

## **A Quiet Reading Event**

### *The Life of Herod the Great* by Zora Neale Hurston

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### **Editor's Note**

*The Life of Herod the Great* is the presentation of Hurston's unfinished and salvaged novel. Synthesized versions of Hurston's preface and introduction are included. Presentation of the narrative text and the preface and introduction reflects the work-in-progress state of Hurston's novel and edits have been made to align with conventions of spelling and grammar. The history of Hurston's manuscript includes it being rescued from a fire. Many pages were burned or singed. Where the missing words and phrases of salvaged pages could be determined by context, they have been edited into the narrative. Where major sections or whole pages are missing or indeterminable, asterisks (\* \* \*) within the body of the narrative indicate missing text.

### **Preface from Zora Neale Hurston**

Why a life of Herod the Great?

For many valid reasons, the first being that the West, whose every nation professes Christianity, should be better acquainted with the real, the historical Herod, instead of the deliberately folklore Herod. Outside of Herod's connection with Christianity, rarely has an individual appeared who gleamed and glittered from so many facets. He has impressed himself upon the pages of history as an athlete, a soldier of the first class, an equally able administrator, a statesman, a devotee of higher learning, as a great and tragic lover, and as a friend as famous as Damon and Pythian.

Few if any other figures in history have been so fortunately endowed. Herod could not avoid prominence, since his father, Antipater, was of ducal status in Idumea, and of singular intelligence. Herod's father and grandfather before him were international bankers, and so esteemed for wisdom that they were everywhere sought as counselors to rulers, and so often the hosts or guests of monarchs, that both were spoken of as "the friends of kings." And the family wealth was counted second between the Euphrates and the Nile. By the wisdom and foresight of Antipater, Herod and his three brothers were superb athletes, with Herod excelling the others. By the time that he was fifteen, he was reputed to be the first horseman of southwest Asia, and first in the use of the weapons of warfare and the science of combat. Nor could he escape the snares of love with his personal charm and physical endowments. He was over six feet tall with a perfectly proportioned body, and with features so harmonious that he was said to be the handsomest man

of his time on either side of the Mediterranean. And like both his father and his grandfather, he was an alumnus of the University of Damascus, which was devoted to Greek philosophy and other Greek concepts of learning.

Then there is the pretense that he was hated by the nation, when in fact, his popularity was enormous. One historian, Flavius Josephus, admits this grudgingly by the statement, “Because of his splendid appearance, and because he took such good care of them, and tolerated no nonsense.” And, in spite of the fact that the names of Herod the Great and certain of his posterity have been more closely connected with Christianity in the first century of its existence, only the well-informed divine can distinguish him from his sons or grandsons. This confusion has been achieved by calling them all Herod when they had distinctive names of their own. The result is that the average reader cannot tell the acts of one from another. Nor has one out of a million in the Western world followed the descendants of this remarkable man to see some absorbed into the patrician families of Rome or various royal houses in Asia and Europe, and indeed a great-grandson to occupy the throne of Armenia.

Nor is the accusation justified that Herod, as king, corrupted the nation and led it into sin by his fondness for the arts and customs of the Greeks in employing Greek sculpture in the decorations of buildings, encouraging the Greek worship of athletics and the body beautiful, and the various forms of literature. In other words, the identical inclinations that we ourselves exhibit.

There was indeed a conflict in Judea, not between Herod and the people, but that eternal struggle which is inevitable in every nation between change and tradition; between priest and palace—the palace representing the wide world. Its course, or evolution, forever following the identical pattern:

Phase One: The palace ignorant and helpless before the priesthood.

Phase Two: Palace becomes literate and the fear of magic is overcome.

Phase Three: Priesthood erudite and bitterly prejudiced against the power of the palace.

Matters were in the third phase in Judea when Herod was born. The conflict cut through every class of society in Judea—the priesthood itself was divided; Pharisee and Scribe against Pharisee and Scribe and so on to the laborer in the field. It is inexcusable to pretend that it was Herod against the whole nation. His faction was in the majority.

For all religious cults are sectarian and jealous of other gods by necessity. Cults proselytize, overwhelm, but never consciously merge. The law of survival is forever in operation. The priesthood in Judea had become cold and cynical, but that did not mean that it no longer wished to survive. Vainly it fought to maintain isolation to prevent competition—geography at war with history.

A life of Herod the Great seems imperative at this time. In two thousand years, the wheel of history has come a full round. What was in Herod’s day is again. The struggle for the mastery of Asia, which was ancient in Herod’s time, and in which he played an important part, has been revived. We see history repeating itself. Once again is taken up the struggle between East and West; that ageless

conflict which began with the siege of Troy by the Greek city states. The contest was seemingly ended for all time with the victory of Alexander the Great over Darius at Granicus and Issus when Macedonia became master not only of Persia, but all of western Asia besides, including North Africa by the conquest of Egypt. However, we see the conflict erupting again in the first century BC with Rome, that new power which had arisen in Europe, now the champion of the West, and Parthia—the old Persian empire under a new name and a new management—again scowling across the Mediterranean, then called the Great Sea, as defending warrior for the East.

