

PHOEBE: DEACON OR DEACONESS

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Introduction

As I read Rom 16.1-2 in the Sümi Naga Bible, in which the Greek word *diakonos* was translated as *dikonlimi* “deaconess,” I found myself muttering, “Is *diakonos* rightly translated?” My attention was drawn to various English versions from which the Sümi Bible had been translated. I found that this particular term was translated in various ways:

1. deaconess (RSV, NJB)
2. deacon (NRSV)
3. servant (NIV)
4. who serves (GNB)
5. who holds office in the congregation (NEB)
6. a leader (CEV).

It is quite apparent from the variety of renderings that there is difficulty in interpreting this particular term. Perhaps we should ask whether this text takes interpreters and translators beyond their theological or social comfort zones: Does the text become difficult to interpret because it relates to the ministry of a woman, Phoebe? What role does she play in the church at Cenchreae? Is the translation of this term fair?

Although the place of ch. 16 as integral to Romans has been questioned on textual grounds, there are strong reasons to accept it as original and this is the position the rest of the paper will assume (see Moo 1996, 5-9). My intention in this paper is to deal with the meaning of *diakonos* in relation to Phoebe’s role in the church of Cenchreae.

Paul’ description of Phoebe

Romans 16 is a chapter filled with greetings and personal commendation. Paul writes a line of recommendation for Phoebe, who is coming to Rome, presumably carrying the letter, and who obviously needs hospitality. Unfortunately, Phoebe is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament. Nonetheless, our information about Phoebe is not scarce in this passage.

In recommending Phoebe, Paul uses the Greek word *synistēmi* primarily in the good classical sense of “to commend.” Commendatory letters were well known in the ancient world. The writing of such letters of introduction or recommendation is also specifically known to have been a Christian practice, as Christians were noted for their hospitality and such a commendation introduced the bearer (Kasch 1971, 897). This kind of recommendation was equivalent to a certificate of church membership. Second, Paul describes Phoebe as a “sister” (*adelphē*), a normal description of a female believer. By using the Greek word *adelphē* Paul meant that she was a devoted member of the family of God and the context makes it clear that she was very dear to Paul. Paul commended her as a sister in the Lord. Naming her as “sister” can also refer to her as “missionary co-worker” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1994, 170).

Third, Paul describes Phoebe as a *prostatis*, which the RSV has simply translated as “helper.” The word *prostatis* is found in Greek literature to mean a “patroness” or “protectress.” The masculine form *prostatēs* had a technical meaning in inscriptions of “executive” or “presiding officer.” Paul uses a verbal form of this word with this meaning in 1 Thess 5.12. On the other hand, where Roman influence was strong, as was true for Corinth, *prostatēs* often translates the Latin word *patronus* “patron” (Branick 1989, 69). In Jewish society, it meant a legal representative or wealthy patron. Thus it is strange to find the *Handbook* (Newman and Nida 1973, 291) and GNB rendering it as simply “good friend.” Speaking about Phoebe, Leon Morris said, “There were not many wealthy people in the church of the day, but it seems that Phoebe was one of them” (1988, 528).

In fact, the term *prostatis* is much disputed and will probably never be clarified completely. To sum up, the word *prostatis* has an encompassing meaning of “patron,” “helper,” “leader,” which apparently designates Phoebe as a wealthy patron of Paul, someone who has put her property at the service of Paul and of many others. So the word points to Phoebe’s social status and function in the community. The host and the hostess of a house church had a leading role in the community, besides the material support which they provided. Phoebe should therefore be received with the honour befitting her position as a community leader. Thus NRSV, with “benefactor,” and CEV, with “respected leader,” are much closer to the intended meaning.

In view of the above descriptions, Paul recognizes and depicts Phoebe as an important leader in the early church. Let us now consider how *diakonos* in this context has been translated and interpreted.

