

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 2, Chapter 1

In our introduction to the Book of Acts last week, one of the several reasons that I highlighted for deciding to teach this New Testament book (besides the fact that the Holy Spirit led me to do so), was because it forms the foundational context for understanding who Paul is. And while much more goes on in Acts than only concerns Paul, and we're going to spend a great deal of our study on those things, there is no greater influence on the modern institutional Christian Church than Paul's Epistles. So I can't help but focus on Paul, especially once he enters the scene in the Book of Acts.

Paul was perceived as problematic within the Messianic movement as early as 48 or 49 A.D. by the Apostle Peter, claiming that Paul could be quite hard to understand. Without doubt this is the same issue that led to James summoning Paul to Jerusalem for a meeting in 49 A.D. because of things he had heard about Paul. So what did Peter mean in 2 Peter 3:16 by 'hard to understand'? Did Paul mumble? Was he a poor Hebrew and Aramaic speaker? Did he speak in circles or in unsolvable riddles? Obviously that is not Peter's issue with Paul as Paul was always depicted throughout the NT as an elite intellectual; articulate, a walking Encyclopedia Judaica, and a persuasive orator even in front of heads of state. So what was so hard to understand about Paul's words? Since Peter was an original disciple of Yeshua, who was there with Him as a constant companion from the beginning of Yeshua's ministry and through the time of His crucifixion and resurrection; and he had personally witnessed Messiah's ascension into the clouds, Peter had been trained at the feet of the Master. But when he heard some of the things that the relative new-comer Paul said about various subjects regarding the meaning and consequences of Yeshua's advent as Savior, and what Jewish and gentile followers ought to do as a result, at times they must not

have sounded too much like the instructions that Peter had heard directly from the lips of Christ.

I can tell you frankly that I have similar issues. There are things that Paul says in his many letters that are at times hard to square with what Christ says in the Gospels. Quite recently I had a lively dinner conversation with a long time dear friend who is one of the most respected, prolific and widely read Christian fiction writers of our time (I don't need to reveal his name as he is doing well enough without free advertising from me). And as I discussed with him some of the things I'm going to discuss with you, he paused and said that (and I paraphrase) as much as Paul has taught him and been a spiritual guide to him, he's not sure how much he likes Paul (on a personal and gut level). That Paul could be infuriating, arrogant, and sometimes contradictory if not sounding outright double-minded on some important theological matters that concern every Believer, gentile or Jew. And I if you don't feel some of that, then you haven't really read Paul.

Now, while I'm not sure I could be quite as disapproving as my friend, I have had similar reactions as I've studied Paul's Epistles. So do I think there's a problem? Yes I do; but the problem is not with Paul, it's with us. Unless and until we, and Christianity in totality, take Paul in his Jewish cultural and religious context, and understand that all of his words naturally, reflexively, flow from who he is in his Jewish context both before and after He met the resurrected Yeshua, then we will misunderstand his words and their intent. His 13 Epistles (some say it is 14 if you assume he wrote the Book of Hebrews, which most scholars say he didn't, and I am in agreement that he did **not**), Paul's letters do not explain who Paul is or delve deeply into his cultural and religious background. Rather they explain *what* Paul did and said to a wide variety of people, in a wide variety of circumstances and cultural settings, after his confrontation with the risen Messiah and his conversion on the road to Damascus. So where do find out who Paul really is? Where do we find out how we are to understand that the very structure of Paul's sentences and the terms he chooses obviously reflects his Jewish cultural background and dedication to, and understanding of, his Jewish religion? We find it in the Book of Acts.

