

### AN OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY:

#### From Abraham to Modern Israel

#### Lesson 9

As we move along in our survey we have arrived at the era of Christ. Thus by modern calendars we are at the cusp of when B.C. turns to A.D. Judaism is at war internally and externally. It's about now that the term "Rabbi" begins to be used to denote some of the great religious leaders of Judaism.

It is commonly said among Christians that Rabbi means "teacher"; it does not. Rabbi means "great one" or "master". Indeed Rabbis were teachers, but they were much more than that. It is important to understand where Rabbis fit in the Jewish social and religious system. First and foremost they were, and remain, part of the Synagogue system, not part of the Temple system. And the Synagogue system and the Temple system in Yeshua's day were not only completely separate institutions, they were competitors. And when the next Temple gets rebuilt, the Rabbis probably will have no role in its operation (although I suspect that is going to be quite difficult for the Rabbis to accept).

It was the Levite Priests who were, and will be, the authorities of the Temple system and this was ordained by the Lord in the Torah. Rabbis as leaders of the Synagogue system were essentially laymen. They were not, and today are not, Levites and they had no place or authority in any Temple ritual such as sacrificing. Further the Synagogue system was a completely manmade system that had been created by the Jews while they were in exile in Babylon. There is no Biblical authorization for an alternative system to the Temple system; nonetheless that is exactly what was created. Do not take this to mean that I'm saying that the Synagogue is a bad thing, or shouldn't exist. It is the result of pragmatism and circumstance. As a result of their exile the Jews dispersed all over the Asian Continent, Europe, China and Northern Africa; so having a place to meet together and worship and learn God's Word was essential. However, there is a definite downside to the Synagogue. It is that as a manmade institution, it is also the bastion of the manmade system of Jewish religion called Judaism and thus it presents a slippery slope if not approached appropriately.

Let's talk about that for a moment. Think about the term Judaism. The word comes from the name of the tribe who created it: Judah. And the members of the tribe of Judah were called Jews. So Judah-ism means it is a system of religious observance and rules that pertains to the tribe of Judah. This is as opposed to the religion of the Torah and all the Tanakh, which I give the label of Hebrew-ism in order to draw a contrast. That is because the term Hebrew not only refers to all 12 tribes of Israel (not just to Judah), but it also refers to the Torah based system of the Bible as written in the Holy Scriptures. So let's be clear: Judaism's rules and regulations do not come from the Biblical Torah (except by extrapolation); they come from what is called Halakah. Halakah is Rabbinical law that was first formalized early in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. by a fellow called Judah HaNasi, also known as Judah the Prince. The document he created is called the Mishna. Today the Mishna is essentially incorporated into a later work called the Talmud, which is essentially commentary on the Mishnah and results in certain rulings and case studies. What comes from the Talmud then is the system of behaviors and rulings that form modern Judaism and its religious structure called Halakah.

Before all this was at all formalized, the Holy Lands in Jesus's time had many Synagogues and Yeshivas (religious schools) where a certain Rabbi would teach his students his own brand of Judaism. And naturally, just as with the various Christian Church denominations, there was fundamental commonality, but also deep divisions and disagreements among these Rabbis about the finer points of the Law. This resulted in the formation of a handful of sects of Judaism around the time of Christ's birth.

The four major denominations (sects) of Judaism were the ***P'rushim*** (Pharisees), the ***Tz'dukim*** (Sadducees), the Essenes, and the newest sect, the Zealots. The ***P'rushim*** (Pharisees) dominated the Jewish Synagogue leadership and were present in the high courts. The Sadducees were aristocrats, and in control of the High Priesthood, and they too had members on the high court. These sects, and the many sub-sects of each of the major ones, were usually segregated by a particular Rabbi's teachings and interpretations of The Law; or perhaps by nationality, or even by trades and crafts. It was usual that the sects took on political and social philosophies as their tenet for existing.

The Essenes we know of primarily as the authors of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran. Until the 1990's it was believed that they were a relatively small sect of no more than 4000 individuals who formed a communal society in the desert wilderness area known as Kihrbat Qumran; sharing their homes, food, and money with one another, they sought isolation.

However, recent archaeological evidence has come to light indicating that the Essenes were more numerous, widespread, diverse, and played a greater role in their time, and on the emergence of Christianity, than previously thought.

