

CHAPTER 25

BARNABAS, JOHN MARK, AND THEIR MINISTRY ON CYPRUS

Acts 13:4–13; 15:36–39

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KEY POINTS

- The beginnings and the growth of the church in Cyprus are not well known.
- A large Jewish presence on Cyprus during the first century AD is evident from ancient sources.
- Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus, converted to Christianity in spite of opposition from a Jewish magician, Elymas (Bar-Jesus).
- Barnabas, a native Cypriot, and his cousin John Mark accompanied Paul on an early mission to Cyprus, but only Barnabas and John Mark returned for a second mission.
- The apocryphal Acts of Barnabas provides us with an account of Barnabas and Mark's second mission to Cyprus, but the document is late and historically suspect.

INTRODUCTION

Christianity spread to Cyprus, the easternmost island in the Mediterranean Sea, early in the first century. This was due in large part to the efforts of Barnabas and John Mark. The details of their ministry on the island are largely lost and the brief descriptions in Acts provide us with a mere glimpse of those early years. Several late traditions purport to fill in

the historical gaps, but their credibility is questionable. This essay attempts to assess these traditions and to survey the history, culture, and geography of the island to see if we might find clues that will augment our understanding of Christianity on Cyprus.

Acts introduced Barnabas as a diaspora Jew from Cyprus who was a Levite. His name was Joseph, but the apostles



gave him the name Barnabas—son of encouragement (Acts 4:36). Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius assert that Barnabas was one of the seventy disciples sent out by Jesus to proclaim the coming kingdom.¹ He was in Jerusalem shortly after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and sold a piece of land, contributing the proceeds of the sale for the needs of the early Jerusalem Christian community. Following Paul's conversion when nobody trusted the sincerity of his new faith, Barnabas befriended Paul and introduced him to the Jerusalem church (9:27).

John Mark is mentioned only in Acts, where he is described as having a Jewish name (John) and a Roman name (Mark). However, this John Mark is probably the same as the Mark mentioned in Paul's letters (Col 4:10, Phlm 24) and 1 Peter 5:13. The early church traditions support this identification. Early church tradi-

tions also claim that later in life Mark followed Peter to Rome and wrote the second Gospel from what he remembered of Peter's preaching. Originally, Mark lived in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12; 13:13) and in his letter to the Colossians Paul alluded to Mark as Barnabas' cousin (Col 4:10). Since Barnabas was a native Cypriot and he sold what land he owned in Jerusalem (Acts 4:37), it is likely he lived with Mark while he was in Jerusalem.²

Following the dispersion of Christians from Jerusalem and Judea after the death of Stephen, many Jewish Christians came to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 11:19) sharing the gospel with fellow Jews in those areas. It is possible that Barnabas made his way to Cyprus at this time in order to share the gospel with family and friends on the island. Located only about sixty miles (96.5 km) off the Syrian coast, Cyprus had a large Jewish population.

1. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2:20; Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 1.12.

2. It was common for extended family members to reside in the homes of relatives.

Turning his attention more specifically to Antioch, Luke noted that some men from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and began ministering to the Greeks as well as the Jews (11:20). Even though Cypriots are mentioned in this verse, it is not likely that Barnabas was among this first group that came to Antioch. Later when the Jerusalem church heard of the large number of converts in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to strengthen the church (11:22). Barnabas may have been redirected from Cyprus to Antioch.

THE EARLY MISSION TO CYPRUS

In time, both Paul and John Mark joined Barnabas in Antioch. The three of them departed for Cyprus with Barnabas as the leader of the mission (Acts 13:3–5). Luke's narrative is clear that the Holy Spirit sent the group on the mission, but it is probable that the choice of the mission's itinerary was Barnabas' decision. Barnabas was familiar with the land, the roads, and the people. As a native Cypriot, he also had relatives on the island that needed to hear the gospel. Additionally, if he was involved in ministry in Cyprus prior to being called to Antioch, Barnabas wanted to continue his earlier work in Cyprus.

Throughout this mission, including the journey into Galatia, Barnabas and Paul prioritized ministry to the Jews. In city after city, the apostles first proclaimed the gospel in the synagogues. This was the routine at Salamis (13:5), Pisidian Antioch (13:14, 44), Iconium (14:1), probably Lystra (14:19) and at the other locations as well. This followed Paul's belief that God's message first and foremost had to be proclaimed to the Jewish people: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16, *ESV*).

