Deacons and Diakonia in Early Christianity

The First Two Centuries

Edited by

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ISBN 978-3-16-156646-2 / eISBN 978-3-16-156647-9
DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-156647-9

ISSN 0340-9570 / eISSN 2568-7484
(Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at *http://dnb.dnb.de.*

The book was typeset using minion pro typeface, printed on non-aging paper, and bound by Gulde Druck in Tübingen.

Printed in Germany.

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What did Phoebe's Position and Ministry as Διάκονος of the Church at Cenchrea Involve?

Margaret Mowczko

1. Introducing Phoebe

Phoebe of Cenchrea is one of at least ten women mentioned in chapter 16 of Paul's letter to the Romans.[1] She had left her hometown of Cenchrea, a busy sea port approximately ten kilometres east of Corinth, and had travelled to Rome carrying Paul's letter. It is likely that some members of the church at Rome, such as Priscilla and Aquila, already knew her. (According to Acts 18:18–19, this couple had ministered in Corinth for about eighteen months and then set sail for Ephesus from Phoebe's home town.) Whether she was known or not, Paul follows the style of a letter of recommendation and introduces Phoebe to the Romans.[2] The New Revised Standard Version translates Paul's introduction of Phoebe as follows:

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[1] Paul commended Phoebe to a church he had not founded and not yet visited. Despite not having first-hand knowledge of the church in Rome, Paul is already acquainted with some of their members, such as Priscilla and Aquila. Other Roman Christians he may have known by reputation. However, some scholars, for example Günther Bornkamm, believe that the last chapter of Romans was not originally part of Paul's letter to the Romans, but part of a letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus. See Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 80. (Paul was well acquainted with the Christians in the Ephesian church.) Susan Mathew provides a short but useful discussion on whether Romans 16 was a letter intended for the Ephesians, but concludes it was an integral part of Romans. Susan Mathew, *Women in the Greetings of* Romans 16.1–16*: A Study of Mutuality and Women's Ministry in the Letter to the Romans* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 4–5. In this chapter on Phoebe, I assume that Romans 16 was originally part of Paul's letter to the Romans.

[2] The verb προσδέχομαι, used in Rom 16:2 and meaning "welcome/receive," is "commonly employed in diplomatic correspondence for receiving a messenger." Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*: *Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 304. The same verb occurs in Phil 2:29 where Paul asks the church in Philippi to "welcome/receive" Epaphroditus. Furthermore, Paul's recommendation of Phoebe to the church at Rome is not unlike his recommendation of Timothy to the church at Corinth (1 Cor 16:10–11). Paul wanted the respective churches to welcome Phoebe and Timothy and hold them in high regard. There is nothing in Rom 16:1–2 to indicate that Phoebe's role in the

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. (Rom 16:1–2)

In his commendation Paul describes Phoebe with three different phrases. He refers to her as "our sister," as "διάκονος of the church at Cenchrea," and as "a benefactor (προστάτις) of many." In this chapter, I discuss each of these descriptions and what they tell us about Phoebe's position and ministry. I especially look at her role as διάκονος and at what this role involved. Note that the word "minister" is used throughout this chapter with a general sense of a person who was regularly involved in, and devoted to, significant service to the church and its mission. These ministers were not necessarily leaders. Nevertheless, I will argue that Phoebe's ministry did involve leadership.

2. "Our Sister"

Paul's first description of Phoebe is "our sister." "Sister" may simply be an acknowledgement that Phoebe is a fellow member of the Christian community, as the kinship of brothers (ἀδελφοί), or siblings, is one of the primary paradigms for relationships among Jesus-followers in New Testament churches. However, "sister" and "brother" were also used in specific contexts. For example, "sister/brother" is one of Paul's favourite words for a co-worker or a prominent Christian (for example, Titus in 2 Cor 2:13; Tychicus in Eph 6:21 and Col 4:7; and Apphia[3] in Phlm 1:2).[4] Furthermore, letter carriers who carried correspondence between churches were often referred to as "sister/brother."[5] This designation made it clear that the carrier, who may have travelled a long distance on a difficult journey, should be welcomed and cared for by the community as a fellow member. The contexts of prominent Christian and of letter carrier both apply to Phoebe.

