

## Unbelievable: An Interpretation of Acts 12 That Takes Rhoda’s Cassandra Curse Seriously

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This article addresses two non sequiturs in Acts 12—the disbelief of Rhoda’s announcement of Peter’s arrival and the apparent disconnect of the death of “King Herod” to the rest of the chapter—by interpreting Rhoda as a Cassandra figure. Like Cassandra, Rhoda is unable to convince others regarding her accurate pronouncement and is then maligned as maenadic. In conjunction with reading Peter’s prison escape as imitating *Il.* 24, this interpretation allows readers to project the vengeance-related logic of these models onto the Acts narrative’s presentation of Herod’s death and thereby understand it as divine vengeance for executing James and imprisoning Peter.

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After an angel rescues him from prison and a likely execution, Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:6–12). With good reason, some scholars identify the initial reception of Peter as humorous. Peter knocks on the outer gate of Mary’s house, and although the “young female slave” Rhoda answers and recognizes Peter’s voice, she does not open the gate to him (12:12–14).<sup>1</sup> Instead, amusingly enough, the Acts narrative depicts Rhoda as being overcome with joy and as running to announce Peter’s arrival to those gathered inside (12:14). This near encounter is dense with irony. For example, Mitzi J. Smith explains, “Paradoxically, the angel of the Lord has *freed* Peter from prison, but the human voice he encounters at the door is that of an *enslaved* girl.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in the words of Luke Timothy Johnson, Peter escapes “out of Herod’s cell, but . . . cannot get through the locked gate to the Christian household.”<sup>3</sup> Irony aside, it is easy to understand

<sup>1</sup>All translations of biblical passages are my own.

<sup>2</sup>Mitzi J. Smith, *The Literary Construction of the Other in the Acts of the Apostles: Charismatics, the Jews, and Women*, PTMS 154 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 126 (emphases original).

<sup>3</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 218. Johnson calls this episode a “charming story,” wherein “the reader is . . . willing to

why interpreters regard this situation—that is, the prison escapee Peter being denied entry into the safety of Mary’s house because the enslaved woman who answered his knocking is overwhelmed with joy at his arrival and runs inside—as funny.

There is even reason to think that some in an ancient audience would agree that aspects of this situation are comedic. The primary impetus for this reasoning is that Rhoda’s action—running to report an important message to her master—can be interpreted as enacting the role of the “running slave” (or *servus currens*), a stock figure from the plays of New Comedy.<sup>4</sup> Often enough in these plays, there is a “running slave” who hurries to deliver a message to his or her master, a task for which he or she expects a reward. Nevertheless, this character “is often forgetful . . . , humorously failing at a job that is relatively simple to perform.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the slave is tasked with delivering good news, rushes to do so in hopes of receiving a reward, but ultimately fails. By projecting the logic of this motif onto Acts 12, interpreters can explain Rhoda’s joy as resulting from the thought of delivering a message that is literally the answer to her master’s prayers—presumably because she expects a reward commensurate with the magnitude of her message, perhaps even emancipation.<sup>6</sup> According to this logic, then, the expectation of a reward renders Rhoda negligent, with the result that Peter must remain outside the gate longer than he otherwise would. At least in this respect (and from a particular class perspective), it is credible to classify the Rhoda scene as comedic.

Nevertheless, the story featuring Rhoda is hardly a miniature New Comedy. A key aspect of “running slave” humor is that he or she fails to complete the task, usually due to his or her own foibles—a failure rendered all the more “comedic” due to the high stakes involved. In contrast, although Rhoda is described as “running” to deliver her message, and although she neglects to let Peter in, she does in fact report everything to her master accurately, which is inconsistent with the

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chuckle over the slapstick misunderstanding of the maidservant Rhoda.” Additional ironies are outlined in Kathy Chambers, “Knock, Knock—Who’s There?” Acts 12.6–17 as a Comedy of Errors,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, FCNTECW 9 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 89–97.

<sup>4</sup>See esp. J. Albert Harrill, “The Dramatic Function of the Running Slave Rhoda (Acts 12.13–16): A Piece of Greco-Roman Comedy,” *NTS* 46 (2000): 150–57. See also Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 62–63; Christy Cobb, *Slavery, Gender, Truth, and Power in Luke-Acts and Other Ancient Narratives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 125–62. “New Comedy” refers to the style of comedic plays that was popular after the death of Alexander the Great into the third century BCE and that was later popularized by Latin playwrights as late as the second century BCE. Among New Comedies, the “running slave” motif appears, e.g., in Plautus, *Amph.* 984–990; *Asin.* 267–269; *Capt.* 790–793; *Curc.* 280–298; *Epid.* 192–200; *Most.* 348–362; *Stic.* 274–287; *Trin.* 1008–1015. See also Terence, *Eun.* 35–40; *Haut.* 35–40.

<sup>5</sup>Cobb, *Slavery, Gender, Truth, and Power*, 143.

<sup>6</sup>See Harrill, “Dramatic Function,” 151–56.

“running slave” motif.<sup>7</sup> Also inconsistent is the disbelief of Mary and her company. When Rhoda accurately announces Peter’s presence outside the gate, no one believes her (Acts 12:15). Instead, they deride her as maenadic and insist that she is mistaken (12:15), and then they are “amazed” when they open the gate themselves and find Peter there (12:16). Of course, it is possible to interpret Rhoda’s running as enacting the “running slave” motif, on the one hand, and the distrust of her accurate report, on the other, as conforming to ancient stereotypes about women and slaves.

A prejudice against women and slaves—particularly with respect to the trustworthiness of their speech—is attested across the spectrum of literary genres in antiquity. According to Tim Whitmarsh, for example, it is a truism of the “top-down perspective” characteristic of Greek novels—a genre not unrelated to the book of Acts—that “slaves are deceitful and manipulative.”<sup>8</sup> This stereotype animates other genres as well, where it likewise applies to women regardless of their class status. In his retelling of the law given to Moses, Josephus writes, “From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex; neither let slaves bear witness because of the baseness of their soul, since whether from cupidity or fear it is like that they will not attest the truth” (*A.J.* 4.219 [Thackeray, LCL]). Cicero similarly contrasts “children, silly women, slaves, and the servile free” with “a serious-minded man” who exhibits “sound judgment” (*Off.* 2.16.57 [Miller, LCL]). Women and slaves—and so especially female slaves—were thus regarded in ancient literature as particularly untrustworthy, and it is possible to interpret the Acts narrative’s depiction of Mary’s incredulity toward Rhoda as trading upon these ancient stereotypes, which compound in Rhoda’s case.<sup>9</sup> As Christy Cobb explains, “Luke presumes his readers already think that most slaves are flighty and unreliable.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, although these prejudices are relevant for understanding Acts 12, they do not sufficiently explain the situational incredulity of Mary and those gathered with her for prayer.

Indeed, the reaction of Mary and her company to Rhoda’s message, as conventionally explained, is nonsensical. Even though Rhoda interrupts their fervent prayers for, presumably, Peter’s release (Acts 12:5, 12), the Acts narrative depicts them as thinking it more likely that Peter’s “angel [ἄγγελος]” (12:15) is knocking on

<sup>7</sup> See the similar observations in Chambers, “Knock, Knock,” esp. 91–93.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Whitmarsh, “Class,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel*, ed. Tim Whitmarsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 72–87, here 85. There are too many examples of such characterizations of enslaved individuals in ancient Greek novels to cite them individually. See such depictions throughout Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe*; Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*; Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*; Xenophon of Ephesus, *Anthia and Habrocomes*; and Heliodorus, *Theagenes and Chariclea*.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., F. Scott Spencer, “Out of Mind, Out of Voice: Slave-Girls and Prophetic Daughters in Luke-Acts,” *BibInt* 7 (1999): 133–55, here 138.

