

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 51, Chapter 14

The first dozen verses of Matthew chapter 14 bring us back to the subject of John the Immerser; more specifically it tells us of his death. That he was in prison was already established back in chapter 11. Now chapter 14 begins by explaining the circumstances behind his arrest, imprisonment, and execution. As a sort of side note, something to remember when we read of various New Testament Bible characters going to jail; it is not that jail itself was the punishment. That is, it was not usual that someone would be arrested, tried and have a sentence handed down to spend a certain amount of time in prison as is the norm in the modern West. The norm then was that a person was arrested and put in jail in order to await trial or to simply remove that person from society for awhile even if no crime had been committed. That a person might languish in prison for a year and more while the wheels of justice spun slowly wasn't unusual. A person accused and convicted of a capital offense would immediately upon trial and conviction be killed. A person accused and convicted of a non-capital offense more often served as someone's slave or was put to hard labor by the government as his punishment. The point is that once John was arrested and thrown in jail he knew what his fate would likely be; he just didn't know the exact means of his end or when it would happen.

Yeshua on the other hand was at this time a free man, although He had become such a controversial figure among the Synagogue authority that His fate wasn't hard to predict (He hasn't seemed to have started to cause trouble, yet, with the Temple authority and its priests). In fact the track He was on would prove to be quite similar to what happened with John.

Let's read Matthew chapter 14.

READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 14 all

This story about John the Baptist's execution is also told in Mark 6:14 - 29. Mark adds some information not contained in Matthew 14, but at the same time Matthew's information is, in a couple of instances, slightly different than Mark's. I think Mark adds enough that before we begin to seriously examine this account we should read his version first. Open your Bibles to Mark chapter 6.

READ MARK CHAPTER 6:14 - 29

There are several arguments put up by Bible historians against the account of John's death in Matthew and Mark, which say that while John's execution is authentic history, the account as found in the Gospels is more than questionable; it leans more towards myth and legend. But, that's what happens when some academics don't have the respect they ought to have for the Bible's accuracy, and instead inject their own personal opinions. They also tend to nit-pick the wrong things and not allow for common conversational expressions within a 1st century Jewish cultural setting to be taken for what they are. Verse 1 of Matthew, which corresponds with verse 14 of Mark 6, presents just such a tempest in a tea pot.

Matthew refers to Herod as **tetrarches** (in Greek) while Mark refers to him as **basileus** (king). This indeed can cause confusion among readers because one now must wonder which of the several Herods this is speaking about. King Herod is a title used for Herod the Great (the one who hosted the star gazers from Babylon as they searched for the new king of the Jews... the infant Yeshua). But the Herod in our current story is Herod Antipas, Herod the Great's son, and he was never a king. So why does Mark call him king? First, the Greek **basileus** doesn't have to mean king; it can mean a leader of people or a commander. It is a rather generic word and doesn't have to be rendered as the title of an official position or office. Second: Herod Antipas wanted to be called king, and often insisted upon it, to the irritation of the Roman government. In fact, he pushed so hard to be given the title of king that Emperor Caligula removed him from office and banished him. Antipas was a Tetrarch, a ruler over a region. And his region at the time of our story was Galilee and Perea. Herod the Great was dead, and Rome divided his territory into 4 regions hence the term tetra. Thus a Tetrarch was a ruler over one-fourth.

So Herod Antipas was only starting to hear about this Jesus fellow, but it was

after the time that he had ordered John the Baptist executed. Herod wondered if this was some sort of reappearance of the dead John the Baptist but in another form. And he owed this to the miracle powers that he seems to think John had that in some way or another got transferred to Christ. While Matthew puts this thought as being owned by Herod Antipas, Mark makes it that people in general who had Herod's ear thought this might be the case. These same people also speculated to Herod that perhaps Yeshua was Elijah or one of the other prophets of old. It is hard to know for certain what to make of all this. I think that while we must take this literally in the sense that this is exactly what people were saying and wondering, we must also realize that Herod and no doubt his closest advisors held some strange and irrational views about things that were common in that era. While Herod the Great and therefore his sons claimed to be Jews, they weren't. And while they claimed to follow the religion of the Jews, they didn't. These thoughts they had about who Yeshua was and where His powers came from were mostly superstitions.