1) **Phoebe as deaconess:** The RSV and the NJB translate *diakonos* as “deaconess,” as does Williams’ New Testament. Basing their arguments on Rom 16.1, some commentators acknowledge there were deaconesses in the early church who cared for needy fellow believers, visited the sick, and were even charged with assisting in the baptism of women converts. In this view, Phoebe as a “deaconess” was to serve women, the sick, or friends, and perhaps also was to give some assistance at the baptism of women. However, those who do not agree with the rendering of *diakonos* as “deaconess” express the opinion that since Phoebe happens to be a woman, the term *diakonos* is “feminized,” resulting in the translation “deaconess.” Those who deny that there ever were deaconesses

say that “deacon” simply means servant and that anyone could be a servant, male or female, ordained or not. Collins (1992, 71) asserts that the term “deaconess” gives a misleading image of Phoebe. Schüssler Fiorenza (1994, 170) writes,

although Phoebe is given three substantive titles—*adelphē*, *diakonos*, and *prostatis*, exegetes tend to denigrate these titles, or to interpret them differently, because they are given to a woman. Whenever Paul uses the title *diakonos* to refer to himself or another male leader, exegetes translate it “minister,” “missionary,” or “servant.” In the case of Phoebe they usually translate it “deaconess.” 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.

The question is, however, does the New Testament either here (Rom 16.1) or anywhere else, refer to such an ecclesiastical office, namely that of deaconess? Ridderbos (cited by Hendriksen 1971, 500) asserts that nowhere else does the NT make mention of a deaconess. It is possible that the translation “deaconess” is an attempt to project back into the early church the duties of a deaconess in later centuries.

In the light of the discussions above, it is likely that *diakonos* in this particular context is used in a non-technical sense. There was no such word as “deaconess” in the Greek language; the masculine form *diakonos* was used of both men and women. To translate *diakonos* as “deaconess” is to make a distinction which the text does not make, especially between men and women who performed as deacons, and may give biblical support to the contemporary practice in which the female deacon is regarded as inferior to the male deacon. Therefore, it does not seem to be advisable to translate *diakonos* as “deaconess.” To do so may involve misinterpretation of the text as well as go against the intention of Paul, and downplay the roles that Phoebe played in the church at Cenchreae.

2) Phoebe as a servant: The KJV and the NIV render *diakonos* in a generic sense as “servant.” The GNB uses the verbal form “who serves.” The verb is mainly found in the Gospels and Acts, whereas the noun occurs mainly in Paul. In secular Greek the word was used to refer to “table service.” This idea was then extended to any kind of service. Paul’s understanding of the term is based on the concept of Jesus the servant. Jesus’ life and ministry have been presented by the evangelists as service (Mark 10.45; Luke 22.26-27). The term is used for those involved in the proclamation of the gospel (1 Cor 3.5). Paul uses *diakonos* for his co-workers (1 Cor 3.5), for his own ministry (1 Cor 3.5; 2 Cor 3.6; 6.4; 11.23), and for that of Christ (Gal 2.17). Most of these cases are rendered as “servant.”

The understanding of *diakonos* as servant, however, does not place much emphasis on an ecclesiastical order but rather implies a specific function within the Christian community. The description implies that Phoebe exercised the ministry of “service” (see Rom 12.7) in a continuing and officially recognized capacity (Byrne 1996, 447).

To render *diakonos* here as “servant” focuses on a particular function that Phoebe played rather than on her ecclesiastical position. Second, it avoids the problem of a distinction based on gender which pertains when a feminine term

(“deaconess”) is used to translate *diakonos*. On the other hand, one needs to be careful in rendering *diakonos* as “servant,” as it may simply portray Phoebe as a Christian woman who was generous and hospitable. Such a rendering may downplay Paul’s intention of projecting her as one who exercises a ministry of leadership in the church at Cenchreae.

3) Phoebe as deacon: The NRSV transliterated *diakonos* as “deacon.” The word used of her is the same word Paul used of himself and others in ministry who preached Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3.5; Col 1.23). When referring to Phoebe, *diakonos* indicates some sort of ministry, not just service in general. She functioned as the leader of a Christian community. Paul does not indicate any subordinative restriction on the basis of gender and in his view she is the *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae. Her role cannot be limited to philanthropic activities only. The addition of *tēs ekklēsiās* “of the church” highlights her active role in the community. Phoebe is commended as a co-worker, engaged like other women and men in preaching and ministering and even missionary work (Manjaly 2001, 254).

However, while accepting the roles that she played as *diakonos* in the church at Cenchreae, some commentators doubt that this kind of office developed fully for women. Does it mean the office in the early church included only men? How did the first Christians understand the office of *diakonos*? Were there female deacons who worked alongside the male deacons in the early church?

