

Immersed: A Journal of Faith, Arts, and Letters

The Greco-Roman Socio-Cultural Background Of The Early Church: A Historical Analysis Of Acts 16:16-21

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Abstract

Like any historical writing, understanding the historical context of the book of Acts is critical to understanding both the author's intended message and what it communicated to its original audience. This analysis acknowledges the historical context of Acts 16:16-21 – socially, culturally, and economically – to assess the passage's greater theological implications. Through an examination of relevant socio-economic and cultural elements, including Hellenistic influences, traditional beliefs about spirituality, and the complex relationship between slavery and the economy, the passage is better understood in its original context. As a result, the reader more accurately concludes the text's implications of exorcism in Jesus' name and the economic opposition faced by the early church.

Keywords: *Acts of the Apostles, Book of Acts, Acts 16:16-21, Greco-Roman Historical Background, Roman Slavery, Jewish Spirituality, Roman Slavery and Economy*

ACTS EXEGESIS PAPER

It is true that many Christians today experience Christianity in a more convenient way than ever before: the Bible App holds hundreds of different translations and devotionals at one's fingertips, church worship services are streamed online, and a simple internet search provides access to the culmination of over two thousand years of theological study. Modern Christians do, however, experience (at least) one disadvantage over the early church: the early church received and wrestled with the writings of the New Testament within a society that either closely resembled or was the original context in and audience to which it was written. Because modern society is vastly different than that of the early church, Christians today often misinterpret or simply miss the theological implications of the texts they study because they are not accustomed to the socio-economic and historical contexts in which they were written. Concepts and implications that, to a first-century audience, could not have been more clear instead seem cryptic to an audience in the twenty-first century. Specifically, the modern church lacks the experience and understanding of Greco-Roman beliefs about spirituality that first-century Christians lived amongst, informed by their first-hand experiences of Jesus' exorcism miracles and proximity to Jewish tradition. Likewise, the modern church does not exist in an economy structured around and sustained by slavery, while this was commonplace for the first-century church. Instead, the contemporary understanding of slavery is heavily informed by American history, rather than the Greco-Roman context that is critical to understanding the dynamic between slavery and the economy. As such, this analysis examines Acts 16:16-21 and its historical implications to frame it in its first-century context and clarify what the passage's underlying implications communicated to its original audience.

Section 1: The Passage in Context

The book of Acts is the fifth book in the New Testament canon and the second volume in the greater work of Luke-Acts (composed by Luke, a physician and companion of Paul). The book's primary theme is outlined in Jesus' instruction to the disciples that they would receive the Holy Spirit and thus be empowered to bear witness to his resurrection throughout Judea, Samaria, and, ultimately, to the ends of the earth (1:8). The events of Acts 16:16-24 occur while the apostles minister "to the ends of the earth," on Paul's second missionary journey.

After Paul and Barnabas separate in Antioch (15:36-40), Paul takes Silas with him through Syria and Cilicia (15:41). Having passed through Galatia and been "forbidden by the Holy Spirit" to preach in Asia (16:6), Paul had a vision calling him to preach in Macedonia (16:9-10). Paul and his companions arrived in Philippi, and without a synagogue to go to on the Sabbath, they found what the text calls a "place of prayer" (v.13) outside the city gate (16:11-13). It was there that they met Lydia, the "seller of purple goods" (16:14), who believed the Gospel and was baptized (16:15).

The following four verses are the subject of this analysis: For several days, they were followed and harassed by a slave girl possessed by a demonic spirit (v.16), who announced them as "servants of the Most High God" (v.17). Paul, annoyed (v.18), cast the spirit out of her. Her holders, perceiving that she could no longer earn them profit by fortune-telling, dragged Paul and Silas before the Roman authorities (v.19) and stated their presence, as Jews, was "disrupt[ive]" to the city of Philippi (v.20) because of the "customs" they practice (v.21).

There is much to unpack here: They were there to proclaim the Gospel and serve God, so why was Paul "annoyed" by her announcement of their identity? Was he justified in using the power of the name of Christ to perform the exorcism on this basis? Why exactly were the girl's

holders upset by the exorcism? If the girl's holders were upset by the loss of profit specifically, why did they accuse Paul and Silas on the basis of them being Jewish? Did Paul understand the offense he was committing?

Because this passage serves as the foundation for Paul and Silas' imprisonment (16:23-24) and the conversion of the Philippian jailer (16:25-34), understanding the cultural and economic implications within the text is critical to understanding the narrative of Acts 16 and the overarching narrative and themes of Acts as a whole.

