

Acts 28:1-25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 28 verses 1 to 15. After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.

When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, No doubt this man is a murderer.

Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live. He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead.

But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. Now in the neighbourhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days.

It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery, and Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured.

[1 : 1 8] They also honoured us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead.

Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Regium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli.

There we found brothers, and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius, and three taverns to meet us.

On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. In Acts chapter 28, we are in the finishing straight of the book. Paul and his companions have been shipwrecked, and after spending some time upon the island of Malta, they finally complete their journey to Rome.

Through miraculous divine protection, Paul and all of the 276 persons aboard the shipwrecked vessel made their way safely to land. The soldiers had planned to kill all of the prisoners, but the centurion prevented them from doing so.

[2 : 2 9] Having been driven by the wind for 14 days, without sight of sun or stars, they didn't have a clear idea of where they were. When they arrived, they discovered that they have landed on Malta. There are competing claims about the identity of the island, arising in part from a narrower construal of the Sea of Adria, mentioned in chapter 27, verse 27.

Some have seen it as a more limited region of the modern Adriatic Sea, between Italy and the Balkans. The island of Miljet, off the Croatian coast near Dubrovnik, is suggested as a possible alternative to Malta.

However, this identification is unpersuasive and rejected by most scholars. When we consider the direction of the wind that drove them away from Crete, their concerns about the sands of the Sirtis, and the fact that the ship that they later board goes via Syracuse, which a vessel of Miljet would not have done, Malta is by far the more likely location.

Several commentators note that the name of Malta means refuge, although Luke does not seem to make anything of the etymology here. Malta is a smaller island than Crete or Cyprus. It's about 95 square miles, or 250 square kilometres.

It's 27 kilometres, or 17 miles long, and 14.5 kilometres, or 9 miles wide. It's about 93 kilometres, or 58 miles, south of the island of Sicily, in the middle of the Mediterranean.

[3 : 50] The local people are here described as barbarians, in verse 2, neither Greek nor Latin speakers, and likely without the Greco-Roman culture associated with those languages. They would probably chiefly have been people of Phoenician origin, speaking Punic, although there would be Greek and Latin speakers around, such as Publius.

The distinction between Greeks and barbarians is one that Paul himself employs in Romans 1, verse 14. It need not be taken in a derogatory sense, as it principally refers to the linguistic differences.

Luke presents the Maltese natives very positively. He praises their hospitality, which would have been most important for survivors of a shipwreck, who would have been greatly at risk if they had been among inhospitable peoples.

The survivors are presumably soaked through from the swim, so the natives kindle a fire. Possibly several fires were made for various groups of the shipwrecked persons, but Paul here might refer to a fire made for his own group of survivors.

Paul gathered wood with the others, but a viper came out and bit him on the hand. Having been tempest-tossed and shipwrecked, many pagans might have speculated that the gods were against Paul.

[4 : 56] The goddess Justice, a daughter of Zeus, clearly had fated Paul to destruction for some wickedness, and wasn't going to allow him to escape. However, Paul shook off the viper, and neither suffered immediate harm, nor swelled up and fell down dead afterwards.

Some have raised questions about the plausibility of this account, as there are no poisonous snakes on Malta today. Indeed, this is one of the considerations some advance in favour of a different island being in view.

As the reasons for identifying the island as Malta are strong on other grounds, it seems reasonable to suppose that the locals are Maltese. They seem to expect that Paul would be injured by the snake, which would be surprising if no poisonous snakes were to be found on the island.

It is quite possible that there were once poisonous snakes there, but that they went extinct or were destroyed by humans, as they have done in other places. The story of the viper might remind the hearer of statements of Christ in the Gospels, speaking of his followers' power over serpents, as symbolic of their power over the evil one, the great serpent of old.

Luke chapter 10 verse 19 The longer ending of Mark's Gospel also has a teaching of Christ on the subject.

