

# Phoebe as an Example of Female Authority Exercised in the Early Church

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*“There is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” --Rom. 13:1<sup>1</sup>*

*“Many women have been enabled by the grace of God to perform deeds worthy of heroic men.” --First Letter of Clement 55:3<sup>2</sup>*

The Apostle Paul’s glowing witness to the Deacon Phoebe in Rom.16:1-2<sup>3</sup> reflects a hard-working church leader who might have been surprised to discover that she is the first person in the history of the church, male or female, to be formally designated “deacon” by name in scripture.<sup>4</sup> The example of Phoebe represents one of the ways authority was exercised in the life of the Church during the earliest generations of believers confessing that Christ, the source of authority, is Lord. In the collaborative ministry of Paul and Phoebe, we see an example of “the Lord himself working through the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.”<sup>5</sup> Like many of the earliest Christians, Phoebe may have been a far-flung traveler and it is likely that she was Paul’s chosen courier for his Letter to the Romans; his gratitude expressed for Phoebe’s generosity, to himself and many others, rings true in the witness of scripture. In a

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all scripture is quoted in the NRSV; *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Michael D. Coogan, ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary, V.2: First and Second Clement*, Robert M. Grant, Holt H. Graham, eds. (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965), 87.

<sup>3</sup> “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church of Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.” *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Michael D. Coogan, ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 635. Even the seven in Acts 6 are elected to serve (*diakonein*) at table but not specifically designated as deacons. This does assume that Philippians was written after Romans, although the “deacons” in Phil. 1 are not actually named.

<sup>5</sup> Bradley Nassif, “‘Authority’ in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition,” in *By What Authority? The Vital Questions of Religious Authority in Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 36.

patriarchal culture, where it was often assumed that women were properly to be considered an invisible component of society and justifiably under-reported,<sup>6</sup> Paul acknowledges a “genuine pneumatic endowment” in the women co-workers he singles out for praise.<sup>7</sup> Phoebe is remembered by Paul--and in the canon of scripture--as a sister, as a benefactor, and as a deacon. She is a useful New Testament figure to study since the witness of her authority is attested so early in the history of the Church that it transcends the differences between Eastern and Western traditions.

Depictions of Phoebe cross a broad range from those that affirm, or acknowledge the possibility of, some sort of authoritative status in interpreting *diakonos* and *prostatis*, to those commentators who oppose it in varying degrees. It appears that Phoebe was a local church leader<sup>8</sup> at a time when the gifts of the Holy Spirit were experienced, thus empowering the formation of the early Church. As Albrecht Oepke wisely observes about the authority she exercised, “The description of Phoebe as the *diakonos* of the church at Cenchreae indicates the point where the original charisma is becoming an office.”<sup>9</sup>

The terms which Paul used to describe Phoebe—both *diakonos* and *prostatis*—have been at times misunderstood and mistranslated. This has been compounded by the tendency to understand early Christian women as only marginal figures or to regard them in subordinate “feminine” roles.<sup>10</sup> Yet Phoebe’s faith inspired her to embark on a mission as Paul’s ambassador to the earliest communities of believers in Rome, at a time when faith in Jesus Christ was a dangerous and costly enterprise. Thus, the example of Phoebe’s life “testifies that early Christian women leaders officially represented early Christian communities.”<sup>11</sup> The possible meanings of *diakonos* and *prostatis* are of considerable interest in determining “the internal governance of the early Christian groups and for questions about the role of women.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 365-366.

<sup>7</sup> Albrecht Oepke, *ThDNT*, v.1, 787.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN.: Fortress Press, 2007), 945.

<sup>9</sup> Albrecht Oepke, “Gune,” *ThDNT* 2:787.

<sup>10</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza points out that commentators attempt to downplay the importance of both titles in their exegesis of the verses describing Phoebe because they refer to a woman. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 170.

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Missionaries, Apostles, Coworkers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women’s Early Christian History,” *Word & World* 6:4 (1986): 424.

<sup>12</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 60.

Phoebe's background as a Gentile Christian may be inferred from her name, which means "radiant," or "bright," or "pure."<sup>13</sup> Although it may sound ironic considering her probable wealth and high social status, the mythological antecedents of Phoebe's name indicating pagan background also suggest that Phoebe might have been a freed slave.

