

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 16, Chapter 6 continued

Ready to get a little “heavy duty” today? I hope so.

As we opened Acts chapter 6 last week it was prudent that we take the time to explore some ancient Jewish cultural issues in order for us to better understand not only what was taking place throughout the Book of Acts, but also throughout the New Testament. And then more-so how the principles that are revealed ought to be brought forward and into application 2000 years later for modern day Believers, Jewish or gentile. And I want to forewarn you that our exploration has only just begun, because the advantage of the Hebrew Roots approach to Bible teaching is to teach God’s Word within the context of the culture of the people who wrote it. What they meant is what the Bible means and how we are to understand it. But it is a Bible era Jewish culture that is being presented to us; so it is not only foreign to gentile Christians, but very often foreign to modern Jews.

Therefore I consider it so important for serious Bible students at this point in your learning process that I want to review in some depth because much of what we discussed isn’t the easiest thing in the world to assimilate and absorb; however it does make all the difference in extracting the truth and thus discerning correct doctrine from the New Testament.

Early in chapter 6 we found that this group of Believers that Peter was leading in Jerusalem was neither entirely harmonious nor as like minded as we might have hoped. And so a complaint arose that of the two main factions that formed the Messianic Jews in Jerusalem, one felt it was being discriminated against. Those two factions are given the names of Hellenists (***Elleniston*** in Greek), and Hebrews (***Ebraious*** in Greek). Thus the first thing to understand is that while Hellenists and Hellenism (which means Greco-Roman culture and lifestyle) is often portrayed as negative or wrong, in the context of the Believers in Jerusalem it is a relatively neutral term that is simply meant to identify a set of common cultural traits about one faction. However, then as now, people from one culture regularly criticize or see as inferior practices and customs from people of a different culture.

Being a Hellenist means that a person’s mother tongue is Greek. Only a few of these Greek speakers could also speak Hebrew. Second it means that they were Jews from the Diaspora who were born and raised in foreign nations outside of the Holy Land. Diaspora Jews represented around 95% of all living Jews, making the Jews who were born and raised in the Holy Land a distinct minority; but a minority that generally felt superior to the foreign Jews. Third it means that whatever their Jewish religious experiences, the experiences of the Hellenists were formed by the teaching of Rabbis at their Synagogues. And finally it means that the Bible they used was the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible dating from 250 B.C. And this Bible had a few small but significant differences between it and the Hebrew Bible. Notably, the vast majority of Diaspora Jews never found their way to Jerusalem and the Temple for the Biblical Festivals or to make sacrifices on the altar for atonement for

their sins because they lived hundreds if not a thousand or more miles away and such a trip was so expensive and time consuming as to be a practical impossibility for all but the wealthiest or most zealous. Yet they didn't usually feel that they were living in a state of sin or ritual impurity for not being able to sacrifice at the Temple Altar; the Synagogue had come up with customs and Traditions that purported to give them atonement by other means.

The other faction of Jerusalem Believers called Hebrews was called so mainly because their native language was Hebrew. They were born and raised in the Holy Land and even though they, too, revolved their daily religious lives around the Synagogue and teachings of the Rabbis, they did have regular connection with the Temple as they were near enough to attend all the required Festivals, could come to make altar sacrifices for atonement as needed, and so on. So to be clear: the term Hebrews in this context doesn't mean that this faction of Believers was racial and ethnic Hebrews and the Hellenist faction was not. It more spoke to language, place of birth, and a general lifestyle philosophy; not a lack of Hebrew genealogy.

Next we spoke about the subject that was at the center of the dispute between the Hellenist and Hebrew Believers, which was the distribution of food to widows. I won't go over all the information we discussed last week about widows in that era. Just recall that supporting widows who had little to no other means of support was charity and that fell mainly to the members of whatever Synagogue she belonged to. Peter and the 11 other disciples who formed the leadership of the Jerusalem Believers all belonged to the Hebrew faction; they were born in the Holy Land (Galilee), spoke Hebrew, and were comfortable going to the Temple for ceremony and sacrifice. So how much prejudice the Hellenist widows were suffering from that was real and intended, or it was mostly perception from people who felt more like outsiders that were dealing with language and cultural barriers, is hard to tell. Nonetheless the 12 disciples thought the problem valid enough that they had the congregation select 7 men specifically to supervise support for all the widows. Due to the Greek names of the 7 it seems all but certain that they all must have been from the complaining Hellenist faction. This group even included one who was a gentile by birth but who had fully converted to Judaism, and another who was an exceptionally spirit-filled man that would soon become the first martyr for his faith in Yeshua: Stephen.

