

## HEROD THE GREAT: ANOTHER SNAPSHOT OF HIS TREACHERY?

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“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the [Rome-appointed] king [of Judea], Magi from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and we have come to worship him.’ When Herod the king heard this, he became greatly distressed” (Matt 2:1–3a). This text invites two related questions and leads to a consideration.<sup>1</sup>

The first question is this: How did Rome get to Judea? In light of the negative and even adversarial manner in which the NT rather consistently portrays Roman influence upon Palestinian life in general, the answer to this question may seem ironic. But the short and simple answer is, “By invitation.” At the death of Alexander Janneus (76 BC)—the last uncontested Hasmonean/Maccabean ruler—his two sons engaged their respective loyalist forces in civil unrest for the right of succession. It was a drawn-out and bloody affair; in the end, wearied Jewish citizens simply appealed to Rome to come, put down anarchy, and establish law and order. In response to this earnest plea, and probably also to exploit such a window of opportunity to extend the Imperium eastward, the decorated Roman general Pompey was dispatched to Jerusalem (63 BC), and Judea was easily annexed by Rome.<sup>2</sup> Peace in Judea was short-lived, however, as little more than a decade later, Pompey and Julius Caesar (two members of the “first triumvirate”) were engaged in warfare between themselves, and Pompey met his death in Egypt (48 BC).

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<sup>1</sup> As a professor of OT and Semitic languages, I acknowledge that by offering this essay I could well be a fool rushing in where angels fear to tread. I work professionally in the subdiscipline of historical geography and therefore at times must pore over classical literature as well. At the end of the day, it is a particular piece of classical literature I encountered that has prompted this essay. But the datum impinges ultimately upon a NT text, and I am very much the NT avocationalist—and I wish to note that right up front. However, I have had the pleasant opportunity of discussing the paper with some NT scholars, and they have been very kind and encouraging. In particular, I wish to express appreciation to Grant Osborne, D. A. Carson, Craig Blomberg, Douglas Moo, Craig Evans, and Moisés Silva, who read an earlier draft of the essay and offered helpful suggestions. I also wish to acknowledge the kindness of Steve Mason, whose generous and thoughtful comments have helped refine and nuance my reasoning, though I hasten to add that Professor Mason remains unconvinced of the argument.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 14.48–68; *J.W.* 1.141–154; Plutarch *Pompey* 39.1–4; Tacitus *Hist.* 5.9; Appian *Syrian Wars* 50.238–239. Parenthetically, having Jerusalem firmly in his grasp, Pompey decided to enter and to investigate the Jewish “Holy of Holies” (Josephus *Ant.* 14.71; *J.W.* 1.152; Tacitus *Hist.* 5.9; cf. Appian *Syrian Wars* 50.252; *Pss. Sol.* 2:2: “Arrogantly the sinner broke down the strong walls with a battering ram and you [God] did not interfere. Gentile foreigners went up to your place of sacrifice; they arrogantly trampled it with their sandals”).

The second question is this: How did Herod I (the Great) come to be a Rome-appointed king of Judea? According to a well-known and oft-cited maxim of unknown origin but erroneously ascribed to Josephus, “Herod stole along to the throne like a fox, he ruled like a tiger, and he died like a dog.”<sup>3</sup> A quite accurate assessment indeed, inasmuch as Herod did come to his throne cunningly, did rule ferociously, and did die disreputably. The starting point for this second question is once again the Maccabean monarch Alexander Janneus. During Alexander’s reign (103–76 BC), his army gained firm control of all the territory south of Judea, known as Idumea (= OT Edom),<sup>4</sup> and Idumeans were forcibly converted to Judaism. To manage this newly-conquered province, Janneus appointed the aristocratic Idumean grandfather of Herod the Great—Antipater I—as governor of Idumea (c. 80 BC). Later, when Antipater died, his son—Antipater II—sought to align himself with Julius Caesar in the latter’s fight against Pompey. In fact, Antipater’s Idumean forces played a decisive role in Egypt in the ultimate demise of Pompey, and, as a result, Caesar declared Antipater II to be a “Roman citizen” and “administrator of all Judea” (c. 47 BC).<sup>5</sup> As an immediate consequence of this, Antipater in turn appointed his elder son Phasaël as military governor over Jerusalem and his second son Herod—at the age of only 25<sup>6</sup>—as military governor over Galilee.<sup>7</sup>

So far, so good for Herod. But dramatic events adverse to the Idumean transpired quickly in the late 40s: Herod’s patron Julius Caesar was murdered by Brutus and Cassius (15 March, 44 BC), and the Parthian enemies of Rome invaded all of Palestine (40 BC). In the process, the Parthians captured his brother Phasaël, who then “committed suicide,” whereas Herod narrowly escaped with his life. He fled to the desert fortress of Masada and then on to Petra in Arabia.<sup>8</sup> In due course, the wily Idumean was able to steal away to Rome, where, in late 40 BC, his powerful ally Mark Antony—together with Octavian (who would become “Caesar Augustus”)—succeeded in persuading the Roman Senate unanimously to appoint Herod

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<sup>3</sup> This maxim does not appear in Josephus (see Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, *A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus* [4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1983] 1.70b; 2.545b). The oldest source in which I have found the maxim is Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1925) 145, where he attributes it to “a certain [unnamed] historian” (I owe this reference to Douglas Moo). Earlier, William Eleroy Curtis, *Today in Syria and Palestine* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1903) 304 had stated that Herod “died like a dog,” but he makes no reference to the maxim, nor does he attribute his wording to another source. Moreover, the maxim sometimes appears today in mutated form: (1) “Herod stole the throne like a fox” (not “stole along,” making it seem that Herod gained his appointment secretly or without permission, which is inaccurate); or (2) “he ruled like a lion” (not “like a tiger”).

