

PUBLIUS THE PROTOS OF MALTA

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The name *Poplios* is the Greek form of the Latin name *Publius* which in the Bible occurs only once as the name of the Chief Man of the island of Malta (1).

The name is well-known in profane history. In fact it is found as a praenomen common among the Romans, such as *Publius Caius*, a man who conspired with Brutus against Julius Caesar (2).

Another *Publius* was a praetor who conquered Palaepolis. He was only a plebeian, and though neither consul nor dictator, he obtained a triumph in spite of the opposition of the senators. He was the first who was honoured with a triumph during a praetorship (3).

He was also a *Publius*, the Roman consul who defeated the Latins, and was made dictator (4).

Publius Syrus was a Syrian mimic poet, who flourished about 44 B.C. He was originally a slave sold to a Roman patrician, called Domitius, who brought him up with great attention, and gave him his freedom when of age. He gained the esteem of the most powerful at Rome, and reckoned Julius Caesar among his patrons. He soon eclipsed the poet Laberius, whose burlesque compositions were in general esteem. There remains of *Publius* a collection of moral sentences, written in iambs, and placed in alphabetical order, the newest edition of which is that of Patav. *Comin.* 1740 (5).

But perhaps the most famous man named *Publius* is *Valerius Publius*, a celebrated Roman, surnamed *Poplicola*, from his popularity. He was very active in assisting Brutus to expel

(1) See F. ZORELL, S.J., *Novi Testament Lexicon Graecum*, s.v.

(2) See J. LEMPRIERE, *Classical Dictionary*, 11th Edition, London 1820, p. 652.

(3) *Ibidem*.

(4) *Ibidem*.

(5) *Ibidem*, p. 651-652.

the Tarquins, and he was the first that took an oath to support the liberty and independence of his country. Though he had been refused the consulship, and had retired with great dissatisfaction from the direction of affairs, yet he respected public opinion; and when the jealousy of the Romans inveighed against the towering appearance of his house, he acknowledged the reproof, and in making it lower, he showed his wish to be on a level with his fellow-citizens, and not to erect what might be considered as a citadel for the oppression of his country. He was afterwards honoured with the consulship, on the expulsion of Collatinus, and he triumphed over the Etrurians, after he had gained the victory in the battle in which Brutus and the sons of Tarquin had fallen. *Valerius Publius* died after he had been four times consul, enjoyed popularity, and received the thanks and the gratitude, which people redeemed from slavery and oppression usually pay to their patrons and deliverers. He was so poor, that his body was buried at the public expense. The Roman matrons mourned his death a whole year (6).

We have quoted some people named *Publius* who more or less belong to the same period of time in which *Publius* the protos of Malta lived to show that the name *Publius* was well known at the time and rather widespread among the Romans. Let us now see what we can find about the historicity of *Publius*, the protos of the island of Malta. The best source of information at our disposal are the biblical dictionaries or encyclopedias. These are generally interdependent, but in some cases one writer gives more details than another. We can examine these various contributions chronologically.

William Smith in 1863 published in London the second volume of his *Dictionary of the Bible*, in which the Rev. Ernest Hawkins, writes about *Publius*, the protos of Malta: "*Publius* (Gr. *Poplios*: *Publius*). The chief man — probably the governor — of Malta, who received and lodged St. Paul and his companions on the occasion of their being shipwrecked off the island (Acts xxviii, 7). It soon appeared that he was entertain-

(6) *Ibidem*, p. 802.

ing an angel unawares, for St. Paul gave proof of his divine commission by miraculously healing the father of Publius of a fever, and afterwards working other cures on the sick who were brought unto him. Publius possessed property in Melita: the distinctive title given to him is "the first man of the island"; and two inscriptions, one in Greek, the other in Latin, have been found in Città Vecchia, in which that apparently official title occurs (Alford). Publius may perhaps have been the delegate of the Roman praetor of Sicily to whose jurisdiction Melita or Malta belonged. The Roman martyrologies assert that he was the first bishop of the island, and that he was afterwards appointed to succeed Dionysius as bishop of Athens. St. Jerome records a tradition that he was crowned with martyrdom (*De Viris Illust.*, xix; Baron. i, 554)".

