

Ancient Historiography and the Book of Acts

Compare the descriptions of the death of Judas in Matt 27:3-10 and Acts 1:15-26

1. List the similarities and differences between these two accounts in Matthew and Acts.

2. It is not uncommon to hear the suggestion that both accounts of Judas' death are factual and that Judas fell after he hanged himself. Does this sort of reasoning fit with the data? Is it possible to determine which account is more historical? What criteria would we use to determine historicity? Do the similarities preserve an historical core, or perhaps the dissimilarities are so great as to rule out an historical basis? How do you offer an explanation that these two passages can claim to be describing the same death event and yet with so many differences?

3. Read the article, "How did Judas die, by hanging or falling down?" and "The death of Judas." What is your response to these two articles? Do you agree or disagree with the analysis? Why?

4. List the characteristics of a type of death you would expect a villain to suffer in a modern film.

5. Read the following 6 passages. Why and how did people die in these passages? What is the common literary motif used by ancient historiographers to describe how wicked people died?

6. Return to Matthew and Acts. Was there dishonour in or stigma attached to committing suicide in antiquity? What does the passage in Acts suggest? Why did the author of Acts choose to describe the death of Judas in this way?

1) The Death of King Joram

2 Chro 21:18-19

2) The Death of Antiochus Epiphanes

2 Maccabees 9:5-7, 9-10, 28

2 About that time Antiochus retreated in disgrace from the region of Persia.

3 He had entered the city called Persepolis and attempted to rob the temple and gain control of the city. Thereupon the people had swift recourse to arms, and Antiochus' men were routed, so that in the end Antiochus was put to flight by the natives and forced to beat a shameful retreat.

4 On his arrival in Ecbatana, he learned what had happened to Nicanor and to Timothy's forces.

5 Overcome with anger, he planned to make the Jews suffer for the injury done by those who had put him to flight. Therefore he ordered his charioteer to drive without stopping until he finished the journey. Yet the condemnation of Heaven rode with him, since he said in his arrogance, "I will make Jerusalem the common graveyard of the Jews as soon as I arrive there."

6 So the all-seeing Lord, the God of Israel, struck him down with an unseen but incurable blow; for scarcely had he uttered those words when he was seized with excruciating pains in his bowels and sharp internal torment,

7 a fit punishment for him who had tortured the bowels of others with many barbarous torments.

8 Far from giving up his insolence, he was all the more filled with arrogance. Breathing fire in his rage against the Jews, he gave orders to drive even faster. As a result he hurtled from the dashing chariot, and every part of his body was racked by the violent fall.

9 Thus he who previously, in his superhuman presumption, thought he could command the waves of the sea, and imagined he could weigh the mountaintops in his scales, was now thrown to the ground and had to be carried on a litter, clearly manifesting to all the power of God.

10 The body of this impious man swarmed with worms, and while he was still alive in hideous torments, his flesh rotted off, so that the entire army was sickened by the stench of his corruption.

11 Shortly before, he had thought that he could reach the stars of heaven, and now, no one could endure to transport the man because of this intolerable stench.

At last, broken in spirit, he began to give up his excessive arrogance, and to gain some understanding, under the scourge of God, for he was racked with pain unceasingly.

12

When he could no longer bear his own stench, he said, "It is right to be subject to God, and not to think one's mortal self divine."

13

Then this vile man vowed to the Lord, who would no longer have mercy on him,

14

that he would set free the holy city, toward which he had been hurrying with the intention of leveling it to the ground and making it a common graveyard;

15

he would put on perfect equality with the Athenians all the Jews, whom he had judged not even worthy of burial, but fit only to be thrown out with their children to be eaten by vultures and wild animals;

16

he would adorn with the finest offerings the holy temple which he had previously despoiled; he would restore all the sacred vessels many times over; and would provide from his own revenues the expenses required for the sacrifices.

17

Besides all this, he would become a Jew himself and visit every inhabited place to proclaim there the power of God.

18

But since God's punishment had justly come upon him, his sufferings were not lessened, so he lost hope for himself and wrote the following letter to the Jews in the form of a supplication. It read thus: Death of Antiochus

19

"To my esteemed Jewish citizens, Antiochus, their king and general, sends hearty greetings and best wishes for their health and happiness.

