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# Peter's Persecution and Deliverance 12: 1-19a

## 43 AD

**Peter's persecution and deliverance DIG: This Herod is the grandson of Herod the Great who ruled in Yeshua's day. What do you learn about his character in verses 1-3? Why would this action please the Jewish leaders? Why do you think Herod, as a Roman official, would now join in the Jewish opposition to the Messianic Community? How do you feel about the fact that God saved Peter and not Jacob? In light of John 21:18-19, how might Peter respond to this question? Who is Jacob? Why do you think he is specifically mentioned? What does this tell you about the importance of the Messianic Community in Jerusalem? Herod died in 44 AD, eleven years after the events of Chapter One. What types of opposition has the community faced so far in Acts? How far had it expanded?**

**REFLECT: Who really has the power here? Herod or ADONAI? What does that tell you about how believers ought to deal with opposition and persecution? What worldly forces seem all-powerful to you right now? How does this chapter put them in perspective for you? How are you like the people in the prayer meeting in this story? What are some of your prayers that you would be surprised if God answered them favorably? Although Peter was miraculously rescued from prison, he went into hiding to avoid Herod. How do you think Peter acted when he left Jerusalem? With a lack of faith? With common sense? Within God's plan? Explain. Likewise, where do you see an overlap between God's power and human common sense in the way things work out for your deliverance?**

Up to this point, the Messianic community was enjoying great growth and success; experiencing one exciting conversion after another. First, there was **Sha'ul of Tarsus**, then the Gentile centurion **Cornelius**, then the mixed crowd of **Jews** and **Gentiles** in the church at **Antioch**. But here in **Acts 12**, the ugly opposition of the Adversary once again raises its ugly head.[257]

**The death of Jacob (James): Now at that time Herod Agrippa I** enters the picture. **He** was the son of Aristobulus IV and the grandson of **Herod the Great** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Aw – Herod Gave Orders to Kill all the Boys in Bethlehem Two Years Old and Under**), **Agrippa** was born in 11 BC and sent to Rome for **his** education after the execution of **his** father Aristobulus in 7 BC. **Herod the Great** (who some people call **Herod** the paranoid) mistakenly thought that Aristobulus was conspiring to overthrow him, had him executed. Arriving in Rome, **Agrippa** was raised by the members of the royal family. In fact **he** became close friends with Gaius, also known as Caligula, who was the grandnephew of Emperor Tiberius. And when Caligula became Emperor in 37 AD he gave **Agrippa** the patriarchies of **Philip**, and **Lysanias** in south Syria **(Luke 3:1).** When Caligula banished **Agrippa's** uncle Antipas I 39 AD, the Emperor added Galilee and Perea to **his** domain. Later in 41 AD when **Claudius** was emperor, **he** gave **Agrippa** both Samaria and Judea, which made **him** king over Judea. Until then Judea was under the control of Procurators, but now it was under the control of **Agrippa** the King. **He** died in 44 AD for **refusing to give God the glory** (see **Bl – Herod Agrippa Gets His Due**).

Despite being raised and educated in Rome, **Agrippa I** was always on shaky ground with the Romans. **He** ran up numerous debts in Rome, then fled to Palestine, leaving angry creditors behind him. Unwise comments he made got back to the Roman emperor Tiberius, who promptly imprisoned **him**. Released from prison following Tiberius' death, **he** was made ruler of northern Palestine **(Luke 3:1)**, to which Judea and Samaria were eventually added in 41 AD. **He** ruled the largest territory of Palestine since **his** grandfather **Herod the Great** nearly fifty years earlier. Because of **his** tenuous relationship with Rome, it was vital that he maintain the loyalty of **his** Jewish subjects. One way to win favor with the resident Jewish authorities was to persecute the hated believers, especially **the apostles**.

**Now about the time Barnabas** and **Sha'ul** arrived in Jerusalem to give the financial gifts for **the Jews** collected from the Gentile believers in Antioch (see **Bj – The Church in Antioch: The benevolence of the church**). But at that point **Herod Agrippa seized some from Messiah's community to do them harm.** This is the fourth persecution of the Messianic Community. **He had Jacob (James), John's brother, put to death by the sword (12:1-2).** So **Jacob** was **the** first **apostle** to **die** (apart from Judas) in fulfillment of **Mark 10:39: You will drink the cup I drink, and you will endure the immersion I must endure.** The ancient Christian historian Eusebius relates a story from Clement of Alexandria,

who says that **the soldier** who guarded **James** was so affected by **his** witness that **he** declared **himself** a believer also and was willingly executed for **Yeshua** alongside **Jacob**.[258] Ironically, **his brother John** would be the last of **the apostles** to **die**, and **he** would **die** of old age.

People who use the book of **Acts** to seek consistency in **God's** actions have trouble with **Chapter 12** because **ADONAI** did not choose to rescue **Jacob**, but **he** did rescue **Peter**. Once again, we cannot use a historical book like **Acts** to establish biblical doctrine.

