

If our understanding of prophecy is correct then this is indeed just the beginning of “these things.” Throughout human history, economic turmoil has inevitably led to political turmoil and often to war. Political and economic uncertainty are often the means by which God brings the “basest of men” to power in order that His

will might be accomplished. We take no pleasure in the inevitable suffering and hardship that is coming on mankind as a result of his greed and sin, but we do rejoice that these things are but a passing phase that will lead to the glory of the Kingdom age when all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Exposition

Paul’s epic journey to Rome

Supplementary studies (5)

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Arriving at Myra gave Julius the opportunity to transfer Paul and the other prisoners to a corn freighter bound for Rome. This vessel had come from the Egyptian port of Alexandria. This article considers Alexandria and the riches exported through this city to satisfy the growing demand from Rome.

WHEN THE CENTURION Julius and the prisoners for whom he was responsible arrived at Myra (“a city of Lycia,” Acts 27:5) the presence of a corn freighter in the harbour allowed them the opportunity to leave the coasting vessel and to go on board the much larger ship (v. 6).

This change of vessel gave rise, in the original series of articles, to a chapter on “Changing ships at Myra” (*Testimony*, May 2007, p. 148), which led in its turn to a consideration of the Lycian port and its importance in the corn trade between Egypt and Rome. Stress was laid on the influence of wind in determining the course of ancient sailing ships, and this was seen to be illustrated by the fact that a ship from Alexandria bound for Puteoli in Italy was constrained to take a course almost due north and call at Myra.

Although Myra itself was very important, its significance was minimal in comparison with that of the port from which the vessel had come. If Myra, therefore, has been given our attention, how much more should we also give some consideration to Alexandria itself. Even today it is a great city, preserving as it does the name of the remarkable individual who founded it in 331 B.C. It is asserted that Alexander founded the city during a brief visit to the area,¹ and this would not

be at all surprising in view of all that Alexander achieved in his short career.

Alexandria

Needless to say, the sources available for consultation on the subject of Alexandria are numerous. An article by James Strahan is very helpful, but we

can give only a short extract from it: “The city of Alexandria almost realized Alexander the Great’s dream of ‘a city surpassing anything previously existing’ (Plutarch, *Alex.* xxvi) . . . it became successively the capital of Hellenic, Roman and Christian Europe, ‘the greatest mart in the world’ . . . and next to Rome the most splendid city in the Empire.”² We note here the expression “the greatest mart in the world,” which testifies to the unique character of Alexandria as a trading city. Suetonius has this to say in his work *The Twelve Caesars*: “Augustus turned the kingdom of Egypt into a Roman province; and then, to increase its fertility and its yield of grain for the Roman market, set troops to clean out the irrigation canals of the Nile delta which had silted up after many years’ neglect.”³ This activity on the part of Augustus was characteristic of the man. Egypt was already well known at that time, for the pyramids and the Sphinx pre-dated Alexander

1. A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Empire* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, second edition, 1971), p. 302.
2. Article on “Alexandria” in: James Hastings (ed.), *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1915), p. 47.
3. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* (Penguin Books, revised edition, 1979), p. 54.

by many centuries. This is a subject to which we hope to return when we come to consider travel and travellers in the Roman Empire.

The riches of Egypt

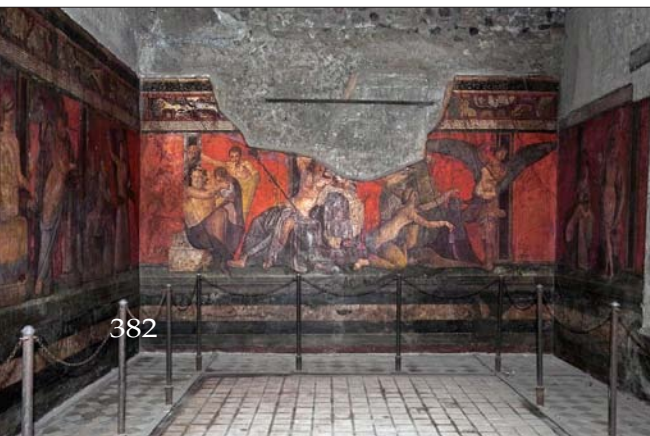
Writing about Egypt, Charlesworth makes these comments: "To describe the economic relations of Egypt to Rome during our period is by no means an easy task, firstly owing to the vast and almost embarrassing wealth of material at our command and secondly owing to the peculiar nature of the province itself."⁴ The same writer also provides us with insight into the riches of Egypt: "The mountains lying to the east of the Nile were rich in porphyry, granite and building stone, and also in gems and jewels."⁵

It is inevitable in a series of studies like the present one, the historical context of which is the Roman Empire in the first century A.D., that the subject of Egypt will occur and recur. We remind ourselves, therefore, that it was in Egypt that Octavian (the future Augustus) finally prevailed over his rival Marc Antony (and Cleopatra) in 31 B.C. In the process, Octavian was adding to Rome's possessions not merely more territory but also a source of immense riches. Ranking prominently in Rome's eyes would be Egypt as a source of corn; and the two ships on which Paul and Luke travelled to Rome provide illustrations of this.

