

Paul – A Legal Case Study
Chapter 6 Part 2
Witnesses

One of the most important things I can do in any case is track down the witnesses I need. These witnesses might have insight into the actual events at issue. They might be able to testify to the character of people involved. Witnesses can make or break a case.

Witnesses come with baggage. Some want to help, but don't always have the personal knowledge necessary. Some want to hurt rather than help, and their motives must be carefully examined for any influence it might have on their testimony. Some witnesses are hoping to get paid for their testimony. This is especially true if they are expert witnesses, giving their expertise in return for compensation.

Any case that goes to trial must be based on evidence, and while the evidence can be “things,” documents, a gun, etc., most evidence is testimony from witnesses. Finding and “scrubbing” witnesses are critical tasks.

In this case, we have Paul himself as a witness. Paul can testify first-hand about what had happened to him, what events led to the fracas in the Temple, and how the events of the day unfolded. But what about beyond Paul? Whom else should we examine as witnesses?

Our witness pool is limited to those mentioned in the writings we have available today. I would love to speak to Paul's parents, for example, but we know nothing beyond the fact they were Roman citizens from Tarsus who were Pharisees and kept their Jewish lineage intact going back over a thousand years.

Even with the limited witness pool, however, we are not devoid of witnesses. We have plenty! We just need to examine them, see what biases they may have, and understand the story they have to tell. This helps us put our defense of Paul together.

Here is my best list of witnesses that could be critical to Paul's defense.

Ananias

Paul's events on the road to Damascus marked the turning point in his life. His encounter with Jesus brought him physical blindness, but spiritual enlightenment. The key witness, other than Paul, that helps us understand this is the Jewish Christian Ananias in Damascus.

Having been blinded, Paul was led into Damascus as instructed by Jesus during the encounter on the road. Paul was spending his time in Damascus praying and he had a vision of a man named Ananias coming to see him. Ananias came to Paul, and based on the events from Ananias's perspective, he would be an important witness.

Ananias is a good witness for several reasons. First, he knew Paul's reputation *before* Paul's life-change on the Damascus road. He would be able to testify to his personal concern about Paul coming to Damascus to arrest the believers there. In fact, Ananias was told by the Lord in a vision to find Paul and restore his sight through prayer. In reply Ananias pointed out,

Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name (Acts 9:13-14).

The last thing Ananias thought he should do is restore the sight of one who was determined to find those who believed Jesus was Messiah and persecute them. Ananias thought it would be better to leave Paul blind!

God assured Ananias this was right and that Paul was a changed man. God further explained that Paul was God's chosen one to go before Gentiles and kings as well as Jews proclaiming the truth of the resurrected Jesus.

Ananias would be able to testify that he went to Paul, following the instructions of his vision, and prayed over Paul. Ananias gave Paul his first clear commission and called on Paul to be baptized and give affirmation of his commitment to Jesus as Messiah. As Ananias prayed over and spoke to Paul, he saw the scales fall from Paul's eyes as his sight was restored. Ananias could also testify that Paul was a changed man. Paul didn't arrest Ananias or anyone else. He didn't put the Christian Jews in chains as he was authorized to do. Instead he affiliated with them and immediately began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues as the Son of God.

Even beyond affiliating with the Christian believers in Damascus, Paul went to the synagogues and found his old allies, those who were unbelieving Jews, and Paul reasoned with them, using the Old Testament Scriptures to prove that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 9:22).

With every witness, I have to ask what ulterior motive might exist for their testimony. With Ananias, I can find very little. There is no economic motivation for Ananias to say anything less than the truth. What is more, Ananias had a reputation of credibility among the whole Jewish community, those who believed in Jesus and those who didn't. He was,

a devout man according to the law, well-spoken of by all the Jews (Acts 22:12).

Ananias would also be helpful as a witness to the fact that Paul's life-change was not for personal gain. Paul left Jerusalem headed to Damascus in full control. Paul had letters from the key authorities authorizing his efforts at stamping out and arresting those confessing Jesus as Messiah. But as a result of his life-change, Paul's life was turned upside down. As Ananias would testify, Paul moved from being the persecutor to being the persecuted. Paul's life was in danger because he confessed Jesus as Messiah. The Christians had to help Paul escape Damascus by lowering him over the city walls in a basket. Ananias would be able to attest that,

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul [aka "Paul"]. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket (Acts 9:22-25).

