

2. Paul in Arabia (re-write 2017)

“Thus the narratives which we live out have both an unpredictable and a partially teleological character.”
[Alastair McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 215 – 216]

From Paul’s seven letters we are able to discover *fragments* of a man’s life. That’s the best we can do. This can never be a biography in the traditional sense of that genre. Obviously, if we let Acts frame our account, we’d have much more material, but still not enough to satisfy real biographical curiosity. What makes this enterprise both challenging and intriguing is this fact: by choosing *just Paul’s own story* we stand a better chance of capturing Paul’s spirit and character, even knowing we will have more questions than answers about the details of his life. All is not lost, however, with regard to some important scraps of his life as will be uncovered in this chapter.

Finding Paul has to begin with Paul’s description of God’s *call*¹ for him to be an apostle and how the Messiah was *revealed* to him.

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. (Gal. 1:15-17)

There are no clues in this report about *when* Jesus was revealed to Paul. Placing Paul in history isn’t easy, but it also not impossible. We don’t know when he was born or when he died. Nonetheless there are some chronological clues to be followed. It means piecing together a few biblical passages, the first of which is connected to his *call*. Note the disclaimer made by Paul after he was called to proclaim Jesus among the Gentiles. The focus needs to be on his declaration that he *did not* “go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me.”

He waited three years!

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him for 15 days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. (Gal. 18-19)

There was a three year period between Paul’s *call* and his *first* visit to Cephas, i.e. Peter. In Galatians Paul refers four times to Cephas (Peter’s Aramaic name) and twice to Peter. In his memory of their meetings it seems that Paul preferred to use the Aramaic name, Cephas, the one that Jesus used for Peter.

¹ In the chapter on *Paul the Story Teller*, at other places in this book, the emphasis is on Paul’s call and not his conversion. There are many scholars (i.e. Alan Segal, 1990) who believe it was a conversion. It’s a debatable topic, to be sure. The landmark book emphasizing Paul’s call was written by Stendahl, 1976.

What is critical to solving the chronological mystery, i.e. placing Paul in history, are the two occasions when Paul and Peter were together: the first visit was three years after Paul's *call*, and the second visit (described in Galatians 2) was fourteen years later as part of the conference recognizing two mission fields: one making Peter an "apostle to the circumcised," and the other "sending me [Paul] to the Gentles." (Gal. 2:8)

There is a seventeen year period of Paul's ministry mostly lost to history. Even so, there is a little clue in the first fragment of his biography. *Paul went to Arabia!* With the eyes of a biblical detective it is actually possible to make an educated guess regarding the year when Paul went to Arabia and the year in which he made that first visit to Jerusalem—i.e. "then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem." It was probably in late 36CE or early 37CE.² when Paul met Cephas (Peter). This means that somewhere around 33CE or 34CE Paul was *called to be an apostle to the gentiles*, and by his own account, traveled to Arabia.. There's no real way to say how long he stayed in Arabia, but there is one clue from another letter that he was there long enough to get into some kind of trouble.³

Paul's call to follow Jesus might actually have happened within a year or so of the crucifixion. Was Jesus crucified around 30 A.D.? Some say that's a possible date. Was it 33 A.D.? That's been suggested as well. The actual dates are less important than knowing that Paul and Jesus were contemporaries. There's no reason to think Paul ever met or heard Jesus. Certainly if he had there would be evidence in one or more of the letters.

Based on Paul's recounting we have *intervals of time* between events. John Knox observed that the *intervals* are more crucial than the actual dates. "For the understanding of Paul it matters little, if at all, just when, in terms of calendar years, his work began or just when it ended. What matters is what happened in it — the order of events and the intervals between them."⁴ I would simply add, following the basic strategy of this account, we want to trust Paul.

Acts states that Paul encountered the Risen Jesus as he "approached Damascus" (Acts 9:3). In Galatians Paul declared that he "returned to Damascus" (Gal. 1:17) after going to Arabia. It is logical to assume that Damascus was one of the places where Paul was, "violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it." (Gal. 1:13) But why?

2.1 Why did Paul persecute the early followers of Jesus?

Among the details imbedded in Paul's story in Galatians we discover Paul's acknowledgment of having persecuted early Jesus followers. He found something wrong and even dangerous in those Jews declaring that Jesus had risen from the dead, and was

² The *Excursus* at the conclusion of this chapter explains in great detail the story behind our certainty for this approximate date for Paul's escape from Damascus.

³ D. Cambell, 2002:299 believes Paul was there for the entire three years.

⁴ Knox, 1987,67.

the expected Messiah. With a picture of Paul the Persecutor in mind we must reasonably assume he would not have proceeded with his persecution on the basis of flimsy evidence.

