

Festus first mentioned in 24:27

Porcius Festus

-Succeeded Felix as Governor of Judea in A.D. 60.
-Little is known of Festus before he assumed the governorship of Judea.
-Per Josephus, Festus was a welcome successor to Felix (cf. Jos. War II, 271 [xiv.1]; Antiq. XX, 185-88 [viii.10])
-Per Josephus, he was also much better than Lucceius Albinus (A.D. 62-64) and Gessius Florus (A.D. 64-66) who succeeded him in office (cf. Jos. War II, 272-83 [xiv.1-3]).
-His term of office was cut short by his death in A.D. 62.

Paul was afraid that Festus would concede to the Jews and knew this would put his life in extreme jeopardy. To prevent this possibility he claimed the one final right available to him as a Roman citizen.

¹Now *three days after* **Festus** had arrived in the province, he went up to **Jerusalem** from **Caesarea**.

²And the **chief priests** and the **principal men of the Jews** laid out their case against **Paul**, and they urged him,

³asking as a favor against **Paul** that *he summon him to Jerusalem*—because they were *planning an ambush to kill him on the way*. <- Acts 23:12-15

⁴**Festus** replied that **Paul** was being kept at **Caesarea** and that he himself intended to go there shortly.

⁵“So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you *go down with me*, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them *bring charges against him*.”

⁶After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, *he went down to Caesarea*. And the next day he took his *seat on the tribunal* and ordered **Paul** to be brought.

⁷When he had arrived, the **Jews** who had *come down from Jerusalem* stood around him, *bringing many and serious charges* against him *that they could not prove*. <- Acts 24:5-6

⁸**Paul** argued in his *defense*, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against **Caesar** have I committed any offense.” <- Acts 24:10-13

⁹But **Festus**, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to **Paul**, “Do you wish to go up to **Jerusalem** and there be tried on these charges before me?”

¹⁰But **Paul** said, “I am standing before **Caesar’s** tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well.

¹¹If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. *I appeal to Caesar*.”

¹²Then **Festus**, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To **Caesar** you have *appealed*; to **Caesar** you shall go.”

¹³Now when some days had passed, **Agrippa the king** and **Bernice** arrived at **Caesarea** and greeted **Festus**.

¹⁴And as they stayed there many days, **Festus** laid **Paul’s** case *before the king*, saying, “There is a man left prisoner by **Felix**,

Chief Priests

-Per Josephus, the high priest in Jerusalem when Festus took office was Ishmael, whom Herod Agrippa II appointed to succeed Ananias during the final days of Felix’s governorship (cf. Jos. Antiq. XX, 179 [viii.8], 194 [viii.11], 196 [viii.11]).
-According to the Talmud, Ishmael served as high priest for 10 years.
-Likely that Ananias, continued to exercise a dominant role right up to his death in A.D. 66. Perhaps this is the reason for the phrase “chief priests”

“I appeal to Caesar”

-Paul appealed to Nero (A.D. 54 to 68) rather than leave his case in the hands of Festus
-Nero only became known as a persecutor of Christians later in his reign (A.D. 63 to 68)
-Roman law (The *lex Iulia*) protected citizens who invoked the right of *provocatio ad Caesarem* (appeal to the emperor) from violent coercion and capital trials by provincial administrators.
-Festus also had to determine if it was either just or feasible to acquit the prisoner so as to make such an appeal unnecessary.

Festus recounts the details of the case to Herod Agrippa.

¹⁵ and when I was at *Jerusalem*, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a *sentence of condemnation* against him.

¹⁶ I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him.

¹⁷ So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought.

¹⁸ When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed.

¹⁹ Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.

²⁰ Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to *Jerusalem* and be tried there regarding them.

²¹ But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar."

²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, "*I would like to hear the man myself.*" "Tomorrow," said he, "you will hear him."

