
ROMANS 16

COMMENTARY

1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the [assembly] which is at Cenchrea; 2 that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.

ch 16 Earlier liberals, up until the 1930s or so, widely looked at the material of Romans ch. 16 as being inauthentic to Paul's letter sent to Rome. Various theories espoused that Paul's epistle *minus* ch. 16 was sent to Rome, but perhaps the epistle *plus* ch. 16 was sent to Ephesus, something obviously predisposed toward looking at Romans as a theological treatise and not really a letter sent to First Century Believers in Rome. An alternative proposal may see the greetings of ch. 16 as a part of some non-extant additional correspondence sent to Rome, and later appended onto the canonical edition of Romans, yet still representing the same Roman audience.¹ The considerable bulk of interpreters and examiners today, however, widely consider Romans ch. 16 and the data it contains to be authentic, with the greetings issued recognized to be a natural part of what one would expect to see with the Apostle Paul explaining who he is, and how he intended to move westward to Rome and then on to Spain.²

While many lay readers of ch. 16 might be prone to just skim through much of what is communicated, responsible Bible teachers do not have this luxury. As noted by Douglas J. Moo in his commentary, the material of ch. 16 is important "for those few who are especially interested in the socioeconomic composition of the early church," further indicating how "it is a gold mine."³ Paul knew a great deal about some of the internal makeup of the Roman community of Messiah followers. It is probable that he had heard about some of these people via intermediaries like Priscilla and Aquila (vs. 3-4). Some of the people he listed he may have even met personally during his activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially when the Jewish expulsion from Rome by the Edict of Claudius is considered.

What is important from Romans ch. 16, which cannot go unnoticed, is how the examiner is presented with various demographic details about the Roman Believers, clues as to whether these people were Jewish or non-Jewish (although not always determinant), those who may have been of some economic means, and those who were slaves or freed persons. The people listed in ch. 16 also provide clues for readers as to the number of sub-assemblies or fellowship groups among the Roman Believers.⁴ Moo is one who thinks that there are "at least three, and perhaps five, separate house churches (vv. 5, 14, 15; cf. also vv. 10, 11)."⁵ While some of this was likely due to geography, with groups being spread throughout the vicinity of Rome, some of it was probably also due to various

¹ Cf. Witherington, pp 375-376.

² Edwards, pp 352-353.

³ Moo, 918.

⁴ Cf. Wright, in *NIB*, 10:761.

⁵ Moo, 919.

theological and spiritual emphases, with various groups being more conservative than others (as would be detectable via the scene of fellowship meals in ch. 14).

Among the Roman Believers, there was some mixture of Jews, Greeks, and Romans to be sure. Noting the specific presence of the Jewish Believers mentioned in ch. 16, Ben Witherington III indicates how Paul “wants the marginalized Jewish Christians, many of them newly back in Rome from exile, to be embraced.”⁶ While the interconnectedness of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, and their reliance on one another, is a certain theme of Romans—what can take some modern readers aback is how many females are issued greetings in ch. 16, a strong indication that females were indeed valued in the leadership of the First Century Body of Messiah. James R. Edwards states for us, “Of the 29 names in the total list, fully one-third are women’s. Suffice it to say that Paul is not the despiser of women, nor the advocate of male-dominated ministry, that he is often portrayed as being.”⁷ As difficult as it can be for various of today’s Messianics to see Jewish and non-Jewish Believers brought together as one in Yeshua, it is even more difficult for various of today’s Messianics to see men and women brought together, and serving the Lord side-by-side.

16:1 Paul’s closing greetings begin with the word, “I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, who is a servant of the assembly that is at Cenchreae” (HNV). The position of Phoebe, as the one who delivered the Epistle to the Romans, to the Romans, is especially notable. Phoebe was not just a letter carrier; Phoebe was granted some significant authority by Paul in conveying his message to the Roman Believers. Craig S. Keener astutely describes, “as the letter’s bearer who knew Paul’s intention directly, she might read it (hence ‘perform’ it orally, and by gestures communicate his emphases and ironies) in the congregations in Rome; certainly she would be called on to explain elements if questions arose.”⁸ Paul did not just hand his letter off to Phoebe as she departed for Rome; Paul made sure that she was issued an approval in his letter, and he probably had several long conversations with Phoebe about what he intended the letter to convey to the Roman Believers. This would serve Paul’s ministry interests as he was moving westward. Witherington further details,

