

# PHOEBE—ORDAINED DEACONESS?

by Avram Yehoshua

[The Seed of Abraham](#)

In 1st Timothy 3:1-7, Paul lists the qualifications for the office of an ordained “bishop,” which was comparable to the position and duties of the Jewish elder. The NIV Study Bible states:

“In the Greek culture the word was used of a presiding official in a civic or religious organization. Here it refers to a man who oversees a local congregation. The equivalent word from the Jewish background of Christianity is “elder.” The terms “overseer” and “elder” are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1st Peter 5:1-2. The duties of an overseer were to teach and preach (1st Tim. 3:2; 5:17), to direct the affairs of the church (1st Tim. 3:5; 5:17), to shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28) and to guard the church from error (Acts 20:28-31).”<sup>1</sup>

Next Paul turns to the deacon and lists his qualifications and responsibilities (1st Tim. 3:8-13). In v. 11 he speaks about *their wives* (or *women* as the NRSV translates it). Because of the possible English translation of *women* some Christians today think this constitutes a separate *ordained* church office known as *deaconess*. One major problem with this position is that it literally comes in the midst of the qualifications of a deacon (vv. 8-13) and is only one verse. In other words, it’s not a separate category (i.e. deaconess), but a woman who was married to a deacon:

“*Women*, likewise, must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” (1st Timothy 3:11 NRSV)

“Likewise, their *wives* must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.” (1st Timothy 3:11 NKJV)

The Greek word, like its Hebrew counterpart, means either a woman or a wife, for the married female even today can be referred to as a man’s woman (i.e. his wife). Many English Bibles use *wives*.<sup>2</sup> Paul continues on with his qualifications for deacons where he speaks of the husband being the man of one wife-woman:

“A deacon must be the husband (literally in Greek: the man) of but one wife (literally in Greek: one woman) and must manage his children and his household well.” (1st Timothy 3:12)

In verse 12 it becomes plain that the use of the term man and woman refer to husband and wife, yet some say that v. 11 includes an ordained deaconesses, who may or may not be married (as in the case of Phoebe). First Timothy 3:11, coupled with Romans 16:1,<sup>3</sup> has some Christian scholars believing that women were ordained as deaconesses in the Body of Messiah in the days of the Apostles, even though their interpretation of Paul, here in 1st Timothy 3:11 is their only source. The two references that they have from him though, prove inadequate to establish such an office for a woman.

The Apostle writes in Romans 16:1-2 saying,

<sup>1</sup>“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a *servant*<sup>4</sup> of the church in Cenchrea,

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Barker et al., eds., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985; Accordance Bible Software), paragraph 24,341.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the ESVS, HCSB, KJV, NET, NIV, NKJV, and the WEB (World English Bible).

<sup>3</sup> Both Romans 16:1 and 1st Tim. 3:11 are the same in both the Textus Receptus and Nestle-Aland text (the two major texts for the Greek New Testament), and so there’s no discrepancy in the Greek texts.

<sup>4</sup> The ASV, ESVS, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, and the WEB have “servant,” while the NRSV has “deacon,” not deaconess, for the Greek word deaconess hadn’t come into use, which is another point against

<sup>2</sup>that you may receive her in the Lord *in a manner worthy of the saints*, and assist her in *whatever business she has need of you*, for indeed she has been a *helper* of many and also of myself.” (Romans 16:1-2)

The word that the NRSV translates as *deacon*, not *deaconess*<sup>5</sup> in Romans 16:1 can equally be translated as *servant*, which is a common designation for any Christian. *Saint* is the Latin-English word for the Greek *holy one*; used for all Christians. In other words, Phoebe could well have been a godly woman of the congregation in Cenchrea (seven miles from Corinth, Greece), who helped others, including Paul, but this would not mean that she was an ordained deacon(ess).

It would seem that if Phoebe had been a deaconess, Paul would not have referred to her as a “saint,” but would have spoken of her position as a leader of the congregation in Cenchrea, saying something like, “that you would receive her in a manner worthy of a deacon.” Also, with Paul speaking of the congregation in Rome assisting her “in whatever *business* she has need of you,” it seems that Phoebe was a businesswoman, perhaps not unlike Lydia (Acts 16:14-15f.) who helped Paul and others financially and in other ways.

