

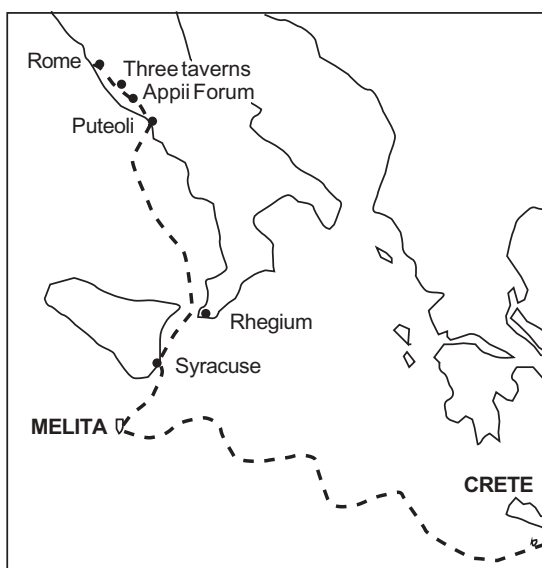
“Unto Caesar shalt thou go”

Paul’s voyage to Rome

2. Saved from the sea

Malcolm Edwards

IN [PART 1](#) we considered the journey of Paul to Rome from Caesarea to the point when the fierce northeasterly wind called Euroclydon sprang up and drove them off course. In this article we resume the story at that point. [Map 1](#) shows the journey.



Map 1. Paul’s journey from Crete to Rome

“Whose I am, and Whom I serve”

Three days after they had left Crete the captain reduced sail to prevent the canvas being blown to ribbons. Yet despite the undergirding of the vessel (see [Part 1](#)) she was still shipping too much water, mostly from the swamping waves. So, to gain more buoyancy, orders were given to throw heavy equipment overboard, followed by everything else not needed, except the cargo of wheat itself. It was a task speedily carried out by all available hands, even the prisoners. But when the storm raged on and the thick clouds and rain obscured both sun and stars for several days and nights, it was then that all hope of being saved was abandoned.

It was somewhat reminiscent of Jonah, whose own journey to Tarshish was probably caught by the same kind of storm. Every person would be praying and fasting, but it was only Paul whom the Lord heard. “After long abstinence” (Acts 27:21) he stood up and addressed everyone. Against the noise of the storm he would have had to raise his voice to shouting pitch, first reminding them of his warning back in Crete:

“Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss. And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man’s life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God, Whose I am, and Whom I serve, saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me. Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island” (vv. 21-26).

Men staring death in the face do not repudiate hope lightly, and the terrified ship’s company could not deny that Paul’s foreboding at Crete had been dreadfully confirmed. Nor could they fail to see the utter conviction in this new pronouncement. Afterwards, several parts of it would still be ringing in their ears: they were to be of good cheer; there would be no loss of life; an angel had spoken to him; all in the ship would be spared; they were to be cast on an island. But the apostle’s utter conviction would have impressed them the most. Here was a man who, in the face of all the gloom and despair, had no doubts whatsoever that it would be exactly as it was told him. The result was an electrifying boost to the morale of the whole ship’s company, and it would be reflected in their labours henceforth.

Fourteen days and nights in this terrible storm they were “driven up and down in Adria”,

meaning the Adriatic Sea (v. 27). It was a sea that had claimed very many ships of that period. Josephus was wrecked there and was among some eighty swimmers who were rescued by a passing ship of Cyrene and taken to Puteoli. But at last the crew sensed they were approaching land. Floating flotsam would be the first signs, and the leaded line soon confirmed that land was indeed near, but what land?

“Abide in the ship”

It being night time, and fearing unseen rocks ahead, the captain gave the order to cast out four stern anchors. This means that, in spite of the battering it had received, the ship was still under some control. By using a small area of sail and the two rudders, which were actually two large steering oars that resembled huge cricket bats, the captain had managed to keep the ship's stern to the wind. The vessels of that period had a higher stern than the prow, so against a following sea it was the best position to maintain. The four anchors only required to be tossed overboard, and as they bit into the rocky sea bed their ropes would soon become taut enough to hold the vessel as it strained shoreward, thus keeping its prow towards the shore. This done, they anxiously waited for the day.

