

09. Acts 13-14

Mission to Cyprus and Galatia



The harbour at Paphos, Cyprus

Acts 13:1 47AD

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch [Antipas], and Saul.

Through the Holy Spirit, prophets share in the gift which Jesus had in its fullness: the gift of being able to discern and communicate God's will. Luke has portrayed Peter as a prophet. Likewise Stephen. He now wants to show Paul carrying on this ministry.

A teacher is recognised as giving authoritative understanding of God's revealed word. Peter has been exercising this ministry in Jerusalem, and Luke has already presented Paul as doing the same in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Acts 13:2

While they were worshipping [λειτουργεω] the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’

‘The Lord said to Ananias, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel’ (Acts 9:15).

Acts 13:3-5

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. [4:36;11:20] When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them (see Acts 12:25).

Barnabas is leading the mission which begins in Cyprus, Barnabas's home country (see Acts 4:36). John Mark is his cousin (Colossians 4:10).

Acts 13:6

They went through the whole island as far as Paphos



Acts 13:6-10

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus (Παῦλος), an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. But the magician Elymas (= magician) (for that is the translation of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, also known as Paul (Παῦλος), filled with the Holy Spirit (compare Luke 4:14), looked intently at him.

Compare the encounter between Peter and Simon, the Samaritan magician (see Acts 8:20-23).

In 22AD Cyprus was set up as a Senatorial Province (like Corinth Acts 18:12, and Ephesus Acts 19:38).

Acts 13:10-12

Paul said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? (Luke 3:4) And now listen – the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun.” Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord.

