

The Faded Glory: Herod in Matthew 2

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INTRODUCTION

Herod the Great looms over the story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew. He is a character judged more by popular impressions than by Scriptural revelation. For generations, that brief glimpse fueled all sorts of false perceptions and fictionalized narratives about Herod and his reign. In the past half century or so, archaeological expeditions in the major sites of his reign have yielded a different impressions. Herod emerges as one of the most cunning and successful client kings in the history of the Roman Republic.

Popular scholars hostile to the Scriptures have attempted to portray this new image of Herod as being contrary to the depiction in the Gospel of Matthew.¹ They even portray him as something of a mentor to future emperors and the inspiration for the rebuilding of Rome under Nero.²

Which depiction of Herod is correct? The one revealed by archaeology and modern biographical study or the one known from the Gospel of Matthew? Perhaps the answer is both. In this booklet, we will examine the life of Herod and attempt to glimpse into his mind.

- Could the Herod of history have become the Herod of the Gospel of Matthew?
- Could influences, both internal and external, have driven him slowly into paranoia and dementia?
- Could the very Roman power that helped his rise also have been his downfall?

In the first section of this paper, we will examine the literary sources available to us. These provide us with the basic framework of Herod's life, which we shall consider in the second section. Here we will attempt to sketch out Herod's rise to power and the influences that made this possible. In the third and final section, we will examine the end of Herod's life and contrast it with his rise and the relatively quiet prosperous reign that is bookended by them.

In the end, we should be able to construct a reasonable synthesis of the Herod of archaeology and the Herod of the Gospel of Matthew. This serves to both support and inform the reliability of the Biblical narrative.

¹ Byron R. McCane, "Simply Irresistible: Augustine, Herod, and the Empire," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 725.

² Duane W. Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 259.

Literary Sources

Herod's appearance in the Gospel of Matthew is not the only textual evidence of his existence. Thanks to contemporary the first century writer Flavius Josephus, the modern historian has an essential framework for reconstructing the history of the Levant under Roman rule. Josephus wrote two works that mention Herod in detail – *Antiquities of the Jews* and *Wars of the Jews*. These books were written sometime between 70 and 90 CE for the Flavian emperors, whom he serve.

Additional Jewish Sources

Herod is not well represented in literature outside of Josephus, but there are three first century CE, Jewish texts that mention him. None of them provide much biographical detail, but they do help us understand Herod's context.

- The earliest is a first century CE interpolation in the pseudopigraphical *Assumption of Moses*. Although Herod is not named, chapters 6-7 clearly refer to him in detail.
- There is also a discussion of Herod in the Babylonian *Talmud*. He is portrayed less than favorably, although the rabbis cannot help but gush about the Temple.
- Finally, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria records the words of Herod's grandson Agrippa before the emperor Caligula. In his remarks, Agrippa mentions the relationship between Caligula's maternal grandfather, Marcus Agrippa, and Herod the Great.

Roman Sources

There are only two known Roman texts that mention Herod. Pliny mentions Herod as the builder of Caesarea Maritima in Pliny's *Natural History*, but adds no personal detail. The fifth century CE writer Macrobius put together *Saturnalia* – a series of dialogues in which Augustus features prominently. In *Saturnalia*, Herod is the butt of one of Augustus' jokes. Outside of these, Herod is all but forgotten in extant literature.

The Reliability of Josephus' Text

Thus, for biographical details we are forced to rely almost entirely on Josephus and what little detail exists in the biblical record. Josephus sometimes demonstrates a tendency to embellish the history to which he was a first-hand observer. As Gottfried Mader pointed out:

Josephus acknowledges the conventions of Greek historiography...with its rigorous insistence on truthful reporting...but equally he draws explicit attention to the

*lamentation....The two strands – as he himself acknowledges – coexist in uneasy tension.*³

Mader continues to detail that while Josephus generally presents factual history, the reader must always be wondering how much is fact and how much is the illusion of impartiality veiling ideology.⁴

Mader's focus is the *Wars of the Jews*, and Josephus had good reason to embellish when writing about a war he participated in. This need not be the case in his later work *Antiquities of the Jews*, however. While Josephus' record of speeches and motivations are sometimes suspect, "there is one area in which everyone who attempts to reconstruct the chronology of Herod's reign agrees: Josephus' chronological notices are more-or-less reliable."⁵

Another important consideration is that when writing about Herod, Josephus possessed a reliable and known source, the now lost writings of Herod's tutor and confidant Nicolaus of Dasmascus.⁶ It was not uncommon for historians to copy large passages of previous histories *in toto* and this seems to be the case here.⁷ The extant fragments of Nicolaus' other works show him to be a reliable historian. There is therefore is good reason to find him reliable when he follows Nicolaus.

Archaeology has verified much of what Josephus has to say about Herod, but that does not mean that the reader should accept what Josephus writes (or omits) as unbiased. Whenever possible, we should continue to seek confirmation from the archaeological record, especially given the absence of other literary references.

³ Gottfried Mader, *Josephus and the Politics of Historiography: Apologetic and Impression Management in the Bellum Judaicum* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Andrew E. Steinmann, "When did Herod the Great reign?" *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 5.

⁶ According to Athenaeus (6.249), Nicolaus' work was a history of the world, stretching to 144 volumes. It ends in the reign of Herod Archelaus, and more than one commentator has noted the way Josephus' narrative changes once he no longer has Nicolaus to guide him.

⁷ Hugh M. Scott, review of *The Sources of Josephus for the History of Syria*, by Adolf Büchler. *The American Journal of Theology* 1, no. 3 (July, 1897), 848.

Herod and Rome

Rome's influence over the Levant began when in 63 BCE when the general Pompey intervened in a feud between two factions of Hasmonean kingdom. Pompey took Jerusalem, installed one of the leaders, Hyrcanus as *ethnarch* and appointed one of his allies, Antipater of Idumea, as *epitropos* or "regent" to oversee affairs.⁸ When Pompey was executed in Egypt in 51 BCE, Roman power passed to his rival Julius Caesar. Caesar ruled as dictator for life; but he was assassinated in 44 BCE, leaving his nephew Octavius and the senator Marc Antony sharing power over Rome. When Antony traveled to the East to form a power block to rival Octavius, one of his key supporters was Antipater's son, Herod. Herod had assumed power when his father died in 43 BCE.

