

Pauline Chronology: The Life and Missionary Work of St. Paul of Tarsus

The Traditional (but *Inaccurate*) Division of Paul's Travels:

People usually talk about “Paul’s Three Missionary Journeys” followed by “Paul’s Voyage to Rome”:

- 1) **Acts 13 – 14** - A journey through Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Pisidia (today’s South-Central Turkey).
- 2) **Acts 15:39 – 18:22** - A journey through Macedonia and Achaia (modern Greece) and Asia Minor (Western Turkey).
- 3) **Acts 18:23 – 21:16** - Another Journey through Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia, ending in Jerusalem.
- R) **Acts 22 – 28** - After being arrested in Jerusalem and imprisoned in Caesarea, Paul is taken by ship to Rome.

Problems with this schema:

- *Paul is not in charge* during the *first* journey; rather, **Barnabas** is the leader of the mission and Paul is his assistant (see Acts 9:27; 11:25-30; 13:1-3; **14:12**).
- After Paul and Barnabas separate, *Paul never travels or works alone*, but always has a growing number of **assistants** (esp. Timothy; see **Acts 15:39-40; 16:1-3**; and the beginnings of most of Paul’s letters).
- The so-called second & third “journeys” are *not circle-trips leaving and returning to Antioch* (see Acts 18:18-23).
 - Rather, Paul makes a *definite break* with Barnabas and the Church at Antioch (see **Gal 2:11-14**; Acts 15:39-40).
 - He spends several years preaching & founding churches in Macedonia & Achaia, esp. in the city of **Corinth**.
 - After leaving Corinth, he makes his main base of missionary operations in **Ephesus**, the capital of Asia Minor.
- If Paul ever returned to **Antioch**, it was probably only for a *brief visit* (see Acts 18:22-23); but he is no longer a member of the community there, nor commissioned by them to go out and preach.

A More Accurate and Comprehensive Overview: Five Main Phases of Paul's Life

The following chronology is based on a combination of evidence from Paul’s own letters and from the Acts of the Apostles, since neither gives us a complete picture and there are some points of tension between them.

0) *Pre-Christian Phase* (ca. AD 10–35)

- A. Paul was a Jew who was born in **Tarsus**, the capital of CILICIA (Acts 9:11, 30; 11:25; 21:39), but possibly also lived and received part of his education in *Jerusalem*, “at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3).
- B. He was a *Hebrew*, born of Hebrew parents (Phil 3:5; 2 Cor 11:22); probably also a *Roman citizen* (Acts 22:25-29; 23:27).
- C. He was *bi-lingual* (Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek) and *bi-cultural* (Jewish and Hellenistic/Greek), making him an ideal “transition figure” for the spread of early Christianity from Palestine to the rest of the Roman empire.
- D. He was originally named “Saul” (Acts 7:58–13:9; 22:7; 26:14), but later (as a Christian) changed his name to “Paul” (see Acts 13:9ff and in all the Epistles).
- E. Raised as a *Pharisee*, he was very *zealous* for the Torah & Jewish Traditions (Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6-9; 26:5).
- F. He begins *persecuting* the followers of Jesus, because he considers belief in Jesus as Messiah to be incompatible with Judaism (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:5-6; 1 Cor 15:9; Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1-2; 22:3-5; 26:4-12).

1) *First Phase of Paul's New Christian Life: In the EAST* (ca. AD 35–49)

- A. Jesus “reveals” himself to Paul (traditionally called Paul’s “conversion”) while Paul is traveling on the road to **Damascus** in southern SYRIA (Gal 1:11-12, 15-16; 1 Cor 15:8-10; Acts 9:3-30; 22:6-21; 26:12-18).
- B. Paul begins preaching in Arabia, Damascus, Syria, and Cilicia, despite some opposition (Gal 1:17-24; 2 Cor 11:23-33).
- C. Barnabas takes interest in Paul, helps & protects him, introduces him to other Christians (Acts 9:26-30; 11:25-30; 12:25).
- D. Commissioned by the church of **Antioch**, in Northern SYRIA, Barnabas and Paul go on their first missionary journey to Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Phrygia (Acts 13–14); Barnabas is clearly the leader, with Paul as his assistant (see esp. Acts **14:12**, when Barnabas is called “Zeus,” the king of Greek gods, while Paul is called “Hermes,” the Greek messenger god).
- E. Barnabas and Paul participate in the “**Council of Jerusalem**” (ca. AD 49; Gal 2:1-10; Acts 15)
(Note: Many scholars think this council was slightly later, ca. AD 51.)

