

Junia Among the Apostles

The Story Behind a New Testament Saint & the Egalitarian Agenda

Junia—The First Woman Apostle

by Eldon Jay Epp

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A review by John Hunwicke

In this important work, Epp investigates the mysterious disappearance of Junia from the traditions of the church. Because later theologians and scribes could not believe (or wanted to suppress) that Paul had numbered a woman among the earliest churches' apostles, Junia's name was changed in Romans 16:7 to a masculine form . . . calling Junia an apostle seemed too much for the tradition. Epp tracks how this happened in New Testament manuscripts, scribal traditions and translations of the Bible. In this thoroughgoing study, Epp restores Junia to her rightful place.

Thus the publisher's press release introducing Eldon Jay Epp's book, *Junia—The First Woman Apostle*. And thus our minds are transported back to an ancient fantasy world which by now we know extremely well; a sinister world of oppressive patriarchy; a world in which cunning and manipulative ecclesiastics falsify records to eliminate whatever threatens their status or their prejudices; a Dan Brownish or Elaine Pagelsish world of truths concealed for centuries, of cowed, conspiratorial monkish scribes in dark and mysterious cells busily destroying evidence.

Poor Epp must have been very distressed and embarrassed if he read this passage, because, to be fair to him, his book is not at all about *scribes* suppressing the fact that Junia was a woman. It is not at all about tracking how this happened in *manuscripts*. And, so far from giving *Tradition* a walloping, Epp in fact demonstrates that Tradition, and the New Testament manuscripts, got Junia's gender *right*.

Linda Belleville, only months before Epp's book was published, made most of the same points as he does, and came to the same conclusions in a rather less pompously written article, which is a much better read (*New Testament Studies* [*NTS*] 2005). She prefaced her work with a decidedly less tendentious *argumentum* than the one dreamt up by Epp's publishers: "Christian tradition from the Old Latin and Vulgate versions and the early Greek and Latin fathers onwards affirms and lauds a female apostle. Yet *modern* [my emphasis] scholarship has not been comfortable. . . ." (Epp's book justifies part of his own description of it as "lengthy and tedious"; I write "part" because I do not want to contradict all of Beverly Gaventa's claim in her Foreword that it is "slender and important.")

Source of the Sex Change

Most readers will probably know the main facts about Junia, her gender, and the continuing controversy about whether she was "an apostle." She occurs, linked with Andronicus, in Romans 16:7 as one of many recipients of St. Paul's greetings as he writes to recommend himself to the Christians of Rome, and she does so in a Greek accusative *Iounian*. Depending on what sort of accent you put on it, the corresponding nominative can be either *Iounias* (masculine) or *Iounia* (feminine).

So which accent do the early manuscripts have? Neither; because early manuscripts lack *all* accents. As soon as accents started to be added to Greek texts, the feminine accent was added; and as soon as the invention of printing made mass production possible, the feminine accent was that chosen by editors.

As far as translations are concerned, the Latin Vulgates give either *Juniam* or *Juliam*, a manifestly feminine name; and the sixteenth-century English translations, including the Authorized Version and the Roman Catholic version from Rheims, regarded the name as feminine. Belleville and Epp show that the overwhelming number of writers and commentators in the first Christian millennium and a half believed St. Paul was addressing a female Junia; and like Burer and Wallace, whose 2001 *NTS* article (arguing that Junia was *not* an apostle) ignited the present phase of

this controversy, they agree that the feminine form of the name is overwhelmingly more probable (or, to use Epp'speak, certain).

So how did the idea get around that the female Junia was really a male Junias? Perhaps a monkish hand can, after all, be detected in this; the ex-Augustinian Martin Luther seems to have set this ball rolling. It is probably due to him that some north European Protestant translations went for "Junias" (masculine), while versions in Spain and Italy, where the dead repressive hand of Romish tyranny had more influence, stayed with "Junia" (feminine). But even despite Luther's influence, with only one exception, Greek New Testaments down to 1927 continued to give her the feminine accent. Yes! Even through the dark oppressive decades of Victorian patriarchy, Junia's femaleness remained unproblematic as far as editors were concerned.

Who, then, is guilty of the sex change? Stand up the thirteenth (1927) edition of Nestle: the standard Greek Testament beloved of twentieth-century "scientific" and "modern" biblical scholarship! Again—Yes! Not Dark Age monks; not obscurantist popes; not medieval misogynist conspirators; not pre-Enlightenment bigots; it is the brightest and the best of liberal European and North American modern scholarship that took a reconstructive scalpel to Junia's groin. All subsequent Greek Testaments, including the influential United Bible Society editions, slavishly followed the obviously infallible *magisterium* of the younger Nestle without qualm or hesitation.

