

FRANK DICKEN

# Herod as a Composite Character in Luke-Acts

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

375

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Mohr Siebeck

FRANK DICKEN, born 1978; 2013 PhD (University of Edinburgh) in New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology; currently Assistant Professor of New Testament at Lincoln Christian University in Lincoln, Illinois.

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*For Jill,*

*With my love*



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Frank E. Dicken  
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## Abbreviations

All abbreviations except for those in the following list may be found in Patrick H. Alexander, et al, eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999).

BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LTPM	Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs
LUOSMS	Leeds University Oriental Society Monograph Series
<i>SBEvT</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
SJSJ	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and its World
TENTS	Texts and Editions for New Testament Study



## Chapter One

### Introduction

In a letter written to Pontius Pilate, Herod expresses his grief over three unfortunate incidents: spilling the blood of so many children,<sup>1</sup> beheading John the Baptist, and conspiring with the Jews to have Jesus executed.<sup>2</sup> Herod writes that he and his family are suffering various punishments as recompense for his crimes. His daughter, Herodias, while playing on a frozen pond, fell through the ice and her head was severed. Herod's wife grieves, holding their daughter's head on her lap, and has been struck with blindness in her left eye. He goes on to state that his son is in anguish and near death. Herod himself is not exempt from punishment as he writes that he is wracked with grief, suffering from dropsy, and has worms coming out of his stomach.

This letter, an obvious forgery, is found in a Syriac manuscript that dates to the sixth or seventh century CE.<sup>3</sup> It is somewhat surprising to read of Herod grieving over his responsibility for the deaths of John the Baptist and Jesus given his depiction in the synoptic gospels as an opponent of John and Jesus. What is most interesting is Herod's statement that as part of his punishment he has worms coming out of his stomach. Anyone familiar with the gospels and Acts knows that the Herod who suffered with worms in his stomach in

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<sup>1</sup> B. Harris Cowper, *The Apocryphal Gospels and Other Documents Relating to the History of Christ*, 4th ed. (London: Frederick Norgate, 1874), 392, n. 3; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 224. Spilling the blood of children clearly reflects the slaughter of innocents ordered by Herod the Great and recorded in Matt 2:16–18. This, presumably, reflects the Syriac text of the document since the Greek text presented by Montague Rhodes James, *Apocrypha Anecdota*, vol. 5, Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897), 68 indicates that Herod's father is responsible for the slaughter, stating πολλήν γὰρ ῥύσιν αἱματος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τέκνων ἀλλοτρίων ὁ πατήρ μου ἐποίησεν διὰ τὸν Ἰησοῦν.

<sup>2</sup> The manuscripts also contain a letter from Pilate to Herod in which the Roman governor expresses his grief over having sent Jesus to his death. There is a tendency in the early Christian period to shift blame for Jesus' death from Pilate and the Romans to Herod and, even more so, the Jewish people which is also evident in this purported letter. On this tendency see J. K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 89.

<sup>3</sup> James, *Apocrypha*, 5: xlv. The Syriac manuscript is held at the British Museum (Add. 14,609 ff. 120a–122a). A Greek manuscript dating to the fifteenth century (Cod. Gr. 929) is held at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. James presents the Greek text with English translation on pp. 71–75. Cowper, *Apocryphal Gospels*, 389–397 offers an English translation based on the Syriac text. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 222–224 gives a very brief introduction as well as a translation.



Acts 12:20–23 was not the same Herod who executed John the Baptist and participated in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. In the words of B. Harris Cowper, this is “a palpable anachronism.”<sup>4</sup>

How could a Christian author, especially one with clear knowledge of the documents of the New Testament and writing at a relatively early date make such a mistake?<sup>5</sup> The Herod who executed John the Baptist<sup>6</sup> and is implicated in the death of Jesus by the author of Luke-Acts<sup>7</sup> was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea from 4 BCE to 39 CE. The Herod who died with worms coming out of his stomach was Agrippa I, King of the Jews from 41 to 44 CE.<sup>8</sup> The author of the *Letter of Herod to Pilate* certainly is guilty of *historical* anachronism, but perhaps there is another explanation as to why the author depicted Herod in this way.