Next we discussed that while the 3 best known and socially acceptable religious/political parties of Jews were the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, in fact there was a 4th that most Jews of that day refused to recognize as being legitimately Jewish at all: the Samaritans. As their name implies they occupied an area called Samaria, which the Jews of that day no longer considered as part of the Holy Land, so despised were the Samaritans. The Samaritans were seen as traitors to Judaism, the Synagogue and the Temple for a number of reasons. First was because the Samaritans were an ethnic mixture of tiny remnants of the 10 northern Israelite tribes who had somehow managed to avoid deportation at the hands of the Assyrians some 700 years earlier and along the way had interbred with gentiles. Some were from the tribe of Judah (Jews) and had also gone to Samaria and in many cases they too married foreigners and had children. But second, from the religious perspective, the Samaritans committed the unpardonable act of erecting their own Temple in Samaria at Mt. Gerizim and creating their own separate Priesthood. They went so far as to make modifications to the Torah of Moses to reflect their beliefs (this is called the Samaritan Pentateuch) and they did not accept any

writings as Scripture other than their modified Torah. That is, they didn't accept as Scripture any of Israel's Prophets. Thus they were judged by the Holy Land Jews as more unclean and untouchable than if they had been gentiles and were worshipping some of the standard pagan gods. For the Holy Land Jews the Samaritans perverted and mocked everything that was holy to them and they hated them for it. So the Samaritans had no ties whatsoever with the two standard Jewish religious institutions of that day: the Synagogue and the Temple.

Then we got into a substantial discussion about the Synagogue as an institution completely separate and apart from the Temple. This is no trivial matter; it is perhaps one of the larger keys that, if understood, can unlock the mysteries of the meaning of many New Testament passages and none more so than the difficult words of Paul; I'll briefly point out the highlights of that topic.

First, we find no mention of the Synagogue in the OT. That is because the Synagogue was a purely **manmade** institution eventually created by the exiled Jews in response to their predicament of having been hauled off to Babylon by the Babylonians in the early 6th century B.C. The Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, the Priesthood abandoned, and the Jews found themselves captives living in a gentile world among pagan gods. They could not ritually cleanse themselves, they could not eat kosher food, they could not sacrifice to atone for their sins, and none of the required Levitical rituals of the Torah for Shabbat or the Festivals could be accomplished.

Thus at first, mainly for the purpose of separating themselves from the pagan Babylonians, they began meeting together and soon they acquired buildings and appointed leaders and teachers and in a few decades they established a complex system of religious authority, teachings, and new traditions that addressed their many conundrums. While much of this solved practical problems that the Jews faced none of this was God-ordained. The Synagogue would not be led by priests but rather mostly by self-appointed or elected lay people. But the Synagogue served a useful purpose in Jewish social and religious life mainly by keeping the far flung Jewish communities connected with a common identity. They didn't assimilate into the gentile world and disappear as what seemed to have happened to their Israelite brethren, the 10 "lost" tribes. The Synagogue and Judaism were born together out of necessity and in time became the center and pulse of Jewish life.

As we get into the era of Christ and the New Testament, even though the Temple and Priesthood had been restored and operating for centuries, the Synagogue continued to flourish as well. The party of the Pharisees had become the leaders of the Synagogue. Religious schools had been set up, and the most famous was that of Gamaliel. These schools had no connection to the Priesthood or Temple; rather they were the source of Rabbis for the many and growing number of Synagogues. And what is so critical for us to grasp is that the teaching of the Synagogue centered on Oral Torah, also known as Tradition, or as Jesus once called it "Traditions of the Elders".

This stood in direct opposition to the Temple and Priesthood that was run by the party of the Sadducees. They did not accept as valid the Traditions of the Elders as taught in the Synagogue; rather they accepted only the written and original Torah of Moses and the

Prophets as their Scriptural authority.

