

Series #24: Women of the Early Church  
Session #2 – The Women of Acts  
Tuesday, April 27, 2021

**Apostles gathered in Prayer and Supplication with the Women** (Acts 1:14)

**New Women Believers** (Acts 5: 14)

**Widows who were neglected** (Acts 6:1)

**Women committed to prison by Saul** (Acts 8:3; Acts 22:4)

**Samaritan women baptized by Philip** (Acts 8:12)

**Women Persecuted by Saul bring them bound** (Acts 9:2)

**Devout and Honorable Jewish Women** (Acts 13:50)

**Women at the Place of Prayer in Philippi** (Acts 16:13)

**Certain Damsel Possessed with a Spirit of Divination** (Acts 16:16-19)

**Chief and Honorable Women of the Greeks** (Acts 17:4, 12)

**Wives and children of Tyre** (Acts 21:4-6)

**Four Daughters of Philip** (Acts 21:9)

**Paul's sister** (Acts 23:16)

**Sapphira** (Acts 5:1-11)

- She and her husband Ananias were members of the early Christian church in Jerusalem. The account in Acts records their sudden deaths after lying to the Holy Spirit about money.

**Candace, a queen of Ethiopians** (Acts 8:27)

- The Candaces of Meroe were the queens of the Kingdom of Kush who ruled from the city of Meroe c. 284 BCE-c. 314 CE - a number of whom ruled independently c. 170 BCE-c. 314 CE - in what is now Sudan. The title Candace is the Latinized version of the term Kentake or Kandake in Meroitic and may mean “Queen Regent” or “Queen Mother” but could also mean “Royal Woman”. Although the term seems to have originally referred to the mother of the king, from around c. 170 BCE it was also used to designate a female monarch who reigned independently.
- A “Candace, queen of the Ethiopians” is mentioned in the Bible when the apostle Philip meets “a eunuch of great authority” under her reign and converts him to Christianity (Acts 8:27-39). In this passage, as in other ancient works mentioning the Candace, the royal title has often been confused with a personal name.
- Amantitere (r. c. 25-c. 41 CE): Amantitere is the queen most often identified as the Candace in Acts 8:27. It has been suggested that she may have been Jewish only based

on the passage in the Bible in which her eunuch, encountered by the apostle Philip, is reading the Book of Isaiah. There is no evidence in Meroe itself which supports the existence of a Jewish community but such communities did exist throughout Kush in small numbers. The biblical passage has also been cited to prove that Amanitere ruled alone since it states her eunuch had “great authority” and was in charge of her treasury but those statements hardly prove an autonomous queen any more than the eunuch’s reading of Isaiah argues for her Judaism. Nothing is known of her reign but physical evidence from the period shows a high degree of affluence.

### **Tabitha/Dorcus** (Acts 9:36-42)

- Dorcas (Greek) / Tabitha (Aramaic): was a disciple who lived in Joppa. The name Dorcas is a Greek translation of the Aramaic name Tabitha, meaning “gazelle”. One species of gazelle is now known as the dorcas gazelle.
- Acts recounts that when she died, she was mourned by “all the widows...crying and showing (Peter) the robes and other clothing that she had made while she was still with them” (Acts 9:39). The Greek construct used in this passage indicates that the widows were the recipients of her charity, but she may also have been a widow herself. It is likely that she was a woman of some means, given her ability to help the poor. The disciples present called upon Peter, who came from nearby Lydda to the place where her body was being laid out for burial, and raised her from the dead. This narrative concerning Tabitha/Dorcus indicates her prominence in the community at Joppa. This might also be indicated by the fact that Peter took the trouble to come to her from a neighboring city, when requested by the community members.
- Her commemoration day is January 27 (TEC/ELCA) or October 25 (RCC/OC)

### **Mary, the Mother of John Mark** (Acts 12:12; Col 4:10)

- Among the Marys mentioned in the New Testament, Mary, the mother of Mark who wrote the second gospel, is spoken of but once, yet this brief description of her is suggestive of her life and labors. She was probably the aunt or sister of Barnabas, the one-time companion of Paul, and such a relationship accounts for Barnabas’ choice of Mark as his companion—a selection over which Paul and Barnabas parted. Further, being related to Mary would account for the leadership among the saints gathering in her spacious home. Evidently the family belonged to Cyprus, hence the choice of such by Barnabas as the first station in his journeyings. It is possible that the narrative of Mary in the Acts was by Mark, which would account for the details of his mother’s large house becoming a well-known center of Christian life and worship. There is a legend to the effect that this same house was the scene of a still more sacred gathering when, in its upper room, Jesus observed the Lord’s Supper on the night of His betrayal.
- It was to Mary’s home that Peter found his way after his miraculous escape, for he knew that a company of believers had gathered there to pray for his release. Peter had a peculiar affection for the godly home. The way in which the saints met in Mary’s home bespeaks her tried steadfastness and the bond of intimacy that existed between them. That Rhoda was one of the maids indicates that the household was

