

KINGDOM THEODICY IN ACTS OF APOSTLES, ACTS 27–28:
SEEING GOD’S HANDIWORK IN SITUATIONS OF LIFE
(STORMS, SHIPWRECKS, SNAKES, AND SICKNESSES)

Overview of Paper

This paper will examine Paul’s voyage to Rome, the travel narrative of Acts, chapters 27 and 28. The providential work of God in caring for Paul during this adventure, that involved a great storm, a shipwreck, a deadly snakebite, and various illnesses, will be emphasized. Also, God’s work toward furtherance of his kingdom in the city of Rome through the apostle Paul will be highlighted (see 28.30-31). Recognition of practical principles about God’s providence—for example, insight and the leading of God’s Spirit, confidence and trust in the Lord’s care, attention to practical matters with thanksgiving for God’s provisions, yielding to God’s overriding orchestration of events during crises—will be made appropriately. It will be suggested that Luke’s travel narrative of Acts chapters 27 and 28 provides the reader with a miniature kingdom theodicy to encourage believers to put their hope and trust in God and his Christ who are a steady and sure refuge during storms and shipwrecks and from snakes and sicknesses.¹

God’s Plan for Paul and Paul’s Resolve

Luke concludes his magisterial Acts of Apostles with the exhilarating but danger-filled travel narrative of Paul, the prisoner, from Jerusalem to Rome. Paul had journeyed across the Mediterranean Sea many times during the course of his ministry to the Gentiles.² Now, after his

¹For brevity, points of the discussion will be illustrated mainly from the book of Acts. Chapter and verse references are to Acts of Apostles unless noted otherwise. English translations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) and Greek phrases and words are from Novum Testamentum Graece (Nestle-Aland, 28th Revised Edition) in *The Greek-English New Testament*.

²“The last two chapters of Acts contain one of the most circumstantial accounts of travel on the Mediterranean Sea in the first Christian century known to modern readers. Although Luke has given no account of any other voyage of Paul, the apostle’s own statement (2 Corinthians 11.25b) accounts for much of his insight and experience shown during the dangerous moments of this voyage.” Burch, “Acts of the Apostles,” *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, 1131.

successful appeal to present his legal case before the highest judicial figure in the Empire, he must cross the open waters once more.³ But this time he was under guard to be delivered to the Imperial City in order to face the Emperor himself who would decide the matter as one having *tribunicia potestas* (i.e., the powers granted tribunes). Such a journey across the sea always was perilous, but the risk was magnified greatly on this occasion due to the circumstances. The time of year was too late for a successful, much less a favorable, crossing of the sea. And Paul, as a prisoner, had little if any decision-making leverage for the voyage. Like it or not, he was in the hands of the appointed civil servants. But most importantly he was in the hands of his Lord and Master who would guide the apostle to the completion of his appointed mission.

Paul had been set apart by God as “a chosen instrument,” as one designated “to carry [the Lord’s] name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (9.15-16).⁴ On his final journey back to Jerusalem (19.21; 20.22-23; 21.4, 10ff.), he seemed to be conflicted, as if under a burden or obligation, but determined to make one last trip to Jerusalem. He had decided, perhaps during his lengthy stay in Ephesus, to return to Jerusalem and afterward to visit Rome.⁵ Such a trip would be dangerous, since Paul had made many enemies in various places because of his

³Had Paul not appealed to have his case heard by Caesar, he most certainly would have been set free by Festus (25.11; 26.32; 28.19). On his right to appeal to Caesar as a Roman citizen, see 22.25ff. Luke notes, through Festus to King Agrippa, that since “Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar” (25.21).

⁴Compare 13.2-3; 13.46-47; 14.27; 15.7, 12; 18.6; 19.10, 17; 20.21; 21.11, 21; 22.14-15, 21; 23.11; 24.24; 26.2ff.; 26.16ff.; 28.17ff.

⁵Acts 19.21b has Paul saying, literally, “it is necessary for me also to see Rome” (Greek *dei me kai Romen idein*). Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 475, notes, “Luke’s devoting so much of his narrative to the details of [the events leading up to and] those few weeks at sea is best explained by his desire to emphasize the divine determination that Paul’s purpose of seeing Rome must be fulfilled, despite all the factors that rendered his ever getting there unlikely in the extreme. . . . It is the will of God that Paul shall preach the gospel at the heart of the empire, and his will is not to be frustrated. The description of the storm and the shipwreck is integral to the story of Paul’s missionary career.” On Paul’s plan to visit Rome and his last journey to Jerusalem, see Filson, *A New Testament History*, 259ff.; Kent, *The Work and Teaching of the Apostles*, 206-207.

preaching, teaching, and “extraordinary miracles” (19.11).⁶ But Paul knew the risks, and even though he was warned at points along the way—Ephesus, Cyprus, and Caesarea—not to go back to Jerusalem, he felt “ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (21.13; cf. 20.23; 21.4, 10, 11).⁷

God’s Protection for Paul and Paul’s Imprisonment

Throughout the book of Acts, Luke dramatically highlights the tensions that existed between “Jews and Greeks” in the diaspora but especially in Jerusalem.⁸ Paul’s role in this stirring up of ethnic⁹ hostilities was unmistakable and based on his conversion to “the Way”¹⁰ of Jesus as Messiah (i.e., Christ) and his turning to the Gentiles when his message was rejected by the Jews. Luke strongly emphasizes this aspect of Paul’s ministry when he and his companions went to discuss matters with James and “all the elders” on the day after they had arrived in Jerusalem (21.17ff.). Because of possible trouble due to Paul’s presence in Jerusalem, the elders

⁶For example, while in Greece on his way back to Jerusalem, he changed his itinerary as a result of “a plot . . . made against him by the Jews” (20.3).

⁷It is interesting to surmise whether or not Paul was attentive to the warnings and, by implication, to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, since, as Luke states, “through the Spirit they [e.g., the disciples at Tyre] were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem” (21.4; cf. verse 12). Apparently, Paul considered the anticipated and prophesied perils awaiting him in Jerusalem as part of what “he must suffer for the sake of [the Lord’s] name” (9.16). The believers at Tyre broke Paul’s heart with their emotional appeal for him not to return to Jerusalem (21.13), but Paul’s stubbornness (“he would not be persuaded,” verse 14) caused them to concede, “Let the will of the Lord be done.” Montague, *Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition*, 297-300, suggests that, in his emphasis on the apostle’s passion to return to Jerusalem one last time to suffer and possibly die there, Luke parallels Paul with Jesus.

⁸For Luke’s use of the expression “Jews and Greeks,” see 14.1; 18.4; 19.10, 17; compare 20.21. Note the contrast between “Jews” and “Gentiles” or “Greeks” in 21.11; 21.20-21; 21.27-28.

⁹To use the word “racial” might be a mistake and a reading of current tensions into an ancient problem. “Ethnic” seems a better choice to define the conflict, since it expresses well what Paul himself said in his own defense to Jewish leaders at Rome, “I had no charge to bring against my nation” (28.19). “My nation” translates the Greek phrase *tou ethnous mou*.

¹⁰See 9.2; 19.9, 23; 22.4; 24.14, 22.

instructed Paul to perform temple rites of purification with four Jewish men. The leaders then reasoned, “Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law” (verse 24).

Paul complied with the request, but it was not enough.¹¹ The “Jews from Asia” who were in Jerusalem “stirred up the whole crowd” who grabbed Paul, dragged him from the temple, and began to beat him. They wanted to kill him, but fortunately for the apostle the Roman tribune and his soldiers intervened. This initiated Paul’s lengthy detention and his repeated “defense”¹² of his conversion to “the Way” and his ministry to both Jews and Gentiles. Luke narrates Paul’s defense at Jerusalem to a crowd in the city and to the Jewish Sanhedrin, at Caesarea to the procurators Felix and Festus as well as King Agrippa, and eventually in Rome to Jewish leaders in the city and presumably to Caesar himself.¹³



Figure 1. Paul’s Seven Speeches at the End of Acts of Apostles. Taken from www.slideshare.net (accessed 18 November 2018). Copyright Unknown.

¹¹It seems incredible that Paul, who already had written his letter to the Galatians with its strong antilegalistic sentiments, would concede this. But see the comments by Dibelius and Kummel, *Paul*, 142-143. Perhaps Paul sensed the dangers, not just for himself but for the entire community of believers in Jerusalem, had he not so acted.

¹²The Greek word *apologia* means “response to charges of misconduct . . . defense.” Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament [Concise NT Lexicon]*, 48. See 22.1; 25.16; compare 19.33; 24.10; 25.8; 26.1, 2, 24.

¹³Luke does not finish the story of Paul in Rome which has led to much speculation about what happened to Paul and about Luke’s overall rationale for writing Acts. See Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 6-13; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 349-354. Compare Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, 205ff., who views Luke’s work as “an interpretive act” for an alternative “to imperial modes of reality.”



Figure 2. Jewish Sanhedrin in the Holy City of Jerusalem.
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It is clear, according to Luke's account, that Paul's journey to Rome from Jerusalem is orchestrated by God and properly begins after Paul's appearance before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. The next night after that, Luke tells us that "the Lord stood by [Paul] and said, 'Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome'" (23.11).

Consequently, Paul's going to Rome and his two-year stay in the city marks the climax of Luke's story about the continuing work of Jesus (i.e., his acts and teachings) through his Holy Spirit and through his witnesses (i.e., the apostles) "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1.1-8).

But first, Paul must escape the dangers in Jerusalem of which he had been warned amply beforehand. He does so not by trickery nor by his own cunning ability but by the handiwork of God who protects Paul through the Roman military presence in the city.¹⁴ The Roman tribune makes sure that Paul's rights of Roman citizenship are preserved (22.22ff.) and provides safe conduct for Paul to the Roman provincial capital, Caesarea Maritima, in spite of a deadly plot by

¹⁴God's overarching governance of circumstances does not negate the value of human ingenuity as is seen by Paul's use of Greek or Hebrew as appropriate to the situation (21.37; 22.2), his appeal for protection as a citizen of Rome (22.25ff.), his deference to the high priest (23.5), his alignment with the Pharisees (i.e., the resurrection party, 23.6ff.), his support from close relatives (i.e., his sister's son, 23.16ff.), and the advantageous assertion of his Jewishness (21.26; 21.39; 22.3; 24.14; 24.24; 25.8ff.; 26.2ff.).

Jewish radicals¹⁵ to kill him, a conspiracy that was thwarted with the help of “the son of Paul’s sister” and a heavily armed guard for Paul (23.12ff.).¹⁶ So Paul’s capture in Jerusalem and his imprisonment in Caesarea, while strictly unjustified from any legal standpoint,¹⁷ was God’s way of protecting Paul for his work in Rome to proclaim the kingdom of God and to teach about the Lord Jesus Christ (28.30-31).

