

Acts

Lesson #19

The Voyage to Rome

(27: 1 – 28: 31)

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Review

St. Paul was not a prisoner during his 2-year stay at Caesarea; he was a Roman citizen held under protective custody at Herod's palace until his case could be adjudicated. Governor Felix (procurator of Judea from A.D. 52-60) ordered that Paul should *"have some liberty, and that [the guards] should not prevent any of his friends from caring for his needs"* (24: 23); indeed, Governor Felix himself *"sent for him very often and conversed with him"* (24: 26).

After two years, however (A.D. 58-60), Festus (procurator of Judea from A.D. 60-62) succeeded Governor Felix. Learning of Paul's case, Festus ordered the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem to Caesarea, where they were to present their case—once again—against Paul. With Felix gone, and not wishing to go back to "square one," St. Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his case directly to Rome. Festus conferred with his attorneys, and he ordered that Paul be transferred immediately: *"You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go"* (25: 12).

Preview

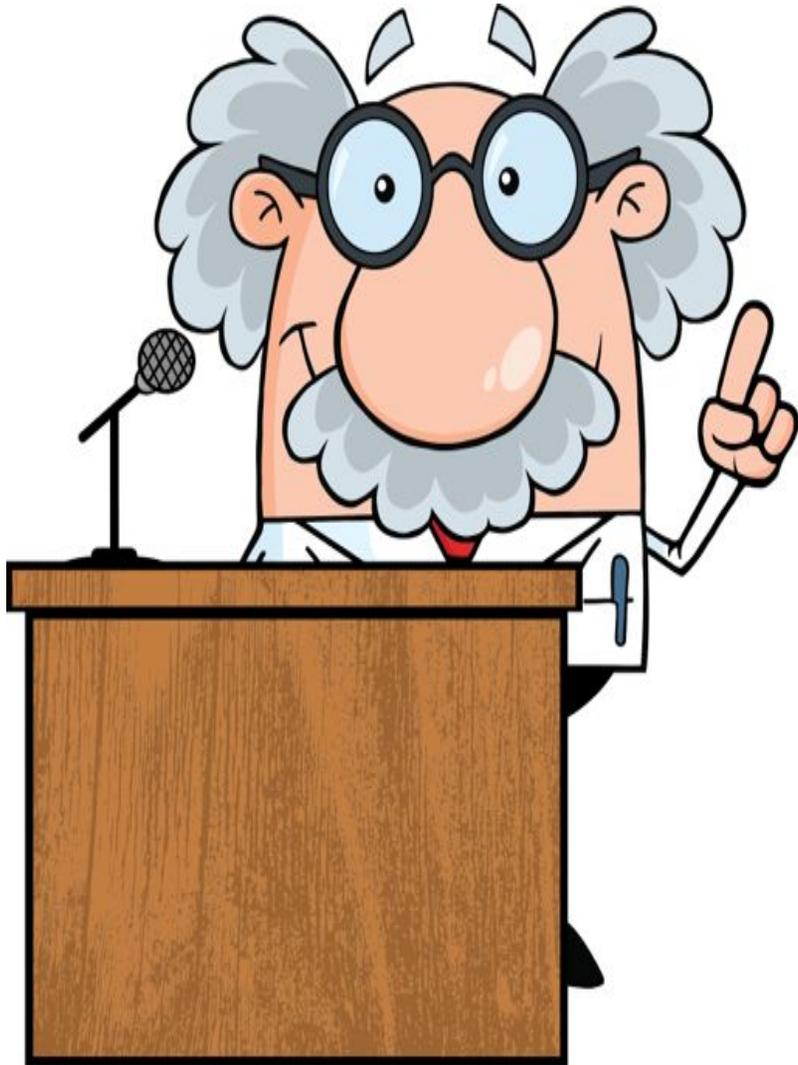
St. Paul sets sail for Rome, accompanied by “a centurion named Julius of the Cohort Augusta” (27: 1), who is escorting a group of prisoners, as well. At each stop on the way, Paul is free to go ashore and visit friends. After sailing from Myra in Lycia aboard an Alexandrine ship, Paul and company encounter strong winds, and then are slammed by a “Northeaster,” a hurricane-force winter storm that blows them far off course, into the deep blue of the Mediterranean. Lost at sea, the storm hammers them for fourteen days, seriously damaging the ship and sickening everyone on board. Finally, they spot land and make a dash for it, only to be caught in the surf zone on a sandbar, and the ship is battered to pieces. Two hundred seventy-six men desperately scramble ashore on the island of Malta, their teeth chattering with the cold—and St. Paul is promptly bitten by a poisonous snake!