<sup>4</sup> See cartographically in Barry J. Beitzel, *The New Moody Atlas of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 2009) 218 (map 92).

<sup>5</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 14.127, 133–155; *J.W.* 1.187–199.

<sup>6</sup> Technically, Josephus states that Herod’s age was “15 years old” at the time (*Ant.* 14.158). However, the Jewish historian elsewhere indicates that Herod was about 70 years old when he died (4 BC), which would date his birth around 74 BC (*Ant.* 17.148; *J.W.* 1.647). Since Herod’s initial appointment in Galilee took place at c. 47 BC, most Herodian scholars hold that “15 years old” should be read “25 years old” in *Ant.* 14.158.

<sup>7</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 14.158; *J.W.* 1.203.

<sup>8</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 14.352–364; *J.W.* 1.263–267.

“king of the Jews.”<sup>9</sup> Armed with such newfound authority and with Roman legionary support, Herod sailed east and commenced a two-year struggle against Parthia, which culminated in the very bloody Roman recapture of Jerusalem in the early spring of 37 BC.<sup>10</sup> Thus began Herod’s 34-year reign over Palestine (37–4 BC).<sup>11</sup>

Herod’s reign may be described as “constructive” at several levels. On the one hand, it was an era of relative calm for Jews. Perhaps Jewish life in Palestine was still not easy, and certainly taxes were comparatively heavy and burdensome, but it was nonetheless an era substantially free from the devastating and destructive effects of warfare, very much unlike the 40 previous years. On the other hand, Herod became almost obsessed with founding/rebuilding cities, in fine Roman style, and with constructing theaters, amphitheaters, hippodromes, temples, fortresses, aqueducts, gymnasias, and palaces throughout Palestine. In that regard, Herod’s architectural fingerprint can still be seen across the whole landscape of the Land, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He built on an unprecedented scale and scope, and much of his construction was grandiose and monumental in nature. Thus for example, Herod constructed at Caesarea the second-largest artificial harbor in the entire empire (365 acres). This vast harbor complex manifests the earliest known use of hydraulic cement in underwater construction east of Italy (cf. Pliny *Nat.* 5.14.69).

He also undertook to erect the Temple in Jerusalem in magnificent fashion. Begun in 20 BC and completed in AD 63, just seven years before its demolition,<sup>12</sup> this project required the labor of 10,000 men for ten years, just to fashion the retaining walls around the Temple platform. The perimeter walls towered more than 80 feet high, and at places they were dug as deep as another 70 feet down to their bedrock foundations (beneath certain portions of the present-day walking area at the “wailing wall,” there are as many as 19 subsurface courses of Herodian ashlar stones, some individual stones weighing more than 500 tons). These walls encompassed some 1.55 million square feet of space, about 36 acres, making the Herodian Temple the largest manmade platform in the world,<sup>13</sup> spacious enough to contain 24 American football fields or six Colosseums (the dimensions: 1035’ on the north side, 912’ on the south, 1536’ on the east, and 1590’ on the west). Ashlars were so finely cut that no mortar was needed. According to Josephus,<sup>14</sup> who would have seen the Temple being constructed during his lifetime, “The exterior of the building was designed to astound the mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the

<sup>9</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 14.379–385; *J.W.* 1.281–285; Strabo 16.2.46; Appian *Civil Wars* 5.75; Tacitus *Hist.* 5.9; cf. Matt 2:1–4; Luke 1:5a; note too that this appointment would later be reconfirmed by Octavian just after the Battle of Actium (Josephus *Ant.* 15.194–196; *J.W.* 1.391–393; Tacitus *Hist.* 5.9).

<sup>10</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 14.470–481; *J.W.* 1.347–353; Dio Cassius 49.22.3.

<sup>11</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.191.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 15.380–425; *J.W.* 1.401; cf. John 2:20—“it has taken 46 years to build this Temple.”

<sup>13</sup> *ABD* 6.365.

<sup>14</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 15.330–425; *J.W.* 5.222–224.

solar rays. To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not overlaid with gold was of purest white...from its summit protruded sharp golden spikes to prevent birds from settling upon and polluting the roof...some of the stones in the building were 45 cubits in length, 5 in height, and 6 in breadth. The retaining wall was the most prodigious work that was ever heard of by man.” The *Babylonian Talmud* remarks: “Whoever has not seen the Temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building” (*B. Bat. 4a*).

Herod was also a generous benefactor outside his own domain: he enriched cities in neighboring Syria, on some Greek islands, and even on the mainland itself.<sup>15</sup> He endowed the Olympic Games,<sup>16</sup> and, through his generosity, he became “President” for its quinquennial celebration in c. 10 BC—held at Caesarea Maritima!

Of course munificence on such a scale brought Herod much fame. And, oh how Herod had an appetite for fame! He yearned for attention and esteem wherever he might find it. Psychologically speaking, he needed this kind of notoriety and affection, both at home and abroad. The monarch also had a fondness for opulence, extravagance, and pleasure of every sort in his lifestyle. In addition to the many palace fortresses he created and adorned essentially for his own use and pleasure, he also constructed royal swimming pools at Jericho, Masada, and the Herodium. These pools exceeded Olympic proportions in size, and in one case the pool was large enough to accommodate boats. These pools too were designed for his personal enjoyment. He also erected a private if sizable theater for himself at the Herodium, with wall paintings, plaster moldings, and a series of painted windows with shutters. Locally unprecedented in scale and design, these features find their closest parallels with rich villas at Pompeii, and they were almost certainly executed by Italian artists.