I find that Origen, writing in the early 200's A.D., seems to have some real knowledge about these views that the Jews of the 1st century held on death, resurrection, and the condition of the soul. I will quote from his Commentary on Matthew regarding this issue because we find the connections between John, Elijah and Jesus to have been rather mysterious and not easy to grasp.

After explaining the different views Jews held on resurrection, Origen explains the matter of the soul.

We must now therefore inquire about the opinion regarding the soul, which was mistakenly held by Herod and some from among the people. It ran something like this: John, who a little earlier had been slain by him, had risen from the dead after he had been beheaded. This person who had risen was the same person under a different name, the one now called Jesus. Herod imagined that Jesus possessed the same powers that formerly worked in John. If the powers that worked in John had passed over to Jesus, Jesus was thought by some to actually be John the Baptist.

The return of Elijah fueled this idea. Here is the line of argument. It was the spirit and power of Elijah that had returned in John. (Christ said of John) "this is the Elijah who is to come". The spirit in Elijah possessed the power to go into John. So Herod thought that the powers John worked in baptism and teaching had a miraculous effect in Jesus, even though John did not

do miracles. It may be said that something of this kind was the underlying thought of those who said that Elijah had appeared in Jesus or that one of the old prophets had arisen.

What I find interesting is this implication that Herod and others thought that John the Baptist was a miracle worker who could heal (and do other things). There is no biblical record of him ever doing a miracle or having the ability to do so. Yet according to two Gospel accounts Herod certainly thought of John as a ***Tzadik***... a Jewish holy man... almost certainly because of rumors and false assumptions about him that made John seem like a possible threat to Herod's power and authority. Yeshua was suffering from the same kind of suspicions aimed at John; only for Christ those suspicions were coming from the Jewish religious leaders who saw Him as a threat to their religious authority and power. Therefore, according to Origen, in Herod's mind Yeshua's abilities... knowledge of which necessarily came to him second hand... made him wary that John may have risen from the dead; and this prospect thoroughly frightened him. But why did others think that perhaps Yeshua was Elijah or some other old prophet? It is because Prophets, and especially Elijah, were so highly revered in Jewish culture, and this was well known even among the local pagans. The Prophets were so highly thought of that they were seen as spiritual giants that may well have possessed special God given power. Elijah was also an especially mysterious man who was said to have never died but rather he ascended, alive, up to Heaven in a whirlwind. That of itself made him pretty unique if not bizarre. And there were well known prophecies that were accepted among the Jews that said Elijah would return. In fact, in Matthew 11 we hear this thought of Elijah's return and him inhabiting a person coming from no less than Christ:

CJB Matthew 11:13-14 ¹³ For all the prophets and the Torah prophesied until Yochanan. ¹⁴ Indeed, if you are willing to accept it, he is Eliyahu, whose coming was predicted.

We need to grasp that even if the Romans and their lackeys didn't necessary believe these mysterious prophecies about the great Hebrew Prophets of old (especially Elijah) returning from the dead, they knew that the Jewish people they ruled over certainly did. And such a return would have given that person a tremendous following of what would have been Jews filled with a fanatic religious fervor; and many Jews (mainly the Zealots) were already itching for a rebellion. This is the last thing Rome or any petty ruler like Antipas wanted. It represented real trouble. Rome measured the success of their assembly of governors and

small time rulers within the Roman Empire based upon their ability to keep the lid on trouble and to maintain the peace in their territory. So arresting and executing anyone who had the potential to unsettle things, no matter whether the threat was real or imagined, was standard operating procedure for these many governors and rulers. John the Immerser seems to have fallen into this potential trouble-maker category for Herod Antipas.

