

## Chapter Eleven – The Coming of a Messiah

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Simon Maccabee's grandson, Alexander Jannaeus, ruled as the fourth Hasmonean King of Israel from 103BC to 76 BC. Like Kim Jong-Il in North Korea today, absolute power made Jannaeus a corrupted tyrant. History will prove that the religions of Abraham's God protect no one from the disease of power. Jannaeus reigned for twenty-seven years because he would not tolerate dissent. Tens of thousands lost their lives questioning his regime. As he feasted with his concubines, he had 800 Jewish enemies crucified. While they are suffering on the brink of death, he had their children killed in front of them, and then slit the throats of their wives.<sup>1</sup>

The palace rivalry and political fighting increased as the Roman Empire pressed into the area and brought two decades of intrigue and rebellion. In 63 BC Antipater the Idumean made a deal with the Roman General Pompey that brought Antipater to power and allowed him to rule rebellious Palestine and set up his son Herod to follow him.<sup>2</sup>

In 37 BC, Herod convinced Caesar Augustus, Mark Antony, and the Roman Senate to make him the King of Judea under the title "Rex socius et amicus populi Romani," allied king and friend of the Roman people.<sup>3</sup> Mark Antony told the Senate that Herod would be an advantage in the Parthian war<sup>4,5</sup> and that Herod should be king. So, they all voted in favor,

And when the Senate was separated, Antony and Caesar went out, with Herod between them; while the consul and the rest of the magistrates went before them, in order to offer sacrifices [to the Roman gods], and to lay the decree in the Capitol. Antony also made a feast for Herod on the first day of his reign.<sup>6</sup>

They also gave him 36,000 Roman troops to bring "peace" to the Jewish conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

Herod had emerged from the Roman upheavals of Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Mark Anthony, and Octavius. The son of Antipater had survived the sexual intrigues among Mark Anthony, Herod's future wife Marianne, her mother Alexandra, Cleopatra, and Herod's Uncle Joseph.<sup>8</sup> Herod was born a Jew, raised as a Jew, and was now the King of the Jews.<sup>9</sup>

Herod thrived within the Roman Empire using the ruthless tactics he had learned as the Romans clashed over who would be emperor. His first act was to execute the entire Jewish leadership, the Sanhedrin, and separate the church and state functions. His second act was to exterminate all the remaining Hasmoneans to insure there would be no challengers to his throne. He selfishly killed

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<sup>1</sup> *Josephus The Essential Writings* Paul L. Maier (Kregel Publications 1988) p. 224

<sup>2</sup> *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson (Harper Perennial 1988) pp 107-109

<sup>3</sup> *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson (Harper Perennial 1988) p. 110

<sup>4</sup> The Parthians were from the area today called Turkistan and northeast Iran who had overtaken the Seleucid Empire and threatening Rome.

<sup>5</sup> *The Wars of the Jews* Josephus 1.14.4

<sup>6</sup> *Josephus The Essential Writings* Paul L. Maier Kregel Publications 1988 p. 234

<sup>7</sup> *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson (Harper Perennial 1988) pp. 110

<sup>8</sup> *Josephus the Essential Writings* Paul L Maier (Kregel Publications 1988) pp. 239-241

<sup>9</sup> *A History of Christianity* Paul Johnson (Simon & Schuster a Touchstone Book, 1995) pp. 10-11 Johnson discusses here and in the *History of the Jews* that many did not think of Herod as Jewish.

family, friends, and enemies. To many, Herod was a violent maniac. Matthew 2:1-23 tells of “The Slaughter of the Innocents,” the killing of all male children in Bethlehem under the age of two. While clearly within the scope of Herod’s numerous slayings, there are no other records confirming this crime.

