

Chapter XVII

The Chronology of Herod

*Part II of the Sabbath
Year of 36/35 B.C.E.*

The evidence is conclusive. The year that Herod besieged and conquered Jerusalem was not a sabbath year, but the following year was. The only response left to those advocating systems “B” and “D” is to claim that Herod’s siege of Jerusalem actually took place in the year 38/37 B.C.E. This claim is not without some construing of the evidence. It is assumed by many that the Roman historian Cassius Dio dates the fall of Jerusalem to the consulship of Claudius and Norbanus, i.e. 38 B.C.E.¹ Based upon this date several historians have rejected the testimony of Josephus and have dated the conquest of Jerusalem by Herod to the latter part of the year 38/37 B.C.E.² It is crucial to our study, therefore, to establish beyond any doubt the chronology of Herod.

Dio’s Contribution

Our first consideration is the assumed dating of the fall of Jerusalem by Dio,³ which is commonly held to be in the consul year of Claudius and Norbanus (Jan. 1, 38 until Jan. 1, 37 B.C.E., late Roman reckoning). A close examination of Dio’s history reveals that Dio does not say this at all and his words are taken entirely out of context. The section of Dio’s Roman history which mentions the siege against Jerusalem is more precisely concerned with the wars of Augustus (Octavian) Caesar and Mark Antony in the divided empire of Rome.

- Chapter 48:29–42 deals with the origin of the divided empire and the events of Caesar and Antony during the consul years 40 and 39 B.C.E.
- Chapters 48:43 through 49:18 relate the history of the wars and events of Caesar during the consul years of 38 until the beginning of 35 B.C.E., primarily concentrating on his war efforts against Sextus.
- In chapter 49:19–34 Dio changes the discussion to Antony and his wars in the east, wars which occurred during the same period as those previously mentioned for Caesar (from 38 to the beginning of 35 B.C.E.). It was within this discussion that the conquest of Jerusalem was mentioned.

Dio begins this history of Antony’s wars by directing his readers’ attention away from Caesar and towards Antony: “This was what Caesar was doing; as for Antony and the barbarians, their warfare was as follows.” He goes on

¹ Dio, 49:22.

² E.g. FH, 3, p. 220; JQR, 9, pp. 92ff.

³ Dio, 49:22.

to document Antony's Syrian wars, explaining how he won victories in Cyrrhastica and other regions in Syria. Finally, Antony besieged his enemy in Samosata, Commagene, a country located in northern Syria on the western bank of the Euphrates river.

After a period of time, and seeing that he was getting nowhere with his siege, Antony opened up negotiations and secured an agreement with the enemy.⁴ "After doing this he set out for Italy, and Gaius Sosius received from him the governorship of Syria and Cilicia." Dio adds that Antony spent the entire year of 37 B.C.E. going to Italy and returning again to the province of Syria.⁵

With the introduction that Sosius (Sossius) had received the governorship of Syria and Cilicia, Dio continues with a digression about Sosius. This digression begins with the words, "This officer subdued the Aradii,"⁶ and continues until the end of passage.⁷ Dio remarks that after becoming governor and subduing the Aradii, who had been besieged up until this time, Sosius "also conquered in battle Antigonus, who had put to death the Roman guards that were with him, and reduced him by siege when he took refuge in Jerusalem."⁸ At no time does Dio say that Sosius subdued Jerusalem in the same year that Antony left off from the siege against Samosata. Dio does observe that Herod had been made governor of Judaea by Antony, but Antigonus he bound and flogged, and afterwards he slew him.⁹

In chapter 49:23, Dio resumes his discussion of Antony's wars in the east by stating, "this was the course of events in the consulship of Claudius and Norbanus; during the following year the Romans accomplished nothing worthy of note in Syria." The primary discussion was about Antony and his war efforts against the Parthians and in Syria, not Sosius or his aid to Herod in conquering Judaea, which was a digression. When Dio says that the Romans accomplished nothing worthy of note in Syria in 37 B.C.E., he was bringing the reader's attention back to Antony's eastern campaigns. Sosius' assistance to Herod, on the other hand, was a war effort to aid Herod in Judaea, not a Syrian matter or a concern of Antony's wars.

Dio's statement, that Antony spent the year 37 B.C.E. "reaching Italy and returning again,"¹⁰ shows that Antony was back in the east towards the end of that year. This fact is further supported when Dio writes in 49:24 that a general of Antony's, named Crassus, made a successful campaign against the Iberians and Albanians in Asia during the first part of the consulship of Gellius and Nerva (36 B.C.E.), in the last part of winter. This victory was followed up by a campaign of Antony's against the Parthian empire.

