

Contextual Exegesis Essay, Acts 17:10-15 (Exemplar)

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Acts 17:10-15 (NKJV)

¹⁰Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹These were more [d]fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. ¹²Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men. ¹³But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. ¹⁴Then immediately the brethren sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵So those who conducted Paul brought him to Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him with all speed, they departed.

During Paul's second missionary trip from 49 AD to 52 AD, he journeyed the eastern corridor of the Aegean Sea¹ down Via Egnatia making his way through the provinces of Syria (Acts 15:36-40) Cilicia (15:41), Galatia (16:6), Macedonia (17), and Achaia (18).² As he traveled, Paul delivered the Council of Jerusalem decrees to new believers (16:4) Additionally, the apostle not only carried the message of the Good News with him to the Jews, but also carved out a new mission to the Gentiles.³ From a contextualization aspect, perhaps, the center point of this journey lies in his ministry in Thessalonica (17:1-9), Berea (or Berea) (vv. 10-15), and Athens (vv. 16-34).. There, one sees the diversity of his communication strategies that he adapted to culture for the purpose of bridging the salvific message as part of his Macedonian Call. Keeping in mind the varied populace Paul encountered, this writing specifically focuses on the apostle's Berean ministry to examine elements of the city inhabitant's historical, cultural, and social backgrounds that influenced his contextualization methodology in a cross-cultural

¹ *Conforming to Jesus Ministry*, Paul's Second Missionary Journey Map.
https://www.conformingtojesus.com/charts-maps/en/paul%27s_second_journey_map.htm

² Qualify this date with multiple sources.

³ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, Publishing Company, 1998), 471.

setting. The study analyzes ethnic Jews, prominent Greek women, and Greek men who comprised his audiences (vv. 11-12). Why look back at Paul's evangelistic adaptations in the early church's inception? Scripture in its ageless truths, provides lessons for the believer with methods for contemporary mission through examination of Paul's communicative approaches to the uniqueness of wide-ranging people groups.

To understand Paul's contextualization techniques in his Berean ministry, one first needs to delve briefly into the historical aspects of the Jerusalem Council within the scope of his Macedonian Call backdropping Paul's second missionary trip Paul began his journey on the back of the resolved conflict from the Jerusalem Council based on contextualization issues that arose from the influx of Gentile Christians into the young church. The Council of Jerusalem holds an integral piece to understanding God's redemptive plan for both Jews and Gentiles as it approaches a pivotal moment for the Church in terms of expanding outward from Jerusalem to the nations. Further, it addressed several cultural issues pertaining to the Gentiles. Must the Gentiles become Jews first embracing the lifestyle of the law? Or, could they retain their culture taking on membership in the community of believers. Further, would the Jerusalem church approve of unhindered outreach to the Gentiles?"⁴ Contention arose over Gentiles being circumcised and keeping the law of Moses to determine salvation (15:1, 5). The apostle and elders resolved it noting God did not distinguish between the Jews and Gentiles purifying their hearts all the same (vv. 7-9). The council chose Paul, Barnabas, Judas (also named Barsabas), and Silas to deliver the message to Gentile believers (v. 22). Later, Paul separated from Barnabas and traveled with Silas to strengthen the churches. Yet, Paul faced these same culturally-based

⁴ Robert L. Gallagher and Paul L. Hertig, eds., *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*: 34 (American Society of Missiology) (Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 2004) 197.

issues that created liminal boundaries for him to cross with intentional strategies in mission. His methodologies involved contextualization. Strong defined contextualization as the “relationship of the Christian faith to its cultural context.”⁵ As Paul obeyed the Spirit’s Macedonian Call resulting from a vision at Troas (16:9-10), he encountered diverse people groups of which to adapt the method of delivering the good news.

Ethnic Jews

Heeding the Macedonian Call posed challenges for Paul. He did not persuade many of the Jews resulting in agitators stirring up the city and his departure. His Thessalonian ministry followed suit likewise. After fleeing Thessalonica under the cover of darkness from angry Jews, Paul left for Berea (v. 10). Locationally, Berea lies 60 miles south of Thessalonica, also part of Macedonia (v.10).⁶ Thus, he traveled the Via Egnatia or the Roman Road once again^{7 8} Paul probably arrived around 51 AD, during his second missionary trip but before the fall of the second temple in 70 AD. During the time of Paul’s visit, Berea had grown to a prosperous city with a large Jewish colony (v. 10)⁹ The Jews in Berea either settled there from people exiled previously from the Northern or Southern Kingdoms. The Jewish religion at this time was protected by the Roman Empire.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Paul addressed three groups with the message of salvation: Berean Jews, prominent women, and Greek men (Acts 17:12).

