

Acts 18:24-19:7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 18 verse 24 to chapter 19 verse 7. Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures.
- He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.
- He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.
- When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed. For he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus.
- There he found some disciples. And he said to them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? And they said, No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.
- [1 : 0 6] And he said, Into what then were you baptized? They said, Into John's baptism. And Paul said, John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is Jesus.
- On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.
- There were about twelve men in all. In Acts chapter 18 verse 23, Paul begins his third missionary journey, not long after returning to Antioch after his second.
- On his return from that journey, in verse 19, he had left Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, which is the location of the events at the end of chapter 18 and the beginning of chapter 19.
- Paul had intended to spread the gospel in the region of Asia on his second missionary journey, but had been prevented by the Holy Spirit. Now, on his third missionary journey, he probably intends to visit places that he hadn't been able to visit previously.
- [2 : 0 7] Ephesus was a huge city by ancient standards, one of the largest in the entire Roman Empire. It was thriving and prosperous in one of the wealthiest regions of the empire, with possibly more than a quarter of a million inhabitants, although estimates of ancient city sizes are very vague in most cases.
- It would be a perfect hub from which the message of Christ could spread further, and would provide a stronger bond between the churches in Galatia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, and Cilicia, with the newer churches in Macedonia and Achaia.
- Ephesus historically had ties to Athens, but was a very cosmopolitan place, with lots of foreign religions, within a primarily Hellenistic cultural setting. Ephesus in Asia also seemed to have been a focus for the Apostle John's later ministry, with the Book of Revelation being addressed to seven churches in the region, Ephesus being one of them.

The story is picked up before Paul arrives in Ephesus, however. Aquila and Priscilla are still there, where Paul had left them, but an important new figure comes upon the scene, Apollos.

Apollos is like the others, a diaspora Jew, whereas Paul is from Cilicia, and Aquila from Pontus. Apollos is from Alexandria. Alexandria was second only to Rome as a city of the empire.

[3 : 21] It was the largest city in the east, was an important site of learning, and had a large and influential Jewish community. Alexandria, while in Egypt, was founded by Macedonians, and elite status was held by Greeks.

It had a huge Jewish population, with lots of tensions between the Greeks and Jews of the city. Philo of Alexandria had likely died only a few years previously, and it is entirely possible that Apollos had encountered him, and not beyond the bounds of possibility that he had studied under him.

Philo was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, most famous for his more allegorical reading of the scriptures, which harmonised them with Stoic philosophy. Apollos is a gifted orator, and powerful in the scriptures.

The extent and nature of his knowledge when he first came to Ephesus is unclear. It seems that he had heard about the message, and even the death and resurrection of Christ. He had received instruction concerning Jesus, but he might have been ignorant of the church and its mission.

He knew about John the Baptist, and the movement formed around him, but was unaware of the form that the Jesus movement was taking. One can imagine, as early disciples scattered and passed through various parts of the empire, many people in places that wouldn't have a church for several years yet would have had a rudimentary but incomplete knowledge of the message, and many others would have had a distorted second-hand impression.

[4 : 41] He is described as fervent in spirit, which might be a reference either to the fervency of his own spirit, or to that of the Holy Spirit. If it is a reference to the latter, it suggests that Apollos had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, even though he was not yet a member of the church.

Given the contrast between Apollos and the twelve disciples of John the Baptist in the passage that follows, this might be a reasonable supposition. The Holy Spirit, throughout the book of Acts, frequently displays his power through bold and effective speech, which Apollos undoubtedly manifests.

Indeed, the description of Apollos here might remind us of no one so much as Stephen, back in chapter 6. Apollos speaks in the synagogue, where he is heard by Priscilla and Aquila, who take him aside and instruct him further and more accurately in the way of God.

It seems likely that this was a more extended process of further instruction, delivered in the context of hospitality in their own home, rather than just being a few words exchanged after the synagogue meeting.

Their taking him aside implies that they did not publicly respond to him or confront him. Apollos would likely not only have been more receptive to such further instruction, but might well have been eager to receive it from people with a clearer and more extensive knowledge of the message of Jesus than he had received.

[6 : 00] Priscilla's role in Apollos' instruction here has provoked much discussion in various quarters concerned with the question of women in pastoral ministry. Priscilla's active participation in the explanation of the way of God is implied, as is the fact that she is educated and informed, and well suited to pass on such instruction.

While this was noteworthy, I would have presented Priscilla as an exceptional woman. It wouldn't have been that scandalous or out of keeping with societal norms. The areas that would have been more restricted would be in public realms, with women acting in public disputation or in the oversight of communities, both of which are matters that Paul speaks of in his letters.

Having been so instructed, Apollos crosses over into Achaia with the commendations of the Ephesian Christians. In this move, Apollos would have strengthened the bonds between the churches of Ephesus and Corinth.

Priscilla and Aquila had come to Ephesus from Corinth, and now Apollos was sent as a sort of return gift from Ephesus to Corinth. In Achaia, he once again demonstrated his giftedness in speech and argument, publicly refuting Jewish opponents of the Christians, demonstrating from the scriptures themselves that the Messiah was Jesus.

This would presumably have involved showing that the Old Testament texts concerning the Messiah clearly pointed to Jesus, that he fit their description. A different encounter is described at the beginning of chapter 19.

[7 : 21] Apollos had only known the baptism of John, and when Paul arrives in Ephesus, by which time Apollos was in Corinth, he met some disciples of John who were in a somewhat similar, though contrasting, condition.

The contrast between the two is well observed by Robert Tannehill. Both know only the baptism of John, but they differ at two significant points. First, the effect of the Spirit is manifest in Apollos' speech, but the disciples in Ephesus have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

Second, Apollos, knowing only the baptism of John, is nevertheless able to teach accurately the things concerning Jesus. In contrast, Paul must instruct the other group that John's baptism of repentance was meant to prepare the people for faith in Jesus, the one coming after John.

In the case of Apollos, John's baptism led him to teach about Jesus because he accepted John's testimony about the coming one and recognised Jesus as its fulfilment.

However, the response by the so-called disciples to Paul's first question in chapter 19 verse 2 seems to lead him to doubt whether they even knew about Jesus and the need for faith in him.

[8 : 28] Paul has to instruct the disciples of John further in the message of John, and then to connect that to Jesus to whom it was supposed to point. The ministry of John was the starting point for the telling of the gospel in the gospel narratives, and its importance was also underlined at the beginning of the book of Acts and on a few further occasions within it.

Once the twelve disciples of John received the message of Jesus, they were baptised, Paul laid his hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit, demonstrating the reception of the Spirit by speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Whereas Apollos seemingly did not require baptism, they did. One of the things that these two accounts illustrate is the manner in which the ministry of the early church and its missionaries would have involved the delivery of updates through the many nodes in the growing network of churches and ministers to people who needed various degrees of upgrades or patches of their knowledge and experience of God's recent work in their days.

A question to consider. What do we learn of Apollos elsewhere in the scripture, especially in the book of 1 Corinthians?

