

An Exposition of Acts 17:1-9

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Introduction

The book of the Acts of the Apostles offers engaging accounts of how Christianity spread throughout the Roman empire, and the account of Paul's visit to Thessalonica is no exception. The passage is a part of the story of Christianity, and knowing history is often a positive thing. In the passage, one finds the account of Paul's ministry in the city, the results of Paul's ministry, the response to Paul's ministry, and the conclusion of the story by the actions of the city leaders. This paper attempts to present an exposition of this passage, what it means and how it is located in Luke's story of Christianity, by including the needful background information and interaction with the text so that once can know these things. The beginning of examining an account may begin with its context, and it is there that this paper begins.

Acts 17:1-9 in Its Context

In any passage, the historical and literary context is very important to consider both in a preliminary consideration and in the process of exegesis. The purpose of this initial section is to describe the relevant background topics prior to discussion of the passage itself.

The Passage and the Book of Acts

The first context to consider is the literary context or the context of the book. First of all, this paper accepts as a premise traditional Lukan authorship¹, and regards the "we" and "us" passages as indicating that Luke was present with Paul.² As a whole, the book of Acts describes the beginnings of Christianity, starting from the events following Jesus' ascension to heaven and to Paul's imprisonment. Broadly speaking, the book divides into two major sections, one section, which focuses on Peter and the other, which focuses on Paul. The passage of this paper is found in the section, which focuses on Paul, and Paul is an important figure in the passage itself. The primary section of the book of Acts this passage occurs in is the Second Missionary Journey of Paul (16:1-18:21), and the account occurs following their first major visit in Macedonia at Philippi after they responded to the Macedonian call. Thus, the visit to Thessalonica is new territory for Paul, as is all of Macedonia.

A key question regarding Acts is its relationship to the gospel of Luke. In the first verse of Acts, Luke makes reference to "the first book"³, and such a reference indicates that this was not just a second scroll in the same literary work called Luke's gospel. Additionally, the overlap between Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:2-12 shows two things that help clarify the relationship between the two. On the one hand, Acts returns to the exact events with which Luke concludes his gospel. On the other hand, Acts describes the events surrounding Jesus' ascension in much greater detail. This shows that Acts and Luke have a close relationship yet are distinct. The significance of these two concepts is that they suggest Luke is picking up where he left off in the gospel, and yet is also continuing the story as it were by explaining it in greater detail before he moves on the greater things. This consideration lays the basis for linking the purpose of Acts with the purpose of Luke's gospel, as found in Luke 1:1-4. A good summary of these

¹ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 290-296.

² Notably, the preceding account is one of these sections, but the passage under study does not continue to use the "we" pronouns thus it appears Luke did not go with them to Thessalonica.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations outside of Acts 17:1-9 are taken from are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, 2011 ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001). E-Sword edition.

verses is that the purpose of Luke's gospel was the edification of an individual Christian, and by connection any Christian reading the writing.⁴ This purpose can be considered the purpose of Acts by virtue of the fact that Luke does not make any reference to his purpose in the initial part of Acts 1. Instead, Luke just picks up the story where he left off. This is also possible because broadly speaking, Acts does indeed fit with the same things Luke said he was going to do in his gospel.⁵ So, broadly speaking, the purpose of Acts is to edify the reader by attempting to reassure him of the historical events pertaining to the reader's Christian faith.⁶

In conclusion, Acts 17:1-9 finds itself within the book of Acts as a part of Paul's Second Missionary journey and has as its aim in the broader context to reassure Theophilus of the certainty of the events that had occurred in Christian history. Having discussed the context in the book of Acts, the historical context of the account must be examined as well.

The Passage and Historical Context

The story of this passage takes place during Paul's second missionary journey in the city of Thessalonica located in the Roman Empire. The year that Paul went to Thessalonica was probably A.D. 50 or 51, early on in his Second Missionary Journey.⁷ The most significant part of this journey that would have direct bearing on the account in its history is the Macedonian Call (Acts 16:6-10). Were it not for that call, Paul would not have likely gone to Thessalonica or other cities in Macedonia. The purpose of this call as understood by Paul was to help these people by preaching the gospel to them (vv 9-10). In the account, the reader surely sees Paul fulfilling this call by sharing Christ in the Synagogue (17:3-4). An additional consideration is that in the general time frame of the account, there was an expulsion of Jews from Rome by the emperor.⁸ This is a consideration in interpretation of the accusation of the mob. In the end, this account occurred around A.D. 50 or 51 during Paul's Second Missionary Journey in a period in which Jews had recently had been expelled from the capital of the Empire itself.