*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* writes that Corinth was most likely the place where Paul composed the Letter to the Romans, “since Phoebe of nearby Cenchrea was apparently entrusted with the carrying of the letter (Romans 16:1).”<sup>6</sup> They also state that, “Paul is not stressing office but service, as we gather from v. 2.”<sup>7</sup> Be that as it may, a separate list on the qualifications for being an elder or an overseer (*bishop* in some Bibles), and a deacon (1st Tim. 3:1-7), are in the New Testament, but no such separate list appears for a deaconess; ordained or not. The only place where one could posit any qualifications for a deaconess is the one verse of 1st Timothy 3:11, in the midst of the qualifications for a deacon (1st Tim. 3:8-13). In other words, there’s nothing in the New Testament (or the Old) to establish the position of a women being a deaconesses.

In his commentary on First Timothy, Donald Guthrie sums up the “evidence” in 1st Tim. 3:11 for women being ordained as deaconesses, either as the wife of a deacon, or as a single woman, and says that the text is inconclusive to draw that kind of a conclusion from it:

“The reference is too general to postulate with certainly a distinct order of deaconesses or women deacons.”<sup>8</sup>

Gordon Fee however, seems certain that Paul spoke of women being ordained deaconesses. He writes,

“This sentence is one of the genuine puzzles in 1 Timothy. Scholarship is divided as to whether Paul is turning his attention to the deacon’s wives (NIV text) or some “deaconesses” (NIV margin), since the word *gyne* can mean either “wife” or “woman.””

“In favor of *wives* is that the deacons are addressed on either side of this verse. *It is also argued that one might have expected more detail if a third category were envisioned.*”

“In favor of *deaconesses* is the structure of the sentence itself, which is the exact equivalent of verse 8, both of which in turn are dependent on the verb *must* in verse 2

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Phoebe being a deaconess.

<sup>5</sup> It’s *deacon*, not *deaconess*. There doesn’t seem to have been a word for *deaconess* in New Testament times, which means such an office didn’t exist.

<sup>6</sup> Everett F. Harrison, Author; Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor; J. D. Douglas, associate ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 10—Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 1990; Accordance Bible Software), paragraph 52,599.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53,385.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Guthrie B.D., M.Th., Ph.D., author; The Rev. Canon Leon Morris, M.Sc., M.Th., Ph.D., general editor, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Pastoral Epistles* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), p. 97.

(thus *implying* three categories). It is further argued that had the wives of deacons been in view, Paul might have been expected to say *their* wives... Since there was no word in Greek for *deaconess* (better “woman helper” as GNB), it is likely that “women” here would have been understood to mean women who served the church in some capacity.”<sup>9</sup>

Women serving the church “in some capacity” though, doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s an *official* capacity. Women have been serving the Lord and the Lord’s people since Rebecca brought water to Abraham’s servant and his camels (Gen. 24:10-26). The Tabernacle of Moses in the Wilderness (Ex. 35:25-26) had women who spun yarn for it, and there were also women whom Scripture says were actually “*serving* women who assembled at the door of the Tabernacle of Meeting” continually (Ex. 38:8), but none of them were given official offices or designations. Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) had many women who followed Him *and ministered to Him* (i.e. served Him), and gave out of their substance,<sup>10</sup> but they weren’t given any official designation, either before or after the resurrection, including Mary Magdala being seen as the first “evangelist.”<sup>11</sup> Just as a pastor’s wife isn’t a pastor, but called alongside him to help him and minister to him (and with him) in his official capacity, so too the wife of an ordained deacon.

Fee notes that the Greek word for *their* (*their* wives) is not found in the text, hence him saying that if Paul had meant *their* wives he would have used *their*, but this is a weak point. Greek, like English, can certainly imply *their* without its use, as Vine believes (see p. 6).<sup>12</sup>

There’s nothing definitive in 1st Tim. 3:11 that speaks of an ordained deaconess, even with Fee saying that the structure of the sentence implies it. The implication can also refer to a woman being the wife of a deacon. Support for Fee’s position is further weakened by the fact that there isn’t a second witness in Scripture for women being ordained as deaconesses, Phoebe in Rom. 16:1-2 included.

There are two meanings for the Greek word for “servant” (*diakonon*) in Rom. 16:1 (and used for deacon in 1st Tim. 3:8, 12). According to the Greek lexicon by Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich (*BDAG*), the recognized authority in the field of Greek words and definitions, the two meanings are:

1. “one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, *agent, intermediary, courier* (cp. Jos., Ant. 1,298, of Rachel who brought Jacob to Laban... Cp. Phoebe Rom. 16:1... of Tychicus as faithful *courier* Col. 4:7” and,
2. “one who gets something done at the behest of a superior, *assistant* to someone... the Eng. derivatives “*deacon*” and “*deaconess*” are technical terms, whose meaning varies in ecclesiastical history, and are therefore, *inadequate for rendering NT usage of διάκονος*” (*diakonos*—servant, i.e. for a woman, “*deaconess*”) “as one identified for special ministerial service in a Christian community.”<sup>13</sup>

Interesting to note is that while the NRSV uses *deacon*, a male designation, for female Phoebe in Rom. 16:1, the ASV, ESVS, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV and the WEB use *servant*. *BDAG*’s second point can speak of Phoebe being a godly woman *who was of assistance to others*, as

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon Fee, author; Gordon D. Fee, general editor, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> Mt. 27:55-56; Mk. 15:40-41; Lk. 8:1-3; 23:49.