By following Herod's career, we are brought into the company of the history-makers of that first century BC and are able to trace the pattern which established the way of life of the Western world of our times as to law and the relationship of man to man. We find Herod in active participation with the Caesars, Marc Antony, Cleopatra, Cassius, Orodes of Parthia, Aretas of Arabia, the last members of the Asamonean dynasty which was founded by the patriotic Maccabeans, and makers of history of the century. And that century was so similar to this, the twentieth AD, as to be startling.

For again the ideology of the whole world is in flux. Old institutions and old concepts are in the death throes, and the new being precipitated out; ideologies East and West fight for the minds of men. Identical circumstances provoke similar reactions, human nature being what it is. Herod drew his sword for the West. And now, at present, the United States, most powerful nation of the West, faces Russia of the East across the expanse of the world, with frowning mien, which is met with equal challenge. It is possible that conclusions beneficial to all can be drawn from the past.

Polybius, the ancient Greek philosopher, was convinced that he had the answer when he lectured to his disciples:

Be a realist and a rationalist. Seek the heart of matters. Know history, for there is "no more a ready corrective of conduct than knowledge of the past." "It is history, and history alone, which, without involving us in actual danger, will mature our judgment and prepare us to take right views, whatever may be the crisis or the posture of affairs." History may be a lantern of understanding held up to the present and the future.

And Herod the Great, like all other figures of history, can only be understood against the background and customs of his times. It is vain to reason on very ancient facts from very modern concepts.

Zora Neale Hurston

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## Chapter One

# Antipater and His Sons

The Common Court of the temple of Zorobabel at Jerusalem was crowded to capacity but in complete silence. But silence has many personalities. This profound absence of sound was filled with the hysteria of hope, for the people gathered here had been hastily summoned by Antipater, the most powerful citizen of Judea, who now stood in the erect posture of a soldier on the speaker's platform, with his left hand stretched out and resting on the lectern.

Standing thus before the congregation, his physical power spoke. In his middle years with a slight brush of gray at his temples, he showed no other sign that he was past his youth. Six feet of brawn and steady, determined eyes. A strong, handsome face and dignity of poise. And now without any preliminaries, Antipater began to speak. Behind him, the Seventy sat in a large semi-circle with Hyrcanus, the high priest, in the center making the required Seventy-one. As if driven by a wind, the semi-circle leaned forward the better to hear. Before him, the vast throng bowed forward likewise. The clusters of large candles illuminated the platform and threw everything on it in high relief.

"As you know, the Great Caesar was in Syria to settle the affairs of our nation, and you are aware of the disposition he made. And further, that I have but recently escorted him as far as Antioch from which port he sailed for Rome. My most recent activities, on my return from Antioch, have consisted in going over the country and quelling the disorders which I found, and which, if left to continue, would have plunged our country again into the horrors of civil strife."

Antipater . . . swept the room with grim eyes. "The current chaotic state of affairs, I, as your governor, appointed by Caesar with full support of the senate, will in no wise tolerate. It was upon my recommendation to Caesar that Hyrcanus has been restored as your high priest, of which office he was wickedly deprived by Aristobulus, his brother. And if you will abandon the wicked and destructive practices of this Aristobulus, who is now dead, and behave towards Hyrcanus as is right and proper, I guarantee that you shall live happily and live your lives without disturbance in the enjoyment of your possessions; but if any of you are addicted to the frigid hopes of what you might gain by innovations and aim to get wealthy by such means, you will find in me a most severe

master instead of a gentle governor, and Hyrcanus a tyrant instead of a king, and the Romans, including Caesar, your bitter enemies, for be assured, the Romans will never bear to be set aside those whom they have appointed to govern you.”

Instantly, a murmur like a fire in the woods swept the room, and almost as quickly it was changed to loud applause. This continued for two or three minutes unabated. Behind Antipater, Hyrcanus was doing his utmost to participate, but his efforts were confusing. First he smiled broadly with his head nodding and bobbing excessively to indicate that he not only approved, but had actually commanded Antipater to say what he did. Then he decided that this was the wrong gesture, as indeed it was for many took to tittering at him, then he overdid a stern frown at the populace, which caused many to titter more in derision. Finally the clamor for the return of peace, prosperity, and security as expressed by the tumultuous applause died away and Antipater continued.

“And to further make certain of the restoration of security and prosperity which we all so desire, I call to my assistance Phasaelus, my first-born son, and appoint him governor of Jerusalem and the places about. He will make it his obligation to restore the perfect order of former times so that each citizen, of whatever class, may enjoy security for himself, his family and his possessions, and second, to rebuild the walls of the city thrown down by Pompey. . . .”

Then even louder and more prolonged applause interrupted Antipater. Seeing himself unable to continue immediately, he turned his clean-shaven face to the right and nodded, and Phasaelus rose and stood and was acknowledged by the populace with thunderous applause and the calling of his name in praise and favor.

With Phasaelus still standing at Antipater’s right hand, the procurator spoke again.

“And to the end that all parts and provinces of our nation be quieted and protected alike, I appoint my second son, Herod, to be governor of Galilee, our most northern province, to put down the tumults there which have come about through the civil strife in the nation and thus gave a handle to those who prefer to live by unlawful means to the injury of honest and pious men.”

