



Missionaries, Apostles, Coworkers: Romans 16 and the Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History

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One can approach a text like Romans 16 with different questions and presuppositions. If one focuses attention on the theological teaching of Paul, this chapter is seen as a mere appendix to Paul's theological testament in Romans. If one is interested, however, in the social realities of early Christian communities and the cultural and religious world in which they lived, much can be learned from this chapter. Although the indirect information conveyed by the list of greetings is very scanty, it nevertheless allows us to learn something about the social status and missionary activity of early Christians.

Exegetes usually discuss the last chapter of Romans in terms of its original position in the Pauline letter collection. While they do not question that the chapter is written by Paul, they are divided on whether it was originally connected with the Epistle to the Romans or whether it was an independent letter of recommendation addressed to the church in Ephesus.¹ In the following I will presuppose that Romans 16 is best understood as an integral part of Paul's letter to the church in Rome rather than as an independent letter to the church of Ephesus. Instead of entering into the "Romans 16 debate" directly, I will attempt to interpret the chapter as a source for the reconstruction of women's early Christian history. Before it is possible to analyze the text, however, two methodological issues must be considered.

First: In order to be able to perceive the significance of the information found in Romans 16 for our understanding of early Christian beginnings and women's role in it, we must place it in the overall context of the social and religious institutions and conventions of the time. Moreover, we have to become

¹For a review of the discussion see J. J. MacDonald, "Was Romans XVI a Separate Letter?," *New Testament Studies* 16 (1969/70) 369-72; K. P. Donfried, "A Short Note on Romans 16," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970) 441-49; W. H. Ollrog, "Die Abfassungsverhältnisse von Röm 16," *Kirche: Festschrift Bornkamm*, ed. D. Lührmann and G. Strecker (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1980) 221-44; E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); P. Achtemeier, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

conscious of our over-all understanding or framework for the reconstruction of early Christian beginnings into which we place the information gleaned from texts such as Romans 16. The works on the social world of the early Christian missionary movement, for example, have provided "love-patriarchalism" as much as a social-sociological model for the historical reconstruction of the Christian missionary movement in the Greco-Roman world. Gerd Theissen has argued that the early Christian missionary movement in the Greco-Roman cities was well

integrated into its societal structures because it adopted the patriarchal structures of the Greco-Roman household but softened it with Christian *agape*-love.²

Not only the reconstructions of early Christianity, however, but historiography on the whole works with theoretical models and theological frameworks. In order to give a coherent historical interpretation scholars have to make inferences based in part upon their sources and based in part upon their general understanding of human behavior and society. We not only interpret our historical sources in order to present a “coherent” historical society but also ascribe “historical significance” to so-called “data” in accordance with our theoretical model or perspective that orders our information and evidence. Just as a quilt brings together patch-work pieces into an artistic over-all design, so also the writing of history does not provide a ready-made mirror of past events but a “stitching” together of historical information into a coherent over-all design or interpretative model.³

The standard Western intellectual and scientific paradigm⁴ is androcentric, that is, male centered and patriarchal. It generates and perpetrates scholarship that takes Euro-American man as the paradigmatic human being and thereby makes women and other races or cultures invisible or peripheral in what we know about the world, human life, and cultural or religious history. Far from being objective or descriptive, androcentric texts and knowledge produce the historical silence and invisibility of women. Although women are neglected in the writing of history, the effects of our lives and actions are a reality in history. While androcentric scholarship defines women as the “other” or as the “object” of male scholarship, feminist studies insist on the reconceptualization of our language as well as of our intellectual frameworks in such a way that women as well as men become the subjects of human culture and scholarly discourse. In the past decade feminist historians have therefore tried to articulate the theoretical problem of how to move from androcentric text to historical context or of how to write women back into history. They have succinctly stated that

²G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); cf. E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (2 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1931) 1.78.

³Cf. G. Leff, *History and Social Theory* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971); P. Hernadi, “Clio’s Cousins: Historiography as Translation, Fiction and Criticism,” *New Literary History* 7 (1975/76) 247-57; R. S. Humphreys, “The Historian, His(sic) Documents, and the Elementary Modes of Historical Thought,” *History and Theory* 19 (1980) 1-20; S. Bann, “Towards a Critical Historiography,” *Philosophy* 56 (1981) 365-85.

