

Herod's Birthday Banquet and its Significance for Jesus and his Disciples in the Gospel of Mark

Urodzinowa uczta Heroda i jej znaczenie dla Jezusa i Jego uczniów w Ewangelii Marka

Key words: narrative criticism, Gospel of Mark, discipleship, Herod, Banquet, sandwich structures. Intercalations

Słowa kluczowe: krytyka narracji, Ewangelia Marka, uczniostwo, Herod, uczta, struktury interkalacyjne

Abstract

This article is an attempt to look at the story of Herod's banquet as it is found in the Gospel of Mark from the narrative perspective taking into consideration the fact that it is connected with the story of Jesus sending his disciples on a mission. The significance of John the Baptist's death will be explored in connection with Mark's understanding of discipleship. It will also be shown how Mark's readers should see themselves in relation to both John the Baptist and Jesus and how they should understand their fates as interconnected.

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi próbę spojrzenia na opowieść o uczcie u Heroda, którą znajdujemy w Ewangelii Marka, z perspektywy narracyjnej, z uwzględnieniem faktu, że owa opowieść łączy się z wysłaniem uczniów przez Jezusa na misję. Istotne dla przedstawionej analizy będzie zbadanie połączenia śmierci Jana Chrzciciela z Markowym rozumieniem uczniostwa. Pozwoli

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to spojrzeć na to, jak czytelnicy Ewangelii Marka powinni postrzegać swój los w świetle wydarzeń z życia zarówno Jana Chrzciciela jak i Jezusa.

1. Introduction

The Second Gospel is known for its interest in Christology and discipleship (Henderson 2006). Mark seems to focus on many aspects of Jesus' and his followers' lives, yet, the two very prominent ones seem to be their suffering and servitude. The purpose of this paper will be to investigate how those two themes are treated in Mark 6,7-30², especially in view of the middle section of the passage (6,14-29), which is an account of Herod's birthday banquet at which John the Baptist is beheaded. The following study will be mainly guided by a narrative approach to the text, yet some historical-critical issues will not be totally left out³. The narrative features which will be taken into account include mainly (1) intercalations, (2) the settings of the story and (3) characterization of Herod and Herodias.

2. Structure: Intercalations.

James R. Edwards (Edwards 1989) suggests that there are nine intercalations or sandwiches in Mark⁴. One of them is Mk 6,7-30 which can be structured as follows:

A: 6,7-13 – Sending out the Twelve

B: 6,14-29 – Beheading of John the Baptist

A': 6,30 – The apostles return

² This is beyond the scope of this paper to go into a detailed discussion of why it should be treated as a sandwiched structure although as will be seen in the investigation that it, in fact, can. For detailed discussions about sandwiched structures see: Edwards 1989, 193-216.

³ For an overview of the areas of investigation carried out mainly by historical-critical scholarship see: Cummins 2006, 32-33. An approach advocating the use of both methods see: Viljoen 2002, 457.

⁴ Humphrey suggests that the whole Gospel is filled with such structures. See for example, Humphrey 2003, 6-9; 13; 27; (or for matters of Mk 6:1-30) 98.

Our section begins with Jesus sending out the disciples (6,7) on a mission that focused on preaching repentance (6,12). Their mission was accompanied by acts of casting out demons, anointing many sick people with oil and healing them (6,13). In 6,14 the narrative switches to a different scene where king Herod is introduced but is later picked up again in 6,30, when disciples, here called the apostles, return to Jesus. According to R.A. Culpepper the inserted story could very well be left out and the whole Markan narrative would not suffer (Culpepper 2011, 145-6)⁵. However, the obvious fact is, that it is inserted. The question is then about the purpose of such “insertion of one literary unit in the midst of another” (Powell 1993, 33)⁶.