Moreover, Herod also indulged himself in luxurious foodstuffs, doubtless accounting for his serious medical complications that may have been partly related to obesity.<sup>17</sup> Inscribed amphorae found at Masada list “garum for the king.” Garum was a very expensive delicacy made of a rare form of fish, preserved and seasoned with salt and served as a sauce condiment (similar to Beluga caviar today) or even as a choice fine wine. According to the calculation of the first-century historian Pliny (*Nat.* 31.43.94), one amphora of garum would have cost 2,500–3,000 sesterii (approximately US \$145). By way of comparison with other first-century realities, one quart of olive oil would have cost about 2–3 sesterii and one pint of wine be-

<sup>15</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 15.326–341; 16.146–148; *J.W.* 1.422–425.

<sup>16</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 15.267–276; 16.136–141, 149; *J.W.* 1.426–428.

<sup>17</sup> A vast body of literature on this subject is available. Consult, e.g., Samuel S. Kottek, *Medicine and Hygiene in the Works of Flavius Josephus* (Studies in Ancient Medicine 9; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 181–90; James McSherry, “Worms, Diabetes and King Herod the Great,” *Journal of Medical Biography* 5.3 (1997) 167–69; W. Reid Litchfield, “The Bittersweet Demise of Herod the Great,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 91 (1998) 283–84; Nikos Kokkinos, “Herod’s Horrid Death,” *BAR* 28/2 (2002) 28–31, 34–35, 62; François Pieter Retief and J. F. G. Cilliers, “The Illnesses of Herod the Great,” in *Health and Healing, Disease and Death in the Graeco-Roman World* (Acta Theologica Supplementum 7; ed. François P. Retief, Louise Cilliers, J. F. G. Cilliers, and S. J. P. K. Riekert; Bloemfontein: University of the Free State, 2005) 278–93.

tween 1–4 sesterii. The average annual salary of a first-century Roman legionnaire was 900–1,200 sesterii.

Herod had fine-quality garum imported from Spain, and dozens of such unopened amphorae were discovered by 20<sup>th</sup>-century archaeologists at Masada alone. Moreover, thirteen amphorae recovered at Masada speak of imported wine from Italy: a series of inscribed amphorae describe a luxurious “Philonianum wine” (because of extreme cost, this premier wine was produced on a very small scale in northern Italy), and still others speak of “Massicum wine” (an excellent wine coming from the Naples region). Finally, stamps on wine amphorae from Masada indicate Herod also imported choice wines from the Greek islands of Chios and Kos. According to Josephus, when the Romans captured Masada in AD 73—more than seven decades after Herod’s death!—they discovered a lavish stockpile of stored grain, wine, olive oil, pulse (beans/lentils), and dates.<sup>18</sup> The historian adds that this mass of durable goods was still undecayed and was amply sufficient to last for years, and that it had been stashed there by Herod.<sup>19</sup> Even if one were to assume a bit of exaggeration on Josephus’s part, this offers an amazing insight into the indulgent king’s insatiable desire to care for his every dietary need and whim.

In addition, it is necessary to recall in this regard that Masada was *only one of about a dozen* palace fortresses Herod built or restored. Moreover, we have practically no record that Herod even personally visited Masada after he had become king!<sup>20</sup> During the years of his monarchy, when he was staying outside of Jerusalem or Caesarea, Herod tended to spend his time either at Jericho or at the Herodium, and later at the hot mineral springs of Callirrhoe, near Machaerus—not at Masada.<sup>21</sup> So one can only imagine the rich dietary delights that would have been stockpiled in those three palaces. Herod’s extravagance in architectural magnificence and personal gratification came at a high cost: punitive taxation on local citizens and excessive customs duty on the lucrative trade routes controlled by the monarch, particularly on incense routes from the Arabian Peninsula and on trade through Herod’s Mediterranean ports.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Josephus *J.W.* 7.295–303.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Josephus *Ant.* 14.362, 390; *J.W.* 1.267, 286.

<sup>20</sup> As he was fleeing south from the Parthians in 40 BC, Herod left some family members in Masada for safety, while he himself took flight to Petra (Josephus *Ant.* 14.358–364; *J.W.* 1.264–267). When he returned to Palestine in 39 BC with his royal appointment, Herod rescued his relatives and others who had been holed up there (*Ant.* 14.390–400, 413; *J.W.* 1.286–294, 303), before moving on to Jerusalem. Later, just after learning the outcome of the Battle of Actium (31 BC) and being unsure of where he would stand with Octavian, Herod once again placed his family members in Masada for purposes of temporary security, while he himself sought to make amends with Actium’s victor (*Ant.* 15.184; cf. Plutarch *Antony* 72.3). Beyond that, the only other connection between Herod and Masada drawn by Josephus is a retrospective glance—made in the context of the very end of the First Revolt that occurred at Masada—in which the Judean monarch was remembered as the one who had built Masada’s massive perimeter casemate wall, the large Western palace, the northern multi-level royal villa with a full-scale Roman bathhouse, and the numerous cavernous, rock-cut water reservoirs (*J.W.* 7.285–303; cf. 4.399; 2.433).

<sup>21</sup> See also Strabo 16.2.40.

<sup>22</sup> Heavy taxation of incense routes is doubtless one reason Herod was *persona non grata* with the Arabs (e.g. Josephus *Ant.* 16.271–285). It is estimated that, in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, Rome was importing

Now we may turn to the consideration inside the Matthean text. If the enigmatic Herod was supremely blessed in his royal life, one would have to conclude that he was exceedingly cursed in his private life. Josephus states of the king:

