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Herod's Wealth

John W. Welch

Herod's construction of Masada and many other massive building projects leave no doubt that Herod the Great had access to large amounts of gold and silver. But where his wealth came from and how much he had is not entirely clear. Several clues, however, concerning the sources and relative amounts of Herod's immense wealth and his use of this money to achieve political ends can be found in the historical remains and from the records of Josephus Flavius.¹ This article briefly identifies the main financial information known about Herod, outlines his political uses and principal sources of income, and appraises his economic resources in order, ultimately, to shed light on certain sums of money mentioned by Jesus in the New Testament.

Herod's Political Uses of Wealth

King Herod was politically astute. His shrewdness is particularly visible in his uses of financial resources to achieve important political objectives.

For example, when Antony and Cleopatra entered Judea on their campaign against the Parthians in 34 B.C., Herod managed to escape from Cleopatra's plans against him by giving her large gifts and agreeing to lease back from her for two hundred talents each year the valuable lands that she had previously taken from his domain.² Then, as Octavius was securing control over the eastern Mediterranean, Herod provided generous assistance to him and his armies: "In short, there were no necessities which the army lacked."³ In return for this support, Herod was soon richly rewarded. When Octavius defeated Antony and Cleopatra, not only was Herod given

back all of the lands Cleopatra had appropriated from him, but he also received several new territories ranging from Gaza in the south, to Joppa on the coast, to Samaria in the hill country.⁴

Later, in 23 B.C., in compensation for ridding the land around Damascus of robber infestation, Herod was awarded further territories north of Judea and Galilee, and a few years later, Caesar proclaimed Herod the procurator of Syria.⁵ Each of these additions augmented Herod's political prestige, as well as his revenue sources and cash flows.

Besides using money to please the rulers in Rome, Herod expended vast amounts of money to enhance his local reputation. Each of his building projects created jobs and wages for numerous workers, and apparently Herod was prompt as a paymaster. Over eighteen thousand workers were employed for several years in constructing the great temple in Jerusalem, and Josephus reports that they were immediately paid for their daily labor: "If anyone worked for but one hour of the day, he at once received his pay."⁶

While much of this huge building growth in the tiny land of Israel benefited the king, as did his palaces in Jericho and Jerusalem and his various fortresses, Herod also built or rebuilt many cities, such as Caesarea, as well as paved the whole of Jerusalem with white stone; these projects directly benefited the populace as a whole. It was said that Herod renovated the temple at his own expense in order to ingratiate himself to his kingdom.⁷ Josephus discusses Herod's motives in making these expenditures as follows:

To the Jews he made the excuse that he was doing these things not on his own account but by command and order, while he sought to please Caesar and the Romans by saying that he was less intent upon observing the customs of his own nation than upon honouring them. On the whole, however, he was intent upon his own interests or was also ambitious to leave behind to posterity still greater monuments of his reign. It was for this reason that he was keenly interested in the reconstruction of cities and spent very great sums on this work.⁸

Whatever his intentions, the economic consequences of Herod's building projects must have had profound effects on the entire economy and society of all peoples under his dominion.

Herod also made use of his financial powers to establish political connections and win honor all around the eastern Mediterranean. He lavished grants on various cities and peoples around

the region: he built public buildings and gymnasia for Tripolis in North Africa, for Damascus in Syria, and a wall for Byblus in present-day Lebanon, as well as “halls, porticoes, temples, and market-places for Berytus and Tyre, theatres for Sidon and Damascus, an aqueduct for Laodicea on sea, baths, sumptuous fountains and colonnades, admirable alike for their architecture and their proportions, for Ascalon.”⁹ His gifts of land, groves, food, money, tax relief, construction capital, shipbuilding financing, donations, temple refurbishings, and street pavings extended from Syria to Greece, from Cilicia in Asia Minor “to every district of Ionia,” including Cos, Rhodes, Lycia, Samos, Nicopolis, Pergamum, and on into the mainland Greek cities of Athens and Sparta. He handsomely enriched the traditional venue of the Olympic games, over which he presided one year, endowing them “for all time with revenues” so that people would not forget his service as president.¹⁰ No doubt this foreign aid improved political conditions for the thousands of Jews living in many cities abroad, each of whom paid a temple tribute back to the temple in Jerusalem each year (the Apostle Paul encouraged his converts to continue making payments to be taken to Jerusalem, 1 Cor. 16:3), which amounted to very large sums of money, attracting considerable attention and causing occasional problems.