The attempted escape next morning of several sailors, using the subterfuge of taking out a prow anchor in a boat, utilised normal nautical practice. Anchors simply tossed out at the prow as were those at the stern would have availed nothing, since the vessel was not moving away from them. The anchor would require to be carried out in a boat and dropped a distance from the ship, and the rope winched tight after the anchor had gripped. Paul, however, perhaps through Luke, became aware of their device, and speaking, significantly, not to the captain but to the centurion, said, “Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved” (v. 31).

It was an ultimatum that Julius could not ignore, such was his trust in Paul and his God. At his sharp command the soldiers slashed through the ropes, and the boat and anchor fell away into the surf. The captain may well have complained strongly at the loss of their main life-saving device, but Julius now trusted Paul's word much more than that of anyone else in the vessel. Abiding in the ship in order to be saved has undoubted spiritual meaning that has been often expounded by others, but, like many parables, it can only be taken so far, since the vessel itself

was soon a total wreck and many of its occupants were saved on pieces of the wreckage.

By now Paul had gained the respect of all the ship's company, and at his encouragement they broke their fast and took food. His confidence now became theirs. The plan was to beach the ship and so, in much shallower water, lessen their danger. To facilitate this, however, would mean the loss of their precious cargo, so over the side went all the wheat.

Thus lightened considerably, the ship was now ready for its final drive for the shore. They were near a spit of land between two inlets, one of which had flowing into it a creek. Whether this was their objective is not clear, but it would certainly be a sheltered place to land. Thus, hoisting up the mainsail and loosening the restraining ropes to free the two steering oars, they cut the anchor ropes and steered for the beach.

It seems from verse 41 that they never entered the inlet but were blown onto the spit of land between the two bays or “seas”, where the prow struck and held fast, whilst the hull was swung broadside to the pounding waves and was quickly broken in two. The character of Julius is once again shown in his preventing the soldiers from killing the prisoners lest they should escape; and so, exactly as Paul had foretold, every one of the ship's company, either swimming or clinging to floating wreckage, made it to the shore, weary, wet, cold and exhausted, but safe, and thankful.

Melita

Acts 28:1 informs us that as soon as they were ashore they knew the island to be Melita, which invites the question as to how they knew this so instantly. It may be that in the growing light of day one of the crew recognised where they were from a previous visit to the island, but it seems more likely that one of the inhabitants who helped pull the survivors ashore told them. They are called barbarians (v. 2), not because they were savages, but because they were neither Greek nor Latin speaking. Malta, as we now call it, was colonised by Phoenicians and Carthaginians many centuries before the Romans rose to power, and at that particular time the island was an independent municipality that sent ambassadors to Rome. It is almost certain, therefore, that there was an interpreter on hand to announce where they were.

Because of the direction of Euroclydon, the landing would have been to the northeast of the

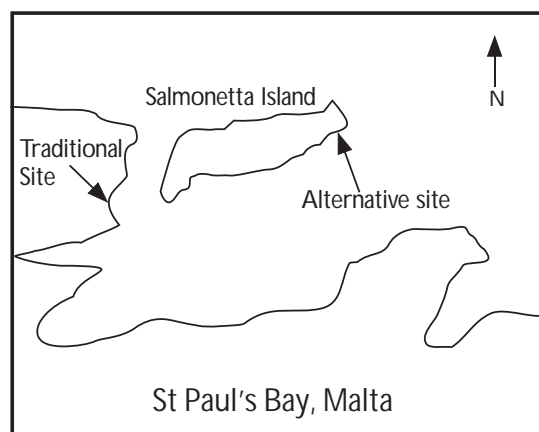
island, so the traditional site known today as St Paul's Bay is certainly in the correct locality. The captain probably had enough control of the vessel to keep her in the general direction of Sicily, and in reaching Melita, which was slightly north of Crete, the sail would be angled slightly to keep the wind astern and to starboard, with the starboard steering oar constantly employed.

The traditional site of the wreck is just south of a tiny island called Salmonetta Island, which almost certainly was joined to the main island of Malta at the time of the shipwreck, forming the point between the "two seas", in which case the tip of this island seems more likely to be where the ship struck (see [Map 2](#)).

