

Martin Goodman, *Herod the Great. Jewish King in a Roman World*, Yale University Press, London-New Haven 2024, pp. 248

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Martin Goodman is the author of numerous publications on the history of ancient Israel, at least some of which, such as *The Ruling Class of Judaea. The Origins of the Jewish Revolt Against Rome, A.D. 66-70* (1987) or *Rome and Jerusalem. The Clash of Ancient Civilisations* (2007), have significantly influenced the perception of Roman-Jewish relations and the origins of the Jewish revolt in the 1st century CE. In his new book, Goodman focuses on the most famous Jewish ruler of that period, Herod the Great (c. 73-4 BCE). His biography is much better documented than, for example, that of Jesus of Nazareth, thanks mainly to his court historian, Nicholas of Damascus, whose account has survived thanks to Josephus' *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*. Despite this, numerous myths have grown up around Herod, which many historians have tried to combat over the last century and a half. One may ask whether, given the considerable number of studies on Herod (and a much smaller but still numerous group of studies on his family members), it is necessary to devote another biography to him, especially since it is not a long work.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first is devoted to Herod's youth, although this statement may be misleading, as almost nothing is known about his childhood. Goodman therefore recounts the most important events of the decline of the Hasmonean state from the perspective of the young Herod and his relatives (especially his father Antipater). The second chapter focuses on the challenges faced by the young Idumean when he began his political career. It discusses how the achievements of Antipater's sons were undermined due to the civil war in Rome, struggles with internal enemies among the Jewish elite, and finally the Parthian invasion. However, none of this prevented Herod from being granted the title of king by the Roman Senate in 40 BCE, although he soon had to face the challenges posed by the alliance between Antony and Cleopatra and their conflict with Octavian. In the next chapter, the author describes the process of the formation of Herod's state, which took place simultaneously with the transformation of the Roman Republic into an informal monarchy, which undoubtedly had a huge impact on the shape of the Jewish kingdom and, thanks to Augustus' favour, contributed to the expansion of its territory. The fourth chapter focuses on the relationship between Herod's two identities – as a Jewish king and a client king in the Greco-Roman world. The king could try to combine them, as state anti-Judaism did not appear in Rome until the reign of the Flavians (69-96 CE), when the image of Jews as external enemies was finally created. However, one could argue with the author's statement. It cannot be denied that state hostility towards Jews began to manifest itself in the decisions

of emperors earlier – during the reign of Tiberius (14-37 CE) and especially Caligula (37-41 CE). In particular, Tiberius' expulsion of Jews from Rome was associated with a struggle against foreign cults (at the same time, there was a campaign against the cult of Isis, which was used in a moral scandal involving a Roman aristocrat), so to some extent, Jews and their religion could be perceived as an external threat, alien to Roman customs. There is no reason to question Goodman's further arguments, as during Herod's lifetime in Rome there were few voices openly hostile to the Jews (apart from writings such as Cicero's *Pro Flacco*, which the author later refers to), and they certainly did not have any state significance in the 1st century BCE. The author's comments on Herod's efforts to legitimise his rule in the eyes of his Greek subjects, who lived in the cities of the Decapolis, which Octavian Augustus had incorporated into his dominion, are also valuable. Among Greeks, the inhabitants of Gadara showed particular separatism, trying to ignore what they considered a shameful period of dependence even many years after the king's death. Their hostility was not diminished even by the king's numerous foundations for pagan cities and Greek culture in general. The last chapter is devoted to the tragedies that befell Herod's household in the last years of his life, and above all to the disputes he had with his sons. The issue of the ultimate failure of Herod's efforts is also raised. When Archelaus (the son designated by the deceased king as his successor in his last will and testament) informally ascended the throne, he quickly came into conflict with the opposition, which expected many of Herod's decisions to be reversed. Before he even went to Augustus in the hope of receiving the royal title, his soldiers carried out a massacre among his subjects, and the emperor remained distrustful and granted Archelaus only the title of ethnarch, which was later revoked, and Archelaus was sentenced to exile.

