

A Study of Romans 16

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Manuscript Considerations

Romans 16 was once suspected of being a fragment of a letter to Ephesus that was later added onto the wrong epistle due to its absence in some manuscripts and the fact that Paul never ministered in Rome. Scholars questioned how Paul could have known so many people there having never spent significant time laboring in the Gospel. However, most are now convinced that the chapter is authentic to Romans, reasoning that “Paul knows so many of the people because people often traveled to and from Rome, and expelled Jewish believers Paul had met earlier (like Prisca and Aquila) had now returned there” (CCR: 182).

Personal Greetings

v. 1-16 – Paul commends his [probable] letter carrier, Phoebe, to the church in Rome, then offers a long list of personal greetings to a number of Christians living there. While most of the believers listed are unknown apart from their mention in Romans 16, the list still provides us with important, tantalizing clues about the community life of early Christians.

What follows is a table of the people mentioned and what's known about them. Names listed in **blue** are men, names listed in **red** are women.

Verse(s)	Name(s)	Details
1-2	Phoebe	Called a <i>προστάτις</i> (<i>prostatis</i> - lit. “a woman set over others,” probably means <i>patroness</i> or <i>benefactor</i>) and <i>διάκονος</i> (<i>diakonos</i> – lit. “servant,” probably means <i>deacon</i>). Likely the person who carried Paul's epistle from Corinth to Rome. See the section on Phoebe below.
3-5a	Prisc[ill]a, Aquila	Husband-wife missionary team and house church leaders, mentioned seven times throughout the New Testament, always together (Acts 18:2, 18, 19; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19). See Priscilla & Aquila below. Paul also calls them “co-workers;” see the section on Co-workers & Hard Workers below.
5b	Epaenetus	Not mentioned anywhere else. Though the KJV says he is the first convert from Achaia, most manuscripts plus the Latin Vulgate say Asia, meaning Asia Minor, i. e. the Roman province.
6	Mary	Probably not one of the women named Mary mentioned in the Gospels or Acts as the name was extremely common. Paul calls her a “hard worker;” see the section on Co-workers & Hard Workers below.

7	Andronicus, Junia	A husband-wife team or possibly brother-sister, Paul describes them as Jews who had converted to Christ before he did and had spent time in prison with him on account of their witness to the Gospel. Most enigmatically, Paul describes them as “outstanding among the apostles.” See the section on Junia below.
8	Ampliatius	Not mentioned anywhere else. A common name for a male slave. Described as Paul's “beloved in the Lord.”
9	Urbanus	Not mentioned anywhere else. A common name for a male slave. Paul calls him a “co-worker;” see the section on Co-workers & Hard Workers below.
9	Stachys	Not mentioned anywhere else. Paul calls him “beloved.”
10	Apelles	Not mentioned anywhere else. Paul describes him as “approved in Christ.” The Greek for <i>approved</i> is δόκιμον (<i>dokimon</i>), “tested.”
10	Aristobulus	Some speculate that this might be Aristobulus Minor, the grandson of Herod the Great (c. 74/73 BC – AD 4) and younger brother of Herod Agrippa I (10 BC – AD 44), but that Aristobulus may have been dead by the writing of Romans (c. AD 56-57). The greeting to “the family of Aristobulus” refers to either his literal household, meaning family members and slaves, or a church that was meeting at his house.
11	Herodion	Probably a freedman and former slave of one of the many Herods.
11	Narcissus	Some speculate that this was the wealthy freedman who served as secretary to the emperor Claudius (AD 41-54); however, that Narcissus was forced to commit suicide in AD 54, prior to the likely dating of Romans. It is possible that his slaves and/or family members had formed a house church that was still meeting as of the writing of Romans.
12	Tryphaena, Tryphosa	Not mentioned anywhere else. The naming alliteration suggests that they were sisters and possibly even twins. Paul calls them “hard workers;” see the section on Co-workers & Hard Workers below.
12	Persis	Not mentioned anywhere else. A common name for a female slave. Paul calls her a “hard worker;” see the section on Co-workers & Hard Workers below.
13	Rufus	A common name meaning “red,” Paul describes him as “chosen in the Lord.” Possibly the son of Simon of Cyrene, mentioned in Mark 15:21.
13	Mother of Rufus	Possibly the wife of Simon of Cyrene, mentioned in Mark 15:21. Paul says that she had been a mother to him, showing that she had ministered to him in a significant

