

HOW ROMAN CULTURE MERGED WITH JUDEAN CULTURE

37 BC

The Political/Religious Situation of Judea:

- Gaius Julius Caesar Octavian (26 yrs) (later to add the title “Augustus”) was in control of the western half of the Roman Republic.
- Marcus Antonius (46 yrs) controlled the eastern half of the Roman Republic.
- Cleopatra VII (31 yrs) (of Greek descent) was ruling over Egypt with an iron fist; she had great influence over Mark Anthony & she did not care for Herod.
- Herod (36 yrs) had been declared “King of the Jews” by the Roman Senate at the insistence of both Mark Anthony & Octavian.
- Herod had recently appointed his 17-year old brother-in-law, Aristobulus, as High Priest, at the insistence of his mother-in-law, Princess Alexandra.
- Alexandra’s father, the former High Priest & Ethnarch, Hyrcanus (74 yrs) (the great-grandnephew of the famous Judas Maccabee), was living a private life in Jerusalem.

Herod had assigned an honor-guard/security detail to his mother-in-law, in part because he did not really trust her not to conspire against his kingship. Alexandra complained (in correspondence) to Cleopatra, who made arrangements for she & her son to be smuggled out of Judea to Egypt in a pair of coffins. The plan was revealed to Herod, who simply stopped it from being carried out.

FEAST OF TABERNACLES The Jewish festival crowd responded so positively to the young High Priest that Herod became worried that they would prefer him as their king.

SHORTLY AFTER THE FEAST Aristobulus (18 yrs) was “accidentally” drowned during some swimming pool horse play with Herod’s servants at Jericho. Alexandra immediately & publically blamed Herod for his death. She petitioned Cleopatra to convince Mark Anthony to bring Herod up on charges relating the death of Aristobulus, which he eventually did.

36 BC?

Before heading off to Syria to defend himself before Mark Anthony, Herod left orders with his sister’s husband, Joseph (who was to govern in his absence), that if Mark Anthony were to execute Herod, Mariamne was to be killed as well, since Herod couldn’t stand the idea of her becoming another man’s lover, in particular Mark Anthony’s. Joseph later shared this information with Mariamne as proof of Herod’s “love” for her.

After Herod had been cleared of the murder charges, he returned home where he & Mariamne got into a huge fight regarding a rumor that she had been sleeping with Joseph (a lie suggested to him by Herod’s sister, Salome, Joseph’s wife, & who hated Mariamne’s “princess” attitude). In patching things up, Mariamne made reference to Herod’s love for her being proved by his order to Joseph. Herod flew back into a jealous rage, assuming that such private information would not have been shared by Joseph unless they had slept together. He had his brother-in-law immediately executed, but could not bring himself to do the same to Mariamne. However, he did have his mother-in-law arrested & detained for her continued opposition of him.

35 BC? Cleopatra had continually urged Mark Anthony to give Judea & Arabia into her control, removing Herod & his Arabian counterpart from power. He eventually agreed to give portions of them to her, forcing Herod to “rent” certain parts of his own kingdom from Cleopatra.

On a visit to Judea, Cleopatra kept trying to sleep with Herod (obviously trying to control him as she did Mark Anthony). Herod deflected her advances & plotted her assassination for the greater good of everyone of the Middle East, including his friend Mark Anthony. Only concerns about the political fallout from such an act kept him from carrying it out.

DEC 33 BC The Second Triumvirate (the power sharing arrangement which included Octavian & Mark Anthony since 43 BC) officially expired. Octavian began portraying Mark Anthony as a betrayer of his wife (Octavian’s full sister), as a defier of the Senate & of basically being a Roman who had “gone native.”

32 BC The Roman Senate declared war on Queen Cleopatra (and, indirectly, Mark Anthony).

31 BC Mark Anthony prepared to take on Octavian for singular control of the Roman Republic. At the prompting of Cleopatra, Mark Anthony assigned Herod with the task of subduing the Arabians rather than directly assisting him against Octavian. (Cleopatra thought that it was to her benefit to keep Judea & Arabia at odds with one another.) Herod was the eventual victor in this war.

2 SEP Mark Anthony lost the “Battle of Actium.” (This was such a turning point in Octavian’s life, that some ancient historians use it as a chronological anchor date.) He & his dwindling forces retreated into Egypt to continue his fight against Octavian.

