

Herod the Great

The man and his dynasty

The Biblical account of King Herod the Great illustrates an evil person desperate to continue his dynasty even to the point of murdering innocent children. However, historical records reveal that in his earlier years Herod had been a great king, loyal to his friends, talented, and pro-Semitic. As he determinedly held on to his crown the stresses upon his soul (from both the inside and outside) became so great that he became increasingly mad.

There was a good reason why Herod was called great. Before he became a murdering tyrant, he had proved himself as a genius in business, in engineering, and in the arena of politics and diplomacy. He was an inventor, a world champion wrestler, a great soldier and one of the greatest conversationalists in the world at that time as well as one of the greatest horsemen and hunters of his day, and had killed more lions and other wild game than anyone at that time. Physically, he was described as being tall, strong and athletic; he had small ears, a well molded nose, black hair, brown eyes and golden skin. Is there any doubt why he received the appellation, "Herod the Great?"

How he came to Power:

John Hyrcanus (134-104) of the Hasmonean (Maccabean) dynasty conquered Samaria, part of Galilee and Idumaea, the Arab region of which Herod's father, Antipater lived at that time. After the death of John Hyrcanus his two sons ruled: Aristobolus I for about one year, and then his brother, Alexander Jannaeus 103-76 BC. After the death of the unprincipled Jannaeus, his wife, Salome Alexandra became queen of what was then known as Judea. She ruled for nine years until 67 BC (a brief golden age) at which time she was strangled by her younger son, Aristobolus II, after which civil war occurred between Salome's two sons, the ambitious and evil Aristobolus II, and the weak Hyrcanus II supported by Antipater the Idumean, the father of Herod.

The Edomites lived in southern Palestine, namely Idumaea between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba for about 400 years before the time of the Hasmoneans. Josephus explains that Antipater's family converted to Judaism (the main requirement being circumcision) during the forced conversions (convert or lose your land holdings) by the Hasmonean ruler, Hyrcanus. Having converted to Judaism, Antipater and family were permitted to enter into Jewish politics. In this way, Antipater became a powerful official under the Hasmoneans.

Before the Roman general, Pompey moved into the Middle East, Aristobolus II was at war with his brother, Hyrcanus II who was being supported financially and militarily by Antipater. When the Romans advanced into the Middle East, Aristobolus II and Antipater via Hyrcanus II both sought the support of the Roman general, Pompey for it would be this Roman general who would decide the leadership of Judea under Roman dominance. After interviewing both the ambitious Aristobolus II and Antipater, the father of Herod, Pompey came to the conclusion that Antipater was a man that Rome could trust. However, Aristobolus II rejected that decision and so took up a defensive position in Jerusalem against the Romans. However, after a

three month siege, Pompey stormed the well-fortified temple area, and Judaea fell into his hands. While Aristobulus II was taken to Rome in captivity, the weak Hyrcanus II was made the high-priest and given titular leadership of Judea (Antipater, the father of Herod possessed the real power).

Desiring even greater power and influence in Rome, Pompey maneuvered with the Senate to strip Caesar of his army and power. Caesar, realizing this betrayal, disregarded Pompey and the Senate and crossed the Rubicon with his army in January of 49 BC. Crossing the Rubicon meant civil war with Pompey and the Senate. Realizing this, Caesar remarked as he was about to cross, "The die has been cast." Herod being a genius and a good military man himself realized that Caesar was by far the greater general. Even so, both he and his father provided financial support for their friend, Pompey (Antipater and Herod believed strongly in the principle of loyalty, and so they always remained loyal both to Rome and to their friends). After Pompey was ignominiously defeated by Caesar in 48 BC at the Battle of Pharsalus, Antipater and Herod found themselves in a difficult political situation: they had supported the defeated enemies of Caesar and now risked losing all the power and privileges they had previously enjoyed.

However, soon after, an opportunity to resolve this difficulty occurred. In 48 BC, Caesar had entered Egypt with a force of only 4000 soldiers and soon found himself surrounded by 20,000 Egyptian soldiers. Antipater and Herod immediately raised an army and rescued Caesar. In gratitude, Caesar made Antipater the procurator of Judea, while also bestowing Roman citizenship upon Antipater and his heirs. Just when all was going well for Antipater and Herod, Caesar was assassinated on March 15, 44 BC, followed a year later by the assassination of Antipater himself.

