

Paul's Shipwreck Acts 27

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The Search Begins!

In approximately 60 A.D., a ship carrying 276 men and a cargo of grain shipwrecked off the coast of Malta. Two of the passengers on that ship were the biblical writers Paul and Luke, who were on their way to Rome—Paul as a prisoner, and Luke as his attending physician and friend. Through Luke's meticulously-detailed account of the voyage and shipwreck, as recorded in Acts chapter 27, we can today undertake a journey back in time to find the remains of that shipwreck. And, even more precisely, we can attempt to find the four anchors described in the Bible that were abandoned in the sea.

"When it was day, they did not recognize the land; but they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible. And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile loosing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore. But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves" (Acts 27:39-41).

For the past 500 years, tradition has held that the shipwreck of Paul occurred at St. Paul's Bay on the northeast shore of Malta, a view held by the people of Malta today. But the biblical narrative and geography of the Mediterranean and Malta tell us that the site of the shipwreck must be located somewhere other than the traditional site, where no physical evidence has been found to-date, in spite of extensive research and exploration.

In order to solve this biblical mystery, we need to review the biblical narrative written by Luke. Luke was a trusted historian and medical professional, whose careful attention to detail will prove invaluable in our quest. Eventhough Luke uses nautical terms which were understood at the time but have vague meaning today, extensive research involving weather, ocean topography, landmarks, and maritime lore, gives us a well-defined path of the ship that the Apostle Paul was sailing on in the Mediterranean Sea.

To begin charting the path of Paul's ship to its ultimate shipwreck site at Malta, we need to begin with Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, and his transfer to the port city of Caesarea on charges of inciting the Jews against Roman authority. Though he was innocent, Paul was not cleared by the authorities in Caesarea, so he appealed to Caesar in the world capital of Rome itself. When the time finally came for him to be transferred to Rome for trial, he and a contingent of other prisoners were all placed under the guard of a Centurion named Julius, boarded a ship bound for Asia Minor to proceed to Rome. At Sidon, on the coast of Lebanon, Julius kindly allowed Paul to receive medical care, then they continued their journey to Myra, where they transferred to a huge, Alexandrian cargo ship that would take them on to Rome.

It was as this freighter sailed along the southern coast of Crete that the voyage took a radical turn for the worse. As they were making progress in a westerly direction along the southern coast of Crete, the gale-force leading winds of a disastrous Mediterranean weather phenomenon known as a "Euroclydon" swept down from the northeast and slammed into the ship.

Nothing short of panic broke out on board among the hardened sailors. These storms were even more infamous in the first century than they are today. Josephus the historian was caught in the same kind of storm while traveling on a ship which was large enough to carry 600 passengers. In his chilling account, we read that of the 600 souls that went into the water when the ship capsized, only 80— including Josephus—were saved.

It is at this point that Luke's account becomes nearly phenomenal in its details, all of which perfectly fit the ocean geography that we know today. As the ship was being blown out of the lee of Crete, the sailors desperately tried to tack her about in order to return to the safety of the port of Fair Havens which they had just left. But their efforts were useless, and as the ship was driven hard into the open ocean, they had to turn their attention from sailing to surviving!

The ship was blown past an island called Clauda, which today is known as Gaudho, and they were entirely at the mercy of the storm.

"So when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive. And running under the shelter of an island called Clauda, we secured the skiff with difficulty" (vv. 15-16).

We know that they were blown on a straight course in line with the storm. Scripture tells us, that after they were blown past Clauda, they used the ship's cables to undergird it so it would not be twisted and pounded to pieces by the heavy seas.

". . . they used cables to undergird the ship" (v. 17).

Because they would have been blown in a precisely southwest direction, they would have been on a crash course with the gulf of Syrte in northern Libya. In fact, verse 17 tells us they were:

". . . fearing lest they should run aground on the Syrtis Sands."

The Bible says that after a long abstinence from food, and in a moment of total desperation, the Apostle Paul addressed all those on board:

"But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and said, 'Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you." Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me. However, we must run aground on a certain island'" (vv. 21-26).

This indicates that the ship was being driven by the winds of God and that the Lord predestined Paul to land at a certain place on a certain island to fulfill God's prophetic plan. Finally, on the fourteenth moonless, starless night, around midnight, the sailors sensed they were nearing land.

"Now when the fourteenth night had come, as we were driven up and down in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors sensed that they were drawing near some land" (v. 27).

