

King Herod the Great Reigns Again in Jerusalem

Archeologist Ehud Netzer spent 40 long years looking for the burial place of King Herod the Great.

It became his personal passion, the mission of his life. His 41-year-old daughter said her father studied the former ruler and his famed building projects in Israel and the West Bank so deeply that he felt he actually knew the ancient ruler.

Herod has always fascinated archaeologists because he left them so much to excavate. He was the greatest builder in the history of the Jewish people, and the ruins of his wonders can be seen throughout the country—Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea being one of the most famous sites in all the Holy Land.

Professor Netzer immersed himself in the writings of the first-century historian Flavius Josephus, who recounted that Herod had died in his massive, gorgeous winter palace in Jericho. Josephus even described the agonizing diseases of which Herod died.

From Josephus' accounts, some medical experts suggest that Herod had chronic kidney disease complicated by a type of gangrene. More recently, others have reported that in his final days, Herod may have also suffered from scabies, which produces unbearable itching. For the man who killed the babies in Bethlehem, his favorite wife, three of his sons and a brother-in-law—to mention only a few—Herod received a first course of his just deserts.

Josephus also stated that Herod was so concerned that no one would mourn his death that he commanded a large group of distinguished men to come to Jericho and then gave an order that they should be killed at the time of his death so that the displays of grief he craved would really take place.

Fortunately for them, Herod's son Archelaus and sister Salome did not carry out Herod's wish.

Burial of Herod

According to Josephus, Archelaus, Herod's successor, "spent all the kingdom's wealth on a magnificent burial." Relatives, armor-bearers and several battalions of well-armed soldiers marched, surrounding the coffin. Hundreds of servants and slaves marched behind, climbing the 25-mile road in the desert heat through the mountains to a place the king had prepared for his grave and which he called Herodium. Again, Josephus is the key source for the assertion that the king was buried there.

Flavius Josephus described the lavish funeral in opulent terms: "The bier was of solid gold, studded with precious stones, and had a covering of purple embroidered with various colors; on this lay the body enveloped in a purple robe, a diadem encircling the head and surmounted by a crown of gold, the scepter beside his right hand."

Netzer's Hunt

Herodium is nine miles south of Jerusalem, just east of Bethlehem, on the edge of the Judean Desert. It was there that Herod the Great built another massive fortress. (Always fearful for his life, he built a number of fortresses, including the famous Masada fortress overlooking the Dead Sea.)

Herodium was built between 23 and 15 B.C. as a combined palace and powerful stronghold. Surrounding the complex was a double wall 63 meters in diameter and seven stories high, within which Herod built a palace that included halls, courtyards and opulent bathhouses. Earth was heaped around the walls, which created a cone-shaped artificial mountain.

At its foot, Herod built a kind of royal "country club,"

including a large pool, a bathhouse and a roofed pool. Despite its desert location, the complex was surrounded by magnificent gardens irrigated by the pool. A special aqueduct from the area of Solomon's Pools near Bethlehem brought water to the palace.

Netzer's Findings

True, Josephus said Herod was buried in Herodium. But where? Despite the extreme heat, Netzer began digging there in 1972, not having a clue where to find the grave in the man-made 300-foot stone and earth mound. Some archeologists thought the logical place would be at the top of the mound. But after 35 years and not finding the tomb, Netzer began digging into the extensive palace complex at the bottom of the hill, which he labeled "Lower Herodium."

In 2006, Netzer's excavations revealed a ramp winding around the bottom of the hill from the lower palace complex and stadium. Along its path were discovered a theater and a monumental staircase, which led past a platform. And then, in May 2007, Netzer came upon what he finally identified as the tomb of King Herod. Netzer found a beautifully carved sarcophagus with decorative urns of a type never before seen in Israel, "shattered into hundreds of pieces." This is exactly how Josephus described the tomb, explaining that it had been smashed by Jewish rebels who had revolted against the Romans in A.D. 66, leading up to Rome's destruction of Jerusalem.

Immediately, Netzer began to promote the idea of a monumental exhibition of Herod's mausoleum at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. It would be a gigantic task, but Netzer began mapping his ideas and with great energy pushed the idea along.

Although 76 years old, Netzer continued to dig and plan for his proposed exhibition. In 2010, as he sat on a safety railing near the tomb speaking with colleagues, the wooden

rail broke and he fell 20 feet. Three days later, he died.

