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The Apostle Paul in Philippi: Genesis of the European Church

James W. Ellis, PhD, JD[1]

[1]Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA
Yeshiva University, New York, New York, USA
Email: james.ellis@alum.cardozo.yu.edu

Abstract: The apostle Paul established the first Christian church in Europe in the Greco-Roman city of Philippi, c. A.D. 52. Three intriguing individuals played pivotal roles in the foundation of the Philippian congregation: "a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth"; an enslaved Delphic prophetess who earned "a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling"; and the keeper of Philippi's prisons, who valued his honor over his life. From out of this mélange came the first known European Christians. This essay explores the historical, social, religious, and political contexts of Paul's sojourn in Philippi, an episode that resonates in the contemporary Christian church, which continues to discuss Christianity's position in a world of religious diversity and the roles women play in spreading the faith.

Keywords: Apostle Paul, Christianity, Delphic Oracle, Imperial Cult, Missionary, Philippi

INTRODUCTION: PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY AND PHILIPPI

The apostle Paul was a pioneering first-century proselytizer of the Christian faith. He took the Christian message beyond its origins in the Roman province of Judaea, to the provinces of Cilicia, Galatia, and Asia in Anatolia (or "Asia Minor"), and onward to Macedonia and the Greek peninsula, before ultimately reaching the capital city of Rome itself (c. A.D. 46-57) (see McGrath 2017, 178-181). The Christian Bible provides historical narratives of Paul's missionary journeys (Acts 13-14; 15:36-18:22; 18:23-21:17). On his second missionary journey (c. 49-52) Paul was accompanied by his associates, Timothy and Silas. Their odyssey began in Syrian Antioch, proceeded through Syria and Cilicia (including the cities of Derbe and Lystra), through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia, and continued on to the district of Troas (Acts 15:41; 16:1, 6-8) (fig. 1). Troas (or "the Troad"), is the westernmost point of the Asian mainland in the Mediterranean region, and consists mainly of a projection of land along the northwestern coast of Anatolia into the Aegean Sea. The book of Acts says, while he was in Troas, "during the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" After Paul saw his vision, the apostle and his entourage "got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called [them there] to preach the gospel" (Acts 16:9-10).

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Figure 1. Paul's Second Missionary Journey.

Paul set sail from Troas first to the island of Samothrace, then journeyed on to the Aegean Sea's northern coast and to Neapolis (modern Kavala), the primary seaport of the Roman colony of Philippi (Orr 1915). When he landed at Neapolis, Paul stepped onto European soil for the first time. From there, Paul and his companions trekked inland over a mountain ridge fifteen kilometers, along the *Via Egnatia* (or "Egnatian Way"), to the hilltop Roman colony of Philippi, where, during the late autumn of A.D. 52 (see Vander Heeren 1911, 7), they spent "several days" (Acts 16:12). During each of Paul's recorded visits to Macedonia, on both his second and third missions, the apostle travelled the Via Egnatia, a Roman road stretching over one thousand kilometers from the Byzantium to the Adriatic Sea (Davies 1963, 91). When Paul eventually left Philippi, he continued along the Via Egnatia, through Amphipolis and Apollonia, to Thessalonica, where he stayed some weeks before he was compelled to leave (Acts 17:1-10). He then ventured southward off the Via Egnatia to visit Athens and Corinth.

It has been conjectured the man Paul saw in his vision at Troas was Luke, the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Luke, who was by vocation a physician (Colossians 4:14), may at this time have been a resident of either Philippi or Thessalonica, engaged in the practice of medicine (Bailey 1909, 417). This could explain why prior to Paul's departure from Troas to Macedonia, Luke wrote exclusively about what "Paul and his companions" did (Acts 16:6), but afterwards Luke described what "we" did, meaning Paul and his entourage, including the author, Luke (Acts 16:10). However, this is speculation, and there is much disagreement.

Paul wrote thirteen epistles (or letters) that are contained within the New Testament canon. Several were sent to the churches the apostle helped establish during his missionary journeys. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians was presumably written from Rome, where he was imprisoned in approximately A.D. 61. Paul wrote to acknowledge and give thanks for a gift of money the church members of Philippi had sent to Paul during his imprisonment. Although Luke's narrative accounts of the apostle's missionary journeys in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts harmonize with Paul's own accounts in his epistles (see Campbell 1955), it is perhaps still best to recognize Paul's letters as the preferable "primary sources for a reconstruction of his career," and treat Luke's Gospel and Acts more as secondary sources, "except at

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those points where the author is writing as an eye-witness," such as seemed to be the case in Philippi (Campbell 1955, 81).

One might wonder why Paul did not stay longer to evangelize in Neapolis (see Fig. 2). After all, it was the main harbor on Macedonia's Aegean coast and was historically an important commercial center, though by the first century it had been relegated more to the status of the chief port of nearby Philippi. Maybe Luke the physician warned the apostle of the "malarial conditions on the coast" (Davies 1963, 93). This factor has been suggested as the reason why, during his first missionary journey, Paul passed quickly through the coastal town of Perga in Pamphylia on his way to the inland city of Antioch of Pisidia (in Asia Minor). Or perhaps there was not a significant Jewish community in Neapolis to which Paul could align himself, in comparison to Philippi. Whatever the case, Paul did not linger long in Neapolis, but trudged inland over hilly terrain to the foothills of Mount Órvilos (now called Mt. Lekani) to Philippi, a hike that must have taken at least a day to complete.

Figure 2. Paul's Path from Troas to Philippi.