⁴Cf. T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962); I. G. Barbour, *Myth, Models, and Paradigms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

the dual goal of women’s history is both: “to restore women to history and to restore history to women.”⁵

Women’s leadership and contributions to early Christianity can only become historically visible when we abandon our outdated patriarchal-androcentric model of early Christian beginnings. Even when the New Testament source texts suggest a different meaning, such androcentric models can understand early Christian women only as marginal figures or see them in subordinate “feminine” roles which are derived from our own contemporary experience and understandings of reality. Rather than to project our own cultural-historical assumptions on the New Testament text, we must replace them with a historical model that makes it possible to conceive of the early Christian movement as a movement of women and men.⁶ Such a model

allows us to do justice to those New Testament texts that suggest women's leadership and contributions were central to the Early Christian missionary movement as well as to those texts that seek to prescribe women's role in terms of Greco-Roman patriarchal culture.

Second: A historical-critical interpretation of early Christian texts can no longer take at face value grammatically masculine language that functions as so-called "inclusive" language in a patriarchal culture. Instead it must utilize this insight into the functioning of generic androcentric language for the reading of historical sources. Such grammatically masculine generic language mentions women only when we are explicitly addressed, when our presence has become in any way a problem, or when we are exceptional. However, it does not mention women explicitly in so-called "normal" situations but subsumes us under "man" and "he." Before the ramifications of such androcentric inclusive language had become conscious, even women writers referred to themselves with grammatically masculine pronouns and expressions. Such so-called masculine "inclusive" language functions in the same way in biblical texts as in modern Western languages.

Historians and theologians of early Christianity interpret such androcentric language in a twofold way: as generic and as gender specific language. They presuppose that women as well as men were members of the early Christian communities and do not assume that the early Christian movement was a male cult like the Mithras cult. While grammatically masculine language with respect to the community is understood in an inclusive way, the same grammatically masculine language is understood in gender specific way when referring to leadership functions, such as apostles, missionaries, ministers, overseers, or elders. If a reconstruction of early Christian history can no longer take androcentric texts as face value, it must develop a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in

⁵J. Kelly-Gadol, "The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," *Signs* 1 (1976) 809. See for this whole section: B. A. Carroll, *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1976); *Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines*, ed. D. Spender (New York: Pergamon, 1981); *Discovering Reality*, ed. S. Harding and M. B. Hintikka (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983); J. Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986); G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University, 1986).

⁶For such a proposal see my book, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

order to read what they say and what they do not say about historical events and persons. Such a "hermeneutics of suspicion" must be applied not only to scrutinize our own presuppositions and interpretations but also to the New Testament texts themselves.⁷

While the books and essays on "women in the Bible" take androcentric language at face value, I would submit that an historically adequate reading of our New Testament sources must take into account the functions of so-called generic grammatically masculine language. The passages that directly mention women are not descriptive or comprehensive but indicative of the "submerged" information conveyed in so-called inclusive androcentric texts. Those passages that directly mention women cannot be taken as providing all the information *about women* in early Christianity. The letter of recommendation concluding now Paul's Epistle to the Romans mentions women's early Christian leadership only in passing, but still mentions it. Its references to early Christian women therefore should be read as the "tip of an iceberg," indicating what is

submerged in grammatically masculine language and how much historical information is lost to us forever. These references, however, must not be fitted into an androcentric model of historical reconstruction but must be appropriated with an understanding of early Christian beginnings that allows for the leadership not only of men but also for that of women.

I. ROMANS 16: A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION FOR PHOEBE OF CENCHREAE

Romans 16 begins with a recommendation which was written in order to introduce a woman by the name of Phoebe to the Christian community in Rome. As is the case with most of the women in the Christian missionary movement, we know of her only because Paul mentions her here. Like the other early Christian women leaders who are greeted in Romans 16, she would have been totally shrouded in historical silence if hers and Paul's ways had not crossed, or if she had belonged to Paul's "opponents" in Corinth. Although Phoebe is given a recommendation by letter in the same manner as Timothy is (1 Cor 16:10-11), her significance for the early Christian missionary movement is far from being acknowledged. In one of the few articles written on Phoebe, Edgar Goodspeed, for instance, suggests that Phoebe needed such a letter of introduction because "the Roman world was a bad and brutal world, and inns were notoriously likely to be no places for a decent woman, particularly a Christian woman, to put up in." Therefore he argues that Romans 16 must have been originally an independent letter to the church in Ephesus where Paul knew family circles who could make Phoebe feel "safe and comfortable." He says that the reason why so many women and their family circles are mentioned in Romans 16 is that they "might lead to Phoebe's entertainment in more than one of them."⁸ In such away Goodspeed conjures subtly the image of a respectable lady to be entertained by other refined ladies, an image that has nothing to do with the realities of early Christian mission and women's role in it.

