

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 50, Chapters 23 and 24

This is our 50th lesson in the Book of Acts. We've been at this for a year and the reason for the deliberate pace has, I hope, become apparent. We've taken many detours to carefully examine the explosive rise of trust in Yeshua as Messiah that was expressed mostly by the Jewish movement called The Way. We've also examined Judaism and the state of Jewish society both inside and outside of the Holy Land in order to better understand the several Jewish Bible characters and their circumstances, and what they mean by what they say; because without doing that we can misconstrue what Yehoveh intends for us to learn. Chief among these Bible characters and decision makers is Paul, whom the Lord has decided must go to Rome, the future seat of the gentile Christian Church, to extend the reach of the Gospel by appearing before the Emperor. How such an improbable thing as a mere Jewish commoner getting an audience with Roman governors and even with the Emperor could ever happen is what we're watching unfold as God orchestrates matters invisibly according to His will. We're going to start our lesson today with another of those detours.

As we continue with our study of Acts chapter 23 we find that ***Sha'ul*** is once again under attack from fellow Jews who think that he has become a traitor to Judaism. Or to be more precise, a traitor to his Jewishness. Before we re-read a few verses from chapter 23 I want to point out that terms like Judaism and Jewishness, which out of necessity I use often, can be challenging to precisely define. Drawing a distinction between those two terms is not as easy as it might seem because there is no single authority that can declare exactly what Judaism is and is not, or what Jewishness is or is not; these are quite subjective terms that get reshaped as history unravels. As an illustration, this is not unlike the issue of definitively asserting what the term Christian means; something, which on the surface, ought not to be so difficult to wrap our arms around (but it is). I suspect that if I asked each of you what a Christian is I would get a slightly different answer. And if I went to the Middle East or North Africa and asked that question, I'd get something else entirely. No doubt all would begin with saying that a Christian is a follower of Christ; but then you would qualify that with some caveats and definitions that not all who call themselves Christians would agree. For instance; can you be a Christian and not believe that Christ is God? Can you be a Christian and not believe in the virgin birth? Can you be a Christian and not believe that Christ is a Jew? Can you be a Christian and not celebrate Christmas and Easter? It was, and remains, like that in trying to deal with ancient Judaism as all the sects maintained the common belief that Yehoveh was the God of Israel; but after that there were many nuances and variations that led to several sects of Judaism being formed. Can you be a Jew and believe that other nations have different (legitimate) gods? Can you be a Jew and not believe in the resurrection of the dead? Can you be a Jew and not be circumcised? And every bit as much in our time as with the ancient past, can you be a Jew and believe that Yeshua of Nazareth is the Messiah?

One of the more difficult things to comprehend is that while it still applies in varying degrees in our time, in Bible times religion was invariably but one element of how you defined your

ethnicity. So, for instance, you wouldn't identify yourself as Canaanite without the proper genealogy, using the standard Canaanite clothing, wearing your hair in Canaanite fashion, living in homes built a certain traditional Canaanite way, having culturally desired occupations while shunning others, and generally living a well defined Canaanite lifestyle while worshipping the Canaanite pantheon of gods in the traditionally accepted way. Thus when we apply this same principle to Jews, we see that the *religion* of the Jews, Judaism (as it was eventually labeled) was merely one of several necessary elements of one's life that served to identify you, and qualify you, as a Jew. Religion was only one part of what made a Jew a Jew; there were several other parts. Generally speaking, remove or renounce any of these parts and your Jewishness would be questioned.

So where did the religion of the Jews of New Testament times, Judaism, come from? It was not taken exclusively from the Hebrew Bible; you'll never find the word "synagogue" or find their liturgical practices in the Old Testament. Rather Judaism was a new phenomenon, a product of the synagogue system. The synagogue system itself was rather new as it arose as a manmade system, which resulted from the unpleasant circumstances of the Babylonian exile of 600 B.C. that left the Jews living in foreign lands, religiously adrift without their Temple or Priesthood. Prior to their exile it was the Temple system that had formed their authorized religious structure and was the focal point of their religious life. But now, without that Temple and Priesthood, their religious structure was defunct. So the leaders among the exiled Jews devised an alternative system that differed somewhat from the Temple and its purpose; a system that eventually came to be known as Judaism (Jews were people from the tribe of Judah....therefore the term Judah-ism....the religion of Judah).