Philip II of Macedon (382-336 B.C.), the Macedonian king and father of Alexander the Great, conquered the city that would come to be known as Philippi in 356 B.C., and began developing it into a site of great military importance. Philippi sat on a "steep conical hill, which controlled the one and only pass through the area between [the inland] mountains and swampland," which descended toward the Aegean (Lazaridis 1974, 319). Approximately two centuries after Philip II took control of the city, the armies of the Roman Republic subjugated all of eastern Macedonia during the Third Macedonian War (168 B.C.). Soon thereafter, Roman colonists settled in Philippi and, in the surrounding countryside, established numerous small towns, villages, and farms, and built country villas. "The Roman settlement was not confined within the ancient walls of the Macedonian city that preceded it, but extended outside them along the Via Egnatia. The length of this road which fell within the city was approximately 5 kilometers. To the north on top of the hill stood the acropolis. … The whole colony of Philippi [was] a unique *ekistic* phenomenon. It involved the establishment of an Italian population in an area of existing Greek cities or among Hellenized Thracian tribes" (Lazaridis 1974, 319).

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In 42 B.C., Philippi came under the control of Marcus Antonius (80-30 B.C.), commonly known as Mark Antony, who rewarded his victorious veterans with lots in the environs of the colonial city (Ducrey 1977, 103; regarding recent relevant archaeological findings see Butera 2017). A decade later, the founder of the Roman Empire, Caesar Augustus (23 B.C.-A.D. 14), led his forces against Antonius and took control of Philippi, which he renamed *Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensium*. Augustus continued the policy of rewarding veterans with property in Philippi, and under the legal fiction known as *Ius Italicum* (or "Italic law"), conferred on Philippi a similar status to those cities actually located on Italian soil. Such cities were governed by Roman law (rather than local law), and city leaders enjoyed much greater autonomy in dealing with provincial authorities. In Philippi a large contingent of legionnaires who had retired from the Roman army lived largely independently from local administration or oversight.

By the time Paul visited the city, Philippi had grown into an exceptionally prosperous Roman colony. And among its citizenry of retired military men who had received land in the area to compensate for their service, public honor and public approval were of particular importance. Inscriptions left behind on the ruins of the Philippian forum attest to the public service and virtuous deeds of leading citizens and plebians alike (Hellerman 2005, 89-109). Therefore, it is not surprising that in Paul's Epistle to the Philippians, which, again, the apostle wrote around a decade after first visiting the city, he emphasized the importance of living with honor (see, for example, Philippians 1:27; 2:29; 4:8). Paul was writing to a church that, it may be assumed, included Greco-Romans of some social standing, and he referred to them as "my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and *crown* [emphasis added]" (Philippians 4:1). The Philippians would have understood Paul's reference to a crown motif as an allusion to a Greco-Roman social honor or achievement, such as the *Civic Wreath* or crown (*corona civica*) worn by the emperor Caesar Augustus (Fig. 3), the crown-like olive wreaths (*kotinos*) that adorned the heads of Greek Olympic champions (Fig. 4), or the "crowns worn by political leaders who had made a contribution to political [or civic] life, particularly in plebian cultural discourse." (Peters 2015, 75). The Roman historian Tacitus (c. A.D. 56-120) reported wreaths and crowns were even sometimes worn by priests as part of Jewish religious practices (*Histories* 5.5).

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Figure 3. Caesar Augustus wearing Corona Civica, c. A.D. 40-50.
Figure 4. Greek Pottery Detail. Victory Crowning Olympic Athlete, c. 450 B.C.

Following the Roman and Early Christian eras, Philippi suffered a series of successive misfortunes during the Byzantian period, including, the "Plague of Justinian (A.D. 547), a devastating earthquake of c. A.D. 619, and a series of successive military invasions. These reduced Philippi to little more than a provincial village, and it was finally abandoned during the fourteenth century. Centuries later, the president and Emperor of France, Napoleon III (1808-1873) sent an archaeological expedition, led by Léon Heuzey, to explore Macedonia. In 1861, Heuzey rediscovered the ancient site (Ducrey 1977, 103-104). Between 1914 and 1938, the École française d'Athènes extensively excavated the ruins of ancient Philippi, an endeavor carried on thereafter by local Greek teams (see Davies 1963).

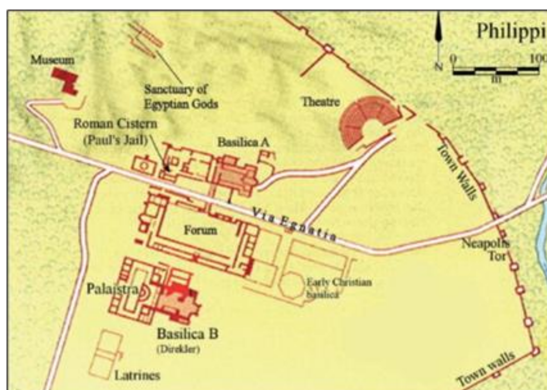

Figure 5. Diagram showing the Via Egnatia and Forum in Ancient Philippi (Crook 2020).
Figure 6. The Bema or Judgment Seat of Philippi (Crook 2020).

The excavation teams determined the Via Egnatia ran in a central east-west axis through Philippi at the foot of a series of terraces leading up to the Acropolis. Various fora paralleled the Via Egnatia (Fig. 5). The forum that the apostle Paul would have seen was extensively updated during the reign of Marcus Aurelius in the second century A.D. However, four excavated steps remain, which appear to have been part of the earlier forum (Fig. 6). These steps lead up to a spot where the magistrates of Philippi held court and occupied their judgment seat (or *bema*). In the book of Acts, Luke describes Paul and Silas being called before this judgment seat to explain what they were doing in Philippi and the effect their gospel message was having on Philippian society (Acts 16:19-22).

