

## Article

# Female Apostle(s) at the Roots of Christianity

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**Abstract:** There is an increasing demand for the ordination of women as priests within the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican's primary argument against priestly ordination of women is biblical, appealing to certain historical events, specifically Jesus' (alleged) choice of male apostles only. This article calls for a rethinking and rephrasing of such appeal to history. Due to the nature of our sources, the historically responsible question should not be whom Jesus appointed as apostles, but who were apostles in first-century Christianity. The article points out flaws in the Vatican's reasoning in this respect and brings attention to evidence from earliest Christianity that does indeed speak in favor of women as priests, if an appeal is to be made to history in the first place. The evidence is Junia, a first-century female apostle, described as "prominent among the apostles" by the apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans.

**Keywords:** apostles; female priests; male priests; Roman Catholic Church; Junia; Paul; gospels

## 1. Introduction

The question of the ordination of women as priests is hotly debated in several Christian denominations. Seen in a global perspective, the issue is of most consequence in the Roman Catholic Church. To be sure, there are other varieties of Christianity that do not approve priestly ordination of women; this includes a number of Lutheran denominations scattered throughout the world, especially in the USA, but also in Australia, Latvia, and Germany. However, given the size of the Roman Catholic Church, with approximately 1.3 billion members, it is evident that the question carries the most weight for people in that denomination.

Pope Francis has shown himself to be open to expanding the role of women in some of the Church's leading structures, but he has been clear on the critical issue of women's ordination as priests: the priestly ordination in the Roman Catholic Church is reserved to men. Of course, the issue is far from new. What is new is the rapidly growing support for the ordination of women as priests, not only from outside of the Church, but also, and more importantly, within the Church itself. Moreover, the support—indeed the call—for the ordination of women is not restricted to lay or non-ordained Catholics; it is increasingly expressed by ordained priests and bishops. Addressing various aspects of Catholic sexual morality, in 2022 the German Catholic Church's Synodal Way (*Der Synodale Weg*) voted in favor of a text calling for the priestly ordination of women<sup>1</sup>. The Synodal Way is a joint effort of the German Bishops' Conference, a lay body known as the Central Committee of German Catholics (*ZdK, Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken*), and representatives of other parts of the German Church<sup>2</sup>. Many bishops around the world responded negatively to this development.<sup>3</sup> One of the most forceful among these responses came from the president of Poland's Catholic Bishop's Conference, Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki<sup>4</sup>. In an open letter addressed to the President of the German Bishop's Conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing, Archbishop Gądecki emphasized that the Catholic Church should be "faithful to the truth of the Gospel", appealing to papal statements on the matter as well as to current teachings of the Church. He writes: "Faithful to the Church's teaching, we should not yield to the pressures of the world or to the patterns of the dominant culture since this can lead



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to moral and spiritual corruption. Let us avoid the repetition of worn-out slogans, and standard demands such as the abolition of celibacy, the priesthood of women, communion for the divorced, and the blessing of same-sex unions". Archbishop Gadecki received support from the Nordic Bishops' Conference in particular; the members of the conference cautioned against "capitulation to the *Zeitgeist*"<sup>5</sup>. The Vatican, too, responded negatively to this call by the German Catholic Church.

Underlying these responses to the Synodal Way is the common claim in conservative Catholic circles: that female leadership within the church is more or less a modern phenomenon, something that emerges from the "*Zeitgeist*". According to this claim, "the truth of the Gospel" in the Bible speaks for male-only priesthood. The purpose of this article is to challenge this claim in two ways: first, by pointing out flaws in its reasoning, and second, by presenting first-century evidence to the contrary.

