

Herod the Great

In 40 BC, Mark Antony of Rome was so impressed with Herod that he personally presented Herod to the Roman Senate, and asked that Herod be made King of Judea. The Senate complied with Antony's request, and appointed Herod as King over Jerusalem and Judea. His authority was to be backed up by Rome. According to the historian Josephus, Herod had journeyed to Rome not expecting to be made king, but to ask for help against the Jewish heir from the Hasmonean dynasty named Antigonus and his allies the Parthians. Mark Antony had been so impressed by Herod that Antony made the decision, and rammed it through the Senate in seven days. At 33 years of age, Herod had seen Rome, impressed the Senate, and been made King of Judea, Galilee, Peraea,, and Idumaea. At this point in the study we should ask how Rome gained control over the whole area, and had the authority to appoint Herod.

The Maccabees, the Hasmoneans, and the Romans

The Greek generals who had served under Alexander the Great continued to rule over the Middle East after Alexander died. The descendants of General Seleucus and General Ptolemy ruled the area where Israel was for about 165 years until the priestly family called the Maccabees led a revolt in 164 BC that took back Jerusalem, and eventually all the area that had originally been Israel. Maccabees was a storied name given them for their prowess in battle which meant the "Hammer". Their real family name was the Hasmoneans. They were priests, and their family ruled over Israel for about 100 years. Their power was ended by an internal squabble between Hasmonean brothers, each with the ambition to rule. This caused a civil war beginning in 67 BC. Their father, Alexander Jannaeus, died around 76 BC. It was his wish that his wife would become ruler at his death, and she ruled for about 10 years. When she died, her two sons, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, became rivals. Hyrcanus had the support of the Pharisees and the masses, but Aristobulus had the support of the Sadducees and the nobility. The Romans had defeated the Greeks in Syria, and since they had the biggest army in the world at the time, both Hasmoneans appealed to the great General Pompey who was in Syria at the time. Both offered Pompey huge tribute (bribes) to be on their side. In 63 BC, Aristobulus was in control of Jerusalem, but Hyrcanus had an army supported by his ally Antipater of Idumaea. During the time of Persian rule between 539 and 332 BC, the Edomites continued to encroach on the southern part of what had been Israel until they inhabited the land all the way up to Hebron. This new area came to be known as Idumaea and the inhabitants were Edomites that were descended from Esau the brother of Jacob. During the Jewish Hasmonean rule between 150 and 63 BC, Idumaea was taken back, and the Idumaeans were converted to Judaism, and thought of themselves as Jews. Thus

Antipater and his son Herod claimed to be Jewish.

The great and powerful Roman General Pompey sent his General Scaurus with several legions to collect the “tribute” and settle the civil war. When Scaurus arrived he took all the bribes, and then said, “Guess what? We are not taking sides, we are taking over.” In time, Pompey showed up in Jerusalem to see his new prize and bring an end to the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty. Hasmonean inability to solve their own civil and religious differences resulted in losing their freedom altogether. Rome had just taken advantage of the contentious squabbles the Jews had with each other. Pompey actually entered the Temple and even the Holy of Holies, but according to the historian Josephus, “he did not touch anything” so as not to infuriate the Jews. Pompey reinstated Hyrcanus as the High Priest, and later the Idumaean Antipater was made Governor of all of Israel. Antipater had become close friends and a supporter of Julius Caesar. Antipater and his sons had repeatedly helped Rome put down rebellions that broke out on a regular basis. Pompey had taken Aristobulus II and his family back to Rome as prisoners, but both he and his sons were able to get free from time to time and cause revolts. For instance, Julius Caesar had freed Aristobulus to make trouble for his rival Pompey about 50 BC.

The time between 58 and 40 BC was marked by great intrigue, civil war, assassinations, and political turmoil in both Rome and Israel. The Roman general Pompey was defeated and killed in 48 BC. Julius Caesar took over, but he was assassinated in 44 BC. While Caesar was in power, he appointed his Idumean pal Antipater as procurator (governor) of Israel, and he in turn appointed his son Herod as governor of the Galilee area. Herod gained a great reputation in Rome by catching and executing rebels. Herod was also great at collecting taxes and keeping the peace. When Caesar was murdered, one of his killers, Cassius, fled Rome to Syria with his army. Cassius demanded a tribute of 700 talents from Israel. Antipater and Herod were in a difficult position. If they did not pay, then Cassius would march in with his army and take it, but if they did pay, Mark Antony would feel betrayed. They elected to pay up as Cassius was the immediate nearby threat. This worked out well for Herod because a rival named Malchus poisoned Antipater, and Herod needed the help of Cassius to wipe out Malchus. Soon after that, Cassius and Brutus were defeated and killed by Antony and Octavian in 42 BC, and Antony took over the Middle East. Meanwhile, there was a power vacuum in Jerusalem that was filled by a young Hasmonean named Antigonus who was the youngest son of Aristobulus. He gained control by offering a huge sum of money to the Parthians who were an emerging power from what had been Persia. The Parthians plundered Jerusalem, and handed the rival High Priest Hyrcanus and Herod’s brother Phasaël over to

Antigonus. He killed Herod's brother, and had Hyrcanus' ears cut off so he could never be a priest again.

Meanwhile, Herod fled south to the fortress Masada down by the Dead Sea. He left his family there and made the long trip to Rome to seek help from Antony. Herod's political skills must have been enormous because during all the civil wars in Rome and Israel, he had changed sides about four times and still managed to gain Rome's favor every time.

An Arab Jew as King of Israel ?