Hyrcanus was deposed by his nephew Aristobulus Mattathias, who put together a coalition with the Parthians, seized Jerusalem, mutilated Hyrcanus and put Herod to flight. Support from the Parthians and a Roman general named Quintus Labienus should have meant that Aristobulus' rule would be secure; but Herod was nothing if not resilient. He secured his family in the fortress Masada and escaped to Rome. There, he pleaded with Marc Antony and Octavius who convinced the Senate to declare him "King of the Jews."⁹

With Roman patronage and the support of the legions, Herod returned to the Levant. It took three years for Herod to take and solidify control. He arranged for the release of Hyrcanus and married the aged man's daughter Mariamne to give his reign legitimacy. In 37 BCE, he took up residence in Jerusalem and minted coins with the slogan, "Herod the King" and obvious Hasmonean imagery.

Shifting Power

Antony and Octavius went to war with each other in 31 BCE. The war did not go well for Antony, who allied himself with Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt. Herod tried to persuade Antony that Cleopatra would be his downfall, but Antony refused to listen. At the same time, the combination of the Roman civil war and an earthquake that hit Judea had given the Arabians cause to believe they could defeat Herod's Jewish state. Herod rushed his armies to the border border to meet this newest threat. It was there at, according to Josephus, Herod pulled one of his greatest coups. He told his troops that this rebellion had been fomented by Cleopatra, and that she and Antony were conspiring against Herod. Their only hope was to defeat the Arabians and then protect themselves by seeking alliance with Octavius.

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.73.

⁹ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 1.284.

Herod managed defeat the Arabians, and then rushed his family off the Masada again before he turned his attention westerward and finding a way to gain Octavian's favor.¹⁰ He rushed to Rhodes, where Octavius was planning his final assault on Egypt.¹¹

There, Herod presented a most unexpected argument to garner Octavius' favor. He boasted of his loyalty to Antony and placed the blame for Antony's sedition on the shoulders of the Egyptian queen. Then, he offered this same loyalty to Octavius Caesar. Octavius was impressed. He restored Herod's diadem, which Herod had taken off and laid at Octavius' feet.¹² In return, Herod was the first of Rome's clients to celebrate Octavius' ascension to supreme power. "[Herod] more and more demonstrated to Caesar the firmness of his friendship, and his readiness to assist him: and what was of the greatest advantage to him was this, that his liberality came at a seasonable time also."¹³

After a decade of civil war and turmoil, Herod managed to emerge as a friend to Caesar and client of Rome. He found himself the ruler of a kingdom that became a magnet for the wealth of the eastern Mediterranean. While client kings were generally nuisances to the Romans, Herod seems to have truly integrated himself into the Roman sphere.

Herod's reign was essentially unchecked from 31 BCE until about 7 BCE, when several issues came to a head, as will be detailed below. He served his Roman masters well, even sending auxiliaries to assist them on raids to places as far away as modern Yemen.

Octavius did not forget Herod, and when the Senate declared him to be *Augustus* in 26 BCE, he honored Herod with grants of land and enormously lucrative trade rights. At a time when Roman policy was turning against client kings and special arrangements, Herod remained a court favorite; and a number of his children were sent to Rome to live in Octavius' personal household.

Architectural Ambitions and Civic Improvement

Thanks to his partnership with Augustus Caesar, Herod became enormously wealthy. If Josephus is to be believed, Herod's wealth was truly staggering, and he put it to good use. In the broader world, he sponsored numerous buildings and improvements, and in one year even sponsored (and hosted) the Olympic Games at one of his new cities.¹⁴

¹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.111, 15.195.

¹¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.187.

¹² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.195.

¹³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.201.

¹⁴ Josephus, *Wars*, 1.426-427.

The continual warfare in the previous generation and an earthquake which hit the Levant in 31 BCE had taken its toll on the infrastructure and urban settlement of his kingdom. In response, Herod employed his wealth to rebuild his kingdom in the style he had observed in the Roman cities of Antioch and Alexandria, as well as the majestic capital, Rome. These were not provincial undertakings, but sweeping, expensive feats of civic planning. As Byron McCane noted:

*The sophistication of these structures and their resonances with the most important currents in the larger world of his day firmly establish Herod as a figure of high prominence in the early history of the Roman Empire. They also establish him as a figure of unparalleled prominence in the history of the Romanization of Palestine.*¹⁵

Rebuilt Urban Centers

What can be said with a certainty is that the scale of Herod's civic improvements to the region is hard to believe today. During his thirty or so years of control over the Levant, Herod oversaw and finance projects that were truly global in both scale and impact. It is not an exaggeration to say that he changed the face of Palestine and Syria on such a scale that he shaped the region's destiny for centuries to come. In many urban sites, Herod's buildings served as the footprint for the next two millennia of construction.

Sebaste

Chief among the territories Caesar transferred to Herod in 26 BCE was the fortified city of Samaria.¹⁶ In celebration of Caesar's new title, Herod renamed the city *Sebaste* (the Greek version of the title *Augustus*)¹⁷ and rebuilt it on a scale meant to "keep both the country and the city in awe" as a spine of security for his kingdom.¹⁸ Herod settled his Gentile veterans in the territory around the city - a nearby, ready reserve of trained soldiers.¹⁹ Although virtually unknown today because the ruins of the city are scattered throughout the suburbs of the Palestinian city Nablus, Sebaste was one of his great accomplishments.

¹⁵ McCane, "Simple Irresistible," 735.

¹⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.217.

¹⁷ Adam Kolman Marshak. "The Dated Coins of Herod the Great: Towards a New Chronology," *Journal For The Study Of Judaism In The Persian, Hellenistic And Roman Period* 37, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 216.

¹⁸ Josephus, *Wars*, 1.426-427.

¹⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.292-297

Caesarea Maritima

Through war and machination, Herod became the exclusive purveyor of Asian goods to the Mediterranean world. To get them to market, Herod constructed an artificial harbor on the Mediterranean coast of his kingdom. A new city rose around the harbor, which he named Caesarea Maritima in honor of his patron. "Caesarea Maritima employed new construction on the grand scale to create a comprehensive vision of the Empire as a destiny to be welcomed."²⁰ Caesarea was a magnificent feat of engineering that showed a harbor could be built anywhere it was advantageous to trade.²¹ As Avner Raba puts it, "Henceforth, harbor sites could be selected for economic or political considerations without regard for coastal topography."²²

Josephus describes the work of sinking massive stones (some over 15m long) to form a 600m breakwater and the building of efficient means of preventing silting. According to Avner Raba, the harbor anticipated later construction techniques used to build almost all later Roman harbors. This technique, known as a *limen kleistos*, was in its infancy and Herod brought it into general use. The innovative genius of Caesarea Maritima made it the model for later harbors, including Rome's main port Ostia.

