

7.25

Mark 6:17–29—Debauchery Abounds in the Beheading of John (Comments from Church Tradition)

The Gospel of Mark presents a vivid account of how Herod beheaded John the Baptist at the instigation of his wife, Herodias, who John had insisted could not be his legal companion (she was his half-sister).

The story involves a banquet at which Herod and other revelers are entertained by Herodias's dancing step-daughter (whose name is given elsewhere as Salome). A drunken Herod offers a rash promise to the young woman—and the fulfillment of that oath costs John his life.

Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she

pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” And he solemnly swore to her, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Mark 6:17–29

A parallel version of the story can also be found in Matthew 14:3–11.

A Multitude of Vices

Interpreters in the early church often noted the accumulation of vices that contribute to the death of God’s prophet.

Ambrose (347–397):

It was shameful in the first place for a kingdom to be promised for a dance. And it was cruel, in the second place, for a prophet to be sacrificed for the sake of an oath. (*Duties of the Clergy* 3.12.77.2)¹

Augustine (354–430):

A girl dances, a mother rages, there is rash swearing in the midst of the luxurious feast, and an impious fulfillment of what was sworn. (*Harmony of the Gospels* 2.33.13)²

The Venerable Bede (672–735):

We hear at the same time of three evil deeds done: the inauspicious celebration of a birthday, the lewd dancing of a girl, and the rash oath of a king.

His love for the woman prevailed. She forced him to lay his hands upon a man whom he knew to be holy and just. Since he was unwilling to restrain his lechery, he incurred the guilt of homicide. What was a lesser sin for him became the occasion of a greater sin. By God's strict judgment it happened to him that, as a result of his craving for the adulteress whom he knew he ought to refuse, he caused the shedding of the blood of the prophet he knew was pleasing to God. (*Exposition on the Gospel of Mark* 2.23.1, 20)³

So here we have an interweaving of vices: lewd dancing, lechery, rage, homicide, rash oath-swearing, and inauspicious birthday celebration.

The last named has not troubled many interpreters throughout history, but “lewd dancing” and “rash oath-swearing” have received considerable attention—depending somewhat on whether John's death is to be blamed primarily on the girl or on the king.

Lewd Dancing

Ambrose (347–397):

Note how varied sins are interwoven in this one vicious action! A banquet of death is set out with royal luxury, and when a larger gathering than usual has come together, the daughter of the queen, sent for from within the private apartments, is brought forth to dance in the sight of all. What could she have learned from an adulteress but the loss of modesty? Is anything so conducive to lust as with unseemly movements to expose in nakedness those parts of the body which either nature has hidden or custom has veiled, to sport with looks, to turn the neck, to loosen the hair? (*Concerning Virgins* 3.6.27.12)⁴

John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407):

Such a captive was he to his passion, that he would give his kingdom to her for her dancing. And why do you wonder that this happened then, when even now, after so much instruction in sound doctrine, many men give away their soul for the dancing of these effeminate young men with no oath needed? They have been made captives by their pleasure and are led around like sheep wherever the wolf may drag them. (*The Gospel of St. Matthew*, Homily 49.16)⁵

Rash Oath-Swearing

The biblical story of the murder of John the Baptist would become a favorite paradigm for discouraging the taking of oaths—and, indeed,

it would become a test case for consideration of an ethical question:

If one makes a rash oath, is it less sinful to break it than to fulfill it?

Ambrose (347–397):

But what was the motive? In this case: “Because of his oath and his guests”! What could be more vile than a murder done to not displease one’s guests? (*Concerning Virgins* 3.6.28.26)⁶

Sometimes people bind themselves by a solemn oath, and, though they come to know that they ought not to have made the promise, fulfill it in consideration of their oath. This is what Herod did. For he made a shameful promise of reward to a dancer—and then cruelly performed it. But if one has made such a promise, it is far better for him not to fulfill it, than to fulfill what is shameful. (*Duties of the Clergy* 3.12.76–77)⁷

John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407):

So the princess danced and, after the dance, committed another more serious sin. For she persuaded that senseless man to promise with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Do you see how easily swearing makes one witless? Thus, whatever she asked, he swore to give. What, then, if she were to have asked for your head, Herod? What if she were to have asked for your whole kingdom? Yet he took no thought of these things. The devil had set his trap, making it strong, and from the moment the oath was complete, he both cast his snares and stretched his net on every side . . . Do you see what swearing leads to? It cuts off the heads of prophets. You saw the bait.

Dread, then, the ruin it brings. (*Baptismal Instructions* 10.26–27.15)⁸

It is indeed a haven of safety if we do not swear at all. So whatever storms burst upon us we are in no danger of sinking. Whether it be through anger or insult or passion, be what it may, the soul is stayed securely. Even though one might have vented some chance word that ought not to have been spoken, one is not laying oneself absolutely under necessity or law. . . . For it is indeed a snare of Satan, this swearing. Let us burst these cords. Let us bring ourselves into a condition in which it will be easy not to swear. (*The Acts of the Apostles*. Homily 13.22)⁹

The Venerable Bede (672–735):

Herod found he either had to break his oath or, to avoid breaking his oath, to commit another shameful act. If it should perhaps happen that we swear carelessly to something which, if carried out, would have most unfortunate consequences, we should be willing to change it in accord with wiser counsel. There is an urgent necessity for us to break our oath, rather than turn to another more serious crime in order to avoid breaking our oath.

David swore by the Lord to kill Nabal, a stupid and wicked man, and to destroy all his possessions. But at the first entreaty of the prudent woman Abigail, he quickly took back his threats, put back his sword into its scabbard, and did not feel that he had contracted any guilt by thus breaking his oath in this way.

(1 Sam. 25:2–39)

Herod swore that he would give the dancing girl whatever she asked of him, and, to avoid being accused of breaking his oath by those who were at his banquet, he defiled the banquet with blood when he made the reward for the dancing the death of a prophet. (*Exposition of the Gospel of Mark 2.23.1*)¹⁰

In any case, John Chrysostom notes the futility of the death that was the culmination of so much wrong:

The request was abominable, but she persuaded him, and he gave the order to bridle John's holy tongue. But even now it continues to speak. For even today in every church, you can hear John still crying aloud through the Gospels. He cut off the head, but he did not cut off the voice. (*Baptismal Instructions 10.26–27*)¹¹

1. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 10:80.
2. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 6:140.
3. *The Venerable Bede*, trans. L. T. Martin and D. Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Pubs., 1990).
4. Schaaf et al., eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 10:385–86.
5. Schaaf et al., eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 10:86.
6. Schaaf et al., eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 10:385–86.
7. Schaaf et al., eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 10:80.

8. Schaaf et al., eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, 6:140.

9. Schaaf et al., eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, 11:86–87.

10. *Venerable Bede*, trans. Martin and Hurst.

11. Schaaf et al., eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, 6:140.