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THREE YEARS? ST. PAUL'S JOURNEY TO ARABIA

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Abstract: The article intends to summarize and answer the questions concerning the journey of Paul to Arabia. Shortly after his conversion, Paul left Damascus to go to Arabia, a place that can be possibly identified with the Kingdom of Nabataea. We cannot surely establish the duration of his stay in Arabia, which may be considerably shorter than three years. Some scholars have claimed that Paul went there to preach the gospel, whereas others have assumed that he prepared in contemplation and prayer to his career as an apostle. The Nabataean kingdom and its capital, Petra, was a greatly Hellenized, “cosmopolitan place”. A passage of Strabo (XIV.5.13.) leads us to a third conceivable assumption to explain the motivation for Paul’s visit in Arabia: the Hellenic surroundings of Petra contributed to the development of his theological thinking.

Key-words: Arabia, conversion, Damascus, Nabataea, St. Paul

Arabia is mentioned twice in the New Testament, and both occurrences are from Paul’s letter to the Galatians.¹ The first one of these two mentions makes a short and hasty reference to an episode of the life of the apostle – a reference that is made neither in any other Pauline letter nor in the Acts of the Apostles. This episode is Paul’s journey to Arabia.

Though there are hardly any details of Paul’s life that are unanimously undisputed by scholars (philologists and theologians), nobody has ever challenged his stay in Arabia, and even the succession of the surrounding events are beyond question. An ardent persecutor of the followers of Christ, Paul (or Saul) was travelling from Jerusalem to Damascus when an overwhelming supernatural apparition overbore him. As a result of this experience, he joined the Christians of Damascus, the ones he had hated and sworn to destroy. After receiving baptism, he did not spend much time in the city but went to Arabia, before starting his missions as an apostle of Christ. These events are to be dated to the middle or the second half of the 30s AD. Unfortunately, this is all we can be more or less sure about, all the rest is result of assumptions and implications. The aim of this study is to ask the proper questions that can be raised in connection with Paul’s road to Arabia and to propose potential answers to them, as far as possible.

¹ Gal. 1:17 and 4:25.

The passage that is the only exact source of our topic is the one below (in its context):

*But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called [me] by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen (έν τοις έθνεσιν); immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia (άπηλθον εις Άραβίαν), and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years (Έπειτα μετά τρία έτη) I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother. Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not. Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia...*²

The letter to the Galatians is the most passionate writing of Paul, in which he rebukes his addressees in an indignant manner, calling them foolish (άνόητοι) twice (Gal. 3:1; 3:3). The reason of his indignation is that shortly after his missionary stay in Galatia, the Galatians were distracted by a different gospel. Because of some “false brethren unawares brought in” (παρείσακτοι ψευδάδελφοι, Gal. 2:4), the Galatians returned to observing the law of Moses, which, according to Paul, does not make any man just (δίκαιος), since justification is possible only by faith.³ To confirm the authenticity of his teachings (“my gospel”), he claims that he did not receive it from any man, nor was he taught to it, but it was given to him by Jesus Christ himself though revelation (Gal. 1:11-12). This personal and almost exclusive revelation (άποκάλυψις) enables the apostle to preach the gospel.

All scholars agree that the revelation mentioned by Paul refers to the events of his road to Damascus, i.e. the so-called Pauline turn. The most important element of this event, Paul's vision, is mentioned *en passant* in the letters of the apostle⁴, however, we have detailed descriptions of it from Luke, the author of a gospel and of the *Acts of the Apostles*, who was very close to Paul.⁵ The Acts maintains three narrations of the road to Damascus, though they differ from one another in some details. The most exhaustive account is to be found in chapter 9. Paul was already close to the city, when suddenly he was shined about by light from heaven. He fell to the ground and heard a voice:

² Gal. 1:15-21 (English translation from King James' Bible).

³ A short theological summary of the letter can be found in Gal. 2:16: “Knowing that a man is not justified (ού δικαιοϋται) by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” The same idea is confirmed later on as well, cf. Gal. 3:8; 3:11; 3:24; 5:4.

