

The rise and reign of Herod the Great

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King Herod is notorious for his massacre of the infants of Bethlehem, but who was he? How did he come to power? What was he really like? This article shows how this ruthless man came to the throne, removed all enemies, real and imagined, and as a paranoid old man saw the birth of Jesus as a threat to his position as king of the Jews.

“NOW WHEN Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Mt. 2:1-3).

Although the above passage is very well known, the last sentence is not given the prominence it deserves, for it indicates the fear and dread in which Herod was held at that time. The people of Jerusalem knew only too well that his concern about a coming usurper could spark off a reign of terror that would leave no stone unturned until he was satisfied that the threat to his throne had been stamped out. Herod had become by this time a maniacal and unpredictable monarch who was capable of the worst kinds of evil. The questions in all minds would be, What star? What birth? What king? and, Whatever next?

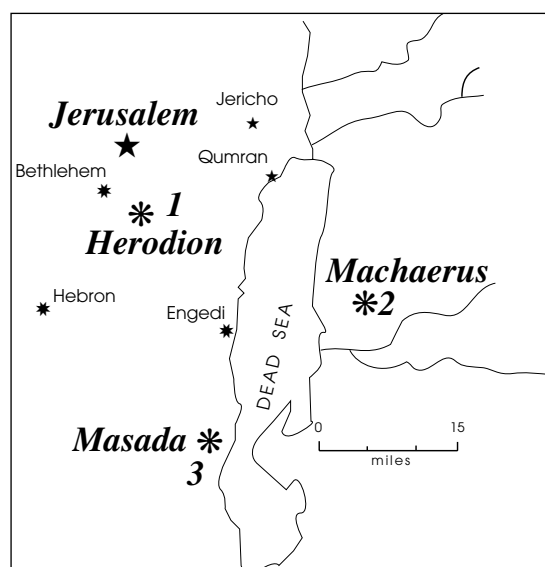
Herod the Great was the first of a line of kings of that name, and his own particular title, ‘the Great’, is deceptive in that it might seem out of character with the slaying of the infants of Bethlehem that Matthew goes on to record. But even the briefest look at this man’s history reveals that it was an act very much in line with his character, particularly at the end of his life when he became extremely paranoid about likely threats to his throne, particularly in that he was not a Jew but an Idumean (Edomite).

The royal builder

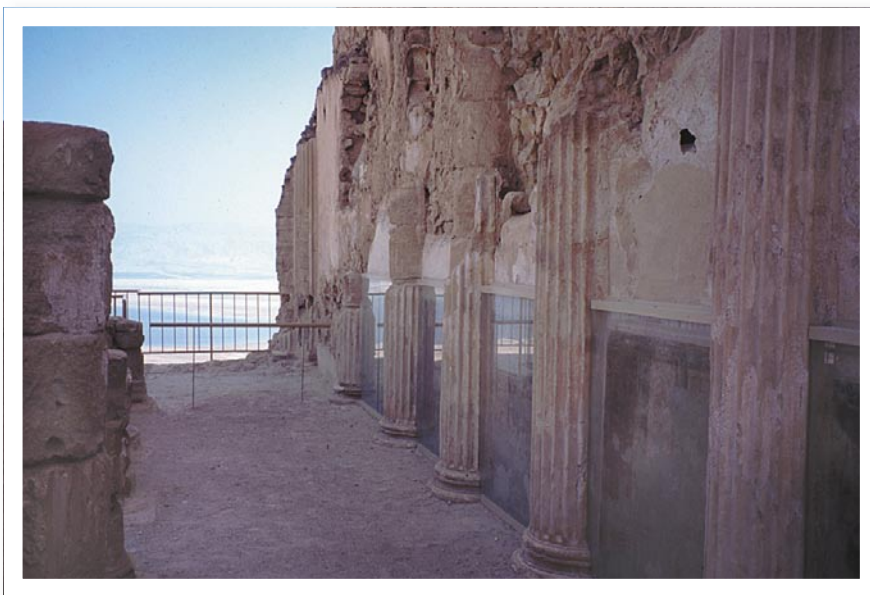
Herod’s greatness was only in his public works, and in that capacity he was quite brilliant. Arthur

