

Short Story Structure in Acts 12

The Story of Peter's Rescue

To illustrate the narrative and artistic qualities of Acts, I have chosen to explicate the story of Peter's rescue from prison as told in chapter 12. The reading that I give to this specimen will illustrate the kind of richness that other parts of the book also possess.

The appeal of the story derives partly from the story pattern itself, the rescue motif. This archetype provides the structure for story, which can be organized around the threefold pattern of the antecedents, occurrence, and aftermath of the rescue. The opening paragraph of the story establishes the situation that makes the rescue possible:

'About that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So, Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.'

Here is the first necessary ingredient of a rescue story – the danger or threat that renders the hero of the story helpless. To heighten the danger, this story locates the threat in a villain, the archetypal evil king with absolute power to annihilate people whom he dislikes.

Almost every detail in the first four verses adds to the threat and the seeming helplessness of the situation. In the New Testament, the very name Herod is synonymous with terror, with the epithet Herod the king adding the connotations of anti-Christian tyranny. To say that this king laid violent hands upon Christians is to give us a physical sense of the terror. The mention in the opening verse of the antagonism between Herod and the church introduces the plot conflict between other religions and Christianity, between the power structure of a small, persecuted religious minority.

In verse 2, the account of the murder of James is callously brief, suggesting something of the swiftness of the murder itself. The execution is made vivid to our imaginations when we are told that James was killed with the sword. Verse 3 enlarges on this hostility against the Christians by indicating the Jews' approval of Herod's crime. All the Jewish hostility delineated in the Gospels and the book of Acts here becomes aimed against Peter, the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem. Herod is suddenly the most dangerous type of villainous king – the one who hopes to win favour with his constituency by killing leaders of a religious minority.

Verse 4 adds to the spectacle by locating us within the echoing walls of a prison, with the hopelessness of Peter's situation intensified by the enormous safeguard of four squads of soldiers to guard him. There may be a hint of foreshadowing here, making us wonder if Herod suspected that something might thwart his plans to kill Peter when the Passover was finished. The further reference in Herod waiting until the Passover was over to bring him out to the people draws the terror to a crescendo, with the dread reinforced by our awareness that this desire to avoid bloodshed on the Passover was what happened at the execution of Jesus.

The first four verses of the story have been an ever-expanding vision of terror and helplessness. Verse 5 has a sudden calming effect. Counteracting all the terror are such spiritual resources as prayer, a caring group of Christians, and God in heaven. The evocative last clause introduces a solemn note of hope into the vision of terror: *'but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.'*

From the general situation we move to the critical last night of the Passover, the night before the planned execution. In verse 6 the writer renders the helpless plight of Peter in full visual detail:

'The very night when Herod was about to bring him out, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.'

It is no wonder that painters have seen the visual potential of the moment. Escaping is obviously the last thing that Peter expected. We notice also the inspiring picture of the hero peaceful in the face of death.

Verse 7 introduces the third essential ingredient in a rescue story, in addition to the threat and the helpless victim, namely, the agent of rescue. In this story, it is an angel, resplendent in supernatural light:

'And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands.'

The shining divine light is one of the great archetypes of the Bible. Here that supernatural aura is mingled with something as mundane as striking a sleeping person to awaken him.

The description of the rescue continues in the next two verses:

'And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals". And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your mantle around you and follow me". And he went out and followed him, he did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision.'

The very details that the storyteller gives us here convey how the benumbed Peter moves as if in a dream. Peter is childlike in the scene. With just a few details the writer makes the event come alive.

In verse 10 the supernatural or miraculous merges with everyday physical world:

'When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and passed on through one street: and immediately the angel left him.'

We have all stood in an empty city street in the darkness and known something of the feelings of fear, vulnerability, loneliness, and exposure that drives one to seek refuge. This is the situation of Peter in his state of semi-consciousness.

Only in verse 11 does the recipient of this miraculous rescue come to full consciousness:

'And Peter came to himself, and said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting."

It has taken Peter about as long to gain awareness as it does a teenager at the breakfast table. Here is his moment of epiphany (insight) into the meaning of the event. The very brevity of the account of the rescue, with everything concentrated in a few vivid details, takes us through the swift excitement of the event itself.

The story of what happens next is likewise so famous that it is impossible to retell the story of the rescue without this sequel. It is the story of the interrupted prayer meeting:

'When he realised this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a maid named Rhoda came to answer.

Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and told that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, "You are mad" But she insisted that it was so. They said, "It is his angel"! But Peter continued knocking; and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell this to James and to the brethren". Then he departed and went to another place.'

What we have here is a delightful foil (contrast and echo) to the story of the rescue. After the terror of the prison, we have the safe and homey associations of the house of Mary. Instead of the sinister gates and soldiers of the prison, we have a maid named Rhoda answering the door of the gateway. (A student incidentally identified Rhoda as the archetypal airhead, though other characters in the episode qualify for the same title.)

