

“All Flesh Shall See the Salvation of the Lord”: The Function of Paul’s Shipwreck Account in Acts 27-28; A Proposal

Introduction

The account of Paul’s shipwreck and his three-month stay in Malta within the “We-sections” in Acts of the Apostles certainly serves a narrative role that captivates the reader. It is the most detailed event, comparable to the accounts of the Passion of Jesus (Lk 22-23), or to the pericope of Peter and Cornelius in Acts of the Apostles (Acts 10-11). The aim of this study is to suggest a new perspective on the function of this account within the whole Lucan two-fold work and especially regarding Luke’s constant focus on the universal character of salvation.

The Literary Account

Whenever we read the account of Paul’s shipwreck in Malta, we are struck by the number of words and the amount of literary space that Luke (author of the Gospel and Acts) employed to narrate Paul’s detour to Malta on his way to Rome,

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where of his own accord he had asked to be taken to be judged by the Roman emperor himself. Some scholars would opine that Luke, as was the custom in those times, has used an already existent sea-voyage diary account as a structure for his story. Maybe; but Luke has given us other very important accounts in summary form: the major summaries of the Communities of the Origin in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35; 5:12-16. He used one-verse minor summaries in Acts 1:14; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31, and numerical summaries in Acts 2:42; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 14:1; 19:20. Summary statements are also found in his Gospel: Luke 4:14-15; 4:31-32, 40-41; 6:17-19; 8:1-3; 19:47-48; 21:37-38. Why, in the case of Paul's shipwreck, did he not give his readers a summary?

Paul's shipwreck account from his leaving Caesarea until his departure from Malta (Acts 27:1-28:10) gives us 111 lines of Greek script; Jesus' passion account contains 120 lines, but these 120 lines include the arrest and the Jewish trial, as well as the Roman trial (Lk 22:54-23:56). The passion account by itself (Lk 23:26-56) consists of only fifty-two lines of Greek script. The conversion of Cornelius and Peter's interpretation of it to Jewish-Christians (Acts 10:1-11:18) also gives us 120 lines of Greek script!

Several scholars including Michael D. Goulder,¹ Walter Radl² and Richard I. Pervo³ consider the account of Paul's shipwreck as the equivalent narrative and symbolical journey of Jesus' death on the cross narrated in Luke 23. Paul himself, in many contexts outside the shipwreck account, often speaks of other shipwrecks as having been among his tribulations, as for example in 2 Cor 11:23. Several texts in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX)⁴ have the word *χειμών* for "tempest," the same lexeme that Luke uses in Paul's case to signify the symbolic menace of death. Luke 22-24 seems to offer parallelisms to Acts 20 - 28 in as much as the shipwreck serves as the account of the cross of Paul, as the *passio Pauli*.⁵

Numerous other exegetes, on the other hand, put forward arguments from the two accounts based on elements in the shipwreck narrative that depict salvation

¹ Michael D. Goulder, *Type and History in Acts* (London: SPCK, 1964), 62-63.

² Walter Radl, "Paulus und Jesus im lukanischen Doppelwerk Untersuchungen zu Parallelmotiven im Lukasevangelium und in der Apostelgeschichte," *Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe 23, Theologie* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1975), 222-251.

³ Richard I. Pervo, *Luke's Story of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

⁴ 4 Ezr 9: 6; 10:9; 4 Mc 15:32; Wis 2:11; Jb 37:6; Sir 21:8.

⁵ For the possible parallelisms highlighted by the mentioned exegetes see Jean-Noël Aletti, *Il racconto come teologia: Studio narrativo del terzo Vangelo e del libro degli Atti degli Apostoli*, trans. Carlo Valentino (Roma: Dehoniane, 1996), 68-69.

as the end result of both “passions.” The shipwreck account is read in its symbolic dimension. The terrible sea voyage ends up with everyone on board being saved. During the voyage, Paul never speaks of death but only of salvation: “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you” (Acts 27:24); “But we will have to run aground on some island” (Acts 27:26); “None of you will lose a hair from your heads” (Acts 27:34).

