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Alastair Roberts

Queen Vashti does not come at King Ahasuerus's command. Shipwreck!

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Transcript

Esther, Chapter 1. Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa the citadel, in the third year of his reign, he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media, and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory, and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen, and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl, and precious stones. Drinks were

served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king, and drinking was according to this edict. There is no compulsion, for the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.

Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehumen, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Nabagtha, Zitha, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs.

At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him. Then the king said to the men who knew the times, for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, the men next to him being Khashina, Sheetha, Admatha, Tarshish, Merez, Marsina, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face and sat first in the kingdom. According to the law what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs? Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, for the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.

This very day the noble women of Persia and Media, who have heard of the behavior of the queen, will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.

This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script, and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household, and speak according to the language of his people. The Book of Esther narrates the history that lies behind a feast, and it is a book that is full of feasts.

The first chapter, the prologue to Esther's story, opens with a remarkable feast, and the final chapters of the book end with the institution of another, the Feast of Purim. As Adel

Berlin notes, chapter one introduces us to several of the themes that will dominate the rest of the book, feasts, insubordination, the king's search for a bride, rash edicts, intrigue in the and other such themes. The chapter opens by locating the story in the time of Ahasuerus, a Persian king, who ruled a vast empire stretching from India, or what would be modern day Pakistan, to Ethiopia at its extremities.

The Persian period began with the fall of Babylon in 539 BC. It ended with Alexander the Great in 333 BC. The precise identity of this figure is debated.

He is not the only Ahasuerus in our Bibles. There is an Ahasuerus who was the father of Darius the Mede in Daniel chapter 9 verse 1. Another Ahasuerus is mentioned in Ezra chapter 4 verse 6. James Jordan has argued that Darius the Persian king, who reigned from 522 to 486 BC, a different figure from Darius the Mede in Daniel, is the same figure as Ahasuerus in Esther and Artaxerxes in Ezra and Nehemiah. More commonly, however, scholars identify Ahasuerus with Xerxes.

He reigned from 486 to 465 BC. The Septuagint and Josephus identify this figure as Artaxerxes, who reigned from 465 to 424 BC. The identification of Ahasuerus as Xerxes rests in large measure upon the strong evidence that Ahasuerus is the Hebrew version of the same Persian term that has rendered Xerxes in Greek, not dissimilar to the Babylonian version of the name.

Had the figure been named Artaxerxes, we would have expected a T in Ahasuerus, as Anthony Tomasino points out. Jordan's position depends upon the argument, for which by his own admission little supportive evidence exists, that Persian monarchs used multiple throne names such as Darius Xerxes and Artaxerxes. Further biblical data to fit into the picture can be found in Ezra chapter 4, which mentions various Persian kings in succession, Cyrus, possibly Darius again, Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes and Darius.

In Ezra, Nehemiah and also in Esther chapter 2 verse 5 to 6, we have references to exiles and their descendants. This genealogical data may place chronological constraints upon the text. Jordan's position is strongest in this in a biblical evidence.

However, there remain difficulties. For instance, if as Jordan argues Mordecai was personally taken into exile from Judah, his advanced age at this point would raise problems for an assumption of Esther's youth. As some commentators have noted, the more general identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes would fit neatly with what we know of the chronology of his reign.

In 483 BC, the third year of his reign that is mentioned in this chapter, Xerxes was assembling his war council to prepare to attack the Greeks. Scholars have long challenged the historicity of the book of Esther. The identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes is not without its problems, for instance.

Herodotus writes about the brutal queen of Xerxes, Amestris. This vengeful and cruel queen seems to have been active long after Vashti was deposed, and her character seems to be the polar opposite of the biblical heroine who is the subject of this book. Scholars have raised further questions of historical accuracy concerning this book.

The reference to 127 provinces, for instance, would, some claim, be as jarring as reading about 400 different US states. Persia was divided into about 20 different satrapies, not over 120 provinces. Besides this, there are details such as the irrevocability of the law of the Medes and the Persians, the height of Haman's gallows, the suggestion that Xerxes would elevate two non-Persians to the status of prime minister within his regime, the choice of a queen of Persia through a beauty contest instead of marrying a daughter of one of the leading families.