This could not mean that they actually saw land in the inky blackness, since Luke always uses this word for supposing or theorizing without visible proof. Rather, like sailors have done for centuries, they were listening for waves crashing on rocks in the night, so they might not suddenly run aground. When they heard the roaring of waves on a reef, they immediately began taking soundings in order to determine just how close they were to running aground.

"And they took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and when they had gone a little farther, they took soundings again and found it to be fifteen fathoms" (v. 28).

The first sounding revealed a depth of 120 feet. A little further on, their soundings showed a depth of 90 feet, which was an undeniable indication that they were nearing a major reef or body of land.

"Then, fearing lest we should run aground on the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come" (v. 29).

The sailors knew they had to act fast or risk crashing into the rocks and having no chance of survival. Their only hope lay in the massive, lead-and-wood stern anchors that were a part of every freighter's essential equipment. These anchors were as long as 8-to-12 feet each and were composed of a massive lead stock attached to wooden flukes which were tipped with lead. Like more modern anchors, they were designed to snag the bottom and hold a ship even in the strongest currents –which was exactly the sailors' desperate hope as they heaved all four of the anchors on Paul's ship overboard in the night.

As the anchors dug in and held, the scene on the ship was undoubtedly chaotic. With the ship suddenly yanked stationary in the water, waves crashing over the stern and the gunwales, ropes and timbers groaned under the strain, the sailors tried to escape the ship by pretending to use the ship's boat to set out the bow anchors.

"And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, when they had let down the skiff into the sea, under pretense of putting out anchors from the prow . . ." (v. 30).

Hearing Paul's warning that they would have no hope of surviving without the assistance of professional sailors, that plan was thwarted and the entire company was left to wait out the long, terrifying night.

"Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.' Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the skiff and let it fall off" (v. 32).

Sometime in the last dark hours before daybreak, Paul, a mere prisoner, encouraged the group of sailors, soldiers, prisoners, and the ship's owner and reassured them that God was in control of the situation, and that they needed to take nourishment in order to be ready to face the ordeal ahead of them. After eating, all hands turned to the task of lightening the ship as much as possible for the inevitable prospect of sailing as near as possible to the shoreline and running aground.

"Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves. And in all we were two hundred and seventy-six persons on the ship. So when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship and threw out the wheat into the sea" (vv. 37-38).

As the first gray streaks of dawn appeared, the sailors apparently were eager to assess their situation and figure out where they were. But as they scanned the coastline, not one landmark or topographic feature was familiar to them.

"When it was day, they did not recognize the land" (v. 39).

The preceding verse indicates that the seasoned sailors did not recognize the location on Malta at which they were positioned. This is a significant clue in solving the mystery of the location of the shipwreck. This verse eliminates the vast majority of candidate sites for Paul's shipwreck location on Malta. In the time of Paul, Malta was a well-visited seaport location. The only bay suitable for large ships, however, was Valletta Bay, located on the east coast of Malta. This bay was used by ancient mariners long before Paul, and is still a bustling seaport visited by many cargo ships today. If the sailors were anywhere near Valetta, they would have recognized the shoreline.

This essentially eliminates traditional St. Paul's Bay, which is approximately five miles north of Valletta. Sailors traveling from Valletta to Rome, as was the customary route at the time, would have regularly sailed past St. Paul's Bay and all other bays on that side of the island; thus, these bays would have been easily recognized by the sailors on Paul's ship. Furthermore, on the north and west sides of the island, the shoreline is nearly all cliffs, and is, therefore, not compatible with the biblical description of the topography.

This leaves us with the south side of the island as the only suitable landing site of the apostle Paul and those who accompanied him. As they approached the south side of the island from the Libyan coast, they would have encountered one of two bays on the south side of Malta. One possible bay would have been Marsaxlokk Bay, on the southeast corner of Malta, and the other would have been St. Thomas Bay, just north of Marsaxlokk. Both of these bays meet the 20- and 15-fathom depth measurements given by the sailors; but only one of these bays has all the criteria described by Luke in the remaining verses.

First, as we have seen the bay of Paul's shipwreck would have to have a projecting reef or shoal over which waves would be crashing in the night, tipping the sailors off to take depth soundings and deploy the ship's anchors.

Second, the true "St. Paul's Bay" would have a beach that would be clearly visible from hundreds of yards offshore. It was the presence of this beach, in fact, that motivated the sailors to attempt the daring move to beach the ship.

". . . they observed a bay with a beach, onto which they planned to run the ship if possible" (v. 39).

