

**WOMEN AS DISCIPLES IN THE EARLY
CHURCH: TABITHA AND LYDIA IN THE
ACTS OF THE APOSTLES (ACTS 9:36-42;
16:11-15)**

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By

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July 2021

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Abstract

The role of women in the church, families and villages is very important. I have witnessed in the work of the Church in our Samoan society the many good works done by women, but still they are not considered good enough to carry out the duties regarded as duties for men only such as being an ordained minister. It is the aim of this paper to seek in Paul's ministry in the first century as told and shown in the Book of Acts whether the contribution of women in the ministry of the early church could suggest making women ordained ministers. The study will focus on the stories of two women, they are Tabitha and Lydia in Acts chapters 9: 36-42, and 16: 11-15.

Declaration

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this paper to my loving parents, Autagavaia Faimalo Pinati Manila and Tenari Manila, to my brothers and sisters, and to all my families and friends. Special dedication is given to my wife Florence and my kids: Jeanmasalcarina, Bensenaila Pelesi, and Reinei Utumisa Manila, for their unconditional love and support.

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List of Abbreviations

CCCS	Congregational Christian Church of Samoa
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Introduction

The role of women in the church in Samoa is very important. There is a saying in our Congregational Christian Church Samoa (CCCS) community: *‘O le itupa lava o Tina e faaleleia ma faamatagofie soo se mea e fai i totonu o le lotu.*’ (The women always make better and beautify anything we do in the church). From the wife of the pastor to the women’s fellowship, their contribution in the development of the church physically, mentally, and spiritually is undoubtedly exceptional. Despite the conspicuously important contribution of women in the development of the CCCS, women are still not considered for ordination as ordained church ministers in CCCS. If the women have been playing a very important part and role in the proclamation of the Gospel, can they be considered for ordination to be church ministers?¹ This is not a new question. It has been a topic of open discussion for many years within the CCCS. I would like to bring up this question again with a biblical study focus on the contribution of women in the development of the early church shown in the Acts of the Apostles.

Many women are mentioned in the Book of Acts taking part in the ministry of Paul to gentiles in the early times of the establishment of the church in the first century. The scope of this thesis allows me to focus only on the women Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42) and Lydia (Acts 16:11-15). In doing so, this thesis aims to explore Tabitha’s and

¹ This question came from a life experience. The use of a life experience as a departure point in biblical interpretation is one of the approaches used by many biblical scholars including the Samoans to read the Bible. See Vaitusi Nofoaiga, “Enacting Sociorhetorical Interpretation in the Island Nation of Samoa in Oceania,” in *Welcoming the Nations: International Sociorhetorical Explorations*, ed. Vernon K. Robbins and Roy R. Jeal (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020), 57-70; Vaitusi Nofoaiga, *A Samoan Reading of Discipleship in Matthew* (SBL Press: Atlanta, 2017), 33-49. Nofoaiga as a Samoan approached reading discipleship in the Bible from his life experience of the Samoan culture of service (*tautua*); Elaine Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 1-4; Mary Ann Tolbert, “Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 28 (1983): 113-115. Wainwright and Tolbert approached the Bible from their experience as women in society. Their personal experience of how women are considered and seen in society led them to their exploration of the Bible.

Lydia's contribution as women's input to the development of the early church in the time of the apostle Paul.

The thesis will be divided into five chapters. Chapter One will give a brief overview of how women have been considered from the point of view of discipleship in the Bible; the definition of discipleship that will be used in the analysis of the interpretation; the methodology used in this study; and my understanding of women's statuses and roles in the Samoan social and cultural worlds. Chapter Two will be a literature review of the scholars' interpretations of Tabitha and Lydia in the Acts of the Apostles. Chapter Three will be the exegesis of Acts 9:36-42, which is an exploration of Tabitha's appearance in the Acts of the Apostles. It is followed by the exegesis of Lydia's contribution to the Apostle Paul's ministry in Acts 16:11-15 in Chapter Four. Chapter Five will be the conclusion of the thesis where the exegesis will be analysed in relation to the understanding of women's roles and status in the Samoan social and cultural world. It will also reveal a recommendation for the church in the consideration of women as ordained ministers.

Chapter 1

OVERVIEW OF WOMEN AND DISCIPLESHIP AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction:

Chapter One will be divided into four sections. Section one will give a brief overview of how women have been considered from the point of view of discipleship in the Bible. It is followed by the definition of discipleship that will be used in the analysis of the interpretation in Section two. Section three describes the narrative-rhetorical criticism as the methodology used in this study. Section four gives my understanding of the women's status and roles in the Samoan social and cultural worlds. This understanding will be used to analyse the interpretations of the selected texts.

1.1 Overview of consideration of women in the Bible from discipleship point of view

The understanding of discipleship in the Bible and in particular the New Testament has largely been an exercise in male leadership. From the Old Testament to the New Testament, males as leaders played a major role from Abraham to Moses to the disciples of Christ to the Apostle Paul. But in the last fifty years, we have heard and seen the growing recognition of the role and contribution of women in society and all aspects of history including the reading and understanding of the Bible. When it comes to discussion of women's contribution in the Bible and especially in the New Testament, the name of the Apostle Paul rises to the fore as the lead figure of any such discussion. After all it is he who writes more than any other in the New Testament about the roles of women in a Christian society. Despite this male focus, women were amongst the first to follow Christ as he began his teachings and ministry. For example,

Mary Magdalene as a woman is acknowledged as one of the earliest of Christ's followers, whom along with Susanna and Joanna supported Christ.

It is to be noted that from the very beginning of the Early Christian Church, women were involved in the establishment of the Early Christian Church, often offering their homes as meeting places for the early Christians. One of the more famous early women supporters of the Early Christian Church was Lydia of Philippi who was one of the Apostle Paul's converts and biggest supporters. This is one of many examples of the important role women undertook in the beginning of the Early Christian Church. It is the aim of this thesis to revisit these important roles and contribution of women in the early church.

1.2 Definition of discipleship

The traditional meaning of discipleship in the church considers male as the only disciples based on the 12 chosen disciples of Jesus in his ministry. This tradition made men the only ordained people to become ordained ministers. It was the tradition brought to Samoa by the early missionaries. The Samoans saw in these foreign traditions a change that would improve their lifestyle such as the separating of certain roles between men and women, especially the role of leading worships. Such practice has been the accepted way of undertaking gender roles not only in the church but in society. However, the emergence of the consideration of the 'location of the reader now' in reading the Bible in 1970s brought about a change in the way of thinking in dealing with those traditional interpretations of the Bible. The meaning of discipleship and its emphases shifted. For example, Fernando F. Segovia in his study of the Gospel of

Matthew came up with two definitions of discipleship.¹ One is discipleship as a tradition of following Jesus in accordance with the historical master-disciple relationship established between Jesus and his followers. Two, is discipleship as the self-understanding of a Christian believer in relation to his or her daily practising of the teachings of Jesus. Segovia's observations of the meaning of discipleship reflect the importance of considering the location of the reader in today's world. Segovia's definitions of discipleship show that Tabitha's and Lydia's contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel as told and shown in the Acts of the Apostles can be regarded as these women's actions of doing discipleship. As such, their contribution can be interpreted as their attempt to make sense their world as women in the ministry. In this way, this study considers important Segovia's definition of discipleship that treats one's self-understanding and experience as a Christian believer and will be one of the elements used in the analysis of the interpretations of the selected texts made in this thesis.

1.3 Narrative-rhetorical criticism – methodology used to explore the text

The narrative-rhetorical criticism will be used as the interpretational tool to explore the selected texts. This criticism is a combination of the narrative criticism and the rhetorical criticism. The narrative criticism² explores what the story is as told and shown in the text. It looks at the characters, the event, and the movements of the characters and their relationship to each other as shown in the text. The rhetorical

¹ Fernando F. Segovia, "Introduction: Call and Discipleship – Toward a Re-examination of the Shape and Character of Christian Existence in the New Testament," in *Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2.

² Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 239. See also, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean," in *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, eds. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 23-49..

criticism³⁴ seeks to find how the language of the text reveals and shows the story told in the text. The narrative-rhetorical criticism is part of literary criticism. As such, it also considers the world behind the text. In other words, the story told in the text and how it is told and shown reflects what happened in the world behind the text. Thus, the use of the narrative-rhetorical criticism also considers the world behind the text – such as the world of the text.

1.4 Women – their statuses and roles in the Samoan social and cultural world

This understanding is important in the analysis of the interpretation of the selected texts – the analysis that will put forward an answer to the focused-question of this study.

From within the social and cultural world of the Samoan people we have a social and cultural value and practice called '*fetausia'i* or *feoeoea'i* (mutual respecting of each other) embedded in the understanding and undertaking of the sister-brother relationship in the *faaSamoa* (Samoan culture or way of living). In this relationship, a brother as *tuagane* is expected to treat his sister with great respect, and the sister in return is to do likewise. It is undertaking the brother's role of treating his sister as *feagaiga* (covenant), and the sister should do likewise. This social and cultural practice is learned by any Samoan from birth in the Samoan *aiga* (family) context – *aiga* as the primary learning centre of the sister and brother before moving on to the village level. It is a social and cultural practice that teaches the sister and brother about their relational and egalitarian roles. Certain roles are to be carried out by the brother and so as the sister. There are

³ George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 3-4. See also: Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

⁴ Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

also roles that they share responsibilities in carrying out such as priestly roles in conducting worships to family gods. According to Le Tagaloa, the women in their status of *feagaiga* as *taupou* (daughter of the high chief) would conduct worship ceremonies/rites to family gods like her father.⁵ This is also mentioned by Schoeffel. She says: “It is clear that in pre-Christian Samoa, women had played an important and possibly equal role with men in religious life, as priests, spirit mediums and deities.”⁶ Thus, women’s involvement in our Samoan world/s as embedded in the sister-brother relationship in the *faaSamoa* shows the value of egalitarianism where both men and women in the task of conducting worship are shared. It should give the Samoans more awareness of how to regard women and their contributions into our society. Seeing the women’s contribution in the church in light of the recognition of the Samoan women in the role of conducting worship as shown above is another issue which will be dealt with at the end of this study.

1.5 Conclusion

This Chapter lays the background of the whole thesis. It shows a brief overview of how women in the Bible have been seen from the point of view of discipleship. The women have been seen as not disciples. However, the emergence of considering the importance of the readers now brought about not only other approaches to reading the Bible but also other interpretations – interpretations that are more meaningful to the world of the reader now.

⁵ Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa, *O le Faasinomaga: Le Tagata ma lona Faasinomaga* (Alafua: Lamepa, 1997), 16-20.

⁶ Penelope Schoeffel, “The Samoan Concept of *Feagaiga* and its Transformation,” in *Tonga and Samoa: Images of Gender and Polity* (ed. Judith Huntsman; Canterbury: Canterbury University Press, 1995), 85-105.

The meaning of discipleship to guide the analysis of the interpretation emphasizes any followers of Christ regardless of gender. The narrative-rhetorical criticism is explained as the methodology used followed by the understanding of women's roles and statuses in the Samoan social and cultural world – the roles and statuses showing the recognition of women to share with men some of the roles such as conducting worships. The following chapter will be the literature review of the interpretations of Tabitha and Lydia.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will provide a literary review of the various roles of women as found in the New Testament leading to the literature review of the scholars' interpretations of the texts in which Tabitha's and Lydia's characters appear in the Acts of the Apostles. The Chapter is divided into three sections. Section one gives a brief overview of the various roles of women as found in the New Testament followed by the literature review of the interpretations of Tabitha's and Lydia's appearance in the selected texts. The last section is the conclusion to the chapter where the focus of the explorations of the chosen texts in Chapters Three and Four will be shown.

2.1 Overview of various roles of women in New Testament

The issue of women as disciples is the subject of various debates and discussions amongst scholars. Some, such as Grace Selover focus on the evolving role of women in Christian ministry in her article of the Emerging Women's Leadership.¹ The article engages the evolving role of women in Christian ministry. A role that has often been confined to stereotypical feminine duties such as homemaker and caring for children. Interestingly, Selover makes a case for the duality of God's divinity as both masculine and feminine. She claims that all of creation was made in God's image, and in creating man and woman, God's image can be viewed as both masculine and feminine. In expressing such a view, she points that God's love for mankind exists as both Heavenly

¹ Grace Selover, "Challenges and New Development in the Emerging Women's Leadership in Unification Church Ministry," *Journal of Unification Studies* 20 (2019):114-129

Father and Heavenly Mother.² God's love then exists as a mothering instinct in a mothering capacity, something that women can obviously relate to. Following this line of thought, she argues that "The mother's heart can be the full, realistic expression and manifestation of God's heart in femininity".³ Bearing this in mind, it is clear why she is hopeful for the future of women in the church as they emerge into prominent leadership roles. They are just as capable as men are in fulfilling these roles.

Women can participate in the church ministry and spiritually fight a good fight like men do. But more than that, they can embrace the discouraged and lost, reach out to the weak and disabled, comfort the isolated and unappreciated, and provide unconditional care and support to a bigger church community....Together with men leaders of the church, they are the agents to bring positive change, harmony, cooperation, complementarity, and a team spirit and dynamics to the church ministry as a whole.⁴

Women in their own ways have fulfilled being models of God's maternal love in the early stages of the ministry. They participated in ministry on their own accord, practicing the examples set forth by Christ. They were agents of change in their time just as their male counterparts were. And in such a light, they were the earliest emerging women leaders – disciples in their own right.

2.2 Literature Review of Tabitha's and Lydia's appearances in the Acts of the Apostles

The contribution of women in the ministry of the early church as shown in the Acts of the Apostles is considered as the work of the Holy Spirit. Clare Watkins, a

² Selover, "Challenges and New Development in the Emerging Women's Leadership in Unification Church Ministry," 115.

³ Selover, "Challenges and New Development in the Emerging Women's Leadership in Unification Church Ministry," 117.

⁴ Selover, "Challenges and New Development in the Emerging Women's Leadership in Unification Church Ministry," 125.

Catholic woman from her experience as a woman in relation to practicing the ministry,⁵ says that discipleship is an experience that is defined as the working of the Holy Spirit in human lives in their own contexts. From this perspective, Watkins considers the works of Tabitha and Lydia as works of disciples. The work of the Holy Spirit is reflected in Heinrich Arnold's interpretations of the consideration of women as disciples.⁶ For Arnold, apostleship is a leadership role in the church that is "not bound to man." It is a role that is bound to the Holy Spirit, and requires one to fully invest himself/herself in God's work. Thus, Arnold sees women such as Tabitha and Lydia as disciples from this perspective.

For William Phipps, Tabitha and Lydia can be considered as disciples from the theological point of view of "one in Christ".⁷ Phipps' interpretation addresses how in church history in the days of Paul would not consider women as ordained minister, priest or bishop.⁸ For Phipps, Paul himself in some of his teachings recognizes the importance of women's contribution. For example, according to Phipps, Paul explains in the letter to Corinthian that women may pray publicly. Paul regarded prophesying and inspired preaching, as a task for both women and men to carry out in the congregation. In other words, Phipps speaks of the work of women as Tabitha and Lydia do as an example of one in Christ as living in Christ that Watkins talks about.

Heinrich Arnold agrees by saying that God being with us to be shown by us in our actions makes all of us disciples. Arnold equates apostleship as a commitment to living separately from the pressures of the world. Such a calling inevitably requires one

⁵ Clare Watkins, *Women and Discipleship*, Reflections on the work of the Margaret Beaufort Institute as it celebrates its Tenth Anniversary (2004):269-276.

⁶ Heinrich Arnold, *Discipleship, Living for Christ in daily Grind* (Farmington: Pa 15437 USA, 2007)

⁷ William Phipps, *Assertive Biblical Women, Contributions in Women's Studies* (Westport: Connecticut London, 1992)

⁸ Phipps, *Assertive Biblical Women*, 129.

to sacrifice the world in favour of living Christ-like. Based on that information according to Arnold, there exist grounds for an argument that justifies deeming Tabitha and Lydia as apostles in their respective era in church history.

