

## The Death of John in Mark

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The arrest of John the Baptist is noted in passing at Mk 1:14 (“Now after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God”). Later, to explain a remark of Herod, John’s death is narrated in detail, as a flashback:

**Mk 6:14.** And King Herod heard thereof, for [Jesus’] name had become known, and he said, John the Baptizer is risen from the dead, and therefore do these powers work in him. [15] But others said, It is Elijah. And others said, A prophet, even as one of the prophets. [16] But Herod, when he heard, said, John, whom I beheaded, he is risen.

[17] For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, for he had married her. [18] For John said to Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother’s wife. [19] And Herodias set herself against him, and desired to kill him; and she could not; [20] for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him he was much perplexed, and he heard him gladly.

[21] And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, and the high captains, and the chief men of Galilee, [22] and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and them that sat at meat with him, and the King said to the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. [23] And he swore to her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. [24] And she went out, and said to her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptizer. [25] And she came in straightway with haste to the King, and asked, saying, I will that thou forthwith give me on a platter the head of John the Baptist. [26] And the King was exceedingly sorry, but for the sake of his oaths, and of them that sat at meat, he would not reject her. [27] And straightway the King sent forth a soldier of his guard, and commanded to bring his head, and he went and beheaded him in prison, [28] and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the damsel; and the damsel gave it to her mother. [29] And when his disciples heard, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb.

Mk 6:17-29 is one of the longest consecutive narratives in Mark. It is unusual in other ways too. Despite the exciting, and even erotic, character of the story, there are none of Mark’s historical present verbs to heighten its vividness; it is all in the past tense. The figure of John is inconsistent: why did Herod arrest him, if he wanted to hear him? And John as a compelling speaker does nothing to advance the Jesus story. It rather advances the John story, just as Paul’s appearances before Roman magistrates in Acts give a sympathetic picture of Christian doctrine, and so advance the Christian cause. The whole point of the story is to make an apologia for John.

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I thus suggest that this piece was borrowed *from the parent John tradition*, with which the young Jesus movement was then in contact. If there was such a contact, not only texts, but practices, might have been borrowed. The borrowing of Baptist fasting is in fact predicted *as a future event* in Mk 2:18-20, a clearly interruptive passage:

**Mk 2:17.** And when Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

[18]. And John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, and they come and say unto him, Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? [19] And Jesus said unto them, Can the sons of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. [20] But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then will they fast in that day.

[21] No man seweth a piece of undressed cloth on an old garment, else that which should fill it up taketh from it, the new from the old, and a worse rent is made. [22] And no man putteth new wine into old wineskins, else the wine will burst the skins, and the wine perisheth, and the skins. But they put new wine into fresh wineskins.

Mk 2:21-22 explicitly claims that the Jesus movement is something new, something that cannot be patched onto the old Pharisaic understanding. The passage has little to do with the question of fasting (raised in 2:18-20), and is better seen as summarizing the difference between Pharisaic Judaism and Jesus' Messianic version of Judaism. The Pharisees were preaching to the already righteous. Jesus goes instead to sinners; to those who are not presently righteous, but who, if only they can *become* righteous, will make a difference to the overall righteousness of Israel.

The indication is that 2:18-20 is a later addition, and that, earlier, 2:17 had directly preceded 2:21-22. If we recognize a kinship between the Death of John story and the predicted adoption of customs from the John movement, we will have a Baptist layer, and the whole of that layer must be where its assignable member is.

I conclude by suggesting that attention to the Baptist sect, as a senior Messianic movement with which the Jesus sect shared much, and from which it learned much, may be fruitful, not least by encouraging renewed attention to the Mandaean writings, which represent a much advanced and elaborated tradition<sup>1</sup> deriving from at least one strand of a movement which was contemporary with Jesus, and in whose service Jesus seems to have begun his own career.

And then, "after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God" (Mk 1:14). And a second, and divergent, Messianic sect had appeared.

### *Works Cited*

- E Bruce Brooks. Salome. Alpha v1 (2017) 94-98  
Charles G Häberl. The Mandaean Death of John. Alpha v1 (2017) 35-36

<sup>1</sup>For the later stages of that development, see Häberl **Mandaean**.