

“They’re Real People! — Gamaliel the Elder”

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Acts 5:27-40

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.

³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while.

³⁵ And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.

³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”

So they took his advice, ⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.” [ESV]

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So far we have met several key figures impacted by the story of the resurrection of Jesus. We met Theophilus, the High Priest for whom Dr. Luke wrote his *Gospel* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. He was the son of Annas, the retired High Priest, and the brother-in-law of Caiaphas, who sentenced Jesus to death. He was the grandfather of Joanna, one of the women who accompanied Jesus and His disciples in their ministry.

We also met Mary of Magdala/Bethany, the woman whom Jesus rescued from demon possession and stoning. She had wasted a year’s wages buying rare ointment with which to anoint Jesus, the one who had saved her life. She was the first to see Jesus risen from the dead.

We learned about Nicodemus, the “Sun-Stopper.” one of the three richest men in Jerusalem. We learn that he had given his wealth to the early Christian Church for the sake of the Gospel.

There was James, Jesus’ own brother, who, with his other brothers, did not believe in Jesus, even claiming that Jesus was “out of His mind.” He had become the leader of the Church.

Now we turn to another enigmatic figure — Gamaliel the Elder, mentioned twice in the New Testament. Who was he?

First of all, he was the son of Simeon, the aged man who had waited all of his life to see the promised Messiah.

“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout,

waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.’” [Luke 2:25-32 ESV]

It is no mere coincidence that it is Dr. Luke who preserved this story about Simeon. He knew these people. Luke knew that Gamaliel's grandfather was the great Rabbi Hillel who was the most important scholar of Jewish Law before Jesus' birth. Simeon had been the President of the Sanhedrin in his prime. Now his son Gamaliel had ascended to that same lofty position. These people — whether Annas, or Caiaphas, or Theophilus, or Nicodemus, or James, Jesus' brother — were all acquainted with each other.

Paul, then known as Saul, played a role in this story, too. Paul was a student of Gamaliel. He defended himself in these words:

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.” [Acts 22:3-5 ESV]

Gamaliel remembered his student. He once described Saul as “that impudent student who had espoused heresy.” Most Talmudic scholars recognize that Gamaliel was talking about Paul.

Like his grandfather Hillel, Gamaliel was recognized as the leading scholar of the Torah in his time. When he died, the writers of the Talmud exclaimed “When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, regard for the Torah ceased, and purity and piety died.”

Gamaliel was in charge of the observations of the months and seasons for the proper timing of the Jewish festivals and observances, such as Passover, Shavuot and Yom Kippur. When he declared “It is sanctified,” the whole Jewish world took notice.

What happened to Gamaliel the First which led him to take a lenient, liberal stand in defense of the Apostles?

Consider who was there when Peter and his companions were brought before the Sanhedrin. The High Priest who was in charge of the proceedings was Joseph Caiaphas. Caiaphas' father-in-law, Annas, was also there. Theophilus would have been there. Gamaliel's student, Saul (who would later be converted on the road to Damascus and become Paul) was also there, being a member of the Sanhedrin.

The resurrection of Jesus had occurred just a few weeks before. Pentecost had happened, with its explosive growth in that Messianic group now called “The Way,” the early Christian Church. Nicodemus had bravely joined them and given his vast wealth to the fledgling Church.

That the lame man by the temple gate had been healed was incontrovertible. That all Jerusalem was abuzz about the events of Pentecost was obvious.

When Peter had courageously proclaimed “We ought to obey God rather than man,” Gamaliel the Elder was stirred. He had taught that himself. When Peter continued with his summary—

“The God of our Fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him at His right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” [Acts 5:30-32]

— the great Gamaliel the Elder was convicted. Sending the apostles outside, he stood and told his enraged colleagues,

“Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men... keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” [Acts 5:35, 38-39 ESV]

While Gamaliel never became a Christian, his word held vast sway in the Sanhedrin at a most important moment in the earliest days of Christianity. God used him to protect the birth of the Christian Church. As for his student, Saul? Well... stay tuned.

For Further Contemplation:

But in the council there was one man who recognized the voice of God in the words spoken by the disciples. This was Gamaliel, a Pharisee of good reputation and a man of learning and high position. His clear intellect saw that the violent step contemplated by the priests would lead to terrible consequences. Before addressing those present, he requested that the prisoners be removed. He well knew the elements he had to deal with; he knew that the murderers of Christ would hesitate at nothing in order to carry out their purpose.

He then spoke with great deliberation and calmness, saying: “Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men. For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought. After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed. And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.”

The priests saw the reasonableness of these views, and were obliged to agree with Gamaliel. Yet their prejudice and hatred could hardly be restrained. Very reluctantly, after beating the disciples and charging them again at the peril of their lives to preach no more in the name of Jesus, they released them. [Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 82-83.]