Given its proximity to Corinth, Paul probably visited Cencreae<sup>14</sup> on several occasions and was quite familiar with Phoebe and the Jesus group in that town. In fact, scholars conjecture that the church in Cencreae must have originated from the evangelization work of Paul's missionary band, even Paul himself, with 50 CE as the probable date of his arrival in the area.<sup>15</sup>

Romans 16, which opens with the recommendation of Phoebe, gives us a glimpse of the rich social mix of early Christian communities, as well as picturing the authority women exercised in early Christian life and mission.<sup>16</sup> Much can be learned from this chapter about the social realities of early Christian communities and the cultural and religious

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<sup>13</sup> If she came from a Jewish background, it is highly unlikely that her name would have been chosen from pagan cultural traditions. "The mythical Phoebe was the daughter of Heaven and Earth, the wife of Koios, and the grandmother of Apollo and Artemis." It is unusual as well that the name "Phoebe" has no patronymic component, and like Lydia's name, is not labeled in association with the names of her father, or sons, in the same way that Prisca is identified as the wife of Aquila. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 943.

<sup>14</sup> Of the half dozen towns named Cencreae upon the map of antiquity, the eastern seaport located seven miles southeast of Corinth is the most probable home town of Phoebe. Cencreae, with its remains lying partly under water today, was named after a son of Poseidon, a god whose gigantic statue was thought to have graced the south break-water horn of the harbor. The two port towns, Cencreae to the southeast and Lechaem to the northwest, served not only Corinth but most of the Peloponnesian Peninsula; Cencreae facilitated trade with the Eastern Mediterranean, especially Asia Minor and Egypt. While today a canal has been dug across the Isthmus of Corinth, in Phoebe's day the two Corinthian port cites were unique for the "Diolkos" running between them; this was an ingenious paved roadway built to drag ships overland upon an enormous movable platform across the ten-mile length of the Isthmus, thus avoiding the dangerous sailing around the southern tip of the Peloponnesian Peninsula. Phoebe probably saw a variety of exotic goods from the eastern world beyond the Roman Empire being off-loaded from ships so they could be hauled across the Diolkos. Joan Cecelia Campbell, *Phoebe: Patron and Emissary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 41-43.

<sup>15</sup> "We must assume that it was a church in Phoebe's residence that had been founded by Paul or his colleagues operating out of Corinth some time between Paul's arrival at the center in 50 CE and the writing of Romans in 56-57." Jewett, *Romans*, 944. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 730.

<sup>16</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "Missionaries, Apostles, Coworkers: Romans 16," 432.

world in which they lived.<sup>17</sup> The link between leadership and household probably had a special significance for the roles of women and the authority they were able to exercise. The fact that the seminal groups of early Christians functioned in much the same way as an extended household, the domain traditionally associated with women, undoubtedly facilitated the leadership of women in Pauline Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Of course, it goes without saying that the women explicitly singled out for acknowledgement in Rom.16 were not the only women exercising authority in the communities of early Roman Christianity.<sup>19</sup> While there are scholars who challenge the conclusion that the destination of the last chapter of Romans was actually Rome,<sup>20</sup> most maintain that these arguments do not constitute a convincing case for an alternate destination

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<sup>17</sup> “Without this chapter, our knowledge of the ways in which women functioned in the early church would be rather minimal, at least as far as the biblical record is concerned.” Andreas J. Kostenberger, “Women in the Pauline Mission” in *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul’s Mission*, ed. Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 224.

<sup>18</sup> Considering that Paul mentions believers in the context of the household five times, “he may or may not have wanted to mention all the individual Christians he knew in the city, but he was certainly keen to mention all the household churches he knew.” N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 2010), 761.

<sup>19</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Missionaries, Apostles, Coworkers: Romans 16,” 427.

<sup>20</sup> It has been argued, especially by earlier commentators, such as C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), xvii-xxiv, that Romans 16 is not part of Paul’s original letter, and was perhaps intended for another destination, such as Ephesus. One reason for this is the discovery of the Chester Beatty “Papyrus 46” in which the Doxology is located between Rom. 15:33 and 16:1. “P46” is an important textual witness in this debate, being the oldest extant manuscript of Romans, dating to approximately 200 AD. Additionally, it appears that Marcion circulated a version of Romans without either Ch. 15 or 16 (Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 49.) It has been argued that the long greetings list supposes acquaintance with numerous people in a city Paul never visited and also that the epistolary ending of 15:33 is repeated in 16:20. One commentator has even speculated a useful explanation for the text coming to be appended onto Romans, from having been copied into the same “letter book” of the amanuensis, Tertius. “How came this little letter to Ephesus to be united with the long letter?...letter books were in use in antiquity...[both] being of the same date would no doubt be written by the same Tertius and stand in his handwriting next to the Ephesian letter in the copy-book.” So, the Letter to the Romans section of Chester Beatty Papyrus 46, with nearly all of Ch.16 missing, might owe its existence “to a situation when a copyist of a longer manuscript did not have a long enough papyrus and therefore had to leave out the last chapter of the text.” Adolf Deissman, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 1978), 236. See also Antti Marjanen, citing Ulrich Wilckens, *Brief an die Römer* in “Letter Courier,” 497.