Cyprus was close to Palestine and it should not be surprising to find that Jews settled on the island early.³ Funerary inscriptions indicate that a Jewish settlement existed on Cyprus as early as the Achaemenid period in the fourth century BC.⁴ By the first century AD literary sources indicate that Cyprus had a large Jewish population. Philo, around AD 40, made note of Jewish colonies on Cyprus (Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 282). Dio Cassius described a large Jewish uprising on Cyprus at the time of Trajan.⁵ In his discussion of magic, Pliny the Elder recounted a large sect of Jewish magicians on Cyprus.⁶ The apostles met one

3. According to Zdzisław J. Kapera, "We can suppose that practically in each of the eighteen known cities there were some Jewish colonies and synagogues" (Kapera, "The Jewish Presence in Cyprus before AD 70," *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 7 [2009]: 37).

4. Michael Heltzer, "Epigraphic Evidence Concerning a Jewish Settlement in Kition (Larnaca, Cyprus) in the Achaemenid Period (IV cent. B.C.E.)," *Aula Orientalis* 7 (1989): 189–206.

5. If Dio Cassius' figures are anything close to accurate, the Jewish population on Cyprus must have been very large. Dio Cassius wrote that the Jews of Cyprus led by Artemion rose up against the Romans during Trajan's reign around AD 117 and slaughtered two hundred forty thousand Greeks and Romans. After Martius Turbo put down the rebellion, a decree was issued banning all Jews from the island (Dio Cassius, *History* 68.322). Dio's figures have been called into question, but nonetheless Dio's account reflects a huge Jewish population in the first century.

6. "There is another sect adept in the magic arts who come from Moses, Jannes, and Lotapea, and the Jews, thousands of years after Zoroaster, but more recent is their branch



Salamis Gymnasium

of those, Bar-Jesus (Elymas), at Paphos (Acts 13:6–12) and the Roman procurator of Judea, Felix, utilized a Cypriot magician named Atomus a few years later (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.142–144).⁷ Additionally, several inscriptions found at Cyprus are evidence of a significant Jewish presence on the island.⁸

SALAMIS

Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark departed from Seleucia Pieria, the Mediterranean port of Antioch and sailed to the eastern port of Cyprus, Salamis. There, they began ministry in the synagogues of the city (Acts 13:5). Salamis was a large city and was the capital of the island before being supplanted by Paphos in the second

century BC. The plural "synagogues" suggests that a number of Jews lived in the city. The fact that Salamis was crushed during the Jewish revolt during Trajan's reign is evidence that Salamis was largely Jewish. The patron deity of Salamis was Zeus Olympios and a large temple of his was located on the periphery of the city's large agora. The temple was originally built during the late Hellenistic period and was reconstructed during the Roman Imperial period.

From Salamis the apostles traveled west to Paphos. The western interior of Cyprus contains the island's highest mountain range, the Troodos range. The mountains compel most travelers from the east to take the southern coastal road

of magic practiced in Cyprus" (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 30.2). Mitford believes the collection of curse tablets from Cyprus (#127–142) "were doubtless drafted by a Jewish sorcerer" (T. B. Mitford, *The Inscriptions of Kourion* [Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1971], 134, 246–83).

7. Elsewhere Josephus mentioned the prosperous Jewish communities in Egypt and Cyprus during the Hellenistic period (*Ant.* 13.284).

8. T. B. Mitford, "New Inscriptions from Early Christian Cyprus," *Byzantion* 20 (1950): 110–16.

to the capital. A milestone dating to the time of Augustus informs us that this route was refurbished prior to the time of the apostle's journey.⁹ The route would have taken the group from Salamis to Tremithous, Kition, Amathous, Kourion, Palaipaphos, and Paphos and would have involved a total of 110 miles (177 km).

TREMITHOUS

Tremithous was located about twenty-one miles (34 km) southwest and inland from Salamis via a Roman road. A horoscope inscription found at the site shows that Jews in the community utilized a Jewish calendar.¹⁰ Takashi Fujii's examination of inscriptions on Cyprus shows that four calendars were used throughout the first two centuries and that the various communities adapted their calendars according to their own customs while also superficially acknowledging the imperial calendar.¹¹

KITION

From Tremithous the apostles would have traveled around thirteen miles (21 km) south to Kition on the coast.¹² The remaining journey to Paphos would have followed the coastal road for the distance. We have already mentioned the Jewish funerary inscriptions at Kition

that establish a Jewish presence at the site in the fourth century BC. Josephus explained that the word "Kittim" referred to the islands and maritime countries. But, more specifically, Josephus identified Cyprus as Kittim and asserted that the word came from Chethimos, grandson of Japheth, the founder of the city Kition. Those origins are doubtful, but Kition was a port city with a Jewish population during the first century that maintained contact with the Jewish mainland. Kition was the birthplace of Zeno (334–262 BC) the father of Stoic philosophy. Later, on Paul's journey to Athens, Paul had an opportunity to debate with the Stoic philosophers (Acts 17:18).

