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Synagogue Responses Vary to Paul's Visit

17: 1-15

50-51 AD

Synagogue responses vary to Paul's visit **DIG: Thessalonica** was a wealthy trading city on a major road from the Adriatic Sea to the Black Sea. How is Paul received there (First Thessalonians 1:4-10, 3:1-4)? What types of accusations has Paul encountered so far (17:5-7 and 16:20-21)? What lays behind these accusations? Since his conversation, this is the sixth time Paul has been forced by persecution to leave an area. How does your view compare with Paul's (see First Thessalonians 2:1-6)? Compared with the Thessalonians in verses 2-4, how do the Bereans receive the gospel in verses 11-12? How is Paul's teaching on the diversity of gifts (First Corinthians 12) illustrated here in the functions of Paul, Silas and Timothy?

REFLECT: Whether Jesus or Caesar was Lord became a real issue for the believers a few years later. When has your faith in Messiah led to conflict with other authorities claiming your loyalty? In terms of time, consistency, and intensity, how would you rate your Bible study? Is it like the Bereans? If not, what can you do to change that? How has the Word balanced you during times of spiritual shaking and quaking? How has it kept you from falling apart when everything seemed to be falling apart around you?

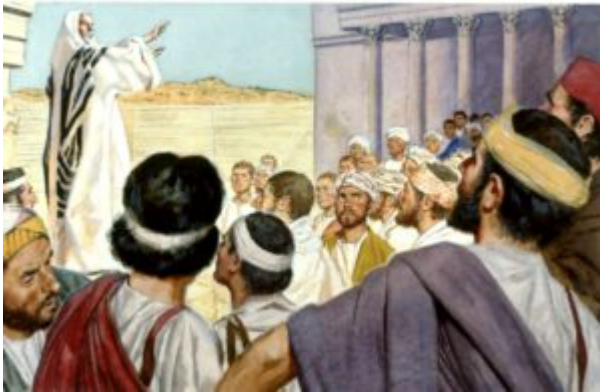
The narrative a considerable journey along the main Roman road, the Via Egnatia, which eventually turned west and went across Macedonia. The journey from **Philippi** to **Thessalonica** was some one-hundred miles, and we are told that **Paul** and **his coworkers** passed through **Amphipolis** and **Apollonia** on the way. No other locations are mentioned, which may suggest **they** were traveling by mule or horse, if that is, they made **Amphipolis** after a day's journey, **Apollonia** after another day, and **Thessalonica** after three days of travel. At that time **Thessalonica** had a population of about 200,000 people, but they only had a small number of **Jewish** people, and one **Jewish synagogue**.³⁹⁷

Courage: After passing through **Amphipolis**, about thirty-two miles from **Philippi** and another thirty-two miles to **Apollonia**, they (**Paul, Silas and Timothy**) came to

Thessalonica about a hundred miles southwest of **Philippi**. **Thessalonica** was an important **city** in many respects. **It** was a harbor town, situated at the head of the Thermaic Gulf. Commanding trade by sea across the Aegean and by land along the east-west Via Egnatia, **it** was a flourishing commercial center. Predominantly Greek, although **it** was controlled by Rome. **It** was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. For its support of Octavian it had become a free city in 42 BC and was not turned into a Roman colony. **It** minted its own coins (both imperial and autonomous), had its own form of government (with politarchs, see **verse 6**), but nevertheless had close ties with Rome, and there is evidence of the imperial cult existing in this city. One may point especially to the coins with the head of Julius Caesar, minted even before the time of **Christ**, which involved the recognition of Julius as a god. These coins reflect the ongoing support that Rome bestowed on **Thessalonica**, which the city had apparently come to depend on. **They** believed that the emperor was the universal savior whose support and aid should be proclaimed as good news throughout the region.

