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# THE POLITICAL BORDERLINES OF HEROD THE GREAT

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This issue of the *University of Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought* celebrates the work of Daniel Boyarin and how it has enriched our understanding of cultural and social borderlines in the history shared—and indeed actively constructed—by Jews and non-Jews. Often the concept of a borderline involves a boundary between two parties. Yet as Boyarin has shown in his research and writing, borderlines are more complex than that. The process of creating a borderline demands a negotiation of identity involving multiple parties. When discussing religious borderlines in late antiquity, these parties could be Christians, Jews and those branded heretics by each. In more modern times, these parties could be Christians, Jews and Muslims, as Boyarin points out in the preface of his namesake volume, *Border Lines*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the process of determining borderlines is complex.

One figure who demonstrates this complexity effectively is Herod the Great. Herod was a borderline figure in several ways. Attention routinely has been given to his Jewishness and the degree to which he belonged to a Jewish or to a non-Jewish world.<sup>2</sup> For example, his father, Antipater, was an Idumaean, which may speak for or against Herod's Jewishness. Idumaea was the land of Edom, but in the late second century BCE. John Hyrcanus theoretically converted the resident population, only allowing those who agreed to circumcision and to follow Jewish laws to remain in the territory.<sup>3</sup> So perhaps Herod was an "authentic" Jew. Or perhaps he was more truly of Edom. We know that Herod declined to permit the marriage of his sister Salome to the Nabataean Syllaeus because the latter refused to adopt Jewish customs (including circumcision).<sup>4</sup> And we may consider the quip by the fifth century CE source Macrobius that it was better to be Herod's pig than his son, which, if true, suggests that Herod kept kosher.<sup>5</sup> These references seem to speak to Herod's

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), xii-xv.

<sup>2</sup> A topic discussed in some form in any comprehensive treatment of Herod. See: Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). Richardson deals with the issue from several different angles in chapters on Herod's family (33-51), building program (174-215), and religious orientation (240-261).

<sup>3</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 13.257-8.

<sup>4</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 16.220-5; *War* 1.401.

<sup>5</sup> Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 2.4.11.

observance of Jewish customs. Herod's expansion and elaboration of the Jewish temple, one of his greatest building projects, further points to his dedication to Judaism.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the tendency of Herod to avoid figural art in wall paintings, mosaics and coins should be read similarly, as Jewish law traditionally prohibits this practice.<sup>7</sup> Yet one must bear in mind that this was also the individual who endorsed the placement of an eagle sculpture above the great gate of the Jewish temple, a controversial decision for Jews who viewed the eagle as a violation of the second commandment.<sup>8</sup> More problematic still would have been the sacred statuary associated with the three Roman imperial cult temples that Herod built at Samaria Sebaste, Caesarea Maritima and Baniyas!<sup>9</sup> One might say that such decisions were more appropriate for a pagan. Considering these choices, where did Herod's cultural loyalties lie? While more evidence could be cited and discussed, it appears clear from this selective review that Herod stood at the border between Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Whatever his internal motivations, he actively participated in both.

The subject of the following article is related, but follows a more focused line of inquiry: the political borderlines of Herod the Great. Over the years, scholars have explored what kind of king Herod was and have strived to highlight many of his political interests and roles. Most of this discussion has centered on his responsibilities as a Roman client-king. Appointed by Rome in 40 BCE, Herod was sensitive to his relationship with Rome and cultivated it with care. Yet he was also a king of the Jews and ruled with an eye on their interests (though some may question to what precise degree). Scholars also have considered Herod as a Hellenistic king—a model that better helps to explain Herod's many benefactions, not only at home, but also abroad, in Syria, Phoenicia, Asia Minor, the Aegean islands, and Greece. From these various perspectives, we have come to appreciate

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<sup>6</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 15.380-425; see also *War* 1.401 and 5.184-226. David Jacobson, for one, reviews the monument's architectural details and Herod's motivations. However, he explains the project less as an issue of personal Jewish piety and more in the context of Hellenistic and Roman patronage and style. David Jacobson, "The Jerusalem Temple of Herod the Great," in *The World of the Herods*, ed. Nikos Kokkinos (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007), 145-176. For the architecture, see also Ehud Netzer, *The Architecture of Herod the Great Builder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 137-178.