Next, the city in which account occurred was Thessalonica. This city as already indicated is in the Roman province of Macedonia and is in fact the province's capital.⁹ The city is located on the Thermaic Gulf with a good harbor and it also sat at a major junction of roads in the region, thus making it a major commercial center.¹⁰ The roads were probably traveled by Paul and in some way dictated his route as he traveled west from Philippi. For the purposes of exposition of the passage, of particular interest is the fact that Thessalonica is a free city¹¹, which was thus allowed to maintain a Greek form of government.¹² As such, the passage refers to the πολιτάρχες, the Greek-type city rulers who are involved in the latter half of the passage.¹³ The status of the city does provide the basis for understanding why the city was

⁴ C.f. Carson and Moo, 305-306.

⁵ i.e. it is a "narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us."

⁶ Note that Darrell L. Bock, Acts, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 23-24, uses the word "reassure", though his conception of the means of this reassurance seems to be a bit too broad and theological than the text actually expresses.

⁷ *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, eds. (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003), s.v. "Paul." Logos edition. Part of the dating would seem to depend on how long Paul stayed in Antioch following the Jerusalem Council. The flow of events is fairly consistent up to this point in the Second Missionary Journey, without any prolonged stay at any stop thus far.

⁸ This in fact was referenced by Luke himself in the next chapter (18:2).

⁹ *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Macedonia."

¹⁰ *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Thessalonica," and *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, Merrill C. Tenney, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), s.v. "Thessalonica."

¹¹ *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Thessalonica."

¹² Bock, 550.

¹³ At one time, the reference to the πολιτάρχες was thought to be a historical inaccuracy on the part of Luke, but now there is sufficient and even ample archeological evidence for their existence in Thessalonica. See *The Holman*

concerned about the Christians' attitudes toward the Empire and Caesar himself. In conclusion, the story of Acts 17 is set in the city of Thessalonica, a Roman city with a Greek form of government, during Paul's second Missionary Journey as he seeks to fulfill his Macedonian Call to preach the gospel there. Having made sufficient introduction to the account in Acts and the historical background, the story may now be presented in an English translation and explained.

Translation

¹And passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia they went into Thessalonica where a synagogue of the Jews was. ²And according to Paul's custom he went in to them and on three Sabbaths discussed with them from the Scriptures, ³Explaining and demonstrating, "The Christ had to suffer and to be raised from the dead and that this is the Christ, Jesus which I am proclaiming to you." ⁴And some of them were persuaded and were joined to Paul and Silas, not only a great crowd of the God-fearers of the Greeks but also not a few women of prominence. ⁵But the Jews being filled with envy and taking some wicked men of the marketplace and making a mob they were throwing the city into discord; and attacking Jason's house, they were seeking to lead them out into the assembly. ⁶But not finding them they were dragging Jason and some of the brothers to the city officials shouting "Are those [people] troubling the Empire here, which [people] Jason has welcomed? ⁷Even all of these behave against the commands of Caesar, saying [there] is another king, [namely] Jesus." ⁸And they upset the crowd and the city officials who were hearing these things ⁹so [the rulers] took sufficient [security] from Jason and the rest [of the brothers] and set them free.¹⁴

An Exposition of Acts 17:1-9

The Beginning: Paul Arrives and Preaches in the Synagogue (vv1-3)

The story picks up the account of Paul's Second Missionary journey after his first stop in Macedonia, in Philippi. The initial event is that they arrived in Thessalonica. The account describes that they passed through¹⁵ Amphipolis and Apollonia on the way. This gives evidence that Paul and his group¹⁶ were traveling on the Engnatian Way from Philippi to Thessalonica. The city of Thessalonica is described as a location where there was Jewish Synagogue. The next event is that Paul actually enters the Synagogue, in accordance with his own custom. It is not certain that the clause in v 1 mentioning the Synagogue indicates that there was a causal relationship between the presence of the Synagogue and Paul's choice to stop in Thessalonica, as if there were no Jews in Amphipolis and Appolonia or as if the Jews were especially present in Thessalonica. Nevertheless, based on what follows it is clear that the direction of Paul's customary ministry required that there be a Jewish Synagogue. It is true that Paul

Illustrated Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Thessalonica," *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Thessalonica," and F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed., *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 324n8.

¹⁴ Multiple resources were used in the creation of this translation, including *The Greek New Testament*. 4th rev. ed. Barbara Aland, et al. eds. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2012), hereafter abbrev. UBS⁴; *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereafter abbrev. BDAG; Rodney J. Decker, *Reading Koine Greek: An Introduction and Integrated Workbook* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), hereafter abbrev. RKG; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), hereafter abbrev. *ExSyn*; David A. Black, *It's Still Greek to Me: An Easy-to-Understand Guide to Intermediate Greek* (Grand Rapids, Baker: 1998); Warren C. Trenchard, *Complete Vocabular Guide to the Greek New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); and Frederick William Danker with Kathryn Krug, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009).