		way.
14	Asyncritus, Phlegon, Patrobas	Not mentioned anywhere else. They, along with Hermes and Hermas, were probably part of a single house church.
14	Hermes	Not mentioned anywhere else. A common name for a male slave.
14	Hermas	The extra-biblical <i>Shepherd of Hermas</i> was considered canonical scripture by some of the Early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus. Both Origen and Eusebius attributed the <i>Shepherd</i> to this Hermas; however, that is unlikely as the <i>Shepherd</i> was probably written in the mid-second century.
15	Philologus, Julia, Nereus, Sister of Nereus, Olympas	Not mentioned anywhere else. Likely the members of another house church, as with the group mentioned in v. 14.

Women in Romans 16

Romans 16 is a significant chapter for the study of women in the early church. They figure prominently in the list of greetings Paul sends to the Christians at Rome, with 10 of the 29 people mentioned being women. Not only do they comprise 35% of the believers mentioned, but Paul speaks highly of them and trusts them with significant ministry responsibilities. Phoebe (v. 1-2) is praised as the benefactor of Paul and many, and the church in Rome is ordered to help her with whatever she needs. Priscilla (v.3-5a), along with her husband Aquila, is noted for having endangered her life for Paul's sake and is thanked by “all the churches of the Gentiles.” Priscilla is also given the semi-title “co-worker” in the Gospel, and Mary (v. 6), Tryphaena (v. 12), Tryphosa (v.12), and Persis (v. 12) are described as “hard workers” in the Lord. Junia (v. 7) is praised for the time she spent in prison with Paul for her work in the Gospel along with her husband (or brother), Andronicus. Finally, the mother of Rufus is noted as a woman who had ministered to Paul in such a way that he considered her his own mother (v. 13). Clearly, women were very active in the life and ministry of the early church.

In recent decades, there has been significant controversy among evangelical Christians over the designation of Phoebe as a διάκονος and Junia as an ἀπόστολος. A good deal of scholarship has been devoted to the prominence of Priscilla as well. See the sections on Phoebe, Junia, and Priscilla & Aquila below.

Phoebe

The Cenchræe from which Phoebe hails is probably the port town 6.5 mi (10.5 km) east of Corinth, leading to speculation that Phoebe was likely traveling from Corinth to Rome on other business and agreed to carry Paul's epistle for him while she was at it. Her name was common for a Greek female slave, opening the possibility that Phoebe was a wealthy freedwoman.

Her role as a προστάτις (*prostatis*) to Paul and many others has received considerable attention. Numerous English translations chose a rather tepid rendition of the Greek, calling

Phoebe a “helper” (NIV, ASV, NASB, NKJV, RSV, NLT) or “succourer” (KJV). Such translations do not do justice to the force of the Greek. Προστάτις literally means “a woman set over others” (TGEL: 549) and it carries the force of a benefactor, sponsor, patron or protector. The Greek verb from which this noun derives, προΐστημι (*proïstēmi*), literally means “to preside over” (TGEL: 539). The masculine equivalent was well-known for carrying the possible meaning of one's legal guardian, and it is now known that a woman could be a legal προστάτις as well. The word has a stronger connotation than that of a meek and submissive helper and is best translated into modern English as “benefactor” or “patron.”

Phoebe's designation as a διάκονος (*diakonos*) of the church in Cenchreae has been much more hotly contested. The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to the office of deacon, an office that many Christian traditions have barred women from for centuries.