<sup>11</sup> In the Gospel of John, Mary is the only one the Lord sends to tell the Apostles that He has risen (John 20:11-18; cf. Mark 16:1-8, 9-11). In Matthew it was Mary and other women (Mt. 28:1-8), and in Luke it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women (Lk. 24:1-11).

<sup>12</sup> The KJV, NKJV, NET and NIV, etc., add *their* to the *wives* in 1st Cor. 3:11. It’s not in the Greek text, but it is implied and an appropriate translation. The HCSB translates it without *their*, but also believes it to be *wives*, not *women*: “Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything.”

<sup>13</sup> διάκονος Walter Bauer, augmented by William F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (third edition, 2001; Accordance Bible Software), pp. 230-231. *BDAG* is an abbreviation for Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich.

Paul says of her in Romans 16:2, who was now being used by Paul as a courier (point 1) because her traveling to Rome dovetailed with Paul's Letter to the Roman Christians.

It seems though, that in her traveling to Rome ("assist her in whatever business she has need of you"), that she wasn't ministering or serving the Roman Christians, but on the contrary, Paul is asking them to minister to her. Paul asks the Christians in Rome to receive her "in a manner worthy of the saints" and says that "she has been a helper to many and of myself." Being a *helper* is certainly something that can be said of many Christians, but it's nothing that marks Phoebe as an *ordained* deaconess. She was a godly woman, a servant of the Lord and His Body. Also of note is that there is no "second witness" to any other woman in the New Testament being a deacon or a deaconess.<sup>14</sup>

Paul penned the Letter to the Romans about 52-55 AD, while First Timothy was written about seven years later in 62 AD. It would seem strange that he would see Phoebe as a deaconess in Romans 16, but say nothing concerning that office in either 1st Tim. 3:1-13f., or anywhere else in any other Letter.

In First Timothy Paul seems to just mention "in passing," the qualifications for the alleged deaconess, which I see as simply speaking about the wife of a deacon:

1st Timothy 3:11 NRSV—"Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things."

1st Timothy 3:11 NKJV—"Likewise, *their wives must be* reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things."

The NRSV does not have "Women deacons" or "Women deaconesses," and so one could take it to mean a total departure from any office, and Paul could just be rambling about women in general. This could hardly be the case, and the NKJV, and many others, place "their" in the translation to give us what Paul meant. He was speaking of the wives of the deacons.

With Paul's biblical understanding that elders and deacons should be mature believers, it would seem that an ordained deaconesses, especially one not married as Phoebe seems to be, would also be held to similar, if not identical qualifications, but neither the Apostle, nor any other New Testament writer ever speak of the possibility of an unmarried woman (e.g. a widow or a single woman) being a deaconess. Yet Paul writes of single women and widows in First Corinthians (7:8-9; written about 53 AD), and in the very letter in question (1st Tim. 5:3, 11, 14, 16 twice; cf. Titus 2:1-8f. where Paul speaks of "older women" teaching the younger women, but says nothing about them being deacons). It would seem therefore, that the *women* in 1st Tim. 3:11 are the *wives* of the deacons, not a separate office in the Body of Messiah and of course they, like their husbands, should be mature believers because they would be *helping* their deacon husbands to perform their duties.

What was the biblical deacon expected to do? The deacon was an extension of the man in charge of the congregation (the administrator/president/head overseer, elder/pastor). The deacon was his "arms and the legs" (for the congregation). The deacon determined who needed financial assistance or food, etc., and the deacon was given the necessary things from the congregation's resources to go to the poor and needy with money, food and/or other things (clothes, etc.). Of course the deacon could go alone or with his wife, depending on the circumstances. (A deacon would not go to a single woman or a widow without his wife, as that wasn't proper.)<sup>15</sup> The deacon also notified members of upcoming congregational events (e.g. when the Feasts were to take place), decisions of the elders, and collected tithes and offerings from the members. (More on this in the section on Jewish deacons (see p. 9).

