

# What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts

## What If the World is *Anti Christ*?

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**Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

*What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If The World is Anti Christ?*

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### Background Notes

**Key Scripture Text:** Acts 12:1-24

### Introduction

How many Herods were there? Our first reaction to reading Acts 12 is to say, "Not another one!" Just when the Christian church began to make great strides in fulfilling the world-wide mission of Jesus, the power structures of this world interposed their ugly heads. This is the third "Herod" in Luke's account of Jesus and his community. Certainly the followers of Jesus were accustomed to persecution in the book of *Acts*, but, in the case of the Herodian family, there is something deeply evil and profoundly sinister about the attack in this week's reading.

When the Bible speaks about *political power*, it presents worldly rulers in a dual light. *On the one hand*, God always remains the One in charge of His world: no one rules without His permission and sometimes by His direction. Kings and princes rise and fall under God's sovereign authority, whether they take the throne in Israel or weld together empires among the nations (see Romans 13). Our Old Testament reminds us of this fact with stories about king Saul, Israel's first monarch, but also about Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king responsible for the great exile and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Throughout the panorama of Biblical history, we read how "God rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever he will" (Daniel 4:17). Perhaps Daniel knew this fact more clearly from his vantage point in captivity than most prophets of his time. Still, the great Isaiah could write about the Persian king Cyrus who succeeded Daniel's captors and call him Yahweh's "anointed one" (Isaiah 45:1). The book of *Habakkuk* is one long puzzle about how God can allow foreign pagan nations to oppress His people — nations "more wicked" than wayward Israel!

*On the other hand*, there's no denying that God's people face the unjust power structures of this world. In our study of *Acts* previously we saw the Temple leadership in Jerusalem oppose the ministry of Jesus and his followers, hauling Peter before the Sanhedrin and stoning Stephen. Saul's reputation as a persecutor of the church precedes his eventual conversion and commission to proclaim the Gospel. All of this is, of course, as Jesus forewarned, "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours" (John 15:20). Or, "you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles" (Matthew 10:18; Mark 13:9; Luke 21:12). The firm but loving word of Jesus to Peter in John 21 casts its own shadow of suffering:

<sup>18</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." <sup>19</sup> (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me" (John 21:18-19).

And so, when we arrive at Acts 12, we are somewhat prepared for the gratuitous attack of Herod on the leadership of the church in Jerusalem, in particular his killing of James and his imprisonment of Peter. Yet there is more than human arbitrariness in this attack: evil is opposing good; the devil is fighting against God's good work; this is *anti-Christ* waging war on Christ himself. The figure of *anti-Christ* is, in Scripture, not reserved for some apocalyptic character in a fictional drama about the end of the world. Almost from the beginning, the adversary of God has contrived stratagems to undermine His kingdom in the world: Serpent against Adam; Cain against Abel; the Nephilim against righteous Noah; the builders of Babel's tower in

defiance of God. And the list goes on, as the reader skims the early chapters of *Genesis*. Who can miss the comparison between the Herods and Pharaoh, that pagan ruler who enslaved the descendents of Abraham and tried to kill their firstborn? In all these examples, human beings imitate the great Adversary who declared in the primeval past, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14; see also, Ezekiel 18). Perhaps we are best served in our understanding of this ages-long opposition by reading Genesis 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Genesis 3:15).

Human history chronicles the "enmity between" this Serpent and the people of God; between Satan and God; between Christ and *anti-Christ*.

To be *anti-Christ* involves two distinct, yet simultaneous crimes: 1) to place oneself *in the place of God*; 2) to act *against God*. The Greek language's use of the preposition *anti* fits both cases, referring to what "substitutes" and also to what "opposes." *Christ* is God's anointed one, His chosen one, sent into the world to achieve His purpose. He is God's own son, fully revealing the character of God and acting in God's place. Whenever Satan or his earthly helpers *replace* or *attack* God's anointed, they oppose God Himself. That is why Jesus tells such powerful parables like the Story of the Tenants in which God is depicted as the owner of a vineyard who leases out his property to human tenants who abuse the privilege, then attack His emissaries and finally kill His son (see Matthew 21:33ff; Mark 12:1ff; Luke 20:9ff). The Herods are among those tenants!

The "spirit" of *anti-Christ* remains in the world, and reaches a grand climax at the Second Coming when at last it meets defeat by the arrival of Christ in His glory (see Revelation 19-20). In his letters, John wrote: "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour...Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son ... and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already ... For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.." (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7).

Paul offers a helpful description of *anti-Christ* when he wrote to the Thessalonians:

<sup>3</sup> Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, <sup>4</sup> who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4).

Both senses of *anti* appear in this passage where "the man of lawlessness" becomes synonymous for *anti-Christ* as one who is part of "the rebellion" and who "opposes" God and "exalts himself against" God, but also, "takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God." Here we have both the sense of "against" and "in place of" God embodied in the same person.

When the Bible speaks about earthly power opposing God, it often uses the symbol of the "beast" or a ravaging, flesh-eating animal. A casual reading of Daniel 7 confirms this usage, as God gives the prophet a vision of successive world powers which come to dominate the history of Israel. In a climactic scene, symbolizing the concentration of evil, Daniel sees:

<sup>7</sup> After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. <sup>8</sup> I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things. <sup>9</sup> As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. <sup>10</sup> A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. <sup>11</sup> I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking.

And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. <sup>12</sup> As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. <sup>13</sup> I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. <sup>14</sup> And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Daniel 7:7-14; compare to Revelation 12-13).

This passage is especially germane to this week's study, for it reveals how the deadly "beast" of human power devours the earth, but how, in the end, the "son of man" (Messiah) receives power from God to end the reign of this beast and establish his own. In the divinely given interpretation of Daniel's vision of the terrifying beast, the following language is used:

<sup>21</sup> As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, <sup>22</sup> until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom ...

<sup>25</sup> He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law; and they shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time. <sup>26</sup> But the court shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end. <sup>27</sup> And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them' (Daniel 7:25-27).

Notice the expressions, "made war with the saints" and "wear out the saints" as actions of the beast against the people of God. We find similar language in Revelation 12:13-17 where "the dragon" pursues God's "woman," the church, and makes war on her offspring, "those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus..." (12:17b). The writer of *Revelation*, using language reminiscent of Daniel 7, continues his saga in chapter 13 by imaging *anti-Christ* as two "the beasts," symbolizing both political and religious power in opposition to Christ and his people.

When we arrive at Acts 12, keeping all of these important texts firmly in mind, we discover *anti-Christ* alive and well in the person of the "third" Herod to appear on the pages of Luke's two-part volume (*Luke-Acts*). We also are assured by the unfolding of the story found there that, although one of Christ's choice apostles dies at the hands of the "beast," another miraculously escapes that fate and lives to see the "beast" destroyed by God for his insolence.

Although evil pervades our world and at times takes a high toll on the people of God, we are assured that evil will not have the last word. While it is true that the "beast" keeps "coming up out of the sea," paraded on the world stage like so many Herods attacking the work of God, we also have God's promise that we will overcome them — someday. That is the overriding theme of Acts 12, as we turn to this week's readings.

## Outline

1. Herod Kills James and Imprisons Peter (12:1-5)
2. Peter Freed from Prison (12:6-19)
3. Herod Judged by God (12:20-24)

## Herod Kills James and Imprisons Peter (12:1-5)

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. <sup>2</sup> He killed James the brother of John with the sword, <sup>3</sup> and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. <sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

## Herod, Herod, Herod

Readers of the New Testament are familiar with more than one Herod. The problem is sorting them all out! Who is this notorious family? The roots of this ruling dynasty go all the way back to events we associate with the Maccabees and their triumph over the Greek kingdom of Syria led by the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Following the death of Alexander the Great, his far-flung empire got broken up into smaller units. Of importance to the little kingdom of Judah, recently returned from exile in Babylon, were two of these subdivisions: Egypt and Syria, led by the Ptolemies and the Seleucids respectively. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C.E. the Jews began to feel like a volleyball tossed back and forth between these two kingdoms, each attempting to dominate the eastern Mediterranean. Called the kingdoms of the North and South in Daniel 11, they each had designs on the land of Israel. But the Seleucids were the most ambitious, and rulers like Antiochus wanted all of their client states to thoroughly following Hellenization, adopting pagan Greek culture and abandoning their own. However, faithful leaders in Judah, like Mattathias and his sons, made an open show of their rebellion and, in the end, led by brother Judas (or Judah) threw off foreign rule and launched their own Hasmonean Kingdom of Judah<sup>1</sup> which lasted eighty years. Things were looking up for the Jews until the Romans arrived on the scene.

