

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 15, Chapter 6

We are going to explore some topics today that are as relevant to helping us to understand the Book of Acts as they are challenging to stay focused and to digest. We're also going to discuss things about the Jewish religious institution that most Jews don't know much about. If you have studied with us for a few years this will likely be a little easier. So here we go.

As I look back over the several decades of my life, I realize that one of the greatest gifts that the Lord has given to me was an opportunity to travel internationally. In my corporate career, as I first started travelling, it was mainly to Western Europe. I was so excited to get to see different countries I had only read about or seen pictures of! Until then I had never ventured further than the border towns of Mexico, which wasn't much of a stretch since I was born and raised in southern California. So after business meetings and on weekends I would do as much sightseeing as possible. But after some years of traveling, as the novelty of long overseas flights and sightseeing wore off, I learned some unexpected and valuable life lessons that have greatly affected my worldview.

As I then traveled to other continents and spent time in the Middle East and Egypt, my eyes were further opened and this is where my experiences began to bleed over into my understanding of God's Word. My purpose in telling you this is not as a mini-biography but rather to say that among the unexpected things I learned was that cultural differences among nations and people can be profound, and that every individual on this planet has their values, personal concerns and worldviews shaped by their local cultural (usually the one they were born into). Before I started to travel I had always accepted the old cliché as unchallenged fact that people are the same everywhere; same values, same wants and desires, with the only difference being the details: language, economic opportunity, available technology and the stage of their national development. It turns out that those who say that have either never traveled abroad or never got involved in the local society beyond being a tourist.

Culture and its associated language determine how we perceive the world around us and how we communicate about those things. In the case of the Bible (especially the New Testament), culture and language affects even the use and meaning of rather common words and terms. Using modern day examples of what I'm getting at, what the word justice means in the Kingdom of Jordan is nothing like what it means in America. The value of life in Egypt is entirely different than it is in Israel. The definition of ethics and morals in Brazil is not the same as it is in Canada. And as concerns the Bible it goes so far that what various Bible characters mean by the words they use changes depending on the era, on what their political, regional, and religious affiliations are, where they are from and at times who they are talking to.

Early in the Bible (in the Old Testament), the issue of cultural differences as it shapes worldview is basic; pagan versus not pagan. And at that time that meant Hebrews as opposed to everybody else. Words and terms were pretty static and so their meaning could be applied

more universally. Cultural change occurred very slowly. As we page through the Bible things accelerate; we see the Hebrews begin to interact more with gentiles, and then later as the Israelites form national coalitions with former enemies intermarriage becomes the norm, and then later still as the Jews are exiled and forced to live among and mix in much more intimate ways with gentile cultures in the Babylonian and Persian Empires, the lines blur further between Jewish and gentile society and so the meanings of terms and words gets much more complex.

If we had retained the Apocrypha in our Bibles, then we could further follow the progress of the Israelites when the complexities of their society increased as living among gentile cultures became permanent, even a desired thing. Years before Christ a major split had occurred in Jewish culture: there were now the Diaspora Jews versus the Holy Land Jews and they had distinct societal differences and life philosophies. By the time we open the first pages of the New Testament and are immersed into the era of the Roman Empire, we are dealing not only with a world cultural milieu that resembles London or New York City, we have the Jews themselves broken into a number of factions, each holding widely disparate beliefs, often having opposing agendas, depending upon different sources of documents, doctrines and religious authority figures to obtain divine direction, even at times insisting on using a certain language while shunning others as heresy.

What I've just explained to you is the intricate backdrop of the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation. Among Jews there was not just one point of view nor was there a single unified Jewish culture. What we must realize is that whatever composite mixture the Biblical New Testament Jewish society was it in no way resembled the worldviews common in the West today; so what they had in mind by what various people said often gets lost in translation or is heavily filtered through a Western mindset as we read the Bible. So today within the context of Acts chapter 6 we're going to explore some cultural issues that are not meant to complicate or confuse us, but rather to untangle Scriptural difficulties (and sometimes seeming Scriptural contradictions) and explain better what our various characters in the Book of Acts meant by what they said, and why they thought the way they did. Without understanding this, modern Believers will make incorrect assumptions that result in dubious doctrines that can lead us well away from the truth. So open your Bibles to Acts chapter 6.

