

Herod The Great: A Life Of Intrigue, Architecture, And Cruelty

by Staff

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King Herod "the Great" makes only a cameo appearance in the Bible, as the conniving and cruel killer of Bethlehem's little boys, yet his mark on Judea in that period is colossal. He reigned as a Roman-appointed king over Judea from 37 to 4 BC. The son of Antipater the Edomite, he was responsible for changing the political rule of Judea from the Levite Hasmoneans—the royal family descended from the Maccabees—to the Edomite, or Idumean, Herodians. He was an intelligent and charismatic figure, but he used these attributes to conspire his way to the throne.

Once he had achieved his political aspirations and Caesar Augustus at Rome had appointed him as king of Judea, Herod took steps to change Judea. Through massive building projects, including the Temple at Jerusalem, and systematically introducing Greek culture into Judea—a process called "Hellenization"—Herod radically changed the Jewish world that our Savior was born into.

Herod's story begins with his father, Antipater. A civil war erupted in Judea between the supporters of two brothers, Aristobulus II, the last Hasmonean king, who reigned from 66 to 63 BC, and John Hyrcanus II, the high priest from 76 to 40 BC. The brothers created enough tension that Rome intervened, taking away Judea's sovereignty and making the region a Roman province.

As a result of Roman rule, Gabinius, a Roman statesman and military commander, divided Judea into five legal districts. Pompey, another Roman statesman and military commander of Rome's eastern kingdom, removed Aristobulus from Judea and imprisoned him in Rome. Hyrcanus II was left as high priest with ruling authority.

Antipater soon made his services available to the Romans, and Rome responded by appointing the Edomite as procurator (financial agent) of Judea. Antipater used this position to make his two sons, Phasael and Herod, governors of two of Gabinius' districts, Jerusalem and Galilee respectively. Thus Herod's political career begins at the age of 25 as a governor.

Herod's style of governing mirrored that of his father's: He was an opportunist, greatly ambitious, and presumptuous. This style was exemplified in his first few years as governor of Galilee. A bandit-chief named Hezekiah led a pack of thieves who attacked Gentile towns and envoys traveling along the borders of Galilee and Syria. Herod captured Hezekiah and had him immediately put to death, an action that won him high praise from the Romans but severe criticism from Jews.

By taking such precipitous action, Herod had ignored the pre-existing law that required any criminal to be tried before the Sanhedrin, so Jewish officials perceived Herod's act for what it was, ingratiating with the Romans. The Sanhedrin tried the young governor, but Hyrcanus, swayed by the Romans, acquitted Herod. However, the external influence was so obvious to the Jews that Herod had to flee to Damascus.

During Herod's exile, civil wars erupted in Judea, resulting in the assassination of Antipater. Antigonus, the son of Aristobulus, seized the throne with the help of the Parthians, a rival empire to

Rome. Seeing his chance, Herod immediately left Damascus and sought Roman help. Caesar Augustus responded to Herod's plea by appointing him king over Judea. He returned to Judea with a large Roman army and deposed Antigonus.

Herod's reign is commonly separated into three periods:

- » The first, 37 to 25 BC, saw Herod removing all threats to the throne;
- » The second, 25 to 13 BC, is regarded as the acme of his reign, when he began massive building projects and expanded Judea;
- » The third and final, from 13-4 BC, is defined by Herod's tragic spiral toward death.

First Period of Herod's Reign

As a usurper, Herod's first challenge was to win over the Jewish people. Despite winning Rome's full support, he was generally despised by his subjects. He attempted to sway them to his side by imprisoning his Edomite wife, Doris, and their son, Antipater II, so that he could marry Hyrcanus' Hasmonean granddaughter, Princess Mariamne. This proved unsuccessful.

The Jews severely disapproved of Herod because he was only half-Jewish and because he had illegally executed Hezekiah, the brigand. The people, instead, placed their loyalty in the Pharisees. Realizing this, Herod used his wealth to win the Pharisees' favor, and they proclaimed that he was made king by God's judgment, thus deserving Jewish respect and obedience. Their support helped abate the Jews' hatred and calmed unrest.