The Voyage to Rome: Introduction

After nearly two years in Caesarea, Luke indicates that “it was decided that we should sail for Italy, [so] they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius” (27.1).¹⁸ He highlights certain aspects of the trip from Caesarea to the island of Crete (verses 2-12), then he underscores the storm at sea (verses 13-26) and the subsequent wreck of the ship (verses 27ff.). Although Luke’s narration reads like a matter-of-fact recitation of Paul’s voyage, the details are sketchy and the exact itinerary unsure.¹⁹ But this is not Luke’s

¹⁵These Jews, more than forty in number and possibly from Asia, “bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul” (23.12).

¹⁶The tribune gave Paul more than normal courtesies granted to prisoners, for example, his own mount or horse to ride (23.24). On Luke’s portrayal of the favorable treatment of Paul by the Roman authorities, see Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, 94-97.

¹⁷See 23.29; 25.7-8, 25; 26.31-32.

¹⁸Note Luke’s use of “we” throughout the narrative, the fourth and last “we-section” in Acts (27.1–28.16). Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 269, states, “The vivid narrative as well as the first person plural demands an eye-witness as the source and to say that Luke’s account is based on literary sources alone . . . is most unconvincing.”

¹⁹But, it can be argued convincingly, Luke knows well the “rigging and sails” of travel at sea. Weiss, *Earliest Christianity: A History of the Period A.D. 30-150*, Volume I, 146-147, notes, “The accurate itinerary may indeed go back to notes of a diary. [But] even though he does give us many important and vivid incidents, he has simply not written for our benefit. . . . He wrote for readers who had known Paul in person, possibly for the Roman church who had witnessed the preaching, perhaps even the martyrdom of the Apostle. . . . The last journey-narrative [of chapters 27 and 28] is the part that is worked out most fully. One cannot escape the impression that it has been given in such detail because it was meant for the church at Rome. They should know the strange adventures and leadings through which Paul had come to Rome.”

purpose for giving us this information about Paul's travel to Rome. Luke wants us to see the "extraordinary"²⁰ handiwork of God in preserving the life of Paul for his mission in Rome—that this travel is controlled and guided by God, that Paul's life is protected and preserved by God, and that all this comes about as announced and mediated by God. And while Luke does not stress these aspects of divine providence systematically, it is hard to miss God's protective care that serves as the basis for the safe conduct of Paul and his companions from the port of Caesarea to the Imperial City. God's overriding care is assumed throughout the narrative and is stressed explicitly at various points.²¹

Compare Carver, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 253, "The account of this voyage has long been recognized as a classic gem of literary skill, for its descriptive vividness, its detailed accuracy even to the exact, scientific use of terms, and for its skillful proportion, so that the great idea of the superintending presence of God dominates the whole story notwithstanding so many secondary interests enter. This twenty-seventh chapter has been a bulwark of defense against the radical assaults on Luke's reliability." Knapp, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 287, says, "The voyage [is] told with . . . brilliance, filled with nautical terms, and simple enough to fascinate a child." For a good, concise overview of Paul's journey, see Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, 256-257.

²⁰Is the common distinction between "ordinary" and "extraordinary" with regard to God's governance of the world a modern one that is superimposed on the biblical text? See Morris and Petcher, "Chapter Five: Supernatural Laws and Natural Miracles," *Science and Grace: God's Reign in the Natural Sciences*, 115ff.; compare Collins, "Passages Dealing with 'Nature' and 'Cause'" and "Defining 'Natural' and 'Supernatural'," *The God of Miracles*, 67-86, 128.

²¹Hills, *The Testimony of the Witnesses*, 377-378, states, "This voyage shows how truly and wonderfully, yet strangely, God often answers prayer. For many years Paul had wanted to visit Rome; but it had never been in his thought to have his desire fulfilled at the expense of the Roman government." Compare Kent, *Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in Acts*, 184, "The intervening weeks had stretched into months and then into years, and Paul had been confronted with one crisis after another, but he had divine assurance that Rome would yet be reached (23.11). The means were not what Paul could have foreseen nor what he might have chosen, but God was in control and the apostle was fully willing to leave the details in His hands."

Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 334, 335, notes that "Chapter 27 comes as a welcome contrast. It is all action and little talk. . . . It is hard to doubt that Luke saw in this episode a paradigm of Paul's mission. . . . Come what may, God would fulfil his purpose by having Paul preach the good news in the very heart of the Empire. . . . Notable is the restraint of the storyteller. We read of no overtly supernatural intervention beyond the assurance provided by an angel in a dream or vision (27.23-24). . . . No miracle is attributed to Paul beyond the prediction of 27.26; otherwise his advice is simply good sense born of experience (27.10, 31). He is indomitable, but not divine (contrast 28.6)."

The Voyage to Rome: The Storm

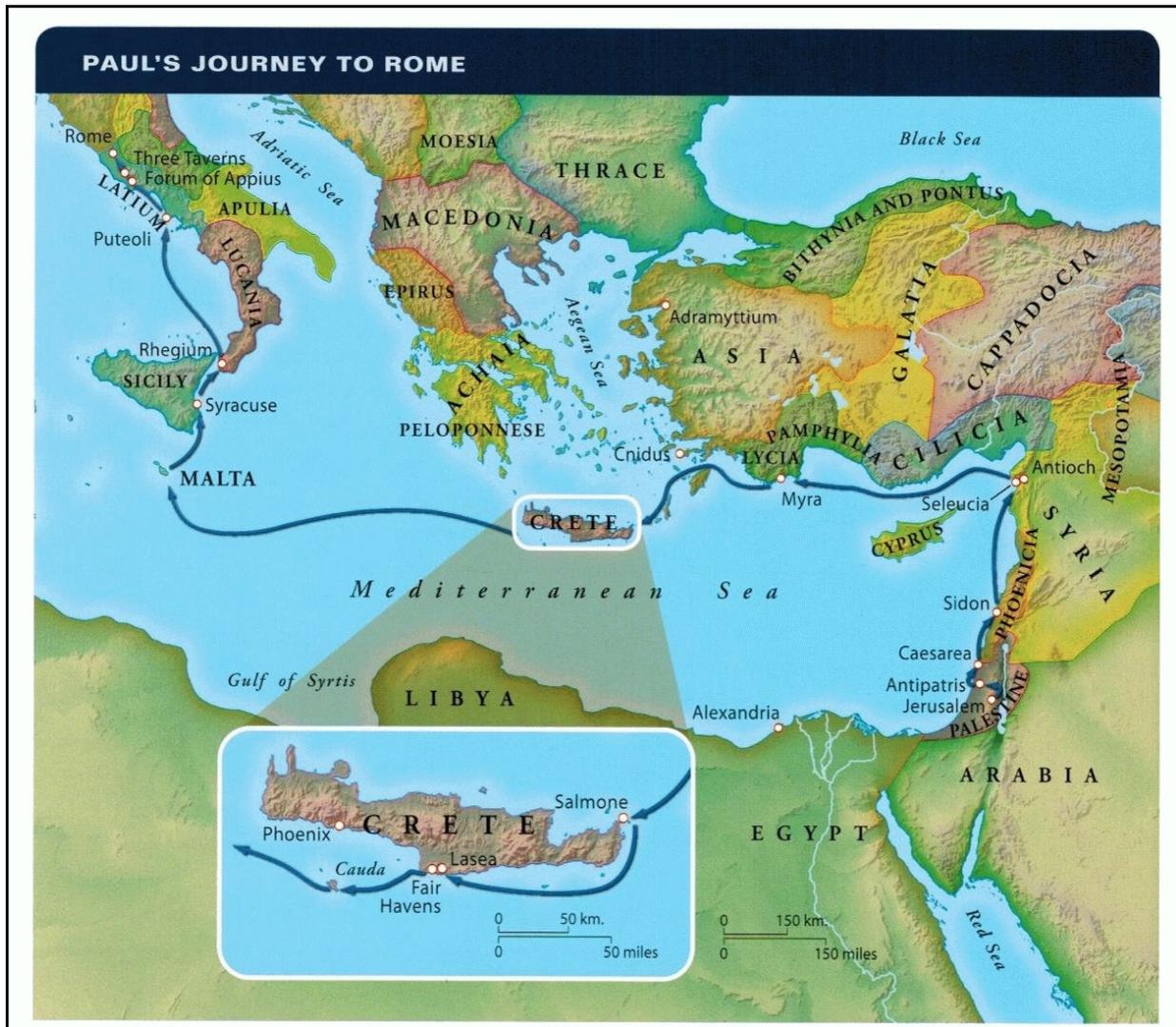


Figure 3. Paul's Voyage To Rome. From Rasmussen, *Zondervan Essential Atlas of the Bible*, 134.

Once the voyage began, crew, soldiers, and prisoners under the Roman centurion skirted along the coast of Asia from port to port until Sidon where “Julius treated Paul kindly and gave

Wansbrough, “Acts of the Apostles,” *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 1101, remarks, “The theological theme of this chapter is Paul the rescuer. Though Paul himself is a prisoner, all owe their safety to him and his divine mission. The bulk of the story falls into a recognized type. The passages in which Paul appears are quite different in character, and can be cut out of the narrative, leaving a neutral story of a sea voyage terminating in a shipwreck.”

him leave to go to his friends and be cared for” (27.3).²² From Sidon, they crossed the open waters, passed “under the lee of Cyprus,” sailed along “the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia,” and got to “Myra in Lycia” (verses 4-5). There they changed ships, put out for Crete via the isle of Cnidus, and eventually “with difficulty” came to the harbor of Fair Havens on the south central coast of Crete (verses 6-8).²³ It was slow going, the winds blew against the ship, and it took a lot of time.²⁴ But Luke moves the narrative along rather quickly in order to recount the storm and the shipwreck. At Fair Havens, the centurion ignored Paul’s warning not to sail for Phoenix on the southwest coast of Crete, as that would mean sure disaster “with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives” (verse 10).²⁵ Luke makes it clear that the centurion based his decision on what “the pilot and the owner of the ship” said rather than “what

²²On the kindness of Julius to Paul, see Simmons, *Peoples of the New Testament World*, 272-273.

²³Luke uses the expression “with difficulty” (Greek *molis*) twice in this section.

²⁴Luke mentions that “the Fast” (i.e., the Day of Atonement) already had occurred, so the best time, before late September, for sailing safely on the open sea also had passed. See as well Knowing, “The Acts of the Apostles,” *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, Volume II, 520. Carver, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 255, says, “Luke’s dating by ‘the Fast’ (Atonement and Tabernacles) is curious in this connection and quite possibly indicates that Paul had, as a true Jew, observed this sacred day, in a Christian way.”