<sup>10</sup> Cobb, *Slavery, Gender, Truth, and Power*, 147.

their door than Peter himself. Their mockery of Rhoda as maenadic (12:15) is likewise curious, given their contention that Peter's angel is standing outside their gate. Some commentators attempt to reconcile these incongruities as the narrative's indictment of the lack of faith in the efficacy of prayer exhibited by Mary and her company. For example, C. K. Barrett assesses that Rhoda's "joy at hearing Peter's voice is understandable, but the unbelief of the rest of the company does little credit to their belief in the possible efficacy of the prayers they were said to be offering on his behalf."<sup>11</sup> The narrative context for this unbelief only heightens its absurdity—as Cobb observes, "the community commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery while praying for Peter's liberation from bondage."<sup>12</sup> The Acts narrative thus frustrates the very expectations that it establishes: although praying for Peter's release during the festival commemorating God's liberation of the Hebrews from bondage, they are unwilling to entertain the possibility of its actualization when it is reported by Rhoda. Such incredulity cannot be explained by appeals to ancient prejudices against the testimony of women and slaves *alone*, and so an additional interpretive frame of reference is necessary.<sup>13</sup>

As it happens, there is a precedent in ancient literature for a female slave delivering accurate messages only to be disbelieved and mocked as maenadic: the Trojan princess Cassandra. There is also an underconsidered precedent for interpreting Rhoda as a Cassandra figure, a comparison that has been advanced by Dennis R. MacDonald.<sup>14</sup> According to MacDonald, the Acts narrative's presentation of the angel of the Lord rescuing Peter from the prison of "Herod"<sup>15</sup> is best read as imitating Hermes's rescue of Priam from the bivouac of Achilles, and the series of parallels culminates in Rhoda's and Cassandra's identifications of Peter and Priam, respectively. Although MacDonald notes Cassandra's inability to convince

<sup>11</sup>C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., ICC 34 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994–1998), 1:571. As Patrick E. Spencer writes, the Acts narrative evokes "extratextual 'presupposition pools' on which the implied auditor draws to construct meaning" and yet subverts the implications of such presuppositions, and instead "the anticipated humor is attributed to her master—Mary and the disciples at her house" ("Mad' Rhoda in Acts 12:12–17: Disciple Exemplar," *CBQ* 79 [2017]: 282–98, here 296–97).

<sup>12</sup>Cobb, *Slavery, Gender, Truth, and Power*, 134. See Acts 12:3–4.

<sup>13</sup>In addition to the framework I am proposing, I also affirm the interpretive value of reading the Rhoda scene with Luke 23:55–24:12. The Cassandra framework that is the focus of this article is comparably understudied and answers questions that the parallel with Luke's Gospel does not.

<sup>14</sup>Dennis R. MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 123–45. For an earlier but less developed version of his argument, see Dennis R. MacDonald, "Luke's Emulation of Homer: Acts 12:1–17 and *Iliad* 24," *Forum* NS 3 (2000): 197–205. For a comparison of female Jewish prophets with Cassandra, see Hanna Tervanotko, "Unreliability and Gender? Untrusted Female Prophets in Ancient Greek and Jewish Texts," *JAJ* 6 (2015): 358–81.

<sup>15</sup>For the anomalous use the name "Herod" in Acts 12, see n. 39 below.

others about her prophecies and the fact that she is repeatedly ridiculed as maenadic, it is possible to press this comparison further than he does. I argue here that emphasizing Rhoda's role as a new Cassandra—taking her Cassandra curse seriously—not only makes sense of the disbelief regarding Rhoda's message, but it can also connect Rhoda's scene to the one that follows (in addition to the preceding scene), establishing a framework for interpreting the death of Herod as divine vengeance for his persecution of the church.<sup>16</sup> In order to make this case, I begin with a review of relevant episodes from Greek mythology and classical Greek literature, especially Homer's *Iliad* and other stories related to the Trojan Cycle, beginning with mythology related to Cassandra.

### I. CASSANDRA, THE RECOVERY OF HECTOR'S BODY, AND THE DEATH OF ACHILLES

Cassandra is a Trojan princess renowned for her beauty—the daughter of Priam and Hecuba, the sister of Hector and Paris, and “the priestess of Apollo” (Ovid, *Metam.* 13.410 [Miller and Goold, LCL]). She is perhaps most famous for her ability to accurately prophesy future events, coupled with an inability to convince anyone about these predictions, and the origin of this distinctive condition is an apt starting point for this mythological overview. Apollodorus relates the story succinctly, “Wishing to sleep with Cassandra, Apollo promised to teach her the art of prophecy; she learned the art but refused to sleep with him; hence Apollo deprived her prophecy of power to persuade” (*Bibl.* 3.12.5 [Frazer, LCL, slightly modified]). As with most Greek myths, there are variations of this story, but Apollo is always involved and the end result is always that nobody will believe Cassandra's accurate prophecies.<sup>17</sup> Throughout her life, these prophecies “were irregular and concerned only moments of crisis.”<sup>18</sup> Upon the birth of Paris, for example, Cassandra begs her mother (and others) to kill him, anticipating his catalytic role in precipitating the Trojan War. About Paris, the chorus in Euripides's *Andromache* laments, “Would that the mother who bore him had cast him over the head to an

<sup>16</sup> Acts 12 consists of three interrelated episodes: Peter's imprisonment and rescue, the scene featuring Rhoda, and the death of Herod. These episodes are often considered a unit due to the roles played by Herod and the angel of the Lord at the beginning and end of the chapter (and the fact that they are all relatively disconnected to the larger Acts narrative). According to conventional interpretations, it is not otherwise self-evident that these scenes form a coherent unit.

<sup>17</sup> See also, e.g., Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1200–1212; Euripides, *Tro.* 366, 408, 428, 450, 500; Hyginus, *Fab.* 93.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Dillon, “Kassandra: Mantic, Maenadic or Manic? Gender and the Nature of Prophetic Experience in Ancient Greece,” in *Essays from the AASR Conference, University of Auckland, New Zealand, July 6–11, 2008*, ed. Jay Johnston and Kathleen McPhillips, AASR Occasional Publication Series (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2009), 1–21, here 14.

evil end before he came to dwell on a ridge of Ida! Beside the prophetic laurel Cassandra shrieked, bidding her kill the child, great destroyer of Priam's city. Whom did she not approach, which of the city's elders did she not beg to kill the child?" (*Andr.* 293–300 [Kovacs, LCL]). Cassandra sees that allowing the infant Paris to live means the destruction of Troy, but she can convince no one to act in accordance with this insight.

Thus, Paris grows up, and, while shepherding on "a ridge of Ida," Zeus nominates him to adjudicate the contest between Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite as to which one was the most beautiful and thus deserving of the Golden Apple.<sup>19</sup> By promising marriage to the already-married Helen, Aphrodite emerges victorious, an outcome "entailing bitter destruction for the luckless city and citadel of Troy" (Euripides, *Andr.* 291–92 [Kovacs, LCL]). According to the now-lost *Cypria*, before Paris sets sail to claim his bribe, Cassandra explains to him the "bitter destruction" that will unfold following his abduction of Helen.<sup>20</sup> As with Hecuba, Cassandra is unable to persuade Paris about the consequences of his actions, and so Paris departs, abducts Helen, and triggers the pact among Helen's former suitors—resulting in a coalition of Greek armies attacking Troy.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, the most influential writing about the ensuing Trojan War is Homer's *Iliad*. While the climax of Homer's account is the duel between Hector and Achilles, perhaps the most memorable scene takes place in the aftermath of this duel, when Priam, Hector's father, infiltrates the camp of the Myrmidons in order to recover his son's corpse from Achilles.<sup>22</sup> For much of the *Iliad*, Achilles declines to engage in battle due to a grievance with Agamemnon. Nevertheless, after Hector kills Patroclus (who was disguised in Achilles's armor), Achilles's wrath finally outweighs his grievance, and he kills Hector—from whom Apollo had withdrawn his aid—in the subsequent duel. Following a funeral for Patroclus, Achilles, still over-

<sup>19</sup>For the Judgment of Paris, see, e.g., Isocrates, *Hel. enc.* 41–44. See also Homer, *Il.* 3.65–66; 24.25–30.

