

Dossier on Herod the Great

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March 19, 2007

*It would be better to be Herod's pig than his son.
~ Augustus Caesar*

Herod the Great was an ambitious and cruel man who became the king of Israel in 36 BC and ruled on behalf of the Romans. His ancestors were Edomite rulers of Idumea who had been forced to acknowledge the overlordship of the Jewish Hasmoneans. Herod's father was Antipater, the conniving and devious man who saw an opportunity to restore Edomite rule, and who bore a major part of the responsibility for the destructive civil war that impoverished the entire nation. This war ended the Hasmonean dynasty and began Israel's slavery to Rome.

In the aftermath of the Roman conquest in 63 BC, Antipater came out on top because he convinced the Romans to appoint him as their regent, ruling Jerusalem on behalf of Rome. Rule was never easy, however, because of the constant and increasing tax burden imposed by the Roman government. The emperor Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC, and in the ensuing power struggle between Cassius, his murderer, and Octavian, both sides demanded even more taxes from all of the Roman tributaries in order to raise armies and fight each other. In trying to collect these taxes, Antipater underestimated the level of Jewish hatred against Rome and was killed in a riot. His son Herod, who had been the ruler of Galilee under his father, immediately seized power.

Herod, who had commanded troops since the age of sixteen, smashed with ruthless ferocity the Jewish tax revolt that had killed his father. He was further tested by Antigonus, the son of Aristobulus and the last of the Hasmonean ruling family, who had escaped from Rome. Gathering his supporters, Antigonus retook Jerusalem in order to restore Hasmonean rule. Antigonus captured and tortured Hyrcanus, his uncle and the enemy of his father, and he then ruled in Jerusalem for several years. But his army was eventually defeated by Herod and the Romans, and Antigonus was beheaded, bringing the Hasmonean dynasty to a bleak and bitter end.

Herod learned early in life to rule by force and to be totally ruthless; he raised the taxes even higher to drive the people into submission. A confiscatory tax called the *fiscus Judaicus* was devised especially for the Jews—either bow down and worship the emperor or pay him.

In order to show the people that their taxes were achieving some tangible results, Herod went on a building binge. He had the Tomb of the Patriarchs constructed in Hebron, rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, constructed a huge tower of the guard next to the Temple, and created new palaces for himself. Herod eventually designed and built an entire city on the Mediterranean coast, naming it Caesarea in honor of the Roman emperor, with the intent that it would become his new capital city.

From the perspective of the Jews, however, Herod's crowning achievement was the rebuilding of the Temple. It was one of the largest construction projects of its era,

comparable by some to the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Temple had been partially rebuilt in the days of Nehemiah around 450 BC, but Herod expanded it and made it much more beautiful. The entire exterior surface as well as the Holy of Holies inside were covered with gold, and the uncovered portions were faced with white marble. The building shone like the sun. It was said that the Temple could be seen from many miles away and appeared to be a dazzling golden-white mountaintop; in the morning sun, the reflection was so bright that one could not look directly at it. The Temple dominated Jerusalem, dwarfing the rest of the city.

Herod was an energetic ruler, but his personal life was marked by extreme cruelty and capriciousness. After defeating Antigonus and becoming the undisputed ruler of Judea, he demanded that Hyrcanus provide his daughter Mariamme to him as wife. Herod was already married, so in order to make room for Mariamme, he banished his first wife and their son, and later had the son executed. Herod went on to take many wives and concubines, but Mariamme was his favorite. She bore him five children in seven years, but she hated him because Herod had killed her brother for becoming too popular with the people. Despite—or perhaps because of—her hatred, Herod lusted after her continually, but in a fit of unfounded jealousy he ordered that she be executed. After her death his lust for her was so strong that he demanded that she be brought back to life so that he could continue having sex with her. In addition to murdering his first-born son, Herod slew several more of his children who in his estimation were a threat to his rule.

He also treated the religious leaders very badly, killing those who refused to support his decisions. When the Temple was dedicated in 10 BC, Herod murdered the entire Sanhedrin, the ruling religious council consisting of Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes, because they had objected to the placement of any Roman regalia in the Temple. Later, when several Jewish teachers and their students tried to tear down golden eagle figures that had been placed on the temple walls, Herod had them captured and burned alive. At one point he needed to take an extended trip away from Jerusalem, and to forestall any possible coup attempts while he was gone, he had his father-in-law, Hyrcanus, assassinated. He created a large bureaucracy and a secret police to collect taxes and spy on dissidents, and by the end of his reign many aspects of the government had become very corrupt.

In his last days, Herod was afflicted with painful diseases, perhaps syphilis and gangrene, compounded by kidney failure. Just prior to his death he gave orders to have all of the principal men of Israel shut up in the hippodrome at Jericho and slaughtered as soon as he had died, so that “his grave might not be without the tribute of tears.” Fortunately this order was never carried out, and instead the Jews had a festival to celebrate his death. Augustus Caesar once said of him, “It would be better to be Herod’s pig than his son.”