

Eternity Daily Bible Study - No. 382
Series: The Primal Church - Acts Chapters 1-8
Verses: Acts 8:1-4
Topic: From Persecution To Proclamation
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Acts 8:1-4 ASV And Saul was consenting unto his death. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. (2) And devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. (3) But Saul laid waste the church, entering into every house, and dragging men and women committed them to prison. (4) They therefore that were scattered abroad, went about preaching the word.

Vicious religious hatred is unleashed and destroys the wonderful community that had formed after Pentecost. Satanic rage fills the heart of Saul and he imprisons many. The righteous lament Stephen, and also the end of the era of innocence for the early church.

More seriously this was a decisive moment for the relationship between the followers of Jesus and orthodox Judaism. For a while it may have seemed that the "Jesus movement" would triumph and all of Israel be converted, for "even many of the priests" believed. But the leadership was unrepentant and it held all the cards. Eight thousand conversions are recorded shortly after Pentecost then after that "great multitudes" believed. Even if there were twenty-five thousand in the community that would still only have been ten percent of Jerusalem and much less than that of the total Jewish population, which including the Diaspora was probably over 5 million.

For the rest of the book of Acts the Jews continue in their unabated hatred of Christianity. James son of Zebedee is beheaded, both Peter and Paul are imprisoned, and later in 62 AD James the brother of Jesus would be stoned to death. There are numerous beatings and stonings and delegations are even sent throughout the Diaspora to cause trouble for followers of Jesus. There was no possibility of Christianity remaining a Jewish religion. To this day a Christian cannot be a Jewish citizen of Israel and "messianic Jews" are not regarded as true Jews in any true legal sense. (But a Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim of Jewish descent can still be regarded as truly Jewish!)

There seems to have been a sudden explosion of violence towards the Christians that day. "And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." But despite the violence there is no record of Christian retaliation. They lived by the cross and did not resort to revenge. Heavily outnumbered the Christians left Jerusalem for the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria and took the gospel with them wherever they went.

The poor folk in the countryside desperately wanted a savior and widely regarded the Temple worship as corrupt. Indeed the Judean countryside was highly radicalized and often in tension with the Temple authorities who used military force to collect tithes for the High Priests while local priests and Levites starved. Also while the very liberal Sadducees ran Jerusalem, the countryside was far more sympathetic to the Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots all of whom believed in miracles, judgment day and the resurrection. In the Gospels Jesus is mainly bothered by Pharisees in Galilee, few Sadducees are that far north. The Essenes and the Zealots in particular may have been very receptive to the Christian gospel.

The Messianic Jewish church in Jerusalem became a core group consisting of the apostles and the brothers of Jesus. This Jerusalem church became very poor and was known as the Ebionites or “poor ones” and persisted until 135 AD when all Jews were forced to leave Jerusalem. The Ebionites were led in succession by various brothers of Jesus (first the eldest brother James till 62 AD, then Simeon till 106 AD then Judas after that, Judas must have been a much younger brother!) They tended to worship in Hebrew and prized the gospel of Matthew. It is hard to sort out fact from fiction regarding the Ebionites since for various reasons they have been seized upon by those wishing to discredit Paul as they seem to have been in considerable tension with him. The Ebionites seem to have finally vanished by about 400 AD.

This is hardly surprising given that Saul was responsible for the murder and imprisonment of many of their friends and only infrequently ever went back to Jerusalem, preferring to spend time among Greek-speaking Jews at Antioch instead. Even his main visit to Jerusalem, with famine relief funds, did not go well, as Paul caused a riot and he landed in prison for two years! As far as the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were concerned Paul was just a big bunch of trouble! (The exception is the apostle Peter who did not end up with the Ebionites but went to the Jews in Babylon then to Rome and eventually became friends with Paul see 2 Peter 3:15)

The good side of the persecution was that it moved the new believers out of their comfort zone and out to tell the world about the miracles they had witnessed, the love they had found and the gospel they had heard. The date of Stephen’s martyrdom is uncertain – and is generally given as being between 32-37 AD, so at least two years had passed, possibly seven or eight and the first Christians from Pentecost were now mature believers and able to articulate their faith – and they did so to the glory of God.

Thus the persecution of Stephen marks the end of Christianity as a Jewish sect, the beginning of the end for Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christianity and a transition to Greek-speaking Jewish Christianity and eventually to Gentile Christianity. One of the transition points is via the Samaritan revival, which we will look at tomorrow.

Blessings,

John Edmiston

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