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Rightly Dividing the Epistles

By Andrew Brown

Otis Q. Sellers, Bible teacher, recommended that serious Bible students consult E.W. Bullinger's *Companion Bible* regularly. Bullinger was a great teacher of the dispensational dividing line at Acts 28:28, but it was not until a few years before his death that he distinguished between Paul's epistles written during and after Acts. Similarly, Sir Robert Anderson, author of *The Silence of God*, discerned the continuing Israelite character throughout Acts, but failed to differentiate among the epistles. Many dispensationalists continue in this mistake, yet it need not be so. We can stand upon the shoulders of students like Bullinger and Anderson and make strides in our understanding of the Bible.

Scripture calls believers during the Acts period a "sect" of Judaism (Acts 28:22), rather than a new religion of Gentiles (Gr: *ethnos* should be translated *nations*). The Apostle Paul testified before Agrippa, **"to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come"** (Acts 26:22 NASB throughout). To this point the inspired Apostle only spoke what the Old Testament said would come. It was later that Paul preached about the Dispensation of Grace, the mystery (secret) **"which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His apostles and prophets"** (Eph. 3:5). In this Paul spoke a secret that was hidden from Moses and the Prophets, but if we ponder when, it was only AFTER Acts 28:28. Recognizing an Acts 28:28 boundary line allows these and many other passages to harmonize as they ought. When facts of Scripture such as these are contemplated, and not set aside, most dispensationalists are found to be standing with errors -- like ignorance of what the Dispensation of Grace actually is: salvation by grace and Gentile salvation are *not* what distinguish this outflow of God's working.

Paul wrote six epistles during Acts. When and where Paul was when he wrote them can be somewhat easily tracked through the details within Acts and the epistles. Paul wrote the Thessalonians letters from Corinth in Acts 18:5-8 and 18:11 respectively. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus in Acts 19:10 and followed up with 2 Corinthians in Acts 20:1-2. Paul wrote Romans around Acts 20:3. The only debate is Galatians with an early and late view; most likely Paul wrote to his first apostolic journey believers in Acts 14:28. Regardless, the internal evidence links all these epistles to Acts, the internal evidence being the character of the Acts period: abundant miracles as apostles heralded the gospel to all the Israelites located near and far (regardless of lifestyle).

Israel was center stage. **"Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit in circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God"** (Rom. 3:1-2). The Jews had (and still have, aorist tense verbs) the advantage in every way when Romans was written. Possession of God's Word was the primary advantage. Romans, the last epistle written in the Acts Period, does not deviate from an Israelite character.

Acts records that Paul's meeting in Rome was centered on the Jews there. The Roman letter was preparation for the salvation-bringing message and contains Acts period points of clarification for Israelites: **"But if you bear the name 'Jew' and rely on the Law"** (Rom. 2:17). Non-Israelites are not

included here. These Romans were 'Jews' who highly regarded the law God gave to Moses. Paul addresses them: **"I am speaking to those who know [Gr: *ginosko*] the law"** (Rom. 7:1). *Ginosko* shows the audience knows the law by experience. Non-Israelite Gentiles have no experience of Israel's law. Examination of Romans 4:1 should end the debate: **"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh has found"** (Rom. 4:1). Abraham was the forefather of the Israelite nation. Exegesis must determine the Romans were Abraham's descendants *"according to the flesh!"* Statements like **"Abraham our father"** (Rom. 4:12) and **"our father Isaac"** (Rom. 9:10) must not be minimized or discarded by the truth seeker.

Non-Israelite Gentiles were grafted into Israel's olive tree in Romans 11, but they were subservient to Israel, proving Israel's advantage. **Gentiles were "partakers with them [Israel] of the rich root of the olive tree"** (Rom. 11:17), **"it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you"** (Rom. 11:18). Being grafted into Israel brought many blessings, but this was a temporary situation. The Gentiles were subservient and supported by Israel, in contrast to Ephesians 3:6, which proclaims Gentile equality with Israel: **"That the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus."** These two passages are contradictory without Acts 28. This is the only educated answer. Romans 9:4-5 reveals that one of many aspects of Israel's advantage was the promises. This could not be true if Gentile promises (like those in Ephesians 3) were given beforehand. Dividing Paul's epistles is mandatory.

