

Household Names

Junia, Phoebe, & Prisca in Early Christian Rome

By Michael Peppard, April 23, 2018

Paul's letter to the Romans is arguably the most significant theological text in Christian history. The longest and most fully developed exposition of Paul's thought, it examines among other things the nature of God, the origin of sin, the means of salvation, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and matters of ethics and ritual. Many Christians have read it, in one form or another. But few readers focus on the end of the letter, where Paul greets almost thirty people in the nascent assemblies of Roman Christians. After all, it seems mostly like an ordinary exchange of pleasantries and commendations.

But pay closer attention to whom Paul addresses and a surprise emerges: the status of women in the early church in Rome. Specifically, three women: Junia, Phoebe, and Prisca. They are not household names. They are not mentioned from pulpits on Sunday morning. But they were undeniably important to Paul—and to the Christian assemblies in Rome and Corinth, where they were authoritative leaders.

If you've never heard of Junia, you can be forgiven; very little is known about her. Yet what we do know is remarkable. Paul greets "Andronicus and Junia" in Rome as "my relatives and fellow prisoners," who are "prominent among the apostles" and were "in Christ before me" (Rom 16:7). The plain sense of the text suggests that this pair is probably a couple, biologically related to Paul in some way, converts to discipleship in Christ prior to Paul—making them exceedingly early Christians indeed—and also distinguished or outstanding among the "apostles." In its etymological and everyday use, the Greek word *apostolos* meant one "sent out" or "dispatched" for a purpose. It was even used in such a way by Paul, about the messenger Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25). But outside the context of travel and delivery, the term usually denoted a person who had been sent out by Christ himself. This is why Mary Magdalene in Christian tradition came to be called the *apostola apostolorum*, the "apostle to the apostles." As the first witness to the resurrected Jesus, she was dispatched by him with a message to the rest of his apostles. The very reason that Paul struggled to defend his own authority as an apostle was that he had not met or been commissioned by Jesus on earth, but only through a visionary experience of him as resurrected (e.g., 2 Cor 12:1-12).

Why would so few of us know of a woman called "apostle" in first-century Rome? Junia was a victim of the Bible's manuscript tradition, in which she was erased from existence by her transition to a man named "Junias." That saga of textual transmission has been expertly charted by Eldon Jay Epp in his book, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle*. Epp is among the leading scholars of textual criticism, which is the practice of discerning the when, how, and why of manuscript transmissions and edits. The Pontifical Biblical Commission defines it in positive terms as the first step of historical-critical method: "Basing itself on the testimony of the oldest and best manuscripts, as well as of papyri, certain ancient versions and patristic texts, textual-criticism seeks to establish, according to fixed rules, a biblical text as close as possible to the original" (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*). Epp's arguments require knowledge of ancient Greek, but in short, his book persuasively demonstrates that the best reading of the oldest manuscript tradition is the feminine name "Junia." The masculine "Junias" was introduced at a later date by copyists, if not intentionally then perhaps unintentionally due to a subconscious bias that someone called "apostle" would also be a man.

To rediscover a “prominent,” “distinguished,” or “outstanding” woman apostle in early Christian Rome would on its own be a notable find. But there is much more to mine from Paul’s greetings to Rome.

Paul describes Phoebe at the beginning of his greetings, but she was not a native of the community in Rome. Rather, he “commends” her as a “minister” (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae, the eastern harbor city of Corinth in Greece. She had been a “benefactor” (*prostatis*) to many, and to Paul as well. He urges the Romans “to receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones” (Romans 16:1-2).

As in the case of Junia, interpreters of these facts about Phoebe have often downplayed their significance. One could minimize her status as “deacon/minister” by noting that these were incipient church offices, not the fully developed “deacons” of later centuries (see also “Will the Church Get Women Deacons?”, *Commonweal*, July 8, 2016). One could minimize the term *prostatis* by restricting it to only monetary support, as in the translation “benefactor.” And one might minimize Paul’s “letter of recommendation” for her by assuming that he would say this about any Christian sister traveling on dangerous Roman roads.

But concerning all three of her attributes, a fuller reading of the evidence is warranted. Though it is probably true that she was not a “deacon” in the sense of later church offices, that is not a strike against her authoritative leadership. None of the church offices, including those ascribed to men, were clearly established and defined by the mid-first century. (In any case, the most important term of authority at that time was not bishop, presbyter, or deacon, but “apostle,” the title for which Paul fought so hard—and the one which he presumed everyone in Rome knew Junia already had.)

