

## “He Is Elijah”

### The Eighteenth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 6:14-29; Malachi 4:1-6*

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Jesus' fame has spread far and wide. People throughout the entire region of what is now Northern Israel and Southern Lebanon have heard about this successor to John the Baptist, who announces that the kingdom of God has come and who heals the sick and casts out demons. Jesus had been preaching in the area around the Sea of Galilee, using the small village of Capernaum as a sort of base of operations. But now Jesus is endeavoring to preach in new areas, starting with his hometown of Nazareth, a few miles to the southwest of Capernaum. In fact, Jesus has become so widely known that he has come to the attention of King Herod, who is afraid that Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life.

As we resume our series on the Gospel of Mark, we now move into Mark 6. As this chapter opens, Mark describes a new phase in Jesus' messianic mission in which Jesus begins to preach the gospel of the kingdom in a number of areas outside the confines of the region of Galilee. As we saw last time, this extension of Jesus' mission beyond the Galilee began with Jesus returning to his hometown of Nazareth. We know that Jesus had left his hometown to go about his Father's work some months before. But the people of Nazareth only knew of Jesus as a common laborer. They also knew Jesus' mother, brothers, and sisters. Based upon the various accounts of this in the gospels, we don't know how much the people of Nazareth knew about Jesus' supernatural conception or whether or not he would be called by God for some great purpose. But from what follows in Mark 6:1-6, it was clear that Jesus was not someone the people of Nazareth expected to become the successor to John the Baptist and whose fame would spread throughout the entire region, much less draw the critical gaze of King Herod himself.

Now that Jesus' ministry was well underway and people from all over the area were seeking him out, Mark recounts how Jesus' own family thought that Jesus was not in his right mind. Concerned for his welfare, they made the trek from Nazareth to Capernaum to take charge of Jesus and bring him home. But by the time Jesus returns to Nazareth some weeks or months later, he is a well-known Rabbi with a large number of disciples. Everyone in town knows his name and his reputation as a miracle-worker has preceded him. On one level, Mark is describing a small-town boy who is now famous, and how the friends and neighbors he left behind resent him for leaving. And yet, on another level, this is the sad story of the people of Nazareth missing the fact that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the Son of God who had come to preach the good news to them. Sadly, human sin and prejudice has so blinded them to the truth, that Israel's Messiah is standing before them as they mock him. Thus our Lord's humiliation begins well before the night he is arrested and betrayed and brought before Caiaphas and Pilate.

Because it was one of their own who brought them the good news, the people of Nazareth would not hear the gospel from the lips of Jesus. When Jesus opened the Old Testament and preached to them in the town's synagogue, we read of how the people were amazed at his teaching. Where did this mere carpenter get such amazing insight into God's word? It was not long before some of the people who were present began to mock Jesus with a series of snide questions. "Is this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" "Who is he to preach to us?" "We know his brothers and sisters." "We know his whole family." Aware of their grumbling, Jesus replied by lamenting that a prophet is without honor in his own home and in his own town. In saying this, Jesus is placing himself in line with Israel's own prophets whom, as those present knew, were rejected because their message entailed a call to repentance.

We also read that it was Jesus who now marveled at the lack of faith on the part of the people. In fact, because of this absence of faith Jesus could perform no miracles in Nazareth beyond healing several people. To perform miracles in the absence of faith would have only hardened the people's hearts all the more and thereby risk placing them even under greater judgment from God. The scene Mark describes in Nazareth is both ironic as well as tragic.

We also saw that it was during this time that Jesus commissioned the twelve disciples to go out two by two and preach throughout the neighboring villages. In this particular commissioning, Jesus is preparing his disciples for what will happen on Pentecost, when they will receive a permanent commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. As Mark reports, the disciples are to preach the message Jesus gave to them—the message of the kingdom. But Jesus also instructed them to take only a staff, a tunic, and sandals, and not to take bread or money. These instructions clearly echo the instructions given to Israel on the night of the Passover and indicate that Jesus is signaling that the preaching of the disciples would amount to a New Exodus in which the people of God would be summoned from their bondage to sin and death, to undertake a journey through the wilderness of this present evil age before coming to the heavenly city. Just as Israel was to trust in the providence of God to provide for their needs in the wilderness of the Sinai, so too, Jesus' disciples are to rely upon the hospitality of God's people as they undertake their mission to preach the gospel. Clearly, a new period in redemptive history is underway.

