HEROD ANTIPAS

In the Gospel today we hear Jesus speaking about Herod Antipas as “that fox” (Lk 13:31-32). What do we know about him? Antipas was a son of Herod the Great, who had been king over Judea when Jesus was born.

The family of the Herods had strong connections with the Roman government. The Herods repeatedly went to court to court the favour of the current emperor. The Roman senate had given Herod the Great, Antipas’ father, the title “king of the Jews.” Herod the Great had several wives. He had the dubious reputation of being one of a handful of rulers in history who have executed a wife (Mariamne) and a son. Herod the Great executed two of his sons. Intrigue was common in the courts of the Herods.

When Joseph and Mary returned with Jesus from Egypt they were afraid to go to Judea, because they heard that Archelaus had succeeded Herod the Great (Mt 2:22). In the parable about the ten minas (Lk 19:14), Jesus spoke about a man who went to a distant country to be appointed king, but whose subjects hated him, and sent a counter-delegation. This probably reminded many of his hearers of an incident about thirty years before, when Archelaus had gone to Rome, opposed by a delegation from his own subjects (Josephus Wars, 2.6.1; Antiquities 17.9.3). Archelaus was so cruel that the Romans deposed him in 6 AD, and the Romans ruled the southern part of the Holy Land, Judea, more directly under a governor, or procurator.

We also have to distinguish Herod Antipas from King Herod Agrippa, who is referred to in the Acts of the Apostles. He was the one who put James, the brother of John, to death in about 43 AD, and imprisoned Peter briefly (Acts 12). Luke reported his sudden death in AD 44 (Ac 12:20-23). We also have to distinguish him from the Agrippa before whom Paul had a hearing at Caesarea (Acts 25:13-32).

Herod Antipas, “the tetrarch”, was another son of Herod the Great. His mother was a Samaritan woman, Malthace. “Tetrarch” means “the ruler over a quarter.” His area was Galilee and Perea. He ruled over this area from 4 BC to AD 39. He did not rule over the whole of Palestine, but a quarter of it. Herod Antipas is important for the New Testament because both John the Baptist and Jesus carried out most of their ministries in his territories.

He was frivolous and vain, and guilty of many crimes. On one occasion Jesus warned His disciples: “Watch out! Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod!” (Mk 8:15). Mostly in the New Testament “yeast” was a symbol of what was evil and corrupt. Both the Pharisees and Herod were badly disposed towards Jesus, for different reasons. When a trap was set to catch Jesus about paying tax to Caesar, the Pharisees brought some supporters of Herod with them. They hoped to cause Jesus trouble whether He answered yes or no.

Herod’s headquarters in Galilee were at Tiberias, on the western shore of the Lake. Jesus spent most of his ministry of about three years in towns in the surrounding area. However, although Tiberias was on the shore of the Lake of Galilee, and the Lake was often called “The Sea of Tiberias”, there is no record that Jesus ever went to Tiberias. Herod had founded the city Tiberias before Jesus began His ministry, between about 18 and 22 AD, to replace Sepphoris as the capital of Galilee. His father, Herod the Great had also been a great builder, and had undertaken the rebuilding of the temple, which was still not finished in Jesus’ time, and was completed only several years before the Romans destroyed it in AD 70. Herod Antipas named his capital “Tiberias” after the current Roman Emperor, Tiberius. He liked to imitate Greek culture. He built the city Tiberias on the model of a Greek city, but on a site of a cemetery. That fact made the place unclean to pious Jews.

Herod Antipas was afraid of the powerful Nabataean king Aretas IV. The Jewish historian Josephus said that Antipas was afraid that John the Baptist’s great public following might develop into a revolt against him (Antiquities of the Jews 18.118). John the Baptist incurred the wrath of Antipas for denouncing Antipas’ second marriage as unlawful. Antipas had a guilty conscience.

Jesus healed the son of a royal official from Galilee. The father would have been in Herod’s service (Jn 4:43-54). Perhaps significantly, Jesus did not “go down” (probably to the coast of the Lake at Tiberias) with him, but healed the royal official’s son from a distance.

