

Characters

House of Herod

ANTIPATER

Herod's father, Antipater (55 years old at the beginning of the plot) is a strong man, sunburned and energetic, smart, daring, cool and collected. He is the most powerful man in the kingdom, but realizes he will never be king because of his Edomite heritage. Therefore he sticks close to the high priest and Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus. For decades he has been manipulating Hyrcanus like a puppet, making sure his standing remains secure.

Antipater is the father of five children. He has four sons - Phasaël, Herod, Joseph and Pheroras, and a daughter, Salome. He has been married for over 30 years to Cypros, a Nabataean noblewoman, an Arab from Petra, and he is able to teach his children that loyalty to family is above all else. His worldwide connections and his many business ventures have made him a very rich man. He is Rome's loyal man in Judea, and he is able to successfully maneuver between its rotating rulers. He fights by the side of Pompey the Great, and when Pompey is murdered, Antipater heroically aids Pompey's enemy, Julius Caesar. When Julius is murdered, Antipater shifts his loyalty to the murderer, Cassius. Up until his death in 43 BC, Antipater remained the most important figure in the area.

Antipater is a master of realpolitik, pragmatic politics. In a land where Jews, Edomites, Greeks, Phoenicians and Samaritans live among each other, Antipater is the glue holding them together and preventing friction and rebellion. Antipater will not be ruled by his emotions - he forgives his enemies, loans money to his opposition, holds his hotheaded son Herod back, and controls every detail of daily life in the Kingdom of Judea - from military recruitment to taxation. When he is poisoned by his enemies (likely backed by the High Priest John Hyrcanus) the kingdom spirals into chaos.

CYPROS

Herod's beloved mother (45 years old at the beginning of the plot) is a noble desert woman, cunning and dangerous, who controls her children and the royal court. She comes from Nabataean royalty in Petra, and spent her childhood in tents rather than royal palaces. She is confident, honorable, vengeful, and never forgives those who have wronged her. Though she is a woman of few words, her black eyes betray her emotions. She is a strict and tough mother, who protects her children like a tigress, and is respected and loved by them. At all stages of his life, Herod respects her and bows before her. Though she has married an Edomite who converted to Judaism, Cypros adheres strictly to her own Nabataean religion and culture, even while living in a palace in Jerusalem. She has expert knowledge of medicinal herbs and sorcery. Though she is a mother of five, she maintains her Bedouin beauty and vitality. She despises her daughter-in-law Mariamne, and Mariamne's mother Alexandra. Cypros is the focal point of intrigue in Herod's royal court, and she speaks to her sons and daughter in a language only they can understand - Arabic.

PHASAEI

Herod's older brother, five years his senior. Phasael (30 years old at the beginning of the plot) is the exact opposite of Herod - he is a smart and moderate man like his father, but naive and trusting. He is Cypros's favorite son. He becomes a father at the age of thirty, when he is appointed governor of Jerusalem. He has one wife and one son - Phasael the Second. Phasael is very successful as the governor of Jerusalem, he has great organizational skills and prefers compromises and negotiations over violent conflicts - though he is a talented military commander as well. When the Parthians invade and assault Jerusalem, Phasael leaves to negotiate peace with their leaders in the north. When he realizes he's walked into a trap, he kills himself by bashing his head against a rock - to spare his brother Herod from having to surrender in return for his release.

JOSEPH II

Herod's younger brother by two years (23 years old at the beginning of the plot). Joseph is impulsive and adventurous, always trying to please and be liked. Joseph envies Herod and tries to be more like him. He is easily insulted, and feels rejected. He is killed in battle, decapitated by Antigonus in the year 38 BC - after defying a direct order from Herod. He fathered a son who married Olympias, Herod's daughter, as well as a daughter who later married Herod himself.

