

Surprised by Lydia
Acts 16:6-15, 40 CEB
Cynthia Long Westfall, PhD
McMaster Divinity College

Lydia's Daughters: A Conference for Women Pastors
25 September 2018

Introduction

When Rev. Leanne Friesen came up with the idea of this conference, I thought it was a great idea and I was really pleased that she asked me to participate. She asked me to talk about Lydia and women in the church and why we should feel empowered and encouraged in what we do! To be frank, I found only three verses about Lydia in Acts 16:13–15 (well, and then 16:40), and Leanne asked me to speak for 45 minutes! So I thought that I would mainly be making connections and parallels between Lydia and all the other women leaders in the church and Israel, to show that the things that Lydia did, the role she played and the ways she behaved were consistent with many women who led in the church and Israel. But then I looked at that passage again, and I started seeing things that I had always missed, and it made me read the whole chapter differently. *I really think that I found something fresh and powerful from this passage that will convince you that this passage strongly and directly supports, affirms and teaches that God himself goes to great lengths to mandate and call women to lead in the churches*—and I can't imagine that this won't empower and encourage you.

Background

The background to this passage is super important: more important than normal.

- Paul met Lydia on his Second Missionary Journey that starts in 15:36.
- It was after the Jerusalem Council.
- Paul and Barnabas fought over Mark and split up
- Paul took Silas
- He picked up Timothy on the way
- He visited the churches that he planted in his first missionary journey.

But then something really weird and unexpected happened—the team was not allowed to preach the gospel in Asia, and they were not allowed to go in the direction they wanted to go.

Let's read the passage:

⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit kept them from speaking the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they approached the province of Mysia, they tried to enter the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them. ⁸ Passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas instead.

⁹ A vision of a man (ἄνθρωπος) from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" ¹⁰ Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. ¹¹ We sailed from Troas straight for Samothrace and came to Neapolis the following day. ¹² From there we went to Philippi, a city of Macedonia's first district and a Roman colony. We stayed in that city several days. ¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the riverbank, where we thought there might be a place for prayer. We sat down and began to talk with the women who had gathered. ¹⁴ One of those women was Lydia, a Gentile God-worshipper from the city of Thyatira, a dealer in purple cloth. As she listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul's message. ¹⁵ Once she and her household were baptized, she urged, "Now that you have decided that I am a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house." And she persuaded us.

And later, after the incident with Philippian jailor, Luke writes,

^{16:40} Paul and Silas left the prison and made their way to Lydia's house where they encouraged the brothers and sisters. Then they left Philippi.

We want to view of the story of Lydia in the context of how Luke tells the story of the Second Missionary Journey. I took note of how Luke framed the passage about Lydia, and I have ten observations about Lydia and one bombshell.

Lydia was a "divine appointment"

God literally "drove" Paul 935 miles (1,500 km) without allowing him an opportunity to preach.

Luke says that when Paul finally got the vision, they immediately made plans to go to Macedonia, because they concluded that they were supposed to preach to the Macedonians. Paul left Asia and brought the gospel to Europe. This is the first time, at least in Acts, that the gospel crossed over from the east into Europe, the West.

Therefore, Paul was prevented by God from preaching the gospel until he arrived at the place of prayer where he shared the gospel with Lydia.

And Paul's first convert in Europe was LYDIA, a Gentile immigrant from Asia Minor.

Lydia was not what Paul expected

Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man who begged Paul to come and help them—the word for man is ἄνθρωπος. The Colorado Springs Guidelines in 1997 stressed that ἄνθρωπος should be translated as "man," indicating that the referent is restricted to males.

Luke's story leads us to infer that Paul has not been allowed to preach until he obeyed the plea to come and help the Macedonian man and the vision would be fulfilled by preaching to a

Macedonian man. You infer that he is not going to be allowed to preach until he reaches the destination that God had set.

But the vision was fulfilled and Paul was finally allowed to preach when he shared the gospel with a group of Macedonian women—and Lydia, who was an immigrant from Thyatira which was in Asia Minor was the only one Luke highlighted as one whose heart was opened by God to accept his message, and she was the beginning of the famous Philippian church

There are three major surprises in Lydia's conversion:

The first is that she is the “wrong” gender! Paul's call to help the ἀνὴρ in the vision is first fulfilled by a woman. It therefore follows that a woman can represent and fulfill a prophecy or, by extension, apply a passage that refers to an ἀνὴρ (a man).

