

Acts 18:1-23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 18 verses 1 to 23. After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth, and he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tent makers by trade. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads, I am innocent, from now on I will go to the Gentiles. And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to

Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people. And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. But when Galio was pro-council of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law. But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Galio said to the Jews, If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things. And he drove them from the tribunal, and they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Galio paid no attention to any of this. After this Paul stayed many days longer, and then took leave of the brothers, and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

At Sancria he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there. But he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them he said, I will return to you if God wills. And he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next, through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

After leaving Athens, Paul moves to Corinth at the beginning of Acts chapter 18. Corinth was the capital of Achaia, a Roman colony and a strategic location for the mission. It was a large multicultural city, with strong connections to Rome. One could travel to Rome from it in about five days. New Corinth was designed using a Roman pattern, predominantly used Latin in its public inscriptions, and a number of the people mentioned in the church there had Roman names and connections. Estimates of its size vary quite significantly. Craig Keener suggests that if the capacity of the theatre of the city gives an indication of the city's size, being about a tenth of the population, we would have a median estimate of about 140,000 people. Estimates of the size of the city, however, vary by an order of magnitude or more. The highest, and quite excessive, estimate that Keener mentions is 300,000 people, with about 460,000 slaves. Compared to other ancient cities, it would have been very populous, and according to some scholars, might even have been one of the top three cities of the empire. Corinth was on the Isthmus, the narrow strip of land between the

Peloponnese peninsula and the mainland of Greece. Although attempts to build a canal between the two sides had failed or been abandoned due to excessive cost, there was a path specifically designed for the transport of ships and their cargoes from one side to another. Trade and crafts had made Corinth the wealthiest city in all of Greece. As a prominent location for trade and for travellers, it should not be surprising that Corinth would have had a reputation for immorality in certain quarters also.

[4 : 28] In Corinth, Paul finds a Jew called Aquila, a native of Pontus and a former resident of Rome, with his wife Priscilla, Aquila works as a tent maker. Corinth was a multicultural and cosmopolitan city, and Aquila and Priscilla would naturally have fit in in this respect. Aquila was a Jew of the Diaspora, a native of Pontus on the south coast of the Black Sea, recently expelled from Rome in Italy, and now living in Corinth in Greece. Later on, they would join Paul in going to Ephesus. When Paul writes the epistle to the Romans, they host a church in their house there. The importance of cosmopolitans and travellers like Aquila and Priscilla was immense for the early church. Such persons were instrumental in spreading the message of the gospel to the most strategic hubs and broadly dispersing it throughout the empire. We get a glimpse of such cosmopolitanism in places like the final chapter of the Book of Romans, where Paul mentions over 20 Christians living in a city that he had yet to visit.

Cosmopolitan tradespeople like Aquila and Priscilla would have come in contact with a huge number of people, and as such would be ideal for spreading the gospel message extensively. Such persons also formed many of the strongest connections that existed between churches in various locations at that time.

Paul didn't aim to go to Rome on this particular missionary journey, but a more Roman city like Corinth would have been a perfect preparation for such a mission in the future, acculturating him to a context that was far more Roman than Syria or Judea, with which he was more familiar. As nothing is mentioned of the conversion of Aquila and Priscilla, many commentators reasonably assume that they were already converted by this point. Paul may have started the church in Corinth, but this need not mean that he was the first Christian in the city. Although Luke's narrative in Acts closely focuses upon the apostle Paul, we should definitely not presume that he was the only person spreading the gospel to new regions of the empire during this period. Indeed, some have suggested that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius was a response to unrest in the Jewish community after the arrival of Christians and the gospel in the city.

The historian Suetonius claimed that the Jews were expelled from the city as a result of a disturbance caused by Crestus, which many scholars have argued might be a reference to Christ. The expulsion of the Jews from Rome likely occurred in AD 49. Some have estimated that around 50,000 Jews lived in Rome at that time.

The expulsion and later return might further help to explain why Paul knew so many people in Rome before he visited. Aquila and Priscilla were tent makers, a trade which Paul shared. Paul would often work with his own hands to support his ministry. The fact that of all the possible tasks that he could have done, Paul was a tent maker, is worthy of notice. The first disciples were fishermen, an occupation given symbolic importance in the gospels as the Lord declared that they would be made fishers of men.

[7 : 25] Tent making might recall the great tent of the tabernacle. Paul, Aquila and Priscilla are all part of the task of constructing a new tabernacle, the tabernacle of the church. They are like Bezalel and Aholiab in the book of Exodus. Aquila and Priscilla are a husband-wife pair, one of a number of male and female pairs in the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. The way that Priscilla is spoken of alongside Aquila might reasonably be seen to suggest that she played a very prominent part in their shared ministry. Paul's missionary approach here is the same as he adopts elsewhere.

He focuses upon the synagogue and tries to persuade Jews and Greeks within it. After Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, perhaps with further support, Paul seems to have been freed up to engage in more ministry, without the same need to devote much of his time to earning his keep. Once again, Paul is largely rejected by the Jews of the city. His response is to shake out his garments, like shaking the dust off his feet, and to declare himself free of the guilt of their blood.