Though officially free, **Thessalonica** was yet another city caught in the emperor's social network involving support and the necessary response from the people of **Thessalonica** of homage and loyalty. Local officials would be expected to enforce loyalty to Caesar in order to maintain the peace and help the city stay in the good graces of the emperor. Here we have another story showing **Luke's** understanding in detail of the municipal institutions and officials governing the area.³⁹⁸ **As was his custom, Paul**, being an observant **Jew (13:9)**, **went to the Jewish people first (Romans 1:16)**. **Upon arrival**, as was **his** custom **they made their way to the Jewish synagogue**, which means that **Paul** had not changed **his** basic mode of operating (**17:1-2a**). We are not told that **he** went immediately to **the synagogue**. In fact, it appears likely that **Paul** and **his** coworkers would first have to establish **themselves** by finding a place to stay and providing a means of support. Setting up shop in the marketplace, or perhaps working out of the home of a fellow **Jew** who practiced the same trade. Possibly someone like **Jason** (see **17:6** below).³⁹⁹

Content: And for three Shabbatot, he gave them *drashes* from the TaNaKh. A *drash* or *drashah*, literally means *searching*. The word denotes a sermon and an interpretation of a text, ending with the Kaddish prayer (**Matthew 6:9-13**). **The word *midrash* is related to it**. **Paul** frequently used **Talmudic and Midrashic** thought patterns (**Romans 10:5-13; First Corinthians 9:9-14; Second Corinthians 3:3-18; Galatians 3:16, 4:22-31**).



Literally, **Paul** lectured to **them**, **explaining and quoting passages from the TaNaKh to prove his point**. The fact that **the TaNaKh** is cited some 695 times in the B'rit Chadashah show that its writers were convinced that although **ADONAI** had done something unique and radically new in **Yeshua**, the meaning of what **He** had done could be adequately expressed only in relation to **the TaNaKh**. This conviction set the first believers to reading **the TaNaKh** with new eyes, which led to understanding how it relates to New Covenant truth. **Paul gave them drashes** from **Isaiah 52:13-53:12, Psalm 16:8-11**, and others from **the TaNaKh**, to prove that **Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead**, saying: **This Yeshua, whom I declare to you, is the Messiah (17:2b-3 CJB).**⁴⁰⁰

Paul showed from the TaNaKh the necessity for the death and resurrection of **Yeshua**, and declared that **he** was the promised **Messiah**. **Searching** is from the Greek word *anakrino*, meaning *examine* or *investigate*, sometimes used of a judicial investigation. The noble Bereans carefully *investigated* the evidence and concluded that the gospel **Paul** proclaimed was the truth fulfilled in **the TaNaKh**. And today, those who honestly *examine the Scriptures* will always come to the same conclusion. **Yeshua** said to **the Jewish leaders**: **You keep searching the TaNaKh because you think that in it you have eternal life. And yet those very Scriptures bear witness of Me (John 5:39 CJB).** Christ Himself used **the TaNaKh** to convince two travelers on the road to Emmaus, saying to **them**: **Foolish people! So unwilling to put your trust in everything the prophets spoke! Didn't the Messiah have to die like this before entering glory?** Then, starting with **Moshe** and all the prophets, the Living Word explained to them the things that can be found throughout the TaNaKh concerning Himself (Luke 24:25-27 CJB). Of course we now have two covenants to prove that **Jesus is the Christ.**⁴⁰¹

The line between clarifying Scripture and adding to it is indeed a thin one. But Scripture is not clarified by listening to someone who thinks they have the gift of prophecy. Scripture is clarified as it is carefully and diligently studied. There are no shortcuts to interpreting

God's Word accurately (Second Timothy 2:15). We must commit ourselves to **searching the Scriptures**, and let our experience of the living Word come from that, not from inner feelings, supernatural phenomena, or other potentially counterfeit or untrustworthy evidences. Then our experience will bring the greatest joy and blessing imaginable - because it is rooted and grounded in divine truth.⁴⁰²

Converts: A small number of **Jews were persuaded and became attached to Paul and Silas, who**, unlike many of today's evangelists, never left new believers to flounder for themselves. Although **Paul** and **his** friends must have stayed in **Thessalonica** for several months, as is clear from **his** two **Thessalonian** letters, and although most of the converts must have been **Gentiles**, even pagan idolaters (**First Thessalonians 1:9-10**), **Luke** concentrates on **his Jewish** mission, which lasted only **three** weeks, and tells **his** argument was developed.⁴⁰³ But in **three** weeks of ministry **they** also won **a large number of the God-fearing Greeks to the Lord and no small number of the leading women (17:4).**

We know from the letter to the Thessalonians that there was a gap of time between verses 4 and 5 where many other things also took place.

