

## **King Herod's Guard**

I consider myself to be a decent man, although there are many who would say that no soldier could be considered decent. I have my principles and my code of ethics, and I stick to them. At least I try to. In the army one has to obey a superior officer, even at times when what you are asked to do may run counter to everything you believe in. There is only one incident in my life where I committed a truly terrible act on the orders of a superior, knowing that it was completely wrong, but fearing for my own life, and the lives of my men, if I did not obey.



I don't think I ever wanted to be anything but a soldier. My father tutored me in the use of weapons almost from the moment I could stand. I became proficient in the use of the dagger and the sword, and I could hunt with a bow and arrow with the men of my village. When the Roman Army marched into our neighbourhood to put down a rebellion, I ran off to join the fight. I arrived too late to do anything but admire the way in which the Roman troops ruthlessly mopped up all resistance to their presence. I resolved to join their army if I could. I wanted to fight on the winning side. Luckily the Romans liked to enrol local men in their army. They would train them up, form regiments, give them Roman officers and then pack them off half way around the world to keep the pax romana in a place where they held no allegiances. So it was that I found myself in Judea, serving the client King, Herod the Idumean.

In King Herod's own personal guard there were men from Gaul, Germany and my regiment from Thrace (which we would now call Bulgaria) In addition there were the Doryphnoroï, which was a ceremonial unit made up of distinguished old soldiers and the scions of old Jewish families loyal to King Herod. We Thracians had had units fighting in the Roman Army for many years, and when Herod the Idumean overthrew Antigonus and became the client King of Judea for the Roman Senate, we became part of his army. The Gauls serving with us had been the bodyguards to Cleopatra, and were given as a gift to King Herod after the battle of Actium. The Germans were modelled on Augustus Caesar's own bodyguard.

Over the years, as I fought well in battle, and it became obvious that the men liked me, and listened to me, I rose through the ranks to become a centurion, commanding a group of 80 men. I was a man under orders. Part of my duties as an officer in King Herod's Army, was to keep my ear to the ground, to make sure that there was no rebellion brewing anywhere in this turbulent country of Judea. When new visitors came to the Palace, where I was stationed, if I was on duty I would talk to them, to find out where they had been and what they had seen. So it was that I was on duty when a group of travelers from Arabia came to the gate of King Herod's Palace in Jerusalem asking to see the new baby king which had been born.

I didn't know of any royal baby being born in the palace, but King Herod had had so many wives and children that I might have missed a child or grandchild being born. To my knowledge King Herod had had nine wives, starting with Doris, whom he divorced for the love of his life Mariamne, by whom he had quite a number of children and whom he executed, after accusing her of plotting rebellion against him. He must have missed being able to call out for Mariamne, because he then married another Mariamne, this one the daughter of Simon the High Priest. Then there was Malthace, then Cleopatra of Jerusalem, then Pallas, then Phaidra, then Elpis, all of whom gave him children. He must have got beyond children then, as his last two wives didn't have any. So, I didn't think a new royal child had been born, but after checking, I went to tell King Herod that these Arabians were here, and what they wanted. King Herod was interested, and had me bring them to him. While he feasted with them and plied them with drink, I went to see their camels being stabled and to talk to their camel men and servants. They were quite wary at first to talk about their masters business, but I eventually found one camel man who really did not want to be on the trip, which had already lasted many months, and was quite willing to share stories of the trials and tribulations of the journey, and the stupidity of men who would set off to find a king guided only by a new star they had spotted in the heavens.

I was intrigued by this. I knew of course that one could travel using the stars, but mostly it was too dark for a regiment to travel at night, so we would use the time to rest. I gathered that this journey had been made mostly at night when it was cooler, and when the star, which had been seen in the East, was at its brightest. All of the travelers were followers of the prophet Zoroaster. Looking at the stars and reading the signs of their god, whom they called Ahura Mazda, which translated is 'Wide Lord', is part of their religion. They only have the one god, which I find very strange, but then so do the Judeans. The Magi who were leading the group were especially skilled in the reading of the stars, and when they saw the new star, back in their own country, they consulted their religious texts, and found reference to a new and powerful king who would be born, so they resolved to follow the star and find him. It seemed like a really odd thing to do, and I kept on probing, but no matter what I asked my new friend he always came up with the same answer. I began to wonder whether they were on some kind of reconnaissance mission.

King Herod must have thought so as well, as after listening to his guests, he sent for me, and told me to send one of the Jewish servants to the Temple, and demand that the Priests bring any sacred texts relating to a new king to be born here and now. I sent the servant with the instructions, but I was seriously worried about King Herod. In recent years he had become very paranoid about everyone, including his own family. He had tried and executed several of his sons, and even his favourite wife for allegedly plotting against him. I sincerely hoped that the Temple Priests would come and tell him that there was nothing in the sacred texts, and that the Arabians were mistaken, but much to my horror, the Temple Priests arrived followed by their servants carrying arm loads of scrolls. They were all chattering excitedly. I led them into the presence of the king and the Arabians, and remained while they told King

Herod that their scriptures did indeed foretell of a King to be born, but it was not here in Jerusalem, but an easy day's journey away in the small town of Bethlehem. The Arabians were delighted that what was written in their holy texts were confirmed by what was written in the Judean texts, and especially that a place was named. They thanked King Herod and resolved to travel immediately to find the baby born to be king.