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church was any less significant or less official than those of Epaphroditus or Timothy, or of any of Paul's other coworkers.

[3] Apphia in Colossae has been thought to be Philemon's wife, but Paul does not mention Apphia and Philemon together as he does with Priscilla and Aquila, or Andronicus and Junia, who were couples. Philemon, Apphia, as well as Archippus, are each addressed individually in the Greek of Phlm 1:1–2. It is possible that Apphia had a ministry and a position in the church at Colossae much like Phoebe did in Cenchrea.

[4] Edward Earle Ellis observes, "The designations most often given to Paul's fellow workers are in descending order of frequency as follows: coworker *(synergos)*, brother *(adelphos)* [or sister *(adelphē)*, as in the cases of Phoebe and Apphia], minister *(diakonos)* [also used for Phoebe] and apostle *(apostolos)*." On the same page, Ellis also notes that "brother/sister" occurs in close connection with the word *diakonos* in Paul's letters. Edward Earle Ellis, "Paul and his Coworkers," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (eds. Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph Martin; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 183.

[5] Ben Witherington, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

The inclusion of the pronoun "our" (ἡμῶν) would have further helped to facilitate a ready acceptance of Phoebe by the Roman Christians.[6] "*Our* sister" denotes a solidarity between Paul and Phoebe.[7] Paul is claiming her as his sister and is implicitly encouraging the Romans to do likewise. Along with a sense of solidarity, there is also a sense of obligation. Lynn Cohick states, "As a sister in the household of God, Phoebe would be expected to use her resources to better the lives of her brothers and sisters."[8] Phoebe appears to have been fulfilling this obligation in her role as προστάτις.

3. "A Benefactor of Many"

The feminine noun προστάτις occurs once in the New Testament, in Romans 16:2, and its meaning here has been debated. (The masculine form of this word, προστάτης, does not occur in the New Testament.) Kevin Giles writes, "In either its masculine or feminine form it means literally 'one who stands before.' This meaning is never lost whether it be translated leader, president, protector or patron."[9]

Paul Trebilco has observed a development in the meaning of προστάτης in Greek texts written by Jewish authors:

> In the LXX and in the three intertestamental texts in which the term occurs, προστάτης means "leader" or "ruler" and never "patron." In the writings of Josephus and Philo [which are more contemporaneous with Paul's writings than the LXX] both meanings of the term ["leader" and "patron"] are equally prominent and occasionally the term also means "champion."[10]

Thus, in the first century C.E., the word had a broader range of meanings in Jewish writings than previously. However προστα(τ)- words were also used in non-Jewish documents with these senses, including the sense of patronage. As one example, the extensive inscriptions about the patronage of Junia Theodora, a woman who lived in Corinth around the same time as Phoebe, show that προστα(τ)- words were used in Greco-Roman society for patrons and patronage.[11]

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 382. On the same page, Witherington provides the example of P.Oxy. 56.3857.

[6] Pronouns are not necessary in ancient Greek as their sense may be implied by the use of a definite article. Paul's inclusion of the pronoun makes the sense of "our" explicit.

[7] Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 945.

[8] Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 304.

[9] Kevin Giles, *Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians* (Sydney: Collins Dove, 1989), 36.

[10] Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 109. In endnote 28 on page 230, Trebilco identifies the three intertestamental texts as 1 Esd 2:12 (see 6:18), Sir 45:24, and 2 Macc 3:4.

[11] Προστασία ("patronage") occurs on the 77th line of the stele that commemorates the

While προστάτης occurs just once in the New Testament, and in the feminine form, participles and infinitives of the cognate verb προΐστημι occur eight times. Twice they are used in the context of church governance (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; see 1 Tim 3:4 and 12).[12] Was Phoebe a leader or the president of the church at Cenchrea? This may well have been the case, but it is implausible that she was a leader of Paul. The translation of προστάτις as "patron" or "benefactor," rather than "leader," fits with what Paul says about Phoebe, that "she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well" (Rom 16:2 NRSV).

