

Whatever the crowd's willingness to hear Paul out, their receptivity evaporated the moment he mentioned Jesus' renunciation of Jerusalem. They were finished listening to him and expressed their outrage by throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air (22:23). Some scholars have interpreted this action as indicating the crowd's conviction that Paul's statement constituted blasphemy, and this conclusion is surely correct. Given what the Jews believed about God, His promises to His people, the messianic kingdom and the centrality of Jerusalem as His chosen dwelling place, the notion that Israel's Messiah would call one of His servants to forsake Jerusalem and its covenant sons was unthinkable. Their theology of the kingdom and their place in it left them no option but to conclude that Paul was a blasphemer, guilty in the most flagrant way of contradicting the Scriptures and their revelation of Yahweh and His commitment to His covenant people.

In the judgment of his hearers, Paul hadn't simply repudiated them or the sons of Israel; he'd repudiated Israel's God. Paul had shown himself to be a false prophet who was leading Yahweh's people away from Him, and their righteous obligation under the Law was to put him to death (Deuteronomy 13). Not because of their sensibilities, but God's own judgment, such a man has no right to live (22:22).

3. Paul's defense before the Jerusalem populace led immediately to his third one before the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) the following day. Luke transitioned to it with a brief account of the intervening events (22:24-30). When the commander standing alongside Paul saw the furious response to his words, he knew he needed to get Paul away fast or he was going to lose control of the situation. He also directed his soldiers to examine Paul by scourging him, which was standard practice for extracting information from a prisoner. The commander obviously believed that there was more to this whole affair than appeared from Paul's words to the crowd; the things he'd said simply didn't warrant the Jews' unhinged reaction. Paul must be withholding something and he intended to find out what it was and defuse this bomb before it exploded (22:24).

When the soldiers began preparing Paul to be flogged he disclosed his Roman citizenship to the presiding centurion (22:25). Why he waited so long is unclear, but it's understandable that he'd divulge his status rather than endure a scourging. Aside from the needless suffering, Paul recognized that it would serve no good purpose. The commander was seeking information he believed Paul was withholding; Paul knew no such information existed and there was nothing he was unwilling to disclose.

The centurion immediately halted the preparation and went to tell the commander. That news was most unwelcome, for Roman law forbade the unjust punishment of its citizens. Every Roman was entitled to a just and complete inquiry before a sentence could be imposed. The commander couldn't scourge Paul, but he was still determined to get to the bottom of the conflict and find a resolution. To ignore the situation was to virtually insure he'd have a city-wide riot on his hands and that wouldn't sit well with his superiors in Rome. Thus the commander determined to hold Paul over to appear before the Council the next day. Maybe in that controlled setting he could sort things out (22:26-30).

- a. The next day Paul was brought before the Council, and he began his defense by declaring his faithfulness to God and good conscience before Him (23:1). Luke gives no indication that the Council had already brought any charges against Paul, but whether or not they'd done so, Paul knew what he stood accused of. Everywhere he went the Jewish community raised the same objections and charges respecting his gospel and it would be no different with the Sanhedrin. These men were surely aware of what had happened the day before and they knew why the Roman commander had ordered this hearing.

Paul's opening assertion thus constituted his denial of the core accusation of blasphemy – which accusation was evident in both the Jews' statements (21:28) and actions (22:23) leading up to this hearing. In that regard it's important to recognize that Paul wasn't denying that he was guilty of blasphemy altogether. He had indeed committed this crime, *but in the opposite way the Jews imagined*.

- By his own admission Paul had blasphemed the living God by persecuting and seeking to destroy Christ's Church (1 Timothy 1:12-13).
- What he was denying was the charge that his commitment to and propagation of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth constituted blasphemy.

Paul's claim introduced and framed his defense, but in doing so it importantly highlighted once again his (and Luke's) contention that his gospel – which concerns the kingdom of God as realized in the person and work of Jesus – proclaimed the *fulfillment* of the Scriptures, not their perversion or abrogation.

