

Brother Against Brother, a House divided

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The video version of this teaching is at: <https://youtu.be/I9CVoZgZi74>

The scripture reading is Acts 21:1-25

Yeshua had warned his disciples that they were not far removed from the days of betrayal. He cautioned that a man's enemies will be members of his own household. Twenty-five years later, there was trouble in Jerusalem, especially among the Jews.

Since before the days of Yeshua, the Jewish people had been under the political thumb of the Rome. Much had changed since Paul last visited Jerusalem. Rome had taken over every aspect of Jewish life including the Temple and priesthood. The sect of the Sadducees, who dominated the Sanhedrin and the priesthood, had totally thrown in with the Romans. The high priest was essentially a political appointment and the position was no longer filled according to Torah law.

Several rival factions had risen up among the Jews, several of which advocated open revolt against Rome. One in particular was an offshoot of the Zealots who had been around for some time. This group was called the Sicarii, named after the curved bladed dagger that many of them used as their weapon of choice for murderous rampages and political assassinations carried out in Jerusalem and beyond.

Just before Paul's arrival in Jerusalem, the appointed High Priest Jonathan was assassinated by members of the Sicarii in the Temple courts. This was the environment that Paul was heading into, yet Paul was determined to go up to Jerusalem and deliver the funds he had collected from the believers in the diaspora.

Paul had spent a little time in Miletus visiting and encouraging the brothers there as well as meeting up with a delegation from Ephesus. It was time to move on and continue his journey up to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:1 NKJV 1 Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara.

The small boat in which Paul was traveling could not venture far out into the open waters of the Mediterranean Sea. In just under a day's journey and hugging the coastline of Asia Minor, they came to the port city and island of Cos. Cos was an important port and had become famous for banking and commerce and was home to a fairly large Jewish community. Some scholars speculate that Paul may have made use of the banking system of Cos to handle the large amount of funds that he was taking to Jerusalem.

Next, they stopped at the much larger island of Rhodes. Rhodes was famous for the large statue known as the Colossus of Rhodes; one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was well over one hundred feet tall, built around two hundred eighty BC. It stood guard over the harbor of Rhodes for just fifty-six years until an earthquake snapped it at the knees. At the time of Paul, the Colossus of Rhodes still lay in ruin where it fell, but it was still a major attraction for travelers in that part of the Aegean Sea. Rhodes was also the home to a massive temple to Apollo, financed and built by king Herod the Great as a tribute and gift to the Emperor Augustus.

From Rhodes, they sailed to Patara, the last stop aboard the small coastal vessel. From here, Paul would seek passage across the remainder of the Mediterranean. Paul and his traveling companions did not linger long at Patara, quickly finding passage to Tyre aboard a large cargo ship.

Acts 21:2-3 NKJV 2 And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo.

Once they made port in Tyre, Paul and the others would have disembarked for several days before re boarding to continue their journey. Tyre was an ancient city and once home to the Phoenician king Hiram, an ally of king Solomon who supplied much of the timber for the construction of the first Temple in Jerusalem.

The city had a substantial Jewish population, including many believers. Many biblical scholars believe that a fair number of believers fled Jerusalem, settling in Tyre following the high profile persecution and stoning of Stephen.

Tyre was also the only city outside of the land of Israel proper which Yeshua and his disciples had traveled to. Matthew's gospel records an important encounter with a certain Canannite woman who had begged Yeshua to heal her daughter.

Matthew 15:22-28 NKJV 22 And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." 23 But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." 24 But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" 26 But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." 27 And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Some three decades later, Paul arrived in Tyre. This woman's daughter was most certainly still alive, probably with children and, perhaps, grandchildren of her own. It would be pure speculation, but we can imagine that this, now adult daughter of the Canaanite woman, whom Yeshua healed, was a member of the believing community of Tyre.

Paul and the others stayed with the believers of Tyre for seven days and received warnings about traveling to Jerusalem. But when the time came, they departed.

Acts 21:4-6 NKJV 4 And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. 5 When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. 6 When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home.

The ship's ultimate destination was Caesarea, but there was a brief overnight stop in another Phoenician city called Ptolemais where Paul and the others stayed with the brethren.

Acts 21:7 NKJV 7 And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day.