For all his despotic actions, Herod did much to advance the Jewish cause. The diaspora Jews scattered throughout the ancient world had greatly increased in population after the Babylonian dispersion. During Herod’s reign, there were 7 to 8 million Jews in the world, roughly 10% of the Roman population,<sup>10</sup> with about 2 million living in Palestine. All benefitted from the relationship that Herod had with Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus. During Herod’s reign, Jews were granted tax concessions and were given other special privileges, including exemption from Roman military service.<sup>11</sup> With Herod as their powerful patron with Rome, Jews thrived with “equality of economic opportunity and freedom of goods and persons. They formed wealthy communities wherever the Romans had imposed stability.”<sup>12</sup> Herod used his influence and money to fund synagogues, libraries, and charitable organizations for the poor, widows, and orphans throughout the diaspora community.<sup>13</sup>

Herod was a very successful king. He used his military force to expand the kingdom beyond the size of David’s, he personally revitalized the Olympic Games, and he launched a vast building program that included theaters, forums, aqueducts, schools, ports, roads, and temples. But Herod’s major impact on Judaism was in Jerusalem, where he converted the Jewish temple into a tourist attraction. Herod assembled 10,000 workers and 1000 supervising priests to rebuild the Temple Mount, doubling its size and raising it higher.<sup>14</sup> Herod’s Temple was now on a scale grander than Solomon’s Temple. He “spent profusely on the exterior gates, fittings and decorations being covered in gold and silver plate.” The stone was “exceptionally white and the glitter of the stone and the gleam of the gold reflected many miles away in the bright sun—that was what made the Temple so striking to travelers seeing it from afar.”<sup>15</sup>

Herod did not do this because he was a pious Jew. He did it for the same reason that tourist attractions are created today: money and jobs. Pilgrims in the hundreds of thousands converged on Jerusalem. Pious Jewish males were required to sacrifice three times a year, but others, diaspora Jews and foreign pagans, came as much for Herod’s grand spectacles as to sacrifice to the Jewish God. The tourists bought sacrificial animals, paid temple fees, exchanged foreign currency into ‘Holy Shekels,’ and burned expensive incense. Moreover, the choirs, the orchestras, sleeping, eating and luxurious inns provided thousands of jobs as wealth poured into the Jewish temple. Caesar Augustus himself sent huge quantities of golden vessels to the diaspora Jews who, much like today, contributed to Israel. And most of the wealth, as always, went to those in charge. The

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<sup>10</sup> *A History of the Jews* Paul Johnson (Harper Perennial 1988) p. 112. Because other authors cite different numbers these should be viewed only as indicative.

<sup>11</sup> Josephus: The Essential Writings, Paul L. Maier, editor, (Kregel Publications, 1988) p. 231

<sup>12</sup> *A History of Christianity* Paul Johnson (Simon & Schuster a Touchstone Book, 1995) pp. 10-11

<sup>13</sup> *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson (Harper Perennial 1988) p. 113

<sup>14</sup> The Temple Mount in the time of Herod stood twice as high as viewed today with the Dome of the Rock at its peak. This would have allowed the temple to be seen at a much greater distance. *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* Leen Ritmeyer (Hendrikson Publishing 2006) is probably the definitive book on the subject.

<sup>15</sup> *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson (Harper Perennial 1988) pp. 115

temple, while a spectacle of worship, became the “Federal Reserve Bank” of Israel. Herod installed the more trusted Pharisees and downgraded the Sadducee high priests to keep an eye on his share of the wealth.<sup>16</sup>

Jerusalem was not Disney by the Dead Sea. It was slaughter on a colossal scale. Each pilgrim had to sacrifice one animal, but with thousands of Pilgrims and some trying to out-sacrifice the others, the flow of blood during “spring break” was enormous. Marcus Agrippa once offered up 100 cattle for his friend Herod. The temple had 34 cisterns, with the largest containing over 2 million gallons, and an aqueduct from the Pool of Siloam to wash away the constant flow of blood from hundreds of animals. “The Temple was an awesome place with the bellows of terrified cattle blending with the ritual cries and chants and tremendous blasts of the horn and trumpet, and blood everywhere.”<sup>17</sup>

Herod’s cronyism with the Roman emperors brought expansion, prosperity, and relative peace to Israel and the Jewish people everywhere. For this, he was named Herod the Great. At the age of 70, after surviving several Roman emperors, ten wives, and many schemes against him, Herod died in agony with a final despotic act of executing one of his sons just five days before he died.<sup>18</sup> It was late March, 4 BC.<sup>19</sup>

