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## Q&A#150 The Typology of the Beheading of John the Baptist

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Today's question: "Is there an ironic twist in Herod's niece getting John the Baptist beheaded? An upside down protoevangelium?"

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### Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, is there an ironic twist in Herod's niece getting John the Baptist beheaded? An upside-down proto-evangelium. The proto-evangelium that we encounter in Genesis chapter 315 is the promise that the seed of the woman will bruise the serpent's head.

And so we see that theme played out on various occasions within scripture. As the woman deceives the serpent figure, whether that's the character of Michael and Saul, or whether it's the character of someone like Jael and Sisera, whether it's Rahab, the men of Jericho, Hebrew midwives, Pharaoh, etc. And on a number of these occasions, we see

the head of tyrants being crushed.

I think Tent-Peg and Jael and Sisera. Or we might think about Abimelech getting his head crushed with the millstone that's dropped upon his head. Other occasions within scripture, we might think of the seed of the woman as David, who crushes the head of Goliath.

And so this theme plays out on various occasions. But there are also inversions of themes within scripture, where you will have a repetition of the negative fall theme, or you might have an inversion of themes in other ways. And so I want to look at this particular account, which I think is a good candidate for thinking about how we might encounter these inverted themes within scripture.

First of all, rather than going directly back to the story of the fall and the promise that's made there, I would suggest looking a bit nearer to hand within the world of scripture. And think about some of the other connections that we might draw with this story of John the Baptist, Herod and Herodias. Now, there is one Old Testament story that provides a very clear set of parallels.

We might think there, I think, of the story of Ahab, Jezebel and Elijah. There's a threefold pattern of characters there in conflict with each other. Ahab, whose opponent is this great prophet, this prophet Elijah, who's the one who declares the drought, who's the one who defeats the priests of Baal and Mount Carmel, other things like that.

There is this rivalry between the king, the Umayyad dynasty, and between Elijah, who's the one who's the anointed prophet of Yahweh. As we go through that story, we see that Jezebel is very much the one who's instigating things behind the scenes. She's a manipulator.

She's conniving. She's the one who has a great deal of influence over her husband. For instance, think about the story of Naboth's vineyard, where Ahab wants to take Naboth's vineyard and turn it into a vegetable garden.

Now, there's a lot of symbolism going on there. Egypt is connected with a vegetable garden, and Israel is the vineyard. And so he wants to take the sort of the heritage of this Israelite Naboth, and he wants to turn it into an Egypt-like place.

And this is something that we're seeing more generally when the story of Ahab and the Umayyad dynasty, this desire to turn Israel into an Egypt-like land. In that story, he's not eating. He's refusing his food.

And it's Jezebel who has to intervene at that point. She tells him to, as it were, take the fruit. And as he takes the fruit, he enters into the land and into the vineyard.

He walks about in the vineyard, and there he's confronted by the prophet. And this is

playing out the story of the four. The woman who gives the fruit to her husband, who instigates events in that respect, and then this confrontation with the prophet who represents the Lord.

In the story of John the Baptist, we see a similar pattern of characters. We see the king, Herod, associated with Ahab. We see Herodias, who's the manipulator, the schemer, the plotter, behind the scenes.

And she's connected with Jezebel. And John the Baptist is similar to Elijah in a great many respects. He dresses like Elijah in camel skin.

He's the one who eats locusts and wild honey. He's the one who's associated with the desert. Within Scripture, there are patterns where we see a desert prophet succeeded by a land prophet.

John the Baptist is succeeded by Jesus. We see Moses succeeded by Joshua. We see Elijah succeeded by Elisha.

Now think about all those names. All those names are connected too. All referring in some way or other to the fact that God saves Joshua, Elisha, Jesus, which is another form of Joshua.

In each of these cases, there is a connection with the names. There is a connection between the pattern of their ministries. We see John the Baptist, his mission really reaches its climax in the baptism of Christ when the Spirit descends upon Christ.

And Christ goes out upon his mission at that point. Same thing happens with the story of Elijah and Elisha. The Spirit descends upon Elisha as Elijah ascends into heaven.

Elijah's ascension is Elisha's Pentecost. We see a similar pattern within the story of Christ and the church. Christ ascends and the Spirit descends upon the church at Pentecost.

