

High-Standing Women in the Book of Acts

And Their Influence among the Synagogues of the Greek East

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The notion that women in the ancient world were predominantly marginalised and excluded from positions of influence is still a relatively common contemporary viewpoint.¹ However, the Book of Acts challenges this view in subtle but significant ways. In Acts, Luke refers twice to “εὐσχήμονες women,” first in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:50) and then in Berea (Acts 17:12). In these two brief references, Luke portrays the influence of prominent women in the development of early Christian communities. In Acts 13:50, the Judaeans incited both the God-fearing women of high standing and leading men of the city (τὰς σεβομένας γυναῖκας τὰς εὐσχήμονας καὶ τοὺς πρῶτους τῆς πόλεως) against Paul and Barnabas, and in Acts 17:12 we learn that many of the Judaeans there believed Paul and Silas’ message, including not a few of the Greek women of high standing and men (τῶν Ἑλληνίδων γυναικῶν τῶν εὐσχημόνων καὶ ἀνδρῶν οὐκ ὀλίγοι). Such Gentiles were doubtless the so-called God-fearers who had attached themselves to the synagogues where Paul and his associates preached (Acts 13:43; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7). Of principal interest for this study is how Luke refers to them and the echo it finds in the documentary evidence. The present paper adds to the conversation on “εὐσχήμονες women” primarily through the analysis of epigraphical evidence in determining who the women of Acts 13:50 and Acts 17:12 may have been within their socio-historical context.

¹ For example, in a recent piece, Robertson writes: “[Women] were restricted from political participation, could not own land or inherit property, and were confined to a domestic role. Women were often secluded, as well, and could rarely venture out of their homes.” Sarah Robertson, “Women and Gender in the Ancient World,” *Schlager Group Inc.*, March 5, 2024, <https://www.schlagergroup.com/women-and-gender-in-the-ancient-world/>. Susan Benton, writing about the public commemoration of a Sardian priestess named Melitine, helpfully challenges this view, saying “We might be inclined to think that a young woman like Melitine, brought out of obscurity and allowed to serve publicly, was an exception in daily life of the ancient world. That has often been the contemporary impression [...] Yet the reality that historians increasingly recognize is far more complicated and nuanced.” Susan E. Benton, “Women in the Ancient Mediterranean World,” in *Behind the Scenes of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. Bruce W. Longenecker, Elizabeth E. Shively and T.J. Lang (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024) 234–240, at 234.