

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Historians have long had before them the thesis that the history of Palestine in the first century CE is shaped by two decisive events, the succession crisis following the death of Herod and the resulting civil war half a century later.¹ It is also the case, of course, that there were a number of intervening factors: the political vacuum that followed the death of Herod; a sequence of inept or vicious procurators and governors;² and the fraternal rivalry of the Herodians.³ In this introduction I will note some of the work that has discussed the years between Herod's death

¹ Schürer–Vermes–Millar (Vol. 1: 330–335) prefer the terms rebellion and revolt to describe the various armed struggles in Palestine while the succession was being debated in Rome. The extent of the resistance to Roman rule was very strong, extended to Galilee as well as to the area around Jerusalem, and involved Roman soldiers as well as Jews incensed by the actions of the Roman procurator, Sabinus. There were at least two regional pretenders to the throne.

² As Schürer–Vermes–Millar 1973 note, the removal of Archelaus (6 CE) led to the direct rule of Judaea and Samaria under Roman prefects or procurators, whose duties included “the command of troops and the exercise of judiciary functions” along with “the administration of financial affairs” (Vol. 1: 372). As the troops were drawn from the gentile population, it is inevitable that their actions reflected popular antagonism toward the Jewish population, regardless of the bearing of the particular prefects in question. Schürer–Vermes–Millar give a detailed analysis of the rule of the prefects, their relation to the equestrian order, and the fate of the Jewish population under particular prefects such as Pilate (see Schürer–Vermes–Millar, Vol. 1: 357–398). Clearly the most flagrant in his abuse of power to suppress the Jewish population was Pilate (Schürer–Vermes–Millar, Vol. 1: 383ff.). Despite the depredations of the worst of the procurators or prefects, Schürer–Vermes–Millar observe that “Within the limits set by the institutions themselves, the Jewish people none the less enjoyed a considerable measure of freedom in home affairs and self-government” (Vol. 1: 376).

³ “The sons of Herod thus plotted and schemed against one another in Rome,” as Schürer–Vermes–Millar described the manoeuvring, after the death of Herod, between Archelaus and Antipas, soon to be joined by Philip (Schürer–Vermes–Millar, vol. 1: 331). There were further rivalries brought on by the rivalry between Herodias (Antipas' wife) and Philip, once the latter had received a royal title from Caligula (see Schürer–Vermes–Millar Vol. 1: 351ff.).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and the civil war, but will not try to weigh the alternative arguments in any sociological balance; that would be possible only in a book that seeks to bring alternative theories to bear on the discussion of various historians regarding this period in Palestinian society.

What I propose to show is how a sociologist might continue the investigation of Palestinian society on the thesis that the death of Herod and the crisis of succession were of paramount importance for the course of Israel's history. The inquiry here, however, is socio-logical. That is, I want to show how an attentive sociologist might raise certain questions about some of the details of Herod's household and regime. By paying attention to certain details, and by following some of the conventions of the sociologist's craft, it should be possible to examine certain aspects of Palestinian society that are less obvious, perhaps, than the distribution of power and wealth and more elusive than overt social conflict between factions and groups.

I propose to investigate the substructure, as it were, and the informal processes of control and resistance that made that society a virtual prison for many, perhaps most, of its citizens, even when they were ostensibly free to walk about and to dispute the interpretation of the Law. The point is to call attention to aspects of social life that not only shaped the experience of people but may also call into question the viability of Palestinian society. In so doing I would hope to show how these aspects of social life, when taken together, suggest a reality sufficiently pervasive to have shaped the religious movements of the period and the texts that we have come to know as the gospels. Sociologists are typically concerned, therefore, with the hanging-together-of-things.

Now, when the life of a society goes relatively smoothly, as it did at times under Herod, not all its assumptions, inner tendencies, and tell-tale signs of strain will come to light; on the contrary, what is most decisive in social life is often latent, implicit, or quite forcibly suppressed. That is why it is important to examine a society when it is coming apart, as it were, at the seams. Only then can one discern the separate pieces, their

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

relative strengths and weaknesses, and the ways in which they fit together and pull in opposite directions. Palestine between the death of Herod and the onset of the civil war (66 CE to 73/4 CE) offers precisely this opportunity to observe what at other times might easily have escaped notice.

No description, no interpretation is either disinterested or complete; all such accounts are informed with a sense of what the historian or sociologist thinks is problematical. I take a “problematik” to be a set of interests and concerns: an interest in how societies maintain order, for instance, or a concern with how they reproduce themselves over time despite the tendency of their members to go away and to die, to resist instruction and to have divided loyalties. If sociologists are concerned with the fate of asceticism in modern societies, for instance, they may investigate the degree to which various ethnic groups produce dedicated workers and self-disciplined citizens, or they may examine the rates of deviance, tax evasion, absenteeism from school and workplace, and disenchantment with major institutions and public figures. Other sociologists, concerned with the ability of a social system to reproduce itself, may focus on these same tendencies but for entirely different reasons. If in this book, therefore, I seem to ignore works that have focused on the same aspects, say, of religion in pre-66 CE Palestine, it is partly because of the difference between my “problematik” and theirs. In a later volume, in which I seek to compare various theoretical approaches to the study of Palestinian society in this period, I will draw more heavily on the secondary literature.

