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The Church in Syrian Antioch

11: 19-30

42 AD

The church in Syrian Antioch DIG: Syrian Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. What might the apostles feel as they hear the gospel is taking root there? What was the nature of Barnabas' character based on verses 22-26 (4:36-37 and 9:27-28)? From this profile, why did Barnabas recruit Sha'ul?

REFLECT: With whom do you associate that no messianic rabbi or pastor would normally contact? How might you share the gospel with those people? Would these people be comfortable in your messianic congregation or church right now? Why or why not? What would you consider evidence of the grace of God at work in your life? In your messianic congregation or church? What experiences have you had with people who take bold risks to share the faith of the gospel? Do they make you feel guilty? Annoyed? Challenged?

For **Messiah's** stated purposes (1:8) the **scattering** of believers, especially **Jewish Hellenistic believers**, which seemed like a disaster, proved to be a great blessing because **those who had been scattered**, like seed, and **went around proclaiming the Word (8:4)**. Now we pick up where 8:4 left off and find out where **those** who we **scattered** went and what **they** did.



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.**

Seleucus Nicator founded the city of **Antioch** in 300 BC. Having previously served as an infantry general under Alexander the Great, he eventually assumed the title of *basileus* and established the Seleucid Empire over much of the territory in the Near East that Alexander had conquered. **Antioch** later became the capital of the Seleucid Empire. It was 300 miles north of **Jerusalem** and became part of the Roman Empire in 64 BC. Rome declared **Antioch** to be a free city with its own municipal government and became the third largest city in the Empire, after Rome and Alexandria, Egypt. Built on the Orontes River, it had a population of around 100,000 residents and had quite a reputation. It was called **Antioch** the great, **Antioch** the Beautiful, and the Queen of the East.

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**.²⁴⁵

Jews had settled in Syrian **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.²⁴⁶

Paul was **Luke’s** source for this information on Syrian **Antioch**. This explains why **Acts 11-14** focuses on the roles **Paul** and **Barnabas** play in, and as sent out by, the church at **Antioch**. It is also possible that **Luke** was born in **Antioch**, or had direct access through personal contacts in **Antioch**. As a result, this material is solidly based in that tradition.²⁴⁷

The birth of the Gentile church: This passage picks up where **8:4** left off, discussing the effect of **those scattered because of the persecution** of **Hellenistic Jewish** believers by **Sha'ul of Tarsus that happened in connection with** the stoning of **Stephen**. While some went to **Samaria (8:5 and 25)** and **Caesarea (8:40 and 10:24ff)**, **Damascus (9:10)**, **Lydda, Joppa and Sharon (9:35-36)**, at the same time some displaced **Hellenistic Jews** traveled as far as **Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch**, a city in modern day Syria, **telling the message only to Jews (11:19)**. They spread the gospel as **they** went; however, it was only when **they** got to **Antioch** that they began to take the next step and evangelize **Gentiles**. Being **Greek-speaking Jews**, from predominantly **Gentile** areas, **they** were more open to witnessing to **Gentiles** than the native Palestinian **Jews**. Through **their** efforts, the first **Gentile** church was born.²⁴⁸

There were some of them, unnamed [Jewish] men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Syrian Antioch and began speaking to the Gentiles also, proclaiming the Lord Yeshua, not as **Messiah**, which would have no meaning to **the Gentile** mind, but as **Lord (to see link click [Aq - Peter Speaks at the Temple: A closer look at Luke's use of the word Lord](#))**, an authoritative figure who is the final judge and through whom, if **they** had faith, would come forgiveness and inclusion into **God's** people. Later, after **the Gentiles** had been taught about **Yeshua's** role as the Jewish **King** of the Jewish nation to whom **they** had joined themselves by **their** faith (**Romans 11:17-24**), **they** could be expected to understand the fullness of the concept of **Messiah**.²⁴⁹ Some of the most significant work done for the Kingdom has been done by unknown **witnesses** who are obedient to **Christ** right where **they** are and where **they** do not attract much attention.²⁵⁰ **The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord (11:20-21)**. Now that **Peter** had opened the door to **the Gentiles** (see **[Bg - Peter Goes to the House of Cornelius](#)**), we see a rapid expansion of the gospel (**1:8**).

