Irish Biblical Apocrypha

Selected Texts in Translation

EDITED BY
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18. THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

1 There was a wicked and cruel king in the eastern world, Herod son of Antipater, who was responsible for the killing of John the Baptist. This is the reason why the outstanding and noble young man was killed: There was a good judge in Herod’s kingdom, who made just decisions and arranged equitable peace terms among all the various peoples, and proclaimed their rights and their laws to them. His name was Philip, a man of great justice and good fortune. Ardargas was the name of the city where he dwelt. And disease came upon him, and within a short time he died. He had a beautiful graceful wife who had few equals in the whole world for comeliness and shapeliness, eloquence, and artistic skill. Even while her own husband, Philip the judge, was alive, Herod loved her greatly, and he often thought of taking her away by force, but for the power of the man with whom she lived.

2 Now when the king of Ascolon, Philip son of Antipater, the brother of Herod, heard that Herodias the wife of Philip was without a husband, he hurried with a host to the place where Herodias was, and took her away with him. She cohabited with him as his spouse for a long time. Herod’s heart was seized with great jealousy and insupportable ferocity because the woman he loved most in the world had been taken from him by his own brother. And because of his intense love for her, he did not allow any change in his feelings, despite the fact that she remained with his brother.

3 Thereafter the king gathered together a large troop, and came to Ascolon as if on a royal circuit. He reached his brother’s dwelling, and Philip rose to greet him, kissed him and made him welcome. He assigned him a lodging-house that was fittingly prepared, and he served Herod with plentiful food and drink. When his meal ended Herod rose up furiously, having many of his armed and equipped soldiers with him, as he had previously arranged, and he proceeded in that fashion to the house in which Herodias and Philip were. Herod had no weapon except a bigpliant rod. When he entered thus, he
found himself at a beautiful princely throne, with the lustre of gold on its joists. Philip was upon it, with Herodias beside him. Herod was enraged throughout his whole being, and he raised his hand, and struck Philip on the crown of his head with a reckless blow from his rod. Then he dragged him from the throne, interposed himself beside Herodias and kissed her. His brother’s bed was prepared for him, and he brought the woman there, and slept with her that night. Next day he took her with him to his own city, and thereafter she was his paramour.

4 When John the Baptist, son of Zacharias, heard these tidings, he was displeased that Herod should have taken a concubine. There was, indeed, close kinship between John and Herod, because Cassandra daughter of Gomer was the mother of Herod and Philip, while Elizabeth, another daughter of Gomer, was the mother of John the Baptist. John urged Herod to repudiate the woman, and came often to Herod to say this. In fact, she was the first unlawful spouse ever denounced in the world. Furthermore, John himself was the first martyr in Christendom, as well as the first hermit, the first monk, and the first believer. He was outstanding as a prophet among prophets, a hermit among hermits, a confessor among confessors, a celibate among celibates, and as an apostle among apostles. For he it is whom the Lord well described thus: “Among all the women’s sons in the world none has been born who is greater than John the Baptist”.

5 Herod then came to the land of Juda, and a great feast was prepared by him there. Herodias, Herod’s woman, had two daughters. Sailusa and Neptis were their names. One of the girls was a singer, a fluteplayer, and a performer of various kinds of music. The other, moreover, was adept at acrobatics, leaping, and gymnastics. Herod brought them into the house to urge them to perform their arts, and to delight the spirits of the nobles and great lords of the world who were gathered within. The girls said that they would not perform unless they received whatever they desired. The king promised this to them, and they bound him to his word in the presence of all the assembled nobles that he would fulfil whatever demands they made on him.

