

Paul's epic journey to Rome

15. Epilogue

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IN THIS EPILOGUE we shall go over the ground (if that is a suitable metaphor in the present context) that was covered in the main series, but this will be done in a summary manner, with the objective of demonstrating the authenticity of Luke's account.

Voyaging to Myra

After conducting his defence successfully before Felix, Festus and finally King Agrippa, Paul was sent to Rome. Acts 27:1,2 describes the arrangements made for the journey. We note that the first leg of the journey was on a coasting vessel bound for the Aegean. This is an indication of the great use made of smaller vessels in the extensive maritime activity of the empire. The port of Sidon is mentioned in verse 3 and then the island of Cyprus, under the lee of which they were glad to be afforded protection against the wind. This first mention of wind is a reminder that this was the great motive power in days of sailing by sea, which continued to be so until relatively recent times.

As we follow Luke in his account, we become increasingly conscious that we are reading the record, not only of what happened to Paul, but also of what happened to the writer himself. With a map before us we can follow each stage of the journey. Acts 27:5 refers to the ship being off the Anatolian coast (the modern Turkey), and, as we follow the vessel's progress, we note the correct order, Cilicia then Pamphylia, as the ship progresses from east to west.

Then there is the mention of a very significant landmark, the Lycian city of Myra. There the centurion Julius, in charge of Paul and other prisoners, finds in port a corn ship from Alexandria, bound for Rome. For a modern reader, unfamiliar with maritime practice in the first century, this could be a strain upon his credulity. What is such a ship doing so far north, and so far out of what appears to be the normal direction? However, this is one of the outstanding warrants of the authenticity of Luke's account. The impossibility of sailing against the wind meant that the great corn ships leaving Alexandria late in the season

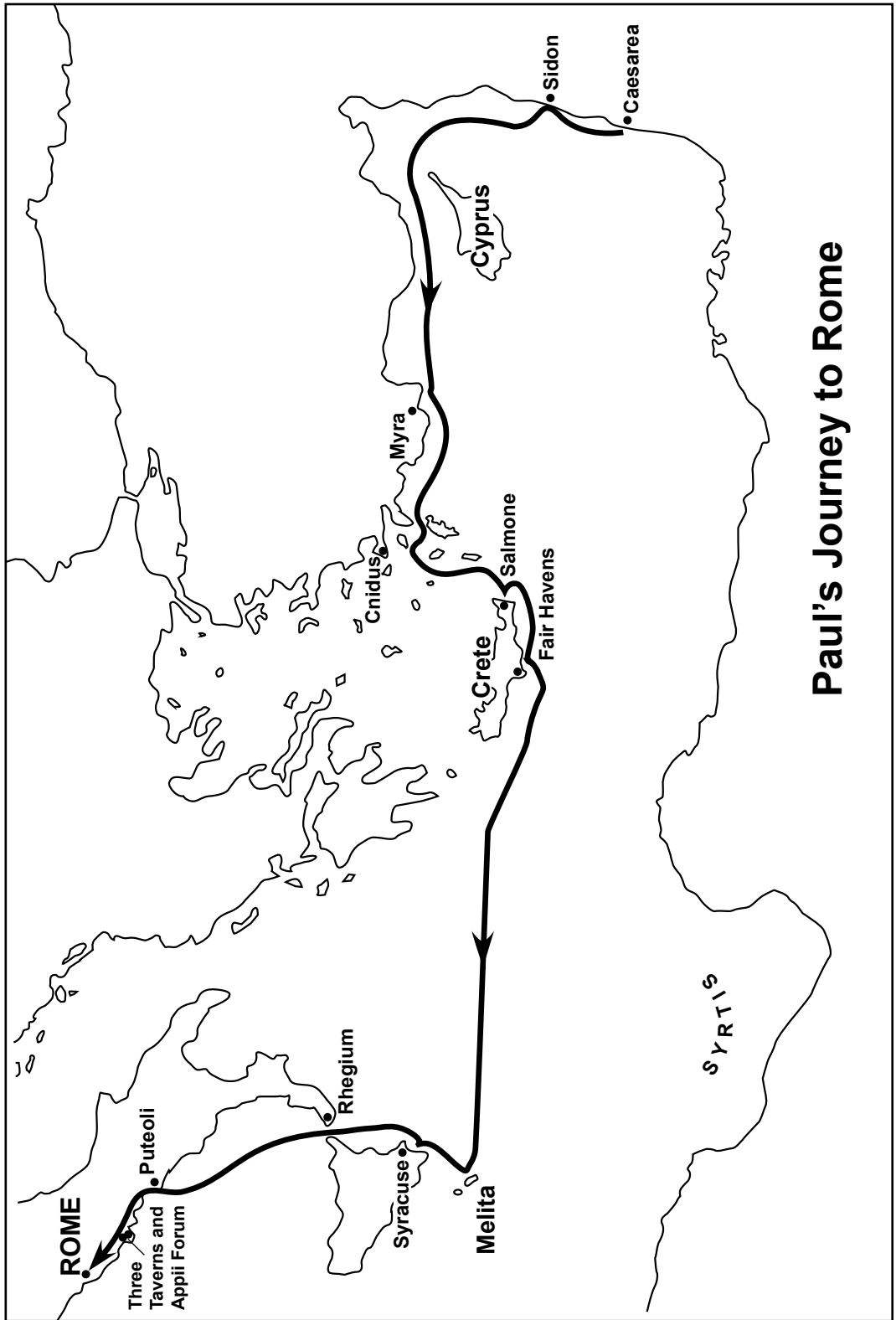
had no alternative but to sail almost directly north. This meant Myra acquired great importance in the corn trade with Egypt.

