

Title: Acts 12 and 13

Author: Dr. Craig Keener

Session 14

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Herod Agrippa I, James, Peter's escape, Rhoda, Elymas Barjesus, Sergius Paulus, Pisidian Antioch, magic, synagogue, Antioch

Abstract

This lecture covers Acts chapter 12 and chapter 13, focusing on the miraculous rescue of Peter from Herod Agrippa I's prison and the initiation of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey. Dr. Craig Keener provides detailed historical, geographic, and cultural context on Herod Agrippa's reign, his sudden death, and the layout of first-century Jerusalem, Cyprus, and Asia Minor. He also explores the spiritual significance of "power encounters" through the confrontation between Paul and Elymas the sorcerer in Paphos, as well as the transition of leadership from Barnabas to Paul. Ultimately, the lecture establishes the historical credibility of Luke's narrative by aligning it with Josephus's accounts and contemporary Roman archaeological data.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Transition in Acts (Acts 12-13)

- A. Luke's narrative brilliance: cutting back and forth between Peter and Paul during transitions.
- B. Famine relief context: Saul and Barnabas delivering relief from Antioch to Jerusalem (Acts 11:30) and returning in Acts 12:25.
- C. Session's dual focus: the final narrative about Peter/Jerusalem church in Caesarea/Jerusalem and the launch of the Antioch mission.

II. Peter's Arrest and Miraculous Deliverance (Acts 12:1-17)

A. The Reign of Herod Agrippa I (41–44 AD)

- 1. Family background: Grandson of Herod the Great, nephew of Herod Antipas, brother of Herodias.
- 2. Social status: First Jewish king with Hasmonean (Maccabean) blood; popular with Jewish citizens.
- 3. Political motives: Highly eager to please the conservative Judeans/Pharisees.

B. The Arrest and Martyrdom of James (Jacob)

1. James, the brother of John, is beheaded by the sword (the first apostolic martyr).
2. Power of life and death held directly by Agrippa I in the absence of a Roman governor.
3. Ignited Judean nationalism.

C. The Imprisonment of Peter

1. Arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (paralleling Jesus' arrest timeline in Luke 22).
2. Imprisonment location: Likely the fortress Antonia on the Temple Mount.
3. Guard security: Four squads of four soldiers (sixteen total); Peter chained to two soldiers inside with two guards outside.

D. The Miraculous Escape

1. Angelic intervention: Chains drop off; doors open "automatically" (by themselves).
2. Literary background of "automatic doors" and escaping chains (Euripides, Homer, Josephus).
3. Peter's initial disbelief: thought he was seeing a vision until entering the cold night air.

E. The Prayer Meeting at Mary's House (John Mark's Mother)

1. Social setting: Upper City of Jerusalem, a home of high means with an outer gate and a servant.
2. Family ties: Mary as the mother of John Mark (relative of Barnabas, who was a wealthy Levite).
3. Use of home churches: Christian meetings occurred in private homes for the first three centuries.
4. Surnames: Mark as a Latin name, indicating openness to Rome/diaspora.
5. The role of Rhoda (Rose): A servant who hears Peter knocking, forgets to open the door out of excitement, and is disbelieved by the praying church ("You're crazy" / "It's his angel").
6. Role of James (the Lord's brother): Devout leader, safe from Agrippa's persecution due to conservative style; Peter delegates news to him before departing.

III. The Arrogance and Death of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:18-24)

A. Execution of the guards: The four negligent guards executed by Agrippa to salvage his honor.

B. Dispute with Tyre and Sidon: Diplomatic delegation from Phoenicia seeking food imports from Judea.

C. The Theater in Caesarea:

1. Built by Herod the Great (foundations still stand today).
2. Crowd gathers on the Emperor's birthday (Claudius).
3. Agrippa wears dazzling royal robes (described by both Luke and Josephus).

