
Darrell Jackson

As they trudged steadily northward, Hannah and Saul balanced their few belongings on the back of the sickly mule they had been able to hastily purchase from a neighbor. Only a few days earlier those few items had proudly decorated their small home and grocery store. They had left reluctantly, as a result of a steep decline in trade. Recent political moves were making it increasingly difficult for followers of Jesus to sell food to their neighbors, who, in turn, were being pressured to adhere to strict religious regulations concerning the sale and handling of food. Observance of those regulations was being carefully monitored by the religious police and the civil authorities, working in close cooperation. Unable to sustain a livelihood, Hannah and Saul had decided to join an uncle and his family who were living in a city close to the northern border of Syria.

Hannah and Saul’s story will not be unfamiliar to the many hundreds of thousands of refugees who continue to flee Iraq, Iran, Sudan, and Syria because of their Christian faith. Religiously inspired persecution may not leave you dead, but perhaps your store is boycotted, leaving food rotting on your shelves and your household income gone. In such situations, many are forced to seek a means of survival elsewhere.

Hannah and Saul were not traveling in 2015, however. They left Jerusalem in about A.D. 33. As they traveled, these persecuted followers of Jesus, forced to become economic migrants, took with them their testimonies of life-changing encounters. Jews witnessed to Jews, and thus the stories of Jesus the Messiah and of God’s enduring promises to his people were spread wherever Jews gathered in diaspora situations (Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19).

Mission and the Diaspora

I understand Acts 11 as a missiologically rich historical account and will address its narrative flow rather than pay close attention to its exegesis, except where necessary.

Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria, was strategically located on the river Orontes, about twelve miles (twenty kilometers) upstream from its seaport. It had been founded by Seleucus I, a Macedonian general under Alexander the Great, in about 300 B.C. Its size and strategic importance help to explain why it played its remarkable role in the unfolding drama and story of the mission and expansion of the early church. Estimates based on contemporary accounts have the population at somewhere around 500,000. Around 10 percent of that population was Jewish, and Josephus¹ mentions that a large number of Greek-speaking Gentiles were ‘attracted to [the] religious ceremonies’ of the Jews, presumably as either “God-fearers” or proselytes.

Mission to and through the Jewish diaspora. As suggested by my opening story, refugees fleeing economic hardship, religious discrimination, and the threat of personal violence engaged in
mission to Jews already living in diaspora. These refugees scattered to cities with existing Jewish populations on the coastlines of North Africa (Acts 11:20), the eastern Mediterranean, and the island of Cyprus (Acts 11:19). As mentioned, Jews reached out to Jews who had adopted Greco-Roman culture and lifestyles and to ethnic non-Jews who had embraced Judaism as either proselytes or God-fearers.2

*Mission through and beyond the Jewish diaspora.* The narrative of Acts 11:19–30 introduces a contrasting second group of unnamed individuals with the description “some men of Cyprus and Cyrene” (v. 20). With the arrival of this group in Antioch, Luke introduces the opening chapters of an ethnically diverse church. Arriving from Cyprus and North Africa, these anonymous missionaries began to share the Good News with the Greeks (Acts 11:20),3 forming a radically new phase of Christian mission.

These missionaries had perhaps been inspired by Peter’s coastal mission to Azotus and Lydda, in the south, and Joppa and Caesarea, in the north, news of which may have spread as far as Cyrene, Cyprus, and Antioch. Peter’s encounter with the Gentile Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10) was reported back to Jerusalem (Acts 11:1–18) and probably followed earlier work of Philip in places like Caesarea (Acts 8:40). Even so, for missionaries to reach out beyond their own ethnic grouping was, and remarkably enough still is, relatively uncommon.4 Tereso Casiño has outlined several arguments nationals currently make against engaging in mission beyond their own diasporas, thereby bolstering ethnocentric or xenophobic cultural exclusivism:

- Such mission is not part of our denominational thrust and lacks support from our denominational leadership.
- The church of the host nation can take care of its own evangelism and discipleship needs.
- Such mission is too complicated, for cultural and other practical reasons.
- We have enough mission needs to address within our own ethnic diaspora community.
- Local mission is not real mission; mission should be from the West to the rest.5

Can we say anything about these missionaries and why they were in Antioch? Luke describes Jews from Cyrene opposing the Gospel in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9), though by the time of Acts 11, Cyreneans are among those proclaiming the Gospel and, with the African and Cypriot missionaries, brought the Gospel to the Greek-speaking residents of Antioch sometime between 35 and 39, presumably when on business as merchants and traders.6

*Mission beyond the Diaspora Jews*

The mission from North Africa and Cyprus has profound implications for every believer alive today. It led, directly, within a generation, to a church with a majority of Greek-speaking members. It resulted, indirectly, in the Gospels’ being preserved in Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic, an early example of what Lamin Sanneh has called the ‘concept of translatability’.7 The Gospel is a Gospel for all, written in a common tongue for use by all people, to be carried by all, through all, and to all. It is not a story about a wonder-working Messiah for the Jews only, but a story about Jesus as our Lord, our Christ, our Anointed One. Casiño encourages this kind of mission by listing several arguments for mission beyond the diaspora. As he has noted, such mission is
• Intently soteriological: every human being is precious to God and needs redemption.
• Comprehensively missiological: God draws people to himself not only for salvation but also for his redemptive mission in the world.
• Decisively ecclesiological: God forms a covenant people and empowers them to be his witnesses as light to the world and salt of the earth.
• Feasibly practical: successful and effective models of missions beyond the diaspora abound today.  

Before these anonymous missionaries arrived, the demarcation in Antioch had been between Jew and Gentile. This distinction was relativized, and outsiders began to refer to the emerging communities in Antioch as “Christian” (i.e., “partisans of Christ,” Acts 11:26). Ironically, this usage may have been resisted by early believers, who feared losing the protection that Judaism was afforded under Roman law as a religio licita. It is also likely that the label “Christian” was used by opponents to stigmatize the members of the early church, much as the label “Marxist” has been used. This usage seems to have been characteristic of the scorn and hatred expressed during the persecution under Agrippa I.

Ethnic Diversity and the Church

In the emerging ‘christian’ congregations of Antioch, traditional ethnic loyalties were breaking down, exacerbated by the realities of diaspora, and re-focussing around loyalty to Christ. The ethnic diversity of the church became an unavoidable consequence of the missionary activity of the Apostles. Three facets of the ethnic diversity of the mission in Antioch described in Acts 11:19–30 are particularly revealing as we consider the character of mission today.

An ethnically diverse church may be appropriate to its location. Unlike Peter and Philip, who carry out urban ministry elsewhere in the region, Barnabas does not come to Antioch to preach the Gospel and baptize new believers. He arrives in response to the work of other missionaries and merely acknowledges the grace of God already at work among them (Acts 11:22–23). Barnabas might easily have passed a complaint back to the Jerusalem mother church about African evangelists arriving in Antioch without proper accreditation, but instead he recognizes that the strategic location and the ethnically diverse character of the Antiochian populace mean that such developments are inevitable within the economy of God’s kingdom.

Several evangelical anthropologists have recently explored the challenges that urban ethnic diversity has posed for earlier models of ethnolinguistic missiology. Missiologists have interpreted Antioch as a model for an urban, ethnically diverse church that better reflects the metropolitan context. Indeed Luke seems oblivious to any obstacles that ethnolinguistic diversity might place in the way of the rapid growth of the Antiochian church (Acts 11:21, 24, 26).

