

“Lydia” for Dr. Gill, PTH903 God’s Women Then and Now

October 19, 2009 by Ava Oleson

Introduction

The story of a spectacular woman named Lydia, Paul’s first European convert, is described in Acts 16:13-15:

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us.¹

Historical Background

The historical context and timely events surrounding Lydia’s story serve as a crucial backdrop. Paul’s impending shift of mission toward the great cities of Europe reflects significant changes in cultural scenery and missionary strategy.² Acts 15 provides a glimpse into Peter and Paul’s response to the Jews who attempted to require Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul refuted this teaching; he declared that God came to save the Gentiles by grace alone, not by the adherence to Jewish laws. God makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile. God had accepted them and purified their hearts.

Paul’s declaration marked a major paradigm shift for the believing community, especially the Jewish believers. Church leaders did not want to make it difficult for Gentiles to come to salvation; in the same way, God did not intend to exclude women or make it difficult for them to

¹All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

²The New Interpreters Bible, Vol X *Introduction to Epistolary Literature: Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 230.

step into their unique calling. God had ushered in a new order, a new value system, a new understanding of gender roles and redeemed relationships. Through Christ's coming, all things were being made new. Layer by layer, God removed inequitable structures. During this pivotal time in history, God raises up an esteemed woman as a high profile leader to serve as a role model for centuries to come.

In Acts 16, Paul and his companions attempted to preach the gospel in Phrygia, Galatia, Bithynia, and Troas. However God went out of His way to make sure they were prevented from going anywhere until they arrived in Philippi, the hometown of Lydia (Acts 16: 6-12). Luke states that the Holy Spirit kept Paul and Silas from preaching the Word in Asia (16:6b). When they tried to enter Bithynia, "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to do so" (16:7). "During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'" (16:9). Immediately Paul knew God had called them to preach the gospel in Macedonia. Lydia was the first convert they encountered. Without a doubt, God designed that Lydia be installed as a role model to the women of that societal structure and religious culture. God, through Lydia, was at work dispelling ancient, outdated, and unfounded ideals. God affirmed a new day for women.

Geographical Background

The first Macedonian city Paul and his companions arrived at was Philippi. Its setting and intersecting routes brought it fame and significance, making it the leading city of the region. Due to the small Jewish population, a synagogue did not exist in the city. Consequently, some of the Jews met for prayer outside the city gates at the bank of the Gangites River.³ Paul and Silas sat down to speak with a group of Jewish women gathered by the river. Lydia, a native of Thyatira

³*New International Version Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 1680.

who currently lived in Philippi, joined the Jewish women for prayer despite not being of Jewish descent. “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us” (Acts 16:15).

Lydia—A Woman of Character and Influence

Lydia was a dealer or seller of purple cloth, a product in great demand among the rich and worn as a status symbol. The official toga at Rome, as well as in other Roman colonies, used this expensive fabric. Quite possibly, Lydia’s home office remained in Thyatira with a branch office in Philippi.⁴ Although Scripture never hints at the existence of a husband, many historians believe Lydia’s husband had passed away leaving her as a widow. The purple dye was obtained from the secretion of shellfish (mollusks) that live in the eastern portion of the Mediterranean Sea. It took about eight thousand mollusks to produce one gram of purple dye; consequently, only wealthy people could afford to purchase purple linen. Based on this understanding, Lydia probably had amassed wealth and confidently conducted her business among upper class merchants. Presumably she had a spacious home with servants in order to accommodate Paul and his entourage (Acts 16:15b).⁵

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Although Lydia had not heard the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, she most likely had come to know the God of the Hebrews through the Jews in Thyatira. Paul and his friends explained baptism for the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and Lydia immediately

⁴Dennis Hounsell, “Lydia Demonstrates Faithfulness,” Christian Standard, <http://www.christianstandard.com/sundayschool.asp> (accessed September 19, 2009).

⁵Nell W. Mohney, *From Mary to Lydia: Letting New Testament Women Speak to Us* (Nashville, TN: Dimensions For Living, 2002), 100.

responded to their message of salvation. In addition, she faithfully shared the good news of salvation with her household, which included her immediate family and servants.

As a woman of tremendous spiritual influence, Lydia took initiative to introduce her entire family to the gospel. As the head of household, she faithfully taught her children and workers and her entire family followed her example. Luke not only provides details of Lydia's influence on her family but portrayed Lydia's household as the core of the emerging church of Philippi.⁶ Her house became the meeting place of what could be called "The First Christian Church of Philippi." In fact, when God supernaturally released Paul and Silas from prison, they stopped posthaste at Lydia's house—the location where believers gathered (Acts 16:40). Paul later thanked the Philippian church for their gifts and offerings, which provided support in his work and the spread of the gospel (Phil. 4:2, 3, 15).⁷ Lydia's access to wealth and resources undoubtedly contributed significantly to Paul's missionary needs.