## 2. Official Roman Catholic Arguments against Priestly Ordination of Women

The Vatican gives two primary reasons for women not being suitable as priests: (a) Jesus was male, and therefore his true representatives must be male; (b) Jesus chose men and men only as his apostles, and therefore all true successors of the apostles must be male. In this article, I shall address the latter argument<sup>6</sup>.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 1577; provided references within brackets),

"Only a baptized man (*vir*) validly receives sacred ordination" [CIC, can. 1024]. The Lord Jesus chose men (*virī*) to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry [Mark 3:14–19; Luke 6:12–16; 1 Tim 3:1–13; 2 Tim 1:6; Tit 1:5–9; 1 Clem. 42.4; 44.3]. The college of bishops, with whom the priests are united in the priesthood, makes the college of the twelve an ever-present and ever-active reality until Christ's return. The Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible [cf. John Paul II, *MD* 26–27; CDF, declaration, *Inter insigniores*: AAS 69 (1977) 98–116.]".<sup>7</sup>

For clarification, Mark 3:14–19 and Luke 6:12–16 relate how Jesus named twelve individuals as "apostles" (*apostoloi*), all of them men, for the purpose of being "sent out" (the meaning of the verb *apostellō*) in order to "proclaim" and "drive out demons" (according to Mark; Luke is silent on the purpose). To these texts, Matt 10:1–4 and Acts 1:13–26 could be added, belonging to the same body of Early Christian tradition (see below). The text in 1 Tim 3:1–13 lists the duties of an "overseer" or "bishop" (*episkopos*), who is clearly male (see esp. v. 2: *mias gynaikos andra*), and that of "deacons" (*diakonoi*), also male (see esp. v. 12: *mias gynaikos andres*). The reference in 2 Tim 1:6 is to Paul's "laying of hands" (*epithesis tōn cheirōn*) on Timothy; note that there is no explicit mention of any ministry in the text, but it is apparent that the Catechism acknowledges Paul's apostolic authority, even though he was not among the "twelve" according to the Gospel tradition (cf. also 1 Cor 15:5). The text in Tit 1:5–9 speaks about "elders" (*presbyteroi*), clearly male (see esp. v. 6: *mias gynaikos anēr*), and specifies the virtues of an "overseer" (*episkopos*), referred to, grammatically, in male terms. The extra-canonical writing of 1 Clement, a letter probably written around 95 CE, narrates in 42.4 how "the apostles" (*hoi apostoloi*) appointed "overseers" (*episkopoi*) and "deacons" (*diakonoi*); if the masculine grammatical gender was not conclusive about them being male (it could be inclusive language), the text in 44.2–3 makes it clear that these are men (*andres*).

## 3. The Counterargument

When the Vatican claims that Jesus chose male apostles, and that the apostles did the same, it is making a *historical* claim. It appeals to *history* when it gives substance for its claim, which means that the appeal must be based on certain *sources* for that history. Of course,

the Vatican might as well say: ‘This is just the way we decided to have it, regardless of how things were originally in the past’. However, it does not. On the contrary, it underlines the historical basis for the male-only doctrine. In other words, as the reasoning goes, a certain thing is held as a doctrine today because a certain thing happened in the first century CE. Such a reasoning can be as valid as any other reasoning. However, in this case, there is a flaw. The claim appeals to history but ignores historical research. It appeals to Early Christian texts but ignores research into Early Christian texts. When it claims not to do so, its appeal to and description of history does not hold. As historical research has long established, first-century Christian writings, most of which are found in the New Testament, give evidence of divergent phases in the history of Early Christianity. Sometimes they provide evidence of diversified views and practices, and sometimes it happens that these do not coincide.

