

NCBC Youth Group
November 3, 2019

MURDER OF JOHN THE BAPTIST
MARK 6:14-29

Introduction: The “Herod” Family

Herod is a familiar name. We see the name Herod mentioned about 40 times in about 40 verses in the New Testament, all found in the first five books of the New Testament. To complicate matters, there are six “Herods” in the Bible, all from the same family.

When we hear the name Herod, we don’t usually think about some virtuous person. In fact, we see Herod relatively early in the New Testament. His first appearance is in the second chapter of the New Testament: Matthew 2:1, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.” This is Herod the Great, the father and grandfather of the other Herods. He had ten wives and produced many little Herods, some of which are in the Bible. This particular Herod, Herod the Great, is not someone we remember fondly. He tried to trick the magi (Matt. 2:7), it didn’t work (Matt. 2:16), so he ordered the massacre of all the boys under two years old in Bethlehem and its vicinity in an attempt to kill Jesus (Matt. 2:16). History also tells us that Herod the Great was paranoid about maintaining his power, and he did not hesitate to kill even his own family members when he deemed them to be a threat against him. For example, not long before he died, he killed his first-born son, Antipater II.

Although he was wicked, he was an effective ruler. He was a skilled diplomat, military leader, and builder. As a ruler, he did not have as much “free reign” as some of the other rulers. The Romans occupied Israel during the time of the New Testament. Herod was not a Roman, but he was the “client king” selected by the Romans to govern this area. This meant that the Romans could replace him whenever they want and for whatever reason they want.

As previously mentioned, Herod had many children, and after his death, the land was divided into four regions that would be given to four of his chosen sons. Remember that Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt to escape Herod’s massacre? Well, when Herod the Great died, they returned. But instead of going back to Judea, they went to Galilee because Joseph “heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in the place of his father Herod” (Matt. 2:22). This is the second Herod: Herod Archelaus. He ruled for about

eight years before being replaced by a Roman governor. He was replaced in 6 AD by Pontius Pilate.

The third Herod is the one that appears in our text today: Herod Antipas. He ruled for over 40 years, but he only ruled over a fourth of the land. He is also known as Herod the Tetrarch. More on him later. The fourth Herod is Herod Philip the Tetrarch, who also ruled over a fourth of the land. The fifth Herod is Herod Agrippa I, who is mentioned in Acts 12. He was the grandson of Herod the Great, and the nephew of Herodias, a character we will meet today. Finally, the sixth and last Herod is Herod Agrippa II, who appears in Acts 25-26.

The Herod that we are interested in is Herod Antipas, or Herod the Tetrarch (Matt. 14:1; Luke 9:7). After Herod the Great died, he was one of the four sons who received a fourth of the land. His territory is Galilee and Perea, which is northwest Israel and a piece of land east of the Jordan River and Dead Sea. Geographically, this is important because Jesus' hometown and headquarters are in Galilee. Also important is that the ministry of John the Baptist was in Bethany beyond the Jordan (John 1:28). This is also in Herod's territory.

Bad News

Our text opens with Herod introduced as "King Herod." As we mentioned earlier, he is not actually a king. This is more of a popular designation rather than an official title.¹ His powers are very limited as a client-king of Rome.

Verse 14 continues, "King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known." Remember in our studies last week that Jesus sends out the twelve to preach and gave them the ability to do miracles (Mk. 6:7-13). Prior to that, Jesus was the only one preaching, healing, and casting out demons, but now that His disciples are sent out in pairs, His ministry's reach multiplied greatly. It is likely that news about Jesus spread very quickly as the twelve were sent out, and word reached Herod.

Herod himself had never seen Jesus. Jesus never went to Tiberius, where Herod lived, even though it was close to Nazareth and Capernaum. And the news he received about Jesus is certainly not good news to him. You see, people were confused about who Jesus was. They said, in the second part of verse 14, "John the Baptist has risen from the

¹ Cleon Rodgers Jr. and Cleon Rodgers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 79.

dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.” They identified Jesus as John the Baptist. They also mistakenly identified Jesus as Elijah in verse 15. Some also said in verse 15 that “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.”

Now, why is this bad news to Herod? Herod wasn't so worried about the mis-identification of Jesus as Elijah or some prophet. He was worried that Jesus was John the Baptist, risen from the dead. In verse 16, Herod said, “John, whom I beheaded, has risen!” This is his worst fear because he recently killed John. To compound his fears, he didn't just kill any man. In verse 20 it says that Herod knew John was a “righteous and holy man.” He killed a righteous and holy man, a man who did not deserve the death penalty. This is called murder. He was afraid that the righteous and holy man that he murdered is now risen from the dead. This is really bad news.

We can see his fear in verse 16. Notice the words “kept saying.” In the Greek, that word is in the imperfect tense, which indicates a past continual action. He didn't just say that once, he kept saying it. He was verbalizing his fear. Luke adds in 9:9, “And he kept trying to see Him.” We've heard of the saying, “like father, like son.” I think that is very appropriate here. Why did Herod Antipas want to see Jesus, who he thinks might be John the Baptist? So he can hear the gospel? No, I doubt that's the case. He wanted to see for himself who this person was—if indeed he was John the Baptist—and he wanted to kill him. Later in Luke's gospel (13:31), we find that Herod wanted to kill Jesus.

Why did he want to kill Jesus? Because Jesus was a threat to his power. Even if Jesus wasn't John the Baptist, Jesus was very popular. If Jesus caused any unrest or led a rebellion in his territory, Rome would remove him from power and install another governor, as they did to Herod Archelaus.

Like father, like son. Herod the Great also wanted to see Jesus 30 years earlier. Why did he want to see Jesus? To worship him? That's what he said he wanted to do, but in reality, he wanted to kill Jesus. Herod the Great claimed to be the King of the Jews, so it didn't sit well with him that the true King of the Jews was born.