A few English translations of Romans 16:2 render προστάτις as "helper" (for example, NASB), but this translation is inadequate.[13] "Helper" does not convey the senses of prominence and power that a προστάτις or προστάτης had in Greco-Roman society. James Dunn notes the bias against recognising Phoebe as an influential woman, and states, "The unwillingness of commentators to give προστάτις its most natural and obvious sense of patron is most striking."[14] He adds that, unlike many modern readers, Paul's original audience "were unlikely to think of Phoebe as other than a figure of significance whose wealth and influence had been put at the disposal of the church at Cenchrea."[15]

Patronage was an important feature of first-century Greco-Roman society, at every level. Seneca described it as "the chief bond of human society" (*De Beneficiis* 1.4.2). Livia, the wife of Caesar Augustus, had "invented new ways of extending patronage"[16] and, after her husband's death in 14 C.E., she "developed a more overt presence in a wide variety of public forums."[17] Other wealthy women followed Livia's example and funded public works, public events, and public people, thereby increasing their own public profiles.[18] Commenting on the inscriptions that praise the patronage of Junia Theodora,[19] R.A. Kearsley

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patronage of Junia Theodora. See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002), 82–84.

[12] Infinitives of προΐστημι occur in Titus 3:8 and 14 in the context of "good works" (see 1 Tim 3:1). It may be that in all eight occurrences of προΐστημι in the New Testament (in Rom 12:8; 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 3:4,5,12; 5:17; Titus 3:8,14) there is a sense of "caring" combined with a sense of "leading," especially as it was wealthier people, those who had the resources of both time and money, who could take on the responsibilities of leading and "good works."

[13] In the ninth-century uncial manuscripts F and G, the word προστάτις is replaced by παραστάτις, a word which can be translated as "helper" or "assistant." The overwhelming textual evidence, however, indicates that προστάτις is the original word in Rom 16:2.

[14] James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 38B; Dallas: Word, 1988), 888.

[15] Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 889.

[16] Beth Severy, *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2004), 234.

[17] Severy, *Augustus and the Family*, 236.

[18] Rosalinde A. Kearsley writes about Livia as a role model for wealthy women in "Women and Public Life in Imperial Asia Minor: Hellenistic Tradition and Augustan Ideology," *Ancient West and East* 4/1 (2005): 98–121.

[19] Like Phoebe, "There is no sign of father, or husband either, guiding or controlling

observes that this woman "not only appears to be acting independently, she is living a very public life circulating freely within the high-ranking, predominately male world of government and commerce in Corinth."[20] Customs surrounding patronage enabled women, as well as men, to exercise leadership in society.[21] These customs also enabled patrons to exercise leadership in churches.

We know that Christianity attracted wealthy women who were already prominent in their communities (for example, Acts 17:4,12). As patrons within their churches, these women would have had a high level of influence.[22] This was especially true if the patron was also the host of a church, as may often have been the case.[23] It is widely acknowledged that, for the first two hundred and fifty years of the Christian movement, most church meetings were held in homes, including homes where a woman was the primary householder.[24] Since

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[Junia Theodora's] actions." Rosalinde A. Kearsley, "Women in Public Life in the Roman East: Iunia Theodora, Claudia Metrodora and Phoebe, Benefactress of Paul," *Tyndale Bulletin* 50/2 (1999): 189–211, 196.

[20] Kearsley, "Women in Public Life in the Roman East," 197.

