Just Starting Acts 23-24

Though Acts 22 closes with Claudius Lysias, the Roman commander, trying to get to the bottom of the disturbance and bringing Paul unbound before the Sanhedrin, our focus tonight begins with Paul’s appearance. Imagine a film camera dollying into the first scene as Paul looks intently at his accusers and begins to speak.

**23:1-5 Scene 1 – Paul and Ananias**  
  
Luke’s account of Paul’s appearance before the Sanhedrin (23:1–9) begins with a reference to Paul’s courage. He “looked intently” at the members of the Sanhedrin sitting on the benches of the council hall in front of him, returning their stares—particularly those of the senior members sitting in the front row—without showing any fear, ready to begin his defense. Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Book 5: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), p. 1630.] My southern roots may be showing here, but I really like French Arrington’s translation of this as Paul “looked straight at the Sanhedrin” [Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 226.]. My oldest commentary on this text takes it that way, as well: “That is, fastening his eyes stedfastly on those senators who were present at the council. The wicked flee when no man pursueth, but the righteous are bold as a lion, and shall not be afraid, Prov. xx. 1.” [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 467.]

That’s the way I take it, though some assume that, with Paul’s apparently weak eyes, he may have been looking to see if any of his former compatriots who had been complicit in the martyrdom of Stephen were there [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 397.]. Conzelmann cites this as questionable speculation [Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 192.].

I personally like the way T. C. Smith presented the dramatic perspective: “[Paul] gazed intently at those assembled. He knew that the priests were going to attempt to make him take the full blame for the commotion the day before. He refused to be saddled with the responsibility for what happened. Thus the apostle quickly declared his innocence with the statement, **Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day.**” [Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 129.]

I like the way Smith sets up the drama, but his use of the Revised Standard Version translation misses a beautiful point. Paul is aware that the Romans are aware of this hearing and his statement that he lived before God in all good conscience should literally say, “I have been a good citizen of God’s state to this day.” [Foakes-Jackson, F. J., *The Moffatt Commentary: Acts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 206; Gloag, Paton J., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Volume II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 304; Robertson, p. 397.] I think it’s brilliant because he was asserting his innocence before those who were supposed to rule justly under God’s authority.

Paul’s defense can be summarized in four points: (1) He has lived his life “before God,” i.e., in conformity with God’s will as revealed in the law; (2) He has lived “with a clear … conscience,” (συνειδήσει ἀγαθῇ), i.e., with a self-awareness that resulted from the knowledge that his behavior in thought, word, and deed consistently followed the standard of God’s laws; (3) He has lived with a “perfectly” (πάσῃ) clear conscience, i.e., with consistent conformity to the will of God in all his behavior; and (4) He has lived in conformity to the will of God “up to this day,” a phrase that adds a temporal element to the assertion that his conduct followed the standard of God’s laws consistently [Schnabel, p. 1630.].

His reward for this is for Ananias to order him struck on the mouth. This seems to be a violent way of calling Paul a liar. Ananias seems to have been one of those corrupt officials who just keeps bobbing up when you think they’re gone. He apparently became high priest in 47 [Arrington, p. 227; Gloag, p. 305.], though it may have been as late as 48 [Conzelmann, p. 192.] We do know from one description that he was a great hoarder of money and sent servants to the threshing floors to gather the tithes that should have belonged to the priests as a whole, beating them up if they didn’t hand over the tithes. [Josephus, Flavius, *The Life and Works of Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews: Book XX, Chapter 9, Paragraph 2* (William Whiston, trans.) (Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston, Co., 1957), p. 599.] We know that he fell afoul of Rome and had to go to there to answer charges circa 52, but was restored by Claudius Caesar. He was deposed while Felix was in office (so, before 59). Finally, he was murdered during the first Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66 [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. 449; Conzelmann, p. 192.]

Paul is so offended that, immediately after declaring his innocence, he should have been punished that he responds with “God is going to strike you” (v. 3). Notice that he doesn’t call a direct curse on the priest nor say what he will do. Rather, he says—rather like a prophet—what God is going to do. It’s something like what Moses said to Israel would happen if they turned their backs on God in Deuteronomy 28, God would: send curses and confusion (v. 20); cause pestilence to linger (v. 21); afflict with wasting disease, drought, and blight (v. 22); turn rain to falling dust (v. 24); and cause military defeats (v. 25).

