

Sha'ul of Tarsus & His Letters ~ Part 34

Sha'ul's Second Missionary Journey ~ Part 2

Note: To examine the graphics in this series, click on them for a pop-up version.

We continue our ongoing story of **Sha'ul's Second Missionary Journey** beginning in Acts 16:1.

¹ Sha'ul came down to Derbe and went on to Lystra, where there lived a talmid named Timothy. He was the son of a Jewish woman who had come to trust and a Greek father.

He was the son of a Jewish woman and, therefore, a **Jew**, not a **Gentile**. Many **Believers** suppose he was a **Gentile** for at least these two reasons: (1) At Numbers 1:2, God calls for a census of Israel ***"by their families, by their fathers' houses."*** (2) The genealogies in the **Tanakh** always mention the men and only rarely the women. Nevertheless, while legal responsibilities and entitlements are passed from father to son, **Jewish** and **non-Jewish** descent are invariably traced through the mother, not the father. The child of a **Jewish** mother and a **Gentile** father is **Jewish**, and the child of a **Gentile** mother and a **Jewish** father is **Gentile**. If a **Gentile** woman converts to **Judaism**, she is a **Jew**, and her subsequent children are likewise **Jewish**. The questions for us are, first, whether this was the case in the first century, and second, even if it was, is it authorized biblically? The conclusion that **Timothy** was a **Jew** and not a **Gentile** is important for understanding v. 3.

Timothy was the son of a **Jewish** woman ***and a Greek father***. Since **exogamy** (marrying outside one's social group) violates **Jewish** law, an explanation is called for, although any conclusion must be a conjecture. **Stern** believes the most likely reason for **Timothy's** mixed parentage is that **Timothy's** mother, **Eunice** (2 Timothy 1:5), like many **Jews** today, was assimilated into the dominant **Gentile** culture around her and did not observe **halakhah** (Jewish Rabbinical Law). Before coming to the **New Covenant** faith, she married a **non-Jew**. Still, afterward, her pagan and nonbelieving husband left or died, after which she raised her son in the faith ***"from childhood"*** (2 Timothy 3:15). Possibly, she and **Timothy** went to live with her **Messianic Jewish** mother **Lois** (2 Timothy 1:5).

² All the brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of Timothy. ³ Sha'ul wanted Timothy to accompany him, so he took him and did a b'rit-milah because of the Jews living in those areas, or they all knew that his father had been a Greek.¹

Sha'ul... took him and did a b'rit-milah, implying that he had an expert **mohel** ("circumciser") perform the operation. While **Sha'ul** had both **Jewish** ritual knowledge (Acts 22:3) and at least some manual dexterity (Acts 18:3), circumcising an adult is not a simple operation and typically requires a specialist.

Because of the Jews living in those areas, several **non-Messianic Jewish** thinkers have a high regard for **Yeshua**. Even if they don't acknowledge Him as the **Messiah**, they consider Him to have been a good **Jew** whose teachings were well within the rulebook of **Judaism** and whose life can serve as an example to all.

Sha'ul's detractors would say that his circumcising **Timothy** was motivated by sheer opportunism, that he did not care a whit about the commandment itself (see Acts 15:1) and, in fact, explicitly taught that circumcision didn't matter at all (1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:6, 6:15), and that he circumcised **Timothy** only ***"because of"*** the **Jews**, that is, to conciliate them, so that they would not raise the issue.

¹ Acts 16:1-3

But this theory conflicts with the **New Testament** evidence. **Sha'ul** himself observed the **Torah** to the end of his life and never taught **Messianic Jews** to stop observing it (Acts 21:20–27).

So, if *"because of the Jews"* does not mean to appease them, what does it mean? It means that even though it was not **Sha'ul's** responsibility to have **Timothy** circumcised, he took it upon himself because he did not want **Timothy's** uncircumcision to provoke questioning that would impede the **Gospel**. The **Gospel** contains the stumbling block of the **Messiah's** death (1 Corinthians 1:23), and a good proclaimer of the **Gospel** will remove all other stumbling blocks if he can. That is the point: *Sha'ul anticipated the problem and solved it.*

Had **Timothy** been a **Gentile**, there would have been no problem. **Jews** were glad to welcome **Gentile "God-fearers."** It is because **Timothy** was, in fact, **Jewish** by having a **Jewish** mother, yet uncircumcised because his **Gentile** father had not had him circumcised, and because this was widely known, there was danger of the **Gospel's** being misrepresented as contrary to **Judaism**. ²

Personal Note: I debated with myself on this post between what I have presented above about **Timothy** versus waiting until we got to the **Letter to Timothy**. I hope you agree that I chose wisely.

In our next post, we will continue to explore **Shaul's Second Missionary Journey**, starting in chapter 6:4.

² All the commentary in this post is taken from: David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Commentary, Ac 16:1-3.