

COMMENTARY ON ACTS 17:1-15: PAUL'S VISIT TO THESSALONICA

Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians are preceded for Bible readers by his short visit to Thessalonica and Berea, in Acts 17:1-15, during what is commonly called his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:40-18:23). Before visiting Thessalonica, Paul and his associates had just crossed over into Europe and declared the good news at Philippi (Acts 16:6-40), where a group of Messiah followers is established, led by the merchant Lydia. Because of a conflict in Philippi with a local fortune-teller, Paul and Silas are arrested, but are then told to move on when it is discovered that Paul is a Roman citizen.¹

Paul and his associates continue to move through Macedonia, now moving to the capital of the province, Thessalonica. Here, Paul goes to the local synagogue to declare the good news of Yeshua to the Thessalonian Jews and various God-fearers. Due to some jealousy against Paul from the synagogue leaders, he is forced to leave Thessalonica and move on to Berea. Later, the Thessalonian troublemakers make their way to Berea, and he must go on to Athens (Acts 17:16-34).

The brief information encountered in Acts 17:1-15 gives us important clues as to the background of some of Paul's assertions made in 1&2 Thessalonians, and perhaps also to the unique eschatological tenor that these two letters have within the Pauline corpus. How under-developed the Thessalonians were in their Messiah faith, may very well relate to the short time that Paul was able to spend with them, before being forced out of town.

1 Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2 And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3 explaining and giving evidence that the Messiah had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Yeshua whom I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah."

17:1 Having just been forced out of Philippi due to being unjustly arrested (16:6-40), Paul and his company make their way to Thessalonica, the capital of Macedonia. It was a journey of about 100 miles or so from Philippi to Thessalonica, with Amphipolis and Apollonia as stopping off points at about thirty-mile increments. Paul traveled on the Egnatian Way (*Via Egnatia*), an overland highway that extended from the Adriatic Sea on the west to the Aegean Sea on the east, crossing over the Roman provinces of Illyricum, Macedonia, and Thrace (remnants of this highway still exist in modern times). The population

¹ Acts 16:6-40 is examined in the author's commentary *Philippians for the Practical Messianic*.

of First Century Thessalonica has been estimated anywhere from 20,000-100,000. Thessalonica was granted the right to govern itself within the Roman Empire on a Greek model, meriting it the status of a “free city.” Darrell L. Bock describes, “As a senatorial province, it was very loyal to Rome, a point that will be important in the events to come.”²

An interesting historical fact about Ancient Thessalonica is brought out by Ben Witherington III, which might relate to the later conflict witnessed as the Jewish leaders in Thessalonica accused Paul of mounting a rebellion against Caesar (vs. 6-7). Witherington mentions the presence of Roman coins in Thessalonica minted with the head of Julius Caesar, and how Augustus took the place of Zeus. In his view, “These coins reflect the ongoing benefactions that Rome bestowed on Thessalonica, which the city had apparently come to depend upon, and the growing imperial theology and eschatology that was part of the rhetoric of response in such a city.”³ It is widely agreed among expositors, that the letters of 1&2 Thessalonians were composed to address the end-time views of the Thessalonian Believers. If indeed there was a high influence of some kind of Ancient Roman veneration in Thessalonica, then the Believers could have certainly thought that some kind of Divine showdown was forthcoming, between Caesar and the Messiah. This would have added some tension to how the Thessalonian Believers interacted with their pagan neighbors, and how they approached various matters of their spirituality.

17:2 As Paul arrived in Thessalonica, and he was familiarized with his surroundings, he went to the local synagogue: “And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures.” 1 Thessalonians 2:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:8 inform us how Paul had actually worked in the city to support himself, so as to not be an unnecessary burden on the group of new Believers that was forming. In Philippians 4:15-16 it is attested that the Philippian Believers, who Paul had just left, actually sent a monetary offering to him at least twice. While the ideal for Paul and his associates was doubtless that the Believers in the fellowships they helped plant would provide them some kind of monetary support, they were not at all hesitant to work a non-religious job (cf. 18:3).