The assassination of Caesar in 44 BC brought about civil war in Rome. Eventually, Caesar's nephew (Octavian, also known as Augustus), and Caesar's cavalry commander (Mark Anthony) joined forces to defeat the two armies led by Brutus and Cassius, two of the men responsible for the assassination of Julius Caesar. This took place at the Battle of Philippi in October of 42 BC. Herod, who had been an old friend of Cassius, had supported him financially in this war against Octavian and Mark Anthony (a more recent friend of Herod). This was the second time that Herod had helped finance the losing side of a civil war in Rome. Again Herod was placed in a difficult political situation with the Romans. Fortunately for Herod, there was a power struggle between Octavian and Mark Anthony and a number of others which meant that the Romans had no time to deal with Herod. Then in October of 41 BC the Peace of Brundisium took place between Octavian and Mark Anthony. By this agreement, Octavian was given the western portion of the empire and Anthony was given the eastern portion. Though Herod and his brother, Phasael had supported Cassius, Mark Anthony recognized Herod as a loyal and brilliant ruler who could be trusted. So, Mark Anthony made Herod and his brother joint rulers over Palestine.

However, the Parthian invasion soon removed this joint rule over Judea. Instability in Rome and the lack of truth and humility in the souls of the Jewish people at that time led to dissatisfaction and unrest. So, Antigonus, Hasmonean the son of Aristobulus II took advantage of this situation and conspired with the Parthians to overthrow the Roman government in the Middle East. As a result of this conspiracy, the Parthians invaded in 40 BC and overran the provinces of Syria and Judea. Antigonus was established as a priest-king in Jerusalem. During this invasion Phasael was caught and murdered, and Herod barely escaped to Rome. In Rome, Herod sought the favor of Octavius and Mark Anthony who declared him the new King of

the Jews, and provided him with a Roman army to drive out the Parthians which he finally did after 3 difficult years of fighting.

It was now 37 BC and Herod had only five years to relax before another major civil war would occur in Rome. This war would be between the western part of the Roman Empire, ruled by Octavian Caesar, and the eastern part of the Roman Empire led by Mark Anthony. Again Herod found himself in a very difficult situation. Who should he support? The decision to support Mark Anthony was based upon his strong belief in loyalty. So, when Mark Anthony was defeated at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, Herod found himself allied with the losing side for the third time in his political career, and yet again in danger of losing his kingdom. After the battle, Octavian went to Rhodes to refit his ships so Herod sailed to Rhodes to confront Octavian and again seek his kind favor. Octavian granted him reconciliation, allowing Herod to maintain his position as king of the Jews, and the two became friends for life. To Rome and to his friends, Herod always remained loyal.

As an Entrepreneur:

He was in control of much trade that existed between east and west. At that time he had as many as 100 caravans. But Herod was not selfish with his great wealth. Because of the civil wars in Rome, he supplied on three different occasions large sums of money first to Pompey, then to Cassius and finally to Mark Anthony. In 25 BC there was a famine in Palestine: Herod fed the Jews for a year or so with Egyptian grain. This he purchased with some tax money, but mostly with his own funds. Around this time the Olympic Games were defunct in Rome. So, he restarted these games paying for the first two with his own fortune.

As an Engineer and Builder:

As the greatest engineer and builder of his age (many say that he was the greatest builder in all of world history), he built not only the city of Caesarea, but its man-made harbor as well which became one of the two greatest harbors in the Roman Empire (the harbor alone was such an engineering marvel that some said it should have been the 8th wonder of the world). In order to secure water for his new city, he had to construct an aqueduct bringing water from the foothills of Mount Carmel, not a simple feat. In this new city he built many buildings including a beautiful amphitheater with near perfect acoustics and hippodrome for chariot races. On Mount Zion he built the famous Temple of Herod which is referenced many times in the New Testament. On this mount on which the Temple would be constructed, Herod built the largest man-made platform ever built even up to this time. Furthermore the retaining wall around the temple-mount took 10,000 men 10 years to build. It was said of this temple, "He who has not seen Herod's building, has never in his life seen a truly grand building" (Talmud-Bava Basra 4a). According to Josephus, it depicted "the whole vista of the heavens." He also wrote: "Viewed from without, the Sanctuary had everything that could amaze either mind or eye. Overlaid all round with stout plates of gold, the first rays of the sun it reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who endeavored to look at it were forced to turn away as if they had looked straight at the sun. To strangers as they approached it seemed in the distance like a mountain covered with snow; for any part not covered with gold was dazzling white . . ." (*The*

