

Paul in Arabia

MARTIN HENGEL
TÜBINGEN UNIVERSITY

The few hints of Paul's time in Arabia (or Nabatea) are much more important than is suggested by the scant attention they typically receive in NT scholarship. Careful consideration of all factors leads to the conclusion that Paul's stay in Arabia was somewhat longer than is usually thought and resulted in successful missionary activity. However, this activity also provoked vigorous opposition on the part of synagogue authorities, as well as state authorities.

Key Words: Paul in Arabia, Nabatea, Aretas, Christian mission, synagogue

For most Romans and Greeks, the inhabitants of Arabia were, in accordance with the topic of this lecture series, indeed a "marginal society or group" on the periphery of the eastern Mediterranean, and a group that was, in addition, exotic and had acquired legendary wealth through trading in spices. For Horace, for example, the *divitiae Arabum* are proverbial:¹ "Land and sea provide Arabs and Indians on the remotest edge (of the world) with luxurious treasures."² For Paul and his fellow Jews in the eastern part of the empire, the Arabs were certainly *not* a marginal society, because here Rome was not the center or hub of the world; Jerusalem was.³ Rather, the inhabitants

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1. *Epist.* 1.7.36.

2. *Epist.* 1.6.5-7: *quid censes munera terrae/quid maris extremos Arabas ditantis et Indos/ludicra (. . .)?* For a translation, see the edition by H. Färber, *Horaz: Sämtliche Werke* (Munich: Heimeran, 1967) 151.

3. On this, see M. Hengel, "Jerusalem als jüdische und hellenistische Stadt," in *Judaica, Hellenistica et Christiana: Kleine Schriften II* (WUNT 109; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998) 115-56.

of Arabia were the nearest *neighbors*, situated, so to speak, right on their doorstep.

1. "ARABS" AND "NABATEANS"

During the early time of the emperors, the term "Arabs" designated mostly the mighty and self-assured nation of the Nabateans, which back then dominated a large area extending from Hauran to the northern Hedjaz (from the 33d to about the 27th degree of latitude), and in AD 1 shared a border with Judea that stretched from the southern Negev over the Dead Sea to the Hauran,⁴ interrupted only intermittently by cities of the Decapolis, such as Philadelphia/Amman and Gerasa/Jerash. Because of this proximity, conflicts persisted from the Maccabean period to the Jewish War. Alexander Jannaeus, Herod the Great, and Herod Antipas conducted wars against them with varying success; and in the Roman wars against the Jews, the Arab—that is, the Nabatean troops—are said to have been particularly cruel.⁵

Conversely, there were manifold, even intimate, positive political, economic, and personal connections. The following are some examples of these connections: Herod's mother, Doris, was a Nabatean. Herod's sister Salome would have liked to marry the Nabatean viceroy Syllaeus but failed to achieve her desire because he did not want to conform to the Jewish way of life.⁶ The marriage of his son Herod Antipas to a Nabatean princess resulted in a political conflict because of the tetrarch's unfaithfulness.⁷ The high priest's slave who was present at Gethsemane (named Malchus according to John 18:10) has a Nabatean name. The Archives of the Jewess Babatha and Salome Komaze, both of whom were from the Nabatean village Maoza at the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, also demonstrate the close economic ties between Jews and Nabateans. In the Bar Kochba revolt in AD 132-135, the Jewish rebels received support from the Nabateans, because the latter disagreed with the conversion of their relatively independent realm into the Roman Province Arabia by Trajan in AD 106. The new name demonstrates how clearly their territory was identified with Arabia.

4. See the contribution by R. Wenning, "Die Nabatäer—fremd und fromm: Religiöses Verhalten einer früh-arabischen Gesellschaft," in Müller and Siegert (eds.), *Antike Randgesellschaften und Randgruppen im östlichen Mittelmeerraum*, 116-36, and the references to other literature on the subject there.

5. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.68-70, 76; 3.68; 5.551, 556.

6. Josephus, *Ant.* 16.220-226, 322; 17.10, 54.

7. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 182-83.

The Nabateans first appear as a power on the historical scene in the early Diadochean period as a nomadic tribe that controlled the trade routes to the Persian Gulf and Southern Arabia. This was the source of their wealth and political influence, which spread from their politico-religious center in the Hellenistic–Early Roman period to other tribes. Already by the end of the third century BC, they are reported to have corresponded in Aramaic, although they spoke an Arab dialect. As a rule, later inscriptions are also composed in Aramaic. We learn of one Aretas, a Nabatean ruler, with the title "tyrannos of the Arabs," at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt (2 Macc 5:8); and a "king of the Arabs," with the same name as the opponent of Alexander Jannaeus, appears after 100 BC. In about 63 BC, about the same time as the Jews, the Nabateans were subjugated by the military power of Pompey. At the time of Augustus they appear in Strabo as a peace-loving, mostly settled people of high culture and extensive trade connections that extend from the Persian Gulf to Italy; their masterful irrigation systems allowed them to farm the desert, and their king resided in the magnificently expanded capital of Petra as splendidly as Herod in Jerusalem. At that time not a few Greeks and Romans lived in the Nabatean capital.

The Nabateans reached a political and cultural climax under Aretas IV (9 BC-AD 39/40), whose Hepithet *rahem 'ammeh*, "the one who loves his people," indicates a national pride ostensibly different from other eastern client kings, whose national pride is reflected in surnames such as *Philorōmaios* ("friend of Romans") or *Philhellēn* ("friend of Greeks"). Under the rule of Aretas IV not only the capital, Petra, reached its zenith but also the kingdom's second-most important city, Hegra, which was located in the northern Hedjaz about 500 km southeast of the capital.