Edwards sees the aim of such intercalations as theological (Edwards 1989, 196)⁷. Joel Marcus agrees, when he says that “the intercalation of the story of the Baptist probably also has a deeper purpose; it points to the paradox that the miraculous successes of Christian missionaries are made possible by the suffering death of Jesus, to which the death of the Baptist points” (Marcus 1999, 397). However, the “successes of Christian missionaries” were not the only concern behind this insertion. Marcus quite rightly mentions John’s and Jesus’ deaths, but it can also be added, following Abraham Smith, that Mark 6,14-29 connects “the fate of the Baptist to the fates of the disciples” (Smith 2006, 281). Some links between the fate of the disciples and that of Jesus and John the Baptist may be seen in the content of their preaching, namely repentance. John, as the forerunner of Jesus, is presented by the narrator as preaching “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1,4); the same

⁵ See also Hooker 1991, 158.

⁶ See also Resseguie 2005, 54.

⁷ One intriguing suggestion concerning the theological validity of the account of John the Baptist’s beheading is that the narrative was inserted “out of Christian desire to refute claims that Jesus was John raised from the dead,” and in order to rehabilitate two Jewish women (Salome and Herodias) in order to facilitate Christian-Jewish dialogue. Cf. Kraemer 2006, 348.

activity was embarked upon by Jesus (1,14) and now the disciples are commissioned the same task in 6,12, just before the narrative in question. What is more, in 1,14 Mark says that John the Baptist was imprisoned. The Greek word used by Mark to refer to this action is *παράδομι* which will later be used in connection with both Jesus' sufferings (cf. Mark 8,31; 9,31) and that of the disciples (Mark 13,11; Boring 2006, 178). What is more, the disciples' actions are associated by the narrator with that of Jesus', and yet Herod sees them as that of John the Baptist, which again may serve as a means of linking disciples with the fate of John. No wonder, attentive readers might have felt that the story seen from a larger perspective may in fact be read as a lesson for Jesus' followers.

In view of the above observations, it does not seem unreasonable to investigate the account of Herod's banquet in connection with Christology and discipleship. We will do so by first analyzing the settings of the story, namely the banquet. Later we will turn to the way Mark uses characterization of Herod and Herodias.

3. Setting: The Banquet

The banquet itself is described in Mark 6,21-28, with its culminating account of the beheading of John the Baptist. Yet, to better understand the setting of Herod's birthday party Mark explains to his readers why Herodias would want to have John the Baptist killed (6,16-20). There are four explanations preceding the story and setting the stage for it. The reader is informed that Herod heard about Jesus disciples' actions, "for Jesus' name had become known" (6,14). This is the first *γὰρ* phrase, and the only one referring to Jesus. Herod seems to be confused, associating Jesus' and his disciples' activity of casting out demons and healings (6,13) with John the Baptist whom he beheaded (6,16). The remaining three *γὰρ* phrases explain John's role in Herod's life and vice versa. John was imprisoned by Herod (*γὰρ* in 6,17) because his repeated (6,18) accusations concerning his marriage with Herodias were not favorably

received by her. She stood behind John's imprisonment, however, since Herod revered John (γὰρ in 6,20), the latter was safe (Hooker 1991, 161).

Yet not for too long a time, for "a day of opportunity came" (6,21). The plot is to unfold at the birthday banquet, an occasion not necessarily of good associations among the Jews as well as the Church Fathers (Marcus 1999, 395). David M. Hoffeditz and Gary E. Yates add that "birthday celebrations with great banquets were normally associated with pagan practices in ancient literature," and in Roman circles, to which Herod Antipas inclined, such events were accompanied by excessive drinking (Hoffeditz, Yates 2005, 215). What is more, they claim that during such occasions women were not normally present (Hooker 1991, 161; which may be indicated by the fact that Herodias had to 'go out' to her mother; 6,24), thus the dance of a teenage girl must have had some sexual overtones, and as they continue, "suggests anything but innocence" (Hoffeditz, Yates 2005, 216).

