

Acts 17:1-15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 17 verses 1 to 15. Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women.

But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. And the people in the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.

Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica. They received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed. In the first half of Acts chapter 17, Paul and Silas visit Thessalonica and Berea.

Travelling from Philippi, where they had been asked to depart by the magistrates, Paul and Silas and their missionary group arrive in Thessalonica, about 70 miles southwest. Thessalonica was a major harbour town, the capital Macedonia, and one of the most prominent and prosperous mercantile centres. Estimates for the population of Thessalonica ranged from more conservative estimates of around 40,000 to larger estimates of up to 200,000. It was a free city, ruling itself without a Roman garrison situated within it. The missionaries, as they typically did, began their work in the synagogue. The gospel was given to the Jews first and also to the Greeks, and there were Jewish synagogues throughout Greece at the time. The extent of the diaspora, both in geographical reach and ubiquity, and in numerical quantity, meant that the ground had been well prepared in many places for the message of the gospel. In virtually every place there would already be people who were knowledgeable in the scriptures. The missionaries were not working with a blank slate, but the foundation of knowledge was already laid for many. While the gospel met with much opposition from the Jews, who often instigated persecution, the early Jewish converts would likely have been the backbone of the youngest churches. They had the scriptural background to understand the message of the gospel well, and would have been able to instruct Gentile converts. A further thing to consider is the possibility that, travelling as they were, the missionaries, even if they were to use the new form of the codex rather than scrolls, would have found it very difficult to obtain and bring many scriptural books with them on their travels. It would have been both costly and cumbersome.

[3 : 46] A further benefit of starting their mission in various towns with the synagogue is the fact that the synagogue would likely have its own scriptural texts, which could be used for confirmatory witness.

Here we see something more of the approach of the missionaries. Going to the synagogue was Paul's custom, much as Jesus is going to the synagogue is described as his custom in Luke chapter 4 verse 16.

Luke's description of Paul's reasoning with the people in the synagogue perhaps suggests that much of the teaching of the synagogue operated in a dialogic or question and answer style. Paul sets out a case for them that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the one who fit the prophecies. We might imagine Paul using various strands of biblical reasoning, several of which we have already encountered in messages of the book of Acts to this point.

He could have used quotations from the Psalms, such as Psalm 110 in relation to Christ's ascension, or Psalm 16 in relation to Christ's resurrection. Isaiah 53 could relate to Christ's suffering, death and vindication in the resurrection, and other references from the books of the prophets.

Then he could use retelling of the biblical narrative, as we see in Stephen's speech, showing how the story both typologically anticipates and necessitates the Christ's suffering, and that Jesus fits the silhouette that the anticipatory scriptures projected perfectly.

[5 : 10] There are two stages to this argument. First, presenting the scripture's portrayal of the Christ, and second, showing that Jesus of Nazareth uniquely fits it. While in Thessalonica, Paul reasons in the synagogue for three Sabbaths. If we were to presume that this was the full time that Paul spent in the city, it might lead to questions about how to reconcile this with details that we have elsewhere in the epistles to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 9, For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil, we worked day and night, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. In 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 verses 7 to 8, For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. Beyond this, there is the fact that Paul was seemingly, in Thessalonica, long enough to receive support from Philippi over a week's journey away, as we see in Philippians chapter 4 verses 15 to 16.

And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

As Craig Keener notes, during the missionary's stay, they had been able to teach the Thessalonians seemingly fairly extensively concerning the faith, and had also appeared to have appointed leaders.

This suggests the stay longer than three weeks. Of course, the text merely speaks of the duration of Paul's period of Sabbath reasoning in the synagogue. They might have been in the city for some period before that, and some period afterwards.

Paul had a measure of success, especially with the devout Greek God-fearers and the leading women. One can imagine that the status of the uncircumcised in the teaching of Paul concerning the body of Christ would have been especially appealing to such persons.

[7 : 10] The Jews respond with hostility, inciting a mob to violence and unsettling the entire city. They attacked the house of one of the believers, who was seemingly hosting some of the missionaries, but they could not find them. As they could not find the missionaries themselves, they brought Jason and some of the other Thessalonian believers to the city authorities instead, accusing them of supporting a movement that was in the process of turning the world upside down.

