

Hear My Defense Before You

By Dan & Brenda Cathcart

The video version is at: https://youtu.be/S8iQA0q_DWM

The scripture reading is Acts 21:26-22:29

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem for the Feast of Shavuot in the spring of 57 CE, he was met with questions about what exactly he was teaching the Jews and Gentiles to believe and practice. The elders among the believers in Jerusalem devised a plan to demonstrate both Paul's own observance of Torah and his support for Jewish observance of Torah in general. In their plan, Paul agreed to pay for the sacrifices necessary for four of his fellow Jewish believers.

Acts 21:23-24 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.

The plan was immediately put in place! The next day, Paul went with the four men to begin the process of purification leading up to redeeming their Nazarite vow.

Acts 21:26 NKJV 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

Everything seemed to be going as planned until the last day of the purification process when everything changed. The prophecy by Agabus that Paul would be put in chains was about to be fulfilled.

The political atmosphere at this Feast of Shavuot in 57 CE was tense. The schism between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was growing daily. The Sadducees, who controlled the priesthood were more and more in bed with the Roman government. Intrigues, assassinations, and bribery had become a way of life among the politically connected family of the high priest. Josephus writes about the corruption within the ranks of the Sadducees.

"Moreover, the Pharisees are friendly to one another, and are for the exercise of concord and regard for the public. But the behavior of the Sadducees one towards another is in some degree wild; and their conversation with those that are of their own party is as barbarous as if they were strangers to them."ⁱ

When the groups of Jewish zealots and Galilean pilgrims were added in along with the political maneuvering among the Roman officials, the Feast days in Jerusalem were days in which discord and rioting were common and expected. First Fruits of Zion in their work Chronicles of the Apostles describe the unrest in Jerusalem.

In the turbulent decade before the Jewish revolt, civil disorder at festivals became increasingly common. It often erupted into bloodshed. In the turbulent months before Paul's arrival in Jerusalem, the assassination of a high priest and a failed insurrection led by a Greek-speaking, false messiah had left the city on edge.ⁱⁱ

It is in this atmosphere that Paul enters the temple to begin the process of purification. This process, as described in Numbers 19, was technically for those who had been in contact with a dead body. However, in

the days of the second temple and the continued dispersion of Jews throughout the region of the former Persian Empire, any Jew coming into the temple from the diaspora was obligated to undergo the seven day purification process.ⁱⁱⁱ Paul had timed the completion of this process carefully. When counting the days of Paul's journey since observing the Passover in Troas, we discover that the seventh day of the purification process and the day that Paul could bring his sacrifices for completing his vow and that of his fellow believers was on Shavuot.

As Paul completed the process and entered the temple proper for the first time since coming to Jerusalem, Jews from Asia saw him in the temple. Who were these Jews from Asia? We need to go back to Paul's first visit to Asia when he visited Antioch and Iconium. Jews from these cities rejected the message of salvation through Yeshua because Paul included the Gentiles in his message. Luke describes the reaction of some of these Jews in Antioch.

Acts 13:45 NKJV 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul.

These Jews stirred up the officials of the city against Paul and drove them out of the city. The same thing happened in Iconium. Then, when Paul shared the gospel in Lystra, these Jews from Antioch and Iconium followed Paul to Lystra, and attempted to murder Paul by inciting the multitudes to stone him.

Acts 14:19 NKJV 19 Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

These Jews, who had already demonstrated their great enmity against Paul and his gospel message, didn't hesitate to slander Paul in the temple and start a riot. If anything, their hatred of Paul and resistance to the gospel grew as the gospel spread throughout Asia and the Roman world.

Acts 21:27-29 NKJV 27 Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." 29 (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)

Note that these Jews from Asia had already seen Paul in the city accompanying a Gentile. Their anger against Paul who had declared to them that he was taking the gospel of salvation to the Gentiles was rekindled. When they saw him in the temple, they acted. Perhaps they had already decided to destroy Paul in any way they could. They accused Paul of four specific heresies. The first accusation was that he spoke against the Jewish people as a whole. The Jews from Antioch were no doubt recalling Paul's warnings to them about rejecting the gospel message and they presented this warning as teaching against the Jews.

