

The Imprisonment and Execution of John the Baptist

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Assessment 3

Research Focus

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Church of St. John, Porthmadog, Gwynedd

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The imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist may invoke questions not only regarding religious understanding, but also contribute to the individual's questioning of their own faith, and to what limits they hold true to their beliefs. It prompts questions regarding morality, ethical views and strength. It also demonstrates social aspects such as cognitive dissonance and obligation to uphold status. These issues will be examined by researching existing interpretation of the New Testament text which describes not only the execution, but also the involvement of those associated with Herod's decision in ordering his beheading.

Also examined, will be an evaluation of interpretation relating to the circumstances which led to John the Baptist's imprisonment. This will include what John the Baptist communicated to Herod, and his beliefs which motivated his opinions.

Texts relating to John the Baptist's imprisonment and execution can be found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. John's incarceration was a result of proclaiming his beliefs to Herod. It appears that John's concern was regarding Herod's betrothal to his own half-brother's wife Herodias. Biblical texts read, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'¹ 'It is against God's law for you to marry your brother's wife'.² So why did John the Baptist feel that his translation of God's law would be considered when delivered by him?

An interesting observation from Kazmierski is that Mark describes John the Baptist as 'the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel'.³ It also appears evident that John grew up knowing the important role he would play in God's work. His name alone was a constant reminder to all that he was set apart. It was usual during the time of John, for names to be passed on from the father to the first-born son, or some form of family name.⁴ John's name, however, was given to John's parents by the angel Gabriel who had foretold of John's conception. Being mature in age and infertile up to this point, John's mother Elizabeth, and later his father Zechariah, both upheld the proclamation provided to them by Gabriel, raising John to fulfil his destiny to serve God.

¹ *New International Version Bible*, Mark 6:18, (Colorado: Biblica, 1984), p.1479.

² *Holy Bible New Living Translation*, Mark 6:18, (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 2013), p.1603.

³ Carl Kazmierski, *John the Baptist: Prophet and Evangelist*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996), p.30.

⁴ Chara Scroope, *The Cultural Atlas: Israeli Culture*, (Australia: Mosaica, 2024), < <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/> > [accessed 28.12.2024].

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the Angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.'⁵

Did this lifelong understanding of his importance, believed by many, provide John the courage needed to address Herod? It may also be possible that John believed he could convince Herod to repent of this sin, as Herod himself was of the Jewish faith. George Mead discusses what the Jewish historian Flavious Josephus tells us of John the Baptist, noting that John's words, '...had an astonishingly persuasive power over the Jewish populace.'⁶

It is unclear whether John the Baptist spoke publicly about Herod's sins, or whether he only spoke to Herod directly. Mark 6:18 reads, 'Because John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."⁷ This does not definitively indicate whether he spoke to him in private or publicly. However, William Duncan's translation of Von Rohden's interpretation of Luke 3:19 states,

...he who had lifted up the voice of condemnation and warning against Pharisees and against members of the Sanhedrim, could not be deterred by fear from declaring freely and publicly that it was not right for Herod to have his brother's wife...⁸

This assumption is possibly supported by the use of the word 'rebuked' as in Luke 3:19, 'But Herod the tetrarch, being rebuked by him concerning Herodias...'⁹ as the term 'rebuked' derives from the Greek 'ἐλέγχω' (elegchō) which translates to expose, reprove or convict.¹⁰

⁵ Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, Editor, *The Scofield Study Bible III*, NIV, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.,2004),p.1338.

⁶ George R.S. Mead, *Gnostic John the Baptizer*, e-book edition (Claremont: Global Grey, 2023), p.5. <<https://www.globalgreybooks.com/gnostic-john-the-baptizer-ebook.html>> [accessed 29 December 2024].

⁷ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible, Mark 6:18*, (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020), p.1451.

⁸ William Cecil Duncan, *The Life, Character & Acts of John the Baptist & the Relation of His Ministry to the Christian Dispensation Based Upon the Johannes Der Täufer of L. Von Rohden*, fifth edition, (New Orleans: Sheldon & Company, 1860), p.228-229.

⁹ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible*, (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020), p.1481

¹⁰ Bible Hub, *Luke 3:19 Study Bible*, <<https://biblehub.com/study/luke/3-19.htm>> [accessed 27 December 2024].

