

HEROD
&
MARY

THE TRUE STORY OF
THE TYRANT KING
AND THE MOTHER OF
THE RISEN SAVIOR

KATHIE LEE GIFFORD
WITH DR. BRYAN LITFIN



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Herod & Mary

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This book is dedicated to two of my favorite men on the planet:

Ray Vander Laan, my first rabbinical teacher in the Holy Land, who lit a fire in my soul once again for the Scriptures and the epic stories behind them.

The other person I want to acknowledge is my son, Cody, who first encouraged me to take this newfound fascination with the ancient stories and turn it into a modern-day thriller for a whole new generation of readers.

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HERODIAN CHRONOLOGY

73 BC	Birth of Herod
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64 BC	Herod flees to Petra during the Jewish civil war
-------	--

63 BC	General Pompey captures Jerusalem for the Romans and enters the temple
-------	--

48 BC	Pompey is executed by beheading in Egypt
-------	--

47 BC	Antipater I helps Julius Caesar in Egypt; he appoints Phasael and Herod as governors in Judea and Galilee; Herod marries Doris
-------	--

44 BC	Julius Caesar is betrayed and murdered in Rome
-------	--

43 BC	Antipater I is murdered by Malichus
-------	-------------------------------------

42 BC	Herod divorces Doris; he gets betrothed to Mariamne I
-------	---

40 BC	Parthians invade Roman Syria and Judea under Pacorus and Barzapharnes; Phasael is killed in prison; Hyrcanus is sent into exile in Babylonia; Herod flees to Masada, Egypt, and Rome; he is named king of the Jews by the Roman Senate
-------	--

39 BC	Herod returns to Judea and fights Antigonus to claim his kingship
-------	---

38 BC	Herod defeats the robbers at Mount Arbel
-------	--

37 BC	Herod marries Mariamne I; he captures Jerusalem as its king; he appoints Ananel as high priest and brings Hyrcanus back from exile; Cleopatra is given Herod's palm groves at Jericho
-------	---

36 BC	Herod replaces Ananel with Aristobulus II, the brother of Mariamne I; he drowns Aristobulus at Jericho
-------	--

HERODIAN CHRONOLOGY

35 BC	Mark Antony summons Herod to explain the drowning of Aristobulus
-------	--

33 BC	Mark Antony divorces Octavian's sister to free himself to pursue Cleopatra
-------	--

32 BC	Herod initiates a war against Malchus and the Nabateans
-------	---

31 BC	An earthquake shakes Judea; Herod delivers an inspirational speech; Octavian defeats Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium; Antony flees with Cleopatra to Egypt
-------	--

30 BC	Mark Antony and Cleopatra commit suicide; Octavian is triumphant as Rome's sole ruler; Herod executes Hyrcanus on suspicion of treason; Herod pledges allegiance to Octavian at Rhodes
-------	--

29 BC	Herod executes Mariamne I
-------	---------------------------

28 BC	Herod executes Alexandra; he initiates a long-term building campaign in Israel
-------	--

27 BC	Octavian is renamed Caesar Augustus; the Roman Republic becomes the Roman Empire; Herod builds up Sebaste in the emperor's honor; he marries Malthace
-------	---

25 BC	Famine in the land; Herod provides relief
-------	---

23 BC	Herod marries Mariamne II
-------	---------------------------

22 BC	Construction is begun on Caesarea by the Sea and the new palace at Masada; Herod sends his sons Alexander II and Aristobulus III to Rome for education
-------	--

20 BC	Mary is born to Joachim and Anna
-------	----------------------------------

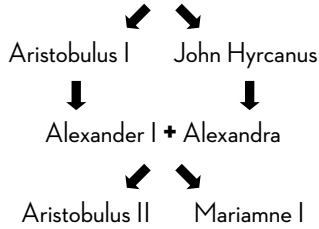
19 BC	Construction begins on the new Jewish temple
-------	--

17 BC	Herod goes to Rome and brings back his sons
15 BC	Marcus Agrippa tours Judea and is impressed with Herod's abilities
14 BC	Herod tours Asia Minor with Marcus Agrippa
13 BC	Antipater II goes to Rome with Marcus Agrippa
10 BC	The new Jewish temple is dedicated for use
9 BC	Herod initiates a second war with the Nabateans and falls out of favor with Caesar Augustus
8 BC	Nicolaus of Damascus reconciles Herod with Augustus
7 BC	Herod's sons by Mariamne I, Alexander II and Aristobulus III, are tried and executed by their father
6 BC	Mary receives the announcement of her virginal conception at Hanukkah (December)
5 BC	Antipater II goes to Rome but falls out of favor and hurries home; he is tried and imprisoned; Mary visits her aunt Elizabeth; the magi visit Herod; Mary gives birth to Jesus during Sukkot (October); Herod punishes the student protest about the eagle on the temple
4 BC	Antipater II is executed on Herod's command; the baby Jesus is presented in the temple; the magi visit Mary and Joseph in the Bethlehem house; the holy family flees to Egypt; massacre of the Bethlehem boys; Herod dies in late March or early April; the holy family returns to Nazareth via Jerusalem