What finally caused Herod to move against the Baptist was when John publicly condemned Herod's marriage to Herodias. Most Bible versions have it as John calling the marriage unlawful. The CJB has John saying that it violates the Torah; that is the most correct interpretation. While it is true that the Greek term used is **ou exesti**, which literally means not lawful, the more important issue is what law code is it that John is saying Herod is breaking? It certainly wasn't against the law in the Roman law code and besides, people in high positions like Herod could do pretty much whatever they wanted as long as it didn't negatively affect the Empire. John would have had no more interest in the Roman law code than did Jesus. Rather the law that John was referring to could only have been the Law of Moses; the Torah. And indeed what Herod did was not lawful according to the Torah.

CJB Leviticus 20:21 *If a man takes his brother's wife, it is uncleanness; he has disgraced his brother sexually; they will be childless.*

It is not so much that Herod Antipas married his brother Philip's wife; it is that this happened while Philip was still living. According to the Law of Moses, a man could marry his **deceased** brother's wife (and in some cases was obligated to do so). But one also has to wonder whatever possessed John to make such a public ruckus over it happening. Could he really have thought that such a verbal attack would go unpunished? There are a few Bible commentators who say that John was intentionally playing out Christ's words of Matthew 10. There's a short lesson that emerges from this, so here's what Christ said:

CJB Matthew 10:26-28 ²⁶ *So do not fear them; for there is nothing covered that will not be uncovered, or hidden that will not be known.* ²⁷ *What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim on the housetops.* ²⁸ *"Do not fear those who kill the body but are powerless to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Gei-Hinnom.*

I don't know that John ever heard Yeshua mouth those words. But if what he thought he was doing by drawing attention to the illicit nature of Herod Antipas' marriage to his living brother's wife was obeying this principle, I think he got it wrong.

Look: as Believers God has not given it to us as our jobs to stand on the rooftops and shout whenever we see something happening that we believe is a sin. Wisdom and temperance are to harness our tongues. There is a time to speak up but there is also a time to remain silent. There is so much sin swirling around us every hour of every day in every imaginable form that if we decided we were put on this earth to point it out and condemn those committing it, people (including our Believing friends) would tire of us quickly. Few Jews of Yeshua's day thought of the Herod family as the true Jews they claimed they were; they didn't take such a notion seriously. They knew the royal family were playing a role in order to try to legitimize their rule over Jewish people as essentially "one of them". Certainly, some of the higher-ups within the Temple authority played along with this fiction because it was to their advantage to do so. But it is well recorded that the common Jewish society detested Herod the Great and his offspring. So it is one thing to recognize sin in someone, but it is quite another to publicly denounce them for it. I cannot help but think that John was a pretty hot tempered guy who didn't know when to reign in his mouth.

We're told in verse 5 that Herod had been wanting to have John killed, but he decided he dare not do so because the Immerser was revered by the common folk. In other words, Herod Antipas made a political calculation. Josephus makes it clear that Herod didn't want John dead because he was popular enough that it might foment rebellion. When John went so far as to openly denounce Herod's marriage, it only proved to Herod that this guy was fearless, willing even to take on a powerful ruler such as himself, and this made the Baptist all the more dangerous. So at first, Herod merely had him arrested and held for a long time. He wanted to kill him but was enough of a politician to know that to do so would make John a martyr, perhaps making him more of a threat dead than alive. But something happened to finally force his hand.

It was at a lavish birthday party for Herod Antipas that he asked for the daughter of his new wife, Herodias, to dance before him and his guests. In those days, such dancing was usually less about artistry and more about playing to the sexual lusts of the men. Some might think that it would be far out of bounds for a ruler to use his daughter in such a lewd way; but she was not his flesh and

blood... this was his step-daughter and this was the wicked Herod. Herod was so pleased with what he saw (and no doubt how his guests reacted) that he decided to show off. He brought her near to him and asked her to name anything she wanted and he'd give it her... up to half of his kingdom he says. Here is one of those statements that some academics scoff at and say this can only be myth and legend because it is absurd to accept that any wealthy ruler would offer to give a girl half of his entire kingdom just because she danced for him. So Matthew and Mark must have this wrong by quoting from the same silly Jewish tradition. Not so fast.

