

## Matthew 14:1-12

### I. Matthew 14:1-2

A. “At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus...”

Who was Herod *the tetrarch*? Well, Herod *the king* (or Herod *the Great*) ruled over almost all of Palestine (see map) for 37 years until he died in 4 B.C.

✓ Matthew 2:1 (cf. Luke 1:5) – Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of **Herod the king** [5-6 B.C.].

It was this Herod who sent the Magi to find Jesus and who killed all the male children in Bethlehem two years old and under (Matthew 2). But Herod the king died soon after Jesus was born (while Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were hiding in Egypt; Mat. 2:19), and when he died his kingdom was divided between three of his sons. Even though these sons liked to be called kings, their real title was either an ethnarch (the chief of the three) or a tetrarch (“ruler of a fourth part”, but actually in this case a third part). Archelaus was the ethnarch of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria (see map). Archelaus was a terrible tyrant – just like his father had been. So as Joseph was journeying back to Israel from Egypt...

✓ Matthew 2:22 – When he heard that **Archelaus was reigning over Judea** in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

Archelaus died when Jesus was around twelve years old, and after that Judea was ruled by a Governor instead of an Ethnarch. So Pontius Pilate became the governor of Judea about the time Jesus began His public ministry. Archelaus’ half-brother Philip II was the tetrarch of Iturea, Traconitis, Gaulanitis, Auranitis, and Batanea in the north (see map). Archelaus’ full-blooded brother was Herod Antipas, and *he* was the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (see map). So we read in Luke’s Gospel:

✓ Luke 3:1-2 – In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, **Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea** [because Archelaus had died], and **Herod being tetrarch of Galilee**, and his brother **Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis**... the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

So it was *this* Herod, the tetrarch *of Galilee* who heard about the fame of Jesus...

B. “And he said to his servants, ‘This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.’”

Obviously, Herod should have known better. He should have known that John the Baptist and Jesus had both been alive at the same time. But Mark and Luke tell us that there was a rumor going around that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead (Mk. 6:14; Lk. 9:7), and this rumor, combined with Herod’s very *guilty* conscience, made him willing to believe his most

superstitious fears. There is a lesson for us here. A guilty conscience can cause irrational fears. But irrational or not, we can't escape them. On the other hand, a clean conscience releases us from these fears and brings us a wonderful *peace* of mind and heart (cf. Ryle and Calvin). Now of course, Matthew hasn't yet told us why Herod should have such a guilty conscience. So now he gives us a *very detailed* "flashback" (cf. Mk. 6:17-29). Verses 1-2 were just *setting us up* for Matthew's *main* agenda – which is the whole "crazy" story of how John died. "[Herod] said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.'"

## II. Matthew 14:3-12

A. "For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison..."

We already know that in Matthew's Gospel, John has been in prison since the very beginning of Jesus public ministry.

- ✓ Matthew 4:12-13 – When [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.
- ✓ Matthew 11:2-3 – John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ.

And now we know that it was Herod the tetrarch who arrested John (probably because John was ministering and preaching in Perea – which was Herod's jurisdiction). Josephus (a Jewish historian who was born only a few years after Jesus' resurrection) tells us that John was imprisoned in Herod's fortress at Machaerus, just east of the Dead Sea (see map and pictures).

B. "Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.'"

Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, who was the son of King Herod the Great by yet another of his wives (see chart – HERODIAS [1]). Herodias eventually married her uncle, Herod Philip I, who was the son of Herod the Great by still another of his wives (see chart – HERODIAS [2]). Herod Philip and Herodias had a daughter together named Salome. But as it turns out, Herodias ended up falling in love with her husband's half-brother Herod Antipas, and so Herodias left Philip, Herod Antipas divorced his wife, and the two of them were married (see chart – HERODIAS [3]). Now even though Herod was not ethnically Jewish (his father was Idumean and his mother Samaritan), he was a *professing Jew* – one who was supposedly a follower of Judaism. But Herod was a *terribly* wicked man, and he never hesitated to flaunt God's laws. God's law clearly said:

- ✓ Leviticus 18:16; 20:21 – You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife... If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity. He has uncovered his brother's nakedness.

And so John the Baptist had been very boldly confronting Herod with his sin: "It is not lawful for you to have her [as your wife]". This is a very familiar picture from the Old Testament – here is God's holy prophet confronting the ruler of Israel with his sin, calling him to repentance, and

almost certainly warning him of God's judgment. As it turned out, the wife that Herod divorced so that he could marry Herodias went home to her father (Aretas) who was the Arabian king of the Nabateans (see map). From that day on, king Aretas bore a grudge against Herod, and eventually, this was one of the reasons that he went to war with Herod – thoroughly defeating his armies. Not long after this defeat, Herod was condemned by Rome to live in exile in Gaul (modern day France) until his death. Herodias chose to go with Herod into exile, but we have no record of any children being born to Herod and Herodias. The law said:

- ✓ Leviticus 20:21 – If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity. He has uncovered his brother's nakedness; *they shall be childless*.