HERODIAN FAMILY TREE

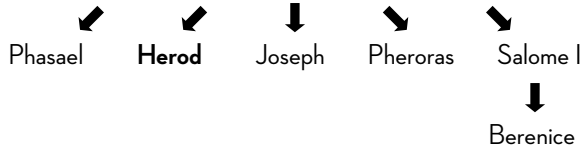
THE HASMONEAN HOUSE

Alexander Jannaeus
(great-grandson of the clan's founder)

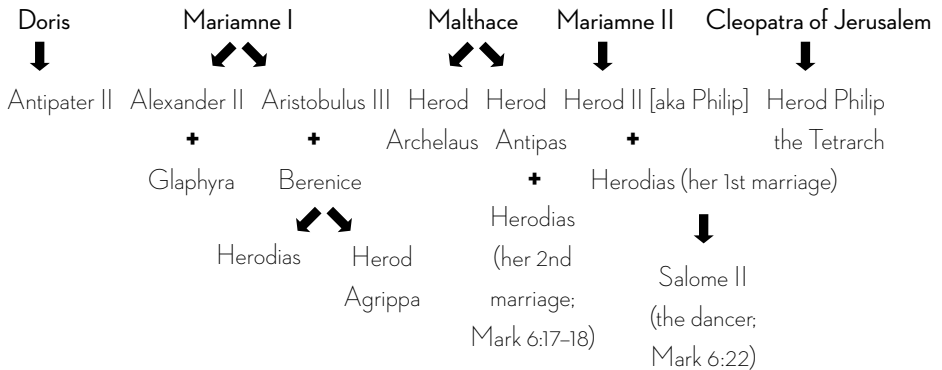


THE IDUMEAN HOUSE

Antipater I + Cyprus



HEROD'S WIVES & CHILDREN

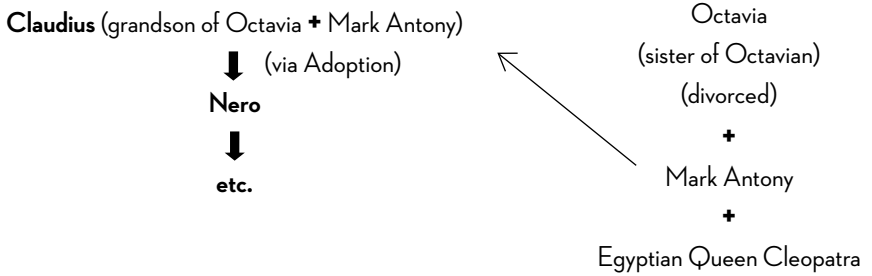
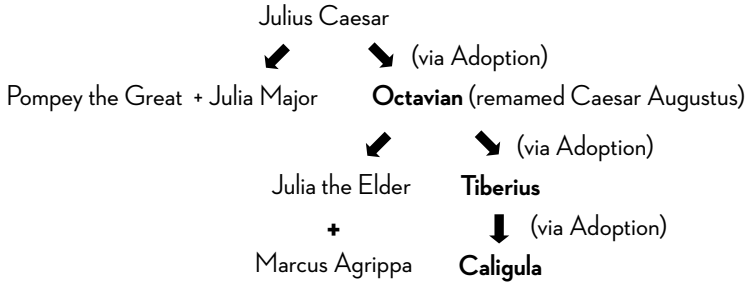


+ = MARRIAGE

↓ = OFFSPRING

I, II, III = DIFFERENT PERSONS (same number = same person)

THE ROMAN EMPERORS



PROLOGUE

I have been completely fascinated by the historical figure of Herod the Great—known mostly to the world for the few references to him in the biblical narrative of Jesus’ birth—since I went on my first rabbinical-guided trip to the Holy Land in 2012 with my brilliant, passionate teacher Ray Vander Laan. Ray changed everything for me when he set fire to my faith by explaining what the Scriptures—written originally in Hebrew and Greek—really meant.