While it is common in much of contemporary Christianity to think that when the Apostle Paul recognized Yeshua as the Messiah and Savior, that he gave up on being Jewish, this is not the testimony given to us by Luke in v. 2. We are told in the narrative *kata de to eiōthos tō Paulō* (κατὰ δὲ τὸ εἰωθὸς τῷ Παύλῳ), “And Paul, as his manner was” (KJV), paraphrased by the Moffat New Testament as, “and Paul as usual went in.” It was Paul’s standard custom, in all of the cities he visited in the Mediterranean, to proclaim the good news of Yeshua by visiting the local synagogue first. He would do his best to present the gospel message to those gathered on *Shabbat*, with whom he would have obviously already shared a belief in the Tanach Scriptures of the One God of Israel. David G. Peterson, among Christian interpreters, is right to indicate that “despite his interest in the engagement of the missionaries with Gentile beliefs and practices, Luke does not allow us to forget that Paul’s custom, wherever possible, was to

² Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 550.

³ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 503.

preach to Jews first.”⁴ In the Book of Acts, we are dealing with the same Apostle Paul, who would say after all, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). The Jewish people, from whom the Messiah Yeshua came forth, were to be the first to hear the good news.

It can be a little difficult for some to acknowledge that the Apostle Paul most certainly had a Jewish mission, because of how he writes in Galatians 2:7-9 that he had a mission to go to the nations or the uncircumcised, and the Apostle Peter had a mission to go to the Jewish people or the circumcised. While some, even in parts of today’s Messianic community, have taken this to mean that there are to be two distinct sectors of the Body of Messiah—Paul going to the uncircumcised and Peter to the circumcised, obviously concerned ministry specializations that the two of them possessed. The Apostle Paul, as a trained student of Gamaliel (22:3) and a Roman citizen from Tarsus (21:39; 22:8; et. al.), had some special skills and abilities in going out into the Mediterranean to declare the good news—that the Apostle Peter did not necessarily have. In the specific ministry duties that Paul had in going out to the nations, Paul still demonstrates a concern with the salvation of his fellow Jews. And, as the intended audience of the Epistle of 1 Peter demonstrates (1 Peter 1:1, 18; 4:3), Peter taught to non-Jews as well as Jews.

V. 2 says that Paul spent three Sabbaths, the equivalent of two weeks, at the Thessalonian synagogue. While the NRSV (and RSV) says, “on three sabbath days [he] argued with them from the scriptures,” “reasoned” (NASU/NIV/ESV/HCSB) is a far better rendering of the verb *dialegomai* (διαλέγομαι). There is a likely connection to be made with what Luke has attested in his Gospel with, “Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27), as Yeshua “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). This is precisely what the Apostle Paul wanted to do regarding the Messiah to those in the Thessalonian synagogue. While some degree of fierce argument would definitely have been present, given the reaction of various Jews in the assembly, this would not have been Paul’s original intention.

Evaluating Paul’s style of discussing the Messiah with those at the Thessalonian synagogue, Witherington thinks, “Paul...is said to be engaging in an act of persuasion or rhetoric in the synagogue. The verbs *διανοίγων* [*dianoigōn*] and *παρατιθέμενος* [*paratithemenos*] in v. 3 indicate the process of opening the mind and understanding of the hearers followed by the putting forward of proper proofs in good rhetorical form.”⁵ He goes on and concludes, “Paul did not resort to sophistic rhetoric but rhetoric of a more sophisticated and substantial sort, involving proofs and not mere flattery or emotional appeal.”⁶ From what Luke has said in Acts 17:1-15 in total, Paul had to have stayed in Thessalonica long enough (a little longer than two or three weeks) to have been considered a threat, as we find out, by the Jewish leaders at the local synagogue. Was this because Paul

⁴ David G. Peterson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 475.

⁵ Witherington, *Acts*, 505.

⁶ *Ibid.*

really did have persuasive arguments about Yeshua of Nazareth being the Savior of Israel? Was it because Paul's influence in reasoning from the Tanach Scriptures, made some of the Jews look bad—because they could not hope to match his intelligence?

The CJB renders v. 2 with, “on three *Shabbats* he gave them *drashes* from the *Tanakh*.” The vantage point of David H. Stern is that Paul delivered various midrashes to those in the Thessalonian synagogue, defining a midrash in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* here as “a sermon, exegesis, exposition or homiletical interpretation of a text.”⁷ While Stern has interjected something useful for considering the ancient Jewish setting of Paul's teaching, we still need to be a bit careful how far we push Paul's reasoning of Yeshua's Messiahship to those at the Thessalonian synagogue.⁸ We can be assured that in Paul's time spent at the Thessalonian synagogue that there was some basic review of the events of Yeshua's ministry, death, and resurrection. We can also be assured that there was some probing of the Tanach or Old Testament, in order for Paul to demonstrate to his hearers that He was the promised Messiah. To the point of knowing how many typological stories or analogies were investigated from the Tanach, we cannot know. Also most critical to recognize, of course, is that the local synagogue was the main place for people to access and hear the Scriptures.

