

Phoebe

- I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a **διάκονος** of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the **προστάτις** of many people, including me. (Romans 16:1-2)
- Two words in Greek describe Phoebe's role in the church. What did these words mean to the authors of the New Testament?

- “...the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the **gospel**, of which I was made a **minister** [διάκονος], **according to the gift of God’s grace** which was given to me according to the working of His power.” (Ephesians 3:6-7, NASB)

Paul uses the term **διάκονος** to refer to himself as a “**minister**” of the “**gospel**,” “according to the gift of God's grace” that was given to him.

We find this word used again by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:12: “A deacon [**διάκονος**] must be faithful to his wife and must manage [**προϊστάμενοι**] his children and his household well.” (NIV)

In these two examples, Paul demonstrates that the word **διάκονος** can be used to describe “a minister of the gospel” or a “deacon.” Paul used the term to describe his own apostolic ministry, and to refer to other leaders in the early church.

In 1 Timothy 3:12, Paul also uses the verb **προϊστάμενοι** to refer to the activity of “managing” one's children and household well.

Strong's Concordance provides the following information about this Greek verb:

Proistemi: I rule

Definition: I preside, rule over, give attention to, direct, maintain, practice diligently.

Other uses of this verb are found in the following verses:

1 Timothy 5:17: “The elders who rule well” NASB

Romans 12:8: “he who leads, with diligence”
NASB

1 Thessalonians 5:12: “have charge over you in the Lord” NASB

It is the noun form of this word **προστάτις** that is used to describe Phoebe in Romans 16:2, as Strong's Concordance indicates:

“Prostátis, which is used of a woman who has an impressive Christian reputation (Phoebe, Ro 16:2).”

And so, it can be understood that Phoebe was a “**minister of the gospel**” and a “**leader**” in the church at Cenchrea.

“And I commend you to Phebe our sister — being a **ministrant of the assembly** that [is] in Cenchrea —that ye may receive her in the Lord, as doth become saints, and may assist her in whatever matter she may have need of you — for she also became a **leader** of many, and of myself. (Romans 16:1-2, Young’s Literal Translation)

Why do we seldom if ever hear of this woman who was a minister, deacon or leader in the church?

Translation trouble...

English translations of “diakonos” in relation to Phoebe:

ESV: “servant”

NASB: “servant”

KJV: “servant”

NET: “servant”

ASV: “servant”

ERV: “servant”

English Bible translations of “prostatis” in relation to Phoebe:

NLT: “helpful”

NASB: “helper”

KJV: “succourer”

ISV: “has assisted”

WNT: “a kind friend”

Unfortunately, none of these translations acknowledge the fact that the words “diakonos” and “prostatis” can indicate that Phoebe, a woman, was a leader in the early church as well as a minister of the gospel.

A noticeable shift in the translation of Romans 16:1-2 began with St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate in the 4th Century A.D.

Instead of keeping the Greek understanding of “prostatis” (literally to stand before or to stand at the head of), Jerome chose a Latin word that literally means “to stand near or at one's side.” Since this time, Phoebe has been referred to not as a “leader” but rather as a “helper,” “assistant,” or “friend.”

(McCabe, E. A Reexamination of Phoebe as a “Diakonos” and “Prostatis”: Exposing the Inaccuracies of English Translations.)

- Why did Jerome do this?
- He made sense of the Bible through the lenses of a non-biblical, human philosophy called “neo-Platonism.”
- This philosophy was profoundly dualistic, ascetic, hierarchical and sexist.
- I discuss this in my book entitled, “A God I'd Like to Meet: Separating the Love of God from Harmful Traditional Beliefs.”

- Other influential theologians who made sense of the Bible through the lenses of this philosophy include: Origen, St. Augustine and John Calvin.

But doesn't this teaching that a woman can be a leader in the church contradict what the Bible tells us in 1 Timothy 2:12? "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet" (ESV).

On the contrary, the **English translation** of this verse, written by the apostle Paul, is **also based on St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate.**

The word translated “exercise authority” in English was originally “authentein” in Greek.

Jerome translated this as “dominari” in Latin, which can mean “dominate” or “exercise dominion over.”

(Wilshire, L. 2010, Insight Into Two Biblical Passages, p. 63)

In the Bible that Paul often quotes from—the Greek Septuagint—this word has a very different meaning:

Do you remember the ancient inhabitants of your holy land? You scorned them for their unholy ways, for their sorcery and profane rituals, their callous killing of children, their cannibal feasts on human flesh and blood. They practiced secret rituals in which parents slaughtered their own defenseless children. (Wisdom of Solomon, 12:3-6, TIB)

The parents in this passage, who slaughter their children in profane rituals to false gods, are referred to as “**authentas.**”

- Historians of the New Testament era also use this word, “authentein,” to refer to something violent or criminal:

Diodorus Siculus: “perpetrator of sacrilege,”
“author of crimes,” “supporter of violent
actions.”

- Flavius Josephus: “perpetrator of a crime,” “perpetrators of a slaughter.”
- In the 2nd century A.D., Greek grammarian Harpocration defined the word as “a person who brings about the murder of someone through the use of others.” (Wilshire pp. 23-28)

- On 32 other occasions when talking about authority, Paul uses the Greek word “exousia.”
- He uses the word “authentein” only once.

- Why does the apostle Paul use a word associated with ritual violence or slaughter in his letter to Timothy?
- Because it addresses a false teaching in Ephesus (the location of Timothy's church) that was symbolized by ritual violence against men.

In 1 Timothy chapters 1, 4 and 6, Paul warns against a false teaching that commanded people to deny the body (e.g. practice celibacy and fast from certain foods) so that they could receive special “knowledge” from God.

The “special knowledge” was called “gnosis.” Those who practiced this false teaching were called “Gnostics.”

- In and around Ephesus, many groups practised this false teaching:
- worshippers of the goddess Cybele (known as Artemis by the Greeks and Diana by the Romans)
- a Jewish sect called the Essenes,
- and a sect called the Naassenes--who mixed the gospel with the mythology of Cybele.

- These groups were celibate, they fasted from certain foods and they claimed that their denial of the body gave them special knowledge from the god or goddess they worshipped.
- The priests of Cybele, the priests of Artemis and the Essenes also practised ritual violence against men to symbolize their denial of the body.
- (Farnell, the Cults of the Greek States Vol. II; Ferguson, Religions of the Roman Empire; and Edwards, Let My People Go)

- This ritual violence either took the form of circumcision or castration.
- One group of Essenes, called the Secarii, would even circumcise non-Jewish men against their will.
- Men who resisted, were “slaughtered.” (St. Hippolytus, A Refutation of All Heresies)

- If we understand Paul's language and context correctly, is he actually saying that women cannot teach or lead in the Christian church?
- Absolutely not.
- He is warning Timothy about a false teaching that was symbolized by ritual violence against men.

- A translation of 1 Timothy 2:12 that takes Paul's original language and context into consideration might read:
- “I do not permit a woman to teach or to support violent actions against a man.”

- Teachers of Cybele mythology were usually women.
- They believed that offerings made to the goddess would “save them” if they had difficulty in childbirth (see 1 Timothy 2:15).
- Rather than teaching and practising Gnosticism, Paul encourages the women of Ephesus to “be saved” through “faith” in Jesus Christ.

- Can women be “ministers of the gospel” and “leaders” in the church like Phoebe?
- Absolutely, each of us should serve the Lord according to the gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit of God.