

The Beheading of John

📖 Matthew 14:1-13a

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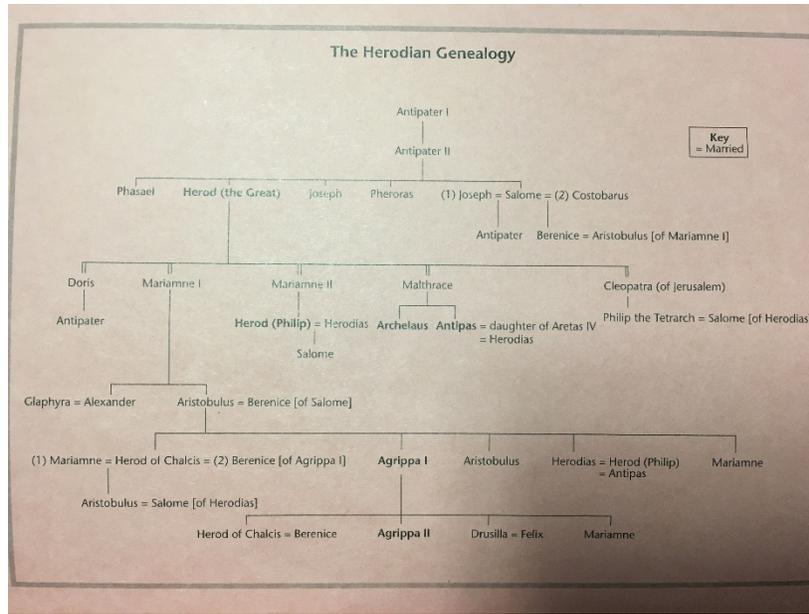
Last time we began the fourth section of Matthew's Gospel in 13:53 which ends in 19:2. This section is titled The Reaction of the King because it is His reaction to that generation's rejection. The narratives Matthew reports reveal a definite pattern to His reaction. First, the leaders oppose Him, second He withdraws, third He trains His disciples and fourth He does some mighty work which brings about more opposition from the leadership. The pattern repeats itself twice and then the third time opposition arises Jesus does not withdraw but abandons the leadership and warns His disciples to stay away from them.

We observed this pattern in the first pericope of Matt 13:53-58 which Toussaint referred to as the key pericope to the section. This occurred toward the end of what is known as the Long Day because so many things happened on that day; Jesus healed a man who was blind, deaf and mute, He was accused of doing the miracle by the power of Satan, He refuted the accusation, He challenged the people to choose whom they would follow and He began teaching new truths about the kingdom's postponement in parables. On the same day in 13:53 He departed from there to go to the other side of the Lake of Galilee. Somewhere along the way He calmed the storm and the Long Day probably came to a close. When they arrived on the other side He cast out the demoniac into the swine and was asked to leave the region. He then sailed back to Capernaum where He healed the synagogue ruler's daughter and the woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years. After a short time in 13:54, He came to His hometown of Nazareth and began teaching those who knew Him from boyhood in their synagogue. The teaching was filled with such wisdom that the people were astonished. To them it was not possible for Him to teach in this way because had not attended the proper rabbinic schools. Because of this they asked, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers." If they had been believing all of the Scriptures they would have known that the only possibility was that He was the Messiah. The OT predicted that the Messiah would have both an earthly origin and a heavenly origin and his heavenly origin could account for it. However, their questions reveal that only His earthly origins were in mind. In 13:55 they ask, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" They knew His father was a carpenter and not a learned Pharisee. Jesus then could not have gotten His wisdom from Joseph. They were looking at Jesus merely from an earthly point of view. They continue along this line of reasoning, asking, "Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and