Ananias would be an early witness to establish the veracity and facts of Paul's movement from a non-believer, to a confessor of Jesus as Messiah. He would also attest to Paul's calling as a believer as well as Paul's lack of personal gain from his commitment to Jesus.

Barnabas

Barnabas would be the next witness in the phases of Paul's life. After Paul was lowered by the basket from Damascus, Paul made the two-week trek back to Jerusalem. Luke explains what happened upon Paul's arrival,

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:26-27).

It is an interesting phenomenon that sometimes one's purest intentions are misread by others. Paul experienced this. Paul left Damascus because he had worn out his welcome among the non-believing Jews, and with his life endangered, Paul returned to his new-found Christian fellowship in Jerusalem. The Christians, however, thought Paul was tricking them with a false claim of belief in order to infiltrate their ranks and bring the movement to a halt.

These facts would be important for Paul's testimony because they again would show the depths to which Paul's life choice had thrown him. Paul wasn't a Christian super-hero after he found faith. He was in danger from the non-believing Jews, and mistrusted by believing Jews. Paul went from the top of the food chain to being eaten by everyone. Barnabas could testify to that and also provide the critical testimony about how things began to turn around for Paul.

What kind of witness would Barnabas make? I suspect quite a good one. Barnabas was really named "Joseph." He was from the priestly caste, a Levite. Barnabas was not native to Jerusalem; he came from the island of Cyprus.

Barnabas was a giving person whose acts backed his beliefs. When the church was just getting its feet on the ground in Acts 4, we read that Barnabas owned a field, sold it, and gave the money to the apostles for use. This same passage (Acts 4:36-37) tells us that the apostles gave "Joseph" the nickname "Barnabas." Luke explained why.

Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement) (Acts 4:36).

Barnabas was a true believer who had years earlier put his "money where his mouth was" and lived up to his nickname as an encourager. Barnabas intervened with Paul and the church, learned Paul's story, and brought Paul into fellowship with the church. Barnabas could testify that Paul was authentic. After sticking his neck out and risking his reputation on Paul's authenticity, Paul made good on his faith. Through Barnabas, Paul was able to go "in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord" (Acts 9:28).

Barnabas's testimony would go beyond Paul's reception at the Jerusalem church. He could also testify that Paul was not in Jerusalem long before his preaching put his life at risk. No doubt Paul's former acquaintances were involved in going after Paul the very way Paul had persecuted the church the last time Paul was in Jerusalem. The church saw that Paul's life was in danger and sent Paul away from Jerusalem to his home in Tarsus (Acts 9:30).

At this point, it seems that Barnabas would have little to say about Paul for the next five years or so. In the interim before Barnabas and Paul re-establish contact, the Acts narrative explains that the church continued to spread even further out from Jerusalem.

Luke explains that the church had spread as far as Antioch, ironically because of the persecution that "arose over Stephen."¹ When word reached the apostles that the church

¹ Paul involved himself in the stoning of Stephen to stomp out the church. Paul's efforts – before leaving for Damascus—actually worked to further the church beyond Jerusalem!

was growing greatly, not only among Hebrew Jews, but also among Greek-speaking Jews, the church sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Barnabas did his work as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24) and even more were added to the church. Barnabas saw an opportunity and a need! Barnabas would be the key witness to establish Paul’s next major involvement with the church.

Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.² For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:25-26).

By testifying to Paul’s work here, Barnabas could add that Paul was effective among the Greek Jews as well as the Hebrew-speaking Jews. This shows Paul actually fulfilling the commission that God informed Ananias (the first witness) awaited Paul.

He [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15).

Barnabas is an important witness also because he was with Paul for an extended time. It wasn’t simply a short stint in Jerusalem followed by one year which came five years later in Antioch. This was the start of many co-workings between Paul and Barnabas. The two went to Jerusalem to help the church during a famine several years later (Acts 11:30). Once their visit was complete, they returned to Antioch taking with them John Mark, Barnabas’s cousin.