of Romans 16,<sup>21</sup> and defend the integrity of the Rom. 1-16 framework as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

In view of the practice of Greco-Roman letter-writing, the first two verses of Rom.16 clearly serve as a letter of introduction from Paul recommending Phoebe and establishing her authority to his audience.<sup>23</sup> This passage is significant for showing “how a letter of recommendation would have been written in the early church.”<sup>24</sup> Paul personally

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<sup>21</sup> Antii Marjanen, “Phoebe, a Letter Courier,” in *Lux Humana, Lux Aeterna: Essays in Biblical and Related Themes in Honour of Lars Aemelaus* (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2005), 496.

<sup>22</sup> Jewett maintains the traditional view that Rom.16 is part of the original letter; Meeks supports “the integrity of the sixteen-chapter letter.” One of the strongest arguments supporting the continuity of Rom.16 with the rest of the letter is the presence of the Greek particle *de* as the second word of the first verse, which clearly implies that the text is not an independent unit but is related to the material before it, as supported by Dunn. The transitional “now” (*de*) after the first word in Rom. 16:1 relates these verses to the text that has gone before in a manner that precludes the possibility of the chapter existing as an independent composition. “The Textual evidence for ch. 16 as part of Romans is overwhelmingly strong...I am assuming that this chapter was authentically written by Paul as part of Romans.” Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 575; Robert Jewett, “Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission,” in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: In Tribute to Howard Clark Kee* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 147; Wayne Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, pg. 201, n. 41; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* 9-16, (Dallas, TX: 1988), 884; Jewett, *Romans*, 941-42.

<sup>23</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, pg. 728. A helpful parallel to Phoebe’s situation, both as a woman who was an ambitious traveler and a letter carrier, is offered by the example of two ancient papyri which have been published among the invaluable resources of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri Online* web-site; even though they are both from the fourth century, they provide a useful lens through which to regard Phoebe as she is introduced by Paul in Romans. Both are letters of introduction written on behalf of Christian women to distant clergy to be used as they travel. One of them, “P. Oxy. 2785,” recommends a woman named Taion leading a small band of travelers in Egypt, and another, “P. Oxy. 3857,” is for a woman named Germania, written by her father in order to secure nightly accommodation as she traveled. So, even if examples of women traveling independently and as letter carriers are rare, this evidence indicates that they do actually exist in the literature. Pace, Marjanen, 504-505. For Taion: Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 157-158; for Germania: G.H.R. Horsley, S.R. Llewelyn, eds., *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri* (North Ryde, N.S.W.: Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1981-95), v. 4, No. 8, 69-70. Additionally, both “P. Oxy. 2785” and “P. Oxy. 3857” are available at *Oxyrhynchus Papyri Online* accessed on 8/8/10 at <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk>

<sup>24</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 942. These two brief verses exhibit components typical of other “epistolary commendations” in the Pauline letters, including an introduction, an offer of credentials, and a recommended action; other examples include: Phil. 4:2-3, 1 Cor. 16:15-18, 1 Thess. 5:12-13, as well as Phlm. 10-17. In fact, the formulaic elements of the recommendation of Phoebe imply that she may likely be the bearer of the letter.

commends Phoebe to the Romans, adding “as is befitting for the saints” which could be an indication to the recipients of Phoebe’s status and honor, but it may also be a complimentary descriptor of the believers meant to hear the letter. He may be diplomatically flattering his audience by associating them with those who were already called by the Spirit of the Lord and also with the earliest church in Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> There is such a strong calling-together of the Roman congregations that Jewett boasts that Paul desires “every believer in Rome to greet every other believer.”<sup>26</sup>

The numerous groups of people cited in the Romans 16 list may indicate several assemblies of believers that met as a house church,<sup>27</sup> and in fact, the early church in Rome seems to have been organized by the house church model well into the third century.<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note as well that the mention of the church (*ekklesia*) in Cenchræe, of which Phoebe is acknowledged as deacon by the Apostle Paul, is the only reference in the whole of Romans to *ekklesia*.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, it also points to Paul’s charge to Phoebe in her evangelizing work to the separate assemblies of believers organized into house churches in Rome. “The titles used to describe Phoebe offer evidence that the extension of her influence included the winning of new members.”<sup>30</sup>

It is plausible that Phoebe served as Paul’s personal representative in reading and expanding on his letter to the various

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<sup>25</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 731. “If there are Roman Christians who are suspicious of Paul; she as an intermediary can help, as can various people already in Rome who knew him.” Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 574.