In 63 B.C.E. the Roman general Pompey, who had his own designs to rule the world, took control of Israel as part of his effort to fortify the Roman Empire in the east. From the more faithful adherents to the original Maccabean cause, he met resistance. The Pharisees staked out a claim to their place in Jewish history during this time, resisting such attempts by Rome.<sup>2</sup> However, living in Jerusalem was a man named Antipater who had two sons, Herod and Phasaël. He saw the failure of the old Hasmonean dynasty, the misguided zeal of certain resistance groups in Judea, and the inevitable conquest by Rome of the eastern Mediterranean, including Israel. An Idumean (Edomite) by birth, Antipater was hardly a purist when it came to Jewish national identity. But he was a pragmatist and figured out how "pay-to-play" politics worked under Roman rule. When Julius Caesar defeated Pompey and inched closer to supreme Roman rule, Antipater offered his assistance in Alexandria against Cleopatra with reciprocal benefits:

After Pompey's death (in 44 BCE) and (Julius) Caesar's triumph, Antipater -- the administrator of the Jews by order of Hyrcanus (II) -- supplied Caesar with much that he needed, when he was at war with (Cleopatra VII of) Egypt.

So later, when Caesar had ended the war and sailed for Syria, he gave (Antipater) high honors. While he returned Hyrcanus to the high-priesthood, he granted Antipater Roman citizenship and freedom from taxation everywhere. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.127, 137].

Completely disgusted with the weak leadership of the Hasmonean ruler Hyrcanus II, Antipater took his new office seriously and appointed his sons Herod and Phasaël governors of Galilee and Judea respectively. Herod proved competent beyond his teen years in suppressing revolt, and in time, after his father's untimely death (he was poisoned by his enemies), took firm control of Israel [Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.156-160 ].

## Herod the Great

(Note: See **Appendix One** at the end of these *Background Notes* for selected readings from Josephus concerning Herod the Great)

At first Herod supported Mark Anthony as Rome's next ruler after the assassination of Julius Caesar, but when the handwriting of defeat was on the wall after the famous battle of Actium (31 B.C.E.) against Octavian

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<sup>1</sup> The word "Hasmonean" is from the Hebrew *Hashmonayim* and refers to a family of Jewish priests who led a successful revolt that began in 168 BC against the Hellenized Selucid rulers of Syria. They formed a dynasty of rulers until Herod the Great became "king of the Jews" in 37 B.C.E. when Rome disbanded their rule.

<sup>2</sup> Appearing around this time was a book referred to as the *Psalms of Solomon* which championed the case of the righteous while recognizing the role of Rome in judging the failed Hasmonean rulers. Chapter 17 of that work illustrates this opinion. Further, among the Dead Sea Scrolls is the famous commentary on *Habakkuk* known as 1QpHab. In it (3:4-6:12) we also read about the fearful and cruel "Kittim=Romans."

(Augustus), Herod submissively backed the new ruler-to-be. Acknowledging Herod's pragmatic loyalty, Augustus confirmed him as "king of the Jews." To cement his relationship with the Jewish people, he had previously married Mariamne, the grand-daughter of the Hasmonean Hyrcanus II. His fidelity to Rome was visible in aggressive building projects throughout Israel and even in foreign cities. Herod built cities [Caesarea Maritima and Sebaste] to honor his new Roman patron, fortresses [Herodium and Masada] to protect the Judean frontier, and lavish palaces for himself. He also began to renovate Jewish shrines [the tombs of the patriarchs at Hebron and the Temple at Jerusalem] to glorify both the Hebrew God and himself. The Roman emperor Augustus [Octavian] in turn rewarded him by three times granting him control of non-Jewish territory: Samaria and the Gaza strip (30 B.C.E.), Batanea and Trachonitis in Syria, south of Damascus (23 B.C.E.), Iturea and the Golan, from the heights east of the Sea of Galilee north to the headwaters of the Jordan river in the Lebanese mountains (20 B.C.E.). The extent of his kingdom rivaled that of David, almost a millennium earlier. Augustus himself publicly proclaimed him "friend and ally of Caesar."

He was, however, incurably paranoid, and countenanced not the slightest suggestion of disloyalty or intrigue against himself. Jealousy and political ambition had led him to murder his beloved Mariamne (29 B.C.E.) and all her relatives except their two sons, only to later order even them executed on false charges of treason (7 B.C.E.). From his own deathbed (4 B.C.E.) he ordered the execution of his eldest son, Antipater III. But the greatest demonstration of his irrational rage, was his reaction to the attempt of religious students to rid his newly renovated temple of a golden Roman eagle and other decorations that they deemed contrary to Torah. Instead of just punishing the youthful offenders, he executed their teachers, arrested the elders of every town in his kingdom, and as his last command ordered their execution to teach Jews not to oppose him. Only the decision of his sister, Salome, to countermand this order prevented the Jewish reaction to Herod's tyranny from exploding into immediate public rebellion. Nor can we forget Matthew's account (chapter 2) of his violent "slaughter of the innocents" in reaction to the magi's visit and announcement that another "king of the Jews" had been born in "Bethlehem of Judea."<sup>3</sup>

#### **Herod's Sons, Herod Antipas in Particular<sup>4</sup>**

The death of Herod gave everyone pause, including Rome. The will Herod left was disputed and Augustus made his own adjustments based on a practical and strategic assessment of the situation in Israel. We must remember that securing the eastern Empire was essential for Rome if the aggressive tendencies of Parthians and Nabateans were to be held at bay. Not everyone in Jerusalem was pleased with the Roman occupation, and a firm hand in that capital city was essential to maintain the *Pax Romana*. When the dust settled, Herod's sons were assigned their domains as follows:

1. Herod Antipas: Galilee and Peraea
2. Archelaus: Judaea, Samaria, Idumaea
3. Philip: Iturea

Whereas Herod the Great was considered a "king," acting as a client for Rome, none of these sons were permitted that title. They were either ethnarchs or tetrarchs, but not kings. As it turned out, Archelaus proved an incompetent ruler and was eventually removed at the request of the Jews themselves, and replaced by a procurator (or governor) who ruled Judea. Eventually this office was held by the Roman Pontius Pilate (26-36 C.E.).

During the days of Jesus, Herod Antipas figures prominently as ruler of Galilee, the Lord's home province. This Herod killed John the Baptizer to appease his own wife, and he also played a part in the mocking of Jesus before his crucifixion. His recognition of Judaism was only formal. He inherited all his father's vices and like

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<sup>3</sup> Josephus remains our best source for these developments: Josephus, *Antiquities* 16.228-404; 17.3-133, 139-151, 164-211, 233, 238-249; *War* 1.19-20, 64, 203-215, 221-673; 2.5-7, 215. Also, from secular sources: Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 49.22. On-line resources include: Mahlon H. Smith, *Perspective on the World of Jesus*, 1999-2008, an American Theological Library Association Selected Religion Website, OCLC catalog no. 62046512.

<sup>4</sup> See Nikos Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (Sheffield, 1998).

his father, too, he was a great builder. He built Sepphoris in Galilee, and Tiberias on the Lake of Gennesaret. His rule (4 B.C.E.– 39 C.E.) was influenced by his wife Herodias whose daughter danced for Herod and then asked for the head of John the Baptizer on a "platter." In 37, Herodias' brother Agrippa became king of the realms of Philip. She thought that the royal title ought to be given to her husband and devised a plan to make Herod Antipas king. The emperor did not agree and exiled Herod Antipas to Lyon in Gaul.

### **A Herod of a Different Line: Agrippa I**

No love was lost between Herod Antipas and Agrippa, the brother of Herodias. He was also the grandson of Herod the Great, the man with many wives! Agrippa's father, Aristobulus, had been executed by Herod the Great after two Roman trials before Augustus, but Agrippa was allowed to live. In Rome, he received his education in companionship with the sons of the imperial family, including future emperors Claudius and Gaius (or Caligula) whose friendship led to his eventual selection as the new Jewish king.