While his munificence may have enhanced the reputation of Herod and the Jews of the Diaspora abroad, at home Herod was sometimes regarded as “the most cruel tyrant that ever existed,” who crippled the cities under his dominion, “lavishing the lifeblood of Judea on foreign communities.”¹¹ Some of this grouching, however, must have been overstated in light of the money that poured into Jerusalem from Jews and God-fearers all over the known world.¹² Moreover, when his kingdom was crippled with famine, Herod used his own moneys, including his artistic ornaments of gold and silver, to purchase grain from Egypt to relieve the suffering of his people.¹³ Josephus claims that “there was no one who asked for aid in his need and was turned away without getting such help as he deserved,” and at least once, because of this solicitude, the people changed their opinion of Herod.¹⁴

Jesus once said, “Make to yourself friends of the mammon of unrighteousness” (Luke 16:9). It would appear that no one around

the time of Christ was more experienced than Herod the Great at using mammon to make friends and influence people.

Main Sources of Herod's Wealth

With all this wealth being used for construction and other purposes, one wonders where it came from. Herod skillfully exploited every available source of revenue common to his day and then some.

Of course, he collected taxes from his subject peoples. Were his tax policies oppressive? Upon Herod's death, one of the things his people clamored for was tax relief. While this outcry may indicate that Herod's tax rate was probably high, popular pressures for tax relief are virtually universal. Moreover, in one period of recovery from sharp crop failure and economic trouble, Herod "remitted to the people of his kingdom a third part of their taxes."¹⁵ On another occasion, he remitted a fourth of their taxes for the previous year because he was in a good mood.¹⁶ In the case of the colonists who settled in Batanea, he remitted the taxes completely. Thus, "the frequently-drawn picture of a kingdom tragically oppressed" by taxes does not appear to be entirely accurate. Moreover, "there is no evidence that Herod or his heirs paid any tribute to Rome after 30 B.C.E."¹⁷

Indeed, Herod's financial resources "did not come exclusively from the imposition of taxes on the kingdom."¹⁸ Herod also collected tribute from other peoples. At one time, the king of Arabia paid a tribute to Rome of two hundred talents, which Herod was responsible to collect.¹⁹ He also controlled important trade routes, from which he derived customs duties, including the Nabatean trade from Arabia and maritime commerce through Caesarea.²⁰

Moreover, Herod brought considerable personal wealth to his kingdom. He owned valuable lands which he rented out. For a time the Arabs rented grazing land from Herod.²¹

He was also engaged in direct agricultural production on his lands. He owned large groves of date palms and balsam trees. On the latter crop, he held a monopoly, for balsam grows only at Jericho in nearby En Gedi, and it was "the most precious thing there."²² This crop brought in a large income. In 34 B.C., Antony took the balsam groves near Jericho and presented them to his love, Cleopatra.

When confronted by the two, Herod "appeased their ill will," agreeing to take these lands back on lease "for an annual sum of two hundred talents."²³ In the end, these lands were restored to Herod by Octavian in 30 B.C. Moreover, Herod's personal estate included fertile lands in the Jezreel Valley that he acquired by appropriation from the Hasmonians.²⁴

In addition, money flowed from all over the known world into the temple in Jerusalem, and hence into the kingdom of Herod, by virtue of the annual half-shekel temple tax that every Jewish man over the age of twenty was required to pay. Large Jewish populations in Rome, Alexandria, Ionia, Babylon, and elsewhere, sent convoys each year transmitting these payments.

Perhaps most amazingly, Herod collected substantial royalties from the sale of copper on the island of Cyprus (which name in Greek means "copper"). The copper mines on that island produced high quality ore and provided a main source of copper for the entire Roman empire. Herod obtained these rights from Augustus Caesar, who was interested in strengthening the hand of Herod in the East so that he could stabilize that part of the world. In that connection, "Herod made a present of three hundred talents to Caesar, who was providing spectacles and doles for the people of Rome, while Caesar gave him half the revenues from the copper mines of Cyprus, and entrusted him with the management of the other half."²⁵

