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## WHO WAS PHOEBE? TRANSLATING *DIAKONOS* IN ROMANS 16.1

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Among my deaconess friends in the Philippines Phoebe is a sort of a heroine, because she is considered the first deaconess, and therefore the founder or mother of the deaconess movement. But is this correct? Was Phoebe really the first deaconess? In fact, was she a deaconess at all?

All the information we have about Phoebe is contained in Rom 16.1-2. But before we look at these two verses more fully, let us first of all examine their immediate context which will influence the way the verses are interpreted and translated.

These two verses form the beginning of the last chapter of Romans, which contains Paul's greetings to the intended recipients of the letter. This would be the normal way of ending a letter at that time (and we should note that it is still a very legitimate way of ending a contemporary letter). By having this ending, the letter to the Romans conforms to the requirements of letter style which was prevalent in the Greek and Roman worlds during the days of Paul.

In this chapter, Paul singles out some of the people who are very close to him and at the same time play important roles in the life of the Christian community in Rome. It is significant to note the fact that in addition to Phoebe, seven and possibly eight other women are mentioned: Prisca (verse 3), Mary (verse 6), Junias (verse 7), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (verse 12), Persis (verse 12), Julia (verse 15), and finally, the sister of Nereus (verse 15). Does this somehow show the prominence and importance of women in the early church? Does it give us a clue as to Paul's attitude towards women playing an important role in the leadership of the church? It is unfortunate that we know very little of these women. But two of them are worth discussing further.

### Prisca

After Phoebe, Paul mentions Prisca or Priscilla and her husband Aquila (verses 3-5). In the New Testament, this husband-wife team is mentioned six times: in Acts 18.2,18,26, Rom 16.3, 1 Cor 16.19, and 2 Tim 4.19. Luke informs us that Paul met them for the first time in Corinth; at that time they had just come from Rome where apparently they were residents but had to leave because of Emperor Claudius' order expelling all Jews from the city.

Paul writes that Prisca and Aquila "risked their lives for me . . ." (Rom 16.4). The book of Acts does not mention anything regarding this matter, but we can safely speculate that it had something to do with Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Paul also mentions "the church that meets in their house". From the inclusion of this note in Romans it must be concluded that Prisca and her husband had returned to Rome some time later, and had once again become active members of the Christian community there.

The accounts in the book of Acts and in Romans 16 tie in with Paul's description of Prisca and Aquila as *synergoi*, that is, "co-workers". This refers not primarily to the fact that both Aquila and Paul were tent-makers, but that Aquila and Prisca were involved in a significant way in Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Corinth and beyond. Since the term "co-worker" is applied by Paul to Timothy (Rom 16.21; 1 Th 3.2) and to Luke (Philem 24), this would suggest that Prisca and Aquila were involved in actual spiritual work in the Christian community, and not simply in extending hospitality to Christian missionaries.

It may be difficult to argue from the above that Prisca was being given importance by Paul, since she is never mentioned without her husband. It may even be asserted that it was Aquila who was being given prominence, and Prisca was mentioned only as an afterthought. There is, however, a valid argument against such an assertion. In the six times that the couple are mentioned, only on two occasions is Aquila mentioned first (Acts 18.2; 1 Cor 16.9), and these can be explained by the cultural situation. In the other four instances, Prisca is mentioned ahead of her husband (Acts 18.18,26; Rom 16.3; 2 Tim 4.19). Since there is no apparent linguistic or cultural reason for going against the natural practice of that time of naming the man first, then the order must be significant. Could it be that Paul was indicating that Prisca was in fact much more important and more prominent than her husband? Houghton writes, "One cannot be dogmatic, but the phrase 'Prisca and Aquila' suggests that she had greater ability than her husband and was the more important of the two for the early church and for Paul." (*The Concept of Woman in the Pauline Corpus in the Light of the Social and Religious Environment of the First Century*, pages 167-168.)

### Junias

Junias is mentioned in 16.7: "Greetings also to Andronicus and Junias, fellow Jews who were in prison with me; they are well known

among the apostles, and they became Christians before I did.”