Once chosen by Caligula as "king of the Jews"<sup>5</sup>, Agrippa initially stayed in Rome. He had a good relationship with the Roman emperor, even though Caligula was a cruel madman, who at times thought he was a god<sup>6</sup>. In 38, Caligula sent Herod Agrippa on a diplomatic mission to Alexandria. Soon afterwards, Agrippa arrived in his kingdom. One of his first acts was directed against bandits who had taken over a part of the realm. Not much is known about this period of Agrippa's reign. In 39, he assumed control over Galilee and Peraea.

In 41, Caligula — who was by now showing signs of complete insanity —and Herod Agrippa were in Rome. But the emperor was murdered, and the Jewish king played a very important role during the accession of the new emperor Claudius. Out of gratitude, Claudius added Judaea and Samaria to Herod Agrippa's realm. He was now king of all the territories that had once been ruled by Herod the Great. Jerusalem was again the capital of Palestine as a whole and received new city walls. Agrippa's entry in the city of David and Herod was a triumph.

Like his uncle (Antipas), and grandfather (Herod the Great), Agrippa was both a Hellenistic and a Jewish ruler. His building program was essentially Greek. He constructed a theater, an amphitheater, baths and porticoes in Beyrouth, a 'pagan' city. On the other hand, he continued construction on the Temple in Jerusalem, repaired several buildings, and finished an aqueduct that had been ordered by Herod the Great and continued by Pontius Pilate.

The untimely end of Agrippa (44 C.E.) receives coverage in both the New Testament (Acts 12:19b-23, in this week's readings) and in Josephus. The reader is encouraged to read the latter account in **Appendix Two** at the end of these *Background Notes*. He was the last king of the Jews, though his son Agrippa II followed him in a much diminished capacity, with the Roman procurators once more taking charge of an ever-increasingly unstable political climate in Judea.

During his life Agrippa turned his public face toward Judaism through shows of piety and apparent respect for Torah.<sup>7</sup> Even Josephus paints an exaggerated picture of Agrippa's devotion (*Antiquities*, 19.330-331), likely as part of the historian's defence of certain figures in Jewish history who were favorable to Rome. In effect, using Agrippa as an example, Josephus seemed to be saying that it was possible to be a good Jew and a good Roman

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<sup>5</sup> Recall that the Romans refused this title to the successors of Herod the Great. Agrippa resumes its use with the Emperor's approval.

<sup>6</sup> In 40, he started appearing in public dressed as various gods and demigods such as Hercules, Mercury, Venus and Apollo. He began referring to himself as a god when meeting with politicians and he was referred to as Jupiter on occasion in public documents. A sacred precinct was set apart for his worship at Miletus in the province of Asia and two temples were erected for worship of him in Rome. The Temple of Castor and Pollux on the Forum was linked directly to the Imperial residence on the Palatine and dedicated to Caligula. He would appear here on occasion and present himself as a god to the public. Caligula also had several god statue's heads removed and replaced with his own in various temples. His predecessors were worshipped after they died; Caligula asked for worship as a "living god." See Philo of Alexandria, *On the Embassy to Gaius* XI-XV; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LIX.26; LIX.28; LI.20; LIX.26-28; J. Sanford, "Did Caligula have a God complex?," *Stanford Report*, 10 September 2003; Michael Farquhar, *A Treasure of Royal Scandals*, New York, 2001p. 209; ^ a b Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LI.20.

<sup>7</sup> F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, New York, 1969, pp.258-264; Witherington, *New Testament History*, Grand Rapids, 2001.

at the same time. But outside of his kingdom — among the paganism which shaped him — he lived the Greco-Roman life. He wanted the best of both worlds, and to some extent he succeeded. Oddly the Jews loved him better than the Gentiles. Among his actions were his gratuitous attempts to suppress and destroy the Jesus movement, and to that matter we now turn.

## Herod Attacks the Church

The "Herod" referenced in 12:1 is Herod Agrippa I, the last "king of the Jews" referenced above in our study. Luke is fully accurate in calling him "Herod the king" since the empire had allowed him that title. Unlike actions of the high priest on behalf of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Agrippa's decision to seize some of the apostles had the sanction of his Roman handlers. If he judged that the Christians were a threat to his kingdom, he was, at the same time, judging that they were a threat to Rome. It was his job to keep the peace in the eastern Empire, and the controversies spawned between traditional Judaism and the Nazarene sect looked bad on the record. Ironically, with the exception of Pilate's surrender to Jerusalem's demands for the execution of Jesus, the Roman authorities had no response to the growth of the Christian movement until now. Under procurators before the restoration of kingship to Agrippa, *Acts* makes no mention of Roman oppression.

Frankly, the Christians did better under the Roman rulers than the Jewish ones prior to the war of rebellion in 66 C.E. But then, the Romans no doubt saw Christians as just another sect of Judaism, like the Pharisees or the Sadducees. On the other hand, we must remember that Agrippa was a *client king*, ruling at the pleasure of Rome and in the interest of Rome. He saw things in Jewish life that would have escaped a Roman procurator, and could take the pulse of high priestly displeasure toward the challenge posed by Christians like Peter and James toward the Temple establishment. The story of Stephen no doubt shaped his thinking, and the recent defection of Saul presented a new threat. Settling the "Christian revolt" would be a handsome feather in Agrippa's kingly cap, and Rome would thank him for preventing a wide-spread revolt.

Luke tells us that Agrippa's attacks on the church were "violent." He uses the Greek verb *kakoō* which means "to harm, injure." His intention was to persecute his victims. The expression "lay hands on" is actually the more colorful "throw hands on," reinforcing the vigorous nature of his actions. His choice of "James, the brother of John" for execution may have been a trial balloon. Like his uncle, Herod Antipas, he preferred beheading as a form of capital execution, and that is the intent of the words "put to death with the sword." This was the same fate as met by John the Baptizer under Antipas. Ever reading the political winds, Agrippa finds support among the ruling Jews for his actions, and so wastes no time seizing the "top dog," Peter. Recall that the apostles had enjoyed high approval ratings among the people in the days following Pentecost. Healings and other "signs" caused wonder and awe among those who saw and heard the message of the Gospel.

However, Luke uses the word "Jews" in 12:3 in the narrower sense also employed by John's Gospel: "the ruling Jews," that is, men like the high priest, the Sadducees and members of the more radical Pharisees — commonly designated as "the chief priests and the scribes." Thus, Herod ingratiated himself with the public leaders of Jewish piety, something he was skilled at doing (again, see above). The Greek word for "pleased" is *arestos*, which means "to make happy, to be seen as fine." In so many words, what Agrippa caused the Jewish leadership to say was, "That's *fine!*" (see Louw-Nida, 25.92), and "You'll get no argument from us if you keep doing that!"

With this feedback spinning his way, Agrippa proceeds to put Peter in prison, but defers action until after the Passover when a proper public trial could take place. Luke's handling of this material calls to mind the events surrounding the arrest, detention, trial and execution of Jesus — events happening at Passover time. In so doing, he helps the reader see how Peter was "following Jesus" in persecution and suffering. Of course, Peter will not face death at this time, as the story shortly reveals, but the circumstances parallel holy week and raise the possibility that God will do for Peter something similar to resurrection. What might that be? The suspense builds as we reach the end of 12:4.