After the publication of Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible*, Rev. Patrick Fairbairn edited *The Imperial Bible-Dictionary*, in 1888, in six volumes. The press compared *The Imperial Bible-Dictionary* to that of Smith, and as the Record puts it, "Smith's Dictionary of the Bible is addressed rather to students and scholars; the Imperial Bible-Dictionary aims rather at extensive general usefulness". This is what we find in the latter about Publius: "Publius (Gr. Poplios). The chief man, as he is termed, Ac. xxviii, 7, of the island Melita or Malta, when Paul was shipwrecked there. It is probable that he held an official position in the island, but this is not stated. He had, however, possessions near the place of the shipwreck, and showed much kindness to Paul and his companions in trouble. For this act of hospitality he received a noble recompense; as his father, who fell dangerously ill, was restored to health through the prayers and miraculous gifts of the apostle. Tradition reports Publius to have become, not only a Christian, but the first bishop of the island; and, as usual in such cases, martyrdom is ascribed to him. But authentic accounts reach no further than the brief notices mentioned above".

An *Encyclopædia Biblica* in four volumes was published in London by Rev. T.K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black, the third

volume in 1902, and here we read: "Publius (Poplios) the 'chief man' (protos) of Melita (see Melita § 3), who received and entertained Paul and his companions after the shipwreck, and whose father was cured of his fever by the apostle (Acts 28, 7-8). Later tradition named him the first bishop of the island, and bishop of Athens after the demise of Dionysius; and according to Jerome (*Vir. Ill.* 19) he died a martyr's death".

Under the name Melita W.J. Woodhouse, Professor of Greek in the University of Sydney, § 3, says that the title Prôtos used for Publius is confirmed by an inscription from the neighbouring island Gaulos (Gozo), *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* 5754.

In J. Hastings and J.A. Selbie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, published in London in 1910, under the name of *Publius* or *Poplius* A.J. Maclean writes: "The 'first man' of Malta, whose father was cured by St. Paul of fever and dysentery by laying of hands (Ac. 28, 7f.). The title Prôtos ('first man') at Malta is attested by inscriptions; it occurs also at Pisidian Antioch (Ac. 13, 50, cf. 25, 2)".

From these evidences one can gather that our sources of information about Publius, the 'chief man' of Malta are twofold, namely the *Acts of the Apostles* and later popular tradition. Let us first speak of Publius in the Acts of the Apostles and then in the local and ecclesiastic tradition.

PUBLIUS IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.

St. Luke gave great prominence in his book, known as the *Acts of the Apostles*, to his master St. Paul's journey, from Caesarea to Rome, of which St. Luke together with Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonika and Paul's disciple, were companions. Indeed, as I have written elsewhere, "I often think that the greatest event in the history of Malta was the shipwreck of St. Paul on our shores, because it gave to Malta a Christian civilization which she has treasured and kept inviolate even during the two hundred and twenty years of Islamic domination".

"It seems that Saint Luke, too, regarded this event as of the utmost importance. In fact there is no other event in the whole

of the Acts of the Apostles which has been narrated in such detail as the shipwreck of Saint Paul in Malta. The beloved disciple of the Doctor of the Gentiles, himself an eye-witness of this great event, devoted to it no less than one chapter and a half out of the twenty-eight which make up the Acts of the Apostles, or sixty out of the thousand verses, about one-sixteenth of the whole book. This is still more significant when one considers that Saint Luke devoted only nineteen verses to such an important deed as the conversion of Saint Paul!" (7)

The Acts of the Apostles have well been described as the Gospel of the Holy Spirit; indeed, they have as their principal object the history of the foundation of the Christian church: its birth in Jerusalem, its extension through Judaea and Samaria, and finally through the whole of the Roman Empire by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles. This seems to be suggested by Jesus himself before He ascended into heaven when He said to the Apostles: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the world" (Acts, i, 8).

In fact, a close examination of the plan of the Acts of the Apostles clearly shows that the book can easily be divided into six visions or periods which are concluded by a remark pointing out the progress of the expansion of the Church from Jerusalem to the end of the world, Rome (8). Thus the first period (i, 1-vi, 6) the birth of the Church in Jerusalem which is concluded with the words: "The word of the Lord continued to spread: the number of disciples in Jerusalem was greatly increased, and a large group of priests made their submission to the faith" (Acts vi, 7).

(7) See *Scientia* XXVI (1960), 4-15. "On November 12th, 1956, the 365th Anniversary of the Foundation Day of the Royal University of Malta, I had the privilege of delivering the oration for the occasion and chose for its subject-matter the date of St. Paul's advent to Malta. As copies of this oration are no longer available, we deem it useful to give hereunder a reprint thereof". The tract quoted above is found in *Scientia*, loc. cit., p. 5.

(8) See C.H. TURNER, *Chronology of the New Testament*, in HASTING'S *Dictionary of the Bible*, I, p. 421.