The identity of Junias is disputed. Does the name indicate a man or a woman? The text itself is not decisive, since Junias is mentioned together with Andronicus, thus necessitating a masculine construction. That Junias has been understood as referring to a woman is apparent in the history of the interpretation of this verse. Thus Chrysostom could write, “Oh, how great the devotion of this woman, that she should be accounted worthy of the appellation of ‘apostle’.” The *Translator’s Handbook on Romans* notes: “Andronicus and Junias are not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament; they could easily have been husband and wife, or brother and sister.” Thus we have assertions from very reliable authorities, both ancient (Chrysostom) and contemporary (Newman and Nida), to the effect that Junias was indeed a woman.

It seems strange and surprising then that Junias is described as being “of note among the apostles” (RSV). To be sure this phrase is rather ambiguous and capable of two interpretations: “they are respected by the apostles” (Living Bible), or “they are outstanding apostles” (New American Bible; and see Jerusalem Bible and William Barclay). But there is quite strong support for the view that Andronicus and Junias are identified as apostles here.

The term “apostle” itself is used in the New Testament in both a narrow and a broad sense. In the one case, it refers primarily to the original disciples of Jesus, the men he selected to be with him during his earthly life. There are two exceptions to this usage: Matthias, who was chosen by the eleven disciples to succeed Judas (Acts 1.12-26), and Paul, who claimed for himself the title, because the risen Christ himself appeared to him. The term “apostle” can however be used in a much wider sense to include all Christian missionaries, that is, Christians who travelled from place to place proclaiming the Gospel. It is perhaps in this wider sense that the term is used here.

The apostle was considered the most important officer in the church. In his listing of the gifts of the Spirit, Paul lists apostles first, followed by prophets and teachers (see 1 Cor 12.28). It is therefore very significant that Junias, even though a woman, was included among the apostles. This makes it certain that women did occupy positions of prominence in some early Christian communities, and that very early in the life of the church, a concept of ministry which included both women and men started to emerge. It is with this background that we now turn our attention on Phoebe.

### **Phoebe as a *diakonos***

The first description used of Phoebe is that of a *diakonos*. That there is difficulty in interpreting this particular term is indicated by the various ways in which it is translated, as the following listing shows:

- (1) “deaconess” (RSV, NAB, NJB, JB, Phillips)
- (2) “servant” (NIV)

- (3) "who serves" (GNB, Translator's Translation)
- (4) "who holds office in the congregation" (NEB)
- (5) "active in the service of the congregation" (William Barclay)

This variety arises out of the various ways in which the term *diakonos* is understood. This word is found 29 times in the New Testament, and it means "one who serves at table" (Mt 22.13; Jn 2.5,9), although it can mean "servant" or "helper" in a much wider sense (Mt 20.26; Rom 13.4; Eph 6.21; Col 4.7). Christ himself is called a *diakonos* in Rom 15.8 and Gal 2.17. The word therefore was understood originally in a secular sense. But Paul uses it in a specifically Christian sense, one who serves Christ and the the Gospel (2 Cor 11.15,23; Col 1.7,23,25). In at least two passages the word *diakonos* is used to describe the ecclesiastical office of "deacon" (Phil 1.1 and 1 Tim 3.8-13). In the 1 Timothy passage, it is clear from the context that the office of "deacon" has developed as part of the evolving church structure which consisted of bishops, elders and deacons.

How should *diakonos* in Rom 16.1 be translated and interpreted? Let us consider the various possibilities mentioned above.

(1) "**Deaconess**" To translate *diakonos* as "deaconess" would mean that *diakonos* is here understood as a **technical term** describing an ecclesiastical office in the Christian community at Cencreae. But since Phoebe happens to be a woman, therefore, the term *diakonos* is "feminized" so to speak, thus resulting in the translation "deaconess". An implicit part of the argument is as follows: *diakonos* referred to an ecclesiastical office occupied exclusively by men. In view of this, had there been a feminine form of *diakonos* at that time, Paul would have used it; but since the feminine form had not yet evolved, then Paul used the masculine form, which had the unmarked meaning of "male deacon", but could be used to refer to women, as long as this is clearly indicated in the text.

