

# **The Naked Bible Podcast 2.0**

**Number 57**

**“Acts 22”**

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**With**

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**July 12, 2015**

## Acts 22

In an earlier episode (#50), we asked whether Paul's stoning at Lystra in Acts 14 was the backdrop for the heavenly visionary experience he described in 2 Corinthians 12. Did Paul in fact have an NDE? We concluded that the chronology Paul alluded to in 2 Corinthians 12 didn't align with the Lystra event and therefore dismissed that possibility. In this episode, we consider a more fruitful trajectory. In Acts 22:17 Paul alludes to a trance vision he had shortly after his conversion experience – an experience distinct from his encounter on the road to Damascus but in which he nevertheless saw Jesus again. This correlation works chronologically. If we presume a relationship between Acts 22:17-21 and 2 Corinthians 12, but passages take on new significance – especially when we consider similar ascension experiences into the heavenly places found in Jewish literature prior to, and contemporary with, the apostolic era.

Here are the papers referenced in the show:

[HEAVEN, Heavenlies, Paradise-DPL](#)

[Heavenly Ascent in Jewish and Pagan Traditions-DNTB](#)

[Mysticism-DNTB](#)

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 57, Acts 22. I'm your layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing?

**MSH:** Very good. Glad to be back for another week and another episode.

**TS:** Well, we're almost done with Acts so, I guess Acts 22 this week.

**MSH:** Yeah, we're trucking our way through it so one chapter today. We've been doing two but we'll focus on one today sort of see what happens after that.

**TS:** Sounds good.

**MSH:** Alright, so let's go to Acts 22. Now, for those who either know or I should say those that don't know, or didn't happen to listen last week, Acts 21 ends with Paul causing a riot. He's in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Jews from Asia, who had troubled him earlier in his travels, show up, at least some of them, and they spot him and start a riot. He gets arrested. He has to be saved from the mob by Roman guards. And at the end of Acts 21, we read this.

<sup>37</sup> As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek?" <sup>38</sup> Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" <sup>39</sup> Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people." <sup>40</sup> And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

**MSH:** So let's just jump into Acts 22. What we're going to encounter here is really going to pick up on something that we had discussed earlier, way back in episode 50, so seven episodes ago when we were talking about Acts 14. So I'm going to start just a couple verses into this and then I'm going to go back to Acts 14 and sort of pick-up with why we connected Acts 14 to Acts 22 and get everybody caught up to speed. So Paul starts speaking in Acts 22 saying,

22 "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."

<sup>2</sup> And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: <sup>3</sup> "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. <sup>4</sup> I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, <sup>5</sup> 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.

**MSH:** And from this point on, Paul is going to get into his testimony, which we've covered in previous episodes about how he went to Damascus and he gets knocked off the horse and the light shines down on him and he hears the voice of Jesus, I'm Jesus as Nazareth whom you persecuting, so on so forth. We know Paul's conversion story and after Paul's conversion, it becomes a little murkier. The part of his life that we're familiar with is just what he's going to get into. Really from this verse that we stopped at right around verse 6 all the way to verse 16, we get the familiar story of Paul, his testimony, what happens to him on the way to Damascus, how Ananias befriended him, how he was baptized and the scales fell from his eyes and so and so forth.

We all know that. That's the part about Paul's life we know. We don't really know that well what happened to him afterwards, sort of what he did prior to when he shows up in the book of Acts in Acts 13 and then the Jerusalem Council reporting about his ministry and so on and so forth. It's Acts 13 that really marks when Paul begins to engage in sort of endorsed ministry or the ministry that God really picked out for him. So that there's this sort of nebulous period, and that's going to become an issue when we return to Acts 22. Now let's go back to Acts 14. Back in episode 50, we were following Paul and his companions through their missionary journeys. And in Acts 14, we hit this specific episode. Let me read, this is Acts 14:19-23.

