

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 13, Herod the Great

Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Anthony Tomasino provides a detailed historical examination of **Herod the Great** and his complex reign over Judea during the intertestamental period. The text explores Herod's rise to power through **Roman political alliances**, specifically his relationship with **Mark Antony and Augustus**, which allowed him to secure the title of King. While the source acknowledges Herod's reputation for **extreme paranoia and domestic violence**, it also highlights his significant contributions, such as his **ambitious building projects** and the reconstruction of the Jewish Temple. Tomasino balances the king's well-known cruelty, including the biblical **slaughter of the innocents**, with his diplomatic success in protecting **Jewish rights** throughout the Roman Empire. Ultimately, the material portrays Herod as a brilliant but **troubled ruler** whose death in 4 B.C. left a legacy of architectural wonder and political instability.

Briefing Document:

Briefing Document: The Reign and Legacy of Herod the Great

Executive Summary

Herod the Great stands as one of the most complex and controversial figures of the intertestamental period. His reign (37–4 BC) was defined by a stark dichotomy: on one hand, he was a master diplomat and a visionary architect who transformed Judea into a showcase of Roman-Hellenistic culture; on the other, he was a paranoid and ruthless tyrant whose later years were consumed by domestic bloodshed and psychological instability.

Key takeaways from his reign include:

- **Political Ascent:** Through strategic bribes and personal charisma, Herod secured the title "King of Judea" from the Roman Senate in 40 BC, eventually ousting the Hasmonean rival Antigonus with Roman military support.
 - **Consolidation through Violence:** Herod systematically neutralized threats to his power, gutting the authority of the Sanhedrin and executing potential Hasmonean rivals, including his own wife and several of his sons.
 - **Architectural Revolution:** His massive building program—highlighted by the reconstruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the construction of the port city Caesarea—endeavored to elevate Judea's status within the Roman Empire.
 - **Cultural Ambiguity:** Though he surrounded himself with Greek counselors and philosophy, Herod meticulously observed many Jewish customs and laws to maintain a fragile peace with his subjects.
 - **Legacy of Turmoil:** His death in 4 BC led to the division of his kingdom among three of his sons (Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip), setting the stage for the political landscape encountered in the New Testament.
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I. Historical Context and Rise to Power

Lineage and Character

Herod was the son of Antipater, the governor of Idumaea. Of Edomite descent, he was never fully accepted by the Judean populace, who cited biblical prohibitions against Edomites entering the assembly of the Lord. Historically, he is described as a "he-man" ruler—a powerful warrior, excellent horseman, and a man driven by immense ambition. Much of what is known of his life comes from the writings of Josephus, who utilized the records of Nicholas of Damascus, Herod's personal secretary.

The Path to the Throne

Herod's political career began as governor of Galilee, where he established a reputation for ruthlessness by violently suppressing local rebellions.

- **40 BC:** Following an invasion by the Hasmonean Antigonus, Herod fled Judea. After failing to find Mark Antony in Egypt, he traveled to Rome.
- **Roman Appointment:** Through bribes and diplomacy, Herod secured an audience with Mark Antony, who persuaded the Roman Senate to appoint Herod King of Judea.
- **Installation (37 BC):** Though appointed in 40 BC, it took three years for Herod to raise an army and secure Roman troop support to depose Antigonus and take control of Jerusalem.

II. The Phases of Herod's Reign

The reign of Herod is traditionally categorized into three distinct periods:

Phase	Years	Key Characteristic
Phase I: Consolidation	37–27 BC	Neutralizing domestic enemies and the Hasmonean line.
Phase II: Prosperity	27–13 BC	Massive building projects and international diplomacy.
Phase III: Domestic Turmoil	13–4 BC	Severe paranoia, family executions, and psychological decline.

III. Challenges to Consolidation (37–27 BC)

Herod faced intense hostility from four primary groups during the first decade of his rule:

1. **The Judean People:** The populace resented him as a "half-Jewish" usurper. They viewed his rule as barbaric, particularly after he imposed martial law and banned public assemblies to prevent riots.
2. **The Nobility and Sanhedrin:** Herod gutted the Sanhedrin's civil authority, reducing the council to a purely religious body. He replaced their power with his own "hands-on" administration.

3. **The Hasmonean Remnant:** To legitimize his rule, Herod married Mariamne, the granddaughter of Hyrcanus. However, he faced constant friction from his mother-in-law, Alexandra, and eventually orchestrated the "accidental" drowning of his brother-in-law, Aristobulus, after the 16-year-old was appointed High Priest.
4. **Cleopatra VII:** The Egyptian queen desired Palestine for its lucrative date palm groves. She influenced Mark Antony to parcel out portions of Herod's land to her. This threat only ended with the suicide of Antony and Cleopatra following the Battle of Actium (31 BC).

IV. The Era of Monumental Building (27–13 BC)

Seeking to compete with Augustus's transformation of Rome, Herod embarked on a "building binge" to turn Judea into a first-rate power.

The Temple in Jerusalem

Herod's most significant achievement was the total reconstruction of the Temple.