<sup>26</sup> This is to show that everyone in all the Christian groups in Rome is on an equal footing; but even more important, Paul is encouraging them to respect and honor each other “and thereby extend the principle of the imperial righteousness of God, which is the theme of the letter.” Jewett, *Romans*, 952.

<sup>27</sup> Considering the references in Rom. 16:5, 10, 11, 14, 15. These include not only the church in the house of Prisca and Aquila, but also the group of slaves “who belong to the family of Aristobulus” (16:10), and “those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissos” (16:11); as well as “the brothers and sisters who are with” Asyncritos *et al* (16:14), and “all the saints who are with” Philologus *et al* (16:15). Thus, it is possible that as many as five house churches are attested.” Jewett, *Romans*, 953.

<sup>28</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 179.

<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the opening greeting in Rom. 1 is addressed to “all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints.”

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Was Celsus Right? The Role of Women in the Expansion of Early Christianity,” in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, ed. David L. Balch and Carolyn Oziak (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 166.

perhaps inter-quarreling groupings in Rome.<sup>31</sup> “Given the diversity of the several house churches alluded to in Rom.16, this would have required formidable political skills on Phoebe’s part. In view of the complexity of the argument of the letter, it would also have required interpretive skills.”<sup>32</sup> One scholar even goes so far as to conjecture that Phoebe “was the person who was asked to explain the possible obscure and controversial passages of the letter. If this is true, Phoebe may have been the first public commentator on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans.”<sup>33</sup>

The fact that Paul mentions her first in the list of greetings points toward Phoebe as the intended bearer of the letter.<sup>34</sup> It is likely that Paul is stressing both her role as a go-between and her specific duty to carry Paul’s letter, with his apostolic authority. In this simple but heartfelt introduction of his female associate, Paul, like Luke in Acts, “gives us something of a survey of the different roles women played in the earliest days of Church history,”<sup>35</sup> in a familial context, and as a benefactor, and as a church leader.

In the two verses headlining Romans 16, Paul calls Phoebe three Greek nouns which the NRSV translates as “sister” (*adelphēn*) and “deacon” (*diakōnōn*) and “benefactor” (*prostatis*). Here, it is informative to note how other Bible translations handle these terms; the earlier Revised Standard Edition (RSV) translates *adelphēn*, *diakōnos* and *prostatis* as “sister, deaconess, helper,” and the King James Version (KJV) as “sister, servant, succourer.”<sup>36</sup> Although earlier translators used more subordinate terms, such as “helper” and “servant,” more recent commentators<sup>37</sup> interpret *diakōnos* as “minister,” which is offered as the alternate translation in the NRSV.

In analyzing her exercise of authority, it now appears more likely that Phoebe served as the leader of her congregation and that *diakōnos*,

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<sup>31</sup> Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 863.

<sup>32</sup> Jewett, “Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission,” 152.

<sup>33</sup> Marjanen, “Letter Courier,” 506.

<sup>34</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 729.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 143.

<sup>36</sup> For the NRSV (which translates *adelphēn*, *diakōnōn*, *prostatis* as sister, deacon, benefactor), see Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: with the Apocrypha*; 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For the RSV (which translates *adelphēn*, *diakōnōn*, *prostatis* as sister, deaconess, helper), see Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1973). For the KJV (sister, servant, succourer) see *The Holy Bible: King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> For example, Jewett, *Romans*, 944, and Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 729-731.

although not yet an ordained order of the church, was an official title of leadership as indicated by the earlier usage of the term in Rom. 11:13 and 12:7. Thus, Robert Jewett maintains that “it is no longer plausible to limit her role to philanthropic activities.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the possessive qualifier, “deacon of the church in Cencreae” makes it more likely that she was one of their group leaders rather than a traveling minister. So, by enjoining the hearers of the letter to receive her in a manner befitting the saints, “Phoebe should be welcomed with honors suitable to her position as a congregational leader.”<sup>39</sup>

Of the three descriptors, Paul calls Phoebe first of all “our sister,” because she is a member of the Christian community which is familiar to Paul. She is “family” among believers and therefore has a unique relationship with all other Christians in the emerging church.<sup>40</sup> Paul uses *adelphē* again in 1 Cor. 7:15, 9:5, and in Phlm. 2, so the term probably refers to full missionary partnership.<sup>41</sup> She is called “our sister” in the same manner that Timothy, one of Paul’s closest co-workers, is often styled as “our brother” (2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 3:2; Phlm. 1).