Herod called the harbor *Sebastos*²³ but the city around the harbor he called Caesarea. Both were clearly honorifics for his patron, Augustus Caesar. Herod made it clear that he was bringing Rome to Palestine. "Caesarea Maritima employed new construction on the grand scale to create a comprehensive vision of the Empire as a destiny to be welcomed."²⁴ This was not entirely welcomed by the Jews who were more than content for Rome to stay on the other side of the world; but the draw of the wealth the new port brought must have done much to assuage their fears, at least among the upper classes.

In 6 CE, when the Romans took over administering most of Herod's kingdom, they made their capital at Caesarea. The prefect's main complex remained at Caesarea for most of the Roman period, and the harbor remained in active use well into the Middle Ages.

²⁰ McCane, "Simply Irresistible," 734.

²¹ Avner Raban and Robert L. Hohlfelder, "The Ancient Harbors of Caesarea Maritima." *Archaeology* 34, No. 2 (March-April 1981): 59.

²² *Ibid.*, 60.

²³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.87.

²⁴ McCane, "Simply Irresistible," 734.

Sepphoris

In Galilee, Herod rebuilt and fortified the city of Sepphoris as a strongpoint to keep an eye on the sometime troublesome Jewish residents. Sepphoris required an enormous investment, including the construction of massive cisterns and the building of an aqueduct.²⁵ The scale tells us how vital it must have been to keep an eye on Galilee, which was probably the most populous region of his kingdom and certainly was home to the majority of conservative, Aramaic-speaking Jews.²⁶

Unfortunately, shortly after Herod's death, Sepphoris became a center of a rebellion which the Romans crushed with their typically ruthless efficiency. The city was destroyed and had to be rebuilt by Herod Archelaus.²⁷ This means that it is difficult to discern what of the archaeological remains belong to Herod's work and what belongs to his son. This problem is further compounded by the tendency of builders to level sites down to the bedrock before rebuilding.²⁸

Sepphoris would have required enormous investment to fortify and maintain. There is no spring or local water supply, so massive cisterns had to be dug out beneath the city.²⁹ It is possible that there was also a Roman aqueduct to supply water, which is likely because of the large baths found on site. Regardless, the city was built intentionally and meant to be a permanent presence in the region.

In later years, Sepphoris became known both for its neutrality and its large Jewish population. The main metropolis of Roman Galilee was Tiberias, built by Herod's son Antipas, but it was built on a graveyard and was considered unclean by the first century CE rabbis.³⁰ The Jews of Galilee gathered in Sepphoris.³¹ If the city served the same purpose during Herod's reign, then it would have been a vital meeting place for the Romans and Galilean Jews.

²⁵ Eric M. Meyers, Ehud Netzer and Carol L. Meyers, "Sepphoris: 'Ornament of All Galilee,'" *The Biblical Archaeologist* 49, no. 1 (March, 1986), 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.27.

²⁸ Meyers, Netzer and Meyers, "Sepphoris," 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.2.

³¹ Meyers, Netzer and Meyers, "Sepphoris," 10.

Jerusalem's Glory

The three sites mentioned above (Sebaste, Caesarea Maritima, and Sepphoris) served a single purpose for Herod – making a clear connection to the Roman world. Although a Roman client, Herod was King of the Jews. For the centerpiece of his rebuilt kingdom, Herod turned his attention to the Jews' holy city – Jerusalem. He rebuilt the city on a massive scale. Dan Bahat explained this saying:

“...the enhancement of the size of the city and the addition of the theatre, Hippodrome, and industrial and commercial quarters made the city of Herod a genuine Near Eastern metropolis, even in the writings of Roman historians.”³²

Josephus tells his readers that Herod's most ambitious project was the Jewish Temple complex in Jerusalem. Supposedly, Herod wanted to rebuild the Temple to please the people he ruled, but they were suspect of his motives. He had to make extravagant promises about the continuity of worship during construction, going to extraordinary lengths to pacify the Jewish leaders. Josephus records a lengthy, emotional speech that Herod delivered to them as well as the concessions he made to persuade them.³³

After the reluctant Jewish leaders agreed to the proposal, Herod's engineers set about constructing what is purported to be a marvel of the age. The Babylonian Talmud declares, “He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building.”³⁴ By any measure, the project was on a scale rarely seen in the ancient world. The Temple platform, which still exists today, was the largest artificial assembly space in the world until the eve of the Modern Age.³⁵

Herod's plans for the Temple were ambitious and were not completed until 64 CE, over a half-century after his death in 4 BCE. Herod expanded the size of the Temple Mount, creating an enormous platform, much of which survives to this day.³⁶

³² Dan Bahat, “Jerusalem Between the Hasmonians and Herod the Great” in *Cities Through the Looking Glass: Essays on the History and Archaeology of Biblical Urbanism*, ed. Rami Arav (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 128.

³³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.380-390.

³⁴ *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Baba Bathra, Folia 4a.

³⁵ William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy ed., *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 2, *The Early Roman Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 43.

³⁶ Mark Alan Chancey and Adam Lowry Porter, “The Archaeology of Roman Palestine,” *Near East Archaeology* 64, no. 4 (December 2001), 169.

Josephus records a lengthy, emotional speech that Herod delivered to them as well as the concessions he made to persuade them.³⁷ In the end, even the rabbis of the *Talmud* reluctantly gloated upon the glory of the Temple. “He who has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building.”³⁸

*Herod's plans for the Temple were ambitious and were not completed until 64 CE, over a half-century after his death in 4 BCE. Herod expanded the size of the Temple Mount, creating an enormous platform, much of which survives to this day.*³⁹

Today, the Temple platform is a Muslim holy site, but the enormity of Herod's construction is still visible. The only contemporary records we have of the Temple platform are Josephus' account and the *Mishnah* tractate *Middoth* (measurements).⁴⁰ There are some substantial differences between the two descriptions, but these can be understood to reflect that the *Mishnah* reports the state of the platform before Herod's re-engineering.⁴¹

Herod's engineers literally converted the landscape through artificial means, creating the largest man-made open space in the Roman world. Josephus reports teams of thousands of workers, led by priests trained to be stone masons and artisans.⁴² They removed the old foundations and replaced them with a new platform, supported by a retaining wall constructed of limestone blocks. The base of the wall is composed of blocks measuring over 11.4m long, 3.5m high and 5.5m wide.⁴³ Each block weighs over 500 tons and had to be maneuvered into position precisely.

Within the walls, an intricately engineered system of fill and arched chambers provided enormous strength to the irregular platform which measures roughly 150,000 m² (37 acres).⁴⁴ The temple itself sat atop the platform, surrounded by divided courtyards which were, in turn, surrounded by a system of stoae and auxiliary buildings. Beneath the platform, tunnels allowed priests and levites to move

³⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.380-390.