20

If you and your children are well and your affairs are going as you wish, I thank God very much, for my hopes are in heaven.

21

Now that I am ill, I recall with affection the esteem and good will you bear me. On returning from the regions of Persia, I fell victim to a troublesome illness; so I thought it necessary to form plans for the general welfare of all.

22

Actually, I do not despair about my health, since I have great hopes of recovering from my illness.

23

Nevertheless, I know that my father, whenever he went on campaigns in the hinterland, would name his successor,

24

so that, if anything unexpected happened or any unwelcome news came, the people throughout the realm would know to whom the government had been entrusted, and so not be disturbed.

25

I am also bearing in mind that the neighboring rulers, especially those on the borders of our kingdom, are on the watch for opportunities and waiting to see what will happen. I have therefore appointed as king my son Antiochus, whom I have often before entrusted and commended to most of you, when I made hurried visits to the outlying provinces. I have written to him the letter copied below.

26

Therefore I beg and entreat each of you to remember the general and individual benefits you have received, and to continue to show good will toward me and my son.

27

I am confident that, following my policy, he will treat you with mildness and kindness in his relations with you."

28

So this murderer and blasphemer, after extreme sufferings, such as he had inflicted on others, died a miserable death in the mountains of a foreign land.

29

His foster brother Philip brought the body home; but fearing Antiochus' son, he later withdrew into Egypt, to Ptolemy Philometor.

3) The Suicidal Death of Razis

2 Maccabees 14:37-46

37

A certain Razis, one of the elders of Jerusalem, was denounced to Nicanor as a patriot. A man highly regarded, he was called a father of the Jews because of his love for them.

38

In the early days of the revolt, he had been convicted of Judaism, and had risked body and life in his ardent zeal for it.

39

Nicanor, to show his detestation of the Jews, sent more than five hundred soldiers to arrest him.

40

He thought that by arresting such a man he would deal the Jews a hard blow.

41

But when these troops, on the point of capturing the tower, were forcing the outer gate and calling for fire to set the door ablaze, Razis, now caught on all sides, turned his sword against himself,

42

preferring to die nobly rather than fall into the hands of vile men and suffer outrages unworthy of his noble birth.

43

In the excitement of the struggle he failed to strike exactly. So while the troops rushed in through the doors, he gallantly ran up to the top of the wall and with manly courage threw himself down into the crowd.

44

But as they quickly drew back and left an opening, he fell into the middle of the empty space.

45

Still breathing, and inflamed with anger, he got up and ran through the crowd, with blood gushing from his frightful wounds.

46

Then, standing on a steep rock, as he lost the last of his blood, he tore out his entrails and flung them with both hands into the crowd, calling upon the Lord of life and of spirit to give these back to him again. Such was the manner of his death.

4) The Suicidal Death of Cato

Appian, *Civil Wars*, 2.14.98-99

98 When these facts became known at Utica some three days later, and as Caesar was marching right against that place, a general flight began. Cato did not detain anybody. He gave ships to all the nobility who asked for them, but himself adhered firmly to his post. When the inhabitants of Utica promised to intercede for him before doing so for themselves, he answered with a smile that he did not need any intercessors with Caesar, and that Caesar knew it very well. Then he placed his seal on all the public property and gave the accounts of each kind to the magistrates of Utica. Toward evening he bathed and dined. He ate in a sitting posture,³⁹ as had been his custom since Pompey's p409death. He changed his habits in no respect. He partook of the dinner, neither more nor less than usual. He conversed with the others present concerning those who had sailed away and inquired whether the wind was favourable and whether they would make sufficient distance before Caesar should arrive the next morning. Nor did he alter any of his habits when he retired to rest, except that he embraced his son rather more affectionately than usual. As he did not find his dirk in its accustomed place by his couch, he exclaimed that he had been betrayed by his servants to the enemy. "What weapon," he asked, "shall I use if I am attacked in the night?" When they besought him to do no violence to himself but to go to sleep without his dirk, he replied still more plausibly, "Could I not strangle myself with my clothing if I wished to, or knock my brains out against the wall, or throw myself headlong to the ground, or destroy myself by holding my breath?" Much more he said to the same purport until he persuaded them to bring back his dirk. When it had been put in its place he called for Plato's treatise on the soul and began to read.

