

Acts 21:17-36: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 21 verses 17 to 36 When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

After greeting them he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed.

They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.

What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads.

Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.

[1 : 1 7] Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them, and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled, and the offering presented for each one of them.

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd, and laid hands on him, crying out, Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people, and the law, and this place.

Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple, and has defiled this holy place. For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort, that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

He at once took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains.

[2 : 2 9] He inquired who he was, and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd. For the mob of the people followed, crying out, Away with him! Paul, in the second half of Acts chapter 21, on his return from his third missionary journey, has just arrived in Jerusalem from Caesarea, he has been accompanied by some Christians from Caesarea, and a company of Gentiles and others that he had brought with him.

This is presumably near the time of Pentecost, as it had been Paul's intention to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost, perhaps as a symbolically appropriate time to present the Gentile believers as firstfruits of the harvest field of the nations, and to present the gift that had been gathered among the Gentiles for the poor Christians in Jerusalem to the church there.

It had been foretold that suffering and persecution awaited him in Jerusalem, and many of the disciples had tried to discourage him from going there on his journey back. But the Holy Spirit was constraining him to go, so he wasn't going to turn aside.

Luke has been framing Paul's journey towards Jerusalem as a playing out of the pattern of Christ's life in Paul's own. Paul is walking in the footsteps of his master. However, there are other matters more immediately at play.

[3 : 58] The Gentile mission had been rapidly growing, and the appropriate relationship between Jews and Gentiles was an issue of great concern, and has been throughout the book to this point.

The more that the Gentile mission expands, and the more that pagan Gentiles convert and come into the church, the more that the relationship between Jews and Gentiles would be a cause of concerns, suspicions, and tensions.

A very great deal depends upon Paul's relationship with the Christian leaders in Jerusalem. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would largely have been pious Jews who followed Jesus. The rising numbers of Gentile Christians, who by now would have been far more than a merely peripheral group around a Jewish movement, would have caused tensions for Judean Jewish Christians, who might have been wondering what implications the rise of a Jew-Gentile church had for their relationship to their Jewish heritage.

The situation had been exacerbated by rumours that had been spreading concerning Paul, that he had been opposing Jewish practices and traditions among the diaspora Jews, that he was intentionally Gentilising the church.

If the issue of Judaising was the pressing problem when the first Gentiles were converting, now that great numbers of Gentiles are converting, the fear of Gentilising is the more pressing one.

[5 : 16] As Craig Keener makes clear, at issue here is the spirit of the Jerusalem decree. The Jerusalem council had determined to ensure that the Gentile converts would be free to live as converted Gentiles.

Implicit in this agreement was the reciprocal recognition of Jews by Gentiles. The Jews should not Judaise the Gentiles, and the Gentiles should not Gentilise the Jews.

Also at stake was the witness of the church to the observant Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere, who had heard the slander that Paul was a subversive Gentiliser. John Barclay, cited by Keener, offers three helpful categories for thinking through some of the issues at stake.

The first is that of assimilation, which is integrating into Greco-Roman society and abandoning distinctive Jewish customs. The second category is acculturation, which is the acquisition of the language and literary heritage of the majority culture through education and other means.

And the third is accommodation, which refers to the ways in which Jews could express their own faith in terms of the values, ideals, and forms of Hellenistic culture and literature.

[6 : 27] In terms of these three categories, Barclay argues that Paul was highly assimilated on account of his eating and association with Gentiles. He was only moderately acculturated.

His canon was clearly scripture, and while he had some knowledge of rhetoric and a rudimentary awareness of Greek literature and philosophy, he does not seem to have been especially knowledgeable in these areas, and he operated principally in traditional Jewish categories.

Finally, he wasn't very accommodated. For Paul, the Gentile world was a sinful one, and he clearly sets himself against it and its moral values. Paul doesn't try to transpose scriptural conceptual structures and language into those of the wider Gentile society.

His approach on issues such as sexuality, idolatry and scripture are manifestly those of an observant Jew. Paul's assimilation was, as we see elsewhere, for the sake of mission, as he puts it in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23.

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law.

