

# King Herod

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## Introduction

Herod visited Masada, a Hasmonean mountain stronghold situated near the Dead Sea, on at least two occasions before he began his remarkable career as king of the Jews.<sup>1</sup> Popularly known today as Herod the Great, Herod eventually became connected with this site when he indelibly placed his architectural mark on its isolated rocky plateau. Standing at an elevation of about thirteen hundred feet above the level of the Dead Sea, the fortress, now called Horvot Mezada (Ruins of Masada),<sup>2</sup> is extremely difficult to access because of its steep and sometimes vertical sides.

Herod's first recorded visit to Masada occurred during a fratricidal war between two Hasmonean claimants to the Jewish throne, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II.<sup>3</sup> Herod was sent by the Jerusalem government in 42 B.C. to recapture the fortress from the rebels.<sup>4</sup> The second visit occurred two years later in a completely different setting: with support from the Parthians, who were Rome's chief rivals in the East and the successors to the Persian Empire in present-day Iran, Aristobulus's son Antigonus sought to depose his uncle Hyrcanus and oust the Romans.

With his betrothed Hasmonean princess, Mariamme; her mother, Alexandra; his mother, Cypros; his sister, Salome; his youngest brother, Pheroras; and some servants, supporters, and soldiers, Herod, a supporter of Rome, fled Jerusalem in an effort to escape capture and certain death. He left his family and supporters holed up at Masada while he continued on to Alexandria, Rhodes, and eventually to Rome itself to gain additional support to oust the Parthians and their appointed king, Antigonus (Mariamme's uncle).

In 40 B.C., during his visit to Rome—Herod's first to the imperial capital—the Roman senate, under the direction of the triumvirs Antony and Octavius, named him king of Judea, Galilee, Perea, and Idumea. Nevertheless, Herod took several years to secure his rule. This effort to stabilize his kingdom began upon his return to the region in the following year.

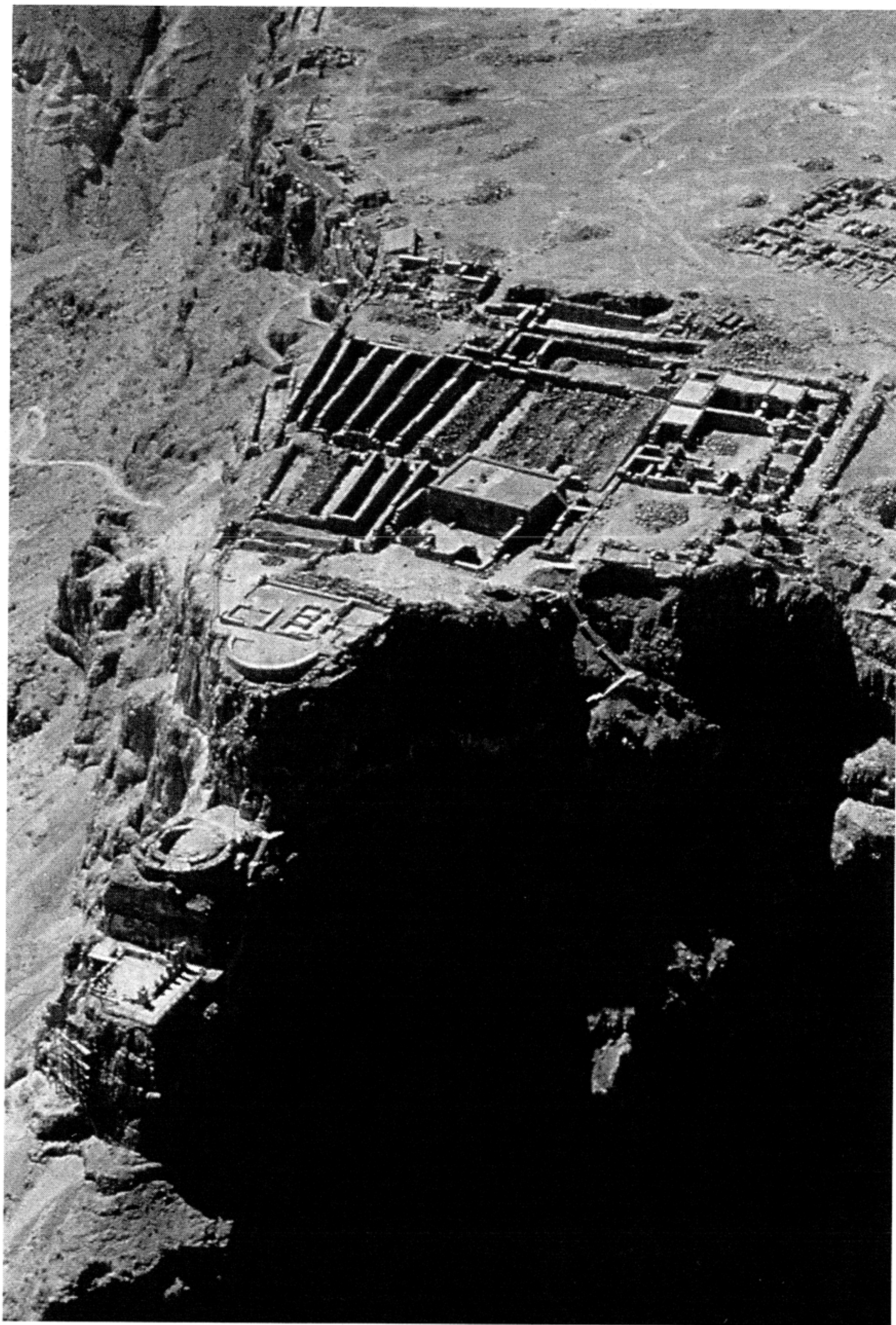
Herod landed at Ptolemais (present-day Acco) in early 39 B.C. to begin the difficult task of imposing order and authority over the nation. Following a successful Galilean campaign, Herod turned his face toward Masada once again. Taking the Via Maris down the coast, Herod captured the city of Joppa (present-day Yafo) and proceeded to Masada, bypassing Jerusalem. Herod eventually broke Antigonus's siege of Masada and freed his family and supporters.

The survival of Herod's entourage during the long siege was complicated by the lack of water. Their capitulation was averted only because a sudden rainfall filled their cisterns. As a result of this near disaster, Herod eventually added twelve huge cisterns to provide the fortress with a sufficient water supply. The cisterns were carved into the northwest side of the cliff and connected to the mountain's top by a system of paths.

During his reign, Herod built walls and other new structures—including the Northern Palace—at the remote site. Renowned for his palaces and fortifications, Herod's efforts to improve Masada made the Hasmonean stronghold his own.<sup>5</sup> Herod's ambitious efforts to transform Masada are symbolic of what he did to the religious, economic, and social landscape of the region during his reign as king of Judea.

Herod's kingdom had experienced repression, revolt, and turmoil for several hundred years. It had been ruled from Egypt by the Ptolemies for over a hundred years after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. It became part of the Seleucid kingdom around 200 B.C. and eventually achieved a considerable degree of independence for nearly a century under the Hasmoneans. However, from 63 B.C. onwards, the whole region (Judea and Syria) was effectively under Roman control as a client kingdom of Rome, although Judea and Samaria did not become organized Roman provinces until A.D. 6 and Galilee and Perea not until A.D. 44. While Herod was alive, his world was part of the Greco-Roman world.<sup>6</sup>





Herod's "Northern Palace." Sometimes called a villa, this complex was built on the northern tip of the Masada plateau and two lower terraces.



Although the influence of his life changed the history of his land and his people, in the broader historic fabric of this period Herod may be considered simply as a minor client king of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, his life deserves consideration, not only in its own right but also for several other cogent reasons: First, Herod's life crossed the paths of many influential people (for example, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Mark Antony, Cleopatra, Marcus Agrippa, and Jesus of Nazareth).<sup>7</sup> Second, his descendants and relatives (such as Archelaus, Herod Philip, Herod Antipas, Herodias, Salome, Agrippa I, and Agrippa II) continued to occupy positions of power and influence into the second century A.D., and several made appearances in the New Testament.<sup>8</sup> Third, Herod left the modern world important cultural artifacts (including archaeological remains at Jericho, Hebron, Caesarea Maritima, Herodium, and Masada) that enable scholars to reconstruct the social setting of his world. Fourth, Herod's Judea occupied a critical position in the region, controlling the only land route between Syria and Egypt. Finally, Herod's life illuminates much about his world—the world that saw the birth and rise of Christianity.

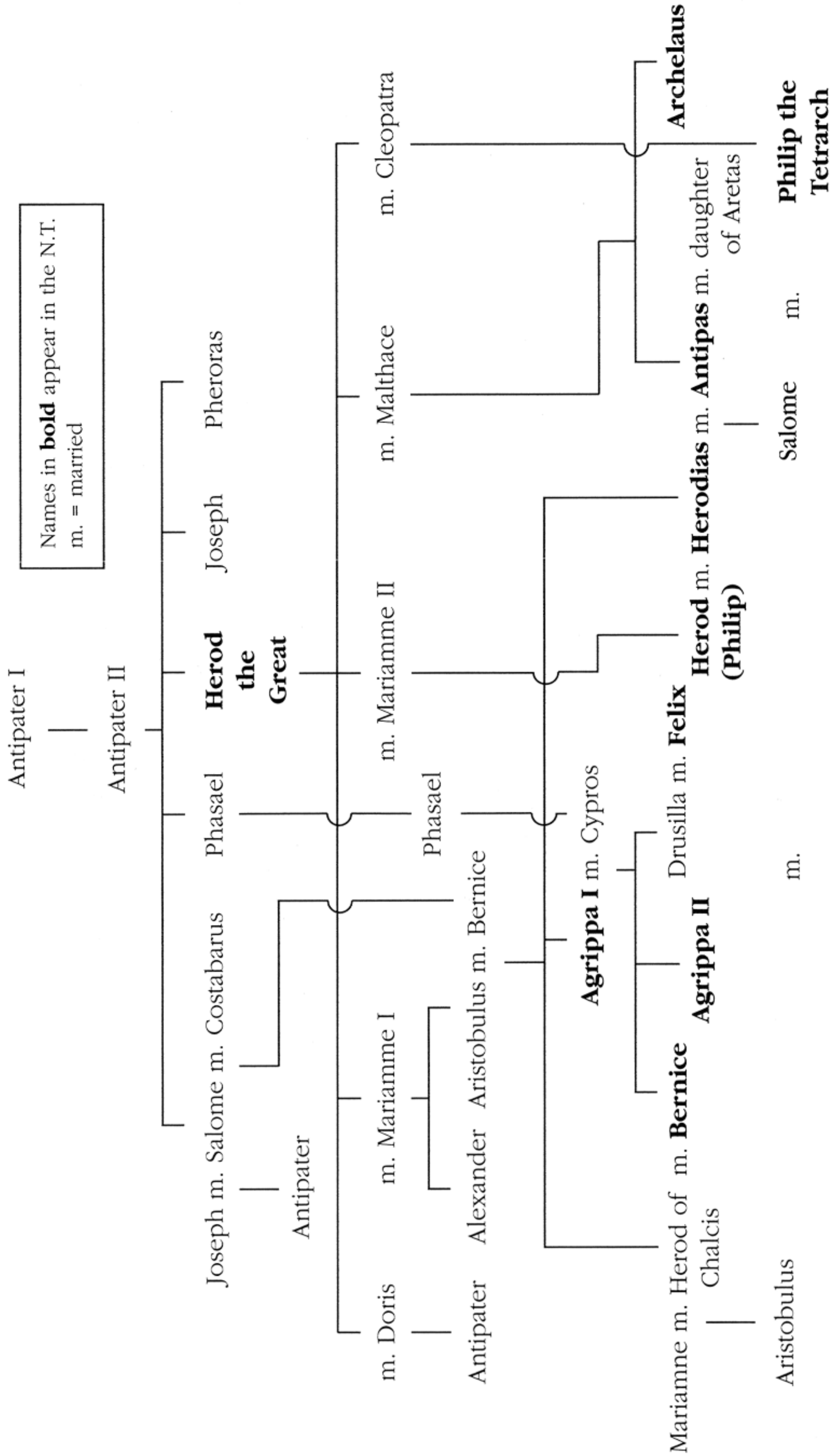
### Sources for Herod's History

Just as Herod's life reveals much about his age, his age elucidates much about his life. Surprisingly, the sources available to reconstruct Herod's life—literature, archaeology, numismatics, and inscriptions—may be better than those for Seneca or even for Paul. Louis Feldman argues, "There is no figure in all antiquity about whom we have more detailed information than Herod."<sup>9</sup>

