

I. Introduction

All things are to be done decently and in order the Bible says (1Co 14:40) – how much more then when trying to understand the timeline of the Bible itself. The greatest problem with timelines for the Book of Acts is that they do not put things in their proper order by reasoning from the scriptures themselves first. All too often they are rather based on the views, opinions, and the traditions of men. The problem with the views and opinions of men is that everyone has one. God says our ways and our thoughts are NOT His ways and His thoughts of God (Isa 55:8-9)! So few today want to reason **from** the scriptures (Isa 1:18, 1Pe 3:15, Act 17:2, 18:4,19, 24:25), but would rather reason among themselves (Mt 16:8, Mk 2:8, Lk 5:21-22).

Even worse are the traditions of men, for they are what make the commandment of God and scripture itself of none effect, even as our Lord Jesus warned us! (Mt 15) This is why in all things the scripture must be our foundation, our guide, and our light of illumination. “Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; **as it is written**” (Rom 3:4). Remember, all truth and knowledge are in Christ and in his Word (Col 2:2-3, Rom 2:20). Therefore truth can never contradict scripture, for the scripture is truth (Jn 17:17).

If we truly reason from the scriptures, along with some historical dates to bound certain well-known events, there is a tremendous amount of detail that we can come to glean from Acts and the epistles. If we first study the scriptures and reason from them as absolute truth, then when we line them up with history we find the answers to many questions we might have concerning the timeline of the book of Acts. Some of these which we find the answers to are the following:

- What is the predominant principle that governs the timeline of the book of Acts?
- When were (non-apostolic) elders in the church first seen?
- When does James the Lord’s brother become an apostle?
- Which was the first gospel written & why was it written first?
- When did John write his gospel & epistles?
- When was Paul’s salvation?
- Did Paul literally see Jesus?
- When is the Jerusalem council of Acts 15?
- Did Paul ever visit Colossae? And if so, when?
- Did Paul ever go to Rome as an apostle of the Lord prior to Acts 28?
- When did Paul & Mark reconcile & did they ever travel together again?
- When did Paul travel round about unto Illyricum (Rom 15:19)?
- Do Paul & Titus rejoin at Nicopolis (Tit 3:12)? And if so, when?
- When did Paul & Titus go to Crete?
- When are Paul’s first & final Roman imprisonments?
- When & where are the 5 whippings of the Jews that Paul mentions (2Co 11:24)?
- When & where are the 3 beatings with rods that Paul mentions (2Co 11:25)?
- When & where are the 3 shipwrecks that Paul mentions (2Co 11:25)?
- When & what sign marked the sealing (i.e. the close) of scripture?
- Does Timothy make it to Paul before Paul is put to death in Rome (2Tim 4:9,21)?

II. Guideposts for Determining the Times

Scripture is our primary guide in understanding the timeline of the book of Acts and we will look at many aspects of it, but there are a few known historical dates that corroborate scripture. These will be interwoven through the subjects we will look at so it is easiest to present them here in one place at the beginning. But do not misunderstand their significance. They do not determine truth they only witness to it. One cannot understand the significance of history without understanding the God of creation and time. To understand past, present, or future we must know the scriptures and the thoughts He has revealed.

Events that help establish the dates of Acts and to understand the order in which things took place:

