

Paul's epic journey to Rome

2. Ships and shipping in the first century A.D.

Tom Barling

As a preliminary to a detailed study of Luke's record of the journey to Rome, this article places the narrative in a framework, and shows the unique insight Paul's voyage provides into maritime activity in the Mediterranean in the first century A.D.

ONE OF THE prominent features in Luke's record of the journey to Rome is the fact that Paul was carried on the second stage of the voyage on two Alexandrian corn ships. Geoffrey Rickman makes these laudatory and comprehensive comments: "The whole passage in the Acts is vividly interesting for the way it exemplifies the route taken by the Alexandrian corn ships, the large number of passengers even on a late sailing, the presence of both the owner and captain on board, the wintering of such ships at intermediate ports along the route, the dangers of sea voyages, and the problems about liability raised when cargo is jettisoned or shipwreck occurs".¹ This, as we shall progressively discover, is typical of the various tributes paid to Luke's unique account. Such insight into contemporary life in the case of the book of Acts is what one would expect from a writer whose scrupulous accuracy in other respects has won such general acclaim.²

A Roman lake

Whilst the Romans are celebrated for the construction of the great network of roads they created, we need to remind ourselves how vital were the sea lanes of the Mediterranean to the survival of Rome as a great imperial power. By the middle of the first century A.D. the whole extent of the great inland sea had become a Roman lake. Geographically and historically, Rome had become the dominant power.

When we consider Rome's location, a most important fact emerges. From the Syrian coast to the Straits of Gibraltar, the sea covers a total distance of some 2,500 miles. The Strait of Messina is a relatively narrow channel dividing the island of Sicily from the toe of Italy. Then the stretch, somewhat less than 100 miles, separating Sicily from the northern shore of Africa, could easily

be commanded by a maritime power, especially when northern Africa came under Roman control. Rome itself was located roughly midway between the western and eastern ends of the Mediterranean.

When we give due weight to the various factors, we can see that, geographically, Rome was ideally located to exercise dominance over both halves of the great inland lake. Furthermore, as the Romans extended their dominion, although they themselves had little enthusiasm for the sea, they increasingly acquired access to sources capable of furnishing recruitment ground for their crews and the raw materials for the building of their ships. This is an aspect of Rome's control of the Mediterranean all too easily neglected.

Rome's dominance established

In the centuries preceding the imperial era (Augustus became *princeps*, meaning first citizen, in 27 B.C.), Rome had a maritime rival in Carthage, an ancient Phoenician possession. But its power had been broken in the three Punic wars, the last culminating in the defeat of Carthage in 146 B.C. and the total destruction of the city itself. Rome could be utterly ruthless with any who threatened its supremacy, and indeed, in the same year, Corinth too had been destroyed by the Roman republic.

Piracy remained a menace, but this too was finally eliminated: "It was with the organisation of the standing fleets maintained by the emperors at Misenum and Ravenna, with auxiliary squadrons in Egypt, Syria and the Cyrenaica, that for the first time in history the whole of the Mediterranean was adequately patrolled, and the inhabitants of

1. G. Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 132.
2. Sir William Ramsay tells the story of his changed attitude to the reliability of the book of Acts in two of his works: *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 70*, London, 1984, p. 8 sq., and *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, London, New York, Toronto, 1915, Chapter III, "The First Change of Judgment".

its coast obtained respite from the marauders. With the reduction of the piratical communities, improved methods of government in the provinces, and the provision of an organized maritime policy, piracy almost disappears from the Mediterranean during the first two centuries of our era".³

When this was achieved, the whole expanse had become truly a Roman lake, a development unique in its long history. Theoretically, a traveller starting out from Gibraltar, travelling all the way to Syria, turning southwards to reach Egypt and then proceeding back to a point opposite to his place of departure, would have covered a distance of well over 5,000 miles, and everywhere he travelled he was in territory under imperial control. This was the world in which Paul and his companions could carry out their preaching and pastoral activities, and we may well see in this the hand of providence. Total control of land routes was, however, more difficult, and Paul speaks of the hazards he had encountered in 2 Corinthians 11:26, when he mentions "dangers from robbers" (NEB), among other perils.

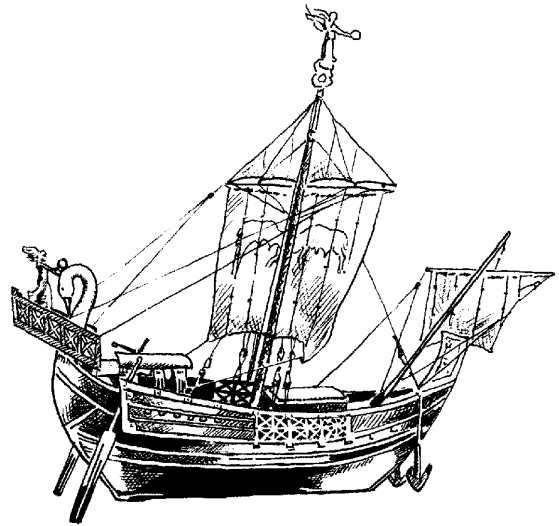
The importance of the corn trade

In [Part 1](#) we saw the importance of Caesarea to the economy of Judea. The first vessel on which the apostle and Luke travelled was a coaster, going all the way to its home port of Adramyttium, situated in the top northeast corner of the Aegean. Thus in Caesarea the coaster on which Paul, Luke and the others were embarked was far away from home, yet clearly the owners of the ship knew how rewarding could be the trade in which it was engaged. As we follow its progress, we shall obtain some insight into this trade.

