

PHOEBE: THE WOMAN DEACON AND PATRON IN ROMANS 16:1-2

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Abstract: The name “Phoebe” probably is not too familiar in the study of the New Testament before 90’s. However, in the recent study of the role of woman in the Bible in connection with the patronage system in the Greco-Roman society, Phoebe has an important role because she helps Paul in his preparation for the mission to Rome. Paul calls her as a sister, deacon, and patron. This research argues that Phoebe has a role as a benefactor and deacon within the patron-client system in the Roman society. Paul asks her to carry his letter to Rome in order that Christian community in Rome may help him for the future mission to bring the Gospel to Spain.

Keywords: Phoebe, patronage, deacon, benefactor, and reciprocity.

Abstrak: Nama “Febe” mungkin tidak begitu familiar dalam studi Perjanjian Baru sebelum tahun 90-an. Namun, dalam studi belakangan ini tentang peran perempuan dalam Alkitab dalam kaitannya dengan sistem patronasi dalam masyarakat Yunani-Romawi, Febe memiliki peran penting karena dia membantu Paulus dalam persiapan misinya ke Roma. Paul menyebutnya sebagai saudari, diakon, dan pelindung. Penelitian ini hendak menunjukkan bahwa Phoebe memiliki peran sebagai donatur dan diakon dalam sistem patron-klien dalam masyarakat Romawi. Paulus memintanya untuk membawa suratnya ke Roma agar komunitas Kristen di Roma dapat menolongnya berkenaan dengan misi di masa depan yaitu mewartakan Injil ke Spanyol.

Kata-kata kunci: Phoebe, patronage, deacon, donatur, dan timbal balik.

PROLOGUE

As a missionary, Paul has to build a wide connection of friends and followers in the entire of Roman Empire. In Roman 16:1-2, he introduces

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his network of clients on behalf of Phoebe, and he sends messages to the community by commending Phoebe to the Roman churches. Her name is stated first among the other names of Paul's friends and followers in the early Christian communities. He introduces her to his community in order to reciprocate her benefactions to him and his churches.

Roman 16:1-2 depicts the practice of early Christians using a letter of recommendation. The letter will guarantee the person recommended a welcome from the church which is addressed. The commendation has four components: (1) identification of the one commended that is Phoebe; (b) credentials of the one commended that she is a deacon; (c) request by the commander is to receive and assist her; (d) credential of the one commended that she is a patroness.¹

Paul gives three substantives to describe Phoebe: "Our sister" (*ἀδελφή ἡμῶν*), "deacon" (*διάκονος*), and "patron" (*προστάτις*). By calling Phoebe as "our sister" (Rom. 16:1), Paul gives her the same affectionate and honorable title that he gives to men. As he calls Timothy and Ephaphroditus his brother (Phil. 2:25; Col. 1:1), he also calls Phoebe his sister as a character of Paul coworkers and also member of Christian community. The designation of a woman as a sister may have been particularly characteristic of early Christianity (1 Cor. 7:15; 9:5; Phil. 2; James 2:15; 2 Clem. 12:5; 19:1; 20:2).²

This research will approach the text by using textual criticism method in order to understand the lexical meaning of the words "*διάκονος*" and "*προστάτις*". Finding the meaning of the word in its context will lead us to find the role of Phoebe in the early Christian church. A socio-historical approach will be applied to support the argument that the purpose of Phoebe in Rome is to assist Paul in his preparation for his mission. Both methods will lead us to understand the role of Phoebe to prepare the coming of Paul in Rome before going to bring the Gospel in Spain.

