

The Opposition by Herod
Matthew 14:1-12
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Matthew 14 continues to develop the theme of opposition to Jesus, this time from Herod the tetrarch. This story follows the rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees when they deemed His miraculous powers as being from the evil one in Matthew 12 and the rejection of Jesus by His fellow Nazarenes in Matthew 13. From the Jewish leadership, to the Jewish people, to now the representatives of the Roman government, the opposition to Jesus expands.

Structurally, Matthew 14:1-12 divides into two very different segments. Verses 1-2 describe Herod's perspective on Jesus, concurrent with the development of Matthew's Gospel. Verses 3-12 is something of a flashback in the narrative, as Matthew 14:1-2 occurs after the death of John, while Matthew 14:3-12 describes the actual events of John's execution.

Herod's explanation of Jesus' miracles (14:1-2)

Herod the tetrarch, also known as Herod Antipas, was the ruler on behalf of Rome over the area of Galilee to the north and Perea to the east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea from 4 BC to 39 AD. In Luke's Gospel, we learn that Jesus was sent by Pilate to Herod for a trial by Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:6-12). In his only meeting with Jesus, Herod treated Him with contempt and mockery.

Herod was the son of Herod the Great, who sought to kill Jesus in Bethlehem in Matthew 2. A tetrarch meant "ruler of a quarter" and upon the death of his father, Caesar Augustus appointed him ruler over the land of Galilee and Perea. Herod initiated the building of the city of Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, named in honor of Emperor Tiberius.

The Herod family was part Jewish, but were aligned with the Romans in their rule over the land of Israel. As such, tension existed between the supporters of the Herod family, known as the Herodians (cf. Matthew 22:16; Mark 3:6; 12:13), and the sects of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots.

Matthew 14:1 begins with the transitional phrase "*at this time.*" Around the time when the Nazarenes were offended at Jesus, Herod had heard about Jesus. By this time, Joanna, the wife of Chuza, who was Herod's steward, was a contributor to the support of Jesus and the disciples (Luke 8:3). This is a possible explanation for Herod's knowledge of Jesus.

As will be explained in the following verses by Matthew, Herod was the person who had John the Baptist killed (Matthew 14:10). Herod connected the ministry of John the Baptist with the ministry of Jesus in verse two. He superstitiously considers the miraculous powers of Jesus as being a resurrected John. Even though John had not performed miracles during his life (John 10:41, *“John performed no sign”*), Herod concluded that it was the risen John who was now able to perform such miracles.

Herod appears to feel some fear for his role in John’s death and speculates that John was so great that he could be resurrected and return with miraculous power. This view of John’s resurrection would align Herod with the Pharisees, since the Sadducees denied the possibility of a resurrection from the dead.

Later in this Gospel, others are said to view Jesus as the resurrected John the Baptist, *“He was asking His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ and they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist...’”* (Matthew 16:13-14). Luke’s Gospel describes Herod’s view that John was risen from the dead as being influenced by others, *“Now Herod the tetrarch heard of all that was happening; and he was greatly perplexed, because it was said by some that John had risen from the dead, and by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen again. Herod said, ‘I myself had John beheaded; but who is this man about whom I hear such things?’ And he kept trying to see Him”* (Luke 9:7-9). Mark 6:14-16 echoes this with, *“people were saying, ‘John the Baptist has risen from the dead.’”*

Matthew has linked the ministry of John and Jesus before (Matthew 3:13-17; 11:18-19) and adds this perspective from Herod to show Herod links the two as well. Opposition to John will lead to opposition to Christ. Matthew’s source of information about Herod’s fears was either Johanna, the wife of Herod’s steward, or one of the servants who would become a follower of Christ.

Herod’s execution of John the Baptist (14:3-12)

1. The arrest of John the Baptist (14:3-5)

Matthew 14:3 is a flashback to begin the story of John the Baptist’s execution that obviously happened before Herod considered Jesus to be John risen from the dead (14:2). To understand this story, it helps to know the Herod family since several of the family members are the main agents against John. This barbaric account is consistent with deeds of the Herod family in both history and in the Bible (cf. Matthew 2:13; Luke 13:31-32; 23:11; Acts 12:1-4).