SOCIAL ISSUES, AND A WOMAN OF THYATIRA NAMED LYDIA

The biblical texts document that beginning from the moment he initially arrived in Europe, in Neapolis and Philippi, Paul's "deeds and speeches" articulated "a theological vision of how Christianity … can fit within a 'pluralistic' empire and its notions of ethnic difference" (Nasrallah 2008, 534, 564). He did not present an

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intrusive vision of Christianity that stood in stark opposition to Greco-Roman traditions; rather, Paul presented and preached a Christianity that in significant ways fit within longstanding Roman social values. Paul was unique among the biblical apostles, and uniquely qualified for his missionary journeys to the Greco-Roman world. He was born a Roman citizen, in the city of Tarsus in southeast Anatolia, in the Roman province of Syria-Cilicia Phoenicia. Paul's hometown was a geographic and cultural crossroad whose origins stretch back to the Bronze Age. As a child, Paul would have studied Hellenistic Greek culture and the Koine Greek language, the *lingua franca* of Rome's eastern provinces (see Ellis 2023, 20, 25-26), and he would have felt the distinct influences of various socio-cultural groups: particularly the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Judaeans (Leonard 1950, 311). Each of these groups seem to have influenced his ideas concerning women, and relations between men and women. In general, the first-century Greco-Roman world was patriarchal; females were accorded fewer rights, enjoyed less freedom, and exerted less power (see Stenschke 2009). The sphere of religion offered a notable exception. For instance, the goddesses Juno and Minerva sat with Jupiter at the apex of the Roman pantheon, and the priestesses of Vesta (the "Vestal Virgins") were among Rome's most important residents. Paul recognized the prominent roles females played in Greco-Roman religious traditions, and he consciously reached out to women to help him further his evangelical aims and establish new congregations (Friedlander 1936). In his various epistles, Paul often expressed sincere gratitude to women who supported his missionary endeavors (see Romans 16:3, 12; 1 Corinthians 1:11; 16:19; Philippians 4:3; 2 Timothy 1:5; 4:19).

In the sixteenth chapter of Acts, Luke mentions one such woman who lived in Philippi. "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a *place of prayer* [emphasis added]. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God" (Acts 16:13-14).

On his missionary journeys, it was Paul's custom when he entered a new city to go immediately to the local synagogue and "reason with [the Jews] from the [Hebrew] Scriptures," before reaching out to "Gentiles" (or non-Jews) in the local community (see Acts 17:2, 10; Ellis 2023, 21). In Philippi, Paul deviated from his usual course though. The city's residents shared a predominantly Gentile "ethnic makeup" (Jewett 1970, 372), and, seemingly, the small number of local Jews did not meet in a synagogue. Rather, on the day of worship, they met at a customary place of prayer that was likely along the waters of the Gangites River (or Krenides River), about half a kilometer from the modern ruins of Philippi (Fig. 7).

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Figure 7. Recent photograph of the Gangites River, near the ruins of Philippi.

The phrase "place of prayer" (from the Greek term προσευχὴν), found in Acts 16:13, indicates a location that was suitable and set apart for Jews to offer prayers. In larger cities of the eastern Roman provinces, this would have been the local synagogue; but in smaller cities with smaller Jewish populations, a "place of prayer" could denote an open-air site outside the city gates (for a contrary view, see Brooten 2020, 139). When Bible verses state Paul specifically visited a "synagogue" (as in Acts 17:2, 10), a quite specific term is used (συναγωγὴν transliteration *synagōgē*), rather than the more general one found in Acts 16:13. In Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* (A.D. 94), the Roman-Jewish historian wrote that custom decreed such independent prayer sites should be located near the water (*Ant*. xiv.10.23). Apparently, Paul considered Philippi, which was a major Roman colony along the Via Egnatia, of such importance to his evangelical mission, he disregarded it lacked the advantages and "strategic character" a local synagogue would have offered (Bailey 1909, 418), and deviated from his *modus operandi*.

Among the people at "the place of prayer" was Lydia, "a woman from the city of Thyatira," "a dealer in purple cloth," and "a worshiper of God." Whether she was Jewish or a Gentile is unclear. Lydia may have been a Greco-Roman Gentile who followed the moral teachings of Judaism and was in the process of becoming a full member of the Judaic faith, or, simply based on the fact that she was worshipping at a Jewish place of prayer, she may indeed have been a Jew. Be that as it may, it is probable Lydia had more freedom and greater social autonomy in Philippi than she had in her home city of Thyatira (Θυάτειρα), which had not been conferred Ius Italicum legal status (Cotter 1994, 357). Thyatira was located in the Roman province of Asia in western Anatolia, specifically in a region that during the Iron Age belonged to the kingdom of Lydia (Figs. 8, 9). The primary historical ethnic group of the region were known as Lydians. Thus, the name of the woman Paul and his companions met in Philippi, Lydia, would have signaled to them that she was "a Lydian woman," a woman of that historical region. Her name was an *ethnicon*, referring to her origins (Cumming 1998, 24). Thyatira, was well-known in the ancient world as a center of the production of an expensive reddish-purple or crimson dye made from madder root and used in the wool cloth trade. Ancient sovereigns and members of the aristocratic class often wore clothing dyed this special color. Perhaps

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living along the Via Egnatia allowed Lydia a steady supply of the special dye from her home province, which she could provide to a wealthy clientele.

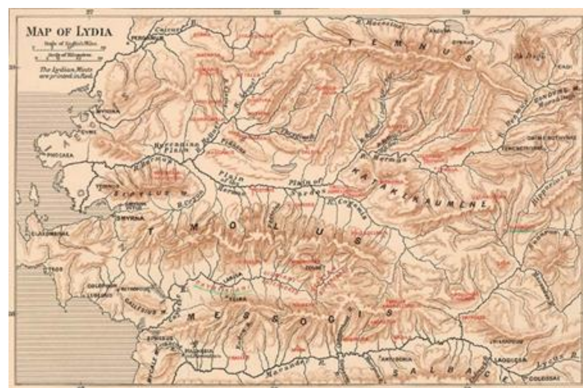

Figure 8. Modern ruins of ancient Thyatira.
Figure 9. Map of kingdom of Lydia (c. 550 B.C.).