As an alternative explanation, the “Herod” of this letter is a composite character. A composite character is an amalgamation of multiple historic people that appears as a single character in a literary work. The letter of Herod to Pilate evidences this phenomenon: Herod appears as a single individual in the letter, but it is obvious that Herod Antipas and Agrippa I are conflated into the individual purporting to compose the letter.<sup>9</sup> To explain, any later reference to Herod’s responsibility for Jesus’ death in a Christian text is likely dependent upon Luke-Acts in some way as this *Doppelwerk* contains the earliest such accusations (Luke 23:6–12; Acts 4:25–27). Also, the author of Luke-Acts is the only witness from antiquity of the name “Herod” for Agrippa I (Acts 12:1–23). Whoever composed *The Letter of Herod to Pilate* knew Luke-Acts (and the Gospel of Matthew) and drew on the traditions contained therein to create his or her own composite “Herod.”

## 1.1 Statement of the Thesis

As a contribution to New Testament scholarship, I will argue, based on a narrative-critical methodology, that “Herod” can be construed as a composite character in Luke-Acts.<sup>10</sup> I will demonstrate that understanding “Herod” as a composite is possible by noting two unique features in the depiction of the

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<sup>4</sup> Cowper, *Apocryphal Gospels*, 392, n. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 389 sets the date of composition at ca. 400 CE.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Mark 6:14–29; Matt 14:1–12; Luke 3:19–20; 9:9 and Jos. *Ant.* 18.116–119.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Luke 23:6–12; Acts 4:27.

<sup>8</sup> The accounts of Agrippa’s death are found in Acts 12:20–23; Jos. *Ant.* 19.343–352.

<sup>9</sup> Herod the Great may also be part of this amalgamation depending on which reading of the slaughter of innocents one prefers.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout the work, the name “Herod” will appear in quote marks when I am referring to composite “Herod.” When I refer to a historical Herodian ruler outside the narrative of Luke-Acts (e.g., Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, etc.) or discuss other scholars’ work on the Herods, the name will appear without quote marks.

Herodian rulers in Luke-Acts. Let me be clear: I do not disagree that these Herods are three different *historical* people. This very fact undergirds my argument: a composite character is a conflation of two or more historical individuals. Instead, I will demonstrate that these Herods can be understood as a single character named “Herod” within the *narrative* of Luke-Acts.

As we will see in chapter three below, composite characters appear in ancient texts as a way to represent and illustrate a stereotypical theme or themes in the writings. Composite “Herod” in Luke-Acts is no different and I will explore “Herod’s” embodiment of political opposition toward the protagonists of Luke-Acts as an outworking of Satanic attempts to hinder the proclamation of the gospel in chapter six. Accordingly, “Herod’s” death in the narrative (Acts 12:20–23) is one way Luke indicates that political/Satanic opposition cannot impede the spread of the good news.

## 1.2 Overview of the Argument

In the next chapter I will review the pertinent works of scholarship that approach the Herodian rulers in Luke-Acts with a narrative-critical methodology. The three key works are John Darr’s *Herod the Fox*,<sup>11</sup> O. Wesley Allen’s *The Death of Herod*,<sup>12</sup> and chapter five of Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom’s *The Roman Empire in Luke’s Narrative*.<sup>13</sup> In addition to these three monographs, I will present the state of scholarship on the Herods of Luke 1:5 and Acts 12 as the distinctive features in narrative depiction of “Herod” in these two passages (namely, the title “King of Judaea” at Luke 1:5 and the use of the name “Herod” for Agrippa I in Acts 12) are crucial in my argument that “Herod” is a composite character. We will see that though many scholars discuss these unique features of Luke’s presentation of the Herodian rulers (even to the point of noting Luke’s close alignment of the various Herods through his repeated use of the name “Herod”), they typically seek historical rather than narrative solutions to the problems posed by these two texts. In other words, scholars have not explained these features of Luke’s narrative in the same way that I will – that “Herod” is a composite character.

