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Judaea and Galilee at the Time of the Nativity

Palestine

The modern name ‘Palestine’ derives from the Greek Palaestina, which comes from the Hebrew *Pleshet* (“Land of the Philistines”). Historically this was a small coastal area to the north-east of Egypt, also called Philistia. For the past 100 years the term ‘Palestine’ has been used by biblical historians as a sort of shorthand to describe the area covering Judaea, Samaria and Galilee. We need to be wary in using the term today, for at the beginning of the twenty-first century it has become so heavily politicised as to render its scholarly derivation almost meaningless. It is helpful to understand that the invention of the term *Syria Palaestina* by the Romans was part of a deliberate policy following the Roman-Jewish war of AD 66-70, which led to the complete defeat of Judaea, to extinguish Jewish national aspirations and to wipe the memory of Judea, Samaria and Galilee from the region. For Rome to rename the area as *Syria Palaestina* was a calculated double insult: it was designed to erase Jewish connections from the local geography in what today we might refer to as ethnic cleansing, whilst elevating the name and memory of the Israelites’ ancient enemies —the Philistines. The Romans used the term Syria

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Palaestina to describe the southern third of the province of Syria, including the former Judaea. The modern term ‘Palestine’ was not known in Jesus’ day.

The scholarly name ‘Palestine’ was revived by the British after the First World War as an official title for the territory from the river Jordan westwards to the Mediterranean coast, lands administered at that time by Britain on behalf of the League of Nations. The area referred to as Palestine today generally extends from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the River Jordan on the east and from the international border of Israel/Lebanon in the north to Gaza in the south. This territory was occupied in early biblical times by the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and in the time of Christ comprised the Roman provinces of Judaea, Samaria and Galilee.

Ancient Philistia was a small but aggressive country—a loose confederation of five tiny ‘city states’. Its people were Aegean – possibly Cretan – in origin and settled the maritime plain of southern Canaan during the twelfth century BC. Their territory extended from Wadi el-Arish (River of Egypt) in the south, for some seventy miles northwards to Joppa (modern Tel-Aviv) which was captured by the Philistines from the Israelites in the eleventh century BC but recaptured by King David a century later. Following the Israelite conquest of Canaan, the Philistines began a period of military and technical superiority over the Israelites, and enjoyed a near monopoly over iron making in the area. The greatest confrontations between Philistia and Israel were at the times of King Saul and King David. The Philistines failed to flourish as a people, however, and were gradually assimilated into Canaanite culture, eventually disappearing from history, leaving only the second-century Roman name “Palestine” as a monument to their presence.

The Mediterranean world at the time of Christ was controlled by Rome. Judaea, Samaria and Galilee formed a backwater, if an incessantly troublesome one, in the Roman Empire. Life in the Empire at the time of Christ was increasingly taking on the character of classical Greece. Roman civilisation was to a large

extent Greek civilisation, and Greek was the ‘world language’ which united all the subject peoples of the east. Indeed a visitor to Palestine at the time of Christ could well have mistaken it for Greece. The ‘ten cities’ – in Greek, the Decapolis – of the Gospels (Matt 4:25 and Mark 5:20) took Athens as their model. They boasted temples sacred to Zeus and Artemis and each had their theatre, pillared forum, stadium, gymnasium and baths. Other Greek styled cities were Caesarea, the seat of Pontius Pilate’s government, Sepphoris (a few miles north west of Nazareth) and Tiberias, which lay a few miles north east of Nazareth on the Sea of Galilee. Finally there was Caesarea Philippi, built at the base of Mount Hermon.

The many small towns and villages in Galilee and Judaea, however, completely retained their Jewish style and architecture. It was in these genuine Jewish communities that Jesus lived and worked. Nowhere do the Gospel writers refer to the Lord Jesus having lived in any of the Greek-styled cities of Palestine. Even so, Greek dress and much of the Greek way of life had penetrated even these purely Jewish communities, where the local people wore the typical tunic and cloak, shoes or sandals, often with a hat or cap for head covering. Furniture often included a bed and the Greek habit of reclining at meals was generally adopted.

