

THE DECLINE OF HEROD “THE GREAT”

REMEMBER:

- **19-18 BC** – The Temple Shrine Building was completely renovated & magnificently adorned.
- **19-12 BC** – The Temple complex was greatly expanded & also magnificently adorned.

17 BC Herod visited Caesar Augustus at Rome. Upon his return, he brought back to Jerusalem with him his sons by the late Mariamne – Alexander (18 yrs) & Aristobulus (14 yrs), who had been educated at Rome. They were quite cold toward their father, owing to his role in their mother’s execution back in 29 BC.

At Herod’s insistence, Agrippa (the second most powerful person in the Roman Republic/Empire) visited Judea on his way back to his administration of the eastern provinces (assigned 23-13 BC).

16-14 BC Herod, left Jerusalem & travelled into the region just north of the Black Sea in order to assist Agrippa with some difficulties there. Along the way he offered assistance to many citizens of the regions he passed through, typically out of his own pocket. Agrippa was greatly helped by Herod’s presence.

14 BC Returning to Rome’s Asia province, Herod convinced Agrippa to hear a legal appeal from the Jews of the region who were not being treated with the religious deference guaranteed them by Roman law. Agrippa upheld their rights & the two parted as great friends.

Once back in Jerusalem, Herod gave the Jewish people a report of his recent travels. Then, since the financial affairs of Herod’s kingdom were so prosperous, he gave his people a 25 % cut in taxes.

“So when he came to them, and gave them a particular account of all his journey, and of the affairs of all the Jews in Asia, how by his means they would live without injurious treatment for the time to come. He also told them of the entire good fortune he had met with, and how he had administered the government, and had not neglected anything which was for their advantage; and as he was very joyful, he now remitted to them the fourth part of their taxes for the last year. Accordingly, they were so pleased with his favor and speech to them, that they went their ways with great gladness, and wished the king all manner of happiness.”¹

Unfortunately, things were not going so well within Herod’s family. During his absence, his sister, Salome, had been engaged in a battle of intrigue with Mariamne’s sons (now 21 & 17 yrs). She warned Herod (60 yrs) that these two sons of his were planning on avenging their mother’s death by killing him & assuming control of the kingdom as the “royal” heirs.

Herod decided to short-circuit any such plan by bringing his eldest son, Antipater (32 yrs & who had been born prior to Herod becoming king) to court. This only made matters worse, since the two sons of Mariamne, being of royal Hasmonean blood, felt insulted by the presence of their older, but non-royal brother.

¹Antiquities 16.2.4.

13 BC When Agrippa returned to Rome after completion of his administration of the eastern provinces, Herod personally took Antipater to the capital & placed him under his friend's care. Once again, this didn't solve the problem. While in Rome, Antipater continually tried to undermine his brothers' influence back in Judea; while in Judea, the two brothers tried to undermine their father's preference toward their elder brother.

12 BC Due, in part, to the success of Antipater' smear campaign, things became so bad that King Herod (62 yrs) took Alexander (23 yrs) & Aristobulus (19 yrs) to Italy where he brought against them formal charges of plotting his murder. Augustus was stunned by the entire episode & invested much effort in reconciling the two sides; blaming both for letting things get out of hand and charging them to work harder at getting along.

"...but Caesar, after some delay, said, that although the young men were thoroughly innocent of that for which they were calumniated yet had they been so far to blame, that they had not demeaned themselves towards their father so as to prevent that suspicion which was spread abroad concerning them. He also exhorted Herod to lay all such suspicions aside, and to be reconciled to his sons; for that it was not just to give any credit to such reports concerning his own children; and that this repentance on both sides might heal those breaches that had happened between them, and might improve that their good will to one another, whereby those on both sides, excusing the rashness of their suspicions, might resolve to bear a greater degree of affection towards each other than they had before. After Caesar had given them this admonition, he beckoned to the young men. When, therefore, they were disposed to fall down to make intercession to their father, he took them up, and embraced them, as they were in tears, and took each of them distinctly in his arms, till not one of those that were present, whether freeman or slave, but was deeply affected with what they saw.

"Then did they return thanks to Caesar, and went away together; and with them went Antipater, with an hypocritical pretense that he rejoiced at this reconciliation. And in the last days they were with Caesar, Herod made him a present of three hundred talents, and he was then exhibiting shows and largesses to the people of Rome: and Caesar made him a present of half the revenue of the copper mines in Cyprus, and committed the care of the other half to him, and honored him with other gifts and incomes; and as to his own kingdom, he left it in his power to appoint which of his sons he pleased for his successor, or to distribute it in parts to everyone, that the dignity might thereby come to them all; and when Herod was disposed to make such a settlement immediately, Caesar said he would not give him leave to deprive himself, while he was alive, of the power over his kingdom, or over his sons."

