

Jerusalem Riot and Arrest (Acts 21:17-22:30)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Background and Introduction

- a. Paul has concluded his third missionary journey.
- b. In Caesarea, Paul was warned by Agabus, a Christian prophet, that if he goes to Jerusalem, he will be bound and handed over to the Gentiles.
- c. However, Paul was not deterred from his plans to proceed to Jerusalem.

II. Paul in Jerusalem

- a. Read **Acts 21:17-26**.
 - i. Paul is now in Jerusalem.
 - ii. There is a false rumor among the Jews that Paul has been teaching the Jews who live among the Gentiles that they should forsake the Law of Moses.
 - iii. James gives Paul advice regarding what he should do to counter this rumor.
 1. James advises Paul to join with four other men to take part in a ritual Jewish purification rite at the temple, to demonstrate publicly that he lives according to the Law of Moses.
 2. James restates what they had all agreed to in **Acts 15** regarding the Gentile converts (that Gentiles only had to follow the four requirements, not the whole Law of Moses).
- b. **Question:** Why was Paul advised to go through this purification ritual, and why did he do it?
 - i. This seems to be some type of Nazirite type purification vow, as was described in **Number 6**, based on the Law of Moses.
 - ii. Paul, a Jew, personally still kept the Law of Moses, although he taught Gentiles that they did not need to do so (except for the four special requirements as explained in **Acts 15**).
 - iii. He saw that the Law of Moses had been “taken out of the way...nailed to the cross” (**Colossians 2:14**).

1. The Law of Moses was merely a “shadow of things to come” (**Colossians 2:17**).
 2. Christ “abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances....” (**Ephesians 2:15**)
 3. In **Hebrews 8:7-13**, it quotes **Jeremiah 31:31-33** (designated **Jeremiah 38:31-33** in the LXX) regarding the promised new covenant. It says in **Hebrews 8:13** that in making a new covenant, God “has made the first obsolete.” The first covenant was taken away, that the second one could be established (**Hebrews 10:9**).
- iv. Paul is doing this not because this is still required, but “to become all things to all men” regarding the Jews. Consider Tertullian’s explanation of why Paul voluntarily undertook the Nazarite vow at the temple, in **Acts 21**:
1. “He [Paul] therefore made some concession, as was necessary, for a time; and this was the reason why he had Timothy circumcised (**Acts 16:3**), and the Nazarites introduced into the temple (**Acts 21:23-26**), which incidents are described in the **Acts**. Their truth may be inferred from their agreement with the apostle’s own profession, how ‘to the Jews he became as a Jew, that he might gain the Jews, and to them that were under the law, as under the law,’ —and so here with respect to those who come in secretly, —and lastly, how he ‘became all things to all men, that he might gain all.’ (**1 Corinthians 9:20-22**)”
 - a. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapter 3; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp. 433–434)
- c. **Question:** Do you see any indication of conflict or disharmony between Paul and James in this interaction?
- i. Modern critics like Resa Aslan, in his book *Zealot, the Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, attempt to use this interaction between James and Paul to make the case that there was extreme tension between the two men, that they were teaching different gospels.
 1. They are reading into the text things that are not there.
 - ii. From chapter 15 of Aslan’s book, a chapter on ‘James the Just’, the brother of Jesus, who led the church in Jerusalem:
 1. “Was it not James who excoriated the heretic Paul for abandoning the Torah? Did he not force the former Pharisee to

repent of his views and cleanse himself at the Temple?" (*Zealot*, p. 198)