<sup>7</sup> For this issue and what follows, see Sarah Japp, "Public and Private Decorative Art in the Time of Herod the Great," in *The World of the Herods*, 227-246, especially 242-244.

<sup>8</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 17.149-67; *War* 1.648-55.

<sup>9</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.403-14; *Ant.* 15.331-41. Netzer provides a convenient and streamlined review of the archaeological evidence, with reference to key bibliography: 85-89 (Samaria Sebaste), 103-106 (Caesarea Maritima), and 218-222 (Baniyas). The location of the Augusteum at Baniyas has proven a point of debate. Excavations since 1999 at the site Omrit, just south of Baniyas, have produced an excellent candidate: the temple identified as "Temple One" at Omrit. For a final report on its architecture, see Michael C. Nelson, *The Temple Complex at Horvat Omrit: Volume 1: The Architecture*, ed. J. Andrew Overman, Daniel Schowalter, and Michael C. Nelson (Leiden: Brill, 2015). See also Overman and Schowalter, eds., *The Roman Temple Complex at Horvat Omrit: An Interim Report* (Oxford: BAR International Series, 2011), which provides additional discussion. For a review of the latter, see Andrea Berlin in *BASOR* 369 (2013): 244-247, who suggests alternative explanations for this and another Omrit temple (called "Temple Two"). While Netzer was less inclined to accept the identification (222), other excavators at Baniyas have received it with more favor, e.g., John Francis Wilson and Vassilios Tzaferis, "An Herodian Capital in the North: Caesarea Philippi (Paniyas)," in *The World of the Herods*, 141; see John Francis Wilson, *Caesarea Philippi: Baniyas, The Lost City of Pan* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 16. See below for further discussion.

the many political roles negotiated by Herod: Roman client, Jewish king and Hellenistic ruler.<sup>10</sup>

This complexity, however, runs deeper still, and the concept of a borderline as employed by Boyarin helps us see the full extent of it. Most efforts to understand Herod's political world have been subject to the gravitational pull of Rome, sometimes with the result of diminishing Herod's agency.<sup>11</sup> This is in part inevitable and not entirely inaccurate. Rome played a key role in Herod's rise to prominence and kingship, and Herod lived within the confines of a territory that Rome dominated for most of his lifetime. I say "most" since this was not *always* the case. For a crucial window of time from 40-39 BCE, Judaea and its environs actually fell into the empire of Parthia, when its prince Pacorus led a force west of the Euphrates that conquered the Roman east, from Idumaea to Caria in Asia Minor. This is just the most striking example of how the geopolitical world of the Near East was not only Rome's playground.

Indeed, Herod was not only in Rome's orbit, but also in that of Parthia. While scholars have acknowledged the Roman-Parthian borderline of Herod, there is still more to explore in this issue, and Boyarin's emphasis on the active creation of borderlines (rather than their inevitable and impersonal genesis) enables the richest appreciation of it.<sup>12</sup> In the first century BCE, Roman and Parthian efforts resulted in an evolving imperial boundary and dynamic to which those in the Near East had to respond. We can only fully understand Herod in relation to this Roman-Parthian borderline and through his manipulation of it in the interests of his own advancement. As the following investigation will show, Herod adeptly positioned himself between Rome and Parthia, sometimes embracing one while rejecting the other, sometimes extending his hand to each where possible, with the result

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<sup>10</sup> For a number of excellent studies that explore these roles of Herod, see David Jacobson and Nikos Kokkinos, eds., *Herod and Augustus* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). As the title indicates, the focus of this scholarly corpus is Herod's relationship with Augustan Rome. But sensitivity is shown to elements of his behavior best explained in reference to the culture of Hellenistic kingship. See Erich S. Gruen, "Herod, Rome, and the Diaspora," in *Herod and Augustus*, 13-27, who investigates the image that Herod projected of himself for various audiences as a "partner" of Rome, "benefactor of the multi-ethnic peoples of Palestine," and Hellenistic king.

<sup>11</sup> See once again Jacobson and Kokkinos, eds., *Herod and Augustus*.

