

## The Book of Acts - Chapter Twenty One

### VIII Acts 18:23-21:16 - The Witness in Ephesus (continues and concludes)

#### Summary to Chapter Twenty One

Paul's group and their friends from Ephesus found parting very difficult, particularly as the Ephesians believed they would never see Paul again. Then Paul's group made their way by ship through the islands from Miletus to Patara, the chief port of Lycia, where they boarded a larger ship that could take them directly to Syria.

They arrived in the main port of Tyre, where they stayed with the church for a week. The church had the gift of prophecy, and they warned Paul of what awaited him in Jerusalem pleading with him not to go. But Paul already knew what was in store for him, through the Spirit, but it was his duty and his destiny in Christ, so they left Tyre and called in at the next port of Ptolemais. There they met with the church for the day, before continuing on to their final port of Cæsarea, where they stayed with the evangelist Philip and his family.

During Paul's time there, the prophet Agabus came down from Judæa and, with the aid of Paul's own belt, he prophesied what was in store for Paul at Jerusalem. Again, he was advised strongly not to go but rather forcefully told them he must go. They then travelled to Jerusalem and stayed with a disciple called Mnason.

Paul received a warm welcome in Jerusalem and the following day he met with James and the church elders to report all that had happened in the last six years or so since he was last with them. He emphasised what God was doing to extend his Kingdom through the Gentiles. They all praised God for this and in return informed Paul of how many Jews had now come to faith in and around Jerusalem. However, these believing Jews had heard reports about Paul that concerned them. In order to show that he was not speaking out against their heritage and traditions, they suggested Paul should publically undergo purification rites, part of the ceremonial law, and pay the cost for four other young men as well, which would prove his sincerity toward Judaism. Paul agreed.

On the seventh and final day of his purification, Paul went to the inner temple courts to offer sacrifices as part of these rites. Jews from Ephesus recognised Paul and had seen him earlier in the city with Trophimus, who was not a Jew. They immediately pounced on Paul, requesting local Jews to help them, claiming that Paul had stirred up people against the Jews and had brought a Greek into the inner temple. The mob grabbed Paul, dragged him outside of the temple, had the inner court gates locked, and began to beat Paul, intending to kill him. The Roman commander immediately intervened to stop the riot and arrested Paul, more because he was seen as the cause of the commotion than for his personal safety. They chained Paul to two guards and headed for the fortress. As Paul was about to

be taken inside, he requested that the Roman commander should give him leave to address the crowd that were still baying for his blood. The commander acceded to his request.

### VIII.g Acts 21:1-16 - On to Jerusalem

Paul travelled to Jerusalem by sea and then by land. Along the way he had sorrowful farewells and ominous warnings from each Christian community about the dangers facing him in Jerusalem. The warnings were reminiscent of the forebodings that accompanied Jesus on his own journey to Jerusalem: <<In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day – for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” >> (Luke 13:33-35), and: <<Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again” >> (Luke 18:31-33).

<sup>1</sup> After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara.

#### Acts 21:1

Torn ourselves away. The wording of v.1 indicates that parting from the Ephesian elders was emotionally difficult, with many tears and prayers of thanksgiving.

Paul’s ship was probably a coaster, one that travelled close to shore in short stages. Each of the places mentioned probably represented a day’s journey and the stopping place for the night. Cos and Rhodes are both islands, with port cities of the same name.

Paul and his companions boarded a sturdier vessel at Patara for the 400 mile or 644km open-sea voyage to Tyre. Patara was the main port city in Lycia; its immense harbour is now filled up with silt.

<sup>2</sup> We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail. <sup>3</sup> After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo.

#### Acts 21:2-3

Tyre was in Phoenicia, which was in the area of present-day Lebanon, with its primary cities being Tyre, Sidon, and Ptolemais. Tyre was the main city of Phoenicia, which had a great history as a sea-trading nation. Originally, it was set on an off-shore island and was heavily fortified and very wealthy. Destruction had been prophesied against Tyre in Ezekiel Chapter 26, partly fulfilled by Nebuchadnezzar as per the prophecy, and finally by Alexander the Great, who built a causeway connecting the city to the mainland, set up siege ramparts and finally conquered the city. In Paul’s day, it was once again a major trading port and their ship had to unload its cargo there, thus they had a full week with the local church.