Emphasizing action or service as a characteristic of considering anyone to become a disciple is also the argument reflected in Beyer interpretation of '*diakonien*' (the need to serve). For Beyer, '*diakonien*' identifies the specific quality of showing the very personal services rendered by one to another.⁹ For example, according to Beyer, preaching in the Acts 19:22 is one example of a form of service. Therefore, the services and activities done by women particularly make them disciples. It is also an important point that supported by Francis in his writing about Women in the New Testament,¹⁰ considering the role of women as church leaders, in terms of identifying the meaning of the services. It is a relevant work that depicts the meaning of "deaconess", that is normally in this sense of the word implies a church worker enjoying some degree of responsibility and authority.

According to Witherington,¹¹ women as deaconesses can play an important part in the early church. He adds that as such, deaconess merely creates a certain male and female parallelism which reveals how the gospel ministers equally to both sexes. It highlights the use of the story of Tabitha that shows further the meaning of the good works done by women is important to the community. In other words, the main reason for the appearance of the story of Tabitha is to reveal how women function and work as

⁹ William, H, Beyer, "Deacons and the Church: Making Connections Between Old and New, 'Journal on Diakon (2002):81.

¹⁰ Francis, Cleary, *Women in the New Testament: St Paul and the Early Pauline Churches* (St Louis: Missouri) 81

¹¹ Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Church* (Edinburgh: Cambridge United Kingdom, 1988), 149.

a deaconess. So Luke as the author of the Acts of the Apostles according to Witherington paints the picture of a woman commissioned for ministry.

Mayer Laurel in her interpretation of Tabitha in the Book of Acts also emphasizes the importance of the considerations of the women's roles in their consideration to be disciples.¹² For Mayer, there are few specific details about Tabitha. The Bible does not say whether she was single, married or widowed, rich or poor, or had children. However, the Book of Acts says something important about Tabitha: "At Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and alms deeds which she did. This woman was full of good deeds and kind deeds she did." In other words, Tabitha was a Christian woman who was very full of many good deeds as well as acts of kindness for the poor, who had compassion. According to Mayer, the important and useful work that Tabitha as a mother did was an example of discipleship who do good service for the good of others.

In Teresa Jeanne Calpino's Doctorate dissertation, "The Lord Opened Her Heart: Women, Work, and Leadership in Acts of the Apostles," she focuses on Tabitha and Lydia as mentioned in the Book of Acts. Her study has a two-fold purpose: firstly, it "explores the types of images and expectations that may have influenced an audience's perceptions of these women," and then it analyses the "characterization of Tabitha and Lydia within their discrete biblical narratives."¹³ Calpino makes an important note of the Book of Acts: there are about thirty stories that have women characters, and the agenda at-hand with this intentional incorporation of women appears

¹² Laurel Meyer, "*Tabitha: A Woman God Used*," Bible Women (2016),

<https://www.tomorrowworld.org/woman-to-woman/tabitha-a-woman-god-used-acts-936-43>.

¹³ Teresa, J, Calpino, "The Lord Opened Her Heart: Women, Work, and Leadership in Acts of the Apostles" (PhD diss. Loyola University Chicago, 2012), 13.

to be providing women with women role models to look up to¹⁴. She identifies Tabitha and Lydia as two independent women who are heads of their respective households. The mentioning of these characters in Acts is unique in Biblical literature in that they are mentioned without reference to some sort of dependency on men. Tabitha and Lydia are both discussed in a manner that highlights their own societal importance regardless of normalized gender role practices of that time.

She also interprets that Tabitha is first mentioned in Acts as “*maphetes*,” the feminine Greek for disciple. But she is specifically documented in the Greek version of the Bible as “a certain female disciple.” She concludes from this phrasing that there is one thing that is absolutely clear: there were other female disciples in this specific time period as well¹⁵. Calpino notes that the use of “*maphetria*,” or any gendered form of “disciple” describes a “reciprocal and hierarchical” type of relationship between two or more parties¹⁶. Discipleship described the willingness of a student to imitate and follow the ways of their master. With this connotation of the word “disciple,” the reference to Tabitha as “*maphetria*” can be interpreted as a declaration of her willingness to follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

She further interprets that the term “disciple” in Greeks is often mentioned in its masculine form. This aligns with the patriarchal values that appeared to dominate mainstream societal thinking in the time of Acts. However, two things are noteworthy based on his findings. First, the plural form of “disciples” can be translated to include both male and female. It is inclusive in nature. Secondly, it was not uncommon to refer to women as disciples during this day in age. Teresa highlights several characteristics of discipleship as highlighted by the Book of Acts. Disciples “protect and speak on behalf

¹⁴ Calpino, “Loyola University Chicago”1.

¹⁵ Calpino, “Loyola University Chicago,”195.

¹⁶ Calpino, “Loyola University Chicago,”197.

of others, send relief, revive the dead, and are hospitable¹⁷” to name a few. And in the brief moment that Tabitha is mentioned, one can draw the conclusion that she is worthy of being deemed a disciple. Acts 9:36 describes Tabitha as “full of good works and mercies which she did¹⁸.” Not only does Tabitha as the humble servant follow the examples of Jesus (discipleship), but she also through her actions exemplifies good works and serves as a role model for men and women alike. She also uncovers three elements that are found in Biblical stories where people are called into discipleship: “First, the initiative must come from the divine.... Second, the success of the call is demonstrated by the unconditional response of the one called. Third, the nature of the discipleship is contained in the saying or pronouncement that follows the call itself.”¹⁹ These elements can be found in the conversion of Lydia. So in the technical sense, if we look at these elements as criterion for discipleship, then Lydia was indeed called by God into discipleship. Her calling into discipleship inspired her to open her home up for the apostles, which according to her study, put Lydia and her household at risk of danger. Considering the threats that the apostles were under during this period, one can see that Lydia, as a committed disciple, disregarded the risk upon her own life in order to further the ministry of Jesus (by protecting the apostles). This was her contribution to the ministry as a disciple.

She provides a clear and concise definition of discipleship. If this respective definition was to be used as a criterion for what constitutes a disciple, then one could argue that Lydia and Tabitha are indeed disciples in their own respective ways. Despite the male-centric norms of those days, Tabitha and Lydia have solidified their contributions as disciples in the Book of Acts regardless of their gender!

¹⁷ Calpino, “Loyola University Chicago,” 201.

¹⁸ Calpino, “Loyola University Chicago,” 204.

¹⁹ Calpino, “Loyola University Chicago,” 273.

In *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective*, Ivoni Richter Reimer studies select narratives from the Book of Acts. She pays close attention to the women in the books. With regards to Lydia, Reimer breaks down and argues against the common scholarly belief that Lydia was from a high class family. Reimer reiterates Lydia's independence from a male leadership figure, and emphasizes how the author disregards her familial situation and relationships. Male companionship that could boost Lydia's image in society is irrelevant here - simply because in the eyes of the author, Lydia plays the same roles as her male counterparts. She is from a middle/working class background, and arguably an avid worshipper. These are two facts presented in the text that the author of Acts found more relevant to mention than her marital status. Lydia took the risk by taking in the missionaries during their journey. And according to Reimer, this act is proof that Lydia's commitment to discipleship was far more important than her own life.²⁰

Dominant male scholarship often overlooks the women in the Book of Acts and their contributions to the missionary journeys. But Reimer breaks these barriers by highlighting the contributions of the women in the Book to the cause of the apostles. Lydia being the independent woman, she is answered the call into discipleship wholeheartedly, ignoring the fact that she could have been placed in danger in honor of Jesus's Christ's cause.

2.3 Conclusion

To summarise this chapter, the overall image ascertained from the Literature Review is that women are if not just as valuable as men within the New Testament. All

²⁰ Ivoni Reimer, *Women in the Acts of Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 24.

reviews agree that both women pass as disciples given their roles and characters reflected in the book of Acts. To sum up both women in Lydia and Tabitha, will not do justice if only just looking as disciples. Their discipleship has been validated with recognition of Christ, in the concept as “one in Christ”, also their genuine commitment to follow and serve as humble servants. This completes the *marphetes* and *diakonia* elements as highlighted in the term Disciples. The features and characteristics in the women disciples will be one of the fundamental bases in this study. These women are a benchmark and a reference in the study, that will be the focus of the exegesis in the chapters to come.

