

DEMONS AND MENTAL ILLNESS

October 21, 2012
6th Sunday of Luke
Revision E_half

Gospel: Luke 8:26-39 (Matthew 8:24-34; Mark 5:1-20)

Today's Gospel lesson is a real hot potato that people today are hesitant to discuss for fear that someone might be offended. Although accounts of the same events are found in three of the four Gospels, none are used at all in the Western lectionary. On the other hand, this same lesson is used twice in the Orthodox lectionary: today and the 5th Sunday after Pentecost where it is read from Matthew 8. John Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria had a great deal to say about this incident in dealing with Matthew and Luke's account respectively. The theme for today is taken from the text, which relates mental illness in terms of demon possession. The theme for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost takes its theme from John Chrysostom in comparing demon possession to covetousness.

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Background: Survey of Jesus' Healings

In Table 1 is an overview of the healings Jesus performed that are recorded in the New Testament. Probably not everything He did was recorded (John 21:25) but Table 1 gives a decent snapshot of a variety of illnesses, ailments and sufferings. All of these conditions occur today and are treated by modern medicine – except the last case, which is called demon possession in the Scriptures. On the other hand, a significant fraction of money spent on modern medicine goes to treat all types of “mental illness” using methods ranging from counseling with psychiatrists to sedatives and padded cells. In the Soviet Union, the tools of this field were sometimes used in fiendish ways to try to “re-educate” enemies of the state – such as Christians. Today's Gospel lesson presents a much different diagnosis. But first, let us read other accounts in the Scripture that might be loosely classified as “mental illness” in today's terminology.

Mental Illness in the Scripture

The Mute, Epileptic Child: A man's only child had a severe case of what might be called epilepsy (threw himself down, foamed at the mouth, gnashed his teeth, became rigid). But

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there was a sinister, organized influence behind this. Epilepsy by itself wouldn't try to drown the child or throw him into the fire. The father knew what was going on and asked the Twelve to cast out the demon; but they couldn't do it. Jesus proceeded to explain "this kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:17-29). We infer¹ that the demon also caused the child to be deaf and dumb (Mark 9:25).

Table 1
Healings Done by Jesus

Disease	Who	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Fever (small pox, typhoid)	Nobleman's son				4:46
	Peter's mother-in-law	8:14	1:29	4:38	
Leprosy	One man	8:1	1:40	5:12	
	10 men			17:12	
Paralysis	Down thru roof	9:1	2:1	5:17	
	At pool of Bethesda				5:1
Withered hand	In synagogue	12:9	3:1	6:6	
Hemorrhage	Woman touched Jesus	9:18	5:21	8:40	
Blindness	2 men	9:27			
	1 man		8:22		
	Man born blind				9:1
	Bartimaeus		10:46	18:35	
Back injury	Crippled woman			13:10	
Dropsy	At Pharisee's dinner			14:1	
Severed ear	In Gethsemane			22:47	
General sickness	Multitudes	12:15	3:7	6:17	
	Centurion's servant	8:5		7:1	
	In Gennersaret	14:34	6:53		
	Lame, blind, mute, maimed	15:29	7:31		
Dead raised	Widow's son			7:11	
	Jairus' daughter	9:18	5:21	8:40	
	Lazarus				11:1
	Tombs opened	27:57			
Demoniacs	In synagogue		1:21	4:31	
	Blind & mute demon	12:22	3:7	6:17	
	Gadarene	8:28	5:1	8:26	
	Mute demon	9:32			
	Syro Phoenician	15:21	7:24		
	Epileptic demon	17:14	9:14	9:37	

The Demoniac in the Synagogue: A man with an unclean spirit began by rebuking Jesus in the Synagogue of Capernaum (Mark 1:23-27). Here is a man who (according to modern techniques) just needed some good counseling to help him relate better to others! How would

¹ For more details see the Study for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, which addresses this account.

modern medicine help this man relate better to the Son of God? There was a basic incompatibility that no amount of counseling will help.

The Blind, Mute Demoniac: A man, who was demon-possessed, blind and mute, was brought to Jesus. In today's world, he would be institutionalized with little hope of rehabilitation. Jesus' healing involved removing the demon; the implication is that the blindness and muteness was caused by the demon (Matthew 12:22-23).

King Nebuchadnezzar During the Time of Daniel: King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered most of the world, including Israel, and had brought a number of the prophets of Israel to Babylon. He also had several dreams that only Daniel could interpret. [King Nebuchadnezzar was no dummy! In order to know for sure that the interpretation of the dream was real he had the interpreter first tell him what he had dreamed!] The dream in Daniel 2 is prophecy concerning the end of the age that the Lord revealed to King Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 3, King Nebuchadnezzar witnessed the three young men (Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego) in the blazing furnace accompanied by One who looked like the Son of God. But in spite of this, King Nebuchadnezzar did not humble himself before the Lord or change his ways.

Therefore, King Nebuchadnezzar had another dream, (which Daniel also interpreted), that prophesied that King Nebuchadnezzar would go insane for seven years, living like an animal and eating grass like a cow. For seven years King Nebuchadnezzar lived very much like the poor soul in our Gospel lesson; his hair looked like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws (Daniel 4:24-37).

After seven years, King Nebuchadnezzar repented and his reason returned to him. Not only was his kingdom restored greater than it was, but King Nebuchadnezzar actually wrote the last part of Daniel 4 himself. Note the change in tense from the third person in verse 33 to the first person in verse 34.

The first question that we might ask ourselves is whether mental illness is really some kind of demon oppression or uncleanness. But more than this; we tend to think of people who are demon possessed as poor lost souls. But we usually don't think of what kind of struggles they are going through, especially those that seem to have lost their mind. However, everything is in the hand of God. Some of the Church Fathers pointed out in the following that the care and provision of God was present for the Gadarene demoniacs even while they were being tormented by the demons.

Description of the Demoniacs

The Gospel lesson took place in the winter of 28 AD. (Jesus was crucified in the spring of 30 AD). Jesus and His disciples had just finished rowing across the Sea of Galilee to the Eastern shore, probably in one of the fishing boats. On the way a storm arose and Jesus calmed the storm. The Twelve commented: "Who can this be, that even the winds and the water obey Him?" When they got back to Nazareth after this trip, Jesus sent the Twelve out two by two to heal the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons all by themselves. The Gospel lesson then is a hands-on-lesson in preparation for the sending out of the Twelve. Jesus knew He was going to

do this and he picked a real bearcat as a demonstration. John Chrysostom stated² that since “no man dared to bring these men to Him, Christ Himself went to them.”