Stanley writes: “Few men have ever lived who, within so short a time, so transformed the outward face of a country”. In the north he built a temple of white marble dedicated to his patron Augustus Caesar at a place later called Caesarea Philippi. He completely rebuilt the ruined city of Samaria, which he named Sebaste. He also built the key coastal city of Caesarea with its many marble buildings, giving it excellent port facilities, including a massive breakwater. There also he built another temple dedicated to Augustus, and for good measure erected a colossal statue of him.

At various resorts Herod built luxurious villas with baths, palms and colonnades, and introduced Greek-style hippodromes and theatres, much to the dislike of religious Jews. He also established strategic fortresses, two prominent ones being at Masada near the Dead Sea and at Alexandrium in the Jordan valley north of Jericho. But it was the rebuilding of the splendid temple at Jerusalem that established his greatness in the eyes of the Jewish and Roman world of that day, a work that continued long after his death, but details of which space forbids.



Herod’s three fortresses around the Dead Sea



The partially reconstructed remains of Herod's palace at Masada

Photograph: Tony Benson

The Hasmonean dynasty

When Herod married his second wife Mariamne (Miriam), the daughter of Alexander, son of Aristobulus II, he was marrying into the proud but declining Hasmonean family, perhaps better known as the Maccabees. Their ancestor Hasmon was of the sons of Jehoiarib, mentioned in 1 Chronicles 24:7, and Hasmon's great-grandson Mattathias was the courageous priest of Modin who resisted the oppression of Antiochus IV, sparking off the Maccabean wars, which gave the Jewish nation over a hundred years of relative freedom from foreign domination. It came to an end in 63 B.C. when the Roman armies under Pompey besieged and conquered Jerusalem.

There followed a brief period of insurrection by remnants of the Hasmonean family, including Aristobulus II and his eldest son, Alexander, both of whom were soon slain. This left the remaining son, Antigonus, his sister-in-law, Alexandra, and her two children by her slain husband Alexander—a son, also named Aristobulus, and a daughter, Mariamne, who would become Herod's wife. (The Hasmonean dynasty used several identical names, which can be confusing; the genealogy below will help readers see who was who.)

The son of an Idumean

The rather weak but popular high priest of that time was Hyrcanus, also a Hasmonean, and he allowed himself to be dominated by an Idumean named Antipater, who had allied himself with the

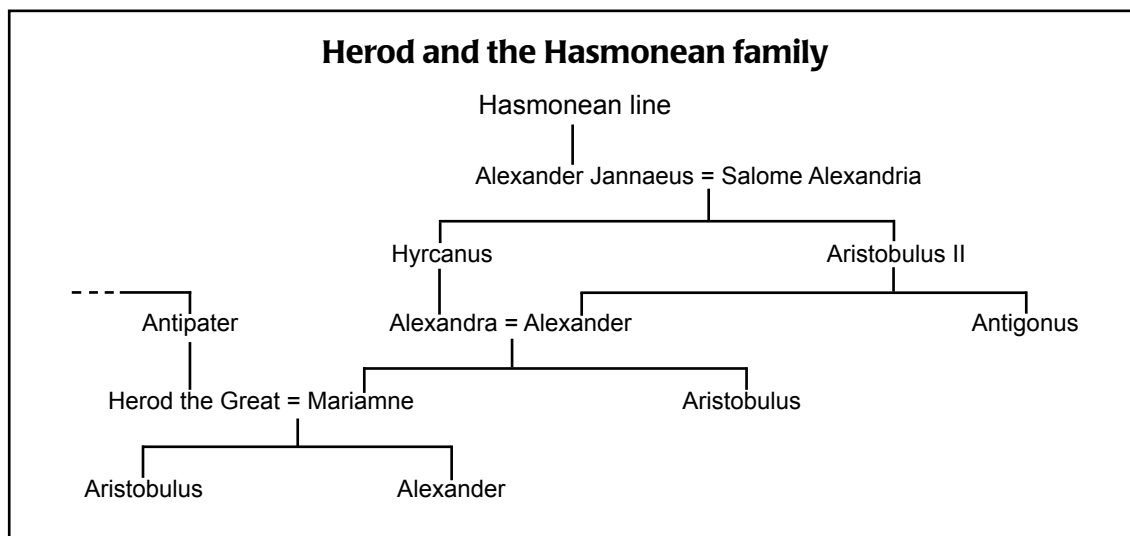
new Roman rulers and was made procurator of Judea from 55 to 43 B.C. Herod was Antipater's second son, being only about fifteen when he first came into public notice; and with his jet black hair and good looks he soon became very popular with the people. He was also a brilliant horseman and a creditable athlete.