This picture of a flourishing communal spirit can certainly stand some correction, however. As Ernst Axel Knauf notes:

Nothing would be more misleading than to imagine the Nabatean kingdom as a state functioning according to Western conceptions of the "state." The Nabateans were "a Bedouin tribe which possessed enough money to acquire some external characteristics of Hellenistic state appearance, without really changing its inner character of a leading tribe in the Arab tribal federation. . . . 'Dominion' under these circumstances was more a construct of personal loyalties than a structure enforced by administrative means of power."⁸

In contrast to other Semitic neighbors, such as the Phoenician inhabitants of the coastal plains, the Itureans in the mountains of Lebanon, or the Damascenes, the Arabs were to the Jews a rather "close"

8. E. A. Knauf, "Die Arabienreise des Apostels Paulus," in *ibid.*, 467-68.

relation, because like themselves they descended from Abraham, the "father of many nations" (Gen 17:5). According to the Genesis account, they counted as descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's oldest son by the Egyptian slave Hagar. For the sake of Isaac, the "son of promise," Sarah, Abraham's legitimate wife, demanded that Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, be driven away by Abraham, but they were then rescued miraculously by God in the desert. Gen 21:20 states laconically: "and [Ishmael] settled in the desert and became an archer." Only a few verses earlier, God concludes his command to Abraham, the reticent father, to fulfill Sarah's desire for Isaac's sake with the hopeful sentence: "I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring" (Gen 21:13).

And Ishmael did in fact, analogous to Isaac's son Jacob, produce twelve sons—that is, twelve tribes. According to Gen 25:31, Ishmael's firstborn was Nebaioth, which in the LXX according to older vocalization appears as Nabajoth. Even if no etymological and historical connection exists between Nebajoth and their own proper name *Nabtu* (with *tet* and *waw*), the LXX translators around 270 BC and Josephus in the first century AD, even more so, viewed Ishmael's oldest son as the progenitor of the Nabateans. That is why, according to Josephus, the entire territory from the Euphrates to the Red Sea is called "Nabatene." With a play on words, he adds an etymological explanation: the twelve sons of Ishmael gave "the people of the ARABS its name, because of their Arete (virtue) and the fame of Abramos" (AR and AB).⁹

Another characteristic also linked Jews and Arabs. Both practiced the custom of *circumcision*. Herodotus, who had not yet mentioned the Jews, testified that the Arabs practiced it. According to Genesis, Ishmael is circumcised by Abraham at age thirteen; Isaac, already on the eighth day after his birth.¹⁰ This allows Philo to describe Hagar and Ishmael as exemplary proselytes.¹¹

After the even more closely related Idumeans (who lived between Judea and Nabatea and who were descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother and Abraham's grandson) had corporately converted to Judaism, after their subjugation by John Hyrcanus, and proved themselves to be nationalistic-thinking Jews in the Bar-Kochba rebellion, the Jews probably expected their neighbors and relatives, the Nabateans, to convert to the true God of Zion and his law. In the depiction of the nations' eschatological pilgrimage in Isaiah 60, the Arabian tribes

9. Josephus, *Ant.* 1.220-21; cf. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 190.

10. Gen 17:23; 20:4; cf. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 191-92. Josephus particularly stresses this observation.

11. Philo, *Abr.* 247-54; Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 112 n. 445; 190-91 n. 774.

are listed paradigmatically first, as bringing all their riches to Zion. The climax at the end (v. 7) then reads: "The rams of Nebaioth [Targum: the Nabateans] are ready to serve you; they shall come up with acceptance on my altar." In LXX Isa 42:11 the "citizens of Petra" are called joyfully to honor God "from the mountaintops" (Targum: the inhabitants of the Arabian Desert).

Even if Arabia was not a marginalized territory for Paul the Jew, and the Nabateans not a marginal society, the topic "Paul in Arabia" itself is certainly a *marginal topic* in the New Testament, which has hardly been worthy of closer inspection because one supposedly lacked the ability to gain much knowledge about it or because it was not a theologically relevant topic. In reality, however, scholars have simply not thought enough about this topic. For one's "theological" understanding of the apostle, it seems merely to be a rather distracting ephemeral and insignificant *factum*. It does not belong among the fashionable New Testament topics. In actuality, however, we are dealing with a longer time in a decisive part of Paul's life immediately after his conversion—this former persecutor of Christians. After all, Paul himself mentions Arabia three times—two times directly and once indirectly.

2. PAUL'S OWN TESTIMONY

The most important testimony is found in the autobiographical account of Gal 1:15-18:

But when God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, *but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus*. Then *after three years* I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas.

That is, the journey into the realm of the Nabateans occurred as the *first undertaking* after the conversion, which took place at the same time as Paul's calling to the office of an apostle of Jesus Christ.

The second text is also found in Galatians (4:26). Here Paul proceeds from a comparison between Isaac, Abraham's legitimate son by the free woman Sarah, and Ishmael, his son by the maidservant Hagar. Paul's argument that Hagar represents the Mosaic covenant, which leads to slavery under the law, contains the following geographical reference: "*The [word] Hagar, however, refers to Mount Sinai.*" Here Paul moves the mountain of the covenant into the Nabatean empire.

The third text, 2 Cor 11:32-33, recounts a biographical episode from the earliest time of the apostle: "*At 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 his hands."

