

O. Paul's Trial Before Agrippa (25:13-26:32)

While Paul was awaiting his transport to Rome, Luke noted that King Agrippa came to Caesarea with his sister Bernice to greet the new procurator. This individual was more precisely Agrippa II, also known as Herod Agrippa II, and was the seventh and final king in the Herodian Dynasty. The Herodian Dynasty had its roots in the latter half of the second century B.C. during the era of Hasmonean rule in Israel. Under John Hyrcanus, Israel conquered Edom (called Idumea by the Romans) and forced the Edomites to convert to Judaism through compelled circumcision and conformity to the Law of Moses. During the reign of John's son Alexander Jannaeus, an Edomite named Antipas was made governor of Edom and his son Antipater became the founder of the Herodian Dynasty when Julius Caesar appointed him procurator of Judea in 47 B.C. (Rome incorporated Israel into its imperial holdings in 63 B.C.)

- The best known of the Herodian rulers was Herod the Great. The son of Antipater, he was appointed "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate and ruled in Israel for 34 years until his death in 4 B.C. (This was the Herod who ordered the slaughter of the young boys of Bethlehem; Matthew 2:1ff). His most notable accomplishment was arguably his renovation and expansion of the Jerusalem temple (hence, sometimes referred to as Herod's Temple). Regarded as one of the greatest construction projects of the first century B.C., Herod undertook it largely for the sake of his own legacy, but also with an eye toward the favor of his Jewish subjects. (The Jews hated him for his brutality and complicity with Rome and Roman culture, and his Roman appointment and Edomite genealogy added blasphemous insult to the injury of his official status as "King of the Jews.") At his death his vast kingdom was divided among his three sons: Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip I, and Herod Antipas. (The latter two, along with Agrippa I, are subjects of the New Testament text – ref. Matthew 2:1ff, 14:1ff; Acts 4:23-28, 12:1ff.)
- Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great and the father of Agrippa II, the subject of the present context. Having secured the favor of the Roman emperor Caligula, Agrippa I was granted authority over the territories previously ruled by Philip, Antipas and Archelaus. Thus he managed to reunite the vast Israelite kingdom of his grandfather, Herod the Great, before his death in 44 A.D. (Acts 12:1ff). Agrippa II's kingdom was somewhat diminished, but he managed to hold onto the northern region of his father's dominion. With his death in 92 A.D., the Herodian Dynasty had come to its end.

Although a Jew by religion, Agrippa II was fiercely loyal to Rome, evident in his active support of Rome during the Jewish-Roman War of 67-73 A.D. He provided the emperor Vespasian with troops and even accompanied Titus on several campaigns in Israel. Thus his presence at Caesarea presented a unique situation for Paul's witness: Here his gospel witness was being made to yet another of Rome's rulers, but one who embraced Judaism as his own religion and who was well acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish history and culture.

1. When Agrippa arrived with his sister (with whom he was reputed to have engaged in an incestuous relationship), Festus informed him of Paul and the circumstances that led to his appeal to Caesar. Intrigued by Festus' account, Agrippa informed him that he would like to hear Paul for himself (25:14-22).

And so, on the following day amidst great pomp and with all the leading men of Caesarea gathered in his presence, King Agrippa took his seat in the auditorium and Paul was brought in to make his defense. But before Paul was allowed to speak, Festus took the opportunity to make his own defense, recounting to Agrippa and the gathered assembly his past dealings with Paul – an account naturally constructed to set himself in a favorable light (25:23-27; cf. also v. 20 with v. 9). In particular, Festus informed the assembly that he was desirous of their help in framing the case against Paul; he could hardly send him to Caesar without a reasonable and coherent explanation.

2. When Festus finished his address King Agrippa turned to Paul and directed him to speak. Paul recognized the regal figure sitting before him and he acknowledged the king by taking note of his unique qualification to hear his defense and imploring him to kindly and patiently hear him out (26:1-3).

Luke's account of Paul's defense before Agrippa is notable in comparison to the preceding ones involving Felix and Festus. It is the most intricate and extensive of the three and closely parallels his defense before the Jews of Jerusalem (22:1ff). In both instances Paul rehearsed his Jewish heritage and strict life as a Pharisee, his fervor for God in persecuting the followers of this new Way, and his life-changing encounter with Israel's risen and glorified Christ on the Damascus road (cf. 26:4-13; 22:1-11).

- That encounter hadn't merely proven to Paul that Jesus had been raised from the dead and is indeed Israel's long-awaited Messiah; the Lord appeared to him to commission him as His ambassador to take His gospel to the world of men – the Gentile peoples as well as the children of Israel (26:14-18; cf. 22:12-21).
- This zealous Pharisee who'd devoted his life to serving Israel's God was henceforth to serve Him *in truth* by being His instrument to open blind eyes so that Gentile and Jew alike would break free from their dark imprisonment and enter the freedom and glory of Yahweh's everlasting kingdom.

The risen Lord's commission, and Paul's uncompromising faithfulness to it, had brought him to his present circumstance of bonds and inquisition. He stood that day before Agrippa guilty of only one "crime": testifying to all men that the God of Israel has fulfilled all that He revealed and promised in the unfolding salvation history recorded in the Scriptures (26:19-23). Through His prophets Yahweh had promised forgiveness, cleansing, restoration and reconciliation – the everlasting kingdom of the new creation, and now the day of fulfillment has come in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

3. The parallel between this account and 22:1-21 is unmistakable and serves to highlight the important fact that Agrippa, though an Edomite and Rome's appointed ruler, had a share in Israel's privilege and endowment. Unlike Felix and Festus who had no real knowledge of or connection with the Jewish people, their Scriptures, their history or heritage, Agrippa was well acquainted with all of them. Much more, the king was party to those things as an adherent to Judaism. (So it was with his sister Drusilla, which is the reason Luke referred to her as a *Jewess* – 24:24). Paul thus spoke to him as an insider.