³⁸ *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Baba Bathra, Folia 4a.

³⁹ Mark Alan Chancey and Adam Lowry Porter, “The Archaeology of Roman Palestine,” *Near East Archaeology* 64, no. 4 (December 2001), 169.

⁴⁰ Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 299.

⁴¹ Bahat, “Jerusalem,” 118-119.

⁴² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.390.

⁴³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.392.

⁴⁴ William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy ed., *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 2, *The Early Roman Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 43.

themselves and the instruments of worship without disrupting the crowds. Herod also had a special tunnel added for his own use.

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Herod's intentions were not altogether altruistic. Both ancient and modern commentators note that the platform was built to be global and political in its perspective. Surrounding the Jewish area (and separated from it by signs warning against crossing into them) was an enormous courtyard for all nations to gather. Herod freely accepted the gifts of wealthy pagans,⁴⁷ and Rome still figured prominently in the life of the Temple. The adjoining fortress' gate was adorned with a Roman *Aquila* (eagle), its wings spread out over all the earth.

*The Temple headed by the high priesthood was the political-economic-religious institution by which the people of Judea were governed and revenues collected for the empire as well as the priesthood....The priests performed sacrifices on behalf of Rome and Caesar, and Roman soldiers stood guard on the porticoes of the Temple at Passover, lest excitement get out of hand during the people's celebration of their deliverance from foreign rule in Egypt.*⁴⁸

In addition to the Temple, Herod massively rebuilt Jerusalem itself. He reinforced the Hasmonean walls of the city as well as constructing a new palace complex in the southwestern corner of the city, abutting the walls. The palace was built on top of the existing Hasmonean structures, which were used as fill.⁴⁹ In other parts of the city, Herod simply obliterated the previous construction.⁵⁰

Recent archaeological discoveries have brought many construction projects that are unknown from the literature. As Dan Bahat states, "...the enhancement of the size of the city and the addition of

⁴⁵ Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2003), 299.

⁴⁶ Bahat, "Jerusalem," 118-119.

⁴⁷ Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*, lines 294-300.

⁴⁸ Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine," *Journal For The Study Of The Historical Jesus* 8, no. 2 (July 2010): 104.

⁴⁹ Bahat, "Jerusalem", 124.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the theatre, Hippodrome, and industrial and commercial quarters made the city of Herod a genuine Near Eastern metropolis, even in the writings of Roman historians.”⁵¹ Unfortunately, like the passing reference to Herod in Pliny,⁵² the testimony of these Roman historians focus on the cities and not the man himself.

Personal Palace-Fortresses

His civic improvements exude confidence in his kingdom’s success as a crossroad for Roman and Jew, but his personal palaces tell a different story. Herod palaces are all fortified strongpoints. Inside they were full of every luxury imaginable, but outside they were all might. They give us a clue as to how delicate the balance was between the Roman and Jewish sides of his reign.

Masada

Of all of Herod’s great works, only one was attracting the attention of Roman writers long after his death – Masada.⁵³ This impregnable fortress in the wilderness near the Dead Sea had been constructed by his predecessors,⁵⁴ but Herod adopted it as his personal stronghold in 42 BCE, and rebuilt it on an epic scale.⁵⁵ There are ten cisterns capable of holding a total of 39,500m³ (approximately 10 million gallons) and storehouses sufficient to provide food for years,⁵⁶ and yet no expense was spared in decorating the interior of the three palaces and numerous auxiliary buildings.⁵⁷ Despite the fastness of its wilderness location and its towering height above the desert floor, Herod surrounded this complex with an impregnable wall, running 1,300 meters around the plateau. The site is one of the few from Herod’s reign that is mentioned by multiple Roman authors.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Ibid., 128.

⁵² Pliny, *Natural History*, 5.14

⁵³ Strabo, *Geographies*, 16, 2.44; Pliny, *Natural History*, 5.17.

⁵⁴ Josephus, *Wars*, 7.285.

⁵⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.296.

⁵⁶ Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod’s Fortress and the Zealots’ Last Stand*, trans. Moshe Pearlman (Jerusalem, Israel: Steimatzky Ltd., 1984), 26.

⁵⁷ *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, online ed., s.v. “Masada,” accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t256/e677>

⁵⁸ Strabo, *Geographies*, 16, 2.44; Pliny, *Natural History*, 5.17.

The Herodium

Josephus tells us that when Herod was forced to flee the Parthians, his household was moving south through Judea to Masadam but armies supporting Aristobulus were constantly harassing his caravan. Herod sent his family ahead to Masada and turned to give battle. He scored a resounding victory.

Decades later, Herod constructed a massive palace and memorial for himself near the site just outside of Jerusalem.⁵⁹ The palace itself sat inside a hollowed mountain, surrounded by battlements and turrets. It was completed in 15 BCE,⁶⁰ and it is Herod's final resting place – a testament to both his power and his need for security. Herod's mausoleum was located on the site in 2011.⁶¹

Romans and Jews

Herod had seen the greatness of Rome.⁶² His sons were educated in Caesar's household.⁶³ His kingdom had a substantial, urban Gentile population which formed a substantial power block.⁶⁴ Early in his reign, Herod even minted coins with Roman helmets on them, showing his reliance on (or at the very least, admiration of) the Roman system.⁶⁵ His new cities not only provided wealth. They also helped keep the Jewish population in check.⁶⁶

All the time, however, Herod seems to have considered himself a Torah-observant Jew. He reveled in his Jewish identity and viewed his kingdom as a Jewish state, even while acknowledging his indebtedness to the Romans. He attempted to maintain the tension of the ancient east and the new, growing west.

⁵⁹ Josephus, *Wars*, 1.265.

⁶⁰ *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, online ed., s.v. "Herodium," accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t256/e488>.

⁶¹ Netzer, Ehud. "In Search of Herod's Tomb," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 37, no. 1 (January-February 2011).

⁶² Charles Sandy Brenner, "Herod the Great Remains True to Form," *Near East Archaeology* 64, no. 4 (December 2001): 214.

⁶³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.342-343.

⁶⁴ Ze'ev Safrai, *The Economy of Roman Palestine*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 17.