Judaism incorporated many familiar elements of the original, Torah-defined system that depended on the Temple; a system that at Mt. Sinai God had defined and commanded to apply to all 12 tribes of Israel. However this newly modified Jewish religion dropped some of the elements of their former religion that seemed impractical (if not impossible) considering their situation, beginning with how and where worship occurred. Most importantly Judaism added new practices to compensate for the lack of the Temple and Priesthood (and thus their inability to sacrifice to atone for their sins), but also because this modified religion was meant to apply primarily to the survivors of the Babylonian exile: Judah....the Jews, and not necessarily to their brother tribes that had long ago experienced their own exile from which they had never returned. Thus especially as concerned Jews who freely chose to remain in foreign lands (Diaspora Jews), instead of eventually returning to the Holy Land, what it meant to be Jewish wasn't necessarily the same as compared to what it meant before the exile. And for those fervent Jews who *did* return to the Holy Land, Jewishness meant something a little different than how the Diaspora Jews viewed it. Thus Holy Land Jews and Diaspora Jews were always at odds with one another over the question of what is a Jew? Or, to say it a bit differently: what constitutes a universally recognized and accepted Jewishness among people who identify themselves as Jews?

I began today's lesson by giving you this information because this is the bottom line cause of why Paul was being persecuted by the Judean Jews (Holy Land Jews who lived in Judea), and especially by the ultra-religious and ultra-nationalist sect of Jews called the Zealots. Christian Bible commentators debate endlessly over exactly which theological issues of Judaism or

Christianity had put Paul in such hot water and they tend to make Messianic theological issues as the reason that the Jewish people came against Paul. While there was indeed one theological issue that is pointed out by Paul as especially contentious (resurrection from the dead), this was actually an old and ongoing debate among Jews that had no special bearing on Paul or on Believing Jews. This mob that wanted to kill Paul was anything but Jewish intellectuals or studied Torah scholars; they weren't ready to murder Paul over some arcane doctrinal difference. Rather the issue was that these angry Judean Jews weren't so much questioning Paul's religion as they were questioning his commitment to Jewishness. In fact we find that as Lysias, the Roman Commander, was questioning the crowd at the Temple as to what Paul had done to cause the riot, he became frustrated because they all shouted something different and none of the answers was very coherent. Basically the mob was very upset about Paul in a general way. Was Paul still a *real* Jew? Was Paul speaking and teaching against familiar, comfortable, traditional Jewishness? Might Paul be trying to redefine Jewishness (a never ending matter among Jews, anyway)? Was Paul turning his back on his Jewish heritage altogether and becoming a gentile, and urging other Jews to cave in and do the same?

So with that understanding as the backdrop for our story, let's re-read the final few verses of Acts chapter 23.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 23:16 – end

As we left off last time, Paul was back in his cell at the Antonia Fortress as much for his own safety as anything else. A mob of Judean Jews along with some of the Sadducean members of the Sanhedrin wanted to kill Paul, each for their own reasons. The Judean Jews had heard (falsely) that Paul was a traitor to Judaism and Jewishness as he was seen regularly consorting with the hated gentiles. The reasons for the Sanhedrin's determination to rid themselves of him are less clear. But my conclusion is that it was because Paul had openly defied them; the first time when, many years earlier, he was sent by the then High Priest to arrest Jesus sympathizers, instead Paul turned and became one of them! Second because the Sadducees were aristocrats who didn't take it lightly when a common Jew developed his own following. Paul's popularity among so many Diaspora Jews was viewed as a threat to their authority and to peace with Rome. But third, the Sanhedrin was convinced that Paul was teaching people to have no regard for the Temple. The Temple was Sadducee headquarters and the High Priest and most of the senior priests were Sadducees. And since the High Priest was the chief justice of the Sanhedrin, and because the income from the Temple was highly lucrative, this was a direct attack upon his territory and his personal finances. The Jewish sect of the Essenes had already openly rebelled against the Temple authorities and subsequently many of its members moved to Qumran and set up their own community and began training a replacement priesthood. The head of the Sanhedrin, the High Priest, didn't need someone else of substantial influence coming against him, creating a following, and causing others to follow suit.

So the most fanatical among the Judean Jews (probably the Zealots and the Sicarri), about 40 of them, banded together and formed a plan to draw the Roman guard out of their fortress, attack them and take Paul away from them, assassinating him on the spot. They took their plan

to the High Priest who offered cooperation. But somehow Paul's young nephew heard of the plan and went to the Antonia Fortress and was allowed to tell Paul about it. Paul sent him to the Roman Commander Lysias who believed the young man (after what Lysias had witnessed he had no reason *not* to believe that a murder plot was afoot). Since Paul was a Roman citizen Lysias decided that the only way he could fulfill his duty to protect him was to get him away from Jerusalem and the conspiracy, and to do it fast. Besides; Lysias had a can of worms on his hands with this whole Paul issue and was more than happy to hand it off to his boss, Felix, to handle.