AMATHOUS

Thirty-four miles (54.7 km) further west along the coast Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark would have arrived at Amathous. Over two hundred curse tablets have been found at Amathous, which leads scholars to believe that the city was a center for magic.¹³ These date to the late second to the early third century AD and may be connected with Jewish magic.¹⁴ Legend has it that Aphrodite was born on the island and numerous cults to Aphrodite are found in Cyprus. Aphrodite was worshiped as the primary deity in Amathous,

and the cult at Amathous was one of the earliest. Aphrodite Amathusia, the local expression of Aphrodite, was famous throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods. A first century BC temple to her has been excavated on the acropolis flanked by two massive six-foot (1.8 m) water vases.



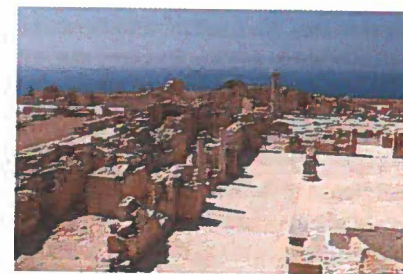
Fifth Century Statue of
Aphrodite from Cyprus

KOURION

Moving on from Amathous, the apostles traveled further west along the coast to Kourion, about fifteen miles (24 km) distant. The city was built on a cliff overlooking the sea, over three hundred feet (91.5 m) above the water. An earlier settlement was located further inland, but sometime during the fifth or fourth century BC, the city relocated to its current site. The chief deity at Kourion was Apollo Hylates and his sanctuary was located a mile (1.6 km)

west of the city where worship was conducted as early as the eighth century BC. Excavations at the site indicate that the city flourished during the Hellenistic and Roman periods and a great deal of construction took place during that time. The city was devastated by earthquakes in AD 332 and 342, but recovered in the early Byzantine period.

One home, the House of Eustolios, was destroyed in those earthquakes but was rebuilt by the wealthy Eustolios. Several mosaic inscriptions remain in the house. One of them extolled the civic benefactions of Eustolios after the earthquakes, claiming that he took care of Kourion as Phoebus Apollo once did. Another mosaic inscription in the same house asserted that the house was strengthened not by stones and iron, but rather by the venerated signs of Christ. The two mosaics illustrate the transition from paganism to Christianity (see page 706 for images of these mosaics).



Kourion

PALAIAPAPHOS

Around 312 BC Nikokles, king of the Paphian kingdom, established a new capital city, Nea Paphos (New Paphos), about ten miles (16 km) west of the older Palaipaphos (Old Paphos). The new site had a natural port and was more strate-

9. David W. J. Gill, "Paul's Travels through Cyprus (Acts 13:4–12)," *TynBul* 46 (1995): 221–23.

10. Sacha Stern, "A 'Jewish' Birth Record, Sambat-, and the Calendar of Salamis," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 172 (2010): 105–14.

11. Takashi Fujii, *Imperial Cult and Imperial Representation in Roman Cyprus* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013), 152–56.

12. The Acts of Barnabas, 17, claims that Barnabas and Paul converted and baptized a man named Heraclius at Kition.

13. Andrew Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 169–218.

14. So Mitford, *Inscriptions of Kourion*, 134. The curse tablets cited by Mitford are now believed to have come from Amathous. A Jewish association with these curse tablets is also supported by Pieter Willem van der Horst, "The Jews of Ancient Cyprus," *Zutot: Perspectives on Jewish Culture* 3 (2003): 118–19.



Sanctuary of Aphrodite

gically positioned. Nea Paphos was probably populated in part with displaced residents of Marion, a city to the north that was destroyed by Ptolemy Soter in 312 BC. Palaipaphos continued to exist and flourished up through the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark would have arrived at Palaipaphos first, twenty miles (32 km) to the west of Kourion. The origins of Old Paphos are not clear. Legends go back to Kinyras, who was mentioned in the *Iliad*. Kinyras allegedly established a sanctuary for Aphrodite, who was born in the sea and came ashore at Paphos. Homer mentioned the sacred site at Paphos and the temple constructed there was the most famous temple of Aphrodite in the Mediterranean world as well as the most sacred site on the

island of Cyprus. The temple has been excavated, but little has survived.

