

# Travel and the Gospel: The journeys of Paul and his letters

■ by David Parish



**The business context of biblical narrative often repays closer attention. David Parish shares his research into 1st century patterns of sea transport, which feature prominently in Paul's journeys. This leads him to reflect on the opportunities business travel today offers for Christian witness and fellowship.**

It has been estimated that Paul travelled over 6000 miles in the course of his missionary journeys. Much of that travel was along the road system of the first century world in part provided by Rome to link its empire but also the developing trade roads into Asia that passed through Palestine. However it is the almost casual use of sea transport that is most striking. Paul often seems to decide at short notice to travel on to a new city and to do so he was merely making use of the network of sea routes that crossed the Mediterranean. The vignette that follows illustrates this.

Looking down from the hillside of the port for Corinth at Cenchreae, there is a scene of great activity with perhaps eight or nine vessels, both small coasting ships and the larger grain ships bound for Rome getting ready to sail. Above the port are the villas of the wealthy traders and ship owners and clustered around the port are the poorer homes of the dock workers. On the harbour side are the warehouses used to store goods awaiting shipment. Overlooking the harbour is a basilica-like building, the temple to Isis. Further to the edge of town are the houses of ill repute, which gives Corinth its reputation for vice.

On the dockside are a small group of Jews clustered round a short middle-aged Rabbi. They talk animatedly, all the time glancing up at the captain of the large ship being loaded with trade goods of various kinds. Wool bales are positioned next to large travel amphora filled with wine in their travel racks waiting to be loaded. The Rabbi, unusually for a Jew, has his hair cut short. He is

travelling light, his only possessions being a warm felted goat's hair travel cloak, leather bag and another bag of manuscripts.

For those of you familiar with the story of Acts you will have guessed the scene is from chapter 18 as Paul, with Priscilla and Aquila, takes leave of the leaders of the Corinthian church he has established, before departing for Jerusalem via Ephesus.

## Corinth

Much of the information is provided by Acts, the accuracy of which, in terms of shipping, trade and other information, is indicated from the archaeology of Cenchreae<sup>1</sup>. The most detailed understanding of the port comes from the excavation of the southern harbour wall<sup>2</sup>. Archaeologists have found a mosaic picture of the harbour from a later date showing much of the same detail. The remains of a building which is believed to be the Temple to Isis have been discovered. The Greeks had adopted this Egyptian God into their pantheon and she became associated with sea travel and her temples were often found in port cities.

Corinth had two ports. The west-facing port across the isthmus was Lechaem and Cenchreae faced to the east. Lechaem was the port for ships to Rome and Cenchreae for ships going to the Greek islands and the Levant.

Corinth had the kind of reputation for low life and aggressive trading practices of ports that is typical down to the present day. David Prior, in the introduction to his commentary on ►►

▶▶ Corinthians, writes ‘Like most sea ports, Corinth had become both prosperous and licentious - so much so that the Greeks had a word for leading a life of debauchery: Korintiazein. Homer talks of ‘wealthy Corinth’ and Thucydides refers to its military importance.’<sup>3</sup>. Prior also quotes Austin Farrar describing Corinth: ‘This mongrel and heterogeneous population of Greek adventurers and Roman bourgeois, with a tainting of Phoenicians; mass of Jews, ex-soldiers, philosophers, merchants, sailors, freedmen, slaves, trades people, hucksters and agents of every form of vice.’<sup>4</sup> J.C Pollock, in his biography of Paul, describes Corinth ‘as a curiously close parallel to the population of a 20<sup>th</sup> Century ‘inner city’<sup>5</sup>. There would have been possibly 20 sailings a day out of Corinth’s two ports and the sailing ship was a common sight all along the Mediterranean coast.

**Sailing Ships in the Ancient World**

The Phoenicians had developed sailing ships capable of trading over long distances in the Mediterranean as early as 700 BC. Scripture gives accurate descriptions of these ships and their cargos in Isaiah 2 and Ezekiel 27. The description in the Bible is confirmed from the Sennacherib Reliefs dated from 700 BC. The Greeks borrowed the technology for their triremes and by 100 AD the Roman merchant fleet numbered around 3000 vessels of all sizes.

The larger grain - carrying ships could accommodate several tonnes of cargo and around 100 passengers. Josephus<sup>6</sup> describes a vessel carrying 600 people. Perhaps half would have been crew to

man the sails and to row when the wind was weak. It would still allow for a passenger load of around 300, the capacity today of a medium-sized passenger ferry to the Isle of Wight.