We find out in verse 22 that Lysias was taking no chances with these violent and committed Jews; so he put together a small army of 200 soldiers, 200 spearmen, and 70 mounted cavalry who could fend them off even if they doubled their numbers. But he also did the one thing that the ringleaders of the plot hadn't expected: the Roman army contingent took Paul from his cell under the cover of darkness and made a nighttime-journey at what had to have been a forced-march pace. Their destination was Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean Seacoast; it was the official residence where Governor Felix resided and so it was well fortified and had hundreds of Roman soldiers stationed there. It was about 60 miles from Jerusalem to Caesarea; however the route they took went through Antipatris (today called Aphek). Once they reached Antipatris they were out of the reach of the assassination squad. The foot soldiers were not required to accompany their prisoner any further and so were allowed to return home. The distance from Jerusalem to Antipatris is 38 miles and they covered that distance in the same amount of time that it normally takes to go 20 miles; in other words, they moved very rapidly. Thus the exhausted foot soldiers were relieved of duty and Paul was accompanied the rest of the way only by Roman horsemen.

Lysias did not accompany his troops and so sent a letter of explanation with them to Felix outlining the circumstances and the charges against Paul. Verse 25 divulges that Luke is giving us the letter to Felix "in these terms". In other words, this is not a verbatim copy of the letter. Rather, somehow, Luke got details of the letter and has preserved that for us. As a number of commentators have pointed out, there is no reason to doubt the content of the letter for it is true to the circumstances, the times, and the Roman record about how things were done.

The letter begins with the customary flattery to a superior and then goes on to frame the situation in the most favorable possible light for Lysias. He discreetly omits that he had determined to flog this man (and was moments from doing so) and instead makes it sound as though he and his troops valiantly risked their own lives on a rescue mission to save Paul from the Jews. He goes on to explain that he took Paul to the Sanhedrin for questioning but nothing they found against him broke any Roman law and there seemed to be no broken Jewish law that rose to the consequence of the death penalty or even going to prison. And because Paul is a Roman citizen, Lysias explains that he is following proper protocol by sending Paul to the governor and that he has ordered the accusers to go to Caesarea to explain the charges to Felix in a formal trial.

Paul and the letter are promptly delivered to Felix and the first thing Felix asks is where he was from. The answer of Cilicia satisfied him. This was not a casual question. It was usual that a

suspect was tried by the provincial governor of the province where the suspect was from; not where the crime was committed. However there was a hierarchy of Roman governors and procurators set up such that in this case Felix outranked the governor of Cilicia and so the case fell to him to try. That is why in verse 35 Felix responds: "I will give you a hearing". That is, he accepted that his was the proper jurisdiction for the matter to be heard. But Paul would have to wait, in custody, until his accusers arrived from Jerusalem to testify. The bad news is that Paul would be imprisoned at Herod's headquarters building called the Praetorium. The good news is that because he was a Roman citizen, and because he had not yet had a trial, he would be guarded by the military but he would not be in a prison cell. So his surroundings were much more tolerable than when he was being held at the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem.

Let's open up Acts chapter 24.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 24 all

We'll take a few side roads as we journey through this chapter because it gives me a good opportunity to pass along some helpful information that will aid you in studying the New Testament in general and in understanding the times in a practical way.

Verse 1 explains that the High Priest **Hananyah** (Ananias) made the trip to Caesarea along with some elders (likely Sanhedrin members), and also with what most Bibles will say was an attorney or a lawyer named Tertullus. It was 5 days after Paul arrived before this contingent of prosecutors showed up and the trial could begin. It is quite misleading to characterize Tertullus as a lawyer. The Greek says that he was a **rhetor**, the word from which we get the English term rhetoric. The KJV Bible translates this term to mean "orator"; that is much closer to reality. Within the Roman legal system his job was not to be a legal expert but rather to present a formal legal case to the judge (in this case the judge was Felix) in the proper protocol complete with lavish praise heaped upon the judge. There were certain people trained and skilled in oratory (a much valued occupation in the Roman culture) that were hired for this purpose as the lofty vocabulary gave the proceeding much gravitas. And especially if the judge were someone as distinguished and highly placed as a provincial governor, the judge would have been greatly offended if an approved **rhetor** had not shown up to set the stage with his flowery words. It was simply the rhetorical fashion of the time; nothing more, nothing less.