<sup>12</sup> Outstanding considerations of Herod in the context of Roman-Parthian relations include: J. Andrew Overman, "Between Rome and Parthia: Galilee and the Implications of Empire," in *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne*, ed. Zuleika Rodgers, Margaret Daly-Denton, and Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 279-299; Aryeh Kasher, "Josephus on Herod's Spring from the Shadows of the Parthian Invasion," in *Flavius Josephus: Interpretation and History*, ed. Jack Pastor, Pnina Stern, and Menahem Mor (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 227-245. A range of other scholars, however, also acknowledge the significance of Parthia for Herod: e.g. David Braund, *Rome and the Friendly King* (London: Croon Helm, 1984), 24-25; Uriel Rappaport, "The Jews between Rome and Parthia," in *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire*, ed. David H. French and Chris S. Lightfoot (Oxford: BAR International Series, 1989), 374-375; Richard Sullivan, *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome, 100-30 BC* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 222-225; Duane W. Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 14-15, 69; Richardson, *Herod*, 119-121, 124-130, 153-157, 161-162. Despite this attention, no scholar has addressed all of Herod's decisions and actions potentially bearing on his relationship with Parthia. This paper attempts to treat them all, to trace the evolution of the relationship as far as the evidence allows, and to fully appreciate Herod's agency in the process.

that it would not be inappropriate for us to consider Herod the friend of both the Romans and the Parthians, if only for a time.

### **The Model of Antipater**

That Herod approached politics open to some collaboration with the Parthians should not surprise us. His father Antipater shaped many of his inclinations. Antipater was a powerful Idumaeon who supported the rights of the Hasmonean Hyrcanus II over his brother Aristobulus II. He was also a figure who consistently displayed international interests in his political behavior—interests that were by no means one-dimensional. Antipater linked himself to the most powerful Romans of the day, beginning in 63 BCE with Pompey and continuing throughout the rest of his career, to 43 BCE. It is important for us to notice how Antipater took care to make friends in many places so as to strengthen his own security. As Josephus emphasizes, “[Antipater] had won the support of powerful men everywhere through kindnesses and hospitality.”<sup>13</sup>

Consider the relationship that Antipater developed with the Nabataeans. Antipater married Cypros, Herod’s mother, who was “Arabian” and connected to the Nabataean royal family. This permitted Antipater to establish a friendship with the Nabataean king Aretas III, to whom he subsequently entrusted his children during one episode of his on-and-off-again conflict with Aristobulus.<sup>14</sup> In fact, this relationship was strong enough by ca. 65 BCE that Antipater was able to arrange actual Nabataean military assistance for Hyrcanus.<sup>15</sup> And not long after, in 63-62 BCE, when Pompey’s subordinate officer Scaurus besieged Aretas, Antipater played a key role in securing a settlement between Scaurus and Aretas.<sup>16</sup> While Josephus indicates that Antipater supported Roman interests in this instance, there is little doubt that he also did a favor to the Nabataeans (and he certainly spun it that way, too). Through Antipater’s efforts, the Romans ultimately raised the siege for a sum of 300 talents, an amount for which Antipater, according to the *Antiquities*, actually served as surety.

One could read Antipater’s other international efforts in a similar manner. In 55 BCE, he brought aid to Gabinius when the latter was in the process of restoring Ptolemy XII Auletes to the throne of Egypt. At this time, Antipater engaged in negotiations with various Jewish Egyptians in order to smooth the army’s advance.<sup>17</sup> And Antipater also assisted Caesar in Egypt in 48-47 BCE when he joined the army of Mithridates of Pergamon and secured the help of the “Arabians” and others prominent in the region, including Syrian notables like Ptolemy and Jamblichus, as well as more Jewish Egyptians.<sup>18</sup> Such actions directly assisted the Romans and Antipater was handsomely rewarded. As a result of his service, Caesar conferred upon Antipater Roman citizenship, tax exemption

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<sup>13</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.181.

<sup>14</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.181; *Ant.* 14.121-2.

<sup>15</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.123-9; *Ant.* 14.14-33.

<sup>16</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.159; *Ant.* 14.80-81.

<sup>17</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.175; *Ant.* 14.100.

