

Herod Antipas: 'That Fox'

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Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great by his wife, Malthrace, inherited the two regions of Galilee and Perea. Like his father, Antipas had great political wit, knowing how to work situations to his advantage. In terms of governance, he seems to have taken a page from Herod's example, placating whichever group needed to be appeased to keep the peace. Antipas was not, however, as ruthless nor as paranoid as his father. His subjects never revolted against him, but lived quietly under the tetrarch's rule. (*Tetrarch* is a Greek title given to governors of some Roman provinces.)

Herod Antipas may be one of the most important secular figures during the life of Jesus Christ, for he ruled in Galilee, the region where Jesus performed the majority of His ministry. Antipas is also the Herod responsible for the death of John the Baptist.

History has also remembered Antipas' impact on the ancient world: his avid continuation of Herod the Great's Hellenization. His greatest flaw was his lack of character, and as this study will show, this failing was his undoing.

Antipas' Struggle for Power

The story of Herod Antipas' reign opens amidst the turmoil surrounding his father's death. The year of 4 BC was filled with political, social, and religious chaos. Before his death, Herod the Great had written numerous wills, appointing different sons to different offices in each will. In his final will, he named Archelaus as king of Judea and his brothers, Antipas and Philip, as tetrarchs subject to the king.

Archelaus assumed this final will would be followed, making him king, but Antipas angled for the throne by claiming to be the rightful heir, citing his father's fifth will. Archelaus decided against appointing himself king and instead sailed to Rome to allow Emperor Augustus to appoint him. Antipas followed his brother and brought a suit against his brother before Augustus.

Before the brothers' departure, prominent men in the Jewish community began planning to revolt against the ruling Herods in revenge for Herod the Great's countless killings and offenses. Archelaus chose to deal with the revolt by killing 3,000 Jews on Passover. Believing the problem solved, Archelaus and Antipas embarked for Rome. However, while the brothers were abroad, the Jews' began a revolution that destroyed several cities (two of which Antipas would later rebuild), and the trouble did not end until Varus Sabinus, the Roman procurator of Syria, intervened.

Meanwhile, Archelaus and Antipas fought in court before Augustus for the throne of Judea. Archelaus undoubtedly considered his argument irrefutable: Herod clearly made him king. Simply refusing to accept this, Antipas made numerous charges against his brother before the emperor. He charged, first, that his brother was not an able ruler, citing his massacre of the 3,000 as evidence; second, that *he*, Antipas, had more support, as nearly all of Herod's family sided with him; and third, that Herod the Great was insane when he wrote his final will, his fifth will being the last one written while sane.

Ultimately, Augustus sided with Archelaus and made him ethnarch and his brothers, Antipas and Philip, he named as tetrarchs (the difference between ethnarch and king is that, as ethnarch, Archelaus would not be superior but equal to Antipas and Philip). Antipas lost his case because Augustus, having been counseled by a mutual friend of his and Herod the Great, ruled that Herod was sane when he wrote his final will.

In addition, the Herodians who pledged their support to Antipas were actually only against Archelaus. To them, Antipas was the lesser of two evils, and direct rule by the Romans was preferable. Thus, Antipas was advised by his influential aunt, Salome (not the Salome who asked for the head of John the Baptist) to take the offensive and not defend against Archelaus' accusations. Salome herself then argued before Augustus, in many ways costing Antipas the throne. However, she won land for herself in addition to the small portion she had been bequeathed by Herod, as well as a payment from Augustus.

This trial demonstrates the consistency of character in the Herodian family. From the first Herodian ruler, Antipater, to Herod the Great's sons, the Herods were voracious for political power and desired approval by and friendship with their Roman rulers at any cost. A notable exception was Herod Philip, whom history records to have been kind and benevolent to his subjects.

In the spring of 3 BC, Archelaus and Antipas returned from Rome to Judea to begin their independent reigns. Antipas proved himself an able ruler by maintaining relative peace within his two districts. Archelaus, on the other hand, was as oppressive as his father, though not as politically savvy. Antipas ruled for 43 years, while Archelaus was deposed in AD 7, during his tenth year. Archelaus' regions then came under direct Roman rule, and Pilate was eventually appointed procurator.