2. "...In fact, after the Apostolic Council [in **Acts 15**], the apostles disappear from the rest of the book of Acts. But James does not. On the contrary, it is the fateful dispute between James and Paul, in which James publicly shames Paul for his deviant teachings by demanding he make supplication at the Temple, that leads to the climax of the book: Paul's arrest and extradition to Rome." (*Zealot*, p. 201)
 - a. **Questions:** Did James "publicly shame Paul" in **Acts 21**? Did he in any way imply that he considered what Paul taught to be "deviant"?
 - b. **Answer:** No and no!
 - i. There is nowhere in the New Testament where James "publicly shames" Paul over anything. In the account Aslan is referring to, from **Acts 21**, it says that when Paul appeared before James and the elders in Jerusalem and gave an account of ministry to the Gentiles, James and the elders "glorified the Lord". (**Acts 21:20**)
 - ii. In **Acts 21** it recounts that James told Paul about the rumors about him that had been circulating among the Jews, and he gives Paul advice to participate in a purification ritual at the temple to dispel those rumors. Paul then follows that advice. There is nothing in the **Acts 21** account that even hints at a clash between the two men here.
 - d. Aslan continues his exaggerations:
 - i. "James compares the Jews who abandon the law after converting to the Jesus movement to those who 'look at themselves in the mirror...and upon walking away, immediately forget what they looked like' (**James 1:23**). [*Note: Aslan is taking this verse in James completely out of context. It refers to believers who hear the word of God but do not put it into practice! -CP*]
 - ii. "There should be little doubt as to whom James is referring to in these verses. In fact, James's epistle was very likely conceived as a corrective to Paul's preaching, which is why it is addressed to 'the Twelve Tribes of Israel scattered in the Diaspora' – that is, Paul's

audience. The epistle's hostility toward Pauline theology is unmistakable. Whereas Paul dismisses the Law of Moses as a 'ministry of death, chiseled in letters on a stone tablet' (**2 Corinthians 3:7**), James celebrates it as "the law of liberty". Paul claims that 'one is not justified by works of the law but only through belief in Jesus Christ' (**Galatians 2:16**). James emphatically rejects Paul's notion that faith alone engenders salvation. 'Can belief save you?' he retorts, 'Even the demons believe – and shudder!' (**James 2:14, 19**). Paul writes his letter to the Romans that 'a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law' (**Romans 3:28**). James calls this the opinion of a 'senseless person,' countering that 'faith apart from works [of the law] is dead' (**James 2:26**)." (Source: *Zealot*, p. 206)

1. Here Aslan is cherry-picking quotes from the epistles of James, taking them wildly out of context, and even adding words these passages did not say, in order to create a phony conflict between the two.
 2. Paul nowhere says that "faith alone" engenders salvation. Also, in **James 2** it says, "faith apart from works", not "faith apart from works *of the law*".
- e. Further on in the same chapter, Aslan writes:
- i. "Considering Paul's views on the Law of Moses and the Temple of Jerusalem, his forced participation in such a ritual would have been hugely embarrassing for him. The entire purpose of the rite was to demonstrate to the Jerusalem assembly that he no longer believed what he had been preaching for nearly a decade. There is no other way to read Paul's participation in the Nazirite vow except as a solemn renunciation of his ministry and a public declaration of James's authority over him – all the more reason to doubt Luke's depiction of Paul as simply going along with the ritual without comment or complaint." (*Zealot*, p. 209)
- f. **Claim of Reza Aslan:** In his book, Aslan advances the idea that there were two separate gospel messages in circulation prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70: (1) the gospel of Paul, which was completely "divorced from Judaism", a Gentile-friendly message which only required belief in Jesus; versus (2) the gospel of James and other Jewish Christians, which was tied to the old Jewish temple and the Law of Moses. (*Zealot*, p. 215, etc.)
- i. **Response:** Here, Aslan appears to have been influenced by an approach introduced in the 19th century by Ferdinand C. Baur, a liberal German Protestant who founded the Tubingen School. Baur applied the philosophical approach of Hegel (resolution of a 'dialectic' between two opposing views) to the Christian faith. Baur and his

followers assumed that the Christian faith arose out of a tension between two opposing influences: that of Paul on the one hand (Gentile-focused faith) and Peter and the other Jerusalem-based apostles on the other hand (a Jewish-based faith).