The significance of Phoebe’s charism as a church leader is emphasized by the title *prostatis*. That she “could claim great authority within the early Christian missionary endeavor is underlined” by this term,<sup>42</sup> which appears nowhere else in the New Testament. The usual meaning is “leader,” “president,” “superintendent,” or “patron,” a translation that is supported by the verb form *proistemi* which is found in 1 Thess. 5:12, 1 Tim. 3:4-5 and 5:17. Daniel Atichea from *Bible Translator* suggests that the term should be rendered as “a women set over others,” as well as “a female guardian.”<sup>43</sup>

A lexical definition for *prostatis* is given as “patron” or “benefactor;” adding that it is “an important term in a society that

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<sup>38</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 944. Schüssler-Fiorenza also defends the interpretation of *diakonos* as a missionary assigned to preaching and church leadership. “It can be concluded, therefore, that Phoebe is recommended as an official teacher and missionary in the church of Cencreae.” Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 171.

<sup>39</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 945.

<sup>40</sup> Her responsibilities to her church family might include exercising leadership, and contributing practically and financially to the good of the community. “As a sister of the household of God, Phoebe would be expected to use her resources to sustain and better the lives of her brothers and sisters.” Lynn Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 304.

<sup>41</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 172-173.

<sup>42</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel C. Arichea, “Who Was Phoebe? Translating *diakonos* in Romans 16:1,” *Bible Translator* 39:4 (Oct. 1988), 408.

attached a great deal of importance to benefaction and patronage;<sup>44</sup> and yet the RSV and KJV translate *prostatis* with reference to a woman in the servile mode of “helper” or “succourer.”<sup>45</sup> By calling Phoebe a “benefactor (*prostatis*) of many and of myself as well” (Rom. 16:2), Paul could be indicating hospitality in the fullest sense, such as housing, and he may be acknowledging that she used her sphere of influence to help expand his mission,<sup>46</sup> and perhaps run interference for any social or political trouble which was generated by Paul as he proclaimed the gospel. The term “benefactor” implies some wealth or influence, suggesting that she had sufficient means and a house large enough to care for guests.<sup>47</sup> Paul confesses that he is indebted to Phoebe himself; she may have provided him hospitality or travel funds; she may even have championed his cause before the civil authorities when he encountered adversity, perhaps defusing turmoil “when he needed seclusion in a private home.”<sup>48</sup>

Although the example of Phoebe runs counter to most traditional women in first-century Mediterranean society, inscription evidence shows that “women wrote poetry, gave lectures, financed fountains and colonnades; women used their numbers to affect change in government laws,<sup>49</sup> and serve as benefactors.<sup>50</sup> So, Phoebe might have secured

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<sup>44</sup> BAGD, 885.

<sup>45</sup> Yet, lexical analysis offers four occurrences of the word in approximately contemporaneous sources in Lucian of Samosata, Cornutus, Dio Cassius, and the Greek Magical Papyri; “in none is ‘helper’ an appropriate rendering.” Caroline Whelan, “*Amica Pauli*: The Role of Phoebe in the Early Church,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 49 (1993), 68. And in fact, Jewett writes, “In light of this high social standing and Paul’s relatively subordinate social position as her client, it is preposterous that translations like the RSV render *prostatis* as ‘helper’.” Robert Jewett, “Paul, Phoebe and the Spanish Mission,” 150.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Rereading Paul: Early Interpreters of Paul on Women and Gender,” in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepherd Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 166.

<sup>47</sup> It is likely, then, that Phoebe was a home-owner and, perhaps as a “wealthy influential person involved in commerce,” was in a position, as a benefactor of many, to give financial and networking assistance to missionaries and other believers journeying through the region of Corinth. Perhaps, she knew the governor, Gallio, or a member of his entourage, thereby smoothing out Paul’s stay. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 303. See also Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 731.

<sup>48</sup> Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, 114.

<sup>49</sup> Examples of women as legal guardians, benefactors, and as the patron of a synagogue, support the idea that the patronage role played by Phoebe was not unique. Indeed, “women with wealth contributed to the overall well-being of their cities, often in the same ways as did their elite male counterparts” Cohick, *Women Earliest Christians*, 242. See also Jewett, *Romans*, 947.

connections for Paul and the church which, in the status-conscious Roman world, where wealth and power went hand in hand, could only be beneficial. E.A. Judge recommends, then, “taking *prostatis* in the sense it often has where Roman influence is strong, as an equivalent of the Latin *patrona*.”<sup>51</sup> Paul says that Phoebe has been a patron or protector of many believers, including himself, and “for that reason” (*gar*), he asks the hearers of his letter to provide her with whatever she needs.

One of the verbal references of *prostatis* which appears earlier in Romans offers a helpful way to view the spiritual origin of the vocation of leader and benefactor. In Rom. 12:8 *proistemi* is described as an authentic charism of the Spirit, along with ministry and the generosity of giving. Therefore, in the few verses which witness to the life of Phoebe, she is specifically praised for two of the gifts given by the grace of the Spirit of God.

