

The Beheading of John the Baptist:

A Historical Parable

History writers and biographers in the ancient world enjoyed great freedom with their subjects. Their purpose was never just to tell 'what literally happened'. They always had a moral purpose in view, and they also tried to construct their tales elegantly. We've already seen how Mark structures his story with sandwiches and '5 + 5' patterns, and so forth. So it's not a total surprise to learn that very little of his story of John's death stands up to historical scrutiny.

The story *is* historical in the sense that John the Baptist was a historical figure, an influential preacher, and a baptizer with a large following. We know also that he spent his last days in prison and was put to death by order of Herod Antipas. The New Testament corroborates with Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.5.2).

However, Herod was not a 'king' but a mere tetrarch (see Mt 14.1; Lk 3.19; 9.7). His father, Herod the Great, had been a 'king', but when he died the Roman authorities did not transfer the title of 'king' to his sons.

And even if he had been a king, he would have been entirely dependent on the emperor in Rome. He would not have been in any position to offer anyone any part of his regime, let alone half, as he does to Herodias' daughter.

Further, Herodias was indeed the wife of Herod's brother— his half-brother, to be precise— but not the wife of Philip, the tetrarch of northern Transjordan, after whom Caesarea Philippi was named (see 8.27). Herodias was the wife of Herod Boethus, who had received no inheritance from Herod the Great.

Josephus tells us that Herod put John to death because he saw him as a potential threat to his political stability. He says nothing about Herodias' involvement.

Prominent men like Herod did celebrate birthdays with great banquets to which they invited important guests, including military officers. However, as a tetrarch, Herod would not have had an army, let alone 'tribunes' (*chiliarchoi*, 6.21) in his service.

The banquet described was a men's affair, and if women provided entertainment, as often happened, they were not respected women, let alone members of the family. That a *royal princess* would have entered the banquet room and danced for Herod and his guests is unthinkable.

And finally, Josephus tells us John was imprisoned and murdered at Machaerus, a Herodian fortress on the heights above the Dead Sea in Transjordan. Machaerus was in the district of Perea, which was part of Herod's

tetrarchy along with Galilee. Machaerus was about three days' journey from Tiberias, the Roman capital in Galilee— a bit far for 'leading men' to travel just for a birthday party— three days there and three days back, with a big party and a hangover in between. Mark, however, mentions the leading men of Galilee, so the event appears to have taken place in Galilee, which is not where John was executed. If it had been in Machaerus, we'd expect the leading men of Perea to be mentioned.

Thus in telling of John's death, Mark has given us a *historical parable*— a story with its roots in history but with a purpose very different from mere history.

Mark has combined historical and Old Testament elements in relation to the themes of his gospel. His story of John's death challenges us to reflect on the mission of the Church. It confronts us with the reality of persecution, evoking a wide range of responses— disgust, outrage, sadness, anger, wise caution, and many others. That is why we can't afford to reduce it to a simple lesson or theological point or just an interesting bit of 'history'. Mark clearly wants to hold it up precisely *as* a parable to our theological and spiritual contemplation.

Through a clever use of association and contrast, Mark dresses his story of John's death in the literary garb of the book of Esther and the Persian court. In Esther, the title 'king' is used repeatedly in relation to King Ahasuerus. Actually, no other book in the Old Testament uses the title *king* so frequently— 136 times in Hebrew and 157 times in the Septuagint, which has some additions. The association of weak 'king' Herod with a powerful Persian king is anything but complimentary for Herod. Even the story's introduction (6.17-20) suggests that Herod was a weak man, despite being 'king' (6.14), and kings ought not to be weak. This weak man is the story's principal character. Mark wants us to look at him very carefully.

John, a prophetic reformer in the garb of Elijah (see 1.2,6), who has confronted Herod just as Elijah himself had confronted King Ahaziah of Samaria (2K 1.18). Herod was a Jew, and John confronted him about his unlawful marriage (6.18). By ancient Israelite law, he was not allowed to take his half-brother's wife as his own (see Lv 18.6; 20.21).

Herodias resents John to the point of wanting him killed, but couldn't bring this about (6.19), apparently because Herod liked to listen to him out of religious fear or awe, even though this left him perplexed and torn over his denunciation of his marriage (6.20). Apparently Herod's

ambivalence threatened Herodias and fed her resentment—and prevented her from eliminating John.

Herod is like Pilate, another weak man, who had Jesus killed not because he was guilty or because he really wanted to kill him, but to satisfy a crowd (15.1-15). Herodias is like the chief priests and scribes who wanted to arrest Jesus and destroy him, but couldn't do so, at least for a time. And John, of course, is like Jesus.