The language "handed him over" comes from *paradidōmi* which has the connotation of "hand over authority," and suggests that the detention of Peter was entrusted to Roman guards. We find similar language used by Peter himself when preaching the Gospel in the earlier chapters of *Acts*: Jesus is "handed over" by the Jews to Pilate for crucifixion (*Acts* 3:13). In passages too numerous to cite here, the Gospel writers consistently used forms of this word to speak about Jesus being "handed over" to the Gentiles for execution. Luke's own usage of this word in his Gospel is impressive: 9:44; 18:32; 20:20; 21:12, 16; 22:4, 6, 21, 22, 48; 23:25; 24:7, 20. Note in some cases, when applied to Judas, the word means "betrayed." The idea of "handing over" carries the stigma of betrayal even in the case of a Jewish king "handing over" someone like Peter to Roman detention.<sup>8</sup>

The guard placed around Peter seems excessive: four squads (*tetradio*) of four soldiers (*stratiōtēs*) each. This may suggest guards in rotation during the watches of the night.<sup>9</sup> We gather from reading further (12:6), that Peter slept between two soldiers while two guards (see 12:10) watched the entrance. To what do we owe this extreme caution? It's hard not to hear echoes from the request of the Jewish leadership to have the tomb of Jesus guarded, even though he was already dead (*Matthew* 27:62-66). Nor could Agrippa be unaware of the incident narrated in *Acts* 5:17-21 in which the imprisoned apostles were "sprung from jail" by an angel of the Lord who sent them back into the Temple to preach! Agrippa was taking no chances, though it's hard to know how he thought about such miraculous things happening to the early Jesus followers. Did he fear that Peter's companions would try to set him free by force? What we do know is that Peter was an important prisoner for Agrippa: cut off the head and the body dies.

What do the followers of Jesus do when the anti-Christ puts their leader in prison? Luke tells us that "the church was earnestly praying to God for him" (12:5). The Greek word, *ektenōs*, means "to stretch out, pertaining to an unceasing activity, normally involving a degree of intensity and/or perseverance; without ceasing, continuously, constantly" (Louw-Nida, 68.12). In 1 Peter 4:8 the same word is applied to how we ought to love one another. A variant form of this word, *ektenēs*, appears in Luke 22:44 where it describes the intensity with which Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. We might say that the church "stretched itself" in praying for Peter. Perhaps in the minds of some, the release of Peter would have been "a stretch," knowing that Agrippa had both the power and the motivation to end Peter's life then and there.

Agrippa's deference to Passover had the appearance of piety, when, in fact, he fully intended to put Peter on trial afterwards. This is the true character of anti-Christ: he wants to be seen as religious, pious, holy and in favor with the Jewish authorities. He even gives lip service to Torah and the keeping of the holy traditions.<sup>10</sup> However, in his heart, he nurtures evil against the followers of Jesus. While the "whole world wonders after the beast" (*Revelation* 13:3; 17:7-8), he wages war against the people of God (*Revelation* 13:7). What we witness in *Acts* 12 is a client king of the Jews, serving the interests of Rome while maintaining a public persona before his fellow Jews. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing (*Matthew* 7:15). His hypocrisy is only outweighed by his cunning, not unlike Jesus' assessment of Agrippa's uncle, Antipas, as "that fox" (*Luke* 13:32). Against such evil, prayer is paramount, though to the church, the cause may have seemed beyond remedy.

### **Peter Freed from Prison (12:6-19)**

<sup>6</sup> Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. <sup>7</sup> And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. <sup>8</sup> And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." <sup>9</sup> And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup> When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one

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<sup>8</sup> According to Josephus (*Antiquities*, 19.9.1f) Agrippa had command of troops in Caesarea from two different cohorts. These were Roman auxiliaries in the service of the Jewish king.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, p. 244.

<sup>10</sup> See Bruce, *New Testament History*, p. 259.

street, and immediately the angel left him. <sup>11</sup> When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." <sup>12</sup> When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. <sup>13</sup> And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup> Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. <sup>15</sup> They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" <sup>16</sup> But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. <sup>17</sup> But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place. <sup>18</sup> Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

The phrase "The night before the trial" underscores the providence of God — acting "just in the nick of time." Luke plays up the drama of the following scene. Peter is asleep while the king of the Jews plans his trial and execution. He seems much like Jesus asleep in the boat when the storm raged around him and his apostles fought fearfully to keep their craft from capsizing (Matthew 8:24; Mark 4:38; Luke 8:23-24). Sleeping between his Roman guards, Peter symbolizes the whole church when it trusts God even in the face of anti-Christ's threats.

What follows depicts a sleepy-eyed and mostly dumbfounded Peter, requiring the Lord's angel to wake him up by poking him in the side (12:7), commanding him into action ("Quick, get up!"), and telling him to get dressed and how he should do it (12:8). Every step of Peter's liberation from prison is orchestrated by God's messenger. Peter was as good as dead, and God needed to raise him up. In fact, the language, "get up!" is identical to instances we have already read in *Acts* when the sick and the dead are raised, and even Peter himself is commanded to "rise, kill and eat", in the case of his Joppa vision. This is resurrection language, to be sure, and Luke uses it intentionally to narrate what happened to Peter that night. Especially powerful is the language, "and the chains fell off Peter's wrists", accompanied by "a light shone in the cell." Charles Wesley, our patron hymn-writer, translated those words into one stanza of a hymn which described his own spiritual liberation:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee. ["And Can It Be?", Charles Wesley, 1738]

Peter had undergone a resurrection from certain death at this early stage of his apostolic ministry. And much of what happened to Peter occurred while he was under the impression that it was all just a vision (12:9). Luke's words, "he went out and followed him," describe a somnambulant state with Peter's foggy recollection of few details and the uncertainty about what was "truly happening" (Greek: *kai ouk ēdei hoti alēthes estin to ginomenon dia tou aggelou edokei de horama blepein*, "and he did not know that truly it was something happening but through the angel he seemed to see a vision"). Such perceptions by Peter were understandable. Had he not had such a vision in Joppa? And did it not point to a reality beyond itself? He supposed the same here.

The wonderful nature of Peter's release continues, as Luke describes how Peter passed the two guards at the entrance, undetected, and then arrives at the locked gates of the city. "Peter's prison was probably the Tower of Antonia, where Paul also was [later] detained (21:34-23:30)."<sup>11</sup> The apparent ease with which this escape

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, p.246. Also, from Josephus comes a description: "Now on the north side [of the temple] was built a citadel, whose walls were square, and strong, and of extraordinary firmness. This citadel was built by the kings of the Asamonean race, who were also high priests before Herod, and they called it the Tower, in which were repositied the vestments of the high priest, which the high

unfolds, points to a profound sense of the miraculous<sup>12</sup> which is apparent at every moment. We can almost imagine shadowing Peter and his heavenly companion as they wend their way, keeping us in suspense with each footstep, hoping that no one hears or sees them, like travelers in a dream slowly making their way to freedom, pursued by some mad beast which nips at their heels.

The gate opens by itself (Greek: *hētis automatē ēnoigē autois*, "which automatically opened for them..."). We can almost hear the words of the women on the way to Jesus' tomb: "Who will roll away the stone?" In this case, the answer comes quickly: "No worry, dear Peter, the iron gates (*tēn pulēn tēn sidēran*, "the gates, the iron ones") open of themselves, much like the angel at the tomb rolled away the stone and sat on it!" Once in the city proper and down the length of one street, the angel leaves Peter alone. "Have you seen enough, Peter?" seems to be the implication. Accustomed to visions, Peter comes to himself (12:11), and realizes that what happened to him was no vision. We pause here to reflect that people in Peter's time had no difficulty distinguishing visions from reality. It has been often alleged that when the apostles "saw" the risen Jesus, they were simply mistaking a vision or memory of their dead friend for his reality, precisely because "people back then" just couldn't keep such experiences of the world carefully separated in their minds.<sup>13</sup> Listen to Peter's own self-reflection: "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting" (12:11) That is, "I'm sure what I saw was not a vision, but reality!"

The real dealer in deception and illusion was not the angel of the Lord, but Herod. He was the master of double-dealing and two-faced piety, showing the Jewish leadership his better side while keeping his paganism for his Roman handlers. He was the devil, "transformed into an angel of light" (see 2 Corinthians 11:14), while the true angel of the Lord operated in the true light which flooded Peter's prison and set him free.

"Now I know..." (Greek: *nun oida alēthōs*, "Now I know truly..."). Standing at the end of a street he barely remembered walking, absent the chains which bound him to his guards, past the sentries guarding the entrance, through the locked gates, Peter stands firmly on Jerusalem soil. Where to now, Peter? Good question! Peter acknowledges that he has been in "Herod's clutches" and that the "expectations" of the Jewish leadership were for his trial and death. But, according to 12:12, Peter was in firm grasp of new information, conferred on him by his experience with the angel of the Lord. Luke uses the Greek verb form *sunoraō* to explain his present state of knowledge. The closest English meaning is "to learn something" (Louw-Nida, 27.5). Peter learned God's will that night: God did not intend for Peter to die *yet*. Assuming these events transpired near the end of Agrippa's rule, the timeframe was likely 43-44 C.E., and tradition placed the martyrdom of Peter close to 65 C.E., some twenty years hence. Peter no doubt recalled the words of Jesus in John 21:18-19:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." <sup>19</sup> (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

In this case, Peter had been led by the hand of the angel, but not to his death. He had followed the leading of the angel, however, and Peter needed to sort out his immediate future.