Back in Judea, Alexandra assumed that the defeat of Herod’s major supporter would soon result in his removal from the Jewish throne. She pestered her father Hyrcanus (80 yrs) into petitioning the Arabians for temporary sanctuary, believing that once Octavian arrived in the region, Herod would be gone & their family would remain as the only legitimate rulers over the Jews. The Arabs agreed. But, the courier turned the letters over to Herod, who subsequently brought Hyrcanus before the Sanhedrin on charges of treason. Given the evidence of the letters, he was convicted and executed. Josephus clearly pitied his demise.

“His character appeared to be that of a man of a mild and moderate disposition, who suffered the administration of affairs to be generally done by others under him. He was averse to much meddling with the public, nor had shrewdness enough to govern a kingdom: and both Antipater and Herod came to their greatness by reason of his mildness; and at last he met with such an end from them as was not agreeable either to justice or piety.”¹

¹ Antiquities 15.6.4.

Early 30 BC Fearing great political fallout from the Actium disaster, Herod secured his mother, his sister & his very young children by Mariamne in the Masada fortress (32 miles SSE of Jerusalem), under the care of his younger brother. He then secured Mariamne & her mother in the fortress of Alexandrium (25 miles NNE of Jerusalem), with secret orders that they should be killed if anything should happen to him on his upcoming visit with Octavian, leaving his children as the only legitimate heirs to the Jewish throne.

“When he had given them this charge, he made haste to Rhodes, to meet Caesar; and when he had sailed to that city, he took off his diadem, but remitted nothing else of his usual dignity: and when, upon his meeting him, he desired that he would let him speak to him, he therein exhibited a much more noble specimen of a great soul, for he did not betake himself to supplications, as men usually do upon such occasions, nor offered him any petition, as if he were an offender; but, after an undaunted manner, gave an account of what he had done; for he spake thus to Caesar;—

“That he had the greatest friendship for Antony, and did everything he could that he might attain the government: that he was not indeed in the army with him, because the Arabians had diverted him, but that he had sent him both money and corn, which was but too little in comparison of what he ought to have done for him; for, if a man owns himself to be another’s friend and knows him to be a benefactor, he is obliged to hazard everything, to use every faculty of his soul, every member of his body, and all the wealth he hath, for him in which I confess I have been too deficient. However, I am conscious to myself, that so far I have done right, that I have not deserted him upon his defeat at Actium; nor upon the evident change of his fortune have I transferred my hopes from him to another, but have preserved myself, though not as a valuable fellow-soldier, yet certainly as a faithful counsellor, to Antony, when I demonstrated to him that the only way he had to save himself, and not lose all his authority, was to slay Cleopatra; for when she was once dead, there would be room for him to retain his authority, and rather to bring thee to make a composition with him, than to continue at enmity any longer. None of which advices would he attend to, but preferred his own rash resolutions before them, which have happened unprofitably for him, but profitably for thee.

“Now, therefore, in case thou determinest about me, and my alacrity in serving Antony, according to thy anger at him, I own there is no room for me to deny what I have done, nor will I be ashamed to own, and that publicly too, that I had a great kindness for him: but if thou wilt put him out of the case, and only examine how I behave myself to my benefactors in general, and what sort of friend I am, thou wilt find by experience that we shall do and be the same to thyself, for it is but changing the names, and the firmness of friendship that we shall bear to thee, will not be disapproved by thee.”²

His words on the value of his friendship were exceptionally persuasive. Octavian affirmed Herod as “King of the Jews,” immediately petitioning the Senate to officially confirm him as such. The two remained very close allies for the rest of Herod’s life.

Mariamne, who suspected that her life had once more been tied to that of her husband, made very clear to Herod her displeasure at his safe return. Their relationship deteriorated even more; yet, Herod was still madly in love with her & refused to do anything to her, despite his sister’s & his mother’s constant condemnation of her to him.

² Antiquities 15.6.6.

30 BC **SUMMER** After the suicides of Mark Anthony & Cleopatra, Herod went to Egypt to meet with Octavian. All Judean territories that had been given by Mark Anthony to Cleopatra were now returned to his kingdom, plus even more. Herod then personally escorted Octavian from Egypt to Antioch, Syria, before returning home to Jerusalem.