It is now known that the Essenes were formed after the Maccabean Rebellion of 167 BC. The Hasmon family (the Hasmoneans), led by Judas the Maccabee, had been ruling the Land since the successful revolt against Syria and Rome. While this family is generally looked upon by Judaism with great favor, the reality is that when they regained control of the Temple from their Syrian and Roman oppressors, they anointed a Hasmon family member as High Priest instead of re-installing one of the descendents of the God-anointed priestly line of Zadok (one of many Levite family lines). This new High Priest, Jonathon, and his successor, Simon, took the further step of circumventing the Torah requirement that only Levites should be the numerous lesser Temple priests. The now irrelevant and abandoned priestly line of Zadok left the area of Jerusalem for Damascus, Syria, and along with them went an ardent group of followers. Thus was born the sect of the Essenes.

One of the more exciting recent finds in the Holy Land is the place that Josephus refers to as the Essenes Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem. This gate was heretofore unknown except for mention in a handful of ancient documents. Now that it has been found exactly as mapped out by Josephus it proves that the Essenes had a substantial community (large enough to have its own city gate) within the walls of Jerusalem, right up until the city's destruction in 70 AD. Evidence is surfacing to support a hypothesis that John the Baptist was himself an Essene, probably (more correctly) a member of a splinter-group of Essenes, called the Nazarenes. More startling is the growing agreement among Biblical scholars that there apparently were several branches of the Essene sect, many of which accepted the deity of Yeshua.

It is said of the Essenes that they refused to engage in commerce in all forms (a pre-Babylonian exile era Jewish tradition); they were pacifists, and did not engage in animal sacrifice. They were, in essence, the Hippie, drop-out movement of their time. However, they were deeply religious and this drove their desire to be separate from the intense Hellenizing that was being pressed upon the Jewish culture. The subsequent perversion of Judaism that was occurring during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanies (175 BC), and followed by the high-handed ways of the Hasmoneans, led to their existence that can be traced to that same time.

It also appears that the main body of Essenes who lived in Qumran, in general, embraced celibacy, rejected marriage, and were careful students of the Torah. They formed a group that consisted of various levels of Jewish society ranging from the least learned field peasants, to the most learned scribes.

Interestingly, another main-line sect was born from the aftermath of the Maccabean Rebellions. Once the Hasmonean rulers and family members who had given their fellow countrymen back their freedom they began enjoying the advantages of power, and so they increasingly accepted the pagan ways of Hellenism. By the time of Christ, their descendents had become a class of aristocrats who self-servingly sold their influence to the highest bidder. They had given up the pure ways of Yehoveh worship and the nationalistic idealism of their forefathers, in favor of a watered-down Judaism that cared little for the common people, was devoid of spirituality, and served their own ambition. These were the Sadducees.

The Zealots' origin can be traced to just few years before Yeshua's birth. In contrast with the Essenes, this party represented the desire for large scale social change, achieved by any means; they were the social/political radicals and activists of that era. The Zealots are credited with being the inciters and leaders of the many riots in Yerushalayim, and were openly speaking of rebellion against Rome. Fearless and volatile, many Zealots carried daggers under their cloaks, and often utilized them; these were notoriously dangerous men. One of Jesus' disciples, Simon the Zealot, bears the identity of his affiliation with this vocal, if not downright fanatical, party.

If it is imaginable, there were even more religious schools than synagogues in Jerusalem, each formed and conducted by one of the growing population of Rabbis. Just as Hebrew-ism had given way to Judah-ism up in Babylon, now back in the Land, Judaism had given way to Rabbin-ism. That is, Rabbis, their teachings and academies, were where direction and authority for the practicing of the Law now emanated. It is not at all wayward to compare the position of Rabbis in that time, to the station of the Academic Elite that dominate today's Universities. In Jesus' time, for the faithful Jew, higher learning consisted only of religious training; and that, primarily of the Law and Tradition. Whatever the Rabbi who owned and ran a particular school said was truth, was accepted without hesitancy, for he was the expert. It was understood that these Rabbis were the source of wisdom and truth, and all else was simply ignorance.

Although the High Priesthood continued to hold the official Jewish religious power, the people's loyalty to them was on the wane. The High Priest's duties had been reduced primarily to officiating at the Temple festivals and sacrifices, and he had become more of a figurehead than a real leader. Learnedness of the Torah was now the measure of piety. The most learned Rabbis therefore considered the least learned peasants incapable of proper piety, with Samaritans occupying the lowest point on the scale of piety and the Galileans only marginally more acceptable.

