

Luke-Acts and Paul's Prison Epistles (AD 61-63)

By Ed Stevens -- Then and Now Podcast -- Dec. 16, 2012

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Thanks for that great introduction to the program, Larry!
- B. Let's ask God for His blessings on our study together --

The One and Only True God whose Name means self-existent and always existent, and who alone knows all things, including all of the past, all of the present, and all of the future – we give you all praise, glory, and honor. Your splendor fills all the heavens. You alone are Holy, Righteous, Merciful, and Gracious. Your love is everlasting and your longsuffering is inexhaustible. We humble ourselves before You and ask for your guidance upon this nation who has forsaken Your Ways. Help us to turn back to You and follow your ways again with a whole heart. And be with us now as we study Your Holy Word. Help us understand it better, and apply it to our lives in a way that help us grow spiritually, so that we can teach others Your Ways and build Your Kingdom in their hearts. It is for Your Glory and in the matchless Name of your Son Jesus that we pray. Amen.

- C. I want to thank Larry, William Bell, Edmund Lee, and Parker Voll for going to the *Evangelical Theological Society* conference with me this past week. This was my **fourteenth consecutive year** to put up an exhibit booth there at their annual meetings. There were five of us full preterists working the exhibit booth. We were able to get a lot of free preterist books, media, and articles into the hands of dozens of new contacts. We planted lots of new seed. **This is something which helps the whole preterist movement.**
- D. **Larry recorded our comments** about what we saw, heard, and experienced in our interactions with the scholars who came by our exhibit booth. There were a couple of local preterists there in the Milwaukee area (**Marco Gruchalski** and **Darren Liberski**) who met with us on Thursday night and shared their stories of how they became preterists. **Larry will be posting all of our comments** here on the Covenant Key website soon.
- E. As far as I know there was **only one person** who seriously tried to argue against Preterism and try to refute it. We did our best to answer his objections and show him the way more accurately. Otherwise, our interactions with the attendees were **positive and congenial.**
- F. Over the years, we have seen some **significant fruit** come from this effort, and every year it just **gets better and better.** The hostility and resistance keeps **decreasing**, while the interest and receptivity is constantly **increasing.**
- G. When we started exhibiting there 14 years ago, most of those scholars had never heard of the Preterist view. Now, that scenario is reversed. Most of them have at least **heard of the preterist view**, and have a vague idea what it is all about.
- H. Just having an exhibit booth there at this conference, **automatically positions us as conservative Christians**, and as a **valid option** within evangelical Christianity.

We should continue to take advantage of this opportunity as long as the Lord keeps the door open for it.

- I. As you can imagine, **the expenses** for an exhibit booth like this, plus the travel, lodging, food, and other expenses are enormous. We could not do this without your **prayers and support**. If you are able, and God puts it on your heart to do so, we would very much appreciate your donations to help defray those expenses. Simply email me at <preterist1@preterist.org> to let me know that you would like to make a contribution, and I will do the rest.
- J. Last time we finished our brief look at the Life and Work of Barnabas and Mark. We noted that Barnabas probably wrote his epistle about the time Paul was in prison in Caesarea (AD 58-60). The epistle of Barnabas was very critical of the Jews, and probably provoked the Jews to hunt him down and kill him. We shared some of the traditions about Barnabas, and showed how the biblical data harmonizes with them, giving us a reasonably good date for the death of Barnabas in AD 60-61, just before John Mark shows up in Rome in association with Apostle Paul (AD 61-62).
- K. Keep in mind that we are talking about events that occurred at the time Paul was in prison in Rome (AD 61-63). This is just before the Neronian persecution broke out in the summer of AD 64, and not long before the Jewish war with Rome began in AD 66. We are getting close to the end. The birth pangs (signs of the times) were becoming more frequent and intense.
- L. If Barnabas indeed died in the AD 60-61 timeframe, and Mark came to Paul in Rome soon afterwards, it implies that the book of Acts was not written until after Paul got to Rome (AD 61), since Acts 11:24 eulogizes Barnabas and speaks of him in the past tense as if he was already dead. We looked at the Biblical and historical evidence which harmonizes with this. I want to look more at this idea that the book of Acts was written in AD 61-62, since in our previous studies we had suggested an earlier date in AD 58-60.

