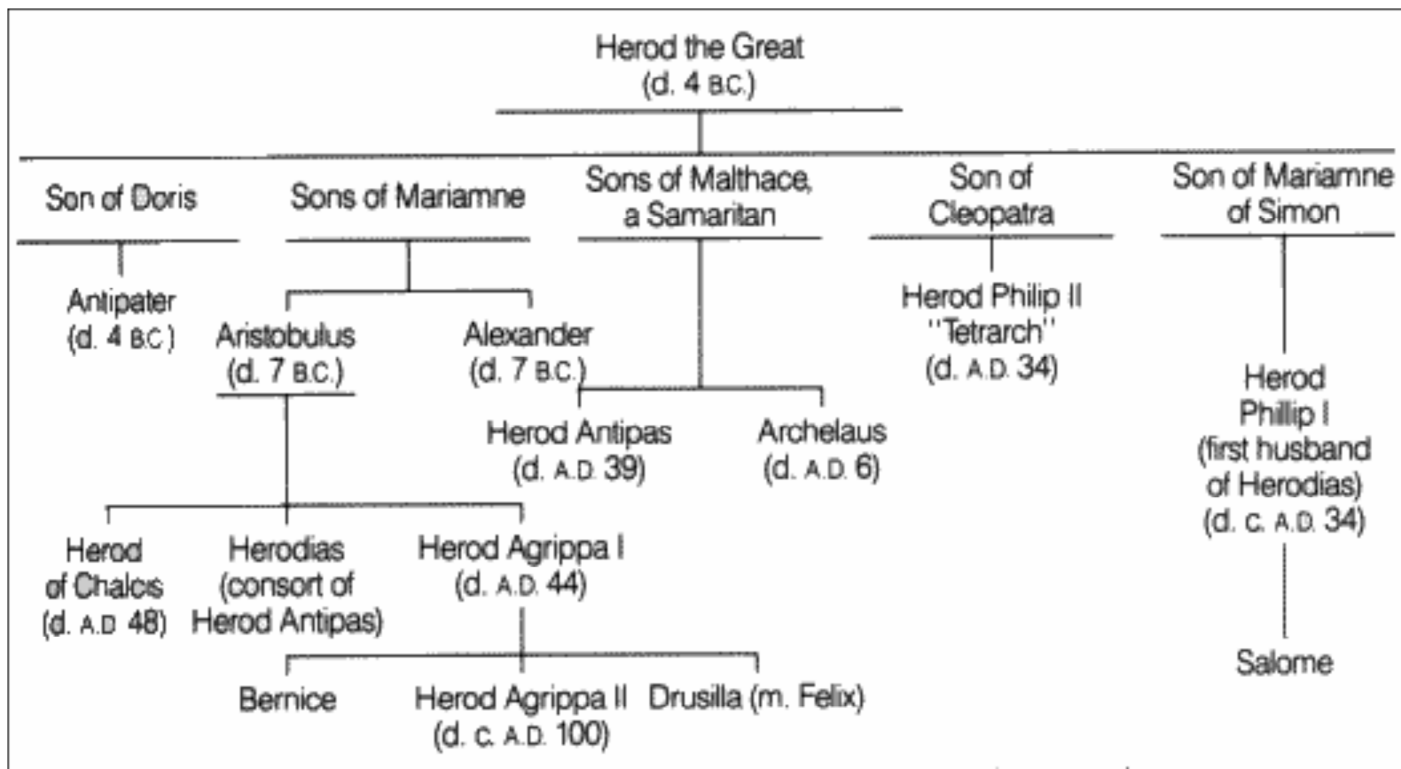


**ROMAN & JEWISH POLITICS DURING THE VERY EARLY NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD  
THE STORY OF HEROD AGRIPPA I**



**Mid 20's** Herod Agrippa (born 10 BC), was the grandson of King Herod "The Great." He was also an intimate friend of the imperial household, having grown up with the Emperor Tiberius's son, Drusus, as well as with Tiberius' handicapped nephew, Claudius (who would himself become emperor). After the sudden death of Drusus (in 23), Tiberius ordered that his dead son's friends stay away from the palace, since seeing them only reignited his grief. Thus, being barred from the imperial court, and being in desperate need to avoid a myriad of debt collectors who were after the large amount of money he had borrowed to maintain his extravagant lifestyle (he'd long before spent all his inheritance), Herod (now in his mid-30's) decided to leave Rome. First he went to Judea, where his family still had great influence. Later, he withdrew to a remote tower in Idumea, south of Hebron.

**Early 30's** Over time, Agrippa (now in his early 40's) became despondent, contemplating suicide. His wife convinced Herodias, Agrippa's older sister, to intervene. She convinced her husband, Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee, Samaria & Perea, to give him a government job as the ruler of the Galilean city of Tiberius. This worked out for a while, until Agrippa, inebriated at a state dinner in Tyre, publically insulted the Tetrarch & Herodias; to which he was reminded of his inability to stay out of debt; at which point Agrippa quit his job & moved on.