From where they were tenuously anchored offshore, the sailors saw that their only possible—though not probable—hope was to run the ship onto a rare and unlikely beach that punctuated the otherwise rocky cliffs of the land in front of them.

However, the entire scene was unfamiliar to the professional sailors. They had undoubtedly navigated the northern shoreline of the island but they did not now recognize this area in the southeast. Most significantly, between the ship and the beach, a chaotic crashing of waves in open water left Luke with no way to describe it except a place where "two seas meet" or "waters collide." This would prove to be our most significant clue in determining the correct bay on the southeast quadrant of Malta.

The sailors knew that, once they made their move, there would be no turning back. All at once, they cut loose the four anchors and left them in the sea, dropped the ship's steering oars into the water, and hoisted the mainsail to the gale-force winds.

"And they let go the anchors and left them in the sea, meanwhile loosing the rudder ropes; and they hoisted the mainsail to the wind and made for shore" (v. 40).

Here we see that, without a doubt, the ship's anchors were dropped into the sea and abandoned. Although some English translations of Acts 27 make it appear as though the sailors brought the anchors back on board, the Greek language of the New Testament leaves no question, whatsoever. In fact, the precise word used to describe what they did with the anchors is the same word Luke used back in verse 20 to describe what happened to the sailors' hope of rescue: it was completely "abandoned" or "left behind."

Obviously, they knew their anchors would be useless from this point forward. Their desperate plan had been to run the ship as far into the bay as possible, hopefully beaching on the sand and wading to shore. However, as they reached the tumultuous whitewater in front of them, the ship ran hard aground on a sloping reef.

"But striking a place where two seas met, they ran the ship aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable" (v. 41).

As the bow of the ship rammed the reef and held there, waves began pounding it to pieces from behind. Amid the screams and shouts of the 276 men, the Roman soldiers immediately began moving toward the prisoners to execute them wholesale, as was Roman policy of the day, so that they themselves could swim for shore without the worry of losing escapees and suffering dire consequences.

". . . but the stern was being broken up by the violence of the waves. And the soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any of them should swim away and escape (v. 42)

It was at that moment that Julius the Centurion, who had shown kindness to Paul and Luke earlier in the voyage, in a final heroic prevented the slaughter of the prisoners (including Paul) and commanded everyone to abandon ship and make for shore.

"But the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, and the rest, some on boards and some on parts of the ship" (v. 44).

Amazingly—miraculously—as the human flotsam and wooden debris washed ashore, it became apparent that every man on board had made it safely to land, exactly as God had revealed to Paul in the darkest hour of the storm. Even this provides an essential clue, as it reveals that the beach visible from the ship was within swimming and floating distance from the reef, which would have to be a mile or less.

“And so it was that they all escaped safely to land” (v. 44).

Although their ordeal was not completely over until after Paul survived a viper bite, the shell-shocked group eventually was ushered into the welcome confines of the home of Publius, before traveling on to Rome.

Now, twenty centuries later, Luke’s account of this remarkable journey lies in the pages of the Bible like a treasure map in an unlocked chest. In fact, the detail is so precise, so startling, it seems almost as though the Bible is counting on someone taking its descriptions seriously—to at least go back and recover the anchors left on the bottom in precisely 90 feet of water somewhere off the coast of Malta.

As we later discovered from analyzing the text, it appears that Luke employed his educated, professional recall and writing skills in order to prepare a written record that would exonerate the Roman Centurion Julius at the inquiry in Rome that inevitably would have followed a debacle like this shipwreck. Regardless of Luke’s motives, however, the benefit was ours as we began to retrace the ship’s course and search for the true “St. Paul’s Bay” of Malta.

Like ever-shrinking rings of criminal evidence that eventually encircle and entrap a suspect, the clues left behind in Acts 27 became our marching orders. First and foremost, Luke’s account provided for us the correct direction of approach toward Malta. Once the ship made its turn at the Syrta and began pounding its way to the northwest, the first landfall at Malta they could possibly make would be somewhere around its southeast corner. This was confirmed by the sailors’ complete unfamiliarity with the land they saw at daybreak, since a huge commercial port was located on Malta’s north shore and, as such, would have been quite familiar to them.

We found another essential clue in the sailors’ perception of approaching land in spite of impenetrable darkness. As a number of sailors told us in present-day interviews, the only way to hear breakers without running aground is to be navigating alongside an extended reef, a finger of barely submerged rocks running out to sea from an island or shoreline.

