

Torturous times: The need for a Gamaliel

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

The weeks after Easter are full of miracles, especially if you are following the postresurrection story in the book of Acts. Acts positively spills over with signs and wonders. Take chapter five, for example: Ananias and Sapphira fall dead after being scolded by Peter. The sick are carried into the streets in the hopes that Peter's healing shadow will fall on them. The apostles heal people tormented by unclean spirits. When the apostles are arrested and imprisoned, an angel comes to them, opens the prison doors and instructs them to "stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life."

The police quickly lock the apostles up again, but Peter and the others persist in preaching their gospel of Jesus, "Leader and Savior." By this point, the members of the council have had it with the apostles. This time they want to kill them.

The apostles' lives are saved by Rabbi Gamaliel, who talks his angry colleagues down with a reasoned proposal. Look at the other revolutionary leaders who have risen up in the past, he says. They attract some followers, but nothing comes of it. They claim to be somebody, but eventually their followers disperse and their movements fail. If this movement is not of God, he argues, history teaches us that it will fail without our having to kill anybody. But if it is of God, nothing we do will be able to stop it.

Of all the signs and wonders in Acts 5, Rabbi Gamaliel's seems to me the most wondrous. There's no magic to it. The only angels who assist him are the better angels of his nature. But it is miraculous nonetheless, a sign and a wonder of the highest order—a reasoned, intellectual intervention into anger bent on killing.

On April 22, the *New York Times* reported that the decision of the United States to employ brutal methods of interrogation after 9/11 was approved "without a single dissent from Cabinet members and lawmakers" who were briefed on these methods by the CIA. Never in the course of these discussions did a single Rabbi Gamaliel raise his or her voice. The *Times* concluded that this "extraordinary consensus" was possible because no one involved in these conversations knew the history of these

methods of interrogation. What they knew was that the American military subjected their soldiers to these techniques in specialized training. This, apparently, was reassuring to our lawmakers. Surely techniques we used on our own soldiers were legal.

What they did not know is that our military learned these methods from torturers who used these “alternative” forms of interrogation to extract false confessions from American prisoners of war. The fact that waterboarding had been prosecuted by the U.S. in war crimes trials after World War II was not a part of these briefings. Lawmakers did not learn that such techniques had been used to torture people since the days of the Spanish Inquisition. They did not possess the historical information that would allow them to think with the past about the present and the future.

In theological schools we put a high premium on history and on what we often call critical thinking. Sometimes, especially in the late days of a semester, it can be a struggle to find the intersections between the critical thinking we are called upon to do in school and the work we feel called to do in the world. Critical thinking about the past can seem like a luxury when there is so much need for action in the present.

The necessity of critical thinking comes into all-too-bright focus, though, when we imagine our nation’s leaders listening to an argument for the legality of torture without anyone raising a critical question or suggesting another path. Then the intersections between the work we do in school and the life of the world become suddenly, terribly visible. The world’s need for people who can think critically with the past about the present is painfully clear when we remember what the refusal of historical, critical thinking has wrought on human bodies from Guantánamo Bay to Abu Ghraib.

When the leaders of Jerusalem wanted to kill Peter and the apostles, Rabbi Gamaliel appealed to history to make a case for the apostles’ lives. Remember Theudas? he asked. Remember Judas the Galilean? If this is not of God, it will collapse under its own weight. But if it is of God—well, we don’t want to be found fighting against God.

Rabbi Gamaliel’s eloquent argument saved the apostles’ lives, but it did not, alas, keep them from being tortured. The members of the council “were convinced by him,” Luke tells us, “and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged.”

Then as now human beings give way all too easily to the temptation to make our arguments on each other's bodies. The apostles' lives were saved because one learned man was willing to make his argument another way: through language, through history, through reason. The apostles' lives were handed back to them by a man willing to think things through.