

Herod's Birthday Present

The gospels of Mark and Luke inform us that after Jesus had sent His disciples on the training mission described in Matt. 10:1-11:1 and while He was waiting for them to return, he heard that John the Baptist had been killed. This is a dark time in Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist was born to aged parents who were beyond the normal child bearing years (Luke 1:5-25). His birth was announced by the angel Gabriel and his father was a priest. Luke 1:15-17 predicted that he would turn the people back to the Lord and many did respond to his preaching. Luke 1:76-77 revealed that he would be a prophet and that he would bring the knowledge of salvation to the Jewish people. He became the voice in the wilderness announcing to the world that the Light (Jesus, Luke 1:78-79) had come into the world (John 1:7), but the world rejected the Light because they were in darkness (John 1:11). He was the forerunner predicted in the Old Testament, but Jewish and Gentile leaders rejected him.

Background. Matthew 3:7-8 captured a key moment in John's ministry out in the wilderness along the Jordan River. He had been baptizing people after they confessed their sins. It would be wonderful if we had the audio of his entire message and especially of his statements to the Pharisees and Sadducees. But we only have the written words and only a portion of the message in Matthew 3:1-10. We are told that when John saw the religious leaders coming to be baptized, he called them a brood of vipers or a family of snakes and asked,

The rest of his message was not any kinder. It is obvious that he was not a man of polish, grace, or soft words when it came to sin. In Luke 3:19-20 we discover that John the Baptist was not a very good politician either.



John the Baptist Preaching in the Wilderness

But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison. Luke

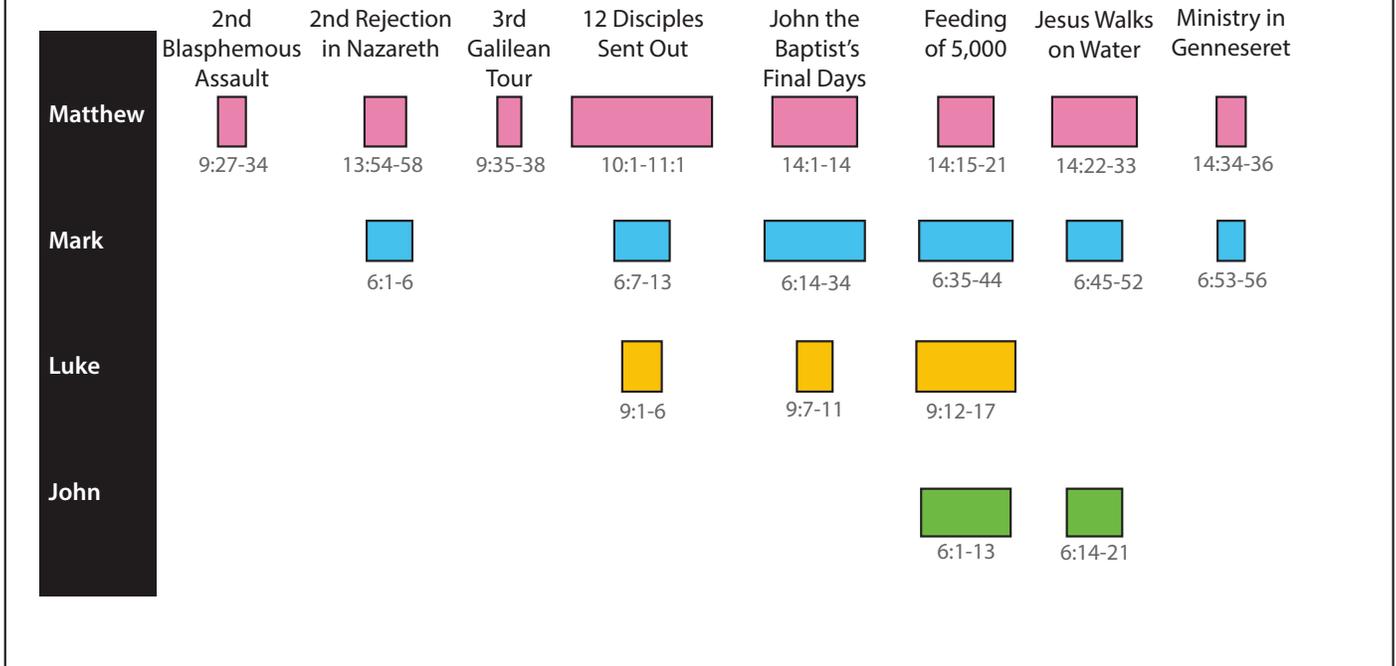
3:19-20 (NASB)

You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Matthew 3:7 (NASB)

As a result he was imprisoned by the king. He was salt and light. He was not the Salt and the Light that Jesus spoke

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about in Matthew 5:13 and 14, but he was salt and light to a sinful world. Light and darkness were clashing. There was a war. Truth was aglow and the darkness did not like it. John was faithful in speaking the truth.

