

NOTE ON ATHENS: DO 1 CORINTHIANS 16.15  
AND ACTS 17.34 CONFLICT?

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Paul preached in Athens (1 Thess. 3.1) and Luke explicitly claims that Paul won some converts of status (Acts 17.34). The Areopagus was Athens' highest court,<sup>1</sup> so Dionysius as an Areopagite<sup>2</sup> was a prominent citizen. The Areopagus included about a hundred members<sup>3</sup> (making Luke's report of a small number of adherents among the hearers in 17.34 less implausible than some have supposed).<sup>4</sup> Luke does not identify Damaris, but because Athens had a tradition of restricting women's public roles, she probably holds some status; while it is unlikely that Athenians would have allowed a woman to sit as a judge of the Areopagus court, she may have been a philosopher, hence part of the group that accompanied Paul to the Areopagus from the marketplace (17.18-19).<sup>5</sup> While Luke

1. For examples from the first century BCE to later in the Empire, see, e.g., Cicero, *Fam.* 13.1.5; *Att.* 5.11; *IG* 2.2.3277 (in Nero's reign); Dio Chrysostom, *Admin. (Or. 50)* 2; Menander Rhetor, 2.3, 385.12-13, in G.H.R. Horsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1976* (North Ryde, NSW: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1981), I, §31, p. 82. See further David W.J. Gill, 'Achaia', in David W.J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting. II. The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 433-53 (447).

2. A title for one of the judges in the Areopagus; see, e.g., Lucian, *Anach.* 19; sources in *BDAG*. Such Areopagites were apparently well-to-do and of high status (e.g. Lucian, *Dial. meretr.* 7.296-97 [*Musarium and her Mother*]).

3. Horsley, *Documents*, I, §31, p. 82. For its earlier, smaller putative origins, see Androtion, *Atthis* 2, frg. 4a (in *PG* 4.16).

4. We need not suppose that all members were always present; but members of a municipal elite frequently devoted their time to public life.

5. See Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 247. For probable opposition to her, she cites Livy 34.2.8-12. On women

is particularly ready to name converts of status (e.g. 13.12; 17.12), he mentions other converts as well (17.34).

Whether these converts formed a church we cannot say for certain (some are doubtful);<sup>6</sup> though clearly one eventually formed there,<sup>7</sup> Athens did not become a center of the Pauline mission as some other cities did. We have no extant letters to a church in Athens, but it would seem odd for Luke to preserve names if there were in fact no individual converts;<sup>8</sup> he lacks traditions of conversions in many other cities or space for converts' names there (e.g. 13.48-49; 14.1, 20, 23; 19.9-10; 20.17).

Despite Luke's specificity in naming two converts, some argue against his claim of Athenian converts by highlighting instead a claim of Paul's. In a letter to the capital of Achaia, Paul apparently claims that Achaia's 'first convert' is from their own city, Corinth (1 Cor. 16.15).<sup>9</sup> Against the value of this argument doubting Luke's information, we might note that Paul speaks explicitly only of the first *household* conversion there,<sup>10</sup> allowing for some scattered conversions earlier.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Paul seems

philosophers and public speech, see, e.g., Craig S. Keener, 'Women's Education and Public Speech in Antiquity', *JETS* 50 (2007), pp. 747-59 (752-58).

6. James D.G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 238; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 533.

7. Later another Dionysius, bishop of Corinth in 170 CE, encourages the Athenian church and preserves an earlier tradition that Dionysius the Areopagite was the first bishop (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.4.10-11; 4.23.3; Robert M. Grant, *Paul in the Roman World: The Conflict at Corinth* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], p. 57; cf. Bede, *Comm. Acts* 17.34); but this is the sort of tradition that could also have developed from Acts 17.34. A church was named for him in Athens (Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament: The Mediterranean World of the Early Christian Apostles* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981], p. 138); Aristides was a Christian apologist in Athens as early as 125 CE (Finegan, *Archeology*, p. 140), and Athenagoras followed there later in the second century (p. 142).

8. From the names, Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament. II. History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 109, infers the founding of a church there (while regarding the speech as Luke's composition).

9. Dunn, *Acts*, p. 238; Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 442.

10. Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994, 2000), II, p. 87; Witherington, *Acts*, p. 533.

11. Paul's 'firstfruits of Achaia' may refer to the specific area around Corinth,

to have forgotten others (1 Cor. 1.14-16), and perhaps has reason only to count converts known in Corinth. Further, while Stephanas was known in Corinth, Paul does not actually specify whether he was originally from there or not (though other factors being equal, it seems more probable than not).

More importantly, from the standpoint of Roman administration, Athens was one of a handful of ‘free cities’ excluded from the province of Achaia until the time of Constantine I.<sup>12</sup> One might informally include Athens in the Roman province of Achaia,<sup>13</sup> but we cannot insist on it here. Paul often employs provincial titles, and his extended period of ministry in Corinth would certainly have made him aware of this distinction. Thus the claim that Corinth boasted Achaia’s first convert is irrelevant to the question of prior converts in Athens.

to which he is writing (David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], p. 767).

12. Antony J.S. Spawforth, ‘Achaia’, *OCD*, p. 6; Eckart Olshausen, ‘Achaia [Roman province]’, in *Brill’s New Pauly*, I, pp. 80, 83; on Athens as a ‘free city’, see also Pliny, *Nat.* 4.7.24. Sparta was another; see Paul Anthony Cartledge, Stephen J. Hodkinson and Antony J.S. Spawforth, ‘Sparta’, *OCD*, pp. 1431-33 (1432); Olshausen, ‘Achaia’, p. 80. Athens also lay outside the Peloponnesus (Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 8.15), but the Roman province of Achaia was broader than this location.

13. Cf. Pliny, *Ep.* 8.24.2-4.