As mentioned already we can also presume that Damascus was the city where Paul was known to be a Pharisee. (Phil. 3:5). With these details in mind Paula Fredricksen imagined what the Jews in Damascus were thinking when early missionaries (apostles perhaps) might have come from Galilee with the message about the messiah who had been crucified and then rose from the dead. Did they have occasions to preach during Sabbath synagogue services? If so they may have been preaching to a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles, because there were God-fearing gentiles interested in Judaism. We're they even inviting others to join them in a common meal that recalled the Last Supper of Jesus?

What Fredriksen emphasized was that this particular message was dangerous, even seditious. The core of the message from these Jesus followers might have been the vision of the end of the world with the expected return of the Messiah. "...this was dangerous. It is got abroad, it could endanger the whole Jewish community."⁵ Why such news could be dangerous needs further exploration.

It is important to remember that Paul's bible was always in his head. Trained as a Pharisee he wrote in Galatians, "I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age for I was for more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors." (Gal. 1:14). Trained as rabbi meant Paul would have memorized the Bible. Teaching was by recitation. After hearing the same passage three or four times it was expected that the text would be memorized.⁶ The Bible was not a book or set of scrolls that Paul carried around with him in a knapsack, but it was always there with him—in his head.

Paul's "zeal" for the stories of his ancestors meant knowing Genesis by heart and living with a passion for preserving a Jewish identity that was threatened and hard to maintain when Jews lived beyond the borders of Judea. Even in Jerusalem itself, in the beginning of the first century there was a tense relationship between the Jewish authorities and the occupying Roman army. Clearly whatever Paul knew about those early Jesus followers troubled him. His previous concerns, though, were never mentioned in any of his letters. At the same time never denied his persecution of the community to which he would devote himself. He actually admitted it in three of his letters. (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal 1:13,23; and Phil. 3:6.)

We enter the realm of pure speculation trying to understand Paul's opposition to the news of the resurrection of Jesus. We know the problem wasn't resurrection *per se*. As a Pharisee Paul believed in the eventual resurrection of the dead, with the coming of the Messiah.⁷ The problem wasn't belief in a Messiah, but it had to be difficult to

⁵ Fredriksen, 1988, 154.

⁶ Horsley, 2013, Loc. 621.

⁷ Eisenbaum, 2009 ,p.53

comprehend how one crucified as a criminal and rebel was the expected Messiah. Commenting on Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians about the message of the cross as foolish, Richard Gordon wrote, "...it would indeed have been 'folly' (1 Cor. 1:23) as well as an anti-Roman political statement to proclaim and organize communities around a crucified political criminal as a central symbol."⁸

It's just a guess but maybe Paul was simply trying to preserve space for Jews to practice their faith without troubling the Roman authorities. Rome had already, through a decree of Augustus recognized that Jews could send a temple tax back to Jerusalem, and were permitted in some provinces to keep their Sabbath day practices. Fearing some kind of reaction from hostile Gentiles with a loyalty to Rome, may have led Paul to what he termed his "earlier life in Judaism" when he was "violently persecuting the *ekklesia* of God." (Gal. 1:13)

With regard to the kind of persecution Paul might have administered as a synagogue official—if that is what we was—it would have been a discipline called *makkot*, which was a lashing. The law allowed a maximum of 39 lashes!⁹ Paul, himself, received that punishment, by his own recollection, fives times. (2 Cor. 11:24). He never disclosed the reasons his back bore those scars, but they must certainly have been evidence of such punishment.

Paul's earlier fear of a Roman response to a Jewish rebellion wasn't something he lived to see. Starting in 66 a war against Jews broke out first in Alexandria and then spread to other cities including Damascus. It finally culminated with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.. Jews lost then lost the privilege to send their temple tax to Jerusalem. Instead, they found themselves building a Roman temple with a new tax designed just for them.

A new Roman coin was also issued following Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the capture of so many Jewish slaves. It is known as the *Judaea Capta* coin. Though there were some different issues of this coin most pictured a strong victorious Roman soldier standing by a palm tree, while on the ground slouched a naked defeated woman, representing all Judaea. Defeated nations in ancient Middle-eastern iconography were often depicted as women. The head of either the emperor Vespasian or Titus was on the other side of these particular coins.¹⁰

Jerusalem was still standing when Paul saw the early Jesus followers as a danger to Judaism. Paul's analytical mind must have given him some clear reasons to oppose this new and fervent Jewish sect. What is hard to accept is the account in Acts regarding Paul having been *sent by* Jerusalem authorities to Damascus. (Acts. 8:1-3; 9:1-2). We are on safer ground, as I have suggested to consider that Paul, already living in Damascus, may have been trying to preserve Jewish privileges that existed within a kind of tolerance

⁸ Gordon, 1997:141

⁹ Fredriksen, 2008, 155.