Dio's words do not prove that Herod's victory over Antigonus and the city of Jerusalem took place in 38 B.C.E. Rather, his comments are part of a digression meant to explain the subsequent victories of Sosius, whom Antony

⁴ Dio., 49:22.

⁵ Dio., 49:23.

⁶ Dio., 49:22:3.

⁷ Until Dio., 49:22:6.

⁸ Dio, 49:22.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dio, 49:23.

had appointed as governor of Syria and Cilicia as he left Asia to return to Italy. The evidence shows that Antony must have left Syria for Italy early in the year 37 B.C.E., for Dio notes that Antony spent the entire year of 37 B.C.E. "in reaching Italy and returning again," via Athens.¹¹ Such would leave very little time for Sosius to conquer the Aradii and then assist Herod in a siege of Jerusalem, which Josephus notes began in the summertime¹² and took six months to accomplish.¹³

The Length of Herod's Reign

Our most important source for dating the year that Herod conquered Jerusalem is Josephus. From his historical works we glean the following facts:

Herod survived the execution of his son but five days. He expired after a reign of 34 years, reckoning from the date when, after putting Antigonus to death, he assumed control of the state; of 37 years, from the date when he was proclaimed king by the Romans. (Jos., *Wars*, 1:33:8)

Having done this he died, on the fifth day after having his son Antipater killed. He had reigned for 34 years from the time when he had put Antigonus to death, and for 37 years from the time when he had been appointed king by the Romans. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 17:8:1)

These statements demonstrate that Herod ruled a total of 37 years from the time he was appointed king by the Romans, and 34 years from the time he conquered Jerusalem and had his rival Antigonus put to death.

The End of Herod's Reign

Josephus notes that not long before the death of Herod the Great there was an "eclipse of the moon."¹⁴ Only on the night of March 12/13 of the year 4 B.C.E. was there an eclipse of the moon in this part of the Middle East, no such phenomenon taking place in either 3 or 2 B.C.E.¹⁵ Shortly after this eclipse Herod died. His son Archelaus assumed the royal mantle and then seven days later observed the Passover Feast (beginning on Abib 14).¹⁶

In determining the reign of kings, the Jewish custom was that if a man reigned beyond the first of Nisan (Abib) it was counted as a year to him. Also, "If a king ascends the throne on the twenty-ninth of Adar, as soon as the first of Nisan arrives he is reckoned to have reigned a year."¹⁷

¹¹ Plutarch, *Antony*, 34f.

¹² Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:16:2.

¹³ Jos., *Wars*, 5:9:4.

¹⁴ Jos., *Antiq.*, 17:6:4 through 17:8:1.

¹⁵ HJP, 1, p. 377, n. 1; HBC, p. 231.

¹⁶ Jos., *Wars*, 1:17:8 through 2:1:3, *Antiq.*, 17:8:1–17:9:3.

¹⁷ HBC, p. 90.

This data leaves us two options. If Herod died BEFORE the first of Abib (i.e. March/April) in 4 B.C.E., we must reckon to him his thirty-seventh Roman year and his thirty-fourth year of ruling Jerusalem only from the year beginning Abib 1 of 5 B.C.E. until Abib 1 of 4 B.C.E. If, on the other hand, Herod lived BEYOND the first of Abib, then we must reckon to him his last year as beginning with Abib 1 of 4 B.C.E. until Abib 1 of 3 B.C.E.

When Herod died, his heir Archelaus gave him a funeral and the nation of Judaea observed a mourning period of seven days. On the last day of the mourning period Archelaus gave a feast for the crowds.¹⁸ After the feast, Archelaus went up to the Temple where he was received with varied acclamations. "Towards evening, however, a large number of those who were bent on revolution assembled on the same spot, and, now that the public mourning for the king was ended, began a lamentation on their own account." They began to mourn the death of Judas and Matthias, interpreters of the law who had died at the command of Herod.¹⁹

Archelaus tried to pacify the crowd but was unable.²⁰ While commenting on this clamor that was going on at the Temple, Josephus provides us with a vital clue as to the date that Herod died. He writes:

At this time there came around the festival during which it is the ancestral custom of the Jews to serve unleavened bread. It is called Passover, being a commemoration of their departure from Egypt.²¹

Josephus goes on to say:

Now the fomenters of disorder, who were mourning for Judas and Matthias, the interpreters of the laws, stood together in the Temple and provided the dissidents with plenty of food, for they were not ashamed to beg for it.²²

In another place Josephus affirms his date for this disturbance against Archelaus at the Temple when he notes that it was at this time that "the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which the Jews call Passover, came round".²³

This evidence proves that Herod died on Abib 7, 4 B.C.E., seven days before Passover: the seven days of mourning, beginning with Herod's death, followed by Abib 14, the day that Archelaus went up to the Temple—actually being the first day of Passover²⁴—in turn followed by Abib 15, the day when the Jews of this period celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover.²⁵

¹⁸ Jos., *Antiq.*, 17:8:1–4, *Wars*, 1:33:8–2:1:1.