### **READ ACTS CHAPTER 6 all**

As this chapter opens we're given a rough time frame; it is around the time that Peter and the disciples were arrested by the Sanhedrin and then flogged for preaching the Gospel and doing miracles in the name of Yeshua. So the setting for this chapter is still Jerusalem, as it has been since Acts chapter 1. Take note: even though all the disciples are Galileans, just as their Lord and Master Yeshua was also from the Galilee, the nucleus of their new sect is in Jerusalem. This makes sense because Jerusalem was the religious power center for much (although not all) of Judaism. And for the 12 disciples and the new Believers and also for the Romans, these members of the sect called The Way were not seen as a new religion but rather as a relatively small but quickly growing movement of Jews within Judaism. However not everything was going well.

The first verse of Acts 6 explains that there was growing antagonism between two factions that composed the Believers in Jerusalem. And the main bone of contention had to do with a perceived unfairness with the distribution of support to widows based on whether they were Hellenists or Hebrews. The first thing to tackle is what the author Luke had in mind when he referred to one group as Hellenists and the other as Hebrews. This represents the first of the troublesome cultural differences among Jews that I spoke of earlier, which we need to be aware of in order to better understand the make-up of the earliest Believers in Christ.

In Greek the words are ***Elleniston*** (which we translate into English as Hellenists), and ***Ebraious*** (which we translate into English as Hebrews). This is the first time in the New Testament that we find the term Hellenists and while there are some disagreements among Bible scholars on the finer details of what this term means to communicate, at the least Hellenists means people whose first language is Greek. Further it means that these people have, to some level or another, adopted Greek and Roman cultural viewpoints (called Hellenism). These Hellenist Believers are still Jews; but very likely most are Diaspora Jews who either made Torah ordained pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Shavuot and as a result of the awesome Pentecost experience of the arrival of the Holy Spirit decided to remain permanently in the Holy Land. Or some were those who formerly lived in foreign lands but for whatever reasons had relocated to Judah at an earlier time.

This distinguishes the Hellenists from the Hebrews who were the native Holy Land Jews. The Hebrews spoke either Hebrew or Aramaic, or likely both languages as they were similar. I've explained in other lessons that languages are invariably linked to culture. So there were built-in cultural differences between the Greek speaking Jews and the Hebrew speaking Jews. In fact, I think it is reasonable to assume that there was a definite language barrier that often created frustration and misunderstanding between the two groups of Christ followers. And to use modern terms to help us understand the unease between the two groups, the Hellenist Jews were closer to what in our time we might call Liberal Christians versus the Hebrew Jews that we might equate to Conservative or Fundamentalist Christians.

For anyone who has been fortunate enough to spend time immersed into modern Israel's vibrant society, the issues among Jews who hail from different languages and cultures is very much on display. The result is distrust and constant collisions between the cultures. When one has to deal with the government agencies (which in Israel is a given), and especially when dealing with the national healthcare system, it is often chaos because so much of Israel's population cannot speak Hebrew. And also because often the social and governmental structure of wherever these Jews have migrated from is totally different from that of Israel and so they can't make any sense of how the system works. So things can quickly dissolve into frustration, anger and a lot of shouting. This is what we see happening here in Acts chapter 6.

But what exactly is the issue of the widows that has so many Believers unhappy? The matter of widows in ancient times is another thing that Western culture doesn't really understand, but since the situation with widows is often brought up in the Bible, then let's take a few minutes to get a handle on it. Obviously, there was no government welfare system in those days to care for orphans, the disabled, the unemployed, or for poor widows. Rather that responsibility fell mostly to the religious system and to personal charity. However since a widow is the result of a

marriage situation, then there were legal sanctions involved.

At the core of most marriages between Hebrews was the Ketubah; the marriage contract. This is not a marriage license. Rather it is a standard legal agreement that states how property is to be handled during the time of the marriage, what happens to property if the marriage is dissolved, and especially how a widowed wife is to be supported should the unfortunate occasion arise (and it arose frequently because wives were always much younger than their husbands).

