

Herod and John

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To begin, Matthew 14:1-2, Mark 6:14-16 and Luke 9:7-9 are really about Jesus, not John, so I will set them aside. That leaves Matthew 14:3-12 and Mark 6:17-29 for consideration. However, strictly speaking, Matthew 14:6-12 and Mark 6:21-29 are really about Herodias, how she got revenge, so I will start with the remaining verses, Matthew 14:3-5 and Mark 6:17-20.

Matthew 14:—3 For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. 4 For John would say to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her".¹ 5 And although he wanted to kill him, he feared the crowd, because they counted him as a prophet.

Mark 6:—17 You see, Herod himself had ordered John arrested, and bound him in prison, on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her 18—John had kept saying to Herod, "It isn't lawful for you to have your brother's wife". 19 So Herodias nursed a grudge against him and wanted to kill him;² but she could not, 20 because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a just and holy man. And consulting him he would do many things; indeed, he would hear him with pleasure.

At first glance there appears to be some discrepancy between the two accounts, but let us slow down and take a careful look.

- 1) The whole episode revolves around Herodias. Her marriage to Philip presumably had nothing to do with passionate love, as such marriages seldom had. With the passage of time (she had a teenage daughter) she decided that Herod had more to offer than did his brother, and managed to convince Herod to take her on.
- 2) Enter John the Baptizer: he evidently was on speaking terms with Herod, and had access to him to the extent that he was able to reprimand him repeatedly for what he had done. Now kings generally do not enjoy being reprimanded, and a queen such as Herodias even less. Herod was mad, and Herodias was furious.
- 3) The evident solution was to get rid of the irritant, so Herod had John arrested, with a view to executing him. But Herod was a puppet king, under the dominion of Rome, and some attention needed to be given to public opinion—it was public opinion that put off the execution: "he feared the crowd, because they counted him as a prophet".
- 4) Now Herod knew that John was "a just and holy man", and the two had been on talking terms. With the passing of time, Herod calmed down and cooled off. He decided that he did not want to kill John, but because of Herodias he could not release him, either (she

¹ The impression one gets is that John took Herod to task several times—a coward he was not.

² I suppose that Herodias was ambitious and figured that Herod offered more than did Philip, so it was probably she who took the initiative; but she had not counted on John being a persistent and vocal 'conscience'.

kept on insisting that John should be killed). But if you must keep a prophet of God in your prison, you may as well make use of him.

- 5) Now consider the last half of Mark 6:20—“And consulting him he would do many things; indeed, he would hear him with pleasure.” I here follow the best line of transmission, albeit representing only 20% of the Greek manuscripts, that has ‘consulting’ in the present tense; the rest, followed by all versions, have the verb in the past. Thus the NKJV has: “when he heard him, he did many things”. However, and unfortunately, at this point most ‘modern’ versions garble the account.

The immediately following ‘he would do many things/he did many things’ is attested by over 99% of the Greek manuscripts—a mere handful (0.4%), of objectively inferior quality, have ‘he was greatly disturbed’ or ‘very perplexed’ (as in NIV, NASB, LB, TEV, etc.). But why then did Herod hear John with pleasure, and why was he ‘very sorry’ (verse 26)? Those modern versions don’t make sense; and just why do they insist on garbling the account on such a totally inadequate basis?

But what sorts of things would Herod take to John for his opinion? I suggest that Herod used John as a sounding board for administrative problems, and since he often followed his advice, he had an unusually good administration, there for a while. That is why he was genuinely sorry to lose John.

- 6) Alas, Herodias knew how to nurse a grudge, and never gave up looking for a way to kill John. The opportune moment came on Herod’s birthday. Herod had doubtless already ‘celebrated’ more than was good for him before the banquet began, and was no longer thinking clearly. We know the rest of the story. One wonders why God would allow such a servant, as was John, to suffer such an ignominious death; but at least it was instantaneous—in terms of suffering, crucifixion or burning at the stake would have been worse. We have no right to understand everything, and therefore no obligation to explain everything. When you get to heaven you can ask God directly, if you still want to know.