

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse

Study Notes: Acts 13:4-7

Luke is now ready to begin chronicling the missionary journeys of Barnabas and Saul.

By Acts 13, the Church now has two basic headquarters – Jewish Jerusalem and Gentile Antioch. This will influence the rest of Luke's narrative.

Let's see what happens in their first specific "sending out" by the Antiochene Church at the direction of the Holy Spirit.

- **Sailing For Cyprus:** vv. 4-5:

"The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. 5When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper."

Luke tells us that Barnabas and Saul headed to Seleucia Pieria – the port of Antioch – and sailed to Cyprus. Depending upon the historical source, this port was somewhere between five and fifteen miles from Antioch – and located at the mouth of the Orontes River.

Antioch was founded in 307 BC by Antigonus Monophthalmos – one of Alexander the Great's successors.

The city was likely renamed by Seleucus I Nicator, after the Battle of Ipsus. He founded four cities in northwestern Syria – the Syrian Tetrapolis:

- Seleucia, named after himself.
- Antioch, named after his father Antiochus.
- Apamea, named after his wife Apame I.
- Laodicea, named after his mother.

Seleucia Pieria, a man-made harbor, was an important political, military, and economic game piece in the Ptolemaic-Seleucid wars. In 70 AD, Rome

made it the base for the imperial fleet.

Seleucia Pieria's port required frequent maintenance. One problem was a very strong stream that led into the harbor. During the flood season it threatened to undermine the port's base, so the Romans built a water channel north of the city to divert it.

Legionaries, sailors, and Judean prisoners provided the manual labor for the project. Titus's tunnel, as it is called today, cuts through the solid rock of the mountain in two places.

Cyprus:

Cyprus was an island, located east of Greece, north of Egypt, south of Turkey, and west of Lebanon and Syria. Cuneiform texts (clay tablets) reference Cyprus beginning around the 1700 B.C. The texts refer to it as "Alashiya". It is most like the "Elishah" mentioned in Genesis 10:4.

Cyprus was extensively colonized by both the Greeks and Phoenicians. In 57 B.C. it was annexed by Rome and was later incorporated in the province of Cilicia.

In 27 B.C., Cyprus became a separate province, governed on behalf of Augustus by an imperial legate. In 22 B.C. Augustus transferred it to the control of the Roman senate. From that point on, Cyprus was administered by a proconsul – a governor appointed by a consul – the highest elected political office of the Roman Republic.

- **Proclaiming The Word Of God: vv. 4-5**

"The two of them ... went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues."

Salamis was a Greek city on the east coast of the island and the administrative center of eastern Cyprus. It was a flourishing commercial transshipment center which traced its Jewish population back to the time of the Ptolemies.

A Brief Note On 1st-Century Synagogues:

Although early synagogues were unique in their footprints, they shared common features. They had inner walls surrounded by benches and a central space defined by a colonnade.

The two corners at the rear of the colonnade have heart-shaped columns, which are two columns carved into one. Archaeologists believe that these columns supported a clerestory roof – a vertical wall with a row of windows above the roof line. The interior arrangements provided the building with plenty of light and ventilation, making it a pleasant and comfortable space for public gatherings.

Although Barnabas and Saul had just come from Antioch (the center of the Gentile-Greek Church), they began their work in the Jewish synagogues.

This practice of presenting the Christian message first in the Jewish synagogue or synagogues of each city became a regular feature of Barnabas' and Paul's missionary work.

In Romans 1:16 Paul notes that the Gospel was presented “first to the Jew”. In Galatians 2:9 he writes: “James, Peter, and John, who were known as pillars of the church, recognized the gift God had given me, and they accepted Barnabas and me as their co-workers. They encouraged us to keep preaching to the Gentiles, while they continued their work with the Jews.”

Did Barnabas and Saul quit preaching to the Jews first, wherever they went? No, it was a matter of where each group was having the most success. Paul still felt a responsibility to preach to both Jews and Gentiles.

The synagogue then, often provided a bridgehead for reaching Gentiles.

- **“John Was With Them As Their Helper.” – v. 5**

Picking up again at the end of verse 5 we read, “John was with them as their helper.”

Luke mentions that John-Mark was Barnabas and Saul's “helper”, but quickly moves on to the story of Sergius Paulus. He will circle back to the story of John Mark when he describes the argument that Barnabas and Saul had about taking him on another missionary journey.

John Mark, the much younger cousin of Barnabas, had previously gone with them from Jerusalem to Antioch. He now was acting as their “attendant”.

