

Paul's epic journey to Rome

4. The second leg: Sidon to Myra

Tom Barling

After a short stop at Sidon, Paul and his companions continue to Myra in Asia Minor, an important port of call for ships carrying grain from Egypt to Rome.

WE CONCLUDED our [last article](#) with Paul and his fellow travellers reaching Sidon. The town was an ancient Phoenician settlement; it was blessed with a twin harbour. After so short a journey it is highly unlikely that the coastal vessel on which Paul and Luke were travelling was transporting supplies to be unloaded. It is much more probable that it was taking on cargo.

Caroline Skeel has shown how important a part Syria played in the economy of the Empire: "In the first century A.D. Syria was the great rival of Egypt in trade and manufacture. Agriculture too was in a thriving state . . . But important as the corn, wine and oil of Syria were, its manufactures were more important still. The purple-dyed stuffs and silks of Tyre and Sidon, and the fine linen of some half-dozen Syrian towns, were exported all over the world".¹ As Sidon was so directly connected with Damascus, it seems at least possible that the vessel was taking on exports from that region, and indeed from more wide a field. We remind ourselves that the book of Acts itself, with its account of Paul's various sea journeys, gives us valuable insight into the coastal traffic of the times. Thus during the voyage at the end of the Third Missionary Journey (which, after Paul had arrived in Jerusalem, led to the dramatic events culminating in his arrest) the boat on which he was travelling called at Tyre to unload its cargo (21:3)—an incidental witness to the constant exchange of goods that went on between the various parts of the empire.

There is an interesting difference between the records of Paul's call at Sidon and the one at Tyre. The latter took place when Paul, in the company of Luke and other ecclesial delegates, were taking the proceeds of the Great Collection to Jerusalem. Then contact was established with the local brethren (v. 4), thus providing evidence of the spread of the gospel. We noted in the [previous article](#) that Julius, the centurion in charge of the

apostle, had given him leave to contact his "friends" at Sidon (27:3). The use of the terms 'brothers' or 'disciples' would mean little to the centurion.

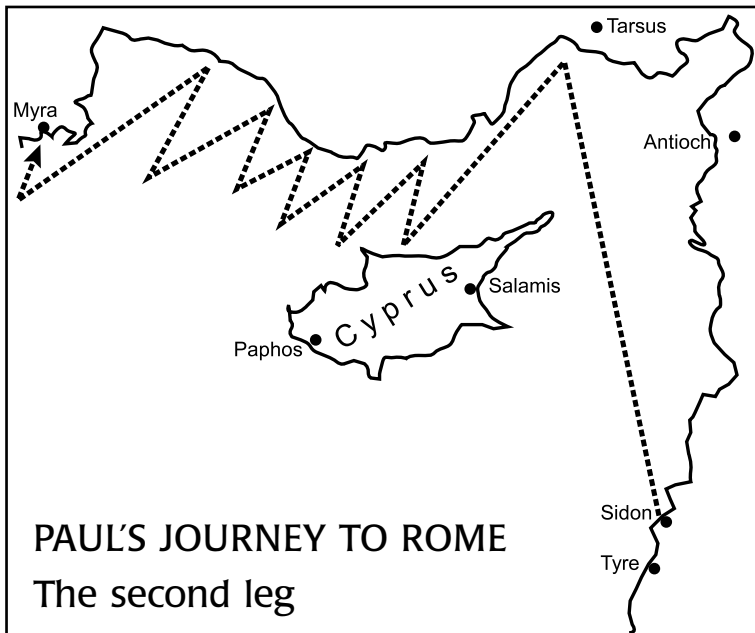
However, when Luke is describing the earlier stop at Tyre, he speaks of the "disciples", and at Ptolemais, the next port of call, "brethren" (21:4,7). Without pressing the point unduly, we may find in the use of the two different terms an undesigned coincidence.

