

# PHOEBE—ORDAINED DEACONESS?

by Avram Yehoshua

[The Seed of Abraham](#)

In 1st Timothy 3 Paul lists several qualifications for the office of an ordained deacon. In v. 11 he speaks about *their wives* (or *women* as the NRSV translates it). Because of the possible translation of *women* some think this constitutes a separate *ordained* church office known as *deaconess*:

“*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 means either a woman or a wife. Most Bibles though, like the NKJV, use *wives*. Paul continues on with his qualifications for deacons, although some say that it includes ordained deaconesses. First Timothy 3:11, coupled with Romans 16:1,<sup>1</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 Paul 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 and states,

<sup>1</sup>“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a *servant* (ASV, KJV, NKJV; or *deacon* NRSV) of the church in Cenchrea, <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>2</sup> in Romans 16:1 can equally be translated as *servant*, which is a common designation for any true believer. *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 (near Corinth, Greece), who helped others, including Paul, but this would not mean that she had to be 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 servant/deaconess of the Lord.” 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. Wouldn’t a deaconess serve the congregation in Rome and not be told to assist her in her business?

*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>3</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. 3:1f.), are in the New Testament, but no such separate list appears for an ordained deaconess. The only place where one could posit any qualifications for a deaconess are in 1st Timothy 3:11. In other words, there’s nothing in the

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> It’s *deacon*, not *deaconess*. There doesn’t seem to have been a word for *deaconess* in New Testament times, which also points away from such an office existing.

<sup>3</sup> Everett F. Harrison, Author; Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor; J. D. Douglas, associate ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary—Romans*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 1990; Accordance Bible Software), paragraph 52,599.

New Testament (or the Old) to establish the position of women being ordained 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 certainty a distinct order of deaconesses or women deacons.”<sup>4</sup>

Gordon Fee however, is adamant 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 (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>5</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 “*servicing* 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 had many women who followed Him and ministered to Him, giving out of their substance,<sup>6</sup> but they weren’t given any official designation, either before or after the resurrection, including Mary Magdala being “the first evangelist.”<sup>7</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. 5).<sup>8</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 solid second witness in Scripture for women being ordained as deaconesses, Phoebe in Rom. 16:1-2 included.

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<sup>4</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.

<sup>5</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>6</sup> Mt. 27:55-56; Mk. 15:40-41; Lk. 8:1-3; 23:49.

<sup>7</sup> In the Gospel of John, Mary is the one the Lord sends to tell the Apostles that He had risen (John 20:11-18).

<sup>8</sup> The KJV, NKJV, NET and NIV add *their* to the text of 1st Cor. 3:11. It’s not in the Greek texts, 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.”

There are two meanings for the Greek word for “servant” (*diakonon*) in Rom. 16:1. According to the Greek lexicon by Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich (*BDAG*), the recognized authority in the field of Greek definitions, the two 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 δ*” (*diakonon*–servant).”<sup>9</sup>

Interesting to note is that while the NRSV uses *deacon*, a male designation, for Phoebe in Rom. 16:1, the ASV, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV and NKJV use *servant*. *BDAG*’s second point could well speak of Phoebe being a godly woman *who was of assistance to others*, as Paul speaks of in Romans 16:2, and 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 or through 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 could be said of many Christians and nothing that marks Phoebe as an *ordained* deaconess, but 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 being a deaconess.<sup>10</sup>

Paul penned Romans about 55 AD, while First Timothy was written about nine years later in 64 AD. In First Timothy Paul seems to just mention “in passing,” the qualifications for the alleged deaconess, which could very well simply be the wife of a deacon:

‘Likewise, their *wives* must be reverent...’ v. 11 NKJV.

‘*Women*, likewise, must be serious...’ v. 11 NRSV.

With Paul’s biblical understanding that elders and deacons should be mature believers, it would seem that ordained deaconesses would also be held to that qualification, 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). 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 ancient 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 feet (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 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 widow without his wife; it wasn’t proper.)<sup>11</sup> The deacon also notified members of upcoming congregational events (e.g. the Feasts), decisions of the elders, and collected tithes and offerings from the

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<sup>9</sup> “διάκονος,” *BDAG*, pp. 230-231. *BDAG* represents *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, written by Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich; *Accordance*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 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>11</sup> “Abstain from all appearance of evil.” (1st Thessalonians 5:22 KJV)

members. (More on this in the section on Jewish deacons (see p. 8).

*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 sacrifice 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, 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4; 1 Thess. 3:2...in the cause of the Lord, Col. 4:7; (Eph. 6:21)...whom Satan uses as a *servant*, 2 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; 1 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>12</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. 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...')

Obviously if one translates it *women*, there is a grammatical possibility that Paul was speaking of an ordained deaconess, but this is not a strong point because the Greek word equally means *wives*. Also, why would Paul "sandwich" a deaconess in-between his requirements for deacon, for both v. 10 and v. 12 literally speak of "deacon"?

There isn't an unambiguous second witness in 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>13</sup> and obviously also a widow, and *BDAG* says it can

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<sup>12</sup> "διάκονος," *Thayers Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, n.p. Accordance Bible Software.