<sup>18</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.187-193; *Ant.* 14.127-136.

and official guardianship of Judaea.<sup>19</sup> Yet Antipater surely had other motivations beyond cultivating a relationship with the Romans. He would have enjoyed the opportunity to broaden his circle of friends to include the Ptolemaic rulers whose position in Egypt he helped to solidify, as well as other regional leaders. Antipater advanced his own prominence, influence and power through developing relations with the Romans, but also through his relationship with the Nabataeans, the Egyptians and others. In short, Antipater worked the west and the east.

With this in mind, it stands to reason that Herod would have been informed by this political approach at a critical stage of his development. His father put him in touch with a world bigger than Rome and allowed him to see the security benefits of a multilateral approach to foreign diplomacy in the Near East. As a result, Herod's keen interest in Parthia seems natural.

### Herod and Parthia

Herod's interest in Parthia was necessary, considering the international power struggles of his day. Beginning in the mid-90s BCE, Roman and Parthian interests in the Near East brought Roman statesmen in contact with the Arsacid kings of Parthia. While the groups maintained peaceful relations for several decades, even settling on the Euphrates River as a working border between their respective empires under Pompey and Phraates III in the mid-60s BCE,<sup>20</sup> the infamous Syrian governor Crassus brought the legacy of cooperation to an end. In 54-53 BCE, Crassus tried his hand at invading the Parthian empire, leading some seven Roman legions across the Euphrates River.<sup>21</sup> The result was disastrous for the Romans. After a moderately successful initial campaign season in 54 BCE, Crassus renewed his efforts in the spring of 53 BCE. At this point, Crassus found himself confronted by a formidable cavalry force of mounted bowmen led by Surenas, a powerful local aristocrat loyal to the Parthian king Orodes II. Far more mobile than the Roman infantry troops, these horsemen avoided direct engagement and instead devastated the invaders with volley after volley of arrows. Crassus was forced to retreat to the nearby town of Carrhae, but the Parthians pursued and continued to exert pressure. In addition to the

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, *War* 194-200; *Ant.* 14.137-143.

<sup>20</sup> See Jason M. Schlude, "Pompey and the Parthians," *Athenaeum* 101.1 (2013): 163-181.

<sup>21</sup> The principal sources for the Crassan campaign include: Plutarch, *Crass.* 14-33 and Dio Cassius 39.33.2, 40.12-28. For discussion see Neilson Caryl Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1938), 78-95; William Woodthorpe Tarn, "Parthia," in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume IX: The Roman Republic, 133-44 B.C.*, ed. Stanley Arthur Cook et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 604-612; Karl-Heinz Ziegler, *Die Beziehungen zwischen Rom und den Partherreich: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte de Völkerrechts* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1964), 32-34; Adrian David Hugh Bivar, "The Political History of Iran under the Arsacids," in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 3 (1): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 48-56; Adrian Nicholas Sherwin-White, *Roman Foreign Policy in the East, 168 B.C. to A.D. 1* (London: Duckworth, 1984), 279-290; Sullivan, *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome*, 306-309; Jozef Wolski, *L'Empire des Arsacides* (Lovanii: In Aedibus Peeters, 1993), 128-133; Gareth C. Sampson, *The Defeat of Rome: Crassus, Carrhae, and the Invasion of the East* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2008); Giusto Traina, *Carrhae, 9 juin 53 av. J.-C.: Anatomie d'une défaite* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2010).

Romans they took as captives, the Parthians managed to secure a number of Roman military standards, which was considered a major dishonor by the Roman people. Crassus ultimately tried to negotiate his way out of the conflict in a diplomatic parlay that turned violent and led to his death. The surviving Romans fled to Syria.

Matters only worsened for the Romans in subsequent years. In 40 BCE, Orodes II commissioned his son Pacorus to carry out a major invasion of Rome's eastern territory.<sup>22</sup> Pacorus crossed the Euphrates and exerted Parthian control over a territory extending from Idumaea through Caria. An effective Roman response came shortly after; in 39-38 BCE, Marc Antony's subordinate, Ventidius, successfully pushed the Parthians out and renewed Rome's presence in the Near East. But the damage had been done. In these episodes, the Parthians proved to locals in the Near East that Roman invincibility was a fiction and that Parthia was also a significant player in the region.