This might recall the task of the watchman, as described in Ezekiel chapter 33 verses 1-6. The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, speak to your people, and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land, and blows the trumpet, and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He heard the sound of the trumpet, and did not take warning, his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming, and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity. But his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.

Paul, as the Lord's appointed messenger, is responsible to deliver his message faithfully. However, if he delivers that message, and it is rejected, the blood of the hearers lies on their own heads. Paul then declares his determination to go to the Gentiles. This wasn't a complete rejection of the Jews on Paul's part. From Paul's letters to the Corinthians, it seems reasonable to believe that a significant number of the earliest converts and core members of the church in the city were Jews. Furthermore, when he moved on, he would once again begin with the Jewish synagogue.

This didn't represent a fundamental re-evaluation of his mission strategy then, just the focus of his mission in the city of Corinth. There are many converts at this time.

[10 : 03] Two especially noteworthy converts are mentioned here, Titius Justus and Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue. Some have suggested that Titius Justus might be Gaius, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1.14 and Romans 16.23. Crispus is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1.14.

where we learn that Paul baptised him. The Lord, presumably Jesus, appears to Paul at night in a vision, calling him to continue teaching boldly in the city. He will be preserved by the Lord and will have success in the city, as the Lord has many people there. It seems most likely that this is a reference not to people already converted to the gospel, but to people either marked out for salvation or people who are faithful Jews and God-fearers who have yet to hear the message of the gospel. Usually, when cast out of the synagogue, Paul would leave the city shortly thereafter.

However, on this occasion, he remains much longer. He has a lengthy stay of 18 months in the city, presumably enabling him to teach the young church extremely extensively. Gallio, the Roman proconsul, was the son of Seneca the Older and the elder brother of the famous Stoic philosopher and statesman, Seneca the Younger. He was in Corinth during the period of AD 51-52, which helps us to date Paul's visit. The Jews focus their attack upon Paul, claiming that he is teaching people to worship contrary to the law. This continued opposition from the Jews might give the impression that, even some time after Paul has been thrown out of the synagogue, his message is making significant inroads among the Jews of the city. The claim of the Jews might be that Paul is proselytising for a religion unrecognised by the Roman authorities. The Jews' claim might be that Paul is not teaching Judaism, a recognised religion, and for this reason is not a legitimate religious teacher in the city. However, the Christian movement is still regarded as a Jewish sect by the Roman authorities. It is important to recognise that, at this point in history, the Christian church is still generally a Jewish one, operating primarily within the social and conceptual world of Judaism.

Gallio dismisses the case, seemingly regarding the issue between the Jews and Paul as one between sects of Judaism, rather than between two different religions. Had the Jews accused Paul of some clear crime or wrongdoing, Gallio would have accepted their complaint, but he sees no reason to accept them on this matter. The identity of the all who beat Sothenes, the ruler of the synagogue, in verse 17, is unclear. Are they the rejected delegation of the Jews? Are they Gallio's men, Gentile observers? Or are they a mixture of Jews and Gentiles? It isn't entirely clear, but it's most likely that the all were a crowd of Gentile observers, who beat Sothenes as the leading representative of the troublemaking Jews.

Gallio's inaction might remind us of Pilate. As a character called Sothenes is mentioned in association with Corinth in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 1, many have speculated that this Sothenes was either already or later converted. Kena remarks upon how many details of Paul's visit to Corinth are either confirmed or possibly strengthened by other references in the New Testament, including but not limited to the fact that Aquila and Priscilla were a married missionary team. They made their homes available for Christian work and were known to the Corinthians. They had connections with Rome and Ephesus. Paul supported himself while in Corinth. Crispus was converted and baptised. Timothy and Silas were both involved in the Corinthian work. Paul began his work there before Silas and Timothy arrived.

[13 : 40] He passed through Athens en route there. Sothenes was possibly a convert associated with Corinth. The Corinthian church had a significant Jewish element and Paul later spent a period of time in Ephesus. After staying for a lengthy further period, Paul returns to Syria and his sending church of Antioch, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Sancria, he cut his hair as part of a vow. Whether a Nazarite vow or a private vow, this was likely a Jewish practice and would have been completed by a sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem, which he may have visited before returning to Antioch.

Paul spends a brief period in the city of Ephesus, reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue, and leaving Priscilla and Aquila in the city, declaring his intention to return, if the Lord permitted at a later point. Ephesus was another sizeable city, likely even larger than Corinth, with a stronger claim to have been the third or fourth largest city in the Roman Empire.

Paul returned to Antioch by way of Caesarea. After spending some time in Antioch, he began his third missionary journey in verse 23, going throughout Phrygia and Galatia, mostly consolidating work that had already been established, rather than starting anything new. A question to consider, how did Paul explain his reasons for his practice of supporting himself with his own hands to the Corinthian Christians in his correspondence to them?