

## QUESTION 5

# What Do We Know About Paul's Early Years of Ministry?

A significant challenge in the study of Paul's life and ministry is establishing his whereabouts, movements, and activities during the years immediately following his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. What exactly was Paul doing during this time? Did he go into relative seclusion for a period as the Lord prepared him for his future work, or did he quickly become active in sharing his new faith in local communities? Unfortunately, we have only limited historical sources that offer relevant information about Paul's early years of ministry. Aside from brief references in his writings to a few events that took place during this period, we are left with only short descriptions in Acts of his activities from the time of his conversion to his missionary journey with Barnabas, a span of roughly fifteen years. As limited as our information may be about the first several years of Paul's Christian life, it is possible to sketch the primary locations in which he served during these early years and some of the major events that transpired. Our brief survey of this evidence will examine the key passages in Acts and the Pauline Epistles and attempt to draw some basic conclusions about Paul's life and ministry in the years following his conversion.<sup>1</sup>

### References to Paul's Early Christian Years in the Book of Acts

References to Paul's activities between his conversion and later missionary journey with Barnabas may be found in three locations in Luke's

1. Readers interested in exploring the subjects discussed in this chapter in greater depth are encouraged to consult the following studies: Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Robert Jewett, *A Chronology of Paul's Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

narrative. This includes Acts 9:19b–30, what is by far the most detailed account of the early years of Paul's Christian life, as well as brief references in 11:25–30 and 12:25. Although these accounts provide valuable information regarding Paul's missionary activities, it is difficult to establish a precise chronological framework of the events they describe given that Luke offers few historical references that allow us to date specific events with certainty. As will be seen later in this chapter, the precise manner in which Luke's testimony corresponds to references in the Pauline writings is also a matter of dispute.

Following his account of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1–19a), Luke makes brief reference to some of Paul's ensuing activities in the cities of Damascus and Jerusalem (9:19b–30). He observes that “for some days” (9:19) Paul was in Damascus where “he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues” (9:20) and “confounded the Jews” (9:22). After “many days” (9:23), he then became aware of a plot to take his life and escaped the city by being lowered in a basket (9:24–25). Luke then records a journey of Paul to Jerusalem where “he attempted to join the disciples” but encountered resistance (9:26). After Barnabas assuaged the concerns of local believers who were understandably concerned about Paul's intentions, Paul is said to have boldly proclaimed Christ and to have engaged in disputes with local Hellenists (9:27–29). His time in Jerusalem would come to an end when some of the locals sought to take his life (9:29), at which point he departed from the city and returned to his hometown of Tarsus (9:30).

After turning his attention to several events that involved the apostle Peter, Luke provides a few additional references to Paul's early activities in 11:25–30. He records that Barnabas, who at this time was a prominent figure in the church of Antioch, personally traveled to Tarsus to invite Paul to serve with him in Antioch. Paul agreed, and the two served together “for a whole year” (11:26). In addition to Paul's ministry to those in Antioch, Luke reveals that he and Barnabas were part of a delegation sent to Jerusalem to care for impoverished believers who were suffering from a severe famine (11:27–30). Luke situates this journey in the “days of Claudius” (11:28), a reference of limited insight given that the reign of Claudius spanned nearly fourteen years. Finally, Luke refers to the completion of this mission in 12:25, noting that John Mark relocated to Antioch at this time from Jerusalem, presumably to work alongside Paul and Barnabas.

### References to Paul's Early Christian Years in the Pauline Epistles

References in Paul's writings to the early years of his Christian life are few in number and appear only in contexts in which Paul sensed a need to defend his apostolic calling and authority. We have nothing that resembles an autobiographical account, only brief allusions to his early years of ministry that are designed to emphasize the fact that he was commissioned directly by Christ to serve as an apostle and that his authority was not conferred upon him by

other Christian leaders. There are two passages of particular relevance to our study of Paul's early years: Galatians 1:11–2:14 and 2 Corinthians 11:32–33.

The Galatians passage is of unique importance as Paul provides something of a timeline of several of the events that took place in the years following his conversion. In seeking to defend his apostolic authority from his Jewish opponents, Paul briefly refers to some of his early travels and activities. On the one hand, his account is designed to separate himself from the other apostles. He does so by demonstrating that his interaction with them was sporadic, limited, and that he related to them as equals, not as one of their disciples or assistants. On the other hand, he sought to clarify that he was not a maverick apostle whose teaching was inconsistent from that of the Twelve. In other words, Paul sought to establish that his apostolic authority derived from Christ alone but that he proclaimed the same gospel message as that of his fellow apostles. For the sake of brevity, we may briefly sketch the key events described by Paul in this passage as follows:

- A journey to “Arabia” and a return to Damascus in the period shortly after his conversion (1:17).
- A journey to Jerusalem “after three years” in which he visited Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, over a period of fifteen days (1:18–19).
- Ministry in “the regions of Syria and Cilicia” over an unspecified period of time (1:21).
- A subsequent journey to Jerusalem that took place “after fourteen years” in which he was joined by Barnabas and Titus (2:1). This journey resulted in a favorable reception among the apostles (2:9) who encouraged them to “remember the poor” (2:10).
- An occasion in Antioch in which he confronted Peter over his treatment of Gentile believers (2:11–14).