⁶⁵ Safrai, *Economy of Roman Palestine*, 17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Dealing with Gentiles

Herod invested heavily in the growing Gentile population engendered by his success and building. Herod sent his sons to Rome, to live in the house of Caesar himself.⁶⁷ Ze'ev Safrai comments numerous times on the Gentile nature of the major cities Herod built during his reign.⁶⁸ Many of these Gentiles were military. Herod granted them land, particularly around Sebaste and Caesarea Maritima.⁶⁹

The uneasy relationship between Romans and Jews can be understood, and yet somehow Herod negotiated this relationship with cunning, if not with ease. He built a new Temple, and yet it was abutted by the fortress and had a gate adorned with the Roman eagle. Whether it was his Roman cities which reinforced the Roman presence or how Temple platform which invited the Gentiles into the worship of the Jewish God, Herod attempted to bring together these two worlds in his kingdom.

The Jewish World

In this Herod, was required to balance the tension of not only the Gentile world but the fragmented Jewish world. Because most of the Jewish writings we possess were written after the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the image of Judaism in the days of Herod we have received is probably somewhat skewed. This is, as one writer put it, “an injustice to the memory of these Roman Jews, who felt strong enough in their faith to participate in their religious community, make dedications in their synagogues and use Jewish markers on their graves.”⁷⁰

It is difficult to quantify the Jewish population of the Roman world in Herod's day. Essentially, there were three self-identified groups of Jews. The Hellenic Jews lived throughout the Roman world, and they wielded substantial power.⁷¹ They were not particularly involved in the affairs of Herod's

⁶⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.342-343.

⁶⁸ Safrai, *Economy of Roman Palestine*, 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Andrew J. Schoenfeld, “Sons of Israel in Caesar's Service: Jewish Soldiers in the Roman Military,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of a Jewish Studies* 24, no. 4 (Spring 2006):126.

⁷¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 10.190-216; Suetonius, *Caesar*, 84.7; Valerius Maximus, *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium*, 1.3.3; 1 Maccabees 8:17-20.

kingdom,⁷² although their faithful payment of the temple tax probably financed much of his rebuilding of the Temple complex.⁷³ The religious elites among the Jews – chiefly the Sadducees – were concentrated around Jerusalem. By far the largest proportion of Jews in the Levant were rural and, led by the Pharisees, often religiously conservative.⁷⁴ Because they bore the majority of the tax burden, Herod courted their favor and good will, sometimes even reducing their tax burden when it served his purposes,⁷⁵ but wary of the potential threat they posed.

Hellenic Jews in the Wider World

There is substantial evidence that a large number of Jews lived outside of the Levant, and they were not opposed to Roman power. Although it is difficult to estimate their numbers, Josephus tells us that there were over 100,000 living in Egypt during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (283-246 BCE) and 2,000 military families serving Antiochus III (222-187 BCE). Jews served in the military of a number of Hellenic kingdoms, including both Egypt and Asia Minor.⁷⁶ They wielded substantial political power on the regional level.⁷⁷

Rome appears to have had a significant Jewish population. When Judas Maccabeus went to Rome to seek help against the Seleucids, he was greeted by Jews living there already.⁷⁸ The praetor Hispanus had them expelled from the city in 139 BCE.⁷⁹ Within a generation, the Jews had returned and relations were restored. Julius Caesar was considered a great friend to the Jews.⁸⁰ After he was assassinated, the Jews of Rome lamented publicly at the site of his pyre.⁸¹

These hellenized Jews vastly outnumbered those still living in the Levant. Herod's massive Temple rebuilding was founded at least partially on their payment of the two shekel temple tax, which Julius

⁷² Anthony J. Marshall, "Flaccus and the Jews of Asia (Cicero "Pro Flacco" 28.67-69" *Phoenix* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1975): 140.

⁷³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.12-65.

⁷⁴ Safrai, *Economy of Roman Palestine*, 58.

⁷⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.365.

⁷⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.11, 12.119.

⁷⁷ Anthony J. Marshall, "Flaccus and the Jews of Asia (Cicero "Pro Flacco" 28.67-69" *Phoenix* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1975): 140.

⁷⁸ 1 Maccabees 8:17-20.

⁷⁹ Valerius Maximus, *Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium*, 1.3.3.

⁸⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 10.190-216.

⁸¹ Suetonius, *Caesar*, 84.7.

Caesar had put into Roman law. Herod, in his capacity as the most prominent Jew in the empire, appears to have served as an advocate for the rights of the Jews outside his kingdom.⁸²

Rural Population in the Levant

At least one writer estimates that only about 20% of the population lived in the cities of Palestine.⁸³ While the urban population would have taken greater interest in the affairs of the broader world, the rural population, such as in Galilee, did not care about Herod's connections or politics. They cared about taxes, and in Herod's Palestine, these were very high. That alone made Herod very unpopular outside of the cities. As long as they paid, however, they lived in relative peace. Herod courted their favor and good will, sometimes even reducing their tax burden when it served his purposes.⁸⁴

Sectarian Jews in Judea

The smallest Jewish population was the sectarians who lived in Judea itself. This area appears to have been mostly sympathetic to the Pharisees, but dominated by the Sadducees. The Pharisee leaders opposed Herod because he was not ethnically a Jew, despite his attempts to show his piety. Some of the Sadducees likewise did not like him, especially after he installed an Egyptian Jew Simon b. Boethus as high priest in the place of other Sadducee claimants.⁸⁵

One Jewish sect that had Herod's full support were the Essenes, a radical, puritanical, eschatological group who are most likely responsible for the Qumran complex near Masada. Herod had some kind of encounter with one of their mystics, a man named Menahem, who forecast a long, profitable reign for Herod.⁸⁶ As a result, Herod treated the Essene sect with preference. His preference for these radicals, who kept their own counsel and opposed both the Pharisees and the Sadducees, could not have helped Herod's standing among the other sects.

Herod's cities and Temple complex attempted to bridge the gaps among these various groups – Gentiles, Hellenic Jews, rural Jews and the Judean sectarians. As long as he remained a strong, central figure the various sides seem to have at least cooperated, but in attempting to unify Levant Judaism, Herod appears to have caused the fissures to deepen. These fissures could be exploited, and at the end of his life, that is what began to happen.

⁸² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.12-65.

⁸³ Safrai, *Economy of Roman Palestine*, 58.

⁸⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.365.

⁸⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.326.

⁸⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.373-378.

