

# A Chronological Summary of the New Testament

by

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## Preface

The following account is in general a summary of the three-volume work, *Introduction to the New Testament* by Theodor Zahn. Also included is some additional material taken directly from the book of Acts.

The purpose of this paper is to present a readable and relatively complete narrative of the events that produced the New Testament up to the death of John around A.D. 100. This narrative, however, includes dates and a discussion of the origin and content of each book in the New Testament.

Zahn's work is a New Testament introduction and as such deals with the issues of authorship, provenance, date, occasion, and destination of the books in the New Testament. The English translation of this German work was originally published in 1909, and there are many more modern introductions that have been written since then. However, perhaps no work is as thorough and detailed. This paper attempts to condense all of Zahn's intricate and lengthy reasonings down to a readable set of conclusions placed in a running narrative of events in chronological order.

New Testament scholarship is not a unanimous discipline, even among evangelical scholars. Opinions on many issues vary. It is not the purpose of this paper to review all the various conclusions and compare them with Zahn's. The purpose here is to give a chronological narrative based on Zahn's work. Occasionally, modern evangelical scholars will differ on major points. The footnotes draw attention to these differences, but the main text is strictly Zahn.

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## INTRODUCTION

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in 3 or 4 B.C. Opinions vary for the date of the crucifixion. Some place it in A.D. 27, while others, including Zahn, think it was as late as A.D. 30. This means that the events in the first eight chapters of the book of Acts take place generally between A.D. 30 and 34.

## THE CONVERSION OF PAUL (ACTS 9:1-31)

Paul is converted on his way to Damascus in the beginning of the year 35. After his conversion he spends time with the disciples in Damascus where he preaches in the synagogues. Paul remains there for a total of three years, but his stay is interrupted by a journey to Arabia. The Jews in Damascus had conspired to kill Paul, and the Governor under King Aretas tried to arrest him. However, Paul learns of their plot and escapes to Arabia by being lowered in a basket through an opening in the city wall. Some time later he returns to Damascus.<sup>1</sup>

Paul goes to Jerusalem in the year 38 for the first time since his conversion. He wants to join the disciples, but they are all afraid of him, not believing that he is truly a disciple. Barnabas takes him to the apostles, and Paul stays with Peter 15 days, seeing none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.<sup>2</sup> Paul moves about freely in Jerusalem speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. However, the brethren learn that Grecian Jews are trying to kill him. The Lord speaks to Paul to leave Jerusalem, and he is taken down to Caesarea and sent to Tarsus in the province of Cilicia.<sup>3</sup>

Paul remains in Tarsus, his native city, from 38 to 43, awaiting a new divine commission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He prepares himself for this new work by pursuing such studies as the literature of the Greeks, among whom he expected to labor in the future. Tarsus was a prominent center for the study of philosophy and rhetoric, and its citizens were praised for their interest in the sciences taught in their schools. Tarsus offered Paul enough literary information and stimulus to enable him to become a Greek to the Greeks, just as his early rabbinical training received at home and in Jerusalem enabled him to be a Hebrew to the Hebrews.<sup>4</sup> In the year 43, Paul, in a vision and revelation from the Lord, receives this new commission.<sup>5</sup>

## THE MINISTRY OF PETER (ACTS 9:32-10:48)

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1 Cf. Gal. 1:17; II Cor. 11:32-33. See also Zahn, III:121.

2 Cf. Gal. 1:18-19.

3 Acts 22:17-21.

4 Cf. I Cor. 9:19-23.

5 The Lord tells Paul at the time of his conversion (the year 35) that he will be sent to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9:6, 15; 22:21; 26:16-18). However, it is not until 43 that he actually begins to minister to the Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:19-26). According to Zahn, the revelation described in II Cor. 12:1-4 is the divine commission Paul receives to begin his work among the Gentiles. II Corinthians was written in 57. Fourteen years earlier (II Cor. 12:2) brings us back to 43.