*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* points out that the Greek word *servant* (*deacon*: NRSV) used of Phoebe in Rom. 16:1 is *universally used of any servant*:

1. "of a king, Mt. 22:13...used figuratively of those who advance others' interests even at the sac-

<sup>14</sup> Compare Dt. 17:6; 19:15; Mt. 18:16; 2nd Cor. 13:1; 1st Tim. 5:19, which is only two chapters away from our text, and also Heb. 10:28.

<sup>15</sup> "Abstain from all appearance of evil." (1st Thessalonians 5:22 KJV)

rifice of their own...of one who does what promotes the welfare and prosperity of the church, Col. 1:25...those through whom God carries on his administration on earth, as magistrates, Rom. 13:4; teachers of the Christian religion, 1st Cor. 3:5; 2nd Cor. 6:4; 1st Thess. 3:2...in the cause of the Lord, Col. 4:7; (Eph. 6:21)...whom Satan uses as a *servant*, 2nd Cor. 11:15...of Christ, who labored for the salvation of the circumcised, i.e. the Jews, Rom. 15:8,” as well as,

2. “a *deacon*, one who, by virtue of the office assigned him by the church, cares for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use (cf...Lightfoot’s *Commentary* on Philippians, dissert. i. sec. i...Phil. 1:1; 1st Tim. 3:8, 12, cf. Acts 6:3ff...a woman to whom the care of either poor or sick women was entrusted, Rom. 16:1 (cf...Lightfoot as above, p. 191; B. D. under the word Phoebe)” and,
3. “a *waiter*, one who serves food and drink: John 2:5, 9.”<sup>16</sup>

From *Thayer’s* it seems that Lightfoot thought of Phoebe as a deaconess, but it’s important to realize that the word is used of anyone who serves another, like Lydia (Acts 16:12, 14-15, 40). Lydia helped Paul and was very hospitable to him and those with him, having them stay in her home in Philippi, both before and after the time that Paul and Silas were jailed in Philippi. Lydia was truly a *servant* of the Lord, but she wasn’t an *ordained* deaconess. What Paul said of Phoebe, he could also have said of Lydia (and it could be said of Tabitha too; Acts 9:36).

Nothing in First Timothy Three seems to lead one to believe that Paul was speaking about ordaining a separate entity known as, or functioning as, a deaconess. This is what he is talking about: the qualifications for future elders and deacons. 1st Timothy 3:8-13 states,

<sup>8</sup>“Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, <sup>9</sup>holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience, <sup>10</sup>but let these also first be *tested*, then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. <sup>11</sup>Likewise, their *wives* must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup>Let *deacons* be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. <sup>13</sup>For those who have served well as deacons *obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.*” (of course, verse 11 can begin as the NRSV has, “*Women*, likewise, must be serious...”)

Even if one translates the Greek word as *women*, it can equally mean it’s their *wives* that Paul is speaking about for that is how the ancients spoke of a man’s wife—as his woman. Also, why would Paul “sandwich” an alleged separate category of deaconess in-between his requirements for a deacon? Verses 8, 10, 12 and 13 literally speak of “deacon,” with verses 10 and 12 literally positioned on both sides of this woman deaconess.

There isn’t one unambiguous second witness in all of Scripture to support a woman being an ordained deaconess, and nowhere does Paul, or anyone else, say that a woman deacon has to be tested (as is said of the deacon; 1st Tim. 3:10), nor if one is a deaconess that she obtains for herself “a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus,” as he says of the deacon (1st Tim. 3:13). Again, if there are separate qualifications for an elder/overseer and a deacon (1st Tim. 3:1f.), it would seem reasonable that qualifications for a deaconess would be listed *separately* too, especially as a woman eligible for that position could theoretically be a widow or a single women (i.e. not married to a deacon).

Both *Thayer’s* and *BDAG* confirm that the Greek word is the same for wives and women. *Thayer’s* writes that it means, “a woman of any age,”<sup>17</sup> and obviously also a widow, and *BDAG* says it can mean a virgin or a married woman.<sup>18</sup> This parallels the Hebrew meaning of the word for “woman”

<sup>16</sup> δῆλονος, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Accordance Bible Software)*, n.p. .

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., “γυνή.

<sup>18</sup> γυνή, Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, pp. 208-209.

(ἡ ἴσα *isha*), which also means a married or an unmarried woman. So the Greek word itself isn't helpful in determining if Paul meant a woman for the separate office of a deacon/ess), or the wife of a deacon, which weakens Fee's argument considerably because there's nothing that demands that it be translated *women for the position of a deacon* (for that is the masculine word that Paul uses).

For 1st Timothy 3:11 *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* also states that the Greek word can mean either *women* or *wives*, and then goes on to list the three possible explanations for v. 11, as well as their position:

"In the Greek language the same word, *gyne*, is used for "woman" and "wife." Since this single word is found here for "their wives," there are three possible interpretations as to what group Paul is talking about."

