

The Herod family
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The story of the Herod dynasty in Palestine is important. It runs parallel to the establishment of Christianity, and is very helpful in understanding the historical and cultural context of the time. The Herods were the puppet kings of Rome, and governed Palestine at the local level during New Testament times. Their time span on this earth stretched from about 63 B.C. until the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

The story shows in graphic detail how God raised up a dynasty of rulers, and in spite of their corruption, used that dynasty to establish and maintain the political and social incubator for the birth and ministry of Christ, and the establishment of Christianity.

This brief paper traces the origins, lineage, intrigue, and work of the Herods, and shows how God managed their activities to accomplish His purpose on this earth. It gives us hope, since we also live in a world full of deception, violence and corruption. We can be encouraged that God is still interested in the affairs of humanity, and that He makes, maintains, and governs history

The Herod story is complex, and filled with cunning political ability and charm, but also with brutal palace intrigue. It interfaces with the famous names we are familiar with: Antony, Cleopatra, Caligula, Julius Caesar, and other legendary names.

The Herod clan was large and it is hard to sort them all out. The following five players are probably the best known and most important in relating to Bible history. They are Antipater (he started the clan), Herod the Great (ruler at the birth of Christ), Archelaus (who ruled when Christ's family fled to Egypt), Herod Antipas (who ruled at Christ's crucifixion), Herod Antipas I (who tried to stamp out Christianity), and Herod Antipas II (the last of the rulers).

Antipater

A starting place would be when the Roman ruler, Pompey, organized the eastern part of the Roman Empire in 63 B.C. Pompey placed a man by the name of Hyrcanus as the high priestly ruler over Galilee, Samaria, Judea, and Perea. Hyrcanus, in turn, appointed an ethnic Edomite, Antipater, as his senior officer. This senior officer and his descendents became Herodian dynasty.

A brief word about who were the Edomites is in order. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau (Genesis 25:30; 36:1, 8). The kingdom of Edom was founded during the 13th century B.C., and is located on the mountain and plateau area between the Dead Sea and Gulf of Aqabah, and is referred to as Mount

Seir. Esau was the oldest of the twin brothers, Esau and Jacob, who were sons of Isaac and Rebecca (Genesis 25:24, 25). The Jews descended from Jacob.

When Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, and when Jacob stole Esau's blessing, an animosity arose between the two that stretched throughout history to this day (Genesis 27:34-41). Even after Jacob fled for his life, and returned in later years, there was a wary truce between the two men (Genesis 33). For example, an Edomite king refused Moses passage through Edom (Numbers 20:14-21). Saul fought against the Edomites (1 Samuel 14:47), David conquered them (2 Samuel 8:14), but they revolted against Jehoram about 847 B.C. (2 Kings 8:20, 22). The Edomites rejoiced over the torment of Judea during the Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C., and began to take over some of the land. Under Persian rule, Edom became known as Idumea, the Greek form of Edom.

In summary, we can see that the Edomites (ethnically part of the Arab world) and Jews had a centuries old tension that was reflected in the culture of New Testament times – and continues today. The Herodian dynasty had to politically navigate the stormy waters between the ruling Romans, restive Jews, and at a time when the Jews had an age old animosity against the Edomites. God gave the Herods the necessary political, diplomatic, economic and leadership skills to maintain a good balance. A place of relative stability was needed to birth the Church.

Now, we can return to how the Herodian lineage developed. Antipater, who was an able and loyal administrator, won Julius Caesar's favor, and in 47 B.C., Antipater was appointed to the procurator ship of Judea. Hyrcanus, now getting up in age, was persuaded by Antipater to give Phasaël, Antipater's eldest son, the governorship of Jerusalem, and Herod, Antipater's second son, to the governorship of Galilee. Bad times, however, fell on Antipater as he was murdered in 43 B.C. It followed that Antipater's two sons, Phasaël and Herod, were granted their father's position in Hyrcanus' court. Then began Herod's rise to power. Here is how it happened.

Herod the Great

The perennial nemesis from Rome's northeastern empire, the Parthians, revolted the year after Julius Caesar's assassination. In 40 B.C., they invaded Palestine, captured both Hyrcanus and Phasaël, and carried them off in captivity. The sly, charming Herod, however, escaped to Egypt, evaded the scheming Cleopatra, and made his way through a stormy winter voyage to Rome where he courted and won the favor of both Octavian and Antony.