Between the Old and New Testaments

Things are not, as might be expected, taken up in the New Testament where they were laid down in the Old. The period from Malachi to Matthew is one of approximately 400 years and during this time great political changes took place. At the end of the Old Testament the Persian Empire was still in power and remained so until 333 BC. Then came the Greek Empire, founded on the conquests of Alexander the Great, which dominated from 333 BC until 167 BC. After Alexander’s death in 323 BC the empire was divided among four of his generals. Two of these were Ptolemy and Seleucus, each of whom founded a dynasty, the Ptolemys in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria. They fought each other incessantly for control of ‘Palestine’ until 167 BC, periodically

exchanging control of the area as first one side and then the other was victorious.

This period of instability was followed by another —the struggle of the Maccabees for Jewish national independence during the period 176-141 BC, which in turn was followed by the rule of a family of Jewish priest-kings, descended from the Maccabees known as the Asmonaeans (a name derived from a Hebrew word meaning ‘wealthy’). The Asmonaeans remained in power for 78 years from 141 BC until 63 BC, in which year the region was conquered by the Roman general Pompey. Then began, from the point of view of the Christian Gospel narratives, a very important political development. Asmonaeon rule, now under the licence of Rome, became increasingly diluted by the growing influence and power of the Herodian family, first under Antipas (see below). In 31 BC Augustus Caesar overthrew Mark Antony at the battle of Actium and the first of the Herods sought and received from the new Roman emperor, the governorship of Judaea, Samaria, Galilee, Peraea and Idumaea. The Herods, as noted above, were from the area of Idumaea, a region in the south of Judaea. According to the Jewish historian Josephus (Antiq 14.1.3.9) the Herods were not of pure Jewish descent: “It is truethat Antipater was of the stock of the principal Jews who came out of Babylon into Judaea; but that assertion was to gratify Herod, who was his son, and who by certain revolutions of fortune, came afterwards to be king of the Jews.” The fact that the Herods were of Idumean stock threw a serious question into the minds of many among the Jewish populace as to the Herodians’ acceptability as rulers over the Jewish nation.

The Jews of the Dispersion

During the almost continuous periods of foreign domination of ‘Palestine’ of the inter-testament period, the unique monotheistic Jewish religion was preserved, so faithful Jews and Christians believe, first and foremost by the power of God. The Israelites had long been a separated, *chosen* people, and vitally different from their neighbours in that they worshipped only one God.

Among the outward means by which this unique religion was preserved, one of the most important was the centralisation and focus of its worship in Jerusalem. If some of God's laws in the Old Testament appear to us to be narrow and exclusive, it must be said that it is unlikely that monotheism could have been preserved without them. In view of the religious state of the ancient world and Israel's tendency to adopt foreign 'gods' during the earlier stages of her history, strict religious isolation was necessary in order to preserve the pure worship of God from the pollution of foreign elements.

Wherever they travelled, Greeks and Romans carried their 'gods' around with them, or alternatively would adopt religions similar to their own. This was not an option for the Jews, who had one temple, in Jerusalem, and one God, the Almighty. The temple in Jerusalem was the only place that the God-appointed priesthood could offer acceptable sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins or for worship of God. On this temple focused all of Israel's sacred memories of their past and hopes for the future. The history of Israel and its future prospects were inextricably bound up with its religion. Without its religion Israel had no history, and without its history, no religion. It can be fairly said that history, religion, patriotism and hope all pointed to Jerusalem and its temple as the focus of Israel's unity.

The depressed state of the nation at the hands of various conquering enemies had not totally undermined Israel's confidence. Israel had passed through great tribulations before and had emerged triumphant from them. Even in recent history, a very great tribulation had been successfully faced, when the Syrian King Antiochus IV forbade their religion and sought to destroy their sacred books and force them into heathen worship. Worst of all, he had desecrated the temple, raising an altar there to the worship of Zeus Olympios. But God had preserved them through this, raising up Judas the Maccabee —popularly remembered as *God's hammer*,¹ who defeated the professional army of Syria with his guerrilla volunteers and then restored and purified the temple.

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The Jews of Galilee, Samaria and Judaea had become, by the time of Christ's birth, a minority among the wider Jewish people. The majority of the nation comprised what was known as 'the dispersion', a term which no longer fully expressed its original meaning—the banishment by God of His people into exile as punishment for their sins. The first-century dispersion was voluntary, encouraged by economic and political considerations. But the very term 'dispersion' still expressed a measure of sorrow, of social and political isolation, felt by these dispersed Jews who continued to look towards Jerusalem as their spiritual home.