Herod's Banquet (6.21-23)

Herodias' opportunity finally came (6.21-23) at a banquet that Herod gave on his birthday for the princes of the court, the tribunes, and the leading men of Galilee (6.21). Herod's banquet recalls the one Ahasuerus gave 'for all his officers and ministers: the Persian and Median aristocracies, the nobles, and the governors of the provinces' (Es 1.3). Several ancient rabbinical commentaries present Ahasuerus' banquet as a birthday party.

Mark's list of Herod's guests seems to have Ahasuerus' guests in mind. The expression for Herod's princes (*hoi megistanes*) is the usual Septuagint rendering of the Hebrew word *sarim*, in Es 1.3. The tribunes (*chiliarchoi*), whose historical presence was most unlikely, correspond to the 'military commanders' understood by the Targum on Esther as Ahasuerus' 'nobles'. The 'first men' (*hoi prôtoi*) of Galilee recall the 'first men' (*hoi prôtoi*) of Ahasuerus (Es 1.14).

During the banquet, Herodias' daughter entered and performed a dance that pleased Herod and his guests. As we've said, respectable women did not join in such banquets or dance for their participants, at least in the Hellenistic world to which Herod's court belonged, but among the Persians, they might have. Even so, when King Ahasuerus summoned Queen Vashti, who was giving a feast for women elsewhere in the palace (Es 1.9), to display her beauty before his guests, she refused (Es 1.10-12). Herodias, on the other hand, sensing her opportunity to have John put to death, *sent* her own daughter to dance before Herod and the men reclining at his table (6.22a).

Mark does not name the young girl (*korasion*, 5.41-42). She enters the story and remains throughout as Herodias' daughter. From her position outside the banquet room, Herodias is very much at the center of the action.

The girl's dance so pleased Herod that he invited her to ask for anything she wanted, up to half of his kingdom (6.22b-23). Again the story alludes to the book of Esther: 'Then the king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even if it is half of my kingdom, it shall be granted to you"' (Es 5.3; see also 5.6; 7.2; 9.12).

Esther had a tremendous opportunity, which she used to save her people. Herodias would use hers to destroy her people in the person of John the Baptist.

John's Execution (6.24-28)

Herod's drunken offer puts the daughter in an interesting position. What Herod wants is something valuable;

he knows it, and he wants it. If she gives it to him for half his kingdom, he'll take it—and she probably won't live to see another day go by. So... what price should she ask?

The 'young girl' leaves the banquet room to ask her mother, more experienced in palace intrigue, what she should demand. Herodias tells her to ask for the head of John the Baptist (6.24). The girl seems to be on her mother's side, because she not only repeats the gruesome request, but does so as a personal demand with a flourish of her own—'*I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist—right now!—on a platter!*' (6.25).

Herod's weakness determines the outcome. Cowed by Herodias, he had arrested John and bound him in prison (6.17). Now, to save face in front of his guests, he sends his bodyguard to bring John's head. The *spekoulatōr* returns with the head on a platter and gives it to the girl, who gives it to her mother.

The background is again provided by the story of Esther, not directly but through the *Midrash Rabbah* on Esther. The book of Esther itself doesn't directly say how Queen Vashti was executed or even that she was executed, but the *Midrash Rabbah* does: Memucan addresses Ahasuerus: 'My lord King, say but a word and I will bring in her head on a platter.' The commentary continues: 'He gave the order. And he brought in her head on a platter.'

John's Burial (6.29)

Now we know why Herod said of Jesus: 'It is John whom I beheaded. He has been raised up' (6.16). We also know how John, God's messenger (1.2-6), was *handed over* (1.14), preparing the way for the *handing over* of Jesus (1.3).

But there is one more thing to tell. John's disciples, who who used to fast while Jesus' disciples feasted (2.18-20), came, took John's body, and laid it in a tomb (6.29). John's passion prepared the way for Jesus' passion. John's disciples also prepared the way for the disciples in Jesus' passion. They too would see to his burial.

Herod had it wrong, of course— John did not rise from the dead (6.14-16). John's death and burial was the end, not the beginning, for his disciples. But for Jesus and his disciples, Jesus' death and burial would be the beginning of *God's good news* (1.1,15; 16.6). John's death was not the event through which God saved his people. But he pointed to one stronger than he, who would come after him, and baptize with the Holy Spirit, not just water (1.7-8).

For Jesus' disciples, the story will *not* end with the burial of their teacher (6.17-29). So, after the story of John's death, Mark returns to the mission of the Twelve (6.30).

With a brilliant interplay between history and literature—that is, between the death of John the Baptist, the book of Esther, and its ancient rabbinical commentaries— Mark's story of John's beheading points repeatedly and subtly to Jesus' passion.