The party scene is introduced by the phrase "a suitable day come" (6,21), which according to A. Yarbro Collins both links the story with v. 19 and "recalls both Herodias's desire to kill John and her inability to persuade her husband to do so" (Collins 2007, 308). Herodias's daughter's dance seems to have aroused her stepfather's sexual desires which Collins describes as "incestuous pleasure," (Collins 2007, 309; Marcus 1999, 396) and which lead him to promising that he will give the girl whatever she wishes (6,22). His offer is then strengthened and reiterated by an oath "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom" (6,23). We will return to the irony of that statement later on, for the time being, it is enough to say that scholars see it as almost an exact quotation from Esther (Esther 3,3; 6)⁸ thus bringing to mind an account of another banquet in the Hebrew Bible. However, the difference between the two is quite substantial. The party to which Esther invited

⁸ On associations with the Book of Esther cf. Cummins, 31.

the king resulted in the villain Haman being hanged (Esther 7,10) and many lives being saved (Esther 8,10-12), the fact that was celebrated by the establishment of the feast of Purim (Esther 9,20-28)⁹. On the other hand, in Mark's story, the possibility to request for anything up to the half of the kingdom, rather than in saving, results in depriving John of his life (6,27-28).

Mark places his narrative about this gruesome feast just before another feast, the one organized by Jesus (6,32-44). If by referring to Herod as king an ironic allusion is made to Jesus (an observation that we will pick up in the following section; Cummins, 36), then Herod's banquet may also be juxtaposed with the feast spoken of and held by Jesus. The types of people Jesus spent time with (they included: poor, lame, sick, outcasts) are contrasted with court officials, military commanders and leaders of Galilee (6,21). What is more, if Herod's banquet ended up in a death sentence, Jesus miraculous feeding may fit well into the expectations of the "messianic banquet" at which people would be given manna¹⁰. According to B. Witherington:

Mark has a way of juxtaposing stories, and in this chapter, two major meals are juxtaposed. One foreshadows the demise of Jesus, the other the rise of the eschatological feast in the dominion of God. Unlike Herod, who thought of himself as a king over part of Israel but simply indulged himself and was immortal, Jesus will be presented here as Israel's true shepherd king who feeds the flock, meeting their needs as Moses did in the wilderness (Witherington 2001, 217).

In another Markan story of a meal initiated by Jesus and held in an "upper/large room" (14,15), the main dish that is served, contrary to Herod's main dish delivered to Herodias on a platter by her daughter, is

⁹ Interestingly, Boring observes that "midrash on Esther even has the head-on-platter motif (*Midr. Esther* 1:19-21); Boring 2006, 178. According to Smith, Another example may be Judith who used a banquet setting to behead a wicked man, Holofernes (Jdt 13:14-16), cf. Smith 2006, 279.

¹⁰ See: Hooker 1991, 164.

that of Son of God's body and blood (14,22-24). The first dish was meant to indulge the ruthless desires of Herod's wife not willing to accept the word of God's messenger, the latter dish may be seen as a foretaste and "an anticipation of a heavenly banquet" (Donahue, Harrington 2002, 400), and as a means of introducing the reality of a new kingdom, the Kingdom of God. In this kingdom rather than seeking to entertain one's sensuality at the expense of others, Jesus' followers are to give their lives in service for others (Mk 10,42-45).

Thus the banquet setting may be seen as an ironic juxtaposition of two rival kingdoms, with Herod Antipas as a king not being able to be attentive to the words of God's messenger, catering for his own needs and not being mindful of the weak and oppressed, those who did not have a shepherd (Mark 6,34). Jesus, seen against the banquet scenery, introduces a new reality, namely that of a coming kingdom of God (1,14-15). In the realm of God's rule, the suffering are to be taken care of. Thus, Herod is rightly claimed to be a myopic ruler not recognizing the rightful kingdom. But there is more in his presentation that Mark manages to achieve and so it is to Herod's characterization that we will now turn.

