

# John the Baptist is Beheaded

**Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9**

**DIG:** What was Herod's fear after hearing reports of Jesus? What was Herod's fear during the life of John the Baptist? Why does Herod put John in prison? Why did Herod behead John? What was the significance of Elijah and Yochanan to the people of Yeshua's day? What does Herod seem to fear most: The fame of Christ? The ghost of John? The reaction of his dinner guests? His wife? How do the two "kings," Jesus and Herod, differ in terms of their kingdoms, character, popularity and use of power?

**REFLECT:** What might this story say to anyone facing persecution? When have you felt like Herod - attracted to the truth, but afraid to follow through with it? What happened? In contrast, how might you grow in reflecting Yochanan's courage? What is one area in your life where your actions are often governed by fear of what others think? How could Jesus help you?

The family of **Herod** was one of the great enigmas of first-century Isra'el. Because of the family's earlier conversion to Judaism from Edom (Idumea), they were appointed by the Romans because of their allegiance to the Gentile occupiers of Judea. Since the **Herods** acted more pagan than Jewish (see **Aw - Herod Gave Orders to Kill all the Boys in Bethlehem Two Years Old and Under**), there was little respect for them in the Jewish community. **Herod Antipas himself** was born in Judea but educated in Rome, the city **he** adored. **He** paid homage to Caesar Augustus and Rome not only by taxing the Jews blind but also by ordering a Roman-style form of execution for any who would dare defy **him**.

At that time **Herod Antipas** heard the reports about Jesus who had become well known because of His Galilean ministry (**Matthew 14:1; Mark 6:14a; Luke 9:7a**). Antipas was the son of **Herod the Great**, and ruled from 4 BC to 39 AD. When **Herod the Great** died, his kingdom was divided among three of his political partners: Archelaus, **Herod Philip**, and **Herod Antipas**. It is the latter **Herod** who is mentioned here. **He** was the **tetrarch**, or *regional governor* over Galilee, which was the territory where most of **Yeshua's** ministry took place.<sup>778</sup> The Jews lived in fear of **him**, and for good reason. With a dark beard covering the tip of **his** chin and a thin mustache over **his** mouth, **Herod Antipas** resembled a true villain. While **his** father had serious faults, **he** also performed many constructive acts. But not so with Antipas, an immature man who never wanted for anything and who always expected to be handed the keys to the kingdom.<sup>779</sup>

**Herod** the Great had a number of sons by several different women. His favorite wife was **Maryomni**. **She** had a son named **Aristobilis**. Before his father executed **Aristobilis**, he had a daughter named **Herodias**. **She** was the granddaughter of **Herod** the Great. Her first marriage was to **Philip**, another son of **Herod** the Great by another wife. So in reality, **she** married **her** half-uncle. After being married to **Philip** for a while, **she** dumped **him** and became the mistress of **her** step-uncle **Herod** Antipas. Later on **she** married **him**. The problem was that **Philip** was still living and **Herod** Antipas married **her** while his wife was still living! So **she** was guilty of triple adultery and two counts of incest. What a mess. This adulterous and incestuous union brought **Herod** immediate trouble and misery. It ultimately cost **him** his kingdom, and sent **him** into life-long banishment. Be careful what you ask for.

**John** denounced the lifestyle of **Herod's** live-in adulteress. Loudly. Publically. So **Herod** Antipas had **John** arrested, bound him and put him in prison because of **Herodias**, his brother **Philip's** wife, whom he had married. **John** had been pointing out **Herod's** sin when he said: **It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife (Matthew 14:3-4; Mark 6:17-18)**. Today it would probably be viewed as merely an alternative lifestyle. But **John** kept pointing out, loudly and in the public eye, that **Herod** had violated the Torah (**Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21**). Antipas wanted to kill **John**, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet (**Matthew 14:5**).

For Antipas, the issue was political as well as moral. Josephus tells us that the woman Antipas planned to divorce in order to marry **Herodias** was the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea. This would have severely strained the relations between the kingdoms. Many of Antipas' subjects in Perea were ethnically Nabatean, thus more loyal to Aretas than to Antipas. The arrest of **John** would of course make matter worse. And when Aretas later defeated Antipas in battle, people said it was **God's** judgment on Antipas for the beheading of **John the Baptist**.<sup>780</sup>

So **Herodias** nursed a grudge against **John** and also wanted to kill him. The phrase **nursed a grudge** is in the imperfect tense, which means that **she** never let up on **her** fury toward **John** for daring to denounce **her** very public relations with **Herod**. How dare this unkempt savage insult **her**? But **she** was not able to, because Antipas feared **Yochanan** and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When **Herod** heard **Yochanan**, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him (**Mark 6:19-20**). But **Herodias** was a patient woman and knew that **she** would find a way to get **her** revenge. **John** was in one of the grim dungeons in the fortress of Machaerus, situated on the barren heights of Moab above the Dead Sea, and he would rot there until Antipas set him free - or **she** could find a way to have him killed. Finally the opportunity came. The stalemate was broken at **Herod's** birthday celebration.

