

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 18,

Romans 16:21-27

6-min. Video Overview

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You know, sometimes the biggest secrets are hiding in the most unlikely places, like say, a simple list of personal greetings at the very end of an ancient, influential letter. It seems totally unremarkable, but one name on that list has sparked centuries of debate, and it could completely change how we see the early days of Christianity. So let's just get right to it.

The central question for us today is this. Could one of the foundational leaders of the early church, someone the Apostle Paul himself called an Apostle, have actually been a woman? And this is the verse right at the heart of the whole mystery. In Romans chapter 16, Paul is given his final shout-outs, and he greets two people, Andronicus and Junia.

But look at what he says about them. He calls them outstanding among the Apostles. Whoa.

So the big question is, who exactly was this Junia? To answer that, we've got to play detective and follow the evidence. And the very first clue we have is the most basic one of all: her name. Okay, so the linguistic evidence is surprisingly clear-cut.

For centuries, some translators actually changed her name to the masculine Junius, pretty much because they just assumed an Apostle had to be a man. But here's the thing. Modern scholars have scoured the historical records, and Junia was a super common Roman woman's name.

That male version, Junius, it's basically a ghost. You just don't find it. And the whole idea that it's some kind of nickname, yeah, that doesn't really work, grammatically speaking.

The text is almost certainly talking about a woman. Period. Now, this next part is absolutely crucial.

When you hear the word Apostle, you probably think of the original twelve disciples, right? But for Paul, the guy who wrote this letter, the term was much, much broader. It wasn't some exclusive club. It was more of a job description for foundational church leaders and key messengers.

Paul called himself an Apostle, along with figures like Barnabas and Silas. So the idea of Junia being in this group fits perfectly within Paul's own framework. And listen, we're not the first people to have this aha moment.

Not by a long shot. Let's rewind all the way back to the fourth century. A guy named John Chrysostom, one of the most famous and influential theologians of the early church, read this exact same verse.

And you know what? He didn't question for a second that Junia was a woman. Instead, he marveled at it. He basically wrote, "Wow, how amazing must this woman have been to be considered worthy of the title of Apostle."

A female Apostle might seem shocking to us, but if we zoom out and look at the bigger biblical picture, we start to find that women in spiritual leadership roles, well, it wasn't as unusual as you might think. You see this pattern pop up again and again throughout the biblical story. You go back to the Old Testament, and you've got these incredible prophetesses like Miriam and Huldah.

Then you fast forward to the New Testament, and you read about Philip's daughters who all prophesy. Even Paul himself, in another letter, just casually mentions women praying and prophesying in church. So Junia, as remarkable as she is, isn't an anomaly.

She seems to be part of a much larger story. And then there's Deborah. Man, Deborah is a whole other level.

She was this truly exceptional figure. She wasn't just a prophet. The text says she was the judge over all of Israel.

I mean, that's one of the highest positions of spiritual and civic authority you could possibly have. So the precedent for a woman in a top-tier leadership role was set centuries before Paul ever wrote his letter. Of course, I know what you might be thinking.

If you have women leaders like Junia and Deborah, what in the world do we do with those other passages where Paul seems to command women to be silent in church? It's a huge question, and we have to tackle it head-on. And the tension is obvious. You can't ignore it.

On one side, you have Junia, the apostle, Phoebe, the deacon, and women prophesying. On the other, you have these commands for silence. So how do you make sense of this? Well, the key, as it so often is with ancient texts, is one simple word: context.

Let's take 1 Corinthians. First, you have to picture the setting. This wasn't a modern cathedral.

It was a small, informal gathering in someone's living room. And apparently, it was common to interrupt lectures with questions. The problem in the church in Corinth seems to be that some of the women, who generally had less formal education back then, were asking questions that were disrupting the whole meeting.

Paul's solution was practical for that specific church. Ask your husbands at home to keep things orderly. It wasn't necessarily a blanket rule for all time.

And the situation in 1 Timothy was even more specific. Paul writes that these false teachers were literally worming their way into women's households, exploiting their lack of training to spread some really dangerous ideas. So his instruction for women not to teach in that particular context can be seen as a targeted, protective measure during a specific crisis, not a universal command for all women everywhere.

Okay, so let's get back to that list of names in Romans 16. Because Junia isn't the only secret it's holding. This list gives us this incredibly rare snapshot of the Christian community right in the heart of the Roman Empire.

And let me tell you, this was not a homogeneous group. Paul's greetings show us a church that cut across all levels of Roman society. You have slaves, former slaves, and people connected to the most powerful households in the entire world all meeting together.

It's just wild. I mean, just look at this. You've got Ampliatios and Urbanus.

These were common slave names. Then you've got people from the household of Aristobulus, a prince from the line of Herod the Great. And then, most stunningly, members of the household of Narcissus.

This guy was one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the Roman Empire, the freedman secretary to the Emperor Claudius himself. To put that into perspective, Narcissus' personal wealth was an estimated 400 million sesterces. That's an almost unimaginable fortune, like billions of dollars today.

And people from his inner circle were part of this Christian community. This tells us the movement had reached the highest echelons of imperial power. So why does any of this matter? Why are we digging into a 2,000-year-old list of names today? Because it proves a profound point.

Context is everything. We can't just read these texts in a vacuum. Understanding the language, the culture, and the specific problems people were facing back then completely changes how we see these ancient documents.

The evidence about Junia, combined with the incredible social diversity we see in that Roman church, doesn't just add a footnote to history. It totally reshapes our picture of the early church. It suggests a movement that was far more inclusive, far more dynamic, and with way more opportunities for female leadership than many of us have ever believed.

And it leaves us with a final, big question. If a female apostle was hiding there in plain sight for centuries, what other lost stories, what other incredible truths are just waiting to be discovered in the details we so often overlook?