2.1. Let us begin with the *last text* because its mention of the Nabatean king's name offers a solid connection between Paul's biography and world history; it is the only time a contemporary ruler is mentioned in the Pauline Epistles. Paul was not interested in political potentates and their power schemes. Aretas IV died AD 39/40, and his long reign of almost fifty years made him the foremost Nabatean emperor. Of no other emperor do we possess so many inscriptions and coins.¹² Paul's adventurous escape from Damascus must have occurred before Aretas's death, but the date may be ascertained with even greater accuracy. Most likely, the escape concludes Paul's second stay in Damascus, as evinced in Gal 1:17, and occurred after his return from the Nabatean Arabia before his visit to Peter in Jerusalem.¹³ The Jerusalem journey, in turn, took place "three years" (that is, two to three years) after Paul's conversion, which would be about AD 33, if we consider the ancient custom of sometimes calculating the beginning of a new year as an entire year. One year more or less does not really matter here. Paul's escape from Damascus concludes the first part of the apostle's life as a Christian, a phase whose importance for his biography and his teaching cannot be estimated too highly. Unfortunately, we know only very little about this part of Paul's life, but close examination may enable us to proceed yet a little further. New Testament research demands painstaking and detailed work.

But first another remark concerning the "ethnarch of King Aretas" will be helpful. This title and the fact that no city coins with the emperor's image have survived from Damascus between AD 34 and 62 have led to the conclusion that the city was then under Nabatean rule and that the ethnarch had been the king's governor. This theory is even to this day explained by the fact that the emperor Caligula, after his inauguration on March AD 37, ceded Damascus to the Nabatean king. One version of this theory is Bowersock's assumption that Aretas took possession of the Damascus region after the death of Herod's son Philip in AD 33/34, but had to relinquish it upon learning of the Romans' impending military intervention in AD 36/37.¹⁴ However, the one is as improbable as the latter. The Romans would have never ceded the world-renowned metropolis of southern

12. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (3 vols.; rev. G. Vermes, E Millar, and M. Black; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973-87) 1.581-83.

13. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 209-13.

14. G.. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 68-69.

Syria, a city so rich in tradition and a member of the Decapolis, to a barbarian king. Nor are the gaps in minting coins convincing evidence, for the same gap is found in other Syrian cities, because coins were sometimes minted in advance, for future circulation. Nor does the title "ethnarch," which Paul used, indicate a military commander (one would, rather, expect the term στρατηγός); rather, it refers to the leader of an ethnic group. The Alexandrian Jews, for example, had such an ethnarch up to the time of Augustus. Knauf thus suspects justly that "ethnarch" refers to a kind of Nabatean general consul—one could also say a sheikh—who led the Nabatean minorities in the city, which simultaneously functioned as a trade colony. The Jews also constituted a considerable ethnic group in Damascus (according to Josephus, it numbered over ten thousand men), which, as Luke correctly reports, possessed several synagogues.¹⁵ A military commander could have also arrested Paul in the city and would not have limited himself to the guarding of the city—that is, the guarding of the city gates from the outside.

Luke also reports the apostle's dramatic escape, but he blames it on the persecution by the Jews. He speaks as little about the ethnarch of the Nabatean king as about the apostle's preceding journey to Arabia. Luke rarely shows interest in the details of Paul's early life.

It is a reasonable assumption that the ethnarch's attack is connected to Paul's earlier trip, as indicated in Galatians. After the death of Philip, his realm, which extended from the Lake of Gennesaret to the far east in Hauran and which separated most of the city district of Damascus from the Nabatean realm, was annexed by Tiberius to the Roman province of Syria. The ambitious Aretas, however, tried to gain dominion over this extensive territory, an attempt that led to a conflict in the area of the Gaulanitis, which bordered on Galilee, with Philip's brother, Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea. Antipas was defeated, whereupon he appealed to the emperor for military intervention, a request answered in AD 36/37 by Vitellius, the governor of Syria. Before actual fighting began, however, Vitellius's campaign ended abruptly with the death of Tiberius on 16 March AD 37. Paul's journey to the Nabateans must have occurred precisely during this tension-laden time; it would therefore make good sense if the ambitious and suspicious ruler eventually became alert to the unpleasant workings of this strange messianic Jew and notified his ethnarch in Damascus to capture this notorious troublemaker. In this case, not so much the Jews (as reported by Luke) as the previous troubles of his trip to Arabia would be the reason for his escape that

15. Knauf, "Die Arabienreise des Apostels Paulus," 465-71; Acts 9:2, 20.

resulted eventually, as Paul himself reports, in his two-week visit to Cephas/Peter in Jerusalem.

2.2. The *second text*, Gal 4:26, allows us to assume that Paul was well acquainted with "Arabia's geography according to salvation history"—referring to the Nabatean realm. Hartmut Gese has indicated that in Persian and Hellenistic–Early Roman times, Mount Sinai was thought to be not on the peninsula named after it, but southeast of the Gulf of Aqaba, in the Midian area (LXX: Μαδιάμ; Josephus: Μαδιανή), in the volcanic mountainous regions of the northern Hedjaz.

In relative proximity lies Hegra/Hagra (Aramaic: *hagrā*; Arabic: *el heġr*), the second-most important Nabatean city, which flourished especially under Aretas IV and which, as attested by inscriptions, possessed a large Jewish community. The Targums identify the *šur* in Genesis and Exodus always as *egra* and, in agreement with Jewish and later Arab tradition, hold that Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael settled in this area. The metropolis Petra, in contrast, was identified with Kadesh, the main Israelite base during its exile in the desert.