Paul was aware of Agrippa's convictions (though Luke doesn't explain how), and so when Festus interrupted him and began to deride him as a lunatic, Paul appealed to the king: "*I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do*" (26:25-27).

Like his Jewish counterparts, Agrippa knew the Scriptures and acknowledged the kingdom they promised. But also like them, the king had his own conception of that kingdom – a conception which found no place for the gospel Paul proclaimed. Agrippa was doubtless caught off guard by Paul's words, but his rebuff reflects more than surprise or embarrassment. His Judaistic perspective obscured Paul's gospel, leaving him no option but to align himself with Festus' cynicism: Did the apostle really believe that with that brief defense he could persuade him – a man of great learning and stature – to embrace this new religion?

A couple of observations about this exchange are important to make:

- a. First of all, Agrippa's response to Paul, when considered alongside his Judaistic presuppositions, indicates that he perceived the Christian "Way" as simply a religious alternative to Judaism. Luke's Greek phrasing in verse 28 is challenging, as reflected in the various English renderings. So also many later manuscripts have a different wording apparently intended to smooth Luke's meaning.

Based on the most likely Greek reading, Agrippa's statement is perhaps best rendered something like: *With so little you seek to convince me in order to make me a Christian!* Luke's wording is important, for it highlights Agrippa's flawed perception of Christianity as just another religion to which a person "converts."

- In fact, Paul was proclaiming a new paradigm of existence – the reality of new creation – grounded in Jesus' resurrection (ref. again 26:22-23). His gospel was the good news of life out of death, not just with respect to the personal resurrection of the man Jesus of Nazareth, but for Adam's race and ultimately the whole creation (ref. v. 18).
 - As he declared to the Sanhedrin two years earlier, Paul saw himself as on trial for the hope bound up in the fact of resurrection from the dead (ref. 26:6-8). And yet, all Agrippa could hear was a man calling for the renunciation of Judaism in favor of a different, quasi-Jewish religion.
- b. Related to this misconception was the fact that Agrippa misjudged the relationship between Judaism and this new Way: Paul was proclaiming *fulfillment* of Judaism and the Jewish scriptures in Jesus the Messiah and the life out of death that has come in Him (cf. vv. 22-23 with 24:14-15); Agrippa heard a man pitching a religious *replacement* for Judaism. Paul recognized this disconnect, and so responded that his gospel and desire for Agrippa were about *becoming* (26:29).

Luke captured the fact that Agrippa perceived Paul to be trying to *make* him a Christian by convincing him to embrace this new Christian religion; Paul's actual desire was that Agrippa – and all those hearing him that day – would *become* what he was. His goal wasn't religious conviction or conversion to a different religion, but entrance into Jesus' resurrection life. Paul longed for all men – Gentile and Jew alike – to find life and completion in the man Christ Jesus (cf. again 26:17-18), and all his energies – expended in the power of the Spirit – were directed toward that singular goal (Colossians 1:24-29; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:1-18).

4. The gospel is God's word of life in Christ, but for many it is an aroma "out of death unto death." To the natural mind it appears at best as the doctrine of yet another religion; not infrequently it appears as irrational nonsense (so Festus – 26:24; cf. John 10:1-20). Separated from the life of God, fallen man's spirituality – like every aspect of his existence – is grounded in and expresses his isolation within a mind which cannot discern things as they really are because it is alienated from the One in whom all truth inheres.

Such men are capable of profound religious innovation and fierce religious conviction and commitment. As exemplified in Paul himself, they can become erudite scholars who devote their minds and lives to the mastery of and conformity to spiritual excellencies. And yet in all that they remain dead: men who are ever learning but never coming to the knowledge of the truth. Whatever their particular religious conviction, it is *death* because it is nothing more than the vain musings of an estranged mind. All religion originates in the mind of fallen man; thus it is *itself* death and it leaves men in the bonds of death.

This is equally true for "religion" constructed upon the biblical Scriptures: In the hands and minds of estranged human beings, that which is "Spirit and life" is reduced to "dead letter" (cf. John 6:50-65 with 1:1-13, 8:31-43, 10:22-39). Scriptural religion – whether Jewish or Christian – may produce the pseudo-life and pseudo-power of knowledge and piety, but in the end it is just another form of *magic*: a natural means to a desirable end.

So it was with Agrippa. He understood and embraced the Jewish religion and believed the promises set forth by Israel's prophets, but he was unable to actually *hear* the prophets – and Paul – because he lacked ears to hear. And so, as he departed the auditorium, the only thing Agrippa gained from Paul's words was the conviction that he was an innocent man (26:30-32). In the most profound irony, the regret he carried away that day was the sad truth that Paul's impetuous appeal to Caesar had slammed the door on his release. As he looked at Paul, Agrippa – and Festus – saw a tragic figure whose folly had locked him in a prison of his own making. The two rulers regarded Paul as the foolhardy victim of his own devices; *what they should have perceived was that they themselves, not Paul, were the rightful objects of that assessment*: Paul, the man being led away in bonds, was the Lord's freedman and his apparent foolishness was actually the working of a mind governed by truth; it was Agrippa and Festus – the wise, mighty and noble men who walked unfettered from the auditorium endowed with the "freedom" of political power – who were the prisoners of their own folly, chained in the dungeon of their own minds, "*darkened in their understanding and excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.*"