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**“JOHN I BEHEADED”: THE STUDY OF LUKE 9, 7-9 AND  
ITS IMPLICATION FOR INSECURITY IN NIGERIA!**

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**ABSTRACT**

This short pericope reveals the widening effect of Jesus’ ministry. News about Jesus reaches into the place (cf. 8,3). Popular speculation about Jesus’ identity leads to uncertainty at the top of society, as Herod’s perplexity about Jesus’ identity shows. Herod’s curiosity about Jesus leads to a desire to see Jesus. This is a man who beheaded John. A voice that challenges his insensitivity and inhumanity. Still he wants to see Jesus. And, as often occurs in this section, there is a reflective “who is this?” question. In Nigeria today we see people like Herod. Such folks make the lives of their people insecure. We shall see to what extent this text applies to the Nigerian Situation.

**Introduction**

Luke situates Herod’s reaction to Jesus after his mission of the Twelve (so also Mark 6,14-16). The idea behind the text is that Jesus’ regional activity gets Herod’s attention. He, Herod could not but take note of the person of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus’ message and miracles raise the question of who he is. The popular musings that followed the raising of the widow of Nain’s son reach Herod (Luke 7,16).<sup>2</sup> He hears and meditates upon the speculations about Jesus as a prophetic figure. The very curiosity and interest that Herod has is the type of reflection and soul searching that Luke wishes his reader to have. The other interrogation “who is this?” appears in 7,19-

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<sup>2</sup>C. H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 102 may overplay the differences between Luke and the other Gospels. Matthew and Mark clearly have Herod express the view that Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead. Luke has Herod ask only who Jesus is. But really, there is no significant difference here. Talbert also notes that this is one of two passages where the question of Jesus’ identity is raised directly (9:18 is the other).

20.49; 8,25, while Jesus' identity is considered or confessed in 4,34.41; 7,16; 8,28; 9,7-9.18-20.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.1 Structure

Form critically, the text is a story about Jesus, since it contains so much narrative and concentrates on his person.<sup>4</sup> The outline of Luke 9,7-9 is as follows:

1.1.1 Popular Reports about Jesus reach Herod (9,7-8)

1.1.2 Herod's desire to see Jesus (9,9)

### 1.1.1 Popular Reports about Jesus reach Herod (9,7-8)

A report reaches to the palace of Herod about the progress and development of the Jesus movement. Herod Antipas was the political ruler of Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39 (Luke 3,1). Matthew 14,1 and Luke 3:19; 9:7 employ the technical title *tetraarchēs* (tetrarch), while Mark 6,14 prefers the more descriptive, functional characterization *basileus* (king).<sup>5</sup> Or Mark may be intentionally ironic. The emperor Augustus explicitly refused Herod the royal title when his father, Herod the Great, died, and his former kingdom was sliced up and divided to the surviving sons.<sup>6</sup> Allegedly, his wife, Herodias, was so jealous when his nephew, Herod Agrippa, got the title king from the emperor Gaius Caligula in AD 37 that she prevailed on her husband to request the title for himself. His request ultimately led to his dismissal and exile when opponents reported that he had stashed away a stockpile of weapons.<sup>7</sup> Mark may be scornfully mocking Herod's royal pretensions by giving him the title he coveted that led to his

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium* (HKNT 3; Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 505. In recalling the questions of 8,25.28, this unit looks back to the miracles in Luke 8, which justifies seeing a unit running from 8,22 to 9,17. "Who Jesus is" dominate this section.

<sup>4</sup> V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 147; similarly, J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke* (i-ix) (AB 28; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 757; likewise, R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (tr. J. Marsh; New York: Harper & Row: Blackwell, 1963), 301-2 does not discuss Luke 9, but the longer parallel of Mark 6:14-29. K. Berger, *Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1984), 233 speaks of an "uncertain acclamation" present within the account.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 355. Matthew 14: 9 also employs the title *basileus*; see T. Schramm, *Der Markus-Stoff bei Lukas: Eine literarkritische und redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (SNTS-MS 14; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 128.

<sup>6</sup> See F. Josephus, *Ant* 17.18.1 <sup>o</sup>188; 17.9.4<sup>o</sup>224-271; 17.11.4<sup>o</sup>318; *Jewish War*, 2.2.3<sup>o</sup>20-22; 2.6.3<sup>o</sup>93-95.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Ant*, 18.7.1-2<sup>o</sup>240-56; *Jewish War*, 2.9.6<sup>o</sup>181-83.

ruin.<sup>8</sup>The choice of *tetraarchēs* might avoid offense to Gentiles since *basileus* could be politically volatile. The report reaches Herod in the form of popular attempts to portray who Jesus is. Herod is greatly disturbed by the variety of opinions. The imperfect tense *diēporei* (was perplexed or, better, was remaining perplexed. Indeed, Herod continued to remain perplexed about the person of Jesus) contrasts with the aorist of the report: *ēkousen* (he heard).<sup>9</sup> Herod was trying to sort out who Jesus really was, given the views raised.