“She is the vanguard, preparing the way for Paul’s visit. Among other things she would likely be the one who delivers Paul’s letter and who begins to make arrangements for Paul’s accommodations, and perhaps also collects resources for his further missionary work.”⁹

It has been widely recognized how “She was likely a Gentile, as her name carries strong associations with the mythology of Apollos (Phoebus) and Artemis” (*ISBE*).¹⁰ Yet, while a letter like Romans being delivered by a non-Jewish person may have had some controversy, it is the gender of Phoebe which still bears the most amount of controversy, even until today. Noting that Phoebe was not Jewish, Tim Hegg summarizes,

“This fact, in itself, emphasizes a central tenet of the Apostle’s theology, namely, that membership within the body of Messiah, and the privileges and responsibilities which attach to such membership, are founded neither upon one’s lineage nor upon one’s gender (cf. Gal. 3:28). Furthermore, that Paul commends a woman as the one he had selected to deliver this most significant epistle, stresses the obvious fact that he did not consider women inferior to the work of the Master.”¹¹

The exact position that Phoebe occupied within the First Century *ekklēsia*, is a matter of some debate. The text communicates *Phoibēn tēn adelphēn hēmōn, ousan [kai] diakonon tēs ekklēsias* (Φοίβην τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν, οὐσαν [καὶ] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας), “Phoebe the sister of us, being also a deacon of

⁶ Witherington, 379.

⁷ Edwards, 355.

⁸ Keener, pp 182-183.

⁹ Witherington, 383.

¹⁰ R.L. Omanson, “Phoebe,” in *ISBE*, 3:853.

¹¹ Hegg, *Romans 9-16*, 447.

the church – in Cenchrea” (Brown and Comfort).¹² That Phoebe was the female, non-Jewish courier, who carried Paul’s letter to Rome, is not in dispute. That Phoebe was **a recognized deacon** of the assembly of Messiah followers at Cenchrea, which was one of the two seaports of Corinth (cf. Acts 18:18), is disputed.

Phoebe is labeled to be a *dikakonos* (δῆκονος), and the controversy over what she was is detectable in a relatively classical lexicon like *LS*: “a minister of the church, a deacon, N.T.: as fem. a *deaconess*.”¹³ That there were deacons in the First Century assembly, is a fact to be recognized (cf. Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 10, 12). Because of Phoebe’s gender, not all versions render *diakonos* as “deacon” (NRSV, TNIV) in v. 1, but instead as either “deaconess” (RSV), or the more generic “servant” (NASU, ESV) or “ministrant” (YLT). The NEB uses the paraphrased and vague, “who holds office in the congregation.” One’s approach toward 1 Timothy 3:11, and the instructions Paul issued there regarding a deacon, plays a role in how Phoebe’s status is identified. Many view *Gunaikas hōsautōs* (Γυναικας ὡσαύτως) in 1 Timothy 3:11 as regarding, “Women...likewise *be* dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things,” a sure indication that Paul anticipated that Timothy would appoint female deacons among the Ephesian Believers. Others view *gunaikas hōsautōs* as speaking instead of “wives likewise” (ESV), an indication that the office of deacon was one for men only. C.E.B. Cranfield is among those many who conclude that Phoebe was indeed a deacon:

“It is perhaps just conceivable that the word δῆκονος [*diakonos*] should be understood here as a quite general reference to her service of the congregation; but it is very much more natural, particularly in view of the way in which Paul formulates his thought...to understand it as referring to a definite office. We regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as ‘a (or possibly ‘the’) deacon’ of the church in question, and that this occurrence of δῆκονος [*diakonos*] is to be classified with its occurrences in Phil 1.1 and 1 Tim 3.8 and 12.”¹⁴

There are examiners, of course, who are not convinced that Phoebe was a “deacon,” per se, but are still willing to recognize that as a First Century female, she was given a wide degree of responsibility.¹⁵ Others, more complementarian than not in their view of gender roles in the Body of Messiah, tend to emphasize that the offices of service in the *ekklēsia* were still being formalized, and that Phoebe is best taken to just be a servant of some sort.¹⁶

