

Lydia and Priscilla
Role Models for Today
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The Acts of the Apostles, Luke's historiography of Christianity's beginnings, focuses on the missionary work of Peter and especially Paul. Woven into the narrative are the activities of two women who contribute significantly to establishing fledgling communities. While Luke introduces us to Lydia in Philippi and Priscilla in Corinth, he gives us only tantalizingly brief accounts of these two women. Exploring the details of their lives will hopefully yield a much fuller appreciation for their discipleship.

Paul, accompanied by several cohorts on his first journey to Europe, meets Lydia in Philippi, an important Roman colony on the Via Egnatia, the principal route between Rome and Byzantium. The encounter between the missionaries and Lydia is rendered in rare first-person narrative:

On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us (16:13-15).

As he does at Antioch (13:14) and Iconium (14:1), Paul goes to the Jewish place of prayer on the Sabbath. That Paul supposed there was a synagogue near the river is consistent with the Jewish custom of building houses of prayer by the sea.¹ Since Philippi is situated interior from its port, Neapolis, a synagogue on the river would be a

seaside equivalent. What seems very unusual is that Paul sits down and speaks to *the women* there. Elsewhere in *Acts*, Paul's synagogue audience comprises both men and women (17:4,12); 16:13 is the only instance in *Acts* where Paul and his companions speak exclusively to a group of women.

Lydia is a worshiper of God, a phrase that designates a Gentile sympathizer, but not a convert, to Judaism.² "Jewish strict monotheism, imageless worship and the strong cohesion of their communities won admiration among many of their pagan neighbors."³ Additionally for women, Jewish ethics, especially directives to care for the ill and poor and the prohibition of infanticide, must have been powerful contrasts to Greco-Roman practices.

Lydia's name indicates that she is a freedperson. Thyatira is a city in the province of Lydia in Asia Minor, and her name is generic, meaning "the Lydian woman." Since she does not have a proper Roman name,⁴ we can assume she is a former slave designated "Lydia" by an owner.⁵ Her occupation as a dealer in purple cloth, a major product of Thyatira,⁶ indicates that she probably went into the business she had learned as a slave because the production and processing of textiles was done primarily by slaves and freedpersons.⁷

Because she is a householder and some types of purple cloth were very expensive, many exegetes assume that Lydia is wealthy or at least very comfortable financially.⁸ While that is possible, she could just as likely be either a producer or merchant of much more common, less expensive purple cloth,⁹ a position that would not require holding a valuable inventory. The location of the synagogue near the river, combined with the women's access to both, suggest that Lydia may either own or manage a textile dye-

house. Because dyeing cloth was very dirty, malodorous and required an abundance of water, it was done outside the city near water.¹⁰ In that case, her household is most likely the workers she employs, manages or works alongside. Since Luke does not refer to her as a leading or high-standing woman, as he does other women (17:4,12), and since he does not describe her as prosperous, it is more realistic to see Lydia as a hard-working member of the urban lower class whose home is a workshop that accommodates workers and guests.

After Lydia and her companions are baptized, she invites Paul and his companions to stay at her home. She links her invitation to Paul's judgment of her as faithful to the Lord (16:15). Evidently Paul was reluctant to accept her offer because Lydia first urges them and then prevails upon them, presumably in response to a "No, thank you." Because the text neither provides the reason for Paul's reluctance nor states that he visits her home before his release from prison (16:40), we must speculate.

Perhaps his refusal is based upon fear for her household's safety. As the host, Lydia is responsible for her guests' protection, and if conflict should arise between Paul and the Roman authorities, she would be suspect as well.¹¹ The subsequent imprisonment of Paul and Silas as Jews advocating illegal customs in Philippi (16:19-24) indicates that Lydia has wisely anticipated local reaction to Paul's mission, but discounted her own risk. It should come as no surprise that Lydia is courageous. Whether or not she sells cloth made and dyed in Thyatira or makes her cloth and dyes it with Lydian purple, either Lydia herself or an agent must travel to obtain materials, a perilous necessity in the first-century Mediterranean world.¹² Moreover, the severe

flogging that Paul and Silas receive "as Jews" (16:20-23) indicates the danger that Jews and Gentile sympathizers face.