Let's discuss the concept of Oral Torah, Tradition, before we get back into Acts chapter 6 so that we can all be on the same page. Oral Torah or Tradition are interpretations of the Torah Law (that is, the Law of Moses). It is somewhat like doctrine is to Christianity; it's only that different terms are used. In Judaism they use the term Traditions; in Christianity the parallel term is doctrines. That is, within Christianity every denomination has decided to interpret the Bible in its own way, and comes to some conclusions about what Scripture passages mean. Then when these interpretations are adopted by Church authorities, they're called doctrines. For example, Southern Baptists have the doctrine of eternal security that says that once you are saved there is no way and no circumstance under which you lose your salvation. This is their interpretation of Scriptures in that regard. Catholics have the doctrine of Transubstantiation whereby when one takes communion, the wine literally becomes blood (not symbolically but it actually, supernaturally changes form) just as the bread literally becomes flesh. This is their interpretation of the Scriptures in that regard. Both the Southern Baptists and Catholics however would not really agree that these are merely interpretations; rather to their minds this is what Scripture plainly says. So, from their perspective they are teaching the Bible when they teach their doctrines; they are considered one and the same. There is nearly no distinction made between doctrine and Scripture except perhaps at the academic level.

It is the same with Judaism. We can rightly speak of Oral Torah as **interpretations** of Scripture, but essentially to the minds of Rabbis and their Jewish congregations the Oral Torah is merely the discovery of the true inherent meaning of the written Torah, thus there is no difference between the written Torah of Moses, and the Oral Torah of the Rabbis.

Saul Kaatz in 1923 published a book in Germany that tried to help explain to mystified gentile Christians about the Jewish mindset of Oral Torah (aka Traditions of the Elders). He said this:

“Every interpretation of the Torah given by a universally recognized (Jewish) authority is regarded as divine and given on Mt. Sinai, in the sense that it is taken as the original divinely willed interpretation of the (Scriptural) text; for the omniscient and all-wise God included in His revealed Torah every shade of meaning, which divinely inspired interpretation thereafter discovered.”

So, from the Jewish viewpoint, every interpretation given by recognized Jewish Rabbis in the Talmud was actually something Moses had received from God at Mt. Sinai long ago, and over time inspired Sages and Rabbis discovered these truths. It was not received in the sense that these interpretations were also written down by Moses, but rather the interpretations were supernaturally and organically contained hidden within the letters of the Torah in the same way that the fruit of a tree is contained in a kind of hidden form within the seed from which came the tree. So if the written Torah of Moses is the tree, then the Oral Torah is the fruit of that same tree. Since they both come from the same seed, then they are essentially of identical divine substance.

Again; while that concept might sound strange to gentiles, it is only because of the terms that are used in Judaism. If I gave you as an illustration that the Bible is the tree, and the doctrines

of the Christian Church are the fruit of the tree, then because they both come from the same seed (and the seed is God), then they are organically inseparable and therefore essentially of the same divine substance. What I just told you **is** generally speaking the Church's position about Church doctrines even if you weren't aware of it; that is, there is no discernable difference between the Bible and Church doctrine. If the Church teaches their doctrine, they feel they are teaching you the Bible. If the Synagogue teaches their Traditions, they feel they are teaching you the Torah. While I don't agree with that stance of either the Church or the Synagogue, some would fight to their last breath to defend it.

What I just told you isn't usually ever expressed to the congregation within Christianity. Rather it is taken as a given that doesn't need expression. So we can listen to months and years of Church sermons that might not include much more than a few words taken from a handful of Bible verses, but at the same time Pastors insist that what they are doing is teaching the Bible. The same goes with Judaism. The Synagogue leaders will teach what Rabbi so and so says from the Talmud and expound on it for hours, while perhaps including no more than a few verses from the written Biblical Torah. But at the end of the day, they will insist that what they are doing is teaching the written Biblical Torah. This perspective is only rarely challenged because it represents a couple of thousand years of custom.

This brings me to my last point before we get back into Acts chapter 6. The result of this reality is that the meaning of terms gets blurred. As regards Judaism, the term Torah can mean what it originally meant: the written Torah of Moses as we find it in the Bible. Or Torah can mean Oral Torah because Judaism sees that as essentially the same as the written Torah. Thus the term law can mean one of the Laws of Moses as written and found in the Torah of the Bible, or it can mean a tradition or ruling as handed down by a Rabbi as his interpretation of the Torah of Moses. And in the New Testament we run across this challenge of regularly trying to discern what a Bible character means by the terms he or she uses (and especially as concerns the term "law").

