

PAUL GOES TO ROME

“Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor ”

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A slightly reduced version of this article appeared in B.J. Beitzel (ed.), *Biblica: The Bible Atlas* (Global Book Publishing, Sydney 2006) 484-489.

THE STORM AT SEA

Another “We-Section” (Acts 27:1-28:10) commences Paul’s sea-voyage to Rome. Here Luke draws upon his own “eye-witness” traditions for his narrative (Luke 1:2). We do not know, however, where Luke has been in the interim since his last “We-Section” (Acts 21:1-18). The first part of Paul’s voyage comprises a travelogue of the places visited before the sea storm (Acts 27:1-8). There are echoes in Chapters 27-27 of motifs from ancient literary voyages (e.g. Lucian, Achilles Titus, Petronius, Charition). The literary conventions of the “storm” and “shipwreck” were so well known that ancient writers (e.g. Juvenal, Lucian) mocked and parodied them. Ancient historians (e.g. Thucydides, Herodotus) also included sea-voyages in their narratives. Luke, a versatile historian and theologian, imitated the traditional openings of ancient historians (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1; Josephus, *Ap.* 1.1.1-3; 2.1.1). However, Luke also added novelistic touches to his narrative of Paul’s sea-voyage so that he might bring Acts to a resounding and entertaining conclusion.

A high status Roman citizen of the provinces, Paul was transferred to the command of Julius, the centurion of the Augustan Cohort (Acts 28:1). Syrian mercenaries made up this well-known cohort mentioned in first-century inscriptions. At Adramyttium, a coastal town in Mysia, Paul boarded a trading vessel destined for the coastal ports of Asia (Acts 27:2). Apart from Luke, Paul’s only travelling companion was Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica (Acts 27:3; cf. 19:29; 20:4; Col 4:10; Phlm 24). The next day the trading vessel put in at Sidon (Acts 27:3a). This Phoenician town was famous for its purple dying and glass blowing, as well as for its double harbour. Julius acted humanely towards Paul, allowing him access to local believers for the provision of his needs (Acts 27:3b). The church at Sidon probably arose from the persecution that followed Stephen’s death (Acts 11:19).

The vessel hugged the shoreline under the lee of Cyprus (Acts 28:4) so that it would be protected from the autumnal western winds. Then it struck out westward across the open sea until it reached Myra in Lycia (Acts 27:5). Julius found a replacement Alexandrian ship belonging to the grain fleet that serviced Asia Minor and Italy from Egypt, the granary of the Roman Empire (Acts 27:6). Because of adverse wind conditions, the trip to Cnidus was difficult. The vessel again hugged the coastline under the lee of Crete off Salmone until it came to Fair Havens and Lasea (Acts 27:7).

Paul warned the centurion about the dangers of travelling in the severe Mediterranean weather of winter (Acts 27:9-10). However, the enormous bonuses that would accrue if the cargo were safely delivered during the winter months clouded the commonsense of the pilot and captain. Consequently, the vessel struck out for Phoenix, a harbour of Crete (Acts 27:11-12). A “violent wind”, a “northeaster” from Crete, was the vessel’s undoing (Acts 27:13-15). This particular wind, named “Euraquilo” (Greek: *Eurakulon*), was notorious in antiquity. Its name was inscribed on a twelve-point wind-rose on a pavement

at Thugga in Africa. No amount of tactical manoeuvring by these seasoned seafarers could deliver the vessel and its crew from impending peril (27:16-20). Adrift for eleven tedious days and nights, only the appearance of an angel standing near Paul enabled the apostle to deliver words of reassurance to the terrified crew (Acts 27:21-26; cf. 23:11).

THE SHIPWRECK

After drifting in the Sea of Adria, the sailors took soundings of the water's depth, using a line and a lead weight for the task (Acts 27:27-28). The danger of running aground was real. The sailors attempted to abandon the vessel in a small boat. But upon Paul's warning, the centurion and soldiers listened to the apostle on this occasion and cut loose the boat, thwarting the sailors' scheme. Throughout the entire crisis, Paul functions as a prophet, a pointer to the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit of prophecy (Acts 27:10, 21, 24-25, 31; cf. 2:17-18). Moreover, Paul acts as a Christian pastor to the crew, selflessly modelling care for his neighbour and piety towards God in a time of crisis (Acts 27:33-38). With their spirits lifted by a meal of bread, the crew lightened the ship by discarding the cargo of wheat into the sea (Acts 27:38).