There were, in practice, two dispersions, one to the east and the other to the west. The eastern dispersion maintained close connection with 'Palestine' and in some respects was not so much a true 'dispersion', with all that the word implied, as simply a geographic separation. The western dispersion, however, began progressively to lose its close affinity with 'Palestine', as its people became more assimilated into the Greek culture in which they lived and worked. They were known as the 'dispersion of the Greeks' (see John 7:35 in this regard) or as 'Hellenists' or 'Grecians'.

The difference between the 'Hellenists' and the 'Hebrews' was far deeper than simply language. It extended to the whole direction of thought. There were intellectual influences pervading the Greek world from which it was impossible for Jews to isolate themselves. These Hellenist Jews were viewed with contempt by the Hebrew hierarchy, especially the party of the Pharisees, who openly declared the Hellenists to be far inferior to the eastern (or 'Babylonian') Jews. That such feelings, and the suspicions which they engendered, had struck deep into the popular mind is shown by the fact that, even in the apostolic church in its earliest days, disputes broke out between Hellenist Christians and Hebrew Christians arising from suspicions of unfair dealings based on factional prejudices (see Acts 6:1).

The 'Babylonian' Jews, by contrast, were viewed as more *pure* Jews. The land of Babylon and even parts of Syria were, in any case, considered by some Jews to be historically and even geographically a part of 'Palestine', as far north as Antioch. In

regard to this Babylonian dispersion it should be noted that from the time of the earlier dispersion (which *was* a judgement of God - see for example 2 Chronicles 36: 11-21) perhaps only 50,000 Jews had returned whilst the wealthiest remained behind. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, there were very large numbers, perhaps millions, of Jews in the Trans-Euphratic provinces (Antiq. 11.5.2; 15.2.2; 18.9.1 ff). To judge by the numbers of Jews killed in uprisings, for example 50,000 in Seleucia alone - according to Antiq. 18.9.9 - these figures do not seem exaggerated. Such a large and compact body naturally became a political power. Treated well under the Persian monarchy, they continued, after the fall of that empire (330 BC) to be favoured by the successors of Alexander, and were similarly favoured in the Parthian empire (beginning 63 BC) in which the Jews formed an important element in its opposition to Rome. So great was their influence that as late as 40 AD, the Roman legate avoided provoking their hostility, according to the Jewish historian and philosopher Judaeus Philo (d. AD 45-50). Even where they were numerous, however, the Jews still faced periodic and sometimes bloody persecution in these eastern lands.

The influence of the dispersion had been felt in 'Palestine' itself in other ways: even the Hebrew language, both written and spoken, had been changed by the returning Jews. Instead of the ancient characters employed, the exiles brought with them on their return the now familiar square Hebrew letters, which gradually came into general use. The language spoken by the Jews was no longer Hebrew, but Aramaean, both in Babylonia and 'Palestine'. In fact the ordinary people were quite ignorant of pure Hebrew by the time of Jesus - the older language then being the preserve of students and of the synagogue. Even there a *Methurgeman*, or interpreter, had to be used to translate into the vernacular the portions of Scripture read in the public services as well as the sermons of the rabbis. This was the origin of the so-called *Targumim*, or paraphrases of the Scripture. In the earliest times of this practice, the Methurgeman was forbidden to read his translation or write down a Targum, lest the paraphrase should be

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regarded as of equal authority to the original. But with the demise of pure Hebrew as a common language, their use became more and more necessary and was officially sanctioned before the end of the second century AD.

In response to these dispersions of population and the great political uncertainties of the four centuries immediately preceding Christ, the Jews placed increasing importance and emphasis on the *outward* observance and study of the letter of the Law. This is a very important point to understand, as it explains some of the opposition faced by the Lord Jesus from the religious authorities of His day. Indeed it can be argued that during this inter-testament period for many in the Jewish religious hierarchy, an unhealthy worship *of the Law* began to usurp the true worship of God, as the Hebrews slipped into religious legalism —something which the Lord Jesus strongly condemned. So it was that the *Mishnah*, or Second Law, came into being. This was originally intended to interpret and supplement the Law contained in the Scriptures. A development of the Mishnah was the *Midrash*, or investigation, a term which was applied to commentaries on the Scriptures and to preaching in general. These *Midrashim* progressively began to carry the authority of the Scripture itself and so increased the authority of the rabbis and scribes who deduced them.