Paul knows that this order went counter to God’s law as presented in Leviticus 19:15a: “You must not act unjustly when rendering judgment.” [Holman Christian Standard Bible]. So, he feels confident in invoking God’s judgment upon the person who has turned his back on God’s law.

Then, Paul calls the priest a “whitewashed wall.” I think Paul was suggesting two ideas here. First, he was evoking the Old Testament in Ezekiel 13:8-12 [HCSB]: **8**“Therefore, this is what the Lord God says: I am against you because you have spoken falsely and had lying visions.” This is the declaration of the Lord God. **9**“My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and speak lying divinations. They will not be present in the fellowship of My people or be recorded in the register of the house of Israel, and they will not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord Yahweh.

**10**“Since they have led My people astray saying, ‘Peace,’ when there is no peace, for when someone builds a wall they plaster it with whitewash, **11**therefore, tell those who plaster it that it will fall. Torrential rain will come, and I will send hailstones plunging[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ezekiel%2013&version=HCSB#fen-HCSB-20720a)] down, and a windstorm will be released. **12**Now when the wall has fallen, will you not be asked, ‘Where is the coat of whitewash that you put on it?’

Of course, since Luke often highlights the similarities between Jesus and His followers, we might also think of what Jesus called the hypocritical Pharisees in Matthew 23:27: **27**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and every impurity.

Even before they identify Ananias, Paul uses this epithet to suggest that he is a false prophet. And that may also explain what Paul means when the Sanhedrin tries to shame him for speaking so fiercely to the high priest. Paul protests that he didn’t know he was high priest (probably snidely implying that a high priest should know better than to break the law). I’m in good company because Augustine and Calvin agree with my interpretation that Paul is calling Ananias out for his lack of priestly comportment [Schnabel, p. 1633, n. 18.].

But notice the similarities here with how Jesus was treated in John 18:22. There, they asked Jesus if that’s the way one answers a high priest and punctuated it with a physical blow [Bruce, p. 451, n. 9.]. Here, the blow comes first and then, the umbrage.

When Paul says he didn’t know who it was, some have tried to use the “weak eyes” excuse [laughed away by Conzelmann, p. 192.] or that Paul had been away from Jerusalem and didn’t know that Ananias was once again elevated to the position [Du Veill, p. 471.]. But those don’t make sense regarding a person like unto Paul who is very aware of how the Sanhedrin works. It is possible, that Paul didn’t know who had given the order [Schnabel, p. 1633], but once again, it doesn’t make the best sense for a person familiar with the Sanhedrin’s functioning as Paul would be. Rather, I still think it was the irony that the high priest didn’t deserve the respect [Arrington, p. 228; 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. 364.] deserved when Paul quoted Exodus 22:28 [HCSB]: **28**“You must not blaspheme God or curse a leader among your people.

So, it may well be that Paul was undermining the legitimacy of Ananias because he had already decided that he couldn’t get a fair hearing in this group [Smith, p. 130.]. So, we move to Scene 2.

**23:6-9 Scene 2 – Paul Takes a Side**

Again, I like the way T. C. Smith dramatically sets the scene: “Paul knew that the Romans would lean over backwards to support Ananias since he was a devoted quisling. With his back to the wall, the apostle’s only recourse was to introduce an element into the discussion which could divide the group.” [Smith, p. 130.] Paul realizes the Pharisee and Sadducees are split on politics with the Sadducees being generally pro-Roman and the Pharisees only seeming to be pro-Roman on the surface; split on biblical interpretation with the Sadducees trusting only the Pentateuch alone and the Pharisees more open to later interpretations (prophets, writings, apocalyptic works); and the Sadducees against all ideas of anything supernatural while the Pharisees were open to the idea of angels, demons, and the resurrection of the body [Marshall, p. 364.]

I have to confess that I’ve always seen this as a divide and conquer strategy. But I’m starting to agree with Eckhard Schnabel when he says that it was more lining up with the Pharisees than trying to start a riot [Schnabel, p. 1635.] It is better to have some allies than no allies.

So, even though some people think it was disingenuous, not entirely honest, Paul asserts his affinity with the Pharisees. When he says, “I am” a Pharisee, it is the continuous present tense. “It may imply that Paul still regarded himself as a Pharisee in some sense, although most certainly not in the party sense of the word, …” [Schnabel, pp. 1635-1636.]. Indeed, F. F. Bruce chides those who think Paul was quibbling over his position by characterizing it as overstating a partial and limited agreement with the group: “And the belief in resurrection which Paul shared with the Pharisaic members of the Sanhedrin, far from being ‘a very partial and limited agreement,’ was fundamental.” [Bruce, pp. 452-453; Smith, p. 131.]

