

Research: Paul's Shipwreck and Voyage to Rome

Acts 27:1, 20-24, 41-44

“This narrative is the most detailed account of an ancient voyage which we possess, and is our principal source of knowledge of the art of navigation as practiced by the ancients. . . . The details of the voyage are clearly authentic” (Dummelow 851).

“The vividness and precision of the narrative confirm what the use of ‘we’ implies—that it is an eyewitness report” (*EBC* 9.557).

“It may be safely asserted that no historical description of a long voyage and shipwreck has come down to us from ancient times so circumstantial, accurate, and natural in its details, as that which is contained in this chapter” (Jamieson 3.177).

“Luke gives a vivid description of the voyage. Here we are confronted with stormy weather and great danger, a stranded ship and a treacherous shore. We already know that the apostle is accustomed to the sea. ‘I have been shipwrecked three times,’ ‘danger at rivers,’ ‘a night and a day I have been at sea,’ ‘danger at sea,’ these are details that we can pick out of an enumeration of the apostle’s sufferings in II Cor 11:23. In ancient times, the ships crept along, hugging the coasts and did not willingly take to the open sea” (*AB Acts* 252).

As a citizen of Rome, Paul exercises one of his rights by requesting that his trial take place before the Emperor. His journey to Rome begins in the seaport of Caesarea Maritima, where he has been imprisoned for two years. A Roman centurion named Julius, a member of the Imperial Regiment, has been assigned to take Paul and some other prisoners back by sea voyage to stand trial in Rome. In the verses of Acts prior to these, Paul advises them not to set sail during the off season. However, Julius, the captain, and others want to start the journey homeward, and ignore Paul’s counsel.

1. **And when it was determined that we should sail into Italy, they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners unto one named Julius, a centurion of Augustus' band.**

Throughout the voyage Julius treats Paul very courteously. He knows that Paul is a special man and recognizes his importance. Moreover, he understands that Paul is a Roman citizen, and thus his treatment of Paul is that of respect, allowing him to visit with his friends when they are in the port of Sidon.

“And when it was determined. By Festus and when the time was come when it was convenient to send him.

“That we should sail. The use of the term ‘we’ here shows that the author of this book, Luke,

was with Paul. He had been the companion of Paul; and though he had not been accused, yet it was resolved that he should still accompany him.

“Certain other prisoners. Who were probably also sent to Rome for a trial before the emperor.

“Centurion of Augustus’ band. A commander of a hundred men. It was a division in the Roman army, consisting of from four to six hundred men” (Barnes 530).

“Julius—who treats the apostle throughout with such marked courtesy, that it has been conjectured that he had been present when Paul made his defense before Agrippa and was impressed with his lofty bearing” (Jamieson 3.178).

2. And entering into a ship of Adramyttium, we launched, meaning to sail by the coasts of Asia;

“While it is not stated explicitly, the port of embarkation was undoubtedly Caesarea. The boat they boarded was a coastal vessel from the city of Adramyttium, a seaport of Mysia on the northwest coast of Asia Minor, opposite the island of Lesbos. . . . As a Roman citizen who had appealed to the emperor, Paul would naturally have had a more favored position than the other prisoners; and the centurion would have recognized his superiority as a gentleman with attendants”(EBC 9.558).

20 And when neither sun nor stars in many days appeared, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved was then taken away.

“Neither sun nor stars, etc. As they could see neither sun nor stars, they could make no observations; and as they had no compass, they would be totally ignorant of their situation, and gave up all as lost” (Barnes 531).

“On these they would be entirely dependent for navigation, the ancients -- in spite of the delightful archaism in the KJV of 28:13—not possessing the compass. Hope was at last abandoned: The Greek verb is in the imperfect tense, which suggests that they were progressively giving up hope” (IDB 9.337).

21 But after long *abstinence* Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have loosed from Crete, and to have gained this harm and loss.

“For fourteen days and nights the ship was in the grip of the Northeaster. The crew tried to lighten the ship by throwing overboard all the deck cargo, then by disposing of the ship’s tackle. In the darkness of the storm they could not take their bearings from the sun or stars. All hope of being saved had vanished” (EBC 9.561).

“But after long abstinence. By the violence of the storm, by their long-continued labour, and by

their apprehension of danger, they had long time abstained from food.

“To have gained this harm and loss. Subjected yourselves to it. Had you remained there, you would have been safe” (Barnes 532).

“Without food need not imply that there was a shortage of provisions, but only that they were unable to eat—presumably on account of seasickness” (*IDB 9.337*).

22 And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship.

“There shall be no loss. This must have been cheering news to those who had given up all for lost. As Paul had manifested great wisdom in his former advice to them, they might be now more disposed to listen to him. The reason why he believed they would be safe, he immediately states” (Barnes 532).

23 For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve,

“Undoubtedly Paul shared the general pessimism on board ship. But one night toward the close of the fourteen-day storm, an angel of God stood by Paul and reassured him with a message of comfort for this time of crisis”(*EBC 9.561*).

24 Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee.

“Fear not, Paul. Do not be alarmed with the danger of the loss of life.

“Thou must be brought. And therefore thy life will be spared.

“God hath given thee all. That is, they shall all be preserved with thee. None of their lives shall be lost (Barnes 532).

41 And falling into a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the forepart stuck fast, and remained unmoveable, but the hinder part was broken with the violence of the waves.

“And falling. Being carried by the wind and waves.

“Into a place where two seas met. Into a place of a double sea. That is, a place which is washed on both sides by the sea. It refers properly to an isthmus, tongue of land, or a sand-bar stretching out from the main land, and which was washed on both sides by the waves. In endeavoring to make the harbor, they ran on this bar or sand-bank.

“The hinder part was broken. The stern was broken or staved in. By this means the company was furnished with boards, etc., on which they were safely conveyed to the shore” (Barnes 533).

42 And the soldiers' counsel was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim out, and escape.

“And the soldiers' counsel, etc. Why they gave this advice is not known. It was probably, however, because the Roman military discipline was very strict, and if they escaped, it would probably be charged on them that it had been done by the negligence and unfaithfulness of the soldiers. They therefore proposed, in a most cruel and bloodthirsty manner, to kill them, though contrary to all humanity, justice, and laws; presuming probably that it would be supposed that they had perished in the wreck” (Barnes 533).

“Roman cruelty, which made the keepers answerable with their own lives for the safety of their prisoners, is here reflected in this heartless proposal” (Jamieson 3.183).

43 But the centurion, willing to save Paul, kept them from their purpose; and commanded that they which could swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land:

“He had at first been disposed to treat Paul with kindness, ver. 3. And his conduct on board the ship; the wisdom of his advice; the prudence of his conduct in the agitation and danger of the tempest; and not improbably the belief that he was under the Divine protection and blessing, disposed him to spare his life. Thus, for the sake of this one righteous man, the lives of all were spared” (Barnes 533).

“Great must have been the influence of Paul over the centurion's mind to produce such an effect” (Jamieson 3.183).

44 And the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land.

“Those who could not swim escaped safe to land. According to the promise which was made to Paul, ver. 22. This was done by the special Providence of God. It was a remarkable instance of Divine interposition to save so many through so long-continued dangers; and it shows that God can defend in any perils, and can accomplish all his purposes. On the ocean or the land, we are safe in his keeping; and he can devise ways that shall fulfill all his purposes, and that can protect his people from danger” (Barnes 534).