Preview, cont.

The people of Malta treat their unexpected guests graciously, however, caring for them through the winter. Three months after their shipwreck on Malta, the survivors board another Alexandrine ship and set sail for Rome.

Once in Rome, St. Paul spends two years in his own rented house and he *“received all who came to him, and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ”* (28: 30-31).

While in Rome (A.D. 60-62) St. Paul writes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.



Rested and ready to travel, St. Paul boards ship at Herod's deep-water port, Caesarea Maritima, headed for Rome. Orbis tells us that the voyage would normally cover 1,810 miles (2,913 km) and take 24 days.

Luke's narrative fits the classic pattern of other sea voyages: Homer's *Odyssey*, with Odysseus sailing home from the Trojan war; Virgil's *Aeneid*, with Aeneas sailing from Troy to found a new home for the survivors of the Trojan war (Rome); and Jonah's memorable adventure on board ship—and in the belly of a huge fish!

All are great sea stories, and all may be read at a deeper level as allegory, as "pilgrimage of life" tales, fraught with adventure and danger, with the hero ultimately arriving triumphantly at his destination.



The Voyage to Rome



St. Paul boards ship on a late-autumn day at Caesarea Maritima.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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“When it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they handed Paul and some other prisoners over to a centurion named Julius of the Cohort Augusta. We went on board a ship from Adramyttium bound for ports in the Province of Asia and set sail. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. On the following day we put in at Sidon where Julius was kind enough to allow Paul to visit his friends who took care of him. From there we put out to sea and sailed around the sheltered side of Cyprus because of the headwinds, and crossing the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphlyia we came to Myra and Lycia.”

(27: 1-5)

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The Voyage to Rome



•As we know, the basic structure of a Roman military unit was:

- Legion (6,000 men)
- Cohort (600 men within the Legion)
- Century (100 men within the Cohort)

Julius was a centurion (a century commander) of the Cohort “Augusta.” Apparently, he and his men were assigned to transport a group of prisoners to Rome, much as a brig “chaser/escort” transports prisoners in today’s Marine Corps.

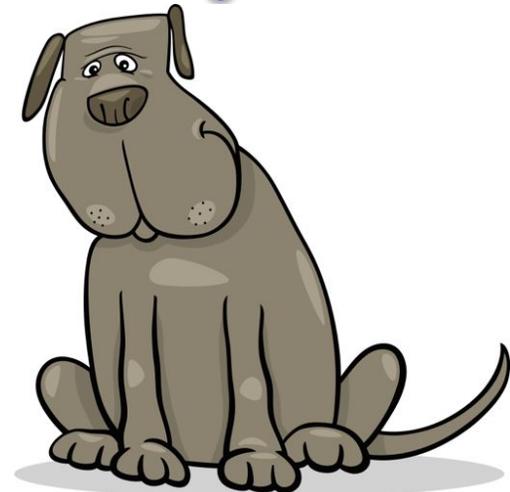
•Remember, Paul is not one of Julius’s prisoners: Paul is a Roman citizen accused by the Jewish leadership and the target of their assassination plot, who has appealed his case to Rome. While in transit, the Roman government has the obligation to protect Paul, as they did during his stay at Caesarea, and Julius has been assigned to do so.

A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical line on the left, with his hand to his chin in a thinking pose. A large blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

So far it seems like a rather pleasant voyage. At Sidon Julius allows Paul to disembark and stay with friends, perhaps accompanied by a bodyguard, and the ship's captain skillfully sails the ship to the lee of Cyprus because of the headwinds.



"... passengers set sail that day for a 3-hour tour, a 3-hour tour!"



“There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship that was sailing to Italy and put us on board. For many days we made little headway, arriving at Cnidus only with difficulty, and because the wind would not permit us to continue our course we sailed for the sheltered side of Crete off Salmone. We sailed past it with difficulty and reached a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea. Much time had now passed and sailing had become hazardous because the time of the the fast had already gone by, so Paul warned them, ‘Men, I can see that this voyage will result in severe damage and heavy loss not only to the cargo and the ship, but also to our lives.’”