**Josephus.** The primary literary source on Herod's life is Flavius Josephus (Yoseph ben Matatyahu in Hebrew).<sup>10</sup> His books *Jewish War*, published sometime between A.D. 75 and 79, and *Jewish Antiquities*, published between A.D. 93 and 94, contain a wealth of information about Herod.<sup>11</sup> Josephus virtually stands alone as the written witness of Herod and his times. While his reports in *Jewish War* and *Antiquities* are sometimes inconsistent and contradictory, Josephus's histories reveal much about this period of time and Herod's position in it.



# The Herodian Dynasty





Apparently, Josephus's main source on Herod's life was the now nonextant writings of Nicholas of Damascus, a non-Jew and intimate friend of Augustus.<sup>12</sup> Nicholas not only tutored Herod in philosophy but acted as a court advisor and court historian. Josephus also had access to Herod's no longer extant *Memoirs*, which in all likelihood provided additional information.<sup>13</sup> Finally, most scholars agree that Josephus utilized archival sources in Rome, particularly in his later work, *Antiquities*.

Using Josephus to reconstruct historical events in Herod's life is somewhat problematic as already noted, since his assessment of the king is often contradictory.<sup>14</sup> Josephus was the descendent of a Hasmonean princess and was conscious of this pedigree. As a result of family pride, one could expect from Josephus a biased interpretation of the conflict between the Hasmonean side of Herod's family and the Idumean side.

Three basic questions arise when consulting Josephus on Herod: first, the reliability of his sources; second, Josephus's own reliability; and third, his historical balance in treating events in the life of Herod. Josephus's lack of balance is nowhere more evident than in his decision to dedicate in his writings three times more space to Herod's family problems than to other important events of his reign.

Furthermore, one may be puzzled by Josephus's access to speeches and private conversations, such as discussions between Herod and Octavian and remarks made by Herod and his wives in their bedroom. Certainly Josephus followed the practice introduced by the ancient Greek historian Thucydides. Thucydides stated that since it was impossible to always give a verbatim report of speeches, he put into the speaker's mouth the thoughts "given in the language in which, as it seemed to me, the several speakers would express, on the subjects under consideration, the sentiments most befitting the occasion, though at the same time I have adhered as closely as possible to the general sense of what was actually said."<sup>15</sup> Smallwood argues, with regard to the speeches in *Jewish War*, "those attributed to Herod need not be rejected as pure Josephan fantasy," since Herod's *Memoirs* and the writings of Nicolas of Damascus could have given intimate information that Josephus included in his works.<sup>16</sup>



**Strabo and Other Ancient Writers.** After Josephus, other ancient writers, such as Strabo, left information about Herod. Often writers, particularly Christians, portrayed Herod in a negative light. Fiction and legends created over time eventually were accepted as fact in many cases.<sup>17</sup>

**Modern Sources.** Just as it is difficult to find a coherent assessment of Herod's life and reign in ancient sources, people living two thousand years after Herod's death also vary in their points of view. Modern descriptions for Herod range anywhere from a genius to a lunatic and from a despot to a well-meaning king with his country's best interests at heart.

Stewart Perowne notes that Herod has been "for 2,000 years . . . detested as one of the most wicked men."<sup>18</sup> While Perowne's description of Herod varies somewhat from this commonly held view, he nevertheless concludes his biography with this observation, revealing the lenses by which many judge Herod's life and administration:

[Herod] did not realize the spiritual world in which he lived. . . . Some centuries before Herod's day, the prophets had propounded a spiritual view of religion. . . . Herod perceived none of these things. He was bent solely on the affairs of this world. His great crime against Jewry, for which he had done so much, was not that he repressed nationalism, but that he never realized its spiritual destiny. Herod's tragedy was not that he saw the vanity of the dream, but that he never beheld the glory of the vision.<sup>19</sup>

Another perspective, a Jewish one, is found in the work of Samuel Sandmel. He states categorically that "Herod was hated, and he was cruel."<sup>20</sup> Yet, Sandmel attempts to place Herod in context and as a result softens some of the prevailing views of Herod, giving more depth to his portrait than has been done in the past.

David M. Rhoads assesses Herod as a "half-Jew from Idumaea, . . . [who] with the help of mercenary troops . . . conquered Jewish territory and succeeded in establishing himself as king of the Jews." He concludes, "The needs of the country were secondary to his efforts to maintain a place for himself within the empire. . . . Having forced his rule upon the nation, he reigned like a tyrant."<sup>21</sup>

A more recent account by Lee Levine begins to move beyond many earlier interpretations.<sup>22</sup> He states, "The Herodian period . . . was a distinct improvement over its predecessors [including



Hasmonean kings].” All in all, Levine continues, “Herod offered the Jews an unwavering political policy which advocated cooperation and integration within the *pax Romana*.” He concludes that the consequences of the collapse of this policy seventy years later “proved to be catastrophic and tragic for the Jewish people.”<sup>23</sup>

Peter Richardson offers another example in the shift from the old paradigm. To date, Richardson provides the most radical reassessment of Herod’s life and reign. He argues that, far from being a “usurping alien” or “half-Jew,” Herod was a “third-generation Jew who was attentive to his religion—a Jew, however, who was a Roman citizen and a Hellenist, who shared the religious outlook of most Roman citizens.”<sup>24</sup>

**The New Testament.** Despite current scholarly reassessment, popular views of Herod are still primarily based on another ancient document, the New Testament book of Matthew. It presents a vivid, dramatic, and horrifying image of Herod—one that is found only in Matthew:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” (New International Version [NIV], Matthew 2:1–8)<sup>25</sup>

The Magi departed and found the house where Joseph, Mary, and the young child Jesus were living, and after presenting their gifts, they departed for home without informing Herod. Joseph, warned by an angel, left Bethlehem and fled into Egypt to escape a death decree similar to the one issued by Pharaoh (Ex. 1:22):

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem



and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.” (NIV, Matthew 2:16–18)<sup>26</sup>

The New Testament informs the reader that when Herod died “an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead’” (NIV, Matthew 2:19–20).

This image of Herod and its subsequent fusing with the lives of other descendants with the same name mentioned in the New Testament only reinforce the stereotype so prevalent today.<sup>27</sup> The often-quoted statement supposedly made by Augustus, “I would rather be Herod’s pig than his son,” capsulizes the most prevalent attitude towards King Herod.<sup>28</sup> However, like most other historical figures of the past, the portrait of Herod is far more complex than is this superficial view.

## Herod’s Background and Rise to Power

**Ancestry.** Herod (*Herodes Magnus* in Latin and *Hērōdēs* in Greek) was the son of Antipater of Idumea. Idumea (called Edom in the Old Testament) was a relatively small area stretching approximately from the southern portion of the Judean hill country to the northern part of the Negev. To the east, Idumea bordered the Judean desert and the Dead Sea, and its territory reached west into the provinces of the port cities Gaza and Ashkelon. The area formed a vital power base for Herod’s eventual rise to power.

Apparently, Idumea was annexed, not conquered, by the Hasmoneans in about 120 B.C., and the conversion of the inhabitants to Judaism was voluntary, not forced as has been traditionally argued.<sup>29</sup> Idumea shared the Jewish allegiance to the nation, religion, and Jewish culture as demonstrated in their unity with Judea against the Romans in war in A.D. 66. This is an important point that helps underscore Herod’s own piety and will be discussed later.

During this period of conquest and annexation, the Hasmonean leaders established themselves as Greek-style absolute monarchs, eliminating opponents and adopting the Greek practice of crucifying political enemies. There were, of course, those who supported them and those who did not approve of their reign, particularly of their Hellenizing tendencies.

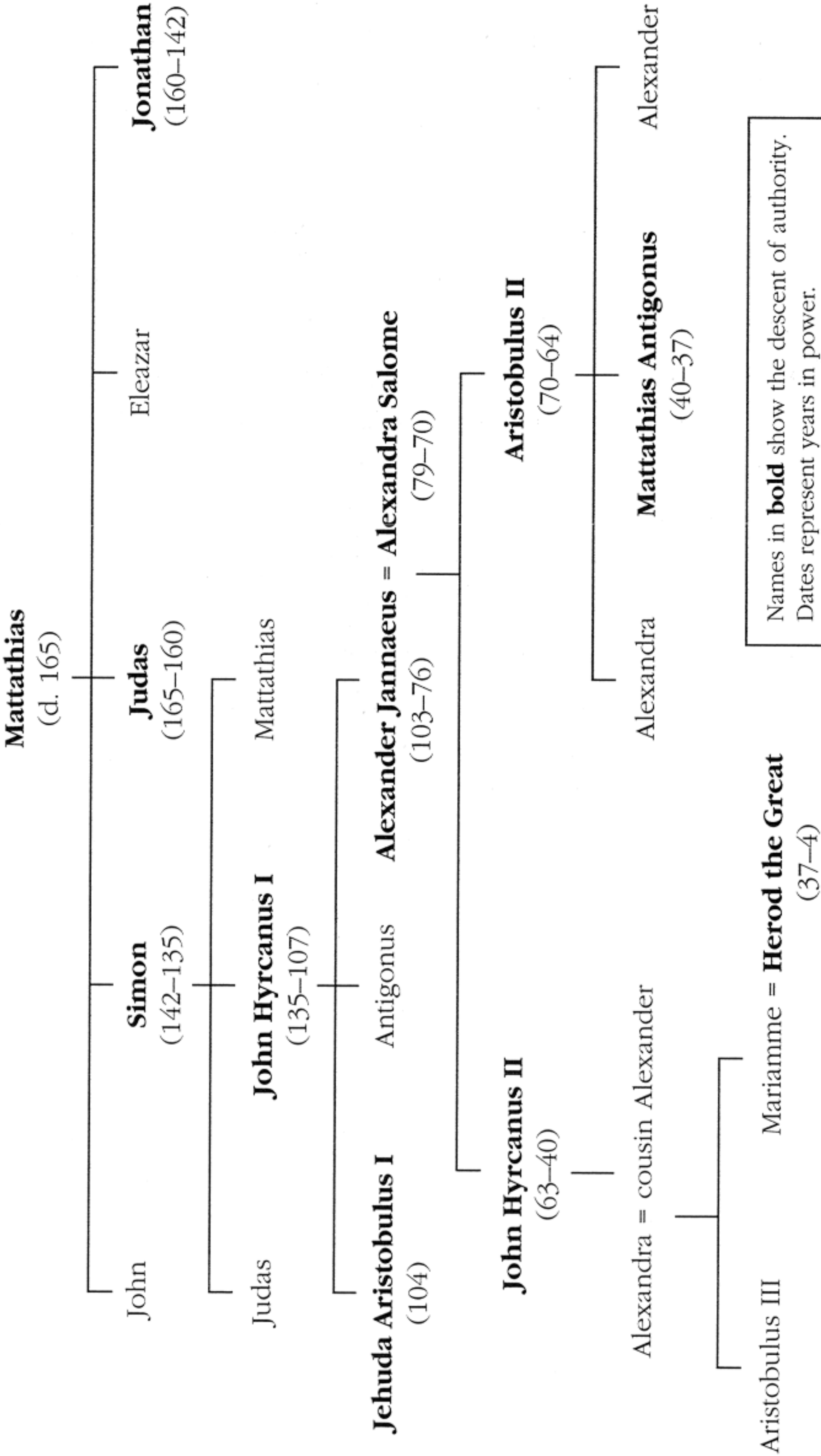
Herod's father and grandfather were men of experience and prominence and rose to importance during the reign of the Hasmonean queen Alexandra Salome. Herod's grandfather Antipas was appointed *stratēgos* (praetor or general) over Idumea by Alexandra Salome and Alexander Jannaeus, her husband. Salome and Alexander had two sons, the older Hyrcanus II and the younger Aristobulus II. Following Alexander's death, Salome retained the throne, but Hyrcanus was appointed high priest. When Salome died suddenly in 70 B.C., Hyrcanus was crowned king. Herod's father, Antipater, was a wealthy man, who eventually made his home in Jerusalem, where he advised the Hasmonean court of Hyrcanus. If Herod was born in Jerusalem while his father served in Hyrcanus's court, which is certainly possible, Herod would have been an ethnic Idumean only.

