
Acts – Historical Background

from “The Life and Epistles of St. Paul,” by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson

Chronology of the Acts

Some readers may be surprised that up to this point we have made no attempts to ascertain or to state exact chronological details. But theologians are well aware of the difficulties with which such inquiries are attended, in the beginnings of St. Paul's biography. The early chapters of Acts are like the narratives in the Gospels. It is often hardly possible to learn how far the events related were contemporary or consecutive. We should endeavor in vain to determine the relations of time which subsist between Paul's retirement into Arabia and Peter's visit to the converted Samaritans, ¹ or between the journey of one apostle from Joppa to Caesarea and the journey of the other from Jerusalem to Tarsus. Still less have we sufficient data for pronouncing upon the absolute chronology of the earliest transactions in the Church. No one can tell what particular folly or crime was engaging Caligula's attention when Paul was first made a Christian at Damascus. No one can tell on what work of love the Christians were occupied when the Emperor was inaugurating his bridge at Puteoli, ² or exhibiting his fantastic pride on the shores of the British sea. ³

In a work of this kind it is better to place the events of the Apostle's life in the broad light case by the leading features of the period than to attempt to illustrate them by the help of dates, which after all can only be conjectural. Thus we have been content to say that he was born in the strongest and most flourishing period of the reign of Augustus, and that he was converted from the religion of the Pharisees about the time when Caligula succeeded Tiberius. But soon after we

¹ Acts 8 and 9, with Gal. 1

² Where St. Paul afterwards landed, Acts 28:13.

³ Herod was with Caligula in this progress. The emperor's triumph had no more meaning than Napoleon's column at Boulogne; but in the next reign Britain was really conquered.

enter on the reign of Claudius we encounter a coincidence which arrests our attention. We must first take a rapid glance at the reign of his predecessor. Though the cruelty of that reign stung the Jews in every part of the empire, and produced an indignation which never subsided, one short paragraph will be enough for all that need be said concerning that abominable tyrant.

In the early part of the year 37 Tiberius died, and at the close of the same year Nero was born. Between the reigns of these two emperors are those of Caligula and Claudius. The four years during which Caligula sat on the throne of the world were miserable for all the provinces, both in the west and in the east. In Gaul his insults were aggravated by his personal presence. In Syria his caprices were felt more remotely, but not less keenly. The changes of administration were rapid and various. In the year 36, the two great actors in the crime of the crucifixion had disappeared from the public places of Judea. Pontius Pilate ⁴ had been dismissed by Vitellius to Rome, and Marcellus sent to govern in his stead. Caiaphas had been deposed by the same secular authority and succeeded by Jonathan.

Now, in the year 37, Vitellius was recalled from Syria, and Petronius came to occupy the governor's residence at Antioch. Marcellus at Caesarea made way for Marullus; and Theophilus was appointed high-priest at Jerusalem in place of his brother Jonathan. Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, was brought out of the prison where Tiberius had confined him, and Caligula gave a royal crown, ⁵ with the tetrarchies of two of his uncles, to the frivolous friend of his youth. And as this reign began with restless change, so it ended in cruelty and impiety. The emperor, in the career of his blasphemous arrogance, attempted to force

⁴ He did not arrive at Rome until after the death of Tiberius. Like his predecessor, he had governed Judea during ten or eleven years, the emperor having a great dislike for frequent changes in the provinces.

⁵ Tiberius had imprisoned him because of a conversation overheard by a slave when Caligula and Herod Agrippa were together in a carriage. Agrippa was much at Rome both at the beginning and end of Caligula's reign.

the Jews to worship him as God.⁶ One universal feeling of horror pervaded the scattered Israelites, who, though they had scorned the Messiah promised to their fathers, were unable to degrade themselves by a return to idolatry. Petronius, who foresaw what the struggle must be, wrote letters of expostulation to his master, Agrippa, who was then in Italy, implored his patron to pause in what he did. An embassy was sent from Alexandria, and the venerable and learned Philo⁷ was himself commissioned to state the inexorable requirements of the Jewish religion. Everything appeared to be hopeless, when the murder of Caligula, on the 24th of January in the year 41, gave a sudden relief to the persecuted people.

