Courtroom Drama and Paul (Acts 25 and 26)

Remember last time, Felix had kept Paul in prison for two years. The procurator/governor already had a questionable record with the Jews:

“Now as for the affairs of the Jews, they grew worse and worse continually, for the country was again filled with robbers and imposters, who deluded the multitude.” [Josephus, Flavius, *The Life and Works of Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews: Book XX, Chapter 8, Paragraph 5* (William Whiston, trans.) (Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston, Co., 1957), p. 595.] Felix had even had the high priest, Jonathan, assassinated because the priest kept trying to use Jewish affairs to manipulate Felix’ administration. “Felix persuaded one of Jonathan’s most faithful friends, a citizen of Jerusalem, whose name was Doras, to bring the robbers upon Jonathan, in order to kill him; and this he did by promising to give him a great deal of money for so doing.” [Josephus, p. 596.] The robbers did this by hiding daggers under their robes and surrounding the priest as though they were merely part of the throng of worshippers heading up to the temple.

Now, Caesar Claudius had appointed Felix to that position, but Claudius was poisoned in about 54 AD (CE) and Nero seemed to take some credit for his consumption of the mushrooms [Suetonius (Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus), trans. J. C. Rolfe*, The Lives of the Caesars* (New York: NY: Barnes & Noble, 2004), p. 239.]. After Caesar Nero succeeded him, it was only by virtue of Felix’ brother Pallas that Felix could stay out of disfavor. But Pallas himself fell out of favor in 55, though his wealth allowed him to continue to have “some” influence for a couple of years.

Still, Felix must have realized that his time was short. After all, his predecessor, Cumanus, was required to answer the charges of the Jews concerning his tenure and, as a result, Cumanus had been banished by Claudius’ decree [Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 4: 24:1-28:31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), pp. 3443.]. So, it would have been very tempting for Felix to find Paul guilty as a “favor” to the Jews. On the other hand, Paul’s position as a Roman citizen made this a bit trickier. A mistaken conviction of a Roman citizen could backfire on the procurator even worse than more Jewish unrest. So, he procrastinated until Chapter 25, as we see.

Before we dive into Chapter 25, let’s summarize what has been important in these legal proceedings so far: “Luke’s readers learn here that authentic witnesses are willing to die for their faith in Jesus: because they have a clear conscience before God and before the people (cf. 24:16), because they are committed to faith in God and his revealed Word in Scripture (24:14), because they believe in Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and Savior in the coming judgment (24:14, 24), and because they know that God will vindicate them as his people who are true to their calling as witnesses of Jesus.” [Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Book 5: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), pp. 1712-1713.]

So, after Felix is replaced by Porcius Festus, we find ourselves on less solid ground. We know that Nero is Caesar, but we’re less certain on the chronology of the replacement. Some sources, noting the decline of Pallas’ (Felix’ brother’s) influence in 55, follow the early church historian, Eusebius, in seeing the change taking place in that year [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 474, n. 30.] or in AD 56 (CE) [Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983 reprint), p. 382.].

Some observe that, while there are no new coins struck with Felix’ name after AD 54/55 (CE) [Keener, p. 3445.]. While this could be evidence for an early installation of Festus, the next batch of new coins start appearing in AD 58/59 (CE) and could be evidence for the transition in those years [Keener, p. 3445.]. This would fit reasonably with Schnabel’s dating of the event as AD 59 (CE) [Schnabel, p. 1718.] or Gloag’s dating at AD 60/61 (CE) [Gloag, Paton J., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 349.].

That Jews were affected by Felix’ tenure up till at least AD 59/60 (CE) could be supported by the fact that: “In 64 Josephus was still trying to free priests arrested by Felix…” [Keener, p. 3445.] Since Festus died in AD 62 (CE), the late (and more probable) dating means that he had a very short term of office. Considering what we earlier read about Felix’ administration and what we know about such rabble-rousers such as the *Sicarii* [Gloag, p. 349.], those bandits that carried swords that looked vaguely like the sickles (*sicae*) [Josephus, Book XX, Chapter 8, Paragraph 10, p. 597.], the poor politician may have keeled over from hypertension. His job was very stressful.

