

Phoebe, the Letter-Carrier of Romans,
and the Impact of Her Role on Biblical Theology

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Dedication

I count it a privilege to offer this article for my friend, Dr. Alan Tomlinson, on the occasion of this *Festschrift* in his honor.¹ I have known Alan for about 20 years and served as his colleague in New Testament at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for 13 years. From day one, we have been of close kindred mind and conviction, probably because we both have Appalachian roots and learned from godly men who taught or were trained at Dallas Seminary. Over the years, we have traveled together to biblical sites, and discussed numerous NT passages, ancient texts, and inscriptions. Knowing him has enriched my life, built up my faith, and increased my knowledge, and I have come to the conclusion that he might possibly be the best NT exegete in the Southern Baptist Convention, or even beyond. Congratulations, my brother!

Introduction

Scholars are not only divided along ideological lines but also clearly undecided on what role Phoebe played in Paul's letter to the Romans.² In

¹ A slightly different version of this article first appeared in the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 56.1 (Fall 2013): 43–51; reprinted with permission.

² Paul wrote Romans to show that, in accordance with the gospel, “no distinction” exists in the impartial judicial administration of God—the law condemns everyone, yet all who believe, Jew or Gentile, are justified by faith (Rom 1–11). In light of Romans 1–11, the apostle provoked an acceptance of all justified believers, “born

their discussions on this topic, they often particularly focus on how Paul used the word δῆκονος as it pertains to Phoebe, mentioned in Romans 16:1–2. On the one hand, the term may be used generically to denote a “servant,” i.e., one who performs various kinds of service.³ On the other hand, the word can also designate the office of “deacon” (cf. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12; Ign. *Eph.* 2.1; *Magn.* 6.1). So, the question usually arises in Romans 16:1–2 whether Paul is commending Phoebe in his letter because she is a noteworthy “servant,” or because she is specifically a “deacon” of the church at Cenchrea. A third possibility exists—*viz.*, Phoebe was the carrier of the letter to the church at Rome.⁴

A brief survey of commentaries written on Romans reveals that a majority of scholars say that Phoebe may have been the letter-carrier for Paul’s epistle to the Romans, but then they often say, primarily on the basis of the word δῆκονος, that she was a deacon. For example, though he provides no proof that Phoebe was a letter-carrier, F. F. Bruce maintained that the letter to the Romans evidently was taken by her to the church; he then states, however, that she was a deacon.⁵ T. Schreiner also thinks that Phoebe was probably the bearer of the letter, but then he too goes on to say that she held the office of deacon.⁶ Though D. Moo strongly alludes to Phoebe being the letter-carrier of Romans, he likewise believes that she was a deacon—however, he is cautious about saying she held the office because he notes that regular offices in the church were

Jew” and “born Gentile,” within the body of Christ (Rom 12–16). I am grateful to my friend Alan Tomlinson for sharing this view with me several years ago.

³ See e.g. Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida (*A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Romans* [London/New York/Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971], 290) who say “it is doubtful that this had become a technical term for an office in the church at the time that Paul wrote, and it is better to use a general term rather than the specific term ‘deaconess.’”

⁴ For quite some time, Alan Tomlinson and I have held that Phoebe was the letter-carrier of Romans. Scholars in general today are finally beginning to attribute this role to Phoebe, but few have actually discussed the impact of her being a letter-carrier on a biblical theology of women in ministry.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 252.

⁶ T. R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 786–87.

still in the process of being established.⁷ J. D. G. Dunn is no different and holds a similar viewpoint to that of Moo.⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield says that it is highly probable that Phoebe was to be the bearer of Paul's letter to the Romans, but then he says it is "virtually certain" that Phoebe is a deacon of the church in question.⁹

I will briefly contend in this paper, however, that in Romans 16:1–2 Paul commended Phoebe as the letter-carrier for his epistle to the Roman church. That is to say, Phoebe was a "servant" exercising a service-oriented task—*viz.*, dispatch letter service. To put forth a case for the latter view, I will first point out various Greek texts in which the word *διάκονος* refers to one who is a letter-carrier or courier. Second, I will show that Paul's recommendation of Phoebe in Romans 16:1–2—though more extensive—nonetheless fits the pattern found in texts where letter-carriers are commended to the recipients of letters.¹⁰ Finally, the impact of this conclusion on biblical theology will be briefly considered.