Another year had passed. One night through the thick stone walls of his prison cell, **John** heard the sounds of music and dancing. **Herod Antipas** had invited the most powerful men in **Galilee - high officials, military commanders**, and all his wealthy friends - to join him at Machaerus for a lively dinner **banquet** to celebrate **his birthday (Mark 6:21)**. This in itself was another indicator of Antipas' pagan values, as **birthday** celebrations were virtually unknown in ancient Jewish tradition.<sup>781</sup> **He** had built the fortress for his protection. Its approach was so steep it was impregnable. When it finally fell to the Romans it was only because some of the Zealots (for Zealots, see **Cy - These are the Names of the Twelve Apostles**) betrayed their fellow rebels to the enemy.<sup>782</sup>

Inside the palace, the custom at that time was that the men and women dined in separate banquet halls. In the chamber where Antipas ate with the men, **he** called for entertainment and then watched intently as his stepdaughter **Salome, the daughter of Herodias**, slithered into the great hall **and danced for them**. Such **dancing** was almost an unprecedented thing for women of rank, or even respectability. But the beautiful young teenager with the raven-colored hair fluttered slowly around the room, swaying seductively to the beat of the tambourines and symbols. All the men were entranced and unable to take their eyes off **her**. When the music ended the roar of approval was so loud it could be heard all the way to the banquet hall of the women.

The immoral spectacle catered to the totally depraved natures of the drunken men, and **Herod** offered **her** a reward. **She pleased Herod and his dinner guests so much that the king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you."** And he promised her with an oath, **"Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom"** (**Matthew 14:6-7; Mark 6:22-23**). This expression was not to be taken literally, but meant *that he would look upon her request with favor*.

**Salome** was very young, but **she** was also very clever. **She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?"** This was the moment **Herodias** had waited so patiently for and **she** answered: **Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist (Mattityahu 14:8; Mark 6:24)**. The young temptress did not hesitate. **At once the girl hurried into the king with the request**. Looking brazenly into the eyes of her stepfather, **she** said in an impudent voice: **I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter right now (Mark 6:25)**. **Salome** means "peace." A nice touch, don't you think?

**Herod** was shocked. **The king** understood political intrigue. After all, **he** had played that game his whole life. **He** grew up in a household where his father **Herod the Great** would kill any of his brothers at the slightest hint of disloyalty. Yes, indeed, **he** knew how to play the intrigue game. So we can only guess how upset **he** was when **he** realized that his own wife outwitted him! **Herod** realized all the implications of the request . . . **He** was to become the

murderer of the prophet whom he feared and respected. But because of his sworn oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her; therefore, he ordered that her request be granted (Matthew 14:9; Mark 6:26).

John was arrested and killed for personal reasons. So Herod immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went and beheaded John in prison (Matthew 14:10; Mark 6:27). As John heard the creak of his cell door swing open, a man entered carrying a broad, sharpened sword. He came alone. The light of the moon came flooding through the door. The Baptizer had accepted his fate over a year ago. The executioner probably didn't even have to force John to his knees. The swordsman then raised the blade high over his head and viciously brought it down. Yochanan probably felt nothing as the heavy steel blade severed his head from his body. The voice crying out in the wilderness was silenced.<sup>783</sup>

Quickly and coldly Yochanan was decapitated in his cell. Grasping John's head by the hair, the executioner brought it in on a platter and gave it to the girl, who carried it to her mother (Mt 14:11; Mark 6:28). When the platter was brought in with the bleeding head on it, no doubt Salome took it daintily in her hands lest a drop of it should stain her, and she tripped away to her mother as if bearing some choice dish from the king's table.<sup>784</sup>