[Herod] was a man who was cruel to all alike and one who easily gave in to anger and was contemptuous of justice. And yet he was as greatly favored by fortune as any man has ever been, in that being a commoner he was made a king, and though encompassed by innumerable perils, he managed to escape them all and lived on to a very old age. As for the affairs of his household and his relation to his sons, he had, in his own opinion at least, enjoyed every good fortune, because he had never failed to get the better of those whom he considered his enemies. But in my opinion he was very unfortunate indeed.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout his life, Herod was married ten times<sup>24</sup>—all political marriages, all unhappy unions. Caesar Augustus (formerly Octavian) had trusted Herod to the point that he permitted the Judean king to write his own will and to decide for himself who should succeed him on the Judean throne.<sup>25</sup> What at first blush may appear to have been an extraordinary privilege granted by no less than the Emperor became, in point of fact, the bane of Herod's tortured existence at home. For Herod's ten wives, as well as his mothers-in-law, his sister, his sisters-in-law, and other near relatives, each jealously coveted to have their own son(s) become the legitimate successor. And the infighting and palace intrigues that ensued are worthy of several Hollywood movies: lies, deceptions, collusions, drownings, divorces, adulteries, suicides, "suicides," poisonings, murders, secret police actions, treasonous attempts to overthrow Herod, etc. In just the last ten years of his life (i.e. 13–4 BC), Herod wrote at least five separate wills, each one naming a different individual or individuals who should be his heir.<sup>26</sup> Throughout this same decade, the monarch

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as much as 20 tons of incense annually, which was grown only in the Southern Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. (With a unit cost in the Roman world sometimes higher than gold, incense is occasionally called "the oil of the ancient world.") Only two generations after Herod's time, Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* 12.41.84) once complained, perhaps with a measure of exaggeration, that at least "HS [sestertii] 100 million" (i.e. roughly US \$5,000,000) were being spent annually by Romans to acquire exotic luxuries imported overland via the Arabian Peninsula. Whatever the case, gaining direct access to the rich and exotic Arabian Peninsula (and beyond, to the mysterious land of India) is surely the principal reason the Emperor Trajan decided to annex Arabia Petraea in AD 106 and, immediately thereafter, to undertake to construct a new arterial paved highway from Damascus to the Red Sea—Via Nova Traiana (*viam novam a finibus Syriae usque ad mare rubrum*)—more than 300 miles in length and completed in only eight years! Just after Herod's death, a Jewish envoy standing before Caesar lamented that the deceased monarch had "sunk the entire nation to helpless poverty" (Josephus *Ant.* 17.307; cf. *J.W.* 2.86).

<sup>23</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.191–192; cf. *Ant.* 16.76.

<sup>24</sup> According to Josephus (*J.W.* 1.477), Jewish custom permitted polygamy, and, true to his overindulgent lifestyle, Herod eagerly availed himself of this privilege.

<sup>25</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 16.129; cf. 15.343.

<sup>26</sup> Herod had already written several wills before the year 13 BC. But in 13 BC, he wrote a new will that named Antipater, son of Doris (Herod's first wife, a member of a Jerusalem family) as his sole heir (Josephus *J.W.* 1.451). One year later, in his 12 BC will, three sons were chosen as equal successors—Antipater, as well as Alexander and Aristobulus, two sons of Mariamme I (Herod's second wife, a Hasmonean princess; Josephus *Ant.* 16.133–135; *J.W.* 1.457–460). Yet another will was drafted in the year 7 BC, in which Antipater was again appointed the sole heir. But if Antipater should predecease his father, Herod Philip (son of Herod's fifth wife, Mariamme II, daughter of a Jerusalem priest) would

divorced two of his wives and was himself responsible for the deaths of three sons and hundreds of their supporters, together with an assortment of other relatives, pretenders, and royal servants. Added to this unrelenting psychological and emotional trauma inside his family and court, Herod was driven nearly insane during these same years by his beleaguered inability to find a cure or even relief from various acute medical maladies.<sup>27</sup> Toward the end of this period, Herod despaired of recovering and grew fierce and indulged in the bitterest anger upon all occasions;<sup>28</sup> at one point he seriously contemplated (and perhaps attempted) suicide.<sup>29</sup>

It is essential for us to recognize that precisely near the end of this very same decade (c. 5–4 BC) the now paranoid, unstable, and menacingly ill septuagenarian monarch learned of yet another potential palace coup—“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” (Matt 2:2).<sup>30</sup> Under these circumstances, it is easy to grasp that Herod “became greatly distressed” (Matt 2:3a), resorted at once to deception (“When you have found him, come back and tell me, so that I too may come and worship him,” Matt 2:8b), “went into a furious rage” (Matt 2:16a), and instigated a pogrom designed to exterminate all male children in Bethlehem under the age of two years old (Matt 2:16b; cf. 2:13b).

This atrocity is not recorded elsewhere in Scripture, in contemporaneous historical sources, nor even in Josephus, who, it seems, rarely passed over an opportunity to recall treachery on Herod’s part. As a result, the historicity of the narrative is doubted by some NT scholars.<sup>31</sup> Beyond the fact that the alleged disaster is oth-

become legal successor (at this point Alexander and Aristobulus were executed). In 5 BC, another will was created, in which Herod Antipas (son of Herod’s sixth wife, Malthace, a woman from Samaria) was nominated as the sole successor, and Antipater, Archelaus (son of Malthace), and Herod Philip were specifically eliminated from consideration (Josephus *Ant.* 17.142–146; *J.W.* 1.646). Finally, in his 4 BC amended will, Herod offered his throne to Archelaus, with Herod Antipas to serve as tetrarch (at this point Antipater was executed; see also *Ant.* 17.188–189; *J.W.* 1.668–669). After Herod’s death, his last two wills were contested in Rome by his sons Archelaus (thinking he should become “king” [i.e. not just ethnarch]) and Antipas (arguing for the validity of the 5 BC will, not the 4 BC will; *Ant.* 17.219–320; *J.W.* 2.14–100). In the end, the legal matter was adjudicated by Caesar Augustus himself: Archelaus was named ethnarch of Judea; Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; and Herod Philip (Philip the Tetrarch) was appointed tetrarch of Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanea, and Pania (Josephus *J.W.* 2.93–94; see also *Ant.* 17.240–247; 17.317–318; cf. Tacitus *Hist.* 5.9; Beitzel, *New Moody Atlas* 237 [map 100]). The widely-held Herodian chronology, also reflected here in my essay, has recently been challenged by Bieke Mahieu, *Between Rome and Jerusalem: Herod the Great and His Sons in Their Struggle for Recognition* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 208; Leuven: Peeters, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.168–173; *J.W.* 1.647, 656–65.