The Use of *διάκονος* as "Courier" in Ancient Texts

That the word *διάκονος* often refers in ancient texts to a messenger, courier, or letter-carrier seems clear. A few examples should suffice to show that the latter statement is true.¹¹

In Aeschylus' (c. 525/4–456/5 B.C.) Greek tragedy titled *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus says that people should worship and adore those who rule them. He then expresses some considerable disdain for his ruler Zeus, before saying that he sees that god's

⁷ D. J. Moo, *Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 913–14; cf. also Moo, "Romans." Pages 2–99 in the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 90–91.

⁸ J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans*. WBC 38b (Dallas: Word, 1988), 886–87.

⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2: 781.

¹⁰ As E. R. Richards (Silvanus Was Not Peter's Secretary: Theological Bias in Interpreting *dia Silouanou . . . egrapsa*," *JETS* Vol. 43, No. 3 [Sept. 2000]: 421) has correctly noted.

¹¹ The list of texts highlighted below were found in LSJ, 398.

messenger/courier (διάκονος) coming, no doubt to herald some news. At this point Hermes, the messenger of the gods, enters the scene.¹²

In Sophocles' (b. 490s B.C.) play *Philoctetes*, the mythological leader of seven ships to Troy is left behind in Lemnos after being bitten by a snake. He is portrayed as pleading for Zeus either to take his life or rescue him from being an outcast. In his plea to Zeus, Philoctetes longs to see his father again. He says that he has sent people to implore his father to take him home in his own ship. He fears, however, that his father is either dead or the envoys/couriers (οἱ διάκονοι) he sent cared little about his concerns and instead hurried to their homes.¹³

In his *Republic* Plato (c. 429-347 B.C.) discusses with Adeimantus the establishment of a city. After saying that a city cannot be set up in a place where it will not require imports, Plato stresses the necessity of persons who will bring to that city what it needs from other cities. He further opines that if the city's messenger/courier (ὁ διάκονος) departs not taking with him anything needed by those from whom they will obtain their required imports, then he will also return from them empty-handed.¹⁴

In his *Antiquities* the Jewish historian Josephus (b. A.D. 37/8) records that when David learned of Absalom's plot and later fled from Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam 15:12), he had persuaded the Levites to remain behind in that city (cf. 2 Sam 15:24). He instructed them to keep him secretly informed of events that took place there while he was away. Josephus reports that, in all of these matters, Achimas, the son of Sadok, and Jonathan, the son of Abiathar, acted as David's faithful couriers (διάκονοι).¹⁵ Likewise, he later records that the high priests had kept their sons in hiding outside of the city so that they might bring word to David of Absalom's plans. When the priests instructed their sons to take news to David, Josephus describes Achimas and Jonathan as setting off without delay, like obedient and loyal couriers (διάκονοι).¹⁶

¹² Aeschylus, *Prometheus Vincitus* 942. Interestingly, the word διάκονος was translated as "servitor" in the Loeb Classical Library series volume.

¹³ Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 497.

¹⁴ Plato *Republic* 370e. Again, the word διάκονος was translated as "servitor" rather than messenger in the older Loeb Classical Library series volume.

¹⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities* VII, 201.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 224.

The New Testament is also not without its other examples in which the word *διάκονος* is used where letter-carriers are indicated. For instance, Paul mentions Tychichus as the letter-carrier in Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7–8, and most scholars recognize him as such in those letters.

Interestingly, though he did not do so in the second edition (1979), in Frederick Danker's 2003 revision of Bauer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), he described the use of *διάκονος* as it pertains to Phoebe in Romans 16:1 as "one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, *agent, intermediary, courier*."¹⁷ For some reason, however, this meaning has not yet readily carried over into New Testament scholarship.

Paul's Recommendation of Phoebe as the Letter-Carrier

Now that it has been established that the term *διάκονος* refers in several ancient texts to a courier, the question that now needs to be asked is, "Is this use of *διάκονος* the one present in Romans 16:1?" Since context determines the meaning of words, it needs to be shown by some contextual means that Paul is speaking of Phoebe as a letter-carrier. If the latter can be done, then this demonstration would lend support to the viewpoint that the apostle is using *διάκονος* in that sense. Thus, to demonstrate the hypothesis posed earlier, I will briefly show that Paul's recommendation of Phoebe in Romans 16:1–2 fits the pattern found in texts where carriers are commended to the recipients of letters.

