

From June 19, 2024, Biblical Archeology

In February 2023, southern Turkey and northern Syria were hit by a series of powerful earthquakes that laid waste to much of the region. The loss to life, livelihoods, and property has been nearly incalculable: The earthquakes killed tens of thousands, displaced millions, and leveled entire cities and towns.

The city of Antakya, built on the ruins of Antioch, one of the greatest cities of the Roman world and an early home to nascent Christianity, suffered irreparable damage to its deep history and rich religious traditions.

- 1) The jailer had obviously fallen asleep either because of Paul and Silas' praying and singing or in spite of it.
- 2) An earthquake will normally get your attention and obviously this time it did get his.
- 3) Now, this was probably a pretty quick set of events but, the jailer did not actually realize that the doors were likely just opened so no one had escaped yet.
- 4) He knew instinctively that he was going to be executed because all his prisoners had escaped – it made no difference why – only that they had and, it would be obvious also that he was asleep on duty.
- 5) So, he decides immediately to kill himself rather than face that punishment.
- 6) Paul of course stops him.

Acts 16:29-34 (NIV)

- 7) This is a really interesting turn of events.
- 8) If I were the jailer, I would have immediately locked the doors, went back to my post and pretended like nothing had happened – being really thankful that I had escaped what would have been my demise.

So, what can you come up with that would have led the jailer not only to have not done that but, to bring these two prisoners out and ask the apparently off the wall question “what must I do to be saved”?

- a) He was not asking how he could be saved from the situation.
 - b) The prisoners were all still there and if he simply locked the doors again he would be fine.
 - c) This was indeed a question about salvation.
 - d) It could have been Paul and Silas' singing and praying (before he went to sleep)
- 9) Personally, I think there was likely some pre-knowledge at play here just based on the apparent connection that is made to God and the fact that he realizes he is unsaved.

- a) Perhaps the jailer had heard Paul and/or Silas speak at some point?
 - b) He could possibly have even attended some of the prayer sessions by the river.
 - c) Perhaps he was already leaning toward a belief in the one true God?
- 10) The other thing that leads me to think that there was pre-knowledge was that the jailer was apparently concerned about the salvation of his family as well.
- 11) I also find it interesting that even though the jailer was afraid for his life when he thought the prisoners had escaped, he was willing and able to take Paul and Silas out of the prison to his home for a meal before he knew of their release.

Problems with verse 31

- ³¹ They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”
- 12) This is one of those verses that can be a little troubling if taken out of context.
- 13) If we were to take this as one verse and try to apply it without the rest of this passage and for that matter, the rest of scripture it would be absolutely BAD theology!
- 14) This, if taken literally (out of context) could be construed to say that Paul was telling the jailer if he believed, the rest of his household would be saved automatically – simply not true.
- 15) As we see, Paul teaches him and the members of his household about the Lord.
- 16) Then he and his household were baptized.

Acts 16:35-40 (NIV)

- 1) The jailer is probably very happy at this point and is glad to report to Paul and Silas that they were free to go.
- 2) He was also probably quite surprised at Paul’s reaction to the news.
- 3) There was a point to be made here and it was important – Paul and Silas were Roman citizens!
- 4) It is important for us to get the big picture here.
 - a) The Roman empire included, as you realize, many countries and nationalities.
 - b) However, just because you were conquered and part of the Roman empire, did not mean you were Roman citizens.
 - c) Remember, Paul was from Tarsus and he gained his citizenship through a special dispensation.
 - d) Silas evidently was a Roman citizen through some other means – perhaps naturally.
- 5) So, what was the affect of this announcement?
 - a) **First**, the magistrates were alarmed – Rome would not take kindly to the violation of their citizen’s rights in this manner by these magistrates.

- i) It was illegal to flog Roman citizens – ***they were beaten then flogged.***
- ii) Every citizen had the right to a fair trial – ***they did not give them a trial at all.***
- iii) Roman citizens were allowed to travel throughout the Empire under Rome’s protection.
 - (1) They ***were not subject to local legislation or local legislators!***
 - (a) In this case, the rules about foreign religious practices were likely local and therefore Paul and Silas would not be subject to them.
 - b) **Second**, they knew they had no legal grounds for expelling two Roman citizens from their city who were not guilty of a crime (no trial, no verdict, no crime).
 - i) However, if Paul and Silas stayed in Philippi it would probably cause further trouble and likely violence.
- 6) They had no choice but to beg Paul and Silas to leave the city and hope they would comply.
- 7) They did, but on their own terms.
 - a) They went to Lydia’s house to encourage the brethren and probably introduce the jailer and his family to the church there.
 - b) Then they left.
- 8) We should note that Luke returns to the third person “they” in this verse.
- 9) This ends the first “we” section of Acts.
 - a) This could indicate that Luke stayed behind in Philippi to continue the work while Paul and Silas moved on toward Athens.
 - b) Or perhaps he returned to Troas – we just do not know.
 - c) The next “we” section begins at 20:5.