⁷See my book, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

⁸E. Goodspeed, "Phoebe's Letter of Introduction," *Harvard Theological Review* 44 (1951) 56.

In antiquity letters of recommendation were not restricted to women or primarily written for them. Numerous examples are found in the papyri or letter collections. They generally mention the person introduced, give a brief statement of her or his identity and relationship to the writer, and then request a favor for the person. The request is usually stated in a quite generalized form, just as is the case in Romans 16:2. Personal letters of recommendation are frequently found at the end of larger epistles. They served to introduce friends, business partners, or slaves of the writer to a circle of friends and acquaintances in a foreign city.⁹ Traveling Christian missionaries and church leaders used such letters of recommendation in order to receive access and hospitality in communities to whom they were not known personally. Phoebe's example testifies that early Christian women leaders officially represented early Christian communities and that their travels served the communication between them. It is likely—but not explicitly stated—that she was the carrier of the letter to the Romans and thus the personal envoy of Paul.

Who was this woman Phoebe? "Phoebe" is a mythological name and could indicate that she was a freedwoman. Although in antiquity, just as today, women were characterized by their relationship to men, i.e., by their family status as daughters, wives, or widows, Phoebe is not defined by her gender role and patriarchal status but by her ecclesial functions. Her position in

the early Christian missionary movement is characterized with three titles: She is “our sister,” the minister or leader of the church at Cenchreae, a seaport of Corinth, and benefactor or *patrona* of many and even of Paul himself.

It is interesting to note that the Greek terms *diakonos* and *prostatis* are often translated with the verb form, e.g., “she serves” the community of Cenchreae and “she has assisted” or “helped many.” If *diakonos* is understood as a title it is translated with “servant, helper, or deaconess” and interpreted in terms of the later deaconess institution.¹⁰ Phoebe is understood as one of the first pastoral assistants helping Paul in his missionary work. Many scholars understand the office of Phoebe by analogy to the later institution of deaconesses, which in comparison to that of the male diaconate had only very limited functions. For instance, Phoebe is then seen as “an apparently well-to-do and charitable lady who because of her feminine virtues worked in the service of the poor and of the sick as well as assisted at the baptism of women.”¹¹ Already Origen had pro-

⁹For examples, see H. Gamble, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 84-87.

¹⁰See, e.g., the reasoning of C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 282: “The word itself (*diakonos*) does appear to have been on the way to technical use by the time this epistle was written (xii. 7), but whether it was so used of women is not certain.”

¹¹H. Lietzmann, *Geschichte der Alten Kirche* (4 vols; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1961) 1.149. See, however, W. H. Ollrog, *Paulus und Seine Mitarbeiter* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979) 31, who argues that such interpretations originated in the mind of privileged men. He points out that the participle *ousan* speaks for a institutionalization of the *diakonia* function. However, he understands then *prostatis* in terms of “protectress, assistant, or helper” and understands then Phoebe’s ministry in terms of financial or social assistance. Since Phoebe’s ministry depended on her personal financial situation, it is particular to her and can not be generalized.

moted this interpretation of Phoebe as an assistant and helper of Paul. From this he concluded that women who do good works can be appointed as deaconesses.