- **Construction Method:** To appease the Jews, he trained priests as carpenters so that holy sites would not be defiled by laymen. He built the new, larger structure *around* the old one to avoid interrupting daily sacrifices.
- **Scale:** It was the largest religious complex in the world at the time, featuring gold foil roofs visible from miles at sea. Even the rabbis later admitted that "you had not seen beauty" until you saw Herod's Temple.

Major Urban Projects

- **Caesarea:** A stupendous port city built with hydraulic concrete that hardened underwater. It was a Greek-style showcase city with a theater and sophisticated docks.
- **Sebaste (Samaria):** Rebuilt as a Greek city and named in honor of Augustus (*Sebaste* being the Greek equivalent of *Augustus*).
- **Fortresses:** Herod constructed or rebuilt numerous defensive sites, including the **Antonia Fortress** (formerly the Acre) in Jerusalem, **Masada**, and **Herodium**.

V. Cultural and Religious Navigation

Herod maintained a delicate balance between his Greek-influenced private life and his public role as a Jewish king:

- **Jewish Sensitivity:** He avoided placing human images on coinage (to honor the ban on graven images) and equipped his palaces with ritual bathing pools (*miqva'ot*). He strictly followed kosher laws in his public diet.
- **Hellenistic Influence:** He surrounded himself with Greek counselors, studied philosophy, and funded the construction of pagan temples in Greek cities both within and outside his realm.
- **International Diplomacy:** He successfully negotiated for the rights of Jews living throughout the Roman Empire, ensuring they could live according to their own customs.

VI. Domestic Turmoil and Final Years (13–4 BC)

The final decade of Herod's life was characterized by extreme paranoia and the systematic execution of his own family members.

Family Conflicts and Executions

Herod had ten wives and numerous children, leading to a volatile environment of competing interests.

- **Mariamne I:** Despite his deep devotion to her, Herod had her executed in 29 BC based on false charges of adultery fueled by his sister, Salome.
- **Hasmonean Sons:** Alexander and Aristobulus (sons by Mariamne) were executed in 7 BC after Herod became convinced they were plotting against him.
- **Antipater:** His eldest son (by his first wife, Doris) was executed just five days before Herod's own death after a failed assassination attempt involving poison.

The Slaughter of the Innocents

The biblical account of the slaughter of male infants in Bethlehem under the age of two aligns with the historical profile of Herod's final years. Given his documented paranoia and the frequent executions of potential rivals, the death of a small group of infants would have been consistent with his character and within his power to suppress.

VII. Death and Succession

Herod died in 4 BC at the age of approximately 70. He was reportedly buried at Herodium, in a tomb recently identified by archaeologists.

Division of the Kingdom

Following his death, Augustus did not appoint a single king to succeed Herod. Instead, the realm was divided among his surviving sons:

1. **Archelaus:** Appointed governor of Judea; later deposed for incompetence and graft.
2. **Herod Antipas:** Governor of Galilee (r. until 39 AD); notably presided over the trial of Jesus.
3. **Philip:** Governor of Iturea and Trachonitis; the only son to die of natural causes while in power (34 AD).

Historical Assessment

Herod's legacy is a mixture of profound architectural achievement and horrific brutality. While he secured a privileged status for Jews within the Roman Empire and created lasting wonders like the Second Temple, his reign ended in a climate of animosity that would eventually lead to the Great Revolt of 70 AD. As one contemporary wit famously remarked, it was safer to be "Herod's pig than Herod's son."

Study Guide:

A Study Guide: Herod the Great and the End of the Intertestamental Period

This study guide examines the life, reign, and legacy of Herod the Great based on the research of Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino. It explores Herod's rise to power, his complex relationship with the Jewish people and the Roman Empire, his monumental building projects, and the domestic turmoil that defined his final years.

Part I: Short Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following ten questions in 2–3 sentences based on the source text.