Herod was appointed to govern the realm of Palestine, and in 39 B.C. traveled home to claim his turf. A wily, capable warrior and military strategist, Herod unseated the Parthian puppet, Antigonus, and mastered his inheritance. From here we can call him Herod the Great. He was ruthless, yet a capable negotiator, effective diplomat, politically astute, and eager opportunist. He displayed

remarkable skills of politically steering a safe course between the ruling Romans, and cantankerous Jews.

As the story continues, in 30 B.C., the charismatic Herod the Great retained the favor of Octavian, who had defeated Antony. Herod remained in power for the rest of his life, down to 4 B.C. He was the king when Jesus was born, somewhere around five or six B.C.

The Herodian party embraced the Hellenization culture and Roman policies in Palestine. They favored local political control, and were resistant to any challenge of the status quo. They did not want the Romans to interfere with their nominal local control, politically. Herod the Great built the great temple in Jerusalem. He started the project in 20 B.C., and it was finished in A.D. 64 – just six years before its complete destruction – a real historical event that was predicted by Jesus (Matthew 24:1, 2). Herod the Great accomplished other favors to the Jews. He gave Palestine order and economic opportunity. The Herods even joined in with the plot to eliminate Jesus (Matthew 22:16; Mark 3:6; 12:13).

Herod the Great, however, had a dark side. He was a cruel tyrant. His family and private life were marked by feuds, intrigue, and murder. For example, Herod the Great had several sons by different women. But, he also had a favorite wife, Mariamme. Herod's sister, Salome, along with his son, Antipater (whose mother was Doris), murdered Mariamme and her two sons (Alexander and Aristobulus) in 7 B.C. Distraught, and nearing the end of his life, Herod the Great then killed his son, Antipater.

Herod the Great contributed much to Palestine. He built many buildings, fortresses, and even started building the massive temple in Jerusalem in 20 B.C.

The slaughter of the innocent babies (Matthew 2:16-18) also occurred under his rule. He finally fell victim to delusions of persecution and uncontrollable outbursts of violence. As mentioned, he died a tormented death in 4 B.C., right after his demented attempt to murder the Messiah in His infancy (Matthew 2:3-19). He was about 70 years of age, and had great wealth, which he spread throughout his family. Surprisingly, Herod the Great's evil stratagems were permitted by God, and were in fulfillment of God's plan, according to prophecy (Matthew 2:5, 15, 17).

It is of special note, however, that Herod the Great recognized and acknowledged the coming of the Messiah, and sought to discern from the Jews the location of where the Messiah (Jesus Christ) would come from (Matthew 2:1-6). Messiah was to be a political leader for Israel, and Herod wanted to eliminate any threat to his throne.

With all of Herod the Great's sons and daughters from different mothers, the picture becomes more confusing at his death. Herod the Great left his kingdom to three sons. **Archelaus**, whose mother was Malthace, a Samaritan woman, took Judea and Idumea. **Herod Antipas**, whose mother was also Malthace, took Galilee and Perea. Finally, **Philip**, whose mother was a Jewess named Cleopatra, took Iturea, Trachonitis, and other lands in the northeast. Then the jockeying began between the sons to gain more power.

Archalaus and the Parable of the Pounds

Archalaus was brutal, but lacked political skills. He took the title of king, and severely quelled the bloody uprisings in Jerusalem after the death of Herod the Great. This was the time when the Jesus and His parents came back from Egypt. The Bible states, *"But when he (Joseph) heard that Archalaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he departed for the regions of Galilee, and came and resided in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'"* (Matthew 2:22, 23). Thus, Christ grew up under the rule of Herod Antipas.

It is, indeed, comforting to know that God has His plan, and is working it out to perfection, even in the midst of the political corruption and intrigue that we see on the surface of history.

Archalaus traveled to Rome to gain the Emperor's support, as things were rapidly falling apart under his rule. He was opposed by his brother, Herod Antipas, and a Jewish embassy, but managed to maintain his hold on power. He was, fortunately, denied the royal title of king. His story serves as the background for the Parable of the Pounds, spoken of by Luke (19:11-27). Archalaus kept his rule for 10 years, but was finally unseated and banished to Gaul. A Roman knight, Coponius, took his place as governor of Judea. He levied a harsh tax against the Jews, which initiated a revolt led by Judas of Gamala, and the rise of the Zealots who became a force in Palestinian politics.

