

Herod's death rewritten by Eusebius

first draft

The narration of Herod's final days is particularly developed and dramatized in Josephus' *War* I and *Antiquities* XVII. Among the numerous overlappings of Josephus' narration and the beginnings of Christian historiography, the episode of Herod's death plays an essential role. Through the theme of the slaughter of the Innocents, the event of Herod's death is supposed to guarantee the historicity of the date and place of a fundamental event : Jesus Christ's birth.

After a short presentation of the historical facts according to the primary source (Josephus' account), we will examine Eusebius' reception of Josephus.

1. The preservation of Josephus' version ? Eusebius' *Church History* as a *palimpseste* of Josephus
2. The destruction of Josephus' version ? Eusebius' *Church History* as a narratological creation (deletions, amalgamations and additions)

Preamble: the historical facts according to the primary source (a summary of Josephus' account)

About one-fifth of Josephus' *Antiquities* is devoted to Herod's 34 year reign. In both *War* and *Antiquities*, Josephus portrays Herod's death in particularly dramatic and detailed narration. After contracting a mysterious illness, Herod finally succumbs to a painful agonizing death in 4 BC.

Herod dies of a mysterious illness, whose multiple symptoms spare no part of his body: fever, respiratory oppression, skin rashes that provoke terrible itching, an intestinal ulcer, phlegmons of the legs and abdomen, as well as gangrene of the genitals that led to worm infestation. After awhile, word gets out that the king is dying. Upon hearing this rumor, a group of religious radicals, directed by 2 Doctors of the Law (σοφισταί), destroy the image of the royal eagle erected above the door of the Jerusalem Temple. The ensuing riot is repressed and the rioters along with their leader are burnt alive.

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In order to avenge his unpopularity, Herod plans a collective assassination. From all of Judea he summons the notables and imprisons them in the Jericho hippodrome theater. They are destined to be mass executed at the time of Herod's death in order to guarantee universal mourning throughout the kingdom.

Note: contrary to the repression of the riot linked to the destruction of the eagle over the temple, Herod's plan was not executed and there is good reason to believe that such a plan never existed¹.

From this point on, Herod's illness worsened (according to Josephus because God punished Herod for his crimes and impieties). At one point, the king is considered to be dead, but he is awoken by the cries and lamentations surrounding him. His pain becomes unbearable, and he tries to commit suicide but is prevented. However the news of this suicide attempt is heard by his son Antipater. Antipater had been imprisoned with a death sentence for attempted parricide and was awaiting his execution. Antipater tries to convince a prison guard to free him so he can claim the throne. But when Herod gets wind of this plan, although agonizing, he manages to order the execution of his son. Herod died five days following this episode.

Josephus' engaging account has no echo over the next centuries, periods during which Herod's death failed to attract the interest of historians. The only surviving theme is Herod's *παιδοφονία/παιδοκτονία* which in the Christian literature, starting with the book of Matthew, is repeated multiple times. But for the rest of the account, the sources remain silent concerning Herod's death, his spectacular illness and the dramatic circumstances that surrounded the event. The rare authors who mention the king's death develop no further, only mentioning it to date the beginning of the reign of Archelaus².

The only historiographic heir of Josephus' narrative is Eusebius.

¹ Cf. W. OTTO 1913, c'est Salomé qui, en libérant les notables de Judée réunis dans l'hippodrome de Jéricho, aurait affirmé que son frère avait l'intention de les tuer. Ils n'y auraient été emprisonnés que pour prévenir un soulèvement à la mort d'Hérode. Mais la documentation archéologique actuelle n'accrédite même pas cette possibilité.

² Ex. Epiphane de Salamine (réf.). Le seul auteur qui en parle est Justin Martyr. Mais il ne mentionne l'événement que pour poser une question théologique, celle de savoir « *s'il n'eût pas été plus convenable que Dieu fit périr Hérode* » [au lieu de le laisser massacrer les enfants de Bethléem] → réponse de Justin = à ce moment-là, c'est dès le début que Dieu aurait dû tuer le serpent (*Dialogue avec Tryphon*).

