Chapter 16 in Paul’s Letter to the Romans:
Dispensable Tagalong or Valuable Envelope?

MARK REASONER

The sixteenth chapter of Romans was treated as a detachable unit at least as early as the second century, showing that some considered it to be a tagalong compared with the rest of Paul’s letter to the Romans. The oldest surviving manuscript of Romans, Chester Beatty Papyrus II, also known as Π46, dating from the early third century, places the benediction of 16:25–27 between 15:33 and chapter 16. This leads some textual critics to conclude that Π46 had an antecedent that ended at chapter 15, since the final benediction was shifted to the end of that chapter. T. W. Manson went so far as to suggest that Paul’s original letter ended at chapter 15, and that what we call chapter 16 was added to a copy of the Roman letter and sent to Ephesus. When textual critics compare Π46 with other early manuscripts of Romans, there is clear evidence that in the second century, if not before, a fourteen-chapter version of the letter once circulated, composed of 1:1–14:23 plus 16:25–27. In this version, the final two chapters, which were tied to the circumstances in Paul’s life and the specific addressees of the letter, as well as the destination phrases (“in Rome”) in 1:7, 15, were omitted in order to make the letter more relevant for the church at large.

It should now begin to be apparent why we can say that Romans 16 has been treated as a tagalong in relation to the rest of the chapters Paul composed in his letter to the Romans. Though the majority of Romans scholars now consider Romans 16 to be an integral part of the letter that Paul wrote, it has not attracted the attention paid to the earlier chapters of the letter. As N. T. Wright writes in another essay in this volume, “I used to think Romans 16 was the most boring chapter in the letter…” (see p. 7).

Still, this chapter is highly significant, since it connects what some people read as the abstract, doctrinal sections of Romans that seem to orbit in the stratosphere down to life as we experience it here with our feet on the ground. As we examine the five parts of Romans 16, we will see that this chapter functions as an envelope for the letter. Just as envelopes in our world of postal mail contain indications of how the letter will reach its addressees, the recipients’ names and address, and sometimes extra greetings or content, so chapter 16 of Romans is indispensable to a complete understanding of the letter. This chapter helps us see that the letter is intended for women and men, slaves and free, Jews and ethnē (nations), indeed all who are following Jesus in the politically repressive shadow of the empire. It is about how God seeks people from all around the world who will live in obedience to God’s will, by the power that Jesus activates in their lives.

The five sections of chapter 16 begin with a commendation and introduction of Phoebe, the woman who probably carried the letter and perhaps read it to some of the house churches in Rome. Second, there are greetings to Paul’s acquaintances within the Roman house churches. Third, there is a warning to stay away from people who stir up division among the believers, followed by a benediction that envisions God crushing Satan under the hear-

1. The commendation and introduction of Phoebe (16:1–2)

Hard evidence for the feminization of Paul’s ministry strategy comes first from his commendation of Phoebe. She is “our sister, who is minister of the church which is in Cenchreae” (16:1). Paul’s word for her church position is diakonon, a word that can be either masculine or feminine in lexical gender, designating the church position described in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. The history of translations of this word in Romans 16:1 provides a picture in microcosm of how churches have tried to negotiate their way through the question of women in the diaconate. In verse 2 Paul uses a rare Greek word, prostatis, which means ‘patroness.’ In the last part of this verse Paul asks the Roman audience of the letter to help Phoebe with what she needs in Rome, “for she has been a patroness of many, even of me.”

A great deal is at stake in what terms we use for women who minister in church. Figure 1, “Translations diakonon and prostatis in Romans 16:1–2,” provides a survey of how these words have been translated. This table shows a general trend toward recognizing Phoebe as a church leader, after centuries of relegating her to a ‘servant’ and ‘helper’ role.

It is inaccurate to imply that Paul’s word for ‘patroness,’ the feminine word prostatis, is a word Paul created to match the feminine patrona of the Latin language, since this Greek word does occur in Sophocles’ play, Oedipus Coloneus and it is attested in pagan Greek authors after Paul as well. Aside from a few uses in 1 Clement, the word does not gain currency in early Christian literature and thus is not found in Lampe’s Patristic Greek Lexicon. Suffice it to say that this is a rare word for ‘patroness’ in the Greek language, and Paul makes sure to use it for Phoebe here.

Aside from translations, commentators have also wondered about Phoebe. Sanday and Headlam take the “a woman can minister to women” strategy in their exegesis:

There must have been a want felt for women to perform for women the functions which the deacons performed for men. Illustrations of this need in baptism, in visiting the women’s part of a house, in introducing women to the deacon or bishop, may be found in the Apostolical Constitutions.