<sup>20</sup>The contents of the *Cypria*, the first epic poem in the Trojan Cycle and sometimes attributed to Stasinus of Cyprus, are known only from later references, especially Proclus's *Chrestomathy* (see *Greek Epic Fragments from the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC*, ed. and trans. Martin L. West, LCL 497 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014], 68–81).

<sup>21</sup>For the reception of this story in another Jewish narrative, Joseph and Aseneth, see Michael Kochenash, "Trojan Horses: The Counterintuitive Use of Dinah, Helen, and Goliath in Joseph and Aseneth," *JSJ* 52 (2021): 417–41, esp. 424–28 and 432–37.

<sup>22</sup>See, e.g., Nicholas Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 6, *Books 21–24* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 291. This Homeric scene likely informed the plot of Aeschylus's play *The Ransoming of Hector*, the third part of his *Achilleis* trilogy, as well as the play of the same name by Ennius. Ennius's play is no longer extant, and only a few fragmentary lines remain from Aeschylus's *Achilleis* trilogy. On the reception of Priam's ransoming of Hector in antiquity, see MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?*, 123–36. Citing Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.8.53, MacDonald reports, "According to Quintilian, students of rhetoric were required to compose speeches as though they were Priam asking Achilles for Hector's body" (125).



come with grief, mounts his chariot and completes twelve laps around the funeral pyre, dragging Hector's corpse behind him. Although Apollo protects the corpse from further injury, the Olympians are moved with pity and devise a plan to rescue it from Achilles. Zeus thus sends word to Priam, instructing him to go to the bivouac of Achilles and ransom Hector's body with many gifts (*Il.* 24.117–119, 141–187). Hermes, messenger of the gods, accompanies Priam and his herald to ensure their safe passage into and out of the Myrmidons' camp (*Il.* 24.333–338), and he brings “the wand with which he lulls to sleep the eyes of whom he will, while others again he rouses even out of slumber” (24.343–344 [Murray and Wyatt, LCL]). With that wand, Hermes “lulls to sleep” all of the guards in Achilles's camp, and he “immediately opened the gates, and thrust back the bars, and brought inside Priam and the glorious gifts on the wagon” (24.445–447 [Murray and Wyatt, LCL]). Just prior to Priam's pathos-laden entreaty to Achilles (24.486–506), Hermes reveals his immortal identity and returns to Olympus (24.460–469). Achilles and Priam subsequently reach an agreement regarding the ransom for Hector's dead body, eat a meal together, and retire for the night (24.507–676).

Intent on safely returning Priam to Troy with Hector's corpse, Hermes reappears and rouses Priam from his sleep (*Il.* 24.679–681). He then guides Priam out of the camp of the Myrmidons (24.689–691), presumably again removing all barriers and lulling all guards to sleep, before once again returning to Olympus (24.692–694). Homer then describes how Priam and his herald approach Troy with the corpse of Hector undetected until “Cassandra, peer of golden Aphrodite, having gone up on Pergamus, caught sight of her dear father as he stood in the chariot, and the herald, the city's crier; and him she saw who lay on the bier in the wagon drawn by the mules” (24.699–702 [Murray and Wyatt, LCL]). She then alerts the Trojans regarding the good news of her father's return with Hector's body. Although the residents of Troy believe her message, it is possible, based as it is upon her keen perception, that Homer has Cassandra's prophetic gift in mind.<sup>23</sup> The strongest evidence in favor of this possibility is Cassandra's location on Pergamus (24.700), which Homer repeatedly associates with Apollo (4.507–508; 5.445–446, 460; 7.21), including its identification as the site of a shrine to Apollo.

Although Cassandra does not appear again in the *Iliad*, she does feature in subsequent Greek mythology related to the Trojan War. Along with Laocoön, Cassandra warns the Trojans against accepting the wooden horse from the Greeks.<sup>24</sup> Virgil writes, “Even then Cassandra opened her lips for the coming doom—lips at

<sup>23</sup>C. J. Mackie writes, “The treatment of Cassandra in the present passage [*Il.* 24.704–6] seems only to hint at some power in the art of prophecy” (“*Iliad* 24 and the Judgment of Paris,” *CIQ* 63 [2013]: 1–16, here 12).

<sup>24</sup>Cassandra's warning about the Trojan Horse was apparently narrated in book 1 of the *Sack of Troy*, attributed to Arctinus of Miletus, one of the epic poems in the Trojan Cycle. For the contents of this lost poem, see the summary in Proclus's *Chrestomathy* (West, *Greek Epic Fragments*, 142–53).

a god's command never believed by the Trojans" (*Aen.* 2.246–247 [Fairclough and Goold, LCL]).<sup>25</sup> In his *Posthomerica*, Quintus Smyrnaeus says of Cassandra, "Nothing she said was ever unfulfilled, all she said was true; and yet her words were destined always to be wasted on the winds, so that the Trojans would suffer" (*Posthom.* 12.526–528 [Hopkinson, LCL]). At the sight of the wooden horse, Cassandra becomes maenadic (12.529–539) and says, "A great bane is hidden here. But you will not believe me, however much I say: the Furies are angry at us for Helen's dreadful marriage" (12.545–548), in response to which "the Trojans taunted her" (12.551) and "mocked [her] and said that she was raving" (12.562–63). Quintus notes that the Greeks inside the wooden horse were delighted to hear the Trojans dismissing Cassandra's perceptive warning (12.576–579), and so, of course, the Greek ruse culminates in the sack of Troy.

Cassandra's final appearance in foundational Greek mythology occurs following Troy's fall.<sup>26</sup> After the siege of Troy was complete and the Greeks began dividing their spoils, Agamemnon takes Cassandra as his slave and concubine. Upon Agamemnon's return to Mycenae, Cassandra sees the vengeful fate that awaits them inside his house. Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife and Helen's sister, has taken a lover, Aegisthus, during her husband's absence. With good reason, Clytemnestra is harboring resentment against Agamemnon, who sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia in order to gain favorable winds as the Greeks prepared to embark for Troy from Aulis—though, again, there exist variations in how this story is narrated, including some versions in which Clytemnestra successfully substitutes an animal for Iphigenia at the moment of sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> Be that as it may, upon Agamemnon's return from Troy, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are plotting his murder, and Cassandra foresees not only Agamemnon's death but also her own.<sup>28</sup> Because of Apollo's curse, however, she is unable to prevent these murders. Instead, she is derided as "mad [*μαίνεται*]" (Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1064) and "out of [her] mind [*φρενομανής*]" (1140).<sup>29</sup> Even so, Aeschylus's chorus affirms, "Divine inspiration can remain

<sup>25</sup> Apollodorus apparently included Cassandra's warning about the Trojan Horse, though the content of his account is known only from epitomes of his work.