The Vatican’s claim rests on the account given in Mark 3:14–19 that tells us that Jesus appointed twelve male apostles. (Incidentally, it should be noted that the words “whom he also named apostles” (*hous kai apostolous onomasen*) in v. 14 is probably a later interpolation from Luke; see Metzger 1994, p. 69.) As noted above, Matthew and Luke also convey this tradition, but there is wide agreement among specialists in the field that both used Mark as their basic source (the three are known as the Synoptic Gospels)<sup>8</sup>. The Gospel of John does not include any tradition of Jesus appointing twelve apostles. Thus, the earliest written account of this tradition is the Gospel of Mark, probably written shortly after 70 CE, but most scholars agree that it was based on oral tradition (most likely including some combination of inherited memoirs and stories or narratives) that had been circulating for approximately 40 years before the author wrote them down<sup>9</sup>. The author, “Mark”<sup>10</sup>, was not an eyewitness to the events he describes. It is important to pay heed to the fact that the Gospel authors were not “historians” in the modern sense of the word. They did not write history as professional historians do today. The Gospels may include a great deal of material that is historically accurate, so to speak, and they may not. We do not know. All we know—or believe that we know—is that 40 years of some sort of oral phase had passed before one version of Jesus’ story was materialized (Mark). This means that we cannot know for certain how far back in time the tradition about Jesus specifically appointing twelve male apostles goes; the number twelve is, of course, strongly symbolic in this context<sup>11</sup>. However, we can assume, as scholars have amply shown, that many aspects of the Gospel accounts reflect the historical settings of the Gospel authors themselves, rather than or in addition to that of Jesus’.

This is certainly a debatable issue. Luckily, however, we do have access to other texts that are penned earlier than the Gospel of Mark: the letters of the apostle Paul. These texts do not include any stories of Jesus appointing certain individuals as apostles, but they give us unique opportunities to see who served as apostles around the middle of the first century (Paul’s seven undisputed letters were written ca. 50–60 CE)<sup>12</sup>, that is to say, according to Paul’s understanding of the concept.

My counterargument—and an appeal—is this. First, in general terms, if we wish to base certain beliefs or doctrines on certain happenings in history, we need to examine that history as carefully as possible. Furthermore, in this case, if the intention is to base a doctrine of priestly ordination on Early Christian understanding and practice, the deciding question must be: Who were apostles at the roots of Christianity? If we ask this question, which is the only proper historical question, we will get a different answer from that of the traditional question of whom Jesus appointed as apostles (the answer to which is dependent on Mark), whatever our judgment of women as priests or apostles.

### 3.1. Who Were Apostles According to Our Earliest Sources?

According to our earliest sources, apostles (*apostoloi*) were considerably more in number than the twelve of the Synoptic Gospels. According to Paul’s (undisputed) letters, they were at least seventeen, and probably more (provided that Paul did identify “the twelve” as apostles, cf. below). As the renowned Catholic priest and scholar Joseph Fitzmyer pointed

out thirty years ago, Paul mentions some of them by name, one of whom was a woman. Fitzmyer writes: “The title ‘apostle’ was given in the early church not only to the Twelve, but to others as well who were understood as commissioned itinerant evangelists (e.g., commissioned by a church, Acts 13:1–3)” (Fitzmyer 1993, p. 739).

The Greek term *apostolos* means “messenger” or “envoy” (cf. Rengstorf 1964; Kirk 1975; Agnew 1986). “Emissary” may be the proper translation of the term in first-century Christian context, for Paul makes it clear that an *apostolos* functions primarily as a missionary (on this point Mark seems to agree). However, already in the Pauline letters the concept of *apostolos* seems to be inclining toward a technical term for a specific position of high status within the Jesus movement (cf. 1 Cor 12:28–29; 15:9; Gal 1:17, 19). On several occasions Paul refers to unnamed and unspecified numbers of *apostoloi* (1 Cor 9:5; 12:28–29; 15:7, 9; 2 Cor 8:23; Gal 1:17). In 1 Cor 15:5, he mentions “the twelve” (the only mention of them in Paul’s letters), but we should note that he does not explicitly describe them as “apostles”<sup>13</sup>. In fact, he never mentions anything about Jesus appointing “the twelve” as apostles<sup>14</sup>. Interestingly, in this same verse he distinguishes between Cephas (Peter) and “the twelve”<sup>15</sup>, but we know from Galatians that Paul did see Cephas as an apostle (cf. below). Furthermore, in 1 Cor 9:5, Paul speaks quite cryptically of “us”, on the one hand, and “the other apostles” (*hoi loipoi apostoloi*) on the other, where he also makes a similarly cryptic distinction between these and “the brothers of the lord [i.e., Jesus]”, presumably including James (cf. Gal 1:19), as well as between these and Cephas. In fact, according to the line of argument in 1 Cor 15:5–7, the risen Christ appeared first to Cephas, then to “the twelve”, then to a large number of “brothers”, then to James, and then to “all the apostles”. Again, why is Cephas not included among “the twelve”? Why are “the twelve” not included among “all the apostles”? These descriptions of Paul’s are not as clear as we would like them to be, but they do indicate that, in earliest Christianity, the concept of *apostolos* was much more fluid than often thought, and that apostleship was far from restricted to any “twelve”.