⁵ Gallagher and Hertig, eds., *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 17.

⁶ Ray Vander Laan, *Cultures in Conflict Discovery Guide*, 132.

⁷ “Paul in Berea,” *Bible Journey*, <https://www.thebiblejourney.org/biblejourney1/10-pauls-journey-to-phrygia-macedonia/paul-in-berea/>

⁸ “Paul in Berea,” *Bible Journey*,

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ William Mitchell Ramsey, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen*, 232.

While Luke did not say whether Paul stopped immediately at the synagogue, the narrator did highlight it as his first stop. Acts 17:10 notes that Paul and Silas went to the synagogue upon arrival.” Luke specifically qualified it as the synagogue of the Jews. The Bereans were Judean Jews. The synagogue served as a place of Torah study or worship. Malina described a synagogue of the Jews as a gathering or assembly, meeting place, or men’s community center for Judeans. When ten or more Jewish, male adults meet together, even in someone’s residence, the group can call it a synagogue. As the assembly’s membership grows, they would put up a dedicated building with its size reflecting the economic side of the community.¹¹ The fact that Berea had its own synagogue reflects the number of ethnic Jews in the community and their wealth. Greek Israelites had their own separate synagogue.¹² Therefore, one might surmise that Paul only witnessed to Israelite Judeans in the synagogue rather than Hellenistic. Further, while the term Judean characterized both devout Judeans and assimilated Israelite Greeks, culturally speaking, Hellenistic Israelites from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia went to a separate synagogue called the “synagogue of the freedmen.” Acts 6:9 cited one in Jerusalem.¹³ The Greek Israelites were less informed about traditions, while more assimilated to the Mediterranean behaviors and values from non-Israelites. Whether Berea had a separate synagogue for Hellenistic converts Luke did not specify.¹⁴

¹¹ James Jeffers, *The Graeco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 217.

¹² Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch. *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 122.

¹³ Malina and Pilch. *Social-science Commentary on the Book of Acts*, 217

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Perhaps, Paul intentionally stopped there because it had a sizable population of Jews. Ramsey supported this theory believing Paul went to Berea because of the Jewish settlers there. The synagogue provided a place for his gospel witness.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Paul stopped in the synagogues upon visiting a town as was his custom (17:2). It additionally may have been habitual insofar as remaining true to his identity as a Jew educated at the feet of Gamaliel (22:3). Scripture does note Paul went to the synagogue of the Jews as customary to him and evangelized to them (13:5; 14:1; 17:1, 2, 10). Nonetheless, it provided him with a ready audience for testimony. Scriptural reference to Paul's took advantage of a ready audience by going to the synagogue of the Jews in Berea. Berea had grown to a prosperous city in Roman times with a large Jewish community¹⁶ Thus, he met where they already congregated.

In contrast to the Thessalonians, Luke describes the Bereans as *eugenes* meaning well born. Luke contrasted Bereans to Thessalonians of which the former showed a character of nobleness, while the latter one of rabble rouser. Thus, Berean character influenced the setting's culture. According to Johnson, nobleness means well born (Greek: *eugenes*)¹⁷ First Cor 1:26 and Luke 19:12 implies *eugenes* describes a person of higher standing with a social status in the world. In the context of the verse, however, it would seem to mean more gracious and open minded. Upholding this supposition, the NKJV describes *eugenes* as fair minded and NLT as open-minded. Acts 17:11 illustrates their open-mindedness to Scripture with three verbs,

¹⁵ William Mitchell Ramsey, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 226.

¹⁶ "Paul in Berea," *Bible Journey*,

¹⁷ Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 307.

received, searched, and find.¹⁸ Thus, the Bereans received what Paul had to say. The group examined the Scripture daily with eagerness to confirm what he had said (Acts 17:11). The word examine in Greek can indicate a legal examination of witnesses (4:9; 12:19; 24:8; 28:18). Malina saw this as suitable since Paul's testimony utilized Israelite traditions.¹⁹ Acts 17:11b notes the Bereans "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." This alludes to a written form of either the Torah and/or prophetic documents. Perhaps, Paul crafted his teaching in testimony fashion knowing the Bereans would confirm it in Scripture as their touchstone of truth.²⁰

Prominent Greek Women

Like Thessalonica, Paul's audience in Berea also had a Greek character. Aside from the ethnic Jews who received the word of God, a number of prominent Greek women (Greek: *euschémón*; εὐσχήμων, ον) also believed it (v. 12). Luke indicates their presence in reverse order than the Thessalonian account listing prominent Greek first in Berea (v. 4). Within the cultural and social framework of Acts, the narrator highlights the role of women in the early church's formation as all one in Christ. Ashley added that women too, acted as recipients of God's favor. Throughout Acts and the Pauline epistles, women became full members of Jesus' faith community, and later took on roles as leaders.²¹

¹⁸ In describing the Bereans fair mindedness Acts 17:11 notes, "These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (NKJV).

