

GETTING ROMANS TO THE RIGHT ROMANS:

PHOEBE AND THE DELIVERY OF PAUL'S LETTER

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Summary

How did Romans reach the people for whom it was intended? There is widespread agreement that Phoebe was the bearer of the letter (Rom. 16:1-2), but little investigation of or agreement about the exact nature of her responsibilities. By exploring the data available to us, especially that found in Romans 16, this essay provides a reconstruction of the events surrounding the transport and delivery of the letter to the Roman Christians. In particular, it proposes the following:

- *Phoebe conveyed the letter to Rome, probably by sea;*
- *the church in Rome at this time consisted of house-churches;*
- *Phoebe was to deliver the letter first to Prisca and Aquila and their house-church;*
- *Prisca and Aquila were to convene an assembly of the whole Christian community, the first for some time, at which Romans was to be received and read;*
- *Prisca and Aquila were to be asked to arrange for copies of Romans to be made;*
- *Phoebe was to deliver these copies to other house-churches; and*
- *Phoebe was to read Romans in the way that Paul had coached her at each of the gatherings to which she took it.*

1. Introduction

It is the spring of AD 56 or 57, and Paul has just spent the winter in Corinth.¹ Now he is on his way to Jerusalem with the collection (15:25-

¹ For his spending the winter of 55–56 in Corinth, see C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols; ICC; Edinburgh:

32²). Under the circumstances, he is bound to be focused on what lies ahead, preoccupied with what kind of reception awaits him in Jerusalem. Yet part of him is looking westwards, wondering about the letter he has sent to Rome. The production of this letter was one of his principal projects during the winter months, and so he is also preoccupied with what kind of reception awaits the letter in Rome. It is no less important for the progress of his mission that *Romans* be well received than that his collection is welcomed by the Jerusalem church. As a result, he will have taken as much care arranging for the delivery of the letter as he took in its composition—why invest so much time, energy and money in the production of a letter that is unlikely to reach its destination? But what exactly was that destination? And what steps has Paul taken to ensure that *Romans* reaches it? And how was the letter to be delivered and received once it reached its goal?

What follows attempts to answer such questions, often by proposing fresh ways of reading the evidence of Romans 16.³ Certainties are obviously out of the question; of necessity, we will be dealing largely with possibilities. The plausibility or otherwise of the suggestions to be offered depends on the extent to which they form a coherent picture of the situation which *Romans* is addressing, and especially on the extent to which they make good sense of the data of Romans 16.

2. Getting Romans to Rome

The obvious starting-point for our inquiry is 16:1-2. There is widespread agreement that this functions as a ‘letter of

T&T Clark, 1975, 1979): 1.13-14; for the winter of AD 56–57, see Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007): 19-20.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references in this essay are to passages in *Romans*.

³ Ch. 16 should be understood as belonging to *Romans* rather than as correspondence originally addressed to Ephesus: see C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (MNTC; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932): xvii-xxiv; Karl Paul Donfried, ‘A Short Note on Romans 16’ in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991): 44-52 (esp. 48-52); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993): 57-64; Harry Gamble, Jr, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans: A Study in Textual and Literary Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Peter Lampe, ‘The Roman Christians of Romans 16’ in *The Romans Debate*, 216-230 (esp. 217-21); Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003): 153-64.

recommendation⁴ for Phoebe in her role as the bearer of Paul's letter.⁵ The background for this is that there were three ways in this period in which mail was taken from its place of origin to its destination.⁶ The only postal service, the *cursus publicus*, was meant solely for the transmission of official material. The well-to-do often used a *tabellarius*, a slave who acted as a courier. For the great majority, however, personal correspondence had to be entrusted to anyone—often a complete stranger—who was heading for the right destination or even just in the right direction.⁷ It was not uncommon in such circumstances for letters not to arrive at their destination.⁸ Several factors were at work here: even a responsible carrier might not be able to track down the addressee; an unreliable carrier might not make the effort to find the right destination or might simply lose the letter; and a letter might be damaged or destroyed in transit. For obvious reasons, therefore, it was far preferable to put the letter into the hands of someone the sender knew and trusted. So it is not surprising to find clear indications in his letters that Paul used a number of his associates, including Phoebe, in this way.⁹

4 On which see, for example, Gamble, *Textual History*, 84-87; Jewett, *Romans*, 941-942; Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings* (JSNTSS 101; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994): 150-51.

5 I am aware of only one commentator who expresses any reservations about this view: Simon Légasse, *L'Épître de Paul aux Romains* (Lectio Divina Commentaires; Paris: Cerf, 2002): 940.

6 Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Context and Exegesis* (with the collaboration of Daniel P. Bailey) (Waco: Baylor University, 2006): 61-65; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995): 38-39; E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004): 177-82.

7 Eldon Jay Epp, 'New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times' in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991): 35-56 (esp. 43-51); Peter M. Head, 'Named Letter-Carriers among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri', *JSNT* 31 (2009): 279-99 (esp. 283-284); David Noy, *Foreigners at Rome: Citizens and Strangers* (London: Duckworth, 2000): 164-165.

8 Klauck, *Letters*, 64; Murphy-O'Connor, *Letter-Writer*, 39; Richards, *Letter Writing*, 181-82. This is one of several reasons which make it likely that Paul kept a copy of each letter that he sent: see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995): 100-101; Murphy-O'Connor, *Letter-Writer*, 12, 36-37; Richards, *Letter Writing*, 158-61.

9 So, for example, Eph. 6:21-22, Col. 4:7-9, and Phlm. 10, 12 suggest that Tychicus carried all three of these letters (as well as that for Laodicea (Col. 4:16): see Richards, *Letter Writing*, 199-200; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002): 868-70; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the*

In view of all that *Romans* was designed to achieve—both for Paul and his mission-plans, and for the church itself—Paul was undoubtedly investing a great deal in Phoebe when he entrusted the letter to her.¹⁰ So what were her responsibilities as the bearer of *Romans*? When he placed *Romans* in Phoebe's hands, what exactly was Paul asking her to do?

