b. Luke's first transitional parenthesis in the Ephesian account records a familiar pattern in Paul's ministry (19:8-10). Per his custom, Paul entered the synagogue at Ephesus and continued for a period of three months to reason with the Jews, attempting to show them from the Scriptures that the kingdom of God has come in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Some believed, but many repudiated Paul and his gospel and actively opposed him, both among their fellow synagogue members and the Ephesian populace. And so, as he had done at Corinth, Paul withdrew from them and shifted his ministry from the synagogue to another venue, in this instance the school of a man named Tyrannus (cf. 18:7-8).

Luke provides no details concerning this school and its founding and purpose, but the context suggests that it was formed to meet the discipleship needs of the emerging Christian community in Ephesus. Whether that was the case or the school existed before the gospel arrived, it is clear that Paul used that venue to carry on his witness and instruction. Apparently Tyrannus' school became the hub of Paul's work in Ephesus: Luke noted that he taught there on a daily basis throughout the duration of his two years in that city.

c. Luke's parenthesis reiterates and highlights the *contradiction* of Jewish unbelief by describing it as disobedience to God (ref. again 19:9). These who regarded themselves as devoted adherents to Yahweh and His Law were actually guilty of willful disobedience to both Him and it. They had rejected Him and repudiated His Scripture by refusing to acknowledge and believe in the One it reveals.

This contradiction provides the backdrop for Luke's second episode involving the sons of a Jewish priest name Sceva (19:11-20). These men were Jewish exorcists who, becoming aware of the miraculous power being manifested through Paul (vv. 11-12), sought to appropriate that power for themselves. In this respect this account closely parallels the previous one involving Simon Magus (ref. 8:9-19).

Simon, too, had become enamored with the Spirit's power and determined to lay hold of it. And like these Jewish exorcists, Simon sought this power under the guise of doing the Lord's work: The sons of Sceva perceived in it a resource for delivering their Jewish countrymen from demonic subjugation; Simon wanted to be able to bestow the Spirit on men as Peter and John were doing.

These two episodes were similar, but the present one has unique features that are central to its contribution to the larger context. Luke has shown in various ways throughout his account that unbelief – Jewish as well as Gentile – flows from the self-referential, self-concerned perspective of the fallen mind. As rational beings, people have no choice but to perceive and assess God and His work and claims in Christ through the grid of their own minds. But their minds are severed from the life of God: Man, the image-son, is now defined by comprehensive estrangement, which means that he is isolated within a distorted and fragmented "self." In a cruel irony, people are constrained to be their own point of reference and judgment in all things, but without the capacity to perceive and judge rightly.

Human existence in the context of the Fall is enslavement to an insane master. It is man locked within himself, but a self that has lost authentic connection with itself and everything else, including the God in whose image it was created.

- Every human being comes into this world consigned to the absurdity of being his own "god" – a being who thinks and functions autonomously, *but in relation to a pseudo-reality fabricated within his own mind.*

- The Fall has rendered man a tragic caricature of himself. He remains God's creaturely "lord," but now perceives and executes his lordship as a fractured and self-deluded pseudo-god. Fallen man is himself a lie.

This defining and determining quality of human existence is perhaps no more powerfully expressed than in man's *religious* life. Being created in the divine image, man can't escape from his essential nature and innate sense of spiritual reality. Whatever a person concludes about spiritual things, he can't free himself from his spiritual consciousness and compulsion – even if his response to them is to convince himself that there is no god or gods. Man is a spiritual being, but he is also a fallen, fractured being. He is inescapably religious, but his religion always takes the form of *magic*.

Magic doesn't here refer to the magician's slight of hand or even occult ritual practices as such. It is the way fallen man expresses his own innate spirituality in relation to himself and the spiritual realities he instinctively discerns: *Magic refers to the way human beings inherently perceive the spiritual realm and the devices and techniques by which they respond to it.* It encompasses all the various dynamics of human interaction – cognitive as well as practical – with the supernatural and divine (whether those entities are real or only imagined).