The rather strange formulation in Gal 4:25, "the word Hagar, however, points to Mount Sinai in Arabia," indicates that Paul knew about this Jewish tradition and therefore connected the name Hagar with the city Hegra/Hagra, located in the immediate proximity of the Sinai mountains. The equation of Hegra/Hagra and the correlative Abraham and Sinai traditional accounts may well be connected to local Jewish legends from this area, which increase the prestige of the Jewish communities in this area. Gese's well-founded assumption provides further evidence:

That Paul knew about the Jewish Hagar tradition associated with Hegra, points perhaps to his longer stay in Arabia (Gal 1:17), i.e., in the Nabatean area south of Damascus. Paul must have known that [Mount] Sinai is located near Hegra.¹⁶

2.3. Based on our findings so far, we may now turn to the *most important text*, namely Paul's journey according to Gal 1:17. One preamble: Galatians 1 and 2 contained something like the apostolic history *in nuce*, even if an abridged one, which makes the text hard to understand because it presupposes that the Galatian believers had already been informed earlier, by Paul himself, about the reported facts and had also received contrary information from the Judaizers. The oath-like affirmation (1:20) allows us to assume that Paul had been accused of lying and that his letter proceeds from polemical and

16. H. Gese, *Vom Sinai zum Zion: Alttestamentliche Beiträge zur biblischen Theologie* (BEvT 64; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1974) 49-62, here 61.

apologetic motivations. In those places where he clearly deviates from Luke's account, Paul's account should be given preference; however, this does not mean that Luke's account in Acts 9 is completely worthless, as radical historical criticism likes to assume. On the contrary, I consider the congruence of Paul and Luke (Acts 9-15) as quite astounding, if one gives due consideration to their different perspectives and the time span of about 25-30 years that lies between Acts and the letter to the Galatians. It is crucial to see that Luke did not utilize Paul's letters, which were probably unknown to him.

Allow me briefly to sketch the dramatic events that preceded the apostle's trip to Arabia. It is about AD 33. The young, ambitious pharisaic scribal student Shaul/Paul, together with like-minded zealots from the Greek-speaking synagogues, had persecuted the Jewish-Christian "Hellenists" in Jerusalem and driven them from the holy city. Upon a report concerning the activities of these fugitive Christian Jews in Damascus, he began his journey to Damascus with recommendations to the Jewish congregation there, and then encountered close to the city the Christ-vision that so profoundly altered his life and thought. In Damascus he was baptized by Ananias, joined the small local Christian congregation *in statu nascendi* and, to the astonishment of the Jews, proclaimed his newly-found convictions in the city's synagogues. Josephus provides an interesting detail concerning the Damascene Jews that is of foundational importance for our understanding of the earliest Jewish-Christian missions outside of Palestine. According to him, at the beginning of the Jewish War in AD 66, the Damascenes herded more than 10,000 Jewish men into the Gymnasium and executed them on suspicion of rebellion. They kept this mass murder from their own women because they had, with few exceptions, converted to Judaism.¹⁷ While Josephus certainly exaggerates here, his note makes nonetheless evident that the synagogue's emphasis on the word in its worship services, which was an innovation in the ancient world and possessed an almost "philosophical character," had a certain attractiveness for pagan men and women.

What Josephus tells us about Damascus may also be valid for other Syrian cities. We encounter here the phenomenon of the "God-fearing ones" or sympathizers, who were attracted by the monotheistic-ethical proclamation of the Jews. The pagans mentioned by Paul in his later letters are predominantly such God-fearing persons. They joined the new messianic end-time message of salvation because it promised them complete equality before God and in salvation. About twenty years later, Paul writes to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew

17. Josephus, *J.W.* 2.560-61; cf. 7.368; Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 82ff.

nor Gentile, neither slave nor master, neither man nor woman because you are all one in Jesus Christ" (Gal 3:28).

Already the Hellenists, who had been driven from Jerusalem, had attended to these "God-fearers." They were concerned for the eschatological gathering of God's people in the name of the Messiah Jesus, who had been crucified and elevated to Godhood, in whom the prophet's prophecies had been fulfilled. Part of this fulfillment was the nations' conversion to the one true God. This conviction must have been particularly strong in Paul, the former zealot for the law, who had received this revolutionary insight in his Christ-encounter in Damascus, that now, with the beginning of the new era, only the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus of Nazareth, rather than the fulfillment of Torah's commandments, was the true path of salvation. Paul was confronted by the phenomenon of these God-fearing pagans at his very first appearance in the Damascene synagogues, because, according to Josephus's account, they made up a fairly large part of the attending worshipers, a part containing not only women but also, even if in smaller numbers, men. The sentence in Gal 5:11, "But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?" refers not to the apostle's missionary activity in the years after his conversion but rather to the former pharisaic scribe in the Greek-speaking congregations of Jerusalem's synagogues.¹⁸

The converted former persecutor was persecuted from the beginning. His clear testimony in Gal 1:15-17 ("When God was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I may proclaim him to the pagans") does not allow us—contrary to Luke's imprecise reporting of this aspect, where the first missionary pagan initiative is ascribed to Peter in Caesarea Act 10—to grant Paul his status as missionary to the pagans only at a much later point in time. He encountered the Gentile problem already in Damascus in the form of the numerous God-fearers.

Similar reasoning applies to the basic elements of Paul's new message, the gospel, which, according to Gal 1:12, he had not received from man but from "a revelation of Jesus Christ." These basic elements must have existed *in nuce* from the very beginning and were determined by his conversion experience, in which Christ revealed himself to the former persecutor as the only foundation and mediator of salvation. In other words, the main contours of Paul's teaching are not products of years of development but they originate in new insight that revolutionized his entire life. This does not mean,

18. Compare M. Hengel (with R. Deines), "Der vorchristliche Paulus," in *Paulus und das antike Judentum* (ed. M. Hengel and U. Heckel; WUNT 58; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1991) 177-293, here 261-62, 289ff. For an English translation of my essay, see *The Pre-Christian Paul* (London: SCM / Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991).

of course, that he paid exclusive attention to the Gentiles from the very beginning. Roughly 24 years later he insists in Rom 1:16 that the gospel was first for the Jews and then for the Greeks. Yet, despite this "first for the Jews," which he upholds throughout his entire missionary work right up to Rome, he had always regarded himself—contrary to all other fellow missionaries—as an "apostle to all nations" (Rom 11:13). The seed of this self-understanding was planted in the Damascus event and emerged—in my opinion from the very first—in his *law-critiquing proclamation* that dismantled the obstacles to salvation that existed between Jews and God-fearing pagans.