Such recognition had important consequences for Herod. In this context, local dynasts and elites must have felt compelled to make connections with Rome and Parthia, when possible. Their survival demanded it. While hindsight tells us that Rome would remain dominant west of the Euphrates, they could not assume that at the time. Many elites may have thought that events were trending in another direction. For example, some also recognized the advantage of their position on the Roman-Parthian border; they could use the climate of Roman-Parthian distrust and conflict when negotiating with either side. With all this in mind, we see that local elites were not entirely passive. The tense circumstances afforded them some agency and the opportunity to manipulate their relations with Rome and Parthia to advance their own positions. To return to Herod specifically, while the evidence is not as full as we may like, there is certainly enough to demonstrate that Herod's rise to power in Judaea and its environs is only fully understandable if we appreciate that Herod was in an area where the orbits of Rome and Parthia overlapped. In this situation, Herod took advantage of the Roman-Parthian power struggle and tried to work with each side, when possible, to enhance and shore up his position.

A couple of examples illustrate Herod's complex approach. First, consider how Herod ascended to the throne in 40 BCE. It was not only because of his qualities in general, but also his specific use of the Parthian invasion of that same year to secure the throne. In this invasion, the Parthians installed Aristobulus's son Antigonus as their vassal king in Judaea. They also arrested Hyrcanus, brought him back to Parthia, and chased out Herod.<sup>23</sup> Herod's first instinct was to approach the Nabataean king Malchus and try to utilize his family's connections to Malchus's court to secure funding for negotiation with the Parthians. Josephus indicates that Herod wished to ransom his brother Phasael, whom the Parthians had arrested along with Hyrcanus and who, unbeknownst to Herod, had perished by suicide or foul play by this point. Josephus mentions Herod's interest in 300 talents, the same price that Antipater convinced the previous Nabataean king, Aretas, to pay to have

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<sup>22</sup> For this invasion in the context of Parthian activities after the Crassan campaign, see Jason M. Schlude, "The Parthian Response to the Campaign of Crassus," *Latomus* 71 (2012): 11-23.

<sup>23</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.248-73; *Ant.* 14.330-69.

Scaurus lift a Roman siege. At any rate, Malchus refused to assist Herod.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Herod finally decided to go to Rome for support, where he informed Antony of everything, emphasizing the Parthian aggression and threat, and angled for kingship and Roman assistance.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, it is well known that Josephus, our primary source for all of this, at one point remarks that Herod actually went to Rome to secure the royal rights of his brother-in-law Aristobulus III.<sup>26</sup> But as a number of scholars have recognized, this was a later attempt by Herod to rewrite history for a domestic audience.<sup>27</sup> In reality, it was not unreasonable for Herod to think that he had a shot at the kingship. Cassius had promised it to Herod in 43 BCE,<sup>28</sup> Antony not long after made Herod a “tetrarch” in 42-41 BCE,<sup>29</sup> and Herod was betrothed to a member of the royal Hasmonean family.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Josephus makes clear that Herod was after the throne when he notes that Herod offered Antony a bribe contingent upon his kingship in Rome in 40 BCE.<sup>31</sup> In the end, Herod’s efforts paid off; he was presented favorably to the Roman senate and achieved his goal. As Josephus describes:

When Messala and Atratinus after him assembled the Senate, they produced Herod, reviewed the benefactions of his father, and recalled the good will, which he himself had for the Romans. And they at once leveled charges against Antigonus and proved him hostile, not only because of his first quarrel with them, but because he received his royal power from the Parthians and thereby had slighted the Romans. And when the Senate had been stirred by these things, Antony came forward and instructed them that it was also advantageous for the war against the Parthians that Herod be king. And since this seemed good to all, they voted to approve it.<sup>32</sup>

Parthia was a major factor in Herod’s promotion to king of Judaea.<sup>33</sup> Fundamentally, it was Roman outrage over the Parthian installment of a vassal king in Judaea that led the senate to appoint its own man, Herod, king of the territory. But Herod’s active role in this deserves emphasis. In the midst of the Parthian invasion of 40 BCE, he first considered and moved toward negotiation with the Parthians, but then changed tactics and appealed to Rome, where he deftly manipulated Roman concerns about the Parthian threat to secure a crown. The creation and negotiation of the Roman-Parthian border was a complex process involving the active participation of multiple parties: Roman statesmen, Parthian

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<sup>24</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.274-6; *Ant.* 14.370-3.

