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## THE CASE OF THE MISSING ACTS OF THE (OTHER) APOSTLES

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### **Abstract**

The Antiochian paradox of the New Testament poses the question of why St. Paul, who was dispatched by the capital of Syria, Antioch, travelled westward to the Greco-Roman world and Europe rather than eastward to Syria and Asia. Antioch, the first significant Christian community after Jerusalem, played a role in the establishment of Christianity. The Roman Empire brought about significant changes, but the East was equally important as the West. It is possible that Paul and Barnabas travelled by sea from Antioch to Greece and Rome. Antioch was linked to historical Orient nations such as Babylonia, Media, Persia, and India by critical trading routes. Messianic advent messengers would have received financial, moral, and spiritual support, as well as conduits, from the Jewish communities of the Eastern Diaspora. Paul and Barnabas sailed west to Cyprus, Greece, Rome, and Spain, despite their improved perspectives on the world. Eastern Christianity may have expanded as a result of a unique missionary dynamism that differed from Western Christianity. Christianity expanded in the East in a manner similar to the Jewish

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Diaspora, with Israel lacking a “Congregation for the Evangelisation of the People” or missionary organisation. The Diaspora's vitality was derived from individual and collective witness, rather than proselytising.

**Key Words:** Paul and Barnabas, New Testament, Mission, Jerusalem, Antioch

In the background of Syriac theology and tradition, I would like to submit a few considerations on what I would call “the Antiochian paradox of the New Testament” or again, “the case of the missing Acts of the (other) Apostles in the New Testament Canon.” The question is as follows. How is it that St Paul, sent by the community of Antioch (Acts 13:1-3), the capital of Syria, went westward towards the Greco-Roman world and Europe and not eastward towards Syria and Asia? And what does it mean that, in our Bible, we have the Acts of the Apostles to the West and not of the apostles to the East? These questions present a typical example of the horizons which open when we look at the Bible and at theology from a non-western perspective.

### **I. Why did Paul Go West and not East?**

In the beginning of Christianity, Antioch played an important role. According to the Acts, Antioch became the first major Christian community after Jerusalem (11:19-26). It was that community which delegated Barnabas to the Gentile mission (13:1-3) and to which they had to report (14:27-28). This report caused the stir that occasioned the Jerusalem assembly at the end of which, the conclusions were notified to Antioch (15:30-33). The resulting picture is that, if Jerusalem remained the basis, Antioch would have become the dynamic centre of the Christian movement.

Now, Antioch of Syria was the capital of Syria, a province that extended eastward up to the Euphrates River. Along with Rome and Alexandria in Egypt, it was one of the three most important cities in the Mediterranean world. Though it was not a very ancient city, it had a glorious history. It was built in 300 BC by Seleucus, one of the three *diadochoi*, the successors of Alexander, who had divided between themselves the vast territories occupied by the great conqueror. Seleucus had inherited Syria, which was much more extensive than the actual Syria as it covered the Eastern part of the conquests of Alexander up to the borders of India. Under his successors, the empire had yielded part of its lands to the Parthian Empire and had split into smaller kingdoms, more or less Hellenized. But it was reunified when

conquered by the legions of Pompey in 63 BC, along with Palestine. Actually, the Roman influence reached far beyond the Euphrates as witnessed by the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, an inscription engraved on bronze tablets on the mausoleum of the Emperor. After listing his conquests in the West, he goes on to the East: "In the case of Armenia, I chose to hand over the kingdom to Tigranes. [...] The Parthians I compelled to restore to me the spoils and standards of three Roman armies. [...] Embassies were sent to me from the kingdoms of India."<sup>1</sup> Under the aegis of the *Pax Romana*, Antioch recovered its importance as the administrative capital of the East and the knob of a trade network which, beyond Syria and Mesopotamia, reached Iran, India and even China. So the roads were wide open for the circulation of goods towards the East, India and beyond. They were equally open to the circulation of ideas, especially since Aramaic, or Syriac was the *lingua franca* of the area. The philosopher and wonder worker Apollonios of Tyana (16-97 AD) is said to have gone all the way to India to propagate Neo-Pythagorism.<sup>2</sup> Vice versa, Philo reports the coming of Hindu or Jain gymnosophists to Alexandria of Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The Greek historian Strabo tells the story of Zarmanochegas,<sup>4</sup> a Hindu monk who was a member of an Indian embassy sent to the Emperor Augustus in Rome. On the way, in Antioch, he met the Greek historian and philosopher, Nicolas of Damascus.<sup>5</sup> Then, having reached Athens, he burnt himself to death publicly in the centre of the town.<sup>6</sup> Asoka had already sent his disciple Maharakkhita to preach Buddhism to "Yona", that is, Greece. In short, in the human geography of those days, Asia mattered at least as much as the West, if not more. In his ambition to conquer the world, Alexander did not go to the West, which, for him, was an insignificant maze of barbarian tribes. He turned to Asia because, for him, there was the world. Three centuries afterwards, the situation had changed with the rise of the Roman Empire. But, for the Roman Empire itself, the East was as important as the West. If the bulk trade (wheat, oil, minerals) came from neighbouring European countries like Spain, it was the East which

