

Caesarea Maritima—Herod's Masterpiece

Ancient Caesarea was a town built about 25 BC by Herod the Great as a great port on the Mediterranean Sea. King Herod the Great decided that Judea needed a great harbor to bring goods in and out of Jerusalem and Judea, as well as millions of tourists from around the known world. Herod also wanted to build a new Greco/Roman city in honor of Caesar Augustus, thus he named it Caesarea in honor of Caesar. Herod built the new city upon the site of an old Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coast about halfway between the cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa. It served as the administrative center of the Roman government in the province of Judea. The problem was that there was no natural deep water port in that area. Everyone else considered it impossible to build a man made artificial harbor there, but to the genius of Herod the Great, it was just another worthy challenge for him to conquer. In 22 BC Herod began construction of a deep water harbor. On the land he built storage warehouses, markets, roads, baths, temples, theaters, and a hippodrome for chariot races. Just think of that great chariot race in The Ten Commandments movie, and you can envision the hippodrome there. On top of an ancient Phoenician city, Herod built in 12 years the grandest city in Judea other than Jerusalem. There was no fresh water there so Herod built an aqueduct about eight miles long from Mt. Carmel bringing in enough fresh water for a major city. The ruins of the aqueduct are still visible today. The amphitheater there has been restored, and the ruins of the ancient theater have an inscription to the Roman emperor and also the governor during the time of Christ—Emperor Tiberius and Governor Pontius Pilate. This was an important find because it is the only evidence of Pilate's existence outside of the Bible.

In 21BC, Herod built a large two-part harbor with an inner harbor with calm water and an outer harbor. The all weather harbor enclosed around 100,000 square meters, and was constructed by using a new invention of Herod the Great—hydraulic concrete. He created a huge breakwater out in the sea to protect the ships in the inner harbor. The great Jewish historian Josephus described the harbor in his writings, "the king triumphed over nature and constructed a harbor larger than Piraeus (the harbor at Athens), including other deep sheltered areas outside the harbor where ships could lay safe at anchor. Notwithstanding the totally recalcitrant (defiance of control) nature of the site, he grappled with the difficulties so successfully that the solidity of his masonry defied the sea, while its beauty was such as if no

obstacle had existed.” Recent archeological digs have confirmed Josephus’ description. Huge stone blocks were piled into the sea to lay the harbor’s foundations. These blocks were hollowed out and had containers made out of wood. They built the large hollow wooden containers so they could float them out into the sea, and when in position fill them with all the ingredients of a new concrete which when combined with water would sink down into position. A special cement was invented by Herod that was poured into the blocks and formed into concrete when it mixed with the water. The secret ingredient of the cement was volcanic ash from Italy. But to form the inner harbor, a large breakwater had to be built out in the sea to create a lull in the sea movements. Large stones that had been cut from quarries were piled and fit together precisely very much as the Temple walls in Jerusalem were built. Just how he got those giant heavy stones way out into the deeper ocean and formed underwater into a wall still baffles experts today. Herod built two breakwaters on the northern and the southern sides. The stone and concrete breakwater on the south side was 500 meters long. The major problem that Herod overlooked was the harbor was constructed over a major geological fault line that runs along the coast. The walls built in the ocean do not stand anymore as the many earthquakes made them tumble down over a 100 years later. The great earthquake of 130 AD pushed the entire harbor floor up with the result of 17 known shipwrecks we have found on the ocean floor. During the time of Christ (28-33 AD), Caesarea was the largest harbor in the Mediterranean Sea. Trade and commerce exploded and Herod made a fortune. Revenues from the harbor were used for Herod’s many building projects in other cities. Herod designed all the buildings in Caesarea after the classic Greek/Roman architecture of the time.

Another amazing structure in Caesarea was Herod’s own palace there. He envisioned a splendid palace that would appear to rise out of the ocean just off the shoreline. In the ocean just across from the great amphitheater and the hippodrome, Herod built underwater piers out into the ocean to form a promontory jutting 100 meters out into the ocean, and set a foundation on top of the underwater promontory. Now the ruins of Herod’s Palace can be seen at the end of an underwater promontory. We can just imagine the awesome views he had from his luxurious palace. Every five years the city hosted major sports competitions, gladiator fights, chariot races, and theatrical productions. People came from all over the Roman Empire to see something akin to Rome’s version of the Olympic Games.