There are all kinds of cool linguistic reasons for this, but I digress.

The second is that she was from the “wrong” place! She was from Thyatira—that's in Asia Minor. And Paul had just come from Asia Minor! So this is more about being called to a certain space and place than it is about gender and race. The Roman Empire and the cities that Paul targeted were multi-ethnic and multi-cultural.

The third is that she is the “wrong” ethnicity! In Acts Paul is following his custom and looking for Jews—on the Sabbath he is looking for a Jewish place of prayer. Apparently there is no synagogue—often this means that there are not the minimum number of male Jews required to form a synagogue. So he finds a Jewish place of prayer, but he converts a gentile—a God-fearer who is hanging out with the Jewish women.

Truly, Lydia's conversion would not be what Paul expected! There's a lot of irony here. It reminds me of a commentary on the book of Luke by Joseph A. Grassi called *God Makes Me Laugh*. I think that Luke was laughing when he wrote this.

Lydia was not the ideal Macedonian/Greek woman

- She was a prominent business woman, most likely wealthy
- She was assertive
- She exercised authority.

Lydia would not have been considered to be a well-behaved woman in the Greco-Roman culture.

Lydia was a prominent business woman in a luxury industry, which would indicate wealth—a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira encodes a wealthy business owner because the purple dye was extremely expensive extracted from sea slugs or roots—it was the color of royalty and used to designate status. We will see that she was her own woman with her own resources who made her own decisions. The Hellenist culture and cultures that it has influenced tended to render even prominent women invisible. To this day, women and their achievements can be rendered invisible. A modern example of this, is that a picture of Obama's cabinet in the situation room

went global, and the Orthodox Hassidic Newspaper *Der Zeitung*, photoshopped Hillary Clinton out of the picture.

The Greek and Macedonian cultures promoted very conservative teachings about gender roles based on the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. Basically, the woman was meant to be ruled by her husband, and generally confined to the sphere of the home but should be “veiled” with a head covering if in public, which was considered an extension of the domestic sphere. These Greek stereotypes about gender roles spread through all the areas around the Mediterranean and the East as a part of Greek or Hellenist culture, and they were the standard by which a woman would be evaluated, even though there were clear exceptions of women who were leaders, heiresses, patrons, business women like Lydia. It was the practice then and now to render women invisible when they stepped outside of the boundaries, which is kind of part of what veiling is about.

And the reason that I hadn’t been able to see what now is clear to me about how Luke highlights the importance and role of Lydia is because sermons, devotionals and commentaries attempt to domesticate Lydia and render her invisible. They mention Lydia as the first convert, but then they concentrate on Paul, Barnabas, the ministry team, how, where and when baptism was practiced, the Philippian jailor and the phenomenal Philippian church often without mentioning her clear role. They all but photoshop Lydia out of the account for reasons that are obvious to me...she does exactly what they think women shouldn’t do, especially in the Pauline mission!

But Luke and Paul do not make Lydia invisible.

Tom Schreiner offers a currently popular interpretation of 1 Tim 2:15 (“a woman shall be saved through childbirth”). He suggests that childbirth is a metaphor, so that it means women will be saved (spiritually) by functioning in their God-ordained role of wife and mother.

But is this true of in Luke’s account of Lydia? Tradition says that Lydia had a husband, but where is he? Perhaps she was a mother, but where are the children? Being a stereotypical mother and wife is not what saved Lydia at the river. Her husband didn’t offer Paul hospitality, Lydia did. Her husband did not lead the church in Luke’s account, Lydia did.

But is this even true in the teaching of Jesus? In fact, in Luke 11:27–28, Luke shows that Jesus rejected the idea that women were saved spiritually or blessed by giving birth or functioning in their roles as wives and mothers:¹

A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!"

But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!"

I’ve searched the NT and I’ve yet to find a woman who was commended for fulfilling the stereotypical gender roles for women (such as being a homemaker or a mother). But women who step outside of typical roles and expectations like Lydia are not rendered invisible by Jesus,

¹ I am not suggesting that the teachings of Jesus or the Lucan accounts are in contradiction with 1 Tim 2:15. I am suggesting that “saved through childbirth” means something entirely different, which I discuss at length in *Paul and Gender*.

