

2. When the men crawled up onto the beach they had no idea where they were, but soon discovered that they'd sailed all the way across the Adriatic Sea and come aground on Malta (Melita) off the southern coast of Sicily. The ISBE Bible Dictionary contains the following overview of the archipelago's history and role in the first century:

*“The central position of Malta in the Mediterranean Sea gave it great importance as a naval station. It was probably at first a Phoenician colony, and later passed under the influence, if not domination, of the Sicilian Greeks. But the Romans captured it from the Carthaginians in 218 BC and attached it definitely to the province of Sicily. Under Roman rule the inhabitants were famous for their industry, especially in the production of textile fabrics, probably of native cotton. The celebrated “vestis melitensis” was a fine and soft material for dresses and for the covering of couches. At the time when Paul visited the island it would seem that the administration was entrusted to a deputy of the proprietor of Sicily.”*

Luke employed the Greek noun *barbaroi* (“barbarians”) to describe the local natives, and this title has been wrongly interpreted as indicating that the Melitans were primitive heathens. But the Greeks used this term for all foreigners untrained in Greek language and culture, and Luke's account hardly paints a picture of a barbaric people. (Interestingly, the Greeks first established a presence on Malta around 700 B.C.) Luke doesn't explain how the residents of that part of the island became aware of the strangers' presence, but his account indicates that they were discovered while still huddled on the beach, wet and cold from the storm and their desperate swim to the shore (28:1-2).

Luke's record of the time on Malta is notable on a couple of counts. First, it is relatively brief, focusing on only two events and the outcomes associated with them. *But most importantly, Luke made no mention of any spiritual fruit among the island's population.* As before at Lycaonia, a miraculous occurrence provoked the observers to ascribe deity to Paul (cf. 28:6 with 14:8-13). But Luke is conspicuously silent about the preaching of the gospel or anyone among the Maltese people coming to faith in Jesus, though the travelers continued on the island for three months while the winter passed. Luke had nothing to say about the ministry and fruit of the gospel on Malta, but history bears witness to it. Malta soon had a thriving Christian community such that it later became one of the apostolic sees (associated with Paul and the tradition of his ministry there). Whether or not God initiated His Maltese harvest during that three month episode, and irrespective of Luke's silence, there can be no doubt that Paul used his time and the providence of the Lord's hand to testify of Jesus and His kingdom of the new creation.

- a. The first of Luke's recorded episodes occurred immediately after the shipwrecked men made contact with the local people. Finding the strangers soaked and chilled to the bone, the natives set about building a fire for them. Paul joined in the effort by gathering wood, unaware that a viper was hiding inside the bundle of sticks he'd collected. As he threw the branches on the fire the panicked snake sank its fangs into his hand and hung there for all to see (28:3-4a). As Paul shook it off into the flames the natives recognized it as a deadly species and drew back in fear, waiting for the apostle to succumb to the venom's effect.

Like so many in the ancient world – including even the Jews, these Melitans associated personal misfortune with personal unrighteousness (cf. John 9:1-2; Luke 13:1ff). Moreover, justice dictates that the misfortune be commensurate with the person's misdeed or unrighteousness. Thus in Paul's case, his seemingly fatal predicament indicated a lethal misdeed, leaving the Melitans to conclude that he must be a murderer receiving his just recompense (28:4b). But after watching for a long time and seeing no change in Paul, the men were forced to reconsider their assessment; in the end, their reassessment amounted to a radical reversal: This man initially judged to be a murderer must actually be a god.

This situation paralleled the one in Lycaonia, but in this instance Luke is silent regarding any response on Paul's part. Various explanations have been proposed, but Luke's silence cannot reasonably be construed as indicating that the apostle had nothing to say regarding the Melitans' claims about him. Paul's silence would be completely out of character, and the reader has every reason to conclude that Paul both rebuked their foolishness and used it as a springboard to tell them about the true God and His great work of redemption in His Son (ref again 14:8ff).