As soon as Jesus and the Twelve stepped out of the boat in the country of the Gadarenes³, demon-possessed men met them. Some details about these men:

- There were actually two of them (Matthew 8:28)
- They were naked and lived in the tombs (Luke 8:27)
- They had been like this for a long time (Luke 8:27)
- These men had been locked up, bound with chains and shackles, but they broke the chains (Luke 8:27)
- They were exceedingly fierce, no one could pass that way (Matthew 8:28)
- Night and day these men would cry out and cut themselves with stones (Mark 5:5)

In today’s terminology, they would be classified as a danger to themselves and others (that is, seriously mentally ill). Treatment programs today involve major tranquilizers to sedate them followed by more tranquilizers to “stabilize” them.

Cyril of Alexandria described⁴ the demoniacs as in a worse state than someone who was already dead. This indicates the utter cruelty of the demons; in addition, the demons had deprived the men of any reasoning ability.

“Jesus, in company with the holy disciples, had landed in the country of the Gergesenes; and immediately a man met them, in whom dwelt many unclean spirits. He was void of mind and understanding, and in no respect different from those already dead and laid in the earth; or rather, perhaps, even in a more miserable state. For the dead, carefully wrapped in their grave-clothes, are laid in the earth, like one on his mother's bosom. But he, in great misery and nakedness, wandering among the graves of the dead, was in utter wretchedness, leading a disgraceful and ignominious life. This was a proof of the cruelty of the demons, and a plain demonstration of their impurity. Besides this, it is a charge and accusation against them of hatred to mankind; for they would have no man whatever on earth sober, but wish them to be like one crazy and intoxicated, to know nothing to their profit, and to be left in ignorance of Him Who is the Maker of all. For of whomever they have possession, and have subjected to their power, him they make an example of great misery, deprived of every blessing, destitute of all sobriety, and entirely devoid of reason itself.”

We might also ask why the demoniacs lived in the tombs. John Chrysostom stated that the sorcerers of his day took young children and killed them “in order to have their soul assist them later”. Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-23) also did this until the Apostle Peter exposed⁵ him in his falsehood. The sorcerers used the dead children to “cry out” that they are the soul of such a

² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXVIII, 2.

³ Matthew refers to the people there as Gergesenes (Matthew 8:28); Gadara and Gergesa were not too far apart and people that lived there could be referred to as either.

⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 8, Homily 44, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 191.

⁵ For details, see Mark Kern, Simon Magus the Heresiarch, St. Athanasius Press, 2004, p. 21-27.

person using ventriloquism. The demoniacs in the tombs perpetuated this heretical notion as if to imply that the dead become demons after they die. Chrysostom stated⁶ that all this is devoid of reason:

“It is not reasonable that an injured soul should cooperate with a wrongdoer, or that a man might be able to change an incorporeal power into another substance. In bodies this is impossible; and one cannot make a man’s body become that of a donkey; much more this is impossible in the invisible soul. One cannot transform it into the substance of an evil spirit. These sayings are conjured up only to frighten children.”

“It is also not possible for a soul, torn away from the body, to wander here in this life anymore. ‘The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God’ (Wisdom 3:1 LXX). If of the righteous, then those children’s souls also are in the hand of God. They are not wicked; and the souls of sinners are immediately led away from here. This is obvious from Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-30). And elsewhere Christ said, ‘Tonight your soul will be required of you’ (Luke 12:20). A soul, when it leaves the body, does not wander here. If we, as we go about on the earth, which is familiar and well known to us, are surrounded with a body, when we are journeying in a strange road, we do not know which way to go unless we have someone to lead us. How should the soul know where to walk without the body to show the way?

It is not possible for a disembodied soul to remain here. Stephen said, ‘Receive my spirit’ (Acts 7:59); and Paul said that he wished, ‘to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better’ (Philippians 1:23). Abraham ‘was gathered to his fathers, being cherished in a good old age’ (Genesis 15:15, 25:8 LXX). Regarding proof that the souls of sinners can’t continue here, the rich man pleaded a great deal for this, and didn’t obtain it (Luke 16:27-31). Had it been at all possible, he would have come, and would have told what happened to him there. From this it is evident that after their departure our souls are led away into some place, and have no more power of their own to come back again, but wait for that dreadful day.

When Jesus commanded the demons to come out of the men, the demons begged Jesus not to torment them before the time (Matthew 8:29). This is an interesting request! Night and day, the demons had caused the two men to cry out in pain and cut themselves with stones (Mark 5:5). But yet now the demons don’t want Jesus to hurt them? John Chrysostom stated⁷,

“The demons’ words betray their shameless nature. They said, ‘Have You come here to torment us before the time?’ (Matthew 8:29). That they had sinned, they could not deny; but they demand that they not suffer their punishment before Judgment Day. He had caught them in the act of perpetrating those lawless horrors, and deforming and punishing His creature in every way. They supposed that He, for the excess of their crimes, would not wait for

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXVIII, 3.

⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXVIII, 2.

the time of their punishment. Therefore they begged Him. The enmity of the demons is obvious from the start, and the sea that Jesus just calmed was not as stormy as the disposition of these demons. They were invisibly receiving stripes, and suffering things intolerable from His mere presence.”

Cyril of Alexandria noted⁸ that the demons asked Jesus, “What have I to do with You”. They had usurped His honor and glory and corrupted His creation. Jesus, as a kind loving shepherd, responded to protect His sheep.

“The Gergesene, or rather the herd of demons lying concealed in him, fell down before Christ's feet, saying, ‘What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of God Most High? I beg You, do not torment me’ (Luke 8:28). Observe in the demons the mixture of fear with great audacity, and arrogant pride; and that the words, which they are forced to utter, are coupled with inflated haughtiness! For it is a proof of the pride of the enemy, that he ventures to say, ‘What have I to do with You, Jesus, Son of God Most High?’ The demons know, for certain, that He is the Son of God Most High, and they confessed this. In claiming adoration from men, they have usurped that which is His, and assumed a glory, which in no possible way is their right. Why then did they claim that Christ had nothing to do with them? With due cause, they had been expelled in their fallen ness from that dignity which is His alone! All men on earth are His; and these they corrupted, removing them far from the knowledge of Him, Who truly is the Lord and Maker of all, and plunged them into the mire of sin, making them worshippers of demons. What earthly king would endure to have those placed under his scepter harassed by barbarians? Or what shepherd is so unfeeling and indifferent, as when savage beasts attack his flocks, to take no heed of the calamity, nor endeavor to aid his sheep? The demons confessed, even against their will, who they are, and to Whom they speak. They uttered words that suit them; such as, ‘I beg You, do not torment me.’”

Jesus then asked the men their name, and the demons replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many!” (Mark 5:9). In the 1st Century, a legion⁹ represented 6,000 soldiers and included some cavalry.

Cyril of Alexandria asked¹⁰ why Jesus asked the demoniacs their name. It was primarily for our benefit so that we might know how wretched the demons are.

