

Acts 13:14, 42-44

“Paul and Barnabas Declare Yeshua on the Sabbath”

“But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down” (Acts 13:14).

“As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. Now when *the meeting of the synagogue* had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God. The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord” (Acts 13:42-44).

The record of the Apostle Paul’s visit, to Southern Galatia in Acts 13:13-14:28,¹ obviously has much more to state than Paul’s ministry activities in relation to the seventh-day Sabbath. In various ways, Paul’s message in Acts 13:16-41 has been compared to the martyr Stephen’s message previously issued in Acts ch. 7, although Yeshua the Messiah’s announcement in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-27) and the Apostle Peter’s declarations at *Shavuot*/Pentecost (Acts 2:14-39) have also been suggested.² Frequently, Paul’s activities on *Shabbat* have been approached along the lines of the local Jewish synagogue being a convenient place for him to encounter various Jewish people and Greco-Roman God-fearers, who would already share a common belief in Israel’s God and in a Messiah to come. Commentators on Acts have tended to focus their attention on some of the procedures or logistics of a Diaspora Jewish synagogue and features of a *Shabbat* service, than the actual observance of *Shabbat*.

What do the narrative remarks of Acts 13:14, 42-44 indicate about Paul’s Sabbath observance? Does Paul’s presence at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch only signal that Sabbath services were a convenient time and place to declare Israel’s Messiah to Jews and God-fearers? Or, does Paul’s presence at a synagogue on the Sabbath also signal his personal commitment as a Torah-faithful Jew to observe *Shabbat*? Is Paul’s observance of the Sabbath only done with missionary intentions, or out of a genuine obedience to God? What can we legitimately deduce from what is stated?

13:14 Luke’s narrative records, “the others went on from Perga to Pisidian Antioch, and on *Shabbat* they went into the synagogue and sat down” (CJB). Nothing is said of Paul and Barnabas’ activities in Perga, only that “they passed on from Perga and came to Antioch of Pisidia” (RSV). Sir William Ramsay suggested that Paul caught malaria on the seacoast and had to recuperate in the higher altitude of the inland areas, per his words in Galatians 4:13: “As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you” (NIV). However, this is only one of several possibilities as to why Paul and his party moved inland toward Galatia, but not one that is impossible.

¹ This section has some adapted sections from the commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic* (2007/2012) by J.K. McKee.

² Cf. David G. Peterson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 385.

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Pisidian Antioch was the first city in the province of Galatia visited by Paul and Barnabas. This city would have been named for Antiochus, the king of Syria, after the empire of Alexander the Great was split between his four generals. Pisidian Antioch was located west of the Taurus Mountains and close to the border of Pisidia. The city likely had a sizeable Jewish population, where Paul could easily attend the local synagogue and find people who were familiar with the Tanach Scriptures.

More often than not, interpreters will approach "Entering the synagogue on the *Shabbat*, they sat down" (TLV), as the local Jewish synagogue mainly being a place for Paul to make contacts,³ with nothing more evaluated. A general assertion is made by Gary Gilbert in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, "Jews regularly gathered on the Sabbath (seventh day, Saturday) to read scripture, both Torah (Pentateuch) and prophets (Philo, *Spec. Laws*. 2.60-62; Josephus, *J.W.* 2.289-92; *m. Meg.* 3.6)."⁴

Readers of the Book of Acts do see a pattern beginning to emerge in Acts 13:14 (cf. 17:2), as Paul would commonly visit the local synagogue as the first place to proclaim the gospel in a new city. It was quite customary for visiting Rabbis to address such a gathering, and Paul being a Pharisee definitely marked him out. Richard N. Longenecker concurs,

"The leader of the synagogue...took charge of the building and made arrangement for the services (Luke 8:41, 49). He was usually one of the elders of the congregation. Generally there was only one leader in each synagogue (cf. 18:8, 17), but at times two or more made up the synagogue chapter...Perhaps Paul's dress proclaimed him a Pharisee and thereby opened the way for an invitation to speak."⁵

Paul's later statement, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees" (23:6), his identification with the Pharisees on the matter of the resurrection—could not have been made without committed adherence to major Torah institutions such as the seventh-day Sabbath. For Paul in Pisidian Antioch, as a visiting Jew from outside the local community, he could have carried news of events in the greater Jewish world that the local synagogue would have found of interest. This was certainly true, as Paul *brought good news* to the synagogues where he would meet. Robert W. Wall states, "What is extraordinary about this scene is not that Paul worshiped with other pious Jews on sabbath, for this is his religious habit. Rather it is that 'the synagogue rulers' invited him to offer the morning's midrash or homily on the biblical lessons (13:15)."⁶

Further noted by Ben Witherington III is how, "Paul and Barnabas are recognized as brothers in the Jewish faith, and since Luke's account is elliptical we must assume some previous conversation with the synagogue rulers."⁷ Some kind of normal, Sabbath observance, on the part of Paul and his associates, is assumed by the author. Presumably,

³ Marshall, *Acts*, 220.