⁴ Apart from the reference in the letter to the Galatians cf. 1Cor. 9:1; 15:8.

⁵ Cf. Philem. 24; Col. 4:14; 2Tim. 4:11.

*Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: [it is] hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord [said] unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do.*⁶

This astonishing scene is noticed by his fellow-travellers, who “stood speechless, hearing a voice, but seeing no man.” The account of the same episode in chapter 22 is slightly different. Here we have Paul as a narrator, telling the story of his conversion to the Jews in Jerusalem: at the middle of the day a bright, heavenly light flashed around him, he fell to the ground and heard roughly the same words as in chapter 9. However, the reaction of his companions was different, since they “saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me.” To sum up: according to Act. 9:7, the company of Paul did hear the voice calling him, yet saw nothing, but according to Act. 22:9, they could see the light but did not hear anything.

The third account (in chapter 26) does not follow any of the preceding ones from the viewpoint of the fellow-travellers. Paul narrates his miraculous conversion to King Agrippa II with the following words:

*At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue...*⁷

The shining apparition in this story involved not only Paul but also his fellows, and they all fell. The words of the mysterious voice in Hebrew language are different, too. The instruction did not command Paul to go into the city but gave a prophesy of his career as an apostle: he would become the apostle of the (non-Jewish) Gentiles, he would turn them from darkness to light, he would bring them forgiveness for their sins, and they would be made holy by believing in Christ.⁸

Narrated by Luke in three different (partly contradictory) versions, Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus is an excellent example to show the problems that emerge when a reader approaches the Acts as a historical source. Commentators explain that the author wanted to emphasize different aspects of the same episode, or even Luke, travelling together with Paul, may have heard the apostle telling the story of his most fundamental experience many times in

⁶ Act. 9:4-6.

⁷ Act. 26:13-14.

⁸ Act. 26:16-18.

different words.⁹ Nevertheless, I think a philologist has some reason to assume that Luke's manuscript was not thoroughly edited.

Two sojourns in Damascus

The aforementioned passage from the letter to the Galatians gives a simple framework to the relative chronology of the events after Paul's revelation, described in the above paragraphs. It is obvious that first he went to the city of Damascus and joined the local followers of Christ, yet he did not spend a long period there but went to Arabia. Then he returned to Damascus, and three years later went up to Jerusalem to see Peter and James. We can conclude that Paul stayed twice in Damascus, first before his trip to Arabia and then after it.

Unfortunately, the Acts makes a reference neither to Paul's journey to Arabia, nor to his two sojourns in Damascus. The most detailed account (chapter 9) claims that Paul, having lost his eyesight, entered the city and met Christ's followers. A disciple called Ananias healed and baptised him, and in this moment Saul, the persecutor of Christians, was turned to Paul, an apostle of Christ.

*Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard [him] were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night, and let [him] down by the wall in a basket. And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.*¹⁰

The plot of the above passage and Paul's actions from his conversion till the visit in Jerusalem can be highlighted in seven points, which altogether took three years, according to Gal. 1:18.

- 1) He recovered and was baptised in Damascus (18-19).
- 2) He started preaching at once in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus is

⁹ Cf. *M. Hengel–A. Schwemer*, Paul Between Damascus and Antioch. The Unknown Years. (Tr. by *J. Bowden*). Louisville 1997, 38.

¹⁰ Act. 9:19-26. The other two narratives of the conversion are more concise and slightly different in their content. The account of chapter 22 only claims that Ananias healed Paul and ordered him to tell everyone what he had seen and heard (22:15), and chapter 26 informs the reader that Paul preached the gospel first in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the country of Judaea (26:20), and ultimately to the Gentiles.

the son of God (20).

3) Many of his audience were amazed (21).

4) He grew more and more powerful and tried to prove (συμβιβάζων) that Jesus was the Messiah (Christ) (22).

5) The Jews were confused, and some days later they agreed to kill him. (22-23).

6) Paul was told about their plan, and his disciples¹¹ helped him to escape (24-25).

7) He arrived to Jerusalem. (26).

