

Acts 23:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.

Analysis

I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest—Paul's statement 'I did not know' (οὐκ ἤδειν, ouk edein) has sparked much discussion. Perhaps Paul had poor eyesight (Galatians 4:15), or Ananias wasn't wearing high priestly garments, or Paul spoke ironically ('I didn't recognize behavior so corrupt as befitting a high priest'). Regardless, Paul immediately submitted to Scripture.

For it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people—Paul quoted Exodus 22:28, demonstrating his submission to biblical authority even when defending himself against injustice. The Greek archonta (ruler) acknowledges God-ordained authority deserving respect despite personal unworthiness. This models Christian ethics: honor the office even when confronting the office-holder's sin. Paul balanced prophetic boldness (calling out injustice) with covenantal submission (honoring God's word).

Historical Context

Paul had been absent from Jerusalem for years, possibly explaining unfamiliarity with current leadership. Exodus 22:28 was foundational to Jewish respect for authority. Paul's citation showed his continued reverence for Torah even while proclaiming freedom from its ceremonial requirements. This demonstrated to the Sanhedrin that his gospel didn't promote lawlessness.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How do you maintain biblical respect for authority while confronting its failures?
2. What does Paul's immediate Scripture quotation teach about knowing God's word for ethical guidance in tense moments?

Interlinear Text

ἔφη	τε	οὐ	Παῦλος	οὐκ	ἔδειν	ἀδελφοί	ὅτι	ἐστὶν
said	Then	G3588	Paul	not	I wist	brethren	that	he was
G5346	G5037		G3972	G3756	G1492	G80	G3754	G2076
ἀρχιερεύς·	γέγραπται	γὰρ	Ἄρχοντα	τοῦ	λαοῦ	σου	οὐκ	
the high priest	it is written	for	of the ruler	G3588	people	of thy	not	
G749	G1125	G1063	G758		G2992	G4675	G3756	
ἐρεῖς	κακῶς							
Thou shalt	evil							
G2046	G2560							

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 22:28 (Evil): Thou shalt not revile the gods, nor curse the ruler of thy people.

Ecclesiastes 10:20 (Parallel theme): Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.

2 Peter 2:10 (Evil): But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, selfwilled, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.

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