

THE ANGEL FREES THE APOSTLES FROM PRISON (5:17–24)

The fearlessness of the apostles in disobeying the first warning from the Jewish authorities and the extraordinary effects of their preaching and miracles left the Jewish authorities with no choice but to arrest Peter and John again. However, their problem is that now they have to arrest all the apostles rather than just Peter and John (Acts 5:18; cf. 4:3). They have to deny the miracles performed in the Temple while the sick and demon-possessed are lined up in the streets to be healed, since by now the whole vicinity around Jerusalem has experienced the miracle working power of God. Most of all, they must refute the teachings that the apostles have spread throughout Jerusalem (5:28); even the prison bars are unable to keep the apostles' teaching from spreading. This is why the second wave of persecution against the church gets complicated for the Sanhedrin council, and thus Luke juxtaposes their persecution against the very work of God.

There is reason to argue about Luke's intention of setting four groups of characters against each other in the episode from Acts 5:17 to 5:42. Two of the groups are in conflict with each other in this particular section, and the following section displays another conflict. It is interesting to note that Luke describes the interactions in both oppositions as going against the expectations of the high priesthood. Thus, it can be how heaven is working to weaken the high priest's power by frustrating his plan. The apostles' deliverance by the angel of the Lord (5:19)³⁶ adds puzzlement, wonder (5:24), and jealousy³⁷ in the hearts of the high priest and the Sadducees (5:17). The second opposition that is wisely designed is the pharisaic conviction by Gamaliel working for

³⁶ In Luke-Acts, the angel of the Lord plays a crucial role in every significant moment (cf. Luke 1:11, 26; 2:9, 13; 22:43; 24:23; Acts 8:26; 10:3, 7, 22; 11:13; 12:7–15, 23; 27:23). Miraculous escapes through divine intervention from prison are further recorded in 12:6–11 (Peter) and 16:26–31 (Paul) in addition to this case. The angel of the Lord directly intervenes in the cases of the apostles and Peter while this being is not mentioned in Paul's case. However, all three wonders "receive no public recognition or acclamation." See Pervo 2009: 142.

³⁷ Similarly, Luke continues to point out the motivation of persecution in the Acts narratives as "jealousy"; in 13:45 with Jews; 17:5 with Thessalonian Jews. Cf. 7:9 with Joseph's brothers. See Keener 2013: 1206.

the new movement of [Jesus](#) to reorient the high priest and his party. As will be seen in what follows, his speech is artistically intercalated between Peter's brief remark to the Sanhedrin assembly and the decision of the assembly.

The fact that God is greater and therefore worthy of a better attitude from His followers than that of the Sanhedrin council, as demonstrated in Peter's earlier statement ([Acts 4:19](#)), is displayed here. Luke is putting the Sanhedrin council in vivid opposition to God in order to weaken its leadership in spiritual matters and thus give the apostles an upper hand. This development indicates how God has intervened visibly to mitigate the threats and at least demonstrate His power, which is above that of the Sanhedrin council.³⁸ Luke accomplishes this by depicting the situation as such that the rulers' decision to put the apostles in jail meant nothing to God. Mockingly, Luke has used his compositional tactics to make the rulers utter their impotence toward heaven's actions ([5:22–24](#)). Twice the Sanhedrin council is depicted as being helpless; during a meeting, they could say nothing against the healing ([4:14](#)) and were greatly puzzled about the apostles as to what would come from all these happenings ([5:24](#)).

THE APOSTLES RELEASED BY GAMALIEL ([5:25–42](#))

There are two concomitant court proceedings in place. One is the Sanhedrin council, a judicial and political institution that proudly judges the apostles on their teachings. On the other hand, there is “the court of common people” before which the Sanhedrin council is consciously guilty. The former is politically motivated with the high priest being the leader;³⁹ the latter is spiritually empowered while God reigns over it and guides its steps. The Sanhedrin council is controlled by guilt and fear, and the apostles are increasingly made confident by the good deeds they have done for the people in [Jesus](#)' name. The Sanhedrin council is only conscious of practical dealings, while the

³⁸ Johnson 1992: [102](#) remarks that in this narrative, the reader of Acts is not expected to look for a dramatic interaction among the protagonists, since the question regarding the submission of the apostles to the “political power of the Sanhedrin has been answered by God.” Whether they are warned and/or beaten, all those inflictions are “empty” since “God is at work in the apostles, and they will not be stopped.”