"...From thence Herod came to Judea and to the temple, where he made a speech to the people concerning what had been done in this his journey:—he also discoursed to them about Caesar's kindness to him, and about as many of the particulars he had done as he thought fit for his advantage other people should be acquainted with. At last he turned his speech to the admonition of his sons; and exhorted those that lived at court, and the multitude, to concord, and informed them that his sons were to reign after him; Antipater first, and then Alexander and Aristobulus, the sons of Mariamne; but he desired that at present they should all have regard to himself, and esteem him king and lord of all, since he was not yet hindered by old age, but was in that period of life when he must be the most skilful in governing; and that he was not deficient in other arts of management that might enable him to govern the kingdom well, and to rule over his children also. He further told the rulers under him, and the soldiery, that in case they would look upon him alone, their life would be led in a peaceable manner, and they would make one another happy; and when he had said this, he dismissed the assembly. Which speech was acceptable to the greatest part of the audience, but not so to them all; for the contention among his sons, and the hopes he had given them, occasioned thoughts and desires of innovations among them.²

²Antiquities 16.4.4-5, 6b. Herod's actual speech at Jerusalem can be found in Wars 1.23.5.

10 BC Herod's 10-year construction of Caesarea Sebaste (on the Mediterranean Coast) was finished. The city's dedication was a major event within the Roman Republic/Empire. It also highlighted, once more, Herod's place as the third most influential person within the Republic/Empire.

"...there was accordingly a great festival, and most sumptuous preparations made presently, in order to its dedication; for he had appointed a contention in music, and games to be performed naked; he had also gotten ready a great number of those that fight single combats, and of beasts for the like purpose; horse races also, and the most chargeable of such sports and shows as used to be exhibited at Rome, and in other places. He consecrated this combat to Caesar, and ordered it to be celebrated every fifth year. He also sent all sorts of ornaments for it out of his own furniture, that it might want nothing to make it decent; nay, Julia, Caesar's wife, sent a great part of her most valuable furniture [from Rome], insomuch that he had no want of anything; the sum of them all was estimated at five hundred talents.

"Now when a great multitude was come to that city to see the shows, as well as the ambassadors whom other people sent, on account of the benefits they had received [from Herod], he entertained them all in the public inns, and at public tables, and with perpetual feasts; this solemnity having in the daytime the diversions of the fights, and in the nighttime such merry meetings as cost vast sums of money, and publicly demonstrated the generosity of his soul; for in all his undertakings he was ambitious to exhibit what exceeded whatsoever had been done before of the same kind; and it is related that Caesar and Agrippa often said, that the dominion of Herod were too little for the greatness of his soul; for that he deserved to have both all the kingdom of Syria, and that of Egypt also."³

Herod's generosity was world renown. Among other things, he helped save the Olympic games.

"But as for his other benefits, it is impossible to reckon them up, those which he bestowed on cities, both in Syria and in Greece, and in all the places he came to in his voyages; for he seems to have conferred, and that after a most plentiful manner, what would minister to many necessities, and the building of public works, and gave them the money that was necessary to such works as wanted it, to support them upon the failure of their other revenues; but what was the greatest and most illustrious of all his works, he erected Apollo's temple at Rhodes, at his own expenses, and gave them a great number of talents of silver for the repair of their fleet.

"He also built the greatest part of the public edifices for the inhabitants of Nicopolis, at Actium; and for Antiochians, the inhabitants of the principal city of Syria, where a broad street cuts through the place lengthways, he built cloisters along it on both sides, and laid the open road with polished stone, which was of very great advantage to the inhabitants: and as to the olympic games,⁴ which were in a very low condition, by reason of the failure of the revenues, he recovered their reputation, and appointed revenues for their maintenance, and made that solemn meeting more venerable, as to the sacrifices and other ornaments; and by reason of this vast liberality, he was generally declared in their inscriptions to be one of the perpetual managers of those games."⁵

³Antiquities 16.5.1.

⁴ Probably those to be held in 8 BC.

⁵Antiquities 16.5.3.

8 BC 12*5-11 (Jewish Date) [FEB] By my calculations, Zechariah's Abijah division was on duty in the Temple during the middle of February. John would have been conceived shortly thereafter.⁶

[Probably sometime during this year] Herod very foolishly decided to augment his wealth from an illicit source. Josephus connects this act with the onset of Herod's final decline.

"As for Herod, he had spent vast sums about the cities, both without and within his own kingdom: and as he had before heard that Hyrcanus, who had been king before him, had opened David's sepulchre,⁷ and taken out of it three thousand talents of silver, and that there was a much greater number left behind, and indeed enough to suffice all his wants, he had a great while an intention to make the attempt; and at this time he opened that sepulchre by night, and went into it, and endeavored that it should not be at all known in the city, but took only his most faithful friends with him.

