

The Epistle of Lydia to the Apostle Paul

Bill McCarron

Preface

“The Epistle of Lydia to the Apostle Paul” is a short piece of prose fiction based on events highlighted in St. Paul’s First Letter to Timothy. It is an attempt at historical fiction; it is not Apocrypha, nor is it an interpretation, per se, of Pauline theology. “Epistle” is one of twenty-one stories I have written based on material in the New Testament. All the stories, including this one, are written in an attempt to go behind the stained glass depictions of Jesus Christ and His followers as ethereal beings with halos and heavenly overtones. No irreverence is intended. Rather, the opposite: Paul is not just a canonized saint, but a man of flesh and blood. His Epistles continue to yield varying interpretations, as does the historical character of Paul himself. Thus, “Epistle” speculates how an early Christian woman of independent thinking might have responded to Paul’s teachings in a letter of her own. “Epistle” is cast as an imitation of a Pauline letter. Lydia herself is characterized as an early feminist of sorts who would have known of Paul’s three-year stint preaching in Ephesus, ca. 54-57 A.D.

“But refuse younger widows, for when they have wantonly turned away from Christ, they wish to marry.” (1 Timothy 5:11)

CHAPTER 1

Greetings from Lydia your disciple in Ephesus in the province of Corita in Asia Minor. It is my fondest hope that this letter finds you sound in mind and in body as you recover from imprisonment in Rome our Capital. Grace and, as they say in our language: *pax tecum in nomine Christi*. 2. Please know that I am a young widow of a Roman official and childless and that I seek to remarry a Gentile of our own persuasion. 3. I take as a model my own mother who lives in Brundisium, herself a widow who has recently married a master of ships in the service of the Empire at Rome. 4. Thus, I cannot cling to her or her new husband, nor they to me, because distance prohibits such an arrangement, though such a union is present in spirit. 5. My mother is faithful to her new husband, but does not submit to him in all matters, having developed, of necessity, an independent spirit during her widowhood. 6. My mother does, however, follow your prescripts and covers her head while attending Church. 7. Her husband is a most kind man as she relates to me in her own letters. 8. He, himself, remains faithful to the Roman gods, but he does permit my mother her own religious freedom, being tolerant and understanding. 9. My mother does not gossip, does not cause scandal, does abide by her husband’s wishes in most matters. 10. It is true that my mother’s husband, not yet being a convert, does not fit your exact model of Christ and His Church. My own heart stirs in admiration of their union, however. 11. I might also mention that my mother and stepfather are both teachers of a sort. 12. He teaches navigation, being a pilot and helmsman on many Roman voyages throughout the southern and western Mediterranean. 13. My stepfather hopes that one of his future commissions will take him east to Ephesus and that my mother can accompany him. 14. In the meantime, my mother teaches young Romans their numerals, the proper declensions of Latin nouns, and the conjugation of verbs. She feels that, whatever future history develops *de verbis Christi*, that knowledge of the Latin language will play a large and important role in pursuit of that endeavor. 15. What makes my mother even more admirable as a person are the occasional examples she brings to her own teaching. She tells her students that not only must they have pure minds and bodies, but that they must become cleansed in the bath of water by means of the word and power of the Holy Spirit of Rome. 16. In thus carrying on the Word in such a manner, my mother risks

being declared an *hostem Romae* and could very well find herself cast into prison as you have been.

CHAPTER 2

My future husband follows in a path close to that of my stepfather. Fidelius, my betrothed, is a loadmaster at our docks in Ephesus, a humble man, and is not given to pretensions or pride, 2. Nor to the mere coinage of Nero, but to the minting of the truths of Christ Jesus. 3. Fidelius desires children of his own who will be our vines and branches in the years to come, as well as witnesses to and practitioners of the faith that has been bestowed upon us by the crucifixion of Christ in redemption for our trespasses and transgressions. 4. Fidelius is my oak tree, and I wrap him in my tendrils. 5. He loves me for my soul as well as my body. 6. He is, as I have intimated, a man of patience and much kindness. 7. He is not easily provoked or self-seeking, nor does he envy the good fortune of others. 8. In his daily life and being he practices not merely *amorem sed caritatem*. 9. He does not worship his Lydia, although he has once or twice begged forgiveness at her feet and washed them with water poured by his hands and dried with the hair of his own head. As I, too, have done for him. 10. Fidelius is, in a manner of speaking, my breadwinner, and I am his new wine. 11. I trust, dear Paul, that you will not misconceive my metaphors, 12. For Christ is our highest bread and wine in the solemn feast of *agapé* which Lydia and her Fidelius consume together.

CHAPTER 3

So we wish from you a blessing upon our planned marriage. 2. We have asked Timothy to aid in our exchange of marriage vows, knowing that Timothy is a most worthy presbyter here in Ephesus. 3. It is at his urging that I write to you in the hope that you, too, will bless our union as a temporal manifestation of the eternal union of Christ and His Church. 4. By the way, I plan on following the teaching profession just as my mother has done. The young women and men in our congregation here need my help because, like all of us, they but see through a glass darkly the kingdom that is to come. 5. My future work, as I envision it, is to uncloud that glass so that the presence of Christ Jesus' messages can become more certain in our hearts and souls. 6. My Fidelius encourages me daily in the pursuit of this goal I have set for myself. 7. Be assured, also, that I shall devote myself to raising and teaching our children, should God bless us with such vines and branches. 8. Fidelius may load worldly goods into the hulls of Roman ships, but he knows that in doing so, he conveys the bounty given us by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the nourishment of others. 9. Of ourselves we bring nothing into this world and we take nothing out, 10. Except that we have food and sufficient clothing, thanks to Christ our Savior, and with these we must be content as you yourself have written. 11. Fidelius and I promise to fight the good fight in a spirit of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, capped by the twin crowns of faith and charity. 12. (Am I too much the teacher here? If so, I apologize for my vanity). 13. Please know that my betrothed and I await, in fond hope, your blessing and encouragement in our lives together. 14. Peace and benignity be to you and your own teachings in the name of Him who died so that all of us might live. Amen.

Notes on the Latin: 1.1: *pax tecum in nomine Christi* (peace be with you in the name of Christ). The phrase also echoes the text of the Latin Mass. 1.14: *de verbis Christi* (words of Christ). 1:16: *hostem Romae* (enemy of Rome). 2:8 *amorem sed caritatem* (love [i.e., physical love] but charity [i.e., spiritual love]). 2:12: *agapé* (spiritual love).

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