The End of Herod's Dominance

Herod negotiated the complex relationship of the various Jewish groups, his Roman masters and the nations surrounding him with cunning, if not with ease. Herod's cities and Temple complex attempted to bridge the gaps among these various groups, but there were simply too many moving parts and fissures appeared, especially among the rural Jews of Galilee. Later generations of Jews would not see his works. They would instead look back on Herod as "an insolent king...bold and shameless" who used fear and violence to oppress the faithful because of their sin.⁸⁷

The inevitable destabilization of Herod's kingdom came not from outside, but from inside. In the last decade of his life, Herod's personal and physical stability became compromised. "In just the last ten years of his life (i.e. 13–4 BC), Herod wrote at least five separate wills, each one naming a different individual or individuals who should be his heir."⁸⁸

Three Treacherous Sons

Herod's reign was always predicated upon his ability to control the various factions of his family. Herod had nine wives and an unknown number of children. His second wife was Hyrcanus' daughter and the last Hasmonean, Mariamne. Early in his reign, Herod had executed both his father-in-law Hyrcanus and his wife Mariamne to secure the throne. Although Herod appears to have loved her, Mariamne always disliked him. After multiple plots against him, Herod reluctantly had Mariamne executed in 27 BCE. She left behind two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus who Herod sent to Rome to learn from Augustus Caesar.⁸⁹

Both sons proved to be extraordinarily rebellious during his last years, and Josephus devotes several chapters to their sedition. When Augustus launched a raid on Arabia, Herod sent five hundred troops to serve as auxiliaries. When the raid was sabotaged by a Nabatean named Syllaeus, border regions rose in rebellion. Herod raided the areas to pacify them, but Syllaeus manipulated the trusting

⁸⁷ Assumption of Moses, 6-7.

⁸⁸ Barry J. Beitzel, "Herod the Great: Another Snapshot of His Traitor?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 2 (June 2014): 314.

⁸⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.342-343.

Augustus, telling him that Herod was in rebellion, and almost persuaded Caesar that Herod was incapable of handling his kingdom.⁹⁰

A desperate Herod dispatched his friend Nicolaus of Damascus who revealed the truth and managed to reconcile Caesar and Herod.⁹¹ Unfortunately, this was not before Syllaeus had whispered in the ears of Herod's sons. They rebelled, buoyed by Syllaeus' argument that they were royal while Herod was not.⁹² At Caesar's urging, Herod assembled a council in Berytus (Beirut) to try Alexander and Aristobulus. After a long trial, Herod had their followers and a number of those who had allied with Syllaeus publicly executed. His sons he had strangled in private.⁹³

Free of the entanglements of Syllaeus, reconciled with the Augustus, Herod turned his attention to restoring his legacy. He elevated his eldest son Antipater, to a co-regency and left the running of the government to him, unaware that Antipater was growing increasingly impatient with his father and plotting against him.⁹⁴

Events aroused Herod's suspicions, and Antipater manipulated the situation so he could travel to Rome. He planned to accuse his father there, but Antipater made the mistake of sending one of his freedmen home with a poison intended for Herod. Herod had the man tortured, uncovered the plot, and made plans to deal with his son. The recalled Antipater arrived in Jerusalem to find his father meeting with the Roman governor of Syria, Quintilius Varus.

Josephus reports that as he and Varus stood in judgment of Antipater, Herod broke down and began weeping. The weight of the betrayals he had endured seemed to have crushed him. Antipater seized upon the weakness and tried to defend himself. Herod's secretary and friend, Nicolaus of Damascus, stepped in and deftly prosecuted the case against Antipater. In the end, Antipater was remanded to Varus and a message was sent to Caesar asking for a final determination.⁹⁵

Caesar placed Antipater's fate in Herod's hand, but he seems to have been unable to decide what to do with Antipater. In the last days of Herod's life, Antipater tried to persuade his jailors to free him

⁹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.287.

⁹¹ Norman Gelb, *Herod the Great: Statesman, Visionary, Tyrant* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 123-125.

⁹² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.287.

⁹³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.394.

⁹⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.32.

⁹⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.99-132

so he could claim the throne. When Herod heard of it, he had Antipater killed in his prison. As a final act of disgust, Herod had his body thrown into a beggar's grave in Hyrcania.⁹⁶

Generations later, the Roman writer Macrobius wrote a series of puns he attributed to Caesar Augustus. Among them is a reference to this period. When told about Antipater's plot, Augustus reportedly quipped, "It is better to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons."⁹⁷

The Aquila Revolt

The knowledge that Herod's health was failing began circulating in 4 BCE. Two popular Galilean teachers, Judas b. Sepphoris and Matthias b. Margalus, fomented a movement to remove the Roman *Aquila* (eagle) from the Temple complex. Somehow their followers heard false rumors that Herod was dead. About forty of them rushed to tear down the *Aquila*, but they were quickly rounded up by the guards and brought to Herod. Although quite sick, Herod flew into a rage. He had the leaders of the revolt publicly burned alive and then executed the rest of them.⁹⁸

The Fatal Illness

After the executions, Herod's health took a turn for the worst. He developed a low fever, itching all over his body, inflammation of the colon and some kind of infected tumors on his feet. On top of this, he developed necrosis in his genitals. His body was racked by a terrible cough and he was unable to eat. The pain became so great that he even attempted to kill himself.⁹⁹

What was Herod dying of? This was not the first time Herod had experienced some of these symptoms.¹⁰⁰ Nikos Kokkinos reviewed the symptoms with Dr. Walter Y. Loebel of the Royal College of Physicians in London, and in a 2002 article for *Biblical Archaeology Review* Kokkinos reported:

Dr. Loebel finds four of Herod's symptoms particularly diagnostic. The intolerable itch can be attributed, he says, to kidney failure, which causes waste chemicals to accumulate in the blood. This would have been the end-stage of a number of

⁹⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17:187.

⁹⁷ Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2.4.11.

⁹⁸ Josephus, *Wars*, 1:654-655.

⁹⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 7:169; *Wars*, 1:662.

¹⁰⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15:243-246.

processes, including “diminished oxygen to the kidneys due to arteriosclerosis [hardening of the arteries].”

Dr. Loebel interprets the transparent swelling around Herod’s feet as edema, a build-up of fluids that often occurs in older people, especially in their ankles and legs. Bedridden people can also get it in their lower back and genitalia, he says. The commonest causes are “heart failure, renal [kidney] failure and dilution of the blood in anemia.” Another type of edema—pulmonary edema, or edema of the lungs—may have contributed to his demise.

The related putrefaction in Herod’s private member, Dr. Loebel sees as “myiasis.” He explains that “the moist skin with edema and the hot climate would have attracted flies who laid eggs, developing larvae looking like worms—[like] maggots used by fishermen!”

Dr. Loebel regards Herod’s inability to breathe unless in an upright position (orthopnoia) as “the most reliable part of the description.” As used in clinical medicine, “orthopnea is a typical sign in heart failure, renal failure or anemia.”

