

THE DESTINATION AND DATE OF THE EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS

The purpose of this paper is to answer four questions: who the Galatians were, where the Galatians lived [the destination of the letter], whether the accounts of Paul's visits to Jerusalem in Acts and Galatians can be correlated, and when Paul wrote the letter.

The Galatians

What one believes about who the Galatians were depends on what one believes about the destination of the letter. The ethnic Galatians in the north of what is now central Turkey were Gauls who had migrated from western Europe,¹ along with subservient groups of local Phrygians and Cappadocians.² However, there was a Roman political province of Galatia that encompassed more territory than that occupied by the ethnic Galatians. The inhabitants of the southern part of this province were made up of local peoples from Phrygia, Pisidia, and Lycaonia.³ The discussion of which group were the target audience of Paul's letter continues below. Whichever group Paul wrote, it is obvious from Paul's letter that they were young in their faith, part of a church that had been planted by Paul on one of his missionary journeys, and recently burdened with argument that submission to the Law was a requirement of Christianity.⁴

Dating

Because the arguments⁵ specific to dating tend to mitigate each other, the dating of the letter is driven largely by the conclusion about the destination of the letter. If Paul sent the letter to the ethnic Galatians in the north, then the letter would have to be dated late enough [A.D. 56/57⁶] to allow time for Paul to plant churches there,⁷ which would have been on the second missionary journey.⁸ The details of the first missionary journey in Acts are explicit enough to rule out any trip up into the mountains to visit the ethnic Galatians, but some argue the language describing the second missionary journey leaves room for a visit, though destination cities and the planting of churches there are not explicitly stated. The language of Galatians 4:13 suggests to some that Paul had visited the Galatians twice before writing, and proponents of a later date assert that

¹ Donald K. Campbell, "Galatians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2004), 587.

² W. W. Wessel, "Galatia," in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed., rev. ed. D. R. W. Wood (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press; 1996), 390.

³ Wessel, 391; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 465.

⁴ Guthrie, 482; D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 465.

⁵ Note that arguments relying on errors in scripture receive no discussion herein.

⁶ Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1999), 293.

⁷ Carson and Moo, 461.

⁸ Guthrie, 465, 473.

these visits would have occurred in the time mentioned in Acts 16:6 and Acts 18:23⁹ [discussion of which passages continues below]. Early date [A.D. 49¹⁰] proponents suggest the language of Galatians 4:13 could mean when Paul first brought them the gospel [as opposed to the first of multiple times Paul was there], but also note that Paul apparently visited the southern Galatians twice on his first missionary journey.¹¹

Early date proponents argue the letter must predate the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, else Paul would have used the Council's decision to strengthen his argument against the legalists.¹² Late date proponents counter that Paul did not mention the Council in later letters either,¹³ and would not have mentioned it to the Galatians since a part of his contention was his independence.¹⁴ Early date proponents argue that Paul's biographical information in the letter must be accurate – else he would have made himself vulnerable to his critics – and that information mentions only two visits to Jerusalem, which must then correspond to his initial visit of Acts 9 and the famine relief visit of Acts 11.¹⁵ Late date proponents counter that Paul omitted the famine relief visit because he did not interact with the apostles in any meaningful way on that visit.¹⁶ They also point out that Paul's description of the purpose of his second described visit correlates with that of the Council in Acts 15,¹⁷ and there are other similarities in that Jewish legalists prompted the discussion and the discussion involved Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James.¹⁸ Early date proponents counter with the observation that there are many differences between the visit described by Paul and that of Acts 15, such as the role Paul had at the meeting, the motivation for the trip to Jerusalem, and the nature of the meeting.¹⁹ Early date proponents also argue that the uncertainty of Peter and Barnabas about eating with Gentiles [described in Galatians 2:11-21] would not have happened after the Council of Acts 15 [and if it had, then Paul would have been foolish to mention such evidence of authoritative disagreement²⁰], which means the visit to Jerusalem described in Galatians 2:1-10 must have been the famine visit of Acts 11, not the

⁹ Carson and Moo, 458; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), lxxv.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 55.

¹¹ Guthrie, 473; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 44.

¹² Carson and Moo, 462; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 44; Guthrie, 476; Longenecker, lxxv, lxxix.

¹³ Carson and Moo, 462.

¹⁴ Guthrie, 476.

¹⁵ Carson and Moo, 463; Longenecker, lxxiii, lxxviii; Barnett, 16, 295.