¹⁵ Gk. διοδεύσαντες, an antecedent temporal adverbial participle.

¹⁶ It appears that Silas was definitely with him (v4) and likely Timothy was as well (see 16:4 in Philippi and 17:14 in Berea after Thessalonica).

ministered in non-Jewish locations,¹⁷ but the presence of the Jewish people gave opportunity for Paul to preach the gospel first to the Jews and then to Gentiles¹⁸, especially perhaps Jewish proselytes, who would be receptive to the gospel of Jesus Christ preached by Paul.

Once Paul enters to the Jews, his ministry actually begins in this city. The text speaks of Paul entering to them, referring especially to the Jews themselves but also including other Greek proselytes.¹⁹ There is not much difference in emphasis, but it is noteworthy that Luke did not say “he entered into the Synagogue” but rather that “he went into them.” His ministry was to specific people, and minister he did! Paul “discussed with them from the Scriptures” for three Sabbath days. While the most natural reading would seem to suggest these were consecutive Sabbaths, not all recent commentators on the passage think this is clear.²⁰ It does appear that the context could support a reading of non-consecutive Sabbaths, but the more natural sense is that these are three consecutive Sabbaths. The verb διελέγομαι (“discussed”) often has a force of joint involvement, such as a conversation, and such a meaning does fit here. There could’ve been a wide variety of conditions in which this ministry took place in the Synagogue, including both formal gatherings, which may or may not include conversing and informal gatherings, which would certainly include conversation. It is noteworthy that this discussion is from the Scriptures, which would refer to the Old Testament Scriptures accepted by the Jews. This too is a part of Paul’s pattern of ministry, especially among Jews. This pattern of reasoning from the Scriptures can be understood as an attempt to contextualize ministry to the Jews or as a more general principle. It is appropriate to understand that Paul was reasoning from the Scriptures with them because he regarded it as truth just as the Jews did, and thus formed a valid basis to discuss the claims of Christ with them.

The means²¹ of Paul’s discussion with the Jews is described next. Paul discussed by διαγνοίγων (“explaining”) and παρατιθέμενος (“demonstrating”). There is a voice change in the second action, which may be understood as emphasis on that the topic being discussed is being set forth to the hearers in the sense of pointing out, rather than just putting it before someone.²² While it is not clear that this distinction really changes the force here, there does seem to be a relationship conceptually in that first action is dependent on the second. Thus, Paul explained the claims of Christ, but he did so while and by demonstrating by pointing out the realities set forth in the Scriptures. The posture here is one of defense by positive proclamation, which will become clear as the content of his defense is examined.

The content of Paul’s defense was two-fold. This clause is a recitative ὅτι clause, a direct quotation of the content of Paul’s words. This being said, it needs to be noted that these kinds of speeches often are summarizations rather than direct quotations.²³ It can be noted that the traditional understanding of inerrancy in no way forbids the understanding that such speeches are summarizations rather than direct quotations, understanding the “modern technical precision” as something that is not required by inerrancy.²⁴ With this in mind, Luke’s recounting of the content of Paul’s explanation and demonstration should be deemed an accurate summary of what Paul said. First, he explains the things

¹⁷ e.g. in Athens, see 17:16ff.

¹⁸ As in Rom. 1:16b.

¹⁹ See section regarding the results of this ministry below. The antecedent of the pronoun αὐτούς should be understood to refer to the Jews but in context one must allow for the presence of the God-fearing Greeks being present in light of the fact that they are a part of the group out of those in the Synagogue who are saved.

²⁰ Bock, 550

²¹ Both διανοίγων καὶ παρατιθέμενος here are taken as participles of means, esp. since they follow the main verb. See *ExSyn*, 758.

²² BDAG, s.v. “παρατιθημι”, notes the subtle difference in meaning between active and middle in 2.a and 2.b.

²³ See discussion in Bock, 20-23, and Carson and Moo, 320-321.

²⁴ *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, Article XIII, accessed February 27, 2016, http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf.

that had to happen to the Christ, namely that he had to suffer and that he had to raise from the dead. As two of the principle parts of the gospel,²⁵ it makes sense that Paul would seek to show from the Scriptures that these two things had to happen to the Christ. From this base, he asserts, “this is Christ, Jesus which I am proclaiming to you.” Bock observed that this is an almost syllogistic argument.²⁶ Now, there is minor a textual variant here regarding the article in front of Ἰησοῦς (“Jesus”). But understanding that the antecedent of οὗτός (“this”) in this clause is Χριστόν (“Christ”) helps make the meaning clear, regardless of the original reading. Paul is adding to his argument that he believes that Jesus is the Christ, and one can easily see the connection that this was the case because Paul believed Jesus did truly rise from the dead. No attempt to prove the resurrection was explicitly offered, but one could envision any one of the eyewitness accounts, even Paul’s own, as the basis for the assumption in the argument that Jesus had risen from the dead. Furthermore, at this point in the narrative, the recipient of Acts has already read Luke’s prior accounts of the resurrection and thus would have not needed here an explicit explanation of the reality of the resurrection. In summary, on Paul’s arrival to Thessalonica he preached the gospel to the Jews in the Synagogue by proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ of the Scriptures and that thus the salvation he offered is true. What was the result of his ministry?