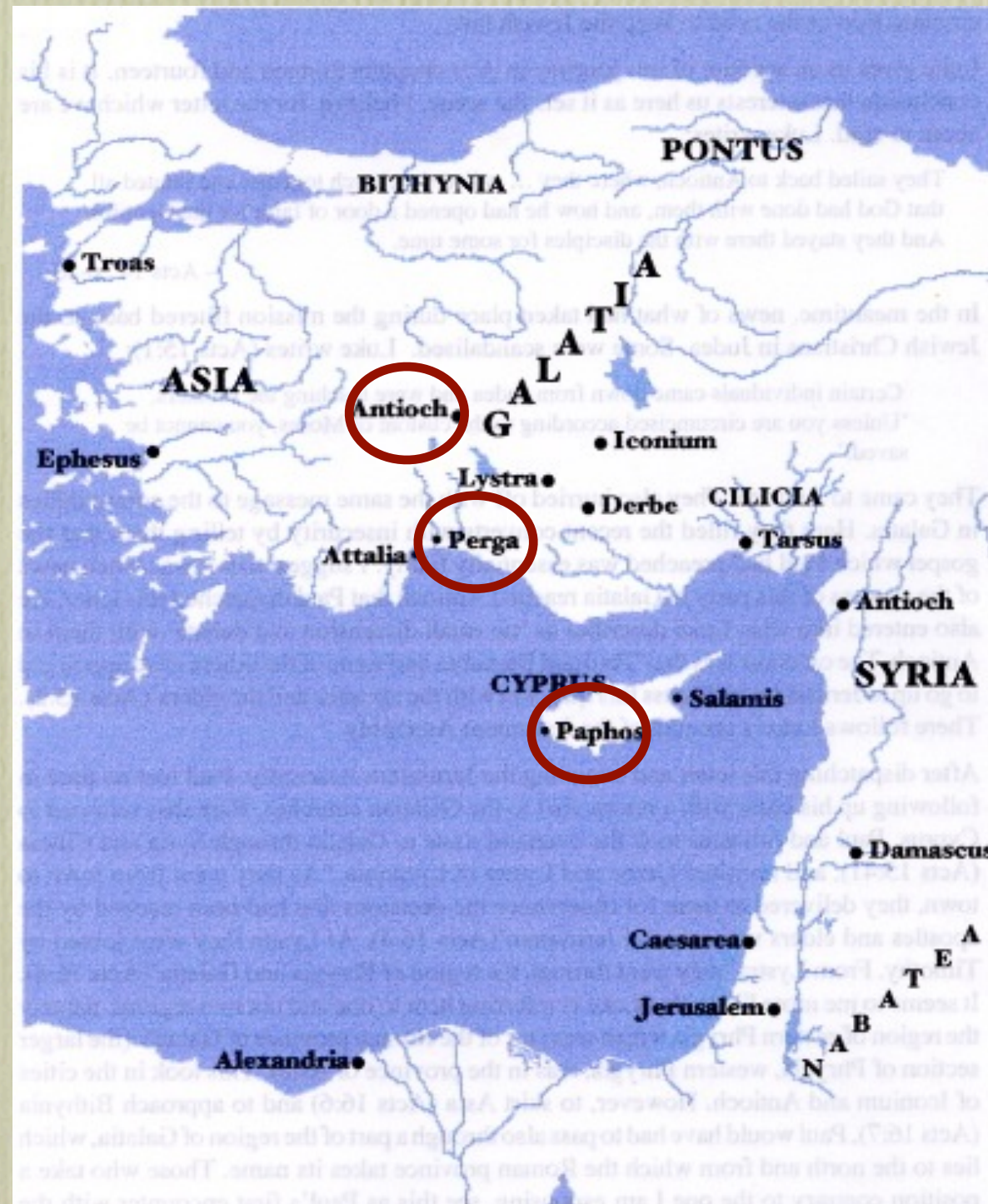
Acts 13:13

Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem (see Acts 15:38).

The river port, Perga, was established by Claudius in 43AD. It boasted a temple to Artemis and a theatre that could hold twelve thousand.

Acts 13:14

Then they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia



Paul and Barnabas head for Antioch, possibly encouraged by Sergius Paulus (see 13:7) who came from there. The one hundred sixty kilometres journey from Perga to Antioch is over difficult and dangerous terrain.

Antioch was the southern capital of the Roman province of Galatia. Though in eastern Phrygia (western Phrygia had been incorporated into the province of Asia), Antioch was sometimes called Pisidian Antioch as it guarded the Pisidian frontier. Like Antioch in Syria, it was named after Antiochus I, king of Syria, son of Seleucus I, a general in the army of Alexander the Great. It was twelve hundred metres above sea level and was a caravan stop on the west-east road from Ephesus to Tarsus. Dominated by an acropolis, it had a temple to Caesar Augustus. Paul mentions his stay there in his Second Letter to Timothy 3:11.

Acts 13:14-18

On the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the officials of the synagogue sent them a message, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, give it.’ So Paul stood up and with a gesture began to speak: ‘You Israelites, and others who fear God, listen.

The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. For about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.

Acts 13:19-22

After he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance for about **four hundred fifty years**. After that he gave them judges until the time of the prophet Samuel. Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years. When he had removed him, **he made David their king**. In his testimony about him he said, 'I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart (1 Samuel 13:14), **who will carry out all my wishes.**'

450 years. Is Luke speaking of the period from Joshua to the destruction of Jerusalem (1220-587)?

Acts 13:23-25

Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised; before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his work, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.'

Paul moves immediately from the promise made to their ancestors to the fulfilment of that promise in the person of Jesus, given to Israel as a 'Saviour' (see Acts 5:31; and Luke 1:69; 2:11). He quotes the last of the prophets, John the Baptist (see Acts 1:5,22; 10:37; 11:16; also Luke 3:3,16).

Acts 13:26-31

My brothers, you descendants of Abraham's family (see Genesis 22:18), and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognise him or understand the words of the prophets that are read every sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him. Even though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed. When they had carried out everything that was written about him, they took him down from the tree (Galatians 3:13) and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead; and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and they are now his witnesses to the people.

