

**THE APOSTLE PAUL'S EXPERIENCE OF *COSMIC CONFLICT* AT  
EPHESUS (Acts 19)**

**Presented by**

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The advent of what academics now call postmodernity and with it, the retreat of scientific, rationalistic materialism as the reigning worldview of the West, bodes well for a revived appreciation of numinous dimensions of spiritual experience in the Scriptures which assume the existence of a metaphysical sphere in the cosmos beyond the verification of the senses. On the global scene, the enlightened, empirical, dogma-dominated, religion which Western Christians have for centuries called 'normal' (except in times of spiritual awakening) is under serious challenge, and is in fact currently being superceded by a revisioned Christianity emanating from the global South.

The latter claims dependence on supernatural empowerment and affirms the reality of a world between God and humans where intelligent, immaterial beings such as angels and demons are in conflict with one another. The effects of this pendulum swing are being felt in the West. In the past few decades the subject of spiritual warfare has received growing attention among religious writers, scholars included.

There are many cultural indications that significant numbers of Christians in the global North are abandoning their hitherto, triumphalist, ethnocentric dismissal of such 'southern' Christianity as 'primitive', 'unenlightened,' or 'premodern'. In effect, a widespread awakening across denominational boundaries is occurring in North America and Europe. Far from being viewed as regressive or detrimental to the faith, such a liberation of Christianity from centuries of spiritual imprisonment at the hands of enlightened rationalists (and I might add, the corrosive genres of 'higher' criticism to which they have subjected the Scriptures) may actually prove to be an advantageous convergence with postmodernity.

As a result of this process (what we might legitimately term 'rechristianization' in a first century sense), many Christians in the secular West are being invested with a freshly revitalized, apologetic relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. With renewed relevance they are becoming capable of conversing with the many around them who profess no interest whatever in the Christian religion, but are nonetheless passionately following spiritual paths which offer the genuine possibility of deep levels of interior connectedness with the transcendent, immaterial world.

Ironically, these postmodern seekers (many are lapsed church goers) who reject religion but espouse spirituality, often conscientiously practice spiritual disciplines, experience ecstatic, altered states of consciousness through prayer and meditation, experiment with non-medical forms of healing, as well as give serious attention to extrasensory experiences such as dreams, visions, locutions and unusual forms of guidance, all of which were quite familiar to first century, Book of Acts, Christians. However, in the flatter world of 'modern' religiosity, such supra-rationality pursued in an open cosmos has little place. It has traditionally been downplayed if not outrightly dismissed by many mainline theologians and consenting clergy along with the rank and file in the pew who have collectively redefined Christian orthodoxy in mostly cerebral terms, that is, giving intellectual assent to articles of right belief with little felt need for direct divine intervention from 'the beyond' on a regular basis.

In a spiritually animated, postmodern context, the Book of Acts, with its numerous stories expressive of the diverse ways in which humans both participate in and are impacted by a cosmic conflict between opposing nonmaterial forces, is reacquiring a status of elevated importance. It becomes again a timeless source of ancient wisdom for those followers of Jesus Christ who see themselves as living in just such a world where only a thin veil separates the seen from the unseen. They feel no need to edit or 'criticize' the oft-times dramatic stories of cosmic conflict in Acts to make them more palatable to the 'modern' reader.

The events which unfold dramatically in Acts 19, when read against the backdrop of a postmodern, supernaturalistically sympathetic, Christian landscape, hold special interest for us as we are gathered here in ancient Ephesus. The chapter commences (vss. 1-7) with an eruption of spiritual energy among a group of disciples of John the Baptist encountered by Paul, who had not yet become followers of the Way. Regardless of the debates among commentators over the precise historical identity and theological status of these individuals, their initiation into the Christian movement, replete with the supra-rational phenomena of speaking in tongues and prophesying is indicative of a conversion experience well known to early Christians. Entrance into the first century apostolic church necessitated the new believer at the point of baptism being adequately prepared for the cosmic conflict by a charismatic infusion of spiritual power from the unseen world which effected deliverance from the grip of dark forces which had previously ruled his/her life.