Although Jesus had visited Tyre and Sidon, he never gave them the same benefits as he did Korazin or Bethsaida, i.e. he taught frequently in the latter places, but the word had been brought to them and a church established. Jesus confirmed this with: <<“Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you>> (Luke 10:13-14), and in Isaiah’s prophecy of Tyre, we read: <<Yet her profit and her

earnings will be set apart for the Lord; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profits will go to those who live before the Lord, for abundant food and fine clothes>> (Isaiah 23:18). As at Troas, where he also spent a week, he no doubt took the opportunity to speak publically on the Lord's Day at least.

<sup>4</sup> Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

#### Acts 21:4

Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. This probably indicates the prophecies given by the Christians at Tyre. But what these disciples told Paul, although not wrong, as prophecies are to be shared, but were misguided, because the narrative clearly shows that Paul was being guided by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem: <<After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also">> (Acts 19:21), <<And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace>> (Acts 20:22-24), and: <<When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done">> (v.14).

Interpreters differ over how much of what these disciples told Paul was actually part of their prophesying or speaking through the Spirit, and how much their own desire not to lose him.

#### Issues with NT prophecies:

1. Some hold that this incident shows that there are two potential kinds of problems with early Christian prophecies: first that there could be mistakes in the prophecies themselves, and second that there could be mistakes in the prophet's own interpretation. This then would be an example of why Paul commands that prophecies must be tested, that is, to guard against both:
  - a. Possible mistakes in the prophecy itself, and,
  - b. Possible mistakes in the interpretation of the prophecy, i.e. those who claimed to speak under the Spirit's prompting could be mistaken, so it was important for the assembly to discern whether the prophecies were really from the Lord.
2. Other interpreters hold that, although such prophecies themselves are completely accurate, because they come through the Spirit, there still could be mistakes in the interpretation of the prophecy. Thus, even though the prophecy is accurate, such prophecies still need to be tested.

In the first case, both the prophecy and the interpretation may be wrong; in the second case only the interpretation may be wrong. In either case, all prophecies would need to be tested, as Paul commands: <<do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good>> (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). Believers are to be open to the disclosure of God's will through fellow Christians exercising the gift of prophecy. Rather than rejecting prophecies outright on the basis of inferior prophetic words, the Thessalonians, and by inference all churches today, need to weigh prophecies to distinguish the true from the false. Tests presumably include the prophecy's conformity with authoritative revelation, its value for edification, and its evaluation by those with spiritual discernment.

<sup>5</sup> But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. <sup>6</sup> After saying good-bye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.

#### Acts 21:5-6

There is no record that Paul had ever worked with the people of Tyre, although they may have been among the churches he spoke to during his journey from Antioch to the Council of Jerusalem some years earlier, see Acts 15:3. However, it is clear they had great respect and affection for him, and honoured him at his departure by having complete families say farewell and pray with him on the beach prior to his departure, where they no doubt gave him the customary gift for sea-farers: <<The Daughter of Tyre will come with a gift, men of wealth will seek your favour>> (Psalm 45:12), and: <<They honoured us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed>> (Acts 28:10).

<sup>7</sup> We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day.

#### Acts 21:7

Ptolemais is the Roman name of the modern city of Acco, which was given to Asher as part of its inheritance (Judges 1:31), where he met with the church for a single day, before continuing on to Jerusalem.

If Jacob's prophecy is anything to go by they would have enjoyed this brief stay: <<Asher's food will be rich; he will provide delicacies fit for a king>> (Genesis 49:20).

<sup>8</sup> Leaving the next day, we reached Cæsarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. <sup>9</sup> He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

#### Acts 21:8-9

Cæsarea was the closest port to Jerusalem.