¹⁶ Carson and Moo, 463; Guthrie, 474; Longenecker, lxiv-lxvi, lxxvii.

¹⁷ Carson and Moo, 463; Guthrie, 474; Longenecker, lxiv-lxvi, lxxvii.

¹⁸ Longenecker, lxxvii.

¹⁹ Longenecker, lxvi-lxvii, lxxvii; Barnett, 295; Guthrie, 475.

²⁰ Longenecker, lxxx.

Council of Acts 15.²¹ Late date proponents try to mitigate this argument by asserting Galatians 2:11-21 is not part of Paul's biographical timeline.²²

Early date proponents note that the letter does not mention Timothy who is known to have been with Paul throughout the second missionary journey and is mentioned in almost every letter after that time.²³ Late date proponents counter that the letter must post-date the Council of Acts 15, because it is not credible that Paul would have circumcised Timothy [Acts 16:3] after writing the strong denunciation of circumcision in Galatians 5:2.²⁴ Early date proponents say the question of Titus' circumcision during the second visit to Jerusalem mentioned in the letter would be more likely in a pre-Council atmosphere, to which the late date proponents offer the theory that Titus was one of the other believers mentioned in Acts 15:2 as attending the Council.²⁵ Late date proponents argue it would have taken time for the development of organized local Jewish opposition to Paul, but early date proponents counter that the opposition emanated from Jerusalem and had been spreading over time to Antioch and then Galatia.²⁶

Late date proponents argue Galatians must be dated later than the letters to the Thessalonians, because those letters had a stress on an early parousia which is lacking in Galatians.²⁷ Early date proponents counter that one cannot fathom development of thought from occasional letters which dealt with specific issues, and that the letters to the Thessalonians were a reaction to eschatological issues specific to Thessalonica.²⁸ Late date proponents argue that the style, theology, and persecution issue in Galatians show affinity with later letters to the Corinthians and Romans.²⁹ Early date proponents counter that even by an early date such as A.D. 49, Paul had been preaching to Gentiles for more than a decade, and that nearer to the center of Judaism, so these issues would not have been new and Paul's theology would have been developed,³⁰ and there were very few years between the letters in any case.³¹ They also contend the lack of mention of these issues in other early letters is due to lack of those issues in those specific churches,³² and issues pertaining to Judaizers continuously cropped up over time.³³

²¹ Guthrie, 477; Longenecker, lxxi-lxxii, lxxx.

²² Guthrie, 477.

²³ Longenecker, lxx-lxxi.

²⁴ Longenecker, lxxv.

²⁵ Longenecker, lxxi-lxxii.

²⁶ Longenecker, lxxii.

²⁷ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 54.

²⁸ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 54.

²⁹ Carson and Moo, 463; Barnett, 293; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 45-54; Guthrie 473; Longenecker, lxiv, lxxxiii-lxxxiv, lxxxvii-lxxxviii.

³⁰ Barnett, 294; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 45.

³¹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 45.

³² Barnett, 294.

³³ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 52.

Furthermore, they argue that the content of Paul's letters regarding tradition, unity, and ecclesiology indicate Galatians must have had an early date.³⁴

Destination

As mentioned earlier, there is a question about to whom this letter was addressed, the ethnic Galatians in the north or the various peoples who occupied the southern portion of the Roman political province. In the latter case, the churches were probably located in the towns mentioned in Acts 13:14-14:23: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.³⁵ Proponents of such a southern destination argue that Paul clearly visited this southern region on his first missionary journey [Acts 13-14], while there is no biblical record of him visiting the northern region, while proponents of a northern destination argue such a visit is indicated in Acts 16:6 and 18:23, during Paul's second missionary journey, after leaving the southern region and before arriving in Troas.³⁶

How one interprets these two passages of Acts and how one reconciles the Acts history with the history in Galatians tends to be the deciding factor in whether one advocates a northern [and thus later] view or a southern [and thus probably early] view. Northern proponents argue that the Holy Spirit's prohibition about traveling into Asia means Paul must have turned north into ethnic Galatia,³⁷ and that the terms found in Acts 16:6 and 18:23 are best understood as suggesting he traveled through Phrygia and Galatia,³⁸ because Luke used geographic terms to describe places in Acts, not political ones.³⁹ Southern proponents counter that the terms in Acts 16:6 and 18:23 are best understood as "Phrygian Galatia" [i.e. the part of the political province of Galatia that was comprised of ethnic Phrygia],⁴⁰ and provide evidence that this was the contemporary designation for this part of the province.⁴¹ Furthermore, they argue, understanding of the Greek participle in Acts 16:6 suggests they traveled through Phrygian Galatia before getting the prohibition about Asia,⁴² and so their likely route would have gone through Iconium and Pisidian Antioch [southern cities], rather than up to ethnic Galatia.⁴³