He explained that the Bible has been translated incorrectly for centuries and, as a result, all kinds of damage has been done. For example, on the first day of our study we stood at the site of David’s famous confrontation with Goliath the Philistine.

“How many of you know what Jesus and his earthly father, Joseph, did for a living before Jesus became a rabbi at the age of thirty?” Ray inquired.

Every member of our group answered, “He was a carpenter.”

“Actually,” Ray responded, “he wasn’t a carpenter. The word in the New Testament used to describe their profession is *tekton*, and it means an architect or builder.”

Well, first century AD Israel was a desert and still technically is. There was practically no buildable wood available in Jesus’ time. The cedars of Lebanon had to be cut down and made into rafts and floated along the Mediterranean coastline to Joppa (Tel Aviv), broken apart, and then carried to the various construction sites all over the country. Jesus and Joseph would have worked with small trees (balsam, olive, sycamore, and so on), but the rest of their work would have been with stone.

At this point in the tour I was thinking, *Oh no! I’m stuck for ten days with a guy who doesn’t even know the Bible!* But Ray explained the critical point: when King James commissioned an English translation in 1604, the translators of the New Testament were all English and had never been to Israel. So they understandably assumed that the word *tekton* meant “carpenter” because their reference point was their own verdant, lush English countryside.

Then Ray leaned in and spoke four astonishing words that set my heart on fire: *Jesus was a stonemason!*

Suddenly all the scriptures I had learned about rocks and stones came to life: “Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” (John 8:7 NLT); “Upon this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18 NLT); “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Matthew 21:42 NIV); and so many more.

“Ray,” I asked, “if we can get something as simple as that so wrong, what more are we getting wrong?”

He smiled at me and with a twinkle answered, “Everything.”

Later we visited the magnificent ruins of so many of Herod’s brilliant architectural wonders, and Ray began to tell us more about the unbelievable life story of King Herod, the self-proclaimed king of the Jews. One site in particular was Herod’s palace in Bethlehem, named Herodium, where he was eventually buried following an excruciating death as a broken, defeated, and horribly disfigured man.

Suddenly, Ray took off his trademark “Michigan Ray” hat and threw it on the dirt around him. “*Herod!*” he screamed into the wind, creating an echo that reverberated through the ruins. “*Herod! Herod! Herod! Was it worth it? Was it worth it?*”

Herod’s life was marked by triumph, tragedy, murder, debauchery, and political intrigue. For me, the story of Herod the Great is the “greatest story *never* told,” while Jesus’ is the greatest story *ever* told.

In this book you will learn why I believe both to be true.

What follows is the story of evil personified in King Herod, contrasted with the living hope of Jesus told through the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who will forever be known as the young virgin who was chosen to give birth to the architect of creation and the builder of all things righteous and good.

To the *true* King of kings, our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Messiah.

Kathie Lee Gifford
Franklin, TN

HISTORICAL NOTE

Though this book isn't a work of fiction, it nonetheless has all the elements of a good novel: plot arc, dialogue, characterizations, conflict, turning points, and so on. King Herod's biography forms a powerful, instructive, sometimes-thrilling but often-tragic saga. You will encounter his story of bluster and bloodshed in all its bleak detail. But interwoven into the macro narrative is a quieter, humbler thread of hope and redemption—the backstory of a teenaged girl named Mary who gave birth to God's Messiah.

The primary sources for Herod's biography are two works by the ancient historian Josephus: *Jewish Antiquities* and *The Jewish War*. My quotations of these sources normally come from Harvard University Press's volumes in the Loeb Classical Library, which have the advantage of printing the original Greek across the page from the English for easy reference. I have also consulted G. A. Williamson's edition of *The Jewish War* (Penguin Classics, 1959; revised, 1981), as well as William Whiston's standby edition of *The Works of Josephus*, the origins of which go back to 1736.

The main source of information about Mary, of course, is the New Testament. My Bible quotations in this book typically come from the New King James Version, but other versions such as the New International Version (NIV) or New Living Translation (NLT) are sometimes used if they make more sense in context. For the ancient church traditions about Mary's backstory, I have made frequent reference to the handy anthology by J. K. Elliott, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives*. Among the ancient sources that Elliott has collected about Mary's parents and early life, the most helpful text that he included (because it was the first to be written after the time of the apostles) is *The Original Gospel of James*. Though this text has some legendary aspects to it, even so, its recollections about Mary reflect ancient Christian spirituality and may contain nuggets of historical truth.