17:3 The thrust of Paul's time at the Thessalonian synagogue is specified in how, “He opened them and gave evidence that Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, saying, “This *Yeshua*, whom I declare to you, is the Messiah” (TLV). The presence of the verb *dianoigō* (διανοίγω) in v. 3 is significant, as Luke 24:31 informs us of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, “Then their eyes were opened [*dianoigō*] and they recognized Him,” which was precisely Paul's purpose in reasoning at the Thessalonian synagogue. F.F. Bruce summarizes how “he expounded on the OT scriptures on three successive Sabbath days, bringing forward evidence of their fulfillment the historic facts accomplished in the ministry, death and exaltation of Jesus.”⁹ The main substance of what Paul focused on, can be agreed by all readers to be what Paul himself considered to be the main elements of the good news:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

Stern suggests that Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and Psalm 16:8-11¹⁰ were passages discussed by Paul with those in the Thessalonian synagogue. I. Howard Marshall goes a little further, stating, “We can be reasonably sure that the Scriptures used would include Psalms 2, 16, 110; Isaiah 53; and possibly Deuteronomy 21:23.”¹¹ One point that cannot escape our notice is Richard N. Longenecker's observation of how “At times the proclamation was accompanied by

⁷ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 286.

⁸ C.K. Barrett, *International Critical Commentary: Acts 15-28* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 811 probably goes too far the other way, when he claims “it would be hazardous to assert that [Luke's] language is based on a Jewish model.”

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 343.

¹⁰ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 286.

¹¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, 277).

miracles. But though miracles brought quick results, ‘reason,’ ‘prove,’ and ‘persuade’—words that describe Paul’s method of preaching—imply his careful dealing with his hearers’ questions and doubts.”¹² The Apostle Paul and company, moving into Thessalonica, **were not some sort of sideshow roadshow pushing interesting philosophy and creative wares.** They were servants of the Lord, most interested in helping others come to the truth of Yeshua, and Paul reasoned and proved His Messiahship the best he could to those who would hear.

4 And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.

17:4 The declaration of the good news of Yeshua to those at the Thessalonian synagogue was met with some success, as Luke says, “some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.” There were new Jewish Believers, as well as Greek Believers who had already recognized the God of Israel.

One might need to be just a little careful in how to view the label *sebomenōn Hellēnōn* (σεβομένων Ἑλλήνων), which is rendered better as “devout Greeks” (RSV/NRSV/ESV). The verb *sebō* (σέβω), “to worship, be religious” (LS),¹³ is employed for the participle *sebomenōn*. Does this actually make any difference? T.R. Schreiner notes, “It is generally agreed that Luke used” this term (and *phobeō*, φοβέω) to describe God-fearers, but he goes on to conclude, “When one looks at the use of the terms in Acts it seems unlikely that...[they] are technical terms” (ISBE).¹⁴ While these Greeks were what the First Century Synagogue would consider “God-fearers,” the emphasis in v. 4 is on the action of fearing/worshipping God. “God-fearers” is not really a term that the First Century Body of Messiah used itself to describe non-Jewish Believers.¹⁵

In addition to God-fearing Greeks, Luke makes the point of mentioning how “not a few prominent women” (NIV) also became Believers in Yeshua. Such leading women could have been the wives of some of the leading men of Thessalonica, although it could also have been that these were the wives of some of the leading men of the Thessalonian synagogue. Marshall informs us of how “we know that Jewish women were to be found in upper-class society, and even Nero’s mistress and wife, Poppaea, was reputed to have Jewish sympathies (Jos., *Ant.* 20:195).”¹⁶

¹² Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:469.

¹³ LS, 725.

¹⁴ T.R. Schreiner, “Proselyte,” in *ISBE*, 3:1010.

¹⁵ For a further discussion, consult the relevant sections of the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics (forthcoming).

¹⁶ Marshall, *Acts*, 277.

These people all formed the first groups from which the assembly of Messiah followers at Thessalonica would be founded. 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, delivered after Paul's time in the city, encapsulates the basic message upon which this young fellowship would develop:

“For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Yeshua, who rescues us from the wrath to come.”

Do the events in Thessalonica, which follow in vs. 5-9, really affect the eschatological tenor of the Thessalonican assembly?

5 But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. 6 When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; 7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Yeshua.”