Of interest to our study are the three primary regions that the Land was divided into, though actually there were four (the fourth being Perea) that were considered as making up the Holy Land. These districts were treated by Rome and by the Jewish religious authorities almost as separate nations. A Roman governor was assigned to each. Most Jews were concentrated in either Judea or the Galilee. Samaria had many small Jewish villages loyal to the Jerusalem religious authority; but central Samaria, which consisted of Shechem and Mount Gerizim, pulled away. Mainstream Samaritans were not even considered real Jews by the Galileans and Judeans, so deep was their hatred of one another.

Galil (*Galilee*) was a region of commerce and industry; Natzaret (*Nazareth*) a blue collar town in central Galil (Galilee). It was also a point of connection to the rest of the world as great caravan routes used Natzaret (*Nazareth*) as a meeting place. This was no sleepy, rustic, backwoods village as often depicted in Christian movies about Christ; it was a center for Jewish Temple life. Priests of Natzaret not only ministered to the local inhabitants, they were sufficiently trained and educated as to be permitted the honor of presiding from time to time in Herod's Temple in Yerushalayim (*Jerusalem*).

Galileans were straightforward, passionate, pragmatic people that lived far enough away from the Rabbinically controlled world of Yerushalayim to practice their Judaism with more freedom and simplicity. Brides were chosen by their ability to bring all the elements necessary for a strong family, rather than by their ability to provide a rich enough dowry. Betrothal was pure, and weddings basic.

Shomron (*Samaria*), however, presented a particular problem during this era. Not only had its citizenry become completely Hellenized, so had the Priesthood. It went so far that the Samaritans built their own Temple in Shechem, and set up a completely independent Temple

system of their own. This Samaritan Temple system mixed the traditional Jewish ways with Greek philosophy, and with Greek gods. Politically, the Samaritans broke loyalty with the Galileans and the Judeans, and sided with the Romans and the Syrians.

The enmity between the Samaritans and two other Israeli provinces (Y'hudah and Galil), was sufficient that Judeans would even avoid using the road connecting Y'hudah (Judah) and Galil (Galilee) because it ran through Shomron (Samaria). Rather, they would take a more circuitous route through Perea, which was primarily a Jewish population. It was this same route that Jesus took when he came to Jerusalem from Capernaum, usually avoiding Samaria altogether. Interestingly enough, despite the hatred between these factions that was primarily a political and religious dispute, they recognized their common Israeli brotherhood and the Samaritan Jews were never considered unclean or impure. Their food, clothing, animals, goods, etc., were all considered acceptable to the Galileans and the Judeans.

It is with this understanding of the social, religious, and political conditions in evidence, that we must approach the outrageous concept to the typical Jewish mind of that day that their long hoped for Messiah would be born to common peasants, residing in Natzaret of the Galil. Living far away from the religious elite and the power center of Jewish religion, Yerushalayim, the mother, Miryam (*Mary*), was a virgin country teenaged girl, and the father, Y'oseph (*Joseph*), a humble craftsman; these were the typical Jewish household. Surely the coming of the long-awaited Messiah would be announced in Yerushalayim (*Jerusalem*) of Judea, the Holiest City, at Herod's Temple, from the mouth of the High Priest at a huge ceremony. The Savior would be the son of a wealthy and respected royal family, so that he might be educated, raised, and adored by those worthy of such a task. It is no small wonder that Yeshua of Nazareth was rejected by the Jewish religious elite, and therefore also most of the general population.

Five months into the pregnancy of **Miryam's** (Mary's) cousin **Elisheva** (Elizabeth), in whose womb grew the babe who would in future times be known as **Yochanan Ben-Z'kharyah** (John the Baptist), the Angel Gabriel appeared to Miryam. This theophany occurred not in front of the golden altar at the glorious Temple, nor did the Angel speak to the High Priest; but in a humble Jewish home the greatest honor imaginable was bestowed on this naïve county girl. She is informed that the Lord God looks upon her as "highly favored", and reveals to her that she shall give birth, as a virgin, to the **Mashiach** (Messiah, Anointed One). She was informed of the name the Most High had decided for the child, **Yeshua** and that He is the Son of God, and that He shall institute a never-ending Kingdom of God on a global scale.

Staggering.