The Setting. In our last study, Jesus had just sent His disciples on a mission to heal and preach. He sent them with only basic provisions and nothing more. The disciples have already left and are on their mission. When we come to this study (Matthew 14:1-14; Mark 6:14-32; Luke 9:7-10), the reader has not been told that a horrible event has already occurred. Jesus and the disciples knew, but not the reader of the gospels. Luke 9:7-9 casually tells us that the reports about Jesus' ministry had finally been communicated to King Herod, that the king wanted to see Jesus, and then the reader is told about the awful event.

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 (NASB)

There it is, that awful event! John the Baptist has already been beheaded. So when Herod hears the reports about Jesus, he is worried that Jesus is somehow connected to John the Baptist or someone else. Luke 9:10 reveals what we have already said. Herod had heard about Jesus while the disciples were out on their mission.

When the apostles returned, they gave an account to Him of all that they had done . . . Luke 9:10a (NASB)

Matthew and Mark add more details. For example, in Mark 6:14-15 we discover that Herod had also heard rumors that Jesus was Elijah or one of the old prophets.

And King Herod heard of it, for His name had become well known; and people were saying, "John the Baptist

has risen from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.” But others were saying, “He is Elijah.” And others were saying, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he kept saying, “John, whom I beheaded, has risen!” Mark 6:14-16 (NASB)

Herod did not know what to believe. He only knew that he had chopped off John’s head. He had beheaded John to satisfy the desire of a step-daughter, and now he was afraid that in some way John or his spirit had returned.

John’s Prison. What follows next in both Matthew and Mark is a parenthesis or an explanation as to why Herod had beheaded John the Baptist. It is a cruel story.

For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. Mark 6:17 (NASB)

Mark 6:17 tells us that Herod the Tetrarch had John arrested and imprisoned because of his wife Herodias, who was actually the wife of his brother Philip. Josephus tells that John was imprisoned on top of Mount Machaerus.¹ Herod had built a fortress on top of Mt. Machaerus at an elevation of 1,000 feet. The fortress measured about 300 feet (100 m) long, 200 feet (60 m) wide. The fortress had three corner

towers, each sixty cubits 90 feet (30 m) high. Then Herod built a palace in the center of the fortress. The fortress was located on the northeastern corner of the Dead Sea. John was in a dungeon somewhere within the fortress.

Herod’s Wife - Herodias. How did John end up in the dungeon on Mt. Machaerus? The answer starts with understanding a few things about Herod’s new wife - Herodias. History reveals that Herod the Great had two sons named Herod Philip and Herod Antipas. They were half-brothers. Herod Philip was known simply as “Philip.”

Herod Antipas is the King Herod mentioned in the gospels and the book of Acts. King Herod had married Aretos, the daughter of the king of Arabia. On one occasion

Herod went to Rome and stayed with his half-brother. While there he met Herodias and established a relationship with her. Eventually they agreed to marry and Herod agreed to divorce Aretos. Before Herod returned to Jerusalem, Aretos heard



Herod’s Palace on Top of Mt. Machaerus

about the planned divorce and she returned to her father in Arabia. War followed and the king of Arabia was defeated. Herod finally married Herodias. The marriage violated God’s law. Leviticus 18:16 prohibits a brother from marrying his sister-in-law. Scripture also prohibited the marriages since his first wife was still alive. Further, Herodias was Herod’s niece. This made the marriage incestuous. This is a very sordid story.

Herod’s Struggle. So Herod’s marriage to Herodias violated God’s law and John the Baptist announced his sin

1. Flavius, Josephus. The Wars of the Jews 7.6.1

to the world and declared that Herod should not have married her.

For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” Mark 6:18 (NASB)

In response, Herodias held a grudge, bitterness, or resentment against John. She wanted someone to kill him.

Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so . . . Mark 6:18 (NASB)

But the next verse reveals that she pressured King Herod into taking John’s life, but she was unsuccessful.

