

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Study Notes: Acts 12:1-4

- **A Shift In Narratives:**

While we might expect that Luke will continue to chronicle the spread of the Gospel through the next missionary journey, that is not what happens. Instead, in Acts 12 Luke returns to the theme of persecution.

Two Stories: The death of James, John's brother, and Peter's imprisonment. Both men were important to the fledgling Church's progress.

- **Herod Agrippa I:**

"Herod" was a Roman title, not a personal name. The Romans used it to describe their "client kings".

Agrippa I was the "king" of Judea from AD 41 to 44. He was a grandson of Herod the Great and a nephew of Herod Antipas. As a child, Agrippa I had spent time in Rome where he developed a friendship with the emperor Tiberius and the future emperors Caligula and Claudius.

As a client king, Herod's primary role was to keep peace in Judea. The key to his success was to maintain a good relationship with the Jewish population. As such, his primary focus was their appeasement. This is demonstrated in his attempts to curry favor with the Jews' religious leaders and subsequently the larger Jewish population.

"How much did Agrippa I know about Jesus and his followers?" His uncle, Antipas, handled the case against Jesus. Another similarity to his uncle was the fact that he disdained and minority populations that could disrupt that peace.

The Jews mostly despised Herod Agrippa I, partly because, although he was a Jew, he had a Roman upbringing. This was aggravated by the fact that his father was an Idumean (Edomite) – a descendent of Esau.

- **Arresting James, The Brother Of John: vv. 1-2**

“It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.”

The Church was suddenly thrown into crisis. F.F. Bruce: “The pendulum had quickly swung between expansion and opposition, growth and shrinkage, advance and retreat...”

Peter’s season of encouraging the Mediterranean coastline churches was over. The previous days of persecution returned – this time with a marked malignancy.

“James, the brother of John”

Two prominent New Testament “James’’: 1. The half-brother of Jesus and author of the book by his name. (See: Matthew 13:55; James 1:1; Galatians 2:9). 2. James, Zebedee’s son, & John’s brother. (See: Mark 1:19; 10:36-40)

In Mark 10, Jesus warned James and John that following him would entail “drinking from his cup and undergoing his baptism of suffering.” The idea of “drinking from the cup” is an Old Testament allusion to suffering God’s judgment for sin. (See: Psalm 75:8)

Ultimately, at the Cross Jesus drank the cup of God’s judgement on our behalf. He bore our penalty and atoned for our sins.

In relation to James and John, Jesus asked them if they were willing and ready to participate in the same kind of suffering that he would undergo. Their answer should echo in our minds: “Oh yes, we are able.”

In Acts 12, James meets the reality of that statement. Luke tells us that Herod had James arrested and “put to death with the sword”.

- **Why James And Why Beheading?**

It’s very possible that James (also called, “James the Elder”), was marked by Herod because of his aggressive personality and his forceful preaching of Christ’s claims. In other words, James probably stood out from the other

apostles in his fearlessness.

“Why did Agrippa chose beheading as James’ punishment?”

Herod Agrippa I was given authority over Judea and Samaria in 41 AD and died in AD 44. This give us the timeframe of the first apostolic martyr. At the earliest, it was eight years after Jesus’ Resurrection. At the most it was fourteen years.

Luke says that James was “killed with the sword.” This is a clear reference to beheading. (We may recall that John the Baptist died in the same way.)

Historians have noted that the Jews considered death by beheading to be disgraceful. Among the Jews, this was one of four ways that was dictated for the execution of Jewish persons. The others included, stoning, burning, and strangulation.

- **Seizing Peter: v. 3**

“When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.”

When Agrippa realized how the death of James the Elder was met with Jewish approval, he decided to take a further step in arresting and condemning Peter.

Agrippa’s attempts to both placate and win over the Jews is reminiscent of Herod the Great’s attempts to endear himself to the Jews by funding a large portion of the Second Temple rebuilding and expansion.

A couple of observations: 1. The attacks on James and Peter were welcomed by the Sanhedrin. Peter’s recent foray into Caesarea Maritima must have sent shockwaves throughout Judea – especially among the Council of the Jews.

2. The Church was making further inroads into the Jewish population. This threatened the Sanhedrin’s grip on Judea and represented a serious threat to Temple worship.

Herod's arrest of the Jerusalem Church's leaders was hardly incidental. Agrippa was securing Jewish approval.

- **Peter Awaiting Trial: v. 45**

"After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover."

Luke says these events took place "during the Feast of Unleavened Bread." he also tells us that Herod intended to put Peter on public trial after the Passover celebrations.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread immediately followed Passover. By Jewish law, during these kinds of celebration, trials and sentencing were not permitted.

Herod knew the volatility of the Jewish population, so he avoided openly breaking their religious codes. He knew it would be very unpopular to execute Peter while the Jews were celebrating their rescue from Egypt.

- **The Tower Of Antonia:**

Luke doesn't tell us where Peter was being kept, other than mentioning it was a prison in Jerusalem. Historians suggest that Peter was held in what was known as Antonia Fortress.

In 35 B.C. King Herod rebuilt the Baris, a strong fortress to protect the Temple Mount. It was located on the Northwest corner of the Temple Mount and called the Fortress of Antonia. Herod gave the structure this name in honor of his friend Marc Antony.

The Fortress of Antonio stood about 115 feet high and was partly surrounded by a deep ravine, some 165 feet wide. It functioned as headquarters for the Roman soldiers, a palace, and a barracks. Herod constructed a secret passage from the fortress to the Temple.

Overlooking Jerusalem, the Antonia Fortress garrisoned some 600 Roman soldiers, who were charged with securing the Temple courts. The Book of Acts mentions the fortress twice: Acts 21:37; Acts 22.

After Peter was imprisoned, Herod had him guarded by four squads of four soldiers each." It's possible he knew Peter – along with the other apostles – had mysteriously escaped from prison before the High Priest could interrogate him. (See: Acts 5:17-21)

Historical sources indicate that the Romans divided the night watch into four sections of three hours. In Peter's case, two soldiers guarded him from within the cell and two stood guard outside the cell.

Two of the soldiers were chained to Peter. John Stott: "Normally it was considered enough for a prisoner to be handcuffed to one soldier."

Luke wants Theophilus and his future readers to see what a strong set of precautions were taken by Herod to ensure that Peter would not escape his grasp before his execution: The greater the seeming impossibility of escape, the greater the astonishment at Peter's escape!

When the Passover was finished, Herod intended to put Peter on trial publicly. As one commentator suggested, Herod intended to make this a "show trial". By trying Peter at Antonio's Fortress, Herod would get the greatest exposure from the event, and hopefully further endear himself to the Jewish leaders and populace.