Although we can't be entirely certain, it is likely that Tertullus was Jewish: a Hellenistic Jew. Tertullus was a Latin name (Latin and Greek were the languages of the Roman Empire), but this is not proof of the man's ethnicity. Many Jews held Latin or Greek names. That said, because **Hananyah** the High Priest was a Sadducee and a wealthy aristocrat, and because the High Priest was an office appointed by the Romans (once the wheels of justice had been properly lubricated), then there was a close and desired relationship established (mostly monetary) between the High Priest and the Roman government. So it is not out of the question that Tertullus could have been a gentile **rhetor**.

The High Priest was by now, and had been for 100 years, a figurehead position of prestige that was largely ceremonial. Mostly the High Priest's duties involved Shabbat, the 7 Biblical festivals, going into the Holy of Holies once per year on Yom Kippur, and announcing New

Moons. As we can imagine, he was not a Torah expert even though the Sadducees claimed that they followed ONLY the Biblical Torah and shunned the Traditions that were championed by the Pharisees. Although I've covered it before, it would be good to repeat it: since the 4th century B.C., and all throughout New Testament times, there were dual and competing religious institutions in existence for Jews: the Temple and its Priesthood led by the High Priest, versus the synagogue system and its leadership. These two systems were rivals in many ways but they weren't enemies; the synagogue recognized the authority of the Temple when it came to the rituals that according to the Laws of Moses could occur only at the Temple, and they acknowledged the role of Priests in ceremonies that the Torah clearly required. The Temple acknowledged that the synagogue system existed and that nearly every living Jew attended one, but that's about it. The synagogue was an unpleasant reality for them, but one they could not hope to change; so they found ways to coexist with it.

One of the most important, original tasks of the Temple priests (as commanded by God) was to teach the people God's Biblical Torah and to enforce it within the Hebrew community. But since the rebuilding of the Temple by Nehemiah (at the end of the Babylonian exile), Temple activities became mostly about ritual and ceremony and less about teaching God's Word and enforcing it. Part of the reason for this was because the vast majority of Jews now lived in the foreign lands of the Diaspora, far away from the reach of the Temple in Jerusalem. So the experience of the Jewish masses with their Jewish religion occurred primarily in synagogues that were led by non-priests; and synagogues were NOT under the authority of the Temple or High Priest. In fact most synagogues (especially at first) were independent from one another like with local community churches in rural areas of the USA. A locally elected leadership usually oversaw the town synagogue, but they had no official connection to the Temple. While there was no sacrificing in synagogues, and the typical God-ordained Temple functions and celebrations on the various Holy days still happened only at the Temple, sheer practicality dictated that whatever teaching and enforcement the average Diaspora Jew received was obtained in the synagogue because it was local or at least relatively nearby.

As a consequence of the exile and the extended time during which there was no Temple and no operating Priesthood to teach and enforce the Biblical Torah (the Laws of Moses) many new religious theories about sin and atonement and ritual cleanness and how to remedy violations and impurity had been created by synagogue authorities. These rulings came to be known as "traditions of the elders". Elders were local synagogue leaders who were usually NOT Torah experts, and more often than not were also not Levites (the tribe of Priests) but rather they were respected civic leaders. So pragmatism and local circumstances played a significant role in what the elders decided to create as rules and laws for the local Jewish community to live by and how to conduct synagogue worship services. It was during this same era that a synagogue tradition arose that Jews should assemble in communal worship one day per week, on Shabbat. Such a communal meeting on Shabbat had never existed prior to the Babylonian exile. Shabbat simply amounted to the general Jewish population ceasing their normal labors for 24 hours; all ceremonial activity and ritual for Shabbat was the province of the priests and so it was performed only at the Temple.

As the decades and then centuries rolled by, these rulings and traditions created by the synagogue authorities became the unquestioned doctrines and practices for the synagogue

and also dictated the lifestyles and religious activities for the masses of common Jews, especially for those living in the Diaspora. For a very long time the Jews that had moved back to the Holy Land tended to show a bit more loyalty and connection to the Temple and Priesthood. But by Jesus' day the synagogue overtook the Temple as the dominate religious institution of the Holy Land as well as in the Diaspora. This showed up primarily in that the original Laws of Moses gave way to **Halakhah**: Jewish Law. And Jewish Law was a fusion of the Laws of Moses, traditions of the elders, and ancient Jewish cultural customs.