Marine archaeologists working with the maritime museum in Haifa have made some exciting discoveries in recent years including remains of both Phoenician and Greek trading ships<sup>7</sup>. The London Museum has part of the hull of a ship found when excavating the site of a Roman wharf at Blackfriars. The Maritime

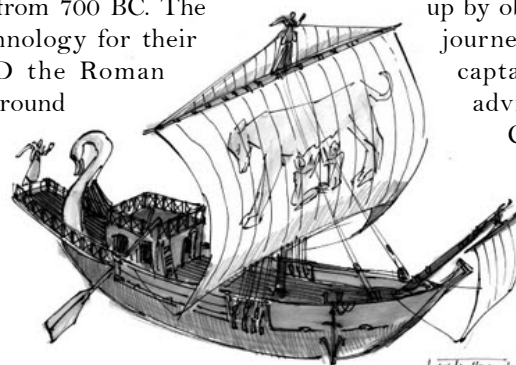
Museum at Fumicino near Rome has in its collection models and images on pottery of vessels of this period. These show that the large trading ships had a broad beam to carry large cargoes and were powered by a large sail amidships and a smaller forward sail. This meant that it was not easy to sail across the wind so the captains followed the direction of the wind as much as possible. As Catherine Hezser says in her chapter on Travel and Mobility ‘during the winter months shipping on the Mediterranean would come almost to a standstill’<sup>8</sup>.

**Ships and Seasons**

Those ships that did venture out in the winter months stayed close in to shore and as Luke vividly describes in Act 27 it was very dangerous when a storm blew up. Acts tells us they left after the Feast of the Atonement in October and so the centurion in charge of Paul travelled knowing the risk. They must have picked up one of the last large grain ships returning from Alexandria via Myra to its home port of Rome to be laid up for winter. In fact Luke’s description of how the captain handled the ship is very accurate and indicates good knowledge of seafaring, no doubt picked up by observation on his many journeys with Paul. If the captain had heeded Paul’s advice to stay in port in Crete they would have avoided the wreck on Malta that followed.

However in summer, sea travel was fast and relatively comfortable. As these were cargo vessels passengers had to bring their own provisions. The fast cargo ships made few stops and sailed at night using astral navigation. It would have been possible on one of these vessels to travel from Rome to Athens in five to six days compared with a month or longer overland.

Caligula urged Prince Agrippa to take one of the fast ships from Rome to Palestine<sup>9</sup>. There were also rabbinic traditions relating to travel with detailed rules for observing the Sabbath while travelling. For example, as long as you



Roman Merchant Ship 1-11 century AD



▶▶ did not walk around the ship on the Sabbath, travel laws could be kept, even if the vessel was doing six knots!<sup>10</sup>

The accuracy of Luke's account is shown in Acts 28:13 in the time taken to sail from Rhegium to Puteoli as one and one half days. Lionel Casson in his essay for New York University cites Luke along with other sources of antiquity to verify that these fast speeds were possible<sup>11</sup>.

For comparison, the tea clippers of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century did around 14 knots and the present world sailing record is 41 knots.

### Companions at Sea

Have you noticed that Paul is quite casual about moving on to the next city and seems always to find a ship going his way? This was made easy by a first century version of 'lastminute.com'. The ship owners or their agents would send a trusted slave into the markets to tell merchants



*The marketplace at Corinth*

of the next sailing and what cargoes they could take. Passengers who wanted to travel then negotiated a price which depended on the speed of the vessel and the route. Paul often took 'stoppers' as presumably they were cheaper when funds were short. Catherine Hezser also makes the point in *Jewish Travel in Antiquity*, that there were a small group of well-known rabbis who travelled the Mediterranean visiting synagogues in the Jewish Diaspora. Paul would simply have blended in, which is probably why he had a good initial reception to his teaching of the covenant God but got into trouble when he moved onto the new covenant. Paul seemed always to travel with others and in Acts 20 there is list of eight of his companions. They must have seemed an odd group to the crews of the

vessels they used. On one trip from Philippi to Troas there was Paul the fifty-year-old Rabbi; Luke; Timothy, a young man of mixed Gentile and Jewish descent; Gaius, who often hosted Paul in his home and was probably another of Paul's benefactors; Aristarchus; Secundus, a slave probably loaned by his master to Paul to act as his servant, and Sopater, probably a convert from Asia Minor. Also in the group were another two close companions Tychicus and Trophimus, who are referred to several times as messengers for Paul to the churches. At other times he travelled with Demas, Jesus-Justus and Aquila.

Like the travelling Rabbis, Paul had wealthy merchants as his benefactors, who provided shelter and no doubt money for his travel. Paul gives Phoebe (Rom 16), who may have been a merchant in Corinth, a letter of commendation to the church in Rome. He mentions that she has been a patron to him and others. Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth also gets a mention and it is accepted by most biblical archaeologists that the wording of the Erastus memorial stone found in Corinth refers to the same person. Dr Bruce Winter deals with this more fully in his book *Seek the Welfare of the City*.



