There are several women mentioned in the New Testament who in the past have had their ministries downplayed. Even today, some question whether Phoebe was deacon of her church (Rom. 16:1–2), or whether Junia was really an apostle. Junia and a woman named Nympha have even had their gender obscured, and are given masculine names in some older English translations of Romans 16:7 and Colossians 4:15, respectively.

But there is another New Testament woman whose ministry and identity have been diminished to such an extent that some do not even recognize that she was a real person. She is the woman who was a recipient of the letter we know as 2 John. In this article I take a look at the text of 2 John. I especially look at the words the letter-writer uses to identify the people he mentions.

“Lady”

Following standard letter-writing protocol, 2 John opens with the sender identifying himself and the letter’s recipients. The sender refers to himself simply as “the elder;” he doesn’t give his name. He then mentions the recipients, also without naming names. The first recipient mentioned in 2 John is the “chosen lady.” Many have assumed that “chosen lady” is used as a metonym, or metaphor, for a congregation, and does not refer to an actual person. This is despite the fact that no congregation is referred to as a “lady” (Greek: κυρία) in the New Testament or in later writings. On the other hand, many women are addressed, or referred to, as κυρία in ancient papyrus letters and documents that still survive today.

Kυρία is a term that was often used for a high status woman. The masculine form of the same word, κυρίος, is often translated into English as “lord” or “master,” indicating the status associated with this term.

While κυρία occurs only twice in the New Testament, both times in 2 John, the word occurs in other Jewish and early Christian literature. For example, it is used in direct address by Isaac to his mother Sarah in the Testament of Abraham (circa 100 AD), and by Perpetua’s brother and father to their sister and daughter, respectively, in the account of Perpetua’s martyrdom (202 or 203 AD). It is used by Hermas (a freed slave) when addressing his female former...
chosen by God;” this phrase in many times, more generally, to describe Peter. Furthermore, “chosen” is used a few also used to describe the recipients of 1 greetings in Romans 16:13. “Chosen” is Rufus, who is mentioned in the closing greeting in 2 John 1:13; and is referred to as (circa 150 AD), Thecla Paul and Thecla (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 224. The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries, vol. 2, trans. James Moffatt 7. It is believed that the chosen lady lived in a city in Asia Minor. Adolf von Harnack, for example, writes that the chosen lady held “a promi-
6. The plural of teknon (“child”) occurs in 1 John 3:1, 2, 10a, 5:2; 2 John 1:1, 4, 13; 3 John 1:4 (cf. 1 John 3:10b). 7. It is believed that the chosen lady lived in a city in Asia Minor. Adolf von Harnack, for example, writes that the chosen lady held “a prominent position in some unknown church in Asia.” Harnack, The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries, vol. 2, trans. James Moffatt (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 224.

The participation of women in congregations and in missions, at all levels, was vital, valued, and acknowledged in New Testament letters. In each of John’s three letters, “children” usually refers to Christians: to spiritual children or disciples. A comparison of 2 John 1:4 with 3 John 1:4 illustrates this. In 3 John 1:4 it says, “I have no greater joy than this: to hear that my children are living according to the truth” (CEB). Compare this with 2 John 1:4: “I was overjoyed to find some of your children living in the truth . . .” (CEB, italics added).

Church
The fact that the lady and her children are distinctly addressed makes the idea that the lady is a church untenable: if the “chosen lady” is a metonym for a church, who then are her “children”?
Some have suggested that the “lady” represents a church and the “children” represents the congregation, but this idea does not correspond with how churches functioned in the first century. In fact, was to this lady and to her congregation that the elder writes.

Women were active in New Testament churches. They were involved in a variety of ministries. Some were prophets, deacons, or missionaries. Others, like the Chosen Lady, were hosts, patrons, and leaders of local congregations. The participation of women in congregations and in missions, at all levels, was vital, valued, and acknowledged in New Testament letters. Today it is important to recognize that these women were not an anomaly. Women ministers were a feature of New Testament Christianity.

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1. A related but distinct word, to kuriaxos, meaning “the Lord’s household” (i.e. a Christian congregation), is known from the third century, but not before. See E. A. Mathieson, The Perspectives of the Greek Papyri of Egypt on the Religious Beliefs, Practices and Experiences of Christian and Jewish Women from 100 CE to 400 CE. Doctoral thesis (2006) Macquarie University, at http://hdl.handle.net/1959.14/290184, p.194
2. See the database www.papyri.info.
3. Accordingly, kuria is translated as “gentlewoman” (the counterpart of “gentleman”) in 2 John 1:1 of the CEB.
4. Kuria occurs in 2 John 1:1 and 5, but the CEB and NLT have not translated the second literally. The woman is described as “chosen” only in verse 1.
5. Phoebe of Cenchrea and Apphia of Laodicea are each called “sister.”
6. The plural of teknon (“child”) occurs in 1 John 3:1, 2, 10a, 5:2; 2 John 1:1, 4, 13; 3 John 1:4 (cf. 1 John 3:10b).