

Who was Porcius Festus?

Porcius Festus was a Roman procurator, succeeding Antonius Felix somewhere between AD 55 and 60. History describes him as fair and reasonable—much more so than Felix or Festus' successor, Albinus. In the Bible Porcius Festus is known for sending Paul to Rome to stand trial under Emperor Nero.

The events leading to Paul's meeting with Porcius Festus are filled with danger. In Acts 21, Paul returns from a missionary journey. He visits James (Jesus' brother), the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and pays the fee of men who had taken a Nazarite vow (Acts 21:17-26). Less than a week later, Paul is spotted in the temple by devout Jews who condemned his work spreading the gospel. Because of a misunderstanding, they falsely accuse Paul of bringing a Gentile into the temple, and they have Paul arrested. Paul gives his defense to the Jews in Acts 22:1-21, but it's not received well, and the mob turns ugly. The Roman tribune (commander above a centurion) protects Paul from the mob by hurrying him into the barracks and orders Paul to be flogged. Paul reveals he is a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:22-29), which causes the tribune to call off the flogging. The tribune later allows Paul to give his testimony before the Jewish council, including the high priest, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, who promptly get into a fight about whether Paul is actually guilty of anything. Tempers flare so high that the tribune again extricates Paul back to the army barracks (Acts 23:1-11). The next day, Paul's nephew warns the tribune that forty men have vowed to murder Paul, so the tribune sends Paul with two hundred soldiers as guards to Felix, the governor in Caesarea (Acts 22:12-22).

The tribune is still curious as to why the Jewish leaders want Paul dead, and he requests Felix uncover the truth. The high priest, some elders, and a hired spokesman

arrive in Caesarea five days later to present their case before Felix, but the Jews from Asia are absent, and the governor delays a decision until the tribune can arrive—or until Paul offers a sufficient bribe. The bribe never comes, and Felix leaves Paul in custody for two years (Acts 24).

Festus succeeds Felix as governor, and Paul's pending case is one of his first concerns. The Jewish leadership meet Festus in Jerusalem and ask that he bring Paul from Caesarea—their purpose was to ambush Paul and kill him on the way. Festus hasn't even been to his new home yet, and he invites Paul's accusers to go with him to Caesarea and get things squared away. Festus could see the charges against the apostle were specious but, wanting to have a good relationship with his new people, asks Paul to go to Jerusalem and stand trial. This would benefit Festus in two ways: he would get on the good side of the Jewish leadership, and he could move the venue of the trial so he wouldn't have to deal with it. Paul politely tells Festus that, as Caesar's representative, Festus needs to either make a fair decision or let him make his case before Caesar. After conferring with his advisers, Festus agrees to send Paul to Caesar (Acts 25:1–12).

Before Paul can leave for Rome, King Herod Agrippa II and his sister/lover Bernice come to visit Festus. The new governor isn't as knowledgeable about the Jewish religion as Felix, whose wife was Jewish, had been. But, in his attempt to repair Rome's relationship with the Jews, Porcius Festus still wants to understand why the Jews are trying to kill Paul. He also knows it's absurd to send a man to trial in Rome with no official charges, so he asks Agrippa for advice (Acts 25:13–27).

Paul gives his testimony to King Agrippa. Unlike Felix, who wanted a bribe, or Festus,

who doesn't understand much of what's going on, Agrippa immediately judges that Paul is completely innocent of any official wrongdoing. He tells Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar" (Acts 26:32).

Despite Paul's innocence and Festus' lack of any real charge, Paul had appealed to Caesar, and Festus must send him. Once in Rome, Paul spends two years under house arrest, chained to a guard, but he is finally in the city where he had longed to be for years (Romans 15:23). And while there he has the opportunity to write the epistles Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Josephus had favorable things to say about Porcius Festus. He recorded that at the time Festus took his position, Sicarii bandits were roaming the countryside, plundering and burning villages. They also mingled into crowds of worshipers and killed people with short, curved swords. Festus learned an imposter had gone to the Sicarii, promising them deliverance from their hardships. The imposter led the bandits to the wilderness where Festus' forces killed the imposter and his followers.

Paul's case was not the only time Festus allowed Jews to appeal to Caesar. King Agrippa built a dining area in his palace that, because of the elevation, looked down onto the actions taking place in the temple. In response to this, and to the guard post that also overlooked the temple, the Jews built up the western wall of the temple's inner court. Agrippa ordered the wall down, and Festus agreed, but then acquiesced to the Jews' counterproposal that they be allowed to petition Nero about the matter. When the Jews returned with a ruling in their favor (all but the two who had been retained as hostages by Nero's wife), Festus agreed to let the wall stand.

In a way, Porcius Festus was to Paul what Pontius Pilate was to Jesus. He valued peace with the Jews more than justice and, despite determining his prisoner was innocent, sent him to judgment. In his quest for political control, Festus dismissed Paul's situation as a "dispute . . . about their own religion" (Acts 25:19). At one point when Paul was speaking before Agrippa, "Festus interrupted Paul's defense. 'You are out of your mind, Paul!' he shouted. 'Your great learning is driving you insane'" (Acts 26:24). Festus was governor for only two or three years before he died. He was succeeded by Albinus.