The integration of the Idumean nobility with the Hasmoneans is demonstrated in Hyrcanus's marriage to an Idumean and in Herod's later marriage to a Hasmonean princess. Most importantly, Josephus affirms many positive qualities possessed by Antipater and clearly blames the Hasmonean court for giving away its authority and power.<sup>30</sup>

Cypros, Herod's mother, apparently came from a distinguished Nabatean family (possibly the royal family of Aretas III or Obodas II). Whether or not Cypros was a converted Jew is unknown, and the extent of Herod's Jewish education is lost to us. However, at this period of time, identification of a child with Judaism came through the father, not the mother. Herod was therefore a third generation Jew, born into this aristocratic family in the late 70s B.C. (usually dated at 73 B.C.). He had three brothers, Phasael, Joseph, and Pheroras, and one sister, Salome. Two of his siblings (Joseph and Salome) had Jewish names—another indication of the family's close association with Judaism.



The Hasmonean (Maccabean) Dynasty



Names in **bold** show the descent of authority.  
Dates represent years in power.  
The symbol = indicates a marriage.

All dates are before Christ. Source: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

**Younger Years.** Josephus suggests that as a young man Herod was athletic, agile, tall, and strong. As a member of the upper class, he played soldier, hunted, and learned to ride horses. Apparently, while Herod was still a young boy, the Essene Manae-mos prophesied that Herod would eventually become king. Training, education, and family connections prepared Herod to serve his nation, but events beyond his control eventually gave him the throne.

A decade after Herod's birth, Aristobulus and Hyrcanus each struggled to establish himself as the legitimate successor to the throne and, in the process, instituted civil war in the land. The inability of the Hasmonean royal family to solve their civil, dynastic, and religious affairs led Roman general Pompey to take advantage of the situation by expanding Roman hegemony in the region.<sup>31</sup> Many Jews were relieved to have Rome intervene in what had become a chaotic situation, but there was some early resistance against the occupation government, particularly in Galilee, where many Gentiles had become enthusiastic converts to Judaism.

Pompey eventually sided with Hyrcanus and occupied Jerusalem in the autumn of 63 B.C.<sup>32</sup> The Roman general then appointed Hyrcanus high priest and ethnarch. Hyrcanus served basically from 63 to 40 B.C., with several periods of interruption. During this time, Aristobulus was captured twice and taken to Rome in both cases. Upon his second release in 49 B.C., Aristobulus headed towards Judea, desiring to depose his brother. However, his intercession in Judean affairs was halted when he was apparently poisoned under orders of Quintus Metellus Scipio, Governor of Syria.

Herod's father, Antipater, supported not only Hyrcanus, but also the Roman alliance. He demonstrated his loyalty to Rome by providing troops and paying for supplies, notably for a Roman campaign in Egypt. Rome gradually drew power away from the Hasmoneans, and while Hyrcanus retained his position as high priest, Antipater increasingly dominated the political life of Judea. Herod's own rise to prominence was greatly enhanced when his father was made a Roman citizen (an honor transmitted to Herod and his children) and appointed *epitropos* (procurator or governor) in 47 B.C. by Julius Caesar, three years before Caesar's assassination.<sup>33</sup>



Antipater asked his two sons to help in the difficult task of establishing order. Herod and his brother Phasael were soon thereafter appointed governors, Herod of Galilee and his brother of Jerusalem. The northern region was a difficult assignment since the borders were infested by brigands.<sup>34</sup> Herod was twenty-five years of age at the time but gained a reputation for his military and administrative abilities when he imposed order in Galilee by putting down the revolt of Hezekiah (Ezechias in Greek sources). He was admired by the Galilean Jews and the Roman officials in Syria for his service.

At this young age, Herod succeeded in establishing order but was also challenged by some of Jerusalem's elite, who were apparently disturbed by Antipater's rise to power. When summoned to answer for his actions in summarily executing Hezekiah, Herod arrived in Jerusalem to stand trial before the Sanhedrin.<sup>35</sup> One of the Sanhedrin's fearless members, Samainas, told the gathering that if they did not check Herod now, some day he would be king. This was the second time this prediction had been made. Under pressure from Rome through Hyrcanus, the Sanhedrin cleared Herod of charges, and he continued serving in appointed positions.

**Family and Marriages.** During this period, Herod married Doris, one of his ten wives. This was a time when Jewish families, unlike their Roman and Greek counterparts, were endogamous community families, characterized by equality of brothers, cohabitation of married sons with parents, frequent marriage between children of brothers, and occasionally polygamy.<sup>36</sup> Throughout his life, Herod demonstrated intense family loyalty to his parents, brothers, and sister. Such fidelity and allegiance was a hallmark of Antipater's family that continued among his children even after he was murdered.

Arch rival Malichus poisoned Antipater in 43 B.C., an act that set back Herod's career. Eventually, with permission from his Roman patrons, Herod had Malichus killed. Even Hyrcanus was apparently relieved, fearing that Malichus wanted to depose him also. Herod made himself indispensable to Hyrcanus, thereby cementing his position in the kingdom as the successor to Antipater. In addition, loyalty to Antipater's memory and to Herod's own abilities kept the Romans from deserting Herod when members of the Jerusalem

aristocracy tried to remove him from his position of power following his father's murder. In 42 B.C., Cassius reappointed Herod governor of Coele-Syria (the area around Damascus). Herod had been first appointed to this position in 46 B.C. by Sextus Caesar.

In the same year, Herod divorced Doris (also divorcing a niece and a cousin, both of whom he had apparently married before Doris). Following his divorces, he prepared to marry Mariamme I (a Hasmonean princess and granddaughter of both Hasmonean rivals, Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II). While Herod certainly married Mariamme in an effort to connect himself with the Hasmonean family, he apparently truly loved her. Although approved by Hyrcanus, the marriage was not sanctioned by Mariamme's mother, Alexandra.

His marriage to Mariamme represents Herod's first attempt to connect himself to the royal family.<sup>37</sup> Later, he married a daughter of a Jewish temple priest, thus connecting himself to the important religious segment of his kingdom. The effort to make proper connections with other families was not limited to his own marriages. As Richardson demonstrated in his insightful construction of Herod's family tree, the Herodian family was intermarried in complex and multiple ways in a web of royal lineages—an attempt to provide some stability in the region.<sup>38</sup>

## **Herod, King of Judea**

Aristobulus's son, Antigonus, joined forces with the Parthians in an effort to supplant Hyrcanus (and therefore Herod) and Roman influence in the region. Hyrcanus was captured and disfigured (preventing him from serving as high priest). Being warned of the impending attempt to capture him, Herod fled Jerusalem. Eventually he made his way to Rome in spite of the dangers of winter sea travel and the chaotic atmosphere in Rome at the time. Apparently his subsequent nomination in 40 B.C. by Marc Antony to become king of Judea was a complete surprise.

Josephus provides a dramatic picture of Herod walking out of the senate house in Rome between Marc Antony and Octavian Caesar: "The meeting was dissolved and Antony and Caesar left the senate-house with Herod between them, preceded by the consuls



and the other magistrates, as they went to offer sacrifice and to lay up the decree in the Capitol. On this, the first day of his reign, Herod was given a banquet by Antony.”<sup>39</sup> Herod was thirty-three years of age and faced a promising future as king of Judea.

**The Struggle to Secure the Kingdom.** Herod lived his life in a period when ambitious people were sometimes brutal and lacking in compassion. It was an era of fratricide, savagery, killing, conspiracy, civil disturbances, and international plots and counterplots. Most importantly, it was a period when security was often nonexistent.

During this period, Jews were defined by three separate and distinct categories: ethnic, political, and religious. Herod could claim the title “King of the Jews” by virtue of his religious adherence. Additionally, he could claim the title “King of Judea” by virtue of his political status as a resident of Judea.<sup>40</sup> However, because his ancestry was Idumean, he could not claim either title based on ethnicity.

Like others during this period, Herod apparently chose dependency on Rome as the best strategy for assuring the welfare of the nation and of Judaism in general. This may have been his most important and successful decision. As future events seem to prove, Herod’s prudence in accepting the political realities of Rome’s dominance in the first century was a better alternative to the irresponsibility and impulsiveness of the political and religious zealots that brought Judea in direct and open conflict with Rome in A.D. 66. His commitment to Rome and to Judaism penetrated his policies in various degrees.

After two and one-half decades of strife in the region, Herod sought to unify the people and establish tranquillity within the nation. For Rome’s part, the region was important because it served as a buffer state between themselves and their nemesis, the Parthians. The Parthian Empire was the only remaining formidable threat to the extensive dominance of Rome in the Mediterranean world.

Following his landing at Ptolemais in 39 B.C., Herod secured Galilee, moved south and captured Joppa, Masada, and Orhesa (Khirbet Khoreisa, south of Hebron). His successes encouraged many to join his cause, enlarging his army considerably. His attempt to secure Jerusalem was halted, however. In the following year, he captured

Sepphoris and routed the rebels in the Arbela caves (in Galilee), demonstrating ingenious military strategy and callous effectiveness by lowering soldiers in cages from above the cave rather than attempting an attack from below.