It was these men who began what may be called the Gentile mission in Syrian Antioch. Looking at Acts 8-11 together, one gains the rather clear impression that Luke is presenting a complex picture of the origins of the proclamation of the Good News to Gentiles. It was not a mission originated by the leadership of either Jerusalem community or the Syrian Antioch church, but by ADONAI through a variety of means including Peter, Paul, these anonymous men from Cyprus and Cyrene, and perhaps even Philip.

Neither the salvation of the Ethiopian eunuch nor that of the house of Cornelius and his household prepared the **Jerusalem** believers for the widespread **Gentile** conversions at **Antioch**. **News about the Gentile evangelism in Antioch reached the ears of the**

community in Jerusalem. Sending the right representative was essential. Sending a legalistic Pharisee would have spelled disaster. **Barnabas**, however, had all the qualifications for the job. Therefore, **they sent him to Syrian Antioch** to investigate and verify the report (**11:22**). This was a wise decision because **Barnabas**, too, was from **Cyprus (4:36)**. Let's pause and take a look at the role **Barnabas** plays in the book of **Acts**. **He** was an early model of a Jewish believer. **He** was the one who convinced **the apostles** of the genuineness of **Sha'ul's** conversion. **He** also represented **the apostles** in the investigation into the church at **Antioch**. And as you see below, **he** was responsible for bringing **Sha'ul** to **Antioch** from **Tarsus**. **He** accompanied **Sha'ul** on **his** first missionary journey and defended **Gentile** believers at **the Jerusalem** counsel (see [Bs - The Counsel at Jerusalem](#)), which was a major role for **Barnabas** in the book of **Acts**.

When Barnabas arrived and saw the grace of God, he was thrilled. Thus, **he** verified **their** ministry of **Gentile** evangelism. **He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with heartfelt devotion.** Such persistence was necessary in a **city** so given over to paganism. **For Barnabas was a good man,** and like Stephen, **full of the Ruach ha-Kodesh and faith. And a large number was added to the Lord** as **he** stayed and participated in **Gentile** evangelism (**11:23-24**).

Although **Barnabas** was thrilled with the great harvest the scattered seeds had ultimately produced, those **Hellenistic Jews** were obviously in a situation over **their** heads. **They** needed a specialist, an expert discipler. **They** needed **Sha'ul**. And right about then, **Sha'ul** probably needed **them**. Seven years after **Sha'ul left for Tarsus (9:30)**, **he** returns on the scene. **Then Barnabas left for Tarsus**, a hundred miles north, **to look for Paul**. Why not send to **Yerushalayim** and ask for **the deacon Nicolas**, who was from Syrian **Antioch (6:5)**? Because **Barnabas** knew that **ADONAI** had commissioned **Sha'ul** to minister to **the Gentiles (9:15, 22:21, 26:17)**. You recall that **Barnabas** befriended **Sha'ul** in **Jerusalem (9:26-27)**, and no doubt the two of **them** often talked about **Sha'ul's** special call from **God**.²⁵¹