The next center of interest for Luke is at "the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark..." (12:12). Scholars suggest that, from the information supplied throughout this account, this house was likely a meeting-place for the church in Jerusalem. F.F. Bruce writes:

If we put this conjecture alongside the usual interpretation of Mk. 14:51, we have an attractive and not improbable picture of Mark's first appearance in the NT narrative. His subsequent history may be gathered from 12:25; 13:5-

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priest only put on at the time when he was to offer sacrifice. But for the tower itself, when Herod the king of the Jews had fortified it more firmly than before, in order to secure and guard the temple, he gratified Antonius, who was his friend, and the Roman ruler, and then gave it the name of the Tower of Antonia" [*Antiquities*, 15.8.5 and 15.11.4]. Further elaboration appears in *Antiquities* 18.4.3, *War* 1.21.1 and 5.5.8.

<sup>12</sup> I.H. Marshall, p. 209.

<sup>13</sup> N.T. Wright, *Acts*, p. 187-188. Wright makes a fine case here criticizing so-called Enlightenment thinking about matters of fantasy and reality.

13; 15:37ff; Colossians 4:10 with Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13. According to later writers, he acted as Peter's interpreter in Rome and reproduced his preaching in the Second Gospel [*Mark*], and afterwards went to Egypt and founded the church in Alexandria (cf. the traditions of Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and others preserved in Eusebius. *HE* ii.15f; iii.39; v.8; vi.14). He is one of many Jews in *Acts* who have a Gentile as well as a Jewish name. He may well have been Luke's informant for this and other Jerusalem narratives. B. Weiss, F. Blass and others have supposed that Mark wrote a continuation of his Gospel, which was used by Luke as a source for the early history of the Jerusalem church (cf. p. 22). Blass argues that this continuation must have been written in Aramaic (*PG*, pp. 141, 193), as indeed his Gospel seems to him originally to have been.<sup>14</sup>

Mary's role in all this is noteworthy. Women, especially widows, often took active leadership in the early church, and Mary, mother of John Mark, has that sort of reputation here. Hosting a house church in Jerusalem during those dangerous times was courageous. Peter, aware of this meeting place, arrives at the outer entrance and knocks. From the description of various parts of this house ("outer entrance" from the Greek *pulē*, as term applied to house doors, gates, including large ones), we are led to believe that it was large and able to accommodate a substantial Christian community, characterized in 12:12b as "many people" (Greek: *hikanoi* from *hikanos*, Luke's favorite term for a sizable number, "respectable number").

The arrangement of the door/gate offered security for the house, inasmuch as Peter finds it locked and requiring admission from those on the inside. Such "locked doors" appear in the story of the apostles who gathered after the death of Jesus, as they still wondered about reports of his resurrection: "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you'" (John 20:19). In light of Herod's recent execution of James, such precautions would be expected, as those who gathered prayed.

It's hard to miss the humor in what follows, and scholars across the spectrum of interpretation have made considerable mention of the comedic elements in Luke's telling of the story. Something of this humor lurked within the release of Peter, as we witnessed him half-asleep being poked and dressed by the angel on his way out of prison and into the city. Once more, Luke tells his story, this time, of how Peter knocks at the door, Rhoda hears his voice, recognizes it, but then forgets to unlock it, leaving him standing outside, while she runs with joyous outbursts to tell the praying church, "Peter is at the door!" As readers, we want to call after her, "Hey, Rhoda, you forgot to let him in!" (12:13-14).

Rhoda then gets cast in a role not unlike that of the women who found the tomb of Jesus empty on Easter morning. Luke's account says that what the women told the apostles "seemed to them like idle tales" (Luke 24:11; the Greek says *lēros*, "silly talk, nonsense, trumpery, trifles, humbug"). Similarly, we find a woman, Rhoda, conscientiously, though a bit absent-mindedly, telling the believers in the house that "Peter is at the door!" and being told, "You're out of your mind," by those inside. The Greek expression here is but one word: *mainē*, from *mainomai* and looks a great deal like our "maniac"! It was the common classical word for "madness" sometimes attributable to intoxication or rage. Rhoda's insistence (Greek: *diischurizomai*, used in the imperfect, denoting continuing action in the past) finally rings a concession from her critics that, yes, she did hear or see something, but that it must be Peter's "angel."

What is this "angel"? N.T. Wright offers a helpful explanation:

Some people think they [the people inside the house] are referring to Peter's guardian angel, a not uncommon idea; but there is no evidence that people in those days thought guardian angels would imitate the voices of their clients. Rather, I suggest that the gathered church suppose that Peter has been killed in the prison, and that his 'angel' is visiting them. People in the first century knew just as well as we do that sometimes, after someone we know and love dearly has died (and whether or not we know that their life was even in danger, let alone that they have in fact died), we can experience a vivid sense of them being briefly with us, speaking to us, cheering us up, smiling at us — and then they are gone. Those who believe, as the Pharisees believed, and as the early church

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, p. 247.

believed, in the ultimate resurrection of the dead, must also believe that the dead person is still 'alive' in some sense, though not now bodily, between bodily death and bodily resurrection. ...two of the regular available ways of describing this intermediate state were 'angel' and 'spirit'; and the group in Mary's house opted for the former.<sup>15</sup>

From the church's response to Rhoda, they plainly believe that Peter is dead, and that Herod's execution has taken place near sunrise on the day he proposed. But they are mistaken, and Luke dramatically turns the lens once more on Peter: "But Peter kept on knocking..." (12:16). That statement could be a sermon all to itself! When faith fails some, others "keep on knocking." When it looks like death has claimed its victim, others "keep on knocking." When the faithful witness, like Rhoda, is so excited she forgets to unlock the door, Peter "keeps on knocking." Against the odds and the likelihood that Herod's will could be successfully opposed, the early church must "keep on knocking." And so must we. Anti-Christ must not have the last word. At the cross, evil and death came knocking and for a few brief hours it appeared that the human race could not turn them away, as the son of God cried, "It is finished!" But the one who lay in the tomb "kept on knocking," until the Spirit of God raised him from the dead and overturned all preconceptions about what happens to people when they die.

At the beginning of the *Revelation*, a series of church profiles offers us a portrait of the early church in its seven-fold aspect (chapters 2-3). At the end of this series, we get the glimpse of a single figure, that of Christ himself, "standing at the door and knocking," seeking admission to any who will open the door. Ironically, he stands outside at the door of his own church, where the lukewarm affection of his followers have effectively kept him outside. Though Luke likely knew nothing of the *Revelation*, perhaps the writer of *Revelation* knew the story of Rhoda and Peter, and of the church locked up inside, unable to grasp that Peter had escaped the powerful grasp of Herod Agrippa. After all, who can escape anti-Christ? Later in his book, the writer portrays the dragon in pursuit of God's people, throwing after them a flood of persecution and death. "But the earth helped the woman," he further explains, "and swallows up the flood" (see Revelation 12:15ff). The dragon is the earthly embodiment of Satan's own kingdom project and takes shape as the beastly *anti-Christ* in chapter 13. Agrippa would not be the last anti-Christ faced by the Christian church in its history. Yet, as the faithful people of God persisted in their faith that the resurrected Jesus is their salvation, this flood yields to hope and life eternal.

Once the door swings open, Peter is met by "astonishment." The Greek word Luke uses is *existēmi*, a word near and dear to the writer throughout the book of *Acts*, and usually occurs in contexts where God has done something remarkable and the people know that it has been His work (see Acts 2:7, 12; 8:9, 11, 13; 9:21; 10:45; and here). The familiar pattern of God doing something remarkable and then having his apostles explain the event appears once more. Peter proceeds to do just that, informing the church in Mary's house "how the Lord had brought him out of prison" (12:17a). The Greek word for "how" (*pōs*) emphasizes the detailed methods which God used. Peter likely reviewed every particular: from the angel's first instructions while the apostle was barely awake to the moment when at the end of the street, the angel vanished and left him alone. The more specific Peter became, the more credible was his testimony. A nearly verbatim parallel appears in Exodus 18:1 where Moses tells his long-absent father-in-law about the exodus from Egypt:

Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.