PHOEBE AS A DEACON (*διάκονος*)

Besides deacons, the early church community has also deaconesses. The first deaconess in the early church whom Paul states is Phoebe. She

1 Charles H. Talbort, *Romans*, (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 332-333.

2 Brendan Byrne, SJ., *Sacra Pagina: Romans*, (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2007): 447-448.

is “οὐσαν [καὶ] διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐν Κεγχρεαῖς” (a deacon of the church at Cenchreae). Based on the mythological background, Phoebe is a Gentile Christian and she comes from Cenchreae.³ Cenchreeae is a seaport seven miles east of Corinth. There is a naval station on eastern side. The west side is used for trade with Asia. The harbor also connects southern Achaia to northern Achaia and to Macedonia. In Acts 18:18, before departing to Syria, Paul had his hair cut at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken. Although the church in Cenchreae may have been founded by Paul, Phoebe is the deacon.⁴

The word *διάκονος* in the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament has four different semantic domains. First, it is interpersonal care or help (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28; Acts 20:24). Second, it means household service especially for food service (Mark 1:31; Luke 22:26-27). Third, it refers to religious roles (1 Tim. 3:10; 1 Tim. 3:8; Rom. 16:1). Fourth, deacon also means the transfer of property or possessions in financial support of others (Acts 6:2; Rom. 15:31). The general idea of the deacon is that of humble service to others while under other authority.

The verb form *διοκω* is often translated: serve, assist, and help. If the word *διακονος* is understood as a title, it is translated with “servant, helper, or deacon.” The words *διακονος*, *διακονια*, and *διακονειν* most often are found in 2 Corinthians. They refer to people who are charismatic missionaries, eloquent preachers, visionary prophets, and spirit-filled apostles. In the same way, the author of Colossians call Tychiacus as “our beloved brother” and “faithful deacon.”

In calling Phoebe as a deacon, Paul identifies her as a servant and agent of carrying his gospel. He asks Roman church to receive her in the lord. Other examples may clarify the meaning of deacon. Epaphras is called a faithful *diakonos* (Col. 1:7), and Paul identifies himself as *diakonos* as bearer the message of the Gospel (Col. 1:23). In the case of Phoebe, Paul is likely emphasizing her role at the church of Corinth as well as her

³ Robert Jewett, *Romans*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 943.

⁴ Wendy Cotter, “Women’s Authority Roles in Paul’s Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?” *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1994): 350-372. Frank J. Matera, *Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 338-339.

special duty to bring Paul's letter to Roman church.⁵

Paul uses the word *diakonoj* as a characterization of himself (2 Cor. 3:6). He calls himself a deacon who suffered much in his mission work. In Cor. 3:5-9, Paul uses the same word to highlight that it is God who calls Apollos and Paul, and gives them a common ministry. In addition, he greets the Philippians along with their "bishop and deacons" (*σὺν ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνοις* (Phil. 1:1)). The term indicates the position of the leadership within the community. Therefore, the coworkers and laborers are those who have devoted themselves to the service of the churches. The deacon is a missionary entrusted with preaching and tending communities. It may be recognized as an official capacity of missionary preacher and teacher. Erlend MacGillivray argues that the role of Phoebe is an official deacon in the church of Cenchreae.⁶

PHOEBE AS A PATRON (*προστάτις*)

Phoebe's role in the community is also found in her title as "*προστάτις*." It means leader or patron.⁷ In 1 Thes. 5:12, *προστάτις* refers to the leadership in the community. In 1 Tim. 3:4-5 and 5:17, the word expresses the leadership functions as bishops, deacons, and elders. The word *προστάτις* also occurs sometimes in the Septuagint referring to "officer" and "leaders" (1 Chron. 27:6; 2 Chron. 8:18; 24:11; 2 Macc. 3:4).⁸

5 Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 304-305.

6 *Διάκονος* together with *οἶσα* refers more to a recognized minister or position of responsibility within the congregation. See MacGillivray, Erlend D., Roman 16:2, *προστάτις/προστατης*, and the Application of Reciprocal Relationships to New Testament Text," *Novum Testamentum* 53 (2011):189-196.

7 There are some different translation for *προστάτις*: RSV: "A helper of;" NEB: "A good friend to;" NIV: "A great help to;" and NJB: "Come to help of." But these translations do not provide clear meaning of Phoebe as patron or benefactor. See also Allan Chapple, "Getting Romans to the Right Romans: Phoebe and the Delivery of Paul's Letter," *Tyndalle Bulletin* 62.2 (2011): 199-200.