Acts 17:1–4 (NIV)

- 1) We commented last time regarding there being no synagogue in Philippi – when we see that there is a synagogue here in Thessalonica and what Paul does, it really supports that claim.
- 2) Obviously, from what we see here, there are God fearing Greeks who were attending the synagogue along with the Jews.
- 3) Likely, the prominent women that are mentioned were also attending.
- 4) Remember, we made note some weeks back that the synagogue rules were somewhat different than that of the temple.
 - a) Temple requirements said that in order for a Greek proselyte to be in the temple with the rest of the Jews, he must have become fully Jewish.
 - b) Women were also treated differently in these areas.

- 5) It is very interesting to me that Luke again makes a point of mentioning the prominent women.
 - a) I personally think there have been some seriously flawed assumptions made about Paul's attitude toward women.
- 6) All be it tentative, it does appear that we have the start of a church here.

Acts 17:5–9 (NIV)

- 1) Jealousy rears its ugly head again.
- 2) Remember back in chapter 13, we had a similar situation.

Acts 13:45 (NIV)

⁴⁵ When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy. They began to contradict what Paul was saying and heaped abuse on him.

- 3) In this situation however, it is not only Paul and his companions who are catching the brunt of the problem it is also the brother, Jason, with whom they are staying.
- 4) They can't find Paul and Silas so they grab Jason and some other brothers and take them before the city officials.
- 5) As always it seems, if you don't have a legitimate charge – just make up one that will get the job done.
- 6) The one charge here, however, that was most serious was that of saying there was another king other than Caesar.
- 7) That will get you killed – ask Jesus – that is the very charge that got Him crucified.
- 8) It is the opinion of some that this is actually what got Paul executed – he refused to worship Caesar.
- 9) One way or the other, once Jason and the brothers were forced to pay a bond to be released, Paul, Silas, and Timothy had no choice but to leave.
 - a) If they did not, and there was more trouble the bond would probably have to be forfeited.

Acts 17:10–15 (NIV)

- 1) Berea was about 45 miles south of Thessalonica.
- 2) And here we have that famous statement about the Jews in Berea – they were more noble than the Thessalonian Jews – two reasons:
 - a) First – they were eager to receive Paul's message about the Messiah.

- b) Second – they did not take it at face value but looked at it in light of the scriptures to see that what he was teaching was true.
- 3) That being said, I have always wondered why the Berean church was not more prominent in the rest of Scripture.
- 4) Again Luke mentions the women here, actually, before the Greek men.
- 5) Being chased and harassed again just like in Lystra, Paul has no choice but to leave.
- 6) Evidently, he feels safe in leaving Silas and Timothy there and he moves on to Athens.

Acts 17:16–21 (NIV)

- 1) The city of Athens was named for the Goddess Athena and actually had individual temples for all the gods of the Greek Pantheon.
- 2) Athens was the center for Greek culture, philosophy, and education.
- 3) In its hey day, Athens had been the home of men such as Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Epicurus, Zeno.
- 4) This was 400 years or so prior to Paul's time.
- 5) In the city as Paul finds it, the philosophers and educated people were always ready to hear something new.
- 6) As one commentator puts it:
“When Paul arrived, it was a small town (ten thousand or so residents), reliving the glory days and filled with intellectuals spending their days philosophizing.”
- 7) Others believe that, even though it was no longer the large commercial/political center that it once was, it was still the cultural and educational center of Greece.
- 8) Either way, at this point it was academia at its finest hour.
- 9) This explains (at least to some) their openness to hear Paul speak at their meeting in the Areopagus.
- 10) To really understand what Paul is up against, we need to understand at least generally, what the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were all about. John MacArthur says the following regarding these two groups:

Epicurean philosophy was the teaching that pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the chief end of man. They were materialists, who, while not denying the existence of the gods, believed they did not intervene in the affairs of men. They taught that, at death, the body and soul (both composed of atoms) disintegrate; there is no afterlife.

The Stoic philosophers, on the other hand, saw self-mastery as the greatest virtue.

They believed self-mastery comes from being indifferent to both pleasure and pain, reaching the place where one feels nothing. In contrast to the practical atheism of the Epicureans, the Stoics were *pantheists*.²¹

11) Stoics were the Star Trek Vulcans of Paul's day.

12) *Pantheism* is a doctrine which identifies God with the universe.

- a) It regards the universe as a manifestation of God.
- b) It admits or tolerates all gods.

13) The Stoics incorporated the theory of eternal recurrence into their natural philosophy.

14) According to Stoic physics, the universe is periodically destroyed in an immense conflagration, and then experiences a rebirth.

15) These cycles continue for eternity, and the same events are repeated in every cycle.

16) Now, let's talk about the real situation here.

- a) First, the Areopagus was a court not just a place where the intellectuals gathered.
- b) The power of that it had fluctuated over the centuries but in Roman times was still considerable.
- c) Though Paul was brought before them, he was not formally tried for anything.
- d) But he was informally required to give an account of his teaching.
- e) They open with a straightforward question:

“May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; we want to know therefore what these things mean.”

17) To be clear, they had no real interest in believing what he had to say, it was only curiosity at this point.

²¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., Acts, vol. 2, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 131.