

HEROD THE GREAT

There are few characters in ancient history more difficult to evaluate than Herod. This is partly because we know more about him, and especially about his private life, than we do about most comparable persons. What is worse, this information is often self-contradictory and almost always biased. This is because it is derived either from Nicholas of Damascus, Herod's court historian, who was extensively used by Josephus, or from those who hated him most bitterly on religious, nationalistic, or personal grounds, cf. also p. 102.

We should do well to remember that the Qumran Covenanters left their settlement after an earthquake in 31 B.C., i.e. at a time when Herod was firmly on the throne, and did not return there until after his death. More than that, Josephus (*Ant.* XV. x. 5) tells us that "from that time on Herod continued to honour all the Essenes", because one of them, Menahem, had told him when he was still a child, that he would be king, and later, when this came true, he foretold a long reign. If we are to identify the Essenes with Qumran, as do the vast majority of scholars, it would be a strange thing, if they were to return to public life, if Herod had really been the monster he is so often depicted as being; it is even less likely that they would have given him the possibility of honouring them.

Religious hatred of Herod was based mainly on the fact that the head of the Jewish state was no longer the high priest, unless indeed it was mainly Zealot in motivation. Klausner has well expressed the reasons for the nationalistic hatred:

By the time that Herod "the Great" came to the throne (37 B.C.E.) not only the royal city, but the entire land of Israel, was a wilderness. During the thirty years which had elapsed from the death of the queen Shelom-Zion (Alexandra Salome) till Herod became all-powerful (67-37) far more than a hundred thousand Jews were killed. All these were the pick of the nation, the healthiest, mainly the young men, and the most enthusiastic, who had refused to suffer the foreign yoke.

Thus the nation was enfeebled to the last degree. It no longer contained men of bold courage for whom political freedom was more precious than life; there remained only those whom we have described—the bitter-minded and the fervid of faith, who did not shrink from martyrdom for the sake of the Law. And even these, ere long, Herod had crushed by force.

There remained no longer the possibility of a great, popular rising which should venture forth, sword in hand, to meet the usurper, a foreigner by birth and depending upon foreigners for support.*

Except for the refusal to accept Herod as a Jew, we can look on this descrip-

* *Jesus of Nazareth*, pp. 1444f.

tion as essentially accurate. It betrays the bitterness of the modern dedicated nationalist, who could bring himself to write, "The Maccabaeans built up a Jewish Palestine: the Herodian kings destroyed it." Klausner could not bring himself to recognize that once Rome appeared in the East, Judea was doomed, and that the rivalry between Sadducee and Pharisee, between Aristobulus and Hyrcanus, only hastened the end. The role of Herod was not to destroy, but to preserve until He whose right it was should come.

When Augustus said, making a Greek pun, that he would rather be Herod's pig (*sys*) than his son (*hyios*), he was putting his finger on that side of Herod's life that has left an indelible blot on his memory. His life was embittered by three ambitious and unforgiving women, one of whom he loved to distraction, and rendered unsure by the plots of his sister and his sons. There can be little doubt that emotionally undermined and physically rotten in his last couple of years, he was no longer responsible for his actions at the time, which included the killing of the baby boys in Bethlehem. The number involved will not have been large—Bethlehem had little importance at the time—and at a time when the lives of many of the religious leaders were being threatened, it will have caused little stir. That is sufficient reason why it was not mentioned by Josephus.

An attempt to end the internecine conflict between Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II, the two sons of Alexander Jannai, had been made by marrying Alexandra, daughter of the former, to Alexander, the latter's eldest son. Their children were Mariamne and Aristobulus III. Hyrcanus rewarded Herod for his loyalty by giving him his grand-daughter as wife. The Romans were not merely influenced by his loyal efficiency, when they nominated Herod as king in 40 B.C. Aristobulus III was only about sixteen at the time, and so far too young for the position of king, and Antigonus had placed himself beyond pardon by bringing in the Parthians. Of any other claimants to the Hasmonean throne Herod had the best claim by reason of his marriage.

One difficulty faced Herod the Romans had almost certainly never realized. Ever since Zerubbabel had disappeared from the scene, the leading figure in the Jewish commonwealth had been the high priest; in one sense the Hasmonians had been high priests first and kings afterwards. It was impossible for Herod to be priest. With the Hasmonians it was possible for the majority to overlook that they had no claim to the Davidic throne—apparently even the Qumran community did not object to them on this score—but once Herod was on the throne the hope of the Davidic Messiah came to full life once more.