First and foremost, she had the significant responsibility of ensuring that Paul's letter reached Rome safely. What would this have meant? It was a matter, first, of making the trip to Rome as speedily and safely as possible.¹¹ She needed to get *Romans* there in plenty of time before Paul reached Jerusalem, so that the believers in Rome could meet his request to pray about the reception that awaited him when he got there (15:30-31). So how would she have made the journey?¹²

While certainty is obviously impossible, there is reason to think that she would have chosen to do as much of the journey as possible by sea rather than by road. It is true that sea travel involved obvious risks because of its vulnerability to the weather, so that it would tend to be

Colossians and to Philemon (PC; Grand Rapids: Cambridge/Eerdmans: Nottingham: Apollos, 2008): 334. On Paul's letter-carriers in general, see Richards, *Letter Writing*, 188-209.

¹⁰ It is often assumed that Paul simply took advantage of the fact that Phoebe was about to travel to Rome anyway: see C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2nd edn; BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1991): 258; Brendan Byrne, S.J., *Romans* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1996): 447; Dodd, *Romans*, 234; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (2 vols; WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988): 2.889; Eduard Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003): 404; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983): 60; Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995): 272; Michael Theobald, *Römerbrief* (2 vols; 2nd edn; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2001): 2.224-225; André Viard, *Saint Paul: Épître aux Romains* (Source Bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1975): 307; Caroline F. Whelan, 'Amica Pauli: The Role of Phoebe in the Early Church', *JSNT* 49 (1993): 67-85 (esp. 82 n. 38 [she holds that Phoebe and Rom. 16 were destined for Ephesus]); Dieter Zeller, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Regensburger Neues Testament; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1985): 246; John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (TPI NT Commentaries; London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1989): 349. In view of the responsibilities Paul gave his letter-carriers (see below), it seems more likely that he specifically commissioned Phoebe for this task.

¹¹ On travel in the Roman world in this period, see Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974); Brian M. Rapske, 'Acts, Travel and Shipwreck' in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, Volume 2: The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994): 1-47.

¹² On travel between Corinth and Rome, see Casson, *Travel*, 152; Noy, *Foreigners*, 143; Richards, *Letter Writing*, 199; Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998): 315-17.

preferred only when it involved significant savings of time and effort.¹³ Yet under the most favourable conditions, the sea journey from Corinth to Rome could take no more than five days; in normal conditions, it would last about twice as long. On the other hand, the journey by land would involve travelling to a port such as Nicopolis or Aulon for the brief voyage across the Adriatic to Brundisium. From there the Via Appia made its way to Rome, almost three hundred and fifty miles away. Altogether, this journey would take up to four weeks.¹⁴ Aside from the greater length and rigours of the journey by road, Phoebe would also have to take into account the unsavoury reputation of the wayside inns and the ever-present danger posed by robbers.¹⁵ As a result, the sea journey would undoubtedly seem to be the better option.¹⁶ This would begin in Lechaem, the Corinthian port situated on the Gulf of Corinth. If Phoebe was unable to find a ship travelling to Rome's port of Ostia, she would probably sail to Puteoli, which handled a large proportion of Rome's trade with the east of the Empire. From there she could seek a passage to Ostia. Alternatively, she could travel the short distance inland to Capua, where she would meet the Via Appia, about six days walk from Rome.¹⁷

As someone who had functioned as a benefactress (προστάτις)¹⁸ for Paul and many others (16:2), Phoebe was likely to have been a

¹³ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, OP, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996): 256.

¹⁴ It is difficult to understand why Riesner allocates only five days for the journey from Brundisium to Rome (*Paul's Early Period*, 316), as it would take about two weeks: see the account of Horace's journey in the opposite direction (Horace, *Satires*, 5).

¹⁵ See Casson, *Travel*, 149-52, 176-82, 188-96, 200-210; Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul*, 97-99; Rapske, 'Acts', 6-21. It is possible that managing the resources that enabled her to function as a προστάτις had involved Phoebe in some travelling, so that she had some experience to draw upon when organising her trip to Rome.

¹⁶ The relative security and ease of sea travel is shown by the case of a merchant named Flavius Zeuxis. According to his tomb inscription in Hierapolis in Asia Minor, he made seventy-two sea voyages to Italy (Casson, *Travel*, 128).

¹⁷ It is possible that Phoebe could have hired some form of conveyance in which to ride to Rome, decreasing the journey time by several days.

¹⁸ For a discussion of various ways of translating and interpreting προστάτις, see Esther Ye L. Ng, 'Phoebe as *Prostatis*', *TrinJ*, ns, 25 (2004): 3-13. She takes the word to refer to Phoebe's provision of hospitality and practical help, and regards it as possible that 'she was a woman of some wealth, but ... not a member of the upper social class, nor extremely wealthy and influential' (13). While this conclusion seems justified, it is important to recognise that even moderate wealth is likely to have been accompanied by some status and influence.

person of relative wealth, status, and influence.¹⁹ She was therefore presumably in a good position to meet the costs involved in making this trip: booking a passage²⁰ for herself and her travelling companion(s),²¹ and providing sufficient food and wine for the journey.²²

Conveying the letter safely to its destination meant, secondly, ensuring that the conditions of the voyage did not cause any irreparable harm to it. How was Phoebe to do this? In particular, how was she to ensure that the letter was not damaged by moisture, whether due to rain or to sea spray? It would not have been difficult to protect the small papyrus letters that most letter-carriers had in their possession:

Letters, which were often individual sheets of papyrus, were commonly carried in a pouch. A soldier had taken a discarded parchment letter, cut