But even though that aspect of the strategy worked, I think it’s very interesting that the debate over the resurrection could have led to sharing of the gospel. Conzelmann wrote that the belief in a general resurrection is the link between (genuine) Judaism and Christianity [Conzelmann, p. 192]. Indeed, it was very likely the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead that had prepared Paul to believe in Jesus’ resurrection of the dead. “He had found fulfillment of the messianic hope of resurrection of Jesus Christ.” [Arrington, p. 228.]

Indeed, the fact that the grammar he uses in his statement about the hope and the resurrection is a hendiadys [Bruce, p. 452, n. 11.]. A hendiadys is a combination of words that you see together more than apart like “ham and eggs” or “sun and moon.” The resurrection is hope and the hope is resurrection.

“While many Jews believed in a future bodily resurrection when ‘the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws’ (2 Macc 7:9), others accepted the Greek (and Roman) concept of the immortality of the soul as the proper way of thinking about ‘life after death.’ This difference of interpretation and belief regarding the question of the hope beyond death divided Sadducees and Pharisees and thus caused a ‘dispute’ (cf. v. 10) in the council hall when Paul expressed and defended his belief in the resurrection of the dead, introduced as a conviction that the Pharisees share.” [Schnabel, p. 1637.]

So, now there are some Pharisees who actually want to acquit Paul. But in verse 7 things become very chaotic. The noun, from which we get “stasis” means that no one wanted to budge from their beliefs. As a result, there was a division, the verb comes from the root from which we get “schism” in English [Robertson, p. 401]. There is a revolt going on here. It’s the same noun used in Acts 24:5 when they accuse Paul of causing disorderly conduct and insurrection among the Jews. Yet, here they are discrediting themselves and, to the Roman soldiers who were waiting outside to take Paul back into custody, they were inadvertently proving Paul’s innocence [Schnabel, p. 1637.]. Conzelmann thinks, ““This verse points to the hopelessness of a Judaism that denies belief in the resurrection: it is divided within itself.” [Conzelmann, p. 192.]

So, since Paul believes in the resurrection of the dead, several members of the Pharisaical party give him the benefit of the doubt, “…willing to concede that an angel or a spirit spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus.” [Smith, p. 130.] They “contended” (διεμάχοντο); i.e., they fought for the opinion, that since spirits and angels (of deceased persons) exist, and since it is possible that when Paul claims to have heard the crucified and risen Jesus speak to him, as he had claimed in his address in the outer court of the temple the day before (22:7–10, 18, 21),33 he heard the “spirit” (πνεῦμα) or the “angel” (ἄγγελος) of Jesus speak (cf. Luke 24:36–43; John 12:29; Acts 12:15). Given this possibility, the Pharisees “would not have been shocked that God might send a messenger to enforce his plan, since they believed in predestination to some extent.” [Schnabel, p. 1639.]

Knowing human nature, as the stakes got higher and Paul’s opponents realized they were losing ground, they would have gotten louder and more emotional. Hence, Claudius Lysias’ centurion intervened to protect the life of a Roman citizen. He is taken back to the Tower Antonia where he will be safe, but in custody. But in the light of what happens next, it’s safe to say that their case against Paul is coming unglued.

**23:11-15 Scene 3 – Counterpoint of Jesus vs. Jews**

If I were filming this as a movie, I think I’d call for a split-screen right now. The differences between the word that Jesus brings to Paul in his imprisonment and the plotting to murder him by the disaffected members of the Sanhedrin. I wouldn’t have sound on the right side of the screen—just people making oaths, getting weapons and hiding along a road in ambush. But I would very clearly present the words of Jesus.

Do you remember that Paul speaks of another vision where Jesus came to him in Jerusalem? In Acts 22:18, Jesus told him the same thing. Be courageous! But then, Jesus was telling him to leave Jerusalem on his own. Now, to the discouraged apostle who hadn’t been able to get the gospel across despite the risk he had taken, Jesus assures him that just as he had testified here (the steps of the tower), so MUST he testify in Rome [Robertson, p. 403.] Bruce goes so far as to suggest that this assurance was so solid as a result of this vision that Paul was more of a “master of events rather than their victim.” [Bruce, p. 455; similarly, Gloag, p. 316.]

