

the seals that events in the Roman world are being described. John was living within the Roman Empire when he received the vision. Events from the first century through to the fourth century can

be seen to equate with the opening of the first six seals. Thus the overall message and the details in the prophecy point to events in the Roman world being the subject of the sixth seal.

# Paul's epic journey to Rome

## 3. The voyage begins

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*We are now ready in this series to consider the voyage itself. Embarking from Caesarea, Paul and his companions in travel, Luke and Aristarchus, make the short journey to the Phoenician port of Sidon, where they are able to meet with the local brethren and sisters in their brief stop.*

**W**E HAVE GIVEN already in the previous article some consideration to the intrinsic interest of Luke's narrative in Acts 27–28 for the light it sheds upon maritime conditions in the first century A.D., and intimated that there is much more to be said on the subject. We have also briefly reflected on Paul's own maritime experiences. The Lucan record touches on so many aspects of contemporary life, as we shall progressively discover, that it is in some ways unique.

At the same time we must not lose sight of the fundamental interest of the two chapters; they describe events in the life of the apostle, whose sole purpose, after his conversion on the Damascus road, was to preach the gospel and to testify to the grace of God in His Son. Hence the apostle's conduct in the varied circumstances of his career must always be of interest, and we shall discover evidence of Paul's nobility and resilience in this present series. We must also not forget that by his side throughout the voyage and shipwreck was that exquisite character Luke, whom the apostle himself describes, briefly but eloquently, as "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14).

### Embarking at Caesarea

It was, then, on a coasting vessel bound for a port in the Aegean that the relieved procurator Festus, acting possibly through the agency of the centurion Julius, embarked Paul and other prisoners on a ship in the harbour at Caesarea. We think the departure was a precipitate one, as the governor would be glad to see the last of Paul.

Then there is the possibility that the vessel was on the point of departure and no time could be lost.

As already stressed in the previous article, the presence of this vessel in Caesarea was a token of the extent of the maritime trade that characterised

the empire in the heyday of the 'pax Romana'. We may well feel it would be a waste of time to speculate about the cargo carried by the coaster, but we can make some suggestions. Caesarea was no ordinary city on Palestinian soil; its very presence was an offence to Jewish susceptibilities. Looking in two directions, Herod had endeavoured to create a city in which Jews and Gentiles could coexist.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, after the deposition of Archelaus by Augustus in A.D. 6, Caesarea became the principal residence of the Roman procurator. All this constituted a potentially explosive mixture; and so it proved, for in A.D. 66 the Jewish revolt against the Roman yoke started here. Yet it was here, too, that faith in Christ made its first conquest of a Gentile, one Cornelius, an officer, moreover, in the service of the occupying power (Acts 10).

### Paul's companions for the journey

We now come to the consideration of the first part of the long journey to Rome: "And when it was determined that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners to a centurion named Julius, of the Augustan band" (27:1, RV).

We first observe the reappearance of the "we", last encountered in Acts 21:17,18. Thus, typically unobtrusive, to the extent that we might miss it,

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1. Josephus records the construction of an amphitheatre, theatre and marketplace, all features of a Gentile city. See *Wars of the Jews*, Book 1, xxi.8.

Luke once more indicates that he is with Paul. We can safely conclude that, during the two years or so separating the apostle's arrival in Jerusalem, reported in Acts 21:15, and his present departure from Caesarea, Luke has never been far from Paul. Indeed, his detailed account of what happened to the apostle, both in Jerusalem itself and during his custody, is a warrant of his familiarity with the events. We also do well to consider the probability that his proximity to Jerusalem and to such sources as James, the Lord's half-brother, enabled him to assemble the material that appears in the third Gospel (*cf.* Lk. 1:1,2).

We have already concluded that Festus, having decided to accede to Paul's request to appear before Caesar, and having entrusted him to the care of the centurion Julius, then made the decision that they would travel by sea. Whilst the identity of the other prisoners is shrouded in anonymity, Josephus informs us, "At the time when Felix was procurator of Judea, there were certain priests of my acquaintance, and very excellent persons, whom on a small and trifling occasion he had put into bonds, and sent to Rome to plead their cause before Caesar".<sup>2</sup> It is possible these fellow-prisoners of the apostle were likewise on the way to conduct their defence, but a variety of reasons may explain why they were on the ship.