The Date of Luke and Acts

AD 61-62 – While I was at the *Evangelical Theological Society* meeting this week (Nov. 2012), I had the chance to talk to **Dr. Dennis Swanson**, one of the professors at *The Master's Seminary* in the Los Angeles area. He has done quite a bit of study on the date of Luke and Acts. He is convinced that both Luke and Acts were written in Rome while Paul was awaiting his trial there (AD 61-62). He agreed with many conservative scholars that **Theophilus** was probably a Roman government official, acting on behalf of the Roman court, to discover whether there was any substantial case against Paul, and to inform Nero of the results of his investigation before the case went to trial. It is also possible that Theophilus was the defense attorney for Paul.

Before doing my research on Barnabas, I leaned toward the idea that the gospel of Luke and the first twenty chapters of Acts may have been written while Paul was still in custody in Caesarea for two years (AD 58-60) before he appealed to Caesar and went to Rome (AD 60-61). However, now I am convinced that Luke-Acts were written after Paul and Luke reached Rome in AD 61. I will explain why:

As we noted in the last two sessions, it appears that Acts 11:24 eulogizes Barnabas as if he was already dead by the time Acts was written, and by using the

movements of John Mark as a guide, it seems that Barnabas must have died about the same time Paul was on his voyage to Rome, or shortly afterwards (late 60 or early 61), since Mark shows up in Rome in either late 61 or early 62, implying that Barnabas died just before that.

Since these two books (Luke-Acts) appear to be written to a Gentile audience, and include several encounters with the governmental authorities and the courts, which supply legal precedents for Nero's court to follow, the weight of evidence favors the idea that Luke-Acts were written for one of Nero's court officials right after Paul and Luke reached Rome in the Spring of 61, and were most likely finished by the Spring of 62 before Paul's case went to trial in Nero's court.

An obvious question arises as to what kind of government official would need, request, or expect a full briefing on all the "facts in consecutive order" regarding Christianity and Paul's involvement with it. We suggested previously that this could have been the former High Priest **Theophilus** who might have used the unjust treatment of Apostle Paul by the rival High Priest Ananias as grounds for getting Ananias deposed. There is at least one article on the Internet defending the idea that Theophilus was the former High Priest. For example, see the following link:

http://www.sidroth.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=9761&news_iv_ctrl=0&abbr=art_

However, it seems unlikely that Paul or any of the apostles would get involved in party politics like that, especially to the point of writing two whole books for their use. If Theophilus was a former High Priest of the Ananus family, he would have already known most of the facts about the gospel and the history of the church in Jerusalem after Pentecost. He would not have needed these two books written for his instruction. He would only have wanted material which clarified Paul's relationship to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the facts about his unlawful arrest in the temple and his unlawful treatment in the trial before Ananias. Furthermore, Luke apparently wrote both books for a gentile audience, not a Jewish one. It therefore seems unlikely that Theophilus was a Jewish ruler, and much more likely that he was a Roman court official or defense attorney for Paul.

A defense attorney in Rome, would definitely have needed all this information from Luke in order to adequately defend Paul in Rome. However, such an appointment of a defense attorney could not have happened until after Paul appealed to Caesar in late AD 60, and probably not until he reached Rome in AD 61. This means that the two-volume work of Luke could not have been written until after Paul appealed to Caesar and was either on his way to Rome, or after he arrived in Rome. Luke would have had easy and abundant access to the other apostles in Jerusalem while Paul was in prison in Caesarea (AD 58-60). His research for Luke-Acts might have been done then, even though the actual writing did not take place until they reached Rome. Since the book of Acts ends with Paul's release from Roman imprisonment, the book of Acts must have been finished no later than AD 63. But there is good reason to believe that the main corpus of Acts (minus the last three verses of chapter 28) was finished before Paul's trial began in early 63.

Whoever this Theophilus was, it is apparent that he had requested a full briefing on Christianity and the Church and Paul's activities (the clear undisputable documented facts). That sounds like something a court official or defense attorney

would require. The apologetic tone of Acts, along with all the precedent-setting court cases that are mentioned there, suggests that it was written for the purpose of helping Paul in his defense before Caesar. Luke says that he consulted at least two other gospel accounts that were already in existence (Matthew and Mark), and that he verified all this as accurate and reliable by talking to those who knew the facts.