As the gentile Church formed and progressed in the years following the death of Christ, and then the eventual demise of all of his Apostles, we find a tug-of-war developing between Church leaders to determine how much Jewishness should be allowed into gentile Christianity, and how much the Church's doctrines ought

to be influenced by the Jewish context of the Holy Scriptures (not to mention the Jewishness of nearly all its characters and writers). And as an aside: let me be clear that while the best technically correct term that I ought to use is Hebrew rather than Jewish, I will use “Jewish” more often because it is the more commonly used term in our day even if from a scholarly standpoint Hebrew is more nuanced. This issue of Paul’s Jewishness is why we talked about Marcion last week who about 40 years or so after the last of the original Apostles died, decided that NO Jewishness should follow into Christianity. And to try and assure that it didn’t he fought against using the Book of Acts as instructional or historical material for Christians, and only wanted to include 9 of Paul’s 13 letters, and even then only versions that Marcion heavily edited. He wasn’t entirely alone in this viewpoint, and his arguments obviously had their long term effect.

One of the things I do to prepare my lessons is to research several of the scholarly commentaries that Jewish and Christian sources generally agree are the best; clearly rising above the many other good ones. And as I studied the various commentaries on Acts, and as I noted the many reference sources used by these excellent commentators, I found it strange that almost no mention was made of the comments written by the earliest Church Fathers. Being a natural-born skeptic I wondered why that was. Finding just what these early Church Fathers had to say was quite a challenge for me because so much of what they had to say were in languages (such as Latin) that I was unfamiliar with. But, thanks be to God, by chance I stumbled across a little-known work accomplished by Francis Martin who not only translated but also collated and correlated what many of the early Church Fathers had to say about Luke’s Book of Acts. And it has greatly added to and colored what I now understand about this pivotal New Testament book as it filled in some critical blanks.

Before we read Acts chapter one together, I want to give you a quote from John Chrysostom, who wrote a rather complete commentary on the Book of Acts around

400 A.D. What he says in only a couple of sentences gives us great insight into the mindset of the Church and Christianity in general towards this book in his day, and in the decades leading up to his commentary. He says this about the Book of Acts: ***“To many people this book (The Book of Acts), both its content and its author, is so little known that they are not even aware it exists. I have therefore taken this narrative for my subject, both to initiate those who are ignorant and so that such a treasure shall not remain hidden***

out of sight”.

Why was this Bible book so little known in Christianity that Chrysostom could say that even its authorship wasn't known, let alone what it contained? After all, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were written by the same author, and the Gospel of Luke was a mainstay for the Christian community long before it and other books were canonized as God inspired and made part of a new Christian Bible that included the so-called New Testament. As I told you last week, Luke originally created a single unified work called “History of Christian Origins”, which consisted of two volumes: the Gospel and the Apostles. Essentially these 2 volumes were part A and part B of a total work developed by Luke. But even before Marcion's time (140's A.D.) Luke's work had been divided and separated into two individual books, and they circulated separately: The Gospel of Luke was one book, and the Acts of the Apostles was the second. Once they became separated, the continuity and connection of Luke's exquisite work was lost. Each book presented only half the story. And many in the gentile dominated Church revered the first half, but didn't much care for the second half because, as Marcion was bold enough to say out loud, it was too Jewish. The Book of Acts especially presented a much too Jewish Paul who had been re-molded by many Church Bishops into an Apostle to the gentiles who was very nearly a gentile himself; his Jewishness being an unimportant (if not troublesome) formality that need not be considered or even brought up. That is why John Chrysostom could say that few within the Church knew the Book of Acts even existed.

Take note of this as well: since it has long been known that the Book of Acts is the direct sequel to the Gospel of Luke, why doesn't Acts directly follow the Gospel of Luke in the Bible? Then we'd have the original continuity and flow that Luke intended. Why did the early Church decide to put the Gospels in the order of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and then insert a 4th Gospel, John, before then inserting Acts? Why not Matthew, Mark, John.....then Luke immediately followed by Acts? After all that is exactly how it is done with Paul, Peter, and others when there are two parts to one letter or one complete work (for example, 1st Corinthians isn't separated from 2nd Corinthians with other books placed in between). Do you think this was accidental? That the Church Fathers didn't realize what they were doing when they separated Luke from Acts? Might there have been an agenda at work, here? Of course there was and the result was exactly what John Chrysostom revealed at the beginning of the 5th century A.D.; few Christians knew that the Book of Acts even existed, or that its author was the Luke of the Gospels, or that Acts was Luke part 2; that's why it was hidden out of

sight. Without the Book of Acts Paul could be more easily recast as a gentile-ish Jew who spoke against the Torah and the Jewish people, and made gentile Believers the New and replaced Israel.

