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December 4th: Psalms 86 & 87 & Acts 26

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Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God. Paul's speech before Festus and Agrippa.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalms 86, a prayer of David. Psalm 86 is an unusual one in several respects. It is a lone psalm attributed to David in a series of psalms of Asaph and Korah.

Indeed, it is the only psalm attributed to David in Book 3 of the Psalter. It has a seeming individual focus in contrast to the national and international focus of the psalms that surround it. Commentators generally observe the number of phrases seemingly from other psalms within this psalm.

Conrad Schaeffer lists several of these. For instance, verse 14, O God, insolent men have risen up against me, a band of ruthless men seeks my life, and they do not set you before them. Psalm 54 verse 3 is very similar to this.

For strangers have risen against me, ruthless men seek my life, they do not set God

before themselves. Verse 15 of this psalm, But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. And in Psalm 103 verse 8, The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Several of the shorter expressions and turns of phrases in this psalm are also familiar from other, especially Davidic psalms. Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me. To you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.

Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Turn to me and be gracious to me. Seeing this psalm as if it were a pastiche of borrowed or formulaic elements lacking in originality, some commentators have considered it to be of lesser quality and likely of much later composition than other psalms.

Alan Ross defends the psalm against such charges, observing, The way the psalm is written may be due to its liturgical style and not a lack of originality. In liturgical passages regular speech forms are used to prepare for the worship. Originality is not a virtue of liturgical texts as it is of other forms of composition.

Besides, we should beware of overstating the supposed unoriginality of this psalm, just as remixes of familiar songs can have a novel character to them. So the psalmist here has composed a psalm that brings time-honoured phrases of Israel's worship into a psalm that is nonetheless fresh and new. Beth Tanner raises the possibility that this psalm may intentionally be composed as a summary of Davidic psalms, fused with Assiniae theology.

The words of be taken up in a radically new setting, in the book of Revelation, where the familiar words will become renewed in a new context and the new context will be familiarised by the familiar words. The psalm begins and ends with petitions for aid and deliverance, with praise and thanksgiving at its heart in verses 8-13. The beleaguered psalmist is calling for the Lord to attend to his cry and his distress.

His life is in danger and his need for deliverance is urgent. He makes his appeal on the basis of his identity and condition. He is poor and needy, thoroughly dependent upon and seeking the Lord's help, consistently calling out to him.

He is godly, a person marked out as God's own by the Lord's gracious covenant, and a servant of the Lord, a worshipper who trusts in and walks in his ways. He also appeals to the Lord's own character and action. The Lord is good, forgiving, and abounding in steadfast love, and he has answered the psalmist before in the day of his distress.

This description of the Lord appeals to the great revelation of the Lord's character to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34, verses 6-7. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation. Schaeffer notes the frequent repetition of the grounds for the psalmist's confident appeal for the Lord to answer him throughout the psalm, For I am poor and needy, for I am godly, for to you do I cry all the day, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul, for you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, for you answer me, for you are great and do wondrous things, for great is your steadfast love toward me, because you, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

The psalmist then comes to the Lord with reasons for his petitions to be heard, which grant him assurance that the Lord will in fact answer him. From petition the psalmist turns to thanksgiving and praise in verses 8-13. The psalmist declares the greatness of the Lord and of his works.

The Lord's greatness exceeds the power of all of the gods, all of the heavenly authorities. His works utterly eclipse any that they could claim for themselves. On numerous occasions in the Old Testament the Lord demonstrates his power over and supremacy over the pagan gods, proving his might through mighty deeds in the eyes of the nations and through subduing foreign gods in the very realms of their supposed power.

The beheading of Dagon in his own temple in Philistia is one example of this, although the most famous examples are found in the story of the Exodus. Seeing the supremacy of the Lord, the nations should come, bow and worship before the Lord, recognizing him as God alone. The verses here strongly recall the language of the Song of the Sea, the praise of Moses declared after the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea.

In Exodus 15, verses 11-16 we read, Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them. You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed. You have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

The peoples have heard, they tremble. Pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed.

Trembling seizes the leaders of Moab. All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them because of the greatness of your arm.