Some compare the position of *diakonos* to the role of a *chazan* (חַזַּן) in Judaism, often a “superintendent, office” (*Jastrow*).¹⁷ In the Messianic community, however, this is often viewed in terms of a *shamash* (שַׁמַּשׁ), who was an “attendant, servant, waiter” (*Jastrow*).¹⁸ *EJ* notes that “A shamash performed a number of functions varying in accordance with the measure of autonomy or the nature of the religious institutions he served: tax collector, bailiff, process server, secretary, messenger, almoner, all-around handyman, grave digger, or notary. He sometimes acted as shulklaper, knocking on window shutters with a mallet to summon Jews to prayer, to announce the arrival of the Sabbath, or waken people for pre-dawn penitential services. By signing the minutes of the *kahal* or of an association he testified to their correctness.”¹⁹ This is witnessed in the CJB rendering of v. 1: “I am introducing to you our sister Phoebe, *shammash* of the congregation at Cenchrea.” The TLV has the somewhat modified, “Now I recommend to you our sister Phoebe—who is a *shammashit* of Messiah’s community at

¹² Brown and Comfort, 575.

¹³ *LS*, 189.

¹⁴ Cranfield, *Romans* 9-16, 781; also Edwards, pp 353-354.

¹⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 38b:887.

¹⁶ Moo, pp 913-914; Keener, 183.

¹⁷ *Jastrow*, 444.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1602.

¹⁹ Isaac Levitats, “Shammash,” in *EJ*.

Cenchrea.”²⁰ With the considerable bulk of today’s Messianic movement being complementarian, and not usually open-minded or forward-thinking regarding women in positions of leadership, David H. Stern has had to carefully craft his statements in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*:

“She was either its only *shammash*, or one among several. It is possible that the Greek word ‘*dikakonos*,’ with the root meaning ‘runner of errands,’ should be taken here to mean ‘servant’ or ‘worker’ in a general sense, as is usually the case in the New Testament. But there is good reason to think that in this instance it is a technical term denoting someone ordained to a recognized office in the congregation and having the duty of caring for its practical affairs, as at Ac 6:6. The usual English term for this office is ‘deacon,’ which transliterates the Greek word; and the closest Hebrew equivalent is ‘*shammash*’ (Yiddish ‘*shammes*’), the person who handles the day-to-day practical tasks of keeping a synagogue going.

“In an age where feminism is an issue, it should be noted not only that this woman held a prominent office in the Cenchrean congregation, but that the word ‘*diakonos*’ is a masculine, not a feminine, form. Phoebe was a ‘deacon,’ not a ‘deaconess’ (as some English versions render the word).”²¹

Stern goes on to reference the requirements listed for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, which there are questions about among examiners regarding whether these are universal requirements for all places and circumstances, or whether they pertained more to the circumstances Timothy was having to rectify in Ephesus. Among the Romans commentators we have been considering, Colin G. Kruse leans toward these instructions being included as “advice to Timothy,”²² and this writer also approaches the instructions for both elders and deacons in 1 Timothy chs. 2-3 as being more situational for Ephesus and not universal.²³

Hegg is a Messianic commentator who recognizes that Phoebe being noted as a *diakonos*, had to have meant that she was a deacon. He states, “We should...understand Paul’s introduction to specify that Phoebe was a (or even ‘the’) deacon of the community from which she had been sent....There is every reason to believe...that Phoebe held an official position in the congregation at Cenchrea, and that she did so without regard to her gender.”²⁴ Hegg goes even further, surprisingly, in observing how “The fact that women have been sidelined (by no desire of their own) must be brought forward as at least one reason why the people of God are often ‘half-strength’ in their efforts. It should be noted that throughout earth’s history God has often used women in strategic ways to awaken His people to the ways of obedience and truth.”²⁵

For the Epistle to the Romans, it is entirely appropriate for us to recognize how a female deacon, Phoebe, is the one who delivered this letter to its recipients. It was not only a woman who delivered this piece of writing—what many consider to be the most influential letter ever written in human history—but who most probably had also been briefed by Paul on how to answer various questions or concerns when they arose.