<sup>19</sup> But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. <sup>20</sup> But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. <sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples,

**MSH:** So we asked the question when we were at this point earlier. Is this event when he was stoned at Lystra what Paul is referring to or referred to later when he wrote his second letter to

the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 12, where Paul describes sort of a mystical, spiritual experience? So we asked the question, did Paul have an NDE, near-death experience, at Lystra? And there have been others that have asked that question. If you recall from episode 50, our answer was no because really of the chronology. Let me read 2 Corinthians 12 though so that you sort of know what I'm talking about. So we have Paul there in Lystra. He gets done. Did he have an NDE? Is this what he's referring to when he writes this chapter or these verses as follows. So here 2 Corinthians 12, it's going to be verses 1 through 10.

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup>I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. <sup>3</sup>And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—<sup>4</sup>and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—<sup>6</sup>though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. <sup>7</sup>So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, **[MSH: So that statement right there connects what he has just been describing this sort of anonymous person, this man in Christ who saw visions and revelations of the Lord, here he says so to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations. He connects himself to this person. He is this person.]** a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup>But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup>For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

**MSH:** Now that's the first 10 verses 2 Corinthians 12. Scholars have wondered what was he talking about, this visions and revelations of the Lord, and some asked, well, maybe what happened at Lystra, maybe there's a connection here. The problem with it as I mentioned in passing before and also back in episode 50 was this chronological reference point, 14 years ago. If you go through the chronology in the life of the apostle Paul, the Lystra event is really hard to align with Paul's comment in 2 Corinthians 12:2 about something that happened to him 14 years ago. And so for that reason and for some other things that we'll get into today, it seems best to identify what Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 12 with some other event in his life. And that event is something he refers to in Acts 22. So let's go back to Acts 22. Paul is giving his testimony in verses 6 to 16. So I want to jump back in at verse 17. Now listen to what Paul says here. He's just given his testimony. He's been baptized. Now verse 17 of Acts 22 says this,

<sup>17</sup> “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance <sup>18</sup> and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ <sup>19</sup> And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. <sup>20</sup> And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ <sup>21</sup> And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” <sup>22</sup> Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

**MSH:** Then the Roman tribune takes him into the barracks and then the rest of the story ensues. What I want to focus on in this episode, the rest of this episode, is this little anecdote by Paul. We know the story of his conversion. He goes Damascus, Ananias befriends him, and he gets baptized. The scales fall from his eyes and eventually, they have to have to help him escape from Damascus. So right around when that's happening, I don't really like the ESV translation, when I had returned to Jerusalem and he falls into a trance and the voice says make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly. I don't think there's really a chronological problem with that. I guess I could live with the rendering but some might think that there's a little confusion there. Just look at what it says. He goes back to Jerusalem, was praying, falls into a trance and a voice says, well, yeah, you're back here in Jerusalem, now get out of here. Get out of Jerusalem quickly because they won't accept your testimony about me. You could fiddle with the language there a little bit to make maybe the transition, the itinerary, a little bit clearer. But I guess it's adequate.

The point is Paul leaves Damascus, goes back to Jerusalem, and at some point, we're not really told how long he's there, even in other places he alludes to what he's doing. At some point, Jesus appears to him. He's in a trance. I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me. Well, the him in context there is the Lord and he addresses him as the Lord, and around verse 21, he said to me go for I will send you far away to the Gentiles. We know it's the Lord so at some point when he's there in Jerusalem, the Lord comes to him and says get out of here. I know you had to leave Damascus. You came here. Well, that's logical, but you got to get out of here, too, because it's just not the time for you to be here. They're not going to accept what you say. You need to go somewhere else, and he does.

Again, Paul alludes to some other things he did before Acts 13 when he winds up back, in 13-15, he winds up back in Jerusalem telling them, telling the disciples, the church in Jerusalem what's going on, and they do accept them. So there's this interval there but it's initiated by this trance, which is really kind of odd. It's very easy to miss this line about him praying in the Temple and then he falls into a trance. A lot of scholars think this is the event that Paul is referring to in 2 Corinthians 12. In other words, when he falls into this trance early in his life as a believer, shortly after his conversion, when this happens to him, this is what he sees, what he describes in 2 Corinthians 12. And we don't get a whole lot of details. He says I was caught up, the man, this man, this third person, I knew this man, was caught up in paradise whether it's in the body or out of the body, I don't know, only God knows. So we get that little detail. He hears things that really he shouldn't have heard and he shouldn't talk about, or he doesn't want to talk about. And after that, this “messenger” of Satan harassed him, the thorn in his flesh, and he

asked God to deal with that, to take it away. God's says my grace is sufficient for you, and so on so forth.