1. The "NIV follows KJV in assuming that these women were the wives of the deacons. The main argument against this is that the word for "their" is missing in the Greek. Yet Vine feels that this meaning is "probable.""
2. "Some have suggested that he is speaking of women in general, but the context of vv. 8-12 would seem to rule this out."
3. "White, though, argues strongly that the reference is to deaconesses, of whom Phoebe (Rom 16:1) is an example...He would take these as a separate group of church officials...We know that there were deaconesses in the church in later centuries, but whether there was such an order in the first century is debatable."

"Hendriksen... writes,"

"the fact that no special and separate paragraph is used in describing their necessary qualifications, but that these are simply wedged in between the stipulated requirements for deacons...indicates that these women are not to be regarded as constituting a third order in the church, the office of "deaconesses," on par with, and endowed with, authority equal to that of deacons."<sup>19</sup>

*EBC* goes on to flesh out the historical understanding that the office of deaconess didn't exist in the days of the Apostles. They write that they are,

"inclined to favor the idea that the reference is to "their wives." Paul talks about the qualifications of the deacons in vv. 8-10 and again in vv. 12-13. It would seem natural to assume that he is talking about their wives in v. 11. He says that these women— whoever they are—must, "in the same way" as the deacons, be "worthy of respect." This is the same adjective (*semna*, fem.) as in v. 8 (masc.). They are also not to be "malicious talkers."<sup>20</sup>

*EBC* believes that Paul is simply saying that the wife of a deacon must be a godly woman too, as her deacon husband must be. *The NET Bible Notes* also interprets the passage as the *wives* of the deacons, but first lists how it might be *women deaconesses*:

"The Greek word here is *γυναῖκας* (*gunaikas*), which literally means "women" or "wives." It is possible that this refers to *women* who serve as deacons, "deaconesses." The evidence is as follows:"

1. "The immediate context refers to deacons;"
2. "the author mentions nothing about wives in his section on elder qualifications (1st Tim. 3:1-7); it would seem strange to have requirements placed on deacons' wives without corresponding requirements placed on elders' wives, and"

<sup>19</sup> Ralph Earle, Author; Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor; J. D. Douglas, associate ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary—1 Timothy*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978; *Accordance Bible Software*), n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

3. “elsewhere in the NT, there seems to be room for seeing women in this role (cf. Rom 16:1).”

Yet, “The translation “wives”—referring to the wives of the deacons—is probably to be preferred, though, for the following reasons:”

1. “It would be strange for the author to discuss women deacons right in the middle of the qualifications for male deacons; more naturally they would be addressed by themselves.”
2. “The author seems to indicate *clearly* in the *next verse* that” he’s not speaking of women as deacons: “Deacons must be *husbands* of one wife.”
3. “Most of the qualifications given for deacons elsewhere do not appear here. Either the author has truncated the requirements for women deacons, or he is not actually referring to women deacons; the latter seems to be the more natural understanding.”
4. “The principle given in 1st Tim. 2:12 appears to be an overarching principle for church life which *seems implicitly to limit the role of deacon to men*. Nevertheless, a decision in this matter is difficult, and our conclusions must be regarded as tentative.”<sup>21</sup>

As point four speaks of, what needs to be realized in this question of deaconesses is that Paul speaks of women *not* having authority over men, and a deaconess would seem to have such authority:

“And I do not permit a woman to teach *or to have authority over a man*, but to be in silence.” (1st Timothy 2:12)

The *NIV Study Bible Notes* believes that Paul was not speaking about a separate office of an ordained deaconess. It states:

“The Greek for this phrase simply means “the women,” and therefore, could refer to,”

1. “deacons’ wives,”
2. “deaconesses (see NIV text note, “in the same way deaconesses”) or,”
3. “female deacons.”

“However, the fact that deacons are referred to again in vv. 12-13 seems to rule out a separate office of deaconess, but many judge otherwise.”<sup>22</sup>

Now that we’ve seen the Greek and Christian aspect of the issue, with Christianity *today* “divided” on the issue of an ordained office for a woman deaconess in the days of the Apostles, it’ll be helpful to see how the Jewish people understood it because the Church has gotten the names *and* functions for its officials from the Synagogue. The officials for the Church parallel those of the Synagogue because the Jewish Apostles weren’t inventing something new in beginning “church,” but only transposing into Greek the Jewish terms for synagogue officials.

