

Paranoid Facts About Herod The Great, The Tyrant King of Judea

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To many Christians, King Herod is the bloodthirsty villain of the Bible, the jealous despot who ordered the slaughter of newborn babies throughout his kingdom following the birth of Jesus Christ. To his subjects, he was Herod the Great, the paranoid tyrant who imposed oppressive taxes to fund his massive building projects, and crushed all opposition. And to his Roman masters, he was little more than a reliably loyal—and wealthy—puppet-king. Throughout history, opinions of Herod the Great have not been...well, great. But there's more to this New Testament dictator than meets the eye. Here are 43 tyrannical facts about Herod the Great.

43. Hand-Picked

Herod was a client king, which means he was subordinate to a larger ruling government. In Herod's case, that government was Republican Rome. Indeed, Herod wouldn't have been king of Judea at all had it not been for the Romans: rather than inherit the throne as kings usually do, Herod was declared king by the Roman senate, with the understanding that he would lead Judea in a decidedly pro-Roman direction.

42. The Family Business

Herod the Great was born in 72 or 73 BCE in Idumea. His father, Antipater, was high ranking official under the king of Judea, Hyrcanus II. Antipater later used his influence with Hyrcanus to have Herod named governor of Galilee.

41. You Have to Share

Herod was declared governor of Galilee in 47 BCE. His older brother, Phasael, was named governor of Jerusalem.

40. Get Out of Jail Free Card

Herod and Phasael enjoyed the support of the powerful Roman Republic, but they were frequent targets of the Sanhedrin, a tribunal of 71 rabbis who served as holy judges throughout Judea. At least three times the Sanhedrin sought to condemn Herod and Phasael for their brutal style of governance, but each time the Romans dismissed the charges. It is from this that we get the common phrase "Getting off Phasael-free."

39. We Want a Prenup!

Herod would later strengthen his ties to Hyrcanus and the Romans by marrying Hyrcanus' granddaughter, Mariamne. There was just one problem: Herod was already married to Doris. Herod resolved the issue by banishing Doris and their son, Antipater.

38. Here Comes Herod Clause

King Herod may have been Herod the Great to his ancient subjects, but his name has been used for one of the modern world's greatest traps. A "Herod Clause" is a particularly malevolent clause hidden in a contract's terms and conditions. One 2014 study, sponsored by internet security firm F-Secure, showed that people could even be compelled to give up their first-born children in exchange for free Wi-Fi, all because they failed to read the fine print.

37. All in the Family

Mariamne also happened to be the niece of Antigonus, the revolutionary who staged a coup against Hyrcanus in 39 BCE. Antigonus, with support from the Parthian Empire, overthrew Hyrcanus and ruled over Judea for three years.

36. In Memory

Herod and Phasaël remained loyal to Hyrcanus during Antigonus' coup. Sadly, Phasaël was captured by Antigonus' soldiers. Rather than face execution, Phasaël chose to die by suicide. Herod would later name a city near Jericho "Phasaëlis," in honor of his fallen brother.

35. Crowning Achievement

With the help of the Romans, Herod was able to put down Antigonus' revolt. With Phasaël and Hyrcanus both killed in the strife, this left Herod as the sole claimant to the throne of Judea. The Romans assented, and Herod claimed the title "basileus," or king, for himself in 36 BCE.

34. He of Little Faith

Though the Romans identified Herod as "King of the Jews," there is some doubt as to the sincerity of Herod's faith. By blood, he was an Edomite, an Arabic group who had only recently converted to Judaism. Herod's frequent clashes with the Sanhedrin, not to mention the observant Pharisees and Sadducees who were his subjects, as well as his pro-Roman attitudes and tolerance of other religions, have led some to allege that Herod was not sincerely Jewish. Others have pointed to Herod's private and public observance of Jewish law, and his works in building holy buildings as evidence of his faith. The subject remains up for debate.

33. No Place Like Rome

Herod's family had always been great friends to the Romans. His father, Antipater, had served as an official under the Roman emperor Pompey, and cannily shifted alliances when Julius Caesar overthrew Pompey in 47 BCE. When the elder Antipater came to Caesar's aid at the Siege of Alexandria, the Roman emperor rewarded him with full Roman citizenship, the title of Procurator of Judea, and a lifetime tax exemption.

32. BFFs

Herod's best friend was Augustus' minister, Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa. Herod frequently traveled to Italy to visit Agrippa, and the two shared ownership of a copper mine in Cypress. Many of Herod's descendants were named after his Roman bestie.

