

"And Also Some Women" Episode #002: Bad Girls of the Bible (Interview with F. Scott Spencer)

Anne: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

Scott: I'm F. Scott Spencer, I have been a professor of religion at Wingate University in North Carolina and at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, for a total of thirty years or so, in an academic career. I am retired. Sort of. These days, I continue to write and edit and and speak in churches and various settings, to various denominations, and continue to have a real passion for critical study of the New Testament. Critical study, in the best sense of the word. I have some commentaries out on the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, and also, little bit of a change, I also have something on the Song of Songs, and a long standing interest particularly in narrative literature in the New Testament, but also in the relationship between men and women in the early Christian period.

Anne: Can you give us a brief overview of who Salome is and what happens in her story?

Scott: Salome is a fascinating figure, mostly in Biblical interpretation through the centuries, and in art and music and just popular imagination. Actually, her name does not appear in the most famous story that she's associated with, namely the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. She's just presented in the story - which is in Mark 6 and Matthew 14, though I'll be focusing mostly on Mark 6 - but she's simply presented as the daughter of Herodias, or she can be called Herodias herself. So you've got mom and daughter having the same name, and the Herodias the Queen is married to Herod. That's just the whole Herod thing. And the whole Herodian dynasty is just a mess to sort out. Everybody is called Herod, but they have other names.

In any event, we do know historically, from the first century historian Josephus, that Salome was a daughter of this Herodias figure, who had been married to the Herod in our story, Herod Antipas', brother Herod Philip, and the soap opera just just starts here. The narrative in Mark could give the impression that the young woman that we call Salome, who's just called Herodias, could either be a daughter of this new marriage, or Herodias could have brought this daughter, Herodias, from a previous marriage. It's all a little confusing. But there is relationship here, which I think the Biblical narrative really wants to stress, that this is part of Herodian power, that is the pre-eminent power right now in Galilee, where Jesus and John the Baptist are working. So, in any event, the Biblical narrative, though it doesn't use the name Salome, we'll just go ahead and use that name,

And the basic story is a very famous one, and it's very odd for the Gospels, and it really stands out as this grisly tale of beheading, And you just don't have anything like that in the Jesus story, and Jesus is only indirectly involved in this story. John the Baptist, who was the one who sort of set the way for Jesus, has been imprisoned because he criticized this marriage between Herod Antipas, who took his brother's wife while his brother was still alive. There was a tradition called Levirate marriage, where you could take, and in fact, you should take your brother's wife if she became a widow and didn't have children. That's not the case

here. John pretty much just calls this adultery, and rails against this king. He's not really a king, he's actually a tetrarch, which means he has a quarter kingdom. So he's kind of a mini little king, but he thinks pretty highly about himself, and he's the power at this time.

But John's in prison. Herod kind of likes him and wants to listen to him, but he can't deal with this criticism, and John is also very popular with the people, and so all of this is very dicey politically. Well, it's birthday time for Herod, there's a big birthday bash, and as a king - king wannabe - he throws a big party for all his cronies, and the elite of the area, his staff, and his officers, and such. And it comes time for some entertainment, as would happen at such parties. And so Salome, or this daughter, who's called a *korasion*, which is a little girl, or a little daughter, and we have no idea what age, but there is a little bit of a stress on a little girl. So that might change some of our popular imagination.

But she comes and dances. My daughter went through ballet all her life, I've attended more dance recitals than I can count. And all it says is that this little girl pleased Herod. Now all kinds of stuff has been read into that. What kind of dance was it? How pleased was he? Is there an erotic dimension? And all of that is certainly possible and could fit the cultural time - imagine all these bawdy men, yelling and screaming and loving the dance, and of course being half drunk. You know, it's kind of like popping out of a cake, if people still do that. A lot has been built into that. But all we know is that Herod was pleased with his little step-daughter's dance, whatever it was, but then he gets a little carried away, saying, "This is so wonderful, I'll give you anything you want, Honey," I'm elaborating a little bit, but he promises up to half the kingdom - that is in the story.