This study, like any other, therefore begins with a brief discussion of the author’s own interests and concerns, which indeed focus on the problems that all societies have in reproducing themselves. Societal self-reproduction is a problem that presents itself simply because all the members of any society eventually and inevitably die; they also tend to have strong outside interests or even leanings, and they often think for themselves. This is not to be confused with the general problem of order, or with a more specific interest in asking how societies control deviance. Here the concern is with the task of societal self-reproduction.

More specifically, of course, the book focuses on the illuminating moment of succession: the death of one king and the search for a new one. In the events leading up to such a succession, in the twilight of an interregnum, and in the accession of a new king to the throne, societies tend to reveal their latent loyalties and tensions. It is the moment of “liminality,” as Victor Turner so aptly terms it. When a society begins to have agonizing doubts about its ability to reproduce itself over time, about its continuity and very survival, what has been buried in the way of antagonisms and hopes, fears and affections often comes forcibly to light. Even an unpopular monarchy still represents the viability of an entire society. Succession is a problem, therefore, not only for a particular household but for an entire society: not for kingships alone, but for a people in its entirety.

Here I will focus on a variety of such observations, but the central focus will be on the way that language either reflects or disguises, expresses or distorts social reality. The need for surveillance and spies in the Herodian regime did not end with Herod's death; it continued through the civil war, and it will be part of our inquiry to ask what it was like to live in a regime founded on stealth and suspicion.

As words depart from deeds, moreover, the promises necessary to enable one generation peacefully to succeed another fail, as do the rites and ceremonies that are usually relied upon to forge alliances, cement loyalties, allay fears of treason, and elicit commitments for the future.⁴ Thus our inquiry will also focus on the way that the generations fought with each other over the succession. I will also focus, however, on the tensions within a rising age-set of young males at odds with each other as well as their elders for the scarce rewards of maturity and the allocation of both privilege and sacrifice.

Sociologists often begin where social historians end their

⁴ If the emphasis on speech and language seems more appropriate to Palestinian Judaism than to Rome, consider this point made by Veyne, that is, that “A senator was not a man like other men. Whatever he said was public and was supposed to be believed . . . Public life was ruled by the will of the governing class, and private life by fear of what the governing class would say” (1987: 174, 176). I quote this here to make the point that authority was grounded in speech that would normally be effective, that is, as good as a deed.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

inquiries. In this book, for instance, my point of departure will be the insight – not a new one, by any means – that the death of Herod was a pivotal moment in the history of first-century Palestine and accelerated the forces that ultimately destroyed Israel in a disastrous rebellion, revolution, and civil war. That there were problems in the succession after Herod's death is amply attested by Josephus and by contemporary historians; a sociologist such as myself, however, may discern in Herod's problems in managing the succession a larger struggle within the society as a whole: a struggle between generations for the scarce rewards of inheritance and authority.

A crisis of succession, I will argue, is not only pivotal in the life of a nation, but may also be revelatory. What that moment reveals, of course, depends partly on the “motes” and the “beams” in the sociologist's eye. In this book I have begun by suggesting that every sociologist brings a set of problems and concerns into any inquiry. Here my interest is in the ability of any society to reproduce itself from one generation to the next. That ability, I will suggest, depends on many factors, one of which is the ability of speech and language to bear the freight of promises and commitments. Language that can elicit and convey the commitment of one generation to fulfill its duties to the past and to the future of a society is essential if that society is to survive the fateful transition between generations. That is why I will focus on various patterns of resistance, subterfuge, rivalry, and sedition within Herod's household on the assumption that these patterns may have been more widespread and therefore critical to the ability of Israel to reproduce itself over time in pre-70 CE Palestine.

A sociologist is likely to see the world from a very different vantage-point, for instance, from that of scholars who already know when the fateful moments in the life of a particular society have occurred. Once convinced that the latter days of Herod the Great reveal what lies beneath the surface of social life, it is easy for a sociologist to jump to the conclusion that such a moment is not only illuminating but also decisive in the course of Israel's later history. Perhaps the civil war did have its causes in the tempestuous succession to the throne of Herod the Great, but to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

Introduction

assume so from the outset would be to commit the familiar fallacy of thinking that what comes after an event is caused by that same event.