Let us consider this matter more closely. First of all, how true is it that the office of *diakonos* in the early church included only men? The decisive passage here is 1 Tim 3.8-13, which describes the office of *diakonos* in the Christian communities reflected in the Pastoral letters. It is often assumed that the deacons referred to in this passage were men, especially in the light of verse 12: "Let the deacon be the husband of one wife, and let them manage their children and their household well." However, what can we do with verse 11, which literally reads, "The women likewise must be serious, no drunkenness, but temperate, faithful in all things"?

Some translations and commentaries interpret "women" as referring to the wives of the deacons (see GNB, William Barclay). This interpretation is justified as follows:

- (1) Verses 8-13 is a unity, and since verse 12 clearly refers to men, then verses 8-10 also must refer to men. The only way to solve the

problem created by the use of the word "women" is to interpret the word as referring to the wives of deacons.

- (2) The list of qualities in verse 11 has much in common with the list in Tit 2.3, which refers to older women. (Of course we must also note that the qualities mentioned in Tit 2.3 also have much in common with the qualities mentioned in 2 Tim 3.8-10!)

Arguments for translating "women" here as "women deacons" include the following:

- (1) The sentence structure of verse 11 parallels that of verse 8: "Deacons likewise . . . women likewise." The virtues mentioned in verse 11 also parallel those enumerated in verse 8. This would favor the emerging office of "woman deacon" as separate from men deacons. At any rate, it does offer proof of the possibility that the office of deacon in the early church may have included both men and women.
- (2) It is very strange that the wives of deacons would be described while the wives of bishops are simply ignored. Some have conjectured that deacons' wives would be younger and more prone to evil practices like gossip and drunkenness; but are these faults the monopoly of certain age groups? Besides, if it was the intention of the author to talk about the wives, he should have used at least the possessive pronoun ("their women", see GNB).
- (3) The whole passage is about church officials, and one does not expect a description of the family in such a passage.

My own preference is to translate *gunaikas* here as "women", and put the alternative reading "their wives" in the footnote. It does look like the writer of the Pastorals was faced with a similar problem to that of Rom 16.1: how to use a masculine form to refer to women. He solved this by putting *gunaikas* "women", in the middle of his passage on deacons, thus making sure that *gunaikas* would be understood not as ordinary women, but as women who were included among the deacons.

A second question to consider is this: was there an office of **deaconess** as distinguished from that of **deacon** during the writing of Romans and of the Pastorals? The evidence clearly indicates that this was not so. M.H. Shepherd bravely asserts that "in no place does the NT describe a ministerial order of deaconesses . . ." ("Deaconesses", in *International Dictionary of the Bible*, page 786).

A quotation from Pliny the Younger is usually cited to prove the existence of the office of "woman deacon" by the first half of the second century: Pliny, who was governor of Bithynia in A.D. 112, wrote to Emperor Trajan about his investigation of Christians as follows:

"I thought it the more necessary to inquire into the truth of the matter by subjecting to torture two female slaves who were called 'deacons', but I found nothing nothing more than a perverse superstition which went beyond all bounds."

Thirdly, it is debatable whether the term *diakonos* as used in Rom 16.1 is used in a technical sense as referring to an ecclesiastical office. More likely, it is used in a non-technical sense describing a special function within the Christian fellowship.

Finally, to translate *diakonos* as “deaconess” is to make a distinction which the text does not make, namely, between men and women who performed “deacon” functions. Even if, contrary to what has been asserted above, we can admit that *diakonos* here describes an ecclesiastical office, most ordinary readers who see “deaconess” here would never suspect that Phoebe was a deacon who just happened to be a woman, and therefore equal to deacons who just happened to be men. The role of the *diakonos* here is actually downplayed by being translated “deaconess” because it refers to a woman. So Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza writes:

“Unconsciously these . . . are projecting back into the first century the duties of deaconesses in later centuries. However, Phoebe’s office in the church of Cenchreae is not limited by prescribed gender roles. She is not a deaconess of the women, but a minister of the whole church.”

