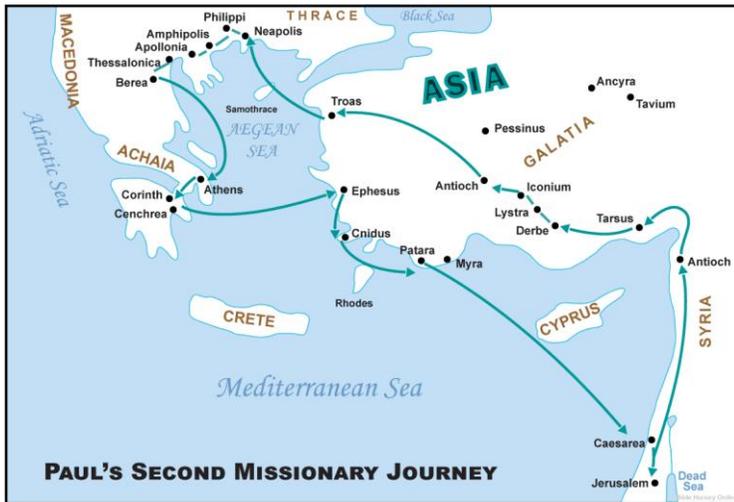
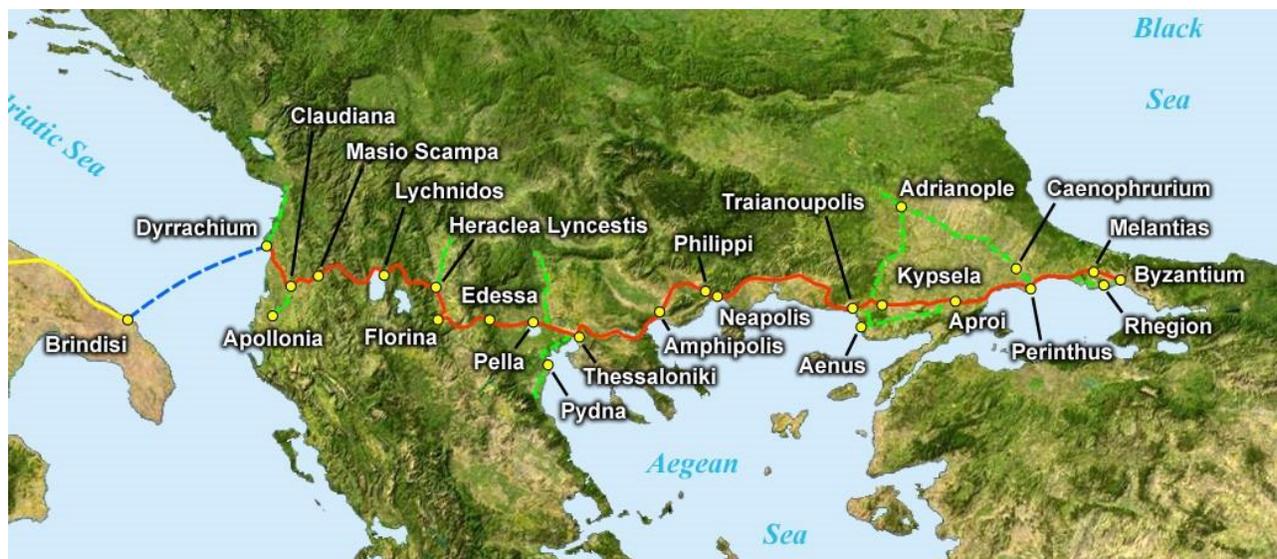


Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians

See also Acts 17:1-10. (See Acts 16-28 for context.)



- Thessalonica was a large, sophisticated, commercially, and politically important city, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. An ideal location for Paul's mission in this part of Greece.
- Population estimates of between 30,000 to 100,000 people during Paul's day.
- Thessalonica was *not* a Roman colony but had been a loyal Roman community for two centuries before Paul arrived.
- Thessalonica remained a *free city* (with tax exemptions), ruled in the Greek style and maintaining its Greek cultural heritage, and did so by its alliance and loyalty to Rome.
- It was a *prosperous* city with a good harbor and was strategically located on the Egnatian Way – the major east-west trade routes (red). This ancient superhighway was the all-weather road built by the Romans that connected Rome to all points further east and facilitated both rapid troop deployment and commercial traffic.



- The religion of Thessalonica had the usual array of Greco Roman cults, but two stand out: the emperor cult associated with the goddess *Roma* and the local cult of the *Cabiri*. Paying due respect to such cults was not only a matter of religious conviction, but an important manifestation of civic loyalty and allegiance to the Roman Empire.
- The Jewish community of Thessalonica¹ had long since learned how to negotiate its precarious way in a pagan city. Not only the authorities but the local population would be suspicious of any group that might upset the symbiosis and balance of competing powers that made life good for all. Though Paul and his few dozen converts would not seem to pose a threat in this large city, his message of an alternative king and Kingdom would be perceived by both Jews and non-Jews as upsetting the fragile stability and they would be resisted, even with violence.
- This letter is thought to be Paul's earliest letter, and quite possibly the earliest document in the New Testament. It should *not* be misunderstood as being a naive Paul who later changes his theology, perhaps in particular his eschatological hope for Christ return.²
- This letter presents an early period of Paul's own distinctive theology. Paul considered his break with Antioch and with the launching of this mission as a major turning point, something like a fresh start, marked by a new mission strategy of which he was the principal architect.
- The church was primarily non-Jewish (hence no mention of the Old Testament). Paul founded his church through his converts among "God fearers," those non-Jewish people at the fringes of synagogue life.
- We have no way of knowing the size of the church, but it probably numbered dozens rather than hundreds!
- This letter is usually dated between 49-51 CE, likely written not long after the Paul established the church, possibly by Corinth (1 Thess 3:6). Although Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy are mentioned, Paul is the *lead* author.
- This is a warm, pastoral letter of affection, encouragement, and exhortation.³

¹ Jews had sufficient numbers to support a synagogue.

² cf. 1 Thess 4:13-5:11 with later Paul writings: Rom 13:11-14; Phil 3:20; 4:5.

³ This Introduction is largely from Eugene Boring. *An Introduction to The New Testament: Literature, History, Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012.