

Messianic Sabbath Helper

Acts 16:13; 17:2

“Paul Reasoning from the Scriptures on the Sabbath”

“And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled” (Acts 16:13).

“And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:2).

The visits of the Apostle Paul, to both Philippi and Thessalonica, are regarded as having taken place during his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:40-18:23).¹ Both of the communities of Messiah followers which were established in these cities, found their start among people who met to worship the God of Israel on the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*. There is obviously much more which took place in Philippi (Acts 16:11-40) and Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-5), as Paul had to leave both places after some incidents with the local authorities. Our interest in evaluating Acts 16:13 and 17:2, is in determining whether a figure like Paul *only* met with Jews and God-fearers on the Sabbath to declare Yeshua the Messiah—or whether he indeed was also keeping *Shabbat* as a Torah-faithful Jew.

16:13 The record of Luke, when Paul and company arrive at Philippi—interestingly enough the first city on the European continent for him to declare Yeshua—is, “On *Yom Shabbat*, we went outside the gate to the river, where we expected a place of prayer to be. We sat down and began speaking with the women who had gathered” (TLV). What readers witness is mainly a group of females, led by the cloth merchant Lydia (16:14), out by the riverside. Examiners have certainly wondered from this small group, whether there were really any Jews at all in Philippi. It seems unlikely that this riverside fellowship was exclusively composed of non-Jewish God-fearers, a majority of which was indeed female. Gary Gilbert offers the general assertion in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, “Paul seeks out the local Jewish community...gathered on the Sabbath.”²

Throughout the Book of Acts, we see that Paul’s usual missionary pattern was to go to the Jewish local synagogue and proclaim the good news to those assembled on *Shabbat*, and he would often remain there until he would be thrown out or those attending lost interest. Philippi is a major exception to this pattern. Luke indicates, “on *Shabbat*, we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we understood a *minyan* met. We sat down and began speaking to the women who had gathered there” (CJB). Apparently, there was only this “place of prayer” (*proseuchē*, προσευχή) for Paul to go to, because there were not enough Jews in Philippi to form a synagogue.

Jewish *halachah* of the period required ten Jewish males to be present in a city to form a synagogue, often called a *minyan* (מִיָּנְיָן), meaning “**number, count; ballot, vote**” (*Jastrow*).³ Ten composing a *minyan* is something codified in the Mishnah (m.*Sanhedrin* 1:6⁴; m.*Avot* 3:6⁵). The Biblical basis for the number ten comes from Abraham’s plea to spare Sodom and Gomorrah on behalf of ten righteous (Genesis 18), and a reference to ten elders in Ruth 4:2.

There are varied approaches witnessed regarding why the fellowship group in Philippi met by the riverside. Frequently, it is concluded that there was a miniscule population of Jews and God-

¹ This section has some adapted sections from the commentaries *Philippians for the Practical Messianic* (2006) and *1&2 Thessalonians for the Practical Messianic* (2012) by J.K. McKee.

² Gilbert, in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 231.

³ *Jastrow*, 801.

⁴ “And how do we know that a congregation is ten? Since it is said, *How long shall I bear with this evil congregation* [of the ten spies] (Num. 14:27)—excluding Joshua and Caleb” (m.*Sanhedrin* 1:6; Neusner, *Mishnah*, 585).

⁵ “Among ten who sit and work hard on Torah the Presence comes to rest” (m.*Avot* 3:6; *Ibid.*, 679).

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fearers, who were too small to have their own building. Meeting by the riverside would be an appropriate way to facilitate various ritual immersions and purity rites. Craig S. Keener offers the useful thoughts in his *IVPBBC*:

“According to Jewish pietists concerned about assimilation, a minimum of ten Jewish men was necessary to constitute a regular synagogue and thus indicate a city where Jewish people would be likely to form their own community; this number of Jewish men may not have lived in Philippi. But in places with no official synagogue, Jewish people preferred to meet in a ritually pure place near water; ritual washing of hands before prayer seems to have been standard in *Diaspora Judaism, and excavations show the importance of water to synagogues.”⁶

It is also quite possible that due to the high Roman population of Philippi, or at least the high Roman patriotism, that the Jews living in the city were not allowed to easily have their own synagogue, so meeting outside the city by the riverside would have to suffice. The Greek term *proseuchē* (προσευχή), simply meaning “prayer,” is used in 3 Maccabees 7:20 to likewise represent “a place of prayer,” the equivalent of a synagogue when there is no synagogue.⁷ The Gangites River flowed by the city of Philippi. William Baird indicates, based on archaeological finds at Philippi, that “just W of the Roman arch which may mark the pomerium (the area around the city from which foreign cults were excluded) the river makes a bend providing a small natural amphitheater.”⁸ This may have been where Paul met with the Philippian Jewish community.

