

“Augustus and His Relationship with Herod”

By Herbert W. Bateman IV¹

Augustus

The personality and policies of Caesar Augustus (formerly Gaius Octavius) marked a momentous turning point in the history of the Greco-Roman world. Born 23 September 63 BC, Augustus was related to both Pompey and Julius Caesar via his mother, Atia. He acquired Roman nobility when Atia married consul Lucius Marcius Phiippus in 56 BC, a nobility amplified when Julius Caesar, Octavian’s great uncle, adopted him and made him heir of his estate in 45 BC.² In August 29 BC, after years of political and military posturing, Octavian celebrated a three-day triumph and took his time in establishing his authority. In January 27 BC, he presented himself to the senate as having restored the Roman Republic as it entered a new era in Rome’s history. Octavian would later recall the senate’s response in this manner, “I received the title Augustus by degree of the senate”³ He was also honored as the “first citizen” (*princeps*) of both war and peace. He transformed Rome’s political system, repaired the religious institutions, and eventually transformed the social life from a Roman Republic to a Roman Empire with himself as leader.

“Augustus showed great respect towards all ancient and long-established foreign rites” (Suetonius, *Aug.* 93).⁴ This certainly was true concerning the estimated 8,000 Jews living in Rome during the reign of Augustus (Josephus, *War* 2.1 §80). Philo contends that Augustus guaranteed their position in Rome, honored their Sabbath, and permitted them to send their temple tax to Jerusalem, to receive Roman citizenship, and to study Jewish law (Philo, *Embassy*, 156–58).⁵ His positive relationship with the Jewish people living in Rome was extended to those in Judea seemingly due to his longstanding political and personal friendship with Herod the Great whereby Herod served as Caesar’s client king over Judea for twenty-six years.⁶

Herod

Herod’s political relationship with Augustus began as early as 40 BC when Mark Antony, Augustus (then Octavius), and the Senate declared Herod King of Judea. The appointment was

¹ This article is an excerpt by Herbert W. Bateman IV chapter “Interpreting the Gospels Historically: A Tale of Two Histories” in *Understanding the Gospels: A Guide for Teaching and Preaching*, edited by Herbert W. Bateman and Benjamin I. Simpson (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017).

² *History of Rome* (or *Velleius Paterculus*) in LCL, trans. by Frederick W. Shipley (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1924), 177–81. Frédéric Hurlet and Frederik Vervaet, “Augustus, Life and Career” trans. by Johanna M. Baboukis in *OEAGR*, vol. 1 (Oxford, NY: University Press, 2010), 332–44.

³ *The Acts of Augustus* (or *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*) 34 in LCL, trans. by Frederic W. Shipley (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1924), 399.

⁴ All Suetonius quotes are from Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. by Robert Graves Revised with an Introduction and Notes by J. B. Rives (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

⁵ John M. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 292–95, cf. 76–77, 238, 267–68, 310.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 250, 293–95.

celebrated with a banquet given by Antony (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.13.10–14.5 §§365–90). After Augustus’s defeat of Antony at Actium on 2 September 31 BC, Herod endeared himself to Augustus (Josephus, *War* 1.20.1–2 §§386–92). Augustus admired Herod’s loyalty and appreciated his ability to rule. Herod’s success contributed to Augustus’s *Pax Romana*, assisted in the spread of Roman culture by way of comprehensive building projects (e.g., Caesarea, Sepphoris, Jerusalem Temple, etc.), provided Rome with a reliable ally on the eastern fringes of the empire, and prepared his sons in the ways of Rome with a Roman education.⁷ It was a common practice of Augustus to find guardians for children of dynastic heirs until they came of age, to educate and raise them in Rome (Suetonius, *Aug.* 48). This practice was extended to Herod’s sons, which enhanced the personal relationship between them.

Aristobulus and Alexander, the sons of Herod through his Hasmonean wife Mariamme, studied in Rome for five years. When tensions emerged between Herod and his two sons, Augustus intervened to re-establish domestic peace in Herod's home even though it was short lived. Aristobulus and Alexander were eventually executed at Sebaste for treason (Josephus, *Ant.* 16.4.6 §§132–134; *War* 1.28.2–3 §§458–60). After Herod died, Augustus served as executor of Herod’s sixth will whereby three other sons were honored with portions of Herod’s kingdom. His sons through his wife Malthace, Archelaus and Antipas, were awarded the largest portion of Herod’s kingdom. *Archelaus* was awarded Samaria, Judah, and Idumea. *Antipas* was awarded Galilee and Perea. Another son through his wife Cleopatra, *Philip*, was awarded the regions of Batanea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.11.4 §§ 318–20).

