

## The Herods

The story of the Herod family has all the ingredients for a great soap opera: glamour, fabulous wealth, sexual misconduct, wife swapping, murder, plots, etc. The historian Josephus provides us with a lot of dirt on the Herod family, who were one of the great scandals of the day.

Four generations of Herods played a significant role in the New Testament.

Herod the Great, who killed the babies at Bethlehem.

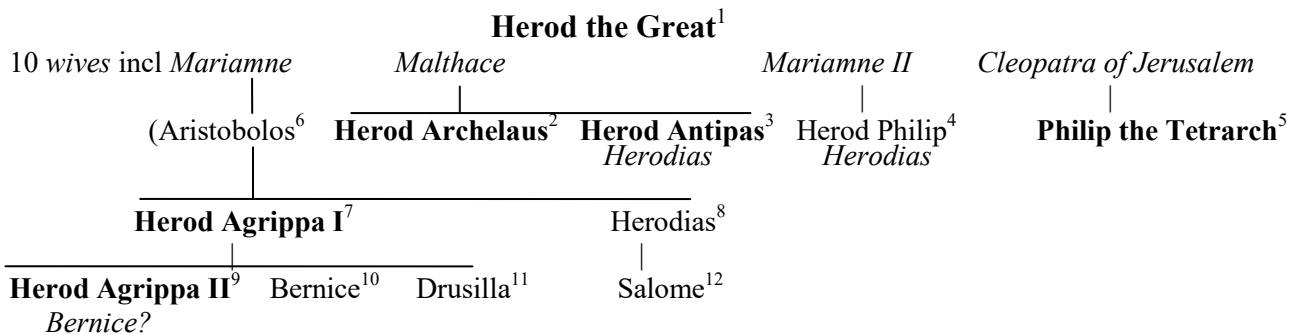
Herod Antipas, who killed John the Baptist and participated at Jesus' trial.

Herod Agrippa I, who killed the apostle James.

Herod Agrippa II, who participated in Paul's hearing before the Roman governor Festus.

Here is a bit of the story of the Herods and their kin. For the really good stuff you have to read Josephus.

### Family Tree of the Herods



### The First Generation

**Herod the Great**,<sup>1</sup> (Governor 47-37 BC; King 37-4 BC) founder of the dynasty, tried to kill the infant Jesus by the “slaughter of the innocents” at Bethlehem.

Herod was born around 73 BC in Idumea, south of Judea. He was the second son of Antipater the Idumaean (Edomite), who was a high-ranking official under the Hasmonean ruler Hyrcanus II. The Hasmoneans were a Jewish dynasty descended from the Maccabees, who were ruling Israel as Roman clients. The Idumeans had been forcibly converted to Judaism by the Hasmoneans, and Herod was raised as a Jew.

Antipater appointed his son Herod as governor of Galilee in 47 BC, when Herod was about 25 or 28 years old. His elder brother, Phasael, was appointed governor of Jerusalem. In 41 BC, Herod and his brother Phasael were named as tetrarchs<sup>1</sup> by the Roman leader Mark Antony, who was the rival of Octavian (later known as Caesar Augustus) for control of the Roman Empire. In these arrangements the Herods were supposedly supporting Hyrcanus. Later, Antigonos, Hyrcanus' nephew, seized the throne from his uncle with the help of the Parthians. Herod fled to Rome to plead with the Romans to restore Hyrcanus to power (actually he was pleading for himself). In Rome, Herod was unexpectedly appointed King of the Jews by the Roman Senate. Herod went back to Judea to win his kingdom from Antigonos. Toward the

<sup>1</sup> Literally *rulers of a fourth* but the term was not always applied literally. The title designates a ruler with less status than a king.

end of the campaign against Antigonus, Herod married the granddaughter of Hyrcanus II, Mariamne (known as Mariamne I). Herod did this in an attempt to secure his claim to the throne and to gain some Jewish favor. However, Herod already had a wife, Doris, and a young son, Antipater, so he chose to dump Doris and her child.

After three years of conflict, Herod and the Romans captured Jerusalem, and Herod sent Antigonus to Mark Antony to be executed. Herod received the role of sole ruler of Judea and the title of king, ushering in the Herodian Dynasty and ending the Hasmonean Dynasty.

Herod was a brilliant politician who outmaneuvered the Hasmoneans and held his own against the formidable Cleopatra of Egypt, who was the ally/paramour/wife of Mark Anthony and a bitter enemy of Herod. Herod managed to survive the downfall of his patron Mark Anthony and to be retained by the winner of the civil war, the ruthless and totally unscrupulous Caesar Augustus. Augustus recognized Herod as a useful tool, someone whom Augustus could rely on to be as totally unscrupulous as he himself was in taking care of affairs in the east for Rome. Herod was not averse to using whatever despotic means were necessary to maintain control, including the execution of members of his own family. Herod was a major player in the cut-throat politics of the Roman world.

