

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [227]

And How Did Bava ben Buta Do This?

(Herod -the madman, Bava ben Buta -the blind man who could see,
and the Rebuilt of the Temple)

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 3b



Background to Our Story

Herod the Great



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

Herod (74/73 BCE – 4 BCE), also known as Herod the Great and Herod I, was a [Roman client king](#) of [Judea](#), referred to as the [Herodian kingdom](#). The history of his legacy has polarized opinion, as he is known for his colossal building projects throughout Judea, including his expansion of the [Second Temple](#) in [Jerusalem](#) ([Herod's Temple](#)), the construction of the port at [Caesarea Maritima](#), the fortress at [Masada](#) and [Herodium](#). Vital details of his life are recorded in the works of the 1st century CE Roman–Jewish historian [Josephus](#). Herod also appears in the Christian [Gospel of Matthew](#) as the ruler of Judea who orders the [Massacre of the Innocents](#) at the time of the [birth of Jesus](#). Despite his successes, including singlehandedly forging a new aristocracy from practically nothing, he still garnered criticism from various historians. His reign polarizes opinion amongst scholars and historians, some viewing his legacy as evidence of success, or a reminder of his tyrannical rule.

Upon Herod's death the Romans divided his kingdom among three of his sons and his sister —[Archelaus](#) became [ethnarch](#) of the [tetrarchy of Judea](#), [Herod Antipas](#) became tetrarch of [Galilee](#) and [Peraea](#), [Philip](#) became tetrarch of territories north and east of the Jordan, and [Salome I](#) was given a [toparchy](#) including the cities of Jabneh, Ashdod, and Phasaelis.

Bava ben Buta

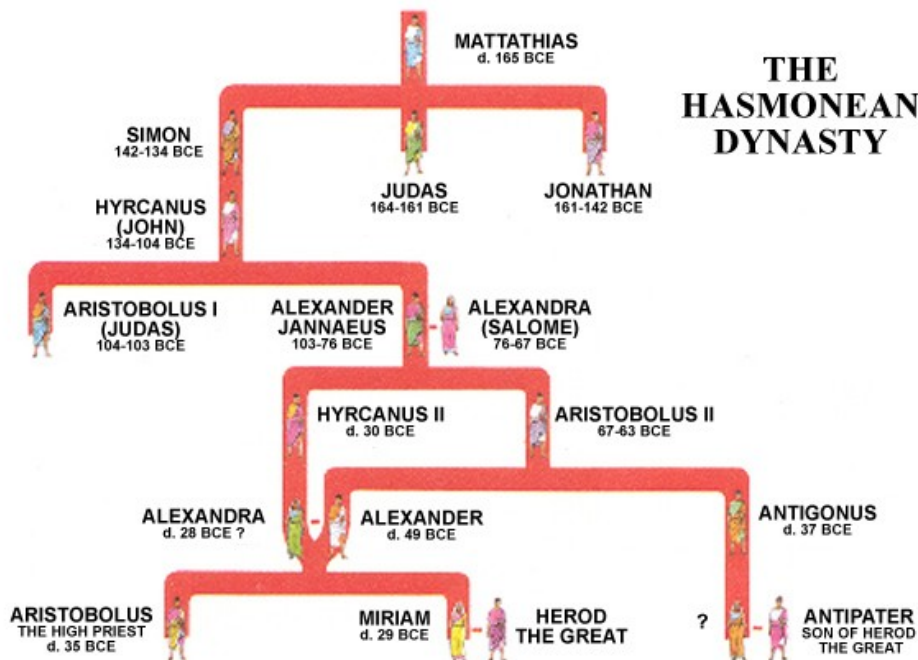


Baba ben Buta ([Hebrew](#): **בבא בן בוטא**) was a teacher of the Law at the time of [Herod the Great](#), and perhaps a member of the prominent family known as *The Sons of Baba* ("Bene Baba"), who, at the time of the siege of Jerusalem by Herod (37 BC), resisted its surrender, and whom Costobarus protected from the wrath of Herod for twelve years, until they were discovered and put to death ([Josephus](#), "Ant." xv. 7, § 10).

Baba ben Buta is also the subject of several traditions which are found in the Babylonian Talmud. While Baba ben Buta supposedly lived in the 1st century, the extensive traditions about him come from the 4th to the 8th centuries, when this Talmud was composed and redacted.

In halakic tradition Baba ben Buta is recorded as a disciple of Shammai; and it is said that he prevented an opinion of Shammai concerning a question of laying one's full body-weight upon animal sacrifices (prior to their slaughter) from becoming a rule of law, because he was convinced of the correctness of Hillel's opinion who permitted the practice (Betzah 20a et seq.). Baba is reported to have been so scrupulous in his religious observances that he brought a free-will offering every day, for fear that he might have committed a sin requiring atonement. These sacrifices were called "sin-offerings of the pious". Baba was a member of the bet din and some sources state that he always saw that justice was done, particularly to women (Gittin 57a; Nedarim 66b).