One of the positions of the people is that Jesus is a resurrected John the Baptist. This opinion is Herod’s own position about Jesus in Mark 6,16 = Matt 14,2, but Luke lacks such a comment. It appears from the other Gospels that this is the view that Herod decided was most likely. Matthew and Mark both mention that Herod was reacting to the reports about what Jesus had done, specifically his miraculous works, while Luke’s language is abundantly broad to suggest that the report of the mission reached Herod’s ears. The learned biblical scholar Ellis<sup>10</sup> is of the opinion that the similarity between Jesus’ message and John’s call to repent is what produced the association with a resurrected John. Herod may have meant “John is Jesus” in a loose sense of “this is like John all over again”,<sup>11</sup> or “Jesus has the spirit of John”.<sup>12</sup> The only other possibility is a type of reincarnation of John, a belief that has no real parallel and thus is unlikely.<sup>13</sup> The remark makes clear that John the Baptist was already dead by this point.<sup>14</sup>

There are two other popular suggestions that are added to Herod’s perplexity. Some suggested that Elijah had appeared. It is hard to know whether this identifies Jesus specifically with Malachi’s promised prophet (Mal 3,1; 4,5) or whether it is an indirect way of saying that Jesus is a prophet of the eschaton.<sup>15</sup> The clear reference to Elijah is more likely, since the third opinion, that Jesus is one of the old prophets raised, is also general. The Elijah description

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Lane, *Mark*, 211

<sup>9</sup> *Diaporeō* (to be perplexed) is employed only in Luke-Acts in the NT: here; Acts 2:12; 5:24; 10:17.

<sup>10</sup> E. E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 137.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. M. Creed, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 127

<sup>12</sup> Cf. E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Luke* (tr. D. E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 153.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium* (HTKNT 3: Freiburg: Herder, 1969), 506-7.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 759.

<sup>15</sup> On the Elijah hope in Judaism, see Luke 1:17; 7:26-27; D. L. Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (JSNTSup 12; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 59-60, 295; similarly, J. Jeremias, *TDNT* 2:936.

specifically recognizes that Jesus is from God and most likely suggests an awareness that he calls the nation to a change of attitude that is to repentance.

The last idea, of a returning prophet of old, was common in Judaism. Prophets who were suggested to be returning include Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah (2 Macc. 2,4-7; 15, 13-14).<sup>16</sup> The description reflects popular respect for Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Jesus as prophet recalls the position of the crowd in Luke 7,11-17.

Mark 6,15 is parallel to Luke here, except in describing Jesus' relation to the prophets of old. Mark says he is like (*hōs*) them, not that he is one of them raised. Of course, common characterizations existed in a variety of forms and, therefore, could be summarized in various ways. This is, then, simply two ways of saying the same thing, since the idea of a raised prophet may describe only the coming of a figure who mirrors an earlier figure. It could well be that Luke is commenting on Mark's remark, since the view of raising up someone may simply allude to someone coming on the scene.<sup>18</sup> Since Matthew relates only Herod's opinion, these other popular identifications are not raised by him.

### **1.1.2 Herod's desire to see Jesus (9,9)**

Herod's deliberation about the opinions of people leaves the matter of Jesus' identity unresolved. The answer seems to be, "John is no longer with us, I slew him, so who could this be?" The implication is that Jesus is some unidentified agent of God, but Herod cannot be more specific until he sees Jesus. Thus, he has acute longing to see Jesus and determine who he is (the imperfect, *ezētei*, expresses this desire with durative force: "He was seeking to see him"). It is a continuous desire and nothing can quench that desire until he sees Jesus).

The Lucan passage differs from Matt 14,2 = Mark 6,16, where Herod suggests that he sees Jesus as John raised from the dead. These writers appear to give Herod's resolution of the issue, not the

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 759.

