

## DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Thirty-Fourth Week -- Monday

### HEROD AND HERODIAS

*"At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus and said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him.' For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Because John had said to him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her'" (Matthew 14:1-4).*

A few months after the circumstances which engaged our attention last evening, John the Baptist was cast into prison by Herod the tetrarch, or as he was commonly called, "the king" of Galilee. This is the same Herod who had succeeded to the tetrarchy after the death of Herod the Great, and who therefore had, during nearly the whole of our Lord's lifetime, been prince of the country to which Jesus belonged. This Herod, surnamed Antipas, inherited the vices but not the talents of his father, though he manifested considerable address [adroitness] in preventing or suppressing popular commotions in his dominions.

Herod had long been married to the daughter of Aretas, king of Arabia (that is, of the Arabian district bordering on Syria and lying beyond Herod's own territories east of the Jordan). But on a journey which Herod took to Rome to pay his court to the emperor, he visited Herod-Philip, his brother by the father's side, who was married to Herodias, who was the sister of both by the father's side. These three persons, then, were all children of the same father by different mothers.

Herodias, though past her youth, was a very charming but unscrupulous and ambitious woman. Herod was smitten with her beauty and winning manners and availed himself of the freedom of access which his near relationship afforded to endeavor to alienate her from her husband, his brother, and to gain her for himself. He was probably met halfway, for Herodias was weary of the comparatively obscure and private life she led with her husband and longed to move in the greatly superior sphere to which Herod could raise her.

It was agreed then between them that he should make her his wife when he returned from Rome. To be sure, they were both already married, but this was no insuperable obstacle to persons who, like most of the Herodian family, were accustomed to make all considerations of right or propriety bend to their own inclinations. It was therefore agreed that Herod should

divorce his wife. This he might do without any material public scandal, as the practice of divorcing a wife for any cause, or without any cause, had become very common in that age (but was strongly rebuked by our Savior). Herodias also agreed to divorce her husband. This *was* a public scandal, being wholly alien to the ideas and habits of the Jews, especially as the existing marriage had not been fruitless. The highest classes had, however, borrowed this practice from the Romans, though their example could never reconcile the public mind to it.

Before Herod returned, this conspiracy came to the ears of his wife, who thereupon fled to her father. This step was probably not unpleasant to Herod, who on his return made Herodias his wife. The proceeding was, however, altogether abhorrent to public opinion, which even Herodian tyrants do not deem it safe to disregard. Herod therefore felt uneasy and sent for John the Baptist in the expectation that if he could obtain his sanction for what had been done, the people, who, as the king knew, held the prophet in great respect, would be satisfied. But if Herod hoped to win or overawe John into a favorable opinion of his conduct, he was grievously mistaken. He had to do with one who feared not the face of man and whom kings were powerless to turn one hair's breadth from the line of truth and duty. John said plainly, "It is not lawful for you to have her," and for that saying he was cast into prison.

Herod, perhaps, might have passed it over, for he had as much respect for John as such a bad man as himself could have. But Herodias, who was in the highest degree exasperated at this adverse declaration from one whose word had so much weight with the people, craved his destruction. Her influence was at this time so powerful with Herod that she would probably have prevailed upon him to slay the prophet, but Herod feared what such an atrocious deed might produce among the people. He did, however, cast him into prison; and there John remained until the watchful vengeance of Herodias succeeded in accomplishing his destruction.

The question has been raised, On what ground did John declare this marriage to be unlawful? This does not seem difficult to find. We must understand that "unlawful" means contrary to the letter or spirit of the law of Moses; and certainly this deed involved more than one transgression of that law.

First, it was unlawful for a man to marry one who was his sister even by one parent only. Second, Herodias' divorce of her husband was unlawful and therefore void, and such being the case, the marriage contracted while her husband still lived was void and Herod and Herodias were living in a state of adultery together. Now, had Herodias not been the sister of Herod, and had her husband been already dead, and had there been no issue by that marriage, then it might not only have been lawful but obligatory on Herod to marry Herodias; for the law required that when a man died childless, his brother should take his widow in order that the firstborn child of this union should be counted as the child and heir of the deceased brother.

But none of these conditions existed here. Herodias was the sister of Herod, and that by the father's side, which was held to constitute a nearer relationship than by the mother's side only; her husband was living; and there had been issue by the marriage in the person of Salome, that

damsel whose dancing subsequently cost John the Baptist his head. Even if Philip had been dead and had died childless (which would have created an obligation upon Herod), his marriage to Herodias would still have been "unlawful" because Herodias was his sister.

It therefore seems to us that the reasons why it was not lawful for Herod to have Herodias are that she was his sister, and that she was the wife of a man still living, and that this man was Herod's own brother, which however it may have affected the legal bearings of the question was certainly a strong aggravation of the moral enormity of the transaction. The Jewish writers who speak of this marriage always do so with reprehension, making the culpability rest either upon the fact that Herodias was his own sister or upon that of her being the wife of Herod's still-living brother. And Josephus seems to include the woman's divorce of her husband along with this when he describes the whole transaction as "confounding the laws of the country," a strong expression on his part of its unlawfulness.