

# Phoebe, προστάτης, as leader

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When we have strong convictions, we also have convincing evidence to support our point of view. Those who hold an opposing conviction can regard our evidence as less important, perhaps even contrived. We in return regard 'their' evidence as unimportant, easily dismissed, or we may not recognise it at all. So both sides can be '...hearing but never understanding, seeing but never perceiving.' (Isa 6:9). Our major Greek New Testaments, Nestle-Aland (NA)<sup>1</sup> and UBS,<sup>2</sup> have reflected the conviction that women cannot be leaders in the church and this has affected the text and apparatus of these New Testaments by downplaying the role of women in the New Testament church, even enhancing texts negative to women.<sup>3</sup> This has been achieved, perhaps quite unconsciously, by changing the accent on key words, punctuation changes, removal of previous evidence from the apparatus, or overlooking evidence because it is regarded as unimportant.

An example of this is the decision not to report the reading of διδάσκω (*I teach*), a far-from-rare reading in the primary sources—the Greek manuscripts—at the end of 1 Corinthians 14:33. The Latin text has *doceo* here almost as the standard Latin reading, and at least one Greek manuscript (2110, 10<sup>th</sup> century) has διατάσσομαι (*I instruct*). This would make very difficult—if not impossible—the joining of verse 33b to verse 34 onwards which universalises the silencing of women, as is now the position of our NA and UBS Greek New Testaments. It also cancels out the possibility of verses 34-35 being a later non-Pauline addition to the text (the conclusion of many scholars) by tying these verses to verse 33, an undisputed text.

Many of our Greek New Testament manuscripts, especially the most important, are now online and we can check them for ourselves. Another reading also not reported in our Greek New Testaments is προστάτης. Many quite early manuscripts have προστάτης as the reading for Phoebe in Romans 16:2. NA<sup>28</sup> has as text προστάτις, and in the apparatus παραστάτις with the support of only Manuscripts 010 (F) and 012 (G) and perhaps 1970. Of 140 manuscripts I checked with this reading, 42 have προστάτης (see list below). This evidence was submitted to Birmingham University where the *Editio Critica Maior* (ECM) Project is centred. The results of the ECM work are becoming the basis of both the text

- 1 Currently in its 28<sup>th</sup> edition: *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, Institute for New Testament Textual Research, 28<sup>th</sup> edn (Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 2012).
- 2 UBS refers to the United Bible Societies (5<sup>th</sup>) edition (published 2014), which contains the same text as NA<sup>28</sup> but, since it is aimed at Bible translators rather than students and scholars, less variants in the textual apparatus. For a comparison of the two publications see [www.academic-bible.com/en/home/scholarly-editions/greek-new-testament/vergleich-na28-ubs5/](http://www.academic-bible.com/en/home/scholarly-editions/greek-new-testament/vergleich-na28-ubs5/).
- 3 Ray R. Schulz, 'Twentieth-century corruption of Scripture,' *Expository Times* 119 no. 6 (March 2008): 270-274.

and the choice of the apparatus of our Greek New Testaments. However as the ECM work on the Pauline letters is unlikely to be ready until perhaps NA<sup>30</sup>, I was advised to consider publication. This article contains and expands on what was submitted.

According to my records the manuscripts listed in Table 1 read προστάτης. The dates are taken from the 'Official List.'<sup>4</sup> Libraries holding these manuscripts may occasionally have slightly different dates. The list below includes manuscripts that have shorthand 'flourishes/signs' on endings for -ης. However these match the same signs on other -ης endings (Rom 15:33; 16:4). Also included are manuscripts where the scribe first wrote προστάτης with an 'η' but this has been written over/through with an 'ι' to now read προστάτις (Mss 1977, 1978, 2401, 2404).

