



Section 11

‘Comes the Moment to Decide’¹

(Matt. 14:1–16:20)

The divergent responses to Jesus, as typified by the disciples and the Nazarenes (Matt. 13:51-58) and as elucidated in the foregoing parables, remain a major theme. From the response of Herod Antipas (14:1-2) to the confession of Simon Peter (16:15-16), the question ‘*Who is Jesus?*’ dominates the passage.² As Matthew progresses, right and wrong answers become increasingly vivid, and each side’s judgments against the other increasingly severe. After 13:54, nowhere is Jesus said to teach in a synagogue (cf. 4:23; 9:35; 12:9); and now, more than before, Gentiles are favored with his miraculous powers (15:21-39). His two remaining discourses are directed almost exclusively to disciples (chs. 18, 24–25); and the part that is not (ch. 23) contains his strongest denunciation against Israel’s religious leaders. But the other side appears to be more effective in its opposition. Aided by the crowds, the nation’s religious and political authorities succeed in having Jesus put to death – an event foreshadowed in the martyrdom of the forerunner. But those triumphs are illusory: even now (16:18), Jesus foresees the stupendous victory that will become reality in Matthew 28 and beyond.

¹From the hymn ‘Once to Every Man and Nation,’ by James R. Lowell (1845).

²Cf. France 1985: 232.





I.

'IN SPITE OF DUNGEON, FIRE, AND SWORD'¹ (14:1-12)

It is not at all surprising that Herod, tetrarch of Galilee (Luke 3:1), hears of the fame of Jesus (Matt. 14:1), who has been accomplishing miracles throughout the region.² The phrase *En ekeinō tō kairō* ('At that time,' Matt. 14:1) and Herod's reference to *hai dynameis* ('the mighty powers,' 14:2) link this passage to the report of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth (13:53-58). Herod's interpretation of Jesus as John raised from the dead (14:2) shows that he is as blind to Jesus' true identity as were the Nazarenes. That statement prefaces the story of the Baptist's imprisonment and martyrdom. Matthew's account, which is considerably shorter than Mark's (Mark 6:14-29) and longer than Luke's (Luke 9:7-9), brings sharply into focus John's relationship both to Herod and to Jesus.³

A. Herod and John

This Herod here makes his only appearance in Matthew. We now learn that it was he who imprisoned John (Matt. 4:12; 11:2), and why; and also what he did to John thereafter, and why.

'Herod the tetrarch' (14:1) is Antipas, son of Herod the Great (2:1) and younger brother of Archelaus (2:22). When their father died in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided among three of his sons – these two (whose mother was Malthace) and Philip (whose mother was Cleopatra of Jerusalem). Archelaus was deposed in A.D. 6, and his territories became

¹From the hymn 'Faith of Our Fathers,' by Frederick W. Faber (1849).

²See Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 11:1. In 14:1, as in 4:24, *akoē* is better translated 'fame' (ESV) than 'news' or 'reports.' See p. 297, n. 34.

³Matthew's account takes twenty-one lines, and Mark's 37, in GNT. In Matthew, the portrait of Herod is especially negative (Hagner 1995: 411). The main function of both accounts is to present John as a prototype of Jesus (Keener 1999: 397). Luke 3:19-20 prepares for 9:7-9.



an imperial province ruled by Roman prefects; Philip ruled until A.D. 34, Herod until 39. As Luke 3:1 reports, when John's ministry began (ca. A.D. 27) Pontius Pilate was prefect (the verb *hēgemoneuō*) in Judea, Herod (Antipas) was tetrarch (the verb *tetraarcheō*) in Galilee, and Philip was tetrarch (the same verb) in Iturea and Trachonitis. Herod Antipas had a second brother named Philip, who was son of Herod the Great by Mariamne II. It is this Philip who married Herodias (Matt. 14:3); her daughter, Salome, became wife of the other Philip, the tetrarch.⁴