[7 : 43] To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law.

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Paul doesn't seem to have completely abandoned Jewish practices. However, he is prepared to put such practices to one side, for the sake of mission. Although this does not mean, that he is requiring Jews in general, to lay aside their culture, it does serve to relativise those practices, in a way that would have led many to view Paul, as a serious compromiser, or even as an apostate.

Especially as claims about Paul, were exaggerated, through the spread of rumours concerning him. This would cause particular problems, for the Jerusalem Christians, as they related to the Jews around them.

They were presenting themselves, as pious and observant Jews, and yet they countenanced, Paul's supposedly gentilising mission. Meeting with James and the elders, Paul and his companions were welcomed, and recounted all that God accomplished, through them, leading the elders to glorify God.

[8 : 58] However, James and the elders, are concerned to deal with the rumours, that have been spreading, which have been dismaying, observant Jewish Christians, and harming their witness, among their fellow Jews. Paul has seemingly come to Jerusalem, with the express aim, of strengthening relations, between Jews and Gentiles, within the church.

The collection for the Jewish Christians, in Jerusalem, has been a repeated issue of concern, in his epistles, as a very practical expression, of the union of Jews and Gentiles, that he proclaims. Now he arrives in Jerusalem, it seems as if, this great unifying gesture, of Paul, and the company of Gentiles, that he has brought with him, bringing the gifts, of their various churches, is in danger, of being entirely in vain, as unsettling rumours, concerning him, are provoking, deeply damaging distrust, in the very place, where he is seeking, reciprocal recognition, and love.

We should also consider, the tensions, that have been rising, in Jerusalem for some time, Jewish nationalism, had become much more pronounced, and there were a number, of instances, of serious violence.

News will have gotten around, that Paul is now in the city, and people's eyes, will be trained upon him, and upon the Jerusalem leaders, in their handling of him. Without compromising, the understanding of salvation, that had been presented, by the Jerusalem council, the Jerusalem leaders, want Paul publicly, to perform an action, that manifests the fact, that he honours Jewish customs, and isn't a Gentiliser.

[10 : 25] The leaders make clear, that this is not, in any sense, meant to compromise, the statement, they made at the Jerusalem council. Such Jewish practices, are not being required, for standing before God.

Nor do they themselves, believe that the claims, of Paul's accusers, really have great substance, to them. Although Paul, may be more assimilated, in the context, of the Gentile mission, this does not mean, that he ceases, to regard himself, as a Jew, or that he has just, shrugged off, Jewish customs.

In chapter 16 verse 3, Paul himself, circumcised Timothy, in order to respect, Jewish scruples. Jewish customs, may not be required, for standing before God, but they have a continuing, cultural significance, and more than that, represent a sort of, religious practice, in a somewhat older sense, of that term religious.

Like the monastic, might adopt, religious orders, as a form, for their Christian piety. For these Jewish Christians, Jewish practices, may have been regarded, as a context, for the practice, of their Christian faith.

The practices, are not incumbent, upon everyone. They don't establish, the person who adopts them, on a special footing, with God. But they do represent, a framework of piety, that can assist them, in their spiritual practice, in their growth, in their witness, and in their enjoyment, of faithful community.

[11 : 44] The Jewish leaders, propose a plan. There are four men, under a vow, and Paul should pay, their expenses, and join with them, in purifying himself. Thereby demonstrating, his respect for, and support for, the continued practice, of Jewish customs.

The exact nature, of the vows of the men, in question, is not entirely clear, and a number of suggestions, have been advanced. Darrell Bach, lists four of these. First, Paul is being purified, for travelling, in Gentile areas, whereas for the others, it is in connection, with the Nazarite vow. Second, Paul is sharing, in the end, of the men's vow, for the remaining week. Third, the four men, have contracted, uncleanness, and need to be cleansed. Or four, Paul's cleansing, is for his own vow, mentioned in chapter 18, verse 18.

The text, doesn't seem to settle, the question for us, and while a few, of these options, are possible, none is without, its attendant, questions or problems. The men, performing a Nazarite vow, does seem more likely though.