The Sicarii were accused of even using the holy festivals to kill anyone they didn’t consider to be sufficiently loyal to Judaism [Foakes-Jackson, F. J., *The Moffatt Commentary: Acts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 219.] Indeed, Josephus tells about how Festus dealt with the *Sicarii*. It appears that they would mingle with the crowds during the big festival days and literally murder their opponents in the temple. “So Festus sent forces, both horsemen and footmen, to fall upon those that had been seduced by a certain imposter, who promised them deliverance and freedom from the miseries they were under, if they would but follow him as far as the wilderness. Accordingly, those forces that were sent destroyed both him that had deluded them, and those that were his followers also.” [Josephus, p. 597.] So, obviously, Festus was considerably more conscientious than Felix. But remember these guys, they may explain something in a moment.

So, Festus barely lands at the harbor structure pictured here on the slide (though the structure as it stands here is now about two football fields from the modern coastline) and gets settled before he heads for Jerusalem. Luke says it was three days. I’m not sure that the three days has divine significance in this verse, but it’s interesting—considering it takes three days for a person to be officially dead in Jewish tradition. Maybe Festus needed an official three days to assert his authority.

Regardless, we read that he goes up to Jerusalem to confer with the Jewish leaders. Remember that we’re not talking about going “up” as with reading a map and going north. We are talking about going up because Caesarea is at sea level and Jerusalem is, at least partially, located on a mountain. Since it was Jewish trouble that had gotten Cumanus banished and Felix called back to Rome to answer for his mismanaged administration, it was probably very wise for Festus to take the initiative in meeting with the Jewish influencers.

And, as we see in verse 2, human nature hasn’t changed since the first century. The Jewish leaders immediately ask Festus for a favor. They are like employees in an office who, upon getting a new supervisor or boss, immediately try to inform him of corporate history and office politics from their perspective. Watch out for this person. Don’t be fooled by that person. By the way, some people do that to new pastors, too. Regardless of whether such tactics work or not, we note that given the opportunity to meet the new governor, they immediately attempt to tell him about the Paul problem from their own perspective.

I think they had two reasons: 1) they were tired of Felix’ vacillation and indecision for all or part of two years [Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 137.] and 2) they may have figured that Festus was vulnerable because of his recent arrival and inexperience [Bruce, p. 475.]. Either way, it’s pretty surprising that Paul was still top of mind because Ananias was no longer high priest because Ishmael (son of Phabi) had been appointed by Herod Agrippa II [Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 202; Gloag, pp. 350-351; Josephus, Book 20, Chapter 8, Paragraph 8, p. 597.]

Now, their big request was that, as long as Festus was in Jerusalem, that he would send for Paul and, as a result, they could get a final judgment. Such a request wasn’t all that unusual. Trials didn’t have to be held in the provincial capitols, they could be held anywhere the magistrate happened to be [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 495.]. Again, I see two reasons for their request, one unspoken and the other revealed to us by Luke. First, having the hearing in Jerusalem provided something of a home field advantage because Festus would be surrounded by vociferous, anti-Pauline Jews. Second, as Luke tells us, they intended to ambush him along the way.

Remember the Sicarii that we talked about earlier this session? The ones that used curved short swords like the one pictured to kill anyone who wasn’t loyal enough to Judaism? And yes, that’s an eastern sword pictured, not a Roman era one. Anyway, all it would have taken was a whispered word from the Jewish authorities and they would have “solved” the PAUL problem very quickly. But I also want you to remember that this is not the first time they’ve wanted to kill Paul while he was in Roman custody; it’s not even the first time they tried to get the Roman authorities to bring him to the Sanhedrin in order to put him in harm’s way. Acts 23:15 shows how that was supposed to happen.