<sup>26</sup> To be sure, Cassandra makes one additional appearance of note prior to this final episode. In the aftermath of Troy's fall, Cassandra is raped by Ajax the Lesser, despite seeking refuge at a statue of Athena. As a consequence, Athena's wrath turns against the Greeks, and the Olympians agree to punish them with significant loss of life during their voyages home (or *nostoi*). See Euripides, *Tro.* 61–97; Ovid, *Metam.* 13.410–411; Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthom.* 13.420–424. With respect to Ajax specifically, Athena strikes his ship with lightning, and Poseidon thwarts his efforts to avoid drowning. See Ovid, *Metam.* 14.468–469; Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthom.* 14.530–589. This story was apparently narrated in book 3 of the *Nostoi* in the Epic Cycle. For the contents of this lost poem, see the summary in Proclus's *Chrestomathy* (West, *Greek Epic Fragments*, 152–63).

<sup>27</sup> See Aeschylus, *Ag.* 104–249; Pindar, *Pyth.* 11.22–23.

<sup>28</sup> See Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1100–1149; Pindar, *Pyth.* 11.31–34.

<sup>29</sup> Aeschylus, Euripides, and other tragedians use a myriad of maenad-related words to



even in the mind of a slave” (1083 [Sommerstein, LCL]). The main point to emphasize here is how prominently the theme of vengeance features—whether for Paris’s abduction of Helen or Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia—in stories about Cassandra’s Apollo-inspired prophecies, a theme that is perhaps never more pronounced than during her prophecy while enslaved.

Of course, Apollo himself is also associated with vengeance, and so one additional event from the Trojan War merits attention here: the death of Achilles.<sup>30</sup> The details of the death of Achilles vary across the centuries of its narrations, but the presence of Paris and Apollo is a near constant.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, echoing Thetis’s prediction earlier in the *Iliad*, Hector warns Achilles with his dying words, “Take thought now lest perhaps I become a cause of the gods’ wrath against you on the day when Paris and Phoebus Apollo slay you, valiant though you are, at the Scaean gates” (*Il.* 22.358–359 [Murray and Wyatt, LCL]).<sup>32</sup> The subsequent demise of Achilles is narrated not in Homer but in the now-lost *Aethiopsis*.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the death of Patroclus in the *Iliad* is often interpreted as prefiguring that of Achilles, and Apollo plays a crucial, vengeance-motivated role in that scene.<sup>34</sup> Patroclus’s death is, of course, significant in its own right, being described as both “the turning point in the plot of the *Iliad*” and “the most extraordinary event in this extraordinary poem.”<sup>35</sup> Evocatively, Zeus sheds tears of blood in anticipation of his

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describe Cassandra, including “inspired by god [ἔνθεος]” (Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1084; Euripides, *Tro.* 366; *El.* 1032; Lycophron, *Alex.* 28), “maenadic frenzy [βάκχευμα]” (Euripides, *Tro.* 367), “speaking with maenadic frenzy [βακχεύω]” (Euripides, *Tro.* 342), “maenad [βάκχειος]” (Euripides, *Hec.* 676; Lycophron, *Alex.* 28), “maenadic [μανάς]” (Euripides, *Tro.* 349; *El.* 1032), “being maenadic [μαίνομαι]” (Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1064), “inspired maenad [μαντιπόλου βάκχης]” (Euripides, *Hec.* 121), “being excited to maenadic frenzy [ἐκβακχεύω]” (Euripides, *Tro.* 169, 408), “sharing maenadic frenzy [συμβακχεύω]” (Euripides, *Tro.* 500), and “oracular [θεσπέσιος]” (Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1154; Euripides, *Hec.* 677).

<sup>30</sup>The *Iliad* is practically bookended by stories about Apollo meting out vengeance. Early in book 1, Apollo punishes the Greek camp with a pestilence because of Agamemnon’s abduction of Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of a temple to Apollo (*Il.* 1.8–21, 446–457). In book 24, when agreeing to relinquish the body of Hector to Priam, Achilles recalls how Apollo and Artemis took vengeance on Niobe for comparing herself favorably to Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis (24.602–617).

<sup>31</sup>See Jonathan Burgess, “Achilles’ Heel: The Death of Achilles in Ancient Myth,” *ClAnt* 14 (1995): 217–44.

<sup>32</sup>For Thetis’s prediction, see Homer, *Il.* 21.277. See also Virgil, *Aen.* 6.56–58; Ovid, *Metam.* 12.580–611.

<sup>33</sup>Sometimes attributed to Arctinus of Miletus, the *Aethiopsis* is situated, chronologically, after the events of the *Iliad*, though its contents are known only from later references, especially Proclus’s *Chrestomathy* (West, *Greek Epic Fragments*, 108–17).

<sup>34</sup>Roberto Nickel, “Euphorbus and the Death of Achilles,” *Phoenix* 56 (2002): 215–33, here 224. See also Jonathan Burgess, “Beyond Neo-Analysis: Problems with the Vengeance Theory,” *AJP* 118 (1997): 1–19, here 14–16.

<sup>35</sup>Nickel, “Euphorbus and the Death of Achilles,” 215.

son Sarpedon dying on the battlefield at the hands of Patroclus (*Il.* 16.459–461). Apollo later acts as Zeus’s instrument of vengeance, stripping Patroclus of his armor (16.801–806, 844–846) and thereby leaving him vulnerable to the spears of Euphorbus and Hector (16.806–822). In this way, although Hector kills Patroclus, it is the vengeance-motivated role played by Apollo that makes it possible.

As for the death of Achilles, there were two main versions in currency by the Roman era, though Apollo features prominently in both and is, once again, motivated by vengeance. The *Aethiopis* attests to the “early tradition in which Achilles was killed on the battlefield, as opposed to a later tradition in which Achilles was killed in the temple of Apollo.”<sup>36</sup> In the earlier tradition, Achilles is engaged in battle near the gates of Troy, and Paris strikes Achilles near his ankle with an arrow that is directed by Apollo. In accordance with Hector’s warning in the *Iliad*, Apollo is involved in order to exact revenge on Achilles for his mistreatment of Hector’s corpse. In the tradition that developed later, Paris ambushes Achilles in a temple of Apollo, shooting him with an arrow that is guided by the god, as in the earlier tradition. Once again, Apollo is motivated by vengeance—in this case, vengeance for Achilles’s slaying of Troilus, son of Priam, at the altar in that same temple.<sup>37</sup> As prefigured in the Homeric death of Patroclus, although Apollo does not kill Achilles himself, he plays a decisive, vengeance-motivated role in exposing Achilles’s vulnerability, which allows Paris to kill him.

## II. THE LIBERATIONS OF PETER FROM HEROD AND PRIAM FROM ACHILLES

The story of the angel of the Lord rescuing Peter from prison (Acts 12:1–11) can be read as modeled on Jesus’s passion and resurrection in the Gospel of Luke, the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt in biblical traditions, and Hermes’s escort of Priam out of the camp of the Myrmidons in Homer’s *Iliad*. Some elements in the Acts narrative can be understood as influenced by more than one model, and no single model adequately explains every element. Instead, readers with the necessary cultural competence can read this scene as a tapestry that interweaves indications of its indebtedness to all three models, each of which imbues the scene with interpretive richness. Accordingly, to appropriate the words of Robert C. Tannehill, the “skilled imagination” can use these well-known stories “to construct the layers of background that give this episode its deeper meaning.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Burgess, “Achilles’ Heel,” 218.

<sup>37</sup>See Burgess, “Achilles’ Heel,” 235 n. 74.

<sup>38</sup>Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986–1990), 2:152. Tannehill refers to the Acts narrative’s intertextuality with only Luke’s Gospel and the exodus story.