Called the “fourteen-year visit,” Paul wrote of this visit in his letter to the churches in Galatia (Gal. 2:1). This was important for Paul’s interactions with the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas got the blessings for their ministry and evangelism from the Jerusalem “pillars” (Gal. 2:9). These were the apostles James, John and Peter, each of whom could also testify as witnesses.

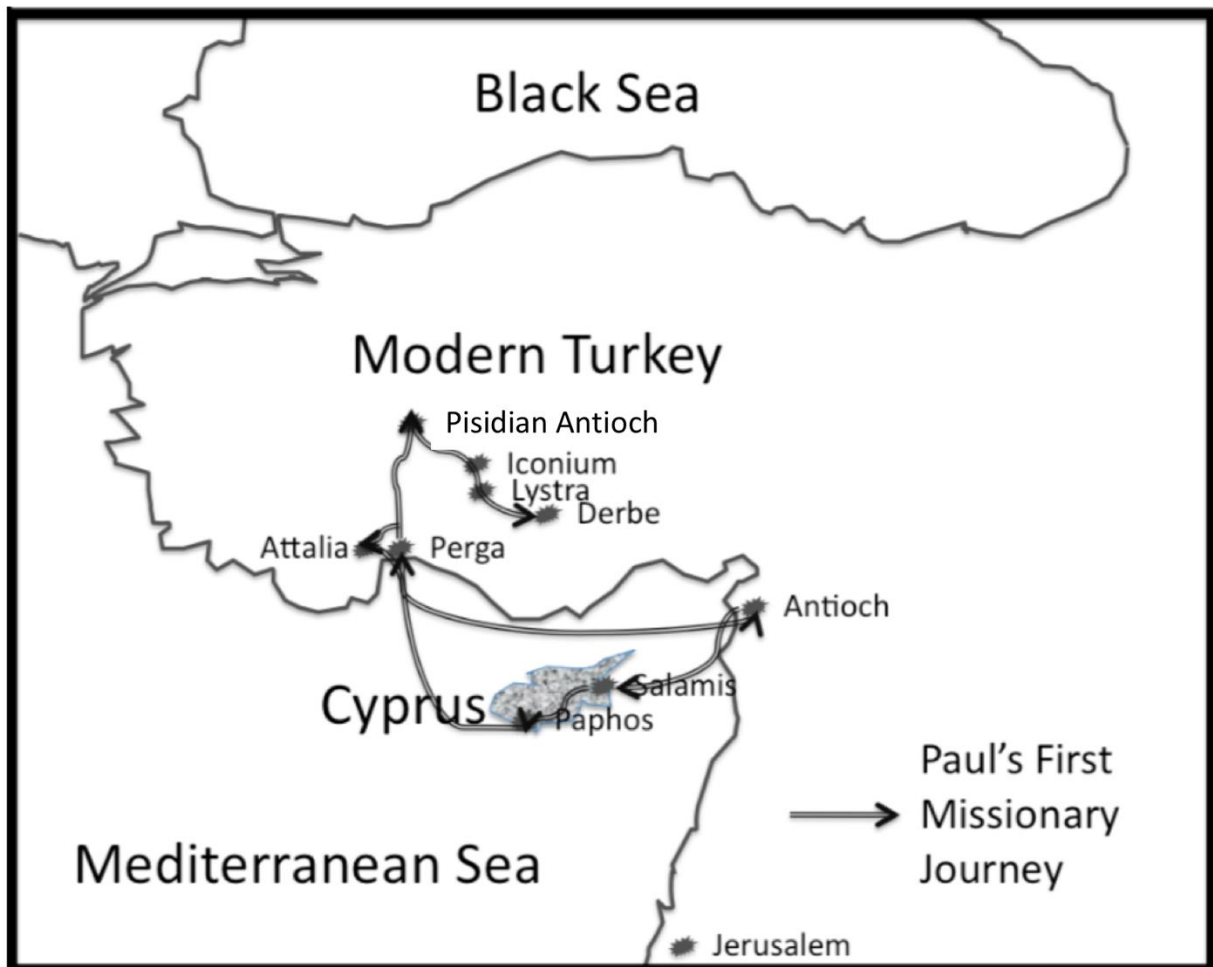
Paul and Barnabas joined efforts in what scholars often call “Paul’s First Missionary Journey.” Here Barnabas would become a very important witness. He could testify that the genesis of the missionary journey came from the church at Antioch. Some members of the Antioch church had a vision of Paul and Barnabas being set apart for some works

² It is helpful to know that Tarsus was relatively close to Antioch. In a straight line, Tarsus was about 150 miles away. Jerusalem, on the other hand, is about 330 miles from Antioch.

of God. The actions of Paul were not those of a renegade or lone wolf, but were the expressed will of the church.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:2-3).

