

Who was Herod Antipas?

The name Herod comes up again and again in the New Testament from Matthew 1 to Acts 26. Herod is simply the family name of a ruling dynasty in Israel. There are four different rulers referred to as Herod in the New Testament as well as Herod Philip II, who is referred to as Philip the tetrarch. There were a number of other Herods who are not mentioned in the New Testament.

Herod Antipater (nicknamed Antipas) became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea upon the death of his father Herod the Great (Herod I). A tetrarch is a “ruler of one quarter,” as he receives one fourth of his father’s kingdom. Herod Antipas ruled as a Roman client and was responsible for building projects including the capital city of Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee. Herod Antipas is the Herod mentioned most often in the New Testament, and, with the exception of Herod the Great mentioned in Matthew 2 and Luke 1, every mention of Herod in the gospels refers to Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas divorced his first wife to marry Herodias, who had been the wife of his half-brother Philip the tetrarch. According to Josephus the two fell in love and made plans to get married while Antipas was visiting with his brother Philip. John the Baptist began his ministry during the reigns of Philip and Antipas (Luke 3:1). In the course of his fiery preaching and denunciation of sin, he “rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, [and] Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison” (Luke 3:19-20).

Matthew 14:3-5 gives more detail of the wickedness of Herod Antipas: “Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother

Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: 'It is not lawful for you to have her.' Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet." Herodias also hated John and wanted to have him killed, but Herod Antipas was afraid to follow through, because the general populace was on John's side. "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" (Mark 6:19-20). Herodias hatched a scheme with her daughter whereby she forced her husband's hand. "On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.' The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother" (Matthew 14:6-11).

As Jesus' ministry became more well-known, Herod Antipas began to fear that John the Baptist had risen from the dead (Matthew 14:1-2). Apparently, he wanted to kill Jesus as well, and this was reported to Jesus by some Jewish leaders in Galilee who hoped to entice Him into moving on to a different area. Jesus, unafraid, replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:32-33). Jesus' reply is not only dismissive of Herod but also critical of the Jewish authorities who had a long history of killing prophets. Throughout Jesus' ministry, some of the rulers of the Jews plotted with the Herodians (supporters of Herod) against Jesus (Mark 3:6; 8:25; 12:13).

Jesus was finally arrested and brought before Pilate, the governor or prefect of Judea. Pilate tried to escape responsibility for dealing with Jesus, and he thought he had found his way out when he heard that Jesus was from Galilee: he could shift the responsibility to Herod Antipas, he reasoned. So Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, who happened to be in Jerusalem for the Passover at the time (Luke 23:6-7).

Herod Antipas was excited to see Jesus in person and tried to get Jesus to perform some miracles for him and asked Him many questions. Jesus refused to answer, probably because He knew Herod Antipas was not sincerely seeking truth. Of course, Jesus also refused to perform any miracles. Herod allowed his soldiers to ridicule and beat Jesus and then sent Him back to Pilate (Luke 23:8-11). That day, Herod and Pilate became friends, whereas before they had been at odds (Luke 23:12). Although Herod Antipas is mentioned in Acts as being partially responsible for the crucifixion, we gain no new information about him.

Herod Antipas eventually fell out of favor with Rome and was exiled to Gaul. The King Herod mentioned later in Acts as a persecutor of the church in Jerusalem is his nephew, Herod Agrippa I, who replaced the Roman governor over Judea as King of the Jews, ruling in Jerusalem from AD 41 to 44.