The Result: Many Greeks are Saved (v 4)

The account immediately turns to the results of Paul’s ministry by the statement “some of them were persuaded and were joined to Paul and Silas.” The initial verb reflects their cognitive acceptance of the conclusion that Jesus was the Christ, as presented previously by Paul. The second reflects a practical response that those who believed the message joined themselves into “close association”²⁷ with Paul and Silas.

The latter half of the description of this result reflects the identity of those who believed, and it somewhat emphatic as if the result is surprising. First of all, the latter half of v4 is one of the more difficult sections in the passage with two minor textual variants, challenging syntax, and a couple of phrases that require some interpretation an explanation. First, to establish the original text and the flow of thought, there is a key syntactical element that helps to clarify things. This is the presence of the particle τε used in a pair that should be understood to communicate the “not only...but also” sense. This seems valid based on the surrounding context as well as the presence of this type of usage as shown in BDAG.²⁸ This particle ties the two parts together such that one would expect them to be grammatically equivalent. Furthermore, the components being joined by the particle are further identifying the “them” who were saved in this passage. Based on this line of argument, several possible textual variants are excluded, namely the ones introducing other conjunctions in the structure or one translating one of the nouns as a nominative case instead of the genitive expected in this construction as has been understood here. Thus, the UBS reading is established as the correct one.

Based on the text as established, one must now explain who are these people that responded to Paul’s preaching. There are two groups. The first is τῶν...σεβομένων Ἑλλήων πλῆθος πολύ, or literally “a great crowd of worshipers from the Greeks.” The consensus opinion is that this group is composed of “God-fearers...former polytheists who accepted the ethical monotheism of Israel and attended the synagogue, but who did not obligate themselves to keep the whole Mosaic law.”²⁹ While there has been at least one proposition that the focus of the term “God-Fearers” is on their pious behavior, rather than

²⁵ See 1 Cor. 15:1-4.

²⁶ Bock, 548

²⁷ BDAG, s.v. “προσκληρω.”

²⁸ BDAG, s.v. “τε,” 2.b.

²⁹ BDAG, s.v. “σεβω,” 1.b. reflects the common view on this.

a distinct group of Greeks,³⁰ the context here would certainly clarify that in this story these are Greek, not Jewish, God-Fearers. It is noteworthy here, as often would be seeing in Paul's ministry, that Paul preaches to a Jewish center of worship but it is the Gentiles present who actually respond to the message of salvation. It is not difficult to see why the Jews would've been especially upset at the Greeks' response to the one they view as an imposter to their Messiah. The second group is γυναικῶν ... τῶν πρώτων οὐκ ὀλίγαι, "not a few women of prominence." If one follows the Codex D's reading³¹, some believe it would be speaking of the wives of those [men] of prominence.³² However, as previously mentioned, the syntax of the passage leads to a rejection of this reading, and thus the translation "women of prominence" is deemed correct. In fact, given the freedoms of women in Thessalonica,³³ it is not entirely unsurprising that Luke would call out that some of these prominent women had believed. In conclusion, the result of Paul's ministry in the Synagogue was a typical response in which the Greeks believed and join Paul, but the Jews by and large reject the message.

The Response: Accusation of the Christians (vv 5-7)

At this juncture, the account turns rather rapidly to one of hostility toward the Christians. There are three primary steps in the story as it plays out. First, the Jews provoke a mob of wicked people. Then, the Jews along with the mob seek to take Paul and Silas to the city assembly. Finally, the Jews not finding Paul and Silas instead take a man named Jason and accuse him and those with him of evil against Rome.

The Jews Incite a Mob (v5a)

The account transitions by drawing attention first to the Jews and the way they incite a mob that disturbs the whole city. The Jews are the primary players in this verse. Luke presents envy as the reason for their actions. In context, they are clearly envious of Paul specifically and part of the basis is the Gentile response to his message about Jesus. Thus, they go into the marketplace and get some wicked men from there and stir them up to form a mob. The text does not describe this part of the account any further. The main idea is that these people were common men but wicked men, and apparently the Jews, serving their own interests, were able to stir them up into a mob. All of this built to the conclusion that the Jews threw the city of Thessalonica into an uproar. This was needful in order for the story to end up the way it did. The Jews leading the mob then proceed to go after the cause of their envy, Paul and Silas.