The narrative in Acts 12 begins with “King Herod” violently persecuting “some belonging to the church” (Acts 12:1).<sup>39</sup> Interwoven into its description of Peter’s subsequent arrest, the Acts narrative refers to the festival of Unleavened Bread (12:3) and then specifically to Passover (12:4). These references allow readers to interpret what follows in relation to both Jesus’s passion narrative, which also takes place during the festival of Unleavened Bread (Luke 22:1, 7), and the story of the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, the foundational story underlying these holidays.<sup>40</sup> In this context, a number of words and phrases in the Acts narrative can be identified as echoing these two models. As shown in the chart below, in Acts 12:1, “King Herod laid hands [ἐπέβαλεν]” (cf. Luke) on some Christ-followers “in order to afflict [κακῶσαι]” them (cf. Exodus).<sup>41</sup> The following two verses indicate that Herod “killed [ἀνεῖλεν] James” and that he “proceeded to arrest [συλλαβεῖν]” Peter (cf. Luke).<sup>42</sup> In Acts 12:4, Herod “hands over [παραδούς] Peter” to some soldiers (cf. Luke).<sup>43</sup> After being liberated, Peter exclaims, “Now I truly know that the Lord sent forth his angel and delivered me from the hand of Herod [ἐξείλατό με ἐκ χειρὸς Ἡρώδου]” (Acts 12:11; cf. Exodus).<sup>44</sup> Finally, at the conclusion of the subsequent scene featuring Rhoda, the Acts narrative indicates that Peter “reported to them how the Lord brought him out [ὁ κύριος αὐτὸν ἐξήγαγεν] of the prison” (Acts 12:17; cf. Exodus).<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup>The name “Herod” is either an anachronism or an anomalous ambiguity, since (a) there is no independent attestation of the identification of Agrippa I as “Herod” and (b) it can be assumed that the Acts narrative is not referring to Herod Antipas, who is identified as a tetrarch in Luke and Acts (Luke 3:1, 19; 9:7; Acts 13:1), in contrast to “King Herod” in Acts 12. It is possible that Acts identifies this ruler from the Herodian dynasty as “Herod” in order to accentuate Peter’s parallel with Jesus, since Herod Antipas (identified as “Herod”) plays a role in the trial scene in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 23:6–12). For a similar argument, see Frank Dicken, *Herod as a Composite Character in Luke-Acts*, WUNT 2/375 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). See also n. 55 below.

<sup>40</sup>For earlier comparisons of Acts 12 with exodus and passion–resurrection traditions, see, e.g., August Strobel, “Passa-Symbolik und Passa-Wunder in Act. xii. 3ff.,” *NTS* 4 (1958): 210–15; Walter Radl, “Befreiung aus dem Gefängnis: Die Darstellung eines biblischen Grundthemas in Apg 12,” *BZ* 27 (1983): 81–96; Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:152–55; Susan R. Garrett, “Exodus from Bondage: Luke 9:31 and Acts 12:1–24,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 656–80, here 670–77; Daniel Marguerat, *Les Actes des Apôtres*, 2 vols., CNT 5 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007–2015), 1:425–28; Knut Backhaus, “Die Erfindung der Kirchengeschichte: Zur historiographischen Funktion von Apg 12,” *ZNW* 103 (2012): 157–76, esp. 164–66; Jenny Read-Heimerdinger, “Exodus in the Book of Acts: A Prophetic Reversal of Israel’s History,” in *The Reception of Exodus Motifs in Jewish and Christian Literature: “Let My People Go!”*, ed. Beate Kowalski and Susan E. Docherty, TBN 30 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 250–68, esp. 257–61. In Tannehill’s assessment, the connection to the exodus story “does not compete with the connection to Jesus’ death” (2:153).

<sup>41</sup>Acts also uses κακῶ verbs to describe the mistreatment of the Hebrews in Egypt (Acts 7:6, 19, 34).

<sup>42</sup>Acts also uses ἀναιρέω to describe the killing of Jesus (Acts 2:23, 10:39, 13:28).

<sup>43</sup>See also Luke 21:12, where the phrase is applied to Jesus’s disciples.

<sup>44</sup>Acts also uses ἐξαιρέω verbs to describe the exodus story (Acts 7:10, 34).

<sup>45</sup>Acts also uses ἐξάγω verbs to describe the exodus story (Acts 7:36, 40).

## COMPARISON OF ACTS 12 WITH EXODUS AND LUKE

Liberation from Egypt	Passion of Jesus	Persecution of Herod
	“The scribes and chief priests wanted to lay [ἐπιβαλεῖν] hands [τὰς χεῖρας] on him ...” (Luke 20:19)	“King Herod laid [ἐπέβαλεν] hands [τὰς χεῖρας] ...” (Acts 12:1)
The king “set over them overseers of tasks so that they might afflict [κακώσωσιν] them ...” (Exod 1:11; cf. Gen 15:13, Exod 3:7, 5:23)		“... in order to afflict [κακώσαι] some belonging to the church” (Acts 12:1)
	“The chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to kill [ἀνέλωσιν] him ...” (Luke 22:2)	“He killed [ἀνεῖλεν] James ...” (Acts 12:2)
	“After arresting [συλλαβόντες] him ...” (Luke 22:54; cf. Acts 1:16)	“... he proceeded to arrest [συλλαβεῖν] Peter ...” (Acts 12:3)
“... festival of Unleavened Bread” (Exod 23:15, 34:18; cf. Exod 12:14–20)	“Now the festival of Unleavened Bread ... was near.... Then came the day of Unleavened Bread ...” (Luke 22:1, 7)	“... during the festival of Unleavened Bread” (Acts 12:3)
	“... the Son of Man must be handed over [παραδοθῆναι] ...” (Luke 24:7; cf. Luke 9:44, 18:32)	“... handing him over [παραδούς] ...” (Acts 12:4)
“... the Passover of the Lord” (Exod 12:11; cf. Exod 12:21–27)	“... the festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover.... Then came the day ... on which it was necessary to sacrifice the Passover lamb” (Luke 22:1, 7)	“... after the Passover” (Acts 12:4)
“... and he delivered me from the hand of Pharaoh [ἐξείλατό με ἐκ χειρὸς Φαραώ]” (Exod 18:4; cf. Exod 3:8; 18:8–10)		“... and delivered me from the hand of Herod [ἐξείλατό με ἐκ χειρὸς Ἡρώδου] ...” (Acts 12:11)
“For the Lord [κύριος] brought Israel out [ἐξήγαγεν] of Egypt” (Exod 18:1; cf. Exod 3:8)		“... how the Lord brought him out [ὁ κύριος αὐτὸν ἐξήγαγεν] of the prison” (Acts 12:17)

Of course, reading this scene in relation to both the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt and Jesus's passion and resurrection narratives has interpretive implications. When Acts 12 is read within the exodus framework, Herod becomes a new pharaoh; the angel of the Lord becomes a new Moses; and Peter can be understood as reenacting the plight of the enslaved Hebrews. Accordingly, readers who make these associations can accurately anticipate Herod's death later in Acts 12, just as Pharaoh, who pursues the Hebrews after Moses liberates them from slavery in Egypt, subsequently drowns in the Red Sea. Within the passion and resurrection framework, Peter becomes further associated with Jesus, an association punctuated by the incredulity expressed in response to the reports about Jesus's resurrection (Luke 24:11) and Peter's liberation (Acts 12:15). Indeed, both scenes feature the act of running, verifications of the accurate but disbelieved reports, and resulting amazement. If nothing else, this association can be interpreted as legitimizing the ministerial succession from Jesus to Peter.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, these two intertexts do not account for all of the features present in the narration of Peter's rescue. In fact, readers familiar with the Greek mythology reviewed above can find additional significance in this passage by reading it against the Homeric scene of Hermes escorting Priam out of the camp of the Myrmidons, a reading advocated by MacDonald.<sup>47</sup>