considerably large, implying that Mary was a widow with means to maintain such a commodious home. As Barnabas her relative gave up his land for Christ, Mary gave up her Jerusalem home to be used as an infant church.

- Mary was a woman of sterling qualities and was loyal to her Christian ideals. At that time Christians were a persecuted sect, yet she faced the consequences of yielding up her home as a center of spiritual power and influence, and was self-sacrificing in time, effort and money to serve the Lord. It has been suggested that young Rhoda who went to open the door for Peter was hesitant thinking perhaps it was the soldiers of Herod who had come to arrest some of the homeless Christian friends whose benefactress and patron Mary had become.

### **Rhoda** (Acts 12:13-15)

- Rhoda (whose name means “rose”) was a girl (Greek: παιδισκη) living in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Many biblical translations state that she was a ‘maid’ or ‘servant girl’. After Peter was miraculously released from prison, he went to the house and knocked on the door. Rhoda came to answer it, and when she heard Peter’s voice she was so overjoyed that she rushed to tell the others, and forgot to open the door for him. She told the group of Christians who were praying that Peter was there. They did not believe her at first, and told her she was “out of her mind”. When she kept insisting that it was Peter, they said, “He is his angel.” Yet Peter kept on knocking, and eventually, they opened the door for him.

### **Lydia** (Acts 16: 11-15, 40)

- Lydia was most likely from Greek background, since originating from Asia Minor, but probably romanized one, while she lived in a Roman settlement. She was evidently a well-to-do agent of a purple-dye firm in Thyatira, a city southeast of Pergamum and approximately 40 miles (64 km) inland, across the Aegean Sea from Athens. Lydia insisted on giving hospitality to Apostle Paul and his companions in Philippi. They stayed with her until their departure, through Amphipolis and Apollonia, to Thessalonica (Acts 16:40-17:1).
- Paul, Silas, and Timothy were traveling through the region of Philippi when they encounter “a reputable businesswoman and possibly a widow... [who] was a righteous Gentile or ‘God-fearer’ attracted to Judaism”. “[S]he was one of a large group [considered]... sympathizers with Judaism, believers in the one God, but who had not yet become ‘proselytes’ or taken the final step to conversion to Judaism”.
- Because these encounters and events take place “in what is now Europe,” Lydia is considered “the first ‘European’ Christian convert”.
- “Thyatira in the province of Lydia (located in what is now western Turkey) was famous for the red [variety of purple] dye”. Lydia of Thyatira is most known as a “seller” or merchant of purple cloth, which is the likely reason for the Catholic Church naming her “patroness of dyers.” It is unclear as to if Lydia simply dealt in the trade of purple dye or whether her business included textiles as well, though all known icons of the saint depict her with some form of purple cloth. Most portray this holy

woman wearing a purple shawl or veil, which allows many historians and theologians to believe that she was a merchant of specifically purple cloth.

- There is some speculation regarding Lydia's social status. Theologians disagree as to whether Lydia was a free woman or servant. "There is no direct evidence that Lydia had once been a slave, but the fact that her name is her place of origin rather than a personal name suggests this as at least a possibility". Ascough cites other examples of noble women named Lydia from the first or second centuries, so it is unlikely that she was actually a slave or servant.
- Because women did not possess the same equality rights as modern women, it appears unusual that Lydia would be capable of inviting a group of foreign men to her house without a man's consent. "The fact that there is no mention of a man has been used to deduce that she was a widow, but this has been challenged as a patriarchal interpretation". Lydia's evident social power exemplified by her control of a household and ownership of a house (which she offered to St. Paul and his companions) indicates that she was most likely a free woman and possibly a widow.
- Her commemoration day is August 3 (RCC); January 27 (TEC); May 20 (some OC)
- She is the patron saint of dyers