¹⁹ On this implication of Paul's use of *προστάτις* here, see Robert Jewett, 'Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission' in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: In Tribute to Howard Clark Kee*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, Peder Borgen, Richard Horsley (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988): 142-61 (esp. 149-50); E. A. Judge, 'Cultural Conformity and Innovation from Paul: Some Clues from Contemporary Documents', *TynB* 35 (1984): 3-24 (esp. 21) [now in *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays by E.A. Judge* ed. David M. Scholer (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008): 157-74 (esp. 171)]; R. A. Kearsley, 'Women in Public Life in the Roman East: Iunia Theodora, Claudia Metrodora and Phoebe, Benefactress of Paul', *TynB* 50 (1999): 189-211; Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 60, 79; Whelan, 'Amica Pauli', 75-77, 82-85. This understanding of *προστάτις* is now widely accepted in the commentaries: see Byrne, *Romans*, 448; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2.783; Dunn, *Romans*, 2.888-889; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 731; Klaus Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (2nd edn; THKNT; Leipzig: Evangelische, 2002): 318; Jewett, *Romans*, 946-47; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996): 916; Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* (SHBC; Macon: Smith & Helwys, 2002): 334; Theobald, *Römerbrief*, 2.225-226; Ziesler, *Romans*, 350. It was far from being the case that 'this poor woman started on a wild winter journey ... without any other resource than Paul's recommendation'. (Ernest Renan, quoted in Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977 [1883]): 488).

²⁰ Depending on the size of the ship and the number of passengers, accommodation might be available in cabins in the deckhouse or in the bowels of the ship; most passengers slept under small tentlike shelters on deck: see Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1971): 180-81; Casson, *Travel*, 154; Chantal Reynier, *Saint Paul sur les routes du monde romain: Infrastructures, logistique, itinéraires* (Paris: Cerf, 2009): 73-75. Phoebe's resources might well have enabled her to secure a cabin for herself.

²¹ Her slave(s)? For security reasons, Phoebe is unlikely to have made the journey alone.

²² While water and cooking utensils were usually provided, passengers had to bring other supplies with them: see Casson, *Travel*, 153; Noy, *Foreigners*, 143; Reynier, *Saint Paul*, 75-77.

it in half and sewed the two halves together to form a crude parchment pouch in which he stored his more fragile papyrus letters.²³

But how would a document the size of *Romans*—a papyrus roll,²⁴ or even perhaps a small codex²⁵—have been protected? We know that papyrus rolls were often stored in a box, a *capsa* or *scrinium*—but how would such a document have been transported? The likelihood is that it was protected by a parchment wrapper, the *membrana*.²⁶ This would undoubtedly decrease the risks posed by the weather and other hazards of the journey. The protection she was able to provide would be raised to another level altogether if Phoebe was able to book a cabin for herself and her precious cargo. In view of the resources at her disposal, this would probably have been well within her reach. Thus, despite the inevitable risks involved, there is good reason to believe that Phoebe would have been able to transport the letter safely to its destination in Rome.

Once Phoebe and the letter had arrived safely there, her next responsibility was to deliver it to the Christian community—but what did this mean in practice? What form did that community take at this period? And how many delivery points did this mean that Phoebe had to find and visit?

3. Where Was Romans to be Delivered?

It is widely held that the community to which *Romans* was sent consisted of a number of separate house churches.²⁷ Evidence for this

²³ Richards, *Letter Writing*, 51.

²⁴ See Richards, *Letter Writing*, 163-69 (estimating that *Romans* would have occupied 136% of a 'standard' papyrus roll, so that it would have been about 5 metres long).

²⁵ Gamble, *Books*, 64.

²⁶ Gamble, *Books*, 48, 81. Something like this was also used, presumably, for protecting the *litterae dimissoriae* concerning Paul's case which Festus would have sent to Rome in the care of the centurion Julius (Acts 25:26-27; 27:1).

²⁷ I use 'house church' for convenience; at least some of the groups concerned might have been 'workshop churches' or 'tenement churches', that is, holding their meetings in domestic space other than a house. (We also need to reckon with the fact that a 'house' (*domus*) might incorporate one or more shops.) See David L. Balch, 'Rich Pompeiian Houses, Shops for Rent, and the Huge Apartment Building in Herculaneum as Typical Spaces for Pauline House Churches', *JSNT* 27 (2004): 27-46; David G. Horrell, 'Domestic Space and Christian Meetings at Corinth: Imagining New Contexts and the Buildings East of the Theatre', *NTS* 50 (2004): 349-69; Robert Jewett, 'Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10', *BR* 38 (1993): 23-43; Peter Oakes,

conclusion is found, first, in Paul's greetings (16:3-16), which are seen as directed to at least four house churches in addition to that of Prisca and Aquila (16:5a).²⁸ These are those belonging to the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus (16:10-11) and the two groups referred to in verses 14 and 15.

A second basis for this view has to do with the nature of the Jewish community in Rome. Epigraphical evidence attests the existence of at least eleven different synagogues in Rome,²⁹ five of which may date to the First Century.³⁰ In contrast to the situation in Alexandria, there is no evidence for an ethnarch or council presiding over Jewish affairs in Rome.³¹ The Christian community is widely thought to mirror its Jewish counterpart—an assumption based on the likelihood that the synagogues formed 'the cradle of Christianity' in Rome.³²

Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level (Minneapolis: Fortress/London: SPCK, 2009): 69-97.

²⁸ Lampe argues for seven, maintaining that the other fourteen persons named in the greetings would represent at least two more house churches ('Romans 16', 229-30; *Paul*, 359), while Jewett sees eight to ten groups reflected in the greetings, with 'dozens of groups' in the community as a whole (*Romans*, 62).