Those who argue for the historicity of the book of Esther have ready answers for many of these objections. The book of Esther clearly distinguishes between satraps and governors. The provinces that it describes are clearly under the rule of governors, not under the rule of satraps as the satrapies are.

Many details of the book clearly ring historically true and fit in with what we know of the period. Despite himself questioning the historicity of the book, David Klines lists a number of the historical details that ring true within it. The extent of the empire under Xerxes from India to Ethiopia in chapter 1 verse 1, the council of seven nobles in chapter 1 verse 14, the efficient postal system, chapter 3 verse 13 and 8 verse 10, the keeping of official diaries including records of the king's benefactors, chapter 2 verse 23, chapter 6 verse 8, the use of impalement as a form of capital punishment, chapter 2 verse 23, 5 verse 14, 7 verse 10, the practice of obeisance to kings and nobles, chapter 3 verse 2, belief in lucky days, chapter 3 verse 7, setting crowns on the heads of royal horses, chapter 6 verse 8, reclining on couches at meals, chapter 7 verse 8. To these, Tomasino adds the names that we have within the book which clearly are appropriate to the time and the place.

Recognising the accuracy of these incidental and scene-setting details, the case for trusting the book on some of the more controversial and less substantiated details might be stronger. The great feast of Ahasuerus with which the book begins should not be regarded merely as a matter of decadent self-indulgence. As Rabbi David Foreman has argued, within a great kingdom, order needs to be kept and one of the ways that this can be established is through grand spectacle and great feasts.

Within this great feast and the celebrations surrounding it, Ahasuerus could wow the governors of the various provinces with his wealth and splendour. His bountiful generosity as a host and benefactor would also win their support and loyalty. The reference to the 127 provinces here, the first of three times within the book, gives a sense of the great extent of the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

However, some Jewish commentators have seen something more going on here. Could the number have a symbolic significance? Some have noted that the number is 12 times 10 plus 7. All numbers associated in some way with completion and perfection. More interesting, however, is the fact that the number 127 is only found on one other occasion in scripture in reference to the age of Sarah.

In Genesis chapter 23 verse 10 we are told that Sarah died at the age of 127. Could there be some connection between the story of Sarah and the story of Esther? Some Jewish commentators, including Foreman, have suggested that there might be. While I've not seen anyone mention this, such a connection could be strengthened by the number 180 which appears shortly afterwards.

There is only one other occurrence of the number 180 in scripture. In Genesis chapter 35 verse 28 it is the age of Isaac when he dies. 127 the age of Sarah and 180 the age of Isaac, her son.

Sarah, like Esther, was taken on account of her beauty by a pagan king and had to hide her identity to save her people. Isaac is the great promised seed. Perhaps what we have here is an indication of some of the themes of the book by a subtle allusion to some figures that share a typological resemblance.

The great feast with which this time of feasting concludes in verse 5 and following is a feast to which all are invited. It lasts for seven days and the festivities and the furnishings are described for us at some length. This is rather atypical for the biblical text which seldom gives much attention to visual details and scene setting.

Rabbi Foreman suggests that these details may evoke the consecration of the tabernacle. In Leviticus chapter 8 verse 23 for instance, You shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting for seven days until the days of your ordination are completed for it will take seven days to ordain you. Seven days for a great inauguration or sanctification event, lengthy descriptions of glorious materials and the summoning of particular persons to enter into the presence of the great king might all evoke the story of the consecration of the tabernacle.

The drinking of great quantities of wine are highlighted here. In the story of Leviticus after the death of Nadab and Abihu, the drinking of wine is expressly forbidden which has led many to suppose that the deaths of Nadab and Abihu followed after their rash actions following the drinking of wine. So while the story of Esther chapter 1 may evoke the consecration of the tabernacle, it might do so in order to stand in some sort of contrast to it.

As the Lord's burning anger came out and burnt up Nadab and Abihu, Ahasuerus' anger is caused to burn against his Queen Vashti. What exactly happens in verses 10 and following is much debated by commentators. Many commentators see here the

lecherous and dishonorable actions of a drunken king.

Indeed, traditionally many Jewish commentators argued that Queen Vashti was summoned into the king's presence naked, wearing nothing but the royal crown. Rabbi Foreman raises a different possibility. The beautiful queen, he argues, is not just an attractive woman to be lusted after.