17:5 When the text communicates that “the Jews were jealous” (RSV/NIV), it is obviously not to be viewed as all of the Jews in the city of Thessalonica, because previously in v. 4 it is clear that “Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas” (NIV). Context dictates that these Jews were those who did not believe in what Paul reported about Yeshua, and that they were largely the synagogue leadership and their confidants,¹⁷ which the TLV correctly puts as, “some of the Jewish people became jealous.” The synagogue leaders in Thessalonica were incensed about Paul's proclamation of Yeshua the Messiah, and they found it something threatening to them. C.K. Barrett's thought is, “The Jews feared that they were losing control of the synagogue and their appeal to religious non-Jews, and objected to the success of the Christian preachers.”¹⁸ To this, F. Scott Spencer's observations are also useful to keep in mind:

“The issue is not so much a doctrinal dispute over Paul's handling of Scripture as it is a social conflict arising from Paul's popularity in the community. With honor and social standing inextricably tied to finite public opinion, Paul's sudden jump in the polls—especially among high society folk—means a slump in rank for the synagogue elites. And so they fight to restore their honor, not by arguing against Paul's biblical exegesis, but by aiming to downgrade his social reputation.”¹⁹

¹⁷ This is a place where, although lacking ancient textual support (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 453, that it has to be noted how the Greek Textus Receptus does say, “the Jews which believed not” (KJV), meaning that the Jews mentioned here were non-Believers. The CJB has incorporated this information into its rendering of v. 5: “But the unbelieving Jews grew jealous.”

¹⁸ Barrett, 812.

¹⁹ F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 180.

V. 5 does not give that many specific clues as to what caused the opposition to Paul from the Thessalonian synagogue. Was the opposition really to the message that Paul declared, Paul's position as one who garnered attention, or to what the message would do to those receiving it as observed by the synagogue leaders?

The main segment of those attracted to Paul's declaration of Yeshua were those considered to be God-fearers by the synagogue. The synagogue leaders became jealous, in all likelihood, because those highly interested in Paul included non-Jewish persons in their assembly who they saw as potential proselyte converts. These could have been people in whom they invested some considerable time, in trying to persuade to go through with ritual proselyte circumcision. The Apostle Paul, however, could have easily come along and said that with the arrival of the Messiah Yeshua, it was faith in what He had accomplished on the tree which decisively made one a member of God's covenant people—just as faith in God always had reckoned people His own from the beginning (cf. Romans 4:9-10).

Questions do need to be raised, from the observations of Paul himself about how the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). By the time of writing his first letter, many non-Jewish Believers in Thessalonica had come to Yeshua directly from paganism. But, what if some of these people had already been attending the Thessalonian synagogue, and had not been definitively told to cut themselves off from idolatry by the synagogue leaders? Could the synagogue leaders in Thessalonica have shown some preferential treatment to certain God-fearers on the way to proselytization, ignoring some others, and then Paul came along and offered a broad-sweeping message of salvation and inclusion for all? If some of the non-Jews in the Thessalonian synagogue were from the proverbial "higher classes" of society, then some of the other non-Jews from the "lower classes" might not have been given as much attention (cf. James 2:2-4).

The Apostolic decree as issued by the Jerusalem Council (15:19-21) required the new, non-Jewish Believers to be cut off from idolatry—and this was not open for negotiation. Surely, if the Apostle Paul came to the Thessalonian synagogue, offering some stellar arguments in favor of Yeshua's Messiahship, a message by which all people could be redeemed from their sins, and he did not show any sort of partiality to those in the Thessalonian assembly—then the synagogue leaders would have most surely lost some prestige. Paul would have made the effort to reach out to everyone to be sure, **but most especially any of those who were largely ignored by the synagogue leaders**. This would have been those non-Jewish people who still had some ties to Greco-Roman paganism, but had not been given the kind of love and welcome that they should have, and who needed a man like Paul to come along and give them some special attention. Human people being who they are, these possibilities being present at the Thessalonian synagogue need to be considered.

Even though v. 5 says that there were Thessalonian Jews who became jealous against Paul, there is no indication in Paul's letters that he was ever hostile back. The job of non-Jewish Believers, by receiving Israel's Messiah into their lives, is so that the Jews who reject Him can be jealous of such non-Jewish Believers participating in Israel's blessings (Romans 11:11). Paul himself expressed, "if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them..." (Romans 11:14). Bock mentions how an interpretation of the

