

1. CITY OFFICIALS IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES*

At one time, Luke, the companion of the apostle Paul, was viewed as an unreliable guide to the history and geography of the Mediterranean world. The writer of Luke and Acts often was alone in his use of terms, location of places, and mention of persons that were not known to scholarship. Such is no longer the case. He has been vindicated repeatedly, to the point that Sir William Ramsay, noted classical archaeologist, once a skeptic of the reliability of Luke, called him the greatest of historians, even above the historian Thucydides.¹

An example of the accuracy of Luke may be found in his mention of two officials in the ancient world, the Asiarch and Politarch. Both of these titles were used by Luke in Acts and both have been discovered on inscriptions in the Mediterranean world. The word Asiarch is a transliteration of the Greek word Ἀσιάρχης and is derived from the word Ἀσία, the province of Asia, and the word ἄρχειν, meaning “to rule.”² The title Politarch is from

ASIARCH

The Acts of the Apostles records an incident in which Paul the apostle was threatened by certain silversmiths in Ephesus, since his preaching of the gospel was causing them to lose business. Scholars, until recent times, viewed Luke’s usage as an anachronism, the only other example of the term in classical sources being found in Strabo’s *Geography*.³ The word Asiarch is also mentioned by the early church historian Eusebius in regards to the martyrdom of Polycarp, when Eusebius speaks of Philip the Asiarch:

26. And when this was proclaimed by the herald, the whole multitude, both of Gentiles and of Jews, who dwelt in Smyrna, cried out with ungovernable wrath and with a great shout, 'This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the overthrower of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice nor to worship.

27. When they had said this, they cried out and asked the Asiarch Philip to let a lion loose upon Polycarp. But he said that it was not lawful for him, since he had closed the games. Then they thought fit to cry out with one accord that Polycarp should be burned alive.⁴

Such care about historical accuracy lends credibility to Luke’s account in Acts 19:31, where he writes, “And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater.” (Acts 19:31 ESV). Paul had intended to go into the theater to speak for himself against the charges made by the silversmiths (specifically Demetrius), but certain Asiarchs, possibly friends in view of their actions,⁵ encouraged Paul not to do so. Whether they were friends, or not, is uncertain. Elwell and Beitzel say,

Why there were a number of such officers in Ephesus at the time of the riot, or why the Asiarchs showed such concern for Paul, is not clear. Perhaps they were deputies of the “Commune of Asia,” responsible to promote and protect the imperial cult (the worship practices of Rome and the emperor). The Asiarchs mentioned were evidently not



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¹ Sir William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, and Sir William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*.

² A. Souter, “Asiarch,” *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church (2 Vols.)*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916-1918).

³ Steven J. Friesen, “Asiarchs,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*. Bd. 126 (1999), 275-290).

⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book IV, chap 15, 26-27.

⁵ Paul’s friendship with the Asiarchs in Ephesians maybe provide understanding into the way in which Philip the Asiarch sought to convince the people in Smyrna against loosing “a lion on Polycarp. HE 4.15, para 27.

adverse to a religious movement like Christianity, which embarrassed the prevailing pagan cult of Artemis. The long account in Acts 19 repeats one of Luke's themes, that Christianity was not subversive nor was Paul a political menace. Otherwise the Asiarchs would not have favored him in such a manner.⁶

The authenticity of this account is supported by Luke's firsthand knowledge of things at Ephesus.⁷ Koester⁸ lists four items that support this thesis: "the use of the term "temple keeper" (19:35) in respect to the cult of Artemis,⁹ the fact that small silver shrines of Artemis were sold in Ephesus, the existence of Asiarchs as local political persons (19:31),¹⁰ and the reference to the "scribe of the Demos"¹¹ as a very powerful Ephesian official (19:35).