There are numerous such women among the dancing girls or the concubines. Rather, Queen Vashti in her royal crown represents the glory of Persia itself. Wearing the royal crown, she is a symbol of the kingdom.

The king is summoning her at the height of the feast, at the culmination of the celebration on the great final day, when he is happy and everything seems to be right. But her refusal to come at this point invites a great crisis. This great spectacle of Ahasuerus' pomp and power and the glories of his kingdom, which was supposed to be crowned with the presentation of the glory of his queen, is spoiled by her non-appearance.

Whereas all of his guests were supposed to be impressed by his might, generosity and benefaction, now all of this will be overshadowed by his queen's dishonoring of him. Other commentators read this situation differently. Many feminist commentators, for instance, have seen this as the queen's assertion of her dignity, her refusal to be dishonored or to be reduced to the status of a common concubine.

The concubines were the ones that should come out at this point, not the queen. Vashti, however, is not a hero in the biblical text. Esther chapter 1 does not seem to be written to invite us to respond either very positively or negatively to any of these figures.

That said, as she is a foil for the character of Esther, if anything Vashti is presented in a more negative light, Esther will be what Vashti failed to be. When the king goes to his advisors for counsel, Memucan gives him advice that may seem rather hyperbolic, presenting the actions of Queen Vashti as a societal crisis. While this is almost certainly greatly overstated, we should not miss the possible element of truth to his claims.

Ahasuerus is trying to rule the kingdom through spectacle, and a bad spectacle, such as that created by Queen Vashti, may cause problems throughout his realm. As a consequence of her actions, Memucan advises that Queen Vashti be banished from the king's presence. She would lose much of her power and influence as a result.

This decree concerning Queen Vashti was then to be proclaimed throughout all of the kingdom of King Ahasuerus, in order that as the people saw the consequences of Vashti's actions, wives would be deterred from dishonoring their husbands as Vashti had done. A question to consider. In his treatment of the Book of Esther, Yoram Hazoni presents the character of Ahasuerus as dominated by an appetite for rule and desire for control.

Vashti exists not as a companion for Ahasuerus, but more as a symbol of his greatness and glory. She is seldom by his side, but must come when summoned. When she dishonors the proud king, the king, to save face, blows up the issue into a matter of state, and the flattering counsellors that he has gathered around him merely protect him from the truth about himself.

How do you assess the characters of Ahasuerus and Vashti? Does the biblical text itself give us any clues as to its perspective upon them? Acts chapter 27 And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort, named Julius, and embarking in a ship of Adramitium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. The next day we put in at Sidon, and Julius treated Paul kindly, and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us.

And when we had sailed across the open sea, along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra and Lycia. There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy, and put us on board. We sailed slowly for a number of days, and arrived with difficulty off Nidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmonae.

Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fairhavens, near which was the city of Lassia. Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives. But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said, and because the harbour was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbour of Crete, facing both south-west and north-west, and spend the winter there.

Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. But soon a tempestuous wind, called the north-easter, struck down from the land, and when the ship was caught, and could not face the wind, we gave way to it, and were driven along, running under the lee of a small island called Cawda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship, then, fearing that they would run aground on the surtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along.

Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo, and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When

neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempers lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, Men, you should have listened to me, and not have set sail from Crete, and incurred this injury and loss.

Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before 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 Caesar, and behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you. So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.

But we must run aground on some island. When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic sea, about midnight, the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms.

A little farther on they took a sounding again, and found fifteen fathoms. And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern, and prayed for day to come. And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship's boat into the sea under pretence of laying out anchors from the bow, 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 ship's boat, and let it go. As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.

And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it, and began to eat. Then they all were encouraged, and ate some food themselves. We were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship.

And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea. Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. So they cast off the anchors, and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders, then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach.

But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck, and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape.

But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first, and make for the land. And the

rest on planks, or on pieces of the ship.

And so it was that all were brought safely to land. The story of the journey to Rome, and the shipwreck in Acts chapter 27, is an exciting episode of the narrative, highlighting the Lord's protection of his servant Paul. However, one might wonder why this account is so lengthy, when much of it, exciting though it may be, might not seem to advance the larger narrative of the book in which it is found.