Philip the evangelist was one of whom the Lord had said: <<Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much>> (Luke 16:10), as he started his ministry caring for Hellenist widows, see Acts 6:5, brought many in Samaria to faith, and was last encountered by us evangelising the region around the Mediterranean Sea coast. Having baptised the Ethiopian in Acts Chapter 8, he was now continuing his work in that region with his gifted family. He would have offered the group a warm welcome at his home, and not just because of the thoughts of Peter: <<Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling>> (1 Peter 4:9).

Four unmarried daughters. The gift of prophecy was promised to women as well as men in Joel's prophecy: <<And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days>> (Joel 2:28-29), which was fulfilled at Pentecost, see Acts 2:17-18.

<sup>10</sup> After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judæa.

<sup>11</sup> Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

## Acts 21:10-11

Agabus had earlier prophesied a coming famine while visiting the church in Syrian Antioch: <<One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)>> (Acts 11:28). OT prophets often acted out their prophecies to aid peoples understanding, and to ensure they had their full attention, e.g. Isaiah 8:1-4 and 20:1-4; and Jeremiah 13:1-11, 19:1-13 and 27:1-22.

Paul's fate in Jerusalem would, in part, be similar to that of Jesus, <<"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" >> (Matthew 20:18-19), with the final outcome very similar as well, although Paul would know many years of imprisonment, followed probably by a short period of freedom, before finally suffering martyrdom.

<sup>12</sup> When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

## Acts 21:12-13

The people there pleaded with Paul. It is clear that:

1. The Holy Spirit had been at work in these church communities preparing them for what would happen to Paul.
2. The high regard and affection they had for Paul, as a teacher and as a brother, that they sought to dissuade him from travelling further.
3. Paul's resolution to continue, although he knew of the danger, as he was under divine guidance and instruction.
4. The ways of God to manufacture ways to fulfil Paul's destiny, so that he would speak before Kings and Jews, including Agrippa II (Acts 23:25-27), and Nero himself after the conclusion of Acts.

Paul's imprisonment had a greater impact on scriptural integrity and Gospel proclamation than his freedom may have done.

Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? is Paul's way of chastising them for trying to prevent him from fulfilling his ministry, much the same as Jesus did to Peter: <<Get behind me, Satan!>> (Mark 8:33b).

There is a tension between us advising people against taking up their cross, thus weakening their resolve to serve in the way they have been called; and protecting those who become over-bold or over-stretched, and thus may put themselves in harm's way: physically, spiritually, or even mentally, by over-extending themselves or taking on tasks they are not equipped or gifted to do.

Paul, as a disciple of Jesus, was willing to follow his Lord's path: <<To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps>> (1 Peter 2:21), and to die in Jerusalem as Jesus had: <<As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem>> (Luke 9:51), and: <<Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again" >> (Luke 18:31-33).

<sup>14</sup> When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

#### Acts 21:14

The Lord's will be done for it is his perfect wisdom, amen.

<sup>15</sup> After this, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.

#### Acts 21:15

Paul and his team set off for Jerusalem despite the danger they knew they encountered. They would stick closely to him just as Elisha had stayed with Elijah, when he knew his time had come (2 Kings 2:1-12). It seems the comment made to the apostles by Thomas, when Jesus decided to return to danger in Judæa, would fit here also: <<Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" >> (John 11:16). Their allegiance to Paul is like that of Ittai the Gittite to David in 2 Samuel 15:21 <<But Ittai replied to the king, "As surely as the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be" >>. Thus Paul's boldness and bravery had a positive impact on them. That is true leadership.

We got ready means they collected all their baggage, which they would have to carry wherever they went, as well as the offerings collected from Macedonia, Achaia, Asia and possibly other regions as well; a considerable weight in silver alone, no doubt.

The distance from Cæsarea to Jerusalem was approximately 62 miles, or 100km, by road. Paul probably arrived there in the spring of AD57.

They went up to Jerusalem as it is built at a higher elevation.

<sup>16</sup> Some of the disciples from Cæsarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.

