

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 42, Chapters 18 and 19

We have been following Paul's missionary journeys, where he is taking the Good News to the many foreign nations of the Roman Empire (starting with the many Jewish communities) that the Messiah that the Jews had been waiting for has come. He invariably begins by showing up in a city and going to the local synagogue to speak. But this Good News was not so good to many Diaspora Jews because it bore little resemblance to the teachings of their Jewish religious leadership concerning the nature and purpose of a Messiah. What was most difficult to swallow, perhaps, was the deity of Yeshua. Not surprisingly, many gentile God-fearers who attended some of these synagogues were more open to the Gospel of Yeshua because they weren't as indoctrinated to the Jewish traditions about the expected nature of the Messiah as were the Jews.

The traditional perspective was that the Messiah would be much as King David was; even, perhaps, a reincarnation of sorts of King David himself. This Messiah would be a warrior leader who would propel the Jews to a successful rebellion against Rome, free the Jewish nation from its occupiers, install the Jewish Messiah as the new Davidic king of a new and expanded Israelite kingdom, and essentially replace the Roman Empire as the world power.

This was an era when the synagogue (not the Temple) was the source of Jewish religious instruction, and the oversight for proper observance and behavior was performed by the synagogue leaders who took their cue from the Pharisees. The Temple was considered by many ordinary Jews to be at best of questionable authority, and (as with the Essenes) at worst as corrupt and illegitimate; so priests were simply there and tolerated because of the Torah-required ritual and ceremonial functions that they, and only they, could perform. If the ordinary Jews refused to co-operate with the priests and recognize their authority then they found themselves unable to comply with the Laws of Moses regardless of how much they might have looked upon the priesthood with contempt.

Nevertheless the Jews of Judea and the Galilee had a close connection with the Temple even though they also gave their allegiance to the various synagogues. But the Jews of the Diaspora had much less to do with the Temple since only the most able had the wherewithal or the motivation to make the long, expensive and sometimes risky trip to Jerusalem from whatever foreign soil they lived upon in order to be obedient to the Torah and to participate in the various Biblical festivals. Certainly it was completely impractical for them to go to the Temple to offer sacrifices to atone for their sins as the occasions arose. Thus a veritable stream of itinerant prophets and teachers went out from Jerusalem and made their way to the many synagogues of the Diaspora where they were generally well received and viewed as representatives coming from "home base". Paul and his disciples were seen as among those many itinerant teachers and so getting an audience was not difficult.

When we left off last time, Paul was about to leave Corinth after a great deal of trouble had

arisen due to the message of Salvation, as he intended to make his way back to the Holy Land. He would take a ship to get there; but before he left, at the seaport of Cenchrea he had his hair cut to fulfill the ritual requirements of a vow he had made. We know nothing about the nature or purpose of this vow or when he first made it. Acts 18:18 reports on this matter with little comment as though Luke's readers ought to fully understand the ins and outs of Paul having his hair cut as part of a vow fulfillment. I certainly wish Luke had told us more because through the centuries gentile Christians have accepted some very dubious teachings of the early Church Fathers about what Paul did and why he did it. And while not universal, the consensus is to apologize for it and try to sweep it under the carpet as a bit embarrassing. Let me elaborate by quoting from a letter written by the early Church Father Jerome from the mid-4th century A.D.

“Granted that there he (Paul) did what he did NOT wish to do, through the compelled fear of the Jews: why did he let his hair grow in consequence of a vow and afterward cut it at Cenchrea in obedience to the law? Because the Nazarites who vowed themselves to God were accustomed to do this according to the commands of Moses”.

So Jerome says that Paul didn't do this by his own free will; he had it forced on him out of fear of the Jews and only did it to satisfy a Jewish custom so that he didn't find himself in a bad way with the local Jewish population. Later the Church Father Venerable Bede had a different sort of rationalization for Paul performing this vow ritual. In his commentary on the Book of Acts Bede wrote:

“Paul did these things (performed the vow ritual of hair cutting) NOT indeed because he had forgotten what he, along with the other apostles, had settled at Jerusalem concerning the abolition of the Law, but so that those among the Jews who had come to believe might not be scandalized, so he played the part of a Jew himself in order to win over the Jews”.

