

Who is Jesus?
Jesus the Threatening Prophet
Matthew 14:1-12

Introduction

Which Jesus?: I had a professor who was meticulous about the way I argued and critiqued when I would write papers in grad school. “Describe your opponent's position in such a way that they would agree with you.” Imagine what that could do for political discourse in our country (!). In academia, failure to do this could anger your interlocutor, undermine your credibility, and result in you arguing for or against something that no one believes and isn't true. But what does this mean in regard to Jesus? If you're not careful, it is easy to end up worshipping a Jesus that isn't real, a Jesus you invented from your own preferences and opinions. Do you believe in a Jesus that isn't real?

- Why do we refuse to believe in the true Jesus? Often because it is a threat to our sin, our lifestyle, our tradition (I've got to change). Can't treat people that way. Can't date or marry that person. Can't participate in that activity. Can't hate that person. Have to care about people and situations I'd like to ignore.

Herod was unable to see who Jesus really was because he viewed his message as a threat and was afraid of him because of his own sin.

¹ At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, ² 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.” ³ For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, ⁴ because John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” ⁵ And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. ⁶ But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, ⁷ so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” ⁹ And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. ¹⁰ He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, ¹¹ and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. ¹² And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.¹

¹ Ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ ἤκουσεν Ἡρώδης ὁ τετραράρχης τὴν ἀκοὴν Ἰησοῦ, ² καὶ εἶπεν τοῖς παισὶν αὐτοῦ, Οὗτός ἐστιν Ἰωάννης ὁ βαπτιστής· αὐτὸς ἠγέρθη ἀπὸ τῶν νεκρῶν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο αἱ δυνάμεις ἐνεργοῦσιν ἐν αὐτῷ. ³ Ὁ γὰρ Ἡρώδης κρατήσας τὸν Ἰωάννην ἔδησεν [αὐτὸν] καὶ ἐν φυλακῇ ἀπέθετο διὰ Ἡρωδιάδα τὴν γυναῖκα Φιλίππου τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ. ⁴ ἔλεγεν γὰρ ὁ Ἰωάννης αὐτῷ, Οὐκ ἔξεστίν σοι ἔχειν αὐτήν. ⁵ καὶ θέλων αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι ἐφοβήθη τὸν ὄχλον, ὅτι ὡς προφήτην αὐτὸν εἶχον. ⁶ γενεσίοις δὲ γενομένοις τοῦ Ἡρώδου ὠρχήσατο ἡ θυγάτηρ τῆς Ἡρωδιάδος ἐν τῷ μέσῳ καὶ ἤρεσεν τῷ Ἡρώδῃ, ⁷ ὅθεν μεθ' ὄρκου ὠμολόγησεν αὐτῇ δοῦναι ὃ ἐὰν αἰτήσῃται. ⁸ ἡ δὲ προβιβασθεῖσα ὑπὸ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτῆς, Δός μοι, φησίν, ὧδε ἐπὶ πίνακι τὴν κεφαλὴν Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ. ⁹ καὶ λυπηθεὶς ὁ βασιλεὺς διὰ τοὺς ὄρκους καὶ τοὺς συνανακειμένους ἐκέλευσεν δοθῆναι, ¹⁰ καὶ πέμψας ἀπεκεφάλισεν [τὸν] Ἰωάννην ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ. ¹¹ καὶ ἠνέχθη ἡ κεφαλὴ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ πίνακι καὶ ἐδόθη τῷ κορασίῳ, καὶ ἤνεγκεν τῇ μητρὶ αὐτῆς. ¹² καὶ προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἦραν τὸ πτῶμα καὶ ἔθαψαν αὐτό[ν], καὶ ἐλθόντες ἀπήγγειλαν τῷ Ἰησοῦ.

The Elephant in the (Sermon Series) Room: Is this story about John the Baptist or about Jesus? We're in a sermon series called "Who is Jesus?", so it might seem out of place for a story to have 10 of the 12 verses about John. Is John the Baptist pointing to John or to Jesus? Even this scandalous story is embedded in Herod's grappling with the popularity of Jesus (e.g., a spinoff like the minions movie is really about Gru).

- It is worth noting that Matthew structures the narrative around Jesus. Jesus is the bookend of the story (starts with Jesus in v. 1 and ends with Jesus in v. 12).
- And this "flashback" (Wayne's World) is embedded in a gospel that is "all about Jesus" ("All About Jesus", 🎵 "from genesis to revelation").
- Even this seemingly disconnected story is grounded in the question of Jesus' identity. It was inevitable that Herod would hear of Jesus' fame and it was natural that John's disciples would turn to Jesus in their moment of grief and loss (v. 1, 12).

