

Acts 12:1-24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 08 November 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 12 verses 1 to 24. About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of unleavened bread.

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. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to guard by the church.

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. 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. 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. 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. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city.

[1 : 1 7] It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. 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. And 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.

[2 : 3 0] 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 an oration 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.

Acts chapter 12 tells of further persecution of the church, at the hands of Herod. The Herod here is Herod Agrippa, who follows after Herod Antipas, who is the one who is involved in Jesus' crucifixion.

Herod the Great was involved in the slaughter of the innocents, at the beginning of the book of Matthew. There is a further Herod later on in the book of Acts, Herod Agrippa II, who is the son of this Agrippa.

[3 : 33] Paul will speak before him later on in the book. Herod kills James, the brother of John, with the sword. And seeing that this action pleases the Jews, he proceeds to arrest Peter.

Both the Jewish and the Roman leaders seem to rule, in large part by crowd-pleasing, rather than actually out of a concern for justice. The timing of the arrest of Peter is significant.

He is arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Herod intends to bring him out after the time of the Passover, presumably when the large crowd of the worshippers from other parts of Judea and the Diaspora have departed, as the greatest opposition to Peter and the early church is probably found among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

On the very night before he is about to be brought out, Peter is sleeping between two soldiers, he is bound with two chains, and he has sentries guarding the door. Reading this account of Peter, we might recall the story of Christ.

Like the story of Christ's crucifixion, this occurs around the time of the Passover. Like Christ, Peter is between two men, Christ was between two criminals on his cross, and Peter is between two soldiers.

[4 : 36] Like Jesus and his tomb, Peter is in a sealed prison, a prison guarded by people outside. As an angel of the Lord descends and rolls back the stone of Christ's tomb, so an angel of the Lord comes to Peter, removes the chains from his hand, opens up the gate of the prison, and leads him out into freedom.

The story, then, is a sort of resurrection for Peter, and this theme continues as we go further on in the narrative. Having been delivered by the angel, Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, where he knows that people will be praying for him.

This would be the house of some well-to-do people. They have a servant girl, they have a gate. Mary was most likely a widow and a host of the early church. While many of the people in Jerusalem had sold their property and their possessions, there were certain people who still had considerable riches.

And would use those to support the wider community. She is the mother of John Mark, a character in the narrative in his own right later on in the story of Acts. Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, as we see in Colossians chapter 4 verse 10.

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. It is possible that Mary and John Mark were also Levites, as Barnabas was a Levite.

[5 : 52] Mark was a Latin personal name. Most commonly encountered in people with Roman citizenship. Like John, a Jewish name, it was an extremely common name. It's likely that this is the same Mark as wrote the Gospel.

And Peter going to his house suggests some association between the two. Something that the tradition has generally recognised. Peter being regarded as a particularly important source for Mark's account in his Gospel.

Many early church meetings would occur in private houses for prayer, worship and study of Scripture. The earliest stage of the church's life involved this meeting from house to house. Private associations, meeting in domestic contexts and without the same formal institutional and leadership structures, which would often develop later.

Such house churches would have been very small for the most part. Craig Keener suggests that the sort of number we should expect to have been there would have been over a dozen, but not more than 50. When Peter arrives at the gate, Rhoda the servant girl hears and recognises his voice and she runs to tell the people who are praying.

But they don't believe her. While they are praying for the protection and deliverance of Peter, they cannot imagine that their prayers will be answered in such dramatic fashion. This is the second of three deliverances from jails or prisons.

[7 : 07] The Lord demonstrating his power to open up prison doors, just as he has opened up the prison doors of the grave itself. Reading the story of the resurrection in the light of this parallel, we can also see the way in which the resurrection is a breaking open of a prison.

The sealed entrance, the armed guards, all of these are features of a prison. Christ opened up the prison of the tomb and now his disciples are opening up the prisons of the tyrants of this age.

Peter appears to a woman who brings the news to the disciples and yet they fail to believe. The exact same pattern can be seen in Luke chapter 24 verses 10 to 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 their words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them. One of the initial responses of the disciples to the appearance of Christ was to think that he must be a ghost. Luke chapter 24 verse 37.

But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. Here they presume that the person who has appeared must be Peter's ghost. When they finally let him in and there's a certain comedy to the way that this plays out underlining something of the playfulness and unpredictability of the spirit, Peter then reports the miracle that had occurred.

[8 : 25] He instructs them to pass on the news to James and the brothers. James here is almost certainly the brother of Jesus who plays a prominent role in the leadership of the early church in Jerusalem. Peter's commissioning them as witnesses to his deliverance, tell these things to James and to the brothers, also reminds us of the story of Christ's resurrection where those who witnessed the empty tomb are instructed to go and tell his disciples and Peter in Mark chapter 16 verse 7.

Peter goes on at this point to another place. Presumably this is because a large house associated with the disciples in the eyes of the authorities would be the first place where he will be sought. Peter's experience is similar to that of Christ.

He's released from prison during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Christ was delivered from the grave. He appears to a woman, much as Christ appeared to women, but her report is not believed as the report of the women was not believed in the story of the Gospels.

He appears to the disciples and then he disappears from the scene. From this point in the story of Acts, Peter is no longer the centre of attention. The narrative gaze switches from Jerusalem and from Peter to Paul and his missionary companions, much as Christ's resurrection was followed by his departure, so Peter's resurrection-like deliverance is followed by his departure from the scene.

Besides a parallel with Christ, there's a juxtaposition with Herod. Peter has gone up from Caesarea to Judea and Herod goes down from Judea to Caesarea. Peter goes to the Gentiles and eats with them.

[9 : 54] Herod has hostility with the Gentiles and refuses 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. While Peter had refused worship there, Herod accepts worship in the city of Caesarea.

And both of them were struck. Peter is struck by the angel to wake him up and lift him up and Herod is struck by an angel to bring him down. All of these things happening around the time of the Passover might also help us to think in terms of themes of Exodus.

Peter is like the Jews instructed to dress for departure at midnight and then being brought out through this passage. While Herod is like the pursuing Pharaoh and he is struck down by the angel of death.

One firstborn son is delivered at midnight and another firstborn son is destroyed. Josephus in his Antiquities of the Jews, book 19, also recalls the death of Agrippa.

[11 : 00] 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 gotten together of the principal persons and such as were of dignity through 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 sun's rays 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 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 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.

[12 : 38] The passage ends by describing the word of God increasing and multiplying. This language recalls the language of Genesis. It is being fruitful and multiplying. This was part of the fundamental human blessing and calling, and now it is being fulfilled as the word of God is spreading out.

It's also the language of growth, similar to that which we have at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel and of the young Jesus and John the Baptist in the book of Luke. A question to consider.

The experience of Peter in this chapter is closely modelled upon the experience of Christ in his resurrection. What are some other examples in the story of the book of Acts where the experience of the disciples is modelled upon the experience of Christ?