



The Book of Acts - Chapter Twenty Five

X Acts 24:1-26:32 - The Witness in Cæsarea (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Five

In AD59, two years after Paul was first arrested in Jerusalem and taken to Governor Felix in Cæsarea, a new governor, Porcius Festus, arrived to take over. Although his seat of government was in Cæsarea, he immediately travelled up to Jerusalem, as it was still the dominant city in the region and he main centre for Jewish religion. If the governor was to encounter any opposition in his region of responsibility, the place that any trouble was most likely to occur would be in Jerusalem. While he was in the city, the Jewish leaders requested he release Paul into their custody for trial, but he refused as this was not proper procedure under Roman law, and stated they should return to Cæsarea with him, where he would try the case himself.

About ten days later, Festus returned to Cæsarea and the Jewish leaders travelled with him. The following day he called Paul before him and heard the charges the Jews laid against him, none of which contravened Roman law, but seemed more a dispute over their religion. In his defence, Paul made reference to the lack of proof they had for any charges and that it was the resurrection, which was at the heart of the issues between him and the Sadducees. Festus could not decide the case and, wanting to do the Jews a favour, he asked Paul if he would be willing to stand trial in Jerusalem. Paul declined and invoked his right, as a Roman citizen, to appeal to be tried before the emperor in Rome. Festus had no other option than to comply.

A few days later, King Agrippa II and his sister Bernice paid a visit to Festus, who outlined the case against Paul to them. As Jews themselves, they were interested in all that Festus had to say about Paul and said they would like to hear him for themselves. The chapter concludes as the courtroom is prepared and with Festus giving his opening address for the hearing to begin.

X.b Acts 25:1-12 - Paul's trial before Festus (his fourth defence)

A change of governor did not bring about a change in circumstance for Paul, for there was no change in the justice he received. In fact, it would bring increased danger, as Festus would attempt to entice Paul to be tried by him before the Jews in Jerusalem, which, although not the same as being handed over to the chief priests, would have meant the mob could have attacked and assassinated him.

The new Roman procurator, or governor Porcius Festus, wanted to win the favour of his constituents. When approached by the Jewish leaders concerning Paul, he at first resisted but

later gave in to their desire to try Paul in Jerusalem. To avoid the fate that awaited him there, Paul invoked his citizen's right of appeal for trial before the emperor.

¹ Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Cæsarea to Jerusalem, ² where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul.

Acts 25:1-2

Festus visited Jerusalem just three days after arriving in the province and was immediately asked by the Jews to have Paul handed over to them. He declined but promised to hear the case immediately he arrived in Cæsarea, which he did some ten days or so later.

The chief priests and Jewish leaders probably refers to members of the Sanhedrin. Previously they had cooperated with the forty or so zealots in their plot against Paul, see Acts 23:12-15; now they themselves plotted against Paul.

³ They urgently requested Festus, as a favour to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way.

⁴ Festus answered, "Paul is being held at Cæsarea, and I myself am going there soon.

Acts 25:3-4

They urgently requested shows that, even after two years, their animosity and fierce passion against Paul had not abated. There was no sign of grace in their hearts.

Festus unwittingly protected Paul by insisting that any hearing should take place in his headquarters at Cæsarea.

⁵ Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges against the man there, if he has done anything wrong."

⁶ After spending eight or ten days with them, he went down to Cæsarea, and the next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him.

⁷ When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove.

Acts 25:5-7

The Jewish leaders had travelled with him, so he called Paul before him the very next day after his arrival.

The Jews had positioned themselves around the court in a manner that was intended to intimidate Paul, but it had no impact on him at all: <<*They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off*>> (Psalm 118:12), but it does show what type of men these had become in trying to get their own way, instead of relying on God's judgement.

The Jews brought many serious charges against Paul, none of which they could prove and all of which Paul could refute. Paul's integrity led him to state that he would willingly accept the punishment of the court (v.11), even death, if he were guilty but he was innocent and deserved his freedom.