So we get these little snippets that have something to do with this experience that he alludes to in Acts 22:17 or at least Luke does, and that Paul, if there's a connection, alludes to in 2 Corinthians 12. So I'm going to go on with that presumption, that there is a connection between this trance event in Acts 22 and what Paul was writing in 2 Corinthians 12. What I want to do is lay out why scholars think this is a good candidate. The first reason is that it does work with the chronology. This would have been very early in Paul's life as a believer, shortly after his conversion. So there's no chronological obstacle to it. But the real reason why scholars feel sort of compelled to consider this is because what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12 has some really interesting parallels to Jewish literature, Jewish theological literature about visionary experiences, and also literature that was well before this era. So what Paul is describing here has parallels in contemporary literature to his own lifetime and also to literature that would've been a few hundred years earlier, stuff we found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. So scholars have noticed this and I want to take you through some of these elements just so that you can sort of understand why scholars think about these references and these passages the way they do. As far as a background, there are some sort of genres or sub genres of literature that are a lot like this. I'll mention two specifically.

One is called, and you might run into this if you're doing Bible study and you're doing background study, one is called *Hekhalot* literature. *Hekhalot* is the Hebrew term, it's a plural, for palaces or temples. And so *Hekhalot* literature describes sort of cosmic journeys through concentric levels of heavenly palaces or heavenly temples. And that's one type. The other type is known as *Merkavah* mysticism, and *Merkavah* can either be spelled with a B *Merkabah* or *Merkavah* with a V. It's pronounced *V* if you'd be saying it in Hebrew, *Merkavah* mysticism. The word literally means throne chariot. A *Merkavah* is a throne chariot. It's the thing in Ezekiel 1. It's this throne upon which God was seated in Ezekiel 1 that has cherubim underneath it, and the cherubim have wings and it moves around, that sort of thing. There's a whole body of literature, especially between the Testaments, especially in even more so among the Dead Sea Scrolls, that have these mystical heavenly visions of the throne chariot of God and even some in the songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. It's a specific Dead Sea Scroll that have multiple chariot thrones flying around the throne room of God.

That text specifically is an interesting Divine Council text because it shows divine plurality and associating multiple thrones with God's thrones. It sort of takes us mentally back to Daniel 7 when the thrones, plural, were set in that Divine Council meeting and, of course, the verdict is given about the destruction of the fourth beast and whatnot. And you have the son of man appearance there. So *Merkavah* mysticism, and specifically that text with multiple chariot thrones, harkens back into a Divine Council meeting. So these are the two major bodies of literature that literate Jews would have known prior to Paul and also listening to Paul and reading 2 Corinthians 12. They would've seen some things that were familiar to them. Now why is that important? It's important because they considered these things credible. They consider these things credible testimony. They had people in their own tradition, their own Jewish tradition, let's just set this weird thing called Christianity aside. There were very influential and important figures in Judaism that claim to have had these experiences and they were embraced as reality. They're not lying. This is true, this is true testimony. And they knew from the Old Testament.

If you've read part of my Myth That Is True draft, this whole motif of the way you legitimize, the way you can tell whether a prophet or prophetic figure is legitimate is he has a divine encounter. That is the litmus test for legitimacy in biblical theology to be a spokesperson for God. Well, Jews were well aware of that and some of those divine encounters were these throne room visions. And so when people in their own religious tradition that they respected highly, important rabbis for example, sort of couch their own authority in the same kinds of visions or very similar visions, they took them seriously. Well, here's Paul relating his testimony saying the same thing. And you can see, for them to be consistent, they better essentially shut up and listen. And it is really inconsistent for them to reject Paul's testimony while they're accepting somebody else's. So it is important for that reason in terms of putting Paul in context in what he's saying.