The sailors’ soundings let us know we would be looking for an approach over which the ocean bottom sloped gently from 120 feet to 90 feet, and the “bay with a beach” told us that we would be looking for an anomaly, a rarity, on the coastline of Malta: someplace a ship would hope of beaching rather than slamming into vertical cliffs.

But what of the place where “two seas meet,” or “waters collide”? It wasn’t until we made our first trip to Malta that we discovered that this phenomenon actually occurs not in one place, but in two bays of the island. We were first drawn to Marsaxlokk Bay, a large, twin-lobed bay on Malta’s southeast corner, because of the beach located at the back of its right-hand lobe, and because of a unique colliding of waves over a nearby reef during certain types of storms.

However, upon further investigation, a second and more remarkable candidate emerged from the pristine blue waters of the Mediterranean: a bay just north of Marsaxlokk. Named St. Thomas Bay, it had all the earmarks of a prime suspect. Its approach from the sea would be from the east/southeast, the precise direction a Euroclydon would be blowing after two weeks of fury. Its approach was punctuated by a long finger of shallow reef over which waves break even in relatively calm weather. Our maritime charts showed a sloping approach that coincided exactly with the sailors’ soundings as recorded by Luke. There, at the easternmost tip of Malta, currents and wind-driven swells come together in stormy weather in a way that can only be described as “waters colliding.” And, finally, at its innermost reaches, where the sea meets the coastline of Malta, the cliffs so prominent everywhere along the eastern coastline give way to a gentle, sloping, inviting beachfront.

Like road signs pointing the way, all these factors eventually led us not only to the prospect of finding four massive lead anchors at the 90-foot depth outside St. Thomas Bay, but to two native divers who had already found four 1st-Century, Roman-style anchors, in exactly 90 feet of water—all within 40 yards of one another. Unfortunately, the divers did not realize what they had found, and, over the years, two of the anchors had been melted down for use in scuba-diving weight belts, and a third was lost—to a place unknown.

But, to our great excitement and the benefit of New Testament historians everywhere, the fourth anchor was preserved as part of a deceased diver's legacy to his widow. It was there for our examination; and, even more importantly, for evaluation by a foremost expert on ancient maritime artifacts from Malta itself.

Dr. Anthony Bonano, head of the Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Malta, upon investigation of the fourth anchor, said: "What you have just shown me is, to be precise, part of an anchor, called an anchor stock, which is lead and is an essential part of a typical Roman anchor. Its flourishing period would be around the first century A.D., though its use would have spanned from the first to second century A.D. back to the second or third century B.C. It would be considered universally Roman, and could have come from a ship from Rome or from Alexandria Of course, a ship would have several of these."

Could this, verifiably, be an anchor from Paul's ship, which lay alongside three others for nearly two thousand years until they were recovered just a few years ago? As with any historical claim, the best we can do is examine the evidence in terms of probability. But the evidence for the anchors of Paul's shipwreck is virtually overwhelming.

Let's review the facts:

The one anchor out of the four that has been preserved, verifiably dates to the first-century era of Roman shipping when Paul's shipwreck occurred.

They were found on the southeast shore of Malta, which is the only shoreline that Paul's ship could have approached under those particular conditions.

They were found alongside a projecting offshore reef, which, under storm conditions, resounds with the roar of waves breaking over it, and would be an unseen warning of impending landfall in the dark of night.

They were found along a route that represents precisely the depth in fathoms as recorded by Luke.

They were found in exactly the correct 90-foot depth recorded by the sailors' soundings.

They were found in the exact number – four – and the exact proximity – all within a 40-yard radius – that maritime experts say the account in Acts would predict.

They were just outside a bay, which, untypical of the Maltese coast, includes a sandy beach.

They were found along a coastline that, because it is not on normal ancient shipping lanes, would have been entirely unfamiliar to the professional sailors on Paul's ship.

They were found outside a bay that is guarded by a reef where, under storm conditions, "two seas meet" or collide with great intensity.

They were found in an area that would have afforded all 276 men aboard Paul's ship a reasonable chance of swimming or floating to shore.

All of these factors, taken together, argue convincingly not only that today's St. Thomas' Bay is the correct site of Paul's shipwreck, but also, that the four anchors recently retrieved from those waters were the very anchors mentioned in Acts 27. As such, that one anchor may well be the only artifact mentioned in the New Testament that has been recovered and preserved in our era—nearly two thousand years after the fact.