... for 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



Herod's Birthday Party

he used to enjoy listening to him. Mark 6:20 (NASB)

Herod was afraid of John because he was a righteous and holy man. Matthew 14:5 reveals that Herod was also unwilling to kill John for another reason. He was afraid of the

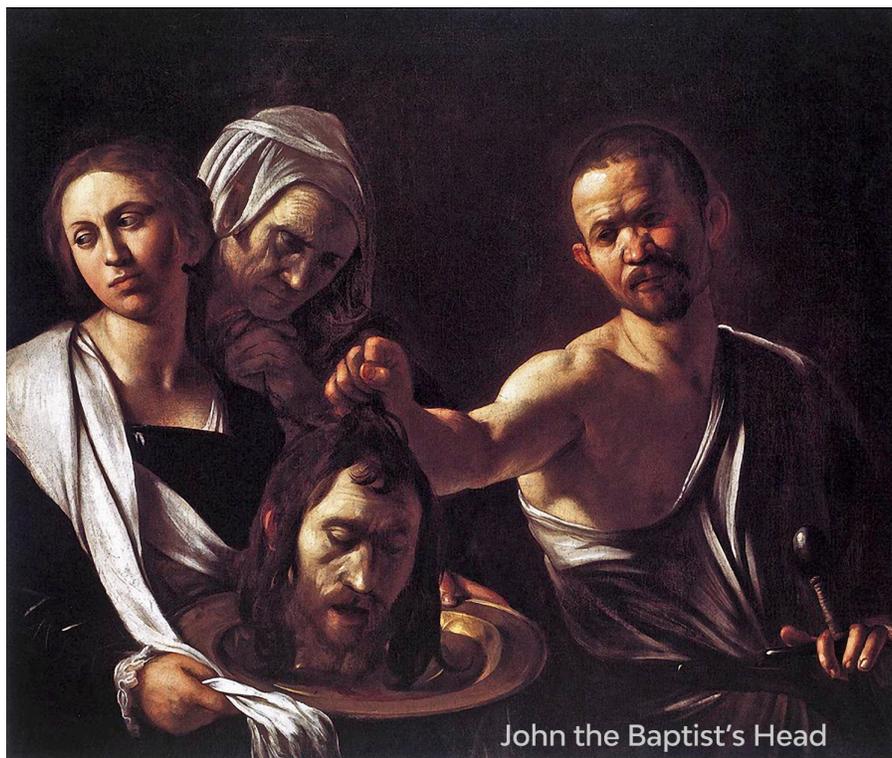
people.

Although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet. Matthew 14:5 (NASB)

Herod could not decide what he wanted. He liked to hear

John speak, but yet he wanted to put him to death. The man was indecisive except when it came to marriage.

Herod's Birthday Party. Then one day Herod had a birthday party. A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the



John the Baptist's Head

leading men of Galilee . . . Mark 6:21 (NASB)

(NASB)

Herod had invited many significant people - lords, military men, and all of the leaders in Galilee. A plot was created. The fishhook on the end of the fishing line was set with bait and Herod was the fish. Herodias was a master schemer.

She could have up to half of the kingdom! Unfortunately, she had not come prepared with a request. So she had to run to her mother and ask what she wanted.

. . . and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." Mark 6:22 (NASB)

