

Antioch on the Orontes

Setting

Founded by the Seleucids around 300 BC, Antioch lies at the foot of Mount Sylphus overlooking the navigable river Orontes. The Seleucids encouraged Jews to settle in Antioch from its inception giving them full citizenship. Many displaced Jews settle here during the Maccabean wars. When Antioch falls to the Romans in 64 BC, Pompey makes it a free city as well as the capital of the Roman province of Syria. Jews, Greeks, Orientals and Romans comprised the city, estimated at 500,000 and third in the empire to Rome and Alexandria. “Antioch the Beautiful” is well known for its paved boulevard flanked by a double colonnade along with trees and fountains. Magnificent structures dot the city to make its look impressive.

Historians describe Antioch as a city of energy and insolence, which became manifested in a series of revolts against Roman rule. Cicero declares the city a magnet for culture with groves of Daphne and a sanctuary for Apollo along with wild parties practiced in the name of religion. Despite this immoral backdrop, life in New Testament times is rich and varied.

An International Church

The persecution that resulted from the martyrdom of Stephen brings disciples to Antioch. At first, they preach the good news only to the Jews, but men from Cyprus and Cyrene preach to Hellenists. The Antioch church forges a new community of believers—Jews and Greeks side by side. The seemingly innocuous statement, “...in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26b), reveals a daring concept of two divergent cultures enjoying table fellowship together. No more Jew or Hellenist, all are Christian.

As news of this new development reaches the ears of the apostles in Jerusalem, they send Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, to assist them. Upon his arrival, Barnabas finds a commitment to the Lord that extends past language and culture to bring the two together as one. He sees how God’s grace has worked to make them of one heart and mind and bids them to remain steadfast in purpose. With so many coming to faith, Barnabas enlists the aid of Saul whom he secures from Tarsus (Acts 11:22-29). As prophets warn of a Judean famine, the church in Antioch ushers resources to come to the aid of their brothers.

A Sending Church

At the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the church in Antioch moves from a mission church to a mission sending church (Acts 13:1-5). Imagine a church where they send out their lead preachers to do mission work! Such a notion is inconceivable in our context. Since Barnabas hails from Cyprus and Saul has already had time in his hometown of Tarsus, Barnabas and Saul select familiar territory for their first assignment (Acts 4:36).

A Church in Conflict

False teachers endanger the unity of this church over whether Gentile converts must be circumcised (Acts 15:1-4). Even Peter and Barnabas cave under the pressure of false teaching as Paul must stand up to mounting popular opinion (Galatians 2:11-15). Paul holds to principle rather than popularity. He looks to the Word as the final word. In their time, they had no writings to layout the guidelines as we do today. They relied on prophecies, a consensus of thinking and reliance on the Spirit’s guidance. The scheme is still sound with a distinct advantage of having “our prophecies” written down. We can learn from the history of the early church on how to handle conflict and the maintain unity of the faith in the bond of peace (Ephesus 4:1-3). As we tear down walls of hostility, may we look to scripture as our guide and spread Christ’s peace in Christ’s way so we may truly be of the Way.

Steve Davis

Cyprus

Geography

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean (140 mi. long by 60 mi. wide). It lies 46 miles south of Turkey and 60 miles west of Syria. Two mountain ranges bound a wheat-growing plain in the island's midsection. Its highest peak rises to over 6000 feet. With mild winter temperatures, visitors can swim in the Mediterranean or snow ski in the mountains on the same day.

Produce

Historians speak well of the abundance of Cyprus—producing wine, oil and grain. Exports include salt, alum, gypsum and precious stones. However, what really built wealth for the island are silver, copper and lumber. Copper was in such abundance that the Greeks named the metal after the name of the island. Its wealth attracted every aspiring empire from Egypt to Babylon to Rome.

Historical Perspective

Evidence of the island of Cyprus being inhabited goes back to 10,000 BC. By 3,700 BC, the island is well inhabited. Cyprian culture is influenced by Minoan, Phoenician and Hellenistic civilizations. According to ancient legend, Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, was born off the coast of Paphos. In 58 BC, the Romans integrate Cyprus into their realm. By the time of the New Testament, the senate governs Cyprus through ex-praetors (i.e., former commanders or magistrates) bearing the title of proconsul¹.

Salamis

Salamis was the most important city under Roman rule. The city lies on the eastern coast south of the Karpass Peninsula (the long tongue of land stretching out northeast into the Mediterranean). It was center of Greek influence on the island. With Cyprus being so close to the Syrian coast, Jews likely settled here before the conquest of Alexander the Great. A sizable Jewish population was on Cyprus, which is attested by Paul preaching in the synagogue at Salamis (Acts 13:5).

