

HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY

“Herodian Dynasty” (Matthew 2:17-22; Luke 21:5-6; John 2:13-17)

After the assassination of Herod Antipater in 43 B.C. his second son known as Herod the Great succeeded him. This was a period of great turmoil in the Roman Empire with various generals vying for the title of Emperor. It eventually came down to a showdown between Marc Antony and Octavian. The triumph of Octavian (ruling from 27 B.C. until his death in 14 AD.), when Marc Antony committed suicide, ended the last of the great civil wars in Rome. For the next two and a half centuries, there was what is known as *Pax Romana*, “Roman Peace.”

Octavian was now the undisputed Emperor of Rome. He took the title Caesar Augustus from the Latin word *Augere* (meaning to increase), which can also be translated as “the illustrious one.” He was the nephew of Julius Caesar so he took the family title “Caesar.” This Emperor was on the throne when Jesus Christ was born,

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (Luke 2:1)

Although Herod the Great had sided with Marc Antony against Octavian, he persuaded the victor that he could be trusted as a ruler in Judea. He did this on a visit to Rome. This was a remarkable demonstration of diplomacy and guile by Herod. Octavian made Herod a vassal king over all of Judea including the city of Jerusalem. He also gave him two Roman legions to maintain the security of his kingdom. The Roman Senate named him “King of the Jews,” which was a title the ordinary Jews hated, as they never regarded the half-Edomite Herod as a true Jew.

Herod the Great was a man that seemed to live a life of remarkable contradictions. He was a brilliant yet ruthless despot. The Romans regarded him as the most able and reliable of their satellite kings. He brought a measure of prosperity to the region. As a consequence, historians are greatly on his legacy. Josephus termed him “barbaric” and others called him “a madman who murdered his own family and a great many *rabbis*,” “the evil genius of the Judean nation” and “the greatest builder in Jewish history.”

The Romans richly rewarded Herod’s loyalty and reliability. He used his great wealth to engage in amazing building projects throughout Judea to perpetuate his name. He sought to model himself on Solomon. This included his magnificent palace and the rebuilding of what became known as Herod’s Temple in Jerusalem. The temple was larger than Solomon’s temple and took 46 years to complete.

Herod poured a fortune into constructing the temple. He imported marble from Italy for the floor. Much of the temple was gold plated and it could be seen for miles around. Even the Jewish Talmud acknowledged that, “He who did not see the Temple of Herod never saw a beautiful building in his life.” Herod intended that this would be a magnet for the Jews around the Empire, which would bring glory to his kingdom and wealth. He was an inspired propagandist and shrewd businessman and politician. This was the temple that the Lord Jesus Christ prophesied would be totally destroyed,

And as some spake of the temple, how it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts, He said, *As for* these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the

which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. (Luke 21:5-6)

This promise was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed it under Titus.

The temple became a very wealthy place. Every Jewish male over the age of twenty paid an annual half-shekel to it,

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, When thou takest the sum of the children of Israel after their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the LORD, when thou numberest them; that there be no plague among them, when thou numberest them. This they shall give, every one that passeth among them that are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary: (a shekel is twenty gerahs:) an half shekel shall be the offering of the LORD. Every one that passeth among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give an offering unto the LORD. (Exod. 30:11-14)

Money poured into the temple from Judea and from around the world. The Jewish diaspora were particularly generous. There were an estimated eight million Jews in the Roman Empire with 2.5 million living in Judea (the Jews constituted around 10% of the population of the Empire). Even Caesar Augustus gave a huge number of golden vessels to it. Unscrupulous leaders took advantage of this golden goose. It was these that attracted the anger of Jesus Christ,

And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem, And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up. (John 2:13-17)

Herod also constructed the port at Caesarea Maritima and the famous fortress at Masada. He was a generous philanthropist to Jewish causes. Herod built synagogues, libraries, and organised welfare for the sick and orphaned. He not only patronized the Jews but he ensured that funds were lavished on the Greeks, Samaritans, and the Romans in Judea. For instance, Herod rebuilt Samaria for the Samaritans and a new temple there and in Caesarea he set up a gigantic figure of Caesar.

One of Herod's great aims was to educate the Jews to make them socially acceptable to the Romans and Greeks. He saw the diaspora Jews as being more liberal and open minded than the conservative Jews living in Judea. So he appointed diaspora Jews to public office in Judea and encouraged the diaspora Jews from around the Empire to come to Israel and have influence.

