

Acts 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 26. So Agrippa said to Paul, You have permission to speak for yourself. Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defence. I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews.

Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee, and now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O King. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

And I punished them often in all the synagogues, and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. And I said, Who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me, and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to

God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason, the Jews seized me in the temple, and tried to kill me. To this day, I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that the Christ must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles. And as he was saying these things in his defence, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you are out of your mind, your great learning is driving you out of your mind. But Paul said, I am not out of my mind, most excellent

Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly, for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe. And Agrippa said to Paul, in a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian? And Paul said, whether short or long, I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains. Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them. And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment. And Agrippa said to Festus, This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

[4 : 14] Acts chapter 26 contains Paul's last major discourse, and it is by far the most stylised. Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice are visiting the governor Festus, And together with the military tribunes and the prominent men of Caesarea, they have gathered together to hear Paul present his case. The purpose of the hearing is to assist Festus in knowing what to write concerning Paul, who has appealed to Caesar. Ben Witherington notes nine elements of Greek rhetorical style that Paul employs within this speech. The speech is a presentation of and witness to Paul's entire mission and vocation. It's not just narrowly addressing the matters in which he has been accused. Witherington argues that it is important to recognise that Paul is not playing the part of the defendant here. Rather, he is playing something more akin to the role of a witness in his own trial. The speech that he gives serves an apologetic purpose. It presents Paul, his mission, and the Christian church to the reader and hearer.

It gathers together Paul's story in one, at its very conclusion, as Paul presents an apologetic for his entire course of life. Within it, Paul makes appeal to many witnesses. Darrell Bock lists seven.

Paul's companions on the way to Damascus, the Jews of Jerusalem, Agrippa's knowledge of Judaism, the scriptures, a heavenly revelation, Paul's own testimony, and Paul's presence before the dignitaries as proof of God's protection. Once again, it is not impossible that Luke worked with forensic sources when writing it. He may well have had access to court records. The chapter begins with Agrippa inviting Paul to speak. Buck suggests that Agrippa might be chairing the meeting, as it is his counsel that is especially being sought by Festus. Paul's speech takes a rhetorical form that would have been familiar from other ancient rhetorical settings. According to Witherington's proposed structure, which differs from that offered by Bach, it starts with a prologue in which he addresses and complements Agrippa in verses 2-3, followed by a narration in verses 4-21, a statement of his fundamental theme and case in verses 22-23, a refutation in verses 25-26, and a concluding appeal in verses 27-29. Agrippa is someone with a greater knowledge of Judaism, who is better situated to speak to the Jewish matters at stake in Paul's case than Festus is. From verse 4 onwards,

Paul recounts his life story. He grew up as a Jew and he lived as a member of the strict sect of the Pharisees. He trained under the feet of Gamaliel, as we read elsewhere. Paul has not simply turned his back on this. Although Paul can elsewhere speak of accounting all of these things that he once considered gain as loss, here his purpose is to stress continuity. He has not rejected his Jewish background. He continues to speak of himself as a Pharisee, as he did before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

He also uses language that makes clear that he identifies with the people, my own nation, our religion, our fathers, our twelve tribes. He claims that he is on trial on account of his hope in the promise that God made to the patriarchs and the nation of Israel in the past.

[7 : 28] This is a communal hope, a hope of the nation, and Paul has not rejected it. Rather, he sees himself as holding on to its fulfillment. Elsewhere in his gospel, Luke underlines the continuity between the piety of Israel and the coming of Christ. Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are all figures that have an Old Testament faith that looks forward to Christ, and for which Christ, and the expectation of what he will achieve, is the realization of the hopes of the nation. Paul singles out resurrection, as he did before the Sanhedrin. It is this key belief, this presentation of the hope of Israel, that he is on trial for. The irony is that for his faithful commitment to the faith of his fathers, he is being condemned. And he makes his appeal here to Agrippa in particular. Agrippa has a reputation for piety in some quarters. He has a knowledge of the scriptures. And so Paul is doing more than just presenting a defense here. This is an evangelistic claim, and he's calling on Agrippa to make a response to it. Of course, Paul did have a radical change of mind. He describes his former life as a persecutor, and his complicity in the imprisonment and death of Christians. His involvement in the martyrdom of Stephen might be in view here. Stephen was stoned, not as a legal sanction, but as the action of a lynch mob. The language here is Paul casting a pebble, which is an idiomatic way of speaking about voting. However, in the context of an act of stoning, Paul may not literally have cast stones in executions for which the Jewish Sanhedrin did not have the authority, but he approved of them by casting the pebble of his vote in favour. We get a fuller picture of Paul's life as a persecutor here.

He punished them in the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, presumably failing. He then pursued them to foreign cities. Before Paul ever became a missionary for Christ, he was a counter-missionary, someone who was opposing the mission of the church by undertaking missionary journeys against it.

This is the third time that we read of Paul's conversion in the book of Acts. The first time is in the voice of the narrator in chapter 9. The second time, Paul tells the story as he addresses the crowd in the temple in chapter 22. It's important to pay attention to the differences of accent and content here. For instance, here he expands upon his commission and he excludes the figure of Ananias.

