

# Female leadership as demonstrated by Phoebe: An interpretation of Paul's words introducing Phoebe to the saints in Rome



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Who is Phoebe? Introduced to Roman believers by the apostle Paul, Phoebe appears only in Romans 16:1–2. Paul describes her via three nouns (sister, servant, succourer, King James Version [KJV]) and encourages the saints in Rome to welcome her and assist her in whatever she may need. Scholars speculate it was she who carried Paul's letter to Rome, delivered it orally numerous times, and explained it during the delivery. In a sense, she was Paul's ambassador, the one speaking for him and introducing him to believers in Rome in churches he did not found. This article covers four major areas. It shows the importance of Paul's three descriptive nouns and examines the significance of her role as letter-carrier and presenter. Paul warmly commends Phoebe to like-minded Roman believers. She is a woman he trusts, esteems, and acknowledges as a local leader in Cenchræa. However, many translations diminish the force of what this article argues was her influence in the first century. Paul's introduction of Phoebe bears significance today in terms of women in leadership and the Christian practice of according rightful recognition to a fellow labourer in the Lord. However, this outstanding woman seems to have been undervalued for centuries. Consequently, this article boldly seeks to shed light on Phoebe, an extraordinary early believer, and to carry on Paul's practice of honouring her.

**Keywords:** Phoebe; Paul and Women; New Testament Christianity; Church Leadership; Believer.

## Introduction

Phoebe, a prominent early church figure, is introduced most graciously in Romans 16:1–2 by the apostle Paul. Although this is her only appearance in the biblical text, the introduction defines her character, encourages a warm reception from Roman believers, and publicly honours her service, status, influence, generosity, and leadership. It conveys the 'remarkable stature this woman had among the early Christians' (Jankiewicz 2013:10).

The New International Version (NIV) renders Romans 16:1–2 this way:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchræa. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

The King James Version (KJV) (Rm 16:1–2) renders these verses thus:

I commend unto you Phebe, our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchræa; that ye may receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succorer of many, and of myself also.

Wilder (2013:43) rightly notes the division of scholars and translators regarding these verses. A study of them and the subsequent list of Paul's friends not only indicates that Phoebe is quite possibly under-recognised today, but also that the early years of Christianity acknowledged the leadership of men and women. Mention of Phoebe lacks any mention of conflict.

Paul explicitly commends Phoebe via three designations: sister (*adelphē*); deacon, minister and/or servant (*diakonos*); and patron, benefactor, leader, helper and/or succourer (*prostatis*). Embedded in the verses are things the recipients probably immediately understood, but we today may find it a bit obscure, namely the Roman Empire's cultural history of patronage, the job of carrying a letter, and the responsibility of delivering it (Perry 2010:16; Thurston 2000:1053).

Looking at these aspects provides insights on Phoebe's important role and prominence in the 1st-century Christian communities of Cenchræe and Rome (Bock 1995:458; Pramanik 2014:59). The article bears in mind Punt's (2014:9) warning that it:

... is not a question whether translation work and cultural studies intersect, but rather to what degree, in which ways, to what effect and how such intersections are acknowledged and handled.

Translations and church traditions have changed or diminished meanings of key words associated with her over the centuries. Although Phoebe is given a recommendation by letter by Paul in the same manner as Timothy in 1 Corinthians 16:10–11, her significance for the early Christian missionary movement is far from being acknowledged (Fiorenza 1986:423).

This article takes a canonical approach. A canonical approach includes the following:

- Looks at the Bible in its final form 'to expose its theological message' (Arnold & Beyer 1999:478);
- Regards the books of the biblical canon as the authoritative writings of the Jewish and Christian communities (Klein et al. 2004:61);
- Acknowledges inspiration and attests to both the literary and theological unity of the Bible (Klein et al. 2004:118).

## Some background information on Paul's letter

Cenchræe was a port city seven miles east of Corinth and from thence trade travelled to Asia ('Cenchræe' 1985:159; Thurston 1956:478). The Christian congregations of Cenchræe and Corinth were separate but affiliated. According to Acts 18:18, Paul sailed from Cenchræe to Ephesus.

Paul may have written to the Romans from Corinth in AD 57–58 (Kroeger & Evans 2002:628). Because no mention is made internally of how his letter arrived in Rome, scholars think that Phoebe took it herself (Miller 2011:17; Zell 2014:102). Paul did not found the Roman churches, but hoped to greet them on his way to Spain (Rm 15:24). Phoebe serves as his esteemed emissary (Campbell 2009:75).

In calling on Roman believers to welcome her, Paul keeps step with the social ethos he mentions in Romans 12–15, specifically that of hospitality and of sincerely loving fellow believers (Perry 2010:17). Familial love focused on Christ exudes from Paul's introduction of Phoebe and then to his personal messages to 26 individuals and several groups.

Paul emphasises Phoebe's importance because she leads a list of long greetings (McNichol 1985:791). He highlights Phoebe's exemplary service, presenting her as a model (like Paul himself!) that others can trustfully follow (Perry 2010:12).

Paul's warm introduction effuses praise but also subtly does the following: Paul aligns Phoebe with himself and his missionary endeavours (Whelan 1993:79). Finger (1988:7) quite rightly sees Phoebe as a businesswoman, theologian, and diplomat.