1. death of Jesus Christ in 30 AD: this establishes the beginning of the book of Acts¹
2. death of Tiberias Caesar 16 Mar 37 AD & the death of King Aretas in 40 AD: historically it is known King Aretas takes control of Damascus shortly after this Tiberias' death, thus with his own death only 3 years later we have a 3 year window on when Aretas has the rule of Damascus as the scripture states. This then brackets the time Paul is lowered out of a basket in Damascus during Aretas' dominion of Damascus (Ac 9:23-25, 2Co 11:32-33).
3. death of Herod Agrippa in 44 AD (Ac 12:20-23): this establishes when the famine relief is sent from Antioch (Acts 11:29-30) and when James is put to death.
4. Note: the fact that the famine occurred during the reign of Claudius Caesar does not help us significantly, but Josephus does witness concerning when this famine was. It greatly afflicted the land of Judea, and he says, it was "a very great famine, in which many died for want of food." He also says, "This is that famine foretold by Agabus, verse 28, which happened when Claudius was counsel the fourth time". This would be equivalent to the fourth year of Claudius' reign or 44 AD. Josephus also lets us know this famine lasted more than 3 full years.
5. the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 (Gal 2:1-10): this establishes the date of Paul's salvation 14 years before and also bounds the start of Paul's second apostolic journey (which starts soon afterwards). This date will be the most important date to calculate given the record of scripture and the historical dates given herein.
6. the 9th year of Claudius Caesar's reign from 25 Jan 49 to 24 Jan 50 AD: his reign is known to have been from 25 Jan 41 to 12 Oct 54 AD. But the 9th year of his reign is significant because historically it is known this is when Claudius commanded all Jews to leave Rome. We expect that it is in the beginning of the reign of Nero (who reigns immediately after Claudius' death) when the order is rescinded (explained why later). This then brackets when Aquila & Priscilla leave Rome (Act 18:2) and the soonest they could return to start a church in their home (Rom 16:3-5). It also determines a marker after which Romans is written.
7. when Gallio is deputy of Achaia, by the summer of 51 or 52 AD for 2 or 1 years respectively²: this brackets when the insurrection of the Jews takes place in Corinth (Ac 18:12) from which we can back date the Jerusalem council (Act 15).
8. Porcius Festus succeeds Felix as procurator of Judea in 60 AD (Ac 24:27): this establishes when Paul is imprisoned in Caesarea, when he arrives in Jerusalem his final time 2 years earlier (58 AD), and approximately the end of the book of Acts, 3 years later, including a 6 month journey to Rome (63 AD).
9. other events which do not help:
 - a. before these days rose up Theudas with 400 (Ac 5:36)
 - b. after this rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing (Ac 5:37)
 - c. when the Egyptian leads out into the wilderness 4000 murderers in 55 AD before Paul's arrest in the temple at Jerusalem (Ac 21:38)

¹ See the "Order of the Gospels" timeline where the date of Jesus Christ's death is established

² An inscription from Delphi includes a letter from Claudius Caesar in which Gallio is named as a proconsul. This is the 26th acclamation of Claudius. The 22nd through the 27th are all known to have occurred in 52 AD with the 27th being before August. Hence, the 26th would be in the spring or summer of 52 AD. The term of proconsul was just one year beginning in the late spring. Thus, Acts 18 can be located to be in the spring or summer of 52 or 51 AD.

III. Concerning Paul's Roman Imprisonments

The universal tradition held to in timelines for the Book of Acts is the freeing of Paul after his Roman imprisonment in Acts 28 and his subsequent journeys after the close of the book of Acts. This then is followed by being imprisoned a second time in Rome and then finally to be put to death – all after the close of the book of Acts. Thus, they have two Roman imprisonments as required by the epistles.³ Though this may solve several difficulties in trying to order Acts with the epistles, it opens up to every man's whim and guess when things take place – why? Because if this is so we have gone beyond what the scriptures say and we now lose any compass we could have had in knowing when events take place during the history of the church outlined for us in the book of Acts. All of the prison epistles are now scattered to the wind as to what order they take place in. Every man puts them in a different order – why? Because there is nothing to guide them but their own imaginations. Remember ALL the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hid in Christ, the Word of God (Col 2:2-3).

