

# Setting His Sights on SPAIN

by Marsha Ellis Smith

SPAIN, at the westernmost reaches of the Roman Empire in the first century A.D., is a place of mystery for many Bible students.

It is not an area of concern in most of our background study for biblical interpretation. So why are we exploring information on Spain? Because Spain was important to Paul. He wanted to go to Spain so much that he mentioned it twice in Romans 15 (vv. 24,28). Some Bible scholars believe Paul made it to Spain (see v. 28). Others disagree. Regardless, we need to know why he wanted to go there so badly.

## Geography

In the center of the Spanish peninsula, the elevated central tablelands known as the *mesetas* are bounded on the north by the Cantabrian Mountains. The Cantabrian range becomes the Pyrenees, which extends eastward. Two rivers run

across the *mesetas* from northeast to southwest and into the Atlantic Ocean, and two mountain ranges also cross the plateau. Even though forests covered the central *mesetas*, the area did not receive enough water. The surrounding mountains blocked both rainfall and the milder temperatures that typically come with a Mediterranean climate.

Two other geological features deserve attention: the two river basins and the coastal plains. Two river basins border the *mesetas*. The Ebro to the northeast has the same basic climate as the *mesetas* and is therefore not desirable for settlement and farming. The Guadalquivir

(or Baetis) Valley is south of the *mesetas* in the Andalusian area between two mountains that block it from the Mediterranean but leave it open to the Atlantic Ocean to the southwest. Its summers are hot and winters mild; and its soil was known even in ancient times for its “richness and fertility.”<sup>1</sup>

Spain’s geographical features also were not conducive to good communication with the coastal areas or the outside world in general. An indication of this was evident in ancient times—and is still seen today by the existence of different languages present in the different areas of the peninsula.<sup>2</sup>

Probably due to the area’s remoteness and inaccessibility, the Romans did not reach Spain’s Atlantic coastal plains until late in the second century B.C. The Mediterranean coastal plains, however, were more desirable due to their fertile soil, milder climate, and



## LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Romans 15:14-33

**Above: Biconical bowl at Merida, 1st century, A.D.**

**Over five miles of aqueduct still stand in Merida.**





ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: JOY BORGAN (32/11/27)

regular rainfall. These plains became quite valuable to the Romans.<sup>3</sup>

### Pre-Roman Spain

Without venturing too far back into Spain's ancient history, a look at the peoples who inhabited the area before Rome entered the peninsula in the third century B.C. would help us understand the atmosphere and culture of Paul's day. About 900 B.C., the first Indo-European invasion first brought people of Celtic origin to the area. More Indo-Europeans of differing races and languages followed, adding more linguistic and racial variety to the indigenous peoples who had inhabited the land area for millennia.<sup>4</sup>

Between the first Indo-European invasion and the Romans' entrance into the Spanish peninsula, Phoenicians and Greeks began to establish settlements. Phoenicians founded Carthage in North Africa in the late ninth or early eighth centuries B.C. and began to colonize Spain about the same time.<sup>5</sup> Greek settlers came along a little later, around the sixth century B.C.<sup>6</sup>

The resulting culture of pre-Roman times in Spain is called Iberian, and Spain is often referred to as the Iberian Peninsula. With the beginning of the

Second Punic War in 218 B.C., Rome began paying attention to the Iberian Peninsula. The Second Punic War (218–202 B.C.) was between Carthage and the Roman Republic and was Carthage's final major military opposition to Rome's dominance in the Mediterranean.

### Roman Spain's Political Situation

Rome's first interest in Spain was due to its war with the Carthaginians. Carthage had utilized Iberian manpower as mercenaries for their army and Iberian gold, silver, and timber in their war efforts. When the Carthaginians attacked an Iberian city, that city appealed to Rome who eventually demanded that Carthage loosen its grip on the peninsula. It did not, so Rome declared war in 218 B.C. The legendary Carthaginian leader Hannibal figured prominently in this situation.<sup>7</sup> Though Hannibal was a formidable military leader and strategist, in the end the Roman commander Scipio defeated Hannibal, conquered Carthage, and brought an end to the war. Carthage found itself stripped of power and was never again a formidable opponent to Rome.