²⁵Had Paul received word from an angel or in a vision, or was this simply intuition or sea-smartness on his part? Luke does not say. But later it is revealed to the apostle by an angel that, although the ship would be wrecked, no lives would be lost. Marshall, *Acts*, 406-407, highlights this ambiguity and notes, “Two points are uncertain. First, it is not clear whether Paul is represented as making an inspired prophecy (cf. 27.21-26); if some divine revelation lay behind this commonsensical statement, we are not told of it, but the fact that Paul speaks with certainty of disaster rather than merely of the possibility may support the supposition of divine guidance behind his statement. Secondly, it is not clear to whom the statement is made.”

But Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 356, believes, “Evidently the character of the Apostle had won him the regard and respect of those in charge of the vessel as well as of the centurion. He must have had some experience of sailing in the Mediterranean, and so was fitted to speak on the question which was now being debated. We should bear in mind too that he had seen more of perils by sea already than we gather from the Acts. For some time before this voyage to Rome, he wrote to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11.25), ‘Thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep’. . . . The verb rendered ‘I perceive’ implies the results of observation, and does not refer to any supernatural communication which the Apostle had received. This is clear from the end of the verse where St. Paul speaks of hurt to the lives of those on board, which did not come to pass.”

Paul said,” and the majority agreed (verses 11-12).²⁶ It was a decision that all of them would soon regret.

While trying to make the short trek from Fair Havens to the more favorable harbor of Phoenix for the winter, the ship was caught up by a “tempestuous wind, called the northeaster” (verse 14). It was blown off course, completely bypassing southwest Crete, and “driven along” (verses 15, 17) for two weeks “across the

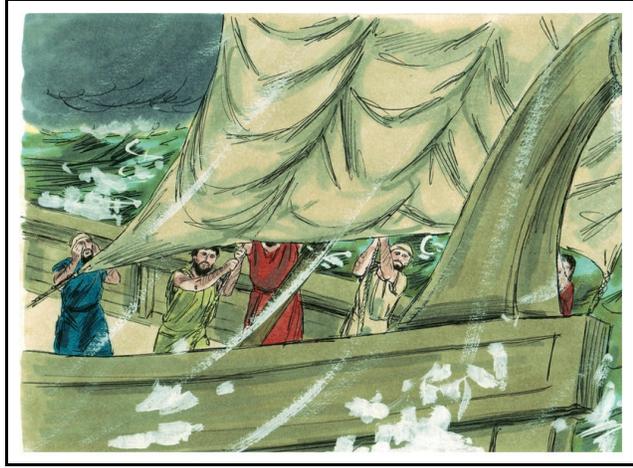


Figure 4. Sailors Struggle With Ship At Sea. “Bible Illustrations by Sweet Media (Online).”

Adriatic Sea” (verse 27) to the island of Malta (28.1).²⁷ At first, the gentle south wind had produced tranquil sailing and a false security (i.e., “supposing they had obtained their purpose,” verse 13). But then the weather suddenly and unexpectedly turned violent (verse 18). Life can be like that. Luke describes a scene of chaos, of being out of control (i.e., driven by the wind and forced along), with no remedy for the situation. Although the travellers got some relief from the fierce storm on the leeward side of the isle of Cauda, that allowed them to “secure the ship’s [life]boat” (verse 16), the crew struggled to keep the ship from sinking.²⁸ And because they

²⁶Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 249, states, “If this was a council of four, the centurion, the ship-owner, the ship’s master, and Paul (perhaps representing the passengers), the ‘majority’ would be three against one.” Compare Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 483.

²⁷Luke uses the Greek verb *phero* (“driven along”) two times and the compound form *diaphero* (“driven across [the Adriatic Sea]”) once in this section.

²⁸Notice how Luke moves seamlessly from actions taken by the passengers to the frantic work of the crew (“we managed . . . to secure . . . they used . . . to undergird,” verses 16-17). Knapp, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 291, says “undergirding the ship” was called “frapping” and “consisted in passing cables round the vessel . . . under the ship or lengthwise.”

feared certain destruction if blown further south onto the Syrtis (verse 17),²⁹ they lightened their load and jettisoned first the unnecessary cargo and then the ship's tackle (verses 18-19). As the storm and its chaos continued (i.e., "no small tempest"), a deep darkness (i.e., during both day and night)³⁰ set in "for many days" that caused the travellers to abandon "all hope of . . . being saved" (verse 20).³¹

Because none had eaten for "a long time,"³² Paul took this opportunity to speak up and remind them of his warning at Fair Havens (i.e., "you should have listened to me . . .," verse 21).

²⁹These were the shoals or large sandbanks off the Libyan coast so feared by ancient mariners.

³⁰On "neither sun nor stars" (Greek *mete de heliou mete astron*), Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, Volume II, 274, remarks, "which the ancients could the less do without before the discovery of the mariner's compass."

³¹Literal meanings of emotive words and phrases used by Luke as a result of experiencing such a dangerous situation are obvious, but it would be difficult to miss subtle hints toward metaphorical understandings too. On Luke's use of "hope" (Greek *elpidzo* and *elpis*), see 2.26; 16.19; 23.6; 24.15, 26; 26.6, 7; 27.20; 28.20. Compare his use of "save" (Greek *sodzo*) at 2.21, 40, 47; 4.9, 12; 11.14; 14.9; 15.1, 11; 16.30, 31; 27.20, 31.

See too comments by Foster, "Acts," *New International Version Study Bible*, 1879, which border on allegory: "Luke's magnificent account of the storm at sea is possibly intended to be more than just an interesting story well told. Here at the climax of his account of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, especially through the labors of the apostle Paul, he provides in cameo an exquisite depiction of the state of the world seen from the perspective of Paul's gospel. The peoples of the world (represented by the ship's passengers) stand under the threat of God's judgment (represented by the terrible storm), with Paul and what he represents being their only hope. On board are representatives of the world's economic, military, and political powers and those skilled in navigating the sea, but none of these can master the raging storm to save themselves or their possessions. They escape only as they follow Paul's instructions. Compare note on Jonah 1.4-16."

³²Was their appetite taken away because of their duress, or did they not have time to eat because of their struggle against the storm? Luke does not say. Humphry, *A Commentary on the Book of the Acts of the Apostles*, 206, suggests, "This abstinence might be owing to the impossibility of cooking, or to the destruction of provisions by leakage. It is no uncommon aggravation of maritime disasters." Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 360, concurs, "The Greek means that everybody on board had been without food for a long time. . . . This was in consequence of the excitement which made it impossible to eat, as well as the condition of the vessel which made the preparation of food very difficult. They had been living on anything that happened to be attainable, and that had been very little." But Knapp, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 292, believes, "The most natural inference is that they were most of them ill; dried foods could otherwise have been taken."

It is not that Paul was rubbing it in as if he were saying, “I told you so.”³³ Rather, Paul cites the accuracy of his words, since he has further admonitions³⁴ for them. Paul’s source for encouragement, the same as his source for his earlier words of warning, was a very good one—“an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship” (verse 23).³⁵ The divine message was clear—“Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you” (verse 24).³⁶ Bluntly put, the angel tells Paul, “Fear not . . . it is necessary for you to go to Rome . . . and look, as a favor to you, God graciously has spared the

³³Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 272, says, “If Paul used the argument, ‘I told you so!’ . . . it is strange that he did not meet the fate of Jonah.”

³⁴“Admonition” is not used in a negative sense here, but with the idea of “authoritative counsel.”

³⁵Compare 1.10; 10.17, 30; 12.7; 23.11 for Luke’s use of “stood” (Greek verb *paristemi*) with respect to messengers from God. On his use of “angel” (Greek *angelos*) in Acts, see 5.19; 6.15; 7.30, 35, 38, 53; 8.26; 10.3, 7, 22; 11.13; 12.7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 23; 23.8, 9. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 339, 340, notes, “Even in the extreme discomfort and distress of a ship pounded unceasingly, he had received one more vision (his last in Acts). This time it was not of Christ (18.9-10; 23.11), nor of a man (16.9), but of an angel (27.23)—the only time an angel appears to Paul in Acts. . . . The God-centredness of the brief message is striking, as so often earlier in Acts (see 10.1–11.18; 14.15-17; 17.22-31). It is God to whom Paul belongs and who stands at the focus of Paul’s worship (27.23); it is God who is affirmed to be in sovereign control of events and of those caught up in them (27.24; see on 4.12); and it is faith in this God which Paul affirms (27.25). To be noted is the fact that it is faith in a God who does not exempt from danger or cut it short miraculously, but who sustains endurance throughout the long drawn out crisis (cf. Luke 21.19); the verb used consistently in the climax of the account (27.43-44; 28.1, 4) means ‘to bring safely through’.”

³⁶The Greek reads *me phobou, Paule, Kaisari se dei parastenai, kai idou kecharistai soi ho theos pantas tous pleontas meta sou*. Carver, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 255, highlights, “All, then, were to be saved by Paul’s God, and as a favor to his slave and worshiper. No one could forget that message. God’s words through Paul are now to be fulfilled.” Compare Hills, *The Testimony of the Witnesses*, 381, who states, “Paul’s life on board was manifestly one of prayer, and his prayers were not for himself alone, but for his fellow-voyagers.” And Humphry, *A Commentary on the Book of the Acts of the Apostles*, 207, who says, “The Apostle is a contrast to the prophet Jonah, who refused to fulfil his mission to Nineveh, and so was the occasion of evil, not of good, to those with whom he sailed.”

Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, Volume II, 725, who translates *kecharistai* as “hath freely given,” notes, “Paul had prayed. Even many of these perhaps, as far as life is concerned, were given to Paul. Even the centurion, in subservience to Divine providence, saved the prisoners in compliment to Paul, verse 43. The providence of God marvellously reigns under contingent events, such as was the accompanying retinue here. More readily many bad men are preserved with a few godly men, than one godly man perishes with many guilty men. The world is like this ship.”

lives of all those travelling with you (but not the ship itself).”³⁷ God would be true to his promises to Paul and to his word concerning the commission of his apostle. God would orchestrate matters and make sure that Paul got to his appointed destination safely. So Paul reassures his bedraggled companions to “take heart” (verses 22, 25).³⁸ Although the ship would be lost, Paul knew that he and all the rest would not be harmed. He knew this, because he believed God’s word—“I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told” (verse 25).³⁹

After fourteen days of “being driven across the Adriatic Sea,”⁴⁰ during the relative calm of midnight, the sailors sensed they were getting close to land and might hit the rocks (verses 27, 29). As their “soundings” (i.e., reasonable observations of the depth of the water with measuring weights) indicated that the ship indeed was nearing land, they took what preventive action they

³⁷The word translated “granted” is from the Greek *charidzomai* and indicates, in this context, divine good will or divine favor. On verses 23-25, Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 413, notes, “Many believed that ships [during terrible storms] would be destroyed because of the impious aboard, or spared because one of special piety was aboard. . . . Paul’s concern for all aboard . . . is because of God’s mission and message, not because he is personally indispensable.” Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 251, also suggests that “the order of importance indicated in the angel’s words is noteworthy. Paul’s task before the emperor was God’s foremost aim, the saving of two hundred and seventy-six human lives was secondary.”