²⁹ Silvia Cappelletti, *The Jewish Community of Rome from the Second Century B.C. to the Third Century C.E.* (JSJSuppl 113; Leiden: Brill, 2006): 3; Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (rev. edn; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995): 139-66; Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, Volume 5: The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996): 182-85; Noy, *Foreigners*, 265-66; Romano Penna, 'Les Juifs à Rome au Temps de l'Apôtre Paul', *NTS* 28 (1982): 321-47 (esp. 327-28); Wolfgang Wiefel, 'The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity' in Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, 85-101 (esp. 89-90). Lampe argues for the existence of fourteen synagogues (*Paul*, 431-32).

³⁰ Penna, 'Les Juifs', 328; Peter Richardson, 'Augustan-Era Synagogues in Rome' in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998): 17-29.

³¹ S. Applebaum, 'The Organization of the Jewish Communities in the Diaspora' in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern (2 vols.; CRINT; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974): 1.464-503 (esp. 498-501); Lampe, *Paul*, 432; Leon, *Jews*, 167-70; Penna, 'Les Juifs', 327; Wiefel, 'Jewish Community', 91. This view has been challenged by Margaret H. Williams ('The Structure of the Jewish Community in Rome' in *Jews in a Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Martin Goodman (Oxford: OUP, 1998): 215-28), but her case is undermined by the fact that there is no evidence 'for any city-wide organization of any religious, geographical or ethnic group at Rome' at this time (Noy, *Foreigners*, 266).

³² See, for example, Dunn, *Romans*, 1.xlvii-xlviii; James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, 2: Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009): 868-72; Reidar Hvalvik, 'Jewish Believers and Jewish Influence in the Roman Church until the Early Second Century' in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007):

Accordingly, the Christians in Rome are believed to have met in house churches but to have had no plenary assemblies or central organisation.³³

Further support for this view is found, thirdly, in the fact that *Romans* does not address the Christian community as the ἐκκλησία in Rome (1:7).³⁴ This is taken to mean that there were no regular meetings of the whole community. This could be either because they had no access to a venue large enough or because, in the aftermath of Claudius' action against unrest in the Jewish community, it was considered too risky to hold such gatherings at this stage.³⁵ Or was it because there was too much division between the different groups that made up the community—even 'fierce competitions' between 'warring factions'?³⁶

179-216 (esp. 180-90); Peter Lampe, 'Early Christians in the City of Rome: Topographic and Social Historical Aspects of the First Three Centuries' in *Christians as a Religious Minority in a Multicultural City: Modes of Interaction and Identity Formation in Early Imperial Rome*, ed. Jürgen Zangenberg and Michael Labahn (JSNTSS 243; London: T&T Clark International, 2004): 20-32 (esp. 21-22); Lampe, *Paul*, 11; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission, 1: Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004): 800-11.

³³ So, for example, Rudolf Brändle and Ekkehard W. Stegemann, 'The Formation of the First "Christian Congregations" in Rome in the Context of the Jewish Congregations' in Donfried and Richardson, *Judaism*, 117-27 (esp. 125); Lampe, 'Romans 16', 229; Lampe, *Paul*, 364; William L. Lane, 'Social Perspectives on Roman Christianity during the Formative Years from Nero to Nerva: Romans, Hebrews, 1 Clement' in Donfried and Richardson, *Judaism*, 196-244 (esp. 208, 210).

³⁴ Byrne, *Romans*, 10-11; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.22; Godet, *Romans*, 85; Haacker, *Römer*, 11, 29; Lampe, 'Romans 16', 229; Lampe, *Paul*, 359; Lohse, *Römer*, 69; Paul S. Minear, *The Obedience of Faith: The Purposes of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans* (SBT; London: SCM, 1971): 7; Viard, *Romains*, 40; Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* (3 vols.; EKKNT; Düsseldorf: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978-1982): 1.68-69; Ben Witherington III (with Darlene Hyatt), *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004): 382-29; Zeller, *Römer*, 12.

A different approach to this absence of προστάτις takes it to signify that the believers in Rome were not yet a properly constituted church: see E. A. Judge and G. S. R. Thomas, 'The Origin of the Church at Rome: A New Solution?', *RTR* 25 (1966): 81-94; Günter Klein, 'Paul's Purpose in Writing the Epistle to the Romans' in Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, 29-43. Against this view, see Donfried, 'Short Note', 44-45; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998): 37.

³⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 1.ii, 19.

³⁶ Jewett, *Romans*, 41, 61, 72; cf. Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003): 107-108, 117, 347; Minear, *Obedience*, 8; Francis Watson, 'The Two Roman Congregations: Romans 14:1-15:13' in Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, 203-15.

Despite its widespread acceptance, this view of the church situation is not without its difficulties. In the first place, despite the claim that it is ‘out of keeping with Paul’s usual practice’,³⁷ the absence of ἐκκλησία in 1:7 is not in itself significant. In the Pauline corpus, the term is also lacking from the *adscriptio* of another three of the nine church letters—those to Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae. This means that nearly half of the church letters are not addressed to the ἐκκλησία in the city or region concerned.

Secondly, how were the greetings in 16:3-15 to be passed on? Some studies treat them as equivalent to greetings from Paul himself.³⁸ But while Paul undoubtedly wants the greetings to be given in his name,³⁹ it is also clear by the way he words them—ἀσπάσασθε not ἀσπάζομαι—that these greetings are not being given by him but will be given by those the letter is addressing.⁴⁰ This might appear to be a separate group from those who are named—in other words, the greetings list could be read as addressed to the house church that will pass on the greetings, with those named belonging to other house churches.⁴¹ However, since the letter is addressed to the whole community (1:7a; 15:33), it must be the church as a whole that is to convey the greetings to those who are named. In this way the greetings list presupposes a meeting of the whole community. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the final greeting exhortation is for a mutual exchange of the holy kiss (16:16a).⁴²

Thirdly, if the letter is to be conveyed to all the house churches, they must be aware of each other. What is more, if the letter is to be passed between them, they must be—and must be willing to be—in contact with each other; they cannot be separated by mutual hostility. This means that their separate existence

³⁷ Dunn, *Romans*, 1.lii.

³⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, 2.891; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 734; Gamble, *Textual History*, 93; Lampe, ‘Romans 16’, 218; Lohse, *Römer*, 403; Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949): 456; Schreiner, *Romans*, 790, 792; Weima, *Endings*, 105, 108.

³⁹ Byrne, *Romans*, 450; Moo, *Romans*, 917, 919; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994): 249.

⁴⁰ Godet, *Romans*, 488-89; Jewett, *Romans*, 951-52; Terence Y. Mullins, ‘Greeting as a New Testament Form’, *JBL* 87 (1968): 418-26 (esp. 425); Schlatter, *Romans*, 273; Heinrich Schlier, *Der Römerbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1977): 442-43.

⁴¹ It is taken this way by Weima, *Endings*, 108.

⁴² Leander E. Keck, *Romans* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005): 370.

does not exclude that the Christian islands scattered around the capital city were aware of being in spiritual fellowship with each other, of perceiving themselves as cells of one church, and of being united by common bonds.⁴³

But once we go this far, surely we have to go further. Would it not be inevitable that house churches with such a sense of kinship would express their common bonds somehow? And the more often they did so, the more some form of organisation would emerge—even if this only took the form, say, of a co-ordinating committee composed of house church leaders. The most obvious way of expressing these bonds, of course, would be through meeting together as a whole community.⁴⁴

Fourthly, Paul hopes that the believers in Rome will act in concert to provide logistical and other support for his journey to Spain (15:24: ὑφ' ὑμῶν προπεμφθῆναι).⁴⁵ It is difficult to see how a collection of entirely separate house churches could achieve the degree of co-ordination that this presupposes.

Fifthly, we have to reckon with the fact that only some seven or eight years after the writing of this letter Christians in large numbers were caught up in a savage persecution. There is reference to a 'great multitude' of victims in both Tacitus (*multitudo ingens*) and *I Clement* (πολὸν πλῆθος ἐκλεκτῶν).⁴⁶ Even allowing for an element of hyperbole here, the community must have reached a considerable size for its members to be noticed and targeted in this way: it

must have been sufficiently large to have become unpopular with a significant portion of the population to make scapegoating worthwhile.⁴⁷

It is unlikely, therefore, that the community was relatively small when Paul wrote to it.⁴⁸ Moreover, their being in the public eye would be

⁴³ Lampe, *Paul*, 397-98.

⁴⁴ The assumption is often made that such plenary assemblies were not possible because the Christians had no access to a venue large enough to accommodate them all. But it might have been possible for them to hire a suitable facility for the occasion, whether a basilica or assembly hall (cf. Acts 19:9) or possibly a *horreum*, a warehouse: see Chrys C. Caragounis, 'From Obscurity to Prominence: The Development of the Roman Church between Romans and *I Clement*' in Donfried and Richardson, *Judaism*, 245-279 (esp. 258 n.61); L. Michael White, 'Architecture: The First Five Centuries' in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler (2 vols.; London: Routledge, 2000): 693-746 (esp. 710).

⁴⁵ On this usage of προπέμπω, see Jewett, *Romans*, 925-26.

⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Ann.*, 15.44.5; 1 Clem. 6:1.

⁴⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, 62.

much more likely if they had been meeting in large groups, at least occasionally, than if they only met as scattered ‘tenement churches’ of around twenty or thirty people.⁴⁹

For such reasons, the common view that the Christian community in Rome existed only as a number of separate house churches has to be questioned. Where then does this leave us? Does it mean that we are to accept one or other of the counter-proposals that have been urged against this consensus? Are we to conclude, as the most recent of these alternatives has argued, that the whole community consisted of just one house church, that of Prisca and Aquila?⁵⁰

There are several problems with this view as well, however. In the first place, Pauline usage does not support the claim that he would have addressed his letter to ‘the churches’ if there were a number of house churches in Rome.⁵¹ Whenever he uses ἐκκλησία in the plural with a place name, the reference is always to a province rather than a city. Secondly, while it is, admittedly, striking that Paul labels only one of the groupings in Romans 16 as a house church (16:5), it is intrinsically likely that there were at least several others. It is probable that the gospel arrived in Rome not as the result of an organised mission but haphazardly, as believers from various places travelled to the capital for a variety of reasons. It is highly likely that the unco-ordinated evangelistic initiatives that resulted from at least some of these visits led to the existence of a number of separate house-churches. Thirdly, it is difficult to see how a community numbering only about sixty⁵² could

⁴⁸ Almost certainly too low, therefore, is the estimate that puts the size of the church at between thirty and one hundred (N. T. Wright, ‘The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections’ in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. L. E. Keck [12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002]: 10.395-770 [esp. 763]), or which sees it as numbered in the dozens rather than the hundreds (Green, *Christianity*, 52). On the other hand, it is probably an overestimate to see it as between one thousand and five thousand strong (James S. Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991): 17).

⁴⁹ Even if, as Jewett argues (*Romans*, 62), there were dozens of these tenement churches, it is difficult to see how, in a city the size of Rome, Christians would have come to public attention if they never assembled in large numbers.

⁵⁰ Bernard Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome: The First Three Centuries* (London: T&T Clark, 2010): 31-34.

⁵¹ Green, *Christianity*, 31-32.