4. Herod Antipas

Characterization¹¹ seems to play quite an important role in Markan narrative. Mark's depiction of Herod with the title 'king' (βασιλεὺς; 6,14) may function as a trigger, building the irony that can later be used to contradict two ways of ruling, that of Christ and that of the rulers (Mark 10,42). The irony (contra Stein 2006, 300) lies in the fact that Herod Antipas, despite his desire to be one, was not a rightful king. He was a tetrarch "appointed by the Romans, who had removed royal sovereignty from the Jews" (Marcus 1999, 392). His attempts to become

¹¹ On characterization in the gospels see: Rhoads, Syreeni 1999.

a king, ironically for Markan readers¹², led him to his “eventual downfall and banishment to Gaul in 39 CE” (Smith 2006, 266). So not only was he not a king but his pursuit for the kingdom also met with complete failure. The irony also lies in the fact that being a king he was not able to follow his own inclinations and desires. Overcome by fear, he was willing to sacrifice the inclinations of his heart when his wife managed to implicate him in killing John the Baptist. We are told that “Herod stood in awe of John and protected him” (6,20), yet his own feelings and convictions were not strong enough to move him to action. Rather, he attempted to please the guests and retain a seemingly good standing among his people and his unlawful wife. Marcus observes, that “The title ‘king’ is (...) rather an example of the evangelist’s irony, for it is prominent in a passage in which Herod is outwitted and manipulated by two women and hamstrung by his own oath and his fear of losing face before his courtiers” (Marcus 1999, 398). He is ready to give the dancing girl whatever she wishes (6,22); a promise that he reiterates with, as Collins puts it, a “foolish oath or vow” to give her up to half of his kingdom (6,23; Collins 2007, 309). Collins observes that by doing so Mark may be ironically characterizing Herod against the backdrop of Greek king Artaxerxes. The phrase “up to half the kingdom” most certainly refers to the story of Esther. If that is an allusion to Ahasuerus (Hebrew for Artaxerxes), then the “assimilation is ironic, since Herod rules over a small territory at the pleasure of Rome, whereas Ahasuerus ruled 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia (Esth 1,1; Collins 2007, 309). In his own eyes, Herod might have been a great king, yet in reality he was a foolish man.

In connection with the ironical portrayal of Herod Antipas as ‘king’ and his “myopic mistreatment of Jesus’ precursor John,” S. Anthony Cummins draws attention to an overall inability of the Jewish and Roman

¹² The date of composition of Mark’s Gospel is generally acknowledged to be sometime between 65-70 AD.

authorities “to recognize and receive Messiah Jesus himself, and thus to envisage and enter into the divine empire emerging in their midst” (Cummings 2006, 31). Mark’s portrayal of Herod may be seen as an attempt to show that the rulers of this world will not accept the rule envisaged by the coming kingdom of God.

What is more, the narrative depicts Herod as a man of dubious moral standing. The reader is not specifically informed about whose idea was it for the girl to dance. All that is said is that the opportune day (6,21) had come. It may suggest that it was the girl’s mother idea. However, we cannot be certain. The reader may be thus encouraged to fill in some narrative gaps and even see Herod Antipas as arranging for the dance. If that was in fact the case, “he is put in an even worse light, ogling and exploiting his own daughter” (Collins 2007, 30).

Apart from his characterization as an immoral king who lacked leadership skills, Abraham Smith notices that there is another typology that seems to have been neglected in biblical scholarship but which may bring some extra light into understanding Herod’s presentation in connection with discipleship. Mark’s reference to Herod as a king coupled with an ancient depiction of tyrants suggests that Herod might be seen against the backdrop of ancient tyrant’s characterization (Smith 2006, 260-293). To support his thesis, he lists four main characteristics of an ancient tyrant and finds them in Mark 6,14-29. Those features include: (1) the tyrant’s paranoia, to which Herod’s fear may testify (6,20); (2) the tyrant’s possession of a bodyguard, which may be supported by his possession of an executioner (gr. *σπεκουλάτωρ*; 6,27); (3) the tyrant’s display of excess; so clearly seen, in Smith’s view, in Herod’s lack of self-control which eventuates in John’s hasty death (6,27; Smith 2006, 281¹³); (4) the tyrant’s encounter with a philosopher; John the Baptist serves as a good example of the wise man (or a prophet) of whom Herod