[21] The practice of patronage was informal and voluntary, but there were certain social constraints and reciprocal obligations involving the client-patron relationship. These constraints and obligations were an extension of the honour-shame dynamic that pervaded Greco-Roman society, and the typical client-patron relationship was one of unequal power. A wealthy man or woman who made a generous donation to his or her city, community, guild, or to an individual, etc., was able to exercise considerable influence and power. Patrons expected loyalty, public support, as well as public praise that reinforced or elevated the patron's level of honour. In Christian communities, some of these dynamics would have been tempered, but patrons still had clout. See Carolyn Osiek, "Diakonos and Prostatis: Women's Patronage in Early Christianity," *HTS Theological Studies* 61/1&2 (2005): 346–70; David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000); Bruce Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

[22] In the following centuries, wealthy women who acted as patrons in the church continued to be influential, even as other ministerial functions and positions were increasingly denied to them. In many churches, male clergy "welcomed women as patrons and even offered women roles in which they could act as collaborators. By 200 AD, the role of women [as patrons and collaborators] in Christian churches was quite unmistakeable." Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 144–45. Like the apostle Paul, and even Jesus (Luke 8:1–3), some of the "great" men of early Christianity, such as Origen, Jerome and Chrysostom, were supported by wealthy female friends and patronesses.

[23] "Hosting early Christian gatherings was one embodiment of patronage as it entailed benefactions by a patron, the host, for a group of believers in the form of a gathering space." Kaisa-Maria Pihlava, "The Authority of Women Hosts of Early Christian Gatherings in the First and Second Centuries C.E." (Dissertation; Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2016), 76.

[24] The custom of meeting in homes is well attested in the New Testament. Wayne Meeks observes, "In four places in the Pauline letters, specific congregations are designated by the phrase *hē kat' oikon* (+ possessive pronoun) *ekklēsia*, which we may tentatively translate 'the assembly at N's household.'" Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 75. Three prominent women are named in the New Testament in connection with each of these four house churches (Priscilla with her husband Aquila: Rom 16:3–5 and 1 Cor 16:19; Apphia: Phlm 1:1–2; and Nympha:

Phoebe was wealthy enough to be a "patron of many," it is likely she owned one of the larger houses in Cenchrea, large enough to host a house church. Hosting and caring for a congregation was, most likely, one of Phoebe's roles as patron. Phoebe's house would also have been large enough to accommodate travelling ministers, and Paul probably stayed with her at some time.

Ben Witherington III notes the pattern of first-century Christian women who hosted both congregations and travelling ministers, and he acknowledges the importance of these women for the Christian message and mission.

> Women converts of some means who offered occasional lodging and hospitality to fellow Christians became the equivalent of a "mother of the synagogue"[25] as their home […] became regular meeting places of the converts in their areas. In a sense, the Church owed its continuing existence to these prominent women who provided both a place of meeting and the hospitality required by the community. […] [Hospitality was] not only the physical support that kept the message going, but also the medium in which the message took hold and was preserved.[26]

Phoebe as patron "kept the message going," but so did her ministry as διάκονος. Moreover, her role as "patron of many" and her status as "our sister" are not distinct from her ministry of διάκονος. There is an overlap between the three descriptions Paul gave Phoebe as we will see as we explore her ministry as "διάκονος of the church at Cenchrea."

Col 4:15). Other women are identified in the New Testament as householders, seemingly independent of fathers or husbands, for example, Mary of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), Lydia in Philippi (Acts 16:14–15,40), Chloe of Corinth (1 Cor 1:11), and the Chosen Lady in Asia Minor (2 John 1:1,5).

[25] In a discussion about "mothers" in the Roman West, Pihlaver describes them as non-elite patrons of various voluntary associations. She notes that, despite their non-elite background, the donations of "mothers" indicates considerable wealth. She further notes that inscriptions do not mention these women as having husbands or fathers, and that the title of "mother" is unlikely to be merely honorary but indicates a position of functional leadership. (Many first-century synagogues and churches may have functioned in similar ways as voluntary associations.) In a discussion about "mothers" in the Greek East, Pihlaver writes that they were of a high socioeconomic standing, and that practically all were "'mothers' of the people or the city. Accordingly, their donations were directed to large groups of people, which was enabled by their wealth and family connections […]. As in the case of the Roman West, the meaning of women's titles [including 'mother'] in the Greek East has also been debated with the main alternatives being the honorary and functional nature of titles. Nowadays, the titles are rarely seen as purely honorific. However, the kind of activities that commanded titles continue to be discussed." Pihlava, *Authority of Women Hosts*, 86–87, 90, 92.

