



CHAPTER ONE

Cherchez la Femme

All stories are true. Some of them actually happened.

RON WETHERINGTON, ARCHAEOLOGIST,
SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

The questions kept nagging me after I learned her name: *Who was Junia?* Why did her name disappear from the Bible? Might she *really* have been one of the apostles? I wanted to find out more about Junia but wasn't sure where to begin. How do you find someone who's been missing for hundreds of years?

There wasn't much to go on. The basic facts are these: The name "Junia" appears in the last chapter of Paul's theological masterpiece—his letter to the young Christian church in Rome. Specifically, in Romans 16:7, Paul sends greetings to Andronicus and Junia. He then provides a sprinkling of clues about them:

- He says they are his "kinsmen," or relatives. This has led analysts to believe they were Jews, like Paul.
- They became Christians even before Paul did, which means they were among the very earliest of believers.
- They were in prison with Paul, which means they were in the forefront of the Jesus movement, and authorities knew about their activism.

- They helped start the Christian church in Rome, which means they kept venturing out bravely after their imprisonment to spread the good news.
- They were considered outstanding, or “of note,” among the apostles.

The clues offer just a brief glimpse, albeit a tantalizing glimpse. I could already see that finding out who Junia was, once and for all, could be important for biblical scholarship. But was it feasible for me to pursue the answers? Would it make a difference to anyone else?

❁ *Why is finding Junia important?* I decided that the search was worthwhile because “finding” Junia would establish an important precedent for women preaching and teaching. And since Paul often has been viewed as someone who wanted to keep women quiet, his praise for Junia seems to show that he was much more broadminded in practice.

If nothing else, establishing that Junia existed should provide a psychological boost for women of many Christian denominations. After all, women come to faith differently from the way men do. They have to reconcile a religion that says, on the one hand, that we should love everyone equally and generously—and, on the other, that women aren’t exactly full members of the church. It seems counterintuitive. How can women be “less than” men in church standing—less worthy, less qualified to spread God’s word—when Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28 NRSV)?

It is to women’s credit that they have kept the faith for centuries and have done much of the hard, hands-on work in caring for the sick and needy, in spite of restrictions in many denominations that they cannot be full participants in the front office and in the pulpit. It is not surprising that women today still yearn deeply for indications that their faith counts fully, that they are not secondary in God’s eyes and in his house. Reclaiming the stories of early women of faith, such as Junia and the other



Icon courtesy of The Orthodox Church in America, www.oca.org. For more information about the three saints (L to R: St. Andronikos the Apostle; Saint Athanasius, Bishop of Christianopoulos; and Saint Junia), and to see a color image of the icon, please refer to the OCA web site at the following page: <http://ocafs.oca.org/Caption.asp?FSID=101406>

women in Romans 16, could be a great comfort to today's women. It would be more affirmation that God wants women to do his work in the world, hand-in-hand with men.

✿ *But how do we find out more about Junia?* I didn't feel qualified to conduct the search myself because I'm not a religious scholar. I'm just an ordinary believer—a moderate Methodist with Presbyterian roots. But I was always the kind of kid who would peek behind doors or pick up something in the road to look at it more closely and wonder, How did it get there? What did it mean to someone else?

Perhaps it would be helpful to have someone look with fresh eyes. Having been a journalist for three decades, I knew how to poke around and

take notes. In newsroom circles, the adage is, “If your mother tells you she loves you, check it out.” In theological circles, this is called the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” You challenge information. The asking of pesky questions helps you get to the core of the matter.

To find traces of Junia, an obvious first step was to check what information was available about her on the Internet. Surprise! There were dozens of articles about Junia. There apparently has been a lively dispute going on about her in theological circles for some time. Yet that debate has gone on largely outside the notice of the general public. Most churchwomen still have not heard of Junia. It seemed time they did.