#### Acts 21:16

Mnason was one of the early disciples, which means he could have either been one of the 72 sent out by Jesus in Luke Chapter 10, or one of the first converts of Paul in Cyprus (Acts Chapter 13). The former is most probable. He took a courageous and generous decision to allow them to stay at his home in Jerusalem, no doubt at his own expense, knowing the type of reception Paul was likely to receive in Jerusalem from the Jews, which may have impacted on those who were associating with him, including the disciples from Cæsarea. However, as a long-serving disciple, Mnason would not be easily intimidated by anyone. Mnason is not mentioned again in the bible.

This marks the end of the record missionary journeys of the apostle Paul.

### **IX Acts 21:17-23:35 - The Arrest in Jerusalem**

While participating in a Nazirite vow at the temple, Paul was attacked by a Jewish mob and rescued by the Romans. After he defended himself before the Jewish crowd and the Sanhedrin, a plot on his life prompted the Roman tribune to send him to Governor Felix in Cæsarea.

## IX.a Acts 21:17-26 - Paul's arrival at Jerusalem

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the Christians rejoiced over the success of his Gentile mission but expressed concern over rumours that he was teaching Jews to abandon their ancestral laws and customs. To disprove the rumours, they asked Paul to participate publicly in a Nazirite vow, as specified in OT law, and recorded in Numbers 6:1-21. See comments made on v.23.

<sup>17</sup> When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. <sup>18</sup> The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present.

### Acts 21:17-18

Rest of us. That Luke, and probably the other Gentiles in the group, went to see James, shows that James was willing to associate publically with non-Jews. At least he had managed to overcome some of his Judaic prejudice and embrace this aspect of the Gospel but not all of it, as the following passages will show.

Went to see James. Jesus brother was now the senior figure in the Jerusalem church, as all the original apostles had been dispersed on mission as they had been instructed to do by the Lord: <<Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" >> (Matthew 28:18-20), and: <<But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judæa and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth>> (Acts 1:8).

It seems that James himself was counted as an apostle, see Acts 15:13-21, 1 Corinthians 15:7-9, and Galatians 1:19 and 2:9.

All the elders were present. Apparently, the leadership of the church at Jerusalem now rested primarily with these elders.

<sup>19</sup> Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

### Acts 21:19

Paul reported in detail all the work and especially what was happening with the Gentiles, i.e. how the kingdom of God was being extended. But he does it with all modesty, for he is just God's tool: <<yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me>> (1 Corinthians 15:10b), and: <<So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow>> (1 Corinthians 3:7).

<sup>20</sup> When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. <sup>21</sup> They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.

### Acts 21:20-21

When they heard this they praised God indicates there was no jealousy among them that God was treating the Gentiles and Jews with equality.

Thousands of Jews have believed. Although this was excellent news it seems this group had not fully understood the Gospel message and the freedom that Christ truly offered them.

Freedom from the yoke of the law was one part of that but they chose to remain under it. It appears that it was this group as much as the unbelieving Jews that were in opposition to Paul.

You teach all the Jews, to turn away from Moses. Paul had always maintained that salvation was apart from the law and that no aspects of the law should be imposed on Gentile believers, but he also knew that the law of God was perfect, and those brought up under the law were still free to live by it, although they needed to recognise they would not be justified for doing so. That would only come through repentance of sin, belief in and acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and the grace and mercy of God. It would appear that many of these Jews had themselves come to faith, some say the language used would indicate the Judæan church to be in the tens of thousands, from 120 just 20 years earlier: <<Who despises the day of small things?>> (Zechariah 4:10a), yet they were conformists still of the law. The danger could be that they were still living their lives under the yoke of the law rather than in the freedom of Christ: <<So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed>> (John 8:36).

Not to circumcise their children. Circumcision is singled out because it was considered the badge of God's covenant with the Jews. The rumour was false; Paul did not object to Jewish believers voluntarily following OT ceremonial laws: <<Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek>> (Acts 16:3), and: <<Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts>> (1 Corinthians 7:18-19).

<sup>22</sup> What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, <sup>23</sup> so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow.