16:2 Paul requests that the Roman Believers be generous to Phoebe, in receiving her, by stating, “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” (NRSV). Phoebe was a

²⁰ The Delitzsch Hebrew New Testament lists her as a *shameshet* (שָׁמֶשֶׁת).

²¹ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 439.

²² Kruse, pp 554-555.

²³ This is examined more fully in the author’s commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.

²⁴ Hegg, *Romans 9-16*, 447.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 448.

prostatis (προστάτις), “a woman in a supportive role, *patron, benefactor*” (BDAG),²⁶ a good indication that she had some financial means. That Phoebe was traveling to Rome on some sort of personal business, is certain enough. Paul had a trustworthy courier to convey his letter to the Believers, whom he wants to help Phoebe in whatever personal matters she needed attending to.

Some interpreters think that Phoebe was on the way to Rome to conduct some legal business,²⁷ perhaps even settling a lawsuit.²⁸ This is often focused around how the term *pragma* (πράγμα), “matter” (NASU), can mean “a matter of contention, *dispute, lawsuit*” (BDAG),²⁹ as it is in 1 Corinthians 16:1: “Does any one of you, when he has a case [*pragma*] against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?” Phoebe going to Rome to settle a legal case is not required, though, as her travels could just as well have been on some sort of financial business. Kruse properly concludes, “Paul’s description of Phoebe both as a deacon of the [assembly] and a benefactor of himself and many others, is sufficient to show that she exercised a significant ministry in the [assembly] at Cenchreae in addition to being a patron of Paul’s ministry.”³⁰

3 Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Messiah Yeshua, 4 who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the [assemblies] of the Gentiles; 5 also greet the [assembly] that is in their house. Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Messiah from Asia. 6 Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.

16:3 Paul tells the Roman Believers, “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Messiah *Yeshua*” (TLV). Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila were among those Jews who had been expelled from Rome by the Edict of Claudius, and had served with Paul in Corinth and Ephesus (Acts 18:1-4, 24-28), having an assembly gathering at their house (1 Corinthians 16:19). There is certainly discussion why Prisca or Priscilla is more frequently referenced before her husband in the Apostolic Writings (Acts 18:18, 26; 2 Timothy 4:19), as both Priscilla and Aquila would have had to work as a spousal team in ministry service. Cranfield’s explanation is probably one of the better ones to be considered:

“The noteworthy fact that the wife’s name is more often placed before her husband’s than after it in the NT is, we would think, much more probably to be explained as due either to her having been converted before him (and perhaps having led her husband to faith in Christ) or to her having played an even more prominent part in the life and work of the Church than Aquila had, than to her having been socially superior to him.”³¹

16:4 Paul is very grateful for the service of Priscilla and Aquila, noting to the Romans, “[they] laid down their neck for my soul, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the assemblies of the nations” (LITV). Priscilla and Aquila would have apparently been among those who risked themselves for Paul at the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-40; cf. 2 Corinthians 6:5; 11:23).

One clause which receives a wide amount of quoting, in various sectors of the Messianic movement, is *hai ekklēsiai tōn ethnōn* (αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τῶν ἐθνῶν), “the assemblies of the nations” (YLT). While Christian readers of Romans will often see “the churches of the Gentiles,” and then continue reading without thinking about what this is, this clause has received a wide degree of play in

²⁶ BDAG, 885.

²⁷ Stott, 392.

²⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, 38b:888, 889.

²⁹ BDAG, 859.

³⁰ Kruse, 557.

³¹ Cranfield, *Romans* 9-16, 784.

contemporary Messianic discussions surrounding ecclesiology and the composition of the people of God.