For many years Rome seemed to have no interest in the Spanish peninsula other than in a military sense. After the

Wars to establish Roman authority ended, civil wars developed between Roman military leaders. Not until 27 B.C. (when Caesar Augustus and the senate reached an agreement) was the peninsula divided into three provinces, and stability seemed to be a possibility. However, the fighting in the northern region continued until Rome finally killed all resistance fighters in 19 B.C.<sup>8</sup>

With the formal division of the region into three provinces, Rome took more interest in the administration of the peninsula. Baetica in the south was a province of the senate and the people, while Lusitania in the west and Tarraconensis in the north belonged to Caesar. The differences between the two types of provinces were relatively insignificant.<sup>9</sup>

### The Romanization of Spain

After 27 B.C., the peninsula—particularly the southern and eastern coastal regions—began to show more signs of Romanization. Some cities were founded and developed based on a Roman city plan. Other older cities were embellished and renovated with Roman art and architecture. One such city, Augusta Emerita (modern Merida), Augustus established as a home for his older

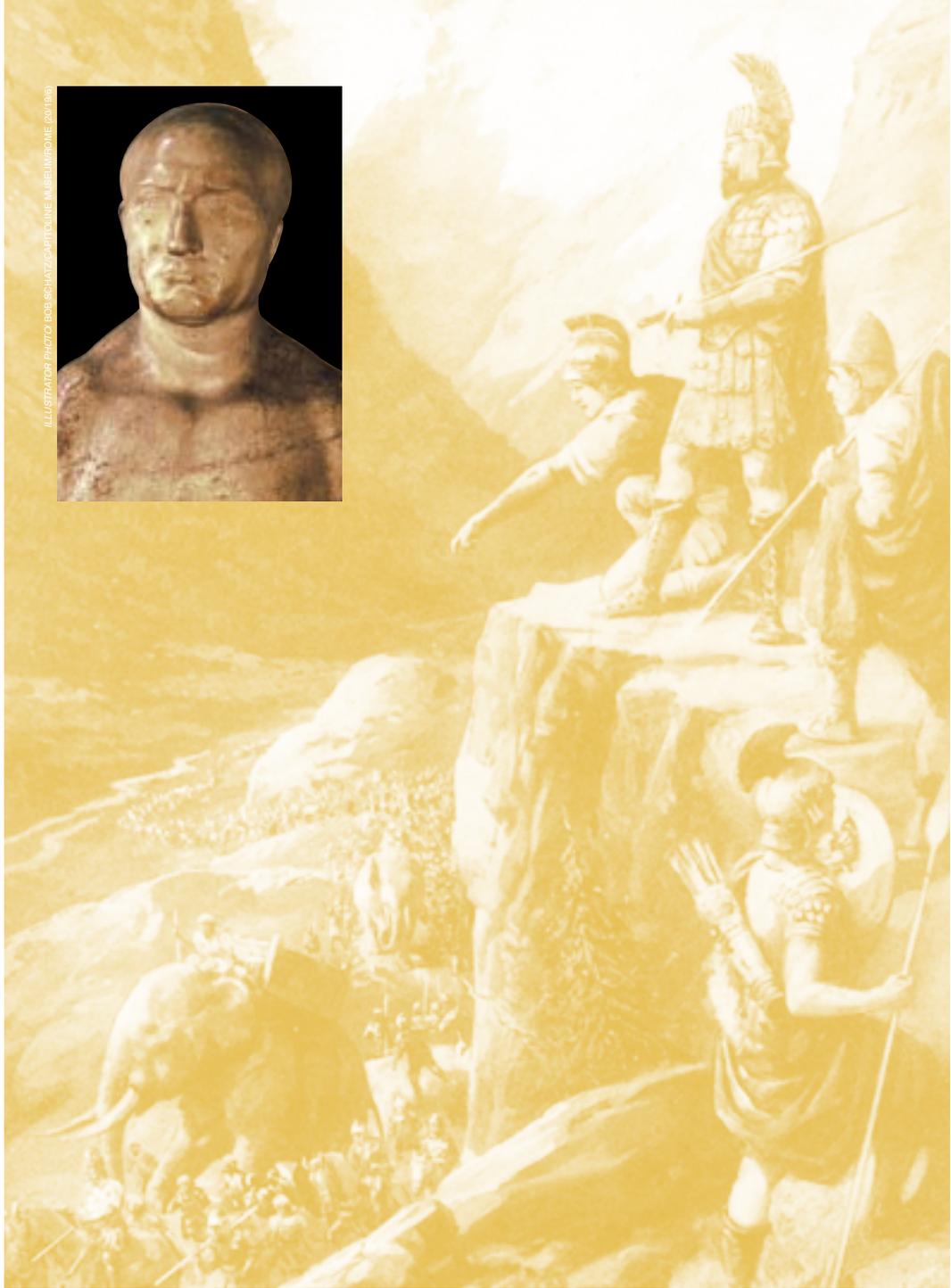
**Left:** Sacred room at the Roman theater in Merida, Spain. This was at the rear of the theater (backstage) and is thought to be a place used in the cult of emperor worship. The veiled statue of Augustus was possibly kept here along with his entourage.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ/CORBIS OUTLINE MUSEUM/ROMA (2016/8)

