

## Forum 4

# A Case for 'President' Phoebe in Romans 16:2

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Romans 16, with its long list of greetings to Paul's fellow-workers, is not an attractive chapter for Bible study. Yet the chapter has importance because of the prominence it gives to women. One-third of those greeted are women; among them is Junia, in this writer's view (Schulz: 109) a female apostle. This paper makes a particular study of *prostatis* (verse 2) which is applied to Phoebe, the probable bearer of Paul's letter to Rome. Phoebe was obviously a woman of importance in the early church, and especially in Cenchrea.

*Prostatis* appears only in Romans 16:2 in the New Testament. It is the feminine form of *prostatēs*. The classical dictionary meanings given for these words include: leader, chief, ruler, president, protector, patron. This article presents a case for choosing one of the first four meanings of that list, in keeping with the literal meaning of 'one who stands to the fore'. In Romans 16, however, *prostatis* is usually translated by a 'help'-word — 'helper': NIV; NJB; RSV; 'good friend': NEB; TEV; 'looked after': JB; 'great assistance': J.B. Phillips. On the evidence available, these attenuated functional meanings seem to run beyond the meaning of the word which implies an office. The following argues for the 'leader/president' translation of *prostatis*.

1. The verbal form of *prostatis* is *proistanai*. In the NT, wherever this verb is used in reference to people, it means 'to be head of, to rule, to direct, to manage' (Rom 12:8; 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 3:4,5,12; 5:17). The NIV translates respectively 'leadership' (Rom 12:8); 'who are over you' (1 Thess 5:12); 'manage' (1 Tim 3:4); 'who direct' (1 Tim 5:17). This consistent NT usage of the verbal form of *prostatis*, plus the points made below, weigh heavily against the meanings of 'patron/ess, protector/ess'.
2. The meaning of 'helper' has even less support. In the classical period this meaning is difficult, if not impossible, to find when a check is made of the various words made from the *prostat-* and *prostas-* stems (cf Liddell and Scott: 1526, 1527). Rather, the meanings are: people in authority or exercising authority over others. Bauer's *Wörterbuch* (col. 1425) gave for *prostatis* only the meanings 'protectress' and 'patroness'. The meaning 'helper' was added by the translators, Arndt and Gingrich (726), but with little or no evidence for the addition. Yet this added word is the one seized upon by English translators.

3. Research into extra-biblical Greek later than the classical Greek period, or material discovered in more recent years, must be noted. Moulton and Milligan could not find *prostatis* in the papyri evidence available to them. More recent research gathered by Horsley has found the word, even if it is uncommon. Since uses of the masculine form consistently describe various positions of authority, and since women often held the same positions, Horsley (243) argues that the feminine form is to be equated with the masculine form both from its usage and by analogy with words like *mystēs/mystis*.
4. In the same sentence in Romans 16:1,2 as *prostatis*, there is a form of *paristanai* meaning 'help'. Both words are usually translated 'help'. This assumes that Paul does not differentiate between the prepositions *para* and *pro* in compounds. Yet one is followed by the dative (as is not uncommon for 'help'-words), whereas the genitive follows *prostatis*, suggesting that the genitive force of the preposition still applies. In words compounded with *pro*, *pro* most commonly governs a genitive, and the prepositional meaning carries through.
5. Some late Western texts F and G give a variant reading of *parastatis*, 'one who stands alongside' or a 'helper'. This variant reading points to the discomfort some copyists felt with the implication of *prostatis*; hence the change. This word in the classical period was also applied to certain people in authority, eg, an official of a collegium.
6. Phoebe is described as both *diakonos* and *prostatis* in Romans 16:1,2. This suggests a 'high' meaning of *prostatis*, that of 'leader, president'. Evidently, some of the Church Fathers thought so. Hatto, in his commentary on this verse stated, '*. . . tunc non solum viri, sed etiam feminae praeerant Ecclesiis*' (Migne PL 134:281; 'at that time not only men, but women also presided over churches'). Or the Latin Migne gives for Origen '*Et hic locus apostolica auctoritate docet etiam feminas in ministerio Ecclesiae constitui*' (14:1278; 'this point teaches by apostolic authority that women also were appointed to the ministry of the church'). These quotations not only support the 'high' meaning of *prostatis*; they also demonstrate that some of the Church Fathers accepted that in the NT church women held leadership positions in congregations along with men. The question of the role of women is not so modern.
7. The Greeks gave the titles of 'protectress' and 'patroness' to their goddesses (Kitto: 19, 205). St Paul would surely have been careful to avoid any suggestion of divinisation of Phoebe. Hence he must have been confident the title would not be misunderstood by his readers. The 'helper' meaning seems unsustainable; that leaves the meaning of 'leader' or 'president' as strong contenders. This counts against those who argue that Phoebe, through her hospitality, was only a 'patroness' of Christians in Cenchrea.
8. That Phoebe led the congregation at Cenchrea would not be unusual in a Greek setting, where goddesses were worshipped together with gods, where priestesses were religious leaders together with priests. It would have seemed strange for Greek women to be refused religious leadership when

they came out of a society where that was customary. The context of Greek Corinth was surely different from the context of Jerusalem. What was accepted as normal in religious life among the Greeks may have been quite unacceptable in Jerusalem or any other place where a Jewish outlook prevailed.

9. Some (eg, Meeks: 60) have found it impossible to imagine what Paul could have meant by describing Phoebe as 'also presiding over me'. Hence they rule out the 'president/leader' options. However, according to Acts 18:18, Paul took a vow at some time while he was at Cenchrea. This vow confronts us with many difficult questions unrelated to the topic addressed here. However, we can ask: What limitations would that vow place on Paul's ministry? From Acts 21:23ff, where Paul joined others taking a vow in Jerusalem, one gathers that he withdrew from public ministry. If this happened also at Cenchrea, where the vow was Paul's, we can at least postulate that he may have taken a back pew for the duration of the vow. He accepted the local leadership, in this case that of Phoebe. Hence, the statement that she 'presided over many people including me' (Rom 16:2) is in this light quite understandable.
10. The acceptance of 'leader' or 'president' assumes that *egenēthē* in verse 2 is used in the sense of 'appointed' to office. The verb is used in this way in Heb 5:5 and Col 1:23. The variant readings of Col 1:23 '... the gospel ... of which I, Paul, have become a herald and apostle and minister' brings out the 'appointment' meaning of this common verb.

The word *prostatis* may be the closest NT word we have to 'president'. If so, this serves as a precedent for the use of that term for an official position in the church today, or at least if the office-bearer is female!

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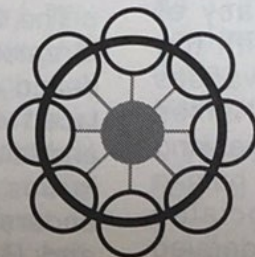
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