Elsewhere, Paul identifies several named individuals as *apostoloi*, apart from himself, including Cephas (Gal 1:18–19; 2:8), James (Gal 1:19; neither of those so named in Mark’s list of apostles)<sup>16</sup>, Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), and a certain couple in Rome (Rom 16:7). By implication, this seems to apply to John and Barnabas (Gal 2:8–9; cf. Acts 14:4, 14), and possibly also to Paul’s co-senders of 1 Thessalonians, Silvanus and Timothy (2:7; depending on how we understand Paul’s use of the first-person plural, “we”, in the letter). The couple in Rome are Andronicus and his wife, Junia, to whom he sends greetings. Paul tells us that Andronicus and Junia are fellow Jews who took faith in Christ before he did (i.e., before ca. 35 CE), and that they are “prominent among the apostles”. This means that our earliest sources attest not only that *apostoloi* were more in number than “the twelve” (whenever they were identified as such), but also that a woman served as *apostolos* around the middle of the first century. We should note the definite article in Paul’s text: Junia is not just “prominent among apostles”, she is “prominent among the apostles (*tois apostolois*)” (cf. Cohick 2009, pp. 216–17). According to Paul’s description, Junia belonged to the earliest group of Jesus followers<sup>17</sup>, either joining the group while Jesus was still alive or very shortly after his death.

### 3.2. The Disappearance of the Apostle Junia

The apostle Junia appears in one of Paul’s greetings in his Letter to the Romans: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Israelites who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (16:7; trans. NRSVUE). The history of interpretation of this verse, and of Junia’s name in particular, is quite remarkable. In Paul’s text, written in majuscule (capital) letters without accents, her Latin name appears in the (Greek) accusative case as IOUNI<sup>AN</sup>. If Paul (or his secretary Tertius; cf. 16:22) would have written the name in minuscule (small) letters with appropriate accents, it would have appeared as Ἰουνίαν (*Iounían*). However, it is also possible, grammatically speaking, to read the name as an accusative of a masculine name, “Junias”, either as Ἰουνίαν (*Iouniān*,

from *Ἰουνιάς*, *Iouniās*) or as *Ἰουνίαν* (*Iounían*, from *Ἰουνία*, *Iounías*) (see esp. [Epp 2005](#), pp. 23–31)<sup>18</sup>. However, as we shall see, this latter reading is highly unlikely.