Eusebius' reception of Josephus

Eusebius introduces a lengthy development describing Herod's death in the *Church History*. As with all the first Christians, Eusebius' interest in Herod is related to the date and place of birth of Jesus Christ. Eusebius takes a position in the controversy about the date and the birth of Jesus in 2BC. We leave this historical debate to the side, especially regarding the difficulties in making Herod's death in 4BC coincide with the birth of Jesus Christ in 2, as these difficulties have been abundantly discussed elsewhere.

Eusebius then tells Jesus Christ's life story. This is when he develops the theme of the slaughter of the Innocents, which is not only described as a founding event, but also as a ritual and theological issue, given that it's the massacre that establishes a continuity between the Old and New Testament, attaching the figure of Jesus Christ to that of Moses, with the analogy of the flight to Egypt and the Exodus.

I Eusebius' *Church History* = a *palimpseste* of Josephus ?

The episode is found in chapter 8 of the 1st book of *Church History*³ and presents itself as a simple *palimpseste* of Josephus, according to the principles laid out in the preface where Eusebius presents himself as a compiler of histories and his *Church History* as a vast anthology.

Eusebius, as he does habitually in CH, presents extracts of Josephus, which make him seem particularly scrupulous about being literal : κατὰ λέξιν (§ 5), then he actually cites Josephus:

- CH 8 § 6-8 = 1st citation, from A XVII 168-170 → text identical (3 § selected out of 14) : short passage structured around the theme of divine punishment for the « crimes » and « numerous impieties of the king ».
- CH 8 § 9-15 = 2nd citation, from W I 656-664 → integral citation of 5 §, ending with the execution of Antipater.

Most of the text discusses Herod's mysterious pathology in gruesome detail, in particular the worm infestation. This representation contains a large number of characteristics of the literary *topos* of the death of the tyrant, as it appears throughout greco-roman Antiquity.

⇒ Eusebius borrows from Josephus the *topos* of the infamy of the persecutor's death.

The documentary value of Josephus' story can only be received with great scepticism. All the more so, when the reader of *War* finds, after Herod's death at the end of book I, finds as a feedback, at the end of book VII, the spectacle of Catullus' horrible death: the tyrannical

³ Le chapitre comporte 4 pages, dont 2 pages 1/2 de Flavius Josephus, empruntées aux 2 récits parallèles de l'événement dans W et A.

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Roman governor of Libya is said to have perished haunted by phantoms of his victims, attacked by an incurable illness culminating in the putrefaction of his ulcerated entrails that ultimately fall off outside the body. (W VII 451 à 453).

Apion also dies of a gangrene of the genitals analogous to that of Herod (C.Ap. II 143).

It is clear that Josephus is inspired by the literary *topos* of the death of the tyrant (cf. the death of Pheretime⁴, Eunous⁵ and Sylla⁶, κτλ., all devoured by worms)⁷. These deaths illustrate the theology of retribution, already present in the Greek cultural context as the banal correlation between moral fault and divine punishment: during his lifetime the tyrant is punished for his crimes with a repugnant and finally mortal illness.

Josephus adds the theme of religious persecution, thus transforming the literary *topos* into a religious *topos* : the infamy of the persecutor's death.

Josephus' renewal of the theme of the retribution for moral faults, by associating it to the theme of religious persecution, allows for a recycling of the *topos* by Christian authors, and not only by Eusebius:

Luc = the death of Agrippa in 44 (*Actes des Apôtres* 12.23)

Lactance = the death of Galerius in 311 (*De mortibus persecutorum*, 33)⁸

Philostorge = the death of Julius Julianus in 363 (*HE*)

to cite only those who were ultimately devoured by worms.

II Eusebius' *Church History* = a narratological creation

Eusebius' deletions : the disappearance of the jewish religious context

Eusebius deletes the religious elements from Josephus' narrative.

- The Temple Eagle Affair

Josephus structures his description of Herod's illness around the theme of divine punishment for « the crimes » and « the numerous impieties of the king ». The nature of these impieties-the execution (torture : burnt alive) of young Jews who tore down the eagle from the temple. In punishing these pious Jews, Herod behaved like a persecutor. He had to face punishment in the form of his horrible illness.

Josephus writes that « his illnesses were punishment for what he had done to the Sages »:

ποινήν εἶναι ~~τῶν σοφιστῶν~~ τὰ νοσήματα

Eusèbe deletes a single word:

ποινήν εἶναι ~~τῶν σοφιστῶν~~ τὰ νοσήματα

which permits him to evacuate the religious meaning held in Josephus' account⁹.