And the counterpoint? Let’s look at some of the negatives. First, the verb for binding the oath contains the word “anathema,” bringing the idea of a definitive curse into the narrative. The early church father, Tertullian observed: “The form of this oath, as says Tertullian, was a solemn imprecation of divine vengeance in these or the like words, " God do so to me and more also," 1 Sam. xiv. 44 ; xx. 13 ; xxv. 22 ; 2 Sam. iii. 8, 35 ; xix. 13, &c.” [Cited in Du Veill, p. 474.] In verse 12, they bound themselves with an oath to kill Paul, but in verse 14, they doubled down on their oath, the grammatical construction using the root “anathema” twice [Foakes-Jackson, p. 209.].

Second, the fact of the fasting meant that they had an urgency to their plot. Although there is a quotation from the Talmud that seems to suggest there is no winning with such an oath (“’He that hath made a vow not to eat anything, woe to him if he eat, and woe to him if he eat not. If he eat, he sinneth against his vow; if he eat not, he sinneth against his life. What must a man do in his case? Let him go to the wise men, and they will loose his vow; according as it is written, The tongue of the wise is health.’ (Hore Hebraice, vol. iv. p. 147).” [Cited in Gloag, p. 319.]. Certainly, we find out in the nephew’s testimony in verse 20 that they didn’t intend to fast very long, since they planned the ambush for the next day [Arrington, p. 232.].

Third, I notice that there were 40, not 70, not 7, not 12, not 144. This is the number for natural sufficiency. Four (4), in Jewish gematria (meaning of numbers) represents the natural order (four cardinal directions, four types of living creatures (bird, domestic animals, wild animals, and humans), four seasons, four rivers coming out of the Garden of Eden). Ten (10) represents human sufficiency or plenty, since there are five digits on each hand and ten would represent a double handful. So, 4\*10 = 40 and explains 40 days and nights of the flood, 40 years in a generation, 40 years in the wilderness (Exodus 16:35), sanctuary of the temple was 40 cubits long (1 Kings 6:17), 40 silver sockets for the bases of the panels in the tabernacle (Exodus 26:19, 21), and Elijah’s 40 day journey to Mt. Horeb (Sinai) in 1 Kings 19:8. As you can see, God sometimes orders human effort, but it generally represents “natural” and not “spiritual” efforts.

Verse 14 indicates that they recruited the priests into their assassination plot. So, there was no plausible deniability among the chief priests and council [Schnabel, p. 1644.]. “The fact that according to later rabbinic teaching, the Sanhedrin was not supposed to aid plotters is no proof that unscrupulous members avoided doing so in the first century.” [Marshall, p. 367.] We can see clearly that this plot is not of the Lord, even if we didn’t have the ecstatic or visionary appearance of Jesus to affirm Paul’s safety going forward.

**23:16-22 Scene 4—Paul’s Nephew Saves the Day**

This is the first time we have seen a mention of Paul’s married sister. One wonders why, if she lived in Jerusalem, Paul didn’t stay with her when he was in the city. “Could it be that the apostle’s conversion to the Christian faith had brought about a rift in the family relationships? If so, this may explain why Paul’s nephew learned about the conspiracy.” [Smith, p. 131.] Personally, I don’t worry about what is *not* mentioned very often. Even if Paul did stay with his married sister’s family part of the time, it is not likely Luke would have mentioned it unless it was relevant.

One commentator suggested that the “sister” and “nephew” might be an “honorary uncle” situation. Their family could have served as Paul’s hosts when he came to study under Gamaliel [Schnabel, pp. 1645-1646.]. Even the commentator realizes this is pure speculation, of course. Indeed, we don’t even know for certain that the married sister lived in Jerusalem (the text doesn’t say so—Bruce, p. 457.].

And we certainly don’t know how the nephew found out, but as I observed before, the more people involved in a conspiracy, the harder to keep the secret. Interestingly, though, Paul knows what to do as soon as he hears. He has the centurion take the nephew to the commander (Claudius Lysias is a military tribune—some sources suggest he is a “chiliarch,” an old Macedonian term for “commander of a thousand” that was appropriated by the Romans in this area for their military tribunes).