¹⁹ Jos., *Wars*, 2:1:1–2, *Antiq.*, 17:8:4–17:9:1.

²⁰ Jos., *Antiq.*, 17:9:1–2, *Wars*, 2:1:2–3.

²¹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 17:9:3.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Jos., *Wars*, 2:1:3.

²⁴ Exod., 12:5–42; Lev., 23:5–8; Num., 28:16–25.

²⁵ Jub., 49:1; Philo, *Spec. Laws*, 2:28.

Therefore, based upon Jewish custom, Josephus reckoned to Herod as his last year Abib 1 of 4 B.C.E. to Abib 1 of 3 B.C.E.²⁶

The Beginning of Herod's Reign

The beginning of Herod's reign can be determined by the following facts: Josephus reports that Herod, fleeing from the Parthians who had seized Judaea (spring of 40 B.C.E.), came to the port at Alexandria, Egypt. Even the Queen of Egypt could not persuade him to remain, "for he was eager to get to Rome although there was a χειμῶνος (winter-storm)²⁷ and Italy was reported to be disturbed and in great disorder."²⁸ He immediately set sail from Egypt at "τὴν ἄκμην τοῦ χειμῶνος (the height of a winter-storm)."²⁹ Winter for Josephus came with the setting of Pleiades,³⁰ a time when one might expect "a great downpour of rain."³¹ The Roman writer Pliny, likewise, observed that winter arrived with the setting of the Pleiades, which occurred about 44 days after the autumnal equinox. He adds that it was customary to date winter's beginning "on November 11."³² Herod, accordingly, left Egypt sometime after November 11.

Josephus continues by reporting that Herod was nearly shipwrecked off Pamphylia but came safely to Rhodes. This event caused a small delay but Herod was in a hurry to get to Rome. He remained in Rhodes just long enough for a trireme he had commissioned to be built.³³ Apparently, Herod was unable to buy passage aboard a ship to Rome because few ships dared to challenge the winter storms at sea. A trireme, meanwhile, was a fast sailing vessel that took only about three weeks to build.³⁴ While staying in Rhodes, Herod spent some time assisting the city in recovering from its damages in the war against Gaius Cassius.³⁵

²⁶ See the discussion in HBC, pp. 230f, and HJP, 1, pp. 326–328, n. 165.

²⁷ The Greek term ἀκμή (*akmen*) means, "the highest point of anything" (GEL, p. 27); and χειμῶνος (*kheimonos*) means either, "winter... in winter time" or "wintry weather, a winter-storm, and generally a storm" (GEL, p. 884). Whiston, *Jos.*, correctly understands both *Jos.*, *Antiq.*, 14:14:2, and *Wars*, 1:14:2, as a reference to a winter-storm, for it was not merely the perils of winter that threatened Herod but a severe storm which later caused him to become nearly shipwrecked off the coast of Pamphylia.

²⁸ *Jos.*, *Antiq.*, 14:14:2.

²⁹ See above n. 27.

³⁰ See Chap. XVIII, pp. 239ff.

³¹ *Jos.*, *Antiq.*, 13:8:2.

³² Pliny, 2:47(125); Nov. 10 in Pliny, 18:60(225), but cf. 11:15(42).

³³ *Jos.*, *Antiq.*, 14:14:3, *Wars*, 1:14:3.

³⁴ The length of time it took to build a trireme (a ship with three banks of oars, one above the other) is demonstrated from the story of the decree of Themistocles that 20 new triremes should be built each year from the produce of the mines of Laurium (DGRA, pp. 781f). Since each ship was built in turn, as the products of the mines were coming in, it shows that one trireme was created every two and one half weeks. Another example is found in the story of how the Romans first built quinqueremes (ships with five banks of oars, one above the other). Unfamiliar with the construction of such a ship, the Romans were able to capture a Carthaginian quinquereme warship that had been driven on shore. Using this ship as a model, the Romans were capable of gathering the materials needed and building 100 quinqueremes, placing them into battle in just six weeks (HDCL, p. 1081; cf. Polybius, 1:20–23). Triremes were less complicated than quinqueremes and, in the hands of experienced shipbuilders, as one would find on the island of Rhodes, known for its shipping port, a trireme would easily be constructed within three weeks.