Archaeological evidence shows that some Christians of later centuries certainly viewed Phoebe as a forerunner of women deacons, in the official sense of the term. In their admirable *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ, and Kevin Madigan catalog sixty-five ancient inscriptions about women deacons. The vast majority come from eastern Christian communities (Greece, Asia Minor, the Holy Land, Syria), while only a few come from Rome, Gaul, or North Africa. Yet the geographical breadth of the “find spots” (from modern-day France all the way to Syria) suggests that the diaconate of women was, while concentrated in the Christian East, not merely a regional peculiarity.

Persuasive evidence is a stone found by workers at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem on December 8, 1903 (see also “Women Deacons, Set in Stone,” posted online at *Commonweal*, September 8, 2016). Probably dating from the fourth century, the Greek inscription translates as “Here lies the slave and bride of Christ, Sophia, the deacon, the second Phoebe, who fell asleep in peace on March 21 during the eleventh indiction....” The inscription’s subsequent lines are broken or missing, which is unfortunate because one of them likely contains the name of a presbyter, which may have helped to date and situate the artifact.

Inscriptions can be ambiguous in their meaning, just like texts transmitted through tradition can be. But we should not ignore that inscriptions were the primary public texts of the ancient Mediterranean world. They communicated values and priorities of communities. The prevalence of these inscriptions demonstrates that women’s ordained leadership was not secretive or embarrassing. To the contrary—and this may be the most important point—many of the inscriptions display reverence for the female deacon named therein; after all, giving honor was the primary function of inscriptions. This particular example tells us that in the Holy Land of the fourth century—certainly a significant time and place for the Christian tradition—a real deacon named Sophia was acclaimed precisely by connection to her predecessor Phoebe. For the Christians who commissioned this public monument, the honorable status of women as deacons was set in stone.

Back to the first-century Phoebe: a more powerful translation than “benefactor” for *prostatis* would also be more faithful to the Greek term in its social context. When used in the masculine form *prostatês*, its semantic range covers “leader,” “ruler,” “presiding officer,” “administrator,” “protector,” “guardian,” or “patron.” Certainly the possession of wealth and the concomitant powers of benefaction could be related to one’s role as a leader, presider, or protector. But generosity alone does not capture the meaning of the term that Paul uses for Phoebe.

What will be most revealing to casual readers of Romans is the historical meaning of Phoebe’s third attribute: that Paul “commends” the Romans “to receive her.” There are only two interpretive options for this commendation, which is, lest we forget, the very reason that Paul mentions Phoebe in the first place. Either Phoebe has already left for Rome and Paul expects his letter to arrive before she does, or Phoebe herself is carrying the letter as its courier.

As a historian of Christianity in the Roman Empire and a papyrologist of Greek letters, I think it is virtually certain that the second scenario is correct. Since no one but Roman military officials and other political administrators had access to the Roman mail system, regular folks like Paul had to rely on personal couriers. When ancient writers followed the conclusion of a letter with a commendation for a person, that person—in this case, Phoebe—was the courier. Paul trusted her, presumably accompanied by an entourage, to carry his most weighty theological letter from Greece to Rome. And since she was not yet known to the Roman Christian assemblies, Paul offers this note of commendation to vouch for her status.

I am not alone in this assessment. In his 2005 essay, “Phoebe, a Letter Courier,” New Testament scholar Antti Marjanen refers to Phoebe’s role as “a scholarly consensus,” summarizing the argument persuasively and spinning out some of its impact as well. To his treatment I would add one further piece of evidence from biblical manuscripts. In ancient writings, the title usually appeared at the end of a manuscript, not the beginning. Thus early manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew conclude with “according to Matthew,” and early manuscripts of Romans end with simply “to the Romans.” These short texts (each of which we call a *subscriptio*) are rarely printed in our modern Bibles and even omitted from many scholarly versions of the Greek New Testament. For the letters of the New Testament, we can observe a scribal tendency to fill in more details over time, with later manuscripts expanding beyond the letter’s destination to include also the letter’s origin, scribe, or courier. In the case of Romans, some manuscripts note that the letter was sent “from Corinth” and “through Phoebe the deacon,” while others say it was written “through Tertius” (the scribe, Romans 16:22) and “sent through Phoebe.”

The *subscriptio* is important not because it adds external evidence from someone who knew more than we do about Paul’s circumstances in the mid-first century. Rather, the copyists who filled out the *subscriptio* were themselves deducing details about letter production and delivery from the internal evidence of the text of Romans, just as we are. They do the same thing with other letters, such as Philippians, where Epaphroditus is introduced as the courier in 2:25-30 and so noted in the *subscriptio*. Why is the inclusion of Phoebe in the *subscriptio* so compelling? Because the copyists would have little reason to elevate an otherwise unknown woman if it were not clear to them what the letter implied. Indeed, we know that just verses later, some copyists—intentionally or not—eliminated Junia’s authoritative status. Feminists they were not.

