

THE HERODIAN DYNASTY: RULERS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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Imagine a person having no knowledge of Christianity or Judaism who picks up a copy of the Bible and begins to read it with interest, beginning in Genesis continuing through the entire Old Testament. He learns of God's awesome power in Creation, and Jehovah's deliverance and development of Israel, a particular and somewhat peculiar family and nation. He then watches that family as they progress and digress. He learns of their fascinating sacrificial system of worship with all of its traditions and ceremonies. He is instructed of judges and kings, priests and prophets. He sees them leave their promised land and re-enter it, only to be violently removed from it again, and again. He watches as they are delivered time and again in spectacular victories, but he also sees their defeats, both at the hands of their enemies, but mostly as a result of their sin. Woven throughout this tale is a shadowy Figure that is visible but veiled who seems to somehow be at the center of it all. When the reader reaches the conclusion of "Act One" and begins to read the New Testament, he rejoices to meet the One that had been alluded of throughout the Old. But, much has changed in the world in the last 400 years, especially the world of the Jews, Palestine. There are strange places called synagogues, which he doesn't remember much about from the Old Testament, though there was one obscure verse in Psalm 74:8 that mentioned them. There is a new sheriff in town also. The Romans are in charge. When he last left Israel, the Persians were the "big Gentile dogs on the block", though there was mention of Greeks, but no Romans. And, there are also competing and conflicting groups fighting for power within Judaism. Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians – He had never heard of these people before. Who are they? And, who is this guy called Herod? He's referred to as some kind of a king, but his power is somewhat limited, and he is definitely not from the line of David. Where did he come from?

The New Testament Herods were the bitter enemies of Christ and His gospel, but they played a huge roll in the grand scheme of the New Testament world. In order to fully understand

the culture and context of Palestine during the time of Christ and beyond, it is important to find out who these Herods were: where they came from and what contributions, if any, they made to Palestine prior to and during the New Testament time period.

The Herodian Dynasty gained strength toward the end of the Second Temple Period.¹ For decades the land of Palestine was fought over by the Ptolemies and the Seleucids who were holdovers from the division of the old Greek Empire. Israel suffered as their land was traded back and forth, particularly when an extremely evil and anti-Semitic Ptolemaic ruler, Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) was in control. His animosity toward the Jews triggered a revolt, which, with the help of the Romans, eventually drove Antiochus from the land.² The nation went through almost an evolution of leadership, which included the Maccabees and the Hasmoneans. Eventually, however, the family of Antipater, the father of Herod the Great, brokered a deal with Pompey of Rome and took control of Palestine.³ This partnership with Rome would remain in place and would continue to secure a role for the Herods in Israel's government for a century, though the relationship was tenuous at best.

Herod the Great was known as Herod the King (Matthew 2:1) and was in power at the time of the birth of Christ. His reign as governor of Galilee began in 47 B.C., but his authority was expanded to king in 37 B.C. He may have been nominally Jewish through circumcision, but he was really an Edomite by blood.⁴ His allegiance was mainly to the Roman government, and he was despised

¹ Köstenberger, Andreas J.; Kellum, L. Scott; Quarles, Charles L. *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Kindle Locations 3043-3045). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Josephus, Flavius. *The Wars of the Jews; or the history of the destruction of Jerusalem* (Kindle Locations 173-175). Kindle Edition.

³ Hoehner, H. W. (1988). Herod, Herodian Family. In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 964). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

⁴ Ryrie, C. C. (1994). Ryrie study Bible: King James Version (Expanded ed., p. 1418). Chicago: Moody Press.

by the Jews. Unger states, “Herod was not only an Idumaeen in race and a Jew in religion, but he was a heathen in practice and a monster in character.”⁵ A striking example of his barbarism was demonstrated when Herod was just given power. He slew all of the members of the Sanhedrin, which had previously opposed him, and had them all replaced with a fresh group who would be submissive to his control.⁶ He was not much nicer to his family. Wiersbe tells us, “He had nine wives (some say ten), and he thought nothing of slaying his own sons or wives if they got in the way of his plans.”⁷ Phillips comments:

Herod filled Jerusalem with foreign mercenaries and the cities of Palestine with spies. No man or woman was safe while Herod reigned. One by one he murdered every rival claimant to the throne. He stamped out the Hasmonaeans; he murdered his wife’s brother, a lad of seventeen, because he was popular with the Jews; he murdered Mariamne, the beautiful Maccabean princess he had married, because he was suspicious of her, and he murdered both her sons; five days before his death he murdered his son and heir. Herod hacked and hewed his way through life, slaughtering six to eight-thousand of the best people in his realm. Caesar Augustus is reported to have cynically said, “I’d sooner be Herod’s swine than Herod’s son.”⁸

