

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Chronological Links in the Book of Acts**

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The New Testament was written within the historical context of the first century A.D. While the various authors at times took note of historical events and figures, their purpose was not to set forth a scientific chronology in terms of our modern approach. Instead, they were proclaiming the world-transforming activities of the Lord Jesus Christ and His followers. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, follows this pattern. He includes several chronological links that provide a historical framework for the growth of the early church and the ministry of Paul. Paramount to Luke's writing, however, is the spread of the Christian faith. Yet, several of Luke's historical notices do satisfy some of our longing for a clear chronology of the early church.

### ***The Death of Herod Agrippa I***

Herod Agrippa I was a grandson of Herod the Great. The complexity of the Herodian family line makes confusion understandable. "He was the child of two first cousins, and was himself married to another cousin, who was the daughter of his aunt, who again was married to an uncle!"<sup>1</sup> Agrippa was born in 10 B.C. and sent to Rome for his education. In Rome, Agrippa befriended Gaius Caligula, who eventually became Emperor. Upon his

accession to the throne in A.D. 37, Caligula "appointed him to be king of the tetrarchy of Philip."<sup>2</sup> After Caligula's short reign, which ended in A.D. 41, Claudius became the Emperor of Rome. "One of the first actions of Claudius on achieving supreme power was to add Judaea to Agrippa's kingdom, with the result that Agrippa now governed a realm practically coextensive with his grandfather's."<sup>3</sup>

Herod Agrippa's death is recorded both by Josephus (*Antiquities* 19.8.2) and by Luke (Acts 12:19-23). Josephus dates Agrippa's death after his third year as king over Judea, that is, three years after the beginning of Claudius' reign as Emperor. Therefore, we know that Agrippa died in A.D. 44. Luke's account places Agrippa's death in the context of a round of persecutions against the early church and at the time that Paul and Barnabas had taken famine relief aid from Antioch to Jerusalem. A.D. 44, therefore, becomes a key date in constructing a chronology of the life of Paul and the early church.

### ***The Proconsulship of Gallio***

The provinces of the vast Roman Empire were governed by rulers with various titles. Those rulers who were appointed by the Roman Senate were known as proconsuls. Acts 18:12 mentions the proconsul of the province of Achaia (southern Greece) by name, Gallio. "Lucius Junius Gallio was a son of the elder Seneca and brother of Seneca the philosopher and of Mela (father of the poet Lucan)."<sup>4</sup> Most proconsulships lasted one year. Dating Gallio's proconsulship in Achaia has been made possible by the discovery of written records. "At Delphi, across the Gulf of Corinth from Corinth, was found a stone (now in the Delphi Museum) which mentions the name of Gallio in his official position."<sup>5</sup> Based on this inscription it is possible to identify the date of the beginning of Gallio's proconsulship. "The date of his entry upon the proconsulship of Achaia . . . can be dated by the aid of the inscription at Delphi already mentioned to (most probably) July 1, A.D. 51 or (just possibly) twelve months later."<sup>6</sup> A.D. 51 is widely accepted as the date for the beginning of Gallio's proconsulship.

During his second missionary journey, Paul had been active in one of Achaia's primary cities, Corinth, for a year and a half (Acts

18:11). Near the beginning of Gallio's arrival in Achaia, the citizens of Corinth brought Paul to trial for spreading the Christian faith. Gallio heard the case and dismissed the charges (Acts 18:12-17). This event would have taken place in A.D. 51, meaning that Paul would have arrived in Corinth late in A.D. 49.

### *The Procuratorship of Felix*

While a proconsul was appointed by the Roman Senate, a procurator was directly appointed by the Emperor to govern a difficult region of the empire. The most notorious Roman procurator in the Bible was Pontius Pilate, who ruled over Judea from A.D. 26-36 and took part in Jesus' crucifixion. A later procurator by the name of Felix also figures into the biblical narrative. "He was originally a slave, and for some unknown service was manumitted by Claudius Caesar."<sup>7</sup> Felix became the procurator of Judea in A.D. 52. He was a harsh ruler who gained many enemies among the Jews. Eventually he was ordered back to Rome to account for the complaints that had reached the emperor's ears.

During Felix's procuratorship, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem. The apostle was sent to Felix for trial (Acts 23:23-35), and Felix agreed to hear his case. Upon hearing Paul's case, Felix suspended judgment, keeping Paul in prison for two years. He and his wife, Drusilla, occasionally called for Paul and listened to him speak about the ways of God. When Felix was summoned to Rome, for political reasons he wanted to leave a favorable impression on the Jewish authorities. Therefore, he left Paul imprisoned (Acts 24:24-27). Felix was replaced by a man named Festus, who early in his procuratorship heard Paul's case and sent Paul to Rome (Acts 25:1-12). Although there is some debate as to the date when Felix left Judea, A.D. 59 has wide acceptance. "The date of his recall and replacement by Porcius Festus is disputed, but a change in the provincial coinage of Judaea attested for Nero's fifth year points to A.D. 59."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Paul would have been in prison in Caesarea from A.D. 57-59. If he arrived in Rome in A.D. 60 and served another two years under house arrest in that city (Acts 28:30), he would have finally been released in A.D. 62.

### *A General Chronology of the Book of Acts*

The historical links in the book of Acts make it possible to form a general chronology of the early church and the ministry of Paul. Paul's famine relief trip from Antioch to Jerusalem took place in A.D. 49, the year that Herod Antipas I died. According to Galatians 2:1, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem fourteen years after Paul's three year sojourn in Arabia following his conversion, although the fourteen years could be inclusive of the three years in Arabia. Galatians 2:1 may be identified with either the famine relief visit in A.D. 44 or, more likely, the Jerusalem Council just prior to Paul's second missionary journey in A.D. 49. These dates would place Paul's conversion as early as A.D. 27 or 30, which seem too early, or A.D. 32 or 35, which fit most chronological reconstructions of this period. Paul's first missionary journey would have occupied a period of about a year prior to A.D. 49 and his second a period of about two years prior to A.D. 51, when Gallio became proconsul of Achaia. Paul's imprisonment following his third missionary journey would have taken place in A.D. 57. Therefore, Paul's missionary journeys must have covered a period of about ten years, from A.D. 47 or 48 until A.D. 57. The secular historical sources and their links to biblical references in the book of Acts provide a workable chronology for the life of Paul and the advance of the early church.

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<sup>1</sup> Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, pp. 474-475.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.6.10 (237).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, F. F. *New Testament History*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969, p. 258.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce, pp.315-316.

<sup>5</sup> Finegan, Jack. *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*. Revised Edition. Peabody, Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, 1998, p. 391.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce, p. 316.

<sup>7</sup> Unger, p. 348.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce, pp. 345-346.