Before doing so, however, it would be prudent to consider briefly something of the function of letter-carriers in antiquity. Besides carrying the letters, couriers sometimes read the letters they delivered, elaborated upon their contents, and also answered any questions the recipients might have. Something of the latter functions can be seen, for example, in a letter from a woman who seeks to enlist Zenon's help against someone who has treated her son badly. After her complaint she wrote, "The rest please learn from the man who brings you this letter. He is no

¹⁷ BDAG, 230. This meaning was not present in the second edition (1979), but comes from one who, as far as I know, had no theological "ax to grind" in the complementarian-egalitarian debate.

stranger to us.”¹⁸ Or, consider a letter from Cicero in which he complains to one of his friends that a carrier did not provide some expected details for him.

I received your letter . . . and on reading it I gathered that Philotimus did not act . . . [on] the instructions he had from you (as you write) . . . [when] he failed to come to me himself, and merely forwarded me your letter; and I concluded that it was shorter because you had imagined that he would deliver it in person.¹⁹

The sender wrote a shorter letter because he expected the carrier to elaborate the details for the recipient. He also did not have to say that the courier would provide additional information—everyone presumed this would be the case.

For letter-carriers to be accepted in the communities to which they were sent it was often necessary for the senders to provide the couriers’ credentials. Thus, a letter of commendation would be provided on their behalf.

Paul used letters of recommendation (cf. 2 Cor 8:18–24; Eph 6:21–22; Phil. 2:25–30; Col 4:7–8; cf. also Acts 9:2; 18:27; 22:5; 1 Cor 16:3).²⁰ In 2 Corinthians 3:1–2 he mentioned the practice and said that he did not need any letter of commendation. He told the Corinthians, some of whom were saying he was not qualified to do new covenant ministry (cf. 2 Cor 2:16),

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all men.²¹

As C. Kim has found, “For Paul, the act of commending someone actually meant sending credentials to the recipient on behalf of the recommended.”²²

Given that Paul had never visited the church at Rome (cf. Rom 1:10; 15:22–23), the need to present Phoebe’s credentials as his letter-carrier was probably more important than usual; so, he commends her as

¹⁸ PCol 3:6 (as cited in E. R. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004], 183).

¹⁹ Cicero, *Letters to Friends*, 4.2.1 (as cited in Richards, *Paul*, 183).

²⁰ Chan-Hie Kim, *The Familiar Letter of Recommendation* (Missoula, MT: 1972), 119.

²¹ Translation mine.

²² Kim, *Familiar Letter of Recommendation*, 119.

a courier (διάκονος). Those who view Phoebe specifically as a deacon in Romans 16:1 should not see Paul's recommendation of her as a courier as diminishing her role or importance. To the contrary, she is a highly trusted individual who is a vital part of the apostle's missionary team; she is sent for the express purpose of delivering the letter to the Roman church and in doing so conveys Paul's apostolic presence (παρουσία).²³ The authority she conveys is not her own but the apostle Paul's.

Several scholars have written extensively on letters in antiquity and on letters of recommendation—notably, C. Kim,²⁴ J. L. White,²⁵ S. Stowers,²⁶ and more recently, E. R. Richards.²⁷ Each finds that Paul's commendation of Phoebe in Romans 16:1–2 shows some of the characteristics featured in Greek papyri letters of recommendation. One should also note here that scholars on letters generally acknowledge that passages of commendation often occurred within larger letters, as is the case in the text considered here.

What is the pattern found in texts where the couriers of letters are commended to their recipients? White's work is representative here when he states that the following kind and sequence of formulae are characteristic of letters of recommendation (*littera commendatica*): (1) a mention of the letter-carrier and his or her credentials; (2) the writer's request with regard to the courier; and (3) usually, an expression of

²³ R. W. Funk, "The Apostolic *Parousia*: Form and Significance," in W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule and R. R. Niebuhr (eds.), *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967), 249. Letters substituted for their authors' actual physical presence to their recipients (cf. Cicero, *Letters to His Friends* 2,4,1). Paul's letters speak for him, with his authority as though he was actually present. In that sense, they are inseparably connected with Paul as a person and as an apostle (2 Cor. 1:15–2:4); see David Bartlett, *The Shape of Scriptural Authority* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 120.

²⁴ Kim, Familiar Letter of Recommendation.

²⁵ John L. White, "The Greek Documentary Letter Tradition Third Century B.C.E. to Third Century C.E.," *Semeia* 22 (1981): 89–106.