It is recorded that about this time an Essene priest named Menahem confronted him and addressed him as "King of the Jews", which the young man took as a divine prophecy and never forgot the encounter. His tutor was a scholar named Nicholas of Damascus, who taught him much about history and philosophy.

Exploits in Galilee

In these early years Herod married an Idumean wife named Doris, who bore him a son whom he named Antipater, after his father. When Herod was about twenty-five years old his father gave him the jurisdiction of Galilee, and his older brother Phasael was made governor of Jerusalem. In his new role Herod energetically put down the rebellion of one Hezekiah, slaying him with several other so-called robbers. As we are well aware, it was contrary to Jewish law to slay anyone without a hearing before the Sanhedrin, and for this reason complaints from the relatives of some of those slain caused Herod to be summoned before that great council at Jerusalem.

Josephus records that, far from being submissive, Herod boldly appeared before them clothed



in purple, with hair and beard trimmed, and with a formidable escort around him. Hyrcanus had sought to smooth matters over somewhat, so that when the great moment came the intimidated council sat in silence and made no accusation whatsoever.

Civil war

Noting Herod's growing power, Antigonus was not prepared to see the throne depart so easily from the Hasmonean household, and in 40 B.C. he allied himself with the Parthians, who had briefly occupied Judea. Having convinced Hyrcanus to surrender to Pacorus, the Parthian general, he thereupon deliberately disfigured him by biting off his ears so that, according to the Mosaic Law, he could not continue as high priest. Hyrcanus was then taken off to Parthia with others, but was later permitted freedom to live in Babylon.

Meanwhile, Antigonus and his Parthian allies had joined battle against the armies of Herod and Phasael, and the latter was captured. Fighting a desperate rearguard action as he retreated eastward, Herod was to learn later that his brother had taken his own life. He was at a low ebb mentally, and twice during this time he also had become suicidal, but was encouraged to fight on by his supporters. He next sought refuge for himself and his family in the fortress of Masada, but soon withdrew with about 9,000 soldiers to the safer refuge of Idumea.

But, although Herod had family and friends in Idumea, he and the king, Malchus, did not get along, and Herod remembered that he had much more influential friends in Rome, in particular the

celebrated Mark Antony. Thus, after travelling by road to Alexandria, he took ship to Italy. It was a voyage that almost came to grief in a similar storm to the Euroclydon that many years later wrecked Paul's vessel at Melita. In fact, Josephus records that Herod's ship barely made it to Rhodes, losing all its burden on the way. Months later, on a rebuilt ship, Herod and company finally reached Italy and eventually the city of Rome.

King of the Jews

Herod's visit to Rome was rewarded with the gift of the Jewish monarchy at the hands of both Antony and Octavius Caesar. It was now 40 B.C., and in high spirits Herod returned to Judea and Galilee with the official title of 'King of the Jews'. He now renewed his war against Antigonus and the Parthians with Roman military backing and increased Jewish support. In 37 B.C. he stormed and captured Jerusalem, where he mercilessly despatched all those who had opposed him in the past (including all but three of the Sanhedrin). Antigonus was finally caught and beheaded.