The only printings of the Greek Bible between 1927 and 1994 which allowed Junia to retain her feminine gender were those which consciously reproduced the *Textus Receptus*, that is, the old "pre-critical" text based on "late" and "poor" manuscripts and used in Byzantine Christendom; a text long despised by most of the confident exponents of Modern Scholarship. (My own mentor in New Testament textual criticism, the great eclecticist George Kilpatrick, believed that "TR" was as useful a text-type as any other; and, back then in the 1960s, what a lonely furrow he seemed to be plowing in making even as modest a claim as that.)

Bias & Emphasis

The best part of Epp's book is the section in which he demonstrates how devoid of evidence, how motivated by untested assumptions and culpably lazy gut prejudice, was the assumption of so many of the big names in modern liberal biblical scholarship that *Iounia(s)* must have been a male. He writes, with all the naïve surprise of the earnest liberal, about a "pervasive sociocultural bias that has operated in New Testament textual criticism and exegesis for an entire century of what we might have regarded as the period of our most modern, liberal, and detached scholarly enquiry."

Entertainingly, Epp fails to realize that he may be sawing off the branch upon which he is himself sitting. If the self-confidence of twentieth-century scholars who loved to undermine the authority both of Scripture and of the Great Tradition, on the basis of their own ephemeral and careless theorizing, was so ill-conceived, so time-conditioned, one might wonder at his own and his publishers' unworried assurance to us that *he* has written a "definitive" "last word" on the subject he treats; and, *a fortiori*, at the implication (writ large from his dedication page onwards) that his discoveries drive reliably towards a more "egalitarian" polity in both church and society.

Eighty-five of his 98 pages deal with what is largely undisputed and was believed by nearly every scribe, church father, and Bible reader before the sixteenth century: that the person St. Paul greets was a woman and that she was called Junia. A mere thirteen pages are devoted to the unresolved and far more important questions: Was she an apostle; and, if so, what does the word "apostle" mean in her case? Could Epp here be guilty of an intentional *suggestio falsi*? The incautious and impressionable reader, picking up his book and seeing that so much plodding erudition is displayed to prove the *one* point, may assume that all you need to show is that Junia was a woman, and then you can at once move rejoicing into the broad sunlit uplands of Feminism and Mrs. Jefferts Schori. Look at the last paragraph of his Preface if you do not believe me.

A Question of Status

But first, there is the curious question of whether Romans 16 really is part of Romans. Until comparatively recently it was one of the favorite certainties of the fashionable, dominant school of Modern Biblical Scholarship that the New Testament books are riddled with interpolations. The last couple of chapters of Romans were commonly dismissed, on what always seemed to me wholly frivolous grounds, as not part of the original text. Indeed, Epp

argues that textual critics may need to abandon the search for a single “original text,” and appears to leave it open whether we should “exegete” Romans with or without chapter 16.

I, too, have long felt that in a culture where orality is dominant, the concept of an “original text” may be misleading when dealing with the Gospels and Acts; papyrological advances have suggested a similar caution with regard to the text of Homer. (Incidentally, Epp’s discussion here subverts—and rightly—the cheerful schoolboy confidence with which the *United Bible Societies* editions highlight “certain” readings with the letter *A*.) But I do rather incline to Beverly Gaventa’s feeling in her Foreword that there must have been *a* text of St. Paul’s letter that Phoebe held in her hand and delivered to Rome.

However that may be, it is curious that Epp does not devote a couple of dozen pages to discussing a point so basic to his thesis as the status of Romans 16; and, all the more so, since he can find space to argue (in detail but on the basis of similarly slender evidence) that 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 *is* an interpolation into what he (apparently now conforming to what he has earlier disdainfully called “the old ‘canons of criticism’”) seems to regard as an Original Text of 1 Corinthians. Or perhaps this is not so curious when one recalls that while the latter passage appears to exhort women to be silent in church, Romans 16, which mentions a large number of women, has provided fertile ground for feminist writers.