Barnabas would testify that the missionary journey began on Barnabas’s homeland, the island of Cyprus! The following map shows where the journey went.



The missionary effort was amazing, as Barnabas could explain. The Holy Spirit worked mightily in Paul. Barnabas would explain that they arrived on Cyprus, sailing into the port of Salamis. They wasted no time presenting the Word of God in the synagogues.

Going throughout the island, they arrived at the far port of Paphos. Here Barnabas could tell details of an important encounter.

In Paphos, Paul and Barnabas were summoned by the Roman Proconsul Sergius Paulus. The Proconsul kept near him a false Jewish prophet named Elymas Bar-Jesus (“Bar Jesus” meant “Son of Joshua”) who was constantly opposing the teachings of the missionaries, trying to turn away the Proconsul from any faith.

Barnabas would have the ability to give an eye-witness account of what happened.

But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him [Elymas] and 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? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time (Acts 13:9-11).

Barnabas could testify that immediately mist and darkness fell on Elymas and the Proconsul “believed” being “astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:12).

In an earlier chapter, I discussed whether Paul had changed his name at some point from Saul. Here we find the Biblical narrative where Paul begins being called by his Roman name Paul rather than his Jewish name Saul. While there is no specific explanation given, there are many reasons that seem reasonable if not obvious. In addition to those given earlier (the inability of Greeks to readily pronounce Saul, for one) there are other considerations of note.

Paul’s common Roman name (“Paulus”) was the very same as that of the Proconsul. It would have been a logical point of connection that Paul would not likely overlook. Second, the Roman Proconsul was not Jewish. Barnabas could testify that Paul was sensitive to this as he interacted with people. Paul would later write,

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law (1 Cor. 9:19-21).

After their experiences in Paphos, the missionaries, now “Paul and his companions” in Luke’s writing, sailed to the mainland, putting in at Perga (now modern south-central Turkey). Paul and Barnabas did not stay in Perga, but went inland almost immediately, going to Pisidian Antioch to evangelize.

Barnabas could testify to the reasons for this move; however, we can make some good assumptions of what happened, because, in part, of some archaeological finds. One of the most important discoveries that sheds light on Paul's and Barnabas's selection of this area for missionary work is a stone now on display in Yalvac, Turkey. The stone is important in light of Paul and Barnabas's success in seeing the Roman Proconsul Sergius Paulus come to faith on Cyprus.

Sergius Paulus was originally from this area. His family was a prominent family in the Pisidian Antioch region, and archaeologists have uncovered inscriptions of the family name in the region.

For this reason, a number of scholars have traced the logical point that Sergius Paulus would have not only likely sought Paul and Barnabas to go share his new, found faith with his family, but would also have given letters of introduction and recommendation as well.³



One can find this stone on display at the Yalvac Archaeological Museum in Yalvac, Turkey. The stone is seen as confirmation of the large land holdings the family of Sergius Paulus would have had in the area.

Barnabas could speak for certain on this, but it seems the logical conclusion.

While Paul and Barnabas were in Pisidian Antioch, they had a chance to attend synagogue on a Sabbath. I would use Barnabas to testify about the experience.

The Synagogue

³ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 403 and cites therein. See also Gill and Gempf, *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (WIPF and Stock 2000) at 386-387.

Synagogue services are novelties to many outside Judaism. Even Jews who are active in synagogue attendance today might wonder what a synagogue service might have been like 2,000 years ago in what is now considered Turkey.

Having Barnabas available as a witness would enable me to put someone on the stand who could attest to the basics of synagogue meetings in that day and time. It would open up a window for people to see and better understand the events that unfolded with Paul. This would especially be important because over and over again, when Paul went into new areas to explain his belief in Jesus as Messiah, he would start in synagogues.