Luke definitely appears to be writing apologetically (in defense of Christianity and Paul) and not just as a reporter of case history and legal facts. Paul did not have a defense attorney while in Judea, since Acts shows that he defended himself in every hearing and trial during the two years he was held in custody in Caesarea. Nor is there any mention in the latter chapters of Acts of a defense attorney in Rome (unless, of course, Theophilus is that attorney). However, we know from Roman court records that it was normal for Roman citizens who appealed to Caesar to have a defense attorney working with them, and Theophilus would fit that scenario well.

Paul would have known, even before he reached Rome, that he would need a good defense to get him acquitted before Nero, so he would have needed Luke to at least gather all the facts, do his research, and at least make some notes before heading toward Rome. How early in the Caesarean imprisonment Luke began doing his research and making his notes is difficult to guess, but it was probably hastened along once Paul realized he would have to appeal to Caesar. The plot by 40 men to ambush and kill him would have been enough to make him start thinking about getting out of Judea, and his Roman citizenship would have come readily to mind, especially after Jesus appeared to him in jail there in Jerusalem in AD 58 and told him that he must testify the gospel in Rome also (Acts 23:11). That would have given him the idea that he would have to testify in Roman court somehow. It would not have taken any imagination for him to see what Jesus was alluding to. All he had to do was wait for the appropriate moment to make the appeal to Caesar. That opportunity came in his hearing before Festus and Agrippa. So, Paul could have commissioned Luke to begin gathering his information in preparation for writing a document like Luke-Acts while they were still in Caesarea.

However, it is not likely that any copies of Luke or Acts would have survived the shipwreck, forcing both books to have been recreated after arriving in Rome, unless they had left a copy in Jerusalem which was then copied and sent to Rome after Paul arrived there. It makes more sense that Luke composed both his gospel and the book of Acts in Rome soon after Paul arrived there (AD 61-62), so that Paul would have them ready before his case went to trial in late 62 or early 63. Chapters 21-28 of Acts could not have been written until after they reached Rome in AD 61. The last three verses of Acts 28 (verses 29-31) appear to have been written by Luke after Paul's release in AD 63, and appended to the otherwise finished book of Acts. Since Acts chapters 21-28 could not have been written until after they reached Rome in 61, it would seem likely that the rest of the book of Acts was written then also, especially in view of Acts 11:24 which seems to eulogize Barnabas after his death in 60-61.

Additionally, there is a tradition which says that just before Barnabas was killed by the Jews on Cyprus (AD 60-61), he had instructed Mark to go to Paul after his death. According to the tradition, Barnabas already had a copy of Matthew's gospel at that time, so that Mark could have taken Matthew's gospel, along with his own gospel of Mark, to Paul in Rome. Luke then would have had access to the other two

gospel accounts, enabling him to easily compose a new account that was directed toward a gentile audience (especially in Nero's court in Rome). This would explain why all three gospels are so similar in content and organization.

Matthew was written first (AD 48). Barnabas had a copy of Matthew, which Mark used to compose his own version (AD 55). Luke then used both Matthew and Mark to compose his synoptic account (AD 61-62). Those who have done careful analysis of the three gospels have noticed that Mark has additional material that Matthew does not have, suggesting that Mark was written later. Same thing for Luke. He has some unique material that was not borrowed from either Matthew or Mark, suggesting that Luke was written after Matthew and Mark were already available. This again points to the probability that Luke-Acts were written in Rome shortly after Paul arrived there, and finished before his case went to trial before Nero (AD 61-62).

Paul's Prison Epistles

Late 62 - Early 63 – Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon -- These first three prison epistles seem to have been written and sent near the end of his two years of house-arrest, when the trial was evidently underway. We might wonder why he did not write them earlier in his imprisonment. It was probably because Paul, Luke and Mark were feverishly preoccupied for the first year of his imprisonment with the production of the two-volume work, **Luke-Acts**, which must have been extremely useful for his defense in his trial before Nero's court. That would easily explain why there were no written epistles sent from Paul during the first year or so of his house-arrest, before his case went to trial. However, as soon as **Luke** and **Acts** were finished, his couriers must have made a fast track to all the churches to distribute them, and report by word of mouth what Paul's present situation was, as well as ask for their prayers and support.