My next stop was to check out more Bible translations to see if they identified Junia as a woman. I gathered the motley assortment of Bibles in my house to check their rendition of Romans and then went browsing at the closest religious bookstore, taking notes Bible-by-Bible, smiling gamely when a clerk walked by to see what I was doing. It turned out that some Bibles had the female name and some didn’t.

Those that used “Junias” to refer to a male apostle in Romans included:

- Revised Standard Version* (1946)
- Amplified Bible* (1958)
- New English Bible* (1961)
- New American Standard Bible* (1963)
- Living Bible* (1971)
- New International Version* (1973)
- Harper Study Bible* (RSV with notes, 1976)
- New Jerusalem Bible* (1985)

Those that referred to “Junia” as a woman apostle included:

- King James Version* (1611)
- Good News Bible* (1966)
- New King James Version* (1979)
- New Century Version* (1987)

New Revised Standard Version (1989)

HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV with notes, 1993)

Oxford Study Bible (NRSV with notes, 1994)

New Living Translation (1996)

New Interpreter's Study Bible (2002)

Holman Christian Bible (2004)

Today's New International Version (2004)

It was almost evenly split, with newer translations tilting toward “Junia.” The *Catholic Study Bible* acknowledged, “The name Junia is a woman’s name. One ancient Greek manuscript and a number of versions read the name Julia.” But the study Bible added, “Most editors have interpreted it as a man’s name, *Junias*.” In other words, “The name is a woman’s name, but most editors have said it’s a man anyway.” It was as if those editors were saying it was a man with a woman’s name, like a boy named Sue. But that was a stretch. To its credit, the *Catholic Study Bible*, unlike the editors it cited, resisted the boy-named-Sue contortion and used the feminine name Junia in its text.¹

To get a feel for other scholarly views, I went back to the bookstore and brought home an armload of commentaries on the book of Romans. All were written by men. Three out of the four said it is *probable* that Paul was referring to a woman, although it’s difficult to be certain. Whether she was really a bona fide *Apostle*, they said, was another matter. Still, this was encouraging. Three of the authors agreed that Junia, most likely, was a “she.” Theirs was not a warm embrace of Junia, mind you, more like having to kiss your sister on the cheek on her birthday, but it was recognition, nevertheless.

The next step was to see what *female* theologians were saying in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, *Women in Scripture*, and *Women in Bible Lands*. They all said Junia was a female apostle. No wavering or quibbling.

My book bills were piling up, but a pattern was emerging. Both male and female theologians increasingly were agreeing that Paul had praised a woman as an apostle.