Tempting as it is to search for a single cause, I hasten to add that there were other, equally pervasive sources of conflict that nourished suspicion in first-century Palestine. The Hasmoneans two and a half centuries before Herod had been enormously successful in bringing the Edomites into the kingdom of Judaea; their forced conversion produced the later anomaly of an Idumaeen by race, Herod, qualifying for the title king of the Jews by virtue of his religious adherence. The long-term tendency of the Hasmoneans to be defeated by their successes is the theme of Perowne's comment about their subsequent conquest of Galilee. Speaking of the great-grandson of the Mattathias who had initiated the Judaeen revolt, Perowne observes that:

Aristobulus reigned for one year only, but it was the most fateful reign in the whole of recorded history. He subdued Galilee, and forced Judaism on its inhabitants, thus ensuring that every child born of Galilean parents should henceforth be born into Jewry, including Jesus of Nazareth. (1956:18)

This is a pointed reminder that the "Jews" belonged to two systems: the ethnic and the religious/political. So Herod was an Idumaeen by ethnicity but a Jew by religion because of the conquest of Idumaea by Hyrcanus, just as Jesus was a Galilean by ethnicity but a Jew by politics and religion because of the conquest of Galilee by Aristobulus. The threat to the succession is obvious: that the king of the Jews is simultaneously a member of two nations, as it were.

Add to this the fact that Herod was Hellenized by culture, as well as Idumaeen (Arab) by ethnicity and Jewish by religion, and one can sense some of the sources of paranoia about an individual's underlying allegiance in Palestine of the period. Thus Grant argues that the die was cast when Antony made Herod the king of the Jews and restored a succession that had been interrupted by the Pompeian conquest:

This conferment of the royal title upon him was a fateful decision, since it meant the termination of the national Hasmonean dynasty in favor

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

of an Idumaeen house of recent conversion and Arab race. It also meant that the kingship and high priesthood must become definitively separated, since Herod lacked even a shred of family qualification for the priestly office. (1973:66)

These many strains, between ethnicity and religion, between the peripheries of Idumaea or Galilee and the Judaeen center, between lines of priestly and monarchical descent, between genders and, I will argue, notably between generations, make it inevitable that the kingship, so vital to the life of the nation, should remain troubled and insecure. The more unstable the kingship, the more likely it was to maintain high levels of official secrecy along with energetic efforts to pry open the hearts and minds of possible rivals and enemies; surveillance as well as secrecy were twins of the Herodian regime. As Michael Grant observes, virtually no one could avoid surveillance:

Government was . . . suspicious and severe, with the closest attention paid to security. Public meetings, other than those summoned by the authorities, were prohibited, and even an informal gathering of very few persons was regarded with official misgivings. "No meeting of citizens was allowed," records Josephus, "nor were walking together or being together allowed, and all their movements were observed." Inside the cities, and out on the open roads as well, there were hosts of men spying on any and every social encounter. The huge fortresses everywhere, with their frightening reputations, provided a further reminder that caution was desirable. When Herod died, the dungeons were found to contain a number of long-term prisoners." (1973:122)

(It is interesting to note that, despite these observations of a police-state at work in every nook and cranny of Jewish society, Grant concludes that the regime of Herod was not oppressive: see 1973:172.)

Given that the later prefects and the Herodian princely states that followed Herod's death were perennially insecure, it is entirely possible that the level of surveillance remained relatively high after the death of Herod. The New Testament suggests that there were informers at the gatherings around Jesus, and Josephus regards the subsequent governors and prefectors as relatively weak and incompetent: all the more reason for their reliance on a network of spies and informers. In any event, it is clear that Herod was not only a man with a divided tempera-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ment but one whose inner conflicts had systemic origins – and long-term consequences – in the world around him.

Even in these rather cursory selections from some of the secondary literature, it is clear that there are two converging streams of analysis. One focuses on the strains between religion and ethnicity, between outsiders and insiders, between priests and the kingship once the royal household could no longer qualify for the priesthood; the other focuses on the conflict between and within each generation. Let me suggest that there is an interaction between these two sets of factors. I mean simply that the strain of living in two overlapping and inter-penetrating social orders (for example, Idumaeans and Jewish, Hellenistic and Israelite) increases the likelihood that the generations, naturally in conflict over the rights and timing of the succession to positions of power and authority, will also be torn between ethnic and political loyalties as these are personified in fathers and mothers, uncles and cousins, sons and daughters. Given the overlapping of dual and competing social orders, it is even more likely that each generation will be disloyal to one or the other set of authorities, thus exacerbating the inevitable tensions that accompany the succession of the generations.⁵

Indeed, Herod typified in himself the danger of a rising generation of males in a society that combines conflicting orders of loyalty and adherence, both ethnic and political. Perowne notes, for instance, that Herod could be “quixotically faithful and loyal to a relation or a friend” and yet put members of his own family to death. This strange combination of brutality and fidelity, Perowne goes on to say, “had its origin in his early youth, when the traditional family piety of the Arabs . . . came into conflict with the stark competition for power and survival which alone governed the Roman world during his boyhood, and for some years after it” (1956:46).

