

The Role of The Woman in The Community of God

By Roy B. Blizzard

I can remember a few years ago discussing this subject on television and in that particular program, I stated that Junia mentioned in *Romans* 16:7 as an apostle was a woman. Many wrote asking for further clarification and references and I might say in this regard that I was overwhelmed at the response I received. Over 900 letters came in from the program, most from women, although a few were from pastors or religious leaders. I must confess that I was shocked at what some of these women were saying. Many expressed a deep resentment at the way they were being treated or had been treated by the leadership of the particular congregation to which they belonged and thanked me for writing and/or speaking on this subject. I knew that the situation was bad, but, frankly, I did not believe that it was really as bad as indicated in the letters I received. Some of them were unbelievable, horror stories, recounting the ways many of the women had been treated or were being treated by their husbands or in the church as a result of the teaching coming forth from the pulpit. It was all and is all because of an unfortunate misunderstanding of the teaching of the Scriptures on the subject of women and their role both in the home and in the congregation of God.

The following information is a brief attempt to answer all those who wrote asking for further information and documentation, plus let me say here that we have a whole series on the subject that is downloadable in MP3 format, i.e., [*The Role of Women in the Community of God*](#), that will delve into the subject in much more detail than in this brief article.

Junia (*Ionia*, -As, -An in Greek) is a name that is structurally derived from Latin and means “youth.” Most dictionaries and commentaries note that in its form found in *Romans* 16:7, it could be either masculine or feminine, however, in examining the Scripture, it is probable that Andronicus mentioned with Junia, was actually Junia’s husband and that both were relatives of the Apostle Paul and probably from his home town of Tarsus. This can be concluded from the usage of the Greek word “*suggeneis*,” which is translated into English as “kinsman,” but which principally means “one related by blood.” It is also very probable that they had accepted Jesus as Messiah before Paul had, and might have been instrumental in his own coming to the Lord. Of course, Junia is not the only woman mentioned in *Romans* 16. Many others are mentioned, although none are referred to as specific functionaries in the church as Junia. It is interesting that many commentaries will admit that the word Junia could be either masculine or feminine, but because of the commentators’ prejudice that no woman could function as an Apostle, will state that Junia must certainly have been a man. This indicates, of course, a basic misunderstanding of the role and the function of women in 1st century Judaism.

One tends to overlook the passage in *Psalms* 68:12, “The Lord giveth the word; the women that proclaim the good tidings are a great host.” Also, I will call your attention, again, to the more familiar passage in *Joel* 2:28ff, “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...even upon the men servants and upon the maid servants in those days would I pour out of my spirit.” These passages certainly indicate that women were to have an active role in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the community of God, but beyond that, St. John Chrysostom writing in the 4th century was clearly convinced that Andronicus and Junia were apostles, and that Junia was a woman. In the *Homilies of St. John Chrysostom*, Volume 11, page 555, he writes, “Oh, how great is the devotion of this woman that she should be counted worthy of the title of Apostle.”

However, in the last few years, extensive research has been done on the subject and published in the book, [*Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*](#), by Bernadette J. Brooten. In her book published in 1982, Ms. Brooten documents inscriptional evidence for women as Heads of Synagogues, Women as Leaders of Synagogues, Women as Elders, Women as Mothers of the Synagogue, and Women as Priests. There are actually three ancient Jewish inscriptions in which a woman bears the title of priest. The inscriptions range in age from the 1st century BCE through the 4th century CE and were found one in lower Egypt; one in Beth She’arim in Galilee, and one in Rome. So, we can say that the practice of women serving as priests was a practice widely spread throughout the land. In addition, we have evidence of Women as Donors in the ancient synagogue. Ms. Brooten continues, “Seen in the larger context of women’s participation in the life of the ancient synagogue, there is no reason not to take the titles as functional, or to assume that women heads or elders of synagogues had radically different functions than men heads or elders of synagogues. Of the functions outlined for each title, there are none which women could not have carried out. If women donated money and even large sums of it, surely they were capable of collecting and administering synagogue funds. Nor is it impossible to imagine Jewish women sitting on counsels of elders or teaching or arranging for the religious service. Even women carrying out judicial functions is not impossible in a tradition that reveres one of its women prophets, (Deborah), as a judge.... This collection of inscriptions should challenge historians of religion to question the prevailing views of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman period as a religion, all forms of which a priori excluded women from leadership roles.

Further steps in research would be to consider these Jewish women leaders in the larger context of the history of religions, comparing their functions with those of women leaders in other communities and religions, such as the Isis, Demeter, or Dionysus religions. It would also be especially useful to study possible connections between Judaism and Jewish Christianity. For example, it is striking that several early Christian women leaders were Jewish; the apostle Junia (*Romans* 16:7), the teacher and missionary Prisca (*Acts* 18:2, 18, 26; *Romans* 16:3,4; *1st Corinthians* 16, 19; *Timothy* 4:19; note in *Acts* 18:26, she teaches in a synagogue context), and possibly the Miriam of *Romans* 16:6, “who labored much for you.”

The inscriptional evidence for Jewish women leaders means that one cannot declare it to be a departure from Judaism that early Christian women held leadership positions.

Additional Jewish sources allude to women serving as Rabbis, the most notable of which was Beruriah, who was the wife of Rabbi Meir. It is interesting to note that Rabbi Meir was a very highly respected Rabbi, however, his wife Beruriah was regarded more highly in most instances than he. The issue of the woman's position in the home and in the church is resultant from Paul's statement in *Colossians* 3:18 as well as *Ephesians* 5:22ff, etc., that wives should submit themselves unto their husbands as unto the Lord.

From these and other passages, all kinds of theologies developed that excluded women from functioning in the community of God and/or teaching in the church or serving in any kind of official capacity and demanded her submission unto her husband in all things. The problem arises when we note that these passages do not say in the original languages what they appear to say in English. For example, the Greek word translated into English as "submit or be subject," is the Greek word "*Hupotasso*," the definition of which can be found in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume 8, page 39ff. The verb is not very common, but stands for "ten," Hebrew equivalents. Kittel states that for a material understanding of the verb in the *New Testament*, its considerable range of meanings must be noted. In the *New Testament* the verb does not carry with it the thought of obedience, to obey, or to have to obey, but rather to adapt oneself to another in love. He continues that the *New Testament* exhortation suggests that the general rule demands readiness to renounce one's own will for the sake of others, i.e. agape. In exhortation, the middle voice embraces a whole series of meanings from subjection to authority on one side, to considerate submission to others on the other. Its detailed meaning, in any instance, can finally be decided only from the context. I think that it is important to note that the correspondent to *Tasso/Hupotasso* in the Greek is a form of the Hebrew root, "*Kaf, Nun, Ayin*."

It is important to note that in Hebrew *KNA* carries with it the meaning of humble. The root can be found on page 488 in *Brown Driver Briggs*, no. 3665. It is also important to note that in translation the word can have a double meaning, just like in English. A person can be humbled by being conquered or being subdued, but the idea, again, with both the Hebrew *Kanah* and the Greek *Hupotasso* is a voluntary submission or humbling of one's self by adapting oneself to another in love.