Ok, you know, this is just a king spouting off. I mean, in a sense, she sort of already has the kingdom, kind of, but not really. In any event, Salome runs away to her mother, Herodias, who's somewhere offstage. The women don't seem to be in the scene, unless they're invited, of course, as the little girl was. And she says, "Mommy, what do we want? We got this big offer!"

And this is Herodias's chance. She's not happy that this John the Baptist is criticizing her marriage, which threatens her political standing. It's a genuine threat here, politically, we never tend to look at the story from Herodias' perspective, but she has, from her perspective, a legitimate axe to grind, and she says, "Okay, we'll ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. This is time to get rid of this guy, I mean, get rid of this threat once and for all."

So Salome comes back in and says, "Daddy, (if she does say that), this is what we want. This is what me and Mommy want." Herod, according to the story, is, he's just - the term is, and I can say more about this later, he's "deeply grieved." It's like, he doesn't like John the Baptist's criticism, but he's a little afraid of John as a spiritual guy, and maybe, you know, he's got some spiritual power, and we don't want to cross that, and the people like him, and this was not at all what Herod planned. But - and I think this is really key in the story, it's not emphasized much in later traditions - Herod, because his word is on the line, he's made this vow, this oath, however rash it is, before his cronies, so an honour thing is on the line. It's a big power thing, and he cannot lose face.

So, grieving though he is, and I think Mark in particular sees a lot of irony and a lot of, "yeah, he's really torn up about this." But, I still think it's a dicey situation. And it says he sends one

of his henchmen saying, yeah, go bring me John's head on a platter. And here it comes in. John is beheaded. And then it becomes this really sort of grisly scene, although Mark doesn't elaborate on it, doesn't really need to be elaborated on, although there is so much art work on this, if you just want to see a whole - all the gory details.

There's John the Baptist's head on a platter, and of course we're at a banquet for goodness' sake, and they specifically bring it in on a platter, So it's like John's head is now being served for food. Now they don't eat it, as far as we know, But it's part of this whole grotesque, ribald scene and underlying it - although there are a variety of ways to get at this and Mark's narrative can be interpreted in different ways - but there certainly is this terrible underlying, "Oh, look at what the women will do if you give them a chance. They all want your head."

And there may be some phallic symbolism in the decapitation, people have written about this. But it does eliminate John's threat. Seems to. But there's also - and then I'll stop it with the quick summary - the lead-in into this story with Mark is that this is a flashback in the narrative. This has already happened, and John the Baptist is dead and gone, and this Jesus guy is now in Galilee, and He's outdoing John. Now, He's not so much preaching against Herod's marriage, but He's working miracles, and He's teaching, and He's challenging the status quo, and challenging Herod's authority implicitly, if not directly. And Herod is worried that, "Uh oh, this is John come back to life to haunt me. I shouldn't have done that."

So you get all of this kind of haunting, spooky stuff to go along with the blood and the gore, and it is a mixed story, to put it mildly from a woman's perspective, and feminists have written a good deal about this. I've written some on it myself and we can explore some of those dimensions, but maybe that's enough to start with.

Anne: Can you just give us a brief overview of who John the Baptist is and how he fits into the story?

Scott: That's a really good question. John the Baptist really means John the Baptizer. He - there was no Baptist denomination at the time, so he wasn't Southern Baptist or any other kind of baptist, but that's just sort of a standard moniker that we use.

Yeah, a fascinating figure and there's a lot of research being done about him historically, but the basic way that he's presented in the gospel narratives is that he was the forerunner for Jesus. Luke actually presents him as Jesus' cousin, like six months older. There's a lot of doubt about that historically. But the other Gospels just simply have that John sort of comes out of the wilderness, he's this strange wilderness prophet, who has been on a strange diet. He was probably an ascetic or self-denying prophet out in the desert, as was a tradition among Jewish and other prophets, and really had a sense that the world needed to change, and that God's reign or God's kingdom needed to come and be manifest more fully.