Ancient Jewish sources detail the procedure behind Sabbath synagogue services in Greek areas outside of Palestine. From these sources, I can determine what information I would be able to elicit from Barnabas about those services. In some ways, these synagogue services differed little from 21st century church services, and in other ways, they were quite different.

Generally, one would find the synagogue around a river or some type of water, typically on the outskirts of town. This provided easy access to the water needed for purification by the priests or others as deemed necessary under the law.⁴

Walking into the synagogue, one would find a special seating arrangement. There are windows into this “reserved seating” in the New Testament. Jesus spoke of hypocritical scribes and Pharisees who sought “the best seats in the synagogues” (Mt 23:6; Mk 12:38-39; Lk 11:43, 20:46). Schurer writes, “The congregation sat in an appointed order, the most distinguished members in the front seats, the younger behind; men and women probably apart.”⁵

The idea of special or ranked seating was not unique to Judaism. It was part and parcel of the Roman world. In arenas large and small, the distinct classes and subclasses of Roman citizenry and non-citizenry had specific seating areas. It was a crime in the Roman world to sit outside one’s appropriate area.

If after taking a seat, one took time to look around, one would see a closet (*tyboh* תיבה) that held scrolls of the law and the other “books” of the Old Testament. Each scroll would be wrapped in linen and have its own encasement.⁶ These scrolls were reverently held. As Paul would note in one of his letters, God entrusted his holy oracles to the Jews

⁴ Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (Hendrickson Publishers 1998 reprint of 1890 publication), Div. II, Vol II at 69.

⁵ *Ibid.* at 75.

⁶ *Ibid.* at 74.

for transmission and safe keeping (Rom. 3:1). This was a unique and holy honor that the Jews treasured. It was reflected in the care and attention they gave the scrolls.

At the front would be a raised platform (*bema* *הַמַּבֵּי*) which would hold a “pulpit” or “reading desk.” The reading desk would likely be rather large to hold the scroll for the chanting/reading portion of the service. This *bema* would also be used for expounding on the Scriptures.⁷

Each synagogue had a designated leader. (Luke uses the term *archisunagogo* - ἀρχισυνάγωγος). His responsibility was to make sure the needs of the service were taken care of and were supervised. He was not the one who actually read the scriptures, prayed, or preached. The members themselves typically did those tasks, but he would choose those fit to perform those functions and secure their help before each service. Schurer calls him the “conductor of their assembly.”⁸

There was also a “minister” in the synagogue.⁹ This man was responsible for bringing out the Scripture scrolls and replacing them after their use (Luke 4:20). This was also the man who had to execute any required scourging and would provide the instruction for children to learn to read.¹⁰

Also noteworthy were containers in each synagogue for the alms or tithes. This was generally just a simple lidded box for money. This is where the hypocrites Jesus spoke of would sound a trumpet (an expression for exaggerated displays of “showiness” in giving) as they made their donation (Mt 6:1-2). There was also a plate or dish that was for the giving of natural products. This would include the “mint and rue and every herb” that Jesus spoke of some tithing, when Jesus noted the folks who neglected the important matters of mercy, justice, faithfulness and the love of God (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42).

The main purpose behind the synagogue services was not so much corporate praise and worship as one might find in many churches today, but “instruction in the law.”¹¹ The

⁷ *Ibid.* at 75.

⁸ *Ibid.* at 65.

⁹ In the Greek, Luke uses the word *huperetes* (ὑπηρέτης) and the ESV translates this man as “attendant” in Luke 4:20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* at 67.

¹¹ Schurer, Div. II, Vol II at 54. The Jewish Philosopher and historian Philo (born around 20 B.C.) wrote of the synagogue services as focused on teaching the law. In his *Hypothetica* (7:12ff), Philo wrote of the Sabbath assemblies as “sitting together in a respectful and orderly manner [to] hear the laws read so that none should be ignorant of them.” Philo, (Loeb 2001) Vol IX at 433.

New Testament constantly speaks of Jesus “teaching in their synagogues” (Mt 4:23; 9:35; 13:54; Mk 1:21; 6:2; Lk 4:15; 13:10; Jn 18:20).

I would have Barnabas testify to this as he explained how a service would unfold. It would make sense of what Paul did, how he did it, and why he did it.

