
Malta

from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia ¹

MALTA mal'te [Gk. *Melitē* (Acts 28:1)]; AV MELITA. The island where Paul was shipwrecked. Though some have identified Malta with Meleda on the east coast of the Adriatic Sea, the African Melita (Malta) is most likely the correct identification. The Romans called the island and principal town Melita.

Malta is a rocky islet 93 km (58 mi) S of Sicily, 240 km (149 mi) S of the Italian mainland, and 290 km (180 mi) N of Cape Bon in Tunisia. A little over 27 km (17 mi) long, 14 km (9 mi) wide, and with a shoreline of 137 km (85 mi), it is the chief island of the Maltese group—which includes Gozo and Comino islands.

Though Malta lacks significant natural resources, it has often had strategic importance as a base from which to control the Mediterranean narrows. Its excellent harbor can accommodate a considerable fleet.

Phoenicians occupied Malta in Paul's day. Luke's calling the people *bárbaroi* (not Greco-Roman; Acts 28:2) agrees with the testimony of Diodorus (v 12) that they were Phoenicians, neither hellenized nor romanized. The date of the Phoenician arrival is uncertain, but Carthage dominated Malta after the 6th cent. B.C. and Rome captured the Maltese islands from Carthage in 218 B.C.

On his voyage to Rome, Paul was shipwrecked on the island (Acts 27:43) and stayed there three months until favorable sailing weather (28:11). The traditional site of Paul's shipwreck is 13 km (8 mi) NW of the present capital of Valletta at a place now called St. Paul's Bay. The location is reasonably certain. W. Ramsay (SPT) and J. Smith (*Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul* [1880]) have exhaustively treated the topographical question.

Two points about the incident of Paul and the snake (Acts 28:3–6) need mention. First, as F. F. Bruce (comm on Acts [NICNT, 1954], pp. 521f) and others have pointed out, there are now no snakes on Malta, but there may have been in Paul's day. Second, in the natives' initial reaction to the incident, "Though he has escaped from the sea, justice [Gk. *díkē*] has not allowed him to live," Gk. *díkē* is probably Luke's hellenizing of a Punic deity (see E. Haenchen, comm on Acts [Eng. tr. 1971], p. 713 n 5). Thus Bauer, rev, p. 198, defined *díkē* here as "Justice personified as a goddess"

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