6 Then, after that, they displayed their wonderful talents with skill and energy, and the dignitaries present praised their art highly. When they
had finished their performance they came to their mother, Herod's concubine, to consult her regarding the demand which they would make on the king. "Ask for the head of John the Baptist, and do not accept any other offer but that, and have the head brought to you on a platter", said the queen. The girls came to Herod and asked him for John's head. Herod was displeased at this, and said that he would sooner give them the greater part of his kingdom and territory than to give them the head which they were seeking. But they persisted, and since he had given them his word as king that he would fulfil his undertaking, he conceded to them that John's head should be struck off.

Thereafter John the Baptist was beheaded, and the head was brought in on a platter on the head of one of the women. It is said, moreover, that there was nobody to be found to behead John until the Irishman Mog Ruith did so for the sake of the payment involved. As a result of this, cold, hunger, and disease have been inflicted in greater measure on the Irish than on all others.

Herod was distressed at the deed because he feared the reaction of the people to the beheading of John. The head was given to Herodias thereafter, and John's disciples sought the body for burial. This was granted to them, and it was buried with respect. Herodias, however, buried the head without revealing the location to John's disciples or friends. On a certain occasion, a long time afterwards, two holy monks from the eastern world came to Jerusalem to fast in honour of the Lord. An angel met them on the way, and said to them: "There is a house in Jerusalem in which is the head of John the Baptist. I will show you where it is. Let you take the head away from there". The monks reached Jerusalem, went to the place which the angel pointed out to them, and took the head with them. Its complexion and appearance were still as good as they had been when the head was attached to the body. They placed it in a satchel of theirs in order to bring it with them to their own land.

As the monks set out on the journey towards their fatherland, they encountered a certain man on the way. He was a skilled craftsman who had left his own homeland because of poverty. The monks put the satchel containing John's head on his back. They proceeded then to a
certain city which was on their route, and spent the night there. John the Baptist appeared to the craftsman that night and said to him: "I am John the Baptist, and it is my head which is in the satchel on your back. Rise up, leave the monks, take the head with you, and you will receive food and clothing [through its power]", said he. The artisan arose and left the monks, taking with him the satchel containing the head.

He came to the city called Inshena, and remained there for a time. He was greatly honoured and regarded in that city, and people trusted him. Thereafter the craftsman fashioned a golden shrine around the head. This could be shut and opened, and it had a lock on it. Now the craftsman died subsequently, and he left his dwelling to his sister, a pious widow. When she died, she bequeathed the shrine to her heir. However, another man called Eodraissimus took the shrine which contained the head. Many wonders and miracles were performed for him by virtue of his having the head, and diseases and pestilences among the people were cured. The marvels and miracles of John the Baptist were thereby spread abroad.

When tidings of the man [who had the head] became known, however, he was banished from the district. A holy man called Marcellus took his place in the house where he lived. Inside that house was the head of John the Baptist, which had been concealed in the ground. John appeared in the night to Marcellus, and told him that the head was buried under the house. He pointed out where the head was, and told him to unearth it. When Marcellus heard this, he told the bishop, Lubrabanu[s], who ruled over that particular city, Emisena. The bishop came, together with the people of the city, and they raised John's head out of its burial-place. They sang psalms and hymns in honour of John, and everyone rendered praise to him, since they had seen all the miracles which the head had performed daily, the head of the chaste martyr, John the Baptist.
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McNamara no. 55;

Text from Yellow Book of Lecan, col. 849; transcribed by Kate Müller-Lisowski, ZCP 14 (1923), 145-53, collated with the Leabhar Breac text.

The text here published is composite. The first part is on the martyrdom of John the Baptist. The second part (par. 8-11) gives the account of the revelation of the whereabouts of John's head which was made long afterwards to two monks from the east. This legend is basically the same as that printed by the Bollandists in *Acta Sanctorum*, June, vol. 5; new ed., Paris and Rome, 1867, 615-17; earlier ed., June, vol. 4, 716ff.

The first part of the text is a combination of biblical and other evidence. There are Irish secular texts on the druid Mogh Ruith, who in Irish tradition was involved in the beheading of John. On these see McNamara, nos 56-57.