Section 2: Background Analysis

There are two underlying socio-economic elements in Acts 16:16-21 that Luke's original intended audience would have naturally understood. First is the nature and reality of Greco-Roman spirituality in light of Greek Hellenistic cultural influence and Roman political authority. This section first seeks to establish this spiritual context to explain aspects such as the "spirit of divination" (v.16). The second underlying element is the nature and reality of slavery and the economic implications of slavery under the authority of the Roman Empire; this section attempts to explain the relevant socio-cultural understanding of slavery and its relevance to and relationship with the economy.

Greco-Roman Spirituality

Over four hundred years before Paul and Silas' arrest, Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia expanded the reign of the Greek Empire and, thus, Greek influence. This expansion of Greek authority included the intentional integration of Greek culture, known as Hellenism.¹ Hellenism accounts for the Greek-style cities built throughout the region, the spread of the Greek language, and "to some extent," the adoption of the "Greek way of life."² This included Greek ideas of spirituality.

While the early church certainly experienced this Greek cultural influence, they were subject to Rome's political authority. This dual influence is described in the era of "Roman Hellenism," which "formed the background of the New Testament."³ The religious landscape surrounding the early church was polytheistic, with each deity fulfilling "different roles and duties."⁴ This "non-exclusive" nature of paganism resulted in increased interest in "divine deeds and power" rather than "divine personalities."⁵ Pagan deities were tied to conventional measures; "as the needs and circumstances" of believers changed, "so changed their religion."⁶

¹ G. R. Stanton, "Hellenism," in *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 425.

² J. A. S. Evans, *Daily Life in the Hellenistic Age: From Alexander to Cleopatra* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), VIII.

³ Fredrick C. Grant, *Roman Hellenism and the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1962), 83.

⁴ Michael Walsh, "Inside Pagan Worship," *Christian History*, January 1, 1993, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/uploaded/CH37s.pdf>, 14.

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 173-74.

⁶ Jon D. Mikalson, *Religion in Hellenistic Athens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

In Acts 16:16, the Greek word used to describe the girl’s “spirit of divination”) refers to “pagan or false prophecy.”⁷ Scholars suggest the “spirit of divination” (v.16) was the python spirit of the Greek god Apollo. From Hellenistic influence, Jews “understood Greek religion” and “knew Greek mythological themes.”⁸ They were by no means unaware of the spiritual culture surrounding them.

As such, they were aware of the Greek phenomenon of Delphi prophecy.⁹ In fact, many Christians believed that python spirits did indeed prophesy and “cast them out as demons.”¹⁰ Furthermore, many Jews believed “the gods of the pagans were demons.” They believed demons “sought to reveal divine secrets”¹¹ and would do so by entering people and “forcing them to do what the demons desired.”¹²

This was further problematic for first-century Christians because they understood that even if a spirit prophesied true information, “its testimony was unwelcome.” Spirits “reveal[ed] activities that [were] not [their] place to reveal,” “compromise[ing] God’s blessing” that is the testimony of the Holy Spirit as witness to the Gospel.¹³

Slavery & the Economy

In contemporary America, the term “slavery” most likely triggers memories of high school history class: learning about our country’s transgressional involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, its dependence on slave labor, and the ultimate emancipation of southern slaves during the Civil War. While this comprehension of slavery is relevant to understanding how America’s past affects our society today, slavery in the Roman Empire was much different and, thus, must be distinguished from slavery in its modern American context.

For starters, Roman law recognized slavery as “an institution of the law of nations.” Although Roman jurists¹⁴ considered slavery “to be against nature,” they did not believe it to be “morally wrong.” Instead, it was seen as “legitimate, proper” and even “morally right.”¹⁵ Similar to the American institution, slavery operated within the understanding that the “master,” or slaveholder, was “superior” to the slave and was to “command” the slaves’ behavior and actions. The slave’s role was “to obey” the master’s commands.¹⁶

The institution of slavery played a critical role in Ancient Roman society, with the “most basic distinction among people under Roman law” being their status as slave or free.

⁷ Craig Keener, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 2422.

⁸ Keener, *Acts*, 2423.

⁹ Keener, *Acts*, 2422.

¹⁰ Keener, *Acts*, 2429.

¹¹ Keener, *Acts*, 2456.

¹² Keener, *Acts*, 2435.

¹³ Keener, *Acts*, 2456.

¹⁴ In Ancient Rome: legal specialists or interpreters of the law.