He was a brutal despot who murdered anyone who threatened his authority.⁹ He saw Jesus, though a mere babe in a manger in Bethlehem, as just such a threat to his power: so much so that he had every child two years of age and under in Bethlehem executed so that any potential risk would be eliminated. (Matthew 2:16)

⁵ Unger, Merrill F. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (p. 557). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Josephus, Flavius. *The Antiquities of the Jews by Josephus* [Annotated Edition] (Halcyon Classics) (Kindle Locations 11859-11862). Halcyon Press Ltd. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 49). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁸ Phillips, J. (2014). *Exploring the Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Mt 2:2). Kregel Publications; WORDsearch.

⁹ Hester, Richard H. (2008) *New Testament Bible History* (p. 41). Blacktown, NSW, AU: www.missionaryoutpost.com.

Despite all of Herod the Great's sinister flaws, he did manage to accomplish some very beneficial improvements to Palestine. Herod was a builder. Unfortunately, much of what he built was on the backs of the Jews that he forced to work for him. He built eleven fortresses throughout Israel, which would offer him protection from any surprise enemy attack that might come.¹⁰ Many of the ruins of these fortresses have survived and can be examined today. These ruins include Macherus, located in the area of Perea, and Herodium, which is near Bethlehem and also provided Herod with a luxurious seven-story palace. Recent discoveries by the Hebrew University confirm that Herod was buried there.¹¹

Perhaps the most famous fortress built by Herod was Masada, located near the western shore of the Dead Sea. Masada is the Hebrew word for "stronghold", and this particular fortress lived up to its name. It was a very narrow plateau that sat upon high cliffs. Access to the top was granted only through a small, winding path that severely limited the number of visitors (or attackers). According to Hester, Masada had many storerooms for food and weapons, and "several elaborate Roman bathhouses with steam heat."¹² Ironically, it would be this Roman supported fortress that would serve as the last holdout for a group of Jews that escaped from Jerusalem after its destruction by Titus in 70 A.D. The Roman pursuers had to build a ramp to ascend to the top, and a wall to prevent the Jews escape. The whole business took more than two years, and when they finally were able to bring their army to the top, they discovered that the Jewish zealots had all killed themselves rather than be taken by the Romans.¹³

Herod also built the City of Caesarea, which became the largest city in Israel, even surpassing Jerusalem. It was named after Augustus Caesar and took a decade to build. Caesarea

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid* (p. 42).

¹² *Ibid* (p. 41)

¹³ *Ibid*

was a valuable port city, which boasted a magnificent theater, pools, a sewer system, and an aqueduct for fresh water. The builders of the city were also said to have discovered a means of pouring a concrete type mixture that hardened under water.¹⁴ Caesarea is mentioned sixteen times in the Gospels and *Acts*. It was the seat of Roman authority in Palestine, and the home of Pontius Pilate. Baker Encyclopedia states: “Three Roman governors of Palestine lived there: Felix (*Acts* 24), Festus (*Acts* 25:1, 4, 6, 13), and Pontius Pilate, who visited Jerusalem on special occasions (as in *John* 19). Archaeologists found Pilate’s name carved in stone in the theater at Caesarea.”¹⁵

Perhaps the crowning architectural achievement of Herod the Great was the building of the Temple, which was mostly completed shortly before his death in 4 B.C. Rabbinic literature claims: “He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building”¹⁶ The Temple was the site of many scenes depicted in the New Testament. When Jesus was tempted by Satan, he was brought to the pinnacle of the Temple. (*Matthew* 4:5) Jesus cleansed the Temple twice: once at the beginning of his earthly ministry (*John* 2:15); and, once at the end. (*Matthew* 21:12; *Mark* 11:15) Jesus taught in the Temple (*Matthew* 26:55; *John* 7:28; 8:2; 8:20); He healed in the Temple (*Matthew* 21:14); and, He rebuked the religious leaders in the Temple. (*Mark* 11:27 – 33). Jesus used the Temple as an illustration when teaching the disciples about his crucifixion and resurrection. (*Matthew* 26:61) He also prophesied about the destruction of the Temple. (*Matthew* 24:1 – 2) When Jesus was crucified, the veil of the Temple was torn from the top to the bottom. (*Matthew* 27:51) The ministry of Jesus while in Judaea surrounds the Temple. It was the center of religious life for the Jews.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Caesarea*. In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 390). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