The ritual act of baptism in the Acts 19 narrative, which served as a visible, symbolic point of contact between the seen world of the convert and the unseen world of warring spiritual powers, is a primary but not the only component of an initiation sequence which climaxed in the rapturous state of tongues speaking and prophesying signifying one's reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. These phenomena are best understood in the context of preceding occurrences in Acts as well as some comparable happenings in the Old Testament. They could be explained as an exaltation of the human spirit caught up in the act of worshipping the deity beyond the limits of mentally controlled, prelearned, liturgical recitation. Christian conversion in the first century has everything to do with the world of the spirits. It is not uncommon for the convert to be the willing recipient of an

otherworldly, angelic, state of psychic-spiritual intoxication spontaneously induced by the Holy Spirit, an immersion in the rarified air of the spiritual world as it were or a Spirit baptism as Pentecostals have termed it.

In early Christian conversions, an expected, conscious response of both head and heart to a reasonably proclaimed body of truths with clear behavioural implications for those who accepted them was central. At the same time, first century Christian preachers were neither oblivious to nor casual towards the reality of the cosmic conflict in the unseen world. They assumed that in order for a convert to be fully awakened and effectively equipped for it, incorporeal powers of darkness would need to be explicitly renounced and in some cases exorcised (with unsettling physical phenomena indicating their exit) and in their place, powers of light intentionally invoked (sometimes with the laying on of hands) with accompanying charismatic manifestations indicative of the new abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Such was their sense of what was 'normal' not 'paranormal'. It followed from this that they seriously viewed every convert's life as a localized battleground of the cosmic conflict, though the intensity of that conflict could vary significantly from person to person depending on the individual's previous degree of involvement with disembodied evil spirits.

The more bizarre account of an abortive Jewish exorcism recorded in vss.13-16 testifies to the generally accepted societal conviction about the normality of the cosmic conflict in the unseen world. Early Christians shared this worldview with many of their contemporaries, in this case seven, itinerant, evidently underpowered Jewish exorcists, the sons of Sceva. This episode of demonic activity in Ephesus shows the cosmic conflict to be so personalized and immanent that the embodied evil spirit is said to have engaged in comprehensible dialogue with the exorcists by taking control of the speech faculty of the man which it inhabited. The demonically afflicted man is also extraordinarily empowered by the indwelling/attached spirit to inflict physical wounds on the startled exorcists who outnumber him but to no avail.

In the content of vss.18-20 the narrator strongly suggests that the magical, occult activities of the local Ephesians for which they were widely known, should be seen as an expression of the intentional collaboration of human with demonic forces (both for good and evil purposes using white and black magic) in the cosmic conflict. Thus it was necessary for those joining the Christian movement to renounce explicitly all occultic activities and destroy any tools of the magical trade they possessed regardless of the personal cost entailed. Regarding this radical prerequisite for conversion, the early Christian evangelists brooked no compromise. On the other hand, those who were involved in the magical arts clearly saw the otherworldly ramifications of what they were doing. They had changed sides in the conflict and as a result needed new spiritual weaponry with which to wage war from the other side.

For the apostle Paul, his engagement in the cosmic conflict entered a stage of unprecedented intensification during his prolonged stay in Ephesus. This proved to have a profound, beneficial impact on the growth of the Christian movement in the city and throughout the entire province of Asia. As the third or fourth largest city in the Roman

Empire, Ephesus, according to Princeton scholar Bruce Metzger, was ‘of all ancient, Graeco-Roman cities...by far the most hospitable to magicians, sorcerers, and charlatans of all sorts.’ The manipulation of the supernatural was a lucrative industry in Ephesus. The city thrived on the manufacture of fetishes used in combination with spells and incantations contained in the famous ‘Ephesian Letters’ (grammata).