⁴ Gary Gilbert, "The Acts of the Apostles," in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, NRSV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 224.

⁵ Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:423.

⁶ Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:191.

⁷ Witherington, *Acts*, 406.

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the synagogue leaders in Pisidian Antioch also recognized this in their interactions with him.

Going to the synagogue on *Shabbat* was a normative part of Paul's life. While he does not probe Paul's Sabbath adherence, F.F. Bruce does describe how Paul probably did have a standardized gospel teaching for those whom he would have encountered at synagogue services:

"[A]fter the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogue invited the strangers to pass on any word of exhortation they might have for the company. Paul stood up to speak, and the summary of his address is given at some length, probably to show the sort of synagogue sermon he was accustomed to preach throughout the Empire. He narrated the deliverance wrought by God for the nation of Israel at the Exodus, and outlined their history from Moses to David to the promised Messiah of David's seed, and declared that the promised Messiah had appeared in their day in the Person of Jesus, whose death and well-attested resurrection proved Him to be the Messiah foretold in Hebrew Scripture."⁸

13:42 The pattern commonly witnessed in the Book of Acts is that a figure like Paul would visit the local Jewish synagogue on *Shabbat*, declare the good news, see various persons come to Messiah faith, and then be pressured to leave. Yet, Paul only left a local synagogue when circumstances offered him no other choice. We should very much think Paul would have doubtlessly preferred to remain preaching and teaching in association with a local, Diaspora synagogue, indefinitely. A synagogue was a place of safety for Paul, among fellow Jews, as well as local Greek and Roman people who were attracted to the God of Israel and the morality of Judaism.

The response to Paul and Barnabas' first encounter in Pisidian Antioch is largely positive. Luke records, "As they were leaving the synagogue they were asked to come again and speak on these subjects next Sabbath" (NEB). The NASU may offer the best rendering of the imperfect tense *parekaloun* (παρεκάλουν) as "begging," also seen in the TLV, "As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging them to speak these things to them the next *Shabbat*." They wanted Paul and Barnabas to return the following week so they could hear more about the One whom they were preaching.

The next time that Paul's declaration of the good news would be able to be heard, at least in a concentrated manner, would be at the next weekly Sabbath service. Eckhard J. Schnabel notes, "This request suggests that the invitation to speak in the next synagogue service was expressed by the officials of the synagogue."⁹ Paul's later ejection from the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch was not at all over his Sabbath orthopraxy or *halachah*, but instead his declaration of the good news itself (13:45-50). Throughout the week between his first and second Sabbath with those at Pisidian Antioch, some ministry activity was likely to be conducted. David G. Peterson indicates, "The message had been spread by those who attended the synagogue and doubtless also by Paul and Barnabas, taking every

⁸ F.F. Bruce, "The Acts of the Apostles," in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 989.

⁹ Schnabel, 585.

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opportunity during the week to teach the gospel.”¹⁰ While they were certainly able to impact many in homes or on the street corners, it was the synagogue on *Shabbat* which is what offered the right venue to reach the most amount of people.

13:43 The end of the second *Shabbat* service in Pisidian Antioch did not stop some people from pursuing Paul and Barnabas. After the service was completed, many followed Paul and Barnabas: “When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God” (NIV). There is an issue concerning who *tōn sebomenōn prosēlūtōn* (τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων) might have been, as some commentators think that “God-fearing worshippers” is a better translation. It is thought that these people might not have been full-fledged proselytes to Judaism,¹¹ but rather God-fearers keeping some of the Torah (i.e., the Sabbath, various purity laws) and on the way toward full proselytization—but not currently there.¹² This status could account for Paul’s dogged determination against proselyte circumcision in his letter to the Galatians. Likewise, these God-fearers could have already undergone full conversion, and been part of the sector insisting on circumcision that Paul must warn against. Ultimately, there is not enough data to know for certain. (What we can know for certain, though, is that the community of Believers themselves never referred to the non-Jews in their midst as “God-fearers.”)¹³

