

Herod Agrippa I: A Zealous King

Is there no end to the Herods? Here we are studying the third ruler in the Herodian dynasty. Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herod Antipas, appears only in Acts 12 in the Bible. But this Herod is different from his royal relatives in that he is the religious king. The Jewish historian of that time, Josephus, describes him: “He loved to live



Michael K. Olmsted

continuously in Jerusalem, and was exactly careful in the observance of the (Jewish) laws of his country. He therefore kept himself entirely pure; nor did any day pass over his head without its appointed sacrifice” (Clinton Arnold, “Acts,” Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, 2002). Given the despicable Roman overlords and the gross immorality of the other Herods, this man was the most religious leader Jerusalem had known in generations.

The divide between religious zeal and faith in God can be as different as day and night, to use an over worn phrase. The Jewish leadership in Jerusalem despised the Gentile Roman overlords as an evil affront to God, and they hated any Jews who “betrayed the faith” to follow the crucified Christ. But when your religious distinctives and financial security depend on the support of a foreign occupying force the obvious choice is to go along with the status quo, collaborate to protect what is yours, and wait for the right opportunity. So there was a convenient peace. Remember, the Jewish power brokers of Jerusalem worked it so the Roman thugs would kill the bothersome Jesus for them!

Both sides benefited. Herod Agrippa I was descended from the Hasmonean line, the son and grandson of collaborating rulers. He grew up in Rome as a friend of the Roman emperors, Caligula and Claudius, and was appointed ruler over the Jewish territory formerly administrated by his uncle, Herod Philip. He proved himself loyal to the Romans, and, when Caligula deposed the inept Herod Antipas, was granted those territories (37 AD). Finally, in 41 AD, Agrippa was made ruler over the additional regions of Samaria, Judea and Idumea.

Herod Agrippa studied the Torah, kept the religious rules and feast days, and courted the priests and religious leaders. He saw all Christians as enemies of both

Judaism and Rome. Like the other rulers of his lineage, he sought total political control, but he also saw himself as the zealous defender of his religion. Acts 12 tells us he arrested and executed James, the brother of John, during the Passover season, which “pleased the Jews” (v. 3). He arrested Peter with the same intent of execution, but this fell at the feast of Passover, so he had to hold his prisoner for execution until after the feast day was past. Peter was treated as a threat to political stability, chained and guarded by sixteen Roman soldiers.

What a picture! A ruthless and powerful king with the authority of both church and state behind him, ready to kill a man whose only crime is to have preached a message of hope and love. It reminds me of faithful Christians like the Bible translator John Wycliffe, who faced threats from kings and the state church because he wanted ordinary people to be able to read the Bible in their own language; our early Baptist pioneers who faced prison and death in England because they would not support the state church; and those who came to America to champion religious freedom for all. There is great danger when any government gets into the religion business, when any politician plays the faith card to garner votes or belittle opponents, when religious zeal targets those who are in opposition. There is a reason Baptists have championed the separation of church and state — to protect the integrity of both and the spiritual freedom of all.

What does the Jerusalem church do to confront the ruthless religious-political power of Herod? They pray. They have no political power, no influence among the Jewish establishment, but they trust God in all things. God answers their prayers. An angel appears to Peter in prison, waking him and telling him: “Shake off your chains and put on your cloak and sandals. We’re breaking out of here” (vv. 7-8). At first Peter thinks he is dreaming as they walk right by the guards and the iron gate swings open. It is only when the angel has led Peter along the street that the apostle realizes he is free! Agrippa reacts as we would expect, killing the guards and increasing his persecution of the church.

But the ugly tale is not done. We are not certain how much time passes before the end came to Herod Agrippa. After a period of tension between Agrippa in Jerusalem and the leaders of Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast, the

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king sought resolution and restoration. A series of athletic competitions were scheduled in that beautiful seaside area in honor of the emperor. Josephus tells us that Herod opened the games clothed in a beautiful silver robe that caught the sunlight. When Agrippa spoke, the people shouted, “This is a god’s voice, not the voice of a mere human” (v. 22). No Jew would have said such a thing, but this was an international port, heavily populated by Gentiles. The author of Acts tells us Agrippa accepted the idolatrous accolades and he was suddenly struck down in divine judgment “because he didn’t give the honor to God” (v. 23). Josephus offers an account less offensive to the Romans, reporting that Agrippa realized his sin and submitted himself to divine punishment. Some scholars suggest that the image of Agrippa being “eaten by worms” is evidence of advanced bowel infection or disease. The point is clearly made that Agrippa was more a man of selfishness and all-consuming religious zeal than a man of faith in God.

In our complex political world, with candidates claiming to be Christian in spite of their flawed morals, racism, egotism and selfish zeal, we should seriously examine our own faith and motives. We judge too quickly, believe falsehoods too easily, and choose sides before we consider sitting down together with a willingness to consider possibilities with God’s help. Have you ever dismissed someone simply because of their ethnicity, social standing, religion or political affiliation? Haven’t we all? In a nation that is supposed to protect religious freedom and value all people, how do you answer the hatred and vindictiveness we face daily? What shapes your thinking and actions?

Herod Agrippa I was a man of zealous faith. He despised and sought to kill anyone who did not agree with him. Our news reports remind us daily that such people exist today. Is your answer to be like them because you know “the truth”? Or do you seek to live out God’s love and grace? What “god” do you worship? Is it the God who gives life? And what does it mean to be zealous for God? Consider Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, the Savior of the world.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.