jealousy or zealotry (verb *zēloō*, ζηλόω) can be “a reference to Jews zealous for God’s glory and the law, which is likely the motivation for at least some.”²⁰ While the Apostle Paul certainly had a message for the non-Jews in Thessalonica which would not have asked for immediate Torah observance (contrasted to those at the Jerusalem Council in 15:5 who demanded that the non-Jews be “ordered” [ESV] to keep the Torah), how much of the jealousy against Paul was related to issues of Torah observance is a little difficult to evaluate.²¹ The Thessalonican synagogue leaders, being jealous or zealous against Paul, can just as easily be associated with negative human emotions because they despised him, as the good news he proclaimed had a resonating effect on all in the synagogue and they lost attention. Likewise to be considered, is how the message of repentance from sins, and turning to the Messiah to be redeemed, always has its opponents who take extreme offense. And also, given the exaggerated accusation seen about Paul declaring an insurrection against Caesar (v. 7), the Thessalonican Jews might have thought that Paul’s message could cause some problems for the local Jewish community.

The Jews in Thessalonica really went to some means to get rid of Paul. It is stated that they took “some wicked fellows of the rabble” (RSV) or “certain lewd fellows of the baser sort” (KJV), *tōn agoraiōn andras tinas ponērous* (τῶν ἀγοραίων ἄνδρας τινὰς πονηροῦς). These would have been various *lowlifes*, for lack of a better description, “bad characters” (NIV), who would hang around the marketplace.²² Luke records how together they “formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason’s house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd” (NIV). It is likely proper for Barrett to note, “Ordinarily δῆμος [*dēmos*] would deserve a better translation, but Luke appears to have in mind not an orderly assembly but a riotous gathering bent on violence, though not...on lynching.”²³

Jason (*Iasōn*, Ἰάσων) was probably a Thessalonican Jew who had become a Believer in Yeshua. Jason’s Hebrew name could have been Joshua/Yehoshua, as Josephus records how a high priest named Joshua changed his name to Jason.²⁴ Romans 16:21 lists a Jason among Paul’s associates, but it is unknowable if this is the same person.

17:6 The mob formed by the synagogue leaders goes to the home of Jason, but Paul and his company were not there. So, Jason and some of the new Thessalonican Believers were taken before the city authorities instead. Barrett’s view of v. 6 is that “Luke evidently thinks it possible that three Sabbaths might suffice to gather men into the new brotherhood; having been nurtured in the synagogue they would probably need little instruction beyond the simple identification of the Messiah with Jesus.”²⁵ While Paul’s time in Thessalonica was brief, it may have actually been that he was in the city a little longer than just three Sabbaths or two

²⁰ Bock, 551.

²¹ Consult the author’s commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* for a further examination.

²² Cf. Bock, 551.

²³ Barrett, 814; Against: Bock, pp 551-552.

²⁴ When one reviews *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.239, the Whiston English translation actually says “Jesus changed his name to Jason” (*The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 323). The Greek source text of this actually uses *Iēsous* (Ἰησοῦς), which once again serves as proof that the Greek name *Iēsous* was a Jewish transliteration that Greek-speaking Jews had no problems using, unlike some Messianics today who struggle over the English name Jesus.

²⁵ Barrett, 814.

weeks, given the disapproval, and later hostility, which were shown toward him. He had to have sufficient time to see that the good news was proclaimed, understood by a core group on some major level, and to see such new Believers rooted enough that they knew they would be forming their own fellowship.

Still, while individuals like Jason were likely Jewish Believers who did not need significant rudimentary instruction in Biblical essentials, the instruction delivered in 1&2 Thessalonians about not only the end-times, but also the doctrine of resurrection, does indicate how little time Paul was able to spend honing the theological understandings of the growing fellowship of Messiah followers. The content of 1&2 Thessalonians is a testament to how in the time between Paul's being ejected from the city of Thessalonica, and his writing the two letters, many more people came to faith in Yeshua—this time directly from the pagan population. Even though someone like Jason could have served to mentor such people in the essential truths of the Tanach, an actual teacher like Paul would have been necessary as an authority.