The Mob Takes Jason instead of Paul and Silas (v5b-6a)

The mob then takes some drastic actions, the Jews continuing to drive them. They attack Jason's house to look for Paul and Silas. Now, not much is known about Jason except what is in this account. What is known is that he had enough of a connection to Paul and Silas that the Jews thought that they would find the preacher Paul at Jason's house, and indeed there is a suggestion by the mob in their accusation to follow that Jason welcomed Paul and Silas, probably with some kind of hospitality. The expressed purpose of the Jews is that they want to take Paul and Silas before the city assembly. Recalling Thessalonica was permitted to have a Greek form of government, this is to be understood as a reference to the kind of official government assembly whose purpose was the "transacting official business."³⁴ In light of the following context, clearly the Jews want to have some kind of official legal action taken against Paul and Silas that will bring harm to them and their ministry in Thessalonica and elsewhere.

³⁰ Max Wilcox, "The 'God-Fearers' in Acts - A Reconsideration," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13 (1981): 102-122.

³¹ γυναικες,, τῶν πρώτων ("wives of the prominent")

³² Bock, 551.

³³ *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Thessalonica".

³⁴ BDAG, s.v. "δῆμος."

The Mob Accuses the Christians of Evil Against Rome (v6b-7)

Unfortunately for the Jews, they do not find Paul and instead they choose to take Jason and accuse him along with some other Christians who were there at that time. Not surprisingly the mob and the Jews take Jason and some of the brothers to the city leaders.³⁵ The way the passage reads, it is as if the mob makes no attempt to present a rational case to the leaders. No, they just bring Jason and the brothers to the leaders and start shouting loudly accusations of evil against Jason. The text does not speak explicitly about the Jews at this point, just using third person plural pronouns and finite verbs, but there is no reason to see the Jews having moved to the background but rather they continue to be a part of what is happening.

The content was explicitly one of wrongdoing against the government of the Roman Empire. It would be logical for the Jews to try to attack the Christians in this way, rather than in questions about the law. In respect to the concerns of the city leaders and citizens, the city of Thessalonica would have their status as a free city put at risk if they gained a reputation of having people against the Empire in their midst and thereby would risk becoming a Roman colony instead like Philippi was. It seems that the accusation is successful because the city rulers evidently become just as upset as the crowd (see v8).

The content of the accusation is one of interest and warrants close examination. There are two independent clauses that form the backbone of the accusations, with two subordinate clauses giving some additional meaning. First the mob accuses the Christians of being “those [people] troubling the Empire,” formulating the statement as a rhetorical question that context shows they expect to be answered in the affirmative. Then the mob adds an emphasis by describing these people as people “which Jason has welcomed.” Then the mob proceeds to accuse the Christians of behaving against the commands of Caesar. This accusation is further explained with a participle phrase that relates what the Christians said about the kingship of Jesus, thus identifying the way that the Christians were accused of behaving against the commands of Caesar.³⁶

From the outset, an important interpretive assumption needs to be recognized. It is an assumption about the truthfulness of the mob’s accusations. It does seem this is overlooked by some of the commentators surveyed. It is easy to try to identify the source of the mob’s accusations as if they are presenting factual evidence. Yet, the tone of the passage seems to indicate that the mob is in fact behaving as a mob that expresses strong but somewhat incorrect views about the topic in question. This premise should be considered in any interpretation of the precise identity of the referents in the accusations.

There is a question whether the recent Jewish expulsion from Rome was what the mob had in mind when they thought of people troubling the empire.³⁷ This should not be considered as valid in light of the Jewish presence in the mob. These Jews could have purposely distanced themselves from the activities of the Jews who were expelled from Rome, but it still seems a little strange that they would’ve taken up this kind of accusation and so bring some accusation against themselves. It’s possible the Roman expulsion was in view, but deemed less likely. The better approach is to understand the phrase as referring to the Christians explicitly and how they have already at this point, as well in much of Acts, obtained a reputation of bringing discord. These people may have already heard of Paul himself, perhaps, from the previous account in Philippi and his work in the Galatian region in the First Missionary

³⁵ Gk. πολιτάρχες.

³⁶ Some argue for two accusations in v7, viewing the speaking against Rome being distinct from proclaiming Jesus as King, but others see these two being more related. See discussion in Bock, 552-553. The position here is based on the fact that the participle λέγοντες (“saying”) is subordinate to the main clause in which the accusation against Caesar is given, and this seems to be best taken as being a part of the primary charge in the second part against Caesar.

