

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts 12_Herod's Persecution & Peter's Imprisonment)

The purpose of this section of Acts is to confirm Israel's rejection of the Messiah. Luke has skillfully woven this theme throughout the entire book and it can be seen up to this point in 4:1-30 (esp. 4:29); 5:17-40; 6:11-8:3; 9:1-2, 29. This animosity of Israel set the stage for the first missionary journey.¹ In Acts 13, we see Saul emerge as Paul, God's chosen apostle to the Gentiles, who carries the gospel to Gentile cities throughout the Roman empire.

Herod's Persecution (12:1-4)

This "Herod" [Agrippa I] was the grandson of Herod the Great [37-4 B.C.] who had tried to kill the infant Jesus with his decree that all male children in Bethlehem two years old or younger be slaughtered (Matt 2:16-17). Only the most paranoid and cruel of rulers could issue such a decree. Note Luke's contrast between the warm expression of love toward the saints in Jerusalem and Herod's hateful and paranoid decree.

The Herod mentioned here is **Agrippa I**, a ruler popular with the Jews for he was partly Jewish, being of *Hasmonean* descent. His kingdom covered basically the same area as that of his grandfather Herod the Great. He was known for doing everything possible to curry the favor of the Jews, so he found it politically expedient to arrest Christians and to execute **James, the brother of John**. Herod **Agrippa I** died in A.D. 44. His son, Herod Agrippa II, was king of Judea from A.D. 50-70. Paul was on trial before Agrippa II and his sister Bernice (25:13-26:32).²

¹ Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985), 384.

² Ibid. The Hasmonian family was the priestly family from which the leaders (Mattathias and his son Judah the Maccabee) of the Jewish revolt circa 164-165 B.C. against forced Hellenization of the Jews (to include desecration of the Temple) arose. Palestine was sandwiched between the two rival successors to Alexander the Great (Seleucus and Ptolemy) and for the next 125 years the Seleucids and Ptolemies battled for the control of Israel. The former finally won in 198 B.C. when Antiochus III defeated the Egyptians and incorporated Judea into his empire. Initially, he continued to allow the Jews autonomy, but after a stinging defeat at the hands of the [Romans](#) he began a program of Hellenization that threatened to force the Jews to abandon their monotheism for the Greeks' paganism. Antiochus backed down in the face of Jewish opposition to his effort to introduce idols in their temples, but his son, Antiochus IV, who inherited the throne in 176 B.C. resumed his father's original policy without excepting the Jews. A brief Jewish rebellion only hardened his views and led him to outlaw central tenets of [Judaism](#) such as the [Sabbath](#) and [circumcision](#), and defile the holy [Temple](#) by erecting an altar to the god Zeus, allowing the sacrifice of pigs, and opening the shrine to non-Jews. Information obtained from www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org .

Actually, I believe that the Jews probably disliked this Herod and he knew it. Else, why his extreme measures to curry favor with the Jews? This position is held by notable theologians including Merrill F. Unger.³

This James that was killed was the brother of John the other Apostle and writer of the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation. The other James was the half brother of Jesus who became a leader in the Jerusalem church, yet was not one of the twelve Apostles to Israel. This latter James will appear in Acts 15 (the Jerusalem Council) and Acts 21 (Paul's trip to Jerusalem where he is arrested).

Since the killing of the Apostle James pleased the Jewish leadership, Herod wanted to capitalize on this situation and imprisoned the most prominent leader of this new movement – Peter. This occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread associated with the Passover. There were four soldiers who guarded Peter during four separate watches of the day – a total of sixteen soldiers each day committed to guarding Peter. Herod didn't want a repeat of Peter's earlier escape in Acts 5:19-24 when he was imprisoned on the orders of the religious leadership which included the high priest and the "elders" of the children of Israel.

