

Which Herod?

Matthew Chapter 14

When we hear or read the name Herod in the Bible many things come to mind but I wonder how many people realize there were several men in the New Testament referred to as Herod. The historical underpinnings of the Herodian Dynasty include a Roman civil war, a man who switched sides in order to rise to power, deals made behind closed doors, a clandestine trip to Rome, a meeting with Octavian (who would eventually become Caesar Augustus), the assignment of two Roman legions to secure his throne, and a marriage to validate his position. According to the Talmud (Baba Basra 3a), the last Hasmonean was a young princess, and upon hearing that Herod intended to marry her and make her queen she committed suicide. Herod preserved her body in honey so that he could claim that he wed the daughter of a royal house.

The first Herod was “Herod the Great”. He is the one described in the historical outline above. He is also the one who “became enraged and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he ascertained from the magi”. (Mat 2:16)

One of Herod the Great’s sons was Herod Antipas who is referenced in Matthew 14:1 and Luke 3:1. He was also called Herod the tetrarch which means he governed one fourth of the kingdom. With the permission of the Roman senate, Herod the Great divided his kingdom into four parts and bequeathed them to his sons. Part of Herod the tetrarch’s kingdom included the Galilee. Herod Antipas is the one who had John the Baptist beheaded; who did not pass judgment on Jesus during His trials and sent Jesus back to Pontius Pilate which eventually led to His crucifixion.

As we get into the book of Acts, Herod Agrippa I lead the persecution of the church as King in Jerusalem. He had James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee put to death. He also martyred the apostle James.

Herod Agrippa II, knowing Paul was a Roman citizen allowed Paul to defend himself giving him the opportunity to preach the gospel to those assembled in the amphitheater in Caesarea (maritime). Festus thinks Paul’s a lunatic, but Agrippa says, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” (Acts 26:28) Later, he tries to convince the Jews rebellion against Rome was futile, but his plea is ignored. Obviously, this only scratches the surface of the history of the Herodian Dynasty, which ended with the death of Agrippa II.

As we continue to work our way through the New Testament, rarely do the writers tell us which Herod is being addressed or ruling. They just call him Herod because those who read the gospels, epistles and writings in the New Testament would have known which Herod was being addressed.

Matthew is writing about the actions of “Herod the tetrarch”. We are told, “at the time, Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, ..”. It must have taken some time for the information or news about Jesus to reach Herod’s ears. The news had to pass through the palace walls, through the crowds that shut out the truth. Upon hearing the news, his fears come to forefront of his mind and tells his servants, “This is John the Baptist, he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” Alexander Maclaren describes Herod as, “...a sensual, luxurious, feeble-willed, easily frightened, superstitious and cunning despot: ...driven farther in evil than he meant or wished”. I wonder how and where John the Baptist had the opportunity to tell Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have her (Herodias)” who had been his brother’s Philip’s wife. Herodias hated John the Baptist and held a grudge against him and wanted John to be put to death. But Herod’s fear and weakness prohibited him from completing the task. Herodias, who first married her uncle Philip and then entered into an adulterous relationship or so-called marriage with Herod the tetrarch, her step uncle, is described as a character driven by “her hot animal passions, her cool inflexible revenge, her cynical disregard for all decency, her deadness to natural affection for her child, her ferocity and her cunning, in her we have a hideous picture of corrupted womanhood.” I wonder if Herodias prompted her daughter to order John’s head on a platter before or after Herod’s foolish promise. Herod is grieved by the request and yet still commands John to be beheaded. Why? Because of his oaths, because of his dinner guests and because he wanted to save face. He lacked the strength of character to realize an oath that should have never been made, should never been carried out.

I wonder how many sins have been committed or compounded because we wanted to save face and look good rather than please God?

1. Who had John the Baptist arrested? Why? What did Herod want to do with John the Baptist but didn't? Why was he reluctant? What does this tell us about Herod?

2. Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected, why? (Luke 9:7-9 might help) What lead to the death of John the Baptist? How would you describe the request and Herod's decision? What does

3. What did Jesus do when He heard of John's death? Why? What motivated Jesus to help the multitude? Where did they come from? what did Jesus do? What resources did Jesus have to feed the multitude?

4. Why do you think Jesus was in a hurry to get the disciples off? Where did Jesus go and what did He do after He dismissed the crowd? (22-33) What is the "fourth watch" of the night? What did the disciples think when Jesus approached walking on the water? What was Jesus response?

5. Who spoke up and what did he ask? How did Jesus respond? What lessons can we learn from these verses (22-36)? How did the disciples respond?

6. Where did they go after the storm and what did they ask of Jesus? Why? What happened? (34-36)