

Old Testament History
by
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Part Eight
Between the Testaments:
The Hellenistic Period

CHAPTER 91

The Romans Take Over

1. Roman Beginnings

About three decades before Samaria fell to the Assyrians, legend states that Romulus and Remus founded the city of Rome (753 B.C.). Among the nations of antiquity, Rome was a newcomer. The glories of the Sumerians, the Hittites, Mittani, the old Babylonian Empire of Hammurabi, and the best periods of Egyptian history had faded centuries before Rome appeared as a city state on the Tiber. During the early years of her existence the mighty Assyrian Empire was defeated by Cyaxeres the Mede and Nabopolassar, the founder of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Before Rome became a power to be reckoned with, Nabonidus, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings, was defeated by the armies of Cyrus the Great, and Persia became mistress of the entire East, including Egypt. The son of Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great, reversed the process of history by invading the East as a missionary for Hellenism and a military conqueror. Alexander's death precipitated the division of the Hellenistic world, which was united again by the diplomacy and the military might of Rome.

Although we are dependent on legend for our accounts of the founding of Rome, its later history is well documented. In the fifth century B.C. the city state of Rome was a thriving republic. By the middle of the third century a series of wars with the Etruscans and other tribes made the whole Italian peninsula subject to Rome. After three wars with the Carthaginians, Rome gained control of the western Mediterranean in 146 B.C. The Carthaginians traced their roots back to the Phoenician city of Tyre, and the wars between Rome and Carthage are known in history as the Punic Wars. In 146 B.C. Carthage was completely destroyed by the Roman general, Scipio Africanus, who put an end to a power which had threatened Rome itself when Hannibal invaded Italy.

Turning toward the east, Rome was able to add to her territories with little opposition. Shortly after the destruction of Carthage, Roman rule was extended over Macedonia, Corinth, and all Achaia. In 133 B.C., Attalus, king of Pergamum, bequeathed his territory to

the Romans. The Roman province of Asia was then organized.

2. Pompey Enters Palestine

In Palestine the strength -- both moral and physical -- of the Maccabees was fast waning. Following the death of Alexandra, her sons Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II were fighting for the right of succession. The news of the chaos in Palestine reached Rome. Pompey, the Roman general who had been so successful in bringing Roman power to the East, determined to intervene. Scaurus, one of Pompey's subordinates, decided to support Aristobulus, on the theory that he would be best able to pay the bribe for Roman support which had been offered by each of the contestants.

Pompey personally intervened to get at the root of the quarrel between Aristobulus and Hyrcanus. He observed evidences of the plan of Aristobulus to revolt against Rome. A Roman army besieged Jerusalem. Hyrcanus supported Pompey against his brother. Jerusalem was besieged for three months. Finally the fortifications were breached. Twelve thousand Jews are said to have been slaughtered in the battle which followed. Pompey, with his officers, entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple. This act scandalized the Jews, for none but the High Priest ever had access to the inner court of the Temple. Pompey did not plunder the Temple, however. He left its costly furnishings untouched and permitted the Temple worship to continue. Jerusalem was, in the words of Josephus, "made tributary to the Romans," and the last vestige of Jewish national independence was removed.

With the defeat of Aristobulus, Judea was made a part of the Roman province of Syria. The coastal cities, the district of Samaria, and the non-Jewish cities east of the Jordan were removed from Judea. Hyrcanus was rewarded for his loyalty to Pompey by being named Ethnarch of Judea, including the districts of Galilee, Idumea, and Perea. He was also confirmed in the office of High Priest. A yearly tribute was paid to Rome.

Aristobulus and a number of other captives were taken as prisoners to grace Pompey's triumph in Rome. En route to Rome, Aristobulus' son, Alexander, escaped and attempted to organize a revolt against Hyrcanus. With the aid of the Romans, Hyrcanus was able to meet this challenge to his authority. Alexander was forced to surrender, but his life was spared.