The nobles of Judea, however, still disapproved of him. He quieted them, not with wealth, but with brutality. Many of the nobles supported his former adversary, Antigonus, so Herod decided to execute the 45 wealthiest and most prominent members of the noble class as traitors. He then seized their lands and wealth to pay tribute to the Romans. The remaining nobles were frightened into submission.

The Hasmoneans also disapproved of Herod because of a crucial matter, the high priesthood. In 40 BC, when the Parthians invaded Jerusalem with Antigonus, they took captive Hyrcanus, the high priest. Herod replaced him with a Babylonian Jew, Ananel, of whom Alexandra, the prominent Hasmonean grandmother of Mariamne, highly disapproved. Alexandra petitioned the famous Cleopatra, the wife of Marc Antony, Herod's Roman patron, to persuade her husband to force Herod to replace Ananel with Aristobulus, Mariamne's brother. Mariamne likewise urged her brother's appointment.

Under mounting pressure, in 35 BC Herod appointed Aristobulus, a seventeen-year-old at the time. In doing so, Herod broke biblical law, which states a high priest holds office for life, as well as that a high priest must be thirty years of age. Aristobulus did not officiate as high priest for long, however. He became popular with the Jews—too popular for Herod, who saw him as a potential threat to his throne. At Herod's command, the young man was assassinated at a feast in Jericho later that same year.

As mentioned above, Herod had political ties to Marc Antony, who became an enemy of Caesar Augustus. When Herod realized Augustus would defeat Antony, he feared his connection might lose him his position. In a show of loyalty, he presented himself before Augustus, but before he made the

trip, he had Hyrcanus executed, just in case the aged Hasmonean tried to claim the throne. Herod returned in 30 BC with Augustus' blessings and the new districts of Jericho, Gadara, Hippos, Samaria, Gaza, Anthedon, and Joppa, all added to his domain by the generous emperor.

Upon his return, Herod's wife Mariamne was falsely accused of being unfaithful. He swiftly and without trial executed the accused man, and he had Mariamne investigated, condemned, and executed in 29 BC. His paranoia not yet quelled, between 29 and 25 BC, Herod executed every relative of Hyrcanus who may have posed even the slightest threat to his throne.

Second Period

The second period, from 25 to 13 BC, is considered by many historians to be the height of Herod's reign. During these years, the king undertook massive building projects—everything from cities to statues in Jerusalem and abroad. Beyond introducing new buildings into Judea, he aggressively pushed Greek culture on the Jews during this time to make Judea look as "Roman" as possible in order to continue his good standing with Augustus.

In this, Herod succeeded. He visited Augustus numerous times during this period, and Caesar gave him additional provinces, doubling Judean territory by 13 BC. However, his real success was dependent upon peace in his region, which he won by taking away power from the Jews.

Herod constructed a number of important cities, and named most of them either in honor of Caesar or his own Edomite family. Perhaps most famous of these is the important coastal city of Caesarea, where Pontius Pilate eventually lived. In addition, Herod had a temple erected in honor of Augustus there. North of Jericho, he founded the city of Phasaelis, named after his brother, and to honor his father, he built Antipatris, where the Romans later held Paul captive (Acts 23). Besides these cities, Herod also built or restored a number of fortresses across Judea to strengthen its defenses.

Herod's best-known building projects were in Jerusalem. Within its walls, he built a theater, and in a valley just outside, an amphitheater, introducing Greek arts. For himself, he built an ornate palace of gold and marble in the city's western district. North of the Temple, he raised a massive citadel, Fortress Antonia, in honor of his patron, Marc Antony.

