PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEY TO SPAIN:
TRADITION AND FOLKLORE

OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS

The early church, and especially the church in Spain, has
maintained various accounts of the missionary journey by the
apostle Paul to Spain. The official and popular traditions are
described briefly.

We shall probably never
know whether Paul fulfilled
the intention expressed in his Letter to
the Romans to visit Spain (Rom
15:24, 28). The early church believed
that the apostle's appeal to Caesar
terminated successfully, that he was
acquitted of the charges against him,
and that he spent some years in
freedom before he was again
imprisoned and sentenced to death.
Eusebius writes that "after pleading
his cause, he is said to have been
sent again upon the ministry of
preaching, and after a second visit
to the city, he finished his life with
martyrdom" (Hist. eccl. 2:22).

Evidence of Paul's activity
subsequent to the "two whole years"
mentioned in Acts 28:30 is found in
three early Christian documents. In
A.D. 96 Clement of Rome, whom
tradition has identified as Paul's
disciple mentioned in Phil 4:3, wrote
an epistle to the Corinthians, in
which he states that Paul

had been seven times in bonds, had been
driven into exile, had been stoned, had
preached in the East and in the West, he
won the noble renown which was the
reward of his faith, having taught
righteousness unto the whole world and
having reached the farthest bounds of
the West.

For a Roman, the "farthest
bounds of the West," a phrase often
used by Roman writers to refer to
Spain, could only mean the Iberian
peninsula. Further, the Acts of
Peter, written in the late 2nd
century, informs us in some detail
about the departure of the Apostle
Paul from the Roman harbor of
Ostia to Spain. And lastly, the
Muratori Canon, compiled by an
anonymous Christian about A.D. 170,
refers to his Spanish mission. This
document, originally written in
Greek and translated into somewhat
barbarous Latin, includes the
following in its account of the Acts
of the Apostles:

Luke puts it shortly to the most
excellent Theophilus that several
things were done in his own presence,
as he also plainly shows by leaving
out the passion of Peter and also the
departure of Paul from town on his
journey to Spain.

By the middle of the 2nd
century, Christians believed that the
apostle's intended visit to Spain was
in fact realized. This is not the place
to discuss the manifold arguments
for or against the apostle's journey
to Spain. It is well known that later
accounts of outstanding conquerors,
missionaries, and other important
personages show a tendency to
exaggerate historical facts by
representing the territorial extent of
their influence as greater than it
actually was. It is possible, therefore,
Augusti by Nero in A.D. 54, soon became one of the larger cosmopolitan and commercial centers in Italy with more than 50,000 inhabitants. Every year on January 27, large crowds from Rome gathered in Ostia for the celebrations in honor of Castor and Pollux. The Jewish community maintained a synagogue on the outer periphery of the city on the Via Severiana. The recently excavated synagogue in Ostia shows an elaborate vestibule leading to the main building ending in a slightly curved apse; in the southern section was the tabernacle containing the scrolls of the Hebrew scriptures. One would not be surprised if Paul had visited and even preached in this synagogue.

Ostia had rapidly taken over the commerce of Puteoli, and most of the goods destined for Rome arrived in Ostia. According to Strabo, “it was the port-town of the Roman navy, the port into which the Tiber after flowing past Rome, empties.” Ships sailed regularly from Ostia to the Spanish ports of Cadiz and Tarraco (Tarragona). According to Pliny the Elder, who under the emperor Vespasian served as procurator in Hispania Tarraconensis, the journey from Ostia to Spain took four days.

