

Study 29: Acts 19

Introduction

The third missionary Journey continues, and after revisiting many of the same churches that he has previously established, Paul came to Ephesus, where some interesting events unfold.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

What was the reception like back in Ephesus again?

What did Paul do when he was unable to continue in the Synagogue?

What was different about the miracles that Paul worked?

How did the Jewish exorcists react to this?

How successful were they?

What were Paul's missionary plans?

How do the people of Ephesus react to the gospel?

How is the assembly described?

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *Paul said that he “fought with beasts at Ephesus” (1 Cor 15:32) – what did he mean?*
- *Why is the town-clerk able to quiet down the crowd?*

Read chapter 20 in preparation for next week

Notes for study 29: Acts chapter 19

Introduction

Paul is at Ephesus. This was the longest stay that we are aware of in the whole of his known ministry. He had a very positive reception on his first visit, and he spent much time there in what was one of the most important and influential cities in the world at that time.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

The third missionary journey began with Paul leaving Antioch mid-year of AD 54. His journey to Ephesus would have taken several months, so he would have arrived at Ephesus later in the year AD 54. Paul spent “*the space of three years*” in Ephesus (20:31), which means that his stay extended over three calendar years – probably about 2 years and three months. This would have him leaving Ephesus early in the year AD 57.

Content: *What are the major events?*

Growth of the church in Ephesus, Unusual miracles, 7 sons of Sceva, Burning of the books, Paul’s travel plans, [writes 1st Corinthians], The riot at Ephesus.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Paul, Sons of Sceva, Timothy, Demetrius, Town-clerk.

Body of the Study

What was the reception like back in Ephesus again?

On the first visit to Ephesus, Paul had a very positive reception from the Jews in the Synagogue, who wanted him to stay longer so that they could hear more (18:19-20). On his return, he was met with similar enthusiasm. He entered the Synagogue to teach again, and this time he was able to spend three months there before he was kicked out. In most places it was the usual “*...three sabbath days...*”.

Paul had some success at converting people to Christ, since “*...some were hardened and did not believe...*” (19:9NKJV) – implying that some did – so it was a positive reception, although not perfect acceptance – but not complete rejection either.

Those who rejected Paul “*...spoke evil of the Way before the multitude...*” (19:9 NKJV). No doubt, the Jews in most places regarded it as *just another Jewish sect*, and as such it is not surprising that they would reject it because it did not conform to Moses. If this was the case, then they had clearly mis-understood the nature of Jesus’ deity, and His fulfilment of the Law of Moses. They could not have been listening to Paul, and were like those about whom Paul wrote in Romans – *ignorant of God’s righteousness – have not submitted themselves to God’s righteousness – and are a disobedient and obstinate people* (Rom 10:3,21).

What did Paul do when he was unable to continue in the Synagogue?

Paul withdrew from them, and went to where people wanted to listen and study. When he left he took the disciples away with Him. The Synagogue must have been having a negative influence on them, stopping them growing in their faith.

Paul “*...departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus...*” (19:9 NKJV). The word *school*, is sometimes translated *lecture room* of Tyrannus. The schools opened at daybreak, and continued until 11:00 AM when they would be dismissed¹. This suggests that Paul was then free to use the school after that time (and is suggested by some texts). We note that Paul was teaching *daily* – which would include the days of Synagogue worship, and would congeal the separation from it.

¹ Ramsay, p271

“...*This continued for two years...*” (19:10 NKJV) which would be added to the three months that he had already been teaching in the Synagogue, making two years and three months before the riot. The result was “...*all who dwelt in Asia heard the word ... both Jews and Greeks*” (19:10 NKJV).

As a major centre of trade, with people coming and going all of the time, there was a great opportunity to teach the travellers, and spread the gospel. The *seven churches of Asia* (Revelation chapters 2 & 3) are all in the vicinity, and were most likely planted as a direct result of Paul’s work with the church in Ephesus – quite likely as a result of evangelistic tours to them from Ephesus. John later lived in Ephesus and worked amongst the churches.

What was different about the miracles that Paul worked?

Whilst all miracles are extraordinary – by definition – these miracles were exceptionally so. Most miracles were worked by the action of the person who possessed the power to work it, so that the person who had the miraculous power *had control over* his spiritual gift (1 Cor 14:32). However in the case of these *special miracles*, we see different things happening. In these cases, people were healed without Paul’s personal intervention – although they happened “...*by the hands of Paul...*” (19:11 NKJV), so the Power to work the miracles had come (from God, via the Holy Spirit) *through* Paul.