The main part of the book concludes with an *Epilogue*, in which the author shows how the perception of Herod over the last nearly two millennia (as it was already evident among Christians in the late 1st century CE) has been dominated by a crime that Herod never committed, namely the so-called "Massacre of the Innocents" described in the Gospel according to Matthew (2:16-18). The author points out that Herod's madness in the last years of his life, as reported by Josephus, lent credibility to the story of the massacre. It was so deeply rooted in the Christian consciousness that, even several centuries after his death, it influenced the reception of stage plays depicting the fate of Herod and his family. As Goodman states in reference to Georg Philipp Telemann's opera *Herodes und Mariamne*, it was "less received and does not seem to have been given a performance in his lifetime, perhaps because the presentation of Herod in the love story jarred with an audience accustomed to the traditional depiction of him as a villain" (p. 163).

The book also includes an appendix devoted in part to the apparent contradictions between Josephus's accounts of Herod. As the author points out, in the most important aspects, the narratives in *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews* are consistent with each other, differing mainly in details and moral judgements. However, the author emphasises that Josephus was not particularly interested in Herod as an individual, which significantly complicates the task of a contemporary biographer who seeks to show how the difficult experiences Herod encountered from his youth changed his personality and attitude towards other people. The chronological tables of the events discussed and the genealogies are also useful features that undoubtedly make the book more accessible to readers who are just beginning to explore the history of Herod and his kingdom. They enable readers to understand the relationships connecting the numerous figures mentioned in the book with the Jewish king.

Although it is difficult to find any errors in the entire work, one may disagree with some of the author's statements, such as his opinion on the Hellenisation of the Hasmoneans (p. 13). Although this view was once very common, scholars have been raising more and more arguments against this established view for some time now.¹ Although the Hasmoneans undoubtedly showed signs of Hellenisation, these were rather superficial, while their concern for and the spread of Judaism among the population, as well as their consistent fight against the "pagans," proved their devotion to Judaism. Dynastic propaganda was also deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. There is no reason to question Goodman's knowledge on this subject, but unfortunately, he did not decide to develop this statement. Perhaps a more detailed explanation of his position would be valuable in view of the rest of the book, which focuses on Herod, the embodiment of the cultural melting pot that was Judea at that time. Moreover, the author is also known for other works devoted to the clash between Judaism and other cultures, of which the Hasmoneans are a unique expression in the history of Israel. We can only hope that the author will one day return to this issue with his characteristic expertise and erudition.²

However, these are minor details. It should be remembered that this book – as its title suggests – is not devoted to the state that Herod managed to create under the auspices of Augustus and other Roman patrons, but to the ruler himself. Goodman sought above all to describe the man who led Judea through difficult times of political turmoil and created a Jewish state that can only be compared to the legendary king Solomon and Alexander Jannaeus, who was closer to Herod. Unlike the latter, however, Herod was able to maintain internal order in the state, while Alexander waged civil war with his subjects for years. The small size of the book does not diminish its value, as the author focused on an area that not only did not interest ancient authors (at least Josephus), but was also subject to the greatest amount of misrepresentation, which Herod was not spared. The problem is that it is most difficult to refute slander from the private sphere of life, as the assessment of its credibility usually bears clear signs of subjectivity. Despite the difficulty of the task he set himself, Goodman did not succumb to the temptation of relativism and always tried to take a clear position on the events discussed, while ensuring that his portrayal of Herod was credible and consistent with the sources. This book can therefore be highly recommended both to those who are just beginning to explore the history of the Jewish state in the 1st century BCE and to professional historians who are familiar with other publications in this field. Although some of the author's ideas have not been sufficiently developed, the enormous amount of work he has put into creating this book cannot be denied.

¹ A constructive and extensive critique of this view can be found e.g., in E. Dąbrowa, *The Hasmoneans and their State. A Study in History, Ideology, and the Institutions*, Krakow 2010.

² M. Goodman partially elaborates on his views on this subject in his book *A History of Judaism*, New Jersey 2018, pp. 98-100. Although some of the author's observations are undoubtedly relevant, they do not seem to prove anything beyond the superficial Hellenisation of the Hasmoneans, which included certain solutions in the field of state and army administration.