²³ So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

²⁴ And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in *Jerusalem* and here, *shouting that he ought not to live any longer.*"

²⁵ But *I found that he had done nothing deserving death.* And as he himself *appealed to the emperor*, I decided to go ahead and send him.

²⁶ But I have *nothing definite to write to my lord about him.* Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, *I may have something to write.*

²⁷ For *it seems to me unreasonable*, in sending a prisoner, *not to indicate the charges against him.*"

Herod Agrippa II

-Marcus Julius Agrippa II (A.D. 27-100)

-Son of Agrippa I (12:1-2), the great-grandson of Herod the Great.

-As ruler of the adjoining kingdom to the north, Herod Agrippa II came to pay his respects to Festus, the new governor of Judea.

-Was appointed "the curator of the temple" with power to depose and appoint the high priest and the responsibility of preserving the temple's treasury and priestly vestments (Jos. Antiq. XX, 213 [ix.4], 222 [ix.7])

-Bernice was his sister (1 year younger)

<- Compare to Jesus' appearance before Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-12)

Porcius Festus

Acts 24:27 (ESV)

²⁷ When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

PORCIUS FESTUS (Πόρκιος Φῆστος, *Porkios Phēstos*). Governor of Judaea while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea. Festus heard Paul testify several times before sending him to Rome (Acts 25–26).

Biblical Relevance

Festus takes over as governor of Judaea from Felix, who had left Paul in prison in Caesarea as a favor to the Jews (Acts 24:27). Promptly after taking office, Festus makes customary visits to Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, who request that Paul be sent to Jerusalem for trial, intending to ambush him on the way (Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 397). Whether Festus is aware of their plan or simply wants to follow proper legal channels (Acts 25:16), he refuses the Jewish leaders’ request and instead invites them to accompany him to Caesarea to present their charges against Paul there (Acts 25:1–5; Barrett, *Acts*, 1120, 1124–5). At this point in the narrative, Festus is presented as a just ruler, careful not to take sides or jump to a conclusion (Acts 25:5; Peterson, *Acts*, 645).

As the trial in Caesarea progresses, Festus, like his predecessor Felix, appears more interested in appeasing the Jews than in providing justice (Acts 25:9; 24:27; Bock, *Acts*, 701). Even though Paul insists on his innocence and the charges against him cannot be proved, Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, asks Paul if he is willing to go to Jerusalem for trial (Acts 25:6–9). At this point, Paul is in danger of being attacked in Jerusalem, and he faces an unjust trial in Caesarea. Furthermore, even if Paul is acquitted, Festus appears to be in no position to protect him (Barrett, *Acts*, 1121).

Paul appeals for a trial before Caesar, and Festus agrees to send him to Rome (Acts 25:10–12). As a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25–29), Paul has a legal right to appeal to Caesar’s tribunal, “although the emperor in this period normally delegated the hearing and judging of cases to others” (Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 397). This plan also suits Festus, because sending Paul to Rome saves him from having to release a man whom his citizens want dead (Barrett, *Acts*, 1130–31). Festus recognizes that the case against Paul has more to do with religious disputes than with any violation of Roman laws (Acts 25:18–19, 25–27). In order to determine a charge, Festus has Paul testify again in a fact-finding inquiry, this time before King Agrippa, who is more knowledgeable on Jewish matters (Acts 26:2–3). Rather than giving a legal defense, Paul takes the opportunity to proclaim the gospel (Bruce, *Acts*, 461), possibly even hoping to convert Agrippa (Acts 26:27–29).

Festus, unable to comprehend either a crucified Messiah or a physical resurrection from the dead, thinks Paul is out of his mind: “Your great learning is driving you insane” (Acts 26:24 NIV; Barrett, *Acts*, 1167). Despite this reaction, Agrippa agrees with Festus that Paul has broken no Roman laws, saying, “This man could have been set free if he

had not appealed to Caesar” (Acts 26:32 NIV). Strictly speaking, Festus still has the power to free Paul, but doing so would jeopardize his relationship with both the Jews and Nero, who was emperor at the time (Arnold, “Acts,” 467). In Keener’s estimation, “the political implications of dismissing an appeal to Caesar were unpleasant, whereas the benefits of sending Paul to Rome free Festus from having to disappoint the Jerusalem leaders if his own juridical conclusions differ from theirs” (Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 397).