Though anti-Christ Pharaoh had enslaved Israel, yet Yahweh brought them out of Egypt. In a similar way, though anti-Christ Herod tried to suppress the church by killing James and imprisoning Peter, God performed a new exodus on behalf of his apostle.

Of equal importance to Peter is getting word to "James and the brothers about this." Obviously this "James" is not the one Herod just beheaded, but rather a man known in church history as "James the Just," the brother of Jesus. Shortly after this incident, this James wrote the New Testament letter which bears his name. The way Luke refers to "James and the brothers" suggests that James the Just assumed a special leadership role within

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<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Acts*, p. 188. Also, J.P. Polhill, *Acts*, p.282; J.H. Moulton, *Journal of Theological Studies*, iii (1902), p. 516f.

the Jerusalem community, even as Peter seems to slip into the shadows until he returns to the first church council in Acts 15 some years later. Peter probably sensed, through the experience with Herod Agrippa, that, like the infant Jesus in Matthew 2 under threat from Herod the Great, he needed to withdraw, in the words of 12:17, "for another place." The angel's arrival and quick-witted deliverance of Peter was a sign of things to come, and Peter got the message. Perhaps he is also signaling a warning to James and the brothers so that they can make a reasonable interim decision about their own visibility in Jerusalem.

Bauckham has credibly argued that the death of James of Zebedee and the temporary jailing of Peter, who faced the same fate, led to the dispersal of the other apostles who still lived in Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> Into this power vacuum stepped James, the brother of Jesus, who had been with the other apostles in the upper room (Acts 1:14). Paul confirms the important role of James in Galatians 1-2. Jerusalem Christians constituted the "mother church" at the beginning of the Jesus movement, even after the persecutions following Saul, and then under Herod Agrippa. In Galatians 2:9, James is called one of the "pillars," and emissaries from the Jerusalem church are likewise referred to as "men from James." Josephus is helpful filling in some details about James the Just. In his *Antiquities* (20.197-200), he describes how James was finally killed by the high priest Ananus.

Much has been made of the phrase "for another place," in connection with Peter's departure from Jerusalem. The common claim is that he went to Rome at this time where he eventually became bishop.<sup>17</sup> However, Peter's whereabouts didn't take him far away, since he reappears at the Jerusalem council in 49 C.E. (Acts 15), and may well have been meeting Paul in Antioch (Galatians 2:11) around 46 C.E. It is my view that Peter and the other apostles avoided public appearances in Jerusalem *until the death* of Herod Agrippa. If Luke is offering a parallel typology with the life of Jesus, this fits the pattern of Jesus in Egypt *until the death* of Herod the Great when the holy family takes up its residence in Galilee (see Matthew 2:13-23). In that connection, an angel warned Joseph in a dream, in much the same way as the angel led Peter to safety.

The aftermath of Peter's mysterious disappearance from prison finds Herod and his soldiers distressed and angry. Sixteen guards are executed at Agrippa's command (12:19). What did their cross-examination (12:19b) reveal? We are not told, but any story they might relate would certainly infuriate Agrippa whose master plan to cut off the head of the Jesus movement failed at its inception. Executing inattentive guards was common Roman practice<sup>18</sup>, and a similar peril faced the guards at the tomb of Jesus in Matthew 28:12-15 whose lives were spared by the intervention of the Temple authorities with the Roman commander. Apparently Peter's guards were not so fortunate.

Herod's sudden departure from Jerusalem takes him completely out of the narrower Judea and places him where the seat of Roman rule over Israel long resided: Caesarea, ironically the location of the first Gentile conversions and where Peter visited some time before. Nor does his peevish withdrawal remove him from the difficulties of ruling Judea, since Caesarea was, after all, the Roman capital of the province. Luke seems to be telling his reader that Agrippa wanted to be far away from the Jerusalem leadership, perhaps in shame over his failure to fulfill their "pleasure" in ending the Nazarene movement.

### **Herod Judged by God (12:20-24)**

<sup>20</sup> Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. <sup>21</sup> On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. <sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> R. Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church," *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, Grand Rapids, 1995, p. 440.

<sup>17</sup> J. Wenham, "Did Peter Go to Rome in 42 AD," *Tyndale Bulletin* 12, 1972, pp.94-102. Also, William A. Jurgens, in his three-volume set *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, a masterly compendium that cites at length everything from the *Didache* to John Damascene, includes thirty references to this question. His conclusions favor a Rome departure. David John Albert, in his Master's thesis for Ambassador College, 1973, "Peter in Rome?" arrives at a different conclusion, examining the same evidence. William Ramsay in his *The Church in the Roman Empire*, similarly doubts the evidence for Peter in Rome and suggests reasons why such a tradition might have gained traction (pp. 283-284).

<sup>18</sup> The later *Code of Justinian* 9.4.4. Also, Bruce, p. 249 and Witherington, p. 389, note 107.

And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!"<sup>23</sup> Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.<sup>24</sup> But the word of God increased and multiplied.<sup>25</sup> And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

[Note: the readers are encouraged to examine once again **Appendix Two** at the end of these *Background Notes* which contains a lengthy quotation from Josephus about the death of Agrippa I.]

The cities of Tyre and Sidon have a long and venerable history as Phoenician communities along the Mediterranean coast.<sup>19</sup> Rome gave free city status to them, but they looked to Herod's realm for commerce. If a squabble erupted, it was in their best interest to mend fences with Agrippa. We don't know exactly why Herod was miffed. We do know that his famous quarrel with Herod Antipas took place in Tyre before Agrippa became king (early 30's C.E.). As to what provoked the current conflict, we don't know. External sources offer us no help, but Luke makes clear in 12:20 that the supply of food from Agrippa's realm was vital to his these two trading partners. The fact that they brokered a truce through the otherwise unknown Blastus, "trusted servant of the king," in order to "ask for *peace*," does suggest a serious disagreement. If we are seeing Luke's penchant for Old Testament parallels at work once more, we can hardly miss the connection between the role of Egypt as a "source of food supply" and the similar importance Herod's kingdom to Tyre and Sidon. Clearly, Herod Agrippa had already appeared as an "Egypt-like" figure in Luke's narratives.

If "flattery will get you anything," the coastal cities must have thought Agrippa a good candidate. Appearing in his expected role as robed monarch, he addressed his subjects. It didn't matter what he said. He might have been berating them for their insolence or discussing his indigestion. At some point during or after his speech, the assembly shouts words which will prove fatal to the king: "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." The Greek is instructive and concise enough to chant: *theou phonē ouk anthrōpou*, "of a god a voice, not of man." And chant it they probably did, to his own personal satisfaction.

For a Jewish king to hear such words and not immediately silence the blasphemy they represented was the height of personal folly. Here is a man allowing himself to be treated as God in his kingly role. Even David and Solomon at the height of their kingly glory, at most accepted their role as "son of God" (see Psalm 2; 2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13). Perhaps it was the decidedly pagan sound of the words "a god" which sealed Agrippa's fate. God came in covenantal judgment on this man who claimed to be Israel's king but allowed such arrogant honor be given him.

Here is the anti-Christ in typological form: he who sits on the throne accepting accolades as God (see *Introduction* above on 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). No sooner does he allow this sacrilege, than "an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." Such an outcome is no surprise to the reader of *Acts*. Throughout Luke's narrative he cited speeches from the church's leaders to the effect that "God will judge the world" (3:21; 10:42; 17:31; 24:25), and presumably that judgment applies to grandiose kings like Agrippa who allowed their rule of "all Israel" to become a selfish claim to worldly power.

The Jewish historian Josephus knew about the death of Agrippa and tells his own version of what happened that day. In vivid tones, Herod puts on his silver-woven robes which reflect brilliantly the light of the morning sun. The net visual effect, says Josephus, is that he appeared to be shining and giving off auras of some divine being. No sooner does he accept the praise of the audience than he sees an owl appearing as an ill-omen and feels a pain in his belly<sup>20</sup>. He is dead within five days, having ruled seven years and died at fifty-four in year 44 C.E.

