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Paul's Witness before the Great Sanhedrin 22:30 to 23:11

57 AD

Paul's Witness before the Great Sanhedrin DIG: Why would the high priest react so violently to Paul's statement? Why and how does Paul show his respect and zeal for the Torah? Why does Paul change the focus of attention from whether he has kept the Torah to his hope of the resurrection? What effect does the split have on Paul's case? The last time we heard God speak to Paul was in 18:9-10, after he had experienced a series of setbacks. How would the Lord's message here in verse 11 help Paul again? How might this help Paul remember what the Lord said about him to Ananias in 9:15-16?

REFLECT: When facing death, what duty do you want to say you have fulfilled before God? How can you pursue that course this week? How has the Lord encouraged you during hard times? What might be your "Rome" – the next crucial step in your spiritual journey? Why do you think so?

A tragic theme running through the thrilling story of the growing Church in **Acts** is the sad reality of **Jewish** opposition. Along with the apostolic preaching of the cross, Luke details the rising tide of **Jewish** antagonism. Having rejected and executed the long-awaited and hoped-for **Messiah**, led by **the Great Sanhedrin** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Lg – The Great Sanhedrin**), **Isra'el** subsequently rejected those who preached the message of forgiveness and salvation in **His** name.

The opposition began when the Messianic Community began on the day of Shavu'ot, after **the emissaries** were immersed by **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** and miraculously spoke in other languages. Some in the crowd mocked and ridiculed them, scornfully deriding **them** as if **they** were **drunk (2:13)**.

That relatively mild opposition stiffened after **Peter's** sermon following **the**

healing of the lame man (3:12-26). The Jewish authorities **were indignant because Peter and John were teaching the people and announcing in Yeshua the resurrection of the dead.** Determined to put an end to this dangerous teaching, **they grabbed them and put them in jail (4:2-3).** The next day, **the Sanhedrin ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Yeshua (4:18).** But refusing to be intimidated, **Peter and John replied, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you decide. For we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (4:19-20).**

The next outbreak of persecution involved **Stephen**. That fearless and powerful defender of the faith crushed **his Jewish** opponents in a debate **(6:9-10)**, so frustrating **them** that **the Sanhedrin** had to arrange for **false witnesses** to lie about **him (6:11)**. **He**, too, was brought before **the Sanhedrin (6:12-15)**, where **he** gave a classic speech defending both **himself** and the gospel **(7:1-50)**. **He** closed that message with a stinging indictment of **the Jewish** leaders for **their** hardened hearts and **their** rejection of the truth **(7:51-53)**. Furious, **they drove him out of the City** and **stoned him** to death **(7:54-60)**.

The murder of **Stephen** was the catalyst for the first widespread **persecution of the Messianic Community**, which was directed primarily against **Stephen's** Hellenistic **brothers and sisters** in the faith **(8:1).** That **persecution**, lead by the zealous **Pharisee Sha'ul of Tarsus (8:3)**, scattered **them** and spread the gospel even further **(8:4)**.

Further persecution, this time directed at **the apostles**, came from **Herod Agrippa I**. Seeking to please **the Jewish** authorities, **he** executed **James** and arrested **Peter (12:1-3). Peter** was miraculously released from **prison (12:7-11),** but was forced into seclusion **(12:17)**.

After **Paul's** encounter with **the** glorified **Messiah** on **the Damascus road, he** became the leading evangelist for **the Way**. Ironically, **Paul**, once the chief persecutor of **the faithful in Messiah**, then became the most persecuted **himself**. **Jewish** opposition first arose against **him** in **Damascus** shortly after **his** conversion **(9:23)**. **He** met further opposition from unbelieving **Jews** throughout **his** missionary journeys. On **the island of Cyprus, he** confronted a **Jewish** false prophet **(13:6-8)**. **The** unbelieving **Jews** at **Pisidian Antioch**, **filled with jealousy**, opposed **Paul's** teaching **(13:45)**. At **Iconium (14:2), Lystra (14:19), Thessalonica (17:5ff), Berea (17:13), Corinth (18:6, 12-13), Ephesus (19:9),**

Corinth again as **he** began **his** trip to **Jerusalem (20:3)**, and after **his** arrival in **Jerusalem (21:27ff)**, **Paul** faced the continual hostility of **his countrymen**.