The third chapter in the apocryphal Acts of Peter describes in a vivid manner the departure of the Apostle Paul from Ostia harbor:

A great multitude of women were kneeling and praying and beseeching Paul, and they kissed his feet and accompanied him unto the harbor. But Dionysius and Balbus of Asia, knights from Rome, and illustrious men, and a senator by name of Demetrius abode by Paul on his right side and said: “Paul, I would desire to leave the city if I were not a magistrate, that I might not depart from thee.” Also from Caesar’s house, Cleobius and Iphitus and Philostrate with Narcissus the presbyter accompanied him to the harbor: but whereas a storm of the sea came on, he (Narcissus) sent the brethren back to Rome, that if any would, he might come down and hear Paul until he set sail; and hearing that, the brethren went up into the city. And when they told the brethren that had remained in the city, some on beasts, and some on foot, and others by way of the Tiber came down to the harbor, and were confirmed in the faith for three days, and on the fourth until the fifth hour, praying together with Paul, and making the offering, and they put all that was needful on the ship and delivered to him two young men, believers, to sail with him, and bade him farewell in the Lord and returned to Rome.

Tarragona would have been the most likely city for the apostle’s mission to Spain. Known as Colonia Julia Victrix Triumphalis Tarraco to commemorate the victories of Julius Caesar, the city was made the seat of one of the four assize courts established in Hispania Citerior. Having spent some time in Tarragona, Augustus made it the capital of the whole province, subsequently named Hispania Tarraconensis. East of the site of the present cathedral the people of Tarragona constructed an altar to Augustus.

An 8th-century Spanish tradition relates that during his mission to the Catalans the Apostle Paul consecrated Procopus first bishop of Tarragona. Because of intense local persecutions by the Romans, Procopus fled to Regium Lepidum — Reggio Nell’ Emilia, northwest of Bologna — where he was immediately accepted as bishop of the city “because he is the successor of Paul in Tarragona.” The 10th-century Greek Menologion and the hagiographer Symeon Metaphrastes mention that Paul, while preaching in Spain, converted the two sisters Xanthippe and Polyxene, who are commemorated in the Greek Orthodox Church on September 23. Xanthippe converted her husband, Philothesus, prefect of Provo (?), to the Christian faith; Polyxene, on the other hand, went to Achaia in Greece, where she was baptized by Andrew the First-called.

Although the patron of Tarragona is St. Fructuosus, who
In Tortosa, a Roman colony 55 km. southwest of Tarragona on the River Ebro, a local tradition claims Paul to have founded the local church and consecrated Rufus, the son of Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21; Rom 16:13) as the first bishop of the city.

In addition to the Catalan traditions of the visit of Paul to Spain, there is an Andalusian cycle of legends maintained by the Christians in Ecija, ancient Astigis, in the province of Seville. These 16th-century traditions hold that the apostle sailed from Ostia to Cadiz, then proceeded to the Roman colony of Astigis, known as Augusta Firma. Hierotheus, a citizen of Astigis, is said to have traveled to Achaia where he was converted in Athens by Paul's preaching. Paul consecrated him first bishop of Athens, whereupon Hierotheus asked the apostle to visit his native city. After his first Roman imprisonment Paul remembered the request of Hierotheus and went to Astigis. His preaching in the forum converted many people, among them Crispin, whom he ordained bishop of Astigis. With Crispin as patron of the shoemakers, it is no coincidence that throughout the centuries Ecija was famous all over Spain for its shoemaking!

None of the local Spanish traditions can be traced to a period prior to the 8th century, and many of them emerged during the 14th century and even later. In the early 1960's several Spanish communities celebrated the 19th centenary of the arrival of the Apostle Paul in Spain, and in 1961 the Spanish postal authorities issued a 1-peseta commemorative stamp showing El Greco's Apostle Paul with the text:

**XIX CENTENARIO DE LA VENIDA DE SAN PABLO A ESPAÑA**

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Dubowy, E.
1914 Klemens von Rom über die Reise Pauli nach Spanien. Biblische Studien 19; 3.

Pfister, F.

Serra, V. J.

Spier
1742 In historia critica de Hispanic Pauli Itinere. Wittenberg.

Vega, A. C.
1964 La venida de San Pablo a España y los Varones Apositólicos. Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia 114: 7-78.

Vives, J.
1965 Tradición y Leyenda en la Hagiografía Hispánica. Barcelona.