



Simon Jones introduces life in GALATIA



WELCOME TO PISIDIAN ANTIOCH

As you walk through the arches into the city of Pisidian Antioch from the arid plains of what is now southern Turkey, you are greeted by cool water flowing from stepped basins down the centre of a wide main thoroughfare that leads to the heart of the city. The thirsty traveller is welcomed with refreshment. You would also see at the far end of the street the towering gateway that led into the temple of Augustus.

Everywhere you go in the city you are reminded of the power of Rome. It became part of the Roman Republic in 64 BC, and was refounded as a Roman colony in the years after Augustus became emperor (63 BC – AD 14) and settled with veterans of his campaigns in the region. In every corner of this city, formerly part of Alexander the Great's Greek empire, you would have seen Latin writing – for example, on inscriptions adorning statues, on signs above shop awnings – and heard Latin being spoken by Italian and other citizens.

GALATIA, A PROVINCE

All this would have greeted Paul and Barnabas as they made their way into the city from their long walk up from the coast. Luke tells the story of the duo's arrival in the province of Galatia, of which Pisidian Antioch was the leading city, in Acts 13. And it was to this part of the world that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatian Christians.

Perhaps, as they walked deeper into the city, Paul was surveying the shopfronts looking for a likely place to set up his workshop. Maybe he spied a tentmaker or a craft worker labouring over canvas or leather and thought he might try there. Paul's ministry was almost exclusively conducted in Roman cities. This was probably because he understood how they worked and because his citizenship meant he was afforded a measure of protection within them (though that didn't work out too well in Philippi according to Acts 16.16ff!). Roman cities were also places where he could find work and a ready audience in the synagogues.

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas went to Cyprus and then made landfall in Perga before heading inland to Pisidian Antioch. After a few weeks, they went on to the smaller cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe before returning to Syrian Antioch whence they had come. So Paul's letter to the Galatians is not written to a single place, but to a group of churches in these various cities at the southern end of the Roman province of Galatia.

GALATIA AND ROME

Pisidian Antioch was home to about 10,000 people, of whom 3,000 were Roman army veterans. At its centre was a temple, modelled on the temple to Mars Ultor in Rome, in which stood an eight-foot statue of Augustus. Although the deity local to the area was *Men Askenos*, the moon god, the imperial cult was the dominant religion in the city; it reminded all its inhabitants that they were conquered people, ruled over by a distant emperor.

Many in the city had made a good living out of the Romans, however, supplying the army legions in the first instance and now meeting the needs of the veterans settled in and around Antioch. We know that it was a relatively prosperous city because of the inscriptions that have been found to physicians, lawyers, teachers, philosophers, poets, actors, dancers, singers, musicians, gladiators, painters, merchants of various kinds but especially of vegetables and herbs, as well as sellers of pastries. This tells us that in its prosperity, Pisidian Antioch was also a centre of cultural life.

Politically it was run along Roman lines, with those described by Luke in Acts 13.50 as the leading men of the city being drawn from the higher echelons of Roman society, including people in the ruling senatorial class. Among the prominent families were the Caristani and the Sergii, the latter famous for producing Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus who Paul meets and possibly leads to faith in Jesus in Acts 13.7-12. It is quite likely that Paul had come straight to Pisidian Antioch after landing in the province, because he had letters of introduction from Sergius Paulus that would smooth his way with the authorities in the city. This could account for the presence of elite people in Paul's audience.

GALATIA AND THE JEWS

There was clearly a well-established Jewish presence in the city. Many of them were probably merchants and craft workers, drawn there by the opportunities to share in the rising prosperity of the place. Certainly, Acts paints a broad and mixed portrait of the audience that greeted Paul and Barnabas as they went to the synagogue. Not only Jews gathered but also proselytes (full converts to the Jewish faith), God fearers (those drawn to Jewish ethical teaching but not keen to fully convert; among these Luke tells us there were some devout women of high standing) and Gentiles drawn by the presence of outside teachers with a new philosophy.

It was probably this mixed community of converts, coupled with some of the social tensions arising from the presence in a Hellenistic city of so many Roman people, along with the divisions between rich and poor in the region, that accounts for the tone and content of Paul's wonderful, acerbic letter.