³⁸The Greek word is *euthumeo* (“be cheerful” or “be in good spirits”) and is used only here and in James 5.13 in the New Testament.

³⁹The Greek is *pisteuo gar to theo hoti houtos estai kath’ hon tropon lelaletai moi*, or literally, “for I believe God that it will be thus according to the way it has been spoken to me.” On verses 21-26, Packer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 212, comments, “This passage throws a most interesting light on Paul’s character. With only a brief reference to his earlier warning (verse 10), he stands out as the one strong man in a terrified and hungry ship-load. His confidence in the divine revelation gives his companions renewed hope and encouragement. He knew that he must appear before the Emperor and he trusted in God that, although they would be shipwrecked on some island, there would be no loss of life. The guidance of the Holy Spirit during the voyage to Rome is comparable with that during Paul’s stay in Corinth (18.9-10) and follows the prophecy in Jerusalem (23.11).”

⁴⁰Luke twice notes the two-week period by “the fourteenth night” and “the fourteenth day” (verses 27, 33).

could (i.e., “let down four anchors from the stern”) and “prayed for day to come” (verse 29).⁴¹

But prayer and human countermeasures did not lessen the fear of the sailors nor their instinct for self-preservation, as they tried to steal away during the night in the lifeboat in a deceptive way (i.e., “under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow,” verse 30). Paul realized what they were doing, warned against it, and the soldiers prevented the escape and “cut away the ropes of the ship’s [life]boat and let it go” (verse 32).⁴² Paul’s word, directed to “the centurion and the soldiers,” had won the respect of Julius and his cohort.⁴³ Furthermore, Paul had expressed his warning in life-and-death terms for all of them . . . together. God graciously had promised to protect all who travelled with Paul but not on their terms nor by their own abilities. Paul sharply said, “Unless these men [i.e., the sailors] stay in the ship, you [i.e., the soldiers] cannot be saved” (verse 31).⁴⁴ The disobedience of a few would have disastrous consequences for the many.

⁴¹The word for “prayed” (Greek *euchomai*) can mean “to petition deity” in a heightened religious sense or, in a less direct religious appeal, simply “to long for” or “to wish for.” See 26.29; compare Romans 9.3; 2 Corinthians 13.7, 9; James 5.16; 3 John 2. Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 156.

⁴²Humphry, *A Commentary on the Book of the Acts of the Apostles*, 208, remarks that the Greek word *apekopsan* (“they cut off”) is “a strong mark of their confidence in Paul, who though a prisoner, now in fact commands, as he had done before, when a prisoner at Philippi.” Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 252, notes, “The storm must have died down sufficiently to enable the dinghy to be lowered. Since we do not know what went on in the sailors’ minds, we cannot say whether the group who scrambled into the dinghy were bent on escape—a dubious adventure on a dark night, on an unknown shore and amid the sound of breakers—or whether they did in fact mean to fix anchors to the bow.”

⁴³Hills, *The Testimony of the Witnesses*, 377-378, says, “A sea voyage is often a revelation of character. We sometimes think less of those with whom we have crossed the ocean than we did before the voyage. Paul grew constantly in the esteem of his fellow-voyagers from the beginning.”

⁴⁴Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 363, says, “We see from this that every human effort was still to be made, although God had revealed to Paul that they should all be saved. If the sailors had left, the ignorance of the soldiers and other passengers would not have availed to save them at such a time. The skill of the sailors was to be exerted to carry out what God had promised.” Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 251, also points out the practicality of what Luke records, “It is of interest to note that the heavenly prophecy and aid were so matter of fact. The sailors were to stay on board and everyone was to eat before leaving the ship in an attempt to reach the shore.” Compare Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 489.

Having settled the matter of self-preservation versus God-preservation, Paul now turns his attention and that of his companions to more practical matters—the breaking of bread. Paul “urged them all to take some food . . . for . . . strength” (verses 33, 34).⁴⁵ The word translated “strength” (Greek *soteria*) can mean “rescue” in the sense of “deliverance from physical harm” or “salvation” in the sense of “deliverance relating to divine initiatives and procedures.”⁴⁶ Paul reaffirms God’s promise of their total perseverance with the interesting phrase, “for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.”⁴⁷ But in order to not perish, they needed to eat. So Paul “took bread,” he gave thanks (Greek *eucharisteo*)⁴⁸ “to God in the presence of all,” “he broke [the bread],” and he “began to eat” (verse 35). “Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves” (verse 36).

In essence, Paul celebrates “eucharist” with them, and any casual student of the practices of early Christians would not miss the parallels here with the celebration of meals, and the

⁴⁵Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 340, remarks on verses 33 and 34, “That landfall had roused Paul’s spirits is also in character. As one who had remained buoyant and resilient in the face of repeated setbacks in the past, and one who had demonstrated his natural leadership many times before, he takes the lead in giving encouragement. This was the nature and effect of his faith.”

⁴⁶See Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 346.

⁴⁷The Greek reads *oudenos gar humon thrix apo tes kephales apoleitai*, literally, “for of not one of you a hair from the head will be lost.” On the use of “hair” (Greek *thrix*), compare especially Luke 21.18, and Matthew 5.36; 10.30; Luke 12.7.

⁴⁸Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 156, says that when *eucharisteo* is used in the New Testament, “except for Romans 16:4 and Luke 17:16 . . . God is explicitly or implicitly the recipient of [the] thanksgiving.” On “giving thanks” to God for bread or food, see Matthew 15.36; 26.27; Mark 8.6; 14.23; Luke 22.17, 19; John 6.11, 23; Romans 14.6; 1 Corinthians 10.30; 11.24.

“eucharist” meal, in the pattern of that established by Jesus.⁴⁹ This reconnection of Paul and his fellow travellers⁵⁰ to bread—that divinely-provided (i.e., from the Creator and the Giver of life) sustenance for life—was important and necessary, especially during a period of stress and struggle, since they had “continued in suspense and without food” for some time (verse 33).⁵¹ Through the breaking of bread together, they were reaffirmed in the connection to their Maker, their bond with his apostle, and their association with each other in this undertaking. After they

⁴⁹See Matthew 26.26; Mark 14.22; Luke 22.19; 24.30, 35; John 13.26, 30; 21.13; Acts 2.42, 46; Acts 20.7, 11; 1 Corinthians 10.16, 17; 11.23, 26, 27, 28. Wansbrough, “Acts of the Apostles,” *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 1101, states, “It is not clear that Luke intends to depict a Eucharist in the full Christian sense. The blessing could be the normal Christian and Jewish blessing before a meal; but . . . [the language] has a definite eucharistic ring.” Similarly, Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 341, says, “Some assume that the sequence . . . must describe a eucharistic act. This is most unlikely. The actions are simply those of a normal Jewish meal. . . . The more significant feature for Luke is that Paul ‘gave thanks to God before them all’. It is as a witness for God, the one God of Israel, that Paul stands out in his endurance, his perceptiveness, and his leadership.” Compare Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 490.

But contrast Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 364, who remarks, “As [Paul] had advised, so he set the example of taking food. But he did more than this. He made an Eucharist of this meal. In the sight of the heathen soldiers and sailors, he broke the bread in solemn thanksgiving, and thus converted the whole into a religious act, which can hardly have been without its influence on the minds of some, at all events, of those who had heard St. Paul’s previous words about the revelation which God had made to him.” See, too, the ambivalence of Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 492-493, “There is a cluster of words and phrases here . . . which are familiar in a eucharistic setting. This supports the view of many commentators that the meal here described was a eucharistic meal. Probably it was so in a limited sense. All shared the food, but to the majority it was an ordinary meal, while for those who ate with eucharistic intention (Paul and his fellow-Christians) it was a valid eucharist. . . . They did not, however, withdraw into a corner to communicate. Paul gave thanks ‘in the presence of all,’ and the communicant Christians broke the bread and ate it with the ship’s company. No mention is made of wine. The terms ‘wine’ and ‘cup’ are absent from the whole of Acts.”

⁵⁰Paul took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to eat “in the presence of all” or about “276 persons in the ship” (verse 37) according to the ESV text, but according to other Greek manuscripts only “seventy-six” or “about seventy-six.” For other variations, see Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition, 442. The important thing is not the exact number but rather Luke’s emphasis on the work of God’s apostle who brings together all the travellers—prisoners, sailors, and soldiers—for breaking of bread or communion.

⁵¹Does Luke mean to indicate that they did not take any food at all during the fourteen days? Or does he mean that they did not take the time to stop what they were doing, to gather together, and to eat a proper meal due to the need to keep wrestling with the ship against the storm? Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, Volume II, 726, suggests, “For they had not so long abstained from food, although perhaps they had no regular dinner or supper. . . . [But] the fourteenth day . . . was thought the critical [decisive of their fate] day among sailors.”

ate enough to be satisfied,⁵² they ditched “the wheat into the sea” to further lighten the vessel’s load (verse 38). But, as before, human efforts by the crew toward salvation from the storm through so much “burden lifting” would not prove sufficient to avoid destruction of the ship.

The Voyage to Rome: The Shipwreck

In three short pericopes (27.39-44; 28.1-6; 28.7-10),⁵³ Luke notes the wreck of the ship and the three-month stay of the travellers on Malta, a landmass initially not recognized by the sailors (verse 39). The ship had been blown across the Mediterranean about 600 miles to the west from Crete to the small rocky island that sits some 60 miles south of Sicily. Luke packs a lot into these short sections, as the text oozes with implied meanings that Luke does not state outright. But his overriding concern is God’s protection of Paul and his safe conduct to the city of Rome.

Once they spotted land after daybreak, the sailors attempted to beach the vessel with a common but simple method of casting off the anchors, loosening the rudders, and hoisting the main sail to the wind to let the ship run its course onto the beach (verse 40). But they hit an unseen “reef”⁵⁴ and, as a result, the ship’s bow (i.e., front) got stuck while the stern (i.e., back) was “broken up by the surf” (verse 41). During the mayhem, the prisoners, including Paul, were under threat of execution lest they escape and the soldiers themselves be responsible (verse 42; cf. 16.27). But Julius, convinced by the genuineness and forthrightness of God’s apostle,

⁵²Literally, “having eaten enough food” (Greek *koresthentes de trophes*). The word for “fill to the full” or “to satiate” (Greek *korennumi*) is used only here and at 1 Corinthians 4.8.