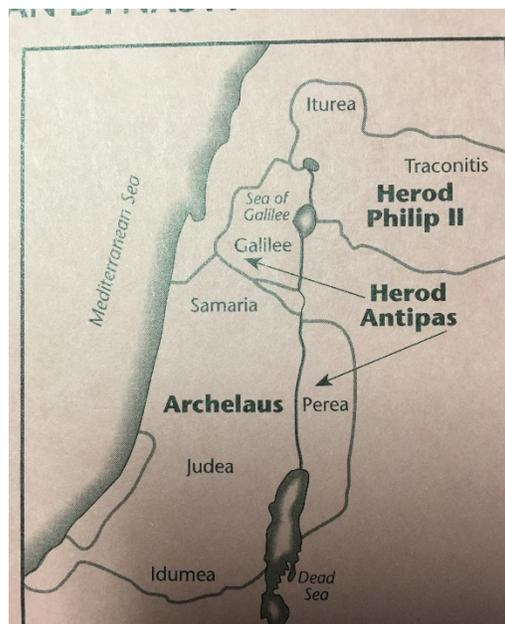
Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?" Of course, neither His mother nor any of His siblings had any semblance of the wisdom and power He had and so where did He get them? If they had been viewing Him from the standpoint of Scripture they would have considered that He was the Messiah and this family explained His earthly origin but His wisdom and power must be explained by his heavenly origin. But they did not consider the Scriptures and so in 13:57, "they took offense at Him." Because they were not believing the Scriptures they were stumbling over the Person of Jesus. They were opposing Him. Their opposition reminded Jesus of an old proverb that held true in their case, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." Neither those of his hometown or even those of his own household were believing He was the Messiah at this time. Familiarity with Him had bred contempt for Him. Therefore, in 13:58 He did not do many miracles there. They were not accepting His person and so He did not do much work there. The town of Nazareth had lived up to its reputation of being despised. The despised, perhaps the only good thing that came out of Nazareth, the Messiah.

In 14:1-12 we now come to further opposition from the leadership. As you can see from verse 13, after the opposition from Herod Antipas, Jesus will follow the pattern we have observed by withdrawing. The reason He is withdrawing is because it is not yet His time. As J. Vernon McGee said, "Jesus withdraws in order not to force the wicked hand of Herod, for the hours of Jesus has not yet come."¹ The main point of the pericope is to document the continued opposition of leaders to Jesus. This opposition is seen in their opposition to John. The relationship between John and Jesus becomes clear; as goes one so goes the other.

We read in 14:1, **At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus.** The expression **At that time** serves to connect this event to the previous event in Nazareth. Evidently **Herod** had not yet heard about the miracles that Jesus was doing until this time. The miracles he had done at Nazareth were very nearby the city of Sepphoris where Herod had an opulent palace. The Herod referred to here is Herod Antipas, otherwise known as Herod 'the Fox.'" He plays a rather major role in the period of the Gospels and Jesus is actually taken to Antipas during His trials prior to the crucifixion. Who was Herod Antipas? From the Herodian Genealogy below you can see that Antipas was one of three surviving sons of Herod the Great.



Herod the Great was the king of Judea when Jesus was born in 5/4BC and who tried to murder him as an infant. He had ruled with great skill over the entirety of Judea and the Galilee and before he died he warned Caesar that none of his sons was capable of ruling the entire region and suggested that Caesar appoint each of them over a portion of the region. Caesar was skeptical but did follow his suggestion. The appointments can be seen from the other slide below. Philip II was appointed over Iturea and Tracoinitis. Archaelus was appointed over Judea, Samaria and Idumea. Herod Antipas was appointed over the Galilee and Perea. If you note on the map both John, the forerunner, and Jesus the King ministered extensively in Galilee and Perea.



John at the Jordan in Perea and Jesus was baptized there and then went into the Galilee. What we gather from 14:2 is that Antipas obviously had heard about John and had already executed him but he had not yet heard of **Jesus**.