The End of the Hasmoneans

As soon as Herod was firmly on the throne he executed Antigonus' leading supporters; in this his own desires and Roman expectations coincided. Since they were also the leaders of the Sadducean party, it meant that their political power received a blow from which it never recovered. He then took steps to neutralize any chance of popular support for the surviving Hasmonians. He brought Hananel from Babylonia and made him high priest. We know nothing of his family, but in the setting it makes sense only if he belonged to a

branch of the family from which Onias III, the last legitimate high priest, had come. He also encouraged Hyrcanus II to return from Parthia and treated him with the utmost honour.

His policy might well have met with popular acquiescence, if not approval, had Cleopatra and Alexandra not worked on Antony. The former hated Herod for having earlier insulted her and in addition wished to add Palestine to her Egyptian kingdom. The latter wanted the high-priesthood for her son Aristobulus. Under Antony's pressure Herod deposed Hananel—an evil omen for the future—and made Aristobulus high priest. A few months later he was drowned in a swimming pool at Jericho. There are no real grounds for thinking that it was other than an accident, but Herod's enemies then and later could not believe it was not deliberate murder.

The next six years were a time of strain and stress for Herod as the two royal ladies schemed ceaselessly against him, and Mariamne, whom he loved to distraction, grew ever colder. We do not know whether she was expressing her natural feelings, or whether she was being egged on by her mother.

The position changed completely when Octavian (Augustus) routed Antony decisively at Actium in 31 B.C. Herod waited on the victor and offered him his services and loyalty. In spite of his relationship to Antony he was accepted, and from then until his death in 4 B.C. his links with Augustus were close and harmonious. At home there was little border fighting or internal unrest. The Romans rewarded him by a steady increase in his territory. Just before Herod went to see Octavian he guarded his rear by putting Hyrcanus to death. He had always been an unwise man, torn between a desire for lack of responsibility and ease and ambitious dreams, so he may well have been listening to suggestions that his turn had come once again, now that Antony had fallen. On Herod's return his mother and sister so worked on him that he had Mariamne put to death and her mother the following year (28 B.C.).

From then on wide circles in Judea hated him bitterly as the ender of the house of Hasmon. This may not have troubled Herod, but he was given little peace by the intrigues of his sons against him and one another. The ordinary citizen was probably concerned far more by the continuing weight of taxation. This was probably less than in the last years of the Hasmoneans, for there were no wars to pay for, but Herod's grandiose building plans kept it heavy.

Herod as King

Herod saw himself in a double role. He was king of Judea, a term which in his lifetime came to include all Palestine on both sides of the Jordan, including the Hauran, except for most of the Decapolis, Ashkelon, and the coastal plain from Dor northwards. He was also King of the Jews and as such protector of the Jews in the Roman diaspora. Note that Matt. 2:1 carefully gives him neither title.

As King of the Jews he was able to gain the right for Jews outside Palestine to live according to the Mosaic law; after his death the Romans continued this policy towards Jews living in their empire. This was not a mere question of expediency, cf. Julius Caesar's grant of privileges in 47 B.C. In 15 B.C. Agrippa,

Augustus' son-in-law, came to Jerusalem and made a great sacrifice to the God of the Jews in the Temple. This shows that for the cultured Roman Judaism was seen as a respectable religion; this was one reason for the number of "God-fearers" we meet in Acts.

It is essential to realize that Herod was a religious Jew—we are not given to read his heart and know what he really thought about God. When he was besieging Jerusalem, when it was in the hands of Antigonus, he sent in sacrificial animals for the Temple sacrifices (*Ant.* XIV. xvi. 2). With all his honouring of Augustus he did not place his image on any coin he minted, nor was any public portrait of him allowed in Jerusalem. There does not seem to be any evidence that he took part in the worship of the pagan temples he had built. When he sent his sons to Rome, he had them educated with other Jewish boys there. Even Augustus' pun, quoted earlier, that he would prefer to be Herod's pig than his son, gains its point from the fact that he knew that the pig would be safe, because Herod would not eat pork.

As King of Judea he tried to strengthen, enrich and beautify his kingdom. Only a fraction of his building operations can be mentioned here. Masada is today the best known of his fortresses. He rebuilt Samaria (a Greek rather than a Samaritan city) and gave Palestine its first good port by building Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. In Jerusalem he built himself a palace, of which the Citadel and "Tower of David" today are traces. His most famous project was the rebuilding of the Temple and its immediate surroundings. Both the great platform of the Haram es-Sherif and the West Wall are Herodian in origin. The work was begun in 19 B.C. and was not completed till A.D. 63, cf. Jn. 2:20, though the main work was finished before his death.