²⁶ Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter-Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

²⁷ E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

appreciation.²⁸ He provides the following letter of commendation as a representative example,

letter carrier/credentials

I think that you are aware about Aischylos, that he is far from indifferent to us. He has now sailed up the river to your party in order to be introduced to Kleonikos.

the request

Therefore, please make an effort to introduce him to Kleonikos; and if he does not find the latter in your company, get letters of introduction to him from his friends.

expression of appreciation

By doing this you would both favor me and the God. And write to me if you ever have need of anything, knowing that you will have it.²⁹

The description of Phoebe and Paul's request in Romans 16:1–2 fits White's description of the letter of recommendation, though, as Richards rightly points out, "Paul's citation of his carrier was never merely formulaic; he commended the person more than was common and in ways that were not common."³⁰

As far as the letter-carrier and her credentials are concerned in Romans 16:1–2 Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a διάκονος from the church which is in Cenchræa (v. 1) . . . for she herself has been a benefactor of many, and of myself as well (v. 2c)."³¹ Paul commended Phoebe as a fellow believer, as a faithful courier, and as a benefactor, a good friend of many, including Paul. This commendation tells the Roman church that she is someone who can be completely trusted—trusted to deliver Paul's letter without compromising and

²⁸ John L. White, "The Greek Documentary Letter Tradition Third Century B.C.E. to Third Century C.E.," *Semeia* 22 (1981): 95-97.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 96. Other examples of the letter of recommendation may be found in Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter-Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 155.

³⁰ Richards, 189.

³¹ Translation mine.

opening it and thus rendering its contents suspect, trusted to elaborate upon its details, trusted to answer any questions that the believers might have of her, etc.

In Paul's *request* he asks "that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you . . ." (v. 2a–b, NASB). Paul asked his recipients to welcome this woman, to accept her in a worthy manner. Further, he instructed the Roman church to give her anything she needed while she was there. Paul was saying, "Receive this lady as my courier/envoy; take care of her; do whatever she asks."

The *expression of appreciation* that White mentions in his study on letters seems to be absent from Romans 16:1–2, but as he points out, and as others generally recognize, many letters which have a request as their primary purpose do not employ the full three-part sequence. Paul may have expressed his appreciation for the church elsewhere in Romans (e.g., 1:8–15) and felt no need to do it here.

To sum, one certainly cannot draw the conclusion based on word-use alone that Paul used *διάκονος* in the sense of "courier" as it pertains to Phoebe. When one combines, however, this potential nuanced word-use with the fact that Paul commended Phoebe as a letter-carrier in this passage of recommendation (a fact generally acknowledged by scholars who have written on ancient letters), then it stands to reason that *διάκονος* means "courier" in Romans 16:1, as Danker concluded in BDAG. If so, then scholars should perhaps stop thinking of Phoebe primarily as one who was a "deacon" in the church at Cenchrea—at least on the basis of this text; for, if the explanation of the text put forth above is correct, then it does not necessarily support that translation and interpretation. Phoebe is clearly a "servant," but here a servant specifically involved in dispatch-letter service; thus, the rather generic use of *διάκονος* as "servant" does not specifically seem to capture enough of what Paul said about her.

Some might object to the evidence put forth above by saying that couriers as the messengers of the gods is one thing, whereas calling a person like Phoebe a letter-carrier is quite another. Sufficient texts described above, however, do call various people letter-carriers. The word *διάκονος* may be used in that sense to refer to a courier.

Others might also protest the conclusion reached above because of the qualifying phrase, *τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς*, which they

translate to mean “of the congregation (church) which is in Cenchrea.” In other words, for them the phrase localizes Phoebe’s position as a deacon in the church and strongly suggests that Paul had in mind her specific status as a deacon rather than her general disposition as a servant. The phrase τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς, however, need mean nothing more than “from the church which is in Cenchrea.” That is to say, the church at Cenchrea was the church to which Phoebe belonged.

Paul also called Phoebe his “benefactor” (προστάτις, Rom 16:2), who has rendered assistance not only to him, but also to many others. This designation “implies that Phoebe was possessed of some social position, wealth and independence.”³² She evidently “put her status, resources, and time at the services of traveling Christians, like Paul, who needed help and support.”³³ The trip to carry the letter to Rome from Corinth, the city of the letter’s origin, would be quite long and expensive. Phoebe may have had some business that she needed to conduct in Rome, and it necessitated her traveling there to do so. If that was the case, she likely also carried the letter to Rome because she was headed that way.