Acts 13:32-37

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you' (Psalm 2:7). As to his raising him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, 'I will give you the holy promises made to David' (Isaiah 55:3). Therefore he has also said in another psalm, 'You will not let your Holy One experience corruption' (Psalm 16:10). For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, died, was laid beside his ancestors, and experienced corruption; but he whom God raised up experienced no corruption.

Acts 13:38-43

Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is justified from all from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Beware, therefore, that what the prophets said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers! Be amazed and perish, for in your days I am doing a work, a work that you will never believe, even if someone tells you' (Habakkuk 1:5).

As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people urged them to speak about these things again the next sabbath. When the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.

Acts 13:44-47

The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with **jealousy** (compare the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:17); and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul. Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of **eternal life**, **we are now turning to the Gentiles** (see Acts 18:6; 28:28). For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’ (Isaiah 49:6; see Acts 1:8).

‘The salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen’ (Acts 28:28).

As a Jew, Paul is determined to be faithful to the mission given to his people by God, no matter how many of his fellow Jews fail to believe (see 3:16), and so ‘**reject God’s purpose**’ (Luke 7:30) and refuse the burden of being the faithful and suffering servants of the Lord.

We recall the words of Tobit:

‘A bright light will shine to all the ends of the earth; many nations will come to you from far away, the inhabitants of the remotest parts of the earth to your holy name, bearing gifts in their hands for the King of heaven’ (Tobit 13:11).

Acts 13:48-52

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 14:1

The same thing occurred in Iconium (125ks from Antioch)

