

Mark 6:14-29 Herod, Herodias, and John the Baptist

14 And King Herod heard about it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, “John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.” 15 But others were saying, “He is Elijah.” And others were saying, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” As if to underline Jesus’ warning to the disciples that He is sending out to preach, heal, and cleanse about the hatred and hostility of the worldly authorities to the Kingdom of God, Mark chooses this place to let us know about the martyrdom of John the Baptist. Jesus’ message, and theirs is **“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand”**,--exactly what both John the Baptist had been proclaiming. This means that they were immediately going to come into conflict with Herod, the King. There is a basic conflict of interests, even of ideologies, between the kingdom of God and the norms of human society. An ambassador of the kingdom of God is called not only to a mission of restoration and deliverance, but also to a conflict with authorities, who want to rule themselves, not bow the knee before God. John the Baptist’s fate is an extreme example of the dire consequences that sometimes follow from such conflict. King Herod heard about Jesus, and His sending out of His disciples. And, I’m sure that the fact that people were saying **“John the Baptist has risen from the dead**, did not exactly thrill Herod, since he had murdered John. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and Malthace, was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from his father’s death in 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. His total disregard for Jewish sensitivity was displayed not only in his marriage to Herodias, but in the selection of an ancient cemetery as the site for his capital, Tiberias. By this choice Herod virtually excluded Jewish settlers, for residence in the city would render them perpetually unclean in terms of the ritual law. The royal title had been denied to Antipas by Augustus. Goaded by the ambitious Herodias, and his own imaginings, it was Antipas’ request for the title of “king” which officially led to his dismissal and exile. It was the people who recognized that God was at work in the ministry of Jesus. The popular theories were that: he is John the Baptist, or he is Elijah, or he is one of the other prophets. So, all the people knew also that Jesus was a Prophet, their only question was whether He was John, Elijah, or one of the other prophets. They think of him as one who appeared suddenly upon the earth a short time after the Baptist’s death. Remember that the people had to get used to the fact that God was sending Prophets again among them. It had been 400 years since Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, and part of John’s mission had been to re-introduce the concept of God speaking personally through a Prophet, so that they would listen to John, and ultimately listen to Jesus. They saw a continuity in the messages of John and Jesus, since they both preached, **Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand**. And just as the transfer of the ‘spirit of Elijah’ to his companion Elisha occurred in 2 Ki. 2:15, they may have thought that was happening here.

16 But when Herod heard about it, he kept saying, “John, whom I beheaded, has risen!”

Interestingly, the one who ignored God’s law about touching corpses to build his palace on a former graveyard, thereby excluding from his presence all those who wanted to remain ceremonially clean, and who killed a prophet of God is now worried by ghosts! Herod, disturbed by an uneasy conscience disposed to superstition, feared that John had come back to haunt him. He felt that in Jesus he was confronted with the Baptist once more, but now returned from the grave with the result that supernatural powers were at work in him. In Jewish thinking resurrection is the prelude to judgment, and the terror of judgment may be caught in Herod’s statement, **“John, whom I beheaded, is risen.”** He himself had been responsible for John’s execution, so that John’s ‘reappearance’ is a threat to him personally, coming back to haunt his guilty conscience, and probably accuse Him personally of this crime too! Herodias’ first husband was the son of Herod the Great, half-brother to Herod Antipas, named Herod Philip. John had accused Herod of using political pressure to take his brother’s wife. The territory of Antipas included the narrow strip designated Perea, which bordered on the Nabatean Kingdom. His marriage to Herodias had

required the repudiation (humiliation and divorce) of a former wife, the daughter of Aretas IV of Nabatea. So, John's proclamation of the unlawfulness of Herod's adulterous union could be interpreted as a call to insurrection which threatened the tetrarch from within his province as seriously, and inflamed the already poor relationship with Nabateans to the east of his province. With a boldness appropriate to his office, John had denounced the unlawful marriage of Antipas to Herodias. Her union with Antipas was adulterous and shocking because the Mosaic Law clearly prohibited marriage to a brother's wife while the brother was yet alive (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). Not even the royal house was exempt from the call to radical repentance.

20 for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he had been protecting him. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; and yet he used to enjoy listening to him.--

