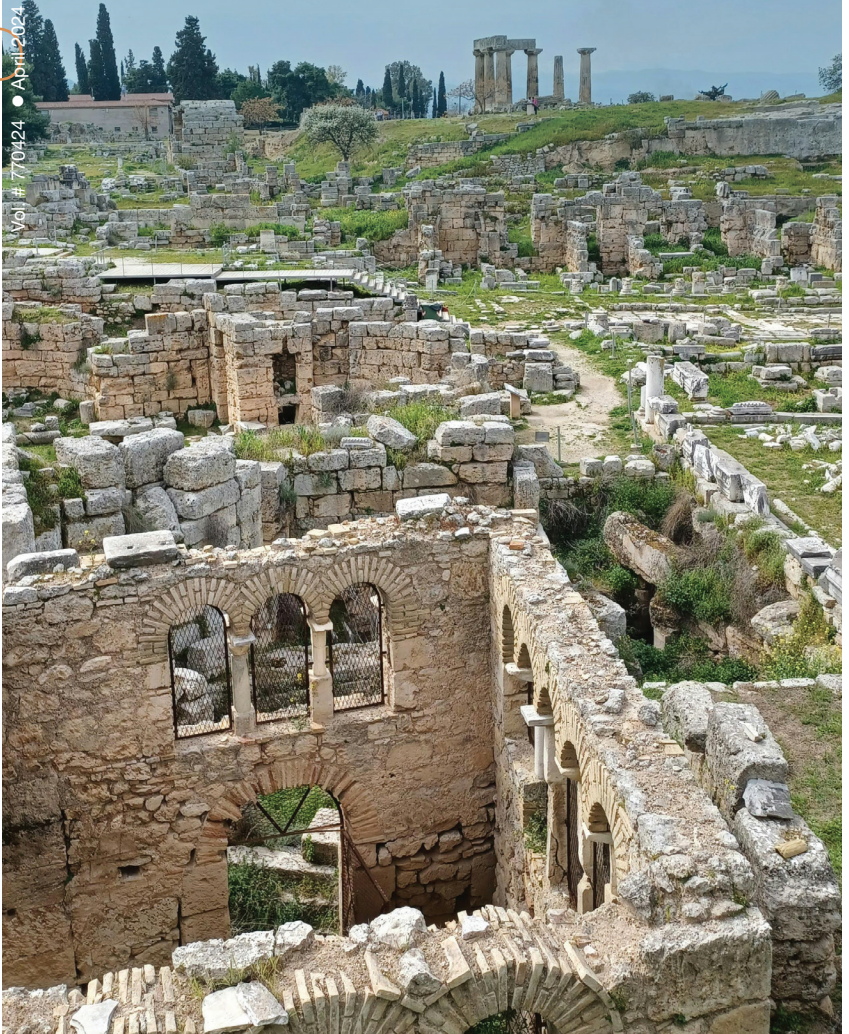


# ANOTHER LOOK AT ACTS 18



**I WAS RECENTLY ASKED** to teach on Acts 18. Whenever I am preparing to teach on a biblical text, the first thing I do is read through the text several times, usually using more than one Bible version. I also ask some questions. What was going on at that time? How would the original readers have understood this? What was influencing the people in the account? What is the meaning in the original language? Then I read commentaries and any books that may give insight.

Let's look at a quick synopsis of Acts 18:1–17. Paul arrived in Corinth (modern day Greece) at the same time as Jews who had been expelled from Italy. Paul was in the synagogue on a regular basis, until they rejected him and his message. There then followed a series of painful events, culminating with Paul being taken before the Roman authorities. At the end of the chapter, Paul left and went to Ephesus.

Every time I read the passage, Acts 18:6 stuck out because of the harshness of Paul's language and the way this verse was misused by Church leadership against the Jewish people. I wanted to try to understand what was really happening in Corinth.