We can begin to see the religious confusion of Judaism in Jesus' own day. The simplicity of God's Law was undermined by difficulties of language, by the use of interpreters to render the Scriptures into the vernacular language, the use of paraphrases of Scripture, the development of a "second Law" and to commentaries on Scripture which were treated as reverently as Scripture itself. These developments emphasised the differences between 'Palestinian' and other Jews, as well as differences between the Jewish hierarchy and the general populace. No wonder Jesus spoke of sheep without a shepherd.

The debt owed to the Babylonian Jews

As large numbers of Jews lived in the eastern lands, it was inevitable that some provision would be made for Hebrew scholarship amongst these dispersed people. Certainly all major matters concerning the Jewish faith were settled by the hierarchy in Jerusalem —ultimately by the Sanhedrin, or Council, of religious elders. It is known, for example, that the great Jewish Rabbi Hillel travelled from Babylonia to Jerusalem to advance his learning, which implies that in Babylonia there were lesser seats of learning. It is not clear how quickly the authority of these Babylonian religious schools increased and perhaps overshadowed those of Jerusalem, but it is known that this is what eventually happened.

The Jerusalem Hebrews already recognised a debt to their Babylonian brethren in the shape of Ezra, the prophet whose book forms a part of our Old Testament. He was instrumental in leading a second group of exiles from Babylonia back to Jerusalem, where he helped the people to reorganise their religious and social life in order to safeguard the spiritual heritage of Israel. Hundreds of years later, a similar debt was perceived by Jews to be owed to Hillel, the famous rabbi. And a third great rabbi, one Chija (one of the teachers of the second century AD and who is still viewed among the celebrated of rabbinical authority), was yet again instrumental in restoring Jewish learning and law at a time of crisis. “It is one of those strangely significant, almost symbolical facts of history,” writes Alfred Edersheim, “that after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 the spiritual supremacy of Palestine passed to Babylonia, and that rabbinical Judaism, under the stress of political adversity, voluntarily transferred itself to the seats of Israel’s ancient dispersion, as if to ratify by its own act what the judgement of God had already executed.”²²

The debt owed to the Hellenists

Whilst the Hellenists were considered to be second class Jews, many Jews from the Jerusalem hierarchy would, perhaps grudgingly, have acknowledged at least one major debt owed to

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them. This was the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, a translation we now refer to as the Septuagint. It was impossible for the Hellenised Jewish communities to remain completely separate from their Greek surroundings and influences. Greek Jews were not a compact body, as were their eastern brethren. Rather, they were dispersed within their dispersion, living here and there as the opportunities for trade and commerce were presented. Their trades, which were the very reason for their being in ‘foreign lands’ were purely secular and demanded social involvement with the communities among whom they lived and worked.

When these Hellenist Jews stepped out of their own immediate family and community, they were confronted with the full force of Grecianism, which was refined and elegant. It was profound and extremely attractive. These Jews might resist, but they could not sweep Grecianism aside. The most telling strength of Grecianism was its intellectual force – its philosophy – before which these Hellenist Jews found it necessary to defend their faith in the intellectual debates in which they became embroiled. Greek philosophy penetrated everywhere. It was the very air that was breathed and the environment within which Hellenist Judaism must be preserved. Jews felt it necessary to meet argument with argument, and to do that they needed to be certain of what they believed. To be certain of what they believed they needed a translation of their Scriptures in a language they could understand.

The Septuagint translation originated in this particular need of Hellenist Jews who were ignorant of the Hebrew language. Whilst it is not clear when this great translation was begun, we do have some clear idea as to when it was finished: from the prologue to the apocryphal ‘Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach’, we learn that in his days the canon of Scripture was closed and that on his arrival in Egypt, then under the rule of Euergetes, he found the so-called Septuagint translation completed. Despite there being two kings with the surname Euergetes, most scholars conclude that the one in question reigned between 247 and 221 BC. From this it follows that the canon of Scripture was at this stage fixed in ‘Palestine’.