- b. The men of the Council grasped the implication of Paul's words: If his life and work as Jesus' ambassador afforded him a good conscience in the sight of Israel's God, then those who opposed this "way" stood condemned by the same God. Either the disciples or the opponents of Jesus were right in their convictions and actions, and only one of the two could claim blamelessness before God. If one faction was honoring Israel's God, the other was blaspheming Him.

Obviously the Jews believed they were in the right and that their opposition to Jesus constituted faithfulness to God. This meant that Paul was indeed guilty of blasphemy – not only for what he was teaching and promoting, but also for daring to align Yahweh with his unholy cause. Thus the Council – as represented by the high priest – responded by calling for Paul to be struck *on the mouth* (23:2). By doing so they expressed both their judgment that Paul's claims were blasphemous and their righteous indignation on God's behalf. Paul had blasphemed with his mouth and his mouth would suffer the due consequences.

- c. Immediately Paul reacted by pronouncing his own word of divine condemnation upon the high priest. These who were so concerned to uphold the righteousness of the Law of Moses were themselves guilty of violating it by calling for Paul to be beaten before he was convicted of any offense (23:3; cf. Deuteronomy 25:1-2).

When the observers decried him for speaking in this way to God's priest, Paul adopted a penitent posture, explaining that he didn't realize that this individual was the high priest. Luke provides no explanation for how Paul failed to know this, and scholars have posited all sorts of answers. Some have suggested that it was an informal meeting in which the high priest was neither robed nor presiding. Others have concluded that Paul's words were sarcastic rather than repentant. He was saying, in effect, "How can a man of your character claim the title of the Lord's high priest?" Others have cited Paul's poor eyesight and wondered whether he had been unable to identify the high priest from across the room.

Paul's failure to recognize the high priest is one difficulty in this passage, but more challenging is his admission of guilt under the Mosaic Code (23:5). Once again some argue that Paul was manifesting a duplicitous posture toward the Law, on one hand insisting that Christians aren't subject to it and then on the other indicating – by his actions at least – that they are (ref. again 16:1-3, 18:18, 21:26).

The answer – as before – lies in Paul's overall perspective on the Law of Moses in light of the Christ event. Paul saw none of the Law as having been abrogated or annulled, but all of it as *Christified* – as fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. This fulfillment means that a person can submit himself to things prescribed by the Law as those things serve the cause of the gospel in regard to one's own edification or the edification of others. Toward the conscious goal of winning men to Christ, Paul would gladly become as one under the Law in order to minister to those under it (1 Corinthians 9:19-22). In this particular instance, Paul likely intended his deference to the Law's directive (ref. Exodus 22:28) to publicly demonstrate the falseness of the charge that he was an opponent of the Law. In this way Paul was simply doing for the Jews of the Council what he'd previously done for the Christian Jewish community: He was showing them that he conducted himself in a manner harmonious with the Law (ref. again 21:17-24).

- d. The balance of Paul's defense – before he was cut off and chaos ensued – consisted of one other statement in which he again asserted his innocence. In Paul's judgment, the whole of what he was facing could be reduced to one issue. True, the Jews in many different places had leveled diverse charges at him, but, at bottom, it all came down to this: Israel – here embodied in their Sanhedrin – had placed him on trial "*for the hope and resurrection of the dead*" (23:6).

This pronouncement has puzzled readers and challenged scholars, in part because it is abrupt and concise and Luke provided only minimal commentary on it. But much more than that, it seems to move the discussion entirely away from the concerns at hand: Paul was standing before the Sanhedrin charged with crimes against the Law and the sanctuary, and therefore against the God of Israel and the covenant nation. *How could he possibly interpret those charges in terms of the doctrine of resurrection and some notion of "hope" which he attached to it?* And even if Paul was somehow able to reduce the accusations against him to this singular issue, how did he think this treatment would serve his defense?