Communication was haphazard in antiquity, with senders of letters tending to use whatever courier they could find. (This explains the common forthright opening of ancient papyrus letters: “Having found someone heading your direction, I did not hesitate to write to you.”) But when the courier was a real confidant of the sender, he or she could be trusted not only to deliver the letter, but also to comment on its contents, clarify

its background, and relay the intentions of the author. In other words, trusted couriers sometimes had authority to interpret.

We see glimpses of this in the letters of Cicero, as analyzed by Timothy Luckritz Marquis in his 2013 book, *Transient Apostle: Paul, Travel, and the Rhetoric of Empire*. The clearest example appears in a letter from Cicero to Appius Pulcher (Letters to Friends 3.1), which affirms that a previous courier he had sent will expand on his letter, and which also describes the expansions on Appius's letter provided by the new courier. As an honored and trusted courier, Phoebe could have had the sender's blessing to explain her letter and its author's intention as well. The social context thus suggests that, in addition to being a diakonos, a prostatis, and the courier of the most important theological text in Christian history, Phoebe may also have been its first authorized interpreter.

Now imagine Phoebe arriving in Rome, tracking down one of the nascent Christian assemblies, opening her satchel of scrolls, and producing Paul's letter. To whom did she give it? Tradition says that Peter was there, though he is not mentioned in Paul's greetings. But from scripture, we know for certain the names of the leaders of only one house-church in Rome at this time. In fact, Paul greets them in the very next line: "Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the church that meets in their house" (Romans 16:3).

Prisca, also called Priscilla in the book of Acts, was the most important early Christian who is not a household name. Even taking the minimal interpretation of her significance, she and her evangelistic partner Aquila (probably her husband) were leaders at three of the main centers of early Christianity: playing host to Paul in Corinth (Acts 18), then later leading house-churches in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19) and Rome (Rom 16:3-5). What's more, of the six times the pair is mentioned, Prisca's name is mentioned first four times. Recall, by contrast, the pair "Andronicus and Junia," presumably also a couple, in which the man's name was listed first.

In his 1992 article "Prisca and Aquila: Traveling Tentmakers and Church Builders," Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., argues that if we evaluate her prior position "by secular standards, this would mean that she outranked Aquila in terms of social status or independent wealth; if by Christian criteria, this would mean she had been converted first or was more prominent in the life of the Church. The choice is not easy, but the balance of probability favors the second alternative." As a manual laborer (according to Acts), Prisca would almost certainly not have held wealth or high status. Moreover, Paul shows no signs of favoring such social status in his patterns of greeting. Murphy-O'Connor realistically depicts Prisca and Aquila as a kind of advance evangelism team, whom Paul had met through trade in Corinth and with whom he developed a life-long kinship. The textual evidence and social context suggest that Prisca was among the top few leaders in Paul's orbit.

Consider what else he says about her: Prisca is a "co-worker in Christ Jesus," she "risked her neck" for Paul's life, and "all the churches of the Gentiles" are grateful to her. Her aforementioned leadership at three early Christian centers explains the gratitude of "all the churches," and her "risking her neck" likely suggests the dangers of ancient travel, combined with the ostracization occasioned by different religious attitudes (for example, refusal to participate in local temple activity at Corinth, Ephesus, or Rome). Even the term "co-worker" should not be overlooked: for Paul, the term "worker" or "co-worker" typically means evangelistic activity, such as the description of Prisca's teaching a certain man named Apollos about Christianity in Corinth (Acts 18:12). In Paul's greetings to Rome, five of the seven people described as "workers" are women.

For those keeping score, that's five evangelistic "workers" and one "apostle" among the women Paul greets at Rome—not counting the "minister" carrying the letter itself.

In the modern sense, these women are not household names. But in the ancient sense of the "household," a woman such as Prisca probably first found her leadership role in the early Christian movement through its deep roots in household metaphors and management. Margaret Y. MacDonald puts it well in her 1999 article "Reading Real Women Through the Undisputed Letters of Paul": "The fact that the group [of early Christians] functioned practically in much the same way as an extended household (the domain traditionally associated with women) has led to a good deal of speculation about how this facilitated the involvement of women in Pauline Christianity. The household base of the movement may have enabled women to turn community leadership into an extension of their roles as household managers." In other words, women were usually in charge of domestic space, which was the very space where Christians met in the first century. And the first household name we have for a house-church in Rome is the name of a woman, Prisca.

Thus when Phoebe arrived in Rome with Paul's letter, it was into Prisca's hand she most likely placed the scroll. Prisca had known Paul for years, and she was one of his most trusted partners, just as Phoebe was a trusted courier. So when we envision the very first discussion of the letter to the Romans, both scriptural and historical evidence suggest the same thing: it was women who were doing the talking.

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