

Jesus meets the people

Jesus meets Herod Antipas

The New Testament story of Herod Antipas starts with John the Baptist. This Herod was called Herod the Tetrarch or Herod Antipas to distinguish him from his father who was called Herod the Great and from other members of the Herod family. Their lives are well recorded in ancient history books and any bible dictionary will give a summary of the essential features of their lives.

The father, Herod the Great, ruled over most of Palestine from 37 - 4 B.C., and it was he who tried to kill Jesus when he was an infant [Matthew 2:1-20]. That Herod had been appointed by the Romans, who gave him the title “King of the Jews”, and he was loyal to them as overlords throughout his reign. Before Roman involvement in Palestine and before Herod the Great, the Jews had been ruled by the Maccabees, who combined the roles of king and high priest. As a result of the Roman take-over and the role of Herod the Great on the side of the Romans there was considerable resentment on the part of the Jews against the Herod family. Even though Herod the Great was a Jew by religion his father was an Edomite by descent and Israel and Edom were ancient enemies, as is well recorded in the Old Testament.

When Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. his kingdom was divided into three parts and each part was given to one of his sons. Herod Archelaus ruled over Judea and Samaria [Matthew 2:21-23]. Herod Philip took over Ituraea and Trachonitis, which were to the North and East of Galilee [Luke 3:1]. Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch, received Galilee and Perea. Perea was to the East of the River Jordan. In 6 A.D. Herod Archelaus was deposed by the Romans following complaints, and Judea and Samaria became a directly ruled region of the Roman Empire. Pontius Pilate was one of these rulers.

It was into this world of political intrigue, simmering conflict and skulduggery that John the Baptist was born. He would have been about twelve years old when the Romans imposed direct rule on Judea and Samaria. John was not brought up in the desert. He was a priest. Yes. Priesthood in Israel was inherited from father to son and John’s father, Zechariah, was a priest [Luke 1:5]. We do not know whether John ever officiated in the temple. As temple service started at 25 or 30 years old [Numbers 4:3 & 8:23-24] and there were more priests than were really needed it is unlikely that he ever officiated. However he was brought up in a priestly family, no doubt trained for eventual work as a priest, with many priests, his relatives, as visitors to the home, and he would have become aware from an early age of both the ancient and more recent laws of Israel and the opinions of the priests on current political events.

John left this privileged position and went into the desert to fulfil his God-given mission. It was this that paved the way for his conflict with Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas married the daughter of a neighbouring king, King Aretas IV of Nabata. No doubt this was a political marriage designed to secure harmony between the two rulers rather than a marriage of love. At any rate, Herod divorced her and married Herodias, the divorced wife of his half-brother Herod Philip [Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6:14-29]. This Herod Philip was not Herod Philip, the Ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis, but another brother. It was illegal under Old Testament law for someone to marry his brother’s wife while that brother was still alive [Leviticus 18:16]. So this was a grave offence against the Jews and John the Baptist shared this outrage. Herod should have been tried and punished, but because he was a ruler he was too powerful.

So John told Herod that he had no right to marry his brother’s wife. It appears that in the old tradition of the ancient prophets John actually went to Herod, obtained an audience and spoke to him. That was a very bold move indeed. It is always dangerous to rebuke a

tyrant! Herodias, the wife, appears to have been most greatly offended and wanted John arrested, so Herod arrested him. Where the arrest took place we are not told. Perea, on the Eastern bank of the River Jordan was part of Herod's territory, and we know that John used to preach along the Jordan, so it could well have been there. John was then bound or shackled in a prison. It was common not only to lock someone in a cell or dungeon but to shackle them in the cell or dungeon as an additional precaution.

Herodias wanted to go further and have John put to death but Herod did not want to harm him any more because he recognised John to be a holy man and was afraid to harm him. He heard a lot about John which puzzled him and he even liked listening to him personally. Prophetic insight into the world of politics, nations and society is not easily understood by worldly people who leave God out of the picture. I am not talking about the naive "lovey-dovey" approach of many Christians today. I am talking about the insight of prophets, which is very different. After thirty five years in power Herod was well experienced in political manoeuvring and manipulation and in dealing with power struggles. A totally different line of approach in which God is lord and judge of all nations would have been very strange. It is difficult to see how there could be any starting point for creating an understanding.

Then Herod's birthday came around. As with great men there was to be a great celebration. Senior civilian and military personnel were invited together with the native leaders of Galilee. Herodias's daughter, whose name is given as Salome in historical records, came in and danced. It is not clear whether Salome was a young girl showing off her first dancing steps or whether she was nubile and performing a dance which would have had sexual connotations [See notes below]. Herod was so enchanted that he made his foolish promise to give her anything she wanted. In traditional old world fashion he followed it up with an oath. This was serious because in Old Testament teaching oaths made to God had to be kept [Numbers 30:1-3]. One man, Jephthah, even killed his daughter as a ritual sacrifice as a result of a foolish oath [Judges 11:29-40].