Occasionally, Herod turned to confiscation and exercising royal powers of eminent domain. For example, in order to make his gifts to Antony, Herod confiscated valuable equipment or ornaments and generally "despoiled the well-to-do," killing forty-five of the leaders of Antigonus's party and placing guards to be sure that no silver or gold was taken out with the bodies.²⁶ On one occasion, Herod took 3,000 talents from the tomb of King David.²⁷ Apparently, Herod had no problem taking from the rich, or from anyone for that matter. Josephus tells, "In place of their ancient prosperity and ancestral laws, he had sunk the nation to poverty and the last degree of iniquity. In short, the miseries which Herod in the course of a few years had inflicted on the Jews surpassed all that their forefathers had suffered during all the time since they left Babylon to return to their country in the reign of Xerxes."²⁸ Herod's storehouses

at Masada and elsewhere are evidence that this statement may well have considerable truth behind it.

Amounts of Money Involved in Herod's History

If the raw numbers given by Josephus can be trusted, even as approximations, Herod had large amounts of revenue coming in each year. In addition, he held in reserve substantial supplies of hard currency, especially in the temple treasury.

Josephus describes the contents of the temple early in Herod's reign as already including "the candelabrum and lamps, the table, the vessels for libation and censers, all of solid gold, an accumulation of spices and the store of sacred money [*bierōn chrēmatōn*] amounting to two thousand talents."²⁹ By leaving the utensils and wealth of the temple in place, Pompey garnered the goodwill of the people of Judea. Crassus, however, marched into Jerusalem and carried away all of the money in the temple, amounting to 2,000 talents, along with all of the gold, equal to 8,000 talents.³⁰ The total value of the wealth of the temple given by Josephus was thus at least 10,000 talents. When the Romans burned the temple in A.D. 70, Sabinus, one of many looters, "openly took four hundred talents for himself."³¹

In addition to those assets, it has been estimated that "the total annual fiscal yield that Herod drew from the kingdom was about 1,050 talents."³² From Galilee alone, the tax output the year after Herod's death was 100 talents;³³ at the same time, the total revenue from Idumea, Judea, Samaria, Strato's Tower, Sebaste, Joppa, and Jerusalem was 400 talents;³⁴ and from Jamnia, Azotus, and Phasaelis, 60 talents.³⁵

While no figures exist to document Herod's revenues from rents or from farming and mining activities, his profits must have well exceeded the 200 talent rent he received from Cleopatra on one tract of land alone, and the income from the mines in Cyprus would have been very significant indeed.

By Galilean and late Jewish definitions, a talent of gold or silver was at least 20.4 kilograms; a Tyrian talent was about 42.5 kilograms.³⁶ So 1,000 talents would have amounted to 45,000 or 93,500 pounds (22.5 or 46.75 tons), respectively.

If the recent estimates are anywhere near accurate in placing the total Jewish population in the Roman empire at this time at about five to seven million people, the annual temple tax from Jews all over the world could have easily yielded over a million shekels. At 15.126 grams of silver per shekel, this amount would equal 15,126 kilograms (33,347 pounds, or 16.7 tons) of silver.

What purchasing power all this wealth commanded is difficult to say. Much depended on the circumstances of supply and demand, need and desire. For example, the Persian Emperor Darius gave the Jews 50 talents for the rebuilding of the temple in the days of Ezra.³⁷ A son who managed 3,000 talents belonging to his father in Egypt spent 400 talents in an extravagant display to impress Ptolemy and Cleopatra.³⁸ A group of Jews paid 8 silver talents to Florus, the Roman procurator in Caesarea, in an attempt to protect the synagogue there;³⁹ and when Titus surrounded and attacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the cost of a single measure of grain in the face of starvation rose to the extraordinary price of 1 talent.⁴⁰

Even after a lifetime of heavy spending, Herod still held several well-stocked treasuries when he died. Josephus points out that after the death of Herod, his sons got, along with land, significant amounts of hard currency. Augustus Caesar himself served as the executor of Herod's estate. The emperor awarded Perea and Galilee to Herod's son Antipas, "with a revenue of two hundred talents" annually.⁴¹ In the north, Philip's annual revenue was one hundred talents; and in the south, Archelaus's income was four hundred talents according to one account,⁴² six hundred talents according to another.⁴³ Salome's share was a total revenue of sixty talents, with various other gifts totaling 1,000 (or 1,500) talents going to other members of Herod's family.⁴⁴ Finally, Herod's legacy to Caesar was another 1,000 talents.⁴⁵

Large Monetary Amounts in the New Testament

The vast wealth of King Herod and his dynasty helps to put various events and sayings from the life of Jesus into an historico-economic perspective.