Luke, Paul or John--they are highlighted and commended. The same goes for the OT...like when the upstart Abimelek creates chaos and murder in Israel for a whole chapter. In Judges 9:53, when he was laying siege to the main tower in Thebez where the whole city had taken refuge, a woman throws a millstone from a window, hit him in the head, and mortally wounded him. And see how Abimelek tried to erase the woman's act from history: "Immediately he called to the young man who carried his armor and said to him, 'Draw your sword and kill me, so people will not say about me, "A woman killed him."'" (Jdg. 9:54 NRS). Which also reminds me of when Deborah judged Israel (Judges 4-5) and Jael was given the honor of killing the opposing general Sisera instead of Barak and is Jael called "most blessed of women" (Judges 4:21-22; 5:24-27), not to mention Ruth's behavior on the threshing floor (Ruth 3)! She secured the line of David and the messiah Jesus Christ!

Lydia took the initiative spiritually

- Lydia was a Gentile "worshipper of God."
- She took the initiative both to locate and join the Jewish women who gathered every week for prayer.
- She sought God and thirsted for him

Lydia is the counterpart of the devout gentile God-fearer Cornelius in Acts 10. God sent Peter to Cornelius and God sent Paul to Lydia.

Lydia was God's goal

If we had in doubts that that Lydia was the first destination of all this guidance by God, Luke tells you that God himself opened her heart. That is confirmation.

Lydia was a trail blazer

She was the first convert in Europe was a woman and she was the starting point for the European mission and immediately took a dominant role. This is not a strange or isolated incident.

We see in Acts 16:40 that Lydia led the first house church in Europe by hosting it. When Paul got out of prison, he immediately headed for Lydia's house and all the believers were gathered in her home.

Neither God nor Paul nor Luke appear to be worried about the feminization of the European church. After being in Philippi for several days, Paul (God) made a choice to preach the gospel first to a group of women. The European mission will be launched from a woman's home and primarily funded by the same woman. And that's OK.

Lydia functioned as the leader in her household

The scripture says that Lydia and her whole household were baptized (16:15).

What's really interesting is that Lydia's conversion and baptism of her whole household is parallel to the conversion of the Philippian jailor and his whole household (16:31–33).

Greek geeks: check out the parallel language! If the Philippian jailor is the leader of his household as is always said, then Lydia is the leader of her household!

ἐβαπτίσθη καὶ ὁ οἶκος αὐτῆς (Acts 16:15 BNT)

σωθήσῃ σὺ καὶ ὁ οἶκός σου (Acts 16:31 BNT)

Except in the jailor's case, he had apparently heard the gospel, but before he believed,

- Paul had to perform an exorcism
- Paul and Silas had to go through an earthquake
- All the prisoners' chains had to miraculously fall off
- Paul had to rescue the jailor from committing suicide

Finally, the jailor was ready to ask, "What must I do to be saved?" Then Paul said, "What *she* did!" He had to *tell* him, "You and your household should be baptized" (like Lydia and her household). I used to think that the Philippian jailor was a real model: I thought that I would love it if someone acted like him and asked, "What must I do to be saved?" But now I realize that I would much rather deal with Lydia and her household at the river.

Luke creates other similar parallels between women and men that have a similar pattern in which the women are unexpectedly highlighted as models of faith:

Elizabeth and Zacharias

Mary and Zacharias/Joseph

Sinful woman and Simon the Pharisee

The hemorrhaging woman and Jairus

Lydia was a theologian and exegete who taught Paul

Lydia explains, "Now that you have decided that I am a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house." While Paul's words were not recorded by Luke, we can see that Lydia is exegeting Paul's message. In effect, she says, "Let me tell you the implications of your gospel. Now I am in Christ and everything is new. Everything has changed. Consequently, allow me, a gentile woman, to house you and your meetings, and financially back you and your ministry." She has taught Paul the implications of his own gospel, and he agrees after some resistance.

I don't know if Paul had already written Galatians or not. It's possible that he had. What we see here is a gutsy application of his message in Galatians.