This is part of a shift in the telling of the story from one that focuses more upon Ananias to a telling of the story in a way that leaves Ananias out of the picture. In the first account of Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9, Ananias receives the commission for Paul that he's supposed to give to him. In the second account, when Paul relates it in chapter 22, he tells of Ananias delivering the commission to him. And here, Ananias is not present at all. The commission is given to him directly by Christ. This serves a number of purposes in Paul's telling. It places a greater accent upon the commission than you have in the other accounts. And as we will see, it also allows Paul to fill the role played by Ananias in a number of key ways. There is a greater focus here also upon the light. It is midday when the vision occurs, but the light from the heaven is brighter than the sun, and all fall down to the ground, which only this account records.

On the surface of things, this is also in tension with chapter 9 verse 7, where Paul's companions are standing there speechless. While there are ways in which these details could be harmonised, it may perhaps be instructive to think about the way that Luke is quite happy for these different accounts to stand alongside of each other, not overly concerned about the apparent tensions between them. While the concern of the modern Christian reader can be to get behind the text, to see what really happened, and to peel away the level of the text, for Luke and other biblical authors, there is a lot more attention given to the way that the story is told. The historical details and their accuracy certainly matters, but the way that the story is told will direct the hearer to certain parallels and connections, and certain resonances that they might miss if they just focused upon the underlying historical events. The voice of Christ speaks to him in Hebrew, or presumably Aramaic, and the form of Saul's name given here reflects that fact. However, even though he is being addressed by Christ in Hebrew or Aramaic, there is a surprising possible allusion to a text from Euripides in the statement kicking against the goads. Many have argued that that turn of phrase is not a Hebrew-Aramaic one, but is borrowed from the Greek. Gerhard Cattel summarised the argument that some have made.

[11 : 59] He writes, Some have sought to prove here, as elsewhere also, a direct literary dependence of Luke, in this case on Euripides' *Bacchae*. In confirmation they point to the similarity of situation in Acts and the *Bacchae*. In both cases there is question of opposition to a new divinity, in Euripides of Pentheus to Dionysus, and in Acts of Paul to Christ, of a senseless course from which a man should be restrained. In each case the attacked god himself utters the saying to warn his opponent. Indeed, this is the third suggested parallel with Euripides in the book of Acts.

The first supposed parallel is found in chapter 5 verse 39 in the opposing of God, and the second is found in the story of Silas and Paul in the jail in Philippi. On closer examination these parallels do not seem to be quite as strong as they first appear. Furthermore, the expression kicking against the goads, even if of Greek origin, may have become naturalised into Aramaic or Hebrew in the interim.

Paul is established by his commission as a witness and a servant, and the surprising thing here is that he plays the role of Ananias. He is sent to a persecuting people to open their eyes. While mentioned in the other two accounts of his conversion, his blindness is not mentioned here. Rather, the blindness is that of the Jews and the Gentiles to whom he is sent. He is sent to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light. He has seen the light, and now he must bring the light. To the hearer of this passage familiar with the other accounts, this sets up a number of key connections. Paul is now aligned with Ananias, and blind Paul is now associated with the Jews. The theme of light is prominent as a metaphor here, and this might connect it with the language associated with the servant of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 42 verses 6 to 7.

I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. Also Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6.

He says, It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to bring back the preserved of Israel. I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. We might hear further allusions to the language of Isaiah chapter 61 verse 1 in the calling of Paul. The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. Paul's mission is based upon what he has seen.

[14 : 42] He bears witness to the risen and ascended Christ, and his mission is in continuity with the Old Testament prophets. He has promised deliverance from the Gentiles, and from his own people.

Describing what follows to Agrippa, he shows that he followed the instructions of the vision. He carried out the mission in Damascus, in Jerusalem, through the region of Judea, and also went to the Gentiles. The reader might be surprised to hear the reference to the region of Judea here. We don't read of any such mission in the story of Acts previously. It was, he argues, on account of this mission that the Jews seized him in the temple and tried to kill him. It was the reference to his going to the Gentiles that particularly aggravated them. However, the very fact that he is standing there before Agrippa at that time is evidence in favour of the claim that God is on his side, that God commissioned him and promised that he would deliver him from his own people.

Summing up the heart of his message, in verses 22 and 23, he says that he is teaching nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass. The Christ must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he will proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles. At this point, Festus, who is probably presiding, interrupts Paul with a loud voice. In all of his studies, he thinks, Paul has lost grip of reality. He is out of his mind. Paul insists that he is not. Indeed, he is speaking true and rational words, and he appeals to Agrippa in particular. Agrippa has better knowledge of the Jewish teaching, and he would know that what Paul is saying is in accord with the teaching of the prophets and also of Moses. He presses Agrippa on the point, which perhaps puts Agrippa in a difficult position, Agrippa feeling pressure to come out against Festus in defence of the prophets. Whatever tone we read in Agrippa's response, it is likely in part an attempt to deflect the force of Paul's statements. Here it becomes very clear that Paul is not just engaging in a defence, he is approaching this as an act of evangelism. He has been given the opportunity to bear witness before kings, and he is not going to let it pass him by. He openly declares his desire that Agrippa would convert, that he would become a Christian, expressing it as the desire that they would become like him, that what he has described in his own life, the way that the calling of Christ has come to him, that that would be true for them as well. At this point, Agrippa rises up, and the governor

Festus, Bernice, and the other authorities there join together in deliberation concerning his case. They determine that he has done nothing wrong. This is the third time that such a declaration has been made concerning Paul. However, since Paul has appealed to Caesar, their hands are tied, he must be sent. A question to consider, what truths might Paul have discerned and later expressed in his theology from the vision and the commission that he received from Christ?