⁵² So Green, *Christianity*, 33 n.118.

have become, in the space of only seven or eight years, a ‘great multitude’.⁵³

Are we left, then, with the other view that has recently been argued against the consensus—a view that holds that there were multiple house churches in Rome alongside regular gatherings of the whole community?⁵⁴ Not quite. There certainly is reason, as we have seen, to think that the Roman Christians belonged to a number of house churches. In addition, we note the plain implication of Romans 16 that a gathering of the whole community was to be held, when the letter would be read and the greetings exchanged. We cannot confidently conclude any more than this, however, as there is nothing to show that such gatherings were already being held. In fact, it is possible that no city-wide assemblies have been held for at least the past year or two, during the time that Jewish Christians have been returning to Rome after the lapse of Claudius’ edict of expulsion. If so, Paul is envisaging a situation where his letter will be the catalyst for the whole community to come together—its delivery as well as its contents would thus promote the unity of the church.

At this point, we should note two possible implications of Paul’s long list of greetings. The first emerges when we ask the following question: why does Paul put Prisca and Aquila at the head of the list of those to be greeted (16:3-5a)? Several possible reasons have been suggested: this couple has become prominent in the church by taking on a leadership role since their return to Rome;⁵⁵ they have come on ahead of Paul to muster support for his coming visit and his mission plans;⁵⁶ Paul’s commendation of them is likely to have paradigmatic intention—they have exemplified in the past what Paul hopes he will soon receive from the Christian community in Rome: namely, substantial—even risky (16:4a)—support for and participation in his

⁵³ Even if there is an element of hyperbole here, it is implausible to dismiss Tacitus’ *multitudo ingens* as ‘a rhetorical flourish’ (Green, *Christianity*, 52), not least because it receives independent support in *I Clement’s* πολὺ πλῆθος.

⁵⁴ Caragounis, ‘From Obscurity’, 252-60.

⁵⁵ Cf. Dunn, *Romans*, 2.892; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980): 413.

⁵⁶ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 735; Godet, *Romans*, 489; Martin Hengel, *Saint Peter: The Underestimated Apostle* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010): 121; Lampe, ‘Romans 16’, 220; Theobald, *Römerbrief*, 2.227. This role has been attributed to Phoebe as well: see Jewett, ‘Spanish Mission’; Witherington, *Romans*, 380, 381, 383. In view of all that he wanted to accomplish both with and after *Romans*, there is no reason why Paul could not have requested both parties to act for him in this way.

mission.⁵⁷ While there is something to be said for all of these answers, the best answer will be one that makes some sense of the order in which Paul says what he says. So, if 16:1-2 enables us to identify the letter-carrier, then 16:3-5a seems likely to identify her first port of call—Prisca and Aquila, and their house church, are mentioned first because they will be the first to receive Paul's letter.⁵⁸

But why is Phoebe to deliver the letter to them first of all? One reason that makes good sense is that Paul wants them to convene a gathering of the whole community, at which *Romans* would be received by the church and read to the church. While Paul would still want the letter to reach all of the various house churches, it is important to note that he addresses the community as a whole (1:7a; 15:33)—so it would be especially fitting for *Romans* to be read to a plenary assembly first. Moreover, since it comes with full apostolic authority (1:1, 5-6), it would also be appropriate for the community to receive the letter in some formal way before it begins circulating amongst them. The probability that they would be inclined to do so increases, the more reading Paul's letter in church was seen as analogous to the reading of Scripture in the synagogue.⁵⁹

If, as we have just suggested, this gathering of the church is to be the first city-wide assembly for at least a year or two, then convening it will be a bold initiative—an initiative that might not be welcomed by all, and might even be resented by some. This might be one explanation of the hearty commendation Paul gives, telling the church that Prisca and Aquila are his coworkers (συνεργοί, 16:3), that they have put their lives on the line for him (16:4a), and that he and all of his Gentile churches are grateful to them (16:4b). When the church receives the letter that is an instrument of his mission, he wants them also to welcome the initiative of such important and active agents of his mission.

We conclude, therefore, that Phoebe was to deliver *Romans* to a number of house churches as well as to an assembly of the whole church. She was to begin with Prisca and Aquila, perhaps because they

⁵⁷ Jewett, *Romans*, 958, 974.

⁵⁸ Haacker, *Römer*, 319. This raises an obvious question: how did Phoebe, almost certainly a newcomer to Rome, go about locating Prisca and Aquila? There is a story to be told here—but it will have to wait for another day.

⁵⁹ On which see E. Earle Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999): 353; E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Exeter: Paternoster, 1989): 137-38.

were to take the initiative to assemble the church in order to receive the letter and have it read. It would then begin circulating among the house churches once this assembly had been held.

Does this mean that Phoebe had completed her assignment when she delivered the letter to Prisca and Aquila? Were they then to hand it on to another of the house churches, which in its turn would hand it on to the next one?

Given the importance he attached to the letter, it is quite improbable that Paul would have been content with an approach that took so much for granted and created so many opportunities for failure. He could not afford to assume that the letter would automatically be delivered to every congregation, any more than he could afford to assume that everyone in this Christian community understood and accepted his gospel and its implications. It is because *Romans* was critical in laying the groundwork for the partnership Paul hoped to forge with the church in Rome that it is both the lengthiest and the most systematic of his letters. For exactly the same reason, he is bound to have taken great care over its transmission as well as its composition. This has to mean more than arranging for it to reach just one of its destinations, and assuming that everyone involved would do the right thing by having it circulated to all. It is therefore highly likely that a crucial part of Phoebe's task was to deliver the letter to each of the Roman congregations.⁶⁰

This is where we can see a second implication in Paul's greetings. Why does he include this uniquely lengthy list of people to be greeted (16:3-15)?⁶¹ For some, the list is primarily for the church in Rome, whether reinforcing a sense of unity between the separate house churches⁶² or overcoming disunity within or between them.⁶³ Others see the greetings primarily as having to do with Paul and his mission. In order for his projected mission to Spain to proceed, Paul needs the support of the church in Rome. The letter as a whole reflects his awareness that he cannot take this support for granted. The extensive

⁶⁰ Esler, *Conflict*, 117; Gamble, *Books*, 97.