But some scholars like Romaniuk, Ng and Agan downplay her importance. Romaniuk (1990:133) thinks the two verses are 'a pleasant exaggeration' and that 'Phoebe served in a general way the entire community'. Ng (2004:13) concludes that Phoebe was not extremely wealthy nor influential. Agan (2008:107) sees Phoebe as an envoy, emissary and spokesman. He does not see her as a deacon or a servant, but instead as 'what we today might call a "representative"'.

As is common throughout the biblical text, Romans 16:1–2 gives few descriptive details. Although we know Phoebe's character through Paul's assessment, we do not know her marital status, age, physical description or religious affiliation at birth. How did she become a follower of Jesus? In what ways did she make her wealth and how does she maintain it? The text remains silent.

Her name is derived from Greek mythology: it means *bright, radiant as the moon, or pure*, and was not uncommon in the Greco-Roman world (Lindsay 1991:1714; Miller 2011:16). Her feast day is 03 September (Thurston 1956:478). Scholars speculate she was a well-educated Gentile widow of middle age and ample financial means, a businesswoman in her own right, and the person responsible for the church that met in her large home in Cenchræe (Boring & Craddock 2004:505; Thurston 2000:1053). Early Christian art portrays her as a beautiful, peaceful-looking woman wearing a loosely draped head covering and a red robe with many folds, signs indicative of wealth and status ('St. Phoebe' 2018).

Some scholars think Romans 16 was added at a later date and indicated an Ephesus destination. Goodspeed (1951:55) writes that the letter to Rome ended in chapter 15 and chapter 16 is an addition. But Donfried (1970:449) believes that Romans 16 was an integral part of Paul's original edition of Romans and not a later addition; in other words, he discounts the Ephesus argument. But Whelan (1993:78) thinks the disproportionately long list of greetings in Romans 16 suggests that Paul had a distinct purpose in doing so, namely that he felt it important to reinforce his connections with Ephesus. However, that debate is outside the scope of this article. This article takes the traditional view that the entire letter to the Romans was written to the Romans.

## Romans: An overview

Paul's eloquent defense of the faith focuses on both humankind's sin and humankind's justification with God through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Considered Paul's masterpiece, Romans forcefully, logically, and gloriously shows the following:

- Gentiles and Jews alike have sinned against God (1:1–4:25)
- Jesus reconciles believers to God (5:1–21)
- Sin and the law work against faith (6:1–7:25)
- The Holy Spirit indwells believers (8:1–39)
- Jews and Gentiles share God’s salvation (9:1–11:36)
- The believer experiences transformed behaviour (12:1–15:13)
- Paul extends personal greetings (15:14–16:27; Kroeger & Evans 2002:630)

This outline helps to show what Phoebe, as probable letter-carrier and expositor, took to Rome and rendered to five house churches (Finger 1988:6). Achtemeier (1985:238) sees Romans as showing how God accomplishes in Christ a redemptive lordship over his rebellious creation and through Christ reconciles it to himself. That certainly is there. However, in complementary fashion, I offer ‘obedience to the faith’ (Rm 1:5; 16:26 – New King James Version [NKJV]) as the epistle’s inclusion, its bookends, if you will. This inclusion invites reading the epistle in that light. The list of named friends certainly indicates that, led by Phoebe, 27 people and additional households practiced ‘obedience to the faith’.

## Paul’s list of friends

Fee and Stuart (2003:64–67), advise thinking in terms of paragraphs (a literary tool and unit) when reading Paul. Paul writes in self-contained units. Romans 16, a self-contained list and unit, contains Paul’s specific introduction of Phoebe and his personal greetings to individuals.

Romans 16 employs the Old Testament (OT) practice of repetition. Readers see and ‘hear’ recurring words (Fee & Stuart 2003:97–98). In the KJV, Prisca, Aquila and Urban are described as helpers (vv. 3, 9); Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis are labourers (vv. 6, 12); Andronicus, Junia and Herodian are kinsmen (vv. 7, 11); and Epenetus, Amplias, Stachys and Persis are beloved (vv. 5, 8, 9, 12).

Romans 16 straightforwardly presents an inclusive ministry where both men and women actively participated with Paul. The text’s openness indicates that this was a normal practice of the early church. The practice set the early church apart from the restrictive socio-cultural norms and regulations in both the Greco-Roman world and the Jewish social structure (Pramanik 2014:58). Romans 16 contains an extraordinary list of believers. Among them are eight named women (plus a mother and a sister) and 19 named men (plus a household and brothers).

Paul’s specific mention of 27 believers shows him a friendly fellow who loved deeply and commended others – wisely and warmly, frequently and individually. Paul is a brilliant apologist throughout the epistle and now in chapter 16 is a compassionate pastor actively involved in many lives. Pramanik (2014:59) believes that Paul’s mentioning of so many women may have inspired other women in other house churches to share their gifts and become more involved in

their new faith. I agree, adding that it seems to have been true for millennia. Perhaps as he wrote, Paul had in mind Psalm 68:11b: The women who proclaim the good news are a great host (Amplified Bible [AMP]).

The Romans 16 list is structured not in terms of social status, but in terms of ecclesiastical standing (Fiorenza 1986:428). Phoebe leads it. And why is that? I think it explains what Paul establishes in his choice of three nouns: *sister*, and *servant*, *deacon* or *minister*, and *patron*. It reinforces that she is the epistle’s probable carrier and expositor. It ‘credentials’ her. Quite likely this carries on the biblical tradition in both testaments of putting the most important name, noun, item or verb first. In the biblical order of disciples, Peter routinely leads (Mt 26:37; Mk 5:37; 9:2; Lk 9:31). By putting Phoebe first, Paul emphasises her multiple gifts. This placement counters today’s tradition of downplaying the input of women and of women’s leadership.