Noting how the RSV says, “on the sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer,” I. Howard Marshall uses it to deduce how the Jewish population in Philippi was not that large:

“Paul and his companions did not know for certain where the Jews met, and that they had not been lodging with Jews. This would not be surprising if Jewish worship was being practised by a mere handful of women, at least one of whom was a proselyte; the missionaries would be dependent on what vague information they could pick up from the local people.”⁹

F.F. Bruce further concludes that the group in Philippi was likely unofficial and informal, even though they did meet to worship Israel’s God in some Jewish capacity:

“There was...an unofficial meeting-place outside the city where a number of women—Jewesses and God-fearing Gentiles—came together to go through the appointed Jewish service of prayer for the sabbath day, even if they could not constitute a regular synagogue congregation.”¹⁰

While more tend to conclude that the fellowship group in Philippi was an informal gathering out by the riverside, Darrell L. Bock does actually think that they actually did have a more formal synagogue. He states, “It is more likely...that this place of prayer is a synagogue, as elsewhere the locale for prayer is always a synagogue when the term *προσευχήν* (*proseuchēn*, a place of prayer) is used.”¹¹ Regardless of whether those whom Paul met in Philippi on *Shabbat* were a formal synagogue or an informal gathering, it is often agreed that some significant Jewish traditions and customs were observed. As Richard N. Longenecker explains,

“[T]hey found some women gathered to recite the Shema, to pray the Shemoneh Esreh, to read from the Law and the Prophets, to discuss what they had read, and, if possible, to hear from a traveling Jewish teacher an exposition or exhortation and receive a blessing.”¹²

Some interesting questions do arise about the composition of who the Philippian Jews may have been. Acts 16:13 only speaks of “the women who had gathered there” (NIV). Is this to say that

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 368; also Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 284.

⁷ *BDAG*, 878 does offer the lexical definition “a place of or for prayer.”

⁸ Baird, in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 750.

⁹ Marshall, *Acts*, pp 266-267.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Acts*, 331.

¹¹ Bock, 533; also Schnabel, pp 679-690 who favors a more formal meeting place near a body of water for ritual immersions.

¹² Longenecker, in *EXP*, 9:460; also Witherington, *Acts*, 491.

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the Jewish men in Philippi were non-religious? Or were there any Jewish men in Philippi? In Conservative and Reform Judaism today, women are allowed to be counted as a part of the *minyan*. Was the Jewish population of Philippi overwhelmingly female, and that is why they met out by the riverside? Or, were there only a handful of Jewish women?¹³ These are some interesting questions that are raised when we consider Paul's unique mission to Philippi. The community meeting at the riverside may have only been a small handful of people—but important enough for Paul to be given a vision (16:9) to go minister to them.

While more is said in the continuing narrative about Paul's Sabbath observance (17:2), and the visit of Paul to Philippi indicates that he is perfectly comfortable declaring the good news at the riverside gathering on *Shabbat*—moving forward throughout Jewish history, and even to today, this scene actually demonstrates how *Shabbat* can be observed in a variety of ways, some innovative. In the ministry work of Outreach Israel and Messianic Apologetics, we do primarily interact with people who are involved in formal congregational settings across the broad Messianic movement—mostly in North America and the developed West. Yet at the same time, there are many who do not have a congregational home, and instead are a part of informal home fellowships on *Shabbat*, or similar to those in Philippi, may have fellowship meetings with Messianic people at a more public place such as an elementary school or hotel ballroom. Certainly, Jewish people throughout history have had to be innovative in keeping *Shabbat*, as a formal synagogue may not always have been an option—either due to population numbers, or local difficulties and prejudices.

17:2 Paul's visit to Thessalonica began mainly with a visit to the local Jewish synagogue. Luke narrates, "And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures."¹⁴ 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. With some of this in mind, Ben Witherington III is proper to direct, "We are not told that he went immediately to the synagogue. In fact it appears likely that Paul and his coworkers would first have had to establish themselves by finding a place to stay and finding a means of support."¹⁵

While the text communicates that Paul was present in the Thessalonian synagogue for three Sabbaths (*Sabbata tria*, *σάββατα τρία*),¹⁶ Paul's actual time in Thessalonica was actually longer. 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). It can be fairly deduced that Paul's total time in Thessalonica was over a month.¹⁷

What we are most interested in, is how to approach the statement, "As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures" (TNIV). Was it just Paul's custom to visit a local synagogue in the Mediterranean Diaspora, in order to conduct ministry activities? Or, was it Paul's custom to also visit the synagogue to engage in corporate worship of the God of Israel, in honor of the weekly Sabbath? Christian commentators on

¹³ Cf. William H. Willimon *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 137 who addresses the issue of Paul and Silas talking directly to women, non-Jewish women in the Mediterranean being a part of Judaism, and women being in the leadership of the First Century *ekklesia*.