One should not, of course, speak of a *law-free* preaching of the apostle, since God's righteous and holy law—summarized in the first command and in the command to love one's neighbor—remained in effect as an expression of God's demanding will over his creatures; the law revealed man in his egotistic being as a sinner who is subject to God's wrath. Any attempt to obtain salvation by way of the law through one's own works was misguided from the start and only led to self-glorification. The law's abiding value and necessity for salvation thus lay in its diagnostic ability to reveal man's deadly sickness. One should not associate Paul with the gnostic antinomianism that occurred much later; a wide gulf separates Paul and Marcion, who completely misunderstood the former. Admittedly, at this early time Paul had not yet conceptually fully developed his teaching on law and justification by faith alone or his conception of being in Christ, which takes the place of being under the law; but the basic direction had been fully present in the "miracle of Damascus."

Certainly, the newly converted preacher remained only a short time in Damascus. Also he claims that he did not consult anyone concerning the actual content of his gospel revealed to him by Christ, even though he probably had already received in Damascus basic data concerning Jesus' passion and resurrection (see 1 Cor 15: 1-8 and 11:23-25). His gospel, which according to Gal 2:2 he proclaimed to the nations and which he presented fifteen years after his calling at the apostolic council in Jerusalem to the "pillars," was, contrary to claims by others, not dependent on corroboration from a third party—nor from the small Christian congregation in Damascus and especially not from the apostles in Jerusalem (Gal 1:17). Paul could not visit Jerusalem as a former persecutor and current apostate in the eyes of his former friends; his life would have been threatened there. For this reason he only stayed, or rather almost hid himself, with Peter for two weeks during a later visit, after "three years," and he did not become acquainted with any other apostle besides James, the Lord's brother. Instead, he rather hastily departed from Damascus without great delay, εὐθέως, to Arabia, the country of the Nabateans.

3. PAUL AMONG THE NABATEANS

At this point three closely connected questions pose themselves:

1. Why did Paul depart so hurriedly from Damascus?
2. What did he do among the Nabateans?
3. Why did he go just to them?

3.1. The first question is more easily answered, with the reasonable assumption that Paul left so quickly because things were getting too hot there. While Luke, who redacted several respectable traditions concerning Paul in Damascus, conceals the Arabian journey and has Paul heading for Jerusalem after a longer stay, which ends with the escape through the city walls, he does report Paul's persecution by the Jews. It is understandable that the appearance in the Damascus synagogue of Paul, the "overturned" Pharisee, created trouble. His open profession of faith in Jesus as Messiah and son of God (Acts 9:20, 22) was contrary to what the people had expected of him. Most of the synagogue penalties that Paul received—five times according to 2 Cor 11:24—probably occurred in the self-assertive synagogues of the Syrian region from Arabia to Taurus during the fifteen years prior to the Apostolic Council. The Syrian synagogues' proximity to Eretz Israel encouraged stricter observance of the law, in contrast to the synagogues further away in Alexandria, Ephesus, or Rome. Luke says nothing about Paul's suffering abuse at the hands of these more distant synagogues.

After what I assume to be a longer stay in Nabatean Arabia,¹⁹ Paul returned to Damascus (Gal 1:17c: "I returned to Damascus") because things had calmed down and probably also because he had gained friends in the faith there. This return also renders improbable the assumption that tensions had ensued with the still-very-young congregation *in statu nascendi*. It is much more likely that Paul's efforts were not in vain. According to Acts 9:25, his "disciples"—a strange expression by Luke, who normally talks only about Jesus' disciples--helped him escape through the wall.

3.2. The second question regarding Paul's activity among the Nabateans can also be answered with reference to v. 16, immediately preceding the journey to Arabia: Paul had been called, "in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles." Thus, already in Arabia

19. On this point I have to correct my former assumption (see "Der vorchristliche Paulus," 278) that the stay was probably not very long. During a short stay Paul would probably not have clashed with King Aretas and his Ethnarch in Damascus. The conflict with the Nabatean representative in Damascus is best explained by a longer missionary activity in Nabatean Arabia. See below, §3.6.

Paul proclaimed by himself the message which he claims to have received "through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12). The common assumption—I only name the historian Eduard Meyer—that Paul "withdrew into the solitude of Arabia" in order "to gain inner clarity," misses the point,²⁰ since he could have accomplished that in the barren isolation of the city area of the Damascus oasis, which extended in the west to the crest of the Antilebanon and in the east far into the desert. Paul clearly differentiates between Damascus and Arabia and, unlike the evangelists in writing about John the Baptist and Jesus' temptation, εἰς τὴν ἔρημον, he went not "into the desert" but εἰς Ἀραβίαν. As in his later extensive missionary trips, he must have sought out the synagogues there, which probably existed in all-important Nabatean cities (especially in Petra), and perhaps he advanced as far as Hegra. That no synagogues have been proved to exist in this area—except in Gerasa, which belongs to the Decapolis—means nothing. In Syria, for example, the accidental nature of our sources and the archaeological findings allow for only a few synagogues, yet Josephus tells us that it possessed the greatest Diaspora of the Roman Empire.²¹ Moreover, the synagogues of pre-Rabbinic times were simple meeting rooms without cultic decorations. Even where Eretz Israel is concerned, their existence is hardly archaeologically ascertainable with any degree of certainty.