Current proponents of spiritual warfare theology are readily attracted to Acts 19 because of its detailed, informational value for understanding the levels, dynamics and strategies of cosmic conflict. Ephesus was a shrine city, the centre of devotion to the Goddess Artemis (Diana to the Romans). She was more popularly worshipped in Ephesus and throughout Asia than any other deity (vss. 27-28). Her temple was one of the magnificent, seven wonders of the ancient world. In the hierarchy of cosmic powers she was a deeply entrenched, ancestral ‘territorial spirit’, not a low ranking demon consigned to torment individuals. Her linkages to magic, sorcery and astrology have been archaeologically documented. She was apparently esteemed by her superstitious devotees who feared the personal, harmful impact of malicious spirits on a daily basis, as one who could protect them from such demonic harassment. Honored with a monthly festival, the Artemisia, her spiritual sovereignty, was reinforced by the popular myth of her statue having fallen from heaven (vs. 35). The Ephesus Artemis cult dominated the religious imagination of the Ephesian citizenry and was woven into the entire socio-economic and political fabric of municipal life.

The Acts narrative, however, makes Ephesus out to be an ideal place for a triumph of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because of its reputation as a centre for ‘demonic’ activity. It describes Artemis’ previously unchallenged spiritual authority as vigorously contested by the supernaturally charged evangelism of the apostle Paul who indisputably shows a connectedness to the spiritual world. His preaching of Jesus is authenticated by exorcisms and miraculous healings which arouse public attention and provoke opposition. Vs.23ff. recount in fast moving detail the urban uproar unleashed by the threat to the Artemis cult posed by Paul’s miracle-attested ministry.

The cosmic conflict visibly expresses itself initially in the form of the aroused opposition of the silversmiths who profited handsomely from the Artemis cult and now fear the loss of their livelihood. The clamour upsizes quickly into a public riot. The ensuing breakdown of public order threatens the lives of Paul and his companions (vs. 29f.) who narrowly avert personal disaster by the timely intervention of local political officials who appeal to the protesters to respect the rule of law and process their grievances in proper legal fashion. Embroiled in this tumult which is framed in miracle and magic, humans are enlisted to fight on both sides of the incarnated cosmic conflict. The growing, tense confrontation between the opposing parties is further fuelled by the fanatical glorification of Artemis in a two hour session of unison shouting by the raucous, feverish pitched crowd which assembles and performs like a robust Greek dramatic chorus in the great theatre situated at the heart of the city.

Prior to his arrival in Ephesus, the apostle Paul was no stranger to direct, on the ground encounters with dark cosmic forces. Clearly, however, the magnitude and intensity of his

clash with evil cosmic powers in the city was on a scale beyond anything he had hitherto known on his missionary journeys. In fact, he could well have been a premature casualty of the events that unfolded. Nevertheless he survived. Moreover the Acts narrator records that the apostle more than merely survived. In fact, his emboldened invitation to Ephesus' citizens to embrace a new transformative spirituality and turn their backs on the shadowy, fatalistic mixture of miracle, mystery and magic traditionally served up to the people of antiquity by demonic, cosmic forces through their human agents, was heard and responded to positively by many Ephesians and Asians.

In summary, while hardly successful in displacing Artemis from her spiritual throne, Paul's bold and electrified ministry in Ephesus (which interestingly enough included the use of his own healing amulets of handkerchiefs and aprons) did constitute an irreversible, on the beach landing, in the heavily fortified spiritual domain of Artemis. A subsequent, perhaps apocryphal, Christian tradition claims that the apostle John extended the Christian bridgehead into the enemy's territory a few decades later by going directly into the magnificent temple of Artemis and exorcising the demon of the goddess from it. Consequently, half the temple crumbled.

Implausible though this account might be to some, it stands squarely in the tradition of the Acts 19 version of the episode of the materialized cosmic conflict which had transpired earlier in Ephesus. The memory of this was not lost on the apostle Paul. In a letter authored toward the end of his life he reminded Ephesian believers that they were embroiled in a pitched battle against adversaries from a world beyond 'flesh and blood', a diabolical hierarchy of non-material entities- rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness, and spiritual forces in heavenly places. (Eph. 6:12/ NRSV). Thus he exhorted them to put on the full armour of Christ so as to be able to wage spiritual warfare effectively.