But there's a real specific one of these accounts that I want to sort of focus on that becomes really, it has some really striking points of analogy to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12, and I want to focus on that just a little bit. To set that up, you have to realize that these mystical texts in Judaism, they were actually forbidden reading to laypeople. They're something that, this is a scholarly term, but they're something scholars talk about called the *Merkavah* restriction. And this is the rabbinic prohibition against people who were not officially sanctioned rabbis or scribes or scholars were not supposed to read this material because the supposition is you're not going to understand it. You're going to parse it incorrectly. You're going to mess up the theology of them. And the reason is, catch this, this will be very familiar for those who are familiar with the work I do. The reason they didn't like it is because some of these visions, just like Daniel 7, have God in anthropomorphic form and visible. In other words, God appears as a man visible, and they also have divine plurality. So the rabbis wanted people to not look at passages that had the second power, the anthropomorphized Yahweh of the Old Testament, the second Yahweh figure, the one that was visible in human form. They said well, we don't want you to look at that because you're not going to be able to handle that. You're not going to be able to really understand that.

Let a professional Rabbi tell you what that means. SO there was an actual official rabbinic restriction against reading this material. And you run across it in the Talmud and all these other Jewish resources about, this is off-limits. Now, of course, we can just go read this stuff. But there was actually restriction. I'll just read you one of them. I might as well. The Mishna states that no individual was permitted to quote expound *Ha Merkavah* unless he was a *haham*. Now *Ha Merkavah* was a throne chariot so no individual is permitted to expound throne chariot material unless he is a *haham* a wise man, a sage. In the pre-rabbinic era, *haham* would have referred to as any sort of mystic book but in the rabbinic period, it is a term that was used specifically for sanctioned officially recognized rabbis. If you weren't one of those you shouldn't be reading this. And I find it really interesting because here it's one of these hints that the Jews understood that Yahweh does show up in our Bible as a man. And they knew that in some instances both figures, the anthropomorphic Yahweh and then the invisible Yahweh are in the same scene.

This is going back to the stuff that I do on the two powers in heaven idea. That was officially accepted as Jewish theology up until the second century which, not coincidentally, coincides with the rise of Christianity. The idea of a Godhead was okay in Judaism until Christianity came along and so this prohibition takes us right back into that turf. So the Jews know that we can't just let anybody know this because their minds might drift over to this



Christian stuff and eventually they just declared a heresy. Here when we're talking about Paul's day, this is just something you didn't do unless you were an official scholar, official Rabbi. Now one of these particular instances, some of you may have heard of this one because it comes up a lot. I've actually heard this on shows like coast-to-coast a.m. and some other talk shows because it's sort of a well-known Jewish legend. But it's called the Pardes legend. Now Pardes you can probably tell sounds a lot like paradise.

We get our word paradise from this term. The Pardes legend is the story of four men who went to into Pardes, went into paradise, that's how we would Anglicize it to make an English word, and it's found in the Tosephta, in both Talmud's, as part of a collection that is further part of the Mischa. So Pardes is a Hebrew term. Literally it refers to an orchard or Garden, Eden. That's not a hard association to make. Eden was the place where God dwelled, which was paradise. You can see how mentally we get there. So the story goes that these four men are allowed to enter Pardes, paradise, and the four men are Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher (Elisha ben Abuyah), and the famous Rabbi, Akiba. So Ben Azzai looked at God and died. Ben Zoma looked and went crazy. Acher went bonkers and started to destroy the garden. But Rabbi Akiba entered God's presence, the garden, the paradise, in peace and departed in peace. He survived. He did okay. So the story really sort of elevates Akiba's status as someone who can sort of handle this. And you say, what's the big deal with that? Well, if we get a little further into the story, what I'm going to do now is I'm going to list out a few of the specific elements in the greater details of the story and I think you'll be able to see how they actually run parallel to some of the things Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12.