1. What are the primary historical sources for the life of Herod the Great, and why is our information so detailed?
 2. How did Herod's ethnic background influence his acceptance by the Jewish people?
 3. What role did Mark Antony play in Herod's rise to the throne of Judea?
 4. Describe the "Slaughter of the Innocents" and the historian's perspective on its plausibility.
 5. What was the "Period of Consolidation," and what were its primary dates?
 6. How did Herod diminish the power of the Sanhedrin?
 7. Who was Mariamne, and what significance did she hold for Herod's legitimacy?
 8. How did Herod manage to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem without halting traditional sacrifices or offending religious sensibilities?
 9. What was the significance of the Battle of Actium in 31 BC for Herod's political survival?
 10. In what ways did Herod demonstrate a commitment to Jewish customs despite his Hellenistic leanings?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. **Primary Sources:** We have extensive information about Herod because Josephus utilized the notes of Nicholas of Damascus, who served as Herod's personal secretary and historian. These records provide a colorful and detailed account of Herod's actions and character that exceeds the information available for most figures of that era.
2. **Ethnic Background:** Herod was of Edomite descent, the son of Antipater of Idumaea, and was only considered "half-Jewish" or "sort of Jewish" by the populace. Many Jews resented him because of a biblical prohibition against Edomites entering the assembly of the Lord until the seventh generation, leading to the perception that he was a usurper.
3. **Mark Antony's Role:** After Herod fled to Rome in 40 BC, Mark Antony advocated for him before the Roman Senate, requesting that he be named King of Judea. Although Herod likely only expected to be reinstated as a local ruler, Antony secured him the kingship and later provided the military resources necessary to install him in Jerusalem.
4. **Slaughter of the Innocents:** This event involved the killing of male infants under two years of age around Bethlehem to eliminate the threat of a potential Messiah. While some scholars doubt its historicity, the text suggests it is consistent with the extreme paranoia and ruthlessness Herod displayed in his later years.
5. **Period of Consolidation:** This was the first phase of Herod's reign, lasting from 37 BC to 27 BC. During these ten years, Herod focused on overcoming hostile forces—including the Judean people, the nobility, and the remaining Hasmoneans—to bring the kingdom under his total control.
6. **The Sanhedrin:** Herod gutted the civil authority of the Sanhedrin, which had previously exercised significant power during the Roman administration of Gabinius. While he allowed the council to continue meeting to discuss religious questions, he stripped them of their legal and civil power, ensuring the "buck stopped with him."
7. **Mariamne:** Mariamne was the granddaughter of Hyrcanus and a member of the Hasmonean royal family. Herod married her to secure a connection to the

previous dynasty and legitimize his rule, though the marriage was eventually marked by mutual distrust and ended in her execution.

8. **Rebuilding the Temple:** To avoid religious opposition, Herod hired Jewish craftsmen and trained priests as carpenters so that only "holy people" worked on the sacred structure. He built the new, massive temple complex around the old structure, only disassembling the original once the new one was sufficiently advanced, allowing sacrifices to continue uninterrupted.
9. **Battle of Actium:** The defeat and subsequent suicides of Herod's allies, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, forced Herod to pivot his loyalty to the victor, Octavian (Augustus). Herod successfully ingratiated himself with Augustus by presenting himself as a victim of Antony's whims, resulting in the return of his lands and confirmation of his kingship.
10. **Jewish Customs:** Herod was meticulous about avoiding "graven images" on his coinage and followed kosher laws, leading to the Roman joke that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son. He also equipped his palaces with ritual bathing pools (*mikvaot*) and secured legal rights for Jews throughout the Roman Empire to live according to their own laws.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the provided source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Paradox of Herod's "Greatness":** Evaluate the various factors that contributed to Herod being titled "The Great." Balance his achievements in architecture and diplomacy against his reputation for brutality and domestic violence.
2. **The Architecture of Power:** Analyze Herod's building projects (the Temple, Caesarea, and various fortresses) as tools of political and cultural messaging. How did these projects serve both his Roman patrons and his Jewish subjects?

3. **Hasmonean Resistance and the Herodian Court:** Discuss the internal threats Herod faced from the remaining members of the Hasmonean line, specifically focusing on the roles of Alexandra, Mariamne, and Aristobulus.
 4. **A Study in Paranoia:** Trace the decline of Herod's mental state during the "Period of Domestic Turmoil" (13 BC – 4 BC). How did his suspicion of his own family members lead to the execution of his wives and sons?
 5. **Herod as a Mediator:** Examine Herod's role as a bridge between the Roman Empire and the Jewish people. How did he navigate the conflicting demands of Hellenistic culture and Jewish law to maintain his position for nearly 40 years?
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Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

- **Antigonus:** The Hasmonean leader who invaded Judea in 40 BC and appointed himself king and high priest, eventually executed by the Romans after Herod took control.
- **Antipater:** Herod's father, a wealthy and powerful governor of Idumaea who laid the foundation for his family's rise to power.
- **Archelaus:** One of Herod's sons who was appointed governor of Judea after Herod's death; he was eventually deposed for incompetence and graft.
- **Battle of Actium (31 BC):** A decisive naval battle where Octavian defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra, marking a major turning point in Herod's political career.
- **Caesarea:** A stupendous Greek-style port city built by Herod to serve as a showcase for the wealth and modernity of his kingdom.
- **Fortress Antonia:** A fortress in Jerusalem (originally the Acre) rebuilt by Herod and named in honor of his patron, Mark Antony.
- **Hasmoneans:** The priestly-royal dynasty that ruled Judea before Herod; Herod viewed them as constant rivals for the throne's legitimacy.
- **Idumaeans:** A person from Idumaea (Edom); a background that made Herod ethnically suspect and unpopular among many Jews.

- **Nicholas of Damascus:** Herod's personal secretary and historian whose detailed notes served as a primary source for the historian Josephus.
- **Salome:** Herod's ambitious sister who frequently stirred up trouble within the royal family and slandered Herod's wives and children.
- **Sanhedrin:** The Jewish ruling council whose civil authority was largely revoked by Herod during his consolidation of power.
- **Sebaste:** The name given to the rebuilt city of Samaria by Herod; the name is the Greek equivalent of "Augustus."