^{CJB} **Esther 5:1** *On the third day, Ester put on her royal robes and stood in the inner courtyard of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the king's hall, across from the entrance to the hall.* ² *When the king saw Ester the queen standing in the courtyard, she won his favor; so the king extended the gold scepter in his hand toward Ester. Ester approached and touched the tip of the scepter.* ³ *"What is it you want, Queen Ester?" the king asked her. "Whatever your request, up to half the kingdom, it will be given to you."*

Does anyone think that the King of Persia was serious about giving this poor Jewish girl, Esther, half of his kingdom? I haven't heard an academic questioning that statement that is nearly identical to the one we read coming from the mouth of Herod in Matthew 14. So are we to perceive Herod's step daughter as such a deranged blood-thirsty savage that rather than receiving half of the value of everything Herod possesses that she instead preferred a grotesque severed head on a plate? The point is this: no doubt this "half the kingdom" is only an expression and was not meant... nor taken... literally. It was an exaggeration built into a well known and ancient idiom that merely means that the one offering the great reward is in a generous mood and super pleased with this person standing before him. I suspect that should some poor naive soul ever try to take advantage of such an offer and ask for too much (thus humiliating the king) they would never live long enough to receive it.

The step daughter responds to Herod's offer by asking for John the Baptist to immediately be beheaded and his head brought into the festive birthday gathering. Was this something she desperately wanted? No. It was her mother that really asked for it, because she was the other half of that marriage that John had denounced and apparently she felt the sting of it. Herodias merely used her daughter's young beauty and persuasiveness to get what she wanted. In fact

when John's head is brought to the girl, she immediately hands it over to her mother. But Herod was stuck. He has just publicly offered this girl anything she wants, even making a vow to follow through, and done it mainly to impress the many dignitaries who came to honor him. He's in a bind. Regardless of why he might do it, killing John would be a dicey thing that could have serious repercussions for him personally. John's followers (and who knew how many there might be) could erupt in a righteous anger and throw his region into riots and chaos, which would in turn get him into hot water with Rome. On the other hand, it would now be too great a humiliation NOT to do it after making such a rash vow... although we can be certain he had no inkling that John's life would be the result.

Do not add any religious significance to Herod's vow. He was not at all concerned with going back on an oath to God; that is, what God might do to him if he didn't follow through. This was not another Jephthah story of a man sorrowfully carrying through with a rash vow made before God (that wound up costing his poor, innocent daughter her young life) so dedicated was he to carry out his vow no matter what the cost. The issue for Herod was political and social; it was about saving face before the elite of society and nothing else.

Finally in verse 12 we are informed that after the beheading, some of John's disciples were told of it and they came for the corpse. Recall that John apparently had a steady stream of visitors to his prison cell in Machaerus, one of Herod the Great's several fortress cities. Back in chapter 11 we read of disciples of John who were with him while he was in jail taking a message on his behalf to Yeshua. The reality of being in prison in those days was that it was expected that family and friends would bring food for the prisoner, often daily; otherwise eating occurred only sporadically and prisoners would regularly just waste away. I suspect that very likely some of those disciples were there when John was abruptly taken from his cell and killed. Nonetheless, they took John's body and buried it (probably the same day, as that was Jewish custom), and then they went and informed Yeshua of what happened to His cousin. It is important to note that despite Yeshua's expanding ministry and His growing number of followers, John the Baptist still had his own separate loyal group of disciples. We read in the Book of Acts chapter 19 (some decades later during Paul's day) that disciples of John remained as a separate and identifiable group, some of them still not understanding entirely who Yeshua was nor did they know of the revelation of the Holy Spirit for Believers. Sometimes a lot of time has to pass before God's revelations can be fully embraced within His worshipers, even for those who are

diligently and sincerely looking for the truth.

In verse 13, upon hearing of John's death, Yeshua determined He needed a little time alone and so went out onto the Lake on a boat. We are not to imagine that he sailed to a desert wilderness as this is so often translated. He was on the Sea of Galilee; there was no desert anywhere near to where He was. What we are to understand is that He was trying to get to a deserted place, somewhere on the rim of the Lake, where there weren't any people. It didn't work. The people found out where He was going and simply walked en masse around the Lake shore to join Him. The way Matthew words it clearly Yeshua was wanting some personal time to grieve over John and to contemplate what this might mean. After all, Herod Antipas seemed to think that Yeshua may well have been a revived John the Baptist (however strange that might seem to us), and this could well present an immediate danger for Christ.