Back in the spring of 3 BC, Antipas returned to a Palestine ravaged by war. The revolutionaries, incited by Archelaus' massacre, were led by Judas the son of Hezekiah (whom Herod the Great had illegally put to death), and they destroyed as much Herodian property as possible until Roman troops ended their rampage. Once Rome's intervention settled the people, Antipas eased tensions by launching building projects to benefit his subjects.

He built three cities, two of which were significant to Jewish history and even to the life of Christ. Antipas rebuilt the destroyed city of Sepphoris in Galilee and Livias in Perea, and founded and built a new city, Tiberias, in Galilee, named after the Emperor Tiberius. Sepphoris was the location of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish high court), and it may have been a place of employment for Joseph, Jesus' stepfather, who lived only four miles southwest in Nazareth.

Antipas founded Tiberias around AD 20. It was possibly the most historically important city built by *any* of the Herods, as it became both the center of government in Galilee and a center for Greek culture in Judea. Antipas' two regions, Galilee and Perea, contained a large majority of Jews, but because of Antipas' Hellenization, he was able to direct his subjects' allegiance to Rome, resulting in relative peace in his regions and good standing in the eyes of Rome.

Antipas and John the Baptist

Herod Antipas is more significant to Christians for his direct involvement in the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. To follow the chronological order of events, Antipas' involvement in John the Baptist's life must be considered first, and it begins with a theme familiar to the Herods: marriage for political interest.

Around AD 27, Antipas married the daughter of Aretas IV, the king of Nabataea, a region just south of Perea that often contended with Antipas' regions. The relationship between the regions was not overtly violent, but war always threatened. Antipas' marriage to the Nabatean princess won the favor of Aretas, but more important to Antipas, he gained security.

However, two years later, Antipas left for Rome with his brother, Philip (not the tetrarch). They were accompanied by Philip's wife, Herodias, who, as the daughter of Herod the Great's first wife's son, Aristobulus, was both Philip's and Antipas' niece. Antipas became enamored of Herodias and asked for her hand in marriage, and she accepted on the condition that Antipas divorce the Nabatean princess. Somehow catching wind of Antipas' plan, the princess fled to her father's court. Predictably, Aretas took severe offense to Antipas' caprice and began nurturing a grudge against the tetrarch.

Between AD 28 and 29, after Antipas and Herodias had married and returned to Palestine, John the Baptist began his ministry (see Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; John 1). In AD 30, Antipas imprisoned John. Matthew 14:3-4 and Mark 6:17-18 both state that he did this in response to John's public denouncement of Antipas' marriage, which violated the marriage laws established in Leviticus 20:21. Herodias also took great offense, hating John from then on.

Josephus adds that John was imprisoned because of the political threat he posed in accumulating a faithful following and proclaiming a soon-coming King. Such a threat may have reminded Antipas of his father's last few years, when a new "King of the Jews" was born.

In AD 31, Antipas put to death the man about whom Jesus said, "None greater was born." At a birthday celebration in honor of Antipas, Herodias' daughter, Salome, was sent to dance before the men, and she performed so well that Antipas granted her a wish. At her mother's bidding, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. Antipas—whom Matthew says was saddened by this request, and whom Mark records had even developed a friendship with John while he held him in prison—kept his promise to Salome and executed the innocent prophet.

This episode reveals much about Antipas' character. As noted above, he had imprisoned John, not only because of his seeming political threat, but also because he and his wife took offense to John's righteous judgment. Unlike Herod the Great, Antipas did not ruthlessly slaughter, but he did throw an innocent man in his dungeon mostly because of his wife's feelings (Matthew 14:3). Secondly, Antipas kept John, as stated in Mark 6:20, knowing *who* he was, a holy and just man. Finally, Antipas was foolish enough to grant his stepdaughter an unconditional wish.

These actions show that Antipas had little moral fiber or personal conviction, but was pliable and easily influenced. It is no mystery why, in Luke 13:32, Jesus called Antipas "that fox" (compare Ezekiel 13:4; Songs of Songs 2:15). Jesus saw straight through Antipas: The tetrarch used his intellect and power for personal gain, even if it meant putting a righteous man to death to smooth relations between himself and his spouse.

Antipas and Christ

Antipas played as important a role in the life of Jesus Christ as he did in the life of John the Baptist. Not only did Antipas eventually participate in Jesus' trial, but Antipas' regions, specifically Galilee, were the geographical context of much of His ministry. For example, Antipas' heavy taxation of Galilee created a gaping divide between economic classes: The rich—who were very wealthy—lived far better than the poor, with no middle-class as we would understand it today.