They are still as a stone, till your people, O Lord, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased. By echoing such expressions, the psalmist draws the minds of the hearers and the singers of this psalm back to the great deliverances of the past, encouraging them to take reassurance from such deliverance in their present distress. Psalm 86 verses 8-10 are also taken up as verses in Revelation chapter 15 verses 3-4

and they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.

All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. In John's description of words largely drawn from Psalm 86 as the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, we are granted a surprising vantage point upon the words of Psalm 86, one which invites us both to see them as a development of Moses' song at the Red Sea and as an anticipation of the great song of the martyrs. In light of the Lord's greatness, goodness and truth, the psalmist desires to be confirmed in and conformed to his way, that he might serve the Lord with a whole and undivided heart, single-minded and without cessation.

This unity of heart will inspire the fullness of worship. From the central section of praise and thanksgiving, the psalm again returns to the trials and fears of the psalmist, surrounded by his enemies. Once again the psalmist finds assurance in the way that the Lord has revealed his character, as in verse 5 he refers to the character of the Lord that he has declared to Moses in the Theophany at Sinai.

His appeal is for grace, strength, deliverance and manifest proof of the Lord's favour towards him, which serve to vindicate him against his enemies. The meaning of the psalmist's reference to himself as the son of the Lord's maidservant is not entirely clear. However, in scripture there are plenty of examples of the Lord showing favour to people on account of others, such as to kings of Judah on account of their descent from David.

Perhaps the psalmist is thinking of his faithful mother and her prayers here, the psalmist's focus is not the downfall of his enemies, but that they be put to shame as the Lord strengthens and vindicates him. A question to consider, where else in scripture might we look to in order to fill out the notion of uniting our hearts to fear God's name? Psalm 87 A Psalm of the Sons of Korah A Song On the holy mount stands the city he founded. The Lord loves the gates of Zion, more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.

Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God. Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon, behold Philistia and Tyre, with Cush. This one was born there, they say, and of Zion it shall be said, This one and that one were born in her, for the Most High himself will establish her.

The Lord records as he registers the peoples. This one was born there. Singers and dancers alike say, All my springs are in you.

Psalm 87 is another psalm that is challenging to translate and to interpret, with uncertainties in the correct version of the text itself. Much of the meaning of the psalm, especially in the second stanza, can hang upon such considerations. The psalm can be

divided into two principal sections, verses 1-3 and verses 4-6, with verse 7 likely standing by itself.

The first stanza of the psalm speaks of Zion's unique character, setting it apart from all other places. It is the city that the Lord himself has founded, on the holy mountains - the word here is plural - singled out by him for a special blessing and favour. It is loved by the Lord, more than all of the, literally, tabernacles of Jacob.

The use of this term highlights the choice of Zion as the Lord's own dwelling place, the site of the sanctuary, rather than any of the other potential sanctuaries or high places of the land. The city is described in ways that brings together both its singularity, the city he founded, city of God, and its beautiful plurality, the holy mountains, the gates of Zion. Glorious things are spoken of this city, in history, in praise and in song, and in promise and in prophecy.

Verses 4-6 are particularly difficult to translate. It is a divine oracle, in which the Lord describes himself as if various peoples were being presented to him and he were recording their city of origin in a register. Rahab, a name used for Egypt in places like Isaiah chapter 30 verse 7, and Babylon, the two great oppressors are there.

Philistia and Tyre, nations nearer to home, with which Israel had often had hostile dealings are there. Even Cush or Ethiopia, which would have been seen as the very edge of the known map, is there. All of these nations will line up for registration, and in an astonishing twist, the Lord will declare that they are sons and daughters of Zion, that Jerusalem is their true place of birth.

These nations, despite their troubled history with Israel, will one day be accounted among the people of the Lord. There are probably already God-fearers and diaspora of populations in these lands, however the oracle seems to speak of something more, of an elevation of those nations to the status of members of the people of Zion as they turn to the Lord en masse and trust in him. The hearer of these words might recall various Old Testament prophecies, such as those made concerning the blessing of all the families of the earth at the calling of Abraham, or in Isaiah chapter 19 verses 19-25.