"And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail unto the places on the coast of Asia, we put to sea, Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, being with us" (27:2, RV). If we wonder what this vessel from Adramyttium, a port on the coasts of the Aegean Sea, was doing in Caesarea, it may well be that, in view of the large Gentile element in the population, their dietary needs could only be satisfied with imports. Then, when we take into consideration the presence of the governor and his entourage, there would be a call for luxury items of a diverse nature not available in Judea.

Inevitably, as its destination was a port in the Aegean, the vessel would have travelled westwards along the southern shores of Asia Minor before eventually turning northwards into the Aegean. En route the ship would put in at a number of harbours, and Julius could entertain reasonable hope of finding in one of these a carrier which would convey them further westwards towards their ultimate destination.<sup>3</sup>

In the company of Paul and Luke was Aristarchus. We have already learnt he was a Thessalonian (20:4), a member of the party of ecclesial representatives accompanying Paul to Jerusalem

with the proceeds of the Great Collection, the money raised at Paul's instigation to relieve want among believing Jews (24:17).<sup>4</sup> Had Aristarchus, like Luke, remained close to the apostle during his Caesarean custody? We cannot tell; what we do know is that Paul used trusted brothers to act as messengers between himself and the various ecclesias he had founded. (One noteworthy in this connection is Tychicus; see Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7.)

It is by no means improbable that Aristarchus had been useful in this capacity during Paul's long period of detention in Caesarea. It is the conjoined force of the observation that Aristarchus was "a Macedonian of Thessalonica" that suggests the conclusion that he was homeward bound and commissioned on his way to take news of Paul and his welfare. As Aristarchus was later with Paul in Rome (Col. 4:10; Philem. v. 24), he may first, as suggested above, have taken news of Paul to the Aegean area, and later rejoined the apostle in the capital with a report concerning the churches he had visited. Whilst there is necessarily conjecture in this reconstruction, there is nothing intrinsically improbable about it.

### Touching at Sidon

"And the next day we touched at Sidon: and Julius treated Paul kindly, and gave him leave to go unto his friends and refresh himself" (Acts 27:3, RV). Sidon was the first port of call; their arrival there marked the conclusion of the first leg of their journey, the distance being about sixty-seven miles. As they arrived the next day, they must have covered some of the distance at night. This would offer no difficulty; they had only to follow the coast. With Sidon lying north-northeast of Caesarea, and the prevailing wind blowing on their port side, they would make easy progress.

Hackett imagines the impressive coastal panorama unfolding before their eyes.<sup>5</sup> However, if