Chapter three will outline the methodological parameters of my argument. The methodology adopted for this project is narrative-critical. The approach taken here is essentially that of Robert Tannehill in his two-volume narrative

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<sup>11</sup> John A. Darr, *Herod the Fox: Audience Criticism and Lukan Characterization*, JSNTSS 163 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Death of Herod: The Narrative and Theological Function of Retribution in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 158 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Kazuhiko Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke’s Narrative*, LNTS 404 (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

commentary on Luke-Acts.<sup>14</sup> This method proceeds from the assumption that Luke-Acts comprises an integrated, narrative whole and notes the thematic connections throughout the narrative.<sup>15</sup> I will also discuss an approach to characterization based on ancient literary conventions and modern scholarly discussions of the matter. I will conclude the chapter on methodology by listing several examples of composite characters in the Hebrew Bible, LXX, early Christian writings, and Rabbinic works. These examples will show: 1) composite characters are a feature of literature contemporaneous with Luke-Acts and 2) it is possible to identify a character as a composite by discerning that more than one historic individual stands behind the character.

The relationship between the historical Herodian rulers and Luke's composite "Herod" will be the subject of chapter four. There I will offer a brief biographical sketch of each of the Herods who stand behind Luke's "Herod." These sketches will incorporate information on the Herods drawn from ancient literary works and epigraphic/numismatic discoveries, with the chief sources being Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*. A brief aside will demonstrate how Josephus' personal biases and objectives affect his portrayal of the Herodian rulers. After presenting a biographical sketch of each of the Herods who stand behind Luke's "Herod," my ultimate aim will be to compare and contrast the narrative portrayal of "Herod" in Luke-Acts with what is known about the Herods in other texts and archaeological evidence in order to highlight the two distinctive features at Luke 1:5 and Acts 12: the title "King of Judaea" at Luke 1:5 (along with the

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<sup>14</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990). Tannehill's analysis ultimately involves the perspective of the implied author and narrator (*Luke*, 7), whereas the present work will focus solely on the textual depiction of "Herod." Though Tannehill wishes to distinguish between the real and implied authors of Luke-Acts, I see little distinction between the two as the basis for analysis in either case is the text of the documents itself.

<sup>15</sup> Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, vol. 1: xiii, 3. See also Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, SBLMS 20 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974), 7. This methodological choice also represents a key difference between the present argument and the works of Darr and Yamazaki-Ransom noted above. As I will explain, Darr's method is to read Luke-Acts in light of Luke's extra-textual repertoire, specifically the literary convention of "charismatic versus ruler" found in Hellenistic literature ("prophet versus king" in the Hebrew Bible/LXX). Darr examines Herod Antipas as a character over against John the Baptist and Jesus in light of this convention. In doing so, he reconstructs a hypothetical reader's first reading of Luke-Acts, showing how that reader builds the character of Herod as she or he progresses through the works. Herod, for Darr, is a paradigm of negative response to God's prophets. In this way, the author shows the reader that a response to John and Jesus that differs from Herod's is required. Yamazaki-Ransom chooses to examine Luke-Acts in light of a heuristic device that he dubs the "triangular model." He constructs this device based on the relationship between God, Israel, and foreign dominating powers as they are described at points in the Hebrew Bible and LXX. He then analyzes the Roman rulers who appear in Luke-Acts, including the Herodian rulers, in light of this model.

chronological difficulties presented by Luke 2:1–2) and the appearance of the name “Herod” for Agrippa I in Acts 12. These two adaptations provide the impetus for seeing “Herod” as a composite in Luke-Acts. First, at Luke 1:5 the title “King of Judaea” for a Herodian ruler finds no external attestation in any literary or epigraphic sources. In order for there to be a composite character we must be able to identify this Herod as a different *historic* individual than the other Herods, but not as a distinct character in the Lukan *narrative*. This is problematic as the historic identification of the Herod of Luke 1:5 is uncertain.<sup>16</sup> However, historical inquiry will show that this Herod is either Herod the Great or his son, Archelaus, and therefore distinguishable historically from the other Herods (Antipas and Agrippa) of Luke-Acts. What makes conflation of this Herod with the others possible is Luke’s use of the titles “King” and “Tetrarch” interchangeably, the overlap between the terms “Judaea” and “Galilee” in Luke-Acts, and the repeated use of the name “Herod” throughout the narrative. This final observation leads to the second distinctive feature of the depiction of the Herods in Luke-Acts, the use of the name “Herod” for Agrippa I in Acts 12. This name finds no attestation outside of Acts for Agrippa I. In this case, I will argue that the appearance of this name for this ruler makes conflation of the Herods possible.