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in A.H.M Jones, *A History of Rome Through the Fifth Century*, 2. *The Empire* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 14-23.

<sup>2</sup> Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonios of Tyana*, II.4-III.50.

<sup>3</sup> Philo, *Prob.* 11.

<sup>4</sup> It could be an approximate Greek rendering of *Sramana Acharya*.

<sup>5</sup> Strabo, *Geographia*, xv.1.73.

<sup>6</sup> Strabo, *Geographia*, xv.1.4.

provided luxury items, like pearls, precious stones, silk and fine linen, which yielded more added value.<sup>7</sup>

Sent from Antioch, Paul and Barnabas could have gone East as well as West. Westward, maritime routes could take travellers to Greece and Rome, the emerging powers of those days. But to the East, an important network of trade routes radiated from Antioch to the historical nations of the Orient, Babylonia, Media, Persia, and India. Moreover, in the East, the way of the two missionaries would have been already staked by the extensive network of Diaspora Jewish communities, which covered not only Syria and Mesopotamia but also Persia and probably even India. This Diaspora would have secured useful relays and provided material, moral and spiritual support to the bearers of the good news of the messianic advent.

For Paul, the way to the East was at least as widely open as the way to the West. It was probably even more appealing. However, Paul and Barnabas decided to proceed to the harbour of Seleucia and embark westward to Cyprus and Greece and eventually Rome and Spain (Rom 15:24.28). This option seems to be taken for granted by the Lives of St Paul, scholarly as well as popular. Yet, in the context of the world vision of those days, it is not as obvious as they would have it, and there lies the Antiochian paradox.

The reason for Paul's paradoxical option can be found in the very origins of his vocation. As he reports in the autobiographical outline which he gives in Gal 1-2, the Risen Lord encountered on the way to Damascus gave him the specific mandate to "preach him among the Gentiles" (1:16). This was not a general vocation call. It was a call to go to the Gentiles. This mandate was later confirmed at the Jerusalem Assembly.

When they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcision (Gal 2:7-9).

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. "Trade in the Roman Empire," in *Atlas of the Classical World*, ed. A.A.M. Van der Heyden and H.H. Scullard (London: Nelson, 1963), 127, Map 51.

The Gentile world in fact was the West, where, apart from Rome and the eastern façade of Greece, prior to 70, Judaism was unknown.<sup>8</sup> It was indeed a pagan world. Therefore, it was in answer to his specific call “to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles” (Rom 1:5) that Paul turned his back on Syria and the world of the “circumcision” and sailed westward, eventually towards Rome and even Spain, the end of the world (Rom 15:24.28). The portion assigned to Paul was the more difficult and the more adventurous one.<sup>9</sup> The Acts of the Apostles gave an ample report of this dramatic venture and how it finally turned into an unexpected success.

## II. What About the East?

The “circumcision,” on the other hand, referred to the widely spread Jewish Diaspora. It was the part of the world where a substantial Jewish presence constituted an influential part of the cultural landscape.<sup>10</sup> Geographically, this meant Egypt down to Ethiopia in the South and Syria, Babylonia, Persia, and even India in the East. The dispersion had begun with the Babylonian Exile in 587 BC. It was followed by successive migrations caused by various economic and political factors. It soon became quite numerous. In Egypt they counted one million Jews out of a total population of 7 million. Beyond Babylonia, an equal number could be found in the Parthian Empire. As King Agrippa, I could say proudly in a letter to the Roman Emperor Caligula,

Jerusalem is the mother city, not of one country, Judaea but of most of the others in virtue of the colonies sent out at the diverse times to the neighbouring lands Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria] [...] not to speak of the countries beyond the Euphrates, for, except for a small part, the whole of

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<sup>8</sup> On the extent of the Diaspora prior to 70 AD, cf. M. Stern, “Diaspora,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century 1* (Compendia rerum iudaicarum) 1/1), ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern (Assen: Van Gorcum 1974), 117-215; E. Schürer- G. Vermes: *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ 3/1* (revised by G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1986), 62-64. The disastrous consequence of the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 shattered Judaism and scattered the Jewish population all over Europe. Synagogues began then to appear in various places.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. L. Legrand, “Gal 2:9 and the Missionary Strategy of the Early Church,” in *Bible, Hermeneutics, Mission*, ed. Tord Fornberg (Uppsala: Swedish Institute for Missionary Research, 1990), 21-83; “*The Power of His Resurrection*” *St Paul and Mission* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2021), 137-150.