At his father’s nod, Herod arose and stood at Antipater’s left. He rose with a swagger and his broad, self-assured smile took the gathering into his arms. The place went wild. With a few bitter exceptions, men cheered, shouted, called out his name, and kept cheering. Why? Not one of them could have said exactly why he was so stimulated at the sight of this young man. Certainly Herod was a good two inches taller than his father or brother, but they were tall enough to satisfy. He was extraordinary in his handsomeness, but should they be excited about that? It was perhaps a freak of personality native to the theater where some, a very few, can command applause for doing practically nothing, while very competent actors can scarcely gain notice. Herod had that something.

“Antipater and his sons!” some voice shouted from the rear of the room.

“Galilee rise again!”

“Antipater and his sons!”

“Praise to Antipater, we are allies of Rome and not slaves as we were to the Macedonians. Antipater!”

“Herod the Over-Bold!”

“Herod the generous to the workers of Judea!”

Finally, Antipater raised his hands and quieted the tumult, his sons resumed their seats, and a most sober silence came upon the people, for the name of Galilee brought to their consciousness the terrible name of a man, Hezekiah, the bandit leader of Galilee. Hezekiah, wholesale murder, ruthless slaughter of unarmed men, women, and children. Robbery. Arson in the night. Horrible butchery and rape.

Now they looked with pity on the shining young man at Antipater’s left. They looked from his gay, self-assured countenance to that of his father and back again. How could the kindly Antipater doom this so youthful and handsome young man to such a horrible death? And especially when he was reputed to be a most affectionate father, and equally loved by this second son of his? Many deliberately looked long and steadily to fix Herod’s shining face upon their minds and memories so that they could later relate just how he appeared at this hour, for all were certain that they would never see him again. Hezekiah.

“And finally, my beloved countrymen, I congratulate you upon your courage and fortitude during the long period of our many misfortunes which began with the arrogant Aristobulus attempting to seize the birthright of our high priest, Hyrcanus, and led to the assault upon us by first Pompey, then others. I also am grateful to you for your willing assistance in restoring Judea to its former glory. With the kindest emotions, I now dismiss you.”

And no sooner did he say this than Antipater, followed by his sons, headed for the door. People gasped. Everybody, even the Sanhedrin, had expected more. They left the temple slowly and reluctantly. They saw that everything necessary for the settlement of the government had been disposed of in less than a half hour. But where were the displays of rhetoric that the highly trained Antipater and his sons were so capable of? Where were the opportunities for others to exhibit? Not one question had been asked. This meeting, stripped of all drama by their new procurator, was the most dramatic and provocative thing that had happened in generations.

Real darkness had scarcely invaded the city, so what with so much to talk about, nobody even considered going home and to bed. The few very elderly men of importance who usually did so had no more notion than the others on this occasion. So according to social rank and financial rating, every man headed for his favorite club, tavern, or humble inn. Some of these spots were in the Upper City and patronized by the prominent and wealthy around the Upper Market Place. Some in the better streets of Accra, or the Lower City. Some less pretentious lay in the Valley of the Cheese-mongers, and still others in poorer neighborhoods. Some existed even in the suburbs.

The members of the Sanhedrin, for the greater part, resorted to a spot in the Upper City not too far from the temple. Pollio and his famous disciple, Sameas, were earlier than most at this club, and went to their favorite table in a corner where they could command a view of the entire room. They ordered an amphora of fresh-pressed wine from the grapes of Gaul and soon a dozen others had crowded about their table, as usual.

“Well, O learned Pollio, what of the happening of this night?”

“You saw and heard as much as I, O Eleazer.”

“But the interpretation?” Eleazer persisted, stroking excitedly his fulsome beard. His eyes glittered with expectation and hope. Pollio, the prominent Pharisee and scholar, cut a quick glance in the direction of Sameas and smiled minutely.

“You forget that I am a Pharisee like yourself, Eleazer, not an Essene. I do not pretend to foretell the future. Whatever may be your hopes, Antipater is a most resourceful and capable man of affairs. I would not be surprised if he succeeded in his aims.”

“Ah, but that is just the heart of the matter, Pollio!” another of the elders all but shouted. “What are the aims of Antipater and his sons? What are they? I—we *all*—should ask. Does that Idumean think to make himself king? Now, I . . .”

But Eleazer was cut off by another of the Chasidim who equaled if not surpassed Eleazer in vehemency.

“But did you look well at Hyrcanus there tonight? Why did the highly intelligent Antipater use his influence with Caesar to have him made high priest and king again? I will tell you why. He recognizes as well as you and I Hyrcanus’s vanity. Not being of the priestly line, and an Idumean beside, the shrewd Antipater means to use him as a tool to have absolute power over the nation. Antipater and his sons, indeed! Those Greek-minded whelps of Edom.” This man raked his old, claw-like fingers through his beard as if he tore something to pieces thereby. “Why, we will never allow it. And that brash Herod, well, who is it that does not agree that making him governor of those Gentiles up in Galilee was the best way of ridding the nation of him? For Hezekiah will quickly do away with him.”