Human religion as magic highlights both man's created nature and his condition:

- First of all it shows that people have an innate, albeit often undefined, sense of spiritual reality (whether they imagine that it exists outside of or within themselves). But more than the mere existence of the spiritual realm, people also sense a *distance* or disconnect between themselves and that realm. This is true whether they conceive of spiritual realities in terms of distinct "gods," impersonal forces, or even a "higher self."

- All people sense a distance between themselves and the spiritual realm, and this nagging impression results from their estranged condition. They may not acknowledge the God of the Scripture or regard themselves as alienated from the divine (whatever they believe concerning divinity), but they can't escape the sense of some sort of separation. And having that sense, people feel compelled to *bridge* that separation. This is the case even with the person who views himself as divine; he still senses the need to fully "actualize" his own intrinsic divinity.

This is what religion is all about. Religion – whatever its specific form and features – consists in every case of a set of cognitive and practical tools for closing the distance between oneself and perceived spiritual verities. But the goal isn't simply nearness; *religion seeks to make those verities present such that they become personally accessible, amenable, useful and beneficial* (as the person himself conceives the notion of benefit).

Fundamental to the way religion accomplishes this is the use of symbols and sacraments (sacred rituals). Tangible entities (images, altars, temples, sacred objects, texts, etc.) and rituals (such as sacrifices, prayers and incantations) are formulated and instituted for the purpose of providing a bridge between the material/personal and spiritual worlds. Spiritual realities are represented or symbolized in physical form, and these physical constructs then provide tangible connection to the spiritual thing they represent, making that thing present and accessible to human interaction and influence through ritual manipulation.

This dynamic explains and is the reason for religious images and icons. Such things are constructed as representations of specific entities, and the belief is that the physical representation provides a point of interface between the worshipper and the entity itself. When a person falls down before an image and offers his petition or praise to it, his conviction is that, through that interface, he is actually communicating with the entity corresponding to the image (ref. Isaiah 44:9-17). Thus the sons of Israel sought to make Yahweh present and amenable to their plight by means of the golden calf (Exodus 32:1ff); thus the Athenians filled their city with temples and altars, including one to the unknown god (Acts 17:16ff).

The Jews of Paul's day would have rejected all such practices as idolatry, *yet they had their own symbolic and sacramental interface with their God*: They didn't construct graven images, but they enshrined the Law; they didn't attempt to secure divine favor through the sacrament of pagan rituals, but they did so through the sacrament of ritual conformity to the Law. The Jews rejected the gospel of Christ, not because they renounced righteousness as the bridge between them and God, but because they insisted upon establishing their own.

Ephesus was a city awash in the magic arts (19:18-19), and that was no less true of its Jewish residents. ***Whether in the synagogue or the temple to Artemis, whether in connection with pagan occult texts or the Tanakh, Gentile and Jew alike were enslaved magicians in need of divine deliverance.***

Occultism and the magic arts were a central feature of everyday life in first-century Ephesus, and Luke constructed his account of Paul's Ephesian ministry around it. What Corinth was to material and carnal indulgence, Ephesus was to occult practices. Dennis Johnson observes: *"Ephesus was not only the site of the famous temple of Artemis, but also a renowned center for the magical and occult arts – so much so, that papyri containing magical formulae and incantations were commonly called 'Ephesian letters.'"* (The Message of Acts)

Luke's early readers would have been aware of Ephesus' status and reputation as a center of paganism and occult practice and so would not be surprised to read that confrontation and conflict attended the gospel's presence there. They'd have also expected Jewish opposition to the gospel in Ephesus, for that was the case in every place. But what they likely wouldn't have considered – and what Luke's account illumines – is the fact that both groups opposed Christ for the same essential reason: *In whatever form – pagan, Jewish, or otherwise – religion is magic and magic is antithetical to the gospel.*

- Magic makes man the point of reference and ultimate resource in assigning and obtaining spiritual benefit; the gospel strips those things from man and gives them to God.

- For this reason, magic (religion) always opposes the gospel, but the gospel inevitably triumphs over it. The former is powerless because it originates in the mind of man; the latter is triumphal because it is the power of God.