Those who resist seeing Phoebe as a deacon usually point out that the literal translation for διάκονος was “servant,” and Paul uses the term to mean “servant” in numerous places (Rom. 13:4, 15:8; 1 Cor. 3:5). However, nowhere else in the New Testament does Paul (or any other author) connect one's status as a διάκονος to service with a specific local congregation, as is the case with Phoebe and the church at Cenchreae. The phrase “διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας” (*diakonon tes ekklesias* – of the church) is unique to Romans 16:1. Because Paul is listing Phoebe's credentials to Roman Christians who would be unfamiliar with her, because she is probably on official church business on his behalf in delivering his letter, because he connects her διάκονος-ship with a specific local congregation, and because his designation of her as a προστάτις indicates that she was a woman who advocated for and supported others in the Gospel, the textual argument for reading διάκονος as a specific office or leadership position becomes very strong. On top of this, numerous early Christian commentators interpreted Phoebe's position in Romans 16:1 as a reference to a specific office in the church without question. For example, see Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, 10.17.

On the other hand, even if a strong case can be made that Phoebe held an office or leadership position, what cannot be determined is what exactly the function of a first century deacon was. 1 Timothy 3:8-13 gives a list of qualifications to serve as deacons, but sheds no light on what roles they were performing on behalf of their local congregations. Extra-biblical documents do not begin to shed significant light on what deacons of any gender were doing until the late second or early third century, and by then, the ministry of female deacons or deaconesses was significantly different from that of their male counterparts, being limited largely to ministry among other women. This does not mean that Phoebe's ministry was limited primarily to women, for a lot can change about a church's polity towards women in the span of even a hundred years (DBE: 39-40). Still, no one knows for certain that she was performing functions that are associated with male-only ministries in our day and age.

The best that can be said about Phoebe is, “Whatever the 'deacons' were at Philippi [1 Tim. 3:8-13], that Phoebe was at Cenchrea.” (LPR:235)

Priscilla & Aquila

Mentioned by name a total of seven times throughout the texts of the New Testament (Acts 18:2, 18, 19; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19), Priscilla and Aquila were a husband-wife team active in evangelism and church planting in the earliest Christian church. They lived and traveled with the apostle Paul, becoming his dearly loved friends and “co-workers” with him

in the Gospel. In the Greek, the Pauline [& Pseudo-Pauline] epistles use Πρίσκα (*Prisca*) while the author of Acts uses the diminutive form of the name, Πρίσκιλλα (*Priscilla*), the latter having been popularized as the standard form for her name in most modern English translations of the Bible. At the time of Paul's epistle to the Romans, they were leading a house church in Rome (Rom. 16:3-5a). The church that met in their home was also mentioned in 1 Cor. 16:19.

Priscilla and Aquila were among the Jewish Christians living in Rome who were expelled from the city by the Emperor Claudius in AD 49. According to Acts 18, they were living in Corinth when they met and formed a relationship with Paul, hosting him in their home for eighteen months. They accompanied Paul on his mission to Syria, but parted ways from him in Ephesus. It was during their stay in Ephesus that they met the prominent preacher Apollos and “explained to him the Way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26).

The couple is curious for being the only married couple in the Bible who are always listed together, never independently of one another. However, even more curious is the fact that Priscilla's name is usually listed first—five out of seven times. As with our modern custom of saying “Mr. and Mrs.,” ancient Roman naming convention almost always meant listing the husband's name first. That Priscilla's name abnormally appears before Aquila's on such a consistent basis suggests that Priscilla was the more prominent of the ministry couple (DBE:122). Some scholars have even argued for Priscilla as the author of the epistle to the Hebrews (WBC:762-63).

Priscilla and Aquila are venerated as Saints by several Christian traditions, while some Orthodox churches commemorate Aquila as an apostle.