Herod's father was an Edomite and his mother was an Arab, but Herod presented himself as a Jew. When the Hasmonean King Hyrcanus I took Idumaea in 125 BC, he imposed the religion of Judaism on the area, and Antipater and his son Herod had been born into that religion. Thus they saw themselves as Jews. In order to solidify his status as a Jew and an heir to the throne, Herod married Mariamne who was of the Jewish royal family of Hasmoneans. Different sources spell her name as Mariamme, but I'm going with Mariamne. She was so young at the time that the marriage was not consummated until much later. It was no problem to Herod that he was already married with children, he just disposed of that family for the more politically correct Jewish family.

Expecting and hoping only to be made a Procurator for Rome, Herod was so impressive to the Romans that they appointed him as King of Judea and the surrounding areas. Rome had never done this before. This was significant because Herod was granted unprecedented authority backed up by Rome, and this meant he got to keep more of the money from taxes. These riches meant that Herod would be able to exercise his great talents as a masterful real estate developer and builder of great cities, palaces, and fortresses. This in turn would result in Jerusalem becoming a great city of commerce, and a great tourist attraction. All of this paved the way for the coming of the Jewish Messiah.

Herod returned from Rome and raised an army from the Galilee, and then he took the whole area on the north and west side of the Sea of Galilee. Then he went down to Masada and retrieved his family. Antony of Rome then met Herod at Jerusalem where they besieged and took the city in 37 BC. Antigonus was taken prisoner and executed by Antony. Herod rounded up 45 of Antigonus' closest friends, and slaughtered them. After that time, Herod would always be paranoid about anyone that was a Hasmonean relative, even his own mother-in-law, his wife, and his own sons. Herod put the mother-in-law under guard confined to the palace. She had a grandson from another child named Aristobulus III who Herod invited to a swimming party at the palace in Jericho. Herod's "lifeguards" drowned him in 35 BC. Herod also bumped off the poor old grandfather Hyrcanus II who had his ears cut off earlier. Herod

had grown to be infatuated with his wife Mariamne, but he was so paranoid he left his trusted servant Joseph to watch her whenever Herod left town. Herod gave instructions to Joseph that if Herod was ever killed that he should kill Mariamne and her mother. Mariamne was quite a beauty and a charmer so Joseph had an affair with her and told her about Herod's orders. She was quite angry when Herod got back, so Herod persuaded Joseph to confess (amazing what hot pokers and a few days on the rack can do).

There was a crisis in 31 BC when Herod's pal Antony was defeated by Octavian and committed suicide. In October of 31 BC, Herod again had to change sides, and make peace with Octavian. Herod travelled to Rhodes to have a face to face with Octavian who now became Caesar Augustus, and was worshipped as a deity by Romans. Octavian was well aware of how contentious and rebellious the Jews were so he determined that the "baddest dude in the valley", Herod, was the man for the job. Herod had a new benefactor. When Herod got back he found out Mariamne had again had an affair, and she also found out he had again left orders to kill her if he did not return. They had a series of wild arguments ending in her execution in 29 BC.

Herod the Builder Becomes Herod the Great

Possibly, at this point you are wondering why this Herod guy was called "the Great". He sounds like a ruthless power grabbing killer. Historically, his fame and recognition as a genius comes from his building cities, palaces, and fortresses. He was clearly a great engineer, architect, land planner, and builder. In the Judean area there are earthquakes an average of every 80 years, yet only Herod's walls and remains of his buildings are still in place after 2000 years. His palaces and fortresses are amazing in size, complexity, and creativity. Many think of Herod as a giant egotist whose only desire was to build monuments to himself, but actually according to Josephus, he had higher goals for the advancement of Israel and Judaism in the Mediterranean world.

One of his great accomplishments was to build a port city called Caesarea Maritima. He named it after Caesar Augustus. It became the largest harbor in the Mediterranean Sea. It was a showpiece, and a big moneymaker for Israel. It rearranged trade patterns in the area, and became the destination for all tourists and Jewish pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem. Thus, it was now much more feasible for the large Jewish communities in Asia Minor and Greece to travel to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Perhaps you wondered how the population of Jerusalem increased so dramatically around Passover during the time of Christ. The great crowd that witnessed Jesus, and welcomed Him to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday were there because Herod had provided access from the sea, and also because Herod had rebuilt the

Temple so that it was considered one of the wonders of the world at that time. Caesarea covered 164 acres of new buildings, harbor facilities, theaters, a palace, several temples, and a hippodrome. Herod built excellent water and sewage facilities. Problems with Mother Nature only presented a challenge to Herod's genius. No water? No problem- Herod built an aqueduct that brought water in from Mt. Carmel. No natural harbor? No problem-Herod built an artificial harbor using a new invention of concrete that sets under water. The harbor would easily accommodate 300 ships. Herod built a theater with a seating capacity of 3500. This was where his grandson Herod Agrippa died in Acts 12. Herod built a promontory palace for himself extending into the ocean with a large swimming pool in the center. Paul was imprisoned on the grounds of this palace in Acts 23:35. Herod also built a network of palaces and fortresses all over Judea including Antonia, Jericho, Masada, and the Herodium, but by far his greatest masterpiece was the Temple Mount and the rebuilding of the Temple itself in Jerusalem.

Herod Unknowingly Paved the Way for Messiah

Herod desired to build cities, harbors, and palaces to enhance Israel and its economy, and he succeeded. In 20/19 BC he undertook his greatest project on top of Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. The Second Temple had been built there 500 years earlier, and it was run down and unimpressive. Herod's ambition was to endear himself to the Jews and the world by rebuilding it, and restoring it and Jerusalem to even greater glory than it enjoyed under King Solomon. His success in doing so was used by God to send His Son Jesus Christ into the world to Jerusalem at just the perfect time to redeem mankind. Never before had the passage "you meant it for evil (selfishness), but God used it for good" been so appropriate to the affairs of greedy ambitious men.

Next week—the "wonders" of the Temple Mount, and its part in the Christ story.

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