<sup>10</sup> The situation can be compared to the place of Christianity in South India.

Babylonia and those satrapies which encircle the fertile land they all have Jewish inhabitants.<sup>11</sup>

This numerous Jewish Diaspora was at the same time disturbing and attractive. Disturbing like any influential minority and pogroms were not rare. It was attractive because of the logical simplicity of its monotheism, the sense of justice expressed in its Torah, and the solidarity between its members. As reported by the Jewish historian Josephus about Antioch,

The Jewish race, densely interspersed among the native populations of every portion of the world, is particularly numerous in Syria. [...] Moreover, they were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies multitudes of the Greeks, and these they had in some measure incorporated with themselves.<sup>12</sup>

This is what the Assembly of Jerusalem calls the “circumcision,” the world of the Diaspora, the part of the world permeated with Jewish presence and influence. This had been attributed to the “pillars”, Peter, James and John (Gal 2:9). What they did to fulfil their mission is unknown. The New Testament Canon is silent about it. There has been no Luke to report the progress of the Gospel eastward. It does not mean that it did not happen. Apart from traditions like that of St Thomas evangelizing India, which is not deprived of solid scientific arguments,<sup>13</sup> and even if we go strictly by solid archaeological evidence, we have, for instance, the epitaph of Abercius, reporting a journey to the East undertaken towards 160, and witnessing to the spread of Christian brotherhood far and wide in the East: “I saw the plain of Syria ... I crossed over the Euphrates, and everywhere I had companions. [...] Faith everywhere led me forward and served food everywhere ...giving the mixed cup with the bread.”<sup>14</sup>

Evidently, the situation described by Abercius did not arise overnight. It was the outcome of a progressive extension of the Christian faith in the East. Summarizing the data analyzed in his book, S.H. Moffett concludes:

Before the end of the first century the Christian faith broke out across the borders of Rome into ‘Asian’ Asia. Its first roots may have been as far away

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Philo, *Legat*, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, vii 43-44.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A.M Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India, vol I From the Beginning up to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1984), 9-66.

<sup>14</sup> Greek Text and Latin translation in *Enchiridion Patristicum*, 187, 77.

as India or as near as Edessa. [...] By the end of the second century, missionary expansion had carried the church as far east as Bactria in what is now Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

And he adds: "Paul's mission to the Gentiles moved the gospel [...] west in the histories, for there was a historian, Luke, accompanying Paul. No such contemporary historian recorded the gospel's eastward march, but there is no doubt that the gospel did move east even while Paul was opening a beachhead in Europe."<sup>16</sup>

Another reason for this absence of a canonical recorded history of the growth of the Church in the East might be that it followed another type of mission dynamism. In the West, Paul's leadership was so imposing that the Christian movement was marked by his personality. In the East, it was less voluntaristic and less personalized. Addressed to the "circumcision" (Gal 2:9), Christianity in the East progressed along the lines of the Jewish Diaspora in its extent and in its methods. Israel had no "Congregation for the evangelization of the people" and no missionary organisation. Its dynamism was more a matter of individual and collective witness, and it did progress in strength and in number. The Diaspora did exercise mission dynamism. But it was not done through outgoing proselytizing. It was rather exercised through the power of attraction of its monotheistic faith, of a demanding Torah and of the witness of a solidly knit community. It was the mission model of attraction rather than that of diffusion.<sup>17</sup> So also would have spread Christian faith in the East.

### III. The Task Ahead

Paul found in Luke a disciple and a writer who gave an elaborate account of his master's drive to the West. With Paul's own letters and the Act of the Apostles, apart from the gospels, this Western spread of the Good News takes up the major part of the New Testament. It can be said that Luke has been too successful. The remarkable work of the "First Christian Historian" has resulted in a one-sided western vision of Christian origins which has obscured the parallel Eastern developments. During this time, Christian faith did spread in the East, even probably up to India. But the Christian Canon is silent about it.