1. This theory of an alleged conflict between Paul and James also fits with the approach that Martin Luther took in exalting Paul's writings while denigrating the letter of James as "an epistle of straw".
- ii. The early Christian writers saw no contradictions between the teachings of Paul and James, as explained by David Bercot in his audio lesson, *'How Do We Harmonize Paul and James'* (available through Scroll Publishing). Bercot explains how the historical understanding of the church, from the beginning, was that the messages preached by Jesus, James, Peter, Paul and the other apostles was fully consistent and harmonious.
1. The "big conflict" that many today allege existed between Paul and James: their teaching on the relationship between works (what we do), and our salvation. However, there is no contradiction between the New Testament writers on this matter.
 - a. John (in the book of **Revelation**): "The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one *according to his works*." (**Revelation 20:13**, NKJV)
 - b. Jesus: "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work." (**Revelation 22:12**, NKJV)
 - c. James: "A man is justified by works and not by faith only...faith without works is dead." (**James 2:24-26**)
 - d. Paul: "But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who 'will render to each one according to his *deeds* [ESV: *according to his works*]: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath," (**Romans 2:5-8**, NKJV)

- i. Here Paul quotes **Psalm 62:13** (designated **Psalm 61:13** in the LXX, which Paul follows in his quote) “God will render to each man *according to his works.*”
 - e. The Christian faith is a *way of life*, involving much more than just a set of intellectual beliefs. True saving faith will always be demonstrated by works (actions of obedient response to the gospel of Jesus Christ).
- iii. Paul’s message certainly was not “divorced from Judaism”, as Aslan claims in his book.
 - 1. As we have seen thus far in **Acts**, wherever Paul went, he used the Old Testament prophecies to convince unbelievers of the truth of the Christian faith. Also, his pattern was to preach to the Jews first, and then (generally after getting persecution from many of the Jews) turn to the Gentiles.
 - 2. For example, when Paul finally reached Rome, he took the gospel first to the Jews. There, to the Jews, Paul:
 - a. “...explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved.” (**Acts 28:23–24**, NKJV)
- iv. Paul’s desire to build on the spiritual foundation given to the Jews, and his passionate desire to spread the gospel to those of his own race, is captured by the following statement:
 - 1. “...I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.” (**Romans 9:1–5**, NKJV)
- v. In several places in his book, Aslan goes to great pains to portray a tension (that is not found in the text) between Paul and James, on a theological as well as even on a *personal* level. Regarding the attitude of James toward Paul, consider the text of the letter issued by James and the other leaders in Jerusalem regarding the resolution of the

question of whether the Gentiles had to follow the Law of Moses. James, along with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, wrote in the letter of instruction that would accompany Paul:

1. "...it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (**Acts 15:25–26**, NKJV)
- g. **Claim of Aslan:** To support the contrived story of conflict between Paul and James in the **Acts 21** account, Aslan writes, "an eerily similar story is recounted in the compilation of writings known collectively as the *Pseudo-Clementines*. In the text, James and 'the enemy' are engaged in a shouting match inside the Temple... the enemy attacks James and throws him down the stairs... Remarkably, the enemy who attacked James is later identified as none other than Saul of Tarsus." (*Zealot*, p. 272)
- i. Here, Aslan is referring to a work generally known as *Recognitions of Clement* (one part of the *Pseudo-Clementines*), which is included in volume 8 of the Ante-Nicene Fathers. That volume of the Ante-Nicene Fathers set, as stated in its introductory notice, consists primarily of ancient "forgery and fiction" writing from the pre-Nicene period.
 - ii. From the *Introductory Notice to the Pseudo-Clementine Literature* (Ante-Nicene Fathers vol 8, pp. 69-70), Dr. Riddle wrote:
 1. "The entire literature is of a Jewish-Christian or Ebionitic origin. [*referring to a Jewish-influenced heretical movement within the early church binding Christians to following the Law of Moses*]
 2. "...The entire literature belongs to the class of fictitious writing 'with a purpose' ...the many 'lives of Christ' written in our day to insinuate some other view of our Lord's person than that given in the canonical gospels, furnish abundant examples of the class.
 - a. [*Personal Observation: This remark, written c. 1886, calls to mind a statement in **Ecclesiastes 1:9-10**: "There is nothing new under the sun"! - CP*]
 3. "The Tubingen School, finding here a real specimen of the influence of party feeling upon quasi-historical literature, naturally pressed *Clementina* in support of their theory of the origin of the gospels. ...Bauer [*founder of the Tubingen School*]

