

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 53, Chapters 25 and 26

In Acts chapter 25 Paul is standing before the new governor of Judea, Festus, who has been joined by King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. This is not a formal trial, per se. It is more an informational gathering; it is meeting because after hearing Paul's accusers, and then hearing from Paul, Governor Festus is at as much a loss as was his predecessor Felix to find any crime that **Sha'ul** had committed. It must be understood, however, that neither Felix nor Festus had any real interest in trespasses Paul might have perpetrated against Jewish religious laws. Rather their concerns were over whether Paul might have violated any Roman laws, or was a threat to Roman rule, and the implication of the High Priest (as head of the Sanhedrin) was that Paul was a rebel who was disturbing a peaceful co-existence between the Jews and the Romans that the Romans greatly valued. It was clear that due to the lack of witnesses to that charge, and due to Paul's demeanor and his outright denial of being a troublemaker, that he was not fomenting a Jewish rebellion. However because Paul was a Roman citizen, and because even before the verdict was handed down he had appealed to Caesar, Felix and Festus's hands were tied. Paul was going to Rome no matter the outcome.

Let's pick up at verse 13 of Acts 25, but first let's re-read these particular passages.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 25:13 – end

We discussed in our previous lesson just who, exactly, Agrippa and Bernice were that Festus (and Paul) were pleased that they had come to Caesarea Maritima so that they could lend some insight into the hard-to-understand complaints against **Sha'ul**. Our grasp of this helps to explain how things went with Paul's trial and what happened afterward.

Agrippa and Bernice both fancied themselves as Jews and interestingly it seems that the Jewish people had no issue with that. Partly this public acceptance of Agrippa's Jewishness is because he was thought to be faithful to many of the Jewish Temple rituals, and especially as it regarded the Biblical Feasts, which he made a show of attending. This endeared him to the High Priest and the Sadducees, but it also made him look good to the common populace (something politicians are especially adept at). Agrippa **and** Bernice's claim of Jewishness comes from the fact that Herod the Great (their mutual great grandfather) had as one his wives Mariamne. Although Herod himself was not a Jew but rather was an Idumean (a descendant of Esau), Mariamne was indeed a Hebrew. By now the Biblically mandated patrilineal descent (that is, the father determines the ethnicity of his offspring) had given way to the Jewish Tradition of matrilineal descent (the mother determining the ethnicity of her offspring). So whatever children Mariamne bore for King Herod the Great were considered as Jews because she was a Jew.

Mariamne was Agrippa's and Bernice's great grandmother. This particular Agrippa of our story with Paul was Agrippa II. His father, Agrippa I, was also considered a Jew and he had

married a woman named Cyprus. Little is known about her, but she was a granddaughter of Herod the Great. So whether she was actually a Jew we don't know, but she must have been considered to be. The point of our ambling down memory lane of the Herod dynasty is that **who and what was a Jew** had already become a problematic matter well before New Testament times. How a person became identified as a Jew varied; it could be that they were a gentile who converted to Judaism by means of circumcision; it could be that the one side of a person's family were Jews (even if the other side were gentiles); it could be that indeed a person had a long genealogical record proving their heritage as a member of the tribe of Judah. The person could have been the offspring of a gentile slave who belonged to a Jew. If the child of a slave was born while that slave was still in the service of a Jew, they were generally considered the property and family of the Master. Thus that gentile slave offspring could be considered to be Jewish depending upon the decision of the Jewish Master. And, there were other nuances as well. This is no doubt the reason for the extraordinarily long and thorough genealogy of Yeshua that we find presented in the Gospels; it was not only to establish that he came from King David's royal line, but foremost it was to prove that He was a Jew in every way that Jewishness could be determined since Jewishness was requirement #1 for a legitimate Messiah. Thus we never hear of Yeshua's claim of His Jewishness being disputed (and this was no small matter in His era).

So Agrippa and Bernice did have some credentials as being Jewish, as did their parents and grandparents, so the Jewish people didn't question their Jewish identities. However I find it personally fascinating that Agrippa and Bernice apparently found it to their benefit to maintain their Jewish identities in the gentile dominated Roman world rather than to play them down. It is clear that it was proving beneficial to them as the Roman Empire didn't see Jews in a bad light or as in any way inferior. Further proof is that the territory that Agrippa and Bernice ruled over for the Romans was gentile: Lebanon and areas to the east of it. The Romans didn't use their Jewishness for political purposes to help them rule the Jews. The only issues that the Romans seemed to have had with Jews in general was when they demanded special rights due to their Jewish religion (which Rome was often obliged to give to them), and when they rebelled (as they constantly did in Judea compliments of the radical Zealots and Sicarri). Yet the Romans were sophisticated enough not to paint all Jews with the same brush and there wasn't any empire-wide or official program of persecution occurring at this time (and only selectively so after the Jewish rebellion of 66 A.D. that resulted in the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.).