Who exactly were the Asiarchs? There is some uncertainty regarding this with some scholars saying that they were possibly high priests,¹² while others viewing them only as important and wealthy officials.¹³ Strabo's account recognizes them as officials who were, according to XX, "chosen from among the wealthiest and most aristocratic in the province. They were expected to finance public games and festivals and usually served one-year terms. Inscriptions attesting *Asiarchs* have been found in over 40 cities in Asia Minor."¹⁴ There is evidence, also, that Asiarchs, much like contemporary public officials, may have been retained by persons after they left office.¹⁵

POLITARCH

One of the officials mentioned by the writer Luke is the politarch. In Acts 17:6-8, he says, "6 And when they did not find them, they *began* dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have upset the world have come here also; 7 and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' 8 And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things." (Acts 17:6-8 NASB)

The city authorities, in the Greek, are politarchs (τοὺς πολιτάρχας). Translations have tended not to use the term politarch but rather to substitute a descriptive phrase, such as "city authorities" (NASB, ESV, NRSV), "rulers of the city" (KJV, ASV, NKJV), "city officials" (HSCB, NIV, NET), "city council," (NJB). This word never occurs in Greek literature, though πολιτάρχος is used once by Aeneas Tacticus. In the

⁶ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 217. A. Souter says similarly,

"When we come to study the connexion of the Asiarchs with the Acts narrative, we are puzzled. It seems at first sight so strange that men elected to foster the worship of Rome and the Emperor should be found favouring the ambassador of the Messiah, the Emperor's rival for the lordship of the Empire. This is only one, however, of a number of indications that the Empire was at first disposed to look with a kindly eye on the new religion. Christianity, with its outward respect for civil authority, seemed at first the strongest supporter of law and order. Artemis-worship, moreover, hulked so largely in Ephesus as perhaps to dwarf the Imperial worship. Thus St. Paul, whose preaching so threatened the authority of Artemis, may have appeared in a favourable light to the representatives of Cæsar-worship, as likely to create more enthusiasm in that direction." A. Souter, "Asiarch," *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (2 Vols.), ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916-1918).

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 584-85.

⁸ H. Koester, "Ephesos in Early Christian Literature," NEED REMAINDER.

⁹ On this see Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁰ They are widely attested in Ephesian inscriptions. See Hemer, *Book of Acts*, passim.

¹¹ See Koester, "Ephesos in Early Christian Literature," p. 130 n. 42.

¹² Steven J. Friesen, "Asiarchs," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*. Bd. 126 (1999), 275-290.

¹³ Thomas Kelly Cheyne, *Eycyclopaedia biblica, A Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1: A-D (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1899), 341.

¹⁴ McRay 1991:255.

¹⁵ Michael Cart, *Archiereis and Asiarchs: A Gladiatorial Perspective*,

<http://www.duke.edu/web/classics/grbs/FTTexts/44/Carter> (last visited September 26, 2011), 66.

1835 an inscription was discovered on an arch at Thessalonica, dated between A.D. 69-79, which begins πολιταρχούντων Σωσιπάρχου and then continues with the names of seven politarchs. Since that time many such examples in other Macedonian cities have now been found.¹⁶

Greek city-states had local rulers, similar to the archons of Athens, who were also responsible to Roman provincial rulers, to maintain order and suppress sedition against the empire. The charges against Paul and his fellow workers was that they were trouble-makers and did things contrary to the decrees of the emperor by proclaiming another king, namely, Jesus, a very serious charge, where it proved.¹⁷ This would have caused concern on the part of these city authorities to ensure that these Christians did not have seditious intentions and to calm the crowd.

CONCLUSION

Though Luke has been questioned regarding his historical accuracy since the rise of historical skepticism about the Bible, his close familiarity with the world of his day should cause one to trust him when he speaks of persons, places, events, and other facts when he writes. As F. F. Bruce said, 'When a writer's accuracy is established by valid evidence, he gains the right to be treated as a reliable informant on matters coming within his scope which are not corroborated elsewhere (Bruce 1985: 2578).'¹⁸

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¹⁶ Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1990), 115, especially fn 35.

¹⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 507.

¹⁸ Associates for Biblical Research, vol. 12, *Bible and Spade (1999) Volume 12* (Associates for Biblical Research, 1999; 2003), 55.

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