As the disciples went through the villages around Nazareth, preaching as Jesus had instructed them, they witnessed the wonderful signs of the presence of the kingdom—many demons fled in terror and many people were healed. It was during this particular phase of Jesus' ministry that King Herod got wind of what was going on out in the hill country and became quite worried that Jesus would upset the fragile peace Herod had forged between Rome and the Jews. Herod was, no doubt, especially troubled by a number of rumors circulating about Jesus, the most troubling of which was that Jesus might be John the Baptist come back to life. If this were true, Herod feared, Jesus might eventually seek revenge upon Herod since it was Herod who had put John to death not long before.

And so it was as Jesus' focus widened that Herod became very concerned. Mark uses the report of Herod's alarm at Jesus' fame, to backtrack a bit and recount the sad fate of John the Baptist, whom Herod had already put into prison and had executed after falling prey to the devious scheme of his wife and step-daughter.

As news about Jesus spread—even the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem had heard about Jesus and sent several members to investigate the rumors surrounding him—Herod finally heard about Jesus and was deeply worried about what he heard. At this point in Jesus' ministry his identity is still largely veiled and even though the disciples are given ever-greater and greater glimpses of his true identity, rumors about who Jesus' true identity, were now rampant throughout northern Israel. As Mark recounts these events in verses 14-16, "*King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, 'John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.' Others said, 'He is Elijah.' And still others claimed, 'He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago.' But when Herod heard this, he said, 'John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!'*"

A little background on the Herod family is useful at this point.<sup>1</sup> Herod Antipas—the current ruler—was the

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<sup>1</sup> See the article by H. W. Hoehner "Herodian Dynasty" in; Evans and Porter, eds., Dictionary of New Testament Background (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 491.

son of Herod the Great. Antipas ruled from his father's death in 4 B.C. until 39 A. D., when he was recalled to Rome and replaced by his nephew, the infamous Herod Agrippa, who later killed James and imprisoned Peter. The Romans liked Antipas because he kept the Jews from engaging in full revolt against Rome, despite an increasingly powerful group of zealots. The Jews, however, hated Herod Antipas. Herod's marriage to Herodias—who was his brother's wife—was considered scandalous by the Jews (even by the Romans) and was a direct violation of Mosaic Law (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). In fact, it was John the Baptist's public criticism of this marriage which led to his imprisonment. Most historians date John's death in 31 or 32 A.D.—if you want a point of reference. While Herod's marriage to Herodias made Jews angry, what was worse was Herod's decision to build his capital, Tiberias, directly on top of the site of an ancient cemetery. This decision completely excluded Jews from living in a city because it was built upon a burial ground which rendered the entire city perpetually unclean according to the ceremonial law.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the Jews hated Antipas because of his callous indifference to their law and custom and due to the fact that politically, Herod was very much pro-Roman.

About this time Herod too had gotten wind of Jesus' fame, but he had also heard some of the increasingly wild speculation which surrounded Jesus at the point in his ministry. There were many in Israel who thought that Jesus was John the Baptist, come back to life. This would have especially frightened Herod since it was he who put John to death. If the rumor were true, Jesus may come and seek revenge upon Herod! This rumor supposedly explained Jesus' miraculous powers—he had been raised from the dead, hence the end of the age was at hand. Another group speculated that Jesus was the prophet Elijah. This was probably the view held by the followers of John, whose ministry had pointed to the coming one, the messenger of the covenant. Like Elijah, Jesus performed miracles and raised the dead. And then there was a third group, who speculated about Jesus as one of the other Old Testament prophets come back to life. These people saw in Jesus someone unique—someone who stood in the long line of prophets who called Israel to repentance. While the people were speculating about who Jesus was, they were in all agreement that Jesus was at the very least a prophet like those from Israel's past.<sup>3</sup> The people knew that something big was up—but until they figured out just who Jesus was, they were not sure what. Herod had heard many of these reports and rumors, and as a man who history recounts as someone given to superstition, these rumors made Herod very nervous—especially since it was he who had put John to death under rather undignified circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that there are so many rumors circulating about Jesus should be seen as additional evidence of what we have already seen throughout Mark's Gospel so far—people are really struggling to figure out just who, exactly, Jesus is. No doubt, given all the interest in Jesus, rumors spread like crazy. Most people who had seen either Jesus or John preach, were not present at Jesus' baptism. Then there was the sense that Jesus' ministry was far greater than John's. John performed no miracles (John 10:41), while Jesus' ministry was characterized by miraculous power. John spoke of someone coming after him who would be far greater. That people might believe that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life would have made perfect sense to those who had no direct contact with either—the vast majority of people living in the area had seen neither Jesus or John, although they had certainly heard of them.

