

Study Aids
Discussion items
For “What’s the Message?” Lessons

Lesson 90 - Herod, the master builder

There was another side to Herod. His visionary programs, his ingenious developments of trade with the rest of the world, and his advancement of the interests of his nation are legendary. Many of his building projects were designed to strengthen the loyalty of his subjects, a goal he never achieved. Most seem to have been built to strengthen his relationship with Rome and to establish himself as the greatest king the Jews ever had. Herod built on a magnificent and grandiose scale. His building projects included:

Jerusalem: The Temple was rebuilt in a splendid setting unsurpassed in the ancient world. Some of the limestone blocks of the supporting platform weigh more than 500 tons. The Temple, made of marble and gold, was taller than a 15-story building. On the western hill of the city, Herod built a spectacular palace complex that contained reception halls, royal apartments, a fortress for his personal guard, fountains, gardens and baths. The Antonia, a huge fortress as luxurious as Herod’s own palace, defended the city. Some scholars believe it was the site of Jesus’ trial. A Greek theater and hippodrome provided the Hellenistic emphasis Herod appreciated. Streets were paved, sewers were built, and water carriers were constructed to make Jerusalem one of the great cities of the world.

Masada: Part of a line of fortresses that included the Alexandrion, the Herodion, and Machaerus, Masada was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Perched atop a plateau in the Judea wilderness with a spectacular view of the Dead Sea nearly 2,000 feet below, it was a luxurious fortress-palace combining all the essential elements of a Herod project. A three-tiered palace hung precariously from one end of the plateau, almost defying gravity. The western portion contained hot and cold baths, mosaic floors, and plastered walls. Masada also boasted swimming pools, barracks for soldiers, huge storehouses with supplies for years of siege, and cisterns holding millions of gallons of water.

The Herodian: This mountain fortress overlooked the town of Bethlehem. Standing on a high hill, the upper fortress was round and more than 200 feet in diameter. Originally, it was seven stories high with an eastern tower that stood more than 40 feet higher. Packed in dirt covered the first four stories, giving the upper fortress a cone shape. Inside were a peristyle garden, reception hall, Roman baths, and countless apartments. The lower palace included an enormous pool, a colonnaded garden, a 600-foot-long terrace, and a building more than 400 feet long. The Herodion was the third largest palace in the ancient world. *(This is thought to be the probable site of the beheading of John the Baptist.)*

Jericho: This palace was built on both sides of a deep wadi (dry streambed) with a bridge across the bed. One wing contained huge, marble-floored hall where Herod received guests. Next to it were peristyle gardens, dining halls, and a complete Roman bath. Across the wadi, Herod built another monumental building, with baths, a swimming pool, and gardens.

Caesarea Maritima: Herod needed contact with the Roman world for its military support and its market for the spice trade and other goods his people controlled. Thus he built Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast, into one of the most spectacular seaports of the ancient world. Founded in 22 B.C., the city housed a large theater, an amphitheater, a hippodrome, and a massive temple to Augustus. Caesarea was almost completely covered with imported marble. It had an elaborate sewer system designed to be cleansed by the sea. The glory of Caesarea was its man-made harbor spanning more than 40 acres. An enormous lighthouse stood near the narrow entrance, able to be seen from great distances at sea. This harbor welcomed the Roman legions, the marble and granite for Herod's projects, and the Hellenistic culture so dear to him. From it, ships carried spices, olive oil, grain, and most important, the gospel to the far reaches of the world.

The visitor cannot help being impressed with Herod's vision and ingenuity. However, all that remain are spectacular ruins, because Herod lived for Herod. By contrast, another builder, a humble carpenter born in Bethlehem, used a different material than did Herod (refer to Matthew 16:18; 1 Peter 2:4-8). Jesus' buildings continue to grow because He built for the glory of God. Like David (1 Samuel 17:46), Elijah (1 Kings 18:36), and Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:20), He lived so that the world may know that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is truly God. His construction project will last forever because He built for the glory of God the Father.

Source: That the World May Know Ministries