

SEED & BREAD

FOR THE SOWER ISA. 55: 10 FOR THE EATER
BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

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ISRAEL IN THE ACTS PERIOD

The ACTS PERIOD referred to in the subject of this study has to do with that thirty-three year period of which the Book of Acts is the history. This began with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It ended with Paul's two years of ministry in his own rented house in Rome. In this study I will seek to provide the Biblical answer to the question-What did the people of Israel, those in Palestine as well as the dispersed ones, do in regard to the presentation of the crucified and risen Savior?

We have already seen in previous studies the limited knowledge that existed concerning the man Jesus before His resurrection. The full presentation of Him could not be made until He had been crucified and risen. However, one becomes a believer by believing the truth that is at hand, and the Gospel evidence shows that the overwhelming majority of the two and one-half million Jews who then lived in Palestine believed whatever truth concerning Him was available to them. Thus, they were dealt with according to the word of Christ that "unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required" (Luke 12:48).

There were those who knew by divine revelation that He was the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of God (Matt. 16: 16, 17). These were told not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father, of which they had already been told. After this they would be witnesses unto Him in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1.4, 8). On that memorable day of Pentecost, 120 of these believers were assembled together. Everyone of those was a Jew who had found in the man Jesus the fulfillment of God's promise of the Messiah.

At this time there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5). This description of their character would certainly indicate that these were a part of the flock of the great Shepherd, of whom He had already said, "**My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me**" (John 10:27). After Peter's message and the witnessing of the 120 was completed, 3,000 souls were added; so the number that believed in the crucified and risen Messiah was 3,120. And .this was in Jerusalem, the very city in which the Lord Jesus had been condemned to death, and where acknowledgment of Him could bring the same penalty.

As the witnessing continued and many miracles were performed, those who believed had favor with all the people; and the Lord continued to add to the 3,120 those who were being saved in that place (Acts 2:41-47). The words "to the church" do not belong to the text here, and their insertion is evidence of the concerted drive of church theologians to get Israel out and get the church in.

The second message of Peter brought further astonishing results and even though the apostles were placed under arrest, "**many of them which heard the Word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand**" (Acts 4:4). Peter's success was phenomenal. Luke's accurate account speaks only of five thousand men and does not include the women and children, of whom there must have been a due proportion. A very conservative estimate would be that there were 15,000 believers in Jerusalem, everyone of whom was a Jew, not a single Gentile among them. These now stand as "the Israel of God" in contrast with "Israel after the flesh" (Gal 6:16, 1 Cor. 10:18). They were Israelites by birth; they became the Israel of God by faith in Jesus Christ. They never ceased to be Israelites.

The Sadducees who had caused the arrest of the apostles could find nothing for which they might be punished; so they let. them go "**because of the people, for all men glorified God for that which was done**" (Acts 4:21), a declaration which reveals the general attitude of the people in Jerusalem toward the Lord Jesus.

Free for the time being, the apostles continued to proclaim that Jesus was the Christ, with the result that "**believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women**" (Acts 5:14). Miracles abounded, so that out of the cities round about Jerusalem there came a multitude bringing the sick and those vexed by unclean spirits, and they were healed everyone (Acts 5:16). This glorious ministry filled the high

priest and the sect of the Sadducees with jealousy, so the apostles were again arrested and placed in the common prison. From this the Lord miraculously delivered them and their ministry was resumed with the result that the number of disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly and a great company of the priests became obedient unto the faith (Acts 6:7). We lose all track of numbers here, but in regard to this, R. C. H. Lenski, the Lutheran commentator, says: "Luke's figures and further notes about the growth make the estimate of 25,000 believers in and near Jerusalem at the time of Stephen's martyrdom seem conservative."

Twenty-five years later in Jerusalem, James said to Paul, "**Thou seest brother how many thousands of Jews there are which believe, and they are all zealous of the law**" (Acts 21:20). The word "thousands" here can only be considered as an attempt by translators to minimize the truth. The Greek word *urias* means ten thousand.; here it is plural (*muriades*), and it means tens of thousands. And when we remember that the resident population of Jerusalem was only 30,000, we can come to no other conclusion than that the overwhelming majority of Jews in Jerusalem and Palestine became believers in and followers of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Up to the time of Stephen's martyrdom, all witnessing centered in Jerusalem. After his execution a great persecution arose and the believers were forced to scatter abroad, going everywhere heralding the Word. And many readers, of course, will wonder why, if there were so many of them, they did not fight back. The answer is obvious. They could not resist, since they had been warned "**all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword**" (Matt. 26: 52) . Furthermore, they had been told that when persecuted in one city to *flee* to another (Matt. 10:23). However, we know that when they were scattered abroad and went everywhere proclaiming the Word, it was proclaimed "**to none but unto Jews only**" (Acts 11:19). Their success continued to be phenomenal. In Samaria, the people with one accord gave heed to the message of Philip (Acts 8:6). Another witness of great power was provided by the conversion of Saul (Paul), a Jew, one of the aristocracy, who could speak to all Jews of whatever level. He would later use the fact of his conversion as positive proof that God had not severed Himself from or cast away His people (Rom. 11:1).

