

Herod Antipas

Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea

Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great. Caesar Augustus made him the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, where he governed from 4 BC to 39 AD. His burning desire was to be the sole ruler over all of Judea, like his father. Herod the Great had even willed it to be so. But Herod changed his will just before his death, and willed his kingdom to Archelaus. Caesar did not want Archelaus to replace Herod as King and named him ethnarch over Judea.

Archelaus quickly fell out of favor with Rome, however, and was banished from Judea in 6 BC. Upon the removal of Archelaus, Antipas took the dynastic title of Herod. If he could not actually be King, he could at least hold the title. He built a new capital city called Tiberias, a city built in classical Greek style. He rebuilt the Roman city of Sepphoris, which later became the capital of Galilee. Like his father, he was a city builder, though on a smaller scale. It is likely that it is in these cities Joseph found his livelihood after going to Nazareth.

Antipas was a good ruler. He imprisoned John the Baptist as a precautionary measure to avoid an insurrection. For this same reason, he was anxious about the growing influence of Jesus, but only threatened Him. Jesus was much more popular. Antipas feared public reactions, and he was being criticized by the followers of Jesus for John's death. From a politician's perspective, he was anxious to destroy any seeds of rebellion at the early stage. He may have learned that procrastination could lead to banishment. His brother Archelaus lasted for only ten years in Judaea, as a result of uprisings he failed to control.

Antipas was a better ruler than his father, Herod the Great. He did not have the numerous wives and the manifold intrigues within his family. He was not power-hungry like his father. He was more casual and ambivalent in his attitudes and aspirations. He learned from Archelaus' misrule. He learned from his own bad experience with John the Baptist. He was often indecisive and uttered threats rather than taking any action. He actually did lack political ambition. It was Herodias who drove him to try to gain more power. She manipulated him into killing John the Baptist. She was a vindictive and power hungry force in his life. She truly wanted to be the wife of a King. Antipas did not have such an ambitious plan.

History views Antipas as an able ruler, who lived peaceably with his people. All of this is to his credit. On the other hand, the Bible views him as cunning, yet weak, deceitful and fearful, a man of degraded moral character.

Jesus is right to call him "that fox"!

"That FOX"

Why does Jesus say Herod is a FOX? Because He is not afraid of him. The Pharisees may think they can get Him to leave Perea and go into Judea. Jesus is not afraid of Herod and He is not afraid of them. Their cunning does not fool Him. Just as Herod the FOX does not worry Him.

Let's consider Aesop's Fables. Aesop wrote 600 years before Jesus was born. People were familiar with his morality tales. In his fables, Aesop contrasted the fox with the lion 12 times. The fox is always shown as cunning, using his wisdom to outwit the other animals of the forest. He is unprincipled in his wisdom, lacks character, and uses his cunning to seek his own advantage. Consider Gen 3:1 "Now the serpent was the most cunning (*wise*) of all the animals in the garden."

For Aesop, the fox was always inferior to the lion. The lion held the power in the forest. The fox feared the lion. He avoided the lion if at all possible, not wanting to be devoured.

So the Lion of Judah is calling out, or daring, the Fox of Galilee to "get it on". And the educated Jews understood the meaning: Jesus sees Antipas as an inferior, a man who is a greedy, cunning man of bad character and, who is above all, a coward.