In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour and defender and deliver them.

And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day, and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and

Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance. Zechariah chapter 2 verse 11 also speaks of such a day. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people, and I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you.

As does Malachi chapter 1 verse 11. For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.

This is an elevation of the nations, but is also, in keeping with the theme of the psalm, an elevation of Zion. Zion is being raised up as the great mother city of the whole world as the nations are turned to the Lord. As Isaiah declares in chapter 2 verses 2 to 4, It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it, and many people shall come and say, Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

One after another people from the line of all of the nations assembled for registration will be marked down as belonging to the children of Zion, a citizen of the city of God described in the first three verses. Conrad Schaefer writes, The relation of birth with Zion, that is full citizenship, erases the differences of race, culture and language, religion. Philistines, Tyrians, Ethiopians are converted into brothers and sisters, family members of Israel, against whom they were previously hostile.

This psalm erases even the origins marked by oppression and impurity, like those of Egypt and Babylon, personifications of violence, brutality, injustice. Almighty God who takes the census, inscribes these unlikely partners as faithful, with birthrights in the capital. The psalm ends with scenes of a celebration, of singers and dancers, perhaps in a procession.

The meaning of the expression, All my springs are in you, is not clear. Alan Ross claims that the expression might refer to the music of the songs, or perhaps the themes of the songs. Alternatively, it might be a reference to Zion as a source of the fountains of God's

grace and salvation, or as a source of life more generally.

A question to consider, where might we look to for various levels of fulfilment of this oracle? Acts chapter 26. So Agrippa said to Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself. Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defence.

I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews.

They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion, I have lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O King.

Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues, and tried to make them blaspheme.

And in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me.

And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. And I said, Who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me, and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and

tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that the Christ must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.

And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you are out of your mind, your great learning is driving you out of your mind. But Paul said, I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly, for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe. And Agrippa said to Paul, in a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian? And Paul said, whether short or long, I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains. Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, and when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.

And Agrippa said to Festus, this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. Acts chapter 26 contains Paul's last major discourse, and it is by far the most stylized. Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice are visiting the governor Festus, and together with the military tribunes and the prominent men of Caesarea, they have gathered together to hear Paul present his case.

The purpose of the hearing is to assist Festus in knowing what to write concerning Paul, who has appealed to Caesar. Ben Witherington notes nine elements of Greek rhetorical style that Paul employs within this speech. The speech is a presentation of, and witness to, Paul's entire mission and vocation.

It is not just narrowly addressing the matters in which he has been accused. Witherington argues that it is important to recognize that Paul is not playing the part of the defendant here. Rather, he is playing something more akin to the role of a witness in his own trial.

The speech that he gives serves an apologetic purpose. It presents Paul, his mission, and the Christian church to the reader and hearer. It gathers together Paul's story in one at its very conclusion, as Paul presents an apologetic for his entire course of life.

Within it, Paul makes appeal to many witnesses. Daryl Bok lists seven. Paul's companions on the way to Damascus, the Jews of Jerusalem, Agrippa's knowledge of Judaism, the scriptures, a heavenly revelation, Paul's own testimony, and Paul's presence before the dignitaries as proof of God's protection.

Once again, it is not impossible that Luke worked with forensic sources when writing it. He may well have had access to court records. The chapter begins with Agrippa inviting Paul to speak.

Bok suggests that Agrippa might be chairing the meeting, as it is his counsel that is especially being sought by Festus. Paul's speech takes a rhetorical form that would have been familiar from other ancient rhetorical settings. According to Witherington's proposed structure, which differs from that offered by Bok, it starts with a prologue in which he addresses and compliments Agrippa in verses 2-3, followed by a narration in verses 4-21, a statement of his fundamental theme and case in verses 22-23, a refutation in verses 25-26, and a concluding appeal in verses 27-29.

Agrippa is someone with a greater knowledge of Judaism, who is better situated to speak to the Jewish matters at stake in Paul's case than Festus is. From verse 4 onwards, Paul recounts his life story. He grew up as a Jew and he lived as a member of the strict sect of the Pharisees.

