

“JERUSALEM MEETS ROME AND FINDS BABYLON: A STUDY IN CHURCH PURITY”

FALL 2022-SPRING 2023

December 14, 2022

***“WITNESSING TO THOSE WHO HAVE NO
BACKGROUND IN BIBLE” Acts 17***

DEFINITIONS:

JERUSALEM: The capitol city of Israel and the seat of Judaism with its valid Torah teachings and its traditions from the Pharisees. It was in this city that the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, was preached and believed. It is where the church began. It represents the Older Mosaic Covenant enhanced now with the New Covenant introduced by Jesus. The followers of the Way (the Lord Jesus Christ) are worshipping in the Temple as well as their homes and the synagogues. Will this new faith be an extension of the Mosaic faith? Will it be another sect of Judaism like that of the Pharisees? Will it be exclusively a Jewish faith for Jewish people? If the disciples, now apostles, obey the Lord Jesus Christ, they must carry that message and its way of life ultimately into the whole world. They are going to encounter many cultures along the way that could dramatically alter the look and practice of this new faith. Would the Gentiles the followers of this new faith encountered have to become Jewish to maintain its “Jerusalem” roots? Would the Gentiles, with their idolatrous culture and background, who followed this new faith influence the Jerusalem faith away from its roots in Judaism? How would this encounter of the culture of Jerusalem with the culture of Rome change this new faith? Would this faith keep its capitol in Jerusalem and it remain a Jewish faith? Or would it become something else entirely? For certain, the obedient followers of Christ would HAVE to encounter Rome; it was inevitable!

ROME: The capitol city of the Roman Empire, the most influential power in the whole of the known world at the time. This has all its own culture, holidays, practices, and worldview based on its own idolatrous history and background. That culture was being imposed on all the conquered cities and lands which Rome had under its power and influence. It was the fourth kingdom in the

images left in the prophet Daniel. Though the kingdoms had differed in their ethnic makeup (Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman), each of the four empires was an expression of the main one, the Babylonian empire. Rome was a rebirth of the Babylonian empire. It is the dominant power in all the known world. The Jewish believers in Messiah would bring the gospel to the Roman cultures found throughout the Mediterranean. What would happen as they met one another? Would it be peaceful? Would it be violent? Could the integrity of the faith introduced by the Lord Jesus Christ in His life, death and resurrection be maintained? Israel had encountered the Gentiles in their escape from Egyptian slavery and had some victories and some disastrous losses as they were influenced by the idolatry of the Gentiles? Would the Way survive this clash or would it succumb as Israel had done earlier?

BABYLON: In Scripture, Babylon is seen as an enemy to Israel. In the Revelation, it is seen as the mother of all harlots, the influencer of ungodliness everywhere she has gone; a murderer, a conqueror, a fornicator with the kings of the earth, and a greedy, covetous drunken destroyer of humanity. She lurks greedily around every corner of the earth to find another people to live off of. She represents a false system of philosophy, ethics, government, culture and society that has ruined every culture on earth. She is the power behind ROME.

We will attempt to show how the church's encounter with ROME led ultimately to her seduction by BABYLON. So severe would be this seduction that before God destroys BABYLON, He calls for His people to come out of her! We will try to call the church to purity by demonstrating the deadly threat to true faith both ROME and BABYLON represent. We will try to show you that we must do all we can to resist the powerful seduction of BABYLON by resisting the power of ROME and living a faith true to the LORD JESUS CHRIST!