How can we insert the road to Arabia mentioned in Gal. 1:17 to this apparently coherent system of narration? What is the point that separates the first staying in Damascus from the second one? Unfortunately, neither Paul, nor Luke, nor any other source gives us a solid hint in this question, thus we must turn to assumptions. There are two moments in Luke's narrative that may be an obvious time for leaving to Arabia.

The first moment is offered after the third element of the above framework, i.e. after Act. 9:21. Surely not earlier than that, since after his recovery and baptism he started to teach at once (εὐθέως) in the synagogues. If so, then we can assume that after having shocked the religious Jews in the synagogues, Paul noticed his lack of success as a preacher and decided to leave Damascus and go to Arabia, thus the fourth item (Act. 9:22) is already about a Paul who had returned from Arabia. In this case we could understand Luke's remark on Paul growing stronger (μᾶλλον ἐνεδυναμοῦτο) as a reference to the sojourn in Arabia. Items 4-6 (Act. 9:22-25) concern the second period in Damascus. An overwhelming majority of modern scholarly literature considers this first assumption to be correct and maintains that the time-clause of Act. 9:23 ("after that many days were fulfilled" – ὡς δὲ ἐπληροῦντο ἡμέραι ἰκαναί) refers to a later period when Paul was confronted with local Jewish people during his second staying in Damascus.

However, there is another possible moment for Paul to go to Arabia: after item 6. In this case his departure is rather an escape, since the conditions have become so dangerous for him that he needed the help of his friends to lower

¹¹ *M. Hengel* draws the attention that Paul was saved by his own disciples (οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ). The word disciple (μαθητής) is totally absent in the vocabulary of the Pauline epistles, which use apostle (ἀπόστολος) instead of it. Luke's account in the Acts assumes that Paul had already acquired some followers among the Christians of Damascus, cf. *Hengel-Schwemer* op. cit. (note 9), 129. There is, however, an alternative manuscript version that does not connect the disciples to Paul so much: λαβόντες δὲ αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ νυκτὸς, cf. *E. Nestle et al.* (ed.), *Novum Testamentum Graece*. Stuttgart 1993²⁷, 347.

him from the city walls in a basket (Act. 9:25). It is puzzling that this way we have no information about his second stay in Damascus. This is a strong argument to opt for the former possibility, yet this latter is still not to be ruled out entirely. The sojourn in Arabia is completely omitted in the Acts, either, so why would it be inconceivable to presume that the second period in Damascus is also left out? Returning to a city where he had been almost killed seems to be illogical, either, but we know that Paul often returned to places where the inhabitants made an attempt on his life.¹² We have to accept that Paul's first departure from Damascus is feasible both after the 3rd and the 6th item and it is impossible to decide this question for sure.

An interesting autobiographical remark of Paul contributes to the problem of the two periods in Damascus in 2Cor. 11:31-33:

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not. In Damascus the governor (ἐθνάρχης) under Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me: And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands.

It is obvious that this story belongs Paul's adventurous escape from Damascus mentioned in Act. 9:25, yet the motivation behind the attempt on his life is dissimilar in the two accounts. Luke narrates that the Jews of Damascus wanted to kill the apostle, whereas Paul does not mention them in his anecdote but rather asserts that the governor of King Aretas wanted to arrest him. The chronology of the Arabian journey is not solved, and we do not even know any more who wanted to harm the apostle of the Gentiles in Damascus: the Jews or the governor of the king?

At that time King Aretas IV ('Philopateris', 9/8 BC - 39/40 AD) was a ruler of the so-called Nabataean Kingdom, which was a country to the south of Judaea (and Damascus). Contemporary Jews called Nabataeans Arabs.¹³ They controlled the whole Sinai Peninsula, part of the Arabian Desert, and the cities east from the Dead Sea. If Paul's remark is correct, we have to conclude that the apostle is tried to be apprehended by the officer of the Nabataean king – but why?