Jesus concentrated his time in Jerusalem by spending it in or around the great Temple of Herod. The fabulous wealth and dominant economic functions of the temple⁴⁶ must have prompted

Jesus' warnings against the temple hierarchy and its money changing. As Jesus sat opposite the temple treasury watching people making contributions to the temple, "and many that were rich cast in much" (Mark 12:41), the enormous accumulations of wealth visible in that extravagant place must also have stood in grotesque and shocking contrast to the simple needs of the poor, making the scene even more poignant when "there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing" (Mark 12:42), which was all that she had.

Money also figures prominently in Jesus' parable of the talents. A man traveling abroad left his goods in the hands of three servants. To one "he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one" (Matt. 25:15). Five talents was obviously a sizable amount of gold or silver—either 102 or 212 kilograms (225 or 467.5 pounds), depending on which weight system was involved. Even the servant with one talent was given sufficient funds to enter into a significant commercial venture. In addition, the ratio of 1:2:5 might have reminded some of Jesus' listeners of the disposition of income streams under Herod's estate among three of his sons, Philip (100 talents), Antipas (200 talents), and Archelaus (400 or 600 talents).

Above all, in the parable of the unforgiving servant, a certain servant was brought to give an accounting to his king. The servant owed the king a debt of 10,000 talents (Matt. 18:24). When the servant begged for leniency and worshipped the king, the king was moved with compassion and forgave the entire debt. That same servant, however, went out and found one of his fellows who owed him 100 pence and demanded payment. When the king learned what had happened, he reinstated the debt in full. Not only does that large debt figure represent an impossible sum, worth perhaps several billion dollars in today's markets, but against the historical background of the Temple of Herod it is noteworthy that 10,000 talents was exactly equal to the value of the total temple treasury as stated by Josephus. Thus, the unforgiving servant may in fact represent the king or the temple high priest into whose hands God had entrusted the keeping of that huge amount of sacred wealth. No one else in Judea could conceivably have held that kind of money. Thus, the political upshot of the

parable may well be this: despite the great debts and offenses of the rulers of the temple against God, they can be readily forgiven by God, so long as they beg his forgiveness and worship him. When asked, however, to be generous to a commoner in need of a small amount, the rich rulers of the temple will be unmoved, and as a consequence, they will be held personally accountable for the loss of the entire temple treasury.

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NOTES

¹See generally, Emilo Gabba, "The Finances of King Herod," in *Greece and Rome in Eretz Israel*, ed. A. Kasher, U. Rappaport, and G. Fuks (Yad Ishak Ben-Zvi: Israel Exploration Society, 1990), 160–71.

²Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.362.

³Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.395.

⁴Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.396.

⁵Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.398–99, and Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.360, indicate that Herod was associated with the procurators of Syria, who were required to obtain Herod's consent to all their decisions.

⁶Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.220.

⁷Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.380.

⁸Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.330.

⁹Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.422.

¹⁰Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.423–27.

¹¹Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.85.

¹²Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.110–11.

¹³Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.306–8.

¹⁴Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.313, 315.

¹⁵Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.365.

¹⁶Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.64.

¹⁷Gabba, "Finances of King Herod," 164.

¹⁸Gabba, "Finances of King Herod," 164.

¹⁹Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.107.

²⁰L. I. Levine, "Herod the Great," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:164.

²¹Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.291.

²²Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.96.

²³Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.362.

²⁴Levine, "Herod the Great," 3:164.

²⁵Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.128.

²⁶Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.5.

²⁷Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.179-82.

²⁸Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.86.

²⁹Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.153; see also Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.72.

³⁰Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.72, 105-9.

³¹Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.264.

³²Gabba, "Finances of King Herod," 161.

³³Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1996), 29.

³⁴Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.96-97.

³⁵Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.98.

³⁶Marvin A. Powell, "Weights and Measures," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:907. For further discussion, see Nanci DeBloois, "Coins in the New Testament," in this volume.

³⁷Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.61.

³⁸Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.209-215-18.

³⁹Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.287, 292.

⁴⁰Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.571.

⁴¹Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.95.

⁴²Josephus, *Jewish War* 2:95-97.

⁴³Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.320.

⁴⁴Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.323; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2:98-99.

⁴⁵Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.100.

⁴⁶Magen Broshi, "The Role of the Temple in the Herodian Economy," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38, no. 1 (1987): 31-37.