³⁵ *Jos.*, *Antiq.*, 14:14:3, *Wars*, 1:14:3.

When Herod's trireme was finished, he set sail from Rhodes and came to Brundisium, from whence he "sped to Rome." Upon arriving, Herod told Antony of his family's misfortunes and how he had left his nearest relatives besieged in a fortress and had "crossed the sea in the depths of a winter-storm to implore his aid."³⁶

Both Antony and Caesar immediately convened the Senate and after hearing the matter the Senate unanimously voted Herod king of Judaea. Antony, we are told, "made it possible for Herod in only seven days altogether to obtain these unexpected grants and leave Italy." As Herod left the Senate he was accompanied by both Antony and Caesar; "Then Antony entertained him on the first day of his reign."³⁷

Josephus and Africanus specifically date the accession of Herod to the throne of Judaea by the acclamation of the Roman Senate in the "185th Olympiad," the consuls being Gnaeus Domitius Calvinus, for the second time, and Gaius Asinius Pollio."³⁸

The consuls named were elected to office on January 1, 40 B.C.E., based upon a Roman system which had begun in 153 B.C.E.³⁹ Their term of office, though, started with March 1 and ended with March 1 of the following year.⁴⁰ The first of March, according to Varro (45 B.C.E.), was still the beginning of the Roman year during this period.⁴¹ He confirms this again when he writes that "the twelfth month was February, and when the extra month is inserted the last five days are taken off the twelfth month."⁴² As we shall see, Josephus used a consul year system that extended from March 1 until the next March 1.

The text of Josephus gives the 184th Olympiad as the period in which Herod came to the throne under Roman orders. If the Attic reckoning for the Olympiad is used, the 184th Olympiad ended on July 1, 40 B.C.E.; if the Macedonian, it ended on November 1, 40 B.C.E. This dating, of course, is impossible, since Herod came to Rome in late winter of 40 B.C.E. and left within seven days, shortly to be followed by the events of the year 39 B.C.E. As Finegan notes, "the date was actually in Olympiad 185, 1,"⁴³ of the Attic period. Josephus uses the Macedonian November to November reckoning, as we shall demonstrate in Chapter XIX. In either case, the evidence clearly shows that in this one instance, the 184th Olympiad is a scribal error for the 185th Olympiad.

We are faced with two different possibilities. First, Herod's reception of royal power from the Roman Senate could have taken place in early 40 B.C.E., if the 184th Olympiad is correct and Josephus used a January 1 date for the beginning of his consul years. Second, if the 184th Olympiad date is a scribal error and should read 185th, then Herod received power in the winter of

³⁶ Jos., *Wars*, 1:14:2-3, *Antiq.*, 14:14:2-3.

³⁷ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:14:4-5, *Wars*, 1:14:4.

³⁸ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:14:5.

³⁹ Senator, 384; MGH, p. 130.

⁴⁰ JQR, 9, p. 92.

⁴¹ Varro, 6:33.

⁴² Varro, 6:13.

⁴³ HBC, p. 230; HJP, 1, p. 281, n. 3, also concludes that the use of the 184 Olympiad by Josephus at this point "is strictly incorrect."

40/39 B.C.E., prior to the first of Nisan (Abib) and the new year. To judge which date is correct we must retrace the events and compare the works of Josephus with that of Dio.

- In *Wars*, 1:12:1–7, and *Antiquities*, 14:11:7–14:13:2, Josephus discusses the events of the year that Cassius died in his war with Antony and Caesar. Dio, 47:15–48:4, places this war and death of Cassius in the consul year of Marcus Lepidus and Lucius Plancus (i.e. 42 B.C.E.).

- In *Wars*, 1:13:1–5, and *Antiquities*, 14:13:3–5, Josephus states that, “Two years later (i.e. after the death of Cassius) Syria was occupied by Pacorus, the son of the Parthian king, and Barzaphranes, the Parthian satrap.” In this same year the Parthians invaded Judaea, deposed Hyrcanus as the high priest, and placed Antigonus in power. The Parthian expedition against Judaea, Josephus states, took place at the time when the Jews were observing the Feast of Pentecost (early June).