Herod's mother & sister remained in constant conflict with his wife & her mother throughout the next year.

29 BC Herod's family problems came to a head when Mariamne refused to lie down with him for an afternoon rest. In the argument that followed, she accused him of murdering her brother & grandfather. Herod's sister & mother used this moment to produce a prepared witness willing to accuse Mariamne of trying to poison Herod with a "love potion."

Mariamne was put on trial & the "evidence" resulted in her being condemned to death. Her own mother publically condemned her, attempting to save herself from a similar fate.

It was after Mariamne's execution, that Herod began to act truly insane.

"But when she was once dead, the king's affections for her were kindled in a more outrageous manner than before, whose old passion for her we have already described; for his love to her was not of a calm nature, nor such as we usually meet with among other husbands; for at its commencement it was of an enthusiastic kind; nor was it, by their long cohabitation and free conversation together brought under his power to manage; but at this time his love to Mariamne seemed to seize him in such a peculiar manner, as looked like divine vengeance upon him for the taking away of her life; for he would frequently call for her, and frequently lament for her, in a most indecent manner.

"Moreover, he bethought him of everything he could make use of to divert his mind from thinking of her, and contrived feasts and assemblies for that purpose, but nothing would suffice: he therefore laid aside the administration of public affairs, and was so far conquered by his passion, that he would order his servants to call for Mariamne, as if she were still alive, and could still hear them; and when he was in this way, there arose a pestilential disease, and carried off the greatest part of the multitude, and of his best and most esteemed friends, and made all men suspect that this was brought upon them by the anger of God, for the injustice that had been done to Mariamne.

"The circumstance affected the king still more, till at length he forced himself to go into desert places, and there, under pretense of going a hunting, bitterly afflicted himself; yet had he not borne his grief there many days before he fell into a most dangerous distemper himself; he had an inflammation upon him, and a pain in the hinder part of his head, joined with madness; and for the remedies that were used, they did him no good at all, but proved contrary to his case, and so at length brought him to despair. All the physicians also that were about him, partly because the medicines they brought for his recovery could not at all conquer the disease, and partly because his diet could be no other than what his disease inclined him to, desired him to eat whatever he had a mind to, and so left the small hopes they had of his recovery in the power of that diet, and committed him to fortune. And thus did his distemper go on, while he was at Samaria, now called Sebaste.³

³Antiquities 15.7.7.

28 BC? Alexandra used this period of Herod's grief & sickness in order to make a play for control of Jerusalem. When Herod was informed of this, he had her executed. Her death brought an end to the royal Hasmonean line, except for that one branch consisting of Herod's children by Mariamne.

Around this same time, Herod's sister had initiated divorce proceedings against her second husband, a close friend of Herod & his governor of Idumea. (Wife-initiated divorce was allowed under Roman law but not under Judean law.) In breaking news of this divorce to Herod, she also informed him that her ex & several others within the kingdom were working against him. Herod purged his kingdom of anyone suspected of plotting against his kingship.

JAN 27 BC The Roman Senate granted Octavian (36 yrs) the honorable title "Augustus" ("Revered") & also named him Imperator ("Commander") with grants of authority in 5-year blocks.

Herod renamed the city of Samaria, "Sebaste" (The Greek term for "Augustus") in honor of his patron & friend.

27-24 BC Herod (who seemed to have finally recovered from his insanity & sickness) decided to hold international games at Jerusalem every five year (the first was scheduled for 22 BC) in honor of Augustus. As venues for the games, he built a Greek-style theater (music/drama) & a Roman-style amphitheater (sports), which caused some problems with the more religious Jews of Jerusalem.

"He also made proclamation to the neighboring countries, and called men together out of every nation. The wrestlers, and the rest of those that strove for the prizes in such games, were invited out of every land, both by the hopes of the rewards there to be bestowed, and by the glory of victory to be there gained. So the principal persons that were the most eminent in these sorts of exercises, were gotten together, for there were very great rewards for victory proposed, not only to those that performed their exercises naked, but to those that played the musicians also, and were called Thymelici; and he spared no pains to induce all persons, the most famous for such exercises, to come to this contest for victory.