His conclusion is that, most likely, “Herod died of age-related failure of his heart and kidneys with terminal edema of the lungs.”¹⁰¹

Loebel’s theory is not the only one that has been put forward, but it does explain all of Herod’s symptoms. Herod must have been experiencing some of these symptoms before the execution of the revolt leaders, but Josephus does note that Herod probably pushed himself harder than he should have during the revolt. This would have accelerated the effect of the disease.

Josephus tells us that Herod lived only five days after the onset of these symptoms. His condition was made worse when he tried to seek relief through a visit to hot springs near Jericho. His doctors attempted to bathe him in warm oil, which triggered additional symptoms. He began to lose his sight and slip in and out of consciousness.¹⁰² After ordering the execution of Antipater, Herod’s torture body failed and he died. Two of his remaining sons, Archelaus and Antipas, arranged his funeral.

¹⁰¹ Nikos Kokkinos, “Herod’s Horrid Death,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 28, no. 2 (March-April 2002). <http://www.basarchive.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/bswbBrowse.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=28&Issue=2&ArticleID=2> (accessed August 30, 2014).

¹⁰² Josephus, *Wars*, 1:657-658.

Matthew's Gospel Account

We began this study of Herod with the question of whether the Herod of the Bible and the Herod of history are compatible. Let us now turn our focus to Matthew's account of Herod, which appears in Matthew 2. Others have dealt extensively and effectively with the formation of the text of Matthew, and a full exegesis of the passage would require more space than the present context allowed.¹⁰³

We can hypothesize a reasonable date range for Matthew's account. Matthew makes it clear that the events take place at the end of Herod's life. He died shortly after Joseph took his wife and Jesus to Egypt (Mat. 2:19), and since Herod kills the male children two years old and younger, the events must be placed sometime 6-4BCE.

Let us now turn our attention to the biblical narrative, which has been intentionally held in abeyance while we examined the context of Herod's life and reign. Herod appears only once in the Gospel of Matthew, and the image we get from the passage makes far greater sense after taking the time to consider other sources. Others have dealt extensively and effectively with the formation of the text of Matthew.¹⁰⁴ Our focus here is the historicity of the narrative, so exegetical comments will be as brief to bring out the historical nature of the words.

Exegetical Survey of the Text

Herod the King (vv 1-3)

This title is in keeping with known currency from Herod's reign. As soon as he stabilized the kingdom, Herod struck coins with the motto Ἡροδου Βασιλειως and Βασιλεις Ἡροδης, just as it appears in the text.¹⁰⁵ His coinage almost always bears this motto and the symbols of the Hasmonean kings, as well as Roman imagery.

¹⁰³ Richard T. France, "Herod and the Children of Bethlehem" *Novum Testamentum* 21, no. 2 (April 1979): 98-120; Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew" in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, edited by G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 8-9.

¹⁰⁴ Richard T. France, "Herod and the Children of Bethlehem" *Novum Testamentum* 21, no. 2 (April 1979): 98-120; Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew" in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, edited by G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 8-9.

¹⁰⁵ Arye Kindler, "Some Unpublished Coins of Herod the Great," *Israel Exploration Journal* 3, no. 4 (1953): 239.

Born King of the Jews...the Christ (vv 2-4)

There are numerous theories about the “wise men” of Matthew. The Greek word μάγος (*magos* or *magi* in the plural) does not have any specific nationality attached to it, although Herodotus associated them with the Medes.¹⁰⁶ Since Herodotus predates Matthew by nearly five centuries, it is difficult to know whether Matthew meant it in this way. Regardless, they were certainly foreign, coming from somewhere to the east. For Herod, this was the direction threat came from.

Herod construes their reference to a “king of the Jews” as a reference to the messiah. This was an age of would be messiahs. Among others, the Qumran sect had an anticipation of a “branch of David” messiah figure, clearly a reference to some form of kingship.¹⁰⁷ In the chaos that followed Herod’s death, one of his own servants, Simon of Peraea, led a revolt while claiming to be the messiah.¹⁰⁸ Historically, would be messiahs meant chaos and revolt for kings.

His Star (v 2)

Traditionally, the Jews were well-known as astrologers. When Hispanus expelled the Jews from in 139 BCE, it was because they were “astrologers.” When Julius Caesar died, there was a comet that appeared in the sky. It made such an impression on the Romans that Augustus even minted coins with the star as a signal of the divine Caesar.¹⁰⁹ Pliny records that the star was memorialized in the temple to Julius Caesar, which was sometimes even called the “temple of the star.”¹¹⁰ Later, when the temple was destroyed by Titus, a comet appeared in the sky for a year, something the Jews observed as the heavens taking notice of their demise.¹¹¹ These types of astral phenomena were associated with the fall of rulers and kingdoms, but also with the rise of the next. Herod’s concern is then not simply because of the use of messianic language but also the astrological sign of a rising star or comet. At least one major astrological event had occurred in his lifetime, and it had brought about one of the great crises of his early reign.

Bethlehem of Judea (vv 1, 6)

The Gospel of Luke refers to Bethlehem as a πόλις, a city, but this is being generous (Luke 2:4). Although only limited excavations have been carried out, the indications are that Bethlehem was more of a village. It is situated 9km south-southwest of Jerusalem, which explains why Luke records

¹⁰⁶ Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.101.

¹⁰⁷ *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, s.v. “Messiahs,” accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t264/e322>.

¹⁰⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.273-277; *Wars*, 2.57-59.

¹⁰⁹ Suetonius, *Divus Julius*, 88.

¹¹⁰ Pliny, *Natural Histories*, 2.93-94.

¹¹¹ Josephus, *Wars*, 6.290.

Mary and Joseph going there for the Roman census. The population would have been small, swelling only during feasts or other activities requiring people to visit Jerusalem. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is significant because, as Herod's advisors point out, this was to be the birthplace of the messiah.

Herod spoke to the magi privately and send them to Bethlehem, which shows us something of his cunning. Perhaps, he was trying to keep the matter quiet so it could be dealt with quietly. This was, as we have seen, his preferred method. Herod worked in negotiations and private trials whenever possible, although he was not afraid to resort to public spectacle.

When He Saw that He Had Been Tricked (vv 16-17)

It is only after Herod realized the *magi* were not returning to him that he flew into a rage. Matthew employs a *hapax legomena* to describe Herod's rage. The verb θυμώω appears only here, and it indicates a heated, boiling anger. Herod then orders a systematic purification of any male under two years of age in Bethlehem.

Some commentators view this as an estimate on Herod's part,¹¹² but in describing Herod's interrogation of the magi, Matthew employs a specific verb, ἀκριβῶω, that implies a careful, precise inquiry. It may be a reasonable conclusion that this date range corresponds to the appearance of the star and some kind of calculations made by the *magi*. In this case, Herod chooses this age range based on full knowledge. He was not one to make estimates.