3. The Power of Antipater

During the years of strife between Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II, the Idumean governor Antipater, or Antipas, took a lively interest in the politics of Judea. Antipater was bitterly opposed to Aristobulus, partly through fear and partly because of his friendship for Hyrcanus. It appears that Hyrcanus relied much on Antipater, who became the virtual power behind the throne.

The Jews resented the presence of Antipater almost as much as they resented the fact that they were subject to Rome. Antipater was an Idumean, or Edomite according to Old Testament nomenclature. The Edomites had been the hereditary enemies of the Jews. From the territory south of the Dead Sea they had been pushed northward to the area around Hebron by the Nabatean Arabs. Under John Hyrcanus the Idumeans had been forcibly incorporated into the Jewish nation, and the antipathy continued. Antipater did not let this hinder him from seeking an ever-increasing amount of power under Hyrcanus II and his Roman overlords, and from seeking positions of influence for his sons Phasael and Herod.

4. Herod the Great

In the crisis which followed the murder of Julius Caesar, Antipater and his sons showed their loyalty to the new regime of Cassius by zealously collecting tribute. Herod was given the title "Procurator of Judea," with the promise that he would one day be named king. When Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius at Philippi, Asia fell into the hands of a new Roman regime. Herod, ever an opportunist, quickly changed his loyalties and bribed his way to favor with Anthony.

The Parthians, who occupied a part of the eastern territory of the once mighty Persian Empire, had not been subdued by Rome. In 41 B.C. they attacked and took Jerusalem and made Antigonus, son of Aristobulus II, king and High Priest. Herod, the son of Antipater, who had inherited the throne of Judea at the death of Hyrcanus, was forced to flee to Rome. There he won the favor of Anthony who bestowed upon him the title "King of the Jews," which was to have meaning only after the Parthians were driven out. The Roman forces helped Herod in this military operation.

Herod's rule spanned the eventful years of 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. He is best known as the king who feared the birth of a rival "King of the Jews," and caused the murder of the infants of Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus. While that act of Herod has not been preserved in secular records, his other atrocities are well documented.

Shortly after capturing Jerusalem from the Parthians, Herod appointed Hananiel of Babylon as High Priest. Herod had married Mariamne, a descendant of the Hasmoneans, thus strengthening his claim to the throne. Her mother, Alexandra, resented the fact that a non-Hasmonean priest occupied the highest office. She determined to have Aristobulus, grandson of Hyrcanus II, as High Priest, and used all of her wiles to accomplish her purpose. Alexandra communicated with Cleopatra of Egypt to influence Anthony to bring pressure on Herod! Her plan was successful. Contrary to Jewish law, Hananiel was removed from office and Aristobulus was named High Priest.

For a time it looked as though Herod and Alexandra were on friendly terms. Herod, however, learned of Alexandra's communications with Cleopatra and realized that she

could not be trusted. He insisted that she remain in the palace, and ordered guards to keep constant watch over her movements. On one occasion she tried to escape to Egypt with her son Aristobulus in two specially prepared coffins, but one of Herod's servants discovered the plot and prevented the escape.

Aristobulus was a real threat to Herod. As a Jew of priestly line, he had an advantage which the Idumean, Herod, could not attain. When the news that Aristobulus had drowned while bathing reached Herod, he feigned great sorrow. Alexandra was sure that Aristobulus had been murdered at Herod's instigation. There is a flaw in Josephus' account of the incident. He records that Aristobulus "was sent by night to Jericho, and was there plunged into a pool till he was drowned, by the Gauls, at Herod's command." The Gauls were not in Herod's service until five years after Aristobulus' murder.¹ Nevertheless it seems that Josephus is correct in ascribing to Herod the murder of Aristobulus.