⁴ HDT IV 205.

⁵ DIOD. 34.23.

⁶ apud PLUT. *Sylla* 36.

⁷ cf. LADOUCEUR, AFRICA, GAUGER, ECKHARDT, Toher, etc.

⁸ + Eusèbe, *CH* VIII.16.

- **The memory of Antiochos IV**

In any case, whatever the relationship between Josephus and the books of the Macabbees (=even if we consider that for the revolt of the Maccabees, Josephus depends exclusively on 1 Mac and not at all on 2Mac) the story of Herod's death bears numerous analogies with the death of Antiochos IV, the prototype of the religious persecutor. For Josephus' reader, the persecution of young Jews by Herod inevitably evokes the memory of Antiochus IV's persecution: Herod's illness is the re-edition of Antiochus' end and the death of 2 kings is a just punishment for their impious and tyrannical conduct towards the Jews.

Eusebius, who was familiar with the books of the Macabbees and the posterity of the *topos* of the persecutor's death in Christian literature, completely isolates Herod's death from its cultural and religious context.

Eusebius' Amalgamations

- **The plan to massacre the notables of Judea in Jericho**

Eusebius can be quite critical towards the inconsistencies of his predecessors: for example with Luc concerning Quirinus' census, in the controversy about Jesus Christ's birthdate). But he conserves Herod's plan to massacre the Jewish notables in the Jericho hippodrome theater, although the historicity of this plan was already disputed during his lifetime.

- **The slaughtering of Herod's son**

Josephus recounts in detail Antipater's intrigue while in prison and his plan to take his dying father's throne. The episode is concluded by the execution of Antipater, which is presented as the result of his ultimate parricidal conspiracy.

In a single sentence (§ 15), Eusebius summarizes the trial, the sentence and the execution of Antipater. He presents Antipater's execution like an assassination immediately following those of his brothers Alexander and Aristoboulos, even though these two were sentenced two years earlier (in 7 BC.). But not only were the three sons of Herod not executed at the same time, but they were also convicted of attempted parricide.

- **The Massacre of the Innocents***

The slaughter theme is incorporated into the narration, with the following amalgamation :

⁹ L'intervention est bien d'Eusebius lui-même. Pour l'histoire du texte, cf. A. PELLETIER, *Guerre des Juifs*, Paris:CUF, Intro. p.20. + discussion sur la nature du texte de Josephus dont disposait Eusebius dans la bibliothèque de Césarée = CARRIKER, INOWLOCKI),

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§ 12-13 = [the plan for] the **massacre** of the notables of Judea

§ 15 = the massacre of **children** [execution of the King's son]

⇒ § 16 amalgamation between all the « children » (παίδων):

Herod dies after the execution of his sons and the massacre of the Innocents

Eusebius' additions

- **Herod's crimes**

§ 3 Eusebius' additions : crime committed = « *contre (κατὰ) Christ and those his age* »
in Josephus = Herod is punished for his τόλμη (A 17.150), but this is without object(≠ κατὰ), as his audacity lies in him breaking Jewish law

§ 5 *idem* « Crime against the Savior and the other children »
+ the whip of God (biblical image)

- **addition of pathos et harmonization between the historical sources and the Scriptures**

- Beginning of the chapter:

§ 1: theme of the suckling infant, related to wars (< Diodorus ?) and to persecutions (< 1Mac and 2Mac?) introduced in the citation of the Book of Matthew

Matt. 2.16 :

« [Herod sent to kill] in Bethlehem and all its territory, all children 2 years old and under »:
πάντας τοὺς παῖδας τοὺς ἐν Βηθλεὲμ καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς ὀρίοις αὐτῆς ἀπὸ διετοῦς καὶ κατωτέρω

→ Eusebius :

τούς ὑπομαζίους ἐν τε τῇ Βηθλεὲμ καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς ὀρίοις αὐτῆς ἀπὸ διετοῦς καὶ κατωτέρω παῖδας

- End of the chapter :

§ 16: summary, then citation of the Book of Matthew 2, 19-22 mentioning Archelaus
ch9 § 1: commentary underlining the harmony between Matthew and Joseph.