

Mark – The First Gospel

013 – Thorny Ground – Mark 6:14-29

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First Thoughts

The placement of this sordid story, which turns Herod's birthday party into a banquet of death, is by no means accidental.¹

Editor's Notes

I'm making another change to how the outline is arranged. Instead of putting all the commentary inline with the main body, I've referenced them as footnotes corresponding to their respective discussion items.

Initial Observations

Parallels, shmarallels! This section is full of allusions to the Old Testament and with what is still to come in Mark's gospel account.

This section is also an extended interruption of the narrative (sandwich rhetoric) of the mission of the Twelve that began in 6:7-13 and concludes at 6:30. Mark's account of John the Baptist's arrest and execution is the most extensive found in any of the gospels. The placement and length provide clues that there is more to this story than simply informing readers about the death of John and Herod's brutality.

Josephus also records John the Baptist's arrest and execution, but some of the details appear to differ from Mark's. For Josephus, the primary reason was the danger of political insurrection.² The details about the names and relationships also seem to differ, and there seems to be some disagreement about the location of the dungeon.³

¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6392.

² *NICNT: Mark*, 6:17-29. "Josephus' report that Herod imprisoned and executed the Baptist because he feared a political uprising to which John might give leadership is thoroughly understandable. The territory of Antipas included the narrow strip designated Perea, which bordered on the Nabatean Kingdom. His marriage to Herodias had required the repudiation of a former wife, the daughter of Aretas IV of Nabatea. It is clear, therefore, that John's proclamation of the unlawfulness of Herod's adulterous union could be interpreted as a call to insurrection which threatened the tetrarch from within his province as seriously as did the incensed Nabateans to the east of his province."

³ *Reading Mark*, 6:14-16.

Who Is Jesus?

*Like the scribes, the family, and the people of Nazareth, Herod and his minions have eyes, but do not see.*⁴

^{6:14} King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him."¹⁵ But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."¹⁶ But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." (ESV)

Discussion

1. Herod never held the official title "King." Why might Mark use this title for Herod?⁵
2. Who is Jesus? Herod's court is abuzz. The disciples will get a chance to respond in 8:27-30.
3. What is absent from speculations about Jesus' identity? (Hint: (irony) what did the demons say when confronted with Jesus?)
4. What is important about the specific mention of Elijah?⁶
5. What might be the significance of Jesus as "one of the prophets of old"?⁷
6. What might be the significance of Herod believing John the Baptist was resurrected from the dead?⁸

⁴ *Reading Mark*, 6:14-16.

⁵ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:14-15. "The royal title had been denied to Antipas by Augustus. Goaded by the ambitious Herodias, it was Antipas' request for the title of 'king' which officially led to his dismissal and exile in A.D. 39. Mark's use of the royal title may reflect local custom, or it may be a point of irony. Herod had modeled his court after the imperial pattern, and it is possible that the irony of designating him by a title he coveted, but failed to secure, would be appreciated in Rome where his sentence had been sealed."

⁶ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:14-15. "The opinion that Jesus is Elijah identifies Jesus with 'the Coming One' announced by John (Ch. 1:7). It probably reflects the conviction of the Baptist's followers. Although he left the identity of the one mightier than himself unnamed, John had defined his function in terms which pointed unmistakably to 'the Messenger of the Covenant,' the prophet Elijah, in the closing paragraphs of Malachi (Chs. 3:1f.; 4:5f.). John must have been responsible for communicating to his followers that Jesus was Elijah, as promised in the prophetic word."

⁷ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:14-15. "The identification of Jesus with John, through whom the ancient gift of prophecy had been affirmed after so long a silence, appears to interpret Jesus as the promised eschatological Prophet whose word would herald the last days."

⁸ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:14-15. "John is not known to have performed any miracles during the course of his ministry (Jn. 10:41, 'John did no sign'), and it was the element of power in Jesus' ministry which led them to believe that John had risen from the dead. The resurrection permitted the powers of the new age to be channeled through him. The opinion that John has returned from the dead in the same body he had possessed before his execution sheds light on the popular conception of the resurrection and indicates that the people had no knowledge of Jesus prior to his ministry in Galilee. They think of him as one who appeared suddenly upon the earth a short time after the Baptist's death."