It may seem somewhat strange that he had not **heard...about Jesus**. Shepard explains, "The fact that he had not heard or at least given serious attention to the work of Jesus until now may be explained by his absence for a time in Rome, by his hostilities with Aretas, his father-in-law, king of Arabia, in which he suffered defeat, by his preoccupation with his numerous building activities, and as Josephus intimates by his personal love of ease and pleasure leading to a life of voluptuousness and unconcern for religious matters among the Jews or little else of public affairs."² So why did he hear about Him at this time. It may be due to the fact that Nazareth was only three miles away from the city of Sepphoris which Antipas had built and where he had a royal palace. Batey says, "When Antipas built Sepphoris and Tiberias, he constructed opulent palaces and enjoyed the pleasures of an oriental monarch."³ So now that Jesus had done miracles so close to Sepphoris it stands to reason that the word reached his palace in Sepphoris.

In 14:2 we see his response to the news, saying **to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."** This is an interesting explanation and casts some light on the various explanations people gave to the person of Jesus. We see several of these later in Matt 16:13. Here Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." So there are four explanations that were floating in the air; John the Baptist, obviously resurrected; Elijah either returned or resurrected, one of the prophets or the Messiah. Pentecost explains, "Some identified Jesus with John the Baptist because of the similarity in their messages. Others said Jesus was Elijah, for the Jews expected Elijah to appear before Messiah; and the Jews knew that Elijah had condemned sin and called the people to repentance in view of approaching judgment...some identified Him as a prophet similar to the prophets who arose in Israel in the days of their fathers."⁴ So there were many explanations but the one accepted by Herod Antipas was that Jesus was **John the Baptist raised from the dead**. The question is why would Herod Antipas believe that Jesus was **John the Baptist raised from the dead?**

The explanation lies in the events explained in 14:3-12 that lead to the execution of John the Baptist. We should review a few things about John. In Matt 3 John was the forerunner of the King. He came to prepare the way for the King. His message was "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." His activity was in keeping with the protocol for a king's arrival in the ancient world. When a king planned to visit an area he would dispatch servants ahead of him in order to tell the people to prepare for the king. The people would respond by preparing the way by picking up trash and setting out flowers along the way, making the journey of the king a smooth and respectful one as his caravan moved past his subjects. This is what John did for Jesus. He was a voice of one

crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight! The nation was to prepare for the King's arrival by repenting of the false religious system of the scribes and Pharisees and being baptized so that when the King came they could put their faith in Him. John was quite successful in this ministry because the people were already dissatisfied with the scribes and Pharisees and they were looking for the soon arrival of the Messiah. When Jesus came to him to be baptized He was identified as the Messiah and He too began to preach "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." With the Messiah now identified John's proclamation of repentance apparently only intensified. In his view (and Jesus') the kingdom was about to come. As we can see from 14:3-4 he did not limit his message of repentance to Jews but extended it to Gentiles such as Herod Antipas as well. **For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." Although Herod wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet.** John was a no holds barred kind of guy. He went straight for the jugular even with the highest rulers in the land like Antipas. He was obviously calling on Antipas to repent of his marriage to **Herodias** because it violated the Mosaic Law. He is an example of someone who called on a government leader to repent and get right with God so that he too might be a partaker in the coming kingdom of God. The broader history of the events that stand behind verses 3-5 are a fascinating look into Herod, Herodias and John and explain why Herod thought that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead.

