

5. HEROD THE GREAT*

INTRODUCTION

Probably Christians are most familiar with Herod the Great because he tried to put to death Jesus when he was in Bethlehem. Certainly the attempt to kill the future king of Israel was a vicious act, Herod was guilty of many other atrocities. As significant as this episode, there are a variety of reasons why Herod is important to secular and biblical history. He is known as a cunning politician, successful military campaigner, but most of all a master builder.¹

Herod was born in the late 70s B.C. of a wealthy Idumean father by the name of Antipater. His father was a favorite with the Romans and became *epistropos*, or overseer, of Judea in 47 B.C. In time Herod, with the assistance of his father, was appointed governor of Galilee and gained recognition for the subjugation of bandits in Galilee. This effective also gained him the attention of Rome, so that after the murder of his father, Herod was made King of Judea, a position that he held for thirty-three years, reigning 37-4 B.C.²

He was known as a ruthless ruler but he was able to maintain his power because of his effectiveness and the manner in which he ingratiated himself to various Roman rulers. He seemed to know intuitively to whom to owe allegiance in the changes within the Roman government. He also knew how to effectively use an army that he had trained to retain his power.³

The primary reason that Herod has gained the appellation “the Great” relates to his skill as a master builder. He built cities and temple in honor of Roman emperors and Roman gods. For example Caesarea Maritima (on the Mediterranean sea) was named after emperor Claudius, and Samaria was called Sebaste, the Greek name for Augustus. Herod built an important harbor at Caesarea Maritima, as well as hippodromes and theatres,⁴ as well as several fortresses (such as Masada, the Herodium, and Macherus) to which he could flee in case of revolt. In order to solicit the support of the Jewish people (he being despised as an Idumean, or Arab, ruler), he constructed the massive temple foundation and retaining walls.

DEATH AND BURIAL OF HEROD

The end of Herod’s life reveals the essence of his character manifested throughout his life, including the execution of his wives and sons, not to mention the killing of the infants in search of the Messiah in Bethlehem. Levine reports, “Realizing his end was imminent, Herod ordered that upon his death the men whom he had locked up in the Jericho hippodrome should be executed, thus ensuring general mourning at the time of his death (*Ant* 17 §173–75).”⁵

The existence and achievements of Herod the Great are not really challenged today, but there has been some questions surrounding his death⁶ and burial. The question of where he was buried has now been answered to a large extent by the discovery in 2007 of Herod’s tomb on the Herodium,⁷ one of his fortresses, by the recently deceased professor Ehud Nezer of Hebrew University.⁸ In addition to the

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¹ See the article by L. I. Levine, in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

² See the interesting study by Steinmann, in which he argues that Herod reigned from 39-1 B.C. Andrew Steinmann, “When Did Herod the Great Reign?” *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009) 1-29.

³ “He was such a warrior as could not be withstood . . . fortune was also very favourable to him” (Josephus, *Bel Jud* I, xxi, 13) See “Herod,” newadvent.org (last visited November 18, 2011).

⁴ Josephus, *Ant* XV, viii, 1; *Ant* XVI, v, 1; *Bel Jud* I, xxi, 1, 5.

⁵ L. I. Levine, in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

⁶ Judy Siegel, “US physician unlocks mystery of King Herod’s death,” *The Jerusalem Post* (Jan 27, 2002).

⁷ See article by Ehud Nezer, “Herodium,” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

⁸ News Release, “Tomb of King Herod discovered at Herodium by Hebrew University archaeologist,” *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, May 8, 2007).

location of his tomb, Nezerfound a pottery shard with a Latin inscription that identified “Herod, King of Judea” and the date and type of wine that he imported from Europe. This and other discoveries has cast away all doubt about the historicity of Herod.

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