The Impact of Phoebe as a Letter-Carrier on Biblical Theology

If this conclusion regarding Phoebe in Romans 16:1–2 is correct, *viz.*, that she is a courier, then some rethinking obviously needs to take place regarding the prominent place these verses play in a biblical theology, particularly with the role of women in ministry. Not surprisingly, some NT scholars, for instance, like Michael Bird and Scot McKnight, have used the role of Phoebe as a letter-carrier and the responsibilities that came with that job to support egalitarian perspectives.³⁴ For example, Bird poses the question, “Now, if Paul was so opposed to women teaching men anytime and anywhere, why on earth would he send a woman like

³² Cranfield, *Romans*, 2: 783.

³³ Moo, *Romans*, 916.

³⁴ See Michael Bird’s comments at

<http://www.cbeinternational.org/?q=content/2011-06-16-fretting-over-phoebe-arise-e-newsletter>. Accessed: 9/16/2013.

McKnight simply cites Bird’s blogpost in his article

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2011/12/09/fretting-over-phoebe-mike-bird>.

Accessed: 9/16/2013.

Phoebe to deliver this vitally important letter and to be his personal representative in Rome?"³⁵ He later says, "I'm careful to make the point that this is not the be all and end all of debates about women in ministry. . . . But I point out that taken at face value, Paul evidently had no problem with women having some kind of speaking and teaching role in the churches."³⁶

Complementarians, however, readily acknowledge that Paul permitted women to have some kind of speaking or teaching roles in the churches. They gladly encourage women to teach other women and children (cf. Titus 2:3–5). Moreover, they also recognize the fact that women prophesied in the early church (cf. 1 Cor 11:5; though in this text Paul pointed to an abuse in the practice).

Egalitarians object to the view of 1 Timothy 2:12 which arguably says that Paul restricted women from teaching men Christian doctrine and from exercising any kind of governing authority over men in the church. They typically claim that such an interpretation is ambiguous at best, and that Paul's words are actually limited in their scope to the events in Ephesus. Complementarians usually maintain that the plain reading of the text is clear and that its scope extends beyond the events at Ephesus. The latter group views this verse as prescriptive and normative;³⁷ the former group does not.

The primary difficulty with using Phoebe's role and responsibilities as a letter-carrier to support the egalitarian perspective seems to be one of scope. One makes a huge jump from Phoebe's role as a courier and its associated responsibilities of clarifying and explaining some of Romans' content (if need be) to the conclusion that women are thus now permitted to teach men in churches, which deduction seems to contradict Paul's words in 1 Tim 2:12. A considerable difference in context is apparent between that of church worship (1 Tim 2:8–15) and delivering mail (as Phoebe did). Three Greek words in 1 Timothy 2:8 have bearing on this issue, and it is to those words to which we now turn our attention.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Typically because verse 12 is seen as grounded in creation, mentioned in 1 Tim 2:13.

The words “in every place” (ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ) in 1 Timothy 2:8 bring into play this issue of scope when considering the restrictions Paul placed on women in 1 Timothy 2:12. Some questions follow, as Mounce has asked in summary fashion: “Is παντὶ τόπῳ, ‘every place,’ in Ephesus or more generally in the world? Does it refer to only public worship or also to conduct in the outside world?”³⁸ One’s answers to these questions also affect conclusions reached in 1 Timothy 2:8–15 concerning (i) a woman’s submission (v. 11); (ii) where a woman may or may not teach (v. 12a); and (iii) the men over whom she may not exercise governing authority.³⁹

Arguably, the phrase ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ means “in every place of worship,” i.e., in every place that Christian congregations are gathered for worship, not just the church at Ephesus. The latter conclusion is reached primarily on contextual grounds. In the purpose statement for the letter of 1 Timothy, Paul told his young associate that in the event he was delayed in visiting Ephesus he was writing so that he might know how people should behave in “the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.”⁴⁰ This description that Paul gave of the church seems to extend beyond just the churches in Ephesus. Moreover, the context of chapters two and three also indicates a more universal than specific interpretation. Paul’s instructions regarding prayer, men praying without anger, women exhibiting modesty and doing godly works, the appeal to creation in 2:13, and the insistence on overseers and deacons to be without reproach all support a universal application;⁴¹ i.e., “in every place” refers to everywhere that Christian congregations are gathered for worship, rather than just strictly at Ephesus.

Did Phoebe perform her duties as a letter-carrier in the context of church worship? I say no. She is no doubt a very important person, but her delivery, and perhaps explanation, of the contents of Romans seems to be quite different from the context of local church worship, and again, the authority she conveys is not her own, but that of the apostle Paul.

³⁸ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 107.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Translation mine.

⁴¹ As Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 107, et al., have noted.