(27: 6-10)

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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical line on the left, with his hand to his chin in a thinking pose. A large blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

"The fast," or *Yom Kippur*, occurs on the 10th day of the 7th month (Numbers 29: 7), which occurs in September/October: in A.D. 59 *Yom Kippur* fell on October 5th. St. Paul had spent a lot of time aboard ships during his travels, and he knows about weather conditions at sea at this time of year.

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting and looking up. A blue thought bubble is connected to its head.

"... the weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed ..."



“The centurion, however, paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. Since the harbor was unfavorably situated for spending the winter, the majority planned to put out to sea from there in the hope of reaching Phoenix, a port in Crete facing west-northwest, there to spend the winter. A south wind blew gently, and thinking they had attained their objective, they weighed anchor and sailed along close to the coast of Crete. Before long an offshore wind of hurricane force called a ‘Northeaster’ struck. Since the ship was caught up in it and could not head into the wind we gave way and let ourselves be driven.”

(27: 11-15)

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“We passed along the sheltered side of an island named Cauda and managed only with difficulty to get the dinghy under control. They hoisted it aboard, then used cables to undergird the ship. Because of their fear that they would run aground on the shoal of Syrtis, they lowered the drift anchor and were carried along in this way. We were being pounded by the storm so violently that the next day they jettisoned some cargo, and on the third day with their own hands they threw even the ship’s tackle overboard. Neither the sun nor the stars were visible for many days, and no small storm raged. Finally, all hope of our surviving was taken away.”

(27: 16-20)

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**Pieter Mulier. *Storm at Sea* (oil on canvas), c. 1675.
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.**



- The storm is fierce, a “Northeaster” with hurricane-force winds (a Category #1 hurricane has sustained winds of 74-95 mph; a Category #5, greater than 156 mph!). As Luke would say, it was “a storm of no small proportions!”

- With hurricane-force winds rotating clockwise, they are afraid the ship will run aground εἰς τήν Σύρτιν, literally, “on the Syrtis.”

- Apollonius of Rhodes in his *Argonautica* (mid-3rd century B.C.) describes a ship that was hit with a “*deadly blast of the north wind [that] seized them in mid-course and carried them toward the Libyan sea for nine whole nights and as many days, until they came far into Syrtis, where there is no getting out again for ships, once they are forced to enter that gulf. For everywhere are shallows, everywhere thickets of seaweed from the depths, and over them silently washes the foam of the water*” (4. 1231-1235).

- Dio Chrysostom (c. A.D. 40-120) writes that once a ship sails into the Syrtis “egress is impossible,” for it consists of “shoals, cross-currents, and long sand-bars extending a great distance” (*Discourse 5: 8-10*).



The Voyage to Rome

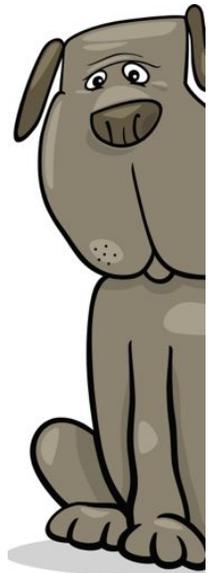
“When many would no longer eat, Paul stood among them and said, ‘Men, you should have taken my advice and not have set sail from Crete and you would have avoided this disastrous loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage; not one of you will be lost, only the ship. For last night an angel of the God to whom [I] belong and whom I serve stood by me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to stand before Caesar; and behold, for your sake, God has granted safety to all who are sailing with you.’ Therefore, keep up your courage, men; I trust in God that it will turn out as I have been told. We are destined to run aground on some island.”

(27: 21-26)

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I *told* you so!



“On the fourteenth night, as we were still being driven about on the Adriatic Sea, toward midnight the sailors began to suspect that they were nearing land. They took soundings and found twenty fathoms; a little farther on, they again took soundings and found fifteen fathoms. Fearing that we would run aground on a rocky coast, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. The sailors then tried to abandon ship; they lowered the dinghy to the sea on the pretext of going to lay out anchors from the bow. But Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, ‘Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.’ So the soldiers cut the ropes of the dinghy and set it adrift.”