Romans 16:4 is a verse, which to my knowledge is not widely emphasized in more academic Messianic discussions regarding bilateral ecclesiology, but is referred to by a selection of Internet bloggers, and those who widely (and perhaps inappropriately) employ social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) to express their views. In this single salutation, the Apostle Paul makes a reference to “the churches of the Gentiles” (ESV). To various advocates of bilateral ecclesiology, mostly laypersons, “the congregations of the Gentiles” (The Messianic Writings) must be a separate grouping of Messiah followers, independent of other assemblies and fellowships of Jewish Believers. The Body of Messiah is thus made up of a distinct and widely separate non-Jewish branch. And, to a Christian commentator like Witherington, he does take “All the churches of the Gentiles” to be overwhelmingly non-Jewish in their demographic.³²

What is interesting to be aware of, about the clause *hai ekklēsiai tōn ethnōn*, is how it is actually translated in two Messianic Jewish Bible versions of note. The Complete Jewish Bible has, “the Messianic communities among the Gentiles,” and the Tree of Life—The New Covenant has, “Messiah’s communities among the Gentiles.” Rather than translating the genitive (case indicating possession) *tōn ethnōn* as just “of the Gentiles/nations,” a preference toward “among the Gentiles/nations” is definitely seen.

There are a variety of potential types of genitives which *tōn ethnōn* could belong to, as classified by Daniel B. Wallace’s *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. These include: a genitive of material [made out of, consisting of],³³ a genitive of content [full of, containing],³⁴ a genitive of source (or origin) [out of, derived from, dependent on],³⁵ a genitive of place/space [where or within which],³⁶ a genitive of association [in association with],³⁷ or perhaps a genitive of destination (a.k.a. direction) or purpose [destined for, toward].³⁸

In reviewing Wallace’s categories here, in my evaluation, the closest to be considered, allowing for *tōn ethnōn* to be translated as “among the Gentiles/nations,” would appear to be the genitive of association. As he defines it,

“The genitive substantive indicates the one with whom the noun to which it stands related is associated. This usage is somewhat common, but only in certain collocations.”³⁹

Wallace goes on to indicate how within a genitive of association, one should expect a rendering along the lines of: “For *of* supply *with*, or *in association with*.”⁴⁰ One example that he lists, which should pique the attention of today’s Messianics, is Ephesians 2:19: “you are fellow citizens **with the saints**,” *tōn hagiōn* (τῶν ἁγίων). If, as a genitive of association, *tōn hagiōn* were rendered as “among the saints,” the same intention would be conveyed: non-Jewish Believers get to be a part of the same community as Jewish Believers, the saints. However, in the case of *tōn ethnōn* (τῶν ἐθνῶν) being rendered as “among the Gentiles/nations” in the JNT/CJB and TLV, the intention of being “among” takes on a definite locational quality.

³² Witherington, 386.

³³ Wallace, pp 91-92.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 92-94.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 109-110.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 124-125.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 128-130.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 100-101.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

An important sentiment to be aware of, is probably witnessed in the book *To The Ends Of The Earth: How the First Jewish Followers of Yeshua Transformed the Ancient World*, by Messianic Jewish teacher Jeffrey L. Seif. He makes the important conclusion,

“Paul is observed making his way around the Greco-Roman world, where he frequents synagogues and tells of the life and teachings of Yeshua. He advocates for a community of Jews and Gentiles together. He makes friends and enemies in the process.”⁴¹

If a wide variety of today’s Messianic Jewish leaders and teachers, such as those who have participated in the *Tree of Life, Messianic Jewish Family Bible Project* (including Seif)—really wanted to emphasize bilateral ecclesiology and force it upon Messianic people—then why does a Bible version like the TLV have “Messiah’s communities among the Gentiles,” for Romans 16:4? Unlike the JNT/CJB by Stern, which is largely the product of a single expositor—the TLV has over fifteen different Messianic Jewish ministries and organizations on its board of reference! And, this does include those who (strongly) adhere to a bilateral ecclesiology of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-13, 19) being composed of the Jewish people/Messianic Jewish community and the Christian Church.

A rendering like that seen in the TLV, “Messiah’s communities among the Gentiles,” actually provides more support for mixed assemblies and fellowships of non-Jewish *and* Jewish Messiah followers, than two sub-communities of Messiah followers separated out. Taking *tōn ethnōn* to mean “among the nations,” of course, makes this being a locational setting, perhaps as a genitive of association, within the Mediterranean basin outside of the Land of Israel/Roman province of Judea.