Some are skeptical that Paul had this much freedom, but ancient sources (and references in the epistles of the New Testament) are very clear about the freedom visitors had to come and go [Bruce, p. 458.]. Some even think that Paul was unnecessarily arrogant or brusque in having the centurion take the nephew immediately to the chiliarch, but it seems most reasonable to assume that Luke is telegraphing the urgency of the situation [Marshall, p. 368.].   
Indeed, I really like the following suggestion: “Paul wants to maintain as direct as possible a channel of communication with the highest representative of the Roman authorities. Also, since there was corruption among the tribune’s officers, the information that Paul’s nephew had was ‘a virtual gold mine for anyone who leaked it to the right parties,’ which means that Paul’s caution of neither identifying his nephew nor relating the information that he had uncovered to the centurion reflects the fact that the Roman garrison in the Antonia ‘was still a hostile and potentially life-threatening place’ for Paul.” [Schnabel, p. 1646.]

The chiliarch tells Paul’s nephew to keep the news private. It seems obvious that this is a means of being careful so that the “escape plan” isn’t given away.

**23:23-31 Scene 5 – Claudius Lysius sends Paul away by Night**

I found myself particularly impressed with the escort that Claudius Lysias arranged. We think of the 200 soldiers, but there were also at least 70 horsemen and an additional 200 spearmen. That they were traveling fast might also be indicated by the fact that the even provided horses for Paul and company (v. 24). Part of the reason for the speed is indicated in the so-called “Western” texts (dated later and generally less reliable): “For he was afraid the Jews would seize and kill him, and that he himself should be blamed meanwhile for having taken bribes.” [Quoted in Bruce, p. 456.] The security arrangements are clearly a result of the disturbance and the assassination plot [Arrington, p. 232.].

For reference sake, there is a map on the slides that shows Antipatris (roughly 60 miles from Jerusalem) and Caesarea (roughly 40 miles beyond that). The trip to Antipatris goes through very rugged terrain and it’s doubtful that the full complement (especially the foot soldiers) would have made it in one night—possibly arriving on the next night? It’s possible, though, that since they had given Paul and company horses to ride, the cavalry escorted them to Antipatris and another complement of foot soldiers took them through to Caesarea based on Claudius Lysias’ letter.

If you read the letter, you’ll notice that it rings very true to life. Notice the amount of legal language: “seized,” “accused,” “accuser,” “deserving death,” “to disclose (as in disclosure),” “to order,” “to give a hearing,” and “a charge.” [Conzelmann, p. 195.] Claudius Lysias justifies himself and doesn’t try to prejudice the Roman authorities one way or another.

Here’s an interesting observation in summary: “Luke took a generally dim view of the imperial Romans, although it was not completely negative. Even the Romans can be useful in protecting a disciple. …an affirmation that even Caesar’s legions can be useful as God protects his endangered messengers and enables them to accomplish their purposes.” [Willimon, William H., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* [Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 173.]

**23:32-35 – Scene 6 -- Felix Agrees to Hear the Case**

At the close of Acts 23, the group arrives and delivers the letter from Lysias. And, Felix agrees to hear the case. But everyone should know that Felix has a very unsavory reputation. “Antoninus Felix practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of king with all the instincts of a slave.” [Tacitus cited in Conzelmann, p. 194.] His brother, Pallas, was a favorite of both Caesar Claudius and Caesar Nero. So, Paton Gloag quotes Tacitus as going even further: “’Relying on such powerful protec tion (namely, the influence of his brother Pallas), he supposed he might perpetrate with impunity every kind of villany’ — (Ann. xii. 54).” [Gloag, p. 324.] Suetonius said that he had married three princesses (including Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa I that we meet later in Acts) [Bruce, p. 462; Gloag, p. 324.], probably because he was not born into the aristocracy himself and wanted to compensate.

Now, Paul is imprisoned in Herod’s praetorium, and an interesting question comes to mind. Where are Paul’s supporters from the Jerusalem church in both Jerusalem and Caesarea? Some would observe that they might visit the prison, bring food, bribe guards to stay with him, read Scripture and prayer with him. But we have no mention of this. Of course, silence is not necessarily evidence and Luke doesn’t even mention his own presence, though we might surmise from 21:18 and 27:1 that he was still around. [Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 4: 24:1-28:31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), pp. 3350-3351.]

Again, I caution everyone not to argue too much from silence. Luke normally elaborated on who was in attendance when he wanted to make a point. He didn’t usually offer details unless they were important. I presume some of the supporters were in and out (just like Paul’s nephew in Jerusalem). If Luke wanted to say that people had deserted Paul, he would have spelled it out.