"As for any money, he found none, as Hyrcanus had done, but that furniture of gold, and those precious goods that were laid up there; all which he took away. However, he had a great desire to make a more diligent search, and to go farther in, even as far as the very bodies of David and Solomon; where two of his guards were slain, by a flame that burst out upon those that went in, as the report was. So he was terribly affrighted, and went out, and built a propitiatory monument of that fright he had been in; and this of white stone, at the mouth of the sepulchre, and that at a great expense also..."

"And indeed Herod's troubles in his family seemed to be augmented, by reason of this attempt he made upon David's sepulchre; whether divine vengeance increased the calamities he lay under, in order to render them incurable, or whether fortune made an assault upon him, in those cases, wherein the seasonableness of the cause made it strongly believed that the calamities came upon him for his impiety; for the tumult was like a civil war in his palace; and their hatred towards one another was like that where each one strove to exceed another in calumnies."⁸

⁶ FROM A FOOTNOTE IN MY CHRONOLOGICAL COMPANION TO THE BIBLE REGARDING THE PRIESTLY DIVISIONS: "Daily sacrifices, and weekly, divisional service ceased with the destruction of the 1st Temple. Daily sacrifices were resumed on 7*1 in 537 BC, but the cycle of weekly, divisional service was not reinstated until after the 2nd Temple was completed on 12*3 (WED/THU 9/10 FEB) in 515 BC (Ezra 6:15-18). If the cycle restarted the week after the Temple's completion, the Jehoiarib Division's first week of service would have been from 12*6 (SAT/SUN 12/13 FEB in 515 BC) until 12*12 (FRI/SAT 18/19 FEB in 515 BC). If this new cycle of service continued uninterrupted until the time of Zechariah - the father of John the Immerser - his Abijah Division would have been on duty from 12*5 (SAT/SUN 15/16 FEB) until 12*11 (FRI/SAT 21/22 FEB) in 8 BC. Had Elizabeth then became pregnant later in the 12th Month, she would have been in her sixth month at the start of the 6th Month in the following year. This also fits very well with my reconstruction of the earliest traditions regarding the timing of Jesus' birth."

⁷ Peter mentions David's tomb in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:29).

⁸Antiquities 16.7.1-2.

8 BC [BEGINNING IN JULY] The Romans took a census of their citizens every 5 years, with severe penalties for non-compliance. From time to time they would extend the census to an accounting of everyone within the Roman sphere of influence. Augustus Caesar was personally responsible (the “Censor”) for overseeing the Roman census three times during his reign.⁹

“Again in the consulship of Gaius Censorinus and Gaius Asinus [8 B.C.] I [took the census, when] the number of Roman citizens was 4,230,000.¹⁰

Res Gestae Divi Augusti

“It came about in those days that a decree went out Caesar Augustus that the entire inhabited *Roman world* be enrolled. This was an enrollment previous to *that* which happened while Quirinius was governing Syria.”¹¹

Luke 2:1-2

6th Jewish Month [AUG/SEP] Jesus was conceived.¹²

[Later in the year?] Herod was being constantly bombarded with accusations from his eldest son, Antipater, that his two sons by Mariamne were still plotting his death. Believing these rumors, Herod appealed to Caesar for the right to try & execute them. Caesar hesitantly gave permission for a Roman trial at Beirut.

9th Jewish Month [NOV/DEC] John was born & named. According to Luke 1:56, Mary stayed with Elizabeth for “about three months,” which would have been just long enough for her to witness the circumcision & naming ceremony for the infant John (Luke 1:57-79).

⁹ FROM A FOOTNOTE IN MY CHRONOLOGICAL COMPANION TO THE BIBLE REGARDING AUGUSTUS’ CENSUS: “Roman records indicate that there was a regular, five-year census cycle during the time of Augustus and Tiberius. These censuses were apparently carried out during the emperor’s annual term as *princeps senatus*, which ran from 1 July until 30 June.”

¹⁰ The total population of the city of Rome around this time has been estimated as between 500,000 to 1,500,000 persons. The Roman Republic/Empire under Augustus may have had a total population of around 40 million persons.

¹¹ FROM A FOOTNOTE IN MY CHRONOLOGICAL COMPANION TO THE BIBLE REGARDING AUGUSTUS’ CENSUS: “The enrollment carried out in AD 6 by Quirinius was necessitated by the removal of Archelaus as Ethnarch, the subsequent absorption of his former territories into the province of Syria and the appointment of Coponius as the first Praefect of Judea. It effectively marked the beginning of direct Roman rule over the Jewish nation and sparked a Jewish resistance movement that continued right through the destruction of Jerusalem 64 years later. It is not surprising that Luke uses it as a chronological marker, indicating that the enrollment about which he was writing predated the infamous one.”