Herod Antipas

Herod Antipas (an abbreviation for Antipater) inherited his father's cunning for political rule. Jesus called him "That fox," (Luke 12:32). He ruled in Galilee until A.D. 39. Probably sometime before A.D. 23, Herod Antipas met the evil force that brought much grief, and his eventual downfall: the woman, Herodias, who demanded John the Baptist's head. Herodias was first married to Herod Antipas's half brother, Philip.

This Philip lived in Rome, and was not the Philip who inherited a portion of his father's rule. This Philip in Rome was the son of an unnamed wife of Herod the Great. Now, here is where it gets complicated. Herodias was also the daughter of Aristobulus, who was the son of Herod the Great and his favorite wife,

Mariamme. This made Herodias a niece as well as the wife of Philip. She liked her uncles.

On a trip to Rome, and while visiting relatives, a sexual affair developed between Herod Antipas and Herodias. Herodias was a descendant of the once mighty Maccabees, and the daughter of Aristobulus. It is better, she thought, to be married to the ruler, rather than the ruler's brother. As it turned out, Herod Antipas took her back to Palestine as an unlawful wife and queen. The two probably loved each other, but trouble dogged them the rest of their lives.

In the meantime, Herod Antipas' rightful queen, who was a daughter of Aretas IV, the king of the Nabateans, got wind of the affair before the couple made it back to Palestine. Herod was going to divorce her. She escaped to her father's place before Herod Antipas could detain her. Consequently, when Herod Antipas and Herodias returned to Palestine, they found themselves in a frontier war with Herod's father-in-law.

The Nabateans, a powerful nation, had moved into the area of Edom and Moab between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C. (Obadiah 1-7; Malachi 1:1-7). By New Testament times their empire stretched from the Mediterranean Sea south of Gaza, to the Red Sea, and on to the Euphrates River. They controlled Damascus. They also built the famous city of Petra, which was their capital. They were a formidable foe. Herod Antipas was wise in marrying Areta's daughter to forge a political alliance, which was a common practice of the day. It was a massive blunder, however, to divorce her and thus bring a bitter war on himself.

John the Baptist

It was at this time that the crime of John the Baptist's murder occurred (Mark 6:14-29). Herod Antipas was celebrating his birthday with many influential visitors in attendance. The location was at the fortress of Machaerus. Machaerus was Herod's southernmost fortress, located east of the Dead Sea, and on the border of Perea. Areas' kingdom spread southward and it was from here that Herod Antipas and Herodias conducted their disastrous war against Aretas. Machaerus was where Herodias had John the Baptist imprisoned because of his speaking out against the unlawful marriage of Herodias and Herod Antipas. Herodias had to silence anything that would cause her to lose her newfound wealth, status, and power.

The wine flowed freely, and the food and celebration continued. The shouts of merriment and the noise of music wafted across the ground and filtered down to the dungeon where John awaited his fate. Finally, being bored, Herod called in his step daughter, Salome, to dance before the guests. It was sensual, sexual, and appealed to all the base instincts of men. The consequences were violence, the death of John the Baptist whose head rolled from his body at the impact of the executioner's axe. The sordid event marked a tragic, downward, freefalling spiral in the life of Herod Antipas. Herod had positive feelings toward John, could

recognize what was truth, and even grieved over John's death (Mark 6:20, 26). But, his life crumbled.

This became the second plank in Herod's fall: the hatred of the Jews against him for the murder of John the Baptist. The Jews believed God was leveling justice against Herod Antipas, and became rebellious. Herod Antipas feared an uprising.

There was yet another force coming hard against Herod Antipas: the ministry and following of Jesus Christ. This disturbed Herod Antipas greatly (Mark 6:14-16). His mind was deteriorating, because he thought Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected and coming to haunt him (Mark 6:16). A tormented conscience and impending loss and bankruptcy is a torturous experience.