Now I could read this in almost any church in the world and get affirming nods of heads and perhaps even applause; but my hope is that you realize how anti-Semitic, anti-Scripture, and just plain erroneous such a thought process is. Bede claims that Paul indeed did do this hair cutting vow ritual even though he knew that the Law had been abolished at the Jerusalem Council (in Acts 15). But even more, Bede suggests that Paul **pretended** to still be a Jew (he merely played a role) in order to win the approval of Jews so that they would hear the Gospel from him. That is, Bede claimed (as did most of the Church by this time) that James and the Jerusalem Council abolished the Law of Moses for Believers (Jew or gentile), even though no such statement or implication exists in Scripture. But even more we see that the Church view had very early on hardened such that to be a Believer in Christ meant that if one was born a Jew, one had to convert to a gentile and fully abandon his or her former Jewish identity. Thus the Church Fathers felt that somewhere along the way Paul had actually renounced his Jewish heritage and become a gentile. The hair cutting ritual was merely a ruse that allowed him to continue playing a role: pretending to still be Jewish. And Paul did that in order to deceive his fellow Jews (for their own benefit) so that they would listen to what he had to say about salvation in Yeshua, give up their Jewishness and become gentile Christians.

I hope you are as appalled as I am. But friends, this well documented mindset of many of the influential early Church Fathers (all gentiles of course) is the source of what a majority of Christians still believe to this day and these thoughts are enshrined in some of the most foundational doctrines of Christianity. It is the classic methodology of Bible interpretation to begin with a doctrine decided upon long ago by a gentile Church council, and then work backwards to twist and turn Scripture passages to make them fit the doctrine. So here in Acts 18:18 the recorded beliefs of these two highly respected Church Fathers imply that Paul isn't really a Jew anymore; however he wants the local Jews to think he still is and so he goes through with this ceremonial hair cutting as part of a vow, but he isn't sincere about it. It is merely part of a bait and switch scheme so that the local Jews might find him trustworthy as one of them. And then when their guard is down, he can pounce on them with the Gospel of Christ! (Unbelievable. You can't make this stuff up!)

Let's re-read a short section of Acts 18 to begin our lesson today.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 18:19 – end

So Paul arrived in Ephesus and stayed there briefly. The only reason he was even in Ephesus is because that was the route of the ship that he was on; first it would stop at Ephesus and then continue on to Caesarea Maritima, the major port city for the Holy Land and Paul's destination.

His first agenda item upon arrival was to go to Jerusalem and report to the Believing community there, since that was the headquarters of The Way. A couple of things: first, while the CJB inserts the word "Jerusalem", it is not actually there. The text merely says that first Paul "went up" to greet the community (in most Bibles community is translated as Church). Then after he went up, he went down; down to Antioch. These terms "went up" and "went down" are merely common Jewish expressions. "Went up", or to "go up", always referred to going to Jerusalem. Thus in contrast to the "up" of Jerusalem, anywhere else one might go is "down". It is really an expression of veneration and status of the place. Jerusalem was by no means the highest geographical elevation even in the Holy Land; but it was the highest place from a status perspective, and from a religious perspective. Thus every other place in the world (even Mt. Everest) would be considered as being "down" from Jerusalem.

Second, in verse 22 where we usually find the word Church in English Bibles (but in the CJB find instead Messianic Community) the Greek word is **ekklesia**. **Ekklesia** is a common, generic Greek word that means assembly or community (any kind of an assembly or community). It carries no religious connotation with it. However most modern Bibles substitute the word Church for **ekklesia** in order to give us the mental picture of going to a place with stained glass, a steeple, pews and a group of gentile "Christians" meeting there to praise Jesus. While indeed it was Believers in Yeshua that Paul went to see, they were all Jews; and they all continued to practice their Jewish ways. They continued to meet in their synagogues and followed their standard Jewish liturgy; no stained glass, no steeples, and no pews.

Antioch was where the synagogue that had been sponsoring his missionary trips was located. We're told that Paul visited there for some time and then departed to again visit a number of

the Believers that he had established in the region of Phrygia.

Verse 24 changes the subject and we are introduced to a Believer named Apollos; he had come to Ephesus to teach. Ephesus was similar to London; it was a commercial and banking center. It was self-governing and was probably the 3rd largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria, Egypt. So if one wanted an opportunity to connect with a great number of Jews and/or gentiles in a short time, Ephesus was the place.