³⁹ Dunn 1996: [68](#) notes that the description of the Sanhedrin council given by Luke in this persecution episode is undoubtedly representative of its political, legal, and religious authority.

apostles' ministry is interested even in the most marginalized issues. Luke makes this clear by juxtaposing the Sanhedrin council and the apostles' ministry ([Acts 5:25–28](#)). Even the captain and officers who went to the Temple to bring the apostles before the Sanhedrin council did not use force. They did so because they were humbled by what *laos* (the people) thought of the apostles ([5:26](#)). It is safe to presume that the apostles had many supporters among the Jewish people in Jerusalem at the time. However, Luke does not say who these people were. Young has cautiously argued that they could possibly be Pharisees because of their appeal toward theology (cf. [Matt 23:3](#)) and their great influence among the common townsfolk ([Josephus, Ant. 18.15](#)).⁴⁰ While this assertion is interesting, it is still not convincing, because further biblical evidence is not supportive.

On the other hand, the reader of Acts will realize, if attentive enough, that Luke is bringing forth the real cause of the Sanhedrin's rage against the apostles; the good news concerning [Jesus'](#) death and resurrection is bad news to the Sanhedrin council because his death highlights the Sanhedrin's negative role while [Jesus'](#) resurrection emphasizes their demise. For this reason, the high priest questioned the apostles: **We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,⁴¹ yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us ([5:28 NRSV](#)).** What gives joy to the believers brings about guilt among the high priesthood in Jerusalem.

Peter's intervention in [Acts 5:29–32](#) before the court is neither an apology nor a form of self-defense. On the contrary, it is a typical witness address like those prior ([2:23–24](#); [3:13–15](#); [4:10](#)).⁴² Structurally, it elevates God's authority over men's. Moreover, it is christologically apologetic and incriminates the Sanhedrin concerning the death of [Jesus](#). It is also kerygmatic, pointing to the exalted [Jesus](#) as the sole mediator between

⁴⁰ Young 1996: 230. Jesus asks his disciples to follow the teachings of the Pharisees in [Matt 23:3](#). Josephus says that “they (the Pharisees) are, as a matter of fact, extremely influential among the townsfolk; and all prayers and sacred rites of divine worship are performed according to their exposition.”

⁴¹ Some MSS (D E Byz) have *ou* (not) before *parangelia* with a question. However, the best texts (P74 ✠ A B 1175) omit the particle *ou* and the question. Metzger 2000 [1971]: 289 argues that the particle *ou* is “a scribal addition.”

⁴² Pervo 2009: 144.

God and the repentant men and asserting apostleship affirmed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. In this kerygmatic intent, Peter relates the new movement to Jewish roots by appealing to the **God of our fathers** (5:30; cf. 3:13; 22:14; 24:14) and offers the opportunity for Israel as a nation to wash itself of its wrong by accepting the forgiveness found in Jesus the Messiah and avert the possible judgment coming upon a rebellious nation (5:30–31); the teachings of the apostles were not threats to the nation but rather opportunities to experience national blessing.⁴³

It is remarkable how Luke is emphatic about God in the apostles' address. This may be the author's way of sharing how the present case on the council desk is engaging the reader with God. While in the subsequent intervention Gamaliel will utilize sociohistorical precedents to make himself the entity that will soothe the tension between the religious leaders and the apostles, Peter refers to God more than any other actor in the history of Israel as the mediator for all.⁴⁴ Although Peter's statement here is brief, its tone is nonetheless fully charged with equal boldness as before.⁴⁵ The verb *peitharcheō* (**to obey**) used in Acts 5:29 (cf. 5:32; 27:21; Titus 3:1), with God as its object, denotes a hierarchy of authority; this term clearly demonstrates how the God believed in by Israel is the only One who deserves obedience (5:32).⁴⁶ Then Peter goes on to mention God again, but this time in relation to his and the Sanhedrin members' shared faith tradition, because He is the God of **our fathers**. It is important to note that *paterōn* (**fathers**) in 5:30 does not necessarily mean the immediate preceding generation but refers to remote progenitors and founders of belief such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and others (cf. Luke 1:73; 3:13; 16:24; John 4:53; Acts 7:14).⁴⁷ At this point, it is right to say that "the Christian faith is the fulfillment ... of Judaism, if Judaism is rightly understood."⁴⁸

⁴³ Bock 2007: 248.

⁴⁴ Bruce 1988: 113.

⁴⁵ This is undoubtedly a result of Luke's compositional artistry of storytelling. Dunn 1996: 69 argues that the author of Acts has "indeed stitched together this brief response," molding its substance from the material found in former Petrine speeches.

⁴⁶ Barrett 1994: 289.

⁴⁷ Cf. Schnabel 2012: 311.

⁴⁸ Barrett 1994: 289.