In view of all this, it does not seem advisable to translate *diakonos* as “deaconess”. To do so would be to read into the text some meanings and intentions which go beyond and even against the intention of Paul:

- (1) it would give the idea that *diakonos* here is a technical term for an ecclesiastical office;
- (2) it would suggest that the text (and the New Testament in general) makes a distinction between men and women who exercise the same “deacon” function;
- (3) and finally, since “deaconess” is now an ecclesiastical office which is regarded in many churches as inferior in both status and rank to the male “deacon”, then translating *diakonos* as “deaconess” would give biblical support to this contemporary practice which is regarded by many as prejudicial and discriminatory to women.

(2) “**Servant**” Another way of translating *diakonos* in this verse is to take its generic sense “servant”. In five instances in the RSV, *diakonos* is translated in this manner (Mt 23.11; Mk 9.35; Jn 2.5,9; 12.26). It is also possible to translate the term *diakonos* in verb form, “to serve” which is what the GNB has done. This has the advantage of bringing out the understanding of *diakonos* as describing not so much an ecclesiastical office but rather implying a specific function within the Christian community. Phoebe would then be a person who was endowed with the gift of *diakonia* “service” (see Rom 12.7), and who used this gift to fulfill her ministry within the church.

There are advantages in dealing with *diakonos* in the above manner;

translating it as a verb is particularly attractive. For one thing, it focuses on the use of the term as describing a particular function rather than a well-defined ecclesiastical office. For another thing, it avoids the problem of male-female distinctions which are created when a feminine term is used to translate *diakonos*. And finally, it leaves the text open for a wider and perhaps more meaningful interpretation, since it allows interpreters to define more clearly for their audiences the content of the terms "servant" and "to serve".

There are, however, certain disadvantages which should be noted. For one thing, it is possible that using the generic will not do justice to the intention of Paul who obviously wanted to portray Phoebe as more than a generous and concerned church member, but as one who holds a responsible position of leadership in the congregation. Furthermore, the use of the general term restricts the text in some way in that it minimizes the possibility of Phoebe being connected with the term *diakonos*, particularly in its more limited and technical sense as a description of a specific function and even of an ecclesiastical office within the Christian communities of that time.

(3) "**Minister**" No translation which I looked at has this particular translation, but at least one writer favors this rendering. Maertens writes, "Since the usual versions of the Bible translate the word (*diakonos*) by 'minister' when it concerns the apostles, it is difficult to see why this meaning should be rejected when the title is used for the Christian woman from Cenchreae. Phoebe is therefore part of the Christian ministry." But Maertens herself doubts whether we can deal with this matter conclusively: "the documents are too inadequate, the primitive Christian vocabulary was still too lacking in precision, and the allocation of ministerial duties too changeable" (*The Advancing Dignity of Women in the Bible*, pages 189-190).

Houghton also rejects this possibility:

"To translate *diakonos* here as 'minister' is questionable in that there is no incontrovertible proof, either in the New Testament or the literature of the early church, that women ever served in this capacity within the Christian community . . . The absence of collaborative evidence elsewhere in the New Testament that a woman actually was appointed to such a position makes the translation 'minister' highly doubtful in this case" (pages 160-161).

It should also be mentioned that to translate *diakonos* here as "minister" is to imply that *diakonos* at the time of the writing of Romans was already understood in its technical sense as referring to a specific ecclesiastical office, a position which, as we have seen, is generally rejected by scholars of today.

(4) "**Who holds office in the congregation**" This is the rendering of the NEB: but while it at least recognizes the importance of Phoebe, it tends

to put too much emphasis on the office rather than the function of *diakonos*.

(5) **“Who is active in the service of the congregation at Cenchreae”** This is William Barclay’s translation, and it has much that is worthy of commendation. It makes it clear that Phoebe’s task includes ecclesiastical functions, and not simply providing mundane services. Furthermore, it portrays Phoebe as a leader of the congregation rather than as an ordinary member.

### **A More Comprehensive Picture of Phoebe**

Our understanding of Phoebe as a *diakonos* is and should be conditioned by the picture that emerges from Paul’s description of her. Unfortunately, unlike Prisca, Phoebe is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament, and therefore information about her is limited to this present passage. There is, however, enough data in these two verses to help us in reconstructing an adequate personal profile.