Every sound argument speaks in favor of reading the name as the feminine Junia. As Fitzmyer and others have pointed out, practically every early and medieval Christian interpreter understood the name as a feminine name (either Junia or Julia), whatever their opinion of Christian apostleship. This includes influential Church Fathers and theologians, including Origen, Ambrosiaster, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, John of Damascus, Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, and many others ([Fitzmyer 1993](#), pp. 737–38; [Belleville 2005](#), pp. 234–36). “[N]ot known for feminist leanings” ([Cohick 2009](#), p. 215), none of them seems to have had problems with the fact that Paul described a woman as an apostle. John Chrysostom, for instance, wrote: “How great the wisdom of this woman that she was even deemed worthy of the apostle’s title” (*In ep. ad Romanos* 31.2 [PG 60.669–70]; trans. in [Fitzmyer 1993](#), p. 738). The same is true of extant early translations of the Bible, all of which read a feminine name, including the fourth century Latin Vulgate (translated by Jerome) that functioned as the standard text in Western Christianity for centuries; in fact, eventually it served as the Catholic Church’s officially promulgated version of the Bible ([Crehan 1963](#)). This is also true of our earliest manuscripts of Romans that contain Greek accents (thus indicating the grammatical gender). Moreover, Junia was a common Roman name; it occurs more than 250 times in ancient documents from the city of Rome alone, both in papyri and inscriptions ([Metzger 1994](#), p. 475; [Lampe 2003](#), pp. 168–69, 176; [Belleville 2005](#), pp. 234–35, 240–42). The fact that Junia was a Jew does not make her Latin name curious in any way, for Jewish inscriptions from ancient Rome reveal that most Roman Jews bore Latin and Greek names (primarily the former) rather than Semitic ones ([Leon 1995](#), pp. 93–121; [Rutgers 1995](#), pp. 139–75).

As a matter of fact, with a single exception (Alford in 1852), all critical editions of the Greek text of Romans, from Erasmus in 1516 to Nestle’s edition in 1927, include the feminine Junia. Then, suddenly, Junia disappears in standard critical editions, turned into a man named “Junias”. No clarification whatsoever is given in Nestle’s 1927 edition, either for Junia’s disappearance or for her male replacement<sup>19</sup>. For the next 71 years, *Ἰουνιᾶν* (“Junias”) is printed in all (but one) critical editions of Romans, until the 1998 Nestle–Aland jubilee edition (27th), when Junia suddenly reappears, again without any explanation and without an alternate reading in the apparatus ([Epp 2005](#), pp. 60–64). This development had enormous effects on standard translations around the world ([Belleville 2005](#), pp. 236–37; [Epp 2005](#), pp. 65–67). The most recent Nestle–Aland edition (28th, 2012) provides the feminine name Junia.

Why did Junia suddenly disappear from the critical editions? As already noted, no explanations were given in the printed text of Nestle’s 1927 edition. As such, we cannot know for sure. However, in his reference work on the United Bible Societies’ fourth edition of the Greek New Testament (1993; equivalent to Nestle–Aland’s 27th edition)—still containing “Junias”—Bruce M. Metzger sheds light on that text committee’s reasoning: “Some members, considering it unlikely that a woman would be among those styled ‘apostles’, understood the name to be masculine *Ἰουνιᾶν* (‘Junias’)” ([Metzger 1994](#), p. 475). It is not unlikely that the same was true of the decision behind Nestle’s edition in 1927, already advocated in influential commentaries on Romans such as that of Hans Lietzmann ([1906] 1971) and Theodor Zahn (1910)<sup>20</sup>. In other words, when these text critics faced the female apostle Junia in Paul’s text, their ideological presuppositions outweighed all approved principles of text criticism, and they simply changed her gender. As Bernadette Brooten so splendidly puts it: “Because a woman could not have been an apostle, the woman who is here called apostle could not have been a woman” ([Brooten 1977](#), p. 142).

Following the reappearance of Junia in standard critical editions and, gradually, in many authorized translations as well (see [Belleville 2005](#), p. 237), some attempts have been made (mostly in evangelical circles) to defend the male-only-*apostoloi* hypothesis by insisting that she could not have been an apostle. One such attempt is the argument that Paul described Andronicus and Junia not as “prominent among the apostles” but as



“well known to the apostles” (Burer and Wallace 2001; Huttar 2009; Burer 2015; Ng 2020). Evidently, these scholars have recognized the futility of pursuing the case of “Junias”, but, from a grammatical point of view, such a reading of Paul’s *episēmoi en tois apostolois* is both forced and farfetched (see esp. Belleville 2005, pp. 242–48; Lin 2020, pp. 194–201)<sup>21</sup>.