Though some have speculated Paul visited Thyatira earlier in his second missionary journey, before arriving in Philippi, this seems doubtful considering Luke's brief description of the apostle's travels in Acts 16:6: "Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia [east of Thyatira], having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia [where Thyatira was]." It's more likely Paul visited Thyatira during his third missionary journey (approximately a decade after meeting Lydia), when the apostle was travelling between Ephesus [a bit west of Thyatira] and Macedonia (Acts 19:1-20:1). In any event, four decades later (c. A.D. 95), the Christians in Thyatira are mentioned by the apostle John in the book of Revelation as one of the "seven churches" of Asia (Revelation 1:11; 2:18-29). In that passage, the "Son of God" commends the saints in Thyatira, "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. … [H]old on to what you have until I come." Conceivably, Lydia left Philippi, returned to Thyatira, and lived long enough to hear those words.

Paul and his companions stayed in Philippi only "several days" (Acts 16:12), long enough to observe one Sabbath. And on that Sabbath, Paul shared the gospel with Lydia and the rest of the women he met at their place of prayer. According to Luke, "the Lord opened [Lydia's] heart to respond to Paul's message. [And] when she and the *members of her household* [emphasis added] were baptized [ἐβαπτίσθη from the root βαπτίζω transliteration *baptizō*, meaning immerse], 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 16:14b-15). The passage does not suggest whether or not Lydia was married, and the mere fact she invited male missionaries into her home is not decisive on the issue. "Perhaps … there was simply no interest [on the part of Luke or Paul] in mentioning her husband and the process that led to the provision of hospitality" (Stenschke 2009, 147). The ancient Greek term translated as "household" (οἶκός transliteration *oikos*) was not limited to family

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members; it could also encompass servants or other persons continually living in a home.

This is one of only four occasions recorded in the New Testament when entire households converted simultaneously. The earliest involved the apostle Peter and the household of a Roman centurion living in Caesarea in the province of Judaea (Acts 10:23-48); Lydia's household came next; followed by the conversion of a jailer's household, also in Philippi (Acts 16:22-34); followed finally by the baptism of Stephanas's household during Paul's lengthy stay in the city of Corinth at the end of his second missionary journey (1 Corinthians 1:16, 16:15; Acts 18:1-18). In each instance, the writer indicates every member of the household was baptized as part of the conversion process. In all likelihood, both Lydia and the jailer's household were baptized in the Gangites River, the closest substantial source of water near Philippi.

Lydia occupies a special position within the Christian faith, and is often singled out as the "first recorded convert in Europe" (see, for example, Leornard 1950, 315). And, because Lydia then persuaded Paul and his companions to stay at her house, Lydia's abode also could be described as the European continent's earliest church building, or "house church." Though Lydia's house has been lost, the ruins of a 5th century A.D. Christian octagonal ecclesial structure remain, which some believe was built on or near her house (Fig. 10).

Figure 10. The Octagon Complex, ruins of ancient Philippi. Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports.

Neither the book of Acts nor Paul's Epistle to the Philippians indicate whether, subsequent to her conversion, Lydia took an active role in propagating her new faith, though "the strong missionary emphasis" in Paul's epistle suggest this may have been the case (Stenschke 2009, 153). In his Epistle to the Philippians, Paul makes an effort to encourage, what one writer has termed, the "specialist proclaimers" of the church in Philippi to continue declaring the gospel and stiffen the resolve of "general believers" in the face of growing pagan opposition (Keown 2009). The apostle's epistles express unequivocally that Paul intended members of the churches he helped establish to continue his apostolic mission, "by drawing others to the faith" through the way they lived and through evangelism (Ware 2005, 8). Surely, Lydia fulfilled this mission if only for a time.

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A COMPLEX RELIGIOUS MILIEU

Luke also describes a very different woman of Philippi. "Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.' She kept this up for many days. Finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' At that moment the spirit left her. When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates (Fig. 6) and said, 'These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.' The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and *the jailer* [emphasis added] was commanded to guard them carefully' (Acts 16:16-23). This was the same jailer whose entire household later converted (Acts 16:31-34).

The lengthy quotation just provided is taken from the recent New International Version (NIV) translation of the Bible. Acts 16:16 of the NIV translation describes the woman Paul and his companions met as "a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future." The much older King James Version (finished in 1611) says Paul and his companions met "a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of *divination*" [emphasis added], and omits the NIV's assertion she channelled her spirit to [either genuinely or falsely] predict the future. The English term "divination" derives from an Old French term, which in turn derives from the Latin term *divinationem*, indicating the power to foresee or predict the future under divine or supernatural inspiration (on the art of divination in ancient Greece, see Flower 2009).

The art of divination, either from natural or artificial stimuli, has been practiced a very long time, both before and after the lifetime of Paul. For example, the English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626), in his influential philosophical text *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), wrote, "Divination hath been anciently and fitly divided into artificial and natural; whereof artificial is when the mind maketh a prediction by argument, concluding upon signs and tokens: natural is when the mind hath a 'presention' by an internal power, without the inducement of a sign." In the process of natural divination, the diviner is a "passive subject," basing their predictions on something within, such as dreams; alternatively, in the process of artificial divination, the diviner actively uses their own [supposed] skills and powers to make predictions using "signs found in nature or produced by man" (Graham 1909).

Christian writers distinguish "divination" from "prophecy." One writer described the former as "the seeking after knowledge of future or hidden things by inadequate means [the "inadequacy" requiring supplementation by] some power which is represented all through history as coming from gods or evil spirits. Hence

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the word divination has a sinister signification. As prophecy is the lawful knowledge of the future divination, its superstitious counterpart, is the unlawful" (Graham 1909). Another writer described the latter as "the foreknowledge of future events [or] past events of which there is no memory, and to present hidden things which cannot be known by the natural light of reason. … The knowledge must be supernatural and infused by God because it concerns things beyond the natural power of created intelligence; and the knowledge must be manifested either by words or signs" (Devine 1911).