An ethnically diverse church may be better suited to ethnically diverse mission. Jacob Jervell has speculated that Luke belonged to the church in Antioch. With greater certainty, we can say that the church leaders included a Levite from Cyprus (Barnabas), two Africans from Libya (including a black African called Simeon), and a boyhood friend of Herod Antipas (Manaen), and to these would soon be added a Pharisee educated under Gamaliel (Saul/Paul; Acts 13:1). In a short time, this company of Christians would become not only a center for discipleship (Acts
11:26) but also a center for mission (Acts 11:29–30). The multiethnic nature of the mission from Libya and Cyprus sets the pattern for the nature of the church. Arguably, the vision for mission within the Christian assemblies of Antioch sprang out of their culturally and ethnically diverse, yet reconciled, church life.

I suggest that a vision for mission, that is, of taking the Gospel to all nations, is the likely overflow of a church made up of women and men from every nation under heaven. If you want to plant multiethnic churches, do so through multiethnic teams. Model what you want the church to become.

*An ethnically diverse church may be controversial.* There is little evidence that change and innovation are ever universally welcome. The new emphasis on mission to the Greeks must have raised questions. Was there now a different mission, or indeed were there now two missions: one to the Jews and another to the Gentiles? Jervell insists, however, that “there is no specific mission to the Gentiles, separated from the mission to the Jews,” arguing that there is only one mission seen throughout the Old Testament, that of bringing the nations to the worship of the one true God. Peter O’Brien adds that, for Paul, “this gospel that he preached is identified with the promise made to Abraham (Gal 3:8). As Gentiles were brought into a covenant relationship with the living God through faith, so the promises made to Abraham were in the process of being fulfilled.”

One can imagine this issue remaining a point of concern for these Jewish followers of Jesus and their Greek brothers and sisters. In order to address some of the theological and strategic questions it raised, Barnabas clearly felt it was time to call in extra help.

**Paul’s Apostolic Call to the Whole World**

The help that Barnabas enlisted could not have been a riskier choice, for he was clearly determined to recruit the controversial convert and preacher, Saul of Tarsus. Saul (later Paul) was recruited by Barnabas to a discipleship role in Antioch only after “some men” had already spoken “to the Greeks also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20), and after Barnabas had subsequently “exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” (Acts 11:23). Whilst Paul located his *vocation* to Gentile mission in the events immediately following his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 26:15-18), it seems certain that Paul’s *formation* as an apostolic witness and cross-cultural evangelist is largely a consequence of his experiences in the congregations at Antioch. What, then, do we learn from this passage about Paul’s formation for the mission he would go on to undertake?

*Barnabas’s recruitment of a Jewish missionary.* Paul had been persuaded by the believers to flee the opposition of Greek-speaking Jews in Damascus and Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–30) and leave for Tarsus. Rainer Riesner suggests that Paul did not convince many of the believers in Jerusalem that God’s mission included the Gentiles. Indeed, Paul himself conceded that he met only a few of the apostles on his first visit there (Gal. 1:18–19), and it is entirely possible that he returned frustrated and disappointed to his native city of Tarsus.

It was in Tarsus that Barnabas found Paul, and I want to suggest that Barnabas played a part in Paul’s rehabilitation, even if, as several commentators suggest, Paul had been engaged in mission to the Jews in Tarsus. In contrast to Tarsus, where Paul likely struggled with a lack of success, Antioch saw Paul’s ministry develop in new ways (Acts 11:26), for which we must
Paul’s call to Gentile mission. Barnabas seeks Paul out precisely because he understands the relevance of Paul’s theological acumen to the new patterns of missionary practice in Antioch. Paul also has practical experience to offer, albeit of an indirect kind. Terence Donaldson has argued that Paul’s mission to the Gentiles rested on his previous involvement in proselytizing Gentiles into Judaism (Gal. 5:11). Prior to his vision of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was driven by a burning desire to maintain the purity of the elect people of God. The test for this was conformity to the Jewish law, the Torah, and it was this test that precisely distinguished Jews from Gentiles. In contrast, loyalty to Jesus, as the Messiah, represented a rival way to define and delimit the people of God; inevitably and irreversibly weakening the distinctions between Jew and Gentile. The threat this posed to orthodox Judaism is what drove Paul’s fierce opposition to Stephen.

