

# Telling the Story

## (Evangelism in the Early Church)

*Maurice W. Lusk, III*

Acts 18:18ff, tells us that Paul stayed in Corinth many days then left for Ephesus in route to Antioch of Syria. Priscilla and Aquila (her name coming first), went with him. Before he set sail for the seaport, he shaved his head, taking a Nazarite vow. Joseph Shulam, a messianic Jew and leader of the church in Jerusalem, and an exceptional biblical scholar, says this act on the part of Paul proves that he did not cease to be a Jew when he came to faith in *Yeshua Ha Mashiach* – Jesus the Messiah, but continued to observe the traditions of a Jew; even though he was an apostle of Christ. A gentile does not cease to be a gentile when he becomes a Christian, why would one think that a Jew would cease to be a Jew? The Nazarite vow is found in Num 6:1-21; one who takes such a vow dedicates himself to a particular promise to God and abstains from strong drink and everything unclean, and cuts his hair as a way of setting a time limitation on the oath. When his hair was grown out again, the vow was ended.

At Ephesus Paul entered into the synagogue and discoursed and reasoned with the Jews. The city of Ephesus was the capital city of Asia Minor, a great commercial center as well as pagan gods and goddesses. The Jews of the synagogue asked him to stay but he was in route to Antioch of Syria and would not be detained, but he did promise to return. So, he left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus and sailed for Syria.

## He was Powerful in the Scriptures (Acts 18:24-25).

*Now a certain Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, a learned man, came to Ephesus; and he was powerful in the Scriptures. 25 This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being zealous in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, having knowledge only of the baptism of John [the Baptist], (Acts 18:24-25).*

Another player in this drama appears on the scene; a Hellenistic Jew from Alexandria in Egypt who was a follower of Jesus. He came to Ephesus and, as did Paul, went to the synagogue and waited for an opportunity to speak following the reading of the Law and the Prophets, then engaged the men of the synagogue in a discourse on their messianic beliefs. Luke tells us that he was learned (*logios* - of words, either learning from them or the presentation of them), and he was powerful (*dunatos* - from *dunamis*) in the Scriptures (*graphai* - the word the Hellenistic Jews used for, "the Scriptures,"). Alexandria was a major Hellenistic center for the Jews of the Diaspora; it was the home of Philo of Alexandria, the most renowned Hellenistic Jew of the first century. Apollos' name was a version of the name for the Greek God Apollo. So to wear that name meant that he was very much at home in the Hellenistic culture, as was Philo.

Verse 25 tells us that Apollos had been instructed in "the way of the Lord." The way of the Lord can be understood as "in the Lord's will," as is its most common usage in the Old Testament, but it had a more specific meaning as used by the early church as a self-designation. The way of the Lord has reference to "the way of the Lord" reference in Isaiah 40, which to them was interpreted as the way of salvation or the way to God through the one he had sent them.

Luke says that Apollos was "zealous in spirit," meaning his own spirit in that he had not been baptized in the name of Jesus (19:1-2), that he was teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus (again

the emphasis is on Jesus in view of the evangelistic motif of the text), being acquainted only with the baptism of John [the Baptist]. The difference in baptisms is explained by Paul in 19:1-7; especially, verse 4, "John baptized with a baptism of repentance in preparation for the anticipation of the one coming after him." Apollos was preaching "a baptism of repentance," as was John, not a baptism in the name of Jesus as Jesus instructed his apostles in their commission (Matt 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-16).

### He Knew Only the Baptism of John (Acts 18:26).

*. . . and he began to speak with boldness in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside, and explained to him more accurately the way of God (Acts 18:26).*

As Apollos began to preach Jesus calling only for a baptism of repentance; Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and explained to him more accurately "the way of the Lord," which meant they explained that baptism was to be done in the name of Jesus, confessing him as the Messiah. It is curious that as important as a correct understanding of baptism was here, as well as Paul with the disciples of John the Baptist in 19:1-7, there are those who insist that is not essential, nor is a correct understanding of it necessary for salvation. Apparently, such a view of baptism is not consistent with the emphasis of this passage.

### Showing by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 18:27-28).

*And when he was minded to go into Achaia [Greece], the brethren encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to receive him: and when he came, he helped them greatly that had believed through grace; 28 for he with great passion refuted the Jews, and that publicly, showing by the scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah/Christ, (Acts 18:27-28).*

While in Ephesus Apollos had expressed the desire to go into Greece, where the skills of logical argumentation were given birth by the renowned Socrates and Aristotle. Apollos was given a letter of introduction, most likely to the brethren in Corinth since Paul's first letter to the Corinthians shows that Apollos had been there and had developed something of a following (cf. 1 Cor 1:10-17; 3:3-9).

When Apollos arrived in Corinth it sounds as if he found the believers involved in controversy with the Jews of the synagogue. Verse 27 says that when he came he helped the brethren greatly, refuting the Jews with great passion. The Greek word for "refuted" has a very interesting construction. It is the word *elegchomai* meaning, "to put to proof, refutation" with two prepositional prefixes, which is done to give additional meaning to the word. The first prefix means "through or thoroughly," the second means, "down into." This gives the word the meaning of "a thorough and in-depth refutation," and he did it publicly as he did in the synagogue in Ephesus.

It would appear that what was being presented in these evangelistic speeches was something of an apologetic case for the messiahship of Jesus. The English word "apology" is from a Greek word *apologia*, which, because of the skills of the Greek thinkers, came to mean, "a logical presentation of argumentation in defense of a proposition one holds to be true." It is translated as "defense" in its eight occurrences in the New Testament.