*The Erastus memorial stone still in its original location in a paved road near the theatre. "Erastus...bore the expense of this pavement."*

The other role played by wealthy merchants in the early church was to provide the couriers to move the letters and gospel copies between the churches. There are 5,800 copies of books or fragments that have been found all over the Mediterranean from North Africa to Albania and the Levant. They are written in Greek, Syriac and Coptic languages. One of the best known is Ryland's Library Papyrus P52, also known as the St. John's Fragment. Bruce ▶▶

▶▶ Metzger holds the view that the fragment is very early, from around AD 100. It is believed to be a copy written to be used in public worship as the print size is quite large and widely spaced. It was found in Egypt and though it is impossible to be certain, it is likely that it originated in Ephesus and was brought by a courier or one of Paul's assistants.

### Lessons for Today

It is clear that a network of business contacts, benefactors and hosts aided Paul in his mission.

Other than an interesting reflection on the travel and economy of the Roman world and its impact on the spread of the gospel, is there anything we can learn for today?

I wonder if we use our business contacts for sharing the gospel as well as we could. When we travel do we try to seek out a local church to understand better the issues facing Christians in their context? For those of us in well-paid jobs there is then the issue of how much of our wealth do we use to help fund mission both at home and abroad? Churches overseas are very open to visits by groups from churches in the UK, both for teaching and sharing in evangelism. At home should we be doing more to fund support for workers in the workplace through chaplaincies or ministries that encourage people in whole-life discipleship?

Major international companies now frequently offer an overseas post as part of the career development plan to enable managers to gain awareness of working in a cross cultural environment. If offered one of these postings it also presents an opportunity to gain understanding of the church in the new country. If you do not have a good command of the

language it is tempting to attend the 'international' church, but 'international' in this case is usually code for a church using English as the main medium for services and with an Anglo-Saxon cultural outlook. When I worked in Spain for one posting I was based in Malaga and chose to attend a free church fellowship held in the large home of a local businessman. The large dining room had windows that opened onto a courtyard filled with flowers, a delightful place to worship. It was challenging, as some of the congregation used the local dialect and not Castilian Spanish, but they were very welcoming - and it helped me to understand the challenges they faced in living out the gospel in their context as well as improving my Spanish.

Similarly, when I was working for a few months on a project near Dallas it was tempting to visit one of the large mega-churches in the city. But again by going to a small local church they were encouraged by a having an overseas visitor and I became aware that most American churches typically have congregations between 60 and 150 members and face the same struggles with budgets and community outreach as churches here.

Recently archaeologists from Cardiff University found a roof tile marked with the sign of a fish while excavating the old Roman port at Caerleon. Soldiers put to tile-making duties often imprinted the tile with a personal symbol. This may be the earliest indication of the spread of the gospel among the army. One wonders about the conversations Paul and the others must have had with his fellow travellers, merchants and soldiers. Are we as bold when we travel?

That soldier put the stamp of his faith on his work. We should show by how we carry out our work and the ethic we apply that the stamp of Christ is upon all that we do. ■

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1 [http://www.holylandphotos.org/browse.asp?s=1,4,11,28,251&img=GSP\\_LCA03](http://www.holylandphotos.org/browse.asp?s=1,4,11,28,251&img=GSP_LCA03)).

2 [http://www.holylandphotos.org/browse.asp?s=1,4,11,28,251&img=GSP\\_LCA04](http://www.holylandphotos.org/browse.asp?s=1,4,11,28,251&img=GSP_LCA04).

3 David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, IVP, 1993, p. 11.

4 *op.cit.*, p.12.

5 J.C. Pollock, *The Apostle: A Life of Paul*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1969, p. 121.

6 *Vita* 15

7 [www.nmm.org.il/Museum/Templates/showpage.asp?DBID=1&TMID=84&LNGID=1&FID=1189&PID=2942](http://www.nmm.org.il/Museum/Templates/showpage.asp?DBID=1&TMID=84&LNGID=1&FID=1189&PID=2942)

8 Catherine Hezser, *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*, OUP, 2010, p. 212.

9 John Morrison, *The Age of the Galley*, Conway, 2004, p.121.

10 Hezser, *op.cit.* p. 213.

11 See [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Journals/TAPA/82/Speed\\_under\\_Sail\\_of\\_Ancient\\_Ships\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Journals/TAPA/82/Speed_under_Sail_of_Ancient_Ships*.html)