Several difficult questions relate to the details in this passage. What was he doing in “Arabia” and where was this location? How are the references to the spans of three years and fourteen years to be understood? Just how many trips did Paul make to Jerusalem? Finally, does the journey to Jerusalem described in Galatians 2:1–10 correspond to a specific journey described in Acts? We will briefly explore these types of questions below. Before we do so, however, we must note one additional passage in the Pauline corpus that refers to Paul's early activities.

In 2 Corinthians 11:32–33 Paul refers to an occasion in which he was forced to flee Damascus in order to escape from King Aretas, who was, as Paul recounts, “guarding the city . . . in order to seize me” (11:32).<sup>2</sup> The ruler named

2. A recent historical novel attempts to reconstruct what may be known of Paul's ministry in Arabia. See Ben Witherington III and Jason A. Myers, *Paul of Arabia: The Hidden Years of*

Aretas is not especially well-known today, but he played a consequential role in several of the political developments of this time. Aretas IV Philopateris was a Nabataean king from around 9 BCE until his death at some point around 39 or 40 CE. Around 36 or 37 CE, he occupied Damascus and other nearby areas, a provocative act of aggression that served in large part as retaliation for Herod Antipas's divorce from his daughter Phasaelis.<sup>3</sup> It will be recalled that Antipas divorced Phasaelis in order to marry Herodias, the sister of Agrippa I and niece of Philip I (also known as Herod II), a marriage that was famously denounced by John the Baptist (see Matt. 14:1–12; Mark 6:14–29).

Paul found himself in a precarious situation in Damascus and was fortunate enough to have escaped from the city (Acts 9:23–25 and 2 Cor. 11:32–33). When Paul's account is read alongside of Luke's narrative, we find that he was the target of a number of Jews and of Aretas during his brief time in the city. The reference to the event in 2 Corinthians helpfully provides us with a chronological reference point for when his second visit Damascus must have taken place, while also indicating that Paul was well-known to the Nabataean king. Paul does not appear to have been just one of many Jews who found himself caught in a tense political situation. We find, rather, that Aretas had actually targeted Paul and sought to apprehend him. This would suggest that Paul had been in the area of Nabataea at some point and that his presence in Damascus had become known. By this time, Paul had established a reputation among the Jews and the Nabataeans for his bold proclamation of the gospel. As will be suggested below, his ministry to the Nabataeans likely took place during Paul's time in "Arabia" (Gal. 1:17).

### A Provisional Chronology of Paul's Early Travels and Ministry

Now that we have briefly surveyed the relevant passages in the New Testament that offer insight related to Paul's activities and travels during the early years of his Christian life, we may attempt to harmonize these passages and establish a basic chronological framework. While several conclusions related to the background of Paul's early Christian years cannot be made with full certainty and remain a matter of scholarly debate, we will attempt to sketch what may be known of the period of Paul's life from his conversion to his first major missionary journey with Barnabas during the late 40s.

- *Conversion of Paul (33/34 CE)*—This date assumes that Paul's conversion took place soon (i.e., within roughly a year) after Jesus's

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*the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020). For additional treatment of this period, see the resources in the preceding footnote as well as the following articles: Martin Hengel, "Paul in Arabia," *BBR* 12 (2002): 47–66; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Paul in Arabia," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 732–37.

3. Josephus provides the relevant background of this event in *Antiquities* 18.5.1–3 (Feldman, LCL 433).

resurrection when the church was still largely confined to Jerusalem and in its infancy. It is also based upon the likelihood that the death and resurrection of Jesus took place in the spring of 33 CE, a conclusion that is arguably most consistent with the New Testament evidence.

