

Matthew 14:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet.

Analysis

'And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet.' Herod wanted to execute John but was restrained by political calculation: the people 'counted him as a prophet' (ώς προφήτην αύτὸν εἶχον/hōs prophētēn auton eichon). Mark adds Herod also feared John personally and was perplexed by him (Mark 6:20). This verse reveals Herod's moral cowardice: knowing John was righteous, Herod preferred silencing him but feared popular backlash. Reformed theology observes that unregenerate rulers often recognize and fear God's messengers while refusing to repent. Herod acknowledged John's prophetic status (through others' estimation) but wouldn't submit to his message. Fear of people restrained Herod temporarily—but ultimately Herodias's manipulation overcame his hesitation (v.6-11). The verse also shows John's popularity despite—or because of—his uncompromising message. People recognized authentic prophetic voice even when religious establishment rejected it. This pattern repeats: genuine prophets often have more popular support than institutional backing.

Historical Context

John the Baptist's popularity was enormous. Matthew 3:5 states 'Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan' went to hear him. Josephus confirms John's widespread following, noting Herod feared his influence might incite rebellion (Antiquities 18.5.2). Popular prophetic movements often threatened Roman-backed rulers' stability. Herod's father (Herod the Great) had

massacred Bethlehem's infants to eliminate messianic threat (Matthew 2:16-18). The family was paranoid about rivals. Herod Antipas inherited this fear while lacking his father's ruthlessness. He imprisoned John as compromise: silencing him without martyring him and inflaming popular outrage. This political calculation temporarily succeeded but ultimately failed. Herodias exploited Herod's moment of weakness (rash vow during birthday banquet) to force John's execution (v.6-11). The account demonstrates how political expedience and moral cowardice combine to persecute God's servants. Pilate showed similar dynamics: wanting to release Jesus but fearing political consequences (John 19:12-16).

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. What does Herod's fear of people (rather than God) teach about the difference between human respect and genuine repentance?
2. How do political leaders today suppress prophetic voices while avoiding public backlash for doing so?
3. What role should churches play in supporting prophetic witnesses who face persecution from authorities?

Interlinear Text

καὶ θέλων αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι ἐφοβήθη τὸν ὄχλον
And when he would him have put he feared G3588 the multitude
G2532 G2309 G846 G615 G5399 G3793

ὅτι ὡς προφήτην αὐτὸν εἶχον
because as a prophet him they counted
G3754 G5613 G4396 G846 G2192

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 21:26 (Prophecy): But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.

Matthew 11:9 (Prophecy): But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.

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