Many questions remain about what John expected of Herod following his statement of disapproval. Did he wish for Herod to remove himself from the marriage? Did he simply want Herod's sins known publicly? Or did he want Herod to consent to being baptised by him? It is unlikely that Herod had already been baptised, as prior to John's practice, the Jewish faith practised only cleansing ceremonies.¹¹ It has been suggested that John's Baptismal practices were adopted in part, from time he allegedly spent with the Essenes at Qumran,¹² whilst others argue that John would not have been accepted by the Qumranites due to his priestly lineage.¹³

John's voicing of his opinion regarding Herod's marriage resulted in his imprisonment at the Machaerus fortress for approximately two years prior to his execution. During this time, it is said that Herod visited John many times.¹⁴ Mark 6:20 reads, '...for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just and holy man, and he protected him. And when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly'.¹⁵ Herod's new wife Herodias seemed to not take kindly to John the Baptist's disapproval of her union with Herod. Besides her formerly being married to Herod's half-brother Philip, she was also the brothers' niece, which added further disapproval. It is suggested that Herod imprisoned John on political grounds,¹⁶ but could Herodias have influenced Herod in his decision to imprison John? In the New Living Translation version of Matthew 14:3, Herod's decision is explained by, 'For Herod had arrested and imprisoned John as a favor to his wife Herodias'¹⁷ Whereas in the New King James Version it reads, 'For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife.'¹⁸ These two passages can be interpreted very differently. Herod clearly thought well of John, so his decision may have been a political one, fearing a

¹¹ Compelling Truth, *How Did Baptism Originate? What is the Origin of Baptism?*

<<https://www.compellingtruth.org/origin-baptism>>. [accessed 19 December 2024].

¹² Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, third edition, (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).

¹³ Alan Taylor Farnes, 'John the Baptist and the Qumran Connection', *Studia Antiqua*, Volume 9, Number 1, Article 6, Brigham Young University, 2011)

<<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1126&context=studiaantiqua>> [accessed 28 December 2024]

¹⁴ Samuel James Andrews, *The Life of Our Lord Upon the Earth: Considered in Its Historical, Chronological, and Geographical Relations*, (Ohio: Old Paths Publications, Incorporated, 2019).

¹⁵ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible, Mark 6:20*, (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020), p.1451

¹⁶ Samuel James Andrews, *The Life of Our Lord Upon the Earth: Considered in Its Historical, Chronological, and Geographical Relations*, (Ohio: Old Paths Publications, Incorporated, 2019).

¹⁷ *Holy Bible New Living Translation*, (Illinois: Tyndale House Foundation, 1996)

¹⁸ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible, Matthew 14:3*, (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020), p.1410.

rebellion by John's followers. This would not have bode well considering his position as tributary to Rome, who required him to maintain peace within the region.¹⁹

The events immediately prior to John's execution appear to be clearly set out in the Bible and have been examined by many theologians. Unlike many verses in the Bible, this account is less open to disagreement in interpretation which may be due to its repetition from Mark and Matthew, with subsequent mention from Luke. The story tells of how Herod held a banquet to celebrate his birthday, during which Herodias' daughter Salome performed a dance. Herod, being impressed by the dance, said to Salome that he would offer her anything she wished for, and in front of his guests declared this by oath. Salome sought advice from her mother Herodias on the matter, who told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Herod was troubled by this request, but because he had sworn an oath in front of his guests, he sent out an executioner who brought back John's head on a platter which was given to Salome.

We have already seen that Herod thought favourably of John, with whom he spent time talking to during his imprisonment, leading to the question of how this could have happened. In William Duncan's translation of Von Rohden's interpretation, he writes of Herodias,

She instructed Salome, her daughter by her first marriage with Philip, how to captivate the heart of her step-father by means of immodest and wanton dancing assisted by the power of her youth and beauty, in order that she might make use of her as a means for procuring the death of John.²⁰

In opposition to the view that it was Herodias who had instigated John's execution, Matthew 14:5 says that Herod did want to kill John but was fearful to do so as the people considered John to be a prophet, and he was therefore afraid of a revolt.²¹ Being of Jewish faith, was Herod genuine in his understanding of John, what was behind his visits to John in prison, was he attempting to gain information he could use to his own benefit, or was he really sharing in

¹⁹ Harold, W. Heohner, *Herod Antipas: A Contemporary of Jesus Christ*, (Zondervan Pub. House, 1980).

²⁰ William Cecil Duncan, *The Life, Character & Acts of John the Baptist & the Relation of His Ministry to the Christian Dispensation Based Upon the Johannes Der Täufer of L. Von Rohden*, fifth edition, (New Orleans: Sheldon & Company, 1860), p.255.

²¹ Thomas Nelson, *The NKJV Bible, Matthew 14:3*, (Nashville: Harper Collins, 2020).

John's faith? He was reported to have been respectful of Jewish customs²², but his motives cannot be certain.

There appears to be many interpretations for John's communication with Herod, his imprisonment at Machaerus, and ultimately his beheading. The research conducted has been based on interpretations of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and that of Flavius Josephus. It has provided awareness of elements central to the story of John which may not be included in the traditional account of what occurred and offers a more comprehensive basis for exploration of the story.

²² Morten Hørning Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee: The Literary and Archaeological Sources on the Reign of Herod Antipas and Its Socio-economic Impact on Galilee*, Revised Edition, Volume 215 of *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

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