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<sup>19</sup> Wallace B. Fleming, *The History of Tyre*, in Columbia University Oriental Studies, New York, 1915, pp. 71ff.

<sup>20</sup> Dunn notes (p. 167) that the language Luke uses to describe Agrippa's symptoms read much like those of the Syrian tyrant Antiochus who oppressed Israel in the 200's B.C.E. and who provoked the Maccabean revolt (see 2 Maccabees 9:9). Did Luke intend the reader to make the connection? Was Agrippa seen in early Christian eyes as another Antiochus who defiled the people of Israel? If so, we have yet one more anti-Christ correlation. The affliction itself might have been either "appendicitis leading to peritonitis" or

According to the historian, he died deep in debt and the kingdom passed finally under Roman rule. To him, the words of Ezekiel 28:2, 9 apply: he said he was a god but he was only a man, the same spiritual outrage as committed by the king of Tyre in that passage and attributed to Satan himself in his rebellion against God.

In his commentary on *Acts*, Robert W. Wall notes that the role of the angel in striking down Agrippa makes him look a great deal like Pharaoh and the plagues, especially the "death angel" against the firstborn of Egypt (Exodus 12:12, 23, 29), which resulted in the Exodus.<sup>21</sup> Earlier, Peter had experienced his own exodus from prison, delivered by the angel of the Lord. The contrast between Agrippa's fate and that of Peter is stark.

When Luke summarizes the present section, he does so with the familiar words, "But the word of God continued to increase and spread" (12:24), unlike Agrippa's kingdom which collapsed into Roman hands at his untimely death. Anti-Christ cannot forever sustain his rule nor will his kingdom endure, as Luther so aptly put it in his hymn, "His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him." Luke tells us how productive that "little word" was in the case of the early Christians.

### Closing Comments

"Who is the anti-Christ?" This tantalizing question has spawned a host of speculations, especially among Christians in America. In 1995, Robert Fuller, professor of religious studies at Bradley University, wrote a book titled *Naming the Antichrist*, in which he offers a history of what he terms "an American obsession." His research and argument challenges Evangelical Christians to take a cautious approach to this provocative tendency. Whether we reference Hollywood's *Omen* series or the more serious attempts of Hal Lindsey and his younger proponents, the pitfalls are numerous: to become fixated on answering the question about *the* anti-Christ, while missing the many anti-Christian and anti-human dimensions of human life found all around us.

It could be said with confidence that the people of God have faced *many anti-Christ*s throughout its history. Had we put the question to German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his reply would not have been speculation but realization: Hitler was behaving in ways that embodied the anti-Christ spirit in Germany and Europe. Eventually, Bonhoeffer would challenge Hitler's use of the term *Fuhrer*, "Leader," and argued that it belonged to Christ alone and not to any man. In a radio speech on February 1, 1933, he warned against the confusion of *Fuhrer* and Messiah. If the *Fuhrer* allows himself to become the idol of his followers, "then the picture of the *Fuhrer* slides into that of corruptor, then he acts criminally against the led as well as against himself. Bonhoeffer was one of the first to see the incompatibility of Christianity and Nazi totalitarian presumption and racial dogma."<sup>22</sup>

Today, the followers of Jesus face similar challenges, and while their task is not to "name the anti-Christ" as an intellectual exercise or out of sheer curiosity about the future, they are still called by reason of their faith in Jesus as Christ and Lord to speak truth to power. The forces of Herod Antipas rage around us, and their social pressures numb our hearts and quench the Spirit. Like James, some may fall beneath the executioner's sword, while others, like Peter, may sit in dungeons, dark and cold, awaiting the light in their cells and the clanking of liberated chains at their sides. It falls to us, like the church in Mary's house, to pray for the persecuted church around the world, and heed the call to petition heaven on behalf of the martyrs whose voices still cry from the altar, "How long? (Revelation 6:10). But it also falls to us to persistently proclaim the word, even if judiciously, like Peter, we must do it "in another place."

Anti-Christ, like Herod Agrippa, will one day cease to trouble the kingdoms of this world. The lock on the bottomless pit will latch for the last time, and never again will the foes of the enemy surround the "camp of the

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a "cyst produced by a tapeworm" (see I.H. Marshall, p.213). Bruce (p. 250) notes that "this kind of death is frequently mentioned by ancient writers, especially as having been endured by people who were considered to have richly deserved it." He offers in support of this the following texts: Acts 1:18; 2 Maccabees 9:5ff; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 7.6.5.

<sup>21</sup> Wall, *Acts in The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X, pp. 181-182.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Fritz Richard Stern, *Dreams and Delusions*, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 163.

saints" (Revelation 20:9-10). Nothing will again defile all of God's holy mountain (Isaiah 11:9). The beasts of wanton power will cease to prowl God's good earth. For such a day, the church prays in hope, even as it continues to work with courage and grace, affirming the word of John the Apostle, "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Glory to God! Amen.

#### **Appendix One: Herod the Great's "Reign of Terror" (Compilation of passages from Josephus)**

##### **Roman Senate names Herod 'King of Jews'**

[In 40 BCE Octavian Caesar] convened the (Roman) Senate. To it Messala, along with Atratinus, presented Herod, detailing both the good services of his father (Antipater) and (Herod's) own support for the Romans... And since the Senate was moved by these things, when (Marc) Antony came up and said that Herod should be king to help carry on the war with Parthia, all concurred. [*War* 1.284 ]

##### **Herod crushes Opposition in Galilee [38 BCE]**

(During the winter of 38-39 BCE) while snow fell from God, (Herod) came to Sepphoris (in Galilee). And as the guards of Antigonos (his opponent) had left, he was unopposed for their provisions. Then, planning to end the evil deeds of some bandits who were dwelling in caves, from (Sepphoris) he sent a cavalry troop and three infantry companies out against them. These (caves) were very close to a village named Arbela [= khirbet Irbid, between Capernaum and Tiberias]. And in forty days he arrived in full force... And he rallied all of Galilee, except those in the caves... Now the caves were in extremely rugged hills. They had entrances in the middle of cliffs with sharp rocks around them. The bandits hid out in these places with their whole households. But the king (Herod) had crates built and he let these down on them, hanging by iron chains from a machine on top of the mount.... Now the crates were full of soldiers holding big hooks with which they were going to kill the bandits who stood against them, by dragging them out and pulling them down .. So when these things happened, the caves were quiet. And leaving (his friend) Ptolemy as general in those parts, the king went into Samaria... But those who had previously troubled Galilee attacked Ptolemy and killed him... But Herod came back and punished them. For he captured some of the rebels. And he besieged and killed those who sought refuge in fortified positions. And he tore down their fortifications, thus ending the rebellion. And he also penalized the cities of Galilee 100 talents. [*Antiquities* 14.414-433 ]

##### **Herodians slaughter Opponents in Judea**

After this (in 37 BCE) the Galileans rebelled against those in power in their territory and drowned those who minded Herod in the Lake [= Sea of Galilee]. Much of Judea also revolted ... And right away every place was filled with murders. On the one hand, the Romans were enraged by frustration in their siege (of Jerusalem). And, on the other, the Jews around Herod were eager to have no opponent left. And whole masses were slaughtered: in the alleys, crowded in their houses, and even taking refuge in the temple. There was no mercy for either young or old. Nor were the weakest women spared. Rather, none controlled his hand, even when the king [Herod] circulated the order to stop. But like madmen they took vengeance on all ages. [*Antiquities* 14.450, 479-480]

