

Herod: The Family of Herod the Great

The Family of Herodⁱ

The Herod mentioned in Matthew 2 and in Luke 1, is known to history as Herod the Great. His family was Jewish, by race, but they were actually Idumeans (Edomites).

Edom is the name of a country lying south of Judah. It is bounded on the north by Moab, and it extends from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba. The people of Edom were descendants of Esau, and the country has a prominence in the Bible (along with Moab) as the scene of the final destruction of the Gentile world-power in the Day of the Lord. (Rev. 16:13-16; 19:17-21).

Nebuchadnezzar ceded portions of Judah to the Edomites after the fall of Jerusalem. This fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 49; and explains why Jeremiah had been exhorting the Jews to destroy the Edomites. Lamentations 4:21, Amos 1:11, 12, and Obadiah 8-10, all prophecy the destruction of Edom by God.

The Nabataeans were the first of God's whips against the Edomites; for the Nabataeans pushed the Edomites back up into a small parcel of land next to Judah. Then John Hyrcanus I, king hierarch of Judea, 134-104 BC, subjugated Edom in fulfillment of the above prophecies, "that Jacob shall lay Esau by the heel." Hyrcanus "permitted the Idumeans to remain in their country as free men if they would circumcise their genitals and observe Jewish law." (God's final whip against the Edomites was Rome. For the Romans used 20,000 of the Idumeans as allies in the siege of Jerusalem, 70AD. But afterwards, the Romans annihilated the Idumeans, stating simply that they were a lawless and despicable race.)

Herod's grandfather, **Antipas**, had been appointed as the governor of Idumea by the Romans. He died in 78 BC, and Julius Caesar appointed Herod's father, **Antipater**, procurator of Judea, who held the post from 47 to 43 BC.

After Caesar's death in 44 BC, Rome was ruled for a time by a triumvirate, including Mark Antony, who appointed **Herod the Great** as the tetrarch of Galilee in 37 BC. Herod increased the physical splendor of Jerusalem and erected the Temple, which was the center of Jewish worship in the time of Christ.

Herod's slaughter of the infants at Bethlehem (Matt. 5:16) was in keeping with his cruel character.

Four sons of Herod the Great are named in the New Testament:

1. **Archelaus** (Matt. 2:22). When Herod died in March of 4 BC, he was succeeded by Archelaus.
2. **Herod Antipas** (Mark 6:14ff; Matt. 14:1; Luke 3:1), who was the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, from 4 BC until he was banished in 39 AD. He was opposed by John the Baptist (Luke 3:19; Matt. 14; Mark 6:14ff); he desired to see Christ (Luke 9:9); he was reconciled to Pilate (Luke 23:6-12). He is the Herod of Acts 4:27.
3. **Herod Philip (Boethos)**, mentioned in Mark 6:17 as Philip (cf. also Matt. 14:3; Luke 3:19).
4. **Herod Philip** (Luke 3:1), the tetrarch¹ of territory east of Jordan from 4 BC to 33 AD.

¹ A tetrarch is the ruler of the "fourth" part of a territory.

Herod the Great had another son, **Aristobulus**, who is not mentioned in the Bible. Two of Aristobulus' children are mentioned, however:

1. **Herodias** (Mark 6:17ff; Matt. 14:3). She had been married to her uncle, Herod Philip (Boethos); but she left him to live with another uncle, Herod Antipas, the ruler rebuked by John the Baptist. It was Herodias' daughter who danced for Herod Antipas (Mark 6:22ff; Matt. 14:6-11). We know from historical sources that the daughter's name was **Salome**. Salome's first husband was her great uncle, the Herod Philip of Luke 3:1.
2. **Herod Agrippa I** (Acts 12:1, 6; 18-24).
Three other descendants of Herod the Great are mentioned in the New Testament, three children of Herod Agrippa I.
 1. **Herod Agrippa II** (Acts 25:13ff; 26:1,2,27-32)
 2. **Drusilla** (Acts 24:24)
 3. **Berenice** (Acts 25:13; 26:30)

All told, then, two or more names from each of the three successive generations after Herod the Great are mentioned in the New Testament.

Herod the Great

Caesar Augustus (Octavian), now Princeps (first citizen) of the Roman Empire after the death of Julius Caesar, appointed Herod, the son of Antipater, king of Judea, and financed his Jewish army with Roman money. Herod drove out the Parthians, protected Jerusalem from pillage, sent Antigonus to Antony for execution, killed all the Jewish leaders who had supported the puppet government, and entered into one of the most colorful reigns in history, from 37 to 4 B.C.

