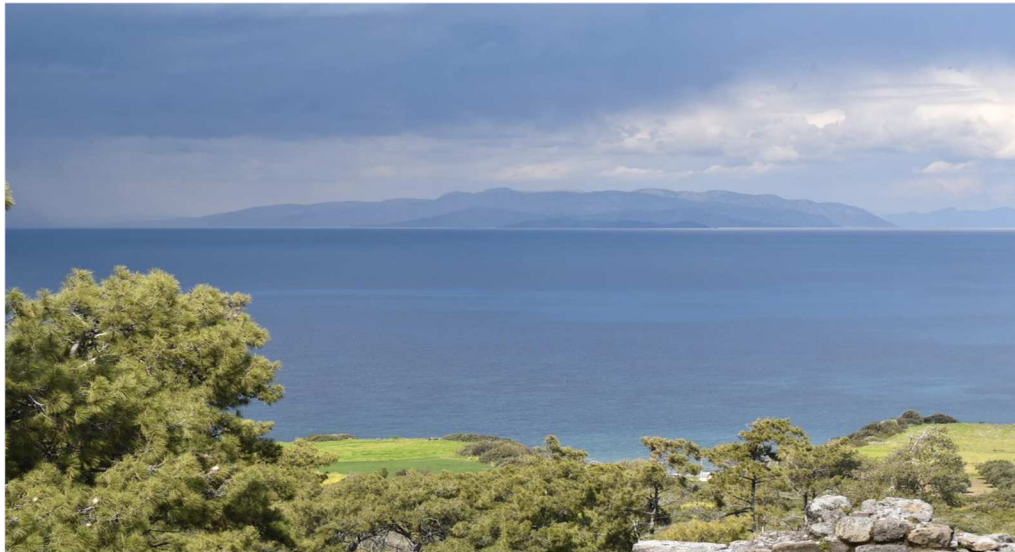


March 21, 2022

AND THE NEXT DAY TO RHODES...
Behind the Scenes in Paul's Third Missionary Journey
(Acts 21:1)
Aquiles Ernesto Martínez



On many occasions I have argued that all forms of communication are generated in particular historical-social contexts of which they are faithful replicas. Therefore, without exception, any discourse must always be understood in relation to its context. But at the same time, I have pointed out that, most of the time, such a context is not available to the recipients. It is hidden; that is, behind the scenes and it is taken for granted between the sender and the receiver of the original information. At best, that context and the relationship to the messages are rarely explicit. Consequently, those of us who are not part of that communication code are left on the sidelines and under the power of imagination that sometimes results in speculations. And when we run into this kind of vacuum, we are forced to employ a methodology that takes into consideration other sources of information and that allows us to reconstruct some viable scenarios in order to fill the contextual gaps left by the discourse.

In the Bible, this discourse-context relationship is a categorical rule. However, because biblical writers have particular agendas and are human beings, they could not talk about everything any more than they should have tried. In fact, most of the time they omitted information about the background of their words and a cause-and-effect connection with it cannot be established. So they excluded information that perhaps for the original readers may have been pertinent. They also didn't realize or open themselves to the idea of how their messages and contexts might have been processed by people outside of the original sender-receiver code.

As a result of my recent visit to Rhodes, Acts 21:1 comes to mind in order to illustrate this important methodological point. In this text the narrator, who seems to have been part of Paul's missionary journey and not a mere literary construct, affirms that the apostle and his companions, after meeting with some of Christian believers in the port of Miletus, sharing some encouraging pastoral words, and an emotional farewell (Acts 20:17-37), followed the following travel itinerary:

After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Kos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara (New International Version)

The interesting thing about this brief note is that the writer of Acts does not give any details about the places mentioned or what happened there. As the present geography reveals and archaeology confirms, these are three islands located in the southeastern region of the Aegean Sea: Cos, Rhodes and Patara. Not information is provided either about Phoenicia, Cyprus, Syria or Tyre (Acts 21:2-3). And although it is true that not all information is relevant to the writer, that we must draw limits and that, for obvious reasons, there is always much more that is excluded than what is included, those of us who want to deepen our knowledge of the biblical passages and their respective social environments want to go deep and bring to light what these texts present as tacit, consider irrelevant, or do not explain.

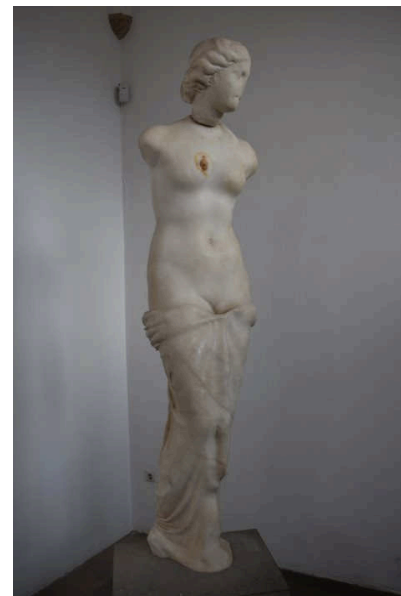
Consistent with this latter idea and assuming that what this passage says about Paul and his fellow travelers is factual and not a mere rhetorical device, it is reasonable we would ask questions that Acts 21:1 does not answer: Where specifically in Rhodes did this missionary team stay? How much time did they spend there and with whom they had contact? What did they talk about? Did they proclaim the Gospel there? And if they didn't, isn't this an incongruity with the charge to preach the Good News to every individual or nation? Or is it rather that the Message must be proclaimed sometimes and sometimes not? Why not stay longer there to establish churches like it was done in Greece and Asia? Did they have the opportunity to observe their Hellenistic-Roman surroundings, some of the temples near the

port, habits of life or religious practices, even for a far and a few moments? And if so, what was their assessment of the context in light of your monotheistic beliefs? Why didn't the narrator take time describe Rhodes?