Consideration of geography leads to three other arguments in favor of a southern view, which are only weakly mitigated by northern proponents. First, southern proponents argue that the south was more accessible so it was unlikely Paul traveled to the north if he was ill, as indicated in

³⁴ Longenecker, lxxxiv-lxxxvii.

³⁵ F. F. Bruce, "Galatians, Epistle to the," in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed., rev. ed. D. R. W. Wood (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press; 1996), 393.

³⁶ Carson and Moo, 458; Barnett, 293; Campbell, 588; Guthrie, 465-469.

³⁷ Guthrie, 467; Longenecker, lxiv.

³⁸ Carson and Moo, 458; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 10; Guthrie, 466; Longenecker, lxvi; Barnett 292.

³⁹ Carson and Moo, 460; Guthrie 466.

⁴⁰ Carson and Moo, 458-459; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 10; Guthrie 468; Longenecker, lxvii-lxviii, lxx.

⁴¹ Barnett, 293.

⁴² Guthrie, 470.

⁴³ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 12.

Galatians 4:13,⁴⁴ while if he had wanted to reach ethnic Galatia, he would have been better off starting from someplace other than Lystra.⁴⁵ Northern proponents question why Luke made no mention of Paul's illness in the detailed account in Acts 13-14, if that was the one describing the Galatian mission.⁴⁶ Second, southern proponents argue that church development occurred along the great lines of communication, indicating a southern view,⁴⁷ and that Paul focused on Roman colonies and capitals of well-established provinces,⁴⁸ which explains why he left the coastal plain at all on that first mission trip.⁴⁹ Northern proponents question why, if this is the case, Paul bothered with Lystra and Derbe, which were rather provincial.⁵⁰ Third, southern proponents argue it was more likely the Judaizers would pursue Paul in the south than in the inaccessible north,⁵¹ and the fact that the agitators of Galatians knew where Paul had been can only be explained by either John Mark as a source of information – which would argue for southern destination, because that was where John Mark left them – or because they were on the main roads,⁵² which again argues for the southern view. Northern proponents suggest the Judaizers were zealous enough to follow in Paul's footsteps wherever he had gone.⁵³

Beyond trying to understand Luke's meaning of "Phrygian Galatia" in Acts, there are two contentions about the term "Galatians" as used by Paul. First, southern proponents argue that Paul usually used Roman imperial names for provinces.⁵⁴ Northern proponents counter that Paul's usage was not invariable,⁵⁵ that contemporary usage would indicate the north,⁵⁶ and in any case the political province of Galatia would include the northern ethnic people.⁵⁷ Second, southern proponents argue that the term "Galatians" was the only term applicable for all the cities visited on the first mission trip,⁵⁸ and likely was acceptable usage even to non-ethnic Galatians.⁵⁹ Northern proponents counter that southerners would not have liked being called

⁴⁴ Carson and Moo, 459; Guthrie, 469.

⁴⁵ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 13.

⁴⁶ Longenecker, lxxv.

⁴⁷ Carson and Moo, 460; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9.

⁴⁸ Barnett, 293.

⁴⁹ Barnett, 278.

⁵⁰ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 10; Longenecker, lxxix.

⁵¹ Carson and Moo, 459; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9; Guthrie, 472.

⁵² Carson and Moo, 459.

⁵³ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9.

⁵⁴ Carson and Moo, 459; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9; Guthrie, 469; Longenecker, lxxvii, lxxx.

⁵⁵ Carson and Moo, 459.

⁵⁶ Carson and Moo, 460; Guthrie, 466; Longenecker, lxxiv-lxxv.

⁵⁷ Carson and Moo, 459.

⁵⁸ Carson and Moo, 459; Guthrie, 470; Longenecker, lxxviii.

⁵⁹ Longenecker, lxxvi, lxxx.