Verse three notes that Herodias was the wife of Herod's brother, Philip. Philip was the half-brother of Herod the tetrarch (Herod Antipas), as they shared the same father (Herod the Great), but Philip's mother was Mariamne II of Jerusalem while Herod's mother was Malthace the Samaritan. Herod the Great had another son by Cleopatra (not the Egyptian ruler), named Philip II, who was the tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis (cf. Luke 3:1). Herod Philip I should not be confused with Philip II.

Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, the son of Herod the Great and Mariamne I. Therefore, Aristobulus was the half-brother of Herod Antipas the tetrarch and was also the half-brother of Philip. This would make Herodias the niece of Herod Antipas and Herod Philip.

John's rebuke of Herod Antipas in verse four was done repeatedly according to the verb used. It was unlawful for Herod Antipas to have a relationship with Herodias, not only because she was married to Philip, but also because it was incestuous. *"If there is a man who takes his brother's wife, it is abhorrent"* (Leviticus 20:21). However, there was no statute in the Old Testament that prohibited an uncle from marrying his niece.

Herod Antipas' first wife, Phasaelis, was the daughter of Aretas, an Arabian king of the Nabateans, to the south of Perea, with the fortress of Petra as its capital. Paul referenced Aretas in 2 Corinthians 11:32-33, *"In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands."* For Herod Antipas to divorce Aretas' daughter was a political problem and the historian Josephus notes that Herod killed John in order to satisfy this problem with Aretas. This animosity by Aretas against Herod led him to invade Perea and defeat Herod's army. Herod would have been killed by Aretas if the Romans did not intervene to defend him.

Yet rebellion to God was the real underlying reason in light of their infidelity and disregard for the Old Testament commands. Matthew 14:5 states that *"Herod wanted to put him to death"* and Mark 6:19 states that *"Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death."* The family saw John as a threat to them, particularly religiously, as Herod the Great had converted to Judaism and Herod Antipas sought to be sympathetic to the Jews. In particular, Herodias was offended by John's moral stand against their marriage. In spite of their connection to Judaism, there was no corresponding allegiance to morality.

Herod is described by Matthew as weak, fearful of the Jewish crowd who “regarded John as a prophet.” Herod is described by Mark as weak, “*afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man.*” Both Gospels agree that Herodias was the reason that Herod was influenced to overcome his fear to have John arrested (Matthew 14:3; Mark 6:17).

Josephus wrote that John the Baptist was imprisoned in Herod’s fortress of Machaerus, situated in the desert heights of Moab, above the Dead Sea. Archeologists have found a prison there with a dungeon beneath the earth where prisoners could be chained to a wall. John would have been imprisoned there for some time, perhaps for around a year, since we learned he was in prison when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “*are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else*” (Matthew 11:2-3).

2. The execution of John the Baptist (14:6-11)

The reference to “Herod’s birthday” should be more understood as the feast that celebrated his birthday. In celebration of Herod, the daughter of Herod Philip and Herodias, and Herod’s stepdaughter, danced before Herod. We know from the history by Josephus that this daughter of Herodias was named Salome. She was the granddaughter of Herod the Great through both her mother and father’s side. She should not be confused with the Salome who appears with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James at the tomb of Jesus in Mark 15:40 and in Mark 16:1.

According to Harold Hoehner’s biography on Herod Anitpas, Salome was a girl between the age of 12-14 years old at this time. When she is referenced in Matthew 14:11 as “*the girl,*” this word is in the diminutive, which signifies that she is a little girl (cf. Matthew 9:24-25). The degree of what sensuality was involved in this dance is uncertain but the Herod family certainly had low morals. Nevertheless, she pleased Herod, who rashly offered to give her whatever she wished through an oath.

Herodias is portrayed by Matthew as the instigator of the murder of John by prompting her daughter to ask for John’s head to be brought on a platter. Mark describes the prompting as being first initiated by the daughter, who wanted her mother’s advice regarding what she should ask for (cf. Mark 6:24). This was Herodias’ long desired opportunity to see John killed, according to Mark 6:19, “*Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so.*”

Herod's response to this request by the daughter of Herodias was being grieved (Matthew 14:9) and being very sorry that he had made his oath (Mark 6:26). Herod's attitude was not because he did not want to kill John, for Matthew 14:5 explicitly says, "*Herod wanted to put him to death.*" Herod was grieved because he was concerned about what the death of John might trigger among the Jews who considered John to be a prophet.