Besides Jews, Paul would have found quite a few Gentile sympathizers in the synagogues, a group that he probably targeted most of all; apparently they were particularly attracted to his proclamation. The earliest "pagan-Christians" are such "God-fearers" on the margin of the synagogue.²² A Nabatean Dušara worshiper on the Agora of Petra would have hardly understood Paul's Jewish-Messianic message and its concomitant scriptural evidence, which Paul considered quite important from the very beginning in his discussion with his Jewish dialogue partners. Such a one would have been rather offended by such a strange proclamation.

Paul's hasty start to his missionary work, which lacked elaborate preparations, had two reasons. First, he understood himself to be an ἀπόστολος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, "a messenger of Jesus Christ," although he knew very well that this mission was a "late birth" compared to the Jerusalem apostles (1 Cor 15:8). This task is inseparably connected to his Christ-vision and did not develop slowly and gradually. His "conversion" was also his calling. Paul did not claim after many years

20. E. Meyer, *Ursprung and Anfänge des Christentums III* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Cotta, 7923) 345; cf. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 101-32.

21. Josephus, *J.W.* 7.43; see also Philo, *Leg.* 245; cf. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 82-83, 292.

22. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 101-32.

suddenly to be an apostle of Jesus Christ but became one because he had seen the risen one, as had the other apostles.

In addition, *time was pressing*. The period of time that the crucified and risen Lord had granted Israel and the Gentiles elected in Israel was short. Paul believed this after his conversion, certainly for several decades, as seen in Rom 13:12 or Phil 4:5. In the beginnings of the early church, after the completely surprising appearances of the risen Christ and the enthusiastic experience of the eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit, the expectation of the return of the Lord, who had been exalted at God's right hand, was particularly intensive and possessed a character of apocalyptic realism. One expected that the Lord and judge would return to Jerusalem to begin his rule over his people and all the nations. It was thus urgently required to gather Israel's elect and all those whose faith in the true God marked them as "first-fruits" from among the nations. Already Jesus, whose work had ended only a few years before, had summoned to repentance tax collectors, sinners, and the lost, and had even occasionally included Gentiles and Samaritans. It was now important to continue this work on his behalf. The mission of the *Kyrios* thus brooked no delay.

A different question is the detailed development of Pauline *theology*, which we know only from the seven authentic letters, written approximately 17-27 years later, between AD 50 and 60. Here it seems to me that certain foundational insights, especially concerning his soteriology, the salvific meaning of Christ's death, the convicting and therefore diagnostic effect of the law, and justification by faith alone without the precondition of having fulfilled the law, were developed rather rapidly by Paul. Without such foundations this former zealot for the law could have never approached the God-fearing Gentiles with such self-confidence. After all, precisely these foundational elements formed the content of his gospel that he had received from no one other than Christ himself, so that he did not have to consult with anyone, least of all with the Jerusalem apostles.

3.3. The third question, why Paul chose the *Nabatean realm* rather than another location, is the most difficult one to answer. It does not seem logical that, viewed from Damascus, he turned south, while his later missionary activity was concentrated in the north and west. After all, Spain was his last destination. Why did he not immediately depart in that direction, toward the Phoenician cities Tyre and Sidon, toward Emesa and Apamea in the north, or to Palmyra in the northeast? Why did he not immediately target the provincial capital of Antioch?

Now, the first Christian mission in the beginning years of the church focused entirely on Eretz Israel. The expelled Hellenists crossed

the border first, and did so rather hesitatingly. In Luke's account this happens paradigmatically through Philip, who goes to the heretical Samaritans and the predominantly Gentile inhabitants of the former Philistia, that is, the Phoenician coastal plain. Damascus too was reached in this way and probably also the cities of the Decapolis in the eastern Jordanian territory, as well as the principal Phoenician cities, Ptolemais, Tyre, and Sidon. In these locations one may have even found occasionally members of the Jesus movement who would have known him from his activity in Galilee, for the Jewish population in these merchant cities had always been relatively large.

The fervent expectation of Christ's return, however, prevented at least geographically, extensive mission plans; a world mission was in no way envisioned at this point. Rather, one expected (as did the prophets) the return of the Diaspora and the nations' pilgrimage to Zion at the time of the Messiah's second advent. The transprovincial mission, beyond the Taurus in Asia Minor, Rome, and Greece, began only in the 40s and 50s. For this reason it may be possible that Paul chose the Nabatean realm because he believed that no missionaries of the new Messianic movement, for example those among the expelled Hellenists from Jerusalem, could have possibly worked this area before him. In Rom 15:20 he emphasizes later that he deems it important "to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man's foundation."

On the other hand, according to contemporary opinion, not only *Syria* but also *Arabia* belonged to the promised land of Abraham and to King David's greater kingdom, and therefore to the coming Messianic kingdom. According to the *Genesis Apocryphon* of Qumran, Abraham travels once around the territory promised to him: he moves from the mouth of the Nile to the north of the Mediterranean coast along the Taurus, from there to the east up to the Euphrates, then follows the river downward to the Persian Gulf and then circles Arabia to return to his point of departure. According to the description of the Davidic world kingdom by the Jewish historian Eupolemos in the second century BC, the royal progenitor of the Messiah conquers all of Syria up to Commagene in the north and to the Nabateans in the south. This conquered area comprises about the same territory as that to which early Christian missionary activity was limited in approximately its first fifteen years.²³

23. Ibid., 188-89. For further discussion of the geographical dimensions of early mission and ideas about the boundaries of restored, eschatological Israel, see M. Bockmuehl, 'Antioch and James the Just,' in *James the just and Christian Origins* (ed. B. D. Chilton and C. A. Evans; NovTSup 98; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 155-98; as well as my own study, "Ἰουδαία in the Geographical List of Acts 2:9-11 and Syria as 'Greater Judea,'" *BBR* 10 (2000) 161-80.