Who is Herod?

Herod Heard About Jesus: ¹ At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus Jesus fame was undeniable and unavoidable. Herod could not escape this counter-cultural, miracle-working, preacher who was gathering crowds by the thousands. He'd already been in plenty of trouble with the religious elite, but they couldn't stop his success (why? because it was true!). Now his fame was reaching the ears of the politicians.

- What is a politician to do with Jesus?
 - Politician (someone professionally involved in politics) vs. public servant.
 - Use Jesus, admire Jesus, partner with Jesus, but it is hard to submit to him.
 - Is it about you or him?

Who is Herod?: Herod's are all over the Bible and Second Temple Judaism. The father of the Herod in our story today (Herod the Great) ruled the area and divided his area of rule among his descendants and relatives (hence tetrachy, ¼, among 3 sons and sister). Herod became a monarchical name. Herod the Great is the "Herod" in the beginning of Matthew who slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem trying to destroy any opposition to his throne (based on the visit of the Magi). Herod the tetrarch was named "*Antipatros*" meaning "like the Father" and called by the nickname "Antipas."

- Family picnics must have been complicated with Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, and Herod Archelaus (other brother). Philip (half-brother also sometimes went by Herod) but also married Herodias (not to mention Herod the Great named everything after himself, half-niece; George Foreman).

But the Herod of this story (Antipasta), was a career politician and his behavior will shed light on a few things.

- **Career Politician:** For him to stay in power for 30+ years meant he had to placate Rome and the local Jewish population.
- **People-Pleaser:** He wasn't Jewish (father an Edomite, mother a Samaritan) but tried to play himself off as a faithful Jew by taking part in various Jewish festivals and traditions (like when a politician shows up to church to get votes).

- **Nepotism:** He gained his position through nepotism. As ruthless as Herod the Great was, he accomplished a lot politically. He had many successful building and infrastructure developments. Herod Antipas loved his position and closeness to the emperor but enjoyed none of the accomplishments of his father (eventually being exiled to Gaul because of a political fallout with the empire).
- **Power and Wealth:** Used his position for personal enrichment (he spent most of his time at his “shore house” on the Sea of Galilee, aka Tiberias).
- **Insecure:** Used the title King when he wasn’t the king (governor).

That’s why the *fame* of Jesus is so threatening. Herod worried about popularity of Jesus and John the Baptist

Explain Away the Miracles: And how does he try to explain the powerful miracles and authoritative message of Jesus? ² 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.”

- This might be an unexpected explanation. Why is he worried? He has a guilty conscience. Unrepentant sinners are often haunted by a guilty conscience.
- Herod would more quickly believe Jesus is a ghost than who he says he is (miracles were hard to believe back then too).
 - People today would sooner believe in astrology, “the universe” than God’s power (the premature death of popular people often leads to ghost ideas, e.g., Elvis, Tupac, etc.).
 - Premature death of popular person leads to ghost ideas (Elvis, Tupac, etc.)
- This is superstition (not a theology of resurrection) that was popular among the community as well (e.g., Lk 9:7).

What Happened to Make Herod Feel So Threatened By Jesus?

John the Baptist: John the Baptist was a relative of Jesus who had his own special role of preparing the nation of Israel for the coming of their Messiah. He was a fiery and prophetic preacher who gathered crowds in the countryside and preached repentance (camel hair clothes, wild honey, etc.). He had a group of disciples that figure somewhat importantly in the expansion of the Christian message in both the Gospels and Acts. He was not afraid to forcefully call out the hypocrisy and sin of leaders (e.g., “brood of vipers”). The Bible depicts him as a prophet in the vein of Elijah, challenging sin and wickedness. His character and boldness caused speculation that *he* might be the Messiah (cf. Christ). But, *he was crystal clear*, he was not the Messiah, he came to prepare the way for the Messiah. His message of repentance placed him straight in the path of the wicked rulers of his day.

Herod and John Have a History: The story of John’s death is like a twisted soap opera. ³ For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, ⁴ because John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” This is a bit of a confusing sentence if you’re not familiar with the story. Herod Antipas was married to Herodias (a little confusing to have Herod married to Herodias). No big deal you say? Well it’s a problem on a *number* of levels.