Paul had originally wanted to be in Jerusalem for the Passover, but due to trouble with many non-believing Jews, he had to delay his trip to avoid being captured or more likely killed. He was now anxious to get to Jerusalem for Shavuot or Pentecost. The next morning, they left Ptolemais for Caesarea.

Acts 21:8-9 NKJV 8 On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

Caesarea was their final stop by ship on their journey to Jerusalem. It would only take a few days to reach Jerusalem overland from there. There was some extra time, it was day thirty-nine of the counting of the Omer and Shavuot was eleven days away.

Paul took the time to stay with a prominent brother and fellow disciple of Yeshua by the name of Philip. This is the same Philip whom we encountered in Acts chapter eight where he is led by the spirit to an Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza.

Acts 8:26-27 NKJV 26 Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. 27 So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship,

Philip preached the good news of salvation through Messiah Yeshua to the eunuch and after Philip baptized him, was "taken up" from that place.

Acts 8:38-39 NKJV 38 So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. 39 Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing.

Many scholars believe that Philip is Luke's primary source of information about the early years of the Jerusalem community. Many years later, Philip, now residing in Caesarea, had four daughters who were blessed with the gift of prophecy. The first century historian, Clement of Alexandria as related by Eusebius records a tradition about Philip's daughters:

"Philip gave two of his daughters in marriage, (but) two of them remained unmarried their entire lives."ⁱ

Paul and Philip most certainly exchanged many stories of their adventures, trials, and tribulations while taking the gospel message to wherever the Spirit led them. While staying with Philip, Paul received a visit from a prominent prophet.

Acts 21:10-11 NKJV 10 And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

This may be the same Agabus who we met earlier in Acts 11 who had traveled to Syrian Antioch to deliver a message about a coming famine.

Acts 11:27-29 NKJV 27 And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 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. 29 Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.

Agabus spoke a very dramatic prophecy concerning Paul. After hearing it many among Paul's traveling companions and others in Philip's household urged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:12-14 NKJV 12 Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."

The people present obviously loved Paul a great deal and feared for his life. Paul understood the implications of this prophecy and was fully prepared for what was to come. Perhaps this prophecy was more for the benefit of the others traveling with Paul rather than for Paul himself. They would soon witness Paul's arrest, imprisonment, and eventual shipment off to Rome in chains. Through this prophecy, they saw Paul's determination to see to the completion of his mission, they would be encouraged and strengthened to carry on in Paul's absence.

The warnings given by the prophet Agabus are reminiscent of the warnings Yeshua spoke to His disciples just before His last journey up to Jerusalem. Yeshua repeatedly warned them that He would suffer many things and be handed over to the Gentiles and killed. First Fruits of Zion in their work Chronicles of the Apostles comments on the similarity of the situations:

"Paul's companions and the believers in Caesarea resigned themselves to accept the inevitable. With an allusion to the Master's prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane, they declared, "The will of the LORD be done.""ⁱⁱ

Paul had arrived in Judea in the early summer of fifty-seven AD at a time when the political and social situation in Jerusalem was on the edge of spiraling totally out of control. Jews were targeting other Jews. The assassination of the high priest Jonathan by the Sicarii was instigated by other Jews. The Sicarii targeted any Jews who cooperated with Rome.

Another major factor in the political unrest at the time was that there were several charlatans who came forth and claimed to be the long-awaited Messiah. Yeshua warned his disciples that there would be false Messiahs.

Matthew 24:23-25 NKJV 23 "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. 24 "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. 25 "See, I have told you beforehand.

Not long after the assassination of Jonathan, a particularly charismatic, Greek speaking Jew from Alexandria came to Jerusalem claiming Messiahship. He went throughout Judea and managed to gather a large following among the Zealots and Sicarii. He promised a violent overthrow of Roman occupation. He knew the scripture and promised that if they would follow him to Jerusalem, they would see prophecy fulfilled in their time. Particularly that of Zechariah.

Zechariah 14:4 NKJV 4 And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, Which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, From east to west, Making a very large valley; Half of the mountain shall move toward the north And half of it toward the south.

This Egyptian imposter promised his thousands of followers that the same earthquake that would split the Mount of Olives would also destroy the walls of Jerusalem allowing them to rapidly take the city.