Galatians,⁶⁰ and in any case this logic again would not exclude northern peoples from being called Galatians as well.⁶¹

The remaining arguments regard details of the letters.⁶² Southern proponents note that there were Galatian churches contributing to the collection for Jerusalem [1 Cor. 16:1], but while Luke mentions two south Galatians among the group [Acts 20:4] he mentions none from the north.⁶³ Northern proponents counter that Luke also did not mention any Corinthians and so the list might be incomplete.⁶⁴ Southern proponents suggest that Paul being welcomed as an “angel of God” [Galatians 4:14] refers to his welcome as Hermes at Lystra [Acts 14:12].⁶⁵ Northern proponents counter that the people stoned Paul in Lystra and persecuted him elsewhere in the south,⁶⁶ but Galatians does not indicate any strong opposition,⁶⁷ and his mention of being welcomed in spite of his illness in Galatians 4:14 paints a very different picture than the welcome as Hermes in Acts 14:12.⁶⁸ Southern proponents point out that Paul said the Galatians had turned their backs on the gospel quickly, implying months had passed, not years.⁶⁹ Northern proponents counter that the word “quickly” is relative to the eternity of the truth.⁷⁰ Southern proponents observe that Paul mentioned Barnabas three times in the letter to the Galatians, suggesting their familiarity with Barnabas, who was with Paul only on the first missionary journey to the south.⁷¹ Northern proponents observe that Paul mentioned Barnabas in 1 Corinthians also with no evidence of Barnabas having been there.⁷² Perhaps the weakest argument is offered by the Northern proponents, that the fickle and superstitious nature described in Paul’s letter indicates ethnic Gauls of the north,⁷³ to which the southern proponents counter that many other people groups appear such in the biblical record.⁷⁴

⁶⁰ Carson and Moo, 460; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 16; Longenecker, lxiv.

⁶¹ Carson and Moo, 459.

⁶² This discussion will not repeat arguments discussed earlier with regard to dating the letter.

⁶³ Carson and Moo, 459; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9; Guthrie, 471.

⁶⁴ Carson and Moo, 459; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9; Longenecker, lxix.

⁶⁵ Carson and Moo, 459; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9; Guthrie, 471.

⁶⁶ Carson and Moo, 459; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9.

⁶⁷ Carson and Moo, 459, 461; Longenecker, lxv.

⁶⁸ Longenecker, lxv.

⁶⁹ Barnett, 293; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 44-45.

⁷⁰ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 44.

⁷¹ Carson and Moo, 460; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9; Guthrie, 470-471; Longenecker, lxxi.

⁷² Carson and Moo, 460; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 9; Guthrie, 471; Longenecker, lxxi.

⁷³ Carson and Moo, 460-461; Guthrie, 467; Longenecker, lxiv.

⁷⁴ Carson and Moo, 461; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 8.

Galatians and Acts Regarding Paul's visits to Jerusalem

As most other arguments cancel each other out, how one reconciles the accounts of Paul's journeys in Acts and Galatians becomes the key to determining one's conclusions about the destination and thus date of the letter. A timeline⁷⁵ seeking to use all the available data follows:

- 33* Persecution began in Jerusalem and believers scattered [Acts 8:1-3]. Scattered people began to share the gospel with Gentiles [Acts 8:4-5].

- 33/34* Peter and John verified Gentile conversions [Acts 8:14-15] and also preached to Gentiles [Acts 8:25]. Philip converted Ethiopian and preached to other Gentiles [Acts 8:26-28, 40]. Peter in Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, ministered to Tabitha and Cornelius, and saw the Holy Spirit come upon Gentiles; then reported to apostles in Jerusalem [Acts 9:42-11:18].

- 33/34 Paul was converted [Acts 9:3]. Ananias ministered to Paul [Acts 9:15] and then Paul began to preach in Damascus [Acts 9:19-25].⁷⁶

- 34-36 Paul went to Arabia and returned to Damascus [Gal. 1:16-17].

- 36 Paul went to Jerusalem and stayed with Peter and met James [Gal. 1:18-20]. Note he did not see other apostles, but did speak to other Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem [Acts 9:26-30].⁷⁷

- 36/37 Paul went to Syria-Cilicia [Galatians 1:21].

- 44 Barnabas went to Antioch to investigate reports of Gentile conversions; then went to get Paul in Tarsus and they went to Antioch together stayed for a year [Acts 11:19-26].

- 47 Paul, Barnabas, and Titus went to Jerusalem to bring the famine offering [Acts 11:27-30], and discussed the gospel message with those of reputation [Gal. 2:1-2]. It was decided that Paul and Barnabas would go to the Gentiles and James, Peter, and John would go to the Jews [Gal 2:6-9], and Paul would remember the poor of Jerusalem⁷⁸ [Gal. 2:10].