Conflict in Thessalonica: As happened in **Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:45, 50)**, **Iconium (Acts 14:2,5)**, and **Lystra (Acts 14:19)** on **the First Missionary Journey**, here also **Paul** is opposed by a **mob** incited by **jealous** people among **the Jews**. **But some of the unbelieving Jewish people became jealous** over the success that **Paul** was having in converting **the Gentiles (First Thessalonians 2:13-16)**. **Paul** hoped that the salvation of **the Gentiles** would **provoke the Jews** into studying the Scriptures and discovering **their** promised **Messiah (Romans 11:13-14)**. But, in fact, it had the opposite reaction. **Taking some wicked fellows of the marketplace** (the mall of today) **and gathering a Gentile crowd, they stirred the city into a constant uproar (17:5a).**

Those unbelieving Jews attacked Jason's house (which seemed to be a center for the church) searching up and down, **trying to find Paul and Silas to bring them out to the mob**. **Jason** was most likely **Jewish**, for **Paul and Silas** wouldn't have needlessly offended the **Jewish** community by lodging with a Gentile. If **he** was **Jewish**, **his Jewish** name may have been **Joshua**, with **Jason** as a somewhat similar sounding Greek name for use in a Greek environment.⁴⁰⁴ The same is true today. Hebrew and local-language names are often chosen to resemble each other. For example, Arnold Fruchtenbaum's (Ariel Ministries) Hebrew name is Aaron, and his English name is Arnold. **When they did not find them, they instead began dragging Jason and some of the brethren before the city officials. The Jewish leaders** brought two charges against them. First, being aware that

the Roman officials would be unwilling to convict on purely religious grounds, since **Jewish** rights were protected by imperial decree, **they shouted "These men who have upset the Roman world have come here too. And Jason has welcomed them."** (17:5b-7a)! Was this charge true? Of course it was. **Yeshua** changes people (Luke 19:1-10; Acts 9:1-20, 19:18-20; First Corinthians 6:9-11).

Jesus Christ is the greatest of all revolutionaries, and **He** seeks true revolutionaries today who have been transformed by the power of **His** gospel and who are prepared to fight against **the world** (First John 2:15-17), to follow the narrow way (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Dw - The Narrow and Wide Gates**). This way may be filled with suffering, hardships, ridicule, and ostracism from the world. It is difficult to follow **Yeshua Messiah**. The problem of applying **His** teachings to our lives is often confusing; that is why it is so important to rely upon the Scriptures and upon **the Spirit of God**.⁴⁰⁵

Secondly, **they** accused them of **acting against the decrees of Caesar** forbidding the proselytizing of Roman citizens, **saying there is another** (Greek: *heteros* means, *another of a different kind*) **king**, whose name is **Yeshua** (17:7b). These were the same accusations made against **Yeshua** at **His** own trial (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Lo - Jesus Before Pilate**). When you read **Paul's** two **Thessalonian** letters, you see the strong emphasis **he** gave in **Thessalonica** on the kingship of **Messiah** and the promise of **His** return. Of course, our **Lord's** Kingdom is neither political nor **of this world** (John 18:36-37), but we cannot expect unsaved pagans to understand this. The kingship of **Jesus Christ** is unlike that of the rulers of this world. **He** conquers with ambassadors (**Second Corinthians 5:20**), not armies, and **His** weapons are truth and love. **He** brings people peace by upsetting the peace and turning the tables upside down (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Bs - Jesus' First Cleansing of the Temple at the Passover**). **He** conquers through **His** cross, where **He** died for a world of lost sinners. **He** even died for **His** enemies (**Romans 5:6-10**).⁴⁰⁶

The missionaries stirred up the crowd and the city officials who heard those things. The **city officials** took this as a serious matter, as did the people listening to the proceedings. The support of the emperor might stop, indeed the city might be censured, if it was known that it harbored "enemies of the Roman order." Thus, **the city officials** took immediate action. **After receiving bail from Jason and the rest of the believers, Paul and Silas** agreed that **they** would leave **the city**, then **they** were **released** (17:8-9). This may be the reason **Paul and Silas** never returned to **Thessalonica** (First Thessalonians 2:17-18).