Usually, I have quoted these ancient documents the way I found them translated into English in whatever book I was consulting. However, since those translations were sometimes unclear, I have freely adapted them in this

book for the sake of giving you the best possible reading experience. Other times, I have availed myself of artistic license to paraphrase the sources or imagine things that the ancient characters might have said. Always, my quotations and imaginations are grounded in historical texts and my expertise about the way ancient people thought and spoke. As I said previously, while this book isn't a work of fiction, it is a narrative, so it should read like a good one.

Of the many modern biographies written about Herod, I consulted a select few and found myself returning again and again to the one I consider the best of them: Michael Grant's *Herod the Great* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971). Some other books that I found helpful, and so should be listed here, are:

- Adam Kolman Marshak, *The Many Faces of Herod the Great* (Eerdmans, 2015)
- Bieke Mahieu, *Between Rome and Jerusalem: Herod the Great and His Sons in Their Struggle for Recognition* (Peeters, 2012)
- Ehud Netzer, *The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder* (Mohr Siebeck, 2006)
- Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford, 2007)
- Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Fortress, 1999)
- Samuel Rocca, *Herod's Judaea* (Mohr Siebeck, 2008)
- Mark Toher (translator), *Nicolaus of Damascus: The Life of Augustus and The Autobiography* (Cambridge, 2017)

Although I have composed the “historical” aspect of this book, bringing my expertise as an ancient church scholar, university professor, and historical novelist to the table, the truth is that Kathie Lee Gifford was the book's driving force from beginning to end. Not only was the original idea hers, as well as the format, but she and I also had extensive (and prayerful) consultations along the way. Her heart, vision, and insight are on every page.

To provide the reader with a sense of how our collaboration worked, Kathie and I recorded some of our conversations. We have attached edited versions of those lively exchanges at the end of the book. Like a musical composition that adds a “coda” to bring the work to a fitting conclusion, we intend these

codas to put finishing touches on the chapters. Perhaps the reader will sense a symmetry between the dramatic events of the Roman past and the challenges of modern life. People often say that history repeats itself. The struggles within Herod's household—as well as God's redemptive work behind the scenes—have many parallels today. The codas remind us that God is just as active now as he was in biblical times. Kathie's reflections on the chapter topics will help our readers process the story on a deeper level and take away lasting insights and relevance for daily life.

All of us from a certain generation (and I am one of them) have Kathie Lee Gifford's voice in our heads. Her bubbly personality, warm spirit, quirky humor, and distinctive verbal inflections are part of our everyday lives. Never did I type a word of this book without an awareness of what she wanted to say, how she wanted to communicate it, and what impact she wanted to achieve. If there was ever a collaborative book in which two people unified their distinctive gifts into a single offering, this is it. I hope you hear Kathie's voice as you read—her wisdom, warmth, and most of all, her love for the Messiah. May this book enlighten, entertain, and bless you from cover to cover.

Dr. Bryan M. Litfin
Lynchburg, VA

CHAPTER 1

A KING IS BORN

The terrible pains weren't what drove King Herod to raise the knife above his flabby, bloated breast in a final act of suicide. True enough, there was pain in him—an agony that never relented. Coughs and convulsions wracked his aged body. A fire burned inside him. His entrails were ulcerated along their entire length. Though hunger gnawed at his belly, Herod couldn't satisfy his appetite lest eating food kindle the fires anew. His feet ached constantly, for they were engorged with fluid and swollen like ripe melons. Gangrene had even caused his genitals to rot away. The man-part that Herod had so proudly considered a sign of his virility was now engulfed in cankers where flies laid their eggs and maggots wriggled as they emerged. Pus oozed where potency once had been. Yes, there was pain in Herod's body. But that was not what drove him to raise the deadly blade above his breast.

It was the itching.

So maddening was this itch that Herod believed he could no longer stand it. The prickly tingle radiated from his blackened groin until it tormented every part of his skin. Though no amount of scratching could relieve it, the red stripes on his flesh and the blood beneath his fingernails showed that he had tried. *I can't take it anymore*, Herod finally decided. *Now I commend my soul to God!*

With great effort, the obese king raised himself up on his sweat-soaked bed. His hand loomed above his head. The blade glinted in the lamplight. Somewhere, deep in the fog of his madness, Herod wondered if the little fruit knife that the servants had brought him could strike a deadly blow. He was determined to do the deed nonetheless. By the force of his will, he would make it work. It would be a dramatic and fitting conclusion to his long reign. For thirty-three years, he had ruled Judea and built great monuments that would stand for centuries. His whole life had been spent helping God's chosen people learn to live with Rome's power and glory. Now the Jews would remember

his tragic end as well. Perhaps they would even admire his courage and fortitude. Herod would become one of those celebrated men of the past, men like Samson, Saul, or Socrates, who had committed noble suicide.