The oath that Herod made out of his enjoyment of the performance was similar to the oaths made by the Persian rulers in Esther 5:3, "*Then the king said to her, 'What is troubling you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be given to you'*" and also Esther 7:2, "*And the king said to Esther on the second day also as they drank their wine at the banquet, 'What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done.'*" Herod, clearly an unbeliever, obviously took his oath seriously, but less so out of an obligation before God and more out of superstitious deference to Judaism.

There is a degree of ambiguity in the text regarding exactly why Herod was grieved. However, it is related to his oaths and his dinner guests, likely placing Herod in a place of making a choice that he would not have otherwise made. Mark 6:21 informs us about these dinner guests, "*A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.*" The lords held high civilian offices in Herod's government, the military commanders were over one thousand soldiers each, and the leading men of Galilee were socialites who would have traveled south to Herod's fortress of Machaerus. Clearly this was a mixed group of significant people under Herod's rule. They not only heard Herod's oath, they too were pleased by the performance by the daughter of Herodias, adding to the motivation for Herod to make his rash vow. Certainly, Herod should have broken the oath to avoid the sin of murder.

So Herod was very conflicted about John the Baptist. Herod wanted to kill him but he also respected John and found him enjoyable to listen to, "*Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him*" (Mark 6:20). Herod was much like any unbeliever who respects righteous men with conviction and who enjoy the topic of religion, but who are offended at any suggestion of sin and who are afraid of what people might think of them. In their guilt, people can become pressured to persecute those whom they know to be holy and righteous men.

3. The burial of John the Baptist (14:12)

The disciples who came to take the body away and bury it were the disciples of John. While these disciples were able to communicate with John, they were apparently not with him at his death and needed to come to take away his body. Obviously, the body did not include the head, and would have been quite a gruesome scene for these disciples.

Only Matthew's Gospel informs us that the disciples of John reported the execution of John to Jesus. These disciples of John had already gone to Jesus at the instruction of John to ask Jesus if He was the Messiah (Matthew 11:3). Jesus' affirmative response was a reason why they sought Him out to report John's death. This addition by Matthew connects John and Jesus together in suffering opposition and serves as a precursor to what was to come.

The report from John's disciples was a part of the reason why Jesus withdrew to a secluded place by Himself (Matthew 14:13). He obviously knew if Herod was willing to execute John the Baptist, who enjoyed great popularity, then He Himself was not safe either. The Jewish leaders were against Him and plotted to destroy Him (Matthew 12:14), the Jews who Jesus grew up with were offended by Him (Matthew 13:57), and now the family of Herod were willing to kill Him. Matthew 14:1-12 continues the theme of the growing opposition of Jesus.

Conclusion

The parallels between Jesus and John have been seen before in Matthew's Gospel. Herod viewed Jesus as being John the Baptist risen from the dead. Jesus compared the criticisms that were brought against them in Matthew 11:18-19, "*For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.*" In addition to their behavior being criticized, now their teaching was rejected.

Herod must be seen as a truly tragic figure in human history. John had been killed by the authority of Herod, and Herod would later play a role in the crucifixion of Christ (cf. Luke 23:6-12). Herod allowed himself to be manipulated by Herodias to kill John and later, Herod would allow himself to be manipulated by the chief priests and the scribes to kill Jesus.

The reason Herod ordered John to be executed was because he was seeking for the best outcome for himself, rather than what was the right thing to do according to God's law. In his desire to serve himself, he was conflicted between his enjoyment he gained from listening to John, his concern over John's popularity with the crowds, his superstition regarding oath-keeping, and his interest in the respect of his dinner guests. Even though Herod knew that John was a righteous and holy man (Mark 6:20), he executed him anyway. Herod chose to succumb to the manipulation of Herodias and save face before his dinner guests rather than listen to John and repent.

Herod had the opportunity to refrain from this evil act against John the Baptist but he was too far along in his rebellion against God. His sin with Herodias and refusal to listen to John's words of rebuke led Herod to arrest John. Herod was only kept from killing John much earlier because of his fear of the Jewish crowds. He eventually found his fear of his dinner guests to outweigh his fear of the Jews. This allowed him to mock Jesus when Pilate sent Jesus to Herod during the trials of Christ.

Man's choice to ignore God and rebel against Him in sin often leads to greater and greater sin. When we do not heed the words of God and act against His will, we find that navigating our desired outcome will overwhelm any consideration for what is right. When the word of God is clear, we cannot allow ourselves to ignore it over the weight of our concerns about what might happen. The principle of pragmatism must not triumph over the principle of righteousness.