

Acts 12:11-25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 12 verses 11 to 25. 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. 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.

When he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer, 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. 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. But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. 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. Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 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. 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.

On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered a narration to them. And the people were shouting, The voice of a god, and not of a man. 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. But the word of God increased and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

Acts 12 tells the story of Peter being arrested by Herod at the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, being placed in prison under armed guard, the intention being to keep him there for the duration of the feast, after which he would be put to death. Peter was delivered by an angel, and led out through the prison and into the city. And he goes to a house where a number of the Christians have been praying for him. Considering the fact that there is a servant girl there, and it also has a gate, it's likely the house of some well-to-do people. Mary, who owned the house, was likely a widow, and one of the hosts of the early church meetings within the city of Jerusalem. We're told that this Mary is the mother of John Mark, and it's presumed that we know who this John Mark is. Both the name John of Jewish origin and the name Mark of Latin origin are common names, and so there would be many people with these names around. Identifying who this John Mark is is not easy, but many have seen him as the same Mark as wrote the Gospel of Mark. In Colossians chapter 4 verse 10 we read,

[3 : 1 4] Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions. If he comes to you, welcome him. An association between Mark and Barnabas would make sense. Mark is taken along with them by Barnabas, and the association between the two would make a lot more sense if John Mark was Barnabas's cousin. This would also raise the possibility that John Mark was a Levite, as Barnabas was a Levite. Mark was a Latin personal name, and it's most commonly encountered in people with Roman citizenship. That Peter went to the house of John Mark's mother suggests that this was a common meeting place and a prominent meeting place within the early church in Jerusalem. It also suggests an association between Peter and John Mark. It is commonly argued that Peter was the primary source for Mark's Gospel, and so the sort of familiarity between the two that would be created by a regular meeting at the house of John Mark's mother would help to make sense of why John

Mark would write a Gospel using the witness of Peter. In the early church's life, meeting from house to house seems to have been one of the most basic forms of institutional structure, or something that is pre-institutional in many respects. They would meet in private houses for prayer, worship, and study of the scriptures, and this seems to have been the earliest stage of the church's life. These private associations meeting in domestic contexts without necessarily the same formal institutional and leadership structures. Those emerged later on over time, and such house churches would usually be very small. Craig Keener suggests that the sort of number we would expect to have been in this meeting in the house of John Mark's mother would have been more than 12, but less than 50. Rhoda, the servant girl, hears Peter's voice and recognises it, and runs to tell the people who are praying, but they don't believe her. And this appearance to the woman, and the woman bringing the news to the disciples, and then failing to believe it, is something that we've seen before. Peter is playing out a similar pattern to the story of Christ's resurrection, in Luke 24, 10-11. Now it was Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. They even think it might be Peter's ghost, again reminiscent of the events after the resurrection, in Luke 24, 37, but they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. We should see the humour in this situation, not just the way that Peter is replaying the events of Christ's resurrection, but also the way in which the disciples simply aren't prepared for God's work. God is working faster and in ways that they cannot expect. Perhaps they were hoping that Peter would be released in the morning, when Herod thought better of what he had done, and God changed his mind. But the idea of a prison break, affected by an angel at night, was simply not on their radar. But that's what God brought about. Peter reports the miracle that occurred, instructing them to pass the news on to James and the brothers. These are the leaders of the Jerusalem church, James the brother of Jesus. And then he has to go to another place. Presumably this is a large house, and it's being associated with the disciples, would mean that the authorities would search it first when they found that Peter was missing from the prison, and so he has to go elsewhere to hide. And later on we see Herod searching for him and not finding him. Peter's experience then is similar to that of Christ. He's released from prison during the feast of unleavened bread. The grave is seen as a prison in the Gospels, and Christ is delivered from the grave, from that prison. Peter appears to a woman whose report is not believed, then he appears to the disciples, and then he disappears from the scene. This is the same pattern playing out again. It's the pattern of Christ's resurrection, and it's the pattern playing out in Peter's life. What we can see here, among other things, is the way that the disciples of Christ bear the marks of their master upon their lives. There are similar features of Christ's story playing out in the story of the disciples, in the story of Stephen, the first martyr, or at various points in the story of the Apostle Paul. There aren't just similarities between Peter and Jesus that are being explored here though. There's also a contrast between Herod and Peter. In the previous chapters, Peter has gone from Caesarea to Judea, and now Herod goes from Judea to Caesarea. There's a reversal of that pattern. Peter has gone to the Gentiles and has eaten with them, but Herod is marked by hostility to Gentiles and refusal to share food with them. Peter refuses worship in Caesarea in Acts chapter 10 verses 25 to 26. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up saying, Stand up, I too am a man. But Herod accepts worship in Caesarea. Peter, when he's in prison, is struck by the angel to wake him up. Herod is struck by an angel to strike him down, to bring him down in judgment. And so there's a similarity but a contrast within that. [8 : 45] And as we see Peter as the leader of the early church, and Herod as a king of the people, we're seeing two different kingdoms at war with each other. The servants of Christ are being delivered by the true king, whereas Herod is being struck down. The fact that all of this occurs at the time of Passover might invite us to think of the relationship between the Egyptians and the Israelites.

