

## The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

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### Study Notes: Acts 11:26-30

#### Review:

Years before the events at Antioch, Saul's friends had escorted him to Caesarea Maritima and sent him home to Tarsus.

The book of Galatians suggests Saul had been preaching in Syria and Cilicia for the past 7-8 years.

Barnabas went to look for Saul: "... When he found him, he brought him to Antioch."

- **A Year Of Team-Ministry: v. 26**

"So they spent a whole year meeting together in the church and teaching a great multitude. It was in Antioch that the disciples first came to be known as "Christians."

Luke indicates that their ministry was largely focused on teaching a large number of apparently newly saved Christians. As the Church at Antioch grew ... an accelerated schedule of teaching, preaching, and discipleship became necessary.

Barnabas and Saul gave the Antiochene Gentile converts a very thorough foundation for their faith in Christ. They would have to be taught the basics of the Old Testament before they could truly appreciate their salvation.

At Antioch, Messianic Jews and newly converted Gentiles would form this new Church. Barnabas and Saul, were, therefore, the ideal mix of ethnic and religious background for the task they were assigned.

- **Another “First”:** v. 26

“The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”

The populace at Antioch called the Antiochene believers, “Christians”. The “pagans” of Antioch recognized the distinctive lifestyle of these believers and labelled them, “Christians”.

While we view the title “Christians” in a favorable way, most scholars indicate that the original Greek reads a lot closer to, “The disciples first got the name “Christians” at Antioch. The Greek text makes it clear that the term “Christians” was not a derisive, if not mocking term.

“What do the 1<sup>st</sup>-century historical records show us?”

The Emperor Julian noted the tendency of 1<sup>st</sup>-century Antiochians to invent nicknames for various groups. This was done as a form of satire, not admiration.

Acts 24:5: “We have found this man to be a troublemaker who is constantly stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the cult known as the Nazarenes.”

The adjective form of “Christians” was essentially Latin, similar to other words such as Pompeiani, Sullani, and other party-names given to the members of particular political or social groups. See: Matthew 22:15-16 – Herodians or “Herodiani”.

When the Romans learned that the disciples claimed the “Christos” (anointed One) as their head, they gave them the name, “Christiani.”

- **Two Notes:**

1. The disciples never use this title of themselves. (Instead, “The brethren” - Acts 15:1: “The Saints” - Acts 9:13, and “The Way”- Acts 9:2.

2. The term “Christianus” isn’t used in a relatively neutral way until we get to Paul’s defense before Agrippa in Acts 26. By then Christ’s message had gained a wider audience in the Roman Empire.

Over time, the name originally given to the disciples by their adversaries became a title of honor rather than contempt.

3. Many Church historians find it interesting that another commonly used ecclesiastical word seems to have emerged from Syrian Antioch; it’s the word “Catholic” – which originally referred to the unity of the Christian faith.

- **Agabus And “The Great Dearth”**: vv. 27-30:

“During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. 30This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.”

Luke seems to be giving us a number of historical “firsts”. He notes that some prophets came down to Antioch from Jerusalem. This is the very first reference to the role of prophets in the New Testament Church.

New Testament prophets played an important role in the ancient Church. (We might have expected that the role of prophets would simply fade away after Christ’s ministry.) See: Hebrews 1:1-2

The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is God’s consummate representative. This is why it would not have been surprising if the role of the prophets had ended with Jesus’ resurrection.

This is clearly not the case. Note 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11. Paul recognizes prophets as one of the five-fold ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church. (Ephesians 2:20: “... We are his house, built

on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.”)

The role of prophets in the Early Church was essentially the same as their role in the Old Testament. (I am leaving out the long tradition of warnings about sin and judgment):

1. Foretelling: Expressing the future.
2. Forthtelling: Expressing God's current activities or His will for a specific situation.

In the New Testament ... one can prophesy without being a prophet, but one cannot be a prophet without prophesying. Foretelling and forthtelling are part and parcel of a prophet's calling.

### **“The Great Dearth”: v. 28**

“One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)”

One of the Messianic Jewish Prophets, named Agabus, was well known for his accurate predictions of future events (See: Acts 21).

Agabus forewarned the believers gathered at Antioch that a severe famine would take place in the Roman Empire.

Luke uses the Greek word “oikoumene” which is literally means the “inhabited world.” This word is often used to refer to the Roman Empire. The Latin equivalent is “orbis terrarum”.

We have no secular records of a famine that encompassed the entire Roman World during 41-54 A.D. Scholars such as F. F. Bruce, suggest Luke meant a “great dearth”, rather than a world-wide catastrophe.

So what do we know about this famine?

Numerous Roman historians refer to a series of crop failures and famine conditions throughout the empire during Claudius' reign.

Suetonius writes about "a series of droughts" that caused "a scarcity of grain" that hit Rome especially hard (Claudius 18.2.)

Other sources indicate a succession of bad harvests and consequent scarcity in various parts of the empire, including, Rome at the beginning of Claudius' rule, in Egypt during his fifth year, throughout Greece in his eighth or ninth year, and in Rome again between his ninth and eleventh year.

Josephus writes of a severe famine that occurred in Judea around 45-47 A.D. 21.

- **The Cross-Cultural Benevolence: vv. 29-30:**

"The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."

The disciples at Antioch decided to raise funds for the poorer Christians living in Judea/Jerusalem. A group of Greek-Gentile believers take up offerings for the Messianic Jewish Christians in Judea.

There was no "second guessing" Agabus' revelation. They didn't form a committee and present a paper on "The Intermediary Costs Of Acting On Charismatic Revelation Related To Famines".

Luke says that they each of the believers there agreed to donate to this cause, "As each one was able". Isn't that the best program for giving? See: Deuteronomy 16:17 - "All must give as they are able, according to the blessings given to them by the LORD your God."

Paul continued that pattern throughout his ministry. See: I Corinthians 16:1-2

With Luke's outline of the Antiochene Church's relief efforts for the saints at Judea, this section of the story comes to an end.

The newly saved Greek-Gentiles at Antioch are following the pattern we saw in Acts 2:44-45 and Acts 4:32-37. As some have noted, this sharing of their material possessions with those less fortunate in Judea expressed their unity with brothers and sisters in Christ who were both geographically and ethnically very different than themselves.

Isn't that the proof of Christian compassion for others?

- **Barnabas and Saul: Taking the Gifts To Judea:**

It was decided that Barnabas and Saul would take the gifts to the Church "elders" in Judea. This is the first time "elders" are mentioned in conjunction with the Jerusalem Church.

Many historians see this as an organizational progression in the ancient Church. In Acts 6, the apostles delegated the responsibility of the widows' feed to the "Seven". It may be that some of these same men had now become known as "elders."

As the New Testament story proceeds, the elders were evidently leaders appointed to serve in the house churches. In some New Testament references, they seem to function just below the level of apostles. See: Acts 14:23; Acts 15:2; Acts 15:4; Acts 15:6; Acts 15:22; Acts 20:17.

Was the designation of "elders" taken from the Jewish form of synagogue organization?

Luke has outlined the salvation of the Greek Gentiles at Antioch – and has explained how Barnabas and Saul gained a broader team-approach ministry there. He gives us a number of "firsts".