(27: 27-32)

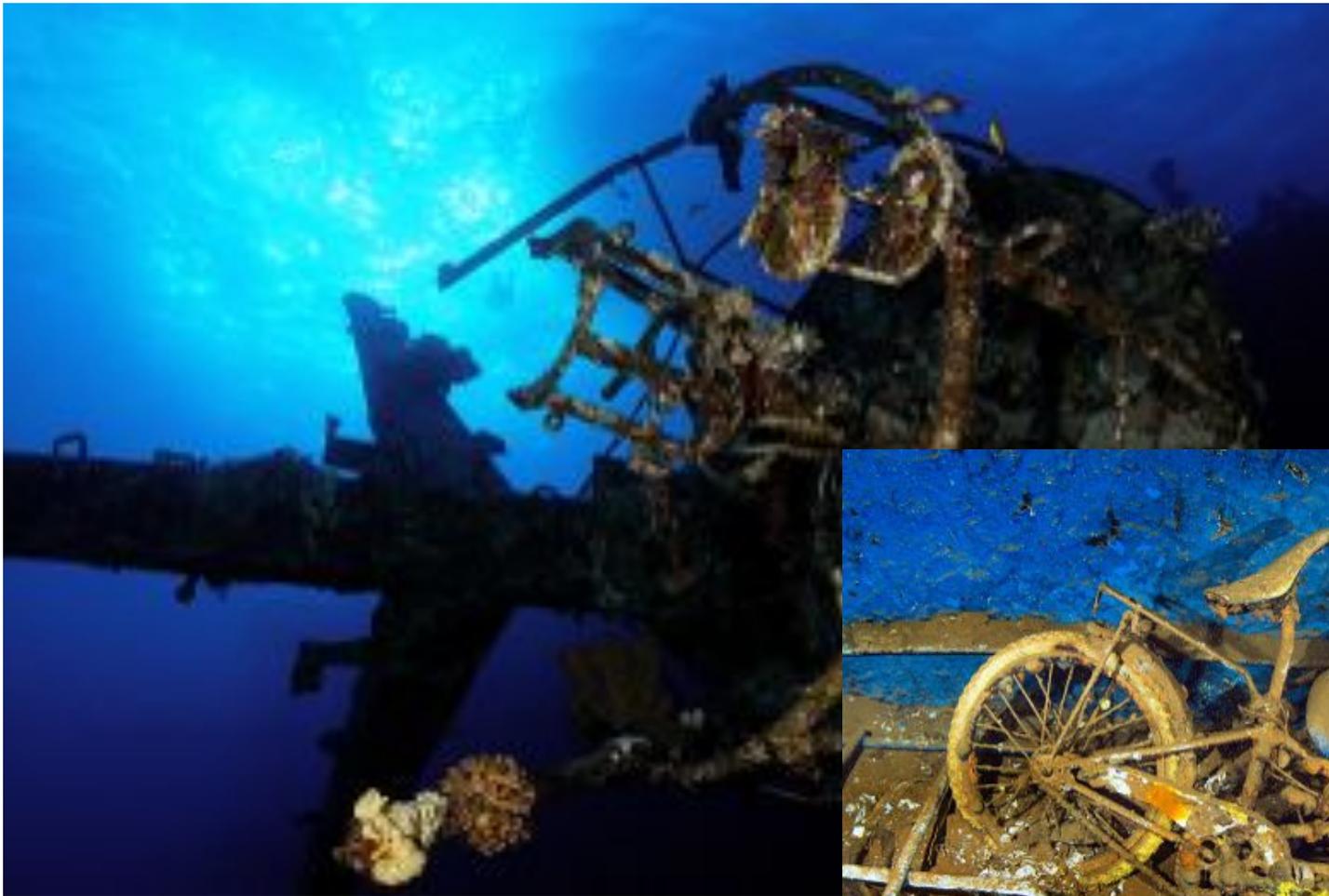
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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical line on the left, with his hand to his chin in a thinking pose. A large blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

That's disgusting!—the captain and crew abandoning ship, leaving the passengers behind to fend for themselves. It still happens today: on April 6, 2014 Lee Joon-seok , the cowardly captain of the Korean ferryboat, Sewol left 304 passengers to die; he is serving 36 years in prison for gross negligence.

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting down. A blue thought bubble is connected to its head.

The Salem Express sank in the Egyptian Red Sea on December 17, 1991. 470 people died. Captain Hassan Moro ordered his crew to let down the lifeboats and “save yourselves.” He was later found dead.



Wreck of the Salem Express, Egyptian Red Sea. Luggage and bicycles are still in the cargo hold.

Photography by Philippe Guillaume

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“Until the day began to dawn, Paul kept urging all to take some food. He said, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have been waiting, going hungry and eating nothing. I urge you, therefore, to take some food; it will help you survive. Not a hair of the head of anyone of you will be lost.’ When he said this, he took bread, gave thanks to God in front of them all, broke it, and began to eat. They were all encouraged, and took some food themselves. In all, there were two hundred seventy-six of us on the ship. After they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.”

