
FAQ

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Paul, Tentmaker

J.K. McKee revised 13 August, 2019

I heard a Messianic teacher say that Paul was not a “tentmaker,” but instead fashioned *tallits* or prayer shawls. Is there any proof of this?

It was not uncommon at all for religious Jews in the First Century to have a trade in which they were actively involved, and Paul, in addition to his religious training, was likely trained in some kind of art. Jews who were mobile were often able to practice their trade in whatever community or city they stayed, so they could support themselves. The reference to Paul as a “tentmaker” appears in Acts 18:1-3:

“After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they **were tent-makers.**”

Notice that the text describes Paul *and* the Roman Jews Priscilla and Aquila as “tentmakers by trade” (ESV). This indicates that to some degree the trade they practiced was one that could bring them a reasonable living. Would this living be made by making some kind of prayer shawl for members of the local Jewish community—or in a field that could service a larger clientele?

David Stern’s *Jewish New Testament Commentary* remarks on Acts 18:2, 3 (p 289) are completely mute about “tentmakers” being synonymous to “*tallit* makers.” However, the Power New Testament (Lexington, SC: Author, 2003), translated by William J. Morford, renders Acts 18:3 with “they *all* were prayer shawl makers by trade.” Justifying this translation, a footnote reads:

“Prayer shawl making required rabbinic training that all three had. The word *skēnopoioi*, translated prayer shawl makers or tent makers, is not found anywhere else in Scripture or secular Greek writing. Jewish men referred to the prayer shawl as a tent or prayer closet because it was placed over the head to shield the eyes while praying.”¹

While this is an interesting conclusion as to what “tentmaker” may be, Hebrew Roots teachers are often left on their own making it. We object to the assumption that a “tentmaker” must be a *tallit* maker because, (1) the *tallit* in its present form is a relatively new application of the command to wear *tzitzits* or fringes, coming in the last millennia of Jewish history; and (2) no current scholarship in the New Testament confirms that *skēnopoios* (σκηνοποιός) means “*tallit* maker.” There is some disagreement as to whether “tentmaker” is the best translation, though. *TDNT* notes, “If the trade is that of making tents of goat’s hair, Paul is perhaps weaving fabric. But rabbinic scholars do not favor weaving, and it is thus more likely that Paul is a ‘leather worker,’ and that as such he is a ‘tent maker.’”²

The question of how Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla were “tentmakers” is ultimately going to be solved in whether or not making prayer shawls, or working with actual tents, brought them a substantial income. We simply do not believe that

¹ William J. Morford, trans., *Power New Testament* (Lexington, SC: Author, 2003), 192 fn #3.

² W. Michaelis, “pitching tents, Tabernacles,” in *TDNT*, 1044.

manufacturing *tallits*, or any kind of religious items for that matter, would have enabled them to incur significant monies to live. Their market for work would have been limited to solely the Jewish community, and Diaspora Jews did not live in the Diaspora solely to do business among themselves—but also with the Gentiles around them. The understanding of Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla as leatherworkers involved with the tent making process seems best.