He trained under the feet of Gamaliel, as we read elsewhere. Paul has not simply turned his back on this. Although Paul can elsewhere speak of accounting all of these things that he once considered gain as loss, here his purpose is to stress continuity.

He has not rejected his Jewish background. He continues to speak of himself as a Pharisee, as he did before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. He also uses language that makes clear that he identifies with the people.

My own nation, our religion, our fathers, our twelve tribes. He claims that he is on trial on account of his hope in the promise that God made to the patriarchs and the nation of Israel in the past. This is a communal hope, a hope of the nation, and Paul has not rejected it.

Rather, he sees himself as holding on to its fulfillment. Elsewhere in his Gospel, Luke underlines the continuity between the piety of Israel and the coming of Christ. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are all figures that have an Old Testament faith that looks forward to Christ, and for which Christ, and the expectation of what he will achieve, is the realization of the hopes of the nation.

Paul singles out resurrection, as he did before the Sanhedrin. It is this key belief, this presentation of the hope of Israel, that he is on trial for. The irony is that for his faithful commitment to the faith of his fathers, he is being condemned.

And he makes his appeal here to Agrippa in particular. Agrippa has a reputation for piety in some quarters. He has a knowledge of the scriptures.

And so Paul is doing more than just presenting a defense here. This is an evangelistic claim, and he's calling on Agrippa to make a response to it. Of course, Paul did have a

radical change of mind.

He describes his former life as a persecutor, and his complicity in the imprisonment and death of Christians. His involvement in the martyrdom of Stephen might be in view here. Stephen was stoned, not as a legal sanction, but as the action of a lynch mob.

The language here is Paul casting a pebble, which is an idiomatic way of speaking about voting. However, in the context of an act of stoning, Paul may not literally have cast stones in executions for which the Jewish Sanhedrin did not have the authority. But he approved of them by casting the pebble of his vote in favor.

We get a fuller picture of Paul's life as a persecutor here. He punished them in the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, presumably failing. He then pursued them to foreign cities.

Before Paul ever became a missionary for Christ, he was a counter-missionary, someone who was opposing the mission of the church by undertaking missionary journeys against it. This is the third time that we read of Paul's conversion in the Book of Acts. The first time is in the voice of the narrator in chapter 9. The second time Paul tells the story as he addresses the crowd in the temple in chapter 22.

It's important to pay attention to the differences of accent and content here. For instance, here he expands upon his commission and he excludes the figure of Ananias. This is part of a shift in the telling of the story, from one that focuses more upon Ananias to a telling of the story in a way that leaves Ananias out of the picture.

In the first account of Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9, Ananias receives the commission for Paul that he's supposed to give to him. In the second account, when Paul relates it in chapter 22, he tells of Ananias delivering the commission to him. And here, Ananias is not present at all.

The commission is given to him directly by Christ. This serves a number of purposes in Paul's telling. It places a greater accent upon the commission than you have in the other accounts.

And as we will see, it also allows Paul to fill the role played by Ananias in a number of key ways. There is a greater focus here also upon the light. It is midday when the vision occurs, but the light from the heaven is brighter than the sun, and all fall down to the ground, which only this account records.

On the surface of things, this is also in tension with chapter 9 verse 7, where Paul's companions are standing there speechless. While there are ways in which these details could be harmonized, it may perhaps be instructive to think about the way that Luke is quite happy for these different accounts to stand alongside of each other, not overly concerned about the apparent tensions between them. While the concern of the modern

Christian reader can be to get behind the text, to see what really happened, and to peel away the level of the text, for Luke and other biblical authors there is a lot more attention given to the way that the story is told.

The historical details and their accuracy certainly matters, but the way that the story is told will direct the hearer to certain parallels and connections, and certain resonances that they might miss if they just focused upon the underlying historical events. The voice of Christ speaks to him in Hebrew, or presumably Aramaic, and the form of Saul's name given here reflects that fact. However, even though he is being addressed by Christ in Hebrew or Aramaic, there is a surprising possible allusion to a text from Euripides in the statement kicking against the goats.