Similarly the Greek terms *prostatis* is translated not with “leading officer,” “president,” or “benefactor”¹² but with “helper” or “assistant,” since many exegetes are unable to conceive of the idea that Paul could be supported or outranked by a woman. After reviewing again all the arguments pro and con for understanding Phoebe in terms of Greco-Roman patronage a recent commentator of Romans concludes:

There is no reference then to a “patroness.”...Women could not take on legal functions, and according to Revelation only in heretical circles do prophetesses seem to have had official ecclesiastical powers of leadership....The idea is that of personal care which Paul and others have received at the hand of the deaconess.¹³

The reference to the Book of Revelation, which reflects a situation at the end of the first century in Asia Minor, is telling because it breaches all rules of historical-exegetical method. It is obvious that an androcentric perspective on early Christian history has to explain away the literal meaning of both words, because it does not allow for women in church leadership, or it can accord them only “feminine” assisting functions. Since this traditional interpretive model takes it for granted that the leadership of the early church was in the hands of men, it assumes that the

women mentioned in the Pauline letters were the helpers and assistants of the male apostles and missionaries, especially of Paul. Such an androcentric model of historical reconstruction cannot imagine or conceptualize that women such as Phoebe could have had leadership equal to and sometimes even superior to men in early Christian beginnings. The much invoked objectivity of historical-critical scholarship has a difficult time to prevail when the text speaks about a woman in a way that does not fit into traditional or contemporary androcentric models of historical reconstruction.

What can we say about Phoebe when we do not attempt to fit our information about her into an androcentric model, but seek to place it into a feminist model of historical reconstruction? The early Christian missionary movement was spread by traveling missionaries and organized in local churches similar to other private associations and religious cults. Whereas a woman such as Prisca engaged in missionary travels and founded house-churches wherever she went, a woman such as Phoebe was the leader of a local community. Her “ministry” or “office” was not as that of the later deaconesses limited to women, but she was the *diakonos* of the whole church in Cenchreae.¹⁴

Paul uses the same Greek expression when he characterizes his own ministry or that of the charismatic missionary Apollos whose teacher had been

¹²W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983) 60, accepts the understanding of the term in the sense of the Latin *patrona* but argues that such an understanding excludes that of “leader, president.” However, his argument is not convincing, since both meanings are not exclusive of each other.

¹³E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 411.

¹⁴H. J. Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981) 31, argues that the ministry of Phoebe consisted in her function as hostess for the community at Cenchreae, to whom she opened her house. However, the text does not refer to a house church.

Prisca. The word cluster *diakonos*, *diakonia*, *diakonein* is found most often in 2 Corinthians and it characterizes the so-called pseudo-apostles who were charismatic missionaries, eloquent preachers, visionary prophets, and spirit-filled apostles.¹⁵ Paul seems to have been criticized in Corinth because he did not make an impressive figure and was not an eloquent preacher and miracle worker, as well as because he did not have support of the community or “letters of recommendation.” Such an understanding of the title in terms of preaching and teaching is justified since it is used also in extrabiblical sources to refer to preachers and teachers.

Phoebe has the same title as these charismatic preachers in Corinth. Yet she is not one of the opponents of Paul but has a friendly relationship with him. She was acknowledged as a charismatic preacher and leader of the community in Cenchreae, the seaport of Corinth, who like the members of the house of Stephanas had dedicated herself “to the *diakonia* of the saints” (cf. 1 Cor 16:15). Just as the closest co-worker of Paul, Timothy, is called “our brother” and God’s *diakonos* (1 Thess 3:2), so Phoebe is not only introduced as *diakonos* but also as “our sister,” a title characterizing her as co-worker of Paul. In a similar way the author of Colossians recommends a man by the name of Tychicus as “our beloved brother” and “faithful *diakonos*” (4:7).¹⁶

The significance of Phoebe’s leadership is also underlined by the third title (after “sister” and *diakonos*), *prostatis*, a word found only here in the New Testament. The usual meaning of

this expression is “leader,” “president,” “superintendent,” or “patron,” a translation which is supported by the verb form which is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 and 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and 5:17. It refers in 1 Thessalonians to the leadership of the community and in 1 Timothy to the leadership functions of bishop, deacons, and elders. Such an understanding of the word in terms of leadership does not rule out its understanding in terms of the patronage system of antiquity, since patrons and benefactors also could take over leadership in the associations and cultic groups supported by them.

Although we have little evidence for all-women associations, we have sufficient evidence that women joined clubs and became founders and patrons of socially mixed associations and cults. They endowed them with funds for specific, defined purposes and expected honor and recognition in return for their benefactions. The well-to-do converts to Christianity must have expected to exercise the influence of a patron in the early Christian community. Christians such as Phoebe acted as benefactors for individual Christians and the whole church. In dealings with the government or the courts they represented the whole community. With their network of connections, friendships with well-placed persons, and public influence, such benefactors eased the social life of other Christians in Greco-Roman society.