But before Herod could go through with the great and memorable deed, a man entered the room. It was Achiabus, Herod's cousin. Surely he would try to prevent the suicide, lest he be accused of the crime himself. Herod quickly lowered his hand and hid the knife in the rumpled bedclothes. The sheets were made of silk imported from the East—the finest in the world. Now they were fouled with pus and blood, and probably much urine too. Herod wasn't quite sure what was happening down there. But no matter. Soon he would be dead. Then God would usher the king of the Jews into a blessed paradise.

The news that Achiabus had come to report actually comforted Herod. Caesar Augustus, the emperor of Rome and mightiest man on earth, had replied to Herod's letter. All the facts about the rebellion of Herod's son had been reported to Augustus, and he had ruled in Herod's favor. "Your son Antipater is guilty of treason," the letter declared. "I leave it to your judgment whether to execute him or send him into exile."

Exile? Such a fate was too good for so despicable a traitor!

Herod's thoughts turned to Antipater, who was locked in a cell not far away in the royal palace at Jericho. He was named after Herod's beloved father. Long ago, back before everything took a dire turn, the young Antipater had shown great promise. Herod had hoped his firstborn son might one day rule Judea as next in the royal line.

But then, like everyone else in Herod's clan, Antipater had turned treasonous. Instead of honoring his father like a good son should do, he had plotted and caroused with Herod's enemies. Antipater even had the audacity to complain about Herod's longevity! "I'll be an old man by the time I gain the throne," he had grumbled. "I wish my father would hurry up and die." And to make sure that he did—sooner rather than later—Antipater had imported deadly poison from Egypt. But the assassination plot had been discovered. Now the despicable backstabber was locked up in chains, awaiting trial for his crimes.

Herod shook his head at the colossal mistake he had almost made.

I can't believe I ever wanted that wretch to inherit my kingdom! I need to put him to death very soon . . .

The truth was, no one in the Herodian house could be trusted. One by one, each of their hearts had grown corrupt. Their lust for power had consumed them. To survive, Herod had been forced to kill them all. His beloved queen Mariamne: executed and embalmed, though never forgotten. Her brother: drowned in a swimming pool. Her two sons: strangled like a pair of dinner fowl in a Samaritan dungeon. And there were more. So many, many more. Deaths beyond count since the first day Herod began to rule. It was a level of bloodguilt beyond remission. Perhaps God wouldn't be so merciful after all.

Perhaps I am not worthy to be called the king of the Jews?

It was time to find out. Achiabus had stepped away from the bed. He now stood across the room, whispering with one of the doctors. Both men covered their noses with kerchiefs, for the stench of Herod's fecal leakage bothered those who didn't dwell in it. Herod, however, had grown used to the smell.

You can do this, he told himself, probing his swollen heart to find enough courage to go through with the heroic deed. He wiped pus from his fingers on the silken sheets, then gripped the knife's hilt in his pudgy fist. It was only a paring knife, intended for an apple that the servants had brought. Its blade wasn't meant to pierce through so much fat. But it would be enough. Herod would make it so. With a sudden jerk, he yanked the knife from its hiding place and raised it again above his head.

Yet the king who had ordered so many deaths couldn't decree his own.

"Stop!" shouted Achiabus as he darted across the room and seized Herod's wrist in an iron grip.

The blade hung poised for a moment, savage like a demon's fang, not caring whether it stabbed a Judean apple or the king of the Jews. With all his ebbing strength, Herod struggled to plunge the knife into his chest. Achiabus refused to let go.

The two men were locked in mortal combat. It would be a fight to the death. But like all the wars in Herod's life, this was a battle he did not intend to lose.

Not far from the Jericho palace where Herod lay dying, a young woman likewise reclined in severe pain upon a bed. But unlike the king, she felt no silken sheets beneath her sweaty back, nor was she surrounded by a host of doctors

and servants. In fact, she wasn't lying on a true bed at all. When her hands spasmodically clawed at her surroundings, seeking something to grip when waves of agony threatened to overwhelm her, all she could find were clumps of scattered straw. Her betrothed had made this simple pallet for his pregnant fiancée in a cave that served to shelter animals.¹ The day had come for Mary of Nazareth to give birth.