“Did Christ then ask because He did not know it, and like one of us, wished to learn it as something that had escaped Him? This is perfectly absurd for us to say or imagine anything of the kind. For being God, ‘He knows all things, and searches the hearts and reins’ (Psalm 7:9 LXX). He asked, therefore, for the plan of salvation's sake that we might learn that a great multitude of

⁸ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 8, Homily 44, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 191-192.

⁹ Each legion was divided into 10 parts, each commanded by a Cohort, where each Cohort commanded 6 Centurions. Each Centurion commanded 100 soldiers.

¹⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 8, Homily 44, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 192.

demons shared¹¹ the one soul of the man, creating in him a wretched and impure madness. For he was their work, and they indeed ‘are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge’” (Jeremiah 4:22 LXX).

The Demons Ask Permission to Enter Swine

The demons then begged Jesus that He might allow them to enter a herd of swine, about 2,000 (Mark 5:13), that were feeding a good way off from them (Matthew 8:30). Jesus permitted them to do so and suddenly the whole herd ran violently down the steep embankment into the lake and drowned.

Why did the demons request of Jesus to enter the swine, and then immediately destroy the swine? John Chrysostom stated¹²,

“Everywhere demons labor to drive men to dismay, and everywhere they rejoice in destruction. This, for instance, the devil did with respect to Job, and in that case too God allowed it, but neither in that case as complying with the devil, but willing to show His own servant more glorious, cutting off from the evil spirit all pretext for his shamelessness, and turning on his own head what was done against the righteous man. Here also the contrary of what the demons wished came to pass. For the power of Christ was gloriously proclaimed. The wickedness of the demons, from which He delivered those possessed by them, was more plainly indicated. He demonstrated how they lack power to touch even swine, without permission from the God of all.”

John Chrysostom gives¹³ several reasons why Jesus allowed the demons to enter the swine:

1. To teach those who are delivered from the wicked demons how great is the malice of the demons.
2. That all might learn how the demons are not even allowed to enter swine unless He should give them permission.
3. That the demons would have treated the two men worse than the swine, unless the two men, even in their calamity, had enjoyed much of God’s providential care. That the demons hate us more than beasts should be obvious to every man. Since the demons didn’t spare the swine, but in one moment of time threw them all down the precipice, much more would they have done to the two men whom they possessed. They would have led them towards the desert, carrying them away, unless the guardian care of God had been present, to curb and check the excess of their violence.

Cyril of Alexandria stated¹⁴ that this encounter with the Gergesene demoniacs illustrates Christ’s care for us in the face of forces that would easily overpower us.

¹¹ The word *mateneimato*, which he renders “divided” or “shared”, has probably only the meaning of “possessed”, the proper signification being to “graze off the land with cattle”.

¹² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, XXVIII, 4.

¹³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, XXVIII, 4.

¹⁴ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Chapter 8, Homily 44, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 193.

“The herd of impure spirits asked for a herd of swine -- worthy of and like itself! And Christ purposely allowed them, though He well knew what they would do. And I can imagine someone saying, ‘Why did He grant their request?’ To which we answer, ‘He gave them the power, in order that this, like all His other conduct, might be a means of benefit to us, and inspire us with the hope of safety’. They asked for power over swine, plainly as something, which they do not possess. They would not have asked for it, if it had been in their power to take it without hindrance? But those who have no power over trifling and valueless things, how can they injure anyone of those whom Christ has sealed, and who place their hope on Him? Comfort your heart; for perhaps you were terrified at hearing that crowds of wicked spirits dwelt in one man, and made him wander among the graves of the dead in shame and nakedness, devoid of mind and understanding. Inasmuch as you too are a man exposed to temptations, you feared a similar misery, should Satan attack you. Have confidence in your heart; do not suppose that any such thing can happen while Christ surrounds us with protection and love. It is certain that they possess no power even over swine. So great is the providence which the Almighty Governor of our affairs bestows on us. For He even said to the Apostles, ‘Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? Not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s will. And even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows’ (Matthew 10:29-31). For if He grants His protection on trifling and valueless things, how will He not consider us worthy of all regard, for whose sake He even became man, and endured the contempt of the Jews? Do not fear; for God helps and encircles with the armor of His good pleasure those whose wish it is to live for Him, and who seek to perform those things that are pleasing in His sight.”

John Chrysostom concurred¹⁵ to say that this illustrates God’s care for all men, even when they’re not expecting it, and even when they are in dire straits like the two demoniacs.

“We learn from this that His providence is not only over all in common, but also over each in particular. He also declared to His disciples, ‘But even the hairs of your head are numbered’ (Matthew 10:30). From these demoniacs, one may clearly perceive this; they would have been choked to death by the demons long before, if they had not enjoyed the benefit of much tender care from above.”

“For these reasons He allowed the demons to enter the herd of swine, that the Gadarenes, who dwelt in those places should learn His power. For where His name was great, He did not greatly display Himself. But where no one knew Him, but they were still in an insensible condition, He made His miracles to shine out, so as to bring them over to the knowledge of His Godhead. For it is evident from the event that the inhabitants of that city were a sort of senseless people; for

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XXVIII, 4.

when they ought to have adored and marveled at His power, they asked Him to leave.”

The Reaction from the Townsfolk

The reaction to all this by the herdsmen and the townsfolk is almost as strange as the demoniacs’ behavior. When the herdsmen brought the townsfolk out and they saw the former demoniacs clothed, in their right mind, and sitting at Jesus’ feet, they were afraid. When the herdsmen explained all that had happened, the townsfolk were seized with great fear and asked Jesus to leave. The demoniacs weren’t the only ones in the area that had problems.

The men who were healed wanted to return with Jesus and the Twelve to Nazareth. However, Jesus sent them back to their own house to “tell what great things God has done for you”. The two men proceeded to “proclaim in all Decapolis what Jesus had done for them and all marveled” (Mark 5:20). Decapolis (Figure 1) is about 1,000 square miles; so they covered a lot of area with their testimony. The cities of Decapolis¹⁶ are shown in Table 1:

There may be a connection between these two healed demoniacs and the Apostle Paul. On the right hand side of the map, we note that Decapolis is in the country of the Nabateans, as is the city of Damascus. This area was referred to in the 1st Century as Arabia, as was generally everything to the East of the Jordan River.

Table 1
Cities of Decapolis

<u>Scythopolis</u>	Gergesa
Hippos	Dion
Gadara	Canatha (not shown)
Pella	Damascus
Philadelphia	Raphana (not shown)

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When the Apostle Paul was converted on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3), he was led into the city and met the Prophet Ananias at the house of Judas on the street called Straight (Acts 9:11; this is the current location of the Patriarchate of the Church of Antioch). After his baptism, Paul went to Arabia (Galatians 1:17) and returned to Damascus. The place in Arabia he went is probably near Bostra and had been evangelized by the healed demoniacs back in 28 AD. Later on, Timon, of the Seventy and also of the first seven deacons (Acts 6:1-6) was Bishop of Bostra.