Luke gives a couple of textual clues, first in the transitional phrase in which he noted that Paul perceived that the Council consisted of representatives from both the Pharisees and Sadducees (23:6a). Second, and by way of explaining the uproar that resulted from the apostle's statement, Luke commented that the doctrine of the resurrection (among other things) divided these two Jewish sects (23:7-8).

Luke's commentary has led many to conclude that Paul made his statement specifically to divide the Council and instigate an argument. He was a Pharisee and understood the doctrinal differences between his own sect and the Sadducees, and thus saw an opportunity to set the two groups against one another. Many reasons have been offered as to why Paul would do this; two are worth mentioning here:

- The first is that he wanted to deflect the discussion to an issue that would bring the whole proceeding to a speedy conclusion. Though Paul clearly knew what it meant to broach the topic of resurrection in that setting, he would never use it as a tool of manipulation; it was too precious to him.
- A more reasonable explanation is that he was acting upon his overall strategy of getting to Rome. That is, Paul calculated that provoking the Council would demonstrate to the Roman commander the futility of attempting to resolve the conflict in Jerusalem and so perhaps encourage him to send Paul away to Rome. Not only would that end the unrest in his jurisdiction, it would absolve him of having to adjudicate these Jewish matters he neither understood nor cared about. Though Jesus' appearance to Paul that night can be interpreted in a way that argues for this view (ref. 23:11), in the end it, too, doesn't do justice to the larger context and Luke's overall purpose in recording Paul's defense episodes.

Another possible interpretation of Paul's statement is that he wasn't so much addressing the charges against him as confronting, in a roundabout way, those who sat in judgment of him. He was, in effect, saying to the Council, "You condemn me and my gospel as unscriptural and blasphemous when you can't even agree on what the Scripture teaches." This view has some plausibility, but it has two significant problems: First, it doesn't accord well with Paul's preceding interaction and tone (23:4-5); more importantly, like the previous views it deviates from the larger theme Luke emphasized in Paul's series of defenses, namely the apostle's insistence that his gospel proclaimed nothing but the fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth of what God had promised all along.

A better interpretation – one which accords with both the immediate context and Luke's overall goal in recording these episodes – is that Paul was indeed answering the charges and providing his defense when he declared that he was on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead. He wasn't trying to play the council members against each other, but neither was he changing the subject. Unlike a contemporary reader, Paul's audience knew exactly what he was getting at.

First of all, Paul was insisting to the Sanhedrin that, contrary to their judgment, he was actually upholding his Pharisaical convictions with his gospel. The members of the Council were well aware that Paul had been an eminent Pharisee, following in the footsteps of his father (cf. 22:3, 23:6b). And he stood before them that day declaring that he wasn't in any way guilty of dishonoring either his father or the sect they'd together embraced. The hope of the resurrection was a key component of Pharisaical doctrine and Paul upheld and promoted it with more zeal than ever.

The "hope and resurrection from the dead" was a doctrine of distinct importance to the Pharisees (who prided themselves on being strict adherents to the biblical text), but it was also the very marrow of Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1ff). Thus the "good news" he proclaimed contradicted neither the Pharisees' commitment to the Scriptures nor the Pharisaical doctrine. Paul was telling the assembly that he believed and taught what he'd believed all along – what all of the Pharisees sitting there in that room acknowledged to be a key component of divine promise in the Scriptures and so also of Israel's eschatological expectation. *Paul hadn't departed from or renounced the central eschatological promise and hope of the resurrection of the dead; he'd simply come to recognize and understand how God had fulfilled that promise in and through Jesus of Nazareth.*

The Old Testament's eschatological revelation embraces a vision of future resurrection and links this resurrection with Yahweh's final judgment and the restoration of all things at the end of the age. The text suggests these things in many ways and places, but is explicit about them (in one reading at least) in the latter part of Daniel's prophecy (12:1ff; cf. also Isaiah 26:1-21).