So as we return now to our Biblical story of Paul standing trial before Felix, we read about the overwhelming flattery that Tertullus heaps upon the governor. He says that great peace is being enjoyed on account of Felix (meaning peace between the Jews and the Romans) and that Felix is apparently working hard to keep improving living conditions for the residents of Judea. None of this is true. Felix was the worst sort of governor; greedy and cruel. He was ruthless and cared only to enrich himself. He was part of what is called the Equestrian class of Roman rulers. That is, the aristocracy of Roman society had two tiers: the higher was the senatorial class and the lower was the equestrian class. Both classes were wealthy. Once a person became a Senator they became part of the upper most class. Sons of Senators remained as part of the Equestrian class until and unless they became a Senator.

Antonius Felix was not a Senator; he was a freedman who had belonged to the imperial family. The retired High Priest Jonathan (another wealthy man who had literally purchased his position as High Priest) had used his influence to help Felix obtain the governor position from Cumanus who had come into disfavor over how he had mishandled some riots between Jews and Samaritans. Felix had good political connections of his own because he was also related to Emperor Claudius through his marriage to the daughter of Antony and Cleopatra. Later Felix also married the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa, a Jewish girl named Drusilla. But this marriage was quite controversial because Drusilla was already betrothed to the King of Emesus, a fellow named Azizus, when Felix was smitten by her and somehow managed to woo her away from Azizus causing much trouble. The Roman politician and historian Tacitus records that Felix was not well regarded. Rather he practiced "every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave." Felix was hard on the Jewish people and behaved with severity towards them, and this resulted in further acts of rebellion by the Jews. Since the Romans valued stability and peace above all, this eventually resulted in Felix being removed from his position and he was replaced by Festus, who we'll read about in Acts chapter 25. Paul is quite aware of Felix and his history so he will tread cautiously when it is his turn to respond to the accusations put forward by Tertullus.

So beginning in verse 2 we have the case against Paul set out from the worldview of the High Priest. And as I mentioned at the outset of today's lesson, we're hard pressed to find anything of a theological nature that Paul is accused of violating. Rather the accusation is from the mindset of a wealthy aristocratic High Priest who doesn't think anyone of a lower class should disagree with him to his face, nor cause him any bother. Thus Tertullus explains in verse 5 that generally speaking Paul is a pest. He foments uprisings among Jews throughout the entire world and he is the ringleader of a sect of Jews called the **Natzratim**. Finally he says that Paul *tried* to profane the Temple but fortunately they were able to stop him before he did. How he went about trying to profane the Temple is never stated. So according to Tertullus Paul never

actually profaned the Temple, he just tried to and didn't succeed.

What would have caught Felix's ear were the political issues that were set forth. What would he care about mundane matters of Jewish religious law? Essentially the first couple of charges are that Paul causes trouble and thwarts every sincere effort of the Sanhedrin and the Romans to maintain the peace. Tertullus then cleverly ties this allegation to Paul being a ringleader (a term used for criminal activity) of a revolutionary sect of Jews called the **Natzratim**. So the implication against Paul is similar to the charge leveled against his Master, Yeshua: he is trying to start a rebellion to overthrow Roman rule.

For the Jewish High Priest to bring these charges of attempted sedition by a fellow Jew to a Roman occupier was beyond the pale. Essentially **Hananyah** was playing the role of informer to the enemy, Rome. While the Torah doesn't have anything directly to say about such an activity, **Halakhah** does. And the general attitude is that a Jew who turns in another Jew to face a gentile court essentially causes Jewish Law to be made inferior to gentile law. In the Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 26, it states that any Jew who would turn in another Jew to gentile authorities was considered to have "reviled, blasphemed, and rebelled against the Laws of Moses". If convicted this would bring on the death penalty of the informer.

The Essenes (who considered the High Priesthood corrupt and wicked and an enemy of God and the people) wrote this in their Temple Scroll that was found at Qumran:

"If a man (a Jew) passes on information against his people or betrays his people to a foreign nation, or does evil against his people, you shall hang him on a tree and he will die."

I have little doubt that this comment is aimed directly at the much reviled High Priest's office due to their very public attachment and notoriously cozy relationship with the Roman government, who appointed them to their lucrative position in the first place.

This is the second time within a week that Paul has faced the accusations of **Hananyah** the High Priest and he's had plenty of time to think about how to respond. This becomes evident in his rather eloquent rebuttal to these ludicrous charges. It begins in verse 10 and we shall examine that next time.