During the year 38, the Apostle Peter travels to the regions of Joppa and Caesarea. In Joppa a disciple dies by the name of Dorcas (Tabitha). She had been a faithful disciple, always doing good and helping the poor by making robes and other clothing. Since Peter is nearby in Lydda, the disciples in Joppa send for him. Peter comes and prays. Dorcas is raised up, and many in Joppa believe in the Lord.

While still in Joppa, Peter receives a vision from the Lord in which he is invited to eat unclean food, food prohibited in the Law of Moses. As he reflects on its meaning, three men arrive from Caesarea. They had been sent by Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who had also received a vision, one in which he is told to invite Peter to his home. The Lord tells Peter to go with the men. The next day he accompanies them back to Caesarea and is brought to Cornelius. He listens while Cornelius relates his vision, and Peter then understands the meaning of his own vision: God had revealed to him that in every nation a man who fears God and does what is right is welcomed by Him. Cornelius and the other Gentiles who hear Peter's message are saved and receive the Holy Spirit.

### THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH (ACTS 11-12)

The church at Jerusalem hears that Greeks are responding to the gospel. This came about after the stoning of Stephen when great persecution broke out against the church. Those scattered by this persecution traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch<sup>6</sup> preaching the Word. In Antioch the gospel was proclaimed also to the Greeks, and many had believed. Therefore, the church sends Barnabas to Antioch to minister. Barnabas goes to Tarsus and brings Paul back in the summer-autumn of 43, and they work together in Antioch for one year.

In the year 44, James the son of Zebedee is executed in Jerusalem by King Herod Agrippa I. When Herod sees how this pleases the Jews, he seizes Peter and has him imprisoned. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Peter is miraculously released by an angel and flees Jerusalem the same year, as do the other apostles there. James, the Lord's brother, stays to direct the church's affairs together with the presbyters (elders). Herod Agrippa I dies in 44, some time after the Passover.

Following these events, Paul and Barnabas journey to Jerusalem with a collection that had been taken by the Christians in Antioch for their poverty-stricken brethren in Judea. This collection was occasioned by the prophecy of Agabus in the year 40, during the reign of the Emperor Caligula. Agabus had predicted a coming famine in Judea.<sup>7</sup> A year or more had elapsed before the collection was completed, and although famine conditions did not yet exist, the collection was now sent to Judea by Paul and Barnabas, possibly in the summer of 44, but more probably in the autumn of 44.

Paul and Barnabas return from Jerusalem to Antioch with John Mark, who settles there. John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and returns to Antioch with him to assist in his missionary work. The three remain active as teachers and missionaries in Antioch until the

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6 There are two cities called Antioch. The city here served as the center of Paul's missionary activities and was in northern Syria. The other Antioch was a city in Pisidia in the southern part of the province of Galatia.

7 This famine occurred during the reign of Claudius (41-54 A.D.).

spring of 50.

Peter comes to Antioch in the year 50. He spends time with the Gentiles and does not hesitate to eat with them. However, when other Judeans arrive, Peter begins to withdraw and separates himself from the Gentiles because he is afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. Paul publicly opposes him because Peter is clearly wrong. These newly arriving Jews, although sent by James, apparently believe that the Gentiles should live under the Mosaic law. Other Jews join Peter in this hypocrisy, causing even Barnabas to be led astray.<sup>8</sup>

### THE LETTER OF JAMES

In the year 50, James writes to the entire Christian Church. At this time it was composed almost entirely of Jews with relatively few Gentile converts and was confined to Palestine and the regions immediately adjoining. As a result of the persecution of 35, the Christians had been driven from Jerusalem and scattered beyond the bounds of Palestine. As a result, many of the ties that had bound them to the Jewish nation while they remained a part of it were severed. Wherever these Christians went they became the nuclei of new churches, and effort was made to hold these scattered members of the church together. This was the purpose for which James wrote his letter.