Now, I want you to remember that because two years is a long time for people to maintain that level of hostility against one individual. Illustrating that, one commentator reminded us of the vow they made in Acts 23:12-13 when 40 men said that they wouldn’t eat or drink till they had killed Paul, observing: “We must not suppose that the 40 men abstained from food and drink for a period of two years! The rabbis did not consider a vow binding if it was a sin against life, so the men could have been absolved from their oath.” [Smith, p. 138.]

Apparently, Festus smelled a rat. He may not have overtly realized anything was wrong, but bringing a high profile trial to Jerusalem at such an early date in his administration, especially when Caesarea was the symbol of his authority. Just like many businessmen want the negotiations occurring in their space, so was Festus wary of conducting this first major event in the Jews’ space rather than his own [Schnabel, p. 1737.].

In his study of Paul’s life, Gunther Bornkamm had an interesting observation on this point in Paul’s life. “From scene to scene the picture of the Jews as Paul’s mortal enemies becomes more and more pronounced and furious. In contrast, the representatives of the Roman government play the part of protectors: the officer of the guard, the commander of the garrison in Jerusalem who had Paul taken with a strong escort of cavalry and infantry to the procurator’s residence at Caesarea to save him from the Jews, and finally, the procurator Felix himself and his successor Procius Festus.” [Bornkamm, Gunther, Paul (translated by D.M. G. Stalker) (New York: NY: Harper & Row, 1971—original, 1969), p. 102.]. Of course, he admits that Felix and Festus weren’t pure protectors. They both had ulterior motives, but the impact here is God’s providence. The representatives of the mightiest nation on earth at the time are providing cover for God’s emissary, Paul.

To make the contrast clear between the Jewish authorities who are attempting to thwart God’s plan and the Roman authorities, notice the differences in the details that Luke gives. The Jews: a) renew their accusations against Paul, b) they urged, implored, cajoled Festus, c) they petitioned for a favor, and d) they were covertly planning to have Paul assassinated on the road so that they didn’t have to worry which way the trial verdict might have gone [Schnabel, p. 1736.] Festus gives a matter of fact reply that he is returning to Caesarea and, if they want, they can send a delegation with him.

That Festus is planning to be even-handed can be observed when we see him respond that the hearing will decide IF there is anything wrong with Paul. I like the Greek word used here. It’s **ἄτοπον** and it’s a compound of the prefix “a” that means “not” and the noun “topos” that means place. So, it literally means, “If there’s something not in place concerning this person.” We might say, “We want to see if this person is out of line in anyway.”

The fact that Festus waits six or eight days before returning to Caesarea shouldn’t alarm anyone. It’s indicative of the reality that he had more things to do than merely defer to the Sanhedrin or settle the issue of Paul [Schnabel, p. 1738.]. Yet, note that he doesn’t waste any time calling Paul to trial when he returns to Caesarea. Now, unlike what was happening in Rome at this time, it looks like Festus is ensuring Paul’s right to a speedy trial. In Rome, Caesar Nero preferred to take his testimony in writing. He expected his prosecutors and the defenders to write out an argument for each point of the case and submit their arguments in writing, one point at a time. Then, Nero would meet with his advisors one-at-a-time before making his decision [Suetonius, p. 227.].

Festus may have read such documents as Claudius Lysius’ letter in advance, but he seems to want to hear the evidence. Verse 7 tells us that the Jews presented some very serious charges, but gives us no details. Most scholars believe they were similar to those brought in our last session by Tertullus when he argued before Felix [Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 242; Bruce, p. 476; Gloag, p. 353; Keener, p. 3456; Marshall, p. 383.]. These would include: 1) disturbing the peace, 2) leading undefined, unsavory Nazarenes, and 3) desecrating the temple [Gloag, p. 353.]. But the fact that Paul finds it necessary to indicate that he is not “against Caesar” means that he understood charges of treason were on the table. This could be a result of their charges that he had agitated the Jews to violence all over the world and a possible twisting of his teaching on the Messiah into the expectation of a revolutionary Messiah intent on overthrowing the Romans [Smith, p. 138.]. The fact that Josephus recounts incidents where “imposters” were involved suggests that these false Messiahs could easily be a real problem.