Moreover, throughout the time of his imprisonment he was probably sending couriers to the churches who reported verbally (unwritten only, no paper trail) on his status. Plus, the churches themselves (e.g., Philippi, Colossae, et al) were sending their own messengers (e.g., Epaphroditus, et al) to take support to Paul and learn of his status. When those messengers of the churches returned from Rome, they verbally reported on Paul's status. We catch a glimpse of this unwritten report idea in Col. 4:7-9, where Paul tells the Colossians that Tychicus will inform them by word of mouth (not written) what his status is (cf. Eph. 6:21-22). Then Paul reminds the Colossians that they had previously received instructions about Mark (Col. 4:10). Those were evidently unwritten instructions, or else they were not preserved for us. This illustrates what we already know was common practice in the first century, that couriers (messengers) normally carried both written and unwritten messages.

Near the end of his imprisonment, when the trial seemed to be going well, he began sending some epistles to the various churches in his network. But these epistles did not give very many details of his trial, probably because he knew that his captors were reading it and checking it over before it was allowed to be sent out to the churches. He did not want to write anything which would give his captors a reason to censor his writings and provide his accusers and prosecutors with any evidence that they could use against him. Details like that were best left for the courier to share by word of mouth.

A lot of insight into the timing and sequence of events from Paul's first arrest (AD 58) down to the outbreak of the war (AD 66) can be gained by analyzing the location and movements of Paul's co-workers. Several specialized books on Apostle Paul have carefully analyzed all of this co-worker activity, and I have used their excellent research for my reconstructions here. Arthur Ogden's book, *The Development of the New Testament*, is one of the best sources.

It is fairly easy to nail down a range of possible dates for the composition of Paul's prison epistles. Paul was sent to Rome in the late Fall of AD 60. After being shipwrecked on the island of Malta, where they spent the winter (three months), it was not until March (AD 61) at the earliest that they were able to board another Alexandrian grain ship and head toward Rome. This places the beginning of Paul's imprisonment in March 61. Paul stayed two full years under house arrest in Rome, before he was released. The earliest date for his release would have been March of AD 63. This gives us a range of **March 61 to March 63** for the prison epistles.

Can we be more specific in regard to precisely when **Ephesians** and **Colossians** might have been written during his two-year range? Was it near the beginning of his imprisonment (61), in the middle (62), or near the end (63)?

We know they were written while Paul was awaiting the outcome of his trial before Nero (Eph. 3:1). In Eph. 6:21-22, Paul says that he has sent **Tychicus** with this letter, so that "you may know about my circumstances, how I am doing ... [he] will make everything known to you ... that you may know about us, and that he may comfort your hearts." Paul had been in Rome long enough to know what his status was. He would not have sent word to them if his situation was still unknown. This implies at least several months after he had arrived, if not a lot longer. He evidently waited to write to them until he had a pretty good idea about how his case before Nero would probably go. Things seem to be stable at the time of writing, with no indication of immediate danger. Tychicus was sent to "comfort their hearts" about the situation.

However, Paul does not yet seem to be anticipating acquittal and release, as would have been the case if the final phase of the trial was underway. Thus, a date in the last six months of the range would seem appropriate. Paul tended to write his letters (and make copies) during the winter when they could not travel, and then send his couriers out with them in the Spring. This would point to a date in the late Fall of 62, or very early Winter of 63.

Some have suggested that the closing greetings of Ephesians and Colossians might give us some clues as to when they were written, especially when those greetings are compared with the closing greetings in his other prison epistles. Here are the closing greetings from all five epistles:

Closing Greetings of the Prison Epistles:

- Eph. 6:24 -- Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love.
- Col. 4:18 -- Grace be with you.
- Philem. 25 -- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. [cf. Phlp]
- Phlp. 4:23 -- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. [cf. Phlm]
- Heb. 13:25 -- Grace be with you all.