found in these writings...support for his theory of the origins of Christianity. It is to be noted, however, that the heterogeneous mixture of Ebionism and Gnosticism in the doctrinal views proved perplexing to the leader of the Tubingen School." (Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 8, pp. 69-70)

- iii. The translator of *Recognitions of Clement*, Dr. Thomas Smith, introduced this work with the following remarks:
 1. "The *Recognitions of Clement* is a kind of philosophical and theological romance. The writer of the work seems to have had no intention of presenting his statements as facts; but, choosing the disciples of Christ and their followers as principal characters, he has put into their mouths, and woven the whole together by a thread of fictitious narrative."
 2. In *Recognitions of Clement*, book 1, chapters 70-71, we find the story Aslan was referring to. However, it is not "eerily similar" (Aslan's words), nor even *remotely* similar, to the story of Paul at the temple in **Acts 21**. In the fanciful story in *Recognitions*, James is accosted and violently assaulted by "the enemy" in the temple, who beats him violently, throws him down from the top step and then leaves James presumed dead. After this incident, this "enemy" is reported to receive a commission from the High Priest to go to Damascus to arrest the faithful.

III. Riot, and Paul Arrested

- a. Read **Acts 21:27-40**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. Jews find Paul in the temple and (incorrectly) assume he had brought his Gentile companion, Trophimus of Ephesus, with him.
 - ii. A mob forms, drags Paul out of the temple, beats him and is planning to kill him.
 - iii. The Roman soldiers intervene, bind him in chains and ask what Paul has done.
 1. Paul is bound with two chains and questioned.
 2. The Roman commander mistakenly assumes Paul is a notorious Egyptian rebel and ringleader.
 3. Paul explains he is a Jew from Tarsus, and he asks permission to speak to the crowd.

4. He addresses the crowd in “the Hebrew language”, as opposed to Greek. Since the predominant local language was Aramaic, that is the language most people today presume that Paul was using when addressing the crowd in Jerusalem.

IV. Paul’s Speech to the Mob in Jerusalem

- a. Let us consider the reasons Paul was hated by the Jews here, who he was addressing, and why he gave this speech.
 - i. It has to do with Paul’s interactions with the Gentiles and suspicion that he has turned against the Law of Moses.
 - ii. There are rumors that Paul has been teaching elsewhere that Jews should abandon the Law of Moses.
- b. An outline of Paul’s speech to the Jews in Jerusalem:
 - i. Paul starts by building bridges, establishing some *common ground* with his audience (as he did in his speech on Mars Hill in Athens, where he was addressing a very different crowd).
 1. He is a fellow Jew.
 2. He grew up in Jerusalem and had learned at the feet of the highly respected teacher, Gamaliel. (**Acts 5:34**)
 3. In the past, he shared their zeal in opposing and persecuting Christians.
 - ii. Then, Paul tells the story of his own conversion: how he was once like them, but changed (explaining how and why).
 - iii. He tells how Jesus spoke to him later, after his conversion, in the temple, telling him that he would be sent to the Gentiles.
 1. When Paul gets to the “Gentiles” part of his speech, the crowd ‘loses it’ and again goes berserk, trying to kill Paul.
 2. That makes it impossible for Paul to continue his speech!
- c. Why this speech by Paul is significant for us.
 - i. We learn some important things about Paul’s life and ministry.
 - ii. We learn important details about Paul’s conversion that are not mentioned in the other two accounts (**Acts 9** and **Acts 26**).
- d. Read **Acts 22:1-30**.