Peter's Imprisonment & Escape (12:5-19)

This passage raises some interesting questions. Why was James allowed to be killed and not Peter? Why was Peter released so soon in a miraculous manner, yet Paul was allowed to remain in prison for two years in Caesarea (24:27) and for two years in Rome (28:30)? Why the difference? Was Peter more faithful or spiritual than Paul? Was it that James was less faithful than Peter, thus God allowed him to be killed? People too often try to explain such calamities in certain Christian's lives on the basis of their evaluation of the believer's faithfulness or spirituality. This reminds us of the question that the disciples of Jesus asked the Lord concerning the man born blind in John 9:2 – "Who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?" We never know all the facts in a particular case even though we may know that certain patterns can be observed throughout human history. Paul would have likely never been able to testify before kings had he not been held in prison for the length of time that he was held. Peter's time was yet to come and who can question God's sovereignty in that timing? Peter had not yet written two marvelous epistles that contain much helpful instruction regarding suffering. James accepted his fate as God's timing and did not express any sense of injustice at it all.

How did Peter sleep knowing that James had been killed – the second martyr of the faith mentioned by Luke (the first was Stephen)? Peter is often seen as asleep (e.g. Matt 26:36-46). Perhaps he remembered Jesus' statement that he would live to an old age (Jn 21:18).

Where did Peter go after his release? Corinth and Rome are two places that Peter evidently visited (1 Cor. 1:12; 9:5; 1 Pet. 5:13), and various church fathers wrote that he ministered throughout the Jewish Diaspora.⁴

³ The name Herod was a family name – a surname that was applied to many individuals of the same family lineage. The father of Herod the Great was a man named Antipater – a man of Idumaeen lineage. (Idumea was a term employed by Greeks and Romans for the country of Edom and its inhabitants – descendants of Esau. In 47 B.C., Julius Caesar appointed an Idumean, Antipater, as procurator of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Herod the Great, son of Antipater, was crowned king of the Jews in 37 B.C. When Titus besieged Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Idumeans joined the Jews in rebellion against Rome.) Even though the Idumeans were incorporated into the Jewish state via conquest led by John Hyrcanus in about 130 B.C., the Jews regarded them with suspicion and prejudice. They considered the Idumeans to be half-Jews even though they submitted to the rite of circumcision. Herod the Great's son, also named Antipater, married a Hasmonaean. Thus, Herod the Great's grandsons, Agrippa I and II, were of mixed Idumaeen and Hasmonaean descent. See Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 555-7, 606.

The Death of Herod (12:20-25)

This Herod, like Lucifer in eternity past, would have exalted his own throne above that of God and proclaimed himself a god. Yet, unlike Lucifer, the execution of Herod's judgment was swift. His plot to leverage his persecution of the new faith to his personal advantage failed miserably – as do all such human schemes that run counter to God's will and purpose.

Tyre and Sidon were in Herod's dominion and for some reason had incurred his wrath. Because these cities **depended on** Galilee for grain, they desired to make **peace** with Herod Agrippa. Probably they bribed **Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king**, to work out a reconciliation. **On the appointed day** when **Herod** was delivering a speech, **the people** honored him as **a god**, and the Lord **God** judged him with death. This was in A.D. 44. This account parallels that given by Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (19. 8. 2). After Herod's death, Felix and Festus, successively, were the governors of Judea. Three of Herod's children figure prominently in the later narrative of Acts— Drusilla, the wife of Felix (24:24-26); Bernice (25:13, 23), and Herod Agrippa II (25:13-26:32).⁵

The last verses of the chapter are not necessarily chronological relative to Herod's persecution and death. Herod died in A.D. 44 and the famine did not begin until at least a year later, maybe two. It is quite likely that Herod was already dead when Saul and Barnabas left Antioch to Jerusalem on their relief mission. Evidently, Luke wanted to mention the two events of chapter 12 that were related to the Jerusalem church (Peter's miraculous release from prison and Herod's persecution and death) prior to continuing the narrative regarding the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Therefore, chapter 12 represents a break in the chronological flow – an interlude of sorts between chapter 11:27-30 and chapter 13. (It is interesting to note that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote his epistle circa A.D. 46 and Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians in A.D. 48 – both around the time of the famine in the region).

⁴ Thomas Constable, *Notes on the Book of Acts*, www.soniclight.org

⁵ Walvoord, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – NT*, 385.