This is the witness of the biblical text from beginning to end, but Luke draws attention to it in this context by means of the Jewish exorcists. In these individuals he brought together Ephesian paganism and Ephesian Judaism: men who engaged the spiritual realm and sought to prevail in it by means of personal power, but who found themselves overcome by the power of God in the Son – whether by being undone (19:13-16) or by being renewed and restored (19:17-20).

The Jewish exorcists were Luke's primary instrument in making his point, but he introduced them into his narrative by means of the miracles God was working through Paul (19:11-12). Supernatural power is thematic in this context, and the way God was manifesting His seems strange and unsettling to some. Why would God heal and cast out demons in connection with inanimate objects, especially when this sort of thing is characteristic of occult practice? But this is precisely the point: *God was demonstrating His power in a manner that would catch the attention of the people of Ephesus and cause them to consider it in relation to the occult power they were familiar with.*

So it was with the sons of Sceva; they themselves were exorcists who would have employed various ritual devices in their work, including the use of incantations and certain words believed to be conduits of power. When they observed Paul's supernatural works in connection with his proclamation of Jesus, they concluded that there is power in Jesus' name and they determined to use it themselves.

There *is* power in Jesus' name, but in the sense that power inheres in and flows from the triune God Himself. As it pertains to men, this power comes through the gospel by the Spirit, not through human devices (magic) to become a tool of human power. Thus, when the exorcists sought to wield power over evil spirits by the name of Jesus, they found themselves powerless and overcome. *Jesus uses men as the servants of His power; He is never the servant of theirs* (19:13-16).

The sons of Sceva conceived of their relation to God in terms of magic, and in this sense they were no different from their synagogue counterparts: Both believed they could prevail with God by ritual words and deeds. But the living God isn't subject to human hubris, and these Jews who were so convinced of their personal capability were abandoned to the adversary's power – to the subtlety of spiritual blindness (19:9) as well as the humiliation of brute force (19:16).

The city of Ephesus with its magical arts epitomized the universal human delusion of personal power – power even to domesticate the supernatural and divine. Self-isolated and self-important, man believes he can prevail to secure divine favor and benefit, but Luke's Ephesian account sets the absurdity of that notion in sharp relief. Men cannot prevail with the powers of evil, let alone with the sovereign God. They cannot prevail with Him, but He prevails with them.

God shattered the hubris and magical pretensions of the exorcists by means of a physical beating; He did so with many others of the Ephesians by means of overcoming grace. In both cases, His power triumphed in a painful unmasking.

The Ephesians were a people infatuated with spiritual power. Until that time they had sought it through magic; now they were witnessing a power they couldn't harness and that every other spiritual power was subject to. The news regarding the sons of Sceva produced amazement and fear among the populace, even to the point that many renounced their magic. The exorcists had tried to use Jesus' name as a tool of personal power; now former magicians were bowing before it in reverent fear (cf. 19:13-14, 17). This widespread renunciation escalated into a virtual movement, such that a day was appointed for a mass public book burning (19:19). Luke recorded the value of the books at fifty thousand pieces of silver, a powerful testimony to their costliness as well as their number. These occult texts commanded a high price because of the perceived value of their contents; now they were being burned as "useless, spiritually toxic waste" (Johnson).

God triumphed over the spiritual darkness in Ephesus, and thus over the powers of darkness that held the city in bondage. Nevertheless, that triumph wasn't absolute, as Luke would go on to show (19:23ff). Thus the Ephesian account highlights the fundamental dynamic of the kingdom of God as it exists in the present interadvental age: *Though the "god of this age" has been judged and condemned and his kingdom has been conquered, it continues to manifest itself in those who are its sons and subjects. It is being plundered, but it isn't yet evacuated of either its agents or its power and influence in the world.*

Until the consummation at the end of the age, the serpent continues to wage war against the brethren of the Son (Revelation 12:1-17), and that primarily through his "children" – the *"sons of disobedience"* (cf. Genesis 3:15 with John 8:31-44; Ephesians 2:1-2; 1 John 3:1-12). The serpent remains active, but as a conquered foe. Those held under his power can be liberated by the supreme power of Jesus' name, and once freed, they can never again be overcome (Revelation 12:10-11).