The authors of the Hebrew Bible (or *Tanakh*) and the Greek books of the Christian New Testament reference spirits who both work to achieve and to thwart the deity's goals. Often, the Hebrew texts mention "evil" or "deceiving" spirits who condemn or punish individuals or groups (see, for example, 1 Samuel 16:14-15; 1 Kings 22:20-23). The New Testament texts speak of Jesus exercising his authority against "impure spirits" and "demons" that had possessed people (see, for example, Mark 5:1-13; 7:24-30). Jesus's disciples are also said to have exorcised impure spirits in Jesus's name (Matthew 10:1; Acts 8:4-8; see Hardon 1954, 306). The Greek term translated in the Bible as "impure spirit" (πνευμάτων ἀκαθάρτων transliteration *pneuma akathartos*) is different from the term used in Acts 16:16 (πύθωνα πνεῦμα transliteration *pneuma python*) used to describe the spirit possessing the enslaved woman of Philippi. The particular spirit of divination possessing the enslaved woman was akin to that of the famed *oracle* or *sibyl* (prophetess) of Delphi, known as Pythia (Πυθία) (see, generally, Fontenrose 1980).

Many ancient Greeks believed a serpent known as Python lived at the centre of the earth, below a sacred precinct on Mount Parnassus in central Greece known as Delphi (a word that shares the Greek root for "womb" (δελφύς transliteration *delphys*). A successive series of priestesses, collectively known as Pythia, received revelations through a tone monument at Delphi called *omphalos* (or "the navel") of earth. Initially Pythia was inspired by the serpent Python, but after Apollo killed the beast he appropriated its name, Apollo Pythios, assumed his role as the oracular patron deity of Delphi, and conveyed his insights to the Delphic priestess (Broad 2007).

Pythia was considered an oracle, a term indicating either [1] a person (or *medium*) through whom supernatural knowledge is revealed, or [2] the knowledge or message the medium reveals. The word oracle shares a Latin root (*orare*, meaning "to plead" or "to pray") with the words "orate" and "orant." An *orant* was an artistic or symbolic motif shared by Ancient Near Eastern, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman Christian societies, depicting (typically) a female figure in a posture of prayer with outstretched arms (Figs. 11, 12).

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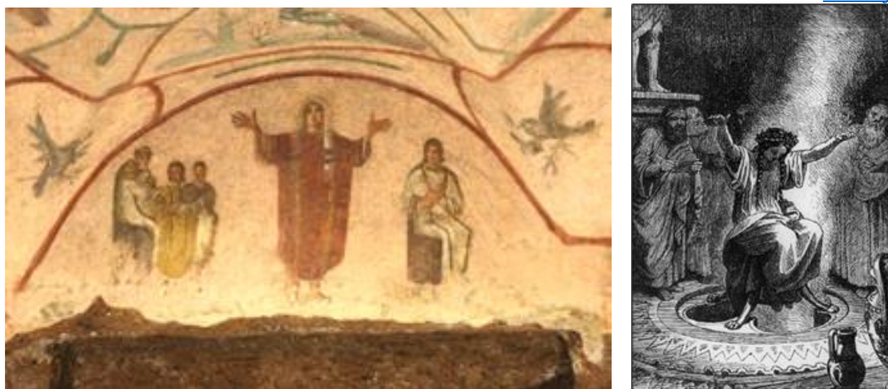

Figure 11. (Christian) Orant Fresco, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, c. A.D. 200.
Figure 12. Heinrich Leutemann. "The Oracle of Delphi Entranced," print detail, c. 1900.

Pythia issued the revelations she received from Apollo Pythios while seated on a tripod in the *adyton*, a restricted area within Delphi's Temple of Apollo (first constructed c. 700 B.C.). The tripod sat over a chasm in the earth, from which drifted sweet-smelling intoxicating vapours (πνεῦμα or *pneuma*, a term literally meaning "breath," but used in religious contexts for "soul" or "spirit"). The vapours she inhaled caused Pythia to fall into an altered mental state (see Broad 2007, 2-3), inspiring visions and ideas, which the oracle conveyed dramatically, at times even raving ecstatically (see Farnell 1907, 189). Modern scientists have suggested the intoxicating fumes may have been ethylene or ethane escaping from the chasm; while other researchers propose Pythia's 'prophecies' resulted from ingesting oleander leaves, rhododendron, or even cannabis (Spiller 2002).

Although the "female slave" Paul and his companions encountered in Philippi was, by land, more than 500 kilometres from Delphi, she nonetheless apparently possessed the same "spirit of divination" as Pythia, using it to predict the future and earn her owners "a great deal of money … by fortune-telling" (Acts 16:16). Ostensibly, her intuitions were dependable. Even Luke, the author of Acts, agreed with at least one of the woman's assessments: "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (Acts 16:17-18). The prominent British Bible commentator, Matthew Henry (1662-1714) has pointed out that if the enslaved woman actually had the power of divination, she would not have been the only clear adversary of the Christian faith to confess the power of the Christian deity in the New Testament (Henry 1950, 208-209; see, also, Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:24; 5:7). However, in Acts 16, Luke presents a clear contrast. Whereas, the "female slave" made money telling fortunes through "magic," and "flirtations" with a pagan religion that worked against the Christian faith (D'Angelo 1990, 458), Paul was given power by the Christian deity to perform extraordinary miracles, a power he displayed when he said for all to hear, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her! [And] at that moment the spirit left her" (Acts 16:18). The apostle's act lent credibility to the enslaved woman's previous public proclamation that Paul and his companions were "servants of the Most High God" (Acts 16:17), and even the