#### Acts 21:22-23

Made a vow. Those under a Nazirite vow would abstain from wine, strong drink, grape juice, grapes or raisins; would avoid any contact that would defile them, such as contact with a dead body; and would not cut their hair, see Numbers 6:1-21. When the time of the vow was over, often 30 days, they would cut their hair and present an offering in the temple (Mishnah, Nazir 6.3). The disciples would have undergone such a vow in seeking divine blessing for an undertaking or to express thanksgiving. If Paul went with them and personally paid for the cost of their offering, it would show that he did not object to Jewish converts following OT customs voluntarily, so long as those same customs were not required of Gentile believers.

<sup>24</sup> Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.

<sup>25</sup> As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

#### Acts 21:24-25

As for the Gentile believers. The Jerusalem elders reminded Paul of the requirements for Gentile Christians agreed upon in the Jerusalem Council: <<It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell>> (Acts 15:28-29). This was to assure Paul that they wanted to avoid giving unnecessary offense to either believers or unbelievers among the Jews. They were not asking Paul's Gentile converts to embrace the Jewish laws beyond those minimal requirements, nor were they requiring Jewish

believers to observe OT ceremonial laws. The Galatians became confused about this when false brothers went to them, and thus Paul raised it when he wrote to them: <<When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group>> (Galatians 2:11-12), and: <<But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you>> (Galatians 4:9-11).

<sup>26</sup> The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

### Acts 21:26

Purified himself. See comment on v.27. Paul voluntarily went along with the suggestion from James and the elders. There is no basis in the text for the suggestion of some that the Jerusalem leaders were reluctant to accept the gift Paul brought, or that participating in this vow was a condition of accepting the gift from the Gentile churches, or anything suggesting reluctance or hostility toward Paul. The text says that the Jerusalem church received Paul and his companions <<warmly>> (v.17), and <<praised God>> as a result of all that they heard from Paul (v.20). Paul's willingness to join with the four men under a Nazirite vow is an example of his, some say misguided, willingness to become: <<all things to all men>> (1 Corinthians 9:22b), which is more fully explained in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, for the sake of advancing the Gospel.

Many commentators are critical of James and the elders for advising Paul to give such adherence to the ceremonial law and of Paul for giving way to them, instead of making a stance for the freedom that Christ had brought them. Thus they were not truly teaching those devout Jews, who had come to faith, the fullness of the Gospel. Paul in some way had acknowledged this earlier, when he wrote to the church in Rome: <<So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God>> (Romans 7:4). But to the Corinthians, a few years earlier, he had written: <<To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law>> (1 Corinthians 9:20). What Paul was doing in his time was to preach the true Gospel and proclaim the freedom Christ now gave the Jews from everything in the past, because Jesus had fulfilled the law. But he was also acknowledging that there was nothing wrong in individuals freely living by the law, providing it was Christ they proclaimed as their sovereign Lord and not the priests or the temple, which many of them seemed to esteem more than the God they should have sought all along. Paul's approach did make it easier for devout Jews to come to faith in Christ. However, integrity and uprightness will be more likely to preserve the faith than sneaking compliances, which has watered-down the impact of the church in modern society.

### IX.b Acts 21:27-36 - Paul arrested

Paul was attacked in the temple by a mob incited by the false charge that he had violated the temple among other things. The Romans rescued him and kept him in custody.

<sup>27</sup> When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him,

## Acts 21:27

Paul was the one undergoing purification for seven days, see v.26. Nazirites were purified at the beginning of their vow, but Jews often underwent formal purification, e.g. <<"Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days. He must purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third and seventh days, he will not be clean>> (Numbers 19:11-12), on other occasions, such as when returning from Gentile territory, as in Paul's case. It marked the conclusion of Paul's vow and the purification would be the offering of sacrifices in the temple by the priest.

The Jews from the province of Asia were probably from Ephesus (v.29) and knew Paul from his three years ministering in their city. Paul had not been in Jerusalem for many years and then only briefly. Therefore, it was Jews from the region of Asia that recognised him and called for their local brothers to help them deal with the man they saw as the threat to their own way of life.

<sup>28</sup> shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place."