Acts 13:40-41 NKJV 40 "Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: 41 "Behold, you despisers, Marvel and perish! For I work a work in your days, A work which you will by no means believe, Though one were to declare it to you."

The second accusation was that Paul taught against following the Torah. They twisted Paul's teaching that Gentiles did not need to become Jews in order to receive salvation.

Acts 13:46-47 NKJV 46 Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting

life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 "For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

The third accusation was that Paul taught against the temple. Paul probably relayed the words of Yeshua that the temple would be destroyed because of the rebelliousness of the people. Even the prominent teachers of the Pharisees warned against coming judgment. First Fruits of Zion in Chronicles of the Apostles relates the words of Yochanan ben Zakkai, a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, when the temple gates began to open by themselves in the year of Yeshua's death.

"He rebuked the doors saying, "Temple! Temple! Why do you alarm yourself? I know about you, that you will be destroyed by fire! For Zechariah ben Iddo has already prophesied concerning you, saying, 'Open your doors, O Lebanon, that a fire may feed on your cedars!'"^{iv}

The final accusation was that Paul brought a Gentile into the temple. Paul, who himself didn't enter the temple proper until he went through the purification process, would not have brought a Gentile into the temple. Although Paul welcomed Gentiles into the synagogues and as full participants in the fellowship of believers, he did not bring a Gentile, specifically Trophimus, into the temple. Luke was quick to point out that the Jews from Asia only saw Paul with Trophimus in the city.

Their accusations against Paul had the desired effect; Paul was immediately seized, dragged out of the temple and the temple gates were shut!

Acts 21:30 NKJV 30 And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.

This was Shavuot, one of the three pilgrimage festivals. The city was filled with Jews from all over the Roman Empire! If the riot itself didn't cause confusion, the interruption of the festival and the closing of the doors would have done so!

It didn't take long for the Roman garrison to respond. They were on high alert at all the feasts!

Acts 21:31-32 NKJV 31 Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32 He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

Paul was taken into custody by the Roman commander and put into chains. The commander attempted to discover what had happened. Accusations flew, but as the crowd only had the accusations of the Asian Jews to go on, nothing was determined. The mob's continued attempts to kill Paul resulted in the soldiers needing to carry Paul out of the crowd. As they approached the barracks, Paul asked to speak addressing the commander in perfect Greek.

Acts 21:37-38 NKJV 37 Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek? 38 "Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?"

The commander immediately thought that Paul was the Alexandrian Jew who had earlier that year claimed to be the Messiah. This Egyptian Jew had rallied his followers to attack Jerusalem resulting in the deaths and arrest of thousands of Jews. However, the false messiah himself escaped. The commander was concerned that this was the same man! Paul quickly identified himself as a Jew from Tarsus, not Egypt, and asked permission to speak to the crowd. Perhaps he could calm them down. After being given permission, Paul stood on the stairs of the barracks and addressed the crowd in Hebrew.

Acts 22:1-2 NKJV 1 "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now." 2 And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent.

Paul began describing his background and his zeal for the Torah, the Jewish people, and the integrity of the temple as a means of refuting the accusations against him.

Acts 22:3-5 NKJV 3 Then he said: "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. 4 "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, 5 "as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.

Paul quickly transitioned to share his experience with Yeshua on the road to Damascus and how it changed his life. They listened as Paul described the light that appeared and the voice that identified himself as Yeshua.

Acts 22:7-8 NKJV 7 "And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' 8 "So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'

The crowd continued to listen as Paul described how he was remained blind and was guided the rest of the way to Damascus. In Damascus, Paul was led to the home of Ananias, a Jew accounted as one who carefully followed Torah and had a good reputation among his fellow Jews.

Acts 22:11-12 NKJV 11 "And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus. 12 "Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there,

Although Ananias was a follower of the way, he still followed Torah and was respected among the Jewish people. Paul is subtly pointing out that the followers of the Way did not abandon Torah! The crowd continued to listen to Paul's account.

