

The Folly of King Herod Agrippa

By Dan & Brenda Cathcart

The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/VL5g8aGiWLw>

The scripture reading is: Acts 12:1-24

Additional reading Josephus Antiquities of the Jews Book 19, Chapters 1-8

Last week's teaching ended with the announcement of the coming of a famine that would affect the entire Roman world. This would fall during the first years of the emperor Claudius. It, also, coincided with the time that Agrippa ruled as king of Israel from 41 to 44 CE. Our reading this week opens with the execution of the Apostle James and ends with the death of King Herod Agrippa the first.

Acts 12:1-2 CJB 1 It was around this time that King Herod began arresting and persecuting certain members of the Messianic community; 2 and he had Ya'akov, Yochanan's brother put to death by the sword.

Up until now, any executions of Jewish believers in Messiah Yeshua were carried out by the High Priest and his delegates. Saul's authority to persecute believers came directly from the high priest. It was strictly a Jewish religious matter. What was King Herod Agrippa's motivation in having the apostle James executed? What was the connection to the famine that affected the entire Roman world during his short reign?

In order to understand the significance of these events, we need to go back a few years to the reign of Gaius Caesar more popularly known by his nickname Caligula. By all accounts, Gaius was the worst sort of tyrant. The historian Suetonius calls him a monster. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles summarize the accounts of various historians:

"To replenish his coffers, he began putting Roman citizens to death on false pretenses and seizing their property and assets. He taxed everything including marriage, lawsuits, prostitution, and plunder. After gladiatorial shows, he auctioned off the gladiators. He gained a reputation for lewd and indecent behavior... Contemporary sources describe him as insane, self-absorbed, vicious, murderous, sexually deviant, incestuous, and bloodthirsty."ⁱ

Agrippa was a close friend of Gaius'. When Gaius became the emperor of Rome, he gave Agrippa the title king and appointed him tetrarch over the recently deceased Herod Phillip's territory east of the Sea of Galilee including modern day northern Israel, southern Lebanon and southern Syria.

During the four years of his reign, from 37 to 41 CE, Gaius became obsessed with the idea that he was a god. He appeared in public dressed as various Roman gods and goddesses including Bacchus, Mercury, Apollo, and Venus. Ultimately, he associated himself with Jupiter, the father of all the Roman gods and demanded that he be worshiped as the father of gods. Incidents in Alexandria incited by the Jew hating governor Flaccus revealed to Gaius that the Jews did not worship him. This resulted in synagogues in Alexandria being closed and the property of the Jewish residents confiscated. In the summer of 40 C.E., Gaius ordered that all synagogues and even the temple in Jerusalem display a statue of him as Jupiter! The historian Philo describes Gaius' hatred of the Jews and his campaign to force them to worship him.

"So great was his inequality of temper towards every one, and most especially towards the nation of the Jews to which he was most bitterly hostile, and accordingly beginning in Alexandria he took from

them all their synagogues there, and in the other cities, and filled them all with images and statues of his own form; for not caring about any other erection of any kind, he set up his own statue every where by main force; and the great temple in the holy city, which was left untouched to the last, having been thought worthy of all possible respect and preservation, he altered and transformed into a temple of his own, that he might call it the temple of the new Jupiter, the illustrious Gaius.”ⁱⁱ

The Jews remembered the years of the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes the fourth who erected an altar to Zeus over the altar of God. In response to this new threat to the temple, the Jews neglected their planting and flocked to the Roman garrison at Acco to beseech that this statute not be placed in their holy temple. This was the sixth year in the sabbatical counting of years. The harvest from this year was critical to see the nation safely through the following sabbatical year, instead it would be extremely sparse! Meanwhile, the followers of the Way remembered Yeshua’s words.

Matthew 24:15-16 NKJV 15 "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), 16 "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Delay in carrying out Gaius’ plans came from a surprising source. King Agrippa exacted a boon from Gaius to do whatever Agrippa asked of him. Agrippa asked that Gaius rescind the order that the statue of himself that had been completed and was on its way to Jerusalem not be installed in the Holy Place of the temple. Since the boon was given and asked for publically, Gaius relented but immediately got around this promise by commissioning a different statute to be built and placed in the Holy Place. Before this second statute could be completed, Gaius was killed by his guards. Agrippa comes out of this incident as a hero of the Jewish people.

Agrippa’s popularity is increased when he acts as mediator between the newly selected Emperor Claudius and the Roman Senate. Agrippa makes sure that Jewish independence in worship of God is part of the agreement. In gratitude for his mediation, Claudius extends Agrippa’s territory to include Judea and Samaria. King Agrippa was now truly the King of Israel ruling over the same region as his grandfather King Herod the Great. King Agrippa was elated that he had achieved his goal to rule over all of Israel. He would now have plenty of resources to satisfy his chosen lifestyle of indulgence. The Jewish people were ecstatic to have a Jewish champion made king over them and enthusiastically welcomed his arrival from Rome!