I pointed out in earlier lessons that while Paul was a special emissary personally commissioned by the risen Yeshua to take the Good News to both the Jews and the gentiles, he was not the only Believer doing this. Paul was the foremost Jewish Apostle; but he wasn't in charge of all the efforts to evangelize. Many others took it upon themselves (usually no doubt at the direction of the Holy Spirit) to tell people in foreign lands about the ways of the God of Israel. But Apollos was not from Jerusalem; he was a Diaspora Jew who lived in the largest Jewish center outside of the Holy Land at that time: Alexandria, Egypt.

History knows of Alexandria (named for Alexander the Great) as a cosmopolitan city of diverse cultures. One of its most famous institutions was its unrivaled library. The city sat at the crossroads of commerce and so it was a thriving and wealthy place that attracted people from all over the empire. Many famous Jews lived in Alexandria including the intellectual Philo. A treasure chest of Jewish thought was created and stored in Alexandria; the education system was unsurpassed. So it is not surprising that someone of Apollo's capabilities would come from there.

However the most popular brand of Judaism practiced in Alexandria was quite progressive and in line with the Hellenism that Rome wanted as the sort of universal culture in their empire. Thus Jewish philosophy more than Torah scholarship was the result. Nevertheless some of the best and brightest Jewish minds flocked there to argue their points of view with other Jewish intellectuals. But it was also in Alexandria that the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was created, 3 centuries earlier. This is the Bible that we today know as the Septuagint and it was what most Jews of that era used for their Bible.

Apollos is (not surprisingly) described as an eloquent speaker who was very studied in the Tanakh: the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. What we learn about what Apollos knew and believed and taught can be a little confusing. On the one hand we're told that he is a great Bible scholar, that he had been informed about the way of the Lord, and that he accurately taught facts about Yeshua. But then we're thrown a curve ball; verse 25 says that even so, he only knew about the immersion of **Yochanan** (John the Baptist). Apollos was such a good speaker that he was invited to speak in synagogues and Paul's friends Aquila and Priscilla, who were still in Ephesus, went to hear him speak and teach. But they quickly realized that there was much Apollos didn't know about Christ, so they undertook to teach him. The implication is that the brilliant Apollos was sufficiently humble that he welcomed Aquila and Priscilla's knowledge about Yeshua. There is much to talk about here.

At this time in history (around 52 A.D.) there were many strands of Messianic Judaism in existence. The one we know most about was the one led by James and Peter in Jerusalem;

but there were several more. Not all of those strands looked to James and Peter as their religious authorities. Some Believers (no doubt including Apollos) were so intelligent and educated that they didn't feel the need to have a mentor or to be given official permission to teach about Yeshua and the Gospel. So, they didn't all believe the same things and therefore didn't all teach the same doctrines. They studied on their own and sought to enlighten others on their own. So it is nearly impossible to know with any certainty exactly what it is that Apollos was teaching about Yeshua. What is startling, however, is that when asked about baptism he said he only knew about John's baptism and knew nothing of being immersed into Yeshua. What does "John's baptism" mean? Actually we've dealt with this before but let's review.

John the Baptist preached repentance of sins; and so when he baptized it was for repentance of sins. That is an entirely different issue than salvation in Christ. John did not baptize for salvation in Christ, and thus one did not receive the Holy Spirit in John's baptism (of course John was baptizing before the Pentecost event happened after Yeshua's death and resurrection). However what John taught was that before one could be saved, one first had to repent of sins; thus John's was a sort of preliminary baptism to Christ's. Then what is baptism in Christ? The Bible tells us that this immersion is a complete re-birth from a spiritual perspective. So the sequence is: repentance first, re-birth second. Apparently Apollos knew a great deal about Yeshua. He was well steeped in information about Yeshua (which would have come mainly word of mouth) and he could communicate them. And that while he had repented for his sins (John's baptism) he had not accepted Yeshua in the way we typically think of it (and apparently didn't know enough to realize that this was the vital step). Therefore he could not have received the Holy Spirit.

