

'Acts' - Extra Teaching Points #31

Acts 21:37 -22:22^(NASB)

Acts 21:37-38

*As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he *said, "Do you know Greek?"³⁸ "Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?"*

Q: In the 1st century, Greek was a common trade language, so most people were bilingual. Why would the commander be so surprised by Paul speaking Greek?

- The Commander thought Paul was a terrorist leader of a group known as "the Assassins".
 - The Greek word translated "Assassins" literally means "the dagger men" or "Sicarii", so named for the short knives they used. See the extra info below.
- The Egyptian the Commander referred to is probably the same one Josephus wrote about ([Ant. lib. xx. cap. 7, sec. 6, and War, lib. ii. cap. 13, sec. 5](#)).
 - The Egyptian (whose name isn't recorded) pretended to be a prophet, and told his followers that the walls of Jerusalem would fall down before them, if they would assist him in making an attack on the city.
 - He raised a group of men, and advanced as far as the Mount of Olives; but Felix, the Roman governor, stopped him.
 - *Josephus records 30,000 instead of the 4000 that Luke mentions, but most think an ancient copyist of Josephus mistook the Greek letter for "4" as being the Greek letter for "30" as they look very similar.*
 - *Another possibility for the discrepancy is that Josephus records the number of men who signed up and Luke records those that actually got as far as the Mount of Olives without figuring out the Egyptian was an impostor.*

The mob was dispersed, four hundred killed, two hundred taken prisoners, and the Egyptian himself, with some of his most faithful friends, escaped and were never heard of again.

- **The commander wasn't surprised Paul COULD speak Greek; he was surprised that he WOULD speak Greek.**
 - The Sicarii were ultra-nationalistic, and wanted to drive out the Roman occupation through terrorist tactics.

Extra info on the Sicarii:

Sicarii terrorism began as Jewish resistance to Roman rule in the region, which began in 40 BCE.

- 56 years later, in 6 CE, Judea and two other districts were combined and put under the control of Roman rule in what would later be considered greater Syria.
- Jewish groups began violent resistance to Roman rule around 50 CE, when the Sicarii and other groups started using guerrilla or terrorist tactics.
- All-out war between the Jews and the Romans broke out in 67 CE, when Romans invaded.
- The war ended in 70 CE, when Roman forces devastated Jerusalem. Masada, [Herod's famous fortress](#), was conquered by siege in 74 CE.

The Sicarii were led by descendants of Judas of Galilee, who helped foster the revolt against direct Roman rule in 6 CE, when they attempted to carry out a census of the Jews under the rule of Roman governor Quirinius in Syria, so that they could tax them.

- Judas famously proclaimed that the Jews should be ruled by God alone.

Josephus adds that the Sicarii later played a leading role in the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66-70 C.E.

- That's why the Roman commander would be anxious to detain the supposed leader of such a group.
- The "Egyptian" seditionist, with whom the military commander at Jerusalem confused Paul, is possibly the same one mentioned by Josephus. (The Jewish War, II, 254-263 [xiii, 3-5])

- His insurrection is stated to have taken place during the reign of Nero and the procuratorship of Felix in Judea; circumstances fitting the account in [Acts 21:37-39; 23:23-24](#).

The Sicarii were different from those “zealous for the Law” Jews who Paul was associated with before he became a Christian.

- The Zealots were a group that was not only zealous for study and prayer, but were also more than willing to take violent action against anyone they felt was betraying the Law.
- Saul of Tarsus, prior to his conversion, was a “zealous” Pharisee ([Phil 3:6](#)), which means he belonged to the Shammaite school, and was ready to take the law into his own hands and act, especially when the official authorities were apparently negligent.
 - The Zealots looked to Phinehas and Elijah as role models.
 - Phinehas killed a Jewish man for being with a Moabite woman ([Numbers 25:7-13](#)).
 - Elijah was a man of “zeal” ([1Kings 19:14](#)) who killed 450 prophets of Baal ([1 Kings 18:40](#)).

A good article on both groups can be found here:

<http://terrorism.about.com/od/groupsleader1/p/Sicarii.htm>

[Acts 21:39-22:1-2a](#)

³⁹ But Paul said, “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people.” ⁴⁰ When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying, ^{22:1} “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you.” ² **And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet;**

Q: Why would Paul speaking in Hebrew cause the crowd to quiet down and listen?

- Not all Jews in the 1st Century could speak Hebrew.
 - Usually it was the priestly class (Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes) who retained Hebrew and spoke it in their circles.
- When they heard him speak in Hebrew, it instantly identified him as one of the priestly class and not just an average guy!

[Acts 22:2b-5](#)

and he said, ³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under **Gamaliel**, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. ⁴ “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, ⁵ as **also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.**

Q: Why would studying under Gamaliel and naming the High Priest and Sanhedrin as witnesses give Paul credibility?

- Gamaliel (who we first met in Acts 5:34) was a highly respected Pharisee, teacher, and member of the Sanhedrin.
 - Studying under Gamaliel would have been seen the way studying at Julliard would be today — an expensive school for only the most gifted students.
- Not many of the people in that crowd would have ever spoken to a high priest, much less have a direct commission from him.
 - This would be similar to one of us meeting with the President of the United States and being given a mission to deliver letters from him and the Congress to Americans abroad.

Acts 22:6-22

"But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, ⁷ and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' ⁸ "And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' ⁹ "And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ "And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.' ¹¹ "But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus. ¹² "A certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. ¹⁴ "And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth. ¹⁵ 'For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ 'Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.' ¹⁷ "It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, ¹⁸ and I saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.'

¹⁹ "And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. ²⁰ 'And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.' ²¹ "And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" ²² They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!"

Q: The crowd didn't reject Paul when he claimed he had seen a bright light from Heaven and met the risen Lord Jesus; it was when he said he had been sent to the Gentiles that they wanted him dead. Why is *THIS* the part that sets them off?

- Up until this point, they were seeing Paul as one of them.
- When he said that Jesus told him to take the message of the Kingdom of God to the Gentiles, they saw Paul as a traitor!
 - The reason the mob had grabbed him and tried to kill him was because he had been accused of bringing Gentiles into the temple.
 - And now there was proof from his own mouth that he was what they thought he was!
- They were so sure of what they thought God was going to do – have them rule over the inferior, low life Gentiles – they rejected the most credible ambassador of the Lord most of them would ever encounter!
 - **The message didn't fit their frame so they wanted to kill the messenger!**
 - *"Like a monkey with his hand grasping a nut inside the trap, they will not release their grip on what they already have, and so cannot get free to take the huge, wonderful thing being offered to them."* N.T. Wright "Acts for Everyone, Part 2" page 160.

Follow Up Assignment

Q: Paul's credibility didn't just come from his education and his connections; it came from the fact that he burned all of those bridges to serve Jesus. What gives *you* credibility?

Q: Has following where Jesus leads you caused someone you love to view you as a traitor? Explain.

Q: As we've studied through Acts, we've been confronted with many things that challenge what we thought we knew, or what we thought we were supposed to be doing. Is there something you are hanging onto, (like a monkey with his hand in the trap), that keeps you from taking hold of those challenges?

- If so, what is it; and how do you treat others who try to get you to change?