(27: 33-38)

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- The winter water temperature in the Mediterranean Sea is in the mid 50s-60s: cold! The men onboard have been seasick for two weeks, vomiting and unable to eat anything as they are tossed about in the violent storm. If they are to stave off hypothermia, they must eat something to help maintain their body temperature. And Paul knows it. He told us previously that he had been “three times shipwrecked” and passed “a night and a day on the deep” (2 Corinthians 11: 25).
- After eating, they throw the entire cargo of wheat overboard to lighten the ship.

“When day came they did not recognize the land, but made out a bay with a beach. They planned to run the ship ashore on it, if they could. So they cast off the anchor and abandoned them to the sea, and at the same time they unfastened the lines of the rudders, and hoisting the foresail into the wind, they made for the beach. But they struck a sandbar and ran the ship aground. The bow was wedged in and could not be moved, but the stern began to break up under the pounding [of the waves]. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners so that none might swim away and escape, but the centurion wanted to save Paul and so kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to the shore, and then the rest, some on planks, others on debris from the ship. In this way, all reached shore safely.”

(27: 39-44)

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The Voyage to Rome



Some go to shore “on boards.”

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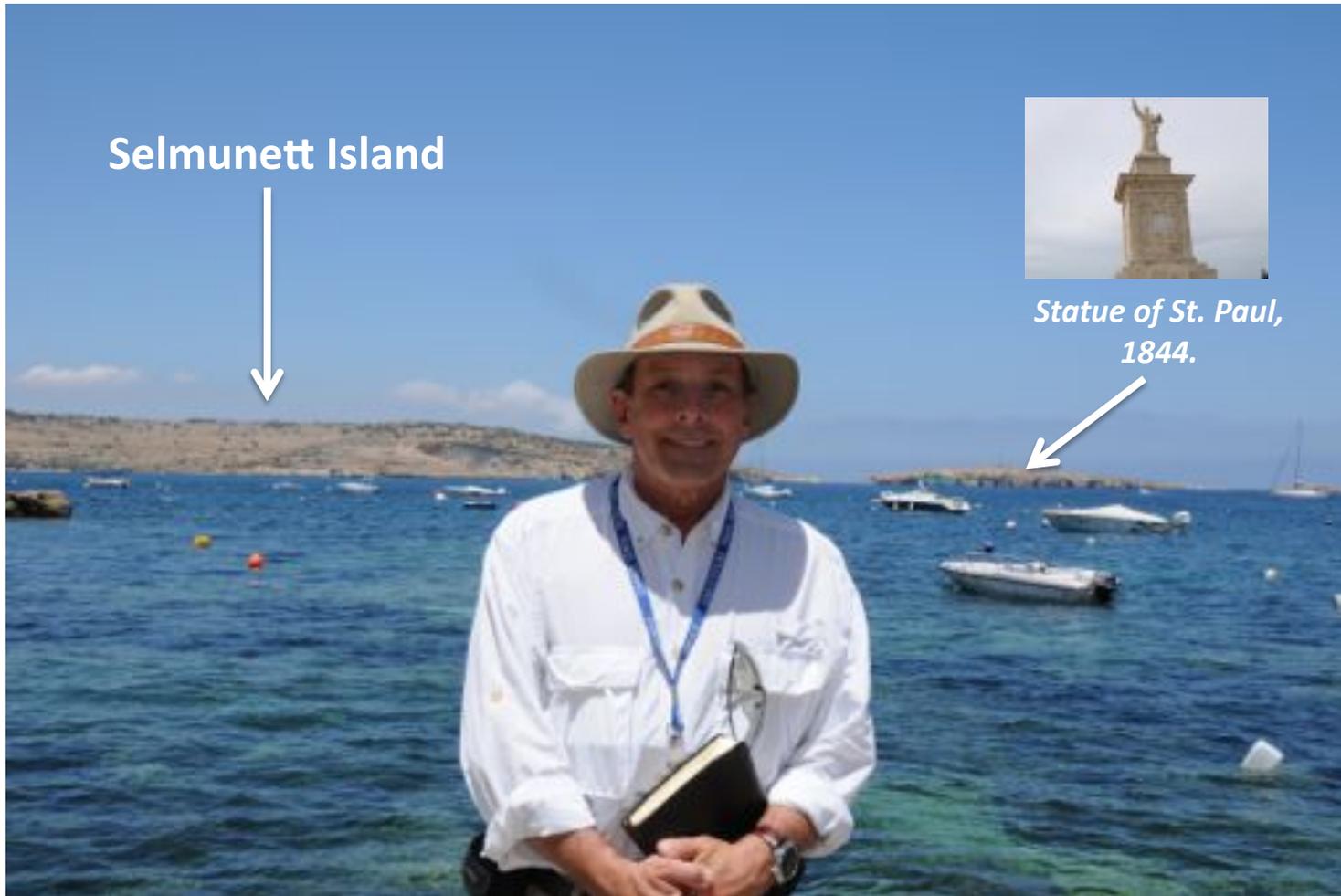


