

## The Nature of Yeshua in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts

light, members of the Heavenly host, are sent out by God to offer some degree of protection or intervention for individual people and whole communities. **But what is promised in Yeshua is a permanent forgiveness from sins.** Would this be legitimately possible if Yeshua were ultimately a created being? Yeshua offers a level of forgiveness that goes beyond the temporary forgiveness available within the Torah's sacrificial system (Acts 13:39).

Paul's message to those in Pisidian Antioch was not just some "update" about events that had occurred in the Jewish world. He urges his audience, "Beware, therefore, lest there come upon you what is said in the prophets" (Acts 13:40, RSV). Paul does not wish a previous prophetic world to be enacted upon those of his generation for their rejection of the gospel. His quotation from Habakkuk 1:5 in Acts 13:41 is from the Greek LXX, which has some notable textual differences from the Hebrew MT<sup>257</sup>: "Behold, you despisers, and look, and wonder marvelously, and vanish: for I work a work in your days which you will by no means believe, though a man declare it to you" (Apostle's Bible).

It is true from reading through this message delivered by Paul to those in Pisidian Antioch, that he does not come out and demand of his listeners that they recognize that "Yeshua is God." But that hardly means that Paul—especially given the testimony of his letters—did not believe that Yeshua was not God. Paul gave a sufficient enough of a message to those at the synagogue, about both what had happened to Yeshua in being executed and raised from the dead *and the forgiveness available in Yeshua* that it is recorded, "As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging them to speak these things to them the next Shabbat" (Acts 13:42, TLV). When reading about Yeshua the Messiah from the Biblical text, no one vignette or message is going to give us a full picture about who He is, requiring us to continue to investigate, probe, reflect, and consider.

### Acts 14:8-20

#### "Paul and Barnabas Are Worshipped as Hermes and Zeus"

"At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, said with a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And he leaped up and *began* to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have become like men and have come down to us.' And they *began* calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose *temple* was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM [Exodus 20:11; Psalm 146:6]. In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.' *Even* saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe."

---

<sup>257</sup> "Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because *I am* doing something in your days—you would not believe if you were told" (Habakkuk 1:5, NASU).

The encounter between Paul and Barnabas and a lame man at Lystra, resulted in a scene of these two being venerated as though they were the gods Hermes and Zeus.<sup>258</sup> What is to be learned from Paul and Barnabas in Lystra, that must necessarily be catalogued for our evaluation of the nature of the Messiah?

When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Lystra, they encounter “a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked” (Acts 14:8, ESV). This man listens to Paul speaking, or “as Paul preached” (Acts 14:9, NLT), and gazing at him demonstrates that he believes strongly enough in what is being said that he can be healed (Acts 14:9). All Paul has to say is “Stand up on your feet!” (Acts 14:10, NIV) and the man leaps and begins to walk. While we as Bible readers may conclude that the lame man was healed by the power of the Lord, this is not the reaction which is witnessed by the natives looking on.

There could have been some language difficulties manifest in Lystra, as the crowds witnessing what had taken place were speaking in Lycaonian, and concluded “The gods have come down to us in human form!” (Acts 14:11, NRSV). Lycaonian may have possibly been one of the local Celtic dialects used by the original ethnic Galatians.<sup>259</sup> It could be speculated that when Paul and Barnabas spoke to the crowds they were only conversing with the upper classes, who would have known Greek. It may also have been that they spoke to the Lycaonians via interpreters. Still, the more reasonable solution is that the crowds would have certainly understood Greek, the language of business and commerce of the day, but not necessarily as a first language. What is clear enough, is that while the Jews Paul and Barnabas had some proficiency in Greek as the First Century language of street business, they would not have known a local dialect like Lycaonian.

Things got out of control, partially due to language barriers, but partially also due to a total misunderstanding of what the Jews Paul and Barnabas represented and were declaring. Because of the healing of the lame man, the masses identified Barnabas to be Zeus, king of the Greco-Roman pantheon, and Paul to be Hermes, the messenger god. (The KJV and NEB employ the Latin forms Jupiter and Mercury.) Various commentators have suggested that the Lystrans’ response to the healing was affected by a local legend, later retold by the Roman Ovid, about Zeus and Hermes visiting the region and no one in Lystra recognizing them except an elderly couple named Philemon and Baucis. As the legend states,

“There is a swamp not far from there, once habitable land but now the haunt of diving-birds and marsh-loving coots. Jupiter went there, disguised as a mortal, and Mercury, the descendant of Atlas, setting aside his wings, went with his father, carrying the caduceus. A thousand houses they approached, looking for a place to rest: a thousand houses were locked and bolted. But one received them: it was humble it is true, roofed with reeds and stems from the marsh, but godly Baucis and the equally aged Philemon, had been wedded in that cottage in their younger years, and there had grown old together. They made light of poverty by acknowledging it, and bearing it without discontent of mind. It was no matter if you asked for owner or servant there: those two were the whole household: they gave orders and carried them out equally” (*Metamorphoses* 8.626).<sup>260</sup>

Some theologians have actually detected a hint of humor in Luke’s words, “Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker” (Acts 14:12, ESV), with the

---

<sup>258</sup> This entry has been partially adapted from Appendix A in the author’s commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, “Acts 13:13-14:28: Paul’s Visit to Southern Galatia.”

<sup>259</sup> Cf. W.S. LaSor, “Lycaonia,” in *ISBE*, 3:188.

<sup>260</sup> Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.S. Cline (2000). Accessible online at <<http://www.tkline.freereserve.co.uk/Ovhome.htm>>.