According to the historian Josephus, Felix, who was procurator of Judea called a large garrison of foot soldiers and cavalry to meet this threat. The revolutionists were no match for the Roman force sent by Felix. Four

hundred were slain and two hundred taken prisoner. The rest of the Egyptian imposter's followers dispersed quickly back to their own homes. The Egyptian himself disappeared and was never heard from again.

The tensions in Jerusalem were high as Paul arrived in the city just before the festival of Shavuot was to begin. Upon arrival after two day's travel from Caesarea, they sought out the brethren.

Acts 21:17-19 NKJV 17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Upon meeting again with the Jerusalem council, Paul and the others with him; Timothy, Luke, Titus, and Gaius of Derbe, related all that had been accomplished in the communities in the diaspora. Paul told them of the Gentile believers in Macedonia and introduced them to Sopater of Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica.

Paul presented to the Jerusalem council the gift of funds brought to them from the congregations where he had traveled. When Paul and the others finished their testimony before the council, the council responded with joy!

Acts 21:20 NKJV 20 And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

The leadership of the council could not help but be astonished for the zeal of these new believers. They could not help but be impressed by how The Way had grown and flourished among the Gentiles and the Jews in the Diaspora, while the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem had stagnated. It seemed that the zeal of most of the Jews of Judea and the surrounding areas had turned away from Torah principles and focused instead on sporadic uprisings, banditry, assassinations, and insurrection against Roman occupation.

There were many accusations and false reports to the Jerusalem council regarding the specifics of Paul's teaching among the Jews and the Gentiles. James the Elder voiced these concerns that were circulating among the disciples.

Acts 21:21-22 NKJV 21 "but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 "What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.

Paul was accused of basically three things: Teaching Jews to forsake Torah, teaching Jews not to circumcise their children, and teaching Jews not to keep Jewish customs. All of these accusations needed to be addressed. The problem was that if these things were true, it would discredit Paul, and by implication, discredit the Jerusalem council because they had endorsed Paul's gospel message and sent him out in the first place. The credibility of the gospel and their credibility as leaders of The Way was on the line. Having heard the testimony of Paul and the others, James and the other council members present understood that these persistent rumors were not true, but they needed to be addressed. James gave Paul specific instruction to dispel the rumors and false accusations.

Acts 21:23-25 NKJV 23 "Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. 24 "Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that

you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. 25 "But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality."

Where would these rumors against Paul have originated? Paul did indeed have more than his fair share of enemies. Many of which were among his own people within the believing community. Even though Paul's Gospel message was that Gentiles have an equal share in the inheritance and promises through Abraham, according to the findings of the Jerusalem Council, Gentiles do not have an equal obligation to the same Torah principles and halachic legal observances that are required of the Jews.

For centuries, the traditional Christian interpretation of these accusations was that they were true, that Paul did indeed teach, not only believing Jews but Gentiles as well, to abandon the Torah, forgo circumcision, and leave behind Jewish tradition. Luke records that James the Elder clearly understood that these rumors were false, and that Paul should publicly demonstrate his commitment to Judaism. By following the instruction given to him by James the Elder, Paul made a public declaration to dispel the rumors. Paul consented to the plan put forth, and by doing so, demonstrated to all the believers in Jerusalem, as well as his detractors, that as a believer in Yeshua Messiah, he was indeed, a faithful, Torah keeping Jew.

Study Questions:

1. What does Acts 21:20 say about the Gentile believers of The Way? How would the believers in Jerusalem view this devotion to Torah on the part of the Gentiles?
2. How are the accusations against Paul by those in Jerusalem similar to the accusations against Stephen? (Acts 6:11-14)
3. Discuss the implications of Zechariah 14:4 in context of Paul's day. How do we guard ourselves from falling into the trap of following a false prophet or false Messiah?
4. Why would the James and the Council require Paul to pay for the ritual sacrifices of the other 4 men who had taken the vow? How would this prove to Paul's accusers that their accusations were false? Review the requirements in Numbers 19.
5. Paul was not one to ignore prophecy. What then was the purpose of the prophecy given by Agabus at Caesarea? Why did Paul ignore it? Or did he?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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ⁱ Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.31.2.

ⁱⁱ FFOZ, Chronicles of the Apostles, D.T. Lancaster, Vol.3, p721