Hyrcanus now returned to Jerusalem, being assured that it was safe to do so, but Herod cunningly deceived him by treating him most civilly and even calling him father whilst covertly plotting his death. Apart from Hyrcanus, the only other survivor of the Hasmonean dynasty was the seventeen-year-old Aristobulus, younger brother of Herod's new wife Mariamne. Herod had shrewdly appointed as high priest a man named Ananelus from Babylon who could be no threat to him, but he had underestimated the guile of Alexandra, the widowed mother of Aristobulus,

who by letters sought the help of Antony through the famed Cleopatra in Egypt. Hence Herod was constrained to appoint the young Aristobulus as high priest in the place of Ananelus; but, having done so, he began plotting the young man's death. Not long afterwards Aristobulus was suspiciously drowned during a happy frolic at a watering place in Jericho during celebrations connected with the Feast of Tabernacles. It was now 36 B.C.

Herod the cruel

There was now only Hyrcanus left of the Hasmonean household, and since this was a kingly line Herod felt no security while he lived, even though Hyrcanus was now eighty years old and of a peaceful disposition. After a few years had elapsed, however, Hyrcanus's daughter Alexandra, who had lost her son Aristobulus to Herod's wiles (see above), conspired with her father to bring about the king's demise. The plot was discovered, and, confronted by Herod with a letter proving his complicity in sedition, Hyrcanus was tried before the Sanhedrin and executed. It was now 30 B.C.

To avoid family conflict, the females of Herod's family were now well and truly separated. His mother and sister were in Masada, and his second wife Mariamne and her mother Alexandra were at Alexandrium.

Soon afterwards the news that both Antony and Cleopatra had died by suicide caused Herod once again to visit Rome to seek assurances from Augustus Caesar that his throne was still safe. He returned to a family crisis that he could not ignore. His wife Mariamne, herself a Hasmonean, was much aggrieved at the loss of her grandfather Hyrcanus and young brother Aristobulus, and reproached Herod for his complicity in their deaths. It spelt the end for her also; after a brief period of intrigue and suspicion she too was tried and executed.

Herod had also not forgotten Alexandra's indiscretions against him, and hardly had another year elapsed before she too was executed. Then, in 6 B.C., the two sons of Herod's marriage to Mariamne, Aristobulus and Alexander, who by this time were both married with young children, were seen in Herod's distorted mind as leaning more towards the Hasmonean way than that of his own household, so they too were arrested, tortured, and put to death.

King Herod had now developed into a beast of a man, but he was terminally ill, and his own end was near. Despite this, in 4 B.C. he con-

demned to death Antipater, his son by his first wife Doris. Only five days after the sentence was carried out, Herod himself succumbed to a loathsome internal disease at his resort in Jericho.

The visit of the wise men

In historical perspective we can now see how the visit of the "wise men from the east" at the very end of Herod's life found him in a demented state of mind that suspected anybody and everybody of trying to usurp him. But, most of all, it would have been their quite innocent question, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?", that antagonised his jealous mind the most. This was the very title he had proudly borne for so long in what he believed to be a divine fulfilment of the Essene prophet's declaration (see above).

The birth of Jesus was during the period 4–6 B.C., the very period when Herod believed he had despatched the last of those he saw as a threat to his throne. Hence his cunning in dealing with the wise men, followed by his cruel action at Bethlehem, as recorded by Matthew, are very much in keeping with what history reveals about his evil character, that of a basically insecure monarch always acutely aware that, as an Idumean, he was not divinely suitable for the position of King of the Jews.

Thus the Matthew narrative merges with known history of Herod's last days, suggesting that his death could not have been very long after Joseph and his family had safely settled in Egypt, a place which was now devoid of Herodian allies: "he [Joseph] took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: and was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called My son" (Mt. 2:14,15).

So, as the evil monarch miserably breathed out his last at Jericho, the true King of the Jews was securely protected and being readied to increase "in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Lk. 2:52) so that he might eventually take on his rightful role, not only as King of the Jews but also as King of the whole world.

Main sources of information

Stanley's *History of the Jewish Church*.
Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* (Books XIV-XVII).