We can hypothesize two answers: the governor persecutes Paul either because his master, Aretas IV ordered him to do so, or because Paul had done something in Damascus that provoked the reaction of the governor. If we consider the first answer more conceivable, then we must presuppose that the apos-

¹² The most obvious example is Jerusalem where the Jews often tried to kill him, yet he returned from time to time, see Act. 9:29-30; 21:10-31. Paul was expelled from Iconium and was almost stoned to death in Lystra, still, he returned shortly to both towns, see Act. 14:5-21.

¹³ J. J. *AJ*. 1.221.

tle had already been to Arabia by this time (=Act. 9:23-25; 2Cor. 11,32f), and there he confronted with the king for some reason. So Paul was haunted in Damascus not because of his missionary activity in the synagogues and because of the fury of the Jews but rather due to the will of the Nabataean king. Thus, considering the reason of his adventurous escape, the narrative of the Acts and that of the second Corinthian letter come into antagonism with each other. Instead of a relatively clear religious motive, we should assume an obscure political reason (i.e. the revenge or Aretas) behind the scene.¹⁴

The other assumption is more permissive and applicable: Paul was persecuted for what he had been doing in Damascus. This version fits the narrative of the Acts easily. Paul preached about Jesus, the Messiah (Act. 9:22), which made local Jews so furious that they did not only agree to kill him among themselves but they also persuaded (bribed?) the governor of the Nabataean king to watch the gates (Act. 9:24) and to put guards around the city (2Cor. 11:32). The Jews wanted to arrest the apostle with the help of the governor. This option does not exclude the aforementioned item 6 (Act. 9:25) as the moment of Paul's departure to Arabia, since he was in fact not pursued by Nabataeans but only by his own people, who used every endeavour to arrest him.

As we can see, we have no firm historical evidence to prove or exclude any of the options above, thus we must rely on vague assumptions. Still, no written source alludes to Paul's confrontation with King Aretas, so it seems more probable that the governor of Damascus observed the urge of the local Jews when he tried to arrest him.

Chronology¹⁵ and motivation

“Three years” are often mentioned as the duration of Paul's staying in Arabia. However, we have to see clearly that Gal. 1:15-18 is our only source for establishing chronology and it does not say that Paul spent three years in Arabia.

¹⁴ Cf. *Hengel-Schwemer* op. cit. (note 9), 128-129.

¹⁵ The absolute chronology of Paul's conversion cannot be satisfactorily established due to the lack of dating sources that could be inserted into the more or less coherent relative chronology of the New Testament. I do not intend to opt for any of the existing theories. For attempts to reconstruct an absolute chronology cf. *F. Schroeder*, Paul, Apostle, St. In: *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. XI. (ed. The Catholic University of America) New York 1967, 2; *G. Lüdemann*, Paulus, der Heidenapostel. Bd. 1. Studien zur Chronologie. Göttingen 1980, 272-273; *J. Roloff*, Paulus. In: *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon. Internationale theologische Enzyklopädie*. Bd. 3. (ed. *E. Fahlbusch et. al.*). Göttingen 1992, 1089; *A. Suhl*, Paulinische Chronologie im Streit der Meinungen. In: *ANRW II.26.2* (1995) 939-1188.

We can accept that the time clause of Gal. 1:18 (“then after three years”) refers to the period between Paul’s conversion and his visit to Jerusalem, still, we do not know about the duration of the two periods in Damascus and that of the intervening journey to Arabia. There are two attitudes towards the chronology of the Arabian sojourn in the scholarly literature on Paul: generally we can distinguish between the theories of ‘long-Arabia’ and ‘short-Arabia’. The former hypothesizes a lengthy staying in Arabia that lasted for years with two relatively short periods in Damascus, whereas the latter presumes that Paul spent most of the time in Damascus and visited Arabia for a short time only.