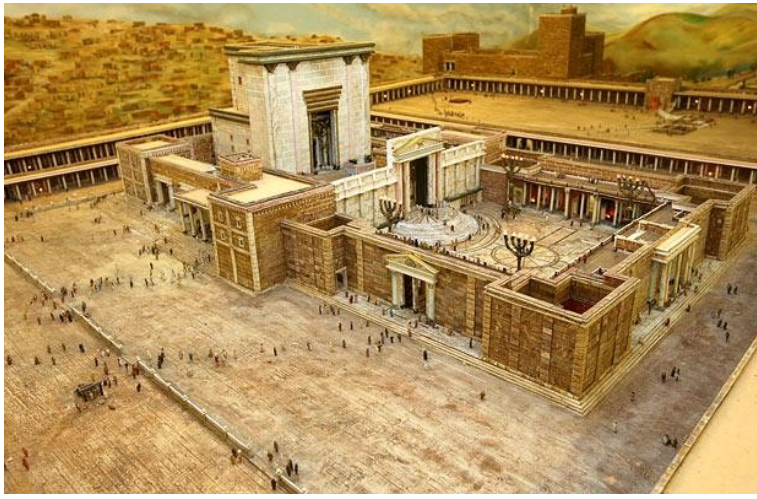
Hasmonean Family



Deuteronomy 17: 14-15

¹⁴"When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,' ¹⁵ you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman.

Herod's Temple



The Text: Babylonian Talmud Bava Batra 3b

Herod was a slave in the house of the Hasmoneans.

He set his eyes upon a certain young girl from the house of the Hasmoneans. One day that man, Herod, heard a Divine Voice that said: Any slave who rebels now will succeed. He rose up and killed all his masters, but spared that girl. When that girl saw that he wanted to marry her, she went up to the roof and raised her voice, and said: Whoever comes and says: I come from the house of the Hasmoneans, is a slave, since only that girl, i.e., I, remained from them. And that girl fell from the roof to the ground and died.

[Herod] preserved the girl's body in honey for seven years to prevent it from decaying. There are those who say that he engaged in necrophilia with her and there are those who say he did not engage in necrophilia with her. According to those who say he engaged in necrophilia with her, the reason that he preserved her body was to gratify his desires. And according to those who say he did not engage in necrophilia with her, the reason that he preserved her body was so that people would say he married a king's daughter.

[Herod] said to himself: Who expounds the verse: *"One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you"* (Deuteronomy 17:15) as meaning that he who is appointed as king must come from a Jewish family and cannot be an emancipated slave or a convert? It is the Sages who expound the verse in this manner, insisting that a king must have Jewish roots. He rose up and killed all the Sages, but spared Bava ben Buta in order to take counsel with him.

[Herod] placed a garland made of porcupines hide on Bava ben Buta's head, which pricked his eyes out.

One day Herod came and sat before him without identifying himself in order to test him. He, Herod, said: See, Master, what this evil slave Herod is doing.

[Bava ben Buta] said to him: What should I do to him?

[Herod] said to him: The Master should curse him.

[Bava ben Buta] said to him: But it is written: *"Do not curse the king, not even in your thoughts"* (Ecclesiastes 10:20).

[Herod] said to him: He is not a king, since he rules illegally.

[Bava ben Buta] said to him: And even if he were merely a rich man I would not curse him, as it is written: *"And do not curse a rich person in your bedchamber"* (Ecclesiastes 10:20). And even were he only a leader I would not curse him, as it is written: *"And you shall not curse a leader among your people"* (Exodus 22:27).

[Herod] said to him: That *halakha* stated with regard to "a leader among your people;" that is, to a fit Jew who acts as a member of your people, i.e., in accordance with Torah law, and this one does not do the deeds of your people.

[Bava ben Buta] said to him: I am afraid of him [of Herod].

[Herod] said to him: There is nobody who will go and tell him, since you and I are sitting here alone.

[Bava ben Buta] said to him: it is written: *"For a bird of the sky shall carry the sound, and that which has wings shall tell the matter"* (Ecclesiastes 10:20).

[Herod] said to him [to Bava ben Buta]: I am he. Had I known that the Sages were so cautious I would not have killed them. Now, what is that man's remedy, i.e., what can I do to repent for my sinful actions?