Most notably, the exodus and passion models lack analogues for the manner of Peter's escape from prison. During the night, Peter is "sleeping [*κοιμώμενος*] between two soldiers" while bound with restraints, and "sentries were guarding the door of the prison" (Acts 12:6). The angel of the Lord appears, and, "striking Peter's side, he awakened him," and "the chains fell from his hands" (12:7). Following the angel's directions, Peter puts on his belt, sandals, and cloak, and follows the angel past "the first guard and the second," and the iron gate "opened for them automatically" (12:8, 10). The Acts narrative leaves to the readers' imagination the particulars of how they evade the guards' notice. After reaching a lane outside, "immediately the angel withdrew from him" (12:10). Several details of this escape can be read as modeled on Hermes's escort of Priam from the camp of the Myrmidons: the angel awakens Peter, just as Hermes awakens Priam; Peter's chains are removed, and the gates open automatically, just as Hermes removes barriers for Priam; and the angel abruptly leaves Peter after escorting him to safety, just as Hermes does with Priam. Nevertheless, the key to this reading may be the question of how Peter escapes the

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., Samson Uytanlet, *Luke-Acts and Jewish Historiography: A Study on the Theology, Literature, and Ideology of Luke-Acts*, WUNT 2/366 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 71–157.

<sup>47</sup> The following analysis briefly summarizes and builds on the foundational analysis in MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?*, 123–45. For earlier studies comparing Acts 12 with Homer's *Iliad* (but not *Il. 24*), see Otto Weinreich, *Gebet und Wunder: Zwei Abhandlungen zur Religions- und Literaturgeschichte*, TBAW 5 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1929), 169–464, esp. 207–15; Reinhard Kratz, *Rettungswunder: Motiv-, traditions- und formkritische Aufarbeitung einer biblischen Gattung*, EHS.T 123 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1979), 354–55.

notice of the two soldiers and additional sentries on guard. In the context of these other parallels, especially the narrative's explicit indication that the angel awakens Peter, it seems that readers are supposed to imagine that the angel puts the guards and sentries to sleep—just as Hermes put the Myrmidon soldiers and sentries to sleep when escorting Priam into (and, presumably, out of) their camp.<sup>48</sup>

As MacDonald indicates, this imitation extends to the subsequent scene featuring Rhoda. After being liberated from prison during the night, Peter proceeds to the house of Mary, where she and others are gathered in prayer for him (Acts 12:5, 12), just as Priam “traveled at night back to the city where the Trojans kept their prayerful vigil for him.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, MacDonald compares Rhoda, the enslaved woman in Mary's house, to Cassandra, the daughter of Priam. Just as Cassandra is the first to see Priam returning with Hector's corpse, Rhoda is the first to learn of Peter's arrival at Mary's house. Such a comparison of Rhoda's presentation with Cassandra mythology not only connects this scene to Peter's prison escape but also makes sense of the counterintuitive reaction of Mary and her company to Rhoda's message.

### III. RHODA'S CASSANDRA CURSE

Peter escapes from the prison of Herod and is greeted, after he arrives at Mary's house, by a “young female slave [παῖδίσκη]” named Rhoda (Acts 12:12–13). When Rhoda subsequently announces Peter's arrival to Mary and her company, they disbelieve her and deride her as “maenadic [μαλινῆ]”; although Rhoda insists on the accuracy of her announcement, they maintain that she must be mistaken (12:15). As I noted in the introduction, these reactions are nonsensical, at least according to conventional interpretations of Acts 12. Indeed, the narrative gives readers reason to expect, instead, that they will believe Rhoda and receive her message with joy: the story takes place during the festal commemoration of the exodus (12:3–4), and they are praying fervently for Peter (12:5, 12), presumably for his release. It makes no sense, then, for Mary and her company to deride Rhoda as maenadic or to insist that she has mistaken Peter's angel for Peter himself. Accordingly, their illogical disbelief in Rhoda can prompt readers to identify an interpretive framework that resolves this apparent absurdity.

<sup>48</sup>John B. Weaver criticizes an early iteration of MacDonald's reading on the grounds that the angel of the Lord escorts Peter *out* of prison and Hermes escorts Priam *into* the bivouac of Achilles (*Plots of Epiphany: Prison-Escape in Acts of the Apostles*, BZNW 131 [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004], 153–54). Weaver's critique is not convincing, however, because—at least in the later iteration of his argument—MacDonald supplies a number of examples of ancient narratives imitating, specifically, Hermes's escort of Priam *out* of Achilles's bivouac (see MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?*, 128–29).

<sup>49</sup>MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?*, 138.



Of course, being repeatedly disbelieved despite reporting accurate and timely messages—and, moreover, being regarded as maenadic—is a characteristic feature of Cassandra mythology. Cassandra sees that her brother will cause the fall of Troy, but she cannot convince her mother to commit infanticide, nor can she convince Paris to respect Helen's marriage to Menelaus. Cassandra warns against accepting the wooden horse from the Greeks, but her fellow Trojans, unconvinced, ridicule her as maenadic. In the final iteration of this motif, Cassandra is, like Rhoda, enslaved, and she is unable to avert Clytemnestra's plot to murder Agamemnon in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter. Thus, insofar as readers interpret Rhoda as a Cassandra figure (as a comparison of Acts 12:1–11 with *Il.* 24 suggests), her inability to convince Mary and her company about the accuracy of her message becomes logical. In this reading, their disbelief and derision are not self-indictments of their lack of faith in the efficacy of prayer; instead, they are standard and expected features in a story about a new Cassandra.

There is, to be sure, a notable tension in this comparison of Rhoda to Cassandra: whereas it is characteristic for Cassandra to relate prophecies, Rhoda simply reports her near encounter with Peter. Nevertheless, the Acts narrative's employment of the name Rhoda—rather than assigning anonymity to her character—can be interpreted as signaling how readers can navigate this apparent discrepancy. Indeed, MacDonald reads Rhoda's name as performing this function. Rhoda means “rose.” Roses are characteristically associated with Aphrodite, and Homer identifies Cassandra as “peer of golden Aphrodite” at the moment that she sees Priam returning with Hector's corpse (*Il.* 24.699), the line that corresponds to Rhoda's introduction in the Acts narrative when it is read as imitating *Il.* 24.<sup>50</sup> Like Rhoda, Cassandra is not, strictly speaking, prophesying in this episode. Even so, as reviewed above, it is because of her beauty that Apollo offers Cassandra the gift of prophecy in exchange for sleeping with him, and so her association with Aphrodite—an association that foregrounds her exceptional beauty—is an essential

<sup>50</sup> MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?*, 144–45. See also Homer, *Il.* 13.365. For the association of Aphrodite with roses in visual media, see *LIMC*, “Aphrodite,” items 72–75, 227, 696–706, 816, 1049, and 1323. For this association in literature, see Homer, *Il.* 23.186–187; Euripides, *Med.* 840–841; Achilles Tatius, *Leuc. Clit.* 2.1. For further attestations of this association, see MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?*, 207 nn. 21–23. For alternative explanations of the name Rhoda, see Clare K. Rothschild, “Ἐτυμολογία, *Dramatis Personae*, and the Lukan Invention of an Early Christian Prosopography,” in *The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era*, ed. Clare K. Rothschild and Jens Schröter, WUNT 301 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 279–98, here 295–96; Margaret Aymer, “Outrageous, Audacious, Courageous, Willful: Reading the Enslaved Girl of Acts 12,” in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, SemeiaSt 85 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 265–89, here 274–75. For the use of the name “Rhoda” among slaves, see Margaret H. Williams, “Palestinian Jewish Personal Names in Acts,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham, BAFCS 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 79–113, here 111.

component of the logic that explains Cassandra's subsequent curse.<sup>51</sup> Thus, because the narrative identifies her as "Rhoda," it is possible for those who read Peter's prison escape as imitating the rescue of Priam to recall Cassandra's epithet at this juncture in the *Iliad* (i.e., "golden peer of Aphrodite") and to associate Rhoda not only with her report of Priam's arrival in the *Iliad* but also with the episode of Greek mythology featuring Cassandra's beauty and Apollo's curse. This association can help readers anticipate Rhoda's reception among Mary and her company. It is also noteworthy, however, that this association involves Apollo specifically.