[26] Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 212–13. Men, such as Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15ff), for example, also used their homes as a base for their ministry to the community. "Phoebe's mission in relation to the community at Cenchreae may be the same as that of the house of Stephanas who committed themselves to the διακονία of the saints […]." Mathew, *Women in the Greetings of* Romans 16.1–16, 73.

4. Paul's Use of Διάκονος

John N. Collins has demonstrated that διακον- words are used in the Acts of the Apostles in the context of a sacred commission.[27] More precisely, he states that διακον- words in Acts, particularly the abstract noun διακονία, are "code words for the kind of ministry by which the Word of God is to spread from Jerusalem."[28] Furthermore, Collins has convincingly shown that "agents" and "emissaries" often convey a truer sense of the word διάκονοι than "servants" or "ministers."[29] These findings are also relevant for Paul's use of διακον- words.[30]

Paul was consistent in how he used the word διάκονος in his letters. He typically used the term for an agent with a sacred commission. Several διάκονοι in the undisputed and disputed Pauline letters are described as a διάκονος of Christ (1 Tim 4:6), or of God (for example, 2 Cor 6:4), or of a specific church (Rom 16:1), a church being a sacred community. Paul also refers to a ruler, or government official, as a διάκονος. This person is not a Christian minister; nevertheless, Paul describes him twice in Romans 13:4 as being a "διάκονος of God." Thus, he is also an agent with a sacred commission. Paul never uses any διακον- word for ordinary servants.

Apart from the διάκονος in Romans 13:4 – and apart from the διάκονοι in 2 Corinthians 11:14–15, who are agents of Satan with a diabolic commission[31] – several other διάκονοι are mentioned in Pauline letters. These include Paul himself (Rom 15:25; 1 Cor 3:5; Eph 3:7; Col 1:23, etc.), Timothy (1 Tim 4:6), Epaphras (Col 1:7), Tychicus (Eph 6:21–22; Col 4:7–9), Apollos (1 Cor 3:5), Jesus Christ (Rom 15:8), and Phoebe (Rom 16:1). In regards to Phoebe, the present participle in the phrase, οὖσαν καὶ διάκονον ("being also a deacon/minister"), suggests she had an ongoing ministry as a διάκονος.

Grammatically speaking, the word διάκονος has common gender. That is, it has the same forms, or declensions, in ancient Greek, whether masculine or feminine, whether referring to a man or to a woman.[32] The actual gender of the διάκονος becomes apparent when a masculine or feminine article or participle,

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[27] See John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church: Making Connections between Old and New* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2002), 52–58.

[28] John N. Collins, *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 156.

[29] See John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[30] I refer to the author(s) of the undisputed Pauline letters, the Deutero-Pauline letters, and the Pastoral Epistles simply as "Paul."

[31] In 2 Cor 11:14–15, Paul mentions "agents (διάκονοι) of Satan" who masquerade as "agents (διάκονοι) of righteousness."

[32] LSJ acknowledges that διάκονος is grammatically feminine in Romans 16:1: H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon,* s.v. "διάκονος" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [9]1996), 398. The heading for the entry of διάκονος in BDAG is given with both a masculine and a feminine article, indicating common gender: Walter Bauer, "διάκονος, ου, ὁ, ἡ,"

or a name (for example, Tychicus or Phoebe), is included in the text.[33] In some early Christian writings, the word γυνή is placed alongside the word διάκονος (i.e. γυνὴ διάκονος) to specify a woman deacon.[34] A separate word for a female deacon, διακόνισσα, was first coined in the fourth century, so it is incorrect and misleading to call Phoebe, a first-century woman, a "deaconess." Translations which render διάκονος as "deaconess" in Romans 16:1, can give "the inaccurate impression that Paul is drawing a distinction of roles based on gender."[35]

5. Women Ministers in the Gospels

Even though Paul gives no indication that Phoebe's ministry was especially feminine, some aspects of her service may be comparable to a ministry of women that is evident in the Gospels. In the Gospels, we read that many women from Galilee travelled with Jesus. Some of these women, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza, and Susanna, were ministering or providing (διηκόνουν) for Jesus and his disciples out of their own means (Luke 8:2–3). Many of these Galilean women were also at the cross where they ministered or provided (διακονοῦσαι) for Jesus (Matt 27:55–56).