Paul related Ananias' words to him commissioning him to share the gospel of the good news of Yeshua's death and resurrection.

Acts 22:14-16 NKJV 14 "Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. 15 'For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 'And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'

The crowd listened as Paul explained that Ananias revealed the word of God to Paul that God had chosen him to know God's will, to see the Just One and to hear God's voice. This was an incredible claim. The Just One was another title of the Messiah. The word translated as "Just One" is "dik'ah-yos," number 1342 in Strong's Concordance meaning equitable, just or righteous. Paul was chosen to see God's Righteous One as described by the prophets.

Jeremiah 23:5 NKJV 5 "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; A King shall reign and prosper, And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.

And still the crowd listened. They were willing to hear and believe that Paul had received a specific commission from God and that he would see the true Messiah.

Paul continued explaining that one day while meditating in the temple, he once again heard the voice of Yeshua. The message was a hard one; that the Jews in Jerusalem would not accept his testimony.

Acts 22:17-18 NKJV 17 "Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance 18 "and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.'

Perhaps the implications of this statement were not lost on the crowd. First, we see that Paul presents himself as Torah observant honoring the temple as he spends time in the temple in the presence of the LORD. Second, as Paul is giving his testimony before the Jews in Jerusalem, he is stating that Yeshua had told him beforehand that they wouldn't accept his testimony! Yet, they continued to listen.

Then Paul went on to relate that Yeshua told him to go to the Gentiles instead, because they would accept Paul's testimony.

Acts 22:21-22 NKJV 21 "Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.'" 22 And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!"

With the words that Paul was sent by Yeshua to the Gentiles, the Jews erupted in anger and refused to listen any longer. The original charges were forgotten in this new greater offense. Paul was taking the Messiah of the Jews and presenting him to the Gentiles! The crowd tore their clothes in anger and rejection; this prompted the commander, who didn't understand Hebrew and Paul's words to the people, to remove Paul from the scene.

Acts 22:23-24 NKJV 23 Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him.

When the commander would have had Paul beaten for inciting the crowd to riot, Paul asserted his rights as one who was born as a Roman citizen. The commander could not just dismiss the fact that a riot erupted over Paul's presence and Paul's words; however, as a Roman citizen, Paul could not be treated as just a Jew.

Acts 22:28-29 NKJV 28 The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." 29 Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

This was Paul's first defense of his actions. The next day, Paul would be taken before the Sanhedrin in the presence of the Roman guard to once more defend himself. Overall, Paul would be called on to defend himself seven times, each time testifying before a higher authority. On the seventh and last time, Paul would testify before Emperor Nero, the highest authority in the land. In each defense, Paul faithfully testified to the words that Yeshua gave him.

The prophecy that Paul had received from Agabus and others over and over again as he traveled to Jerusalem, that he would be bound by the Jews and turned over to the Gentiles, had come to pass. The fate that Paul's friends and fellow believers tried to encourage Paul to avoid, ultimately led to the gospel message truly going out to the Gentiles.

Study Questions:

1. What made the accusations against Paul so effective in turning the crowd against him?
2. How Did Paul refute the accusations against him?
3. What was Paul’s purpose in describing his encounter with Yeshua?
4. What was the “offense” that Paul committed that turned the crowd against him? How is this a theme throughout the Book of Acts?
5. What seeds do we see in this event that led to the eventual separation between followers of the Way and mainstream Judaism?
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 The Work of Josephus. *The Wars of the Jews*. Translated by William Whiston, A.M. Hendrickson Publishers. ©1987. Book 2, Chapter 8, line 166. Page 608.

ⁱⁱ Chronicles of the Apostles. D.T. Lancaster. First Fruits of Zion. ©2011, 2016. Book 3, Page 750.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chronicles of the Apostles. D.T. Lancaster. First Fruits of Zion. ©2011, 2016. Book 3, Page 744.

^{iv} Chronicles of the Apostles. D.T. Lancaster. First Fruits of Zion. ©2011, 2016. Book 3, Page 764.