

Machaerus: The Fortress where John the Baptist was Beheaded

Introduction

If John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness of Judea, in the south, why was it in the hands of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee in the north, to punish John for his preaching when it should have been the responsibility of the governor of Judea where, according to the Bible, John preached?

The purpose of this article is to ask the question: if John preached in Judea and Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee (two regions distant from one another and under different rulers), what authority did Antipas have to condemn John? Did John at any time move to preach in Galilee to fall under the rule of Antipas? How is it possible for Antipas to condemn a citizen of Judea that was ruled by a Roman governor without any prior coordination?

John the Baptist and the Wilderness

It is said that, at the approximate age of thirty, John started to preach in the wilderness of Judea and on the banks of the river Jordan¹. He spoke against the evils of the time and called men to repentance and baptism. His message to people was to repent because the Kingdom of God was at hand. He baptized multitudes and was, therefore, called John the Baptist. John was born in Judea and “came preaching also in the wilderness of Judea”². The Judean wilderness or desert was a rocky tract of land in the Judean province lying between Judea as such and the western shore of the River Jordan and the Dead Sea. It was a desert terrain, thinly peopled and an almost

¹ Mark 1:4-5

² Matthew 3:1.

uninhabitable mass of barren ridges extending the whole length of the Dead Sea and a few miles north along the Jordan³.

We must remember that upon the death of Herod the Great in the year 4 BC, Rome refused to name another king for the region later called Palestine and divided the rule of the land among three of Herod's sons: Phillip, Archelaus and Antipas⁴

According to Josephus, Philip inherited the northeast part of his father's kingdom, which included Iturea and Trachonitis; and possibly Gaulonitis and Paneas⁵

Archelaus was made ruler of the province of Judea which included Judea, Samaria and Idumea⁶. Archelaus, being poorly efficient in his new job was deposed and a Roman governor was named to govern Judea in the year 6 AD.

Herod Antipas, on the other hand, was made ruler of Galilee and Perea.⁷ By the time John began to preach, Judea had already become a Roman province, now under the rule of Pilate. Antipas had no authority or say in how the law was applied in Judea. How could he then arrest and kill John the Baptist; a man born in and ministering in Judea? The Bible never mentions that John moved to Galilee to exert his ministry there.

Location of John's ministry

As mentioned before, John ministered mostly in the desert or what was also called the wilderness of Judea, located west of the Jordan. This region was under the control of the Roman governor. However, the Bible also tells us that John crossed over to the eastern shore, to the other side of the Jordan River to perform his baptisms and, most

³ M. Pierce Matheny. Wilderness. In: Holman Bible Dictionary, Broadman and Holman (1991) (Wilderness of Judea)

⁴ Antipas was the youngest son of Herod the Great

⁵ Josephus, Antiquities 17.188–189

⁶ Idumea is the name the Romans gave to Edom.

⁷ Jeffers, James S. (2000). *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*. Intersity Press. p. 125. Antipas was the ruler or tetrarch of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to 39 AC.

definitely, to preach⁸. The main location for this ministry was called Bethany, Bethany beyond the Jordan⁹.

The eastern shore of the lower part of the Jordan River and the upper half of the Dead Sea fell within the territory of Perea. As Perea was ruled by Herod Antipas, if John spent a significant portion of his ministry in his tetrarchy and broke any real or imagined rule in that region he could be punished by Antipas.

Now, we are told that during the party in which Salome and Herodias asked for John's head, Antipas," reluctantly" ordered one of his executioners to go, behead John and bring back his head on a platter. According to the Biblical account, all this was apparently accomplished quickly. If the party happened in Galilee, it is unlikely that the soldier could leave the party in Galilee, travel 100 Km to Judea, kill John and be back by the time suggested in the narrative or, at least, before the head began decomposing. Where were they?

According to the historian Flavius Josephus, John had been beheaded in the Machaerus fortress, in Transjordan. Machaerus was located in the inferior part of Perea, the territory on the east side of the River Jordan controlled by Antipas, a territory where John was performing his baptism ministry and where he, most likely, preached against any happenings he considered sinful - such as the behavior of Antipas.

Machaerus had been built by the Hasmoneans many years before the birth of John the Baptist.¹⁰ It was subsequently destroyed and Herod the Great had reconstructed it making in the interior of the fortress a magnificent palace where Antipas frequently resided. It is likely that he gave a great feast there, during which and according to the Bible, Salome executed the fatidic dance and the fatidic request for John's head¹¹

⁸ John 1:28; John 10:40

⁹ *ibid*, John 1:28

¹⁰ The Hasmoneans were also known as the Maccabees. They were the last Jewish rulers of Israel (from 164-63 BCE). Their rule ended when the Romans conquered and took over the region. In 37 BCE, the romans appointed the Idumean Herod the Great as King of Israel. It is believed that Jesus may have been born during or soon after Herod's rule.

¹¹ Matthew 14: 1-12

Conclusions

This scenario makes sense. John baptized, preached and ministered in a region beyond or on the other side of the River Jordan, in Perea. His preaching placed him at odds with Herod Antipas¹². Herod was residing in Machaerus at the time and had John imprisoned there at Machaerus. When Antipas made the decision to kill him, the executioner had a short distance to travel. John was incarcerated and executed right there at Machaerus. As John was exercising a ministry in Perea, it was Antipas and not Pilate who had to deal with any “wrongdoing” on the part of John the Baptist.¹³

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¹² The Gospels state that John attacked the tetrarch's marriage as contrary to Jewish law (it was incestuous, as Herodias was also Antipas' niece, but also John criticized the fact that she was his brother's wife in (Matthew 14:3-4; Mark 6:17-18) On the other hand, Josephus says that John's public influence made Antipas fearful of rebellion (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.118).

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