The typical service would have a reciting of the *Shema*. The *Shema* is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. In the main, it contained the core confession, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Dt. 6:4). It is called the *Shema* because the word “*shema*” is the first Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6:4 translated “Hear.”

There would be prayers recited with the *Shema*, although the *Shema* was considered a confession of faith more than a prayer.¹² Certain formula prayers were offered rather than extemporaneous prayers. The whole congregation did not say the prayer, but rather the one assigned to pray. This prayer leader would typically stand in front of the chest of scrolls while pronouncing the prayers. The congregation would answer the prayers with “amen.” Schurer writes that the prayers were typically offered while standing and facing Jerusalem. This is consistent with what is detailed in the New Testament.¹³

Following prayers, the Scripture readings would occur. Two parts of the Old Testament were read, one section from the Law (*Torah*)¹⁴ and a portion from the prophets. The Law section was rather large so that the entire Law would get covered every three years. The prophet section was simply a paragraph and was typically chosen by the reader. The reader of the scripture would stand while reading.¹⁵ This is also testified to in the synagogue accounts given in the New Testament. (Lk 4:16 speaks of Jesus going to the synagogue on the Sabbath, stating “he stood up to read” choosing to read from Isaiah 61:1-2, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...”).

¹² Schurer at 77-78.

¹³ Mt 6:5, “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues.” Standing in prayer was not only in the synagogue. Jesus also spoke of others standing while praying. See, Mk 11:25, “And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone...;” Lk 18:11, “The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus...”

¹⁴ These were scrolls of what we consider the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

¹⁵ Schurer at 79-81.

After the reading, an “edifying lecture or sermon”¹⁶ was given in explanation of the scripture read. The role of teaching, like that of the reading and the praying were open to qualified members of each congregation. The ruler of each synagogue typically gave the assignments.¹⁷

The service was closed with a benediction or blessing which was announced upon the congregation with hands raised to shoulder height. The congregation responded with “Amen!” and the service was finished.¹⁸

Paul and Barnabas at the Synagogue at Pisidian Antioch

Having had Barnabas explain synagogue services, I would then have him return to the story line about Paul and what happened at the synagogue. He would explain that after Paul and Barnabas came to Antioch in Pisidia, “on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down” (Acts 13:14). This is standard, and other than being visitors, their actions would not have stood out from the normal members. While the New Testament account does not explain which seats the two took, I suspect they were not special seats, or that would have created a ruckus that would likely have been written up.

Barnabas would then testify that “after the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, ‘Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.’” (Acts 15:15).

Barnabas would explain that Paul accepted the offer and stood to speak. Paul addressed both the Jews in attendance and the Greeks who also attended synagogue. Called “God fearers,” these Greeks were interested in the monotheism of Judaism, though they had not converted to Judaism. Paul began,

Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen...” (Acts 13:16).

Paul then began discussing God’s faithfulness in making the Jews great while in Egypt and then redeeming them from that captivity. God “put up with”¹⁹ the Jews for 40 years in the wilderness before giving them their inheritance. Paul then recounted God’s provisions of judges, prophets, and kings. Paul added that with King David, God promised a Savior through David’s offspring. Paul explained that Jesus was this promised Savior. John the Baptist came before Jesus proclaiming a baptism of

¹⁶ *Ibid.* at 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* at 65, 82.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* at 82.

¹⁹ Acts 13:18.

repentance while noting that one was coming “the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie” (Acts 13:25).

Paul then explained that the rulers in Jerusalem failed to understand the Prophets and the Law and condemned Jesus the Savior. The irony, as Paul explained, was that by attempting to dispel any role Jesus could have among the people as their Messiah, the rulers actually fulfilled the prophecies and brought about Jesus’ necessary death. Paul explained that although Jesus was executed and buried, God raised him from the dead.

By testifying to this, Barnabas would be dispelling a key charge of the Jews against Paul. Paul was not discounting the Old Testament and the Law of Moses. Paul was embracing it. Paul was finding it truer than most thought! For Paul, the promises and prophecies were not hollow visions of what might happen one day. They were real. They had been proven real by their direct fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul and Barnabas assured the people that there were many witnesses to the resurrected Lord. Paul and Barnabas had come to Pisidian Antioch to bring them this great news. Paul then cited several Psalms as texts to support the resurrection events.