Open your Bibles to Acts chapter one.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 1 all

We have so many interesting and foundational topics, one after the other, in this first chapter, and we'll deal with several of them. We've already covered authorship, so we could easily call the Book of Acts, Luke part 2. And like the first book (the Gospel of Luke) this one is dedicated to the same fellow Theophilos. Now Theophilos is a Greek word that means "friend of God". There are not just a few scholars who therefore say that in fact while this is a real name in use at that time, that it also just as easily could be a general term referring to all of the new Believers in Christ (as friends of God). We'll not get into the many debates about this, because most of them in my opinion are specious arguments that ignore the plain wording before us. Absolute proof of course isn't possible, but there is no reason to think that Theophilos isn't a rich benefactor who paid Luke to do this thorough investigation into Yeshua and all that He did and then what happened to the early movement of Believers after His ascension.

Right away in verse 2 we see Luke's focus on the work of God through the ***Ruach HaKodesh***, the Holy Spirit, and we'll find the use of this term Holy Spirit 39 more times in Acts. This means that of all the uses of the term Holy Spirit in the entire New Testament, the Book of Acts alone contains almost half of them. In fact the second verse explains that Yeshua gave instructions through the auspices of the Holy Spirit to the 12 disciples He had originally chosen (11 really because Judas had committed suicide). Thus Luke makes a strong connection not just with YHWH and the Holy Spirit, but now with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. So we see the great unity, the oneness, the ***echad*** of God expressed and understood by Luke.

Luke reminds his readers in verse 3 that after Yeshua arose from the rocky tomb that He presented Himself to many of His followers and left no doubt that it was He, and that He was real and alive, not an apparition or a ghost. We find record of this fact in numerous places in the NT, so here is but one example:

Matthew 28:8-10 CJB

⁸ So they left the tomb quickly, frightened yet filled with joy; and they ran to give the news to his talmidim. ⁹ Suddenly Yeshua met them and said, "Shalom!" They came up and took hold of his feet as they fell down in front of him. ¹⁰ Then Yeshua said to them, "Don't be afraid! Go and tell my brothers to go to the Galil, and they will see me there."

Skip down to verse 16.

¹⁶ So the eleven talmidim went to the hill in the Galil where Yeshua had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they prostrated themselves before him; but some hesitated. ¹⁸ Yeshua came and talked with them. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make people from all nations into talmidim, immersing them into the reality of the Father, the Son and the Ruach HaKodesh, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember! I will be with you always, yes, even until the end of the age."

Then we get a piece of information in verse 3 of chapter 1 that we didn't get in the Gospels: after His resurrection Yeshua stayed around for a period of 40 days communing with and instructing His disciples. Why 40 days? God instructed Moses on top of Mt. Sinai for 40 days, and now God (Yeshua) is instructing His disciples for 40 days. 40 is a Biblical number that symbolizes testing and/or transition. And since we know that the Holy Spirit would arrive to dwell within humans on the 50th day after Passover, and we know that Yeshua arose on **Bikkurim** (Firstfruits) and remained on earth for 40 days, then depending on how one decides to count the days from Passover to Firstfruits (I say it is 3 days) that it seems probable that 1 week to the day after Christ ascended into Heaven, Shavuot arrived and with it the Holy Spirit. One week is 7 days and 7 is the ideal number and is symbolic of wholeness or divine completion. Makes sense that it would be exactly 7 days between Christ ascending and the Holy Spirit arriving; and it follows the Biblical pattern we saw in the Torah and in the Old Testament.

We get one other important piece of information: what was it that Christ mainly spent His time teaching His disciples about? It was about the Kingdom of God. And by the way, at times we'll see places in the NT that speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven; it is synonymous with the Kingdom of God. And yet as we'll see in a couple more verses, there were aspects about the concept of the Kingdom of God that the disciples still couldn't comprehend.

