

## Developing a Chronology for Paul

### ***Problems with Developing a Chronology of Paul's Life***

Neither Paul's letters nor the book of Acts specifies any dates for the events that they report.

Imprecise terms with regard to time intervals are used throughout the book of Acts (e.g., "for some time" in Acts 14:28; "for a considerable time" in Acts 18:18).

The book of Acts uses approximations that frustrate scholars desirous of more precision (e.g., Acts 19:8–10 indicates that Paul stayed in Ephesus for two years and three months, but Acts 20:31 seems to round off this number to three years).

Paul is ambiguous with temporal references: in Galatians 1:18–2:1, he says that he made his first visit to Jerusalem "after three years" and his second visit "after fourteen years." But does he mean that the first visit was three years after his encounter with Christ (1:15–16) or after his return to Damascus (1:17)? And what about the second visit? Was it fourteen years after the first visit? Or fourteen years after the encounter with Christ? Or fourteen years after the return to Damascus?

### ***Promising Reference Points***

Acts 22:3 indicates that Paul was educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, whose school flourished in that city from 20 to 30 CE.

Acts 7:58 says that Paul was a “young man” at the time of Stephen’s martyrdom.

Second Corinthians 11:32 places Paul in Damascus at a time when King Aretas had some influence in that city, which would fit well with the political situation during the years 37–41 CE.

Acts 18:1–2 indicates that Paul arrived in Corinth at a time when Claudius had “recently” expelled the Jews from Rome. Roman records indicate that this occurred in 49 CE.

Acts 18:12 says that Paul was in Corinth when Gallio was the proconsul, which position he held from the summer of 51 CE to the summer of 52 CE.

Acts 24:27 indicates that Paul was a prisoner in Caesarea at the time Festus replaced Felix as the Roman governor there. Records indicate this was in 59 or 60 CE.

Paul calls himself an “old man” in his letter to Philemon (v. 9).

Of these “promising reference points,” the mention of Gallio in Acts 18:12 has turned out to be the most useful. Scholars working out a chronology for Paul typically start with his time in Corinth (51–52) and work forward and backward from there.

### ***Chronology for Paul’s Letters***

Once we have developed a reasonable chronology for Paul's life, can we tell when his letters were written or in what order? These things can be determined with varying degrees of certainty for different letters.

### *The Seven Undisputed Letters*

#### **1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Romans**

appear to have been written in that order during the 50s while Paul was engaged in what Acts presents as his second and third missionary journeys. First Thessalonians was written from Corinth toward the end of the second journey; the two Corinthian letters were written from Ephesus and Macedonia while he was on the third journey; the letter to the Romans was written from Corinth a few months later on that same trip.

**Philippians** and **Philemon** were written from prison, which suggests to many that they were written near the end of Paul's life, when he was imprisoned in Caesarea or, more likely, in Rome. Many scholars, however, think that the letters might have been written earlier, during some imprisonment not mentioned in Acts. The most popular of these alternative suggestions holds that either or both letters might have been written during that prolific third missionary journey, assuming that Paul spent some time in prison during his long tenure in Ephesus (cf. 1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:8–11). Discussion of all of these options continues, but the best time period for these two letters remains uncertain.

**Galatians** is the most difficult of the undisputed letters to date. It does not fit obviously or easily into any part of Paul's itinerary narrated in the book of Acts, and there is uncertainty as to whether the letter is addressed to a northern or southern region. Scholars who think that it is addressed to "South Galatia" tend to date it early, at the conclusion of the first missionary journey (making it the earliest of all Paul's extant letters). Those who think that it is addressed to "North Galatia" place it later, perhaps around the time of Romans.

#### *The Six Disputed Letters*

Chronology of the "disputed letters" depends on whether those letters are viewed as authentic or pseudepigraphical.

If **2 Thessalonians** is considered to be authentic, it is usually thought to have been written shortly after 1 Thessalonians (i.e., near the end of the second missionary journey).

If **Ephesians** and/or **Colossians** are considered to be authentic, they usually are grouped with Philemon and considered to come from a period close to the time when that letter was written (but the date of that letter—which imprisonment?—remains in dispute).

If **1 Timothy**, **2 Timothy**, and/or **Titus** are considered to be authentic, they often are thought to stem from the time of a "second career" that Paul is presumed to have had following his Roman imprisonment. In particular, 2 Timothy would be seen by those who

consider the letter to be authentic as coming from a time close to Paul's execution by the Roman authorities.

When any or all of these letters are considered to be pseudepigraphical, they are viewed as coming from a time after Paul's death.