Among commentators who see *hai ekklēsiai tōn ethnōn* as perhaps being a separate group of Believers, to be slightly differentiated from the Jewish Believers, Kruse actually observes, “The other comment Paul makes about Priscilla and Aquila is that *not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them*. For what reason were all of the Gentile churches grateful to them? Perhaps it was because this couple of Jewish believers had opened their homes in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:9) and Rome (16:5a) to Gentile believers?”⁴² Here, it would seem that “all the Gentile churches” (NLT) would often be groups of Messiah followers, facilitated by Jewish Believers, in an effort to reach out to pagans with the good news of Israel’s Messiah! This is hardly some support of two distinct and widely separate branches of the faith community, as proposed by Messianic Jewish bilateral ecclesiology.

16:5 By the time that Paul wrote the Believers in Rome, his two friends Priscilla and Aquila had apparently returned to the city, and were leading a fellowship of Messiah followers, as he states, “Greet the assembly that is in their house” (a, HNV). V. 5 continues with the remark, “Greet Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Messiah from Asia” (b), who apparently also made it to Rome. It is hard to tell if Epaenetus was Jewish or not, but the emphasis of him being *aparchē tēs Asias* (ἀπαρχῆ τῆς Ἀσίας), which is much better rendered as “who is the firstfruits of Achaia” (KJV), would lend support to him being an Ephesian non-Jew, who seemingly made his way with Priscilla and Aquila to Rome. He was certainly the first of many more people who would come to Messiah faith in Asia Minor. The term *aparchē* is similarly used in 1 Corinthians 16:15, regarding “the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and...they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints.”

⁴¹ Jeffrey L. Seif, *To The Ends Of The Earth: How the First Jewish Followers of Yeshua Transformed the Ancient World* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer, 2012). [eBook for Amazon Kindle]

Be aware of how Seif was able to say this, in spite of the fact of how elsewhere in his work, he actually attested of how “Dr. Mark Kinzer...[is] a man whom I consider to be one of the most thoughtful theologians in the modern-day Messianic Jewish revival...,” with Kinzer being one of the main persons responsible for the Messianic Jewish, bilateral ecclesiology.

For a further discussion, consult the relevant parts of the author’s publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?*

⁴² Kruse, 560.

16:6 Paul issues greetings to a female in v. 6: “Greet Miriam, who has worked hard for you” (TLV). It is most natural to take the Greek *Maria* (Μαρία), and view it as the equivalent of the Hebrew *Miriam* (מִרְיָם),⁴³ which would make this individual a Diaspora Jew. The *BDAG* lexicon lists this person as “an otherw. unknown Christian, probably of Jewish descent,” but does note the doubts of some scholars, who draw attention to *Maria* as “the fem. form of the Roman name Marius.”⁴⁴ There is little reason for us to think that this Miriam or Mary was not Jewish. Yet, given how common the name Miriam was in Judaism, this Mary of Rome should be identified as one who was independent of the other Marys witnessed in the Apostolic Scriptures.⁴⁵

7 Greet Andronicus and Junias {Junia, NRSV, ESV, HCSB, TNIV}, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Messiah before me.

16:7 As it appears in the RSV, v. 7 reads as, “Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.” That these two figures were some sort of important ministry team, who were most probably Jewish (the NRSV calls them “relatives”; the TNIV and NLT have “my fellow Jews”), and with whom Paul had spent some time in prison, is fairly deducible. These two individuals had believed in Yeshua before Paul, and they are recognized to be *episēmos* (ἐπίσημος), “**of exceptional quality, splendid, prominent, outstanding**” (*BDAG*).⁴⁶

Over the past several decades, there has been considerable debate over the gender of the second person listed in v. 7, with the pendulum definitely having swung away from what is listed in lexicons as *Iouñias* (Ἰουνιάς) being a male, “Junias,” with now a significant majority in Biblical Studies recognizing “the strong probability that a woman named *Junia* is meant” (*BDAG*).⁴⁷ As one traces Bible scholarship from the 1960s to the present, older scholars considered this figure to be Junias, a male:

- “Grammatically it might be a feminine...though this seems inherently less probable, partly because the person is referred to as an apostle” (*IDB*).⁴⁸
- “The name may be masculine, ‘Junias,’ a contraction of Junianus, or feminine, ‘Junia’...In all probability this is the masculine” (*ISBE*).⁴⁹

At first, the possibility that this individual may be a female is disregarded because it would mean that there is actually a female apostle in the Scriptures. The second quotation seems to moderate just a bit as there are no sexist editorial remarks. Bible scholarship over the past two to three decades stands in contrast to this:

- “The only woman who is called an ‘apostle’ in the NT...Without exception the Church fathers in late antiquity identified Andronicus’ partner in Rom 16:7 as a woman...Only later medieval copyists of Rom 16:7 could not imagine a woman being an apostle and wrote the masculine name ‘Junias.’ This latter name did not exist in antiquity...” (*ABD*).⁵⁰

⁴³ Cf. *Thayer*, pp 389-390.