Chapter 3

EXEGESIS OF TABITHA (ACTS 9:36-42)

Introduction.

The story of Tabitha and her miraculous resurrection is a unique narrative within the Lukan writings. Luke's writings focus on the conversion stories of Cornelius and other male figures, but the narrative of Tabitha differs as it is the sole narrative specifically about a female disciple. This particularity as to Tabitha's gender raises questions as to what else sets her apart from other women in the Book of Acts – why is she different from the other women who feature in Luke's writings? The major issues in this text relating to Tabitha are concerned with her status within Jewish society – her marital status, her status as a female leader of the textile and garment business community of Joppa, her status as a respected person/woman within this community - all of which culminate in her position as a convert to the teachings of Christ¹. This chapter will explore the character of Tabitha within the Lukan narrative. It will explore what the story says about Tabitha and how the language of that story as in the flow of the story shows who Tabitha is. In doing so, the exegesis will look at the settings, characters, placement and wider context of the narrative within the text itself to come up with a description of Tabitha.

3.1 Placement of the Acts 9:36-41

The placement of the text raises the issue of understanding this text within the broader scope/context of the Book of Acts as a whole. The placement of the narrative/story of Tabitha within the wider Lukan narrative is often noted for its contrast

¹ Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 232.

with the other miraculous healing narratives within the text – the main contrast being that Tabitha is the only “female disciple”. This is a seven verse narrative placed after the narrative of Aeneas and his healing – setting up a range of contrasts intimating that Tabitha is someone different within the text and its world – in that she is not a Jew (Acts 1-7), she is not a Samaritan (Acts 8) and she is not a Gentile (compared to Cornelius) – but she is a woman who has an identification, a location, a place within the world she lives, unlike other women who are conspicuous by their invisibility. She is an example of Luke’s understanding of mission, in that she is breaking the boundaries that separated people based on ethnicity, race and gender.

3.2 Setting of Acts 9:36-41:

Acts 9:36a: Εν Ἰόππῃ δέ τις ἦν μαθήτρια ὀνόματι Ταβιθά, ἣ διερμηνευομένη λέγεται Δορκάς.

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which translated means Dorcas.

This verse as the opening verse of the chosen passage introduces the setting of this narrative – the town of Joppa, a small seaport located south of the major Roman port of Caesara Maritima. Joppa was a business centre known for its textiles and garment industries in which Tabitha was heavily involved in. In this industry women played an important role in all aspects – an industry in which Tabitha was a leader, a benefactor and woman of note. The fact is Tabitha’s name is given in both the Aramaic and the Greek later in the same verse, also hints at a duality of language – which reflects the fact that the community of Joppa was a mixture of Greek and Aramaic². This duality hints at a fluidity of setting, subject matter and space within which characters are able to move, so as to allow the acceptance of something different– like that of a strong female

² Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 232.

character. It also lends itself to an “integration of cultures” whereby cultures appropriate elements from other cultures in beneficial ways³ – in this case a mixture of Greek and Aramaic again highlighting this motif of crossing boundaries– leading to a different space from which to read and understand the text.

3.3 Characterisation of Tabitha as a disciple

A “disciple” in the general sense was that of a person who followed a certain set of teachings and lived their lives accordingly⁴. This definition and understanding of “discipleship” fits with the meaning attributed to “discipleship” as posited by Fernando F. Segovia, to describe those who follow the teachings of Christ and willing to sacrifice⁵. Other references in Acts highlight the duties and indeed the fate of those who follow Jesus as a “disciple” – a follower of Christ: they suffered great persecution at the hands of Saul in Damascus (Act 1); they protect and speak on behalf of others (9:19-25); they provided relief to the impoverished (11:29); they also accompanied Paul throughout his missionary travels (14:28; 16:1) – with an emphasis on service for the greater good and community⁶.

Tabitha is described as a “disciple” before she is actually named in the narrative – identifying her with the “disciples” of Jesus, thus placing her on a different level than the other females of this time. By locating Tabitha as a “disciple” this intimates the master-servant relationship often associated with those who are “disciples”, intermingled with that of the intimate follower of Jesus as indicated by Segovia. This

³ Bill, Ashcroft, *Post-colonial Transformation: Hybridity and Cross Cultural Diffusion* (New South Wales: Australia, 2001), 14-17.

⁴ Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 233.

⁵ Fernando F. Segovia, “Introduction: Call and Discipleship – Toward a Re-examination of the Shape and Character of Christian Existence in the New Testament,” in *Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2.

⁶ G. Cloke, ed., *Women, Worship and Mission: The church in the household in The Early Christian world*. (New York: Routledge. Press 1998), 422-451.

again reflects a fluidity of reading, understanding and intermingling which this thesis would argue is apparent through this Lukan narrative.

According to Suzanne Dixon, women are very important characters in spreading the good news in the Book of Acts and are considered as very committed followers and believers of the Gospel.⁷ For Dixon, this is evident in the use of the word disciple in Acts. The word disciple is used twenty-nine times in Acts as reference to a mixed-gender group and four times to individuals. One of the emphases of the designation of being a disciple in Acts is the carrying out of work of service as revealed in the teachings and actions of the resurrected Christ. To be a disciple is also identified in the Book of Acts 13:52, as those who are filled with the Holy Spirit, and moved in spirit, to serve the resurrected Christ. And of course, if everyone is included in this gift of the spirit, then discipleship, the work includes males and females and is a means of mutual benefit for the work of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Verse 36b shows Tabitha as a disciple who is devoted to both good works and mercies – a reflection of her virtuous and righteous nature – the attributes associated with a follower of Jesus.

Acts 9:36b αὕτη ἦν πλήρης ἔργων ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἐλεημοσυνῶν ὧν ἐποίει. (She was full of good works and mercies (almsgiving) which she did.)

It shows that Tabitha's righteousness based on her ability to do good for others such as her charitable acts or her "almsgivings". In Acts, Tabitha and Cornelius are shown as examples of people with charitable hearts⁸. The reader is thus able to recognize the righteous nature of Tabitha as an important part of her character as a disciple. Her

⁷ Suzanne Dixon, and McHardy F, eds., *Women in the Roman Economy, in Women's Influence on Classical Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2004), 58–59.

⁸ G. Cloke, ed *Women, Worship and Mission: The church in the household in The Early Christian world*, 426.

background of someone who experience life from humble beginnings highlights the virtuous nature of her charity to those seeking help, and her efforts to help those from similar backgrounds. Tabitha as woman disciple is explained by the use of the word generous. This word generous as an adjective is the translation of the Greek word (*plērē*) which also mean “full of.” Being generous as ‘full of’ indicates that Tabitha has done a great deal of good work. Tabitha's good deeds or good works show that she believed in God. In addition, Tabitha’s good work depicts a picture of a Mother or a woman, who takes the lead of being a good example for all. She is an example of the kind of mother whose service and kindness is not just for her own family but for all. She makes use of her talents as a woman leader to help those people in need in her community. Her work in silence reveals the importance of the lesson that the good deeds and actions speak louder than words.⁹ This also allows the reader to extend to Tabitha the qualities and virtues of being a good follower of Jesus.

Verse 37 describes the death of Tabitha from an undetermined illness and the funeral rituals of the ancient world.

Acts 9:37 ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἀσθενήσασαν αὐτὴν ἀποθανεῖν· λούσαντες δὲ ἔθηκαν [αὐτήν] ἐν ὑπερώῳ.

At that time, she fell ill and died. Having washed her, they laid her in an upper room

The treatment of her body in death, accentuates the importance and respect with which she is held in this community .The funeral rituals of washing and cleaning of her body described the depth of the community’s love and respect for Tabitha, especially as this ritual is not mentioned anywhere else in the Lukan narratives¹⁰. Such practices indicate

⁹ Johnson. T. Luke, *The Acts of the Apostles*. (A Michael Glazier book published by The Liturgical Press, 1992), 177-178.

