

Herod the Great and the Tetrarchs

Herod the Great (reign 40 - 4 B.C.), ethnically a Gentile whose father's ancestors converted to Judaism, was raised as a Jew. Experiencing the power of politics through his father Antipater II who was appointed procurator of Judea by Julius Caesar (47 B.C.) as a treasury official who managed Rome's financial affairs, Herod the Great would be appointed a military prefect as a leader of an administrative area. In conflict with Parthian invaders and their appointed Judean ruling Hasmonean Antigonus (40 B.C.), Rome appointed Herod the title "King of the Jews." Fighting for three years to make the title effective, the Roman legion secured the throne for Herod in 37 B.C.

Noted for his colossal construction projects, Herod built Masada (~37-31 B.C.), Herodium (~23-15 B.C.), the Temple Mount and Second Temple (~20-10 B.C.), and the magnificent new port Caesarea Maritima (~22-9 B.C.). However, the cost of these projects impoverished his people, and although he rebuilt the Temple, the king of the Jews also built temples for pagan gods.

While Herod was considered a tyrant and bloodthirsty ruler having murdered three of his sons (Aristobulus, Alexander, and Antipater), he was a cunning ruler, loyal to the emperor, capable of subduing opponents and maintaining order among the Jewish population. The New Testament mentions him prominently at the time of Jesus' birth when God used Herod to fulfill Old Testament Messianic prophecies (see the article "Messianic prophecies of Jesus' name, birth, and origin" at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/2JesusChrist/MessianicProphecies2Birth.aspx).

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; **for this is what has been written by the prophet:**

'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah;
For from you will come forth a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him." After hearing the king, they went on their way; and behold, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on ahead of them until it came to a stop over the place where the Child was to be found. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And after they came into the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary; and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And after being warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him." So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod; **this happened so that what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet would be fulfilled:** "Out of Egypt I called My Son." (Matt 2:1-14)

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, and came and settled in a city called Nazareth. **This happened so that what was spoken through the prophets would be fulfilled:** "He will be called a Nazarene." (Matt 2:19-23)

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In another fulfillment of prophecy, God used Herod's actions to associate the birth of Jesus to the inauguration of the New Covenant (see the article "Herod's Slaughter of Innocents a fulfillment of prophecy?" at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/1God/QHerodSlaughterInnocents.aspx).

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent men and killed all the boys who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. **Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled:**

"A voice was heard in Ramah,
Weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children;
And she refused to be comforted,
Because they were no more." (Matt 2:16-18)

With 10 marriages and 15 children, Herod's will upon his death was contested; however, Rome respected his will, Rome divided Herod the Great's kingdom among his three sons and sister Salome. While tetrarch often meant ruler of ¼ of a territory, Rome used the term Tetrarch loosely to mean a ruler of a part of a province. In the New Testament, the Greek noun for "tetrarch" was used only in reference to Herod Antipas (Matt 14:1; Luke 3:19; 9:7; Acts 13:1). More than a tetrarch, Archelaus took the title "ethnarch," a term seen in 2 Corinthians 11:32, which meant "ruler of a region."

Archelaus was ethnarch over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea (reign 4 B.C. – 6 A.D.). Bloodthirsty like his father but lacking his governing abilities to maintain social order, Archelaus would be eventually stripped of power and banished to Rome. Archelaus' reputation (and God's warning) caused Joseph to settle in the region of Galilee rather than Judea upon his return from Egypt (Matt 2:22).

Salome was tetrarch over Jamnia. Salome's reign was shortened by her death and her domain was incorporated with Archelaus.

Philip was tetrarch over the northern part of Herod the Great's kingdom (Syria): Gaulanitis, Batanaea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis. Perhaps the most capable of Herod's sons, he would have a long and peaceful rule.

Antipas was tetrarch over Galilee and Perea. Notable to Antipas was the construction of his capital city Tiberias named in honor of the emperor Tiberius.