The uniqueness of this ordering is that it stays within what can be reasoned from the scriptures. Why is there no release after Paul's imprisonment in Rome? Because there is no scriptural evidence that he was ever released. In fact, Paul himself lets the Ephesian elders know that they will **never see his face again** – even before his Roman imprisonment of Acts 28. He says, “And now, behold, I **know** that ye all … shall see my face **no more.**” (Ac 20:25,38)⁴

A. Objections to a Pre-Acts 28 Roman Imprisonment

The primary reasons for people believing that Acts 28 cannot be Paul's final Roman imprisonment are as follows: (1) there is no mention in the book of Acts of Paul's visit to Rome before then and (2) tradition indicates Paul was released by the written testimony of early church fathers. The evidences they bring against Paul having been to Rome before Acts 28 are three-fold. (3) In Acts 19:21 Paul states “I must also see Rome.” Again in Acts 23:11 when Paul is in prison in Jerusalem and “the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.” They would argue that both of these mean he had not seen Rome yet. (4) Lastly, in Acts 28:21 when the chief of the Jews visited Paul under house arrest 3 days after he arrived in Rome they have not heard of Paul. Again they say Paul could not possibly have been to Rome previously and founded the church there at Rome or they would surely have heard of him.

“And they said unto him, We neither received letters out of Judaea concerning thee, neither any of the brethren that came shewed or spake any harm of thee. But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, we know that every where it is spoken against.” – Ac 28:21-22

We will see evidence that Paul did indeed visit Rome prior to Acts 28, but first let us deal with these objections so that we can put them into a proper context.

³ It is clear from studying the prison epistles that they are incompatible as far as all happening at the same time or during the same imprisonment [more on this later]. It is this fact which forces all those who try to integrate Acts and the epistles to come to the conclusion that there must be two Roman imprisonments. Having tried long and hard myself to see if there be any way to only have one Roman imprisonment (that being the one in Acts 28), I can say without a doubt it is not possible. The prison epistles clearly require two Roman imprisonments – to this there is no disagreement, even though Acts only shows one.

⁴ This is implicit proof that the epistle to the Ephesians (which is a prison epistle!) has already been written, for you will notice no such warnings in the epistle as are given in Acts 20 to the elders. In fact, one must wonder if there were any elders yet in Ephesus at the writing of Ephesians for there is no address to the leadership at all (as in Philippians & Colossians).

1. Things Not Mentioned in Acts

Concerning the first objection that there is no mention of such things in the book of Acts, this is true. Acts itself only shows one Roman imprisonment. This silence, though, does not preclude another Roman imprisonment during the time of Acts. To this we should not altogether be surprised, for there are **many** things that occur in the epistles which were not recorded in Acts but are recorded for us in the epistles. For instance, we know Luke traveled with Paul many times, yet he is NEVER once even named in the book of Acts.⁵ Similarly, Titus was sent to Corinth repeatedly and traveled with Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, but he is never mentioned in Acts, though we know these events happened.

Paul speaks of three shipwrecks before the writing of 2Corinthians, none of which are specifically mentioned. Yet the only recorded shipwreck is that of Ac 27 which is on the way to Rome and occurs after the writing of 2Corinthians. This is what makes the study of God's word exciting because the author himself invites us to search the scriptures. This is why any issue concerning the word of God requires us to rightly divide the word of truth (2Tim 2:15).

2. Tradition of the Early Church Fathers

The second objection to a pre-Acts 28 Roman imprisonment of Paul is that tradition indicates Paul was released after his imprisonment in Acts 28 by the written testimony of early church fathers. Tradition is a notoriously poor guide to the truth as Jesus' teachings so manifestly declare: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time ... But I say unto you" (Mt 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-34, 38-39, 43-44). None of these church fathers was in the first century. Hence, none of them were eyewitnesses. None of them claimed to know for sure, only that it was reported. We cannot build off of what is reported by men, when the witness of scripture shows us otherwise. No weight can be attached to the testimony of the church fathers (1) if they were not eye-witnesses and (2) if scripture as we shall see indicates contrary to their testimony. The Word of God is final authority. Now to the testimony of the word "if they [i.e. the supposed church fathers] speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isa 8:20)

3. Scriptures Supposedly Implying Paul had not Seen Rome

We need to look at the evidences now of Paul's pre-Acts 28 Roman imprisonment. But concerning the 3 scriptures earlier quoted (Ac 19:21, 23:11, & 28:21) that seem to imply Paul had not been to Rome before Acts 28, let us make a few comments here before we proceed. It is of note that in Ac 19:21 Paul says he must also see Rome. The other places he mentions (Macedonia, Achaia, and Jerusalem) he had specifically all been to before. And it is this context in which Paul says he must also see Rome. Rather than being a witness against having been to Rome it is in actuality a witness that he had been to Rome already and wanted to see how they were doing (just like as for Macedonia, Achaia, & Jerusalem). The same principle can also be seen in the Lord's words to Paul in the castle in Jerusalem: "for **as** thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome."