**Right:** Artist's rendition of Hannibal crossing the Alps into Italy. One of the most important battles of the Second Punic War was at Zama, where Hannibal met Scipio Africanus. Hannibal's infantry, some of whom rode elephants, stamped the Roman soldiers. Yet Scipio's cavalry took down the riders and won the battle. Hannibal, though defeated, escaped and returned to Carthage. Carthage surrendered to Rome, which meant they surrendered control of Spain, North Africa, and their navy and army.

**Inset:** Bust of Scipio Africanus, who fought Hannibal in Northern Africa.



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soldiers. It is a large city on a gentle slope, with an amphitheater, a forum, and a temple to Diana, and with water supplied by two aqueducts. Archaeological excavations have uncovered inscriptions, statues, and art, all of which are Roman in design.<sup>10</sup>

Roman influence is also evident in other cities—Tarraco, Corduba, Emporiae, and Saguntum.<sup>11</sup> At one city in the Baetica region of southern Spain, Urso, “five out of the original nine bronze sheets inscribed with Caesar’s colonial charter” for the city have been discovered. These explain how the city

was to be administered.<sup>12</sup> In some instances private citizens of these cities funded the Roman renovations to the existing structures. Their actions give evidence about how loyal the Spanish residents were to the Roman Empire.<sup>13</sup>

Another sign of Roman influence was the production of Roman bronze coins in small denominations by about 30 Spanish cities. While this was a common practice among the western provinces during the reign of Augustus, most other mints ceased production after his reign. But the Spanish mints continued until the reign of Caligula (A.D. 37-41)

with possibly one coin being issued under Claudius (A.D. 41-54).<sup>14</sup>

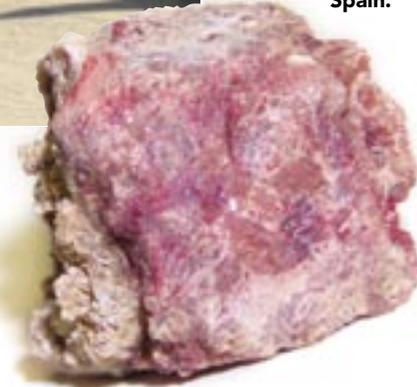
And always, where the Romans go, so go their roads. Strabo mentioned two main roads the Romans refurbished.<sup>15</sup> One, an ancient road already known as the *via Augusta*, linked the Guadalquivir Valley with the eastern part of Spain. The *via Augusta* then linked with the *via Domitia*, a road that ran through France and Italy and then to the city of Rome itself. The second road ran west from Tarraco and was rebuilt under Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero.<sup>16</sup>



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JOY BORGAN (32/1/13)

**Left: This 15,000 seat amphitheater at Merida, Spain was completed in 8 B.C. Exhibitions and fights were staged in the cross-shaped center area. Occasionally, the central part of the arena was flooded for staged naval battles.**