“I am one who does not agree that his death at the hands of the bandit is inevitable,” Sameas spoke slowly and coolly. “I am a realist and a rationalist, and since it is known that Antipater is unusually fond of his children, and Herod in particular, he would not be sending the youth to certain death. Being a scholar instead of a soldier, I have not much of an idea what possibilities are in Herod’s favor. Oh, most will see the possibility and probability of Herod’s destruction by Hezekiah with his army of cutthroats and robbers, but there must be some chance of his survival, or I am sure that Antipater would never send Herod against the monster.”

“But it is madness, O Sameas. Consider that men of great experience in warfare have shunned an attack upon this Hezekiah. He is formidable. Even Sextus Caesar, president of Syria, despite Hezekiah’s bold eruptions into adjoining Syria on occasion, has not dared to give the bandit leader the meeting. Oh, Herod will surely be destroyed, and in a most barbarous manner.”

Several venerables around the table by nods, murmurs, and gestures of finality gave assent to this. Sameas glanced at Pollio to see if he also read between the lines. Seeing that his teacher did, he smiled faintly and spoke again.

“Perhaps it is because I take no pleasure in the death of our young governor of Galilee that I do not see the same conclusion as you do so easily. Often the wish is father of the thought.”

After quick exchanges of glances among themselves, one of the elders murmured, “You speak strangely tonight, O Sameas. Have you, like the rash youth of Judea, been bewitched by this shining young Edomite? Antipater is a very rich, and now powerful man. Perhaps you too have been corrupted.”

“Corrupted? Like yourselves, I see the power and abilities in Herod and the probability that he may go far in government. But unlike you, I see no threat to myself. Therefore, I have no wish for him to be removed from my path.”

There was the clamor of numerous young voices at the entrance, and around fifty young men of the first families of Jerusalem burst into the room. They bore none other than Herod in their midst. There was shouting and much movement as the strapping figure of the son of Antipater was carried to the far side of the room to a long table already filled with many dishes and amphoras of wine.

“The shame of it!” One handsome youth whose father had a reputation for piety shouted, “We would feast our leader on his first night as governor of Galilee, but where do we find him? In the library of his home poring over the battles of Alexander the Great and Caesar’s Commentaries. But we are going to feast him whether he wills or not. Here, help us place him at the head of the table, Alexander, and you, Dositheus! Let us be merry, for soon we march for Galilee to comb the beard of the barbarous Hezekiah.”

But here Herod freed himself from the arms of his friends and stood erect and laughing in that magnetic way that he had.

“I will be feasted by you, my friends. A good soldier knows when he has met a superior force, and does not fling away his forces to no profit. Many great military leaders take the view that a skillful retreat is as glorious as the winning of a battle. He can fight another day at a time and place of his own choosing.” He flung out his arms in surrender and marched to the head of the table amid loud cheers and seated himself. “However, I can merely taste the wines only, for my father says that dedicated leaders never have time for wine.”

The rest of the group quickly seated themselves while they indulged in jokes and friendly raillery. The eyes of the others in the room were irresistibly fixed on Herod and his group. His head covered with a thick mop of light brown hair which curled fiercely, his upper garment of fine white linen of Cos, and his arm ornaments of heavy gold with jewels, and the clasp on his left shoulder of a most curious design accented by a large ruby.

“What a comely youth,” Pollio sighed.

“And why not?” Eleazer snapped. “That family has bred like the Arabian horses they so treasure. I have it from a reliable source that the women chosen for mothers must not only be of a good family, but must also be tall, beautiful, and able to read and write Greek.”

“Do their horses also read Greek?” Sameas, the youngest about the table, asked, facetiously, to soften the vehemence of Eleazer. And when his sally was rewarded with a burst of laughter, he added, “I am in need of an additional secretary, and if Antipater’s horses are that highly bred, I might procure one for a scribe.”

“But seriously,” Pollio took it up, “it might be well if that custom became more common. It has been maintained by many learned men outside of our nation that marriage within the family fosters imbecility, and imperfections of the body. During many centuries the Greeks bred for human perfection. Now, to be sure, this careful breeding in the Antipater family has done them no hurt. They all have fine, tall bodies and perfect limbs, and none would be so rash as to contend that they are not of active minds.”

“You mean to imply that that is the reason why Antipater can now lead Hyrcanus about like a dancing bear at the games?” This rhetorical query came from a Pharisee with pink cheeks showing above his thick beard and with a twinkle in his eyes. “If so, we ought indeed to think seriously of the matter. Perhaps, for the good of our nation, the Maccabean family should have ended with John Hyrcanus, for since his time, the family has produced nothing but trouble for our nation. It is due to their stupid and wicked acts that we are now subject to the Romans.”

Now they were off, this nearly score of the principal men of Jerusalem. They brought up the past with bitter and scornful accusations while no more than forty feet away at the other end of the room was Herod and his friends—some of them the sons or grandsons of those who sat there lamenting—and all of the principal families of Jerusalem. These men trod sorrowing steps back over the road which had led to Antipater becoming procurator of Judea.

