GLORIFYING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE PAST:
HEROD THE GREAT AND HIS JEWISH ROYAL PREDECESSORS

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Throughout his reign as King of Judaea, Herod the Great (40–4 BCE) struggled for legitimacy and recognition from his Jewish subjects. He began his reign as a bankrupt usurper, who had succeeded in seizing the throne mostly through the aid of Roman military might. He ended it as a wealthy and powerful king, who founded a dynasty and brought Judaea to its greatest prominence and prosperity. This article focuses on how Herod achieved legitimacy among his Jewish subjects, specifically how he used the historical past to strengthen his hold on the present. By appropriating past sources of legitimacy through multiple media, he positioned himself as a rightful Jewish king. Although not all of his subjects accepted his claims, he managed to acquire enough support to rule successfully for over thirty years and to pass on his kingdom to his chosen successors.

1. Herod the Hasmonean

When Herod first received the kingdom of Judaea from the Roman Senate in 40 BCE, he had an extremely tentative claim to the throne. His grandfather and father had served as important officials in the Hasmonean court (Josephus, J.W. 1.124–226; Ant. 14.8–284). Herod himself had been στρατηγός of Galilee, but he had no real royal connections. In addition, because Herod was an Idumaean with an Arab mother (Josephus, J.W. 1.181; Ant. 14.121), many Jews did not even consider him entirely Jewish.¹ Almost immediately upon receiving his crown, Herod began establishing his credibility and legitimacy as king. In this attempt, he naturally turned to the most recent source of authority, the Hasmoneans. Through his use of dynastic maneuvering, architecture, and coins, he linked himself with this dynastic family and asserted his legitimacy as their successor.

¹ For a discussion of whether Herod was really a Jew, see Shaye J.D. Cohen, The Beginnings of Jewishness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 13–24.
In the late 40s BCE, Herod was betrothed to Mariamme, the granddaughter of both Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.241; *Ant.* 14.300). Hyrcanus, who was high priest and Ethnarch, likely made the match in order to stabilize his regime by ensuring the loyalty of Herod and his family. Although Herod was in his twenties when he was betrothed, he had already proven himself by governing Galilee (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.203–241; *Ant.* 14.158–184, 268–300). This betrothal was a huge boon for the Idumaean. Mariamme was a woman of surpassing beauty and intellect. She was also the granddaughter of two sons of Alexander Jannaeus. Herod's betrothal was, therefore, a public declaration of his importance to Hyrcanus and his regime.

Herod's marriage to Mariamme in 37 BCE was a powerful signal that he was claiming the position of Hasmonean heir, especially since Hyrcanus had no sons. Hyrcanus's daughter, Alexandra, was Mariamme's mother. Mariamme's father was Alexander, the eldest son of Aristobulus II (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.241, 344, 432; *Ant.* 14.467). Thus, once Herod had married Mariamme, his war against Aristobulus's other son, Mattathias Antigonus, became a civil war over control of the Hasmonean family and the Kingdom.

Herod was madly in love with Mariamme, but her openly hostile attitude, her plots, and conflicts with her Idumaean in-laws led to her arrest and execution in 29 BCE (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.436–444; *Ant.* 15.65–87, 202–236). It is noteworthy that Herod did not order her death until Octavian had confirmed him as King of Judaea in 30 BCE, after most major members of the Hasmonean family were dead. One interpretation, therefore, is that Herod used his marriage for political gain. When he achieved his goal, he no longer needed either his marriage or his wife.

While Mariamme may have been the lynchpin in Herod's attempts to connect himself with the Hasmonean family, his relationship with Hyrcanus II was also central to this aim. In the first place, Herod rose to promi-