As he constantly did in his sermons ([Acts 2:24](#); [3:15](#); [4:10](#); [5:30](#)), Peter again cites God as the being behind Jesus' resurrection: **The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead.**⁴⁹ Though the council members will be even more enraged by Peter's consistent boldness, Luke must have had no intention to dramatize the interaction here, since Peter repeated it to clarify God's power that brought Jesus back from the grave ([5:30](#)). This was first of all good news that Peter was releasing to the culpable judges ([5:28](#)) and also an opening for the politicians to turn their hearts to the Savior. Thus it can be seen how the apostles were not just provoking the anger of the authorities. Furthermore, Luke's rhetorical framing of the statement in [5:29](#) and [5:32](#) is a confirmation of the apostles' positive disposition toward the Sanhedrin council. As witnesses,⁵⁰ Peter and the other apostles spoke with unprecedented boldness because they were with Jesus. They cannot help but attest to the events—Jesus' accreditation by God who used him to perform miracles and wonders, his betrayal by this same council, unjust crucifixion, ignoble death, resurrection, forty-day reappearances, ascension to the Father, the Pentecost, and many other happenings that have followed. Luke concludes that God is the giver of the Spirit while pointing out that the Spirit, as a witness, is given to those who obey him ([5:32](#)).

Obviously, the high priest and his associates, the Sadducees, would not heed the apostles' teachings but rather hatefully seek to murder the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection ([Acts 5:33](#)). It is at this point that the other counterforce appears. The Sanhedrin council had tried to frustrate God's program but its efforts were futile. After that they too had taken note that they could not overpower God or even try to comprehend His ways; thus, they were finally divided. Gamaliel⁵¹ took a different stance and considered Peter

⁴⁹ It should be noted that while the Spirit's relation to the resurrection is remarkably confined to the Pauline Epistles ([Rom 8:11](#); [1 Cor 6:4](#), etc.), the Synoptics and Acts are entirely silent regarding Jesus' resurrection as the work of the Spirit. Rather the author of Acts in particular attributes Jesus' resurrection to God Himself ([2:24](#); [3:15](#); [4:10](#); [5:30](#); [10:39–40](#); [13:29–30](#), [33](#), [34](#), [37](#); [17:30](#)). See Cho 2005: 83–89; cf. 48–50.

⁵⁰ *BDAG 620–21* notes that the term *martys* (witness) in [5:32](#) means “witnesses who bear a divine message.”

⁵¹ Gamaliel, a student of Hillel who was one of the greatest rabbis of all time, is known as the most respected rabbi of his generation ([Soṭa 9:15](#) describes Gamaliel as “the glory of law”). He was a

and the other apostles' *propos* very seriously and suggested that the apostles should be sent out for a moment (5:34). "He is the only councilor we have met who has the slightest interest in discussing the Christians' claims."⁵² The speech by Gamaliel is overall divided into two parts. The first three verses (5:35–37) are an exposé of historical facts and the last two (5:38–39) demonstrate his advice and conclusion.

Gamaliel starts his intervention with a significantly grave tone. It immediately impacts his audience (*eipen te pros autous*)⁵³ by displaying careful consideration and cautioning every action that would be directed toward the apostles (Acts 5:35). This attitude is an expression of his faith as he later concludes. However, before giving a conclusion, Gamaliel argues as a professional trial lawyer with jurisprudence, and more importantly, strives to convert his hearers by persuading them to buy his argument. He handles this case overtly and officially. He would, first of all, have been troubled by the bloody record of his national policy. The two examples he elaborates on are both about capital punishment. The Sanhedrin council of which he is a member had already shed blood by killing Jesus. Gamaliel refrained himself from mentioning the most recent incident perhaps because he did not want to sound like he was convinced by Peter's charges. However, it goes without saying that Jesus' death would be next on his jurisprudence list. This explains why Gamaliel cautioned his colleagues to carefully think of what they are going to do with the apostles.

Gamaliel's conclusion shows his profound conviction that the case of the apostles is not comparable to the cases of Theudas and Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:35–37). His conviction can be seen through the way he qualifies the crimes of these two troublemakers; for a lawyer, qualifying a crime is critical in the process of judging the criminal. Gamaliel thinks of Theudas as someone who boasted of being somebody (5:36), and the

well-known teacher of the law and was Paul's tutor (Acts 22:3).

⁵² Mason 1995: 150.