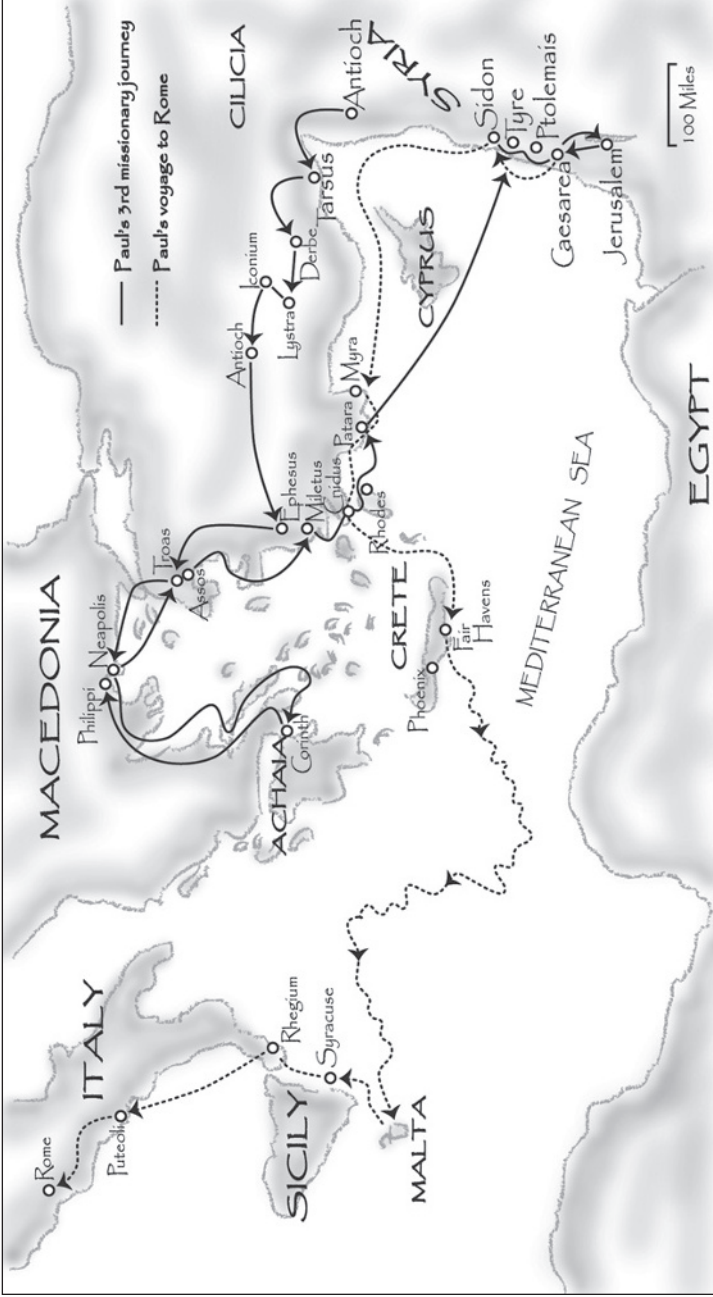


I was beginning to realize that making sense of what Paul's praise meant would require more knowledge of the time and place than I had gotten in church over the years. How could I understand what I was finding without knowing the context? To put it into perspective, I would have to find out why Paul was writing the believers in Rome and why he singled out people like Junia. This search of mine was driving me back for more Bible study.

Enough detail can be found here and there to piece together a background sketch. Paul sent the letter to the new church in Rome about 57 C.E., probably while he was preaching in Corinth. It was a time of great ferment. The Mediterranean became even more of a bustling bazaar of competing religious views after Christianity had elbowed its way in. "The Way" offered by Jesus of Nazareth was the newcomer in a very superstitious world. People there already worshiped a variety of Roman and Greek gods, as well as Egyptian deities like Isis, Persian heroes like Mithras, and the "one God" of Abraham.

In the two decades after Jesus' resurrection, Paul had made many arduous missionary journeys into this fractious environment, establishing churches and collecting relief funds to shore up the needy Jerusalem church. His intention was to take the funds to Jerusalem and then fulfill a longtime dream to visit Spain, stopping by the church community in Rome on the way. His letter to the Romans was a self-introduction of sorts, an overview of his thoughts as a seasoned Christian. Paul could not have known that it would be three long years before he would make it to Rome. He was arrested when he returned to Jerusalem and imprisoned in Caesarea on trumped-up charges. When he finally arrived in Rome, it was as a prisoner, exercising his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his charges in person to the emperor. As Luke fatalistically put it in Acts 28, "and so we came to Rome."

Rome at the time was the center of the known world—a sprawling city of around one million, according to historian Edward Gibbon. The Roman Empire stretched from Britain to Africa, Arabia, and Asia Minor—where Turkey is today. Thanks to the enforcement of Pax Romana, travel



Source: Darren Moore.

was relatively safe. All roads really did lead to Rome. The city was a cosmopolitan crossroads of peoples.

At the time Paul wrote his letter to them, the Christian community in Rome is believed to have been small but growing (perhaps 1,000 to 1,400 members) and gaining converts all the time. The new Christians were an assortment of Jews and Gentiles (all those who were not Jewish by origin). There were freed slaves, as well as slave owners—men and women. They generally met in house churches; significantly, some of those houses were owned by women.