8 In one of the inscriptions of Corinth, there was a woman named Junia Theodora. She got a great praise and fame because of her patronage (*prostasian*) of the Lycian league of Cities "Having gained friendship of the authorities for the nation" and by "Welcoming Lycian travelers into her own home" as they journeyed from Rome. It seems that the typical pattern for honoring person as "patron" and "sister," like those for Junia, describing their generous support and hospitality for others and community. See Gregory R. Perry, "Phoebe of Cenchreae and "Women" of Ephesus: "Deacons" In the earliest Churches," *Presbyterion* 36 (2010): 3-36.

In 1960's biblical scholars understand the role of Phoebe as a helper, but recently in the study of patron-client system, many scholars argues that Phoebe is a leader of a Christian community.⁹

Patronage is a central system in the Roman society. A patron-client tie is an asymmetrical exchange relationship. Both parties are unequal in the control of resources. They have also different power and status. Both are bound together because their relationship can serve their mutual interest through the exchange of resources.¹⁰ The relationship between patron and client will raise a mutual relationship. The patrons who give favors to their unequal clients will receive honor from the society. People receiving of favors and services owe their benefactors gratitude and a return in kind.¹¹

A patron might provide accommodation, money, and food for a client. The patron may give a low interest loan for the client. In return, the client will praise the patron publicly. For example, the client will praise the patron at the forum or agora. Patronage also occurs in a wider level. At a city, the local patron supports the city by providing public buildings, being sponsors for festivals, and other community services. The people as the whole community will praise the benefactor with a statue, an inscription, or a special ceremony for giving honor to the patron.¹² Such relationship keeps the patrons to continue the support of their clients, and

9 MacGillivray, Erlend D., Roman 16:2, *προστάτις/προστατης*, and the Application of Reciprocal Relationships to New Testament Text," *Novum Testamentum* 53 (2011): 183-184.

10 Alicia Batten, "The Patron-Client Institution: God in the Letter of James: Patron or Benefactor?" in *The Social World of the New Testament*, eds. Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Steward (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 47-62.

11 Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, "Patronal Power Relations, in *Paul and Empire*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 1997), 96-97.

12 For example, on a monument made in the middle of the first century C.E. in Corinth, there is an inscription to honor Julianus Spartiaticus, a patron of the tribe of Calpurnia: "Gaius Julius, son of Laco, Grandson of Eurycles, (of the tribe) Fabia, Spartiaticus, Procurator of Caesar and Augusta Agrippina, Tribune of the soldiers, awarded a public horse by the Deified Claudius, Flamen of the Deified Julius, Pontifex, Duovir Quinquennalis twice, Agonothete of the Isthmian and Caesar-Augustan Games, High-Priest of the House of Augustus in Perpetuity, First of the Achaeans. Because of his virtue and eager and all-encompassing munificence toward the Divine House and toward our colony, the Tribesmen of the Tribe Calurnia (dedicated) to their Patron." See L.L. Welborn, *An End to Enmity: Paul and the "Wrongdoer" of Second Corinthians*, (Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 310.

clients are to remain loyal to their benefactors.

At the gate of a Greco-Roman town, such as Pompeii, there are funerary monuments which proclaim the status and achievements of the town's wealthier families. At the central space Roman forum, there are statues and inscriptions showed who the town's main patrons are. The elite domination of the town is supported by the presentation of the relationship between the patrons and the people living at the town. The elite are patrons in three ways. First, individually: each has a network client. Second, collectively: they operate a rotating system of individual patronage of the town as a whole. Third, the elites act as brokers in dealing with higher or external patrons such as senators and emperors.¹³

The patronage system spreads out through the Roman Empire including Corinth as a Roman colony. Romans 16 states three names: Phoebe, Gaius, and Erastus. Phoebe is the local patron in the eastern port of Corinth. Gaius, "the host to me and to the whole church" (Rom. 16:23), is the patron for the Christian community at Corinth. Erastus, the steward of the city (Rom. 16:23), is probably a patron in the urban center. The designation of Phoebe as a "patroness" to many and also to Paul (Rom. 16:2) indicates that she is a woman of considerable financial and material resources. It seems that she comes from the middle of high-class group and uses her resources to help the congregation. Murphy O'Connor and Meeks describe that the upper-class benefactors in the early church community provide their houses for the congregation to gather together. The host or the hostess of the house usually presides over the Eucharist celebration and are responsible for the ordering of the community.¹⁴

Recent studies of women in the Roman Empire find that women participate also in the patronage system as benefactors. For example, Caroline F. Whelan argues that under the Roman law, woman enjoys freedoms and privileges. In the law of *Manus Mariti*, women are on

13 Diefmar Neofeld and Richard E. DeMarris, eds. *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament* (London: Rutledge, 2010), 178-191.