### **Damaris** (Acts 17:34)

- the name of a woman mentioned in a single verse in Acts of the Apostles (17:34) as one of those present when Paul of Tarsus preached in Athens in front of the Athenian Areopagus in c. AD 55. Together with Dionysius the Areopagite she embraced the Christian faith following Paul's Areopagus sermon. The verse reads:
- As usually women were not present in Areopagus meetings, Damaris has traditionally been assumed to have been a hetaera (courtesan, high-status prostitute); modern commentators have alternatively suggested she might also have been a follower of the Stoics (who welcomed women among their ranks) or a foreigner visiting Athens. The Georgian text of Acts makes Damaris the wife of Dionysius.
- She is a Saint of the Greek Orthodox Church, remembered on 3 October together with Dionysius the Areopagite and two other disciples of Dionysius, who also became martyrs. 3 October in the Julian calendar, which is used by the Old Calendarists, currently coincides with 16 October in the Gregorian calendar. In modern Athens, Saint Damaris is also honored by having a street named after her — Odos Damareos — siding the Profitis Ilias Square, which is one of the main urban open spaces in the Pagkrati neighborhood.

### **Priscilla** (Acts 18:2-3, 18-20, 24-26; Rom. 16: 3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19)

- Priscilla (/prɪˈsɪlə/; Greek: Πρίσκιλλα, Priskilla or sometimes misspelled as Priscila) and Aquila (/ˈækwɪlə/; Greek: Ἀκύλας, Akylas) were a first century Christian missionary married couple described in the New Testament. Aquila is traditionally listed among the Seventy Disciples. They lived, worked, and traveled with the Apostle Paul, who described them as his "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3).

- Priscilla and Aquila are described in the New Testament as providing a presence that strengthened the early Christian churches. Paul was generous in his recognition and acknowledgment of his indebtedness to them (Romans 16:3–4). Together, they are credited with instructing Apollos, a major evangelist of the first century, and “[explaining] to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26).
- It is thought by some to be possible, in light of her apparent prominence, that Priscilla held the office of presbyter. She also is thought by some to be the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews.
- Priscilla was a woman of Jewish heritage and one of the earliest known Christian converts who lived in Rome. Her name is a Roman diminutive for Prisca which was her formal name. She is often thought to have been the first example of a female preacher or teacher in early church history. Coupled with her husband, she was a celebrated missionary, and a friend and co-worker of Paul.
- While the view is not widely held among scholars, some scholars have suggested that Priscilla was the author of the Book of Hebrews. Although acclaimed for its artistry, originality, and literary excellence, it is the only book in the New Testament with author anonymity. Hoppin and others suggest that Priscilla was the author, but that her name was omitted either to suppress its female authorship, or to protect the letter itself from suppression.
- She is the only Priscilla named in the New Testament. The fact that she is always mentioned with her husband, Aquila, disambiguates her from different women revered as saints in Catholicism, such as (1) Priscilla of the Roman Glabrio family, the wife of Quintus Cornelius Pudens, who according to some traditions hosted St. Peter circa AD 42, and (2) a third-century virgin martyr named Priscilla and also called Prisca.

### **Drusilla** (Acts 24:24)

- Drusilla (Greek Δρούσιλλα; AD 38 - 25 August AD 78) was a daughter of Herod Agrippa, King of Judaea and sister to Berenice, Mariamne and Herod Agrippa II.
- Her father had betrothed her to Gaius Julius Archelaus Antiochus Epiphanes, first son of King Antiochus IV of Commagene, with a stipulation from her father that Epiphanes should embrace the Jewish religion, but the marriage had still not been contracted on her father’s death at Caesarea in 44. According to Josephus, on Agrippa’s death, the populace “cast such reproaches upon the deceased as are not fit to be spoken of; and so many of them as were then soldiers, which were a great number, went to his house, and hastily carried off the statues of [Agrippa I]’s daughters, and all at once carried them into the brothels, and when they had set them on the brothel roofs, they abused them to the utmost of their power, and did such things to them as are too indecent to be related” Once Drusilla’s brother, Herod Agrippa II, had been assigned the tetrarchy of Herod Philip I (along with Batanea, Trachonites and Abila) in around 49/50, he broke off her engagement and gave her in marriage to Gaius Julius Azizus, Priest King of Emesa, who had consented to be circumcised. It appears that it was shortly after her first marriage was contracted that