However, his throne was not secure until he finally stormed Jerusalem with Roman assistance in 37 B.C. This time Herod prevented the Roman general from desecrating the temple and stopped the complete plunder of the city. Jerusalem was the most significant city in the region and was an important symbol. It became the capital of Herod's kingdom and continued to be the religious center for Jews, including Diaspora Judaism.

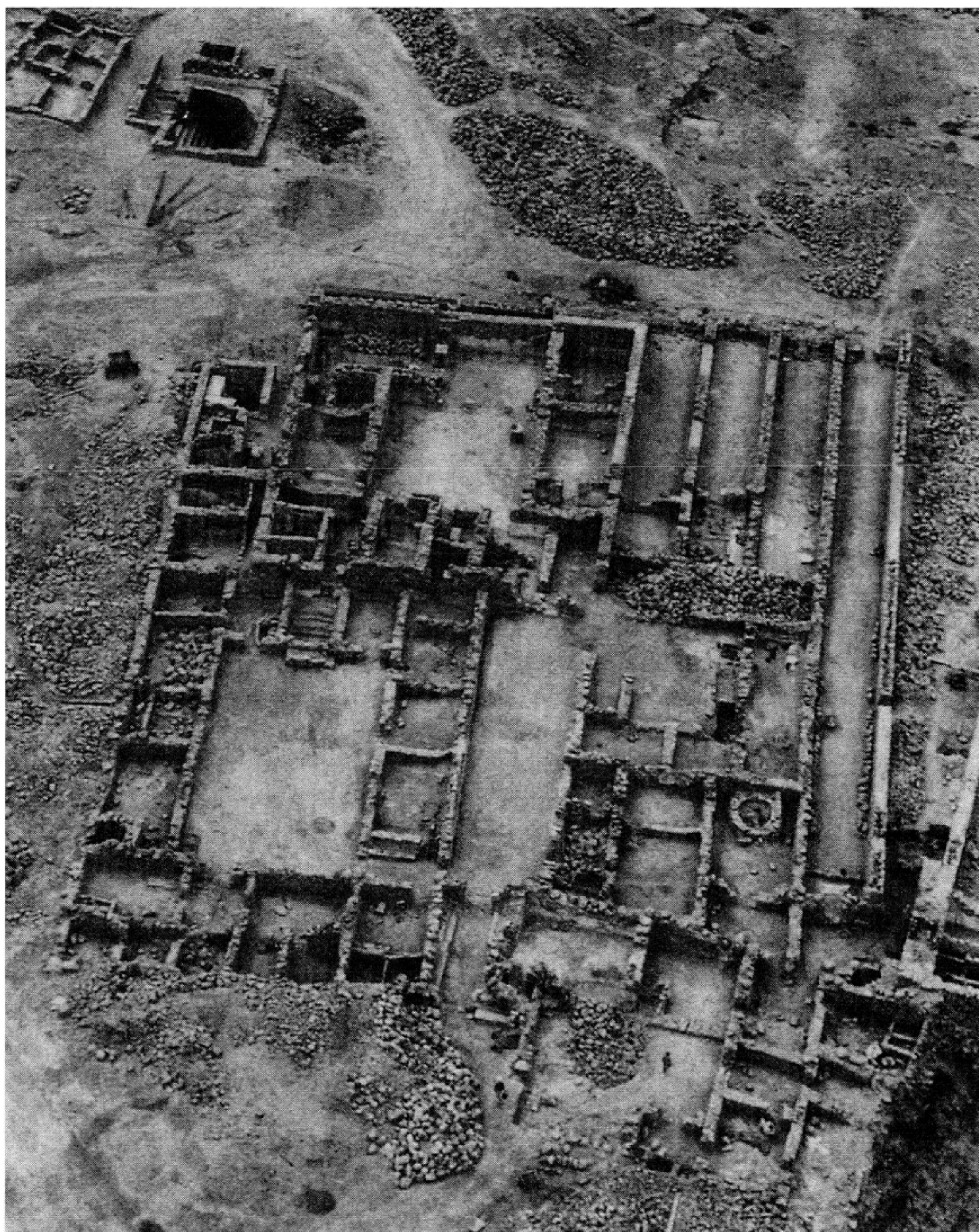
Often, Herod's reign is identified as beginning when Jerusalem was taken instead of when he was appointed three years earlier. Herod married Mariamme just before Jerusalem capitulated. In another important action taken at this time to help insure the stability of the fledgling regime, Marc Antony executed Antigonus, who was Aristobulus's last surviving son and Herod's chief rival.

Among Herod's efforts to secure his kingdom was an ambitious building program that included building walls and fortifications. Apparently Herod's first building effort in the Herodian capital was the Antonia Fortress (named in honor of Marc Antony, who had nominated him for the throne).<sup>41</sup> The Antonia was a combination of palace and fortress with high walls and towers, moat, courtyards, baths, and quarters for a large number of troops.<sup>42</sup>

Later, Herod built his largest, most impressive palace fortress at the western edge of the Upper City. Called the Central Palace, it was an architectural achievement as well as a strong fortress. It was comprised of the city fortification wall itself on the western side and an inner wall forty-five feet high in the south and east, with towers at regular intervals. On the north side was still a stronger fortress or citadel formed by three multistoried towers, named for a friend slain in battle (Hippicus), a son also killed in war (Phasaël), and his Hasmonean wife (Mariamme).

Another defensive measure undertaken by Herod was the construction or reinforcement of Jerusalem's massive walls. Herod also sought to add to the security of his kingdom by building fortresses at Masada, Machaerus, Hyrcania, Cypros, Alexandrium, Jericho, and Herodium.<sup>43</sup> These efforts at security did not always





Ruins of Herod's Western Palace at Masada. Aerial view looking south.





Building ruins at Masada

prove successful, especially when territory was confiscated with consent of his Roman patrons.

In 26 B.C., Cleopatra, who desired to annex Arabia, Judea, and southern Syria into her own kingdom, gained Iturea, Samaritis, some independent coastal cities, and parts of Nabatea, further pressing Herod's control of the region. Court intrigues continued within the family, who utilized outside forces to help sway the balance. In 34, Cleopatra gained Jericho and parts of the coastal plain, increasing pressure on Herod's land claims again. She apparently associated with anti-Herodian forces in Jerusalem, which caused Herod more concern about increased political pressure from within and without the state.

Another apparent setback occurred when Herod chose to support Marc Antony against Octavian when a rift between the two Roman leaders escalated to open conflict. On September 2, 31 B.C., Octavian's forces defeated Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, making Octavian the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. During the following year, Herod succeeded in what might be considered a most remarkable comeback. The forty-three-year-old Herod proceeded



to Rhodes, where Octavian had made public his decision to support, wherever possible, existing client kings. Herod risked everything on this one opportunity by placing his crown aside, dressing as a commoner, and appealing to Octavian personally. Josephus records Herod's defense:

"I was made king by Antony, and I acknowledge that I have in all things devoted my services to him. Nor will I shrink from saying that, had not the Arabs detained me, you would assuredly have found me in arms inseparable from his side. I sent him, however, such auxiliary troops as I could and many thousand measures of corn; nor even after his defeat at Actium did I desert my benefactor. When no longer useful as an ally, I became his best counsellor; I told him the one remedy for his disasters—the death of Cleopatra. Would he but kill her, I promised him money, walls to protect him, an army, and myself as his brother in arms in the war against you. But his ears, it seems, were stopped by his infatuation for Cleopatra and by God who has granted you the mastery. I share Antony's defeat and with his downfall lay down my diadem. I am come to you resting my hope of safety upon my integrity, and presuming that the subject of inquiry will be not whose friend, but how loyal a friend, I have been."<sup>44</sup>

Octavian realized that the loyalty shown by Herod to his patron Antony, who had been the legitimate Roman ruler in the East, was not only natural, but commendable. Herod was Rome's most active proponent in the region, and Octavian believed Herod's loyalty could be transferred to him. Herod, therefore, emerged from the crisis stronger than ever.

Soon after Antony and Cleopatra's final defeat, Herod received Cleopatra's bodyguards (some four hundred Gauls) and the territory once confiscated by her in addition to the coastal cities of Gaza, Anthedon, and Joppa; Strato's Tower (future site of Caesarea); Samaria; and the Transjordanic cities of Gadara and Hippos. Herod thus advanced his nation from being a small landlocked state to one that rivaled the ancient Israelite kingdoms of David and Solomon.

**The Struggle to Maintain the Kingdom.** Both Octavian, who by this time was the emperor Augustus, and Marcus Agrippa made state visits to Judea. Herod also visited Italy on several occasions, helping cement the Herodian relationship with Rome, a relationship that spanned nearly two hundred years—from Antipater's assistance to Julius Caesar to Herod's grandchildren and great-grandchildren well into the early second century A.D.

Renewed in his determination to establish law and order in his kingdom, as Rome required and as he believed was in the best interest of Judea, Herod moved to eliminate all domestic opposition to his rule and control any institution which might threaten his ability to rule effectively. Herod carried out proscriptions of the leading Hasmonean courtiers. Forty-five notables of Antigonus's party were executed, and all others disappeared from the historical record. Herod made the Sanhedrin (whatever their function had been before) more like the privy councils of other Hellenistic kings—convened at his request and made up largely of family, friends, and close associates.

Herod appointed the high priest and ended the Hasmonean practice of uniting the political and religious authority in one person (the high priest had also been king). While certainly this move helped consolidate power into his hand, it may also suggest a respect for Jewish law and tradition, since he was not a descendent of Aaron and therefore could not assume the role of high priest.

Against his own wishes but under pressure from Antony, who was in turn pressured by Cleopatra, Herod had appointed his brother-in-law Aristobulus III as high priest. Entrusting the position of high priest to the surviving male member of the Hasmonean dynasty proved too destabilizing, and in 35 B.C. Herod had Aristobulus killed in Jericho. It had become obvious that Aristobulus was becoming the focus of an effort to reassert a Hasmonean claim to the throne. From that point forward, Herod appointed some six high priests who came from Alexandria and Babylonia, from families with no special connection with Judean politics. Their only qualification for office, it appears, came from the purity of their priestly lineage.<sup>45</sup> It must be recalled that the Hasmoneans had also controlled the office of high priest and were vocally criticized by the Essenes for this policy.

As attested by Josephus on numerous occasions, Herod did not fail to forestall any attempt to overthrow him—even if he had to execute family members,<sup>46</sup> including his wife's grandfather (Hyrchanus II); his mother-in-law (Alexandra), his brother-in-law (Costobar), and eventually his wife (Mariamme). Evidence suggests that Alexandra, Costobar, and Mariamme plotted against Herod. Instead of legitimizing his regime, Herod's marriage to Mariamme had revealed, reflected, and intensified strains within the political,



cultural, and societal confines of his kingdom during this turbulent period of history. His marriage into the Hasmonean dynasty had been intended to transcend and relieve the stresses between religion and ethnicity, priesthood and kingship, insiders and outsiders, and between generations. Instead the marriage had become a source of nationalist intrigue and enmity.

His execution of Mariamme, however, was the beginning of a long downward spiral of trouble in his own family—a family paralyzed with rivalries and strains. He was vexed with her death until his own death in 4 B.C., demonstrating a persistent love-hate relationship with his young wife, but in light of Mariamme's capital offense against the state, Herod apparently felt he had no other choice but to execute her.