PAPHOS

Passing on from Palaipaphos, the apostles would have arrived at Nea Paphos, ten miles (16 km) further down the road. Here, according to the biblical text (Acts 13:6–12), they met Sergius Paulus and Elymas (Bar-Jesus). The capital of Cyprus was transferred from Salamis to Nea Paphos sometime during the second century BC and at that time the city came to be known simply as Paphos. Sergius Paulus was appointed proconsul of the island by the Romans. Such appointments were usually for one year. Four inscriptions have been suggested as references to Sergius Paulus, but none of these are entirely conclusive.¹⁵ Nevertheless,

15. A first century boundary stone from Rome probably from the time of Claudius (GIL 6.31545) referred to L[ucius] Sergius Paulus as a curator of the Tiber. Some scholars have suggested that this Sergius Paulus went to Cyprus shortly after his curatorship. Another first century inscription from Soloi in Cyprus (*Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes* III.930) mentioned the proconsul Sergius, but it is not clear that this is the same



L. Sergius Paulus Inscription from Pisidian Antioch

these several inscriptions have led many scholars to conclude that one or more of these inscriptions refer to the proconsul Sergius Paulus mentioned in Acts 13. The L. Sergius Paulus inscription found at Pisidian Antioch is particularly interesting and has led some scholars to suggest that the proconsul had family in Pisidian Antioch and requested Paul, Barnabas and John Mark to travel there to share the gospel with the proconsul's relatives.

The encounter with Bar-Jesus (Elymas) at Paphos is not entirely surprising, given Pliny's comments and the well-known

presence of Jewish magicians on the island. The magician's association with Sergius Paulus suggests that he was functioning as an advisor to the governor. Magicians were frequently employed by political leaders as astrologers and necromancers who were skilled at issuing curses against opponents. However, the impotent power of Elymas' magic was no match for the force of the Almighty and Elymas walked away blind. Sergius Paulus walked away with a new faith.

Sergius Paulus who was proconsul during Paul's visit. A third inscription was found at Kytharia, Cyprus and contained the name Quintus Sergius [Paulus]. The name Paulus is conjecture and epigraphists have debated whether this inscription dates to the time of Caligula (which would be too early) or Claudius. The fourth inscription (*Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes* III.935) was found at Pisidian Antioch and alluded to L[ucius] Sergius Paulus, son of L[ucius] Sergius Paulus. Various arguments have been proffered to connect these inscriptions to Acts 13, but none of them are compelling. See Bastian Van Elderen, "Some Archaeological Observations on Paul's First Missionary Journey," in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin. (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 152–57; Douglas A. Campbell, "Possible Inscriptional Attestation to Sergius Paul[us] (Acts 13:6–12), and the Implications for Pauline Chronology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 56 (2005): 1–29.



END OF THE EARLY MISSION

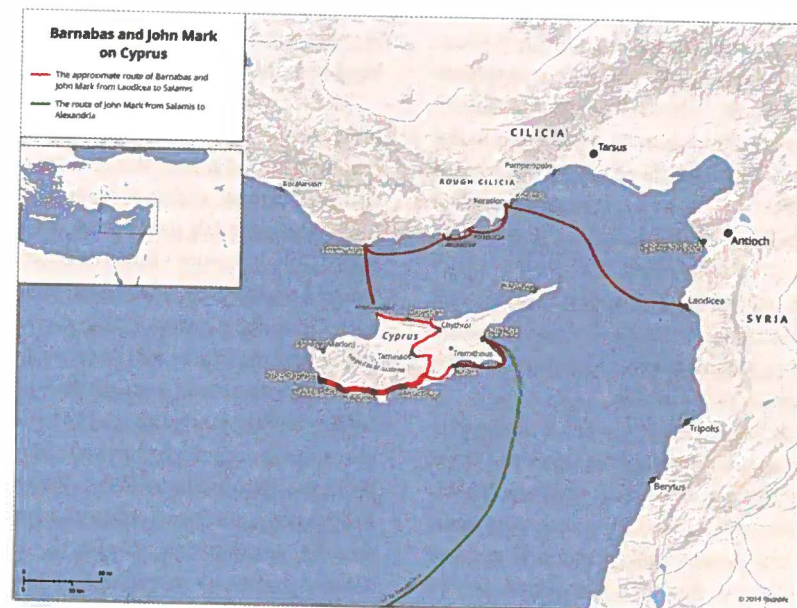
The mission continued as the apostles sailed from Paphos to the Anatolian mainland, probably putting into port at Magydos and traveling another seven miles (11.25 km) north to Perga. At this point John Mark departed from the mission and returned to Jerusalem, leaving Barnabas and Paul to continue on their own to Pisidian Antioch and Lycaonia. The reasons for Mark's departure are not clear, but the incident disturbed Paul to such a degree that he refused to let Mark join them on another mission. Barnabas was equally insistent that Mark should accompany the apostles and the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul resulted in a split. Paul took Silas and departed

for Syria and Cilicia, while Barnabas and John Mark returned to Cyprus.