“Why did they take John Mark with them? Some scholars suggest that they “availed themselves of his eyewitness knowledge of certain important phases of the gospel story, and in particular, the passion narrative.”

John Stott points out that Barnabas and Saul had been specially chosen and sent by the Holy Spirit. However, John Mark had been selected by these teachers – and did not share in the same specific selection by the Holy Spirit.

The word Luke uses in conjunction with John Mark's role on the missionary team is, “hyperetes”. In Greek literature it was used of a servant or assistant of doctors, army officers, priests, and politicians. This leads some to question if John Mark's service was pastoral, such as instructing enquirers and nurturing converts, or practical, such as arranging lodging, carrying the baggage, etc.

Question: “Was John Mark expecting a greater ministry role, but given the role of a practical assistant?”

- **Bar-Jesus And The Proconsul: vv. 6-7**

“They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God.”

Barnabas and Saul left Salamis, travelling from the east coast of Cyprus to the west coast, some ninety miles. They may have been preaching as they went, but Luke is silent about it.

At Paphos, they met a man, Bar-Jesus, whom Luke describes as a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet. The name Bar-Jesus can be translated as “son of Joshua”, “son of the Savior”, or “son of salvation”. Luke will also call him “Elymas”, meaning, “magician” or “sorcerer.”

We have seen such persons before in Luke's narrative. In Acts 8, Luke told us about Simon Magus. Bar Jesus bears a striking resemblance to him, in as much as both men held a certain sway over the local populace and its leaders.

Josephus characterizing him as, "Simon ... a Jew, born in Cyprus, who "pretended to be a magician," one of the friends of Felix, the procurator of Judea, and employed by him to seduce Drusilla from her husband, Azizus, king of Emesa."

Bar-Jesus was, in essence, a type of court wizard. This may seem odd, but we must remember that the superstitious and occult was an everyday part of the first century, even among high-ranking political officials.

While the proconsul was thoughtful and intelligent, Luke tells us, "... Elymas the sorcerer opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith."

Again, we have a similarity to the story of Simon Magus at Samaria. Simon, who had a following in Samaria and as far away as Rome, was regarded as the "power of God". He had profited greatly by the magical arts. In the Samaritan situation, it was Peter who dealt with Simon when the latter offered to pay money for the power to impart the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Like Peter, Saul saw Bar-Jesus' opposition as an attack of Satan and moved to check his power.

- **Saul/Paul: vv. 9-10**

"Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas, and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!"

It was common for Jews to take a Greek or Roman second name, like Joseph Barsabbas (1:23) and John Mark (12:12, 25). Luke determined that it was a good time to mention Saul's other name now as he moves into increasingly non-Jewish contexts.

There is no biblical evidence for a conversion from Saul to Paul. Saul was most likely called Paul at birth. Saul did not drop his Jewish name to fully embrace his new life and vocation as a Christian missionary to the Gentiles.

As such, the Jewish Saul did not become the Christian Paul.

Like other Roman citizens, Saul would have had multiple names: what we call a “praenomen”, “nomen”, and “cognomen”. By this we mean a personal name, a family name, and a personal nickname. Example: Gaius Julius Caesar.

As a zealous Pharisee, learning at the heels of the great rabbis in Jerusalem, Saul would have rarely used his Roman name, “Paulus”, among his fellow Jews.

But now, some 15 years after becoming a Christian, Saul of Tarsus had been sent on a missionary journey. At Paphos, Barnabas and Saul are dealing with a Roman proconsul named Sergius Paulus.

Is it a coincidence that Luke suddenly decides to let his readers know that Saul was also called Paulus? Let me point out that from then on Luke always calls the apostle by his Roman name, Paul.

An interesting proposition: Luke’s sudden change in identifying Saul as Paul may have nothing to do with ideas of cultural or religious identity. Here’s why:

In the Greek world, the word “Saulos” meant something like “prancing.” Perhaps someone in Antioch advised Saul to switch to Paul before he went on his first missionary journey to the Gentiles of the Roman world.

As John Drummond put it, “Calling oneself “Prancer” when standing before the likes of philosophers and Roman governors would probably not generate a great first impression.”

A Final Note:

Throughout the rest of his Acts narrative, Luke does not refer to Paul as ‘Saul’ again. From chapter 13 to the end of Acts Luke uses his Roman name, “Paul”.

- **Next time: The Judgment Against Bar-Jesus**