⁶¹ Aside from the sixteen occurrences here, and three in 'holy kiss' exhortations (1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26), ἀσπάζασθε is found only twice more in the Pauline corpus (Phil. 4:21; Col. 4:15).

⁶² See, for example, Lane, 'Social Perspectives', 213-14; Lohse, *Römer*, 406; Wilckens, *Römer*, 3.133.

⁶³ See, for example, Jewett, *Romans*, 953; Watson, 'Two Congregations', 211; Witherington, *Romans*, 376, 379; Ziesler, *Romans*, 348-49.

greetings are to be read in this light—by naming those who know him and can vouch for him, Paul is reinforcing his attempt to win the readers' acceptance of his message and mission.⁶⁴ A third approach sees these greetings as primarily to do with Phoebe and her visit. By naming all of these individuals and groups, Paul is thought to be indicating who Phoebe can rely on for whatever help she needs.⁶⁵

There is no need to deny the validity of the other two approaches, for there is no reason why Paul's greetings could not serve several purposes simultaneously. But the third approach should be given priority: the fact that Paul made the greetings follow immediately upon the 'letter of recommendation' for Phoebe (16:1-2) most naturally implies that there is some relationship between the two. Whatever else that relationship might involve—and again, Paul might have more than one reason for connecting the two—it makes good sense to think that both concern the delivery of the letter. Paul commends Phoebe as the bearer of the letter to those to whom she will deliver it (16:1-2), and then he points her to those to whom she must take it (16:3-15).⁶⁶

4. What Delivering Romans Meant

There is reason to think that Phoebe's responsibility went even further than this, however. Given all that he wanted it to accomplish, is it not likely that Paul would have wanted each of the Roman congregations to have its own copy of the letter—or that, at the very least, he would want several copies to be circulating between them? It is difficult to see how the multiple readings that would be required for its argument to be grasped and absorbed could occur if a single copy of the letter had to be passed back and forth between each of the congregations.⁶⁷ It seems likely, therefore, that Phoebe would have been instructed to arrange for

⁶⁴ So, with varying emphases, Gamble, *Textual History*, 49, 92; L. Ann Jervis, *The Purpose of Romans: A Comparative Letter Structure Investigation* (JSNTSS 55; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991): 151-52; Lampe, *Paul*, 168; Moo, *Romans*, 917-18; Schreiner, *Romans*, 792; Weima, *Endings*, 114-15, 116-17, 222-23, 226-28.

⁶⁵ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2.783; Gamble, *Textual History*, 41; Lohse, *Römer*, 406; Talbert, *Romans*, 337.

⁶⁶ It might well be that there are more house churches to receive the letter than those Paul knows and names, but he would be confident that those to which he sends Phoebe can be relied upon to put her in touch with the others.

⁶⁷ Gamble, *Textual History*, 41.

copies of the letter to be made. But how would she, possibly a newcomer to Rome, go about doing this?

It is here that we can see another possible reason why the first to be greeted are Prisca and Aquila and their house church (16:3-5a). We have already suggested that they will convene a meeting of the whole community in order to receive the letter and have it read. Now we can suggest that they head Paul's list because he is also confident they will be able to make the necessary arrangements to have copies of *Romans* made and then distributed. Their familiarity with Rome as well as their business interests meant that they would know where a good *librarius*, a competent copyist, could be hired. But did Paul's confidence in them go further than this—was he also relying on them to meet the costs involved?

These costs were not insignificant. Although obviously these figures can only be approximations, it has been estimated that making a copy of *Romans* would cost the equivalent of around six weeks' wages for a day labourer, that is, about \$2500.⁶⁸ Phoebe might well have been in a position to meet such an expense, because of the resources that had enabled her to be a benefactress (προστάτις) to Paul and many others. However, she is likely already to have covered the cost of the journey to Rome for herself and whoever accompanied her. It is also possible that before leaving Corinth she had paid for the production of *Romans*.⁶⁹ If so, Paul might have wished to spare her the further expense of paying for copies to be made. Indeed, he might well have seen this as a cost that should be borne by the Christian community in Rome.⁷⁰ In practice, this will mean that the costs will be met by those

⁶⁸ Richards, *Letter Writing*, 163-69. (I have adjusted his figure upwards to allow for inflation since the publication of his book.)

⁶⁹ In her study of Phoebe as προστάτις, Ng argues that Paul would not have accepted financial support from her ('Phoebe as *Prostatis*', 8-9). However, it is doubtful that either Paul or Phoebe would have regarded her funding the production of *Romans* as amounting to financial support of Paul. In a sense, such funding would constitute a gift from Phoebe to the church in Rome. Alternatively, this would fall into the same category as the gifts Paul received from the Philippian church when he was in Thessalonica (Phil. 4:15-16): namely, as support for work in another place.

⁷⁰ This is perhaps implied by what Paul did for the churches of Galatia. As Gal. 6:11 indicates, Paul had completed his letter to these churches in his own hand, visibly different from that of the scribe who wrote the rest of the letter. This verse also implies that all of the Galatian churches will see this letter with its Pauline epilogue, as the letter-carrier delivers it to each church in turn. But given the extreme importance Paul attaches to the issues addressed in the letter, it would not be surprising if he expected each church to have a copy made which they could keep. He had sent the letter to them, but it was their responsibility to arrange for their own copy.

with the necessary resources—people such as those who host a house church; people like Prisca and Aquila. Their business interests will presumably enable them to meet the costs involved. People who have conducted business in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3), Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19), and now Rome (again?), will have more capacity than most of Rome's Christians to handle such costs.⁷¹

We are suggesting that Prisca and Aquila are the first to be named in the list of greetings because they will not only take delivery of the letter but will also—at Paul's request, conveyed by Phoebe—arrange to have copies made.⁷² So, first, the letter will be received and read at an assembly of the whole church. Then Phoebe will take his letter to be read to the various house churches, and then leave them with a copy to be read and circulated again and again.