Reading that story further, we can see similarities between the ministry of Elijah and the ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of Elisha. Elijah is promised that he will come again, as it were, in the story of Malachi, in the prophecy of Malachi. And in the Gospels, we are told that John the Baptist is the Elijah that was to come.

So there's a repetition of this character. This character occurs again. He appears on the scene again, but he appears in the character of John the Baptist.

Jesus follows after that. Elijah is followed by Elisha, who completes the ministry of Elijah. If you think about the ministry that Elijah is given at Mount Horeb, there are three different tasks that he's given, anointing Hazeel, anointing Jehu, and anointing his successor Elisha.

He only does one. The rest of his ministry is completed by Elisha. And you see the same thing in the story of John the Baptist and the story of Christ.

There's a continuity of the ministry through John the Baptist, through Christ, and through the church, where the ministry started off by one is continued by the other. Looking through this story, then, we can see further parallels. The miracles performed by Elisha.

Elisha is the one who multiplies bread to feed a multitude, a hundred people. We have the story of Christ, of course, in the feeding of the 5,000, the feeding of the 4,000. The feeding of the 5,000 is paralleled with the story or connected with the story of the death of John the Baptist.

The death of John the Baptist is told retrospectively in both of the gospels where it is told. In Mark and in Matthew, it is looking back upon an event that has already happened. This event is playing upon the mind of Herod, who's questioning whether Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead.

Now, within the gospel of Luke, particularly, you have a twofold pattern within two phases of Christ's ministry. The first beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, his witness, followed by the witness of the Father to Christ at the baptism. And then this ministry very much focused upon Galilee.

And then ending with the death of John the Baptist and his seeming resurrection in the ministry of Christ. The next phase begins with the witness of Peter. It ends and then followed by the witness of the Father in the event of the Transfiguration, which is very much paralleled with the baptism.

And then ends with the death and resurrection of Christ. So there's a twofold pattern here within the gospel. And as that played out, I think we'll have a better idea of what's going on within the death of John the Baptist within this story pattern.

Now, we've seen then a connection between the story of John the Baptist and the story of Elijah. You have Elijah and Ahab and Jezebel. You have John the Baptist and Herod and Herodias.

And in both cases, there is this challenge to the king, the ruler who isn't able to deal effectively with this prophet who's an opponent. But the conniving wife, the royal consort who wants to destroy the prophet and sets out to take his life. There is another story within the Old Testament this might remind us of.

And that story is the story of Esther. In Mark's account of the death of John the Baptist, there is one detail that might stick out to us that immediately creates a connection. And that is the promise, the rash promise that Herod makes to Herodias, Herodias' daughter.

Herodias' daughter 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 to you.

And he vowed to her, whatever you ask me, I will give you up to half of my kingdom. Now, this may be a formulaic promise that kings would make, but there's something more going on here, I think. It's something that where have we heard these words before? We have heard these words before and they are found in Esther chapter 7, verse 2. Or reading at verse 1. So the king and Haman went into feast with Queen Esther.

And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, what is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted to you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled. And so you have a similar situation where there is a vow made to this woman who pleases the king.

And then it's said up to half the kingdom. Other details within the book of Esther. The focus upon feasts and the fate of people being determined at feasts.

A further detail we might think of is the event of Esther being presented to the king. She's the pleasing young maiden who's presented to the king. And in a similar way to the daughter of Herodias, who's called by tradition Salome.

That story is one that has all these echoes of the Esther story. Now think about some of the associations that are drawn through that. Who is Herod like? Herod is like King Ahasuerus, the one who has these great feasts, birthday feasts or these great feasts for the kingdom.

And he's drunk with wine. He calls in women, royal women before to present themselves to the company of the feasting company. He's the one who promises up to half the kingdom.

He's the one who seems to maybe be led by his lust rather than by any wisdom that you should have as a king. He's mastered by wine rather than by wisdom. And as you read through the story, that might be the parallel that you see.

But there's a further parallel. He's parallel with Haman. He's the one who has this opponent, this one who will not bow to him.

In the case of the story of Haman, it's Mordecai. In the case of the story of Herod, it's John the Baptist. And in both cases, there is a conniving wife behind the scenes who instigates this plot, gets him to take the life of the one who will not bow to him.