14 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, (New haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 75-77. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "The Corinth that Saint Paul Saw," *Biblical Archaeologist* 47 (1984): 156-158.

equal with their husband in their ownership and disposal of property by the system of separation of good. The *ius trius liberorum* law (Law of Three Children) is the Roman law which allows women to act without a guardian. Another law, The *Tutor Optivus*, frees a woman to choose her own guardian or several guardians. She may change the guardian if the chosen guardian does not act in accordance with her deeds. The benefactor both woman and men are called *magistri*, *quaestores*, and *duciriones*. Then Whelan concludes that wealthy women are in a legal position to patronize an association.¹⁵

Honor and shame value has deep connection with the patronage system. If the patronage oils the social wheel, the honor and shame culture may be served as the engine that moves the society. The benefactor and requital are matters of honor. A patron will be superior in the society by having more humble clients. A person is held in honor because of the family's honor. It occurs also because of personal achievement.

The social dynamics of an honor-shame culture makes their distribution to the group gives advantageous to both patrons and the members. The relationship between the patron-client should be seen in the context of economic, social, and political relationship in the first century of Roman culture. Paul's description of Phoebe as "patron of many and of myself as well" implies that he considers her social superior. But more than that, the benefaction also allows clients to access to the patron social and economic resources. Paul as the client of Phoebe will share her honor in the society who recognizes Phoebe; she as the benefactor will also enjoy Paul's reputation at churches where Paul has worked. The benefactors not only become patrons, but also they may be leaders of the community.¹⁶

The letter of recommendation in Roman 16:1-2 portrays also the tradition and custom of friendship between patron and client. Paul as the client shows his loyalty to her by recommending her to the Roman

15 Caroline F. Whelan, "Amica Pauli: The Role of Phoebe in The Early Church," *JSNT* 49 (1993), 67-85. Another inscription from the third century C.E. discovered at Aphrodisias showed that a Jewish woman named Jael was a *προστατις* of a synagogue. See Robert Jewett, *Romans*, 946.

16 *Ibid.*, 77.

church. His commends Phoebe's action so that the church in Rome will act similarly toward her. She is not the benefactor of Roman church, but the goal of the action is reciprocity. By announcing her status, Paul is reciprocating her gift of aid unspecified by Paul.¹⁷

The phrase “*αὐτήν προσδέξασθε ἐν κυρίῳ | ἀξίως τῶν ἁγίων*” (you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, Rom. 16:2) suggest that phoebe should be welcomed with suitable honor. The expression “worthy of the saints” shows how Phoebe is to be welcomed: “as a fellow believer should be received.” Phoebe should be accepted with honor suitable with her position as a leader in the church of Corinth, her previous support to the Christian mission, and her role in the missionary project envisioned in Romans.¹⁸ Besides that, Paul also requests the congregation to provide whatever she needs to accomplish. It may show that Phoebe comes to Rome also with her own business.

PHOEBE'S ROLE FOR THE MISSION OF PAUL

In Romans 15:17-21, Paul describes his success mission that he is the minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God. Paul presents himself as the ambassador of the divine power to the Gentiles (Rom. 15:18). He had accomplished the circle area “from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum” (Rom. 15:19). And in verse 24, he plans to expand his mission to Spain. He says, “I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be sped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little.”

The text above depicts Paul's plan that he is about to move to Rome and then going the mission to Spain. The sentence, “I have enjoyed your company for a little,” implies that Paul will not stay for a long time there. Before going to Rome, Phoebe brings the letter to the Roman church because the mission requires the cooperation of the Roman churches. Paul needs a support from Rome to embark on the Spanish mission. In Rom. 15:24, the phrase “*ὑφ' ὑμῶν προπεμφθη/ναι*” (to be helped by you)

¹⁷ Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 304-305.