Many scholars believe Lydia's scriptural profile sufficiently indicates the importance of her conversion for the wider Philippian mission. "The connection between hospitality—sharing goods with others—and responsiveness to the word of God is an important literary theme in Luke and Acts. This is another indication of Lydia's spiritual authority as first convert and leader of the church in Philippi."⁸ New Testament scholar, Stanley Horton, makes particular note that Lydia had a leadership role in a male and female environment:

[Lydia] besought Paul and his entire company to make her large home their home and headquarters. . . . No doubt also, she had many friends and business acquaintances who might not go down to the riverside but who would come to her house. Thus, it was in her house a church would be established. . . . The assembly soon began to grow. . . . There

⁶ Ibid, 592.

⁷Hounsell .

⁸The New Interpreters Bible, Vol X *Introduction to Epistolary Literature: Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 230.

were not only women but ‘brethren’ who were now part of the congregation (see verse 40).⁹

Lydia had exceptional communication skills. She “persuaded” or “urged” Paul and the others to stay as guests at her house (Acts 16:15b). Notice that Lydia, a Gentile woman invites four men (three Jews and one Gentile) to be her guests. Although Paul rarely accepted aid from his converts, so as to refute those who might accuse him of preaching for a profit, he could not decline the generosity of a woman desiring to minister to their needs in such a practical way. The Greek aorist tense of the verb “persuaded” implies insistence. She presented a compelling argument of a simple-fact condition. Lydia confidently expresses reality, “You have judged me to be faithful to the Lord. Therefore enter my house and stay” (v. 15). Any woman who could articulate her case clearly enough to cause Paul to change his mind, expressed a high degree of confidence and influence. Her accomplishment was significant on many levels. She gave direction, leadership, and took charge in a situation with the most powerful male leader in the New Testament Church. Paul and the others evidently respected her. As a result of her persistence, Lydia became the first female pastor of perhaps the very first household church in Europe.

Lydia’s role as leader and pastor of her household is significant. In the book, *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, John Elliott explores the emerging theological implications of the institution of the “household” in contrast to the “temple,” two basic institutions of Judaism and early Christianity. Neyrey, the editor of this work, is known for his pioneering work in applying social science criticism to New Testament interpretation. He demonstrates how the temple gradually

⁹ Ralph W. Harris, Stanley M. Horton, Gayle Garrity Seaver, *The Complete Biblical Library*, vol 6. in *The New Testament Study Bible. Acts* (Springfield, MO: World Library Press, 1991), 389.

emerged as an institution whose managers, interests, and ideology stood utterly opposed to the ministry and mission of Jesus and His community.

The temple, a holy place, had lost its power to make holy; in other words, it no longer brought unholy people into communion with the Holy One. Roman oppression and exploitation of the Jewish people, undermined the center of Jewish political, economic, and social power. The temple no longer symbolized a place where the hope of salvation and the experience of God's mercy could be realized.¹⁰ The temple served primarily as the arena of Jesus' conflict with the temple's chief and related legal authorities such as the chief priests, Sadducees, scribes, elders, and Sanhedrin. In addition, the Jewish religious leaders in their conspiracy with the Roman governor to take his life, took place in the temple.

Luke, however, transitioned the focus from the temple to the household. The household emerged as the preeminent sphere and symbol of the reception of the gospel. Households encouraged a unique Christian identity and solidarity of the Spirit with a distinct structure, social organization, identity, and value system. The household, once the gathering place of the powerless and marginalized, emerged as the location where God's Spirit actively moved and where relationships, shared resources, and collective values solidified the vision of a salvation available to all the families of the earth.¹¹

Given this theological theme, Lydia's household of faith emerged as a powerful and significant component of the Early Church. Her household illustrated the typical location of the gospel's reception and the church's growth because, at that time, the church consisted of organized households of faith. Without a doubt, Lydia served as the pastor of a church since her

¹⁰John H. Elliott, "Temple Versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions" in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 223.

¹¹Elliott, 217.

household became one of the prominent, strategic congregations. Lydia played a significant role at the onset of the New Testament church both as the first European convert and as the first female pastor.