Agrippa next went to Syria, where, Flaccus, a friend from Rome was now governing. Unfortunately for Agrippa, his older brother Aristobulus also lived in Syria and was well aware of his brother's poor track record. He did what he could to dissuade the governor from putting any trust in him. When Aristobulus got wind of an illicit financial arrangement made between Agrippa & a group of Damascus petitioners before the Syrian judgment seat, he passed this information on to Flaccus, who immediately severed all ties with Agrippa.

**36 Spring** Arriving at the Galilean port city of Ptolemais, Agrippa (45 yrs) decided it was time to return to Italy and there to attempt contact with Emperor Tiberius. Having no cash, he dispatched his freedman to borrow 20,000 drachmae<sup>1</sup> from Agrippa's deceased mother's estate. When the executor learned the money was for Agrippa, he confiscated 2,500 drachmae<sup>2</sup> from the total for debts owed him by Agrippa.

Before his hired ship could sail all the way to Egypt (then to Rome) the Roman Praefect of Jamnia (a Judean port city) learned of his presence on board and demanded the repayment of the 300,000 drachmae<sup>3</sup> which Agrippa had borrowed from the imperial treasury. He promised to pay the next day, but that night cut the cables holding the ship in place and sailed off to Alexandria.

At Alexandria, Agrippa begged the Jewish governor of Egypt to loan him 200,000 drachmae<sup>4</sup>. He refused the loan to Agrippa, but agreed to loan the money to Agrippa's wife, out of amazement for her commitment to him. He provided a small portion of the loan immediately & arranged for the rest to be delivered at Puteoli (a port in southern Italy), in order to keep Agrippa from spending it prior to his arrival there. When Agrippa sailed for Italy, his wife & family returned to Judea.

Arriving back in Italy, Agrippa arranged to visit with Emperor Tiberius on the Isle of Capri. That visit was immediately cancelled when Tiberius got word the next day from Judea about Agrippa skipping out on his imperial debt. He was barred from the Emperor's presence until the debt was paid in full. Agrippa managed to convince Antonia, mother of his child-hood friend Claudius (and the best friend of his own deceased mother) to loan him the full sum. This got him back into the imperial court, with Tiberius even assigning responsibility for his 16 year old grandson. Agrippa then turned around and borrowed 1 million drachmae<sup>5</sup> from a freedman of Tiberius, repaid his debt to Antonia, used the rest to become a very close friend of her 23 year old grandson, Gaius (Caligula="Little Boot"), who was also Tiberius' grand-nephew, whom he was openly grooming as the next emperor.

**[Summer?]** One day, while traveling in a chariot with Gaius, Agrippa prayed out loud, "O that the day would once come when this old fellow will die, and name thee for the governor of the habitable earth! For then this Tiberius, his grandson, would be no hindrance, but would be taken off by thee, and that earth would be happy, and I happy, also."<sup>6</sup> This remark was overheard by the chariot driver.

**[OCT?]** Herod caught his chariot driver stealing some of his clothing. After the man was arrested, he told the authorities that he had important information for the Emperor. He passed on what he had heard Agrippa say in the chariot. Agrippa was immediately arrested.

Chained for transport to prison, and still wearing his purple fringed toga, an owl landed in the tree above his head. A German prisoner, who claimed to have a prophetic gift, told him that this was an omen indicating that he would soon be freed from his chains and promoted to high office. But he also told him that the next time an owl landed above him like this, he would have only 5 days left to live.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Worth about \$1.6 million in modern buying power.

<sup>2</sup> Worth about \$200,000 in modern buying power.

<sup>3</sup> Worth about \$24 million in modern buying power.

<sup>4</sup> Worth about \$16 million in modern buying power.

<sup>5</sup> Worth about \$80 million in modern buying power.

<sup>6</sup> Antiquities 18.6.6.

<sup>7</sup> Antiquities 18.6.7.

**37** [16 MAR] Tiberius (77 yrs) died. Gaius Caligula (24 yrs) became the new emperor.

[Spring] One of Gaius' early acts as emperor was to release Agrippa from prison, gifting him with a gold chain of the same weight as the iron prison chain he had worn for the past six months. He gave him the Tetrachy of the recently deceased Herod Philip (E & NE of the Sea of Galilee), and promised him the Tetrarchy of the Lysanias, (N & NE of the Sea of Galilee).<sup>8</sup>

**38** [Spring/Summer] When Agrippa returned to the Middle East with such honors, his sister, Herodias, could hardly stand it. She began urging her husband to go to Rome and request for himself the title of his late father (Herod "The Great") - "King of the Jews."