¹⁶ Hoehner, H. W. (p. 966)

Later, in the Book of Acts, the Temple continues to be an important focal point in the lives and ministries of the Jerusalem apostles, and also in the life of Paul who was arrested in the Temple and accused of defiling it by bringing Gentiles in. (Acts 21:28 – 29)

The New Testament would be an entirely different place without the Temple that was built by Herod. Though Herod was certainly a wicked and cruel man, God still used him to set the scene for the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Herod the Great passed off the scene shortly after the birth of Christ. His predecessors were perhaps equal to him in their immoral lifestyles and their contempt for the true worshippers of God, but they were not equal to them in their accomplishments. His children brought nothing worth noting that was beneficial to the land or people of Palestine. They were spoiled children, not unlike what is often seen in the children and grandchildren of the “great” men in America today.

Shortly before his death, Herod had his oldest son, Antipater, executed. When Herod finally died himself, He was replaced by his son Archelaus. (Matthew 2:22) Herod, however had six wills, the last of which was written just days before his death. The children squabbled over who should rule after their father. According to Josephus:

When Caesar had heard these pleadings, he dissolved the assembly; but a few days afterwards he appointed Archelaus, not indeed to be king of the whole country, but ethnarch of the one half of that which had been subject to Herod, and promised to give him the royal dignity hereafter, if he governed his part virtuously. But as for the other half, he divided it into two parts, and gave it to two other of Herod's sons, to Philip and to Antipas, that Antipas who disputed with Archelaus for the whole kingdom.¹⁷

Herod Antipas was the one who imprisoned and eventually beheaded John the Baptist. (Mark 6:27) Antipas married his brother Herod Philip’s wife, Herodius. John had preached against Antipas’ divorce of his first wife and subsequent marriage to Herodius, and as a result, John

¹⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (Kindle Locations 15268-15271).

provoked the wrath of a very wicked and ambitious woman. Herod actually feared John, but apparently, he feared his wife more.

Antipas was also the Herod that mocked the Lord Jesus:

"And Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate." (Luke 23:11)

He was angry because Jesus would not perform miracles to entertain him. Jesus wouldn't even acknowledge him. Antipas was sent, in 39 A.D., into exile after a complaint was lodged against him to Rome from his nephew, Herod Agrippa I.¹⁸

Agrippa I was a grandson of Herod the Great, and son of Aristobulus. He "vexed certain of the church", and had James the brother of John executed; and, would have killed Peter also, had the Lord not released him from prison. (Acts 12) Wiersbe believes that Herod was trying to convince the nationalistic Jews of his loyalty to them by persecuting the Church, which by this time included Gentiles. Wiersbe states:

The Herods were despised by the Jews, who resented having Edomites ruling over them. Of course, Herod knew this; so he persecuted the church to convince the Jewish people of his loyalty to the traditions of the fathers. Now that the Gentiles were openly a part of the church, Herod's plan was even more agreeable to the nationalistic Jews who had no place for "pagans."¹⁹

God removed Herod Agrippa I from his position and from this earth when He did not give God the glory when people began to worship him:

"And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." (Acts 12:2, 20, 22-23)

¹⁸ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 131). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

¹⁹ Ibid (p. 452)

The last Herod we meet in the Scripture is Herod Agrippa II. Paul the Apostle appears before him, his sister, Bernice, and Felix in Acts 27 and 28. Out of all of the members of the Herod family, this one is the least dislikeable. McGee states:

He belonged to the rottenest family that I know anything about. It is the worst family that is mentioned in the Bible. I think old Ahab and Jezebel were like Sunday school kids compared to the Herod family. You know the old bromide about giving the Devil his due. Well, let's give the Herods their due. Agrippa was an intelligent man and a great man in many respects in spite of his background.²⁰

Luke tells us that Agrippa II was almost persuaded to be a Christian after hearing Paul's defence of the gospel and personal testimony of salvation.

Good or bad (mostly bad), the Herod family played an integral role, which shaped the culture for the people of Palestine in the beginning of the New Testament period. Their contributions and influence affected every aspect of Jewish society. Would the world have been a better place without them? Perhaps, but perhaps not. Though they may have in fact meant much of what they did for their own selfish, greedy, and evil purposes, God used them to accomplish His sovereign purpose. The Herod Dynasty helped to set the stage the "fullness of time" required for the coming of the Saviour and the spread of His gospel.

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²⁰ McGee, J. V. (1997). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed., Vol. 4, p. 626). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

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