

Paul's Letters and the Missionary Journeys

By

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To gain a better understanding of the unfolding of the unique gospel of the Apostle Paul, here is the *probable* order in which his letters were written, and where they were written from, with *approximate* dates. No one can be dogmatic about the *exact* order, place or date of all his letters, but through an in-depth study of the relevant historical details in the book of Acts, and the internal evidence within Paul's letters, a fairly accurate picture emerges concerning when and where Paul wrote his epistles. I would advise any student of the Scriptures to read through Paul's letters in the order below, taking into account the changes that were occurring during the transitional period encompassing 30-70 AD, largely covered by the book of Acts. ¹

| EPISTLES | PLACE | DATE A.D. |
|-----------------|--|-----------|
| 1 Thessalonians | From Corinth, during an 18 month stay, on his 2 nd Journey, after a visit to Athens (3:1-2) | c. 52 |
| 2 Thessalonians | From Corinth, towards the end of his stay, on his 2 nd Journey | c. 53 |
| Galatians | From Ephesus, during a 3-year stay (see Acts 20:31) on his 3 rd Journey (the second official visit to Jerusalem, described in Galatians 2:1-14, taking place in-between the 2 nd and 3 rd Journeys c.54 AD - <u>see below</u>) | c. 55-57 |
| 1 Corinthians | From Ephesus, near the end of his 3 year stay, on 3 rd Journey (Chp.16) | c. 57 |
| 2 Corinthians | From somewhere in Macedonia, on his way to Corinth, on his 3 rd Journey | c. 57 |

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| 1 Timothy | From Corinth on his 3 rd Journey, while Timothy was back at Ephesus (1:3-4) | c. 57 |
| Romans | From Corinth on his 3 rd Journey | c. 57 |
| Titus | From somewhere between Corinth and Nicopolis, on 3 rd Journey (Evidently, Titus was in Crete, having been sent there by Paul from Corinth - 1:5). Some suggest that this letter was written later, after Paul's release. This is possible for there isn't any specific mention of him visiting Nicopolis on his original three Journey's, although, of course, he still could have visited it earlier | c. 57-58 |

The above letters constitute Paul's earlier ministry - the following letters constitute his later ministry while he is under probable house arrest in Rome, known as the prison epistles. ²

| EPISTLES | PLACE | DATE A.D. |
|-------------|--|-------------|
| Philippians | Rome (<u>See Note 2 below</u>) | c. 61-63 |
| Colossians | Rome (<u>See Note 2 below</u>) | c. 61-63 |
| Philemon | Rome (<u>See Note 2 below</u>) | c. 61-63 |
| Ephesians | Rome (Even though this letter is known as 'Ephesians', it is a circular letter addressed to 'all the saints who are believers in Christ Jesus'). (<u>See Note 2 below</u>) | c. 61-63 |
| 2 Timothy | Rome (Some scholars believe that Paul was released after his trial before Caesar, during which time he revisited many of the churches that he had established on his previous Journey's. He may have visited Spain, which he had been planning on doing for many years. But he was eventually imprisoned again, during which time he wrote this final epistle to his beloved brother and fellow apostle, Timothy. Shortly after, according to tradition, Paul was beheaded). (<u>See Note 2 below</u>) | c. 63 or 67 |

Paul's Missionary Journey's

1st Journey - Acts 13:2 - 14:28

The First Jerusalem Council - Acts 15:1-35

2nd Journey - Acts 15:36 - 18:22

The (possible) Second Jerusalem Council followed by Peter's visit to Antioch - Galatians 2:1-14

3rd Journey - Acts 18:23 - 21:17

It is evident from the book of Acts that Paul made four official visits to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-30; 11:30, also 12:25; 15:1-30; 21:17-19), though he may have attended feasts there at other times. In three of these official, significant visits, Barnabas went with him. Paul recounts in Galatians 2 that Titus also went with them at the time when Paul's ministry was officially accepted by the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Now according to the Acts account, if the Titus in question was from Corinth, then he didn't come on the scene until the end of the 2nd Journey, while Paul was in Corinth (18:7). In that case, this Council had to be later than the Council mentioned in Acts 15. Yet on the other hand, the Council of Acts 15 and the Council of Galatians 2 appear to be identical in detail. If this is the case, then the Titus of Paul's apostolic team would have joined them much earlier, probably on the First Journey, and he is not mentioned in the book of Acts.

From the details of Galatians 1:15-2:1 and Acts 9:20-30, the following chronology of Paul emerges: After his conversion (c. 34 AD) he spends 3 years in Damascus, which also included a trip to Arabia early on, in which he probably visited Mount Sinai. Due to a plot to kill him, he escapes from Damascus and makes his first visit to Jerusalem since his conversion (c. 37 AD). He stays with Peter for 15 days, only getting to know the apostles, including Barnabas, and also James, the Lord's brother. (Galatians 1:19 is translated incorrectly in most versions. It should read "Yet I became acquainted with no one different from the apostles, except James, the brother of the Lord."). During these two weeks in Jerusalem, Paul moves freely amongst the brethren, but He doesn't visit the churches of Judea. Due to another plot to kill him, the brothers take him to Caesarea, after which he returns to his hometown of Tarsus in Cilicia, travelling through Syria on his way. He then spends many years in Tarsus until Barnabas arrives to take him to Antioch. After a few years, they embark on the First Missionary Journey (c.46 AD).