On the Herodian Genealogy you can see that Herod Antipas was first married to the daughter of Aretas IV. Aretas IV was the King of Nabatea. He ruled from Petra, "the rose red city, half as old as time." The marriage sealed political and economic ties that were important for Antipas to maintain in light of the fact that his region of Perea bordered Nabatea for some forty miles. Batey says, "Antipas' marriage ratified a strong and valuable alliance with his fierce neighbors, granting important trade concessions and promising mutual nonaggression. The long period of peaceful relations that Antipas enjoyed with Aretas suggests that the marriage had a considerable degree of success." However, in AD29 Antipas planned a trip to Rome to resolve some issues related to the city of Tiberius which he built in honor of Caesar Tiberius. On the way he stopped to visit his half-brother Philip at the port city of Caesarea by the Sea. Philip was married to Herodias and Antipas fell in love with her and secretly proposed marriage to her. She secretly accepted his offer and pledged to marry him on the condition that he get rid of his Nabatean wife. Antipas agreed and set sail to Rome. Upon his return to the Galilee the word of his proposal to Herodias had become known to his Nabatean wife. She pretended not to know and asked if she might visit their opulent fortress palace at Machaerus near the border of Perea and Nabatea. Antipas gladly granted her request in order to get his affairs in order for marrying Herodias. When his wife arrived at Machaerus she arranged for her escape across the border and made her way to Petra where she informed her father, King Aretas, of Antipas' plan to marry Herodias. This broke the political and economic ties that had for so long maintained important trade agreements and mutual nonaggression. It also upset familial and emotional bonds and Aretas began to seek a chance to settle the score.

With his Nabatean wife out of the picture, Antipas married Herodias, who had herself recently divorced his half-brother Philip. She and her daughter Salome moved into the palace at Tiberius on the Lake of Galilee. It was at this time that Matt 14:4 records that **John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her."** The imperfect tense means that John had been making this accusation over and over. The specific law that Antipas had violated was part of the Mosaic Law. Lev 18:16, "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness." And Lev 20:21, "If there is a man who takes his brother's wife, it is abhorrent; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness. They will be childless." It is interesting that John held a pagan Gentile responsible to keep this law. Luke 3:19 adds that John reprimanded him "because of all the wicked things which Herod had done."⁵ John did not hold unbelievers to a lesser ethical standard than he did believers. He took an unbeliever to task for all the wicked things he had done. The reason is because Antipas needed to repent if he was to have a part in the kingdom to come. Initially, neither Antipas nor Herodias had any interest in John's constant rebukes. In fact they were so incessant that in Matt 14:5 **Herod wanted to put him to death.** But the fact was that John was very popular and held in high regard among the Jews and therefore **Although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd.** If Antipas had put him to death he would have had a Jewish revolt on his hands. With the added possibility of a war being waged by Aretas on the Perea front Antipas could not risk executing John.

This tenuous situation led him in Matt 14:3 to have **John arrested...bound and put...in prison.** The prison he was placed in was at Machaerus, a fortress palace situated upon a high mountain about five miles east of the Dead Sea near the border of Nabatea. Mark 6:20 records that Antipas spent time interrogating him there and though he was very confused by what John taught he enjoyed listening to him. We can see in our mind's eye on one hand Antipas in the fine purple linen of kings and on the other John in a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt. The two could not have been from more different worlds as John explained to him things concerning the coming kingdom of God and the necessity of repentance to take part in the kingdom. Mark also records that during this time Herod actually became "afraid of John" because he knew "that he was a righteous and holy man" and so while his wife Herodias' plots and schemes to destroy him continued Antipas "kept him safe." It is probable from his change in demeanor toward John that he was being influenced by John's teachings on the soon coming kingdom of God and had begun to employ some of John's counsel such as giving to those in need and tax collectors not collecting more than ordered and soldiers not accusing anyone falsely and being content with their wages. It was during these discussions and changes that in Matt 11 John got word of the works of Christ and sent word by his disciples asking Him, "Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" And Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me." Even so it does not seem that the works of Jesus reached the ears of Antipas at this time. Nevertheless, we can be sure that John told

Antipas of the Messiah as the one coming after Him whose sandals he was not fit to remove and that the message of the kingdom was having some effect on him.