Alexandra again requested Cleopatra to intervene on her behalf, and was again successful. Anthony commanded Herod to appear before him to answer for his crime. Herod could not defy Anthony, so he planned to go to Egypt. First, however, he asked his uncle, Joseph, to look after his affairs during his absence. In the event that Anthony pronounced the death sentence upon Herod, Mariamne, his wife, was to be immediately killed. Herod could not bear the thought of her belonging to anyone else, and he suspected that Anthony had been attracted by her beauty.

When a report reached Jerusalem that Herod had been slain, Alexandra made plans to secure the kingdom for her family. Joseph told Mariamne of the order which Herod had made before leaving for Egypt. Alexandra's plans to secure the kingdom from Anthony, with Mariamne's aid, were frustrated when Herod returned home. The report of his death was untrue. He had explained things to Anthony and had returned with full power.

When Mariamne revealed her knowledge of the order which Herod had given to Joseph, Herod concluded that there had been criminal relations between Joseph and Mariamne. Joseph was put to death with no opportunity to defend himself. Alexandra was "bound" and "kept in custody" because of her part in the affair. For the moment, Mariamne escaped censure. Herod seems to have truly loved her, unwise though he was in his expressions of love.

The next crisis in Herod's life was related to the struggle for power within the Roman Empire. The conflict between Anthony and Octavian for supreme control began in 32 B.C. Herod was the protégé of Anthony and desired to actively support him in his bid for control. Anthony, however, realized his need for a buffer state in the East against the Parthians. Herod did not remain idle, for he had to fight the Nabatean Arabs who were taking advantage of the general unrest. After some hard fighting, Herod overcame the

1 *Antiquities* xv. 217; *Bell, Jud.* I, 397.

Arab resistance.

Anthony did not fare so well, however. The battle of Actium (September 2, 31 B.C.) ended in defeat for Anthony, and Octavian emerged as the ruler of the Roman world. Herod managed to emerge on the winning side after a meeting with Octavian on the Isle of Rhodes. Josephus tells how Herod boasted of his friendship for Anthony and the help he had given in the fight against Octavian, concluding with the observation that Octavian could observe the kind of person Herod is and the loyalty he would show his benefactors, pledging equal loyalty to Octavian.² Octavian confirmed Herod in the kingship of Judea.

After the defeat at Actium, Anthony fled with Cleopatra to Egypt where the last act of their tragedy was played. The Roman armies reached the environs of Alexandria, and Cleopatra determined to rid herself of Anthony. She barricaded herself in a monument with two of her women and made Anthony think she had committed suicide. Anthony, according to plan thrust his sword into his body but did not succeed in taking his own life. Cleopatra and her women drew the badly wounded Anthony into the monument. His corpse was found there by the Romans when they broke into the monument. It is suspected that Cleopatra realized that her chances of making terms with the Romans would be enhanced if she could rid herself of Anthony.

Octavian personally entered Alexandria, August 1, 30 B.C. Legend says that Cleopatra tried to charm Octavian with her feminine wiles, only to be repulsed by him. Cleopatra's death remains a mystery. One day she was found dead in her royal robes. The story was circulated that she had had an asp (or two asps) brought to her secretly. Small marks, reportedly discovered on her body, were considered proof that she had committed suicide by allowing herself to be bitten by the snakes.

The death of Cleopatra and the conquest of Egypt by the forces of Octavian strengthened Herod's hand in Palestine. Cleopatra's possessions in Palestine, given to her by Ptolemy, were added to Herod's domain. With other cities deeded to Herod by Octavian, Herod ruled a country equal in size to that which Alexander Jannaeus had ruled.

Successful in politics, Herod's domestic problems were to plague him again. Mariamne, who had been entrusted to a servant, Sohemus, when Herod went to meet Octavian at Rhodes, again learned of a plot to kill her in the event of her husband's death. When she greeted Herod angrily on his return, he ordered Sohemus put to death without trial. Mariamne was tried and condemned to death on the charge of adultery and attempt to poison. Remorse and its aftermath, illness, plagued Herod more effectively than his enemies. Alexandra soon afterward was put to death for a new plot against Herod.