99 When Plato's dialogue had come to an end and when he thought that those who were stationed at the doors were asleep, he stabbed himself under the breast. His intestines protruded and the attendants heard a groan and rushed in. Physicians replaced his intestines, which were still uninjured, in his body, and after sewing up the wound tied a bandage around it. When Cato came to himself he dissembled again. Although he blamed himself for the insufficiency of the wound, he expressed thanks p411to those who had saved him and said that he only needed sleep. The attendants then retired, taking the dirk with them, and closed the door, thinking that he had become quiet. Cato after feigning sleep, tore off the bandage with his hands without making any noise, opened the suture of the wound, enlarged it with his nails like a wild beast, plunged his fingers into his stomach, and tore out his entrails until he died, being then about fifty years of age. He was considered the most steadfast of all men in upholding any opinion that he had once espoused and in adhering to justice, rectitude, and morality, not as a matter of custom merely, but rather from a high-souled

philosophy. He had married Marcia, the daughter of Philippus, as a girl; was extremely fond of her, and she had borne him children. Nevertheless, he gave her to Hortensius, one of his friends,— who desired to have children but was married to a childless wife,— until she bore a child to him also, when Cato took her back to his own house as though he had merely lent her. Such a man was Cato, and the Uticans gave him a magnificent funeral. Caesar said that Cato had grudged him the opportunity for a deed of honour,⁴⁰ but when Cicero pronounced an encomium on him which he styled *the Cato*, Caesar wrote an answer to it which he called *the Anti-Cato*.

5) The Death of Aristobulus

Josephus, *War*, 1.70-84; also referred to as Chapter 3:1-6

CHAPTER 3.

HOW ARISTOBULUS WAS THE FIRST THAT PUT A DIADEM ABOUT HIS HEAD; AND AFTER HE HAD PUT HIS MOTHER AND BROTHER TO DEATH, DIED HIMSELF, WHEN HE HAD REIGNED NO MORE THAN A YEAR.

1. FOR after the death of their father, the elder of them, Aristobulus, changed the government into a kingdom, and was the first that put a diadem upon his head, four hundred seventy and one years and three months after our people came down into this country, when they were set free from the Babylonian slavery. Now, of his brethren, he appeared to have an affection for Antigonus, who was next to him, and made him his equal; but for the rest, he bound them, and put them in prison. He also put his mother in bonds, for her contesting the government with him; for John had left her to be the governess of public affairs. He also proceeded to that degree of barbarity as to cause her to be pined to death in prison.

2. But vengeance circumvented him in the affair of his brother Antigonus, whom he loved, and whom he made his partner in the kingdom; for he slew him by the means of the calumnies which ill men about the palace contrived against him. At first, indeed, Aristobulus would not believe their reports, partly out of the affection he had for his brother, and partly because he thought that a great part of these tales were owing to the envy of their relaters: however, as Antigonus came once in a splendid manner from the army to that festival, wherein our ancient custom is to make tabernacles for God, it happened, in those days, that Aristobulus was sick, and that, at the conclusion of the feast, Antigonus came up to it, with his armed men about him; and this when he was adorned in the finest manner possible; and that, in a great measure, to pray to God on the behalf of his brother. Now at this very time it was that these ill men came to the king, and told him in what a pompous manner the armed men came, and with what insolence Antigonus marched, and that such his insolence was too great for a private person, and that accordingly he was come with a great band of men to kill him; for that he could not endure this bare enjoyment of royal honor, when it was in his power to take the kingdom himself.