¹⁶ Shown in Figure 1 are the traditional boundaries of Decapolis, where the cities in the table are those listed by Pliny, Natural History, V, 74. Damascus and Raphana are not within these traditional boundaries, and Ptolemy, Geography, V, xiv, 18, omits Raphana from the cities of Decapolis. Stephan of Byzantium, on the other hand, lists 14 cities within Decapolis.

In relating all this to our lives today, we might ask whether all mental illness is actually demon possession, or whether only some of it is. Perhaps a larger question is whether all sickness is caused by demons. This certainly was the case for the Patriarch Job (Job 2:3-10), where Satan demanded the opportunity to inflict great misery on Job's body to prove to God that Job wasn't as righteous as God claimed he was. (Satan lost the argument, but Job spent a long time in great misery because of it – and was rewarded for his faithfulness). This was also the case of the woman with the back injury (Luke 13:10-17) “whom Satan had bound for 18 years.”

Cyril of Alexandria asked¹⁷ the question, “Why would the Lord permit demons to possess men like this?”

“The reason for these things is very deep; for so God is addressed by one of His saints, ‘Your judgments are a vast abyss’ (Psalm 35:6 LXX). We need to bear this in mind. The God of all purposely permits some to fall into the power of demons, not so much that they may suffer, as that we may learn by their example in what way the demons treat us and so may avoid the desire of being subject to them. For by the suffering of one, many are edified.”

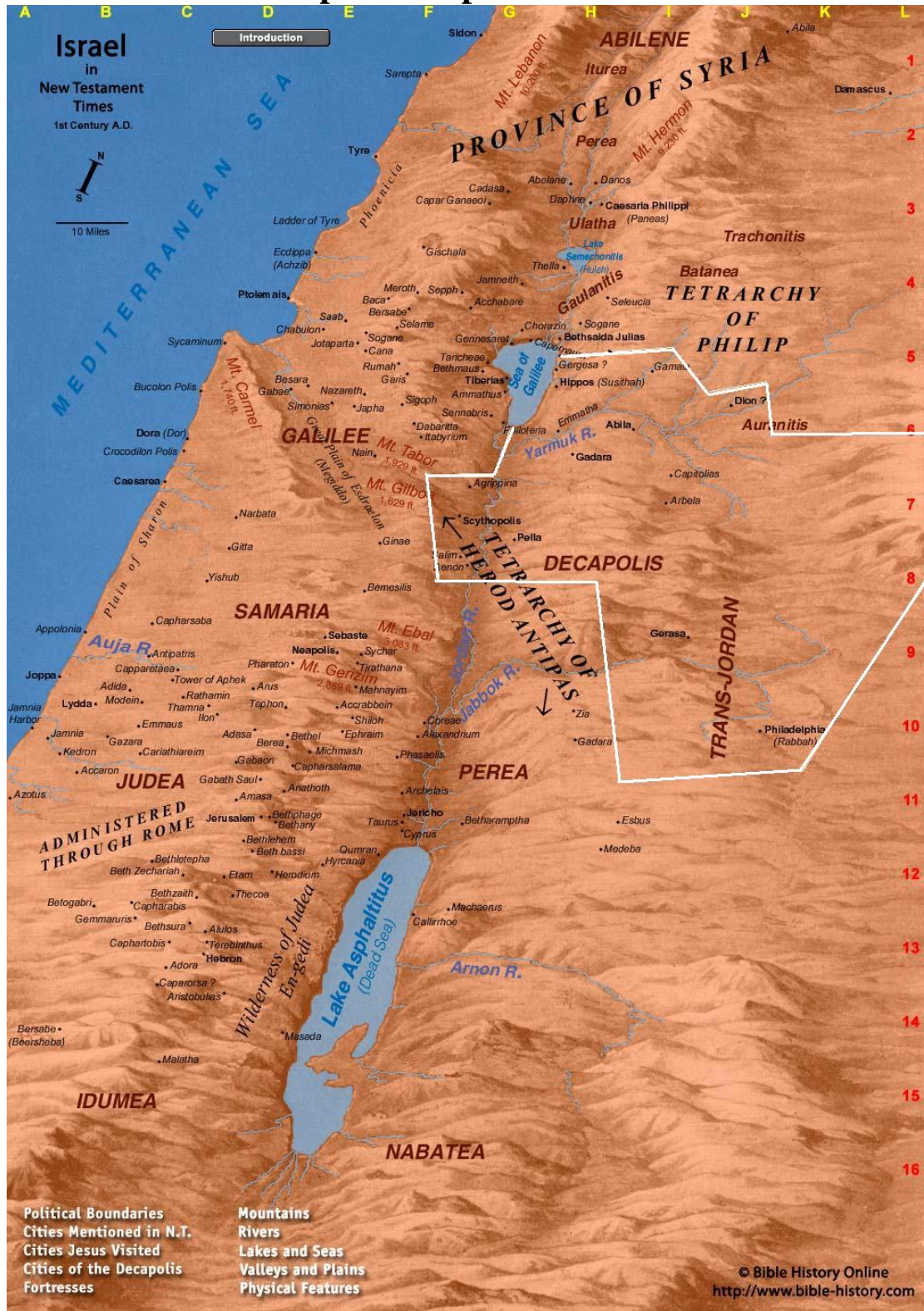
“Learning what happened to the herd of swine, we understand that wicked demons are cruel, hurtful and treacherous to those who are in their power. Proof of this comes from the fact that they hurried the swine over a precipice and drowned them in the waters. Christ, therefore, granted their request, that we might learn from what happened, that their disposition is ruthless and bestial, incapable of being softened, and solely intent on doing evil to those whom they can get into their power.”

“If, therefore, there is anyone among us wanton and swinish, filth loving and impure, and willingly contaminated with the abominations of sin, such a one by God's permission falls into their power, and sinks into the abyss of perdition. But it can never happen to those who love Christ, to become subject to them. Nor to us, as long as we walk in His footsteps, and, avoiding negligence in the performance of what is right, desire those things which are honorable, and belong to that virtuous and laudable conversation, which Christ has marked out for us by the precepts of the Gospel.”