Josephus wrote that Herod "thought it best to put John to death, to prevent any problems he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties by sparing a man who might make him repent of it" later on. But ten years later, Antipas was defeated in battle and was exiled in Lugdunum by Aretas, where Herodias joined him (*Antiquities*, Book XVIII, verse 2). Salome didn't fare too well either. After dancing for Herod's birthday party and demanding that John be beheaded, she is not mentioned again in the Bible. Josephus, however, tells us that she later married her uncle Philip, who was tetrarch of Trachonitis. (this Philip was a half-brother of Herod Antipas, different from the Philip who was also a half-brother of Herod but who had originally married Herodias and who lived as a disinherited prince in Rome.) There is a tradition passed on by Nicephorus and repeated by Dr. Whitby prior to the 18th Century, and mentioned in Matthew Henry's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew published in 1706, that this Salome died when she was trying to travel across a frozen lake and fell through the ice and was decapitated by the sharp edges through which she fell. Make no mistake about this: You can never make a fool out of God. Whatever you plant is what you'll harvest (Galatians 6:7 GWT).

On hearing this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb (Mark 6:29). It is hard to imagine the pain they must have experienced in carrying the decapitated body of the one they dearly loved and had faithfully followed. He was a great and godly man, who had been their friend and teacher, the one under whose fiery preaching

they had confessed and forsaken their own sins and under whose inspiration they had perhaps led others to repentance. Then they went and told Jesus (Matthew 14:13).<sup>785</sup>

After killing John the Baptist, the miraculous activity of Jesus throughout Galilee caught the attention of Herod Antipas, for His name had become well known. When the fame of Yeshua reached him, however, some of his advisors suggested that Yochanan had been raised from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him. Others said: He was Elijah. And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago who had come back to life." But when Herod heard this, he did not believe the Nazarene was the Messiah but, instead, the reincarnation of the forerunner (Matthew 14:1-2; Mark 6:14-16; Luke 9:7b-9). It was as if Antipas was being haunted by the dead prophet as punishment for ordering his murder. He couldn't forget the sight of John's head dripping with blood as the gold platter was brought to the banquet hall. Afterwards he was continually restless, wretched and full of apprehension. Antipas could scarcely believe that the Baptizer was really dead, and as the fame of Jesus reached him, Herod's confused mind always reverted back to the man whom he had beheaded. And as he formerly had often and gladly sought out the Baptist, now he would eagerly seek out Jesus in the hope that somehow it really was Yochanan and his guilty conscience could be relieved.

Herodias had her revenge against John the Immerser. But if she or her husband thought that killing the Forerunner would quiet the excitement about Jesus sweeping through Galilee, she was sadly mistaken. Yochanan may have stirred strong emotions by his baptism of repentance, but Yeshua ha-Meshiach was challenging the religious authority of His day in ways never seen or heard of before. **But we must remember that what happens to the herald will happen to the King.**

The Baptist both terrified and fascinated Herod. Although Herod had thrown John in prison, he sensed that the people were right: John was a prophet (Matthew 14:5). And so he was distressed when he found that he had to fulfill his reckless oath and have John beheaded. Yet Herod's predicament was more dire than John's. Although he endured a tragic death, Yochanan had done his work on earth - he had been the one to go before the Lord to prepare the way for Him (Luke 1:76). Yeshua said **among those born of women there had not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11).** The forerunner would enjoy eternal life with God.

Herod, on the other hand, had been given the honor of knowing one of the greatest prophets of all time. Instead of being transformed by this experience, he chose to continue in his sinful ways. Perhaps he feared what would happen to his life if he let Yochanan's message penetrate him. Surely, he would have had to change. Instead of grasping onto the

truth, **Herod** - for all eternity - would be known a **man** who was manipulated to do what **he** did not want to do: Sentence **John the Baptizer** to death.

Fear of change can sometimes lead us to hold on to negative or sinful patterns in our lives as well. We have the honor of knowing **Jesus** on a personal basis. That prospect can make us rejoice, but it can also make us fearful. As a committed believer, what will **ADONAI** call us to change in our lives? Will we have to give up habits that lead us away from him, or friendships that influence us negatively? Will we have to risk persecution by taking up unpopular stands?

**But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved (Hebrews 10:39).** Let us not **shrink back** from the **Lord**, even when **His** truth challenges all the assumptions upon which we have built our lives. **His** truth is the door to eternal life.

***Father**, give us the courage to follow **You**, no matter what the cost. Even if we must face the pain of change, help us to trust in **Your love** for us and **Your** plan for our lives. Amen.<sup>786</sup>*