¹⁰ Beverly. R. Gaventa, *Abington New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abington, 2003), 160.

a physical and emotional intimacy as visible representations of the mourning of the community which held her in such high regard.

Even the act of laying her body in the upper rooms reflects the reverence with which she was held at the time of her death. Indeed the “laying” of Tabitha in the upper rooms of her house has been said to reflect the stories of Elijah where he carried the dead son of the widow Zarephath to be laid in an upper room (1 Kings 17:19)¹¹. In that narrative Elijah prayed alone to God and in reply the widow’s son was miraculously revived. This miracle repeats a common motif of miracles as signs of the power of God to bring back to life the dead and cross the boundaries between heaven and this world.

Verse 38 mentions Joppa which highlights the importance of the setting to the narrative. The verse also describes how Peter came to be at Tabitha’s death vigil/lamentation/mourning – reflecting Peter’s journey to visit Tabitha, just as Tabitha has begun her journey to the afterlife. It highlights the distance that is traversed by Peter to be at Tabitha’s side.

Acts 9:38 ἐγγὺς δὲ οὔσης Λύδδας τῇ Ἰόππῃ οἱ μαθηταὶ ἀκούσαντες ὅτι Πέτρος ἐστὶν ἐν αὐτῇ ἀπέστειλαν δύο ἄνδρας πρὸς αὐτὸν παρακαλοῦντες· μὴ ὀκνήσης διελθεῖν ἕως ἡμῶν.

Since Lydia was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, begging him "Do not hesitate to come up to us!" And Peter got up and went with them; arriving, they took him into the upstairs room.

This verse shows that Peter is called to grieve with other fellow followers of Christ and associates with Tabitha. Peter, like Elijah, prays to God as he knows he does not have divine authority, but is reliant upon the power of Christ himself. Here Peter is likened to the prophets of Elijah/Elisha who also share resuscitation stories in the Old Testament.

¹¹ Gaventa, *Abington New Testament Commentaries*, 162.

The two men have been sent to Peter to seek his assistance. Peter does not ask for the reason why they have come to him. There is no connection with Tabitha however people going to see Peter suggests there is prior knowledge and relationship between Peter and the men which is the link to Tabitha.

Peter's role is further hinted at this verse as he follows the two men to the upper room as shown in verse 39.

Acts 9:39a ἀναστὰς δὲ Πέτρος συνῆλθεν αὐτοῖς· ὃν παραγενόμενον
ἀνήγαγον εἰς τὸ ὑπερῶον
So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took
him up into the upper room.

This verse like the prior one highlights the unexplained familiarity between the men and Peter. This is further emphasized when the men took Peter straight to Tabitha's room. There is no explanation or introduction of Peter to Tabitha's family or friends – he is almost immediately upon arrival, taken to her death in the upper rooms.

The narrative here describes a setting where Peter arrives at Tabitha's bedside and is surrounded by a group of "widows". The reference to "widows" surrounding Tabitha recognizes her social reality in Joppa, the "widows" in this reality were people whom she befriended and with whom she bonded in special friendships. These people, these "widows" were often people on the margins of society – not readily accepted by society but who were accepted by Tabitha¹². This familiarity can be seen in their weeping for the loss of a treasured associate, friend and leader – Tabitha. The showing off of their tunics and other clothing openly highlights their pride in demonstrating their connection with Tabitha through the shared textile and garment industry, and in particular her role as a female leader and benefactor¹³. It also reflects the charity of Tabitha in an industry that "clothed" people. This theme of the importance of "clothing of people" is also seen

¹² C. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2012) 21.

¹³ C. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary Volume 2*, 24.

in other texts in the New Testament (Luke 3:11; James 2:15-16). Ben Witherington III suggests the reason for the story of Tabitha is to illustrate how she was a leader of the widows group she was associated with¹⁴.

Peter then in verse 40 turns away from Tabitha's body to pray and in doing so commands Tabitha "to get up". This healing command is similar to that in Luke 8:54 and Mark 5:41 but there are differences: in Luke the healing command is used to describe an act akin to Christ's resurrection.

Acts 9:40a ἐκβαλὼν δὲ ἔξω πάντας ὁ Πέτρος καὶ θεὸς τὰ γόνατα
προσηύξατο

Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed.

Acts 9:40b: καὶ ἐπιστρέψας πρὸς τὸ σῶμα εἶπεν· Ταβιθά, ἀνάστηθι.

He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up."

The use of the imperative in a miraculous setting is a demonstration of God's divine power: as in Acts 9:6 where the risen Christ commands Paul, and in 8:26 it is used when the angel commands Philip in this similar manner after his conversation. It can also be viewed as an example of when the Holy Spirit is filling a vessel of God with His miraculous power – in this case Peter.

This command and Tabitha's resuscitation story share similarities with the miraculous healing stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 32:37). These stories stress the healing power of God who works through His anointed ones, His chosen servants, His apostles and His prophets. God's power is used to save those poor impoverished, on the margins of society who have no one to rely upon except God – similar to how Tabitha was a beacon for the impoverished and those on the margins of society.

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III: *Acts of the Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1998), 151.

The opening of Tabitha's eyes is the beginning of her resuscitation in that she recognizes Peter – not only in a physical sense but also in terms of a spiritual divine sense. Her ability to “see” Peter is an important part of the narrative – without it the reader is not aware when Tabitha's healing is complete. This is the first physical act of Tabitha's through this narrative – an act in which she “awakens” from the slumber, the deep she was in, and from the journey she undertook.

Acts 9:41 δοὺς δὲ αὐτῇ χεῖρα ἀνέστησεν

He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive

Verse 41 shows Peter lending Tabitha his hand to help her up. This reflects the imagery of the healing hand of God as shown in Christ grasping the girl's hand in Mark 5:41. The emphasis is on the assistance – the healing provided through the “healing hands of God.” Jesus filled with the Holy Spirit pulled the girl up, so too Peter who does the same for Tabitha – to raise her up, to bring her out of the deep sleep she was in. This again stresses and highlights the power of Jesus to heal, to “awaken” people from the deep slumber they were in to the reality of the Kingdom of God.

Once Tabitha is resuscitated, the public pronouncements of the miracle begin. Here the public display of the miracle is in a place where Tabitha is circled by her family, friends and associates – including followers of Christ who are called “Saints”. This public showing is to emphasize the power of God in healing Tabitha, in a public setting with her family, friends in a communal setting thus opening the miracle to all and sundry to witness. The account of Tabitha's rise from death can be retold as an important and useful part of this story. Not only is the saving work and miraculous power of God revealed through the apostle Peter, but the importance of this woman's life is also demonstrated to revive and continue good works to be done for the benefit of

all. It is a clear picture and idea of the importance of good works, and God's gifts to people who strive to promote the common good of others. The fact that Tabitha is alive in the last part of this story is a wonderful story of God's grace to His people, especially those who have shown kindness, love and good works for the benefit of others. Service in the life of Christ prioritizes good works for others.

Acts 9:42: γνωστὸν δὲ ἐγένετο καθ' ὅλης τῆς Ἰόππης καὶ ἐπίστευσαν πολλοὶ ἐπὶ τὸν κύριον.

This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Verse 42 sums up the narrative of Tabitha's miraculous resuscitation by its spread far and wide. It became "known throughout Joppa." This highlights a shifting of focus from the private to the public, from a smaller sphere of mission to a larger, from the local space to a wider global space¹⁵. It also highlights Luke's recognition of the importance of the role played by women in the early Christian Church in spreading the mission, within the new parameters/boundaries/space that have been drawn through the teachings of Christ which challenge the old with the new. It is within these new parameters/boundaries that women play an important role – one not envisioned previously before the advent of Christ's mission.

This spreading of the message coincides with a spreading of the faith of those who believe as the number of the believers swells in numbers. This is reflective of a common device of Luke's to finish a narrative with a few words showing the effect of the miracle, the "catching of people" and the growing of the faith through new churches (Acts 9:31; 12:24; 19:20). Indeed, creating a new space in which to grow, to spread the faith is the mission of Christ as he commanded his disciples in the Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20).

¹⁵ Vernon Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 13.