It's very interesting. So in the Pardes story, there are warnings given to the four against self-exaltation. And this is very common in *Hekhalot* literature. You're going to see some stuff but don't think it's because your great. Don't get puffed up. Don't get a big ego. Don't go way here thinking that your special or something like that. Even Akiba in the in the actual Pardes story, when he's asked, why didn't you go crazy and die and start destroying everything? Akiba says it's not because I was greater than my fellows, so there's this emphasis on humility and against self-exultation. Well, that's pretty clear what we have going on in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 is engaged in defending his apostolic authority, his status as an apostle, which his opponents have challenged. We've talked about this on a number of episodes in the podcasts in those two chapters, 2 Corinthians 11-12. Paul has been challenged and he wants to defend himself so he sort of drifts into this, well, ok, let me talk about this guy I know that was caught up to paradise and saw visions and heard revelations from God. I'll talk about this guy because I don't really want to boast because boasting is not good. It's not relevant. I don't want to do that because I want to focus on my weaknesses because that's where the Lord is magnified.

You get this same kind of thing going on in what Paul is doing. He wants to refrain from boasting even as he drifts into this account of seeing the very presence of God, and in fact, seeing the Lord. He is seeing the anthropomorphized God. He is seeing God in the flesh, Jesus, the resurrected Christ. So we get a very similar feel at that point to what Paul is saying. It's a Divine Council encounter. It's a divine encounter what he's relating. Second point, the Pardes story of the four men, of course Akiba is the only one that comes out of this sane and peacefully, also relates to the fact that if you survive this encounter you will have supernatural powers and authority, supernatural abilities. You'll have a supernatural endorsement essentially that will be conferred upon you. Anyone who can survive basically gets to see the *Merkavah*, the throne of God and survives will be the one who is empowered to function as God's spokesperson, God's

emissary, God's ambassador. Look at Paul. Paul is using this experience to say, hey, I am an apostle.

And back in earlier chapters in 2 Corinthians and lots of other epistles and in Luke, Luke's writing in the book of Acts, Paul's authority, his status, is validated by supernatural powers, by the Spirit enabling them to do certain things, like heal people. He raised Eutychus from the dead. We saw that in an early episode. He exercises demonic spirits. It's the same sort of thing going on. He is God's spokesperson. What he is able to do validates him, and the only reason he can do it is because he's had a direct encounter with God, just like the prophets of old, the whole Divine Council motif for validating who is a true spokesperson for God and who is not. Third one, the Jewish Pardes tradition, in that tradition, Pardes was viewed as the Edenic Garden, the very dwelling place of God, the abode of God. It was essentially the celestial holy of holies. It's where God's presence was. And Pardes becomes a term that is used for the uppermost level of heaven.

We get this language in the New Testament, and even in this passage here as well, about a tiered cosmology. Sometimes it's a third heaven, and that's the language we get in 2 Corinthians 12. And you'll see that repeated in Jewish texts, contemporary with Paul, and earlier than Paul, like the Dead Sea Scrolls. Your cosmology will have three levels, the third heaven is the uppermost one. Sometimes there will also be several levels of heaven, the uppermost one as well. And scholars have debated whether that sort of like a doubling down on the cosmology. In some of these episodes where people will go through various stages of heaven before they see God, the first three kind of repeated by the second three and then you hit number seven, who is God. So there's actually a conceptual overlap and I want to get into the details of a seventh level and third level. They're 6 and one half of a dozen. They're the same place. It's where God is. I will give some files to Trey that give you the basics of that cosmology because I know people are interested in that. I've gotten questions about that before, but I don't want to get too far into the issue now. So you can go read those things that Trey will post along with this episode. The third point here is this idea of the uppermost heaven is very common in these paradise stories. So back in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul alludes to the third heaven. And in verse 3 he uses the term paradise in very clear terminology there. And scholars have built good arguments that third heaven and paradise are what Paul's really talking about, the same thing. It don't want to belabor that.