Having highlighted the distinctive features in the narrative depiction of the Herods in Luke-Acts, which lend themselves to understanding “Herod” as a composite character, chapter five turns to the narrative of Luke-Acts itself. The aim of this chapter will be to offer an exegesis of the passages in which “Herod” appears in order to show: 1) the consistent characterization of “Herod,” i.e., that “Herod” may be read as a single character and 2) that this character is an antagonist over against three of his primary protagonists: John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles/early Church.<sup>17</sup> I will begin with an analysis of Acts 4:25–27 in order to provide the internal evidence of the depiction of “Herod” as a representative king *and* ruler. I will argue that this passage is the programmatic summation of the role of “Herod” in the narrative as it recalls not only “Herod’s” involvement in the trial and execution of Jesus but also, more subtly, the ruler’s execution of John the Baptist via the narrative alignment of Jesus with John. The text is also proleptic, anticipating “Herod’s” persecution of the church, particularly the apostles James and Peter. After this analysis of Acts 4:25–27, I will return to the characterization of “Herod” in relation to each of the protagonists. This

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<sup>16</sup> The historical problem centers not only on the unique title, but also Luke’s inclusion of the census under Quirinius as the backdrop for the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1–2).

<sup>17</sup> The exceptions will be Acts 12:20–24 and 23:35 which I will discuss in chapter six as these passages illustrate the themes discussed there. The reference to “Herod’s” Praetorium at Acts 23:35 leads us to an examination of Paul’s trial before Agrippa (Acts 25:13–26:32), not because the narrative indicates a family relation between “Herod” and Agrippa (it does not), but because Luke portrays Agrippa in ways that are comparable to his depiction of “Herod.”

discussion of the depiction of “Herod” will reveal in full what the analysis of Acts 4:25–27 showed in summary, i.e., that “Herod” is a king and ruler who has taken his stand against the Lord and the Messiah.

Chapter six will situate composite “Herod” in the cosmic conflict between the devil and God envisioned in the Lukan narrative by showing that “Herod’s” actions may be explained in terms of Satanic opposition to the spread of the gospel to the end of the earth. In order accomplish this, I will note that the proclamation of the gospel to the end of the earth is a central theme in Luke-Acts (cf. Acts 1:8). John the Baptist initiates this proclamation, which Jesus continues in the third gospel and the apostles and other disciples carry it out in the Book of Acts. Next, I will explore two features of the portrayal of Satan that relate directly to “Herod:” 1) the devil’s rule over the kingdoms of the earth (cf. Luke 4:5–6) and 2) Satan’s attempts to hinder the proclamation of the gospel. These facets of the portrayal of Satan provide a framework for interpreting “Herod’s” reign as king and ruler as well as his antagonism toward the protagonists, which stems from his ruling under the authority of the devil. Though the narrative depiction of the devil casts the entire earthly ruling power in Luke’s narrative in a negative light,<sup>18</sup> “Herod’s” actions exemplify an extreme-negative: namely, that political persecution, including imprisonment and even execution, may come upon those who participate in proclaiming the good news. However, opposition such as that envisioned by composite “Herod” cannot hinder the continued progress of the gospel.

To make this evident with regard to “Herod,” I will return to Luke-Acts and two final passages in which composite “Herod” appears. Acts 12:20–24, the narrative of “Herod’s” death, demonstrates that though political persecution may come upon the church just as it had come upon John the Baptist and Jesus (cf. Acts 12:1–5), such persecution will not stop the progress of the gospel as the story concludes with the plain statement that the word of God grew and multiplied (Acts 12:24). Second is the narrative of Paul’s trial before Agrippa which takes place at “Herod’s” Praetorium in Caesarea (Acts 23:35; 25:13–26:32). The setting is “Herod’s” final appearance in the narrative. This setting, along with the portrayal of Agrippa in ways that are remarkably similar to “Herod” (though Agrippa is *not* part of the composite character), provide an ominous tone to the entire narrative that anticipates Paul’s imminent death.<sup>19</sup> However, Paul does not die. Rather, Agrippa finds Paul innocent and sends him to Rome, ostensibly because Paul has appealed his case to Caesar but actually because Paul was informed by the Lord that he must testify in Rome (Acts 23:11). Therefore, these two passages demonstrate narratively that though political opposition is a reality that those