<sup>25</sup> See in general Josephus, *Ant.* 14.3.74-89, which is fuller than *War* 14.277-85.

<sup>26</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 14.386-7.

<sup>27</sup> See Kasher, “Josephus on Herod’s Spring,” 239-240.

<sup>28</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.225; *Ant.* 14.280.

<sup>29</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.244; *Ant.* 14.326.

<sup>30</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.241; *Ant.* 14.300.

<sup>31</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 14.382.

<sup>32</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 14.384-5; cf. *War* 1.284.

<sup>33</sup> See Rappaport, “The Jews between Rome and Parthia,” 375; Sullivan, *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome*, 222; Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great*, 14-15, 69; Richardson, *Herod*, 127-128; Kasher, “Josephus on Herod’s Spring,” 239-240.



royals and the many elites and dynasts living between the Mediterranean seaboard and the Euphrates River. Herod used the border for his own benefit.

The second example of such borderline activity involves an attested direct diplomatic exchange between Herod and the Parthian king Phraates IV in 36 BCE. As mentioned earlier, after his arrest Hyrcanus was brought back into the Parthian empire in 40 BCE, no doubt as a partial check on Antigonus, the new Parthian vassal.<sup>34</sup> He remained there for several years as the newly crowned Herod returned to the Near East in 39 BCE as part of the Roman effort to recover lost territory. Incidentally, they were able to complete this process by 37 BCE. Ventidius defeated the Parthians and Herod tenaciously eliminated resistance from Antigonus's supporters. Eventually, Herod took Jerusalem, Antigonus surrendered to the Romans, and Marc Antony had Antigonus executed.<sup>35</sup> Herod later initiated a diplomatic exchange with the Parthians in which Phraates granted permission for Hyrcanus to return to Judaea in 36 BCE. According to Josephus:

Herod wrote and called on him [Hyrcanus] to ask Phraates and the Jews there to not refuse this opportunity for him to share the kingship with Herod. For it was just the right time for Herod to repay and Hyrcanus to be rewarded for the good deeds that he enjoyed when he had been supported and saved by him. While writing these things to Hyrcanus, Herod also sent Saramalla as an envoy and a great number of gifts to Phraates, asking that he not prevent Herod from showing his favor to the benefactor who similarly treated him so well. But that was not the reason for his eagerness. Rather, on account of the fact that he himself was not worthy to rule, he feared the changes that might come for good reason. And he hastened to get Hyrcanus into his own hands or even to completely put him out of the way. For this he did later.<sup>36</sup>

As mentioned, Phraates agreed and Hyrcanus returned. I emphasize here that Herod carried out a productive and direct diplomatic exchange with the Parthian king Phraates. This is an exchange many scholars neglect to highlight. As for why he initiated it in 36 BCE, two factors are key. First, the Parthian vassal Antigonus was no longer a complicating factor. And second, it came right after an important shift in the Parthian kingship. Orodes died in 37 BCE. The Parthian invasion and installation of Antigonus as king took place under his auspices three years earlier. With Orodes out of the way, there was a chance for diplomatic negotiation.

Indeed it is no coincidence that Antony at this time also opened up diplomatic channels with Parthia. As Cassius Dio tells us, in winter or spring of 36 BCE, after allowing a Parthian refugee named Monaeses to return to the Parthian empire, Antony also sent envoys to Phraates in peace, to negotiate for the return of the standards and prisoners of war lost by Crassus in 53 BCE.<sup>37</sup> Dio would have us believe that this was all part of a ruse to throw Phraates off, while Antony was preparing war:

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<sup>34</sup> See references in fn. 23 and especially Josephus, *War* 1.273.

<sup>35</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.286-357; *Ant.* 14.390-491.

<sup>36</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 15.18-19; cf. *War* 1.434, which is condensed.

<sup>37</sup> Dio Cassius 49.24.