¹⁵Cf. D. Georgi, *Die Gegner des Paulus im 2. Korintherbrief* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964); V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984).

¹⁶Cf. A. Lemaire, “The Ministries in the New Testament,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 3 (1973) 133-166.

The motif of reciprocity stressed by Paul speaks for an understanding of *prostatis* in the technical-legal sense of the Greco-Roman patronage system.¹⁷ Phoebe’s patronage was not limited to the community of Cenchreae but included many others, even Paul himself, who stood with her in a patron-client relationship. Therefore Paul asks the community in Rome to repay Phoebe according to the “exchange law” of Greco-Roman patronage the assistance and favors which Paul and other Christians owed her as her clients. Those who joined the Christian community joined it as an association of equals in which, according to the pre-Pauline baptismal formula of Galatians 3:28,¹⁸ societal status stratifications in terms of the patriarchal family were abolished. This is the main reason why the early Christian movement seems to have been especially attractive to those who had little stake in the rewards of religion based on either class stratification or on male dominance. It is obvious why women were among its leading converts.

II. PAUL’S APPEAL TO LEADING WOMEN IN THE ROMAN CHURCH

It is often observed that an unusually high number of women are found among those who are greeted in Romans 16:3-16. Of the 26 persons mentioned by name, roughly one third are women. While seven women are explicitly mentioned by name, two are characterized by their family relationship: the mother of Rufus and the “sister” of Nereus. Although it is difficult to know what Paul means when he claims that the mother of Rufus was also his own, it is generally assumed that she is not Paul’s natural mother. Meeks suggests that she might have extended her patronage to him.¹⁹ More difficult to resolve is the question whether “the sister of Nereus” is the natural sister, the Christian wife, or the Christian co-missionary of Nereus, since the word can be used in these three ways.

In light of our discussion of androcentric language we must, however, insist that this is

not all the information we have on women. If grammatically masculine language functions as inclusive language then it is safe to assume that among those who belong to the house of Aristobulus and Narcissus are also women. Similarly the “brethren” and “saints” who are with those groups of persons mentioned in 16:14-15 must have included “sisters.” Finally, it is unlikely that the house church of Prisca and Aquila consists only of men and not of women. In short, the women explicitly greeted in Romans 16 are not the only women in the Roman community and its leadership. However, their mention allows the exegete to read grammatically masculine language as inclusive unless a case can be made to the contrary.

This list of greetings is further interesting in terms of the social composition of the Roman church insofar as it contains not only Jewish, Greek, and Latin names, but also those of free, freed, slaves—women and men. Since it is difficult

¹⁷S. C. Mott, “The Power of Giving and Receiving: Reciprocity in Hellenistic Benevolence,” *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. G. E. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 133-66.

¹⁸For the literature and interpretation, cf. *In Memory of Her*, 205-241.

¹⁹W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 60.

to make a clear distinction between slaves and freed persons on the basis of names, it is no longer possible to say something about the actual economic situation and social mobility of those who are greeted. Those of the houses of Aristobulus and Narcissus are probably slaves, while Junia, Ampliatus, Stachys, Herodion, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Hermes, Patrobas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas either could still be slaves or could be former slaves, since all freed persons carried with their name a certain stigma of their servile origin. While freed slaves were still bound legally to their former masters and could not have public office or marry members of the senatorial aristocracy, the children born to them after they were set free enjoyed complete legal and social freedom. Children born into slavery, however, were the property of their mother’s master, because slave women—even when married to other slaves or freedmen—were the sexual and economic property of their masters.²⁰

The list of those greeted is clearly structured—not in terms of social status but in terms of ecclesial standing. It begins with the most important persons of the community—Prisca and Aquila—and ends with greetings to whole groups and to “all the saints” belonging to them (16:15).²¹ The greetings to Prisca, Aquila, Epaphroditus, Mary, Andronicus, Junia, Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Persis, as well as Rufus and his mother presuppose personal acquaintance. Paul’s greetings to several house churches (16:10-11) and other individuals are more general and do not indicate that Paul knew these persons personally. Since he had not yet visited the church in Rome, Paul—I would suggest—underlines his close ties with leading persons in the community in order to document that he was not a complete stranger to the Roman churches. While it would not have been necessary to explain, e.g., that Epaphroditus was the first gentile convert in western Asia Minor or to elaborate that Prisca and Aquila were his trusted coworkers in a letter to Ephesus, it makes sense for him to do so in a letter to the Roman church in order to claim them as his close friends and associates in Rome.