⁵³But the section about the shipwreck could be considered continuation of or the climax of the storm narrative.

⁵⁴Literally, “having fallen into a place between two seas” (Greek *peripesontes de eis topon dithalasson*), that is, “a location with sea on either side (e.g., point, reef, sandbank). Some interpret as a non-geographical sea-faring hazard patch of crosscurrents. The specific meaning remains debatable.” Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 97.

restrained his men, and he gave orders for the swimmers to jump and get to shore and for the rest to grab on to flotsam and float to land (verses 43-44).⁵⁵ As a result of the quick and beneficent action of the centurion, “all were brought safely to land” (verse 44).⁵⁶ And even though human initiative was necessary (i.e., swimming or floating) to bring all the voyagers to safety, God worked through the counteraction of the Roman leader (i.e., “he kept . . . he ordered”), a nonbeliever, to save Paul and all the rest. No one was dashed against the rocks, and not one of them drowned in the sea. As Paul had said earlier, not a hair perished from the head of any.

But does Luke hint at more than physical safety for Paul and the rest? In this regard, his language or word choice in this section is instructive—plan, kill, escape, save, keep, plan, order. For Luke, “plan” (Greek *boule*) is a “product of deliberation,” thus a “decision” or “resolve” and used frequently of the divine plan, purpose, or will.⁵⁷ Those against God’s plan or will had killed “the Author of life” (3.15), they had killed “the prophets . . . who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One” (7.52), and they had tried to kill (Greek *apokteino*) his apostle, Paul (21.31; 23.12, 14). But unlike the sailors who prior to the wreck had tried “to escape (Greek *pheugo*) from the ship” (27.30), Paul, who was confident of the Lord’s protection, would not try

⁵⁵Simmons, *Peoples of the New Testament World*, 273, notes that “this was a bold step, for if any of the prisoners had escaped, Julius’s life and those of the other soldiers would have been forfeited.” And Stagg, *The Book of Acts*, 260, adds that the Greek of verse 44 is ambiguous, so that Luke could have “meant that some reached shore by floating on ‘things’ from the ship or by the help of some who could swim.”

⁵⁶Carver, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 261-262, remarks, “‘Thus,’ [Greek *kai houtos egeneto*, ‘and so it was that,’ ESV] by the plan and providence of God, and by wise planning, watchful care and vigorous exertion. Paul’s confidence in his God (verse 25) had been fully justified in the outcome. He has had a new opportunity to bear witness to men who would not have known his God otherwise, and he has again been faithful.” Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 253, notes, “Luke’s main emphasis, however, throughout this whole narrative of the voyage and shipwreck has been that despite every hazard and adversity it was the will of God that Paul should be spared to bring the Gospel to Rome, and that the Apostle himself was aware of this.”

⁵⁷Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 73. Of twelve uses of *boule* in the New Testament, nine are by Luke. See 2.23; 4.28; 5.38; 13.36; 20.27; 27.12; compare Luke 7.30; 23.51.

to “escape” (verse 42, Greek *diapheugo*; cf. 16.27; 25.11).⁵⁸ He was more than just a prisoner of Rome. He was foremost a prisoner of the Lord (see Ephesians 3.1; 4.1; 2 Timothy 1.8; Philemon 1, 9, 23). He would submit to the Lord’s will in this circumstance. And the master of the voyage, the centurion Julius, who desired or resolved “to save Paul,” prevented or “kept” the soldiers from “carrying out their plan.”⁵⁹ In the spirit of the Master and Lord over all, he put a stop to their plan to kill Paul, and perhaps unknowingly he stopped a plan that would hinder the work of God in getting Paul to Rome to further the message of the kingdom (28.23, 31). Furthermore, this protection occurred because of “an authoritative order” or “command”⁶⁰ from an officer in charge of the safekeeping and welfare of others. As a result, they all “were brought safely to land” (verse 44; cf. 28.1, 4).⁶¹

The Voyage to Rome: The Snakebite

Luke, in this brief section, does not mention explicitly God’s protection of Paul after a deadly snakebite, but such seems to be implied strongly.⁶² The sudden appearance and attack of

⁵⁸The compound form (*diapheugo*) is a hapax legomenon used in the New Testament only here by Luke.

⁵⁹The Greek of verse 43a is *ho de hekatontarches boulomenos diasosai ton Paulon ekolusen autous tou boulematos*. On Luke’s use of “save” (Greek *diasodzo*), compare verse 44; 23.24; 28.1, 4; and Luke 7.3. For his use of “kept” (Greek *koluo*), see 8.36; 10.47; 11.17; 16.6; 24.23; Luke 6.29; 9.49, 50; 11.52; 18.16; 23.2.

⁶⁰Luke uses the verb *keleuo*, meaning to give an order or to command. Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 198.

⁶¹The Greek reads *kai houtos egeneto pantas diasothenai epi ten gen*. Note the passive use of *diasodzo* by Luke here, perhaps his way of hinting at the underlying work of God, rather than that of the centurion or the crew, in their and Paul’s salvation.

⁶²Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 9, 564, says that “Luke gives us such a vividly detailed account of this incident because he wants his readers to appreciate that Paul was not only a heaven-directed man with a God-given message but also a heaven-protected man. The powerful account of the storm and shipwreck has shown this, and now this vignette stresses it once more.”

the viper tends to jump out, no pun intended, at the reader. The bite of the viper, Paul's lack of suffering, and the response of the natives are the foci of Luke for this part of his narrative. Luke begins by stating that the "barbarians"⁶³ or the "native people" of Malta "welcomed . . . all" the weary strangers and did so with more than ordinary hospitality.⁶⁴ This would be no small task given the number of people, whether 276 or even the smaller number of other manuscripts, who needed shelter and to be cared for. Luke does not detail what kindnesses were shown by the native people, except his mention of the "fire"⁶⁵ that they kindled "because it had begun to rain and was cold" (verse 2).⁶⁶ Paul, a tentmaker⁶⁷ by trade and not one to eschew common labor, pitched in to help with building the fire. But when he "gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand" (verse 3).

⁶³The Greek word *barbaroi* (28.2, 4) is "an onomatopoeic word [meaning] 'foreign from Hellenic perspective' . . . not a pejorative term such as our 'barbarian,'" and it means those who speak a foreign language, or those who do not speak Greek. Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 68. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 414, explains, "The Maltese were of Phoenician descent, and most commoners there spoke and read only Punic (the late Phoenician dialect of the Carthaginians). But Roman citizens and retired soldiers also lived there, the elite spoke Latin or Greek, and the island was certainly not considered culturally primitive." Knapp, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 295, though, states that "Luke's nationality comes out in the term *barbaroi*; as the Jew divided the world into Israelites and Gentiles, so the Greeks divided it into Greeks, Romans and barbarians."

⁶⁴Luke says the Maltese "showed us unusual kindness" or, literally, "were showing not the ordinary kindness to us" (Greek *pareichon ou ten tuchousan philanthropian hemin*). For Luke's use of *parecho* ("bring about" or "furnish" in a positive sense), see 16.16; 17.31, 19.24; 22.2. For his use of *tugchano* ("to come upon" or "to happen upon" in the sense of experience in a normal way), compare 19.11 and 27.3. For *philanthropia* ("affection that is characteristic of one who cares for people"), see Titus 3.4. Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 272, 358, 372. On this occasion and many others, God worked through nonbelievers to help Paul and his companions.

⁶⁵Luke in this section uses the word "fire" (Greek *pur*) three times (verses 2, 3, and 5).

⁶⁶Foster, Notes on Acts, *New International Version Study Bible*, 1881, indicates, "It was the end of October or the beginning of November."

⁶⁷Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 322, says that "tentmaker" (Greek *skenoipoios*; 18.3) means "maker of stage properties, the linguistically probable rendering . . . but the traditional preference is tentmaker."



Figure 5. The Viper and Paul on Malta. Copyright Unknown.

Luke compels us to the action here in a dramatic way. He could have said, “The viper bit Paul.” But colorfully he indicates the response of the viper to the heat of the fire and the “angry” and “deliberate” attack of the viper on Paul—it “fastened on his hand.”⁶⁸ Luke does this, I feel, to lead us to the shock and amazement of the natives who witness a poisonous viper “hanging from [Paul’s] hand” (verse 4).⁶⁹ But from Paul, there is no startled reaction! Luke records no surprise from the apostle, no jerking back, no scream or yell . . . nothing . . . except the tranquil, “He,

⁶⁸The word for “viper” (Greek *echidna*; see Matthew 3.7; 12.34; 23.33; and Luke 3.7) has an uncertain etymology and can refer to a venomous or poisonous type of snake. It is called “the creature” (Greek *to therion*) in verses 4 and 5, a general word for a beast or a wild animal. The word for “fasten” (Greek *kathapto*; only here in the New Testament) means “take a firm hold” onto something. Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 158, 170, 181. Note Taylor, *Paul: The Missionary*, 466, who states, “True, it is not said in so many words that he was bitten, and that he was kept from death by the special agency of God, but all that is implied in the condensed narrative of the historian.”

⁶⁹The viper apparently held on for some time thus creating the sensation of an attack for a reason (i.e., not an accident or a mistake). Luke’s other uses of the Greek word *kremannumi* (“hang up” in the transitive, or “hang on” as here in the intransitive middle) refer to crucifixion (see 5.30; 10.39; and Luke 23.39; cf. Galatians 3.13 where Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21.23!). Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 207. Is Luke hinting at symbolic connections between the snake (i.e., the Accuser), the firewood (i.e., the tree or the cross), the hanging (i.e., the crucifixion of Christ), the watching and waiting (i.e., of unbelievers who change their minds), and God’s protection and salvation of Paul the prisoner (i.e., the sinner/murderer)?

however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm” (verse 5).⁷⁰ Luke either omits any detail of Paul’s emotive response as unnecessary to his purpose, or he portrays Paul as one whose emotions and responses to life-threatening crises are God-controlled and God-maintained.

But Luke does tell us the reaction of the inhabitants of Malta to Paul’s encounter with the viper. Plainly put, “they said to one another, ‘No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live’” (verse 4).⁷¹ Presumably, translation from their native dialect to Greek or Latin took place for Luke to be able to know what they were saying. And the gist of their response was not so much superstition or misguided religious beliefs but their strict connection of “justice” to what they had seen happen to Paul. He must be a murderer (Greek *phoneus*; cf. 3.14; 7.52; 9.1). He luckily was able to escape (Greek *diasodzo*; cf. verse 1) the sea, but he was not so lucky to escape the justice of the viper bite. The serpent, as the agent of judgment against the murderer, “has not allowed him to live.”⁷² But, to their surprise, after Paul “shook off the creature into the fire,” nothing unusual happened to him.⁷³ He “suffered no harm” (verse 5).⁷⁴

⁷⁰Compare Luke’s narrative about the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (Luke 4.16-30). When the Lord was threatened with physical harm and possible death by the people of his hometown (verse 29), Luke simply says that he passed “through their midst” and “went away” (verse 30).