- b. From the beach episode Luke immediately turned his attention to a second miracle involving a leading figure named Publius (28:7ff). He was likely the local magistrate and he owned much of the land in the surrounding area. When he learned of Paul and his companions he welcomed them into his home and entertained them over the course of three days. The likely reason was that Publius had heard about the snakebite incident and concluded that Paul might be able to heal his sick father. And so it was; when the apostle was told about the ailing man he went in to him and prayed and laid his hands on him and he was instantly healed. News of this miraculous healing spread like wildfire throughout the island and Paul soon found himself besieged with sick individuals seeking their own cure, all of whom the Lord healed.

Again, what is most remarkable about Luke's account of these two episodes is his silence regarding any gospel ministry among the Melitans. Both episodes involved divine miracles which drew the people's attention to Paul and provided him a powerful platform for credible and effective witness to Christ and His gospel (cf. 5:14-16 with Matthew 4:12-25), and yet Luke says nothing about Paul (or anyone else) taking advantage of it. He recorded only that God's work through Paul secured the islanders' respect and assistance in supplying the group for their continued journey toward Rome.

Given Luke's narrative emphasis on the expanding incursion and fruit of the gospel among the Gentiles, one would have expected him to recount any such ministration and fruit among the Melitans. Perhaps the reason for Luke's silence was that the Spirit brought none of the natives to faith at that time; perhaps he was focused on the goal of Paul's arrival in Rome. Some have concluded that Paul actually presented no witness to Christ on Malta; he was content to let the pagan population there remain in its darkness. But Paul's commission and passion for the gospel make this conclusion implausible. He would have testified of Christ even in the absence of the Lord's miraculous hand, but, being graced by it, Paul surely would have maximized the opportunity it afforded.

3. Luke concluded his treatment of Paul's journey to Rome with a brief account of its final stage. As winter yielded to spring the group located and boarded another Alexandrian ship which had wintered on the island. Interestingly, Luke noted that the ship had a representation of Castor and Pollux (the *Twin Brothers*) as its figurehead (28:11). In Greco-Roman mythology, these twins were said to have been immortalized in the Gemini constellation and they were regarded as the patrons of sailors. (They were thought to appear in the phenomenon of St. Elmo's fire.) Luke's reason for mentioning this detail is unclear, but perhaps it was to indicate in advance that this leg of the journey would pass without incident with the ship and its passengers arriving safely in Rome.

- a. From Malta the ship sailed to Syracuse on the southeastern Sicilian coast where it docked for three days. From there it sailed north to Rhegium on the mainland where a south wind carried it on to Puteoli, the Italian port on the Gulf of Naples where merchant ships commonly unloaded their goods for transport to Rome. The group spent a week at Puteoli, during which time Paul and his companions located a congregation of believers and were allowed to stay with them.

Puteoli was connected to Rome by the Appian Way via a crossroad leading inland to Capua, and along this route the travelers made their way toward the imperial capital. Nearly three years and countless trials and tribulations had passed since Jesus' appearance to Paul in Jerusalem, but now at last the Lord had fulfilled His promise: His chosen vessel to the Gentiles was entering Rome, poised to appear before the earth's greatest king to testify of the King of Kings.

- b. The Roman brethren learned of Paul's coming before he arrived in the city and many went out to meet him and the others while they were still some 40 miles off (28:14-15). (Luke doesn't say how they heard the news, but it was likely through the saints in Puteoli.) The apostle's long-standing goal of meeting and ministering to the church of Rome had been realized, though everything about that encounter and the circumstances leading up to it was vastly different than he had anticipated.

Paul had purposed to go to Rome long before the Jerusalem christophany. But his intention was to travel there as part of a longer missionary journey that would carry him as far as Spain. He envisioned traveling to Rome as a free man and spending a season among the Roman saints, directly ministering the gospel to them and being ministered to by them. But the Lord had a different plan for His apostle. Paul would indeed minister to the church in Rome, but not as a free man and not as their casual guest. He was coming to them in bonds and the marrow of his gospel ministry and encouragement would be indirect, through the witness of his faithful example as Caesar's prisoner and Christ's bond-servant.

In the end, the Lord had used the path to Rome to nurture Paul in what it means to live by faith and not by sight. Jesus' pledge had doubtless elicited in Paul some notions of how the particulars were going to play out, but faith obligated him to hold his speculations as just that. Faith meant entrusting himself to the One who promises without presuming upon either the form or the process of its fulfillment.