The second period (vi, 8-ix, 30) the Church's extension in Palestine, in Judaea, Galilee and Samaria, the martyrdom of St. Stephen. "The churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria were now left in peace, building themselves up, living in the fear of the Lord, and filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit" (ix, 31).

The third period (ix, 32-xii, 23) the Church is extended outside Palestine, namely to Antioch of Syria; which is concluded with the words: "The word of God continued to spread and to gain followers".

The fourth period (xii, 25-xvi, 5) the beginnings of the Church in Asia Minor: Saint Paul in Galatia and for conclusion: "So the Churches grew strong in the faith, as well as growing daily in numbers" (xvi, 5).

The fifth period (xvi, 6-xix, 19) the Christian Church is extended to Europe through the missionary work of St. Paul particularly in Corinth and in Ephesus; and is concluded with the words: "In this impressive way the word of the Lord spread more and more widely and successfully" (xix, 20).

Finally in the sixth period (xix, 21-xxviii, 31) the word of the Lord is extended to Rome: St. Paul "welcomed all who came to visit him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete freedom and without hindrance from anyone" (xxviii, 31).

The tract in the Acts of the Apostles which deals with Publius is the following: "Once we had come safely through, we discovered that the island was called Malta. The inhabitants treated us with unusual kindness. They made us all welcome, and they lit a huge fire because it had started to rain and the weather was cold. Paul had collected a bundle of sticks and was putting them on the fire when a viper brought out by heat attached itself to his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand they said to one another that man must be a murderer; he may have escaped the sea, but divine vengeance would not let him live. However, he shook the

creature off into the fire and came to no harm, although they were expecting him at any moment to swell up or drop dead on the spot. After they had waited a long time without seeing anything out of the ordinary happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say he was a god.

"In that neighbourhood there were estates belonging to the prefect of the island, whose name was Publius. He received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It so happened that Publius' father was in bed, suffering from feverish attacks and dysentery. Paul went in to see him, and after a prayer he laid his hands on the man and healed him. When this happened, the other sick people on the island came as well and were cured; they honoured us with many marks of respect, and when we sailed, they put on board the provisions we needed" (xxiii, 1-10).

It is not our intention to explain each word in this tract of the Acts of the Apostles, but we limit ourselves to those parts which may have some bearing on our scope, namely the historical evidence of Publius and his deeds. We therefore start with the name Publius.

We have seen above that the name Publius was very well known at the time. Some writers think that this may have been only a "forename" which supposes another name not mentioned by St. Luke; but there is nothing to prove the assumption. (9).

It is only reasonable to think that Publius was a native of Malta who lived within his family, whose father is mentioned, but presumably he never had a family of his own. He therefore belonged to a wealthy family who had large possessions on the island as mentioned by St. Luke in the Acts.

This may be one of the reasons why he is called Prôtos or the chief man of the island. The title Prôtos is generally under-

(9) E. JACQUIER, *Les Acts des Apôtres*, Ed. 2, in *Etudes Bibliques*, Gabalda, Paris 1926, p. 748 in explaining the name PUBLIUS writes: "(Poplios) ita semper fere Graeci paullo antiquiores pro Publius (DITTENBERGER HERM. VI, 282 sq. 287 sq.), et est nomen a populus derivatum. Erat ei id praenomen, si erat civis Romanus; verum mirum est illa aetate praenomen solum indicari; itaque potius ut in homine provinciali pro nomine unico putandum, cf. *Markos, Loukios*. Blass".

stood not merely because of the wealth of Publius but also because he was also the representative of the Roman authority or as others call him either the governor of Malta or the delegate of the Roman praetor of Sicily of which Malta was a dependence. The Acts call him the "Prefect of the island" which obviously means that he was the responsible person governing the island and not mere one of the natives (10).

This is all we know from the Acts; all the rest belongs to the popular local and ecclesiastical tradition which, however, all considered, is quite eloquent, as we shall see.

(To be continued)

(10) JACQUIER, *op. cit.*, p. 748-749, writes that Publius played the guest to "Paul et ses deux compagnons, Luc et Aristarque, probablement le centurion Julius et peut-être aussi tous les naufragés, pendant trois jours, pour leur donner le temps de prendre les mesures nécessaires pour leur établissement dans l'île où ils devaient attendre le retour du beau temps. Publius, aussi humain que ses administrés, devait avoir des esclaves nombreux et par conséquent un grand train de maison. Comme représentant de l'autorité romaine, il était responsable du sort des soldats et de leurs prisonniers, et devait pourvoir à leur nourriture, ce qu'il fit généreusement . . ."