³⁷ So Bruce, 324.

Journey. The mob is expressing their displeasure at the presence of the Christians whom they had heard about in Thessalonica.

There is also some discussion and disagreement regarding the second accusation and the identity of the “commands of Caesar” which the Christians are accused of behaving against. There were at least four different views³⁸ on the identity of the “commands” or “decrees”³⁹ of Caesar. First, and certainly the most common, is that the Christians were committing treason or sedition against Rome. Second, in light of Caesarian commands against predictions about the death of rulers or predictions in general, the idea has been put forward that the violation here is against that command. Third, there is an idea that mandatory oaths of loyalty to Caesar’s household may have been in view here. Lastly, edicts against the Jews such as have already been mentioned as well as others may have been the accusation in view.

There are two primary considerations that must be brought into proper light as the second accusation is interpreted. First, as already noted, the mob is not necessarily exhibiting the kind of careful thought that would suggest that they are bringing entirely logical accusations against the Christians in the way they should have. Second, the fact that Thessalonica is a free city with its own government restricts the nature of any kind of jurisdiction they would have regarding the Empire and the Caesars. This concept would be analogous to the different jurisdictions of the state and federal governments in America.

Having established these two points, several points may be made regarding the matter. First, the mob is clearly very concerned about the way the Christians are upsetting the Empire. This in no way takes away from the motivation of the original Jewish agitators here. Second, the Christian belief that Jesus is King itself would’ve been troubling enough, given the privileged status of Thessalonica as a free city. Third, one does not need to identify a specific commandment of Caesar that the Christians were violating, though as has already been mentioned, there are several suggestions though none conclusive.⁴⁰ The key is found in understanding the accusation that the Christians were disrupting the peace and that the nature of their beliefs could in a general sense be found threatening to Rome. This is certainly a true statement from the perspective of the mob, regardless of what any government official may conclude regarding the accusation and its validity. The truthfulness of the statement from the perspective of the mob is the explanation for the fact that they could and did drag the Christians to the local city leaders, even if there is not a strict local statute being violated and even though the city leaders do not have jurisdiction in Roman matters strictly speaking.

Summary

In summary, the Jews stirred up a mob of common people and proceeded to seek to take Paul and Silas to the city leaders but instead attacked the Christians at Jason’s house ~~instead~~. They were seeking for the city leaders to do something to stop these men, because they felt Paul was disturbing the peace with his teachings which appeared to have a general idea of being against Rome. In reality, the mob was characterized by a general sense of being upset rather than logical argument in its case as presented to the city leaders. They did hit on an accurate understanding of Paul’s teaching that he did indeed proclaim another king and they did believe strongly that Paul was disturbing the peace. This understanding is backed up by comparison with Paul’s epistles to the Thessalonians, with their strong

³⁸ See summary in E. A. Judge, “The Decrees of Caesar at Thessalonica,” *Reformed Theological Review* 30 no. 1 (Jan-Apr 1971): 1-7.

³⁹ BDAG, s.v. “δόγμα,” shows that either of these can be valid translation depending on the context. The general translation of “command” is preferred here so that context may dictate how the word is understood, rather than read the concept of a decree into it if in fact it isn’t actually what is in view.

⁴⁰ Judge, 1.

eschatological message. The mob's accusation will demand a response from the city rulers against the Christians.

The Resolution: The Christians are Released (vv 8-9)

The account comes to a rather rapid conclusion after the mob concludes their accusation. The crowd is clearly upset by the information that comes out through the mob's accusation, and in fact the city leaders appear to be upset as well. Their reaction is understandable in light of Thessalonica's status of a free city because Rome could change their status if they heard of people who believe in another king were found in that city. The leaders' response could be seen as accepting the mob's concerns, though it falls short of full accepting them. If the Christians had really broken a local statute, the leaders would've acted in a stronger manner. If the Christians had broken a Roman statue, the response is a little more difficult to determine. However, it is clear that the city leaders needed to promote an environment of peace and if there was anything that the Christians had done, it had been to upset the peace even if the Jews and their envy was the true root cause of this episode. It is in this spirit that the city leaders are believed to have acted.

The leaders then "took sufficient [security] from Jason" and the other brothers. Now as Bruce points out,⁴¹ the men against whom the accusations are directly levied were not present so they can't actually take any action against Paul and Silas. Instead, it is logical that Jason and other Thessalonians would be held responsible for Paul and Silas going forward. It is commonly regarded that this security essentially ensured that Paul and Silas would be forced to leave the city as part of this agreement.⁴² While this may be questionable, practically speaking this was the only recourse for Jason given the fact that unlike other instances⁴³ there was no rebuttal from the government to the Jews who were behind the episode. The climate created by this episode had not cleared, and so trouble would likely continue for Paul and Silas even if they stayed. Thankfully, the epistles to the Thessalonians make clear that the church continued to grow spiritually and continue in their faith even amidst these issues.