<sup>17</sup>F. Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.10.6 § 413; similarly, Delling, *TDNT* 1,487; Friedrich, *TDNT* 6, 842

<sup>18</sup>A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke* (ICC; Edinburgh: Scribner, 1896), 241; likewise, Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 759.

deliberation that Luke supplies.<sup>19</sup> Later, Herod has alleged malice and curiosity toward Jesus (Luke 13,31; 23,8-15).<sup>20</sup> Luke pursues Jesus’ identity against the backdrop of common uncertainty about who Jesus is. In fact, the disciples wrestled in a similar manner with Jesus’ identity (8,25; cf. 5,21; 7,20.49).<sup>21</sup> Thus, when Peter gives his confession, it stands out, not only because Luke recounts the confession in closer proximity to Herod’s opinion, but also because Luke portrays more consistently the uncertainty over Jesus’ identity.

## 1.2 Implication

Our author, Luke, places the Baptist in history, working from the most distant figure to the more proximate. John’s ministry emerges in AD 28-29, Tiberius’ fifteenth year.<sup>22</sup> Though Caesar had great power, his rule was felt in Palestine only through those who administered on his behalf – the prefect, Pontus Pilate, and the appointed Jewish ruler, Herod, one of three tetrarchs from Herod the Great’s sons. Pilate was responsible for keeping the peace and collecting taxes.<sup>23</sup> Herod also kept an eye on the region, giving an air of Jewish self-government, though his family held political power through Rome’s kindness since 63 BC, hence his outburst, “John I beheaded”. Herod’s brother Philip served as tetrarch in a neighboring region. John began his ministry in this complex setting: political Rome, political Israel, and religious Israel all had a stake in the affairs of the region.<sup>24</sup> Is there any similarity in what is happening today in political Nigeria and in Religious Nigeria? Your answer may be as good as mine!

Luke portrays John’s ministry as a call to repentance. The ethical thrust of Luke’s Gospel begins here. Ministering in the desert in fulfillment of the pattern of salvation indicated by Isaiah, John preaches “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. His ministry in the Jordan River region is designed to get people ready for the arrival of God’s salvation by having hearts open to respond to the coming Messiah (1,15-17.76-77). That is why in citing Isaiah,

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. H. K. Luce, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* (CGTSC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 177-178.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, 137.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 759.

<sup>22</sup> There is a discussion about how the fifteen years are counted. Was it from coregency in AD 11 or from Augustus’s death or the Senate voting Teberias into office in AD 14? For more see, D.L. BOCK, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 108.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. F. JOSEPHUS, *Jewish War* 2.9.2 <sup>oo</sup> 169-77.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities*, 18.5.2<sup>oo</sup> 115-18.

Luke mentions the leveling of obstacles in the way of God's arrival. If the creation bows to God's coming, certainly human hearts should as well.

John preaches in the manner of the OT prophets, seeking for a "turning" of the heart. Though the Greek word for "repentance" (*metanoia*) means "a change of mind", the concept of repentance has OT roots in the idea of turning to God (1 Kgs 8,47; 2 Kgs 23,25; Ps 78,34; Isa 6,10; Ezek 3,19; Amos 4,6.8). To be prepared for God's salvation, one's heart must be opened to his message. Any doubt that this is John's thrust can be seen in his exposition of repentance in Luke 3,10-14, where it is defined not as an abstract act of the mind, but as something that expresses itself in action. John is a sentry keeping watch over God's plan and blowing a trumpet to announce preparation for the Messiah's arrival. When it comes, all humanity will see the salvation of God (v.6).

"John whom I beheaded" The account of John's imprisonment and execution narrated only in Mark 6,14-29 underscores the great impiety of Herod.<sup>25</sup> First, John reproaches him publicly for marrying Herodias, his niece, who is already the wife of his half-brother.<sup>26</sup> According to Josephus, when Herod Antipas stayed with them on his way to Rome, he fell in love with her and brazenly proposed marriage. Herodias may have perceived this arrangement as a move up the social ladder and agreed upon the condition that he must divorce his wife, the daughter of Aretas IV, the ruler of neighboring Nabatea. This divorce may have touched off a border war with the outraged Aretas years later, which resulted in serious military losses for Herod.<sup>27</sup> His new marriage ignited religious protests at home because it was classified as incestuous (Lev 18,16; 2021).

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<sup>25</sup>D. W. Chapman, *The Orphan Gospel: Mark's Perspective of Jesus* (:UNKNO, 1992),186, summarizes well Herod Antipas's unpopularity as a monarch: "The Jews hated his father. Antipas has close ties with Rome, the Jews hated Rome. His mother was a Samaritan, and the Jews hated Samaritans. He built or rebuilt towns or cities naming them after Roman royalty. To populate Tiberias, he forcibly relocated his subjects (today's Palestinian controversy should cast light on how popular that move must have been). In Tiberias, he built a royal palace and adorned it with a frieze of animal figures, in violation of the Second Commandment".

