

NATIONAL BIBLE SOCIETY OF IRELAND
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The Absurd Death of John the Baptist

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Who was John the Baptist (JP Meier)

- JB was a 1st cent. Jewish prophet, proclaiming an eschatological message with some apocalyptic traits.
- His message was imminent judgement and the way to avoid that was by repentance, illustrated by his baptism.
- There is an implied critique of the adequacy of the Temple worship.
- The differences between JB and Qumran are greater than the similarities.
- He anticipated “the coming one”, but it is difficult to be more precise than that - an angel? the messiah? a heavenly figure? God himself?
- He had a big influence in his day - as the need to execute him illustrates. Still, any idea of a revolt is due to Herod's paranoia rather than to anything JB actually said.
- The relationship between Jesus and John is hotly disputed - e.g. did Jesus follow his “mentor's” example and baptise?

Gospel portraits: Mark, Matthew, Luke, Q, John, Gospel of the Nazoreans

Behold, the mother of the Lord and his brethren said to him: John the Baptist baptises unto the remission of sins, let us go and be baptised by him. But he said to them: Wherein have I sinned that I should go and be baptised by him? Unless what I have said is ignorance (a sin of ignorance).

Mark	Q	Matthew	Luke	John	GN
-	-	-	birth	-	-
(Elijah) baptises	? passive	Elijah! uneasy	? relegates	“best man” Not Elijah omits	- refuses
-	Mid-time?	OT End	Mid-time	Voice	-
Death	prison	Death	omits	omits	-
disciples	disciples	disciples/ unbelief		disciples/ converted	-
baptism	baptism	baptism	(baptism)	(baptism)	
repent	repent	repent	repent	omits	
forgiveness	judgement	kingdom fierce	forgiveness fierce	omits reasonable	

The death of John the Baptist

But to some of the Jews the destruction of Herod's army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety toward God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body[,] implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behaviour. When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on humankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in

a difficult situation, and see his mistake. Though John, because of Herod's suspicions, was brought in chains to Machaerus, the stronghold that we have previously mentioned, and there put to death, yet the verdict of the Jews was that the destruction visited upon Herod's army was a vindication of John, since God saw fit to inflict such a blow on Herod."

(Antiquities 18:116–119)

1. Mark's narrative echoes two biblical stories where women, deceit, banqueting, and death are connected. The book of Esther is directly cited in Herod's offer to give the girl up to half his kingdom (6:23), the same promise made by Ahasuerus to his young queen (Esther 5:3, 6–7; 7:2–3).
2. In the LXX, Esther and the other candidates for the king's harem are called *korasia*, the same word used to describe the dancing daughter (Mark 6:22, 28). Esther uses a banquet as a pretext for the accusation that prompts the king to order Haman's execution (Esther 7:1–10; *Midr. Esther* 1.19–21 even adds the head-on-a-platter motif).
3. In the book of Judith, the heroine decapitates the besotted and intoxicated Holofernes at a banquet (Jdt. 12:10–13:10a) and brings it back to Bethulia, where she removes it from her food bag and proudly displays it to the men of the city (13:15).
4. There are also intertextual echoes of Jezebel's persecution of Elijah (1 Kings 19–21; 2 Kings 9). As Ahab is manipulated into killing the innocent Naboth by Jezebel, Herodias tricks Herod into ordering John's execution. Elijah is closely identified with John the Baptist in Mark (6:14–15; 9:11–13), so the implicit Jezebel/Herodias typology seems relevant.

Initial Conclusions

- ▶ Mark gets a great deal of history simply wrong
- ▶ Mark's account seems "intertextual" with other stories of women and murders/executions
- ▶ Josephus' version looks the more probably historically
- ▶ So, what was Mark up to?

Furthermore

- ▶ It is an example of Mark's "sandwich technique"
- ▶ 6:7-13 The sending out of the Twelve
- ▶ 6:14-16 Herod hears speculation about Jesus
- ▶ 6:17-29 The execution and burial of John the Baptism
- ▶ 6:30 The return of the apostles.
- ▶ Narratively, the story fills in the time between sending and return.

- ▶ It associates John's death with the deaths of the prophets of old.
- ▶ It anticipates the fate of Jesus (already signalled with the link between 6:14-16 and 8:27-30)
- ▶ Table: parallels between the story of John's death and Jesus' crucifixion.
- ▶ Vocabulary: handed over (*paradidomai*: 1:14) king/kingdom (6:14, 23, 25, 26), risen (6:14, 16), send (*apostellō*: 6:17, 27), to kill (6:19), body, placed, tomb (27).

- ▶ John's death is a measure of the cost of discipleship
- ▶ John's death anticipates the death of Jesus or rather, John's destiny is read in the light of Jesus' destiny.
- ▶ Speculation about the resurrection of John hints at the final resurrection of Jesus in Mark's narrative
- ▶ Awkward: Jesus as "John redivivus" *before* the death of John?
- ▶ So, Mark is "up to" a lot more than a simple glance might reveal

- ▶ Thus, although absent, Jesus is the real topic of the passage
- ▶ Thus, John, although passive, plays an immensely significant role
- ▶ And so, the Herod family—apparently so much to the fore—are less important for Mark than the absent Jesus and the passive John
- ▶ Mark cares more for theology than history