I think Phoebe knew the letter’s content, judged it precious, and had memorised it. Why? Because of low literacy, memorisation was common in her day. It obviously acted as a safeguard against document loss during transit. In addition to be the letter-carrier, Phoebe may well have had the responsibility of ‘performing it’ – that is, reading it aloud or reciting the letter from memory to those meant to hear it (Chapple 2011:212). She may have given personal insights on Paul and commented on current church situations in Corinth and Cenchreae. As presenter, Phoebe taught and preached (Miller 2011:17). These points will be further developed in the article.

Letter-carriers often were entrusted with verbal messages that could amplify or add to the letter’s material (Chapple 2011:213). Phoebe may have mentioned issues facing the Corinthian church. The Corinthian church had problems including divisions, sexual immorality, and lawsuits (1 Cor 1:10–17; 5:1–13; 6:1–11). Quite likely, Phoebe’s journey from Cenchreae to Rome involved land and sea travel – and the dangers of both. Since Paul’s introduction indicates a woman of wealth, Phoebe probably paid the travel expenses for herself and her attendants. As a benefactor and patron, perhaps she paid the salary of the scribe, Tertius, who wrote it to Paul’s dictation (Rm 16:22) – and wrote himself in the list!

## Phoebe as sister (*adelphē*)

Most scholars, in studying this passage, mention Paul’s reference to Phoebe as ‘our sister’ but do not examine it fully. In checking familial references in Paul’s writings (see Table 1), I found that Phoebe is the only one to whom he refers as sister in the KJV and NKJV. However, versions like the NIV and Revised Standard Version (RSV) also refer to ‘Apphia our sister’ (Phlm 2).

Table 1 shows the written honour Paul accords specific individuals. It emphasises the loving, familial relationships among the recipients of the letters and among the early church leaders.

**TABLE 1:** Family references and reorientation in the New Testament.

| Person                     | Text ( <i>Adelphē</i> and related words) | Scripture (KJV)  |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Phoebe                     | Romans 16:1                              | I commend unto you Phebe <i>our sister</i> ...   |
| Jesus is speaking          | Mark 3:35                                | For whosoever shall do the will of God the same, is my <i>brother</i> , and my <i>sister</i> , and <i>mother</i> . |
| Jesus is speaking          | Mark 5:34                                | ... he said unto her, <i>Daughter</i> , thy faith hath made thee whole ...   |
| Ananias                    | Acts 9:17                                | Ananias ... putting his hands on him said, <i>Brother</i> Saul .....   |
| Apollos                    | 1 Corinthians 16:12                      | As touching our <i>brother</i> Apollos ...   |
| Timothy                    | 2 Corinthians 2:1                        | Paul ... and Timothy <i>our brother</i> , unto the church ...  |
| Titus                      | 2 Corinthians 2:13                       | I had no rest in my spirit, because I found not Titus my <i>brother</i> ...  |
| Timothy                    | Colossians 1:1                           | Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus <i>our brother</i> ...                          |
| Tychicus                   | Colossians 4:7                           | ... Tychicus ... a beloved <i>brother</i> , and a faithful minister ...  |
| Timothy                    | 1 Thessalonians 3:2                      | ... and sent Timotheus, <i>our brother</i> , and <i>minister</i> of God ...  |
| Timothy                    | 1 Timothy 1:18                           | This charge I commit unto thee, <i>son</i> Timothy ...   |
| Titus                      | Titus 1:4                                | Thou therefore, my <i>son</i> , be strong ...  |
| Epaphroditus               | Philippians 2:25                         | ... to send to you Epaphroditus, my <i>brother</i> , and companion ...   |
| Philemon                   | Philemon 7                               | ... the saints are refreshed by thee, <i>brother</i> ...   |
| To Philemon about Onesimus | Philemon 10, 16                          | I beseech thee for my <i>son</i> Onesimus ... but above a servant, a <i>brother</i> beloved ...                    |
| Philemon                   | Philemon 20                              | Yea, <i>brother</i> , let me have joy of thee ...  |

Note: Words in italics from the King James Version.  
KJV, King James Version.

Church Father John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, notes that Paul distinguishes and doubly honours Phoebe: (1) Paul begins a long list of friends with her; (2) he calls her 'our sister' – a singular honour which 'is no slight thing' (Chrysostom 1841). Likewise, Punt (2014:6) points out the great respect this sibling term carried.

A form of endearment, 'our sister', acknowledges the new family relationship centred in Christ and shared by all believers. Jesus restructured both the Sabbath and the family around himself (Mt 12:8; Mk 3:35). Jesus gave the woman healed of the issue of blood a new family, one based on faith in him. He called her Daughter (Mk 5:34; Branch 2013:8).

When a family term is used for a personal relationship in the New Testament, it may denote a blood or a spiritual kinship. Paul uses the designation *our sister* for Phoebe in a Christ-centred way. Paul uses the family term in the sense of spiritual brotherhood some 130 times (Von Soden 1964:145). Among believers, a spiritual bond can be male-to-male, female-to-female, or male-to-female (Von Soden 1964:144). Phoebe joins a ready-made family of believers in Rome. The Romans 16 list mentions both Jews and Gentiles. Part of the amazing message of Romans is that believers worldwide are loved by God the Father and called to be saints (Rm 1:7).