Paphos

As the birthplace of Aphrodite, Paphos became a popular place of pilgrimage. Under Roman control, Paphos became the administrative center of Cyprus. Paul, Barnabas and John Mark meet the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus. He summoned them to hear the word of God. Luke describes the governor as “a man of intelligence”. This makes Sergius Paulus the first Roman official to hear the gospel that Luke mentions in Acts. The presence of a Jewish false prophet with the governor during this audience may suggest that the meeting may not have been neutral.

Elymas practices magic, which clearly is a violation of the Torah. However, the practice of magic would have been common practice in a pagan culture. Elymas (a.k.a. Bar-Jesus) opposes the gospel in an effort to turn him away from the faith. This has led some to believe that the proconsul converted to Christianity (Acts 13:12). However, no evidence clearly substantiates this assertion.

While the blinding of Elymas somewhat parallels Paul's blinding, significant differences also must be noted. The condition of physical blindness reflects the spiritual condition in both. However, Paul regains his sight spiritually as well as physically. Why is Elymas blinded? Paul says Elymas is an “enemy of all righteousness...making crooked the straight paths of the Lord” (Acts 13:10-11).

Steve Davis

¹ Proconsuls were governors to senatorial provinces who exercised both military and judicial power. Their power was absolute but was held accountable at the expiration of their office.

Phrygia and Lycaonia

Phrygia

The ancient country of Phrygia lies in central Asia Minor on a table plateau about 4,000 feet above sea level. Iconium is considered a part of Phrygia even though geographically it lies more closely to Lycaonia. Influential Jewish communities in a most decidedly pagan environment probably explains the rapid growth of Christianity in the region. In fact, at Pentecost, Jews from Phrygia are present (Acts 2:10).

Iconium

Resting along a mountain range on a high fertile plateau, Iconium is richly watered by several large streams. Situated on a major trade route between Ephesus and Syria intersected by five major thoroughfares, Iconium is at an important crossroads for the Roman Empire and is a center of commerce and agriculture. It is well known for its crops of plums and apricots. The city retains its Hellenist heritage in contrast to nearby Antioch (of Pisidia) and Lystra that underwent Romanization as they were utilized as Roman military outposts.

Upon the arrival of Paul and Barnabas, many Jews and Gentiles believe the gospel. However, unbelieving Jews slowly poison the minds of many. After a lengthy stay, Paul and Barnabas must escape a plot to harm them as the divide sharpens (Acts 14:1-7).

Lycaonia

Lycaonia lies along the southern part of the Anatolian plateau averaging 3,300 feet above sea level. Its summers are hot and dusty, and its winters are extremely cold and harsh.

Lystra

Hellenism makes little impact in Lystra since it does not lie along any ancient main road. In 6 AD, Augustus makes Lystra a Roman colony necessitating an imperial road between Antioch and Lystra. A Roman garrison is charged to defend against the threat of mountain tribes, which soon diminishes. This unlikely combination makes for mixture of Lycaonian and Roman influences and adds to the confusion of language since the primary dialects would be Lycaonian and Latin rather than Greek. This further explains why Paul and Barnabas do not put an immediate stop to sacrificing to them as gods after healing a cripple from birth.

Local legend held that Zeus and Hermes had once visited the city. A temple to Zeus just outside the city adds further credence to the proclamation of a theophany (i.e., gods walking among men). When Paul and Barnabas discover the true nature of the city's intentions to sacrifice to them as gods, they rend their garments, which, in this case, was a Jewish practice done in the presence of blasphemy. Paul points the truth of one living God as the creator and source of all. When Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrive, the fickle crowd turns away as Paul is dragged out of the city and stoned (Acts 14:8-20; cf. 2 Timothy 3:11; 2 Corinthians 11:25).

On his second missionary tour, Paul finds a young convert name Timothy (Acts 16:1-5). His father is a Greek making him a member of a small, elite class educated in Greek culture and language. His mother and grandmother are Jewish Christians (2 Timothy 1:5). This unusual combination of faith and classical training makes him an ideal traveling companion for Paul.

Derbe

Until recently, the location of this sight has remained unknown and cannot be confirmed until it has been properly excavated. Many converts come from this city along with Gaius (Acts 20:4).