Whatever hatred the Jews exhibited for Rome existed mostly in Judea, and centered primarily in Jerusalem; it was less so in the Galilee, and nearly not at all in the Diaspora. This is because in Judea the Romans were seen as unwanted, unclean occupiers of Jewish land; but the Romans had a lesser presence in the Galilee so there were fewer run-ins between Romans and Jews there. Diaspora Jews had for generations chosen to live among the Romans so generally there were few problems. Paul, as a product of the Diaspora, doesn't seem to display any particular dislike or prejudice against the Romans, and so his comfort level with gentiles is evident in the Book of Acts and in all of his Epistles. Yeshua had certainly commissioned the right man for the job of taking the Gospel to the gentile world of the Roman Empire.

Thus what is really happening with Agrippa and Bernice's involvement with the Paul affair has to do with Festus trying to figure out what to put in his report to Nero as the reason for Paul's incarceration and subsequent appeal. And since Agrippa and Bernice were Jews and familiar with Jewish ways, Festus's fervent hope was that they could help to untangle this perplexing situation that he found himself in.

In verses 14 – 21 Festus is explaining to Agrippa the dilemma he was facing with Paul, and so gave him a brief review of how Paul wound up in his jurisdiction. We don't need to go over this to any degree as we have already carefully followed Paul's path to this moment. What is clear is that from Festus's perspective he was suspicious of the High Priest's motives for wanting Paul brought back to Jerusalem for trial and so characterizes the High Priest's request as asking for a favor. His suspicion was only heightened when the High Priest told Festus of the charges against **Sha'ul** that to Festus's mind amounted to some minor Jewish religious disagreements. The heavy implication of it being a favor to give Paul over to the High Priest is that there is a hidden agenda and that there is no good or compelling reason for the request of a change of venue; so Festus denied it. The further implication is that while Festus smelled a rat, he didn't know what it was. He wasn't at all aware that the High Priest, no doubt egged on by the Zealots and the Sicarri, intended to assassinate Paul well before he arrived back in Jerusalem. Festus also reveals to Agrippa that Paul had appealed to Caesar and he intended to honor it. This tells Agrippa that nothing that goes on here is going to change the trajectory of where this is headed: Paul is going to Rome one way or another.

Somehow, as we read in verse 22, Agrippa had heard about Paul beforehand, and what he was doing, and had wanted to know more details; now was his opportunity and he was glad for it. Because Agrippa and Bernice wore the official titles of King and Queen, when they arrived at the hearing we're told there was much pomp and circumstance befitting of their regal status. Festus then had Paul brought in and he explained to the King, Queen and their guests that this Jewish man, Paul, had many complaints against him from the Jewish community. A better translation is as the CJB has it; the complaints were from the **Judean** Jewish community and they were so upset with Paul that they wanted him executed! But Festus admits he could find nothing about their complaints that would lead him to sentence Paul to death. And then Festus openly admits that the real problem at the moment is that he has no clue about what to tell the Emperor about this situation and so is beseeching especially Agrippa and Bernice for their advice.

Let's move on to chapter 26.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 26 all

Festus turned the floor over to Agrippa. In no way what was happening was an official trial; it was a discussion in order to help Festus know what to say in his report to Nero. So Agrippa was given wide latitude to proceed as he wanted to. Wisely he simply asks Paul to explain himself.

When we're told that Paul stretched out his hand to begin his defense it is speaking of some kind of customary gesture, very likely one of acknowledgement and respect to Agrippa. It was

certainly not like when he was arrested at the Temple Mount and motioned with his hand for the mob to be quiet so he could be heard. He begins with the customary Roman salutations and flattery to the dignitaries that are present, but as when he was before Felix and then Festus, he might exaggerate but he doesn't lie. He acknowledges that Agrippa (and by extension, Bernice) are well informed about Jewish customs and sensitivities (since they are Jews). And rather than attempting to make his defense short and sweet he asks for patience to be fully heard. But it is imperative that we notice that what Paul really gives is not so much a defense against the specific charges against him, but rather a defense of his entire life; who he is, what he has done, and what it has all led to.