As Yeshua's reputation swelled so did the numbers seeking after Him, thus the adjective "huge" is added to the word "crowd". However in verse 14 we must not spiritualize the reality of the situation. The multitudes were not clamoring after Him as their Messiah, nor were they seeking Him for salvation. To them He was still this amazing *Tzadik* that could heal anyone of anything, and they weren't about to miss their opportunity that only came along rarely. And, as verse 14 states, when they found Him, despite not wanting to be found, He of course understood their need and set aside His grieving and trepidations and in compassion He healed those who were ill of their infirmities. We must not imagine that everyone in the crowd wanted or needed healing. Rather families and friends accompanied those weak from illness, the blind, the lame, and no doubt in the crowd were some fascinated onlookers.

After a day of miracle healings, Christ's disciples show up. It's the evening, and the disciples ask Yeshua to end His healings, and send the people away from this deserted area to buy food from the local villages for their supper. This in no way was a cruel or uncaring request, but rather a practical one. After all, as verse 21 says, the crowd, the multitude that had come for healing, had grown to 5,000 men plus women and children. So despite the title for this event that we'll traditionally read in commentaries about "the feeding of the 5,000", there were far more people than that present. I suspect the low end would have been 10,000 and they all needed to eat not because they were starving but rather because it was mealtime and they were getting hungry.

But their Master tells the disciples NOT to send the people off to buy food for themselves, but rather they (the disciples) should feed them. The disciples respond incredulously; they say that all they have with them is 5 loaves of bread and a couple of fish. In other words, they brought provision enough for themselves and no one else (which, again, was not being selfish but rather doing what was responsible and natural). The signal that a miracle is about to happen is when Yeshua points to the food items and says: "Bring them here to Me". This will not be the first time in the Bible that the feeding of a large crowd beyond what little is available is recorded. In 2Kings chapter 4, we read this:

CJB 2 Kings 4:42-44 ⁴² *A man came from Ba'al-Shalishah bringing the man of God twenty loaves of bread made from the barley firstfruits and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give this to the people to eat."* ⁴³ *His servant said, "How am I to serve this to a hundred men?" But he said, "Give it to the people to eat; for ADONAI says that they will eat and have some left over."* ⁴⁴ *So he served them, and they ate and had some left over, as ADONAI had said*

So the Prophet Elishah got a word from God that the insufficient amount of food for 100 men would be so miraculously multiplied that they would eat their fill and still have some left over. And this can probably be attached to the miracle of more than enough Manna raining down on the 3 million or so Israelites all during their 40 years in the wilderness.

We are meant to notice the importance of food all throughout the Bible, and therefore for the divine provision of it. In the Creation story God had food in the form of plants ready for the moment that He would create the first human, and then the second. After the law of the 7th day as a day of rest was established, the next law God made concerned food. Adam and Eve could eat freely of everything in the Garden except for the fruit from one particular tree: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Later after the Great Flood, God expanded the permissible human diet to include certain animals. Later still, at Mt. Sinai, God instructed Moses about food by giving Him a list of permissible and prohibited things that people could eat, which also included instruction about keeping these food items from becoming inedible due to contamination (the laws of clean and unclean).

A few decades ago the Lord impressed upon me the important place that the human consumption of food holds in His economy. This overriding concern about food began at Creation and continues to this very day. I was so convicted about

my lack of recognition of this unequivocal biblical fact, and that I had for the majority of my life paid no attention to God's instructions to His worshipers about the food we eat, that it fell upon me like thunder and I immediately changed to eat biblically kosher. Institutional Christianity has taken it upon itself to suspend God's food laws by saying that when Christ came, it was the end of any rules or of God's divine will concerning food. That is, the doctrine is that God's concern about what we eat went from paramount to vanished. But I'm here to tell you that Yeshua has already made it abundantly clear that none of God's laws were changed or abolished at His advent. And from the Lord's perspective, food laws were rather useless if there wasn't enough for the people to eat. So what permissible food for humans is, and the sufficient provision of it, are central to God's will and His character. All Jesus is doing is demonstrating this reality, yet again, and perhaps His miracle of feeding the multitudes at the Sea of Galilee involved an element of both remembrance of past provision and hope for the future provision for God worshipers as expressed by the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb.