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In the volume that replaced this commentary for the International Critical Commentary series, Cranfield proves to be more open to Phoebe’s status as holder of a definite office:

It is very much more natural...to understand it as referring to a definite office. We regard it as virtually certain that Phoebe is being described as ‘a (or possible ‘the’) deacon’ of the church in question and that this occurrence of diakonos is to be classified with its occurrences in Phil I.I and I Tim 3.8ff.8

Dunn notes that given the date of this letter, “Phoebe is the first recorded ‘deacon’ in the history of Christianity.” That the mention of her name and office made an impression on early readers is evident in a sixth-century inscription from the Mount of Olives for a woman named Sophie who is identified as a deaconess called “the second Phoebe.”9

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Women in the Roman house churches

Seven women and five men are complimented for the ministry they have performed or are performing. If the descriptions are limited to people presently performing ministry, Rufus’ mother and the men Andronicus and Urbanus would have to be deleted from this tally, making the proportion six women to three men. Lampe points out as well that the verb ‘labor’ (kopiaō), a verb used for performing missionary work and applied to Paul in Galatians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 15:10, is used four times of women and never for a man here in Romans 16.11

In Paul’s full acknowledgement of the prominent places that women occupied in these house churches, we may see that Paul is here operating within a church network that does not have the leisure to debate whether or not people from a given gender, class, or rank are suited to be church leaders. He is rather affirming all who are in the church and seeking to empower them to function as leaders.

Slaves, freedmen/women in the Roman house churches

Since the “leveling of names” occurred later in the imperial period than in the mid-first-century when Paul wrote this letter, we are able still to make some class distinctions on the basis of names with a considerable degree of probability for the letter written to the Romans.12

The term ‘servile’ designates either a slave or a freedman/woman. I have designated the name Julia as freedwoman, because Lampe observes how this name is usually found attached to freedwomen.
Certain names, such as Hermes and Ampliatus, are characteristic of slaves in the first century, but they could be retained when the slaves were freed, so I must simply designate them as ‘servile.’ In the class-conscious world of the Principate, a slave or a freedman/woman was tainted by servility. We therefore see that a predominant number of the proper names listed are names that were common among slaves or former slaves. The only names that are probably not slave names are Prisca, Aquila, Urbanus, and Rufus. Lampe notes that the first three of these four “free” people are designated as “coworker” by Paul. He asks whether this class identity as free had something to do with their ministry as Paul’s cowokers.

The origin of the people named in Paul’s greetings

Lampe uses explicit evidence (e.g., “Epaenetus, my beloved, who is the firstfruits of Asia in Christ” in 16:5) as well as evidence from inscriptions to determine which names designate people who certainly came from the east, who are marked by boldfaced “east” in the table. The other names marked by “east” probably came from the east, according to Lampe. But what do we mean by “east”? We mean anywhere in the Greek lands (e.g., Macedonia, Achaia, Boetia), Asia Minor (e.g., Aquila was born in Pontus, a detail from Acts 18:2 that Lampe considers reliable), Syria, or Judea. Lampe exegetes Paul’s description of Andronicus and Junia as indicative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (verses)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prisca (3–5a)</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>free</td>
<td></td>
<td>“my coworkers in Christ Jesus, who have risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but all the churches of the nations send thanks”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquila (3–5a)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>free</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>“my coworkers in Christ Jesus, who have risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but all the churches of the nations send thanks”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“those of Prisca and Aquila’s church”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epaenetus (5b)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>“firstfruits of Asia, my beloved”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (6)</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
<td>“who has labored much for you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andronicus (7)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>“my relatives and my fellow prisoners, who were before me in Christ, who are outstanding among the apostles”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junia (7)</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>“my relatives and my fellow prisoners, who were before me in Christ, who are outstanding among the apostles”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ampliatus (8)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
<td>“my beloved in the Lord”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanus (9)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>free</td>
<td></td>
<td>“our coworker in Christ”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stachys (9)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>“my beloved”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apelles (10a)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>“approved in Christ”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10b)</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“those of the household of Aristobulus”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herodion (11a)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
<td>“my relative”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11b)</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“those of the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tryphaena (12a)</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
<td>“who labored in the Lord”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tryphosa (12a)</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“who labored in the Lord”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persis (12b)</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>“the beloved, who has labored much in the Lord”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rufus (13a)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>free</td>
<td></td>
<td>“chosen in the Lord”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rufus’ mother (13b)</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“his mother and mine”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asyncritus (14)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phlegon (14)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hermes (14)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrobas (14)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hermas (14)</td>
<td>servile</td>
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<td>east</td>
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<tr>
<td>(14b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“the brothers with them”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philologus (15a)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia (15a)</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>freed-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nereus (15b)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nereus’ sister (15b)</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olympas (15c)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>servile</td>
<td>east</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15c)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“all the saints with them”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of their origin probably in Judea, since they were in Christ before Paul and seem to be “closer to the original Palestinian apostles.”17