- *Initial Visit to Damascus (33/34 CE)*—The events recorded in Acts 9:19b–22 appear to have occurred shortly after Paul's conversion. During his visit, Paul passionately proclaimed the gospel in Damascus to what appears to have been a primarily Jewish audience.
- *Ministry in Arabia (33/34–36/37 CE)*—Following his conversion and early proclamation of the gospel in Damascus, Paul indicates that he spent around three years in Arabia (Gal. 1:17–18).<sup>4</sup> “Arabia” was not a specific nation or city, but a broad territory to the east of the land of Israel. During Paul's lifetime, much of this region was controlled by the Nabataean kingdom, a kingdom which ruled a significant portion of the territory located in modern Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It would seem, therefore, that Paul visited this region for a significant period of time after his conversion and that he managed to irritate the local authorities in the process. This would explain his need to escape from Damascus after Aretas had taken control of the city. Contrary to the frequent claim made in popular literature, Paul does not indicate that his time in Arabia was focused on meditation and training for future ministry as he lived in relative isolation. It would seem, rather, that he was quite active in proclaiming Christ as the risen messiah in the years immediately following his conversion.
- *Subsequent Visit to Damascus (37 CE)*—Based on the historical background discussed above, Paul appears to have returned to Damascus around the time of Aretas's excursion into the city that took place around 37 CE. Because reference is made to Paul being lowered in a basket in both Acts 9:23–25 and 2 Corinthians 11:32–33, it would appear that both passages refer to the same event. Luke therefore seems to juxtapose two separate visits to Damascus in Acts 9:19b–25, the first taking place shortly after his conversion, and the second taking place “after many days had passed” (9:23). It is suggested here that the “many days” covered a span of roughly three or four years, a period that would have included his time in Arabia.

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4. Scholars differ as to how the reference to “three years” in Galatians 1:18 should be interpreted. Should this be understood as three years from the time he returned from Arabia, or three years from his initial conversion and ministry in the city of Damascus? The most natural reading is arguably that the three years initiated with the events outlined in vv. 15–16, that is, his conversion.

- *Initial Visit to Jerusalem (37 CE)*—Following his ministry in Arabia/Nabataea and his subsequent escape from Damascus, Paul journeyed to Jerusalem where he met with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, over a span of fifteen days (Gal. 1:18–20). It is likely that this visit coincides with the visit Luke recounts in Acts 9:26–30 and which Paul alludes to in his address to the crowds in Jerusalem years later (Acts 22:17–21).
- *Ministry in Cilicia and Syria (37–48/49 CE)*—After Paul was forced to flee Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–30), he spent several years ministering in his hometown of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia (Acts 9:30; Gal. 1:21) before relocating to the province of Syria where he ministered primarily in Antioch. This is corroborated by Luke's reference to Barnabas traveling to Tarsus to recruit Paul (Acts 11:25) and their subsequent ministry together “for a whole year” in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Paul thus seems to have spend a bit more than a decade ministering primarily in Tarsus following his escape from Damascus and brief journey to Jerusalem around 37 CE.
- *Relief Offering to Jerusalem (47/48 CE)*—Paul observes that he made a subsequent trip to Jerusalem “after fourteen years” (Gal. 2:1). How these years are to be measured is a matter of dispute, but, like the reference to the “three years” in Galatians 1:18, it would appear likely that the reference point is to be understood as Paul's conversion and that roughly fourteen years transpired between this event, which we have provisionally dated to around 33 or 34 CE, and a subsequent journey to Jerusalem that would have taken place around 47 or 48 CE, a bit before he set out on his first major missionary journey with Barnabas. We may further infer that this journey to Jerusalem took place at some point during the year in which Paul was serving with Barnabas in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Many scholars argue that the journey described in Galatians 2:1–10 is best understood as a reference to the Jerusalem Council, an event described in some detail by Luke (Acts 15:1–35). This is certainly possible, though the details in Paul's account seem to better correspond to the journey described in Acts 11:27–30, the journey in which Paul and Barnabas were sent by the church in Antioch to Jerusalem to “send relief to the brothers living in Judea” (Acts 11:29). Paul's reference to the admonishment he received to “remember the poor” is certainly consistent with this interpretation, as is the encouragement he was given to preach among the Gentiles. Among other things, we might also note that the visits recorded in Galatians 2 and Acts 11 were both preceded by some type of revelation (Gal. 2:2; Acts 11:27–28). It would also seem less likely that the apostles would have felt compelled to encourage Paul to “go to the Gentiles” after the first missionary journey.

**Summary**

This chapter has analyzed passages in the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles that make reference to Paul's activities and whereabouts during the years following his conversion. The biblical accounts suggest that Paul quickly engaged in evangelistic activities after his conversion and that he had faithfully ministered in a number of locations by the time he arrived in Antioch just prior to his missionary journey with Barnabas. Neither Acts nor the Pauline Epistles provide comprehensive information about the first several years of Paul's Christian life, but they correspond well to one another and provide enough detail to construct a basic picture of Paul's activities during this time.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What are some of the challenges of reconciling Paul's accounts of his early ministry with the accounts recorded in Acts?
2. In your view, how plausible is the common assumption that Paul spent the first several years after his conversion in relative isolation as God prepared him for future ministry?
3. To what degree do you find the nature of Paul's ministry in the early years of his Christian life to be similar to that of his ministry in later years?
4. From your perspective, is Paul's journey to Jerusalem described in Galatians 2:1–10 more likely to correspond to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–35) or to the previous visit in which he delivered a relief offering collected by those in Antioch (Acts 11:27–30)?
5. How might we describe Paul's relationship to the apostles and key figures in Jerusalem in the years following his conversion?