Indeed, Rhoda's consequent association with Apollo contributes to the credibility of interpreting her as a new Cassandra because Apollo also features, implicitly but undoubtedly, in a parallel episode later in Acts. It is well known that the Acts narrative exhibits a proclivity for constructing episodes about Peter and Paul, respectively, in parallels.<sup>52</sup> Among the most commonly identified parallels are the three prison escape scenes, two involving Peter (Acts 5:19–21, 12:5–11) and one involving Paul (16:25–34). Remarkably, the latter two are both situated adjacent to scenes involving young enslaved women. As one commentator notes, just like Peter in Acts 12, "Paul also has to encounter a *παιδίσκη* ('slave girl'), and this in proximity to a prison miracle."<sup>53</sup> The enslaved woman that Paul encounters is explicitly identified as mantic: the narrative describes her as "a young enslaved woman [*παιδίσκην*] with a Pythian spirit [*πνεῦμα πύθωνα*]" who generates profit for her masters by "prophesying [*μαντευομένη*]" (Acts 16:16). Like Rhoda, this enslaved woman speaks truthfully but is not well received. She says of Paul and his companions, "These men are slaves of the Most High God" (16:17), only to be rebuked and subjected to an exorcism by a vexed Paul (16:18)—which leads to his incarceration and subsequent prison escape (16:19–40). By reading Rhoda as a Cassandra figure, an additional parallel emerges: associations with Apollo. Rhoda's name and inability to convince others recall Apollo's curse of Cassandra; the Pythian spirit possessing the enslaved woman in Acts 16, as is commonly recognized, similarly recalls Apollo-inspired prophecy.<sup>54</sup> The "Pythian spirit" is associated with Apollo on account

<sup>51</sup> See Dillon, "Kassandra," 5–6.

<sup>52</sup> See Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, SBLMS 20 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), esp. 23–26. See also David P. Moessner, "'The Christ Must Suffer': New Light on the Jesus–Peter, Stephen, Paul Parallels in Luke-Acts," *NovT* 28 (1986): 220–56, here 221–27, where he traces the history of this observation in scholarship, beginning with F. C. Baur.

<sup>53</sup> Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 406. See also Smith, *Literary Construction of the Other*, 128. Other studies have focused on the young enslaved women in Acts 12 and 16 (and Luke 22) without necessarily emphasizing the parallelism. See Spencer, "Out of Mind, Out of Voice"; Cobb, *Slavery, Gender, Truth, and Power*.

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 152–67; Shelly Matthews, *First Converts: Rich Pagan Women and the Rhetoric of Mission in Early Judaism and Christianity*, *Contraversions* (Stanford,

of the popular myth in which Apollo slays a monstrous serpent, the Python, at the Delphic Oracle, after which Apollo gained “the Pythian” as an epithet, and the priestesses of his shrines—at Delphi and elsewhere—the designation as “Pythias.” The characterizations of Rhoda and the Pythian woman are thus both animated by mythology featuring Apollo—and so, in paralleled narratives, Peter and Paul both encounter young enslaved women who make poorly received but accurate pronouncements and who can be interpreted in relation to Apollo. In addition to these interpretive advantages, reading the Rhoda scene as modeled on Cassandra mythology can also establish a framework for interpreting the subsequent death of Herod as an act of divine vengeance for his execution of James and imprisonment of Peter—an interpretation that is perhaps intuitive but not explicitly supported by the Acts narrative.

#### IV. DIVINE VENGEANCE IN THE DEATHS OF HEROD AND ACHILLES

It is commonly noted that the death of Herod in Acts 12:23 functions, along with his persecution of “the church” in Acts 12:1–4, to bracket the three scenes in Acts 12. Most of the content of the final scene (12:20–23) does not appear to be shaped by a literary model: Herod returns to Caesarea and attends to administrative matters; he fails to rebuke some who make blasphemous claims about his mortality (12:22); and the “angel of the Lord” immediately strikes him, after which he is “eaten by worms and dies” (12:23). The Acts narrative thus constructs the death of King Herod as the death of a tyrant, drawing on information about the deaths of Herod the Great and Agrippa I, probably using Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* as a source.<sup>55</sup> Although commentators commonly assert that Herod’s death is the consequence of his persecution of “the church,” the Acts narrative does not make this causal connection explicit.<sup>56</sup> On the contrary, by relocating Herod to Caesarea (Acts 12:19) and contextualizing his death in relation to attributions of divinity

CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 89–92; Dennis R. MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature*, New Testament and Greek Literature 2 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 44–45.

<sup>55</sup> Josephus, *A.J.* 17.168–191 (Herod the Great); 19.343–352 (Agrippa I). See O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Death of Herod: The Narrative and Theological Function of Retribution in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 158 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006), 170–78.

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., Carl R. Holladay, who writes, “The two sections [of Acts 12] are logically connected: a ‘God-fighter’s’ hostile actions against the church and the dire consequences of his actions” (*Acts: A Commentary*, NTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016], 248). Similarly, see Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 2 vols., EKKNT 5 (Zurich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 1:361.

offered by an envoy from Tyre and Sidon (12:20–23), the Acts narrative seemingly disconnects Herod's death from his persecution of "the church." Nevertheless, an interpretive framework exists within which it is credible to regard his death as related to—indeed, as revenge for—his persecution of James, Peter, and the church: the vengeful logic of mythology related to Cassandra, Apollo, and Achilles. The Acts 12 narrative can be read as establishing this logic through its construction of the first two scenes.

As argued above, the rescue of Peter from Herod's prison can be read as modeled on Hermes's rescue of Priam from the bivouac of Achilles, and it is possible to read the Acts narrative as thereby associating Herod's execution of James and imprisonment of Peter with Achilles's vengeance-eliciting mistreatment of Hector's corpse. Indeed, Priam's ransoming of Hector takes place amid a series of vengeance-related killings in the Trojan War, all but the first of which involve Apollo.<sup>57</sup> After Patroclus kills Sarpedon, Apollo renders him vulnerable to the spear of Hector; seeking vengeance for the death of Patroclus, Achilles engages Hector in battle and kills him after he is abandoned by Apollo; and because Achilles abuses Hector's corpse, Apollo directs Paris's arrow to Achilles's vulnerable ankle. Thus, because it is situated amid—and in relation to—this series of vengeance-motivated killings, Priam's entreaty to Hector is itself associated with the theme of vengeance. This association is attested, for example, in the final extant fragment of Aeschylus's *Ransoming of Hector*, which reads, "Justice exacts the penalty for the wrath of the dead" (266 [Sommerstein, LCL]).<sup>58</sup> In Trojan War mythology, justice demands Achilles's death as "the penalty for the wrath of" Hector. Accordingly, readers possessing the appropriate cultural competence can project this logic onto Acts 12:1–11 and can thereby anticipate that the just penalty for the execution of James and imprisonment of Peter is the death of Herod.<sup>59</sup>

The characterization of Rhoda as a new Cassandra can be interpreted as reinforcing this reading of Acts 12:1–11, again proleptically signaling the death of the one responsible for persecuting the church, killing James, and imprisoning Peter. By emphasizing the nonsensical inability of Mary and her company to believe Rhoda's accurate report, the Acts narrative evokes the mythological logic surrounding Cassandra. The narrative's depiction of Rhoda as a "young enslaved

<sup>57</sup> Even Apollo's slaying of the Python (referred to above in the context of the Pythian woman in Acts 16) is sometimes constructed as revenge for the Python harassing Apollo's mother, Leto. See, e.g., Hyginus, *Fab.* 140.