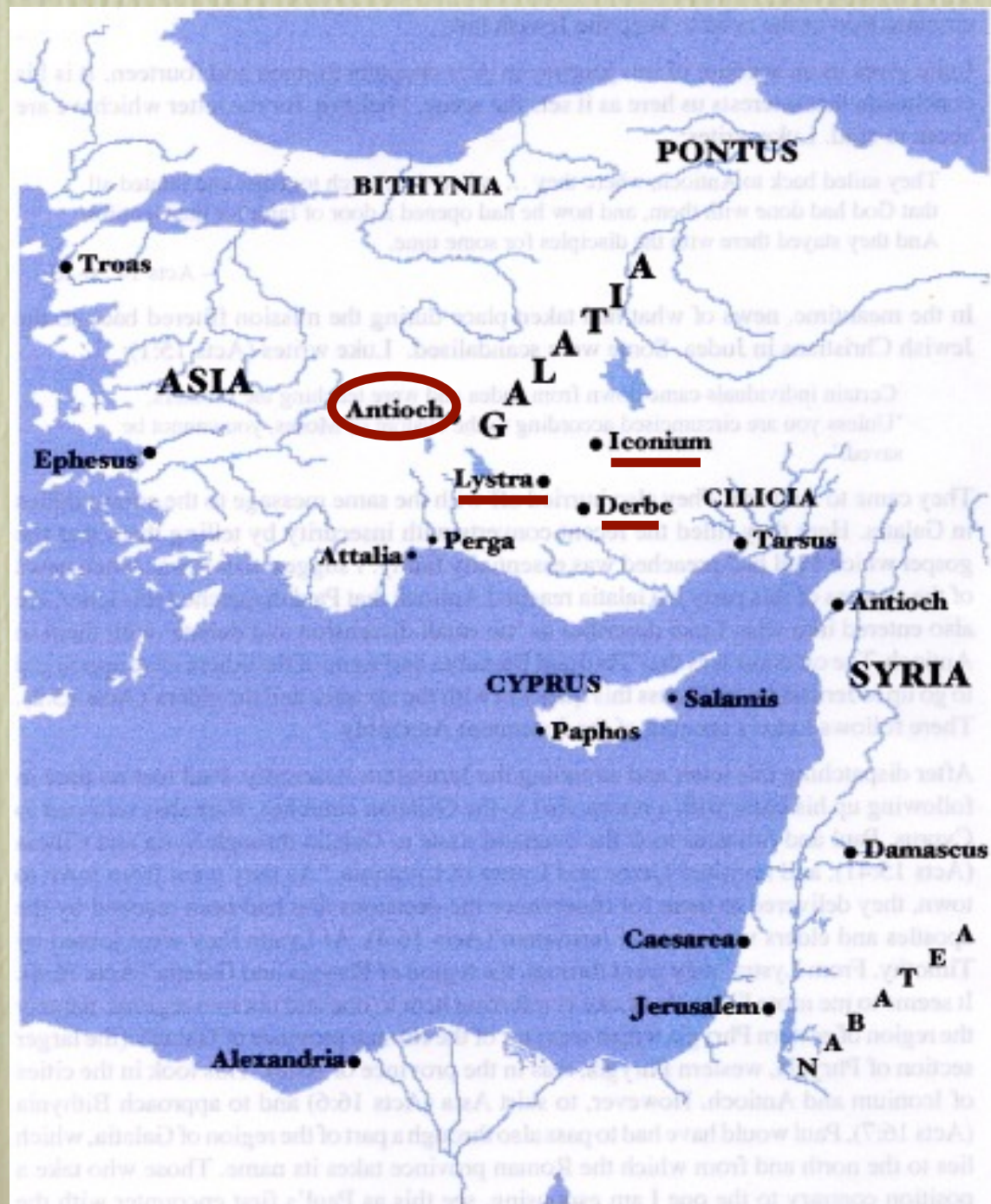
Acts 14:1-4

The same thing occurred in Iconium, where Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking **boldly** (see Acts 9:27²-28) for the Lord, who testified to the word of his grace by **granting signs and wonders** (see Acts 4:30, 5:12, 6:8) to be done through them. But the residents of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the **apostles** (missionaries).

In his last letter, written to his close friend Timothy, Paul remembers his experiences at this time: 'You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them' (2 Timothy 3:10-11).

Acts 14:5-7

And when an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, the apostles learned of it and fled to **Lystra** and **Derbe**, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country; and there they continued proclaiming the good news.



Acts 14:8-13

In **Lystra** there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had **faith** to be healed (Luke 8:48; 17:19; 18:42; Acts 3:16; 4:12), said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And the man sprang up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice.

Acts 14:14-18

When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, “Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

Peter would not allow Cornelius to prostrate himself before him in worship (see Acts 10:26). Here we see Paul and Barnabas shocked at what the pagan crowd are preparing to do. They call on the crowd to abandon the ‘worthless things’ they call gods and to turn to the God who gives life, the God who is seen through the things he has made.

We recall Paul's words in which he reminds the Thessalonians of how they 'turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God' (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

We are reminded also of his statement in the Letter to the Romans: 'Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made' (Romans 1:20).

Acts 14:19-20

Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds. Then they stoned Paul (2 Corinthians 11:25; compare Stephen Acts 7:58) and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city.

We find out later that among those who became believers at **Lystra** was the Jewish mother of Timothy (see 16:1). Paul gives her name as Eunice, and mentions that her mother Lois was a believer as well (see 2 Timothy 1:5).

The next day he went on with Barnabas to **Derbe**.

Acts 14:21-22 The return journey

After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.'

Paul and Barnabas experienced suffering. It was accompanied by being 'filled with joy and the Holy Spirit' (Acts 13:52; compare 5:41). They were able to encourage the new disciples to continue in their faith and not to be dissuaded by suffering. Jesus had prepared his disciples for suffering (see Luke 21:12-19), concluding with the words: 'By your endurance you will gain your souls' (Luke 21:19). The disciples on the road to Emmaus were assisted by the risen Jesus to see the role of suffering in the path of the Messiah to glory (see Luke 24:26).

Paul returns to this topic again and again in his letters: ‘We sent Timothy ... to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for. In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution; so it turned out, as you know’ (1 Thessalonians 3:2-4).

After referring precisely to the sufferings experienced on this first missionary journey, Paul writes: ‘all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’ (2 Timothy 3:12).