31. Faster, Higher, Stronger

To further demonstrate his Greco-Roman bona fides, Herod agreed to serve as the president of the Olympic Games, beginning in 12 BCE. Herod's financial support of the games ensured that they would continue at a time when their popularity and finances were dwindling.

30. Building Sites

Once he had established himself as king in Judea, Herod commenced a series of massive construction projects. Using funds derived from oppressive taxes, Herod built large cities, including Caesarea and Sabaste, as well as a lavish palace for himself at Herodium. Parts of Herod's buildings are still standing today.

29. Last Man Standing

At Hebron, in the West Bank, stands Herod's Cave of the Patriarchs. The 2,000-year-old temple is the oldest prayer structure in the world, and the oldest building still used for its intended purpose. It is said to stand on the burial site of the Jewish patriarch Abraham. With its six-foot-thick stone walls, the Cave of the Patriarchs is the last of Herod's buildings to remain fully intact.

28. King of the Hill

The greatest of Herod's buildings, though, was the Temple on the Mount at Jerusalem. Herod employed a crew of 1,000 priests from Rome, Egypt, and Greece to work on the temple; though they finished the main building within two years, work continued on the temple for another 80 years after that. The temple covered 35 acres and featured walls that were more than nine stories high. The temple was destroyed in 70 CE, but parts of it remain: the foundations now form what is known as the Wailing Wall.

27. Court is Adjourned

The Temple also featured “the Court of the Gentiles,” essentially an open-air bazaar where guests to Jerusalem could shop for souvenirs and trade for foreign currencies. The Court of the Gentiles was the site of the famous “Jesus and the Money-Changers” story which appears in all four Gospels.

26. Like a Limestone Cowboy

The buildings built under Herod’s reign feature several distinct, uniform features. They are almost all built of mekeke limestone, dressed in a particular local style, and tend to combine features of both palaces and fortresses. In strict accordance with Jewish law, no statues or carvings of humans or animals would be found either inside, or on the building itself. The characteristics of Herod’s buildings were so distinct that the term “Herodian Architecture” was created to describe those buildings and buildings like them.

25. Never Herod of Him

Though he’s remembered as one of the biggest villains of the Bible, Herod is only mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. The other three gospels, Mark, Luke, and John, don’t refer to King Herod or the Massacre of the Innocents at all.

24. Artistic License

The Massacre of the Innocents never gets mentioned by Josephus, either. Josephus was Herod’s primary biographer and one of his biggest critics, so he could have hardly ignored Herod’s biggest atrocity. Most scholars now agree that the Massacre of the Innocents was invented by Matthew to add prophetic significance to Christ’s birth.

23. Didn’t Make the Cut

King Herod is never referred to in the Gospels of Mark, Luke, or John, but he is mentioned in the Gospel of Bartholomew. In this apocryphal text, left out of the Bible, Jesus descends into Hell after his death on the cross and rescues everyone but Cain, Judas, and King Herod.

22. A Cult of His Own

Ironically (given his antipathy to Jesus), Herod himself attracted religious followers. “Herodians” sought to establish a theocracy in Judea, and even claimed Herod, not Jesus, was the Messiah. It is believed by some scholars that the apostle Paul began as a Herodian.

21. The Opposite of Christmas

According to tradition, December 28 was the day Herod ordered the Massacre of the Innocents. To mark the terrible event, medieval Christians in England celebrated “Childermas Day,” or “Holy Innocents Day.”

20. Boxing Day?

As part of the Childermas festivities, English parents would beat their children to “remind them of the cruelty of King Herod.” And you thought a lump of coal was bad?

19. Learn From the King

Childermas was widely considered a day of bad luck, not unlike our modern Friday the 13th. Buildings or marriages begun on Childermas were sure to fail. King Edward IV even demanded his 1461 coronation be moved to the following day, so as not to tempt fate.

18. Pranksgiving

Despite its bad rep in England, Spanish Christians were considerably more relaxed about Holy Innocents Day. In Spain, the day became the equivalent of April Fool’s Day. Throughout the Spanish-speaking world, December 28 continues to be a day for planning elaborate pranks or pitching large-scale flour fights.

17. I Told Ya So

After 35 years of constant searching, a team of Israeli archaeologists led by Professor Ehud Netzer uncovered King Herod’s tomb in 2007. It probably shouldn’t have taken Netzer that long: the tomb was discovered exactly where the historian Josephus said the tomb was located.