<b>Manuscript</b>	<b>Century of composition</b>	<b>Manuscript</b>	<b>Century of composition</b>
20=L	9 <sup>th</sup>	796	11 <sup>th</sup>
49	9 <sup>th</sup>	808	14 <sup>th</sup>
56	10 <sup>th</sup>	911	11 <sup>th</sup>
142	10 <sup>th</sup>	1297	13 <sup>th</sup>
35	12 <sup>th</sup>	1315	12 <sup>th</sup>
57	12 <sup>th</sup>	1424	10 <sup>th</sup>
69	15 <sup>th</sup>	1463	11 <sup>th</sup>
88	12 <sup>th</sup>	1827	13 <sup>th</sup>
110	12 <sup>th</sup>	1830	15 <sup>th</sup>
133	11 <sup>th</sup>	1845	10 <sup>th</sup>
263	13 <sup>th</sup>	1875	10 <sup>th</sup>
384	13 <sup>th</sup>	1933	11 <sup>th</sup>
450	10 <sup>th</sup>	1977	14 <sup>th</sup>
458	11 <sup>th</sup>	1978	15 <sup>th</sup>
460	13 <sup>th</sup>	2011	12 <sup>th</sup>
466	11 <sup>th</sup> /12 <sup>th</sup>	2110	10 <sup>th</sup>
491	11 <sup>th</sup>	2125	10 <sup>th</sup>
496	13 <sup>th</sup>	2242	12 <sup>th</sup>
619	10 <sup>th</sup>	2344	11 <sup>th</sup>
621	11 <sup>th</sup>	2401	12 <sup>th</sup>
627	10 <sup>th</sup>	2404	13 <sup>th</sup>

Table 1: List of manuscripts and their respective dates of composition.

4 The Institute for New Testament Research, Münster/Westfalen: 'Die Kurzgefasste Liste,' [www.uni-muenster.de/INTF/Publications.html#Kurzgefasste\\_Liste](http://www.uni-muenster.de/INTF/Publications.html#Kurzgefasste_Liste).

## Reasons to include προστάτης

What are the meanings of προστάτης/ης, specifically in Romans 16:2? My Arndt-Gingrich lexicon (1957), a widely used source, has not served us well here.<sup>5</sup> A lexicon of classical Greek—Dunbar (1840)—gives the following for προστάτης:

‘One who stood before, or at the head of others, hence a leader, superintendent, a president, a chief, leader, a patron, protector, guardian. Every sojourner (μέτοικος) was obliged to choose a patron.’<sup>6</sup>

Arndt—Gingrich omit the core meanings of this word and include only ‘defender, guardian’ for προστάτης and ‘protectress, patroness, helper’ for προστάτις.<sup>7</sup> The ability to squeeze the meaning of ‘helper’ from προστάτις is some achievement! This meaning needs to be checked against the limited times this word appears in Greek literature to see if it can ever mean ‘helper.’ My cursory check did not find this meaning. However, this is the meaning some translators prefer, enabling them to dilute the role Phoebe played in the church in Cenchrea, unless translators are choosing as their text the variant reading of Manuscripts 10 and 12, namely παραστάτις.

The ‘patron/ess’ meaning is questionable. Did Paul choose a woman, Phoebe as his patron/ess? Was he required to choose someone in each place he visited, and why is there no other mention of them? Did the church appoint people to this position, and if so when, where and with what role expectation? Verse 2 reads ‘... she has been the patroness/leader of many, and of me too ...’<sup>8</sup> That Phoebe was patroness of Paul is

5 Also known as BAGD. W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, a Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

6 George Dunbar, *A New English and Greek, and Greek and English Lexicon* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart, and Co., 1840). Another authoritative source, LSJ s.v. προστάτης, is supportive, offering the following range of meanings based on an expanded range of literary, epigraphic and papyrological sources: ‘one who stands before, front-rank man; leader, chief; ruler, chief author, administrator; president, presiding officer; one who stands before and protects, guardian, champion; patron (at Athens, taking charge of the interests of μέτοικοι); one who stands before a god (to entreat him), suppliant; (Suppl.) perhaps foreman, guarantor of a loan.’ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, rev. and augmented by H.S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); P.G.W. Glare, ed., H.G. Liddell et al., *Greek-English Lexicon Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). LSJ lists προστάτις as the feminine form of προστάτης, without further definition.