4. The Ignorance of the Jews Concerning Paul

Lastly, concerning the chief Jews ignorance of Paul this can only mean if Paul had been in Rome that either he was not able to go into the synagogues and testify as was his custom, but must have worked with the Gentiles. This seems completely implausible at first knowing that Paul always went to the Jews first. We see this pattern established very clearly on Paul's first apostolic journey. In the beginning of Paul's journeys we see he always went to the Jews. His first entrance to new places was invariably to the Jews and the synagogue in that area. We see this extensively on his first journey (Ac 13:5 [Salamis], 13:14,15,42 [Antioch in Pisidia], 14:1 [Iconium]). This continues on his second journey (Ac 17:1 [Thessalonica], 17:10 [Berea], 17:17 [Athens], 18:4 [Corinth], 18:19 [Ephesus]).

Yet what we can miss is that there is a constant though subtle transition that is taking place in Paul's ministry as each trip continues as he goes less and less to the Jews and more and more to the Gentiles. During the first trip we see a revelation coming to Paul and Barnabas that they were sent primarily to the Gentiles:

⁵ Though we see the clue given by Luke himself in Acts when he changes from "they/them" to "we/us", still he is never mentioned directly, though the epistles repeatedly speak of him.

Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth. – Ac 13:46-7

After their first journey comes to an end the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 takes place. There it is confirmed by the pillars of the church (James, Cephas, and John) that Paul and Barnabas were indeed the apostles to the Gentiles. Having “perceived the grace that was given unto me [Paul], they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.” (Gal 2:9) On their second journey a similar rejection by the Jews now causes a change not just in understanding but in their future direction.

And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he [Paul] shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean; from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles. – Ac 18:6

This is clearly confirmed as on Paul’s third journey we see only **one** time that he goes to the synagogue of the Jews. Note that that is to return to Ephesus to continue where he had left off at the end of his second journey (Ac 19:8 [Ephesus]) and to continue the relationship he had already started. Yet after only 3 months he had to separate from them. Since, as we shall find, the most likely time for Paul’s first visit to Rome is during his 3 year stay at Ephesus, we should not be surprised if by then his primary goal and direction is not to go to the synagogue or to the Jews at all but to reach the Gentiles right from the beginning. As he shortly thereafter writes to the Romans, “For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh [i.e. the Jews], and might save some of them.” (Rom 11:13-14)

But the primary reason that the Jews did not know Paul when he came to Rome in Acts 28 is simply because they were not there when he came previously! How can this be?! Simple, the Bible itself gives us the answer: “a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (*because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:*)” (Ac 18:2). There were NO Jews in Rome upon penalty of death ever since Claudius in the 9th year of his reign (i.e. sometime during Jan 49 to Jan 50) had commanded ALL Jews to depart from Rome. This lasted throughout the remainder of Claudius’ reign till his death (12 Oct 54).

The most likely time for this command to be removed was in the very beginning of Nero’s reign while he tried to restore the empire to that under Augustus’ rule. Paul would then be in Ephesus and must have taken the first available opportunity to go to Rome. Thus, there were no synagogues to go to and no Jews yet to minister to. It would completely have been a mission to the Gentiles. Those Jews who would be returning would take much longer to move their permanent possessions back with them to Rome and by then Paul would have been in prison and/or have already left. This then, even if there had been some Jews in Rome when Paul was there, would explain the chief Jews’ ignorance of Paul. As they came later after Paul left this would explain their limited knowledge of this sect (Ac 28:22).