And his big thing was repent. We hear that kind of preaching from folks today, but it basically just means, it's time to change, it's time to become more faithful to the God of Israel, it's time to be faithful to God's ways, to keep God's law more fully. And, of course, we are now under the Roman Empire, and that's not God's true kingdom. He didn't preach directly against it, saying let's kill Caesar and all that - he had no army, he was just this kind of, a lone prophet.

But he was very powerful, and his main thing was, he set up shop in the desert area around the Jordan River, and there he invited people to come to him. He didn't go out and preach, he didn't travel around, he just kind of set up this and said, "Come and be baptized, just be immersed in this water."

And there was a whole variety of washing traditions for cleansing, and sort of re-dedicating one's life, although his seems to be a little unique - it was called Baptism of Repentance For the Forgiveness of Sins. The idea was, come into these waters, and this becomes a sign of your commitment, and you leave here ready to become part of what God is about to do. And it wasn't that John himself was about to do anything other than prepare a people. He really felt that God was about to come in a big splash.

It's not improper to call John an apocalyptic prophet. It's not so much the end of the world as the making of a new world, which does mean the end of the old regime, and Caesar is likely not to be happy about that. But this new world, this new kingdom, is coming, and now we're going to be ready for that and tie it in with that will be the coming of a new messiah, an anointed one, who will be the earthly agent. John doesn't develop a full profile of who this messiah is, and doesn't know exactly who it is. He just says this one's coming soon, I'm just preparing the way for him. I'm not even worthy to untie his sandal strap. He's going to be so much greater. I baptize with water, He's going to baptize with God's spirit.

And then Jesus, in fact, comes. Somewhat strangely to some, Jesus submits to John's baptism. And that creates kind of an interesting crisis for the early Christians and the Gospel writers. It's like, well now, who's baptizing who? If Jesus is the big gun coming, shouldn't he be baptizing John? "Thank you, John, very much appreciate you starting this. Now I'll take over."

But each of the Gospels has to explain John's significance, because we do learn also that some people are beginning to say that maybe John is the messiah. John is not working miracles, but he's pretty powerful and they sense that God is working. So is John the messiah? He keeps talking about somebody else, but maybe John's really the one. So there was a little bit of this rivalry, not so much between Jesus and John but between their followers.

John, though, pretty quickly gets removed from the scene because, as I mentioned before, when he's not baptizing folks, he's criticizing the local Galilean regime, which is going to be a little north of where he is in Judea baptizing. But he's saying, this guy's marriage is wrong, this is part of our problem, this is part of why we need reform. We have corrupt leaders. And like sometimes happens today, he goes for their sex lives, he says this is an illicit marriage.

And Herod, by the way, the whole Herodian family is half Jewish, Idumean, half Jewish, half Idumean. Which also makes for, "Are you Jewish or not? Are you faithful to God or not? Well, you don't seem to be faithful to what we think are pretty clear views about marriage, you went and took your brother's wife, et cetera, et cetera."

So John's creating political trouble while he's gaining a following, while people are talking about change and reform, while John is talking about this big apocalyptic regime change. So he's arrested, and we don't know exactly how long there is between the arrest and the

beheading, but he's in prison. So he's off the scene while Jesus then begins to travel and develop his ministry.

So that actually is important background, and ties into what I said a little bit before that Herod's made the John-Jesus connection. He realizes they're kind of in the same stream. We don't know what all he's thinking, except after he has John beheaded, he's scared to death that this Jesus figure is really John, coming back to get him. So a lot of spooky, superstitious stuff. And Herod being kind of spiritually minded, but more politically minded, is trying to sort out all that.

Anne: So I know you wrote a little bit about The Herodian dynasty, and particularly Herod Antipas being Hellenized, and I was wondering if you could explain a little bit what that means and why that's such a problem in first century Galilee.