Passing Cyprus

To revert to the journey, when they put out to sea from Sidon, the character of the voyage changed. Luke records: "From there [Sidon] we . . . passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us" (27:4, NIV). This is the first mention of winds, but it will by no means be the last; they play a decisive role in the rest of the voyage. Some map makers have totally misunderstood the situation, representing the vessel as passing to the south of Cyprus, and then up the west coast of the island, an error discussed at some length by James Smith.² As we hope to demonstrate, the voyage to Rome was taking place late in the year and at a time when the winds blow steadily from the west. On leaving Sidon, the boat would follow the east coast of Cyprus as a lee coast, and make towards the north, to arrive off Cilicia, specifically mentioned by Luke: "When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia" (v. 5, NIV). Here Luke gives the correct sequence of provinces sailing from east to west.

Commentators familiar with Smith's important work accept his opinion without demur. Thus Ramsay comments: ". . . westerly breezes blow with great steadiness through the summer months in the Levant; and it is certain that ancient ships

1. Caroline A. J. Skeel, *Travel in the first century after Christ, with special reference to Asia Minor*, Cambridge University Press, 1901, pp. 35-6.
2. *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*, pp. 63-68. [The case for the ship sailing south of Cyprus was put by Brother Malcolm Edwards in "[Unto Caesar shalt thou go](#)", *Testimony*, Jul. 2004, p. 292.—Ed.]



that the writer was an eyewitness, one who omits irrelevant details but gives us the essential details. The strategy adopted by the centurion now paid off, and Julius was able to tranship his passengers at Myra. Here they found an Alexandrian corn-ship making for Italy. Myra was an important port of call for these great vessels. It was located some 3.5 miles from the port of Andriaki.

The significance of the stop at Myra

If we study a map of the eastern Mediterranean, we make what appears at first sight a strange discovery. Myra lay almost due north of Alexandria, and one may well wonder why a vessel

westward bound sailed east of Cyprus, as the Adramyttian ship now did".³ Ellen Semple makes these comments: "Most important are the dry northeast trade winds of summer, to which the Greeks gave the name of Etesian, and which blow over the entire Eastern Basin. They appear in late May, alternate with south winds or with calms till July 25th, the helioteic [*sic*] rising of the Dog Star; then they become established and dominate the East Basin till about September 15th, when they begin to give way".⁴

Along the coast of Asia Minor

Favoured by the protection off eastern Cyprus, the coaster appears to have made favourable progress. Once they were off Cilicia (v. 5) they had a lee shore and no longer had to contend with the adverse wind, at least not to the same degree. Furthermore, they were now assisted "by a land breeze which prevails there during the summer months, as well as the current which constantly runs to the westward along the coast of Asia Minor".⁵ The so-called Western Text here appears to incorporate an authentic detail, reporting that this leg of the journey took fifteen days.⁶

The total distance from Sidon to Myra was something of the order of 400 miles, but this can only be the roughest of estimates, as the progress of the vessel would scarcely be a straight line ([see map](#)). It would appear that at this stage they did not encounter any untoward problems, for Luke passes over it briefly. In all this we can discern

bound for Italy should call in at a point so far from its direct route. The fact that an Alexandrian corn ship should call at Myra throws a vivid light on the navigational problems encountered by sailing vessels of the period. James Smith, as ever, is helpful: "... with the westerly winds which prevail in those seas, ships, particularly those of the ancients, unprovided with a compass and ill calculated to work to windward, would naturally stand to the north till they made the land of Asia Minor, which is particularly favourable for navigation by such vessels, because the coast is bold and safe, and the elevation of the mountains makes it visible at a great distance; it abounds in harbours, and the

3. W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, ninth edition, London, 1907, pp. 316-7.
4. C. Semple, *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region in Relation to Ancient History*, London, 1932, p. 94.
5. See Hackett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1877, p. 314.
6. There is a long article on the Western Text in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, 1992, vol. 6, p. 809ff. Helpful also are the comments of Colin Hemer in his book, *The Setting of the Book of Acts in Hellenistic History*, Eisenbrauns, 1990, p. 53ff. He comments, "We may in general accept the balance of probability that the longer [Western Text] is more likely to be derived from the shorter by explanatory gloss and expansion than the shorter abbreviated from the longer. This balance is confirmed by the character of the distinctive western readings, which often are like inferential enlargements".