He tried to treat his Jewish, Samaritan and Gentile subjects equally. When he built Caesarea, he intended it to be half Jewish, half Gentile in population, and for the latter he built a temple to Augustus and Rome in it. He instituted the Actian Games to be held every four years at Jerusalem in honour of Augustus' victory at Actium and built for them a hippodrome within the city walls, a theatre some distance south of them and an amphitheatre a little further away.

It is not hard to understand his motives. He had no wish to Hellenize the Jews by force as Antiochus Epiphanes had tried so disastrously to do, but he wished to bring them sufficiently out of their isolation to create a unitary kingdom. A purely Jewish Palestine had become a fanatic's dream, and so the disparate elements had to be brought closer together. There was also a growing gap between the Palestinian Jew and the Jewish diaspora. This wish to make his kingdom part of the culture that surrounded it lay behind his generous gifts to famous cities, e.g. Athens, Antioch, Rhodes, and his becoming a major benefactor of the Olympic games.

Such a king had no respect for traditional interpretations of the Mosaic law. Apparently he was loyal enough to it not to have gladiatorial shows in which man fought man, but he pitted gladiators, and especially condemned criminals, against wild beasts, which the religious Jew considered a contradiction of man's worth as created in the image of God. Then, in his dealings with burglars

and highwaymen, whom the troubled times had caused to proliferate, he sold those that could not make restitution to foreigners instead of Jews, thus involving them in lifelong slavery instead of only six years servitude. It is hard to know how much ill-will he caused by his treatment of the high-priesthood. His record was certainly better than that of his successors, Roman and Herodian.

Jewish Religious Parties Under Herod

When the Judean state emerged under Simon the Hasmonean, there were apparently few far-reaching religious divisions within it. The Hellenists had either been murdered during the long struggle for freedom or had been forced to flee the land. On the remainder of the population Ezra's reforms had worked as a unifying power. The differences that existed were mainly social and economic. Even though the leading priestly families had their traditions that were not necessarily shared by the mainly non-ecclesiastical Pharisees, it was for social and political reasons that John Hyrcanus turned to them, the Sadducees as they came to be called. As so often happens, religion was appealed to to justify political differences, but down to the time of the Roman take-over the conflict had been a mainly secular one. In fact, when we study the points at issue between Pharisees and Sadducees as recorded in the Talmud—they are few—it becomes very difficult to believe that their hostility was ever primarily religious.

Even with the Essenes of Qumran a genuine religious split was slow in developing. Undoubtedly the assumption of the high-priesthood by Simon the Hasmonean had deeply shocked their legitimist principles, a shock doubtless the greater because some of their leaders will have lost lucrative positions in the change, but they apparently remained within the official religious community until Alexander Jannai had shown himself completely unworthy of the respect of any truly religious man. It was then that the Teacher of Righteousness had shown them a theological justification for withdrawal from corporate society.

The Roman take-over greatly reduced the political importance of the two main parties. Herod's triumph and the massacre of Antigonos' supporters that accompanied it broke the political power of the Sadducees completely. They remained the dominant force in the Temple, and they were used by the Romans, when it suited them, but henceforth their real importance lay in their maintenance of ancient priestly traditions.

Religiously Herod was clearly neutral. He could have invited the high-priestly descendants of Onias IV to return from their temple in Leontopolis in Egypt, but that would have set up a possible rival to his power. We have seen that his first high priest, Hananel, will probably have been linked with the legitimate high-priestly line. After the premature death of Aristobulus III he was restored and probably died in office. He was followed by an obscure figure, Jesus son of Phiabi, who was deposed, so that Simon, son of Boethus, father of Herod's new wife, Mariamne II, might take his place. Twenty-four high priests were to follow during the existence of the Temple and of these only four families account for eighteen of them. Since, however, the earlier

rabbinic writings clearly use Sadducees and Boethusians as synonyms, it is a reasonable supposition that these four families were linked by marriage at the very least; probably the connection was even closer. Boethus, or his son Simon, came from Egypt, which suggests that the family had been loyal to Onias IV and was probably linked to him by blood.

If this is so, it would show Herod favouring legitimacy, so long as it did not threaten his position. This in turn made it easier for the Essenes to return from Qumran. Their later withdrawal back to Qumran may be fairly confidently linked with the Roman assumption of direct rule over Judea in A.D. 6, which for them was a clear sign that they had entered the last days. This view of Herod's treatment of the high-priesthood is a contradiction of Josephus' statement, "Herod . . . made certain men to be (high priests) that were of no eminent families, but barely of them that were priests . . ." (*Ant.* XX. x. 1). Josephus found it hard to say anything good of Herod; in addition he was a great admirer of the Hasmoneans and proud to be a Pharisee, so we may doubt the objectivity of his opinions in such matters.