Claudius and Herod Agrippa I

With the accession of Claudius (AD 41) the Holy Land had a king once more. Judea was added to the tetrarchies of Philip and Antipas, and Herod Agrippa I ruled over the wide territory which had been governed by his grandfather. With the alleviation of the distress of the Jews, proportionate suffering came upon the Christians. The “rest” which, in the distractions of Caligula’s reign, the churches had “enjoyed throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria,” was now at an end. “About this time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.” He slew one Apostle, and “because he saw it pleased the Jews,” he proceeded to imprison another. But he was not long spared to seek popularity among the Jews or to murder and oppress the Christians. In the year 44 he perished by that sudden and dreadful death which is recorded in detail by Josephus and St. Luke.⁸ In close coincidence with this event we

⁶ It appears from Dio Cassius and Suetonius that this was part of a general system for extending the worship of himself through the empire.

⁷ Philo’s account of this embassy is, next after Josephus, the most important writing of the period for throwing light on the condition of the Jews in Caligula’s reign. The Jewish envoys had their interview with the emperor at Puteoli, in the autumn of the same year (40 AD) in which he had made his progress through Gaul to the shore of the ocean.

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities*, xix:8; Acts 12. The proof that his death took place in 44 may be seen in Anger and Wieseler; and indeed it is hardly doubted by any. A

have the mention of a certain journey of St. Paul to Jerusalem. Here, then, we have one of those lines of intersection between the sacred history and the general history of the world, on which the attention of intelligent Christians ought to be fixed. This year, 44 AD, and another year, the year 60 AD (in which Felix ceased to be governor of Judea, and, leaving St. Paul bound at Caesarea, was succeeded by Festus), are the two chronological pivots of the apostolic history.⁹ By help of them we find its exact place in the wider history of the world. Between these two limits the greater part of what we are told of St. Paul is situated and included.

Using the year 44 as a starting point for the future, we gain a new light for tracing the apostle’s steps. It is evident that we have only to ascertain the successive intervals of his life, in order to see him at every point, in his connection with the transactions of the Empire. We shall observe this often as we proceed. At present it is more important to remark that the same date throws some light on that earlier part of the Apostle’s path which is confessedly obscure. Reckoning backwards, we remember that “three years” intervened between his conversion and return to Jerusalem. (Gal 1:18) Those who assign the former event to 39 or 40, and those who fix on 37 or some earlier year, differ as to the length of time he spent at Tarsus, or in “Syria and Cilicia.”¹⁰ All that we can say with

coincident and corroborative proof of the time of St. Paul’s journey to Jerusalem, is afforded by the mention of the Famine, which is doubtless that recorded by Josephus. Anger has shown that this famine must be assigned to the interval between 44 and 47; and Wieseler has fixed it more closely to the year 45.

⁹ It ought to be stated that the latter date cannot be established by the same exact proof as the former; but, as a political fact, it must always be a cardinal point of reference in any system of Scripture chronology. Anger and Wieseler, by a careful induction of particulars, have made it highly probable that Festus succeeded Felix in the year 60. More will be said on this subject when we come to Acts 24:27.

¹⁰ Acts 9:30; Gal. 1:21. Wieseler, with Schrader, thinks that he stayed at Tarsus only half a year or a year; Anger, that he was there two years, between 41 and 43; Hemsén, that he spent there the years 40, 41, and 42. Among the English writers, Bishop Pearson imagines that great part of the interval after 39 was

certainty is that St. Paul was converted more than three years before the year 44. The date thus important for all students of Bible chronology is worthy of special regard by the Christians of Britain. For in that year the Emperor Claudius returned from the shores of this island to the metropolis of his empire. He came here in command of a military expedition, to complete the work which the landing of Caesar, a century before, had begun, or at least predicted.¹¹ When Claudius was in Britain its inhabitants were not Christian. They could hardly in any sense be said to have been civilized. He came, as he thought, to add a barbarous province to his already gigantic empire; but he really came to prepare the way for the silent progress of the Christian church. His troops were the instruments of bringing among our barbarous ancestors those charities which were just then beginning to display themselves in Antioch and Jerusalem. (See Acts 11:22,24, 27-30) A “new name” was faintly rising on the Syrian shore which was destined to spread like the cloud seen by the Prophet’s servant from the brow of Mt. Carmel. A better civilization, a better citizenship, than that of the Roman Empire, was preparing for us and for many. One Apostle at Tarsus was waiting for his call to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. Another Apostle at Joppa was receiving a divine intimation that “God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that fears Him and works righteousness, is accepted with Him.” (Acts 9:34,35)

passed in Syria; Burton, who places the conversion very early, is forced to allow nine or ten years for the time spent in Syria and Cilicia.

¹¹ It may be gathered from Dio Cassius that the Emperor left Rome in July 34 and returned in January 45.