This Septuagint version, complete with its many difficulties and occasional extreme liberality in translation, became to a large extent the ‘people’s bible’ of its time. Alfred Edersheim comments: “...we specially mark that it preserved the messianic interpretation of Genesis 49:10 and Numbers 24:7, 17, 23, bringing us evidence of what had been the generally received view two and a half centuries before the birth of Jesus. It must have been on account of the use made of the Septuagint in argument, that later voices in the Synagogue declared this version to have been as great a calamity to Israel as the making of the Golden calf...”⁷³

Sects and parties at the time of Christ

In the four Gospels we read of Priests, Levites, Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Samaritans and Galileans. Most of these officials or categories appeared in the inter-testament period. Who and what were they?

The word ‘**priest**’ occurs in the Gospels a dozen times and ‘high priest’ or ‘chief priests’ 84 times. The Jewish priesthood was ordained by God at the time of Moses, in the tribe of Levi. The function of the priests was strictly religious. After the return from captivity in Babylon, however, from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the civil power of the state passed into the hands of the priests, so that they were ‘princes of the realm’ as well as ministers of religion. The head of this order was the high priest. In the time of Christ the priests were, for the most part, persistent enemies of Jesus, being worldly in spirit and therefore quite unable genuinely to shepherd the people as their religious office required. Ultimately it was they who delivered Jesus to Pilate to be crucified.

The **Levites** were the descendants of Levi and had special religious status. They were accepted in the principal position as the ‘first-born’ of the Israelites, and had control of the tabernacle and its religious services —see Numbers chapter 3 for the account of their adoption by God. The priestly functions of the Levites changed over the centuries and it is today not entirely clear as to the precise relationship between the priests and the Levites, but by the time of Christ it was the Levites who performed the

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subordinate services associated with public worship, for example as musicians, gate keepers, guardians, temple officials, judges and craftsmen. They are only mentioned in the Gospels twice (Luke 10:32 and John 1:19).

In New Testament times the **scribes** (or “teachers of the law” in the New International Version of the Bible) were the students, interpreters and teachers of Old Testament Scriptures and accordingly were held in high esteem by the ordinary people. They were fiercely opposed to the Lord Jesus. He, in turn, denounced them for making the Word of God ineffective by their traditions (see Matt 16:21; Matt 21:15 and 23:2. See also Mark 12:28-40). The Scribes were also called lawyers (Matt 22:35; Luke 10:25; Luke 11:45-53 and Luke 14:3).

The **Pharisees** (*separated*) arose in the time of the Maccabees and were called ‘separatists’ in mockery by their enemies, because they ‘separated’ themselves from the political ambitions of the parties in their nation. They were experts in the written law and the oral law. In belief, they were conservatives, in contrast to the very liberal Sadducees. Their religious orthodoxy, however, was spiritually barren and so the Lord Jesus condemned them (e.g. Matt 12:1-2; Matt 23:1-33; Luke 6:6-7; Luke 11:37-54). It seems that in the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Israelites had two opposite and equally unacceptable extremes: legalism (the Pharisees) and license (the Sadducees). This has always been a problem, even in the Christian church. Christians see the hand of Satan in these extremes as they off-balance and distract the church from its true mission.

The name of the **Sadducees** is likely to have been derived, it is thought, from Zadok the High Priest of King Solomon’s time (1 Kings 2:35). They were the aristocratic political party among the Jews, the rivals of the Pharisees. In religious belief they were the ‘liberals’ of their day, denying the existence of spirits, the resurrection of the dead to face judgement and the immortality of the soul. They were very much the secularists of their faith and had they been strong enough, would probably have paganised it. The Sadducees came to prominence at the time of the Maccabees and

disappeared completely after the destruction of the Jewish nation in AD 70. Like the Pharisees they were condemned by Jesus (Matt 16:1-12 and Matt 22:23-33). It is ironic that, coming from two very different and often diametrically opposing viewpoints, the conservative Pharisees and the liberal Sadducees should have made common cause in opposing the man who described himself as ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (John 14:6) but perhaps this only reflects that their campaign of untruth came from the same root.

The **Herodians** were a political, rather than a religious party. They took their name from the family of Herod and obtained their right to rule from the Roman government. In practice they were Rome’s puppet government. The Herodians were averse to any change in the political system, which favoured them so singularly, and viewed Christ as a revolutionary. They accordingly came into conflict with Jesus and were condemned by Him. (Mark 3:6; Mark 8:15 and Mark 12:13-17). Interestingly, in these passages from Mark, the Pharisees are seen allied to the Herodians against Jesus. This ‘axis’ might be more easy to understand, since both the Pharisees and Herodians represented ‘conservatism’ within Judaism, one religious and the other political.

