

intermittent. A lack of bibliography requires a reader to search in dense footnotes to discover the sources underlying this highly technical work. However, the authors certainly unite to prove what the editor Tobias Nicklas declares: ‘These texts should be the focus of more investigations in the study of ancient Christianity than has been the case so far’ (p. 20).

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A dangerous parting. The beheading of John the Baptist in early Christian memory. By Nathan L. Shedd. Pp. x+218. Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 2021. \$44.99. 978 1 4813 1522 7
JEH (74) 2023; doi:10.1017/S0022046923000404

When your emperor grinningly displays a decapitated ostrich head, you do well to infer that your head might be next. But what communicative aim is served when a Herodian king is coaxed into beheading a popular Jewish prophet? In this revised dissertation, Nathan L. Shedd argues that Mark (vi.17–29) used John’s beheading to exonerate Jesus as a crucified miracle worker, while Justin Martyr (*Dialogus* 49.4) and Origen (*Commentary on Matthew* 10.21–2) used it to embody Jews’ inferiority to Christians.

According to Shedd, previous research on the Baptist’s beheading has focused on chronology, historicity and redactional use of the passage. Scholars have argued that John’s death occurred between 28 and 34 CE, considering John’s public appearance in 27 CE (Luke iii.1–3) and the discussions of his death in 37 CE (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116–19). They have found little historical value in Mark’s account, since he claims that Antipas’s brother Philip married Herodias (Mark vi.17) rather than her daughter Salome (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.136–7). And they have found Mark to use the story to clarify that Jesus is not John, while also prefiguring his death.

Against this background, Shedd uses social memory theory – where the past is viewed as a social construction serving the needs of the present – to discuss how John’s beheading is used to mediate meaning. Shedd argues that although historiographers are never free to create pure fiction, the ways in which they emphasise, suppress or contextualise different aspects of the historical record are always shaped by contemporary concerns. This process is particularly pronounced, Shedd contends, in commemorations of past violence, such as John’s beheading or the atrocities of Rwandan ethnicides, and their use for later identity formation and conflict management.

Studying other beheadings in ancient literature, Shedd maintains that although decapitation was less dishonourable than crucifixion, fire or damnation to beasts, it did not indicate an honourable death. Most beheadings constitute the dishonourable death of a person of higher social status, and may even be combined with prolonged imprisonment, torture or public display of the severed head to increase the humiliation. While Shedd demonstrates that disgraces suffered during the execution were generally thought to be reflected in the afterlife, his claim that beheading, specifically, was thought to impede bodily resurrection is doubtful. As evidence, Shedd presents only resurrection believers who affirm that their Creator is surely able to

repair any kind of physical damage including replacing any lost body parts. These affirmations might respond to real or imagined objections that the loss of a head would make bodily resurrection impossible, but in the absence of anyone actually arguing as much, the perceived difficulty remains rather hypothetical.

Shedd's main analysis argues that Mark frames the decapitation to connect John's innocent suffering to that of Jesus, to undermine Herod's position as a manly and efficient ruler and to enhance Jesus' reputation as a prestigious healer. The verbal similarities between how Herodias and the chief priests aim to dispose of their antagonists, despite their respective popularities with Herod and the crowds, are taken to be a deliberate use of interpretive keying – a rhetorical technique to lend deeper meaning to an event by paralleling it to another, more archetypal event. Shedd maintains that in this case the effect works in both directions, strengthening both John's and Jesus' positions as innocent victims without necessitating that either one serves as the archetype of the other. Herodias's manipulations, Herod's suggested lust for his stepdaughter, and the king's overly generous promise of 'up to half my kingdom' are taken by Shedd to portray Herod as a weak and undependable ruler, in control of neither himself nor his kingdom. Building on the perceived impossibility of a bodily resurrection of a decapitated body, Shedd also argues that Herod's astonished speculation that John might be resurrected after all (Mark vi.16) is included to suggest that Jesus' resurrective powers – previously demonstrated in the raising of a young girl (Mark v.41) – are extraordinary enough not to be hindered by such impediments.

When Justin Martyr summarises John's beheading, Shedd finds that by introducing Herod as '*your* king' and John as 'a prophet among *your* people', Justin depicts Herod as a representative Jew performing what he perceives to be the usual Jewish habit of rejecting and killing God's prophets (cf. Matthew xxiii.37 / Luke xiii.34). Presented in a narrative context shortly after the Bar Kokhba war of 132–5 CE (cf. Justin, *Dialogus* 1.3), this detail serves to depict the Jews of the second century as putative allies of Herod, hence enemies of God's prophets, and thus as righteously persecuted rather than innocent victims of Roman imperial violence, Shedd argues.

Similarly, when Origen interprets the Matthean narrative of John's beheading (Matthew xiv.1–12), Shedd finds him to identify John consistently with the concept of Jewish prophecy. When John is seized, bound, imprisoned and executed, it is in Origen's view the prophetic *Logos* that is locked up and killed, Shedd argues; when John's head is taken away from his disciples, it is the source of prophecy that is taken away from the Jewish people; and when John's head is displayed on a platter, it is the κεφάλαιον ('head') of all Jewish prophecy, i.e. Christ, that is rejected by the Jews even when brought to them on a silver plate. Thereby, Shedd maintains, Origen depicts his Jewish contemporaries, represented by Herod and his guests, as violent enemies of true prophecy.

Although Shedd does not always argue convincingly, and spends many pages discussing Markan issues where he has no intention of challenging the scholarly majority, he manages to present an intriguing perspective on the intersection between ancient beheadings and early Christian anti-Jewish polemics, worth consideration by any scholar working on either of those subjects.

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