As soon as it was night, the brothers smuggled Paul and Silas out of town to Berea, fifty miles southwest of Thessalonica (17:10a). After Paul and Silas left, we know that the believers in Thessalonica suffered severe persecution (First Thessalonians 2:14, 3:1-5; Second Thessalonians 1:6-7). Before leaving, however, we know that twice he received funds from the church at Philippi (Philippians 4:15-16). Until the funds arrived he supported himself as a tentmaker (First Thessalonians 2:9; Second Thessalonians 3:7-10).

Conflict in Berea:



After the fierceness of the opposition in Thessalonica, Berea was a breath of fresh air. Upon arrival, they made their way to the Jewish synagogue. Now these in Berea were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, Evidently, they did not have the prejudices to overcome that the Thessalonian Jews did. Significantly, when persecution arose in Berea it was led by Jews from Thessalonica (17:13 below). Unlike the Thessalonians, whom Paul had to reason with, and persuade the Bereans listened and received the message with goodwill. But, the Bereans did their homework, this search was not casual. They searched the Scriptures each day for themselves to see whether these things preached by Paul were true (17:10b-11). Paul probably told them that there was evidence in the TaNaKh that Messiah would suffer and die for their sins. The final word, for them, was the written Word of God.⁴⁰⁷ When they realized the missionaries were telling the truth, they embraced it and searched their scrolls to verify the truth for themselves. No wonder Luke describes them as more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica. Therefore, because the Bereans were students of the Scriptures, many of them believed such as Sopater of Berea, son of Pyrrhus, who later assisted Paul

(20:4), as well as quite a few prominent Greek women and men (17:12).

*When we hear spiritual ideas that disturb us, we need to be cautious. We can **search the Scriptures** for ourselves, listening to trustworthy sources, and seek wisdom from **the Spirit of God** and **Jesus, our Lord**.*

The Jews from Thessalonica were not satisfied to force **Paul** out of their own city. When **they learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea, they** took the fifty-mile trip to **Berea** to start another riot, **agitating and inciting the people (17:13)**. The opposition to the growth of the Church was getting stronger and more organized. How did these unbelieving **Jews** hear that **Paul and Silas** were ministering in **Berea**? Perhaps the growing witness of the **Berean** believers reached as far as **Thessalonica**, or it may be that some troublemaker took the message to his friends in **Thessalonica**. Satan also has his "missionaries" and they are busy (**Second Corinthians 11:13-15**).⁴⁰⁸

However, it was too late. A group of eager Bible students was already being drawn together around **Messiah**. **Silas and Timothy remained in Berea** because the opposition was after **Paul** and not **them**. **Then, the brothers**, outwitted the enemy and **immediately sent Paul away to the sea**. Those escorting **Paul** stayed with **him** all the way to **Athens**. **After receiving an order for Silas and Timothy to join him in Athens as soon as possible, they left (17:14-15)**. Which **they** did for a short time, but after hearing **their** reports, **Paul** sent **Timothy** back to **Thessalonica (First Thessalonians 3:1-6)**, while **Silas** was sent on a special mission to some other part of **Macedonia (Acts 18:5)**. Later, **Paul** went on **his** own to the city of **Corinth (18:1)**. **Silas and Timothy** later return from **Macedonia** and meet **Paul** in **Corinth (Acts 18:5 and First Thessalonians 3:6)**. And from the city of **Corinth**, **Paul** writes **First and Second Thessalonians**.⁴⁰⁹ In any case, **Paul** at this stage of **his** missionary work is spending time with both **Jews** and **Gentiles**, and not with just **Gentiles** connected to **the synagogue**, as we shall see in what follows in **Athens**.

Lord God, Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore, I obey them. The unfolding of Your Word brings light and gives understanding to the simple. I pant with open mouth for I long for Your mitzvot. Turn and be gracious to me, as is Your practice toward those who love Your Name (Psalm 119:129-132).