Shaner (1980:223) sees a connection between Paul's introduction of Phoebe to the Romans and Paul's address to Philemon. Both stress familial relationships. Paul urges the Romans to receive Phoebe and beseeches Philemon to receive Onesimus. Paul, likewise, speaks of his personal debt to

Philemon and to Phoebe. Zell (2014:105), however, counters that Phoebe may have been one of many women called sisters in the church throughout the centuries, one of many servants given special honour for their faithful work, but not necessarily called to a recognised office.

I believe Phoebe is intentionally and exceptionally honoured by Paul. He gives sibling status of sister to her and of brother to Tychicus, Timothy, Onesimus, Philemon, Epaphroditus, and Titus. All are exceptional believers in the 1st-century church.

## Phoebe as deacon, servant or minister (*diakonos*)

After sister, Paul then calls Phoebe a deacon of the church at Cenchreae. The NIV's translation choice supplies a textual note offering *servant* as an alternative. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) likewise uses *deacon*, but has a note indicating *minister* as an alternative. The English Standard Version (ESV) and KJV use *servant*. The Orthodox Jewish Bible calls her 'the Messianic Shammash of the *kehillah* at Cenchreae'; and the Complete Jewish Bible calls her 'the *shammash* of the congregation at Cenchreae'. A *shammash* is the one who directs and leads the public order of worship.

This translation divergence signifies the varying textual interpretations of Phoebe's role. However, in my view, the Jewish versions capture Paul's intended meaning more fully because they carry the sense of *diakonos* and the upcoming word, *prostatis*. Finger (1988:5) agrees and states:

Translators have usually characterized Phoebe as a helper, servant, or deaconess (even though the office of deaconess was not instituted until later and was much more restricted than the male diaconate).

However, she was 'a leader of the church at Cenchreae' (Finger 1988:5).

Punt (2014:5) elaborates, saying that translating *diakonos* as deacon or deaconess for Phoebe:

... does not take the use of the word in the New Testament into consideration, does not consider the more common meaning of the word, and appears to rely on a stance dating back to later developments when the exclusion of women from positions of leadership in the early Jesus follower communities apparently was promoted.

Punt (2014:5) favours translating *diakonos* as minister and also asserts that the rendering of *prostatis* as *helper*, seemingly disregards the 1st century's patronage system (see Table 2).

Table 2 gives visual reference that translations for Phoebe and for men and angels vary. The KJV translates a word similarly to *diakonos* for Epaphras in Colossians 1:7 and Tychicus in Colossians 4:7 as *minister*. The NIV agrees but calls Timothy a 'brother and co-worker' in 1 Thessalonians 3:2.

**TABLE 2:** *Diakonos* and related words as servant or minister

| Person            | Text ( <i>Diakonos</i> and related words) | Scripture (KJV)  |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Phoebe            | Romans 16:1                               | I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a <i>servant</i> of the church which is at Cencrea: ...  |
| Jesus             | Matthew 20:28                             | ... even as the Son of man came not to be <i>ministered</i> unto, but to <i>minister</i> , and to give his life a ransom for many.                                       |
| Paul              | Ephesians 3:7                             | I was made a <i>minister</i> , according to the gift of the grace of God.  |
| Tychicus          | Ephesians 6:21                            | But that ye also may know my affairs, <i>and</i> how I do, Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful <i>minister</i> in the Lord, shall make known to you all things: ... |
| Epaphras          | Colossians 1:23                           | ... as ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellow servant, who is for you a faithful <i>minister</i> of Christ; ...   |
| Paul              | Colossians 1:23, 25                       | ... whereof I Paul am made a <i>minister</i> ... I Paul am made a <i>minister</i> ...  |
| Timothy           | Timothy 4:6                               | If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good <i>minister</i> of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith ...                    |
| Timothy           | 1 Thessalonians 3:2                       | ... our brother and <i>minister</i> of God ...   |
| All are ministers | 1 Peter 4:10                              | As every man hath received the gift, even so <i>minister</i> the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.                                     |
| Angels            | Hebrews 1:14                              | Are they not all <i>ministering</i> spirits, sent forth to <i>minister</i> for them who shall be heirs of salvation?   |

Note: Words in italics from the King James Version. KJV, King James Version.

Phoebe and the three men share striking character similarities as believers and similar job descriptions. Paul's description of Phoebe with this noun, *diakonos*, establishes her prominence along with them. Paul's word choice of *diakonos* for Phoebe is quite significant, for he uses a similar word to describe his own ministry (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; 11:23; McCabe 2018). Likewise, Paul calls Christ a minister in Romans 15:8, merely 22 verses before introducing Phoebe.

The Greek word *diakonos* carries a sense of honour. A person called a deacon had recognised responsibilities, functions, and duties. The concept cuts across lines of social rank and status: a deacon can be one who acts as a slave or personal attendant, or one who serves as a king's ear (Perry 2010:13–14). In Romans, it is clear that Phoebe is not Paul's personal attendant but an agent of the church at Cencrea, a woman of sound character and one having a large role in the plans of God (Perry 2010:16–17).

