

Paul's epic journey to Rome

Supplementary studies (2)

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The record of Paul's journey to Rome introduces us incidentally to those who were his helpers and fellow-believers. He delighted in the fellowship that he shared with them in Christ. They in return valued his company and advice and supported him generously.

WHEN THE SHIP carrying Paul left Caesarea, the apostle was to travel by sea over many miles, eventually disembarking at Puteoli on the west coast of Italy. The first port of call was Sidon; and the possible reasons for this were touched on in the previous article in this supplementary series. Julius, the centurion responsible for Paul, allowed him to go on shore while the boat was in harbour. Paul was granted permission to receive the attention of his "friends" (Acts 27:3), and these were unquestionably the local believers. They will no doubt have greeted Paul affectionately and rendered him whatever services he needed. (We have already surmised that Paul's departure from Caesarea was somewhat precipitate, with certain of his needs still requiring attention; and this help will have been willingly provided by the brethren and sisters at Sidon, with whom Paul 'refreshed' himself.)

Fellows in Christ

From what we know of Paul, he was always anxious to make contact with fellow-believers wherever he went; his "friends" were those who shared the same hope of salvation. Although this may seem to be a digression from the details of Paul's journey, it is important to bear in mind that, for both Paul and Luke, their relationship with the Lord and with their fellow-servants of Christ far transcended the business of the sea voyage to Rome.

We have seen that, at Sidon, it was Paul's friends whom he visited and who responded to his needs; and the term "friends" is the Greek word *philoï*, used by the Lord Jesus himself when he said, "You are my friends if you do what I com-

mand you" (Jno. 15:14, RSV).¹ Saul of Tarsus had learned from the beginning of his new life in Christ that there was a total identity between the Lord Jesus and his followers. On the Damascus road, when the glorified Lord revealed himself and Saul enquired who he was, he received the unexpected reply, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest" (Acts 9:5); and this established the identity between Jesus and his disciples. In persecuting Christ's followers, Saul had been doing it to the Lord. It was a lesson the future apostle never forgot. Thus, in writing to the Corinthians, Paul declared, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is made to stumble, and I burn not?" (2 Cor. 11:29).

Brotherly love

In connection with Paul's relationship with his fellow-believers, we do well to note the occurrence of the word *philadelphia*, the New Testament Greek word for 'brotherly love'.² There is a particularly beautiful example of its use in 1 Thessalonians 4:9: "But concerning love of the brethren [*philadelphia*] ye have no need that one write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another". It is perhaps therefore worth remembering that the sea voyage to Rome would not have happened for Paul if he had not first gone to Jerusalem to take the proceeds of 'the great collection' as a practical expression of 'brotherly love' towards the brethren and sisters there. Paul explained to Felix that, although he had provoked the animosity of the Jews in Jerusalem by his preaching of the gospel of Divine grace, he had committed no offence, but had simply gone there to bring alms to his people (Acts 24:17).

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1. Except where otherwise noted, all Bible references are quoted from the Revised Version.
 2. The Greek word *philadelphia* occurs in the following passages: Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1; 1 Peter 1:22 and 2 Peter 1:7.

Aristarchus

We have seen how willingly the local believers at Sidon responded to Paul's needs when his ship briefly docked there. While the apostle undoubtedly had his adversaries within the early church, there can be no doubt that he also had very many who loved him for his great work. There is abundant evidence that Paul strove, whatever his circumstances, to remain in touch with the communities he founded. If we look again at Acts 27:2, we can take note of the reciprocal brotherly love in the case of Aristarchus, who travelled with Paul and Luke on the journey to Rome: "And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium . . . we put to sea, Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, being with us".

Aristarchus is one of the minor characters in the Pauline circle, of whose existence, if we were challenged, we might well be ignorant, even though for the Apostle Paul he was undoubtedly a very real person. His name appears a total of five times in the New Testament, three times in Acts (19:29; 20:4; 27:2) and twice in Paul's letters (Col. 4:10; Philem v. 24). But what of the occurrence of his name in Acts 27:2, which is the one of immediate interest to us? With his usual great economy of words Luke provides a hint; and what follows may or may not be the right interpretation of it.

Without attempting a full biography of Aristarchus, we take note of the fact that he had been deputed to travel with Paul to Jerusalem with the proceeds of the 'great collection' (see Acts 20:4). He was with Paul at the end of his stay in Judea; and when he left Caesarea by ship with Paul and Luke he is described as "a Macedonian of Thessalonica", which confirms what is recorded in Acts 20. From this we conclude, first, that Aristarchus was free to travel as one of Paul's trusted companions and emissaries; and, secondly, that he would have been able to carry news of Paul wherever he subsequently travelled.

The departure for Rome was a major development in Paul's life of service, coming as it did at the end of his enforced sojourn in Caesarea (which Aristarchus seems to have shared with him). Paul's time in Caesarea and his appeal to Caesar in Rome would no doubt become generally known through the reports of Aristarchus, and the various Christian communities he passed through would have been glad to learn of these latest developments in the life of the great apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul's trusted emissaries

Through his various emissaries, Paul was able not only to send news about himself, but also to secure information about what was occurring in places of particular interest to him. Tychicus is a notable example of this; he was the one who, with Onesimus, went to Colosse, carrying the letters to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians.³ The Colossians needed help to resolve the problem that had cropped up among them. Paul uses truly affectionate terms in describing Tychicus and Onesimus in Colossians 4:7-9: not only were they to be the bearers of news about himself, but also (and this was particularly important for Paul) they were to bring comfort to the hearts of the Colossians (v. 8).

There is a specially beautiful (though incidental) tribute paid by Paul to his fellow-believers and fellow-helpers in 2 Corinthians 8:23: "As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honour to Christ" (NIV).⁴

This theme of Paul's emissaries and fellow workers could be developed at much greater length; but it will come to our notice in a prominent way when we look again at Paul's progress from Puteoli to Rome. With Rome in mind, too, we recall that the person who conveyed the Letter to the Romans was none other than a sister: "I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church that is at Cenchreae" (Rom. 16:1).

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

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3. The most probable background to Paul's writing to the Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon is that Epaphras had gone to Rome to seek Paul's assistance in dealing with the heresy that had arisen in Colosse (see Col. 2:16-23). In response, Paul used Tychicus as his emissary and as the bearer of the letter to Colosse. Paul took the opportunity also to send back to Philemon in Colosse his runaway slave Onesimus, who had been converted to Christ (it would appear, by Paul in Rome). In addition to Colossians and Philemon, Paul also wrote his letter to the Ephesians, knowing that Tychicus could land at Ephesus en route to Colosse. See my study of this situation in *The Letter to the Colossians* (Birmingham, The Christadelphian, 1981).
 4. The Revised Version renders these last phrases: ". . . the messengers of the churches . . . the glory of Christ".