While all of Judea waited to find out what would happen to King Herod—whether he would recover, or, if he died, who would succeed him—Mary labored in total obscurity. No one who passed the cave's entrance bothered to notice the Jewish teenager struggling to deliver the baby in her womb. Not far away, the city of Bethlehem bustled with visitors, for the great Caesar Augustus had commanded a census to be taken in his Roman realm. Every man was required to return to his hometown to register. Joseph had recently arrived with Mary, at first seeking lodging with a local family member. But since that house's guest room was already occupied, the travelers had to settle for more humble accommodations. Desperate to find shelter, Joseph had carried his wife into a nearby cave where Passover lambs were birthed by priestly shepherds. There, in a place that no one noticed, a child would be born whom the world would never forget.

Though King Herod feared that some other king of Israel might supplant him, he never could have imagined that a ruler's beginnings could be so humble. Certainly, Herod himself didn't start out that way. The tormented invalid with a dagger in his hand and a death wish in his heart was once a man of power and prestige. He had brimmed with the energy and confidence that befitted a king. "Herod's genius was matched by his physical constitution," wrote his ancient biographer, the Jewish historian Josephus. "As a fighter he was irresistible; and

1. Mary was a virgin engaged to be married to Joseph at the time of her Son's birth. We know this because Scripture says they were still "betrothed" when they journeyed to Bethlehem (Luke 2:5). Nevertheless, they were essentially spouses at that time. Ancient Jewish betrothals were more binding than modern-day engagements. Back then, the engaged couple was considered legally married in every way except for sexual consummation and cohabitation. To break the betrothal agreement would actually require a "divorce" (see Matthew 1:19, where the Greek word for divorce, *apoluo*, is used). Joseph was acting as Mary's husband when he brought her to Bethlehem, even though they had not had any sexual union (Matthew 1:25).

at practice [the] spectators were often struck with astonishment at the precision with which he threw the javelin, the unerring aim with which he bent the bow.” Herod had “pre-eminent gifts of soul and body.” Everyone considered him to be “blessed by good fortune.”

Josephus recorded an early glimpse of Herod when he described how the future king sojourned in Petra as a boy. Herod’s world at the time was in turmoil, for a civil war had broken out in Judea. His father, Antipater—the man for whom Herod’s firstborn son was later named—found himself caught in a whirlpool of violence and aristocratic intrigues. The Jewish throne was up for grabs and two Judean princes wanted it. Though Antipater wasn’t a contender, he was second-in-command to John Hyrcanus, one of the two brothers who could lay claim to the royal title. If Hyrcanus won, Antipater would have a lot to gain. But a conniver named Aristobulus hoped to take out his elder brother and seize the throne instead.

Soon, Aristobulus began to prevail. When Antipater perceived that his friend Hyrcanus was about to be destroyed, taking his own fortunes down with him, he sprang into action. A safe haven had to be found for the imperiled aristocrat. Fortunately, Antipater knew where to find one. He convinced Hyrcanus to take refuge among the Nabateans. Antipater also sent his wife, Cyprus, and their five children—four sons and an infant daughter—to this adjacent kingdom. The family slipped out of Jerusalem at night and traveled 150 miles across the desert to the stronghold of Petra. There, they would be cared for by Aretas, king of the Nabateans and Cyprus’s relative. That king’s mighty army would soon march to Jerusalem and dethrone the evil Aristobulus.

As the nine-year-old Herod approached the city of Petra, his boyish eyes gazed in wonder at his surroundings. What he encountered impressed him beyond belief. He never had seen a city like this before. Petra lay in the red-rock desert of Arabia, a region that today is in the country of Jordan. The Nabatean capital was nestled in a cleft surrounded by mountains. Its easiest entry route was through a narrow canyon with towering walls. At times, the gorge was so tight that the four sons of Antipater could join hands as they walked through it with the outermost boys brushing the walls on either side. Eventually, the narrow defile opened to reveal the city’s stark and austere beauty, all of it hidden from the eyes of outsiders. It was a secret haven reserved for the chosen few.

Though Petra was a remote and exotic place deep in the desert, it was

also lush and luxurious—an artificial oasis made possible by clever Nabatean waterworks. Dams controlled the flash floods and cisterns retained the water for future use. Pipes distributed the water wherever it needed to go. Dazzled by what he saw at Petra, Herod would spend the rest of his life creating well-watered desert strongholds. Verdant gardens had no business existing in such arid places unless a man of great genius birthed them out of the sands. As Herod looked upon these wonders, he vowed to become that kind of man.

Yet the invincible security of Petra, while comforting to those who lived within its natural walls, turned out to be an illusion. The young Herod soon gained a valuable lesson about who held true power in his world. Never, through all his later years, would he forget it. This early revelation marked Herod so deeply that it became the core tenet of his future foreign policy. What had he learned?