Paul explained that even the great King David’s body was destroyed after death, yet the body of Christ never faced “corruption.” In Jesus, Paul explained, was a forgiveness of sins for people. This, Paul said, was the work Habakkuk spoke of when he prophesied, “Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you” (Acts 13:41; Hab. 1:5).

After the synagogue meeting, many came to Paul and Barnabas asking them to stay around and return to speak more on this subject the following Sabbath. The next Sabbath, Paul and Barnabas returned and the audience was huge! Clearly over the week, the people had been talking and promoting the coming service.

As the synagogue began to fill up, it was soon apparent the room was not large enough. Many, if not most of the attendees were Greeks, not Jews! As this began to register to the “normal” Jews who usually attended the services, jealousy set in. As the awaited lesson by Paul began, Barnabas could explain how certain Jews began to speak out, trying to contradict Paul and speaking abusively of him (Acts 13:45).

Barnabas would testify that Paul did not back down. He spoke plainly and boldly telling the Jews,

it was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46).

The Gentiles rejoiced, but the unconverted Jews were not so pleased! Some Jews went to the power brokers in town and managed to generate enough persecution against Paul and Barnabas that they shook the dust off their feet and left the district heading to Iconium. Reports were that those believing in Jesus as Messiah in Pisidian Antioch did not abandon their belief once Paul and Barnabas left. They continued to be “filled with joy and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52).

Paul and Barnabas at the Synagogue in Iconium

Iconium was about a 90-mile walk for Paul and Barnabas from Antioch. It was the “last [easternmost] city in Phrygia.”²⁰ Just as they had in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went into the Jewish synagogue with their message. Again, as in Antioch, “a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed” (Acts 15:1).

While Barnabas would testify about the events, he would also note that in Iconium, certain Jews instigated trouble. These Jews were not persuaded by Paul that Jesus was the Messiah, and they began persecuting those who believed. The city’s population was soon divided over those who believed and those who didn’t, and some vigilantes decided to kill Paul and others.

When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country (Acts 14:5-6).

This testimony is important to me in trying Paul’s case. It is indicative of Paul’s actions not being based on his personal self-interest. To the contrary, Paul’s preaching and actions stemmed from convictions rather than profit. This was not Paul self-aggrandizing. This was Paul suffering for what he believed. This story is not a one-time event. It was going to get rougher soon.

Paul and Barnabas at the Synagogue in Lystra

Paul and Barnabas left Iconium for the countryside, including the village of Lystra, some 18 miles south/southwest of Iconium. As Paul and Barnabas preached in Lystra, Barnabas would testify that among those listening was some unnamed man crippled from birth. The crippled man listened to Paul and believed what Paul taught. As Paul realized that the man was believing, Paul proclaimed loudly, “Stand upright on your feet!” The man “sprang up and began walking” for the first time in his life (Acts 14:10).

²⁰ Xenophon *Anabasis*, i.2.19.

Barnabas was an eyewitness to this miracle, but not the only eyewitness. This was not done in solitude in some dark alleyway, but was done before the eyes and ears of many. The people saw what was done and were amazed.

I'm not sure how well Barnabas would be able to testify to some of the background behind what happened next, but my researchers would certainly find it, and I would be able to set it in front of the court to make sense of what happened next. The necessary background centers on Greek mythology.

----- **IMPORTANT BACKGROUND** -----

Almost 40 years earlier, in 7AD, the great Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso ("Ovid") finished his monumental work, the *Metamorphoses*. This set of books was Ovid's effort at combining and linking together all the great mythical stories of his time into a long running narrative. Among the well-known stories he put into his work was one of a poor married couple living their everyday lives.

As Ovid recounts the story, Zeus (Ovid used "Jupiter," the Roman name for Zeus, the greatest of the gods) took on the "guise of a mortal"²¹ along with the god Hermes (Ovid used Hermes's Roman name, Mercury). Hermes is famous for his winged shoes and the winged staff with two snakes entwined (the "caduceus"). The two gods, disguised as humans, went to "a thousand homes ... seeking a place to rest," but all the homes were shut and locked. Everyone refused them entry.