The reason I've taken so much of your time with this over the last couple of weeks is this:

in the New Testament ALL the writers were products of the Synagogue system to one level or another. None were priests so far as we are aware, so they certainly weren't products of the Temple system as run by the Sadducees. So what does that tell us about their vocabulary and the meaning of the terms they used? It means that they were schooled in Tradition, Oral Torah, by their Synagogue leaders and their vocabulary reflected that important fact. Certainly Scripture was read and known, and Scripture was believed in and trusted; some knew the Torah and the Prophets better than others who knew mostly Traditions. But at the same time the Oral Torah that interpreted those Scriptures was seen as every bit as divine and authoritative and trustworthy as the original Scriptures themselves.

Before we move on I want to give you as an example of the effect of these Jewish cultural realities the Sermon on the Mount, whereby Yeshua was seen as great Rabbi (and a Rabbi is by definition a product of the Synagogue). So He did NOT quote Scripture per se. Rather He spoke to His listeners in the same way as all Rabbis of His era did; He referred to what earlier interpreters of Scripture said (remember how Yeshua said, "you have heard that our fathers

were told” and then went on to say, “but I tell you”), and followed by giving His own interpretation of Scripture. This procedure was fully accepted and expected by the Jews sitting there on the hillside listening to Him because they understood the process of how Oral Torah was created (and no doubt not everyone accepted this Rabbi’s teaching). Thus to the minds of those hearing Jesus, He was merely creating new Tradition in the customary way (even if it was more profound than anything they had ever heard before because they were hearing it from God!).

We aren’t done with learning about the Synagogue and its deeply rooted role in Jewish life and, most importantly for us, in the creation of the New Testament. But for the time being we’ll pull off of this fascinating subject and get back to Acts chapter 6.

Let’s begin reading at chapter 6 verse 8.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 6:8 – end

Here we meet the exceptional follower of Christ, Stephen. And since he was so full of grace and of Holy Spirit power God did great miracles through him. And now for the first time we see the Synagogue come against Stephen and the Believers. And since their interpretations of the Torah couldn’t stand up against Stephen’s they took the bold action of accusing him of blasphemy. Specifically they said that he blasphemed against both Moses and God.

To blaspheme Moses doesn’t mean to go against Moses the person. Rather it means to go against what God gave to Moses. Thus the sense is to go against the Torah given at Mt. Sinai. Rabbis were infamous for hurling the accusation at one another that they are blaspheming Moses or destroying the Torah when they disagreed on important interpretations. So the charge of blaspheming Moses wasn’t as serious or unusual as it might sound.

But what does the far more serious charge of blaspheming God mean? How does one do that? Obviously there was no question among anyone that Stephen was a Jew who worshipped the God of Israel; so he didn’t renounce God. In this era the accusation of blaspheming God was nearly exclusively about one thing: pronouncing God’s formal name out loud or even writing it. This was a Synagogue tradition that began in the late 300’s B.C. There is no evidence that the Temple shared that belief. After all, the Sadducees who ran the Temple were purists and accepted only the original written Torah of Moses and the several Prophets as authoritative. And the OT is not only NOT against pronouncing God’s name, it uses God’s name 6000 times, and has almost every Hebrew Bible character of any importance speaking God’s formal name. The Hebrews were encouraged in the OT to call on God’s name. In fact, many Hebrew names included God’s formal name, although usually in abbreviated fashion.

Interestingly the prohibition against using God’s formal name stemmed from a Synagogue ruling that a child should never call his father by his given name as it was deemed disrespectful. From that grew the notion that if it was disrespectful to call one’s human father by his given formal name, how much more so to call our Heavenly Father by His formal name. Thus began the Oral Tradition that it was wrong to pronounce God’s formal name, and eventually it was considered so serious as to be blasphemy.