Not only was the shipwreck a very particular *passio*, and not only did it not mean a definitive death for Paul, but God himself confirmed Paul as the saviour of all those on board the ship: “For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you’” (Acts 27:23-24). It is a passion that provides salvation to all on board the ship, similar to Jesus’ passion providing salvation to all humankind, albeit a different kind of salvation. The moment that Paul is on dry land, he is declared innocent by the goddess of Justice and by the inhabitants themselves, after being bitten by a viper yet suffering no harm: “They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god” (Acts 28:6). The escape from the sea storm and from the viper bite was confirmation enough by the divinity that Paul was innocent.⁶ God, the goddess of Justice, and the Maltese inhabitants all declared Paul innocent in Acts 27-28; the Roman Centurion in Lk 23:47 declared about Jesus: “Certainly, this man was innocent.”

This would serve as one of the many narrative instances in which Luke puts Jesus in parallel with his disciples, a literary technique known as *synkrisis*, designating parallelisms or contrasts between protagonists in a narrative.⁷ The ultimate aim of the extended shipwreck account is thus the witnessing in Malta of the Gospel that Paul is then to bring to Rome, to the emperor himself, according to what God himself had predicted.

Οἱ βάρβαροι and Luke’s Universalism

According to Luke’s account of the shipwreck on Malta in Acts 27:1-28:11, the inhabitants of the Island are οἱ βάρβαροι, probably due to their speaking

⁶ See *ibid.*, 69-70.

⁷ For a technical elaboration of the *synkrisis*, see *ibid.*, 56-57, and for the *synkrisis* in the shipwreck narrative, *ibid.*, 65-86.

a language that was not Roman or Greek, but Phoenician or Punic,⁸ so that their speech sounded like a lot of “bar-bar-bar” that did not make any sense to strangers to that language.⁹ The term βάρβαροι refers to non-Greek speakers (see Rom 1:14), rather than to those who are not part of the Roman Empire. Consequently, Luke as the author of the “We-sections” had in mind to highlight the mission of Paul both to the Jews as well as to Gentiles of Greek language or who spoke any other language, but who were inserted within the Hellenistic panorama.

The persistence of Phoenician, and later Punic, culture in Malta is attested to not only by the language or the cult of the inhabitants but also by the qualifier ὁ πρῶτος, “The First One” of the Island (as in Acts 28:7) in terms of political institutions.¹⁰ Was the term only a generic one, indicating solely a status of primacy or was it a very precise technical designation for a specific office?

Relying on the monograph study by Raimondo Zucca, *Sufetes Africae et Sardiniae: Studi storici e geografici sul Mediterraneo antico*,¹¹ one can get to a clarification of the matter. Zucca studies the survival of institutions created under Punic governance in regions such as Malta and Sardegna. Such institutions, like the *Sufes*, sometimes coexisted with two other designations embodied within the same person: those of the *magistratus* and the *princeps*. At Carthage the bearer of the title corresponding to *princeps* - the πρῶτος - was the official responsible for

⁸ See Anthony Bonanno, *Malta: Phoenician, Punic and Roman* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2005), 142, where the Maltese archaeologist is of the opinion that the Romans did not have any intention of immediately imposing their official religion, their language (at least for official transactions) and their artistic choices upon the Phoenician ones of the people they occupied. Understandably, Bonanno even quotes Acts 27-28 with regards to the language. At Malta bilingual inscriptions have been uncovered: see *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum (CIG)* 3.5753; *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum (CIS)* 1.124. See also Hans Conzelmann et al., *Acts of the Apostles*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 223.

⁹ See Gérard Rossé, *Atti degli Apostoli: Commento esegetico e teologico* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1998), 870. Pace Rossé, Luke does not give a caricature of the islanders when he calls them οἱ βάρβαροι, if, as the author himself states, that was the nomenclature used for non-Greek speaking peoples, in this case some Phoenician dialect. See also Gerhard Schneider and Omero Soffritti, *Gli Atti degli Apostoli: Testo Greco e traduzione*, Commentario teologico del Nuovo Testamento, no.5, trans. Vincenzo Gatti (Brescia: Paideia, 1986), 532. In Rom 1:14, Paul separates nations only as “Greeks and Barbarians.”

¹⁰ See *Inscriptiones Graecae (IG)* 14.601, “πρῶτος Melitaion kai patrōn;” *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL)* 10.7495, “municipi Melitensium primus omnium”; Schneider, *Gli Atti degli Apostoli*, 534; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 714.

¹¹ Raimondo Zucca, *Sufetes Africae et Sardiniae: Studi storici e geografici sul Mediterraneo antico* (Roma: Carocci, 2004), 65-66.

the finances of the city, its procurator, as well as being third in the hierarchical order of administrative roles in Phoenician territories.¹² Within this framework, the significance of Publius as ὁ πρῶτος in the narrative account of Paul’s shipwreck on Malta in chapters 27 and 28 of Acts of the Apostles is much greater.

