

# DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Forty-Fourth Week - Third Day

KING ARETAS

***"In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands" (2 Corinthians 11:32,33).***

This evening we give our attention to a curious point in the history of Saul's escape from Damascus, which does not appear in the regular narrative (Acts) nor in the apostle's own reference to it (Galatians). We allude to the text given above. The startling fact is that Aretas, a petty king of Arabia Petraea, should exercise authority (via an officer or ethnarch) in a city not belonging to his proper territory but one under Roman jurisdiction. Neither Josephus nor any other writer speaks of Damascus as ever having been subject to Aretas, and therefore the circumstance of our text seems at first view unaccountable and even improbable. That the fact is not mentioned by the only one or two writers likely to have noticed it is not in itself strange. But in the absence of such proof, it is yet by no means improbable to show--from the information we do possess--that Aretas should *at this time* have had possession of Damascus.

This Aretas is the same king of Arabia whom Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, had so deeply displeased by divorcing his (Aretas') daughter and marrying Herodias, the wife of his brother (on his father's side) Herod Philip.<sup>1</sup> The injured princess had returned to her father, and he, incensed at the treatment she had received, soon began hostilities against Herod (Antipas). In the last year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (A.D. 37), Aretas had completely defeated Herod's army. Aretas was, like Herod, tributary to the Romans, though in some degree less dependent. So now Herod sent a report of the matter to Rome, thus arousing the emperor's wrath at the audacity of Aretas to wage war with another "protected" sovereign without his permission or concurrence. Tiberius therefore sent orders to Vitellius, the Roman prefect in Syria, to declare war against Aretas and either take him alive or send his head to Rome.

But Vitellius harbored a dislike for Herod, and therefore he moved with a noticeable lack of speed in pursuing the order of Tiberius. Indeed, the very knowledge that this order came through Herod's own presentation of the matter was alone sufficient to render it distasteful to him. The reason for Vitellius' resentment is as follows.

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1 The reader may wish to refer to the earlier excerpt entitled "Herod and Herodias."

A rebellion had arose in Parthia against the Romans, with great commotion ensuing. After various attempts to settle these disorders, Tiberius ordered Vitellius to go and contract an alliance with Artabanus, the king of the Parthians. Accordingly, Vitellius and Artabanus met, each with a guard of honor, upon a bridge over the Euphrates erected for just this purpose. Herod was also present, in a rich pavilion curiously set in the middle of the stream. After the two men concluded the articles of agreement, Herod provided a splendid entertainment in honor of it.

Herod then hurried to send the emperor news of the conclusion of the treaty, providing a full account of the particulars. Vitellius also sent his own official account, but his messenger arrived considerably later than the one sent by Herod. Tiberius was thus displeased with Vitellius, coldly stating that since he had already received all the needful information from Herod, his own intelligence was stale. Vitellius was much hurt at this, and seeing that he had been greatly lowered in the emperor's favor by the officious meddling of Herod, Vitellius harbored a secret resentment against him. For the time being Vitellius kept his hatred to himself, knowing that Herod had won the favor of the emperor, which he valued much more than the loss of his own.

It was not long after this that Vitellius received the order from Tiberius to employ the Roman forces against Aretas, ostensibly to punish him as a rebellious vassal but in actuality to take the side of Herod Antipas in the bitter war between them. Slowly and reluctantly Vitellius moved in obedience to this order. It was his intention at first to march his troops through Judea, that being the nearest way to the territory of Aretas. But at Ptolemais he was met by an embassy from the Jews who implored him to change his plan, for they could not allow the Roman standards with their idolatrous images to be carried through their country. The prefect, Vitellius, was a man noted for his courtesy; and unwilling to give needless offense, he sent the troops across the plain of Esdraelon. Vitellius himself went to Jerusalem, where Herod and some others were also proceeding in order to offer sacrifices in the temple at the feast of the Passover, then nigh at hand.

Gratified by his ready concession to their religious scruples, Vitellius was received with every possible mark of respect. On the fourth day after his arrival, news arrived of the death of Tiberius and the accession of Caius Caligula. Upon receiving this news, Vitellius required the Jews to take the oath of allegiance to the new emperor; and he eagerly seized the opportunity by abandoning or postponing the campaign against Aretas, alleging the necessity of first obtaining the sanction of the new emperor to the orders received from his predecessor. Vitellius therefore returned to Antioch and dismissed his troops into winter quarters.

This event, as we can now see, coincides with or slightly precedes the mention of Aretas as master of Damascus in the sacred volume. Aretas may have accomplished this feat of possession either in the course of hostilities between him and Herod upon the Syrian frontier or upon the withdrawal of Vitellius. But a third possibility seems more likely. As soon as Aretas was aware of the orders Tiberius had sent to Vitellius to send him back dead or alive to Rome,

he took possession of Damascus, which had belonged to his ancestors, and retained it in his possession during all the reign of Caligula. It had become a matter of life or death to him; and when he saw two legions of Roman soldiers marching against him, he had no alternative but either to submit or do all that he could to strengthen his position. To submit would be death with ignominy; to resist would, at the worst, be death with honor. So when the Romans had declared war against him and were prepared to hunt him to the death, Aretas knew this was no time to hesitate in making himself master of any city he was able to win--and the possession of which was surely desirable merely on the ground that it was immediately under Roman jurisdiction.

The New emperor, Caligula, had little regard for Herod. By not ordering the resumption of the campaign against Aretas, he seems to have justified the precaution taken by Vitellius. How long Aretas held Damascus we do not know; but it is likely the Romans came to terms with him rather than incur the expense and trouble of a profitless little war. Later Aretas either relinquished his occupation of Damascus or was confirmed in the possession of it by the Romans.

The governor of Damascus, under the authority of King Aretas, was either a civil governor or a military commandant. The influence that the Jews had with him may be explained by considering how much it was to his own interest to conciliate so important a portion of the Damascene population. Besides, the government of Aretas could hardly fail to be popular with them. They hated the Roman yoke, and in the quarrel between Herod and Aretas their sympathies were entirely with the latter. As for Herod, in his own dominions he was not much liked; and beyond them, he was detested.

It seems, therefore, that the Scripture intimation, strange as it may be deemed at first, fits very well into the common history of these events.