Legally, within first century Jewish society, a widow by definition possessed a valid Ketubah. Unlike in modern times in Western culture where typically a wife inherits her deceased husband's property by default unless there is a will or prenuptial agreement that says otherwise, in ancient times a woman had no rights of property inheritance and no amount of legal paperwork could change that. Therefore the Ketubah spelled out the terms for her support by the deceased husband's family who would inherit the husband's property.

One of the marriage contract principles was that the widow was to be cared for at a level that would allow her to maintain similar living standards that she had been enjoying with her husband. Usually this involved the widow getting to keep the house that she and her husband resided in. Property could be designated for use for her support; however she didn't receive ownership of the property. It is only the income from the property that she could receive and it was up to the husband's family to be honest and diligent in the property administration.

However if she remarried, all rights to income ceased because she would have received a new Ketubah from her new husband thus voiding the former Ketubah. Some widows received a comfortable living. But the common Jews had little if any property and so a widow was often left without much, if any, support. Thus the Torah Laws commanded that the local community provide her food and a modest means of support. However from a government standpoint this support was considered voluntary charity and could not be compelled. Thus the widow had to rely on the goodwill of her family and of her community. If none was forthcoming she was in a dire situation.

Typically in the New Testament era the religious entity that oversaw a widow's support was the Synagogue. The Temple had not played a major role in that matter since before the exile to Babylon. If there was a dispute it would have been directed to the Sanhedrin.

In our story the 12 disciples felt that the complaint that the Hellenist widows were receiving less than the Hebrew widows was legitimate so they took action. A general meeting of the local Believers was called to work it out. As is typical of congregations people first look to the leadership to be the ones to handle matters. But the 12 disciples told the congregation that they didn't think it right that they should take time from studying and teaching God's Word in order to "serve tables". To serve tables doesn't mean to be waiters. Rather to serve tables means to take on the responsibility of overseeing food distribution. But as our story demonstrates, congregation leaders need to have the starch to stand up and say that they cannot and must not try to do everything; the congregation has duties as well. And it seemed good to the disciples that food distribution to the widows was an appropriate thing for the

congregation to handle. It was decided that the congregation would select 7 men of especially good character to supervise the matter. The 12 disciples, if in agreement, would then officially appoint them and consecrate them into service with the laying on of hands (***semichah***).

What is interesting is the 7 they chose; every one of them had Greek names. In fact, one named Nicholas was a gentile by birth and had been living in Antioch of Syria, but had converted to Judaism, meaning he had in fact become a Jew. So it appears that the 7 chosen might have all been from the Hellenist faction, who were the ones making the complaint. Since the complaint came from the Hellenists it seems the Hellenists were given the job of solving it. So here is a great application to take from this: if you want to complain about something around here don't be surprised if you are tasked with fixing the problem! One thing I'd like you to notice: if it is so that all 7 were Hellenists then it means that Stephen who would soon be persecuted and martyred was also a Hellenist Jew.

Verse 7 reiterates that the number of Believers was constantly growing and substantial numbers of priests also joined. This issue of priests joining the Believers caused great heartburn for the Priesthood; after all it was the High Priest who had this group's leader (Yeshua) killed, and it was the High Priest (as President of the Sanhedrin) who had twice arrested Peter and the last time had him flogged. So priests joining the ranks of Believers would have been seen as disloyal. Priests (common priests) only worked for the Temple two weeks per year. There were 24 courses of priests that served in rotation. So priests had regular jobs and crafts to support them and their families. But, they also would receive some portion of the Temple sacrifices to supplement their incomes (this was Torah Law). It is hard for me to imagine that the priests who joined the Believers kept their positions as priests. So there was a great cost for them to make such a commitment.

It's at verse 8 that the focus shifts to Stephen, previously described as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Here we see that much like the 12 disciples, Stephen was so exceptional in faith and fervor that he too was able to perform great miracles. He apparently was also quite fearless and outspoken and so this provoked fierce hostility among some of the other local Jewish factions. So in verse 9 we find that a particular synagogue took action against Stephen. This was known as the Synagogue of Freedmen and it consisted mostly of Diaspora Jews from such places as Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia. To help us understand just how far flung Jewish communities had become since Babylon, consider that Cyrene was in Northern Africa and today is known as Tripoli, Libya. Alexandria was an enormous port city in Egypt and goes by the same name to this day. At the time of Christ, Philo tells us that close to a million Jews lived there. Cilicia lay on the Mediterranean Sea coast in what is today modern Turkey. It is probably not a coincidence that this place is mentioned because Paul came from Tarsus, a city in Cilicia. Considering what comes next in Acts chapter 7 (Stephen's martyrdom) and that Paul was involved in it, the Synagogue of Freedmen may well have been the one that Paul belonged to. At this time Asia was the name for the western parts of Asia Minor with Ephesus as its capital. So Asia, as used here, is like saying northern Europe or southwestern United States.