Noticing a bay with a beach, the crew released the four anchors and the ropes. They hoisted the sail, made for the beach, and grounded the vessel on a reef (Acts 27:39-41). Again, God intervenes because of Paul's presence on the vessel, sparing the prisoners from execution (Acts 27:42-43), and landing the entire crew safely in modern St. Paul's Bay (27:43b-44).

MALTA

Paul had landed on the small island of Malta (Acts 28:1), 18 miles long and 8 miles wide, and located 58 miles south of Sicily. This Phoenician colony was founded from North Africa (c. 1000 BC), but from 218 BC the Romans had controlled it. The "natives" (Acts 28:2: *barbaroi*) spoke a Phoenician dialect and thus were, like all other non-Greeks, labelled by the Greeks as the "*bar-bar*" people because of their incomprehensible language and different culture. The Maltese showed the stranded party "kindness" (Acts 28:2: *philanthropia*), a term used of hospitality and beneficence.

Miraculous events accompanied Paul's stay at Malta. A viper, fleeing from a bundle of brushwood collected for a fire on the beach, latched onto Paul's hand, but with no deleterious effects. The islanders temporarily regarded Paul as a murderer pursued by *Nemesis* (or Divine Retribution). But when Paul did not die as expected, the islanders considered Paul to be a god instead (Acts 28:3-6; cf. 14:8ff).

Luke provides us here sympathetic insight into the religious belief systems of the Gentiles to whom Paul ministers (cf. 14:8ff; 16:16ff; 19:23ff). But he also establishes that Paul, the servant of the risen and triumphant Jesus, had the "authority to walk over snakes and scorpions" (Lk 10:19). Moreover, he demonstrates in memorable manner that Paul was innocent of any charge worthy of death (Acts 23:29; 25:25; 26:31). Some scholars, however, remain sceptical about the historicity of this event, arguing that there are no vipers or poisonous snakes on Malta today. But in an age of unparalleled species extinction, we above all should not be surprised about the viper's disappearance from such a small island over time.

Paul also heals the father of Publius, “the leading man (*protos*) of the island”, from fever and dysentery. As a result, many other islanders sought healing for their diseases from Paul (Acts 28:7-9). Significantly, the term for this official (*protos*) is found on Maltese inscriptions. Once again Luke displays historical accuracy in his use of contemporary inscriptional terminology for officials, family names, the names of deities, and civic institutions (e.g. Acts 13:7; 14:12; 17:6; 18:12; 19:9, 31, 35, 39).

MALTA TO ROME

Luke resumes his coverage of the last leg of Paul’s journey to Rome with another travelogue (Acts 28:11-16; cf. 27:1-8). Having spent the three months of winter in Malta, Paul and his entourage could recommence their sea trip for Syracuse in Sicily (Acts 28:12) when the westerly winds arrived from February 8 onwards (Pliny, *NH* 2.122). The Alexandrian ship, part of the grain fleet between Egypt and Rome, had as its figurehead the “Twin Brothers”, Castor and Pollux, the sons of Zeus (Acts 28:11). Seneca (*Ep.* 77) observes that their constellation, Gemini, provided good fortune in a storm. The irony of this would not have been lost on Paul who knew that only Yahweh and His Son Jesus could save voyagers from sea disasters (Jonah 1:4-2:10; Ps 107:23-30; Mark 4:35ff; 6:47ff; Acts 27:21ff; 2 Cor 11:25).

The ship stopped at the twin-harboured town of Syracuse for three days (Acts 28:12), undoubtedly in order to load food supplies. Syracuse, Strabo informs us (*Geog.* 6.2.7), was the storehouse of Rome. From there Paul sailed to Rhegium, situated in the toe of Italy, with the help of a southerly wind (Act 28:13). The trip from Rhegium to Puteoli (Acts 28:13) across the Straits of Messina was about 350 kilometres. Puteoli declined as the most important Italian port for seafaring traffic, being eventually supplanted by the port of Ostia, which was refurbished in the reign of the emperor Claudius (Seneca, *Ep.* 77). Since the ship had to unload its precious cargo of food supplies for Rome, Paul was allowed to stay with the believers of Puteoli for seven days (Acts 28:14). Since the service of ancient inns was poor and their reputation for immorality notorious, Paul would have appreciated the hospitality of local believers. Whether these believers were products of the original Pentecost event (Acts 2:10) or were the inevitable result of the mobility of first-century converts (e.g. Prisca and Aquila), we cannot say.