The author is James, the oldest of Jesus' four (half) brothers. From the year 44 (at the latest) onward, he was the head of the Jerusalem Church and the leader of Jewish Christianity. He was highly esteemed even among non-Christian Jews and was known, among other titles, as "James the Just". He was a stern ascetic and so, unlike Jesus' other brothers, he most likely remained unmarried.

James addresses his readers at once with practical exhortation. He found in them not a lack of prayer, but an entire lack of the energy of faith and sincerity of motive, without which prayer works no outward effect and brings no inward peace. Their most serious problem was that the faith they confess with their lips is not manifest in a life that demonstrates its truth and vitality. They particularly fail in works of mercy and love, in bridling the tongue, and in bearing suffering patiently. Many of those who boast about their faith could well be put to shame by the good conduct of unbelieving Jews. By contrast, James' readers are constantly prizing the things of this world too highly. An utter disregard of all religious restraint could be found among those engaged in commerce. Those who were landowners robbed their laborers without mercy, while those who had no property were full of vain longings for better conditions. A spirit of complaining led to a contemptuous treatment of the poor and a cringing politeness toward the rich. Thus James reminds them of the transitory and worthless nature of these things and that the love of the world is enmity against God. He emphasizes the need for them to acknowledge the incomparably greater value of the things that God promises and gives to them as Christians.

A general feeling of discontent had taken possession of his readers, one principle cause

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<sup>8</sup> For the events of this paragraph, see Gal. 2:11-14.

being the sharp distinction made between rich and poor within the church. James urges his readers to rejoice with a certain amount of pride whichever is their portion. If in humble circumstances, one is to remember the high place given to him as a child of God. If rich, he is to recognize that in spite of his wealth he is privileged to be reckoned among the poor and lowly to whom the grace of God is given. James continues by exhorting them to count it pure joy when they fall into all sorts of trials. However, they must never on any account regard God as the author of a temptation to sin that may be involved in such trials.

### PAUL'S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY (ACTS 13-14)

The church in Antioch, at the direction of the Holy Spirit, sends Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey in the spring of the year 50. The journey continues until the autumn of 51. As a result, four churches are established: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

From Antioch Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark travel to the seaport of Seleucia, about a 16-mile journey. They sail to Cyprus, Barnabas' native country, and land at Salamis, the eastern port and capital of the island. They travel through the entire island until they come to the city of Paphos at the western end. Paphos is the seat of the Roman government where Sergius Paulus, the governor of the island, resides. There they meet a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus.<sup>9</sup> He is an attendant of Sergius Paulus. Sergius Paulus wishes to hear the word of God and therefore sends for Paul and Barnabas, but Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas, opposes them, attempting to turn Sergius Paulus from the faith. Paul rebukes Bar-Jesus, who is struck with blindness, and Sergius Paulus, being amazed at the teaching about the Lord, believes.

Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark then sail to Perga in the district of Pamphylia in Asia Minor. From there John Mark returns to his mother's home in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas travel to the southern province of Galatia, stopping first at Antioch in the district of Pisidia.<sup>10</sup>

In Pisidian Antioch they enter the synagogue first before going to the Gentiles, a general pattern followed by Paul.<sup>11</sup> This would be their practice throughout their travels. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers send for them. Paul is permitted to speak to the people, and he gives a history of the Jewish people from the time God chose them until the present. Many Gentiles believe, but the Jews stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and they are expelled from the city.

They next travel to Iconium, a distance of about 90 miles. They spend considerable time preaching the Word there, and a great number of Jews and Gentiles believe. However, the Jews who refuse to believe stir up the Gentiles and poison their minds against the brethren. Paul and Barnabas learn of a plot among the Jews and Gentiles to stone them, and so they flee to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe.

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9 "Bar-Jesus" means *son of Jesus*, a common name.