⁸ Then Paul made his defence: “I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Cæsar.”

Acts 25:9

Paul’s plea of innocence is quite categorical. He had done nothing wrong against the Jews, their temple or Cæsar, i.e. against Roman law.

⁹ Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favour, said to Paul, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?”

¹⁰ Paul answered: “I am now standing before Cæsar’s court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. ¹¹ If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Cæsar!”

Acts 25:9-11

Felix, in desiring to do the Jews a favour, had kept Paul in prison for two years, see Acts 24:27. In light of the new plot against Paul (vv.2-3), if Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favour, had done the same, it could have been deadly for Paul.

Festus assured Paul that he, and not the Jews, would try him. But Paul was not reassured. He feared Festus would give him up to the Jews. As a Roman citizen he had the right to appeal his case to Cæsar. He exercised that right in order to remove the matter from the governor’s hands, as he could not overrule this request, i.e. no one has the right to hand me over.

Cæsar was the emperor Nero Cæsar, who reigned AD54-68. The first five years of his reign were relatively peaceful; after that his actions became increasingly cruel and irrational, eventually leading to the widespread persecution and massacre of Christians, including the apostles Paul and Peter.

Just as David had fled to the Philistines to escape King Saul (1 Samuel 27:1), so too Paul had to go, even as a son of Abraham, to Rome to seek protection from the Jewish religious leaders, who had sworn before God to protect their own people: <<See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her – but now murderers!>> (Isaiah 1:21).

The authorised version refers to Cæsar as Augustus, whereas Nero was the Cæsar ruling at this time. This is not an error on the part of Luke, as all Cæsars had the official title Cæsar Augustus Germanicus.

¹² After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: “You have appealed to Cæsar. To Cæsar you will go!”

Acts 25:12

In considering difficult or unusual cases, Roman administrators usually had an advisory board or council of high-ranking officials for consultation. They would be well versed in both Roman law and the local traditions of the country they were in, helping the administrator to make rational decisions that would both see justice fulfilled and help keep the local populace content.

X.c Acts 25:13-26:32 - Paul before Agrippa

King Agrippa II was a Jew and was interested in hearing Paul, who took the opportunity to proclaim fully and freely the Gospel of Jesus, proving that it was the fulfilment of the hope of the Jewish nation and had been written about in scripture by all the prophets from the time of Moses onward.

X.c.i Acts 25:13-22 - Festus presents the case to King Agrippa II

A visit to Cæsarea by the Jewish King Agrippa II afforded Festus an opportunity for a hearing to formulate charges against Paul that he could send with him to Cæsar in Rome.

¹³ A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Cæsarea to pay their respects to Festus.

Acts 25:13

King Agrippa was Agrippa II, the great-grandson of Herod the Great, who is referenced in Matthew 2:1 and Luke 1:5. Agrippa II ruled over several minor, primarily Gentile territories. The emperor Claudius had conferred on Agrippa II rule over the temple in Jerusalem and the right to appoint the high priest (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 20.222-223).

- He was made king of Chalcis and tetrarch of Trachonitis and Abilene by Claudius Cæsar. This region would have included Galilee.
- He was the nephew of King Herod Agrippa I, who had killed the apostle James and died when at the hands of an angel, see comments made on Acts 12:1.
- Bernice was the widow of King Agrippa I and the allegedly incestuous sister of Agrippa II. She was her brother's constant companion.
- She would later marry Polemon, king of Cilicia, but divorced him to return to her brother.
- She also had an illicit but well-documented relationship with Titus Vespasian, who became emperor just over a year after Nero, although there would be three other Cæsars ruling in the intervening time.
- Her sister Drusilla was the wife of the previous governor Felix.
- Both Agrippa II and Bernice were practising Jews, although Agrippa's heritage was Edom. See Genesis Chapter 36 for how this land was populated by Jacob's older brother Esau.
- Agrippa was a judge, was fully conversant with Jewish law and knew of The Way, so Paul would be content to stand before him to give his defence.
- Agrippa would provide Festus with sound advice as to what to write to the Emperor about Paul.

