

# THE GOVERNORS: PILATE, FELIX, AND FESTUS

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a great honor to be able to be a part of the 2007 lectureship here at Gonzales. I have admired James Eaves for several years and appreciate the opportunity to be associated with him again in this effort. I am excited about the theme for this year's lectureship, *Life Lessons from New Testament Characters*, and am grateful for the opportunity to study three occasionally overlooked New Testament characters. These three men are known very well outside of religious circles--in fact they were each mentioned by contemporaneous writers. These three men were of a class of men--hand picked by emperors--who, as procurators, exerted influence and power in Judea for around fifty-seven years. Their mandate ranged from collecting taxes to keeping order, but their actions at times went beyond the bounds of humaneness into cruelty. These three men were significant ones in the Biblical accounts of the lives of Jesus and Paul; however, while they are Biblical characters, these three men, unlike others studied this weekend, are not ones whom Christians, or any who wish to be such, should emulate! Please join with me as we study Pontius Pilate, Antonius Felix, Porcius Festus, and to a far lesser extent each of the other procurators--the Roman governors of Judea.

## THE OFFICE OF GOVERNOR

Apart from some of the prophecies of the Old Testament, the Bible does not reveal any great details regarding the coming of Rome in to power prior to the events recorded in the Old Testament. By the second century B.C., Rome had already established herself as a power able to contend with the Hellenistic (Greek) governments which in that day ruled the Holy Land and its surroundings. They had conquered their native Italy, neighbor Sicily, and western rival Spain. By the middle of that century, Macedonia and Greece to the east and Carthage in North Africa also had fallen to the Romans. In the early part of the first century B.C., Rome threatened Judea. In 64 B.C. her neighbor Syria fell, and she followed in 63 B.C. as the Roman general, Pompey, wrestled control from her. Within a quarter of a century, an aspiring Idumaeon was in the right place at the right time with the right political connections to have control turned over to him as king of Judea under the Roman Caesar. He was Herod the Great, progenitor of the rulers of Judea for roughly the next century. After his death, his kingdom was divided and given to his sons. In A.D. 6, one of his sons, Archelaus, was deposed, and in his place were appointed procurators--the governors about which this study is concerned.

Having procurators over the kingdom would ensure that Rome would have a loyal representative exerting her will over the captive Jews. Among other responsibilities, these governors would keep the Roman peace in the conquered land (Josephus, *Wars*, II. xiv. 1), would be Caesar's voice (Tiberius referred to one governor in this way, "Cuspius Fadus, my procurator" [Josephus, *Antiquities*, XX. i. 2]) when they held council, and would serve as the directors of financial operations and tax collection. Also of interest to the Bible student are these two considerations: no Sanhedrin meeting could be convened without their approval (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XX. ix. 1) and these governors had the power of life and death when judgment was issued (Josephus, *Wars*, II. viii. 1).

Judea was not the only land that had such rulers; in fact, her neighbor to the north, Syria, was also so ruled. In the early days of the Jews' governors, they were required to report to the Syrian governor (*Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, "Procurator"). For this reason, some will call the early Judean procurators prefects or legates; however, "it is convenient to follow common usage and assume that this title [procurator-DFC] was current from the first" (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "Procurator"). These governors ultimately were not so restricted and would have such authority that any complaints about their rule had to be brought before the Caesar himself. Such power, as can be imagined, occasioned abuse of the office, and ultimately contributed to the Jews' rebellion against Rome in A.D. 66 which hastened the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70)--the fulfillment of [Mat 24:5-35](#).

#### PONTIUS PILATE--WHO WASHED HIS HANDS

The first governor given attention in Scripture was Pontius Pilate. Tiberius appointed him governor in A.D. 26 and he remained in that position until atrocities committed by him among Samaritans required that he appear before Tiberius Caesar at the order of the Syrian Vitellius--so often in that age timing was everything, and such was the case with Pilate, for before he could reach Rome, Tiberius died (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII. iv. 1,2). Pilate's reign ended in A.D. 36. A very clouded set of traditions concern themselves with his final years which apparently culminated in his suicide (*ISBE*, "Pilate, Pontius"). Perhaps the most notable action of Pilate, aside from his treatment of Jesus, involves his setting up "Caesar effigies" in Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII. iii. 1). Due to public sentiment and the threat of punishment from Rome, Pilate ultimately had the images moved to Caesarea--which had been built by Herod the Great and named for Tiberius' grandfather Augustus.

The character of Pilate as seen in Scripture harmonizes well with this characterization of his attitude: "He was a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate" (Philo, "On the Embassy to Gaius," XXXVIII. 301). Jesus' appearance before Pilate is recorded in Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; and John 18,19, and is alluded to in [Act 3:13](#); [Act 4:27](#); [Act 13:28](#) and [1Ti 6:13](#). Pilate is also mentioned in [Luk 3:1](#) (recording his governorship) and [Luk 13:1](#) (alluding to atrocities committed among the Galileans). Regarding the trial of Jesus, Pilate as governor had the power to release this Jesus whom he deemed innocent ([Mat 27:24](#)); he did not, however, have the political backbone to do it; therefore, he washed his hands, "and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified" ([Mat 27:26](#)). While Pilate tried to wash his hands of the death of Jesus, neither God nor man concedes his innocence. Consider the record of early historians. Speaking of the plight of Christians, Tacitus wrote, "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty [crucifixion-DFC] during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate" (*The Annals*, XV. 44). Josephus likewise records Pilate's guilt:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works ... He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us [the Jews-DFC], had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him (*Antiquities*, XVIII.

iii. 3).

