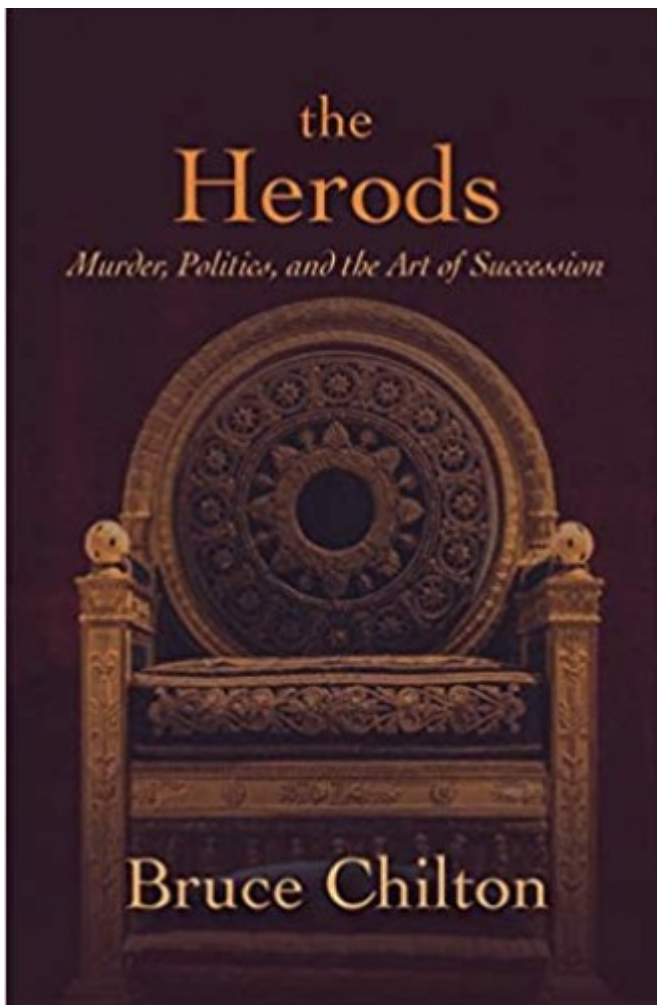


Understanding the biblical Herods

Bruce Chilton moves Herod the Great and Herod Antipas from backdrop to center stage.

by [Tony Jones](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Herods

Murder, Politics, and the Art of Succession

By Bruce Chilton

Fortress

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Herod is offstage in most nativity plays, because no one wants a villain on Christmas Eve. Instead, the wise men warn the holy family about the mean man who's looking for them, then the Magi go home by another route just to avoid him. Herod never takes the stage.

So it goes for Herod—in fact, for the Herods, since at least a couple of men go by that name in the New Testament. They are supporting characters, window dressing, straw men. Probably the most apt metaphor for Herod the Great and his descendants, like all of the power players in Judea at the time of the New Testament, is that they are the backdrop in front of which the drama of the Christ story takes place. And we rarely think of them as more than that, which is why many of us don't know the difference between Herod the Great (who orders the massacre of the Holy Innocents in Matthew) and Herod Antipas (who orders the crucifixion of Jesus).

Bruce Chilton aims to remedy that, and he does so in easy, readable prose that moves the reader through a string of family members who outdo one another in huge personalities, pandering insecurities, and murderous tendencies. Similar to the recent, brilliant novels by Madeline Miller and Natalie Haynes—which tell the tale of the *Iliad* and the Trojan War through the experiences of the secondary characters Patroclus and Helen, respectively—Chilton's masterful new book puts the Herods center stage. In so doing, he shines a new spotlight on Jesus and the early church.

Antipater, the *pater familias*, converted to Judaism and ruled Idumea, a large territory south of Judah, on behalf of the Maccabean kings. He displayed some of the political savvy for which his family became famous when he befriended the Roman general Pompey; then, when Pompey was defeated by Julius Caesar, he sidled up to Caesar; and when Caesar was assassinated, he had the foresight to turn on his ally Mark Antony, correctly predicting that Antony's union with Cleopatra would end badly.

Phasaël was Antipater's eldest son. A gifted diplomat, Phasaël suffered in the shadow of his younger brother Herod, a fierce warlord of whom Chilton writes, "Taller than average for an Idumean of his time, his black hair and beard framed dark eyes, and his handsome head crowned an athlete's body."

Herod was impetuous as a young man, often getting out of scrapes with help from his father and brother. But by 40 BCE, Antipater had been assassinated, and Phasaël, having been captured during a siege of Jerusalem by the Parthians, threw himself out the window of his jail cell and fell to his death, leaving Herod alone to rule.

Herod soon claimed the title “King of the Jews,” which his father had abjured. He then made a series of decisions both wise and ruthless that would take him from Herod to Herod the Great. First, he rejected the advances of Cleopatra and instead traveled to Rome where he asked for and received the help of Octavian—who became Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Next, he married Mariamme, a Maccabean princess, meaning that his children would be legitimate royalty. Finally, he put 10,000 masons to work renovating and expanding the temple in Jerusalem, which had been in a state of disrepair for generations. Along the way, he quashed various rebellions and won victories for Rome and the Jewish people.

But as he aged, writes Chilton, “Herod, suspicious to the point of paranoia concerning his reputation, had developed the habit of going into Jerusalem in disguise to listen to what people said about him and ruthlessly dispatched any relative or friend who proved disloyal.” Indeed, by the time of his death in 4 BCE, Herod had ordered the execution of Mariamme, many of his children by various wives and concubines, and thousands of others. Did he order the murder of all the male children of Bethlehem? Chilton doubts it—mainly because he sides with Luke rather than Matthew on the timing of Jesus’ birth—but he freely concedes that mass murder was not unknown to Herod.

Having executed his Maccabean offspring, Herod wrote a deathbed will leaving the kingdom to one of his Samaritan sons, Archelaus. But another son, Antipas, traveled to Rome to contest the will before Augustus, who was less than pleased with the dispute. The emperor split the kingdom between the two, and Antipas bided his time. When Augustus died, Antipas strengthened his position by marrying Herodias. The fact that she was already married to another brother of his greatly angered a certain desert prophet and baptizer named John, whose head ended up on a platter as a result of his protestations. Not long after, Herod Antipas, taking on his father’s name, ordered the crucifixion of John’s cousin, Jesus.

The line of Herod continued with Agrippa I and Agrippa II, who acted as client-kings for Rome until the Jewish Revolt, which started in 66 CE and culminated with the

sacking of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus. When the temple fell in 70 CE, so did the Herodian dynasty.

Chilton excels at breathing life not only into the characters we encounter in the biblical text but also into the many competing forces and factions in the ancient Near East. Have you wondered about the difference between the Pharisees and the Sadducees? Or been confused about how Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas both ruled in Jerusalem? Chilton parses all of this out, along with shedding light on the various postures toward the Herodians and toward Rome extant in the first-century church. Finally, he explains several of Jesus' teachings by putting them in the context of the tumult in Jerusalem. They make infinitely more sense to me having read Chilton's exegesis.

If I have one nit to pick, it's the lack of maps and a family tree for the Herods, which I hope the publisher will see fit to include when this book goes to paperback. Those visual references would be a great aid, even to those of us steeped in the ancient Near East.

I have read many books about the first centuries BCE and CE, and I cannot remember one as helpful as *The Herods*. In fact, I might go so far as to say that preaching the New Testament without having read this book constitutes misdemeanor homiletical malpractice.