Jason and some of the Believers are brought before the city rulers, and the Jews opposed to Paul issue the accusation, "These men...have turned the world upside down" (RSV). This rendering might go a little too far, with the NIV being a bit better: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here." The verb *anastatoō* (ἀναστατόω) communicates, "to unsettle, upset" (LS),²⁶ and historically speaking—even though more than a bit exaggerated—the Thessalonian Jews may have intended there to be some kind of connection made to a previous problem with Jewish messianism.²⁷ The Edict of Claudius from 49-50 C.E. ejected all the Jews from the city of Rome (cf. Acts 18:2), as the historian Suetonius records, "Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, expelled them from the city" (*Life of Claudius* 25.2).²⁸ This "Chrestus" is none other than a reference to the message of "Christ," which when arriving in Rome stirred up the Roman Jewish population. The Romans, not quite knowing what to do, simply expelled all of the Jews (and this likely had a significant effect on the social circumstances of the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers getting along, as depicted in Paul's letter to the Romans, as the Messianic Jews later returned to Rome).²⁹ Longenecker indicates for us how, "Probably the Jewish opponents of the missionaries played upon the fear that such a situation might be duplicated at Thessalonica, unless Paul and Silas were expelled."³⁰ And if a problem did erupt for the Roman authorities, from another Diaspora Jewish community, would the events that had occurred in Rome repeat themselves in Thessalonica, with the Synagogue to blame?

The place of Thessalonica as a free city in the First Century Roman Empire need not be overlooked, given the accusations issued by the Thessalonian Jews against Jason and the Believers, who had accepted the message preached by Paul. If Rome had heard that an

²⁶ LS, 62.

²⁷ F.F. Bruce, "The Acts of the Apostles," in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds. *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 995.

²⁸ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, 202.

²⁹ Consult the author's entry for the Epistle to the Romans in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

³⁰ Longenecker, in *EXP*, 9:469.

insurrection against Caesar were present in Thessalonica, then such a status could have been revoked. Circumstances similar to what had been seen in the Jewish community in Rome, due to the declaration of Yeshua, could have repeated themselves.

17:7 With Jason and his companions standing before the city leaders of Thessalonica, the Jewish leaders make the accusation, “Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus” (NRSV). It is communicated that Paul and his associates teach things contrary to *tōn dogmatōn Kaisaros* (τῶν δογμάτων Καίσαρος), the edicts of the Emperor. Bruce notes that while “This was a subtle charge; even an unfounded suspicion of this kind was enough to ruin many a man,”³¹ it cannot go overlooked, as Bruce further points out that from 1&2 Thessalonians, “there was [evidently] a strong eschatological emphasis in Paul’s preaching and teaching at Thessalonica.”³² The essence of the gospel is, after all, “Yeshua is Lord!” (cf. 16:31), which is not only an affirmation of Yeshua’s Divinity and oneness with God the Father, but by implication also means that *Caesar is not Lord*. While later Apostolic teaching will include the stipulation, “honor the king” (1 Peter 2:17), *the King*, Yeshua the Messiah, was taught to be coming back to the Earth to establish His own Kingdom and His own Reign. By necessity, this meant that all other kings and rulers were impostors, or at least inferior and subordinate, to Him.

Yeshua the Messiah Himself did not advocate that His followers take up arms to overthrow the Romans in Judea, or lead some revolt across the Empire. As He had told Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:36). Yet, one can easily see various opponents to the good news deliberately misrepresenting the teachings and emphases of Yeshua’s followers, as one day—some time in the future—the Messiah will return and reign supreme over the Earth. Bock observes, “The missionaries may well have been heard to be predicting a change of rulers rather than fomenting outright rebellion.”³³ That a trumped up accusation could be brought forward—that the gospel message required Yeshua’s followers to totally dismiss Roman rule and Caesar’s authority—would definitely create some difficulty for the early Believers. In a city that relied upon Roman benevolence, disdain toward the Believers could have been shown because the good news would rightly affirm that Yeshua was the True King.

8 They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. 9 And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

17:8 It is said that “When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil” (NIV). The accusation that the message declared by Paul and his company, accepted by those like Jason and various others attached to the Thessalonican synagogue,

³¹ Bruce, *NICNT*, 344.

³² *Ibid.*, 345.

³³ Bock, 553.

could foment some kind of problem with the Roman government—was alarming. While the jealousy issued toward Paul by the synagogue leaders could have been caused entirely by dislike of him (v. 5), there has to have been doctrinal disagreement associated with it as well. While the city leaders of Thessalonica were disturbed by the charges brought up against Jason, and against the message that Paul proclaimed about Yeshua, they did recognize that no revolt against Caesar or Rome had been caused. Robert W. Wall describes, “Paul’s Jewish opponents are disingenuous since their criticism of him is motivated by theological disagreement rather than political loyalty. For this reason, Rome does not take their court appearances and legal accusations seriously. More often than not, civic authority rightly recognizes this is a religious conflict and properly located it within the Jewish community.”³⁴ While at first the city leaders of Thessalonica would have been set aback by hearing that this Yeshua figure was a superior king to Caesar, they would have also heard that such a king was executed back in Judea, and would have mocked the idea that He was resurrected from the dead—only to later return and conquer the Earth. This was an internal problem for the local synagogue to handle, and not the Thessalonican city government.