B. Historical Backdrop for Paul’s Acts 28 Imprisonment

Consider the conditions that existed during Paul’s imprisonment as revealed in the scripture and from what we can glean from history. First a little historical background is needed to understand the times. Nero succeeds Claudius Caesar on 14 Oct 54 AD. This he did through the machinations and plottings of his mother. She had convinced Claudius that Nero (Claudius’ adopted son through her) was a better successor than his own two natural sons. Then after Nero is named co-ruler and a year or two goes by (so that Nero’s presence and rule is established) Claudius dies of his favorite meal: mushrooms (which had been poisoned).

Nero now takes the sole rule at the young age of 17. In typical idealistic zealousness of teenagers, he promises to govern with compassion and responsibility. But as he grows up in the corruption of court politics (stirred up by his own mother), he becomes increasingly jaded with how things work. As suits a man with absolute power and no real moral character he soon casts aside these for more efficient ways. Within 5 years (59 AD) he murders his own mother. His reign from there becomes increasingly brutal and depraved. By July 64 AD in order to remove buildings owned by others so he could build a new hippodrome for his own pleasure (i.e. a new entertainment center) he has that part of Rome set on fire.

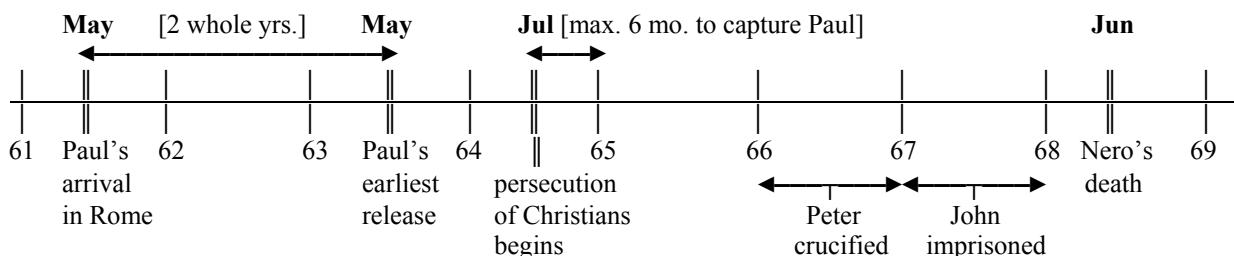
While Rome burns he plays his fiddle and then blames the Christians for the fire and begins an empire wide persecution of Christians in order to divert the blame from himself. Paul's two years of Roman imprisonment at the end of Acts can be dated as 61 through 63 AD (probably ending in the March to May timeframe). Thus, Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment requires that he be released only 1 year before the empire wide persecution against Christians breaks out in July of 64.

Can we really expect someone as cruel and heartless as Nero had become to release such a politically valuable prisoner as Paul? Have we made light of Nero's cruelties? This is the Nero who murders his own mother, fiddles while Rome burns and people are dying in the flames (which he set for his own selfish pleasures). This is the Nero that so despises Christians that when called to account for his deed of setting the fires blames the Christians and begins a widespread campaign of torture against them (which lasts the rest of his life). This is the Nero who invents the most horrible punishments for peaceful law-abiding Christians. He fed them to wild, starved animals. He rolled them in pitch and lit up his garden at night with living burning bodies and then drove through his garden (supposedly naked) in his chariot to 'enjoy' the sight! This was a sick man.

Can we for one moment believe, within one year of beginning his great persecution of Christians (that would last the rest of his life), that this man would release the very mover and instigator of this belief which he had so come to despise – the very father of Christians (so to speak), Paul himself? No, we cannot.

C. The Lack of Time

Acts 28 cannot be Paul's first Roman imprisonment in addition because there is not sufficient time to fulfill all that is required for him to do after his first release. Paul's release from his first Roman imprisonment requires nearly a year (at least 10 months) of journeys and labors AFTER this persecution of July 64 begins before Paul is recaptured. Yet Paul is still publicly active in his apostolic ministry according to the epistles. Look at the timeline below.



The following is a list of all the things that Paul would need to accomplish during this time after his first release.