At least, most of the Jews were ecstatic. The followers of the Way were less enthusiastic. Agrippa was only one fourth Jewish through his Grandmother Mariamne the Hasmonean. Mariamne was not from the tribe of Judah, nor the line of David; she was from the Hasmonean house of the family of Aaron! Agrippa was not the true king of Israel.

King Agrippa’s first full year as king over all Israel encompassed the years 41 to 42 CE which was the sabbatical year following the sparse planting and harvest during Gaius’ final year as emperor. Although food was scarce, enthusiasm about this new king was still high. At the end of the sabbatical year, when the king of Israel is commanded to read the Torah to the people, King Agrippa is invited to fulfill this role. However, any king appointed over Israel must be from among the tribes of Israel.

Deuteronomy 17:14-15 NKJV 14 "When you come to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,' 15 "you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother.

Further, since the time of David, the king must be from David’s line.

2 Samuel 7:12-13 NKJV 12 "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 "He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

King Agrippa, who presented himself as pious and Torah observant while in Israel, was granted the honor of reading the Torah to the people. The Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sotah Folio 41a records Agrippa's response while reading the Torah:

"When He (Agrippa) reached, thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, his eyes ran with tears. They said to him, 'Fear not, Agrippa, thou art our brother!'"ⁱⁱⁱ

When the people cried out, "You are our brother", the thousands of followers of the Way did not join in. They knew that the true king of Israel was Yeshua and they were waiting for His return. Their silence in the temple would have been noted. The disciples of Yeshua refused to contribute to the flattery poured out on Agrippa by the rest of the Jewish people! The sages will later comment on this excessive flattery as coming from the enemies of Israel:

"At that moment the enemies of Israel made themselves liable to extermination, because they flattered Agrippa."^{iv}

This refusal to flatter and endorse Agrippa as the rightful king of Israel is the reason that Agrippa began to harass the followers of the Way. Agrippa had a ready ally in the high priest, a son of Annas whom he had appointed after first taking the high priesthood from the family of Annas for a year before restoring it to Annas' family. The family of Annas, all Sadducees who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, readily participated in Herod's persecution of the followers of the Way.

This persecution continued from the autumn of 42 CE through the spring of 44 CE at which time the apostle James or Ya'akov was betrayed into the hands of King Herod Agrippa. James was apparently taken before Agrippa where he testified to Yeshua's death, resurrection and certainty of return. Eusebius records a tradition passed on by Clement:

"In book 7 of *Outlines*, Clement adds an interesting tradition regarding James that the man who brought him into court was so moved by his testimony that he confessed that he too was a Christian."^v

Eusebius goes on to quote Clement:

So they were both taken away together, and on the way he asked James to forgive him. James looked at him for a moment and replied, "Peace be with you" and kissed him. So both were beheaded at the same time."^{vi}

Agrippa's execution of James pleased the Jewish people, particularly those who flattered and fawned over him. Agrippa, wanting to further please these people, had Peter arrested as well.

Acts 12:3-4 NKJV 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. 4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.

Peter was arrested some time during the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread and was being held until after the feast had ended. The numbers of Jews coming to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage feasts during the reign of Agrippa exploded. Based on the number of Passover lambs sacrificed, there were over six million Jews in

Jerusalem for this observance of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It appears that Agrippa wanted to bring Peter out before the people for execution as soon as the Feast ended so the public execution would discourage the followers of the Way to abandon that sect and return to a more main line sect of Judaism. However, God had other plans.

During the days that Peter was being held in prison, the disciples prayed for his release continually.

Acts 12:5-6 NKJV 5 Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church. 6 And when Herod was about to bring him out, that night Peter was sleeping, bound with two chains between two soldiers; and the guards before the door were keeping the prison.

Peter was treated as a high risk prisoner always being watched by a squad of four soldiers. Four squads of soldiers would rotate through this task for a total of sixteen soldiers devoted to making sure Peter remained in prison. Perhaps Annas had warned Agrippa about the time that all twelve of the apostles had miraculously disappeared from prison! But even this greater number of soldiers guarding Peter could not stop God.

Acts 12:7-8 NKJV 7 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me."

The words the angel spoke to Peter resonate with the instructions God gave Moses for escaping out of Egypt after that first Passover sacrifice.

Exodus 12:11 NKJV 11 'And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD'S Passover.

Peter at first thought he was having a vision. He followed along mindlessly until they were out of the prison and on the streets of the city.

Acts 12:9-11 NKJV 9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron gate that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people."

Peter probably had several choices of where to go in the city. Disciples would have been living throughout the city. He chose to go to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark. Many of the disciples had gathered there to pray for Peter.