Jewish War, p. 305). Herod not only constructed this magnificent temple in Jerusalem but also built a hippodrome, a theater, amphitheater (28 BC) as well as a sewage system. He rebuilt Samaria (27 BC) and renamed it Sebaste and started many building projects in the Galilee area as well which provided many contracting opportunities for Joseph. In Judea he built many palaces and numerous fortresses including Antonia, Herodium and Fort Masada which continues to awe people even today. Outside of Judea he built many structures in Sparta, Athens and Rhodes.

Desired to have a good relationship with the Jews:

Herod's rule was characterized by tremendous growth and construction by his obsession for massive and elaborate building projects which provided tens of thousands of jobs for the Jewish people and great opportunities for the Jewish entrepreneurs. In order not to offend the Jews, he never had a statue made or a picture painted in his image (Exodus 20:4). In vain Herod tried to win over the Jews, by contributing large sums of his personal money in time of famine, but to no avail, and though he was a legal convert to Judaism, he was never accepted by the religious hierarchy as a fellow member of Judaism. In an extraordinary attempt to win over the Jewish religious hierarchy, he built the most magnificent temple the world has ever seen. Augustus Caesar and Herod's friend, Agrippa said, "Herod's realm was far too small for his liberality."

As a Madman:

In 29 BC Herod puts Mariamne, the only woman he ever loved on trial on a trumped-up charge of adultery. She was found guilty and executed. At that time Mariamne was 25 and had born him 5 children after 7 years of marriage. Alexandra, Mariamne's mother declared Herod mentally unfit to rule and so declared herself queen and was swiftly executed by Herod without a trial. The following year Herod executed his brother-in-law, Kostobar for conspiracy. In 6 BC., Herod accuses his two favorite son, Alexander and Aristobulos, his sons from Mariamne, the Hasmoneas, of conspiracy. Because of his paranoia, he believed false rumors about them and so they were removed from life. This left Antipater, his eldest son as his heir whom he also killed just five days before his death. Circa 5 BC, he ordered the death of all boys two and under to be killed in and around the Bethlehem area (Matthew 2:16)). Also about this time, there were a couple of Pharisees who did not like the Roman Golden Eagle hanging over the temple gate so they persuaded forty young men to tear it down. Herod's troops caught these men and even though Herod was dying, he crawled into court and unto his throne and sentenced them to death. To make it interesting, they were killed in different way: some by bow and arrow, some by decapitation, some were dropped into boiling oil, several were hung, several crucified, some rolled over a fire like a rotisserie. Since these were some of the key young men of the land, the word got around that even though Herod was dying, he was still very much in control. Then while he was dying, he ordered all the Jewish nobility to be locked into the hippodrome and for the building to be burned down at his death.

All during Herod's life, he faced tremendous pressure and stress. This stress eventually produced mental illness in Herod and possibly had an effect on his physical health as well. So, toward the last few years of his life, ancient historians described his illness as rapid mood changes, delusions of persecutions, uncontrolled outbursts, hypertensive cerebral attacks, attempted suicide, heart and kidney function deteriorated, poisons accumulated in the blood stream. His mouth had become ulcerated, his breath foul, constant pains in the stomach accompanied by near constant diarrhea for the last three years of his life; his scrotum had become gangrenous and filled with maggots.