- i. We learn some things about Paul here.
 1. He was from Tarsus in Cilicia but grew up in Jerusalem.
 2. He had learned at the feet of Gamaliel, a highly respected Jewish teacher.
 3. He had persecuted to death and imprisoned men and women Christians before his conversion.
 4. He was well known to the high priest as well as to members of the Sanhedrin.
- ii. Things we learn about Paul's conversion in this account.
 1. Ananias (who baptized Paul) also was a devout Jew who followed the Law of Moses and who was well respected among the Jews of Damascus.
 2. Ananias told Saul that he was specially selected by God and that he should:
 - a. Know His will; and
 - b. See "the Just One" [ESV = "the Righteous One"] and hear the voice of His mouth.
 - i. "And he said, "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth;" (**Acts 22:14**, ESV)
 - ii. **Question:** Where in the Old Testament does it speak of "the Just One", or "the Righteous One"?
 - iii. **Answer:** Read **Isaiah 53:11-12**, from a version based on the LXX.
 1. "The Lord wishes to take away the pain of His soul, to show Him light, to form Him with understanding, and to pronounce righteous the Righteous One who serves many well; and He shall bear their sins. Therefore, He shall inherit many, and will divide the spoil with the strong, because His soul was delivered over to death. He was considered among the lawless, and He bore the sins of many, and was

delivered over because of their sins.”
(Isaiah 53:11-12. LXX, OSB)

2. “...the Lord also is pleased to take away from the travail of his soul, to shew him light, and to form him with understanding; to justify *the just one* who serves many well; and he shall bear their sins. Therefore, he shall inherit many, and he shall divide the spoils of the mighty; because his soul was delivered to death: and he was numbered among the transgressors; and he bore the sins of many and was delivered because of their iniquities.” **(Isaiah 53:11–12, Brenton LXX En)**
 3. Note that in the LXX (which Philip and the Ethiopian are reading from in **Acts 8**), the prophecy calls Him “the Just/Righteous One”. In the Masoretic Text, it says, “my righteous servant” (NKJV) or “the righteous one, my servant” (ESV).
 4. When Ananias told Paul he would see the Righteous One and hear the words from His mouth, I believe Paul would have understood that he was referring to the fulfilled prophecy of **Isaiah 53!**
3. In **Acts 9**, it simply says that Saul was baptized by Ananias. However, in the account in **Acts 22**, we find more detail regarding Paul’s baptism, including what Ananias actually said to Paul.
 - a. Ananias said to Paul: “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” **(Acts 22:16, NKJV)**
 - b. Many things happen in baptism. Here it says that Paul’s sins were washed away.
 - c. Recall that Paul had been praying and fasting for three days prior to this, had been humbled and blinded by God, and even called Jesus “Lord”. However, he needed to be baptized in order to *have his sins washed away*, according to Ananias.

- d. This is consistent with what Jesus said in **Mark 16**:
 - i. “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. *He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.*” (**Mark 16:15–16**, NKJV)
 - ii. **Question:** Why did Paul have to be baptized?
 - 1. **Answer:** To be saved, to have his sins washed away.
- e. This is not complicated. Let us preach the same message of conversion and salvation that Paul received from Ananias!
- f. **Suggestion:** If this teaching regarding the connection between water baptism to having your sins washed away is new to you, I suggest:
 - i. Take a fresh look at all the passages in the New Testament that refer to baptism.
 - ii. Consider also the early Christian understanding of baptism. Listen to an audio lesson by David Bercot on *What the Early Christians Believed about Baptism*, and/or read the article on Baptism in Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs, ed. David Bercot. Both are available through Scroll Publishing. Also, the audio is available for free online via Scroll Publishing’s YouTube channel.