Historic Archaeological Project

Dudi Mevorach, the Israel Museum's curator, was with Netzer when he fell. Mevorach and his colleagues spent three years putting together the exhibition, which will be on display until October 5, 2013. The exhibit is spread out over 900 square meters and involved the transport of stones weighing 30 tons. The museums' foundations had to be strengthened before the exhibit could be mounted, for fear it might be too heavy.

If you plan to be in Israel before the exhibition closes, make sure your tour guide takes you to the exhibition. It is certainly worth seeing! Going to Herodium itself would be very special.

Herod's Pathological Character

Herod was actually a converted Jew. His father was an Idumean (from the tribes of Esau) and his mother an Arab. Some of the descendants of the Maccabees known for converting surrounding tribes demanded the Idumeans become Jewish. And so it was. A convert was acceptable in the Jewish world, but not a convert who became king of the Jews. Therefore, the Pharisees detested him and the Sadducees were angry with his high taxes. He was, indeed, a most unpopular king of the Jews.

It would seem natural, then, that when the wise men came asking where the king of the Jews was born, every fiber in Herod's body sensed treachery. Killing babies was his sure way to stay on his throne.

Though successful in politics, Herod was bitterly unhappy in his private life. He married 10 wives, including the beautiful Hasmonean (Maccabean descendant) princess, Mariamme, the granddaughter of the last true line of priests who were descendants of Aaron. Though he loved her passionately, he suspected her of infidelity and had her executed along with

her mother. Later, in 7 B.C., he had her two sons killed. When Herod found that his favorite son, Antipater, had been plotting against him, he had him executed along with two of his brothers—just five days before his own death in 4 B.C.

The Roman Emperor Augustus caustically remarked about Herod, “I would rather be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.” He murdered members of his own family yet scrupulously observed Mosaic dietary laws and would eat no pork.

Herod’s court was Hellenized and cultured. He ruled as an autocrat, supported by police, and despite his rebuilding of the Temple, to the Jews he remained a detested foreigner and a usurper. Most Jews openly hoped for his death, calling him “the wicked.”

The Temple and Yeshua

Elected king of the Jews by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C., Herod began rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem in 19 B.C. It was an architectural marvel. Final work on the Temple was not completed until just six years before the Romans destroyed it in A.D. 70. All that remains today is the great platform whose western side is the Wailing Wall, where Jews still lament the destruction of the Temple.

The demons of Herod’s life were jealousy of power and suspicion, its necessary companion. He was a tyrant who bathed his own house and his own people in blood and killed off the last priests of the line of Aaron. The high priests were then selected by the Romans, and sometimes the office went to the highest bidder.

Here is what is so important to note. Caiphas, who was appointed by the Roman governors, was apparently not a Levite. He was not a descendent of Aaron if, as Josephus says, Herod purposely killed all the legitimate Hasmonean lineage who were descendants of the Maccabbees, who in turn were Levites. Thus, it seems, a false, corrupt high priest is the one who led the

demand for Yeshua's death.

Caiphas is also believed to have been a Sadducee—a religious Jew who did not believe in the resurrection. (How furious he must have been when he heard about Lazarus! Ideologues do not change their opinion when faced with reality.)

Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, killed John the Baptist and also interviewed Yeshua at his trial. But when Yeshua did not perform a miracle or even talk to him, Herod Antipas sent Him back to Pilate. If Herod the Great had a true heart for God, he could have traveled with joy to Bethlehem. His son did cross paths with the Savior of the world but did not recognize Him either. How sad.

What's Left?

Thus the personal legacy of a megalomaniac. No picture of Herod, not even on a coin, exists. No one knows what he looked like.

The incredible, massive and luxurious palace in Jericho where Herod spent his last days is now neglected, lying in ruins. Some of the gorgeous mosaics are covered in dirt, flooring torn up by marauders, paintings on the walls disappearing. Journalist Moshe Gilad, who recently visited there, lamented, "Here is all that remains of that powerful reign, backed by the great empire. Here is all that remains of an enormous construction project, most of whose components were brought in glory and splendor from Rome."

For all his 37 years of rule as an absolute tyrant with the lives of an entire nation—including his family—defenseless before his slightest whim, Josephus said of Herod, "He was a most unfortunate man."

In a strange way, the exhibit made me more aware than ever of the power of the Man Yeshua. Even though at the time, Herod was the highest authority in the land when Yeshua was born a

babe, Yeshua is now King of the Jews, King of kings and Lord of lords, while the best of Herod that's left are a glued-together smashed sarcophagus and the decaying ruins of a once-great empire.

For the original article, visit .

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