Scott: To be hellenized is a term we use - and probably folks would be aware it has something to do with being Greek, and it does, but Greecsizing doesn't sound very good - so hellenizing. Going back a few centuries to Alexander the Great, who really put Greek thought, language, culture, and ideas on the map, on a huge map that he expanded. So it's with Alexander, that this whole process of hellenization, of Greek culture, philosophy, thought, language being superior really begins. Greek became the lingua franca of business and commerce.

Most people knew enough Greek to get by. There were still local dialects and such, Jesus himself primarily spoke Aramaic, but probably knew enough Greek. The New Testament writers are all writing in Greek. And this process of hellenization went everywhere.

And Galilee, which would be in the northern part of Israel, was perhaps more hellenized, and all that really means is that Greek influence was a little more felt. That doesn't mean it was always viewed as the enemy. You know, we can, we can still hold to our traditional faith or some version of it, but maybe now express it in new forms and new ideas, although as always, the more conservative, the more traditional among any religious group, will really resist any kind of change, So Jesus doesn't go around railing against the Greeks and such, although he is very Jewish, primarily, in everything that he does. I mean, that's who he is.

Now from Herod's point of view, you know, to put it very colloquially, Herod wants to be cool. You know? He's only a tetrarch, officially, so he has a quarter little kingdom of his father, who is now dead. But Herod the Great, who wasn't quite as great as Alexander the Great was, but was pretty darn great, in terms of building, and power, and all this. His sons, Antipas was one of them, fought and fussed over the succession, and whatnot. There did come a time - and this is in the sort of in the New Testament period the New Testament doesn't talk about - but there comes a time when Herod Antipas seeks to have a full kingdom from Caesar, and Caesar responds basically by exiling Antipas, saying, "I think I'll take away even the little tetrarch that you have."

Herod wants to be, you know, a real player on the scene. And so that will mean being as Hellenic and as Roman as possible. The Romans greatly respected Greek culture, and we all know, all the Greek gods sort of carried over and got Roman names. So you have Herod wanting to be a part of that new modern regime. He also has to satisfy his Jewish

constituencies on some level, because that's the folks that he "reigns" over. So there really is just this back and forth.

We shouldn't overdo the tension. There was a time, about a hundred and fifty, sixty years before Jesus, almost two centuries, in the famous Maccabean period, where one Greek ruler really decided that we were only going to allow Greek stuff here, and he wanted to basically just stamp out Judaism, And that led to the Maccabean revolt, and to the events that that surround what we know today as Hanukkah, which was a time of liberation, a time of rebellion because no, no, no, okay, we might tolerate some Hellenistic influence, but not not this kind of super aggressive stuff.

Herod wasn't doing the super aggressive stuff, but you always have that kind of stress intention there, so it's good of you to raise that. Scholars have gone back and forth sometimes really making a huge divide between Hellenism and Judaism. You did have at this time a number of what we typically call Hellenistic Jews, who were very educated in Greek culture and ways and thoughts, but also very dedicated Jews. The most famous one, at least from the Christian perspective, would be the Apostle Paul, who was raised in a Greek area, But, and then, of course, added on to that Hellenistic Jewish upbringing, the belief in the Jewish messiah, Jesus, which adds another layer to all of this. But that, maybe, helps explain the culture a little bit.

Anne: In your writing, you quoted someone else, I can't remember who, about the story of Salome as a novelistic digression. Why do you think Mark includes this in the gospel?

Scott: That's a great question, and I don't think there's a definitive answer. I've already mentioned, it is an odd story, though there was a pretty solid historical foundation. Josephus writes about this. You know the details can vary, but John was beheaded by Herod, and Herod had taken his brother's wife, and there was a daughter.

Now, the whole banquet scene and all of that, that's only in Mark and Matthew. But that may have been due to, "This is pretty well known history, and so I've got to throw in something about this." But that, in some ways, only begs the question of why tell the story this way. And always, in narrative interpretation, it's not just "why include this," but "why include it here, at this point in the narrative," that there is an orderly progression. And one thing that Mark does - and I'll focus on Mark, Matthew to some extent - the non-technical term for it is that Mark uses a sandwich technique a lot. If you want the formal term, it's intercalation.