<sup>26</sup> Herodias was the daughter of Herod Aristobulus, one of the sons of Herod the Great (half brother of Antipas), and Mariamne, and is therefore the half niece of Herod Antipas. On the issue of the confusion with Herod Philip, see Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*(SNTSMS 17; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 131-36.

<sup>27</sup> Josephus, Ant. 18.5.1 <sup>99</sup> 109-15

Ironically, Herod’s young stepdaughter captivates him with her presumably erotic dancing, which also hints of incestuous lust. John condemns Herod for the lust that led to the first incest; his inflamed passion for his stepdaughter results in John’s execution. Herod is, therefore, presented as one who knows no taboos. The lascivious behavior at Herod’s court would also have been considered disgraceful to a pious Jew, and Jews viewed birthdays as pagan celebrations.<sup>28</sup> The party is rife with paganism: the presence of dancing girls at a stag party (Herodias is not present), a drunken king doing the bidding of a woman, and the beheading of a prophet on a whim.

Herodias understandably holds a grudge against someone who has called for her removal from the seat of power. Either Herodias seizes the moment to sacrifice her daughter’s dignity by sending her in a dance to win Herod’s favor or takes advantage of an opportunity to do away with her prophetic nemesis when her daughter comes to consult with her. The delighted king impulsively or drunkenly offers the girl half of his kingdom, a proverbial expression for generosity (1Kg 13,8, Est. 5,3.6; 7,2). As a puppet of Rome, Herod does not have the right to give half of his kingdom away.<sup>29</sup> Herod, whom Jesus calls a shaking reed (Matt 11,7) and a fox (Luke 13,32), is himself outfoxed by his wife, who is engaged in court intrigue. He values his honor in keeping his rash oath more than John’s life and winds up killing the one he fears and has gladly heard. It will not be the last time that a ruler submits to the will of others to have an innocent man executed. This is the case and sad story in Nigeria on daily basis. We have many ‘Herods’ and ‘Herodias’ in the exalted positions and offices today in Nigeria who respect no rules and have no fear of God. These “reeds” and foxes” as Jesus calls them repeat the action of Herod and Herodias just to remain in power, or to carry out the will of their masters who put them in power, the power which, ultimately, they will lose.

The grisly detail of John’s head brought to Herod and the other partyers on a platter caps off a banquet already polluted by excess

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<sup>28</sup> M. `Abod. Zar.1:3.

<sup>29</sup> Anyone aware that Herod Antipas lost all his kingdom when he was sent into exile and that it was given to Agrippa would find this rash promise ironic.

and lust. John dies according to the caprice of an evil woman and the weakness of her impotent and debauched husband. Even beheaded, John is more powerful than this so-called king. Herod's ghastly crime will live on in infamy message of moral outrage and call for repentance still rings in the corridors of power. Bad leaders in Nigeria who hold unto power and still want to continue to be in authority, thereby behaving like Herod should learn from this passage and from Herod. There are consequences for every action done here on earth.

### **Conclusion**

One of the great dangers of the 'Prophetic Voice' like that of John the Baptist is that because of fear, the 'Prophetic Voice' has lost its desire to minister in concrete action as the 'Voice' seeks to share God's word. Herod perplexity indicates how even in the highest social circles people struggled to understand Jesus. Herod pictures a figure who almost tragically trivializes Jesus and his ministry. As a true prophet, John has no fear of the great and powerful and boldly confronts them with their sins. This should be the attitude of true and authentic prophets in our land.

The powers of evil seem to deal a dismal defeat with the arrest and death of John the Baptist, but the Baptist's beheading does not silence God's message. Goddert comments: "One is rejected, but the work goes on and expands. The kingdom cannot be stopped by human opposition."<sup>30</sup> Ironically, even John's executioner suspected that he might ultimately triumph (Luke 9:9=Mark 6:16); and he was right. Death to God's messengers will not defeat God's cause. Justin Martyr's famous dictum, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," applies as does Søren Kierkegaard's: "The tyrant dies and his rule ends, the martyr dies and his rule begins."<sup>31</sup> God raises the dead and raises up new witnesses to take their place here in this life. So corrupt leaders who kill and silence 'Prophetic Voices' in our land should take note.

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<sup>30</sup> Geddert, *Watchwords*, 157 in D. E. Garland, *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 249.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted from Garland, *Mark*, 249.