¹³ Cf. Marcus also supports that claim saying: “The tyrant is not a true king but a slave to his own passions and his claim to sovereignty is belied by his inability to enforce his will and avoid what he hates.” Marcus 1999, 399.

stood in awe and to whom he liked to listen (6,20; Smith 2006, 271). So, Smith concludes that in describing Herod “Mark draws on each of the aforementioned stock features of the tyrant” (Smith 2006, 281). Such a presentation of Herod, coupled with an account of Jesus being rejected in Nazareth (6,1-6) and his mission to “the people who are characterized as sheep without a shepherd” (6,30-44), is according to Cummins an invitation to a discussion on the “leadership roles of Jesus, his disciples, Herod and John the Baptist” (Cummins 2006, 36). How then should the reader view those roles in view of Herod’s depiction?

Smith provides quite an illuminating answer to that question by pointing out that there are certain features of Herod’s characterization which may be seen as indicative of the way Jesus’ disciples are to exercise their authority or leadership roles. Mark makes it clear that the authority (ἐξουσία) Jesus possessed (1,22; 2,10) was imparted to the disciples (3,14; 6,7 – immediately preceding the account of John the Baptist’s beheading), he also points out that there was a danger of a misuse of this authority. In Mark 10,35, James and John are reported to have asked Jesus to do for them whatever they wanted. Their desire was clearly connected with exercising powerful roles as those sitting at the right and left sides of the ruling king. In the following verses (10,36-45) Jesus teaches them about the nature of kingdom leadership, however, an attentive reader, in Smith’s view, may already be alert to an echo of Herodias’ daughter asking for whatever she wanted (6,24-25; Smith 2006, 286¹⁴). This allusion within the narrative to Herod portrayed as a tyrant may be a way of exposing “the tyrannical quest for control in the request of the two disciples” (Smith 2006, 286). They should be more than careful not to follow their own will but rather the will of God (3,35). And this is something they found quite difficult and also something Jesus most

¹⁴ Smith, quite convincingly, bases his argument on the reappearance of the verbs θέλω (to will, wish, want, would) and its cognates in crucial passages referring to Jesus passion and discipleship (Mark 8:31-38; 9:33-37; 10:32-45).

perfectly exemplified (14,36). Thus, Smith concludes, “the *exposure* of tyranny in Herod was not solely a critique of a brutal ‘king’ but a didactic challenge to Jesus’ disciples within and beyond the narrative to avoid becoming tyrants among themselves” (Smith 2006, 287).

So, in short, we can say that what we have here is a portrait of a weak and vacillating man (Witherington 2001, 215). A man whose characterization can be very well summarized in Marcus’ words:

...we see that this supposed ‘king’ is not even in control of himself, much less of his subjects; he is, rather, overmastered by his emotions, which swing wildly from superstitious dread (6,14, 16) to awe, fascination, and confusion (6,20), to a sexual arousal that seems to border on insanity (6,22-23), to extreme depression (6,26). In this context his pretensions to royal authority (6,16, 27) appear almost farcical; Herod is one who merely *appears* to rule (cf. 10,42), whereas actually his strings are pulled by others (Marcus 1999, 398).

Herod, a weak and vacillating ruler, yields his political and moral power to his wife’s influence. It is Herodias, whose role in the narrative cannot be underestimated, to whom we will now turn.

