

Who was Theudas in the Bible?

Theudas is mentioned once in the Bible, in Acts 5. Theudas was a false messiah, seen by the Romans as an insurrectionary and rabble-rouser. In Acts 5 he is mentioned as an example of the futility of pretense, and his claims are compared to those of Jesus.

The allusion to Theudas comes during a trial. Peter and the apostles had been arrested in Jerusalem a second time for preaching that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 5:18). They were brought before the Sanhedrin and questioned by the high priest (verse 27), who reminded the apostles that they had been strictly forbidden to preach in Jesus' name. "Yet," the high priest says, "you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of [Jesus'] blood" (verse 28). It's at this point that Peter and the apostles make their famous declaration, "We must obey God rather than human beings!" (verse 29).

The council was infuriated at the apostles' refusal to bow to their demands, and they had a mind to stone them to death—which they would later do to Stephen (Acts 7). But from within their ranks comes a voice of reason: a much-respected Pharisee named Gamaliel (under whom Paul trained, Acts 22:3) stood up and addressed the Sanhedrin: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men" (Acts 5:35). Then Gamaliel mentions Theudas: "Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing" (Acts 5:36). Theudas-following was a fad that soon died out once the leader was gone.

Given the fate of Theudas, Gamaliel says, the council should let things run their course: "In the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if

their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-39). Gamaliel’s wisdom is evident. If Jesus is a false messiah, Gamaliel reasons, then His work would come to nothing; Peter and Jesus’ other followers would eventually be scattered, and the movement would fail. However, Gamaliel says, if Jesus’ followers are truly doing the work of God, then it would be foolish to stand in the way.

Gamaliel’s speech worked. Rather than kill the apostles, the court had them flogged, “ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go” (Acts 5:40). The apostles left, rejoicing that “they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (verse 41). And, of course, they “never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah” (verse 42). The gospel continued to spread. Jesus continued to build His church.

The Theudas that Gamaliel mentions is a different Theudas from the one appearing in Josephus’ history, *Antiquities of the Jews*. The Theudas Josephus describes would have been killed sometime between AD 44 and 46, and the Theudas mentioned in Acts 5 met his fate much earlier.

Theudas was one of a long line of false messiahs that Jesus warned about (Mark 13:6). Theudas promoted himself as something, when, in reality, he was nothing. He probably gathered a following based on a promise to “reconquer” the Promised Land, the popular idea of the time being that the Messiah would overthrow Rome. Theudas’s following was short-lived, one proof, as Gamaliel said, that the movement was of human origin.

Theudas claimed a power that he never possessed; Jesus publicly showed His power on many

occasions (John 11:47). Theudas tried to set up an earthly kingdom by means of force; Jesus stated that His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). Theudas and Jesus were both killed by the Romans; however, Theudas stayed dead, and his followers disbanded. Jesus rose again, and His followers are still going strong.