¹⁰ Lopez, 2005;93 (Paul, Gender and Gender Paradigms)

protecting Jews practicing their faith. Bridgett Kahl suggests that Jews actually had some kind of *insider* status not accorded other defeated tribes and territories. “In Paul’s time the Jews, like the Galatians, had by and large rather successfully gained an “insider” status and, for some of them, even upper status in the eastern part of the Roman empire.”¹¹

Why would Paul feel that this Jewish sect proclaiming Jesus as Messiah was a threat to other Jews? Was it their refusal to accept the protection of Rome as disciples of Jesus? This is a critical question to ask, because our picture of Paul, as will be explained in detail further on, leads us to see that he also strongly opposed Rome, albeit in some subversive ways in his letters. By the time Paul was writing the letter to the Galatians it is clear Paul had concluded that Jewish accommodation to Roman protection was ultimately an inconsistent and even contrary stance for a true Jew to take. Paul, in other words, changed from preserving some space in which Jews were protected by Rome to challenging it as a faithless compromise of key elements of Jewish beliefs.

Bridgett Kahl offers some clarity on the conflict inherent in Jews accepting accommodation with Rome, and it’s many gods. It was so at odds with the insistent and uncompromising monotheism of the first commandment: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:2). By minimally accepting some allegiance to Rome, Kahl maintains, Jews were accepting Rome’s sovereignty over them. She went on to explain, “This was a politically viable solution, though full of inherent contradictions and significant theological problems. The Torah of the one God who would not tolerate other gods had an effect become a favor granted by the supreme representative of idolatry, the *one other god*, Caesar.”¹²

2.2 Paul’s Call— Then Comes the Question: Did He Follow Abraham’s Journey?

There is really just one, clearly identifiable, story of Paul’s call to be an apostle to the gentiles. It’s the story in Galatians. Unlike the three accounts in Acts Paul offers few descriptive clues. It’s more a statement of fact.

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me. (1 Gal. 1:15)

What must be noted is the problem of language which translates into English Paul’s statement about being call by God. The problem is with the infinitive “to reveal.” “Reveal” is a word we might use to describe the opening of the curtains to begin a play. If that is the picture in our minds, this play begins Paul in the middle of his life. What is missing however, is the real *drama* of what happened. It was a revelation of dramatic consequences. It’s almost better to use the Greek word in our translations. Thus:

¹¹ Kahl, 2010: 211

¹² Ibid. p. 216 (Italics in original.)

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to **apocalypse** his Son to me. (1 Gal. 1:15)

Our word *apocalypse* is the Greek word for something dramatic and unexpected that can be both visual and audible. The connection to the life of Paul, sometimes overlooked with all the emphasis on Paul the *thinker*, is that Paul was more likely a Jewish *mystic*. This event may hardly have been his first, nor would it be his last, encounter with the holy. It's misleading to think that Paul had a *singular* spiritual encounter with Jesus. There are serious reasons to question the idea that Paul's *call was* somehow his first and only mystical experience with the holiness of God. In a further chapter the focus will be on Paul's mysticism and his charismatic gifts. As Ashton points out there was enough in Paul's story —including his openness to mystical experiences— that led some people to think he was crazy.¹³ (See 2 Cor 11:16) And he may have been a little out of his mind to travel to Arabia.

In the rather extensive, even exhaustive, literature about Paul, there seem to be only a few scholars who have dared—or is it cared?—to wonder about Paul's time in Arabia. There was a direction in Paul's life, and, indeed, a dramatic turn in it with his travel to Arabia. The quote of the philosopher McIntyre, at the beginning of this chapter, speaks of lives with their unpredictable events, which, nonetheless, seem to have a *teleological character*. In the Excursus at the end historical data is what matters, but those details hardly tell us anything about Paul. There's also a place for wondering about what Paul was doing in Arabia, and how it may have framed his ministry in the second half of his life. The bible in Paul's head was leading him.

It is important that my readers understand that I am offering here some proposals and ideas about Paul in Arabia that are not based on a plethora of evidence. We are not covering well-traveled ground here. Paul's journey to Arabia is one the least discussed pieces of his story in all the books on Paul I've read. Most scholars simply ignore this detail. Others are like Kirsop Lake, writing in 1919, who mentioned it, almost in passing, said of Paul's involvement in the Nabatean kingdom of Arabia, "But for the present purpose the question is not of primary importance."¹⁴

Others suggest that following Paul's call what he needed was some quiet time. "What is likely is that he earnestly desired a time of quiet recollection."¹⁵ I once heard a seminary professor make an off-hand remark on Paul in Arabia. "It's like he was off to seminary. Better to keep him silent for three years, before he gets his first parish!"