Where, then, did the masculine name “Junias” come from? Bluntly put, the name itself comes out of the blue, for it is nowhere attested in ancient sources, not even as a diminutive form of Junianos/-us, as some have suggested<sup>22</sup>. As far as we can tell, the name never existed in the ancient world (Brooten 1977, p. 142; Belleville 2005, pp. 239–40; Epp 2005, pp. 23–31; Hartmann 2020, pp. 649–51), suggesting that it is merely “a figment of chauvinistic imagination” (Jewett 2007, p. 962). As Eldon Jay Epp explains, “[o]nly with the thirteenth century Aegidius [or Giles] of Rome, and especially with Martin Luther’s translation, did the view arise that Junia was in fact a male, Junias” (Epp 2005, p. xi)<sup>23</sup>. Whereas Aegidius’ changing of a woman into a man seems to have resulted from a grammatical misunderstanding on his part of the Latin Vulgate (*Iuliam* erroneously read as masculine accusative; see Brooten 1977, pp. 141–42; Epp 2005, pp. 35–37; Cohick 2009, p. 215), Luther’s motives appear to have been based on his ideological presuppositions. In 1522, Luther translated Paul’s text into German, based on Erasmus’ second edition of the Greek text (1519), having the Vulgate text in mind as well (Cameron 2016, p. 220). However, even though both versions included a feminine name, Luther decided to translate Paul’s greeting in Rom 16:7 as: “Grüsset den Andronicum und den Juniam [i.e., masculine]”. This was no typo on Luther’s part, for he refers to the male “Junias” elsewhere in his works as well (see Epp 2005, p. 38). Why did Luther choose to go against the feminine identification in Erasmus’ text as well as in the Vulgate? Linda Belleville is probably right when she suggests that “the source of the masculine Junias may well reflect Luther’s personal disposition against an apostolic attribution” (Belleville 2005, p. 237 n. 24; cf. Hartmann 2020, pp. 652–53)<sup>24</sup>.

Luther’s translation of the New Testament wielded enormous influence, not only in the German-speaking world, but beyond it as well (Cameron 2016, p. 217). Accordingly, the influence of Luther’s preference for a male apostle named “Junias” cannot be overestimated. In fact, it was primarily because of his translation that the view prevailed that Junia was not a woman but a man (cf. Schottroff 1993, p. 36). In comparison, John Calvin translated *Iuniam* as Junia in his commentary on Romans, despite his patriarchal opinions on women’s leadership in the church (see Hartmann 2020, p. 653).

If we take a look at international (English-speaking) commentary series today, we can see that most commentators seem to read the feminine name Junia, including Catholic scholars like Brendan Byrne, Frank J. Matera, and Scott W. Hahn (Byrne 2007; Matera 2010; Hahn 2017), thus agreeing with Joseph Fitzmyer, who in turn agreed with the French Catholic priest and commentator M.-J. Lagrange (Lagrange [1916] 1922, p. 366). None of these scholars argues for the imaginary name “Junias” and none of them questions Paul’s description of Junia as *apostolos*.

Since this article is part of a special issue on medieval monasteries in Iceland, it is appropriate to mention authoritative Icelandic translations of Paul’s greeting in Rom 16:7 through the centuries. The first Icelandic translation of the New Testament, that of Oddur Gottskálksson in 1540, contains the masculine name “Júlíon”, most likely identifying the Vulgate variant *Iuliam* as masculine under the influence of Luther’s insistence on a male apostle<sup>25</sup>. We may probably assume, then, that prior to the entering of Lutheranism, (Latin) Bibles used in Iceland identified *Iuniam*/*Iuliam* as a female apostle<sup>26</sup>. Subsequent translations follow Luther’s male version of the name (Guðbrandsbiblíá 1584: “Junion”; Steinsbiblíá 1728: “Júnio”; Viðeyjarbiblíá 1841: “Júnían”; Biblíá 1912/1981: “Júnías”), whereas in the most recent version, published in 2007 (a revision of the 1912 translation in the case of Paul’s letters), the female apostle Junia (“Júnía”) occurs for the first time in an authoritative Icelandic translation.