But in narrating the story, Mark has selected various incidents from Jesus' life, and in this case from John's life - one thing that's unusual about this is it's a story that doesn't really feature Jesus, but surrounding it are stories that do. The sandwich technique is very simply, a story begins and then it stops and then another story comes in, but then a third story to complete the sandwich finishes off the first story. So there's a middle story, the meat of the sandwich that's spliced between an original story that split apart. It's a lovely technique, really, and he does it like six times throughout his entire gospel, and this is one of those.

So the full section would be most of Mark chapter six. It's like chapter six, verse six or something through verse forty four, I may not have the exact verses. But that begins to give us a clue. So what is the story of John's beheading and of Salome's dance is the middle

story. But what surrounds it? Because the sandwich technique is not just, “ah, well, it just seems like a cool way to narrate something,” but actually means that these stories go together. There’s something about them that they sort of comment on each other. They mutually interpret each other.

Well, the first story is when Jesus sends the Apostles out for the first time on their own little mini mission, and they come back and, oh, they’ve worked miracles in Jesus’s name. People are pretty excited. They’re feeling really great about themselves. It’s just narrated briefly, then that stops. Then you have this rather long story where John the Baptist loses his head. And then the last verse of that story is that the disciples of John - and I should have mentioned earlier, John himself had some followers, some of whom became followers of Jesus, but not at all, so there’s that interesting dimension - but it says that some followers of John took his body and they gave it a nice burial, which is good.

Now looking ahead, the apostles of Jesus don’t do anything with Jesus’s body when he’s killed later. So you already get this little, hmmm, how should apostles act? Well, then the following story picks up from the apostles and Jesus, because they go on a little retreat so the apostles can tell Jesus about everything that really happened on their little mission. And they’re very excited about, “We get to be with Jesus and debrief, and he gets to ask us, and now we, really, you know, we have our own little retreat, and we’re ready for no telling what new mission.”

Well, during that time, though, the crowd follows, as they often do, they see where Jesus and the apostles are in the desert. Hundreds, thousands flock to him, and Jesus winds up teaching them all day, instead of having a nice little cozy session with the Apostles. And they’re not very happy about it. And then, on top of everything else, Jesus says, “You know what? It’s a long day, and we need to feed these folks.” And the apostles go, “No, no, no, we don’t have the money, you spent all day with them.” And, you know, again, paraphrasing a little bit, but, “Jesus, we need our time, okay, that’s why we came out here. Let’s send them home. You’ve been nice in teaching them.”

But then this is the famous miracle of the feeding of the five thousand that involves the disciples. They wind up being the caterers and the busboys. They distribute all the food that Jesus is producing, or sharing, or however you want to view that, and then they take up twelve basketfuls of remains, one for each of them. So Jesus’ apostles kind of get put in their place. Now, that’s all very interesting. It’s still kind of like, okay, I see that - what does that have to do with the intervening beheading story?

Well, I’ve already hinted. It does seem to actually set up something about how do apostles and disciples treat their leaders. It’s a subtle thing, but it does. I do think on some level the beheading of John the Baptist sets the stage for Jesus’ death to come. Now, Jesus is not going to be beheaded, but it’s going to be under Roman authorities, under Pontius Pilate. Pilate and Herod are kind of buddies, at least on a narrative level.

And so Mark really begins to say, Jesus is going to die. And what was that gonna mean? You’re going to have a dead Messiah. He’s going to be placed in a tomb. All right, but it’s going to be, you know, this Jewish guy, a member of the Jewish council, is going to give him his tomb. And it’s going to be the women followers of Jesus who follow to see where Jesus

is, and who then come on Easter Sunday, wanting to anoint his body, but of course it's not there. But the male apostles are nowhere around - not at the crucifixion, not at the burial, and they are not the original witnesses of the empty tomb. So we already have that criticism beginning to develop.