<sup>28</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.148.

<sup>29</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.183–184; *J.W.* 1.662; cf. *Ant.* 16.259—his life had become unbearable and he trusted not one single person!

<sup>30</sup> According to Josephus (*Ant.* 17.43–45), Herod was also aware of a Pharisaic prediction that he would lose his throne by God’s decree.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) 144–48; idem, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 22–28; Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1993) 109–21, 226–30; idem, *ABD* 3.410–15; E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane, 1993) 85–90; Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend* (London: Penguin, 2006) 109–26. By contrast, the Jewish historian Samuel Rocca, *Herod’s Judaea: A Mediterranean State in the Classical World*

erwise unattested in ancient literature, the core of their argument is that the incident is doubtless a literary reminiscence on the part of Matthew of the early childhood of Moses, who also was spared the cruel actions of an obsessed and despotic monarch with homicidal intentions (Exod 1:15–2:10). According to this view, both the founder of Judaism and the founder of Christianity are presented alike in Scripture in strikingly similar circumstances.

As a respectful counterpoint, I offer the following. We have already observed that Herod was obviously and unquestionably quite capable of such unspeakable brutality, particularly in his later years. On this point there is general agreement. Furthermore, included in the writings of Macrobius is a short snippet purporting to describe this same appalling event. Macrobius was an early 5<sup>th</sup>-century Latin philosopher.<sup>32</sup> His work contains accounts of various, sometimes curious, or even humorous banquet conversations that would take place annually during the carnival-like days of the Roman holiday festival held to honor their god Saturn.<sup>33</sup> Originally a festive occasion commemorating the dedication of the Temple of Saturn in the Roman Forum, Saturnalia evolved into a highly-popular, raucous, jovial event that lasted for several days in mid-December.<sup>34</sup>

Following the literary pattern of Plato's *Symposium*<sup>35</sup> or Plutarch's *Quaestiones conviviales*, the *Saturnalia* is a compendium of antiquarian lore, which appears in the form of an imaginary dialog that records witticisms or "notable sayings worth remembering" (*Sat.* pref. 4). Macrobius indicates that he obtained his memorabilia "from a range of authors and mix of periods" and that he faithfully recorded them "in the actual words the old writers themselves used."<sup>36</sup> Yet, in drawing his "fund of knowledge" from many different sources, Macrobius declares his intent was to imitate bees, which sample a wide variety of flowers yet transform their nectar into a single taste (pref. 2–5). Or, he states that his aim of creating a "harmonious whole" from many different parts may be likened to a perfumer, who takes any number of ingredients but seeks to blend all the aromatic essences into one single fragrance (pref. 8). Similarly, he compares his work to harmonious music created by a chorus that is nevertheless comprised of many different-pitched voices (pref. 9).

Much of the dialogue in Book 2.4 in particular is ascribed ultimately to the witty remarks or the memorable sayings of either Cicero (the well-known Roman orator)<sup>37</sup> or Caesar Augustus.<sup>38</sup> I shall illustrate the droll holiday banquet dialog

(Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 122; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 350 argues that the incident described in Matt 2:16–18 is further evidence of Herod's insanity just before his death.

<sup>32</sup> *Sat.* 2.4.11.

<sup>33</sup> Saturn was the god of agriculture who became the Roman god of time; cf. *Sat.* 1.10.19.

<sup>34</sup> See *Sat.* 1.1.1–3; 1.10.1–23. Cf. Seneca *Epistles* 18.1–4—a festival of pleasure and merrymaking, where everyone lets themselves go with pleasure; Pliny *Letters* 2.17.24—a time when the world resounds with festive cries of holiday freedom; Catullus 14—the best of all days; Statius *Silvae* 1.6.82–102—may such a sacred festival endure throughout all time!

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Sat.* 1.1.3–6.

<sup>36</sup> *Sat.* pref. 3, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Macrobius also responded to Cicero's thought in a philosophical treatise, entitled *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*.

with a few typical examples. When a certain man had accidentally plowed under his father's tombstone, Caesar Augustus offered the repartee, "Now that's what I call cultivating your father's memory" (2.4.10). Or, in response to a humpback man who kept pleading in court before the Emperor, "If you find any fault, sir, please set me straight," Caesar rejoined, "I can offer you advice, but I certainly cannot set you straight" (2.4.8). On one occasion, when Caesar Augustus was complaining about the dull color of some Tyrian purple cloth he had ordered, and the merchant responded, "Hold it up higher in the light and look at it," Caesar whimsically jested, "You mean I need to stroll about on my balcony so that the Roman people can say I'm well dressed?" (2.4.14). On another occasion, when a young man who had sunk into vice was ordered out of Augustus's military camp, he threw himself at the mercy of the Emperor, exclaiming, "How can I ever return home? What will I tell my father?" "Tell him I displeased you," the Emperor sarcastically quipped (2.4.6). Or again, when a soldier who had been struck by a rock while on a military campaign, and who had a noticeable scar on his forehead, was nonetheless bragging about his military exploits, Caesar wryly observed, "Never look around when you're running away" (2.4.7).

Now, in Section 2.4.11, Macrobius wrote as follows: "When he heard that the son of Herod [arguably Antipater], king of the Jews, had been slain when Herod ordered that all boys in Syria under the age of two be killed, Augustus retorted, 'It's better to be Herod's pig than his son [*melius est Herodis porcum<sup>39</sup> esse quam filium*].'"<sup>40</sup> The context of Macrobius's parody clearly centers on the memorable wit of Caesar, not the treachery of Herod. But what are we to make of the entire entry in 2.4.11?