Herod did have the confidence of Octavian, who assumed the name Augustus, but he had to

² *Antiquities* xv. 187-93.

make the best of difficult circumstances in his kingdom. He attempted to gain the good will of the Judeans by remitting a third part of their taxes, but antipathy to him continued. The oath of allegiance to Herod and Caesar was resented by the more religious elements among the Jews. Herod thought highly of the Essenes, and excused them from taking the oath.

Although Herod's reign was one of trouble, much of it brought on by his own jealousy, there are accomplishments for which he should be given credit. Foremost among these are his buildings. Whole cities were built or rebuilt by Herod: Samaria became Sebaste in honor of Augustus; Straton's Tower became Caesarea, with a harbor protected by a mole and a wall with ten towers; Antipatris, northeast of Joppa; Phasaelis in the Jordan Valley, north of Jericho; and Anthedon, thoroughly renovated, became Agrippeion. Fortresses were built: Herodeion, Alexandreion, Hyrkania, Machaerus, and Masada. The gymnasiums, baths, parks, marketplaces, streets, and other luxuries of a Hellenistic culture were part of his building programs.

In the eighteenth year of his reign (20/19 B.C.), Herod began the work of building, or, more correctly, rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple proper, on which priests and Levites were employed, was finished in a year and a half with no interruption in the daily sacrifices. It took eight more years to complete the courts. The entire structure was arranged in terrace form, with one court higher than the other, and the Temple highest of all. The outer court was open to the Gentiles and the Jews who were unable to approach closer to the Temple because of ceremonial impurities. A "court of the women" and an inner "court of the Israelites" provided, respectively, for the women and men to approach more closely to the sacred Temple precincts which, of course, were entered only by the officiating priesthood.

Work on the surrounding buildings of the Temple was still going on during the ministry of Jesus (cf. John 2:20). The work was completed during the time of the procurator Albinus (A.D. 62-64), only a few years before the armies of Titus destroyed the city of Jerusalem with its Temple (cf. Matt. 24:2, 15-22, 32-35).

Herod's interest in the Temple was doubtless inspired by his love of grandeur, and his desire to be well received by his Jewish subjects. His personal life was such, however, that his gift of the Temple could not clear his name before the Israelites of his own, or subsequent generations.

The last years of Herod were marked by intrigue and conspiracy. Alexander and Aristobulus, his sons by Mariamne, were educated in Rome. They openly boasted of what they would do to those who had been the enemies of their mother when once they came to power. Antipater, Herod's son by his first wife, Doris, determined to eliminate Alexander and Aristobulus as rival claimants to the throne. Charging that they were plotting against Herod's life, Antipater produced documents which incriminated Alexander and Aristobulus. They were tried, convicted, and strangled to death. Antipater himself was

later found guilty of attempting to poison Herod, and given the death sentence. Augustus is reported to have commented, "I'd rather be Herod's hog (*hus*) than his son (*huios*)." Out of deference to Jewish dietary laws, Herod did not kill his hogs.

When it was known that Herod was sick and nearing death, several zealous Pharisees pulled down the golden eagle which Herod had unwisely erected over the great gate of the Temple. Regarding this as a "graven image," the Jews resented its presence. Herod ordered the death of these Jewish leaders, a final act of tyranny which caused his memory to be hated by the Jews.

Herod's death came April 1st, 4 B.C. Cancer of the intestines and dropsy are suggested as its causes. It is said that Herod knew that there would be no mourning when he died, so he ordered the imprisonment and death of a number of the leaders of the Jews that there might be mourning throughout the land. Although this story is probably untrue, Herod left behind him a reputation of infamy. True, he was manipulated by evil people, and was often "more sinned against than sinning," yet he allowed his passions to master him and he must go down in history as one of the world's great failures. That he was jealous even of the infant Jesus shows the extent to which the desire for worldly sovereignty may lead a man astray.