¹⁵ J.A. Harril, “Slavery,” in *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*, eds. Craig A. Evans & Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1124.

¹⁶ Keener, *Acts*, 1906.

Approximately one-third of the Roman Empire's population were slaves.¹⁷ While slaves were legally recognized as humans, they were economically and culturally treated as slaves.¹⁸ As such, slaves were taxed as property and recognized as such in the division of estates.¹⁹ Interfering with another's economic property, especially as a foreign visitor, was considered one of the highest forms of disrespect and dishonor against the owner of that property; this principle applied to slaves as well.

Within the slave population itself was a hierarchical structure, with the abilities and skills of slaves ranging between those who were simply "manual laborers" to those who were "well-educated." These distinctions determined the "price" put on that individual's life.²⁰ While many slaves served in a "domestic capacity,"²¹ others were physicians, business managers, and estate managers.²² Slaves were not "segregated from free-borns"²³ in their work, but they were subjected to the rule of their masters. This often included physical abuse, which was legal under Roman law, and in some cases, sexual abuse.²⁴

The role of slavery in the first-century Roman Empire is closely tied to its role in the economy, as the demand for slaves was "fueled" by geo-political expansion and the growth of the economy.²⁵ A slave with "special abilities" would have been treated better than a slave without.²⁶ Given the pagan context, the popularity of soothsaying and fortune-telling, and the practice of people seeking "oracular consultation and stationary shrines,"²⁷ slaves with these abilities were likely economic assets to their holders.

Section 3: Insight into the Passage

Understanding the Greco-Roman context of Paul and Silas' offense in Philippi is critical to understanding their accusation and imprisonment. Without this foundational understanding, one might assume that Paul acted out of genuine annoyance and, therefore, misused the authority of Christ's name. Likewise, it could be confusing that the girl's holders accuse Paul and Silas on account of their Jewishness rather than the exorcism that offended them; one might even skip over or miss this discrepancy entirely. Fortunately, these potential misinterpretations are remedied by the proper knowledge of the passage's background.

¹⁷ Keener, *Acts*, 1907.

¹⁸ Keener, *Acts*, 1914, 1923.

¹⁹ Keener, *Acts*, 1915.

²⁰ Keener, *Acts*, 1908.

²¹ Keener, *Acts*, 1912.

²² Keener, *Acts*, 1908-09.

²³ Harril, "Slavery," 1124.

²⁴ Keener, *Acts*, 1915.

²⁵ Keener, *Acts*, 1907.

²⁶ Keener, *Acts*, 2465

²⁷ Keener, *Acts*, 2422.

First, Paul did not perform the exorcism because he was “annoyed” (v.18). Rather, the Greek verb “διαπονέομαι” is used, which can mean either “greatly annoyed” or “deeply distressed.”²⁸ While it is possible that Paul *was* annoyed after being followed for days on end, it is unlikely that Luke would attribute Paul’s exorcism to such an emotional motivation, let alone justify Paul using Christ’s name because he was merely uncomfortable. From an understanding of the significance of witness of God’s power coming from the Holy Spirit, the latter translation is likely more accurate. Paul was “deeply distraught”²⁹ by the girl’s proclamations, not because he was annoyed, but because he knew that God does not welcome demonic testimony.³⁰ Paul did not abuse the power of Christ’s name out of his own discomfort. Instead, Paul relied on the power of the Spirit to do God’s will because he understood that the source of the testimony compromised the testimony itself.³¹

Second, it is clear the girl’s holders were upset by the loss of profit Paul’s exorcism causes, as they “saw that their hope of gain was gone” (v.19). Given the social understanding that interfering with one’s slave, and thus, their economic endeavors was highly disrespectful, the girl’s owners likely felt personally offended in addition to Paul’s economic interference. This understanding clarifies the reason for Luke’s including these details: to reinforce Luke’s argument that “when Gentiles oppose the Christian mission, they do so for economic reasons.”³²

This theme of economic opposition is also illustrated in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 8:26-39), where the crowd of Gerasenes sent Jesus away after he cast demons into a herd of pigs that ended up drowning in the sea.³³ The Gerasenes were too upset by their economic loss to realize the miracle that Jesus had performed right in front of them. Likewise, the slave girl’s holders do not revel in the power of Christ’s name but are instead upset by its economic effect. While they lack specificity in their claim of the “customs” (v.21) they oppose, their real opposition is to the economic interference caused by the spiritual practices and priorities of Christians. They likely base their accusation on the proclamation of Christ, however, because they knew this would elicit a more aggressive response by the officials. This example serves to illustrate opposition to Christian witness, a theme developed throughout the book of Acts.