So Paul begins by presenting his life's resume. He essentially says that the facts of his life's history are public knowledge, and many can testify to the truth of it if need be. The first thing I want to address is in verse 2 where most English translations have Paul say that he is accused "by **the** Jews". In grammar the word "the" is called an article; and here the Greek doesn't contain the article. A literal translation is: "I am accused by Jews". In fact, considering the context, it is probably most accurate to translate this as: "I am accused by Judeans". Why is this important? Because by Bible editors adding in the article "the" (that is not there in the Greek) it has Paul pointing fingers to **all** Jews as a religion or ethnic culture as being part of the conspiracy and hatred towards him. Remove the article "the" and it merely has it that certain Jews (which he identifies as Judeans) are making these accusations. It's an important distinction because Paul is regularly characterized by some Bible commentators as actually anti-Jewish; and thus by saying "the Jews" are against him, he separates himself away from "the Jews".

Paul says that he has been known by the Jewish community since he was young, and this includes in his own country and in Jerusalem (where he went to the religious academy of Gamaliel). His own country of course is Cilicia. He goes on to explain his religious affiliation: he is a Pharisee. This would mean something to Agrippa and Bernice as they understand the religious party system of the Jews. It is also immediately clear that there would be a natural antagonism between the Pharisee Paul and the Sadducee High Priest. And also notice that **Sha'ul** refers to the Pharisees as the strictest party of "our" religion. These little words mean something. First, strictest doesn't mean rigid or mean. It is rather meant as a badge of merit that claims that a Pharisee is the most devoted among Jews to obey God.

What is the religion of the Jews? Judaism. So the Pharisees are part of Judaism. But Paul is also implying that what he is currently practicing as a member of The Way (which his entire audience is well aware of and is the main reason that Agrippa is so interested in hearing from Paul) is also a legitimate part of "our" religion: Judaism. He is a Pharisee by social/religious party and training, and he is also a member of The Way according to the specific **Halakah** he adheres to. Paul sees no conflict between the two and Agrippa apparently sees none either. I don't want to go any further until I explain what I mean by the **Halakhah** that Paul follows. While the simplest meaning of **Halakhah** is Jewish Law, you've by now realized that there never was, and still is not in modern times, a single, universally recognized **Halakah** for all Jewish people. It is like that within Christianity. Depending on what denomination you might belong to you indeed follow Christian doctrine; but the details of the Christian doctrines that you follow vary from denomination to denomination. So while Paul shares a continuing bond

with the fundamental teachings of the Pharisees, his doctrine has changed to also embrace the teachings of Yeshua. This is verified by the Greek grammar used here. As Dr. David Stern points out in his commentary on this passage:

“The Greek verb (lived) is in the aorist tense, which implies that an action accomplished in the past has effects that continue on into the present. Paul lived as a Pharisee in the past and he continues to do so after becoming a Believer”.

This would not be hard for Paul to do since much of the doctrines of the Pharisees were similar or the same as Yeshua's (a few were not, of course). So while since time immemorial it has been the common Christian mantra to say that what the Pharisees taught was nearly in direct opposition to what Christ taught, this is quite wrong. That is because most Christian scholars are ignorant of ***Halakhah*** and what the ancient Rabbis actually said, and so make assumptions based on a handful of encounters in the Gospels between Yeshua and some particular Pharisees.

Paul absolutely continues to identify himself as belonging to the party of the Pharisees (and has so in earlier passages of Acts as well). But then in verse 6 I think Paul takes some liberties because his real agenda begins to emerge. He says that the real reason he is on trial is because of the promise that his forefathers received. What promise is this? It is the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant. So to Paul the Abrahamic Covenant is not only alive and well, but it is the centerpiece of God's plan for redemption through Yeshua. Let's revisit that covenant as it has been a long time since we studied it way back in Genesis.

Genesis 12:1-3 CJB

^{CJB} Genesis 12:1 Now ADONAI said to Avram, "Get yourself out of your country, away from your kinsmen and away from your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you.