It has been suggested that the primary reason for Phoebe’s journey carrying Paul’s letter to its intended Roman audience was that she was taking up the mantle as principle benefactor of Paul’s mission to Spain.<sup>52</sup> It can be inferred from “help her in whatever she may require of you” that the Roman recipients of Paul’s letter “would understand her to be recommended as the patroness of the Spanish mission.”<sup>53</sup> Her patronage might have involved creating a logistical base of mission operations in Rome by garnering the cooperation of the house churches there, many of whom Phoebe may have already been familiar with.<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to observe that Phoebe is introduced at a moment of high tension for Paul, so Phoebe’s support may have been especially appreciated at this time. In any case, “it does provide a valuable model of

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<sup>50</sup> Cotter cites a study conducted in which among 147 inscriptions from professional *collegia* in Rome and Italy in general, seventeen cite a woman as benefactor. Wendy Cotter, “Women’s Authority Roles in Paul’s Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?” *Novum Testamentum* 36:4 (1994), 364.

<sup>51</sup> Meeks concludes that Phoebe is “an independent woman (she is probably traveling to Rome on business of her own, not solely to carry Paul’s letter) who has some wealth and is also one of the leaders of the Christian group in the harbor town of Cenchreae.” Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 60, citing Edwin A. Judge, “The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community,” *Journal of Religious History* (1960), 4-15, 125-137.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Jewett postulates that she may have agreed to cooperate with Paul in negotiating and funding his Spanish mission. This theory is well outlined in “Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission,” 142-161.

<sup>53</sup> Jewett, *Romans* 947.

<sup>54</sup> In fact, Jewett interprets the personnel listed in Romans 16 as “comparable to a roster of potential campaign supporters that political operatives bring into a city as they begin to establish a campaign for their candidate. Since these persons are listed immediately after the reference to Phoebe’s ‘matter,’ the greetings constitute the first stage in the recruitment process.” Jewett, “Spanish Mission,” 153.

the relationship between Paul and Phoebe. . . He expected her to play some role in support of his efforts, and hence was an integral part of his proselytizing activity.”<sup>55</sup>

Even in a study on the evidence of female authority attested in the ministry of Paul, it is remarkable to encounter Phoebe described by him as “a deacon in the church of Cenchreae.” As with many usages in early Christianity, this one may have had a fluid range of meanings. It is evident that the term *diakonos* was going through a transition of interpretation; a range of meaning appears to be indicated from the more generic (eg., 1 Thess. 3:2; 2 Cor. 3:6 and 11:23), to other references, such as Phil. 1:1, which begin to point toward an ordained group.<sup>56</sup> Biblical scholars have contributed to a lively dialogue in their varying interpretations of the word.

Paul refers to Phoebe as a *diakonos*, using a term of masculine gender. While not yet an ordained order of the church, *diakonos* in this passage may have a technical sense designating a definite local office.<sup>57</sup> Whatever his intention was, the expression “a deacon of the church of Cenchreae” certainly “has a legitimizing affect”<sup>58</sup> in describing her authority. Throughout Paul’s writing, he makes use of words from the *diakon-* root and reflects the message of Jesus about service, which in turn grows out of the Old Testament command to love for one’s neighbor. In his teaching about *diakonia*, Jesus “takes and links it with the command of love for God to constitute the substance of the divinely willed ethical conduct of His followers.”<sup>59</sup> Examples in the Corinthian correspondence show Paul connecting words from the *diakon-* root with preaching work.<sup>60</sup> While there is no way of establishing with certainty whether the term refers at this time to the diaconate, an “order” which

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<sup>55</sup> Although he is satisfied with his mission in the East and knows that he has “fully proclaimed the good news of Christ” (Rom. 15:19), nevertheless, Paul may be experiencing doubt about his upcoming reception from “unbelievers in Judea” (15:31) and concerned about building missionary ground “on someone else’s foundation” (15:20). He is recorded elsewhere as encountering competition eating into the flock of his Ephesian missionary territory from “savage wolves” (Acts 20:29), and in Corinth criticism from “super-apostles” threatening to frustrate his effectiveness (2 Cor. 12:11). These were perhaps the disadvantages of Paul’s own particular style of front-runner ministry. Whelan, “*Amica Pauli*,” 73.

<sup>56</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 729.

<sup>57</sup> Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 79. It is natural, “particularly in view of the way in which Paul formulates his thought, to understand it as referring to a definite office.” C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, v. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Limited, 1950), 781.

<sup>58</sup> Jewett, “Spanish Mission,” 148.

<sup>59</sup> Hermann W. Beyer, *ThDNT* 2:84.