The Cadeceus



Ultimately, a poor and humble old couple (Baucis and Philemon) invited Zeus and Hermes in for food, shelter and rest. Although the couple had little to offer, they gave the gods the best of what they had. Of course, the couple had no idea who the guests really were, although they thought it odd that as often as they poured the wine, it never emptied!

After eating and seeing the commitment of the couple toward hospitality, the gods revealed their true identities. "We are gods," they said, "and this wicked neighborhood shall be punished as it deserves; but to you shall be given exemption from this punishment."

The gods then transported the elderly couple away from the punishment, destroying all the people and homes that had refused them entrance. By the end of the story, the couple

²¹ The quotations from Ovid are all from book 8, the translation of F. J. Miller as revised by G. P. Goold in the Loeb Classical Library Edition.

become priests to Zeus and Hermes and their humble home becomes a marble temple. The couple are granted the wish of their choice. The final wish of the couple is to die together at the same time, and so the two eventually pass away by becoming trees that are entwined together. These trees, the locals said just decades before Paul and Barnabas arrived, could be seen and recognized “even to this day.”

The reason this story is necessary background to understanding Barnabas’s testimony is that the events supposedly happened right where Paul and Barnabas were. These events allegedly happened in Tyana, a small town in the same region where Paul and Barnabas were traveling.

The people in Lystra would have been weaned on this story. These were people of Phrygia, the region that included Tyana.²² Many of these people believed that Zeus and Hermes had previously come to their area dressed as mortals.

Into their lives then comes Paul and Barnabas, and Paul performs a miracle worthy of the gods! Barnabas would attest to the reaction of the people, one that is not at all surprising.

And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’ Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker (Acts 14:11-12).

These people were serious! Even the local priest of Zeus (who no doubt traced the ancestry of his job to the supposed encounter of the very first couple who became priests to Zeus) “brought oxen and garlands²³ to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds” (Acts 14:13).

Barnabas would testify to his and Paul’s reaction. While most might have enjoyed the celebrity status (after all, not many get mistaken for gods), Paul and Barnabas were horrified. They tore their garments and showed themselves fully human crying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you.”

Paul’s authenticity was further demonstrated as Barnabas would testify that having tried to put aside any ideas of divinity, Paul pointed the people back to his message:

²² When Paul returns to this area in his second missionary journey, Luke writes of the area as “the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (Acts 16:6).

²³ Ovid notes in his account that as of his day, people were still laying garlands at the trees in honor of Zeus and the couple that first granted hospitality to Zeus and Hermes.

We bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God (Acts 14:15).

Paul was not speaking of a god who needed human hospitality. He was no Zeus in need of a place to sleep. Paul spoke of a God “who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.” Yet even with this, Paul was scarcely able to restrain the people from sacrificing to them. (Acts 14:15-18).

Doubtlessly, the crowd’s reaction spread quickly. Anytime there is a god in a nearby neighborhood, people will want to see him or her! A full day’s walk, 19 miles, up the road was Iconium, where Paul and Barnabas had been. Certain people in Iconium had already plotted to stone Paul and Barnabas, and not surprisingly these people came into Lystra. The non-believers tried to convince the town that Paul and Barnabas were hucksters, and they riled up the crowd in Lystra. These non-believers then stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, thinking the unconscious Paul was dead.

To be continued...

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “...we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:11).

Think for a moment about the majestic and far-reaching arm of God in the salvation of mankind. God has prepared the fields for harvest, has called the workers, has sent them forth and has seen to the harvest. Now we should make that personal. See the majestic arm of God reaching into your life and touching you with the opportunity for eternity in his presence.

2. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me!” (Mt 16:24)

We should see the arm of God as he uses us in his fields to harvest those “appointed to eternal life” (Acts. 13:48). Our goal should never be simply a theological understanding of what Luke meant by that phrase. Our goal should always be to humbly follow God and do as instructed.

3. “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28).

All of us have good days and bad days, though few of us have days that match Paul’s! It is reassuring to know that being stoned, being persecuted, and being maligned, all for the cause of Jesus, never changed Paul’s conviction that God was

at work in something much greater. We are a part of that. So we rejoice, even in the midst of suffering!