

How to examine a historical claim about Paul

How can a reader distinguish evidence from reconstruction?

A strong historical explanation identifies its claim, supplies relevant sources, and shows how the conclusion follows. Textual testimony, inscriptions, manuscripts, geography, and later traditions answer different questions. Their agreement matters, but it should not be exaggerated into proof of unrelated claims.

Begin with a precise claim

Ask whether a source establishes a person, office, place, date, action, or reported belief. The Gallio inscription helps date a proconsulship; Acts places Paul before Gallio. Their connection supports a chronological reconstruction without the inscription itself mentioning Paul. A surviving manuscript establishes a textual witness, not the date of every event it narrates. Precision makes the evidence useful rather than merely impressive.

Biblical references: Acts 18:12-17

Sources: acts, chronology

Compare without counting the same testimony twice

Acts and Paul's letters can illuminate one another, but differences in purpose, sequence, and detail need examination. Possible dependence means two accounts should not automatically be counted as two independent witnesses. Paul's persecuting past and his testimony about seeing the risen Christ are central first-person evidence in the letters. The three Damascus accounts in Acts are three presentations within one work, not three independent documents.

Biblical references: Galatians 1:13-24 · 1 Corinthians 9:1 · 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 · Acts 9:1-19 · Acts 22:3-16 · Acts 26:9-18

Sources: letters, acts

Keep conviction and argument visible

Christian faith confesses that Jesus rose and that Paul encountered him. Historical discussion examines the testimony, its setting, and competing explanations; it should neither disguise faith commitments nor substitute confidence for an argument. State what is secure, what is probable, and what remains open. Acknowledging uncertain dates or a disputed interpretation allows the central testimony to be considered on its actual evidence.

Biblical references: 1 Corinthians 15:1-20 · Galatians 1:11-17

Sources: letters

Sources

- [acts] Acts 7–28; passage references are supplied in each section. <https://ebible.org/web/ACT.htm>
- [chronology] Pauline Letters chronology: Acts, the letters, dated external anchors, and explicitly qualified reconstructions. <https://paulineletters.com/explore/timeline>
- [letters] Romans through Philemon; passage references are supplied in each section. <https://ebible.org/web/>

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