

## Herod the Immovable Rock and the Slaughter of the Innocents

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Can God create a rock so heavy he cannot lift it?

Have you ever heard that question or some variant of it?

It is supposed to be a trick question.

If you say yes, God can make something so big he can not lift it,  
you admit that this God is not all powerful, that his strength has limits.  
On the other hand, should you say no, there is no limit to God's strength,

the same thing is admitted:

God is not all powerful because there is something he cannot do.

Ha! God has been conquered by Logic!

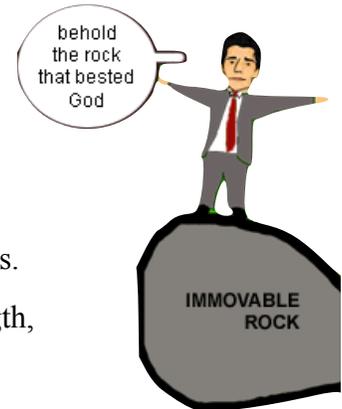
or has He?

Given the setting and circumstance, you probably realize that I don't think so.

It would be out of character for me,  
as it would be for most people who find themselves behind pulpits on Sunday mornings

OBVIOUSLY God can create something which He cannot move,  
he's done it something like 107 Billion times,  
because that's the estimate on how many people have ever lived

While there are plenty of Christians who would give me strange looks for saying this,  
the idea of human free will as an immovable rock, something that God cannot overturn,  
is not a new idea, but one widely accepted in ancient Christianity.



## Herod the Immovable Rock and the Slaughter of the Innocents

In the second century, a Greek theologian writes:

*“God works together with willing souls.*

*But if the person abandons his eagerness, the spirit of God is also restrained.*

*To save the unwilling is the act of using compulsion;*

*but to save the willing, that of one showing grace.”*

(Clement of Alexandria, Salvation of the Rich Man ch. 21)

It is said over and over again in the Christian writers of the first few centuries that God does not compel us, either to good or to evil. but allows us to make our choices, and allows them to have real consequences.

Thus, it is in human power to pervert that power and do horrible evils.

Because according to the first century Mathetes

*“man may become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing”*

and uses that will as God hoped we would.

He comes to us, to His own people whom he made,

and as it is put in John: *“His own received him not”*

He does not force himself on them, he loves them too much for that,

he’s not about to take away their free will,

and their choice is its own punishment, for

*“to those who did receive him, he gave power to become children of God.”*

Those who chose not to miss out on this awesome relationship with the divine that God effects so intimately by entering into human life himself.

And God lets them go their own way.

Psalm 81 gives a glimpse of God’s point of view:

*“But My people did not hear My voice, and Israel did not attend to Me.*

*So I left them to their hearts’ desires: Let them go their own ways.”*

## Herod the Immovable Rock and the Slaughter of the Innocents

This morning's reading from Matthew gives us a glimpse of this truth in action.  
Herod. Oh Herod who thought that somehow he could prevent the coming of the Messiah,  
and do it through an act of such barbarity.

It may please you to know that this episode may not have actually happened.

There is no corroborating evidence about such a slaughter,  
even from the contemporaries of Herod who otherwise  
had no qualms about chronicling his other atrocities.

I can't tell you it happened, nor can I definitively say that it didn't.



But Matthew does include this story in his narrative,  
and he has a purpose in doing so.



These beginning chapters of Matthew's gospel set up a comparison between Kings.  
Jesus is in the royal line of King David, established in the genealogy of the first chapter,  
Herod is outside the Dynastic line, ruling as a vassal king of the Roman Empire,  
who bribed and murdered his way to power.

But foreigners and even the stars in the heavens recognize the birth of a King  
Herod is in a grand palace, but Jesus is in a manger  
Herod has power and clings to it, but the Son of God chose vulnerability and had to flee  
Herod uses force and violence to ensure his rule, God does not.

As a first century text puts it so well:

*“Was He sent, think you, as any man might suppose,  
to establish a sovereignty, to inspire fear and terror?*

*Not so. But in gentleness [and] meekness has He sent Him,  
as a king might send his son who is a king.*

*He sent Him, as sending God; He sent Him, as [a man] unto men;*

*He sent Him, as Saviour, as using persuasion, not force:*

*for force is no attribute of God.*

(Mathetes (Justin the Martyr?), Epistle to Diognetus, ch. 7 vs. 4)

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Another reason Matthew may have included the Slaughter of the Innocents is to highlight

what the incarnation meant and what it did not,

*Why the Word was made Flesh and came to dwell with us*

Every year during Christmas and Advent,

we sing *Peace on Earth*, and read about *lions and lambs laying down together*,

*spears turned pruning hooks, and nation not lifting up sword against nation,*

...and yet...look. Christ's birth isn't Instant World Peace, is it?

Regardless if you think the Slaughter of the Innocents

is a historical event or not,

I haven't seen many lions cuddling up to lambs.



Even in God's most radical joining of himself and humankind in the

Christ Child,

he allows that those feeling threatened are still able to react as they will.

That doesn't stop God from loving us.

God is determined to love his creatures, and no fear or hatred can overturn that love.

There's a silly little jingle from one of the videos we sometimes show the kids in Sunday school:

*You can't stop a train by standing in the track,  
you can't stop an avalanche by yelling "Hey! Turn back!"  
and Standing in the way of what God is going to do  
will be really really really really not so good for you*



Even though God isn't going to violate Herod's free will  
even though Herod's cruelty still has its consequences,  
even though Herod is doing his best to be an immovable rock,

Nothing is going to stop God from fulfilling his plans

anymore than yelling at an avalanche to "turn back"

is going to do anything but make you a bit hoarse.

Herod's fear and hatred is not stronger than God's love.

## Herod the Immovable Rock and the Slaughter of the Innocents

God's light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness has not understood it, grasped it, or overcome it  
God's love survives.



Matthew ties this truth into his story,  
connecting the Holy Family's escape to Egypt  
to the epic of national identity for the Jewish people,  
Israel going into Egypt to survive a famine,  
and eventually guided home.

This is the story of Israel, but Matthew shows it to be a story into which Christ fits.

This is the story of God's People, the story of Salvation

The story of God loving us so much as to be one of us

A major part of Christianity is the scandal that  
God does something that God is not supposed to do.

When the Word of God was born as a human child,  
He deigned to live a human life, with all its limits.

He himself became one of his immovable rocks.

A Rock that had to chose to trust and follow God just like the rest of us.

God challenges the definition of God as all powerful by himself choosing to lay power aside,  
and doing so reveal a power greater than we think of power.

A power revealed in powerlessness.

*Now to the One  
who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly  
than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church  
and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever.  
Amen.*