First Timothy 3.8-13 extends some help in dealing with *diakonos* in this context, though not in its totality. In this particular passage, the author speaks of the office of *diakonos*. By the time of the writing of the Pastoral Epistles (assuming them to be some considerable time later than the widely accepted Pauline Epistles), “deacon” had become a technical term referring to an office or position within the church. It is often assumed that the deacons referred to in this passage were men, especially in the light of v. 12: “Let the deacon be the husband of one wife. . . .” In the preceding verses (3-7) the author did not mention women or wives. However, in v. 11 the author seems to strike a different note in his discussion of *diakonos*: “Likewise the women . . .” The question arises: why did the author introduce women in the middle of giving instructions on *diakonoī* and in a way parallel (“likewise”) to the *diakonoī*? Commentators are divided as to the meaning of “women” in the verse. There are two possible interpretations: “wives of deacons” or “woman deacons.”

The UBS *Handbook* on Timothy (Arichea and Hatton 1995, 75-76) provides arguments for both options, from which the following are adapted:

Arguments for “wives of deacons”:

1. Deacons are mentioned in v. 8 and again in v. 12, which leads to the deduction that v. 11 refers to a category other than deacons. But of course one can counter that there was not yet at that time a feminine term for deacons.

2. One would have expected a more detailed description of this new office. But then there is very little description of bishops and deacons, so why should one expect this of woman deacons?
3. It would have been possible for the author to use the feminine form of “deacon.” But of course one can counter that such a form did not exist at that time. Had there been a feminine form, then the author would have avoided using the masculine form, and besides, there is evidence that the term “deacon” was used of women during Paul’s time; for example, the case of Phoebe in Rom 16.1-2.

Arguments for “woman deacons”:

1. The structure of the sentence allows it to be read as introducing a new category, that is, woman deacons. The word “likewise” is a key transition word that serves to introduce a new category within the overall topic of church leaders. In addition to bishops and male deacons, the term “likewise” argues strongly for seeing a distinct third group who are discussed within the context of male deacons. But not all the women are the subject of concern here. The author would not make a general reference to women of the congregation in the middle of a list of special groups.
2. Had the author meant the wives of deacons, it seems he would have included a possessive pronoun to identify the women: “*their* wives.” But this pronoun is missing.
3. It would seem unusual for the author to discuss wives of deacons but not the wives of bishops. If there were requirements for one group, why not for the other?
4. The four qualities are roughly the equivalent of the four qualities of the deacons in v. 8.

In view of the above arguments, a compromise solution can be suggested: that the verse speaks of women who were in some way involved in service as deacons, although perhaps at that time the title of “deacon” was not yet applied to them. The only way the writer of 1 Timothy could distinguish them from male deacons was to refer to them as *gynaikas*, which has been literally translated as “women.” By the term *gynaikas*, the author meant they are not ordinary women, but women of substance who were included among the deacons. Thus the evidence favours interpreting the women in v. 11 as female deacons, a special leadership group in addition to the bishops and male deacons. In the light of this understanding, Phoebe can be called a deacon. Her activity in this regard was directly associated with the church. This suggests she had a specific ministry within the congregation at Cenchreae.

Conclusion

In the light of the discussions above, one needs to be careful in translating and interpreting *diakonos*. Paul uses *diakonos* in an inclusive way (1 Cor 3.5; Col 1.23). He applies *diakonos* to himself and his co-workers. By using this Greek word to describe Phoebe, Paul projects her not as a mere member in the church at

Cenchreae, but as one who holds a leadership role in the church. Paul's obvious regard for her work seems to support the conclusion that she functioned as a deacon. Our translation of *diakonos* should not be limited by the preconceived idea that only men were deacons. The term *diakonos* indicates that Phoebe could have been called a deacon. On the other hand, we need to be careful not to import ideas from a later period in the church's history. It is most likely that *diakonos* in Romans does not yet refer to an ecclesiastical office within the hierarchy of the church. But at the same time the word, as applied to Phoebe, does appear to have been on the way to technical use during this time. It is, perhaps, possible that Phoebe is among the first women to hold the office of *diakonos* having the responsibility of preaching, teaching, and even missionary work.

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