5. Herodias

Herodias is introduced to the Markan narrative as Herod’s brother Philip’s wife (6,17). These first words describing her are only later followed by the mention of the fact that Herod had married her (6,17)¹⁵. The unlawfulness of this marriage is reported to have been repeatedly voiced by John the Baptist. At this point the narrative has John’s exact words quoted: “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife,” (6,18) the words which echo Lev 18,16; 20,21 and show that their actions go against God’s laws. She probably would have enjoyed the relationship

¹⁵ On the complicated family relationships within Herod’s family see: Marcus 1999, 394-395.

with Herod more if not those constantly reiterated words by John the Baptist, which caused her to “nurse a grudge,” or “have it in for him” (6,19).

Herodias’ resentment towards the messenger of the Lord, and her depiction as an instigator who incites her husband to do evil (Hoffeditz, Yates 2005, 200) make some scholars see the conflict of Jezebel and Elijah (see John’s depiction in Elijanic terms: Mark 1,6) as a possible background of this Markan story. Thus, according to Culpepper, when the vicious wife, whose aim is to kill the one pointing to her sins (6,18) is introduced, the allusions to Jezebel are more than clear (Culpepper 2011, 149-150). Nursing a grudge against John for such actions, she wanted him dead (6,19). The only obstacle was her husband Herod who, out of respect for John, did not want to fulfill his wife’s desires (6,20). Yet, just as her narrative predecessor, Jezebel, Herodias finds her way to persuade her husband to do what she wishes. She is depicted as having abilities to use her family members in order to achieve her goals. She probably does it by having understanding of Herod’s lust but also of the court settings. She is also presented as one pulling the strings while remaining in the background (Culpepper 2011, 152). She advises her daughter to request for John’s head which is finally being delivered to the banquet guests on a platter (6,28) John’s head on a platter (6,28). This leaves the readers with an impression of her just waiting for the right moment and being able to use it for her own purposes with whatever means available. Sadly, what she wanted to achieve was contradictory to God’s precepts, something that the reader is again reminded of in Mk 10,10-12 where her and Herod’s actions are explicitly called adultery.

For the disciples, her depiction might have served as a warning that the preaching of repentance will always have its enemies. The enemies, holding a grudge, more probably than not, will continue to do so until the opportune moment comes and the voice of the prophet is silenced, sometimes by most horrible of deaths. This idea is emphasized by the comparison to Jezebel who dies (2 Kgs 9,33) and Elijah who does not

but instead is taken to heaven (2 Kgs 2,11). According to Hoffeditz and Yates, the Markan “narrative of John’s beheading reverses the story line of the Hebrew Bible in that it is now the word of the wicked queen that brings about the death of the prophet” (Hoffeditz, Yates 2005, 219). This picture, foreign to Jewish thought, of the suffering of Elijah is meant to show that the Markan main character, Jesus, and his followers alike, will suffer persecution if not death.

6. Conclusions

As has been shown above, Mark uses such narrative technics as intercalations, settings and characterizations in order to show his readers how he viewed Christ and the disciples. Firstly, it must be concluded that the ironic picture of Herod as a king stands in opposition to the king Jesus inaugurating the kingdom of God. Using the theme of a feast/banquet Mark seems to be saying that what Jesus is after is substantially different from what Herod and thus earthly rulers seek. Serving others is the appropriate way of conduct in the domain of God’s rule, and Herod’s characterization as a tyrant serves as a sober warning to the disciples to use their God-given authority wisely. It has also been shown that the opposition directed towards those proclaiming the words of God, namely the disciples commissioned to preach repentance, is very likely to lead to persecution or even death.

Mark finishes his account of John the Baptist’s death with John’s disciples coming, taking his body and laying it in a tomb (Mark 6,29). This is clearly the pious act Jesus’ disciples are expected to perform yet fail to do after their Master’s death on the cross (Mark 15,45; Collins 2007, 314). That coupled with Mark’s open-ended structure (Mark 16,8) leaves the reader wondering about his or her own decision regarding the way Markan Jesus encourages them to embark on.

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