This brings us to another responsibility that Phoebe had as the letter-carrier. It is likely that delivering *Romans* meant not only handing it over but also 'performing' it: that is, reading it aloud to those meant to hear it.⁷³ The letter's bearer was also to be the church's lector. This view has recently been challenged by Jewett.⁷⁴ He sees Tertius as Phoebe's slave or employee, and believes that he is accompanying her to Rome. He argues that Tertius was not only Paul's amanuensis in the production of the letter (16:22), but that he will also be the one who reads it to the believers in Rome, for people of Phoebe's social class would have a scribe do this on their behalf. This proposal is doubtful, for three reasons. In the first place, 16:1-2 suggests that Phoebe is unknown in Rome, while 16:22 implies that Tertius is known there. It is difficult to see how Phoebe's slave made the acquaintance of those Paul names, whether in Rome or perhaps in Corinth, if Phoebe herself

⁷¹ Lampe argues that Prisca and Aquila belong towards the lower end of the socio-economic scale, and not to the upwardly mobile entrepreneurial class (*Paul*, 187-95). This view has justifiably been criticised by Jewett (*Romans*, 956-57).

⁷² I am not necessarily suggesting that each house church would be given its own copy of *Romans*, but only that several copies are likely to have been put into circulation between them. If Jewett (*Romans*, 62) is right to see dozens of house churches as being in existence at this time, the cost of providing each one with a copy of the letter would be prohibitive; even a dozen churches would probably put that cost way out of reach.

⁷³ Dunn, *Beginning at Jerusalem*, 594-95; Esler, *Conflict*, 117-18; Head, 'Letter-Carriers', 297-98; Richards, *Letter Writing*, 184-85, 202; M. Luther Stirewalt, Jr., *Paul, the Letter Writer* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003): 14-16, 23; Richard F. Ward, 'Pauline Voice and Presence as Strategic Communication', *Semeia* 65 (1994): 95-107 (esp. 101-103).

⁷⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 23, 978-79.

was unknown to them, especially given that she had been a προστάτις to many. Secondly, had Tertius been going to Rome, it is not likely that Paul would have commended Phoebe only (16:1-2) or that Tertius would have included his greeting in the way that he did (16:22), as he would soon be greeting the believers in person. Thirdly, in Paul's circle believers like Phoebe were more likely to use their social position as an opportunity for service than to see it as involving a dignity that had to be maintained. It is no more difficult to see Phoebe as a lector than it is to see Paul as a manual worker. We conclude, therefore, that there is no reason to think that it was Tertius, rather than Phoebe, who was to read the letter to the church.

There are two aspects of this role that deserve comment. First, reading the letter was a rhetorical act.⁷⁵ That is, the bearer of the letter was also its interpreter—when it was being read out for the first time, the letter was also receiving its first public interpretation.⁷⁶ Such things as the reader's intonation, facial expressions, and use of pauses and gestures were all vital ways of communicating the intended meaning of the words. So much so, that the hearers could safely assume that the reader, as bearer of the letter, had been coached by the sender in how to read it.⁷⁷ With so much riding on the positive reception of *Romans*, there is thus little doubt that Paul would have gone through it carefully with Phoebe so that she was able to communicate its contents as he wanted. Her reading of the letter can thus be seen as an authorised interpretation of its contents.

Secondly, we know that letter-carriers were often entrusted with verbal messages for the addressees that amplified or added to the material contained in a letter.⁷⁸ This is quite likely here: Paul might well have given Phoebe particular things to say in connection with the

⁷⁵ See especially Pieter J. J. Botha, 'The Verbal Art of the Pauline Letters: Rhetoric, Performance and Presence' in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (JSNTSS 90; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993): 409-28.

⁷⁶ On Phoebe as the letter's first interpreter, see Hengel, *Saint Peter*, 121.

⁷⁷ The need for such coaching is reinforced by the fact that *Romans* would have been written in *scriptio continua*, without punctuation: see Paul J. Achtemeier, 'Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity', *JBL* 109 (1990): 3-27 (esp. 10, 17); Gamble, *Books*, 48, 203-204; Stirewalt, *Paul*, 17; Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP, 1998): 100.

⁷⁸ William G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973): 45-46; Head, 'Letter-Carriers', 296, 297-98; Stirewalt, *Paul*, 16.

reading of the letter.⁷⁹ So, it is possible that she had been told how to introduce and conclude her readings of it. Also possible is that she had been given some idea of how to respond to questions and other immediate reactions the letter might provoke. In addition, it is quite likely that she has personal greetings and other messages from Paul for at least some of those named in 16:3-15.

5. Conclusions

We have been looking for answers to two overlapping kinds of question—the first prompted by the data of Romans 16; the second by the historical particularity of *Romans* as a piece of communication, its rootedness in particular times and places and circumstances. Our quest for answers has led us to the following proposals:

- Phoebe brought the letter to Rome, probably by sea;
- the church in Rome at this time consisted of a number of house churches;
- Phoebe was to deliver the letter first to Prisca and Aquila and their house church;
- Prisca and Aquila were to convene an assembly of the whole Christian community, the first for some time, at which Romans was to be received and read;
- Prisca and Aquila were to be asked to arrange for copies of Romans to be made;
- Phoebe was to deliver these copies to the other house churches; and
- Phoebe was to read Romans in the way that Paul had coached her at each of the gatherings to which she took it.

It is appropriate to conclude by asking how confident we can be about any of this. It should be clear that certainty is unattainable; we are dealing here with possibilities, chiefly because there is a limit to what we do know and can know about these matters. The most suitable test of these proposals, therefore, is the extent to which they give a plausible account of what we know—and in particular, of the evidence supplied by *Romans* itself. How far they succeed in doing so is for the reader to judge.

⁷⁹ Cf. Hengel, *Saint Peter*, 121.