The **Samaritans** were a mixed race living in the province of Samaria. In 722 BC the Assyrian King Sargon II took the Israelites of the northern kingdom to Assyria as captives, but left many of the poorer and weaker behind. Later, people from Cuthah, Babylon, Hamath, Sepharvaim and Ava were sent to Samaria and intermarried with the remnants of the northern kingdom, bringing with them their own idols. Esar Haddon sent to the Samaritans a priest from the tribe of Levi, who lived at Bethel, and he taught them that they should fear the Lord. The result was a sort of syncretism, where the Samaritans worshipped the Hebrew God and other gods as well. When in 535 BC the second temple was being built under Zerubbabel (Ezra 4:1-3), the Samaritans offered help, but were refused. From this time forward a bitter enmity sprang up between the Samaritans and their Hebrew neighbours, to the south and north. This enmity was still very much in evidence in the time of Christ, which gives added significance to the account

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of the Samaritan leper (Luke 17:16) and to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37).

The **Galileans** were an extreme party which arose in northern 'Palestine' and followed one Judas of Galilee, who began a rebellion against all foreign domination. They were insistent on their own rights and cared little for the rights of others. As political fanatics, they came into violent conflict with Pilate (Luke 13:1-3). Christ's enemies made efforts to identify Him and His disciples with this fanatical group (Matt 26:69; Mark 14:70; Luke 23:6).

It can readily be seen from this brief description of the sects and parties prominent at the time of Jesus' birth, even before considering the added complication of the conquering Romans, that 'Palestine' was a turbulent, troubled and violent region. There was certainly lawlessness in those troubled days, but more unsettling for the ordinary people of that sad and often brutal region, was that it was a time of *law with disorder*, represented most conspicuously by King Herod "the Great" himself.

The Herodians

The glorious victories of the Maccabees against the Syrian overlords culminating in 141 BC with the purification of the temple had appeared, for a moment, to be almost a return to the days of the miraculous deliverances in the Old Testament. But the moment would not last for long. The Maccabees became both high priests and kings, thus thoroughly secularising the nation state. The remainder of Maccabean rule was marked by internecine squabbling punctuated with open warfare. This period also saw the rise of the two opposing parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Contention for the crown led Judas the Maccabee into an alliance with the Romans, and from that time forward there was a discernible downward spiral in the fortunes of Israel. In 63 BC, when Pompey captured Jerusalem and replaced the high priest, the last of the Maccabean rulers was effectively stripped of power and the country became a tributary of Rome, subject to the Roman governor of Syria. Shortly afterwards Gabinius, a Roman governor, divided 'Palestine' into five independent districts.

About fifty years before this, the district of Idumaea, to the south of Judaea, had been conquered by the Maccabean king John Hyrcanus I, and its inhabitants forced to adopt Judaism. After it became Judean, its administration was delegated to one Antipater, a local noble of considerable political cunning and determination. Antipater was an Edomite (an Arab from the region between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba). A man of great wealth and influence, he increased both by marrying Kypros, the daughter of a noble from Petra, (in southwest Jordan) which was at that time the capital of the rising Nabataean kingdom. His son, Herod, although a practising Jew, was therefore of Arab origin on both sides.

Antipater successfully intervened in the unhappy civil war for the crown, which was being waged between the opposing factions of Hyrcanus II and his warlike brother, Aristobulus, finally decided in the favour of Hyrcanus II by the force of Roman arms under Pompey. King Hyrcanus II, however, was a weak character and real power was wielded by Antipater. Around 57 BC Herod, Antipater's son, met and befriended Mark Antony and became his lifelong friend. Julius Caesar also favoured the family and in 47 BC he conferred on Antipater hereditary Roman citizenship, a considerable honour. The confusing and sickening history of the Herodians is recounted by the Jewish historian Josephus. Readers who would like to follow the story in greater detail should refer either to Josephus complete works⁴ or to Alfred Edersheim's full and scholarly summary in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, referenced earlier. The following is only a brief outline.