The Jewish ethnicity of some of the people in Paul’s audience is explicitly marked by his use of the term suggenēs, a word that I’ve translated ‘relative’ in Figure 2. It has the sense of ‘kin’ or ‘ethnic relation.’ Paul uses the term in Romans 9:3 to make clear that he grieves over the situation of his ethnic kin. In the greetings list of chapter 16, the term is used for Andronicus and Junia, the apostles mentioned in verse 7, and for Herodion in verse 10. It is also used in verse 21 when Paul sends greetings from his ministry team. Jason and Sōsipatros seem to be identified as Jews here. In an excellent article that reflects on what ethnicity meant for the historical Paul, Charles Cosgrove concludes that “on the basis of Rom 9:1–4, it seems fair to say that Paul loved Jews as his own people.”18 The references to his relatives in chapter 16 seem to confirm Cosgrove’s point, for they solidify the impression Paul seems determined to make in this letter, that he loves his people and values his Jewish identity (Rom. 3:1–2; 9:1–3; 11:1, 28; 16:7, 11, 21).

The first Apostles in Rome

Paul begins his letter to the believers in the capital city with the self-designation “called apostle” (Rom. 1:1). Tradition tells us that Peter and Paul were both martyred in Rome, a circumstance that was explicitly used to elevate Rome’s status among other Christian centers of the Mediterranean world. But in Paul’s greetings here in Romans 16, we see that there was another pair of apostles who were active in Roman church life before the more famous pair of martyrs, Peter and Paul, arrived. These apostles are Andronicus and Junia, a man and a woman, whom Paul describes as “outstanding among the apostles.”

The rediscovery of Junia the woman apostle in Romans 16:7 represents a significant step in early Christian prosopography. The name that occurs in most of the manuscripts is Iounian, a name that when found with no accent could be either a man or a woman. The most complete treatment on the questions surrounding this name has been done by the New Testament scholar of textual criticism, Eldon Jay Epp.19 In the discussion that follows, I summarize Epp’s work as found in the original article he published on Junia in 2002.

If this name is accented as Iounian it could be the accusative case of either the feminine name Iounia (Junia) or the proposed masculine name Iounías (Junias). In addition, if the name in Romans 16:7 is accented as Iounían it would be from the proposed masculine name Iouniãs. Some have also suggested that the Iounian here in Romans 16:7 is a contraction of the masculine Iouniánós (Junianus).

The name was understood as a woman apostle by all the patristic authors. The early translations, such as the Old Latin, Vulgate, Syriac and Coptic translations all translate the name as a woman’s name. Among English translations, from Tyndale to near the end of the nineteenth century, the name was usually translated as though it were the woman’s name, Junia. In terms of English translations, the first translation to render the name masculine was Rodolphus Dickinson’s translation of the New Testament (first published in 1833), followed by the Emphasized Bible (Rotherham) (1872, 1878, 1898), the English Revised Version (1881), and the American edition of the Rheims translation (1899; the 1582 original used “Julia”).20 Complete tables of how Iounian has been translated in English versions are available in Epp’s work. In a nutshell, Epp shows how there is no record of any man being named Junias, even though that used to be the suggested form of the masculine name.21 And as for a contraction of Iunianus, Epp follows a scholar named Thorley in asserting that the contraction of Iunianus would be Lunas, rather than the Iunias found here.22 The variant Julia shows that a scribe was reading this as a woman’s name and changed it to a more recognizable woman’s name, perhaps also influenced by the “Julia” of Romans 16:15.23 A last ditch effort to keep women out of leadership roles has been attempted by those who state that “outstanding among the apostles” means that a woman named Junia was recognized as special by the apostles, but was not considered an apostle herself. Epp shows the research supporting this assertion is actually inconclusive, and cites the native Greek speaker John Chrysostom’s clear testimony that the text is indicating that Junia, a woman, is regarded as an apostle.24

The scope of addressees listed here shows us that Paul is embracing a Christianity in which women labor as leaders and in which slaves and people of differing ethnic origins are accorded full place. It is appropriate now to complete Wright’s quotation, since I only offered the first part of it at the beginning of this essay: “I used to think Romans 16 was the most boring chapter in the letter, and now, as I study and reflect on the names it includes, I am struck by how powerfully they illustrate how the teachings of both Jesus and Paul were being worked out in practice.”

3. Warning (16:17–20)

The warning in 16:17–20 appears to come as an abrupt change from the preceding greetings, but with the majority of commentators, it is probably right to view this as integral to the letter and not a later insertion. The parallels drawn between this warning and those in Philippians 3:21–21 and Galatians 6:11–15 make it appear likely that Paul could easily enter a warning mode when concluding his letters.25 Cranfield even argues that these verses are not so abrupt, since the greetings are completely concluded in 16:16 and greetings from Paul’s logistics/secretarial team begin at 16:21.26

Who were these people that Paul warned the Romans to avoid? Cranfield refuses to make a final decision, but notes that the reference to “belly” used to be taken to refer to Jesus-followers who were committed to Jewish food laws, but seems to side more with...
the idea that it might be the Gentile "strong" of Romans 14:1—15:6 who despised the "weak" for their Jewish-influenced diet. A diet-related warning is also found in the conclusion of Hebrews, and thus is probably authentic to the end of the letter here (Heb. 13:9–10).

