

Problems of Pauline Chronology

Two basic aspects are involved in the issues of chronology:¹

- 1) Relative Chronology – What is the basic sequence of events? In what order did Paul write his letters? How do the letters fit in with Paul's travels including his visits to Jerusalem?
- 2) Absolute Chronology – What were the actual dates of Paul's letters? What were the actual dates of Paul's visits?

Paul's visits to Jerusalem illustrate the problems in relative chronology that we encounter when we try to correlate Paul's letters with Luke's description in Acts.

Paul's most important, autobiographical narrative, at least for chronological purposes, is found in Gal 1:13-2:14. From this passage we see:

- 1) Paul was a persecutor of the church (Gal 1:13).
- 2) He experienced a call/conversion experience (Gal 1: 15-16).
- 3) Next he spent 3 years in Arabia and Damascus. (Gal 1:17)
- 4) Paul went to Jerusalem to visit Peter (Gal 1:18- the verb for "to visit" is frequently used with the connotation "to get to know" or to become acquainted." ἱστορέω is so used in Josephus, *Antiquities* 1, 11, 4; *BJ* 6, 1, 8 and often in Clement, *Homilies*. The aorist active infinitive is used in Gal 1:18. This was his first visit to Jerusalem after his call/conversion (Gal 1:17).
- 5) Then he went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Gal 1:21).
- 6) 14 years later Paul made a second trip to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus (Gal 2:1). The visit discussed the issue of circumcision of Gentile converts – Paul's gospel to the Gentiles (Gal 2:2-10).
- 7) Disagreement at Antioch (Gal 2:11-14).

One problematic issue even in Paul's account is whether he means that the 14 years were from the time of his conversion or 14 years after the 3 years in Arabia and Damascus.

Or we might try to order the letters on the basis of the offering for the poor in Jerusalem and his delivering of the offering:

- 1) Agreement to make the collection (Gal 2:10) if that is what is meant by Paul's statement.
- 2) Instructions to Corinthians to set money aside for the collection (1 Cor 16:1-4).
- 3) Exhortation to the Corinthians to complete the task of getting the money ready (2 Cor 8-9).
- 4) Paul's preparations to deliver the money to Jerusalem (Rom 15:25-8).

¹ For a full discussion of these issues, see, among others, David G. Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul* (2nd ed.: New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 32-43 and John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (rev. ed., Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 43-73.

Acts mentions 5 visits to Jerusalem:

- 1) Soon after his conversion (Acts 9:26-30).
- 2) To deliver relief aid from Antioch to Jerusalem (Acts 11:29-30; 12:25).
- 3) Meeting to discuss the extent to which it is necessary for Gentile converts to obey Jewish law (Acts 15:1-29).
- 4) A visit to greet the church in Jerusalem (Acts 18:22).
- 5) Final visit to Jerusalem bringing alms (Acts 24:17) followed by arrest and transport under guard to Rome (Acts 21:15ff).

John Knox's Solution:

A three-visit framework:

The reasons given by Paul for the visits to Jerusalem are also found in Acts:

Acquaintance - Gal 1:18; Acts 9:26-7

Conference - Gal 2:1-10; Acts 15:1-29

Offering: Rom 15:25-28; Acts 11:29-30; 24:17

Knox says that Luke changed the chronology of the 3 visits.

Acquaintance visit Gal 1:18 and Acts 9:26-7

Conference Gal 2:1-10 - Time of the visit = Acts 18:22.

Description is in Acts 15: 1-29.

Offering Rom 15:25-28 - Time = Acts 21:17ff

Description is in Acts 11:29-30.

Absolute chronology:

Process of trying to correlate the sequence of Paul's visits and letters with external evidence that provides dates. This is more difficult than determining the order of events and composition of letters.

Three most important bits of evidence include:

A) Paul's escape from Damascus (2 Cor 11:32-33).

Paul states that the governor or etharch under King Aretas was guarding Damascus.

Therefore, the dates of the reign of the Nabatean King Aretas IV are important. Aretas IV ruled over the Nabateans from 9 B.C.E. until his death in 38-40 C.E. The date when the Nabateans acquired control over Damascus is important. A probable date is 37 C.E.

Paul's escape from Damascus was probably between 37-39 C.E.

B. Edict of Claudius (Acts 18:2)

- 1) Compelled the Jews to leave Rome giving reason why Priscilla and Aquila came to Corinth.
- 2) Paul arrived in Corinth shortly after 49-50 C.E.
- 3) But there is some evidence that 49 C.E. is the wrong date. Dio Cassius says that the edict was in 41 C.E.
- 4) This affects the dating of 1 Thessalonians because the letter was written from Corinth.
- 5) Did Paul come to Corinth in the early 40s? Most scholars date 1 Thess to around 50-51 C.E., but maybe it was written earlier if Paul came to Corinth earlier.

C. Proconsulship of Gallio (Acts 18:12)

Paul was in Corinth and was accused by Jews when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (the name of the Roman province in which Corinth was located). Inscriptional fragments found at Delphi mention Gallio as proconsul in 50-1 or 51-52 C.E. These dates fit well with the traditional dating of Edict of Claudius (49 C.E.). Also, this scenario fits with Paul's eighteen-month stay in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18).