The Dynasty of Herod the Great:

At his death, his kingdom was split into two tetrarchies and one ethnarchy. Antipas and Philip II both received a tetrarchy while Archelaus received an ethnarchy. Antipas' domain was composed of both Galilee and Perea. Since Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a city of Galilee he lived under the jurisdiction of Antipas. This explains why Pontius Pilot sent Jesus Christ to Herod Antipas for trial and sentencing, but when the Lord would not entertain him with miracles, Antipas sent him back to Pilot. Since Perea was located on the east side of the southern portion of the Jordan River, Antipas also had jurisdiction over John the Baptizer. On one occasion John questioned how Antipas could rule the Jewish people and at the same time be in violation of the Jewish laws regarding marriage. This offended Herodias who had eloped with Antipas while being the wife of Philip I. For this reason, Herodias conspired to have John the Baptist executed. On the other hand, Philip II benevolently ruled his lands north and east of Galilee and remained in power until his death in 34 AD. His tetrarchy consisted of Syrians, Romans, Greeks, Arabs and a few Jewish people. Archelaus, the full brother of Antipas, was given half of Herod's kingdom, an ethnarchy (ruler of a nation) consisting of Samaria, Judea and Idumea. Archelaus had a reputation for great cruelty and this fact was known by Joseph. So, when Joseph had come out of Egypt he decided not to return to Bethlehem, a city in the ethnarchy of Archelaus but to live in the tetrarchy of Antipas the fox, a nickname given to him by the Lord himself. Both Archelaus and Antipas were removed by Roman Emperors: In 6 AD Archelaus was removed by Octavian for murdering too many of his subjects, and Antipas was removed by Caligula in 39AD for allegedly conspiring against Rome. Archelaus was banished to a pathetic little town on the other side of the Alps, Vienna Gaul (France); Antipas and Herodias to Lyons, Gaul another undesirable town not far from Vienna.

The next two rulers were the grandson and great grandson of Herod, Agrippa I followed by his son Agrippa II. These two rulers affected the lives of the apostles where the first three, Antipas, Archelaus and Philip affected the lives of Joseph, John the Baptists and the Lord Jesus Christ. Agrippa I, not a friend of Tiberius, found himself in a Roman Dungeon in 36 AD. Fortunately for him, Tiberius died the very next year. Caligula the next ruler and close friend of Agrippa I not only released him from prison, but also gave him the former tetrarch of Philip II. Galilee was added to his domain by Caligula after the banishment of Antipas in 39 AD. When Caligula was assassinated in 41 AD, Agrippa I was in Rome. Upon his recommendation to the Senate, Claudius was made the next Roman Empire. In gratitude, Claudius gave Agrippa also the lands of Samaria and Judea. It was about this time that Agrippa I murdered James, the brother of John and tried to provide the same fate for Peter.

Justice sometimes comes quickly as it did in his case for in 44 AD when he was in Caesarea and there receiving the adulation of being a god, he was struck down by an angel of the Lord. He was the last powerful ruler of Herod's dynasty. When Herod of Chalcis, a brother of Agrippa I died, Agrippa II, the son of Agrippa I was given Chalcis, a small area between Phoenicia and Syria and responsibility over the temple and priesthood. In 53 AD Claudius also gave him the former kingdom of Philip II. When Nero succeeded Claudius, he added some other small properties to Agrippa's domain. The temple in Jerusalem was both completed (63 AD) and destroyed (70 AD) during his reign. It was this last Agrippa that Paul had met. Paul was not only well known among the Christian community but also was known by all the important people in the Roman Empire. This being the case Festus, the Roman governor of Judea arranged for Agrippa to meet Paul who was at this time (circa 60AD) imprisoned in Caesarea. Paul used this opportunity to present the gospel to Agrippa II, but to no avail.

Circa 4 BC a fraternity of scientists, chemists, physicists, astronomers-astrologers etc., possibly numbering a hundred or so, came to Jerusalem to worship the One descended from the family of David, the One born to be the king of the Jews. Being a very old and famous fraternity having their beginning among the Medes, Persians and Chaldeans, they were given an audience with King Herod. To Herod's shock and consternation they announced that the rightful heir to the throne of David had been born. Herod by contrast was not born into his royalty, but a royalty that he and his father had fought hard to achieve. Now, he was coming to the end of his life and so wanted to establish a lasting dynasty. Nothing would prevent him from securing his throne for his offspring. So, he, after careful interrogation of both the magi and Jewish theologians in Jerusalem, ascertained the exact age and location of this one named Jesus and sought to kill him.

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