The material in Acts shows Festus to be a savvy politician, currying favor with the Jews—who had a history of resisting Roman authority—while at the same time avoiding a perversion of justice (Barrett, *Acts*, 1121). Festus’ own account of Paul’s trial (Acts 25:13–21) has “dashes of self-serving interpretation” (e.g., Acts 25:16) in which he is careful to portray himself in the best possible light (Pervo, *Acts*, 617). It is unclear what Festus might have done to appease the Jewish leaders if Paul had not appealed to Caesar, but he does appear concerned to give Paul a fair trial (Peterson, *Acts*, 648).

Paul’s imprisonment under Felix and Festus was marked by politics and corruption, yet it was key in sending Paul to Rome to preach the gospel: “What looks like a legal can of worms tainted with the odor of corruption is the unfolding of God’s plan” (Pervo, *Acts*, 609). Some commentators have noticed parallels between Paul’s trials and those of Jesus in Luke 22–23 (Johnson, *Acts*, 428–9). In both stories, there is an inconclusive trial before a Roman governor (Luke 23:2–5; Acts 25:1–12), followed by a hearing with a Herodian king (Luke 23:6–7; Acts 25:13–27; Pervo, *Acts*, 609).

Extrabiblical Information

Very little is known about Festus beyond the material in Acts. Outside of the NT, he is mentioned only by Josephus, who appears to be largely favorable toward Festus’ short rule (Pervo, *Acts*, 608). His predecessor, Felix, had been excessively harsh toward the Jews and was removed by the emperor Nero for his overly violent response to a Jewish uprising (Arnold, “Acts,” 448, 456). Josephus recounts that after Nero installed Festus, a delegation of Jews went to Rome to accuse Felix, who was spared punishment only because of his brother’s influence (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.182). These conflicts with the Jewish leaders might explain why Felix “wanted to grant a favor to the Jews” (Acts 24:27, NIV) by leaving Paul in prison at the end of his career: Felix needed “all the Jewish mercy he [could] get” (Arnold, “Acts,” 397). Festus, knowing the cause of his predecessor’s downfall, would have similar motivation to “do the Jews a favor” (Acts 25:9, NIV; Peterson, *Acts*, 648).

There is some debate about when Festus came into office, though most scholars agree that it was not later than AD 60. Barrett prefers an earlier date, between about 54 and 56 (Barrett, *Acts*, 1116–8). Pervo, on the other hand, leans toward a later date of around 58 to 60 (Pervo, *Acts*, 608). Festus apparently died in office and, after a brief interim period, was succeeded by Albinus, no later than AD 62 (Barrett, *Acts*, 1117).

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Ambush

Acts 23:12–15 (ESV)

¹² When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, “We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near.”

Charges Against Paul

Acts 24:5–6 (ESV)

⁵ For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶ He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him.

Acts 24:10–13 (ESV)

¹⁰ And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied:
“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense. ¹¹ You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, ¹² and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up

¹ Otten, J. D. (2012, 2013, 2014). Porcius Festus. In J. D. Barry, L. Wentz, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair-Wolcott, R. Klippenstein, D. Bomar, ... D. R. Brown (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city.¹³ Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me.

Herod Agrippa II

Acts 12:1–2 (ESV)

¹ About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. ² He killed James the brother of John with the sword,

AGRIPPA II (Ἀγρίππας, *Agrippas*). Son of Agrippa I and king of the Jews from ca. AD 53–100.