3. Now Aristobulus, by degrees, and unwillingly, gave credit to these accusations; and accordingly he took care not to discover his suspicion openly, though he provided to be secure against any accidents; so he placed the guards of his body in a certain dark subterranean passage; for he lay sick in a place called formerly the Citadel, though afterwards its name was changed to Antonia; and he gave orders that if Antigonus came unarmed, they should let him alone; but if he came to him in his armor, they should kill him. He also sent some to let him know beforehand that he should come unarmed. But, upon this occasion, the queen very cunningly contrived the matter with those that plotted his ruin, for she persuaded those that were sent to conceal the king's message; but to tell Antigonus how his brother had heard he had got a very the suit of armor made with fine martial ornaments, in Galilee; and because his present sickness hindered him from coming and seeing all that finery, he very much desired to see him now in his armor; because, said he, in a little time thou art going away from me.

4. As soon as Antigonus heard this, the good temper of his brother not allowing him to suspect any harm from him, he came along with his armor on, to show it to his brother; but when he was going along that dark passage which was called Strato's Tower, he was slain by the body guards, and became an eminent instance how calumny destroys all good-will and natural affection, and how none of our good affections are strong enough to resist envy perpetually.

5. And truly any one would be surprised at Judas upon this occasion. He was of the sect of the Essens, and had never failed or deceived men in his predictions before. Now this man saw Antigonus as he was passing along by the temple, and cried out to his acquaintance, (they were not a few who attended upon him as his scholars,) "O strange!" said he, "it is good for me to die now, since truth is dead before me, and somewhat that I have foretold hath proved false; for this Antigonus is this day alive, who ought to have died this day; and the place where he ought to be slain, according to that fatal decree, was Strato's Tower, which is at the distance of six hundred furlongs from this place; and yet four hours of this day are over already; which point of time renders the prediction impossible to be filled." And when the old man had said this, he was dejected in his mind, and so continued. But in a little time news came that Antigonus was slain in a subterraneous place, which was itself also called Strato's Tower, by the same name with that Cesarea which lay by the sea-side; and this ambiguity it was which caused the prophet's disorder.

6. Hereupon Aristobulus repented of the great crime he had been guilty of, and this gave occasion to the increase of his distemper. He also grew worse and worse, and his soul was constantly disturbed at the thoughts of what he had done, till his very bowels being torn to pieces by the intolerable grief he was under, he threw up a great quantity of blood. And as one of those servants that attended him carried out that blood, he, by some supernatural providence, slipped and fell down in the very place where Antigonus had been slain; and so he spilt some of the murderer's blood upon the spots of the blood of him that had been murdered, which still appeared. Hereupon a lamentable cry arose among the spectators, as if the servant had spilled the blood on purpose in that place; and as the king heard that cry, he inquired what was the cause of it; and while nobody durst tell him, he pressed them so much the more to let him know what was the matter; so at length, when he had threatened them, and forced them to speak out, they told; whereupon he burst into tears, and groaned, and said, "So I perceive I am not like to escape the all-seeing eye of God, as to the great crimes

I have committed; but the vengeance of the blood of my kinsman pursues me hastily. O thou most impudent body! how long wilt thou retain a soul that ought to die on account of that punishment it ought to suffer for a mother and a brother slain! How long shall I myself spend my blood drop by drop? let them take it all at once; and let their ghosts no longer be disappointed by a few parcels of my bowels offered to them." As soon as he had said these words, he presently died, when he had reigned no longer than a year.

6) The Death of Herod the Great

Josephus, *War*, 1.654-665, also referred to as Chapter 33:4-8

4. At this the king was in such an extravagant passion, that he overcame his disease [for the time,] and went out, and spake to the people; wherein he made a terrible accusation against those men, as being guilty of sacrilege, and as making greater attempts under pretense of their law, and he thought they deserved to be punished as impious persons. Whereupon the people were afraid lest a great number should be found guilty and desired that when he had first punished those that put them upon this work, and then those that were caught in it, he would leave off his anger as to the rest. With this the king complied, though not without difficulty, and ordered those that had let themselves down, together with their Rabbins, to be burnt alive, but delivered the rest that were caught to the proper officers, to be put to death by them.