These verses are strongly reminiscent of the story of Ahab and Jezebel (whose 'target' was, of course, John's spiritual "father" Elijah), which the rest of the story will work out between a resolutely hostile Herodias and a wavering Antipas, who will eventually be tricked into pronouncing sentence of death, against his better judgment. The parallel with Pilate's ineffectual resistance to the determined hostility of the priests in 15:1–15 is yet another indication of Mark's desire to link together the fates of John and of Jesus. Herodias 'had it in for him', while Antipas's combination of fear and respect for John led him not only to block Herodias's murderous intentions protecting him from Herodias, and listening to him with close attention, and even with appreciation. The implication is that, like Felix with Paul in Acts 24:24–26, he was at least open to persuasion regarding repentance, but he remained confused and undecided as Luke tells us he also did about Jesus (Lk. 9:7). The lesson of course, is that if we hang around people who hate and despise God, then we run the risk of them influencing us away from God. And if we fence-sit, we risk coming down on the wrong side of the fence. Just as the weak Ahab had blurted out his troubles to Jezebel, Antipas had not concealed from Herodias what John was saying. The prophet's charge infuriated her. She nurtured a sustained grudge against John and desired to silence his disturbing accusation permanently, by execution. The imprisonment of John was a compromise measure—always dangerous, but it gave Herod some peace in his household. This is also why we don't marry unbelievers—they tend to draw us away from God, not us draw them toward God. Well, this silenced John's proclamation to the people, but it also silenced John's witness to Herod. And, at last, the trap was sprung on wishy-washy fence-sitter, double-minded Herod.

21 An opportune day came when Herod, on his birthday, held a banquet for his nobles and military commanders, and the leading people of Galilee; 22 and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want, and I will give it to you." 23 And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you, up to half of my kingdom."

--Antipas's birthday feast was a an "opportune time" from the viewpoint of Herodias, since it offered the opportunity to break through the resistance which Antipas had so far maintained to her plot against John. Josephus identifies the name of Herodias' daughter as Salome. She was, apparently, in her middle teens at the time of her infamous performance. The performance pleased both Herod and his guests, perhaps precisely because it was the princess who danced. Meanwhile Herodias was biding her time, but that she deliberately sent her daughter into the feast to dance, in order to induce Herod to grant her desire. The enemy plays on our weak points. We've already seen that Herod was willing to commit adultery and betray his own brother for a woman, now the enemy presses his advantage in order to get Herod to commit the sin of murder. We see this progression, just as is mentioned in James 1:13-15 **13 No one is to say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it has run its course, brings forth death.**

When it comes down to it, it's not the offensive preaching of John that results in his death, but Herod Antipas giving into his lusts, and making a stupid promise, which he is then obligated to fulfill. In a boisterous manner appropriate to the feast and the presence of his chief men, Herod invited the girl to specify what her reward should be, sealing his words with an oath. The invitation, together with the formulation, **"unto the half of my kingdom,"** was a phrase used by kings to emphasize their generosity, which was designed for Herod to impress **his nobles and military commanders [from Rome], and leading people of Galilee** who were his guests at the celebration. Josephus tells us that these parties were multi-day affairs with a lot of drinking and entertainment. The moral of the story is don't drink and party. It's not so much the drinking, as the dumb things that you do when you've been drinking!

24 And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." 25 Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

Herodias had not fully revealed her intention, she had merely instructed her daughter to perform in such a manner as to win Herod's approval. When Salome asked what she should claim for herself, Herodias responded with a bluntness and promptness which lets you know that this had been the plan all along. This was a deliberate plan to catch Antipas off his guard, and trap him, forced by social pressure and by his own thoughtless promise into doing what he knows to be wrong.

26 And although the king was very sorry, because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother.--The request of Salome,

expressed with arrogance and malice, immediately sobered Antipas. Only moments before he had revelled in boisterous celebration; now he experienced the deepest grief. Herod was filled with conflicting feelings. He was reluctant to grant the request but finally decided that he had no other choice since he had sealed his invitation with an oath in the presence of his great men. Trapped, Herod gave the order that the girl's demand was to be honored.

John's boldness in preaching the truth of the need to repent, and turn to God, Like the courageous prophets before him, John understood that the proclamation of God's word included moral responsibility, and it didn't matter who you were, because God is Lord of All. John's was a costly courage, but it was such a witness to Israel that it made history, being included in the chronicles of Josephus, and the other historians of the times. Herodias may have thought she silenced John the Baptist, but because of her actions, not only the people then, but all of the generations since, billions of people have known all about her sin, and about what a snake she was. How's that for irony?! Those who cover up their sin will not prosper! And for Herod too, the memory of John the Baptist haunted him. We read about his paranoia about it in our verse today, and the ministry of Jesus was such a continual reminder, that he wanted to kill Jesus too. Then in A.D. 36 the Nabatean hordes swept down upon him to avenge the humiliation suffered by the daughter of Aretas, whom he had divorced in favor of Herodias, Salome's mother. They administered a stinging defeat to Antipas which many of the people in Israel interpreted as an act of God avenging the murder of John the Baptist, and Rome interpreted as a sign of weakness, meaning that he would never officially get the title of "King" that he petitioned Rome for, and would in fact be exiled with Herodias for the rest of their lives. **29 When his disciples heard about this, they came and carried away his body, and laid it in a tomb.--**And, for John the Baptist, his disciples arrived to carry away his body, and give it a proper burial. But, as with all of us who follow through with God's will for our lives, putting our trust in Jesus as Messiah, this isn't the end of John the Baptist's story. I look forward to meeting him one day in heaven.