- Dio, 48:15–34, also reports the history of the invasion of Syria and Judaea by Pacorus, during which the Parthians deposed Hyrcanus and placed into power Aristobulus (Antigonus). Dio dates this event to the consul year of Gnaeus Calvinus, serving as consul for the second time, and Asinius Pollio (i.e. 40 B.C.E.). As a result, based upon the above information from Josephus, the invasion occurred at the time of the Feast of Pentecost (June) in 40 B.C.E. Dio, therefore, agrees with Josephus when he dates the invasion of Judaea by Pacorus two years after the death of Cassius.

- In *Wars*, 1:13:6–1:14:3, and *Antiquities*, 14:13:6–14:14:3, Josephus tells us how the Parthians plotted against Herod and how a suspicious Herod fled from them. Leaving Judaea, Herod went to Idumaea and then to Masada where he took refuge. Herod next tried to go to Arabia to seek the aid of King Malichus but was turned away. He then retired to Egypt. “Eager to get to Rome,” Herod left Egypt at “the height of a winter-storm.” He sailed to Pamphylia, where he was nearly shipwrecked because of this violent storm, and barely reached Rhodes. While waiting for a trireme to be constructed, he spent some time in that city helping repair damages caused by the war against Cassius. When the trireme was finished, he set sail and “sped to Rome.”

Conclusion

It is clear from this evidence that Herod set sail from Egypt to go to Rome in the winter of 40/39 B.C.E., since he fled from the Parthians who had taken control of Judaea around Pentecost (early June) of 40 B.C.E. Josephus specifically states that Herod had left Egypt at “the height of a winter-storm,”⁴⁴ and that Herod also told Antony that he had “crossed the sea in the depths of a winter-storm to implore his aid.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Jos., *Wars*, 1:14:2.

⁴⁵ Jos., *Wars*, 1:14:3.

If a four season year is used, the three winter months would approximately be Tebeth (Dec./Jan.), Shebat (Jan./Feb.), and Adar (Feb./March), the tenth through twelfth Hebrew months. But it is clear from the evidence in the works of Josephus (since he includes the month of Khisleu [Nov./Dec.] in his winter and only speaks of spring, summer, and winter and never of the fall), that he more precisely recognized the setting of Pleiades, customarily dated to November 11, as the beginning of winter.⁴⁶ His winter, accordingly, would include the last half of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.). It would continue with the months of Khisleu, Tebeth, Shebat, and Adar (the ninth through twelfth months). The harsh weather that comes to this part of the world in mid-November and early December also fits well with the conditions met by Herod when he left Egypt. We cannot be far from the truth if we date his departure from Egypt as occurring on or about December 1, during a period replete with severe winter storms.

We also know from ancient records that it took at least 53 days in winter to reach Rome from Alexandria.⁴⁷ With Herod's near shipwreck and subsequent three week stay in Rhodes, it is fair to estimate that he spent about eleven weeks on his journey to Rome from Egypt: eight weeks at sea and three weeks at Rhodes. Schürer also places the beginning of this voyage in "late autumn" and "fairly near the end of the year."⁴⁸ Estimating that he left Egypt on or about December 1, he could not have arrived in Rome much before mid-February, 39 B.C.E. These details prove—since Josephus reports that Herod was made king when the consuls for 40 B.C.E. still served—that he used the March 1 beginning for his consul years. These facts also demonstrate that the 184th Olympiad, found in Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14:16:4, in reference to Herod's reception of royal power from the Romans, is a scribal error and, as generally agreed by historians, should read "the 185th Olympiad."

Combining all of the data about the beginning and ending of Herod's reign, we find that Herod was appointed king by the Romans in or about mid-February of 39 B.C.E., in the last months of the year 40/39 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning (Chart I). Josephus counted this year to Herod as his first under the authority of Rome. The thirty-seventh year of his Roman reign, counting 40/39 B.C.E. as year one, accordingly, was 4/3 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning. This date is confirmed by the fact that Herod died not long after the eclipse in mid-March of 4 B.C.E. and only seven days before Passover, i.e. a few days after the first of Nisan (Abib), the beginning of the new year of 4/3 B.C.E. Herod's thirty-four year reign, which was counted from the year he conquered Jerusalem and had Antigonus executed, therefore, would start in the year 37/36 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning, and would also end in 4/3 B.C.E.

⁴⁶ See Chap. XVIII, pp. 239ff.

⁴⁷ APA, pp. 136–148.

⁴⁸ HJP, 1, p. 281, n. 3.