## Culture

Every place has a unique culture. What few of us really stop to realize is that the Bible also has a culture. However, we read the Bible through our cultural eyeglasses—2,000 years after the events of Acts—speaking different languages, probably not fully understanding the issues of the day and how they impacted the people.

The events of Acts 18 probably occurred around AD 55–57. At that time, there were no churches as we know them today. Believers met in homes, in nature and in synagogues. Within the synagogue, you would find Jews, proselytes (those who had become Jewish through conversion and circumcision) and Gentile God fearers. Those who believed in Jesus (Yeshua) were a part of the mix and included people in all three categories. Then there was the larger part of the population who were pagans and worshiped in pagan temples.

At this time, Christianity was still regarded as a sect of Judaism. Under Roman law, religions that existed before the people

who practiced them were conquered by Rome were legal and called *religio licita*. However, it was illegal to start a new religion, which was called *religio illicita*. This means that at the time of Act 18, Judaism had legal status, but starting a separate religion of Christianity would not be legal. It wasn't until the time of Constantine in AD 325 that Christianity was named the official state religion, which eventually led to all other non-Christian and non-Jewish faiths deemed illegal by AD 391.

During the first century, there was a clash of cultures and a mixture of cultures. Hellenistic or Greek culture clashed with Hebrew or biblical culture. Roman culture imposed Roman law on the conquered territories in the Roman Empire.



## Corinth

Corinth was an important city with 90,000 inhabitants, 1,000 of them temple prostitutes. On the acropolis was the temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sexual love and beauty. She was the main pagan deity there, but there were other pagan temples too.

I visited Corinth as a teenager and was shocked by the numerous nude statues and pagan temples. Corinth was a sensual, hedonistic place. In fact, I've read that the phrase "to act as a Corinthian" meant to fornicate.

Paul arrived in Corinth and met Aquila and Priscilla, who were also tent makers. All of them were Jewish believers in Jesus (Yeshua). Many Jews were arriving in places throughout the region because Roman leaders had expelled all Jews from Rome. This would have been a very painful, difficult time for the Jewish world. Sadly, it wasn't a one-time occurrence. Jews would be expelled from various countries in Europe over 30 times throughout the centuries to come.

## Jewishness of Paul

Although Paul has come to be identified with Christianity, he clearly remained a practicing Jew. In Philippians 3:5, he described himself as “*circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee.*”

In Acts 22:1–3, Paul addressed the Jews, calling them brothers and fathers, and spoke to them in Hebrew. He affirmed that he didn’t regard his Jewishness as something in the past but rather remained a Jew.

In Acts 18:18, Paul shaved his head, presumably an action relating to a Nazarite vow, which is a very Jewish concept.

## Persecution

It has been said that wherever you go, you take yourself with you. All of the pain, persecution and trauma that Paul had endured had become part of him. He had been driven out of Macedonia, and the persistent resistance of the Jewish leadership must have been troubling to this man who viewed the Jews as his countrymen, brothers and fathers. Paul had been persecuted, imprisoned and beaten. In the end, he would write from a Roman jail. It was a rough season for Paul. Later, when he wrote to the Corinthians, he said of himself, “*I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling*” (1 Cor. 2:3).

At first, he worshiped and shared the good news in the synagogue in Corinth, until once again, Jewish leaders rejected him and his message. He must have experienced anger, frustration, pain, depression and fear. The Bible never whitewashes human experience. The tendency we have to put halos on spiritual leaders is not the way the Bible handles issues.

I suggest this was Paul’s frame of mind when he made a really strong statement against the Jews in Acts 18:5–6. “*When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’*”

Paul's statement was almost like a curse. In essence, he was saying, "I'm done with you!" Did he mean it when he said, "*From now on I will go to the Gentiles?*" Did he mean that all Jews were included or only those present? Did he mean he would never go to the synagogue again? Clearly not, because in Act 18:19, Paul was in Ephesus, and the first thing he did was to go to the synagogue and converse with the Jews there.