In chapter 16 of the third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and the unnamed mother of the sons of Zebedee, "and other women besides," are referred to as women deacons (see Matt 27:55–56). It is anachronistic, however, to call them deacons (διάκονοι) before the church was in existence. A recognised ministry or office of deacons came decades later.[36] Still, it seems that these female followers of Jesus were ministering in a way that his male disciples were not.[37]

A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature (rev. and ed. by Frederick K. William Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ³2000), 230–31.

[33] For example, an early Christian mosaic from Patrai in Achaia mentions ἡ θεοφιλοστάτη διάκονος Ἀγριππιανή. This phrase, which identifies a female deacon named Agrippiane, contains three first declension words and διάκονος, a second declension word, but they are all grammatically feminine. G.H.R. Horsley mentions this mosaic in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, Vol. 1* (North Ryde, NSW: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, Macquarie University, 1981), 121. In the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the word for διάκονος (in both singular and plural forms) occurs with the feminine article (both singular and plural) for female deacons. Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (trans. Kenneth D. Whitehead; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 61–62.

[34] As one example, Clement of Alexandria's *Strom.* 3.6.53 has the genitive plural διακονῶν γυναικῶν: "women deacons."

[35] Kristina LaCelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition: Women's Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 62.

[36] The διάκονοι greeted in Paul's letter to the Philippians (written about 60 C.E.) may be the first reasonably clear reference to an office, or recognisable position, of deacons.

[37] Martha is another New Testament woman who provided (διακονεῖν) for Jesus (Luke 10:40; see John 12:2). She may have been wealthy (see John 12:3) and may have acted as Jesus'

Like the women who supported Jesus and his mission, Phoebe provided materially for others and served those who needed assistance, including the apostle Paul. She may also have been a financial sponsor of Paul's mission.[38] Supporting others, and looking after their welfare, was one aspect of the ministry of some deacons (διάκονοι), both male and female, in the apostolic and later church.[39] But Phoebe's role as διάκονος involved still other ministries.

6. Phoebe and Paul's Letter to the Romans

Tradition and scholarship agree that Paul entrusted Phoebe with his Letter to the Romans. Robert Jewett suggests Phoebe travelled to Rome especially to make preparations for Paul's planned mission to Spain (mentioned in Romans 15:23–24,28), by making contacts and organising financial support.[40] Other scholars suggest Phoebe was in Rome for her own business interests.[41] It is not clear whether Paul employed Phoebe because she happened to be going to Rome, or if she was employed especially to deliver his letter.

There is plenty of evidence that some διάκονοι in the apostolic and post-apostolic periods travelled as part of their ministry, often acting as representatives and agents of their churches.[42] These deacons maintained a vital network of communication between churches by carrying verbal and written messages.

In both the undisputed and disputed Pauline letters, letter carriers are usually described using two or more titles or descriptions, along with a clause designed

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patron in much the same way as Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza, and Susanna. Simon Peter's mother-in-law also served (διηκόνει) Jesus (Matt 8:14–15; Mark 1:30–31).

[38] See Robert Jewett, "Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission," *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: Essays in Tribute to Howard Clark Kee* (eds. Jacob Neusner et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 142–61.