Junia

The enigmatic designation of a woman named Junia as “distinguished among the apostles” (ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις - *episēmos en tois apostolois*) has in recent years set off a tempest of debate among the evangelical community, for if women were permitted to serve in the highest seat of authority in the early church, why should they be barred from serving as pastors and elders today?

John Chrysostom (ca. 344/354 - 407) provides the most poignant early witness to the fact that this verse was understood as referencing a female apostle:

“Greet Andronicus and Junia . . . distinguished among the apostles.' To be apostles is a great thing, but to be distinguished among them—consider what an extraordinary accolade that is! They were distinguished because of their works and because of their upright deeds. Indeed, how great was the wisdom of this woman that she was thought worthy of being called an apostle!” (*In epistulam ad Romanos* 31.2; PG:60.669-70, translation mine)

Nevertheless, debate on whether this was actually a woman holding the authoritative office of apostle has persisted on three main points.

Junia or Junias? - Some have argued that the Ἰουνίας of Romans 16:7 is a *masculine* name, and numerous modern translations have agreed with this contention by favoring Junias in the main English text (NIV, ASV, RSV, NASB). However, while Junia as a Latin name for a

woman is frequently attested in the ancient world, Junias as a Latin name for a man is completely unattested (FWA: 24). Some scholars have proposed that *Ἰουνία* could be the Greek shortened form of the Latin name Junianus since the latter is attested. However, the nominative/accusative forms of the hypocorism for Junianus would be *Ἰούνιος/Ἰούνιον*, *not* *Ἰουνιᾶς/Ἰουνιᾶν* (FWA: 42). Furthermore, this *still* would not explain the lack of a masculine *Ἰουνιᾶς* elsewhere in the ancient world as we would have expected to see this contraction of the name in other places.

The earliest commentators were virtually unanimous in their identification of Junia as a woman until the twelfth century, a list that includes nearly two dozen witnesses (FWA:32). The only exception was Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310/320 – 403), whose witness is not reliable because he identifies the obviously-female Priscilla as a man in the very same passage of his commentary(!). Jewett's acerbic assessment of man-Junia as “a figment of chauvinist imagination” (JCR: 962) seems appropriate.

“Distinguished among the apostles” v. “Well-known to the apostles” - In recent years, Wallace and Burer have proposed that *ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις* should be read in an exclusive sense, i. e. “well-known *to* the apostles,” instead of the traditional, inclusive “distinguished *among* the apostles.” The lexical and exegetical arguments surrounding this point of contention are lengthy and complex. I believe that the evidence strongly favors an inclusive translation of the phrase, though an exclusive reading cannot be responsibly ruled out altogether. See JRA for the paper by Wallace and Burer and GW:165-80, JEA, and FWA:72-8 for critiques of their arguments.

What sort of “apostle”? - This represents the most valid point of contention. *Ἀπόστολος* did not always refer to an authoritative office in Paul's epistles. Walters (WEC:188-89) lays out four different usages for “*ἀπόστολος*” found in the Pauline corpus:

- (1) Members of the Twelve.
- (2) People who had seen the resurrected Christ and been commissioned by him to testify of this (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:1-11).
- (3) Missionaries “successful in church planting, labor and suffering,” which are the basis of Paul's arguments 2 Cor.
- (4) Emissaries of local churches (2 Cor. 8:23; Php. 2:25).

Of these options, Walters rules out (1) and (4). There is little indication that Andronicus and Junia (or anyone else, for that matter) were ever ordained to replace deceased members of the Twelve after the ordination of Matthias in Acts 1, and the “emissaries” interpretation is unlikely since their apostleship is not connected with a specific local church or task. That leaves (2) or (3). The second option would bolster arguments for the ordination of women or the idea that women held the priesthood before the Apostasy, while the third option would not. Unfortunately, the data from the text itself is inconclusive.