“The longest journey begins with the first step,” Eleazer began. “At times I reason that something had to be wrong in the household of the pious John Hyrcanus for his sons to behave in ways so injurious to our nation.”

“Possibly,” Pollio commented, “but not necessarily so.” He halted for a moment while regarding the gay company of young men at the other end of the room. “John Hyrcanus did forsake the sect of the Pharisees and joined the Sadducees, but some most excellent citizens belong to that sect.”

Then from one mouth to the other, the recapitulation went on. On the death of John Hyrcanus, his oldest son Aristobulus promptly changed the form of government from the traditional theocracy under the rule of the priesthood to a monarchy by declaring himself a king. He began this by imprisoning his mother and three of his brothers to avoid any competition for the crown. Antigonus, the brother next him in age, he allowed to be free, but before the end of his short reign of a year, he had Antigonus assassinated. His mother, he starved to death in prison. Then he himself died.

The third son of Hyrcanus succeeded Aristobulus, and immediately killed the son who was fourth in age because he suspected him of royal ambitions. The youngest wisely kept his mouth shut and so survived. This third son was named Alexander Jannaeus, who further alienated the nation by crucifying eight hundred prominent citizens. For the first time in the history of the nation, a high priest had a partition erected between himself and the people while he served at the altar, as the public brought citrons and bombarded the high-priest king. After numerous other cruelties, Jannaeus finally died.

He left two sons. Hyrcanus II, the present incumbent, who was degenerate and feeble-minded, but inordinately vain and cunning. Hyrcanus always pretended that he cared nothing for public office. His younger brother, Aristobulus II, was openly ambitious for prestige and power. While

their mother, Alexandra, was ruling, this Aristobulus attempted to seize power, justifying his rashness by continually pointing out the unfitness of Hyrcanus to govern. No sooner was Alexandra dead than he drove Hyrcanus off the throne and made himself king. Publicly, Hyrcanus pretended not to care, but poured out his grief and disappointment to his bosom friend, Antipater, who promised to, and did, assist him.

Antipater persuaded Aretas, king of Arabia and his kinsman, to aid Hyrcanus. He even paid him a large sum of money to do so. He took the willing and eager Hyrcanus to Arabia by night, and Aretas later brought him back into Judea with an army, and beat Aristobulus in battle.

Then entered the Romans. Pompey, planning to war with the Parthians, sent Gabinius and Scaurus into Syria ahead of himself. Scaurus took a bribe of four hundred talents, and Gabinius three hundred, to aid Aristobulus and ordered Aretas to get out of Judea immediately with his army, or go to war with Rome. The Romans and their love of bribes! Neither Scaurus nor Gabinius cared a green grape whether Aristobulus was the rightful heir or not. What they wanted was money, and seeing that Aristobulus had possession of the national treasury, they promptly decided in his favor.

But later, Pompey arrived in Syria. Antipater went as ambassador to Pompey for Hyrcanus, while one Nicodemus performed the same service for Aristobulus.

Now, with Pompey, Antipater was in his element, moving with assurance, while Nicodemus was like a fish in hot oil. Antipater, educated in the Greek manner, well-traveled and familiar with the courts of kings, and with a sense of the fitness of things, had no trouble in charming and convincing Pompey. Besides, as was acknowledged by Nicodemus as well, Hyrcanus was the elder brother and had been confirmed in the priesthood by his parents and the law of the land.

Nicodemus helped the cause of Hyrcanus further, though unintentionally, by exposing before Pompey the bribes accepted by Gabinius and Scaurus, and behaving as if he expected Pompey to seize upon his generals instantly and send them home to Rome in chains. Not only did the two generals show their rage, but they were supported by Pompey. Hurriedly he dismissed the claims of Nicodemus, but sent him off with the statement that he would talk with him later, and went home with Antipater as a house guest.

Aristobulus naturally doubted his chances of success now with Pompey and began to look around for other means to gain the crown. He was devious and resorted to bald untruths to put Pompey off until he could find help from some other source. Pompey's rage rose like a pillar of fire to Heaven.

"Does this insignificant provincial so deceive himself that he thinks he is of superior intelligence to the first citizen of Rome? He has no legitimate claim to what he is contending for, to the detriment of the nation, nor has he the strength to seize it by force. He begs for my consideration, then attempts to defraud me by stupid lies and stratagems. By Jupiter, I will pluck him and stew this Aristobulus like a pigeon!"

So to the distress of the nation, Pompey went to war against Aristobulus, pulled down the walls of Jerusalem to get at him, beat him, and carried Aristobulus, his wife, and his two sons and two daughters off to Rome in chains.

Antipater, who had set out to protect Hyrcanus in possession of his birthright, did not have to exert himself to remove the troublesome Aristobulus from his path. Pompey performed this task for him.

Alexander, the older son of Aristobulus, was married to Alexandra, the daughter and only child of Hyrcanus, but in this savage struggle for power, they became first estranged, then the bitterest of enemies. They had two children, Mariamne and Aristobulus III, whom he was never to see again.