During the 40 years Israel wandered in the wilderness, the Lord promised to remove sickness from their midst if they would only obey His voice (Exodus 23:22-26, Deuteronomy 7:12-15). If they didn't obey His voice, He promised to bring the plagues and sicknesses that He brought on Egypt back on them (Deuteronomy 28:58-61). Similarly at the Lord's coming, there is no more death, sorrow, crying or pain (Revelation 21:4); these former things have passed away along with Satan (Revelation 20:10). It certainly seems like wherever Satan goes, misery, sickness and death follows. If one were to take away Satan, it would appear that sicknesses would go also. But then, what would be the role of the various strains of bacteria and viruses? At one time before the Fall, they had some good, useful purpose (Genesis 1:31). These are some good things to meditate on as we consider how great the Lord is and how much He's done for us.

¹⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 8, Homily 44, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 193-194.

Figure 1
Map of Decapolis and Nabatea¹⁸



¹⁸ © Bible History Online <http://www.bible-history.com>

THE TRAINING OF PAUL

October 21, 2012
20th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision D

Epistle: Galatians 1:11-19

Today's Epistle lesson is also used in the Eastern lectionary for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost. In the West, the Epistle text is sometimes used for the 5th Sunday of Trinity.

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Today's Epistle lesson is also used in the Eastern lectionary for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost. In the West, the Epistle text is sometimes used for the 5th Sunday of Trinity.

The subject of today's Epistle is the early life of the Apostle Paul between his conversion and the beginning of his First Missionary Journey where the Church in Antioch sent him out. During this time, Paul also had a "flight to Egypt" experience where he had to escape from a garrison of soldiers (about 400 men, Acts 21:31, 23:23).

The context of the Epistle lesson is just how the Apostle Paul came to be an Apostle and how he got to know what he knew. To explain this, we need to go beyond just the Epistle text and cover Paul's life prior to 45 AD.

Some Dates as References

Paul's life as an Apostle began in 45 AD when Barnabas went to Tarsus to get him and brought him to Antioch. Paul and Barnabas then taught in the Church in Antioch for a year (Acts 11:25-26) before being sent out by the Church on their First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:1-4) in about 46 AD. Upon their return, they went up to Jerusalem for the Council of Jerusalem in 48 AD (Acts 15, Galatians 2:1-10).

There are three places in Paul's epistles that give us some dates prior to 45 AD. Two of them involve the context of the Epistle lesson:

- Galatians 2:1 - Paul's conversion occurred 14 years before the Council of Jerusalem or 34 AD¹⁹

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¹⁹ The context is his going up to Jerusalem. He didn't go up to Jerusalem immediately following his conversion (Galatians 1:17), but he did three years later (Galatians 1:18) and 14 years later (Galatians 2:1).

- Galatians 1:18 - Paul went to see Peter and James in Jerusalem 3 years after his conversion or 37 AD
- 2 Corinthians 12:2 - Paul had a vision of heaven 14 years prior to writing 2 Corinthians. Since 2 Corinthians was written in 55 AD, his vision occurred in 41 AD

Let us look at these periods in the life of the Apostle Paul more closely.

Birth to 34 AD

Paul was born in Tarsus of Cilicia probably between 5 AD and 10 AD, and was a Pharisee along with his father (Acts 23:3, 23:6). His father was a Roman citizen, and thus Paul was also (Acts 22:27-28). As was customary, all Jewish boys learned a trade as part of their education. Paul's trade was tent making (Acts 18:1-3); this would prove very helpful later on (Acts 20:32-35, 1 Corinthians 9:6-12). Paul continued his education in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, the most respected Rabbi of that day (Acts 22:3, 5:34). This higher education usually began about age 16-17 for Jewish boys where some type of formal education usually began at age 6. Paul was an excellent student and advanced beyond many of his contemporaries, being "exceedingly zealous for the traditions of his fathers" (Galatians 1:14). In the late 20's AD, it is possible that Paul came with other Pharisees to be baptized by John the Baptist. John refused to baptize the Pharisees (Luke 7:30) and called them a brood of vipers (Matthew 3:7).

In 30 AD, when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, Paul began to persecute the Church. Paul may have been a junior member of the Sanhedrin; he mentions that he cast his vote in favor of putting some Christians to death (Acts 26:10). In 31 AD (almost a year after Pentecost), Paul was present at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 22:19-20, Acts 7:59-8:3).

The martyrdom of Stephen began as a dispute with the Synagogue of the Freedmen (people from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia). They were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which Stephen spoke (Acts 6:9-10). Since Paul was from Cilicia, he may have been personally involved in this dispute. According to tradition²⁰, Paul was also a relative of Stephen.

For the next three years, Paul "persecuted the Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" (Acts 22:4). He "punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, he persecuted them even to foreign cities" (Acts 26:11).

John Chrysostom pointed out²¹ some interesting contrasts in the life of the Apostle Paul. Paul persecuted the Church out of ignorance (1 Timothy 1:13), but yet he was extremely knowledgeable in the Law. The Jewish leaders persecuted the Christians out of love for power, but Paul did it out of zeal for doctrine. Paul's teacher, Gamaliel, was not like the other Jewish leaders, and does not seem to have a love for power like them; perhaps he instilled this in Paul. Paul was given mercy because of his ignorance; the other Jewish leaders were not given mercy because they did things willfully.

²⁰ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 27.

²¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, III, v. 13.

“‘But I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief’. Why then did other Jews not obtain mercy? Because what they did, they didn’t do ignorantly, but willfully, well knowing what they did. For this we have the testimony of John, ‘Many of the Jews believed on Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him. They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God’ (John 12:43). And Christ again said to them, ‘How can you believe, who receive honor one of another’ (John 5:44)? The parents of the blind man ‘said these things for fear of the Jews, lest they should be put out of the synagogue’ (John 9:22). The Jews themselves said, ‘Perceive you how we avail nothing? Behold, the world is gone after Him’ (John 12:19). Thus their love of power was everywhere in their way. When they admitted that no one can forgive sins but God only, and Christ immediately did that very thing, which they had confessed to be a sign of divinity, this could not be a case of ignorance. But where was Paul then? Perhaps one should say he was sitting at the feet of Gamaliel, and took no part with the multitude who conspired against Jesus. For Gamaliel does not appear to have been an ambitious man. Then how is it that afterwards Paul was found joining with the multitude? He saw the doctrine growing, and on the point of prevailing, and being generally embraced. For in the lifetime of Christ, the disciples consorted with Him, and afterwards with their teachers, but when they were completely separated, Paul did not act as the other Jews did, from the love of power, but from zeal. For what was the motive of his journey to Damascus? He thought the doctrine was pernicious, and was afraid that the preaching of it would spread everywhere. But with the Jews it was no concern for the multitude, but the love of power, that influenced their actions. Hence they say, ‘The Romans will come and take away both our place and nation’ (John 11:48). What fear was this that agitated them, but that of man? But it is worthy of inquiry, how one so skillful in the Law as Paul could be ignorant? It is he who says, ‘which He had promised before by His holy prophets’ (Romans 1:2). How is it then that you know not, you who are zealous of the Law of their fathers, who were brought up at the feet of Gamaliel? Yet those who spent their days on lakes and rivers, and the publicans, have embraced the Gospel, while those that studied the Law are persecuting it! It is for this he condemns himself, saying, ‘I am not fit to be called an Apostle’ (1 Corinthians 15:9). It is for this he confesses his ignorance, which was produced by unbelief. For this reason, he says, he obtained ‘mercy’ (1 Timothy 2:16). What then does he mean when he says, ‘He counted me faithful?’ (1 Timothy 1:12) He would give up no right of his Master’s; even his own part he ascribed to Him, and assumed nothing to himself, nor claimed for his own the glory which was due to God. Hence in another place we find him exclaiming, ‘Sirs, why do you these things to us? We also are men of like passions with you’ (Acts 14:15). So again, ‘He counted me faithful’. And again, ‘I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me’ (1 Corinthians 15:10). And again, ‘It is He that works in us both to will and to do’ (Philippians 2:13). In acknowledging that he ‘obtained mercy’, he admits that he deserved punishment, since mercy is for such. And again in another place he says of the Jews, ‘Blindness in part is happened to Israel’” (Romans 11:25).