Herod “the Great”

Herod made his political debut at the age of 25 when, in 42 BC, his father Antipater appointed him, with Mark Antony's approval, as governor of Galilee, an act which rendered Hyrcanus II powerless. In 40 BC the Parthians invaded Palestine, civil war broke out and Herod fled to Rome. The Roman Senate nominated him king of Judea and equipped him with an army to make good his claim. In 37 BC, at the age of 36, Herod became the unchallenged ruler of Judaea, a position he maintained for 32 years. To consolidate

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his new power, Herod divorced his wife, Doris, banished her and his son from court and married Mariamme, a princess of the Maccabean family. Although the marriage was primarily aimed at ending his feud with the Maccabees, Herod was, by all accounts, deeply in love with his second wife.

Herod's reign was, however, marked by a paranoid fear of rivals and his rule proved very bloody, even by the standards of the day. His wife Mariamme's uncle Antigonus (a Maccabee) had been the prime antagonist in the earlier civil war. On Herod's request he was executed by the Romans. Next to experience Herod's vengeance were the principal supporters in Jerusalem of his former rival Antigonus. Forty-five of the noblest and richest were executed. Herod then appointed an obscure Babylonian to the high priesthood, a move which aroused the active opposition of Mariamme's mother, Alexandra, who claimed the high priesthood for her son Aristobulus. Eventually Herod relented and Aristobulus, although only seventeen, was made high priest—a sad reflection of the spiritual decline in Israel. Herod had his mother in law watched from that time forward. Aristobulus, as a Maccabee and therefore still viewed favourably by many of the populace, was joyously greeted at the religious Feast of Tabernacles. Herod feared him as a rival and arranged for a bathing accident to take his life.

Alexandra denounced the murder of Aristobulus and Herod was consequently summoned to Mark Antony. Bribery of Antony and behind the scenes manoeuvring enabled Herod to weather this storm. During his absence from Jerusalem, Herod committed the government to his uncle Joseph, who was also his brother in law, having married Herod's sister, Salome. Herod's clear instruction was that, should he be found guilty by Antony, Mariamme was to be killed—she was not to be allowed to become the wife of another. Joseph told this to Mariamme, apparently to show her how much Herod loved her! But on Herod's return from Mark Antony, Salome accused her husband Joseph of impropriety with Mariamme and, when it became apparent that Joseph had told Mariamme of Herod's secret and dark instruction, Herod took

this as confirmation of the charge. Joseph was executed, without even a hearing.

Serious foreign crises now supervened. During the war between the two Roman leaders Octavian and Mark Antony, the de facto heirs to Caesar's power, Herod supported his friend Antony and continued to do so despite his friend's mistress, Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt, using her influence with Antony to obtain some of Herod's best lands. After Antony's defeat at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, Herod openly admitted to the victorious Octavian which side he had supported. Octavian, who knew Herod from his visit to Rome, believed him to be the one man likely to rule 'Palestine' in the best interests of Rome and duly confirmed him as king. He also generously restored to Herod the lands stolen by Cleopatra and in succeeding years added to them parts of the modern lands of Jordan, southern Lebanon and Syria. In order to further secure himself from possible domestic rivals, Herod had the aged deposed King Hyrcanus II executed, on the (probably) spurious grounds of intrigues with the Arabs during the earlier war.

When summoned to appear before Augustus to explain his conduct during the earlier war, Herod entrusted Mariamme to one Soemus, with the same instruction as had been given to the earlier Joseph. Again Mariamme learned of the instruction and again Salome and others made accusations of unfaithfulness about Mariamme. Soemus was slain without a hearing and this time, Mariamme followed after a showpiece trial. Heartbroken remorse gripped Herod and brought him to the brink of suicide. Alexandria, Mariamme's mother, continued to plot the overthrow of Herod but was discovered and executed. The remnants of the Maccabean family were now few. The treacherous Salome had married another Maccabee on the death she precipitated for her first husband Joseph. She married Costobarus, the governor of Idumaea but, tiring of him, denounced him to Herod, who had Costobarus and a number of other Maccabees executed. The Maccabee family was now virtually extinct.

Herod's suspicions turned then on his own family. The king had ten wives during his eventful career, but this account focuses

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only on those whose offspring play a significant part in this sad history. The son of Herod's first wife, Doris, was Antipater; those of the loved Mariamme were Alexander and Aristobulus. A second Mariamme, whose father Herod had made high priest, bore a son who was named Herod (a name shared by other sons). Malthake, a Samaritan, was the mother of Archelaus and Herod Antipas. Finally Cleopatra of Jerusalem bore Philip.