Where, then, can we locate the genesis of Paul’s missionary call to the Gentiles? Paul Bowers suggests that Paul “traces back his own involvement in Gentile mission not to something commonly implicit in the believer’s experience of Christ, but to a quite personal summons (1 Thess 2:4; Gal 1:15, 16; 2:7–9; Rom 1:5, 6; 15:15; Col 1:23).” Donaldson agrees, seeing in Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus a reconfiguration of Paul’s convictional world concerning Gentiles.

For the later Paul, the term *ethnos* as a descriptor of non-Jews is extended to include “the nations,” a reinterpretation that suits his self-understanding as an apostle called to “all the world” (Col. 1:23. The literal meaning of the Greek here is ‘all creation under the heavens’) arrayed along a representative arc from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Rom. 15:19). Paul’s reference to his priestly “offering of the nations” (Rom. 15:16) seems justified by his having proclaimed the Gospel to every nation located along this arc.

Antioch and the shaping of Paul. The Jewish apostle to the Gentiles is shaped in the ethnically diverse congregations of Antioch. Norman Thomas writes of Paul, “Antioch nurtured him and allowed him to experiment with new patterns,” also noting that “it was in Antioch that Paul had time to develop his strategy of mission to Gentiles.” This mission to the Gentiles became so central for Paul that he urged the church in Corinth, “Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks, . . . just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, . . . so that they may be saved” (1 Cor. 10:32–33). His conversion to the Gentile mission becomes so complete that when James and the Jerusalem church send observers to Antioch who then join Peter and Barnabas in withdrawing from table fellowship with the Gentiles, Paul firmly condemns their action as hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11–14).

The resulting mission activity. Korean poet Kim Chi-Ha has written, “Bread is heaven. As heaven cannot be monopolized, bread should be shared and eaten by all.” Paul and Barnabas learn from the church in Antioch how vital it is for the sake of the Gospel that Jews eat with Greeks in a demonstration of practical reconciliation and love that transcends all ethnic and cultural divides.

This action overturned the social conventions of the day. Charitable support was rarely, if ever, given by one ethnic group to another in the ancient world. Such a love offering is radically innovative and possibly unique. This symbolic sharing of food between Greek and Jew was a staggering moment in the life of the early church. It must have seemed that the world was being
turned upside down. Consequently, the church in Antioch grows in its trust and respect for Paul and Barnabas and entrusts them with mission on its behalf (Acts 11:29; 13:2–3).

This sending out into mission is what eventually, after further extensive missionary travels, will bring Paul to trial before the Gentile rulers of the nations. Paul, defending himself before Agrippa (and others), testifies that the words of Jesus to him on the road to Damascus have convinced him that he was sent to “the Gentiles” (Acts 26:17). Paul is very aware that he stands before Agrippa because of his mission to the Gentiles and the violent response it provoked from the Jews in the temple (Acts 21:27–31). Even at trial, his public defense raises a veritable storm when he concludes with a reference to his Gentile mission (Acts 22:21–22). Paul’s mission is not merely an outworking of his theology; Paul’s theology is a mission theology that propels him to the nations, to the ends of the world, to Jew and Gentile alike. Ultimately, his mission theology brings him into conflict with the authorities of both the Jewish and Gentile worlds as he spreads the Gospel of Christ’s sovereign rule over the whole world.

Mission at World’s End

Diaspora and ethnic diversity are likely to remain points of attention for missiologists and mission practitioners into the foreseeable future. For students of the megachurches also, these are important issues. Some of the largest churches I have observed during my ministry have been diaspora churches (e.g., Nigerians in the United Kingdom and Ukraine), and in a large number of other churches, from Norway to Australia, from north to south, cultural diversity has shaped the content, conduct, and communication of Sunday worship.