Luke discusses this event above any others of Paul’s two to three year ministry in Ephesus, probably to set it in contrast with the Pagan worship and magical practices that were happening in the city – which Luke is about to discuss.

Luke the physician makes a distinction between the diseases and demon possession “...*the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them...*” (19:12 NKJV). Such distinctions were not common until the advent of modern medicine, with many diseases attributed to demon possession – however due to his medical training and his revealed knowledge of demons by inspiration, Luke knew differently, showing his accurately detailed narrative.

How did the Jewish exorcists react to this?

The exorcists would attempt to cast out evil spirits from persons using magical arts. During Paul’s time in Ephesus, “...*some itinerant Jewish exorcists...*” (19:13 NKJV) arrived. The usual practice was to *bind with an oath* the evil spirit by a mighty power – Jehovah – Abraham – Jesus – or some other power, and demand that because it was bound by that power (under the control of the exorcist) that it was to *come out* of the possessed person.

These exorcists were Jewish. They must have heard about the miracles that Paul was doing – or even seen them first hand. As Jews, they recognised the power of God, but these Jews went further, and also recognised Jesus’ ability to perform miracles, although probably only as a power – similar to the other powers they (the exorcists) had been extolling.

In addition to the itinerant exorcists “...*Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so...*” (19:14 NKJV). Sceva is unknown outside this passage. Some translations read that he was “a Jewish High Priest” however his name nowhere appears in the records of High Priests (who were always based in the Temple in Jerusalem; and headed up the Sanhedrin). It is possible that he was a leader of one of the twenty-four courses of priests in Jerusalem, in which case the description of “a Jewish chief Priest” is more appropriate. A further possibility is that neither of these cases is true and they were falsely claiming such descent in order to have some credentials. That there were seven of them is of some significance. The number 7 brings with it the idea of completeness or perfection. The seventh son would be regarded as special, and the seventh grandson of the seventh son even more so. These men came along as *a complete package*, with (supposedly) the credentials from Sceva.

These men must have been observing Paul’s work in performing the *special miracles*, which were done “...*in the name of Jesus Christ...*” The genuine miracles that were performed would have impressed these charlatans, who were unable to accomplish anything like this by applying their *magic charms*. They received a very different reaction to that of Paul when he demonstrated the power of Jesus in cast out demons (c/f 19:12).

How successful were they?

They were attempting to cast out some demons, saying “... *We adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches...*” (19:13 NKJV). However, “...*the evil spirit answered and said “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?”...*” (19:15 NKJV). The evil spirit recognised Jesus, and he was aware of the power of Paul – but he asked (with contempt): *Who are you!*

Under the power of the demon, the man overpowered all of them, and the seven sons of Sceva “...*fled out of the house...*” (19:16), and ran through the streets of Ephesus. The news would have spread very quickly, and “...*This became known to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus...*” (19:17 NKJV).

The people of Ephesus reacted with great fear and respect. Not just the Christians, but also those of the city (the *Jews and Greeks*). The power of God was a very different thing than what they had seen demonstrated by the exorcists. They had witnessed the very real power of God in the miracles of Paul, and had seen and heard of the failure of the seven sons of Sceva. The miracles attested to the giver of the power, in Jesus. As a result “...*the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour...*” (19:17 NIV).

The people of Ephesus turned away from their belief in magic and turned to God, becoming Christians. They renounced their former occult practices, and “...*came and openly confessed their evil deeds...*” (19:18 NIV). To put an end to their practice of the magical “arts” they also “...*brought their (occult) books together and burned them in the sight of all...*” (19:19 NKJV).

The price of the books was reckoned at fifty thousand pieces of silver, the equivalent to 50,000 days wages. In today’s dollars (2007), for a man to take home \$200 a day (\$1,000 per week) is common – about the average wage in Australia. This puts the equivalent value of the books at about \$10 Million.

What were Paul’s missionary plans?

After two and a bit years in Ephesus, the church had grown and Paul was thinking about moving on to other areas – including revisiting Corinth again. “...*After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. “After I have been there,” he said, “I must visit Rome also.”...*” (19:21 NIV). We also know that his plans included a visit to Spain after he had been to Rome (Rom 15:24, 28).