7 Cf. the more recent F.W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. BADG (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), based on Arndt-Gingrich and Bauer-Aland (6<sup>th</sup> ed). BADG3 lists the following for προστάτης: ‘one who looks out for the interest of others, defender, guardian, benefactor;’ for προστάτις: ‘a woman in a supportive role, patron, benefactor.’ It is perhaps noteworthy that the term προστάτις does not appear in the standard Patristic Greek dictionary, G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Rather only the masculine form (s.v. προστάτης) is supplied, with the following meanings: ‘champion, patron, supporter; protector; leader, chief; ruler (including ecclesiastical rulers, i.e. bishops).’ The latter usage appears as early as Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 92:2 (2<sup>nd</sup> century).

8 My translation.

challenging enough, but that she was patroness of 'many' stretches credibility. However she could be 'leader' of Paul and many others. The 'many' implies the congregation in Cenchrea had many foreigners in it if the 'patroness' meaning is to stand. Also as Phoebe took Paul's letter to Rome, did the other sojourners for whom she was previously patron/ess need to choose another person in her absence? Further the patron/ess requirement for foreigners seems to be a legal matter, an early form of border protection. Was the requirement empire-wide or only for certain areas? Was this legal matter a concern of the church or of the state? For a church to require a patron/ess for any foreigner would seem to clash with the teaching of '... neither Jew nor Greek ...' (Gal 3:28). The 'patron/ess' meaning may apply in other contexts, but sits uncomfortably here. The 'patron/ess' translation leaves many questions unanswered.

I had overlooked προστάτης as I thought it was an itacism. Some scribes write an eta (η) for an iota (ι). However, as this form of the word kept appearing, I decided to go back over my notes and the manuscripts, and check additional manuscripts as well. I found many I had overlooked, but from all the manuscripts I re-checked none had this tendency of itacism (see list above). Perhaps the masculine form started as an itacism and was then perpetuated. But if there is a reverse itacism, then the feminine form may have derived from the masculine as it applied to a woman. Which then is the earlier reading? When we apply the rule, 'prefer the harder reading' then the masculine meaning of 'leader' while still making good sense would appear to be more difficult, at least for those who have trouble accepting the leadership of women in the church.

Alternatively, as προστάτης appears to be a little-used word, προστάτης, the familiar word for 'leader' could have been substituted to make the meaning clear. I am convinced scribes copied manuscripts with a view to giving the message; hence an obscure word has been clarified by a familiar word for 'leader.' This 'give the message' outlook helps explain why we have thousands of variant readings of the Greek New Testament in the manuscripts when we know at the same time the Masoretes could copy the Pentateuch in Hebrew almost word-perfectly. Also to give Phoebe, a woman, the masculine title when she already had a feminine title would suggest προστάτης was the earliest reading. I accept προστάτης as the earliest reading as it appears in our earliest manuscripts. Its representation in all text-types implies that it was spread over a wide geographical area, and the word is not common.

παραστάτης, with a basic meaning of 'helper,' is the reading of Manuscripts 10 and 12. These two manuscripts are closely related and probably share a common source.<sup>9</sup> The lacunae in the copies remaining are also almost identical! These are 'Western' text-type manuscripts which in Acts have been accused of an anti-feminist outlook,<sup>10</sup> and that may be a factor here. However this reading does not appear in its 'parental' line, namely

9 Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (London: The Oxford University, 1964), 53.

10 Ben Witherington, 'The anti-feminist tendencies of the 'Western' text in Acts,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984): 82-84.

Manuscript 06=D. It could be a type of 'eye skip,' as the similar παραστήτε preceded in the same sentence. As both of these manuscripts are Greek/Latin diglots, perhaps the Greek has been influenced by the Latin. The Latin translates the Greek noun προστάτις/ης with a 'help' verb, *adstitit*. The first Latin translations coincided with the Montanist movement which had two women among its leaders.<sup>11</sup> As today, scribes could have been influenced by this movement and in translation played-down the role of Phoebe. Whatever its origin, it has reinforced the 'helper' translation.