It was during that 40 day period at one of these post-resurrection gatherings that Yeshua instructed the 11 that they were not to leave Jerusalem but instead to wait for what the Father promised. So obviously at this particular gathering they weren't in Galilee; rather Jesus met with them in Jerusalem. Then in verse 4 Christ says something quite interesting that has more depth to it than meets the eye. He says that although His cousin **Yochanon** (John the Baptist) baptized people in water, the disciples would be baptized in the Holy Spirit. Notice that with John, the baptizer was the human being, John. But Yeshua didn't say that they would go out and baptize in the Holy Spirit instead of water, but rather they would **be** baptized **with** the Holy Spirit. One can only imagine what this might have meant to them; I suspect it was puzzling. So this is where we'll pause and talk about this because since these 11 disciples are all Jews, and since their cultural and religious context is second Temple Judaism, any talk among themselves about baptizing was within the framework of how Jews baptized and what that act meant to them.

First; the English word baptize comes from the Greek verb **baptizeim**, and it is a generic term that means to immerse. So whatever it is meant to symbolize, the action physically involves immersion of something, usually into a liquid. And the purpose of being immersed is to take on the qualities of the liquid that person or object is being immersed into. The term was regularly used as it regards dying cloth; so a plain cloth is immersed into a vat of dye and it takes on the quality of that dye, which is to change the cloth to a certain color.

From the Jewish second Temple period perspective, whereby Judaism had become an amalgam of Traditions that overlapped and intermingled with Torah commandments regarding the God-ordained act of immersion, the purpose of immersion was generally to become ritually purified or cleansed. There were many ways that ritual purity could be lost, but immersion invariably was the way to regain that lost purity. In fact, immersion to regain ritual purity was not only for humans but for inanimate objects like cookware. The preferred place for immersion was at a Mikveh; a ritual bath that had steps down into a water reservoir, and usually separate steps back up. The water reservoir had to be deep enough that the entire body, head to toe, could be enveloped in water. But when a Mikveh was not available a river or a spring fed lake was acceptable.

I spoke about immersion as a change in status. When someone or something is **not** ritually pure it is not usable for God. When someone or something **is** ritually clean, it becomes usable for God. And so it was common for

a person or object to be ritually clean, then made ritually unclean, only to be made ritually clean again through immersion. Now to be clear: the water used for immersion is itself only symbolic and has no magical quality to it. Rather by going into the water and immersing (baptizing), it signals that you (or the object) is willfully changing your status from one condition to another; from being someone who God is not able to use because you aren't pure enough in God's eyes, to someone God is able to use because you are now pure in God's eyes. As regards Believer's baptism it is symbolic of laying down our own will and submitting to God's. It is death and burial of our identity and allegiance to self, and thus having our status changed such that our new identity and allegiance is Messiah.

So whereas John, a physical human being, could only immerse a person into physical water as a show of symbolism, now through Christ, and without the aid of a human, God would immerse a person into His Holy Spirit and it wasn't symbolic but real. And what did one obtain with immersion into the Holy Spirit? Power! Finally, praise the Lord, finally the power to hear God and to obey Him; to do His will in impossible circumstances. Power to go forth with the Good News and deliver it to others. And with Christ's disciples at least, power to do miracles like their Master had done.

To stay on course let's talk about Yeshua and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit descended upon Christ. He was the first to receive the Spirit that dwelled within. And yet, since Yeshua was God the Holy Spirit was as much a part Him as for His Father. There is only one Holy Spirit, not many. Thus essentially the same spirit that was within Yeshua, He would share with His 11 disciplines and also with all who came to faith in Him. I think a good way to look at it is that Yeshua shared His Holy Spirit with His disciples as the means to empower them to do what He had done, and what He wanted them to do. This was a first, right? NO! God is a God of patterns; and all that we see happening in the NT, was first patterned in the Old Testament.