Many Jews and non-Jews attending this synagogue service received the good news with great vigor. These people encouraged Paul and Barnabas “to continue in the grace of God,” recognizing the special calling and service that the Lord had given them. Bruce makes the point, “These people. . . formed the main nucleus of Paul’s converts in most of the cities he went to, as he offered them through Christ equal rights before God with Jewish believers, without the necessity of observing the Jewish ceremonial law and becoming proselytes.”¹⁴ Perhaps the only major difference between Bruce’s statement here and present Messianic views is his conclusion that such non-Jewish Believers were not anticipated to keep any of the “ceremonial law,” as the Apostolic decree of Acts 15:19-21 did enjoin some mandatory “ceremonial” instructions on the non-Jewish Believers coming to faith, such as abstaining from blood and improperly slaughtered meat. However, Bruce is absolutely right in saying that a group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, once a part of the local synagogue, often formed the foundation for the new Messianic assemblies founded by Paul. Likewise, Paul did not expect non-Jewish Believers to become proselytes in order to be accepted as full-fledged and equal members of God’s community.

13:44 The effect of Paul’s visit to Pisidian Antioch can clearly be seen, where Luke says “The next *Shabbat*, nearly the whole city gathered together to hear the message about the Lord” (CJB). It is justified for us to ask what he means by employing the terminology *schodon pasa hē polis* (σχεδὸν πᾶσα ἡ πόλις), “almost all the city” (YLT) or “almost the whole town” (HCSB). Nearly all the town coming to the Sabbath meeting

¹⁰ Peterson, 397.

¹¹ Cf. Bruce, in *NBCR*, 990.

¹² The TLV has “many of the Jewish people and God-fearing inquirers,” for *polloi tōn Ioudaiōn kai tōn sebomenōn prosēlūtōn* (πολλοὶ τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων).

¹³ Consult the FAQ, “God-Fearers.”

¹⁴ Bruce, in *NBCR*, 990.

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indicates that the population was either not that large, or Luke might intend “the city” to be comparable to “those of influence.” What we can certainly deduce is that its Jewish population had enough of an effect on local affairs for a substantial number of people to show up on the Sabbath to hear about Yeshua. They knew where the synagogue was, and the synagogue played some role in the affairs of the wider community.

Bruce takes what is stated in the direction of the considerable majority of the non-Jewish population indeed showing up for the second Sabbath service, going as far as to compare it with more modern incidents witnessed in Twentieth Century Protestantism:

“During the following week, the Gentiles who had heard Paul’s address spread the news through the city to such good purpose that on the next sabbath day almost the whole Gentile population turned up at the synagogue. Knowing (as we unfortunately do) how pious Christian pewholders can manifest quite un-Christian indignation when they arrive at church on a Sunday morning to find their places occupied by rank outsiders who have come to hear a popular visiting preacher, we can readily appreciate the annoyance of the Jewish community at finding their synagogue practically taken over by a Gentile congregation on this occasion. But there was a further reason for their annoyance: these Gentiles were plainly minded to give a favourable hearing to a message which they themselves, for the most part, found unacceptable.”¹⁵

More to the circumstances depicted in Acts, Wall indicates that the jealousy which was stirred (14:45), is because “Paul is their principal rival as teacher of the Jewish community of their city.”¹⁶ Paul was so good as a teacher of Israel’s Scripture, to his fellow Jews and those of the nations attracted to Israel’s God—that he made others envious.

What can one conclude about the Apostle Paul and the Sabbath, in Acts 13:14, 42-44? It does too little to suggest that Paul simply found a Diaspora synagogue meeting on *Shabbat* to be the easiest and the best place to declare the good news to his fellow Jews, and Greeks and Romans attracted to Israel’s God. It is fair to recognize how the Jewish religious leaders did not accuse Paul of Sabbath violation, and instead would have been much more negative toward the message he declared, and how it was inclusive of those from the nations. Paul is initially welcomed at the Diaspora synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, an indication that while an outsider, his demeanor as a Pharisee and obvious Sabbath observance, provided him with the initial degree of credibility he needed in order to testify of Yeshua the Messiah to the congregants.

¹⁵ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 281.

¹⁶ Wall, in *NIB*, 10:194.