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The Witness of the Worm

Text: Acts 12:20-24

There are two A s that will always get you in trouble: anger and arrogance. Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great (ca. 9 BC- AD 44), is marked by both.

**Anger**

Herod was very angry (20)

*Very angry is* [thumomacheo](https://www.preceptaustin.org/acts-12-commentary#angry) *(*[2371](http://studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=2371)*)(from thumós = wrath, indignation, passionate heat + máchomai = to fight) which is found only here in the Bible and means literally "to carry on war with great animosity" (to fight fiercely), to have a hot quarrel, to be greatly offended, to be furious, to enraged against, to be exasperated, very angry. "Highly displeased" is too mild. The* [present tense](https://www.preceptaustin.org/greek_quick_reference_guide#present) *describes this as Herod's continual attitude* (from [preceptaustin.org](http://preceptaustin.org)). Herod was apparently in a dispute with the cities of Tyre and Sidon, over their food supply, which the king controlled. Herod is an angry, controlling man (20).

We’ll see his **arrogance** later in the text.

**Orator**

Herod was, apparently, a skilled orator (21).

People began to deify the skilled orator (22). I understand how this could happen. I have sat under the spell of an electrifying orator. I have heard women and men handle the language with skill and infuse their rhetoric with such passion that I found it difficult to leave my seat after the speech. The first time I heard the late Pastor Frederick Sampson of Detroit, I sat in my seat, frozen. It was so thrilling. I have heard recordings of Winston Churchill. In his history of World War II entitled "The Storm of War," Andrew Roberts [writes](http://www.npr.org/2012/07/14/156720829/winston-churchills-way-with-words):

"Winston Churchill managed to combine the most magnificent use of English — usually short words, Anglo-Saxon words, Shakespearean. And also, this incredibly powerful delivery. And he did it at a time when the world was in such peril from Nazism, that every word mattered."

I have heard in, in person, orators like Jesse Jackson and Gardner Taylor and Bryan Stevenson. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 17-minute *I Have A Dream* speech still thrills listeners today, nearly 56 years after it was delivered. It would be tempting to raise these orators up to the level of a god. However, I *know* I am listening to a mere mortal. As compelling as these communicators might be, they are not God!!!!

**Arrogance**

In this text, the judgement of God was meted out on a man who accepted glory that belonged to Another (23). Herod was not judged because he was a *skilled orator*. God *gave* Herod his oratory skill. Herod was judged, says the text, because **he did not give glory to God.**

Isaiah 42:8

*I am the Lord, that is My name*

*And My glory I will not give to another,*

*Nor My praise to carved images.*

(An aside; this passage in Isaiah is a clear statement of the deity of Christ. If God will not give His glory to another, yet the glory of God rests on Jesus [John 17:1-5], Jesus must not be “an other”. Jesus must be God.)

May I remind you of Matthew 5:16?

*Let your light so shine before humanity that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*

You and I have significant skills and abilities and gifts. We are grateful to be competent in many areas. It is even permissible to celebrate achievement in those areas. **Celebration** was not the offense here. **Competency** was not the issue here. At issue is the tendency of all of us, Herods that we are, to accept glory.

The glory that might come to us from our Herod-like orations or our effective light-shining and salt-being, is to be given back to God. The glory is not ours. We should be pointing people to our God!!

The text is not clear as to how the worms destroyed Herod. Did he have internal worms and die by an intestinal disease? Did worms cover him in a plague-like infestation and literally eat him? The text is not clear, but a non-biblical historical source contains an account of this event. Josephus, the historian, gave a detailed account of this event in his writings. He tells us that the worms were internal.

[Antiquities 19.8.2](http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/josephus/ant19.html): […]and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto reverenced thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward 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 … 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.

(End of quote)

The death by worms was a witness to Herod’s lack of humility. The worms which consumed Herod are a reminder to us all the importance of humility and appropriate deflection. I say appropriate deflection because there are times when we receive a compliment and the only proper response is “thank you”. There are other times when people, wishing to encourage us, say things which should *only* be said to God.

“You're awesome”.

“I adore you”

“You are the best presenter I have ever heard”

“I praise you”

Accepting such well-intentioned and perhaps misguided comments can lead to death.

William H. Willimon in his commentary on Acts (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, p. 114):

*Herod becomes food for worms. God is not nice to those who try to be God. Hitler perishes huddled in a bunker in Berlin. Mussolini is hung upside down. Thus, ever to tyrants. Next to this ugly scene of Herod being devoured by worms, Luke laconically remarks, ‘But the word of God grew and multiplied’.* (End of quote)

Luke, the writer of Acts closes this section with a simple statement. It is one of six summary statements in Acts. May I show them to you? (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31).

But (despite this episode in Herod’s life) the word of God grew and multiplied. What a contrast: Herod is now silent; food for worms. The word of the Lord is continually being proclaimed. In her pronouncement, called the Magnificat, Mary, in Luke 1:52, says of God, *He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly.* Herod is exhibit A.

**Closing**

In an interview in March 1966, John Lennon, of the British band, the Beatles, said that the public was more infatuated with the Beatles than with Jesus. he suggested that the Christian faith was declining and might be outlasted by rock music. Well, John Lennon is dead and rock music has certainly not superseded or eradicated the Christian faith.

Isaac Watt’s 18th century hymn said it well:

*1 Jesus shall reign where’er the sun does its successive journeys run, His kingdom stretches from shore to shore,*

*Till moons shall wax and wane no more…*

The worms silenced the arrogant orator who did not glorify God.

May no worms, figurative or literal be a witness against us. Let us give God, and God alone, the glory due Him!

Hallelujah!!!!

Amen