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John the Baptist is Beheaded
Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9

John the Baptist is beheaded 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 (**to see link click 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.[778] 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.[779]

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. Publicly. 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 matters 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**.[780]

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.[781] **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.[782]

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** had 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.[783]

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 (Matthew 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.[784]

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).**[785]

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 then **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 (Mt 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.[786]