So on this night, the first of Herod's as governor of Galilee, Aristobulus was dead by poison, and Scipio had cut off the head of Alexander at Antioch. Alexandra, his cousin-wife, when the news reached her at the palace of her father in Jerusalem, made no pretense of grief. The news had reached the palace in early afternoon. She hurried to the nursery where her small son played and clasped him to her breast in a lingering embrace.

"God be praised!" Alexandra exulted. "The arch criminal who would have robbed you of your throne is dead, my adored little son. Now, nobody nor anything stands in the way of your ascending the throne when Hyrcanus, my father, is dead. I must begin to take greater care to prepare you for your kingdom, for Hyrcanus is neither firm of mind nor body, and may not live very long now. But I, your devoted mother, will attend to the affairs of government until you reach an age that I consider fit for you to rule. I will appoint the noble Antipater to assist me."

The small boy was struggling to free himself from Alexandra's embrace.

"Oh, release me, Mother. Don't you see how you interfere with our game? These two sons of the household steward and I are birds and seeing which one of us can fly the farthest and the fastest. I was away over the Mount of Olives when you obstructed my wings. Go away, Mother! The others will get ahead of me."

"Hush and listen, son. I shall feast you at sundown in honor of the hour when we shall receive the government. Come and embrace me, my beloved. I shall feast you this evening on roasted young mutton and figs stewed in honey."

The little boy, enthralled with his play, thrust his mother away and went on moving about with arms extended in flight, but Alexandra left the nursery smiling. Let the boy play. She would keep him playing for at least thirty years or more while she exercised the power of government. And why not? She was only twenty-seven, while Alexandra, her mother-in-law, had been sixty-four when Alexander Jannaeus died and she took over the government and deprived her sons of it for nine years. She had held on until she died, at the age of seventy-three. Alexandra could see no reason why she could not follow her mother-in-law's example, with the assistance of Antipater and his sons.

With a light heart, Alexandra paused briefly at the apartment of Mariamne, her daughter, and ordered her to dress carefully for the occasion, and would have hastened on to her own rooms for the same purpose, but the girl, a very beautiful child approaching puberty, detained her.

"Will I be feasted also at another time, Mother? Is Aristobulus to be all in all forever with you, and I nothing?"

“Don’t be foolish, Mariamne! What would be the occasion for such a thing? You are a girl, and the people would never tolerate a woman as their governor except as a regent during the childhood of the real king. Besides, there is no need to be melancholic. When your brother has obtained the government, I will then be able to find you a proper husband. Now, our fortunes are depressed and a suitable match would be impossible. You are not heir to the family fortunes. The best that can be arranged for you will come when the time arrives.”

“Has Aristobulus been declared king then by the Romans?”

“Not at the moment, but no doubt it will soon occur. Both your wicked grandfather and father are removed from our path, and our excellent and faithful friend, Antipater, has raised an army and marched on to Egypt with Mithradates of Pergamus, the general of Julius Caesar. He has performed other splendid services for Caesar and will no doubt win his high approval. Naturally, he will ask in return for the elevation of Hyrcanus to his former position. The tidings may reach us within the month.”

Alexandra was so overwhelmed by her dream of power that she could not resist removing another obstacle from her path that evening at the feast.

“Father,” Alexandra began in a very solicitous voice, “the reports from Egypt, as you know, are very good. Antipater is gaining mightily upon Caesar. All the powerful Romans speak in praise of the excellent Antipater. Naturally, Caesar will be grateful, and since Antipater has performed so many and difficult things for your sake, he will beseech Caesar to restore you as high priest and king of Judea. Our fortunes improve.”

Hyrcanus, gleeful and with eyes rolling in his head, exulted, “Ah, my faithful friend, Antipater! Yes, yes, he does not like to see me unhappy. He will persuade Caesar to place me at the head of government again, even though he knows my wishes to keep away from public affairs. How fond Antipater is of figs stewed in honey! He should be with us this night. He likes stewed figs. And he is ever good and kind to me. He alone of all my relatives and friends does not say that I am a degenerate imbecile and slothful and unfit to reign. Never has he mocked me with scorn nor laughed at me.”

Alexandra saw the eyes of her father grow moist and was touched with pity for a moment, then became practical again.

“Yes, I know, Father. Your father and mother and brother Aristobulus all spoke that way of you, and numerous of the leading men of the city. Therefore, it would be better to have the kingdom confirmed to my son.”

The eyes of Hyrcanus flung wide open in fright and injury.

“You, also, Alexandra? Everybody except Antipater wants to take my kingdom from me.” Hyrcanus shed angry tears. “You are the one who is mad, Alexandra. Your son cannot lawfully receive the high priesthood until he is twenty-one. You are insane to think otherwise. Nobody else can even consider anyone but me so long as I am alive.”

“Be quiet, Father. The serving men will hear you. You are getting old and besides you continually say that you have no taste for public affairs. Why not . . .”

“That is a lie! I love the honor and the glory of it. I love the raiment of office.” He beat on the table with his fist and wept in rage. “They made me say that—my mother and the Pharisees. Only Antipater knew my heart. They made me say it or they would have passed me over entirely. They said I was too foolish and must submit to the rule of the Pharisees or . . .”