Women, according to scholars like Rodney Stark, Peter Lampe, and Gillian Clark, formed a very crucial part of the early church in Rome. Although Roman society was highly patriarchal, like most of the world, and men ruled the scene, it is significant that Roman women could inherit and own property. Women were expected to stay within the private parameters of the home, as opposed to the wider world of politics and public debate, but that confinement played to their advantage in the new Christian sect, because the first services were held in homes where women ruled the domain. Women helped spread the word to neighbors and local tradespeople, sometimes bringing their children with them as they visited other houses, telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth.



What's in a name? Initially, I formed an image of Junia as a perpetually youthful, energetic person because some dictionaries list “youthful” as the translation for the Latin name “Junia.” It was natural to see her as an ancient Roman version of the perky girl next door.


But most scholars say the name Junia actually indicates that she would have been a freed person or child of freed slaves of the prominent Junian family, which also included Brutus. British scholar John Thorley says in *Novum Testamentum*² that the bearer of the name most probably acquired it through manumission from slavery in the household of the Junian family resident in the Roman province, of which

Tarsus was part at that time. So Junia could have had connections to a worldly Roman family and to the same town where Paul was from.³



To see how Junia fits into the picture in Rome, we must start at the source—the last chapter in Paul’s letter, Romans 16. Once you break it apart, you can connect real people to the names. The chapter is, essentially, a list of personal greetings to people Paul knew in Rome. In effect, Paul is schmoozing. He is trying to establish a positive connection with the believers who will help pay for his upcoming trip to Rome and support his teaching. He begins with a glowing recommendation for Phoebe.

Paul’s high praise for Phoebe immediately raises interesting questions. It’s not the kind of thing we expect from Paul. Why would he do that, and how might this woman be important to Junia’s story?

 *Who is Phoebe?* Apparently, she is carrying Paul’s letter to the new church in Rome. Since there were fraudulent preachers traveling about, Paul emphasizes Phoebe’s qualifications. He apparently wants the Romans to know she is trustworthy.

Paul goes on to say that Phoebe is a deacon of the church in Cenchreae, a seaport nine miles from Corinth. The Greek *diakonos* can mean “minister,” or it can mean “servant” or “helper.” Since the letter was written before church hierarchies such as bishop or deacon were officially established, the term is not a formal rank, but it is recognition of significant leadership, nevertheless. As centuries went by, patriarchal church leaders began referring to Phoebe with the least generous interpretation of *diakonos*. They identified her as merely a “servant,” while maintaining the most flattering interpretation of *diakonos* as “deacon” or “minister” when men were described. Unlike Junia, Phoebe’s name was not changed in later translations. But her role was subtly diminished, over time, in many translations.

So Paul is asking that Phoebe be given whatever assistance she needs. She appears to have traveled to Rome independently, rather than with a husband or brother, as was the custom of the time. She probably had servants or attendants of some sort to accompany her and must have been a woman of some means, because Paul also describes her as a “benefactor” (*prostotes*) to him and others. As Leon Morris, the highly respected Romans scholar, observes, “There were not many wealthy people in the church of the day, but it seems that Phoebe was one of them.”⁴ We might presume that she was a patron who provided financial support for the new Jesus movement, but her role probably was even larger than that. The literal meaning of the Greek word *prostotes* is “one who presides” or “a woman who is set over others.”

Paul shows then, by his words of acceptance and admiration, that Phoebe is somebody *special*. He does not identify her by her husband, as was the custom, or by her *occupation*, which also was customary, but by her own history of leadership. This description of Phoebe is a crucial prelude to the praise for Junia a few verses later, because it establishes that women were serving as leaders in the early church. And it shows that Paul approved. Although other writings attributed to Paul were later used to diminish the role of women in specific church situations, he makes it clear with his praise for Phoebe at the outset of Romans 16 that he respects the efforts of women who were helping spread the gospel. Clearly, Paul embraces women as active participants in the Jesus movement.