Many have argued that that turn of phrase is not a Hebrew Aramaic one, but is borrowed from the Greek. Gerhard Cattell summarises the argument that some have made. He writes, Some have sought to prove here, as elsewhere also, a direct literary dependence of Luke, in this case on Euripides' Bacchae.

In confirmation they point to the similarity of situation in Acts and the Bacchae. In both cases there is question of opposition to a new divinity. In Euripides, of Pentheus to Dionysus, and in Acts, of Paul to Christ, of a senseless course from which a man should be restrained.

In each case the attacked God himself utters the same to warn his opponent. Indeed, this is the third suggested parallel with Euripides in the Book of Acts. The first supposed parallel is found in chapter 5 verse 39 in the opposing of God, and the second is found in the story of Silas and Paul in the jail in Philippi.

On closer examination these parallels do not seem to be quite as strong as they first appear. Furthermore, the expression kicking against the goads, even if of Greek origin, may have become naturalised into Aramaic or Hebrew in the interim. Paul is established by his commission as a witness and a servant, and the surprising thing here is that he plays the role of Ananias.

He is sent to a persecuting people to open their eyes. While mentioned in the other two accounts of his conversion, his blindness is not mentioned here. Rather, the blindness is that of the Jews and the Gentiles to whom he is sent.

He is sent to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light. He has seen the light, and now he must bring the light. To the hearer of this passage familiar with the other accounts, this sets up a number of key connections.

Paul is now aligned with Ananias, and blind Paul is now associated with the Jews. The theme of light is prominent as a metaphor here, and this might connect it with the language associated with the servant of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 42 verses 6 to 7. I am the

Lord, I have called you in righteousness.

I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. Also Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6. He says, It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel.

I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. We might hear further allusions to the language of Isaiah chapter 61 verse 1 in the calling of Paul. The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who abound. Paul's mission is based upon what he has seen. He bears witness to the risen and ascended Christ, and his mission is in continuity with the Old Testament prophets.

He has promised deliverance from the Gentiles and from his own people. Describing what follows to Agrippa, he shows that he followed the instructions of the vision. He carried out the mission in Damascus, in Jerusalem, through the region of Judea, and also went to the Gentiles.

The reader might be surprised to hear the reference to the region of Judea here. We don't read of any such mission in the story of Acts previously. It was, he argues, on account of this mission that the Jews seized him in the temple and tried to kill him.

It was the reference to his going to the Gentiles that particularly aggravated them. However, the very fact that he is standing there before Agrippa at that time is evidence in favour of the claim that God is on his side, that God commissioned him and promised that he would deliver him from his own people. Summing up the heart of his message in verses 22 and 23, he says that he is teaching nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that Christ must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he will proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.

At this point, Festus, who is probably presiding, interrupts Paul with a loud voice. In all of his studies, he thinks, Paul has lost grip of reality. He is out of his mind.

Paul insists that he has not. Indeed, he is speaking true and rational words, and he appeals to Agrippa in particular. Agrippa has better knowledge of the Jewish teaching, and he would know that what Paul is saying is in accord with the teaching of the prophets and also of Moses.

He presses Agrippa on the point, which perhaps puts Agrippa in a difficult position, Agrippa feeling pressure to come out against Festus in defence of the prophets.

Whatever tone we read in Agrippa's response, it is likely in part an attempt to deflect the force of Paul's statements. Here it becomes very clear that Paul is not just engaging in a defence, he is approaching this as an act of evangelism.

He has been given the opportunity to bear witness before kings, and he is not going to let it pass him by. He openly declares his desire that Agrippa would convert, that he would become a Christian, expressing it as the desire that they would become like him, that what he has described in his own life, the way that the calling of Christ has come to him, that that would be true for them as well. At this point, Agrippa rises up, and the governor Festus, Bernice, and the other authorities there join together in deliberation concerning his case.

They determine that he has done nothing wrong. This is the third time that such a declaration has been made concerning Paul. However, since Paul has appealed to Caesar, their hands are tied, he must be sent.

A question to consider, what truths might Paul have discerned and later expressed in his theology from the vision and the commission that he received from Christ?