What a shame St. Paul never gave Junia a puff in Ephesians; had he done so, that letter would undoubtedly have been shifted out of the “pseudonymous” category to which much Modern Scholarship has consigned it, and would now be held up as central to the Pauline *corpus*. As it is, Epp asserts without argument that Ephesians and Colossians (being in his eyes unsatisfactory on gender matters) are “deutero-Pauline” and that 1 Timothy (2:8–15 does not suit him) “from the customary critical standpoint, is the composition of a later Paulinist.” Really? And would that be the same sort of Customary Critical Standpoint as the one that led Nestle and his uncritical followers to award Junia an accentual penis?

I am not a “fundamentalist”; I have no problems with the concept of New Testament pseudepigraphy (although I have never followed the unargued but common assumption that judgments in this field have an adverse effect upon the canonicity of the documents concerned). What does set me wondering is the immediate and sometimes hysterical uproar occasioned by *possible* discoveries that sit uncomfortably with the Customary Critical Standpoint.

Anthony Kenny’s *A Stylometric Study of the New Testament*, arguing that, in respect of 96 stylistic features, Ephesians, Colossians, and both the Timothies are closer to Romans than 1 Corinthians is (Titus being the only stylistically rogue member of the *corpus*), never seemed to get onto many undergraduate reading lists. And a plausible claim that papyrological evidence might date 1 Timothy to before A.D. 70 inspired comparatively few writers even to trouble to refute it. Skeat’s codicological researches into the formation of the New Testament Canon received little notice, despite their revolutionary implications. Our culture is one in which any new theory, fantasy, or piece of potential evidence that appears to cast doubt on the authenticity of traditional Christianity is welcomed and is sold on to the secular media within hours; anything that might run the risk of bolstering it is buried. Now there’s a *real* conspiracy.

Philology & Common Sense

Andronicus and Junia were *episemoi en tois apostolois*; does this mean *distinguished among the apostles* or merely *well known to the apostles*? Epp’s treatment of this central question is light and unimpressive.

Preliminaries are in order. This is not entirely a matter of the highest philology; a fair bit of it is nearer what we call Common Sense. “*X* is well known/renowned/notorious among *Y*”: This can have two meanings— *inclusive*, where *X* is a member of the class of objects *Y*; and *exclusive*, where *X* is *not* a *Y*. But it is often far from clear whether a particular statement is inclusive, exclusive, or *both*.

“The *New York Times* is well known among politicians”: That is quite clear; the newspaper is not itself a politician and so the sense is exclusive—politicians know the newspaper well.

However, take “Condoleeza Rice is well known among politicians.” Surely, this can bear the implications *both* that other politicians know Dr. Rice well (“exclusive”) *and* that the world at large knows her well as belonging to the

category “politician” (“inclusive”). Because both propositions are true, we probably will not often need to try to distinguish.

If we were to distinguish, we would need *information external* to the proposition itself. Consider three examples. (1) “William the Conqueror is well known among historians.” Since (external information) we assume that the Bastard was not a historiographer, it is fairly clear that this means “Historians know William well.” (2) “Mephistopheles McPherson is well known among historians.” Because you do not know whether M.M. is or is not a historian, you will not know whether this is meant inclusively or exclusively unless I tell you, thereby giving you additional information external to the statement. (3) “Winston Churchill is well known among historians.” I think you will need to search in the wider context that contains this statement (external information) before you know whether this is meant inclusively or exclusively; after all, Churchill did write history (so the statement could be inclusive), *and* he is, as a well-known world leader, an appropriate object for the attention of historians (so it could be exclusive).

I suspect that these considerations account for the fact that Burer and Wallace on the one hand, and Belleville on the other, come so easily to different conclusions about some of the evidence they discuss. Sometimes, indeed, external information is available, as in the case of Euripides’ *Hippolytus* 103: “Yet she [Aphrodite] is revered and famous among mortals”; we know that the sense must be exclusive because we know that Aphrodite is not a mortal. (It seems a little unfair for Euripides’ evidence to be dismissed as a bit too early for comparison with Romans by writers who are willing to rely heavily on some words of Chrysostom; is he not a bit too late?) More often, matters are less clear because external information—or, if you like, context—is lacking.

Plausibility Problems

It seems to me hard to reconstruct a plausible and natural context in which this usage, in Romans 16:7, can be inclusive. St. Paul has carefully associated Andronicus and Junia with himself as fellow Jews (*suggeneis*) and fellow captives (*sunaiikhmalotous*; he is very fond of compounds with *sun*); if they were apostles, it would be natural for him to go on to describe them as fellow apostles (*sunapostolous*), or (cf. Romans 1:5) as *sugkoinonous tes autes kharitos kai apostoles hes kago*, but he does not.