Prisca and Aquila have a place of prominence at the beginning of the list of greetings. They are called Paul’s “co-workers,” to whom not only Paul himself but all the gentile churches owe a debt of gratitude. When Paul was in danger (probably in Ephesus), they risked their lives

for him. Not only they but also “the church in their house” receive greetings. Exegetes have long recognized that it is unusual that in four out of six New Testament texts Prisca is mentioned before Aquila. The reason for Prisca’s prominence in the Pauline letters and Acts might be either her higher social status or her prominence in the early Christian missionary movement or both.

Since Luke concentrates in the second part of Acts on the greatness of Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, he refers to Prisca and Aquila only in passing. Acts 18 also indicates that Luke probably had more information about them than he transmits to us. Nevertheless, Luke’s brief remarks illuminate the historical significance of this missionary pair. Acts 18 tells us that Aquila was a Jew from Pontus. Priscilla—Luke always uses the diminutive of Prisca—is identified as his

²⁰S. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken, 1975) 191-97.

²¹W. H. Ollrog, “Die Abfassungsverhältnisse von Röm 16,” 236.

wife, but it is not clear whether she also was Jewish. Her name is found in good old Roman families, and it is connected with the cemetery of the *gens* Acilia in Rome. However, her name does not necessarily prove that she is of noble birth and therefore more prominent than Aquila. It could simply indicate that she was a freedwoman of the *gens* Acilia. That both she as well as Aquila are said to be tent-makers or leather-workers by trade (Acts 18:4) speaks for the latter. Meeks sums up the couple’s social status as follows:

wealth: relatively high. They have been able to move from place to place, and in three cities to establish a sizable household; they have acted as patrons for Paul and for Christian congregations. Occupation: low, but not at the bottom. They are artisans, but independent, and by ancient standards they operate on a fairly large scale. Extraction: middling to low. They are eastern provincials and Jews besides, but assimilated to Greco-Roman culture.²²

However, we must keep in mind that the last characterization might apply only to Aquila.

According to Acts 18 the couple was expelled from Rome when Claudius decreed that all Jews should leave the city (49 C.E.). They had already set up business in Corinth when Paul arrived there, and he stayed with them. Exegetes debate whether or not they had become Christians before they met Paul. Since it is customary for the writer of Acts to mention the conversion and baptism of prominent persons in the narrative, his failure to do so here speaks for the assumption that the couple had been members of the Christian community before their expulsion from Rome.²³ When Paul left Corinth, they moved with him to Ephesus where they established a house church (1 Cor 16:19). Since Acts 18:19 does not mention this but places Paul in the center of the narrative, it is safe to assume that the same is true for Luke’s account of Paul’s stay in Corinth. This assumption is supported by the fact that in Ephesus the couple took in Apollos, one of the most erudite and eloquent missionaries of the early Christian movement. Priscilla became his teacher who instructed him in “the way of God more accurately” (18:26). Might we assume that the Sophia and Spirit theology of Apollos was influenced by her catechesis? Priscilla certainly was also among the “brothers” who wrote a “letter of

recommendation” for Apollos to the church in Corinth (Acts 18:27).

Prisca and Aquila were traveling missionaries who, like Paul and Barnabas, supported their missionary work with their own labor. Like Timothy or Titus they are Paul’s co-workers, but unlike them they are not dependent on him or subject to his instructions. The opposite is true according to Romans 16. Moreover, they also had other co-workers.²⁴ At Romans 16:9 Paul greets Ur-

²²W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 59. See also A. V. Harnack, “Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 1 (1900) 35-41.

²³F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity. The Acts of the Apostles* (5 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1920-1933; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965) 4.222.