**Below: Cinnabar was an export from first-century Spain.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ RANDY HUGHES/ COURTESY TENNESSEE DIVISION OF GEOLOGY

Giving evidence to the fact that emperor worship (the ‘imperial cult’) existed in Spain is a representation on a coin produced at Tarraco. The coin shows an altar to Augustus at that city. This worship, probably repeated in other cities as well, may have been at the suggestion of the local citizens and not the Roman magistrates. These worship practices provided another way for the people to identify with the citizens of the empire and to express their loyalty.<sup>17</sup>

### Spain’s Contributions to Rome

Spain helped Rome in a variety of ways. We have already indicated the military benefit the peninsula supplied to Rome. But Spain also provided vital products to the empire—such as the wine and olive oil they shipped to Rome during the first half of the first century A.D. Spain also produced and exported a fish sauce—a type of relish highly valued in Rome and throughout Italy. Pottery, the type used as tableware, was also a Spanish export. Although archaeological evidence would not be available, written evidence exists of the Spanish also producing woolen and linen goods and grain. Probably the most important export to the Romans was the mining industry, including alluvial gold, cinnabar (used for red dye), and especially silver.<sup>18</sup>

One benefit that was actually worth more to the Romans than the mining industry, whether they realized it at

the time, was the human contribution that Spain made. For instance, Seneca the Elder came from Corduba to Rome probably in the 30s B.C. but returned to Spain where his three sons were born. Seneca the Elder wrote a collection of orations and legal cases plus a history of Rome. One of his sons was Seneca the Younger, the Roman philosopher and playwright known still today for his prolific writing. Two of his plays were *Oedipus* and *Agamemnon*. A third son of Seneca the Elder was Gallio, known to Christians from Acts 18:12-17, which records that when he was proconsul of Achaia, he refused to hear charges against the Jews in Corinth.<sup>19</sup>

Two other famous sons of Spain were Trajan (emperor, A.D. 98-117) and Hadrian (emperor, A.D. 117-138) both from Italica in Baetica. Italica was a town Scipio Africanus founded for his wounded soldiers after his campaign against the Carthaginians.<sup>20</sup>

We will never know with certainty the reason Paul wanted to go to Spain, but we can conjecture. We know Spain was a land torn by centuries of wars, longing to be a part of something solid and secure. Its people were intelligent and hardworking farmers, miners, artists, and philosophers—each searching for a religion whose god was worthy of worship—a god to whom they could give their loyalty and who would take care of them.

Why wouldn’t Paul want to go to Spain? It sounds like his kind of place—a land and a people primed for the gospel message. **B**

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3. *Ibid.*, 14-15.
4. Harold Livermore, *A History of Spain* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958), 27-28.
5. John S. Richardson, *The Romans in Spain* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), 14.
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7. Mary T. Boatwright, Daniel J. Gargola, and Richard J. A. Talbert, *The Romans: From Village to Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 111-112.
8. Richardson, *The Romans in Spain*, 134-135.
9. *Ibid.*, 135; Chris Scarre, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1995), 84.
10. Richardson, *The Romans in Spain*, 138-142.
11. *Ibid.*, 142-144.
12. Michael Grant, *A Guide to the Ancient World: A Dictionary of Classical Place Names* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1986), 677.
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14. *Ibid.*, 145.
15. For more information on the geography of the Iberian peninsula as reported by the ancient geographer Strabo, see *Strabo’s Geography, Book III*, chapters 1-5, [online, cited 7 February 2005]. Available from Internet: [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/3A\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Strabo/3A*.html).
16. Richardson, *The Romans in Spain*, 160-162.
17. *Ibid.*, 169-174.
18. *Ibid.*, 163-168.
19. *Ibid.*, 174-176; [online, accessed 7 February 2005]. Available from Internet: [www.bartleby.com/65/se/senecaY.html](http://www.bartleby.com/65/se/senecaY.html); [www.bartleby.com/65/ga/Gallio.html](http://www.bartleby.com/65/ga/Gallio.html).
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Marsha Ellis Smith is a freelance writer living in Louisville, Kentucky.