Steve Davis

Philippi

Geography

Philippi lies at the eastern end of the Via Egnatia, which is the major overland route over the Balkan Peninsula. Its location makes it a strategic city surrounded by mountains and close to the sea. Located on a broad, flat, marshy plain, Philippi is hot in summer and cold and raw in winter. Gold was found on nearby Mount Pangaeum but played out by Roman times. Neapolis serves as its port city lying nine miles to the south and is separated by a coastal mountain range. When Paul set out from Neapolis, he crossed a ridge rising to 1600 feet before descending to the fertile plain where Philippi is nestled.

History

The city bears the name of Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, who annexed the city after driving out settlers from the isle of Thasos. After the Roman conquest and the gold exhausted, Philippi declined to a small settlement. However, Roman political events soon revive Philippi's fortunes. Octavian, later Augustus Caesar, defeats Brutus, one of the assassins of Julius Caesar, at Philippi. In honor of this victory, Philippi becomes a Roman colony. After Octavian defeats Antony at the battle of Actium in 31 BC, Augustus honors the memory of Julius Caesar and loyalty of Philippi by giving Philippi the status of Law of Italy along with privileges and immunities. This gives the city many privileges reserved only for residents of Rome among them immunity from taxation. Philippi swells once again in population when an influx of Antony's followers move to Philippi because they are dispossessed of their Italian properties.

Luke refers to Philippi as the leading city of the district of Macedonia even though Amphipolis is the district capital (Acts 16:12). This reference probably infers that the size and importance of Philippi overshadows Amphipolis. In Paul's day, the city was walled and heavily fortified with an estimated with a theatre holding over 50,000.

Paul at Philippi

Paul, Silas (also called Silvanus), Timothy and Luke set out from Troas and come to Philippi by way of Neapolis. Paul's strategy seems to be to follow the large populace along the Egnatian Way. On the Sabbath, Paul seeks to worship with the Jews. Apparently, no synagogue exists here for Paul goes outside the city to a riverside looking for a place of prayer. The lack of a synagogue may be due to the practice of including and excluding religious practices inconsistent with Roman values and law within the colonial limits of the city. The absence of any men mentioned by Luke may also suggest that the Jewish community was too numerically weak to support a synagogue, which required ten men. At the very least, the river provides a place for the observance of purification rites.

Lydia, a native of Thyatira, latches onto both the gospel and Paul. She convinces the party to stay with her. Paul's length of stay is uncertain but comes to an abrupt end when he casts a spirit of divination out of a young woman. Her owners, who profited from her possessed state, drag Paul and Silas to the agora (marketplace) where they are beaten then thrown into prison. An earthquake opens all the prison doors but no one escapes since the prisoners attribute the action to divine intervention in response to the singing and prayers of Paul and Silas. As a result, the jailor and his household convert to Christianity.

These miraculous events probably lead to the release of Paul and Silas by the magistrates. However, on hearing that they have beaten Roman citizens without a trial, they quickly make personal apologies. The acquisition of citizenship probably came from Paul's father or ancestor, which was passed on to him. While Roman citizenship afforded Paul certain privileges and rights, Paul always saw himself as living as a citizen to God (Acts 23:1).

Steve Davis

Thessalonica and Berea

Thessalonica

History

Thessalonica was founded by Cassander, a general of Alexander the Great, and named after his wife, who was Alexander's sister. After the Romans took over Macedonia, it was divided into four districts and Thessalonica became capital of the second district. Rome granted the status of a free city because of its support of Anthony and Octavia during the Battle of Philippi.

Geography

Located along the Egnatian Way, which linked the leading cities of Macedonia, Thessalonica was a commercial and military center. Not only was it a principal city of Macedonia it was its chief seaport. In fact, it is still one of the principal harbors of southeast Europe. The city lies on a productive plain of fertile soil from sediment left by rivers and streams. It is a three-day journey from Philippi. The mention of Amphipolis and Apollonia by Luke probably indicates the cities where they spent the night as they traveled here (Acts 17:1).

Paul in Thessalonica

Luke records that Paul spends three Sabbaths laying out his case that Jesus is the Christ. This reference has led some to believe he spends only three weeks here, but this is not necessarily the case. Other factors suggest a longer stay: (1) The phrase, "three Sabbaths," may only reflect how long the synagogue rulers allow Paul to teach there. (2) Paul thanks the Philippian church for sending material assistance to him on at least two occasions during his stay (Philippians 4:16). (3) Paul writes to the Thessalonians how he worked day and night to support himself as he taught them gospel as an example of how they ought to live (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). (4) It is unlikely that Paul was able to return after the Jews rioted.