²⁴M. A. Getty, “God’s Fellow Worker and Apostleship,” *Women Priests*, ed. Leonard S. Swidler and Arlene Swidler (New York: Paulist, 1977) 176-82; E. E. Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970/71) 437-52.

banus as their and his own fellow worker who, together with Ephraenetus, might have moved to Rome with the couple. However, Prisca was not the only woman missionary co-worker in Rome. Another expression for missionary coworkers is “those who toil.” In 1 Corinthians 16:16-18 Paul admonishes the Corinthian Christians “to subordinate themselves to every co-worker and laborer,” and in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 he exhorts the community in Thessalonica to “respect those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you.” It is therefore significant that in Romans 16:6, 12 Paul commends four women—Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis—for having “labored hard” in the Lord. These women are thereby characterized as leaders of the community who, like Prisca, deserve respect and recognition for their tireless evangelizing and community-building ministry.

While Prisca and Aquila do not receive Paul’s favorite title “apostle,” another missionary pair does so. In Romans 16:7 Paul greets Andronicus and Junia(s), his co-patriots who have been in prison with him. Unlike in Prisca’s and Aquila’s case the text is clear that they had become Christians before Paul and that they are renowned among the apostles. Exegetes have usually argued that the accusative form *Junian* must connote a male name, because no women can be counted among the apostles. In recent years, however, it is more and more recognized that this androcentric theological assumption cannot be maintained exegetically, since we have no evidence whatever for a male name Junias, but plenty of evidence for the occurrence of the female name Junia in antiquity.²⁵ The name Junia indicates that this pre-Pauline Jewish Christian woman was either a noble lady of the *gens* Iunius, which is not very likely, or that she was a slave or freedwoman of a man Iunius or a descendant of former slaves of the noble house of Iunius.²⁶

Like Prisca and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia are missionary partners. They might be Jewish Christians from Syro-Phoenicia, or they might have even come from Tarsus. Since they had become Christians before Paul, it can be conjectured not only that they had worked together with Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, but also that they belonged to the circle of apostles in Jerusalem who together with James and the twelve received a vision of the Resurrected One (1 Cor 15:7). Moreover, since they are now in Rome, they seem to have been engaged in missionary activity. In the discussion with his rivals in Corinth and Galatia, Paul stresses that he is a true apostle because he has received a resurrection appearance and has proven himself to be an

outstanding missionary to the gentiles.²⁷ For Paul, however, the mark of true apostleship does not consist in

²⁵See my article, "Die Rolle der Frau in der urchristlichen Bewegung," *Konzilium* 12 (1976) 3-9 in which I pointed out that Roman Catholic exegesis followed the lead of the "Fathers" in understanding Junias as a woman's name. Cf. M. J. Lagrange, *Saint Paul, Epître aux Romains* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1916) 366. B. Brooten subsequently explored this reference in an unpublished MA thesis. Cf. her summary "Junia...Outstanding Among the Apostles," *Women Priests*, ed. Leonard S. Swidler and Arlene Swidler, 141-44; the correction finds its way slowly into the standard commentaries and introductions to the New Testament. See, e.g., H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 2.139.

²⁶P. Lampe, "Junia/Junias: Sklavenherkunft im Kreise der vorpaulinischen Apostel (Röm 16:7)," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1985) 132-33.

²⁷For a review of the problem, see my articles, "The Apostleship of Women in Early Christianity," and "The Twelve," *Women Priests*, ed. L. Swidler and A. Swidler, 135-40 and 114-123.

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mighty speech and pneumatic exhibition but in the conscious acceptance and endurance of the labors and sufferings connected with missionary work. Andronicus and Junia fulfill Paul's criteria for apostleship: They were outstanding in the circle of the apostles and like Paul had suffered prison in pursuit of their missionary activity.

However, in one signal aspect these two missionary couples are different from Paul who seems to have worked mostly in tandem with male co-workers like Barnabas, Silvanus, or Timothy. The practice of partnership-mission appears to have been the rule in the Christian missionary movement, which allowed for the equal participation of women with men in missionary work. Moreover, it is likely that such missionary partners were at first couples. In 1 Corinthians 9:5 Paul maintains that he, like the other apostles, has the right to financial support by the community as well as the right to be accompanied by a female co-missionary, because the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord and Cephas were entitled to take with them on their missionary journeys "sisters" as "women or wives." The difficult double accusative object "sister, woman" is best explained, when "sister" like "brother" is understood as a missionary coworker.²⁸ Thus the missionary pairs Prisca-Aquila and Andronicus-Junia were not exceptions in the early Christian movement. When Paul stresses celibacy as the best condition for missionary work (1 Cor 7:24-40), he expresses his own opinion which was not generally accepted. However, it must be noted that Paul characterizes neither Prisca nor Junia as "wives." Their patriarchal status in the household is of no significance. Rather he greets both women because of their commitment and accomplishments in the work of the gospel.