Paul's Conversion

Armed with letters from the high priest to the synagogues of Damascus (Acts 9:1-2), Paul headed north to seek out Christians that had scattered because of his persecution (Acts 8:4). On the road to Damascus, Paul met the Lord and was struck blind (Acts 9:3-8). In that encounter, the Lord told Paul to go into the city of Damascus where he would be told what to do. The Lord also told Paul that He would send him to the Gentiles that they also might have an inheritance among the faithful (Acts 26:16-18).

Meanwhile in Damascus, the Apostle Ananias also had a vision (Acts 9:10-12). Ananias was one of the original Seventy and was one of the people Paul was looking for, and Ananias knew it (Acts 9:13-14). The Lord told Ananias that Paul was coming and that:

- Paul had been told that a man named Ananias would lay hands on him to restore his sight (Acts 9:12).
- Paul would evangelize the Gentiles and proclaim Christ to kings and to Israel (Acts 9:15).
- The Lord would show Paul how much he needed to suffer for the Lord's Name's sake (Acts 9:16).

Ananias went right away to the house on the street called Straight where Paul was staying and laid hands on him, restored his sight and baptized him. Located at this address today is the Patriarchate of the Church of Antioch.

34 AD to 37 AD

Paul spent some days with the disciples of Damascus after his baptism (Acts 9:19-20). Undoubtedly, Ananias and Paul talked about their visions: that Paul was a chosen vessel to evangelize the Gentiles and would suffer a lot. In our Epistle reading, Paul stated that he did not immediately confer with flesh and blood (Galatians 1:16), but he went to Arabia for a while (Galatians 1:17). The implication is that he spent the greater part of three years (34-37 AD) in Arabia (Galatians 1:18). See Figure 1 for a map of Paul's movement in and around Damascus and Arabia.

To a Jew in the 1st Century "Arabia" did not necessarily mean the entire Arabian Peninsula. Josephus wrote that Arabia could be seen to the East from a tower in Jerusalem. In the 2nd Century, the kingdom of Nabatea was established as generally to the East of Palestine. This area was generally referred to as Arabia by residents of Palestine (see map). Note that Nabatea includes both the area surrounding Damascus and the area of Decapolis evangelized by the healed demoniacs in Mark 5:20 (see also Matthew 8:28).

The politics of this area was somewhat in turmoil at the time of Paul's conversion. From an article²² in Bible Review that gives a historical perspective to Nabatea:

"Although the mother of Herod the Great came from an eminent Nabatean family, he later fought the Nabateans in a war that he won only after suffering heavy losses. The Nabateans, in return, enthusiastically provided auxiliary troops to aid

²² Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "What Was Paul Doing in Arabia?" Bible Review, October 1994

the Roman governor of Syria in brutally suppressing the Jewish revolt that followed Herod's death" (about 4 BC).

"In order to calm the tensions between the two peoples, one of Herod's sons, Herod Antipas, married the daughter of the Nabatean king, Aretas IV. However, in about 23 AD he divorced her in order to marry Herodias, the wife of his half-brother Philip. John the Baptist criticized this marriage, as reported both by Josephus and the Gospels, with the result that John was imprisoned and then beheaded (Matthew 14:3-12; Mark 6:17-29, Luke 4:19-20). Using a disputed border as an excuse, the Nabatean king attacked Galilee to avenge the insult to his daughter."

"The Nabatean king knew from experience that Rome had little patience with warlike actions between the client kings who guarded the eastern frontier of the empire. He thus had every reason to feel anxious not only about Jewish reaction, but about Roman reaction to his attack on Galilee. The Roman emperor was perfectly capable of reacting quickly and decisively. All he had to do was to give an order to the governor of Syria, who had four legions at his disposition."

Just as the Nabatean King Aretas was expecting the reaction from Rome, Paul [a Jew, a Pharisee, and the son of a Pharisee] went to Arabia.

Prior to leaving for Arabia, Paul had begun to preach Christ in the synagogues of Damascus (Acts 9:20). Those who heard him were amazed since they knew that Paul tried to destroy Christians in Jerusalem, and had come to Damascus to do the same (Acts 9:21-22). After his return to Damascus from Arabia, the amazement and consternation turned into a murder plot against Paul. The Jews hatched the plot (Acts 9:24) and got the governor of Damascus under King Aretas to go along (2 Corinthians 11:32). With an Ethnarch guarding the city looking for Paul, the Christians let Paul down in a basket through a window in the city wall (Acts 9:25, 2 Corinthians 11:32-33) and he escaped, heading for Jerusalem.

The Twelve had divided the world up into different regions, and then they drew lots to see who would go where. The Apostle John had drawn the region of Asia Minor²³, but he couldn't go there until after the death of the Virgin Mary, since the Lord had directed him to care for her (John 19:25-27). On Paul's missionary journeys, he filled in for John in Asia Minor until John could get there. Paul did something similar during his first three years as a believer in Arabia. Timon, of the Seventy and of the first seven deacons, was later Bishop of Bostra in Arabia. Paul laid the groundwork for Timon. John Chrysostom noted²⁴ Paul's fervent, yet extremely humble, character, as he began his life as an Apostle. He desired to go to places that the Twelve and the Seventy hadn't taken up the preaching of the Word yet.

"Paul was a fervent soul! He desired to go to regions not yet cultivated, which were in a wild state. Had he remained with the Apostles, since he had nothing to learn, his preaching would have been limited, for they needed to spread the Word everywhere. Thus this blessed man, fervent in spirit, undertook to teach wild barbarians, choosing a life full of battle and labor. He said, 'I went into Arabia', and added, 'and again I returned to Damascus' (Galatians 1:17).