#### ANTONIUS FELIX--WHO AWAITED A CONVENIENT SEASON

Antonius Felix was appointed procurator by Claudius Caesar around A.D. 52. While most of the procurators came from affluent families, Felix was a freedman (former slave) of whom Claudius had developed a fondness and to whom Claudius had already given "the command of cohorts and of troops of horses" (Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, Claudius. XXVIII). Josephus goes into some detail regarding the means by which Felix conducted his affairs, telling of Felix' marriage to Drusilla, sister of Agrippa and wife of Azizus the king of Emesa--incidentally, that adulterous marriage produced a son who died in the infamous eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79 (*Antiquities*, XX. vii. 1,2). Josephus also tells of Felix' murder of the high priest, Jonathan (*Antiquities*, XX. viii. 5). Felix served until around A.D. 60 when he was replaced by Festus at the appointment of the reigning Caesar--Claudius had died in A.D. 54. Like Pilate's, Felix' reign was such that many went to Rome to complain, "and he had certainly been brought to punishment, unless Nero had yielded to the importunate solicitations of his brother Pallas" (*Antiquities*, XX. viii. 9) who had been a treasurer under Claudius (Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, Claudius. XXVIII).

The character of Felix as seen in Scripture likewise harmonizes well with this characterization of his attitude: ". . . Felix, indulging in every kind of barbarity and lust, exercised the power of a king in the spirit of a slave" (Tacitus, *The Histories*, V. 9). Luke recorded that Claudius Lysias, the chief captain who saved Paul from the Jews in the temple ([Act 21:33-35](#)), sent Paul to Felix--who governed as the other procurators from Caesarea--to have a Roman hearing ([Act 23:23-30](#)). After the accusers ([Act 24:1-9](#)) and Paul ([Act 24:10-21](#)) had their say, Felix determined to wait until the chief captain could testify to render a verdict ([Act 24:22](#)). In the meanwhile, Felix and Drusilla took opportunities to hear Paul speak "concerning the faith in Christ. And as he [Paul-DFC] reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled [was terrified-ASV], and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call thee" ([Act 24:24-25](#)). It can be assumed that no such convenient season availed itself, for Felix had said this wishing for a bribe and left Paul bound when his successor, Festus, came into office for he was "willing to shew the Jews a pleasure" ([Act 24:26-27](#)).

#### PORCIUS FESTUS--WHO THOUGHT PAUL MAD

As has been mentioned, around A.D. 60 Felix was replaced with Porcius Festus by Nero. Josephus records that Festus quelled a revolt and in spite of his desire to disallow it, ultimately allowed a wall to be erected which blocked the view from the Fortress Antonia into the temple (*Antiquities*, XX. ix. 10,11)--incidentally, had this wall been constructed earlier, Paul would not have been rescued by Claudius Lysias, and barring, the providence of God, would have died in the temple! It could be said that Festus was atypical of the men who were procurators in Judea; however, his reign was short-lived, for he died around A.D. 62.

Luke recorded that Festus frustrated an attempt on the life of Paul after just days in office ([Act 25:1-4](#)). A short while later in Caesarea, a trial of Paul was held under him as well, with the accusers and Paul speaking testifying, "But Festus, willing to do the Jews a favor [he had just come into power-DFC], answered Paul, and said, Wilt thou go up to Jerusalem, and there be

judged of these things before me?" ([Act 25:7-9](#)). To this Paul, a Roman citizen with associated rights, appealed to Caesar ([Act 25:10-12](#)). In the meanwhile, Agrippa II traveled to Caesarea and was made aware by Festus of Paul's situation ([Act 25:13-27](#)). Agrippa II allowed Paul to speak to him, whereupon Paul recounted his background and conversion ([Act 26:2-23](#)). Festus could not forbear to interrupt saying, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad" ([Act 26:24](#)). Festus was new in the area, but Agrippa II was not; Paul knowing this and knowing Agrippa said he was speaking not madness, "but speak forth the words of truth and soberness" ([Act 26:25-27](#)). Agrippa was apparently moved, but not to conversion; he ultimately commented to his host, "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed to Caesar" ([Act 26:28-32](#)). So ends the Bible narrative concerning Festus and the procurators.