16. No Body Home

Though Herod’s tomb has been discovered in the ruins of the ancient city of Herodium, one mystery remains: where is Herod’s body? When Netzer opened Herod’s tomb, all he found was a broken sarcophagus, but no remains.

15. Paternal Instincts

No one knows for sure how many children Herod had. Records from that time are spotty, and the births of daughters especially tended to go undocumented. Herod had at least 14 children that we know of, by eight of his ten wives.

14. The Best in the Business

A man with as many enemies as Herod needed security. Herod’s personal guard comprised of 2,000 men, taken from all over the known world. Among them were

Germanic warriors, Thracians, and a team of Celtic soldiers who had once served Cleopatra.

13. Star-Crossed

According to Josephus, Herod's death came on the eve of Passover and was immediately preceded by a lunar eclipse.

12. Revisionist History

While most scholars put Herod's death at 4 BCE, some have suggested Herod may have died as early as 1 BCE. Some scholars have proposed Herod's children might have pushed the date of his death ahead to overlap with their own reigns, thus giving them greater credibility as rulers.

11. Scheduling Issues

All of these timeline issues create some major problems for the Christian calendar. While you might assume that Jesus was born in Year Zero—between 1 BCE and 1 CE—from Sunday School lessons or the like, most historians suggest that he would've been born between 6 and 4 BCE, which would put him right in line with Herod's final years. All that said, the discrepancy does lend credence to the theory that the whole "Massacre of the Innocents" thing never happened.

10. Sow What?

In his time, Herod was considered a great builder. And despite being dead for more than 2000 years, Herod continues to leave his mark on the Judean landscape today. Herod's palace at Mount Masada was excavated in 1963. Among the discoveries was a cache of seeds. In 2005, one of those seeds was planted, blossoming into a Judean date palm, a species which had been considered extinct for more than 800 years.

9. Gender Reveal

The date palm, named "Methuselah," is considered the oldest germinated plant in the world. Much to the scientists' disappointment, Methuselah turned out to be a male tree, meaning it cannot give off fruit, or lead to the growth of more Judean date palms.

8. Turning Over a New Leaf

In 2015, more seeds from Herod's palace were planted. These turned out to be female Judean date palms, which scientists are hoping will be pollinated by Methuselah. King Herod might just have played a major role in bringing an ancient species back from the dead!

7. Father of the Year

Following Mariamne's death, Herod invited Antipater back to Judea and named him heir to his kingdom. And then he executed him. Hasn't he ever heard of playing catch in the yard?

6. Behead of the Family

Herod's reign was marked by discontent among his subjects. As his reign wore on, Herod became increasingly paranoid and began to suspect even those closest to him of conspiring to have him deposed. From 23 BCE to 6 BCE, Herod ordered the executions of Mariamne, her grandfather, her mother, her brother, the two sons he and Mariamne shared, as well as his eldest son, Antipater, all on suspicion of infidelity or conspiracy.

5. Throwing the Baby Out With the Bathwater

There comes a time in every king's life when he has to wonder "How will I be mourned?" Paranoid Herod suspected his subjects hated him, and indeed they did, which made him very self-conscious. Herod left explicit orders that, in the event of his death, a group of popular public figures should be assassinated; that way, a general sense of public grief and mourning would fall over Judea.

4. Asking Too Much

Despite the king's orders, Herod's son and sister refused to carry out the assassinations. After Herod's death in 4 BCE, those popular Judean diplomats continued to live rich, full lives, while the people of Judea mourned very little.

3. That's So Sweet

While the Massacre of the Innocents is definitely bad PR, perhaps the weirdest story told about King Herod was that he had his wife, Mariamne I, preserved in honey after her death. Mariamne was executed on her husband's orders, but Herod found her too beautiful to be buried and kept her preserved body for seven years. Some even claimed Herod had an affair, relations, with the body.

2. Not the Way I Heard It...

In another version of the story, the preserved body was that of a Hasmonean princess who threw herself from a roof rather than marry Herod and fulfill his wish for royal legitimacy.

1. You Get What You Give

Herod suffered from paranoid delusions, rage, and arteriosclerosis, but his death in 4 BCE came at the hands of a mysterious and agonizing illness which modern doctors are still not

able to identify. At one point, the pain was so excruciating, the king attempted suicide. The illness came to be known, among the Judean people, as “Herod’s Evil.”