17:9 Jason as Paul’s host, and the others, had to give a “pledge” or “post bond” (NIV) or “bail” (NRSV),³⁵ for what has happened. This would be taken as a security that the preaching of Yeshua was not intended to mount any kind of problems for the city of Thessalonica or the Roman Empire, and that Paul and Silas would leave (at least during the city leaders’ term of office). This is a pledge that would have been lost if the Messiah followers caused any more problems in Thessalonica. (A more negative scenario could have potentially involved those like Jason losing their property, being subject to arrest, and possibly even executed on charge of treason.) Bruce indicates that “Paul’s friends had no doubt gone bail for him without his consent, but once they had done so, his hands were tied.”³⁶ Paul and Silas had to leave Thessalonica, although we see every indication that the new group of Believers in the city continued to grow and proclaim the good news of Yeshua (1 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 2:14-16).

10 The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. 12 Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.

17:10 Having to leave Thessalonica, Paul and Silas travel to Berea (Beroea), which was about 46 miles southwest of Thessalonica, on the way to Achaia. Paul expresses in his first letter to the Thessalonians how he was not happy with having to leave the city, saying, “For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us” (1

³⁴ Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:239.

³⁵ Grk. *hikanos* (ἱκανός).

³⁶ Bruce, *NICNT*, 345.

Thessalonians 2:18). While Paul and Silas are mentioned here, where was Paul's associate Timothy in all of this? Was he left in Philippi, and he would find out later what had transpired? Was he left in Thessalonica? What we do know for sure is that Timothy was able to go to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:6), and the new group of Thessalonian Believers would have known that he was associated with Paul.

Arriving in Berea, the same custom that Paul followed in Thessalonica (vs. 1-2) is demonstrated: Paul goes to the local Jewish synagogue to declare the good news of the Yeshua the Messiah.

17:11-12 There is a definite contrast between the Jews of Thessalonica, who made false accusations against Paul, and the Jews of Berea, where Paul and Silas have just arrived. Luke records, "These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so" (v. 11, NRSV). The result of Paul's declaration of the good news is, "Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men" (v. 12, NIV). While it can be commonly thought that when the Apostle Paul entered into a Jewish synagogue, that he always had conflict with the synagogue leaders and only found new Believers among the non-Jews, this is not at all the case. The Jewish community in the Diaspora was not always hostile to Paul and the good news of Yeshua.

Luke's statement is that the Berean Jews were quite honorable people, being of "noble character" (NIV). The term used to describe this is *eugenēs* (εὐγενής), originally meaning "well-born, of noble race, of high descent" (LS),³⁷ but later "**pert. to having the type of attitude ordinarily associated with well-bred persons, noble-minded, open-minded**" (BDAG),³⁸ being associated with noble behavior. Josephus uses *eugenēs* to describe how during the Maccabean crisis, there were Jews who did not give in to the demands of Antiochus Epiphanes. This is because "the best men, and those of the noblest [*eugenēs*] souls, did not regard him, but did pay a greater respect to the customs of their country than concern as to the punishment which he threatened to the disobedient; on which account they every day underwent great miseries and bitter torments" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 12.255).³⁹ The Jewish philosopher Philo would also use *eugenēs* to describe how Moses was "a fine and noble [*eugenēs*] child to look upon" (*Life of Moses* 1.18).⁴⁰ In the estimation of Barrett, "Luke means that the Berean Jews allowed no prejudice to prevent them from giving Paul a fair hearing,"⁴¹ as "the people were more amenable than at Thessalonica" (Moffat New Testament).

The appreciable character of the Berean Jews is seen in not only how they welcomed the good news that Paul preached, but most especially in how they were "checking the *Tanakh* every day to see if the things Sha'ul was saying were true" (CJB). The Bereans would investigate the Tanach Scriptures, the Old Testament, to confirm that Paul's message was something viable. This is something that they did daily, *kath' hēmeran* (καθ' ἡμέραν), no less!

³⁷ LS, 323.

³⁸ BDAG, 404.

³⁹ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 324.

⁴⁰ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 460.

⁴¹ Barrett, 817.