As **Chapter 23** opens, **Paul** once again faces **Jewish** opposition. **He** had just been attacked on **the Temple** grounds by **a Jewish mob** and savagely beaten (see **Co – Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem**). Only the intervention of **Roman** soldiers saved **his** life. **Claudius Lysias**, the commander of the **Roman** forces in **Jerusalem**, tried unsuccessfully to find out what **he** had done. So, **he** allowed **Paul** to address **the** angry **crowd** from the steps of Fort Antonia. But **Paul's** mention of **his** commission to **the Gentiles (22:21)** caused the riot to break out once again. **Lysias** then decided to use the brutal **Roman** interrogation method of **scourging** with *the flagellum* to extract a confession out of **him**. However, the discovery that **Paul** was a **Roman** citizen halted that as well, since it was illegal to submit a **Roman** citizen to such torture. By now, thoroughly frustrated and confused about how to proceed, **Lysias** decided to take **Paul** to **the Great Sanhedrin,** which functioned as **the Jewish** Supreme Court.[539]

Paul's appearance before **the Great Sanhedrin** marks the fifth (and last) time **the Jewish Supreme Court** was called upon to evaluate the claims of **Yeshua Messiah**. The first time was when **Jesus Himself** stood before **the Jewish** leaders (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Lj – Jesus Before the Sanhedrin in the Upper Story of Caiaphas' House**); the second involved **Peter and John** (see **Ar – Peter and John Stand before the Sanhedrin**); the third followed the arrest of all **the apostles** (see **Au – The Apostles are Persecuted**); and fourth was **the trial** of **Stephen** (see **Aw – Stephen's Testimony to the Sanhedrin**). Five times the peerless communicators of the gospel had proclaimed the truth to **the Sanhedrin**, and five times **the Jewish** leadership had rejected it. Not only did **they** condemn **themselves (John 3:18)**, but **their** rejection lead **the nation** into rejecting **Him** also.

Therefore, just as the Jewish leadership once led the nation into *rejecting* Jesus as the Messiah, they must one day lead the nation to *accepting* Jesus as the Messiah (see the commentary on **Revelation Ev – The Basis for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ**)**.** During the last three days of the Great Tribulation, as the armies of the antichrist circle in for the final destruction of **Isra'el**, **the Jewish** leadership will lead a national revival (see the commentary on **Isaiah Ki – Isra'el's National Confession of Sin**), and **all Isar'el will be saved** (see the commentary on **Isaiah Kg – The Second Coming of Jesus Christ to Bozrah**). That, however, will be in **the far eschatological future**.

The commander: Therefore, on the next day, still **desiring to know exactly why Paul had been accused of by the Judeans, the commander released him and ordered the ruling kohanim and all the Sanhedrin to meet together**. This implies that during the rest of the day, **Paul** was entirely free of **Roman** custody. **And the commander brought Paul** in **himself** to the Royal Stoa **and set him before them (22:30).**



Technically, this was not **a trial**, nor was it a formal meeting of **the Sanhedrin**. There were no formal charges brought against **Paul**, nor did any witnesses testify against **him**. But it felt like **a trial** to **Paul**. **The Commander** was merely gathering evidence to see if there was a case for a **trial**. **Lysias** did not need to be physically present and would not be permitted to attend the confrontation between **Paul** and elders anyway. So, **Luke** implies that at least, **he** remained in the vicinity.