Herod had executed his sons Alexander and Aristobulus just three years previous. When Josephus told this story, he made an interesting comment:

*...this temper he showed in what he did afterwards when he did not spare those that seemed to be the best beloved of his friends that were left, wherein, though the justice of the punishment caused those that perished to be the less pitied, yet was the barbarity of the man here equal, in that he did not abstain from their slaughter also.*¹¹³

Before executing his sons Alexander and Aristobulus, Herod took very carefully planned, precise steps in their trial even though Caesar had all but ordered him to execute them. Early in his reign, he was careful to execute both his father-in-law Hyrcanus and his wife Mariamne only when it was advantageous to him. He left Antipater's execution until the last days of his own life to minimize its impact. Herod's quick, sudden actions in the Aquila Revolt seem to have ben the exception rather than the rule. He tended to be methodical but pragmatic, even when time was of the essence.

¹¹² Granty Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 100.

¹¹³ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.404.

Out of Egypt (v 15)

Herod exerted tremendous influence over almost all of the Levant and Syria. He commissioned numerous projects far from his own kingdom, as far away as Asia Minor. Egypt, however, lay beyond his reach. The Jews who lived there were mostly military, having served the Ptolemaic kings and then the Romans. They had their own priesthood and temple. What's more, many of the Jews in Egypt had recently been made citizens by Augustus.¹¹⁴ Of anywhere in the Roman empire, Egypt was probably the safest place for Joseph to take the young Jesus.

The Threat of a Would-Be Messiah

The threat inherent to the magi's question, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" (Mat. 2:2) can be best seen in the context of events after Herod's elimination of the sons of Mariamne in 7 BCE. Herod took his role as "King of the Jews" seriously, stamping this on all of his coins alongside both Roman and Jewish symbols.¹¹⁵

It is worth noting that according to Matthew, Herod immediately connects "King of the Jews" with the Messiah (Mat. 2:4). This was an age of would be messiahs. Among others, the Qumran sect had an anticipation of a "branch of David" messiah figure, clearly a reference to some form of kingship.¹¹⁶ This messianic kingship is therefore reinforced by the prophetic connection to Bethlelehem of Judah, which was a small town about five miles outside of Jerusalem's walls.

Additionally, the appearance of a star was generally credited as some kind of change in the rule of nations. When Julius Caesar died, there was a comet that appeared in the sky. It made such an impression on the Romans that Augustus even minted coins with the star as a signal of the divine Caesar.¹¹⁷ Pliny records that the star was memorialized in the temple to Julius Caesar, which was sometimes even called the "temple of the star."¹¹⁸ These types of astral phenomena were associated with the fall of rulers and kingdoms, but also with the rise of the next. Herod's concern is then not simply because of the use of messianic language but also the astrological sign of a rising star or

¹¹⁴ Schoenfeld, "Sons of Israel," 118.

¹¹⁵ Arye Kindler, "Some Unpublished Coins of Herod the Great," *Israel Exploration Journal* 3, no. 4 (1953): 239.

¹¹⁶ *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, s.v. "Messiahs," accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t264/e322>.

¹¹⁷ Suetonius, *Divius Julius*, 88.

¹¹⁸ Pliny, *Natural Histories*, 2.93-94.

comet. At least one major astrological event had occurred in his lifetime, and it had brought about one of the great crises of his early reign.

Consideration of Herod's Behavior

The threat to Herod's rule is apparent in the text, and Herod's reaction certainly seems to be in keeping with what is known about him in the hypothesized date range. Matthew then provides us with two clues as to his behavior. When the magi did not return to him, Herod flew into a rage (μαγῶν ἐθυμώθη λίαν) which is in keeping with his emotional instability during the trial of Antipater. At the same time, his careful interview of the magi (Mat. 2:7) is in keeping with the methodical, systematic approach he took to most of his affairs, providing him with the information needed for action. The synthesis of his rage and his gathered intelligence in ordering the extermination of the males two years old and under is in keeping with the way he handled the Aquila Revolt. Some commentators view this as an estimate on Herod's part,¹¹⁹ but Matthew makes it clear that Herod had taken a careful approach to planning the massacre.

In describing Herod's execution of Alexander and Aristobulus Josephus commented:

...this temper he showed in what he did afterwards when he did not spare those that seemed to be the best beloved of his friends that were left, wherein, though the justice of the punishment caused those that perished to be the less pitied, yet was the barbarity of the man here equal, in that he did not abstain from their slaughter also.¹²⁰

Before executing his sons Alexander and Aristobulus, Herod took very carefully planned, precise steps in their trial even though Caesar had all but ordered him to execute them. Likewise, he did not let his emotions get the better of him in his execution of Antipater. He had, unfortunately, allowed his emotions to control his action in the Aquila Revolt, and the effect had not been positive – on him or his kingdom.

A Note Concerning Bethlehem

When Herod executed the forty men involved in the Aquila Revolt, it caused an outcry. Why would such an outcry be absent if he had wiped out the male children of Bethlehem? Part of the flaw inherent in this question is based on the assumption that when Luke refers to Bethlehem as a city

¹¹⁹ Granty Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 100.

¹²⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 16.404.

(Luk. 2:4), he is using the term the way we use it. Although there have not been a large number of archaeological digs in the city, the indication is that the town was quite small during Herod's reign. As such, the taking of the male children may have involved a very small number of children. It is not therefore surprising that there is no mention of the massacre.

Conclusion

As we have seen from the survey of Herod's life and compared what is known about his last years with Matthew's account, we have demonstrated that there is a historical synergy between the Gospel of Matthew and the extrabiblical records of the end of Herod's reign. This makes it highly probable that the magi arrived in Jerusalem sometime between the arrest of Antipater and the Aquila Revolt.

Although there is no mention of the massacre of the innocent outside of the Gospel of Matthew, that does not preclude its existence. The survey of Herod's behavior, particularly at the end of his reign, makes it clear that Herod was not above such actions. As Richard France reported:

*The historical evidence, therefore, such as it is, suggests that the incident in itself is not improbable, but very much in keeping from what we know of the last years of Herod's reign. Among the atrocities of that period, it was a relatively minor incident, which necessarily has not left any clearly independent mark in the very clearly selective records of Herod's reign.*¹²¹

We may therefore safely conclude that despite the absence of other historical reference, the Gospel of Matthew's record of Herod's actions are in keeping with what is known about him. The absence of additional evidence is not the same as the presence of contrary evidence, and no satisfactorily contrary evidence exists.

¹²¹ France, "Herod and the Children," 119.

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