The sons of the Macabbean Mariamme, as heirs presumptive, were sent to the centre of power, Rome, for their education. This was in order to pay due homage to the emperor and the political system whilst ensuring they would become known in Rome as friends of Rome. On their return to Judaea these princes were married: Alexander to the daughter of the king of Cappadicia and Aristobulus to his cousin Berenice, the daughter of Salome. Salome, for her part, continued to hate the dead Maccabean Mariamme and her offspring. The two princes, in their Maccabean pride, did not disguise their feelings towards the house of their father. At first Herod did not believe the denunciations of his sister, Salome, but eventually his own suspicions against his family took control. As a first step Antipater, the son of his first wife Doris, was recalled from exile and sent to Rome for education, a sign of disfavour to Alexander and Aristobulus. Next Herod sent the two disfavoured sons to Rome in order to place formal accusations against them before the emperor. For a while the emperor's wise counsellors were able to maintain the peace, but as time went by and further family intrigues took place in Jerusalem, Herod again laid charges against the two sons before emperor Augustus who eventually gave him full powers over them. They were duly condemned to death and, as two elderly soldiers ventured to intercede for them, some 300 supporters of a supposed plot were slaughtered whilst the two princes were strangled in prison.⁵

Antipater was now heir presumptive but, impatient for the throne, he plotted with Herod's brother, Pheroras, against his father. The wily Salome again denounced her nephew, who fled to Rome. Herod later obtained clear evidence of Antipater's failed plot and lured him back to Judaea where he was arrested. With

Augustus' permission Antipater was executed, just five days before Herod's own death. So ended a bloody and brutal reign. Small wonder that Herod feared the birth of a new king, announced by the wise men from the east. Small wonder that we read, "When Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matt 2:3). Small wonder that when Joseph was warned in a dream that Herod sought the infant Jesus, he should flee that very night. Small wonder that the slaughter of all the boys under the age of two in Bethlehem should have been ordered by Herod without a second thought. So steeped in human blood was Herod's reign that the slaughter is not even mentioned in Josephus. (Historians also believe that the highly partial Josephus, writing for a Roman audience at a difficult time for Jews, would not have mentioned the slaughter because it would have necessitated further and detailed reference to Jesus whom, of course, they had executed and whom, as a Jew, Josephus did not wish to elevate in any way).

No greater contrast could be imagined as between King Jesus, whose most magnificent act was to lay down His life for His people – sinners all – and Herod "the Great" whose most notable characteristic was his willingness to lay down the lives of others to reinforce his own wretched hold on power. Alfred Edersheim summarises Herod's reign: "We can understand the feelings of the people towards such a king. They hated the Idumaeans; they detested his semi heathen reign; they abhorred his deeds of cruelty. The king had surrounded himself with foreign councillors, and was protected by foreign mercenaries from Thracia, Germany, and Gaul. (Jos Antiq. 17.8.3.) So long as he lived, no woman's honour was safe, no man's life secure. An army of all powerful spies pervaded Jerusalem —nay, the king himself would stoop to that office (Antiq 15.10.4). If pique or private enmity led to denunciation, then torture would extract any confession from the most innocent. What his relation to Judaism had been, may easily be inferred. He would be a Jew —even build the temple, advocate the cause of the Jews in other lands, and, in a certain sense, conform to the law of Judaism.... Strangest of all, he seems to have had at least the passive support of two of the greatest rabbis

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—the Phillio and Sameas of Josephus (Antiq. 14.9.4; 15.1.1; 15.10.4) ...We can but conjecture, that they preferred even his rule to what had preceded; and hoped it might lead to a Roman Protectorate, which would leave Judaea practically independent, or rather under Rabbinic rule.”⁶

Notes

¹The name Maccabee may be derived from Maqqabha —a hammer

² Alfred Edersheim *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993) p. 9.

³ *Ibid.* p. 21

⁴ William Whiston *Josephus, The Complete Works* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998).

⁵ It is recorded in Macrobius, Saturnalia 2.4.11 that Augustus made the grim joke that it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son. The king’s pig was safe, on account of his studied outward observance of Judaism; his sons were not.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 90.