❁ *And who are these other women?* After that auspicious beginning, Paul then praises the contributions of Prisca and Aquila, a husband-and-wife team. In some very dangerous situations, he says, they “risked their necks” for his sake. In Corinth, they had shared their home and their tent-making business with him. But notice who gets top billing in the greeting? Prisca, who is sometimes called by the longer nickname of Priscilla. She is mentioned before Aquila (Latin for “eagle”) in four out of six references to the couple in the New Testament. In the ancient world, the first person named in a pair carried the greater distinction and honor. It is very likely


that Prisca was the more gifted teacher and speaker, although she and her husband shared equally in their ministry. The two had helped plant the seeds of Christianity in Corinth and Ephesus and had come back to Rome to lead a house church. They apparently had enough resources to travel and to have a house large enough for small groups to gather.

Some scholars connect Prisca to a noble Roman family, which means she would have been trained in rhetoric, philosophy, and oratory. Prisca also is believed to have taken the lead in tutoring the gifted missionary Apollos about Jesus' teachings. She must have been dedicated and daring to keep leading the missionary movement, which was under suspicion from many sides. Christianity was not illegal, but there was angry resistance from some segments of the Jewish community. There was friction and there was great risk. Paul is openly appreciative of Prisca's brave efforts in Romans 16.

Paul goes on to greet Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia, and Mary, "who has worked very hard among you." Then he salutes Andronicus and Junia, followed by a list of others, including six more women: Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis ("who has worked hard in the Lord"), Rufus's mother ("who was a mother to me also"), Julia, and Nereus's sister.

That is a lot of names to sort out, but we can learn from the list that Paul places Junia firmly in the company of women who were stalwarts of the early church. Ten women are named in the Romans list and nineteen men. Too often, believers skip over the list of names as if they were the titles at the end of the movie. But if you stay in your seat and read on, you will see that women had major roles in the movie.

I felt compelled to find out what those roles might have been. I was committed fully now to finding out everything I could that would lead to discoveries about Junia. At this point, I knew what Paul thought about Junia. But what about other people? What might they have said about her?

 *What did people besides Paul have to say about Junia?* Quite a lot, as it turned out. Every leading scholar during the first thousand years of the

Christian church confirmed that Paul referred to a female apostle in Romans 16, including Origen of Alexandria, one of the most prolific scholars of the age; Jerome, the father of the Latin Vulgate Bible; Hatto, the Bishop of Vercelli; Theophylact, a deacon at Constantinople; Bishop John Chrysostom, who was later revered as a saint; and renowned scholar and educator Peter Abelard.⁵

That's a formidable group of intellectuals. Of the group, John Chrysostom is most often cited for his generous praise of Junia. Although Chrysostom sometimes expressed misogyny in his writings, he had nothing but good things to say about Junia. He wrote that both Junia and Andronicus were known for their good works and upright conduct. Then he adds, with reference to Junia, "To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles—just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle."⁶

As British commentator John Thorley points out, scripture does not mention Junia's "works" or "virtuous" actions. Chrysostom may have had some independent information at the time that is no longer available, or he may have been being expansive and enthusiastic.⁷ Even so, it is noteworthy that one of the most respected church leaders of the age, who had a deep knowledge of Greek and church history, saw no problem in praising a woman's virtues as an apostle. Chrysostom underscores his admiration for the early church women by saluting Paul's greeting to Mary in Romans 16:6:

How is this? A woman again is honored and proclaimed victorious!
 Again we are men put to shame. Or rather, we are not put to shame only, but have even an honor conferred upon us. For an honor we have, in that there are such women among us, but we are put to shame, that we men are left so far behind by them. For the women of those days were more spirited than lions.⁸



His words were welcome affirmation. I felt as if I had been holding my breath while I pored over books, and now I could exhale. The search absolutely must go on.

No doubt about it, the consensus among the early Christian fathers was that Junia was a woman—and an impressive one at that. That should counter criticism that calling Junia an apostle is some kind of liberal, feminist revision of scripture. To the contrary, the more conservative way to interpret Paul's references to an apostle is actually the *older* way, the way that the early church fathers saw it, as a female apostle.