Also, it is important to remember that the Messianic community did not replace **Jacob** as they had replaced **Judas (1:15-26)**. As long as the gospel was going **to the Jew first (Romans 1:16)**, it was necessary to have the full complement of twelve **apostles** to witness to the twelve tribes of Isra'el. The stoning of **Stephen** (see **Ax – The Stoning of Stephen**) once again confirmed the rejection of the gospel by the Great Sanhedrin and the expansion of the Good News **through all Judah, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (1:8).** Therefore, the number of **apostles** was no longer important.[259]

**The imprisonment of Peter: Seeing** that the killing of **Jacob pleased the Judean leaders, he proceeded to capture Peter,** the chief of **the apostles, as well (12:3a).** Because **Agrippa's** grandfather was **Herod the Great**, **he** was a descendent of the Edomites. As a result, **he** did what **he** could to appease **the Jews**. **The Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei – The Oral Law**) **records another event where he did the same thing. When Antipas was publically reading the commandments of the Kingdom (Deuteronomy 17:14-16), at Sukkot of the Sabbatical Year, he read: You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother, he wept when he read the words, for he remembered his Edomite ancestry. But the people** of Hasmonean ancestry, who remembered that **he** was also the grandson of Maryomni (a Hasmonean, a descendent of the Maccabees), **cried repeatedly, "Do not be dismayed, you are indeed our brother" (Sotah 8:8).** This shows that because of the insecurities of **his** Edomite background, **he** went very far in trying to **please the Jews**.[260]

**This was during the Days of Matzah** or **the Festival of Unleavened Bread (12:3b). After seizing Peter, he put him in prison.** This was **Peter's** third imprisonment **(4:3** and **5:18)**. Then **Agrippa handed him over to four squads with four soldiers each to guard him.** The usual number of a Roman military

**night-**watch was **four**, and the watch changed every six hours. Normally this procedure was reserved for dangerous political prisoners. Perhaps **Antipas** had heard of **Peter's** previous escape in **5:19** and to make sure it didn't happen again. **He was intending to bring him before the people after** the eight **days** of **the Festival of Passover/Unleavened Bread (12:4),** fearing an unpredictable mob reaction when **Passover** pilgrims flooded **the City**. We may compare the similar problem that arose when the Jewish leaders were contemplating the arrest of **Jesus** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ka – The Plot Against Jesus**).

**So Peter was kept in prison, but Messiah's community fervently** (Greek: *ektenos*) **offered prayer to God for him (12:5). Luke** uses *ektenos* to describe the agonizing prayer of **Jesus** in the Garden of Gethsemane: **And being in agony, He was praying very fervently** (Greek: *ektenos*)**; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground (Luke 22:44).** The imperfect tenses in this verse make it clear that **they prayed** for several days. This is the turning point in the story. Never underestimate the power of **prayer**. While it is true that **the angel** fetched **Peter** out of **prison**, **prayer** fetched **the angel**![261]

**Peter's deliverance: Herod** thought **he** had the situation well in hand. But **God** had other ideas. **Now that very night, the night** of the eighth **day** of **Unleavened Bread, when Herod Antipas was about to bring him out** (for **he** was to **die** the next **day**)**, Peter was sleeping (12:6a).** The fact that **Peter was sleeping the night** before **he** was scheduled to **die** shows that **he** was not too worried about the situation. And why not? Back in **John 21:18-19a, Peter** had the assurance of **Yeshua** that **he** would reach old age before **he died: I tell you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.** So **he** wasn't worried because **he** knew that somehow **God** was going to rescue **him**.

**He was bound with two chains between two soldiers, while the two** other **guards were before the door keeping watch over the prison (12:6b).** Among the Romans the prisoner was bound to **the soldier** who had charge of him by means of a chain, which joined the prisoner's right wrist to the left wrist of **the soldier**. Sometimes, however, for greater security, the prisoner was chained to **two soldiers**, one on each side of him, and two were stationed outside **the door**. This was the case with **Peter**.[262]



In **Herod's** plans to win the favor of the Jewish people there was one thing **he** forgot – **he** didn't consider what **Ha'Shem** might do! **God** had more ministry for **Peter** and **He** didn't want **him** executed yet. **Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. The light,** however, didn't awaken either **Peter** or **the soldiers**. **He poked Peter on the side and woke him up,** saying: **Get up! Quick! And the chains fell off his hands. Then the angel said to him, "Get dressed and put on your sandals," and he did so. Then he tells him, "Put on your cloak and follow me." Peter went out and kept following him.** Still groggy, however, **he didn't know that what was happening with the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.** In a series of miracles, **they** made **their** way **past a first guard, and a second** at **the** cell **door,** then **they came to the iron gate leading** from the prison courtyard **into the** streets of the **city, which opened for them by itself.** Finally, **they went out and walked along a narrow street. Suddenly the angel left him** because **his** divine duty was done **(12:7-10).**

**When Peter** finally **came to himself, he** exclaimed: **Now I know for real that the Lord has sent His angel (Acts 12:11; Psalm 34:7; Dani'el 3:28** and **6:22) and delivered me from the hand of Herod Agrippa and from all that the** unbelieving **Judean people were expecting (12:11).** This wasn't a dream – **he** was really free! **They** had killed **Jacob** and **they** were looking forward to seeing **Peter** killed, but that **expectation** would not be fulfilled.

