

Life in Crete at the Time of Titus

ARTICLE FOR UNIT TWO

WHERE ON EARTH IS CRETE? Crete is an island southeast of Greece along the imaginary boundary between the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. The island is about 150 miles long from east to west, and its width ranges from 35 miles at its widest point and 7.5 miles at its narrowest.

According to Titus 1:5, Paul left Titus in Crete that he “might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town.” The only other writing in the New Testament that mentions Crete is the book of Acts. Among the people present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost were Cretans (Acts 2:11). And in Acts 27 we find the story of Paul’s eventful journey to Rome as a prisoner. After sailing along the south coast of Crete with some difficulty, the ship was caught in a violent storm and was shipwrecked on the island of Malta west of Crete. However, all 276 persons aboard managed to escape harm.

Regardless of which hypothesis one accepts, the time that Titus was on Crete would have been in the second half of the first century AD. We can surmise that Paul must have left Crete in a hurry for some reason and left Titus there to establish the churches on a firmer footing.

The Cretans who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost would most likely have been Jewish inhabitants of Crete. It would be less likely that Gentile people would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate a Jewish festival. This demonstrates that a Jewish community had already existed in Crete for some time, even though the majority culture of the island was Greek.

In fact, we do have evidence of Jewish presence in Crete at least by the second century BC. The evidence comes from 1 Maccabees 15:15-24, which is part of the Old Testament Apocryphal books. These are books that Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy accept as part

“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5).

So what was Crete like in the time of Titus, say around AD 60-80? For one thing, we know from the statement in Titus 1:5 that there were some churches on the island. It may be that the Christian movement on Crete began when Jewish Cretans who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost, experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), and returned to Crete and spearheaded the Christian movement on the island. According to the statement in Titus 1:5, Paul and Titus must have preached the gospel on Crete for some time even though neither Acts nor any of Paul’s other letters says anything about Paul and Titus being on Crete.

Some scholars have conjectured that the evangelistic and pastoral events alluded to in Titus occurred after the events recounted in Acts. According to this proposal, Paul was released after two years of imprisonment in Rome mentioned in Acts 28 and conducted further missionary travels in the eastern as well as the western regions of the Roman Empire. It is during this time that he and Titus visited Crete.

Other scholars are unconvinced by such a proposal and believe that Paul was executed after the two years of imprisonment. Accordingly, the missionary and pastoral activity alluded to in Titus must have occurred some time during Paul’s missionary travels recounted in Acts but for some reason the author of Acts decided not to mention it.

of the Old Testament canon. According to the statement in 1 Maccabees, when non-Jewish Cretans began to oppress the Jewish community in Crete, the Jews appealed to the Romans and received Roman friendship and protection in 141 BC not only in Crete but also elsewhere in the Mediterranean world.

The Romans began to dominate the Mediterranean world in the second century BC. It wouldn’t be long before Crete would also be brought under Roman domination. In 67 BC Rome occupied Crete and made it part of a Roman province that included Cyrene in North Africa, which is in modern Libya. The Roman governor, who had the title proconsul, ruled the province from the Roman capital of Gortyna on the southern coast of Crete. Thus in the time of Titus Crete was a Roman province ruled by a Roman governor.

Although space prohibits giving a lengthy history of Crete prior to New Testament times, it would be of interest to note that the Old Testament refers to Crete as Caphtor, the original home of the Philistines who migrated to the land of Canaan some time before the Israelites began to enter the land (Deuteronomy 2:23; Jeremiah 47:4; Amos 9:7).

The island of Crete is extremely mountainous, with mountain ranges as high as 8,000 feet covering the length of the island. Since the mountains drop down steeply to

the southern shores of Crete, there were fewer cities along the southern coast, such as Gortyna mentioned earlier, and Fair Havens, Lasea, and Phoenix mentioned in Acts 27:8, 12. Crete's northern coast was more heavily populated because the mountains slope down to the shoreline much more gradually.

The letter to Titus quotes one of Crete's prophets as saying, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12). Historians tell us that this writer was a prophet and poet by the name Epimenides who lived around 600 BC. None of his writings has survived, except as quotes and allusions in other Greek authors. There may be a reference to this same author in Paul's speech in Acts 17 to a crowd of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in a meeting of the Aeropagus in Athens. Paul told this crowd of philosophers that as he walked around he found an altar with the inscription, TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Paul used that as an entry point to speak about the one true God and then quoted a couple of lines from what he calls "some of your own poets." The quoted words are: "For in him we live and move and have our being . . . We are his offspring" (Acts 17:28). Although not absolutely certain, either one or both of these lines may be from Epimenides.

Now back to the quote in Titus 1:12 that "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons." The indictment of Cretans by Epimenides had to do with the fact that he was affirming the immortality of the Greek god Zeus whereas Cretans denied Zeus's immortality. Some ancient authors have attributed to Epimenides the following hymn of praise to Zeus (quoted by Richard. N. Longenecker, *Acts of the Apostles [Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 476*):

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one—

The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever,
For in thee we live and move and have our being.

Other ancient authors have also made equally disparaging comments about Cretans, who apparently had a reputation for lacking ethical principles, stealing, and harboring robbers and pirates (William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles, Word Biblical Commentary*; [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000], 398-99). A Greek historian by the name Polybius living in the second century BC made the following comments about Cretans:

Money is so highly valued among them, that its possession is not only thought to be necessary but in the highest degree creditable. And in fact greed and avarice

are so native to the soil in Crete, that they are the only people in the world among whom no stigma attaches to any sort of gain whatever . . . Cretans by their ingrained avarice are engaged in countless public and private seditions, murders and civil wars . . . I will now address myself to showing that the Cretan constitution deserves neither praise nor imitation . . . Now, with few exceptions, you could find no habits prevailing in private life more steeped in treachery than those in Crete, and no public policy more inequitable (Polybius 6.46-47).

It should be noted that right before and right after the negative comment in Titus 1:12 about Cretans in general, there is a specific reference to Jewish practices. In 1:10-11 we have the following statement: "For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach—and that for the sake of dishonest gain." These two verses clearly echo the comments of Polybius about the Cretans' unscrupulous greed for money. But it is significant that it is specifically connected with the Jewish teaching of circumcision. The implication is that there were some Jewish groups that taught circumcision for the sake of monetary gain.

In 1:13-14 the instruction to Titus is that he should "rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth." Again, Paul's concern is not so much with the character of Cretans in general but with teachings and practices of some Cretan Jews. These "Jewish myths" that Titus was instructed to address were probably an accommodation to Greek philosophical ideas which not only contradicted the Christian message but also distorted the basic teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures. To accommodate Crete's Greek culture, certain Jewish teachers were apparently dabbling in myths in an attempt to make the Hebrew Scriptures more palatable for a better sell. In contrast, Titus must "avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law" (3:9). "Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives" (3:14).

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