- Herodias was married to Antipas' half-brother Philip. So Antipas married his sister-in-law. This is a clear violation of Jewish law (Lev 18:16, 20:21) and a problem for someone trying to pass himself off as a good "Jewish ruler".
- He wasn't divorcing his wife b/c of some legitimate reason, merely to pursue his own wicked desire.
- Further, this was a politically disastrous move. His first wife was the daughter of a neighboring province (Arabian Nabatea). By divorcing this wife it led to a war with the Nabateans in which Herod lost.
 - Sin will make you stupid.

Herod was on "thin" political ice. The people hated his new marriage to Herodias' on both religious and political grounds.

John is a Political Problem: ⁵ And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. John was calling out the sin of Herod, the coming of God's kingdom (which Herod the Great also feared; plenty today confuse KoG language). Herodias wants John the Baptist dead because he called out their adulterous relationship. John's rebuke, it was like a spark on tinder. "Religious fanaticism with messianic overtones is more politically dangerous than mere political extremism."

- John's popularity protected him from the unjust ruler. John had the popular support. Herod didn't outright kill him because he didn't want to anger the crowd (so he just put him in prison; so kind).
- His heart was wicked despite the political pleasantries he engaged in.
- John's relationship with Herod/Herodias has all the feel of Elijah with Ahab/Jezebel (after all, John is a prophet in the vain of Elijah). As we'll see, Herodias pushes Herod to kill John (something he didn't have the political fortitude to do on his own).
- Speaking into a **political situation** is ok and even good sometimes. Romans 13 (God-ordained government) and 1 Tim 2:2 (e.g., pray for kings so we can live a peaceful life) are not the only passages of Scripture. We also have John the Baptist as an example of political engagement.
 - In American politics we talk about being "too liberal for the conservatives and too conservative for the liberals." But Jesus doesn't map onto our political situation (vote how the Lord leads, with Biblical conviction, and Spirit-led obedience). But Jesus is "too liberal for the liberals and too conservative for the conservatives." He radically outpaces every view of obedience, generosity, grace, and justice you could ever imagine.
 - It is not partisan to speak against immoral laws or immoral leaders. We also shouldn't be surprised when they seek to use the Bible rather than submit to it.
 - And character has to count in our leaders. We must be clear-headed in our opposition to immorality whether it is in our preferred political party or in our opponents. If we excuse immoral behavior in our preferred political party but point it out in political opponents then we are not seeking the way of Jesus but the way of political power.

The Dance: ⁶ But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, ⁷ so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Herodias' daughter danced for the birthday party (pre-teen, young teen girl; daughter/niece of Herod). Many commentators understand her dance to be salacious. Herod promised her whatever she wanted. And her mother uses this oath to get what *she* wants ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."

- Sin doesn't want a piece of you, it wants to take over. It will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost more than you want to pay.
 - Whatever your convictions about drinking beverage alcohol for celebration, in moderation (and there are many godly people who have a variety of opinions), the Bible is clear that drunkenness is a sin. Alcoholism is dangerous. And I've watched people turn to alcohol to cope. They can't make it through life without being under the influence. It becomes ever-present, unavoidable, necessary to live. It is no longer an option but a necessity. The emotional, relational, and financial cost is ever-increasing.
- Herod puts himself between a rock and a hard place (sin does that). If he kills John he keeps his promise to his daughter/wife but endangers his political situation. If he doesn't kill John, he reneges on his promise.
 - The only way out is to do the right thing but lose face and *he's unwilling to lose face! ("God, I'll do whatever you want except admit I'm wrong"). You can't be found until you admit you're lost.
- ⁹ And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. At the end of the day, he was more worried about his reputation among his important guests than the public backlash or *what is right*.
- The grotesque result of his sin was on full display: ¹⁰ He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, ¹¹ and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. Their wickedness was not just tolerated *but celebrated*.
 - You think things are bad today? (they are but sin's been around awhile). We see plenty of immorality justified in our political leaders today.

John and Jesus: There are a lot of things that link the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus. John prepares the way for Jesus to come. Jesus' ministry replaces and exceeds John's (much to the chagrin of some of John's disciples). John helps kickoff Jesus' ministry by baptizing him and explains that he must "decrease" while Jesus "increases." That is, John is a forerunner, a preparer, for the greater ministry of Jesus. John calls for the wicked to turn from their sin, Jesus gives them the opportunity to receive new life in him.

- It is worth noting that the same Herod that beheaded Jesus is present as part of Jesus' trial at the end of his life.
- John was killed without a legitimate trial; Jesus was killed without a legitimate trial.
- John and Jesus were both problems for the political establishment.
- The connections between John and Jesus are common enough at the time that their identities were sometimes confused.

⁹ And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. ¹⁰ When the time came, he sent a servant to the

tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' ¹⁵ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" ¹⁷ But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone"? ¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him" (Lk 20:9-18).

- In light of John's conflict with the political leaders that led to his death, the flow of Matthew's gospel has an ominous feeling. Jesus started his public ministry around the time that John was arrested. In a sense, he picked up where John left off. He has received popular acclaim but a lot of pushback from societal elites. He's headed toward Jerusalem and a (seemingly) inevitable conflict with the powers that be. John's conflict with Rome's Jewish overlords didn't end well and, it doesn't seem, Jesus' will either.
- Herod wonders if Jesus is John come back to life, come to haunt him. He confuses John and Jesus. To some extent, Herod's confusion makes sense because John's death is a foreshadowing of Jesus' crucifixion.
- And yet, John makes clear that Jesus is greater than he. And Jesus walks the path to Jerusalem with perseverance and conviction.
- Jesus is the greater prophet than John. **John promised the kingdom, Jesus is the king.**

1. Jesus is a threat to worldly power.

- The fear that John and Jesus bring to Herod is this message of the Kingdom of God. Herod is terrified that anyone is challenging his power. Any threat to his throne is a threat.
- For him, religion is a useful tool to gain popular support but as soon as it infringes on his personal freedom or challenges his sin, then it is of no use.
- **Speak to the current political situation.** Vote your conviction with Biblical clarity. But don't baptize either political party with the gospel. There are no Christian political parties in America. And, tbh, Jesus is a threat to all of the American political parties.
 - Jesus outpaces them all in his call to radical discipleship.

2. Jesus is a threat to unrepentant sinners.

- But he is a gracious and gentle Savior for all who repent and turn to him.
- In your sin, you are an enemy of God. Your motives are corrupt. You glory in the wrong things. You seek lesser things.
- But, Jesus loves you too much to leave you in your sin. He loves you enough to die for you, to pay the price for your sin.
- Are you an unrepentant sinner?

- Do you see your sin as mainly unwise choices and bad behavior rather than a posture of disobedience to God?
- Do you consider yourself a “good person” but consistently display character and behavior contrary to the gospel?
- Are you able to call out everyone else’s sin but your own?
- Do you feel entitled to the blessings and grace of God?
- I pray that God opens your eyes to the ugliness of your sin but the beauty of Jesus and his grace.
 - Most people are unable and unwilling to change their views, admit their mistakes, and confess their sins.
 - Like Herod, too often we’re too wrapped up in ourselves, living at the center of our own worlds, so we can’t see the better way of freedom in Jesus.
- He’s not asking you to work harder. You don’t need to be an example of his blessings. He’s asking you to admit your sin and turn to him.
- Herod’s sin has blinded him from the truth. Spiritually blind people are not *just* blind, they are blind to their blindness! (e.g., husbands/wives walk away from family and call it “finding themselves”).

3. Jesus is a threat to our comfort. So one Herod kills lots of baby boys. Another Herod kills John the Baptist. In time, Jesus himself will be killed. This trend doesn’t end with Jesus. Things can go badly for his followers, too. ¹⁶ Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, ¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles... ²¹ Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²² and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved... ²⁴ “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master... ³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword... ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:16-18, 21-22, 24, 34, 38-39).

- Go to an Eagles game wearing a Cowboys jersey. You will be the recipient of mocking and jeers for merely identifying with an enemy team. That’s what this story is here to tell us.
- To walk in the path of John and Jesus is to embrace the cost of discipleship.

Is Jesus a threat to you?

- Is Jesus a threat to your opinions? Is Jesus a threat to your life goals? Is Jesus a threat to your habits? Is Jesus a threat to your relationships? Is he a threat to your bitterness, anxiety, and reputation and you’re afraid to let those things go because they’ve become familiar friends?
- Here’s the truth: resisting and refusing Jesus is the greatest threat to you. It is the true threat to your joy, freedom, and life. It is the true threat to your eternal destiny and present happiness. Turn from your sin and trust Jesus.