The ‘long-Arabia’ theory is the traditional one, shared by the majority of Catholic literature.¹⁶ Time adverbs of Act. 9:19-25 do not imply a long stay in Damascus. After his recovery and baptism, Paul started preaching immediately (εὐθέως) about Jesus (Act. 9:20). The other indication of time (“many days were fulfilled” – ἐπληροῦντο ἡμέραι ἱκαναί)¹⁷ is difficult to interpret as a very long interval, either. If three years passed between the revelation near Damascus and the visit in Jerusalem and if Paul stayed for only some weeks or months in Damascus, then it is obvious that the majority of these three years were spent in Arabia.¹⁸

The first argument against ‘long-Arabia’ arrived in 1897: in a short study¹⁹ J. W. McGarvey pointed out that Paul does not say anything about the duration of his journey in Arabia in his letter to the Galatians²⁰, however, the narrative of Act. 9:20-22 clearly implies that the apostle stayed long in Damascus until his confrontation with the Jews. McGarvey self-evidently considers the Arabian journey to fit the narrative scheme of the Acts after our item 3. McGarvey is rather passionate in attacking the theory of ‘long-Arabia’: “Let us hear no more, then, of Paul spending three years in Arabia.”²¹

The 20th century saw many scholars joining McGarvey in this question.²² They called the attention to the fact that the “three years” refers to the duration

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. the entry on ‘Paul’ in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Schroeder, op. cit [note 15], 5.) and in *Katolikus Lexikon* (Tóth K., Pál, apostol, szent. In: *Katolikus Lexikon*. III. (ed. *Bangha Béla*). Budapest 1932, 475); see also the fundamental study of *J. Holzner* (Paulus. Sein Leben und seine Briefe. Freiburg 1959, 57-58).

¹⁷ According to both *LSJ* and *PGL*, ἱκανός means ‘sufficient, satisfactory’, however, Luke often uses the word meaning ‘many, great’ in his gospel and in the Acts, cf. φῶς ἱκανόν – “great light” (Act. 22:6); ἀγέλη χοίρων ἱκανῶν – “herd of many swine” (Lu. 8:32).

¹⁸ See also *ODCC* 1046.

¹⁹ *J. C. McGarvey*, Those Three Years in Arabia. In: *J. C. McGarvey*, Short Essays in Biblical Criticism. Cincinnati 1910, 247-250.

²⁰ Cf. *Lüdemann*, op. cit. (note 15), 85.

²¹ *McGarvey*, op. cit. (note 19), 249.

²² Some of them: *H. Maccoby*, The Mythmaker. Paul and the Invention of Christianity. New York

of time between Paul's conversion and his arrival to Jerusalem. The apostle probably spent most of this time in Damascus and Arabia was only a brief adventure. They all support the theory of 'short-Arabia'. Still, most lexicons²³ hesitate to decide in this issue and they confess that we do not know about the duration of Paul's journey in Arabia: it could take a few days as well as three years.

We have to remark that in accordance with the chronology in the ancient Near East, it is very unlikely that the "three years" made three full calendar years. It is more probable that it lasted in fact about two years. Several scholars have pointed out that an interval of "three years" were calculated in antiquity by considering the remaining part of the first year as one full year, similarly to the time elapsing from the last one. Thus, "after three years" should be understood like this: 3 years = (x + 1 + y), x indicating the rest of the first year and y indicating elapsed time from the last one, until the event in question. We encounter the same method of measuring time when we consider the resurrection of Christ on the third day.²⁴ Though it is not more than one day and a half from the afternoon of Good Friday until the dawn of Easter Sunday, the x + 1 + y days are to be interpreted as three days. Taking this into consideration, some scholars have emphasized recently that the "three years" mentioned by the apostle should be understood as about two actual years.²⁵

The aim of Paul's journey in Arabia is obscure, too, yet scholarly literature assumes two possible motivations. Some researchers suppose that Paul went to Arabia to convert Arabs to believe in Christ, while others think that it was a period of silent preparation for him – he prepared himself to his career as an apostle, reorganized his thought to understand the significance of his revelation near Damascus.