This shows us something important: a non-Believer can be quite an effective Bible teacher. I can vouch for this because many modern Bible commentators that I have read.....very good ones....not only aren't Christians, they don't even believe in God. This goes for both Jewish and gentile Bible scholars. Usually they are highly educated historians and/or brilliant language scholars. But for them the Bible is merely humanly created literature and they have become expert on the Bible as a career path; but not as a source of truth or as a divine Holy Book. Apollos, on the other hand, was a spiritual man; he believed in the God of Israel and he believed in the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh) as truth. He also seemed to believe some things about Yeshua that is not at all clear to us. Apparently Aquila and Priscilla tutored Apollos in the beliefs and doctrines of The Way, the Jerusalem-based strand of Messianic Judaism. By all accounts he seems to have accepted it. Remember: there was no such thing as a New Testament for Apollos to study; and there wouldn't be a New Testament for another 150 years. In time (but not yet), some of Paul's letters would start to be shared among Believers and a couple of the Gospel accounts would also start to circulate, informally. But a number of other teaching letters and Gospels written by other authors than the ones that are in our Bibles also gained traction. So whatever Apollos had learned, and would learn, about Yeshua would have come from listening to others. Who those others were before Aquila and Priscilla we don't know.

I don't want to wax too philosophical; however there are so many millions of Christians who have some facts and knowledge about Jesus; but what is it that they think they know about Him? What is it that they actually believe about Him? What is it that they felt was happening to

them when they were immersed.....if ever they were immersed? And if they were immersed, immersed into what? Are we really saved in God's eyes if the Jesus Christ that we believe in is nothing like the one in the Bible, or that what He actually taught (as recorded in the New Testament) are not the doctrines that we've been told are what He commands of us or are not the values we are to live by? I wish I had answers for you. But there can be no better example of this conundrum than Apollos; we are left to ponder whether this fine man was truly saved before he met Aquila and Priscilla. Or was it only afterward when vital blanks of his faith in God were filled in? Knowledge is indeed the key, but it must be the correct knowledge. And trust in Yeshua is the door; but it must be in the **real** Yeshua, not the one of our personal imaginings or the one we prefer.

Clearly Apollos was a motivated evangelist; and a gifted one as well. So after some undisclosed amount of time he traveled to Achaia to speak and teach. He apparently had gained enough knowledge, and now sufficiently agreed with the doctrines of The Way, that letters of recommendation were sent on his behalf to Believers in Achaia to welcome him. When he arrived he fearlessly debated the unbelieving Jews, in public, and used the Scriptures (as opposed to "reasoning" with them) to demonstrate the truth of what he was teaching: that Yeshua of Nazareth is indeed the Messiah the Tanakh spoke about.

Let's move on to Acts chapter 19.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 19 all

In verse 1 we learn that Apollos was in Corinth at the same time that Paul had arrived in Ephesus. This was Paul's 2nd time in Ephesus. It seems that he goes to some Believers there and asks them if they had received the Holy Spirit when they came to belief. "No", they said. In fact, they had never even heard of the Holy Spirit. So what we're learning is that apparently through one Believer or another, many Jews and gentiles had learned about Yeshua, and believed what they heard. And, just like Apollos, they had even been baptized; but they had been baptized into John's baptism: a baptism of repentance of sins. And indeed Paul agrees with that but says that there must be another baptism as well.

One of the issues of New Testament times was that immersion had become a kind of social norm that tended to identify a person with a particular teacher, philosopher, or even religious party. Thus we'll hear of Paul speaking of people being baptized in his name, just as we hear the same of John the Baptist and of course of Yeshua. In fact being baptized in the teachings or ways of someone or another was common and didn't carry the specific religious meaning that we think of it today. Joseph Shulam calls this a personality cult; not unlike young people who will follow certain Rock Stars wherever they go because they are so enthralled with them. And then it was rather usual that after being immersed into a certain teacher, another teacher would eventually come along that tickled this persons ears and he'd change allegiance by being immersed (literally and figuratively) into this latest teacher's ways. So the practice of immersion had become somewhat tainted in its reason and purpose.

Thus we see one reason why Paul would even think to ask into what (or more in line with the times, into WHO) these professed Believers in Ephesus had been immersed. These disciples

told him that it was into the immersion of John. But a second reason for his inquiry is that no doubt Paul sensed that these Believers had but the most vague understanding of their faith in Yeshua. Paul never seems to question whether they rightly accepted that from a historical and factual basis Yeshua was the Messiah; but to Paul there was also no sign that any of these disciples were bearing the evidence of having received the spirit. No doubt Paul had encountered this before; so he knew the symptoms as well as what questions to ask, and how to respond.