<sup>60</sup> Examples are: 1 Cor. 3:5, 2 Cor. 3:6-9, 4:1, 5:18, 11:23.

emerged in the church by the time of Ignatius of Antioch,<sup>61</sup> it is possible to conjecture that Phoebe had an apostolic leadership role in a Christian church that qualified her to exercise spiritual authority over the souls in her care.<sup>62</sup>

Notice that Paul identifies himself in a similar vein a few verses earlier than his recommendation of Phoebe (Rom. 15:25, 31), referring to his “ministry” or *diakonia* to Jerusalem. Again, to the Corinthians, he notes that both he and Apollos are *diakonoi*; they carry God’s message and mediate God’s word (1 Cor. 3:5).<sup>63</sup> So, it is problematic that, whenever Paul calls himself, Apollos, or Timothy *diakonos*, scholars translate the term as “deacon,” but because the term in Rom. 16:1 refers to a woman, some exegetes translate it as “servant.” Additionally, the RSV translates *diakonos* as “deaconess;” this is done by analogy to the later institution of deaconesses which, in comparison to that of the deacons, had only a limited function in the church. “Exegetes tend to denigrate these titles, or to interpret them differently, because they are given to a woman.”<sup>64</sup>

However, since as shown in 1 Cor. 3:5-9 Paul uses *diakonos* in parallel with *synergos* to characterize himself and Apollos as missionaries, the Romans 16:1-2 text simply does not permit such a feminine stereotyping of Phoebe.<sup>65</sup> While it is reasonable to question the meaning of *diakonos* in Rom.16:1, comparing it both to its usage describing the distinct church office that developed early in the second century and also to the female office of “deaconess” that developed considerably later, a natural tendency toward a pejorative quality can be seen with more clarity now in the earlier translations of *diakonos* and *prostatis* in Rom.16:1-2 which use feminine gender-specific terms like

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<sup>61</sup> Ignatius, Eph. 2:1; Magn. 6:1.

<sup>62</sup> Marjanen, “Phoebe, a Letter Courier,” 503.

<sup>63</sup> In both instances the term suggests a bearer of a message—in this case, the gospel. So, the *diakonia* word group suggests a sense of representation or agency; that is, in calling Phoebe a deacon, Paul was identifying her as his agent or intermediary carrying his gospel message. Cohick, *Women Earliest Christians*, 304.

<sup>64</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 170.

<sup>65</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 47. Furthermore, while language with masculine grammar describing the community of early believers is sometimes understood in an inclusive way, “the same grammatically masculine language is understood in gender-specific ways when referring to leadership functions, such as apostles, missionaries, ministers, overseers, or elders... Those passages that directly mention women cannot be taken as providing all the information about women in early Christianity.” Therefore, references to early Christian women should be read “as the tip of the iceberg.” Schüssler Fiorenza, “Missionaries,” 423.

“deaconess” and “patroness.”<sup>66</sup> In light of the use of *diakonon* in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians to refer to missionaries including Paul himself, “it is no longer plausible to limit Phoebe’s role to philanthropic activities.”<sup>67</sup>

While the term *diakonos* probably was not yet used by the Apostle Paul in any formal or titular way, Phoebe is being recommended by Paul “as an official teacher and missionary in the church of Cenchreae.”<sup>68</sup> In fact, since Phoebe is given a letter of recommendation by Paul in the same manner as Timothy (1Cor. 16: 10-11), it is likely that her significance for the development of the early church is generally under-acknowledged.<sup>69</sup> “Although earlier commentaries interpret the term *diakonos* as signifying a subordinate role along the lines of the modern deaconess movement, it now appears more likely that Phoebe functioned as the leader of the congregation.”<sup>70</sup>

While it is possible that Phoebe’s ministry included service to women believers and assistance at baptism for women, “she is not a deaconess of the women, but a minister of the whole church.”<sup>71</sup> The very fact that Phoebe is introduced “with a clause in which the term *diakonos* is connected with a genitival construction (*tes ekklesias tes en Kenkreais*), instead of a relative clause (such as *he diakonei te ekklesia te en Kenkreais*), implies that *diakonos* in this context is not only to be understood as a general term referring to her willingness to serve but as a church office in the same sense as in Phil. 1:1.”<sup>72</sup> Since *diakonos* and *synergos* are used as parallel terms in 1 Cor. 3:5-9 for a missionary entrusted with preaching and tending churches, “it seems clear that the *diakono*i of the Pauline mission served in the recognized and official capacity of missionary preacher and teacher. There Phoebe is recorded as an official teacher and missionary in the church of Cenchreae.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The same sort of tendency toward assigning diminutive value to female identity is evident in the use of terms like “actress” over “actor,” “poetess” over “poet,” “jewess” over “jew,” and “priestess” over “priest.”