I think you get the point. The fourth point, Akiba and of course his three companions, the one who dies and the other three sort of go bonkers, when they enter Paradise, they hear conversations. They hear things that they are normally not privy and probably "shouldn't be hearing." This is a conversation between God and those who attend him. It's a Divine Council meeting. They actually get to hear some of this, over here it, and the paradise stories talk about people hearing these things and sort of either getting a sense of, well, I better not spill the beans when I get back to Earth, or do I really belong here? I really shouldn't be listening to this. I'm sort of out of place. I'm crashing the party, that sort of sense. So there's this feeling, impression that you get from these texts that the humans who get to see this are not only privileged but also, there's a sense of inappropriateness or even peril in some cases where, I really shouldn't be here. This is sort of above my pay grade kind of thing. We get the same kind of feeling with Paul and 2 Corinthians 12:4 says, this man, who is him, you heard unutterable words which is not permitted for a man to speak.

So Paul drifts into this episode in his life that he knows because he knows his Old Testament, and frankly, he knows his Divine Council theology too. He knows that this validates his status as a spokesperson for God but he doesn't want to boast about it. And so he only obliquely alludes to, yeah, I saw this and I heard some stuff but I'm just not going to get into it, and he catches it in this third person language, this man who was caught up into heaven. So he's trying to validate his status as an apostle but yet not boast, yet not really get into it. He doesn't want to use it but he sort of feels he has to use it in some way to address the attacks levied at him from his opponents that the Corinthians have heard. The Corinthians have heard these other people try and take Paul down. And so he's got to say something but he doesn't want to really get into it too much.

I think, as well, that the paradise stories, these divine encounters, you get to see the Divine Council thing, I also think that's what's behind Paul's line in 1 Corinthians 13 about, 'though I speak with the tongues of men and angels,' that whole thing. Basically if I don't have love, who cares about this. I think there's an oblique reference there to this whole idea of the tongues of angels. He's heard angelic conversations and he's basically saying look, even though I can tell you that I've been in the room, I have been in the room with God and heard these conversations, if I don't have love, that just doesn't mean anything, it doesn't mean squat. So I think Paul's actually alluding to this episode or maybe another one in 1 Corinthians 13. It's the same audience, it's the Corinthians. It's just kind of an interesting thing I thought I'd throw in there. Fifth and finally, we'll do one more. The nature of Paul's thorn in the flesh I think is affected by these parallels, too. Now let's just say something about the thorn in the flesh a little bit. There are a number of different interpretations of this. In Greek, the thorn in the flesh is referred to as the messenger of Satan, it's *angeles satanas*. *Angeles* is normally translated angels but that just means messenger, so messenger of Satan. So some have speculated that well, maybe Paul was encountered by an entity, that he's plagued by a divine being who's been working for Satan or in cahoots or aligned with Satan's purposes, whatever, hostile to Paul, hostile to the program of God.

That's one option. Others have said this is probably an illness. Some have said well, it's an illness caused by a demonic entity or something like that. Scholars, you can read the different options are there. I think, though, that any interpretation of this has to account for the connection, because Paul mentions this specifically right on the heels of relating this visionary experience. There's a connection in Paul's mind between this visionary experience and this quote, thorn in the flesh, this messenger of Satan. And I think that is important because, here we go back to the Pardes stories. In the Pardes legend that includes Akiba, Akiba actually encounters what he refers to as angels of destruction who seek to do him harm. They want to do violence to Akiba and God forbids that in the Pardes story about Akiba. He protects Akiba from angels of destruction who show up in that event to harm this person who God allowed to see the *Merkavah* and not only survived but go away in peace. So that person, that human being, becomes a target of these angels of destruction and God steps in says no. I'm not going to allow this.