If we were in a court, we could throw several more exhibits on the judge's desk corroborating that Junia was a woman. One of the most persuasive is that Junias was not known as a man's name in those days. Several philological studies have shown that the name Junias was never in usage in antiquity, whereas the name Junia was a well-known woman's name. According to Daniel B. Wallace of the Biblical Studies Foundation, no instances of the male name Junias have surfaced in Greek literature.⁹ The name Junia is found on ancient grave inscriptions numerous times and always in the feminine form.

Hans Lietzman, who was considered a superb philologist in the early 1900s, made an investigation into all surviving names in antiquity and came to the conclusion that the name Junias did not exist. The name Junianus existed, yes, and it is possible that Junias was a short form for that name, Lietzman said, but he could find no trace that the short form was ever used. That research certainly increased the odds that the male name Junias was a fabricated name, contrived by simply adding an *s* to transform Junia into a man.

But wouldn't you know it? Despite his own evidence, Lietzman still balked at conceding that Junia was a female apostle. Lietzman acknowledged that there is no philological evidence that there was a man named Junias, but still he insisted it was unthinkable that a woman was an apostle and therefore he would continue to read the male name anyway.¹⁰ Perhaps

we can accept his scholarship today with a more open mind than Professor Lietzman was able to do himself.



Junia was not the only woman of faith to have her identity tampered with.

- If you look up above the high arch over the door in St. Zeno’s Chapel in the Basilica of Santa Prassede in Rome, you will find a mosaic portraying four figures: two female saints, Prassede and Pudentiana, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, and a woman whose head is surrounded by a square halo. The square halo indicates the person was still living when the portrait was made, and the ninth-century portrait is believed to be the mother of Pope Pascal I. If you peer closely at the inscription, you can read “Theoda Episcopa,” which means “Bishop Theodora.” The picture clearly is that of a woman. But look again at the inscription. The *a* on the name Theodora is defaced to make it look like an *o*. Attempts apparently were made to deface it after the mosaic was installed. Scholars like Karen Jo Torjesen of Claremont Graduate School in California and others have concluded that those efforts were made centuries ago to hide the fact that a female bishop was revered.¹¹
- In the “Greek Chapel” of the Priscilla Catacombs in Rome, there is a fresco showing numerous female figures gathered at table, perhaps celebrating a funeral banquet or Eucharist. Centuries after the fresco was painted, someone added beards to a replica of the figures, possibly in the belief that the scene was a communion service and that women should not be seen leading the Eucharist.¹²
- Several ancient versions of the New Testament transformed Nympha’s name in Colossians 4:15 into a masculine form,

apparently as a reaction against a woman leading a house church. The name means “bride” in Greek, or “young wife.” Confusion may have occurred because when used as a direct object, both the masculine name *Nymphas* and the feminine name *Nympha* are written as *Nymphan*. Faced with a choice, older translations leaned to the male translation. Yet modern scholars have discovered the masculine name is nowhere to be found in inscriptions of the period, whereas the feminine name is attested more than sixty times. The feminine name is now preferred in many new translations.¹³

- In the Domitilla catacombs, one of the showplace crypts is the so-called “arcosolium of the little apostles.” Underneath the arch of the crypt, there is a painting of the twelve apostles sitting around Christ. In the center there once was a fresco of a woman praying. Her image was later blacked out. To the right and left side of the woman’s portrait are paintings of the saints Peter and Paul. The woman in the portrait was obviously a very prominent person, perhaps the Christian for whom the crypt was made. But who was she? We cannot say, because her image has been totally obscured.¹⁴
- In the Codex D, an early flat-bound version of scripture, the reference to a woman convert in Athens named Damaris in Acts 17:34 is eliminated. Other references cite her as “high standing,” but even that recognition was dropped. The Codex D also rewrote the Acts 17:4 reference to the role of some “noble women,” so that the women become the wives of the noble men instead of the participants.¹⁵



Most of the scholarly world knows about such changes, but people in the pews do not. Likewise, most scholars also know about Junia the apostle, but most church women do not.