<sup>13</sup> "γυνή," *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, n.p.

mean a virgin or a married woman.<sup>14</sup> This parallels the Hebrew meaning of the word for “woman” (אִשָּׁה *isha*), which means a married or an unmarried woman. So the Greek word itself isn’t helpful in determining if Paul meant women (a possible separate office), or the wives of the deacons, which weakens Fee’s argument considerably because there’s nothing that demands that it be translated *women*.

The *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states for 1st Timothy 3:11 that the Greek 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. “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 a par with, and endowed with, authority equal to that of deacons.*”<sup>15</sup>

The *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* goes on to state that they believe 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>16</sup>

The *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 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 γυναικας (*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

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<sup>14</sup> “γυνή,” *BDAG*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Earle, Author; Frank E. Gaebelein, 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. n.p. *Accordance Bible Software*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

(1 Tim. 3:1-7); it would seem strange to have requirements placed on deacons' wives without corresponding requirements placed on elders' wives, and"

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 1 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>17</sup>

What also needs to be realized in this concern is that Paul speaks of women not having authority over a man, and a deaconess would certainly 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* also 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>18</sup>

Now that we've looked at the Greek and Christian aspect of the issue, with Christianity "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 side 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, 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, teach Mosaic Law and speak of Life in Yeshua. Note, also, that Paul didn't have a monopoly on establishing assemblies or "house synagogues" (Acts 11:19; Gal. 1:22), and therefore, his terms for the offices of the Church weren't made up by him.

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<sup>17</sup> W. Hall Harris, ed., *The NET Bible Notes* (1st edition, ed. Richardson: Biblical Studies Press, 2005), n.p. *Accordance Bible Software*.

<sup>18</sup> *NIV Study Bible Notes* (Accordance), n.p.

The word *synagogue* comes from the Greek, and by definition can mean “a *Christian* assembly.”<sup>19</sup> James uses it in referring to *Christian* assemblies (James 2:2; see also Acts 9:1-2; 26:11). It would be used for the assembly of Jewish and Gentile believers at Antioch, other believing assemblies, and also traditional Jewish congregations that didn’t believe in Yeshua. In other words both a synagogue of Jews that didn’t believe in Jesus, as well as an assembly like Antioch, made up of (only) believers (Jewish and Gentile), could equally be called a *synagogue*. Actually, the word “church,” as a distinct entity separate from the Jewish people, wasn’t in the vocabulary of the Apostles.<sup>20</sup>

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

1. *Nasi*: ‘Prince,’ president. The highest ranking member of the congregation. This position could also be vested in, or be 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 the *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), the half brother of Yeshua, was the *nasi* over the entire assembly of believing Jews in Jerusalem, even though he wasn’t an Apostle.
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.

<sup>19</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 *believing* 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>20</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*. The word was first used of Israel about 300 years earlier in 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). 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 and had returned to Rome with the Good News.

- A. This is the believing Apostle (literally, *sent one*), sent by the Lord Himself to the people (Acts 1:8) with the message of Life in Messiah Yeshua, officially acting in His Name.
3. *Zakane*: “bearded one,” *elder*. He was at least 40 years of age, spiritually mature, was an example to the men of how to live out one’s faith in God, and was 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,” usually well off financially, he had time to study and therefore, teach 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 ten men like this or *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) in providing for the physical 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 an official position.
- A. This is the church office of an ordained deacon.
- B. In Acts 6:1-6 there are seven Jewish believers from outside of Israel (Hellenist Jews) who were chosen to distribute food and/or money to the Hellenistic Jewish believers 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). With the reason for these deacons coming into existence being specifically because the Hellenistic *widows* “were neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1), it would seem that this would 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. This fact, along with the understanding that the *shamash* was always a man, confirms that there wasn’t a Christian office of ordained deaconess in the days of the Apostles.
6. *Hazan*: the disciplinarian for the *Bet Din* (the synagogue court, #10). He dealt out physical punishment, up to 39 lashes (Dt. 25:1-3) for anyone sentenced to 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. Today in the Church, 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 around from synagogue to synagogue, proclaiming the Word and seeking to bring the Jewish people closer to God.
- A. An evangelist.
8. *Rabi*: (Rabbi) “my great one” or “my teacher.” In the days of the Apostles there were two types of rabbis. 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*. 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.
- A. The first rabbi is the church pastor, while the second would be more like an evangelist-teacher.
9. *Meturgeman*: interpreter/translator. He stood beside the reader of the Hebrew Bible in the syna-



gogue and translated it into Aramaic. This was done when the Jewish people returned from Babylonian captivity and 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 was Greek, hence, the Greek New Testament, and why this synagogue office wasn't needed among believers.
  - B. The need in the USA, etc., for a man to translated the Hebrew and Greek Bible for the congregation isn't necessary as there are Bibles in all languages.
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 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. It could also function as a legislative body dealing with both secular and religious issues.
  - 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 spoke of to the Corinthians in 1st Cor. 5:12-6:5. 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).

With the biblical realization that no women were made deacons in Acts 6, and the Jewish understanding of the offices of the Synagogue, it's clear to see that there were no ordained women deacons in the days of the Apostles. Phoebe wasn't one, nor was Paul teaching, in 1st Tim. 3:11, that women were to be either.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Last revised on Monday, September 18, 2023.