

Parthians Control Palestine from 10–37 B.C., Herod Regains Throne, Kills Mariamne & Assassinate Hasmonaean Sons; Magi Arrive in Jerusalem with Entourage of Thousands; Sudden Appearance Sets Off Fear & Trepidation; Failure of Herod's Signal Corps; Herod's Building Programs

During these three years between 40 and 37 B.C., the Hasmonaeans and Idumaeans waged a struggle for power culminating in the execution of Antigonus in 37 B.C. Through the favor of Augustus and Antony, Herod obtained the crown of Judea that year and became the king of the Jews.

The first act of his reign was the extermination of the Asmonean house, to which Herod himself was related through his marriage with Mariamne, the grandchild of Hyrcanus. Antigonus was slain and with him 45 of his chief adherents. Hyrcanus was recalled from Babylon, to which he had been banished by Antigonus, but the high-priesthood was bestowed on Aristobulus, Herod's brother-in-law. These outrages against the purest blood in Judea turned the love of Mariamne, once cherished for Herod into bitter hatred. The Jews, loyal to the dynasty of the Maccabees, accused Herod before the Roman court, but he was summarily acquitted by Antony.

When Antony, who had ever befriended Herod, was conquered by Augustus at Actium, Herod quickly turned to the powers that were, and, by subtle flattery and timely support, won imperial favor. The boundaries of his kingdom were now extended by Rome. (p. 1379)

Afraid to leave a remnant of the Asmonean power alive, he sacrificed Mariamne his wife, his mother-in-law Alexandra, and ultimately even his own sons by Mariamne, Alexander and Aristobulus la-ris-ta-bü'-las\ (who by blood were Asmoneans).¹ (p. 1380)

When the Parthian Magi arrived in Jerusalem in 4 B.C., Herod was mentally deranged from a disease of which he was unaware. His vision of a dynasty was still alive and he remained adamant about preserving his kingdom in perpetuity. He was in good standing with Rome, for he and Augustus remained good friends.

He was confident of his future ambitions since both the Roman and Parthian Empires were enjoying a period of peace. He had assassinated any Asmonean pretenders to the throne. As far as he knew, there was nothing that could disturb his tranquility—that is, until the day a large entourage of Parthian troops approached the gates of Jerusalem.

XII. The Magi Arrive in Jerusalem

The movie about the Battle of Carrhae demonstrated the expertise of the Parthian cavalry. Their light cavalry was expert with bow and arrow and could hit targets at full gallop and while riding away from the enemy. Their heavy cavalry was imposing in full armor which included their horses. To what degree the troops in the Magi's caravan were configured we do not know, but we do have some idea of how many may have been involved in the 1,000-mile trip from the Parthian capital in Hecatompylos to Jerusalem.

We do have historical record of the way Surenas, the victorious Parthian general at the Battle of Carrhae, prepared for his travels:

¹ Henry E. Dosker, "Herod," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 3:1379–80.



Whenever (Surenas) travelled privately, he had one thousand camels to carry his baggage, two hundred chariots for his concubines, one thousand completely armed men for life-guards, and a great many more light-armed; and he had at least ten-thousand horsemen altogether, of his servicemen and retinue.²

That the Magi arrived with that many is unknown but it is a reasonable assumption that their caravan numbered in the thousands.

From the information provided in Matthew 2, it can be estimated that the Magi observed the “star” between one and two years before their arrival in Jerusalem. This expanse of time was required to prepare for the trip. The number of Magi who arrived in Bethlehem is not indicated in the Bible. Tradition has assumed the number to be three. But tradition also depicts them each of a different race, riding into Bethlehem on camels, and worshipping at the manger. We have confirmed they were all Parthians, riding on horses, and arriving at least a year after the virgin birth.

Preparation for this journey required: (1) the accumulation of the costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, (2) official coordination with King Phraates IV, the Sophoi, and fellow Magi regarding a prolonged absence, (3) organization of the caravan that would require food, clothing, and other logistics for a 2,000-mile round trip, (4) conscript the necessary men from the army for protection, and (5) determine the number of camels needed to carry provisions. The retinue would likely have also included servants, animal handlers, cooks, and drivers of supply wagons.

Their decision to undertake the mission was apparently not opposed either by the king or the Sophoi. We have learned that no one was willing to mess with the Magi, not even the Parthians. Further, many of these men were not only Jewish, they were believers. A “star” had advised them to travel to the east to worship the Messiah foretold by the Israelite prophets, including Daniel whose prophecy indicated the precise timing of His birth.

The Magi, among whose specialties was astronomy, were very aware of the importance and significance of the message from the “star”: “The Messiah is to be born and we are to prepare to go and worship Him.”

Once their caravan was ready and it began to make the trek, a long thousand-mile trip lay ahead that would include traversing the Zagros \za'-gras\ Mountains. In all probability they traveled eastward on the Silk Road, the equivalent of a superhighway at that time.

The Silk Road stretched from Xi'an \shē'-än'\, China to Tyre, Syria, covering over 4,000 miles. It was a trade route that linked China with the Roman Empire and all the nations in between prospered because of it including Parthia. The Silk Road ran right through Hecatompylos where the Magi's caravan departed on their mission.

