

Journeys of St. Paul

Antioch on Orontes, Ephesus, and Corinth, cities second in wealth and importance in the Roman Empire only to Alexandria in Egypt and to Rome, are inseparably linked with the early history of Christianity. According to the information supplied by Acts it was in Antioch that the word 'Christians' was first used to refer to the adherents to the new religion. Yet it was not only in these great cities that Christianity found adherents, for it gathered them also in far distant towns and communities of Anatolia, Macedonia and Greece. From the Levant through the uplands of the Taurus and to the well settled valleys of western Anatolia, cities to the other side of the Aegean, to all these places, on foot or riding or by slow moving ships, St. Paul, the tireless apostle, carried the Gospel. At each place he gathered into fellowships of churches men and women, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, who had accepted the message and he nurtured the faithful, both by his presence and his letters. Although born as a movement within Judaism, it was in Anatolia and the immediate lands on the other side of the Aegean that the Gospel first took root, largely as a result of St. Paul's missionary work in about the middle of the first century. It was in these countries that Christianity developed away from its origins in Palestine to become a religion of the Greco-Roman world, and ultimately of the present. St. Paul's journeys through Anatolia, Macedonia and Greece are recorded in the second and longer part of the Acts of the Apostles, written in Greek by the evangelist Luke, author of the Third Gospel perhaps a few decades after the martyrdom of St. Paul. A sequel to his Gospel, Acts continues Luke's history of Christian origins and tells us the story of the early church and how it spread from Jews to Gentiles, largely through the efforts of St. Paul. In regard to the subject matter of this book the absolute chronology of these journeys and their length are circumstantial. The works of various Greek, Roman and Jewish authors and other contemporary sources, as well as discoveries in archaeology, help to shed light on this period and on the world in which St. Paul traveled. St. Paul's journeys fall into the history of the Greco-Roman world when the spark of the Hellenistic period had come to an end. The Roman overtake of Macedonia, Greece, Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean was followed by the economic collapse of these countries because of the exploitation of Roman tax farmers (Mt 11.19 and others) and the harshness of Roman laws of debt. In these countries the first century BCE is marked by other disasters brought by the Mithradatic wars, the feud between Pompey and Julius Caesar, the wars between the latter's murderers Brutus and Cassius and his avengers Octavian (later Augustus) and Mark Antony, and finally between the avengers themselves. Big earthquakes may be added to these conflicts. Still, beginning with Julius Caesar the economic conditions of the Roman provinces saw a relative rehabilitation which was best reflected in the architecture of big cities. Thus St. Paul could see what had been left from the Hellenistic age and what was built at the time of the early Roman rulers: Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius and Nero, and by Herod the Great in the East. St. Paul's letters do not give any hint about the routes that he followed during his journeys. Apart from Acts 17.1 where two stations on the Via Egnatia, and 28: 15 two more on the Via Appia are mentioned we are not informed about the roads the apostle traveled. At some sites that St. Paul should have visited there has been little or no excavation, and in towns and cities that have been continuously inhabited there is sometimes virtually nothing to be seen, as the remains of earlier ages have either disappeared or lie beneath the existing structures. Nevertheless, in one form or another, be it a stretch of Roman road and a milestone, or the remains of a synagogue, a bridge still in use after some two millennia, or a dedication to Artemis or Hermes, such evidence can help us to understand something of the Greco-Roman world in which St. Paul traveled and make so-called educated guesses about St. Paul's routes. Ultimately Anatolia, Macedonia and Greece became the most Christianized region in the Roman Empire and it was at the middle point of these countries, on the Bosphorus, at Byzantium that the victory of St. Paul's missions was officially acknowledged by Constantine the Great, who would found his new and Christian capital as New Rome and dedicate it in 330.

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