

## WHAT WENT OVERBOARD FIRST?

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“The violent storm continued, so on the next day they began to throw the ship’s cargo overboard, and on the following day they threw the ship’s equipment overboard with their own hands.”

Acts 27.18–19 TEV

The TEV specifically states that it was the ship’s cargo that was thrown out in Acts 27.18, and in doing so, it stands in the distinguished company of the RV, RSV, JB, LB, Moffatt, C. K. Williams, Phillips, Barclay<sup>1</sup>, the Spanish VP, the Français Courant and no doubt many more. The KJV and the NEB are a little more circumspect, and use the expression “lighten the ship”. This avoids saying what was jettisoned, but still clearly implies that something was. The purposes of this note are (1) to suggest that the Greek text does not necessarily support this conclusion, despite its almost universal acceptance, and (2) to put forward a rendering that seems more in harmony with the overall context of the chapter.

The ship was an Alexandrian ship on its way to Italy (Acts 27.6), and as might be expected in the light of the heavy grain trade between Egypt and Rome in the first century, its cargo was wheat (27.38). There is no suggestion either that the cargo consisted of anything other than wheat<sup>2</sup>, or (apart from the verses under discussion) that any part of the cargo was disposed of before v. 38. The wheat would not be readily jettisoned, both for obvious financial reasons, and for more urgent practical reasons: its weight constituted valuable ballast, and in heavy seas a laden ship is less likely to capsize than an unladen one provided the cargo does not shift.<sup>3</sup> It was only when the sea depth was known to be decreasing (27.27–29) that the wheat was abandoned, so that the ship would ride higher and thus get closer to land before grounding<sup>4</sup>. (Perhaps the German *Die Gute Nachricht* has sensed this, and attempted to minimise the problem by rendering “einen Teil der Ladung” in v. 18.)

The Greek text has the expression ἐκβολὴν ἐποιοῦντο in 27.18, and thus does not explicitly specify what went overboard, or indeed that anything did. Commentators (e.g. Bruce, Moulton, Williams, Haenchen) cite the similar expression in the LXX of Jonah 1.5, but do not seem to take full account of the differences between the two passages. In Jonah 1.5, the verb is aorist in tense (ἐποίησαντο) and the objects jettisoned (τῶν σκευῶν τῶν ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ) are explicitly stated. In Acts 27.18, the verb is imperfect, and no objects are mentioned. The parallel therefore is not of great help in determining the exact force of Acts 27.18.

In attempting to do this, two questions must be considered. (1) What is the

<sup>1</sup> In his 1953 volume on Acts in the Daily Study Bible Series, Barclay translates “they began to throw equipment overboard” in 27.18. However in his NT translation of 1968, he reverts to the majority view with “they began to jettison the cargo”.

<sup>2</sup> Haenchen p. 704 cites Renié’s view that it was deck cargo that was jettisoned in v. 18, but the text nowhere suggests the existence of such deck cargo.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bruce p. 517. Haenchen pp. 704, 707 seems to take the view that the wheat was stored in sacks, and not loose in the holds as Breusing thought. If so, it could not readily shift in a storm, but could be thrown out fairly easily at need, as in v. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Newman and Nida, p. 497.

significance of the imperfect tense of *ἐποιοῦντο*, as against the aorist of *ἔρριψαν* in v. 19? (2) What is the contextual relevance of the emphatically placed *αὐτόχειρες* of v. 19? Apart from the KJV, English versions have not failed to note the imperfect, but they have uniformly assumed that its force is inchoative, and without exception use the English verb "began". When this is followed by a transitive verb such as "throw", English usage then demands that the jetsam should be specified. The absence of specific jetsam from the Greek, either explicit or self-evidently recoverable from the context, suggests that *ἐκβολὴν ἐποιοῦντο* is not most happily rendered by an expression like "began to throw".

If on the other hand *ἐποιοῦντο* is taken as conative, the problem can be resolved. In v. 18, then, an attempt was made to jettison something, and (implicitly) the attempt was not successful. The objections may be raised that the implication of failure is not sufficiently clear, and that in any case there remains the problem of identifying the intended jetsam. Verse 19, understood in the light of comments made by Bruce and Haenchen, can give reasonable answers to both these objections. To take the second one first, Bruce (p. 511) cites the interpretation of J. Smith that by *τὴν σκευὴν* of v. 19 "the mainyard is meant: an immense spar, probably as long as the ship, which would require the united efforts of passengers and crew to launch overboard". Bruce (p. 509, quoting Lake-Cadbury) and Haenchen (p. 707, following Breusing) state that the foremast could be used as a derrick. If verses 18-19 refer to the hoisting overboard of a very heavy and unwieldy spar, then surely a first attempt would be made to do so with the aid of a derrick. It is easy to picture how such an effort could be frustrated by the adverse weather conditions; if such a heavy object were raised far, it could affect the stability of the ship, and/or damage the derrick. The assumption of a failed attempt to move a very heavy piece of equipment by mechanical means in v. 18 gives much more point to the presence of *αὐτόχειρες* in v. 19 and thus answers the second question posed above. What the derricks were unable to accomplish was next day finally achieved by hand. The punctiliar aorist of v. 19 is as appropriate for a successfully completed manual effort as the imperfect of v. 18 for a prolonged but vain mechanical effort. Without such an assumption, it is hard to see any relevance at all for *αὐτόχειρες*. If anyone is throwing things overboard in the ordinary course of events he naturally does it "by hand". The verb *ἔρριψαν* itself implies this, and it is superfluous to add "by hand" anywhere, let alone in an emphatic position.

Perhaps it was an awareness of this that led to the TR reading of the first person *ἔρριψαμεν* in v.19. This does give *αὐτόχειρες* some relevance, though it tends to imply that Luke as a passenger took a rather dim view of sharing in such undignified manual labour.

If the foregoing suggestions are accepted, a more accurate rendering of vv. 18-19 would be "The violent storm continued, so on the next day, they tried to hoist the ship's heavy<sup>5</sup> equipment<sup>6</sup> overboard; on the third day,

<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps "spare equipment". Cf. Bruce p. 511, Moulton p. 366, Hanson (citing Lake) p. 248, Haenchen p. 704, Barclay (1953 and 1968).

<sup>6</sup> "Tackle" or "gear" would give a more nautical flavour, but these terms are probably too technical for a TEV-type translation.

by manhandling it, they finally succeeded." Such a change does not alter the overall thrust of the account, but in its details it (1) gives more point to the contrast of tense between v. 18 and v. 19; (2) avoids making a statement about the cargo which is not only unsupported by the Greek text but is actually at variance with it in v. 38; (3) supplies a new force to the otherwise pleonastic *αὐτόχειρες*; (4) suggests a motivation for the occurrence of the alternative reading of *ἐρπίψαμεν*; (5) takes account of the probable fittings of the ship; (6) meets the economic and practical necessities of the situation. Thus, despite its apparent novelty, this interpretation can claim support grammatically, contextually, culturally and psychologically, and so deserves serious exegetical consideration.

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## ON TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING GALATIANS 1.13

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The apostle Paul refers to his activities as a persecutor of the church three times (Gal. 1.13; 1 Cor. 15.9; and Phil. 3.6). In Gal. 1.13 he states in particular that he persecuted the church *καθ' ὑπερβολήν*.

The Greek adverbial phrase *καθ' ὑπερβολήν* has been translated frequently in the twentieth century as though it connotes violence, even though there is no lexical basis for doing such. Moffatt (1924) and Goodspeed (1927) have "furiously" for the phrase. The RSV (1946) has "violently". Phillips (1947)