Acts 14:23-27

After they had appointed elders [πρεσβυτέρος] for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe. Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.

We have already noted the presence of elders in the Jerusalem church (see Acts 11:30). At this stage, most of the early converts were Jews or Gentiles who were attached to the synagogue. Paul sets up organisational leadership in the newly founded communities along lines borrowed from the Jewish synagogue.

They stayed in Antioch with the disciples for some time (Acts 14:28).

There are good reasons to support the suggestion that it was at this time, that is to say, before the calling of the Jerusalem Assembly, that Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians. In it he records an episode which we will pause here to recount, since it is closely related to the Jerusalem Assembly recorded by Luke in the next chapter, and since it may even have been instrumental in bringing it about. Paul writes:

‘When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? (Galatians 2:11-14).

Peter was quite happily sharing table fellowship with Gentiles who were not following the Jewish dietary laws. He may even have been disregarding these laws himself – at least that is the impression we get from Paul's account where he speaks of Peter 'living like a Gentile and not like a Jew'. This should come as no surprise in the light of the vision which Peter had at Joppa in which he was told by God to eat food that was forbidden by the law (see Acts 10:13). His experiences in the house of Cornelius confirmed for him the significance of his vision.

However, when Jewish Christians came to Antioch from Jerusalem ('from James'), Peter, Barnabas and others, withdrew from the common table and began to eat apart. Their behaviour incensed Paul because, whatever their motive, they were breaking communion, and making the Gentiles feel like second-class Christians. He condemned them for what he called their hypocrisy. They were 'not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel' (Galatians 2:14).

Before Paul and Barnabas had gone to Cyprus and Galatia, they had gone together to Jerusalem with relief from those in Judea affected by a famine (see 11:27-29). If, as is likely, this is the meeting described by Paul in Galatians 2:1-10, James, Cephas and John agreed that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised. However, nothing was said at that meeting about how Gentiles were to eat when sharing a meal with Jews, nor about exempting Jewish Christians from their obligations as Jews.

Since table fellowship is essential to Christian community, and since there was a long history of problems between Jews and Gentiles when it came to sharing meals, it is understandable that, at this early stage of experimenting in how best to build community, different churches may have gone in different directions. Whereas in Judea Gentile Christians probably followed Jewish food laws, in Antioch it may well have been the Jews who adapted. While Peter seems to have been quite happy to eat with Gentiles in Antioch according to the customs that were followed there, he seems also to have been concerned as to how Jews back in Jerusalem would react when his behaviour was reported by the visitors who did not share his openness.

Perhaps he behaved as he did so as not to jeopardise his mission. Whatever his reasons – and we should note that Barnabas agreed with Peter – Paul objected strongly. It is clear that his objections did not sway Peter or Barnabas, or Paul would surely have mentioned it. It may well have been this confrontation that was the occasion for the calling of the assembly which Luke is about to recount.

As we shall now see, the assembly decided that Gentile Christians should comply with the prescriptions of the law when sharing a meal with Jews. We will also see that, as a result of the assembly, Paul came to see the appropriateness of the decisions that were reached, at least as regards communities that were largely Jewish. In the name of charity, it was right to ask the Gentiles to respect the sensitivities of their Jewish brothers and sisters. The essential thing was not to break communion.

Luke tells us that after the assembly Paul returned to the churches of Galatia, and ‘as they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem’ (Acts 16:4).

The key decision of the assembly, however, and one which supported Paul's missionary practice and his understanding of the gospel, was that Gentiles could become Christians *as Gentiles*. They were not bound by the Jewish Torah. The practical regulations were about ensuring harmony and sensitivity in a community an essential element of which was sharing in the Eucharistic celebration. Where the majority of the community was Jewish, charity pointed towards the Gentiles adapting to these laws. Where the majority was Gentile, however, the situation was different and Paul seems to have continued to explore ways in which communion of Jews and Gentiles could best be nurtured. In the following presentation we will look at Luke's account of what happened at the Jerusalem Assembly.