Based on the text of Romans 16 alone, the possibility that Junia held an authoritative apostolic office does exist, but it is not the only option. She may have simply been a church planter and missionary.

Co-workers & Hard Workers

συνεργός (*synergos* - “co-worker”) and those who κοπιῶ (*kopiaō* – a verb meaning “to work hard”) were semi-titles and honorific descriptions that Paul used of his associates throughout his epistles. Within the text of Romans 16, Priscilla (v. 3), Aquila (v. 3), Urbanus (v. 9) and Timothy (v. 21) are all identified as “co-workers” while Mary (v. 6), Tryphaena (v. 12), Tryphosa (v. 12), and Persis (v. 12) are identified as “hard workers.” When all Pauline [& Pseudo-Pauline] epistles are considered, those identified by name as “co-workers” or “hard workers” include:

Co-Workers & Hard Workers	
Priscilla	Rom. 16:3
Aquila	Rom. 16:3
Mary	Rom. 16:6
Urbanus	Rom. 16:9
Tryphaena	Rom. 16:12
Tryphosa	Rom. 16:12
Persis	Rom. 16:12
Timothy	Rom. 16:21; 1 Th. 3:2
Titus	2 Cor. 8:23
Epaphroditus	Php. 2:25
Euodia	Php. 4:2-3
Synteche	Php. 4:2-3
Clement	Php. 4:3
Aristarchus	Col. 4:10-11; Phm. 1:24
Mark	Col. 4:10-11; Phm. 1:24
Justus	Col. 4:10-11
Philemon	Phm. 1:1
Demas	Phm. 1:24
Luke	Phm. 1:24

Timothy's identity as a co-worker opens some intriguing possibilities. Applying Timothy's functions to all co-workers and hard-workers, Grenz and Kjesbo argue that these early Christians “assisted in composing letters (Rom 16:22; 1 Thess 1:1), carried apostolic messages to local churches (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10-11), sought to encourage the believers on Paul's behalf (1 Thess 3:2), [and] reported to Paul the status of congregations under his care (1 Thess 3:6).” They also note that Priscilla and Aquila hosted a house church (WTC: 84). In 1 Th. 5:12, Paul speaks of hard workers as having charge over their brothers and sisters and being tasked with admonishing them, and in 1 Cor. 16:16, Paul urges the Corinthian believers to “submit themselves” (ὁμεῖς ὑποτάσσηθε) to all who co-work and hard-work (παντὶ τῷ συνεργοῦντι καὶ κοπιῶντι). Paul's designation of his associates as co-workers and hard workers appears to signal an important ministry, possibly even one that involves leadership in local churches.

Final Instructions

Verses 17-20 consist of Paul's final warning to the believers in Rome. He names no one specifically, but he may have in mind problems with divisions that are already forming or he may be concerned that the current leaders could become corrupted. Re-iterating his mission to “bring Gentiles to obey Israel's God” as mentioned in 1:5 and 15:18, Paul warns them “to be 'wise' in good matters (contrast 1:22) and 'innocent' or unskilled in what is evil (16:19).” However, Paul is not ordering believers to be naïve. It is possible that he has in mind the idea of “the first humans partaking from the tree that provided experiential knowledge of the difference between good and evil (cf. Rom 5:12-21; Gen 3:5)” (CCR: 190).

Having sent greetings *to* believers in Rome, Paul now sends greetings *from* some of the believers residing in Corinth with him. Mentioned first is Timothy (v. 21), Paul's companion and “co-worker” who is mentioned in many other places throughout the New Testament (e. g., 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10; Php. 2:19-22; 1 Thess. 3:2). Lucius (v. 21) could be the Lucius of Acts 13:1, the author of the Lucan corpus, or it could be another “Luke” altogether. Jason (v. 21) may be the Jason of Acts 17:5-7 while Sosipater (v. 21) is likely the Sopater of Acts 20:4. Paul's scribe, Tertius, whose name suggests that he was the third-born son of a Roman family, inserts his own greeting (v. 22), the only known example of a scribe naming himself in the Pauline corpus. Later, “Quartus” (v. 23) likely identifies a fourth-born male. Gaius (v. 23) is apparently “a patron and person of means,” like Phoebe in v. 1-2 (CCR: 191).