The proceedings open with a statement by **Paul**, although one might have expected in the first place an opportunity for **the Jews** to state **their** case in this scene. This is due to abbreviation by **Luke**. The reader already knows what the charges are. **Luke,** therefore, concentrates on **Paul**.[540]



The confrontation: Paul, looked intently at the Sanhedrin (23:1a) and probably recognized many familiar faces in the room, since **he** may well have once been a member **himself (26:10)**. In any case, **he** understood **his** audience. Those accused were given the opportunity to speak on their own behalf and speaking in Hebrew, **he** started **his** defense with the word: **brothers.** These **people** were still **Sha'ul's brothers**. **His** addressing **them** in this was showed that this was not a formal meeting of **the Sanhedrin**, for it would not have been appropriate when addressing **the Jewish Supreme Court**; rather, it was appropriate for old friends. After all, this gathering was summoned by **the Roman commander (22:30).**[541] **Paul** continued, **"I have lived my life with a clear conscience for God up to this day" (23:1b).**

The conflict: But the kohen gadol Ananias (not to be confused with **Annas** in **4:6**) **ordered those** servants **standing by him to strike him on the mouth (23:2). Ananias** had been appointed in 47 AD and was dismissed by **Rome** in 58 AD. **The Romans** had suspected **him** of being responsible for riots in Judea in 52 AD, but **he** was cleared of the charge. **Luke** may have wanted to remind us of how **Yeshua** was treated at **His trial (John 18:22ff)**. The most likely explanation for the action of **Ananias** is that **he** understood **Paul's** words as a claim that, though now a believer in **Yeshua**, **he** was still a good **Jew**, having served **Ha'Shem** with a **clear conscience** all **his life** (or since **his** conversion), **up to this day**. To **Ananias,** it seemed to be the height of arrogance, even blasphemy.[542]

Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you on the mouth, you whitewashed tomb (see **Matthew 23:27**)**!** The metaphor derives from the practice of painting **tombs** with ashes in order to warn people of possible defilement which **they** conceal. Basically **Paul** called **him** a hypocrite. **It was an**

offense to smite or curse any Jew – although such punishment was permissible in defense of God's honor. In other words, as a punishment for transgressing the commandments of YHVH (Sanhedrin 85a). Paul merely made a statement of **his clear conscience** – not even claiming to have lived a blameless life, if the distinction be pushed – and in return received a slap in the face. This could not be justified either from the TaNaKh or **the Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei – The Oral Law**). **Do you sit judging me according to the Torah, and yet in violation of the Torah you order me to be struck?" Those standing nearby said, "Do you insult God's cohen gadol" (23:3-4)? For it has been written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people' (23:5)." Luke** quotes the TaNaKh almost always in a form either corresponding to the **LXX** or close to it, and not according to the Hebrew Masoretic Text. Here **Exodus 22:27** is quoted close but not exactly corresponding to the **LXX**.[543]

Having accused **Ananias** of hypocritical behavior, **Paul** went one step further, and said: **I didn't know, brothers, that he is the cohen gadol.** This remark dripped with sarcasm. **He** knew perfectly well who **Ananias** was. It was as if **he** was saying, "I didn't know a man such as you could possibly be **the high priest**!" **Despite the fact that contempt of the court was punishable by flogging, Paul** was not given any penalty for **his** remark, which speaks volumes.[544]

The conquest: But recognizing that he wasn't going to get a fair **trial,** as the actions of **the cohen gadol** clearly showed, and **one group was Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Sanhedrin, "Brothers, I am** (present tense) **a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees!** Though **a** Messianic **Jew** for more than twenty years, **Sha'ul** still considered **himself a Pharisee**. Still holding the floor, **Paul** stated what **he** saw as the real reason **the Jews** wanted to kill **him**, saying: **I am on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead" (23:6)!** This is often seen as a cleaver ruse on **Paul's** part to divert attention from **himself**. But **the resurrection** really struck at the heart of the matter, and was the hidden motive behind **their** hatred. **The Pharisees** believed **in the** concept of **the resurrection of the dead**, while **the Sadducees** did not (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ja – Whose Wife Will She Be at the Resurrection?**).