#### THE REST--WHO RULED THE JEWS

Pilate, Felix, and Festus were but three in a line of governors which stretched for the better part of the first century A.D. The first three were appointed by Caesar Augustus (27 B.C. to A.D. 14). They were Coponius (A.D. c6-9) under whom a massacre of Jews at the hands of Samaritans occurred (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII. ii. 2), Marcus Ambivius (A.D. c9-12), and Annius Rufus (A.D. c12-15). Under Tiberius (A.D. 14-37) three more were appointed. They were Valerius Gratus (A.D. 15-26) who so delved into Jewish politics that he appointed four high priests (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII. ii. 2)--which for nearly two centuries had been as much a political as religious position, Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26-36), and Marullus (A.D. 36 or 38-41)--sources are a bit confusing at this point with some including prior to Marullus a Marcellus (A.D. 36-37/38) and others indicating these as being names or perhaps forms of the same name for one man. In either case, there was a break after Marullus during which Herod Agrippa I who had been banished by Tiberius was restored by Caligula as king. In A.D. 44 procurators again ruled on behalf of Rome, with Claudius appointing four. They were Cuspius Fadus (A.D. 44-c46) who was not afraid of meeting insurrection with violence (Josephus, *Antiquities*, XX. i. 1; v. 1), Tiberius Alexander (A.D. c46-48), Ventidius Cumanus (A.D. 48-c52) under whom Josephus maintained the Jews' troubles [leading to the rebellion of A.D. 66 and destruction of A.D. 70] began with the death of 10,000 Jews at the feast of unleavened bread (*Wars*, II. xii. 1), and Antonius Felix (A.D. c52-c60). Nero (A.D. 54-68) appointed the last three procurators. These were Porcius Festus (A.D. c60-62), Lucceius Albinus (A.D. 62-64) under whom "nobody durst speak their minds, but tyranny was generally tolerated" (Josephus, *Wars*, II. xiv. 1), and Gessius Florus (A.D. 64-66) who made Albinus look good, doing "... his unjust actions to the harm of the nation after a pompous manner; as though he had been sent as an executioner to punish condemned malefactors ... where the case was really pitiable, he was most barbarous" (Josephus, *Wars*, II. xiv. 2). So ended the procurators and Roman peace in Judea.

#### LIFE LESSONS FROM THE GOVERNORS

From Pilate one learns that one cannot wash his hands of responsibility. Two thousand years after the fact, the Jews are still blamed for killing Jesus (witness Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*), but so is Pilate for turning the innocent Jesus over to the angry mob--and both rightly! So none today can wash his hands of working out his own salvation in obedience ([Php 2:12](#); [Mar 16:16](#); [Gal 6:7-9](#)).

From Felix one learns that there may not be a more convenient season. When one passes an opportunity to respond to the Lord's invitation, he does so at the risk of his own soul. Paul

wrote to the Corinthians, ". . . behold, now *is* the accepted time; behold, now *is* the day of salvation" ([2Co\\_6:2](#)); likewise, to the Hebrews he wrote, "But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" ([Heb\\_3:13](#)).

From Festus one learns that Christianity is true and reasonable. The laws of nature demonstrate that God exists and that His Word is accurate ([Heb\\_3:4](#)). The principles of logic demonstrate that obedience to God is reasonable ([Isa\\_1:18](#)).

From the rest one learns that the Christian must obey and pray for his rulers no matter what type of men they might be. Paul wrote, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God" ([Rom\\_13:1](#)) and "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and *for* all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" ([1Ti\\_2:2](#)) in a day when despots were the rule not the exception. Man today, so long as the commands of man do not violate God's Will ([Act\\_5:29](#)), must respect the authority of his human government--no matter what it might be!

#### CONCLUSION

In this study the Roman governors of Judea, especially Pilate, Felix, and Festus, have been examined from both a secular and Biblical perspective. That the Bible agrees with the historians is not a surprise, but is reassuring to the Christian in an age when the historicity of Scripture is often attacked--albeit never defeated! May the Bible student not emulate the examples of these men, but apply the life lessons from these men to his own life.

#### SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. How many Roman governors are mentioned in the Bible, and what are their names?
2. In what year did Judea fall to Rome, and who was Rome's general?
3. What were three responsibilities of the governors?
4. What years did Pontius Pilate serve as governor?
5. What years did Antonius Felix serve as governor?
6. What years did Porcius Festus serve as governor?
7. Which of the governors listened with Agrippa as Paul spoke of his conversion?
8. Which of the governors did not release the innocent Jesus?
9. Which of the governors saw Paul after he was saved from Jews in the temple, and who was the chief captain who sent Paul to him?
10. What lessons are learned from the governors?

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does one not read, aside from prophecy, about the kingdoms of Greece and Rome until the time of Caesar Augustus?
2. Why would the Romans think it necessary to have governors in subordinate lands?
3. How could the men studied have become corrupted as governors?
4. What can we make of the agreement between the secular and Biblical accounts of these governors' lives?
5. Why would the setting up of "Caesar effigies" offend the Jews?
6. Why did Pilate send to crucifixion one who he knew was innocent, and why did he scourge him if he knew he was innocent?

7. How did Felix' morality contribute to his fear at hearing Paul reason of righteousness? of temperance? or judgment to come?
8. Why did Festus think Paul was mad?
9. Why could the priesthood have become a political position as much as a religious one in the centuries preceding the birth of Jesus, and what role did this play in the days of Jesus?
10. What other lessons might be gleaned from the governors?