**39** [Spring/Summer] Herod Antipas finally gave in to Herodias' wishes. They travelled to Italy in order to meet with Emperor Gaius to make the request. Learning of their plans, Agrippa went ahead of them & told his friend Caius that Herod Antipas had been involved with Sejanus (the traitor executed back in 31) & that he was now involved with the Parthians (the sworn enemies of Rome). Caius immediately stripped Herod Antipas of his tetrarchy (Galilee, Samaria & Perea) & his wealth, giving it all to Agrippa. He then banished Herod Antipas to Lyons (France) for the balance of his life. When reminded that Herodias was Agrippa's sister, she was given the option of divorcing her husband and remaining a free, independent woman. She chose exile & all her wealth was given to Agrippa as well.

**40** The next crisis in which Agrippa played a role began in Egypt, where the Greek inhabitants began complaining that the Jewish inhabitants were not showing proper deference to the emperor by erecting statues of him in the style of a god.<sup>9</sup>

[Summer/Fall] Representatives of the pro-statue faction went to Rome to bring the issue to Gaius' attention. Gaius sent Petronius to the Middle East as the new Legate of Syria, with specific order to place divine statues of the emperor within the Jerusalem Temple. If opposed, he was to annihilate the opposition and sell the remainder of the Jews into slavery.

[Fall/Winter] With three Roman legions & a large Syrian auxiliary force, Petronius arrived at Ptolemais, where he ordered them into their winter quarters, intending to accomplish his task the following spring. Tens of thousands of Jews soon arrived at Ptolemais, begging him not to do what he had come to do. Travelling to Tiberius, Galilee, crowds of a similar size gathered for more than 40 days, petitioning him not to carry out Gaius' orders. Aristobulus, the brother of Agrippa, along with other Jewish leaders, convinced Petronius to risk his own life by writing to Gaius & asking him to revoke his order.

[Meanwhile, back at Rome] Agrippa (50 yrs) invited Gaius to a very extravagant banquet & after many drinks requested a special favor of him – to revoke the order regarding the placement of his divine statues in the Jerusalem Temple. Shocked by the audacity of his friend, he nonetheless, issued an order telling Petronius not to install the statues if he had not yet done so.

[Winter] When Petronius' letter arrived at Rome, Gaius was incensed and sent back an order for Petronius to commit suicide for delaying in carrying out his order.

**41** [24 JAN] Gaius (28 yrs) became the first Roman Emperor to be assassinated. The Praetorian Guard installed his 50 year old cousin, Claudius (Agrippa's child-hood friend), as the new emperor. Agrippa acted as Claudius' emissary to the Senate, who were hesitant to accept him as emperor. For this assistance he was awarded control of the balance of his grandfather's (Herod "The Great's") kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wars 2.9.6 & Antiquities 18.6.10.

<sup>9</sup> Wars 2.10 & Antiquities 18.8.

<sup>10</sup> Wars 2.11.5 & Antiquities 19.5.1.

**41 [Winter]** Because of storms in the Med, Petronius got word of Gaius' death 27 days before he received Gaius' final letter to him.

Claudius issued two special decrees (one for Egypt & another for the rest of the Jews) condemning the actions of Caius & affirming Roman protection of Jewish religious rights.

**[Spring/Summer]** Herod Agrippa arrived at Jerusalem as the new "King of the Jews." He was very careful to observe all the Jewish religious customs, apparently even paying the costs for those finishing their Nazirite vows at that time.<sup>11</sup> He ordered a gold copy of his own gold chain placed above the Temple Treasury as a public reminder of his change of fortune. He also suspended housing taxes & cooperated with Petronius in punishing some Greeks who had forcibly set up an image of Gaius in synagogue at Doris.<sup>12</sup> He was very much trying to be loved by the Jews.

**44 [Passover (APR/MAY)]** All this sets the stage for Herod Agrippa's deadly actions against the apostles James & Peter, as recorded in Acts 12:1-19.

[Summer] Acts 12:20-23 tells the story of Herod Agrippa's death at Caesarea. It is interesting to read Josephus' account of what happened after the king failed to rebuke the people for hailing him as a god-like figure.

"Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But, as he presently afterwards 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. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner."

"When he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace; and the rumor went abroad everywhere, that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation.

"Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign; for he reigned four years under Caius Caesar, three of them were over Philip's tetrarchy only, and on the fourth he had that of Herod added to it; and he reigned besides those, three years under the reign of Claudius Caesar: in which time he reigned over the forementioned countries, and also had Judea added to them, as also Samaria and Cesarea. The revenues that he received out of them were very great, no less than twelve millions of drachmae.<sup>13</sup> Yet did he borrow great sums from others; for he was so very liberal, that his expenses exceeded his incomes; and his generosity was boundless.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Compare this to the advice given to Paul by James in Acts 21:17-26.

<sup>12</sup> *Antiquities* 19.6.1-4.

<sup>13</sup> Worth about \$960 million in modern buying power.

<sup>14</sup> *Antiquities* 19.8.2.