10 It may be during this leg of the journey that Paul becomes ill and rather than continue north, he and Barnabas head southeast to the cities of Lycaonia where Paul spends time recovering while preaching the Word. See Gal. 4:13-14.

11 Cf. "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16); see also Acts 13:44-48, esp. v. 46.

In Lystra a man is healed who was crippled from birth. When the crowd sees what Paul has done, they hail both Paul and Barnabas as gods. The priest of Zeus<sup>12</sup> brings bulls and wreaths to the city gate, and he and the crowd wish to offer these as sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. When the Apostles hear of this, they tear their clothes and rush into the crowd shouting that they too are only men, human like them. Paul and Barnabas speak to the crowd of the living God, but even then they have difficulty in restraining the crowd from offering sacrifices to them. Then some Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium come to Lystra and win the crowd over. Paul is stoned and dragged outside the city where he is left for dead. But while the disciples are standing around him, Paul gets up and once again enters the city. The next day he and Barnabas leave for Derbe.

After Paul and Barnabas had preached and won a large number of disciples, they travel back to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch encouraging the believers. They exhort them to remain true to the faith. It is only through many hardships that one enters the kingdom of God. Paul and Barnabas also appoint elders in each church and commit them to the Lord with prayer and fasting. They travel through Pisidia to Perga where they preach the gospel and then continue to Attalia. They sail from there back to Antioch (in Syria) where they had started. On arriving they gather the church together and give testimony of all that God had done through them and of how the door of faith had been opened to the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas remain a long time with the disciples in Antioch. This ends Paul's first missionary journey.

### THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL (ACTS 15)

While Paul is in Antioch, Pharisaic Jewish Christians arrive from Judea insisting that the Mosaic law, in particular circumcision, was to be the rule of faith and practice even among believing Gentiles in the Church of God. In response to a revelation that Paul received from the Lord, the church at Antioch appoints him to go to Jerusalem, taking Titus, a Greek Christian, and Barnabas with him. They travel through Phoenicia and Samaria and upon arriving in Jerusalem meet with the apostles and elders who had gathered there at James' suggestion. Paul sets before them the gospel that he preached to the Gentiles. This takes place in the winter of 51-52. Peter, James, and John give Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. The apostles agree that Paul and Barnabas should go to the Gentiles while they minister to the Jews, and ask only that they continue to remember the poor in Judea.<sup>13</sup> Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch with a letter from the Apostolic Council. They are accompanied by Judas Barsabbas and Silas who will confirm in person the contents of the

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<sup>12</sup> Zeus was called *Jupiter* in the Roman pantheon.

<sup>13</sup> The details in this paragraph come from Gal. 2:1-10. This paper places them under the Jerusalem Council because Zahn takes Gal. 2:1-10 to be a reference to this council in Acts 15 (III:452-453). A number of evangelical scholars today take a different approach. See, e.g., D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992], pp. 293-294. Carson takes Gal. 1:18 to correspond to Acts 9:26 and Gal. 2:1-10 to correspond to Acts 11:28-30, the "famine visit." On this view, the writing of Galatians precedes the Jerusalem Council. Interestingly, however, both Zahn and Carson agree that Peter's withdrawal described in Gal. 2:11-14 is an event that takes place between the Acts 11 famine visit and the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Peter would not have acted this way after the Jerusalem Council.

council's letter. Silas and Judas were both prophets and men of prominence in the Jerusalem church.

In this letter the apostles and elders state that these Judaizers who went out among the Gentiles did so without their authority. It is therefore the judgment of the apostles and elders that Gentile Christians not be burdened with any requirements of the Mosaic law other than abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. Upon reading the letter, the church in Antioch is encouraged and greatly rejoices. After Judas and Silas deliver lengthy messages, Judas returns to Jerusalem. Most likely Silas remains in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.<sup>14</sup>

### PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY (ACTS 15:35-18:22)

In Antioch during the Spring of 52 Paul and Barnabas decide to revisit the churches established on their first missionary journey, but they have a disagreement over whether John Mark should travel with them.<sup>15</sup> The disagreement is strong enough that they part ways for the second journey. Barnabas and John Mark sail to Cyprus. Paul chooses Silas. He was probably somewhat older than Paul, since he had held the position of elder in the Jerusalem church. They revisit the churches founded on the first trip in southern Galatia, traveling through Syria and Cilicia.