Herod Antipas also participated in another dastardly deed: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in A.D. 30. At Christ's trial, Pilate sent him to Herod Antipas, because Jesus fell under Herod's jurisdiction, being from Galilee (Luke 23:6-12). Herod, in the face of heated opposition from the Jews, experienced his popular support quickly fading. Furthermore, faced with a war that was going badly, he caved in to Jew's demands for Jesus' murder. The act also cemented an alliance between Pilate and Herod – which Herod badly needed. Political pressure caused Herod Antipas to make another enormous decision. But, again, God was using the political corruption and palace intrigue of the day to accomplish His eternal purposes.

As a footnote to the girl, Salome, she eventually married her uncle Philip, the governor of Iturea, and brother to Herod Antipas, about 30 A.D. King Philip died in A.D. 34, and she then married her cousin, Aristobulus, king of Chalcis, which was north of Abilene in the Anti-Lebanon hill country. Salome, according to legend, died from injuries incurred from a fall on some ice.

Meanwhile, the military campaign Herod Antipas was conducting against his father-in-law was falling apart. It was a disaster. In fact, Herod Antipas' army was destroyed. Finally, Herod Antipas had to appeal to Emperor Tiberius in Rome for help, who sent Vitellius, governor of Syria to help. More problems confronted Herod, however. Vitellius marched his two legions of warriors through Judea on the way to Petra and a military confrontation with Aretas in the Arabian Peninsula.

The Jews opposed Vitellius. They objected to the army marching through Judea with their various images and insignias, which was against their laws. Vitellius halted his army. There, along with Herod Antipas, he went to Jerusalem for a few days to offer sacrifices to God, and win over the Jews. While there, he granted the position of high priest to Theophilus. However, while in Jerusalem, more bad news cascaded upon Herod Antipas. In A.D. 37, the report came from Rome that Herod Antipas' sponsor, Tiberius, had died. Fearing that the new Emperor would

not want him to continue the war effort, Vitellius disbanded his army, and retired to Syria. Herod Antipas was abandoned.

Finally, in A.D. 39, Herod Antipas fell from power. Caius Caligula had ascended the throne at Rome, and Herod, incited by Herodias, appealed to the new ruler for the title of king. Herodias was desperately jealous of the favor Caligula had bestowed upon Herod Agrippa I, her brother. She wanted Herod Antipas to have the same. Herod Antipas was resistant to the persistent cajoling of Herodias, suspecting he might run afoul of Caligula by such a request. Eventually, he consented. Caligula, suspecting treasonable motives, actually deposed Herod Antipas. Ironically, the charge had been leveled against him by his treacherous nephew, Herod Agrippa I. Herodias had dragged Herod Antipas to his moral and political failure. But, to her credit, Herodias rejected the favors of the Emperor, and accompanied Herod Antipas in his exile at Lyons in Gaul (modern France).

As to the favors Caligula offered Herodias, he discovered that she was the sister of Herod Agrippa I. Consequently, he offered to let her keep her share of the Herod Antipas wealth. She refused, stating, "Thou, indeed, O emperor, actest after a magnificent manner, and as becomes thyself, in what thou offerest me; but the kindness of which I have for my husband hinders me from partaking of the favor of thy gift: for it is not just that I, who have been made a partner in his prosperity, should forsake him in his misfortunes."¹ In the end, even Herodias displayed deep love for her husband, and a degree of honor. But, her dark side was very dark.

Herod Agrippa I

It seems, according to Josephus, that the third son of Herod the Great, Philip of Iturea, was the best ruler. He was a generous leader, who continued the Herodian pro-Roman policies. His territory was far enough away from the center of Jewish activity to avoid direct confrontation with them. He married another member of the Herodian clan, as mentioned, by marrying Salome.

Upon Philip's death, the way opened up for the third Herod to be mentioned in the Bible, Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1). Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, the son of Aristobulus, and brother to Herodias. Herod Agrippa I had been raised in the royal courts of Rome, and gained favor with Caligula, who granted him the vacant realm of Philip. Herod Agrippa I was very charming, ruthless, deceitful, calculating, but an astute politician and ruler. Upon the exile of Herod Antipas and Herodias, Agrippa was granted their realm of Galilee and Perea. Caligula's successor to the Roman throne, Claudius, granted Herod Agrippa I the rest of the realm that was ruled by Herod the Great (A.D. 41). Herod Agrippa I was now in control of Palestine, having also won the support of the Jews.