The first scholar I checked with was Carolyn Osiek, who is a New Testament expert at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth. Professor Osiek, who received her divinity degree from Harvard, has written several highly regarded books on the early Christian communities.

“Oh, yes, *Junia*,” she said when I called, as if it were somebody she had spent time with.

Was she an apostle? “Yes.”

A woman? “Yes.”

How would you describe her? “As a dedicated first-generation follower of the Jesus movement, someone engaged in full-time apostolic ministry, probably with her husband.”

Osiek said she found John Chrysostom’s praise in the fourth century for Junia particularly compelling. “By the twelfth century, when Junia’s name was probably changed to a man’s name, it was *unimaginable* for them that a woman could have been an apostle. But it was not unimaginable for Chrysostom, who was a native Greek speaker and knew the early Greek translations very well. Although there was rhetoric of the time that women were weak or untrustworthy, one of his closest friends and supporters was Olympias—a very powerful woman. She was the superintendent of a monastery in Constantinople, a deaconess, and a major supporter of his. He regularly went to her for advice during his brief time as bishop there. He knew that God could work through women.”

We talked for quite a while about where Junia might have lived and how she might have died. “You really should talk to Bernadette Brooten,” Osiek recommended. “She has written extensively about Junia.”

So I did. I tracked Brooten down at Brandeis University, where she is a professor of Christian studies. She, too, holds a doctorate in theology from Harvard and has written several noteworthy books about early Christians. More to the point, she wrote a series of scholarly papers on Junia that helped launch new interest in her story.¹⁶

Was the person mentioned along with Andronicus in Romans 16 a woman?

“Absolutely.”

And an apostle?

“Oh, yes.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“There are three strikes against this being a masculine name,” she said. “One: the early church interpreted it as feminine. Two: it is a Latin name and would not normally have been changed into Junias in Greek. Three: Junia is found only as a *female* name in antiquity.”

Later I would come to admire how Brooten had distilled the complicated debate into a one-two-three case. She was positive that Junia was an apostle and got right to the point. How would she compare Junia to other women mentioned briefly in the New Testament, such as Lydia and Prisca?

“Lydia was a slaveholding woman whose household converts to Christianity, but we don’t have direct evidence of her either preaching or teaching beyond her household. Prisca, according to Acts, teaches. Junia, as an apostle, would have taught or preached,” she said, “because those are the standards Paul sets in describing himself as an apostle.”

We talked for so long about Junia and the ins and outs of gender controversy that I felt guilty taking so much of Brooten’s time on a Saturday afternoon. She not only was patient with my questions; she offered to resume the conversation after an appointment with a graduate student. I was to find a similar response from other New Testament scholars, male and female. They seemed to find the Junia case fascinating and were eager to help set the record straight.

Elaine Pagels, the author of *Beyond Belief* and *The Gnostic Gospels*, was gracious, even though I caught her after a long day of teaching at Princeton. She said that the Junia story was typical of church tradition that was lost over time—or ignored. “It just wasn’t in the interest of those preserving the tradition to include it,” she said. That seemed a tactful way of saying that winners get to write the history, and sharing power with women was not on their minds.

Pagels pointed out that as Christianity became more popular in Rome, it included more wealthy members, not just the odd lot of poor people, slaves, and tradespeople it attracted at the outset. Over time, the

church became more accommodating to the values of those affluent households, whose belief codes came from traditional sources like the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who believed that a man must be master of the house and be in charge of the slaves, women, and children. Patterns of domination and submission were considered essential to running a well-ordered house in the Greco-Roman world, she told me.

Those changes were subtle but very effective. I don't like conspiracy theories, so I don't think it was out of malice. Most men didn't feel ill will toward women; they just didn't see them as part of the ruling structure of the world. You know that prejudice of any kind, racial or ethnic, is often quite unconscious. Most people don't know they have it and would be distressed to know that they do. It's not on their radar screen to question.