Agrippa II in the New Testament

King Agrippa II appears in the New Testament only in Acts 25:13–26:32. After Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea for two years, the governor Festus presented Paul before Agrippa II. Paul asked Agrippa if he believed the prophets. Agrippa’s response indicated that he thought Paul was trying to convert him. Paul responded by saying that he hoped everyone listening would be like him, except for the chains of imprisonment. Agrippa, Berenice, Festus, and other dignitaries declared that Paul had done nothing wrong. Agrippa also said that Paul would have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:13–26:32).

Agrippa II in Other Sources

Agrippa II was born ca. AD 27/28. He grew up in Rome with the future Roman emperor, Claudius. When Agrippa I died in AD 44, Agrippa II was only 17 or 18 years old—too young to rule his father’s kingdom. Roman governors ruled the former kingdom of Agrippa I from AD 44–48. Agrippa II began to rule in AD 48 when Claudius granted him the kingdom of Chalcis, formerly ruled by his uncle Herod (Josephus, *Ant.* 19.360–62; *J.W.* 2.223). The territory over which he ruled continued to expand. In AD 53, Claudius removed him as ruler of Chalcis and gave him the former territories of Philip and Lysanias (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.138; *J.W.* 2.247). Nero further expanded Agrippa’s rule when he granted him parts of Galilee and Peraea in AD 55 (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.159; *J.W.* 2.252). Agrippa II ruled Judaea alongside various Roman governors.

Agrippa II supported Rome during the Jewish revolt (AD 66–70). The Roman procurator Florus angered the Jews by raiding the treasury of the temple in Jerusalem. When the Jewish people attempted to take control of the Temple, Florus sent troops into the city to kill anyone they met (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.293–308). Agrippa II was in Alexandria when this happened. When Agrippa returned to Jerusalem, he was informed of what had happened by the high priests. In a lengthy speech to the Jews, Agrippa called them to remain faithful to Rome because the Roman army was too powerful to be defeated (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.336–401; Richardson, *Herod*, 314; Schaefer, *History*, 114; Schürer, *History*, 196–98). Agrippa’s speech persuaded the people to avoid war with Rome for a little while. When war with the Jews eventually broke out, Agrippa provided military support to both Vespasian and Titus (Josephus, *J.W.* 3.29, 68; Tacitus, *Historiae*).

Agrippa even led his own army in the siege of Gamala (Josephus, J.W. 4.9–10; Life 1.114). In AD 75, Vespasian gave Agrippa the rank of Praetor as a reward for his loyalty to Rome (Dio, *Historia*).

Agrippa II’s sister, Berenice, also appears in Acts. She was married to her uncle, Herod of Chalcis, until his death in AD 48. Upon Herod’s death, Berenice moved into the royal palace at Pnias with Agrippa. Rumors of incest followed the siblings. These rumors forced her to marry Polemo, king of Cilicia (Josephus, Ant. 20.145–47; Juvenal, *Saturae*; Kokkinos, *Herodian Dynasty*, 321). During the Jewish-Roman war (AD 66–70), she became Titus’ mistress as he campaigned against Jerusalem. After the war she accompanied Titus back to Rome (Tacitus, *Historiae*; Dio, *Historia*). A few Cynics publicly chided Titus because of his illicit relationship with Berenice, so he sent her away (Dio, *Historia*; Kokkinos, *Herodian Dynasty*, 328–30). After Titus died, Berenice left Rome for good and returned to her brother.

Apart from Agrippa’s allegiance to Rome during the Jewish-Roman war, we know very few details about his reign. He continued to rule until his death in AD 100. After his death, his territory was made part of the province of Syria. Agrippa II ruled for 47 years, the longest reign of any members of the Herodian Dynasty. Like many of his Herodian predecessors, Agrippa II proved to be a shrewd politician, though his legacy is tainted by his loyalty to Rome during the war.

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Jesus Before Herod

Luke 23:6–12 (ESV)

⁶ When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷ And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. ⁹ So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate. ¹² And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.