–Save This Page as a PDF–

Syrian Antioch during the Time of Paul

During the Seleucid dynasty numerous cities throughout Eretz (the Land of) Isra'el, **Syria**, and Pisidia, were named in honor of Antiochus. Seleucus Nicator founded Antioch on the Orontes in 300 BC, naming it after his father, where it served as the Seleucid capital. It rapidly became a city of importance and in 165 BC was already the third largest city after Rome and Alexandria. Modern scholars estimate its population in the first century as around 100,000. Following Pompey's reorganization of the whole region it became a free city in 64 BC, serving as the seat of administration of the Roman province of Syria. Its position on the Orontes River encouraged its growth as a commercial center, the produce of Syria passing through **the city** on its way to other Mediterranean countries. Enlarged and adorned by Augustus and Tiberius, Herod the Great contributed to the city's glory by paving its main street with marble and lining it on both sides with marble colonnades. It was called Antioch the great, Antioch the Beautiful, and the Queen of the East.

Jews had settled in Syrian **Antioch** since its foundation, being included among the military colonists who established **the city**. In line with city's political importance, its **Jewish** community ranked in status with those of Alexandria and Rome. The growth of the **Jewish** population was presumably stimulated by the material advantages the city offered, as well as its attractions as a major urban center. Many **Jews** appear to have emigrated from **Isra'el**, **Jews** from **Syria** itself also tending to congregate in the capital – together with migrants from Babylonia and other parts of the Parthian Empire.

The annexation of Eretz (the Land of) Isra'el by the Seleucids around 200 BC intensified the contracts between **Antioch** and Jerusalem. **Jewish** representatives were frequent visitors in the Seleucid capital and Onias III apparently sought refuge from his opponents in the famous temple of Apollo at Daphne near **Antioch** (Second Maccabees 4:33). The book of **Acts** witnesses to the traffic between **Antioch** and Jerusalem, as well as the cosmopolitan character of both, noting that **in theses days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts 11:27)** and that among **the prophets and teachers were Simeon called Niger,**

Lucius the Cyrenian, and Manaen (brought up since childhood with Herod the Tetrarch).[54]

Persecution scattered the early **Hellenistic believers** to the city of **Antioch,** the modern **Syrian** city of Antakiyeh, which became the home church for **Gentile** missions. It had a school of theology and became the church home of two church fathers, Ignatius and John Chrysostom. It was there that we see the first widespread evangelism of **the Gentiles**. **As a result, Syrian Antioch became the center of Gentile Christianity, just as Jerusalem had become the center of the Messianic Community.** Early on, **the city** became one of the major bases of the Church (see the commentary on **Acts, to see link click Bj – The Church in Syrian Antioch**). And **it was in** Syrian **Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26b).** This may clarify how the church at **Antioch** was able to send relief help to the **Jewish** believers in Jerusalem (see **Au – After Fourteen Years, Paul went up to Jerusalem, and took Titus and Barnabas with Him**).

Antioch was made up of Greek speaking **Syrian** majority, with a large **Jewish** minority and probably more than a dozen synagogues. But, it was a major city of pagan worship. Its patron god was Tyche, but being polytheistic, they also worshiped the Ashteroth, which involved immoral festivals and ritual prostitution. Only five miles away was the town of Daphne, which was the center of the worship of Apollo and Artemis, and it was noted for its pleasure seeking Temple. Syrian **Antioch** was such a wicked **city** that it was perhaps only overshadowed in its depravity by Corinth. **It** was so morally corrupt that the Greek writer Juvenal, wrote in his satire that “the sewage of the Syrian Orontes flowed into the Tiber River.” He was describing the degradation of Rome, but blamed it on **Antioch**.[55]

Jews had settled in **Antioch** since its foundations, being included amongst the military colonists who established the city. In line with the city’s political importance, its **Jewish** community ranked in status with those of Alexandria and Rome. The growth of **the Jewish** population was presumably stimulated by the material advantages the city offered, as well as its attractions as a major urban center. Many **Jews** appear to have emigrated from the land of **Isra’el, Jews** from **Syria** itself also tending to congregate in the capital – together with migrants from Babylonia and other parts of the Parthian empire.[56]