Miller (2011:17) points out how unusual *diakonos* is. Most nouns have only one gender, but *diakonos* is among that small cluster of nouns with common gender, that is, they can change gender based on context. *Diakonos* in Romans 16:1 is indeed feminine, disregarding its inflected ending. Paul applies it to himself and his co-workers. Phoebe seems to be a minister, or at least as one seen as serving the local church in a way that came to be later recognised as the duties of the office of deacon (Miller 2011:16–17). Furthermore, the textual variances of the words, *servant*, *deacon* or *minister*, can apply to all Christians (Moo 1996:913–914).

The word applies to Jesus in Matthew 20:26, 28, and Mark 10:43, 45. The KJV translates the word as *minister* and the NIV as *servant*. The Orthodox Jewish Bible gives the Matthew verses a more nuanced approach by linking the duties of the Messiah as to serve and as minister.

However, our modern understanding of the words *deacon* and *servant* seemingly dims Paul's 1st-century meaning. A deaconess, as we now know it as church officer, did not come into the church until the 4th century (Jankiewicz 2013:11). It had a very limited role in comparison to the 1st century and a very limited function (Whelan 1993:67–68). The debate as to whether Phoebe held the office of deacon is tainted by its dependence on our modern situation (Miller 2011:17).

Consequently, I believe Phoebe is textually slighted in English.

## Phoebe as deacon or minister

Fiorenza (1986:425) notes that Phoebe's ministry or office was not as that of the later deaconesses, limited to women, but she was a *diakonos* of the whole church in Cencrea. McCabe (2018) agrees, saying that the scope and power of the word *diakonos* are 'masked in English translations as "servant"'. Paul's introduction indicates Phoebe both served well and used her wealth to serve.

Several extra-biblical references shed light on women as *diakonoi*. For instance, Pliny documents indicate that, during Trajan's time (AD 98–117), there were four female deacons in Bithynia. Pliny mentions two servants or slaves 'who were tortured for being ministers' (McCabe 2018). Furthermore, the word minister (*ministra*) 'is synonymous with the Latin word *diaconus*', for a *diaconus* can be defined as a 'minister of the church, a deacon' (McCabe 2018).

As a *diakonos* of the church at Cencrea, it is logical to assume that teaching was part of Phoebe's gifts of leadership, service, and wealth (Miller 2011:17–18; Mowczko 2014a).

In calling Phoebe both servant, deacon, or minister and succourer, helper, leader or patron, Paul seems to be writing about a specific woman with a specific status (Miller 2011:16), a woman of great gifts and great character. I believe she ministered in the sense of leading the church at Cencrea.

## Phoebe's legal position as a woman in the Greco-Roman world

Yet, before discussing Phoebe as a *prostatis* [patron] one must first consider the legal status of women in the Roman world. Arguably, Phoebe, as a wealthy woman and one called a patron and benefactor, was in a good position financially and legally. Whelan (1993:73–74) provides insights, that women:

- enjoyed more freedoms and privileges than traditionally supposed;
- were equal with their husbands in terms of ownership and disposal of property by the system of separation of goods; this is because of the concept of free marriage (*sine manu*) which all but dissolved the restraints of *manusmariti*;
- acted without a guardian;
- were freed from the restraints of perennial tutelage because of *tutor optivus*; and
- had the right to make a will.

Women throughout the Roman world had various means to acquire wealth and could freely dispose of it. Consequently, they could assume the role of patrons. This wealth gave them the ability to engage in and to cultivate voluntary associations. Roman law backed them (Whelan 1993:75).

## Phoebe as patron, benefactor, succourer of many or helper (*prostatis*)

Paul transitions quickly from *servant* to *succourer* [*prostatis*] of many. Since *prostatis* occurs only once in the New Testament (NT), here in Romans 16:2, it is called a *hapax legomenon*. The ideas carried in the word *prostatis* combine ruling and taking care of (Reicke 1968:702). These words clearly carrying more weight than *succourer of many*.

Consider these additional views: *Prostatis* means the one who stands before (Jankiewicz 2013:10). Cerling (1976:210–211) thinks that because Paul calls her a *prostatis*, ‘he is probably referring to her as a ruler or one of the rulers of the Church’; furthermore, Paul uses ‘“deacon” only of ministers, never in a clear-cut instance speaking about people who are not ministers’. Cerling (1976:211) adds that it does not mean Phoebe was the chief minister or ruled over her husband; ‘it simply means she was a minister. She could have been under the authority of her husband or unmarried, but was a minister’.

In its verb form, *prostatis* carries the multiple meanings of ‘to care for’, ‘give aid to’, and ‘preside over’ (Moo 1996:915). Paul’s usage seems to favour a verb that means to direct, to preside over (Moo 1996:915–916). Clarification may come with insights from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures where the Greek word *prostatis*, appears several times (see Table 3).

The use of the word in the LXX indicates positions of royal, personal, public and ecclesiastical trust. As seen in Table 3, it denotes a person of high standing, literally a ruler, an overseer, and one associated with money (Jankiewicz 2013:11–12). The KJV’s choice of *succourer* conveys none of these.