2) *Early Independent Missionary Phase: In MACEDONIA & ACHAIA (ca. AD 50–52)*

- A. Paul breaks with Barnabas due to the “**Incident at Antioch**” (contrast Gal 2:11-14 with Acts 15:36-41).
- B. Paul travels with Silas & Timothy through ASIA and crosses over to **MACEDONIA**, where they establish small Christian churches, esp. in **Philippi & Thessalonica**, possibly also in Beroea (Acts 16:1–17:15).
- C. After getting kicked out of one Macedonian city after another, the three missionaries go down to **ACHAIA**; Paul alone briefly visits *Athens*, but his preaching is not very successful there (Acts 17:16-34).
- D. They move on to **Corinth**, the capital of ACHAIA, where they stay for over 18 months (Acts 18:11, 18); they meet Prisca & Aquila in Corinth soon after **Emperor Claudius** had expelled Jews from Rome in AD 49 (Acts 18:2).
- E. Paul is brought to trial before the **Proconsul Gallio** (Acts 18:12-17), who was in *Achaia only in AD 51–52*; this fact is the only fixed date in the chronology of Paul’s life, from which all other dates are calculated backward or forward.
- F. From Corinth, Paul & his companions write ***1 Thess***, and probably also ***2 Thess*** (see 1 Thess 3:1-6).

3) *Mature Missionary Leadership Phase: In ASIA Minor (ca. AD 53–57)*

- A. Paul travels through Asia, then to Syria (including brief visits to Jerusalem and Antioch), and back again to **Ephesus**, the capital of ASIA (Acts 18:18–19:41).
- B. He remains in **Ephesus** for *at least 27 months*, probably longer, preaching and strengthening the churches (Acts 19:8, 10, 22); Ephesus becomes his “missionary headquarters” with more and more associates over time.
- C. Paul travels personally and sends & receives messengers and letters back and forth from Ephesus to Macedonia, Corinth, various parts of Asia Minor, and possibly other regions (1 Cor 16:5-12; 2 Cor 8-9; Phil 2:19-30; 4:10-20).
- D. He and his associates found other Christian communities in and around Asia Minor; e.g., *Epaphras* establishes a church in Colossae (Col 1:7).
- E. Paul encounters opposition from Jews and Gentiles, and is blamed for a riot caused by some silversmiths in Ephesus, since he preached against the “idolatry” of worshipping pagan gods (see Acts 19:26); he probably spends some time in prison in Ephesus.
- F. From Ephesus, Paul & his companions write ***1 Cor***, ***2 Cor***, ***Phil***, ***Phlm***, and probably ***Gal*** (see 1 Cor 15:32; 16:8; 16:19).

4) *Final Missionary Travel Phase: To the WEST (ca. AD 58–62/64)*

- A. Paul wants to go to Rome & Spain, but first to collect & deliver money for poor Christians in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4; Rom 15:22-32; Acts 19:21); he stays in **Corinth** three more months (Acts 20:3), and writes ***Rom*** from there (Rom 16).
- B. Paul and some associates deliver this collection to **Jerusalem**; soon he is arrested in the Temple (Acts 20–21).
- C. Paul is held under arrest for about two years in **Caesarea**; at his trial he appeals to Caesar and is taken to **Rome**, where he remains under house-arrest for two more years (Acts 22–28); possibly writes ***Col*** from prison in *Caesarea*.
- D. We cannot be sure what happened next, since nothing else is written in Acts: either he was tried, found guilty, and executed; or he was tried, found innocent and released, so he might have gone to preach in **Spain**, as he had planned.
- E. Early Christian tradition agrees Paul was executed during the reign of Emperor Nero; but we cannot be sure whether it was at the end of his first Roman imprisonment (AD 62), or after his return from Spain (AD 64), since his death is not recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.

X) *After Paul’s Death: His legacy continues (AD 60’s - 90’s and beyond)*

- A. Paul’s associates continue to preach, gain converts, build up Christian churches, address problems, write letters, etc.
- B. ***1 Tim***, ***2 Tim***, ***Tit***, and ***Eph*** are probably *pseudepigraphic* (i.e., letters written in Paul’s name by followers after his death).
- C. **Ephesus** and Colossae remain strong centers of Pauline-style Christianity, possibly led by Timothy and Onesimus.
- D. Someone begins collecting and editing Paul’s letters (cf. 2 Pet 3:15-16); by the late first century, about 10 letters are circulating together (not yet 1 Tim, 2 Tim, or Tit); Ephesians possibly functions as an introduction or “cover letter.”
- E. Eventually, *thirteen letters* attributed to Paul are recognized as “canonical” (i.e., accepted in the NT; the “Letter to the Hebrews” was sometimes also thought to be written by Paul, but most scholars and church leaders today agree that it is not Pauline).
- F. Other legends about Paul develop, as recorded in *non-canonical* works (e.g., “Acts of Paul”; “Acts of Paul and Thecla”).