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<sup>15</sup> S.H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia. Vol I Beginnings to 1500*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), xiv-xv. For Persia particularly, see Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 78-89.

<sup>16</sup> Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. L. Legrand, "The Power of His Resurrection," *St Paul and Mission*, 88-90.

The New Testament canon leaves wide open a big gap concerning what could (should?) have been the Acts of the Apostles to the East. These Acts did take place, but they were not recorded in Scripture. This raises challenging questions and opens a vast field of research in several directions.

One is *theological*. The canon of the New Testament Scriptures does not cover the entirety of the work of the Spirit in the Church and in the world. This question is connected to the relationship between Scripture and Revelation. It belongs to the field of systematic theology.

From the point of view of *history*, the task consists of building a bridge across the canonical gap left between scriptural data and the traditions recorded in apocryphal gospels and various Acts like the Acts of Thomas? For the West, we find continuity between the Acts of the Apostles, Clement of Rome, the Didache and the Apostolic Fathers. For the East, is it possible to reconstitute a bridge across the gap left between scriptural data and oriental traditions and writings? Syriac literature, in particular, has much to offer.

On the part of *biblical research*, indications are not lacking in the NT pointing to non-pauline developments. For the West, the evidence is substantial. When Paul writes to the Romans, he addresses believers whom he did not evangelize. Similarly, he recognizes that Apollo and others have contributed to the foundation of the Corinthian community (1 Cor 3:5-6). The South is evoked in the episode of the Ethiopian minister (Acts 8:26-40). For the East, an important clue is given in the list of Nations which benefit from the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost day in Acts 2:9-11. They represent the Diaspora of "devout men from every nation under heaven" (v 6). Asian nations head the list: "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia," (v.9a) come first before other directions are pointed out in vv 9b-11. To a large extent, the list enumerates the countries which did not belong to the Pauline orbit. It is a way for Luke to suggest that the work of the Spirit reaches even beyond the story he is about to tell and to evoke the role of the Jewish Diaspora of "devout men from every nation under heaven" in the diffusion of the Gospel.

Another indication is given by the presence of Peter in Antioch after the Jerusalem Assembly, according to Gal 2:11-14. Why was he there? In a hurry to analyse the conflict between the two apostles, commentators fail to consider this preliminary question. For H.D. Betz, it would have been "an occasional visit, perhaps a stopover on the way



to another place. Or it could have been a final move from Jerusalem to Antioch because of unfavourable circumstances [in Jerusalem]."<sup>18</sup> Yet, it was not an "occasional visit." The reason for Peter's presence in Antioch has been given a few verses above in the assignment of competence decided in Jerusalem. Peter has been entrusted with the gospel of circumcision (v 8). Started by Jewish Christians and comprising a substantial Jewish component, the Antiochian community has become a vibrant centre of evangelization. When "a great number (of pagans) turned to the Lord," it was seen as a sign that "the hand of the Lord was with them" (Acts 11:21). But it raised also problems of coexistence and particularly of commensality and connubiality in a community which had been culturally homogeneous. It was normal that the apostle who was responsible for the "circumcision" should come to the spot. Paul gives a one-sided report of the debate which followed. But commentators agree that he did not come out victorious. Even Barnabas did not side with the radicalism of his companion (Gal 2:13). Antioch will no longer serve as a basis for Paul's mission. There will be no epistle for the Antiochians. Under petrine leadership, Antioch became for a time the bridgehead of the Jewish Christian mission to the East before it shifted further East to Edessa and Nisibis in post-apostolic times. We need not see Peter's ministry to circumcision through Pauline lens and imagine him touring Mesopotamia and Persia. The apocryphal Acts of Peter and a solid tradition see him turning his steps westward towards another dynamic Diaspora in Rome. We can only surmise that, after having stayed some time in Antioch and having restored a sustainable *modus vivendi* between Jewish and Gentile Christians,<sup>19</sup> he left the Antiochian church to its Spirit inspired dynamism.

We encounter Peter once more in the Gospel of Matthew. It offers a promising field of research as it is a non-pauline gospel and even a petrine gospel: Peter is represented as the mouthpiece of the apostolic group and emphasis is laid on the leadership entrusted to him by the Lord (16:13-20).<sup>20</sup> It is also a Syrian gospel according to the commonly

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<sup>18</sup> H.D. Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 105.