The benediction at 13:20 certainly captures the scriptural theme of God's representative treading on the serpent (Gen. 3:15; Ps. 9:13; Acts 28:3–6; Rev. 20:2–3, 10). It also repeats the strategy Paul shows at the end of 1 Thessalonians, where he uses language employed in Roman propaganda and subverts it by asking for the blessing of the God of peace, rather than the Roman peace which was so celebrated in Augustan theology (1 Thess. 5:3, 23). It is evident that Paul is conscious of the real struggles that his addressees faced while living under the power of Rome, an empire that asked all to pledge allegiance to its grandiose self-perception and vision for the world.

4. Greetings from those with Paul (16:21–23)

After the "God of peace" benediction, the people with Paul, apparently in Corinth, send their greetings. The mention of "relatives" here in verse 21 allows Paul the opportunity to show the Jews in Rome that he is with some Jews when composing the letter. Tertius, the scribe who writes the letter, also sends greetings. The composition of this letter was no doubt a challenging task, and may account for this greeting, the clearest record of a Pauline letter to the Greek. Indeed Marshall, who takes a positive view of the composition of this letter, states that Paul is conscious of the real struggles that his addressees faced while living under the power of Rome, an empire that asked all to pledge allegiance to its grandiose self-perception and vision for the world.

5. The final benediction in Romans (16:25–27)

Because this doxology floats in the manuscript tradition, sometimes coming at the end of chapter 14, sometimes at the end of chapter 15, and sometimes appearing twice at the end of different chapters, there is considerable debate regarding whether these three verses were written by Paul or added by a later scribe. Since our focus here is on Romans 16 as we encounter it in our Bibles, I will treat it as part of the chapter and ask how well it summarizes the letter. Whether scholars consider this as Paul's own benediction or one by a later scribe, most regard this benediction as a fitting summary of the letter. For example, I. Howard Marshall is very positive about the content of this benediction, as is plain from his title "Romans 16:25–27—An Apt Conclusion." A different, and I believe more suitable response is provided by Karl Barth, who writes the following humorous and insightful summary of the significance of the list of people in this chapter—a summary that contributes to our understanding of the whole chapter's value:

Reading occasional letters—letters arising out of and addressing specific situations at specific moments in history—as Scripture challenges us when we include chapter 16 as an integral part of Paul's letter to the Romans. This challenge can be summarized in the following question: What is the significance of this final chapter of greetings for those of us who are not the original recipients of the letter? Since the chapter was completely missing in some manuscripts, we can see that one response to this question has been, This chapter has no value for any readers beyond those who first received the letter.

A very different, and I believe more suitable response is provided by Karl Barth, who writes the following humorous and insightful summary of the significance of the list of people in this chapter—a summary that contributes to our understanding of the whole chapter's value:

The possibility that Tryphaena and Tryphosa and the other 'laymen'—not to speak of the 'theologians' included in this long list!—would not have been able to understand the Epistle, does not seem to have been considered. In other words, there was once—and this would hold good even if the 'Ephesian' theory were right—a body of men and women to whom the Epistle to the Romans could be sent in the confident expectation that it provided an answer to their questions; that somehow or other it would be understood and valued. For this body of men and women it seems that theology—this theology!—was THE living theme....In fact, these men and women are more surprising than are the other historical problems raised by the Epistle to the Romans. We are, however, not surprised that they were able to—salute one another with a holy kiss. Like an envelope in which we seal a postal letter to a loved one, Romans 16 lets us know that real people, including women leaders, those with slave backgrounds, and those both with and without...
Jewish connections, were meant to hear and benefit from this letter. It gives us the powerful example of Paul describing the woman Junia as an apostle and also shows us that Paul regarded her and the other women leaders mentioned as people who were truly laboring and doing good work in building up the house churches of Rome. The commendation for Phoebe, the greetings list, the warnings of people causing division, the benediction that criticizes the other women leaders mentioned as people who were truly laboring and doing good work in building up the house churches of Rome. The commendation for Phoebe, the greetings list, the warnings of people causing division, the benediction that criticizes the other women leaders mentioned as people who were truly laboring and doing good work in building up the house churches of Rome.

**Notes**

6. 1 Clement 16:1; 61:3; 64:1.
11. Ibid., 165–66.
15. Ibid., 183.
16. Ibid., 167.
17. Ibid., 168.
27. Ibid., 799–802.