

**THE BEHEADING OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
AUGUST 29/SEPTEMBER 11, 2007**

ACTS 13: 25-32

ST. MARK 6: 14-30

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Gospel...And king Herod heard of him; (for his name was spread abroad:) and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. Others said, That it is Elias. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead. For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee; And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an

executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother. And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb. And the apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught.

...

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist (St. Matthew 11: 11)

This Herod

The Herod of today's Gospel was the son of King Herod, the killer of babies in Bethlehem. He was tetrarch although St. Mark refers to him as king.¹ Fornication drove Herod as it had Solomon:

Herod also was driven by fornication to order the unjust and inhuman beheading of him who was greater than all of them that are born of women (cf. St. Matthew 11: 11), at whom even the wild beasts wondered when he was living in the wilderness, him who was the voice and Forerunner of the Word and the lamp of the Light, as the divine herald, the Evangelist Mark will clearly show us today.²

Herod had learned of Jesus' fame and erroneously thought that the Forerunner was Christ and had acquired the power to work miracles after his resurrection.³ Others thought John was Elijah since he stressed repentance and warned them of the upcoming wrath:

It appears clear that Herod feared John, considered him quite powerful and thought that (John) would be even stronger in denouncing him. And here is a thing worthy of wonder: the slayer fears the **slain**, and the lawless fears one **who dies for the law** (emphases supplied).⁴

The Circumstances Of John's Death, His Laying Down The Law On Herod's Marriage

By the law, any way you look at it, Herod had stolen away Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Some thought Herod stole her away whilst brother Philip was alive;

others say he was dead with a surviving daughter. Herod would have broken the law by marrying her whilst his brother still lived. He would have broken the law by marrying her when there was a child. The law required that one take his brother's wife upon his death but only where there was no surviving child:⁵

The intention of the lawgiver was to raise up seed unto the dead brother, and particularly to provide for his wife and his household, so that his inheritance would be kept inviolate; where a child was left to carry on the family, he did not allow such a practice. Thus it was that Herod was rebuked by the Baptist, because he lived unrighteously and lawlessly, without any shame.⁶

Herodias wanted to kill John due to his admonition to Herod, but she couldn't. So Satan arranged a day of debauchery (a drinking party) to celebrate Herod's birthday. The Evil One "dances by means of the young girl".⁷ Propelled by his lust, Herod gives her his oath and has the "unlawful and ungodly and indeed mindless oath" carried out. Under the circumstances, he should have broken his oath:⁸

It behooved thee not to have taken an oath so hastily and unthinkingly; but, having taken such an unwise oath, it would have been better to break the oath rather than to behead a righteous man; for when the choice is between two evils, **the lesser is better** (emphasis supplied).⁹

An Alternative Spiritual Sense

Bl. Theophylact states that things may also be "understood in a spiritual sense":

Herod represents the fleshly and superficial Jewish people (fn 8 indicates that "Herod" means 'fleshly' or 'skinlike.'). He married this woman, false and shameless glory, and even today her daughter, erroneous knowledge of the Scriptures, dances and moves among the Jewish people, beguiling them. For they think they know the Scriptures, but they do not. For they decapitated John, the speaker of prophecy, not accepting the head of all prophecy, Christ. Though they have the word of the prophets, they possess the word without its head, which is Christ.¹⁰

Brethren, avoid fornication; this was what drove Herod to his despicable decision. Stand up for doing the right thing "For the righteous live for evermore,

and their righteousness endures always.”¹¹ Avoid hard or heavy drinking, and you won’t have as much to repent about (smile). Don’t give oaths which have evil in their means or purposes. Never take an oath for evil, as a satanic rite; resist the slanderer. Remember the Lord has defeated him and merely allows him to ‘pester’ us as tests of our constancy. Follow Christ faithfully and good works will ensue to manifest our faith. Have no fear for He is with us always (St. Matthew 28: 20).

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Blessed Theophylact, *Explanations of the Holy Gospel of St. Mark, Vol.II*, (translated from the original Greek by Fr. Christopher Stade) Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 1997, p. 52.

² *The Gospel Commentary (Lessons Taken from the Holy Gospel and from Many of the Divine Writings of Our Father among the Saints, John Chrysostom)* (translated from the Slavonic into English by Hieromonk German Ciuba), Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity of Christ (Old Rite), Erie, Pennsylvania, 2002, p. 839.

³ *ibid.*, p. 840.

⁴ *id.*

⁵ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

⁶ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, pp. 841-842.

⁷ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, p. 843.

¹⁰ Bl. Theophylact, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

¹¹ *The Gospel Commentary, op. cit.*, p. 840.