

EXEGETICAL BRIEF
Romans 16:1,7
Phoebe, a deacon? Junia, an apostle?

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The apostle who heralds God's gracious gift of righteousness in Christ Jesus also treasures the individuals who by grace have heralded it themselves. Perhaps nowhere is that more apparent than in the closing chapter of his epistle to the church at Rome. Here Paul singles out a number of that congregation's individual members. Aquila, Urbanus, Stachys, Aristobulus, Herodian, Rufus: These are his dear friends, and they are his co-workers in Christ. Especially noteworthy is that he mentions by name seven women who have risked their lives for him; who work hard; who are dear sisters in the faith; whom the apostle loves in the Lord.

Nowadays two of the women of Romans 16 seem to garner the most attention. Is it due to the fact that when each is mentioned, today's translations invariably offer a footnote or two? Is it because the apostle writes more about these two women than about the others on his list? Whatever the reasons, students of the Scriptures today are asking: Can we know for certain that Phoebe was a deacon called to serve the church at Cenchreae? They may even wonder: Was Junia one of the apostles?

In the opening passage of Romans 16 Paul writes, "Now I commend to you our sister Phoebe. She also continues to be a *διάκονος* of the church which is in Cenchreae. Please welcome her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints and help her in whatever matter she may have need of you. For she also has proven to be a helper of many people -- of me as well" (vv 1-2).

Paul spent 18 months in Corinth on his second mission journey, and now near the end of his third mission journey he has returned to this important city. Cenchreae was its seaport eight miles away, and Phoebe was a trusted figure there. Now she is entrusted with the vital task of carrying this precious epistle to the Romans. When she arrives, Paul wants them to receive and assist her, whatever she needs. He recommends Phoebe for a couple of reasons. For one thing, Paul writes, she is "our sister," a dear fellow believer. Not only that, she is a *διάκονος* of the congregation in Cenchreae.

Popular translations of this passage invariably place a footnote below their preferred translation of *διάκονος*. If "servant" is preferred, then "deacon" or "deaconess" or "minister" is footnoted. Likewise if "deacon" is preferred, then "servant" goes in the footnote. Interestingly enough, the 2011 edition of the New International Version (NIV) has reversed what had appeared in its 1984 edition. "Deacon" is now preferred; "servant" is in the first footnote. The second footnote adds, "The word deacon refers here to a Christian designated to serve with the overseers/elders of the church in a variety of ways; similarly in Phil. 1:1 and 1 Tim. 3:8,12."

This interpretation is not new. Church fathers like Origen and Chrysostom concur with it, as does Theodoret of Cyrillus, who speculates, "The church at Cenchreae was so large that it even had a woman deaconess, and one who was famous and well known to boot." More recently Lenski claims,

Phoebe occupied an official position by appointment of the church which was similar to that of the seven deacons who were appointed in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-6)... Her work of ministering was not mere private effort but was carried on by authorization of the congregation... This is the first mention of women deacons in the church.

Notable commentators of the last several years assert that Phoebe “functioned as an official title of leadership” (Robert Jewett, 2006); that “women in that office were known to conduct baptisms for women and to preach the Word of God” (Arland Hultgren, 2011); and that “she functioned as an official teacher in the church in Cenchreae” (Colin Kruse, 2012).

Might these interpreters be assuming too much on the basis of scant evidence? Let’s examine it briefly. Traditionally we have referred to those seven men of Acts 6 as “deacons,” yet we have no actual indication that they were called by that term. They were appointed “to serve tables” (διακονεῖν τραπέζαις) so that the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and “to the service of the Word” (τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου). Note that the task to which the Seven were appointed (διακονεῖν) is cognate to what the apostles were called to do (διακονίᾳ). Especially when we observe how actively and skillfully Stephen devoted himself to the preaching of God’s Word, might the position to which he and his six Jerusalem colleagues were called just as likely have been referred to as “overseer” (ἐπίσκοπος) or “elder” (πρεσβύτερος) or the like?

At the start of his epistle to the Philippians Paul addresses all the saints “including the overseers and deacons” (σὺν ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνοις). Here at Php 1:1 the “deacons” at Philippi do appear to have been called by the church to an office and to responsibilities that seem to have differed in some ways from those of the “elders.” Yet Philippians provides no additional information in that regard.

That leaves 1 Timothy 3:8,12 as the only instance in Scripture where we are given any definitive information about early believers who were appointed as deacons. We learn, for example, that these deacons were not explicitly called to teach God’s Word in a public setting; the qualification διδακτικός (“able to teach”) is noticeable by its absence from Paul’s instructions about that office. We also learn that what Paul says here about deacons meshes almost perfectly with what he says in the previous passage about overseers (ἐπίσκοποι). One of the matching qualifications is this: Just as the overseer was to be a “one woman man” (μῑᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα), the same was required of deacons. They too were to be μῑᾶς γυναικὸς ἄνδρες.