A further argument was the prophetic promise (such as, for example, Jer 12:14-17) to the "neighbors of Israel," who "learn the way of my people and shall swear by my name." The Nabateans, however, were the nearest neighbors to the east and the south, and not only the closest neighbors but also the closest of kin, *sons of Abraham like Israel* itself. Was not, therefore, Abraham's promise true for them, above all other nations, that through his seed, that is, through the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth, many nations were to be blessed?

We should remind ourselves one more time that Nabajoth, whom Josephus regards as the progenitor, was Ishmael's firstborn and was, just like Jacob /Israel, Abraham's grandson. The Abrahamic tradition was alive in the Nabatean realm not only among the Jews who had settled there but also in Damascus, where according to Nicolaus of Damascus (philosophical advisor to King Herod and greatest historian of the Augustan period), Abraham had once reigned as king.²⁴ Apparently, the divinely sanctioned "father of many nations" and messenger of God's promise was greatly revered in Damascene and Nabatean synagogues of Arabia, and efforts had probably been undertaken to make his authority known to the God-fearing pagan "relatives" whenever possible.

In the Nabatean realm, as in southern Syria, there existed a latent tendency to worship the highest God of the heavens. Albrecht Alt has collected the "God of the fathers" inscriptions for Nabatea and southern Syria, in which the God of a tribe was venerated as the highest deity but was not limited to local boundaries.²⁵ Among other things we find the title "Lord of the World" in Hegra for Dusares, in Palmyra for Baalshamim, the old Semitic God of the sky, in the *Genesis Apocryphon* for the God of Abraham and also in the *Enoch* fragments of Qumran, and later almost stereotypically as the most common Jewish address to God in prayer. In Hegra we encounter inscriptions such as "the God of our Lord Aretas," which is reminiscent of the Pauline formula "the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ," or about the god "who separated day from night," a formula which is echoed in the Jewish Havdala prayer. In Palmyra a great number of inscriptions even feature the invocation of an anonymous most high God, "whose name be praised forever." The one true God of Abraham was not far away from this.²⁶

In this context, should Paul, in light of "the revelation of Jesus Christ," not have thought about the new salvation-historical mean-

24. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 87.

25. A. Alt, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (3 vols.; Munich: Beck, 1953-59) 1.1-78.

26. Hengel and Schwemer, *Paulus*, 194-207.

ing of "our physical ancestor" (Rom 4:1)? Was not this Abraham, who had turned from Chaldaean polytheism to the true faith in the one God and who had left his home country according to this God's command, of great significance for all God-fearing pagans? Did not this Abraham, whom God had already proclaimed justified on the basis of his faith in God's promise even before his circumcision (Rom 4:1-12), have to become the father of all who believe, and did not all who believed in the Messianic savior, whether they were Jews, Arabs, or other "pagans" have to become his "spiritual sons"? The question concerning the true Abrahamic kinship had already been controversial in John the Baptist's sermon of repentance (Matt 3:9 = Luke 3:8) and played an important role in the proclamation of Jesus (Matt 8:11-12; Luke 13:16, 28; 16:19-30; 19:9). For Paul, this question was probably already considered among the physical descendants of Abraham in Arabia.

3.4. Another point must be added to this: According to Gen 21:4, Abraham circumcised his son Isaac on the eighth day and thus it became Jewish custom; Paul refers to this command in his own case (Phil 3:5). And, according to Gen 17:23-27, Abraham is said to have circumcised Ishmael in his thirteenth year. According to Josephus, circumcision was valid for all Arabs, for which he could already cite Herodotus as a witness. Thus the question, which later led to conflicts in Antioch, in Galatia, and also in other mission congregations, did not have to burden Paul's mission in the Nabatean cities. On the contrary, Paul could understand the fact that pagans also practiced the ritual of circumcision as indication that this ritual—as shown by Abraham's own example—lost its salvific significance when contrasted to faith and was reduced to a mere outward sign. Only the circumcision of the heart through faith in Jesus Christ was decisive. It was particularly the pattern of Abraham's late circumcision at 99 years of age and Ishmael's at thirteen years (Genesis 17) that demonstrated that the true event of salvation occurred much earlier in the justification of the patriarch on the basis of his obedience by faith (Gen 15:6), for which circumcision merely served as "a seal for righteousness by faith."

Although the Epistle to the Romans is the apostle's last great letter, written 20 years after his missionary endeavors in "Arabia," Paul does not use it to present new ideas but crucial foundational thoughts of his theology, which are ultimately rooted in the revelation of Jesus Christ at his calling, which in turn determines the content of his gospel. This Jewish scribe, well advanced in the study of scriptures, must have thought quite early about the relationship between the Abrahamic promise and sonship, Christ's salvific act, the

justification of the ungodly, and the meaning of the reception of the Torah at Sinai. It is probable that he formulated his thinking when he read the traditions where Abraham and his sons were particularly remembered and where "Sinai" stood most concretely before his mind's eye. Did he not already have to confront this question during his stay in Arabia? It seems thus particularly unlikely that he should have "proclaimed circumcision" there (Gal 5:11).²⁷

Just as the main development of early Christian Christology occurred in the stormy first years of the church's beginnings, as a result of the revolutionary first appearance of the risen Christ and the reception of the Spirit, both of which were connected to the great commission, so also the basic outlines of Pauline theology were formed relatively quickly. Paul, the first Christian scribe and teacher whom we really know, was a sharp and precise thinker, and it would be wrong to assume that in the beginning of his missionary activity he for any length of time "ran aimlessly" and "fought like a man beating the air" (1 Cor 9:26). Even his opponents did not accuse him, the "apostle of the pagans," of changing his theological views several times according to the fashion of the times (a practice favored by today's theologians). The Lord's return was near, and thus one did not have to please current trends at any cost.