PHERORAS

Herod's younger brother by eight years (17 years old at the beginning of the plot). Pheroras is talented but weak of character and easily influenced by others. He's a drunkard and a romantic. Herod trusts him and bestows respect, property and responsibility upon him. Pheroras marries the sister of Mariamne the Hasmonean, and is widowed shortly thereafter. He falls in love with his wife's Jewish servant, and insists on marrying her, though Herod offers him his daughter, and is furious when Pheroras rejects her. In spite of his high standing in the royal court, he is tempted to secretly cooperate with Antipater the Second, Herod's eldest son, and finds himself involved in schemes and plots to assassinate the sons of Mariamne, and later in a plot to poison Herod himself. Pheroras is trapped in a web of women - his wife, his mother-in-law, his sister-in-law, and Doris, the mother of Antipater the Second. Herod visits Pheroras on his sickbed and strangles him with his own two hands in the year 7 BC.

HANNAH, WIFE OF PHERORAS

Hanna is Pheroras's first wife's servant, and his lover following his wife's death. Hannah, a young Jewish woman, controls her lover completely. Though his brother Herod, the women of the royal court and the ministers of the kingdom are all working against her and her influence on Pheroras, she does not relent. Pheroras gives up on marrying one of Herod's younger daughters, and marries Hannah instead, who gives him a son and a daughter. Hannah is a descendant of the House of David, and the Jewish Elders prophesize that her son will rule the land after Herod. In return she pays a heavy price. She brings her mother and sister into the women's household and together they conspire with Doris, the mother of Antipater the Second, against

Salome and Cypros. At one stage she has an affair with the royal court's foremost troublemaker, Antipater the Second, son of Herod, and together they plot to get rid of her husband, Pheroras, and then of Herod himself, using a highly lethal poison they obtain from Egypt. When Herod discovers her plots, following the death of his brother, she tries to commit suicide by jumping off the roof, fails and then turns in her partners-in-crime and brings about their death in return for a pardon from the king.

SALOME (SHLOMIT)

Herod's beloved and usually-loyal sister. She is 15 years younger than Herod (11 years old at the beginning of the plot) and the only one who survives Herod's reign from beginning to end - wisely overruling his final order.

Salome married three husbands - her uncle Joseph, Costobarus governor of Idumea, and Alexa, Herod's good friend. All three men were much older than her. She gets rid of her first two husbands by revealing their secrets to her brother Herod and bringing about their executions. Salome is a master schemer, uninhibited by moral considerations, and impossible to trick. She has Herod's ear, she protects him and exposes plots hatched against him - some of which are real, others maliciously fabricated by her. Her best friend is Livia, wife of Augustus Caesar, the most powerful woman in the world. Her hatred for Mariamne, Herod's wife, knows no limits - Mariamne despises Salome and her inferior Edomite heritage, and Salome, in response, frames Mariamne and her two sons for crimes that bring about their executions. Salome wants to be queen - if not the queen of Judea, then the queen of Idumea, and if not Idumea, then Nabataea. And if not her, at least her daughter, or her son.

Salome is a passionate woman. At the age of forty five she meets a Nabataean nobleman, a conman named Silas who is much younger than her, and she sleeps with him during a dinner at the palace. Later she will fall in love with him and wish to marry him, but Herod will prevent this. Another time, she sleeps with her son-in-law, her daughter's husband Aristobulus, Mariamne's son - though he claims this happened in the night, without his knowledge. These incidents undermine her standing in the royal court.

JOSPEH I

Joseph I (50 years old) is an Edomite, Herod's uncle, and the younger brother of Herod's father, Antipater. He is the governor of Idumea, the southern part of Judea. A loyal and veteran government official, he is married to Salome, Herod's sister, and 35 years her senior. When Herod flees to Rome during the Parthian invasion, Joseph is left in charge of Masada, where the refugees from the royal court in Jerusalem reside. While Masada is besieged and suffering from lack of water, Herod's mother and his sister Salome wage war with Herod's fiancé Mariamne and her mother Alexandra. Joseph tries to maintain his objectivity, and finds himself in trouble with his wife and her mother, Cypros.

When Herod heads out for a fateful meeting with Marc Antony four years later, he appoints Joseph to watch over his wife Mariamne in his absence, and commands him that in case Antony kills Herod - Joseph must kill Mariamne. Joseph reveals his orders to Mariamne, and brings about his own death - his wife falsely claims that he slept with Mariamne, and the jealous Herod has him killed.