The Contents of the Account

What, then, are the contents of the shipwreck account to which Luke wanted to attribute so much importance? The account is replete with data concerning nature and fertility elements. Luke gives us several details of sea navigation, marine geography, winds, names of islands, many of which are hapaxlegomena in the Bible. Furthermore, by means of a series of Greek prepositions μέν... δέ in 28:6-9 Luke tightly links together the viper incident, the reaction of the inhabitants and the goddess of Justice, and the farmlands of Publius, leading man of the Island (28:7). Luke furthermore underscores Paul’s healing of Publius’ father, who lay sick with fever and dysentery.¹³ Consequently, a strict link between symbols of fertility, farm estates, and sickness are indicative elements that have much to do with fertility and its shortcomings.¹⁴

Alain Badiou dedicates his book *Saint Paul: La fondation de l’universalisme*¹⁵ to demonstrate that the most significant contribution of Paul to philosophy was that of negating that God divides humanity into two classes: *the elect* and *the excluded*. Paul himself had affirmed in his letter to

¹² See Bonanno, *Malta: Phoenician, Punic, and Roman*, 102-105; Peter Serracino Inglott, “‘You are all embarked’: A short Meditation on Acts 28:1-11 in the Wake of Sundry Philosophers,” in *St Paul in Malta and the Shaping of a Nation’s Identity*, ed. John Azzopardi and Anthony Pace (Malta: Office of the Prime Minister, 2010), 61.

¹³ The translation of the plural πυρετοῖς in Acts 27:8 as “fever attacks” seems to be better accepted than “affected by fevers.” Archaeological digs by the Missione Archeologica Italiana in the sixties brought to light Roman remains pertaining to domestic agricultural estates of considerable importance. On those estates, instruments for the extraction of olive oil, datable to the second or third centuries BCE, were found. The region traditionally considered as the farmlands of Publius is called Burmarrad, that is, “The Sickly Place”, due to the stagnant waters and the continuously soaked soil characteristic of marshland, that stretched all the way up to the Roman farm, source of dysentery and related illnesses. See *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto preliminare della campagna 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968*, ed. Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo (Roma: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche 1964-1972).

¹⁴ For archaeological evidence concerning the cultivation of olive trees, wheat and cotton for the textile industry, as well as the art of navigation and sea commerce, see Bonanno, *Malta: Phoenician, Punic and Roman*, 177-181.

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l’universalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).

the Galatians 3:28 that neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female are privileged.

Archaeological excavations, such as at Ras il-Wardija, at Kerċem in Gozo, have shown that Roman Malta was still very much immersed in Phoenician and Punic fertility cults, even though it had already been dominated by the Romans for almost two centuries. Malta thus offers the case of an island completely different from any other area to which Paul's missionary journeys had taken him. Malta was an island whose cult and religion were neither Jewish nor Hellenistic/Greek. Malta was predominantly Phoenician and Punic, with fertility cults exuding from all its pores. Consequently, Luke takes pains to describe the sea voyage as well as the first encounters of Paul and his fellow prisoners with the leading man and the inhabitants of Malta in terms of natural elements, fertility beliefs, and absence of fertility in sickness and diseases.

Paul's Conversion/Call and Evangelization of Malta

It can be taken for granted that the entire life and thought of Paul were dominated by his belief that on the road to Damascus, the Risen Lord had called him for a unique mission: that of bearing the Good News to all nations. The term "nations" refers to all those who do not belong to the Jewish People. In fact Paul preached the Gospel in the whole world where the Hellenistic culture prevailed. It is possible to verify various religious practices for the Athenians and Corinthians (with philosophers who adore the unknown gods) and the Ephesians (with goddess Artemis, symbol of riches and property considered as a supreme value) and all the others. But all these different beliefs were variations of the same fundamental cult of the pantheon based on deities that had replaced the more ancient cult centred essentially on earthly realities that had prevailed in the Mediterranean Basin with the mother-goddess of fertility as its fulcrum.¹⁶

One cannot ignore the fact that the term οἱ βάρβαροι refers to non-Greek speaking inhabitants. Clearly, even though Malta had been subject to Roman dominion for almost two centuries, archaeological research has sufficiently shown that several sanctuaries continued to be built in which the Phoenician and Punic cult, essentially dedicated to female deities associated with fertility and the earth, was practised. Examples abound, but the case of Ras il-Wardija at Kerċem in Gozo can be considered a paradigm.¹⁷ Therefore, the prevalent

¹⁶ See Peter Serracino Inglott, "Re-imagining One's Father," in *Pauline Malta: The Formation of a Nation's Identity*, ed. John Azzopardi and Thomas Freller (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patri Martin Caruana OP, 2010), 13-14.