Numbers 11:24-26 CJB ²⁴ Moshe went out and told the people what ADONAI had said. Then he collected seventy of the leaders of the people and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵ ADONAI came down in the cloud, spoke to him, took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy leaders. When the Spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied- then but not afterwards. ²⁶ There were two men who stayed in the camp, one named Eldad and the other Medad, and the Spirit came to rest on them. They were

among those listed to go out to the tent, but they hadn't done so, and they prophesied in the camp.

How about that? The precedent and pattern had already been set with the first mediator, Moses, whereby God's spirit that rested upon him was SHARED with his "disciples", the 70 elders. And what did they do as a result? They prophesied; meaning they spoke as God directed them. Two others who had stayed in the tent encampment also had the spirit rest upon them and they prophesied in the camp. But it was short lived. Now we see what we've talked about time and again; Yeshua, the second and better Mediator, came to bring the Torah and Prophets to a whole new and higher level of fulfillment. With Yeshua as Mediator the Holy Spirit didn't just rest upon worshippers, He indwelt. And the effect wasn't short lived, it was lifelong. When you and I and everyone who has trusted in Christ were anointed with the Holy Spirit, it was meant to be for a lifetime. We don't need to occasionally redo it.

We'll move on to verse 6 now, and into another awesome topic, but I don't want to leave the matter of baptism before telling you this: yes it is symbolic. But it is also commanded by Yeshua and so that makes it vitally necessary. It is not optional. And one of the purposes of baptism is to make a public profession to fellow Believers that you have decided to put down your crown, take up the cross, and join the community of Believers. Will submerging under water change you? No. Water can't enter into your innermost parts; but the Holy Spirit can and will. By being obedient to God to follow Messiah's command to immerse and by being willing to let others around you know of your change of status, you will be changed.

Since coming to Messiah, have you been immersed? Have you perhaps left a faith or denomination that was well off the mark and you want to immerse in the truth of Yeshua, and the truth of the entire Word of God, and not merely in the image or fantasy of whatever you used to think Him to be? Do you want to boldly tell the Father and your family and congregation that you now know that through faith in Messiah you have been grafted into the Covenants of Israel; the covenants that provide for a Jewish Savior to pay the price for your sins? Do you want to declare that the Lord has made you prepared, full of power, and finally usable by God? Then be immersed (I'll be happy to talk to anyone who wants to know more at the end of this message).

In verse 6 we see that the disciples still didn't get this Kingdom-of-God thing, not

even with God Himself (Jesus) personally teaching them about it (one more reason that the coming of the Holy Spirit that we see in chapter two was so necessary). So the disciples ask Yeshua this question: "Lord, are you going to restore self-rule to Israel?" You see, all of Judaism was breathlessly waiting for a Deliverer, an anointed one, to come and not only rescue Israel from the hands of the Romans; but to also restore self-rule. That self rule was to come in the form of a Davidic King. And the disciples well understood that Yeshua came from one of the royal lines of David, so He was qualified for the position. And, by the way, there were many lines that came from David through his many wives. But only the line that came through David's son Solomon was considered as the royal line, meaning eligibility to sit on Israel's throne as king. So even though through all Yeshua had done and taught them the 11 still seemed to harbor the notion that in His now resurrected body, He would lead Israel in a successful military rebellion against Rome. This particular expectation of a Messiah was present in virtually all Jews, whether they lived in the Holy Land or in the Diaspora. And since Christ had proven in every way that He was the Messiah, what would have been a more logical question that the one the disciples put forward to Him about Israel and self-rule?

The disciples didn't get it that, at least for this time, Yeshua came only to die as a ransom for sin. Yeshua's answer to their question is fascinating and important. He didn't say "no". He essentially said "later".

Acts 1:7-8 CJB ⁷ He answered, "You don't need to know the dates or the times; the Father has kept these under his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Ruach HaKodesh comes upon you; you will be my witnesses both in Yerushalayim and in all Y'hudah and Shomron, indeed to the ends of the earth!"