Accordingly, he [Antony] sent him [Monaeses] forth on the ground that he would win the Parthians over to himself, and sent envoys with him to Phraates. He was pretending to try to achieve peace on the condition that he receive the standards and captives taken in the disaster of Crassus. This was in order that he might catch the king unprepared on account of his hope for a settlement. But in fact he was making all things ready for war.<sup>38</sup>

Dio suggests that Antony was not single-minded in his tactics. Perhaps some of Dio's hypothesizing is true. But there is no reason to think that Antony could not have been somewhat optimistic that he could score the standards and captives through diplomatic means at this time of political change in Parthia.

It is interesting to consider whether it was Herod or Antony who contacted the Parthian king first. Unfortunately, the sources themselves do not give us a lock on the relative chronology. In fact, with such ambiguity, one may even ask if the two collaborated on a joint diplomatic effort. Such questions are important, and answers to them have bearing on our understanding of Herod's role in the negotiation of the Roman-Parthian borderline. Was Herod a passive figure who absolutely took Antony's lead and operated inseparably from Rome? Or was he more of an agent who reached out to Phraates on his own, either without Roman foreknowledge or after previously justifying the action (perhaps in light of Antony's interest in warming Roman-Parthian relations)? This is a many-sided question, not every part of which can be answered. What evidence we do have, however, at least suggests that this was an independent action by Herod. As we have seen, neither Dio nor Josephus connects these two diplomatic efforts. Nor do they suggest there was a common embassy of any sort. This is particularly notable in the case of Josephus, whose account routinely highlights the Herodian family's collaborative efforts with Romans. Herod seems to have sent an embassy—no doubt with multiple aims—in his own name. As Josephus points out, it was an opportunity to take possession of the ranking member of the Hasmonean royal family from the Parthians, who were still clearly a threat. Only a few years before, they controlled the Near East. Perhaps they could do it again. But in addition, Herod certainly also used it as a chance to build up a rapport with the new Parthian king in the same dicey geopolitical context. Herod had real reason to be in the good graces of Parthia, too. Like Antipater, he was not a passive one-dimensional figure.

### **Herod's Tactics After 31–30 BCE**

This brings us back to the beginning. Based on the above observations, I contend we can fully comprehend Herod's kingship only when we consider his actions in light of the political borderline between Rome and Parthia. Even as a Roman-appointed king, Herod secured his position by manipulating the threatening power of Parthia. In subsequent years, we see that Herod also worked to improve his standing with Parthia. He engaged fruitfully

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<sup>38</sup> Dio Cassius 49.24.5.

with both of those states seeking hegemony in the Near East—at least through the mid-30s BCE.

Herod's circumstances changed after 31-30 BCE. Following the battle of Actium, in which Octavian fought and defeated Antony (who later committed suicide), Octavian became the Roman in charge in the Near East. Herod started to fear for his own position due to his alliance with Antony against Octavian and the fact that Hyrcanus was still alive. Might Octavian not dispense with Herod and crown Hyrcanus as king? Hyrcanus was the last surviving Hasmonean heir. But to guard against this possibility, Herod eliminated Hyrcanus, an act that was vicious but effective. Limited in his choices, Octavian maintained Herod as king.<sup>39</sup> Scholars also have noted this act, but have not recognized its significance with regard to Parthia. Recall that Phraates returned Hyrcanus on the understanding that he was to be honored back in Judaea. That Herod killed him (to serve his more immediate needs) likely would have caused significant tension between Herod and Phraates. The problem would not have been Phraates's personal concern for Hyrcanus and Phraates's ethical orientation in general. One must remember that Phraates was a political realist and had a brutal streak as well. In fact, he may have come to power in 37 BCE after murdering his father, Orodes, his brothers and perhaps even a son to secure his grip on the throne.<sup>40</sup> More likely, Herod's decision to kill Hyrcanus caused problems in public policy and reputation. Indeed this hardly would have looked good for Phraates in the Parthian empire. Babylonian Jewry, an important constituency that honored Hyrcanus, would have been displeased and could have viewed Phraates as complicit in the act. In addition, it might have reflected poorly on Phraates in general, perhaps highlighting weakness of judgment and failure to command respect among regional dynasts. As a result, in 31-30 BCE Herod must have compromised to some degree the relationship he previously had developed with this Parthian king. From then on, Herod was even more dependent on Rome.