Later, Alexander and Aristobulus, his sons by Mariamme, were executed when accused by other family members of planning to assassinate their father. Tragically, another son, Antipater, was convicted of plotting against his father and was executed shortly before Herod's own death in 4 B.C. Far from being simply capricious acts based solely on anger or resentment (certainly these emotions were involved), his actions were calculated to preserve the stability of the region and in family matters were also based on a kinship system deeply rooted in the notions of honor and shame.<sup>47</sup> Betrayal by family members brought shame on the king and undermined his authority. Additionally, Jewish tradition gave him recourse against his rebellious sons.<sup>48</sup>

However, these incidents, as noted in Josephus, reveal the problematic nature of Herod's methods of maintaining security, particularly that of a widely used means of extracting information—physical torture.<sup>49</sup> Confessions given under duress could yield extremely questionable information, which created a vicious cycle that made it nearly impossible for Herod to clearly define the extent and exact nature of subversion within his realm and family.

Much like dynastic struggles in Rome and Ptolemaic Egypt, Herod's family seethed with infighting, as competing factions within the family sought to advance their cause for succession.<sup>50</sup> Of Herod's fifteen known children, ten were sons. Richardson argues:

With ten wives and an embarrassment of male children as potential successors, the rivalry within the palace walls for precedence was

intense. . . . Along with the poisoned palace atmosphere that afflicted immediate family relationships, there were strong pressures to form alliances beyond the palace walls that would create a firm base for succession.<sup>51</sup>

Herod may have altered his will on six occasions, an indication of the struggle between family members vying for power and position. Certainly this betrays a regime plagued by chronic suspicion, as potential claimants to the line of succession accused each other of disloyalty to Herod and the state.

Josephus takes an inordinate amount of space reviewing the details of the infighting, obscuring other important events of Herod's reign. Yet even in his personal life, Herod tried to promote harmony, reconciling with wives and children on several occasions. He also attempted to prepare his sons to rule Judea following his death. For example, he sent several of them to Rome to be educated and prepared for future service to their nation. Even when Augustus chastened Herod for believing all the accusations brought against family members, he also censured family members regarding the actions that brought about such allegations.

**Herod's Relationship with Rome and with Judaism.** Through Herod's influence, Rome demonstrated a respect for Judaism and its institutions on numerous occasions. Sosius, the governor of Syria who captured Jerusalem for Herod in 37 B.C., gave gold to the temple before he left. In 15 B.C., Augustus's friend and son-in-law, Marcus Agrippa, sacrificed a hecatomb at the temple to the delight of the populace; and apparently all the Roman emperors welcomed and perhaps paid for sacrifices offered on their behalf in Jerusalem.

In 22-21 B.C., Herod remitted one-third of the taxes following the sabbatical year. Octavian, now known as Caesar Augustus, rewarded Herod by adding Gaulanitis, Hulata, and Panias to his territory. Herod was appointed epitropos of Coele-Syria for the third time. Herod received many honors, including such titles as a "friend and ally" as well as "friend of the Romans" and "friend of Caesar."<sup>52</sup> Also, Herod was given the rare opportunity to name his own successor, requiring only the confirmation of Caesar. With new titles, honors, and territory, Herod moved to expand Judea's influence in the region.

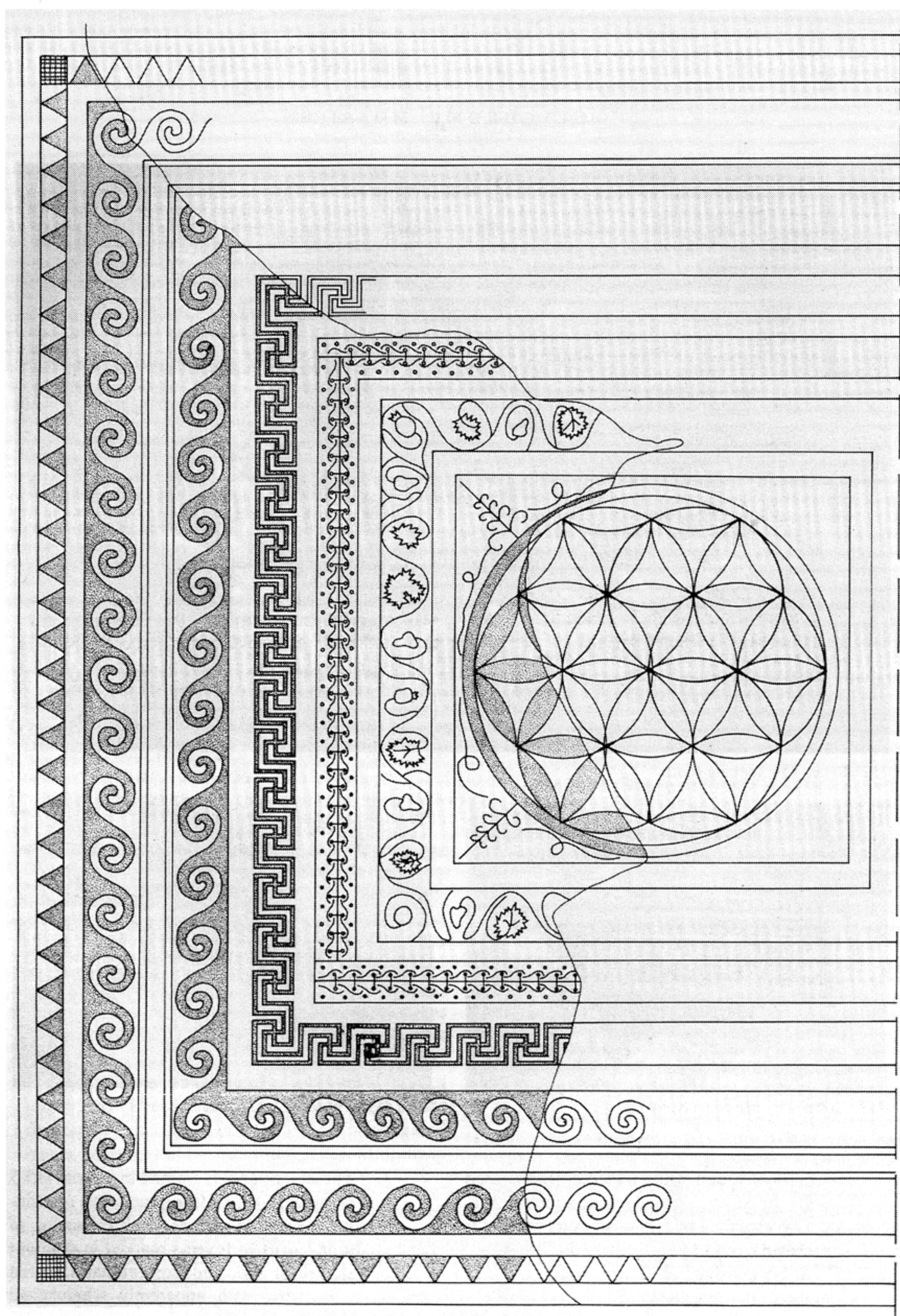


Having created the first Judean navy, Herod joined Marcus Agrippa (who was now coregent with Augustus) in an expedition to the Black Sea and Pontus. In 14 B.C., Herod again remitted taxes after the sabbatical year of 16/15 B.C. In 12 B.C., Augustus gave Herod half of the income of the Cyprus copper mines (and the management of the other half), thus facilitating Herod's building programs. That year, with his increased economic power, Herod apparently saved the Olympic games by providing badly needed funding. The trustees of the Olympic games appointed him president of the games, a post without precedent.<sup>53</sup> During the same year, the great architectural and engineering wonder, the Mediterranean seaport Caesarea, was opened.<sup>54</sup>

Another apparent contribution to the prosperity and security of the nation was Herod's effort to discourage sectarian strife and division by emphasizing Jewish worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Herod did much to protect Jews outside Judea, who were relatively more numerous in the Greco-Roman world than at present, representing as much as 10 percent of the population (seven million out of seventy million).<sup>55</sup> With Herod's help and influence, the Jews of the Diaspora were guaranteed freedom to worship, to follow their dietary and sabbatical laws, to send the temple tax to Jerusalem as prescribed in the law, and to avoid military service in the Roman army. Herod may have even helped finance a synagogue in the imperial capital itself; at least, the Jews there named a synagogue in his honor. Because Herod was a friend of Rome, the Jews of the Diaspora experienced an unprecedented time of prosperity and security in the empire. It seems obvious why Diaspora Jews were favorable to Herod. In addition, they, of course, were engaged in the same balancing act of trying to practice Judaism while living in the Roman world.

Herod's greatest achievement for his nation and for Judaism was the construction of the temple in the capital city.<sup>56</sup> Apparently, he paid the complete cost to train and support the priests doing the work of gathering the building materials from various parts of the region and rebuilding the temple. It was a magnificent structure, innovative in its design. For example, Herod's temple included provisions for women and Gentiles.<sup>57</sup>





Drawing of mosaic pavement at Masada. As is the case with all the mosaics at Masada, no images of animals or humans are worked into the design. This particular mosaic is multicolored and is located in the antechamber leading into the reception room of the Western Palace.



While Herod undoubtedly hoped this huge project would ingratiate himself to his Jewish subjects, he also hoped this monumental work project would stimulate the economy. Certainly it was a manifestation of his commitment to his Jewish faith. Other acts reflect his devotion; for example, he constructed memorials to the patriarchs and matriarchs at Hebron, to Abraham at Mamre, and to King David in Jerusalem.<sup>58</sup> The walls surrounding the ancient oak tree at Mamre and the Herodian buildings over the caves of Machpelah (located in Idumea) may also demonstrate Herod's belief that no fundamental contradiction existed between his Idumean heritage and his Judaism.

Another manifestation of Herod's commitment to his Jewish heritage is the absence of any animal or human representations on his coins and in his buildings.<sup>59</sup> In particular, the design of one coin minted during the third year of his appointment to kingship (the first year of his effective reign), utilizes motifs from the temple, symbolic of his deep-seated attachment to his heritage. Other symbols found on Herodian coins differ little from Hasmonean iconography.



Mosaic on the floor of room 449 at Masada. Post-Herodian inhabitants partially built over the mosaic.

