

Was Apphia an Early Christian Leader? An Investigation and Proposal Regarding the Identity of the Woman in Philemon 1:2

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The epistle to Philemon begins, “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker” (NRSV). Paul and Timothy¹ then also address “Apphia the sister” (*Apphia tē adelphē*). Throughout the multitude of commentaries on Philemon, one struggles to find a helpful description of this mysterious woman. The standard volumes concerning the evangelical gender debate rarely mention Apphia, and both hierarchical² and egalitarian³ perspectives have done little to explore her identity. Specifically, the lack of detailed research regarding Apphia’s status may be due to the fact that, unlike other women in the NT, she is not given a now-controversial title (cf. “deacon” in Rom 16:1–2 or “apostle” in Rom 16:7). Also potentially at play is the tendency of readers to miss something they are not looking for: because Apphia is not contested ground in the evangelical gender debate, it makes sense that a work exploring her identity has been missing. In contrast, most of the detailed work on Paul’s relationship with Apphia is not by evangelical scholars.⁴

In Phlm 1:2 we catch a glimpse into the dynamics of the ancient Christian household into which Paul is writing: “to Apphia our sister,⁵ to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your [sg.] house” (NRSV). The intent of this article is threefold: first, to explore Apphia’s status within the ancient household; second, to investigate her relationship to the various parties mentioned; and third—most importantly—to determine the potential implications for women in the church today.

Apphia: Wife, Slave, or More?

What did the early church make of Apphia, in those rare cases where she is discussed at all? Is she a wife, a friend, a slave, a Pauline co-worker?

The leading view is found, for example, in the writings of John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), who believed Apphia was Philemon’s wife: “It seems to me that she was his partner in life. Observe the humility of Paul. He both joins Timothy with him in his request and asks not only the husband but the wife also, to whom Paul may be a friend as well.”⁶ Pelagius (c. 360–418) is less certain when he writes, “Apphia is *believed* [my emphasis] to be Philemon’s sister or spouse.”⁷ F. F. Bruce contends that Apphia is “probably” Onesimus’s wife, and other modern commentators have followed suit, including Murray J. Harris, Ralph Martin, Ben Witherington, Bruce Malina and John Pilch, Douglas Moo, and James D. G. Dunn. Karl Barth asserts this same sentiment.⁸

However, as Robert Wilson correctly observes: “Apphia is frequently thought to be Philemon’s wife, and Archippus his son, but while it is very natural to think of a family this is not expressly stated in the text.”⁹ Sara Winter is far more blunt: “The assumption that Apphia was the wife of Philemon can be attributed to androcentric gender bias.”¹⁰ Rather, Apphia is prominent enough to be named among men without being socially confined as a wife.¹¹ Indeed, as Eduard Lohse points out:

Their names [Apphia and Archippus] are mentioned because the matter that the Apostle is dealing with is not just a personal affair that concerns Philemon alone. Rather the decision that must be arrived at is a concern of the entire community.¹²

Since Apphia’s potential status as wife carries historical weight, we will explore this option first. It is not obvious that Apphia is either the wife of Philemon or Archippus, and this uncertainty is due to Paul’s use of “sister” (*tē adelphē*) instead of “woman, wife” (*gunē*). Paul has married couples within his social sphere (e.g., Priscilla and Aquila in Rom 16:3, 1 Cor 16:19 and 2 Tim 4:19), and he is perfectly capable of referring to Apphia as someone’s wife—but he does not. These facts leave open the interpretation that Apphia is an unmarried woman within the household, an interpretation which I prefer.

If Paul wanted to indicate that Apphia was in a socially subordinate position—either that of a wife or a slave—Paul could have used *doulos* (“slave,” “servant”) to describe her ranking, but he does not. Language of subordination in Philemon is only self-applied by Paul: “prisoner” (*desmios*) in Phlm 1:1, 9. Paul does write to slaves in several of his epistles (e.g., 1 Cor 7:21–22, Eph 6:5–9, Col 3:22–4:1, 1 Tim 6:1–2, Titus 2:9–10), but it does not seem that any slave is actually addressed by name. Apphia, if she is a slave, would be the sole exception.¹³ In antiquity, the direct addressees of a letter are named first (after the name of the sender), which is a position of honor or preeminence. The epistle to Philemon is directly addressed first to three individuals (Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, vv. 1–2), and second to the broader church (v. 3). The inclusion of Apphia before Archippus may signify that she held a status higher than his.¹⁴ Thus, any notion of Apphia’s status being presented by Paul as subordinate can and should be judged as incongruous. Indeed, Theodore of Mopsuestia, a contemporary of Chrysostom and Pelagius, rules out any notion of Apphia’s subordination: “Paul makes a point of greeting Philemon and Apphia equally. He wishes to indicate thereby that in no way is there a difference of faith or strength of faith between men and women.”¹⁵