This change, however, does not mean that Herod completely cut off all connections to Parthia. One scholar, who has rightly emphasized the importance of Herod's relationship with Parthia, has suggested that Herod continued to be in contact with the Arsacid administration.<sup>41</sup> J. Andrew Overman contends that Herod played some part in the Parthian return of the lost Crassan standards and captives in 20 BCE. According to this reconstruction, when Augustus (the proper designation for Octavian after 27 BCE) travelled to Syria in the late-20s BCE, it was Herod who put him in contact with the Parthian envoys whom he then used to ask for the standards and captives. When Augustus was successful, Herod escorted him back to the Mediterranean then proceeded to erect a Roman temple in celebration of the achievement.

Yet the extant evidence may still confirm that not everything was business as usual for Herod and Phraates after 31-30 BCE. No ancient source credits Herod with facilitating

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<sup>39</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 15.161-178.

<sup>40</sup> Dio Cassius 49.23.3-4; Justin 42.4.14-42.5.2; Plutarch, *Crass.* 33.5.

<sup>41</sup> For the following, see J. Andrew Overman, "Omrit as Part of the Roman East," in *The Roman Temple Complex at Horvat Omrit*, 12-15; J. Andrew Overman, Jack Olive, and Michael C. Nelson, "A Newly Discovered Herodian Temple at Khirbet Omrit in Northern Israel," in *The World of the Herods*, 177-195; Overman, "Between Rome and Parthia," 290-297.

this productive Roman-Parthian exchange—not even Josephus.<sup>42</sup> This does not mean Herod played no such role. It was not unheard of for Roman client-kings to help facilitate Rome’s relationship with neighboring dynasts. And in fact, the record documents Herod’s offspring playing such a role with Parthia later on.<sup>43</sup> Still, if true, the silence is peculiar, particularly in Josephus. Yet it would be explicable in light of the limited role that Herod might have played, as well as the special circumstances surrounding this episode. As for Herod’s role, it would have had to be low profile, considering once again his decision to kill Hyrcanus. Phraates likely could not afford to work too publically with Herod, a lightning rod to some in the Parthian empire. This only would have been more the case for their diplomatic engagement in 20 BCE, when Phraates sent Parthian notables (as “hostages”) to Rome.<sup>44</sup> Neither side would have had interest in spotlighting Herod in that exchange; he had killed an important person secured through diplomacy with Parthia. As for the special circumstances, it has been well demonstrated how important this diplomatic accomplishment was for Augustus. He presented it in Rome as a military victory, and it became a cornerstone of his self-image.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps Herod understood the significance of this event for Augustus and gave him full credit and a monopoly on its benefits. To the extent that this is true, it is reasonable to conclude that Herod maintained some contact with the Parthian court, though it was necessarily less public.

Herod was a borderline figure in both the personal and the political. Regarding the political, Herod adroitly negotiated his responsibilities both to Rome and to his subject people. Another major borderline with which he contended was that between the Roman and Parthian empires. It is most useful to conceive of Herod’s behavior here as part of a multi-party and dynamic process in which Romans, Parthians and Near Eastern elites played active roles in the definition and manipulation of the Roman-Parthian border. Whenever possible, Herod worked with the Romans and the Parthians to maintain and enhance his own position. In the process, sometimes his actions made the Roman-Parthian border more hostile. Other times his actions encouraged peace. In the end, the Roman-Parthian border was crucial for Herod, and he played a significant role in helping to shape its character.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The key sources for the return of the standards include: Dio Cassius 54.7-9; Augustus, *RG* 29; Strabo 16.1.28; Velleius Paterculus 2.91.1; Suetonius, *Aug.* 21.3.

<sup>43</sup> Herod Antipas, for example, played a role in the diplomatic efforts to attain a Roman-Parthian peace and settlement during the negotiations of the Parthian king Artabanus III and Roman general Vitellius in 37/38 C.E on the banks of the Euphrates river. Antipas hosted a celebratory feast in the middle of the Euphrates. See Josephus, *Ant.* 18.101-5.

<sup>44</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 21.3; Eutropius 7.9; Orosius 6.21.29.

<sup>45</sup> Much work has been done on this issue. See, for example, the excellent piece by Charles Brian Rose, “The Parthians in Augustan Rome,” *AJA* 109 (2005): 21-75, with comprehensive bibliography.

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