King Aretas came slinking back to Petra with a wounded army after being booted from the confines of Jerusalem. His men were demoralized. Along the route of their retreat, Aristobulus's forces had ambushed them, slaying six thousand Nabatean soldiers. Though Herod's father, Antipater, had survived the attack, many others had been killed.

Why did the once-triumphant army of Aretas suddenly pick up and leave Jerusalem?

What iron pry bar had been strong enough to dislodge them?

It was no army that kicked the Nabateans out of the Holy City, at least not by the direct application of force. Nor was it a plague among the troops, nor a hefty bribe, nor a sudden change of political allegiance. It was something that everyone had long feared. Now, at last, it had come true.

The Romans had arrived in Judea.

And they were there to stay.

The new power in Judea had ordered King Aretas of Petra, "Withdraw, you trespasser, or you shall become our enemy and face our wrath."

Immediately, Aretas obeyed, for he understood what had just happened. Jerusalem's future was now intertwined with the distant city of Rome. The Jewish homeland had just become occupied territory. Once again, God's chosen people would have to learn how to live under foreign rule.

Yet the Romans weren't content only to conquer Judea. Down in the Arabian desert, Petra presented another enticing target. The lucrative spice

trade that King Aretas controlled was well worth possessing, so the Romans decided that the Nabateans needed to come under their thumb like everyone else. The Roman war machine kicked into motion and marched south to capture Petra.

At this critical moment, Antipater gave his son the lesson he would never forget. The Roman legions found they couldn't penetrate the canyons to capture Petra, so they began to ravage the surrounding countryside. Soon the troops devastated the Nabatean kingdom in their search for food. They ransacked the local farms and date groves until even what meager supplies the peasantry had managed to stockpile ran out. So what did Antipater do? Even though he was married to a woman of the Nabatean aristocracy, he rounded up wagonloads of precious grain from Judea and supplied the Roman troops—the enemy!—with the victuals and matériel they needed to finish the job at Petra. Thus he betrayed the people and place that had provided refuge to his wife and five children.

With the Roman army reenergized, King Aretas had no choice but to parlay for peace. Young Herod could only watch, astounded, as his father informed the king that even impregnable Petra would be no match for Roman might. “You must buy them off or your country will be destroyed,” Antipater told his friend. “Three hundred gold talents is their price. You'd be wise to pay it.”

Cornered and out of options, King Aretas gave in. He paid the enormous ransom so the legions would retreat to Judea. Yet now the Nabateans, like the Judeans before them, carried the weight of defeat on their shoulders. They no longer possessed absolute freedom. The shadow of eagles' wings loomed over them.

This boyhood lesson about the contours of power was one that Herod took to heart. Its implications would determine every facet of his future reign. When Rome decided to get serious, the savvy leader—as Antipater had so quickly shown—learned to play nice and make the best of the new situation. Fighting for independence was a fool's errand. Why bang your head against a brick wall? The wall wouldn't crack but your forehead surely would. Far better to get along with Rome; for the man who could give that city what it wanted could live very well indeed.

Perhaps he could even live like a king.

CHAPTER 2

THE GLORY OF ROME

What Herod learned from watching his father's political maneuvers at Petra—that cooperating with the Romans was a lot smarter than fighting them—was the exact opposite of what most Jews believed. Whereas Antipater showed his son how to make deals with the new overlords, the typical Jewish father taught his boys to detest foreign domination. Several centuries later, a rabbi would urge his people to take a more collegial approach by offering the advice, “When you enter a city, follow its customs.” But back in the days of Herod, few Jews thought that way. The Jews hated what Rome had to offer. Herod, on the other hand, found himself fascinated by it.

As loathsome as it was to the Jews for their land to be conquered by the Romans, the worst affront of all was a specific act of desecration and blasphemy that occurred in 63 BC. This fateful deed struck a terrible blow to the collective consciousness of worldwide Jewry. When the victorious Roman general Pompey the Great walked into the Most Holy Place of the Jerusalem temple, a line of no return was crossed.

The battle to possess the temple mount had been fierce. When its largest tower finally came crashing down, the Roman legionaries poured in like a biblical plague of locusts. The holocaust that day was complete. Twelve thousand Jews fell before the stabbing swords of the invaders. Surrounded by the bodies of the fallen—some of them dead, others still dribbling out their lifeblood onto the pavement—General Pompey approached the temple itself. He crossed the sacred precincts and ascended the stairs of the sanctuary. This foreign conqueror, a devotee of the pagan gods, intended to see for himself what was inside. “Not light was the sin committed against the sanctuary,” the historian Josephus later remarked, “which before that time had never been entered or seen.”