[6 : 13] Mark chapter 16 verses 17 to 18 And these signs will accompany those who believe. In my name they will cast out demons, They will speak in new tongues, They will pick up serpents with their hands, And if they drink any deadly poison, It will not hurt them.

They will lay their hands on the sick, And they will recover. Given Exodus themes in the preceding chapter, We might also think of some connection with the character of Moses, Who also shows power over serpents as the messenger of the Lord, And as a sign of his authority.

He turns his staff into a serpent, And then picks it up as a rod again. Paul seemingly picks up a serpent, As if it were a stick, For the fire, But is unharmed. In Numbers chapter 21 verses 4 to 9, The Israelites are judged for their grumbling by fiery serpents, But Moses sets up the brazen serpent, To which they can look and be healed.

The response of the natives is to regard Paul as a god, Much as the pagans in Lystra had done in Acts chapter 14. In that city, There was a sudden shift of the people's attitude to Paul, From regarding him and Barnabas as gods, To regarding them as people to be put to death.

Here the movement goes in the opposite direction, But it illustrates the same level of superstition among the pagans. Publius is the chief man of the island, Presumably a procurator, And a Roman citizen.

[7 : 32] The fact that his father is present on the island Suggests, as Craikina notes, That Publius was from the island. Publius receives them in his house for three days, Presumably not all of the survivors of the shipwreck, But the people of higher status.

While they probably don't have much, If any money, To pay for lodgings after the shipwreck, The centurion and the soldiers Would probably have been able to secure some lodgings By virtue of their military status. This is also an example of fellowship Between Jews and Gentiles.

Publius' father was suffering from fever and dysentery. Depending on its kind, A fever could last for an extremely long time, For months or even a few years. Darrell Bach is one of several commentators Who mentions a microbe found in goat's milk in Malta That could be the cause of such fevers.

However, Kena cautions against taking this identification as certain, Given the fact that there were many other potential causes of such fevers, And there was also the additional symptom of dysentery.

It is likely that the events of the voyage, And Paul's vision and prophecy, Came up during their conversations with Publius. For Paul visited Publius' father, Prayed for him, And put his hands on him, So that he was healed.

[8 : 41] After this remarkable healing of a man With a serious medical condition, Many people from around the island Came to Paul, And his companions, And were also healed. Another thing that we see here Is Paul's common dealings with people of authority.

We've seen this throughout the book of Acts. He deals with Sergius Paulus in chapter 13. He has friends among the Asiarchs in Ephesus. He speaks to the Sanhedrin, To Agrippa, Festus and Felix.

And now also to Publius. The gospel is addressed to all people, But it is also for people as groups. And so it addresses their leaders in a special way, The ones who represent them.

It calls for them to repent, Not just individuals as detached persons. The people of Malta send them on their way With everything that they need. Considering the huge quantity of possessions That they have presumably lost in the shipwreck, This was an immense blessing.

Finally, after wintering in Malta, They take another Alexandrian ship, Heading up the western coast of Italy. The ship has the twin guards, The Diosciuri, Castor and Pollux as its figurehead, For which the ship would likely have been named.

[9 : 45] The twin guards, of course, Are Gemini in the Zodiac. They were patrons of navigators, And were also regarded as the punishers of perjurers, And the guardians of truth. So the fact that they are figureheads on Paul's ship Might be apt.

While I see no clear evidence That there is something more going on here, It is curious to see a number of signs of the Zodiac Randomly appearing throughout Luke's narrative, In his gospel, And now in the book of Acts.

While scripture clearly does not advocate The practice of astrology, In various places it does seem to use Some celestial symbolism for its own purpose, Such as in Revelation chapter 12, And perhaps also in the story of the Magi.

[10:46] The most dangerous stretch of the journey Would be from Malta to Sicily. Julius the centurion would probably have requisitioned passage On this vessel to Italy, Another Alexandrian ship.

By this point Paul had seemingly obtained great favour With those holding him, And he was permitted considerable freedom, Even while technically still in custody. A question to consider.

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