¹⁷ See Serracino Inglott, "You are all Embarked," 59, 61.

culture in Malta seems to have been radically different from the predominant one - referred to as Gentile just the same - in all the other areas in which the missionary journeys of Paul had taken him.¹⁸

One might surmise that the shipwreck account of Paul on Malta serves the historical aim of clarifying the fact that Paul’s mission beyond the pale of the Jewish culture was not only for the Greek world, not only for the Greek culture in which he had been raised, and with which he was as familiar as with the Jewish culture and tradition of his youth in the native city of Tarsus. The Good News had to be proclaimed even to those whose culture was neither Jewish nor Greek. This motivation would simply not have been plausible had Paul been shipwrecked on an island whose culture was not Phoenician/Punic.

The Function of the Account

The function of Paul’s shipwreck account on Malta was thus not to add one more, last minute story of evangelization by Luke’s hero, Paul. Luke wanted to further underline the universality of salvation through the Gospel by detouring Paul, by divine providence ordinance, to Malta, an island that was neither Jewish nor Hellenistic, but Punic and Phoenician, having fertility cults as its fundamental religion.

Paul’s Particular Preaching in Malta

When Paul and his fellow prisoners came onto dry land, Luke’s account quotes absolutely not a single word that Paul preached on the Island, in most evident contrast with other moments in Paul’s life.¹⁹ Paul is habitually depicted

¹⁸ The inhabitants of Malta continued to actively practise a cult to the Phoenician and Punic pantheon even for some centuries after the annexation of Malta to the Siculo-Roman Empire. This is well attested to by the Maltese archaeologist, Professor Anthony Bonanno, in his book *Malta: Phoenician, Punic and Roman*, 2005, 188: “In spite of the direct control from Rome and more intensified cultural and commercial, as well as political, intercourse with Sicily, we have good reasons to believe that Punic religious beliefs and practices survived for centuries after the Roman annexation.” See also: Claudia Sagona, *The Archaeology of Punic Malta*, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, suppl. 9 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 273-274.

¹⁹ Ben Witherington iii, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 780-781 is of the opinion that notwithstanding that Luke does not explicitly say that Paul proclaimed the Gospel in Malta, he would have preached just the same, since after the healings from diseases the inhabitants of Malta showered Paul and his companions with gifts, and at the moment of departure provided them with all their needs (Acts 28:10). With Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, no. 5 (Collegeville,

by Luke as never missing one single opportunity to evangelize. Even when he was tarrying at the “bus-stop” in Athens (Acts 17:16-18), waiting for Timothy and Silas, he could not bear to merely kill time. “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons (σεβόμενοι), and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.” He grabbed the occasion to preach the Risen Christ to the Athenian Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers as well (Acts 17:18-32). Later on, just three days after he arrived in Rome, Paul sent for the local leaders of the Jews at his lodgings, where he was under house arrest, and they went to him in great numbers. “From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets” (Acts 28:23).

However, Luke does not record one single word uttered by Paul during a sojourn of three months in Malta where it was divinely ordained that they “will have to run aground on some island” (εἰς νῆσον δέ τινα δεῖ ἡμᾶς ἐκπεσεῖν) (Acts 27:26). Not a word, except for a very particular means of evangelization: the healing from disease and dysentery of the father of Publius, the Chief Man (ὁ Πρωτοῦς) of the Island, and later on of its other sick people (Acts 28:8-9).

This other manner of evangelization, that is, besides verbal preaching, reminds us of the episode of Jesus in the Synagogue of Nazareth, narrated to us also by Luke, where Jesus had described his mission as one of proclamation of the Gospel, indeed, but also of healing: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Lk 4:18-19). Later on, when John the Baptist heard what Jesus was doing, he sent two of his disciples to ask whether he was the Messiah or whether they had better wait for another. Luke, at this point, tells his readers that Jesus had healed many diseases, and several infirmities, had exorcised evil spirits, and given sight to many blind persons (Lk 7:21). No reference is made to Jesus preaching or announcing the Gospel. Yet, Jesus’ answer to the two disciples sent by John adds this specific element: “Go and tell John what you have seen *and heard*” (v.22). Seen, yes, the miracles, but as to “hearing” no reference whatsoever had been made! Jesus continues to explain: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” This last

MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 463, Witherington sees the sharing of material goods as a symbol of the sharing of the Gospel, as is frequent in Luke-Acts (Lk 8:3; Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37).

phrase - “the poor have good news brought to them” - with its generic term “the poor,” seems to summarize the various healings mentioned only a minute before; a summary of healings interpreted as a proclamation of the Good News.

