

# Will the Real King Herod Please Stand Up?

Jewish history largely remembers King Herod as a cruel tyrant who suffered from mental illness. But in her biography of the 1st-century, B.C.E., Roman ruler of the Land of Israel, Mireille Hadas-Lebel makes the distinction between his dysfunctional family life and his professional accomplishments





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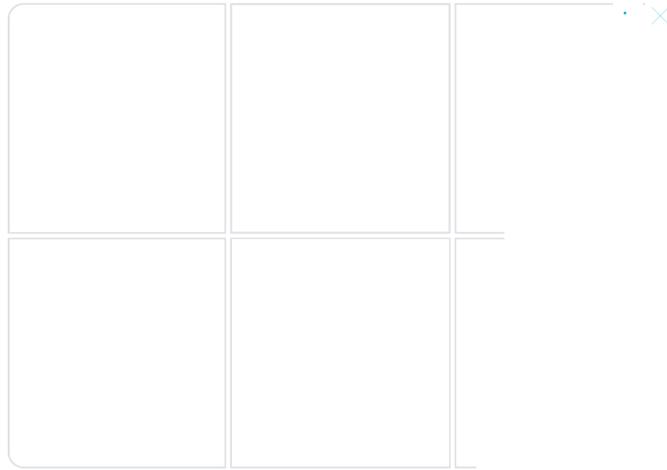
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In 1895, the Hebrew-language newspaper Hamelitz, which was published in St. Petersburg, serialized a translation of a book by the Ukrainian-Russian writer Daniil Lukich Mordovtsev, titled “Herod: His Foundation Story in the Historical Chronicles.” It was the first biography of Herod to appear in Hebrew, and the newspaper felt it necessary to edit the text in order to underscore Herod’s negative image.

Until then, readers of Hebrew could have learned about Herod in the chronicle “Josippon” – attributed to Flavius Josephus although it was actually written in the 10th century by an Italian Jew – but it was not until the mid-19th century that it possible to read about Herod in the books by real Josephus (Yosef Ben Matityahu) in the first century C.E., in Kalman Schulman’s translations-adaptations of “Antiquities of the Jews” (1864) and “The Jewish War” (1862). The first full translation into Hebrew of “The Jewish War,” by Y.N. Simhoni, appeared only in 1923, in Warsaw, followed by a version by Shmuel Haggai in 1964 (and another by Lisa Ullmann, in 2009). A Hebrew translation of “Antiquities,” by Abraham Schalit, appeared in 1963-1964. Herod and the period of his monarchy were also depicted in literature about the history of the Jewish people by Heinrich (Zvi) Graetz, Simon Dubnow and others.

It was only in 1960, however, that Abraham Schalit published “King Herod: The Man and his Actions,” which elicited immediate controversy in Israel. Among Schalit’s critics were his Hebrew University colleagues Joseph Klausner, who wrote voluminously on Herod, and Yitzhak Baer. Schalit detached Herod from the image of the bloodthirsty monster that had been created in the Jewish tradition, and found that he possessed many positive attributes.





In the generations that followed, local scholars (as well as amateur historians) wrote a great deal about Herod and his times, but did not produce full-fledged biographies, whereas a good many biographies of him appeared in the international arena during the 20th century. The appearance of a new Hebrew biography had to wait until 2007: “King Herod: A Persecuted Persecutor,” by Aryeh Kasher and Eliezer Witztum. It restored Herod to the tradition that portrayed him as a cruel tyrant who suffered from mental illness. In the scholium commentary to “Megillat Ta’anit” (“Scroll of Fasting”), the anniversary of Herod’s death is a festive day. It was only for the Jews of Rome – thus, at least, the Roman playwright Persius (34–62 C.E.) relates – that it was his birthday that was a day of celebration.

Christianity viewed Herod as an anti-Christ. The theologian Fulbert of Chartres (10th–11th centuries) wrote that Herod symbolizes the devil and the Jews were his helpers. Graetz responded to such Judeophobic remarks by noting that, fortunately, the New Testament account of the Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem (Matthew 2), at Herod’s order, is a fiction, so the Jews cannot be accused of it.

Probably no figure in the history of the Second Temple period, and not only then, had a biography more dramatic than Herod. In “Antiquities” and “The Jewish War,” Josephus left future biographers not only a lengthy and detailed picture of the king’s life and deeds, but also of his “psychological traits.” The translation of Josephus’ works into European languages led to Herod’s becoming the protagonist of dozens of plays, with a complex and



multidimensional personality. In the final chapter of her book, Hadas-Lebel provides an exhaustive account of the medieval Mystery Plays, which were aimed at the general public, and of the “secular” dramas that began appearing in the 16th century. Among these, I will add, was the first play written in English by a woman, Elizabeth Cary (1613), and, in Russian, Gavrila Derzhavin’s play “Herod and Mariamne” (1809), according to which Herod succeeded to the Hasmonean dynasty because the last Hasmoneans were incompetent despots.



