

ACTS 22-24, 25-28

This section contains Paul's testimony before different people and the political manoeuvring of his enemies (the Jewish leadership, especially the Sadducees), Paul himself, and the Roman authorities at various strata of the chain of command.

To the Jews Paul speaks as a devout Jew. To the Romans he speaks as a Roman citizen. To the Jewish council he speaks as a Pharisee against the Sadducees (who are at the top of the Jewish hierarchy and constitute the Jewish priesthood). Paul is well versed in Greek. Tarsus (his birthplace) was one of three leading educational centres in the world. The common language of Asia minor (outside of the official Greek) was the Semitic Aramean (or "Hebrew" in Acts). The dialect would vary from place to place but the language was essentially the same.

In this section there are three speeches of Paul, all of which are different, tailored to his audience.

1) Speech to the Jewish people - 22: 1-22.

Paul emphasizes his devoutness and zeal as a Jew, and one totally committed to eradicating false religion (as he believed "the Way" to be). It took nothing less than a direct revelation from Christ to change his heart and mind, and that changed 180 degrees. From a persecutor he became an evangelist and apologist of the Way. He speaks about this revelation and how it did not change his devoutness to Jewish religion, but only to recognizing that Jesus was the messianic fulfilment of Jewish religious hopes (for it was devout Jews like Ananias who were Paul's supporters in becoming a member of the Way and a missionary evangelist). The revelation from Christ also came to him in the temple (the seat of Jewish religion), and he hears in it a call to take the gospel to the gentiles.

2) Speech to the Council (Sanhedrin) - 23: 1-9.

The council was made up mainly of the priestly class of Sadducees (the minority with the greatest power) and the Pharisees (the majority with the least power). Paul appeals to his blameless conduct as a religious Jew. He calls the high priest a "white-washed wall" (outwardly pure but inwardly corrupt). The prediction about the high priest being struck down would have been significant for Luke (the author of Acts). Ananias was high priest from AD 48-58. He was struck down and killed by Jewish patriots in AD 66 as a Roman lackey. Acts was written after this time and, therefore, Paul's words would be seen as prophetic.

Paul's strategy of appealing to the resurrection of the dead was brilliant. For Pharisees believed not only in resurrection, but also in angels, spirits and visions of the divine. Paul's Damascus road experience would not be dismissed as easily by them as it would by Sadducees who were much less imaginative and more cynical about such beliefs.

3) Paul's speech before Felix, the Roman Governor - 24: 10-21, 24-26.

Paul presents himself as a blameless Jew who had come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the temple and bring alms (money) to his people (You will recall that this was part of Paul's campaign on his journeys as a gesture of goodwill from the gentile dominated-churches outside Jerusalem to the Jewish-dominated church of Jerusalem). He argues that the real disturbers of the peace were those Jews from Asia who had come down to Jerusalem to accuse him and create a riot. The only controversial thing he claimed was the resurrection of the dead, which a good many Jews believe anyway.

Felix was a brutal governor who was recalled to Rome after complaints about him from the Jewish leadership. His keeping Paul in prison may have been an attempt to appease the Jews. Paul's discussion of Justice, self-control and the coming Judgement may have scared Felix and his wife Drusilla. Although Drusilla was Jewish, she was reputed to have had many sexual exploits while her husband's lack of self-control expressed itself more in physical brutality and a corruption of justice (by being money hungry and therefore open to bribes).

Paul is kept in prison for 2 years, during which time many came to visit. It was probably a good time to write letters.

ACTS 25-28

After defending himself against accusations by Jewish religious leaders and their supporters, Paul appeals to be tried in Rome (on the basis of his citizenship), believing he will get a fairer trial this way (as well as hoping to get to Rome as part of his missionary journeys).

1) In his defence before Festus, Agrippa and Bernice, Paul highlights his supreme religious faithfulness as a Pharisaic Jew, his experience of divine revelation of the risen Christ, and the essence of his message to Jew and Gentile.

To the Gentiles he preaches a turning from darkness to light, from Satan to God in order to receive forgiveness of sins and sanctification by faith in Jesus as Messiah. Somehow, faith in Jesus as the messiah also unlocks a capacity to receive Christ's transforming Spirit into one's soul, changing one's orientation and motivation of life.

To the Jews, Paul emphasizes that a) the messiah had to suffer according to the scriptures, b) he was raised from the dead and, therefore, c) he “proclaims” (through his Spirit living and speaking through believers) light to both Jews and Gentiles.

2) Festus is a shrewd politician who does not get caught by the sinister designs of the Jewish leadership. He wants to understand the charges but he also realizes that there is not enough evidence to punish Paul according to Roman law. Ritual laws of Jewish religion have nothing to do with Roman legal offences. Defiling the temple would be more serious, as would be causing social unrest and revolutionary resistance to Roman authority. Paul keeps clear of these latter offences and focuses his testimony on the question of Jesus as the long-awaited messiah of the Jews.

3) Paul very clearly sees his call to preach the gospel to the gentiles related to the refusal of the Jews to accept it. In his letter to the Romans, Paul sees this as part of the larger plan of God. This plan is 1) to make room for the Gentiles within the unbelief and temporary exclusion of the Jews, 2) this will then conclude with the final acceptance of the Jews of their rightful messiah, and 3) then the Kingdom of God with Jesus as sovereign can be established (at the end of world history as we know it).

4) The key issue for the Jews seems to be the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus is already resurrected (before the end of history when all the faithful were believed would be resurrected), it is a sign that he is, indeed, the messiah. Resurrection would be divine vindication of the one crucified as a blasphemer and teacher of false religion. For the Jewish leadership to accept all this, they would also have to accept their guilt for having engineered the killing of the one they ought to have supported and worshipped.

5) After a very stormy journey, Paul is finally brought to Rome. There he meets believers, as well as other Jews who have not yet been poisoned by the antagonistic sentiment of the group from Jerusalem. They listen to his version of the faith in their synagogues, and while some believe, many do not. This only further confirms Paul’s sense that God is now moving the faith to the Gentiles.