Chapter 4

EXEGESIS OF LYDIA (ACTS 16:11-15)

Introduction:

The placement of Lydia's narrative in the Book of Acts is different from that of Tabitha. Tabitha's narrative is about her miraculous resuscitation at the hands of Peter. Lydia's story focuses on her relationship with Paul – her call for his support and her own conversion as a follower of the risen Christ. The story about Lydia can be seen as a narrative within a narrative or a story within a story, with the inclusion of the vision of the Macedonian man asking for help from Paul. Thereby indicating a crossing of boundaries, as Tabitha crossed from the dead to the living through the divine healing grace of God, so too is this other example of crossing boundaries not only physically but spiritually, as Paul crosses borders to help others such as Lydia.

4.1 Placement and setting of Acts 16:11-15

This narrative is set in the city of Philippi - a major business centre in the country state of Macedonia. Philippi was once the centre of Greek merchant trade but was taken over by Rome and became the base for craftsmen, traders, free migrant workers and slaves. Philippi was also known as the “gateway between the Europe and Asia” in the time of Rome. The reference to the city of Philippi acts as a framing device as the narrative begins and ends with references to the city¹.

Paul's group's travels to Macedonia reflects this theme of “crossing boundaries” in Paul's mission – a response to the divine mission Paul and his followers have been

¹ This is similar to the Lukan narrative of Tabitha in that it begins within the city setting of Joppa and ends within the same city setting of Joppa.

called upon. This has been suggested as a physical sign of the spread of the Gospel in Europe, especially as Lydia is celebrated as the first convert on European soil.²

4.2 Characterisation of Lydia as a disciple in the progression of the passage

As covered in the previous chapter, the Book of Acts has not been the most popular of texts when the issue of the representation of women in it is discussed. The earlier descriptions of Lydia as being a “purple seller” or “purple selling woman” indicate a woman of humble origins or low birth yet “full of wisdom”³. John Calvin introduced certain traits to further lift the profile and status of Lydia – a reference to a gathering of women by the river as a Jewish ritual placing her within Jewish tradition (even though she was not identified as Jewish) and confirming the location of her origin – the city of Thyatira. Calvin even “commends the piety of Lydia” (John Calvin *In Acta Apostolorum* 16.13) which is seen as a sign of her adherence to the teachings of Christ, just as Tabitha’s “righteousness and acts of almsgiving” were seen as a reflection of a tradition of charity.

Lydia like Tabitha has also been described as a socially upward mobile woman, a noble woman who worked in the garment industry, as “the women of Lydia were noble by the weaving of garments...celebrated in poetry for their textile work and dyeing”⁴. Later interpretations of Acts and Lydia have tended to have focused not only on her feminine virtues and nobility, but also to highlight her upwardly mobile position as a

² Dennis R. MacDonald, ed, *Lydia and Her Sisters as Lukan Functions in A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 105-110.

³ Calpino, “Loyola University Chicago,” 236.

⁴ Ivoni Richter Reimer *Women in the Acts of Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* Minneapolis (Fortress Press, 1995), 161.

“dyer” of garments⁵. Her status as a dyer meant that she would have been a woman of considerable capital in order to maintain a business as capital intensive as the garment dyeing⁶. Lydia is “moulded” into a form similar to Tabitha – a socially mobile woman of not inconsiderable means. Lydia, like Tabitha, is a Gentile who becomes a follower of Christ. This highlights a parallel between the narratives of Tabitha and Lydia, in that both have Jewish followers of Christ (Peter and Paul) preaching to Non Jewish believers of Christ. The characterisation of Lydia as a disciple or follower Christ shown in Acts 16:9-11 will be elaborated upon below.

Acts 16:9-11 is part of Paul’s second missionary journey. It is during this journey that Paul receives a ‘...vision...a man of Macedonia pleading, “Come to Macedonia and help us.”’ The nocturnal nature of the vision (dreamlike) and the image of the Macedonian man in 16:9 seem to suggest that this vision or “calling” which was divinely inspired and therefore one which Paul cannot ignore.

In 16:10 the reader is immediately transported to Macedonia, a sign that he was indeed “called” to Macedonia as there is no impediment or problem to travel to Macedonia. This convinces Paul’s mission that they were indeed called “to proclaim the good news to them” No matter how Paul and his mission tried to control their own course and destiny on this mission, it becomes clear that they are travelling around Asia Minor pursuant to God’s direction⁷. It is in verse 16:11 that Paul and his companions have finished their mission in Macedonia and have now proceeded to Philippi.

Acts 16:12 – 13: καὶ ἐῴθην εἰς Φιλίππους, ἥτις ἐστὶν πρώτη[ς] μερίδος τῆς Μακεδονίας πόλις, κολωνία. Ἦμεν δὲ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ πόλει διατρίβοντες ἡμέρας τινάς.

⁵ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles* (New York Funk and Wagnallis, 1883)

⁶ Calpino, “Loyola University Chicago,” 262.

⁷ Beverly, R, Gaventa. *Abington New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2003), 233.

and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.

τῇ τε ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων ἐξήλθομεν ἔξω τῆς πύλης παρὰ ποταμὸν οὗ ἐνομίζομεν προσευχὴν εἶναι, καὶ καθίσαντες ἐλαλοῦμεν ταῖς συνελθούσαις γυναιξίν.

On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.

Verse 13 highlights a strategy of Paul when spreading the Word of God – in that he would seek a synagogue or place of gathering. It was from such places of public gatherings that Paul would begin his mission to find new converts⁸. As such it seems that the first target of Paul's missionary was a gathering of women, who happened to have Lydia as their leader. Here we have the report of a gathering of women, somewhat like a meeting of like-minded people seeking to discuss the issues they face every day. We have therefore a deliberate meeting of people to discuss a serious issue. The verb *συνελθούσαις*, in this context also speaks of a communal gathering – that brings forth a sense of belonging and togetherness. It would be safe to say that these women have gathered here for a serious matter.

It is here that Paul and his followers sit down to speak with the women, in a serious manner reflecting the serious nature of the gathering. The use of “speak” here stresses the formal nature of the setting. The verb “speak” is also used to describe those who “speak” with or infused with the Holy Spirit – such as Paul as part of his mission. As such it indicates a sense of the prophetic nature of the discussion, the “speaking” that will occur in such an environment. Some commentators suggest that this is a reflection of Paul's missionary method of seeking out a synagogue and preaching before any and all who would listen.

⁸ Frederick, F, Bruce. *The book of the Acts* (Eerdmans Publishing company: Grand Rapids Eerdmans 1988), 310.

Acts 16:14 καί τις γυνή ὀνόματι Λυδία, πορφυρόπωλις πόλεως
Θυατείρων σεβομένη τὸν θεόν, ἤκουεν, ἧς ὁ κύριος διήνοιξεν τὴν
καρδίαν προσέχειν τοῖς λαλουμένοις ὑπὸ τοῦ Παύλου.

A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

Lydia is described as a “worshiper of God” or a God fearer but not as a Jew. Also she is one of the early Christian converters, can be identified as a possible former slave who operates a business.⁹ Indeed she is described together with Cornelius (another Gentile) noted for their piety and devotion to prayer. Her introduction in Acts has her located in a place of prayer on the Jewish Sabbath which is the author’s attempt to illustrate her nature as a person of piety. As we are aware she is a business leader of note and renown in her own right, but yet she is introduced in prayer on the Sabbath, again to emphasise her piety and devotion to her faith. She is therefore portrayed as a devout Gentile follower of Jewish religious beliefs – a person who was “believing and behaving as a Jew without having become one”¹⁰. This would also seem to make her the perfect person to listen to the teachings of Christ.

The text begins with the reference to κύριος the risen Christ who calls Lydia to open her heart. A call that comes from the divine and hits to the very heart of a person’s devotion. The divine in this case is the presence of the risen Christ who calls to Lydia’s heart. It is not enough to hear the words of the Apostle but without the underlying divine call of the risen Christ, then Paul’s words are nothing but wind in the air. Lydia’s unconditional response and willingness to accept being baptized and judged by Paul is a sign of her openness, the vulnerability she opens herself due to her total faith in the

⁹ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT Yale University Press, 2003), 203.