A **resurrection of the dead** constituted a major part of **the Pharisees** hope in **ADONAI's** final deliverance of **His people**. Thus, they were theologically "ripe" for the gospel that the hoped-for **Messiah** had **risen from the dead**. **Paul**, a **Pharisee himself**, had come to realize this. Other **Pharisees**, such as **Nicodemus**

and **Joseph of Arimathea** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Lx – The Burial of Jesus in the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea**) had **believed (15:5)**. In short, for **Luke** and **Paul**, the natural fulfillment of the **Pharisaic** hope was in **the resurrection** of **Christ**. It was therefore not accident, and certainly no ruse, that **Paul** made **his** appeal to **the Pharisees** in **the Great Sanhedrin**.[545]

When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees, who only accepted the five books of Moses, **say there is no resurrection or angel or spirit, but the Pharisees affirm them all. Then there was a great uproar,** but it soon became clear that **the Pharisees** were **Paul's** defenders. **Some of the Torah scholars of the Pharisees' party stood up and protested sharply,** saying, **"We find nothing wrong with this man! What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him" (23:7-9),** possibly defending **Paul's** Damascus road experience.

As a big dispute was developing, the Roman **commander was afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them** and **he** was responsible for **his** safety. **So he ordered the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them and to bring him into headquarters** of Fort Antonia **(23:10).** Significantly, **Lysias** did not intervene directly in the legal proceedings, nor did **he** take action against **the Sanhedrin itself. He** merely removed **Paul** from possible danger. The violence of the last two days, and especially the enmity of **the Jews**, must have made **him** wonder anxiously about the future. There seemed little prospect of **his** leaving **Yerushalayim** alive, let alone of **his** traveling on to **Rome**.

The consolation: The Lord had certainly preparing **Paul** well for the events that had just transpired in **Jerusalem (20:23, 21:10ff)**. Still, they had been particularly trying – **the mob** in the Temple Compound, the arrest, the attempted scourging, and the violence of **the Sanhedrin**. To what was it all leading? **God's** words assured **him** that there was a divine purpose in all that had happened to **him**. **So on the following night the Lord stood beside Paul** (see **Bf – Peter's Vision: A closer look at visions or dreams**)**, and said: Don't worry! For just as you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome (23:11)!** This is the last of four times that **Paul** saw **the Lord** in a vision **(9:5; 18:9-10; 22:17-21,** and here**). Paul** had already expressed **his** own desire to visit **Rome (19:21)**. Now **he** received **ADONAI's** endorsement. The key word is, of course, **testify**. All of **Paul's** troubles the past two days had derived from **his** testifying to **Christ** before **the Jews**. Now **his** trip to **Rome** and all the legal hassle

in between would also be a **testimony**. With this verse, the final blueprint for **Acts** is mapped out.

You might think that things are bad for you right now, but you may not even know the half of it! But **Jesus** knows. Before the cross, **Messiah** said: **In this world you will have trouble.** Despite the chaos of living in a hostile world, we may enjoy tranquility. Yet this too is conditional. We must choose it. The life of a believer in **Christ** is not the proverbial rose garden, except, perhaps, for the thorns. Nonetheless, **Yeshua** encourages us when **He** says: **But take heart!** We can choose shalom when we choose to believe that **He** has **overcome the world (John 16:31-33).** Therefore, **He** continues to say to you today: **Don't worry!** Why? Not because everything is fine; but because **God** is still on **His** throne. **His** promise still holds true: **All things work together for good for those who love God, and who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).**

*Grow in me the patience, **Lord**, to live by these words: **Commit your way to ADONAI. Trust in Him and He will do it. He will bring out your indication as light, and your cause will shine as noonday. Be still before ADONAI and wait patiently for Him. Do not fret over one prospering in his way, over one carrying out wicked schemes. Put away and turn from wrath. Do not fret – it only leads to doing evil. For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for ADONAI – they will inherit the Land (Psalm 37:5-9).** I know this in my mind. **Lord**, help me live it in my heart and life.*[546]