A Proposed Homiletical Outline for Preaching Acts 17:1-9

As a practical goal of exegesis, the goal is often to preach a message based on the passage in question. As such, the following homiletical outline is offered as a way to simplify the passage for the purpose of preaching.

1. The Background of the Story
 - a. Context of Acts: The Purpose of Reassurance for the Reader
 - b. Context of History
 - i. Paul's Second Missionary Journey and the Macedonian Call
 - ii. The City of Thessalonica: A Roman free-city with a Greek government.
2. The Beginning of the Story: Paul's Ministry in Thessalonica (vv 1-3)
 - a. The first event was that they arrived at Thessalonica.
 - b. The next event was they entered the Synagogue according to Paul's custom.
 - c. The next event was Paul attempting to persuade Jews in the Synagogue of the reality that Jesus was the Christ for three Sabbath Days
3. The Result of Paul's Ministry (v 4)
 - a. The first result of Paul's actions was that some were persuaded.
 - b. The second result was that those persuaded followed Paul and Silas
 - c. The surprising identity of those persuaded was many Greeks proselytes and prominent women.

⁴¹ Bruce, 325.

⁴² Bruce, 325-326, and Stephen Ger, *The Book of Acts: Witnesses to the World*, Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2004), 233, WORDsearch edition.

⁴³ E.g. Acts 18:12-16 in Corinth.

4. The Accusation of the Mob (vv 5-7)
 - a. The next main event was that the envious Jews threw the city into an uproar by making a mob of wicked people.
 - i. The reason for the Jews actions was that they were filled with envy.
 - ii. The conditions preparing the city to be in an uproar were the gathering of wicked men who would become a mob.
 - iii. The next main event was that the Jews were throwing the city into an uproar.
 - b. The next main event was the Jews were seeking Paul and his fellows to take them to the city assembly.
 - i. The preceding event was that the Jews attacked Jason's house.
 - ii. The next event was the Jews were seeking them.
 - iii. The reason the Jews were seeking them was to take them to the city assembly.
 - c. The next main event was the Jews took Jason instead of Paul and accused Paul and his group of evil against Rome.
 - i. The antecedent event was that these Jews did not find Paul.
 - ii. The primary event was that the Jews took Jason and some of the brothers to the city leaders.
 - iii. The contemporaneous actions of the Jews once they took the brothers to the city leaders was loudly accusing the Christians of evil against Rome.
5. The Conclusion of the Story: Resolution of the Accusation (vv 8-9)
 - a. The next event described was that the crowd and the city rulers were brought into turmoil.
 - b. The final event was that they took sufficient security from Jason and those with him and let them go.
6. Conclusion: Application of the Meaning
 - a. Primary Application: Assurance Through Historicity of the Christian Faith
 - b. Secondary Application: Evangelization through Rational Persuasion

Conclusion

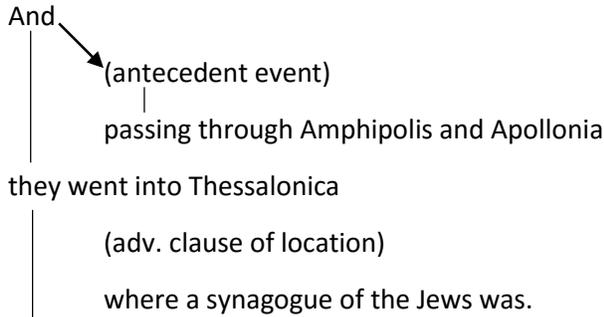
In conclusion, what is the reader to make of this account? For sure, as stated at the beginning, this account is an interesting account that explains how Paul's Second Missionary Journey proceeded and as he tried to share the gospel and was met with opposition. The central purpose of the book is to reassure the reader of the truthfulness of the historical claims of Christianity, and this is surely applicable to today. How does the Christian know assuredly the truthfulness of the claims of Christ? Part of it is by knowing the history of the Christian faith and the historical facts that surrounded this faith. As the Scriptures are inspired and regarded to be sufficient, the periods and acts of history recorded in the Scriptures deserve focus. Thus, this account was considered important enough for the Holy Spirit to include in Scripture. It is in this sense that it is telling that the account seems to focus more on the responses to Christianity than on Paul himself. Secondly, additional applications may be gleaned from observing the examples found here too, the most notable and applicable example being Paul himself. His approach to reason with the people in the synagogue to seek to bring them to persuasion of the truthfulness of Christ's claims is certainly valid today. Christians sharing their faith should aim to rationally persuade people of the truthfulness of the Christian's faith claims.⁴⁴ The way this aim is implemented may differ in different contexts, but the central idea is that the believers ought never to seek merely emotional decisions for Christ. Rather, he should pursue the response of faith that is rooted

⁴⁴ This in no way suggests that the Christian must argue from the worldview commitments of the lost as he seeks to persuade them, but that issue would fall under matters of apologetic method which are out of scope here.

in rational persuasion even if there is an emotional element. May God bless all Christians with “full conviction” about the gospel that has come to us (1 Thess. 1:5) just as it did to the Thessalonians.