[Bava ben Buta] said to him: He who extinguished the light of the world by killing the Torah Sages, as it is written: *"For the mitzvah is a lamp, and the Torah is light"* (Proverbs 6:23), should go and occupy himself with the light of the world, the Temple, as it is written with regard to the Temple: *"And all the nations shall flow [venaharu] unto it"* (Isaiah 2:2), the word *venaharu* alluding to light [*nehora*]. There are those who say that this is what he said to him: He who blinded the eye of the world, as it is written in reference to the Sages: *"And if it be committed through ignorance by the eyes of the congregation"* (Numbers 15:24), should go and occupy himself with the eye of the world, the Temple, as it is written: *"I will desecrate my Temple, the pride of your strength, the delight of your eyes"* (Ezekiel 24:21).

[Herod] said to him: I am afraid of the Roman government, that they will not permit me to make changes in the Temple.

[Bava ben Buta] said to him: Send a messenger who will travel there for a year, and remain there for another year, and take yet another year to return. In the meantime, you can demolish the Temple and rebuild it.

He [Herod] did so.

Eventually, they sent a message to Herod from Rome: If you have not yet demolished it, do not demolish it; and if you have already demolished it, do

not rebuild it; and if you have demolished it and already rebuilt it, you shall be counted among those who act wickedly, seeking counsel only after they have already acted. Even if you are armed and in command of a military force, your book, i.e., your genealogical record, is here. You are neither a king nor the son of a king, but rather Herod the slave who has made himself a freeman.

...

The Sages say: One who has not seen Herod's building has never seen a beautiful building in his life.

With what did he build it? Rabba said: With stones of white and green marble. There are those who say that he built it with stones of blue, white, and green marble. Alternate rows of stones set out an edge a bit and drew in an edge a bit, so that they would better receive and hold the plaster. He considered covering it with gold, but the Rabbis said to him: Leave it, and do not cover it, since it is more beautiful this way, as it looks like the waves of the sea.

And how did Bava ben Buta do this, i.e., give advice to Herod the wicked? But doesn't Rav Yehuda say that Rav says, and some say it was Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi who says: For what reason was Daniel punished? Because he offered advice to Nebuchadnezzar, as after sharing a harsh prophecy with him, it is stated: *"Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you, redeem your sins with charity and your iniquities with graciousness to the poor, that there may be a lengthening of your prosperity"* (Daniel 4:24). And it is written: *"All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar"* (Daniel 4:25). And it is written: *"And at the end of twelve months"* (Daniel 4:26). Only after a year was the prophecy fulfilled but not before that, apparently because Nebuchadnezzar heeded Daniel's advice.

The Gemara answers: If you wish, say that a slave like Herod is different since he is obligated in the mitzvot, and therefore Bava ben Buta had to help him repent. And

if you wish, say the Temple is different, as without the help of the government it would not have been built.

And from where do we derive that Daniel was punished?

If we say we know this because it is written: *"And Esther called for Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her" (Esther 4:5)*, and Rav said: Hatach is Daniel. This works out well according to the one who says Daniel was called Hatach because they cut him down [*hatakh*] from his greatness and turned him into a minor attendant. But according to the one who says he was called Hatach because all governmental matters were determined [*hatakh*] according to his word, what is there to say? What punishment did he receive?

His punishment was that they threw him into the den of lions.



Explaining the Story

What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why did Herod kill all the members of the Hasmonean family?

? Why did Herod spare the girl?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did the girl kill herself?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Herod preserve the girl in honey?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why did Herod kill all the Sages?

? Why did Herod spare Bava ben Buta?

Bonus ? Why does the Talmud tell us these horrible stories about Herod?

? Why did Herod blind Bava ben Buta?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? How did Herod test Bava ben Buta?

Extra Bonus ? Bava ben Buta refuses to curse Herod (in a guise of a stranger) even though he doesn't know Herod is standing in front of him. Why?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? What prompted Herod to regret his actions (especially the killing of the Sages)?

Extra Bonus ? How do we know Herod's repentance (in the story) is sincere?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why did Bava ben Buta advise Herod to rebuild the Temple?

Extra Bonus ? Why did the Sages (at least some of them) frown upon Bava ben Buta's advice to Herod to rebuild the Temple?

Extra Bonus ? Why did Bava ben Buta advise Herod how to circumvent the Roman authorities?

? What do you think about Bava ben Buta's practical advice to Herod regarding how to deal with the Roman authorities?

? Why didn't the Roman authorities retaliate against Herod for his unruliness?

Bonus ? How do we see the Sages' ambivalence regarding Bava ben Buta's advice to Herod?

Bonus ? Why did the Sages bring the story about Daniel's punishment for advising Nebuchadnezzar?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! "To advise or not to advise: Bava ben Buta's difficult call" – or the (sometimes) heavy price of surviving and moving on in life.

EPILOGUE