²³ We can see this from Revelation 2 and 3, where John addresses some of the Churches in this region.

²⁴ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Galatians, Chapter 1, v. 17

Observe his humility; he doesn't speak of his successes, or whom or the many he instructed. Yet such was his zeal, immediately after his baptism, that he confounded the Jews, and so exasperated them, that they and the Greeks lay in wait for him to kill him. This would not have been the case, had he not greatly added to the numbers of the faithful. Since the Jews were defeated in doctrine, they resorted to murder, which was a clear sign of Paul's superiority. But Christ did not allow him to be put to death, preserving him for his mission. Of these successes, however, Paul says nothing. In all his writings, his motive is not ambition, nor to be honored more highly than the Apostles, nor because he is embarrassed at being taken lightly. He calls himself, 'one born²⁵ out of due time', and, 'the first of sinners', and 'the last of the Apostles', and, 'not fit to be called an Apostle' (1 Corinthians 15:8). The one who said this had labored more than all of them; which is real humility. For he, who is conscious of no excellence, and speaks humbly of himself, is candid but not humble; but for Paul to say so after such accomplishments, is to be practiced in self-control."

"What great things did he achieve in the city of Damascus? He tells us that the governor²⁶ under Aretas the king set guards about the whole city, hoping to trap this blessed man. This is a proof of the strongest kind that he was violently persecuted by the Jews. He says nothing of this, but, mentioning his arrival and departure, is silent concerning the events which occurred, nor would he have mentioned them (2 Corinthians 11:32) had not circumstances required it."

"He said that after three years he went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas' (Galatians 1:18). What can be lowlier than such a soul? After such successes, lacking nothing of Peter, not even his assent, but being of equal dignity with him, he went to him as his elder and superior. The only object of this journey was to visit Peter; thus he pays due respect to the Apostles, and regards himself as not even their equal. Which is plain from this journey, for Paul visited Peter for the same reason many of our brethren today visit with holy men. Or rather by a humbler feeling, for today they do so for their own benefit, but Paul, not for his own instruction or correction, but merely for the sake of honoring Peter by his presence. He says, 'to visit Peter'; he does not say to see (Greek: *ideio*), but to inquire about, (Greek: *istoresai*) a word, which those, who seek to become acquainted with great and splendid cities, apply to themselves. Worthy of such trouble did he consider the very sight of Peter. Paul did this again on his arrival at Jerusalem, after having converted many Gentiles; having reformed and brought to Christ Pamphylia, Lycaonia, Cilicia, and all nations in that quarter of the world, he first addressed himself with great humility to James, as to his elder and superior (Acts 21:17-19). Next he submitted to his counsel, and that counsel contrary to this Epistle. 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those which have believed; therefore shave your head, and purify yourself' (Acts 21:20-24). Accordingly he shaved his head, and observed all the Jewish ceremonies; for where the Gospel was not affected, he was the humblest of

²⁵ The Greek word *ektroma* means literally "an abortion".

²⁶ The "governor" under Aretas was an Ethnarch. Archelaus (Matthew 2:22) was an Ethnarch, which is a higher position than a Tetrarch, such as Herod Antipas, Philip and Lysanias (Luke 3:1). Thus it was a higher ranking official who was after Paul, trying to kill him, than was after Peter (Acts 12:3).

all men. But where by such humility he saw any injured, he gave it up, for that was no longer being humble, but that could destroy the disciples.”

Chrysostom continued²⁷ to say that Paul, in his humility, referred to himself as “less than the least of all the saints” (Ephesians 3:8). In spite of being a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man (1 Timothy 1:13), he was given the grace to communicate the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles. Paul didn’t call himself the least of the Apostles, but less than the least of all the saints. In his humility, Paul mourned his former sins, even though they were blotted out.

37 AD to 45 AD

Arriving in Jerusalem, Paul met with Peter and James, the Lord’s brother (Galatians 1:18-19). This was his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion and he only stayed 15 days. At first, the disciples in Jerusalem were afraid of him and didn’t believe he was a disciple. But Barnabas, who had also studied²⁸ under Gamaliel, took Paul in, introduced him to the Apostles, and declared to them concerning Paul’s conversion (Acts 9:26-27). When Paul spoke boldly in the Name of Jesus and disputed with the Greek-speaking Jews, they also hatched a murder plot (Acts 9:29). This is why he only stayed 15 days in Jerusalem. When the brethren in Jerusalem found out about the murder plot, they hustled Paul down to Caesarea and off to his hometown of Tarsus (Acts 9:30). With Paul out of the way and no longer organizing the persecution of the Church, Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and multiplied considerably (Acts 9:31). This peace lasted until about 44 AD when Herod (Agrippa) killed James, the son of Zebedee, and tried to kill Peter also (Acts 12:1ff) because it pleased the Jews.

Before leaving Jerusalem, Paul had another vision from the Lord that confirmed the one he had at his conversion (Acts 22:17-21). In this vision, which occurred while Paul was praying in the Temple, the Lord warned him to get out of Jerusalem quickly because:

- They will not receive your testimony in Jerusalem
- The Lord would send him far from there to the Gentiles.

Paul spent the next 8 years in Tarsus (37 AD - 45 AD). During this time Paul had at least one other vision, this one greater than all the others. This vision occurred in 41 AD (14 years before the writing of 2 Corinthians in 55 AD). In this vision Paul was caught up into Paradise and heard things that he couldn’t even speak about (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). This vision prepared Paul for his role as an Apostle since the Churches on earth are modeled after the Assembly of the Saints in heaven just as the Tabernacle in the wilderness was modeled after the Tabernacle in heaven (Exodus 25:9, 20; 26:30, Acts 7:44, Hebrews 8:5).

There was other foundational work that Paul did while he was in Tarsus that we don’t notice until later. A number of the members of Paul’s immediate family either came to know the Lord; or if they already did, the breach between them and Paul was repaired. According to

²⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, VII.

²⁸ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, June 11.

tradition²⁹, Stephen, one of the first seven deacons was a kinsman of Paul and therefore some repair work on family relationships may have been necessary.

Some of Paul's kinsmen that are mentioned in the Scriptures are Herodion (Romans 16:11), Andronicus and Junius (Romans 16:7), Lucius, Jason and Sosipater (Romans 16:21). Herodian, Andronicus³⁰, both members of the Seventy, and Junius were in Rome in 55 AD when Paul wrote Romans. According to tradition, they had been sent there by Peter and Paul to help get the Church started, and Paul addressed them by name in Romans 16. Herodian was later Bishop of Neoparthia and Andronicus was later Bishop of Pannonia (North of Dalmatia).

