

Junia the Apostle

Returning to the text to discover the significant role of women in the early church | KLYNE SNODGRASS

People often forget how important women and their work were in the early church. We emphasize the importance of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16), but pay no attention to the fact that Martha says virtually the same thing (John 11:27).

Further, we often ignore the lists of names in Scripture and the greetings at the end of some New Testament letters, which is too bad, for we can learn a great deal about God's people and the character of the early church by paying attention to the names and descriptions used of people in the Bible. One of the most revealing texts is Romans 16, which is mostly a long list of greetings to people in the Roman church, a church that Paul did not found and had not visited. In this chapter he mentions twenty-six people in the Roman church. Ten of these people are women, eight of whom are mentioned by name.

The most important of these women is Junia. Yet many Christians are aware neither of her importance nor even of the fact that she was a woman.

Romans 16:7 in the New Revised Standard Version reads, "Greet

Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was." The King James Version likewise understands Junia as a woman, but some other translations, including the Revised Standard Version and the New International Version, render the name Junia as a man's name, Junias, largely because it was assumed that apostles were only men.

The translation of the Revised Standard Version is especially reprehensible for reading, "Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles, and they were in Christ before me." The word "men" has no basis in the Greek text at all; it was just assumed by the translators.

The bias toward supposing the name is masculine is even more surprising because the name Junias never occurs anywhere in Greco-Roman writings. Junia, on the other hand, is a common name and occurs more than 250 times just in material from Rome, not to mention other places. Translators who took the name to be a man's name assumed that Junias was a shortened form of the name Junianus, even though they had no evidence for

the shortened form.

Yet people in the ancient world knew Junia was a woman's name. In fact, the first evidence of anyone thinking Junia was a man did not appear until the thirteenth century with Aegidius of Rome. Even John Chrysostom (fourth century AD), whose mother tongue was Greek and who was not particularly supportive of the ministry of women, waxed eloquent in praise of Junia: "And indeed to be apostles at all is a great thing. But to be even amongst these of note, just consider what a great encomium this is!... Oh! how great is the devotion of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!" Today virtually all New Testament scholars agree that Junia was a woman, regardless of their view about women in ministry.

Still, some seek to evade the attribution of the title "apostle" to Junia. As is clear in the quotation from Chrysostom above and in the King James, Revised Standard, New International, and New Revised Standard versions, the most natural way to understand the description of Andronicus and Junia is that they are outstanding (prominent, or of note) among the apostles. Recently a few

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have argued that the Greek words in question should be understood to say these two people were considered outstanding by the apostles.

When I first heard this theory, I thought it was a recent invention to avoid consideration of Junia as among the apostles, but on investigation found that the attempt has a long history. Theoretically the words in question could be translated either way, either “respected among the apostles” or “respected by the apostles.” The latter has little in its favor though. It makes little sense in the context. Why bother to report the attitude of the apostles about this pair? We could understand Paul saying the whole church valued them, as he suggests for Gaius in Romans 16:23, but it is hard to imagine Paul taking note of the view of the apostles. Especially when we remember Paul’s refusal to grant the leading apostles any special status in Galatians 2:6, such an explanation makes little sense. Nowhere else does Paul make such a statement, and he would not accord the view of the apostles any special status.

Consequently, it seems there is little doubt that Andronicus and Junia, possibly a husband-wife pair, were well respected among the apostles. Junia, a woman, was an apostle, a Christian before Paul, and someone who had been in jail for her faith. Paul was converted about AD 35, so Junia was a Christian from the earliest days.

To say she was an apostle obviously is not to claim that she was one of the twelve. The title “apostle” was applied to other people for a variety of reasons. It could be used generally of people who were sent as agents (2 Corinthians 8:23, NIV, “repre-



sentatives”; NRSV, “messengers”) of Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25), of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 14:14), Apollos (by implication in 1 Corinthians 4:9), Silvanus (by implication in 1 Thessalonians 2:7), and Jesus (as an agent from God, Hebrews 3:1). Andronicus and Junia are not singled out as respected among general messengers. They are respected among a recognized group of early church apostles.

We cannot be certain what qualified this pair for the title apostle, but the most likely reason is that they were witnesses of the risen Lord. Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 9:1, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” Paul based his claim to be an apostle on the fact that he had seen

the risen Lord. The same is probably true for Andronicus and Junia. Alternatively, a popular view among church fathers was that Andronicus and Junia were among the seventy-two sent out by Jesus in Luke 10:1-20.

Junia is not the only woman whom interpreters have denigrated. Paul commends Phoebe to the Roman church in Romans 16:1. She is probably the person delivering the letter to the Romans. The New International and King James versions describe her as a servant, whereas the New Revised Standard and Revised Standard versions use “deacon” and “deaconess,” respectively. The word in question is regularly translated as servant, minister, or deacon and is used of Paul, Apollos, Epaphras, Tychicus, and church leaders (Philippians 1:1). This same word describes Phoebe. She, too, was a leader and someone who served the Lord.

Translators have sometimes denigrated the status of women like Phoebe and Junia, but the early church valued them and other women serving the Lord, as even a casual reading of the Gospels, Acts, and the letters shows. Christians today can easily slight the work and leadership of women, or worse, limit the work they are allowed to do. Without the work of women, most churches would be in deep trouble. No one benefits when women—or men—are denigrated. As Junia was respected among the apostles, and as Phoebe was commended by Paul, so women who have worked hard for the Lord deserve our commendation and respect. ■

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