

Who was Herod Agrippa I?

The New Testament mentions several different Herods from Matthew 1 to Acts 26. Herod Agrippa I is one of the Roman-appointed rulers in Israel from the Herod dynasty.

Herod the Great was “king of the Jews” at Jesus’ birth and tried to have Him killed (Matthew 2). Herod Antipas was king during the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Antipas had John executed (Mark 6) and later declined to pass judgment on Jesus, sending Him back to Pilate (Luke 23:7-12). In Acts 4:27, Herod Antipas (simply called Herod) is mentioned as one of those guilty of the crucifixion of Jesus. Acts 12 speaks of Herod as a persecutor of the apostles, but this is a different Herod—Herod Agrippa I.

Herod Antipas was a ruler in Galilee, but Herod Agrippa I, leading the persecution in Acts, is ruling as king in Jerusalem. Luke, the writer of Acts, did not see the need to explain who the Herods were, as that would have been common knowledge to his readers. Also, Herod was a family name almost synonymous with “ruler,” so it could be used in much the same way that today a writer might speak of “the President” or “the sheriff” without stopping to explain each time that he might be speaking of a different person occupying the office.

Herod Agrippa I was the king of Judea from AD 41 to 44. He was a grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herod Antipas. A series of prefects (of which Pilate was one) had governed Judea as a Roman province for over 30 years. Rome placed Agrippa I on the throne as a client king for about 3 years. Agrippa had spent time in Rome where he developed a friendship with the emperor Tiberius and the future emperors Caligula and Claudius. These friendships helped him secure his ruling position. After Agrippa’s death, he was replaced with a Roman procurator.

As a client of Rome, the king of Judea's job was primarily to keep the peace. Herod Agrippa I knew that, if anything was troubling the Jewish population, appeasing them was in his best interest. Apparently, keeping the peace was Agrippa's reason for persecuting the church. Acts 12:1-3 reports, "King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also." Luke specifically attributes Peter's arrest to the fact that it pleased the Jews.

Peter did not die at Herod Agrippa's hands but was miraculously rescued from prison (Acts 12:5-17). When it was discovered that Peter had escaped, "there was no small commotion among the soldiers" (verse 18). Herod Agrippa was frustrated: "After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there" (verses 18-19).

It was in Caesarea that Herod Agrippa I met his demise. "[Agrippa] had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. After securing the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.' Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died" (Acts 12:20-23). From the information Luke gives, one might expect that Agrippa was suddenly overpowered by worms that consumed him

in a matter of seconds, and one can envision how this might be portrayed gruesomely in a Hollywood movie. But Luke does not say that Herod died immediately, only that he was “struck down” immediately. According to Josephus, Herod Agrippa I was immediately incapacitated by a severe pain his stomach; the pain lingered for five days before he died. The book of Acts tells us that the cause of death was worms (parasites, probably) directly from the hand of God.

The fate of Herod Agrippa I is a graphic reminder that it does not pay to fight against God (see also Psalm 1). While Herod the king is writhing on a bed of pain with worms in his gut, Peter the apostle is free to spread the gospel and serve the Lord. Herod died, “but the word of God continued to spread and flourish” (Acts 12:24).