**TABLE 3:** *Prostatis* and related words reflect leadership and standing.

| Person or noun                      | Text ( <i>Prostatis</i> and related words) | Scripture (The OT scriptures are from the LXX in the KJV translation)   |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Phoebe                              | Romans 16:2b:                              | ... she has been a <i>succourer</i> of many.  |
| Jaziz the Hagerite and other rulers | 1 Chronicles 27:31:                        | ... and over the flocks was Jaziz the Hagerite. All these <i>were</i> the <i>rulers</i> of the substance which was king David’s.  |
| Various rulers                      | 1 Chronicles 29:6:                         | Then the chief of the fathers and princes of the tribes of Israel, and the captains of thousands and of hundreds, with the <i>rulers</i> of the king’s work, offered willingly, ... |
| Various officers                    | 2 Chronicles 8:10:                         | ... and these <i>were</i> the chief of king Solomon’s <i>officers</i> , even 200 and 50, that bare rule over the people.  |
| High priest’s officer               | 2 Chronicles 24:11                         | ... the king’s scribe and the high priest’s <i>officer</i> came and emptied the chest ...   |

Note: Words in italics from the Old Testament in the King James Version. OT, Old Testament; KJV, King James Version.

By the time of the Roman Empire, *prostatis* came to be used to describe various civil and state offices and functions, and especially to denote a presiding officer (MacGillivray 2011:184). A kindred word, *prostates*, ‘was used among the Greeks for presidents of various secular or religious associations’ (Jankiewicz 2013:12). No doubt Paul’s audience immediately understood the Greek word.

A more nuanced and accurate rendition of *prostatis* [patron] denotes leadership; it connotes respect; it indicates wealth used wisely; it unquestionably means influence (Miller 2011:16; Mowczko 2014b). Paul’s choice of the word *prostatis* clearly adds to Phoebe’s credentials. The word appears three times of Jesus in 1 Clement (Thurston 2000:1053).

Enlarging on its choice of *benefactor* for *prostatis*, the AMP (Classic Edition) describes Phoebe’s actions as ‘shielding us from suffering’. This could indicate Phoebe’s personal courage in living out the new faith. Perhaps she championed the ‘unprotected and despised’; perhaps she helped needy converts; perhaps she ‘fought the battles of those who were oppressed’ (Dean 1955:231). The word also could be translated to *patroness* or *protectress*. In the masculine, the word is associated with defender and guardian. The term *patron* or *patroness* signals a person of wealth and power who used her influence to help others, specifically Paul and other Christians (Gaventa 1992:320).

Such a word connotes bearing, breeding and influence. I believe that, when Phoebe entered a room, people noticed.

## Patronage in Greco-Roman culture

Patronage is a practice embedded in the social and economic realities of daily life in Greco-Roman culture (Miller 2011:16). Patrons actively sought clients; patrons opened social opportunities to those in a lower social status (Miller 2011:16). Phoebe must have enjoyed this opportunity, for Paul calls her a patron of many.

Women of wealth could and did hold influential positions within society in the 1st century. It is reasonable to assume that Phoebe followed the practice in a financial way that benefitted fellow believers in Cenchræe and benefitted also Paul (Kearsley 1999:202). Iunia Theodora, for example, was a woman in Corinth, known for political and possibly commercial patronage. Her activities show that without holding a formal position, a wealthy woman was able to achieve public recognition, and to use her wealth and influence to obtain satisfactory results for her dependents (Kearsley 1999:201–202). Five surviving documents attest to Iunia Theodora (Miller 2011:16). Phoebe and Iunia Theodora attest to patronage in many spheres (Kearsley 1999:189).

Seen through the lens of the kind of patronage common at the time, the Romans 16 list serves as a tool. It introduces Phoebe to Paul’s ‘network of connections’ and thereby reciprocates the benevolence and patronage both he and the Cenchræan church experienced because of her (Whelan 1993:84).

## Prostatis and patronage

In Phoebe's case, the Greek term *prostatis* is often translated not as leading officer, president or benefactor, but instead as *helper*, as in the AMP and American Standard Version (ASV), New American Standard Version (NASV), NKJV and RSV. Instead of seeing Phoebe in leadership, she is a succourer as described in the KJV, and helpful as described in the New Living Translation (NLT).

The debate is lively. Perry (2010:18) notes that Phoebe's patronage of Paul and the Cenchræan church illustrates the social relationships and shared mission that Paul has mentioned in chapters 12–15. However, MacGillivray (2011:184–185) does not see *prostatis* as leadership and does not believe Paul describes Phoebe as a presiding officer. Instead, *prostatis* in Romans 16:2 relates to the dynamics of ancient reciprocity. Consequently, MacGillivray (2011:199) prefers the word *benefactor* because of its broadness and flexibility, and implication of reciprocity. Whelan (1993:68), however, believes *prostatis* is best translated as *protectress* or *patroness* rather than anything that carries the sense of servility as a helper or the sense of servicing.

Patronage in Rome often meant close association and even direct access to the emperor. Patronage involved power, honour and prestige. Social relations throughout the empire were governed in a sophisticated, reciprocal relationship (Punt 2014:5). Punt (2014:6) writes that:

Paul's identification of Phoebe both as minister and as patron undergirds her respected position and bestows on her a coveted social status, a public role of patronage, protection and authority, all of which would have been acknowledged publicly.

Yet, it seems that many translators are unable to believe that Paul could be supported by a woman or share rank with her (Fiorenza 1986:425). The Contemporary English Version (CEV) proves an exception by translating the passage this way: 'After all, she has proved to be a respected leader for many others, including me'.

Romans 16:1–2 taken as a whole, however, seems to Jewett (2006:947) to indicate that Phoebe has agreed to underwrite a matter of great importance to Paul: an evangelism mission to Spain. She is its patroness and, in this way, is helping Paul. Phoebe certainly travels for an apostolic church (Thurston 2000:1053).

