

A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 6:14-29

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This is a prophet martyr story in the tradition of the prophet martyrs of Israel. You might want to look up the martyrdom and ascension of Isaiah in the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, which is an earlier prophet martyr story. In that story, his enemies accuse Isaiah of prophesying against Jerusalem and against the temple. Isaiah is tried before the king, found guilty, and sawed in two with a wood saw. In the story of the prophet Jeremiah, Jeremiah was nearly killed. He was thrown into a cistern and only rescued at the last moment. Elijah was involved in a life-and-death struggle with Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab.

For Mark's hearers, the memories of Jezebel and of her conflict with Elijah lay in the background of this story of John the Baptist. Elijah was constantly telling Ahab how corrupt he was, by implication, because Jezebel was bringing in all the prophets of Baal, and that he was violating the will of God by having married Jezebel. Elijah confronts the priests of Baal, defeats them, and kills 400 of them. He then escapes because he knows that Jezebel is going to try and kill him. The only reason that Elijah survives this battle with Jezebel is that she got killed before he did. He fled in fear for his life.

John was clearly in dialogue with King Herod. Incidentally, this "Herod" is not Herod the Great who built the temple and died around 4 B.C. It is his son, Herod Antipas. He was one of the three sons of Herod the Great who became his successors when the kingdom was divided after his death. Herod Antipas ruled in the area of Galilee. The story clearly implies that John the Baptist was in steady dialogue with the king as is typical of the prophets. That is, the prophets are always in one way or another speaking to those who are in power and in various ways confronting them, guiding them in some instances, helping them in others, opposing them if they do that which is wrong.

In this instance, John was telling Herod that he was doing wrong: "It's against the law for you to have your brother's wife." She was the wife of Philip, Herod's brother, who was another one of the successors of Herod the Great. She had fallen in love with Herod, and left her husband and married him. He had a bigger kingdom and she looked out for her own interests. She was determined to get John the Baptist because he was steadily criticizing their marriage in public which made it very uncomfortable for them.

This story reflects the actual politics of the period. There are indications in the historical record that the marriage of Herod Antipas and Herodias actually did happen. Herod did marry the wife of his brother Philip. This marriage was part of the corruption that became systemic in the rule of Herod Antipas.

The story of the banquet is a story of ancient banquets of kings. It has connections with the story of Esther and the banquet that was held which Queen Vashti refused to join, not

wanting to be shown off (probably naked) to the king's guests. The story of the banquet in Daniel when the words appeared on the wall is another similar scene. This story in Mark, then, needs to be told in the spirit of the great royal banquets of antiquity.

Herodias' daughter comes in and dances. We don't know how old she was; we can estimate 12,13,14. A clear implication is that Herod was delighted at this dance of his stepdaughter, that he'd been turned on. It's appropriate to play with those dynamics in telling the story. It is not necessarily implied that this was the dance of the seven veils in which she did a striptease or something, as has been part of the development of the legend of the story. It was probably a more innocent dance than that. It was the dance of a girl, not of a voluptuous woman as she has often been portrayed in operas and other performances.

The impact of the execution is horror for the storyteller and for the listeners. This is a sign of political corruption at its very worst. Herod Antipas, knowing who John was, knowing that he was a prophet, executes him at the whim of his wife's manipulative request.

The contrast between the innocence of the girl asking for the head of John the Baptist on a platter and Herod's motives is grotesque. Herod demands and orders that he be executed because he had vowed to the girl that he would give her whatever she wanted. He never was required by any law to execute an innocent man in order to fulfill a vow. It is a sign of the utter corruption and evil of those in power, and specifically of Herod.

This story has many common elements with the story of the trial before Pilate. Pilate also condemns Jesus to death knowing that he had done nothing wrong. A further similarity is that Jesus' execution is ordered out of political expediency and out of Pilate's desire to save his reputation and his own political future. In the same way, Herod clearly has John executed rather than suffer the political embarrassment of not fulfilling his vow. When you tell this story, you need to convey in some way the grotesque character of this trial and of this whimsical execution. It is a tragedy of a great prophet who becomes a martyr at the hands of a capricious ruler.