⁷¹It seemed better to depart from the ESV rendering of “Justice” (Greek *he dike*; only here in Acts) and use the small letter, “justice,” in order to be consistent with “sea” (Greek *tes thalasses*; cf. 4.24; 7.36; 10.6, 32; 14.15; 17.14; 27.30, 38, 40) which also could be personified and capitalized given the aversion of ancients to, and their fear of or respect for, the sea.

⁷²Literally, “justice to live did not allow” (Greek *he dike dzen ouk eiasen*). On “allow” (Greek *eao*), Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 105, indicates that the etymology is uncertain, but “the basic idea is removal of real or perceived impediment to a desired action . . . let something happen [or] take place . . . permit, allow.” Compare 14.16; 16.7; 19.30; 23.32; 27.32, 40.

⁷³The normal did not occur; this to the Maltese was abnormal, or it went beyond normal. For “shook off” (Greek *apotinasso*), see also Luke 9.5.

⁷⁴The Greek is *epathen ouden kakon*. For “suffer” or “endure” (Greek *pascho*), see 1.3; 3.18; 9.16 (!); and 17.3.

So they waited and waited, and they watched Paul. They believed the poison eventually would take effect. Something bad would happen, either Paul's hand and arm would "swell up"⁷⁵ or he would "suddenly fall down dead" (verse 6).⁷⁶ But after watching and waiting "a long time,"⁷⁷ they realized that "no misfortune"⁷⁸ had befallen God's apostle. As a result, they "changed their minds"⁷⁹ and no longer believed that he was a murderer. They concluded instead "that he was a god."⁸⁰ Once again, the issue with the natives on the island was not necessarily any problem with their belief-system or due to any superstition. At its basic level, the thinking of the Maltese runs like a thread through the human family.⁸¹ When something very bad happens to

⁷⁵Of "swell up" (Greek *pimpremi*; only here in the New Testament), Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 284, notes that "a case can also here be made for 'burn with fever', but the more striking malady appears to be meant in view of the context suggestive of divine vengeance."

⁷⁶On "fall down" (Greek *katapipto*), see 26.14; and Luke 8.6. For "suddenly" (Greek *aphno*), see 2.2; 16.26. For Luke's use of "dead" (Greek *nekros*), see 3.15; 4.2, 10; 5.10; 10.41, 42; 13.30, 34; 17.3, 31, 32; 20.9; 23.6; 24.21; 26.8, 23.

⁷⁷How long? Luke does not say. The verb "wait" or "expect" (Greek *prosdokao*) could mean "be in suspense" (cf. 3.5; 10.24; 27.33). Luke uses the verb twice in verse 6 to describe the anticipation of the natives for something bad to happen to Paul.

⁷⁸Literally, "nothing out of place" (Greek *meden atopon*), therefore, nothing out of the ordinary or "unusual, surprising . . . deviant, wrong." Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 61. See 25.5; and Luke 23.41. Packer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 216, adds, "Luke thus believed that Jesus' words had proved true: 'I have given you the power to tread underfoot snakes and scorpions . . . and nothing will ever harm you' (Luke 10.19)."

⁷⁹The Greek *metaballo* (used only here in the New Testament) means "to make a turn about, change . . . metaphorically [to] change one's mind." Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 229.

⁸⁰The Greek is *elegon auton einai theon*. Compare 3.12; 5.13; 6.15; 10.25; 12.15; 14.11ff.; 16.29; contrast 12.22. The *NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, 1803, suggests that "there is some irony in the islanders' reappraisal of Paul—from murderer destined for death to god!" Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 345, 346, says, "The episode on Malta is a cameo and summary of the long drawn out crisis confronting Paul. . . . Quite exceptionally, Luke allows Paul to be reckoned a god and he makes no attempt to qualify or correct the opinion. We cannot conclude from this that Luke wanted Paul to be thought of in these terms, abandoning his earlier consistent strategy and emphasis. Rather he lets the judgment stand, precisely as the reversal of the earlier verdict of Paul's guilt (28.6). Paul's godlikeness here is rather the measure of his innocence and of his stature as the spokesman for the one true God." See as well the comments by Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 492-493.

⁸¹See Barnes, *Scenes and Incidents in the Life of the Apostle Paul*, 415ff.

someone, then that person must have done something bad. But when something very good happens to someone, then that person must be very, very good. It is an issue about strict justice, or you get what you deserve in life. And that seems to be Luke's point in his narrative about God's providential care of Paul on his way to Rome.

Luke provides the reader no real conclusion for this brief section. It is an "open" plot, unless the next story about the healing of the father of Publius and others on the island is meant to supply more information. Is this Luke's way of hinting at an "open door" for the message of the kingdom of God, or just another indication of God's protection of Paul to get him to Rome for his mission there? As suggested above, it is not a message about snakes, nor is it about the beliefs and misunderstandings of the native people on Malta. Rather, Luke cleverly draws us in to the message about the goodwill, or grace, of the God who did not and would not deliver up his servant Paul to strict justice. That is the subtle irony of Luke's narrative here. Paul was a murderer! And because of that, he did not deserve to live.⁸² Justice, in the understanding of the Maltese, would not permit him to live. But unlike Justice, and the Sea, that normally would have devoured the murderer, the Lord Jesus Christ spared such an one and designated him an apostle and sent him to the nations (i.e., the Gentiles).

The Voyage to Rome: The Sicknesses

During their "three months" on Malta (28.11), Paul and some of the other shipwrecked voyagers had the opportunity to meet with the "chief" (Greek *protos*; cf. 13.50; 17.4; 25.2; 28.17) of the island, a man named Publius who owned lands in the vicinity of where the ship had landed

⁸²See 9.1; 22.4-5, 19-20; 26.10-11; compare 1 Timothy 1.12-17. See also McConnell, "The Maltese Viper: Acts 28.1-10," [online], who sees divine irony at work not only in the "justice" meted out to the murderer Paul but also in the placename of the shipwreck (i.e., Malta that possibly means "place of refuge"; cf. Greek *Melite*), the "barbarian kindness" of the natives, and the harmed/healed hand of Paul becoming a healing hand to the Maltese.

(verse 7).⁸³ They stayed with Chief Publius for “three days,” and he welcomed them and treated them with great courtesy.⁸⁴ While there, Paul was told about the father of the Chief who suffered from “fever and dysentery” (verse 8).⁸⁵ These were typical ailments that easily could afflict islanders during the cold and damp winter season.⁸⁶ Luke says that “Paul visited him and prayed, and [by] putting his hands on him healed him.” The verb for “visit” (Greek *eiserchomai*) literally means “to go into” or “to enter into” (i.e., the presence of the sick father) and suggests, in the context here, a divine visitation of the sick man in the person of Paul as the Lord’s representative. As one who totally was dependent on the Lord for his own personal care and well-being, and, by extension here, the health and well-being of others, Paul appropriately

⁸³Luke begins verse 7 with a circumlocution, literally “now in the [places] around that place” (Greek *en de tois peri ton topon ekeinon*). For his use of a generic “place” in connection with healings (i.e., summary statements), see Luke 4.37; 6.17; 9.12. On the “lands” (Greek *chorion*), compare 1.18, 19; 4.34; 5.3, 8. Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 386, notes that the word is a diminutive of *chora* meaning “a relatively small area of land . . . piece of land, plot.”

⁸⁴On “receive” or “welcome” with the active meaning “to extend hospitality” (Greek *anadechomai*), compare the only other instance in the New Testament at Hebrews 11.17. For “entertained us hospitably” (Greek *philophronos exenisen*), see 10.6, 18, 23, 32; 21.16. Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 374, says concerning *philophronos* (only here in the New Testament), that it means “in an attentive manner, of a host who was generously hospitable.”

⁸⁵Literally, “with fevers and dysentery suffering to be lying down” (Greek *puretois kai dusenterio sunechomenon katakeisthai*). On “fever” (Greek *puretos*), see Matthew 8.15; Mark 1.31; Luke 4.38, 39; and John 4.52. “Dysentery” or “intestinal disorder” (Greek *dusenterion*) is used only here in the New Testament. On Luke’s use of medical terminology, here and in his account of the viper biting Paul, see Unger, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, 311.

⁸⁶The Greek word for “suffer” (*sunecho*) denotes to restrict, to constrain, or to grip, so in reference to the human body it can mean “to afflict.” Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 340. See too Luke 4.38, but compare Luke 8.37, 45; 12.50; 19.43; 22.63; and Acts 7.57; 18.5.

offered up prayer to God. Luke notes very simply, “he prayed” (Greek *proseuchomai*).⁸⁷ Then Paul placed “his hands on him” and “healed him.”⁸⁸

This sparked a general response from “the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also,” and they came to Paul and “were cured” (verse 9).⁸⁹ In a remarkable way, God had protected and cared for Paul and his fellow voyagers through the storm, through the shipwreck, and through the perils on the island with the help of the Maltese. And now the natives, as a result of their kindnesses, received in return many blessings from the Lord through the apostle Paul. To thank Paul and his companions, the Maltese “honored [them] greatly,”⁹⁰ and when the time came for the voyagers once again to sail toward Rome, the people on the island provided them with necessary supplies for their trip (verse 10).

But Luke, as with the narrative about the viper bite, does not provide for us any tidy conclusion for Paul’s brief stay on Malta, except for the summary about many healings and the

⁸⁷On Luke’s sparse use of “pray” with healings, see 9.40; and perhaps Luke 5.16; 6.12.

⁸⁸For the use of “place on” or “lay on” (Greek *epitithemi*) with “hands” (Greek *cheiros*), see 6.6; 8.17, 19; 9.12, 17; 13.3; 19.6; compare Matthew 9.18; 19.13, 15; Mark 5.23; 6.5; 7.32; 8.23, 25; 16.18; Luke 4.40; 13.13; and 1 Timothy 5.22. For Luke’s use of “heal” (Greek *iaomai*), see 9.34; 10.38; 28.27; Luke 5.17; 6.18, 19; 7.7; 8.47; 9.2, 11, 42; 14.4; 17.15; 22.51.