The Pharisees, who had been forced into politics largely by accident, had learnt a bitter lesson at the hands of Alexander Jannai and had been deeply shocked by the way Israel had been torn asunder under Hyrcanus and Aristobulus. Hence many of them saw in Herod the man who could give them peace and the elimination of their deadly enemies. While Herod was besieging Jerusalem, Shemayah and his pupil Hillel had advised the citizens to admit him, so later, when Hillel and Shammai refused to give an oath of loyalty to Rome, Herod relieved them and their disciples of the necessity (*Ant.* XV. x. 4).

This is not to suggest that the Pharisaic leaders approved of Herod. Far from it, but they regarded the rule of Rome as a righteous judgment from God and Herod's religious neutrality as their opportunity for turning the hearts of the people to God and His Law. It is no accident that later rabbis looked back to Hillel and Shammai as the real formulators of their distinctive system.

The Essenes too were released from any obligation to take the oath. This was partly because they considered that any such oath involved taking the name of God in vain (*War* II. viii. 6). More important, perhaps, to Herod was that they accepted the ruler, however good or bad, because he had been appointed by the will of God (*ibid.* 7, cf. *Rom.* 13: 1, 2).

Josephus drew on a number of sources and he sometimes combined them clumsily. Hence, though he usually wrote eulogistically of the Pharisees, we find the unexpected condemnation in *Ant.* XVII. ii. 4, "For there was a certain sect . . . who valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers . . . They are called the sect of the Pharisees, who were in a capacity of greatly opposing kings. A cunning sect they were and soon elevated to a pitch of open fighting, and doing mischief". He tells us too that when they refused to take the oath of allegiance they were fined, and when Herod found that they were prophesying the end of his rule, he executed their leaders.

Josephus was indubitably correct in calling them Pharisees, but in one vital point they had a different outlook from that of the disciples of Hillel and Shammai. Though they were devoted to the Law, they laid an equal or even greater

stress on the kingship of God. We can probably hear their voice in the Psalms of Solomon, written shortly after the death of Pompey in 48 B.C.; they rejoice over God's judgment on the man who had brought shame on the name of God by subjecting Judea and entering the Temple. There is no evidence that they were prepared to take arms against Herod, for they were expecting supernatural deliverance through the Messiah, but they were certainly bitterly opposed to him.

It could well be that those who conspired against Herod, when he first built his theatre in Jerusalem (*Ant.* XV. viii. 1-4), belonged to this group. Almost certainly Judas and Matthias belonged to them. They were popular teachers who, when they thought Herod was on his death-bed, encouraged their pupils to tear down the golden eagle Herod had placed over the great gate of the Temple. Even though he was near his end, Herod rallied sufficiently to have the two teachers and those directly involved burnt alive and ordered others implicated to be executed (*War* I. xxxiii. 2, 3).

It was from these circles that the Zealots sprang. For them the kingship of God took precedence over the keeping of the Law, even though this was deeply honoured. In ch. 15 we saw that already during the reign of Hyrcanus II Herod, as his father's representative in Galilee, had trouble with Hezekiah, the leader of a band of "robbers", whom he summarily executed with his men. Josephus respected the Zealots' teaching deeply, though he detested many of their actions. Hence, when he wrote of their principles, he did not identify them by name but wrote of "the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy" (*Ant.* XVIII. i. 6). In attributing the origin of their views to Judas the Galilean he almost certainly meant Judas the son of Hezekiah. Shortly after Herod's death he was able to seize Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee, and claim the "royal dignity" (*Ant.* XVII. x. 5). Though he was not able to hold his position long, it shows how he had been able to build up a considerable following in spite of the activity of Herod's spies.

No sooner was Herod dead than the kingdom he had built up began to dissolve. This was helped by the poor quality of the men Rome sent out as its representatives, but had they been of the highest calibre they would have only delayed the final tragedy. Only a man of Herod's understanding, will-power and ruthlessness could have done what he was able to do. In God's purpose he gave Israel a breathing space in which they could draw the lesson from the failure of the outward keeping of the Law, of the possession of an Aaronic priesthood and Temple cultus and of kingship and national freedom. The opportunity was accepted by the few, and so the second Commonwealth was doomed to pass even as the first had, when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

The Religious Position at the Death of Herod

A summary of the religious groupings at the beginning of the first century A.D. may be useful.