I. SYNAGOGUES THROUGHOUT THE DIASPORA PROVIDED A NATURAL PLACE TO INTRODUCE THE GOSPEL

- A. As a discipline for His people, God scattered them throughout the known world by the hands of their enemies*
 - 1. Their homeland was the place He had prepared for them through His covenant and was the place of His blessing*
 - 2. But it was not only the land which had been blessed. The people had been blessed also. They took that blessing with them wherever they went.*
 - 3. How does one keep one's ethnic and religious traditions alive when he has been forcibly removed from the homeland in which those traditions had been practiced?*
 - 4. To keep their traditions alive they chose to live in communities and to create community centers for meeting, teaching, training and celebrations. The meeting centers came to be known as a synagogue or a shul.*
 - 5. Being scattered and setting up synagogues everywhere they went was both a negative and, as is typical of the way the LORD works, positive as well. It is negative for the people whose blessing was to be found in the promised land. They were being deprived of God's richest, promised blessing because they were living outside the land. It was positive in that the synagogues provided a way for interested Gentiles to discover the One True God and to learn of His will. Many Gentiles were thus "primed" to hear and respond to the Gospel when it came to them.*
- B. Since the Jewish community was already meeting for all community gatherings there, and especially for instruction, it was only natural that the Jewish missionaries of the Christ should go to them first to share with them the gospel.*
- C. As he visited the synagogue, the Christian missionary could use the familiar texts of the Tanakh to teach that Jesus was the Christ the prophets had foretold. This gave him a natural audience who already were aware of those very texts.*
- D. The synagogue would not only have Jewish families attending but many interested Gentiles attending the synagogue also.*
- E. Those interested Jews and Gentiles would continue with the teachings of the Christian missionary unless or until the*

synagogue leader asked them to leave. That often resulted in the formation of a church that met in one of the homes of the newly converted believer, whether Jew or Gentile.

F. The organization of the synagogue lent itself easily as a model to the newly forming church. It would have elders, a moderator for the meetings (teaching pastor), congregational seating, deacons who would serve the needs of the meetings, a veneration of the Scriptures and of the One God, a format for studying the Scriptures in depth, a community mindset, etc.

G. Did God have a model, ideal Christian community in mind with His command to go into all the world? For example, was the church community in Ephesus (or name any of the cities or regions in which Paul preached) to look identical to the one formed in Jerusalem or just similar or neither? What was Christianity supposed to bring to the various communities with wide variation to Jewish cultural life to which the Jewish Christian missionaries had lived their whole lives? Was there a new order that would be introduced in that formerly idolatrous city or community? Weren't they running the risk that the fragile, loosely ordered, minority Christian church might get absorbed into the wider culture and lose its identity?

To follow our theme of Jerusalem (followers of the Way being almost exclusively Jewish) meeting Rome (followers of the Way becoming a mixed group as they contacted more Gentiles with idolatrous backgrounds and various Gentile cultures) it is going to become more difficult to establish a distinct Christian culture. Did all the new Gentile believers have to become Jewish first and then adopt Jewish cultural life such as the traditions, the holidays, the diet, the Torah? The further the Jewish Christian missionaries went into Roman territory and out of the lands with synagogues, the greater the threat of the Roman culture became on the expression of faith in Christ

II. NOT EVERY CITY/COMMUNITY IN THE OUTER REACHES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE HAD SYNAGOGUES

A. A city or region may not have a Jewish population.

B. A city might have a Jewish population but it would be too small to be able to form a synagogue. In these cases there was usually a gathering in a grove of trees or by a riverside that would recite

- Torah or sing psalms and teach/practice their cultural traditions. They would welcome a Jewish rabbi if one should ever venture into their gatherings or inquire in the city regarding a Jewish gathering. This was the case in Philippi in Acts 16.*
- C. But there would be some cities in which there was no knowledge of the Torah or Jewish cultural practices therefore no knowledge of God. Such locations would be governed by a god or goddess or more. The culture in such a location was dominated with the rituals that satisfied or coordinated with the myths/legends/miracles of the heroes or gods/goddesses of the region. They had ongoing narratives of the exploits of the gods or demigods and the humans in the region. They would offer the sacrifices demanded of them by those whose function it was to know the minds of the local deities. These were priests and priestesses or a shaman or witch or seer or oracle. Of course, they had feast days, holy days, celebrations and observances that had been practiced for many generations. Society had been built around these important cultural foundations.*
- D. When the gospel was brought to such regions one was starting from ground zero with the people having no knowledge of the Messiah. The principalities and powers of that region would resist sometimes to the shedding of blood, this intrusion into their territory of some new theology that would threaten the security of their dominion over the people. For them the Gospel was a threat to the entire social fabric.*
- E. When Paul, the well-trained Pharisee and Christ-instructed missionary came to Athens, he encountered this very problem with some of the locals. Athens was large enough and central enough to have a synagogue, so he reasoned with the Jews and Gentiles who worshipped there. He also reasoned in the marketplace, where nearly everyone had to visit at least once per day. He took advantage of every gathering of people in which he could proclaim the coming of the Messiah.*
- F. He was troubled by all of the idolatry in the city and his background did not lend itself to open discussions with the local philosophers and their dearth of knowledge of God or the Scriptures. He would have to find some way to introduce the gospel to these people. He could not use the Scriptures as their common agreed discussion material. Here are some observations we can make about one of the most successful missionaries of all*