Perhaps, more insightful and helpful to our understanding of Paul's motivation to travel to Arabia is a comment by Barclay noting that what had to haunt Paul, in all the years that he was the traveling apostle, was his earlier zeal when he opposed the very faith that

¹³ Ashton, 2000, 138.

¹⁴ Lake, 1919:271

¹⁵ Diessmann, 1927:247

now claimed his life.¹⁶ In some ways, being called to follow Jesus as Messiah, placed the young man Paul in a difficult situation. Could he just go back to his Pharisaic friends and tell them of this revelation—this apocalypse? The answer is obvious; not now, probably never! Neither could he just appear at a gathering of early disciples celebrating the Lord's Supper, especially in Damascus and say "Let me join you." He had no credibility in either camp!

Rather than see Paul's journey to Arabia as some kind of escape or even retreat (i.e. Diessmann), my thesis is that Paul connects what happened to him (his *call*) with a key part of his Jewish faith. *He was going to follow in the footsteps of Abraham*. This can't be proven, but at least two of Paul's letters (Romans and Galatians) have arguments grounded in God's call to Abraham with this subsequent declaration; "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." (Gal. 3:8)¹⁷. The Abraham story clearly shaped Paul's outreach to Gentiles to be included in the family that knows Jesus as Lord.

In 1977 my wife Caroline and I were blessed to travel for 11 days in the Holy Land. One afternoon our travels took us south of Jerusalem into the desert where we headed to the city of Haran, where Abraham had his call from God to go to the land of Canaan (i.e. Judea or modern day Israel). It is recorded in Genesis (23:19, 25:9) that Sarah and then Abraham were buried in Haran. To this day the burial site of the two of them is treasured by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. At the time of our visit it had only been included in Israel as a result of the 1976 war with Israel's Muslim neighbors.

Tensions in 1977 were particularly tense between the Muslim and Jewish communities in Haran regarding some new Jewish settlements. We arrived in Haran later in the afternoon and visited a glass blowing factory. The visit was cut short around 4pm when our bus driver yelled at us to get back on the bus. The bus picked up speed quickly while our driver, said "Hold on to your seats. I'm driving us fast out of the town. It's not safe for any of us to be here after dusk."

We had been in a city with a holy gravesite preserving the memory of Abraham whose story is contested by differing ethnic and religious groups. Certainly in the time of Paul it was also a famous site. Perhaps on his way to Arabia Paul passed through Haran. Even more to the point of this story in terms of the first century world it may have been that the Nabataean kingdom claimed the territory to the north and east thus controlling the tombs of Abraham and Sarah. They may have preserved memories of Abraham and Sarah—some which might have been different than the accounts in Genesis.

Arabia was also the home of Mount Sinai where Moses stood when encountering the "thunderous" voice of God. (Exodus 19:19). There Moses received the 10 Commandments. What is relevant to our focus on Paul is the second reference he makes in the letter to the Galatians with regard to Arabia. "Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children." (Gal.

¹⁶ Barclay, 2007:13

¹⁷ See also Romans 4:1-12

4:25) Jewish scholars must shake their heads at this unique and unusual comparison of Mount Sinai with Hagar, because it appears nowhere else in Scripture.¹⁸ For now it is simply important to note the possibility that Paul saw Mount Sinai while in Arabia. Certainly while there he was thinking about what was also a most unusual call—that he was to go to the Gentile world.

In further chapters we will explore in more detail the implications of Paul's understanding of his role as Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul's vision of community uniting Jew and Gentile depended, in large part, on his unique and creative interpretation of the covenant and promises that God made to Abraham in Genesis. Romans and Galatians are the two letters where Paul's concentrated theology swirls around his reading of that narrative.

2.3 Was a sketch of Paul's face hung at the Petra Post Office?

Paul did something while in the Nabataen Kingdom that placed a warrant on him as a wanted man. We know this from his comment about fleeing Damascus in a basket because he was about to be arrested by the governor of that city.

In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.” (2 Cor. 11:32-33)

The Excursus “A date for the attempted arrest of Paul” found at the end of this chapter is an exploration into the unique politics of Arabs, Jews, and Romans preceding Paul's perilous escape. It is likely, by the way, that Paul upon reaching the ground outside the wall of Damascus, made his first visit to Jerusalem. First century politics involving Roman provinces and tensions with Parthia were in the background when Paul escaped from the clutches of the Nabataen governor. Paul, who never played a role in the larger historical events, nonetheless, had his own story to tell.