As we read all the Gospels we see Yeshua always urging folks to feed the hungry. When He told Peter (and others) to feed His Sheep, He meant it on two levels. On the ***P'shat*** level He meant it quite simply and literally; whenever people you encounter are hungry, feed them as an extension of what Yeshua would do if He were there. On the ***Remez*** level, He tells us that men don't live on bread (food) alone but also on every word that comes from the mouth of God. So feeding His sheep also means to instruct them in God's divine Word as an act of compassion. Both things are the responsibility, the duty, of Christ's followers. The ***Remez*** did not replace the ***P'shat***.

Therefore in a demonstration His disciples were certain to remember the rest of their lives, the meager basket of 5 loaves and 2 fish are set before Christ. Verse 15 explains that first the vast crowd of thousands was told to sit down in the grassy area where they had come to plead for healing. Next Yeshua is said to have looked up to Heaven and said a blessing. Why is Yeshua looking up to Heaven? Because He is doing what He always does, and always instructs us to do: He is glorifying The Father. Yeshua is making what in Hebrew is called a ***berakhah***. The Greek word used is ***eulogeo***. The Greek lexicons explain that it means to consecrate a thing with solemn prayers, and to offer praise. When He breaks the bread during the ***berakhah*** it is a rather standard Jewish way at a meal for praising The Father for the provision of food. It is possible that He recited a blessing that was (or became) typical and is used to this day. **"Blessed**

are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the Earth." I tell you this because it is not that by breaking the bread that Jesus was beginning the process of preparing smaller portions in order to parcel it out to the many individuals and families. Rather the *berakhah* is one of ceremonial ritual that He no doubt had recited hundreds of times.

Yeshua hands the baskets of food back to the disciples who are then ordered to distribute it to the hungry crowd. So, when, exactly did the miracle of multiplication happen? We're not told how it transpired. Just as with the foot washing and other acts Jesus did with His disciples to teach them important principles, the disciples should, by now, have realized that their Master was no mere Prophet or *Tzadik*. Not only was Christ's divine character on display, but also it revealed that a disciple's truest job was to serve people on Yeshua's behalf. Even the food that got multiplied came from them; they were the ones who brought the loaves and fishes and they were the ones tasked with giving it out. But now the question becomes: is there any significance, or symbolism, as regards the 5 loaves and 2 fishes? That is, do the numbers 5 and 2 in Hebrew gematria play a role? My answer is that I don't know. I also don't think that the food items of bread and fish are the issue because these were the staple food items for the people of Galilee; it would have been unexpected if the food consisted of something else. But when we think of all that Yeshua has taught, and all that He stands for, one thought that comes to mind is that perhaps the 5 loaves is symbolic of the 5 Books of the Torah. And the 2 represents the 2 greatest commandments of the Torah: To love God with all our mind and strength and to love our fellow man as we love ourselves. Both of these things were clearly being demonstrated in Christ's actions. I confess that this might just be an allegorical interpretation, yet it is hard for me to dismiss as something we are meant to take from the story.

In the end, the people are more than satisfied and there is even much left over. The message is clear: God has no limits on the abundance He can supply. He wants to shower His worshipers in abundance. Yet this sort of message only erupts into daily reality for everyone at the entry into the Messianic Kingdom of God and the end of the age. Good righteous people will go hungry on this present earth; an earth that is not presently God's Kingdom but rather it is Satan's realm. Even so, as Christ's disciples we are to help provide for those who don't have enough to eat. Always this obligation begins with, and is prioritized for, God's people and those who have been grafted in. But it certainly doesn't exclude those who are yet to discover God's truth and His grace.

We'll continue in Matthew chapter 14 next week.