Could it not be, then, that all of the deacons of 1 Timothy 3 were males? Although these deacons were not teachers of the Word, could it not also be that they were called to a position in which they needed to exercise authority over other men? Paul’s instructions about overseers and deacons come on the heels of what he wrote at 1 Tim 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach, that is, to exercise authority over a man.” To refer to her as a preacher of the church seems to place her work in contradiction to the guidance Paul gave Timothy just a few years later.

Simply put, the Phoebe whom Paul commends in Romans 16:1 could not have been a “1 Timothy 3 deacon.” Nevertheless might she still have been called to the position of assisting her husband in gospel ministry in keeping with the order God lays out for the church? Or might she have held a recognized office in which she was to instruct and counsel other women? Nothing in

Scripture rules that out. It is evident from the writings of the early church that some form of the office of deacon (or deaconess, if you prefer) was open to women.

Still, consider how *διάκονος* is used elsewhere in Paul's epistles. He calls Christ a "*διάκονος* of the circumcised for the sake of God's truth" (Ro 15:8). Epaphras, Tychicus, and Timothy are named or addressed with the same term, each of these believers a *διάκονος* "in the Lord" or "of Christ." Paul refers to himself as a *διάκονος* of God, of Christ, of the new covenant, and of righteousness. At Colossians 1:24-25 Paul alludes to "the church of which I became a *διάκονος*." The noun *διάκονος* points specifically to the office of "deacon" only at Php 1:1 and 1 Tim 3:8,12. Otherwise the preferred interpretation would seem to be the more general "minister" or "assistant" or "helper" or, quite appropriately, "servant."

Here at Romans 16:1 the more cautious approach might be that Phoebe was a "servant" of the church at Cenchreae. Did she bring food to the poor? Did she house weary travelers who were on their way to or from Corinth? Did she encourage Paul or Timothy or Titus when they were doing kingdom work in Cenchreae? Did she help settle grievances the believers may have had with one other? Was she devoted to prayer? Did she share from her wealth? Did she instruct women and children in their homes or in her own, building them up in the gospel in keeping with Jesus' great commission? Was her entire life one of humble service conducted in his saving name? It is not necessary to qualify Phoebe's *διακονος* role as that of a "deacon" appointed by the church. Instead by recognizing Phoebe as a "servant" of the church we may consider any of these tasks as well as many others fitting for a woman who had been given a new life in her Savior Jesus.

The proclamation of the gospel has always created its own forms of ministry. Over the centuries the church has been rightly served by those called by the Holy Spirit to the office of pastor, teacher, staff minister, administrator, professor, missionary, evangelist, deacon, deaconess, preschool director, and so forth. Certainly the gospel created its own forms of public or representative ministry in the first century even as it does so today. Nevertheless Phoebe of Cenchreae may simply be joined to the roll of countless "sisters" in the faith and "servants" of the church who are given special honor for their faithful work while not necessarily having been formally called to a recognized office of ministry.

It seems another woman honored in Romans 16 has stirred up even more interest. At Romans 16:7 Paul writes, "Greet Andronicus and Ἰουλιαν, my kinsfolk and fellow prisoners. They are ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις. They even came to be in Christ before me."

After centuries of debate there appears to be no way to determine beyond a shadow of a doubt whether the second individual greeted in this verse is a female or a male. In other words, there is some question whether this name should be accented as the feminine Ἰουλίαν (Junia) or the masculine Ἰουλιᾶν (a contracted form of Junianus). The masculine "Junianus" is seen frequently enough in Greek and Latin writings, but its contracted form "Junias" is extremely rare. Conversely "Junia" was a common name for a first century woman; it appears regularly in Greek and Latin. While the evidence is hardly conclusive, then, Ἰουλίαν is the more likely pronunciation and "Junia" the preferred translation here.

The church fathers almost unanimously identify this as a woman's name. So have most modern Bible commentators. Their interpretation suggests that Ἀνδρόνικος καὶ Ἰουλίαν were a husband and

wife pairing similar to the couples greeted in v3 (Priscilla and Aquila) and v15 (Philologus and Julia). During the centuries between the fathers and today's commentators, however, the pendulum of interpretation swung the other way. Most of the Byzantine minuscules, the first to use accents, placed a circumflex over the last syllable of the name, making it a masculine form. Likewise most of the commentators from the 13th to mid 20th centuries took Ἰουνιᾶν as a man's name. For this reason too a preference for the feminine "Junia" over the masculine "Junias" could never be beyond debate.