Certainly if Paul had just gone to Arabia on retreat it would be hard to find a cause for arresting him. It seems plausible that he was in Arabia for a considerable time—two or maybe three years—long enough to establish some kind of reputation. Paul may have been one of the most surprised citizens of Damascus, a few years later after his sojourn in Arabia, when the Nabataen king took control of the city in which he was living. Unlike the account in Acts my suspicion is that Paul had a little time, maybe not much, to prepare his escape.

What matters is the warrant for Paul's arrest. Why? What did Paul presumably do while in the Arabian kingdom to be declared, as maybe he was, an enemy of the state. There are some scholars like Betz who believe Paul was acting as a missionary while in Arabia.¹⁹

¹⁸ Martyns, 1997, 436-7.

¹⁹ Betz, 1979:74

There may be some truth in this matter, but there's one question that I find lacking in all the scholars I've read. Most scholars, giving some thought to the Arabia visit, seem to ignore the fact of Paul needed to work at something in order to earn a living. Where did Paul learn to work with his hands? I think it was in Arabia.

Further on there is a chapter devoted to *Paul the Artisan* in which I explore questions regarding the kind of work he did, and why, at certain times, he also accepted help having someone as his patron. For now there are a few aspects of Paul learning to work with his hands, and taking up a trade while in Arabia that make sense. First of all, it's clear he could not have continued a life as a Jewish rabbi, as a respected member of the Pharisees. As Horsley explains, "...Paul presumably would have received support in the tributary system of the Jerusalem Temple state..."²⁰ That couldn't be the case anymore.

We will never know why Paul chose to travel to Arabia upon receiving his call, but we can be certain that there were Jews there. Frericksen wondered if he contacted other followers of Jesus while he was in Arabia, but thinks he didn't based on his comment that he did not "...confer with flesh and blood" (Gal. 1:16) with regard to Jesus. She comes, to a logical conclusion regarding Paul's knowledge of the essential message about Jesus: "...Paul's sole exposure to the kerygma seems to have been through the Christians whom he had persecuted in Damascus."²¹

Given the realities of the diaspora, however, it's highly likely that there were Jews in the major cities of the Nabataen Kingdom. Some of them may have heard about Jesus and been convinced he was the messiah. We will never know. What we do know, however, is that Paul was heading to a land filled with foreigners from all over the world. The Roman historian Strabo was told by a friend and informant that Petra was a city "full of foreigners."²²

What would have Paul done while in one of the cities of the Nabataen Kingdom to get in trouble? It's hard to imagine him immediately causing trouble in this new world, because a primary concern had to be finding some way to support himself. In the chapter "Paul the Artisan," you will find an extensive discussion about what it means to learn a trade. We know Paul left behind the work of a Pharisee and all its privileges. In the second half of his life he would work on a daily basis alongside others.

Perhaps it was in Arabia, and maybe in Petra, when Paul began to see the possibility of creating a unique community of equals (Jews and non-Jews) in common fellowship. Who were the non-Jews in the Nabataen Kingdom? They could have been from China and India. Arab traders carried goods, and maybe even people from all over the world. The

²⁰ Horsely, 1991, 249.

²¹ Fredricksen, 1988, 157.

²² Bowersock, 1983, 61.

Nabataeans were speaking a semitic language with similarities to Aramaic²³ and Hebrew—languages Paul knew in addition to Greek, and probably Latin. They were the only other people in the 1st century world who practiced circumcision.²⁴ Most important of all they must have embraced Abraham and Sarah as their ancestors.

Equally important for understanding Paul in Arabia is that his first language was Greek. Paul must have traveled with Arabia with traders fluent in Greek—a language they needed in order to trade in Damascus, but also when they traveled toward the East. Peter Frankopan, in *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, reminds us that following the military achievement of Alexander the Great 300 years before the time of Paul, the Greek language was spoken “...all over Central Asia and the Indus Valley.”²⁵

Like so many in his world Paul was bilingual, meaning he was competent in two or more languages. As Kathy Ehrensperger framed it such people have “...’a distinct compound state of mind—*multicompetance*’.”²⁶ Choosing Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles certainly makes a great sense given his bilingual skills.

What did those Nabataeans see in Paul? They would have seen him as a Jew keeping a somewhat strange set of practices, but would have realized he was fluent in Aramaic and Greek. His fluency in Aramaic would have helped him learn their Arabic dialect. What they wouldn’t have expected was Paul’s passion for them to be included in the same story that shaped his life and mission.

Paul would have found Jews living in Arabia with a life-style, to which he was familiar. His work and relationships must have included many interactions with his Arab neighbors. We can discern from Paul’s letters—which wouldn’t appear for another fifteen or twenty years—how the *story* of God in Christ became for Paul far more important than particular practices associated with the Jewish way of life. Life for Jews in the diaspora created it’s own questions about how to live with your non-Jewish neighbors. It meant constantly negotiating their lives: a life which kept Jewish traditions (maybe not all of them) while at the same time maintaining relationships with non-Jews through work and daily living. We know from Paul’s letters that what to eat and with whom to share meals were challenges in Corinth and Rome, and, most likely, equally so in Petra. It’s not possible to say when Paul came to the conclusion that “all foods were clean” (Rom. 14:20), but his openness to non-kosher food could have started in Arabia.