Clearly, translators and commentators express many views.

I believe the problems surrounding both words for the female versions of minister and protector expose some hidden assumptions of Bible translators regarding the position of women in early Christianity and reveal a basic lack of understanding of the position of women in the Roman period. I believe that translation and undue emphasis as *helper* or *servant*, diminish Phoebe's role and Paul's admitted esteem of her. Furthermore, they carry the gender-laden discriminations of centuries.

Over the centuries these assumptions have been perpetuated, leading to a downplaying of the role of women, a marginalisation of women, and even a disregard for the sovereignty of God and the sovereign way he gives gifts to the church. Let us use the strong words of *minister* and *leader* that Paul uses to describe Phoebe.

## Possible origins for *prostatis* as helper

The translation and nuance of the word *helper* may have come in the 9th century. Already by then, translators recognised the discomfort, which translating *prostatis* as leader, would cause (McCabe 2018). The idea of helper may also have come with the Vulgate. It is possible that translators could have seen 'stand next to or beside', rather than 'stand at the head of' (McCabe 2018).

I agree with McCabe who concludes that Phoebe, as a *diakonos* and as a *prostatis* in Romans 16:1–2, has often been slighted in English translations, because Phoebe has been called a *servant* and *helper* respectively.

Ng (2004:13) presents a nuanced, contrary view. Here is a summation: Phoebe did not render help in a servile manner. Neither is Phoebe a leader nor a congregational president. Phoebe is neither a patron to Paul in a juridical sense, and Paul was not a client of Phoebe in the traditional Roman sense. Paul had financial independence. Phoebe provided hospitality to Paul and many others. Phoebe also rendered practical help in keeping with her duty as a deacon in the church at Cenchræa. Yes, Phoebe was a woman of some wealth, but probably not a member of the upper social class.

McCabe (2018) gives good insight when she notes that, truly, if Paul had wanted to describe Phoebe strictly as a helper, he likely would have chosen another Greek word that addresses this nuance, such as *boethos* (helper) or *hupereten* (one who functions as a helper). Jankiewicz (2013:11012) adds that Paul could have said Phoebe was *sumballopolu*, being of great help (Ac 18:27). But he did not.

## Letter-carrier and presenter and copies

In the Roman world, personal letters of recommendation frequently graced the ends of larger epistles. They served to introduce the friends, business partners or slaves of the writer to a circle of friends and acquaintances in a foreign city (Fiorenza 1986:424). Boring and Craddock (2004:505) write that letters of recommendation such as Phoebe carried, 'facilitated leaders of one congregation assuming an active role in the congregation to which they were moving'.

Wilder (2013:44) notes that, in ancient texts, *diakonos* often refers to a messenger, courier or letter-carrier. He believes that Phoebe was the specific carrier of Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul's introduction fits an established pattern for introducing letter-carriers; it gives her credentials (Wilder 2013:46).

Phoebe's role and Paul's choice of her, perhaps were revolutionary. Paul assigned a masculine task to a woman. Other NT letter-carriers were Tychicus to the Ephesians (Eph 6:21–22) and Onesimus to Philemon (Malik 2012). The NT indicates frequent travel among believers, apostles and evangelists in the Roman world.

Phoebe was to present the epistle to the house churches. Chapple (2011:212) says she was to perform it. He (2011:213) argues that the reader, as the bearer of the letter, 'had been coached by the sender in how to read it'. Finger (1988:6) concurs that Phoebe is the most likely candidate for proclaimer and interpreter. Communication in the Roman world depended more on spoken rhetoric than on print media. Phoebe most likely presented Paul's letter herself to the five house churches in Rome (Finger 1988:6).

Chapple (2011:207) also notes the order of the list's greetings. He (Chapple 2011:208, 211) states that Prisca and Aquila come after Phoebe because she is to deliver the letter first to them and they are to arrange for copies, an expensive, time-consuming endeavour. It is true that Phoebe could have paid for copies made in Cenchræ before leaving, but that would have added baggage weight. Perhaps house churches throughout the Mediterranean world paid for individual copies of the letters of all the apostles. These are things that probably were known in the culture of the day but are obscure to us today.

However, of this there is no doubt: Paul's epistle and Phoebe's action of carrying, it have had immeasurable impact. Jankiewicz (2013:11) rightly discerns this: Phoebe carried with her, perhaps under the folds of her robe, 'the whole future of Christian theology'.

## Conclusion

Origen (2002:290–291), a Church Father, sees the verses on Phoebe as teaching 'with apostolic authority that women are likewise appointed to the ministry of the Church'. He adds that 'women are to be considered ministers of the church', and that Phoebe is among the women 'who through good services have merited ... apostolic praise'.

I believe Origen is right. It is widely established that churches and other apostles recognised Paul's forcefulness, study, conversion experience, honesty and leadership. There is no sense in Romans 16 that Phoebe desired to usurp Paul's leadership. Quite the contrary. But there is the sense that Paul not only recognises a fellow believer, but also acknowledges a fellow leader. Paul trusts Phoebe. Paul respects Phoebe. In diction marked by graciousness, Paul indicates his gratitude for this co-worker, a woman. His words show he delights in honouring Phoebe openly to fellow believers because of her character, leadership and devotion to Christ. Paul carries on the tone of warmth and praise set in the first two verses throughout chapter 16.