Those who regard Arabia as a missionary journey argue that after his revelation and recovery Paul immediately started preaching in Damascus and we have no reason to doubt that he did the same in Arabia, too. Yet there is no trace of this Arabian mission, no Arabian congregation was established, which has led some scholars to the conclusion that Paul spent only a short period of time there, visiting only some cities near Damascus, and his endeavour was ulti-

1986, 105; *K. Haacker*, Zum Werdegang des Apostels Paulus. Biographische Daten und ihre theologische Relevanz. In: ANRW II. 26. 2 (1995) 917; *H-D. Saffrey*, Histoire de l'apôtre Paul, ou Faire chrétien le monde. Paris 1991, 27-28; *J. Murphy-O'Connor*, Paul. His Story. Oxford 2004, 25-27.

²³ Cf. the entries on Paul in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Prat 1911, 569. and in *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* (Roloff, op. cit. [note 15], 1089.).

²⁴ See Lu. 24:7.

²⁵ *Lüdemann*, op. cit. (note 15), 83; *Hengel-Schwemer*, op. cit. (note 9), 107.

mately a failure.²⁶ A longer missionary attempt is highly unlikely, since the apostles usually travelled in pairs²⁷ or in groups of three, a custom fully observed later by Paul.²⁸

Others think that Paul had a psychologically obvious need to reorganize his thoughts before starting his apostolic career, similarly to Jesus, who went out to solitude before he started preaching the gospel in Galilee.²⁹ Yet it is probably not necessary to prove how unlikely it is to assume that Paul had contemplated for three years before he returned to Damascus. Obviously, Paul had an active, urbanised character who liked cities, travelling from one to another.³⁰ If Jesus spent only forty days in the desert, it is impossible to expect Paul spending years under similar conditions. Martin Hengels also remarks that Gal. 1:17 does not say that Paul went out to the wilderness (εἰς τὴν ἔρημον) as Jesus did but to Arabia (εἰς Ἀραβίαν), which makes it more probable that he set out to a long journey and did not withdraw into solitude and semi-wilderness in the vicinity of Damascus.³¹

Kingdom of Nabataea

As it has been mentioned above, the geographical destination of the Arabian journey may well have been the country of a Semitic people called Nabataeans (ναβαταῖοι). The kingdom of the Nabataeans underwent a considerable cultural development between the 1st century BC and AD, reaching its heyday under the long rule of King Aretas IV. In the 1st century BC, Diodorus of Sicily

²⁶ According to Murphy-O'Connor, Nabataeans were hostile with the apostle because they considered him as a spy of the Jews. „It is most unlikely that Paul penetrated very deeply into 'Arabia'. He may not even have reached Bosra, which is close to the southern border of modern Syria. [...] It is also probable that Paul did not stay very long. [...] I would give him a week at the most. [...] The sole importance of his imprudent venture is that it indicates that from the beginning he was convinced that his mission was to the Gentiles.” (Murphy-O'Connor, op. cit. [note 22], 26.)

²⁷ Following the instruction of Jesus, cf. Mr. 6:7.

²⁸ Hengel-Schwemer, op. cit. (note 9), 109.

²⁹ Mt. 4:1-11; Mr. 1:12.13; Lu. 4:1-13.

³⁰ A. N. Wilson, Paul: The Mind of the Apostle. New York-London 1997, 81.

³¹ Hengel-Schwemer, op. cit. (note 9), 109. N. T. Wright presented an interesting theory about the “Arabian” journey. He presumes that Paul used to belong to the Shammaite school, the most radical group of the Pharisees, and his road followed the pattern of Elijah in the Old Testament. After killing the priests of Baal, Elijah withdrew to Mt. Sinai. Moved by the instructions of the Lord he returned with renewed zeal to Damascus (1Ki. 19:15). Wright highlights the parallels between Saul, the persecutor of Christians and Elijah, the murderer of the Baal priests. Both a depressed Elijah and a broken Saul hide in the caves of Mt. Sinai, then return to Damascus to fulfil God's will (N. T. Wright, Paul, Arabia, and Elijah (Galatians 1:17). JBL 115.4 (1996) 683-692.

did not hold Nabataea in high esteem: the inhabitants “range over a country which is partly desert and partly waterless, though a small section of it is fruitful. And they lead a life of brigandage, and overrunning a large part of the neighbouring territory they pillage it, being difficult to overcome in war.”³² However, at the beginning of the 1st century AD, Strabo presented a significantly more favourable picture of them. The Nabataeans established a well-organized state, the capital of which was Petra, one of the most spectacular ancient cities:

The capital of the Nabataeans is called Petra. It is situated on a spot which is surrounded and fortified by a smooth and level rock (petra)... It is always governed by a king of the royal race. The king has a minister who is one of the Companions, and is called Brother. It has excellent laws for the administration of public affairs.