¹⁴ The TLV has, "As was his custom, Paul went to the Jewish people; and for three *Shabbatot*, he debated the Scriptures with them."

¹⁵ Witherington, *Acts*, 504.

¹⁶ Technically speaking, given how *sabbaton* (σάββατον) can also neutrally mean "a period of seven days, week" (BDAG, 910), *Sabbata tria* could be rendered as "three weeks," although the weekly Sabbath is obviously intended given the venue of the Thessalonian synagogue.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

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Acts, do not tend to probe Paul's Sabbath keeping. In fact, perhaps endemic to how distant many Christians are from their Hebraic Roots and faith heritage in Judaism, some have to consciously mention that the Apostle Paul in his ministry activities among the nations **never forgot about the salvation of his fellow Jews** (cf. Romans 9:1-5). William H. Willimon, for example, has to assertively explain, "Even at this rather late stage in the gentile mission, we note that (1) Paul continues to go first to the synagogues, to those who ponder the Scriptures and that (2) not all Jews reject the gospel."¹⁸

More generally, Paul's finding the local synagogue in a new place, and using it as the first locus of ministry operation, is what you will typically find stated. David G. Peterson just asserts, "Paul's custom of first visiting the synagogue for ministry...and continuing there as long as he could, is further illustrated in vv. 10 and 17...The interpretation of Scripture played a key role in the synagogue ministry."¹⁹ What cannot be overlooked, to be sure, is how the local Diaspora synagogue was one of the few places not only where a concentration of people held the Scriptures of Israel in inspired regard—but it was actually one of the few places where such Scriptures could even be accessed, in either their Hebrew or Greek Septuagint forms!

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 Acts 17:2. The narrative states *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." The verb *eiōtha* (εἰωθα) can mean "to maintain a custom or tradition, be accustomed" (BDAG),²⁰ "to be accustomed, to be usual" (Mounce and Mounce).²¹

It was Paul's standard custom, in all of the cities he visited in the Mediterranean, for sure, 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—his fellow Jews, proselytes to Judaism, and Greco-Roman God-fearers. 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 preach to Jews first."²² 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.

While there are those who direct that Paul has not given up on seeing his fellow Jews come to Messiah faith, not many are too interested in applying "as he usually did...for three sabbaths he spoke to them" (Kingdom New Testament), to Paul's continued observance of the seventh-day Sabbath. Joel Liberman, a modern Messianic Jewish leader, is one of the few, however, who rightly concludes,

"Being an observant Jew, *Sha'ul* did not attend synagogue services whenever it suited him, but every Shabbat! And so while in Thessalonica, he attended the synagogue there and gave a thorough exegesis of a text from the *Tanakh*. The message was critical. Note that the source and authority of *Sha'ul's* message was the Scripture. His message did not come from philosophy, sociology, history, or law. The meaning of what *Yeshua* had done could be adequately expressed only in relation to the *Tanakh*."²³

¹⁸ Willimon, 141.

¹⁹ Peterson, 477.

²⁰ BDAG, 295.

²¹ William D. Mounce and Robert H. Mounce, eds., *The Zondervan Greek and English Interlinear New Testament (NASB/NIV)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008, 2011), 1052.

²² Peterson, 475.

²³ Liberman, 241.

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Acts 17:2 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* [*paratithēmenos*] 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.”²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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 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.”²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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. And once again, it is critical to remember that the local synagogue was the main place for people to access and hear the Scriptures.

Today’s Messianic people should rightly conclude that Acts 17:2 does not just point to Paul’s having a sincere urge to proclaim the good news of Messiah Yeshua to his fellow Jews on *Shabbat*; **Paul himself also kept *Shabbat*!** Likewise, as is seen in the statement, “and three sabbath-days [he] discoursed with them from the scriptures” (Weymouth New Testament), synagogues were the place to discuss important matters from Israel’s Scriptures. For many of today’s Messianic Believers, their Messianic congregation is not just a place to attend “Saturday church”; it is indeed a meeting place to fellowship as brothers and sisters in Yeshua, and to discuss *and even debate* the Holy Scriptures—in a respectful and constructive manner, seeking resolution to the issues that face us.

²⁴ Witherington, *Acts*, 505.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 286.

²⁷ 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.”