Thus, when Christ told the rich young man to give everything to the poor and follow Him (Matthew 19:21), the instruction and principle would have struck the Galileans quite hard, since they knew how destitute the living conditions were for the vast majority of the region's population. In addition, this economic context would have caused all Galileans to consider the true value of the Kingdom Jesus preached, especially if the upper crust were willing to give up their vaunted status to obtain it.

Antipas' direct encounter with Jesus is recorded in Luke 23:6-12. After Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, and questioned by the Jews, He was brought before Pilate. Pilate asked if Jesus was a Galilean. He was following a Roman law that required criminals to be tried by the governor of the region in which their offense was committed. This law, however, had lost its official status, and by asking this and then sending Jesus to Antipas, Pilate was being uncharacteristically kind to a man with whom he had a history of strife.

Why did Pilate do this? Perhaps, not believing Jesus was guilty (Luke 23:14), he sent Jesus to Antipas because he did not want the guilt of wrongfully condemning an innocent Man. Or, possibly Pilate did not feel adequately informed as a Roman to judge a Man whose accusers were of the Jewish religious community. To Pilate, Antipas would have been better suited to weigh the merits of the case.

Jesus appeared before Antipas in Jerusalem, for the tetrarch was in the capital for Passover. Antipas again shows his true character in Luke's short passage. At first, Antipas is excited that Christ is brought before him, hoping to be entertained by a miracle. Then Herod engages in an interrogation to which Jesus refuses to respond, most likely because Antipas—"that fox"—asked questions in such a way that, if answered, would entrap Jesus. After both of his expectations fail to materialize, Antipas "treated Him with contempt and mocked Him." Like a child, the tetrarch became upset when Jesus did not do what he wanted.

Despite this, he determined that Jesus was innocent of all the charges the Jews raised against Him. Antipas returned Pilate's politically polite gesture and sent Jesus back to the Roman procurator. It is interesting to note that this mutual show of politeness healed the strife in the two rulers' relationship (Luke 23:12). Also fascinating is that both Pilate, a legalistic, fully Hellenized pagan and foreigner to Palestine, *and* Antipas, a half-Jewish tetrarch who spent most of his life in Judea—both examining Christ from differing perspectives—found Jesus Christ completely innocent, a historic testament to His perfection.

Antipas' Final Years

About five years later, Herod Antipas' fall from power began. The events leading to his downfall were all caused by his own actions. First, in AD 36, Aretas IV, whose daughter Antipas had abandoned for Herodias, launched a successful invasion of Perea. When Emperor Tiberius heard about this, he ordered Vitellius, a Roman general in Syria, to reclaim the region.

However, the previous year, after Vitellius made a treaty with Parthia and set off to deliver it to Tiberius, Antipas hurried to reach the emperor first with news of the treaty and took credit for its success. In AD 36, then, Vitellius was less than eager to help Antipas. Further, in the following March, Tiberius died, leaving the throne to his grandnephew, Gaius. Vitellius then completely abandoned his efforts to help Antipas, leaving Perea occupied.

Also during that year, the new Emperor Gaius gave Agrippa—Herodias' brother and Antipas' nephew—the region Herod Philip had ruled up until AD 34. Agrippa had been educated in Rome, and through family connections, grew up as a close friend of Gaius. Agrippa accrued so much debt growing up in Rome that Tiberius, who must have seen him as a parasite, forced him to return to Palestine. After Tiberius' death, Agrippa requested political promotion from his old friend, which was granted.

Finally, Herodias advised Antipas to follow Agrippa's example and request the title of king from Gaius. Antipas decided to go to Rome and appear before Gaius. What neither Herodias nor Antipas knew was that Agrippa had sent a letter to Gaius that accused Antipas of secretly planning a rebellion against Rome with her long-standing nemesis, the Parthians. Roman historians record that Antipas approached the emperor's throne as Gaius was reading Agrippa's letter. The emperor, trusting his friend, promptly exiled Antipas to Gaul, giving Galilee and Perea to Agrippa.

So ended the political life of Herod Antipas, who received no less than he deserved for his intrigues and unrighteous acts. In the end, "that fox" was outfoxed by a man of even baser character than his own.