church history when he encountered those with no background in the Holy Scriptures. ACTS 17:16-34

- 1. Create interest in your subject Acts 17:17-21*

Get very familiar with your own subject

Speak it to one another both to encourage and to practice

Pray for opportunities to speak it to others

- 2. Find your common spiritual ground and use it to introduce the gospel Acts 17:22-23*

Read and get familiar with the stories of the region you are going to visit; do not be afraid to read about the beliefs and practices of other cultures. Paul knew the account of the reason for the altar to the unknown god because he had read the secular poets of his day

Get God's big picture of the cosmos including its origin from the Word of God

- 3. Go back to the basis of theology and introduce the proper understanding of the person and nature of God; help them see how such knowledge applies universally to all men and all history. Acts 17:24-28*

We should familiarize ourselves with basic theology;

read good books about God, His person and nature;

study the Scriptures to know God and to see what He is truly like; be in love with Him

Come to a point that you know God is the creator of all human beings and that all human beings are accountable to Him

- 4. Demonstrate how the God to whom you have just introduced them relates to all of the listeners and holds them accountable for their view of Him; this goes to the relevance of your message to the hearers*

The final destiny of a human being is determined by his relationship to God; in the absence of a personal relationship the final destiny of a human is permanent eternal separation from God with no hope of restoration to Him.

God has overlooked the ignorance and indifference men have shown to Him over many centuries. Your message is to declare that He is no longer overlooking this but is granting grace and mercy

The gospel is the message of God's present grace and mercy are granting to all men, great and small, the opportunity to repent now because no far from now He has planned a day of judgment by His standard of righteousness. All not fitting that true righteousness are condemned forever.

Jesus, His Son, is that vessel through which sins have been paid for and grace will be shown to all who repent of their wrong view of God.

Jesus, is the resurrected from the dead, person by whom He will judge all men.

- G. Though Paul was not outstandingly successful as some might count success, he did show us that speaking to people with no biblical background is not only possible but desirable and can be done truthfully using talking points about which all men share some familiarity. This account does tell us that some joined him and did believe. But this is the end of the story and we do not know if a church in Athens was established as a result of this nor do we hear anything about follow up with them.*
- H. We do not see the use of Scripture quotes from Paul here but there is great evidence of the knowledge of Scripture in all that He says. The most effective tool in creating faith is the Scriptures themselves. It is by the hearing of the Word of God that faith comes. But when there is no knowledge of those Scriptures in the minds of those to whom you are speaking, at least offer them the big picture of what the Scriptures teach. We are calling men to flee from the wrath to come through faith in the Christ. We have to call them away from the biggest obstacle to their salvation now - the false belief about the True God.*
- I. This may be the great lesson we learn from this "Jerusalem encounter with Rome": Since the Scriptures are not known by all they become less useful to our witness since they cannot be regarded as a common source. But we do not abandon the thought that God is real and present; that He is the sovereign and that all men regardless of their worship of something else are responsible and accountable to the God Almighty. But the practice of not using Scripture but instead using philosophical apologetics to share the gospel, taken to an extreme would put the church at the mercy of philosophy as a way of reasoning and discussing theology. This would be a grand detour for the church*

in coming years as Greek philosophy would become central in church teaching.

- J. We cannot know how this encounter with Paul and the gospel affected these souls for Christ. Consequently we do not know how Athens was affected by the presence of these believers or even if they kept the faith and were thriving.*
- K. We can see the incredible reliance Paul had upon the Spirit of God to grow these believers. We do not know how much time, if any, he spent with them afterward but it was not too much longer that he simply left them there and went on to Corinth.*