Judaism was no longer a religion of the rural tribes of Canaan, no longer the religion of Moses, and their God, Abraham’s God, was no longer the Chairman of the Board of Gods. The Jews were a strong, significant, and respected part of the Roman Empire.<sup>20</sup> Jewish adherents congregated in every major city and town. Jewish Palestine was a churning intrigue of political, social, and religious calculation. There was extreme wealth for some and subsistence poverty for the majority. The Jewish religion conducted its rituals of sacrifice and worship on a grand, majestic, and luxurious scale. The Jewish sects, though, were deeply divided along political and religious lines.

Jewish literature was rich with Apocalyptic writings. A messiah from God would return to end the suffering of Israel, reward the Jews, and vanquish their enemies. The books of Isaiah, Daniel, Esdras, Enoch, Tobit, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Maccabees, and Jubilee, as well as the Assumption of Moses, the Psalms of Solomon, the Wisdom of Solomon, and others, told of the arrival of an earthly messiah who was expected to “defeat the oppressive enemies of Israel” and “establish justice on earth.”<sup>21</sup>

The entire Jordan valley was alive with holy eccentrics. Everyone was on the lookout. “The Roman government, the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Sadducees, and even the Pharisees assumed that a messiah would make changes to the existing order.”<sup>22</sup> There were:

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<sup>16</sup> All of this section is from the *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson (Harper and Row 1987) pp. 110 - 119

<sup>17</sup> “*A History of the Jews*,” Paul Johnson (Harper Perennial 1988) pp. 116-117

<sup>18</sup> *Josephus the Essential Writings* Paul L Maier (Kregel Publications 1988) pp. 252 -254

<sup>19</sup> *Josephus the Essential Writings* Paul L Maier (Kregel Publications 1988) pp. 252 There was a documented lunar eclipse just a few days prior to his death which astronomers have calculated to have been on March 13<sup>th</sup> 4 BC.

<sup>20</sup> *Jews God and History 50th Anniversary, 2nd Edition* Max I Dimont edited by Ethel Dimont (Signet Classics 1994) Kindle location 1755

<sup>21</sup> *The Jews in the Time of Jesus an Introduction* Stephen M Wylen, (Paulist Press 1996) pp 170-171

<sup>22</sup> *A History of the Jews* Paul Johnson, Harper and Row 1988 p. 125

“many prophets, preachers, and holy men, representing most of the twenty-four religious sects in the country at the time, [who] went about proclaiming the coming of a messiah who would deliver the Jews from the evil of the Roman Empire.”<sup>23</sup>

The poor rural people of Galilee and Judea believed the Messiah would be talking in terms of “the realities of power – government, taxes, justice.”<sup>24</sup> However, “there was such a variety of views about the Messiah in Judaism it was almost impossible”<sup>25</sup> to be wrong.

Judaism’s ancient vague theories of God<sup>26</sup> had mixed with those of the Greeks and Persians. Abraham’s God was now the one all-powerful God of the universe. On that, the Jews agreed. But what was his plan for them? Many ideas abounded: human souls and life after death; martyrdom and an approaching end time; resurrection of the dead and the banishment of evil; a messiah whose kingdom would come with a final judgement; a vindicated peace on Earth and life everlasting. All these ideas swirled uncongealed in the cauldron of Jewish politics, brought to a boil by Roman subjugation.

Into that chaos, a baby would soon be born. A baby whose name and religious followers would change the world: Jesus.

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<sup>23</sup> “Jews, God and History” *50th Anniversary, 2nd Edition* Max I Dimont edited by Ethel Dimont (Signet Classics 1994) Kindle location 2085

<sup>24</sup> *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson, (Harper Perennial 1988) p. 125

<sup>25</sup> *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson, (Harper Perennial 1988) p. 219

<sup>26</sup> *A History of Christianity* Paul Johnson (Simon and Schuster a Touchstone Book, 1995) pp 14