7. Herod's opinion frames the discussion for emphasis.⁹ What does this hint at about Herod's psychological frame of mind?^{10 11}

The Baptizer's Arrest and Imprisonment

¹⁷For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. ¹⁸For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, ²⁰for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly. (ESV)

The Gospel of Mark contains two "passion narratives," the first of which reports the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist.¹²

Discussion

8. Background on Herod Antipas.¹³
9. What was Herod's transgression against which John spoke? Why was it so heinous?¹⁴
10. What can we learn about Herod from what Mark records?¹⁵ About Herodias?¹⁶

⁹ *Reading Mark*, 6:14-16. "The Hellenistic magical papyri suggest that magicians used the spirits of murdered people to perform supernatural acts, so Herod may be portrayed here as believing that Jesus is a magician (Smith 1978, 97- 98)."

¹⁰ *Reading Mark*, 6:16. "It also indicates Herod's sense of his responsibility for John's death, which was brought home to him in a pointed way by the popular rumors stimulated by the activity of Jesus. In Jewish thinking resurrection is the prelude to judgment, and the terror of judgment may be caught in Herod's statement, 'John, whom I beheaded, is risen.'"

¹¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6303. "If Jesus' hometown remains unable to respond to Jesus because they remain caught in their own assumptions about Jesus' family and childhood, Herod is unable to respond to Jesus because he is also caught up in the past, in his guilt-ridden memories of John."

¹² *NICNT: Mark*, 6:17-29.

¹³ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:14-15. "Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and Malthace, was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from his father's death in 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. His total disregard for Jewish sensitivity was displayed not only in his marriage to Herodias, but in the selection of an ancient cemetery as the site for his capital, Tiberias. By this choice Herod virtually excluded Jewish settlers, for residence in the city would render them perpetually unclean in terms of the ritual law."

¹⁴ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:17-18. "Her union with Antipas was adulterous and shocking because the Mosaic Law clearly prohibited marriage to a brother's wife while the brother was yet alive (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). This flouting of the Law in high places could not but call forth the stern denunciation of the wilderness prophet."

¹⁵ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:19-20. "More weak than cruel, Herod listened to John with an undeniable fascination. John's word left him perplexed, and in anguish. Yet he found a strange pleasure in the authoritative preaching of this holy man, whose stringent life gave added power to his probing word. Too weak to follow John's counsel, he nevertheless had to listen."

¹⁶ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:19-20. "She nurtured a sustained grudge against John and desired to silence his disturbing accusation in a manner that had ample precedent in the Herodian annals—arranged 'accident' or execution. Antipas would not permit this, for he had a superstitious fear of John whom he recognized as a righteous and holy man."

11. With this story, what parallels might Mark be hinting to from Israel's past?¹⁷

Herod's Banquet

²¹ But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. ²² For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." ²³ And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." ²⁵ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." ²⁶ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. ²⁷ And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison ²⁸ and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (ESV)

*What begins as an ostentatious celebration turns into a banquet of death for a righteous prophet.*¹⁸

Discussion

12. Background: "Herodias' daughter." There is a significant textual problem here. It can be interpreted as "his daughter, Herodias."¹⁹ Josephus identifies this girl as Salome, a daughter of Herodias from her earlier marriage. The "girl" in 6:22 is the same Greek [*korasion*] as "girl" in "Little girl, I say to you, arise" of 5:41.²⁰ The dance may, or may not have been erotic (c.f., footnote 20) but it was clearly intended to achieve the goal of Herodias.²¹

¹⁷ *UBC: Mark*, 6:14-29. "The similarities between John the Baptist and Elijah help to explain the way John's death is narrated in Mark. Herod, who both fears John and resents him, is made to resemble Ahab, the king of Israel, in his attitude toward Elijah; Herodias, who schemes to kill John, resembles Jezebel, Ahab's wife, who had a special hatred for Elijah (see 1 Kings 16:29–19:3; 21:1–29, and the historical notes on the figures in the present story). Thus, several characteristics of Mark's account help the reader see that John is the prophet like Elijah predicted in Malachi 4:5."

¹⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6419.

¹⁹ *NET Bible*, translation comment on 6:22.

²⁰ *Reading Mark*, 6:17-29. "The involvement of the young daughter is a particularly chilling detail. Textual variants make it uncertain whether the evangelist regards her as the daughter of Herodias only, or also of Herod. Commentators usually assume that the dance was erotic, although the evangelist never suggests this. However, it is plain that she is put by the Gospel writer into the same age group as Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter. The same word, (*korasion*) is used for both. One little daughter is restored to life; one participates in a grisly murder. It is the child who adds the detail of the platter. John's head is the final course in this macabre banquet (Much of the above discussion is based on Anderson 1992, 120- 32)."