Appendix: Clausal Diagram of Acts 17:1-9

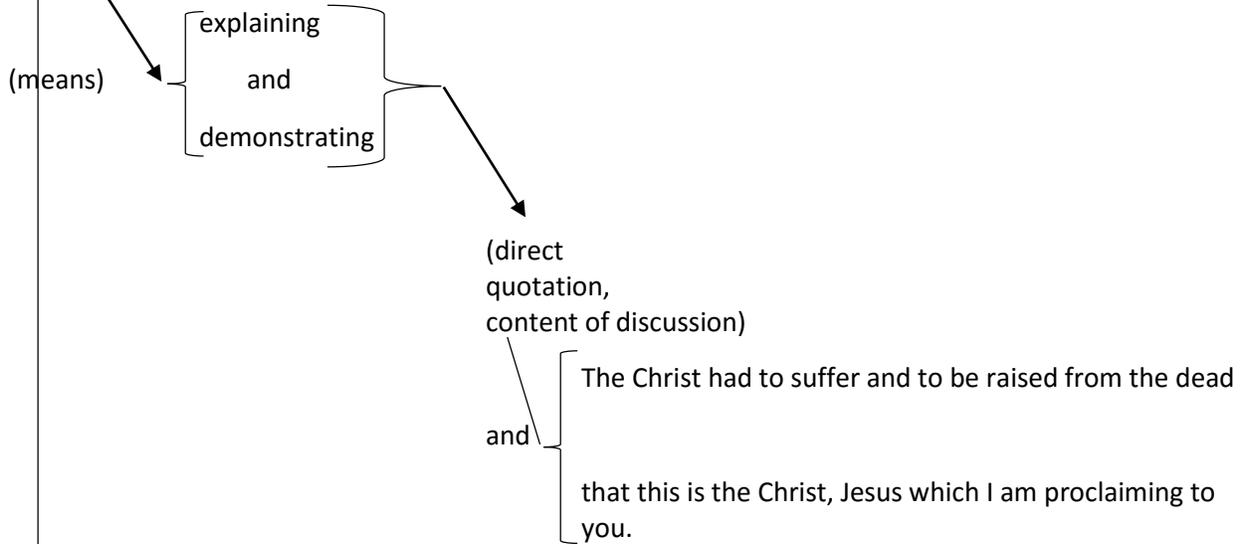
17:1:



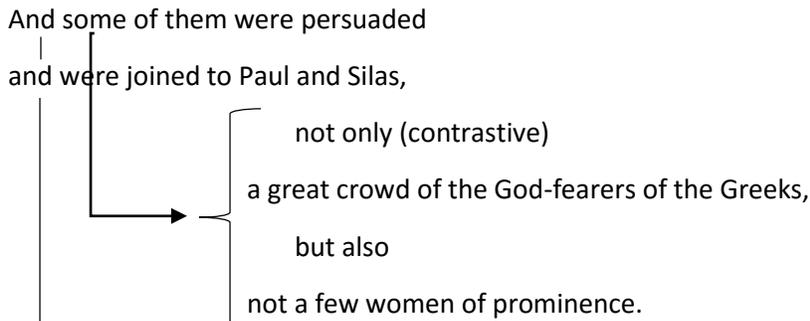
17:2:

And according to Paul's custom he went in to them
And on three Sabbaths discussed with them from the Scriptures,

17:3:



17:4:



17:5:

But The Jews

(reason) → being filled with envy and

(antecedent event) → taking some wicked men [into] the marketplace

(contemp. event) → making a mob

were throwing the city into discord;

(by)

attacking Jason's house

They were seeking to lead them [Paul and Silas] out into the assembly;

17:6:

And

(antecedent event)

not finding them

they were dragging Jason and some of the brothers to the city officials

(contemp. event)

shouting

(direct discourse)

Are those [people] troubling the Empire here, which [people] Jason has welcomed?

and

Even all of these behave against the commands of Caesar,

(means)

saying [there] is another king, [namely] Jesus.

And they upset the crowd and the city officials who were hearing these things

So [the rulers] took sufficient [security] from Jason and the rest [of the brothers]

And set them free.

Ptc. of attendant circumstance, and so translated as a separate clause.

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