## Acts 21:28

Teaches all men everywhere. Paul was accused of profaning the temple because he had taught people to pray everywhere, which of course Diaspora Jews did anyway: <<Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before>> (Daniel 6:10).

Brought Greeks into the temple. They also accused him of polluting the temple by bringing a Gentile into the inner courts, which was expressly forbidden. In fact, there was an inscription in both Latin and Greek that stated: 'It is a capital offence for strangers to enter' (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities). Paul had done no such thing but had been seen with Trophimus in the city and the Asian Jews had made the assumption he would also bring him into the temple courts. Rumour makes a crime out of innocence: <<They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship>> (Psalm 109:5).

Defiled this holy place. The Jews from Asia (v.27) charged Paul with defiling the temple by taking a Gentile, i.e. Trophimus the Ephesian (v.29), beyond the stone barrier that divided the outer courtyard, the Court of the Gentiles, from the inner sanctuary, which was off-limits to Gentiles under penalty of death. But their accusation was a lie. Paul, although knowing of the death penalty, would not have brought a Gentile into the forbidden area because of his ongoing belief in his own Jewish heritage.

<sup>29</sup> (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.)

## Acts 21:29

Trophimus was named as one of those who would accompany Paul to Jerusalem to help bring the offering for the poor from churches in Greece and Asia (Acts 20:4). He was not a Jew and his presence in the inner temple area would have been unlawful and punishable by stoning.

<sup>30</sup> The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut.

## Acts 21:30

Dragged him from the temple. Paul was driven out of the temple in a way described by Job: <<They were banished from their fellow men, shouted at as if they were thieves>> (Job 30:5), and Paul, who had gone into the temple in all sincerity before God, may have thought: <<When I weep and fast, I must endure scorn>> (Psalm 69:10).

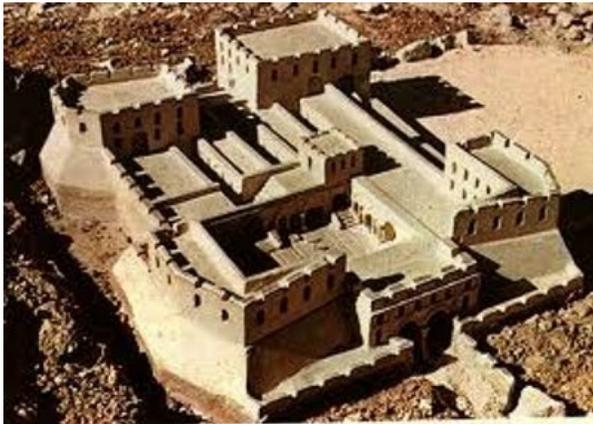
Paul had been the object of mob violence before. It had usually ended in him being brought before the officials of a city, being proclaimed innocent and set free. But here, as was the case in Lystra, this mob was intent on being both judge and executioner. The old battle cry was once again heard in the city: <<O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple>> (Psalm 79:1a).

The temple grounds were the largest open area of Jerusalem, and crowds often gathered there. The shutting of the gates was probably to ward off any further desecration of the sanctuary. It would also prevent Paul from escaping back into the temple to seek refuge by holding onto the horns of the altar, as had been done by others in the past: <<But Adonijah, in fear of Solomon, went and took hold of the horns of the altar>> (1 Kings 1:50), and: <<When the news reached Joab, who had conspired with Adonijah though not with Absalom, he fled to the tent of the LORD and took hold of the horns of the altar>> (2 Kings 2:28).

<sup>31</sup> While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. <sup>32</sup> He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

## Acts 21:31-32

A Roman tribune was the commander of a cohort or regiment, equivalent perhaps to a colonel in the British Army. A cohort would consist of at least 600 but up to 1,000 soldiers, under the command of several centurions. Also see comments made on Acts 10:1.



At once. The Roman response would have come very quickly. Roman soldiers were quartered in the Herodian fortress known as the Tower of Antonia on the northwest corner of the temple wall. See the image and comments on Acts 12:4. Its high tower provided a full view of the temple area, and it had two flights of stairs leading down into the grounds, so that soldiers could run down to the crowd almost immediately. A lookout person on the tower would have observed the mob below.

