

PHILIPPI: THE CITY AND ITS PEOPLE

(Gordon Fee)

Philippi was located at the far eastern end of a large fertile plain (Dartos) in central Macedonia; it sat astraddle the Egnatian Way, nestled on the edge of the plain at the initial ascent up a considerable acropolis, 16 kilometers inland and across a low range of coastal mountains from the seaport of Neapolis (modern Kavalla). Originally founded as Krenides by some Greek colonists from the island of Thasos (ca. 360 BCE), it was taken over and renamed after himself by Philip of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great) in 356. Its reason for existence and for Philip's taking it over are related to its strategic location: it sat as sentinel to the large agricultural plain of Darto; it was well-protected by its acropolis; and, most importantly to Philip, it was nearby to Mount Pangaion on the northern side of the plain, which at that period was rich in mineral deposits, including gold.

Philippi (and all Macedonia) came under control of the Romans in 168, who abolished the ancient Macedonian dynasty and eventually created a Roman province, divided into four parts. According to Luke, Philippi was "the leading city of that district of Macedonia" (Acts 16: 11).

Our interest in the history of the city stems particularly from 42 BCE, in which year two major battles were fought nearby in the plain—between Cassius and Brutus (the assassins of Julius Caesar) and the victors, Octavian (later the emperor Augustus) and Mark Antony. Following these victories Octavian honored Philippi by "refounding" it as a Roman military colony, thus endowing its populace with Roman citizenship. Always astute politically, Octavian populated the town and its surrounding agricultural area with discharged veterans from the war. This both alleviated a population problem in Rome and ensured allegiance to the Empire (through its emperor) at this strategic spot along the major highway across Macedonia and northern Greece which connected Rome with Asia Minor and other points east. In an even more astute move Octavian did the same once again after he defeated Antony in the battle of nearby Actium in 30 BCE, this time with veterans from Antony's army, thus creating loyalty from those who had once fought with him and more recently against him. Although these events happened some ninety-plus years before the writing of our letter, they have a considerable effect on several key matters in Philippians.

By the time Paul came to the city in 49 CE (Acts 16:11-15), Philippi was the urban political center of the eastern end of the plain. Its population was both Roman and Greek; and although Latin was the official language, Greek was the predominant language of commerce and every day life—all the more so in a city located in Greece.

Of the four people from the early Christian community whose names we know, three bear Greek names (Lydia, Euodia, Syntyche) and the other Roman (Clement). We know very little otherwise about the socio-economic makeup of the congregation itself. Lydia, a merchant from Thyatira, bears the name of her home province. That she had a household large enough to include Paul and his companions suggests she owned a villa; at least some of the women who were gathered with her at the river for worship, perhaps including Euodia and Syntyche, were very likely members of her household. The jailer, on the other hand, who also had a household, probably belonged to the artisan class; whereas the young girl from whom Paul had cast the divining spirit belonged to the slave class that often made up a large part of early Christian congregations (as members of Christian households or, as in her case, on their own). What this suggests is that the socio-economic range is similar to what one finds in churches in other urban centers. Finally, the fact that three of the people whose names are known to us are women is probably not accidental, since there is good evidence that in Greek Macedonia women had long had a much more significant role in public life than in most other areas in Greco-Roman antiquity.