3.5. To say that Paul worked as a solitary missionary in the Nabatean realm requires two other presuppositions: *first*, he was able to support himself. He was probably already back then a tentmaker, as Luke acknowledges in Acts 18:1-3. That means he did not learn this profession, as has sometimes been supposed, later in Damascus or Tarsus. His trade, which he could pursue easily since it was not dependent on a specific location, was of incalculable advantage to him as a missionary, if compared to Galilean fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James and John, who depended on the support of congregations (1 Cor 9:4-7). Also unlike them, Paul did not have to care for a family, an extremely important pre-condition for his missionary work.

Since Aramaic (with some Arabic coloring) was spoken in the Nabatean realm, and Aramaic was certainly also the predominant language in the synagogues there, one has to assume that Paul was also able to speak Aramaic well—a fact those scholars like to deny who keep the pre-Christian Paul away from Jerusalem and who want to turn him into a pure Hellenist. Paul probably learned Aramaic at the latest during his student years in Jerusalem.²⁸

27. Ibid., *Paulus*, 190-92.

28. Ibid., *Paulus*, 193-94.

3.6. We can only estimate the length of Paul's missionary activity in "Arabia." If it had been a short, insignificant stay, he would not have needed to mention it. In that case, his conflict with Aretas's representative would have been difficult to understand as well. Presumably he was already suspect to him when he returned from the Nabatean territory. That he did in fact stay in Arabia for a longer period of time is also indicated by his return to Damascus: at the least he stayed in Arabia until the commotion (which his about-face and the consequent indignation of his opponents had caused) had subsided.

Moreover, missionary activity takes time. Paul could easily have worked one or even two years in this manner. The three years between his conversion and the visit to Jerusalem (Gal 1:18) are a relatively imprecise measure of time for us, since Paul might well have counted the incomplete years as full ones. What is decisive, however, is that he had his first missionary experiences in Arabia and Damascus over a longer period of time, during which he also constructed the theological foundation of his message. *These first years must have been of foundational importance to him.*

When Philip the Tetrarch and son of Herod died around the winter of AD 33/34, King Aretas directed his covetous glance more and more toward Philip's territory, so that an armed conflict with Herod Antipas ensued around AD 35/36. This conflict may have been a reason for Paul's departure from the Nabatean empire. A Jewish prophet of entirely new eschatological teachings about the crucified Messiah, who, risen from the dead, is about to return to establish his kingdom and sit in judgment, must have seemed like a dangerous political enthusiast to the king, who was suspicious of Jewish claims to power; and through the ethnarch of the Nabatean trade colony, the king's arm extended even to Damascus.

We do not know whether Paul's missionary activity in "Arabia" was unsuccessful. One should not jump to hasty conclusions based on his silence on this issue, since he is equally silent concerning his entire work of fourteen years in Syria and Cilicia following his visit to Jerusalem. We cannot even learn from him that he comes from Tarsus or that he had the Hebrew name *Shā'ûl*. Only Luke tells us these facts. In 1 Cor 15:10 Paul does say, however, with a certain pride:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me.

These lines indicate that he was an extraordinarily successful missionary, and nothing speaks against including in this statement his effectiveness in Nabatean Arabia and Damascus. Nor should one preclude the possibility that he revisited Damascus and Petra during

his long activity in Syria, just as he later revisited the congregations in the west and around the Aegean, and in some cases did so several times. According to Acts, Paul seems also to have been known in Sidon, Tyrus Ptolemais, that is, in the Phoenician port cities. Apparently, in his capacity as missionary in the time prior to the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, Paul traveled—probably mostly in the company of Barnabas—throughout all of Syria and Cilicia (Gal 1:21).

4. CONCLUSION

We thus possess only one direct and two indirect indications of Paul's sojourn in the Nabatean realm; for this reason scholars have tended to suppress the question concerning the meaning and content of his stay in this area—as, by the way, has been the case for a long time with regard to the question concerning the pre-Christian Paul. The still young NT discipline is subject to fashionable research topics in a special way, and fashion-oriented research blinds us with respect to phenomena that are presently not in vogue. Perhaps my thoughts have shown that it is profitable to think especially about the first beginnings of Paul's missionary proclamation outside of Eretz Israel and therefore to non-Jews, or more precisely, to the Nabatean kinsmen.

To adopt the language of this lecture series: we have tried to depict how a complete outsider and recent convert to a Messianic-enthusiastic sect, who as a Jew was a member of a people who were a foreign body in the Roman empire, in a "marginal society" between desert, cultivated land, and sea—the Nabatean realm—how he appeared in public for the first time and immediately caused offense. Without anticipating this himself, he lit a blaze that developed into a continually growing wildfire that finally reached the Orient and Europe and that influenced the particular course of our European history.

The picture of a wildfire also reminds one of the stormy missionary successes, which emanated from an Arabian 600 years later in the southern Hedjaz. Paul's work, of course, happened—to borrow a phrase from Augustine's Confession: *sine vi humana, sed verbo*--"without human force but by the word of God." "God's word" was for the apostle the gospel, the "word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18), which was revealed to him by Christ himself near Damascus, and of which he was "not ashamed . . . it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith."²⁹ In this exclusive tie to the word of the gospel that was entrusted to him—"without human power"—lies even for us today the greatness of the person and the truth of the message of the outsider Paul.

29. Rom 1:16 (my confirmation verse).