The girl did not know what to ask for so she consulted her mother, Herodias. She seized her opportunity to retaliate against John the Baptist and told her daughter to ask for John's head on a plate. Sad but trapped he issued orders for John to be beheaded.

When Jesus became more prominent, Herod thought that he must be John raised from the dead! He clearly had a guilty conscience. He even wanted to meet Jesus [Luke 9:9]. Jesus warned his disciples to be wary of Herod [Mark 8:14-15]. The Pharisees reported that Herod wanted to kill Jesus, but I am not sure that we can trust their motivation. Jesus described him as "that fox". Not very complimentary [Luke 13:31-33].

Herod wanted to meet Jesus. He had liked hearing John, at least intellectually, and now he wanted to hear Jesus. He wanted to see a miracle for himself. At last he got his chance when Pilate sent Jesus to him for trial [Luke 23:1-16]. Herod was in Jerusalem at the time. Perhaps he had come for the Passover. Rulers tend to be very observant of the religious rituals of the people they rule over. This is important if they are to keep the obedience of the people. It was not so important that they actually believed anything! So it is not at all improbable that Herod had come for the Passover. As relations between Herod and Pilate had been bad, Herod was not in Jerusalem on a social visit!

Herod was very pleased to see Jesus and put many questions to him, but Jesus did not reply. We might have expected Jesus to tell Herod to repent, or persuade him to give up his evil ways, or tell him the good news of the Kingdom of God. But Herod had already turned his back on all the opportunities he had been given. So God had nothing more to say to him and Jesus, the messenger, remained silent. Herod already knew what he needed to do and was not willing to do it. So Herod gave up and mocked and ill-treated Jesus. Then he sent him back to Pilate.

Somehow these events brought reconciliation between Herod and Pilate. Perhaps it was the mark of respect and recognition which Pilate had shown to Herod by sending Jesus to be tried by him - even though we suspect that Pilate really wanted to hand over a difficult situation. Perhaps it was a sense that they faced a common enemy and shared a common bond.

The focus of these studies is the meeting between Jesus and other people. Hence we will focus on the meeting between Jesus and Herod. The lesson here must be that Herod had turned his back on God, rejected what the messenger, John, had to say, and then killed the messenger. God had nothing more to say to Herod. So when Jesus met him, Jesus had nothing to say. Herod could only wait for God's final judgement.

There are of course other lessons to be learnt from Herod's downward path. His illegal marriage was followed by arresting John for rebuking him. Then he kept John in prison though he knew him to be a holy man. This posed a risk to John and made it easier for Herod to be trapped. To avoid taking the first steps towards temptation must be the message here. Then Herod committed the crime of murder in order to observe a less important law about keeping ones oaths, and in order not to lose face. In the long run however I suspect those who witnessed the events would have seen him as a fool and not thought much the less of him if he had broken his oath. He and they were probably in a drunken stupor in any case.

My own interest in Herod Antipas started when I was a student. Members of the Christian Union used to go out to local churches on a Sunday to take their services for them. One of us would preach, another arrange the hymns and a third would read the lessons.

On one occasion I remember it was my turn to preach. It was not a church we had been to before so we had no information about it. I was desperate to give the congregation a message of hope and encouragement, but the more I prayed about what I should say the more I felt God leading me to talk about when Jesus met Herod the Tetrarch. So I did.

I then asked that congregation whether God was still speaking to them or whether there was nothing more for him to say. Talking to them afterwards I became convinced that the message had been the right one for them. I doubt if their church survived much longer. Of course I am not suggesting that they were bad people, but I suspect they had stopped listening to God.

There are some detailed points worthy of note in this story:

Matthew and Luke call Herod "the Tetrarch" which was officially correct. Mark calls him loosely "the King". Perhaps that is what the people called him.

Salome's age at the time is uncertain. The Greek word used to describe her, "korasion", is also used in Mark 5:41. There the girl's age is given as twelve. This was probably eleven by our reckoning because in the Middle East when a child is in the first year of life they are said to be one year old and so on, whereas we count only completed years. Hence Salome could have been a little girl showing off her dancing skills rather than an older girl performing to show off her body. Her lack of confidence in knowing what to ask from her uncle without consulting her mother also suggests a young age.

The story of Herod killing John the Baptist is also told by the Jewish historian Josephus [Antiquities, Book 18, Chapter 5, Sections 1-2]. However his perspective is different in that he says that Herod feared that John would lead a revolt and put him to death for that reason. Josephus also says that when Herod Antipas was defeated by Aretas IV, the father of the previous wife, who had escaped, in 39 B.C., this was seen by many Jews as punishment for killing John. He also names the location of the prison where John was kept as inside the Fortress of Machaerus. This was just to the East of the Dead Sea in the South of Perea.

Luke says little about Herod killing John. Luke's gospel and his book of Acts were addressed to someone called His Excellency Theophilus. Some think these two books were written to explain Christianity to the Roman authorities. This might explain why he does not dwell on the action of Herod, who had been a local ruler on behalf of the Romans.

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