BARNABAS AND JOHN MARK'S RETURN MISSION ON CYPRUS

The New Testament mentioned nothing more about the exploits of Barnabas and John Mark on Cyprus. However, later traditions passed on folklore and traditions of questionable value. The Acts of Barnabas, supposedly written by John Mark, described a journey by Barnabas and Mark departing from Laodicea in Syria and arriving at a number of sites in Rough Cilicia.¹⁶ From there they sailed south to Cyprus and landed at Krommyakon. Their journey continued east to the northern coastal town of Lapethos and then moved inland to

16. The ship was blown off course and landed at Korasion, Pityoussa, Akonesiai, and Anemurium (Acts of Barnabas 11–13). The ports were sequentially located along the Cilician coast from east to west.



Lampadistos¹⁷ and Tamassos. Barnabas and Mark crossed the Trogodos Mountains and arrived at Palaipaphos and Paphos. There they met Bar-Jesus, the magician that they met on the first journey to the island. Bar-Jesus opposed Barnabas and Mark and stirred up the Jewish communities along the southern coast. He pursued Barnabas and Mark as they continued to move to the east. They traveled to Kourion, Amathous, and Kition. In each location, Barnabas and Mark were harassed by the residents as Bar-Jesus continued to stir up trouble. Taking a ship from Kition, they finally arrived at Salamis. There, at the insti-

gation of Bar-Jesus, Barnabas was seized and burned to death (Acts of Barnabas 23).¹⁸ Mark escaped and fled to Alexandria, Egypt where he engaged in a ministry to the Egyptians for several years.

As with many of the apocryphal gospels and acts, there is a mixture of truth and legend. Many of the early traditions were forgotten over the centuries and the traditions that persisted slowly changed. However, it would be a mistake to dismiss the early church traditions entirely. Most scholars date the Acts of Barnabas in the fifth century, but certain details stand out. The geography of the document is accurate and the itinerary is plausible.¹⁹

17. Lampadistos is the only city or town on the itinerary that is unknown.

18. The traditional tomb of Barnabas lies underground at the monastery of St. Barnabas outside the city walls of Salamis.

19. Philip H. Young, "The Cypriot Aphrodite Cult: Paphos, Rantidi and Saint Barnabas," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 64 (2005): 37: "the geographical and cultural details of the account in the Acts of Barnabas are so specific and different from the story told in Acts that they demonstrate that the writer had a firsthand knowledge of Cyprus and was, most likely, a native of the island himself."

The journey along the southern coast from Paphos to Salamis corresponds (in reverse order) with our conjectured journey from Acts 13. Additionally, the legendary aspects of the narrative are modest compared to other postapostolic Acts. Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.16) repeated an earlier tradition that Mark ministered in Alexandria and several other patristic authors made the same claim, although they do not agree with the time of his arrival.

Perhaps the Acts of Barnabas preserves nothing more than an early travel narrative of Barnabas' and John Mark's second mission to the Cyprus. This travel narrative was fleshed out with weaker traditions that still circulated on the island in the fifth century. For those who are more skeptical of the traditions, even this may be going too far. For some the Acts of Barnabas was written too late to be of any value historically.

CONCLUSION

The earliest Christian ministry on the island of Cyprus is sketchy. Acts 11:19 reports that Christians fleeing from the persecution associated with the lynching of Stephen came to Cyprus and preached the Christian faith to Jews on the island. Neither the names of the evangelists nor the details of this ministry were given in this singular verse. Later, Barnabas, Paul, and John Mark sailed to Cyprus and began a ministry on the island (Acts 13:2-13). But even this brief account offers us few details of the journey. After Paul and Barnabas split up, Barnabas took John Mark and returned to Cyprus (Acts 15:39). Thereafter, they completely disappear from the biblical narratives. More information about this second mission appears in a document written about four hundred years later, the Acts of

Barnabas, but the historical value of this book is suspect.

The early Christian evangelists began their work sharing the gospel in Jewish communities. Ancient sources, as well as inscriptions, indicate that Cyprus had a large Jewish population, so it is reasonable to assume that the missions focused upon cities, towns, and villages with a Jewish presence. The topography of the land, coupled with the presence of known Roman roads, suggest that ministry on the first (and perhaps the second) mission was conducted in the cities of Salamis, Kition, Amathous, Kourion, Palaipaphos, and Nea Paphos along with smaller communities along the way. Several traditions report Barnabas' martyrdom at Salamis where today a tomb is reportedly the place where his remains were buried.

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