However, Paul and Luke were to complete their westward travels in two great ships, both transporting corn from Alexandria to Italy. If anything was essential to the survival of Rome it was the corn trade (see above), in which the supplies from Egypt played a very important part. It is reckoned that Egypt made a contribution of a third of the supplies essential to satisfy Rome's hungry thousands. So important was Egypt in the eyes of Augustus that the governor was specially appointed by himself. In due course we hope to comment at greater length on the maritime trade in corn.

Paul the experienced traveller

At various stages we shall also see what a seasoned and knowledgeable passenger the Apostle



A Roman grainship

Paul was. At an important juncture of the journey to Rome, when a decision had to be made about where the ship was to winter, whether at one or another Cretan port, Paul confidently proffered his advice—though it was overruled, with the unfortunate consequences he had foreseen (Acts 27:8-12).

Paul was indeed no stranger to the sea; he had been born at Tarsus, situated on the southern coast of the province of Cilicia and only some ten miles from the coast. There is much incidental information in Acts that throws light on Paul's maritime experience. Thus when the brethren in Jerusalem prudently sent Paul home to Tarsus to escape the clutches of his adversaries, he travelled down to Caesarea, indicating without a doubt that he went by sea to Tarsus (9:30).

Then there is the itinerary followed when, at the end of the Third Missionary Journey, he made the journey to Jerusalem with the ecclesial delegates to convey the proceeds of the Great Collection. This stage of the journey by sea is carefully reported by Luke, for indeed he was himself one of the party.⁴ But the most eloquent witness to his vast maritime experience lies in the celebrated passage where, reluctantly, he engages in what he regards as the folly of boasting (2 Cor. 11:16-28). Among the hardships he had endured

3. This is the testimony of H. A. Ormerod (see *Piracy in the Ancient World*, London, 1924, pp. 256-7).

4. That Luke was one of the party travelling with Paul to Jerusalem is evident from the word "we" in Acts 21:1,7,10-12,15-17.

in the service of his Lord, he refers to the three occasions when he had suffered shipwreck. Where and when precisely all this befell him we cannot tell, but we know from the date of 2 Corinthians that it was before the shipwreck on Malta recorded in Acts 27.

Constantly we need to remind ourselves that the large section of Acts devoted to the apostle's activities does not aim to give us a detailed biography. Such an exercise would occupy many volumes, but at the same time we need to note how Acts witnesses incidentally to Paul's sea journeys. Even from our brief survey we can safely conclude that Paul knew what he was talking about when he intervened in the conference on Crete (Acts 27:9,10).

Because of the intrinsic interest of Acts 27–28, the record, as we have already briefly indicated, has attracted much attention from a variety of authors writing about life in the Roman Empire. As for those who have commented on the journey itself, following it stage by stage, a special place must be given to James Smith, a scholarly Scots-

man with the means to visit the Mediterranean and carry out meticulous researches in the area. His book is entitled *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St Paul*. It first appeared in 1848, and the fourth edition, the best known, appeared in 1884. The work remains authoritative, and has commanded considerable respect. Thus Sir William Ramsay speaks of the book as excellent, and more recently Colin Hemer has drawn repeatedly upon it.⁵ What gave Smith a special advantage was the fact that when he visited the Mediterranean the days of the sailing ship were by no means over, and he was thus able to consult experienced contemporaries.

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

-
5. Ramsay speaks of the excellence of Smith's book in *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (ninth edition), London, 1907, p. 314. For Hemer see his *The Book of Acts in the setting of Hellenistic History*, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 1990. On page 4 he states that Smith in his monograph "has never been bettered".

New series

The city of Hebron

1. Giants in the land

David Green

This study is concerned mainly with the naming and the history of the city of Hebron and its environs. Since both these aspects are connected with the Anakite¹ giants occupying parts of the land of Canaan, the first part of the study will be a more general consideration of the aboriginal giant inhabitants on both sides of the Jordan.

THE USUAL WORD translated 'giants' in the Bible is *rephaim*. There is a considerable difference of opinion as to the derivation of this term, but two interesting possibilities are 'ones that weaken' or 'those who strike terror'. The corresponding word usually used in the Septuagint is *gigantos*, but twice 'Titans' is used (2 Sam. 5:18,22).

Nephilim is a less common word that is translated 'giants' in most versions. It is used only three

times, once in Genesis 6:4 and twice in Numbers 13:33. A number of similar meanings are suggested for this term: 'heroes', 'fierce warriors', 'fellers', 'bullies' or 'tyrants'. These suggestions are based on the assumption that the underlying meaning of the word is 'to fall upon' or 'to cast down', that is, 'to fell'. The contexts of the passages where the terms *rephaim* and *nephilim* are used show that both apply to people of exceptional stature.

Giants in Transjordan

The racial origin of these giants is shrouded in mystery, but they appear to have been the original inhabitants of parts of the land on both sides of the Jordan. We are first introduced to them in Genesis 14, when those in the Transjordan area came un-