¹⁰ John, Stott. *The Spirit the Churches and the World: The Message of Acts* (InterVarsity Press, 1990), 263.

teachings of the risen Christ (Acts 16:15a). The fact she opens her home to not only Paul and his missionaries but to her fellow believers is a sign of her faith in Christ (Acts 16:40). Lydia's acceptance of Christ comes from the effect of the divine on her human heart and faith. She is judged on her faith and ready to be a believer.

Indeed, not only does the divine open her heart but also allows her to "listen intently" to hear the truth of Paul's teachings. Though Lydia has been listening, it is only when divine intervention touches her heart and life can she really "hear" what God is saying. This produces a deeper "listening" which leads to a "truer" understanding of the teachings of Christ. Indeed, it can be said that Lydia is chosen blessed by God because of her ability, her openness to "listen" to hear God "speaking" to her as Paul did to the gathering of women.

Acts 16:15 ὥς δὲ ἐβαπτίσθη καὶ ὁ οἶκος αὐτῆς, παρεκάλει λέγουσα· εἰ κεκρίκατέ με πιστὴν τῷ κυρίῳ εἶναι, εἰσελθόντες εἰς τὸν οἶκόν μου μένετε· καὶ παρεβιάσατο ἡμᾶς.

When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

Because of the deeper understanding that has benefitted Lydia, this allows her and her household to be baptized. Her household is converted, and by being converted this allows the household to become as open as Lydia's heart has become under divine intervention. The stress on the house also shows a "crossing" from the synagogue to the home, from the public to the more intimate. The house is "open" for other purposes, as Lydia's heart was opened to divine intervention from God. Indeed, the word *οἶκος* is Greek for household and home. It is not a translation that refers to a static definition of a building, but rather more dynamic in that it refers to an extended family under Lydia's

care¹¹. By belonging to the household/home it gave its members a sense of belonging, of unity of togetherness¹².

Once again we are reminded of Lydia's power and leadership of her own household in this verse – as she invites Paul and his missionaries into her house, where she is the power. Her power is proclaimed when she speaks, urging strongly to enter her *ὄικος*. This power is spoken together with the knowledge that she is judged to be faithful to the Lord. She is adjudged as being worthy and so she invites Paul to enter her house as by doing so they have become like her own family, her own gathering of friends, associates and women. The fact that she vocally invites them into her *ὄικος* highlights her difference which made her different from all other women in the New Testament – from all the women found in Acts (Mary mother of Jesus, Mary mother of John Mark to Rhoda and Priscilla) only Lydia is given a voice, actually speaks in the text.

Luke saw women as an important, if not essential part of the mission to spread the Gospel far and wide. The fact that in Christian circles, women such as Lydia and Tabitha had prominent roles as not only the matriarch of their respective group of friends but also opened their homes to fellow followers to act as a centre for the dissemination and growth of Christianity, highlighted the stark contrast with the Jewish communities where they would not play the same role¹³.

Lydia is an example of women in the first century Roman world who "...were entering the public sphere in business and as patrons....impacted the early church in

¹¹ Philip, H, Towner. *Households and household codes. Dictionary of Paul and his letters: A compendium of contemporary biblical scholarship*, ed. G F Martin and Read D G (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 417

¹² Towner, *Households and household codes*, 419

¹³ Stanley, J, Grenz, & Denise, M, Kjesbo. *Women in the church: A biblical theology of women in ministry*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press.,1995), 284.

those roles.”¹⁴ The use of her name itself gives clues that she was an important woman, obviously someone who had worked her way from the lower classes (even may have been a slave) to the position of prominence in both society and the early church in Philip¹⁵. Lydia’s wealth is hinted at throughout the narrative: from the description of her as a head of her household (Act 16:15) in that her entire household is said to be baptized. This suggests as mentioned earlier in this thesis that she is indeed a woman of wealth and presence within the local community¹⁶. Though it’s not clear or mentioned how she arrived at this position, the fact she is the titular head of her household speaks to her presence and respect within this community. Her inclusion as one of the baptized indicates that she has received the Holy Spirit and God’s generosity to be a follower of Christ. Her invitation to them to stay with her also highlights that she recognizes that they are all linked/bound together in Christ – which is also recognized by Paul and his missionaries hence the reason they accept her invitation¹⁷.

Indeed, Lydia converted through the work of the Holy Spirit on her heart (v.14) and as a result she extends her hospitality to fellow followers of Christ, here in this excerpt and later in when the Jewish men (followers of Paul) are released from prison and she invites them to her house for rest and respite from their pervious incarceration (v.40). The fact she invites both Paul and his followers into her home twice, and allowed it to be used for the services of her fellow adherents to Christ proves Witherington’s statement that Lydia blessed Paul and his followers by “...providing a

¹⁴ Cynthia Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 268.

¹⁵ Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle’s Vision for men and Women in Christ*, 270.

¹⁶ Frederick, F, Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*, 13.

¹⁷ Witherington, *Women in the earliest church*, 493

venue for the church to meet and be nurtured”¹⁸. This hospitality on the part of Lydia is a sign of the veracity of her faith and belief in Christ. Thus, Lydia can be considered a disciple of Jesus.

This giving nature of Lydia and other women in the New Testament highlights the generosity that flowed from God to women such as Lydia. We can see in this example of Lydia that she was the nexus of God’s Holy Spirit. In that it was through her that the Holy Spirit encountered the reality of the human world - a reality which cannot cope with the power of the Holy Spirit. An encounter which leads to an “unexpected and transformational” consequence¹⁹. This idea of transformation comes with the motif of exchange, where the crossroads of Paul and Lydia meeting leads to a life altering event for both of them. Indeed, it is the theme of reciprocity which is evident in the relationship between the two, that strengthens both and then is further strengthened with their bond as Christians and with God through their acceptance of Christ as Lord and Saviour.

This encounter with Lydia is the beginning of something new, as not only is it with a woman but also a gentile. A clash of tension between the two is inevitable but through an attempt to understand each other, something better is created or born from this clash. As Gittins states “...where there were strangers, there was tension...the demands of hospitality might clash with the demands of purity (exclusiveness) or proselytization (assimilation or conversion)”²⁰. This suggests that such a conflict is more than about the conflict but about the resolution that arises from the encounter and the confrontation of different forces.

¹⁸ Witherington, *Women in the earliest Church*, 496

¹⁹ Sheppard, C, Willard, what is generosity? *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37(1): 5-11 2013) 17

²⁰ Anthony, J, Gittins, *Ministry of the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 2002), 166.

4.3 Analysis

In the description of Tabitha in the text itself, she is not only the first female named as a “disciple” or follower in Christ in Europe, but also a business woman of note. She is a gentile who started as a follower of Jewish customs and traditions, and then she converted to being a follower of Christ. It was in that conversion – from a follower of Jewish customs/traditions to being a follower of Christ – that she transforms herself and is reflective of the transformation that occurs to those who follow Christ. Her devotion to the teachings of Christ can be seen in the explanation that she practiced charity – the giving to others, in particular the poor, the impoverished and the infirm – reflecting/repeating many of the acts Christ himself did within the community. Tabitha is described as being full of “good works and mercies” (Acts 16:36). Indeed, Tabitha is described as if she is worthy of being blessed as the case may be in this text – it is almost as if the writer was trying to establish Tabitha’s bona fides for being resurrected, of being “saved” by her faith in Christ. The Tabitha narrative is used to highlight the miraculous power of Christ by contrasting it with the miracle narratives of Aeneas and Cornelius. As stated earlier in the exegesis, Tabitha as a female “disciple” is the external embodiment of the expanding gospel. She is a female disciple who shows mercy to the Gentiles – she is not Jewish (Acts 1-7), nor is she a Samaritan (Acts 8) or a Hellenistic Jew (Aeneas) – but a woman who exhibits and practices the teachings of Christ. This constant crossing of space in identity by Tabitha is reflective of the Gospel reaching out from beyond the nationalistic fervor of the Jewish people, and reaching out/crossing into the space of those who serve outside their own community. Luke is illustrating to the reader how the Gospel is able to reach out and touch the hands of another/others who are not Jewish – but shows the power of the love of a person who gives freely and openly to her community, to her people, to her God. As already mentioned and

emphasized in this thesis, not only was Lydia a woman of means as well as being a gentile, but she was also the centre or the bedrock of those who followed the way in her community.²¹ This meant that her encounter with Paul in the text was not only a way to highlight the status of women as leaders amongst the followers of the way, but also to highlight the mission of Paul and its widespread scope.