The question of what it is doing here should be considered. Is it simply a result of the fact that Luke is an eyewitness to these events, and as a result is more long-winded in his description? That might well be part of it, but I think there might be something more going on. Luke wants us to pay attention to the significance of this story within the wider framework of his narrative.

Both in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke frames his narrative around journeys, and there are parallels between the two accounts. Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem, and Paul sets his face toward Rome. N.T. Wright observes a deeper parallel between this particular account and the account of the Gospels.

At the equivalent point where in the Gospel we come to the crucifixion itself, we come in Acts to the shipwreck, the moment when the forces of wind and wave do their worst, and it looks as though Paul will be drowned at sea, or smashed on the rocks, or killed by the soldiers, or finally, in an almost comic touch, poisoned by a Maltese snake. The darkness and hopelessness of the storm at sea mirror the dark hopelessness of Gethsemane and Calvary itself, and then finally, after the sailors have used one anchor after another to slow the boat down and prevent it simply accelerating into the waiting rocks, they manage to steer close enough into land so that when the ship finally runs aground and starts to break up, everyone on board comes safe to shore. We have already seen parallels between Paul's hearings and trials and those of Jesus.

There are further details in the narratives that fill out the associations, such as the presence of a centurion who gives some sort of favourable witness in both. Sea imagery is prominent in Matthew, Mark and John. Luke, by surprising contrast, does not employ the language of the sea in the same way or to the same degree in his Gospel.

What is referred to as the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias in the other Gospels, for instance, is consistently spoken of as the lake in Luke. Luke's sea imagery waits for the Book of Acts, where it is associated with the journey to Rome. The sea is connected with chaos.

It is a realm beyond human mastery and order, yet it is bounded by God's sovereignty. In revealing the destructive might of the sea, the event of the flood also reveals the radical dependency of creation upon a gracious providence more generally. Through the flood, we can see the whole world as a sort of arc, a realm whose hospitable elements – stable

ground, gentle rains, fertile earth, light winds, meandering rivers, changing seasons - are a fragile environment that can only be enjoyed because the terrifying forces of chaos that lie just beneath the surface are held at bay by the might and the goodness of God.

The sea is a realm where providence can come into a new focus, as it does in Acts chapter 27, in ways that accentuate and foreground broader narrative themes. Among other things, in the Gospels and now in the Book of Acts, the sea serves as a powerful metaphor for the new field of mission that the Church has been called out into. It is a dangerous realm, in which they must depend upon the provision and the protection of God from the immense powers that surround and will assail them.

While the typical servants of God in the Old Testament are shepherds, in the New Testament we see disciples commissioned to be fishers of men. There are also several stories in the Gospels that focus upon the threatening sea. In her treatment of the sea in the Gospel of Mark, Elizabeth Struthers Malburn describes the boat as a mediator between the land and the sea.

Peter Lighthouse develops this imagery. The fact that Jesus teaches from a boat shoved out in the sea perhaps gives us an image of the Church. The Church is a little ark, a little bit of Israel, tossed about on the sea of nations.

But there's no danger, because the Lord of the Church walks on the sea as dry land. Like the ark during the flood, the Church is a microcosm, the seed of a new humanity, waiting to find its purchase in the soil of a renewed creation. Like the ark, it is exposed to all the terror of the elements, subjected to the winds and the waves, being radically dependent upon God's good care to guide it through them all.

While people of the land may seek to control their environment, people of the sea must adapt themselves more to its conditions and look to the heavens for their care. The sea is also connected with the Gentiles. It is no accident that aside from the story of the flood, the one great boat story in the Old Testament is the book of Jonah, the Israelite prophet who has sent the Assyrian city of Nineveh.

One of the important features of Jonah's story is the way that the experience of the prophet symbolizes the experience of the nation. The disobedience of the Israelite prophet Jonah mirrors the disobedience of Israel and is a lesson to them. His sleep is like their spiritual insensibility.

The storm is the turmoil of conflict that the region is cast into. Jettisoned from the ship, Jonah is like Israel, cast into exile. The big fish is Assyria, an appointed beast, nations being represented by beasts in the prophets and elsewhere.