¹⁹ Malina and Pilch, *Social-science Commentary on the Book of Acts*, 124.

²⁰ Simon J. Kistemaker, *The New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 620.

²¹ Edith Ashley, *Women in Luke's Gospel* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2000), iii, <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/804/adt-NU20020222.16120002whole.pdf;jsessionid=0977E91315C10579841B05602247798F?sequence=1>

At the time of Paul's ministry, Beroea had been the seat of the provincial assembly of Macedonia. The high priest of the imperial cult headed it.²² While an established city under Roman rule, Greek women had few rights opposed to men. Jeffers stated married women had to abide by established household duties. Even upper-class women had to remain inside the home except when participating in important events. Notwithstanding, male relatives had to accompany them outside the home.²³ Working under these social regulations, prominent women either heard Paul in the company of their husbands or another male relative. Conceivably, the wife believed, and the husband did not. Lydia, a Macedonian, contrasts to general Hellenist gender limitations established during the classical period. Bruce explained that Macedonian women characteristically conducted themselves independently from men. Further, he said that the Roman law governing the colony allowed for different privileges for freeborn women with three children and freedwomen with four children. This included rights to make legal transactions on their own.²⁴ Prominent women in Beroea may have had more freedom than women in other cities that Paul visited. Further, the fact that Luke mentioned prominent women first, may indicate that these same women who received the word of God may have played a major role later in the formation of the early church.

Greek Men

Luke mentioned Greek men among the believers as well as the prominent women in Beroea. In 17:12, he did not describe the Beroean men (Greek: andrōn; ἀνδρῶν) who believed

²² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 98.

²³ Jeffers, *The Graeco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 243.

²⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: A New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 311-312.

further. However, he referred to the Thessalonian men as devout (Greek: *sebomenōn*; *σεβομένων*; 17:4). This leaves the reader with the question whether Paul evangelized to God-fearers, proselytes, or pagans (cf. 1 Thess 1:5–2:16 for Paul’s account of the church’s founding). It additionally gives rise as to the location where the Greek men heard Paul teach. Luke did not specify where. Luke made it clear that Paul evangelized to both Jews and Gentiles in the synagogue during the apostle’s travels to Antioch (Acts 13:16; 43, 48), Iconium (14:1-2), Thessalonica (17:1-4); and Corinth (18:4).

In Acts 10:2, Luke describes Cornelius as a God-fearer. He prayed to God continually and did many works of charity for the people. In essence, Cornelius had familiarity with the God of Israel and probably came in contact with Jewish people. Kraabel notes from *Pauly-Wissowa*, that God-fearers (Greek: *sebomenoi* or *phoboumenoi ton theon*) frequented synagogue services, held scriptural, monotheistic beliefs and participated in some ceremonial traditions of the Law, but did not convert fully through circumcision.²⁵ Acts 10:2 uses the adjective *phobeō* (cf. Acts 17:4 *sebō*). Paul did not describe the Greek men in Berea as either *sebomenoi* or *phoboumenoi ton theon*. Having been assimilated to Mediterranean values and cultures, the Greeks in Berea probably had shown favor toward the Jews, perhaps in offering financial support for a local synagogue.²⁶ In contrast, Gentile proselytes became full members of the Jewish community by full adherence to the letter of the law and its traditions, including circumcision. They also went through purity rites via baptism.²⁷ Few Greek men went that far. Some of the converts could

²⁵ K. G. Kuhn and H. Stegemann, "Proselyten," *RE*, suppl. ix (1962), 1260.

²⁶ Kraabel in Marjorie J. Cooper, "Theological Perspectives on the God-Fearers, with Application to Acts 13:48." *Presbyterion* 46, no. 1 (April 1, 2020): 90–99.