⁸⁹The word for “disease” (Greek *astheneia*; only here in Acts, but see Luke 5.15; 8.2; 13.11, 12; cf. the verb *astheneo* in Luke 4.40; 9.2; Acts 9.37; 19.12; 20.35) specifies any “condition of debilitating illness, sickness, disease, disability.” The verb for “cure” (Greek *therapeuo*) means, in its basic sense, “offer helpful service” (see 17.25) and, in a specific sense, “heal” (see 4.14; 5.16; and 8.7). Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 57, 169. For other healings and miracles by the apostle Paul, see 14.8ff.; 16.16ff.; 19.11ff.; 20.9ff. For Luke’s summaries of healings, see 4.29-30; 5.12-16; 8.4-8; 10.38; Luke 4.36-37, 40-41; 5.15-16; 6.17-19; 7.21; 8.1-3; 9.1-2, 6, 10-11; 10.9; 13.32. For an overview of disease and healing in the New Testament, see Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity*, 45-48, 65-68.

⁹⁰Luke concludes this section (the beginning of verse 10) with another circumlocution, literally, “who also with many honors they honored us” (Greek *hoi kai pollais timais etimesan hemas*). Luke seems to use *time* (“honor, esteem, regard”) and *timaos* (“to have special regard for”) in other places in a commercial sense (4.34; 5.2, 3; 7.16; 19.19; cf. Luke 18.20). Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 353, defines the word here as “by metonymy, of a specific mark of esteem, honor.” But Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 370, states, “No doubt these [‘many honors’] included gifts of money and such things as would be needed by travellers who had lost everything in the shipwreck.” Compare Unger, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, 311, who suggests the phrase “may refer to an honorarium or physician’s fee.”

reciprocal kindnesses of the islanders.⁹¹ At this point, one might think that Luke assumes his reader (see 1.1; cf. Luke 1.3) understands the connection between the healing of diseases and the breaking in of the kingdom of God (e.g., Luke 10.9). And interestingly, Luke does not mention, as he does elsewhere in connection with “signs and wonders” by the apostles, any proclamation of the kingdom of God by Paul to the Maltese. Did Paul share the good news about Jesus with those he had ministered to by prayer and the laying on of hands? We might assume such, but Luke does not say that he did. Luke instead anxiously pushes his narrative to its finale with the apostle and his Roman entourage making their way to the Imperial City (verses 11-16).

The Voyage to Rome: Conclusion

In order to get God’s apostle to Rome for his less than encouraging meetings with “the local leaders of the Jews” and his delay of at least “two whole years” in presenting his case before Caesar (28.17-28; verse 30), Luke quickly draws to a close the sea voyage from Caesarea Maritima to Rome (verses 11-16). With winter now over, sailors and soldiers along with the prisoners boarded an Alexandrian vessel that proudly displayed above its name “a figurehead” of

⁹¹Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 9, 564, 565, summarizes, “Luke seems to have included it [i.e., this section] to illustrate the continuing power of Paul’s ministry despite his being in Malta as a prisoner destined for a hearing before Caesar. No matter what the circumstances are, the true servant of Christ is, like Paul, never off duty for his Lord. . . . Paul was no god, as they had soon learned. But he was a messenger of the one true God, with good news of life and wholeness in Jesus Christ. In carrying out his God-given commission, Paul gave of himself unstintingly on behalf of people. That they appreciated his ministry is evidenced by their giving him and his colleagues supplies for the rest of their journey. . . . For what Luke tells us it seems that Paul may have looked on his stay in Malta as a high point in his ministry—a time of blessing when God worked in marvelous ways, despite the shipwreck and his being still a prisoner. God seems, through the experiences at Malta, to have been refreshing Paul’s spirit after the two relatively bleak years at Caesarea and the disastrous time at sea and preparing him for his witness at Rome.”

Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 346, notes that this section (28.7-10) “functions as a corollary to the verdict just given [i.e., in verse 6]. Paul is received as a celebrated figure; nothing is said of Paul as prisoner or in custody—these details are now irrelevant; the miracles confirm Paul’s standing as a medium of healing power (divinely authorized and attested); the locals continue to be truer representatives of heaven’s judgment on Paul. . . . Nor, somewhat surprisingly, is anything said about Paul preaching to the people. Rather, the whole episode has a celebratory character—celebration in effect as the vindication of Paul.”

Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Zeus and Leda, who were revered by mariners.⁹² The ship left Malta, made its way to Syracuse on the eastern side of Sicily where it stayed “for three days,” then “made a circuit”⁹³ up to Rhegium at the tip of the Italian peninsula. After only a day at Rhegium, they caught a favorable “south wind”⁹⁴ and sailed northward the following day to the port of Puteoli, the main shipping hub for the Imperial City and about 150 miles to its south on the north side of the Bay of Naples.⁹⁵

At Puteoli, they became aware of other “brothers” or Christians in the city,⁹⁶ and there they enjoyed the hospitality of fellow believers for a week. During that time, word got to Rome that Paul and his companions had arrived in Italy and were coming. So some of the disciples in Rome decided to make their way southward thirty-three miles to Three Taverns, and others travelled out forty-three miles as far as the Forum of Appius to greet Paul along the way. Luke tells us that when Paul saw them, he “thanked God and took courage.”⁹⁷ It was in this company

⁹²See Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 98. Zerwick and Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 454, indicate the “figurehead” (Greek *parasemos*) could be a carving or a painting with the name of the ship below.

⁹³The Greek phrase is *hothen perielontes*, literally, “from which having gone around.” Danker, *Concise NT Lexicon*, 279, suggests it means “work a way around, sail around, apparently in a tacking maneuver.”

⁹⁴The Greek *notos*, used here by Luke (cf. 27.13; Luke 12.55), can mean “south” or “southwest” when referring to the wind.

⁹⁵The winds proved to be favorable for a steady, and uneventful (i.e., without any serious incident), last leg of their journey. It seems to be implied by Luke, but not so stated, that these following winds were God-directed and God-provided. For a brief history of the ports, see the articles on Puteoli, Rhegium, and Syracuse by J. Finegan, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 3, 971-972, Volume 4, 75, 495-496.

⁹⁶The word for “brothers” is the Greek *adelphos* and is used frequently by Luke and other New Testament writers (e.g., 28.14, 15, 17, 21).

⁹⁷Literally, “whom having seen Paul having given thanks to God he took courage” (Greek *hous idon ho Paulos eucharistesas to theo elaben tharsos*).

and association of other believers in Jesus, first at Puteoli and then along the Appian Way, that Paul and his companions “came to Rome.”

So Luke describes the concluding segment of the trip without incident, except for his mention of the favorable winds and the excellent reception of Paul by many believers in Italy. And he punctuates their arrival at Rome with an air of finality, “. . . and so we came to Rome.”⁹⁸ But he brackets the heartening outreach of the Roman brothers to Paul, in verse 15, with a double reference about their coming.⁹⁹ This seems to be Luke’s way of emphasizing the fact that, from his viewpoint, Paul came into the Imperial City, not as a notorious prisoner nor as a beleaguered traveller, but as a welcomed Christian brother.¹⁰⁰ The Lord—as he had promised and as Paul had believed—protected and brought his apostle, albeit a prisoner of the Romans,¹⁰¹ to the chief city of the Empire for his appointed work there.

⁹⁸The Greek reads *kai houtos eis ten Romen elthamen*, verse 14b; compare verse 16a, “and when we came into Rome . . .” (Greek *hote de eis elthomen eis Romem*).

⁹⁹Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 9, 567, suggests, “The best explanation for the appearance of ‘and so we came to Rome’ in verse 14 is that it reflects Luke’s eagerness to get to the climax of his story and that this eagerness led him to anticipate their arrival at Rome—even though he had to go back in verse 15 and include another detail of the last stage of the journey before finally bringing Paul and his colleagues to Rome (vv. 16ff.). So the solution lies along psychological rather than linguistic or administrative lines.”

¹⁰⁰Wansbrough, “Acts of the Apostles,” *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 1102, remarks, “The final stages of the journey become, indeed, almost a triumphal progress towards the goal. The guards quite disappear until 16b. [And in verses] 11-16, Malta to Rome, the journey continues as though Paul were a free man.” Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 349, highlights, “The most striking feature of the final phase of Paul’s journey to Rome and of his first act in Rome itself is the interplay on the theme of brotherhood. On the one hand, the Christian ‘brothers’ who support and meet him on the way to Rome (28.14-15); and on the other, the Jewish ‘brothers’ who meet with him in Rome itself (28.17, 21). This indication of an overlapping spectrum of brotherhood is by no means new in Acts (see on 1.15), but it is particularly noticeable here. Luke may even see significance in the name under whose patronage Paul’s ship sailed—‘the Twins’ (twin sons of Zeus) (28.11)—perhaps suggesting that the Christian and Jewish brothers Paul was soon to encounter were likewise twin siblings of the one God, brothers of Paul and so of one another.”

¹⁰¹To downplay Paul’s situation as a prisoner, Luke stresses the liberties that were given to the apostle while he was in custody at Rome (28.16, 23, 30). Paul, as a result, was able to accomplish his work “with all boldness and without hindrance” (verse 31).

Luke's Travel Narrative As A Kingdom Theodicy

The role of “theodicy” proper, in its classical construct by “the last of the great seventeenth-century metaphysicians . . . Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,” concerns “the problem of vindicating God’s supreme justice, which he exercises in choosing the best world for creation from among an infinity of possible worlds” and doing so in light of the world’s evils (i.e., moral, physical).¹⁰² Theodicy, as the term implies, seeks to justify the ways of God and to resolve the tensions that exist when one believes in a God who created a universe full of suffering yet he is all-powerful or omnipotent and all-loving or omnibenevolent. As J. I. Packer explains,

Theodicy asks how we can believe that God is both good and sovereign in face of the world’s evil—bad people; bad deeds, defying God and injuring people; harmful (bad) circumstances, events, experiences and states of mind, which waste, thwart, or destroy value, actual or potential, in and for humankind; in short, all facts, physical and moral, that prompt the feeling, ‘This ought not to be’.¹⁰³

In reality, though, theodicy as a biblical concept, rather than a philosophical or a theological one, has a multisided nature.

In his book, *A Philosophy of Evil*, Lars Svendsen, a professor of philosophy at the University of Bergen, Norway, introduces the classical way of thinking about the justice of God in his chapter entitled “The Theology of Evil.” He outlines four “types” of theodicy which he labels: (1) privation theodicy (from the neoplatonist Plotinus); (2) free will theodicy (from Plato); (3) Irenaean theodicy (from the church father Irenaeus); and (4) the totality theodicy (from Augustine). Svendsen, however, moves away from the classical construct to engage thinkers

¹⁰²Rutherford, “Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,” *Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, 396, 399; for discussion of Leibniz in the modern context, see Neiman, “God’s Advocates: Leibniz and Pope,” *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, 18-36; and compare Gottlieb’s Chapter 6, “The Best of All Possible Compromises: Leibniz,” *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, 163ff.

