

# PAUL'S VOYAGE AND SHIPWRECK

by ROBERT W. ORR

**M**R. ORR, Christian missionary in Pakistan, suggests how the voyage and shipwreck narrative of Acts 27 : 1—28 : 18 makes its own contribution to Luke's overall purpose in writing to the most excellent Theophilus.

**E**VEN at the lowest possible view of Luke's great *History of Christian Beginnings*—that is, a literary work of superb design and execution—one would expect the last pages of the book to be reserved for some particularly important matter. Instead one finds them devoted to such an apparently trivial subject as the journey to Rome.

The fact that the story of the voyage is highly valued for the light which it sheds upon ancient navigation scarcely satisfies us. Nor will it satisfy the expository preacher, who may be somewhat daunted by the question of what use he is to make of this considerable piece of narrative. Is it in some sense an allegory of the history of salvation which Luke is just about to complete, or a kind of nautical *Pilgrim's Progress* to round off Theophilus's religious instruction?

In the course of thirty years I have heard some half-dozen sermons on this passage, one of them being memorable for the untiring zeal of our interpreter in inspecting each forbidding headland and seductive beach of the voyage of life, beginning from the leisure among one's friends and "kindly treats" (*sic*) of childhood, and beating through the contrary days of youth in search of a comfortable and commodious haven. Any lesser preacher would have sent us home with his benediction a full half hour before our guide was through with labouring exceedingly with the storm, had run under the lee of each small island, and with sighs of relief we were at last making straight for the heavenly shore, to escape safely out of our disintegrating maritime tabernacle.

Here in Pakistan we are occasionally admonished to save ourselves from spiritual shipwreck by casting four anchors out of the stern. The best that can be said for this method of navigation is that it is conservative, but there is the additional advantage common to allegories, that the four cardinal safeguards can be anything one chooses, from tithing to teetotalism. But the question remaining before us is, What did Luke mean to accomplish by this story of the journey?

It seems to me that Luke uses the narrative of the journey very

skilfully to suggest to any highly-placed reader in Rome that it would be both magnanimous and wise of the Emperor to treat his prisoner well. From this point of view, the centre of the story is in verses 23 and 24, recounting the night vision which shows that this Paul is a servant of Almighty God, and under His special protection. His appearing before Caesar is a divinely ordained event, and so the Emperor should be careful how he treats this prophet-in-chains. Moreover, the Empire was in debt to Paul for the lives of 276 of her subjects, including a ship-owner, a sea captain and a centurion, after all hope had been abandoned. Indeed, if Paul's advice had been heeded, not only the lives but the ship with its freight would have been saved.

Courteous treatment is recognized, and the name of the doer is recorded. The second hero of the story is known to history: Julius of the Augustan cohort, who so considerably allowed Paul free communication with his friends—a good pattern for the authorities in Rome. The senior citizen of Malta, Publius, is similarly honoured for his kindness, and even the friendliness of the local Maltese is recorded. God rewarded those who treated His servant well, and not only was Publius's father cured of his dysentery, but many Maltese also were healed.

The grim counsel "Kill the prisoners"—just of course the kind of sentence which concluded many of the Emperor's court sessions—is attributed to "the soldiers", the coarse men of the ranks; but it was the honourable and courteous centurion who forbade the slaughter. Here is a prisoner whom Justice will not allow to perish.

More precariously, it might be suggested that Luke saw an allegory here. Paul's gospel ministry would not only save souls; even the Roman ship of state might be preserved by disregarding the advice of the leaders and of "the more part", and by hearkening rather to Paul. The ship would break up only if the prisoner's words were too long neglected. The cargo of African wheat, more necessary than anything else to keep Caesar on his throne, was lost by not listening to the Christian preacher. Paul had shown anxiety that the sailors should remain in the ship; they might, indeed, save their own lives by escape, but others could be saved only by their remaining at their post of duty.

Luke was too skilful a writer to strip his story of all but the details which he intended to be meaningful. In this vigorous and colourful narrative, the writer pays the discerning reader the delicate compliment of crediting him with being able to interpret the analogy without a key.

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