It swallows Jonah and later vomits him out after he prays for deliverance. This is a lesson that Israel is supposed to learn from. As a symbol of international relations, Israel as the

sleeping prophet, fleeing from the calling of the Lord, caught in a storm on the ship with pagan mariners, is a powerful one.

Israel can no more control the storms of regional conflict and unrest than Jonah can control the storm in the deep. However, Israel's disobedience has consequences for the surrounding nations as the waves of Assyria may overwhelm them too. In Jonah chapter 1 and 2, God presents a different way of thinking about Assyria, as an appointed beast to protect a disobedient prophetic nation from utter destruction as it has forsaken its calling.

The Gentiles are associated with the sea in scripture, and the seething fury of the storm-tossed sea threatening to overwhelm the weak vessel symbolises the vulnerability that the land of Israel stood in relative to the surrounding nations. As we will see, there are several noteworthy similarities and contrasts between the story of Jonah and the story of Paul's shipwreck. Once again, the Jewish prophet in the boat with pagans symbolises something greater, standing for the people of God in the vessel of Christ.

The chapter begins with a description of the first stages of the journey to Rome. Paul was entrusted to Julius the Centurion, and Luke here joins them. We see the narrative changing to We.

The ship that they board is a ship of Adramitium in Mycia in the province of Asia. Even though there was a network of roads throughout the empire, sea travel was generally the swiftest way to move about, even though it was more hazardous. Karl Laney discusses the fact that the Mediterranean was largely, but not entirely, closed to sea travel in the winter months.

Severe storms, winter fog and cloud cover made it very difficult to move about in those times. Conditions varied considerably, however, from one part of the Mediterranean to another. Conditions were much milder in the southeastern quadrant.

For much of the Mediterranean, though, travel was exceedingly dangerous between November and February, which was why Paul suggested staying in fair havens. Passengers lived on the deck of the ship. Beyond water, provisions usually were not offered.

Ships were for cargo and for troops, they were not for passengers. There weren't schedules, you would board whatever boat you could find, and travel was extremely dangerous. 2 Corinthians 11.25 was written before the events of this chapter.

Within it Paul says, Three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I was adrift at sea. This then will be Paul's fourth shipwreck, at the very least. As these were sailing vessels, the speed of travel also depended heavily upon the direction of the wind, and how favourable it was to the direction of intended travel.

Paul and his company are sailing against the winds, which is why they had such a slow going. They travel along the coast, to the north of Cyprus, along the Mediterranean coast of modern day Turkey, until they reach Myra. There they take an Alexandrian ship to Italy, presumably a much larger vessel.

As a vessel bringing Egyptian grain to Rome, it would have been one of the largest vessels in the Mediterranean at the time. Lainey gives their dimensions as about 180 feet, or 55 metres in length, 50 feet, or 15 metres in width, and about 44 feet, or 13.5 metres, from the deck to the bottom of the hold. He notes Lucian of Samosata's claim that a ship of this kind could carry enough grain to feed every person in Attica for a year.

Luke records the number of persons aboard the ship as 276, which seems surprisingly large to some commentators, but others point out that Josephus reports 600 persons on the ship that took him to Italy. The course of travel needed to be determined in no small measure by the wind. Just as they had sailed under the lee of Cyprus earlier, the side shielded from the wind to the north, now they must sail under the lee of Crete, which is this time on the south side, until, with difficulty, they reached Fairhavens, which would offer temporary shelter.

The fast, or the Day of Atonement, in September or October had passed, but they had tarried in Fairhavens, presumably waiting for better weather conditions. Paul strongly warned them about going on. We should bear in mind here that Paul was not just a mere landlubber.

He had three shipwrecks under his belt already, and might have learnt some things from the experience. If they stayed at Fairhavens for the winter, while it would not be ideal, it would save the passengers and the cargo. However, as they determined that Fairhavens wasn't suitable to stay in for the winter, they decided to go to Phoenix, another harbour in Crete, which would provide them with better winter shelter.

They travelled then west along the Cretan coast, with a gentle south wind, but suddenly an east-north-east wind hit them, and it drove them down away from the protection of the shore, preventing them from reaching Phoenix. They get some protection from the small island of Korda, and they take three actions at that point. They haul up the ship's boat, a much lighter boat that could be towed behind the ship in good weather.