<sup>58</sup> See also n. 22 above.

<sup>59</sup> As noted above, the same conclusion can be drawn by readers who associate Herod with Pharaoh. Indeed, the word for "striking" in Acts (*πατάσσω* [12:23]) is the same one used in Exodus (LXX) of God (Exod 3:20; 7:25; 9:15; 12:12, 23, 27, 29) and Moses (7:20; 8:12, 13) "striking" the Egyptians and Pharaoh. The primary difference is that the Cassandra-Apollo-Achilles framework makes sense of the Rhoda scene being situated between Herod's persecution and his death. Nevertheless, these frameworks are complementary.

woman” can, moreover, be interpreted as further specifying the mythological framework that structures the narrative. Indeed, although Cassandra frequently prophesies about the deadly consequences of the actions of others—including Paris’s abduction of Helen and the Trojans’ reception of the wooden horse—and is derided as maenadic for doing so, perhaps most relevant here is the episode involving Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Having been taken as his slave and concubine, Cassandra sees the retribution that awaits Agamemnon inside his house: Clytemnestra is plotting his murder in revenge for his sacrifice of Iphigenia. This is the only occasion where Cassandra’s prophecy concerns the death of an individual as the consequence for killing someone else, and, as it should happen, it is the only prediction she makes while enslaved. Thus, because Rhoda’s characterization has more in common with this episode of Cassandra mythology than others, and because it is situated subsequent to a scene that recalls Hermes’s rescue of Priam from Achilles, it is possible to interpret both of these scenes as proleptically signaling the divine vengeance that awaits Herod, the one responsible for killing James, imprisoning Peter, and persecuting the church—all the more so because of Apollo’s active role in cursing Cassandra and facilitating the death of Achilles.

The rhetorical force of the first two scenes thus allows readers to project their mythological logic onto the third, imbuing it with a coherence that it otherwise lacks: just as Apollo facilitates the death of Achilles as an act of vengeance for his mistreatment of Hector’s body, so also, readers of Acts can conclude, does the angel of the Lord—playing the role of a new Apollo—facilitate the death of Herod as an act of vengeance for his persecution of the church, execution of James, and imprisonment of Peter. Indeed, it may be worth noting that the manner of Herod’s death recalls the death of Achilles in Greek mythology. Although Apollo is an instrument for divine vengeance, he does not kill Achilles himself; instead, he guides Paris’s arrow to the location of Achilles’s vulnerability, allowing Paris to kill him. Similarly, the Acts narrative does not indicate that the angel of the Lord kills Herod; instead, he strikes him, apparently rendering him vulnerable to worms, which consume him, and then Herod dies (Acts 12:23).<sup>60</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

The interpretation of Rhoda as exhibiting a Cassandra curse thus has the advantage that it makes sense of the anomalous reaction of Mary and her company to Rhoda’s report of Peter’s arrival and also helps readers identify a framework

<sup>60</sup>It might be helpful to recall Apollo’s role in the death of Patroclus in the *Iliad* (described above), where he strips him of his armor, leaving him vulnerable to the Trojans’ spears. For worm-related deaths generally, see Christopher B. Zeichmann, “Worm Food: Towards a Typology of Worm and Lice Disease-Descriptions in Graeco-Roman Narratives,” *Ancient Narrative* 17 (2021): 185–99.

within which they can logically regard the death of Herod as revenge for his persecution of the church. Due to a curse inflicted by Apollo, Cassandra is unable to convince others about the accuracy of her prophecies—that Paris's abduction of Helen will lead to the Trojan War, that receiving the wooden horse will lead to the fall of Troy, and that Clytemnestra is plotting Agamemnon's death as revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter. The tragedians, in particular, frequently depict others as deriding Cassandra as maenadic on account of her predictions. The Acts narrative's characterization of Rhoda fits neatly within this paradigm, relieving interpreters of the burden of making sense of the otherwise nonsensical reaction of Mary and her company to the news that their prayers have been answered.

In the stories of the Trojan War, Priam's ransoming of Hector is situated amid a series of alternating vengeance-motivated killings: Patroclus kills Sarpedon; in revenge, Patroclus is killed by Hector (aided by Apollo); in revenge, Hector (abandoned by Apollo) is killed by Achilles; and, in revenge, Achilles is killed by Paris (aided by Apollo). It is therefore possible for readers who identify the angel's rescue of Peter as modeled on Hermes's escort of Priam out of the bivouac of Achilles to anticipate this vengeful logic extending to Herod as well. Indeed, ancient writers associated this vengeful logic with the scene of Priam ransoming Hector. Accordingly, by associating Herod with Achilles, the Acts narrative can be read as signaling the divinely wrought death of Herod already in Acts 12:1–11.

If this connection is too subtle for some readers, it is noteworthy that the Acts narrative can be read as reinforcing this interpretive frame of reference through its characterization of Rhoda as a new Cassandra. Not only does this reading connect the Rhoda scene to Peter's escape from prison, but it also evokes the theme of vengeance associated with Cassandra's inability to convince others of her prophecies. In the final iteration of this motif in the life of Cassandra, she is enslaved and accurately predicts the death of Agamemnon as revenge for his sacrifice of Iphigenia. Readers who are attuned to the themes of vengeance running through these literary models can thus interpret Peter's escape and the disbelief of the enslaved Rhoda as signaling the death of the person who persecuted the church, killed James, and imprisoned Peter. In accord with readings that associate Herod with Pharaoh, then, the Acts narrative here constructs the ruling class's opposition to Christ-followers as inviting divine vengeance, wielding the logic of mythology concerning Cassandra, Apollo, and Achilles against Herod and, perhaps, all who would act likewise.

Finally, it is worth reflecting further on some interpretive implications for the Rhoda scene when it is read within a Cassandra framework. Recent interpretations of Acts 12 that attend to the intersecting oppressions faced by Rhoda present credible arguments for reading her characterization as comedic. Such arguments suggest that the Acts narrative is best read as assuming the perspective of the slave-owning class. (After all, it is difficult to imagine a reader who is enslaved finding humor in the treatment of Rhoda.) Taking Rhoda's Cassandra curse



seriously, however, offers a challenge to the credibility of this reading. Cassandra mythology is famously tragic. So also is Rhoda's story—she is disbelieved and disparaged despite the reader's narrative-informed expectations that her report will be believed and celebrated. Perhaps, then, the Cassandra framework can be read as restoring some of Rhoda's dignity, in part because that disbelief and even her enslaved status can thereby be interpreted as signals of intertextuality that structure the larger narrative. In this reading, Rhoda's characterization is not a punch line tickling the sensibilities of slave-owning readers; on the contrary, her association with Cassandra might even increase such readers' sympathy for Rhoda's plight. Nevertheless, it is still noteworthy that, in a narrative about Peter's rescue from the prison of Herod that evokes famous literary models of liberation, freedom is not extended to the enslaved Rhoda.<sup>61</sup> All that can be said is that the narrative is unconcerned with the possibility of her emancipation. Accordingly, although Acts 12 may not assume the particular slave-owning perspective that is often argued, the narrative's lack of imagination with respect to liberation suggests a top-down, androcentric orientation nonetheless—ironically, a tragedy worthy of Cassandra.

<sup>61</sup> See Aymer, "Outrageous, Audacious, Courageous, Willful," 284.