So Christ's answer to the question 'will Israel return to self-rule' is yes Israel will. And by the way they had self-rule restored to them in May of 1948 and have been under self-rule ever since. However that still isn't the fulfillment of what Yeshua was speaking about; because Yeshua's concern wasn't merely the land of Israel having independence, and being led by a Jew; but rather that Israel would be the core of the Kingdom of God. And that event is still in the future, and it is what modern Christianity calls the Millennial Kingdom. So while it is going to come as a surprise to many Believers, it shouldn't surprise you to know that Israel and the Kingdom of God will one day be the same. And Jerusalem as capital of Israel will also be the capital of the worldwide Kingdom of God with

Jesus Christ ruling on earth as king.

But Yeshua told them that they didn't need to know when this would happen; in fact the Father is the only one who knows and is keeping it to Himself. So instead of receiving knowledge of when these events will happen (events they don't yet fathom), they will (in a matter of days) receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. His answer also completely blows away the Christian concept of Replacement Theology or that the Jews no longer have a right to the Holy Land; and instead it now belongs to the gentile Church.

Another important thing that happened here is most instructional for our day, and it plays into a pet peeve of mine. Jesus refocused them from anxiously staring into the future and instead told them to concentrate on the now. Whatever lies ahead in prophecy is important and we can count on it; but we should not live our lives in waiting mode. Or as with today among too many Believers, constantly thinking about the coming End Times while the days whiz by and mostly we just fret and worry about the terrible things we read about the End Times, instead of our being productive. Folks, there are nearly daily a bevy of false prophets who send out internet newsletters or write books and try to tell you to watch out for this month or this blood moon, because the Holy Spirit told them the destruction of the USA was coming, or the Anti-Christ would appear, or the world would enter into war, or we'd have a complete financial collapse or "fill in the blank with whatever catastrophe is currently in vogue". They sound so convincing; but when that month or day passes and nothing particularly important happens, they just move right on to their next false prophecy. Why listen to them? Does it make you feel more religious, or does it merely play into your fears and so you are happy you're not alone in those fears? How does it help the Kingdom of God, or yourself or your family, to be full of fear and trembling about a future no one can possibly know....because Yeshua Himself said you couldn't? Do you know why these false prophets continue doing this? Because they continue to get an audience!

Christ says that He has told us **what** we need to know about the outcome of God's plan of redemption; but the **when** is not for us to know. Rather as His devoted followers we are to get on with the business of doing God's will, living holy lives, caring for Yeshua's sheep, and doing whatever we can to bring the lost ones into the Kingdom.

Yeshua telling the disciples to be witnesses for Him in Jerusalem, in Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth tells us a couple of important things. First it tells us that Jerusalem is the beginning point, like the epicenter of a massive earthquake, and the Gospel is to ripple outwards from there. It is to spread next to Samaria (a place the Jews, including the Believers, simply despised even though most Samaritans had some Hebrew blood in their veins). And then after Samaria to every corner of the earth; meaning to the gentile world, but no doubt also to the Jewish Diaspora. In fact, I have no doubt that since to this point Yeshua was 100% about being the Jewish Messiah who came for the Jewish people, that when the disciples heard this instruction from Jesus their first thought was for their Jewish brothers of the Diaspora (representing more than 90% of all living Jews) who lived in far flung cities and towns throughout Northern Africa, Asia, and Europe. Little did they understand just yet that gentiles were to be an important part of their work. And that is why we're going to see so much focus on Paul, the designated Apostle to the gentiles, in a few more chapters.

But telling His disciples to be a witness for Him was said, and understood, within the common Jewish legal understanding of the term. A witness was part of the legal system's process of justice. A witness was more than a casual observer to an event; rather a witness was important and carried real power and knew things. A witness in the Jewish legal system was often the accuser. A witness was believed in their testimony because if they weren't truthful they could be prosecuted. Two witnesses whose testimony matched was typically sufficient for conviction. And if the conviction was for a capital offense, the witnesses also led the execution process. Do you want to be a witness for Christ? Then understand the seriousness of your office, and that only the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can give you the necessary authority and power to function in that position.

We'll continue in Acts chapter 1 next week.