5. After this, the distemper seized upon his whole body, and greatly disordered all its parts with various symptoms; for there was a gentle fever upon him, and an intolerable itching over all the surface of his body, and continual pains in his colon, and dropsical turnouts about his feet, and an inflammation of the abdomen, and a putrefaction of his privy member, that produced worms. Besides which he had a difficulty of breathing upon him, and could not breathe but when he sat upright, and had a convulsion of all his members, insomuch that the diviners said those diseases were a punishment upon him for what he had done to the Rabbins. Yet did he struggle with his numerous disorders, and still had a desire to live, and hoped for recovery, and considered of several methods of cure. Accordingly, he went over Jordan, and made use of those hot baths at Callirrhoe, which ran into the lake Asphaltitis, but are themselves sweet enough to be drunk. And here the physicians thought proper to bathe his whole body in warm oil, by letting it down into a large vessel full of oil; whereupon his eyes failed him, and he came and went as if he was dying; and as a tumult was then made by his servants, at their voice he revived again. Yet did he after this despair of recovery, and gave orders that each soldier should have fifty drachmae a-piece, and that his commanders and friends should have great sums of money given them.

6. He then returned back and came to Jericho, in such a melancholy state of body as almost threatened him with present death, when he proceeded to attempt a horrid wickedness; for he got together the most illustrious men of the whole Jewish nation, out of every village, into a place called the Hippodrome, and there shut them in. He then called for his sister Salome, and her husband Alexas, and made this speech to them: "I know well enough that the Jews will keep a festival upon my death however, it is in my power to be mourned for on other accounts, and to have a splendid funeral,

if you will but be subservient to my commands. Do you but take care to send soldiers to encompass these men that are now in custody, and slay them immediately upon my death, and then all Judea, and every family of them, will weep at it, whether they will or no."

7. These were the commands he gave them; when there came letters from his ambassadors at Rome, whereby information was given that Acme was put to death at Caesar's command, and that Antipater was condemned to die; however, they wrote withal, that if Herod had a mind rather to banish him, Caesar permitted him so to do. So he for a little while revived, and had a desire to live; but presently after he was overborne by his pains, and was disordered by want of food, and by a convulsive cough, and endeavored to prevent a natural death; so he took an apple, and asked for a knife for he used to pare apples and eat them; he then looked round about to see that there was nobody to hinder him, and lift up his right hand as if he would stab himself; but Achiabus, his first cousin, came running to him, and held his hand, and hindered him from so doing; on which occasion a very great lamentation was made in the palace, as if the king were expiring. As soon as ever Antipater heard that, he took courage, and with joy in his looks, besought his keepers, for a sum of money, to loose him and let him go; but the principal keeper of the prison did not only obstruct him in that his intention, but ran and told the king what his design was; hereupon the king cried out louder than his distemper would well bear, and immediately sent some of his guards and slew Antipater; he also gave order to have him buried at Hyrcanium, and altered his testament again, and therein made Archclaus, his eldest son, and the brother of Antipas, his successor, and made Antipas tetrarch.

8. So Herod, having survived the slaughter of his son five days, died, having reigned thirty-four years since he had caused Antigonus to be slain, and obtained his kingdom; but thirty-seven years since he had been made king by the Romans. Now as for his fortune, it was prosperous in all other respects, if ever any other man could be so, since, from a private man, he obtained the kingdom, and kept it so long, and left it to his own sons; but still in his domestic affairs he was a most unfortunate man. Now, before the soldiers knew of his death, Salome and her husband came out and dismissed those that were in bonds, whom the king had commanded to be slain, and told them that he had altered his mind, and would have every one of them sent to their own homes. When these men were gone, Salome, told the soldiers [the king was dead], and got them and the rest of the multitude together to an assembly, in the amphitheater at Jericho, where Ptolemy, who was intrusted by the king with his signet ring, came before them, and spake of the happiness the king had attained, and comforted the multitude, and read the epistle which had been left for the soldiers, wherein he earnestly exhorted them to bear good-will to his successor; and after he had read the epistle, he opened and read his testament, wherein Philip was to inherit Trachonitis, and the neighboring countries, and Antipas was to be tetrarch, as we said before, and Archelaus was made king. He had also been commanded to carry Herod's ring to Caesar, and the settlements he had made, sealed up, because Caesar was to be lord of all the settlements he had made, and was to confirm his testament; and he ordered that the dispositions he had made were to be kept as they were in his former testament.