Apphia in the Congregation

Because Apphia is probably not a wife or a subordinate within the household, the question arises concerning her actual status. The primary recipients (Philemon, Apphia, Archippus) are mentioned first, then “and to the church in your house” (*kai tē kat’ oikon sou ekklēsia*). The use of the second person singular genitive “your” (*sou*) demands some explanation: is this a collective singular, addressing the three individuals as one, or is this referring to Philemon, as has been traditionally assumed?¹⁶ Since three people are directly addressed and spoken highly of in the direct address, one cannot limit the address to a singular individual.¹⁷ Had Paul only intended to communicate with

Philemon, for instance, he would have made it clear in only naming Philemon.

The options are multiple: Apphia could have been the (or “a”) homeowner,¹⁸ a manager within the household, a well-respected member of the house church, or some combination thereof. Her being called “the sister” (*tē adelphē*) can now be more fully explored in the next section, and these interpretive options leave open a host of opportunities regarding the identity of Apphia—including the position of leader.

Sister Apphia the Leader? Explorations and Parallels

Paul’s use of *tē adelphē* is appositional, describing Apphia as “the sister.” The standard lexicon for NT Greek lists two glosses for *adelphē*: a literal, “a female who comes from the same womb as the reference, sister” and a metaphorical, “a person or thing viewed as a sister in relation to another entity, sister.”¹⁹ The word itself does not mean “leader” or any of the other disputed terms for leadership in the evangelical gender debate; that, of course, does not mean Apphia was not a leader within the household. Paul does not need to describe women with terms of leadership in order for women to be leaders.

Paul has already used familial language in v. 1 in his reference to his co-author Timothy as “brother” (*ho adelphos*). The apostle’s consistent use of familial language throughout all his epistles is stark: he uses *adelphoi* (“brothers,” “siblings”) regarding mixed congregations (Rom 1:13, 7:1, 8:12, 1 Cor 1:11, 3:1, 12:1, 14:20, Gal 1:2, etc.)²⁰ and does not seem interested in being gender-exclusive. For example, the NT does have women who were prominent in the early church. In Rom 16:1, Paul commends “our sister (*tēn adelphēn hēmōn*) Phoebe, deacon²¹ of the church at Cenchreae.” Paul’s use of the articular *hē adelphē* for Phoebe and Apphia specifies a precise designation, and does not likely refer to either woman as simply a fellow Christian.

The accusative feminine noun *adelphēn* applied to Phoebe is singular and articular, and it follows a near-identical syntactical pattern as Phlm 1:2: personal name + article + appositional noun:

Rom 16:1: *Phoibēn tēn adelphēn hēmōn* (“Phoebe the sister of us”)

Phlm 1:2: *Apphia tē adelphē* (“Apphia the sister”)

Philemon 1:2 is written *to* Apphia, as the dative form *Apphia tē adelphē* indicates: “to Apphia the sister,” putting her as a direct recipient. Since *tē adelphē* is articular, it could be a title: “Apphia the Sister.”²² Instead of being the recipient of the epistle, Phoebe receives commendation in Rom 16:1–2, hence the accusative case of “sister” in this context. Craig Keener notes that, “probably [Phoebe] was the owner of the home in which the Cenchreaen church met, and thus its host.”²³ Similarly, in Rom 16:15 Paul specifically mentions the sister (*tēn adelphēn*) of Nereus—though he does not name her. This unnamed sister was included within a specific group, illustrating her status in Christ along with her brother and the others. All this evidence shows that, in the work of the early church, “sisters” were heavily involved in missionary activity, and being a “sister” does not indiscriminately remove one’s ability to serve as a leader. Apphia, therefore, by virtue of Paul’s chosen terminology and by being mentioned in the

address, is an esteemed member of the house church and thus shares an equal status with Philemon and Archippus. Michael Bird suggests that Apphia “may also have held some formal office in the house church that met in her house.”²⁴