Although co-workers of Paul, Prisca and Aquila seem to have adopted a different missionary method and practice. While Paul can write eloquently about "the building up of the community" as primary task for ministry, he himself seems to have moved from missionary center to missionary center using the hospitality of local churches. By contrast, Prisca and Aquila founded and supported "a church in their house" wherever they moved. Insofar as like "the other apostles" they worked and traveled as "a missionary pair," and gathered converts in house churches, they did not divide the apostolic *diakonia* into the service of the word that aims at conversion of individuals and that of eucharistic table sharing that establishes community.

The house church²⁹ was the beginning and center of the Christian mission in a certain city or district. It provided space for the preaching of the gospel and for worship gatherings, as well as

for social and eucharistic table-sharing. The existence of house churches presupposes that some Christians must have had the means to provide a place as well as economic resources for the community. Prisca and Aquila appear to have been among such well-to-do Christians. How-

²⁸For such an understanding, cf. already Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.6.53.3f: "...and took their wives with them not as women with whom they had marriage relations but as sisters that they might be their co-missionaries (*syndiakonous*) in dealing with housewives."

²⁹A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977); R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); H. J. Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche*.

ever, Paul's greetings to those of the house of Aristobulus and of the house of Narcissus "to the extent that they belong to the Lord" (Rom 16:10-11) also indicate that slaves and family members did assemble in households whose masters were not Christians. As the movement spread, several house churches developed in a city like Corinth or Rome. Many dissensions and disagreements which are usually interpreted as having theological roots might have developed because of diverse house churches in a city.

In distinction to Acts, the Pauline letters do not assume that whole households were converted to Christianity. It is not the household of Prisca and Aquila but the church in their house that, like other house churches in Rome, receives greetings from Paul. Basic for the organizational structure of house churches, therefore, seems not to have been the structure of the patriarchal household but a combination of organizational forms found in private or cultic associations and Jewish communal structures. While some of the religious clubs and associations admitted members of the lower classes, and women indiscriminately, others were reserved to persons of high social status, common nationality, or shared profession as well as to slaves, women, or men exclusively. As Romans 16 indicates, the house church as well as the whole church in a city counted women as well as men, persons with high or low social status, and persons of different nationalities among its membership and leadership. Those who joined the early Christian missionary movement joined it as an association of equals. Membership and leadership in the early Christian missionary movement, therefore, was bound to come in tension with traditional patriarchal household and societal structures which still defined the life of those Christian freeborn women and slaves still living in pagan households.

III. CONCLUSION

Romans 16 gives us a glimpse of the rich social mix of early Christian communities, as well as of women's contribution to early Christian life and mission. The significance of women's leadership in the early Christian missionary movement that emerges from a careful reading of Romans 16, however, is downplayed when exegetes argue that the leadership of women like Phoebe, Prisca, or Junia was "unofficial" because it was not exercised in public but restricted to the private sphere of the house. This distinction is not only anachronistic but also overlooks that in the house church the "private and public" spheres of the church overlap. Moreover, there is no indication whatever that women's missionary work was restricted solely to women. Finally, the well worn argument of Scripture scholars that women's early Christian missionary activity was possible because women, but not male, missionaries had access to the women's quarters has no

basis in fact. Unlike their Athenian counterparts, Roman matrons were not sequestered in the house. Women worked in trades, dined with their husbands, attended shows, games, parties, and even political gatherings, and were notorious for receiving preachers of strange cults into their homes.³⁰

³⁰S. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 176-89; R. MacMullen, "Women in Public in the Roman Empire," *Historia* 29 (1980) 208-18.

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The contributions of our early Christian foresters to early Christian faith, community, and mission can only become historically visible when we are willing to abandon our outdated androcentric models of historical reconstruction. By highlighting the often unconscious bias of established so-called objective scholarship, as well as the obfuscating functions of androcentric language of biblical sources, a hermeneutics of suspicion is able to recover glimpses of the discipleship of equals in the beginnings of Christianity as a heritage and vision for all of us.