And Belleville’s discussion has led her to a conclusion that many on both sides of this argument may feel creates more problems for her than it solves. She finds herself obliged to translate *episemos* in a passage of Lucian as “most distinguished,” and to attach this rendering to Andronicus and Junia (“most distinguished among the apostles”).

But can they really have been *that* high up in apostolic circles? That they were real, pukka apostles, fully paid-up members of the club, might be demonstrable. But “most distinguished”? Senior or equal to the *stuloi* and *dokountes* of the Jerusalem Church? This couple who, on the most favorable estimate, occur once in the middle of a list and have left in history and tradition no other evidence of their existence, still less of their apostleship, and least of all of their *leading* role in the apostolic group? Are Calendar makers *really* now to give them an entry at the same liturgical rank as St. Peter? And (to return to Romans 16:7), we may wonder why St. Paul, instead of merely saying that they became Christians before he did, does not say that these “most distinguished” apostles had attained apostleship before himself (cf. Galatians 1:17).

Oddest of all, for Belleville’s and Epp’s views, are Junia’s place in the middle of a list and the way her status apparently needs to be expressed and yet seems to be tossed aside in passing. If she is an apostle—nay more, one of the two “most distinguished” apostles—then Romans 16 is rather like a letter I might write sending greetings to my fellow Anglicans in America which ran, “. . . and give my best wishes to Tom, Dick, and Harry, to Molly, Mildred, and Maureen, to Katharine Jefferts Schori—she’s a primate in the Anglican Communion, y’ know—to Phil, Jill, and Jack. . . .” Or like a list of political friends in which, sandwiched between Uncle Donald and Auntie Condie, we suddenly found “and say hullo to Dubya: y’ know, he’s a pretty well known head of state.”

The scenario we are asked to accept is just downright improbable to anybody who tries to see the wood rather than merely taking a microscope to a little bit of bark on one of the trees.

Context & a Dilemma

Epp, among other writers on Junia, seems to need to steer clear of anything too detailed about the contextual purpose of Romans 16. But this does not prevent him, in a footnote, from challenging his critics to supply a context. So I will stick my neck out and do so. St. Paul intends, I believe, to visit Rome so that the Roman Christians may help him on his way to preach the gospel to the rest (the western half) of the world. Just as he had needed the *koinonia* of the Philippians to support his mission in the East, he needs Roman sponsorship in the West.

But the Jewish members of the Roman Church, in frequent contact with Antioch and Jerusalem, may have heard ill of St. Paul, especially as the result of intemperate expressions such as those in Galatians (“If they’re so keen on circumcision, why don’t they just cut the whole thing off?”). So he expresses his views more moderately in Romans, makes a “collection” among his Gentile converts by which to commend himself to Jewish or Judaized Christians, and compiles a list of Christians in Rome who are influential and know him and may be prepared to speak well of him; whose judgment may carry weight with those Roman Christians possibly suspicious of Paul as an apostate from Judaism. In this context, it helps his case to assure the Roman Christians that Andronicus and Junia are extremely highly regarded by the apostles, using that term in the same sense as he had in Galatians 1:19 to refer to the senior members of the Jerusalem Church.

Not, of course, that this is the only way in which the term “apostle” is used either in Paul or in the rest of the New Testament. If it *does* mean “leader of the Jerusalem Church,” it seems odd that a couple apparently resident in Rome are among “the most distinguished” leaders at Jerusalem. Epp in fact spends but a page and a footnote in skating over this matter. Belleville records the speculation of some Latins that Andronicus and Junia may have been among the Seventy-two who were sent out by the Lord, although this hardly puts them in the top league (“most distinguished”) of apostles.

Those who, believing her to be an apostle, are concerned to maximize the status of Junia, appear to be on the horns of a dilemma. *Either* they can make her out to be a leading apostle in a *maximal* sense of that word, together with Peter, James, John, and Paul—in which case they have a major problem explaining her almost-invisibility in the records; *or* they can assign to her an apostleship in a *minimal* sense of that term, perhaps like that of Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:25—in which case, they have not proved anything that will be of much use to them in their sociocultural agenda.

The Fathers whom Epp and Belleville list as regarding Junia as an apostle do not seem—despite the fact that “something of a women’s liberation movement [was] at work . . . at the turn of the millennium” but disappeared “in succeeding centuries”—to have been in the least worried by her and her status. I know of no suggestion that she was regarded as one of the New Patriarchy of Twelve upon which the Lord founded his New People, nor that Tradition assigned to a female Junia a role of founding apostle-bishop of one of the churches.