"He also proposed no small rewards to those who ran for the prizes in chariot races, when they were drawn by two, or three, or four pair of horses. He also imitated everything, though ever so costly or magnificent, in other nations, out of an ambition that he might give most public demonstration of his grandeur.

"Inscriptions also of the great actions of Caesar, and trophies of those nations which he had conquered in his wars, and all made of the purest gold and silver, encompassed the theatre itself; nor was there anything that could be subservient to his design, whether it were precious garments, or precious stones set in order, which was not also exposed to sight in these games.

"He had also made a great preparation of wild beasts, and of lions themselves in great abundance, and of such other beasts as were either of uncommon strength, or of such a sort as were rarely seen. These were prepared either to fight with one another, or that men who were condemned to death were to fight with them. And truly foreigners were greatly surprised and delighted at the vastness of the expenses here exhibited, and at the great dangers that were here seen; but to natural Jews, this was no better than a dissolution of these customs for which they had so great a veneration. It appeared also no better than an instance of barefaced impiety, to throw men to wild beasts, for the affording delight to the spectators; and it appeared an instance of no less impiety, to change their own laws for such foreign exercises: but, above all the rest, the trophies gave most distaste to the Jews; for as they imagined them to be images, included within the armor that hung round about them, they were sorely displeased at them, because it was not the custom of their country to pay honors to such images.⁴

⁴Antiquities 15.8.1.

24 BC? Herod took a group of the most influential opponents to these “images” on a tour of the amphitheater, demonstrating that they were nothing more than bare wooden armor stands. This seemed to satisfy them & the majority of Jews seemed to have adjusted to his Roman innovations; although there were incidents of protests & assassination attempts against him by small groups of conservative Jews.

22 BC? Herod established Caesarea on the coast in honor of Augustus. It became the major Roman port for Judea & was a showpiece of Herodian architecture.

Late 20’s BC Herod sent his two young sons by Mariamne – Alexander & Aristobulus (probably in their early teen’s) – to Rome for education. While there, they lived in Augustus’ palace.

20 BC Augustus (43 yrs) visited the Middle East. While there, he gave Herod (53 yrs) control of the territories to the east & northeast of the Sea of Galilee. For all practical purposes, Herod was now the third most influential man in the Roman Republic/Empire.

“He also made him one of the procurators of Syria, and commanded that they should do everything with his approbation; and, in short, he arrived at that pitch of felicity, that whereas there were but two men that governed the vast Roman empire, first Caesar and then Agrippa, who was his principal favorite, Caesar preferred no one to Herod besides Agrippa; and Agrippa made no one his greater friend than Herod besides Caesar; and when he had acquired such freedom, he begged of Caesar a tetrarchy for his brother Pheroras, while he did himself bestow upon him a revenue of a hundred talents out of his own kingdom, that in case he came to any harm himself, his brother might be in safety, and that his sons might not have dominion over him.

“So when he had conducted Caesar to the sea, and was returned home, he built him a most beautiful temple, of the whitest stone of Zenodorus’s country, near the place called Panium.⁵ This is a very fine cave in a mountain, under which there is a great cavity in the earth, and the cavern is abrupt, and prodigiously deep, and full of a still water; over it hangs a vast mountain; and under the caverns arise the springs of the river Jordan. Herod adorned this place, which was already a very remarkable one, still further by the erection of this temple, which he dedicated to Caesar.”⁶

Despite being so powerful, Herod desperately wanted the people to like him. In this particular year he cut taxes by 33 %. He made sure there were a lot of construction projects going on to keep everyone employed. He required citizens to take an oath of loyalty to him personally, exempting only those whose faith forbade such oaths. His spies kept him apprised of public opinion regarding himself & his actions. He even made a habit of going out on his own, *inognito*, trying to learn for himself what people thought about him.⁷

This desire for approval from the Jewish public may have been the impetus for his next & most audacious project – the complete renovation of the Jewish Temple.

⁵ The name of the city which grew up around this shrine to Augustus at the base of Mt. Hermon was Caesarea Philippi (given this name in AD 14, in honor of the recently deceased Augustus by Philip, a later son of Herod). It was near there, in AD 32, that Jesus would ask the question which prompted Peter to respond, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” (Matthew 16:16)

⁶ Antiquities 15.10.3.

⁷ Antiquities 15.10.4.