A second reason why Paul declines her invitation may be the lack of a *paterfamilias*. Lydia is legally and financially free. She is the head of her household: no husband is mentioned. This is the only instance in the *Acts of the Apostles* where an unattached woman offers Paul hospitality. Because she is an anomaly, Paul and his fellow missionaries may be nonplussed as to their proper response. Another factor in their confusion is that, because her companions at the place of prayer are exclusively female, Paul may presume that her household does not include men. Here we see the ex-Pharisee apostle to the Gentiles in a quandary. Will he extend full acceptance to a Gentile woman by judging her faithful to the Lord and staying at her possibly all female home (16:15)? Luke does not answer that question. While Paul and Silas bid farewell to the brothers and sisters at Lydia's home (16:40), Luke provides no evidence that they accepted her offer of hospitality.

While Luke does not credit Lydia with leadership of the community in Philippi, we can conclude that she holds that position. Contrary to his usual practice in other cities (cf. 13:44, 14:1), Paul never preaches to a great number of people in Luke's account of the Philippian ministry. As far as we know in Acts, only Lydia's group and the jailer's household (16:32) receive his word. Luke does not indicate that any of Paul's companions stayed behind in Philippi to manage the fledgling community, as do Silas and Timothy in Beroea (17:14). And Paul takes leave of the Philippian community at Lydia's home (16:40), not at the jailer's home. More convincingly, Luke's description of Lydia is by far, with the exception of Priscilla, the most informative of any other

description of a woman in Acts. While he refers to women of "high standing" (13:50), "not a few leading women" (17:4), and even Queen Bernice (25:13,23; 26:30), Luke provides many more details about Lydia. For example, he gives her hometown, occupation, social status, personality and spiritual quest.

The importance of the community in Philippi to Paul and his gratefulness for their generosity are found in his letters. In *2 Corinthians* 8:1-6, Paul commends the churches in Macedonia for giving beyond their means in spite of poverty. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul extols their helping him establish the community in Thessalonica after his departure from Philippi (*Phil* 4:16). Moreover, he tells them "that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone" (*Phil* 4:15). Here, Paul praises both their generosity and their receptivity to him and his mission. Lydia epitomizes these qualities in *Acts* 16:13-15. She eagerly listens to Paul's words, embraces baptism and courageously insists that his group stay at her house. Surely, Lydia, the first recorded European convert, has the qualities necessary to lead the sisters and brothers who gather under her roof. Thus, we can conclude that Paul left Philippi content that the new community was in Lydia's capable hands.

Paul meets Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth:

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together-by trade they were tentmakers (18:1-3).

Claudius' expulsion of Jews from Rome is recorded by Suetonius as necessitated by Jews "who constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus..."¹³ If we take "Chrestus" as a variant of "Christus," there is reason to believe that Priscilla and Aquila were members of the Jewish Christian community in Rome. They most likely settled in Corinth because of the great demand for tents at the Isthmian games celebrated there annually.¹⁴ Because they had established themselves in Corinth before Paul arrived, they were able to offer him a place to live and work to share. Their generosity to Paul also supports their acceptance of Jesus as Messiah prior to meeting Paul because if they had not been Christians in Rome and had lost their livelihood in Rome because of Christians, they would not have welcomed Paul. Also, since Paul sought them out, it is quite possible that they had established the first Christian community in Corinth prior to Paul's arrival.