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<sup>2</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 211.

<sup>3</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 212.

<sup>4</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 213; France, The Gospel of Mark, 253-254..

Since Jesus was baptized by John, people who witnessed that event would have known otherwise. But since John was imprisoned before Jesus began to preach in Capernaum (Mark 1:4), it would have appeared that in some sense that Jesus succeeded John. Maybe Jesus was the Elijah of whom John had spoken. Maybe he was another one of the prophets. But whatever was the case, people who had actually witnessed either Jesus or John and any of the events associated with them, knew that God was at work and that the four-hundred years of prophetic silence after the final Old Covenant prophecy of Malachi had surely come to an end. Something big was happening, and Mark's point is that the people of that time and place were struggling mightily to figure out what that was. It is interesting to notice that there appears to be no discussion yet of Jesus as Israel's Messiah.<sup>5</sup> But Herod is afraid that Jesus is indeed, John the Baptist come back to life and that Jesus may seek revenge.

**A**t this point in his Gospel, Mark breaks off his account of Herod's interest in Jesus now that Jesus was expanding his ministry, to explain to his reader what had happened to John.

Recall that in the opening chapter of his Gospel (1:4-8), Mark has described John's mission as follows: *"And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'" Now Mark recounts the fate of John, his information probably coming not from Peter, but from one of John's disciples.<sup>6</sup> In many ways, Mark's account of the death of John prefigures what will happen to Jesus.*

In Mark 1:14, Mark has already told us that John had been arrested, and now he tells us of John's fate, especially in light of Herod's fears. Upon hearing the rumors that Jesus may be John, come back to life, we read, *"For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison."* John had been arrested not only because he was generating many followers who might disrupt the peace, but in an act of boldness in keeping with his office to summon the people of Israel to repent and to warn them that judgment was about to come, John spoke out about Herod's sinful marriage. Herod arrested John *"because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'"*

In his mission as messianic forerunner, John's responsibility was to call all of Israel to repentance, including Herod. After baptizing Jesus, John had, apparently, crossed over the Jordan River into an area near the royal palace (Machaerus) near the city of Perea. Herod's displeasure with John was both personally and politically motivated. Like most local rulers, Herod wanted to keep Rome happy—so as to keep his job. If John the Baptist stirred up trouble in the region to the east of the Jordan, this may have aroused Israel's powerful neighbors (the Nabateans) to respond with military force. Herod did not want, nor could he afford any unnecessary trouble along his eastern border.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 207.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 215.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 219.

Strangely enough, however, Herod was a closet fan of John. As Mark points out in verses 19-20, “*So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.*” While Herodias took personal offense at being called an adulteress and even wanted John put to death, Herod saw God’s hand upon John, and protected him from Herodias, even though John’s preaching identified Herod as a sinner by name, complete with an explanation of the greatness of his sins. Herod must have been convicted by John’s words and so he not only liked to listen to John preach, he kept his wife at bay and secretly protected John by having him arrested. This would not only put an end to any potential political unrest, it would have kept John from dying at the hands of Mrs. Herod. This would be like some Hollywood celebrity secretly watching and sending a large check to a televangelist who was loudly and publically critical of the celebrity’s immorality. Had Herodias not out-foxed her husband, John may have survived. But that was not to be John’s fate. He must decrease so that Jesus can increase.

In an echo from the story of Ahab, who blurted out his troubles to Jezebel, so too Herodias took advantage of a boast by her husband during his birthday celebration. According to verse 21, “*Finally the opportune time came,*” for Herodias to exact revenge upon John. “*On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.*” Those present were members of the inner circles of Herod’s government (petty lords), with the emphasis falling upon the presence of Roman battalion commanders (Tribunes).<sup>8</sup> Imagine a birthday dinner for the president, his cabinet and the joint chiefs. These men have all gathered in Herod’s fortress palace at Machaerus, where John had been imprisoned. While the text does not explicitly say so, a banquet and a birthday in the luxurious confines of a royal palace with all the big-wigs present seems to imply large quantities of alcohol and from Mark’s report there is every possibility that Herod was well-lubricated when Herodias finally trapped him.