¹² FROM A FOOTNOTE IN MY CHRONOLOGICAL COMPANION TO THE BIBLE REGARDING JESUS’ CONCEPTION: “This dating is based on my own research into the phrase “in the sixth month” as used in Luke 1:26. The Greek construction appears to be a technical reference to the 6th Month of the Jewish year, using definite articles with both the word “sixth” and the word “month.” In direct contrast, Luke 1:36 gives the current length of Elizabeth’s pregnancy as “*the* sixth month,” using no definite article whatsoever.

7 BC [Early in the year?] After the Roman trial (*in absentia*) at Beirut, Herod (67 yrs) had Alexander (28 yrs) & Aristobulus¹³ (24 yrs) executed, leaving Antipater (39 yrs) as the apparent heir to the Jewish throne. Antipater knew he was not popular with the majority of people in the kingdom (nor with the military hierarchy) so he immediately turned his energies to driving a wedge between Herod and the other potential heirs:

- Herod II “Philip” (20 yrs), son of Mariamne (II)
- Herod (17 yrs), son of Cleopatra of Jerusalem
- Herod Archelaus (16 yrs), son of Malthace the Samaritan
- Herod Philip (15 yrs), son of Cleopatra of Jerusalem
- Herod “Antipas” (13 yr), son of Malthace the Samaritan

2nd Jewish Month [MAY] Jesus born.¹⁴

[Sometime during the year] Antipater was sent back to Rome with Herod’s Roman testament. The will named him as Herod’s chosen heir. The designated “second-in-line” to the throne was Herod II, the grandson of Simon, the High Priest appointed by Herod (25-5 BC).¹⁵

An Interesting Edict Specifically Protecting Jewish Religious Rights (c. 7 BC)

“Caesar Augustus, high priest and tribune of the people, ordains thus:—Since the nation of the Jews have been found grateful to the Roman people, not only at this time but in times past also, and chiefly Hyrcanus the high priest, under my father, [Julius] Caesar the emperor, it seemed good to me and my counsellors, according to the sentence and oath of the people of Rome, that the Jews have liberty to make use of their own customs, according to the law of their forefathers, as they made use of them under Hyrcanus, the high priest of Almighty God; and that their sacred money be not touched, but be sent to Jerusalem, and that it be committed to the care of the receivers at Jerusalem; and that they be not obliged to go before any judge on the Sabbath day, nor on the day of the preparation to it, after the ninth hour; but if any be caught stealing their holy books, or their sacred money, whether it be out of the synagogue or public school, he shall be deemed a sacrilegious person, and his goods shall be brought into the public treasury of the Romans. And I give order that the testimonial which they have given me, on account of my regard to that piety which I exercise toward all mankind, and out of regard to Caius Marcus Censorinus, together with the present decree, be proposed in that most eminent place which hath been consecrated to me by the community of Asia at Ancyra. And if anyone transgress any part of what is above decreed, he shall be severely punished.”¹⁶

¹³ Two of Aristobulus’ children would later play important roles in New Testament history. Herodias (8 years old at the time of her father’s death) was the one who manipulated her own daughter into asking for the head of John the Immerser (Matthew 14). Herod Agrippa (3 years old at the time of his father’s death) was the one who executed James the apostle & nearly executed Peter (Acts 12).

¹⁴ FROM A FOOTNOTE IN MY CHRONOLOGICAL COMPANION TO THE BIBLE REGARDING JESUS’ CONCEPTION: “Clement’s Stromata 1.21 (written in Alexandria around 200) references the conviction of some that Jesus was born on either 24 or 25 *Pharmuthi* (the 8th Egyptian month) or 25 *Pachons* (the 9th Egyptian month). At the time of Jesus’ birth, these dates occurred in mid-April and mid-May, respectively, the latter being exactly where a conception date in the Jewish 6th Month would place it. It is interesting to note that the Constitutions of the Holy Apostles 5.13 (written after the Stromata, but before the 6th Century) orders that the birthday of Christ be celebrated on the 25th day of the 9th (presumably Jewish) month – in my estimation a misapplication of the earlier Egyptian date. Since 9*25 in the Exodus-based Jewish calendar almost always falls during the Roman month of December, it was only one more, small step to our modern celebration of 25 December.”

¹⁵ This Herod [Philip] was also betrothed to Herodias, his young niece. Once married, they had a daughter named Salome. Herodias later divorced Herod [Philip] in order to marry another son of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas. It was to this second marriage that John the Immerser objected. It was Salome who danced for Herod Antipas & who asked for John the Immerser’s head.

¹⁶ Antiquities 16.6.2.