By far the most interesting mention is Erastus, who is called the city's treasurer or director of public works. Keener notes: “Because the Greek phrase describing his work here is more general than a corresponding Latin one would be, scholars debate his exact role. An inscription from this era mentions one Erastus (presumably from the city's same political class) as Corinth's aedile” (CCR: 191). Some scholars believe the Erastus of the inscription and the Erastus of Romans 16 are one and the same, which would constitute extra-biblical confirmation of the existence of this Erastus if so.



Doxology

In concluding his letter, Paul offers final praise to God that recaps many of the themes discussed throughout Romans. As per Keener (CCR: 193):

Rom. 16:25-27	Earlier points in Romans
God is powerful to “establish” you according to my gospel (16:25)	I yearn to share some grace-gift by God's Spirit so you may be “established” (1:11)
“my gospel” (16:25)	God will judge people according to “my gospel” (2:16); Paul serves the gospel (1:1, 9, 16; 15:16, 19-20; cf. 10:15-16) and wants to share it with them (1:15)
“Preaching” of Jesus Christ (16:25)	Preaching (10:8, 14-15)
“Revelation” (<i>apokalupsis</i>) of the gospel mystery (16:25)	God's righteousness “revealed” in the gospel (1:17)
“Mystery” of Gentile inclusion (16:25)	“Mystery” of how Gentiles are included (11:25)
God's mystery is now “revealed” (<i>phaneroō</i>) from the Scriptures of the prophets (16:26)	God's righteousness is now “revealed” from the law and prophets (3:21); Paul's good news was already promised in the prophets (1:1-2); cf. <i>apokaluptō</i> in 1:17
The objective is the “obedience of faith” among all nations (16:26)	The objective is the “obedience of faith” among all nations (1:5; 15:18; cf. moral righteousness in chs. 6-8)
To the only wise God be glory forever (16:27)	To God be glory forever (11:36), for his incomparable wisdom (11:33)

Abbreviations

CCR	Craig S. Keener, <i>Romans: A New Covenant Commentary</i> (Eugene, Or.: Cascade, 2009).
DBE	Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis and Gordon D. Fee, eds., <i>Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy</i> (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005).
FWA	Eldon Jay Epp, <i>Junia: The First Woman Apostle</i> (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2005).
GW	Richard Bauckham, <i>Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels</i> (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002).
JCR	Robert Jewett, <i>Romans: A Commentary</i> (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007).
JEA	Linda Belleville, “Ιουνίαν . . . ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις: A Re-examination of Romans 16.7 in Light of Primary Source Material,” <i>New Testament Studies</i> 51 (2005): 231-49.
JRA	Michael H. Burer and Daniel B. Wallace, “Was Junia Really an Apostle?: A Re-examination of Rom 16.7,” <i>New Testament Studies</i> 47 (2001): 76-91.
LPR	C. H. Dodd, <i>The Letter of Paul to the Romans</i> (New York, N. Y.: Harper and Bros., 1932).
PG	Jacques Paul Migne, <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , 162 vols.
TGEL	Joseph Henry Thayer, et al., <i>The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament with Index</i> (LaFayette, Ind.: APSA, 1981).
WBC	Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans, eds., <i>The IVP Women's Bible Commentary</i> (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
WEC	Carroll D. Osburn, ed., <i>Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity: Vol. 1</i> (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1993).
WTC	Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, <i>Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry</i> (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

Although not directly cited in this version of the article, I am indebted to Kevin L. Barney, an LDS academic, for his *Footnotes to the New Testament: Romans*. See http://feastupontheword.org/images/7/7c/12_Romans.pdf.