

Who was Herod Agrippa II?

There are several different Herods mentioned in the New Testament. All of them are members of the Herod dynasty, rulers appointed by the powers in Rome to oversee Israel. Herod Agrippa II is the one who heard Paul's defense of the gospel and famously rejected Paul's appeal to be saved.

The godfather of the Herod clan was Herod the Great, the king when Jesus was born and one who tried to have Him killed (Matthew 2). Herod Antipas ruled during the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. He is the one who had John executed (Mark 6) and sat in judgment at one of Jesus' trials (Luke 23:7-12). Herod Agrippa I was king of Judea for a few years and the one who had James executed. His death is recorded in Acts 12.

Herod Agrippa II was only seventeen when his father, Herod Agrippa I, died. He was in Rome at the time and was favored by Emperor Claudius. Claudius kept Agrippa II in Rome for a few more years and then made him tetrarch of the Syrian kingdom called Chalcis and gave him the responsibility to supervise the temple in Jerusalem. Herod Agrippa II eventually gave up the territory of Chalcis but was granted the title of king and given more territory, including all that had been ruled by Herod Philip. Nero later added to his territory, including some of Galilee.

Herod Agrippa II lived with Bernice, who was herself in the Herodian line, being a daughter of Herod Agrippa I. She had been married to her uncle, Herod Pollio of Chalcis (not mentioned in Scripture), but after his death moved in with her brother, Agrippa II, in an incestuous relationship. Late in his career, Herod Agrippa II saw that tensions were rising between Rome and the Jews, and he tried unsuccessfully to prevent war. Ultimately, he sided with Rome, and he was expelled by his Jewish subjects. He lived out

the rest of his life in Rome. He was the last of Herod's line to be a king.

Herod Agrippa II makes a brief appearance in the New Testament in Acts 25 and 26. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and accused by the Jewish leaders of desecrating the temple. For Paul's protection, the centurion in charge had sent him under heavy guard to the Roman governor Felix in Caesarea (Acts 23). Felix, who happened to be married to Drusilla (a sister of both Bernice and Agrippa II), heard the charges brought by the Jewish leadership but deferred judgment, for he hoped that Paul would offer him some kind of bribe to be set free (Acts 23:25-26). After two years, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but Paul remained in prison because Felix did not want to anger the Jews (Acts 23:27).

Governor Festus wanted to clear up old court cases, so he entertained the accusations of the Jews and asked Paul if he would be willing to stand trial in Jerusalem. Paul realized he would have no chance there, so he invoked his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" (Acts 25:10-11). Festus had no choice but to send him to Caesar, which had the immediate result of preserving Paul from the Jewish leadership.

Festus, however, was perplexed as to what charges should be sent with Paul to Rome, so, when King Herod Agrippa II paid a visit to Caesarea, Festus discussed Paul's case with him, thinking that Agrippa might have more knowledge of the religious issues involved. Then Agrippa told Festus that he would like to hear from Paul himself, and Festus said,

“Tomorrow you will hear him” (Acts 25:22).

On the next day, with much pomp and circumstance, Festus, Agrippa II, and Bernice gather to hear Paul. Festus introduces Paul by saying, “King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him” (Acts 25:24-27).

Herod Agrippa II then gave Paul leave to speak for himself. “So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: ‘King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently’” (Acts 26:1-3). Paul then goes on to tell the story of his life as a persecutor of the church and how Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. He concludes with referencing prophecies that the Messiah would rise from the dead and that salvation would be provided to the Gentiles.

Governor Festus interrupted Paul’s defense at that point, shouting, “You are out of your mind, Paul! . . . Your great learning is driving you insane” (Acts 26:24). Paul replied, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus. . . . What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced

that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do” (verses 25-27). Then Herod Agrippa II said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” (verse 28). Paul’s reply shows the heart of an evangelist: “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains” (verse 29). At that, the royals left the room, convinced of Paul’s innocence. Herod Agrippa II said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (verse 32).

It is significant that Herod Agrippa II admits Paul had done nothing wrong and should by all rights be set free. With the possible exception of Herod Antipas who liked to listen to John—albeit for superstitious reasons—this is the only biblical record of a positive interaction between a Herodian king and Jesus and His church.

Herod Agrippa II also makes a statement to Paul that has sparked the imagination of millions of Christians. In the King James Version, Acts 26:28 is translated “Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” Many sermons over the years have been preached about the man who “almost” became a Christian but ultimately did not. The words of Agrippa II have become a cautionary tale of “almost” becoming a Christian, but waiting too long. A gospel song titled “Almost Persuaded” was written by prolific songwriter Philip Bliss in 1871 and has been sung in churches for several generations:

Almost persuaded now to believe;

Almost persuaded Christ to receive;

Seems now some soul to say,

Go, Spirit, go Thy way,
Some more convenient day
On Thee I'll call.

Almost persuaded, come, come today;
Almost persuaded, turn not away;
Jesus invites you here,
Angels are lingering near
Prayers rise from hearts so dear;
O wanderer, come!

Almost persuaded, harvest is past!
Almost persuaded, doom comes at last!
Almost cannot avail;
Almost is but to fail!
Sad, sad, that bitter wail—
Almost, but lost!

The sentiments expressed in the hymn are noble, and certainly the Bible warns about waiting because “today is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2; cf. Hebrews 3:7-15). However, the sermons and song are based on a poor translation of what Agrippa II actually said. There is no hint in Acts 25 that Agrippa was seriously considering becoming a Christian. In fact, a more accurate translation of what he said gives almost the opposite impression. The NIV accurately translates verse 28, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” In other words, Agrippa fully understood what Paul was trying to do, and he tells Paul plainly that it is not going to

happen, at least not in such a short time.

There is a lesson for us here on personal evangelism. Acts 25-26 gives a great example for believers to follow. Paul was in chains with his life and freedom on the line, but he did not shrink back from faithfully proclaiming the gospel to those in positions of power. While the number of people who are “almost persuaded” to believe but then turn away is disturbing, what should be even more troubling is the number of Christians who are “almost persuaded” to boldly speak for Christ when they are given the opportunity, only to meekly let the opportunity pass them by.