It is with this scene set before us that we read in verse 22, “*When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.*” Josephus, the famed Jewish historian tells us that this young woman, named Salome, was in her middle teens at this time. She later married Herod Philip (who was many years older than she), and then after he died she married yet another member of the Herodian family named Aristobulus.<sup>9</sup> According to legend, she was an attractive young woman, and she is clearly acting at the direction of her mother, who knew all of Herod’s weaknesses. The dance was probably was probably a form of seduction. By the time Salome had worked her wiles, we read, “*The king said to the girl, ‘Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.’ And he promised her with an oath, ‘Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.’*” Herod had too much to drink. He had lost control. And now he was trapped.

[Salome], who was acting at Herodias’ behest “*went out and said to her mother, ‘What shall I ask for?’*” This was the moment Herodias had been waiting for. As we learn in verse 24, she got exactly what she wanted. “*The head of John the Baptist,’ she answered.*” Herod could only protect John for so long. John’s preaching enraged Herodias and now she had both men (Herod and John) right where she wanted them. “*At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: ‘I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’*” Here was Herod, trapped, right in front of his friends and underlings.

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<sup>8</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 220-221.

<sup>9</sup> Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 221.

There was nothing he could do—despite his discomfort with the whole thing—but give the girl what she asked for. Thus we read in verse 26 and following, *“The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.”* Herodias waited for the right time and used the right means. John the Baptist—who dared to call her an adulterous—was now dead. She had gotten her wish. She had John’s head on a platter—literally.

We learn in verse 29 that *“On hearing of this, John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.”* More than likely, John had a number of followers waiting outside the prison who visited him and tried to help as they could. They came and buried John in an unknown tomb at an unknown location—despite the medieval church’s fascination with supposed relics of John, including his skull. Herod remembered this quite well when he got news of Jesus and heard that he might be John come back to life. No doubt, he was chagrined by the possibility and by the recollection of how his wife and step-daughter got the best of him. He was also, no doubt, afraid that if this were John resurrected, he might come seeking revenge. Ironically, in A. D. 36, the Nabateans did cross the border in force and Herod’s forces suffered a stinging defeat. According to Josephus, many in Israel considered the defeat to be God’s judgment upon Antipas for putting John to death.<sup>10</sup>

**W**hat, then, do we take with us from this section of Mark’s Gospel?

While at this point, rumors swirled around Jesus, Jesus knew full well who he was and the role that John played in the great redemptive drama. As we will see when we get to Mark 9:9-13, Jesus explains John’s ministry in the following terms. *“As they were coming down the mountain [of transfiguration], Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what ‘rising from the dead’ meant. And they asked him, ‘Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?’ Jesus replied, ‘To be sure, Elijah does come first, and restores all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him.’”* Thus the people of Israel were right to assume that the coming of Elijah preceded the dawn of the messianic age. But they were wrong to think that Jesus was Elijah. John was Elijah. Jesus was the covenant Lord who will bring blessing and curse to his people.

As we read in our Old Testament lesson this morning (Malachi 4:1-6), Elijah must indeed come before the day of judgment. The prophet writes, *“‘Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. ‘See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.’”*

Thus John comes as the last of the Old Testament prophets—the final harbinger of the messianic age.

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<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII, v. 1-3.

This is why his ministry centered in a declaration of a baptism of repentance and in warning that someone far greater than he was to come after him. His entire ministry focused upon exalting Christ. As Jesus himself says of John in Matthew 11:11-15, *“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear.”*

With the death of John the Baptist, the old covenant has come to a close and the messianic age has dawned. People were therefore fascinated with John’s preaching—even Herod. While his demand that Herod and his wife Herodias must repent led to his death, the fact of the matter was, John the Baptist was the greatest of men because he knew that he must decrease so that Jesus might increase. He is Elijah, heralding the coming of the Messiah. And yet, no one can see it. Some think Jesus is Elijah, or even John come back to life. But everyone knows something is up and that God is beginning some mighty work. In John’s cruel death, we are also given a glimpse of Jesus’ fate. Jesus ministry will eventually take him to Jerusalem, where he too will be rejected, imprisoned and put to death.

But Jesus’ head will not be put on a platter. He will conquer death and the grave as he lays down his life for his sheep. Since he is far greater than Elijah, his death will save us from our sins. For his death is the very death of death itself. Amen.