Luke confidently states that the prosecutors couldn’t prove any of the charges [See some of the notes after the Questions regarding Paul’. Have witnesses gone home after the feast of two years ago and lost interest? Could the prosecutors see that Festus’ eyes were glazing over whenever they talked about issues within Judaism? Remember, Felix was Jew-curious and had married a Jewish princess named Drusilla. Festus doesn’t have that background. And how do you prove treason without an insurrection or a conspiracy?

So, Paul is like a modern defense lawyer who asks the judge to dismiss the case because the prosecution has failed to prove their case beyond a shadow of a doubt. He doesn’t offer any evidence; he just denies that he is opposed to either the Law or against Caesar.

So, normally, we’d be ready for the dismissal of the case, but Festus has other ideas. He can’t find this defendant guilty of treason, but he can do a favor for the Jews by letting them try him on ecclesiastical law back in Jerusalem. I agree with the following position: “In my view, Festus is not primarily hostile toward Paul; he is one of the fairer judges in Acts. Yet he is politically predisposed to accommodate the Sanhedrin insofar as possible;…” [Keener, p. 3457.] So, he asks Paul if he would be willing to go back to Jerusalem to resolve this thing.

That a “change of venue” would be irregular here should be noted. “If Festus merely wanted to change the venue from Caesarea to Jerusalem to personally bring the trial to a conclusion, his suggestion would be perfectly legal. But Paul had been in the custody of the Roman legal system; he could be transferred to the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem only if he had first been acquitted at least of the political charges.” [Schnabel, p. 1743.] That he didn’t dismiss demonstrates the irregularity. Fortunately, he asked Paul.

Keener observes that Festus might have been thinking that he could accommodate the Jewish leaders by starting with a new hearing that would no longer rely on the records from Felix’ proceedings. It would be time-consuming but allow him to sort out some of the complexities behind the case. Unfortunately, disregarding Felix’ records (especially the letter from Claudius Lysias the chiliarch in the tower at Jerusalem) would have been disastrous for Paul, even if the new hearing were held in Caesarea as opposed to Jerusalem [Keener, p. 3459.]

Paul must have suspected that Festus was tempted to turn him over to the Sanhedrin and would have perceived that as a death sentence [Schnabel, pp. 1744-45.]. Since we know from Paul’s later words that he wasn’t afraid of death in and of itself, his reticence can be attributed to believing that that God was going to use his case to send him on to Rome. In the U.S., attorneys often move for a change of venue when they don’t think you can get an impartial jury or local government is rigged against their defendant. Paul does almost the same thing in verse 9. He evokes a law dating back to the Roman Republic: *provocatio ad populum* from 449 BC (BCE) [Foakes-Jackson, p. 219.].

“If he was apprehensive about the result of a trial before Festus in Jerusalem, it was not because he had lost his confidence in Roman justice, but because he feared that in Jerusalem Roman justice might be overborne by powerful local influences. There would be no reason for such fear at Rome.” [Bruce, p. 478.] Festus seems to want to get around it, but this right to appeal is ingrained in imperial law, although the appeal to the people from the Republic is now the appeal to Caesar in the Empire. He appeals to his advisors because, I think Smith is right, “He was terribly afraid of what the imperial government might do to him, if he had to refer his first case [Smith, p. 138.].

Festus’ dilemma was exacerbated by the fact that Paul made a very bold statement in verse 11. “If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death: …” It’s a classic statement of innocence used in Plato’s *Apology* and Plato’s *Crito* dialogue, perhaps shortened to “If I deserve to die, I ask no mercy.” [Conzelmann, p. 203.] This plea forced Festus’ hand and definitely thwarted the hopes of the Jewish leaders. Verse 12 seems to indicate that Festus’ hands are tied. It’s ironic that: “Paul made his appeal to the emperor in the context of being accused of sedition against Rome.” [Arrington, p. 242.]