COSTOBARUS - 50 years old, a military and administrative man, the governor of Idumea following Joseph. He marries Salome, Herod's sister, after the death of her first husband. Though his family converted to Judaism like the rest of the Edomites, Costobarus conspires with Cleopatra to tear Idumea away from Judea and reconstitute the Edomite religion. He takes part in Herod's wars and in the conquest of Jerusalem, and is put in charge of assassinating the supporters of the Hasmoneans, but he betrays Herod and hides a family of Herod's opponents in his house for years. His wife Salome brings about his death - she falls for another man, and disposes of him by revealing his secrets to her brother Herod. Costobarus is executed.

SILAS (SHULAI) - A Nabataean nobleman. The most powerful man in the Nabataean kingdom. A statesman, a conman and a warrior. The prototype for the present day Saudi prince. The Romans are convinced that he is their man in the area, and fail to realize he is the cause of their failures. Silas is the right hand man of Ovdad, king of the Nabataeans, but he betrays him and overthrows him. He is a charming cheater who is able to seduce the wives of Nabataean noblemen, the wives of the royal court in Jerusalem, and the wives of Roman noblemen. When he wants to marry Salome, Herod's wife, Herod agrees under the condition that the Nabataeans all convert to Judaism. Silas will get his vengeance later on - he is able to destroy the friendship of Augustus Caesar and Herod, and for years he humiliates Herod and Judea. Eventually, Nicolaus of Damascus is able to bring about Silas's execution in Rome.

DORIS - Herod's first wife (15 years old at the beginning of the plot). A strong, beautiful girl born in Jerusalem to Edomite nobility. Though as far as Herod is concerned this is a marriage of necessity, to strengthen his standing among the Edomite community in Judea, Doris loves and admires him. At the age of 16, alone in Jerusalem while her husband is up north, she gives birth to her son, Antipater the Second, Herod's firstborn. Five years later, Doris learns that her husband has gotten engaged to Mariamne the Hasmonean, who is 12-years-old at the time. Five years later, Herod marries Mariamne and Doris is kicked out of the palace without her son. Two years later, when Mariamne gives birth to her first son, the young Antipater is kicked out of the palace and sent to live with his mother in Ashkelon. 23 years later, when she is about 50, Doris returns to the palace as the wife of king Herod and mother of Antipater, heir to the throne. In a short while she gets matters under control and leads the web of scheming meant to put her son on the throne as soon as possible. Conspiring with other factions in the royal court, she is able to bring about the execution of the sons of Mariamne the Hasmonean. 8 years after her return to the royal court, and a year after the death of Mariamne's sons, Doris is banished once again, following a failed attempt at poisoning Herod.

ANTIPATER II - Herod's eldest son (born in 46 BC). Up until the age of 10, Antipater was Herod's only son. He grew up in Jerusalem, and was then forced to flee with his mother to Idumea, fearing the Parthian invasion. When Herod returns to Judea as a king, he marries another woman and banishes Antipater's mother, Doris. When Herod has his first son from Mariamne, he kicks his son Antipater out of the palace and sends him off to join his mother Doris in Idumea. The boy is summoned to Jerusalem only three times a year, for the holidays,

and keeps a jealous eye from afar on his father's new children who have taken his place.

Then, at the age of 32, everything changes: Herod's relationship with his sons from Mariamne goes sour, and he brings Antipater back to the palace and declares him the heir to the throne. Antipater conditions his return upon the return of his mother as queen. Antipater is a charming conman, cruel, vindictive and scheming. He is not particularly skilled as a fighter, hunter or athlete. On the contrary - he has a tendency to grow fat, and prefers the company of women, mostly older women. He hates and admires his father, cooperates with him while plotting his death. Like the perfect actor, he gains the trust of his enemies and pretends to want what's best for them, then recruits them in service of his ambitions. Gradually, with the help of his mother, he takes over the royal court and his father Herod, while taking advantage of Herod's dreams and mental instability. Once he's successfully gotten rid of his competition, Mariamne's sons, he is free to take on his next mission - killing his father. Unfortunately for him, his plan is revealed. He is tried and executed a mere 5 days before the death of Herod.