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woman's clients, who consulted her for advice and guidance, would have found credence in her declaration after seeing what Paul did. Luke presents this as a significant turning point in the dissemination of the Christian faith, for "even a 'pagan' slave," who was "economically and pneumatically exploited," could recognize the truth of the message Paul and Silas espoused (Nasrallah 2008, 565). It is also significant that Luke does not say the once-possessed woman of Philippi responded affirmatively to Paul's invitation to follow the "way to be saved," as had Lydia and her household. Matthew Henry postulated the woman may have merely believed Paul and the others served "the Most High" of the Greek or Roman pantheon of gods and goddesses, perhaps Zeus or Jupiter (Henry 1950, 208-209). Be that as it may, the woman's implicit endorsement of Paul's new gospel message before the people of Philippi had both religious repercussions, and potential economic and even political consequences, as well.

When the spirit left the enslaved woman, presumably, so too did the Philippian's confidence in her prognostications, and so too did her owner's prime source of income. Therefore, her owner's sought redress for their economic damages. "When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, '*These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice* [emphasis added].' The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks" (Acts 16:19-24). Luke describes the jailer as δεσμοφύλαξ (transliteration *desmophylax*), which translates more specifically as a "keeper of the prison."

When the city magistrates heard Paul and Silas were Jews, they apparently assumed they were not Roman citizens (see Acts 16:38). In fact, Paul and Silas shared complex (self)identities. They were both Jews and newcomers to Philippi and Macedonia; yet they both also spoke Greek and were Roman citizens. Their accusers, the enslaved woman's owners, on the other hand, might safely be presumed to have been Gentiles, both Greek- and Latin-speaking, and native to Philippi. Thus, the accusers seem to have appealed to the Roman city officials on the bases of shared religious and political allegiances (Glancy 2004, 102). Conceivably, even though Paul and Silas were also Roman citizens, they were unable to protest their harsh treatment, because the Philippian magistrates carried out their proceedings in Latin, rather than in Greek, a language in which they may have lacked fluency (Bailey 1909, 419). It seems clear, Paul and Silas (Roman citizens) were ordered to be beaten and imprisoned (by Roman magistrates) without going through the formality of being officially condemned.

While it is evident the owners of the enslaved woman were distressed that they had lost a source of income when they brought Paul and Silas before the Philippian magistrates, it is also worth questioning whether some form of oppression was also

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involved. Jewish persecution of Christian evangelists and missionaries, *on religious grounds*, is a recurring theme in the book of Acts (see Acts 4:1-3; 5:17-18; 6:8-14; 7:57-58; 8:1-4; 9:1-2; 12:3; 14:19; 17:5-9, 13-14; 21:27; 23:12-15; 24:27; 25:2-3). On one occasion though, in the city of Thessalonica (approximately 150 kilometres from Philippi), a Jewish mob dragged Paul's associate, who was named Jason, out of his home, presented him before the city officials, and levelled accusations, *on political grounds*, saying the Christians proselytizers were, "[causing] trouble all over the world [and] defying Caesar's decrees" (see Acts 17:5-9). What happened in Philippi may have been another such "exceptional" incident (Schwartz 1984, 357), in which an (apparently) Gentile group levelled anti-Roman accusations against Paul and his associates. It must be noted, however, a minority of Bible scholars, including Daniel Schwartz, contend the Philippian accusers were, in fact, Jewish. Schwartz, therefore, offered an alternative translation of the accusations brought against Paul and Silas in Acts 16:20-21: "These men are upsetting our city, *although they are Jews* [emphasis added], and are teaching practices which it is unlawful for us to accept or to do, being Romans." Roman law did not forbid the conversion of Roman citizens to Judaism until the second century A.D., but a Jewish Christian publicly preaching a faith that was incompatible with official Roman religious practices was another matter (Schwartz 1982, 359-360, 363), tantamount to treason against the emperor.

AN ANTI-ROMAN ACT?

Philippi sat at a geographical, political, as well as a religious crossroad, and the dividing line between official political and religious concerns was blurred. A cult devoted to the goddess Diana-Artemis thrived in and around Philippi during the time of Paul and continued on into at least the third century A.D.. Diana's devotees included both Roman colonists and Thracian natives (see Ducrey 1977). The Philippian cult of the goddess Diana-Artemis was led by female priestesses; another cult devoted to the Roman god Sylvanus was led by male priests; and a third, mixed-gender cult of Isis flourished in Philippi during the time of the apostle Paul, all centered at cultic temples on the Acropolis hill. These pagan cults remained extremely popular for several generations after the Christian church was established (Abrahamsen 1987, 20-22), the Isis cult persevering into the fifth century (see Feissel 1983, 185). Sculptural representations of Diana-Artemis can still be seen on the Philippian Acropolis, carved directly onto rocky hillsides overlooking the ruins of the ancient city. Depictions of other gods also scatter across the Acropolis, including images of Athena-Minerva, Zeus-Jupiter, and carvings of the Thraco-Macedonian "Rider God" (figs. 13, 14). The Romans annexed the south-eastern Balkan region of Thracia, or Thrace [Θρᾴκη], in the first century A.D.. A mixture of Greco-Roman deities and popular pagan cults would be expected in a city inhabited by both Roman colonists and "partly Latinized Greeks" and Thracians (Ducrey 1977, 107). Over centuries, Philippi's diverse population fostered an ethos of "religious associations" (Abrahamsen 1988, 47), and *syncretism*, a merging of various religions and cultures. "The religious history of Philippi demonstrates the diversity of religious sentiment and development" during the Roman Empire (Abrahamsen 1988, 55). In Philippi,

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Paul and his associates were compelled to compete against a complex embedded pagan syncretism (Abrahamsen 1988, 55).