Classical scholars consider the learned Macrobius to have been a reasonably credible historian, as one would evaluate such things in the late-Roman period. He is certainly judged to be neither a novelist nor a composer of fictional, unrealistic work. In fact, some of Macrobius's compositions represent a serious and important source for understanding Neoplatonism. But does Macrobius represent a credible source when it comes to his information about Herod? When and how did Macrobius come by this quip attributed to Caesar Augustus?

<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere in Book 2, Macrobius's memorabilia are said to derive, *inter alia*, from Hannibal of Carthage (2.1.1–3), Pompey (2.3.8), Sulla (2.3.9), Orbilius (2.6.4), Clodius (2.6.6), Aristotle (2.8.13–14), Socrates (2.8.16), and Hippocrates (2.8.16).

<sup>39</sup> There were probably several reasons Herod would have abstained from eating pork, in compliance with Jewish dietary laws. Herod had two of his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, killed in 7 BC, but Macrobius is more likely to have in view Herod's execution of his son Antipater (early March 4 BC); see also Aryeh Kasher, *King Herod: A Persecuted Persecutor* (SJ 36; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007) 70 n. 40. Only four days after Antipater's death, Herod himself died while residing in his palace at Jericho (he was buried in the Upper Herodium).

<sup>40</sup> Emphasis added for clarification. Any number of modern sources convert this antiquarian observation of Augustus into a more paronomastic original Greek form ("It's better to be Herod's pig [ἴς] than his son [υἱός]"); see, e.g., Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel of Matthew: Translation, Introduction and Commentary* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982] 82; Michael Grant, *Herod the Great* [New York: American Heritage Press, 1978] 195; Brown, *Birth* 226—a statement Brown feels "may be historical"; Craig A. Evans, *Matthew* [NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012] 60). The rationality for such an assumption may be found in Macrobius's own assertion that he made use of Greek literature (pref. 2), amply supported by the fact that he cites the works of dozens of Greek authors in the *Saturnalia*.

Regrettably, the evidentiary trail grows cold at this point, and one is obliged to proceed by inference. That said, it seems to me very likely that Macrobius would have learned of *most* of the Emperor's witty remarks—not just this one—from various internal, imperial Roman written and/or oral sources, transmitted directly or indirectly. Near the beginning of his preface, Macrobius explains that he had toiled for years through “various books of Greek or Latin” in order to make available his “fund of knowledge,” designed to make one's mind more active, one's memory better stocked, one's speech more skillful, and one's language more refined (pref. 2, 11).

In the case of Herod, in particular, we learn from numerous passages in Josephus that the Judean king himself, as well as several members of his immediate family, had maintained a decades-long, very close official, and warm personal relationship with Caesar Augustus and with his imperial court in Rome. Some members of his royal family had lived in Rome for extended periods of time, where they received their education.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, it seems quite plausible that *many* public events that occurred in Herod's Palestine would have been communicated directly to members of the royal house in Rome, in one form or another.

This should have been especially true of matters relating to Herod's family and to political succession. Thus for example, we note in Josephus that, in connection with Herod's 13 BC will, in which Antipater was named sole heir, this new appointee was sent on an embassy to Rome, with a copy of Herod's will in hand, and his nomination was ratified and made public there.<sup>42</sup> We also observe, in conjunction with this decision, that Herod wrote to all his friends in Rome about Antipater, and, as a result, Herod's designee became very well known in those circles.<sup>43</sup> Subsequent to that, presumably in 12 BC, Herod himself sailed west to consult directly with Augustus at a Roman tribunal (possibly their last face-to-face meeting). In this case, Herod wanted to discuss with the Emperor serious family plots, most especially one having to do with Alexander and Aristobulus, two sons of his wife Mariamme I.<sup>44</sup> As a result, one or both of these brothers had to appear before Caesar, where apparently their innocence was demonstrated to the satisfaction of the Emperor. Thus, a (temporary) reconciliation between Herod and the two sons of Mariamme I was effected.

Five years later, however, at the time when Alexander and Aristobulus were executed in Sebaste and their corpses buried in Alexandrium,<sup>45</sup> Antipater was sent on another mission to Rome, again to stand before Caesar Augustus with a new will of Herod.<sup>46</sup> But not long thereafter, in 4 BC, Herod communicated directly with Caesar about possible treachery on Antipater's part. On this occasion, Augustus responded with a letter, in which Herod was informed that the Crown was giving

<sup>41</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 16.6–7; 17.20–21.

<sup>42</sup> Josephus *J.W.* 1.451.

<sup>43</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 16.87; cf. 16.372; 17.6.

<sup>44</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 16.90–91; *J.W.* 1.452–454; in some modern sources her name is spelled Mariamme.

<sup>45</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 16.392–394; *J.W.* 1.550–551.

<sup>46</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.52–53; *J.W.* 1.573.

him permission to deal with Antipater as he saw fit: either exile or execution.<sup>47</sup> Herod opted for the latter, and Antipater was summarily executed and his corpse buried at Hyrcanium.<sup>48</sup> Finally, just days after Herod's own death in 4 BC, both Archelaus and Herod Antipas departed Judea to appear in Rome before the Emperor, where the matter of Herod's succession was finally decided by Caesar himself.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, there is good reason to believe that Macrobius could have come by this quip having to do with Herod's treachery and Antipater's death as the result of internal Roman sources.