⁵ Schürer–Vermes–Millar note that “The existence, side by side, of a dual organization in the country, Jewish and Roman, each with its own legal system and its own judiciary institutions, occasionally had irregular results . . . Jewish courts decided in accordance with Jewish law. Even in cases of criminal law the same situation almost always prevailed, with the exception, however, of political offences . . . Even Roman citizens were not totally exempt from complying with the requirements of Jewish law” (Vol. 1: 377–378).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Conflicts of loyalty or affection appear to have plagued the household of Herod after his marriage to Mariamme in what Perowne calls “fatal nuptials”: fatal because the old factions became part of his household (1956:70). Mariamme was a member of the family of Hyrcanus: that is, she was a Hasmonean, and as such she could give ethnic and religious legitimacy to Herod’s kingship. Unfortunately for Herod, she did not return his affections but was in fact a fifth-column within his regime: a source of nationalist intrigue and enmity. Eventually Alexandra and Mariamme conspire to get a Hasmonean high priest, Mariamme’s popular brother, appointed to the office, and this intensifies Salome’s – and other Idumaeans’ – hatred for the Hasmoneans (Perowne 1956:73). In the end, it is Queen Alexandra’s “fatal schemes” and “corroding ambition” that caused the deaths of the leading male members of the Hasmonean line for their part in her plots to overthrow Herod (1956:77). The country – the house – divided against itself could hardly stand.

It may be that the civil war thus began in the attempt to unite the Idumaeans and the Hasmoneans by marriage, divided as they were by class and status as well as by ethnicity. A similar argument has been made by Lincoln (1989) about the causes of the St. Bartholomew’s massacre: that Henry, by forcing a marriage between Catholic and Protestant in his own household, breached ethnic boundaries that the people in turn were all too willing to restore by violence. The Herodian household also failed to unite through marriage and kinship an otherwise divided system. Not only did the attempt fail; the breach became irreconcilable when the Idumaeans, led by Herod’s sister Salome, incriminated Mariamme of infidelity and sedition. Salome’s plot worked, and Herod had Mariamme put summarily to death. From then on, Perowne warns us, Herod “became moody, suspicious, and liable to sudden accesses of vindictive passion” (1956:86). Eventually the split between Hasmonean and Idumaeans was passed on to the next generation. Herod’s son by Mariamme, Aristobulus, married Berenice, one of Salome’s daughters by an Arab prince. That gave Salome a chance to carry on her Idumaeans vendetta

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42502-5 - The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion

Richard Fenn

Excerpt

[More information](#)

against the Hasmonean line of Mariamme into the next generation, where the succession foundered.

Grant not only attributes the question of the succession to the chronic internecine warfare in Herod's household but credits that familial discord with undermining Herod's reputation among rivals and allies in the Middle East:

In Herod's heyday, Augustus had granted him the unique privilege of being allowed to make his own choice from among his numerous sons and thus to nominate his own successor. But this privilege at some stage was revoked, and meanwhile his prestige at Rome suffered greatly when Roman governors of Syria, and even Augustus himself, found themselves drawn with increasing frequency into these desperately unsavory disputes. (1973:78)

I do not want to engage in a historical speculation as to whether the Hellenization of Palestine or the crisis in succession following the death of Herod was more important to the eventual outcome. No doubt the pride and the decadence of the Hasmonean side of the Herodian household, through Mariamme and her sons Alexander and Aristobulus, were pitted against the outside influences represented by the Idumaeans: a clear legacy of the Jewish nationalism that earlier had resisted Hellenization under Alexander Jannaeus. Thus Perowne (1956:113) says that Josephus "rightly" traces the fatal rebellion of the first century to the resistance that began against Antiochus Epiphanes over two centuries earlier and continued to disturb Israel under Alexander Jannaeus. Certainly the causal linkages are too long and complex to be disentangled by the relatively simple logic that I will be employing for this inquiry. Besides, in any moment such as the struggle for the Herodian succession, the effect of past events is reflected in contemporary tensions; all the more visibly if previous tensions have never been fully resolved.⁶

In any event, Herod's appointment as king of the Jews

⁶ It is important to note, for instance, that even movements of cultural defence against Hellenization may have actually continued the process under new auspices; thus Hengel notes that "the Hasmoneans did not really slow down the 'process of Hellenization' in Palestinian Judaism but in fact continued it as soon as they themselves came to power" (1980: 117). It is an observation such as this that makes it difficult for me to trace Palestinian society's difficulties in self-reproduction to outside influences such as Hellenistic culture.