The Miracle Worker Acknowledged as the Teacher

Although the title Διδάσκαλος has much to do with the authority in activities of διδάσκειν or of διδαχή, or the διδάσκαλία (in the Letters), numerous are the texts in Luke’s Gospel, wherein Jesus is referred to as διδάσκαλος, Teacher, even in miracle contexts, without any reference whatsoever to teaching. In Luke 8:40-42, 49-56, we find the pericope of the raising from the dead of Jairus’ daughter. When someone from Jairus’ household comes to inform him that his daughter is dead, Jesus is referred to as the Teacher, even if the context is uniquely that of a miracle: “Your daughter is dead; do not trouble *the Teacher* any longer” (μηκέτι σκύλλε τὸν διδάσκαλον - Lk 8:49). In the context of an exorcism, in Luke 9:37-43, we find the fervent request by a father for his son who is possessed by an impure spirit: “Διδάσκαλε, I beg you, to look at my son” (v.38).

At this point, we may also point out that in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23, Paul himself contrasts the proclamation of the Cross by Christians with the demand for signs by the Jews: “For Jews *demand signs* and Greeks desire wisdom, but *we proclaim* Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” The signs of miracles and of healings are not exclusively for people imbued with the spirit of the land and fertility cults. From a narrative perspective, therefore, Luke does not make any reference whatsoever to Paul announcing the Gospel of Christ Jesus in words whilst in Malta, but shows that Paul does demonstrate its salvific power in deeds. This was sufficient for the Maltese inhabitants - sea people and people who lived so close to the soil of the ground, for whom fertility cults and beliefs were woven into the fabric of their very being,²⁰ who appreciated health and who groaned under the cruel burden of its absence - to believe Paul and his message.

²⁰ See Bonanno, *Malta: Phoenician, Punic and Roman*, 105-116. The goddess Astarte remained the principal deity of the Maltese Archipelago, as many archaeological remains at Tas-Silġ (Malta) and at Gozo have witnessed to. Even if not definitive, the identification of a bearded head of some deity with Eshmun, the god corresponding to the Greek god Asclepius, god of healings, has been found in Malta, see Bonanno, *Malta: Phoenician, Punic and Roman*, 122-123.

The Many Clothes of Salvation

It is interesting to note that a word in the Maltese Semitic language has much to do with salvation. Words like healing, salvation, health, safety are expressed by the verb עָשָׂה (*yāshāʿ*) in Hebrew, from which the name יֵשׁוּעַ (*Yeshūʿaʿ*), Jesus, is derived. In the Maltese language, the noun הַיְשׁוּעָה finds some corresponding equivalence in *wisaʿ*, space, room, spaciousness, opening, and then, liberation, freedom from imprisonment, from confinement. In Psalm 66:12, the salvation brought about by God is depicted as “you have brought us out to a spacious place” (New Revised Standard Version), translated as *ħriġtna fil-wisaʿ* by the Malta Bible Society. Salvation as spaciousness, liberation from restricting, oppressive experiences both physical and spiritual occur frequently in the Old Testament (Pss 4:21; 18:17-20; 25:17; 31:9; 118:5; Est 4:14). Then, salvation has to be seen as the freeing of a person so that such a person can come out to freedom of salvation in Christ.

Conclusion

By bringing it to the Maltese inhabitants accompanied by salvation and clothed in healings Paul could indeed preach the Gospel without words. Indeed, Paul’s proclamation of salvation is not restricted to preaching in words, but can take any form in which human beings are made whole again so that they can feel the presence of God within them in every way possible. This is indeed salvation in a holistic sense: salvation is a making whole again so that a person can enjoy the perfection of wholeness that God saw in all his creation when he exclaimed “Everything is very good” in the Genesis creation account (Gen 1:31). In the context of the shipwreck on and evangelization of Malta, evangelization becomes synonymous with healing, and healings become another way of proclaiming the Gospel.

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