Sometime after their return, after a total period of about 17 years from his conversion (3 + 14), Paul and Barnabas, along with Titus and some other brothers, make an official visit to Jerusalem (c. 50/51 AD).³ It is at this Council that those in Jerusalem officially accept Paul's ministry amongst the nations. So this would strongly suggest that the First and Second Jerusalem Councils mentioned above are in fact one and the same Council. Yet it is still possible that there was another Council after the Second Journey.

The Secrets

Here is a summary of the New Testament truth, or the 'secrets', that Paul gradually revealed through his letters. It is evident that there are two major groupings of his letters - the earlier, transitional letters and the later 'prison' ones. Yet the development of new truth throughout his letters is highlighted below. Although the exact order of his letters is unknown, the following summary will show that, even if there needs to be minor alterations to the above order, the pattern of the development of new truth remains.

| EPISTLE | NEW TRUTH REVEALED |
|-----------------|---|
| 1 Thessalonians | The snatching away of the Body of Christ ecclesia (commonly called 'The Rapture' or 'Great Snatch'). This should more accurately be termed 'The Transformation.' |
| 2 Thessalonians | Revealing the prophetic details of the 'Day of the Lord' |
| Galatians | Justification by faith apart from works of Law, and the explanation of the revelation of his unique evangel and calling to the nations |
| 1 Corinthians | Begins to reveal hints of the heavenly destiny of the Body of Christ, including the new humanity, the spiritual, resurrection body, the secret of the resurrection (the transformation), the order of the vivification of all, universal salvation at the consummation of God's plan, and an emphasis on abundant grace |
| 2 Corinthians | Universal salvation, the Conciliation of the world, more on spiritual bodies, the Judgment-seat of Christ, and evidence of his unique revelations of Christ |
| 1 Timothy | Universal salvation |
| Romans | A treatise on the evangel of God, including Justification by faith, the Conciliation, universal justification and salvation, the new humanity and the resulting battle between the flesh and the spirit |

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|-------------|---|
| Titus | Confirmation of the new humanity and justification |
| Philippians | The ultimate subjection of All to Christ, the secret of Christ's universal headship, justification and the celestial destiny of the Body of Christ |
| Colossians | The secret Administration of grace, the secret of Christ, the maturity of the Body of Christ ecclesia, Universal Reconciliation, the new humanity and the celestial destiny of the Body ecclesia |
| Philemon | Grace |
| Ephesians | The revelation in full of the secret Administration of grace, the secret of Christ, the joint-Body ecclesia, its heavenly destiny, mission and warfare, the new humanity, the seven-fold spiritual unity, the five-fold gifts, God's eonian purpose in Christ, the ultimate subjection of ALL |
| 2 Timothy | This final letter contains valuable instructions for believers during these last days, especially for Evangelists and Teacher/Pastors who are to proclaim Paul's message. The emphasis is on the apostasy of the last days which had already begun even then |

Scripture references for the above summary of Paul's teaching can be found in the article *The Evangel of God and its Secrets*.

Endnotes:

¹ I mention the following as a way of comparison with my own work above. John A. T. Robinson in his notable work *Redating the New Testament* (SCM Press, 1976) makes a strong case for placing *all* of the NT writings as being originally written before 70 AD. He gives the following order to Paul's letters, allowing for 'a year or two out either way' (p. 84).

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|------------------|------------------|
| I Thessalonians | 50 A.D. |
| II Thessalonians | 50 or early 51 |
| I Corinthians | 55 (spring) |
| I Timothy | 55 (autumn) |
| II Corinthians | 56 (early) |
| Galatians | 56 (late) |
| Romans | 57 (early) |
| Titus | 57 (late spring) |
| Philippians | 58 (spring) |
| Philemon | 58 (summer) |
| Colossians | |
| Ephesians | |
| II Timothy | 58 (autumn) |

In relation to the above conclusions of Robinson, two things must be borne in mind:

- I. He calculates Paul's conversion from his acceptance of a 30 AD dating for Christ's death, whereas I accept the 33 AD date for Christ's death and resurrection, and;
- II. He believes that the 'prison epistles' were written from Caesarea and not Rome (see below). He also believes that the evidence is lacking for the view that Paul was released from prison in Rome and then later wrote 2 Timothy after being imprisoned again.

It is interesting to note that the Chronological Outline in the *New Bible Commentary* (21st century edition) comes very close to my own conclusions presented above. Nevertheless, overall I find Robinson's conclusions very persuasive also.

² It is worth noting that some biblical scholars hold the view that Paul wrote these 'prison epistles' while being held for trial in Caesarea (e.g. John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, pp. 71-82). Either way, whether written from Caesarea or Rome, these letters would've been penned during a 4-5 year span from c. 59-64 AD, though some believe that 2 Timothy, and possibly Titus, were written later after an 'alleged' release and re-imprisonment of Paul shortly before his execution/martyrdom.

³ There are two possible interpretations of Paul's chronology in Galatians 1:15–2:1. Some scholars count the 3 years of 1:18 as included within the 14 years of 2:1; while others view the 14 years as following on from, or in addition to, the initial 3 years, making a total of 17 years maximum. There is also a debate as to how these years are to be calculated due to the ancient Hebraic way of counting days and years inclusively. See F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Doubleday Edition 1980), pp. 242-246, 269; John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, pp. 36-37. As is evident above, I have chosen to accept the view that Paul was recording a sequence of years beginning from his conversion, i.e. "Then after 3 years I went up to Jerusalem...then after 14 years I went up again." As Robinson states in his book, referenced above, if these days are to be reckoned as inclusive, which was a common Jewish practice, then the total would be 15 years. If it's exclusive, then it's 17 years. In my chronology, I'm allowing for the full 17 years.