In such instances, we see a contemporary expression of the discovery made by the church in Antioch that the Gospel is the reconciling good news of Jesus for Jew and Gentile alike, even to the ends of the world. The implication is clear: the migrant Christian journey into mission was a calling to encounter previously unknown ethnic groups and cultures that existed at the margins, on the edge. Unknown dangers and boundless opportunities await those who are obedient enough to enter the migrant experience at the world’s end. Paul knew of those dangers and opportunities to the end, remaining faithful to Jesus as well as to the vision for mission that had been kindled and tended by the ethnically diverse diaspora church in Antioch.

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Darrell Jackson is senior lecturer in missiology at Morling College, Sydney, Australia.

Appendix I

Paul, Galatians, and Acts: The Likely Chronological Sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Scripture</th>
<th>Date A.D.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Gal. 1:17, conversion near the city</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arabia</td>
<td>Gal. 1:17</td>
<td>31/32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Gal. 1:17</td>
<td>after three years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>Gal. 1:18</td>
<td>33/34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acts 11:26, designation “Christian” in Antioch ca. 37
Syria-Cilicia Gal. 1:21 34–42
Antioch Acts 11:25 42/44

after fourteen years
Jerusalem Gal. 2:1 57
Paul writes to the Galatians

Bibliography


Notes

3. This reading of “Greeks” is preferred over “Hellenists,” given the context for the text and the general direction Luke gives his account.
4. This claim might, at first, seem highly contestable, but here I am using the term ‘missionary’ to describe all those who are ‘sent’ into mission. Thus I am referring to every disciple of
Jesús.


6. These residents included Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch (Acts 6:5), and Lucius of Cyrene (Acts 13:1). Lucius’s presence in Antioch prior to Acts 11:19 may help explain why Cyrenians were regularly visiting Antioch.


11. See, for example, Michael Rynkiewich, Soul, Self, and Society: A Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Postcolonial World (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2011).


16. See Appendix 1 for a possible chronology of Paul’s writings relevant to the theme of this Bible study chapter.

17. Riesner, Paul’s Early Period, 264.


19. See Jervell, Theology, 117. Jervell believes we can talk about the Paul of Acts as a missionary to the Jews (e.g., in Damascus, Jerusalem, and Tarsus), while the Paul of the Epistles is an apostle to the Gentiles. I find his contrast, however, to be unnecessarily polarizing, and as it is dependent on Luke’s silence about Paul’s activity in Tarsus, it is not entirely persuasive.

20. My portrait of Paul in Tarsus is, admittedly, speculative, but it is possible to imagine Paul’s frustration in Tarsus at being unable to fulfill God’s words of Acts 9:15, which he placed at the center of his call and vision when defending his ministry toward the end of his life.

22. Ibid., 251.
26. Thomas, “Church at Antioch,” 146, 149.
27. It is possible that the persecution and resultant Diaspora under Agrippa delayed a decisive resolution of issues relating to the Gentile mission (first discussed in Acts 11:1–8, though not resolved until the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15). The deferral of this issue was doubtless a source of hot controversy; indeed, Paul even refers to a “circumcision faction” in Antioch (Gal. 2:12). Paul was caught up in this dynamic, most obviously when he opposed Peter and Barnabas for withdrawing from eating with the Gentiles.
29. Some Pauline scholars have queried the extent to which Paul expected the churches, as congregations rather than individuals, to follow his example in mission. Paul Bowers (“Church and Mission in Paul”) attempts to resolve this paradox with the suggestion that Paul’s mission theology reflects the Jewish concept of the mission of the people of God (“a light to the nations”). Paul’s missional exhortations to his congregations are typically “live such good lives before the Gentiles.” Bowers concludes, “Where Paul . . . searches out, pursues, confronts, and urges men to accept the word, his churches are expected . . . to attract, allure, respond and receive. Paul promotes a centrifugal mission; his churches are to form the focus of a centripetal movement. Paul disseminates; they assimilate” (109). I mention this position here not because I necessarily agree with Bowers but because no serious contemporary Pauline scholar would discuss Paul’s theology without reference to its missionary character.