The Great Jewish Revolt of 66-70 AD started in Caesarea when the Jews took exception to a

pagan ceremony conducted on their Sabbath near their synagogue. The Romans ignored Jewish protests, which provoked a riot that soon spread throughout the country. When the small Roman garrison responded with unprecedented force, even the most moderate Jews joined the revolt and temporarily drove Roman forces out of the country. The Roman legions came back in 70 AD and wiped out all the Jewish rebels and completely leveled Jerusalem. A Roman historian records that 2500 Jewish captives were taken to the outdoor theater in Caesarea to be slaughtered by gladiators in front of a festive crowd. From that time on, the Romans made Caesarea the capital of the newly named province they called Palestine. It remained the capital of Palestine (what had been Israel) until 325 AD. In 640 AD, Caesarea was the last city in Palestine to fall to the Muslim invaders. In 1101 AD, the Crusaders recaptured it from the Muslims, and the Crusader fort remains there today. During the Crusades, a legend grew up that in Caesarea the Holy Grail was discovered, and for two centuries Europeans came there searching for the Holy Grail. The Crusaders lost the city back to the Muslim leader Saladin in 1187. In 1265 AD the Baybars of Egypt destroyed the city, and it lay in ruins until 1884.

Modern Day Caesarea

After the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948, the Rothschild family owned all the land in the area of ancient Caesarea. The Rothschilds agreed to transfer most of the land to the new Israel. In his will, Edmund James de Rothschild created a foundation to further education, arts, and culture in the area. The foundation is owned half by the Rothschild family and half by the nation of Israel. The foundation is continuing the development of all the land around the ancient ruins and the profits go for maintaining and restoring ancient Caesarea. Most of the restoration has occurred in the last 20 years, so if you were there in the nineties you won't recognize it today. The foundation built and operates the only 18 hole golf course in Israel.

Caesarea in the New Testament

In the great commission that Christ gave the Twelve Apostles in Matthew 28:19 and Acts 1:8, Jesus told them to go and take the Gospel to "Judea, Samaria, and then to the rest of the world". About 10 years later, they had obeyed Him to take it to Judea and Samaria where their audience was primarily Jewish, but they had failed to fulfill the last part to take it to all the Gentile nations. Why had most of the Apostles not even left Jerusalem? Traditionally, the

boundaries between Jew and Gentile were uncrossable during the time of Christ. Jews considered Gentiles unclean, and the dietary laws were so ingrained into their life that it was unthinkable to even sit down at a table with a Gentile. Even the Gentile houses were considered contaminated. Therefore, the Apostles blocked out (selective hearing) the last part of the great commission, and had no intention to go into Gentile territory. Nevertheless, the will of God cannot be thwarted, and in times of great transition like the establishment of the church, God often intervenes. The dividing wall between Jew and Gentile had to be broken down, and it all began in Caesarea. The Roman centurion, Cornelius, lived in Caesarea, and he was a God fearing man searching for God, so God prepared his heart to hear the Gospel and believe in Jesus. Then God gave Simon Peter a recurring dream or vision that disturbed Peter. Originally God had given the Jews the laws of kosher eating to keep them separated from the pagan Canaanites, but now that separation was counterproductive. God was now bringing Jews and Gentiles together as one in the church. God made it clear that things had changed, and He had a Gentile in Caesarea named Cornelius that He wanted Peter to go to and share the Gospel. The world of monotheistic law abiding Jew was about to collide with the world of polytheistic philosophical Greco-Roman culture, and it first occurred in Caesarea. The story can be found in Acts 10:34-43 where Peter delivered a short presentation, and immediately Cornelius and his family and the whole household believed in Jesus. I imagine that Peter was amazed and had his doubts, but God revealed that it was true by giving them the gifts of the Holy Spirit, so that Peter and the apostles would have no doubt that Cornelius, et al were all saved. When Peter reported all that to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem they said, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to eternal life". The rest of the story is that some of the Jews then went up and started a Gentile church in Antioch, Syria which became huge and they sent the Apostle Paul on his three missionary journeys into the Greek world and later to the western world as well. It all started for us Gentiles in Caesarea.

Much later Paul took a ship from Ephesus to Caesarea on his way to Jerusalem where he was arrested. The Romans imprisoned Paul in Caesarea for two years during which he was taken numerous times to Herod's Palace to appear before the Roman Governor Felix to defend himself in Acts 24. Later, Paul appeared before the successor of Felix which was Governor Festus. In both trials Paul had the opportunity to preach the Gospel to all the Romans there in Herod's Palace in Caesarea. Paul's disciple, Luke, accompanied him to Caesarea, and it was there that he wrote the Gospel of Luke. In Acts 25:23-26:32, Paul also got to witness to

Festus and the great-great grandson of Herod the Great, named Herod Agrippa. The Gospel was so compelling that Agrippa said, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian". Then both men said that Paul was innocent and should be set free.

As we can see from history, Herod the Great had great plans to build Caesarea to enrich himself and bring glory to himself, but God used it for good. God used It as part of His grand plan to bring the Gospel to the world, and so even we, the Gentiles of the western world should see the city and the artificial harbor as a link in the chain of God's plan to save us.

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