And then, finally, in some ways the most fun interpretation, in a little bit of a macabre way, particularly with how that bottom layer of the sandwich comes in: it's a whole feeding story, A feeding the five thousand. Well that ties in with, I mean, this is a feeding banquet that Herod is throwing, and that whole grisly bit about John the Baptist's bloody head being served on a food platter, then juxtaposed really in a disjunctive way, but also a kind of fascinating, a suggestive way with a Jesus who genuinely feeds the needs of people. And also begins to point ahead - how is he ultimately going to do that? By giving his life.

And you start having some eucharistic, you know, things that happen at the Lord's supper: this is my body and blood, which, you know. if you go to church, you're kind of comfortable hearing that, but it really is still very strange. This is my body and blood given for you. So it's a contrastive parallel, if I can put it that way. John's bloody head, serving on a platter, what good can come out of that? Well, what good can come out of Jesus's death, that he talks about at his last supper, et cetera et cetera.

So maybe I've said enough so you can see, sort of, some of the threads working. I don't think that settles the matter because this story is still a very jarring story of a beheading, and then the details of the dancing, and all of that. It makes for a great story, and Mark's a good storyteller, if he's nothing else.

But it's still, what the sandwich effect does is that it invites the reader to to really wrestle with what these connections are, and not to just - it's so easy to just kind of lift these stories out of context, and as I think was done in the history of interpretation, but Mark says, now you got to work with this in this immediate sandwich, but also the larger narrative of Mark that starts with John the Baptist back in chapter twenty one, and ends with Jesus' empty tomb after his death in chapter six. So all of this is a swirling together, and not in a super neat and tidy package, but there's the jarring and bumping, and I think Mark says, "Good, that's what I want you to be doing. I want you to be struggling with this."

Anne: Can you expand a little bit about what you were saying before about having a more kind of cynical approach to Herod's regret, and also how that maybe takes some of the weight off of these bloodthirsty women.

Scott: Absolutely, and I'm glad you asked. This is very important to me, I don't claim to be any great gift to womankind, I assure you, and my wife and daughters would certainly agree with that, but I have been challenged by feminist criticism for twenty five years or so, and this is early days of Biblical feminine criticism. But, I just thought, this is such a very sharp reading, coming from experience, which obviously I don't have, but I can read and listen a little bit sometimes.

And so I really am challenged by: how are women being perceived here? And, of course, the history of interpretation is that this is, you know, women are highly sexualized. So you get this, you know, super sexy dance. Because that's just what, you know, what women and

young girls will do and they know the power of that and Herod, bless his heart, just couldn't help himself. You know, I'm going overboard, but only a little bit, and it really has become kind of a classic Eve story, almost, which, again, I would say, misreading of Genesis by valorizing Adam's pathetic response in Genesis. Oh, well, the woman you gave me made me do it. Just how could I possibly have avoided the fruit?

Now, there's no sexuality and alluring in that story anyway. It just says, Eve handed out the fruit and he took and ate it. I mean, it's very pedestrian in many ways. But of course, so much is built up about women using their sexuality, temptresses, and all this kind of thing, And then you throw the bloodthirsty thing in there. It's like, so, you know you can play into almost every stereotype in the book. And the narrative has some of that, but a couple of things

I've already mentioned, I think it's important, although difficult, to read this story - how would Herodias - mom, to say nothing of the daughter, but the daughter is kind of of a messenger back and forth, and she herself is kind of caught in a power play, and I think there is, there's something to resist there about how this daughter is being used both by mom and dad and the whole political regime - but on mamma's part, if I may, I mean she is in a difficult political situation, because of this denunciation of the marriage. And if push comes to shove, you know, if Antipas had taken her from his brother's wife, if Antipas thought she was too hot a political liability, he just dumps her. That's kind of the way things work. And she and her daughter are out, So she, in a sense, is protecting her interests.