*Athenodorus, a philosopher, and my friend, who had been at Petra, used to relate with surprise, that he found many Romans and also many other strangers residing there. He observed the strangers frequently engaged in litigation, both with one another and with the natives; but the natives had never any dispute amongst themselves, and lived together in perfect harmony.*³³

Strabo affirms that Petra was a frequented place, though it had not been so often visited by foreigners before. Athenodorus noticed that there was a considerable difference between the behaviour of foreigners and natives. Nabataeans have not adopted litigation, which is common among Romans and other Hellenized people.

Josephus³⁴ provides information for the Nabataean history in the 30s, which is prevailed by an enmity between Aretas IV and Herod Antipas, King of Judaea. Antipas cheated on his wife, daughter of Aretas, with his niece Herodias. When his wife became aware of his promise to marry Herodias, she escaped Judaea and went back to his father. It is probable, however, that it was only an excuse for war, since the military conflict took place years later, as Josephus reveals. The actual reason for war was a disputed territory that used to belong to late Philip (brother of Herod Antipas), who died in 34 AD.³⁵ Aretas proved to be superior in the war between 34 and 36, yet Antipas turned to Emperor Tiberius, who ordered Vitellius, procurator of Syria, to punish the Nabataeans. The life of Aretas was saved by the death of the emperor: the attacking Syrian legions stopped when they received the news from Rome in the spring of 37 AD.

The possible coincidence of the Jewish-Nabataean conflict and Paul's journey to Arabia-Nabataea lead some scholars (including M. Hengel) to the as-

³² Diod. II.48.1-2. (Translated by C. H. Oldfather)

³³ Str., *Geogr.* XVI.4.21. (Translated by H. C. Hamilton–W. Falconer)

³⁴ J. *AJ.* XVIII.109-115; XVIII.120-126.

³⁵ J. *AJ.* XVIII.106.

sumption that the aforementioned conflict may have influenced or even ended Paul's staying in Arabia.³⁶ An argument for this position could be Paul himself in 2Cor. 11:32, if we interpret it as the revenge of Aretas (see above). However, other sources do not confirm this theory. In fact, we have very little evidence for the extension of Nabataean authority over Damascus. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is actually the only source that claims that Aretas IV was master of Damascus. Although we have plenty of coins minted by Aretas IV, no such coin was found in Damascus.³⁷

Archaeological research has greatly contributed to our knowledge about the culture of Nabataeans. The traditional sun god of the Nabataeans (Ḍū Sharā – 'Lord of the Mountains'), originating from the nomadic period, had become a syncretized divinity in the Hellenistic Age, being identified either as Zeus or as Dionysos. Hellenistic attributes on coins and sculpture reinforce this change.³⁸ A similar procedure can be noticed in the figure of Atargatis, an ancient Semitic fertility goddess. Yet it is not only the syncretism of the pantheon that reveals the Hellenism of the Nabataeans but also their architecture. The monastery and the treasure of Petra were both supposed to have been built after the Roman conquest (106 AD) but today they are dated to the time of Aretas IV.³⁹ The lack of burials (implied by Strabo⁴⁰) is refuted by the decorative façade of royal rock tombs.⁴¹ The original structure of the Hellenistic theatre building is dated to even earlier: 33 BC.⁴² It is no wonder that G. W. Bowersock calls Petra "a cosmopolitan place",⁴³ where Hellenistic, Egyptian, and Iranian elements appear and mingle in architectural decorations.⁴⁴

We have to see that the Nabataean kingdom and particularly its capital, Petra, was a profoundly Hellenized place that was probably an attractive destination to a profoundly Hellenized Jew who grew up in Tarsus, another greatly Hellenized city in Cilicia, in the Eastern Mediterranean. Strabo writes the following about the culture in Tarsus:

³⁶ *Hengel-Schwemer*, op. cit. (note 9), 112.

