

Men's Group 5th November 2013

Gentlemen,

This evening we have a shortened meeting starting at 2030 after the church prayer meeting. The two chapters here have some interesting history and narrative but not a huge amount else so I hope we can clear them this evening and next week start on the second part of the book which focusses more or less exclusively on Paul.

By the way Jeff from ARDA will be in Singapore for the synod meeting on Friday and Saturday. Depending on his schedule it might be possible for some of us who wish to meet with him, to discuss the whole Laos thing.

Acts 11. 1 – 18

Here Peter repeats the entire story of the dream to the Jerusalem church. In verse 18 it says 'When they heard this they quieted down.' What then was their state of mind before? Why such a big issue?

In **verse 17** we are told that God has given the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles in verse 17. In **verse 18** this is seen as equating directly to 'God giving them the repentance that leads to life'

Are these two things the same, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the repentance that leads to life? What about today? Is it the same?

Acts 11. 19 – 26

Chronology

Paul's conversion seems to have come very soon after the death of Stephen, maybe AD 37.

Paul is in Damascus for 3 years, then via Jerusalem to Tarsus in Turkey; from there he moves to Antioch (? AD 41-42).

Acts 11.19 takes us back to AD 37 again, implying the foundation of the Antioch church at around that time. So when Paul gets there it would be maybe 4 or 5 years old.

The famine in 11.28 -30 and the trip to Jerusalem have to be between AD 41 (Claudius) and 44 (Herod Agrippa). It is one year after Paul arrives in Antioch so probably AD 42-43.

Barnabas was the man who introduced Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem when no one wanted to know him. Here he seems to do the same for him again, in Antioch. Barnabas and Paul were obviously pretty close at this time but later they will have a serious split. John Mark, who returns to Antioch with them in 12.30 will feature in this.

The sudden death of Herod Agrippa I in AD 44 (12.23) is well documented from other sources, including Josephus, *The Jewish War*.

The execution of James the Apostle would be spring of AD 44, slightly before Easter.

This all fits together pretty well.

THEOLOGY

Professor Bart Ehrman—a well-known popular American theologian—lists three criteria that may be useful for assessing the likely historicity of biblical stories, whether they really happened or not. He suggests asking the following three questions:

- Is it situationally/culturally consistent? Does it fit with what we know about how things operated in that culture at that time?
- Is it attested by multiple independent sources, preferably as early as possible?
- Would it be advantageous or disadvantageous to the church to invent the story?

The last of these is particularly interesting. Stories that show the church or the major players in a poor light are unlikely to have been invented.

A classic of this is the story (told in all four gospels) of the leading disciple of his time denying Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. It's extraordinarily unlikely that anyone would have invented such a story. Along with Jesus calling Peter 'Satan' in Mark 8, it has to be one of the best-attested stories in the entire New Testament.

Acts 12. 1 - 17

Here we have execution of James, and the first serious politically significant attack on the church. This is James the Apostle, not James the brother of Jesus who at this time is in the process of taking over the leadership of the Jerusalem church (as we see for example in 12.17). This process may have been accelerated by Peter's vision—now he may be more focussing on international ministry. We know surprisingly little about Peter's life from here onwards.

Another miracle story. Then a rather light-hearted story about Rhoda and Peter at the house of John Mark. How does this story measure up against Bart Ehrman's criteria?

Acts 12. 20 -23

There's an interesting parallel here between the deaths of Herod Agrippa and that of Ananias and Sapphira—both ascribed to the intervention of God or His Providence. Obviously this is commentary rather than historical fact—one could never know. The sudden death is historical fact. The rest is how you choose to look at it.

Next week onwards, it's Paul and the foundation of 'the church as we know it today'.