Their Roman names and manual labor indicate that they are freedpersons who took the names of their former owners and carried on the craft they had learned as slaves.¹⁵ That tent making was arduous and low paying work is attested to by Paul: "To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty... and we grow weary from the work of our own hands" (*1 Cor* 4:11-12). Although tent making was a low-pay, low-status craft, work was readily available because leather tents for traveling and festivals, plus linen and canvas awnings and sunshades, were in demand.¹⁶ Tent making was also an apt occupation for missionaries who had to pull up shop and relocate their base of operations. Most likely, Priscilla and Aquila resumed this trade in Ephesus when Paul left them in

charge of the community there (18:19) and again when they returned to Rome and established a house-church (*Rom* 16:3-5).

Priscilla and Aquila are credited with having greater knowledge of the Way of God than does Apollos, an eloquent Alexandrian Jew, well versed in the scriptures. When they hear him discoursing on Jesus in the synagogue, they take him aside and explain the Way of God to him more accurately. Their instruction prepares Apollos for fruitful missionary work in Achaia (18:24-28). Presumably, the teaching that Paul did while working with them in Corinth gave Priscilla and Aquila a deep understanding of the "Way of God" that helped them become premier first-century missionaries.

Of the three times that Luke cites their names, Priscilla precedes Aquila at 18:8 when Priscilla and Aquila accompany Paul on his journey to Syria and at 18:26 when Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos. At 18:2 she is introduced after Aquila as his wife. This primacy of the woman's name has engendered much speculation as to the reason. Some exegetes insist that Priscilla is of higher social or economic status, but this is easily refuted because she performs the same low-status work as Aquila.¹⁷ What is more likely is that she had higher status in the first-century Christian communities than did Aquila. These early communities were organized in houses and functioned as extended families. Women who opened their homes to the community naturally expanded their household management to community leadership.¹⁸ With her gift for teaching (18:26), Priscilla can be considered such a leader. Additionally, she may have been more charismatic than her partner and therefore remembered as the more prominent when Luke wrote the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Two differences between the Lukan and Pauline accounts of Priscilla occur in her name and marital status. In *1 Cor* 16:9 and *Rom* 16:3, Paul calls her by her proper name "Prisca." The author of *2 Timothy* follows suit and greets Prisca and Aquila in 4:19. Luke, however, consistently uses the diminutive of her name. Luke introduces Priscilla as the wife of Aquila in *Acts* 18:2, yet Paul never refers to them as man and wife. In *Romans* 16, they take their place with other male and female co-workers for Christ, such as Andronicus and Junia, Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. None of these people is identified as other than brother or sister. Paul's consistent addressing of the recipients of the Roman epistle as "brothers and sisters" (7:1, 10:1, 12:1, 16:17) leads us to understand that "brothers and sisters" are terms inclusive to those who were members or leaders of the early church.

Paul's predilection for celibacy, as stated in *1 Cor* 7:36-38), plus his great appreciation for the work of Prisca and Aquila (*Rom* 16:3-5), encourages us to view them as either non-married co-missionaries or partners in a celibate marriage. Traveling with a woman would give a male missionary more opportunity to proselytize women, while a male partner would offer a woman protection from male dominance and possible violence.¹⁹ In addition, there is no mention of children; the hazards encountered in traveling and preaching the way would certainly militate against having a family. Rather than as a wife, Priscilla should be recognized as an equal co-worker with Aquila, a missionary of the early church in her own right.

Luke's reluctance to praise Priscilla (and Aquila's) accomplishments is in marked contrast to the lavish tribute he gives to Apollos. After crossing to Achaia, Apollos "greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, for he powerfully refuted

the Jews in public, showing by the scripture that the Messiah is Jesus" (18:27-28). Here, Apollos is described as engaging in public debate about Jesus' identity, an activity that in *Acts* only Peter (2:22-36), Stephen (7:51-53), Paul (13:26-33) and Barnabas (13:46-50) perform. It is quite possible that Luke credits public, attention-getting sermons with the spread of Christianity, rather than the quiet formation of domestic congregations.

