RELIGION UNDER AUGUSTUS AND HEROD
ONE TEMPLE AND MANY SYNAGOGUES:
ON RELIGION AND STATE IN HERODIAN
JUDAEA AND AUGUSTAN ROME

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Abstract

The reign of Herod, who was neither a priest nor a Roman, looks as if it were a neatly intermediate step between the Hasmonaean period, when Judaea was ruled by high priests, and the Roman period, when it was ruled by non-Jews. It also seems to be the beginning of the separation of religion from state in Judaea.

In fact, things are not at all so neat and clear-cut. On the one hand, the Hasmonaean had already introduced formal and real separation of religion from state—by adding the royal title to their high-priesthood, which allowed even for rule by a queen, and then by abandoning their earlier insistence that their non-Jewish subjects convert to Judaism. And Herod's reign, on the other hand, although it indeed continued and deepened this separation between the two spheres, nevertheless saw religion subject to the state. Herod appointed and switched high priests at will, preferring priests from the Diaspora who could be expected to have no political aspirations.

Thus, Herod's main contribution to the religion/state issue in Judaea seems rather to have been elsewhere, and one despite himself. Namely, his expansion and renovation of the Temple, which turned it into something quite massive and impressive, exacerbated the contradiction between the continued existence of that which the Bible and Jewish tradition considered to be the House of God, i.e., the palace of the true King of the Judaea, on the one hand, and Roman rule, on the other. This contradiction generated the rebellion of 66 CE and the ensuing destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

Contemporary developments in Rome exacerbated the problem and contributed to the crisis. Namely, the decades of Herod's rule were also those of massive growth for the Jewish community of Rome, which comes into view especially in the latter half of the first century BCE. This means that around the same time that Herod was providing the Jews with a visible and impressive symbol for the territorial nature of the Jews and their God, Jews in Rome were providing the emperors with more and more visible evidence for Judaism being something universal, and spiritual, without political aspirations and claims. So if once Romans could think of Jews only as Judaeans, by the days of Augustus, and into the first century, Jews were, for Romans, more and more adherents of the Jewish religion—thus allowing Romans less and less understanding for the motivations of territorially-oriented Judaeans just as the latter were getting a more and more impressive symbol for their aspirations. It is no surprise that it all blew up within a few decades.

For more than a century prior to Herod's reign, on the one hand, Judaea was ruled by high priests, that is, by people who ruled the state by virtue of their status vis-à-vis the Jewish God and function in His cult.