Ruling during Jesus' life and ministry, Herod Antipas figures prominently in the New Testament, and his interaction with John the Baptist highlights one of the most scandalous moments of his life. While married to a Nabatean princess, Antipas had an adulterous affair with Herodias, the wife of his half brother Philip I (different from Herod Philip the Tetrarch who was sometimes known as Philip II), while visiting Rome. Both would plan to get divorced and eventually marry; however, the Nabatean princess learned of the plan and fled to her father Nabatean king Aretas IV. With his daughter safe, Aretas IV, having a cause for war, would invade Herod Antipas' domain (36 A.D.) and defeat his army, and Antipas would only be able to escape by Roman rescue (37 A.D.).

Recorded in three gospels, John the Baptist's condemnation of the public adulterous affair between Antipas and Herodias, places an emphasis on the historical significance of this criticism.

At that time **Herod the tetrarch** heard the news about Jesus, and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he himself has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

For when **Herod** had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." Although **Herod** wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet. (continues...)

But when **Herod's** birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased **Herod**, so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. And after being prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." And although he was grieved, **the king** commanded it to be given because of his oaths and his dinner guests. He sent word and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. John's disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus. (Matt 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 3:19-20)

As Roman prefect of Judea (reign 26-36 A.D.), Pontius Pilate had the power and authority to decide capital punishment and presided over the trial of Jesus. Unable to rule for capital punishment, but concerned about angering the Jews, Pilate refers Jesus to Herod Antipas for judgment; because of His Galilean roots, Jesus could be seen as falling under Antipas' judicial jurisdiction. Antipas too would not find any charges worthy of capital punishment and refers Jesus back to Pilate.

But Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no grounds for charges in the case of this man." But they kept on insisting, saying, "He is stirring up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee, as far as this place!" Now when Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that He belonged to **Herod's** jurisdiction, he sent Him to **Herod**, since he also was in Jerusalem at this time.

Now **Herod** was overjoyed when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him. And he questioned Him at some length; but He offered him no answer at all. Now the chief priests and the scribes stood there, vehemently charging Him. And **Herod**, together with his soldiers, treated Him with contempt and mocked Him, dressing Him in a brightly shining robe, and sent Him back to Pilate. And so **Herod** and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for previously, they had been enemies toward each other. (Luke 23:4-12)

Because Antipas' interaction is only recorded in the careful historian Luke, there is debate as to whether it really occurred; nonetheless, Luke would record the prayer of the apostles that made a reference to Psalms 2:1-2 with a view towards Pilate and Herod Antipas as gathering together against the Christ.

The kings of the earth took their stand,
And the rulers were gathered together
Against the Lord and against His Christ.'

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both **Herod** and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and purpose predestined to occur. (Acts 4:26-28)

With the political downfall of Antipas, Antipas' nephew Agrippa I took over Antipas' domain, and through political calculation would receive Philip the Tetrarch's domain, Judea and Samaria equaling the kingdom of his grandfather Herod the Great. Herod Agrippa I (reign 37-44 A.D.) is significant in Acts 12 responsible for the execution of the apostle James and the imprisonment of the apostle Peter with the intent of execution.

Now about that time **Herod the king** laid hands on some who belonged to the church, to do them harm. And he had James the brother of John executed with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter as well. (Now these were the days of Unleavened Bread.) When he had arrested him, he put him in prison, turning him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending only after the Passover to bring him before the people. So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made to God intensely by the church. (continues...)

On the very night when **Herod** was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly stood near Peter, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Put on your belt and strap on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." And he went out and continued to follow, and yet he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. Now when they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of **Herod** and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." (Acts 12:1-11)

When **Herod** had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.

Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one mind they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was supported with grain from the king's country. On an appointed day, after putting on his royal apparel, **Herod** took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. The people repeatedly cried out, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. (Acts 12:19-23)

Son of Agrippa I, Agrippa II (reign 50-66 A.D.) was the last ruler of the Herodian rulers. He is only referenced once in the New Testament in the trial of the apostle Paul, which is significant for his testimony and gospel message. Saul the Pharisee, persecutor of Christians becomes the apostle Paul evangelist for Jesus Christ.

Now when several days had passed, **King Agrippa** and Bernice arrived in Caesarea, paying their respects to Festus. And while they were spending many days there, Festus presented Paul's case to the king, saying, "There is a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix; and when I was in Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I replied to them that it is not the custom of the Romans to hand over any person before the accused meets his accusers face to face, and has an opportunity to make his defense against the charges. So after they had assembled here, I did not delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered that the man be brought. When the accusers stood up, they did not begin bringing any charges against him of crimes that I suspected, but they simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive. And being at a loss how to investigate such matters, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these matters. But when Paul appealed to be held in custody for the Emperor's decision, I ordered that he be kept in custody until I send him to Caesar." Then **Agrippa** said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him."

So, on the next day when **Agrippa** and Bernice came amid great pomp and entered the auditorium, accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought before them. And Festus said, "**King Agrippa**, and all you gentlemen present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had committed nothing deserving death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him. Yet, I have nothing definite about him to write to my lord. Therefore, I have brought him before you all and especially before you, **King Agrippa**, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him as well." (Acts 25:13-27)

Now **Agrippa** said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." Then Paul extended his hand and proceeded to make his defense: (continues...)

“Regarding all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, **King Agrippa**, I consider myself fortunate that I am about to make my defense before you today, especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

“So then, all Jews know my way of life since my youth, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and in Jerusalem, since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. For this hope, O king, I am being accused by Jews. Why is it considered incredible among you people if God raises the dead?

“So I thought to myself that I had to act in strong opposition to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, after receiving authority from the chief priests, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being put to death. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was extremely enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

“While so engaged, as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, at midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you as a servant and a witness not only to the things in which you have seen Me, but also to the things in which I will appear to you, rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’

“For that reason, **King Agrippa**, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but continually proclaimed to those in Damascus first, and in Jerusalem, and then all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they are to repent and turn to God, performing deeds consistent with repentance. For these reasons some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to murder me. So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place, as to whether the Christ was to suffer, and whether, as first from the resurrection of the dead, He would proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”

While Paul was stating these things in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you insane.” But Paul said, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus; on the contrary, I am speaking out with truthful and rational words. For the **king** knows about these matters, and I also speak to him with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. **King Agrippa**, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you believe.” **Agrippa** replied to Paul, “In a short time you are going to persuade me to make a Christian of myself.” And Paul said, “I would wish to God that even in a short or long time not only you, but also all who hear me this day would become such as I myself am, except for these chains.”

The **king** stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, and when they had gone out, they began talking to one another, saying, “This man is not doing anything deserving death or imprisonment.” And **Agrippa** said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” (Acts 26:1-32)

Recognizing the power of Herod the Great, the title “Herod” became a royal appellation. However, when using Herod as a synonym with king, confusion about the nature and extent of the king in power results without some knowledge of ancient history.

Herod Who?

Herod	Significance to God’s plan
Herod the Great	Fulfills Messianic prophecies about the birth and origin of Jesus Christ (Matt 2:1-23)
Herod Antipas	Validates and martyrs John the Baptist as a prophet of God (Matt 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 3:19-20) Involved with the sequence and timing of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Luke 23:4-12; Acts 4:26-28)
Herod Agrippa I	Validates and martyrs the apostle James and sets up the testimony of the apostle Peter’s freedom from prison (Acts 12:1-11, 19-23)
Herod Agrippa II	Of all his testimonies, Paul’s conversion account is the most extensive of retelling of what he experienced with Jesus Christ and in so doing, presents the gospel (Acts 25:13-27; 26:1-32)

Reference:

1. Youngblood RF, Bruce FF, Harrison RK, eds., *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, (2014).