¹ Cited by Flavius Josephus in William Whiston, *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (New York: H.L. Burt Company, Publishers, n.d.), p. 471.

Herod Agrippa I rose to great power, though still a puppet king of Rome. Unfortunately for him, however, his reign was short lived. He died in A.D. 44. He was well loved by the people, but he made a fatal mistake. He opposed the fledging Church. He put to death the first Apostle martyr, James, the brother of John. Seeing that this was to the liking of the Jews, Herod Agrippa I overplayed his hand.

He arrested Peter, and was going to put him to death. God helped Peter to escape, and Herod Agrippa I was so furious that he had the guards executed. He then traveled to Caesarea, and proceeded to give a great speech to the people of Tyre and Sidon who were petitioning him for peace. He died, struck down by an angel of the Lord at the age of 54, because Herod Agrippa I did not give the glory to God. God is very much in control of the affairs of humanity.

God used the event for at least two purposes. First, He removed a barrier to the spread of the Church, which was the killing of Christians. Secondly, since the Christians in Jerusalem confined themselves to that area, Herod Agrippa's persecution forced them out and onto the uttermost parts of the world. This was the instruction from God (Acts 1:8), but He used Herod Agrippa to force the issue with the Christians.

Herod Agrippa II

But, the Herod dynasty was not finished. Herod Agrippa I left a teen-age son. Claudius appointed this son as king of Chalcis in A.D. 48. Later, more of the realm was added. This son became the last of the Herod dynasty, and was given the title of Herod Agrippa II in A.D. 53. His wife (or live in companion) was his sister, Bernice. They were living together in an incestuous relationship. Another sister, Drusilla, was married to Antonius Felix a Roman procurator of Judea. Felix had seduced her away from the king of Emesa, now known as the Syrian port city of Homs. Paul spoke out against this arrangement before Felix, which cause Felix great fear (Acts 23:24-25:14). Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus.

King Herod Agrippa II displayed the better qualities of a Herod: intelligent, pro-Roman, and very supportive of Judaism. God had used this dynasty, who under Rome maintained a degree of stability and peace in the region, which was needed for the establishment of Christianity. Rome was grateful to this dynasty. However, when the Herodians stepped over the line in opposing the work of God, He put a stop to their cruelty. God used corrupted, cruel, immoral rulers to advance His cause. The Herods were an amazing and competent family, and an unwitting but important part of God's plan.

The Herodian end

But, the reign of the Herods came to a jolting end, and they disappeared from the dusty pages of history. Festus died in A.D. 64, and the Great Revolt of the Jews started in A.D. 66 with the eventual terrible destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Some estimates placed the Josephus indicates that Herod Agrippa II lived in

Caesarea, and witnessed the Roman destruction of his country. He lived the life of a humble and contented vassal of Rome, and died in A.D. 100.

There is another positive note to Agrippa II. When the Jewish wars started (A.D. 66), the Jewish Christians began deserting Jerusalem. In an act of compassion, Agrippa II provided them asylum in the town of Pella in Decapolis, which is beyond Jordan in the north part of Peraea. In another strange twist, Bernice, Agrippa's wife and sister, employed her sensual charms to seduce the conquering Titus. He desired to elevate her to the imperial throne, but public opinion dissuaded him.²

As a peculiar note, the great temple buildings in Jerusalem built by the Herods at great expense, and to keep the favor of the Jews, were completely destroyed by the invading Roman army. The soldiers were told that Jewish treasures of gold was hidden in the seams of the great stones of the temple buildings. Eager for rich plunder, the soldiers dismantled every stone and laid the area waste. Some estimate that some 1.3 million Jews were slaughtered, and about 100,000 prisoners were taken away. The Jewish commonwealth was destroyed, and the conquering Vespasian confiscated the land for himself, or distributed it out to his military veterans. The Herodian attempt to please God with their wealth and power was ultimately and devastatingly rejected.

In a span of 100 years, virtually the entire huge and wealthy Herod clan had become extinct. These were the ones who had power, wealth, and prestige; yet, one generation sought to murder the Christ child, another generation presided over His crucifixion, and a third tried to stamp out the church. The enemies of the Gospel utterly failed and were destroyed, but the church of Jesus Christ goes on.

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), Vol. 1, p. 401, n. 2.