Yet, one can only imagine what went through the mind of **Y'hosef** (Joseph) when told all by his fiancée, now about 3 months pregnant! No matter what the level of trust between them might have been Joseph must have had doubts and suspicions. It took a divine visit to **Y'hosef** in a dream to reassure him. Dreams or lack thereof had great significance in those times. A “good dream” was regarded as an indication of having favor with God. So the combination of Joseph’s “good dream”, along with its incredible content, wiped any doubt from his mind. Rather than wait for the agreed to time to marry Miryam, he did so immediately; partly, I’m sure, to keep her from suffering embarrassment as she grew bigger and her condition became more obvious.

A few months later, about 5 BC by our current calendar, Miryam gave birth to the Savior of all mankind. In a cave used as a barn, in the town of **Beit-Lechem** (Bethlehem) of Judea, the birthplace of David, the Word became flesh [**Luke 2, Matt. 1,2**]. The Heavens rejoiced, and legions of Angels sang praises to the God Most High; but the Jewish religious hierarchy had quite a different reaction. This was not going to be the Messiah, the Deliverer, the Rabbis and the priests had expected.

Interestingly, the basis for their rejection of **Yeshua** as the Messiah appears not to have stemmed from any argument the Priests or Rabbis made against Yeshua’s claim of fulfilling all the prophecies of the Old Testament (for, indeed, there was no argument to be made!). The problem lay in the mental picture they had drawn for themselves of the purpose of the Messiah, which Jesus in no way fit. They had long ago made the Torah, God’s Word, subservient to the scholarly commentaries of the Rabbis and Priests, and had interlaced Scriptural truth with man-made Traditions.

These were days of great restlessness in the Holy Land, throughout all 4 provinces, as the Jews awaited the appearance of the hoped-for Savior that would rescue Israel from the oppressive hand of Rome. Their hope was not for one who would save all mankind from its awful destiny: permanent separation from God. It was, rather, for a redeemer of the glory of Israel itself; a return to Jewish self-rule. Their hope was most certainly not for a light to the gentiles, but rather for a warrior-king from the royal line of King David who would rid Israel of these non-Jewish heathens. And, their hope was not for the ultimate, and final, Sacrificial

Lamb that would atone for the world's sins and bring a new and right relationship between God and humanity because the Jews were confident that they were already "right with God" since they were the seed of Abraham. It was the pagans that must be judged, punished, and banished from the Land at the leadership of a powerful and charismatic Deliverer.

The Rabbis and their followers had developed a purely pragmatic and nationalistic view of redemption and he who would bring it about. And, of course, the coming Warrior-Savior would be in full agreement with the pronouncements and authority of the religious leadership. It is no wonder, then, that the more learned and those in power...the Priests, Rabbis, and Scribes... those who had spent the mental time and energy contemplating and developing such ideas as to bring them to a point of general consensus, found **Yeshua's** pronouncements, and his outspoken disdain for their rulings and laws, not only objectionable, but blasphemous and a real danger to their personal authority.

Yeshua was 30 years old when he was baptized by his cousin, **Yochanan Ben-Z'kharyah** (John the Baptist), and immediately the **Ruach HaKodesh** (Holy Spirit) descended upon Him. He began teaching that the Kingdom of God has come, and crowds formed to hear him. His was a grass roots movement, with an audience composed primarily of the working class Jews. Yeshua was openly critical of the Jewish religious hierarchy, even accusing them of being hypocrites, although that was a name they commonly called one another during heated debates [**Matt. 23:13-36**]. He publicly condemned their legalistic approach to practicing and administering the Law of Moses, the Torah. And, He accused them of distorting the true sense and meaning of the Torah, and making it a burden rather than a blessing to the followers of the God of Israel. But, He made it very clear that He personally obeyed and respected the Torah, and that in no way was He advocating abolishing it, nor should the people refrain from following it. In fact, He spent a great deal of His time explaining the Torah's intent, and how He had come to make the Torah complete, to perfect it and fill it full of meaning. In perhaps His seminal speech to the people of the Holy Land, he went to a high hill above the Sea of Galilee and there made a speech that Christianity has dubbed The Sermon on the Mount. To emphasize what His purpose was and was not, we read this recorded statement of his in Matthew chapter 5:

**(Mat 5:17-19 CJB)**

***<sup>17</sup> "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.***



**<sup>18</sup> Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.**

**<sup>19</sup> So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.**

He also made it abundantly clear that He was deity. But most importantly He did nothing that the Jews had come to expect of a Messiah; foremost, He didn't lead a rebellion against the Romans. To the average Jewish citizen, this was de facto proof that He was not who He claimed to be.