[39] For example, several churches sent deacons to accompany Ignatius to Rome and care for him when he was under arrest in around 110 C.E. In his letters, Ignatius speaks with warmth about these deacons, indicating his deep gratitude for the service they offered him (Ign. *Eph.* 2:1; Ign. *Magn.* 2:1, 6:1; Ign. *Phld.* 4:1; Ign. *Smyrn.* 12:2). Deacons visited and cared for Perpetua when she was in prison. In chapter three of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* (circa 205) she writes, "Then Tertius and Pomponius, those blessed deacons who tried to take care of us, bribed the soldiers to allow us to go to a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves for a few hours." "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (trans. Herbert Musurillo; Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 110.

[40] Jewett, "Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission," 149.

[41] For example, Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 60. Stephen Llewelyn notes that individuals in the Roman world frequently relied "on the chance journey of another to carry his or her letter," and that these letters were usually "carried by persons known to either the writer or addressee (e.g., by servants, friends or acquaintances)." Stephen Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, Vol. 7 (North Ryde, NSW: Macquarie University Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1994), 51 and 29.

[42] As one example, in his letter to the Philadelphians, Ignatius asks that they send a deacon to the church in Syria as an ambassador (Ign. *Phld.* 10:1–2; see Ign. *Smyrn.* 11:2–3).

to commend the carriers to the recipients of his letters.[43] Tychicus was a letter carrier and is referred to as both a "beloved brother" and a "trustworthy διάκονος" in Eph 6:21 (see 2 Tim 4:12; Titus 3:12). (Note the similar terminology for Tychicus and for Phoebe: "brother/sister" and "διάκονος.") In Colossians 4:7, Tychicus is described as "a beloved brother," "a trustworthy διάκονος," and "a fellow servant (σύνδουλος) in the Lord." Along with this list of credentials, the church in Colossae is given this message about him:

> [He] will tell you all the news about me […] I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here (Col 4:7–9 NRSV).

These verses about Tychicus give an indication of both the role and the qualities of Paul's letter carriers. The custom of letter carriers in the first-century Greco-Roman world meant that Phoebe, like Tychicus, would have passed on news and personal messages from Paul. Furthermore, she would have provided explanations and commentary about his letter.

Patrick Gray explains:

> Paul's coworkers who delivered his letters did not drop them in the mailbox and then go on their way but, rather, would likely have read them aloud to the recipients and been available to explain the significance of the references they contained.[44]

Peter Head, who has examined forty Oxyrhynchus papyri where the letter-carrier is named, observes that, on occasion, letter carriers functioned

> in some way or other to "represent" the sender, to expand on details within the letter, and even to expound and reinforce the primary message of the letter in oral communication. … [But Head] did not find any evidence that any particular letter-carrier was also expected to read the letter aloud to the recipient …[45]

Phoebe was Paul's envoy, and while she may or may not have been the first person to read Paul's letter aloud to the Romans, she was, most likely, the first commentator on his letter. Paul had a great trust in Phoebe as the deliverer of his letter, regarded by many as his *magnum opus*.[46] Delivering Paul's letter and act-

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[43] As well as Phoebe, we know that Timothy (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10–11), Titus (2 Cor 8:16–24), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25–30), Onesimus (Phlm 1:12–13; Col 4:8–9), and Tychicus carried letters from, and sometimes to, Paul. In the Acts of Paul (written in the mid-second century) the emissaries Threptus and Eutyches are said to have taken a letter from the Corinthian elders and delivered it to Paul in Philippi, and they are called deacons (*Acts Paul* 1:7; *3 Cor.* 3:1).

[44] Patrick Gray, *Opening Paul's Letters: A Reader's Guide to Genre and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 136.

[45] Peter M. Head, "Named Letter Carriers among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri," *JSNT* 31/3 (2009): 279–300, 297.

[46] The author of First Clement highlights the issue of the trustworthiness of letter carriers in his description of those who delivered his letter to Corinth: "trustworthy and prudent men who from youth to old age have lived blameless lives among us, who will be trustworthy wit-

ing as his representative may well have been one of Phoebe's roles as "διάκονος of the church Cenchrea." But was she regarded as an official deacon?