When Paul wrote Romans, he was in the middle of his Third Missionary Journey and was staying in Corinth at the time. With him in Corinth were Lucius, Jason and Sosipater (Romans 16:21), all members of the original Seventy and now doing apostolic work with Paul. Jason is also mentioned as working with Paul on Paul's Second Missionary Journey in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-7). According to tradition³¹, Jason was later Bishop of Tarsus; Lucius, Bishop of Laodicea; and Sosipater, Bishop of Iconium. Jason and Sosipater later teamed up as apostles and evangelized the Island of Corfu (West coast of Greece).

After spending about 8 years in Tarsus, Barnabas arrived in 45 AD looking for Paul (Acts 11:25). The Church in Antioch had gotten started recently by some men from Cyprus and Cyrene (Acts 11:20). The men we know from the Scripture that were from Cyprus are Barnabas (Acts 4:36) and his brother Aristobulus (Romans 16:10). According to tradition³², Aristobulus was also Peter's father-in-law and later Bishop of Britain. Those from Cyrene were Simon of Cyrene and his sons Rufus and Alexander (Mark 15:21). Simon was pressed into service to carry Jesus' cross at the crucifixion. Rufus worked with the apostle Paul, was in Rome when Paul wrote Romans (Romans 16:13), and was later Bishop of Thebes³³. Simon's other son, Alexander, became a traitor to the Faith and was largely responsible for Paul's martyrdom (2 Timothy 4:14, 1 Timothy 1:20). Another man from Cyrene was Lucius of Cyrene who was one of the prophets and teachers at the Church of Antioch (Acts 13:1).

When Barnabas found Paul in Tarsus, he brought him to Antioch (Acts 11:26). Along with the others, Paul and Barnabas taught at the Church in Antioch for a year before they went off on their First Missionary Journey. During this one-year period, Agabus, a prophet and one of the Seventy, predicted that there would be a great famine. During the famine, Barnabas and Paul hand-carried alms from Antioch to the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30).

As one can see from this brief history of the Apostle Paul's early life, there was considerable preparation and training he went through prior to his being sent out as an Apostle. He didn't have the opportunity to follow Jesus for three years like the Twelve and the Seventy. However, the Lord did speak to him personally and specifically in directing him what to do. When he said in Galatians, "I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood" (Galatians 1:16)

²⁹ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 27.

³⁰ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, April 8, May 17.

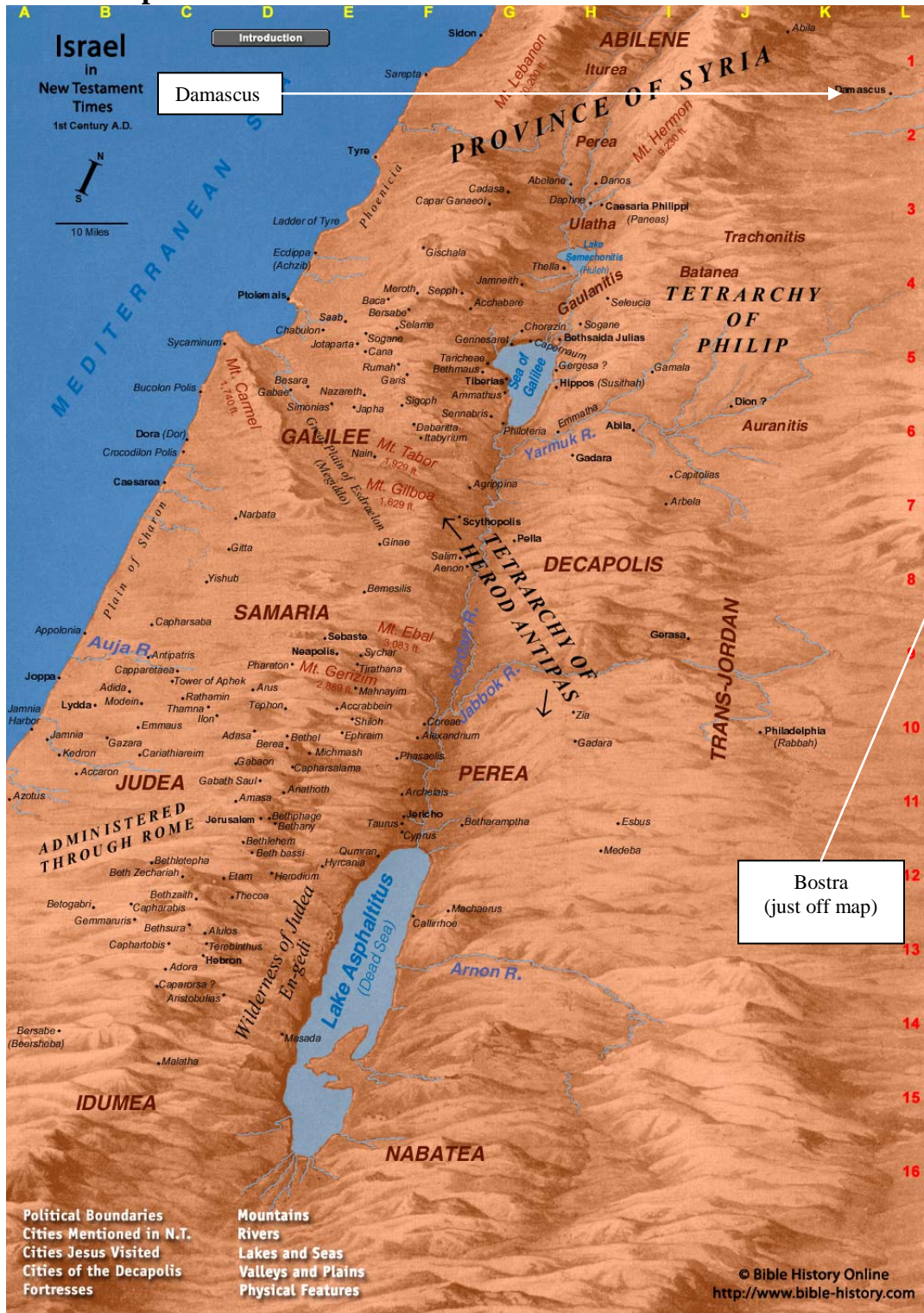
³¹ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, April 28, September 10.

³² Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, March 16.

³³ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, April 8.

following his conversion, he is not putting down the Twelve, nor is he saying one shouldn't confer with one's elders. He is simply referring to the visions he had that were necessary for him to be able to do what he had done.

Figure 1
 Map³⁴ of Paul's Movement Around Arabia and Damascus



³⁴ © Bible History Online <http://www.bible-history.com>. Other maps also available.