Yeshua put together a rather motley crew of 12 followers that He called **Talmidim** (Disciples), 3 of which were fishermen, and one a tax collector, the most hated profession in the entire Holy Land. It is likely most of them had only the minimum Jewish education required at that time. Yeshua, accompanied by his 12 ordinary men, made a pilgrimage from Galil (*Galilee*) where He lived, to Jerusalem as was customary for every Jew to celebrate **Pesach** (Passover), the remembrance of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The Holy City was swelled with Jewish visitors and served as a great audience for His prediction of the coming destruction of the Temple and its Priests [**Matt. 24:1,2**]. He even created a disturbance in the outer court of the Temple when he angrily overturned the tables full of carefully stacked coins of the authorized money exchangers. This didn't sit well with the local police, as Yerushalayim was always one spark away from another of the many riots that seemed to plague them.

Yeshua and his disciples then shared a special Galilean traditional Passover meal together; however it wasn't the more well known Passover meal when the lamb was eaten. This is because the slaughter of the Lambs wouldn't occur until later in the day on the day of His crucifixion. Christians call Yeshua's final meal with his disciples the Last Supper. After the meal, Jesus and His disciples all went to the Mount of Olives, where Yeshua was arrested by the Temple Guard. The Temple Guard was not Roman (though we are told that a few Roman troops assisted in Yeshua's arrest); rather, it was Jews who formed the Temple police force, Levites no doubt. Yeshua was held in the house of the High Priest, as one might expect since this was an action of the Jewish Temple leadership, not the Roman authorities. The

Sadducees who had arranged his betrayal and arrest using one of Christ's inner group of 12, **Y'hudah Ischariot** (Judas), delivered Him to the Roman governor accusing Yeshua of inciting a riot. The Jewish religious authorities wanted him dead and would have gleefully killed him themselves, but Rome had long ago stripped the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Religious Court, of any right to execute capital punishment. Reluctantly the Romans obliged, and did the act for them. If executing another bothersome peasant Jew would help keep the peace, why not do it?

The Roman governor of Jerusalem Pontius Pilate, ordered Yeshua to die on the death stake. He was to undergo the most gruesome and humiliating form of capital punishment: crucifixion. The death warrant was carried out by some of the small contingent of Roman soldiers garrisoned in Yerushalayim. Yeshua died on **Pesach** (Passover).

On the third day (day one being the day He was executed), several women went to pay respects at His tomb and found it empty. Word raced around the city that His body was missing. Had it been stolen by some group trying to discredit Yeshua's claims? Just as problematic, had His body been stolen by yet another group that wanted to contrive a "divine disappearance"? Or, indeed, was He alive, resurrected, and exactly who He said He was? His 12 disciples and newest followers didn't know how to behave or what to think. Most were dispirited and discouraged. Had they tied all their hopes and dreams to yet another false Messiah; one of the many that had already come and proved to be simply idealistic men who wanted fame and a following?

A few days later, after the Passover crowds thinned out, small groups of Jews began meeting in their homes, trying to understand what had occurred. Many believed Yeshua was the Son of God, just as He bluntly said He was; and, that He had been resurrected, just as He had predicted. This was a little easier to accept for those new believers that followed the Pharisees because they believed in bodily resurrection. For those who followed the Sadducee teachings it was near impossible to accept, as their belief system denied the possibility of bodily resurrection. The Essenes, however, were fully prepared for the advent of the Messiah for they had long been preaching "the Kingdom of God is at hand". The Zealots were angry and cynical; disappointed that Jesus did not lead them in open warfare against the Romans; and so again they began their wait and watch for the Warrior King/rebel leader they had hoped for.

Believers from many of the smaller sects and sub-groups accepted Yeshua as Savior, each in

his own way; that is, their beliefs became hybrids of their former doctrines and philosophies, with Christ simply added to the mix.

The Jewish religious authorities put out an edict: no one is to associate with the followers of Yeshua and these new “Messianic” sects that had made a carpenter’s son their God. Worshipping a man was nothing less than idolatry, the punishment being excommunication or death. The disciples ignored the order and went about the work Yeshua had assigned them: telling the Jews about the Good News. It’s about 35 AD.