The healing of Aeneas by Peter resulted in all who lived at Lydda and Saron turning to the Lord (Acts 9:35); and the resurrection of Dorcas caused many in Joppa to believe in the Lord (Acts 9:42). These were Jews that believed.

At this point in the Acts period, eight years after the resurrection, a new element entered the scene. Peter was commissioned to proclaim the Word to one Gentile family, the house of Cornelius, which he did with complete success; and this was both the beginning and the end of his ministry to the Gentiles. After Acts 12, Peter was no longer prominent, and Paul began to fill the scene.

From Acts 13 to Acts 28, we follow the independent ministry of the Apostle Paul. The outcalled ones of God in Antioch were directed by the Holy Spirit to release all controls and direction of Barnabas and Paul so that they might do the work to which the Lord had called them. What this work was can be determined the moment it begins (Acts 14:1, 2).

Together they traveled to Seleucia, a seaport, and landed at Salamis on the Isle of Cyprus. There **"they preached the Word in the synagogue of the Jews"** (Acts 13: 5). Thus, "to the Jew first" dominates every act of ministry in the Acts period (Acts 3: 26; 10:36; 13:46; Rom. 1: 16). To the Jew first is stamped on every page of the Acts of the Apostles. This obligation having been fulfilled on the Isle of Cyprus, they were able to accept the invitation of Sergius Paulus, a Gentile, who desired to hear the Word of God (Acts 13:7). He heard, he saw, and he believed.

Their next stop was in Antioch in Pisidia, where they went into the synagogue, and by invitation of the rulers they heralded the Word and proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. The effect was good and the results were excellent even though much opposition arose during the week that followed which led them to break off their ministry to the Jews and turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13: 42-49). Thus, the Word of the Lord was published throughout all that region.

Some interpreters try to make this to be the end of Paul's ministry to the Jews, but at their next stop in Iconium, Paul went with Barnabas into the synagogue and spake in such manner that a great multitude of the Jews and also of the Gentiles believed (Acts 14:1). The words **"and so spake"** indicate that they followed the divine order, **"to the Jew first, and also to the Greek"** Paul did not violate the truth which he later declared in his Roman epistle (Rom. 1:16). Their success created a sharp division in the city, and when persecution arose, they fled to Lystra and Derbe and there preached the gospel.

In Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Ephesus, Paul continued his ministry in the synagogues. The results were good everywhere in spite of increasing opposition on the part of some Jews and some Gentiles (Acts 16, 17, 18, 19). In Ephesus there was extreme opposition, but the results were such that we are told, "**mightily grew the Word of God and prevailed.**" At this point Paul's ministry took a different track as he headed toward Jerusalem. There he was arrested and in time was brought as a prisoner to Rome. There, after three days, he called the chief of the Jews together, who declared they were glad to hear him, stating that all they knew about this sect was that everywhere it was spoken against (Acts 28-17-22). Gladly they appointed him a day during which he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, besides persuading them concerning Jesus, both from the law of Moses and the prophets from morning to evening. The result was that some believed the things that were spoken and some believed not. Concerning this, let us consider the words of another.

'We feel safe in saying that in all Paul's career he scored no greater success in a single day's work than on the day which Luke describes in v. 23, etc. He converted half of the rabbis and leaders of the eleven synagogues in the capital of the world! **Oi men oi de** (v. 24) equals 50-50 according to our way of speaking. . . Converting the rabbis and the leaders could mean only one thing, namely that these rabbis took the gospel of Paul into their synagogues with the result that whole synagogues were converted, and the members who refused withdrew to other synagogues." R. C. H. Lenski.

The conclusion is inescapable. The Word of God shows that the overwhelming majority of Jews in Palestine and in the exile became believers in the Lord Jesus Christ during the Acts period. This is the truth. Where it may lead us and what changes it makes in our thinking is up to each one of us to find out.

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