⁴⁴ *BDAG*, 617.

⁴⁵ Cf. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Mary,” in *EDB*, pp 863-865.

⁴⁶ *BDAG*, 378.

⁴⁷ *BDAG*, 480; also Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), 476.

⁴⁸ F.W. Gingrich, “Junias,” in *IDB*, 2:1026-1027.

⁴⁹ S.F. Hunter, “Junias,” in *ISBE*, 2:1165.

⁵⁰ Peter Lampe, “Junias,” in *ABD*, 3:1127.

- “Probably the wife of Andronicus; member of a husband-wife team who, like Paul, were Jews...The only woman called ‘apostle’ in the NT, Junia may have accompanied Jesus’ ministry, had a vision of the risen Lord...Paul approved of her role, calling her ‘outstanding’ among apostles” (*EDB*).⁵¹

Major Bible versions today which employ the masculine “Junias” include the RSV, NASB/NASU, and the 1984 NIV. Versions produced over the past two decades or so will render v. 7 with the female “Junia” (NRSV, ESV, HCSB, TNIV). Messianic versions like the CJB and TLV rightly recognize this person as the female “Junia,” whereas The Messianic Writings has the male “Junias.”⁵²

The bulk of Romans commentaries, spanning the past three to four decades, almost uniformly identify the second person of v. 7 as a female. This includes the commentaries we have been consulting in this Romans study (C.E.B. Cranfield,⁵³ F.F. Bruce,⁵⁴ James D.G. Dunn,⁵⁵ James R. Edwards,⁵⁶ John R.W. Stott,⁵⁷ Douglas J. Moo,⁵⁸ Grant R. Osborne,⁵⁹ Ben Witherington III,⁶⁰ Craig S. Keener,⁶¹ Colin G. Kruse⁶²). Each one of these examiners might have a slightly different view of the role that the figure of Junia might have played among the First Century Believers—and certainly have different views on women in leadership in the Body of Messiah—but they all agree that this person was a female. **The significant majority of New Testament scholars accept the fact that Junia was a woman.** Andronicus and Junia were most likely husband and wife, but they could have been brother and sister.

What makes the rendering Junias (male) or Junia (female) significant is how Paul says, *episēmoi en tois apostolois* (εἰσιν ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις), and how Andronicus and Junia “are outstanding among the apostles” (NASU, NIV). Egalitarian interpreters, who believe in the ordination of female clergy today, certainly welcome the perspective of Junia as a female apostle and leader within the First Century *ekklēsia*.⁶³ Complementarian interpreters, who do not believe in the ordination of female clergy, will, perhaps a bit begrudgingly, have to still recognize that the second person listed in v. 7 is a female. But, complementarian interpreters may contest what it means for Junia to be *episēmos*, with a version like the ESV having, “They are well known to the apostles” (contra NRSV: “prominent among the apostles”).⁶⁴ Such a perspective is represented by Thomas R. Schreiner:

“Some have said that the verse proves that Junia was an apostle, and thus women can fill any church office. The verse seems to be saying, however, that Andronicus and Junia were **well known to the apostles**, not that Junia was herself an apostle.”⁶⁵

That there were apostles, other than the Original Twelve, is witnessed in the Messianic Scriptures (Acts 14:4, 14; 1 Corinthians 15:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:6). Paul himself was regarded as an apostle, and

⁵¹ Bonnie Thurston, “Junia,” in *EDB*, pp 756-757.

⁵² The ISR Scriptures (1998/2009), a Sacred Name Bible which will be seen from time to time within the broad Messianic community, uses the masculine “Junias.”

⁵³ Cranfield, *Romans 9-16*, 788.

⁵⁴ Bruce, 258.

⁵⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 38b:894.