It is of course possible that someone writing around the year AD 400–430 learned of Herod's atrocity indirectly via some early Christian source(s), or even directly by way of the Gospel of Matthew, which was in wide circulation by that date. However, that would presume a certain level of biblical literacy on Macrobius's part, and especially of his interest in things Christian. So, this raises the question, What and how much do we know about the Roman author's motivation and interest with respect to his writings? Much hinges on an enquiry into Macrobius's motivation(s), ideological inclination(s), and sources in the *Saturnalia*, but as we will see below, this remains a partly unresolved and perhaps ultimately irresolvable question nevertheless deserving of the continued attention it receives. Something like consensus has been achieved with respect to certain portions of the question, but it must be recognized that studied convictions continue to differ on other elements, and to that degree the case is not clear-cut.

On the one hand, Macrobius wrote as a Roman, and, based on his writings, many classical experts assume that he was a pagan and wrote as a pagan.<sup>50</sup> This is perhaps best illustrated in his lengthy and extremely detailed discourse on solar monotheism.<sup>51</sup> True, even in a "Christian" empire this may have been a topic presumed to arise while celebrating the annual holiday of Saturn, a festival anticipating the return of light after the winter solstice. Yet, in Macrobius's version of the Sat-

<sup>47</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.182; *J.W.* 1.661. See *Ant.* 16.270; *J.W.* 1.510 for another occasion when a "full report" of matters pertaining to Herod's political dealings was sent to the Emperor, in this case prompting Herod to journey to Rome and to meet with Augustus.

<sup>48</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.187; *J.W.* 1.664.

<sup>49</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.224; *J.W.* 2.1; cf. n. 26 above and see the sources cited there.

<sup>50</sup> See most recently Michele Renee Salzman, "Religious *Koine* and Religious Dissent in the Fourth Century," in *A Companion to Roman Religion* (Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World; ed. Jörg Rüpke; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 109–25, esp. pp. 113–14. Earlier works holding to the conviction that Macrobius wrote as a pagan include Jacques Flamant, *Macrobe et le Néo-Platonisme latin, à la fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (EPRO 58; Leiden: Brill, 1977) 134–41, 460–82, 651–93, esp. pp. 137, 653–55, 676–77; Danuta Shanzer, *A Philosophical and Literary Commentary on Martianus Capella's De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii, Book 1* (University of California Publications in Classical Studies 32; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) esp. pp. 135–37 and note the additional bibliography she cites there; Charles Guittard, *Macrobe, Les Saturnales; Livres I–III* (Roue à livres 31; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1997) 318–19; and especially Wolf Liebeschuetz, "The Significance of the Speech of Praetextatus," in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede; Oxford: Clarendon, 2001) 185–205 and see his bibliography. Based on Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, the same verdict that the Latin philosopher wrote as a pagan is unequivocally affirmed by Mireille Armisen-Marchetti, *Macrobe, Commentaire au Songe de Scipion* (Collection des universités de France; 2 vols.; Paris: Belles Lettres, 2001–2003) 1.xviii–xix.

<sup>51</sup> *Sat.* 1.17.1–1.23.24.

urnalia celebration, there are twelve table guests at the banquet, all identified by name, all known pagans, three of whom are perhaps the most prominent pagan figures of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Praetextatus, Symmachus, Flavianus). His celebration takes place in the home of Praetextatus, and Macrobius resolves to place the extended description of solar theology in the mouth of the pagan host, who had been a well-known high priest in the cults of several Roman deities. Praetextatus's excursus strictly adheres to the conventional pagan belief that Sol/the Sun ultimately encompassed all divinities as one.<sup>52</sup> The rhetoric is thoroughly and consistently pagan, and there are no tell-tale signs in the text of personal reservation, misgiving, or doubt expressed by or implied on the part of Macrobius as writer and editor. Macrobius's discussion, as it stands, offers a rationalized, penetrating defense of solar theology.

In addition, note should be taken of Macrobius's discussion of the structure of the Roman calendar,<sup>53</sup> for he fully perpetuates the longstanding Roman religious doctrine that certain days of the year were to be consecrated to the gods (*festi*; i.e. days unsuited for business, but which did include sacrifices, sacred feasts, athletic games staged in honor of the gods, pagan holidays) while other days were reserved for human beings (*profesti*; i.e. ordinary days that were for personal and public business, including such things as legal activities, public gatherings, and war).<sup>54</sup> According to Percival Davies, Macrobius's works "contain no reference to Christianity."<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, Robert Kaster is convinced the *Saturnalia* was written for an audience Macrobius assumed was Christian.<sup>56</sup> The non-inferential arguments Kaster adduces in the support of his thesis are limited, however, almost exclusively to this one passage in 2.4.11 referencing Herod's outrageous act, and he can cite no other NT text or event—either from the *Saturnalia* or from Macrobius's other writings—to support his view. Moreover, even if Macrobius had learned of the Judean atrocity via some Christian medium, because he included one of Herod's own sons among the casualty count requires that at least that portion of his story was accessed from another source or sources. And we recall it was the death of one of Herod's sons that prompted Augustus's quip in the first place.

<sup>52</sup> For Praetextatus's illustrious career as a pagan and his work as a possible literary source for Macrobius, refer to Majastina Kahlos, *Vettius Agorius Praetextatus: A Senatorial Life in Between* (Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae 26; Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2002); see also R. van den Broek, "The Sarapis Oracle in Macrobius, *Sat.*, I, 20, 16–17," in *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren* (EPRO 78; 3 vols.; ed. Margreet B. de Boer and T. A. Eldridge; Leiden: Brill, 1978) 1.123–41.

<sup>53</sup> *Sat.* 1.16.2–4, 13.

<sup>54</sup> See John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) 46–55.

<sup>55</sup> Percival Vaughan Davies, *Ambrosius Aurelius Theodosius Macrobius, the Saturnalia* (Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies 79; New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 1.