- 47* Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with John Mark [Acts 12:25-13:1].

⁷⁵ Except as otherwise noted, the dates in the table are from Barnett, 21, 277. The dates in Carson and Moo, 369, agree within a year. * indicates these dates are personal extrapolations based on the assumption that the year of Christ's death and other dates are correct.

⁷⁶ Carson and Moo, 363, suggest this preaching might have occurred after Paul's return from Arabia.

⁷⁷ Carson and Moo, 361-362, also came to this reconciliation solution, which affects the depiction of the events described in years 47 and 49 also.

⁷⁸ Jerusalem is specified by Barnett, 295.

- 47-49 Paul and Barnabas went on the first mission trip to Cypress and Southern Galatia [Acts 13:2-14:25].
- 49* Paul, in Antioch [Acts 14:26-28], heard of disturbances in the Galatian churches [Gal. 1:6-9]. Also, members of the Jerusalem church arrived and insisted Gentiles and Jews eat separately [Gal. 2:11-14] and be circumcised [Acts 15:1-2].⁷⁹ Paul wrote Galatians.⁸⁰
- 49 Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to attend the Jerusalem Council [Acts 15:3-29].
- 49* Paul and Barnabas went to Antioch with Silas and Judas with results of the Council [Acts 15:30-35].
- 49-52 Paul and Silas went on the second mission trip to Macedonia and Achaia, while Barnabas and Mark returned to Cypress [Acts 15:36-18:21], bringing results of the Jerusalem Council.⁸¹
- 52 Paul landed at Caesarea and went to Jerusalem and then Antioch [Acts 18:22].
- 53-57 Paul went on his third mission trip [Acts 18:23; 19:1-20:38].
- 57-60 Paul returned to Jerusalem [Acts 21:15] and was imprisoned in Caesarea [Acts 23:33].

This timeline reconciles the Acts and Galatians accounts in the following ways. First, the events of Acts 9:19-30 occurred after the events of Acts 9:42-11:18, Luke having chosen to carry through the history of Peter and other apostles before turning to the story of Paul. Second, Galatians 1:18-20 describes the same initial visit to Jerusalem by Paul as described in Acts 9:26-30. Third, Galatians 2:1-10 describes the same second visit to Jerusalem by Paul – the famine relief visit – as described in Acts 11:27-30. Fourth, Paul wrote Galatians in Antioch, after the first missionary journey, just before attending the Jerusalem Council depicted in Acts 15. This last item provides credible motivation and plot flow: Having just returned from the first missionary journey – which established the churches in [southern] Galatia – Paul heard about the trouble there with regard to Judaizers and also experienced similar troubles in Antioch – the issue with Peter and Barnabas about eating with Gentiles – and so wrote the letter to the Galatians and then went to Jerusalem to hash things out with James.⁸² After the trip to Jerusalem and the successful Council, Paul was eager to revisit the [southern] Galatian churches to bring them the results of the Council to reinforce what he had written to them.

⁷⁹ Guthrie, 478-479, put the Antioch incident with Peter before the first missionary journey but an incident with Jewish leaders after, though the timing of the Peter incident troubled him [480]; else his early history of Paul substantially agreed with this timeline.

⁸⁰ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 55, agrees with placement of the letter between the first missionary trip and the Jerusalem Council.

⁸¹ Barnett, 328.

⁸² Barnett, 286.

Conclusion

Though it is wise to give credence to the traditional view of such things, which in this case would be that the letter was written to the ethnic Galatians and thus at a late date, it is easier to dismiss the patristic assumption upon realizing that quite soon after the first century Rome reorganized its districts such that “Galatia” no longer encompassed the area in the south.⁸³ The evidence, particularly the exercise of reconciling the Acts and Galatians accounts of Paul’s movements, leads to the conclusion that Paul wrote Galatians to the southern cities he had visited on the first missionary journey, at an early date of around A.D. 49. However, there is no need to be dogmatic about it, for as Longenecker wrote, “the deriving of either doctrinal insight or spiritual benefit from Paul’s letter to the Galatians is not dependent on a final solution as to provenance,”⁸⁴ nor, one concludes, on final solutions as to date and destination.

⁸³ Guthrie, 465; Longenecker, lxiii.

⁸⁴ Longenecker, lxviii.