Herod sought to prove himself as a Jew (he even attempted to invent Jewish genealogy for himself and married a daughter of the Maccabees), yet was happy to persecute the Jews on behalf of the Romans. His first act as king was to execute almost all the members of the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. He ruthlessly held onto power by murdering perceived rivals including numerous family members over the years. He ordered the deaths of his wife, his mother-in-law,

his brother-in-law, and one son just five days before his own death. Human life meant nothing to him. It is not surprising that Caesar Augustus reportedly observed, "It is safer to be Herod's son than his son."

Herod the Great was the king when the Wise Men came from the East to see the newborn Saviour recorded in Matthew 2. His paranoia and cruelty led him to slaughter all the infants of Bethlehem in his attempt to kill the newborn King of the Jews.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not. (Matthew 2:16-18)

After failing to murder the last potential rival, Herod died soon after in 4 B.C. He murdered thousands in his lifetime but failed to kill the Saviour,

But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life. And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: (Matthew 2:19-22)

The Jewish historian, Josephus claims that Herod died in great agony with disease eating away his body.

HEROD ARCHELAUS (23 B.C. – c. 18 A.D.)

On the death of Herod the Great his son Archelaus succeeded him. He was notoriously evil and provoked open rebellion from the Jews. In one act he killed 3,000 Jews in the temple in retaliation for protesting the placing of a pagan symbol of Rome there. The Romans eventually had him removed in 6 A.D. when the Jews and Samaritans united to petition Rome to depose him. It is no wonder that his reputation persuaded Joseph to go to live in Galilee, "*But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee.*" (Matthew 2:22)

HEROD AGRIPPAS (11 BC – 44 AD) & HEROD AGRIPPAS (6 AD – 39 AD)

When the Romans deposed Herod Archelaus, they eventually replaced him with a grandson of Herod the Great, Herod Agrippas (sometimes called Agrippas I) and a son of Herod the Great known as Herod Antipas.

Herod Agrippas reigned over most of Judea. His uncle, Herod Antipas who killed John the Baptist (cf. Matthew 14:6-11; Mark 6:19-28) and took part in the trial of Jesus Christ (cf.

Luke 23:5-12) was permitted to rule over the region of Galilee by the Romans. He was eventually forced into exile after his nephew, Herod Agrippas persuaded the Emperor Caligula not to trust him. Josephus claims that he was exiled to France, where he died. Herod Agrippas is the king named Herod in the Acts of the Apostles,

Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.) And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people. (Acts 12:1-4)

The enemy lost an important leader when Saul was saved and now Satan stirred up an old family of adversaries. This would not be from the religious leaders but the political ones of the Herodian family. Christ warned that state power would be used against his followers (Luke 12:11-12; 21:12-19). Herod Agrippas was cultivating the favour of the Jews, just as Pilate was when he crucified the Lord. Doubtless, he thought killing the leader would make him even more popular. Peter was imprisoned during the period of the Passover. This may well have been a calculated action to undermine the inevitable enthusiasm and outreach of the church at this time when they especially thought about the resurrection. Herod Agrippas placed his famous prisoner in the hands of sixteen soldiers, in chains and behind bars and bolts. This could not stop God acting and delivering Peter. The Bible records the subsequent death of this wicked king,

And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man. And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. (Acts 12:21-23)

Josephus records a similar story in his writing,

Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower; and there he exhibited spectacles in honor of Caesar, for whose well-being he'd been informed that a certain festival was being celebrated. At this festival a great number were gathered together of the principal persons of dignity of his province. On the second day of the spectacles he put on a garment made wholly of silver, of a truly wonderful texture, and came into the theater early in the morning. There the silver of his garment, being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays, shone out in a wonderful manner, and was so resplendent as to spread awe over those that looked intently upon him. Presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good) that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king neither rebuked them nor rejected their impious flattery. But he shortly afterward looked up and saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, just as it had once

been the messenger of good tidings to him; and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain arose in his belly, striking with a most violent intensity. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproveth the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept what Providence allots, as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner." When he had said this, his pain became violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumor went abroad everywhere that he would certainly die soon. The multitude sat in sackcloth, men, women and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground he could not keep himself from weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age and in the seventh year of his reign. (Antiquities 19.8.2)

God's day of reckoning for Herod came. Herod began this attack on God's work but God is going to end it. It may appear initially that God had overlooked his sin but this was a false hope. With a powerful contrast, Luke summarises the Lord's victory over political powers, "*But the word of God grew and multiplied.*" (Acts 12:24) This should encourage us. Pharaoh, Jeroboam, Ahab, Nebuchadnezzar etc. all tried to fight God and lost. John MacArthur comments,

You can't find one man in history, one man in the revelation of God that ever fought against God and won...the most powerful of men are unable to fight God and win...And so God has a long history in the Old Testament of all the kings who tried to fight him and what happened to them, and the whole Old Testament is strewn with the wreckage of kings who tried to fight God.