Finding **Paul**, however, was no easy task. **He** had apparently been disinherited for **his** belief that **Yeshua** was **the Messiah (Philippians 3:8)**, and forced to move from **his** home. The Greek word **to look for** (Greek: *anazeteo*) suggests a very lengthy search implying difficulty on the part of **Barnabas**. Eventually, however, **Barnabas** caught up with **Paul**, and **when he had found him, he brought him to Syrian Antioch** to co-minister with **him**. **Barnabas** had recognized **Paul's** ability when he observed **him** preaching in Damascus, and was prepared to introduce **him** to **the Antioch** church, just as **he** had done earlier to the **Jerusalem** community. In this we see the bridge-building abilities of **Barnabas**,

perhaps another reason the **Jerusalem** community wisely sent **him** to **Antioch** to help facilitate growth there.²⁵² **For a whole year they met together with Messiah's community and taught a large number (11:25-26a).** What a great team they must have made - **Sha'ul** the teacher and **Barnabas** the encourager. **One** taught the principles of a godly life and **the other** assured **them** they could do it with **God's** help.²⁵³

Now it was in Syrian Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (11:26b also see Acts 26:28). The word **Christians** in the Greek text is *Christianoi*, which could also be translated **Messiah people**, and was a term used in derision. The name *Christianoi* was applied to **Gentile** believers by **Gentile** non-believers. Why? Because **Jewish believers** would have called **their Gentile** brothers and sisters in the faith by the same term **they** used for **themselves, people belonging to the Way (9:2)**; while **Jewish** nonbelievers of **Antioch** wouldn't have thought enough about **Gentile** believers in **Yeshua** to give **them** a special name. But in time both **Jewish** and **Gentile believers** in **Yeshua** learned to bear proudly the name that began as a nickname (**First Peter 4:16**). The name non believing Jews gave to Jewish believers was *Natzratim*, or Nazarenes, that is, followers of **the man from Nazareth**. The word in modern Hebrew for **Christians** remains *Notzrim*.²⁵⁴

What is the difference between a Jewish Messianic believer and a Hebrew Christian? On the one hand, there are **Jews** who grow up in religious homes. **They** go to Shul, **they** may not be completely kosher like Orthodox **Jews**, but **they** are mindful of the commandments of Moshe regarding food. **They** go to Hebrew school. **They** observe the feasts. **They** are connected with the **Jewish** community and way of life. Then one day, whatever the circumstance, whether through interaction with a person or personal revelation, **they** are saved. Most likely by another **Jew**. If this person comes from an Orthodox background the reaction of the family can be severe. Many times **they** will be excommunicated. In extreme cases, **they** will be declared dead and a funeral held to emphasize the point. If this person comes from a Reformed **Judaism** (which has abandoned aspects of Orthodox **Jewish** worship and ritual in an attempt to adapt to modern changes in social, political, and cultural life), the reaction may not be as severe, but the problem still remains - where does this person go to worship? Do such people have to give up **their Jewishness** and go to church? No. Messianic congregations have a Torah procession, the parashah is read (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Af - Parashah**), some have Davidic dance. **They** read from the Torah and the prophets, but **they** also include readings from the B'rit Chadashah. In short, **they** do not have to abandon their **Jewish** roots to follow **Yeshua** as their **Messiah**. **They** would call themselves Messianic **Jews**.

On the other hand, there are ethnic **Jews** who grow up in secular homes. **They** have no

contact with the Jewish community. If **their** last name wasn't Goldware, Levi, or Cohen, you wouldn't even know they were **Jewish**. **They** don't go to Temple, **they** either don't know or don't care about eating kosher, **they** didn't go to Hebrew school and **they** don't follow the feasts. Then one day, whatever the circumstance, whether through interaction with a person, most likely a **Gentile**, or a personal revelation **they** are saved. They have no **Jewish** roots to give up. Therefore, **they** identify with **Christ** and would go to church. They are **Hebrew Christians**, but would merely call themselves **Christians**.

The benevolence of the church: Now at the end of the first year of the co-ministry of **Barnabas** and **Sha'ul**, prophets came down from **Jerusalem** to Syrian **Antioch**. Now a **prophet** was one who received direct revelation from **God**. The early Messianic Community had **prophets**, like **Judah** and **Silas (15:32)**, and the church at **Antioch** had **prophets** like **Lucius the Cyrenian**, **Simeon called Niger**, **Manaen (13:1)**. For **one** to be a **prophet one** had to give a **near historical prophecy**. **One of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted through the Ruach that there was going to be a great famine over all the Roman world**. The Greek word for **world** used here is *oikouméne*, which means *the inhabited world, or the Roman world*. Indeed, **this took place during the reign of Claudius (23:34, 28:17)**, who was emperor from 41 AD to 54 AD.

