

"SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF PHILIPPI"

(Ben Witherington III)

Though Philippi was originally a city built and fortified by Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, in 358-357 B.C.E., the Philippi that Paul knew was a Roman city, indeed a Roman colony, and so a metropolis run on the principles of Roman law, with Roman officials, ideology, and culture. Of course Roman citizenship was highly prized in such a place. Following the victory of the Roman army over the Persians in 168 B.C.E., Philippi became an important and strategic spot as one of the major stopping places on the *Via Egnatia* that connected Rome with the East. It was located in a very fertile region eight miles from the sea, and at various periods in its history gold was mined nearby.

The city was best known to the Romans from a historical point of view as the place where Brutus and Cassius, the infamous assassins of Julius Caesar, fought Marc Antony and Octavian in 42 B.C.E., with the latter prevailing. Eventually, when Octavian defeated Antony at Actium in 31 B.C.E., having taken the title Augustus, he rebuilt Philippi as a military outpost, populated it with Roman soldiers, made it a colony (see Acts 16:12), and even gave it the *ius italicum*, that is, the legal character of a Roman territory in Italy which was the very highest honor ever bestowed on a provincial city. In practical terms this meant that there would be no poll or land taxes in Philippi, and colonists could purchase, own, or transfer property plus engage in civil law suits. The city was made a senatorial province in 27 B.C.E. by Augustus, was transferred by Tiberius to his own personal control as an imperial province in 15 C.E., and then was transferred back to the senate's control by Claudius in 44 C.E. The proconsul who governed the province had his administrative seat in Thessalonica, not in Philippi. In any case Philippi's links with Rome were numerous and strong, and there was regular social interchange between the two cities aided by imperial slaves or freedmen acting as couriers between Rome and the East (see Phil. 4:22).

Indeed Philippi was in many ways Rome in microcosm and chiefly populated by Romans, though there were also some Greeks and apparently a few Jews as well. Acts 16:11ff. suggests that Paul could find no synagogue within the Philippian walls, and this comports with other evidence that the Jewish population in this city was not large. This same account also suggests that women soon came to play a prominent role in the fledgling Christian community at Philippi, something

Philippians 4:2-3 only confirms. This is not surprising in view of the variety of roles women assumed in Macedonian society in general since at least the Hellenistic era. For example, R. MacMullen points to a woman who was a high priestess in Macedonia.

If we ask about the social makeup of Paul's audience in Philippi several things may be affirmed. First, it is likely that the majority of Paul's audience was one or another sort of Gentile, and in the main their cultural orientation would have been Greco-Roman with an emphasis on the last half of that hyphenated word. The few names mentioned in Philippians as associated with the church there may suggest converts with some Greek background, but we cannot be sure. Having said



this, there is nothing improbable with the suggestion, prompted by Acts 16, that some of the first converts may have been Gentile adherents to the Jewish religion. This may in part explain the reason for the warnings in Philippians 3. The character of the letter itself, which in many ways has the least Jewish flavor of all his epistles, also favors the conclusion that the majority of the audience is Gentile.

Second, not only the generosity of the Macedonians but also their poverty is suggested in 2 Corinthians 8-9 and 11:9, and at least the former is suggested of the Philippians in chapter 4. We may suspect that as in Paul's other congregations, particularly in Corinth, there were Christians of various socio-economic standings in Philippi. This is suggested not only by Acts 16, which refers to a rather well-to-do woman and her servants, 68 but also by various hints in Philippians that we will discuss in the commentary itself. What is not suggested in Philippians is the sort of serious social tensions created by the social differences we find in 1 Corinthians. The letter also suggests that there were capable women and men assuming leadership roles in and for the Philippian congregation. This leads to some further considerations of other social matters.

Philippi in the Time of Paul