The apologies of Apollos were in defense of the proposition that Jesus was the Messiah, according to the Scriptures. In our culture this is called "presenting one's case," and is the model for the case presented in a court of law. In rabbinic form, this is the type of argumentation used by Jesus in John 5:31-47; Matt 22:15-46, and the model of proof for his messianic identity he gave his disciples following his resurrection (Luke 24:27, 44-49).

## Conclusion

How can any of this inform our thinking as to how to reproduce the evangelistic success of the early church as modeled by

Paul and others here in Acts of Apostles? First, we can ask who these people were who believed what the early Christians were telling them about this Jesus of Nazareth? Why were they attracted to what they were hearing? This is an especially good question as concerns the godfearers. Why did they receive the message of a messianic deliverer who had come into the world, while so many of the Jews did not?

The Jews who chose not to believe that Jesus was the Messiah held a concept of the Messiah different than the one Jesus fulfilled. They wanted a Messiah on their own terms, a Messiah they could define and if Jesus did not meet their definition or did not promise to do what they wanted from him, then they wanted nothing to do with him. The Jewish literature of the first century gives a variety of messianic figures, from the Dead Sea scrolls to the rabbinic literature; there was a significant diversity in the expectations concerning the Messiah. Those who refused to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah on his terms did not receive the deliverance God sent through him. This has not changed from the first century to the present century. Christianity is a religion that centers in a person, that person is Jesus of Nazareth; it is all about who he was and how what we believe about him effects who we are.

## Excursus on the Messianic Texts Used by the Early Christians

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In his translation of the New Testament, which he calls *Ha Brit Hadashah*, David H. Stern, a messianic Jew and the translator makes following observations:

. . . the most convincing evidence of *Yeshua's* being Israel's Messiah is the number of prophecies in the *Tanakh* that he fulfilled at his first coming. Following is a partial list of the

Messianic Prophecies, along with the New Testament verses verifying *Yeshua's* fulfillment of them.

Besides prophecies there are incidents in the *Tanakh* which function as pictures in advance, or "types" of *Yeshua* (David H. Stern, *Complete Jewish Bible*, Introduction xliii).

Following are some of the most salient texts used by the first Christians, such as Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Paul, and Apollos in the cases they made to the men of the synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world.

The argumentation presented began with the fact the Messiah was to be "one of us," of the seed of Adam, (Gen 3:14-15); he would be of the seed of Abraham (Gen 12:3), the seed of Isaac (Gen 17:19; 21:12) the seed of Jacob (Gen 28:14; Num 24:17-19), a son of David and an heir to his throne (2 Sam 7:11b-14; Isaiah 9:6; 11:1-5; Jeremiah 23:5); and in a way not fully known he would be the Son of God (Psalms 2:9; Proverbs 30:4).

He would come to Israel 483 years ( $69 \times 7 = 483$ ) years after the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah (Daniel 9:24-26). He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), he would be preceded by a herald or voice crying in the wilderness to make ready for the coming of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3-5; Malachi 3:1). He would be anointed with the *Ruach Elohim* (the Spirit of God), (Isaiah 11:2; 61:1; Psalms 45:8), and he would be a prophet like unto Moses (Deut 18:15-18).

He would come to bring deliverance to the *anowim* (oppressed), (Isaiah 61:1-2). He would be a healer (Isaiah 35:5-6; 42:18), a man of great compassion (Isaiah 40:11; 42:3), he would be without sin (Isaiah 53:9); and he would take to himself the consequences of every man's sin (Isaiah 53:11-12; Psalms 69:10).

He would be hated without cause (Isaiah 49:7; Psalms 69:5), rejected by men (Isaiah 53:2-3 ; 63:3-5; Psalms 69:9); especially, the leaders of Israel (Psalms 118:22), and would be forsaken by his

followers or *talmidim* (Zech 13:7). In his death he would be beaten (Isaiah 50:6), and executed by crucifixion having his hands and feet pricked (Psalms 22:17; Zech 12:10). By his death deliver the human race from the powers of sin and death (Isaiah 53:5-12). He would be buried in a wealthy man's tomb (Isaiah 53:9).

But he would be raised from death (Isaiah 53:9-10; Psalms 2:7; 16:10), and lifted up on the clouds into the presence of God where he would be hailed the Lord of Glory (Psalms 16:11; 68:19; 110:1; Daniel 7:13-14).

These are prophecies from the *Torah* (Genesis through Deuteronomy), the Prophets (2 Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Micah, and Malachi), and the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs). Isaiah and Psalms are the most quoted in the cases presented for the messiahship of Jesus. Psalms is quoted 17 times and Isaiah 23 times in these arguments concerning the Messiah and Jesus' fulfillment of these Scriptures. In Luke 24:19-32, we see Jesus opening the Scriptures to the two men on the way to Emmaus, telling them that they were slow to believe all that the prophets had spoken, then tells them, "Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself," (Luke 24:26-27). Later, he appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem and opened the Scriptures to them,

*Then he said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me." 45 And he opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. 46 Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem, (Luke 24:44-47).*

What were the texts of Scripture he opened to them? What text did Peter use to make the claim that Jesus was the Messiah? What

texts did Stephen use in his argumentation with the Hellenistic Jews of the synagogues in Jerusalem; what texts did he use about which they were “not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke”? (Acts 6:8-11). It was from Isaiah 53 that Philip identified the Messiah to the Ethiopian Eunuch; so also Paul with every entry into the synagogues to tell them of the coming of the long awaited Messiah.

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