### **THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY**

Within months after Christ’s death, the outlawed Messianic movement began spreading. The members of one of the several Jewish Messianic sects called themselves “The Way”, and would, many years later, have their identity Hellenized to reflect the Greek name, Christos (Greek for Messiah). In time, when gentiles began to make up more and more of the Messianic movement, these followers were called Christians.

The very first Jewish sect to embrace Yeshua’s Messiah-ship was the Nazarenes, almost certainly an offshoot of the Essenes. Various Jewish leadership groups met regularly to discuss how to stamp out these sects; a few were unconcerned, others were vehement. A young Pharisee named Saul presided at an illegal execution, encouraged by the Sanhedrin, of a Messianic Jew named Stephen who spoke of Yeshua as the Messiah, and of the coming destruction of Yerushalayim (*Jerusalem*) and the Temple. Stephen’s killing sparked riots and the anger of the Roman governor because these unruly Jewish troublemakers were, by law, forbidden from carrying out executions.

Within 3 years, Pilate was removed from office by the Roman Senate after a particularly ugly riot in Samaria. It appears the Romans had lost faith in his ability to control these unruly people. King Agrippa, Herod's grandson, came to power in a few years and to many Jewish historians, oversaw the last golden age of Judaism in the Holy Land. The non-Messianic Jews loved him. He cared deeply for the people. He also ordered the execution of the Messianic Jew James, brother of Jesus and leader of the Believers in Jerusalem; later this new Herod ordered the imprisonment of Peter, which was also a popular decision.

Thousands of Jews had come to belief in Yeshua, and were now what we would today say are Messianic Jews, while as yet only a handful of gentiles accepted Him. These few gentile believers found themselves occupying a religious no-man's land. The Messianic Jews (known as The Way) were requiring these non-Jewish believers to convert to Judaism in order to worship Yeshua in their synagogues, and many resisted. However, as uncomfortable and ambiguous as this was, the real issue of the times was the growing animosity between Jews and the pagan Hellenists. The Romans, of course, sided with the Hellenists. Middle ground disappeared and was replaced by extreme views on both sides. Roman rule had become intolerable for the Jews, and the Jews were a never-ending problem for the Romans.

The highly educated Pharisee **Sha'ul** (Saul), whose Greek name was Paulus and whom Christians commonly call Paul, became perhaps the most fervent and effective leader of this new Messianic Jewish sect. Paul was a Rabbi, educated at the most prestigious school of Judaism in Jerusalem: the Academy of Gamaliel. Paul was not born in the Holy Land. He was a Diaspora Jew: one of the millions of Jews born and raised outside of Judah, Samaria, and the Galilee. Tarsus of Cilicia (a Roman province) was his home, but he came to Jerusalem because it was the power center of Jewish education and religious authority. Paul was an ambitious young man, and soon ascended to a position on the lower Sanhedrin.

**Sha'ul** ingratiated himself to the Jewish leadership by gaining a reputation as the fiercest hunter of heretics: among which Jews who worshipped Christ were his number one target. While on his way to Damascus, Syria, to arrest some suspected **Yeshua** sympathizers, he had a direct encounter with the resurrected Messiah and this resulted in a changed heart as well as temporary blindness. Afterward, Paul became a fearless and tireless planter of new Believing congregations and an evangelist of the Good News, as well as a prolific writer on behalf of the risen Messiah. His letters and epistles dominate the New Testament and are perhaps the most studied passages in the entire Bible by Christians. In fact, Paul in later times became the greatest source for denominational doctrines that rule the Church in our day.

It is important to understand the nature of these so-called “Churches” that Paul planted. The first several, and almost all of those afterward, were simply various Jewish Synagogues, already existing, which he was able to persuade to accept Yeshua as the Messiah. They continued in their Jewish liturgies, and simply added Christ to the mix; and they continued as Synagogues, not Churches in the sense we think of a church. As more and more gentiles came to belief, some accommodations were made by the Messianic Jewish leadership, headed by Jesus’ brother James, which allowed these new gentile believers to worship alongside Jews, and inside the Synagogues, without first becoming Jews by means of circumcision. Eventually, gentiles outnumbered Jews, and the Synagogues began taking on a different flavor. In time, gentiles wanted to continue worshipping Christ, but without Jewish influence; so they built separate places of worship; this is the birth of the Church era.

We’ll continue next week with the spreading of the Gospel among the gentiles.