Paul's activity in Corinth was **"reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks"** (Acts 18:4). Many Israelites abandoned Judaism and adopted the Greek lifestyle and were called Greeks. The only reason Paul heralded to non-Israelite Gentiles in Corinth or elsewhere was to **"move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them"** (Rom. 11:14). Therefore non-Israelite believers were minimal--only a few "branches" compared to the whole tree. The Corinthians were Israelites. They erroneously separated into factions following the other Israelites including Peter, Apollos, and Paul (1 Cor. 1:12). **"I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses"** (1 Cor. 10:1, 2). The Corinthian ancestors were Israelites enslaved by Pharaoh and were part of the Exodus! They participated in a modified version of Passover, **"For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven"** (1 Cor. 5:7, 8). These Israelites were partaking in God's feast given to the nation of Israel; this was strictly regulated for Gentiles (Exodus 12:43-49).

The same can be said for Galatians. Never would the verse **"But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother"** (Gal. 4:26) be spoken to a non-Israelite. Their heritage is stamped in the letter: **"Be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham"** (Gal. 3:7). To be a son (representative) of Abraham, an Israelite must have faith, but first must be an Israelite. Jesus gave this exact argument to Israelites who must **"do the deeds of Abraham"** (John 8:39). **"And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise"** (Gal. 4:28). This statement had enormous impact on those dispersed Israelites who felt cut off from the promises of God due to their inability to follow the law, which could only be followed in the land of Israel. **"You observe days and months and seasons and years"** (Gal. 4:10) reveals they were still following Israel's observational days. This epistle's focus on circumcision and law keeping reveals its Israelite background.

In Thessalonica Paul followed his *custom* of entering the synagogue and teaching the Jews and Greeks (Israelites) for three Sabbaths before being chased out by the rejecting Jews (Acts 17:2-3). The letter's

internal evidence is neutral regarding their heritage, but the book of Acts testifies they were Israelites. There is no evidence Paul gave his message to any Gentiles there. (There is also compelling evidence the Hebrews epistle was written to these Thessalonians BEFORE Paul wrote his two epistles. This may be covered in a future article. Hebrews obviously bears an Israelite audience.)

All these letters have the characteristics of the Acts Period commission (Mark 16:15-20). This commission pertained to every Israelite hearing the salvation message from a God-commissioned apostle. It was accomplished by God working in power with signs and miracles (tongues, healing, exorcisms, etc.) with God's protection from poisons, serpents, and the like. **"These signs will accompany those who have believed"** (Mark 16:17). The record confirms: **"they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word by the signs that followed"** (Mark 16:20). Mark documents *past tense words* since the commission was completed. The **"Lord will execute His Word on the earth thoroughly and quickly"** (Rom. 9:26). God reached over 8 million Jews dispersed abroad, speaking many different dialects, facing diverse Satanic attacks, in approximately 33 years.

Paul heralded **"in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ"** (Rom. 15:19). The power of the Spirit was with Paul everywhere. **"God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul"** (Acts 19:11). Miracles were commonplace. The apostles were nothing like missionaries today. **"My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power"** (1 Cor. 2:4). The Spirit demonstrated miraculous power so that your **"faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God"** (1 Cor. 2:5). Visible power was behind these words. The Thessalonians experienced the same. **"Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power"** (1 Thess. 1:5). There was no mistaking it. **"You received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performed its work in you who believe"** (1 Thess. 2:13).

Signs followed the apostles and believers: **"God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by the various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will"** (Heb. 2:4). The Lord distributed many gifts to the believers. Paul was **"longing to see [the Romans] so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you that you may be established"** (Rom. 1:11). The Spirit's gifts and power **"were bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands"** (Acts 8:18). There were no secret believers. With signs following belief, believers were **"made a public spectacle"** (Heb. 10:33).

The **"testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift"** (1 Cor. 1:6, 7). This reminds the reader of Mark's commission. One can easily notice throughout the Corinthian epistle the use (and misuse) of the gifts. **"Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy"** (1 Cor. 14:1). The entire chapter pertains to miraculous tongues and prophecy present among them. The Galatians received a miraculous vision of Christ crucified, **"before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified"** (Gal. 3:1). Paul makes his case: miracles were among them because of them **"hearing with faith"** (Gal. 3:2, 4). Everything was perfectly consistent with Mark's commission: **"The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles"** (2 Cor. 12:12).

By accepting the truth of the Israelite, Acts period character of Paul's early epistles, one will see many

passages shine with more depth and significance. One's understanding will greatly abound through numerous studies including church, the body of Christ, Gentiles, Greeks, *apostello*, etc. The list may seem endless but **"see to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking"** (Heb. 12:25). Follow E.W. Bullinger's example, who after a mistake of similar division was illuminated, is quoted as saying, "That scraps half the books I've written. But we want the Truth, and the Truth is in what you have said." Recognizing the hints these great Bible scholars have given us, we can stand on their shoulders, study them out and advance in the truth.