The Voyage to Rome



**Niccolò Circignani. Shipwreck of St. Paul (fresco), 1581.
Meridian Hall (1st floor, west wall), Vatican City.**

[Pope Benedict XVI donated a mosaic replica of this fresco to the city during his visit to Malta, April 17-18, 2010.]



Selmunett Island



Statue of St. Paul,
1844.



Dr. Creasy at St. Paul's Bay, Malta.

Selmunett Island splits into two islands as tides change the sea level, creating a shallow channel.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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“Once we had reached safety we learned that the island was called Malta. The natives showed us extraordinary hospitality; they lit a fire and welcomed all of us because it had begun to rain and was cold. Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire when a viper, escaping from the heat, fastened on his hand. When the natives saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to one another, ‘This man must certainly be a murderer; though he escaped the sea, Justice has not let him remain alive.’ But he shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no harm. They were expecting him to swell up or suddenly to fall down dead but, after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god . . .



Laurent de La Hyre. *St. Paul Shipwrecked on Malta* (oil on canvas), 1630.
Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama.



- The lethality of a snake bite depends upon three things: 1) the type of snake; 2) the volume and concentration of the venom injected; and 3) whether the injection is subcutaneous, intravenous, intramuscular or intraperitoneal (directly into the abdominal cavity).

- Subcutaneous bites are by far the most common—and the least lethal.

- The volume and concentration of venom varies according to the interval between bites.

- The fact that St. Paul is unaffected by the bite may well be due to natural causes, or perhaps to supernatural ones.

- This scene may very well be the source for the addition to Mark's Gospel (c. A.D. 60-65) that reads: *"In my name they will . . . pick up serpents . . . [and] it will not harm them"* (16: 18).

“In the vicinity of that place were lands belonging to a man named Publius, the chief of the island. He welcomed us and received us cordially as his guests for three days. It so happened that the father of Publius was sick with a fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and, after praying, laid his hands on him and healed him. After this had taken place, the rest of the sick on the island came to Paul and were cured. They paid us great honor and when we eventually set sail they brought us the provisions we needed.”

(28: 1-10)

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Bay of St. Paul

The possible archaeological remains of Publius' estate, overlooking the Bay of St. Paul.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas
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St. Paul's Cathedral, Malta.