²⁷ Jeffers, *The Graeco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, 218.

have been Gentile pagans, worshippers of multiple gods. Esler believed most Gentiles mentioned in Lucan writings had converted to Christianity from idolatry, however, they previously had been associated with the Jewish synagogues.²⁸ From a cultural standpoint, ancient Macedonians during the Hellenistic periods had distinct ethnic characteristics from Greeks. Thus, pagan converts formerly held polytheistic views, but their gods did not include those from Greece.²⁹ Stefov noted Macedonians may have looked toward the philosophical and theological theories associated with a single divine being--a God in heaven.³⁰ Notwithstanding, whether a God-fearer, Jewish proselyte, or pagan, Paul had the opportunity to minister in a field ready for harvest.

Presumably, Paul would have presented Christ to the Gentile Bereans with different nomenclature and language. The Macedonians spoke koine Greek. The passage does not mention translators, so Paul must have had knowledge of Greek to communicate with them. God-fearers, proselytites, and pagans more than likely would not have had the same familiarity with Scripture as the ethnic Jews. With this presumption, Paul would have made adaptations to the way he presented Christ to the Gentile Bereans so they would understand the gospel.

In a larger scope of Paul's contact with Gentiles, he may have interacted with them in multiple areas like the synagogue, marketplace, or trade guilds of tentmaking. Scripture highlights the presence of God-fearers in the synagogue (ie., 14:1; 17:1-4). For example, in the

²⁸ Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 31.

²⁹J. S. Gandeto. "Differences Between Ancient Macedonians and Ancient Greeks." *History of Macedonia.org*. <http://www.historyofmacedonia.org/AncientMacedonia/gandeto.html>

³⁰Risto Stefov, "History of the Macedonian People - The Rise of Christianity a New Beginning," History of the Macedonian People from Ancient Times to the Present, https://mk.wikibooks.org/wiki/History_of_the_Macedonian_People_-_The_Rise_of_Christianity_a_New_Beginning

synagogue at Pisidian Antioch Paul addressed the assembly as “Men of Israel, and you who fear God,” (13:16). A great multitude of devout Greeks in the Thessalonica synagogue believed Jesus is the Christ (17:4). Another possibility of Gentile witness existed through mixed table-fellowship in which Paul spoke to Jews and Greeks who had attended synagogue. Nevertheless, Paul’s message of salvation went to the Jews first (cf. 13:46). Since Scripture does not specify it, one only can draw hypothetical conclusions through a historical reconstruction of Luke and Paul’s letters analyzing his patterns of witness. With surety, Paul preached to the Diaspora Jews and Greek men in bringing both into the community of believers.

Paul’s Contextualization Strategies

Paul’s contextualization strategies in Acts 17:10-15 encompass location, rhetorical technique, culture, and gender. As customary for Paul, he would witness in the synagogue (13:5; 14:1; 17:1, 2, 10). Location played an important role in this passage as Paul brought the gospel there. In addition to the ethnic Jews, he may have interacted with prominent Greek women and Greek men in the synagogue providing a pathway to Gentile conversion (17:12). Insofar as his rhetorical technique, Paul presumably adapted it to the Jews in the Berean synagogue. Malina saw Paul’s manner of teaching as a testimony utilizing Israelite traditions.³¹ It worked well with the open-minded Bereans who responded to Paul by receiving, searching, and finding scriptural evidence to confirm his message to them (v. 11). The word examine (NIV) in Greek can indicate a legal examination of witnesses (4:9; 12:19; 24:8; 28:18).

One key point to take away from Paul’s witnessing strategies comes with his ability to bring the gospel message to the cultures associated with ethnic Jews, Gentiles and women. He reached across diverse cultures that traversed ethnicity and gender. Since his reach encompassed

³¹ Malina and Pilch, *Social-science Commentary on the Book of Acts*, 124.

multiple people groups, it ensured a greater chance that new converts would pass along what they learned to others within their own communities. Thus, Gentiles would have witnessed the gospel to the dominant culture of other Macedonians or Roman citizens in Berea.³²

When Paul left Berea because of Thessalonian agitators, Silas and Timothy stayed behind. They perhaps had done so to calm the city, but additionally to establish a church. It would seem many believed because of Paul's Berean ministry. More importantly, Paul began the realization of mission to the nations in Berea as part of his Macedonian Call.

³² Thomas A. Kraabel, "The Disappearance of the 'God-Fearers,'" *Numen* 28, no. 2 (1981): 113–26. Kraabel felt that Gentile witness primarily originated in the synagogue. The God-fearer's Christian among the Jews demonstrated the straight-line expansion of Christianity in the early church: Jew — God-fearer — Gentile.

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