Spending time in Ephesus was certainly the main plan for the third journey, as long as the Lord was willing for him to do it (18:21). Revisiting the churches in Galatia and Phrygia were a convenient part of the journey, but not its main intent.

To prepare plans for his journey, Paul sent Timothy and Erastus on ahead. Timothy was familiar with many of the churches and places that Paul was planning to visit as he made his way towards Corinth again. He had been in Thessalonica (carrying Paul’s letters back there from Corinth), and it is most likely that he stayed there for some time, and then came to Ephesus during Paul’s three year ministry.

Erastus is probably the same Erastus who was the treasurer of the city of Corinth (Rom 16:23). If this was the case, then how did he happen to be in Ephesus? Was he just visiting and returning home to Corinth, and Paul commissioned him to prepare for his journey? It would seem quite proper to appoint him, since one of the purposes of Paul’s journey was to gather a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-2).

It was during this time in Ephesus that Paul wrote the first letter to the church at Corinth (1 Cor 4:17). Ephesus was strategically placed, along with Corinth. Paul was able to find out what was happening in the church in Corinth from the numerous Christian visitors who were passing through between Corinth and Ephesus. Things in the church in Corinth had begun to fall apart in the three intervening years since Paul had left. The first letter was written to correct some of the problems, and in answer to many questions that they had asked in a letter. Paul wrote about the great door of opportunity that he had to preach the gospel in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8-9). However there was also much adversity, as we are about to see.

How do the people of Ephesus react to the gospel?

Much progress had been made in the city, and christianity was having an effect. Burning \$10 million worth of books cannot be overlooked in triggering the events that follow. There were clear implications for the pagan worship at the great temple of Diana – and then for the trades that revolved around it. “...A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen...” (19:24 NIV). Like many others, he made his living from making *souvenir shrines* that would be bought and taken home after the worshippers had been to the temple of Artemis (some examples of marble and terra-cotta have been found at Ephesus). These were regarded as a good-luck charm.

The huge change that had occurred in Ephesus caused an economic downturn, and the craftsmen were having a bad time. Like a good trade union leader, Demetrius “...called them together with the workers of similar occupation...” (19:25 NKJV). He blamed the church for their problems – and Paul as the leader and promulgator. There is evidence of trade guilds at Ephesus, and unless the workers were members of the guild, they were not allowed to work.

Demetrius had correctly summed up the effect that christianity would ultimately have on their trade – for it most certainly would see the cessation of the temple worship of Artemis (Diana) and the sexual immorality of temple prostitution that went with it. Demetrius’ accusation “...this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands...” (19:26 NKJV) was exactly right, as he preached against their idolatrous worship.

The men of the city responded in support of Demetrius, and they cried out with rage, stirred up the whole city “...and rushed into the theatre as one...” (19:29). As they went, “...seizing Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians, Paul’s travelling companions...” (19:29 NKJV) probably looking for Paul and being unable to find him.

Paul heard about the riot, “...and wanted to go in to the people...” (19:30 NKJV) and give an answer – especially since his two travelling companions had been seized. He did not want to leave them to suffer alone. However the brethren did not think this was a good idea. Had Paul fronted up, he might have been killed (certainly if the mob had their way, and if the Lord did not restrain them), and also his two companions. Some of the city officials (who may have been christians) also advised him not to go into the theatre, as they recognised the danger to the lives of Paul, Gaius, and Aristarchus.

The Jews put Alexander in front of the assembly. He apparently wanted to establish that the Jews were not responsible for the lack of worship of Artemis, lest they should be blamed.

The whole frenzy continued for the space of 2 hours, with most of the mob not knowing why they had come together. Eventually the town clerk quietened them down and then eventually dismissed the assembly.

An inscription found at Ephesus uses many of the terms recorded by Luke, and says

“This has been dedicated by the loyal and devoted Council of the Ephesians,
and the people that serve the temple. Peducaeus Priscinus being the proconsul,
by the decree of Tiberius Claudius Italicus, the townclerk of the people”

It might not have been this man who was the town-clerk at the time of the riot, but it shows the accuracy which Luke ascribes in his narrative.

How is the assembly described?

The word used to describe the assembly is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is usually translated “church”. In most cases, the assembly spoken of in the New Testament is a *religious assembly*. However in this case, it clearly isn’t. The word “church” simply means *assembly* and we can see from the context whether it is a religious assembly, or a secular assembly.

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