Pay their respects. Although King Agrippa was appointed directly by the emperor and did not report to the Roman governor, as he had a similar status himself, still it was Agrippa that came to Festus rather than the other way round, as might be expected of one who had a royal title and position.

¹⁴ Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. He said: "There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. ¹⁵ When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned.

¹⁶ "I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over any man before he has faced his accusers and has had an opportunity to defend himself against their charges.

Acts 25:14-16

Spending many days indicates that the two men seemed to find each other's company pleasurable. No doubt, it would be beneficial for Festus to glean some knowledge from Agrippa about the customs, culture, foibles and expectations of the Jews he would now rule on behalf of the Roman emperor.

Festus discussed Paul's case with the king and said how it was against Roman custom to condemn a man without allowing him to defend the charges brought against him, which of course was the Law of Moses too, as the Pharisee Nicodemus had once said to his colleagues: <<*Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?*>> (John 7:51).

Faced his accusers. Roman laws required that both the accused and accusers be in court for a face-to-face meeting. Paul had stopped his own defence on some aspects of the charges against him in his trial before Felix when he realised his accusers, the Asian Jews, were not present. See comments made on Acts 24:18-19.

¹⁷ When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in. ¹⁸ When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected.

Acts 25:17-18

Festus' statement that the Jews did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected indicates his conclusion that Paul had broken no Roman laws. To Festus, this was merely a religious dispute; a judgment Luke as the author of Acts wants the reader to appreciate.

¹⁹ Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. ²⁰ I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. ²¹ When Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Cæsar."

²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear this man myself."

He replied, "Tomorrow you will hear him."

Acts 25:19-22

Festus found that the crimes the Jews brought against Paul were about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive (v.19b), just as Gallio had in Corinth: <<*Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanour or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law – settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things"*>> (Acts 18:14-15). However, Festus could not let them settle the matter themselves as they were intent on killing Paul, an innocent Roman citizen. He could easily have come to the same conclusion as Gallio and released Paul but by trying to get Paul to travel to Jerusalem, and forcing him to appeal to Cæsar, took the matter out of Festus' hands anyway.

Festus, in his ignorance, was willing to dismiss Paul's claims about Jesus as some fanciful notion but may have taken more notice if he were to have heard Jesus say: <<*I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades*>> (Revelation 1:18).

X.c.ii Acts 25:23-26:32 - Paul witnesses to King Agrippa II

Amid considerable pomp (vv.23-27), Paul testified before the king in fulfilment of Acts 9:15, <<*But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel">>.*

Of the five defence speeches, see Acts 22:3-21, Acts 23:1-11, Acts 24:10-21, Acts 25:1-12 and Acts 26:1-29, this final one before Agrippa gives the most detailed exposition of the Gospel.

²³ The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

Acts 25:23

The Jewish leaders were clearly not invited back to give their side of the account for this was not a trial as such, for Festus court no longer had authority to decide Paul's case. It was just an opportunity for Festus, Agrippa and Bernice to hear Paul. There were also a significant number of others in the room, giving Paul an audience for his Gospel proclamation.

²⁴ Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Cæsarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer.

Acts 25:24

In the Greek this is clearly addressed only to the males in the audience. Clearly, Festus did not see his court as a place for women.

²⁵ I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. ²⁶ But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. ²⁷ For I think it is unreasonable to send on a prisoner without specifying the charges against him."

Acts 25:25-27

Decided to send him to Rome. Since Paul had appealed to Cæsar, Festus had no choice but to send Paul to the emperor in Rome. To do otherwise would have brought serious problems for him. However, he was still at a loss as to what he could write to Nero and was hoping this hearing would provide some clues as to what the charges were that warranted taking up the emperor's valuable time.