Herod possessed intellect without morals, ability without scruple, and courage without honor. He was like the Caesars in many respects. He overlaid freedom with dictatorial order enforced by the military. He beautified Jerusalem with Greek architecture and sculpture. He enlarged his realm and made it prosper, achieving more by subtlety and intrigue than by force of arms. He was broken by the treachery of his offspring. He married many women and unwisely; and he knew every good fortune but happiness. According to Josephus, Herod had great physical bravery, strength, and martial skill. He was a perfect marksman with javelin and bow, a mighty hunter who killed forty wild beasts in one day. He was always able to wind up on top of the heap even though enemies sought to discredit him with Antony, Augustus, or Cleopatra. From every crisis he emerged richer, more powerful than before.

Augustus judged Herod too great a soul for so small a kingdom and restored all the cities of the Hasmoneans to him and wanted him to rule over Syria and Egypt as well. He had become king by the help and money of Rome; and the Jewish people were working night and day to free themselves from Roman rule. So they hated Herod. Also, the fragile economy of the country bent and broke under the strain of the taxes used by the luxurious court and ambitious building program. He enlarged the Temple of Zerubbabel, calling it too small, and enraging the people. His own Temple was destroyed by Titus Vespasian in 70 A.D.

Herod's sister persuaded him that his favorite wife, Mariamne, sister of Aristobulus, and granddaughter of Hyrcanus II, was trying to poison him. He had Mariamne tried and executed. Thereafter he was faced by continual plots by his family, and he jailed

some and executed others. As an old man he broke down with sickness and grief. He suffered from dropsy, ulcers, convulsions, and probably cancer. He died at the age of 69 hated by all his people. It was said of him that he stole to the throne like a fox, ruled like a tiger, and died like a dog. The Jewish kingdom was divided among his three sons Philip, Herod Antipas, and Archelaus.

The following paragraphs, to the end of the article, are reproduced from Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*.

“At first Herod the Great espoused the cause of Antony; but he contrived to remedy his mistake by paying a prompt visit, after the battle of Actium, to Augustus in the island of Rhodes. This singular interview of the Jewish prince with the Roman conqueror in a Greek island was the beginning of an important period for the Hebrew nation. An exotic civilization was systematically introduced and extended. Those Greek influences, which had been begun under the Seleucids, and not discontinued under the Hasmoneans, were now more widely diffused; and the Roman customs, which had hitherto been comparatively unknown, were now made familiar. Herod was indeed too wise, and knew the Jews too well, to attempt, like Antiochus, to introduce foreign institutions without any regard to their religious feelings. He endeavored to ingratiate himself with them by rebuilding and decorating their national temple; and a part of that magnificent bridge which was connected with the great southern colonnade is still believed to exist – remaining, in its vast proportions and Roman form, an appropriate monument of the Herodian period of Judea.

