

JEWISH POLITICAL HISTORY IN THE GOSPELS

Throughout the Gospels, the land of Israel is correctly depicted under the authority of the Roman Empire (cf. Luke 2:2). This political reality begins with General Pompey's siege of Jerusalem in 63 BC. By the time one opens the Gospels, there is no longer a Roman Senate and Rome has transitioned into an Empire. The first emperor, Augustus Ceasar, is already in power and he is succeeded in AD 14 by Tiberius, his adopted son.

Matthew and Luke,¹⁴ however, are not initially concerned with the power of Rome as they are with letting the reader know that Herod the Great (73–4 BC) is “king” (*basileos*: βασιλέως) over the land of Israel (Luke 1:5; Matt 2:1). Under the influence of Mark Antony, the Roman Senate named Herod “King of Judaea” in 37 BC (*War* 1:282–285). The portrait painted of Herod in historical sources is one of a paranoid, power-hungry client king, who was deeply loyal to Rome, especially as it assured his continuing authority over the land. This characteristic of Herod the Great is on full display in Matthew 2 when Herod calls the *magi* in order to find where Jesus, the “king of the Jews” (Matt 2:2), had been born. Herod was disingenuous to state that he desired to worship the child. He is incensed after the *magi* do not return, and sends men to kill all males two years old and younger (Matt 2:16–17). Herod's paranoid tendencies do not begin there as he is also responsible for killing his Hasmonean wife, Mariamne, and their two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus (see *War* 1:442–444, 550–551; also *Ant.* 17:44). He is, however, survived by his many building projects, all of which have made it through the passage of time in either monumental ruins or from being reused.

After Herod's death in 4 BC, his kingdom is divided among his three sons. Often they are referred to in the Gospels as “Herod” without their

own distinguishing names (Matt 14:1; Mark 6:6; Luke 3:9). Herod Archelaus, ethnarch in control of Samaria, Judea, and Idumea (Edom, and Herod the Great's homeland) is referenced as ruling over Judea in Matthew 2:22. “Judea” here refers geographically to the portion of land between Samaria and Idumea. With their return to the land of Israel from Egypt (Matt 2:23)—after Herod the Great's death—Joseph and Mary avoided Archelaus' territory and withdrew into Galilee, which was under the control of Antipas.¹⁵ Archelaus was noted for his cruelty—far surpassing his father—and his ardent desire to be named “king” over his brothers. His political ploy to regain his father's former authority was contested by a group of Jewish and Samaritan leaders who he had previously chosen to deal with barbarously.¹⁶ Some suggest that Jesus' “Parable of the Pounds” (Luke 19:12–27) is partly an allusion to this event. As a result of this, Archelaus was deposed by Augustus Caesar and exiled to Vienna of Gaul in AD 6 (*War* 2:111). After his exile, Judea officially became a Roman province. The imposition of direct Roman rule in Judea brought with it a census, which in Luke happens under [Publius Sulpicius] Quirinius, governor of Syria (Luke 2:2; AD 10–12). Marc Turnage has already noted Luke's use of this event to literarily establish Roman authority over the land of Israel.¹⁷ From that point, Rome was ever present,



Bust of Pompey (photo Alphanidon, via Wikimedia Commons).

Some of Herod's building projects (clockwise from below):

Western Wall of the Temple Mount (lower courses are Herodian stone) (photo Maureen Farrell Garcia).

Cave of the Patriarchs at Hebron (photo Ricardo Tulio Gandelman, via Wikimedia Commons).

Aerial view of the remains at Masada, looking southeast (photo Samuel Magal).





THE DIVISION OF HEROD'S KINGDOM

specifically in Judea, through a series of procurators and prefects. The most well known prefect, who is also responsible for Jesus' death, is Pontius Pilate.

After his father's death, Herod Antipas was named tetrarch in control of the Galilee and Perea in the Transjordan. Antipas, who is responsible for John the Baptist's imprisonment and death (Matt 14:3; Mark 14:10), is also referenced in the Passion accounts (Luke 23:11). Luke's Gospel is the only one to depict this political reality. In fact, when Pilate sends Jesus to Antipas, Pilate states: "And when he



Pilate Stone from Caesarea, now on display at the Israel Museum (photo Jeffrey P. Garcia).

Inscription reads:
[...]S TIBERIEUM
[...PONTI]US PILATUS
[...PRAEF]ECTUS IUDA[EA]E

[...]s Tiberium
[...Ponti]us Pilate
[...]prefect of Jud[ae]a

(from Greatness Grace & Glory: Carta's Atlas of Biblical Biography / Paul H. Wright; © Carta Jerusalem)

learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction (*ek tes exousias*: ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας), he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time." Herod Philip, the third son to inherit a portion of Herod the Great's land, was a tetrarch in control of Batanea (or Bashan), Trachonitis, Auranitis, Paneas (Baneas¹⁸) and the Ulatha region.¹⁹ He is referenced with Jesus' passing through the region of Caesarea Philippi (see above) and in Mark where Herod Antipas is said to have seized the Baptist because he openly spoke against Antipas's marriage to his brother Philip's wife, Herodias (Mark 6:17).

Luke, while being particularly precise with the Jewish political reality of the land of Israel, is also so in defining the religious leadership of the day.²⁰

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...

(Luke 3:1-2)

Along with listing Roman authority, the Evangelist includes the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. Indeed, in the Second Temple period politics and religion were not separate spheres. While the high priest and priesthood played an important role in Jewish life in the land of Israel (see below), there appears to be a distinct relationship between the priestly elite, especially Caiaphas—son-in-law to Annas—and Pilate. During Jesus' last week of life, he is described by Luke as coming before Caiaphas and the elite of Jerusalem, Pilate, Herod Antipas, and Pilate once again (Luke 22:66-23:25), *not* the entire Sanhedrin. Pilate's and Caiaphas's allegiance is implied by the fact that the latter's tenure as high priest is the longest in the house of Annas (AD 18-36), and that both Pilate—removed from his position by Lucius Vitellius (*Ant.* 18:88-89)—and Caiaphas were deposed in the same year (AD 36/37).²¹