Matthew reports that Herod arrested and imprisoned John 'because of Herodias' (i.e., because John rebuked Herod for marrying her, 14:3-4). Herodias' desire (the verb *thelō*) to have John put to death (the verb *apokteinō*, Mark 6:19) finds fulfillment through Herod's oath to Salome (Matt. 14:8-11). Herod also wanted (*thelō*) to have John killed (*apokteinō*, 14:5a); but unlike Herodias 'he feared [the verb *phobeomai*] the crowd, because they held him to be a prophet' (14:5b), so he kept John alive in prison.⁵ Indeed, throughout the story Herod is shown to be fearful and cowardly: 'he fears John [Mark 6:20, with the verb *phobeomai*]; he fears the Jews who approve John's preaching [Matt. 14:5]; he fears to break an unholy oath

⁴On the threefold division of Herod's kingdom, see comments on Matthew 2:22. Luke 3:1 also identifies Lysanias as tetrarch (*tetraarcheō* again) of Abilene. The noun *tetraarchēs* means 'ruler of a fourth' (in which light it is interesting that Luke 3:1 lists four rulers: three tetrarchs and one prefect), though, in time, that literal sense ceased to apply (BAGD s.v.). Herod Antipas is called *basileus* ('king') in 14:9; but Rome never officially awarded him that title. In his *Antiquities of the Jews* (18.5.1) Josephus names Herodias' first husband Herod rather than Philip. Some think the evangelists have confused this Herod with his half-brother Philip the tetrarch, and have mistakenly made Philip husband of Herodias instead of Salome. This view is refuted by H. W. Hoehner, 'Herodian Dynasty,' *DJG*, 323-24; he rightly calls Herodias' husband 'Herod Philip.' Herodias was daughter of Aristobulus, another son of Herod the Great, so she was both niece and wife to Herod Philip and then to Antipas. For Antipas' later relation to Jesus, see Luke 13:31; 23:6-12. The only person expressly called *Antipas* in the NT is a Christian martyr (Rev. 2:13).

⁵Both Herodias and Herod wanted John killed; but whereas she was 'careless of the consequences,' he was not (Morris 1992: 371). Cf. Mark 6:19b-20. The participle *thelōn* (Matt. 14:5a) is concessive: 'though he wanted' (e.g., *ESV*).

[14:9]; he fears to seem weak before his guests [14:9]; he fears Herodias, whose merciless scheming and hatred are apparent [14:8].⁶ How this Herod differs from his father!

Yet starker is the contrast between the fearful king and the fearless prophet. Like Elijah before Ahab, and no less aware than his OT counterpart of the risks involved, John boldly and persistently declares God's law in face of Herod's sin.⁷ John's righteous and holy life (Mark 6:20) invests his preaching with yet greater authority (cf. comments on Matt. 7:29). Our appreciation for Jesus' words about his forerunner in 11:7-15 is now deepened. Here, as there, the prophet stands over against a man who wears soft clothing – and who is also a reed shaken by the wind (11:7-8).⁸

Herod is guilty of several sins, all of which are prohibited in Matthew 5: 1. He divorces his wife, daughter of Aretas IV, king of Nabatea, in order to marry Herodias, his brother Philip's wife and his own niece. In so doing he violates 5:31-32, and the OT law concerning incest (Lev. 18:16; 20:21).⁹ 2. He disobeys the sixth commandment (Exod. 20:13) by wanting John dead (cf. 5:21-22) and by having him murdered.¹⁰ 3. Salome's dancing

⁶Filson 1960: 169. Herod Antipas was 'more weak than cruel' (Lane 1974: 220). One reason Antipas feared John is that any kind of 'opposition from an apocalyptic preacher could easily have been regarded as seditious' (Hagner 1995: 412); Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.2, states that this was the reason for John's arrest. This episode recalls Queen Jezebel's rage against the earlier Elijah and her power over her husband, King Ahab (see 1 Kgs. 18:4; 19:1-2; 21:4-16).