“You see, Father? Therefore, why not consider living a quiet private life where no one will be provoked to laugh at you? Pass the government on to my son, and secure a comfortable estate—say down at Merissa in Idumea beside that of Antipater and entertain yourself with the possession of a flock of beautiful doves?”

“What? What do I want with a flock of doves? No! I want to be . . .”

“Or rare white peacocks, Father?” Alexandra pressed.

Hyrchanus fixed a baleful glance upon his daughter’s face and suddenly got to his feet. Alexandra ceased to speak with her mouth wide open . . . in surprise.

“Birds!” Hyrchanus said coldly. “What do I want with birds? I was born to be a king. I am first by birth and you like my brother and many other wicked men want me to hide myself and pass my life occupied with the feathers of birds. I want to be king. I want to be king! I want to . . .”

And he fled from the room shaking with sobs.

Now, the group of principal men about the table in the tavern had heard about this scene, for servants talk to servants and sometimes, when they have received presents for information, to men of importance who consider it prudent to discover what goes on in certain houses. They discussed the character of Alexandra and described her as a bold, ambitious woman who dominated the weak mind of her father. But what could she do? Judea was now under the Romans, and nobody knew that recent day in Syria what disposition Caesar would make of public affairs.

“And now the story told by the servants more than two years ago is confirmed,” said Eleazer sadly. “We were all deceived by the man. He is unfit for public affairs, but vain and cunning. He is easily moved by vanity. There he sat tonight while Antipater spoke, nodding and smiling like the imbecile that he is, trying to persuade the people that he had commanded Antipater to do and say what he did when it is well known that he has no more power than a shadow on a wall. Except for the priesthood, everything is in the hands of Antipater. His pretensions are utterly ridiculous.”

“Again, the generosity of Antipater is confirmed,” Pollio nodded. “Recognizing his childish vanity, Antipater persuaded Caesar to allow Hyrchanus to wear the robes of the high priesthood, like a plaything. His fidelity is a thing of wonder. That Idumean is God’s image of a friend.”

“Antipater’s fidelity I too saw as one of his components as I looked at him almost in a trance,” Sameas broke in. “I saw his acts and attributes making an eternally moving series of pictures like the graven frieze about the Parthenon at Athens: His ancestry and the work of his ancestors, being the leading group of carvings. His childhood in Idumea, as he was in training to become an athlete

and soldier and statesman; his education in mathematics, philosophy, rhetoric, and familiarity in the arts; his appearances at the various courts of Asia; his buying up the taxes of nations and thus gaining familiarity with everything in those countries, and making intimate friends of the rulers; his lifelong and faithful friendship with Hyrcanus, the war he waged against Aristobulus to protect Hyrcanus from being shoved aside; his gathering of all those great stores of corn, oil, and wine as soon as he discerned the possibility of the civil strife in Rome and so was in position not only to make enormous profits, but gain the friendship and gratitude of the great men of the earth, and so place them in his debt.

“A stirring group of carved pictures consists of his gathering and equipping three thousand men and joining Mithradates on his march to join Caesar in Egypt and all the benefits Antipater bestowed on the general like not only provisioning the army, but persuading Arabia, Gaza, Ascalon, Syria, Tyre, and Sidon to aid Caesar, while also removing all obstacles from the path of Mithradates. I particularly like the picture of the valor of Antipater at the Jews Camp in Egypt where he was the first to breach the walls of the city, and the first to enter, and his noble support of Mithradates when the Egyptians would have beaten him otherwise; his fighting close to Caesar himself, in Egypt, and winning the admiration of the great Roman by his daring successes. Then the picture when Antipater met Caesar in Syria in that gorgeous setting where his bearing and his rich apparel made him look more like an emperor than Caesar himself. His great dignity and handsome body became him.”

“I thought his most persuasive moment was when that cringing Aristobulus accused Antipater of deceit with Caesar and Antipater flung loose his costly linen robe and exhibited the scars he had accumulated in the battles in Egypt, and exclaimed, ‘My wounds and scars attest to my fidelity to Caesar!’” interrupted the Pharisee with the twinkling eyes.

“I was approaching that magnificent drama, Gorion,” Sameas said with irritation. “I was the one who had this vision, and I should be allowed to reveal it in my own fashion. I went to Damascus to oppose any advancement of Antipater and his sons, but was overwhelmed. Who among us had troubled himself to deserve so much from Caesar? Who else could have done so well for our nation? At enormous financial cost to himself, and even at the risk of his very life, he had purchased the goodwill of Rome for our nation, to the end that we emerged as the confederates of Rome instead of being made subjects. Considering all these things, and in spite of the urgings of many of my friends, I kept my lips firmly closed.”

“Yet Antipater received enormous benefits for himself and his sons,” Eleazer objected. “I heard Caesar announce that Antipater and his descendants were henceforth Roman citizens, free from taxes everywhere, and that he was free to choose whatever province in Asia that he chose to govern. With his fine Greek politeness, Antipater left the choice up to Caesar, who promptly made him procurator of Judea.”