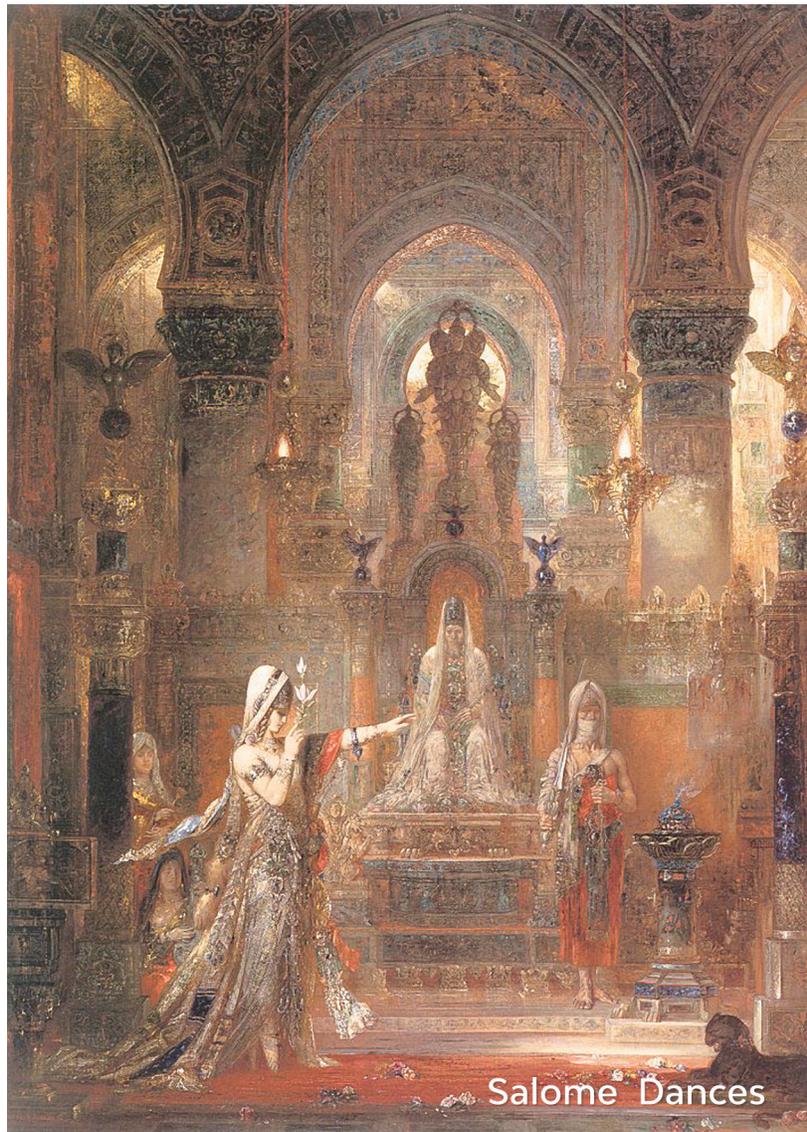
And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." Mark 6:24 (NASB)

She asked her daughter to go and dance before King Herod. She did and the big fish swam toward the bait.

According to Flavius Josephus, the name of Herodias' daughter was Salome.² The dance she performed was unexpected since she was a princess.

The reaction of King Herod suggests that her dance was sensuous for we are told that she "pleased" him. When her dance was over, the king asked her what she would like.

And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." Mark 6:23



Mom knew immediately what she wanted. It is possible that Salome might have considered a larger reward, but her mother wanted only one thing - the head of John the Baptist. So Salome very quickly returned to the banquet hall to make her one big request. She may have run back in her excitement to make a request that King Herod did not want to fulfill.

Immediately she came in a hurry to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once

the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And although the king was very sorry, yet because of his oaths and because of his dinner guests, he was unwilling to refuse her. Mark 6:25-26 (NASB)

King Herod fulfilled the request only because his notable guests were present. Was he afraid of appearing weak or proving that his word could not be trusted? Whatever his

2. Flavius Josephus. Antiquities of the Jews. XVIII, 5, 4

heart motivation was, he granted her request.

Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded him to bring back his head. And he went and had him beheaded in the prison, and brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother. Mark 6:27-28 (NASB)

What a gruesome set of events. The order was sent to chop off John's head from the rest of his body. The deed was done, and the head was brought to the banquet on a platter as if it were to be served to the guests. John's head was given to Salome who then gave it to her mother.

Herodias and Salome were devious women. The girl appears to have been unashamed. King Herod was not much better, since he was willing to murder a righteous and holy man to satisfy a young woman.

Conclusion. What a tragedy! The conflict between darkness and light has been raging. Jesus has been rejected and John is dead. The disciples are on a mission, and now Herod wants to meet Jesus. Luke 9:10 tells us that the disciples returned next. The flash back to the events surrounding John's beheading in the past reveal that the conflict between the darkness and the light is continuing to increase. The conflict is getting worse.

Yes, our world loves darkness. The men of darkness want those who live in the light to live as they do and desire the things they do. That is why one member of the darkness murdered John the Baptist who was light - small "L." In the gospel of John we are told,

This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. John 3:19 (NASB)

Jesus was the Light, with a capital "L." And His light glowed in the darkness and He communicated truth. John was light and Jesus was **the** Light.

God has asked us to be light - lamps on a hill shining out to others. We have been asked to point those in the darkness to the Light. Are you light in the darkness? We are called

light, and we have been asked to walk as light.

. . . for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light . . . Ephesians 5:8 (NASB)

Those who are followers of Jesus are to be light. Are you telling others about God, or are you just blending in?