In Lystra Paul circumcises Timothy in his home, and Timothy then joins Paul and Silas on their journey. They travel through Phrygia and Galatia. When they come to the border of Mysia, they try to enter Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prohibits them and they go down to Troas instead. That night, Paul receives his *Macedonian vision*. In this vision, Paul sees a man from Macedonia (north of Achaia) appealing to him to come and help them. In response, Paul and the others immediately leave for Macedonia, with Luke joining them at this point.<sup>16</sup> With this vision, the Lord directs Paul to carry the Gospel to Europe for the first time.

Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke depart from Troas and put out to sea. They sail straight for the island of Samothrace. The next day they arrive by sea at the port town of Neapolis in Macedonia and without delay travel the ten miles inland to Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city of that district of Macedonia. In Philippi there is a small, organized Jewish congregation that had among its worshippers a number of God-fearing Gentiles, mostly

14 Acts 15:34 represents numerous textual variants. The verse does not appear at all in three of the most important and oldest uncials (Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and Vaticanus). Some manuscripts contain a short version of the verse: "But it seemed good to Silas to remain there." Only one uncial (D, Bezae Cantabrigiensis) and a few Latin manuscripts have the full version: "But it seemed good to Silas to remain there, and Judas alone returned to Jerusalem." Without taking a firm stand, Zahn in a lengthy footnote (I:207-208, n. 1) seems to incline to the view that the short version is genuine. If so, of course, the apparent contradiction between Acts 15:33 and 15:40 is easily explained.

15 Acts 15:36-40. Paul did not want to bring Mark on this trip because he had left them and returned home during their previous missionary journey (Acts 13:13). It is not stated in Acts, but Zahn (II:430) suggests that Paul, on the basis of this "desertion," considered Mark unfit for missionary work. However, at some point Paul again accepts Mark as a useful co-worker. He is with Paul during his first Roman imprisonment (Col. 4:10), and Paul sends for him during his second Roman imprisonment (II Tim. 4:11).

16 Luke was the author of Acts, and his presence or absence with Paul is determined by the use of the pronoun we. The so-called "we-passages" are 16:10-17; 20:5-16; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16.



women. They meet together for prayer at the riverside outside the city gate. Paul and the others join them on the Sabbath. Lydia, a member of this Jewish congregation and a native of Thyatira, responds to Paul's message. She is converted and baptized along with the rest of her household. Lydia persuades Paul and his companions to stay at her home.

While in Philippi, Paul heals a demon-possessed slave girl who could predict the future. When the owners of the girl realize that their hope of making money is gone, they seize Paul and Silas and drag them into the marketplace to face the authorities. The magistrates order them to be stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison. The jailer is ordered to guard them carefully, so he puts them in the inner cell and fastens their feet in the stocks. However, around midnight a violent earthquake strikes. It shakes the prison foundations so that the doors fly open and the prisoners' chains come loose. The jailer awakens and in fear that the prisoners have escaped draws his sword to kill himself. Paul shouts at him to stop and assures him that they are all there. Lights are brought, and when the jailer sees Paul and Silas, he falls trembling before them. He wishes to know what he must do to be saved, and upon hearing the word of the Lord, he and his household are converted to the Lord and baptized. The next day Paul and Silas are released after the magistrates learn that they are Roman citizens. They leave Philippi after only a few weeks of work, but Timothy and Luke remain behind to carry on. Luke most likely remained in Philippi for the next five to six years until he accompanied Paul to Jerusalem.