7. Was Phoebe an Official Deacon?

While several Post-Nicene writers unequivocally regarded Phoebe as an ordained deaconess, they appear to have been projecting the customs of a later female diaconate back onto the New Testament church. We must take care not to make a similar mistake by projecting modern customs and roles of deacons onto the first-century church. The roles of deacons in various denominations today often have little in common with the roles of deacons in the apostolic church.

We must also not make the mistake of thinking that διάκονος simply means "servant" in Romans 16:1, which is how the KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, HCSB, CEB, among others, have translated the word here. Phoebe simply cannot have been both a servant, in the usual sense of the word, as well as being a "benefactor of many," as patrons would typically have had their own servants, rather than being servants themselves. We must not presume that Phoebe was involved in menial service in her church. Rather, as Susan Mathew observes, "when Paul uses διακονέω and διάκονος in relation to a congregation [as in the case of Phoebe], it implies some role in leading the congregation."[47] Robert Jewett, writing about Phoebe, asserts that διάκονος "is an official title of leadership."[48]

Phoebe had a recognised position and ministry in Cenchrea, and Paul probably used the word διάκονος in Romans 16:1 as he did in Philippians 1:1, for ministers with a recognised leadership role. Newer editions of the NIV, NLT, and NRSV, translate διάκονος as "deacon" in Romans 16:1, which is in line with how διάκονοι is typically translated in Philippians 1:1, and there is a growing consensus among scholars that Phoebe was a deacon. Leon Morris, for example, states emphatically, "Phoebe is certainly called a deacon."[49] A deacon in the mid-first century was different to a deacon in the third century, however, when an all-male, hierarchical governmental structure had become the norm in quite a few churches, with deacons being under the supervision of a bishop (ἐπίσκοπος).[50]

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nesses between you and me" (*1 Clem.* 63:3). "First Clement," *Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, [3]2007), 131.

[47] Mathew, *Women in the Greetings of* Romans 16.1–16,75.

[48] Jewett, *Romans*, 944.

[49] Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 529.

[50] Ignatius, in the early second century, assumes the churches he writes to have a bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) as leader or supervisor, supported by presbyters and deacons. In fact, he believed that without a bishop, a council of presbyters, and at least one deacon, "no group can be called a church" (Ign. *Trall.* 3:1). However, some churches do not seem to have used the term ἐπίσκοπος for their leaders. Polycarp, the leader of the church at Smyrna, counted himself

Nevertheless, whatever an official διάκονος or deacon was in the mid-first century, Phoebe was one of them.[51]

8. Conclusion

We have seen that Phoebe's ministry included caring for the welfare of many people, including Paul, through patronage and hospitality, and that she was, most likely, the host of a house church in Cenchrea. In Rome, where she acted as Paul's envoy and letter carrier, Phoebe would have relayed news about the apostle and provided commentary on his letter. Like other διάκονοι, her ministry involved both leadership and some travel. Her sacred commission as διάκονος encompassed these elements plus, undoubtedly, more elements that have been long forgotten by the church and hidden by time. Phoebe, like many ministers in the mid-first century, adapted her service to meet various needs and situations as they arose. But we can safely say that Phoebe, as sister, patron, and διάκονος, was a leading figure in her church at Cenchrea, perhaps the leading figure.

among the presbyters; he does not call himself ἐπίσκοπος in his letter to the Philippians. (See the opening greeting of his letter to the Philippians.) Polycarp only refers to the church offices of presbyters, deacons, and virgins. Similarly, in the apocryphal Corinthian Correspondence, the leader of the Corinthian church, Stephanas, is simply counted among the presbyters. There was no universally accepted paradigm of church leadership and ministry terminology in the first and second centuries C.E.

[51] Paul's theology of ministry, as given in Rom 12:4–8, is that grace, gifts, and faith are necessary for ministry. Furthermore, the eight ministries listed in Rom 12:6–8, including the ministry of διακονία, do not exclude women (see 1 Cor 12:4–31). Paul's theology of ministry did not exclude Phoebe or the other nine, or so, women mentioned in Romans 16.