House of the Hasmoneans

JOHN HYRCANUS

The high priest and leader of his people (56 years old at the beginning of the plot), he is the eldest son of King Alexander Jannaeus and Queen Salome Alexandra. He is anointed king by his mother and is immediately deposed by his brother Aristobulus. Later he will be recognized by Julius Caesar as the leader of his people and will maintain this position until the year 40 BC. He's a pleasant and affable man who lacks initiative and is easily diverted. He's a puppet leader controlled by the Romans and their representative, Antipater. John Hyrcanus simply wants to live in peace and honor. He is lazy, inert and ambitionless. He spends his life getting mixed up in other people's plots, and always paying the price. He's a tall, chubby, handsome man with a smile on his face. In the year 40 BC he is captured by the Parthians and extradited to his brother's son, Antigonus, who has laid claims to the throne. The latter bites his ear off to disqualify him from the throne by way of handicapping him. Hyrcanus is banished by the Parthians to Babylon, but returns to Jerusalem three years later, only to be falsely accused and executed by Herod. His granddaughter is married to Herod. His daughter is Alexandra.

MATTATHIAS ANTIGONUS

A Hasmonean prince, the same age as Herod. The son of Aristobulus and brother of John Hyrcanus. He grew up in the court of Ptolemy King of Chalkis (present day Lebanon) while his father was held captive in Rome for repeatedly rebelling against the Romans. Mattathias Antigonus sees himself as the rightful ruler of Judea. After several attempts at taking over the land, he forges an alliance with the Parthians, invades the land with their help, conquers Jerusalem and rules over it for three years. He disqualifies his uncle, John Hyrcanus, from the throne by biting off his ear, and brings about the death of Phasaël, Herod's brother. Antigonus is beloved by the Jews

and gains their support as heir to the Hasmonean dynasty. When Herod returns to the land of Israel in 39 BC, after being appointed king by the Roman senate, he successfully conquers Jerusalem and takes Antigonus captive (in the year 37 BC). Antigonus's life comes to a humiliating end - Marc Antony decapitates him. Antigonus is brave, stubborn and ambitious, a daring and handsome warrior. His relationship with his mother was compromised due to her being the lover of Gabinius, the Roman military man who fought against his father.

ALEXANDRA

A Hasmonean princess, daughter of John Hyrcanus, widow of Alexander, son of Aristobulus, the brother and enemy of her father. Alexandra is Herod's mother-in-law; her daughter is his wife Mariamne. She is beautiful, scheming, arrogant, subversive, relentless and power hungry. She is as spoiled as royalty, and condescends to Herod, his family and his heritage. She is a good friend of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. She does everything in her power to get rid of Herod, hurt him and bring the Hasmonean house back to power. Her final days are particularly despicable - she renounces her daughter and testifies against her to save her own neck. It does her no good - during her next attempt at taking over the citadels of Jerusalem she is executed by Herod.

MARIAMNE THE HASMONEAN

Mariamne the Hasmonean is actually Herod's hostage, taken to assure that her grandfather Hyrcanus behaves properly. Herod is engaged to her when she is 12 years old and he is 30, and cannot imagine one day being king. When he meets her again after he returns from Rome she is 16 and the greatest beauty of her generation - more beautiful even than Cleopatra - and Herod falls head over heels in love with her. She is arrogant and does not speak much, but what few words she does say pierce her husband's heart. She is vain and charismatic, a goddess. She drives Herod crazy and pushes him away, she hits his soft spots and despises him for who he is. The king sought out by the world's most powerful men is a slave for her love. When he becomes convinced she cheated on him with another man he puts her on trial and executes her. She has two sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, who will live to be executed by their father as well.