⁷The verb in Matthew 14:4a, *elegen* (from *legō*), is in the imperfect tense. It illustrates two usages: the iterative ('he kept saying') and the 'pluperfective' ('he had been saying') before Herod arrested him (Matt. 14:3, where the verbs are in the aorist tense). Cf. *GGBB*, 546-47, 549.

⁸See the comments on 11:7-9. John showed the same courage in 3:7-10.

⁹The law about levirate marriages (Matt. 22:24; Deut. 25:5) does not apply; for the brother, Philip, is still alive and he has a daughter (Hoehner, *ibid.*, 323). In light of Herod's transgression, note that Matthew 14:3-4 does not expressly say he *married* Herodias; but cf. Mark 6:17. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.1., reports that the Nabatean wife fled to her father when she learned of Herod's intentions.

¹⁰John had no trial, and was beheaded – a double violation of Jewish law (France 1985: 234); beheading was a Roman practice (Gundry 1994: 289). The responsibility is Herod's: 'and he sent and beheaded John' (14:10; compare the fuller statement in Mark 6:27-28).

arouses his lust (cf. 5:28) – desire doubtless intensified by the food and drink he was consuming. As Herod is sleeping with her mother, his desire is incestuous (Lev. 18:17).¹¹ 4. Thus aroused, he makes a foolish vow (cf. 5:33-37).¹²

Yet Herod, while distressed (the verb *lypeō*) over the consequences of his vow (14:9) shows no sign of repentance.¹³ To be sure, he recognizes John to be a righteous and holy man; John's preaching pleases him (though it much puzzles him); and fearing John as he does, he keeps him safe (for a time) from Herodias' evil (see Mark 6:19-20). Yet by all indications John's rebuke (Matt. 14:4) has no effect on Herod's behavior; and there is not the slightest hint that Herod wants to emulate John by becoming a righteous and holy man himself.¹⁴ Nor does Antipas embrace the truth about Jesus; on the contrary, like his father, he will threaten Jesus' life (see comments on ch. 2; cf. Luke 13:31). He is indeed impressed by Jesus' miraculous works (and later hopes that Jesus will perform one for him

¹¹Cf. Keener 1999: 400, who also notes (i) that Salome was likely a virgin of marriageable age (twelve to fourteen), possibly already betrothed or married to Philip the tetrarch; and (ii) that 'only in a drunken stupor would one invite another member of the royal family to engage in such a sensuous...dance.' The occasion is Herod's birthday (Matt. 14:6a); *genesiois... genomenois* ('the birthday having come') is apparently a dative absolute (GNTG 3: 243; cf. BDF, par. 200). Such parties, with their excessive drinking, were a Greek and Roman custom, not a Jewish. The fortress of Machaerus, where all the events occur, included a dungeon (where John was kept) and separate dining facilities for men and women (so that Salome 'went out' to confer with her mother; Mark 6:24); cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.2. See Keener 1999: 399-400.

¹²As a Roman client, Antipas could not keep the promise 'I will give you up to half my kingdom' (Mark 6:23; Keener 1999: 400). But this may be a proverbial expression of generosity (Lane 1974: 221). Cf. the king's words in Esther 5:3, 6; 7:2. Herod's distress over his vow may be compared to Darius' displeasure in Daniel 6:14 (MT, 6:15); cf. Goldingay 1989: 132.

¹³If the phrase 'on account of the oaths' is joined to the preceding participle *lypētheis* ('being distressed'), it states the reason for Herod's distress. If joined to the following verb *ekeleusen* ('he commanded'), it gives the reason for this order (cf. Hagner 1995: 413; TC, 29).