Apphia the Leader: A Response to Objections

There are some stated objections to this reading, and key commentators who argue against it are Joseph Fitzmyer and Andrew Perriman.²⁵ These scholars come from differing perspectives,²⁶ but both concur that Apphia was not a leader in the church. Fitzmyer, in response to the work of Winter writes, “there is not a hint here that *adelphē* means that Apphia was ‘also a church leader’; such a meaning of *adelphē* is nowhere attested.”²⁷ Perriman comes to a similar conclusion when he writes, “the fact that the term [*adelphē*] is also applied to Phoebe . . . certainly does not mean that these two women held similar positions or wielded similar influence.”²⁸ Fitzmyer’s dismissal of Winter’s argument illustrates a lack of serious engagement. In both of her articles, Winter contends that Apphia is a “church leader”²⁹ or “church worker.”³⁰ Her arguments for Apphia being a church leader spring from Apphia’s inclusion in the address³¹ and the fact that this is a public document to the house church.³² Fitzmyer’s contention that, “There is not a hint here that *adelphē* means that Apphia was ‘also a church leader’” misses the mark, and it must be reassessed for the following five reasons: (1) Fitzmyer does not take into consideration the rhetorical placement of Apphia, which would include her status as “the sister.” (2) He excludes the authority women had in some homes in the ancient world.³³ (3) He ignores Phoebe and the possible parallel described above. (4) He does not explain the other women named by Paul, who illustrate that Paul had no issue with women leaders in the church.³⁴ (5) He relies too much on the semantic domain of *adelphē*³⁵ and ignores contextual, perspectival, and rhetorical factors that undermine his dismissal³⁶—especially given Apphia’s placement in the introduction—and because of this he assumes a surface level reading of a rhetorically sensitive and dialogically sophisticated introduction.³⁷ In short, Fitzmyer never asks the important questions about Apphia, and thus we should find his objection lacking sufficient force or nuance.³⁸

Supplemental Reasons for Naming Apphia: The Liberation of Onesimus

Interpretive difficulties arise almost instantly regarding the social context of Onesimus: was he a runaway slave, as has been traditionally believed? Options abound³⁹ but based on our conclusions we must ask the question of the consequences of Apphia’s status in this public epistle. Perriman notes, “The fact that the term [*adelphē*] is also applied to Phoebe . . . certainly does not mean that these two women [Apphia and Phoebe] held similar positions or wielded similar influence.”⁴⁰ This is a remarkable case of question begging. Perriman, like Fitzmyer, never asks the question about Apphia’s placement and her function within the epistle, and thus his comment lacks coherence.

Paul sent Onesimus back and the question naturally arises, “for what reason?” Whether for acceptance or reconciliation or manumission, what can be plausibly inferred is that Apphia’s presence gives her the potential for vital input in the treatment of

Onesimus. Paul is, in effect, giving her a voice and treating her as a distinct and natural moral agent in the house church.⁴¹ Marianne Meye Thompson notes, “If Onesimus was a household slave, then his departure from the household will also have affected her [Apphia].”⁴² Whether the purpose of the epistle is manumission or some other option,⁴³ Onesimus’s status is inextricably tied up with the three people mentioned in the introduction (Philemon, Apphia, Archippus) and within the larger Christian assembly. Paul’s ingenious inclusion of multiple people almost assures the necessary social pressure that would have resulted in Onesimus’s freedom. I conclude with J. Albert Harrill, who notes:

Paul addresses the letter to several people, including the church in Philemon’s house (Phlm 2), to raise the honor-shame stakes to that of a public hearing, in the agnostic code of face-to-face rhetorical encounters. Paul pressures Philemon⁴⁴ by making a public plea, before the entire house church, to strengthen his hypothetical language.⁴⁵

Depending on the thorny issue regarding Pauline chronology, and if one believes Paul wrote Colossians (as I do), then we have a potential answer regarding Apphia’s influence. In Col 4:7–9, Tychicus is mentioned as “coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother” (v. 9). Strikingly, Onesimus there is not called a “fellow-slave” (*sundoulos*), as Tychicus is (Col 4:7). Rather, Onesimus is a beloved brother, a member of Paul’s missionary entourage, and bears a certain privilege as one who is faithful. If Colossians is post-Philemon, then we have a possible answer to the question of manumission, and we have the canonized proof of Apphia’s influence upon the congregation and—subsequently—upon the contentious debates regarding slavery in the NT. Apphia is, therefore, a vital and challenging persona who transcends societal constructs in favor of Onesimus who is defined as “no longer a slave” (Phlm 15–16).⁴⁶