The religious taboo that Pompey was about to violate carried the weight of the centuries behind it. The idea of the Most Holy Place—also referred

to as the holy of holies—goes far back in biblical history. Before there was a fixed temple in Jerusalem, the Israelites had their tabernacle, a portable temple made of poles and fabric that could be collapsed and moved from place to place. It was carried by the wandering Israelites until they finally settled in the Holy Land.

The heart of the tabernacle—and later, the temple—was its inner sanctum where the Lord dwelled in all his burning, blazing glory. God instructed Moses that the priest “is not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain . . . or else he will die” (Leviticus 16:2 NIV). Only one thing could allow the Jewish high priest to stand before God and live: an animal offering that made atonement for one’s sins. The pathway into God’s presence was stained red with the blood of sacrifice.

None of these restrictions, however, bothered Pompey when he opened the curtain that screened the Most Holy Place. He walked straight inside. Pompey didn’t die that day, for the ark of the covenant had been captured by the Babylonians many centuries earlier, so the divine presence no longer dwelled above the mercy seat. Instead, Pompey found some other ritual implements in the temple’s inner sanctum: a golden table, a menorah, sacred pitchers and vessels, spices, and a huge sum of money. Surprisingly, and much to his credit, the victorious Roman general didn’t take any of this for himself. He merely ordered the temple to be cleansed and to resume its services the next day.

When General Pompey left the sanctuary after a quick inspection, he wasn’t thinking about the blood of animal sacrifices upon an altar. Pompey had a different kind of blood on his mind. Someone had to dispose of the twelve thousand Jewish corpses that now littered the temple precincts. It was time to clean up the city and get it working again. Pompey was in Jerusalem to install a new regime.

From then on, Judea would no longer be a free kingdom with its own ruling family. Rome had arrived on the scene. And wherever Rome went, so did domination, oppression, and a constant flow of tribute to the most powerful city on earth. A new lord had taken up residence in the Holy Land of God—a lord who would shed the blood of his enemies without blinking an eye. Herod’s only question was: Will I have the courage to do the same when the time comes?

Rome. Its very name signifies august majesty and timeless glory. The Roman army, comprised of highly trained legionaries with the finest weapons and equipment, is synonymous with brutality and conquest. Ancient Rome was a city of which no one in the Mediterranean world could be unaware—or unafraid.

In 63 BC, when Pompey walked into the Most Holy Place and young Herod was still hiding in the Arabian desert, an important event happened in the distant capital city. A child named Octavian was born on Rome's Palatine Hill to a father of modest political standing. No one at the time could have guessed how great a destiny lay ahead of this newborn baby.

Despite the obscurity of Octavian's family, legends about his miraculous birth eventually developed. One account says that some sort of omen in Rome predicted that "nature was pregnant with a king for the Roman people." To prevent the arrival of this predicted king, the senate issued a decree of death against every male child who was born that year. However, a few senators made sure the decree was never enforced. Each of these men hoped that perhaps his child might be the promised one.

Another legend recounts the story of Octavian's conception. When Octavian's mother visited the temple of the sun god Apollo, she fell asleep there. In the dark of night, a snake glided up to her bed, remained for a while, then left. Upon awakening, she felt she needed to ritually cleanse herself as if she had had sexual intercourse. A snakeskin mark appeared on her body, so visible that she never again went to the public baths where it would be seen. Nine months later, she gave birth to Octavian. His father dreamed that the sun had risen from his wife's womb.

The original sources of these legends were independent of the four Gospels of the New Testament. Even so, they recorded similar omens.

- A prophecy of a coming king . . .
- A death decree against innocent boys . . .
- An otherworldly conception . . .
- A symbolic dawn.

What dark forces inspired these stories that so closely—yet falsely—imitated the accounts in Scripture?

Mystery now shrouds the events that happened at the time of Octavian's birth. Myth and folklore obscure the origins of this great man. What historians know for certain is what happened next. The boy grew up to become the most powerful man on earth: Caesar Augustus, the first ruler of the Roman Empire.

Little did Herod suspect that one day, the great Augustus would be his intimate friend. The boy hiding in Petra had no way of knowing that his fate was bound to the emperor's. Nor could Herod have imagined the great deeds he would achieve on the Roman stage: that he would build a mighty fortress to honor Mark Antony, face the seductive powers of Queen Cleopatra, or navigate the schemes of countless politicians and princes who each left their mark on the Roman world. All Herod could know was the one indubitable truth he had learned in Petra: that try as he might to hide in a desert stronghold, no place on earth was beyond the reach of Rome's bloodstained hands.