As Keener observes: “Ironically, had it not been for the intervention of Paul’s enemies (Acts 25:2-3), Paul could have languished in custody in Caesarea much longer. The accession of a new procurator meant new administrative priorities and a new shuffling of cases.” [Keener, p. 3447.] He goes on to cite cases of prisoners “lost” in bureaucratic machinery.

So, now. Festus pulls a page out of Nero’s playbook. He claims to need time to deliberate and he uses the upcoming visit of Herod Agrippa II as his opportunity. Festus wants favor with Caesar Nero and Herod Agrippa II received new lands and cities in Galilee and the surrounding areas upon Nero’s ascension to the imperial throne. Further, Agrippa II is almost a “king” of the Jews so Festus can pass the buck to him because of his expertise in religious matters, something of which is confusing to Festus himself. So, if he can get Agrippa on his side, he won’t look bad for sending Paul on to Rome.

Marshall points out that Luke wouldn’t have overheard the private conversation nor would it have been in the official court records. So, he suggests that Luke must be dramatizing the probable based on how matters turned out [Marshall, p. 386.]. I had to laugh when one commentary cited British New Testament scholar, C. K. Barrett, as suggesting: “Luke can only have guessed at the contents of any conversation between Agrippa and Festus, but it was a good guess.” [Keener, p. 3471.] I didn’t address this in our session because dramatization based on deducing what was probable was a standard feature in ancient history writing. It does not take away from its historical importance, even though modern historians would not be likely to do so. However, I don’t worry about this at all because I don’t think it was just a good guess (as per Barrett above) but it involved deductions guided by the Holy Spirit.

In verse 18, Festus indicates that there was no substantiation of the serious charges and implies that even the charges weren’t as serious as he could have imagined (please see my notes after the suggested questions). What he means by this is explicitly addressed in verse 19. These are “disagreements.” In the New Testament, the word used for “disagreements” here only appears in Acts. Here, it suggests that the religious differences have no legal standing [Keener, p. 3481.]. Older English translations are unhelpful here because they translate the word for religion as “superstition.” Although the word used here can be pejorative [Keener, p. 3481.], it does not have to be so, but can mean religion “in terms of a particular system of cultic beliefs and practices.” [Schnabel, p. 1755.]

Indeed, it is unlikely that Festus would have used the word derisively because he would have been insulting Agrippa’s putative faith (Jewish) at a time when he wanted his help [Foakes-Jackson, p. 221, Gloag, p. 364.]. However, the idea that Festus considered the disagreements to lack legal substance and seemed to feel it was trivial can be seen in the careless phrase “a certain man” in referring to Jesus [Gloag, p. 364.]. But the key to the issue, as he almost seems to stumble into it according to verse 19, is that the Jews contend that Jesus is dead while Paul contends that He is alive. “The real point at issue had evidently been made clear enough, though Festus did not realize its import.” [Bruce, p. 483.]

The religious issue piques Agrippa’s interest (and the flattery wouldn’t have hurt either). I find the parallel interesting between another procurator and another “Herod” in Luke 23. One is tempted to compare the words between what Herod Antipas said in the gospel and Herod indicates here. Agrippa says, “I *wish* to *hear* this man” and Antipas says that he had *desired* to *see* Jesus for a long time [Foakes-Jackson, p. 222.].