Marshall is right to conclude, “Here was no mere emotional response to the gospel, but one based on intellectual conviction.”⁴²

In Berea, for whatever reason, the Jewish community was quite gracious toward Paul and his message in declaring forth Yeshua. For Bible readers, this can certainly be taken as a testament to the diversity of the Diaspora Jewish community, and how the culture present in Berea was not actively hostile to those visitors who entered in. Wall notes, “there are certain environments of family life, relationships, and even culture, as well as various personal habits of mind and heart, that nurture and shape the sort of person who is interested in the things of God,”⁴³ and this was the advantage present in Berea. Paul presented a reasonable case from the Tanach Scriptures, and the Bereans’ duty was to make sure that it was so.

Remaining true to the Word of God was more important than religious politics or various agendas to the Bereans. Today, their example, as testified in the Book of Acts, has allowed many men and women since—who diligently search the Scriptures and *stick to the text*—to be called, or be somehow referred to, as “Bereans” in their honor. These are people who will choose the Bible over a denominational tradition or an organizational membership (even with some denominational traditions surely having some degree of positive value). Messianics, in particular, have learned on many different levels to appreciate what the Bereans represent. While non-Jewish Messianics from Christian backgrounds, in their quest to appreciate their Hebraic Roots and the Torah, have taken encouragement from the Bereans’ example—Messianic Jews also take considerable encouragement, because the Bereans serve as a testimony that not all in the Jewish community will just throw people aside who believe that Yeshua is the Messiah. Stern rightly attests, “Today such openmindedness is similarly welcomed by Messianic Jews and is praiseworthy.”⁴⁴

The influence of the Bereans’ approach to theological issues, and their demeanor in searching the Scriptures, has left an undeniable influence throughout history on our faith. There are important spiritual issues that have to be regularly investigated and fine-tuned, not only to perhaps assuage a person’s own internal human doubts—but most especially to anticipate external criticism and attacks. The field of apologetics, the defense of the faith, is quite concerned with making sure that people not only believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, the Savior God made manifest to us in the flesh, but that we all know *why* we believe in it. People need to know why they believe in a Sovereign Creator who made the universe according to His intelligent design. People need to know why they can trust the claims of the Scriptures, and why the Bible is historically reliable. To a commentator like Ajith Fernando, the Apostle Paul was one who practiced apologetics. He summarizes some rather useful observations that we all need to be most cognizant of:

“Paul not only expounded the gospel from the Scriptures, but he also practiced apologetics. Those who seek to be biblical in evangelism should be both expounders and apologists. In my early years of ministry I saw myself as a Bible expositor, and part of my expository ministry was to explain the gospel to non-Christians. But they began to present

⁴² Marshall, *Acts*, 280.

⁴³ Wall, in *NIB*, 10:241.

⁴⁴ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 287.

objections and ask questions I found difficult to respond to. As I kept searching for answers, I began to realize that to be an effective witness for Christians meant getting into apologetics too.”⁴⁵

These words need to be taken very seriously for our current Information Age, by all Messianic Believers. The landscape of our faith will be significantly and *rapidly changing*, in the next decade or so (2010s-2020s), due to the sharing of ideas. This is especially true via social networking tools like blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. People who once had no voice, now have a voice. While these are tools that can be used for good, they are also tools that can be used for evil. Our own Messianic movement is definitely affected by these things—and frequently not always for the better. Given the fact that apostasy is prophesied to transpire in the Last Days (2 Thessalonians 2:3), congregational leaders and teachers need to be most aware of what people are saying about God, the Bible, and various important issues. No one needs to be caught “surprised,” because a sub-group or clique within the Messianic community has been open about their less-than-Biblical views via an electronic-related communication venue.

13 But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. 14 Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. 15 Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.

17:13-15 The Jewish leaders in Thessalonica must have really considered the Apostle Paul to be a threat, for them to make the effort to follow him down to Berea, and do the same thing that they did in their own city (v. 5). The Berean Believers, having heard from Paul what had occurred in Thessalonica, knew that he had to leave if the problems were to stop, and most importantly if he were to be safe. There is every indication that Paul and the Bereans left on good terms, as he has an escort from Berea all the way to Athens. Athens was apparently well outside of the influence of the Thessalonican Jews, as Paul would later write, “when we could endure *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone” (1 Thessalonians 3:1).

When reviewing what occurred in Thessalonica, Berea, and what follows in Paul’s journey—one can only recognize that the hand of the Lord was behind his travels, his being rejected, and him decisively needing to go to various places to proclaim a message of salvation and deliverance to all who would hear. Paul was persistent, not being intimidated by what anyone could do to him, and so he continued on. All of us must take encouragement from Paul’s example, and recognize that when we endure various trials, the Lord likely has a much grander purpose in mind for the work of His Kingdom.

⁴⁵ Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 467.