



[Send to printer | Close window]

Lower Criticism

A female apostle? Impossible!

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

The Bible on your shelf doesn't actually exist. No exact original of it is to be found in Greek, Syriac, or any other ancient language. It is, instead, the product of hundreds of compiled parchments and papyri, containing big blocks of text or little bits of it, some ancient, some more recent, some ancient but recently discovered. Along the way they got copied into uncials and minuscules, dubbed with names to inspire novels (Codex Sinaiticus; Philoxeniana), and now are signified in the clearinghouse Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* as

or

It would seem to be a straightforward work of science to sort, date, and judge each of the texts, and in many ways it is. There are rules for comparing scraps of majuscules and scraped palimpsests. The scriptural scholars of bygone eras help contemporary ones through their own questions scrawled in the margins of their Bibles. And it's not too hard to recognize and correct the ever-so-slightly incorrect transcriptions of some sleepy monk in a tomb-cold scriptorium. But the letter is not copied alone; so is the spirit and the meaning. Text critics are inevitably exegetes, and aspiring exegetes must also be text critics. This is Eldon Jay Epp's basic principle for biblical studies.



Which brings us to Romans 16:7, embedded in the oft-overlooked collection of greetings to various Christian luminaries at Rome. Here Paul hails his "relatives who were in prison" with him, "prominent among the **apostles**" and "in Christ before" he was. This impressive pair is Andronicus and his coworker. The latter is sometimes called Junia—thus the KJV, every other English translation up till the 1830s, and nowadays the NRSV. The lion's share of recent English Bibles, though, give the name Junias, with the -s on the end. The RSV specifies Andronicus and Junias as "my kinsmen" and "*men* of note among the **apostles**"; the Good News generously adds a footnote after Junias suggesting the name "June"; the NIV—most widely read of all contemporary versions—offers no footnoted alternative to Junias at all. The matter at stake in the choice of names is the simple question asked of everyone upon entry into this world: Is it a boy or a girl?

Junia: The First Woman Apostle
by Eldon Jay Epp
Fortress, 2005
138 pp. \$16, paper

Until about a hundred years ago, the consensus was universal. Junia was a woman. Every church father, without exception, thought so. Even John Chrysostom, not exactly famous for positive thoughts about the **female** sex, commented, "How great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of **apostle**." However, in a curious twist of fate, the church a millennium and a half later concluded *not* that her wisdom was so great, but that, if she was indeed worthy of the title of **apostle**, then she wasn't a she at all. The very liberal vanguard that exalted the historical-critical

study of the Bible found the leadership of a woman unthinkable, and so made Junia into Junias, a man—even though there is not a single record of the name Junias anywhere in ancient Rome.

The switcheroo from **female** to male was possible, in the first place, because the **apostle's** name appears only once, in the accusative form "Junian." (Exegetes need to be not only text critics, but first-rate grammarians as well.) The suffix *-n* is found on both masculine and feminine nouns. The one textual clue to help choose between them, in this case, is an accent mark. A

with a circumflex accent mark could come from masculine Junias, while a

with an acute accent mark would derive from feminine Junia. But there are no accent marks in the oldest extant scriptural texts. There are no punctuation marks or spaces between words, either; such niceties are later developments. It is of no small significance, though, that as soon as scribes *do* start inserting accent marks in their fresh copies, they always choose the acute and never the circumflex. The only variant that they display is to the name Julia. Even this mistake is telling: Julia is another woman's name (in fact, the most popular Roman name for women), and probably first appeared when one of those notoriously sleepy scribes skipped ahead to Romans 16:15 and borrowed the name from there. The grammatical and even accidental choices of the medieval copyists reveal the whole interpretive tradition behind them.

And yet—masculine constructions of

still appear in modern textual commentaries and handbooks all over the place. It turns out that the awkward absence of the name Junias in Latin literature, and the conviction that an **apostle** simply *must* be a man, together begat great scholarly ingenuity. Sometimes Roman surnames were contracted to shorter forms; an example is Patrobas in Romans 16:14, which is short for Patrobios. Junias, then, was proposed as a contraction of the attested Roman surname Junianus. There isn't the slightest shred of evidence that this is what happened, yet somewhere along the way the contracted-Junianus theory turned into a sure thing. Epp documents how the idea grew from conjecture to certainty in its own kind of scribal-transmission error. It culminated in the 1927 Nestle Greek New Testament, where the distinctly masculine version of the name, complete with circumflex, was offered as the definitive and undisputed reading—even claiming the oldest *unaccented* texts in its defense! Only in 1998 did the standard Nestle-Aland and United Bible Society editions replace the masculine with the feminine name. Accordingly, few English translations reflect the correction.

Is it really possible that plain textual evidence could be so obscured by plain bias? If John Chrysostom, of all people, allowed that Junia could be a woman and an **apostle** at the same time, could the progressive leaders of the twentieth century be guilty of such blatant prejudice? Epp cites the report of Bruce Metzger's *Textual Commentary to the UBS* (2nd ed.), from as recently as 1994, explaining the dispute about the name:

Some members, considering it unlikely that a woman would be among those styled "**apostles**," understood the name to be masculine

("Junias"), thought to be a shortened form of Junianus (see Bauer-Aland, *Wörterbuch*, pp. 70f.). Others, however, were impressed by the facts that (1) 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

anywhere, and (2) when Greek manuscripts began to be accented, scribes wrote the feminine ("Junia").

In other words, the Junia reading had textual evidence on its side; the Junias reading had none; yet until less than a decade ago, the latter still won the day.

Could Paul have called a woman an **apostle**? He certainly did not use the term lightly. He was compelled to defend his own apostolicity, as the last and untimely born, to the disciples of Jesus, whose friendship with the Lord automatically granted them apostolic status. It can only be the highest of Pauline praise to call Andronicus and Junia prominent among the **apostles**.

That he was capable of applying this praise to a woman is suggested not only by the textual evidence but by the context of Romans 16 as well. A woman and deacon by the name of Phoebe is entrusted with the letter itself. Seventeen men are greeted along with eight women (omitting Junia), but of the twenty-five, seven of the women are described as contributing the most to the churches, while only five men receive that distinction. Prisca is listed ahead of her husband Aquila, and in two places (vv. 6 and 12) four of the women are said to have "worked very hard," the same verb Paul uses to describe his own apostolic ministry in 1 Cor. 4:12, Gal. 4:11, and Phil. 2:16.

The early church thought that Junia the woman was an **apostle**, yet remained indifferent to the implications of her status. The modern church disbelieved the apostolicity of any woman, and so ignored the hard evidence. Between the textual and contextual witnesses, in the interplay of exegesis and grammar, Epp draws the reasonable conclusion that there was indeed a **female apostle** named Junia. But, he notes, "human beings carry out not only textual criticism and interpretation, but implementation as well, and that makes all the difference."

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson is a doctoral student in systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Copyright © 2006 by the author or Christianity Today International/Books & Culture magazine.
Click here for reprint information on Books & Culture.

This article is located at:
<http://www.ctlibrary.com/34871>



www.ChristianityToday.com
Copyright © 1994–2009 Christianity Today International
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#)