JONATHAN ARISTOBULUS

Mariamne's 17-year-old younger brother, Alexander's son, John Hyrcanus's grandson. He's tall and handsome. Herod is jealous of him, while Marc Antony pines for him. Cleopatra the Queen of Egypt intercedes on his behalf and Herod is forced to appoint him high priest. When he appears at the temple for Sukkoth dressed in the high priest's garbs, the people cheer him on, hoping that he will become the next Hasmonean king - this incident brings about his swift death. Herod's Gaelic bodyguards drown him in a pool in a palace in Jericho, while supposedly playing a game. His death will haunt Herod and Mariamne's relationship. Like his sister Mariamne and like the other Hasmoneans, Jonathan behaves as if royal blood flowed in his veins. He's been bred with the manners of a prince, is educated, well-spoken and arrogant, and a star athlete. He treats his brother-in-law Herod the way a nobleman would treat a freed slave who turned rich.

ALEXANDER

Son of Mariamne the Hasmonean and Herod. When he is 6 years old, his mother is executed by his father for adultery. At the age of 13 he is sent along with his brother to be educated in Rome by Asinius Pollio, one of Rome's greatest minds. At 18 he returns to Jerusalem as the heir to Herod's throne. He is married to princess Glaphyra, daughter of King Archelaus of Cappadocia. Alexander is a perfect, handsome prince - an athlete, a hunter, a horse rider, and an eloquent speaker, befitting of a man educated by the Romans. However, he is arrogant and innocent and easily falls prey to the plots concocted by the women of the court and his older half-brother, Antipater. Alexander is convinced he will soon take the throne from his father, and is stunned to find that Antipater is appointed in his place. He cannot let go of the memory of his mother Mariamne's execution, and bears a terrible grudge for Herod. For 11 years since his return from Rome he finds himself mixed up in plots and accusations, but is able to break free time after time. In the year 7 BC, at the age of 29, he is executed by his father Herod for plotting to assassinate him.

ARISTOBULUS

Son of Mariamne the Hasmonean and Herod, Alexander's younger brother, a year his junior. He is married to Berenice, who is Salome's daughter and Herod's sister. He is as handsome as his brother, though not as eloquent. His marriage is destroyed by his mother-in-law, Salome, who does all she can to bring about his death, and turns his wife against him. Aristobulus is bookish, and spends many hours with Nicolaus of Damascus near the temple's priests, delving into the Holy Scripture. Herod does not like his ties with the Pharisees, the biblical scholars. Like his brother, he is educated in Rome, and returns to Jerusalem at the age of 17. He is executed along with his brother at the age of 28. He fathered five children.

NICOLAUS OF DAMASCUS

A Greek-Syrian author and historian. At the age of 34, he is the tutor for three of the most famous children in the world - the children of Cleopatra and Marc Antony. But then, his employers commit suicide, and the children are sent to Rome. Herod invites Nicolaus to his court and he becomes his friend, teacher, advisor, lawyer, confidant and royal historian. Nicolaus is smart, discrete, modest and sober. He manages to remain sane in Herod's insane court, within the web of plots, knives and poisoned drinks. Several times he rescues Herod from states of political distress, and tries to settle matters between Herod and his sons. He spends 26 years with Herod, and after Herod's death moves to Rome and writes a book about Augustus's life. His brother Ptolemy is Herod's money man.

HILLEL THE ELDER

The president of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council). A Jewish scholar, born to a rich family from Babylon, who came to Israel to study the Torah and worked as a woodcutter to fund his studies. He is well-versed in Roman and Greek wisdom, and develops a system for interpreting Jewish law. At a time when the king represents the Roman interests, and the high priest is no longer a religious authority, Hillel establishes the stature of the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees,

and is as respected among the people as Moses. Hillel cancels the tax on entering the rabbinical study halls and makes studying accessible to all. He coined the phrase "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow" as the basis principle of Judaism. His humanistic approach, which expresses itself in "Love Thy Neighbor", paves the way for Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings. He is a modest, humorous man with nerves of steel and cold logic. He fathered a dynasty of heads of the Sanhedrin for four hundred years after his death. Hillel has an ambivalent relationship with Herod - he avoids meddling in affairs of the state in order to steer clear of trouble with Herod and his secret police, he assists in Herod's foreign relations with exiled Jews, and he prays for Herod's death every single day.