D. Divine Judgment:

1. Flatterers hail him as a god; Agrippa accepts the worship instead of deflecting it.
2. Agrippa immediately collapses and dies at age 54 after five days of severe stomach pains (bowel disease and worms).

3. Worms as a culturally symbolic death for tyrants in antiquity.

IV. The Launching of the Gentile Mission from Antioch (Acts 12:25 - 13:3)

A. Return journey: Barnabas and Saul travel 400 miles back to Antioch, taking John Mark (likely a teenager).

B. Diversity of the Antioch Leadership (Prophets and Teachers):

1. Simeon called Niger: Roman surname, nickname meaning "black" (possibly a North African proselyte).
2. Lucius of Cyrene: Cyrene had a large Jewish population.
3. Manaen (Menachem): Grew up in the royal court with Herod Antipas (possibly a foster brother/wet nurse connection).
4. Barnabas and Saul: High status, educated leaders representing different geographic areas.

C. The Calling and Commissioning:

1. Holy Spirit speaks during a fast: "Set apart Barnabas and Saul".
2. Prophetic confirmation of callings they had already individually received.
3. Laying on of hands and financial sending by the church.

V. The Mission in Cyprus and the Power Encounter at Paphos (Acts 13:4-12)

A. Logistics of the Cyprus Journey:

1. Travel 15 miles to Seleucia, then sail 60 miles to Salamis on the eastern coast of Cyprus.
2. Large Jewish community in Salamis; visitors speak in local synagogues (historically corroborated by Paul's letters detailing synagogue beatings).
3. Journey across Cyprus to New Paphos (provincial capital) via the southern road.

B. Confrontation with Elymas Barjesus:

1. Barjesus: A Jewish magician/sorcerer attached to the governor's court.
2. Popularity of Jewish magicians in antiquity due to their access to the "hidden name of God".

C. Sergius Paulus, the Proconsul:

1. Roman aristocrat of the senatorial class, family originally from interior Asia Minor.
2. Luke's historical accuracy in using the correct local title "proconsul" (only 20% of proconsuls are epigraphically preserved).

D. The Power Encounter:

1. Elymas opposes Barnabas and Paul; Paul (called Paul first here, using his Roman citizen cognomen in a Roman environment) steps forward.
2. Paul pronounces temporary blindness on the magician (reminiscent of Paul's own experience).
3. The proconsul believes upon seeing the demonstration of God's power.
4. Transition of leadership: Leadership shifts from Barnabas and Saul to Paul and Barnabas.

E. Contemporary Power Encounters (Keener's Reflections):

1. Dr. Emmanuel Musunga's (chemist) story of the three occult-affiliate students in Brazzaville.
2. Dr. Rodney Ragwan's story of his grandfather's encounter with a spiritualist in Durban.
3. Conversions of witch doctors and sorcerers in modern Indonesia and the Philippines through spiritual power demonstrations.

VI. Transition to the Interior of Asia Minor (Acts 13:13-16)

A. Sailing to Perga in Pamphylia:

1. Land at Attalia and travel north to Perga (10 miles).
2. Correct geographic descriptions of Pamphylia Lysia district.

B. Traveling the Via Sebaste (Augustus Highway):

1. Broad, paved Roman military highway built to secure the interior.
2. Travel to Pisidian Antioch (a Roman colony with 5,000 descendants of military veterans).
3. Strategic reason to visit: Sergius Paulus' family estates were in this interior region; they likely possessed letters of recommendation from him.

C. Synagogue Preaching in Pisidian Antioch:

1. Sabbath reading cycle from the Torah and prophets.
2. Paul is invited to speak as a visiting Judean scholar trained under Gamaliel.
3. Platform posture: Standing to speak (normal convention in the diaspora, contrasting with Jesus sitting in Galilee).
4. Adaptation of rhetoric: Paul uses a scripture-laced exposition to appeal to the Jewish and God-fearer audience, demonstrating classical rhetorical adaptability.