The population of Rome had grown long before the imperial era, and with it came the need to feed an ever-increasing number of mouths. We would appear to be on safe ground in maintaining that, by the first century, the corn freighters plying the seas between Alexandria and Italy had been operating for some time⁶ in the days of the Roman Republic, and the growing demand for Egyptian corn was already reflecting the increase in Rome's inhabitants.⁷

It was the desire for such riches as displayed in Pompeii that fuelled the trade with Alexandria.

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The Sphinx and Khafra's pyramid at Giza in Egypt. Picture: Philip Walker

Luxury goods

Is it possible, then, to form some idea of the possible cargo on the ship to which Julius transferred Paul and Luke at Myra? If, as seems certain, corn formed the bulk of the cargo, the vessel could nevertheless have included many other items, since Egypt was, as we shall see, a unique source of many commodities. Charlesworth can be our guide in this. The upper echelons of Roman society were very wealthy, as a visit to the site of Pompeii can testify. Destroyed by an eruption of Vesuvius in August A.D. 79, it provides a near-contemporary insight into the economic and social background against which Paul's journey to Rome was set.

The visitor to Pompeii cannot fail to be impressed by the luxurious villas, which in some cases have now been extensively restored. As in Rome itself, there were many households in Pompeii requiring luxury goods, most of which were imported from the provinces. Carcopino illustrates such goods in the following terms: "Into [Rome's] three ports of Ostia, Portus, and the emporium beneath the Aventine poured the tiles and bricks, the wines and fruits of Italy; the corn of Egypt and Africa; the oil of Spain; the venison, the timbers, and the wool of Gaul; the cured meats of Baetica [Southern Spain]; the dates of the oases; the marbles of Greece, and of

4. M. P. Charlesworth, *Trade Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire* (Chicago, Ares Publishers, second edition, revised, 1974), p. 16.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
6. This view is supported by Lionel Casson, in: *Ships and Seafaring in Ancient Times* (London, British Museum Press, 1994), p. 101.
7. This is certainly the opinion of J. Carcopino in: *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (Penguin Books, 1991), p. 27.

Numidia [part of North Africa]; the porphyries of the Arabian desert.”⁸

It is when we pause to remember that Rome had to provide for so many wealthy households that we begin to appreciate just how the Empire came to depend increasingly on exploiting the wealth of its provinces, and developing its trade and commerce well beyond the borders of Italy. Even India was not beyond Rome’s trading reach, and its goods would find their way to Rome via Alexandria.⁹

Paul and the true riches

While we have been led into a major digression in our attempt to evaluate the background of Paul’s journey to Rome, we must not lose sight of our principal purpose. Paul certainly never lost sight of his, which was to present “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8) by bearing witness to the Lord Jesus “also at Rome” (Acts 23:11). By the time he journeyed to Rome, Paul had already acquired experience of several great cities of the Roman world, including both the Antiochs (Syrian and Pisidian), Corinth and Ephesus. Indeed, Paul’s work and travels had given him unique insight into the world of his time, with its splendour, its idolatry, its degradation and its corruption.

But Paul and Luke were bearers of riches of an altogether different character from those that

were being carried on the ships on which they travelled. They were carrying to Rome the glad tidings about one who had surrendered the privileges of his birth. In his earlier encouragement to the Corinthian believers to give generously to the Judean relief fund, Paul had reminded them of the supreme example of the Lord Jesus: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9, NIV).

Then, as always, there were wide disparities in the circumstances of the believers, and it is the responsibility of those who are well blessed to give without grudging to those in need, as Paul did in spending his life to bring the precious truths about Christ to those who had never heard them. In the process, too, the apostle became very well travelled in the Roman Empire; and the subject of ‘Travel and travellers’ seems appropriate for consideration as this series continues.

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

8. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

9. Sir Mortimer Wheeler devoted a whole book to Rome’s far-flung trading activities: *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (Penguin Books, 1955). See especially p. 18.