¹⁴Davis 2002: 330-31, speaking of Herod's OT counterpart, observes that Ahab in 1 Kings 22 is 'an interesting bundle of perversion: he hates the word (v. 8), yet wants the word (v. 16); he fears the word (v. 30ab), yet defies the word (vv. 29, 30c).'

personally; Luke 23:8); and he even professes belief in a yet grander miracle – one that explains those works – namely, that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead (Matt. 14:2).¹⁵ But there is no suggestion that Herod interprets those works as Jesus does (12:28); nor that Herod has the faintest idea of Jesus' true identity, or the least interest in becoming his follower (as did his steward's wife, Luke 8:3). Herod appears to think that John accomplished miracles, or could have done so (none are on record; cf. John 10:41); but he evidences no knowledge of John's verbal witness to Jesus. In his refusal to repent and submit to God's rule, he rejects the premier proclamation of both John and Jesus (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Thus, Herod responds to the message of the kingdom as did the crowds (see comments on Matt. 13). Does not Herod's rejection of John's witness help to explain Jesus' silence in Luke 23:9?

B. John and Jesus

We learned from Matthew 11:7-19 that Jesus and John are united in their mission and in their experience of opposition; no wonder John's disciples report his death to Jesus (14:12b, a statement peculiar to Matthew). Later reflecting on John's execution, Jesus declares that he too will die at his enemies' hands (17:12). In death, as in life, John points forward to Messiah.

John is seized, bound, imprisoned and killed. Where Jezebel failed (see 1 Kgs. 19:2), Herodias succeeds. Herod's plot to slay Messiah was foiled; but his son Antipas beheaded Messiah's forerunner. Antipas threatens Jesus too (see below on Matt. 14:13), but so do many others. Already Jesus' foes outnumber John's. In time, Messiah too will be seized and bound; and though, unlike John, he is brought to trial, the proceedings are illegal.¹⁶ While John is imprisoned for a

¹⁵I join Davies and Allison (1991: 468) in taking Herod's belief to be 'that John had come back to life and was now known as Jesus.' Herod therefore voices 'a very ill-informed piece of popular superstition' (Marshall 1978a: 356). However, ascribing Jesus' powers to John (Matt. 14:2) is not as bad as ascribing them to Satan (12:24).

¹⁶The verbs *krateō* ('seize') and *deō* ('bind') are applied both to John (14:3) and to Jesus (26:48, 50, 57; 27:2). On the trial before Caiaphas, see 26:57-68 and comments.

time, Jesus' death follows swiftly upon his arrest and trial. Beheading was merciful compared to crucifixion; and more appalling than a severed head presented on a platter to diners (14:8, 11) is Messiah's accursed death and separation from the Father (27:46; Gal. 3:13).

John was not silenced until his contribution to 'the restoration of all things' was complete; indeed his death was integral to that work (see comments on Matt. 17:9-13). Moreover, Matthew and others provided a permanent record of John's work, and the word of God for which he forfeited his life remains an unfettered power (cf. 2 Tim. 2:9). Herod would in time die as well; and whereas only a few historians take note of him, the church has honored John through all her history.¹⁷ Yet the church accords far greater honor to the One whom John foretold – which fully accords with John's own purpose (John 3:28-30). Contrary to Herodian superstition, John did not rise from the dead in Jesus (Matt. 14:2). Yet Herod here employs the very language – 'He has been raised [*ēgerthē*] from among the dead [*apo tōn nekrōn*]' – later used to announce Jesus' personal triumph over death and all the powers of darkness.¹⁸ It is that event which assures the ultimate conquest of all the Herods of the world, and the ultimate vindication of all God's faithful prophets. John is buried by his disciples (14:12a – as Jesus would be by one of his, 27:57-60), there to await his resurrection.

¹⁷Antipas' army was later destroyed by the forces of Aretas IV (whose daughter Antipas had divorced to marry Herodias), which some Jews took to be God's judgment on Antipas for his murder of John the Baptist (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.1-2). Cf. Acts 12:23-24, where the word of God advanced over a later Herod's dead body.

¹⁸Cf. the use of this verb, *egeirō*, and phrase in Matthew 17:9; 27:64; 28:7.