“Oh, Caesar knows how to be grateful,” Gorion nodded. “But do not forget the practical and materialistic nature of the Romans. Caesar did not do these things because of the handsome body and face of Antipater, and because he is a magnificent host, but because he knew of no

other man in this part of Asia who could hold it and administer it wisely for the Romans. In fact, Antipater received less than he deserved.”

“Still,” contended Eleazer, “his administering the civil authority is a violation of our laws. That Idumean is not of the priestly line. Our laws state that we are to submit to be governed by our priests.”

“But what can Hyrcanus do?” Pollio asked. “You know his defects. Do not deceive yourself; Caesar saw them too. Nothing could have persuaded him to leave affairs in the hands of Hyrcanus. I was there also. Caesar merely indulged Antipater by allowing him to be high priest. He expects nothing of Hyrcanus or any of his family. With Parthia the enemy of Rome and a powerful enemy at that, Caesar would risk nothing like that. Never! Rome has rejected the Asamoneans.”

Sameas took a sip of wine and leaned forward. “Therefore what we witnessed earlier this night is the result of the acts and components of Antipater. He has made himself our most responsible citizen. Since he has associated Phasaelus and Herod in his affairs for the past ten years by way of training and preparation for public office, he appointed them tonight as his assistants. Who among us is prepared to take their places?”

A heavy silence hung over the group while Sameas looked from face to face for an answer.

“And particularly,” Sameas continued, “who among us wishes to go up to Galilee and contest with Hezekiah? It is a ferocious gamble, but you find Antipater willing to wager his young and favorite son. If he loses, it will be very tragic, but if he wins, it will add to his splendor. That is the man with whom we are confronted.”

Nobody said anything. In the prolonged silence, a voice was heard from the other end of the room where were seated four divinity students at the table nearest Herod and his friends.

“Let us gather hundreds of men before the house of our new procurator and make a great tumult and clamor. This Antipater is no better than the heathens who worship idols and sacrifice their children to Moloch! He throws his young son to the monster Hezekiah as they once threw their infants into the fire. This night, we have been visiting all the taverns of the workers, and also those of Judea’s esteemed families, and everywhere, people weep at the sacrifice of Herod. Everywhere, they place wagers, not on the survival of the unfortunate young man, whom they describe as very handsome and generous, but on how long he will escape the terrible tortures and death at the hands of Hezekiah.”

There fell a dramatic silence over the whole room that was eventually broken by the hoarse voice of a heavy-built man at a table near Sameas who challenged, “Ten shekels that Hezekiah destroys Herod within a month!”

“Twenty shekels of gold that Hezekiah overtakes the son of Antipater within two weeks,” another voice took up the challenge.

“I raise that to a mina!” another voice shouted.

“Five mina!”

“A talent of silver that Herod survives,” said a voice at the table of Herod.

“What madness!” gasped one of the divinity students.

“Taken!” shouted the hoarse-voiced merchant. “I shall thereby increase my stock of purple and scarlet.”

“Five talents of gold that Herod conquers Hezekiah no later than the third encounter!”

“Taken! Taken!” cried several voices at once. “But who is this madman?”

Herod slowly rose from his couch beside the banquet table and stood calmly that all might see him. A startled gasp broke from many throats.

“Herod himself,” murmured several.

“Yes, Herod, son of the noble Antipater,” Herod said in a proud, sure voice. “Ten talents of gold that I shall be too hard for Hezekiah! Ten talents. Who accepts my wager?”

Nobody did. They gazed upon the handsome, resplendent young man and broke into loud cheers. They kept it up. He was lifted by numerous men and stood upon the table, the cheering continuing. Herod, smiling defiantly, drew the fine sword of Damascus steel with the jeweled hilt that his father had given him on his graduation from the University of Damascus, and waved it triumphantly. The room went madder. The four divinity students rushed into the crowd around the table, carried away by the enthusiasm that Herod invariably aroused, and shouted that they were going to follow him as their leader.

“You see how that Herod corrupts our youth?” Eleazer demanded sourly.

But nobody was listening. For the moment, practically every man in the room was convinced that Herod was invincible. The vast army of Alexander the Great, with the great Macedonian at its head, could not have stood against Herod. That was the way he affected people. He was borne aloft by his worshippers and out of the tavern. The cheering kept up and gradually receded in the distance. The sober men about Sameas did not sit down again. When the voices, vastly augmented, sounded faintly from the Valley of the Cheese-mongers, Pollio looked at the others, lifted one brow half-smilingly.

“Perhaps it is time that we all went home to our beds.” Then he smiled openly. “Did a heathen god pass us in parade, or did we merely imagine it?”

## Reflection Questions

“Herod had that something...” What is this *something* Hurston is referring to? How does Hurston’s opening depictions of Herod compare to your preconceived understandings of the historic figure?

Did the theme of power strike you in this chapter? What types of power were at play and which one stuck out to you the most (familial, political, cultural, gender, sexual...)?

Are you already familiar with this time in history? How does your current knowledge of history affect how you relate to the story?

Think on the geography mentioned in this chapter. How is understanding the place meaningful to understanding Herod himself?

Consider something unexpected in the text for you. What was it? Why was it unexpected?

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