## The Nature of Yeshua in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts

unspoken clause being, “*Can you believe it...?*” This humor would have been affected by Isaiah 46:5-7:

“To whom would you liken Me and make Me equal and compare Me, that we would be alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse and weigh silver on the scale hire a goldsmith, and he makes it *into* a god; they bow down, indeed they worship it. They lift it upon the shoulder *and* carry it; they set it in its place and it stands *there*. It does not move from its place. Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer; it cannot deliver him from his distress.”

This same suggested humor is seen as the priest of Zeus prepares to honor Paul and Barnabas and offer sacrifices to them (Acts 14:13). Some of this may have taken place because of the linguistic differences between Paul and Barnabas as visitors, and the Lystran natives. The crowd may have been too big and too unruly for them to fully understand what Paul and Barnabas told them in Greek, a language which the two of them may have had a better command of than many of the Lystrans themselves.

When Paul and Barnabas see what the Lystrans were preparing to do—worshipping the two of them as Hermes and Zeus—Paul and Barnabas rush out into the crowd and tear their robes (Acts 14:14). Tearing robes is a way seen in the Tanach to express mourning or anguish (Genesis 37:29; Esther 4:1). Another reason for tearing one’s robes would have been to respond to blasphemy, something that the high priest does at Yeshua’s trial (Mark 14:63). The rips that Paul and Barnabas would have made would probably have only been about 4-5 inches.

Paul and Barnabas recognized that some kind of gross miscommunication has taken place, because neither one of them is Yeshua, the only One who was God Incarnate who came down from Heaven (Philippians 2:6-8). They were two mortals empowered by the Lord “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform healing” (Luke 9:2), but this is not how the Lystrans perceive things to be—likely because of the local mythology.

Rebuking the Lystrans, Paul and Barnabas ask them, “Men! Why are you doing these things? We are men also, with the same nature as you, and we are proclaiming good news to you, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God” (Acts 14:15a, HCSB). They say that their mission is to proclaim to them the goodness of the One True God, so that they might turn from “worthless things” (NIV, HCSB) or “these follies” (REB). This terminology comes directly from the Tanach to designate false gods: “You must not turn aside, for *then you would go* after futile things which can not profit or deliver, because they are futile” (1 Samuel 12:21). We also see a parallel in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 where Paul writes the Thessalonians that they “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.”

The God that Paul and Barnabas is proclaiming is the One “who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them” (Acts 14:15b, NEB). This pieces together phrases seen in Exodus 20:11<sup>261</sup> and Psalm 146:6.<sup>262</sup> We see Paul emphasize the same things later in his address to the Athenian philosophers at the Aeropagus, where he speaks of “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24).

The overall challenge that we see in Lystra with the Lystrans thinking that Paul and Barnabas were Hermes and Zeus was that they were not familiar with the truth of the One God of Israel. F.F. Bruce observes in his Acts commentary, “To Jews, who already know that God is one, and that He is the living and true God, the gospel proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, but pagans must first be taught what Jews already confess regarding the unity and character of

---

<sup>261</sup> “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:11).

<sup>262</sup> “Who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever” (Psalm 146:6).

God.”<sup>263</sup> The incident in Lystra is one of the first that Bible readers actually encounter of the good news or gospel *going directly to non-Jewish pagans*, people who were not conformed to the truth about the God of Israel as the One God of Creation. It is a strong indication that most of the Greeks and Romans who Paul ministered to and mentored were already associated with the Jewish Synagogue in some way—knowing that the God of Creation was the LORD (YHWH) of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Lystrans are appealed to, as they are told “In the past, [God] let all nations go their own way” (Acts 14:16, NIV). This thought is likely affected by Micah 4:5, “Though all the peoples walk each in the name of his god, as for us, we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.” Until this point in human history, God’s mission was primarily concerned with Israel on the whole, not with other nations.

Still, even though God was primarily concerned with Israel and not the world as a whole, Paul and Barnabas are sure to tell the Lystrans that God did provide a witness to them of Himself, via His physical provision (Acts 14:17). As the Creator, God still bestowed His goodness on all humanity by providing them the seasons for growing crops for their nourishment. The witness to His authority presented them was via His natural revelation in Creation. Possible Tanach passages that Paul and Barnabas may have been considering include Psalm 19:1 and 89:37,<sup>264</sup> with God’s natural revelation and the accountability of the heathen world seen in Paul’s letter to the Romans (Romans 1:19-20).

Paul and Barnabas’ plea is not heeded, and “they barely managed to prevent the crowd from offering sacrifice to them” (Acts 14:18, NEB). It is actually witnessed, somehow, that Jews from their previous encounters in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium (Acts 13:13-52) followed them to Lystra. This may indicate that either (1) Paul and Barnabas were literally followed after fleeing from Iconium, or (2) the encounter in Lystra is prolonged and word reached the Jewish leadership in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, who promptly sent a delegation to see Paul and Barnabas stopped.

The Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, in all likelihood those who opposed Paul and Barnabas in those cities, “persuaded the people” (Acts 14:19, RSV) that they were dangerous. They would not have had the right to stone Paul and Barnabas outright, but instead stirred the mob to do it. This way, a perceived blasphemy of Paul and Barnabas apparently being worshipped could be answered for, and if anyone were to blame for murder, it would have been an unruly crowd of people. Paul himself is stoned almost to the point of death, his unconscious body being dragged out of the city. Some have thought that this may be the incident described in Galatians 6:17,<sup>265</sup> with other notable references likewise seen in the Pauline Epistles (2 Corinthians 11:25<sup>266</sup>; 2 Timothy 3:10-11<sup>267</sup>).

---

<sup>263</sup> F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 293.

<sup>264</sup> “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands...It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful” (Psalm 19:1; 89:37).

<sup>265</sup> “From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Yeshua” (Galatians 6:17).

<sup>266</sup> “Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep” (2 Corinthians 11:25).

<sup>267</sup> “Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me!” (2 Timothy 3:10-11).