Paul in "Arabia" – his "first" journey

In one of his letters Paul states that soon after his conversion he went to preach the Gospel in Arabia.

"But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal His Son to me in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles … I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia …. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem." Gal. 1:15-18

Why did Paul go to Arabia? Some have suggested that he went into the deserts of Arabia to quietly work through both the theological and the practical consequences of his conversion. Several eminent theologians have suggested that this was the purpose of his stay in "Arabia". [See R. A. Cole in the Tyndale Commentary on Galatians and John Stott in the Message of Galatians – the Bible Speaks Today].

They suggest that Paul spent three years being taught by the Holy Spirit as a compensation for the three years of instruction the Lord Jesus gave to the other disciples and which Paul missed. Another suggestion is that he just went to seek solitude in the desert like Moses and Elijah. But Paul says in 2 Cor. 11:32-33 that the governor of Damascus was ordered "to seize" him. If Paul had lived in solitude why would this be so?

King Aretas was the Nabatean king Aretas IV Philodemos who ruled "Arabia" from 9 BC to 40 AD. At that time "Arabia" was defined as a Roman area to the south but still part of the Roman Province of Syria. It included Moab and Edom – today's Jordan. It spread from the Hauran hills south of Damascus in the north, down to the south of the Gulf of Aqaba and included most of Sinai. Notice Paul's reference to a geographical mount in Gal. 4:25, ***"Now this Hagar is mount Sinai in Arabia."*** Perhaps Paul spent some time in Sinai. Most of the inhabitants of this "Arabia" were Nabateans whose language was a precursor of Arabic. The Nabateans were descended from the oldest son of Ishmael, the son of Abraham.

The Nabateans were the Jews' closest relatives who were still Gentiles. [The descendants of Esau had been forcibly converted to Judaism between 135-104 BC by John Hyrcanus (135-134 BC)] Kypros, the mother of the Herod, came from a royal Nabatean family. Herod Antipas ruled in Galilee as tetrarch from 4 BC (when his father, King Herod, died) to 39 AD. There were growing tensions between Herod Antipas and King Aretas IV. This eventually led to a war (34-36 AD) which King Aretas won and which was the end of Herod Antipas' rule.

It appears that Paul, soon after his conversion and after some preaching in the synagogues of Damascus, left Damascus to obey the great divine commission he had been given in Damascus through Ananias, ***"To carry My name before the Gentiles and kings …."*** (Acts 9:15) Paul's conversion probably took place about 31-32 AD so his first missionary journey to the Gentiles was probably begun 32-33 AD. Paul arrived in "Arabia" when tensions between the Nabateans and Jews had greatly intensified. War broke out during the time Paul was in Arabia (34 AD)! King Aretas was subject to Rome – as was Herod – and in this "provincial squabble" it was possible that Rome would intervene and annex one or both provinces into the larger Roman Province of Syria. So King Aretas couldn't afford to appear weak and all signs of unrest had to be avoided. Yet here, into this situation, came Paul, an itinerant evangelist, seeking to win the Nabatean population over to what appeared to be a "Jewish sect" (Christianity)!

Paul spent many months in "Arabia" probably in the northern part where there were flourishing towns. Some of the ruins of these towns can be visited today in Suweida, Bostra (where there is an amazing amphitheatre), Amman, Medeba down to Petra and Aila (Aqaba). Some authorities suggest that Paul travelled as far as the Nabatean city of Agra. Today it is in Saudi Arabia and is called Mada'in Saleh. Most of these cities are in present-day Jordan.

The distances and roads would not have been a problem, for all these centres were on major trade routes. Many of the people in these cities were Hellenised Nabateans and the cities had the typical structure of Greek cities: an oideion (a music hall), a bouleuterion (council hall), a nymphaeum (fountain), basilicas, an amphitheatre, public baths and temples etc.

Paul doesn't tell of the impact of his ministry in "Arabia" – not even in general terms. But the aggressive reaction of the Nabatean officials who wanted to arrest Paul in Damascus, suggests that many people (Nabateans) had been saved and had joined the other believers. From the outside it must have appeared that these Nabatean believers had "switched sides" in the middle of a war from being pro-King Aretas to being pro-enemy (i.e. Jewish)! Paul certainly stirred up trouble for himself in fulfilling his divine commission.

Probably Damascus was the base of Paul's ministry in "Arabia". On his return there he was very nearly arrested, but the believers organised his escape by letting him down over the wall in a basket. (Acts 9:25 and 2 Cor. 11:32ff). Paul then travelled to Jerusalem to visit Peter and stay some time with him. (Gal. 1:18-19)

When Paul was forced to leave Jerusalem, he travelled via Caesarea to his hometown of Tarsus. (Acts 9:30) At that time Cilicia was part of the Roman Province of Syria (Gal. 1:21-24). And so began Paul's mission to Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21-24).

If you want see a more detailed description of Paul's **first** real missionary journey get hold of:

Paul between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years, by Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer. London: SCM Press and Louisville Westminster John Knox, 1997.