Joanna, the wife of Chuza, was one the women who were Jesus’ disciples (Lk 8:3). She and other women supported Jesus during His ministry out of their own resources (Lk 8:1-3). Since her husband, Chuza, was the manager of Herod’s household, he probably had considerable resources.

The career of Herod Antipas was dominated by his relationship to Herodias, whom he married in spite of the fact that she was his niece and was also married to his half-brother Herod Philip. To marry Herodias, Antipas divorced his first wife, a daughter of the powerful Nabataean king Aretas IV. The Jewish historian Josephus said that Antipas was afraid that John the Baptist’s great public following might develop into a revolt against him (Antiquities of the Jews 18.118). John the Baptist incurred the wrath of Antipas for denouncing Antipas’ second marriage as unlawful. Antipas had a guilty conscience.
and was greatly disturbed; but he liked to listen to him. He knew that John was a righteous and holy man, and he kept protecting him, even though Herodias had in it for him and wanted him dead. Antipas sent men to arrest John the Baptist. Although he wanted to kill him, he was afraid both of John the Baptist and of the crowd, because they used to regard John as a prophet (Mt 14:5; Mk 6:18-20).

Herod had another fortress at Machaerus, in Perea, east of the Dead Sea, and that is where he had John the Baptist beheaded at the instigation of Herodias. Antipas’ frivolousness and vanity are apparent at his birthday celebration with some of his leading citizens.

Antipas was guilty of many infamous crimes. Herod locked John the Baptist in prison because John rebuked Herod “because of Herodias, his brother’s wife”, and also because of “all the other evil things he had done” (Lk 3:19). The Pharisees were not sincere when they told Jesus, “Leave here and go away, because Herod wants to kill You (Lk 13:31).” However, we know enough about Herod Antipas to know that he was a danger to Jesus. Antipas had already beheaded John the Baptist (Mt 14:1–12). Immediately after Antipas had John the Baptist executed, Jesus left Galilee on one of His four withdrawals.

During Jesus’ trial, when Pilate found out that Jesus came from Galilee, which was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent Jesus to Antipas, who was also in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover (Lk 23:7-12). Antipas asked some idle questions of Jesus, and caused Jesus to be mocked, but sent him back to Pilate. There had been strained relations between Pilate and Antipas up to this point, but after Pilate had given Herod an opportunity take the case of Jesus of his hands relations between them were better. It is another case of mutual enemies uniting in opposition to Jesus. Shortly after Pentecost, after the Jewish Council had released Peter and John, the Christians gathered, and, in their prayer, quoted Psalm 2, and said, “For truly both Herod and Pontius Pilate have gathered together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city against Your holy Servant Jesus” (Ac 4:27).

Aretas, the father of Herod’s first wife, resented the insult of Antipas to his daughter when he divorced her. He seized an opportunity a few years later to wage war against Antipas (36 AD). The forces of Herod Antipas were heavily defeated, and Josephus says that many people regarded Antipas’ defeat as punishment from God for his killing of John the Baptist.

In 39 AD Antipas’ nephew and brother-in-law Agrippa denounced him to the Emperor Gaius Caligula as a plotter. When Gaius Caligula became emperor, he granted Philip’s former territories to Agrippa, and gave Agrippa the title of king. Under Herodias’ prodding, Antipas went to Rome to seek royal status for himself. Not only did he fail, but the agents of Agrippa also accused him of crimes against Rome. Antipas was deposed from his tetrarchy and ended his days in exile. He was deported to Gaul. Herodias followed Antipas into exile. Caligula then granted Antipas’ former territories to Agrippa also.

The city of Tiberias, which had been founded by Herod, figured during the Jewish revolt (66-70 AD). The Jewish historian Josephus led the Jewish forces that captured Tiberias and destroyed the palace that Herod had built there. Josephus was supported by the lower classes but opposed by the rich elements in Tiberias. Josephus had to surrender to Vespasian’s forces in 67 AD, and subsequently switched sides in the war to save his own life.