They undergird the ship with cables or ropes, to prevent the spars or the hull from breaking apart. They lower the ship's gear, sail, tackle, rigging. Concerned about running aground on the Sirtis, dangerous sandbanks and shallows off North Africa, they want to be as high in the water as possible.

On the third day, they cast the ship's tackle, all the spare gear and perhaps even the mainsail, overboard. To make matters much, much worse, there was no sun or stars for many days, preventing navigation. In contrast to the boat stories of the Gospels, the ship

of Acts chapter 27 has a mixed multitude of passengers.

It's saved through the message of the Apostle. A tempest striking a pagan ship bearing a Jewish prophet towards the West is quite reminiscent of the story of Jonah. However, whereas in the book of Jonah the disobedient prophet places the lives of everyone else in danger, here the situation is reversed.

God grants Paul all of those who sail with him, as we see in verse 24. This is a powerful image of salvation, and as in the literary structure of the book of Acts, it is paralleled with the story of the crucifixion in Luke, it invites our attention. A Jew and Gentile multitude are saved by observing the Apostle's teaching, by faithfully remaining on the ship, and by being sustained through blessed and broken bread, and parallels with the Church are not difficult to identify.

The vision of the Church that appears here is one formed of many different peoples, enduring suffering and hardship, formed together in a communion that serves to break down former oppositions, surrounded by threats and tempests, persevering and overcoming through the divine guidance and aid upon which they depend. God gives Paul assurance for himself and also for everyone else who is with him. Until Paul has completed his mission, he cannot be harmed by all of these things that come at him, and as long as he is in the boat, the other people are safe with him.

This is all in stark contrast with Jonah, who threatened other people by his presence. A ship like Paul's in such conditions would drift about 36.5 miles or 58.4 kilometers a day, bringing them near to Malta. Presumably hearing sounds of breakers, they realize that they are approaching the land and start to take soundings.

They discover that they are nearing the land, and so they let down four anchors from the stern. They then pretend to let down anchors from the bow, but the sailors are actually attempting to lower the ship's boat in order to escape the vessel. Paul tells the centurion and the soldiers, and they prevent them.

Paul then, as if he were the natural leader of the company, instructs them to eat a meal. Many have seen here an allusion to the Last Supper. There is a very similar context.

If the crucifixion is paralleled with the shipwreck, it comes at the right point. There is a reference to the arrival of the 14th night, and the strict instruction to the centurion and the soldiers that everyone must stay in the ship or be destroyed. Both of these things evoke a Passover context, and by extension, the context of Christ's death.

The 14th of Nisan was the day of the Passover. We read that Paul took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and began to eat. And the echo should not be that hard to hear, in Luke 22, verse 19, and he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, This is my body, which is given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. From the plague of darkness, they're going to be delivered through this evening meal. They're going to pass through the waters.

They're going to be delivered from the hands of soldiers that want to kill them, and they're going to come out safely on the other side. The specificity of the number of the company, 276, is also interesting. Like 153, 120, and 666, it is a triangular number which fascinated many ancient thinkers.

St. Augustine and others refer to such numbers in their works. What symbolic meaning it might have, if any, is quite unclear to me, perhaps something related to 24 minus 1. F. H. Coulson argues for some significance, and several early church writers speculated about some spiritual meaning. However, while the number is tantalisingly specific, no clear symbolic import suggests itself.

They cast out the remainder of the food. This might again remind us of the Passover meal, of which nothing was to be left until the morning. This also serves the practical purpose of lightening the ship even further.

When the day comes, they have some visibility at last, and they see a bay and a beach, although it is land that they do not recognise. This part of Malta was not a normal part of the sea route. They are making for the land to run aground, so they cast off the anchors, they loosen the rudders so that they will be able to steer towards the beach, and they hoist the foresail.

However, before they reach the beach, they strike a sandbank, and the vessel stuck. As the soldiers would be liable for the escapees, they plan to kill the prisoners, but the centurion prevents it from being carried out, as he desires to protect Paul. Those who could swim were ordered to swim, and the rest were given planks from the ship.

According to the word that the Lord had given to Paul, all were brought safely to land. A question to consider. Where can we see themes of providence in this story that connect with broader themes of providence in the larger story of Acts?