The congregations that Paul established, which many today would call “house churches,” would in fact have been seen by the Apostles as “house synagogues” (house congregations; places of assembly) where they would fellowship, sing praise, and worship the Lord, teach Mosaic Law and speak of Life in Yeshua. Note, also, that Paul didn’t have a monopoly on establishing assemblies or “house synagogues” (cf. Acts 11:19; Gal. 1:22), and therefore, his terms for the offices of the Church weren’t made up by him. He was just writing in Greek what he knew in Hebrew to the names and functions of the synagogue officials.

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<sup>21</sup> W. Hall Harris, ed., *The NET Bible Notes* (1st edition, ed. Richardson: Biblical Studies Press, 2005; *Accordance Bible Software*), n.p.

<sup>22</sup> *NIV Study Bible Notes* (Accordance), n.p.

The word *synagogue* actually comes from the Greek, and by definition can mean “a *Christian* assembly.”<sup>23</sup> James uses it in referring to *Christian* assemblies (James 2:2; see also Acts 9:1-2; 26:11). It would also be used for the assembly of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Antioch, other Christian assemblies, and also traditional Jewish synagogues that didn’t believe in Yeshua. In other words both a synagogue of Jews that didn’t believe in Yeshua, as well as an assembly like Antioch, made up of (only) Christians (Jewish and Gentile), could equally be called a *synagogue*. The word “church,” as a distinct entity separate from the Jewish people, wasn’t in the vocabulary of the Apostles.<sup>24</sup>

## *The Offices and Functions of the Ancient Synagogue*

1. *Nasi*: “Prince,” (today president). He’s the highest ranking member of the congregation. This position could also be vested in a *zakane* (#3; elder) or a *rabbi* (#8). The *nasi* saw to the spiritual and physical needs of the synagogue members and acted as *head judge* in a three member *Bet Din* (#10; the judicial court).
  - A. The office of *nasi* would become that of president, administrator or *episkopos* (bishop/overseer, elder or pastor) of the church.
  - B. Acts 15:19; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12 reveal that Yakov (James; actually Jacob), the half brother of Yeshua, was the *Nasi* or Prince over the entire assembly of Christian Jews in Jerusalem, even though he wasn’t an Apostle. That’s because he was the Lord’s brother and so “next in line” to Yeshua the King. Yakov was the oldest of Joseph and Mary’s naturally conceived sons

<sup>23</sup> Wesley J. Perschbacher, editor, *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publications, 1990), p. 388. *Synagogue*: a “collecting, gathering; a Christian assembly or congregation, James 2:2” (where *James* speaks of a *Christian* synagogue, “for if a man comes into your *synagogue* with a gold ring”).

William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 432, has exactly what Perschbacher has.

Walter Bauer, augmented by William F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 782-783: a “place of assembly...a *Christian assembly-place* can also be meant” (James 2:2). A “meeting for worship, of the Jews...*Transferred* to meetings of *Christian congregations*.”

<sup>24</sup> The Greek *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklaysia*), translated into English as “church,” literally means “an assembly” or congregation, but it also speaks of those “called out.” Originally it pictured the Greek “town meetings” of free men *called out* of the populace to vote on city matters. The spiritual aspect relates to believers being “*called out* of Darkness into His marvelous *Light*” (1st Pet. 2:9), and may be one reason why Paul chose to use this word instead of *synagogue*. Christians are the “Called Out Ones,” the Greek equivalent of the Hebraic, “Chosen People.” Where it says, “to the *church* at Corinth,” it should read, “to the assembly (or congregation) at Corinth” or “to the *called out ones* of Corinth.”

Paul’s use of *ekklaysia* in no way opposes *Israel* or Mosaic Law. The word was first used of Israel about 300 years earlier in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible (i.e. the Old Testament), which is called the *Septuagint*. It speaks of the Congregation or “the Church of Israel” at Mt. Sinai (Dt. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; see also KJV Acts 7:38, which correctly has Stephen saying of the Lord, “This is he, that was in the *church in the wilderness* ...”

This was most likely the reason why Paul used *ekklaysia* instead of *synagogue*, which was a relatively newer, non-biblical term. The Church (Assembly of those *called out*) didn’t begin in Acts 2 on Pentecost (the Mosaic holy day of *Shavu’ot*; Lev. 23:15-21; the Feast of Weeks). Jewish Christians, including the Jewish Apostles, were *filled* with the promised Holy Spirit (Ezk. 36:27) on that day (see Acts 2:46-47; 5:11-12, 42 where “the Church” met in the Temple). Paul’s churches were “house assemblies” (1st Cor. 16:19; Phlm. 1:2; see also Rom. 16:5, 10-11, 14-15, 23), which Jews would call “house synagogues.” Also, it doesn’t seem that Paul began the congregations in Rome (1:13, 15), Ephesus (1:15; 3:1-4) or Colosse (1:3-4, 9) even though house churches (assemblies) are mentioned in two of those letters (Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15). The assemblies in Rome were most likely begun by Jews from Rome who had been in Jerusalem for *Shavu’ot* (Acts 2:1-10f.), had come to believe in Yeshua (cf. Romans 16:7) and had returned to Rome with the Good News. This would also apply to other cities outside Israel.