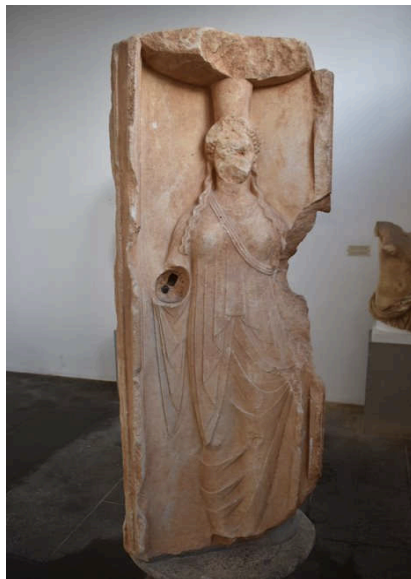
To channel some of these concerns pertaining this passage and its milieu and as a simple pedagogical exercise, I would like to share some photographs of select sites of the island of Rhodes and some religious-cultural objects found therein, along with some exegetical and cross-cultural observations. I do this to place the brief, incomplete, and enigmatic note of Acts 21:1 in context much broader and focusing on what it leaves aside. I also do so as part of an effort to understand the biblical texts with what I call a responsible, situated, and relevant imagination.

By the time Paul and his companions arrived at the port of this island, the famous Colossus of Rhodes, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world according to the testimony of Antipater of Sidon, had already been destroyed. But given the presence of so many temples from the Hellenistic and Roman periods in and around its harbor, and so many religious objects that suggest the existence of beliefs and practices that, in the end, fit within the pejorative biblical category of "idolatry," it is impossible not to conjecture about what the missionary team led by Paul could or should have experienced and evaluated.

For example, near the docks of Rhodes, we find the remains of a sanctuary dedicated to Aphrodite Pudica (the goddess of beauty and love) from the third century BCE. And it is believed that a statue exhibited today in the Archaeological Museum of Rhodes was possibly worshipped in this sacred place.



And if we look up to the west, on top of a nearby hill, we can identify the ruins of a hippodrome, a theater, a library, an agora, and a temple in honor of Apollo (a popular deity associated with hunting, divination, and music), which is now under restoration. In this area experts have also identified the remains of a possible sanctuary in honor of Athens Polias (the goddess of war and wisdom) and Zeus Poileus (the maximum god of Olympus), near of which a statue of the goddess in charge of magic and spells was found, i.e., Hekate.





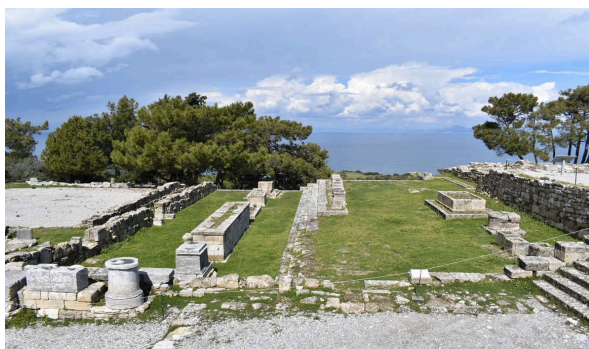
Among other aspects to consider, what would we say about all these symbols of privilege and power of a political-religious elite and its relations with the people under its direction but from a Christian perspective? How could we not conjecture what the writer of Acts could or should have said from the point of view of Jesus-centered mission and its Jewish influence?

If we leave the port of Rhodes to explore the island, we can easily detect other important archaeological sites and their suggestive material culture. And when we think of the intentionally overlooked background of Acts 21:1, it is perhaps less likely that Paul and his fellow servants would have moved there. However, it costs us nothing to reconstruct part of this environment, especially when the existing evidence reveals so many similarities with the rest of the peoples of the Mediterranean Sea basin and even the information that Acts provides about the successes and mishaps of the evangelistic charge to reach the last corners of the world.