What was it, though, in Paul’s convictions about Christ as the culmination of God’s story that could have caused him trouble from the very beginning of his ministry? The answer

²³ Hengel, 2002,49 reported that by the Nabataen traders “... by the end of the third century BC, they are reported to have corresponded in Aramaic, although they spoke an Arabic dialect.”

²⁴ Ibid. 50.

²⁵ Frankopan, 2016, 8.

²⁶ Ehrensperger, 2013, 56 [Quoting A. Pavlenko. *Emotions and Multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005:12. Italics in original]

must lie in our understanding of the demands and expectations Paul had for the way that this gospel was to be lived and shared. So much of what Paul asked of his followers was grounded in Judaism, but to faithful kosher-keeping Jews looking in from the outside it had to seem strange to see Jews and non-Jews breaking bread together. It had to be disturbing to see the social differences between slave and free disregarded in their times of worship and fellowship. We have already noticed the leadership of women may have been extremely disconcerting to Roman men, but it's clear that women played a key role in the missionary work of the early church.²⁷

Paul probably didn't get in trouble in Arabia, however, for mixing with the wrong people or letting women share in leadership. More likely there was something Paul was condemning, perhaps in a more public way about the ideas and beliefs others held that he found reprehensible. Perhaps it was his presumably unwavering commitment to what he believed which caused an enmity that would make him a marked man with a warrant for his arrest.

Many of us live in a world where our religious commitments are negotiated alongside other responsibilities and interests. We also live in a highly individualized world—so unlike anything Paul could ever imagine. We talk about the freedom to choose your religion. Paul's message was so different! Douglas Harink characterized Paul's understanding of faith this way:

“In other words, the apocalypse of Jesus Christ is itself imperial in its demands, omnivorous in its appetite. The gospel creates and names a world, a “kingdom,” a people, a social and political body in practice in which the reign of Christ dissolves the loyalty claims of all other kings, lords, powers, empires, social orders, economies, and nations.”²⁸

The phrase “dissolves the loyalty claims” may be the key for understanding something of the trouble Paul found for himself with various political authorities through his apostolic ministry. Communities drawn together around Christ could be generous, loving, forgiving, and celebratory inside their common life. They were commended by Paul to practice the same in their daily life. “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all...” Gal. 6:10) Their ultimate loyalty, though, was always to Christ crucified, and no other lord or master. Further on it will be demonstrated that calling Jesus by the Greek name for Lord (i.e. Kurios) carried many political overtones.

No evidence in any documents from the first century can inform us with complete certainty why that governor in Damascus, connected to the Nabataen king, wanted to arrest Paul. In his preaching or teaching, however, Paul must have asked for a loyalty to Christ that preceded and most likely precluded other loyalties valued in the Arab world where his ministry began. It certainly wouldn't be the last time some authority tried to lock Paul up.

²⁷ Schussler-Fiorenza, 1994, 167.

²⁸ Harink, 2003,89.

Much of this account of Paul in Arabia has been about unanswerable questions. At the same time this chapter has started us to seek our picture of Paul by relying on what he wrote. We would never know about Paul even going to Arabia, if Acts was our only source for his story. The story of escape from Damascus in a basket is there in Acts. The reason given there blames the Jews who were trying to kill Paul. (Acts 9:23-25) Jews seeking to have Paul arrested is a continual theme in Acts, but it cannot be confirmed within Paul's letters. It's so much better to take Paul's words as the more credible account.

The few details from Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians (11:32) are sufficient to place Paul in history. He was in Damascus. The Nabateans controlled the city, if only for a brief time, and it was during the time of King Aretas IV. Once we consider the background of 1st century politics involving the Arab Kingdom, Judea, and Damascus we can discover a date from which it's possible to say when Paul made his first and second visits to Jerusalem. Even more interesting is how this one date (in late 36 or early 37 C.E.) places Paul's *call* within a year or two of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Excursus 1: A Date for the Attempted Arrest of Paul

If we put a map of the Middle East in front of Paul today, he would most likely ask us "What's a map?". Maps as we know them did not exist in his world. We would find it hard to comprehend living in Paul's one-dimensional, or "odological", world, but that is what prevailed in antiquity.²⁹ Distances between places and towns were measured in some instances with regard to what a Roman army could converse in a day.³⁰ Sometimes the Romans placed mile markers along significant routes. Mostly distances and travel itself were thought of "...in terms of sequences or itineraries, like beads on a string."³¹ The kind of mental map that Paul must have had also seemed to go in one direction on that day he left Arabia to go back to Damascus. From that point on Paul's map had an "...underlying itinerary or sequence that runs from east to west."³² Eventually he wanted to travel to the Western edge of the earth—to Spain. (Rom. 15:28).