1. We would expect when he is 1st released from prison to rejoice with the saints in Rome and visit the house churches there to encourage them. He might also need some healing from being in prison. At the same time he must prepare to see those churches which were so concerned about him and to which he wrote during his imprisonment. [1 mo.]
2. Paul had promised to visit Philippi, so leaving Rome Paul heads for Macedonia once again (along with a team of co-labourers such as Luke and others), probably stopping in at Corinth to see how they do. [1 mo.]
3. Arriving in Macedonia Paul also visits with Thessalonica, after seeing Philippi.
4. Paul now must go inland to visit Phrygia in order to see how they do. Paul probably passes through Troas, through Bithynia, and on to Phrygia. In particular he wants to get to Colossae as soon as is possible to try to get Archippus back to his purpose and to see how Philemon has received Onesimus. [2 mo., including time in & from Macedonia]
5. After finishing in Phrygia (Colossae and possibly Laodicea), he must return to Antioch to finally let them know of all that has happened to him. This finally concludes his third trip. [2 mo., including time in & from Phrygia]
6. After staying at Antioch, Paul starts his planning for a fourth trip. He gathers supplies and a team and coordinates via letters to the places he will go. [3 mos. minimum]
7. Paul and his team returns to Jerusalem to pass through there to encourage the Hebrew saints for he would want to see how his epistle to the Hebrews was received. [1 mo.]
8. Paul & his team must now go to Crete and start a new work there. Titus would be with Paul, most likely also Artemas. [4 mo. minimum]

9. Paul leaves Titus and another brother (probably Artemas) to take care of the work. Paul then goes to Corinth or Nicopolis to begin an outreach “round about unto Illyricum” (Rom 15:19) [aka Dalmatia, 2Tim 4:10], “To preach the gospel in the regions beyond you [Corinth]” (2Co 10:16). [4 mos. minimum, including travel]
10. After at least a year (though more likely to be 3 full years given the pattern of discipleship), Paul writes Titus to ordain elders in every city and to prepare to meet him in Nicopolis in the winter. [4+ mo.]
11. Titus must send Artemas to Paul to let him know of the concision in Crete and of some of the Cretans.
12. Paul finishes his ministry “round about unto Illyricum” (Rom 15:19), sends Artemas or Tychicus to Titus to relieve him in Crete, and goes to Nicopolis to winter and to await Titus’ coming. Note: presumably Titus does arrive to see Paul before Paul is captured since there is no second letter to Titus from prison (as is with Timothy). [2 mo.]

At this point and not one moment before can Paul now be taken! All of this travel is required to happen after his release and according to the timeline must all occur within only 1½ years (14 months of freedom and at most 6 months to be captured for a total of 20 months)! Yet we see it takes a minimum of 24 months (2 years) for everything to be fulfilled that we know of (much less what we don’t know of).

Can we really expect Paul to evade the grasp of the Roman empire for over a year while traveling throughout it doing public ministry? No. I expect even the 6 months I have allotted would be over-generous (especially considering that the life of not a few Roman soldiers would be at stake if he were not apprehended speedily). During Nero’s persecution of Christians, Paul would have been prime target number one. Yet we are led to believe (1) he can publicly travel through the Roman empire and do apostolic ministry and not be slain or captured for over a year? Or (2) that Paul the apostle who did not fear man nor death would hide during this time or conceal himself in any way? It seems most inconceivable knowing the heart of Paul to be unashamed of the gospel and the wickedness of the times. As his final journey to Jerusalem (in Acts 20 & 21) shows he did not run from, hide, or even try to avoid persecution in fulfilling his calling, EVEN when he **knew** it was coming.

It should be clear to see, not only did Paul prophetically indicate he would never be released again, but it also cannot take place for there is no time to fulfill the scriptures. Let us look at another reason that the first Roman imprisonment cannot be that of Acts 28, but must take place before this.⁶

⁶ Additional corroborating evidence in the book of Romans will be looked at in the section entitled “Did Paul ever visit Rome before writing them?”