Paul and Silas pass through Amphipolis and Appollonia without stopping and arrive in Thessalonica around September of 52, where they stay with Jason. Timothy rejoins them here or at Berea at the latest. Paul enters the synagogue and on three consecutive Sabbaths he reasons with the people from the Scriptures. A number of Jews are persuaded as well as a large number of Greeks, including a few women belonging to the upper classes. Thus the church is begun. So as not to be a burden to anyone in the church, Paul and Silas support themselves by working. At the same time, they receive gifts from the church at Philippi. After three weeks of preaching in the synagogue at Thessalonica, jealous Jews round up some bad characters and form a mob. A riot begins and a search is made for Paul and Silas at Jason's home. They are not found, but Jason and some other Christian brothers are dragged before the city officials. They are made to post bond and then released.

That night Paul and Silas are sent to Berea about 50 to 60 miles away. Upon arriving they teach at the Jewish synagogue. Their concern for the oppressed condition of the infant church in Thessalonica makes them desirous of returning immediately, but they are unable to do so. The Bereans receive the word with great eagerness and examine the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul has said is true. But Jews from Thessalonica come to Berea and stir up the crowd, and the brothers immediately send Paul to the coast, while Silas and Timothy stay behind in Berea. The men who escort Paul to the coast bring him to Athens and then return to Berea with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join Paul there.

While in Athens awaiting their arrival, Paul reasons in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks as well as in the marketplace with those who happen to be there. It may possibly be during this time of waiting that Paul makes another attempt to return to

Thessalonica, but he is hindered by Satan from doing so.<sup>17</sup>

There are several problems associated with the exact sequence of events at this point. The relevant Scriptures are Acts 17:15-16; 18:1-5; and I Thess. 2:17-3:6. It is uncertain whether Silas and Timothy actually arrive in Athens or whether they remain for a longer time in Berea and then join Paul in Corinth. If they do come to Athens, Paul and Silas then send Timothy back to Macedonia, to Thessalonica in particular, to encourage the church in the persecution that they were then suffering at the hands of their own countrymen. However, at the time Paul writes I Thessalonians in May-June of 53, the three are all back together in Corinth.

In Athens Paul is brought to a meeting of the Areopagus (the highest court of Athens) by some Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. During his movements about the city Paul had noticed an altar inscribed "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD". The Athenians had a strong sense of a superior power that was evidenced by their many idols and objects of worship, and lest there should be one deity inadvertently disregarded and slighted, an anonymous altar was set up. Paul now proclaims to them the identity of this unknown God. He testifies of God and of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. A few men believe, among them Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, as well as a woman named Damaris.

In November of 52 Paul travels from Athens to Corinth, the capital of the province of Achaia (or Greece), and ministers there for a year and a half until the summer of 54. Timothy and Silas were probably engaged in missionary activities in the province working from Corinth as a center. At the time of his arrival, Paul is in a discouraged state of mind. This may have been due to his experiences in Athens or his continued anxiety about the Thessalonian church. He stays with Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who had to leave Rome under the edict by the Emperor Claudius banishing all Jews from the city.<sup>18</sup> He works for wages in their tent shop during the week thus confining his preaching activity to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Opposition soon becomes more pronounced, and Christian preaching is forbidden in the synagogue. Because of the Jews' opposition and abusiveness, Paul now goes to the Gentiles. However, with the baptism of the synagogue ruler, Crispus, and his entire family, as well as a considerable number of Corinthians, the church is started. It assembles in a house adjoining the synagogue belonging to Titius Justus, an uncircumcised proselyte. Having now established a church separate from the synagogue, Paul contemplates leaving Corinth, lest his continued preaching should lead to further outbreaks of fanaticism on the part of the Jews. But encouraged by a vision from the Lord, he remains there, staying longer than at any place where he has worked heretofore.

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17 I Thess. 2:17-18.

18 Claudius issued this order probably in or shortly before the year 52.