Now we must be honest in noting that after immersing these disciples (who seemed to put up no protest) into the immersion of Yeshua, Paul then laid his hands on them and it is upon laying on of his hands that they received the Holy Spirit the text says. It has been a long running debate within various denominations as to whether it was the immersion or the laying on of hands that the Holy Spirit came upon these men. Even more they began speaking in tongues; and for me it is the speaking in tongues....and not the reception of the Holy Spirit....that we need to be looking at. Speaking in tongues is something that seems to have occurred whenever one of the Apostles was directly involved in someone coming to faith (we saw it in the case of Cornelius and Peter for instance). Yet, Paul clearly implies that it is being immersed into the name of Yeshua that brings in the Holy Spirit. Immersion and laying on of hands are two different things done for different purposes. So it is hard to know what to make of this other than it may be a special privilege that the Lord blessed these Apostles with to cause those disciples present to speak in tongues. After all; when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, Peter was present and there was no immersion at all. Even so the disciples began speaking in tongues. So I think it is wrong to contrive a rigid doctrinal formula or demand a certain sequence based on what we've read to this point about the coming of the Holy Spirit, immersion, laying on of hands, and speaking in tongues. But one thing is clear: water immersion in the name of Yeshua is a New Testament commandment for Believers; this is not an option. And receiving the Holy Spirit is the sign of our acceptance into the Kingdom; yet we have seen instances where the Holy Spirit came before immersion and other instances when He came after immersion. We've seen instances of the new Believers speaking in tongues; and other times when it doesn't happen (or at least, it is not mentioned).

Paul previously had made a short visit to the synagogue of Ephesus when he was on his way from Corinth to the Holy Land and promised them that if the Holy Spirit led him back that he would come and teach them more. Having completed his business back home, he made the 1500 mile overland journey back to Ephesus to fulfill his promise. Paul taught there for 3 months, apparently without interference. But as always happened, in time those who just could not bring themselves to accept Paul's teaching on Yeshua and salvation turned on him and the trouble began. Those in the Ephesus synagogue who had hardened their hearts and become firm in their opposition to the Gospel began, of course, to speak not only against Paul but also against The Way. This time in response Paul did an interesting thing: he took those disciples who had come to believe and departed with them in tow from the synagogue and began preaching and teaching in an entirely new venue: the hall of Tyrannus (or as it says in the CJB, in Tyrannus' *yeshiva*). What we see here is what today we might call a church split. Yet when we see this from God's perspective, this goes back to one of the first God-Principles I ever taught you: the principle of Division, Election, and Separation.

Sometimes the Lord determines to divide us into groups, elect the group that He chooses to follow Him for a certain divine purpose, and separate them (us) from everyone else. I can tell you from experience that as difficult and gut wrenching as it is, sometimes there is no choice but to leave a congregation that you had been part of and go elsewhere. Perhaps it happens because you have learned too much to continue identifying yourself with a group you know is stubbornly wrong minded and is no longer in harmony with Yeshua. At other times it isn't so much about right and wrong as it is about following the Lord's plan for your life. Sadly, it can also be over the most petty or selfish things, and the split and separation reflects nothing but human failure. It is never a desirable thing to do to be in the middle of congregation split regardless of the reason, and it invariably causes long lasting hard feelings among brethren. Yet, when it is done for the right reasons, and seems to be God directed, what are we to do? Twice we have seen Paul do this: the first time he acrimoniously parted company with his long time traveling companion Barnabas (over his nephew John Mark), and now he not only leaves this synagogue on bad terms but he takes with him those who adhere to what Paul is teaching. It is one thing to go away; but the anger only increases when you to take people with you.

Let's part today with this thought. What Paul did in leaving the synagogue and taking disciples with him was radical and generally was considered a serious offense against **Halakhah**: Jewish Law. No doubt the word got around the Jewish communities of the Diaspora and so from here forward we don't find Paul going to many more synagogues (some say that he never again preached in synagogues but I find that as highly improbable). This incident would have had much to do with what we'll read in Acts chapter 21 about Paul going to Jerusalem and consulting with James, with one of the main issues being that Paul was being slandered among the Jewish communities with the accusation that he was speaking against the Law. So James would have Paul give a public demonstration of his continuing allegiance to the Law of Moses.

We'll continue with Acts chapter 19 next time.