After all the tension of what happens in the prison during the rescue, we have the undercurrent of humour in this episode, climaxing in the absurd suggestion that it is Peter's angel knocking at the door. After the swift, purposeful actions of the rescue, we now witness confusion of action at the prayer meeting. The opened gates of the prison contrast with the gate that remains closed to Peter here, as Peter finds it easier to get out of prison than into a prayer meeting. The angel had led Peter out of prison; here the hapless Peter is momentarily identified as his own angel. In the first story, Peter was amazed; here the people around him are said to be amazed.

Putting these two episodes beside each other, we find the epitome of two tendencies that recur throughout the Bible. On the one hand we encounter miraculous, more-than-earthly activity. On the other, we recognize actions so familiar to our own experience that they could have happened in our own family or neighbourhood or church during a typical week. The Bible as a whole is filled with both types of material.

At first sight we might think that the story of Peter's rescue is complete with his exit from the scene. But it is a narrative principle that an action is complete only when the issues that have been introduced are resolved. The story opened not with Peter, but with the wicked Herod and his elaborate intentions to persecute the church. At the end of the story, therefore, we return to Herod. The first piece of narrative business is to show us the aftermath of the rescue back at the prison the next morning:

'Now when day came, there was no small stir among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. And when Herod had sought for him and could not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and remained there.'

As readers, we are naturally curious to know the repercussions of the miraculous rescue in the camp of the enemy. In keeping with the logic of a miracle story; this scene helps to authenticate the miracle. We note, too, another element in the coherence of the story: Peter's appearance had caused commotion at Mary's house, and now his disappearance causes commotion at the prison and court.

Balancing the opening reference to Herod's grand and evil schemes against the church the story ends with an account of Herod's untimely death:

'Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and they came to him as a body, and having persuaded Blatus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and made an oration to them. And the people shouted, 'The voice of a god, and not of man!'" Immediately an angel of the Lord smote him because he did not give God the glory; and he was eaten by worms and died.'

There is a good narrative rationale for the inclusion of this material. The chapter began with Herod's wicked experiment in living, which consisted of an attempt to exalt himself by killing Christian leaders. In order for this story to be complete, we need to see the outcome of the experiment.

Here at the end, Herod's plan of action is put into the supernatural framework of the Book of Acts as a whole, where God is the chief actor and where the great conflict between good and evil is more than earthly and human. Suddenly the story takes on the colouring of the holy war in Old Testament Israelite history, where pagan kings are portrayed as God's enemies. We notice also the appearance of an angel in these verses, another link with the story of Peter's rescue. The angel appeared to Peter and smote him to initiate deliverance; he smites Herod to initiate judgment. Similarly, Peter had earlier dressed for a rescue, whereas Herod dresses for a condemnation.

The picture that Luke draws of Herod in these verses may have been influenced by his familiarity with Greek tragedy. Greek tragedy is always about a powerful figure, usually a king, who is guilty of some great flaw of character. In Greek tragedy, moreover, this flaw is almost always some form of *hubris*, or overweening pride. Godlike pride is the most acute form. It was a spectacle that moved the ancient Greeks deeply, and here we find it in brief but vivid form. Josephus recorded the same event, but in more detail. Luke's account seems more governed by the literary pattern of tragedy than the physician's viewpoint.

In this account of a king eaten by worms, Herod becomes a physical as well as moral monstrosity; a walking piece of rotten flesh covered by a symbolic robe.

The story ends with a brief and understated counterpoint to the story of judgment that precedes it: *'But the Word of God grew and multiplied.'* (v.24). Here, in fact, is the hidden or spiritual plot in the story of Acts – the mighty acts of God contending with forces hostile to the Christian gospel.

The narrative logic of **Acts 12** is impeccable. There is no detail that does not belong to the overall action. We see here in microcosm the type of narrative artistry that permeates the entire book.

What themes, finally, emerge from this well-told story? The truth that literature conveys is often representational truth – truth to the way things are in human experience. At least our themes are embodied in the story we have been considering:

1. The reality and availability of a God who is more powerful than the threats that befall His followers.
2. The power of evil in the great spiritual warfare of the ages.
3. The smallness of human faith and expectation in the daily routine of Christian living.
4. The monstrosity of human rebellion against God and His purposes.

These realities are conveyed not as ideas, but as images – images of prison and light, an open gate and a closed door, a maid named Rhoda and royal robes glittering with gold over rotten flesh.

The story of Peter's rescue epitomizes the Book of Acts. It is an adventure story that combines everyday realism with a miracle. The story features the heroic character Peter and is a chapter in the ongoing struggle between the early Christian church and its opponents. The artistry with which the story is told is amazing.