The incident shows these Jews to have been hypocrites. They feared the Roman guard and stopped beating Paul immediately they arrived. Had they feared God, they would not have persecuted Paul this way but would have brought him before the Sanhedrin for a fair hearing, as their law demanded.

<sup>33</sup> The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done.

## Acts 21:33

The Roman guards came to Paul's rescue, although it was not Paul they cared about but public order, for Paul was bound with two chains, which probably means bound with a soldier on each side, and placed him under arrest, a status he would now retain for the remainder of Luke's account in Acts, a period of several more years.

<sup>34</sup> Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. <sup>35</sup> When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. <sup>36</sup> The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!"

## Acts 21:34-36

Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another. The Jews of Asia had heard Paul claim that Jew and Gentile were both equal in the sight of God and that the Jews no longer had a special place in God's eyes: <<Then the Lord said, "Call him Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God">> (Hosea 1:9), and that God had cast the Jews away, which was not true. He had cast them off, but not away: <<I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin>> (Romans 11:1). Paul had preached the law fulfilled by the Gospel but they had interpreted it as Paul making the law void: <<Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law>> (Romans 3:31).

The commander could not get at the truth. Speaking with Jesus: <<"You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him">> (John 18:37-38).

Away with him! This shout echoes the shout of the crowd that had demanded Jesus' crucifixion about 24 years earlier: <<With one voice they cried out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!">> (Luke 23:18), and: <<But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Cæsar," the chief priests answered>> (John 19:15).

## IX.c Acts 21:37-22:21 - Paul speaks to the crowd

Paul's address to the Jewish crowd sought to establish what he had come into the temple to prove in the first place, his faithfulness to his Jewish heritage. He gave his personal testimony: his former zeal for Judaism (Acts 22:3-5), his encounter with the Risen Lord (Acts 22:6-11), his commission (Acts 22:12-16), and his vision of Christ in the temple (Acts 22:17-21).

<sup>37</sup> As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?" "Do you speak Greek?" he replied. <sup>38</sup> "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?"

## Acts 21:37-38

Paul, despite his pain, in great humility requested leave of the commander to speak, in order to give an account of himself, both to the Romans and to the Jews. He spoke first in Greek, which surprised the Roman commander, as it was the language of the educated, and the commander had thought he was an Egyptian insurrectionist, who would rob both Roman and Jewish wealthy people around the region. The Egyptian leader had promised: 'to show them

the fall of the walls of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, and that they should enter the city upon its ruins'.

In Jewish Antiquities 20.171 and Jewish Wars 2.263, Josephus records this group and states that Felix took an army against them, killed 400, captured 200 and dispersed the rest. Eusebius also speaks of it in History 2.20. This had occurred in the final year of Claudius (54AD), and was about three years or so before this incident, making Paul's arrest around summer of 57AD.

Josephus referred to them as terrorists or Assassins, called dagger men, Greek sikarios, who terrorised Roman sympathisers by stabbing them under the cover of crowds. The tribune must have thought the Egyptian had returned to stir up another revolt.

<sup>39</sup> Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people."

#### Acts 21:39

Tarsus in Cilicia. See the outline and history of the city given in Acts 9:30.

A citizen of no ordinary city could mean either Tarsus or Rome, both of which applied. As a Roman citizen, Paul could have demanded a hearing, but he simply and politely requested it from the Roman commander.

Paul wanted to speak to the people, yet not Paul, for Jesus had stated: <<for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you>> (Matthew 10:20).

<sup>40</sup> Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic:

#### Acts 21:40

He was a man of unimposing stature and his pulpit was not like that of Ezra: <<Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion>> (Nehemiah 8:4a), but the stone stairway of the prison, but Paul had the presence of the Holy Spirit and the crowd fell silent to hear his message, which he proclaimed in Aramaic, so all the Jews would understand, and would endear him as one who respected the Hebraic law and Pharisaic traditions.