A Case Study in Translators' Bias
Could a woman have been an apostle—even “prominent among the apostles”?

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In Chapter 16 of his Letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul offers greetings to friends and ministry associates. Several women are mentioned among Paul’s coworkers: Phoebe (v. 1), Prisca (v. 3), Mary (v. 6), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (v. 12), the mother of Rufus (v. 13), Julia (v. 15), and the sister of Nereus (v. 15). An interesting textual variation occurs in verse 7 that has bearing on the range of offices held by Paul’s female coworkers. The NRSV translates verse 7, “Greet Andronicus and Junia . . . they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” The name Junia here denotes a woman. But a superscript letter in the NRSV refers the reader to a note that says, “Or Junias; other ancient authorities read Julia.” The NIV, in contrast, translates, “Greet Andronicus and Junias.”

This translation construes both names as those of men, and no explanatory note is appended. What is the cause of the discrepancy here? How can the original Greek be so ambiguous that translators are unsure of what the name is and whether it denotes a man or a woman?

The editors of the NRSV have done well to alert readers by means of their note to both a textual question and an interpretive one.

The textual question concerns what Paul originally wrote. Among the many Greek manuscripts that underlie our English translations of Romans 16:7, only two have the name Julia. A few other manuscripts in languages other than Greek also have this name. Textual scholars rightly regard this as meager support for the reading of Julia. The confusion of the Greek letter for “n” with the Greek letter for “I” was an easy error for ancient scribes, and especially so given the fact that the earliest manuscripts were written in capital letters, with no spaces between the words.

The textual question can be answered with little doubt: Paul originally wrote the letters IOUNIAN. (Transliterated into English, this would be “Junian.” The name has a final “n” because it is in the accusative case as the direct object of the verb greet). Now the interpretive question enters the picture. Paul no doubt originally wrote the Greek name without an accent mark. This was typical of the earliest manuscripts. Accents were not introduced until the seventh century or later. The interpretive question arises because, some scholars say, depending on the accent, the name could be either Junian, the accusative form of the woman’s name, or Juniûn, the accusative form of the man’s name. Are we, then, left with an unsolvable dilemma?

Bruce Metzger, a leading New Testament textual critic and author of A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, points out two facts favoring a woman’s name. First, “the female Latin name Junia occurs more than 250 times in Greek and Latin inscriptions found in Rome alone, whereas the male name Junias is unattested.” From where, then, have scholars derived the name Junias? The assumption among many interpreters of Romans 16:7 has been that Junias must be a contraction of Junianus, a common Latin name. The name Junias is, therefore, a hypothesis.

Second, Metzger points out that “when Greek manuscripts began to be accented, scribes wrote the feminine . . . (‘Junia’).” What this means is that, although the earliest manuscripts of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans had no accents and so were ambiguous, when accents began to be inserted, every extant witness construed the name as feminine. There is not a single ancient Greek manuscript that accents the name as Junias. In effect, then, the interpretation of the name as that of a man is completely lacking in explicit textual support, and indeed, the name Junias is itself a hypothesis lacking attestation.

Why is it then that so many modern English translations of Romans 16:7 render the name Junias? (In addition to the NIV, see the RSV, TEV, NEB, and JB. Surprisingly, the KJV has “Junia.”) It is hard to see any other reason than the translators’ bias against the possibility that a woman could be an apostle, let alone “prominent among the apostles.” The comment in the second edition of the standard New Testament Greek lexicon (Walter Bauer, et al., 1979, p. 380) is typical: “The possibility . . . that this is a woman’s name . . . is prob[ably] ruled out by the context.” But given the above evidence and the additional fact that the pairing of the names “Andronicus and Junia” may point to a husband and wife team, James D. G. Dunn’s comment is apt: “The assumption that [the name] must be male is a striking indictment of male presumption regarding the character and structure of earliest Christianity” (Romans, p. 894).

Junia, however, has recently gotten her due from lexicographers. The third edition of the standard lexicon (Walter Bauer, Frederick Danker, et al., 2000) was released last fall. This new edition says that “the strong probability [is] that a woman named Junia is meant [in Romans 16:7]” (p. 480). Incidental evidence such as that of Romans 16:7 combines with other names and narratives in the New Testament to sketch a picture of early Christian communities in which women frequently occupied leadership roles, including that of apostle. It is unfortunate, then, that the gifts and calling of Junia’s modern-day sisters are not always similarly recognized.

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