Paul describes this couple as ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις. Readers familiar with the New Testament recognize that the noun ἀπόστολος, appearing midway through Rom 16:7, on occasion is used in a broad sense. To bear this out some choose to translate ἀπόστολος as "emissary" or "ambassador" or, in a Christian context, "traveling missionary." A footnote included here in the Holman Christian Standard Bible says, "The apostles' is not always a technical term referring to the 12; cp. 2Co 8:23; Php 2:25 where this word is translated as 'messenger.'" Also compare Jn 13:16; Acts 14:4,14; 1 Cor 15:5-7; 1 Th 2:6; and Heb 3:1. Perhaps that is indeed what Paul intended here, yet that seems unlikely largely because such instances are rare. In the vast majority of the occasions when Paul uses the word ἀπόστολος he is referring to the Twelve plus himself. That alone is a strong reason for understanding τοῖς ἀποστόλοις here in the usual sense, "the apostles."

The root meaning of the adjective ἐπίσημος is something like "having a mark on." In usage it means "notable, prominent, outstanding," implying a comparison with others in a group. Or when no comparison is implied it means "esteemed" or "well-known." As to which of these two senses is intended here in Romans 16, we must consider the use of the preposition ἐν when it follows an adjective like ἐπίσημος.

Might ἐν have the sense of personal agency, thus "regarded as outstanding by the apostles" (that is, by the Twelve)? Recent grammarians and commentators normally reject this interpretation. Douglas Moo, for one, points out that personal agency is typically demonstrated by the dative alone or by ὑπό plus the genitive. Daniel Wallace asserts that the construction "ἐν plus dative" only rarely shows personal agency and that there are no unambiguous instances of such a construction in the New Testament. Wallace receives support from Blass-Debrunner.

Consequently some try to make a case for the sense "among." Paul's point, they contend, is that Junia was regarded as "prominent among the (Lord's) emissaries" or "notable in the circle of the traveling missionaries" or even "outstanding among the apostles."¹ Yet there is a valid objection to this interpretation as well. When adjectives like ἐπίσημος are used in an implied comparison, as would be the case here, the group to which someone is being compared is typically in the genitive case. Had he wished to say that Andronicus and Junia were "outstanding among the apostles" or "prominent in the circle of the traveling missionaries," Paul apparently would have written ἐπίσημοι τῶν ἀποστόλων rather than ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις.

More likely here we have the other sense of ἐπίσημοι when it's followed by ἐν. Paul is not making a comparison. He is rather saying that "in the sphere of the apostles" Junia was "well-known." Yet

¹ Several interpreters have concluded that because Junia was "outstanding among the apostles," she was no less an apostle than Paul. Then they ask, "If a woman was allowed to be an apostle, then why aren't they allowed to be pastors and priests?" By way of example, cf. Bernadette Brooten, "Junia ... Outstanding among the Apostles (Romans 16:7)," online at <http://www.womenpriests.org/classic/brooten.asp>.

here again the interpreter exercises caution. This is not saying that Junia was *included* among the apostles. Daniel Wallace presents compelling evidence for rejecting this interpretation. He points to the apocryphal Psalms of Solomon, where the writer indicates that the Jewish captives were “a spectacle among all the Gentiles.”² One can easily see the similarity between that passage’s ἐπίσημῳ ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν (Ps Sol 2:6) and ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις here in Rom 16:7. Very importantly, we notice that in the passage from the Psalms of Solomon the first group (the Jewish captives) was not included in the second group (the Gentiles). Likewise in the similar construction here in Romans 16 the first group (Andronicus and Junia) is not included in the second group (the apostles).

This last distinction is not clear when we translate ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις as “esteemed among the apostles.” Better rather to say that Junia and her husband were “esteemed by the apostles.” Indeed these two individuals were converts to the Christian faith at the time of the first Christian Pentecost or shortly afterwards. Even longer than Paul they had faithfully served their Savior and thus were highly regarded by the apostles. St. Paul makes it a point to extend a greeting to this dear woman and her husband.

Whether Phoebe actually held the office of “deacon” remains uncertain. Including Junia “among the apostles” is a shaky interpretation. On the other hand, placing Junia and her husband “among the emissaries” of the Lord Jesus is unnecessary. Still there is no doubt whatsoever that the apostle Paul had a deep and abiding appreciation for such sisters of his. They devoted themselves to work of the heavenly Father. They furthered his kingdom of grace. They gave themselves fully to the work of the Lord. Similarly the church today recognizes that women no less than men confess the faith boldly and serve their Savior wholeheartedly. They are worthy of honor, respect, and affection, whether they have been called into public ministry or not.

² Daniel B. Wallace, “Junia Among the Apostles: The Double Identification Problem in Romans 16:7.” Online at <http://bible.org/article/junia-among-apostles-double-identification-problem-romans-167>.