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Culas gives a description of the "moderating influence of Peter," in *Good News amidst Crises: Antioch and the Gospel of Matthew* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 80-83.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. R.E. Brown, K.P. Donfield, and J. Reumann, *Peter in the New Testament* (London: Chapman, 1973), 75-107; Lawrence Culas, *Good News amidst Crises: Antioch and the Gospel of Matthew*, 120-126.145-150.

accepted opinion,<sup>21</sup> likely from Antioch itself.<sup>22</sup> The mission perspective of the gospel combines a firm option for the priority given “to the lost sheep of Israel” (15:24; cf 10:5) with an openness to the Nations (28:19-20). This corresponds to the Antiochian situation of a church which owes its origins to the Jewish diaspora and yet, opened itself to the Gentiles. In this way, Antioch played the role of cradle and prototype of the non-pauline Diaspora mission, moving under petrine inspiration and guidance.

In the gospel of Matthew, the episode of the Magi in 2:1-12 has a particular significance. The Magi come from the East (v 1). They represent the mysterious Orient. The image is eminently positive. In the Bible, the Orient is the noble point of the compass, the land of the rising sun. It is the land of such noble figures as Job (1:3), Agur (Prov 30:1), Lemuel (Prov 31:1). The Magi bring gold, incense and myrrh, which symbolize the fabulous wealth of the East. They symbolize universalism. But a meaningful aspect of this universalism is that it is centripetal. It moves towards a centre that plays the role of the pole of attraction. In Luke, the shepherds, after having met the Saviour, go out to “make known what they had been told concerning the child (2:17). They anticipate the centrifugal spread of the Word narrated in the Acts. In Mt, the long and arduous journey of the Magi moves towards the child (2:1-10), object of their worship (2:11). With that, their mission is accomplished. They have only to make their exit, “by another way” (2:12).

This centripetal universalism corresponds to that of the Old Testament that views the Nations coming to gather in Zion (Is 2:3-5; 60:2-20; Pss 68:33; 87). As seen above, it corresponds also to the form of mission dynamism of the Jewish Diaspora, a mission model of attraction rather than diffusion. It is this mission model that the Magi represent. This mission model of the Jewish Diaspora is likely to have been also that of the Eastern churches. If the outgoing shepherds of Luke represent the western mission drive of the Pauline churches, the

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<sup>21</sup> “Konsens ist: Matthäus stammt aus dem syrischen Raum” (U. Luz, *Das Evangelium von Matthäus (Mt 1-7)* EKK I/I, Köln/Neukirchen: Benzinger/Neukirchener Verlag, 1985, 73.

<sup>22</sup> U. Luz puts it cautiously: “To my mind, Antioch is not the worst possible hypothesis” (*Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 74). J.P. Meier is more definite: “the most viable hypothesis is that Matthew’s gospel was written at Antioch ca 80-90” (R.E. Brown and J.P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome, New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity*, London, Chapman, 1983, 27.

journey of the Magi represents the Antiochian and Eastern mission models, based on the force of attraction given by the witness of faith.

As regards the Gospel of Matthew and India, we have also the puzzling report of Eusebius concerning Pantaenus. Sent to India ca 180, he found there Christian communities who used “the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language which was brought to them by the apostle Bartholomew.”<sup>23</sup> Was it a translation, a targum of the Greek original? Or on the contrary did it represent the original text of an early source of Mt? Was “India” present day India or does it stand for Arabia as strangely supposed by a number of authors?<sup>24</sup> All these questions are debated. However, it is interesting to discover an early tradition connecting the Gospel of Matthew with the Far East.

The Gospel of John is another non-pauline gospel. An interesting feature of this Gospel is the special interest it bears on Thomas, who is several times singled out for significant interventions (11:6; 14:5; 20:24-28; 21:2).<sup>25</sup> At the end of the Gospel, he is even presented to the reader as the prototype of the successive generations of believers, of those who “have not seen yet have believed” (20:29).<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

This is the kind of question raised by an eastward, Asian approach to the Bible and to our theology. “East is East and West is West,” said Kipling. I would not pursue with him, “and never the twain shall meet.” Communion, or *koinonia*, is also part of our Christian outlook. But things do present different aspects when seen from different angles. This applies as well to the Scriptures and to our faith outlook. Asian theology and exegesis propose the use of Asian methods like the *dhvani* form of interpretation. They also invite us to take into account the Asian and Indian viewpoints to enlarge the one-sided perspective of our western partners. The field is vast and wide open.

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<sup>23</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 5.10.

<sup>24</sup> Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, 65.116-117.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Paul Palatty, *Thomas in the Fourth Gospel* (Alwaye: St. Thomas Academy for Research), 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Palatty, *Thomas in the Fourth Gospel*, 132-146.