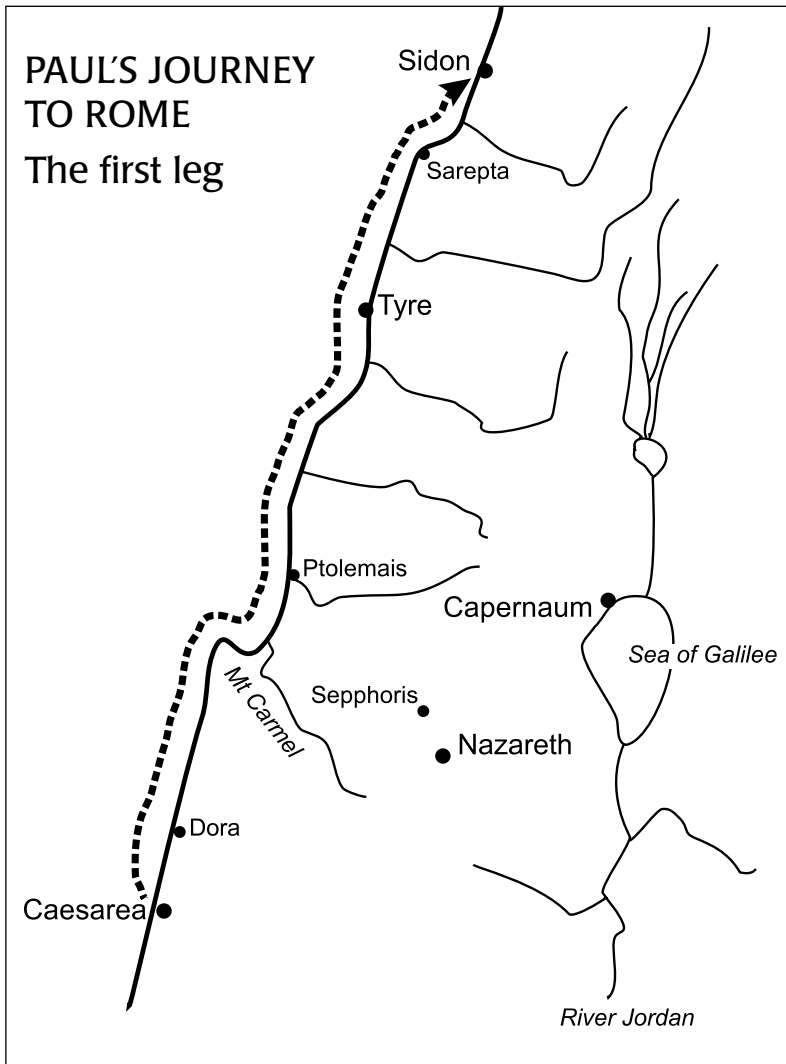
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2. *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, 3.

3. Whilst Luke's use of the term 'Asia' in Acts 19 understandably concentrates on Paul's work at Ephesus (the greatest of the Asian cities), the Roman province of Asia in the first century A.D. extended eastwards to embrace Lycia, in which was situated the important port of Myra. It was there, as we shall see, that Julius was able to find a vessel bound for Italy.

4. References to Paul's initiative in organising the collection may be seen in 1 Corinthians 16:1,2 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-4.

5. H. B. Hackett, *Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1877, p. 312.



and, ironically, the gospel had been preached in Phoenicia as a result of the persecution orchestrated by Paul before his conversion (Acts 11:19).

But what was the nature of the service rendered to Paul by local disciples? Casson has pointed out that a fare-paying passenger on a ship had to fend for himself: "Since the carrying of passengers was only incidental to the carrying of cargo, ancient merchantmen provided the minimum in facilities . . . About all they furnished was water and deck space. Travellers came aboard with their servant or servants . . . loaded with bedding, food and wine".<sup>6</sup> In view of the somewhat precipitate departure from Caesarea, Paul's requirements for a long journey had probably not been met when they boarded the coaster.

It must be evident that Julius so early in the voyage was granting this special privilege to the apostle, not because he had had opportunity to appreciate Paul's personality, but because he had been apprised of the special circumstances attending his appeal as a Roman citizen to

much of the journey took place at night, the passengers would have been asleep and the coastal scenery would thus have been hidden from their eyes.

After they had tied up, the centurion showed kindness to the apostle, allowing him to go ashore, there to establish contact with his friends and "refresh himself". The NIV is more explicit; the friends "provide[d] for his needs". It is obvious that Paul must have informed the officer that he had friends in Sidon, for how otherwise could Julius have possibly known? There is evidence of the presence of believers in Sidon. Certainly there were disciples in Tyre, south of Sidon, for Paul had made contact with them on his way to Jerusalem (21:3,4). Moreover, the Lord's fame had reached the region during his ministry (Mk. 3:8)

Nero. Moreover, he would be cognizant of the ruling made by Felix, recorded in Acts 24:23. The importance of this has already come to our notice.<sup>7</sup>

The mention of Sidon together with Tyre reminds us of the importance of the two in maritime history. Both Phoenician ports figure in the Old Testament. Ezekiel has a graphic passage which portrays the importance of Tyre in shipbuilding, and in the same chapter (27) he records the extent of its commerce.

(To be continued)

6. L. Casson, *Ships and Seafaring in Ancient Times*, London, 1994, pp. 124-5.

7. See [Part 1](#), Jan. 2007, p. 17.