

Lesson Supplemental – Paul’s First Missionary Journey

Relevant Sources:

- Arnold, Clinton E. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary
- Map Source: Bible History Online



The first missionary journey with Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark began sometime in the spring of AD47, and ended sometime in the fall of AD 48 (approx. 18 months). According to the book of Acts, the three missionaries departed from Syrian Antioch towards Cyprus (13:2-4), crossed over to the Roman province of Pamphylia (13:13), headed north towards Pisidian Antioch (13:14), turned east towards Iconium (13:51), forced to take shelter in Lystra and Derbe (14:6, 20), then reverse course back towards Syrian Antioch (14:21-28). Subtle passages in the account by Luke would indicate that not all the villages visited by Paul were included in the book of Acts.

Additionally, Luke also mentions that John Mark did not continue with Paul and Barnabas but returned to Jerusalem (cf 12:25 – John Mark was from Jerusalem) after the team landed in Pamphilia (13:13).

Left out of Luke’s account was the rationale to reverse course on the journey back to Syrian Antioch from Derbe, rather than to cross over towards Paul’s hometown of Tarsus. The likely reason would be that winter was approaching, and to cross over the Taurus Mountain terrain during winter would be much more difficult than to reverse course.

In this missionary journey, Paul’s effort follows a pattern / strategy / practice of starting in the local Jewish synagogues. He does so for two reasons:

1. Theological: Paul maintains his conviction that the gospel should first be presented to the Jews, then to the Gentiles (Rom 1:16)
2. Practical: Gentile proselytes and God-fearers who have already turned from their idols and are seeking the one true God gathers regularly in the synagogues. Since they are already there, starting from the synagogues just makes practical sense.

The following backgrounds to the cities cited by Luke are extracted from Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary:

Syrian Antioch

Antioch (aka Antioch on the Orontes, or Syrian Antioch) was a city located 300 miles north of Jerusalem in the province of Syria. It was the third largest city in the Roman empire at the time of Paul, with a population between a quarter to a half-million people.

The city was the capital of the Roman province of Syria. Though it was a free city, it was still under Roman rule. Deities worshipped in the city includes Apollo, Artemis, Isis, Zeus, Tyche, the Syrian cults of Baal, the mother goddess Judaism, the emperor cult, along with many other minor cults. Antioch has a bad reputation for its morality.

The city has a sizeable Jewish population numbering between thirty to fifty thousand.

Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12)

The island of Cyprus (Barnabas' hometown of Acts 4:36), was the third largest island in the Mediterranean following Sicily and Sardinia. The island itself measures approximately 138 miles long and sixty miles wide. The island has a long and rich history that can be traced as far back as 6000 BC.

The two largest cities on the Island are Paphos (or Nea Paphos, meaning "New Paphos", also the capital of the island) on the west side, and Salamis on the east side. Salamis would be the entry point into the island for those traveling from Syria. In between these two cities are many smaller villages such as Tremithus, Citium, Amathus, Curium, and Palaipaphos ("old Paphos," and site of a famous sanctuary of the goddess Aphrodite), which Paul and Barnabas may have also visited, but left off of Luke's account in the book of Acts. The distance between Salamis and Paphos is estimated to be 106 miles. Luke leaving out these excursions may likely be to focus on the key event that occurred in Paphos (focus of his documentation).

The Jews settled on the island sometime during the reign of Alexander the Great. By the time of apostle Paul, the population was evidently large enough to require multiple synagogues (Acts 13:5).

Perga (Acts 13:13;14:25)

Perga was one of the leading cities of Asia Minor, and also the capital city of the Roman province of Pamphylia. It had a sizeable population evidenced by the archaeological find of a fourteen thousand-seat theater. It also has a large stadium, many Roman baths, a large gymnasium, and three aqueducts supplying water to the city. The main deity worshiped in the city was Artemis, also known as the Queen of Perga.

There were presumably a sizeable Jewish community in the city at the time (Acts 2:10); also Philo (*Embassy* 281). Luke recorded that Paul and Barnabas did not evangelize in this city on entry; but did do so on their return trip back towards Syrian Antioch (Acts 14:25).

Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-51)

Pisidian Antioch is a city that technically sits in the territory of Phrygia but was called "Antioch towards Pisidia" to distinguish it from another Antioch in Phrygia that sits on the bank of the Maeander River. The city itself was regarded as the most important Roman colony in Asia Minor. The colony in this city was organized in a manner to resemble a miniature Rome, and its importance to Rome was second in Galatia only to Ancyra – the capital city of the Roman province (The territory of Phrygia is in an area that is part of the Roman province of Galatia).

Antioch has a high population of Roman citizens and was home to many Roman senators and

equestrians. The city had a large imperial sanctuary constructed to serve the emperor cult. The principal deity of the city was the moon-god called *Men Askaenos*. Other deities worshiped in the city include *Juppiter Optimus*, *Dionysus*, and *Asklepios*.

The Jewish settlement arrived in this city sometime around 200 BC when more than ten thousand Jewish people were forcibly resettled in Phrygia and Lydia from Babylon.

Iconium (Acts 14:1-7)

The city of Iconium sits about 90 miles east-southeast of Pisidian Antioch, and was also part of the Roman province of Galatia in the mid-first century AD. For many years, this city was regarded as the eastern most city of the ethnic territory of Phrygia. The deities worshipped in the city include mother goddess Cybele, Herakles (Hercules), Zeus Megistos (Jupiter Optimus Maximus), and Apollo. The city was also friendly to Rome and was honored by the emperor Claudius sometime shortly before Paul and Barnabas's visit.

The city itself does not seem to have a high Jewish population, as evidenced by having only a single synagogue (Acts 14:1). This means that the city was largely a Gentile city.

Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:8-20)

The cities of Lystra and Derbe were incorporated into the Roman province of Galatia as the "Lycaonian cities" in AD25, and were often mentioned together – as Luke did also in Acts. However, Luke demonstrated his knowledge of the former territorial divisions, which the local populace was still sensitive at the time of this writing. Rather than citing a visit to "Lycaonian", Luke intentionally designated them as Lystra and Derbe.

The city of Lystra was a fairly new colony in the time of Paul, having been established in 26 BC by Augustus, and made a Roman colony in AD 6. It is located about 20 miles south of Iconium, and approximately 100 miles from Pisidian Antioch. The city itself was a rather insignificant city at the time of Paul and Barnabas's visit.

The Jewish population does not seem to be significant, as no mention of a synagogue was made by Luke in the book of Acts. This is further evidenced by Luke recording that Jews had to travel great distances to this insignificant city just to oppose Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:19).

The city of Derbe is located about 65 miles southeast of Iconium. Very little is known about the city either from literary evidence or from archaeology. The site itself was only positively identified in the late 1950s when two inscriptions were discovered on the site that mentioned the city.

Luke did not record any specifics to the ministry efforts in Derbe, only that many people became followers of Christ (Acts 14:21).

Attalia (14:25)

The city of Attalia served as the harbor for Perga in the province of Pamphylia. It is located approximately five miles southwest of Perga. This was likely also the entry point for Paul's ministry team when they traveled in from Cyprus. Being a port city to a major metro area, it likely was not very significant so far as Paul's ministry strategy is concern (focused on Perga).