

Philippians – Philemon Session Three



La conversion de Saint Paul by Luca Giordano (1690), Museum of Fine Arts of Nancy

The Mystery of Christ; The Founding of the Church at Philippi; Did the Philippians Hear the Old Testament?; Philippians 2:12 – 3:11

The Founding of the Church at Philippi

Philippi was the first European city to be evangelized by Paul. He arrived there in the late summer or early autumn of AD 48, having tramped across western Turkey from Galatia. His ship from Troas docked at Neapolis, modern Kavalla (Acts 16:11). According to Luke, Paul did not spend any time in this port city, but continued inland to Philippi (Acts 16:12). This is confirmed by Paul's hint that his first converts came from Philippi (Phil. 4:15).

Given Paul's subsequent preference for coastal cities, notably Corinth and Ephesus, his haste to move inland is surprising. At this point in his career, however, he had not realized that he would have to keep in touch with his foundations. He understood his mission as simple evangelization, to plant the gospel and march on; the watering of the seed was not his responsibility (1 Cor. 1:17a). It was only two years later, when he arrived in Corinth and was forced to concern himself with the affairs of the church at Thessalonica, that he became aware that facility of communications had to be a critical factor in the choice of a missionary base. The abundance of evidence for the religious preferences of the pagan population of Philippi makes the absence of any archaeological or epigraphic hint of a Jewish presence significant. Luke's source evokes a 'place of prayer' outside the city near a

river to which Paul and his companions went on the sabbath (Acts 16:13). The implication that it was a Jewish place of worship cannot be denied. The term 'place of prayer' does not exclude a building, but neither does it necessarily imply one. The known first-century Diaspora synagogues, however, are all within cities, as one might have expected, since Jews had a legal right to a place of worship. If they were too few to build a synagogue, a room in one of their houses would be the obvious place to meet for study and prayer. Moreover, no Jews are mentioned among Paul's converts. Lydia is explicitly identified as a Gentile (Acts 16:14) and the same must be said of the jailer (Acts 16:30 – 1). Finally, the group whom Paul found assembled did not contain any men. Luke's source mentions only women (Acts 16:13), one of whom, Lydia, is identified as a 'worshipper of God'. In other words, she was a God-fearer, a pagan who associated herself with Judaism but without becoming a formal convert. Since a Jewish presence in her home town, Thyarira in Asia is apparently attested, it is not necessary to assume that she was attracted by a Jewish community in Philippi.

In order to account for these data, it is necessary only to assume that the place of prayer served, not Jewish residents of Philippi, but Jewish travelers on the *Via Egnatia*, who happened to be in the city on the sabbath. Lydia herself had come from afar. In the absence of transient Jews, local God-fearers gathered there, and perhaps Jewish women married to pagans. It was among this group that Paul made his first converts.

– Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, OP, (*Paul: A Critical Life*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996)

Did the Philippians Hear the Old Testament?

Philippians does not contain a single explicit OT quotation. Nevertheless, there are numerous allusions to OT texts, especially in 2:14 – 16 (see also Phil 1:19 [Job 13:16]; Philippians 2:10 – 11[Isa 45:23]). This is not surprising, given that Paul's thought is steeped in the OT. But can we expect the Philippians, coming out of a pagan background, to have been tuned in to such echoes from the Greek Bible?

This is not an easy question to answer with confidence. Certainly, there is no reason to assume that the Philippians would have been familiar with the OT prior to their coming to Christ. Nor would the majority of Christians in Philippi have been able to read the OT privately. This was not least because levels of literacy in the ancient world were low. At the same time, we can surmise that the Philippians, living in a largely oral culture, would have heard the Scriptures read again and again as part of their instruction in the Christian way. What is more, Paul's letter would surely have been read aloud to the church – not just once, but on repeated occasions.

Conceivably, those who delivered the letter would have highlighted and explained the OT allusions for the faithful.

It is likely, then, that the Philippians' ears would have been trained over a period of time to hear Paul's allusions to Scripture.

– Dean Flemming (*Philippians, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, *New Beacon Bible Commentary*, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009)

The Mystery of Christ ***(Philippians 3:7 – 11)***

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

We see in this passage one of the most beautiful expressions of Paul's life in Christ, and indeed one of the most profound formulations of the mystery of Christ in the entire New Testament. It is the earliest Christian conversion story, taking into account the warnings expressed above about various understandings of conversion. In this passage Paul looks back after a period of years spent in missionary activity to reflect on the impact made on him by his encounter with the Risen Christ. While Acts describes it in dramatic terms drawn from traditional theophany symbolism (bright light, blindness, a heavenly voice), Paul speaks in much simpler terms, not of how it happened but of what changes it has produced in him. It has made him a person with a single passion: to maintain and strengthen the relationship with Christ begun years earlier, but not in an isolated individualist or narcissistic way. Always for Paul, being in Christ means being in community, which is the body of Christ expressing his presence in the world.

Conformity to Christ, a key idea in the latter part of this passage, is conformity to suffering and death in order to be conformed to resurrection. Paul had an uncanny way, so early in this Christian tradition, of seeing an intimate connection between the fate of Jesus and the life of Christians. Only about twenty-five years after the crucifixion of Jesus, when the memory was still fresh, witnesses were still alive, and

crucifixion was frequently practiced, Paul could find meaning in that awful fate. If we compare the conformity of Jesus to the human condition in 2:6,7 with the conformity of Paul, and by implication of all believers, to the condition of Jesus in 3:10 – 11, we have an early formulation of what was later to become a key idea about the work of grace in the Incarnation and the Christian life: that the entry of divinity into our humanity was for the sake of gradually but surely transforming humanity into divine life.

– Carolyn Osiek, (*Philippians Philemon*, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2000)

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Philippians, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, *New Beacon Bible Commentary*, By Dean Flemming, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009

Paul: A Critical Life, by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, OP
Oxford University Press, New York, 1996

Session Four: Philippians 3:12 – 4:23 *Running the Race*