The way in which the deliverance of one is the same way in which the others are brought down. Peter is led through a narrow passage, through the city, and in the same way the people are led through the Red Sea. And then there's the defeat of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. Herod in the Gospels often plays the part of a pharaoh-type figure. And here we see the pharaoh figure being defeated in the same action that lifted up the people of God. The death of Herod is also recorded in the work of Josephus.

In the Antiquities of the Jews, book 19, he writes, Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Stratos Tower. And there he exhibited shows, in honour of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety, at which festival a great multitude was gathered together, of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity throughout his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning, at which time the silver of his garment, being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the suns raised upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread in horror over those that looked intently upon him. And presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place and another from another, though not for his good, that he was a god. 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 above 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 fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner, and when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life.

In contrast to the grisly death of Herod, we are told that the word of God increased and multiplied. This is the language of fruitfulness and multiplication, of the blessing that God gave to humanity at the very beginning, but applied to the word of God. The word of the kingdom is prospering at this time, it's the language of growth. It's also the sort of language that we have at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel, in reference to Samuel, as he's a boy and growing up, and then also used of the young Jesus and John the Baptist in Luke's Gospel. This is a chapter of transitions. There's the movement of the centre of gravity of the church, away from Jerusalem. It ends with Paul and Barnabas going back to Antioch, and they had come from Antioch at the end of chapter 11. The fact that the whole chapter is bookended by Paul and Barnabas and their journey to Jerusalem, but we don't hear anything about them during their time in Jerusalem, is an interesting feature of the text, and it suggests that there is part of a greater shift taking place here. The story begins to follow Paul and Barnabas and the other missionaries as they're moving around. It's no longer focused in Jerusalem in the same way.

[12:37] Again, it's no longer focused upon Peter, James and John. James has been killed, and Peter has now been released from prison, but he never appears on the scene to quite the same degree again. We see him again in chapter 15, but apart from that, we don't see that much of him. Also, the leadership of the Jerusalem church seems to be focused much more upon James, the brother of Jesus, and others.

Saul and Barnabas leave with John Mark. John Mark's association with Paul seems to be short-lived at this point. He ends up going back to Jerusalem, and there's a quarrel concerning him at the end of Acts 15, in verses 37 to 40. Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, but Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. Nevertheless, the reference to Mark in Colossians 4 verse 10 suggests that relationship between Paul and Mark was healed by that point.

A question to consider. In the early church, there was a lot of movement around and to and fro between different churches, and many associations between various people. Reading this chapter, consider some of the associations between key figures in the early church that can already be discerned within it.

Also, where else in the New Testament might we find a reference to meetings between key people during the period covered by this chapter?