Antonius Felix, the Roman procurator of Judea, met Drusilla, probably at her brother's court (Berenice, the elder sister, lived with her brother at this time, and it is thought Drusilla did too). Felix was reportedly struck by her great beauty, and determined to make her his (second) wife. In order to persuade her, a practising Jew, to divorce her husband and marry him, a pagan, he sent an emissary to plead for him. But for the marriage of Drusilla with Azizus, it was in no long time afterward dissolved upon the following occasion: While Felix was procurator of Judea, he saw this Drusilla, and fell in love with her; for she did indeed exceed all other women in beauty; and he sent to her a person whose name was Simon (Note: in some manuscripts, Atomos), a Jewish friend of his, by birth a Cypriot, who pretended to be a magician. Simon endeavored to persuade her to forsake her present husband, and marry Felix; and promised, that if she would not refuse Felix, he would make her a happy woman. Accordingly she acted unwisely and, because she longed to avoid her sister Berenice's envy (for Drusilla was very ill-treated by Berenice because of Drusilla's beauty) was prevailed upon to transgress the laws of her forefathers, and to marry Felix; and when he had had a son by her, he named him Agrippa. But after what manner that young man, with his wife [or "with the woman"], perished at the conflagration of the mountain Vesuvius, in the days of Titus Caesar, shall be related hereafter.

- She was about twenty-two when she appeared at Felix's side, during St. Paul's captivity at Caesarea - the Book of Acts 24:24 reports that "Several days later Felix came [back into court] with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess."
- The Book of Acts gives no further information on her subsequent life, but Josephus states that they had a son named Marcus Antonius Agrippa and a daughter Antonia Clementiana. Their son perished with most of the populations of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the AD 79 eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

### **Bernice** ( Acts 25:13-14, 23; 26:30)

- Berenice of Cilicia, also known as Julia Berenice and sometimes spelled Bernice (Greek: Βερενίκη - after 81), was a Jewish client queen of the Roman Empire during the second half of the 1st century. Berenice was a member of the Herodian Dynasty that ruled the Roman province of Judaea between 39 BCE and 92 CE. She was the daughter of King Herod Agrippa I and a sister of King Herod Agrippa II.
- What little is known about her life and background comes mostly from the early historian Flavius Josephus, who detailed a history of the Jewish people and wrote an account of the Jewish Rebellion of 67. Suetonius, Tacitus, Dio Cassius, Aurelius Victor and Juvenal, also tell about her. She is also mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (25:13, 23; 26:30). However, it is for her tumultuous love life that she is primarily known from the Renaissance. Her reputation was based on the bias of the Romans to the Eastern princesses, like Cleopatra or later Zenobia. After a number of failed marriages throughout the 40s, she spent much of the remainder of her life at the court of her brother Herod Agrippa II, amidst rumors the two were carrying on an incestuous relationship. During the First Jewish-Roman War, she began a love affair with the future emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus. However, her unpopularity

among the Romans compelled Titus to dismiss her on his accession as emperor in 79. When he died two years later, she disappeared from the historical record.

- Berenice was born in 28 to Herod Agrippa and Cypros, as granddaughter to Aristobulus IV and great-granddaughter to Herod the Great. Her elder brother was Agrippa II (b. 27), and her younger sisters were Mariamne (b. 34) and Drusilla (b. 38). According to Josephus, there was also a younger brother called Drusus, who died before his teens. Her family constituted part of what is known as the Herodian Dynasty, who ruled the Judaea Province between 39 BCE and 92 CE.
- Josephus records three short-lived marriages in Berenice's life, the first which took place sometime between 41 and 43, to Marcus Julius Alexander, brother of Tiberius Julius Alexander and son of Alexander the Alabarch of Alexandria. On his early death in 44, she was married to her father's brother, Herod of Chalcis, with whom she had two sons, Berenicianus and Hyrcanus. After her husband died in 48, she lived with her brother Agrippa for several years and then married Polemon II of Pontus, king of Cilicia, whom she subsequently deserted. According to Josephus, Berenice requested this marriage to dispel rumors that she and her brother were carrying on an incestuous relationship, with Polemon being persuaded to this union mostly on account of her wealth. However the marriage did not last and she soon returned to the court of her brother. Josephus was not the only ancient writer to suggest incestuous relations between Berenice and Agrippa. Juvenal, in his sixth satire, outright claims that they were lovers. Whether this was based on truth remains unknown. Berenice indeed spent much of her life at the court of Agrippa, and by all accounts shared almost equal power. Popular rumors may also have been fueled by the fact that Agrippa himself never married during his lifetime.
- Like her brother, Berenice was a client ruler of the parts of the Roman Empire that lie in the present-day Israel. The Acts of the Apostles records that during this time, Paul the Apostle appeared before their court at Caesarea.