Using Phoebe as the letter-carrier shows her importance. Commending her, meant sending her credentials to the

recipient, in this case the Romans (Wilder 2013:47). In other words, she, as a letter-carrier, did not have to announce her own background or relationship to the writer.

Yet, Paul deviates from the usual formula for such communication. He is warm, kind, effusive, and I believe, a bit self-effacing and humorous. For example, he expresses appreciation of her, hints of her great wealth, acknowledges her spiritual depth as a believer in the way, gives her the unusual ranking of 'our sister', and talks of her generosity to him personally and to many others (Wilder 2013:49).

Hoehner (2007:763) offers linguistic insights on the position of women in the early church that provide insights on Phoebe. Hoehner encourages a separation and a distinction, as is shown in Paul's writings, between gift and office. Gifts are not gender-specific; offices are. For example, a pastor is a gift to a congregation, and an elder holds an office in that congregation or over many congregations. Therefore, according to Hoehner (2007:769), a woman 'may have the gift of pastor-teacher, apostle, evangelist, and/or prophetess, while, scripturally speaking, she cannot hold the office of an elder or bishop'. Phoebe, it seems, probably was gifted as a pastor-teacher, apostle, evangelist or prophetess.

In terms of viewpoints called egalitarian (equality in male and female relationships), and complementarian (male headship in a loving, self-sacrificing way), this article leans toward egalitarian in the sense of equality in Christ of the sexes (Gl 3:28). I think that, in Cenchræ, Phoebe led the meetings which were in her house. She exercised leadership during visits from Paul; yet exercised it under Paul's oversight. Paul was the leader of many churches and obviously trusted her. The church functioned normally under her and during Paul's visits. I detect a gracious humour in Paul's statement, 'she has been a benefactor to many, myself included', and take it to mean that Paul benefitted in many ways from her ministry including hospitality, financial assistance, encouragement, and shared purpose in Christ. Quite possibly, this benefit included her teaching and leadership in the church at meetings. Jankiewicz (2013:11), likewise, sees that Paul functioned as a minister or deacon in service of the entire church, while Phoebe served the local church at Cenchræ as such.

Paul's introduction gives every reason to think that Phoebe's life, wealth, leadership, hospitality, help and insights on the faith were at the disposal of the church at Cenchræ and were now available to the church in Rome. Within two verses, Paul succinctly establishes her status. He encourages the Romans to welcome her according to her ecclesiastical rank and the established Christian tradition. The welcome probably includes helping her to secure suitable housing. Undoubtedly, it includes hospitality as defined by holiness (Jewett 2006:945).

Via his introduction, Paul acknowledges Phoebe as a preacher and gifted, gracious leader of the community in Cenchræ (Fiorenza 1986:426). If Paul, Origen and John Chrysostom recognised Phoebe's leadership, why can people today not recognise modern women as heirs of Phoebe, as well as heirs



of Prisca and Junia (Marshall 2017:35)? Jankiewicz (2013:12) states that 'translators may have felt uncomfortable with a notion that a woman could carry any leadership or presiding role in the early Christian church'. However, Romans 16:1–2 shows this: Phoebe is a leader. Leadership does not reside in gender, but in gifting and in God's choice; leadership is recognised by others (Branch 2019).

Phoebe and Paul were 1st-century believers. Over the centuries, official ecclesiastical titles went to men and excluded women. Put another way, power and its corollary, prestige, were concentrated in men. This concentration became generational, habitual, perpetual and normal in the Christian church. The exclusion of women in hierarchical ministry in the catholic church (in the sense of being universal and worldwide) and the Roman Catholic Church (a specific church) became traditional.

Romans 16:1–2, the terse passage about Phoebe, argues against this deeply rooted exclusion. A study of her ministry, life and contributions, provided so succinctly and eloquently by Paul, shows her worth to the early church and challenges today's church to return to biblical basics. Punt (2014:6) puts it this way:

Paul's identification of Phoebe both as minister and as patron undergirds her respected position and bestows on her a coveted social status, a public role of patronage, protection and authority.

Jankiewicz (2013:11) writes that 'Paul's calling Phoebe a deacon appears to make her ministry as equally important and valid as that of other early church leaders'.

A fair translation of Romans 16:1–2 must encompass the importance of Paul's word choice of *our sister*, *diakonos* and *prostatis*. These words indicate leading by love, service, teaching, example and belief in Jesus. The translation must honour the generosity of Phoebe and the egalitarian model of the early church.

I offer my own, somewhat wordy, translation of the passage, but one that, I think captures the sense of Paul's words: I recommend most highly to you Phoebe, our sister, a minister in the church in Cenchreae. I request that you welcome her in a way that becomes the saints of the Lord and that you supply her with any help she may need, for she is a leader whose generosity benefits many. She has been a patron to me a well.

It is time that biblical translations and the church honour this outstanding woman, a 'leader in her own right' (Jankiewicz 2013:12). She serves as an example throughout millennia. The textual weight of Paul's introduction of Phoebe to the Roman believers acknowledges her as a significant leader (Gaventa 1992:320) who serves constantly, gives generously and selflessly, believes whole-heartedly in the new way Paul preaches, presides as the primary teacher in the congregation at Cenchreae, and ably oversees a single-church arena under Paul who serves as an overseer in a multi-church arena. Thus,

recognised as a leader and established as Paul's friend, sister in the Lord and emissary, Phoebe, no doubt, was warmly welcomed by ready-made friends and fellow saints in Rome.

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I declare that I have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced me in writing this article.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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