Luke makes it clear that the three (Agrippa, Festus, and Bernice) arrive to hear Paul with great ostentation. Having the *chiliarchs*, the high commanders of each of the five cohorts in Caesarea, and several local officials and dignitaries accompanying them probably didn’t hurt Festus’ case that this was a major event [Smith, p. 140.]. Yet, I’m not the only one who thinks that Luke may be playing up the irony here. I like the painting on the slide because the three Roman officials are decked out in bright clothes versus Paul’s gray jail clothes. It echoes the sentiments expressed by F. F. Bruce: “There is probably quiet humour in Luke’s description of the ‘great pomp’ with which they assembled; Luke had a very true sense of values, and knew that in his friend and teacher Paul there was a native greatness which did not need not to be decked with the trappings of grandeur that surrounded his distinctive hearers.” [Bruce, p. 484.]

And that brings us to Paul’s more detailed defense before Agrippa II. After getting the nod from Agrippa, Paul immediately uses a broad hand gesture to indicate that the speech has begun. In the light of the suggestion regarding the description of the “pomp” earlier, it must have seemed very dramatic for Luke’s readers to imagine the apostle lifting his hand while constrained by chains [Keener, p. 3495.].

There are several formal elements in Greek rhetoric, both verbally and in writing. Sometimes, different words are used for the different elements. For example, the *Exordium* could be called a preamble or a beginning. It literally comes from the Latin prefix “ex” followed by the noun for order so that it would mean “out of order” (not part of the main body). In Graeco-Roman rhetoric, the exordium was often used to flatter the audience and form a bridge with the audience. So, we notice that just as Tertullus flattered Felix back in Acts 22, Paul gives an endorsement to Agrippa’s knowledge of Jewish religion and begs his patience implying that he is a careful, insightful judge.

In narrative writing, the story (*Narratio*) generally follows the *Exordium*. In courtroom proceedings, it is followed by a *Refutatio* or “refutation” of the accusations. I believe you see these counter-arguments in Acts 26:4-8, but I think you should give your students a chance to answer the questions below before you hear my answers.

The main accounts, whether biographical, testimonial, or evidentiary, were part of the aforementioned *Narratio*. It is the Latin word from which we get the English word “narration” so you know that it is straightforward, orderly presentation. I like the presentation that divides Paul’s argument into two parts: I) Acts 26:9-11 where he speaks of his zeal in persecuting the church because of his loyalty to the Law and the Jewish faith and II) Acts 26:12-18 where he recounts his encounter with the Living Lord and what that means for the way he currently lives. Again, I will address some of the logic after the questions below.

The *Propositio* is the Latin word from which we get the English word, “proposition.” In modern rhetoric, it is the thesis statement. In ancient rhetoric, it can be a summary or assertion that is relatively unadorned. We will look at Acts 26: 19-20 in this light a little later.

Finally, the Peroratio (from which we get our English word peroration) is an emphatic conclusion, call to action, or summary offered with a certain amount of passion or emotion. It is usually something of a challenge to listeners to prove the speaker wrong, and we can argue that from Acts 26:21-23, as well.

* ***Exordium* – Fortunate in Agrippa’s expertise and patience  
   (vv. 2-3)**
* ***Refutatio* – Paul’s Pharisaic training, background, and  
   hope for resurrection (vv. 4-8)**
* ***Narratio* – Part I: Paul’s persecuting zeal / Part II: his  
   experience of the heavenly light/voice (vv. 9-18)**
* ***Propositio* – Paul preached in Damascus and to Gentiles  
   (vv. 19-20)**
* ***Peroratio* – Jews persecuted him, but God protected him  
   (vv. 21-23)**

Questions for Discussion

Exordium (vv. 2-3): How does Paul’s opening words to Agrippa help prepare the king to be willing to listen to him?

Comment: We should probably all learn something from this approach. Paul expresses both enthusiasm for being to share and compliments Agrippa on his knowledge base and implied patience. The comment on patience also suggests that this will not be a short speech, but his request indicates that he hopes not to be interrupted. We shouldn’t flatter someone with something that obviously isn’t true, though. Agrippa believed he was knowledgeable in Jewish religious issues and Paul plays to that.

*Refutatio* (vv. 4-8) How does Paul’s recounting of his training and hope for resurrection answer the supposed charges against him?