And so John was vindicated – though some would say not until too late.

- C. “John had been saying to [Herod], ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’ And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.”

Mark seems to give us a very different picture:

- ✓ Mark 6:19-20 – And *Herodias* had a grudge against [John] and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for 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.

It may be that after some time Herod's temper cooled, and with John now safely contained in prison Herod could somehow find his preaching entertaining – instead of offensive and politically embarrassing. Herod *knew* that John was a *righteous* and *holy* man, and so he kept him safe – though he kept him “safe” in a prison cell. And yet though he listened to him gladly, he only found him strange and perplexing. Herod never had even the remotest intention of repenting. Jesus warned of the *leaven* of Herod and called him “that fox” (Mk. 8:15; Lk. 13:31-32). Later on, Herod will mock and treat Jesus with contempt (Lk. 23:11). Herod is a wicked coward. He flaunts God's laws, imprisons God's servants, and then listens to them as little more than an entertaining pastime. *But* at least John the Baptist is “safe”. At least his life has been spared. And at this point, I think it would be natural for us to *hope* that this is a sign of God's favor and protection. Contrary to everything we might have expected, John's life has been spared. Could this mean that we can expect John's release from prison? Why else would he have been spared for this long? But, of course, we already know better, because Herod is *now* afraid that Jesus is *John* – raised from the *dead*! So what *happened*? What went wrong?

- D. “But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.”

The girl's name is Salome, Herodias' daughter from her previous marriage to Herod's half-brother Philip. So Salome is Herod's step daughter *and* his niece. Matthew uses the word for a *young* girl, so she was certainly not past her early teens. The guests were mostly, if not all men. Mark tells us that Herod “gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee” (Mark 6:21). We should obviously assume a very debased and depraved atmosphere. And when Herod promises to give Salome whatever she asks, he's just showing off

for his guests. Herod is not concerned for Salome. He only wants to make a display of his wealth and power. Probably we should also assume that Herod is at least partially drunk – that’s only to be expected at a party like this. Mark tells us that Herod promised to give Salome whatever she asked of him, up to *half of his kingdom* (Mk. 6:23)! But aside from the fact that this is a very *foolish* and *rash* promise, Herod is no king, and he has no kingdom. He is a petty ruler of two tiny little provinces in the vast Roman Empire *pretending* to be someone that he is not (cf. Carson). Lust... arrogance... drunkenness... this is truly a birthday feast that fits the reputation of Herod. But what will Salome ask for?

- E. “Prompted by her mother, she said, ‘Give me the head of John the Baptist here [right here and now] on a platter’”

You can almost feel like you’re in one of those dreams that make no sense – the ones that are completely random and unreal. *How in the world* has Herod’s birthday feast come to this? Herodias sees an opportunity for revenge, but certainly she won’t be successful! What about the fact that Herod knows deep down that John is a righteous and holy man, and that he even listens to him gladly? What about Herod’s fear of the masses who consider John to be a prophet? What about the fact that if Herod does what Herodias asks he will have to execute John on the spot – without even any semblance of a trial? How unpopular would that be? Surely Herod will not grant such a request! Herod *was* aware of *all* these things...

- F. “And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given.”

For the first and *only* time, Matthew calls Herod what he loved to be called – “the king” – at the very point that he has most disgraced himself as the evil coward that he is. For any number of reasons, Herod does *not* want to execute John the Baptist. Mark even tells us that Herod was “*exceedingly* sorry” (Mk. 6:26). This is not what he had expected. This is not what he wanted. Later on, Herod will have such a guilty conscience that he will be willing to believe John the Baptist has risen from the dead. And yet *only because of his oaths* (cf. Lev. 5:4-5) *and his guests* he commanded it to be given.

“We infer that, though he had sworn *a hundred times*, yet if there had been *no witness*, he would *not* have held by his oath. No inward feelings of religion constrained Herod to do this, but the mere love of power drove him headlong; for he reckoned that he would sink in the estimation of those who were present, if he did not fulfill his engagement.”  
(Calvin)

So *only* because Herod did not want to be embarrassed before his birthday guests, he did the very thing he absolutely did *not* want to do:

- G. “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. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.”