Moreover, the prophets – and the Jews of Jesus' day – associated this last-day judgment and renewal with Messiah's coming and the establishment of His kingdom. Thus John the Baptist – the last of the prophets of the preparatory era – called for repentance on the ground that the Messiah had arrived and was therefore about to execute Yahweh's judgment on the world: a work of purging, renewal and ingathering (Matthew 3:1-12). So Jesus Himself emphasized this judgment/resurrection dynamic as a key aspect of His messianic accomplishment and prerogative (John 5:1-30, 11:1-26; cf. Luke 14:1-15, 20:27-38).

Jewish scholarship, however, tended to read this eschatology of the kingdom of God in terms of an all-at-once cataclysm: Yahweh was going to send His Servant through whom He would accomplish a second great redemption for His people. As with the Egyptian prototype, the Lord would use His messianic deliverer to conquer and destroy His enemies, in that way liberating the captive exiles of Israel in order to regather them to their restored land and establish the long-awaited kingdom promised to David. For many of the Pharisees and those who followed their teaching, this cataclysmic "Day of Yahweh" episode was going to include the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked for the purpose of a final reckoning. At that time, the Lord would vindicate for all time His covenant people and condemn the nations who opposed, oppressed and subjugated them.

It was in this sense that *resurrection* and *hope* were conjoined in Jewish eschatology. Not every Jew or Jewish theological tradition looked for a future resurrection; the Sadducees were a notable case in point. But all of the sons of Israel embraced an eschatological hope – a confidence in a future day when Yahweh would arise and intervene and bring Israel’s long exile and captivity to an end and establish the Davidic kingdom under the reign of his messianic son.

The Jews believed God for His promises and they eagerly longed for the day of their fulfillment; their failure – their unbelief – lay in their refusal to discern that fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. Part of the reason for it was the way they’d been taught to envision the kingdom: The prophets largely portrayed the messianic kingdom in the language and forms of its Israelite counterpart, and this led the Jews to expect Messiah’s kingdom to be an earthly, temporal kingdom which amounted to a resuscitation of its Davidic predecessor. And in that the messianic kingdom promised Israel’s liberation and recovery from exile, no man could be the Messiah who didn’t overthrow the yoke of Roman subjugation.

Their earthly, natural conception of the kingdom was one important reason for Israel’s rejection of Jesus as the Messiah; another was the fact that they didn’t discern the already/not yet scheme by which it would be realized. This failure, too, has its basis in the scriptural (Old Testament) presentation of the kingdom. As noted, the prophets often seemed to indicate that all the components and features of the messianic kingdom would be realized at once. This was a primary reason John struggled with Jesus as the Messiah: In his understanding, Messiah’s presence meant that Yahweh’s appointed day of judgment, redemption, renewal and ingathering had come (the “Day of the Lord”). He was right, but it wasn’t to take the form he expected (Matthew 11:1-15).

The Jews missed the *essential spirituality* of the kingdom, and thus couldn’t find in the person and work of Jesus any evidence whatsoever that it had come. In fact, they regarded everything about Him – perhaps most especially His ignominious death at the hands of Rome – as irrefutable proof that He wasn’t the Messiah. Neither the kingdom they were anticipating, nor the manner in which they expected it to be installed, had come to pass in Jesus of Nazareth.

This flawed conception prevented even the scripturally precise Pharisees from discerning the fulfillment of the promise of resurrection in Jesus. Paul held the same eschatological hope as his Pharisaical brethren, but he recognized that that hope – bound up in the reality of resurrection – has already been realized in Jesus’ triumph over death. Paul’s gospel (like the Jewish Scriptures) focused on resurrection as the hope of the righteous and condemnation for the wicked, *but as this is true in Jesus*, the “firstfruits from the dead.” He is both the basis for the resurrection of Adam’s race and the criterion of its judgment and winnowing (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1ff; Matthew 25:31ff). And so, whether accused of forsaking Pharisaical orthodoxy or apostatizing from Moses and the Scripture altogether, Paul’s defense was the same: “*I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the prophets, having a hope in God...*” (24:14-15).