**When he realized** everything that had happened to **him, he went to the house of Miriam, the mother of John (also called Mark,** whose gospel was written to

the Romans**). She** must have been a wealthy woman because **she** had servants and **her house** was big enough to accommodate many believers. And **her** house must have been well known because **Peter** knew exactly where to go. **Luke** presents **five cameos** of important believing women in a variety of roles they assumed (see **Bd – Signs and Miracles Follow Peter: A closer look at Luke, Women and Ministry**). Believers met in each other's **homes** for **prayer**, worship and fellowship arising from their common trust in **Yeshua**. We can see the same thing today with the *havurah* (friendship-group) within the Messianic Community.

**Many** believers **were assembled** at **her house and together they prayed** all **night. Their prayers** were interrupted **by a knock at the door**. **When Peter knocked on the door of the entrance gate, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. Although she recognized Peter's voice** from previous contacts**, out of joy she did not open the gate but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, "You're crazy!"** We must face the fact that even in the most fervent prayer meetings there is sometimes a spirit of doubt and unbelief. We are like **the father** who cried out to **Jesus, "I believe! Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).** Those **Jerusalem** believers believed that **ADONAI** could answer **their prayers**, so **they** kept it up **night** and **day**. However, when the answer came right to **their door, they** refused to believe it. **YHVH** graciously honors even the weakest faith, but how much more **He** would do if only we would trust **Him**.[263]

**But she kept insisting it was so. But they were saying, "It is his angel" (12:11-15). The reference to Peter's angel could allude to the Jewish belief in guardian angels in special relationship to humans** (**Genesis 48:16 LXX; Tobit 5:22**)**. Though from a later period, there is some evidence that Jews believed that guardian angels had the same appearance as the one they protected (Genesis Rab. 78 [50a],** which interprets **Genesis 33:10** to refer to the angelic prince of Esau who had Esau's appearance). **To this we should remember that the rabbis taught that one's spirit or angel often lingered on earth, appearing for several days after one's death and that belief may be reflected here.**[264]

**But Peter kept on knocking,** hoping that **he** didn't attract attention to **himself** and get arrested again**.** Finally, **Rhoda** was able to convince **the others** to come and see for **themselves**. **When they opened the gate** (much to **Peter's** relief)**, they saw him and they** rushed out into the courtyard. **They** were **amazed** on how **their prayer** had been answered**! But he motioned with his hand for**

**them to be silent, and he** fully **explained to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. He** said: **Go tell these things to Jacob,** the half-brother of **Yeshua (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:18-19), and the brothers.** From **Acts 15** we learn that **Jacob** was the head of the Messianic community in **Yerushalayim** at that time.

**Then, Peter left** Jerusalem **and went to another place (12:16-17). He** didn't want to put all **his** fellow believers in jeopardy, and knew **Agrippa** would soon be looking for **him**. With this account we basically come to the end of the story of **Peter** in **Acts. He** makes one more brief appearance at the **Jerusalem** counsel in **Acts 15**, then **he** walks off the pages of the Bible to make room for **Paul** and the story of **his** ministry to the Gentiles.

**Peter's** sudden, mysterious disappearance from a securely guarded cell caused no small amount of angst among the Roman **guard**. Roman law dictated that if **a prisoner** escaped, **his guard** would suffer the same punishment, and **Peter** was going to be **executed**. **When day came, there was no small commotion among the** sixteen **soldiers** that had been guarding **Peter as to what had become of him. They** just couldn't figure out that **the eyes of ADONAI are on the righteous and His ears open to their prayers, but the face of ADONAI is against those who do evil (Psalm 34:15-16). Herod made a** major **search** of **the City for Peter, but he did not find him.** Furious, **he** turned **his** anger on the hapless **guards**. **He interrogated them and,** just like **his** grandfather, **he commanded that they be led away to execution (12:19a). His** plan had blown up in **his** face. **He** needed a vacation to pull **himself** together. Unfortunately for **him**, **he** still failed to learn that **he** could not fight **Ha'Shem**. That mistake, which cost **him Peter** and **his** prestige with **the Jews**, would shortly cost **him his** life.[265]

Before we leave this portion of **Acts**, it would be good for us to consider how believers can best pray for those **in prison**, for even today there are many people in prison simply because they are believers: **Remember the prisoners as if you were fellow prisoners (Hebrews 13:3a).** In other words, **pray** for **them** as you would want **them** to **pray** for you if the situation were reversed. We ought to pray that **ADONAI** would give **them** the grace to bear with suffering so that **they** might have a triumphant witness for **the Lord**. We should ask **the Spirit** to minister the Word to **them** and bring it to **their** remembrance. It is right to ask **God** to protect **His** own and to give them wisdom as they must deal with a difficult enemy day after day. We must ask **YHVH** that, if it is **His** will, **they** be delivered from **their**

bondage and suffering and reunited with **their** loved ones.[266]