² I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great; and you are to be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse anyone who curses you; and by you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

It is of course the final words of that covenant (by you all the families of the earth will be blessed) that is Paul's focus. Paul is certain that a Jew such as Agrippa will see the irony in this, which is that he is on trial for believing in the Abrahamic Covenant! But in all fairness, that is quite the exaggeration unless we include the idea of spiritual blindness in the equation. Even if we want to say that it was because of Paul's belief that Yeshua is the Messiah that is a necessary part of the Abrahamic Covenant, which has never been part of the complaints against him at any point. And yet, in an indirect way, due to the spiritual blindness of Jews who won't believe that Yeshua is their Messiah, Paul does seem to be receiving an inordinate amount of negative attention that is irrational if it can't be accounted for by something like a spiritual blindness. However, how a non-Believer like Agrippa is expected to recognize this I

don't know. Further, there is no doubt from Paul's earlier defense that he is connecting the subject of resurrection from the dead with Abraham's Covenant and with Yeshua.

Paul now elaborates on the Abrahamic Covenant by saying that the 12 tribes hope to attain the promise that is contained in it. This reference to the 12 tribes is, of course, meaning all Israel; both houses of Israel including Ephraim (currently still exiled) and Judah (which has returned to the land). Shulam and Le Cornu point out that before, during, and after the New Testament era the standard understanding among Jews was that while one house of Israel had returned from exile (Judah), the other house (Ephraim, the 10 northern tribes) had not but rather remained in exile because unlike Judah, Ephraim stubbornly remained in their apostasy. Please pay close attention to this as often you will receive push-back by some in the Jewish community because they believe that Ephraim came back with Judah from Babylon and thus all 12 tribes have already returned. Their point is that today's Jews represent all 12 tribes and have since 500 B.C. This claim doesn't match Scripture or history, but it does have a huge effect on how we are to interpret Ezekiel 36 – 38. Much of the Christian world also believes that all of Israel, and not just Judah, returned from Babylon and this has a great deal to do with what is sometimes called Replacement Theology, meaning the Church has replaced Israel as God's chosen. According to Replacement Theology all Israel is receiving from God in this age are His curses, while the Church gets all of the blessings that God at one time promised to Israel, but has reneged and decided to give them to gentile Christians.

However there is no historical or Biblical evidence that Ephraim returned with Judah; it is simply tradition held by some sects of Jews and Christians. In fact the most widespread expectation among Jews during New Testament times was that the two houses of Israel would finally be reunited only in the coming Messianic Age. Some ancient Sages and Rabbis like Rabbi Akiva say that the 10 tribes (the house of Ephraim) will never return again, and he bases his conclusion on a passage from Deuteronomy 29:28 that says: "And he cast them into another land to this day". However the venerable Rabbi Eliezer said in opposition to Akiva's position: "Like as the day grows dark, and then grows light, so after darkness is fallen upon the 10 tribes shall light hereafter fall upon them." So he is saying they will return from exile, eventually.

The bottom line is that while there was no unanimous position on the issue of who exactly returned from the Babylonian Exile, the majority opinion of Sages, Rabbis, and common Jewish folk was that the 10 tribes were not part of the return. So the Jews saw themselves as primarily from the tribe of Judah, with some identifying with Benjamin (as did Paul), and then there were the Levites who were a special case.

Paul in Acts 26:7 seems to take the rather standard Pharisaical position of his day that only Judah returned from exile and so the reunification of all 12 tribes under the banner of the Abrahamic Covenant was only a hope; a still-future event. I'll point out that everything I see tells me that right now, in our time, as I speak, we are in the midst of the actual return of the 10 Lost Tribes to Israel as predicted in Ezekiel; I have personally witnessed groups of those lost tribe members arriving to Israel at the airport (to much ceremony), and identifying themselves as such.

Paul, in verse 8, now clarifies the connection he is making between the Abrahamic Covenant and resurrection as he says: ***“Why do you people consider it incredible that God raises the dead?”***; but additional clarification is needed here. “You people” is a direct reference to Agrippa and Bernice, because they represent the aristocratic Jews. Their point of connection, then, with the Jewish people occurs only at the highest level with their aristocratic counterparts, the Sadducees. And the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. This is why earlier I said that Paul was exaggerating because in reality if you weren’t a Sadducee, you believed as the Pharisees or the Essenes, both of which accepted bodily resurrection. I have never found a Bible scholar who estimated the percentage of Jews who were Sadducees; but those who venture at least an opinion agree that it is self-evident that there were relatively few aristocratic, wealthy Jews when compared to the common folks; so there were relatively few Sadducees. Paul’s stand on resurrection, then, would have represented the majority opinion among Jews. His opinion was anything but new or radical; so there is no chance that he was on trial for holding the majority opinion on the issue of resurrection as he implies!