Into the storm

Hitherto Luke's account has occupied only six verses. In the conditions of the day, the ship, leaving Myra, was constrained to hug the coast until it reached a point near Cnidus, easily identifiable on the map. Now open sea lay ahead and the vessel was compelled to follow an oblique course, roughly southwest, until it was off the southern coast of Crete. The conditions of the journey, so adverse, meant it was necessary to put in at a port. This the freighter was able to do in the harbour at Fair Havens, near which lay the town of Lasea (v. 8), situated on the southern coast of Crete. This is a particularly interesting part of the account; the laborious nature of the voyage meant the ship would be running out of supplies so water would be especially needed.

Verse 9 is precious, for it gives an incidental proof of the delay experienced, as it gives an indication of the lateness of the season. The fast, that is, Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), had already gone by. So they were well into the month of October, and maritime conditions would become increasingly unfavourable. It is at this point that Paul expresses his opinion, recommending that they tie up for the winter.

However, he is overruled, and because of the beguiling weather they set out for Phoenix with its safe harbour facilities. Leaving Fair Havens they hug the coast, but at Cape Matala there lies open sea. Rounding this point, the weather deteriorates, and soon there is danger. A dreaded wind, of typhonic force and popularly known as Euroclydon, descends from the Cretan heights and the vessel now becomes a prey to the typhoon. As they move forward, the irresistible force of the gale drives them under the lee of the island of Cauda, but the southern coast of the small island affords no secure shelter. No effort can prevail against the wind (v. 15). Trailing in their wake is the ship's dinghy, waterlogged. With effort they bring it on deck.



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As they drift irresistibly southwest, towards the dreaded shoals of the Syrtis (a well-known hazard), they resort to various measures to alter the vessel's course, all of which were in harmony with the practice of the time (vv. 15-17). The use of "we" indicates the presence of the narrator (v. 18). Every detail is imprinted on Luke's memory; note "the third day" (v. 19). Despite all the measures adopted, the enveloping gloom invades the travellers. Paul now takes the initiative (vv. 21-26), declaring there is no reason for despair, for he has received an assurance from an angel; they are to survive, arriving upon an unnamed island. This Divine assurance is either ignored by some commentators or rejected by sceptical commentators, but for the student of Acts this is but one piece of evidence of direct Divine activity.

Reaching land

After the prolonged tempest, the fourteenth day arrives, and finally there is hope, as the sailors sense (v. 27). A series of soundings presage the nearness of land (v. 28). Appropriate measures are adopted by the sailors, but the proximity of land moves them to attempt to lower the dinghy and flee. They are thwarted by the vigilant Paul, who is now taking control more and more. On his advice the centurion instructs his men to deny the sailors their means of escape (vv. 31,32).

Paul now seems to be in complete command, for he organises the distribution of food (vv. 33-36). We learn that there are 276 on board, an incidental evidence of the size of the freighter (v. 37). The frustrated sailors would now have every interest in assuring as safe a beaching of the boat as possible (v. 40). It is acknowledged that the seamanship of the crew was of a high order (vv. 38-41). In all of this part of the record, the presence of the narrator is obvious; he is drawing on his personal experience.

The ship is successfully run ashore, and this arouses the fears of the soldiers, responsible for the prisoners. However, Julius intervenes, determined to have Paul spared. Then, by various means, all on board reach land (vv. 43,44).

The identity of the island they had reached is soon established; it is Malta (28:1). The islanders show no little kindness to the shivering survi-

vors (v. 2). Refuelling the fire which has been kindled, Paul escapes a snake bite, apparently supernaturally. The superstitious Maltese react in typical manner, changing from one opinion to another, as they see what befalls the apostle (vv. 3-6). Accommodated by Publius, "the chief man" of the imperial government, Paul in return heals his father, which leads to many others coming to him, and probably also to Luke, to be healed (vv. 7-10), for they honoured "us", as Luke reports.

Final stages

An indirect witness to the importance of the corn trade with Egypt and the capacity of these vessels is the fact that when the time comes to depart, a ship from Alexandria which has wintered in the island is able to accommodate, in addition to its existing crew and passengers, all 276 from the wrecked vessel (v. 11). The weather now is kindly and the ship's progress is easy to follow: Syracuse in Sicily; Rhegium, and finally Puteoli (vv. 12,13).

Paul and Luke are welcomed by fellow believers in Puteoli; they are then escorted by Roman brothers who, apprised of Paul's forthcoming arrival, form two groups from Rome to greet Paul and Luke, and this they do at Appii Forum and the Three Taverns, two well-known stopping places on the Appian Way.

As we have thus retraced Luke's record, we can see the multitude of geographical, climatic and other features that are easily verifiable. They give us total confidence in his account, and we can see why students of various aspects of Roman life turn to Acts 27 and 28 for reliable information of interest in their specialised field.

But we cannot leave Luke's account without paying a tribute to this truly exquisite character. He is happy for Paul to be in the forefront, for indeed the apostle was a dynamic personality, and this emerges clearly in some of the episodes recounted in Acts 27 and 28. There was a wonderful bond between these two: both so loved the Lord Jesus and were dedicated to his service. If we add the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts to Paul's epistles, we can begin to appreciate what a wonderful partnership this was.

(Concluded)