

## Herod from Hell: Confessions and Reminiscences

**Craig R. Smith**

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*Edgy and edifying, this intriguing novel balances the religious with the risqué.*

From California State University professor Craig R. Smith comes an imaginative novel, *Herod from Hell*, which places Herod the Great in the position of a penitent speaking from the lower regions of Hell.

Having spent more than two thousand years in a cursed ossuary, Herod's soul is only too happy for a change of scenery, even if it means relocating to Hades, where he's relegated to its eighth level for the sins of his past. Herod is charged to speak about his lifetime, leaving no sin unconfessed. All the while, he must studiously learn about the life and death of Jesus, whose story holds the key to moving up from level to level.

The well-annotated historical elements of Smith's work make for a fascinating read. He traces Herod's life as a royal ascending to the position of a Hasmonean king, and he shows how a curious young scholar might become a ruthless leader via the temptations and disappointments of power. Smith also humanizes Herod and the historical giants surrounding him, including Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Though they are a brutal and calculating bunch, they have their insecurities, dashed wishes, and regrets, too.

Herod meets an even more diverse cast of characters in Hell, many of whom, usually over cocktails, offer him pieces of the divine story that will quicken his ascent. They include Martin Luther, Pope Leo X, and Henry VIII ("I killed several of my wives, I did," he admits). It's interesting to note that no one quite matches Herod for upward mobility, though. Though he's been in Hell for practically no time at all, he acquires knowledge quickly, far surpassing his earthly contemporaries.

Smith strikes an interesting balance between irreverence and loyalty to the biblical texts. Readers may be surprised by the risqué elements introduced into the biographies of King David, Jesus, and John the beloved disciple, though Smith writes about those character quirks with the right mixture of good humor and conviction. A few quips, though, including one related to the French Quarter and Hurricane Katrina, do seem crass.

Still, just as the reader begins to adjust to these twists, condemnations of Darwin are introduced, as is literalism surrounding original sin and the authorship of Revelation. Those who allow much room for poetic license may not find these passages as jarring. Some anachronisms, particularly when it comes to dates of events, require an additional measure of trust.

Overall, readers interested in the history of Jerusalem during the period leading up to Jesus's appearance stand to gain much from Smith's inventive accounts. His research relies on some greats in biblical studies, from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to Elaine Pagels, and such reputable sources lend this fictionalization historical credibility. An engaging and subtly edifying work, *Herod from Hell* is, at many turns, a treat for curious readers.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May 8, 2014)

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