The great difference between the religion of Palestinian Jewry (and indeed of the Eastern diaspora and probably a majority of Jews in the West) and early

Christianity, once it had become firmly based in the Greek cities of the Eastern Mediterranean, was that the former had very little philosophical speculation on the facts of its faith. It is going too far to say that Judaism had no theology, but it was mainly concerned with behaviour. What little speculation there was in smaller circles was more mystic than philosophic.

It is popular today to contrast Hellenistic Judaism with the Judaism of Palestine and the East. The latest work on the subject, *The Jewish People in the First Century*, edited by S. Safrai and M. Stern, shows in the chapters on *The Jewish Diaspora* and *Relations between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel* that there was far less of a cleavage than is often suggested. The actions of the Hellenists in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes, cf. ch. 12, brought such opprobrium on them, that even in Alexandria or Asia Minor strict adherence to at least the externals of the Mosaic Law was expected of those who wished to be known as Jews. Only then was it possible to play with Greek thought as well. For the mass of the Jews in the Western diaspora there will have been little obvious division, beyond language, between them and their fellow-countrymen in Palestine.

The Sadducees were probably almost entirely confined to Palestine. They belonged virtually entirely to the richer priestly families, who dominated the Temple worship, and the wealthy families with which they were linked by marriage. They were proud to be the inheritors of ancient traditions, mainly cultic but also legal, which were not infrequently in conflict with the opinions of those who stood in the inheritance of Ezra. Their power came from the unique position of the High Priest, and once this was undermined, they faced, like all conservative authoritarian autocrats, inevitable defeat. Their basic authority was the Pentateuch as expounded by their traditions. If they publicly rejected the possibility of the resurrection of the dead, cf. Mk. 12:18, it was probably less a conviction and more an affirmation based on the apparent impossibility of proving it from the Pentateuch alone (but cf. Mk. 12:26, 27). They regarded the prophetic books as having devotional but not authoritative value. Their ill-fame among the masses came especially from the rigour with which they applied their interpretation of the Law, which made no allowances for the poor and needy.

Opposed to them were those who considered that the Torah interpreted from within itself and by the aid of the prophetic books could be made to cover the whole of life. They considered that such interpretations must override Sadducean traditions, however venerable they might be—in fact, wherever details have come down to us, the differences between the two sides seem to be unimportant. The main difference was that the Sadducees presented themselves as the authoritarian enforcers of the Law, while their opponents considered that the Law was open for the study and understanding of all who had the preparation and leisure. Apart, however, from a general uniformity in the manner of life, we cannot speak of a united opposition.

The Essenes of Qumran were concerned above all with the legitimacy of the High Priest, so it is not surprising that the backbone of their movement seems to have consisted of priests and Levites. So far as the practical application of the Torah was concerned they were rigorists. Their special views were derived

from the interpretation of the Prophets (not the Torah) given by the Teacher of Righteousness, aided by their conviction that they were living in the last days.

The name Pharisees almost certainly means "separated ones" and at the first was probably a name given them by their enemies. This separation, in some ways as real as that of the Essenes, was due to their insistence on outward purity and ritually pure food, especial insistence being laid on proof that the tithing process had been carried out. There were probably from the first varying groups, but by the beginning of the Christian era these had crystallized round the two great teachers Shammai and Hillel. Shammai was wealthy and of good family and he advocated rigour in the interpretation and enforcement of the Torah. Hillel, a poor man, of whose Babylonian background we know virtually nothing, took the part of the poor, and with them in mind made his interpretation of Torah as merciful as possible. It is easy to understand why, apart from a strictly limited number of rulings, the views of Hillel and his disciples carried the day. Had they not, Pharisaism would never have become the dominant power in Jewry after the collapse of the state, nor would the masses gradually have accepted "the yoke of the Law", cf. Acts 15: 10.

In Galilee with its mainly proletarian society Pharisaism may have been admired by many, but grinding poverty made the transformation of society a more attractive vision. So it was taken for granted by the religious leaders in Jerusalem that the observance of the laws of ritual purity could not be assumed for Galilee. The Zealots will have understood "the kingdom of heaven" in this way, and they will have read an advocacy of violent action into Matt. 11: 12. It is clear, however, that they tried to keep the demands of the Torah, where they considered it practically possible. G. Vermes in ch. 3 of *Jesus the Jew* argues for a considerable element of the charismatic in Galilee at the time.

A considerable element of the population both among the poor and the richer landowners were more concerned with living than religion, though they will have given their conformity to accepted standards, but their determined opposition to Pharisaic demands during the earlier portion of the second century A.D. shows how little they really shared their ideals. This opposition must not be interpreted in all cases as a sign of materialism.