(Jones, Simon, and Judah; Mt. 13:55; Mk. 6:3).

2. *Shli'ach*: “sent one.” He was a Jewish legal emissary or agent sent by, and officially representing, the synagogue. He performed acts of legal significance for the benefit of the sender (i.e. the *nasi*), as opposed to himself.
  - A. The *shli'ach* is the believing Apostle (literally, *sent one*), sent by the Lord Himself to the people of Israel (Acts 1:8), and the Gentiles (cf. Rom. 11:13; 1st Tim. 2:7; 2nd Tim. 1:11), with the message of Life in Messiah Yeshua, officially acting in His Name.
  - B. Compare Hebrews 3:1, where Yeshua is spoken of as the Apostle of our faith, having been sent from the Father to Israel.<sup>25</sup>
3. *Zakane*: “bearded one,” *elder*. He was to be at least 40 years of age, spiritually mature, an example to the men of how to live out one’s faith in God, and was officially involved in the decisions that effected the life of the community. He could also bring teachings from the Word.
  - A. This office is used in the New Covenant to denote an elder, pastor, shepherd, bishop, presbyter, *episkopos*, overseer or leader.
4. *Batlan*: “man of leisure,” who was usually well off financially, and so he had time to study. Therefore, he taught the Word of God to the people—a teacher. He devoted his time to study and he fed the flock from the Word. He was supported by the community or he was wealthy. In a synagogue of 120 males, there would be 10 men like this called *batlanim* (plural for *batlan*).
  - A. This office would become the teachers of the Word (teachers, elders and pastors).
5. *Shamash*: servant; also known as a *gabai*. He was an assistant to the *nasi*. He was the “arms and legs” of the *nasi* (and the congregation), providing for the physical and financial needs of the community from the congregation’s resources. He collected tithes, administered funds and food, etc., to the poor and the needy, and was available to serve the *nasi* in whatever needed to be done in the physical realm. He also announced the rulings of the synagogue, as well as the times of the feasts, etc. The *shamash* was *always a man*, and the wife of the *shamash* was never in an official position.
  - A. This is the church office of an ordained deacon.
  - B. In Acts 6:1-6 there are seven Jewish Christians from outside of Israel (Hellenist Jews) who were chosen to distribute food and/or money to the Hellenistic Jewish Christians in need. After the seven were chosen, *the Apostles ordained them* to the office with the laying on of their hands (the prayer of consecration/ordination). The reason for these deacons coming into existence was specifically because the Hellenistic *widows* “were neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1), and so this would seem to be the perfect place for some Hellenistic Jewish-Christian *women* among them to be ordained too. Yet, there wasn’t a single woman among the seven and no one complains that there isn’t a woman “deacon.” This Scripture fact, along with the understanding that the *shamash* (the Hebrew deacon) was always a man, confirms that there wasn’t a Christian office of ordained deaconess in the days of the Apostles.
6. *Hazan*: He was the disciplinarian for the *Bet Din* (the synagogue court, #10). He dealt out physical punishment, up to 40 lashes (Dt. 25:1-3) for anyone sentenced to be punished by lashes by the *Bet Din*. Today the *hazan* is the cantor or prayer leader in the synagogue, the one who sings or chants the Hebrew prayers.
  - A. In the Church today, as in Judaism, it seems that this function has changed to that of praise and worship leader.
7. *Magid*: “to tell,” a story teller. Not necessarily associated with one synagogue, he would travel

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<sup>25</sup> Also, see my article, [Messiah—The Sent One](#), on how the term, “the sent one,” is title for the Messiah of Israel from the Tanach (Old Testament).

around from synagogue to synagogue, proclaiming the Word and seeking to bring the Jewish people closer to God.

A. This is the church's evangelist.

8. *Rabi*: (Rabbi), literally "my great one" or colloquially, "my rabbi, "my master" or "my teacher."

A. In the days of the Apostles there were two types of rabbis.

1) One was the local rabbi who expounded Scripture from the weekly Torah readings. He belonged to one synagogue where there might be a number of rabbis like him or *batlanim*.

2) The other was the traveling rabbi, who, like Yeshua, would collect students along the way as he went from one town to the next. This rabbi acted more like a *magid* (#7), or a prophet, calling the people back to God.