Luke, anticipating Paul’s arrival in Rome (Acts 28:14b; cf. 28:16), notes that some believers of Rome had come along the Appian Way as far as the Forum of Appius, 43 miles from Rome, to meet the apostle (Acts 28:15). Others had travelled as far as the Three Taverns, 33 miles from Rome. Paul’s controversial reputation would certainly have preceded him (Rom 3:8), as well as his status as the apostle to the Gentiles (15:15-19), even though he was not the founder of the church at Rome (15:20). But Roman believers had been expecting the apostle’s arrival for some time now (Rom 1:10-13; 15:22ff), notwithstanding the fact that God had delayed Paul’s trip for two years at Caesarea and had brought about its culmination in a most unexpected way. We do not know who precisely these Roman believers were, but presumably they would have passed on the greetings of the many believers in Romans 16:3-15, including Prisca and Aquila (16:3-4; cf. Acts 18:2-3, 18-19). The pastoral effect of this meeting for Paul was exhilarating (Acts 28:15b) and he proceeded confidently to Rome.

PAUL IN ROME

When Paul arrived in Rome, he was placed under house arrest for two years (Acts 28:16, 23, 30). He lived in a “hired dwelling” (Acts 28:29), probably an apartment in a Roman tenement, paid at “his own expense” (28:30), and large enough to accommodate “great numbers” (28:23). Paul was under the care of one “soldier” (Acts 26:16; cf. 12:6), and was chained to his guard (28:20). He was probably near the Praetorian barracks beyond the city walls northeast of Rome. This soldier, however, did not belong to the higher ranked centurions who had guarded Paul at Jerusalem and Caesarea (Acts 21:32; 22:25ff; 24:23). The change to a low ranking guard was because Paul’s status as a Roman citizen was more common in Rome, whereas it was rare in the provinces (22:25-29).

Unashamed of his bonds, Paul preached the kingdom of God boldly at Rome (Acts 28:31). He called together the Jewish local leaders (Acts 28:17), presumably the elders, scribes, and rulers of the four to five mid first-century Roman synagogues. Philo (*Leg.* 155-157) locates the large Jewish community at Rome on the other side of the Tiber. Synagogue inscriptions reveal that the Jews had sought out powerful Roman patrons (Agrippa, Augustus). Paul lays the ground for a favourable response to his upcoming legal examination by establishing his Jewish credentials in front of the powerful Roman Jews (Acts 28:17, 20 [cf. 23:6]). He also underscores that his appeal to Caesar did not imply any charge against Israel (28:19).

Given the recent expulsion of the Jews from Rome (AD 49: Acts 18:2; Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4), it is not surprising that the Roman Jews knew little of the Roman believers (Acts 28:21-22). A later meeting of Paul with the Roman Jews produced another divided response (Acts 28:24-25; cf. 13:40-47; 18:5-8; 19:8ff). In citing Isaiah 6:9-10 (Acts 28:26-28), Paul emphasised God’s transfer of his offer of salvation to the Gentiles (28:30; 13:46-47). However, the apostle did not thereby exclude the Jews from a continuing experience of divine grace, either in the present or in the future (Rom 11:1ff, 25ff). The response of a Jewish remnant to the gospel throughout Acts affirms this, as does Paul’s welcome of “all who came to him” (28:30), whether Jew or Gentile. Finally, the Captivity epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon) were probably written during this period of Paul’s house arrest at Rome in 61-62 AD.

We are left with a puzzle. Why doesn’t Luke indicate what happened to Paul after his two-year detention? What was the result of Paul’s trial before Caesar, assuming that it went to court? If Paul was acquitted before Nero, where did Paul go afterwards and what happened to him? What did Luke know about Paul’s fate? And if Luke was aware that his audience knew about the apostle’s fate, is this cryptic conclusion to Luke-Acts satisfying (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-11)?