I want to stress this yet again. The OT not only doesn't prohibit the use of God's name, it says God's people should call on His holy name. And further, the only admonition and ruling against using God's name is found in the rabbinical rulings (such as the Mishnah and the Talmud). And what are the Mishnah and the Talmud? Oral Torah, Tradition. And who wrote the Mishnah and the Talmud? The Rabbis. And what did the Rabbis represent? The Synagogue. Let me be clear; I'm not in any way demeaning the Synagogue or the Rabbis. I'm saying that when doctrines and Traditions of men begin to take over, Biblical truth inevitably takes a back seat. Or as Christ once famously said:

Matthew 15:1-9 CJB

¹ Then some P'rushim and Torah-teachers from Yerushalayim came to Yeshua and asked him,

² "Why is it that your talmidim break the Tradition of the Elders? They don't do n'tilat-yadayim before they eat!"

³ He answered, "Indeed, why do you break the command of God by your tradition?"

⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'

⁵ But you say, 'If anyone says to his father or mother, "I have promised to give to God what I might have used to help you,"

⁶ then he is rid of his duty to honor his father or mother.' Thus by your tradition you make null and void the word of God!

⁷ You hypocrites! Yesha'yahu was right when he prophesied about you,

⁸ 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me.

⁹ Their worship of me is useless, because they teach man-made rules as if they were doctrines."

In no way was Christ putting down **all** Traditions and customs and Jewish doctrines. He was saying that while there is a place for them in our faith, they are to be subservient to the Holy Scriptures. Oral Torah (Tradition) is NOT equal to the written Torah of Moses. Church doctrines are not equal to the Bible. And this is because Traditions, customs and doctrines are manmade and therefore subject to opinion and error, while the Holy Scriptures are God-made and thus infallible.

Notice that we are expressly told in verse 13 of Acts 6 that those who made the accusations against Stephen were FALSE witnesses. What do false witnesses do? They lie and fabricate. So we don't have to speculate; the charges against Stephen of constantly speaking against the Temple and against the Torah are false charges. And what exactly are the charges that

amount to blasphemy in their eyes? The charges are that Stephen says Yeshua was going to destroy the Temple, and that He has changed CUSTOMS that Moses handed down to the Jews. Note: it was not the Laws of the Torah that they accused Stephen's Master of changing, but rather the CUSTOMS. That is, they are speaking about one thing only: Oral Torah, Traditions. But recall; to the Jewish mind Tradition and the actual written Torah were the same things. And indeed I demonstrated to you that the Sermon on the Mount was given in typical rabbinical fashion, as Yeshua first said what earlier interpretations of the Law were (earlier Traditions) but now what He says is the proper interpretation. Indeed Stephen was challenging the currently accepted Oral Torah rulings and customs. But he, like Yeshua, was in no way challenging the Torah of Moses.

As for the charge that Yeshua was going to destroy the Temple? We could go deeply into that as many commentators have. But I have only one thing I want to say about it; this was a silly and phony charge designed only to illicit murderous emotions. From their viewpoint how could Yeshua destroy the Temple? He was dead and gone! Crucified in front of them. The accusers certainly didn't believe that Yeshua was alive, resurrected, and living in Heaven with God! No, in the end this was about one thing only: Stephen was speaking against the Traditional Torah interpretations as taught in the Synagogues. Thus we are told that it was Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedmen who were making these charges.

The final verse of Acts chapter 6 has Stephen standing before the Sanhedrin. Thus this street mob did not defy or overwhelm the Sanhedrin to lynch Stephen. Whatever happened to Stephen would be decided, or at the least condoned, by the Supreme Court of the Jews. And whether they were right or wrong in what they decided, they were the legitimate civil government of the Jews.

I love the final words of this chapter as it says Stephen's face looked like the face of an angel. And angels are regularly depicted as emitting bright light; so from the Jewish perspective, and according to the now voluminous Synagogue traditions concerning angels and demons, the idea is that Stephen's face was bright and shining in a supernatural way. Luke's idea in reporting this phenomenon was to compare the glow of Stephen's face with the same Moses that Stephen is on trial for supposedly speaking against.

Exodus 34:29-30 CJB

²⁹ When Moshe came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, he didn't realize that the skin of his face was sending out rays of light as a result of his talking with [ADONAI].

³⁰ When Aharon and the people of Isra'el saw Moshe, the skin of his face was shining; and they were afraid to approach him.

Next week we'll begin with Acts chapter 7 and the trial and martyrdom of Stephen. We're going to discuss some fascinating things about Stephen that will surprise you.