⁵⁶ Edwards, pp 355-356.

⁵⁷ Stott, 396.

⁵⁸ Moo, pp 921-924.

⁵⁹ Osborne, pp 406-407.

⁶⁰ Witherington, pp 387-390.

⁶¹ Keener, 186.

⁶² Kruse, pp 563-565.

⁶³ Consult the perspective represented by Scot McKnight, *Junia Is Not Alone: Breaking Our Silence About Women in the Bible and the Church Today* (Englewood, CO: Patheos Press, 2011).

⁶⁴ A Messianic version like the TLV, seemingly follows the ESV in this regard: “who are well known among the *shlichim*.”

The Delitzsch Hebrew NT rendered *apostolois* (ἀποστόλοις) as *shlichim* (שְׁלִיחִים).

⁶⁵ Schreiner, in *ESV Study Bible*, 2184.

spoke in 2 Corinthians 8:23, “As for Titus, *he is* my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, *they are* messengers of the [assemblies], a glory to Messiah,” with *apostoloi ekklesiōn* (ἀπόστολοι ἐκκλησιῶν) very possibly being “apostles of the assemblies” (HNV). Andronicus and Junia serving as apostles, is much more likely in this context, in the sense of them being missionary-preachers, and not in the same dimension of figures like Peter, James, John, or perhaps even Paul.⁶⁶ Given that they were Jewish Believers before Paul, they may very well have been among those in Jerusalem at *Shavuot*/Pentecost (Acts 2:10), or if native to Rome were immediately impacted by those Roman Jewish Believers who returned home after this.

Mentioning some of the work of Richard Bauckham in his *Gospel Women: Studies in the Named Women of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), Witherington draws attention to the proposal of how the female apostle Junia, was the Joanna listed in Luke 8:3.⁶⁷ He describes, “Early Jews who had regular contact with the Greco-Roman world in one way or another often took Latin names, favoring those which sounded like their Jewish names if possible, and Junia is close in sound to the Jewish name Yohannah [Heb. *Yochanah*, יְחִיָּה; Grk. trans. *Iōanna*, Ἰωάννα].”⁶⁸ If this is correct, then it would also explain how Andronicus and Junia were both Believers before Paul, but rather than being Jewish Believers native to Rome, they would instead have been Jewish Believers native to Israel or the province of Judea.

N.T. Wright, who is among those who correctly acknowledge Junia as a female apostle, and working from egalitarian presuppositions, further adds, “though presumably others, such as Mary Magdalene, were known as such as well.”⁶⁹

What have some Messianic voices said about the identity of the female Junia in v. 7? In his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, Stern draws the conclusion, “The matter takes on importance from the remark that they were **well known among the emissaries**, which may mean not that they were well known *to* the emissaries, but that they were themselves well-known emissaries. If so, this would be the only instance of a female emissary in the New Testament.”⁷⁰ While the CJB does have the rendering, “Greetings to Andronicus and Junia, relatives of mine who were in prison with me. They are well known among the emissaries; also they came to trust in the Messiah before I did,” Stern hesitates as to whether or not Junia was an actual emissary or apostle. In his commentary on Romans, Hegg, as a complementarian no less, does recognize that Junia was a female apostle: “Many commentators have opted for the masculine purely on contextual grounds, reasoning that ‘apostle’ could not be applied to a woman. But this is to apply a prejudice to the text of which it knows nothing.”⁷¹

For my own self as a Bible teacher, I have never tried to hide or conceal my egalitarian views regarding both men and women in positions of leadership within the Body of Messiah today. I absolutely welcome the fact that Junia was a female apostle commended by Paul, and certainly believe that her presence in the greetings of Romans ch. 16 lends strong support to women being permitted to serve and lead and teach within the assembly, on the same platform as men. Yet at the same time, I know that many studies and some debating will be on the horizon, as an egalitarian ideology can be tailored for the theological and spiritual future of our emerging Messianic movement.

⁶⁶ Cf. Moo, 923.

⁶⁷ “Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means” (Luke 8:3).

⁶⁸ Witherington, 388.

⁶⁹ Wright, in *NIB*, 10:762.

⁷⁰ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 439.

⁷¹ Hegg, *Romans 9-16*, 449.