If it had, it is not easy to see how St. Ignatius could have so easily assumed and asserted that the *episkopos* was the *tupos tou patros*, Image of the Father. In an age (we are told) of growing misogyny, in which *sacerdotium* was confined to men, nobody, as Gaventa admits, seems to have been either aware of, or in the least disconcerted by, any reflection that Junia subverts this restriction.

It is true that the women mentioned in the New Testament afford a legitimate and interesting field for study, and do bear witness to the divine givenness of the leadership roles of so many women in the church of every age. But has not the church of our own day been given Blessed Teresa of Calcutta? And what about Mother Angelica, the nun with the television station who won such an amusing victory over her local (liberal) bishop? (“What an outstanding apostle *that woman is*,” I would cry if I were not afraid of being misunderstood.)

If Junia is needed to validate the “leadership roles” of such women as these, then good luck to her. But there are no reasons for seeing Junia and her status as having any relevance to the question of the admission of women to the presbyteral or episcopal priesthood of the ancient churches, in which the *sacerdos* images the Father and is the Bridegroom of his church. Whether it has or has not any bearing upon the admission of women to the non-sacerdotal ministries of the Reformation tradition, I would not presume to discuss.

Gynophile Gospel

Epp’s general agenda is clear, even if its every term is not spelled out. From the programmatic dedication to his grandsons (“May they live in a more egalitarian world”) to his concluding rhetoric (the “significant and regrettable

[and] unnecessary alienation of women”), the subtext is of change. Since all the mainstream liberal Protestant sects have, for some decades, been enthusiastically committed to the fullest incorporation of women into ministries both liturgical and nonliturgical, it is difficult to construe his purpose in terms other than as a determination to carry his gynophile gospel into the last resisting redoubts; the Catholic and Orthodox Churches and any surviving biblical Protestant communities.

His influence is clear in a paper written in 2006 by a brace of English Anglican bishops. David Stancliffe (Salisbury) and Tom Wright (Durham) felt the need to attack a paper by Walter Kasper in which the cardinal had begged the Church of England not to terminate the movement towards *communicatio in sacris* by admitting women to the episcopate. They followed Epp in his simplistic conviction that the only thing needing to be proved is Junia’s gender. If this is to be established, they claim, “then even Roman tradition might be forced to recognize the possibility that women could be apostles, and therefore presumably could hold ordained ministry in the apostolic succession.” This is quite staggering in its implication that if New Testament women exercised “leadership roles,” this feeds in directly to a conclusion that women be ordained to priestly ministries.

For nearly two millennia, women have unashamedly (and laudably) exercised “leadership roles” in the Church, but nobody in all the centuries before Epp’s generation was clever enough to spot that this points to their call to ministerial priesthood. Recent popes have made powerful women saints “doctors of the Church” or “patrons of Europe” without—the pontifical simpletons!—apparently realizing that these actions logically imply that women can be called to *episkope*. Most Christians for some eighteen hundred years have regarded Junia as a woman, without its for one moment occurring to their confused minds that this makes her some sort of proof of, or paradigm for, women in the sacerdotal ministry of the Catholic Church.

The conviction that all you need to do is to prove that Junia was a woman (which the Tradition had in any case overwhelmingly asserted until modern liberal scholarship decided it knew better) in order to demonstrate the need to expunge the semiotics of gender from the theology of priesthood, simply shows that Epp and his running dogs have not begun to understand what the discussion is all about.

Junia’s life, in the last decade or so, has been a rich and fulfilling one. After being rescued from the sexually ambivalent embraces of Erwin Nestle, she has been an associate of St. Mary Magdalene in the kipper trade; with her, she met Jesus when he was working as a healer, during his Year Out, in the spa at Tiberias; probably (like so many women clergy) a divorcee, she has ditched Chouza and acquired Andronicus as her “partner” (the term is Gaventa’s), changed her name, and helped to found a Church in Rome.

We are clearly in a new age of rich mythopoeia, worthy to compete with the most imaginative that the medieval cultus of the saints could offer. The fertile need of modern feminism to provide justification and aetiology for its novel dogmas has surpassed the inventiveness even of the hagiographers whose trade it was to promote pilgrimages, shrines, and relics. What a jocosely lady Clio must be.

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