Finally, because Paul had spent his entire life living in a societal culture built upon Hellenistic principles, he understood that his exorcism would be disruptive. The widespread social influence of Hellenism permeated the entirety of Alexander’s former empire, even under the new Roman authority.³⁴ While there were likely considerable differences between Judea and Philippi,

²⁸ Philip J. Long, “Acts 16:16-18 – The Spirit of Python,” Reading Acts, published March 12, 2019, <https://readingacts.com/2019/03/12/acts-1616-18-the-spirit-of-python/#:~:text=While%20walking%20through%20the%20marketplace,Parnassus.>

²⁹ Long, “Acts 16:16-18.”

³⁰ Keener, *Acts*, 2456.

³¹ Keener, *Acts*, 2456.

³² Daniel R. Schwartz, “The Accusation and the Accusers at Philippi (Acts 16:20-21),” *Biblica* 65, no. 3 (December 31, 1984): 358, <https://research-ebSCO-com.libproxy.calbaptist.edu/>.

³³ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 358.

³⁴ Grant, *Roman Hellenism*, 83.

ethnic and religious social principles of tolerance were extremely similar, if not identical.³⁵ Beyond his understanding, Paul likely expected and anticipated the potential consequences of the exorcism yet decided to proceed anyway.

A closer look at the girl's words reveals that she announced they proclaimed "a way of salvation" rather than "the way of salvation" through "god the highest" (v.17), a phrase used to describe pagan supreme beings rather than specifically the "God of Israel."³⁶ "The absence of the definite article," as well as the classification of God as one of the many pagan deities, qualifies the girl's testimony as "misleading" and therefore dangerous.³⁷ While Paul understood the socio-political consequences of the exorcism, he also understood that the consequences of tolerating unwelcome and misleading testimony by demonic power were far more significant.

With these new insights, Acts 16:16-21 can be understood in its original context: For several days, Paula and Silas were followed and harassed by a slave girl possessed by a demonic spirit (v.16), believed to be the python spirit of the Roman god Apollo. She announced them as "servants of the Most High God" (v.17), which the spirit within her described as a pagan supreme being rather than the one true God. Paul, understanding the potentially destructive nature of this misleading demonic testimony (v.18), cast the spirit out of her. Her holders, perceiving that she could no longer earn them profit by fortune-telling, were offended by Paul's intrusion upon their economic property and prosperity. They dragged Paul and Silas before the Roman authorities (v.19) and stated their presence, as Jews who acted with the power of the Holy Spirit to do God's will, was "disrupt[ive]" to the city of Philippi (v.20) because of the "customs" (v.21) they practiced in their willingness to interfere with the socio-economic status-quo.

Conclusion

Context is critical to understanding any message being communicated, especially in reading the New Testament. Without it, the risk of reading outside ideas and incorrect hermeneutics into the text is significantly greater. The historical nature of the book of Acts is best understood with an understanding of the socio-economic and historical context in which it was written. In Acts 16:16-21, understanding common influences and beliefs of spirituality and the complex relationship and social implications of slavery and the economy in their first-century context is critical to understanding the actions and reactions of Paul, the slave girl, and the girl's holders. Without this proper exegesis, readers misinterpret (or completely miss) the distinction between the reactions and motivations of Paul and the slave holders. Even more so, understanding these interactions is vital to understanding the theological implications of Paul's exorcism, which are easily misinterpreted without the proper context. This leaves room for misapplication of the scripture; For example, if one were to overlook the potentially dangerous implications of the girl's claim and conclude that Paul exorcised the spirit out of an emotional reaction, they may also conclude that it is acceptable to use the name of Jesus for their personal benefit, regardless of God's will's, even in reactionary circumstances. This exemplifies how misinterpretation can not only create the illusion of a contradiction in scripture but also lead a believer farther from the

³⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 538.

³⁶ Janusz Kucucki, "The Mission to the Gentiles: The Second Mission Journey of Paul According to Acts 15, 36—18, 22," *Journal of the Nanzan Academic Society Humanities and Natural Sciences* 11, no. 1 (January 2016): 124.

³⁷ Kucucki, "Mission to the Gentiles," 124.

character and will of God rather than closer to him. Beyond the specific conclusions of this analysis, however, this examination first and foremost serves as an example of the importance of understanding the historical context of a passage in order to understand the intended message.

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