To the southwest of the capital of Rhodes, there is the site of Kamiros, which was part of a coalition that included the island settlements of Ialysos and Lindos. In this ancient city-

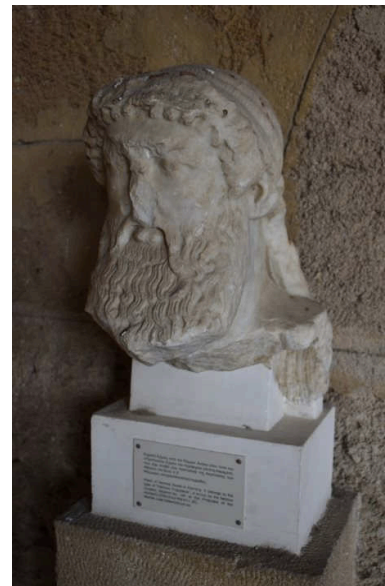
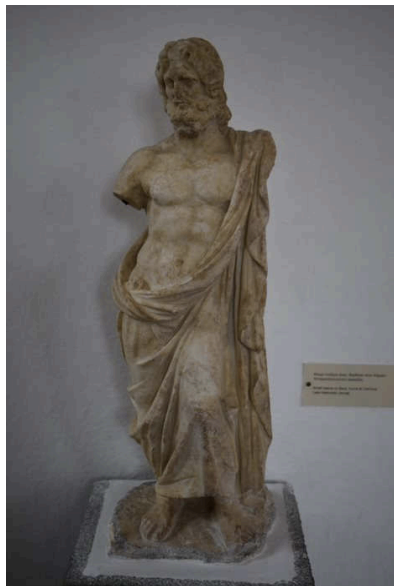


state, founded by the Dorians around the fifth century BCE, there is a restored acropolis with its agora, residential area, tombs, dwellings, spas, fountains, cisterns, and several sanctuaries. Take, for example, the foundation of a temple to Athena in the upper part of the city and, in the lower part, another temple in honor of Apollo and altars celebrating other deities; one of them being Helios (the divine personification of the sun).





At this location, other important religious objects for the study of the background of the New Testament were discovered: a statue of Zeus and a head of Hermes (the messenger god), both deities known among the Romans as Jupiter and Mercury respectively (see Acts 14:12).

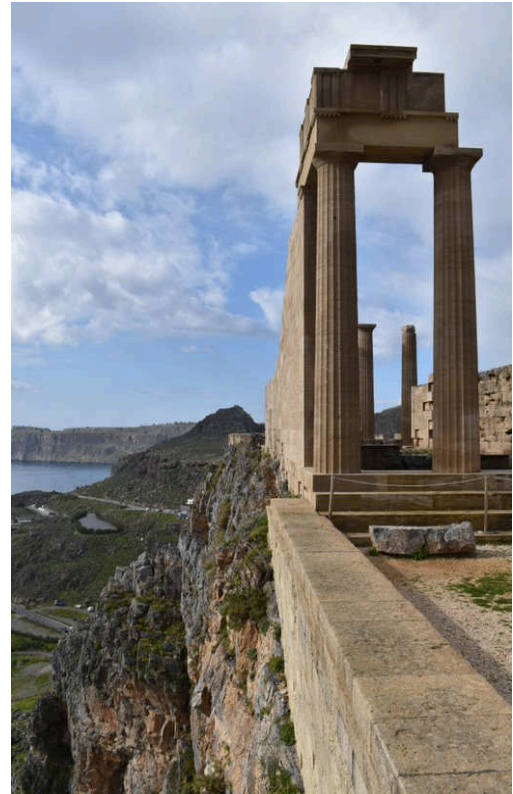


I may add that in Hellenistic and Roman times, the popularity of Apollo was so spread out that near Kamiros, in Theologs, we can contemplate the abandoned remains of a sanctuary in his honor, while very close, in Soroni, archaeologists discovered a statue dedicated to Dionysius (the god of wine) (ca. 100 BCE). Since the Bible is a collection of religious documents in a religious world, all this information is relevant.

Continuing with our tour, on the eastern coast of Rhodes, the city of Lindos captures our devoted attention with its architecture, location, and landscapes. And whether the apostle Paul and his companions were aware of this fortified enclave or not, the present buildings and objects discovered therein, buried in the mystery or gaps of the biblical narrative, allow us to travel in space and time by giving us a good mental idea or graphic representation of the world that is frequently repressed or even condemned.

In the highest part of this acropolis, we find altars and some inscriptions with names of priests, surrounded by what were rows of columns, porticoes, stairs and even a church. But there the remodeled remains of the temple of Athens and other sacred enclosures of the fourth century BCE are especially striking.





All these features remind us that the construction of fortresses on top of hills (for security and control) was a common and necessary practice in contexts of battles and invasions. They also testify to the stark dynamics of power and privilege and the crossovers of politics, religion, and the material culture, issues about which the Bible is oftentimes conveniently silent.



After opening the curtain of the closed scenario painted by the writer of Acts 21:1, how could we not think about the meanings and implications of all this valuable evidence thanks to a reading methodology that is sensitive to the information that this biblical text omits for many and justifiable reasons? Why not welcoming approaches that would also take into consideration the silences or gaps with the proper cognitive controls? After all, no discourse encompasses all of social reality or understands it exhaustively. There is always much more to be said.

I believe that if we approached the biblical texts and their dialectic, mutant, and complex relationship with their matrix and socializing contexts, with their similarities and differences, instead of accepting the information as it comes, perhaps we could understand the history and cultures of the peoples more deeply and, in this cross-cultural process, understand ourselves.

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