St. Paul is the patron saint of Malta and Roman Catholicism is the official state religion. With a total population around 400,000, there are 360 churches and 98% of the Maltese are Roman Catholic.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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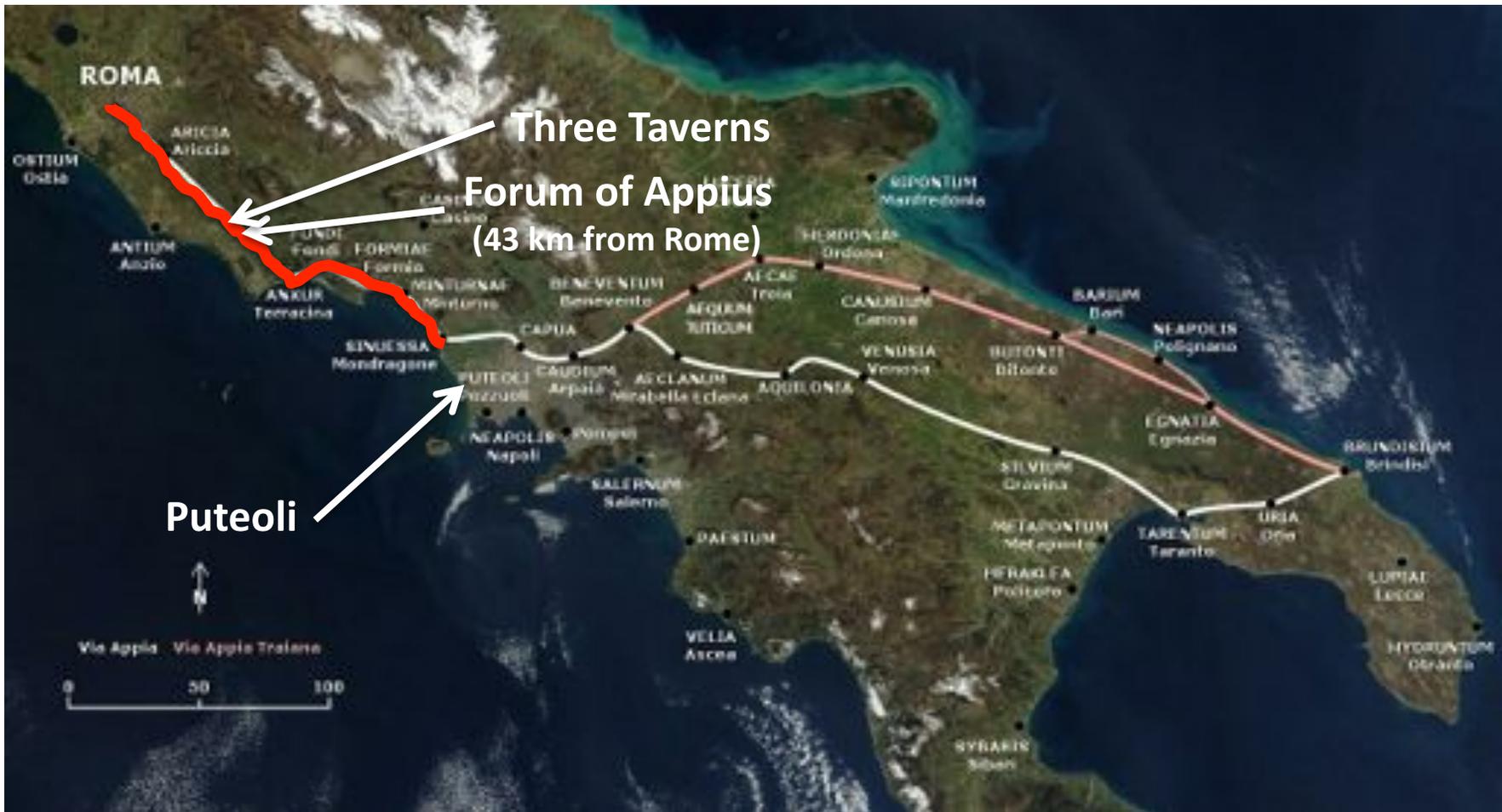
“Three months later we set sail on a ship that had wintered at the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with the Dioscuri as its figurehead. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days, and from there we sailed round the coast and arrived at Rhegium. After a day, a south wind came up and in two days we reached Puteoli. There we found some brothers and were urged to stay with them for seven days. And thus we came to Rome. The brothers from there heard about us and came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul gave thanks to God and took courage. When he entered Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.”

(28: 11-16)

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The Voyage to Rome



The *Via Appia*, or the “Appian Way,” one of the most strategically important roads in ancient Rome.



•As you will recall, St. Paul and company sailed from Crete sometime after *Yom Kippur*, which fell on October 5th in A.D. 59, so the shipwreck on Malta would have occurred in late October or early to mid- November. Paul and company then spent three months on Malta, where they winter. Thus, Paul would have sailed for Rome sometime in early February, A.D. 60, arriving in Rome at the beginning of spring.

•To confirm our dating, Pliny the Elder writes that navigation resumes in the Mediterranean when the west winds start to blow on February 8th (*Natural History*, 2. 122).

•The Alexandrian ship Paul sails on is a grain cargo ship with the twin figureheads of the mythological Castor and Pollux, patrons of sailors.

•The Christian community in Rome was founded long before St. Paul arrived in A.D. 60. He writes his epistle to the church in Rome in A.D. 57; Priscilla and Aquila returned home to Rome from Ephesus before A.D. 54; and in Jerusalem on Pentecost A.D. 32, there were visitors from Rome who witnessed the birth of the Church.

“Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had gathered he said to them, ‘My brothers, although I had done nothing against our people or our ancestral customs, I was handed over to the Romans as a prisoner from Jerusalem. After trying my case the Romans wanted to release me, because they found nothing against me deserving the death penalty. But when the Jews objected, I was obliged to appeal to Caesar, even though I had no accusation to make against my own nation. This is the reason, then, I have requested to see you and to speak with you, for it is on account of the hope of Israel that I wear these chains’ . . .

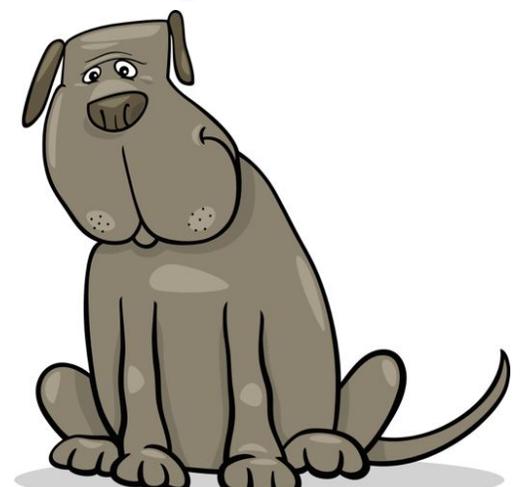
“They answered him, ‘We have received no letters from Judea about you, nor has any of the brothers arrived with a damaging report or rumor about you. But we should like to hear you present your views, for we know that this sect is denounced everywhere.’ So they arranged a day with him and came to his lodgings in great numbers. From early morning until evening, he expounded his position to them, bearing witness to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus from the law of Moses and the prophets. Some were convinced by what he had said, while others did not believe. Without reaching any agreement among themselves they began to leave . . . [and Paul said], ‘Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.’”

(28: 17-24)

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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical black line on the left side of the page. He has a thoughtful expression, with his hand to his chin. A large blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

That was smart of Paul to inform the Jews in Rome that he was there. He fully expected that the Jews in Jerusalem had sent messengers ahead of him to continue the trouble!

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting down. It has floppy ears and a friendly expression. A blue thought bubble is connected to its head.

Paul sure lucked out!



- Finally, we read:

“[Paul] remained for two full years in his lodgings. He received all who came to him, and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

(28: 30-31)

- Luke writes that Paul lived two full years ἐν ἰδίῳ μισθώματι, literally, “at his own expense,” emphasizing once again that Paul was primarily self-funded.
- Paul “was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him” (28: 16). In our reading, the soldier provided security, not imprisonment.
- The final word of Acts in Luke’s Greek text is ἀκωλύτως, “unhindered,” stressing St. Paul’s freedom to proclaim the Gospel while in Rome.



St. Paul, of course, went on from Rome in A.D. 62 and continued his work, being arrested again during the persecution under Nero, A.D. 64-68. This time, however, he was sentenced to death, imprisoned at the Mamertine Prison in Rome and —as a Roman citizen—beheaded, probably in A.D. 68. Luke deliberately leaves this out.



Luke begins his Luke/Acts narrative with Caesar Augustus issuing a decree from Rome that the whole Roman world be counted. The action then moves in Luke's Gospel from Caesar in Rome to Galilee, Jerusalem, the cross and the empty tomb, with Jesus as the main character; Acts then moves from the resurrected Jesus to Judea, Samaria and to Rome, with the Holy Spirit as the main character: Jesus drives the action in Luke; the Holy Spirit drives the action in Acts.

Luke crafts a brilliant, perfectly balanced, symmetrical narrative, a work of genius that stands shoulder-to-shoulder at the very summit of world-class literature.



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Questions for discussion and thought

1. When St. Paul finally sails for Rome, Luke and Aristarchus from Thessalonica travel with him in the company of Julius, a centurion of the “Augusta” Cohort. Julius is a “chaser,” transporting a group of prisoners to Rome. What evidence suggests that Paul is not one of them?
2. St. Paul warned Julius and the ship’s captain that their sea voyage would end in disaster. How did Paul know this? Why didn’t they listen to him?
3. The “Northeaster” rages for 14 days; the ship is fatally damaged; the passengers are desperately sick; and the ship is lost in the Mediterranean Sea, with no one—including the captain—knowing where they are. How would you have felt if you were onboard? How did Paul feel? What is the lesson in all this?
4. The Maltese people were exceedingly kind to the 276 men on board the doomed ship. Why? Can you think of any modern-day analogies?
5. When Paul’s appeal was finally heard in Rome, what do you think was the verdict?

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