⁵³ Codex Bezae has *tous archontas kai tous synedrous* instead of *autous*. So Gamaliel said "to the rulers and the members of the Sanhedrin." Most English translations (ESV, NRSV, NKJV, etc.) take the reading, "He said to them," while TNIV renders the ambiguous *autous* into Sanhedrin: "He addressed Sanhedrin." Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger 2004: 347, 351 argue that Codex Bezae possibly indicates that the high priestly circle (the rulers) is distinguished from the other Sanhedrin members whose power was controlled by the council.

number of people (about four hundred men) who rallied to him cannot be compared with the eight thousand people who were converted due to the movement led by Jesus' apostles. Moreover, by the time of the Sanhedrin, the good news had reached beyond Jerusalem. One may see similar descriptions in the example of Judas that further emphasize how Gamaliel judged Jesus' witnesses through different lenses. In response to the claim that Luke is a perfect historiographer with respect to sequencing events in their strict order of occurrence, there may be certain counterarguments.⁵⁴ However, without doubt, Acts is a historical work of value in terms of its sophisticated composition. Religion, law, history, and the high-caliber politicians' attitudes are put in one session to honor the mission of the Jerusalem church at its tender age. Hence Gamaliel asks the assembly to leave the apostles alone and let them go (5:38). It is nevertheless shocking to see how Luke uses the words of Gamaliel's conclusion (5:39)⁵⁵ as a prediction of what Saul, his student, will do in persecuting the church (9:4–6; 22:7–8).

Does the agreement in the Sanhedrin session mean that the members sincerely want to obey God? Is the Jerusalem high priest really convinced that the apostles deserve an honor as Gamaliel suggests? The answer is certainly “no.” The Sanhedrin is not divided over their attitude toward the church, as some scholars argue.⁵⁶ The truth of the matter is that Gamaliel was only influential during the sittings; the impact of his speech is just temporary.⁵⁷ To be sure, the following action in the assembly was to flog the apostles,

⁵⁴ See Witherington 1998: 238–39 for a detailed analysis of the movements referred to by Gamaliel and the proposed order of events. It is generally accepted among scholars that Theudas (4 BCE) mentioned in 5:36 is a different man from that (44 CE) of Josephus' *Ant.* 20.97–98. They are different people with the same name. E.g., Bruce 1988: 116; Marshall 1980b: 122; Mason 1992: 1–20, etc. Cf. Keener 2013: 1230–33.

⁵⁵ It is noteworthy that Gamaliel in his address uses the second person plural “you” (vv. 35, 38, 39) toward his audience and this indicates that, as Pervo 2009: 148 notes, he “is as much an outsider as is Peter.”

⁵⁶ For example, Dunn 1996: 71 argues that the Sanhedrin has never been so divided as it is seen to be here. However, it should be remembered that this was just an opinion of a respected member of the Sanhedrin council who was temporarily given a chief position.

⁵⁷ Mason 1995: 151 argues that Gamaliel “is no more a partisan of the Christians than he is of the other popular groups mentioned.”

and this persecution is an unfortunate development.⁵⁸ In the previous assembly, the apostles had only been warned. However, this time, they are given severe punishment. As a member of Gamaliel's belief system, Saul of Tarsus ([Acts 22:3](#)) will very soon invade the Jerusalem church to do just what his teacher had dreaded; Stephen is stoned as an indication of a persecution that was continuing to grow harsher. [Acts 5:41–42](#) shows a wholly different scene brought about by the [Jesus](#) movement. Warnings did not discourage the apostles from witnessing; now whipping does not cause any shame to them but joy! For the apostles, persecution for [Jesus](#)' sake is even worthy of celebration. Luke does not give the Sanhedrin the opportunity to comment again, but the attitude of the apostles must have shocked them. He continues to deliberately show how Christian faith during the early days was not different from an unstoppable fire; the apostles did not consider flogging a reason to avoid the Temple courts, and thus proclaimed the good news about [Jesus Christ](#) day after day and from house to house.

The joyful attitude of the apostles in their suffering should not be confused with sadistic and masochistic psychology. They were joyful for the fact that they have now understood God's purpose for their lives; they had a mission and a mandate from God the creator to fulfill. They were to be martyrs empowered by the Spirit to spread the fact of [Jesus](#)' death and resurrection so that the lost world would be saved. They were considered worthy to suffer disgrace for the sake of the name; while [Jesus](#) went through suffering and disgrace in his physical body, they all stood away from him, but now they have found themselves in the very courts where their Lord once stood before the very people who had threatened to kill them. The name of [Jesus](#) had never been disgraced when his church went through persecution and suffering; the contrary is rather true in many instances in the history of the church.

⁵⁸ Peterson 2009: 227 argues that it is likely that since this was a Jewish assembly, the flogging of the apostles was like the practices prescribed in [Deut 25:3](#) or [Acts 22:19](#); [2 Cor 11:24](#). Cf. *m. Mak.* 3:10–15.