Priscilla, Aquila and Lydia never speak in a public forum, yet they foster house-churches in spite of the danger from antagonistic Jews and Romans. By focusing so much on public speeches and testimony, especially of Paul, Luke emphasizes the heroic, manly character of early Christianity.²⁰

This is perhaps an explanation for the virtual silence of women throughout the *Acts of the Apostles*, as well as their shadowy presence at the edges of crowds. Only three women utter words. Sapphira lies to Peter and is struck dead (5:7-10). Lydia invites Paul to stay at her house (16:15). An unnamed slave-girl cries out in Philippi's market that Paul proclaims a way of salvation. Paul, very much annoyed, exorcises her spirit of divination (16:17-18). The words of Sapphira and the girl cause punishment, while Lydia's offer does not receive a response. We are told that Philip has four daughters who prophesy, but they do not speak (21:9). There are devout women of high standing incited by Jews in Antioch (13:50), not a few of the leading women of Thessalonica join Paul (17:4), and not a few Greek women of high standing in Beroea believe Paul (17:2). Drusilla, the governor's wife, and Queen Bernice silently listen to their husbands interrogate Paul (24:24, 25:13).

Luke's sprinkling of a few high status, but silent, women here and there in *Acts* has been interpreted as a deliberate restriction of women's roles in order to demonstrate

that Christianity was not subversive of public order. Because Romans equated Jewish prophecy with women and magic, Luke strove to dissociate Christianity from Judaism in the minds of his Gentile audience by expunging any instance of female prophecy. Even the slave girl in Philippi who was shouting the truth about Paul was treated as possessed and silenced. By reporting that some high standing women are attracted to Christianity, but have no public leadership roles, Acts refutes allegations that Christianity ignores good moral order.²¹

Here we have the reason for the incomplete presentations of Lydia and Priscilla. Lydia is not praised for organizing a group of women to worship God or for sponsoring the fledgling community in Philippi, nor is Priscilla applauded for her role in establishing Christian communities in Corinth and Ephesus. Such undertakings overstep the line of "proper" female behavior and threaten acceptance of Christianity as a legitimate sect. Luke's undercutting of their contributions demonstrates that debate over women's roles in the church was already occurring at the end of the first century. Paul's heartfelt admiration for Prisca (and Aquila) "who work with me in Christ Jesus and who risked their necks for my life" (Rom 16:3-4), along with his commendation of Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1) and Mary, "who has worked very hard among you" (Rom 16:6) is the most outstanding scriptural example of recognition of women's importance in the establishment of the early church. Luke's work of only one generation later documents the beginning of the church's deliberate and systematic attempt to marginalize women's participation in Christianity. We, however, can read between Luke's lines and applaud Lydia and Priscilla's faith and heroism.

Like Lydia and Priscilla, 21st-century Catholics must be pioneers who "risk their necks" to convert the church to a new order. Roman Catholics who are committed to establishing a clergy that includes deacons and priests of both genders, married or celibate, must take up the banner of Lydia and Priscilla. We must speak out, form new congregations, write new liturgies and welcome all with genuine vocations to serve their sisters and brothers in Christ. We must not allow the Catholic hierarchy to ignore this unprecedented opportunity to reform, brought on by the current scandal in clerical and episcopal practice and the dearth of priests. We must emulate Lydia and Priscilla by starting a new chapter in Christianity, one that is led by both men and women.

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¹Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 292.

²Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 93.

³Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 36.

⁴Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 165.

⁵Reimer, p. 108.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁷Pomeroy, p. 199-200.

⁸Johnson, p. 293; Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Rereading Paul. Early Interpreters of Paul on Women and Gender," *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 240; Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster Press), p. 400.

⁹Reimer, p. 102-5.

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- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 107.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 124.
- ¹² Meeks, p. 17; Acts 27..
- ¹³ Suetonius II, trans. J.C. Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 53.
- ¹⁴ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Prisca and Aquila," *Bible Review* , Dec., 1992, p. 48.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 43.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 44.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 42.
- ¹⁸ Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Reading Real Women Through the Undisputed Letters of Paul," *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 204.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 203.
- ²⁰ Mary Rose D'Angelo, "(Re)Presentations of Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke-Acts," *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 187.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 188-190.