<sup>56</sup> Robert A. Kaster, *Macrobius, Saturnalia* (LCL 510–512; 3 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) 1.xxii–xxiv. A similar assessment can be found in the stimulating, in-depth study of Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 5, 127, 231–72, 395. While it is his personal conviction that Macrobius "was almost certainly a Christian," at the end of his lengthy, fair, and balanced treatment, Cameron on p. 272 seeks to show how either a Christian writer or a pagan writer (perhaps, in either case, not a very committed devotee) might have been motivated to compose the *Saturnalia* in the form it exists.

In similar fashion, it is easier to understand Macrobius's more generic placement of the atrocity in Syria as a consequence of a Roman provenance than to hold that his information derived from either the NT or another Christian source. Syria was the accepted rubric in classical literature for the entire Roman province aligning the eastern Mediterranean coast, of which Judea was but a small part near the southern perimeter.<sup>57</sup> Someone obtaining this information directly from any early Christian source—for historic, geographic, and perhaps even prophetic reasons (Matt 2:4–6)—is more likely to have situated the atrocity in Judea or even in Bethlehem of Judea.<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, we must take into account that Macrobius attributes this witty saying to Caesar Augustus. So, perhaps we should ask the question concerning when and how the Caesar came by this information about Herod. And here, as we have already seen, the evidentiary trail has not grown cold. We have good options for responding to the question of how Caesar most likely heard about the incident(s) that evoked his quip concerning Herod, and many of those options tend to point to Macrobius as a reasonably credible witness.

Are we obliged to believe, as the wording of Macrobius would seem to imply, that Caesar himself and/or his imperial court would somehow have had an awareness of the atrocity? Or should we simply imagine that Macrobius himself was the creative genius of this antiquarian wit, not just its transmitter? And if he were its author—or if he were a plagiarist, as some classical scholars hold—are we to assume that Macrobius also engaged in the same kind of creativity, or the same “borrowing,” with respect to pithy sayings ascribed in his text to Cicero and to other more ancient, notable figures?

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<sup>57</sup> It is noteworthy that Augustus, on his trip to Syria in 20 BC, extended Herod's territorial domain northward to include Trachonitis, Iturea, and surrounding terrain. While Josephus's two accounts of Herod's promotion are not easily coalesced (*Ant.* 15.360: “Caesar associated Herod with the procurators of Syria, instructing them to obtain Herod's consent to all their actions”; *J.W.* 1.399: “Caesar gave Herod the position of procurator of all Syria”), in any event the Judean's more prominent role in *Syrian* affairs must thereafter be taken into account. An earlier such promise which had been made to Herod (Josephus *Ant.* 14.280; *J.W.* 1.225) suggests that, even then, the Romans recognized the Judean's assistance in Syria as a valuable asset.

Exceptionally remarkable in this regard is a recent study (Andreas J. M. Kropp and Daniel Lohmann, “Master, look at the size of those stones! Look at the size of those buildings! Analogies in Construction Techniques Between the Temples at Heliopolis (Baalbek) and Jerusalem,” *Levant* 43.1 [2011] 38–50) demonstrating a pronounced, distinctive affiliation of architectural design and masonry style and proportions between Herod's Temple at Jerusalem and the contemporaneous temple construction of the monumental Roman site at Baalbek, situated today in the Beqa' valley of Lebanon but a city most likely in the hands of Iturean monarchs during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. So striking are the several correlations which exist that the authors suggest there may have been Herodian sponsorship and/or technical support of the Baalbek project.

<sup>58</sup> In this regard, consult, e.g., the 4<sup>th</sup>-century discussion of the highly-influential Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.8.1–5. Consult further the recent discussion of Salzman, “Religious *Koine*” 117–25. One might also refer to Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 2.116–47 concerning the degree to which pagan elements of society and traditional public holidays—including especially the celebration of Saturnalia, that most popular holiday!—continued as secular celebrations, even *after* they had been removed from the official Roman calendar by both Constantine and Theodosius.

In the same way that paragraph 2.4.11 makes explicit reference to “Herod king of the Jews,” the fact is that many of Macrobius’s jocular memorabilia attributed to Augustus include the mention by name of additional historical characters, some of whom like Herod are otherwise attested in classical literature (e.g. 2.4.1—the aristocrat Avienus; 2.4.2—the poet Lucius Varius; 2.4.4—the writer Pacuvius Taurus; 2.4.9—the lawyer Cassius Severus; 2.4.12—the author Maecenas; 2.4.16—the statesman Vatinius; 2.4.18—the statesman Cato the Elder; 2.4.18—the geographer Strabo; 2.4.21—the consul Pollio; 2.4.22—the Roman knight Curtius; 2.4.24—the procurator Julius Licinus; 2.4.28—the slave-dealer Toronius Flaccus) or of a specific historical event (e.g. 2.4.27, 29—the Battle of Actium)—to cite only those found in Book 2.4. It seems relatively implausible that Macrobius, who held a very high position in one imperial administration—perhaps even praetorian prefect of Italy—should simply have fabricated memorable sayings that were then subsequently ascribed to those of an earlier imperial administration.

My impulse in writing this piece is not fundamentally dictated by methodological considerations or by the need to find independent verification. I remain unconvinced of a methodology that requires an event from antiquity to be independently corroborated via another source, as a matter of course, before it can be lent historical credence. Too much of ancient Near Eastern history glaringly belies such a dictum!<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, it does seem reasonable to me to conclude that *Sat.* 2.4.11 may provide us with a snapshot, if you will, with another credible *prima facie* reason to believe that the “slaughter of the innocents” (as the horrid incident is sometimes known today) is a historically reliable biblical account, one that also comports with what we otherwise know about Herod’s erratic temperament and behavior.

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<sup>59</sup> It is instructive to observe how much of Herodian history—both in this essay and in Herodian studies in general—is predicated on the uncorroborated commentary of Flavius Josephus.