

# Acts 23:12-35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Acts chapter 23, verses 12 to 35. When it was day, the Jews made a plot, and bound themselves by an oath, neither to eat nor drink, till they had killed Paul.

There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath, to taste no food till we have killed Paul. Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly, and we are ready to kill him before he comes near.

Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.

So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you. The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside, asked him privately, What is it that you have to tell me?

[ 1 : 0 4 ] And he said, The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath, neither to eat nor drink, till they have killed him.

And now they are ready, waiting for your consent. So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, Tell no one that you have informed me of these things. Then he called two of the centurions and said, Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen, to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night.

Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and bring him safely to Felix the governor. And he wrote a letter to this effect, Claudius Lysius, to his excellency the governor Felix.

Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews, and was about to be killed by them, when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen.

And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.

[ 2 : 1 8 ] And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.

So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatras. And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him.

When they had come to Caesarea, and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.

And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium. Paul was taken in the temple by the Romans, delivering him from the mob who were about to kill him. The tribune, Claudius Lysias, was trying to get to the bottom of things, to discover why the Jews so hated him.

And in chapter 23, he has just testified before the Sanhedrin, but his mention of the resurrection had produced such dissension in the council that he once again had to be rescued by the Romans.

[ 3 : 2 4 ] That night the Lord appeared to him and told him that he would have to testify concerning him in Rome. Paul has faced a number of plots to this point in the book of Acts, and has been delivered from each one of them.

There were plots against him in Damascus and Jerusalem in chapter 9, and in Greece in chapter 20. Now he faces a seemingly more serious plot, about which he is alerted by his nephew.

Jesus, of course, had plots against him during the period of his ministry also. Once again, this plot is instigated by the Jews. Their oath not to eat or drink until they kill Paul might recall the rash vow of King Saul back in 1 Samuel chapter 14.

There are 40 of them involved, which is a very large number, and they go to the chief priests and the elders, telling them about their conspiracy, and getting them involved. The chief priests and elders would have to ask the tribune to bring Paul down to them, and then, while they were on the way, they would strike Paul when he was exposed.

The involvement of the chief priests and elders is important here. The Jewish authorities and aristocracy, for all of their supposed lawfulness and their cooperation with the Romans, are only too happy to employ assassins and to align themselves with bandits, going against the law of Rome. [ 4 : 37 ] Paul has been accused of subversion, but here the very authorities are corruptly acting against the law, and quite purposefully seeking to circumvent the justice of Rome. The sort of corruption and violence from the authorities that we see here is also testified to by the writings of Josephus, who describes the sort of intrigue that was found among the Jewish authorities of the period, and the collusion of the aristocracy and chief priests with robbers and brigands.

Earlier in this chapter, Ananias the high priest clearly acted contrary to the law in his handling of Paul's case. Now we are beginning to see how deep the lawlessness of the rulers and the aristocracy goes.

This sort of corruption would ultimately contribute to the downfall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Here it also serves an apologetic purpose for Luke. Paul and the Christian movement, while they are accused of breaking the law and being seditious, are law-abiding and not seditious, whereas the accusers from the Jews are profoundly compromised and complicit with brigands and robbers. News of the plot gets to Paul's nephew. Considering the number of people involved, 40 people, presumably younger men, and the chief priests and the elders, it might not be entirely surprising that word leaked out.

Paul had spent most of his earlier life in Jerusalem. His sister presumably moved to Jerusalem at the same time as he did, and likely married there. We know that Paul was a very well-connected person prior to his conversion.

[ 6 : 04 ] He studied under Gamaliel. He had access to the high priest. He advanced in his studies more than others, and he was a Roman citizen. It's likely that his sister, his brother-in-law, and his nephew moved in the higher parts of Jerusalem society, where his nephew might have gotten wind of the plot.

As a relative of Paul, Paul's nephew would also have had access to him to provide needed support when he was in the barracks. Paul is in the barracks, not a prison, and various allowances would be made for him to receive visitors, particularly visitors of family that would support him.

After Paul's nephew informs him of the plot, Paul instructs the centurion to bring his nephew to the tribune. The tribune listens carefully to the testimony of the nephew. He presumably knows enough about the Jerusalem authorities not to trust them.

The report of this plot presumably had the ring of truth to it. Knowing that 40 men lie in ambush, presumably well armed, in a place where they would be unseen and where terrain would be to their advantage, he determines to send a large contingent of soldiers with Paul.

Paul was also given a mount to ride, presumably to allow him free movement if they were attacked. The size of the force sent with him is surprising. It is very large, about 470 men, 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen.

[ 7 : 21 ] It might be the case that hearing these rumblings and plots, the tribune is concerned to give a show of strength. Whatever is the case, we should see God's providence in this situation. The Lord has delivered Paul out of plots before, and now he does so again.

The tribune, Claudius Lysias, sends a message with the contingent to the governor Felix. It is possible that Luke had access to the original letter. The letter briefly describes the tribune's part in Paul's case, and the plot against him.

The tribune clearly skirts over certain details that might be inconvenient to him, for instance the fact that he only found out that he was a Roman citizen as he was about to whip him. Along with sending Paul to Felix, he has also instructed the accusers of Paul to bring their case before Felix. The group escorting Paul splits up at Antipatrus. The most dangerous leg of the journey having been completed, the soldiers can return to Jerusalem while the horsemen go on with Paul.

Antipatrus was about 37 miles northwest of Jerusalem, about halfway to Caesarea. Upon his arrival, Paul was presented before the governor Felix along with the letter that Lysias sent. [ 8 : 30 ] Felix promises a hearing when Paul's accusers arrive. A question to consider. What can we say about the relative presentation of the Jewish and the Roman authorities within the book of Acts?