These sort of benevolent acts extended to Herod, his family, as well as the Jewish people do not suggest that Augustus understood the Jewish people or their customs. He believed the Jews fasted every Sabbath (Suetonius, *Aug.* 76). Nevertheless, Augustus’s relationship with Herod and tolerance toward the Jews living in Rome appears to have spread to Jews living throughout the Roman world.⁸

Matthew

So how might this historical information help in interpreting the historical setting about Jesus’s birth recorded in Matthew? During my early study of Matthew, it seemed odd to me that Herod would act so violently (2:16) after he heard of the Magi seeking the birth of the Messiah (2:2–3). Yet for the early Judean follower of Jesus who was reading this account and for whom the Gospel was written,⁹ they knew far more about the historical setting concerning Augustus and Herod than me. First, they knew of Herod’s longstanding relationship with Rome’s leaders as well as his paranoia. Herod was suspicious of everyone and trusted no one when it came to securing and retaining his rule over Judea. During the early years of consolidating his rule from 37 to 24 BC, he drowned his one brother-in-law Aristobulus III in 35 BC and executed his uncle Joseph in 34 BC (Josephus, *Ant.* 15.3.2–6 §§42–70). Herod killed his father-in-law John Hyrcanus II (30 BC), his Hasmonean wife Mariamme (29 BC), his mother-in-law Alexandra (28 BC), and another brother-in-law Costabar (27 BC). Herod’s distrust would later spread to his sons Aristobulus and Alexander as well as his Idumean son, Antipater, through his wife Doris.

⁷ For a complete history of Herod, see Peter Richardson’s *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (South Carolina: University Press, 1996).

⁸ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 279. “Diaspora,” Livius: *Cultuur, geschiedenis en literatuur* (Livius.org, created in 1996; last modified on 25 April 2016), <http://www.livius.org/articles/concept/diaspora/>?

⁹ J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 158–59; Jack D. Kingsbury, “Social History of the Matthean Community” in *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. David L. Balch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 264.

All were put to death because they were a perceived threat to his throne. Second, they knew of Herod's close political and personal relationship with Augustus. After all, Augustus appointed Herod and supported his rule over Judea for decades.

So when Matthew 2:2–3 tells us that upon Herod's hearing of the Magi coming to pay homage to a newborn king, it caused him "inner turmoil" (ἐταράχθη; BDAG 990). Why? Was it because Herod was trying to thwart the Messiah? Or was it because Herod had established a pattern of paranoia that resulted in death for anyone who might threaten his rule. When he assembled the "experts of the law" (2:5–6), was it because he himself anticipated Messiah? Perhaps not! It may be he believed along with many others of his day that David's dynasty ceased in 586 BC. According to Ben Sira, David's dynasty had ended, the power of the dynasty had been given to others, and the honor of the dynasty had been removed because of the great sins of the Davidic monarchs (49:4–6). Elsewhere Ben Sira emphasizes that people have the power to choose to obey God. Each person, including kings, is responsible for his actions (15:11–17). The kings of the Davidic monarchy chose disobedience and thereby forfeited their right to rule. Only David, Hezekiah, and Josiah appear to receive absolution. Ben Sira never mentions the restoration of David's line. Similarly, Josephus believed the establishment of David as king and his dynasty was a tribute to the power of God (*Ant.* 5.9.4 §§335–37). God raised David to power, despite his ordinary parentage, and his dynasty lasted for twenty-one generations. Yet as the story of David and his dynasty continues to unfold, the longevity of the dynasty was evidently conditional with no everlasting dimensions (*Ant.* 7.4.4 §§ 92–93; 8.4.6 §§ 125–29).¹⁰ Finally, it is interesting that Augustus appears to turn a blind eye to Herod's paranoia throughout the twenty-six years of Herod's reign. Why? Perhaps it was because of Herod's loyal support of Augustus when Augustus first assumed his rule over Rome. Perhaps it was because of Herod's longstanding political and personal relationship with Augustus. Whatever the real reason, these historical realities about Herod were common knowledge to Matthew's readers but not widespread among us twenty-first century readers. Thus the manner in which we fill in Matthew's historical gaps should give consideration to Jesus's historical context.

While Herod died in late 4 or early 5 BC around the age of seventy (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.8.1 §§191–92), Augustus died a month short of his seventy-sixth birthday, 19 August 14 AD (Suetonius, *Aug.* 100). Nevertheless before they died, each left their kingdoms to heirs. For Herod, three sons inherited his kingdom (Josephus, *Wars* 1.33.8–9 §§665–73). For Augustus, he had convinced the Roman people that the next leader of Rome should come from his family.

¹⁰ H.W. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History in the Antiquitates Judaicae of Flavius Josephus*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 7 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 78–83.