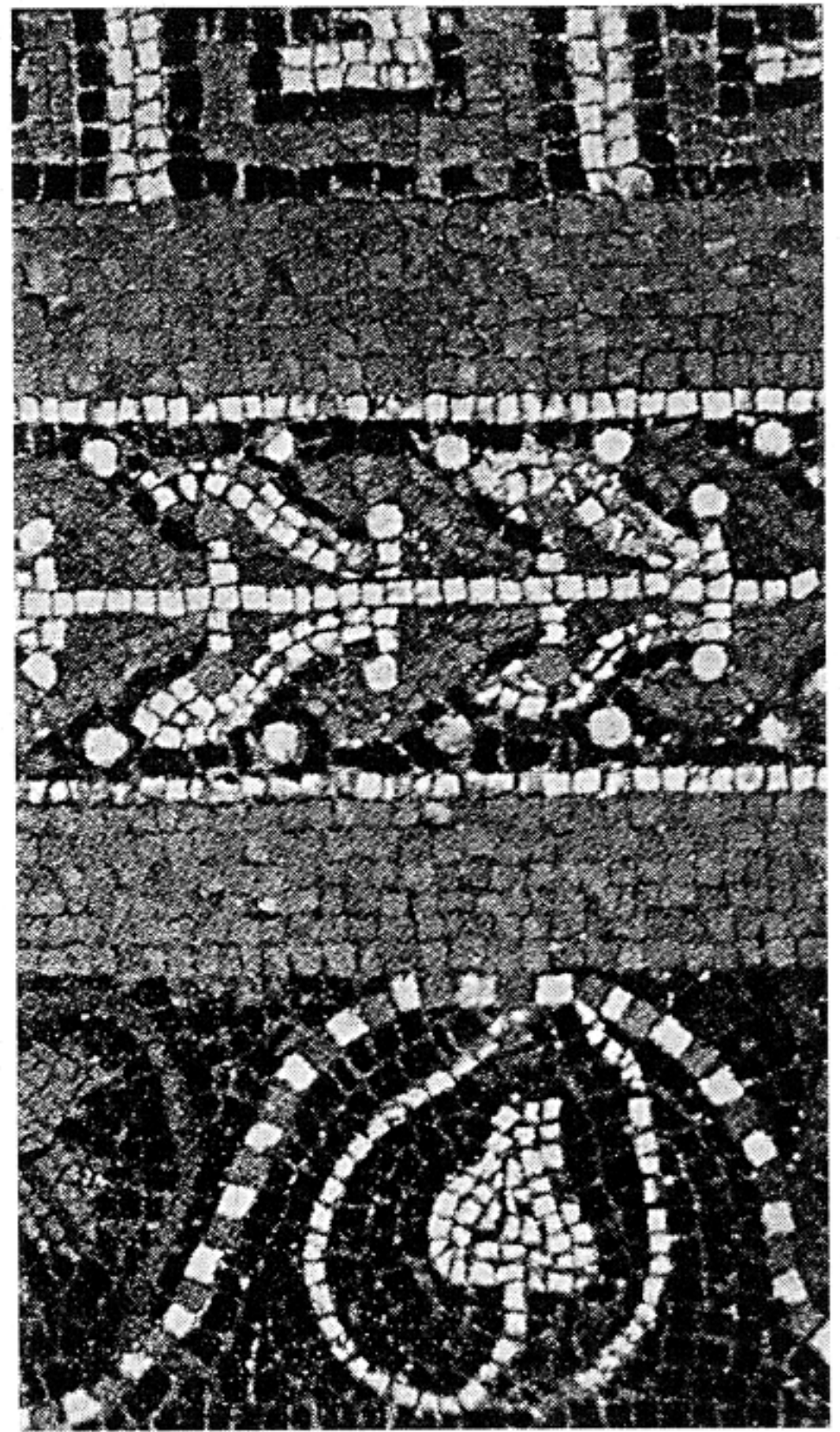


Herod's sympathy with Jewish law and tradition is demonstrated by the favor Herod showed the Essenes as a result of an Essene's prophetic blessing given Herod in his youth. Some evidence suggests that the Essenes reentered Jewish life during Herod's reign<sup>60</sup> as a result. Another evidence of Herod's adherence to Jewish law is that he required circumcision of non-Jewish males who wanted to marry members of his family.

Herod, like his father, would have resented being identified as "half-Jewish." He demonstrated his loyalty to Judaism and to Judea on many occasions. If one takes another position, many of Herod's actions are unintelligible.

**Economy, Culture, and Religion.** Herod's construction projects throughout the region (walls, shops, towers, palaces, cisterns, theaters, stadiums, aqueducts, fortresses, amphitheaters, and public buildings) strengthened Judea's economy. He improved trade routes, enlarged harbors, and created new markets for dates, wine, olive oil, asphalt, and opobalsam. Other industries such as glass, pottery, and perfume expanded significantly during his reign. Resettlement programs, agricultural development, and work relief gave the nation an unprecedented era of productivity.

As noted, tax relief and gifts of grain to his subjects following sabbatical years and natural disasters helped the citizens of Judea. He apparently even melted his gold and silver jewelry into bullion for trade during economic crises and allocated food supplies to neighboring states in need. His concern was also directed to the infirm and elderly. Herod's efforts to improve the quality of life in his kingdom included efforts to enact new laws improving social justice while encouraging the application of the Torah in everyday life. Such actions gained him not only the support of his subjects



Masada mosaic



and the good will of his neighbors, but also an international reputation of generosity and innovation.

Moreover, Herod attempted to be fair to his non-Jewish subjects. He demonstrated that it was possible for a Jewish king to remain on friendly terms with local pagans in the Greek cities around and within Judea. The difficulties inherent in ruling two distinct groups of people within the region (Jews and non-Jews) cannot be overemphasized.<sup>61</sup> Hostilities between the Jews of the Judean and Galilean hills and the pagan inhabitants of the Greek cities on the coastal plain and in the Decapolis went back to Hasmonean times. In the second and early first centuries B.C., the aggressive Hasmonean state had expanded into surrounding areas and suppressed the freedom of city states such as Gaza and Ashkelon to such an extent that, when Pompey conquered the Jews and restricted their state to the hill country, the cities greeted him as a liberator. The Hasmoneans found their Greek subjects immutably alien: unlike the hill peoples of Galilee and Idumea, attempts to convert them to Judaism proved ineffective.

For Herod, attempts to steer a middle course between the competing cultural communities was challenging. His gentile subjects thought of him as a Jewish king; nevertheless, he supported non-Jewish citizens of the regions in their rights and furnished funds to build Greek cities and temples. Further, his army was composed of both Gentiles and Jews.<sup>62</sup> Assuming that this army was typical, it not only checked rebellion from within, but also protected the inhabitants of Judea from attack from without.<sup>63</sup>

Certainly, Herod encouraged the adoption of many aspects of Greek culture, even among his Jewish subjects.<sup>64</sup> Art and architecture were copied from the surrounding culture (Greek architecture adorned the entirely Israelite temple in Jerusalem). Greek was widely spoken, though doubtless more so in cosmopolitan Jerusalem than in the Galilean and Judean countryside. Hellenization had come about neither through imposition from outside nor through the spontaneous adoption of Greek culture wholesale nor through gradual assimilation, but through the deliberate integration of Greek elements to enrich the indigenous society and culture.<sup>65</sup> Apparently, Herod amassed a sizable Greek library and surrounded himself with competent individuals (including



Romans and Greeks) to help run the affairs of state and manage increasing resources.

“In the Hellenistic and Roman periods the leading families of the cities of Asia enjoyed greater wealth than ever” before.<sup>66</sup> The Herodian dynasty was one of these families. Herod used his resources to move beyond his own kingdom. Herod donated funds to build facilities for festivals and games at Berytus, Damascus, Delos, Ptolemais, Sidon, and Tripolis. Inscriptions and monuments in Herod’s honor were located in Athens, Chios, Cilicia, Cos, Lycia, Pergamum, Phaselis, and Samos. He helped improve public buildings at Antioch, Balanea, Bybulus, Laodicia-on-the-Sea, Sparta, and Tyre. Herod built temples to Roma and Augustus in Caesarea, Pnias (Caesarea Philippi), and Sebaste. He reconstructed a temple in Rhodes, and helped complete a temple in Si’a.

Many studies of Herod’s life emphasize his building projects for the obvious reason that they have endured. They are observable by even the most casual tourist and are certainly the most easily appreciated aspect of his career, stunning in any way one chooses to categorize them—size, location, or purpose. He was a remarkable patron, matching even Augustus and Marcus Agrippa, his only two rivals. The significant absence of any references to architects suggests that Herod played a crucial architectural role in his building program.

Of course, like many other aspects of his life, the purposes of his massive building programs have been examined and reexamined on numerous occasions in an attempt to “reveal Herod’s personality, fears, tastes, and ambitions.”<sup>67</sup> Some believe that the palace and fortress complexes reveal Herod’s paranoia; the Jewish projects, a crafty plan to ingratiate himself with the religious element of his nation; and the non-Jewish construction projects, his deep commitment to Hellenism (even paganism). Whatever purposes these structures were intended to fulfill, they represent an ambitious enterprise, superbly implemented.

**Herod’s Death and the Aftermath.** In spite of these many successes, Herod’s last year was difficult and full of confusion, betrayal, and stress. Apparently for the New Testament authors Luke and Matthew, Herod’s last days were significant to early Christians as an important historical reference point. Luke sets the



historical stage of his gospel by identifying the announcement of John the Baptist's birth: "In the time of Herod king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron" (NIV, Luke 1:5). Matthew also identifies the historical setting of Jesus' birth in Judea: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem" (NIV, Matt. 2:1).

Sometime between the events discussed in Matthew 2:1-18 and 19-23, Josephus records that it was rumored that Herod was about to die (in his seventieth year—about 4 B.C.).<sup>68</sup> Upon hearing this news, the rabbis Judas (Judah ben Zippori) and Matthias (Matthias ben Margalit) incited their students to tear down a Roman Eagle that had been placed—probably some ten to twenty years earlier—on the outside of what is now called Wilson's arch, an entrance to the temple complex.<sup>69</sup>

Herod was incensed at their apparent ingratitude—he had built the temple and made every effort to balance the demands of Jewish tradition and Roman requirements. On March 12, Rabbi Judas and Rabbi Matthias, the instigators and leaders of the action, and some of the students involved in the protest were executed. On the following night, there was an eclipse of the moon—a symbol of the changes that were to befall the kingdom. Shortly thereafter, Herod died at his winter palace in Jericho. His last struggles are vividly described by Josephus:

From this time onwards Herod's malady began to spread to his whole body and his sufferings took a variety of forms. He had fever, though not a raging fever, an intolerable itching of the whole skin, continuous pains in the intestines, tumours in the feet as in dropsy, inflammation of the abdomen and gangrene of the privy parts, engendering worms, in addition to asthma, with great difficulty in breathing, and convulsions in all his limbs.<sup>70</sup>

As in life, Herod's last sickness is surrounded by controversy—various diagnoses have been suggested for his complaint, ranging from arteriosclerosis to syphilis. Whatever the cause of his last illness, Herod went to his winter palace at Jericho, where he distributed fifty drachmas<sup>71</sup> to his soldiers and greater gifts to commanders and friends.



According to Josephus, one of Herod's final acts was to gather Jewish leaders from throughout his kingdom into the hippodrome at Jericho. He then ordered that they all be killed when he died. Josephus suggests that Herod wanted his subjects to mourn at his death. Sandmel argues that this story, like the Matthean account regarding the "slaughter of the innocents," is nothing more than an attempt to malign him.<sup>72</sup> Ironically, both stories have largely shaped the artistic and popular view of Herod in modern Judaism and Christianity.

Certainly, of the two stories, the Matthean narrative is the most plausible, since Herod continually eliminated subversive or radical elements within the state in an attempt to assure continued stability in the region.<sup>73</sup> Such internecine struggles were paralleled in the Roman provinces and in Rome itself—it is just that Herod's life is better documented than the lives of many client kings of Rome, thus revealing the reality rather than an imagined ideal.