¹⁸ Robert Jewett, *Romans*, 945.

is a technical term for missionaries.¹⁹ Paul asks the congregation in Rome to take some of his responsibilities for the mission to Spain that they may support him financially and morally. In Rom. 15:28, Paul says, "I shall go on by way of you to Spain." His sentence again stresses the plan that after the offering has been delivered, he will go to Spain directly.

According to Jewett, there are two problems about Paul's mission to Spain. First, there is an absence or few numbers of a Jewish population in Spain during the Julio-Claudian period. It eliminates Paul's mission for he usually bases his mission in a synagogue. Moreover, it brings economic burden as well. Without a synagogue as a starting place, the crucial contact with patrons will be difficult to make. Moreover, Jewish travels often use such buildings as a convenient place to develop business contacts. Secondly, the wide various spoken languages in Spain caused a language barrier for Paul. A missionary need Latin language for communicating and there is no evidence that Paul is sufficiently fluent in Latin. He needs a translator for his mission. Therefore, he needs a help of a person coming from high social status who can penetrate the Roman community and provide him the logistic for his mission to Spain.²⁰

In the context of Paul's mission to Spain, the recommendation of Phoebe as his patroness could be understood. In Romans 16, Paul also greets Erastus, the city treasurer, and special greetings for the five house churches (Rom. 16:5, 10, 11, 14, and 15). His greeting will have a unifying effect and overcome the tensions between the weak and the strong, between the Gentile Christian and Jewish Christian.²¹ If every single community considers that they are one in Christ, they will be able to help Paul more in his mission.

Because of Phoebe role in the community as deacon and patron, the churches at Rome will be easily to cooperate with her for collecting financial need. For that purpose, Paul recommends Phoebe to the

19 Robert Jewett, "Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission," in *The social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism*, eds. Neusner Jacob, Peder Borgen, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Richard Horsley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 142-161

20 Robert Jewett, "Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission," 144-145.

21 Robert Jewett, "Romans as an Ambassadorial Letter," *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 17-19.

churches at Rome. Phoebe's task is to present the letter to some of the communities and discuss the purpose of the letter with the local leaders. Her wealth and social prestige would be a guarantee that the recipient of the letter will understand her why Paul recommends her as the patroness for the mission to Spain. Moreover, the community will be honored in their involvement with a person from the high status. The persons and the communities whom Paul greets will consider that they are involved in the project of spreading the Gospel to Spain.

CONCLUSION

The patronage system in the Greco-Roman society provides a place for Gentile and Jewish men and women to interact each other inside the Christian community as well as at the wider society. It provides an opportunity for an elite gentile woman to sponsor a Jewish man. Moreover, the female benefactor would have voice and authoritative role in the community, without consideration of her gender. As a leader and patron of the community, Phoebe acts as the benefactor for an individual Christian and the whole church. In dealing with the wider society, she represents the whole community. With her status and network connection to other wealthy people, she eases the social life of other Christians in Greco-Roman society.

As a benefactor, Phoebe is assumed as a person who has wealth, status and influence. She, thus, is in a good position to bring Paul's letter to Rome. Paul has a strong reason to ask her favor because of her high status in the Christian community. Paul himself has never been in Rome, and he knows the situation of the community in Rome only by corresponding letters with his co-workers. Therefore, sending Phoebe is a smart strategy because the Christian community in Rome who acknowledges Phoebe's status may will support Paul financially for his mission to Spain.

Paul's commendation of Phoebe is an important fact of the leadership role of women in the early Christian community. In Romans 16, Paul state 10 names of women and 18 men. It shows that in the first century CE,

Paul has developed a wide range of connection with people both man and woman who are able to help him in the mission. He calls Phoebe as a deacon and his word "deacon" in Romans is similar in use to the reference in Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3. Deacon is the one who take care community and described as "overseers." Her status show that she is in a position of authority in the Christian community and is the first woman Paul references in his letter.

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