



THE HISTORICAL JESUS V: **Herod the Great**

AS THE LIFE AND REIGN of the Judean king, Herod the Great (73 – 37-4 BCE), drew to a close, his diplomatic efforts, construction projects and personal brutality continued unabated. However, the relations between Herod and Caesar Augustus became strained in the later years of Herod's reign, and Augustus began to treat Herod's domain as a subject land. In 8 BCE, on the orders of Caesar, the Syrian governor, Gaius Sentius Saturninus (9-6 BCE), initiated a Roman census in all Palestine. The imperial census was routinely conducted across the empire every fourteen years and was a traditional expression of allegiance, a procedure for enlisting men into military service, and a means of leveling taxes. However, in this instance Augustus further used the census to maintain control over Herod and the Palestinian people.

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Finally, Herod (4 BCE) developed a fatal illness variously attributed to heart, liver and kidney failure, to pulmonary edema, to colon and pancreatic cancer, and to diabetes, poisoning and various infections.¹ “Herod's kingdom did not survive his death. In his last will, subsequently confirmed by Augustus, he bequeathed Judea, Idumea, and Samaria to his son Archelaus; Galilee and Perea to another son Herod Antipas; and the northeastern parts of the kingdom to a third son Philip. For the nation, Herod's death was the signal to demand an alleviation of the burden of taxation and a change in the nature of the regime. When their demands were not met, a dangerous rebellion broke out which was only suppressed by the vigorous intervention of Quintilius Varus, then governor of Syria [6-4 BCE].”² “About 2,000 Judeans were crucified. Roman vengeance came down especially cruelly upon Galilee's largest city Sepphoris, which was burned and whose inhabitants were sold into slavery.”³ Meanwhile,

the imperial census initiated by Saturninus was extended until 3-2 BCE, when P. Sulpicius Quirinius, Roman commander and administrator in Syria, was given an interim assignment to complete the census.⁴

“Augustus did not bestow the title of king on Archelaus, who had to be content with that of ethnarch. He failed to win the support of the Jewish and Samaritan subjects, and they complained of him to the emperor, who ordered that he be deposed and that his inheritance, Judea, be organized as a Roman province (6 C.E.).”⁵ “The [subsequent] era of the procurators was an era of increasing rebelliousness among the Jews. There were numerous peasant uprisings. People could not longer bear Roman oppression, the arrogance of the privileged upper classes, and the rulers’ contempt for Jewish piety and ancestral custom.

“In Galilee a group arose in revolt against the Roman census of 6 CE [again supervised by P. Sulpicius Quirinius]. Led by a certain Judas of Galilee, forebear of the leaders of the Great Revolt, their slogan was ‘no ruler but God.’ Galilee was known for its gangs of ‘bandits,’ rural peasants driven by poverty to desperate means. Like Robin Hood of medieval England, rural bandits were friends and heroes to the local poor, dangerous criminals in the eyes of the upper classes and those responsible for social order. The bandit groups in Galilee took on an increasingly political coloration after the census revolt. Eventually these Galileans, among them the party famed as Zealots, became the core of the militia who fought the Romans in the Great Revolt.”⁶

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Profound Yet Hidden Events

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1. “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius [Quirinius] was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child” (Luke 2:1-5).

2. “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod

the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him” (Matthew 2:1, 2).

3. “And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they [the wise men] departed into their own country another way” (Matthew 2:12).

4. “And when they [the wise men] were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him” (Matthew 2:13).

5. “But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child’s life. . . . But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: and he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene” (Matthew 2:19-23).

6. “And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him. Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast” (Luke 2:40-42).

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Endnotes

1. See Nikos Kokkinos, “Herod’s Horrid Death,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 28, no. 2 (March/April 2002): 28-35, 62.
2. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM ed. (1997), s.v. Menahem Stern, “History: Second Temple Period (The Hellenistic-Roman Period).”
3. Moses A. Shulvass, *The History of the Jewish People*, vol 1, *The Antiquity* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1982), p. 103.
4. See John D. Davis, “Qurinius (Quirinus), . . . Publius Sulpicius,” at www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc09/htm/iv.vi.xii.htm.
5. Shulvass, *Antiquity*, p. 103.
6. Stephen M. Wylan, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 75.