24:1-9 – Scene 7 – The Prosecution States Its Case

As we read about the trial/hearing, it all reads fairly orderly. However, we should probably consider what we know about ancient hearings from contemporary writings. “Hearings were usually open to the public; thus Seneca the Elder warned that declamation students were unprepared for the real world of the courts (Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 9, pref. 5) where interruptions were common (9, pref. 3) and speakers had to be loud so that he judges could hear them over competing noise (9, pref 5).” [Keener, p. 3353]

Generally, a case would be presented in four rhetorical sections, even as Tertullus does so here: 1) *exordium* (introduction often full of flattery), 2) *narratio* (facts of the case lined out, in this case the charges), 3) *probatio* (supposed proof), and 4) *peroratio* (conclusion calling for decision in one’s favor) [Schnabel, p. 1672.] One could also add Assertions in verses 8-9 to assure the judicial authority that one is telling the truth and asserting that one’s opponent is not [Keener, p. 3385.].

Tertullus’ exordium talks about Felix as being known as a keeper of the peace and suggests that he will be brief and not bother the procurator any longer than necessary. This implies that this should be a simple case to judge and can be dispensed with easily.

Next, Tertullus doesn’t waste any time in trying to set Paul up as the villain. First, he refers to “this man” instead of designating Paul by name. This dehumanizing approach. Then, he uses the adjective “pestilent.” This word is usually used for plagues and infestations but was also used for scoundrels who served as contagious moral plagues. Plato used it the dialogues as a “civic affliction” (creator of unrest). Ironically, Caesar Claudius himself used it to describe the Jews in 41. How ironic that the attorney for the Jews is using it against the Jews’ perceived foe in Paul [Keener, p. 3374.].

The question as we read the case is whether this is the first minor charge to start the slate of accusations or whether it should be combined with the role of agitator to be the first of three major accusations [Arrington, pp. 236-237; Bruce, p. 464; Foakes-Jackson, p. 214; and Smith, p. 134.] My preference is to follow Keener with the idea that these are escalating charges [Keener, pp. 3373-3374.].

On the slides, I treated this as the first charge, hence part of the *narratio* (facts of the case), even though this would not be accepted as a charge in a modern court of law. This section continues with the charge that Paul is an agitator. This is really a new charge and shouldn’t surprise us. “It was customary in ancient rhetoric to add to the original charges additional offenses to undermine the defendant’s character and assist the prosecution.” [Keener, p. 3553.]

Smith puts it poetically when he says that they are blaming Paul as the cause of all of the disturbances among Jews around the world [Smith, p. 134.]. Tertullus could have brought forward plenty of evidence for this, as Keener’s chart below indicates, but as we know from Paul’s defense, the Asian Jews didn’t seem to show up.

A close-up of a document

Description automatically generated

[Chart from Keener, p. 3377.]

The section continues with the claim that Paul was the “Ringleader of the Nazarenes.” What did that mean? We only hear of this faction here in the New Testament, though it is used in a derogatory way of Jesus in the gospels [Foakes-Jackson, p. 214.]. It may have been a name tagged onto Jewish Christians to taint their reputations with that of their messianic leader [Marshall, p. 375.]. The point, however, is that ringleaders are supposed to be responsible for whatever their followers do, and Tertullus may be implying that some calling themselves Nazarenes have made significant trouble [Bruce, p. 465; Keener, p. 3380; Schnabel, p. 1683.] The old reputation of Nazareth as a stronghold for bandits may be in play here, as well, in my opinion. But, but Tertullus may be trying to warn Felix that Paul is a very convincing speaker and hence, he should not pay attention to him [Keener, p. 3380.].

Tertullus may also be using a “birds of a feather” argument here. After all, Jesus was known as the Nazarene and He was executed by the Roman authorities as a threat to the peace. Why wouldn’t Paul and his alleged sect (in the sense of an organized party) be the same kind of threat? [Schnabel, p. 1683.]

The final charge in this section is that Paul is a defiler of the temple. More precisely, the charge is that he attempted to defile the temple. Remember the accusation about Trophimus in Acts 21? The trouble with trying to make the original charge (when the riot started) stick was that no one actually saw Paul defile the temple by bringing Trophimus in. They had no witnesses that such had occurred, though false ones could be dredged up if they had really wanted to do so. So, adjust that to “conspiracy to defile the temple” and it’s easier to make it stick [Bruce, p. 466.]. Another reason for making a “softer” charge here is that if he actually had desecrated the temple, “A desecrated temple can no longer be used for sacrifices and worship until the temple has again been sanctified.” [Schnabel, p. 1684.]

