

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Forty-Sixth Week - Fifth Day

AGABUS PREDICTS A FAMINE

"And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:27-30).

Who were these "prophets" of whom Agabus was one--and the only one--to whom any predictions are ascribed? The word prophet in its primary sense certainly does denote one who foretells future events. But since these prophets were commonly regarded as public instructors in religion, and as they constantly appear in that capacity in the Old Testament, the more general idea of a public teacher came to be expressed by the word. In this sense it frequently occurs in the New Testament, where there is no apparent reference to the prediction of things future.¹ It therefore seems that the "prophets" of the New Testament were such disciples as applied themselves to public teaching and preaching, and who were occasionally enabled under the inspiration of the Divine Spirit to foretell things important for the church to know.

Although the primary function or gift of these prophets was not to foretell future events, and though there were probably many who never did predict things to come, yet when such predictions were announced to the people they usually came from one of these. Some also appear to have possessed this gift more signally or frequently than others. Thus, the only other notice in Scripture respecting Agabus is in connection with another prediction of a future event--he is the same person who at a later period predicted to Paul that he would be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles at Jerusalem (Acts 21:10,11).

This famine in our text, as we are expressly informed, took place during the reign of Claudius Caesar. Now if such a famine did take place, surely we should expect some secular record of it. Is there any such record? And since Luke has used the phrase "all the world" in the limited sense of Judea (Luke 2:1), we must look for some indication in the present text as to whether we are to take the phrase in the wider or narrower sense. And we do indeed find that the narrow sense is indicated by the fact that those to whom the prediction was delivered clearly

¹ See Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28; 13:2, 8; 14:3, 5, 24.

understood that the brethren in Judea would be exposed to sufferings from which they themselves would be exempt. This limited sense becomes even the more emphatic if, as was probable, the money was not sent till the famine had actually commenced; for if the calamity extended into Syria where Antioch was the metropolis, the brethren there would have been in as much need of help as those in Judea.

History records four famines in the reign of Claudius; none of them, however, was general to all the world nor even to all the Roman empire. The first of these was at Rome in the first and second years of Claudius and arose from the difficulties of introducing adequate supplies of corn from abroad. These difficulties must have been chiefly local, for the emperor was considered to have taken the proper measures for preventing the recurrence of a famine from the same causes by making a port at the mouth of the Tiber, at great expense, and a convenient passage from it up to the city. Before this was done, corn could be brought to Rome in summer only and was stored in granaries for winter use.

The second scarcity occurred in the ninth year of Claudius and is mentioned by Eusebius (the sole authority) as afflicting Greece only, where wheat was sold at a truly famine price.

The third dearth was at Rome in the eleventh year of Claudius. It seems to have been of the same nature with the first. From the terms in which it is mentioned by Tacitus, we gather that the granaries had become exhausted and the ships (which under ordinary circumstances might have brought the produce of the last harvest from foreign ports) were kept away by adverse winds and weather. But the calamity was not of long duration, for when the granaries of Rome were nearly empty, "by the goodness of the gods, and the mildness of the winter, ships arrived with sufficient provision."

The fourth famine, but the second in time, is that which afflicted Judea toward the end of the fourth year of Claudius. It is mentioned by Josephus, and in terms that would alone suggest this was the famine the sacred historian had in view. It is adduced by Josephus somewhat incidentally in conjunction with Helena queen of Adiabene. This princess was a proselyte to Judaism and had brought up her son Izates in the same faith, in which he was more fully confirmed afterward by a learned Jew called Ananias. Speaking of the arrival of Helena at Jerusalem, Josephus says:

Her arrival was a great blessing to the people; for the city at that time labouring under a heavy famine, so that a great many perished for want, the queen sent abroad several of her officers; some to Alexandria for the purchase of corn, others to Cyprus to buy up dried figs. These having used the utmost expedition, as soon as they returned, she distributed food to those who were in need. By this liberality she laid a lasting obligation upon our whole nation. Moreover, her son Izates, having heard of the famine, sent a large sum of money to the chief men of Jerusalem (*Antiq.* xx. 2, 6.)

Afterward Josephus refers to the same famine in such terms as seem to show that it was not confined to one season but extended over two or three years.

From supplies of corn being obtained from abroad, it is clear that the famine was confined to Judea, or was felt with most intensity in that district. That it did not extend to Egypt on the south is clear; and if it had been felt to the northeast, Izates would have wanted his money to feed his own people. In this case we see that Helena and Izates, proselytes to Judaism, do the same thing for the native Jews that the proselytes to Christianity at Antioch did for the native Christians. It is well reasoned from this case by Lardner,² who has brought together all the information bearing upon the subject,

that the Jews of Judea seem to have expected it as due to them, that some particular regard should be shown them by the rest of their countrymen, and by all who came over to the worship of the true God, and were admitted to share in any of the privileges of the Jewish people. Thus St. Paul assures us: "Only they would that we should remember the poor, the same which I also was forward to do" [Gal. 2:10]. The very last time that St Paul was at Jerusalem: "After many years," says he, "I came to bring alms to my nation and offerings" [Acts 24:17]. Nor was St. Paul's argument a new thought, though expressed by him with a divine temper: "But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints; for it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia, to make a certain contribution for the poor saints that are at Jerusalem. It hath pleased them verily, *and their debtors they are*. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things" [Rom. 15:25-27].

2 *Credibility of the Gospel History*. Part 1, B. 1, Ch. 11.