Now, you have to think her interests are valid and all of that, but they would be from her perspective. Now, from the point of view of the Christian gospel narrative, of course, she's a villain here. And I'm not for any kind of capital punishment, least of all beheading in this way, so there's no justifying, but still, seeing the political dynamics that involved the women as victims, as much as, you know - oh well, you know, Herodias is playing her power card. Well, she's doing what she can in her limited situation. So there is a - you know, if you're so inclined, you could say, well, she's doing what she has to do under the circumstances.

But, beyond that, the political dynamic, again, comes back to Herod Antipas' involvement. He might want to say, later on - he doesn't actually in the story - he might want to say, "Well, you know, the women just forced me into this." But that would appear weak. He wouldn't. He might say that underneath it, but - he's engaged in this party in his honour. It's his birthday. He's the king, or the king wanna-be, and has a whole bunch of male officers who have eaten and drunk well and who owe him everything. I mean, you've got all of this crony network and, you know, brotherhood kind of thing working here. But he's got to maintain that good standing. He's buying a lot of favour just by throwing this party. They're not throwing the party for him. He's throwing it for them and for him as well. It's very self-serving.

But all of this is boosting his standing among his cronies, and now his word is on the line. He said, I'll give you a thank you for dancing. He's pleased. Now again, we can interpret what that means, but you really do have to interpret that. It's just not in the narrative. And in my writing - and you can see that others write about the verb that's used - can be used for he was sexually pleased, But that's not how it's normally used. It's normally used for just pleasing an authority, including many times for pleasing God. This is in the biblical narrative, So it just, it can't carry the weight of necessarily being a sexualized thing.

But in the whole banquet thing, I mean, he's feeling good about it, and so: half of my kingdom I'll give you if you want it, just anything you want. Now that's probably just a throwaway line. That's, by the way, exactly what the King in the Book of Esther said as well. It's kind of what kings - just kind of like, yeah, I got so much. I can give you half my kingdom and still have a lot. But, you know, I love you so much, whatever you want, it's all that kind of stuff. I think it's more of a game, but Herodias' mother, Mrs. Herodias, if you will, seizes on this and calls his bluff, and the daughter comes back in the presence of all the men, okay, this is all a big public thing, this same little girl who danced.

Oh, by the way, and I'm just going to say she said, "Oh, daddy! Oh, guess what we want? Because I talked to mommy about, you know, we don't really need half the kingdom, we're cool, we just want John's head on a platter, okay?" Then Herod realized that, okay, that's not really what I want to do, because I don't like John, but I'm a little afraid of him.

And then just to amplify on what I said earlier - this is only in Mark, but I think it's a brilliant touch, but again it's one of those tantalizing things, it's hard to know what to do - Mark says that Herod was *perilypos*, the Greek word that means he was deeply grieved, when he heard this request. It's like, "Oh, no." He, though, has to follow through, and the narrative says, and it's only one verse, but it's important: because of his guests. He would look bad, he would lose face, and we can't have that, however badly he feels. So Herod caught in this great crisis of conscience.

Now, I think Mark is just letting the irony roll here, okay, and I'm trying to kind of, almost being hyper-dramatic, like, "Oh no, but oh, my honour, so, okay, I guess we have to do this. But it's like, you know, afterwards, you know, Herod goes home and cries whole night and just, no! He goes on and he's scared, but again, he's scared about himself! "Oh, maybe now John is going to come back and haunt me." It's all self-centred, and it's all about politics, and all it's about - It's all about keeping his standing.

But I do think interpreters have views that, "Well, you know, Herod didn't really want to. You know, the women pushed him." But yeah, the less you blame Herod, the more the women come in for, "Well, there you go, that's what you expect." And it's very much the same way with Pontias Pilate, who we also love to let off the hook because, well, he didn't really want to. Now Matthew has "He washes his hands," and it, you know, becomes a very anti-Jewish scene. "Oh, it's you Jewish bloodthirsty folks, not me, I'm a sweetheart." Well, historically Pilate was as ruthless as they come, just like Herod.

