

Matthew 14:3-12

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-14/matthew-143-12/>

Matthew narrates the fate of John the Baptist. He tells why he was imprisoned and how he came to be gruesomely executed by Herod.

The parallel gospel account of this event is found in Mark 6:17-29.

Matthew already informed his readers that *John the Baptist* was imprisoned (Matthew 11:2). But somewhere between that moment when *John's disciples* came to *Jesus* inquiring on behalf of their teacher whether or not *Jesus* was the Messiah and *Jesus's* confrontations with the Pharisees (Matthew 12), His teaching of parables and His trip to Nazareth (Matthew 13) *John* was executed.

After telling us about *Herod* the tetrarch's incorrect assumption that *John* had come back to life and was the one responsible for the miracles *Jesus* was performing, Matthew narrates the backstory of how *John* died.

The reason *Herod* had *John* arrested, bound, and put in prison was because of a woman—*Herodias*. Before continuing, it would be beneficial to untangle the intertwining branches of Herodian dynasty.

Herod the Great (72-4 BC) was the official half-Jewish *King* of the Roman province of Judea. He was ruthless and cruel. Not only did he order the slaughter of Bethlehem's male infants in an attempt to kill the newborn Messiah (Matthew 2:16), he also had two of his sons, Aristobulus IV and Alexander strangled to death in 7 B.C. on the suspicion that they were trying to claim his throne. Herod the Great had several wives and many children. When he died the Romans shrewdly divided his "kingdom" and reorganized it among his offspring. The more dispersed the local authority of their puppet rulers, the better for Rome.

Herod the Great's son, Archelaus (23 BC – 18 AD) inherited the district of Judea from his father (Matthew 2:22). Archelaus was later deposed by Caesar Augustus in 6 AD and died in exile. At that time Judea and Samaria were placed under the direct supervision of Roman governors. Pontius Pilate, who governed these provinces during the time of *Jesus's* ministry, was the fourth Roman to hold this office, which he held from 26 AD – 36 AD.

Herod Antipas (the tetrarch) (20 BC – 39 AD) was the son of Herod the Great and *the brother* of Archelaus. Upon his father's death he was granted the provinces of Galilee and Perea at age sixteen. This is the *Herod* who had *John the Baptist* executed.

Philip (27 BC – 33 AD) was *Herod Antipas's* half-brother and was the son of *Herod* the Great. Initially he was his father's sole heir, but he was left out of the will in favor of Archelaus and Antipas and another half-brother, also named *Philip* the tetrarch (26 BC – 34 CE). *Philip* the tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis (Luke 3:1) is not mentioned in this chapter. But strangely

enough *Philip* married his niece Salome who, in this passage, erotically *danced and pleased Herod* Antipas. The disinherited *Philip* (the *Philip* pertaining to these events) was the husband of his niece *Herodias*, the daughter of the executed Aristobulus IV.

Herodias (15 BC – 39 AD) was *the wife* of her uncle *Philip* and the granddaughter of *Herod* the Great through his son Aristobulus IV who was executed by his father in 7 B.C. *Herodias'* marriage with *Philip* produced a *daughter*, Salome. Later *Herodias* divorced her uncle *Philip* in order to marry her uncle *Herod* the tetrarch. Thus, *Herodias* was the niece, ex-sister-in-law, and *wife* of *Herod* the tetrarch.

Matthew and Mark tells us that *Herod had John the Baptist arrested and put in prison because of Herodias* (Mark 6:17). The reason why *Herodias* hated *John the Baptist* was because *John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have her as your wife."* Given *John's* bold rebukes to the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 3:7), he was probably *saying* this to the public as well. *Herod* and *Herodias's* marriage was unlawful for two reasons. First, it was forbidden to marry a blood relative (Leviticus 18:6). *Herodias* was the *daughter* of *Herod's brother* Aristobulus IV. And second, it was unlawful to marry your *brother's wife* (Leviticus 18:16). *Herodias* had no concern for the law, but she did take offense at being called out and made a scandalous example by an eccentric *prophet*. She wanted *him* dead.

Her half-brother and husband, *Herod* wanted to put *him* to death too. But initially *he* did not do so, because *he feared the crowd* who regarded *John as a prophet*. When we consider Mark's more detailed account of these events, it appears as if *Herod* was beginning to grow fond of *John the Baptist* and *he* would visit his prison and think about what he said.

"...for Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he had been protecting him. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; and yet he used to enjoy listening to him."
(Mark 6:20)

Unable to have *John* executed herself, *Herodias* harbored her murderous grudge and bided her time waiting for an opportunity (Mark 6:19).

It came on *Herod's birthday*. Salome, *the daughter of Herodias* and *Philip* (*Herod's* niece two-times over and step-daughter) erotically *danced before Herod* and *his* guests. Mark says that these guests were *Herod's* lords, Roman military commanders, and "leading men of Galilee" (Mark 6:21). Her dancing *pleased Herod* and *his dinner guests*. Given the context, a more descriptive translation of the Greek word "Areskso" would be "aroused" rather than *pleased*. *Herod* was *so much* turned on by *his* step-daughter's performance, *that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked*. Mark adds that *he* pledged to give the girl "up to half of my kingdom" (Mark 6:23). Before answering Salome left the banquet and found *her mother* to see how *she* should answer (Mark 6:24).

Herodias saw *her* opportunity. The *mother* prompted her daughter to say *Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist*.

Herod was grieved. He no longer desired to have John killed (Mark 6:26), but neither could he go back on his oaths so publicly made in front of his dinner guests, however foolishly they were promised. And so, the king commanded the execution to be given.

Rather than create the mess in his palace, Herod sent and had John beheaded in prison. John's head was promptly brought on a platter and given to the girl who then brought it to her mother. Herodias got her gruesome wish.

John's disciples came and took away the body and buried it. And then they went and reported the awful news to Jesus.

Biblical Text

For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." Although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod, so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Having been prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist." Although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. His disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus.