

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Study Notes: Acts 12:20-25

With James the Elder's death and Peter's supernatural escape described, Luke continues the story of Herod Agrippa I.

- **A Furious Dispute: v. 20**

"Now Herod was in a furious dispute with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they convened before him. Having secured the support of Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their region depended on the king's country for food."

With Peter's escape, Herod left his home in Jerusalem and went to Caesarea Maritima. There, Herod's prior disappointment turns to a pointed disagreement with two Phoenician cities – Tyre and Sidon.

Caesarea Maritima was on the Mediterranean Sea west of Jerusalem, while Tyre and Sidon were north of Galilee in Syria. (Tyre and Sidon are still cities in modern Lebanon.)

Jesus warning to Chorazin and Bethsaida: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you." - Luke 10:13-14

Luke tells us that Herod was "in a furious dispute" with these city-states in Phoenicia but doesn't detail the exact reason. It probably was about tax revenue, grain payments, or Tyre and Sidon's shipping fees.

The twin cities had an ongoing problem with food supplies for their municipalities. Their geographic location on a narrow strip between the mountain range and the Mediterranean provided little farmland.

As a result, they had a long-standing need for imported grain.

Food production shortfalls were not uncommon in the ancient world, especially in Greece and throughout the Mediterranean region. While Egypt was well known for its wheat, Galilee, Samaria, and Judea were closer to Tyre and Sidon. As such, Judea became the natural source for grain.

Why was there a feud between Herod and the port cities of Tyre and Sidon? Most likely the twin cities were having food withheld from them. The question is, "Why?"

Some Bible scholars speculate that the initial problem was due to a shortage of food through the Roman empire, which caused the cities to have their rations reduced. (See Agabus' prediction in Acts 11:28)

The empire-wide famine may have contributed to the issue between Herod and these sister-cities, but there's probably a political aspect as well: Technically, Tyre and Sidon were not part of Herod's jurisdiction. This put the port city of Caesarea by the Sea in economic competition with Tyre and Sidon.

The majority of the grain supplied to these ports came from the Judean fields. Tyre and Sidon's dependence on Judean agriculture went back centuries. The prophet Ezekiel makes mention of this problem when he wrote:

"Judah and Israel traded with you; they exchanged wheat from Minnith and confections, honey, olive oil and balm for your wares." – Ezekiel 27:12-17

- **Appeasing A Tyrant: v 20**

"Having secured the support of Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their region depended on the king's country for food."

As their situation was worsening, the political leaders of Tyre and Sidon decided to try to appease Herod and restore some semblance of their former trade relations with Maritima.

Blastus – Herod's "chamberlain" – may well have been the king's trusted personal attendant. Additionally, by using the word "secured", Luke likely means that Blastus was bribed to get the city leaders an audience with Agrippa I.

- **Death Of A Tyrant: vv. 21-23**

"On the appointed day, Herod donned his royal robes, sat on his throne, and addressed the people. And they began to shout, "This is the voice of a god, not a man!" Immediately, because Herod did not give glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died."

The events of the Bible happened in real time, in real geographical places, involving real people. Herod's death is recorded in both secular and sacred history, including Josephus' History of the Jewish People.

F.F Bruce: "The accounts of Luke and Josephus are independent, but they agree in all essentials." -F.F. Bruce

- **The Appointed Day:**

Luke cites the "appointed day" that the leaders of Tyre and Sidon were to appear before Herod. One of two celebrations may have occurred during this time. We cannot be sure which one Luke means. One was a festival carried out quinquennially, or every five years. It was held on March 5th, to celebrate the foundation of Caesarea Maritima.

It's possible that Herod organized a festival to celebrate the emperor's birthday on August 1st. This would include gladiatorial games. Historians seems to favor this possibility.

On the “appointed day”, Herod entered the hippodrome wearing expensive garments made of a reflective material. Josephus: “[It was] made wholly of silver and of a contexture truly wonderful.”

As the morning sun fell on Herod, he appears to glow. Some historians believe he did this intentionally – to imitate the Phoenician sun god.

“... Herod ... addressed the people. And they began to shout, “This is the voice of a god, not a man!”

1. The people saw the rays of the sunrise reflecting off Herod’s exquisite robes.

2. Herod gave a remarkable speech.

The combination led to the crowd shouting, “This is the voice of a god, not a man!” Considering the paganism of first century Rome, this is not as shocking as it sounds. The emperors were regularly worshipped as gods.

While Agrippa normally demonstrated a measure of respect for the Jewish God, on that day he did not rebuke the crowd. For Judea’s king, it must have seemed like the apex of his career.

Proverbs 29:4-5: “By justice a king gives a country stability, but those who are greedy for bribes tear it down. Those who flatter their neighbors are spreading nets for their feet.”

- **The Angel’s Response:**

“Immediately, because Herod did not give glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.”

Josephus: Herod immediately got a terrible pain in his gut and saw an owl—a harbinger of death. He goes on to say that Agrippa spent the next five days in agony before he died – his bowels eaten by worms.

- A combination of both supernatural and organic references:

Luke says that an angel of the Lord was present in the crowd that day:

“... Angels (ministering spirits) serve God and are sent to help those who will receive salvation.” – Hebrews 1:14. However, sometimes they are the agents of God's wrath. See: Genesis 19:13; Exodus 12:23; Psalm 78:49; Isaiah 37:36.

“Doesn't Luke's account contradict Josephus' insistence that Herod languished for five days before he died?”

Luke actually said: “... An angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.”

Luke's account of the death of Ananias and Saphira:

- “When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died.” – Acts 5:5
- “At that moment she fell down at his feet and died.” – Acts 5:10

If Luke meant that Herod died immediately, wouldn't he have stated it that way? There is no real divergence of facts between Luke's account and secular sources. Luke just doesn't give us the timeframe in which Herod died.

- **“Eaten By Worms And Died.”:**

Dr. Luke is using medical precision to describe Herod's sudden affliction. He uses the word “skōlēkobrōtos”. It is a combination of two Greek words, “scolex” and “bibrosko” and is translated into English as “worm eaten” or “diseased with maggots”.

This medical event was not unknown in the first century. Secular examples of this dreaded disease are recorded in the cases of Pheretimo of Cyrene, Sylla, Antiochus the Great, Herod the Great and Maximinus.

The term, skolekobrotos occurs more often in 1st-century sources as a disease of plants than humans. Theophrastus, a botanist uses the word to describe plant eaten by worms.

The word scolex was used by ancient medical writers to describe numerous types of intestinal worms.

Did the angel's actions cause an acceleration of a preexisting medical condition, or was Herod immediately, supernaturally infested with intestinal worms? The Bible doesn't tell us. Both explanations could be accurate. In the end, Herod still died horribly from skolekobrotos.

- **“But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.” vv. 23-24.**

“It is important to note, the appointed day referred to in the Book of Acts was the same day on the calendar Agrippa had intended to kill Peter.”

Herod intended to kill Peter, but the angel killed Herod. Herod meant to deal a crushing blow to the Jerusalem Church by executing Peter. Instead, the Word of God continued to spread and flourish.

Dr. John Stott's summary:

The chapter opens with James dead, Peter in prison and Herod triumphing; it closes with Herod dead, Peter free, and the word of God triumphing. Such is the power of God to overthrow hostile human plans and to establish his own in their place.

Tyrants may be permitted for a time to boast and bluster, oppressing the church and hindering the spread of the gospel, but they will not last. In the end, their empire will be broken, and their pride abased. – Dr. John R.W. Stott