The nature of the kangaroo (bogus) accusation about the “conspiracy to desecrate the temple” can be observed in that Tertullus presents Paul’s seizure as though it was an official arrest by the temple police. Yet, it wasn’t the “temple police” (who were uniformed and identifiable) who had seized Paul, but it was the mob [Keener, p. 3382.]

**24:10-21 -- Scene 8 Paul’s Defense**

The *Proemium* would be Paul’s introductory remarks for his defense. It can’t really be called an exordium as with Tertullus because it is so brief. In fact, when we look at verse 24:10b, we see that he actually outdoes Tertullus in terms of brevity. Paul talks about Felix’s track record as a judge and then, claims that he is happy to be judged by him.

From there, he jumps into the *Narratio* – the facts of the case from Paul’s perspective in 24:11. Notice that Paul doesn’t answer the minor charge of being pestilent or that of causing trouble all over the world. This would have been outside Felix’s jurisdiction, so he doesn’t waste the court’s time with it [Schnabel, p. 1688.]. Instead, he speaks of a 12 day duration. Looking at the chart on the slide, Paul’s point is that he was engaged in the sacred precinct for several days with no sign of a disturbance before there was any sign of trouble. [See chart on the slides.]

He builds on this when he gets to the proof, or in this case, the lack of proof on the prosecution side in his *Probatio* –24:12-13 – There was no dispute and no unrest until he took a theological position counter to those in authority and the crowds were stirred up by the Jews from Asia Minor.

Then, as we get to where Paul speaks to counter the prosecution’s arguments, the *Refutatio* in 24:14-18, Paul explains the significance of those days. “Paul could also be offering a particular sort of argument from probability, namely, one based on his ethos: how plausible is it that someone would go up to the temple only for the festival (24:11) and to bring alms (24:17) yet would merit the sort of denunciations the chief priests gave him? He was instead framed because of his theological convictions, which his accusers rejected (24:5c, 14-15).” [Keener, p. 3394.]

He closes out his defense with his *Peroratio* – 24:19-21 by protesting that there aren’t any witnesses (v. 20). Therefore, the prosecution clearly lacks evidence. It was typical to bounce the charges back and counterattack the prosecution in ancient trials. In this case, Paul points to the lack of witnesses. This meant that they had technically and illegally abandoned the case and should have led, under Roman law, to a dismissal [Keener, p. 3413.]. He also changes the focus of the case in this section by reminding them that he is really being put through this legal proceeding because of a theological conviction. Thus, he is suggesting that it shouldn’t be a civil matter.

24:22-27 – Scene 9 Felix’s Inconclusive Verdict

The last scene demonstrates Felix slow-walking his verdict and calling upon Paul multiple times to explain himself, despite promising a verdict after he heard from Claudius Lysias. He may have been stalling because he felt that he should dismiss the charges against Paul, but going against the religious establishment wasn’t a politically astute thing to do [Bruce, p. 472.]. Indeed, going against the Jewish leaders was exactly what caused his predecessor, Ventidius Cumanus to be deposed [Schnabel, p. 1700.].

Luke tells us that in one of these conversations where his wife, the Jewish daughter of Herod Agrippa I, participated, Paul emphasized: 1) justice, 2) self-control, and 3) the eventual (and certain) judgment of God (v. 25). Remember that the word for “justice” is also the word for “righteousness.” So, Paul would have been emphasizing ethical justice, as well as political justice. This would have made Felix rather uncomfortable in that his idea of justice seemed strictly tied to power and his reputation for unjust deeds [Smith, p. 136.].

When Paul spoke of self-control, this probably lit something of a fire under the three-times married Felix who had a reputation for sexual excess and had seduced the previously married Drusilla with the help of a magician named Atomos [Bruce, p. 472, n. 24.]. Then, when Paul spoke of the coming judgment, it would have been uncomfortable in more than one way. Felix may have heard it as a threat from an imperial review of his verdict [Schnabel, p. 1704.] or as a prophetic indication that Jesus’ return and judgment would be something for him to worry about as Jesus brought His fiery wrath [Keener, p. 3435.].

So, Felix deflected Paul with that age-old “I’ll think about it some other time” excuse and just kept calling Paul, expecting a bribe to make him feel better about dismissing the case.