How can you not react to something like this with a feeling of stunned disbelief and shock? It would have been one thing if John was executed because of Herod's anger and rage over John's preaching of God's Word. You could say that there would be something noble about this. But that's not how the story goes. A resentful wife... a birthday feast... a dancing girl (who happens to be Salome)... a drunken "king"... a completely unrealistic and careless promise... and a reputation to maintain before the dinner guests... *this* is what leads to the death of John the Baptist with his head presented to Herod's wife on a platter. It was all so preventable... so senseless... so random – almost as though John's death was nothing more than a *chance accident*. Where was God in all of this? Where was God in this story?

## Conclusion

I think we can know at the very least that Matthew tells us this story in order to *fortify* our *faith* in the face of unjust suffering. There could be no greater contrast between the righteousness and holiness of John, and the wickedness and depravity of Herod. And so Calvin writes: "In this way the Lord sometimes gives up his people to the *pride* of wicked men, till he at length makes it evident that their blood is precious in his sight" (Ps. 116:15). Stories like this one should always bring back to us a needed sense of perspective – especially as *we* enjoy the blessings of freedom and peace here in America. Matthew Henry put it this way: "If Christ's forerunner was thus treated, let not his followers expect to be caressed by the world." And J.C. Ryle exhorts us: "Let us learn... that God's children must not look for their reward in this world." For these reasons alone, it is *good* for us to be reminded of the story of John's death.

But I also wonder if Matthew was trying to *fortify* our *faith* in the face of suffering – *especially* when that suffering appears to be utterly *random* and *senseless*. Sometimes it's the apparent randomness of life that most challenges our faith. Martyrdom is one thing. But a "chance" martyrdom that almost seems "accidental" is quite another thing. Some might even ask if we can call John the Baptist a martyr! It is when our sufferings appear to be most random and senseless that we are most inclined to doubt the hand of God. In other words, sometimes it's not so much the *suffering* as it is the "*randomness*" of life that most challenges our faith. Let's remember that John the Baptist is the one of whom Jesus once said:

- ✓ Matthew 11:11 – Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.

This is the one of whom it had been prophesied in the Old Testament:

- ✓ Matthew 3:3 – The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."
- ✓ Matthew 11:10 – Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.

If there was ever a person who would not be the victim of a "random twist of fate", you would think it would be John. Who would have ever guessed that *John the Baptist(!)* would end up being executed by beheading because of a bunch of crazy "chance" circumstances? It almost

seems like John's death was a fluke! It doesn't seem right! We expect things to make more "sense". And yet listen to what Jesus says later on in Matthew chapter seventeen:

- ✓ Matthew 17:12 – "I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him *whatever they pleased*. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

On the one hand, "they did to John the Baptist whatever they pleased". John the Baptist was murdered because when Herod "accidentally" got into an awkward spot, it pleased him to save "save face" before his birthday guests. On the other hand, the death of John the Baptist was a foreshadowing of the suffering and death of none other than Jesus Christ. God was *no less* sovereign in the "randomness" of John's death than He will be in the carefully orchestrated and prophesied sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. So how do we explain the birthday party, the choice of Salome, the drunken and careless promise, and the order that was given simply to avoid embarrassment before the dinner guests? How do we explain the apparent *senselessness* of John's head on a dish? We can't. And we don't. But we do believe that God is sovereign in *all* of our sufferings – and *never more or less* at one time than any other. Will we trust God in what appears to be the randomness of our lives... will we trust God in what appears to be the senselessness of our lives... and will we trust God especially when the result of that "randomness" and "senselessness" is our own pain, and hurt, and suffering? *Remember* John the Baptist. Even in *his* death we can be assured that God did not lightly suffer it to come about, for the death of His saints is *never* a trifling matter with God (cf. Keil-Delitzsch). No matter what the circumstances were that surrounded his death, *we would still be right to say: Precious* in the sight of the LORD was the death of John the Baptist (cf. Ps. 116:15).

### Teaching our Children

The content of this passage is certainly intended for more mature audiences (though Matthew relates the story in a very modest and restrained manner). To whatever extent you feel it is appropriate, talk with your children about the sovereignty of God in our sufferings (*see first paragraph of the Conclusion*) – and especially in those sufferings that may appear to be completely random and senseless (after reviewing some of the circumstances surrounding John's death *see remainder of the Conclusion after paragraph 1*).