With this background information from Mark, Luke and secular history we come to Matt 14:6ff. The occasion was **Herod's 50th birthday**. Herodias' hatred for John had only grown and she was still plotting to have him executed. Mark 6:21 adds that Herod put on a feast much like Belshazzar's feast in the book of Daniel where "he gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee." After much eating and drinking Herodias' plot went into action. The plot involved a *pas seul*, a provocative solo dance by her beautiful **daughter**. The text says this **pleased Herod, so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked**. This oath reminds us of the oaths of the great Persian kings such as Ahasuerus who said to Esther, "What is *troubling* you, Queen Esther? And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be given to you." Antipas made himself out to be a great king on par with the great kings of Persia but he was really nothing more than a tetrarch. His oath was a foolish one made in a half-drunk state. Shepard said, "But the opportune day for the plotting Jezebel finally came, on the anniversary of Herod's reign or more probably his birthday, when he made a great Belshazzar-feast for his lords, captains of thousands or military authority, and chief men of Galilee of the high social and financial class, in the place of Machaerus. The daughter of Herodias, Salome herself, was prostituted by her mother to the low level of a scenic dancer and when guests had finished gormandizing and were flushed with wine, this seventeen-year old damsel came in with all her enticing beauty and "executed a *pas seul* in the midst of those dissolute and half-intoxicated revelers." The dance was mimetic and licentious and pleased Herod and the maudlin group of guests lounging on the divans. She leaped into the middle and gave a shameful exhibition of lewd dancing as pre-arranged by Herodias."⁶

Herodias would finally have her way. "Antipas, half-drunk, was caught in the snare of the wily Herodias. What she had failed to get by entreaty she secured by craftiness. Herod promised with an oath to give the damsel whatever she might ask for herself, to the half of his kingdom. The girl did what her mother expected, ran to know what she should ask. "The head of John the Baptizer," was the reply. Doubtless the young girl drew back from such a hideous request, for we are told by Matthew that the mother, pushing her forward, instantly prompted her with the words: "Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptizer."

In 14:9 we see that Antipas **was grieved**. The word means he was "deeply sad." The transformation in his demeanor toward John was secured. He had once wanted to put John to death but now he did not want to. John was a righteous and holy man and he enjoyed listening to John, even if he did not understand all the things he was saying. But he had been tricked by Herodias. Now he was in a position to do what was right for the first time but it says that two things led him to command that John be put to death. First, because he had made an **oath** to the girl. It was a foolish **oath** made when he was half drunk. But if he did not keep it he would likely have to face the reprisals of the wily Herodias, something it seems he did not want to face. Second, because of his **dinner guests**. His pride got the better of his judgment. He wanted to save John but he wanted to save face

even more so. Shepard says, "He might well have repudiated so foolish an oath which would have been honored in the breaking. But his pride and his fear of the criticism of his drunken guests prevailed over any prompting of conscience or sense of justice..."⁷

Therefore, in 14:10, **He sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother.** No doubt she was repulsed and disgusted by carrying this tray with a bloody head on it. The Romans commonly executed by beheading and without a trial. And what we are to take away from this, and the reason Matthew records it is to prompt us to think that if this was how the forerunner of the King was treated how do we think the King Himself will be treated.

In 14:12, **His disciples came and took away the body and buried it;** John's body had been thrown away as refuse but His disciples came and gave him a proper burial. It should be observed that there is such a thing as a proper and improper burial and the body is not worthless and so should not be treated as worthless. It is worthy of a proper burial. That is what they gave John and that is what they gave our Lord.

Now this explains everything because remember that back in 14:1-2 when Antipas **heard the news about Jesus** he thought that He was **John the Baptist risen from the dead**, and now with **miraculous powers at work in him**. In other words, his conscience was haunting him and his explanation was that John had come back from the dead to revisit him for his sins.

If you wonder the end of Antipas and Herodias, a few years later she became jealous of her brother Agrippa who was given the title king by his friend Emperor Gaius and convinced Antipas to go to Rome and request that he also be given the title king for his many years of faithful service. When they set sail her brother Agrippa wrote Emperor Gaius informing him that Antipas had enough weapons and armor to equip 70,000 troops and that he was planning to join the Parthians in a revolt against Rome. Tradition says that when Antipas and Herodias appeared before Gaius he was reading Agrippa's letter. Rather than conferring upon him the title of king he sent him into exile in the south of France; Herodias choosing to join him. And so Antipas the Fox was finally outfoxed by Agrippa and the two disappeared from the pages of history.