A contemporary model of Herod's mausoleum, as envisaged by the late archaeologist Ehud Netzer, and installed at Herodium. Credit: Moshe Gilad

In European culture, the name "Herod" became synonymous with people who were cruel, mad and devious. In Russian, "Irod" was a metonym for a child murderer. In 1833, the French royalist historian Jean-Baptiste Capefigue summed up Herod's life in the following way: He rose to power like a fox, reigned like a lion and died like a stray dog (Capefigue was wrong on the last count, of course). Herod's presence was ubiquitous in Christendom, whereas in Jewish culture, he was an almost forgotten figure, certainly as compared to his presence in European cultures. It was only in the memoirs of Glückel of Hamlin, from the 17th century, that I found the name "Herod," used to describe a person who has deceived her husband.

The book by Mireille Hadas-Lebel, professor emerita at the Sorbonne, which appeared first in French, in 2017, and is now available in a Hebrew translation, thus becomes the third biography of Herod in Hebrew, and it differs from its predecessors. It is a fusion of history and belles-lettres. It's readable, it flows, it is elegantly written and it is up to date with regard to most of the archaeological finds of recent years, notably at Masada, where Herod's lifestyle, with his imports of wines and apples from Italy, was revealed.

Most pointedly, the book does not cling to a chronological sequence, but focuses rather on important events and key aspects of its subject's life. For example, the author deals briefly with the love-hate relationship between Herod and his wife, Mariamne the Hasmonean – the subject of many European dramas – and follows Josephus in describing the affair, and the madness that seized Herod after he sent her to her death. It's legitimate to ask whether there was any substance to Herod's suspicions that his wife had



It bears noting that Hadas-Lebel quotes an article by the 19th-century French scholar Ernest Renan, who wrote that Herod was “cruel, lustful, obdurate, as one needed to be in order to succeed in the new surroundings. A lion in which one sees only its broad throat and thick mane, without demanding moral sense from it, and with a true sense of greatness.” She tries to strike a balance between the Herod who is considered to be suffering from paranoia and is violent, impulsive, mentally ill, power hungry, who acknowledged no power above him other than that of Rome; and the Herod who understands the rules of realpolitik, who possesses a sense of survival, initiates grand construction projects – among them a large port in Stratonos Pyrgos (Caesarea) – for which he imported raw materials and apparently also trained workers and craftsmen from abroad. Herod, the author writes, was more than a local ruler and “did not see himself as the king of a small province in the East called Judea, but rather as a monarch with broad horizons, cosmopolitan, capable of adjusting to the innovations of his time.”

Accordingly, he built and renovated temples and public structures in various lands. He was the king of the non-Jews and it was for them that he built amphitheatres and baths, whereas for the Jews he built a third Temple, far more luxurious than its predecessor (whose dedication is not marked in the Hebrew calendar), and during whose reign the Oral Law developed without interference.

In other words, Herod did not try to convert the Jews to Hellenism but conducted a two-pronged policy, one aspect of which was aimed at the Jewish population and the other at non-Jewish society. It took a powerful ruler to pursue a dual policy of this kind, which was not considered acceptable by the Jewish public. His murderousness was manifested largely in the family context and amid palace intrigues, and it is difficult to accept that the person who carried out all these projects was mentally ill, paranoid and impulsive.





civil war between John Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, which led to Rome's takeover of Judea and the abolition of the Hasmonean monarchy. The Roman protection that was granted to Herod, and his coronation as a client king, accorded the Herodian state stability and security as well as economic prosperity. Still, it was a brief interim period – Herod came to power in 37 B.C.E. and died in 4 B.C.E. – between the Hasmonean period and the rule of the prefects that led to the revolt against Rome, and all that remain of Herod's achievements are his building projects, both public and private.

In 2013, some 800,000 visitors flocked to a monumental exhibition at the Israel Museum that depicted Herod's major contribution in terms of the changes he wrought in the Land of Israel landscape. Herod the great builder suited the Zionist ethos of "building the land," and some thought he had been rehabilitated and given the place he deserves in the collective Israeli memory.

But the exhibition did not succeed in making Herod part of the political discourse in Israel, for example as the king of the Jews and the non-Jews alike. The Herod controversy remains within the walls of academia and in the academic literature. The political and cultural discourse will very likely find it difficult to see the Herodian period as a "useful past" from which lessons can be gleaned about the tensions between politics and morality, between realism and messianism, between Jewish culture and gentile culture, between state and religion – tensions that are endemic to contemporary Israeli society.



Hadas-Lebel writes, “Although Herod’s reign was strewn with bodies, he could also take pride in multiple achievements. Herod the Cruel or Herod the Great? Time will tell what the generations to come will memorialize.” There is no doubt that in recent generations, he has been judged under the influence of the different approaches to the conflicts mentioned above – and that is how he will be judged, if he is judged, in the generations to come.

*“Herod,” by Mireille Hadas-Lebel, Hebrew translation from French by Hamutal Bar-Yosef, Carmel Publishing; 304 pages, 99 shekels*

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