Comments: We assume from the past hearing that part of the accusation is that he is teaching against the Torah (Law) and leading others astray. But he refutes that charge by saying that his way of life has been consistent with the Law his whole life and “all the Jews” (meaning those back in Tarsus, those in Jerusalem, and those now accusing him) know it [Schnabel, p. 1766.] I also believe that Keener is quite correct to emphasize the way Paul stacks phrases together like “from my youth,” “from the beginning,” and “for a long time” to express his consistency of behavior and solidarity of character [Keener, p. 3496.]

As for being a Pharisee, this is further evidence that he was committed to living according to the Law. As I noted in the session, Paul still considered himself to be living in strict accordance with the Law, so he wasn’t trying to undermine it. Some translations make it sound like past tense so that Paul was a Pharisee. But the Greek tense is the aorist tense which indicates that something happened in the past that has a continuing effect. It is the transformative past. [Keener, p. 3498.] Evoking his identification with the Pharisees has two purposes. First, that tie to the Law: Pharisee was “an umbrella term. It was used to describe those who bound themselves together in small groups pledged to live strictly according to the law, especially by maintaining the ritual purity which was demanded of priests in the Old Testament and by tithing all their produce.” [Marshall, p. 391.] Second, they were the group that believed in the hope of resurrection and it was Paul’s mention of this which had caused the disruption in Jerusalem.

During the session, I pointed to resurrection associated with hope because it corresponds closely to the earlier charges of inciting Jews all over the world (as does Bruce, p. 489, Keener, p. 3500, and Schnabel, p. 1767). Marshall, however equates the hope with Old Testament prophecies and promises which Paul would have seen fulfilled in Jesus [Marshall, p. 392.]. I think it means that in a broader sense, but throughout Acts, Paul is usually talking about the believers’ hope in the resurrection of the dead based on Jesus’ resurrection. This, in turn, points even more dramatically to Jesus as the Messiah.

*Narratio* (vv. 9-18): How does Paul’s admission of his persecuting zeal serve for his defense?

Comment: Paul’s account of persecuting the church demonstrates that he not only understands the position of his accusers, but he actively and energetically supported their cause in the past. Rhetorically, he is undermining any credibility that he was desecrate the Temple and building a foundation for his later testimony in favor of Christ. In the famous Rhetorica ad Alexandrum, there is an account of witnesses that gives more weight to a testimony in favor of a person if the witness himself is (or, in this case, has been) an enemy [Keener, p. 3505.]. Paul had been predisposed not to believe in the resurrected Jesus. By sharing his past malevolence against the gospel, his current defense of the gospel and his preaching of it, has gained credibility.

What does the heavenly light/vision/voice description do for his defense?

Comment: Also as part of the *Narratio*, Paul shares another account of his conversion/commissioning experience. Simply put, the voice in the heavenly light is that of the Living Lord. So telling this narrative was affirming the truth of Jesus’ resurrection/ascension.

The differences between the accounts can be attributed to the needs of their audiences. For example, in this passage, there is no mention of Ananias and Paul gets his mission and commissioning directly from the Lord. The truth is that Paul did get his mission and commissioning from the Lord, but part of that commissioning came when the Lord called Ananias (and part came later in the vision in the temple). That would have been a lot of details which would not have helped the King to understand. So, Luke gives a *Reader’s Digest* version which doesn’t distract from the main thrust.

On the other hand, this is the only account where we get Jesus telling Paul that it is difficult to kick against the goads. Goads were sharp sticks used to make oxen uncomfortable enough to keep lumbering on under heavy loads. If a person kicked against the stick, one was likely to puncture and bruise oneself enough to do some real damage. As a result, this became a saying in Semitic and Greek culture. Since Agrippa was raised with Greek culture but came from a Semitic background, it was very appropriate to quote this line for Agrippa. The implication is: “Just as the wooden spike constrained the ox, so the submission to the call of Christ constrained Paul.” [Smith, p. 142.]