The name Synagogue of the Freedmen indicates that the Synagogue mostly (or at one time) represented former slaves, but by no means does that indicate that all members were slaves at

one time or another. There were many Synagogues in Jerusalem, and some were directly connected to Synagogues that had their origin in the Diaspora.

Here would be a good place to stop, put down our Bibles, and get a better understanding of Synagogues in New Testament times. I'm not sure I have the words to emphasize the importance for modern Believers to understand what we're about to learn because it alters how we read the New Testament and especially how we read and understand the words of Paul. And it is nearly unanimous in the modern Church that Paul is the foundational source of the doctrines used by Christianity. So how Believers understand Paul is vital to our faith.

In New Testament times and in the 3 centuries or so leading up to it, the world of the Synagogue was separate and distinct from the world of the Temple. And, especially important, is that words and terms held in common between the Temple and the Synagogue were used differently and meant different things to those who were attached to the Temple versus those who were attached to the Synagogues. Even more, it can be generally stated that while priests and Levites were attached to the Temple, all other Jews were attached to the Synagogue and only had limited contact with the Temple depending on their distance from it.

We are going to be pretty thorough in our study of the Synagogue and its profound impact on Judaism and on the writers of the New Testament. Thus we'll not finish today. Let's begin by briefly reviewing some things we discussed a few weeks earlier. The Jews of the Holy Lands at the time of the Book of Acts were divided into 3 main religious groups that were something like political parties blended with religious denominations. They were the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. However there was a 4<sup>th</sup> group called the Samaritans that usually isn't discussed because even though they considered themselves Jews, and even though they claimed Moses and the Law, they were by design disconnected from Jerusalem and the Temple. This situation goes back in its origin to the time of King Jeroboam around 925 B.C. who reigned not long after King David and then Solomon.

The Samaritans in time had set up their own Temple at Mt. Gerizim in Samaria, and instituted their own Priesthood, and so shunned the Temple and Priesthood in Jerusalem. They used their own version of the Scriptures called the Samaritan Pentateuch, that was indeed the Torah but with a few key modifications to validate their beliefs. I won't talk further about them because they are not important to our study just yet. Just know that although they called themselves Jews, in fact they represented tiny remnants of the 10 northern Israelite tribes most of whom had mixed their genes with foreigners. Certainly some of the Samaritans were legitimately connected to the tribe of Judah (at least from times long past). However it was because of the Samaritan's refusal to adhere to the Jerusalem based Temple of the Holy Land Jews, or even the Synagogue based Jews of the Diaspora that they were ostracized and considered as impure and untouchables.

The Sadducees' sphere of operation was the Temple. The Pharisees' sphere of operation was the Synagogue. The Essenes disconnected from the Temple because they deemed it wicked and corrupt (they were right); but they also seemed to remain relatively friendly to the Synagogue, even if they didn't join it, and so set up their own religious centers. They, too, wanted nothing to do with the Samaritans.

It is vital to pause and remember that God, through His Torah, provided one place of communal worship and ritual and one only: the Wilderness Tabernacle that was used during the exodus, and then later the Temple that was located on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem. But when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in 587 B.C., and hauled the Jews away to Babylon, the one authorized place of communal worship and ritual was no longer in existence and most of the Jewish population now lived as captives in a foreign land almost a thousand miles away from the Holy City. Thus we read in Daniel about the Jews finding alternative ways to meet together, pray and worship.