In Galatians, Paul sees exactly what changes if uncircumcised Gentile men are accepted into the church on an equal status as Jewish men. Social practices changed, the authority structure of the church changed, and the entire culture of the church became multi-ethnic instead of staying within the dominant culture of Judaism.

So, what happens with Lydia? In Galatians, 3:28 Paul indicates that what applies to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles also applies to the relationship between slave and free and male and female. Lydia sees that potential in Paul's gospel and theology in what can be applied and what could change in the relationship between her, a woman and a gentile, and Paul.

This is the foundation of the first house church in Philippi.

Lydia had the confidence and sheer audacity to confront and persuade Paul and his team

Luke says, "she persuaded us."

She schooled them.

Her exegesis won that day.

If Galatians wasn't already written, I would suggest that this experience informed Paul's theology when he wrote it.

Like Jacob, she struggled with God and man and she prevailed. Just kidding...I don't think that she was struggling with God. He was the one who set it up.

Lydia was a patron who financially supported Paul

We see here that Lydia housed Paul and his ministry team. So Paul formed a patron-client relationship with Lydia. He was reluctant, but he allowed it.

Again, this is in contrast with the Philippian Jailor. Yes, the Philippian Jailor got Paul and Silas and...

"took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.³⁴ He brought them up into the house and set food before them" (Acts 16:33-34 NRS).

But in the morning, he wanted Paul and Silas gone:

"The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace" (Acts 16:36 NRS).

In fairness, the Philippian Jailor was embedded in the power hierarchy and had something to lose: he had conflicting identities. Lydia had no such conflicting identities in her patronage. She was in a position to offer it and Paul accepted it.

Paul had many converts that owed him their lives, but not many who were in a position to be a benefactor like this. But he does mention that the Phoebe the deacon was a patron to him in Rom 16:2, and describes Priscilla and Aquila as patrons of him and all the churches of the gentiles.

Lydia's generosity was the origin of the character of the Philippian church and the Macedonian churches!

- Paul used the Macedonian churches as an example of generosity (2 Cor 8:1–5; 9:1–5)
- Paul said that the Philippians were the only ones who supported him financially in his time of need (Phil 4:10–19)

Paul was in good company when he accepted the benefaction of women—Jesus also accepted the benefaction of women. I searched the gospels for the verbal cognate for deacon (διάκονος)—which is δικαίω. I found that this verb was only used for the support and ministry to Jesus by women. Not once for a man. Yet, the office of deacon is supposed to that which serves Jesus and the body of Christ. How could we come to the place that that the church restricted women from doing that when they were the only ones that did it during his life?

There is controversy over Phoebe's role in Rom 16:1–2, where Paul calls her a deacon and a patron (benefactor NRSV) of many, including Paul. Some scholars have tried to dismiss the evidence of these verses. Among other things, they have bleached the word προστάτις, which means a patron who is a woman, and ridiculed the idea that Paul would accept any patron-client relationship, so that Phoebe was probably really just a hired servant. But Lydia was Paul's patron long before that.

Now here's the bombshell

In the orthodox church Lydia has been given the title "Equal to the Apostles"

That title speaks for itself. Junia is not the only woman who is associated with the title "apostle" (Rom 16:7).

How could we have made Lydia all but invisible in the western traditions? As I said, there have even been attempts to "domesticate" Lydia. Perhaps the assumed presence of a husband was the first, but some have suggested that she was a slave, which would mean that she, a slave woman, would not be acting on her own authority. Their key evidence is that she is from Thyatira, but that is no evidence at all! The Hellenist period was one in which people freely moved around the Empire to do business. Luke's description of a dealer in cloth, who takes the initiative, offers the hospitality of her own home and who has her own household is completely inconsistent with the status and role of female slaves in the Roman Empire. Furthermore, if this description were applied to a man, no one would ever suggest that he is a slave. This is a clear attempt to render Lydia invisible.

Philippi had the first convert and the first church in Europe. It became a metropolis for Christianity. Today, in Philippi, there is a church of Saint Lydia, and a baptismal in the river where she was baptized. There's nothing for the Philippian jailor. He doesn't even have a name.

Luke crafts this account in a careful and marked way to show us how God specifically chose, called and equipped Lydia to a ministry in which she was the strong foundation, lynchpin and represented the character of the famous Philippian church.