³⁷ A. Negev, *The Nabateans and the Province of Arabia*. In: ANRW II. 8 (1977) 569: „The existence of a Nabatean ruler at Damascus at this time has never been satisfactorily explained.”

³⁸ *Ph. Hammond*, *The Nabataeans: Their History, Culture and Archaeology*. Gothenburg 1973, 95-96.

³⁹ *G. W. Bowersock*, *Roman Arabia*. Cambridge, Mass. 1983, 62.

⁴⁰ Str., *Geogr.* XVI.4.26.

⁴¹ *Hammond*, op. cit. (note 38), 94.

⁴² *Hammond*, op. cit. (note 38), 99.

⁴³ *Bowersock*, op. cit. (note 39), 61.

⁴⁴ *Hammond*, op. cit. (note 38), 95-99.

The inhabitants of this city apply to the study of philosophy and to the whole encyclical compass of learning with so much ardour, that they surpass Athens, Alexandria, and every other place which can be named where there are schools and lectures of philosophers.

*It differs however so far from other places, that the studious are all natives, and strangers are not inclined to resort thither. Even the natives themselves do not remain, but travel abroad to complete their studies, and having completed them reside in foreign countries. Few of them return.*⁴⁵

These lines may strikingly remind the reader of Paul himself, who may have received his Hellenic education in the schools of the Cilician Tarsus before he moved to Jerusalem to study at the feet of Gamaliel and to learn the perfect manner of the Jewish traditions.⁴⁶ If this (probably generalized) account of Strabo is valid in the case of Paul, then we can have a third assumption concerning the motivation of his Arabian journey. If we are right in being doubtful about both the missionary theory (claiming that Paul went to Arabia to preach the gospel) and the contemplation theory (claiming that Paul was preparing in prayer to his career as a preacher of the gospel), then we can presume that he went to Arabia since it provided Hellenized surroundings that Paul had been accustomed to in Tarsus. What he exactly did there is of course impossible to tell, yet the remark of Strabo (“natives ... travel abroad to complete their studies”) can support the assumption that Paul continued his studies there. This may be another factor that accounts for the change of his attitude towards Judaism.⁴⁷ He does not consider the religious laws and traditions valid any more: nobody is justified by the work of the Jewish law but only by believing in Christ.⁴⁸ Arabia may well be the place where Paul recognized this message.

⁴⁵ Str., *Geogr.* XIV.5.13: “Τοσαύτη δὲ τοῖς ἐνθάδε ἀνθρώποις σπουδὴ πρὸς τε φιλοσοφίαν καὶ τὴν ἄλλην παιδείαν ἐγκύκλιον ἅπασαν γέγονεν ὥσθ' ὑπερβέβληνται καὶ Ἀθήνας καὶ Ἀλεξάνδρειαν καὶ εἴ τινα ἄλλον τόπον δυνατὸν εἰπεῖν, ἐν ᾧ σχολαὶ καὶ διατριβαὶ φιλοσόφων γεγόνασιν. διαφέρει δὲ τοσοῦτον ὅτι ἐνταῦθα μὲν οἱ φιλομαθοῦντες ἐπιχώριοι πάντες εἰσὶ, ξένοι δ' οὐκ ἐπιδημοῦσι ῥαδίως· οὐδ' αὐτοὶ οὗτοι μένουσιν αὐτόθι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τελειοῦνται ἐκδημήσαντες καὶ τελειωθέντες ξενιτεύουσιν ἠδέως, κατέρχονται δ' ὀλίγοι.”

⁴⁶ Cf. *Act.* 22:3.

⁴⁷ This essential change in the world view of Paul is highlighted in *D. Boyarin, A radical Jew. Paul and the Politics of Identity.* Berkeley 1994, 31.

⁴⁸ Cf. n. 3.