First of all, Phoebe is being “commended” very positively to the Roman Christians. The word *sunistemi* can mean “introduce” in a neutral sense, but in the present context, it is more likely that it means “recommend” (GNB) in a very good sense. Writing letters of recommendation was a prevalent practice at that time, as it is now.

Secondly, Phoebe is referred to as a “sister”, that is, a fellow believer, a Christian like Paul himself. But it is more than that: the term “sister” can also be understood as a term of endearment, indicating the closeness between Paul and Phoebe, and the high regard which Paul had for her.

Thirdly, the Christians in Rome are urged to “receive her in the Lord’s name”, and to “give her any help she may need”. The tone of Paul’s plea for Phoebe is similar to his entreaty for church leaders in 1 Th 5.12-13 (and see 1 Tim 5.17). The portrait of Phoebe that comes out of this is not that of an ordinary church member, but of an important leader in the Christian community. It also suggests that Phoebe was visiting Rome only for a short while, and therefore needed hospitality and other kinds of assistance in order that she could efficiently accomplish the purpose of her journey. Is it possible then that Phoebe was one of those traveling missionaries in the early church? Is there truth in the suggestion that she had been sent on a mission on behalf of Paul or the Corinthian church? And how should we deal with the speculation that Phoebe was the bearer of the letter?

Finally, Paul describes Phoebe as a “helper” (RSV, see GNB “good friend”). The Greek word here is *prostatis*, literally “protectress, patroness”. According to Liddell and Scott, *prostatis* literally means “one who stands before, a front rank man, a chief, a leader of a party, protector or champion”. They further claim that the term is “the title of a citizen in Athens who took charge of the interests of clients and persons without civic rights”. Some scholars hold that *prostatis* here



should be understood as "ruler", supporting this claim by deriving *prostatis* from the verb *proistemi*, which means "to rule, to direct, to be at the head of". On this basis, Thayer lists the meaning of *prostatis* as "a woman set over others", as well as "a female guardian".

Others simply claim that *prostatis* here primarily means "helper" (RSV). Käsemann writes: "The idea is that of the personal care which Paul and others have received at the hands of the deaconess." The *Trnslator's Handbook* favors taking the term in this general sense (as GNB "a good friend").

What comes out of this survey is that *prostatis* is a much more complicated term than has been assumed. And analyzing it becomes more difficult if we remember that it is only used here in the New Testament, although it is prevalent in post-apostolic literature. Perhaps Houghton is correct when he claims that something of each of "leader", "patroness", and "helper" is present in the use of the term.

It is appropriate at this point to mention Fiorenza's contention that *diakonos* and *synergos* ("co-worker") are used as parallel terms by Paul especially in his first letter to the Corinthians (see for instance 1 Cor 3.5-9). Her conclusion is worth quoting:

"The *diakonos*, like the *synergos* . . . is a missionary entrusted with preaching and tending churches. Since the term is also used in extra-biblical sources to refer to preaching and teaching, it seems clear that the *diakono*i of the Pauline mission served in the recognized and 'official' capacity of missionary preachers and teachers. It can be concluded, therefore, that Phoebe is recommended as an official teacher and missionary in the church of Cenchræe."

## Conclusion

In view of all this, we can now return to *diakonos* and state more clearly how it should be rendered faithfully both in translation and in interpretation. What we have discovered of Phoebe in these two verses would seem to suggest that *diakonos* should be understood not simply as a generic word describing Phoebe as a useful and active member of the church in Cenchræe, but as a word which somewhat depicts Phoebe's role as a leader within the Christian community. And while we can grant that *diakonos* in Romans does not yet refer to an ecclesiastical office with a set place within the hierarchy of the church and with specific qualifications for the office bearers, yet it does describe a person with special functions in the pastoral and administrative life of the church; and such functions would most probably include pastoral care, teaching, and even missionary work. Thus we see here the beginnings of the development of the office of the deacon, which, together with the bishop and the elder, became a part of the three-fold ministry of the post-apostolic church, a development which is clearly portrayed in the Pastoral Letters.