The caravan traveled through Ctesiphon \te'-sa-fän\ at the Tigris River, then up the Euphrates to Palmyra and across to Damascus where they turned south onto the Damascus Road to Jerusalem.

² Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans: Crassus*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 14:448.



The Magi's arrival in Jerusalem and their appearance at Herod's palace is said by Matthew to have troubled both him and all of Jerusalem (Matthew 2:3). That the whole town was aware of their arrival indicates there were more involved than three men on camels. Such an innocuous trio would not have concerned Herod or been a source of "trouble" for the entire town.

Their surprise entrance into Jerusalem presents a mystery that can only be explained by divine intervention. We learn that Herod, ever vigilant to stay abreast of any threat to his throne, either internally or externally, used a series of forts to alert him of goings-on throughout Palestine:

After the battle of Actium (31 B.C.) [Augustus's defeat of Mark Antony] ... Herod was free to govern Palestine, as a client-prince of the Roman Empire should govern his kingdom. In order to put down the brigands who still infested the country and to check the raids of the Arabs on the frontier, he built or rebuilt fortresses.³

These forts were positioned on hills from Damascus to the Negev south of Jerusalem. They were staffed by a signal corps who conveyed their reconnaissance to Jerusalem most likely through runners.

The town guards, the royal guards, and the temple guards deserve special mention. Many guards were needed to keep watch over a town, since towns were the most important targets of enemies. (pp. 288–89)

The kings of Israel had their own guards. At the beginning of the monarchy, in the reign of Saul we already hear of Saul's "runners," who constitute the escort preceding the king's chariot, a personal royal guard. According to 1 Kings 14:27–28, the "officers of the runners" guard the entrance to the royal palace. The personnel of the guard were so numerous that they could be organized into divisions of a hundred, and they played a significant military role.⁴ (p. 289)

There is no other clue in Scripture of how information was conveyed from one fortress to another and finally to the palace, but an organized system was in place. Yet when the Magi and their entourage of thousands of men and animals arrived at Jerusalem it was a complete surprise to everybody.

What happened next is recorded in Matthew 2, the only passage in Scripture that mentions the visit of the Magi. Our historical background has identified them as Parthian priests, an elite fraternity of men who possessed both spiritual and political authority. They followed protocol by going immediately to the highest ranking power in Palestine and announcing their intentions.

When the Magi arrived at Herod's palace the political circumstance in Palestine was fragile. In his younger days, Herod had done great things for the Jews in Caesarea, Samaria, and Jerusalem including rebuilding the temple.

By far the greatest talent of Herod was his singular architectural taste and ability. He built at Jerusalem a magnificent theater and an amphitheater, of which the ruins remain. Thus he introduced into the ascetic sphere of the Jewish life the frivolous spirit of the Greeks and the Romans.

³ John H. A. Hart, "Herod," in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 13th ed. (New York: The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1926), 13:380.

⁴ García López, "שָׂמָר, שָׂמָר," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. David E. Green (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 15:288–89.



(He rebuilt) the temple of Zerubbabel and making it more magnificent than even Solomon's temple had been. Besides this, Herod rebuilt and beautified Strato's Tower, which he called after the emperor, *Caesarea*. He spent 12 years in this gigantic work, building a theater and amphitheater, and above all in achieving the apparently impossible by creating a harbor where there was none before. This was accomplished by constructing a gigantic mole⁵ far out into the sea, and so enduring was the work that the remains of it are seen today. The Romans were so appreciative of the work done by Herod that they made *Caesarea* the capital of the new régime, after the passing away of Herodian power. (p. 1380)

In Jerusalem itself he built the three great towers, *Antonia*, *Phasaelus* and *Mariamne*, which survived even the catastrophe of the year 70 A.D. But the universal character of these operations itself occasioned the bitterest hatred against him on the part of the narrow-minded Jews.⁶ (pp. 1380–81)

The Jews of Jerusalem and Palestine were religious and therefore extremely legalistic. They did not like the idea of the "king of the Jews" being an Arab. Herod found they were always plotting. The Pharisees were self-righteous, the Sadducees were driven by power lust, and the Herodians were not a religious sect but a political party but would go into league with the Pharisees in opposition to Jesus.

As Herod grew older he became bloodthirsty. An insatiable power lust motivated him to eliminate anyone who might threaten his throne, even to the point of murdering his Jewish wife *Mariamne* and her two sons.

Herod and Augustus were friends and in moments of grandeur they would talk about their bloodlines ruling Rome and Palestine forever. What Herod doesn't know is that One who has the legitimate claim to his throne is a citizen of his kingdom. The problem is Herod has no clue while the Magi, who are closing in on Jerusalem, are about to introduce him to the shocking news that there is a small child in his midst who holds an eternal patent on the title King of the Jews.

⁵ "1: a massive work formed of masonry and large stones or earth laid in the sea as a pier or breakwater. 2: the harbor formed by a mole" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v.: "mole").

⁶ Ewing, "Herod," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 3:1380–1381.