²¹ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:21-23. "She was, apparently, in her middle teens at the time of her infamous performance. That she was not yet married seems clear from the fact that she was still under the influence of her mother; certainly no

13. Salome may have shared her mother's opinion of John the Baptist. She expresses no surprise about the request, though it was not communicated to her in advance, and appears to add her own grisly detail "on a platter."²²
14. Herod faces a decision, a test, and a judgment.²³ And he fails.²⁴ He is like the soil with thorns that chokes out the growth of the seed (4:7, 18-19).
15. Background: Although this text does not say, victory is relatively short-lived for Herod and Herodias. In A.D. 36 the Nabateans avenge the humiliation of Aretas²⁵ (c.f. footnote 2). In A.D. 39 Antipas is exiled (c.f., footnote 5).
16. In what ways does this first Passion narrative parallel and foreshadow the second?²⁶

Summary

- a. Two Passion narratives in Mark: the execution of John and the crucifixion of Jesus.
- b. Herod as an example of seed that falls among thorny ground.
- c. Sandwich rhetoric showing what Jesus' disciples can expect to face.²⁷
- d. The story describes that the faithful could expect to suffer and die. It does not explain the *why*?
- e. A warning that just as persecution could cause some seed to not lead to fruit, so can the appeal of the comforts of the world.²⁸
- f. Comparison of two types of kingdom and power – the world and the kingdom of God. Comparison of the two "banquets."²⁹

prince would have permitted his wife to perform artistically before the company of assembled men. The dance was unquestionably lascivious, designed to captivate and further the ends of the dancer."

²² *NICNT: Mark*, 6:24-25.

²³ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:26-28. "The request of Salome, expressed with arrogance and malice, immediately sobered Antipas. Only moments before he had revelled in boisterous conviviality; now he experienced the deepest grief. Herod was filled with conflicting feelings. He was reluctant to grant the request but finally decided that he had no other choice since he had sealed his invitation with an oath in the presence of his great men. As had to happen, Herod gave the order that the girl's demand was to be honored."

²⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6359. "Herod appears to be exhibit A of Jesus' teaching about blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (3:28-30); namely, this is what happens when one so persistently rejects the wooing of God's Spirit that one becomes deaf to God's word and leading."

²⁵ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:29. "They administered a stinging defeat to Antipas which the people interpreted as an act of God avenging the murder of John the Baptist."

²⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6296. "Mark insists on showing that Herod, despite his feelings for John, remained ultimately trapped by his own political ambitions. Later in the Gospel, Mark will portray Pilate as similarly caught between finding no guilt in Jesus and yet 'wishing to satisfy the crowd' (15:14-15). In this way Mark undercuts the power of Herod and, later, of Pilate. Such figures appear powerful, suggests Mark, but they do not even have the character to do what they know to be right."

²⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6341. "It is as though Mark wants his readers to realize that despite high hopes for the ministry of Jesus and his disciples (6:6b-13) and the exciting things happening all around (6:14a, 30-56), sometimes bad things do happen to good people. These setbacks to God's best and brightest hopes for the world must not be allowed to derail faithfulness to God's kingdom among Jesus' disciples, whether in first-century Jerusalem or Rome or twenty-first-century America."

²⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6423. "It functions as a sobering reminder to Christians, who might be under political or religious oppression or material allurements, to remain unwavering in God's mission and commitment."

²⁹ *UBC: Mark*, 6:14-29. "This account, with its description of the opulent and morally bankrupt court life of Herod, contrasts powerfully with the demands placed upon the disciples in 6:7-13 and with the next episode, in which

- g. The most important question and response: Who is Jesus, really?
- h. The core of repentance: setting aside preconceived ideas about Jesus and accepting the evidence for who Jesus really is.
- i. The sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: rejecting clear evidences about Jesus and refusing to repent.

Jesus, he argues, has been rejected from the beginning. That he should die for his message of transformation should come as no surprise; but along the way, his message has taken root in some, and his death will be like a seed that will become newness of life in the resurrection.³⁰

Jesus and the Twelve are in the open country (6:31, 35). This contrast shows that the rightful 'king' was not Herod (6:14), and that the places of earthly power and wealth with their customarily extravagant claims and style do not constitute the vehicle of God's salvation. Rather, as the next episode shows, it is in the humble ministry of Jesus that God manifests his provision for Israel and for the world."

³⁰ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6316.