B. The first rabbi is the church pastor, while the second would be more like Christianity's evangelist or teacher.

9. *Meturgeman*: interpreter/translator. He stood beside the reader of the Hebrew Bible in the synagogue and translated it into Aramaic. This was done when the Jewish people returned from Babylonian captivity and primarily spoke Aramaic, the language of their captors. Aramaic is close to Hebrew, but by the time of Messiah, 500 years later, the language of the Jewish people living in Israel had returned to Hebrew, not Aramaic.

A. The need for a translator of the Greek Septuagint, the official Bible of the Jews living outside Israel, wasn't necessary because the *lingua franca* in the Apostle Paul's day all over the Roman Empire was Greek. Hence, why most of the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and why this synagogue office wasn't needed among Gentile Christians, whom most of the New Testament was written for.<sup>26</sup>

B. The need in the USA, etc., for a man to translate the Hebrew and Greek Bible for the congregation isn't necessary as there are Bibles in all languages today.

10. *Bet Din*: "House of Judgment." The congregational court of law with jurisdiction in civil, criminal and religious matters. In Temple times the Sanhedrin, made up of 70 members, was the national *Bet Din* or "Supreme Court."

A. This is how the great or Jerusalem Sanhedrin functioned, as a *judicial* body, when it tried Yeshua and found Him guilty of blasphemy because He had answered in the affirmative if He was the Messiah, the Son of God when the High Priest put Him under oath and commanded Him to tell them (Mt. 26:62-68, etc.). It could also function as a *legislative* body dealing with both secular and religious issues, as well as the national center for *teaching* God's Word and what it meant.

B. Each synagogue had a *Bet Din*. The smaller synagogues had the *nasi* and two elders and/or rabbis on it, and the larger congregations had the *nasi* and twenty-two elders and/or rabbis.

C. This is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said to the Corinthians in 1st Cor. 5:12-6:5, that they should judge their own Christians. He wanted the Corinthians to set up a *Bet Din* so that it could judge the members of the congregation, to justify the righteous and to hand out punishment to the offender (see also 1st Cor. 5:1-8).

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<sup>26</sup> The only Gospel that was written originally in Hebrew was Matthew, for it was written for the Jewish people living in Israel. Also, the first half of the Book of Acts seems to have come from an original Hebrew source.

# Conclusion

There is no biblical nor historical basis for women deaconesses in the days of the Apostles, and so 1st Tim. 3:11 cannot be speaking of a woman deaconess. Even if one translates the Greek word in the verse as “women,” as the NRSV does, instead of “wives,” Paul is only speaking of them as the women or wives of their deacon husbands:

1st Timothy 3:11 NRSV—“Women likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.”

Also, verse 11 is literally sandwiched in-between the qualifications of a male deacon (1st Tim. 3:8-13), and there aren’t any passages in Scripture where there are qualifications for a woman deaconesses, as there are for men pastor/elder and deacon. In other words, v. 11 does not speak of a deaconess.

Romans 16:1-2, which speaks of Phoebe as a “servant” and helper<sup>27</sup> of Paul and others, can and should be taken to mean that she’s a good Christian woman who has helped many, including Paul, in ministering or serving him and in delivering his Letter to the Romans to the Roman elders. This understanding is borne out by the majority of English Bibles which translate *diakonos* (servant or deacon) for Phoebe in v. 1 as servant and not deacon.

The fact that the term “deaconess” didn’t exist in the first century, either in grammar or history, also proves that there weren’t any female deaconesses in the Church, or out of the church in the secular world.

Another major point against women being deaconesses in the early Church is the biblical realization that no Jewish women were made deaconesses in Acts 6, when seven deacons were chosen from among the Hellenist Jewish group to minister to their needs.

Finally, the Jewish understanding of the office of *shamash* or “deacon” in the Synagogue reveals that only men were deacons. There is no scriptural nor historical basis for women being deacons or as we might call them today, deaconesses in the days of Peter and Paul, whether in the synagogue or its mirror reflection, the church.

It’s clear to see that there were no Christian women ordained as deaconesses in the days of the Apostles. Phoebe wasn’t one, and Paul certainly wasn’t making up a new category for one, with just one verse in 1st Tim. 3:11. This follows God’s design for the Priesthood in Israel. There were not women priests in the Levitical Priesthood, but there were “women priests” in the pagan temples. We would call them cult harlots.

1st Timothy 3:11 NKJV—“Likewise, *their* wives *must be* reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> προστάτις Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, paragraph 8,153: “caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources.”

<sup>28</sup> This article was last revised on Saturday, October 7, 2023.