For three Sabbaths Paul testifies that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Some Jews, many gentile God-fearers and prominent women believe. The success of Paul and Silas fuels hostility from unbelieving Jews, who hire loafers to make mischief. They drag Jason and some of the authorities to accuse them of disloyalty to Caesar. Jason must make bail and offer a sufficient guarantee that satisfies the city authorities. The wording suggests that Paul and Silas must leave town never to return. The Thessalonian letters are written due to their abrupt departure and a deep concern for their continuing spiritual growth.

Without going into details, Luke provides insight into Paul's message to the Jews. First, Paul argues from scripture that the Christ must suffer and die. Earlier sermons by the apostles used references from the Psalms and Isaiah (Psalm 2:1-7; 16:8-11; 110:1; 118:22; Isaiah 52-53). Second, he proclaimed Jesus—probably telling his life story. Finally, he set the fulfillment (Jesus' life-story) side by side with the prediction (prophecy).

Berea

Cicero refers to Berea as "the town off the beaten track" since it is not along any major road. Driven out of Thessalonica in the middle of the night, Paul and Silas pick up where they left off in the synagogue in Berea. The noble character of Jews here suggests a spirit for all Christians to emulate as people who search out God's word to verify what is truth rather than hold to our own preconceptions. Their desire to know God better pushed away any resentment or doubt. They carefully weighed Paul's words with God's to determine what really is true, which is the same journey we must make as well. Nevertheless, Jews from Thessalonica terminates Paul's efforts as they agitate the crowds against him. Paul must leave immediately by sea and ends up in Athens.

Steve Davis

Athens

Description

The acropolis rises 512 feet above the rest of the city. It houses the Parthenon—the temple of Athena, the goddess of wisdom and matron of the city. A huge gold and ivory statue of the goddess stands inside. Ancient visitors can see the gleaming spear point of Athena from forty miles away. Images of Apollo, the city's patron, of Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Bacchus, Neptune, Diana and Aesculapius were elsewhere. In fact, countless temples, images and altars dot the city. The finest Greek sculptors fashioned these images from stone and brass even from gold, silver, ivory and marble. Contemporary accounts refer to Athens as having more gods than any other place in the Roman world.

The agora or marketplace provides the city's hub for commerce, social life and government. Paul enters the discussions of religion here. Later, his hearers ask him before the Areopagus. The Areopagus is similar to a council of elders subject to the king of Athens but influential in the formation of the aristocracy. Under Roman rule, the Areopagus handles matters of religion and education along with other concerns. By Paul's time, the tribunal has lost some of its influence but its rulings still command great influence in the Roman world. While Paul's appearance before this tribunal seems informal, their disapproval would have stopped Paul from preaching openly in the agora.

Setting

Athens boasts a rich intellectual and political heritage that continues to impact western culture. This is the home of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Athenian art, literature and political thinking have stimulated much of our way of life. Magnificent structures adorn Athens to punctuate her cultural sophistication and rich heritage. However, she is morally and spiritually bankrupt despite the Athenians' opulent attention to ethics and religion. In Paul's visit, we see exactly what happens when Hellenistic sophistication rubs up against the gospel.

Defending Faith

Luke describes Athens as a sea of idols—a city suffocated by idols. The sheer magnitude overwhelms Paul provoking him into a righteous bout of anger—he is jealous for the Lord (cf. Numbers 25:11-13). Whereas Phinehas struck down the enemies of God in a righteous bout of jealous anger, Paul pours the heat of his anger into words defending the faith. His abhorrence of idolatry, stirred by the holiness of God, moves Paul to passionately proclaim the good news in a setting that would typically overwhelm. As heated opposition mounts from Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, Paul refuses to be deterred even when he is taken to the Areopagus—one of the most august tribunals of history, the same tribunal that found Socrates guilty.

The Epicurean sees the world as a random collection of atoms and consider the gods to be remote. Humanity ought to seek the most good through pleasure—not in hedonism but in a serene existence detached from pain and suffering. The Stoic pursues duty to the “world soul” and resigns themselves to an existence of living in harmony with nature and reason. While Paul shows some affinity for Greek literature, Paul sees the judgment and resurrection as significant counterpoints to their thinking.

Paul argues that the Creator God, unknown to them, sustains all life, rules all the nations, fathers all humans and judges all. Unlike the Greek gods, the Creator cannot be bound by death—he is so full of life that he can bring back the dead. All creation, the living and the dead, must be rectified to his will. He has fixed a time to judge the world and not even dead can escape his court. The time to decide is while we yet live. There is no possibility of a miscarriage of justice. We cannot expect to ignore God without any repercussion—God demands to be heard and demands to be obeyed.

Steve Davis