Herod and Herodias

As we come back to our story, we ask: Why did Herod Antipas kill John in the first place? This is where the plot thickens. Again, John was a righteous and holy man. He didn't die as a criminal; he was murdered. Verse 17 tells us the reason: “For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother

Philip, because he had married her. [18] For John had been saying to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’”

Now, verse 17 is really a flashback that recalls an event that occurred earlier. Mark 1:14 records the arrest of John the Baptist. Verses 17-18 tell us that John was arrested because he confronted Herod Antipas about his sinful relationship. He was in an adulterous relationship because he married his brother’s wife—he stole his brother’s wife. But, if we look into it closer, we find that he is also in an incestuous relationship. Herodias was his niece.

Let’s trace this a little bit more. Herod Antipas was originally married to the daughter of a nearby king, King Aretas. In order to marry Herodias, his brother’s wife, he had to divorce the daughter of King Aretas. King Aretas, as you can imagine, was not very thrilled, so he brought an army against Herod Antipas. Herod almost lost if the Romans did not intervene and rescue him.

His new wife, Herodias was the wife of Philip, his half-brother. Philip was also a “Herod.” His full name was Herod Philip I or Herod II.² Herodias was the daughter of their half-brother, Aristobulus, who was executed by his father, Herod the Great in 7 BC. This makes Herodias the niece of Herod Antipas and Philip. This is an adulterous and incestuous relationship, and John the Baptist confronted Herod and publicly denounced it. Notice that the Scripture also denounced this sinful and illegitimate relationship. The Scripture records Herodias as the wife of Philip, not the wife of Herod.

Herod, Herodias, and John the Baptist

Notice that John didn’t mince words or sugar coat anything. He just said outright: “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (18). Herodias, his new wife, wasn’t so thrilled about John, so she wanted to kill him (19). But Herod wouldn’t put him to death because he was a righteous and holy man (20). Matthew 14:5 tells us that Herod was also afraid of the people because they regarded John as a prophet. Well, Herod was afraid of John before he murdered him, and he was afraid of John after he murdered him.

Herod put John in prison to keep him safe (20). I believe he did it to keep John safe from his new wife. It is interesting that the last part of verse 20 says, Herod “was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him.” Herod didn’t understand much of what

² Not to be confused with Philip the Tetrarch.

John was preaching,³ but John had to be a good preacher. At the very least, Herod enjoyed listening to John.

Bad Oath

Herod's birthday was here, and he threw a birthday celebration. Verse 21 tells us that the important people of Galilee were in attendance. This is not your typical birthday party. This is an event pervaded by all kinds of sin: Gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual deviance.⁴ The participants were men only.

At the party, in verse 22, the daughter of Herodias came in and danced. This kind of dancing is indecent in nature, which is usually done by slaves or prostitutes.⁵ This gives us a glimpse of the kind of entertainment they had. It also tells us a little bit about the kind of people Herod and Herodias are. What kind of mother would allow her daughter to dance seductively in an event like this? Perhaps a bigger question is what kind of man is Herod, throwing this kind of party, much less letting his own stepdaughter do this? Well, the issue of morality obviously didn't bother Herod. Verse 22 tells us that Herod was pleased by her dancing—in other words, she seduced Herod and his guests.

Herod was so pleased that he said to her in verses 22-23, "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." This was a bad oath, and he will regret it. But he didn't really have that much power, and territory isn't really that big either. He was really trying to brag in front of his guests.

She went to her wicked mother for advice, and she hurried back to the king with her request: verse 25, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." This was the perfect opportunity for Herodias to kill John. Perhaps she even sent her daughter in to dance on purpose, knowing that Herod will act rashly.

Herod must have been shocked, and he was very sorry. He was stuck. He made a bad oath, and now he's forced to either keep it or risk embarrassment by breaking it.⁶ He chose to go through with it because of the oaths he made. Don't take this as some kind of personal integrity. He's merely trying to save face.

³ cf. 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3.

⁴ Jews generally avoided birthday celebrations, but Romans used it as an excuse for all kinds of sin. John MacArthur, *Mark 1-6 The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 306.

⁵ Rodgers Jr & Rodgers III, 79.

⁶ The word "oaths" appears in the plural in verse 26, indicating that he probably repeated it many times. This makes it harder to break it because surely, everyone heard it.

They sent an executioner and beheaded John. John was very likely held at a place called Machaerus.⁷ Archaeological discoveries of the area reveal a prison and two dining rooms, which fit the description of our text. As requested, the head of John the Baptist was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who gave it to Herodias (28).

Conclusion

John's disciples came and took his body away and laid it in a tomb (29). Did Jesus ever meet Herod? He does in Luke 23:8, "Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus." I think one of the reasons he's glad is because this confirms for him that this is not John the Baptist.

We see tragedy when we look at the life of Herod. How tragic that having stood in the presence of Jesus, the Son of God, he still refused to believe. His life was dominated by fear. He feared the loss of his own power. He feared the people. He feared John before he murdered him, and he feared after he murdered him. The tragedy is this: He feared so many things and people, yet he didn't fear God. To compound that tragedy, he was glad when he was in the presence of Jesus. Again, he was glad because it quieted his fears a little, but he wasn't glad for the right reason. He should have been glad because there is eternal life in repenting and believing in the gospel, the gospel that Jesus preached.

We often have misplaced fear and misplaced gladness in our lives don't we? We fear what people think of us instead of whether we are pleasing God. We often fear and rejoice in the wrong things. Let's learn to fear God and rejoice in Him alone.

⁷ According to Josephus (Rodgers Jr. & Rodgers III, 79 under verse 17)