

Mt 2,20: Herod and Antipater?

A supplementary clue to dating the birth of Jesus

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The death of Herod mentioned in Mt 2,19 is commented by Mt 2,20 in the words "those who sought the child's life are dead". This use of plural is quoted in grammar-books as a typical example of a plural form applied to a single person¹. It seems confirmed by mentions about Herod alone found in Mt 2,7.12.13. 15.16 - only Mt 2,3f suggest a larger number of enemies of the new-born.

But on the other hand, we know from Joseph Flavius that the eldest son of Herod, Antipater, was executed only five days before the death of the king (Jewish War I, 664f; Antiquities XVII, 190f). Therefore not only was Herod dead, but also his still possible successor. For Joseph, in Egypt, it could have been one piece of news. The author of the Gospel however stressed the role of the king, well remembered by all, and remade the story in a midrashic manner. Only the saying from Mt 2,20 preserved an older tradition about the disappearance of more than one enemy (sayings are usually more faithfully preserved than narrations!).

There are some good reasons to believe that Antipater could have been engaged in the attempt of killing Jesus. The new-born was not a real danger for the aged king, but he could cause trouble for his successor. Antipater also plotted against his brothers Alexander and Aristobul, who were finally executed (Jewish War I, 551f etc.). He could just as well have influenced the decision of killing the male children in Bethlehem.

This hypothesis provides a new clue to the dating of the birth of Jesus. The prosecution against Alexander and Aristobul and their subsequent death took place in 7 BC. In 6 BC Antipater left for Rome to have his right of succession confirmed (Jewish War I, 573, Antiquities XVII, 51f) and found himself accused after his return (Jewish War I, 617f etc.). Hence the killing

1 E.g. F. BLASS, A. DEBRUNNER, F. REHKOPF, Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch, Göttingen 1984¹⁶, p. 116 (§ 141).

of the children could have happened no later than in 7-6 BC, may be a short time after the execution of the two brothers (winter 7 BC), when any rumour about a new king would provoke a violent reaction. At the same time Antipater became particularly inclined to suspicions, cruelty and terror (Jewish War I, 567).

It would mean that Jesus was born in 8-7 BC. This conclusion fits in with other existing indications: the possible census in 8 BC or later and the conjunction of Jupiter with Saturn in 7 BC that probably led the wise men to Jesus.