The incident of the snake fastening itself on Paul's hand brings out an undesigned coincidence not mentioned by Blunt. We have established that the time of year was early autumn when they left Myra (see [previous article](#)) and they were hoping to reach Phenice to "winter" there (27:12). It could have been late November or possibly even early December when they landed at Melita, and the reference to the "cold" and the "fire" establishes this (28:2). Furthermore, a snake in a bundle of sticks suggests it was in hibernation, which would confirm the onset of winter.

Malta has had no snakes in living memory, and it is easy to understand why this is so. It is much easier to eliminate snakes from small islands, and, since Malta actually comprises three islands, their extinction would be assured in course of time. Although the islanders believed the snake had bitten Paul, the record does not actually say that it did so. It may have only coiled around his arm for self preservation, having just awakened from hibernation. In fact, even if it had bitten him, it is said that snakes coming out of hibernation have no venom for several days afterwards. Whatever was the case, after first assuming Paul was a criminal who, having cheated the sea, was still destined to die, they then changed their minds and decided that being unharmed he must be a god. They were, however, shortly to find out about the true God that Paul worshipped.

The shore on which they were wrecked was part of, or very close to, the estate of the chief man of the island, Publius. Almost certainly he would have lived in one of the many luxurious villas that archaeologists have uncovered in parts of Malta. It is said that the cathedral at Citta



Map 2. Possible sites of Paul's shipwreck

Vecchia in the southwest of the island is built on the ruins of the house of Publius, but this is doubtful since it is several kilometres from St Paul's Bay. Whatever was the case, Publius was able to accommodate 276 shipwrecked people, and his hospitality was rewarded in that Paul was able to heal his father, who was suffering from what is thought to have been dysentery. This action brought many other sick people to Paul and would surely have led to Christianity being introduced to the island.

To Italy and Rome

Another ship of Alexandria was berthed at Melita awaiting the arrival of spring, and after three months it took them all to Puteoli on the coast of Italy, stopping briefly at Syracuse and Rhegium. Luke's nautical mind observed that it had an unusual carved figurehead of the twin Greek gods Castor and Pollux (the Gemini, that is, the Twins), which pagans believed were protective of mariners. He recorded also that, before reaching Rhegium, the ship "fetched a compass" or performed a full circle (v. 13), presumably in seeking the south wind that finally took them to Italy.

We are told that at Puteoli they "found brethren" (28:14), with whom they stayed seven days. Paul's company was reduced to himself, his two companions and their military escort. Presumably the few days' stay in Puteoli allowed the brethren there to inform those at Rome of Paul's arrival, some of whom travelled the sixty-five miles to Appii Forum to meet him. A later group arrived at the Three Taverns, some ten miles closer to Rome, where all three parties were united. It was that emotional gathering that

caused Paul to thank God and take courage against what lay ahead for him in Rome.

But how did these Roman brethren know of Paul? We should not forget that there had been an ecclesia at Rome for some time. It was now A.D. 62, and some five years previously Paul had sent them a long epistle countering the influence of Judaism amongst them. In Romans 15:32 he had announced that he fully intended to visit them, but in better circumstances no doubt. From his salutations in chapter 16 he had obviously met some of their members previously in other locations, one or two of whom may have been amongst the welcoming groups.

And so Paul finally arrived in Rome, still a prisoner but allowed the rare concession of dwelling in his own hired house. One can deduce that this reflects the influence of the centurion Julius. It was a privilege that allowed him to write his letters with greater relaxation, and to receive visitors with little restriction.

The Acts story draws to a conclusion with the apostle's meeting with the local Jewish leaders,

to whom he explained his situation as a prisoner of Rome. They had not heard of the events that led to his appeal to Caesar, but they confirmed that the sect he belonged to was everywhere spoken against in Rome. This bears out the historical facts, for some two years later the brethren in Rome were dreadfully persecuted by Nero after the great fire of A.D. 64. Paul was nevertheless faithful to the principle already expressed in his epistle to the Roman believers, that the gospel was "to the Jew first" (1:16), and accordingly he did his level best to convince the local Jews out of the Law and the Prophets of the truth about the Kingdom of God in relation to Jesus Christ, but without avail.

So the book of the Acts concludes with the Jews departing in some ferment, with Paul's quotation of Isaiah 6:9 ringing in their ears, plus his parting shot: "Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it" (28:28).

(Concluded)