In her book, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time*, Elise Boulding describes the years around 200 B.C., which marked a major shift for the Mediterranean world where Lydia lived. This era marked the division between the role of Rome in the great transition from the oppressions of antiquity to the relatively more open societies of the new Europe. Society focused on rectifying problems of communication, distribution of resources and organization of large-scale societal interaction. During the era of the Roman Republic, women began to enjoy a new pattern of women's civic affairs, which launched a "running start" on the future.¹²

Rome experienced dramatic changes as women successfully demonstrated against restrictive laws. Women moved more liberally in public, including the political arena. They crowded the court when important trials occurred, attended senate meetings, and conducted large-scale trading. In addition, women exercised considerable liberty pertaining to their decisions regarding marriage, divorce, and conduct of personal affairs. Historical evidence indicates that women served as judges, administrators, priestesses, and founders of hospitals and orphanages.¹³

The ultimate signal of those new perceptions came at the end of the millennium with the appearance of a new Teacher from the humble town of Nazareth in the Roman province of Syria. Jesus surrounded himself with a community of people who bypassed the usual sex-role

¹²Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1976), 340.

¹³E. M. White, *Women in World History: Her Place in the Great Religions* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1924), 287-288. Quoted in Boulding, 346.

definitions. Something very remarkable happened. For the first hundred years of the new era, women left behind old constraints, stepped into the public sphere, and participated in the creation of a new society. The rate at which women joined the new Christian movement indicated the readiness of women for a new life.

Lydia, a woman in this cultural setting, serves as an outstanding example. As a product of this new age in the Graeco-Roman culture, Lydia successfully owned and operated her own business and led her entire family.¹⁴ In addition to the new found Roman freedoms, Greek culture brought further refinement to the culture of that day. Women of means in the Greco-Roman culture had position in society. “Such women of means were not unusual in Macedonia since at least the Hellenistic era had allowed women important social, political and religious roles.”¹⁵ The cultural context played a crucial role in Lydia’s significant role in the Early Church. These significant cultural changes in the Graeco-Roman world opened the door for Lydia to serve in a strategic ministry during the establishment of the Early Church.

The social changes impacting women’s role in society were unstoppable. New possibilities for women as social reformers, teachers, scholars, and individuals modeling a new humanness grew. During the first thousand years of the new era, many streams of women’s participation intersected. At this time in history, Lydia defines unlimited possibilities rooted in her faith in Christ, while also reflecting the notion of gender equality. Her participation in leadership in the Early Church indicates that Jesus did not start a movement for men nor did he start a movement for women. He started a movement for humans.¹⁶ Interestingly, God started

¹⁴Mohney, 100-101

¹⁵William Tarn and G. T. Griffin, *Hellenistic Civilization* (London, Edward Arnold, 1959), 98, as quoted in Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of The Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 492.

¹⁶Boulding, 358.

using women in the Church at this particular time in history when opportunities for women were finally being celebrated. Lydia comfortably walked the streets of Philippi, doing business with people of social importance and means. God purposely introduced Lydia into the picture because Judaism was a patriarchal religion. Lydia introduced a new image and form of leadership to the first century church. Her pioneering ministry validates the ministry of women in the twenty-first century. Against the backdrop of this new socio-cultural milieu, Lydia enters the leadership complexion of the New Testament church.

Contemporary Lessons from the Life of Lydia

The early introduction of Lydia into the historical context of the New Testament Church reinforces that God is an equal opportunity employer. Lydia's life provides contemporary women with keen insights. First, when Paul met this mature and intellectual woman, she exhibited a genuine hunger for God. Lydia only knew of the God of the Hebrews; she had not been introduced to Christ, who had been at work preparing and shaping her heart. She experienced a season of preparedness. As she listened intently to Paul and his companions, the Lord opened her heart to respond. Just as Lydia, women who find themselves in a season of preparation can rest assured that God is shaping them for a unique assignment despite not fully understanding what God's plans and purposes.¹⁷ God is at work preparing women who are willing to listen as He reveals His assignment. God will fulfill His divine purpose just as He gave Lydia the gift of faith and illuminated His truth to her. God will give the gift of faith and bring clarity to the unique call of every woman called to leadership.

¹⁷Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 590.

Second, Lydia urges women today to find their own voice. She did not express fear because of her own persuasiveness. She illustrates focus, determination, decisiveness, and competence. God's women, both then and now, need to possess these important qualities.

Third, Lydia did not worry about what others thought. She did not give it a second thought. In other words, no one owned her. She saw Paul and his companions' need, responded to the need, and immediately took charge of organizing and opening her home to be a place of salvation, discipleship, worship, and missions support.

Fourth, Lydia invited women in the marketplace to offer their training, skill sets, and expertise to Christ. The need for marketplace skills in the church has never been greater than it is today. Emerging mega churches and small to medium sized congregations all possess organizational deficiencies that skilled people in the marketplace easily recognize.

From the beginning of time, God purposed to set Lydia up as an illustration. He ordained that she would use her resources, relationships, business skills, and strong work ethic as a strategic link in the spread of the gospel and growth of the church. God also intends to use and shape the experiences of modern day Christian women to lead strategically. Women can boldly and confidently step into their God-given roles because of the testimony of women like Lydia who courageously provided a model for women in ministry.

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