



[Mark 6:14-29](#)

Herod Antipas executes John the Baptist

Date: 1st CE

Place: Rome

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: Mark 6:14-29

Reference:

6:14-29

Commentary:

This passage narrates the events leading up to the death of John the Baptist, following his imprisonment by the tetrarch Herod Antipas (4 BCE – 39 CE - date of his rule). Josephus, *Antiquities* XVIII.116-119, also tells us that Herod Antipas had John killed, however, the particular narrative given by the Markan author cannot be taken as a historically accurate presentation – it is a highly polemical account crafted to denounce the character of the Roman tetrarch, and to warn the Gospel's audience of danger presented by worldly rulers. As the story goes, John, whom Herod Antipas does in fact admire for his righteous and holy conduct, has been arrested due to his condemning of the marriage of the tetrarch to his brother's widow, which John claimed was unlawful (this is also discussed by Josephus in the passage cited above). During what is a historically suspect birthday celebration (as Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, p. 391-404, states, the rabbis viewed birthday celebrations as idolatrous, and it is extremely unlikely that a Jewish king would have had a party such as is described here). Mark tells us, however, that Herod Antipas's step-daughter, Herodias (the child of his brother's widow), performs a dance for him and his high-ranking guests, which so pleases Herod Antipas that he publically promises to give her anything she asks for. Prompted by her mother, the young girl requests the head of John the Baptist, which the apparently grieved Herod Antipas, wishing to maintain the honour of his word, gives to her.

The martyrdom of John (see also Matthew 14:1-12) is viewed by many scholars, such as Mark McVann, among others, as a forerunning martyrdom account to that of Jesus, with John's death at the hands of Herod and the events preceding it effectively acting as his 'passion' narrative. McVann discusses several parallels between the narratives of John and Jesus's imprisonment and execution. Notably, the recognition of both Herod Antipas and Pilate that John and Jesus are extraordinary characters (Mark 6:20, 15:5, 9:13), the fact that both John and Jesus shame the immoral conduct of Herod and the Jewish leaders respectively (Mark 6:17-18, 11:15-18), and that seemingly arbitrary characters – Herodias and Barrabas – essentially seal the fates of both men (Mark 6:25, 15:15). McVann argues that one of Mark's key aims is to emphasise to his audience that worldly rulers, represented here by Herod (and also by Pilate at Jesus's trial in [Mark 15:1-15](#)), are untrustworthy and ultimately purely concerned with their own power and selfish interests. This viewpoint understands the Markan author to be reinforcing the message of Mark 13:9 for his readership, which claims that the followers of Jesus will suffer at the hands of "governors and kings". The treatment of John and Jesus, therefore, illustrates to them the type of persecution that they can expect from those with worldly and power-driven interests.

As McVann identifies, this episode casts Herod and his entire family in a despicable light – the Herodians are incestuous, weak minded, unjust, and murderous (see Mark McVann, "The 'Passion' of John the Baptist," p. 154). The fact that Herod is portrayed as revelling at a birthday party, disapproved of by the first-century rabbis, and where he allows a female family member to be flaunted for all the male guests, simply adds to the picture of his moral bankruptcy. Ched Myers is in agreement, believing the passage to be highly politically charged, painting a "sarcastic social caricature" of Herod, who ignores the righteous and honourable status of John that he himself has formerly acknowledged (see Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 16). Myers also argues that by killing an individual known by the king to be holy and righteous, Herod disregards honour, a serious misdemeanour in the first-century Mediterranean, which valued this quality highly (for an initial influential work in this area, see Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World*). However, Mark makes sure to mention that it was to fulfil his oath to his step-daughter, made in front of his high-ranking guests, that Herod Antipas makes the decision to kill John, something that he would have rather not had to do; the breaking of such an oath would have subjected him to further



dishonour. Far from an attempt to redeem Herod Antipas, however, this detail just further emphasises the futility of John's death, ordered simply because of an ill thought out and whimsical promise made to a young girl. The implication of sexual attraction on the part of Herod to his step-daughter makes the entire incident all the more sordid.

For the Gospel writer, Herod Antipas is not to be trusted, and far from representing right-thinking Judaism, indulges in a range of deplorable behaviours. His weakness of moral character (which as [Mark 15:1-15](#) suggests, he shares with the Roman governor, Pilate) and desire to silence anyone who questions his conduct aligns him in Mark's mind with the imperial rulership that keeps him in power, the very rulership that first-century Christians would also have to contend with.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Baptist](#)
- [disciples](#)
- [Elijah](#)
- [elite](#)
- [execution](#)
- [Galilee](#)
- [Herod Antipas](#)
- [Herod Philip](#)
- [honor](#)
- [king](#)
- [kingdom](#)
- [military commander](#)
- [oath](#)
- [prison](#)
- [promise](#)
- [prophet](#)
- [tetrarch](#)

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[Mark 15:1-15](#)

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