

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Jesus Christ and Herod Antipas**

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One of the key political figures during the time of Jesus' ministry on earth was Herod Antipas. Jesus encountered Antipas personally on just one occasion, and on that occasion the distinct characters of these two individuals could not have stood in more stark contrast. While Antipas represented all that went along with human authority, power and pride Jesus stood as a reminder of the power of humility and servanthood.

### ***The Political Career of Herod Antipas***

Herod Antipas was one of the sons of Herod the Great, the king of the Jews during the four decades leading up to the time of Jesus' birth. He is best known to Bible students as the Herod who slew the infants of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). Shortly after this atrocity, Herod the Great died and the Roman Emperor, Augustus, divided Herod's kingdom among his sons. Antipas received control over the districts of Galilee (Luke 3:1), and Perea. Among his accomplishments as Tetrarch of Galilee, Antipas built two major cities in that district. Sepphoris, located just four miles from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth<sup>1</sup>, had been destroyed during a Jewish uprising. Some have speculated that Jesus, as a carpenter, may have traveled back and forth to Sepphoris with his father to find work in the reconstruction of that city. Antipas also built a new city along the shores of the

Sea of Galilee and named it after the then ruling emperor of Rome, Tiberias.

Antipas' political career came to an end in AD 39 when he was accused of disloyalty to the new Roman emperor, Caligula. Caligula deposed Antipas, giving his territories to his nephew Agrippa I. Antipas died in exile in Spain.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Herod Antipas and the Death of John***

Having been married to the daughter of the Arabian king Aretas, Antipas left his first wife and married, his own brother, Philip's, wife Herodias.<sup>3</sup> Antipas' marriage to Herodias was a gross violation of Jewish law and it brought the public reprimand of that great prophet John the Baptist. Because of John's bold accusations, Antipas imprisoned John (Luke 3:19-20). Josephus says that John was imprisoned in Antipas' fortress at Macherus, located east of the Dead Sea in the region of Perea.<sup>4</sup>

Having imprisoned John for an undetermined amount of time, Antipas found himself trapped in a dilemma. While celebrating his birthday, his stepdaughter Salome presented a dance that captured Antipas' imagination. He offered to grant Salome a special request, and with her mother's influence she requested the head of John the Baptist. Herodias had long held a hatred for John because of his accusations against her character, and now she had her opportunity. Antipas must either recant his offer in the presence of his friends or carry out the awful deed and put John to death. He chose the latter (Matthew 14:3-12).

### ***That Fox!***

The murder of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipas stood out as a significant event in the mind of Jesus Christ. If Antipas was willing to kill one prophet of God, he would certainly be willing to kill another.

When Jesus learned of John's death He attempted to withdraw for a period of solitude (Matthew 14:13-14), but the crowd was too persistent. While His withdrawal probably had much more to do with His grief over the death of John, some

have suggested Jesus may have been attempting to distance Himself from public attention and the scrutiny of Antipas. While it is likely that Jesus did avoid Antipas, His desire was not prompted by fear.

When some Pharisees warned Jesus about Herod's possible intentions to kill Jesus, Jesus simply responded, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:31-33). Jesus knows the inner heart of every man (John 2:24), and He rightly referred to Herod Antipas as "that fox". Herod's character was sly and deceptive. But Jesus showed no fear. He stayed His course, knowing that His life would end on a cross in Jerusalem rather than at the hands of Antipas. Nevertheless, Jesus seems to have avoided Antipas, but He did so for a more pressing reason. His withdrawals from the public arena "seemed to be motivated primarily by a desire to be alone with his disciples for the purpose of rest and instruction, and secondarily to avoid Antipas."<sup>5</sup>

Antipas did indeed have concerns about Jesus. This fact probably became known through some "inside sources" (compare Luke 8:3; Acts 13:1). When Antipas heard about Jesus' spreading fame he remarked, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him." (Matthew 14:1-2). While Antipas may have held some superstitious ideas about Jesus, it is more likely that his hardened heart only despaired about Jesus' influence among the people. "It is more probable, however, that the statement is to be taken symbolically or perhaps ironically or in mockery. . . . Antipas may well have thought, 'it is John the Baptist all over again.'"<sup>6</sup> Indeed Antipas was a "fox"; his character stood in such contrast to the loving Lord Jesus.

### ***Antipas and the Trial of Jesus***

Jesus did have one face to face encounter with Herod Antipas. During Jesus' trial Pontius Pilate sent Him to Antipas

for examination. Luke 23:6-12 gives the account. Antipas was delighted to see Jesus in this setting because he hoped to coerce Jesus into performing a miracle of some kind. But Jesus refused to dignify the situation with even a single word. He remained silent in the presence of this ungodly ruler. Antipas showed his true, repulsive character by ending this interview with ridicule and mockery. Antipas had Jesus dressed in an elegant robe and sent back to Pilate.

The contrast is astounding. The King of kings stood in the presence of an unworthy monarch. The Creator endured the mockery of the created. The Almighty endured the ridicule of a fool. But silence won out over ridicule. Humility won out over arrogance. Jesus won the victory that day, and He won it on a cross. The Christian will always do well to follow the example of the Savior. When we are tempted to defend ourselves or to lash out at others we will better honor Jesus Christ with quiet lips and humble hearts. Antipas and Jesus, a study in contrasts, proves to us once again that God's way is supreme.

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<sup>1</sup> Bouquet, A. C. *Everyday Life in New Testament Times*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p.27.

<sup>2</sup> Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Revised Edition. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 473.

<sup>3</sup> Unger, p.472.

<sup>4</sup> Josephus. *The Antiquities of the Jews*. 18.5.2.

<sup>5</sup> Hoehner, Harold W. *Herod Antipas: A Contemporary of Jesus Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972, p.200.

<sup>6</sup> Hoehner, p.190.