**(King) Herod the Great<sup>1</sup>** (40 B.C. – 4 B.C.)  
married:

Malthace

Mariamne II

Mariamne I

Cleopatra

**Archelaus (Ethnarch)<sup>2</sup>**

**Herod Antipas (Tetrarch)<sup>3</sup>**  
Marries **HERODIAS** (3)  
(his niece and sister-in-law)

**Herod Philip I**  
marries **HERODIAS** (2)  
(his niece)

**Aristobulus**

**Herod Philip II (Tetrarch)<sup>4</sup>**  
marries Salome (2)  
(his niece)

(Ruled Judea, Idumea,  
& Samaria  
4 B.C. – A.D. 6)  
After Archelaus, Judea  
was ruled by a series of  
governors such as Pontius  
Pilate (A.D. 26-36)<sup>5</sup>

(Ruled Galilee & Perea  
4 B.C. – A.D. 39)

(Ruled Iturea, Traconitis,  
Gaulanitis, Auranitis,  
& Batanea  
4 B.C. – A.D. 34)

Salome (1)

**HERODIAS** (1)

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 2:1 (cf. Luke 1:5) – Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of **Herod the king**.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 2:22 – When [Joseph] heard that **Archelaus was reigning over Judea** in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.

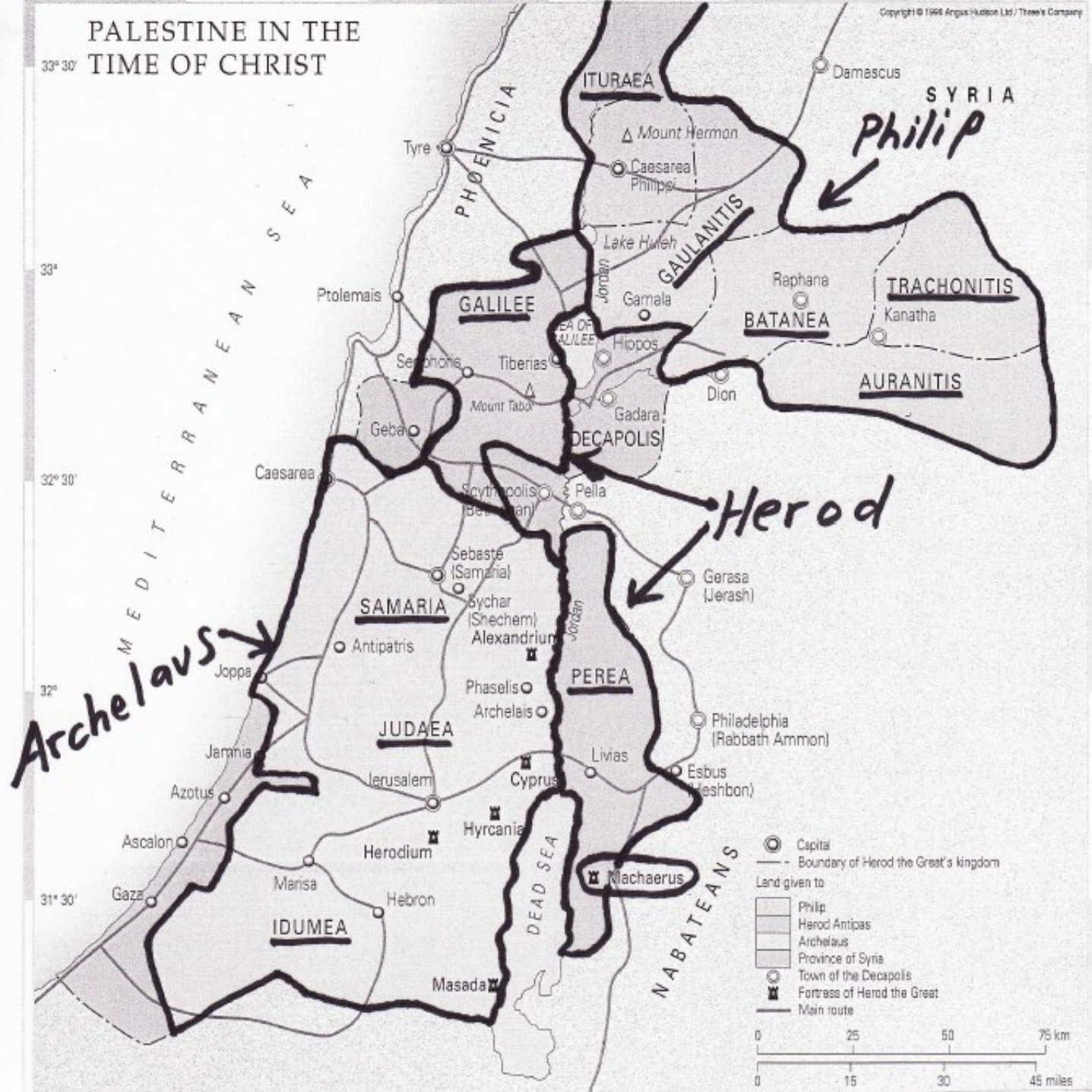
<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:1-2 – In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, **Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis...** the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

<sup>4</sup> See Luke 3:1 under footnote 3

<sup>5</sup> See Luke 3:1 under footnote 3

# PALESTINE IN THE TIME OF CHRIST

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