The news about the visitors and what they had come for had spread around Jerusalem like wild fire. From the mutterings of the servants, the townspeople seemed to be pleased that a promised King was coming to rid them of King Herod as generally the populace did not like him, for although he claimed to be a Jew, his family were from Idumea, and they were only converts to Judaism. Less was said in my presence about the baby born to be king getting rid of the Romans as well. I wasn't really worried about a group of rebels following a baby, but when he grew up he might become a problem for Rome. My biggest fear was the effect this was having on King Herod. He wandered around the palace muttering to himself and pulling at his beard, which was never a good sign. After a couple of weeks, it became obvious that the Arabians were not going to return. King Herod completely lost his temper, and stormed around the palace shouting threats to anyone who came near him. His anger was soon reported to the population of Jerusalem, and all talk of the new baby king ceased. The people became scared, wondering what the king might do in his anger.

It was me who found out first. I was summoned to his audience chamber to discover him pacing up and down.

'You have to go' he said 'And kill him'.

In his present mood I didn't dare ask any questions, so I waited. He paced up and down a bit more, and then turned around and saw me still waiting there.

'What are you doing still waiting there?'

'I am waiting for you to tell me who I am going to kill, and where'

'That baby in Bethlehem, of course.' he raged 'Just go and do it'.

'How am I to know which baby in Bethlehem I am supposed to kill?'

'Use your initiative. If they don't tell you which baby it is – kill them all'

'Kill them all? All of the babies in the whole town?'

'Yes. Well, at least all the boys. Its going to be a boy of course'. I bowed myself out of the room, and went to gather my centuria to march to Bethlehem to carry out King Herod's orders.

I remember the journeys there and back so clearly. On the way I was trying to work out how on earth I was going to work out which baby was the one born to be king. When we got there, I stopped outside the town and briefed my soldiers. There was silence when they were told that we had come to kill a baby, but not much surprise. They knew King Herod and his moods only too well. There was shock on their faces as I told them that if the town didn't give up the baby, we were to kill all the baby

boys in the town aged under two years old, that being the time that the Arabians had said that the star had appeared.

We marched in to town in good order, and into the market place. I sent some of my soldiers to gather the people of the town in the market place. When they were gathered and stood in front of me, I told them that King Herod had been told that a baby had been born in Bethlehem, who was prophesied to be a king. We had been sent to find him. I waited and watched the crowd. Most of the crowd looked bewildered, but a few looked as if they might know what I was talking about. I picked on one and asked them directly where the baby was, when they didn't answer, I picked up a nearby child and held my sword to its throat, and demanded that they tell me where the baby was, otherwise I would kill this child. At this point several women began to scream, and run away. I motioned to my men, who went and drove them back in to the crowd.

Several voices began to shout at me in panic, that the family I was looking for had left weeks ago. I ordered the crowd to be silent and asked one of the speakers to tell me what they knew. They told me that a baby had been born to a family who had come for the census. Shepherds had come to visit them in the middle of the night because, so they said, angels had told them he was God's son. Then some men from Arabia had come to present him gifts. This sounded very promising. So I asked the crowd which one of them was this family. Several people told me, and everyone assured me that the family were long gone, but I didn't believe them. I kept on at the gathered crowd for hours, until people began to faint, and children cried out for food and drink, but still no one would tell me where the baby was, or where the family had gone.

At last I lost my patience, and told them that if they didn't reveal which of the babies in the crowd was the one I was looking for, I would have to kill every baby boy in the town. For an instant there was stunned silence, and then the anger of the crowd, long confined, rose up. I ordered some of the my men to keep the crowd under control, and others to pick out every boy child under the age of two, and kill them. Others I ordered to check all the houses to make sure there was no baby boy hidden in them.

As the first child was killed a great wailing rose up from the crowd, and some of the younger men began to surge forward, fists raised. I didn't want any more blood on my hands than necessary so I ordered my men to beat them back with the flats of their blades.. Still no one would say where the baby born to be king was. I began to believe that the family might have left, but I couldn't return to King Herod unless I was reasonably certain that the baby was dead. So I did as I had been ordered by King Herod and killed every one of the 20 boy children we found. We regrouped and marched away, leaving the town covered in the blood of its children and young men.

The journey back was made in silence while we all contemplated the horror of what we had done. Many of my men have children of their own; I have children. We had killed women and children before, but it was always in the context of a war, a battle, a rebellion, and if they were not actually combatants, they were complicit by association. To go to a town living in peace, to find and kill a baby who might just

one day become a king to challenge an already ill and aging tyrant, was completely against my principles. To be forced to kill every baby because the one could not be found, revolted me and my men. But we didn't feel we had a choice. If we had failed in our task, with the mood the King was in at that moment he would most likely have killed me himself. He was certainly capable of that. He would then have had my men executed for disobeying orders. Then he himself would most probably have led another unit of soldiers to Bethlehem, and would have killed more than just the babies in the town. Obeying orders is sometimes easy because what you are asked to do is something you want to do, obeying orders you know are wrong, is difficult. I made a judgment that not to have obeyed orders would have brought more bloodshed on more people, and I have to live with that for the rest of my life. But it has not lessened the horror of what I had to do.

King Herod died only a few years after this terrible event, mourned outwardly by his troops, who formed his funeral procession, and in sullen silence by the citizenry forced to watch the magnificent funeral. I completed my years of service and took retirement. I married the Judean woman who was the mother of my children. We had not been legally allowed to marry while I was still in the army. We used my retirement money to buy some land from a kinsman of hers in her home town, and I settled down to the life of a farmer. The events in Bethlehem scarred me more than I ever thought that they would. I still wake at night sometimes, hearing the crying of the babies and the wails of their mothers. Soon after the event a couple of my men deserted, and had to be brought back and flogged, before being dishonourably discharged. I handed out the lightest sentence that I could, but I had to maintain discipline.

When the nightmares keep me awake at night, I ask myself if I could have done anything differently. Most of the time I don't think I could, but it doesn't stop me from regretting what I had to do. I also wonder whether one of the boys was the one I should have killed, or whether sometime a man will come forward and claim to be the king visited by the Arabians, and prophesied by them to be the king to save Judea.