Contemporary records demonstrate that a series of famines affected Mediterranean agriculture during his reign. In the winter of 40/41 AD Rome experienced such a lack of food that stores were only stocked for a week. This crisis continued at least into **Claudius'** second year 41/42 AD. **Yerushalayim's** status as the "navel of the earth" unfortunately does not include the advantages of a city endowed with natural resources or trading materials. The mountains yields only stone in large quantities and most raw materials are lacking. More significantly, **Jerusalem** naturally possesses only one real water source, the spring of **Siloam (Second Kings 20:20; Second Chronicles 32:2-4; Nehemiah 3:15; Isaiah 8:6, 22:8-11; John 9:7ff)**.

In times of famine grain supplies were the first to be affected, and here too **Tziyon** is ill-served by its geographical location, the soil in the surrounding area is notoriously poor in quality. **The City's** chief requirements had to be imported from Galilee, Samaria and the Transjordan. However, the capital produced fruits and vegetables, such as olives, dates, vines and honey. While **Jerusalem** enjoyed a high standard of living, **her** citizens also suffered from a higher cost of living than the rest of the country. In times of drought and famine, these prices soared and **the City** experienced special hardships. Any severe disturbance to the wheat and barley production and/or transport could cause the price to escalate more than sixteen times. Only a few exceptional urban centers in the ancient world

depended upon foreign imports for their food. Unfortunately, **Jerusalem** was one of them. In time of need, aid from the diaspora provided a vital source of sustenance, and the diaspora communities felt a strong sense of responsibility to the believers in **Judea**.²⁵⁵

So the disciples of Syrian Antioch decided to send relief to those kedoshim (brothers and sisters) living in Judea, each according to his ability (Galatians 2:1-10). So the Messianic community in **Yerushalayim** sent **Antioch** a teacher in **Barnabas**, and the church at **Antioch** sent the Messianic community in **Jerusalem** relief from **the famine**. This is in keeping with **Romans 15:25-27**, when **the Gentiles** receive **spiritual blessings** from **the Jews**, **they are obligated** to share **their material blessings** with **them**. **This they did, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Sha'ul (11:29-30).** This is the first use of the word **elders**. **They did not send relief to the apostles**, but to **the elders**. This shows that **Acts** is a transitional book, and the leadership in **Tziyon** was being transformed from **apostles**, which ended with the death of **John** around **98 AD**, to **elders**, which is a permanent office.

The final stage in **the Lord's** command recorded in **Acts 1:8** had been reached. The Messianic Congregation, being **Jewish**, had expanded from **Jerusalem** and **Judea** to **Samaria** and to **the Gentiles** in the most remote part of the earth, then becoming predominately a **Gentile** Church. The church at Syrian **Antioch**, begun in this chapter, was to play a leading role for several centuries. But of all its honors, one stands out. It was the church that **Paul** pastored and from which **he** was called by **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** to launch **his** missionary journeys (see [Bm - Paul's First Missionary Journey](#)).

*We are aware, **Lord**, that during times of hardship and cultural conflict, the people who know their **God** will be strong and take action. Those who are wise among the people will give understanding to many (**Dani'el 11:32-33**). May we not be those who are lulled to sleep by the times or driven to despair. May we instead be **like warriors** in battle trampling down **the mud of the streets, fighting** because **You, Lord**, are with us. **They will be like mighty warriors treading down muddy streets in war. They will fight, because ADONAI is with them and will put horsemen to shame (Zechariah 10:5).***²⁵⁶