In particular, they focus upon the way that the declaration of Jesus' kingship threatens the claims of Caesar. The message of Paul and the missionaries was potentially subversive in a number of respects.

They taught against idols, false gods and false religions, and the imperial cult would have been among the most obvious targets, whether it was explicitly singled out or not. The language of Christ's kingdom, of his coming and of his divine sonship, was extremely similar to the language used of Caesar.

Yet Christians declared that Christ's title was unique, implicitly presenting Caesar's claims as if they were the parody. While the claims of the Christian faith's subversive posture towards Rome have been rather overplayed by many of late, the Jews of Thessalonica would not have been the first to draw attention to the various ways, indirect and more direct, that the gospel message threatened Rome.

Perhaps one of the most notable and obvious ways that it threatened Rome was in the claims that the Christians made about Jesus being crucified under the authorisation of Rome. The unjust condemnation of Christ and his resurrection were an indictment of Rome's injustice and challenged its claims concerning itself.

[8 : 43] The motives of the Jews should be considered here. They are, we are told, driven by jealousy, presumably at the success that the missionaries had with the devout Greeks and perhaps more especially with the leading women.

Such elite women would have had more social freedom to convert than elite men and could act as wealthy patronesses and could exert their influence on behalf of their religious teachers. In the first missionary journey, while in Pisidian Antioch, the Jewish opponents of the missionaries had used the influence of God-fearing elite women to stir up persecution against them from the authorities.

If the Christian missionaries successfully converted large numbers of the leading women and devout Greeks, the Jews stood to lose a great deal of their social connections, financial support and influence.

Indeed, it might even turn against them. As Thessalonica was a free city, its inhabitants would have been very nervous about losing its privileged status. Any whiff of sedition would have been extremely troubling to the authorities.

Thessalonica had a temple for the imperial cult and leading Thessalonians were likely scrupulous in ensuring that Rome's interests were not threatened. They required Jason, as a host of the missionaries, to pay a bond.

[9 : 54] In contrast to Philippi, here it is one of the early converts, rather than the missionaries themselves, who is persecuted. Jason courageously suffers on behalf of the missionaries and on behalf of Christ.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes them receiving the gospel in much affliction. From Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians, we might also get the impression that a significant number of former pagans were among the earliest converts, not just Jews and devout God-fearers, as he speaks of their turning from idols to serve the living and true God.

From Thessalonica, Paul and Silas are sent away by night to Berea. Berea was about 45 miles west-southwest, of Thessalonica, according to Darrell Bach.

It was also on the way to Athens. Once again, they began their ministry in the synagogue, receiving a far more favourable response this time. The Berean Jews received the message of the missionaries eagerly and examined the scriptures to confirm their witness, something that wins them commendation as noble in character.

As modern readers of the text, we can easily fall into the trap of imagining the Bereans all flicking through their personal Bibles, perhaps when they go home, but it is entirely likely that the synagogue itself did not contain a full set of the scrolls of scripture, and the text that it did have would likely be in a Greek translation.

[11 : 14] Although communal reading of the scriptures would have been common, private ownership was very rare. The process of examining the scriptures quite probably took the form of a communal act of deliberation under the oversight of synagogue leaders, reading relevant passages from the Torah scroll and other scriptures that they had in their possession, and discussing them together as a community.

The process of examining the scriptures is described as a daily one, probably involving members of the synagogue community during the week, not merely on the Sabbath. In Berea, many of the Jews believed, and once again, a number of Greek women of the elite and some men.

However, once again, the missionaries are followed by a counter-mission, as Jews come from Thessalonica and whip up the crowds against them. As Paul was apparently the chief target, Silas and Timothy remained, while Paul proceeded alone to Athens, conducted by some of the Bereans.

He went down to the sea, and we can presume boarded a vessel to Athens. The fact that some of the Bereans accompanied him, not merely to the sea, but for the entirety of his journey, is an indication of their nobility and their commitment to hospitality.

A question to consider. Many Christians have described themselves as Bereans, on account of their commitment to confirming every teaching that they receive from the scriptures. How might closer attention to the situation of the Bereans help us to follow their noble example even more closely?

[12 : 45]

