

Question: Who was Herod?

Answer: It may be surprising to know that there is more than one Herod referred to in the New Testament. The first and best known is Herod the Great. The entire group of Herod's were never to be considered autonomous kings of the Israel/Palestine region. As a vassal, Herod the Great ruled over the lands of Palestine yet answered ultimately to Rome. Herod the Great ruled from 37 – 4 BC. Herod was an athlete and schemer who was also a very capable politician who ruthlessly mowed down anyone who opposed his rule. Those that he saw as threats to his own power were quickly disposed of. The list includes people such as Aristobulus III, whom Herod had made High Priest; Joseph, his own sister's husband; his own wife Mariamme I; and finally his mother in law, Alexandra. (*NJBC 75:157*)

Herod ruled the Jews but was never considered by them as a Jewish king. In fact, the Jewish nation truly hated him. Besides being ruthless, Herod did not practice Judaism. He was deeply involved with the Roman Imperial Court worshipping the gods of the Romans and seeking the advice of Roman philosophers and rhetors. (*NJBC 75:158*) Mindful of his loyalty to Rome, Herod Hellenized Palestine by publicly supporting emperor worship and building Roman Imperial Cult temples, theatres, gymnasiums, and cities that were very Romanesque. Herod the Great is to be considered one of the greatest builders of all time. It was he who instituted the restoration of the second temple. Even though Herod had in many ways disassociated himself with the people he ruled, he oversaw the complete restoration of the second temple in extravagant fashion. Herod died in 4 BC but the construction project on the temple continued until the year 63 AD, only seven years before its destruction by the Romans in the Jewish Revolt. The ruins of the second temple still stand in Jerusalem today. The last remaining remnant is the west "Wailing Wall." Herod also set out to modernize and grandly build up the port city of Caesarea Maritima which sits on the Mediterranean coast. He also undertook massive building projects at Masada, Herodium, Cyprus, and Jericho to name a few. All of these projects were financed by taxes.

For the most part, the people Herod ruled refused to swear allegiance to him. This included the Pharisees. One of their many problems with Herod was that on a regular basis he would remove and appoint high priests to the temple with no basis for his actions. (*NJBC 75:158*) When people like the Pharisees opposed either his appointment or antics, Herod would resort to violence in order to keep them suppressed. The last years of Herod the Great's life involved the continued struggle for consolidated power primarily against his own sons and wives. By the end of his life, Herod had 10 wives.

Herod the Great does play a role in the New Testament stories of Jesus. He is the one accounted by Matthew who requests that the wise men after visiting Jesus return and report to him so that he too can pay Jesus homage. Joseph receives a vision shortly after the birth of Jesus and the visit of the wise men to, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." (Matthew 2:13) Judging by the ruthlessness of Herod, the warning from the angel was valid. Jesus was the Messiah, or "anointed one" and a definite threat to Herod's power. Like everyone else Herod had ever dealt with, if Jesus was seen as a threat, the only way to handle the situation would have been to have him killed. Since Herod was never able to locate Jesus (because the wise men did not return to Herod as he ordered), Herod had all children two years old and younger killed in and around Bethlehem to take care of the problem. (Matthew 2:16-18)

The date of Jesus' birth is closely tied with the story of Herod. It is known that Herod died sometime in 4 BC. Since Matthew's account clearly deals with Herod the Great, most scholars agree that Jesus was probably born sometime in 4 BC. The miscalculation we have today for the birth of Jesus taking place at year 0 is due to Dionysius Exiguus a monk who determined the current dates in the sixth century AD. (*NJBC 75:160*)

Herod's death did not bring relief for the Jewish people in the form of a new and just ruler. Several of Herod's sons divided the throne after his death. Herod's unified kingdom was split into three parts. The sons that took power were Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Philip. Archelaus ruled his portion of the kingdom from 4 BC to 6 AD. Of all the Herod successors, Archelaus was the least liked for his mis-governance. (*NJBC 75:164*) The second ruler, Herod Antipas took over control of Galilee and Perea as a tetrarch or petty king, which was considered a lower office than what his brothers held. Herod Antipas is the man who had John the Baptist put to death. Of all the Herodian rulers, Philip was the most just to his people. He rebuilt the town of Bethsaida and renamed it Julius in honor of Augustus Caesar's daughter.