¹⁰³Packer, “Theodicy,” *New Dictionary of Theology*, 679; compare Phillips, “Part I, Our Problematic Inheritance,” *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, 3ff.

such as Schelling, Hegel, Mandeville, Voltaire, Kant, and others in a section he calls “History As Secular Theodicy.” Because of the secularization of our modern world, we have “replaced God with History.” But the “belief in progress” that is assumed in Western thought must be revised again and again depending on what has happened in our world. So we struggle with trying to justify the rationale of our existence according to a continuum of successive events (i.e., history) and make some sense of it for “progress” or otherwise. This, though, as he rightly states, “makes the world man’s responsibility. We exist in this world and we’re obligated to it. The problem of evil is *our* problem.”¹⁰⁴

To finish his section about the theology of evil, Svendsen takes us to the insight of Job which he highlights as “Beyond Theodicy.” Unfortunately, Svendsen concedes the classical, much less the biblical, notion of God’s holiness and righteousness, when he argues that Job finds wisdom in one “simple insight: God, and therefore the world, is unjust.” While this preserves evil as evil, it does take us beyond theodicy in the sense of losing God as God. Suffering, Svendsen says, “loses its ‘why’ . . . [and] can no longer be justified with reference to something higher.” As a consequence, he concludes,

Instead of a rational world justly shepherded by an almighty, good God, we have a world shepherded by chance. We aren’t rewarded according to our just deserts, but rather by luck—be it good or bad. And there’s no moral message to be read in other people’s luck, be it good or bad. In a theocentric world, it was possible to trust in life’s inherent justice, in the fact that every soul would receive its just reward. Today, it’s the world’s inherent *unjustness* that greets us every day. Once again it’s up to us to intervene and do something about it.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Evil*, 39ff.

¹⁰⁵Ibid. Contrast Parker, “Providence,” *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, 427, who notes the connections of God’s providence to the work of Christ and says, “The doctrine of providence tells us that the world and our lives are not ruled by chance or by fate but by God, who lays bare his purposes of providence in the incarnation of his Son.”

But Svendsen misses the radical confidence that Job has in God (see Job 19.25-27), a wisdom that sustains the patriarch and helps him to cope with the unjustness of his situation. It is clear from the passage above that “Job expresses hope in a future vindication, even though he feels that God has been his enemy. This gives Job a new confidence, something that he realizes fully at the end of the book.”¹⁰⁶ But Svendsen is correct, I think, in asserting that Job takes us “beyond theodicy,” because the line of reasoning according to strict justice does not and will not work.¹⁰⁷

Beyond theodicy pushes us to look at the problem from a more radical perspective than from the mundane perspective of our own human predicament.¹⁰⁸ A biblical view beyond theodicy does affirm the goodness of God in his world. After all, he created it and made it “very good.” He cares for his world and his creatures, both human and nonhuman, in a real and beneficial way. This is his providence, his protective care, his maintenance of what he has brought about and wills to sustain.¹⁰⁹ But it is in the nature and the nurture (i.e., his maintenance) of the Almighty to rescue or save the world that includes evil and suffering. And whether or why God has permitted or even, in some measure, orchestrated this situation of evil and suffering in the world may be too difficult for human knowledge.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶Fletcher, “The Perseverance of Job the Patriarch,” <www.davidwfletcher.com/religion-files.php>.

¹⁰⁷Compare the emphasis of Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, 130-138, on the transition of Job from strict justice or “a quid pro quo calculus of deeds and consequences” as the basis for his wealth (i.e., “the logic of merit”) to “the surprise of gift” or the surpassing generosity of God as the basis for his restored situation.

¹⁰⁸Phillips, “Part II, Our Neglected Inheritance,” *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, 147ff.

¹⁰⁹Rolston, “The Providence of God,” *The “We Knows” of the Apostle Paul*, 71-76.

¹¹⁰In my judgment, God’s creation of free will, that is truly free, in his creatures helps to solve the mystery of evil and suffering in the world, since it is difficult to underestimate humans and their creative force for good or their destructive power for evil.

But this much we do know—evil and suffering exist. And they exist, according to the Bible, because the rule of God was cast aside. The story of the Bible rings true, whether we fully understand it or not.¹¹¹ God, also according to the Bible, wills to reorder his “old creation” by effecting a “new creation” that he graciously has given to us through his Christ.¹¹² Through the work and sacrifice of his son Jesus, God has reestablished his rule, his kingdom, both in heaven and on earth.¹¹³ And this work of his Anointed One included a definitive response to the situation of evil and suffering.¹¹⁴ The God who made all things and sustains all things suffers with us and for us in the person of Jesus. This is the Christian gospel or good news. It involves a radical, Christological solution to the questions raised about God’s justice in the world. And since the Anointed One endured the curse of crucifixion¹¹⁵ but was vindicated by his resurrection, it is an extraordinary, Messianic resolution to the old, gnawing circumstance of suffering and evil. It is, in a real way, a kingdom theodicy, one for which Paul was willing to suffer and lay down his own life if necessary.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹See “The Mysterious Cause of Evil” in Schwarz, *Evil: A Historical and Theological Perspective*, 50-59.

¹¹²“The New Creation” and “The Life in Christ,” Knox, *Chapters in A Life of Paul*, 128ff., 141ff.

¹¹³But the world, in a dynamic way, remains a “battlefield” between good and evil. See, for instance, Morris and Petcher, “Chapter Ten: The Kingdom of Christ and the Culture of Science,” *Science and Grace: God’s Reign in the Natural Sciences*, 279ff.

¹¹⁴Schwarz, “Jesus’ Struggle against Evil,” *Evil: A Historical and Theological Perspective*, 68ff.

¹¹⁵Carson, “The Ironies of the Cross,” *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus*, 13-37; and Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, 1ff.

¹¹⁶Compare “Paul’s Gospel of Redemptive Suffering” and “Paul’s Response to Tragic Suffering,” Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament*, 57-79.

As Luke describes it, this is Paul's predicament under the constraint of a kingdom theodicy. He was compelled to go to Jerusalem one more time, at the risk of losing his very life for the sake of the gospel. But he was willing to take that risk in order to reconcile Gentiles and Jews in Christ Jesus.¹¹⁷ And he wanted more than anything else to visit the Christians at Rome and advance the work among the Gentiles from the heart of the Empire (Romans 1.8ff.; 15.32ff.). But, as Luke aptly tells us, there were many obstacles, including suffering and evil, in Paul's way. God, however, in his providential care of Paul, overcame them all. After a dangerous but successful return to Jerusalem, Paul is carried along day after day, place by place, through many incredible circumstances until, in the custody of the soldiers of the Empire, he arrives safely in Rome. There he awaits trial before the Emperor himself. But while he waits, he does the work that God has called him to do—teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ and proclaiming the kingdom of God. A kingdom theodicy, the right ways of God according to his reign through Christ Jesus, sustained Paul in a remarkable way on his voyage from Caesarea to Rome. In a similar way, the

¹¹⁷Paul wanted personally to bring to Jerusalem “the collection for the saints” from the Gentile churches (see 1 Corinthians 16.1-2; Romans 15.25-28; cf. 2 Corinthians 8.3ff.; 9:1ff.). This monetary contribution served both as a charitable outreach from Gentile Christians to needy Jewish Christians and as an important symbol toward unity of all those who confessed the name of Jesus as Lord. Compare the relief fund from the Antiochene Christians to the Judeans (Acts 11.27-30).

reign of God in our lives and the rightness of his actions on our behalf will get us through the storms and the shipwrecks and will protect us from the snakes and the sicknesses.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸To many moderns, the shift from God's care for and work in the life of Paul to God's care for and work in our lives may not be apparent. To be sure, the "jump" from the classical world to the modern world remains a delicate but important one for interpreters of the Bible. The basic solution, however, lies in the nature of God who transcends time and who cares for his people now just as he has throughout history. Gutzke in his *Plain Talk on Acts*, 211, explains it like this: "Can a person who believes in God and trusts Him for salvation expect that God will lay His hand on him in everyday affairs? Can a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ expect that God will watch over him day by day? These questions we will find answered as we study the last two chapters of Acts." Compare McConnell, "The Maltese Viper: Acts 28.1-10," [online], who asks, "So, what is Luke trying to teach us in this passage today? God's plan for our lives is filled with many unexpected twists and turns! Just like Paul, our lives are filled with divine irony . . . [that] seems so mysterious and uncertain. . . . [But] every once in a while God gives us a little glimpse of this divine irony [to] remind us of who is really in control."

For helpful comments about biblical hermeneutics and modern applications, see Bartholomew, Chapter 3, "The Story of Our World," *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture*, 51ff; Keener, Chapter 1, "Reading Experientially," *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost*, 21ff.; Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, Chapter 11, "Application," *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 401ff.; and Mickelsen, Chapter XVII, "Devotion and Conduct," *Interpreting the Bible*, 356ff. See too Cox, *How to Read the Bible*, 10-16, 215ff.

For a thematic interpretation of the modern relevance of the biblical narrative based on the idea of mission, see Wright, Part III, "The People of Mission," *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, 189ff. For the role of the Holy Spirit as testimony or witness to the character and nature of God, see Ramm, Chapter IV, "The Theological Implications of the *Testimonium*," *The Witness of the Spirit: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit*, 62ff. For general comments on scripture's testimony about the relevance of scripture, see Guthrie, Chapter 10, "Scripture," *New Testament Theology*, 953ff.; and Knudsen, Chapter 1, "Revelation and Inspiration," *Theology in the New Testament: A Basis for Christian Faith*, 15ff.

Kingdom Theodicy Implications

- God works through his people, his servants as a leavening effect in the world. God saved 276 persons for the sake of Paul.
- God works through earthly (i.e., of this world) authorities and powers to protect his servants and to further his rule (i.e., his kingdom, not of this world) on the earth.
- God controls the weather to accomplish his purposes. Luke does not explicitly say this, but it is implied strongly.
- God communicates his will and what he will do by his angels, his messengers.
- God does not rule out or overrule human initiative in his care (i.e., his protection, his salvation) for us.
- God desires and looks for obedience to his ways and obedience to the words of his messengers.
- God preserves us or saves us by the breaking of bread—his gift of life—and by communion with his messengers and with one another.
- God works his good will to his people, his servants through strangers who are nonbelievers.
- God cares for us in spite of the fact that he is a Just God, and we deserve to die.
- God desires for his kingdom to break through into our condition of suffering and to heal us of our infirmities.
- God cares for us and will bring us to our appointed destinations to give him thanks and to further his rule on earth.

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