

"CAESAREA MARITIMA"

(Acts 24:1-27)

(Paul Barnett)

Herod's¹ vision extended beyond the boundaries of his realm. A major problem for Herod was the lack of any safe harbour on his coastland. Ships from Egypt or Syria were forced to anchor in the open sea, leaving them vulnerable to onshore winds. Many ships were dashed to pieces on an inhospitable shoreline.

Herod conceived the idea of an artificial harbour at an ancient though run-down settlement called Strato's tower. This he renamed as Caesarea in honor of his Patron Caesar Augustus. It is referred to as Caesarea Meritima to distinguish it from other cities named after the emperor. In c. 23 B.C. Herod's builders began to rebuild the city with magnificent public buildings constructed of white marble. Water was brought for the large population of the new city by aqueducts, whose remains are still intact today. Most significant of all, however, was Herod's great harbor, which exceeded the Piraeus, the port of Athens.

Herod's motives in the building of Caesarea were twofold. A great port for his kingdom was fundamental to the expansion of trade into, as well as out of, Israel. But Caesarea was also Herod's bridge to the world's stage on which, it appears, he desired to be a significant player. Herod was no passive client king, content in the obscurity of remote Israel. Caesarea was Herod's statement to the world outside, perhaps his most important symbol. Caesarea provided a magnificent entry to his kingdom, as well as a majestic stepping stone to the western world. Again Josephus is our witness.

Notwithstanding the totally recalcitrant nature of the site, [Herod] grappled with the difficulties so successfully, that the solidity of the masonry defied the sea, while its beauty was such as if no obstacle had existed. Having determined upon the comparative size of the harbour as we have stated, he had blocks of stone let down into twenty fathoms of water, most of them measuring fifty feet in length, some even larger. Upon the submarine foundation thus laid he constructed above the surface a mole two hundred feet broad; of which one hundred were built out to break the surge, whence this portion was called the breakwater, while the remainder supported a stone wall encircling the harbour. From this wall arose, at intervals, massive towers, the loftiest and most magnificent of which was called Drusion after the step-son of Caesar.

Numerous inlets in the wall provided landing places for mariners putting in to harbour, while the whole circular terrace fronting these channels served as a broad promenade for disembarking passengers.

In A.D. 6 Herod's patron Augustus took the momentous step of annexing Judea as a Roman province. Archelaus, Herod's son, had proved to be an inadequate ruler; disgruntled Jewish aristocrats



¹ This is *Herod the Great* who lived from 73 BC until 4 AD. He was King of Judea when Christ was born but died soon after the birth of Jesus.

who had earlier lobbied for autonomy under the Romans were now successful in their requests. Caesarea came into its own as the capital of the new province. Successive Roman prefects and procurators made their home in Herod's new city, from which they administered the province, making periodic visits to Jerusalem, the previous capital.

Whereas there is no evidence that Jesus ever visited Casarea, the great seaport was to become important in the history of early Christianity. In c. 34 Caesarea became the home and center of operations of Phillip "the evangelist" (Acts 8:40; 21:8). Soon afterward Peter was drawn to the city where he preached the gospel to those assembled in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:23-48). It is probable that Christianity spread from Caesarea to the cities of Phoenicia—Tyre, Sidon and Ptolemais (Acts 21:3, 7; 27:3; cf. Acts 15:3)—through the ministry of Philip the evangelist.

In 41 Judea reverted back to its former status as a Kingdom ruled by a Jewish King. Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod, upon his accession had attempted to destroy the leadership of the church in Jerusalem. Agrippa had James Zebedee killed and imprisoned Peter with the same intention (Acts 12:1-4). However, Peter escaped. After Agrippa took up residence in Caesarea he met his death following a ceremony in the amphitheater when the people venerated him as a "god" (Acts 12:19-23; Josephus Ant. 19.343-52).

Caesarea was a city of mixed population. In all probability Gentiles predominated over Jews. Racial conflict between Jews and Gentiles in 66 was to be the spark that led the great war between Jews and Romans that blazed from 66 to 74.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to Caesarea. A recent convert but now in danger in Judea, he embarked from Caesarea to Tarsus in c. A.D. 36 (Acts 9:30; cf. Gal 1:21). After his missionary tour through Greece A.D.49-51, Paul disembarked in Caesarea for Jerusalem, re-embarking for his journey north to Antioch (Acts 18:22). In c. 56 Paul returned briefly to Caesarea as the house guest of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8). Some weeks later Paul was brought back under guard to the capital, where he remained the prisoner of successive procurators Felix and Festus for more than two years (Acts 24:27). Finally Paul sailed from Caesarea under escort for trial before the emperor in Rome (Acts 27:1-2). In the centuries to come Caesarea was to become a great world center of Christian scholarship, in particular through the work of Origen.