*Propositio* (vv. 19-20): Why is preaching in Damascus and to Gentiles significant?

Comment: The *Propositio* concerns Paul following through on his call. It is important because it asserts that his preaching is not intended to destroy and upset, but rather to heal: open spiritual eyes, transform from Satan’s bondage to God’s opportunity, receive forgiveness of sins, and receive a spiritual inheritance they won’t regret (v. 18). For his Jewish-aware audience (King Herod Agrippa II) this summary of his missionary work would have resounded with the idea of being a “light for the Gentiles” and “turning darkness into light” in Isaiah 42:16 [Schnabel, p. 1781.]. Rather than desecrating and undermining the Hebrew scriptures, he was “fulfilling” them. We could summarize this section as: “The greatest witness that Christians can give for the cause of Christ in the present day is their personal experience. The most effective message to proclaim in the modern age is the assurance that the power of Christ has changed their lives.” [Smith, p. 142.]

These three verses also demonstrate that Paul was not anti-Jew, but that the message in Damascus, Jerusalem, and beyond had always been consistent with going to the Jew first and then to the Gentile [Schnabel, p. 1784.] Notice also the wording of verse 20 about preaching deeds worthy of repentance. The emphasis on repentance puts Paul in line with the preaching of John the Baptist, the one so in tune with the prophets that he was thought by some to be another Elijah, as recorded in Luke 3:8 [Keener, p. 3529; Marshall, p. 398.].

*Peroratio* (vv. 21-23): Why does Paul appeals to Jewish persecution and God’s protection as the final section of his defense?

Comment: Paul is asserting that he was merely doing what God had commissioned him to do when he was seized in the temple. First of all, Paul is demonstrating his consistency in preaching the gospel of Christ. Second, his being seized in the temple implied “…an illegal action that discredits their later accusations before the Roman court.” [Schnabel, p. 1785.] Paul doesn’t specifically say that it negates the charge, but it is clear that it was the Jews who were fomenting the trouble that day rather than the apostle.

In addition, Paul is indicating that his being alive to stand trial on that day is vindication, an indication that God is protecting him. You might refer to the Bornkamm quotation at the bottom of page 3 and top of page 4 of these notes. After all, “He has been marvelously delivered from peril by God, and still takes a firm stand in witnessing to his convictions. But these are not opposed to the religion of his people. Not only Moses, but every prophet since has taught what amounts to this, (a) that the Messiah is capable of suffering … and (b) that this Messiah (Paul does not mention the name of Jesus) must be the first to rise from the dead and bring light, …” [Foakes-Jackson, p. 225.].

So, now we come to the reaction. One authority figure mocks Paul and the other accuses Paul of trying to force him to make a decision in a short time. In verse 25-25, Festus mocks Paul by saying that all of his studying and thinking has driven him mad. It’s probably good to ask your students if they’ve ever had people dismiss the gospel as wishful thinking, fairy tales, or confused reasoning? That’s the same kind of mocking to which Paul was being subjected here. Our enemy, Satan, often resorts to ridicule.

Of course, Agrippa also seems to chide Paul. Rather than the “Almost thou hast persuaded me to be a Christian” of the King James Version, the text is more suggestive of, “Do you really think you can convert me in such a short time?” Agrippa implies that these are difficult concepts and weighty implications. How dare Paul rush him.

Ask your students if they have ever shared about the Lord and heard people say that they had to think about it or needed more evidence? Has anyone ever said that this wasn’t really the right time in their lives to make a decision? If so, they understand how Paul felt.

Nonetheless, we discover that Paul’s defense is successful enough that Agrippa says that they could have dismissed the charges if he hadn’t appealed to Caesar. But Paul appealed to Caesar for two reasons: 1) he needed to go to Rome to complete his mission and 2) if he had been freed in Caesarea, the Jews would have killed him and aborted the mission. Imprisonment and appeal were, strangely enough, God’s provision for keeping Paul’s gospel mission alive.