<sup>67</sup> Jewett, “Spanish Mission,” 149.

<sup>68</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 171.

<sup>69</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, “Missionaries,” 423.

<sup>70</sup> Jewett, “Spanish Mission,” 149. Additionally, The *New Documents* resource provides examples from inscription evidence of the early Christian use of *diakonos* referring to a woman: one of a Cappadocian woman from a later time in the sixth century named Maria, and most intriguingly, an inscription from a Jerusalem archeological site of a deacon named Sophia who was described as “a second Phoebe.” *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, v. 2, 109; v. 4, 122.

<sup>71</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 170.

<sup>72</sup> Marjanen, “Phoebe, a Letter Courier,” 503.

<sup>73</sup> Arichea, “Who Was Phoebe?” 408.

Interpreted in this way, “Phoebe was a deacon who just happened to be a woman, and therefore equal to deacons who just happened to be men.”<sup>74</sup> Thus, while not ordained, she is an important leader in the Cenchræe community, and “we see here the beginnings of the development of the office of the deacon.”<sup>75</sup>

In this study of the brief text in which the Deacon Phoebe’s memory is preserved, close attention has been paid to the Apostle Paul’s description of her and the apostolic authority she exercised in her collaborative support of him. The witness of Phoebe in the New Testament suggests that the God-appointed authority of women was central to the early Christian missionary movement. While it is difficult to determine with certainty what the term *diakonos* signified in the first century, the combination of “deacon of the church of Cenchræe” and “sister” and “benefactor of many and of myself as well” denotes a woman whose evangelizing ministry was inspired and supported by the Holy Spirit at a foundational time in the development of ancient Christianity.

On balance, the fluid use of terminology in the early Church must not be allowed to cloud the significance of Paul witnessing to the genuine God-inspired authority he experienced at the hands of Phoebe and for which he expresses gratitude, introducing her as our sister and deacon and benefactor. Paul’s ministry is apostolic based on the evident zeal of his charism. And so it is with Phoebe as well; her zeal in the Lord, as deacon and patron, is remembered as well affecting the lives of those around her. Paul’s acknowledgement of Phoebe as deacon witnesses to the way authority was expressed in the early Church, and it is clear from Rom. 12:8 that Phoebe’s authority is given by the grace of God as a gift of the Spirit; her participation in the divine life as a deacon was a result of her faith in Jesus Christ. And in the same way that Paul experienced the authority of his own call as an apostle, scripture

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<sup>74</sup> Arichea, “Who Was Phoebe?” 406.

<sup>75</sup> In his careful analysis, Daniel Arichea observes: “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 special 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 missionary work.” Arichea, “Who Was Phoebe?” 404.

indicates that he clearly recognized and validated the spiritual energy and status of Phoebe's charism as well.

Phoebe is recorded in the memory of the church excelling in her God-given vocation just as Paul did and the ancient title Deacon he uses to describe her depicts a ministry which for Phoebe was lived out in a much fuller, more creative and energetic scope than the later liturgical office of deacons allowed early Christian males and females. Hers was a ministry much more open to the strength and inspiration of the Spirit. It is fortunate that women have risen once again in considerable numbers to the ranks of benefactors and, now possessed of extensive education and gifts, are making innovative use of great charisms in creative ways, avenues which were unavailable to them in many of the intervening centuries after the early Christian period, corralled as they were more exclusively within the domestic arena. Could the Eastern Church not benefit richly, then, at least from elevating to the status of officially recognized Deacon those women whose apostolic zeal clearly shows forth today their God-appointed charism, in the same way that Paul celebrated the same charism in Phoebe? As Paul exercised his apostolic discernment in affirming Phoebe's vocational path, it now falls perhaps as a challenge to the episcopate to continue the apostolic charism by recognizing, and affirming, and by holding up the charismatically gifted Orthodox women ministers as *axios* – worthy of note in the liturgical assembly.

After so many centuries of obscuring and thwarting the apostolic energy of women, restoring the female diaconate would reflect a truer understanding of the charism of the New Testament era Deacon, one which lifts up the genuine spiritual authority of Phoebe and other apostolic figures like her. In this way the God-given charism of men and also women—that is, half of all the Orthodox faithful—may be validated and allowed to excel in its own creative and energetic ways in the service of the gospel. The New Testament witness is an exhortation that Phoebe be heard today in a broadening of the scope of ecclesial authority for others called like Phoebe. Her genuine charism lived out in service to the church in Cenchreae was an authentic witness to the life of the Holy Spirit and her example is as relevant to the new generation of the Orthodox Church today participating in the life of the Spirit as when she was praised by the Apostle Paul.