SHAMMAI THE ELDER

Chief of the Court, friend, partner and opponent of Hillel the Elder. A smart, meticulous and sharp man, Shammai was a fanatic nationalist who advocated for separatism. He made a living as an expert in construction. Unlike the pragmatic Hillel, who cherished peace and peaceful ways, Shammai cherishes the truth, even if happens to be unpleasant. Unlike Hillel, who believes each man should be judged on his individual merits, Shammai believes in one law for all. Shammai is the man who is able to sway the opinion of the members of the Sanhedrin who are terrified of young Herod and his soldiers - and nearly brings about a death sentence on Herod. His uncompromising approach is surprisingly respected by Herod. Several days before Herod's death, Shammai's students smash the Caesarian Gold Eagle in the temple, and are torched to death by Herod.

MENAHM THE ESSENE

Menahem the Essene is the leader of the Essene cult in Jerusalem, and its hidden messiah. He leads a double life. He is a key figure in the royal court and an advisor to the king, and at the same time he lays the groundwork for the rebellion against the Roman rule that will erupt after Herod's death. He is believed to have prophetic abilities and the ability to see futures - he prophesized to Herod that he would rule Judea, and told him the number of years he would rule. He has ties to zealots in the Galilee and their leader, Judas of Galilee, whose father was killed by Herod. He has a mystical influence over the women in Herod's court and the influential Bagoas, the head of the eunuchs. He tells them their fortunes and causes riots that eat away at the king's house. Shortly before Herod's death, Menahem the Essene prophesizes the coming revelation of the messiah born in Bethlehem. He is convinced that the messiah is himself - a mistake that ends his life.

MALCHUS

(About 50 at the beginning of the plot). The great enemy of Antipater and his sons, Phasael and Herod. Malchus is a rich Jewish man who owns estates which supply livestock to the temple. He is part of the closest circle of advisors to John Hyrcanus, the high priest. He has a small and powerful army at his disposal, which he uses to suit his needs. Malchus opposes the Edomite takeover of Antipater and his sons on the kingdom of Judea, and turns John Hyrcanus against them. According to him, the utter surrender to Roman decree is a mistake, and that they must work to find other allies.

Malchus is a conniving manipulator, but he misreads reality over and over again. Cassius nearly executes him when he fails to collect the taxes and is in urgent need of the help of Antipater, his enemy. Along with Hyrcanus, he poisons Antipater, then is able to avoid his sons' vengeance for a while by making use of his sharp tongue. For his next move, he plants on deposing Hyrcanus and ruling in his place. Herod manages to trick Malchus and gets him killed by the Roman army in Tyre.

HEZEKIAH THE GALILEAN

A rebel, a robber, and a popular freedom fighter in the Galilee in the northern part of the Judean kingdom. His band of fighters strikes at Syrian settlements and Nabataean trade convoys, stirring conflict between Judea and the Roman Governor in Syria. On Herod's first mission as governor of the Galilee, he manages to eliminate Hezekiah and his men. Hezekiah is the father of a dynasty of rebels who will make Herod's life difficult until the day he dies.

JUDAS OF GALILEE (SON OF HEZEKIAH THE GALILEAN)

As a young boy, Judas of Galilee witnesses his father's crucifixion at Herod's hand. From that moment until the day Herod dies, Judas will fight Herod and his Roman allies, and cooperate with any faction within the court or without it which is fighting against Herod. He is daring, cunning, and a skilled guerilla warrior. He raises his sons to live in constant war against the foreign occupier.

JOSEPH THE CARPENTER

Joseph lives in Nazareth and works in the Galilee as a carpenter of no exceptional skill. Herod recruits him to be his cross-builder as early as his first mission in the galilee, and has been using his services ever since. When Herod becomes king of Jerusalem, Joseph moves to Bethlehem and builds crosses in his workshop for the executions of those who oppose the king. Joseph has four children from his first wife. In his old age, he is asked to take in a girl from the royal court who is pregnant out of wedlock. Her name is Mary, and a prophecy she received from Menahem the Essene predicts that her son Jesus will be the King of the Jews.