

January 27

Commemoration: Lydia, Dorcas, and Phoebe, witnesses to the faith

When Paul on his second missionary journey carried his preaching out of Asia and into Europe, he began at the city of Philippi in Macedonia (north of Greece). His first European convert was a woman named Lydia, a merchant who dealt in purple-dyed goods. (Purple dye, made from a certain mollusk, was extremely expensive. One use of it was for the stripes in the togas of Roman senators. Lydia's occupation suggests that she had considerable capital.) She and her household were baptized, and she invited Paul, with Luke and his other companions, to make her house their headquarters in Philippi.

Dorcas (or Tabitha in Aramaic -- both names mean "gazelle") is mentioned in Acts 9:36-42. She was a member of the early Christian community in Joppa, a seacoast town of Israel, and noted for her acts of charity, in particular for making garments and giving them to needy widows. When she fell ill and died, Peter came to see her, and raised her to life. His words to her, "Tabitha, kumi," (Tabitha, arise), are reminiscent of the words of Jesus to the daughter of Jairus, "Talitha, kumi," (little girl, arise) as given in Mark 5:41.



Whether this is anything more than coincidence is hard to say. If the Aramaic words of Jesus had been quoted by Luke rather than by Mark, one might suppose that Luke was underscoring a resemblance between the two episodes (the reader is invited to look up both stories, the former in M 9:18-26 = P 5:22-43 = L 41-56 and the latter in A 9:36-42). As it is, I am not sure that Luke (or Peter, presumably Mark's source for his account) intends a connection.

Phoebe (the name means "bright" or "radiant": Apollo and Diana, the god and goddess of the sun and moon respectively, were often referred to as "Phoebos" and "Phoebe"), was a Diakonos of the Church at Chenchreae, the eastern seaport of the city of Corinth. (Corinth was on a narrow isthmus that connected southern Greece (the Peloponessus) with northern Greece and the mainland of Europe. Attempts had been made to dig a canal through the isthmus in order to shorten shipping routes, but no attempt was successful till modern times. Accordingly many ships were simply dragged out of the water, put on rollers, and moved across the isthmus and into the water on the other side. Naturally, the crew got shore leave. Naturally, Corinth became famous as a port that accommodated sailors with shore leave. This may account for the fact that Paul has a great deal more to say about sexual matters when writing to the Corinthians than he does in other connections.) When Paul mentions her, she has left the vicinity of Corinth and is in Rome, so that Paul commends her to the Church there.

There has been some dispute about whether Paul means to say that she was a "deacon" in the Church (holding the same office held later by Athanasius in Alexandria and Lawrence in Rome), or whether he refers to another office, that of the "deaconess," not the same as a female deacon (but in that event, one would have expected a feminine form of the word), or whether he is simply using the word in a non-technical sense to mean someone known for her helpfulness and service to the Church. He calls her a Diakonos, a word which the KJV translates as "deacon" three times (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:8,12), as "servant" seven times (including the reference to Phoebe) and as "minister" twenty times (including references to Paul himself). It is a word that originally had the meaning in secular Greek of "someone who is responsible for, attends to, ministers to, or waits on a person or group of persons or a task or area of responsibility." Later, it came to be used in a technical sense to denote a certain office in the church. One has to guess from the context whether it is being used in the technical sense or in

the older, descriptive sense. A similar problem sometimes arises with Angelos, which is Greek for "messenger, bringer of news." The form Euangelos means "bringer of good news," and gives rise to our word "evangelist." When mysterious beings gave messages to men from God, and then disappeared, they were called "messengers of God," or simply "messengers," and so Angelos came to mean sometimes "messenger" and sometimes "angel." Sometimes the context does not make it clear which is meant. Again, the Greek Martyros means "witness," but came to refer to the particular kind of witness who says, "Jesus is Lord," when he faces death for saying it. Hence, Martyros is sometimes to be translated "witness" and sometimes "martyr." Similarly, Episcopos can mean "overseer" or "bishop," and Presbyteros can mean "elder person" or "presbyter, priest."

Phoebe was in any event a person of consequence in a congregation near Corinth, someone who had made a valuable contribution there.

Icon of Lydia