Our map of the Middle East would seem strange to Paul for another reason—the boundaries marking off national states from one another would make little sense to him. The countries encompassing parts of the desert Paul knew as Arabia include Saudia Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and Israel. Arabia, though, wasn't a nation state in any sense of the term in Paul's world. Upon reaching Arabia Paul would have been told he was inside the Nabataean Kingdom whose

²⁹ Mattern, 1999, 39.

³⁰ Ibid, 29

³¹ Campbell, 2014, 275.

³² Ibid

boundaries were sand. More likely the *absence* of any Roman military presence is what would have told him that he was in a different part of the world.³³

There is date, discovered through this inquiry, provides a few clues for a Pauline chronology regarding his call and his first and second visits to Jerusalem. As noted previously the most important detail is found in 2 Corinthians 1:32-33. Paul reminded the Corinthians that he had once escaped from Damascus when he was lowered over a wall that surrounded the city. In that passage he mentioned the name “King Aretas,” which is the detail that leads to a date for Paul.

Some background about the Nabataean’s will be helpful. Our knowledge of the history of the Nabataeans does not go back very far because they left few written documents. Their legacy, however, continues with the survival of parts of their magnificent cities carved out of stone. They are a lasting testimony to their artistic creativity and prosperity.

Written records, from other sources, of their story in history date from the mid-third century prior to the birth of Jesus. We have different pictures of them. One is that they “...were an uncommonly energetic and successful nomadic people.”³⁴ Another description was that they were a “sedentary people...given to the acquisition of possessions.”³⁵ Their economy was based in trade which led to their dominance and control over Western sections of the Silk Road—never a single road or route, by the way. At two points in our story their power over this key trade route extended up to its Western terminus which was Damascus. A portion of this road bore the ancient name “The Kings Highway” connecting Syria with the Gulf of Aqaba far to the south.

The capital of the Nabataean Kingdom was Petra. Called a “rock-bound city” it was located in the cavernous mountains southeast of the Dead Sea. It was an almost impregnable fortress-like city fortunately supplied with a constant stream of water—engineered through a series of manmade aqueducts. There have been many archeological excavations of various Nabataean cities which have “...brought to light a prosperous civilization in that territory which was at its peak by the time of Paul’s visit.”³⁶ The ancient city of Petra is the most popular tourist attraction in Jordan today.

What matters to this discussion is a brief interval when the Nabataean’s controlled Damascus for the second time in their history. Their control of this city, though, was quickly and shrewdly abandoned in the face of a Roman army returning from the East somewhere in late 36 CE or early 37 CE. The story itself involves shifting alliances with regard to Rome’s control of Judea and other provinces in East Asia, as well as the tabloid pages character of Antipas, the third son of King Herod (the Judean king at the time of the birth of Jesus).

³³ Lewis, 2016, 6.

³⁴ Bowerstock, 1983, 16.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Betz, 1979, 73.

King Herod died in 4 CE. Herod's rule was remembered for its harsh brutality and onerous taxes. He may have called himself "King of the Jews," but he never held the affection of Jews, whether in Jerusalem or Judea. Upon his death in 4 CE, there were riots throughout the land along with many voices crying out for freedom from Roman rule. His will stated that his three sons were to inherit parts of his Jewish Kingdom.

One of his step-sons didn't last too long with his portion of the inherited kingdom. Herod Archelaus was the ruler over Judea, Samaria, and Idumea, but he was so incompetent, that Emperor Augustus replaced him with a Roman governor, known to us as Pilate. Another stepson was Philip the Tetrach who ruled the Decapolis. At one point he governed territory extending from Lake Gennesaret almost to the edge of Damascus. He was its ruler from 4 CE to 34 CE.

King Herod's third son Antipas³⁷ was named tetrarch of Galilee.³⁸ It may not seem to have been a significant part of the world, but Galilee was along major trade routes extending up to Damascus. (Southern Syria in our maps today.) Roman armies were stationed in this territory as well as in the neighboring provinces of Syria, Judea, and just to the east in parts of modern day Jordan. What is important to our story is the favor Antipas carried with two emperors, including Tiberias at the time of the Nabataean takeover of Damascus.