Though the evidence pointing to Junia is limited, she said, it's something of a miracle that it still exists at all. "The fact that we even have these traces about Junia is very interesting—some made it in anyway! All of this really is like a detective story. We are rewriting the story of Christianity, but not just from a woman's point of view—from the *original* view," she said.

Perhaps then, Junia could take us "back to the future," where women could be praised once again as leaders in the church.



When I told friends what I was working on, they not only wanted to hear more; they wanted me to hurry. "Now tell me more about Junia," they would say the next time I saw them. The idea of Junia taps into a subliminal frustration of women believers who have read scriptures all their lives in which women were nameless or not valued. I understood that quiet frustration. As a young girl, I had wondered why Noah's sons were all named in Genesis, but not his wife. Her name is not given in scripture, although in Jewish tradition she is called Na'amah.

Likewise, it says in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus had four brothers and “*sisters*.” Mark identifies the brothers as James and Joses and Judas and Simon. The sisters are not named.

And then there’s the story in Matthew 14 about how five thousand were fed with the loaves and fishes, “not counting women and children.” The not-so-subtle message is that women and children did not count.

Perhaps that seems a petty concern, like carping about who cooked the Last Supper and had to do the dishes while the men talked theology. Yet it is possible to intellectually accept that such was the patriarchal culture of those times and still chafe at the thought of all those undervalued women. Passing along such traditions unthinkingly has done a disservice to the successive generations of young women.

This was brought home to me in an embarrassing way when I was teaching a fourth-grade Sunday school class. We were studying the story of Moses and how his mother and sister hid him in a basket in the bulrushes so the Pharaoh of Egypt would not kill him along with other newborn male babies who might someday pose a threat. As we put the felt cutout of a baby boy in the brown basket on the story board, one of the fourth-grade girls asked, “What was Moses’ mother’s name?”

Hmmm. I was stumped. Well, his sister’s name was Miriam, I offered.

The little girl persisted, “But what about the *mother*?”

I desperately looked in the Sunday school teacher’s guide. No mother’s name. The little girl would not relent. “Where is this story from?” she asked.

I grabbed a Bible so we could look up the story in Exodus. No mother’s name.

“Who wrote this book?” the girl asked.

I told her that I had learned in Sunday school that it was Moses, but there may have been other contributors.

She was not deterred. “But he should have put his mother’s name in! She’s the most important person. If she hadn’t thought of putting him in the basket, he would have died,” the girl protested. She had a good point.

For months after that, I kept looking for the name of Moses’ mother. I later found out it was Jochebed. You can find her name through

other Biblical sources but not the names of many other women alluded to in scripture—like the Samaritan woman at the well, who was the first person to learn Jesus was the Messiah—or the anonymous woman “with issues of blood,” who touched the hem of Jesus’ garment as he passed in the midst of a throng and was healed through her own powerful faith. Jesus “felt the spirit go out of him” and suddenly asked, “Who touched me?” But we do not learn the woman’s name; we just learn about her faith.

In later centuries, the name Photina was attached to the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. That became a popular tradition in the Eastern Church. But in scripture she was nameless. In a similar manner, the name Veronica was attached in the second century to the woman with “the issues of blood.” The story that she wiped Jesus’ face with her veil, which was left with a likeness of his face, also became a revered tradition. But again, in scripture, the woman was nameless.



It was for those “invisible” women who have been unnamed in history, as well as the women today who still bake the church suppers, who rock the wailing babies in the church day care, who take out loans to go to a seminary and then are offered lesser jobs as assistant ministers or at the smallest churches—it was for those women that I wanted to tell Junia’s story. Those women—and their daughters and sons—might have their faith deepened by knowing more about the intrepid women of the early church.

But there were more questions that needed to be answered. Once we can establish that Junia was a woman, what does it mean to say Junia was an *apostle*? That’s the controversial designation.

Were there *other* apostles in addition to the twelve disciples?

And could one of them have been a woman?