Herod was the greatest builder of Israel's history. He spent lavish sums on his various building projects and on generous gifts to other regions, including Rome itself. His major projects included the reconstruction and expansion of the Temple Mount, the tomb of the patriarchs at Hebron, the great harbor city at Caesarea, and fortresses at Masada, Herodium, Alexandrium, Hyrcania, and Machaerus. Herod also built Sebaste (Samaria) and other pagan cities because he wanted to appeal to the country's substantial pagan population.

In spite of all his efforts Herod never achieved acceptance from the Jewish population. He died as a hated tyrant. His death is usually dated to 4 BC, but some historians date it closer to 2 BC. This is relevant to the dating of Christ's birth because the visit of the Wise Men must antedate Herod's death.

Herod had three wives whose children played a prominent role in the dynasty.

Mariamne I, the Hasmonean princess, who was his favorite wife, was the grandmother of Herod Agrippa I and Herodias through her son Aristobolos. She and her sons Alexander and Aristobolos as well as other members of her family were murdered by Herod because of his jealous suspicion. His suspicions of Mariamne were both political and sexual. At Mariamne's insistence Herod had made her brother Aristobolos high priest, but shortly thereafter Aristobolos drowned in a tragic swimming accident at one of Herod's swimming pools. Herod's firstborn son, Antipater son of Herod's first wife Doris, was made his heir for a time, but he also was executed. (Killing babies at Bethlehem would mean nothing to Herod.)

Malthace the Samaritan was the mother of Herod Archelaus and Herod Antipas, two sons who managed to survive the royal carnage and succeeded Herod the Great as rulers of parts of his kingdom.

Cleopatra of Jerusalem was the mother of Philip the Tetrarch who ruled territories on the northeast corner of Israel, east of the Sea of Galilee.

Mariamne II of Jerusalem was the mother of Herod Phillip who was the first husband of Herodias.

## The Second Generation

**Herod Archelaus**,<sup>2</sup> son of Malthace, did not receive the title of king but ruled as ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea (4 BC–6 AD). His accession to the throne upon the death of Herod the Great was the signal for Mary and Joseph to return with Jesus from Egypt to Nazareth. After a relatively short reign

Archelaus was deposed as king of Judea and was replaced by a series of Roman governors, including Pontius Pilate (26–36 AD).

**Herod Antipas**<sup>3</sup> (Antipater), son of Malthace, ruled as tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (4 BC–39 AD). Though he was not granted the formal title of king by the Romans, he was commonly called King Herod. His capital was at Tiberias, on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. He was the murderer of John the Baptist and the Herod who participated on Jesus' trial, hoping to see a miracle.

Antipas divorced his first wife Phasaelis, the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea, in favor of his niece Herodias, who had formerly been married to his half-brother Herod Philip. He had more conscience than his wife/niece Herodias. He liked to listen to John the Baptist (Mark 6:20) but did not follow through on what he heard. Herodias hated John because he had condemned Antipas' marriage to her. Herodias instigated John's death through the dance of her daughter Salome when Antipas felt obligated to fulfill the rash promise he had made to Salome to give her whatever she asked for.

**Philip the Tetrarch**,<sup>5</sup> son of Cleopatra of Jerusalem, ruled over territories on the northeast corner of Israel (4 BC–34 AD). His capital was Caesarea Philippi. He married Herodias's daughter Salome, his grandniece, who was more than thirty years younger than him.<sup>2</sup>

Herod Philip,<sup>4</sup> the son of Mariamne II of Jerusalem, the uncle and first husband of Herodias, was not a ruler.

#### Third Generation

**King Herod Agrippa I**<sup>7</sup> (37–44 AD) executed James the son of Zebedee and imprisoned Peter, but Peter was delivered by an angel. Because Herod arrogantly acted like a god, he was put to death by an angel of God (Acts 12).

Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great through Herod's Hasmonean wife Mariamne I. His father Aristobolos was one of Herod's Hasmonean sons whom Herod murdered. Agrippa lived in Rome where he became friends with the future emperors Caligula and Claudius. After a number of setbacks and intrigues, Agrippa was made king of the territories of Gaulanitis, Auranitis, Batanaea, and Trachonitis, which his uncle Philip the Tetrarch had held, with the addition of Abila. Agrippa instigated the banishment of his uncle, Herod Antipas. He was then granted his uncle's tetrarchy, consisting of Galilee and Peraea. This created a fairly large Jewish kingdom which, however, did not include Judea as its center. Agrippa was a skilled politician who was good at maintaining Jewish Roman relations. An irony in the kingships of the two Agrippas is that they were in a way a restoration of the Hasmonean dynasty through their descent from Mariamne.