Whatever the truth may be about his last days and his death, Herod's body was taken "two hundred furlongs to Herodium, where, in accordance with the directions of the deceased, it was interred. So ended Herod's reign."<sup>74</sup> Ironically, the burial place of one of the best documented personalities in the ancient world remains hidden to archaeologists today.<sup>75</sup>

While Josephus often renders a harsh verdict on the life of Herod, another ancient source gives a more positive one. Strabo, a contemporary of Herod, notes that he was "so superior to his predecessors, particularly in his intercourse with the Romans and in his administration of affairs of state, that he received the title of king."<sup>76</sup> In all likelihood, Strabo was in Rome on at least two occasions when Herod was there, and he may have traveled through Judea during Herod's reign, thereby having a more personal view than that of Josephus.

While it is impossible to access Herod's inner motives (which were naturally complex and perplexing), external events do represent one means of understanding the meaning of his life and his career as king of the Jews. However one assesses his reign, Herod's death signaled the end of an era that witnessed Rome's most successful attempt to impose order on Judea.





Bronze coin from the reign of Herod (37 B.C.). The obverse, on left, shows a tripod with a basin; the reverse, a helmet with palm branches. The palm branches were a typical Jewish (Hasmonean) symbol. The absence of animal or human figures on the coin may also represent Herod's commitment to his Jewish heritage. The inscription around the obverse proclaims Herod the King, rather than Herod the Great, perhaps indicating how he referred to himself.

The Herodian dynasty sought to renew itself through the succession of the sons to the father's kingdom. When Herod died in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided among three sons (Archelaus as king of Judea; Herod Antipas as tetrarch of Galilee; and Herod Philip as tetrarch of Trachonitis). This effort to maintain a family dynasty may be one of Herod's greatest failures. The following decades reveal the internal weakness within the fabric of the Herodian dynasty and the failure of Herod's successors to legitimize themselves with their subjects and/or with Rome. The sporadic and often nonviolent manifestations of resistance to Herod's rule and to his patron, Rome, gradually increased and eventually engulfed the entire nation in war against the most powerful state in the Mediterranean world in A.D. 66.<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion

The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was the death knell to Herod's dreams, and to his efforts to bring peace and prosperity to Judea and establish his family securely upon the throne. The devastating



result of the war included the consignment of the Judean ruling class to oblivion and the end of sacrificial worship of God in the temple. Many rich landowners were imprisoned, enslaved, or executed. Priests who surrendered when the temple was already on fire were put to death. Most of the Jews who escaped without physical punishment lost their land. Jews were required to pay the poll tax of two drachmas annually to Capitoline Jupiter, just as the tax had formerly been paid to the temple. This tax, the *fiscus Judaicus*, symbolized the deliberate destruction, not just of the Jewish nation, but of the religion and society of Judea.

Finally, Jewish rebels fleeing the formidable Roman army made their last stand at Masada in A.D. 70, after the fall of Jerusalem to Titus. The defensive infrastructure at Masada, so well implemented by the Hasmoneans but fortified mainly by Herod, was eventually breached by the Romans. Evidently, refusing to surrender to Flavius Silva and the Roman Legio X Fretensis, the defenders took their own lives on Masada, making it a symbol of Jewish nationalism and a popular tourist site today.



“To King Herod the Jew.” Found at Masada, this inscription from an amphora, one of thirteen with similar inscriptions, specifies the destination for the jar of wine. The inscription can also be translated as “to the Jewish king Herod.”



Among the many artifacts discovered by archaeologists at Masada were several jars from a shipment of wine apparently sent in 19 B.C. from southern Italy.<sup>78</sup> On the jars, which were found scattered in several locations on the mountain fortress, were thirteen Latin inscriptions that refer to “King Herod the Jew” or “the Jewish king Herod” (*regi herodi iudaico*), rather than “Herod King of the Jews.” Not only do these inscriptions reveal how others viewed Herod, but they also represent his own self-definition: he was a Jewish king, king of Judea (including Jews and non-Jews).

Through his political acumen and his consummate diplomacy, Herod exercised considerable freedom in his country’s internal affairs, promoting the well-being of his own subjects (Gentiles and Jews) and of Jews throughout the Roman Empire as he sought to make Judea the premier province in the Roman Empire.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Except where noted otherwise, all the information about Herod’s life and activities comes from Josephus.

<sup>2</sup>Herod is the name of several members of a dynasty that were appointed to govern Jewish Palestine under Roman rule. Today, King Herod is known popularly as “Herod the Great,” and even Jewish scholar Stephen Wylen argues, “He designated himself Herod the Great, and by this name he has gone down in history.” Stephen M. Wylen, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist, 1996), 70. However, no contemporary historical record accords him this title, and likewise no available data suggest that he ever wished to be so identified. Apparently, the title crept into usage after his death as a means to distinguish him from his descendants who shared his name. In that sense, it simply meant “Herod the *elder*,” instead of the connotation suggested by the titles given to Macedonian leader Alexander (Alexander the Great) or to the Russian leader Peter (Peter the Great). See Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 12.

<sup>3</sup>The Hasmoneans (Maccabeans) were a family of high priests and kings descended from Mattathias, the father of Judas Maccabeus. They influenced the political and religious life of Judea from 165 until 37 B.C. Under their political leadership (between 142 and 63 B.C.), Judea became, in the period of Seleucid decline and before the rise of Rome, an independent state. This rise to power



began in Mattathias's rebellion against the anti-Jewish decrees of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 167 B.C., when he and his five sons fled into the hills, attracting a sizable guerrilla force and organizing an effective resistance to the Syrian occupation. The goal of achieving religious toleration eventually grew into a desire for national independence, which was eventually achieved. Scholars are divided about which Maccabean leader Josephus refers to as the one who established the fortress on the plateau and gave it the name Masada, "Mountain Stronghold": Jonathan, the brother of Judas Maccabeus (mid-second century B.C.) or Alexander Jannaeus, whose Hebrew name was also Jonathan.

<sup>4</sup>Most readers are accustomed to dating ancient events as either A.D. (*anno domini*, Latin for "year of our Lord") or B.C. (before Christ). Today, many scholars present an alternative designation of C.E. (the Common Era, meaning common to all people who utilize the traditional Western calendar) and B.C.E. (before the Common Era). In terms of the older abbreviation, then, C.E. corresponds to A.D., and B.C.E. to B.C.

<sup>5</sup>For example, noted Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin notes, "There was no controversy at all about the man who turned Masada into the formidable fort it became: King Herod the Great." Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand* (New York: Random House, 1966), 11.

<sup>6</sup>The Greco-Roman world is a term used by scholars to describe the lands surrounding the Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great through the first three or four centuries of the Roman Empire.

<sup>7</sup>Gaius Julius Caesar was born on July 12, 100 B.C., in Rome; appointed dictator for ten years in 47 B.C. and for life on February 14, 44 B.C.; assassinated on March 15, 44 B.C.; and deified in 42 B.C. Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (Augustus) was born on September 23, 63 B.C., in Rome, a son of Julius Caesar's niece; was adopted by Caesar; effectively became emperor in 27 B.C.; extended his powers in 23 B.C.; died on August 19, A.D. 14; and was deified on September 17, A.D. 14. Marcus Antonius (Marc Antony) was born around 83 B.C.; was appointed with Lepidus and Octavian *tresviri rei publicae constituendae* (triumvirate); was defeated at Actium in September 31 B.C. (after an open breach with Octavian earlier); and eventually committed suicide on August 30 B.C. Cleopatra VII was born in 69 B.C.; became joint ruler of Egypt with Ptolemy XIII in 51; sided with Marc Antony against Octavian (Augustus); and committed suicide on August 10, 30 B.C. Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa was born in 64 or 63 B.C.; became *praetor urbanus* in 40 B.C.; was appointed *tribunicia potestas* (making him second only to Augustus) in 18 B.C.; and died in March 12 B.C. Jesus of Nazareth was born in 4 B.C. at Bethlehem (shortly before Herod's death) and began teaching throughout Galilee and Judea before being executed in Jerusalem in A.D. 30.

<sup>8</sup>Herodias was the daughter of Herod's son (Aristobulus) and Herod's niece (Bernice). She married Herod's son Herod Philip (who ruled as tetrarch from 4 B.C. to A.D. 33/34), and she later married another of Herod's sons, Herod Antipas (who ruled as tetrarch from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39), as noted and discussed in Mark 6:17-29; Matthew 14:3-12; and Luke 3:19-20. Agrippa I (identified simply as Herod in the New Testament) was the son of Herod's son (Aristobulus) and is discussed in Acts 12:1-23. Agrippa II and Bernice were children of Agrippa I and interviewed Paul at Caesarea as noted in Acts 25:13-26:32. Drusilla, third and youngest daughter of Agrippa I, was married to the Roman procurator of Palestine (Felix) and is



mentioned in Acts 24:24. The Philip mentioned in Luke 3:1 was the son of Herod and Cleopatra of Jerusalem, and he founded the city of Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27). Salome (unnamed in the New Testament) was the daughter of Herodias and Herod Philip and stepdaughter of Herod Antipas and is mentioned in the story of Herodias noted above (Mark 6:17-29).

<sup>9</sup>Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:989. Additionally, Mary Smallwood suggests that because of these same sources, we have more information about Herod's land "than we do about any other part of the Roman Empire" during this period of transition. E. Mary Smallwood, "Introduction," in *Josephus: The Jewish Wars*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 18-19.

<sup>10</sup>He was a priest of royal descent and Pharisaic persuasion, born in Jerusalem in A.D. 37, just after Pontius Pilate was removed as provincial governor. Apparently he took a leading but reluctant part in the revolt of A.D. 66-73, and after he surrendered to the Romans in Galilee, he witnessed the last stages of the revolt from the Roman camp. Later Josephus attached himself to the Flavian family, obtained Roman citizenship, and spent the second half of his life at the imperial capital, where he composed his historical works, which were written mostly in Greek.

<sup>11</sup>Originally the titles of Josephus's works were in Greek, but modern scholarship regularly follows the convention of translating the titles of Greek works into Latin for reference purposes. An excellent English translation of *War* that is readily accessible to the general public is Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. G. A. Williamson, introduction by E. Mary Smallwood, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1981).

<sup>12</sup>See S. Safrai and M. Stern, eds., "The Jewish People in the First Century," in *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, 2 vols. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), 1:21 and following.

<sup>13</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.174.

<sup>14</sup>Some of the contradictions may indicate how Josephus's archival research in the imperial capital offered him an alternative interpretation of events other than Nicolas's and Herod's histories, which were Josephus's main sources in his earlier work.

<sup>15</sup>Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, ed. and trans. Charles F. Smith, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1.22.1.

<sup>16</sup>Smallwood, "Introduction," 24.

<sup>17</sup>For example, Eusebius, citing Julius Africanus, states that Herod burned the archives of Jewish families so that he would not be embarrassed by references to his own origins. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Krisopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1.7.13. Such an act is highly unlikely since Josephus indicates that the information was available. Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.31.

<sup>18</sup>Stewart Perowne, *The Life and Times of Herod the Great* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), 176.

<sup>19</sup>Perowne, *Herod the Great*, 179-80.

<sup>20</sup>Samuel Sandmel, "Herod," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:585-94; Samuel Sandmel, *Herod: Profile of a Tyrant* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1967), 261.



<sup>21</sup>David M. Rhoads, *Israel in Revolution: 6-74 C.E.: A Political History Based on the Writings of Josephus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 23-24.

<sup>22</sup>L. I. Levine, "Herod the Great," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:161-69.