And at the end verse 12, after John's disciples gave him a proper burial **they went and reported to Jesus**. The beheading of John was interpreted by Jesus as opposition to Himself so that in verse 13 "He withdrew" with His disciples. Jesus knew well that opposition to His forerunner only foreshadowed opposition to Himself. If the Roman leadership had murdered John they would also murder Him. Pentecost says, "In the gospels the death of John is to be viewed as a foreshadowing of the ultimate rejection of Jesus Christ by that nation to whom He had presented Himself as Savior-Sovereign."⁸ So we see the theme of continued opposition to the king.

In summary, in 14:3 Herod Antipas had John arrested, bound and put in prison because of his marriage to Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For in 14:4, John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." This accusation, among others continued and in 14:5, although Antipas initially wanted to put him to

death, he feared the Jewish crowds because they regarded John as a prophet. Mark adds that while John was in prison at Machaerus Antipas dialogued with him and came to revere him as a holy and righteous man and actually kept him safe from Herodias' schemes to destroy him. However, in 14:6 when Herod's birthday came he had a big feast for all his leaders and Herodias craftily devised a plan to trap him. She sent her daughter Salome in to provide provocative entertainment in the midst of them and this pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. In 14:8 when Salome went to her mother she was pushed forward by her mother to request "the head of John the Baptist" on a platter. And although he was grieved because he had learned to respect John his pride and fear of criticism got the best of him and he gave the command and had John beheaded in the prison. In 14:11 his head was brought out on a platter and repulsively given to the girl who brought it to her bloodthirsty mother and the body was thrown out as refuse. In 14:12 his disciples came and gave his body a proper burial. They then went and reported these things to Jesus. In 14:13 Jesus interpreted this Roman official's opposition to John as foreshadowing the Roman official's opposition to Himself. Indeed, later on the Pharisees told Him that Antipas wants to kill you and He said to them, "Go and tell that fox, behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach My goal." But at this time He simply withdrew with His disciples according to the pattern in this section.

What can we learn? First, we can learn that there is great opposition to Jesus and therefore to us. This was not only true when He was here but it is true now. This opposition is carried out against His body on earth. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world. Second, we can learn that John confronted a governmental leader with the standards of Scripture and challenged him to repent in preparation for the kingdom. We can do the same thing today. When a government leader does evil things we should confront them with violating the Scripture and calling for a repentant faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is much more important than calling them to task for violating the Constitution. Men need to be prepared for the kingdom and this preparation comes through faith in Jesus as the Messiah. As far as we know Antipas never believed. All we know is that during Jesus' trial he did have a confrontation with Antipas who was excited to meet Him for he had never seen Him and had wanted to for a long time because he had been hearing about Him and wanted to see Him do a sign. He questioned him at length but Jesus answered him nothing. Antipas mocked him and treated Him with contempt and sent Him back to Pilate dressed in a gorgeous robe. It was that day that Antipas and Pilate became friends for before that day they had been enemies. Nevertheless, expect opposition and confront governmental leaders with the standards of Scripture and challenge them to have a repentant faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, apart from which no man can see the kingdom of God.

¹ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, p 81.

² Cited by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 227-8.

³ Richard A. Batey, *Jesus and the Forgotten City*, p 105.

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 228.

⁵ Cf the articles by Chris Cone that argue that we cannot hold unbelievers to the same standard as believers. This seems contrary to the ministry of John the Baptist. Cf <http://www.drcone.com/2013/03/27/why-i-concurrently-oppose-and-support-gay-marriage/> and <http://www.drcone.com/2015/05/22/biblical-ethics-for-those-who-dont-believe/>

⁶ Cited by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 229.

⁷ Cited by J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 229.

⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, p 230.