The descriptions of Tabitha and Lydia, in the study, reflect one of the most important aspects of women in relationships. It reflects the important role of mothers in the early days of the church. But it also acknowledges working together to share functions within society. As can be seen in the use of Lydia in the book of Acts who was a leader of the church in her ministry. Discipleship by kindness and wholehearted devotion to the work of the gospel of Christ. It means to be a leader, in the gospel through his actions and deeds.

In Samoan context in terms of social and cultural practices, we see and experience some of the ways in which families are living together and share their responsibilities, like brother and sister relationship, and also show priestly role in conducting worship to family god. According to Le Tagaloa, the role of women as *Feagaiga/taupou* (daughter of the high chief) was allowed to be the leader during worship. Which is one of the important parts of life of every Samoan in times of worship. This same picture is taken from the description of Tabitha and Lydia, according to the interpretation from Acts. Discipleship in society and families is a work that reflects a leadership in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not only that but their roles in the society and families highlighted their faith in relation to Christ. So in my own view about these two women from the book of Acts, exercises the important role of women in the ministry that

²¹ Frederick, F, Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*, 311.

reflected the point of women can be considered as ordination in terms of discipleship in families, communities and even in church.

4.4 Conclusion

The exegesis has shown the character of Lydia as having the traits of a true disciple. She is the first convert in Europe, and it was her home that housed the first church in Europe which hosted Paul and his travelling party. As a woman who had a business in the midst of dominant males in the time of the Roman Imperial ruling of the world shows her courage and bravery. She had the courage to be a messenger of Christ. Most important of all, she was baptized by Paul. Thus, Lydia as a brave woman is definitely can be considered a disciple of Jesus.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The study of the two women disciples – Tabitha and Lydia – are reflective of the powerful role women played in the early church/mission of spreading the “Word”. They are both from “outside” – in that they are women, who are gentiles, able to work for their position and standing in society. They have crossed many roads and obstacles to be accepted by Christ – from being slaves to being successful business women and parts of their respective communities. This fluidity and amorphous quality highlights how through the discipleship they practiced, they were both true mirrors of the blessings received through their faith in the teachings of Christ.

These attributes can also be seen in the way that Samoan women conduct themselves in the church setting of the CCCS in Samoa. They are an integral part of the church community acting as a bridge across the great divide of faith and pragmatism. Their reality is one fraught with challenges, but challenges they face with a steely determination to profess the love and grace of God as through the life, death and resurrection of His Only Begotten Son – the second “life” that comes with the acceptance of Christ in one’s life so that as Christians we can all have our hearts opened to the glory of God.

Some of the roles of women are mentioned in the book of Acts, during Paul's ministry, which was attended by the disciple Tabitha. The female disciple was a leader in her society, especially in her good works for the people. Discipleship reflects the service offered for the benefit of others. Although Tabitha is said to have died, her actions for the people spoke louder, that is, discipleship, as deeds for God speaks louder than words. Tabitha's job was to be a disciple in her society.

According to the definition used by the author of the Book of Acts, Lydia was a woman in the business of buying and producing purple cloth, which meant that she was wealthy, and also a gentile woman. But the presence of the gospel made Lydia known for her willingness and sincerity to accept the gospel of Jesus through the teachings of Paul. The image of the woman whose heart yearned for the Lord, who gave her life to answer the call of the gospel. But the woman's desire was to save her family and her people through the gospel of Jesus Christ. This means using women as disciples to help and lead others. This shows that discipleship is not just about making disciples of all nations. Discipleship also helps the family, the community, and the church.

The issue of women being ordained ministers in our church continues to be a topic of constant discussion among members of the church. From this study it is unlikely that women have the opportunity to be better disciples in their own way.

How do Tabitha and Lydia act as examples of faith in today's church?

The Lukan narratives of Lydia and Tabitha are memorable stories. Lydia's inclusion in Acts is in relation to the ministry of the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul's ministry and especially his outreach towards women, as well as the treatment of women in the Bible has often been described by some scholars as being confusing. Paul went to Philippi after receiving a call to help people in Macedonia. Upon arrival at Philippi, Paul encountered women followers to the teachings of Christ – something which was somewhat novel at the time.

Paul met them at their place of congregation by the river and “sat down and began to talk to the women who had gathered.” Lydia was a leader, a woman of note in the community and a leader within the Christian church at Philippi. She is the example of a woman of faith who is strong both in her faith and in her public life, where she would be judged not only for being an entrepreneur but also for being a female one at that.

Again Lydia is the epitome of someone who is able to stand strong in face of trials forced upon her not only for being a woman, but also for being a follower of Christ. It is her faith which gives her the strength to carry one in light of such tribulations. Indeed, women were not the silent flowers often thought of, but rather they were entering the public sphere in business and as patrons, and they impacted the early church in those roles as well. Paul goes on to say that women in the ministry helped him to continue the faith in light of these issues

This idea of women being substantial actors in the spread of the gospel can also be seen in the narrative of Tabitha. Here, she was a woman, a widow who was able to survive despite being a woman on her own with no apparent husband. She was a woman who thought of others more than she did of herself. She actively sought out the poor and impoverished to help out either physically, financially or spiritually through her leadership of her local church. Tabitha was following the teachings of Christ in that she displayed great energy to put herself before others. This unwavering respect/love for the poor and impoverished can be seen with the way she is treated after death. She is truly mourned and the depth of the grieving with the narrative account of outpouring of love and respect upon word of her death.

Another interesting fact about both Lydia and Tabitha is that both straddled different aspects of their worlds, often taking on roles which were not often associated with their status as women: they were both business people and also employed many people. This was a way to not increase their business but also to link connections with those they thought to be their closest friends. The fact they were involved in trades showed their unique ability to cross different divides within the wider community and still maintain an identity as both women and followers of Christ. This was stressed by

their position as the ideal followers of Christ because of their strict following of Jewish ethical standards.

In conclusion it seems that both Lydia and Tabitha have been influenced with the presence of God's love – as the Lukan narrative states they both have had their hearts opened by God. This opening of their hearts allows the two to straddle to ingress to cross from one world to another – to be as fluid and amorphous to flow in a world which has sought to confine them to one definition. It is this opening of hearts that is apparent in the missions of both women, and highlighted in the text that should act as a guide for all Christians. A follower of God cannot move forward unless one is opened to the grace of God His Spirit to inundate a person from inside as well as outside. Only then can true mission occur where the whole body. The whole person is the receptacle of God's love and Word – and it is there that all people who follow Christ can grow and flourish as Tabitha and Lydia did in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

Overall, the good works done by Tabitha and Lydia have shown how influential women are in doing any type of work – influential in terms of their strength physically, mentally, and spiritually. They have shown that women have their own way of committing to doing any work for either an individual or for a group of people. Tabitha and Lydia were able to do the work of being a disciple and an apostle like Paul and his travel party who were males. Lydia as a woman who is the first convert in Europe started the first church in Europe. Tabitha as a woman helped many people in need in a place dominated males. Women having the strength and faith as shown by Tabitha and Lydia should be considered to do the work of ordained ministers. Hence, women should be considered ordained ministers.

Glossary

<i>Aiga:</i>	<i>Family</i>
<i>Fa'asamoa:</i>	<i>Samoaan way of life</i>
<i>Feagaiga:</i>	<i>Covenant as between brother and sister, or pastor and congregation.</i>
<i>Fetausia'i:</i>	<i>the nature of caring between people</i>
<i>Feo'eo'ea'i:</i>	<i>the nature of sharing between people</i>
<i>Taupou:</i>	<i>Daughter of the high chief</i>
<i>Tuagane:</i>	<i>Brother</i>

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