Okay, so the narrative is kind of massaging their egos, but also underneath this, you know, "Come on," I can hear Mark say. "Do any of you really believe he's deeply grieving?" And the reason I have, I think, some support for that, other than that's the way I want to read it - the only other usage of this *perilypos*, this "deeply grieved" phrase, comes with Jesus later in the garden of Gethsemane, where he is deeply grieved about his impending death, and prays, "Father, If there's any way," - there's other emotional words used, He is agitated - "If there's any way to let this cup pass from me."

Now, we often gloss over that real quickly here, because, well, Jesus quickly says, "Oh, not my will but yours be done." And yes, he goes ahead to the cross. But Mark says, but there

still is - I mean, Jesus loved life. This was not something like, "Oh boy, the cross is tomorrow, it's what I came for." There's a lot that needs to be worked through here. We need to struggle with Jesus more in Gethsemane. And while he does go ahead and comply, or at least not resist, he doesn't run off somewhere, there still is this - Jesus himself struggles, and he's deeply grieved with losing his life, which he goes ahead and submits to, later, for the sake of, as Mark - this is Mark language - as a ransom for others. There's a lot of theologizing going on there,

But I think Mark deliberately sets up this incredible juxtaposition between Herod, who is playing this grief game, and not giving up any of his standing, surely not giving up his life, willing to sacrifice somebody else's life - namely, John the Baptist, who was in fact the forerunner of Jesus. So, deeply grieved, give me a break. Jesus, on the other hand, really struggles - I don't want to minimize that - but works through that for the sake of giving himself, and I'll just kind of weirdly tie it all together, to feed others, to nourish others - spiritually, in other ways. I mean, you know, I'm kind of floating through metaphors and all of that, but I want to contend that Mark is doing that kind of narrative juxtaposing, and it's meant to make us think and be uncomfortable, and to sort of to say, look, you've got this political, Herodian, Pilate, Greco-Roman regime, and then you've got this weird wilderness prophet John, and this itinerant Jesus, who wanders around and doesn't have a penny to his name, doesn't have a place to lay his head, but is still the very messiah of God. Where is the real power? Where is the real life? How do you resist? How do you comply?

So maybe that helps a little bit. I mean the women, it's still not, it's not a fun narrative for women, but it needs to be said, I think in a broader context.

Anne: Yeah, that's perfect. and just what you were saying about Jesus loving life, reminded me one of my favourite John the Baptist-Jesus moments is when Jesus is talking about him and he says, well, you know John lives in the desert and barely eats, but I love eating and drinking.

Scott: Oh yes, oh no. that's, perfect and it's not in Mark, but it is in Luke seven. And also in that same passage, he does say - he doesn't call Herod by name, but he says, those who are royalty live in palaces and dress in fine robes - I mean, Jesus goes there. He makes the direct comparison. And anyone who would know the Galilean setting would recognize he's talking about Herod. So that's a great comparison.

So Jesus was very, very conscious of that. You know, John was very conscious, even though they didn't go around saying every day of the week, it wasn't like a campaign thing where they're saying, down with Herod, and down with Caesar, and let's vote the bums out. Of course they weren't in the power position to do that, and they weren't looking to violently overthrow. Now if God wanted to come and do that, well, okay. John the Baptist, in particular, seemed to be ready for God to do the fire and brimstone stuff.

But Jesus, I'm not sure. I'm a little less sure of that. But still there is that consciousness of the contrast, and I think I think it's extremely relevant, not only for sort of gender dynamics, male and female, conflict, but for just autocratic versus - are we going to do our politics, and theology, for that matter, from above or from below? And Jesus and John work from below.

I think that's why Jesus was baptized by John, which is pretty wild. You know, this is a baptism of repentance for sinners. Christians don't typically view Jesus that way, but Jesus enters fully into the human condition. "I'm gonna be baptized, too. This is what we need to do, because this is how we're going to work things, from the bottom of the river up as it were."