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<sup>18</sup> I.e., the Roman political system envisioned by Luke 2:1–2; 3:1–2 and the repeated references to Caesar in Acts.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 20:25–26, 38 also anticipate Paul’s death.

who proclaim the gospel may face, it will not hinder the geographic spread of the good news to the end of the earth. In chapter seven, I will summarize the argument and offer two implications prompted by my argument.

In an essay published in 1978, Joseph Fitzmyer pondered why Luke would have Herod ask the crucial question, τίς δέ ἐστιν οὗτος περὶ οὗ ἀκούω τοιαῦτα; (Luke 9:9) and wrote that determining what role Herod plays in the larger narrative would solve the quandary.<sup>20</sup> John Darr states that he was prompted to write *Herod the Fox* as a response to Fitzmyer's question.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a statement made by Darr in his discussion of Acts 4:23–31 prompted the present work. He writes, “Soon another Herod (King Agrippa I) will ‘lay hands on and mistreat’ members of the Church (Acts 12:1)....The lesson is clear: if one chooses to be a true witness – one who sees, hears, responds and tells – the one will inevitably encounter a ‘Herod’.”<sup>22</sup> Darr is on to something here, something with which the present discussion will grapple. My argument will be that Luke's witnesses do not encounter *a* Herod, but instead, in the narrative of Luke-Acts the protagonists encounter “Herod,” a composite character who embodies Satanic opposition toward their efforts to preach the good news to the end of the earth.

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Composition of Luke, Chapter 9,” in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, ed. by Charles H. Talbert (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), 151, n. 42.

<sup>21</sup> Darr, *Herod the Fox*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 207–208.

## Chapter Two

### The Herods in Lukan Literary Scholarship

When one begins a scholarly investigation of the Herodian rulers, one quickly learns that historical concerns rule the day.<sup>1</sup> Since this monograph is a literary investigation of the Herods in Luke-Acts, works of historical scholarship will be supplemental to this study in two ways. First, insofar as they offer interpretations of the biblical texts, I will utilize and evaluate them in the exegetical sections below (though their contribution in this regard will be minimal). Second, I will draw on these historical works in my biographical sketches of the members of the Herodian dynasty who figure in Luke-Acts (chapter 4) which will provide points of comparison and contrast to the narrative of Luke-Acts, thus helping us discover the distinctive features of Luke's presentation of the Herods and showing us how Luke has constructed composite "Herod." However, since they are historical works, an extensive review of these works here would offer little justification for the current project.<sup>2</sup>

Rather, literary investigations that treat the Herods as characters in Luke and Acts concern us here. I will first provide an overview of the theses, methodological parameters, and key contributions of the three works that

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<sup>1</sup> The key works of historical scholarship include Nikos Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty*, JSPSS 30 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Abraham Schalit, *König Herodes: der Mann und sein Werk*, 2. Auflage mit einem Vorwort von Daniel R. Schwartz (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001); Samuel Rocca, *Herod's Judaea: A Mediterranean State in the Classical World*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 122 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Morten Hørning Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee*, WUNT 215 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas: A Contemporary of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980); F. F. Bruce, "Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea," *ALUOS* 5 (1963): 6–23; Daniel Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judaea*, TSAJ 23 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990); Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Michael Grant, *Herod the Great* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971); Stewart Perowne, *The Life and Times of Herod the Great* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Inc., 1957); Stewart Perowne, *The Later Herods* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Inc., 1958); A. H. M. Jones, *The Herods of Judaea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938). The writings of Josephus will be evaluated and drawn upon as well.

<sup>2</sup> Tamar Landau, *Out-Heroding Herod*, AGAJU 63 (Leiden: Brill, 2006) presents a major study of Herod the Great as a character in the writings of Josephus in light of several rhetorical features of Hellenistic literature. Landau's monograph is a thorough literary investigation, but since an entirely different corpus is the basis for Landau's study, it is of ancillary import to the current study.