Conclusion and Implications of Apphia for Women Today

Far from being a throwaway epistle, Philemon is fertile ground for theological ethics. As the only woman mentioned in the introduction of a Pauline epistle, Apphia deserves pride of place within the Pauline corpus as a unique individual, a sister with a significant say in the household of God, and as a potential leader who may have had considerable positive influence upon the life and ministry of Onesimus who, once freed, used his freedom to boldly live and proclaim the gospel as a faithful brother, no longer as a slave. Paul’s inclusion of Apphia illustrates that he does not discriminate on the basis of gender and pays respect to each leader as an equal in Christ, as a sister, as a leader, and perhaps as an advocate for Onesimus’s manumission.⁴⁷

Notes

1. I accept the traditional view that Paul and Timothy are co-authors of Philemon. See E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-century Letter*

Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 32–36.

2. For example, Judith TenElshof and Robert Saucy, “The Complementary Model of Church Ministry,” in *Women and Men in Ministry: A Complementary Perspective*, ed. Robert L. Saucy and Judith K. TenElshof (Chicago: Moody, 2001), 371n3, only mentions the use of *adelphē* and says nothing of its significance. Wayne Grudem and John Piper, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), does not mention Apphia. The same is true of Grudem’s *Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006). Andreas Köstenberger and Margaret Köstenberger, *God’s Design for Man and Woman* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 157, does mention Apphia, concluding that she is “possibly Philemon’s wife,” though giving no evidence for this assertion nor discussing any possible implications of her being named in the address.

3. Such as Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005); Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995); Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); and William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

4. Cf. Sandra Hack Polaski, *A Feminist Introduction to Paul* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 43–44; Sara Winter, “Philemon and the Patriarchal Paul,” in *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: T&T Clark, 2004), 122–36.

5. In v. 2, some manuscripts read *agapētē* (“beloved”) instead of *adelphē*. However, *adelphē* is the preferred reading. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 588.

6. Peter Gorday, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 311.

7. Gorday, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 311. The lack of references to Apphia in the patristic literature is illustrative of the general sexism of the early fathers. See Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1983).

8. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 206; Murray J. Harris, *Colossians & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 245; Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 142; Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 54; Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 322; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 382–83; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 312; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1961), 228.

9. Robert McLachlan Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians & Philemon* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 333.

10. Sara Winter, "Methodological Observations on a New Interpretation of Paul's Letter to Philemon," *USQR* 39 (1984): 203–12, esp. 207.

11. Paul's practice of naming prominent women before or among men is not without precedent. Cf. "Prisca and Aquila" in Rom 16:3 and 2 Tim 4:19. Paul also mentions a certain Chloe and her people (*tôn Chloēs*) in 1 Cor 1:11. See also Rom 16:1–16 where women are named among men without discrimination.

12. Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1971), 190.

13. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 334, mentions the work of Lightfoot and Lohse regarding Phrygian inscriptions that include the name "Apphia," signifying that her name was common, "doubtless of native origin."

14. Paul could have appealed to Apphia's status as a slave if she were indeed one, since the letter is about the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon/the church. However, this is a rhetorical ploy Paul does not utilize.

15. Gorday, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, 311.

16. Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word, 1982), 273, notes that the use of "your" in the singular "makes it clear Philemon is the real recipient of the letter." Winter agrees, "Philemon and the Patriarchal Paul," 127. I maintain that this interpretive option is highly unlikely. From v. 4 onward Paul does speak in the singular, but the collective nature of the introduction seems to rule out that Paul has in mind a single person. The recipients would likely not make the distinction Winter and O'Brien make: they are being addressed, yet are not included after that? Philemon is not exclusively addressed after v. 1, so it is likely that this is a collective singular, including all three people at once. It is also worth noting that Paul speaks in the singular in v. 2 and this personal pronoun appears throughout the epistle. To restrict these as referring exclusively to Philemon misses the character of the introduction.

17. Contra Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 322–23.

18. Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman's Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 144–63, esp. 163.

19. BDAG 18.

20. Others include Phil 1:12, 3:1, 3:13, 1 Thess 1:4.

21. It is highly improbable that Phoebe is a slave or servant. There are sufficient Greek words to communicate this, and Paul does not utilize such vocabulary. Rather, Phoebe would have been a deacon in Cenchræa, and thus associated with an established city church. See Payne, *Man and Woman*, 61–63.

22. Most translations see the article functioning as a pronoun. However, there is some reason to doubt this. The subsequent and antecedent names have pronouns modifying them, but Apphia does not. The lack of a specific pronoun being applied to Apphia may cast some doubt upon the belief that the article is functioning as a possessive pronoun for her. The parallel with Phoebe includes a pronoun, but Apphia lacks one. The lack of a pronoun for Apphia may indicate that the article is intended to raise her status, thus functioning in a "well-known" sense as Daniel Wallace puts it. I offer this for the reader's consideration only as a possibility and no more. See Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 225.

23. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives*, 240

24. Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), 134.

25. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, AB 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Andrew Perriman, *Speaking of Women: Interpreting Paul* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998).

26. Perriman is an egalitarian when it comes to the ordination of women. See <http://www.postost.net/2016/06/craig-keener-fallacy-mutual-submission>. The perspective of Fitzmyer (who passed away on Dec 24, 2016) on the ordination of women is less certain.

27. Fitzmyer, *Philemon*, 87–88.

28. Perriman, *Speaking of Women*, 72n37.

29. Sara Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *NTS* 33 (1987): 1–15, esp. 2.

30. Winter, "Methodological Observations," 204.

31. Winter, "Letter to Philemon," 1.

32. Winter, "Letter to Philemon," 1.

33. For instance, Paul (or a Pauline writer) uses the infinitive "to rule a household" (*oikodespotein*) in 1 Tim 5:14, which may suggest that women had greater household authority. See also 1 Cor 7.

34. Rom 16:1–16, Phil 4:2–3. See also 1 Cor 11:2–16.

35. The contention is not exclusively that *adelphē* means "leader." Rather, contextual and rhetorical factors contribute to the fact that her inclusion in the introduction indicates she is a leader within the household. The use of *adelphē* is supplemental.

36. He also seems to assume that the arguments in favor of Apphia's leadership are primarily lexical, which falsely attributes a lexical fallacy to his interlocutors.

37. Perriman's objection will be dealt with below.

38. Fitzmyer, in addition to offering his own plausible explanation of Apphia, would need to incorporate all of the offered objections into a coherent scenario—something he does not do.

39. See Winter, "Methodology," 206–10 for a discussion of options. See also Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 319–27.

40. Perriman, *Speaking of Women*, 72n37.

41. I owe this specific insight regarding women and moral agency to Dr. Love Sechrest and her course on Ephesians at Fuller Theological Seminary.

42. Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 208.

43. See Winter, "Letter to Philemon," 5–10.

44. This is not certain, as has been argued above. See also Winter, "Letter to Philemon," 1–2.

45. J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 13–14.

46. Also of note is the language of kinship (*adelphos* in v. 1, *adelphē* in v. 2, vocative *adelphē* in v. 7, *adelphon agapēton* in v. 16, etc.) that permeates the epistle, illustrating the asserted unity of Eph 2:11–22, where there is no dividing wall of hostility between people groups (cf. Gal 2:11–3:29).

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Apphia was a woman greeted by Paul in his letter to Philemon. What was her role or position at Colossae? Was she Philemon's wife? Or was she another Phoebe? The letters of the apostle Paul give glimpses of some of the men and women involved in first-century church life. In a short letter sent to Colossae—a letter which we know as the letter to Philemon—Paul writes primarily about his friendship with two men, Philemon and Onesimus,[1] but Apphia is also addressed. Who was Apphia, and what was her role or position in the church at Colossae? Apphia the Sister. It has been thought that Apphia was Philemon's wife. Paul greets him along with Apphia (probably Philemon's wife) and Archippus (possibly a son), and the Christian community, Philemon it is thought was converted by Paul possibly in Ephesus. Paul refers to himself as a prisoner, as often elsewhere (cf. Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians especially), the second word in Greek enunciates the theme and sets the tone of the letter. Here it is the prisoner of Christ Jesus (for he writes this while in prison for preaching the gospel) appealing, rather than the apostle commanding, Philemon to consider his feelings for freeing Onesimus the slave. An Investigation and Proposal Regarding the Identity of the Woman in Philemon 1:2. By Nicholas R Quiet. The Otherness of Onesimus: Re-reading Paul's Letter to Philemon from the Margins. These high-born Christian women seized upon the study of the Bible and of Hebrew and Greek. The circle of Roman women who studied with Jerome in the late 300s showed such scholarship that he thought nothing of referring some church elders to Marcella for the resolution of a hermeneutical problem. By the early 400s, Augustine could declare that "any old Christian woman" was better educated in spiritual matters than many a philosopher. The women's spiritual zeal exploded into social service. Fabiola founded the first Christian hospital in Europe. Many other church women encountered severe opposition from their families for spending their wealth so generously in helping the poor. Such selfless ministry became a trademark of Christian women.