CHAPTER TWO

PLACING THE EPISODE AT MALTA:
A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF ACTS 28:1–10 WITHIN
ITS LITERARY CONTEXT

In this chapter, I provide a “first reading” of the Malta episode staying at the level of literary analysis and the recognition of motifs. The primary goal of this chapter is to observe what is in the text, note the way in which the literary context (i.e., the Sea Voyage in chapter 27) of Acts 28:1–10 produces meaning, and raise the right questions about the passage – questions which will drive the remainder of this study and will not be answered fully until the concluding chapter. Convincing answers to these questions will require sustained examinations of the cultural and religious scripts upon which Luke relies as well as a broader investigation of portions of his entire literary project in both his Gospel and in Acts. Before examining the Malta episode and the questions it raises, it is necessary to situate the text within its preceding context.

I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEA-VOYAGE: (ACTS 27:1–44)

Acts 28:1–10 is situated strategically between Paul’s sea-voyage (27:1–44) and his arrival in Rome (28:16–31) which the reader has been anticipating at least since Acts 19:21 (“after I have been there [Jerusalem] it is necessary for me to see Rome.”). An examination of the passage preceding the Malta episode yields important questions and will make stronger the ones posed by my initial examination of Acts 28:1–10.

Acts 27 contains a host of questions. Does the reappearance of the “we”-narrator indicate the possibility of an eyewitness account or the use of a travel diary of one of Paul’s companions? What is the reason for the

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2 For a good review of the various positions on the matter, see J. Wehnert, Die Wir-Passagen der Apostelgeschichte: Ein lukanisches Stilmittel aus jüdischer Tradition (Göttingen:
length of the account which causes a strong delaying effect? Is Luke symbolically portraying Paul’s death and resurrection? Is the account literally dependent upon or influenced by other shipwreck narratives? These are just a few of the interesting problems this text poses. The present discussion can bracket these questions since I am concerned with establishing how the motifs, plot, and characterization of Paul in Acts 27 contribute to the meaning of the Malta episode.

A. The Hellenistic Narrative Setting

Before Paul’s voyage to Rome, Luke devotes (from Acts 21:18 until 26:32) a little less than six chapters to recounting an intra-Jewish debate regarding Paul’s orthodoxy with respect to his Jewish faith and whether he “stirs up insurrection” (κινοῦντα στάσεις, Acts 24:5). In these chapters Paul is a prisoner under Roman custody. In this lengthy portion of the narrative, the Apostle to the Gentiles has had no interaction with Gentile churches, has had no occasion to offer God’s salvation to the Gentiles through preaching or healing, and is characterized more like a philosopher standing on trial or a rhetorician giving forensic speeches than an apostle or prophet of God.