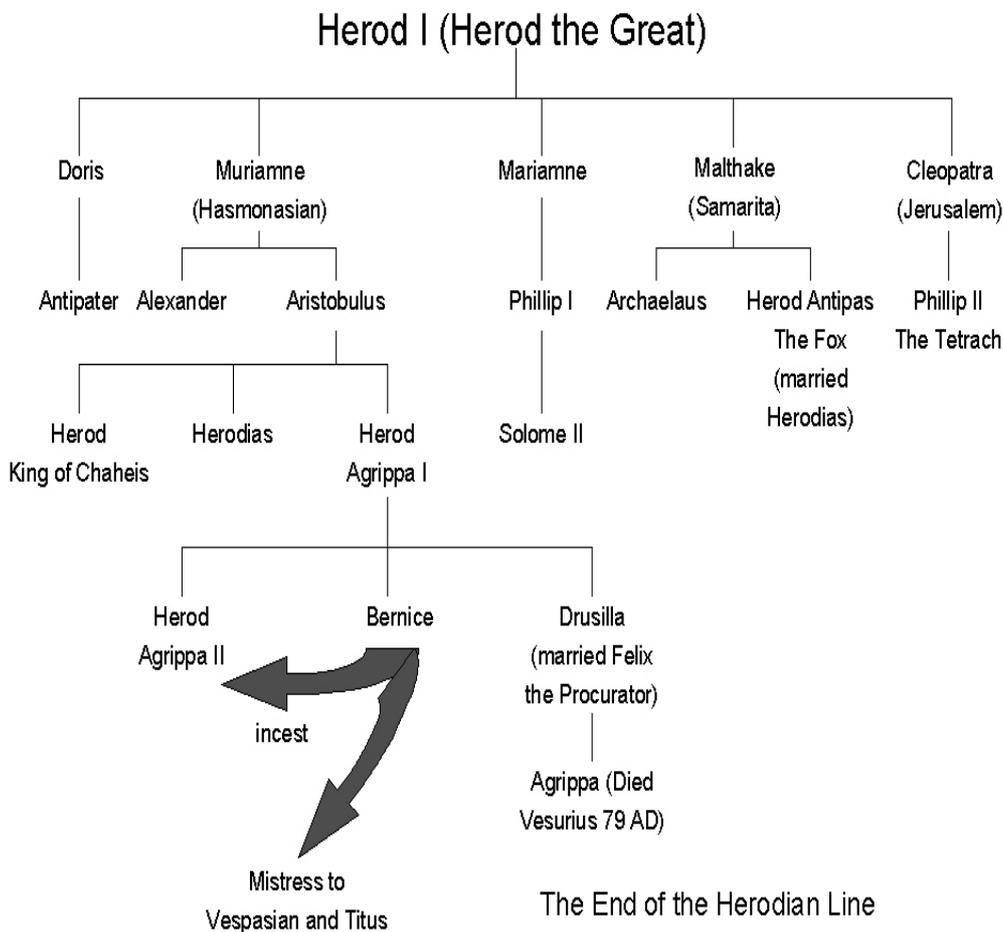
The period when Herod was reigning at Jerusalem under the protectorate of Augustus was chiefly remarkable for great architectural works, for the promotion of commerce, the influx of strangers, and the increased diffusion of the two great languages of the heathen world. The names of places are themselves a monument of the spirit of the times. As Tarsus was called Juliopolis from Julius Caesar, and Soli Pompeiopolis from his great rival, so Samaria was called Sebaste after the Greek name of Augustus, and the new metropolis, which was built by Herod on the seashore, was called Caesarea in honor of the same Latin emperor; while Antipatris, on the road (Acts 23:31) between the old capital and the new, still commemorated the name of the king’s Idumean father. We must not suppose that the internal change in the minds of the people was proportional to the magnitude of these outward improvements. They suffered much, and their hatred grew towards Rome and toward the Herods. A parallel might be drawn between the state of Judea under Herod the Great, and that of Egypt under Mahomet Ali, where great works have been successfully accomplished, where the spread of ideas has been promoted, traffic made busy and prosperous, and communication with the civilized works wonderfully increased, but where the mass of the people has continued to be miserable and degraded.

After Herod’s death the same influences still continued to operate in Judea. Archelaus persevered in his father’s policy, though destitute of his father’s energy. The same may be said of the other sons, Antipas and Philip, in their contiguous principalities. All the Herods were great builders and eager partisans of the Roman emperors; and we are familiar in the gospels with that Caesarea Philippi, which one of them built in the upper part of the valley of the Jordan and named in honor of Augustus; and with Tiberias on the banks of the lake of Gennessaret which bore the name of his wicked successor. But while Antipas and Philip still retained their dominions under the protectorate of the emperor, Archelaus had been banished and the weight of the Roman power had descended still more heavily on Judea. It was placed under the direct jurisdiction of a governor, residing at Caesarea by the Sea, and depending, as we have seen above, on the governor of Syria at Antioch.

And now we are made familiar with those features which might be adduced as characterizing any other province at the same epoch – the praetorium (John 28:28), the

publicans (Luke 3:12; 19:2), the tribute-money (Matt. 22:19), soldiers and centurions recruited in Italy, Caesar the only king (John 19:15), and the ultimate appeal against the injustice of the governor (Acts 25:11). In this period the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ took place, the first preaching of His apostles, and the conversion of St. Paul. But once more change came over the political fortunes of Judea. Herod Agrippa was the friend of Caligula, as Herod the Great had been the friend of Augustus; and when Tiberius died, he received the grant of an independent principality in the north of Palestine. He was able to ingratiate himself with Claudius, the succeeding emperor. Judea was added to his dominion, which now embraced the whole circle of the territory ruled by his grandfather. By this time St. Paul was actively pursuing his apostolic career. We need not, therefore, advance beyond this point in a chapter which is only intended to be a general introduction to the Apostle's history."

A Flow Chart of the Family of Herod the Great



ⁱ Sources:

Josephus, Flavius, *Antiquities*; and *Wars of the Jews* (Electronic version)

Edersheim, Alfred, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life; The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah; and The Temple*. (Electronic version)

Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*. (Electronic version)

ⁱ Flow Chart design by Renee Koster, Grace Atlanta Bible Church