But shortly Paul is going to use the issue of resurrection to segue into presenting the Gospel of Jesus Christ to Festus, Agrippa, Bernice, and their elite guests; something that I’m quite sure they didn’t expect. For now, however, he goes back in time to when he was working for the Sanhedrin, and confesses some unflattering truths about himself. He admits that he was an enemy to The Way and to the name of Yeshua of Nazareth. He thought it was his obligation to use all of his energy and authority to round up Believers and throw them in prison. I like the way that F.F. Bruce takes the liberty to use the English language to bring across in modern terms what Paul intended to convey about his personal past. He has Paul saying:

“Pharisee though I was, and thus in theory a believer in the resurrection of the dead, I yet judged it incredible in this particular case (the resurrection of Yeshua), and thought it my duty to oppose such a heresy.....”

That impacts me. I think back to what seems like only yesterday, but in fact is a couple of decades, to when I opposed any thought of observing Sabbath on the 7th day. No one could have convinced me that Jesus didn’t “nail the Law to the cross”. I was solid in my belief that everyone has two choices: believe in the Law of Moses for salvation (that was for Jews), or believe in Christ for salvation (that was for gentiles). I scoffed at the notion that the Old Testament had any place in my study or my life as a New Testament Believer. Like Paul, I knew of Scripture that said otherwise to each of these things, but my spiritual blinders and loyalty to denomination and traditional gentile Christian creed were so firm that I thought it heresy that anyone could say something different and be right about that which the entire Church (that I knew anything about) called wrong. If F.F. Bruce were to paraphrase my thoughts as he did with Paul’s then he would have me saying:

“Christian though I was, and thus in theory a believer in what the Bible says, I yet judged it incredible in those particular cases, and thought it my duty to oppose any such heresy”.

Paul admits in verse 10 that he bore absolute culpability for sending Christians to their death. In obvious confirmation of having some sort of membership in the Sanhedrin, he says he “cast

his vote” against them (thus voting for their execution, as voting is exactly how verdicts were rendered). He says he wandered synagogue to synagogue searching for Believers. What does this confirm? That there were individual Believers present in a number of synagogues, and they were part of the regular congregation of Jews. That is, there weren’t necessarily “Believing synagogues” but rather only a portion of a synagogue (maybe only a single person) believed that Yeshua was the Messiah. In fact Paul says he tried to get those that he found to blaspheme. Many commentators say that this means he tried to get them to renounce Yeshua; I can’t accept that. How could Paul think (back at the time that he was not a Believer) that renouncing Yeshua was blaspheming if he thought the Believers were heretics **for** believing in Yeshua in the first place? No; if anything, **refusing** to renounce Yeshua might have been cause for a charge of blasphemy (but I doubt it as many “messiahs” running around the Holy Land with followings; it was kind of the norm and we don’t hear of executions over it).

But this overlooks the obvious; what Paul means is that he tried to get them to blaspheme in some classic Jewish understanding of what was commonly held by the Sanhedrin as blaspheming. Something that could be proved in the Jewish courts. And the reason for trying to get the Believers to blaspheme was so there would be legal cause for their execution (this was one way to stamp out a sect of Judaism that the Sadducees obviously were apprehensive about). One of the few non-criminal things that a Jew could be tried for in Jewish courts and then executed was blasphemy (the Torah calls for execution for blasphemy). But the intent of the High Priest was to use the tool of blasphemy and then execution for religious persecution, and not for upholding the sanctity of God’s commandments.

I find it interesting that Paul admits that he went so far as to pursue Believers even outside of the Holy Land. The thing is that before Paul became a Believer, the new movement with Jesus as its leader was happening exclusively in the Holy Land. So if there were known Believers elsewhere, it’s because they had fled hoping to avoid arrest. These Believers all belonged to one synagogue or another and a synagogue would have co-operated with the Jewish Temple authorities if asked to. This is proof that even though the synagogue and the Temple were two separate entities, and they did not share an authority structure, the ruling of the Sanhedrin was honored by synagogues in most cases; even by synagogues in foreign nations.

We’ll continue next week when Paul tells his distinguished audience about his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.