

Acts 19:8-20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 19, verses 8 to 20. And he entered the synagogue, and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the way before the congregation, he withdrew from them, and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus.

This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.

Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize. But who are you?

[1 : 0 4] And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks.

And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together, and burned them in the sight of all.

And they counted the value of them, and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. In the middle of Acts chapter 12, we find the Apostle Paul in Ephesus, in one of the longest periods of his ministry in any single city.

He spends three months teaching in the synagogue. The fact that he can remain there for so long suggests that they are more receptive than they were in other parts of the empire. Perhaps in a large cosmopolitan city like Ephesus, they are more open to new ideas.

However, there is a progressive hardening of the opposition to Paul. Some become stubborn, they continue in unbelief, and then they speak evil of the way before the congregation. Paul at this point responds by withdrawing from them, and he starts teaching in the hall of Tyrannus.

[2 : 2 4] As he withdraws from the synagogue, he takes the disciples with him. It seems that a number of people have converted through Paul's message, and now they follow him out of the synagogue, and into this new context of teaching.

Whereas in previous cities, when he had left the synagogue, no mention had been made of him taking a community with him and starting up a new site of teaching. Here a new community of learning seems to have been formed immediately.

The hall of Tyrannus was likely a sort of lecture theatre. Tyrannus might have been the lecturer for the main hours of the day, and then after those hours were over, Paul could use the hall to teach and debate with other teachers in the city, perhaps spending special time at the end of the day instructing the new disciples.

Some versions of the text give the hours of his teaching, as from the 5th to the 10th hour at the end of verse 9. That would be from about 11am to 4pm.

Paul would likely be working for his keep in the early morning, during which time Tyrannus was using the hall, and then he would teach for the rest of the day. People would be able to come in during the siesta time in the afternoon, and listen to him speak.

[3 : 30] In such a way, Paul would have become one of the known philosophers or teachers within the context of the city of Ephesus. And the result seems to have been a spread of the word of the gospel from this urban centre throughout the whole region of Asia.

We might presume that this context would also have been more familiar to Greeks, to persons who did not come from a Jewish background, and as a result, people might have been more receptive outside of the Jewish community.

Alongside the founding of this new school, Paul also is performing great miracles. Even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were used to heal the sick.

These handkerchiefs or aprons may perhaps have been sweat rags that he used during his work as a tent maker. One can imagine people surreptitiously obtaining these, and then using them for the sick.

This might also recall the story of the woman with the issue of blood, who touched the garment of Christ and was healed from her condition. The nature of these miracles seems somewhat magical.

[4 : 27] This is not the typical form in which exorcisms and healings occur. Darrell Bock raises the possibility that God is dealing with people in a way that they would understand. In a city preoccupied with magic, the healings have a character that is somewhat similar to magic.

However, as already noted, we should recall that there are events like this in the Gospels, and also a few events like it in the Old Testament, such as in the stories of Elijah and Elisha.

The summary of the healings and the exorcisms that we find here might recall similar summaries of the miracles of Jesus in places like Luke 4, verses 40-41.

Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying, You are the Son of God.

But he rebuked them, and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ. The difference between magic and miracle becomes clearer in the case of the seven sons of Sceva.

[5 : 28] He is a chief priest, not a high priest. A high priest wouldn't be so far from Jerusalem. The healings and the exorcisms performed by Paul don't occur through skills or arts, through incantations or formulas, but through the action of God through him.

The name of Christ is not used as something by which to manipulate or control God, but as something that is a sign of authorization. Appealing to Jesus' name by itself does not convey power.

The sons of Sceva presume that Jesus' name is a source of power that enables them to manipulate him to act, rather than something that can only be used by faithful persons to whom that power is entrusted.

Faith is entirely absent in their more incantational approach. And the story here indicates the degree of syncretism that existed between Ephesus' culture of magic and Jewish practice.

The demons know Jesus and they recognise Paul. Some have suggested a distinction being drawn here between knowing and recognising. Whether or not there is, we see examples of this both in the Gospel and earlier on in the story of Acts.

[6 : 33] Luke chapter 4 verses 33 to 34 In Acts chapter 16 verses 16 to 17 This is a reminder that Paul is fighting against the kingdom of Satan itself, and all these minions are part of that struggle.

The demon enables the man to overpower all of the seven sons of Sceva, badly wounding them and stripping them naked, humiliating them. In this process there is also a humiliation of their false form of religion.

They are shamed, but the name of Jesus is extolled. His name is not just a name that people can use to manipulate things, but it is a name that has been given to faithful persons to proclaim, and to act in terms of as a means of deliverance to oppressed persons.

Fear falls upon people, much as after the judgement upon Ananias and Sapphira. This event provokes many new believers to confess their dabbling in magical practices, openly divulging practices whose power supposedly lay in their remaining secret, bringing them into the light and destroying them.

The syncretism of the Jewish sons of Sceva suggests that Ephesus was fertile ground for syncretistic practices, so such a radical disavowal of magic is noteworthy and necessary.

[8 : 19] The demonic realm is real and powerful, and to thoroughly abandon its powers and turn to Christ alone would be a very powerful public demonstration of the confidence that believers had in the fact that Jesus was Lord over all principalities and powers, that there were no spiritual forces above him.

The burning of the books was a public rejection of the way of life that they represented, an abandonment of the false power that they offered, and a surrendering to Christ. This wasn't a forced confiscation of magical books from others, and the immense value of the material burned is probably an indication of the number of people involved, as well as the huge part that magic played in people's lives.

The fact that they would invest so much money in it suggests that this was a major preoccupation for them. Born of a desire for power and also extreme fear of these spiritual forces, Christ has set them free from all of that.

The cost of all of the books has been estimated by some as equivalent to 50,000 days' wages for an average worker. This would be a catastrophic blow to the kingdom of Satan within the realm of Asia.

One of the dangers for the early church was always that of displacing the old paganism, yet still being conceived of as a form of religion that functioned in the same way as that old paganism.

[9 : 38] Alexander Schmemmann discusses the way that the sense of religion of a period can distort Christian faith and practice according to its image. He writes, He gives the example of something that he calls mysteriological piety.

This was essentially the old patterns of religion that existed before the gospel was accepted, into which Christian notions were then slotted. As such, it was only half of a conversion.

The powers of the old paganism had been swapped out for those of Christ, but the fundamental notion of what religion is, of what it means to relate to God, had not been sufficiently transformed.

As a result, there was a general desire for Christianity to perform the purposes of the old paganism, so church buildings started to be seen as sacred and sanctifying places, and certain holy sites started to attract cults to them.

The external rites and ceremonies of worship started to become more and more elaborate and complicated. This established a sort of external solemnity, which sacralised certain ceremonies and actions, emphasising that they were not regular things, in order to develop an atmosphere of sacred and religious fear.

[11 : 06] Along with this was a sharper distinction between clergy and lay people, the clergy performing these sacralising rites. All of this was a distortion of Christianity, which in some of these quarters was trying to do what paganism had done, albeit in a Christian key.

Framing Christianity in terms of magic was a huge danger in Ephesus. In these verses we see how God communicated his power in a way that grabbed the attention of such a culture, while decisively distinguishing the Christian faith from it.

A question to consider. What are some of the cultural notions and models of religion that are prevalent in our own day that we might be tempted to reframe the Christian faith in terms of?