They do not tell us anything more definite than we already know from the internal evidence of the epistles. However, it is interesting that both **Philemon** and **Philippians** have exactly the same closing greeting, word for word, suggesting that they might have been written about the same time. Furthermore, the similarity in travel plans of Paul and Timothy mentioned in both Phlp. 2:24 and Heb. 13:23 suggest that both Philippians and Hebrews were written right at the end of Paul's imprisonment (March AD 63). So, the similarity between Philemon and Philippians may indicate that Philemon was written about the same time as Philippians and Hebrews. However, Philemon was delivered by a different courier (**Tychicus**) than Philippians (**Epaphras**) and Hebrews (**Mark?**). This does not help us nail down the dates of Ephesians and Colossians any tighter, other than to suggest what we already suspect, that **Ephesians, and Colossians** were written about the same time, and sent together with the epistle to **Philemon**, which was written soon afterwards.

Philemon (verses 1, 10-12, and 23-24) tells us that Timothy, Onesimus, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke were with Paul when he wrote Philemon. Apphia and Archippus were in Colossae with Philemon. Note here that Demas was still with Paul and had not yet deserted him (cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). This dates Philemon before the Neronian persecution broke out, at which time Demas fell away and returned to Judaism ("...having loved this present age" 2 Tim. 4:10).

Tychicus was the courier that carried all three epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon) to the churches in Asia Minor. Is there any evidence from any of Paul's epistles to help us pinpoint when Tychicus might have done that? Are the movements of Tychicus mentioned in any of the other letters, with any indication of their date? Yes, to both questions.

Paul, in both Ephesians and Colossians appeals to his readers to pray for him, so that he will be empowered and emboldened "to make known the mystery of the gospel" and to "speak forth the mystery of Christ" (Eph. 6:19-20 and Col. 4:3-4). It is hard to tell from this appeal whether he was already engaged in speaking boldly at his trial, or whether he was simply praying for the strength to do it once the trial did begin. Since there are no other indications that the trial was already underway or nearly over (as we see in the case of Philippians especially, and maybe in Philemon), the implication is that Ephesians and Colossians were written earlier than Philemon and Philippians, at a time when the trial had either not yet begun, or had just begun and they had no clear idea of what the outcome would be. Since Paul gave that information to Tychicus to relay to them by word of mouth, it is impossible to know whether the trial was already underway at the time Ephesians and Colossians were written. However, the epistle to Philemon expresses a more definite hope that Paul would be released and come to Colossae to stay with Philemon, suggesting that it may have been written nearer the end of the trial when Paul was more optimistic about the outcome. Tychicus delivered these three epistles to Asia Minor (Eph, Col, Philem). And based on the more optimistic expression of hope in Philemon, we can assume that Tychicus left on that courier mission after Paul's trial had begun, but before it was over.

Tychicus is mentioned in the epistle to Titus, which was written sometime after Paul was released. It seems that Tychicus had already delivered the three epistles

(Eph., Col., and Philem.) to the churches in Asia Minor months earlier (AD 62-63). We also see Tychicus in Ephesus later when Paul wrote Second Timothy during his second imprisonment (at the time of the Neronian persecution in late AD 64). So, the movements of Tychicus do support the idea that these three epistles were written near the end of Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, after the trial had begun, but before they knew how it would go.

Letter coming from the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16)? While we are discussing the two prison epistles of Ephesians and Colossians, I want to mention a question that I often receive about Paul's Epistle that was coming to the church in Colossae from the Church in Laodicea. Many have asked me whether that may be a lost epistle that we may someday find and add to our NT canon. However, most of the commentaries on Colossians and Ephesians discuss this issue, and explain that the epistle to the Ephesians appears to be that missing letter. I wrote an eight-page paper on that for one of my Masters degree courses. If you would like to get a PDF copy of that paper ("**Ephesians Intro**"), simply email me and request it <preterist1@preterist.org>.

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If you have questions, or need more information, simply email me at:
<preterist1@preterist.org>

If you would like a couple of great books which detail all of these events, I would recommend **ISRAEL AND THE NATIONS** by F. F. Bruce, which is available for order at our website (www.preterist.org), and my book, **First Century Events**, which deals with the Roman, Jewish, and Christian events of the first century. We will be using it as a study guide here in our studies of the first century. You can purchase it from our website: <http://preterist.org>

Some further recommended reading:

Josephus *Antiquities* and *Wars* (sections which deal with the Herodian rulers)