Sometimes great men of God have low spots. For Paul to have responded so sharply, there had to be strong emotions involved. The prophet Elijah is another example of a great man of God who suffered from depression. Many great leaders in our own times who have done great things for God find themselves mired in times of discouragement.

A 2022 Barna report found that 42% of Protestant pastors have given real, serious consideration to quitting full-time ministry, 56% because of stress; 43% due to loneliness and isolation; 38% because of current political divisions; and 29% due to the negative impact on their family. I would say that Elijah's problem—and Paul's problem too—are still very real today.

Just a couple of verses later in Acts 18:8, Luke pointed out that Crispus, a leader in the synagogue became a believer in Jesus (Yeshua). In fact, this chapter shows several Jewish believers, namely Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos, Crispus and Paul.

Just as the Lord had ministered to His servant Elijah during his depression, so the Lord visited Paul with words of encouragement. The first words emphasize that Paul was in a place of fear. Acts 18:9b–10 say, "*Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.*" This last phrase is very similar to what God told Elijah. "*Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him*" (1 Kings 19:18).

## The Plot Thickens

In Acts 18:12–16, we find that the Corinthian Jewish leadership was still upset with Paul, which resulted in them taking him to court. Gallio was the Roman judge. It seems that they were charging that Paul and his teachings were not Jewish.

Therefore, it would be illegal as a *religio illicita*. Gallio dismissed this charge summarily, viewing it as being part of the legal Jewish religion. He wasn't interested in deciding between different doctrinal views. Author and Bible teacher F.F. Bruce cited this as an important moment that probably made the outreach activities of the fledgling Church unrestrained for the next ten years.

But then we read in verse 17 that the Greek (pagan) mob decided to show their feelings toward the Jews. The leader of the synagogue was beaten in front of the judgment seat (court) and the Roman leader Gallio did nothing. Anti-Jewish sentiment and mob violence prove that this was indeed a difficult time.



## Paul's Visit to Corinth

Acts 18:11 tells us that Paul remained in Corinth for 18 months. This passage reveals some of his activities while there. It is also believed that he wrote the book of Romans while in Corinth in about AD 57. Isn't it interesting that while all this was happening with the Jewish community, he penned the words of Romans 9–11, his treatise about the Jewish people in God's plan? Perhaps he was partially attempting to heal the pain his

angry words may have generated. Perhaps the painful events that occurred in Corinth caused Paul to seek God about the Jewish people, his natural family. It may have been in Corinth that Paul, led by the Holy Spirit, penned some of the greatest Scriptures relating to the Jewish people and our relationship with them. I believe that what was spoken by Paul in Acts 18:6 when he was in a state of weakness did not reflect his overall views on the Jewish people. In fact, Romans 9–11 clarifies his beliefs.

Today, we know that the organized Church through the centuries used these words and others like it in the New Testament against the Jewish people in ways that brought deep pain and continue to do so until the present day. Theological anti-Semitism, replacement theology and supersessionism marred Jewish–Christian relations and made it very difficult for Jewish people to view Christianity and Jesus (Yeshua) in a positive light.

## Key Applications from this Chapter

Always remember, no matter how hard things get, no matter how much we are persecuted, the Lord is with us. He will never leave us or forsake us even until the end of the age.

Don't look down on those who are depressed, fearful, anxious and angry. If the apostle Paul and the prophet Elijah could experience these emotions, then we also are subject to such temptation. Don't beat yourself up for your emotional responses, but rather cry out to God. He is with you. Pray for your pastor, encourage him or her and let him or her know you support them.

During difficult times, we must discipline ourselves to not respond to our persecutors with anger or cursing. As Paul said in Romans, referring to the Jews who did not believe in Jesus (Yeshua), *“Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable”* (28–29).

The older I get, the more I realize that I don't know everything. I identify with Paul's words in Romans 11:33 when referring to the Jewish people who do not believe in Jesus, *“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!”*

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Scripture from the New King James Version

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## TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT)—*Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- *Torah* (Gen.—Deut.)

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