Of course, his most important and well-known project was the Temple in Jerusalem. Deciding that the Temple built by Zerubbabel no longer matched the quality of its surrounding architecture, he undertook a massive rebuilding project in 20 BC. The project was so extensive that the Temple was not truly completed until AD 64, only six years before its destruction. The Temple's beauty was acknowledged throughout the Roman world, and even became proverbial: "He who has not seen Herod's building has never seen anything beautiful."

The Jews were not particularly supportive of his ventures. He tried to follow biblical criteria in his construction of the Temple, such as not including any images, allowing only priests to work on the Temple proper, and never entering the inner rooms himself. Yet, late in the construction, Herod enraged the Jews by placing the image of an eagle on the entrance gates. The Jews also found it hypocritical that Herod, only half-Jewish, claimed piety in this work, despite building numerous temples in honor of other gods in other Roman provinces, including a temple to Apollo and even one to Baal.

The Jews were also suspicious of his aggressive marketing of Greek culture. He not only introduced Greek theater, but also began hosting Olympic-style games in Jerusalem in honor of Caesar. He also syncretized Greek and Jewish culture in every possible area. He surrounded himself with a cabinet of Greek orators and philosophers as advisors, and he replaced state officials with Greek politicians. One historian claims that Herod "boasted of being more nearly related to the Greeks than to the Jews."

Herod's Hellenization was an effort to further ingratiate himself with Augustus, proving his loyalty to Caesar above his loyalty to God. The Jews recognized where his devotion lay and grew restless. The king responded by increasing taxes, banning any kind of public assembly, and quickly imprisoning any critic of his reign in one of his many fortresses.

This period may have been both the pinnacle of Herod's splendor and Judea's power, but it came with a grave price. During this time, his homicidal atrocities were masked by his building projects, but they resurfaced with renewed tragedy in his final years, from 13 to 4 BC.

Final Period

The final period of Herod's reign, up to his death, is defined by family betrayal, sickness, and more bloodshed. Herod became suspicious of Alexander and Aristobulus, his two sons by Mariamne, whom he suspected were conspiring against him for the throne in revenge for executing their mother. In an attempt to counter their suspected plot, he allowed Antipater, his son by his first wife, Doris, to return from exile. Whether Alexander and Aristobulus actually plotted against Herod is questionable, but Antipater's hatred for Herod was unequivocal. He conspired to take the throne and began by slandering his step-brothers. Convinced, Herod imprisoned and executed Alexander and Aristobulus in 7 BC.

Antipater had won support in the courts of Judea, but he was not satisfied. Next, he sought to poison his father. He sent poison to his ally, Pheroras, one of Herod's brothers, who dined with the king often enough to carry out the assassination. The king, however, discovered the plot only when, mistaking Antipater's intentions, Pheroras drank the poison himself. When Pheroras' servants informed Herod about the plot, Antipater was executed.

Between then and his death, Herod ordered a massacre for which he would be reviled throughout the professing Christian world. The old, paranoid king, after hearing from the visiting magi that a new King of the Jews had been born in Bethlehem, ordered all male children under the age of two to be killed (Matthew 2:16). Having been confronted with imagined and unimagined threats for many years, Herod dealt with this threat with unprecedented cruelty.

Shortly after this "Massacre of the Innocents," Herod died of an agonizing sickness. Rewriting his will just days before his death, he made Archelaus heir to his throne and ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea; his brother Antipas, tetrarch over Galilee and Perea; and his son Philip, tetrarch of the regions east of Galilee. According to orders made before Herod's death, soldiers were to round up many of Judea's most distinguished men into Jerusalem's theater and execute them all. Herod justified this final act of cruelty by saying that it would ensure that the Jews lamented his passing. Happily, this order was not carried out.

By increasing Rome's involvement in Judea; expanding the nation's size, power, and wealth; and mixing an exclusive Jewish culture with Gentile Greek culture, Herod shaped the political, economic, and cultural world in which Jesus Christ lived. Longer-term, he also appointed men into power who would later encounter and affect the early Christian church. Despite being morally repulsive, King Herod was a towering figure in the history of Judea.