Some scholars have argued that Luke died before he finished Acts or before he commenced a projected third volume. Both options are unsatisfactory explanations to the problem of Acts’ ending. Verse 31 is typical of the six summary statements throughout Acts regarding the gospel’s continuous progress (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). The ending appears to be deliberate. Regarding a projected third volume, some scholars have proposed that Luke’s use of *protos* in Acts 1:1 does not mean ‘former’ (implying only two volumes, Luke and Acts) but ‘first’ (implying a ‘third’ volume after the “first” and “second”). However, this is an unlikely interpretation of *protos*. Rather than hypothesising Luke’s premature death, it is safer to conclude that Acts 28:30-31 is Luke’s intended ending.

Luke gives clear indications of Paul's death (Acts 20:22-24, 29a, 38; 21:10-14), as well as of his impending trial before the emperor (27:24). What Luke does not indicate is whether this took place immediately after his account breaks off (AD 62) or occurs at a later date. Paul may have been acquitted, or released when his accusers did not appear due to the prohibitive cost of mounting a prosecution (cf. Acts 28:21). Either way, if Luke's audience knew of Paul's execution under Nero some time before 9 June 68 AD, the date of Nero's suicide, Luke could safely omit reference to Paul's fate. This is especially the case if Luke wrote his two-volumed work after the sack of Jerusalem (Lk 21:20ff: AD 70).

The most likely solution to our puzzle is that Luke brings his two works to a *theological* climax, focusing on how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8; 13:47; 28:28; cf. Luke 24:47), symbolised by Rome as capital of the empire. Luke is not a first-century 'Eusebius' writing a universal history on the expansion of the apostolic church. He leaves out too much that is important. How did the church at Rome (cf. Acts 2:10) and Colossae start (cf. 19:10)? What happened to James, the Lord's brother and leader of the Jerusalem church (cf. Josephus, *AJ* 20.200)? Why does Luke omit specific mention of Titus, the well-known co-worker of Paul's letters? Nor is Luke writing a multi-volumed historical monograph, like Livy or Polybius, but a more limited work, such as the narrowly focused historical monographs of Sallust (*The Jugurthan War*, *The Catalinarian Conspiracy*) and Josephus (*Against Apion*, *Life*).

Instead, Luke charts the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, with a strong biographical interest in its main proponents (e.g. Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, James). Luke also concentrates upon the two main churches that launched its missionary expansion (Jerusalem and Antioch). He displays hortatory, apologetic, and evangelistic purposes in his 'case-studies' of how the gospel was defended before Jews, Greeks, and Romans. He defends the fulfilment of God's covenantal promises to Israel (Luke 1:1; 24:44; Acts 2:30ff; 3:18; 7:1ff; 13:16ff; 15:15ff; 26:6-7), but which were rejected by many first-century Jews (4:1-3; 5:17ff; 6:9ff; 7:54ff; 11:19; 13:50ff; 14:2ff, 19ff; 17:5, 13; 19:9; 20:19; 22:30; 24:1ff; 28:24b-28). Nonetheless, there were significant examples of Jewish belief in Christ (2:41; 6:7; 14:1; 16:1; 17:11-12; 18:8; 28:24a). Luke adds to his story novelistic touches that make his narrative vivid and exciting, while maintaining the historical accuracy of his account. In sum, Luke bypasses the fate of Paul for other themes.

What happened to Paul after his Roman imprisonment? The evidence of Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy provides an answer. Many scholars dismiss these letters as 'pseudepigraphic' inventions of a later Pauline generation which re-packaged Paul's teaching for a new age. But if a secretary wrote the Pastorals (Luke? cf. 2 Tim 4:11; Rom 16:22) on behalf of Paul while he was in prison, many of the unusual features pointing to a different author can be accounted for.

Several geographic references in the Pastorals (1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 1:17a; 2:12; 4:13, 20; Titus 1:5; 3:12), not easily reconciled with Acts, point to fourth missionary journey of Paul upon his release some time after AD 62. The earliest evidence that Paul reached Spain, mooted in Romans (15:23, 28), is found in Clement of Rome (*Epistle to the Corinthians* 5:5-7: AD 95), though this may simply be an inference from Paul's text. By the time of writing 2 Timothy, Paul is again imprisoned in Rome (1:16-18) and awaits

execution (4:6-8, 16-18). According to Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 2.25), Paul and Peter were martyred in the Neronian persecution c. AD 66-67.