**Herodias**,<sup>8</sup> sister of Herod Agrippa I, left her first husband, her uncle Herod Phillip, to marry his half-brother, her uncle Herod Antipas. She instigated the death of John the Baptist. When Antipas was exiled to Gaul, she went with him.

#### Fourth Generation

**King Herod Agrippa II**<sup>9</sup> (50–93 AD) was asked by the Roman governor Festus to hear Paul's defense at Caesarea (Acts 25 and 26). Paul made an appeal to Agrippa to believe in Christ, but Agrippa brushed it off.

---

<sup>2</sup> This connection is not certain because the same names were shared by multiple persons within the dynasty. It may have been a different Salome who married Phillip. Adding to the confusion is that different sources use different names to refer to the same person. We cannot be certain that all the connections presented in this article are accurate.

Because of his youth at the time of his father's death, Agrippa did not succeed his father as king, but later he became king of Chalcis in Lebanon and gradually received additional territory. He collaborated with Rome throughout the Jewish revolt which led to the destruction of Jerusalem.

**Salome**,<sup>12</sup> daughter of Herodias, danced for Herod Antipas and, at Herodias's direction, requested the beheading of John the Baptist. Later she married her great-uncle Philip the Tetrarch.

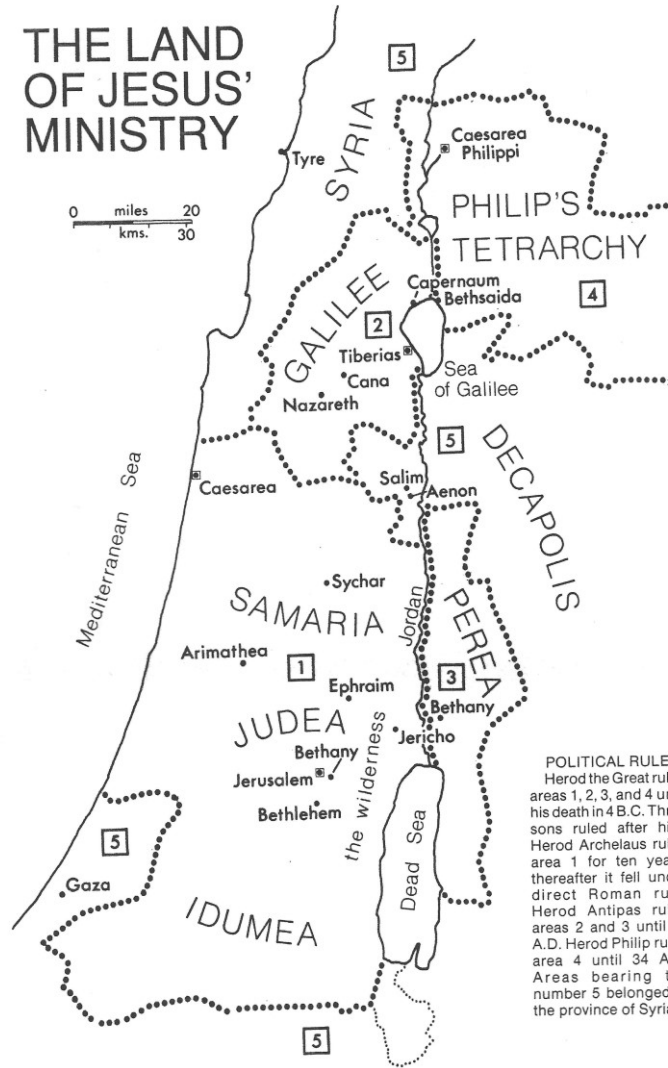
**Berenice**,<sup>10</sup> daughter of Herod Agrippa I, twice widowed, left her third husband to be with her brother Herod Agrippa II, her rumored lover, and was with him at Festus's trial of Paul (Acts 25:13-27).

**Drusilla**,<sup>11</sup> daughter of Herod Agrippa I, left her first husband to marry the Roman governor Felix, before whom Paul was interrogated (Acts 24:24) before he was tried by Festus (Acts 25 and 26).

This much simplified account of the Herods (there is enough material in their lives for years of a soap opera) gives a picture of the toxic atmosphere in which John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul conducted their ministries, and that is without even considering the soap opera atmosphere provided by the Hasmoneans, the high priests, and the Roman emperors.

# THE LAND OF JESUS' MINISTRY

0 miles 20  
kms. 30



**POLITICAL RULE**  
 Herod the Great ruled areas 1, 2, 3, and 4 until his death in 4 B.C. Three sons ruled after him. Herod Archelaus ruled area 1 for ten years; thereafter it fell under direct Roman rule. Herod Antipas ruled areas 2 and 3 until 39 A.D. Herod Philip ruled area 4 until 34 A.D. Areas bearing the number 5 belonged to the province of Syria.

# THE LAND AT JESUS' BIRTH