##### **Herod's Tactics to pacify Jews**

Then (about 20 BCE Herod) also excused those in his kingdom from a third of their taxes---allegedly to recover from the crop-failure, but also to regain those who harbored resentment. For they were bitter about the enactment of those practices which relaxed their religion and threw aside the traditions. And there were also arguments from all who were ever provoked or upset. But (Herod) also paid much attention to such a situation, taking away their opportunities and ordering them to their labors, whatever happened. And no congregating was allowed to those around the city, nor was wandering or dwelling in community. But everything was watched... Thus, on the one hand, by every method he completely suppressed those who were so bold as not to go along with his projects. On the other, he asked the people to submit to swearing loyalty and compelled them under oath to declare their good will to him, or at least to support his rule. Out of good treatment and fear, therefore,

the crowds yielded to what he wanted. But those who summoned courage and made trouble for him he submitted to every method of torture. Now he even tried to persuade Pollion [= Abtalion] the Pharisee, as well as Samaias [= Shemaiah] and the bulk of their associates to take the oath. But they would not concur. Yet, by gaining respect through Pollion, (the Pharisees) were not punished like those who expressed dissent. And those who were called Essenes by us were also excused from this obligation. [*Antiquities* 15.365-371 ]

### **Herod enlarges the Temple**

And so then, in the eighteenth year of Herod's reign (20 BCE),...he threw himself to an uncommon task: to reconstruct the temple of God by his own means, greatly increasing its precincts and raising it to a more worthy height. He planned this as the most significant of all his deeds, as it was, and to act as his eternal memorial... [*Antiquities* 15.380]

### **Custody of High Priest's Robes**

Now a well-fortified and exceedingly strong citadel was built at right angle to the north side (of the temple). The kings and high-priests of the Hasmonean family had erected this before the time of Herod and called it "Bira" [= "fortress"]. Here they deposited the ceremonial robe which the high priest wore only when he had to offer sacrifice. King Herod kept it under guard there. After his death it was subject to the Romans, until the time of Tiberius Caesar (in 36 CE)... But before this it was under the seal of the high-priest and treasurers. And one day before the feast the treasurers would go up to the Romans and, after examining their own seal, would take the robe. Then, after the feast was over, they would return to this place and put it back, after showing the chief of the guard the corresponding seal. [*Antiquities* 15.403-404, 408]

### **Attempt to Purge Herod's Temple [4 BCE]**

The most eloquent and unequalled interpreters of the patriarchal laws [= Torah] were Judah ben Sariphai and Matthias ben Margaloth, men especially endeared to the people through educating the youth. For all who preoccupied themselves with virtue were with them day after day. (In 4 BCE) when they heard the king's illness was beyond cure, these men stirred up the youth against whatever works the king had built contrary to the patriarchal Torah. To tear these down, (they said), would be taken as acts of piety, stemming from the laws. For indeed, all these other things had happened to (king Herod)...---even this illness---because he dared to go against what the Torah specified.... Now with such words they stirred up the young men. And a report reached them corroborating these sages by indicating that the king had died. So, in broad daylight, in sight of the crowds gathered in the temple, they went up and pulled down the (imperial) eagle and cut it up with axes. Now the king's officer assumed with great insight---for the deed was reported to him---that if this was done, they would go on to worse things. So, bringing a large enough force, he encountered the crowd of those who were trying to take the accursed thing down... He captured no less than forty of the young men who dared to stay while the rest of the crowd fled as they approached. And the instigators of their daring, Judah and Matthias, who deemed it disgraceful to yield him space to enter he also led to the king. And the king had them bound and sent to Jericho. Then he summoned those in charge of the Jews.. And Herod deposed Matthias from the high-priesthood. And he had the other Matthias, who stirred up the faction, burnt alive along with some of his disciples. And on this night there was a lunar eclipse. [*Antiquities* 17.149-157, 165]

### **Herod's Death [4 BCE]**

By (Herod's) edict, the noteworthy Jewish men of all the nation were made to come to him [at Jericho] from wherever (they were). Now there were many, as the whole nation was summoned. And all heeded the edict, for death was waiting those who did not respond to the letters. The king was mad at all alike, the innocent as well as those evidently guilty. So, confining them all in the hippodrome, he sent for his sister Salome and her husband Alexas... For he was not ignorant of the thinking of the Jews, how they wanted and would rejoice at his death. For even while he lived there was pressure to revolt and insult his projects. So, (Herod ordered Salome and Alexas), when they saw that he had lost his life, they were to station in the hippodrome soldiers who did not yet know of his death and command them to kill the prisoners. And if they did away with them in this manner,

they would not ruin his pleasure in two ways: by confirming those things which he communicated to them when he was about to die and by honoring him with a noteworthy mourning. Having done these things, Herod died five days after he killed his (oldest) son, Antipater. He was king for thirty-four years after he imprisoned Antigonus but thirty-seven after he was appointed by the Romans. He was a man cruel to all alike: angry with his inferiors and haughty to the righteous. But before the king's death was found out, Salome and Alexas sent back to their homes those who had been summoned to the hippodrome. [*Antiquities* 17.174-178, 191-193]

#### **Appendix Two: Josephus' Account of the Strange Death of Herod Agrippa I**

Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea [...] There he exhibited shows in honor of the emperor [...] On the second day of the festival, Herod put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a truly wonderful contexture, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment was illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it. It shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him. At that moment, his flatterers cried out [...] that he was a god; and they added, 'Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.'

Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and he fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, 'I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots, as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner.'

After he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumor went abroad that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign. [*Antiquities* 19.343-350].

**Digger Deeper:** *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If the World is Anti Christ?*  
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If the World is Anti Christ?*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. The basis for this week's study is Acts 12:1-24. Using the following section references, construct an outline for this passage: 12:1-5; 12:6-19; 12:20-24. What single theme seems to connect all the sections?
2. The Herod mentioned in 12:1 is Herod Agrippa I, the last Jewish ruler with the title "king of the Jews" who was recognized by the Roman Empire. What problems might a Jewish king face representing the interests of a Gentile world power like Rome? What compromises would he likely make?
3. What did Herod do in 12:1-5, and how did he do it? What about his actions seems familiar when compared to earlier events in the life of Jesus and the apostles? What might Luke be intending by stressing this similarity?
4. What impact might Herod's killing of the Apostle James have had on the original Twelve? On the church as a whole? Why do you think Herod took such precautions in guarding Peter after his arrest (see also Acts 5:17-21)? (Compare with the precautions sought after Jesus was crucified in Matthew 27:62-66).
5. Luke describes Peter's mysterious release in 12:6-19. If you were casting this as a dramatic scene, how would you write the script? Include the characters, the sequence of events, the scenery and the actual dialogue. Why is the angel so detailed in his instructions to Peter?
6. Under what misimpression did Peter initially operate before he finally stood alone on the street in Jerusalem? What fresh realization did he have once he "came to himself" (12:11)? How might his miraculous release from prison seemed like a "resurrection from the dead"? Like the Exodus?
7. Do you think Peter sensed that his deliverance from prison was a sign from God that he was suppose to make some major life adjustments? What change might Peter have thought God wanted him to make?
8. To whose house does Peter go and why? What special role does Mary, John Mark's mother, seem to play in the life of the Jerusalem church? Is this surprising, considering the culture? What role did women play in Jesus' ministry?
9. What else do we know about John Mark from the New Testament (see Acts 12:25; 13:5-13; 15:37ff; Colossians 4:10 with Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13)?
10. How does *humor* shape Luke's telling of the story of Rhoda, Peter and the Jerusalem believers?
11. Compare the way people doubt Rhoda's report that "Peter is at the door" with the way that the original disciples questioned the women who reported Jesus' resurrection (compare Luke 24:11 with Acts 12:15).
12. What do you make of Peter's words to the Jerusalem church (12:17)? Explain why he wants this message sent to "James and the brothers." What does Luke mean by telling us that Peter "went to another place"? How might Peter's entire experience affected this decision? Did he remain away from Jerusalem permanently (see Acts 15 and Galatians 2:9-11)?
13. Is there additional humor in the account of Herod's finding that Peter disappeared from the prison? How does Luke spin that part of the story?
14. As you read 12:20-24, what personal impression does Herod make? How do his subjects treat him? What serious sin does he commit? How does God deal with him? Based on the outcome of Herod's life after his violence against the church, what major message does Luke communicate in Acts 12?
15. As Herod *falls*, what happens to the Christian church in 12:24?
16. In what way is Herod Agrippa I an "anti-Christ" figure? Read the following additional passages as you think about your answer: 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4; Daniel 7:7-14; 7:25-27; Revelation 12:13-17; 13).
17. How should we view such anti-Christ figures in light of this week's story? Have there been many such persons throughout history? In recent history?