sinuosities of its shores and the westerly current would enable them, if the wind was at all off the land, to work to windward, at least as far as Cnidus, where these advantages ceased".⁷

Because it was a storage place for Egyptian corn, Myra acquired considerable importance. It has been calculated that Rome had a population of 1,000,000 during the principate of Augustus, much of it dependent upon the corn dole. J. Carcopino arrives at this figure by a series of calculations based upon available statistics from Roman sources.⁸ This estimate is supported by G. Rickman in his monograph *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*.⁹ If man should not live to eat, he must eat to live. A reliable supply of grain was essential to the life of the capital, and it is generally recognised that during the first century Egypt provided a third of its supplies, or enough for four months. There may be some doubt about the precise amount Egypt contributed to feeding the Romans, but what is certain is that the Egyptian source was vital to the life of the Empire.

Augustus saw this with his customary clarity, and made special arrangements for the government of the province. In his biography of Augustus, A. H. M. Jones states, "Strangest of all, a strict rule was laid down that no senator might visit the country without his express consent. The reason for this strange anomaly is given by Tacitus, 'for fear that Italy might be starved out by whoever held that province, whose frontiers by sea and land could be held against huge armies by however small a garrison; in other words that Egypt was at the same time so vital to the corn supply of Rome, and so strategically defensible, that it was unsafe to allow a senator, a potential rival, to obtain control of it'.¹⁰ This estimate of the importance of Egypt to the Romans is borne

out by the speech delivered by Agrippa II when he endeavoured to dissuade the Jews from revolting against the Romans: ". . . besides what it [Egypt] pays in money, it sends corn to Rome that supports it for four months [in the year]". Then Agrippa proceeds to show, like Tacitus, how easy it was to defend Egypt against attack.¹¹

It is thus in our survey of the second leg of the journey to Rome that we discover that the account has clearly been drawn up by an eyewitness, who himself acknowledges at the beginning of his Gospel how important is the testimony of eyewitnesses (Lk. 1:1,2). As is apparent to all readers of Acts, it is not Luke's purpose to afford insight into the life of the Roman Empire, but in the second part of the book to concentrate upon important episodes in the life of the Lord's great servant, Paul. However, so wide ranging is Luke's narrative, touching as it does incidentally at so many points upon the life of the time, that it is a precious document for the student of the Roman Empire in the first century of our era, and this secondary aspect of our studies of the journey to Rome will inevitably recur, as it is in itself a warrant of the truth of the events chronicled by Luke.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

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7. *Op. cit.*, p. 72.
 8. J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (translated from the French), Penguin Books, 1956, pp. 27-8.
 9. G. Rickman's work came to our attention in our first study; here once more are the bibliographical details: *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, Clarendon Press, 1980 (see now pp. 8-10).
 10. A. H. M. Jones, *Augustus*, London, 1970, p. 101.
 11. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book II, ch. XVI.4 (p. 489 in Whiston's translation).

Paul's companions to Rome

Luke uses the first person throughout the . . . narrative; and he was therefore in Paul's company. But how was this permitted? It is hardly possible to suppose that the prisoner's friends were allowed to accompany him. Pliny mentions a case in point (*Epist.* III 16). Paetus was brought a prisoner from Illyricum to Rome, and his wife Arria vainly begged leave to accompany him; several slaves were permitted to go with him as waiters, valets, etc., and Arria offered herself alone to perform all their duties; but her prayer was refused. The analogy shows how Luke and Aristarchus accompanied Paul: they must have gone as his slaves, not merely performing the duties of slaves (as Arria offered to do), but actually passing as slaves. In this way not merely had Paul faithful friends always beside him; his importance in the eyes of the centurion was much enhanced, and that was of great importance. The narrative clearly implies that Paul enjoyed much respect during this voyage, such as a penniless traveller without a servant to attend on him would never receive either in the first century or the nineteenth.

W. Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, pp. 315-6