Regrettably this variant from only two closely-related 9<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts has been included in our Greek New Testaments, while προστάτης, with wide manuscript support as shown above, has been omitted. Manuscript 1970 (12<sup>th</sup> century) may also be a candidate for παραστάτις, as the scribe wrote προστάτις but an 'α' has been added by what looks like the same hand so that it now reads παραστάτις. Did the scribe intend to write προστάτις but wrote an 'α' instead of an 'ο,' having just written the similar παραστήτε, or did the scribe intend to write παραστάτις but misspelt it, so made a correction?

How could Paul say Phoebe had been 'a leader of many and of me too' as mentioned above (verse 2)? Acts 18:18 informs us that 'Paul stayed on in Corinth ... he had his hair cut off at Cenchræa because of a vow he had taken' (NIV). With his head shaven because of the vow, he would have had to take time out and accept the local leadership—in this instance that of a woman, Phoebe.

### Paul's purpose in writing

Paul had not yet visited Rome although he had planned to do so many times (Rom 1:11-15), so he begins his letter: 'I Paul, a servant (δοῦλος) of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God' (Rom 1:1 NIV). He needs to establish two things: his authority for ministry, and the importance of his message – the gospel of God. As he comes to the end of his letter he returns to these themes. At Romans 15:15 he states '... because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God ...' (NIV). He has spoken of how Christ became a minister (διάκονον) to the Jews for God's truth (Rom 15:8), now he speaks of his Gentile ministry. He ends his letter on the theme of ministry. '... from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ ...' (Rom 15:19 NIV). He speaks of his plans to minister in Spain after going through Rome. However, now his ministry (διακονία, Rom 15:31) is taking him to Jerusalem. Paul uses several words for 'ministry/ministering,' but the διακονος/ια/εω words are his most common (e.g. Rom 11:13; 15:8,25,31; 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 4:1; 5:18; 6:3,4; Eph 3:7). He perhaps uses these words because they are the words Jesus used to describe his own ministry (Mk 10:45).

11 Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 151-197.

Consistent with the purpose of his letter and in the context of the ministry topic of our chapter 15, Paul continues to our chapter 16. He needed witnesses to back him up, and he needed his representative taking his letter to Rome to be well qualified. Most manuscripts record Phoebe as the one entrusted to deliver his letter to Rome. We find in chapter 16 a long list of people being greeted, those who knew him, who could vouch for him, many having shared in ministry with him. The list of greetings to the Romans is much longer than in any other letter. Several of those greeted have something of their importance mentioned too:

'... risked their lives ... first convert ... worked very hard ... outstanding among the apostles ... fellow worker ... women who work hard ... chosen in the Lord ... my dear friend ...' (NIV)

Paul implies, 'Ask any of these and they will vouch for me.' And those named would be under some obligation to support his authority, affirm his credibility, and endorse his gospel of God.

Paul asks (verse 2) that Phoebe be received in the Lord, given hospitality that is worthy of Christians (ἀγίωv), and be provided with whatever she needs. Clearly Phoebe is more than a mere courier. She will be in Rome and need care for some time, quite likely engaged in reading and explaining the letter. She may well have been prepared for this task by being among those who were with Paul in Corinth as he dictated and explained his letter to Tertius (Rom 16:22). She too must have credibility as Paul's mouthpiece. Hence the three 'titles' he gives her, ἀδελφὴν, διάκονον, and προστάτις/ης. He used διάκονον to describe the ministry of Christ in Romans 15:8, and forms of the word to describe his own ministry in 15:25 and 15:31, and here he uses this word to describe Phoebe's ministry. Paul presents Phoebe as a person of high standing and one who can vouch for him as trustworthy, credible and understanding of the faith. She is a proven leader.

My hope is that the προστάτης reading of Romans 16:2 is included in future Greek New Testaments.

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