

Some Words About...

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Propempein (to see off) - προπέμπειν

The Greek word *propempein* meant to see someone off in proper style. Thus in 1 Esdras 4:47 King Darius writes letters to all his officers to give Zerubbabel and all with him a royal sendoff on his way to Jerusalem. And in 1 Maccabees 12:4 Jonathan sends letters to Sparta and Rome seeking an alliance and asking that the letter bearers be sent along in peace. The bearer of the letter was not always so thoughtfully protected. See 2 Samuel 11:14 where the special treatment of the letter carrier was of a different sort. In the apocryphal Letter of Aristeas the writer says that Eliezar gave his delegation a royal sendoff (172).

The point in each case is that one group saw another group on its way safely. This could well have meant that they inspected the vessel to make sure that it was seaworthy, interviewed the captain and crew to see that they were trustworthy, and approved the accommodations and supplies.

New Testament

In Acts 15:3 Paul and Barnabas as emissaries from the church in Antioch are “sent on their way” to Jerusalem by the church, accompanied by others from the local congregation, to see what the apostles in Jerusalem have to say about the need to circumcise Gentiles who convert to Christianity.

Acts 20:38 has Paul taking leave of the elders of the Ephesian congregation. They hated to see him go, especially because they might never see him again. They had come from Ephesus to the port of Miletus, had met with Paul, heard him say farewell to them, “and they saw him off aboard ship.”

In Acts 21:5 the disciples in Tyre along with their women and children came along with Paul and his party “and saw them off leaving the city.” Paul and company had stayed with the Christians of Tyre for seven days while their ship unloaded cargo (and probably loaded cargo for Ptolemais), and now they all said a prayerful goodbye.

In these three statements in Acts there is an almost modern atmosphere, that peculiar combination of anxious hope and wistful loss on the part of those seeing off their friends and a different combination of eager anticipation and reluctant release on the part of those departing.

In Romans 15:24 Paul expresses his hope that he will be able to stop over in Rome on his way to Spain “and have you see me on” after enjoying their company for a while. This interesting phrase is apparently Paul’s way of assuring the churches in Rome that he does not intend to make Rome a part of his missionary territory—perhaps because of the established Jewish Christian nature of some of the congregations there (see Galatians 2:7). There was a surprising amount of parochialism throughout the Roman Empire, and Paul tried not to step on anyone’s toes.

1 Corinthians 16:5–11 may raise a few eyebrows. Paul is in Ephesus and intends to stay there until Pentecost, after which he intends to go to Macedonia, then to spend a winter in Corinth, after which the Corinthians “may see me off whithersoever I go” (16:6 — as Don Quixote was later to say). Meanwhile, Timothy is to visit the Corinthians, and Paul urges them “Let no one neglect him, but see him off in peace, for I am expecting him and the brethren” (16:11). All in all, it sounds like a tight schedule — Corinth is at the other side of the Aegean Sea from Ephesus, and Macedonia has most of Attica between it and Corinth — but Paul was an experienced traveler and an enthusiastic planner.

The following verses suggest that Apollos was a bit less ambitious. Like Jonathan in 1 Maccabees 12:14, Paul makes a point of asking special treatment for the bearer of the letter. Most letters in that day were simply given to someone on his way to a given destination, but occasionally the bearer had a special relation to the sender (16:11).

In 2 Corinthians 1:16 Paul has left Asia one step ahead of a lynch mob and apparently fled to Macedonia. He had planned to go to Corinth first and then to Macedonia and back to Corinth so they “could see me on my way to Judea.” But he seems not to have found a ship ready to leave for Corinth, so he grabbed one sailing for Troas. He asks the Corinthians if he acts indecisively — big joke! The letter, then, is to explain why he still delays coming to Corinth (1:23 - 2:13).

There are interesting arguments against the unity of 2 Corinthians, but they do not rise to the level of Assured Results of New Testament Scholarship.

Titus 3:13 indicates that Titus, who has been placed in a position of some authority among the Christians in Crete by Paul, is to make arrangements to “see Zeno the lawyer and Apollos quickly on their way that nothing hinders them.” He is in charge of their proper sendoff (see 1:5ff.).

The Third letter of John is to Gaius, obviously a leader in the local congregation. The author writes the letter of appreciation for his Christian activities, especially with reference to certain visiting brethren and for “doing so well in seeing them off on God’s work” (3 John 6).

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