It is due to the difficult circumstances of Babylon that the Synagogue was created. The Synagogue at first was a place of meeting for Jews that was apart from the pagan worship places. The people were taught the Torah and the Prophets to keep the religion of the Israelites alive. Without the priests to oversee, lay people became the Synagogue leaders. Torah prescribed Temple ritual was replaced with study and prayer. Traditions and customs were developed to deal with the situation of Jews living far from home, in a gentile controlled world, where at least for a time the Temple didn't exist and Jerusalem lay in ruins. Without the Temple the Jews couldn't atone for their sins or renew ritual purity when they became defiled. The Traditions and customs created by the Synagogue purported to solve that problem. So when King Cyrus the Persian liberated the Jews from Babylon and took their Empire from them, 95% of the exiled Jews didn't return to the Holy Land. This 95% is what we today called the Diaspora....the dispersed....Jews.

As the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah explain, the Temple was eventually rebuilt and the city of Jerusalem restored. The Priesthood was re-established and sacrifices on the Temple Altar resumed. But by the time this had occurred, the Synagogue had become a reality if not in name, then in concept; the last couple of generations of Jews had grown up within an alternative religious system. The Jewish exiles were comfortable with it and didn't question its ways and rules, and the new religious authorities had no interest in giving up their power and positions merely because the Temple was once again operative. They had adapted and learned to live without the need for a Temple and Priesthood for more than 70 years. Besides, in the years ahead the 95% of Jews who lived so far away from the Temple, worshipping, praying, learning, and being governed by local religious authorities was far more convenient and practical. Thus eventually the Jews found themselves with 2 religious systems each with its own religious authority: the Synagogue and the Temple.

Let me be clear: it is **not** that the Synagogue disavowed the Temple or was against the Temple or discouraged their people from going to the Temple. There is no evidence that ritual sacrifice took place at the Synagogue, and the Temple was still the center of the Jews' religion. The Synagogue authorities did **not** see themselves as the new Priesthood. It was expected, especially of those who lived close enough, that Jews should go to the Temple to observe certain observances and appointed times found in the Law of Moses. Yet, we are left with the thorny issue of the Jews having one God-ordained system, the Temple, which found itself in some ways in competition with a relatively new man-made system the Synagogue. The relationship between the Temple and the Synagogue was muddy and messy. Yet Jews found no conflict of conscience in belonging to a Synagogue whose authorities determined how the Law ought to be followed by its members, while at the same time submitting to the authority of

the High Priest on matters of ritual and sacrifice that could occur only at the Temple. So it is as though the result of the invention of the Synagogue was that Judaism had compartmentalized Jewish life; everyday activities and behavior was legislated and dictated by the Synagogue. The occasional ritual and sacrificial needs were legislated and dictated by the Temple. That may not be how the Lord had ordained it; but that is how it was.

Christians joke that (at least in America), if you don't like the Church you're attending just cross the street to another one. And it is true; I was born and raised in a tiny community of less than 1000 people; but we had at least 4 churches operating all the time and sometimes 5. None of them were full. It was not much different in Jerusalem. Even in the Holy City with the Temple rising up on Mt. Moriah in all its splendor and glory; a place where people could go every day if they wanted to that they might study, pray and worship, the Jerusalem Talmud reports that there were 480 Synagogues in Jerusalem; the Babylonian Talmud puts that number at 394. Either way that is a staggering number of houses of worship for one city. But it also demonstrates the fractured nature of Judaism and the Synagogue system.

The bottom line is that wherever there was so much as a colony of Jews a Synagogue would be found there. Thus the Synagogue and Synagogue life is central to the New Testament. It is no wonder that Yeshua often found His way to Synagogues to reach out to His people. <sup>CJB</sup>  
**Luke 4:16 *Now when he (Yeshua) went to Natzeret, where he had been brought up, on Shabbat he went to the synagogue as usual. He stood up to read.....***

Paul, too, of course frequented Synagogues. <sup>CJB</sup> **Acts 17:2 *According to his usual practice, Sha'ul went in; and on three Shabbats he gave them drashes from the Tanakh.....***

Thus when we read Paul, we must always understand that he is the product of the Synagogue and not the Temple. This is proof enough that Oral Tradition, which was the foundation of the Synagogue system of behavior and liturgy, had a profound effect on Paul's life, thoughts, and vocabulary.

We'll continue on this topic next week and finish up Acts chapter 6.