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King Herod: President of the Olympic Games

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With final preparations underway for the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, we can all look forward to two weeks of athletic competition by the best of the world's athletes. In between the contests, we will hear about how much more expensive these games are than any before them and about different sponsors -- companies, taxpayers, and governments -- who have contributed money to pay the cost.

Sometimes it seems the Olympics limp from games to games trying to determine how to pay the bills, but this is nothing new. More than 2000 years ago, the Olympics were having the same problem. It was getting harder and harder to pay the bills, and the games were in decline. But then a financial savior appeared, in the unlikely form of Herod the Great, King of Judea.

The year was 14 B.C., and the citizens of Olympia, the city and religious shrine in Greece where the Olympic games were held, were worried about paying for the next games. Hosting the spectacle every four years was taking a toll on the city's finances, for not only did they have to cover the housing and feeding of athletes and spectators, they also had to pay for the sacrifices offered at that time.

Olympia was the central Greek shrine to Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. The Olympic games were held as a celebration in his honor. The first and last of the five days set aside for the games were devoted to offering animal sacrifices to Zeus and his consort, the goddess Hera. In recent years, Olympia's leaders noted, the money had been getting tighter and the lavish character of the games had become noticeably more shoddy and worn.

King Herod decided to do something about this problem. The previous year he had finished rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem, which had

taken him 15 years. It was so magnificent that six centuries later, the rabbis still said that anyone who had not seen Herod's Temple had never seen true beauty. Herod also was finishing his other building project, Caesarea, a new city built from the ground up. With the largest harbor on the eastern Mediterranean Sea, it was designed to encourage trade and travel.

So needing a new project on which to lavish his money, Herod decided to pay for the Olympic games of 12 B.C. He journeyed to Olympia for the games that summer and presided over them as president. Of course, Herod's gift ensured that the games would go on in style. But by granting Herod the role of president, the Olympians placed Herod in a position where everyone, especially the elite, the wealthy and the rulers, would meet Herod and thank him for his benefaction. Even Caesar Augustus probably thanked Herod for honoring Zeus, Caesar's patron God, when Herod visited Rome later that summer.

Since the ancient Olympic games were not a secular event as they are today, but a religious celebration devoted to Zeus, a good part of the money Herod the Jew donated must have gone to pay for the sacrifices to Zeus. Thus, Herod must have practiced the saying of the later Christian apostle Paul: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

Apparently Herod enjoyed his Olympics so much that he gave additional funds to endow the festival in future years. For this further gift, the ancient historian Josephus records, Herod had his name recorded as perpetual president of the Olympic games.