So scholars have looked at that and thought, boy, that is a good argument that the thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, is some sort of entity that is dogging Paul. And Paul beseeches God and says can you do something about this? Can you remove this thing? Can you remove it? And God says no because I'm going to allow this to happen because my strength is made perfect in your weakness. So it ends differently for Paul, but yet there's this conceptual

parallel. So I would say to sort of move toward the end of our episode here, I think the cumulative weight of evidence is pretty clear. I don't know if I would use the word compelling but I think it's close to being compelling. You have five specific points of overlap with these earlier *Merkavah Hekhalot* paradise stories, these elements are in them. Even the one that is sort of most famous and you say the Akiba story, wasn't that after the New Testament era? Wasn't that after when Paul lived? It was, Akiba lived after that. But scholars have noted that and said look, all these kinds of elements are in the earlier literature going back to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

So the Akiba story adopts these elements and elevates Akiba as the leading rabbi of his day, and here we have in 2 Corinthians 12, look at what is going on with Paul. Paul's testimony aligns with these things, and so if you were Jewish audience like I said before, look, when your leaders tell you this stuff, they relate these experiences, you believe them, and you give them authority. You listen to them. They become your spiritual leaders. And Paul knows this. He knows that the Jews have done this that others have claimed to have seen the Lord, and so on so forth. So when he's relating his testimony, it's very easy for us to say you know what? Paul has a good argument here. Paul is pressing them to hear him out because they can look at the Old Testament and say we believe the prophets. We believe God's messengers. We believe this rabbi. We believe this guy, this guy, and this other guy. And Paul says what about me? My story is no different. You need to give me an audience and you need to listen to what I have to say. Now there's one fundamental difference between Paul's story and everybody else, and I think you know what that is.

In Paul's version, even though he's framing his call to ministry in a way that's entirely consistent with the Old Testament prophets, and every other spokesperson for God all the way back to Adam through Noah, Moses, Joshua, even before we hit the classical prophets, all the major spokespeople for God had divine encounters. Even though Paul is recounting his testimony to the Jews listening to him in language that they would've understood and known as consistent with biblical theology, his experience is different because who does he see? He sees Jesus. He sees this person, whom they have crucified, sitting on the throne. He sees the incarnate God, Jesus Christ, and that's the one, going back to Acts 22:21, 'he said to me,' Paul says he, the Lord from verse 19, he calls him the Lord,' the Lord said to me go for I will send you far away to the Gentiles,' and that they just don't want to hear. They don't want to hear this business about Jesus being on the throne. They don't want to hear this business about the Gentiles are part of the people of God.

They just flip out, they flip out at that point. And the rest of Acts 22 is the Tribune takes them back to the barracks. They're going to beat him. They're going to flog him. And Paul interrupts and says hey, is it lawful for you to do this to someone who's a Roman citizen? And then the Tribune flips out and says well, now, wait a minute. I got this by a considerable sum. How did you become a Roman citizen? Paul says, hey, I was born one, and they stop. They realize he's a Roman citizen. They could be in trouble by harming him without a trial. And this is the thing that triggers the events that follow. Paul's going to speak before the council. The Jewish Council, the 70, the Sanhedrin, it is not a coincidence that it's 70. This is the Jewish Council, the religious council that is mirrored off the Divine Council motifs from the Old Testament. These are the Jewish authorities. He's going to get to speak to them and that's the whole episode we'll talk about next time, about both Pharisees and Sadducees, and Paul splits the crowd with what he says. We'll get to that in a future episode of the podcast. But this is the

event the triggers Paul's time before that Council. It triggers the event of Paul eventually appealing to Caesar, getting to Rome, and as we talked about on the podcast in the previous episode, he's like yeah, I can't wait to see Rome guys. You Roman gals that don't believe in Jesus, I can't wait to see you.

But guess what, I'm just passing through because I'm supposed to go to Spain because I am the apostle to the Gentiles, and this needs to happen for the fullness of the Gentiles who are brought in so the Lord can return. We talked about that before, but right here in Acts 22, this is what starts the whole ball rolling, this confrontation. And it's kind of interesting that it's prophesied by Paul's allusion back or least we can link the two because we have the whole New Testament, Paul mentions this trance he had. We know what went on in that trance because we can read 2 Corinthians 12. So this whole thing is prefaced by Paul recounting his calling in the throne room of God, right there with the Divine Council, and he says they are the ones that sent me to the Gentiles. For those of us who have the whole New Testament and can put these pieces together, it's really telling because the rest of Paul story, he's going to get to Rome, and we know he wants to get to Spain and we know why. So it helps us frame what's going on in the book of Acts and in Paul's life.