Acts 12:12-15 NKJV 12 So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. 13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. 15 But they said to her, "You are beside yourself!" Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, "It is his angel."

This is reminiscent of Mary Magdalene bringing the news of Yeshua's resurrection to the twelve apostles who refused to believe her.

Mark 16:10-11 NKJV 10 She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept.
11 And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.

Peter continued to knock until those gathered inside opened the door. Rather than staying, Peter told them to send word to James the brother of Yeshua and the other apostles.

Acts 12:16-17 NKJV 16 Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren." And he departed and went to another place.

Peter's instructions to the disciples are reminiscent of the instructions Yeshua gave to the women at His empty tomb.

Matthew 28:10 NKJV 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me."

Herod Agrippa commanded that a search be made for Peter, but after they did not find him, Agrippa had the soldiers put to death. More important events came up distracting Agrippa from his search for Peter. He received word that Claudius had returned from a campaign in Britain. To celebrate Claudius' victory and return, Agrippa ordered a grand celebration in Caesarea inviting dignitaries from around the region.

Acts 12:21 NKJV 21 So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them.

Josephus describes the events of that day.

On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another (though not for his good), that he was a god."^{vii}

Agrippa accepted their flattery and acclamations that he was a god reminding us of his good friend Gaius Caesar who demanded to be worshiped as a god!

Acts 12:22-24 NKJV 22 And the people kept shouting, "The voice of a god and not of a man!" 23 Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. 24 But the word of God grew and multiplied.

Herod Agrippa was the last man who laid claim to the title King of Israel. He reigned for a total of seven years, three years over Philip's tetrarchy and four years over all of Israel. As a backdrop to Herod Agrippa's reign, the famine predicted by Agabus was in effect in the Roman world. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles explains:

It took place in a series of localized shortages across the Roman world. It had begun in Italy with the mismanagement of supplies under the wicked Gaius Caligula... In the fall of the same year that Claudius took office, the seventh year Sabbatical began for agriculture in the land of Israel, contributing to the shortages in Judea. By the middle of the decade, the Nile flooded heavily. Crop failures in Egypt affected supplies to the whole Roman world.^{viii}

King Agrippa's sole ambition was to be king over Israel and to use his power for his own pleasure. Although he was known in Israel as a generous benefactor and Torah observant Jew, his behavior in Rome and among the other Roman leaders in the Middle East was anything but generous and Torah observant. He spent lavishly on his own pleasures without concern for anything resembling a budget. When his popularity with the Jews had them proclaiming him as a god, judgment quickly fell. And in the background of all these excesses, there was a famine in the land.

When Yeshua the true king comes, there will not be a famine in the land. He will be truly generous and sincerely Torah observant. His care will be for His people and the glory of God the Father. And the word of God will grow and multiply.

Study Questions:

1. Both Gaius Caesar and Herod Agrippa have similarities to the coming Antichrist. In fact, many of the believers were ready to flee Jerusalem when Gaius Caesar began his persecution against the Jews. What are these similarities to the Antichrist?
2. How is the famine in the Roman world at this time a fulfilment of Amos' prophecy in Amos 8:11?
3. The timing of the events surrounding James' arrest and subsequent execution followed by Peter's arrest and miraculous escape have obvious connections with the first Passover in Egypt. What is the significance of this timing and these connections?
4. James and Peter were both arrested by Agrippa yet James was executed and Peter was miraculously released. What could be the reason for the disparate outcomes for James and Peter?
5. Although the believers were praying constantly for Peter's release, when it happened they didn't believe Roda's report of Peter's presence at the door. Does that mean those gathered to pray didn't have faith that their prayers would be heard and answered?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

© 2020 Moed Ministries International. All Rights Reserved.

ⁱ Chronicles of the Apostles. First Fruits of Zion. ©2011, 2016 D. T. Lancaster. Page 307-308

ⁱⁱ The Works of Philo. Translated by C. D. Young. *On Embassy to Gaius*, XLIII (346). ©1993 Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. Page 788.

ⁱⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sotah Folio 41a. http://www.halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_41.html#PARTb

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sotah Folio 41b. http://www.halakhah.com/sotah/sotah_41.html#PARTb

^v Eusebius. The Church History. Translation by Paul L. Maier. ©1999, 2007 Paul L. Maier. P59.

^{vi} Eusebius. The Church History. Translation by Paul L. Maier. ©1999, 2007 Paul L. Maier. P59.

^{vii} Josephus. Antiquities of the Jews, Book 19 (344-345). Translated by William Whiston. ©1987 Hendrickson Publishing, Inc. P523

^{viii} Chronicles of the Apostles. First Fruits of Zion. ©2011, 2016 D. T. Lancaster. Page 347-348