In the story of Esther, it's Zeresh, the wife of Haman. And in the story of Herod, it's Herodias. In this story, there are further connections.

Herodias' daughter could be connected with Esther. Esther, in some senses, might also be connected with Herodias herself. We might think about John the Baptist as connected

with Mordecai, the one whose life is sought to be taken.

And then you have, as those connections work out a bit more, you might think about Mordecai is like Herodias. Herodias is the one who advises for her own purposes, her daughter or this young woman that she's looking after who's pleasing to the king. She advises in order to get what is needed.

And so Herodias gets her daughter to request the life of John the Baptist. And in the case of Mordecai, he gets Esther to request the life of Haman, ultimately. And so there are all these reversals that are taking place.

So rather than look immediately back to the Proto-Evangelium, I would look to these earlier cases, these other cases that we find earlier in scripture that help us to see the inversion of themes, the play upon different characters. And the way that these characters are juxtaposed with each other and compared with each other, there are ways in which we see a more direct comparison between characters like Haman and Herod. And in both cases, Haman is the Agagite.

He's associated with Amalek. He's associated with the one who's set against the people of Israel. He's a descendant of Esau.

He's associated with Edom. And Herod is an Idumean king. And he's already been associated with the death of the firstborn.

And his father is the one who tries to kill the firstborn. He tried to kill the sons in the story of Matthew, chapter 2. And Christ flees from that. And that story plays off the Old Testament story of Hadad, who flees from Edom as Joab and David try and take the life of the men of Edom.

And so there's a reversal of that theme where the sin of David's house comes back upon his head as the son of David. His life is sought by the descendant of the one who his father sought to take the life of. And so the descendant of Hadad or the descendant of the people of Edom tries to take the life of the son of David in this case.

So the tables are turned at that point. So I think there are a number of reversals taking place here. And as we reflect upon these reversals, it might help us to understand a bit more about the characterization of different figures.

This is not just a random story. It's a story. It's set at a feast.

As in the story of Esther, the story of Esther is set around feasts. It's set around the presentation of women to the king. It's set around plots and scheming.

And in the story of John the Baptist, we have a similar thing. The head being brought upon a platter. The head as food.

And that whole theme that's playing out, there's a sort of inverted Purim that's taking place here. And now you have Herod defined as the sort of anti- He's the one who's the opponent but also similar to Ahasuerus. Whereas Ahasuerus led to the salvation of the people of Israel.

He's the one who leads to for us to take the life of Israel. He's the one who's playing out the inverse of Esther. And Herodias and Herodias' daughter are filling out this picture in various ways.

John the Baptist is like Mordecai, but Mordecai who actually loses his head. And he's the one who, within that story, Christ comes into the picture as the one who's going to set that story right. He's going to avenge, as it were, the death of John the Baptist.

He's the one who's John the Baptist raised from the dead. And so the background in the story of Esther, I think, is very important. And that's where I'll go to first, rather than the story of Genesis chapter 3. Furthermore, I would suggest that reflecting upon the parallels between John the Baptist and Elijah would help us further.

There are parallels there and inversions. Not so much inversions within that story. But again, there are themes of the king whose weak will, the one who his wife, the conniving, manipulating woman who controls the heart of the king.

And then you have the way that the prophet who's standing against them, his life is sought. All of this, I think, does lead us to think that there may be an inversion of the proto-evangelium. That here we do see that the seed of the woman is the one who takes the head, or the seed of the wicked woman, of this serpentine woman, is the one who takes the head of the righteous son of the woman.

And ultimately, the seed of the woman, Jesus Christ, will defeat the serpent in that story. But there is an inversion there. And I think as we see the inversion of more particular iterations of this theme within scripture, the way that the story of Adam and Eve, of the serpent and the woman and the man, how that's being played out in the story of Ahab and Jezebel, and the story of Ahasuerus and Haman and Esther.

As it's played out in those stories, I think in those more particular iterations, it will help us to see how this inversion is taking place. This is a very introductory exploration of these themes. There's a lot more going on there.

If you'd like to think about this more, please leave any comments that you might have, any thoughts that you might have in the comments below. I'd love to hear feedback. I've not figured out exactly how to piece all of these things together.

But the pieces belong together. I know that much. Thank you very much for listening.

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