Figure 13. Diana with bow, deer, and dog, Philippian Acropolis, date unknown.
Figure 14. Rock reliefs at Philippi.

Scholars debate the extent and influence of the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor and Greece during Paul's day. One has written that, "the imperial cult, like the cults of the traditional [Greco-Roman] gods [were] a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society [throughout the Roman Empire]," along with politics and diplomacy (Price 1984, 248). Others question the extent, or even existence, of the "theology" of the imperial cult in the specific Greco-Roman regions and cities in which the apostle Paul actually evangelized, and the extent to which the cult impacted either the book of Acts or Paul's missionary journeys. One writer has concluded the archaeological evidence reveals that in the Greek cities Paul visited (namely, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth), the influence of "the emperor cult" varied from "marginal" to significant (Miller 210, 316-319). The indications are the imperial cult would have been just one of many cults attracting the attention of Greeks and Romans living in Philippi during the time of Paul's visit; though it may have had a greater influence on the city's magistrates, who quite possibly were retired veterans of the Roman imperial army. Not long after Paul's visit, Philippi became an official *neokorate* city, a city that had built a temple devoted to the cult of the imperial family, with a celebrated social class of *neokoros* (νεωκόρος), or guardians of the temple (see Burrell 2004, 191).

Rome's imperial family shared the Greek people's special historical reverence for the god Apollo. Although Apollo was one of the most Hellenic of all pagan deities, he was revered from a very early date in Italy, where he was also closely associated with prophecy and benevolence. Tradition indicates the Romans adopted the worship of Apollo from the Greeks during the reign of Tarquinius Superbus (c. 495 B.C.), when the Delphic oracle was consulted. But it was in the time of Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor, that Apollo became a chief god of Rome (see Freese 1911, 186). Caesar Augustus (who was previously known as Octavian) venerated Apollo, in part because Augustus credited Apollo for his crucial victory over the forces of Antonius and Cleopatra at the naval Battle of Actium (31 B.C.).

The battle was fought near one of Apollo's sanctuaries and Augustus believed Apollo's blessing ensured his great triumph. After the battle, Augustus built a monument and sanctuary to Apollo near Nicopolis, where his camp had been, and instituted the quadrennial Actian Games in Apollo's honor. When Paul exorcised the Philippian enslaved woman's spirit, he took away a power of divination associated with the oracle of Delphi, who, in turn, was considered a mouthpiece for Apollo, who, again in turn, was a patron god of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. In effect, Paul exorcised the Greco-Roman religious authority and demeaned the key patron of the Roman emperor, who was, himself, revered by many as a deity. This web of connections may help to explain why the "new customs" Paul and Silas taught were thought to be "unlawful for … Romans to accept or practice."

It appears the *anti-Roman* accusations of the enslaved woman's owners prevailed. The Philippian magistrates had Paul and Silas flogged, placed them in prison, and assigned a jailer to guard them (Acts 16:22-23). Luke writes that later that night, "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" (Acts 16:25-28). Though theologians and commentators often view the "violent earthquake" as a miraculous event (see, for example, Henry 1950, 210-211), Luke's text does not require such an interpretation. The earthquake may have just been an ordinary phenomenon; however, it did result in the extraordinary consequence of freeing every prisoner from the restrictions of their chains. The Bible authors frequently write of people being freed from prison or from chains. They often write of freedom from *spiritual* prison or chains (Isaiah 61:1; Romans 6:18); but, at other times, biblical personages are freed from *physical* prisons and chains (see, Genesis 41; Jeremiah 40:4). In Acts 16, Luke juxtaposes both types of freedom.

Luke indicates prison guards could be put to death for allowing inmates to escape (Acts 12:19). So, when the Philippian jailer realized the inmates that he was responsible for had been freed from their chains, he intended to take his own life (presumably a preferable fate to having it taken from him). In the Greco-Roman world, individuals who had lost their honor often longed for death. This attitude is reflected in the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484-425 B.C.), who, in his seminal work *The Histories* (Ἱστορίαι), wrote, "When life is so burdensome, death has become for man a sought-after refuge" (*Hist*. 7.46). The Athenian philosopher Plato (c. 428-348 B.C.), in his dialogue Phaedo, echoed this sentiment, explaining suicide is permissible "when God brings some necessity or compulsion [ἀνάγκη transliteration *anagke*] to bear on the individual" (Droge 1992, 22). The Philippian jailer felt this compulsion. Paul was aware of such Greco-Roman sentiments. A decade after he visited Philippi, the apostle was again imprisoned (either in Ephesus, Caesarea, or Rome), and from prison Paul wrote his Epistle to the Philippians, which contains his well-known soliloquy on existence and survival.

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Weighing the prospects of continuing life or accepting death, Paul wrote, "I eagerly expect … that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. … Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body" (Philippians 1:20-24). A person living in the first-century Mediterranean world, whether pagan or Christian, "whether Gentile or Jewish, was trained from childhood to desire honor and avoid disgrace" (Gupta 2008, 256).

Thus, fearing his wards had escaped, the jailer drew his sword to kill himself, but before he could, Paul shouted "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" (Acts 16:28). The jailer undoubtedly knew Paul and Silas's claims, that they spoke on behalf of God, and, perhaps, the jailer attributed Paul and Silas's remarkable release to divine intervention. Whatever his reasoning, the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). They replied the jailer and his household should "Believe in the Lord Jesus," and the jailer and his household were baptized (Acts 16:31-33). The Philippian jailer had the distinction of being the first identified male to convert to Christianity in Europe.

AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSION

After his brief sojourn in Philippi, Paul's second missionary journey proceeded through the Grecian Roman province of Achaia, stopping in Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth, before concluding c. A.D. 52 (Acts 17:1-18:22). The apostle returned to Macedonia and Greece approximately three years later, on his third missionary journey, and visited the church he had helped establish (Acts 20:1-6). The Bible accounts do not state whether Paul was in Philippi on any other occasion. However, he did send the church his Epistle to the Philippians at some date between A.D. 54 and 61 (see Jewett 1970). The letter, which was written while Paul was incarcerated (Philippians 1:7, 13-14, 17), is one of his four so-called "prison epistles" (the others being Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon). Scholars disagree on where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote Philippians; some say in Ephesus (c. A.D. 53-55); others Caesarea (c. 57-59); still others Rome (c. 61) (see Bruce 1995, 8-16). Wherever he was, Paul was under the watchful eyes of "Caesar's household" and the "praetorian guard" (Philippians 1:13; 4:22 RSV), and faced the real prospect of being put to death (Philippians 1:20-23; 2:17). This does not decisively prove, however, that Paul's incarceration was in Rome. Praetorian guards were stationed throughout the empire to protect provincial governors (including in Ephesus or Caesarea, where Paul was also imprisoned) and "Caesar's household" could reference every attendant "attached in any capacity to the imperial ménage" (Bowen 1920, 113). Ostensibly, the apostle wrote to the Philippian Christians to thank them for a gift they had sent to comfort him in his confinement (Philippians 1:5; 4:10-19). The Philippians had apparently extended similar generosity at other times (2 Corinthians 11:9; Philippians 4:10, 16). However, Paul devoted most of his letter to reporting on his circumstances, encouraging the Philippians to stand strong and united in the face of persecution, and warning them to beware of "Judaizers" (or "Legalists") and "Antinomians" (or

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"Libertines") (Philippians 3:1-4:1) (on Paul's rhetorical strategies and general objectives in Philippians, see Snyman 2006).

Philippians is arguably Paul's warmest and most affectionate epistle. For example, he says the Philippians are "in [his] heart" and he "love[s] and long[s]" for them (Philippians 1:7; 4:1), and in his closing exhortations, Paul even mentions individuals by name. "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, *my true companion* [emphasis added], help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:1-3). Maybe the women Paul names, Euodia and Syntyche, had been among those he met by the river on his Sabbath in Philippi, or (along with Clement) were members of Lydia's household and had been striving to build the church in Philippi since their baptisms (Gilbert 1893, 39). In his writings, Paul frequently commended women who opened their homes to Christian fellowships, including Priscilla (and her husband Aquila) and Nympha (1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; see also Acts 12:12), and other women who otherwise "risked their lives" in aid of Paul and the gospel cause (Romans 16:4; 1-15).

As an aside, it is worth speculating on the identity of the person Paul described as "my true companion [σύζυγε transliteration *syzygos*]," the person he asks to help Euodia and Syntyche. The term translated companion could also be translated "yokefellow" or even "spouse," and alludes to those united in a common endeavor, labor, or business. Some think Paul is referring to Epaphroditus, who apparently physically brought the apostle's epistle to Philippi (Philippians 2:25-30). The theologian and philosopher, Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150-215) suggested Paul may have referenced his own wife (Clement 1890, 3.53.5). The Bible never mentions explicitly whether or not Paul was married, though there are suggestions he was not (1 Corinthians 7:8). Nonetheless, it is clear one of Paul's primary motives in his Epistle to the Philippians was to "strengthen the family links between the apostle and the Christian congregation in Philippi" (Snyman 2006, 261; Alexander 1995, 240), primarily the links connecting his spiritual family, rather than his conjectural relatives by marriage.

Polycarp (A.D. 69-155) was a disciple of the apostle John (and thus, an *apostolic father*), a contemporary of the *church father* Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 50-110), and an early bishop of the church in Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey). Polycarp survived the apostle John, thought by many to have been the last surviving original apostle, by roughly half a century. In c. A.D. 108, Polycarp issued his letter now known as The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians. In his epistle, Polycarp quoted extensively from the book of Acts and Paul's own Epistle to the Philippians. Notably, Polycarp addressed in detail the topics of Christian wives, widows, and virgins, encouraging the wives to walk "in the faith given to them … and to train up their children in the knowledge and fear of God. … [urging] the widows to be discreet and [pray] continually for all, [and stressing] virgins also must walk in a

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blameless and pure conscience" ("Epistle of Polycarp" 1885). Polycarp also emphasized themes he apparently drew from Paul's own epistles to Timothy, Paul's colleague in Ephesus, to "teach the Philippians to recall an image of the apostle that [Polycarp expected] the Philippians to know. … as a caring pastor, teacher about … household relations, and example of suffering" (Lookadoo 2017, 381, 383). It is interesting to note that, five decades after it had been established, the church in Philippi was still recognized for the devoted spiritual lives of its female members, and Paul's reputation for carefully attending to "household relations" in Philippi persevered.

The apostle Paul's missionary journeys were crucial steps in bringing the Christian message to Asia Minor and Europe. Establishing churches in important coastal cities along major trade routes, such as Philippi, was one of Paul's key strategies. In such cities, Paul and his companions encountered a cross-section of Greco-Roman society, Jews and Gentiles, women and men. In Philippi, the cross-section included a traveling businesswoman named Lydia, an enslaved pagan woman prognosticating for profit, and a man of Greco-Roman honor, the Philippian jailer. The earliest recorded Christian church in Europe was founded from this mélange, a church which was relatively healthy and prosperous (Philippians 1:3-11), in particular when compared to other churches founded during Paul's second missionary journey, including those in Thessalonica and Corinth (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 3:6-15; 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21; 5:1-13; 6:12-20; 11:17-34). Luke provides an intense narrative in the sixteenth chapter of Acts that brings to life a critical stage in the unfolding drama of Christianity's dissemination, and touches on issues that continue to concern the contemporary Christian church, including Christianity's position in a world of religious diversity and the roles women play in spreading the faith.

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