<sup>23</sup>Levine, "Herod the Great," 165, 169.

<sup>24</sup>Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews*, xiii.

<sup>25</sup>"King of the Jews" is a political phrase which certainly would make Herod and Jerusalem's elite duly troubled. Later, after Herod's death, Joseph decided to go to Galilee and avoid Herod's son Archalaus, who was then ruling over Judea.

<sup>26</sup>The story would have sounded familiar to most of Matthew's Jewish readers. For Matthew, Jesus' life was a fulfillment of the stories of Moses. See Exodus 1-20.

<sup>27</sup>Herod's son Herod Antipas was responsible for the execution of John the Baptist and played a role in the passion narrative; and Herod's grandson Herod Agrippa I was responsible for the arrest of Peter and the execution of James. Agrippa I was apparently a devoted Jew and is still honored as "a genuinely pious Jew" whom his subjects "loved." See Wylen, *Jews*, 75. He is identified simply as "Herod" in the book of Acts. See Acts 12:1-11.

<sup>28</sup>This statement may reveal something about Herod's religious proclivities as it suggests that he observed Jewish dietary law, including abstinence from eating pork.

<sup>29</sup>A. Kasher, *Jews, Idumaeans, and Ancient Arabs* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1988), 46-47; see also Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews*, 54-55.

<sup>30</sup>Most scholars agree that later legends making Antipas the son of a temple slave of Apollo at Ashkelon are mere fiction; see Sandmel, "Herod," 586.

<sup>31</sup>Even Josephus blames the two Hasmonean claimants as responsible for Roman intervention. See Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.19.

<sup>32</sup>In the process, the Holy of Holies in the temple was exposed, a desecration in the eyes of the Jews. Many defenders of the capital were killed, albeit mostly by Aristobulus's rebels. Even though Pompey ordered the cleansing of the temple and a resumption of rituals and worship, the occupation of Jerusalem may have initiated a hostility to Roman rule among some of the Jews.

<sup>33</sup>Additionally, he was exempted from taxes. These favors were a reward for despatching Jewish troops to help Julius Caesar at Alexandria. Apparently, the Jews were genuinely loyal to him, especially during the civil war which pitted Caesar against Pompey. Their support (through Antipater) was not forgotten as Caesar made Judaism a legal religion and offered them several concessions: excusing them from emperor worship, which he understood was impossible for monotheists. Instead, the Jews were to offer an additional morning sacrifice to God in honor of the emperor, and he excused them from agricultural taxes during the Sabbatical year (when the Jews neither planted nor harvested crops).

<sup>34</sup>See John W. Welch, "Legal and Social Perspectives on Robbers in First-Century Judea," in this volume.

<sup>35</sup>Herod's first reaction to the trial (which could have imposed the death penalty if the accused were found guilty of violating the law) was to inflict a retaliatory strike against Jerusalem. However his father and brother persuaded him to refrain, arguing among other things that it would be a violation of Jewish law. This is one example of the use of piety as a successful argument for or against an act, which may reveal Herod's personal commitment to Judaism.



<sup>36</sup>K. C. Hanson, "The Herodian and Mediterranean Kinship, Part I: Genealogy and Descent," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19, no. 3 (1989): 77.

<sup>37</sup>Apparently Herod arranged for his brother Pheroras to marry Mariamme's sister and his son Antipater to marry Antigonus's daughter. Richardson identifies many other such marriages. See Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews*, 46–51.

<sup>38</sup>Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews*, 46–51.

<sup>39</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.285.

<sup>40</sup>Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew because of his acceptance of Judaism (religious) and because of his ethnicity (Mary and Joseph were descendants of Judah), but he did not live in Judea. He was a Galilean.

<sup>41</sup>The Antonia Fortress was more of a major reconstruction and expansion of the existing Hasmonean fortress known as Baris (*bira*, Hebrew for fortress).

<sup>42</sup>For a detailed description of the Antonia Fortress, see Andrew Teasdale, "Herod the Great's Building Program," in this volume.

<sup>43</sup>Interestingly enough, this is the only site Herod named after himself. Herodium was a complex in the barren Judean hills south of Jerusalem and east of Bethlehem. When Herod fled Jerusalem as the Parthians prepared to attack the city, he met a group of rebels at this site in 40 B.C. This may explain why he later built the complex.

<sup>44</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.388–90.

<sup>45</sup>The longest serving high priest (about 24 through 5 B.C.) was Simon ben Boethus, who became Herod's father-in-law (Mariamme II).

<sup>46</sup>Familial rivalries also existed in the Hasmonean Dynasty; for example, Aristobulus I seized power from his mother and starved her to death. He also incarcerated several of his family members. Alexandra Salome, wife of Aristobulus I, arranged to kill her brother-in-law (Antigonus) as her husband lay dying. Following Aristobulus's death, she freed her other brothers-in-law and married the youngest, Alexander Jannaeus. He killed one of his brothers and later his anti-Pharasis policy led to an unsuccessful rebellion in which some fifty thousand people were killed. Later, those assisting Alexander Jannaeus in implementing his policies were executed or brutally murdered with the consent of Alexandra. After their deaths, her two sons (Aristobulus II and John Hyrcanus) divided the nation into factions, causing a long and deadly civil war full of intrigue and political murders (including the murder of Herod's father).

<sup>47</sup>See K. C. Hanson, "The Herodians and Mediterranean Kinship, Part III: Economics," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20, no. 1 (1990): 20.

<sup>48</sup>Deuteronomy 21:18–21.

<sup>49</sup>Torture was commonly practiced in the ancient world. The ancient Greek practice of torturing slaves to obtain information influenced early Roman laws, in which torture gave the testimonies of slaves and those of low social status more validity.

<sup>50</sup>See Michael Grant, *From Alexander to Cleopatra: The Hellenistic World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), 196–98; see also Theodore John Cadoux, "Cleopatra VII," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 251–52; Levine, "Herod the Great," 161–69; and Ben Witherington III, "Herodias," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:174–76.

<sup>51</sup>Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews*, 37.

<sup>52</sup>See Levine, "Herod the Great," 163.



<sup>53</sup>See M. I. Finley and H. W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976), 99.

<sup>54</sup>Known today as Caesarea Maritima, the name *Maritima* was added by modern archaeologists to distinguish it from Caesarea Philippi. See Teasdale, "Building Program," for a complete discussion of Caesarea. See also Kenneth G. Holum and Robert L. Hohlfelder, eds., *King Herod's Dream: Caesarea on the Sea* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988).

<sup>55</sup>Apparently, the same percentage of Jews existed in the Parthian Empire. See Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus*, 42.

<sup>56</sup>There are numerous references to Herod's temple in the New Testament, Josephus's writings, the Mishnah, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is considered the most important monument and the most significant national and religious institution for Jews during this period (only the Essenes considered it less important).

<sup>57</sup>For further discussion of the temple complex, see Teasdale, "Building Program."

<sup>58</sup>Archaeological data, the type of stonework, and the dating connect these structures to Herod, but no epigraphic or literary evidence supports the conclusion that he built them as a measure of his devotion.

<sup>59</sup>Apparently, pagan temples were erected only for the non-Jewish population of Herod's realm.

<sup>60</sup>The Essenes were apparently a group begun by priests opposed to the Hasmonean attempt to usurp the high priest's office. They established their own institutions, lived in separate communes in towns and cities, and separated themselves from the temple. The identity of the Herodians mentioned in Matthew and Mark has always baffled scholars, but there is some evidence that the Herodians were Essenes, having been "nicknamed by the common people because of the protection and favor Herod showed them"; see Constantin Daniel, "Les Hérodiens du Nouveau Testament, sont-ils des Esséniens?" *Revue de Qumran* 6 (1967): 31-53; 7 (1970): 397-402.

<sup>61</sup>Hostilities between the two groups are no more evident than at the beginning of the war in A.D. 66, which saw appalling massacres in the cities around Judea—Jews killing Gentiles and destroying their property, while Gentiles killed Jews in a number of cities, most horrifically in Sycthopolis.

<sup>62</sup>Like the later Hasmonean kings and queens, whose power rested on their mercenary armies comprised mostly of non-Jews, Herod's army apparently also consisted of a large number of non-Jews, particularly within the officer corps.

<sup>63</sup>See Wilfried Nippel, *Public Order in Ancient Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>64</sup>The Roman Empire itself arose in the context of the Hellenistic world and took full advantage of its unity, promoting the use of the Greek language and accepting aspects of Greek culture. The complex unity achieved culturally through Hellenization and politically through integration of territory made Rome a strong and viable power during this period. Apparently, Herod felt he could accomplish the same on a local level, precariously balancing the demands of Jewish tradition, Roman political influence, and cultural Hellenism.

<sup>65</sup>Apparently, most Jews enjoyed a completely relaxed attitude to the Hellenization of their society, even if some of them occasionally made rhetorical attacks upon particular manifestations of this process. This attitude is no more



difficult to understand than Roman attacks on Greek culture by Hellenized members of the Roman aristocracy.

<sup>66</sup>G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Duckworth, 1981), 119.

<sup>67</sup>Holum and Hohlfelder, *King Herod's Dream*, 59.

<sup>68</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.651.

<sup>69</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.648–55; for the apparent location of the eagle, see Richardson, *Herod: Kind of the Jews*, 15–18.

<sup>70</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.656.

<sup>71</sup>See Nanci DeBloois, "Coins in the New Testament," in this volume.

<sup>72</sup>Sandmel, *Profile of a Tyrant*, 261.

<sup>73</sup>Nevertheless, Matthew's account is often rejected as a completely reliable historical source; see Samuel Sandmel, "Herodians," in *Interpreter's Dictionary*, 2:594–95. There are several reasons given. First, it was composed after the events it reports. However, the date of a text's composition is not necessarily a warrant against the possibility that it preserves accurate memories, if it was able to use earlier sources. The Homeric epics, Arrian's *Anabasis*, and Livy's histories are regularly used by scholars, even though they were composed centuries after the events they described. Second, there is no extrabiblical confirmation or corroboration. Likewise, many historians do not reject other historical narratives, just because there is little or no external verification, as in the case of Hannibal's fifteen-year campaign in Italy or Agricola's seven-year administration of Britain. Other New Testament scholars are less certain. W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann state, "The slaughter of infants two years old or less in a town of the size of Bethlehem (population ca. 300) at this time would not only have been a comparatively minor incident, and so probably unknown to Josephus, but also completely in line with Herod's known character." W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible Matthew* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), 19.

<sup>74</sup>Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.673.

<sup>75</sup>See Ehud Netzer, "Searching for Herod's Tomb," *Archaeology and the Bible: The Best of BAR, Volume Two: Archaeology in the World of Herod, Jesus, and Paul*, ed. Hershel Shanks and Dan P. Cole (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1990), 136–57.

<sup>76</sup>Strabo, *Geography*, ed. and trans. H. L. Jones, Loeb Classical Library, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917–33), 16.2.46.

<sup>77</sup>Scholars have often characterized Herod's reign as seething with revolutionary fervor. A recent study, however, reveals a more complex picture. See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 59–145.

<sup>78</sup>Hannah M. Cotton and Joseph Geiger, "Latin and Greek Documents," in *Masada II: The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963–1965, Final Reports*, ed. Joseph Aviram, Gideon Foerster, and Ehud Netzer (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1989), 133.