Ex. 2.1 The Nabataean Kingdom and the Fall of Herod Antipas

King Aretas IV (8. B.C.E. to 40 C.E.)³⁹ had a long mostly peaceful and prosperous rule over his kingdom. We don't know the circumstances that first connected King Aretas to Antipas, but both Augustus and Tiberias understood politically arranged marriages could enhance Roman rule. At some point in the middle of Tiberias' rule as Emperor (14-37 CE) Antipas married Phaesalis, a daughter of King Aretas IV. The Nabataean king obviously had his own motivations in approving this alliance, as it must have had something to do with the all important trades routes so essential to the success of their kingdom.

Antipas, following somewhat in the footsteps of his father King Herod, made it a point to curry favor with whoever was emperor. It was on one of his visits to Rome that he fell in love with the wife of his half-brother. Her name was Herodias, and she was the daughter of another half-brother Aristobolus. At this point Antipas, while still in Rome, determined to divorce Phaesalis. Herodias, in turn, would be divorced from his half-brother, to marry Antipas.

³⁷ There is some confusion regarding which title and name should be used for Antipas. He is called King in one biblical account (Mark 6:14), and sometimes bears the name Herod Antipas (i.e. Josephus). For more on this matter:

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1597-antipas-herod-antipas>

³⁸ In some historical accounts he is known as Herod the Tetrarch

³⁹ Bowerstock, 1983, 55.

Word of the intentions of Antipas to divorce Phaeselis came to her while Antipas was still in Rome. To stay in Galilee would give Antipas opportunity to have her murdered. In the words of Campbell, "...she was the unfortunate party thrown over so that Antipas could marry Herodias..."⁴⁰ Several generals, supposedly connected to Aretas, helped her escape back to the safe custody of her father. From any Middle-Eastern point of view, even today, such a set of public events involving a daughter was considered outrageous and immoral—it was a matter of *honor* as well. Aretas needed revenge, but waited for the right opportunity. Bowersock says that Aretas was "enraged."⁴¹

Another source for this tabloid-like story are the gospel accounts in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. John the Baptist was horrified with this shameful set of events that should never have involved any person, but especially one claiming rule over Jews. Mark's account claims that Herod was actually afraid of John the Baptist "...knowing that he was a righteous and holy man..." (Mark 6:20). All the things that described John the Baptist (as one who defended Torah; Mark. 6:18) found their complete opposite in Antipas. The story about the dance by Herodias' daughter (Mark 6:22) may be fiction, but knowledge of the death of John the Baptist, at the hands of Antipas, most likely reached the ears of King Aretas, while was waiting for the "right moment" to revenge the wrong done to his daughter and the need to defend the honor of the Nabataean Kingdom.

Death and politics played the critical roles in this narrative. Two deaths occurred which gave Aretas his opportunity to strike against Antipas. The first death took place in 33 CE when the appointed governor of Syria (which included Damascus) died. Tiberias sent General A. Vitellius to be its governor. He chose to live in Antioch. To the East was Parthia. Rome had reason to fear that the Parthians might mount military aggression against their Roman provinces. Through 35 and 36 CE Vitellius negotiated with Artabanus, the Parthian leader, a peace settlement that included an exchange of hostages. At the end of this agreement Tiberias asked Antipas to oversee the final arrangements.

Antipas was always one to curry favor with the emperor and did so on the occasion of this important settlement, thereby upstaging Vitellius. "...Antipas, Josephus tells us, had definitively upstaged Vitellius after the latter's diplomatic triumph by reporting news of the important agreement to Tiberius in detail first (Ant. 18.104-5)."⁴² This was also the moment that King Aretas chose to take out his revenge against Antipas.

In late 36 CE the Nabataean army won a decisive victory over the forces of Antipas who received no help from Rome. It seems that Vitellius, with his army still in the East, heard about the Nabataean attack and was pleased to see the defeat and humiliation of Antipas. Tiberias died in early 37 CE. The next emperor Caligula ended up banning Antipas and his family to Gaul.

⁴⁰ Campbell, 2002, 288.

⁴¹ Bowersock, 1983, 65.

⁴² Campbell, 2002, 294.

King Aretas took control of Galilee and his army proceeded to march through part of the Decapolis all the way to Damascus, governing it maybe for six months. Hearing that Vitellius was returning with his Roman army, which would obviously want control of the territory of Damascus, King Aretas suddenly abandoned control of the city. For a brief time in late 36 or early 37 CE the Nabataeans were in control of the city to which Paul had returned from his own visit to Arabia. Most likely Paul's escape in that basket was planned and carried out by friends he had made there who also were Jesus followers.

There was no Nabataean governor in Damascus when Paul most likely returned following his time in Arabia. Soon after when the Nabataean governor came to Damascus there was no Paul living there. He had escaped, most likely, to Jerusalem, spending two weeks with Peter and James. Oh the stories they must have shared!