#### 4. Conclusions: Female Apostle(s) at the Roots of Christianity

Current scholarship is gradually repairing an older and greatly skewed view of women's role in first-century Christianity (see, e.g., with further references, [Cohick 2009](#); [Howard 2021](#); [Bond and Taylor 2022](#); [Huyen 2023](#)). The argument of the Vatican that the reservation of priesthood to men is based on apostolic assignment in earliest Christianity does not hold. As it turns out, the male-only priesthood appears to be based on later developments in the history of Christianity. Somewhat ironically, in his epistolary response to the Synodal Way, Archbishop Gądecki quotes Pauline letters most frequently (rather than Gospel accounts) as a scriptural support for his case of being “faithful to the truth of the Gospel”, calling the demands of the German Catholic Church a “modernization” and an “update of the Gospel” (in a negative sense). However, as we have seen, the insistence on exclusively-male-apostles is itself a “modernization” of a sort, an ancient one, to be sure, but nevertheless an “update of the Gospel”.

When the Vatican appeals to history as an argument against priestly ordained women, it fails to do justice to our sources for that history. Few parts of human history have been so thoroughly scrutinized by specialists as first-century Christianity, and few ancient sources have been so meticulously analyzed as the texts of the New Testament. All this research tells us that the men who eventually wrote down (diverse) parts of the sayings about Jesus that had been circulating for 40 years and more did not write “history” in the modern sense of the word. Because of that, and because of the nature of their sources, the Gospel accounts cannot always be taken as historical facts. Sometimes they can, but their use as sources for historical details is extremely complicated. What is not complicated is the common knowledge, not only among specialists, that the earliest “Gospel” (*euangelion* = “good news”) about Jesus is the one we have access to in the (undisputed) letters of Paul. The question that needs to be asked is *not* whom Jesus appointed as apostles, but *who served as apostles* in first-century Christianity. If we ask this latter question, the answer can only be that, according to our earliest sources, at least one woman served as apostle. There may well have been other female *apostoloi*; we do not know. However, the fact that Paul confirms both that a woman was an apostle and that she was considered “prominent among the apostles” suffices to show the flaw in Archbishop Gądecki's and the Vatican's reasoning. The “update” occurred already in ancient times when (male) Christian leadership started to follow their own current “Zeitgeist” by depriving women of leading positions in the church. We may assume, based on our best sources, that most first-century *apostoloi* were male, but the same sources tell us that they could in fact also be female. Priestly ordination of women and female leadership on all levels accords well with practices at the very roots of Christianity.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For general report (Catholic News Agency), see <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/250298/german-synodal-way-members-back-text-calling-for-women-priests> (accessed on 17 March 2023). The full text is available here (in German): [https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente\\_Reden\\_Beitraege/SV-III-Synodalforum-III-Grundtext-Lesung1.pdf](https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente_Reden_Beitraege/SV-III-Synodalforum-III-Grundtext-Lesung1.pdf) (accessed on 17 March 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> See [https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente\\_Reden\\_Beitraege/2020\\_FAQ-Synodal-Path-englisch.pdf](https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente_Reden_Beitraege/2020_FAQ-Synodal-Path-englisch.pdf) (accessed on 17 March 2023).

- 3 For an overview (from Catholic News Agency), see <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/250945/fraternal-letter-bishops-germany-synodal-path> (accessed on 17 March 2023).
- 4 Archbishop Gadecki's statement can be found here (in English): <https://episkopat.pl/letter-of-fraternal-concern-from-the-episcopates-president-regarding-the-german-synodal-path/> (accessed on 17 March 2023). For general discussion of his statement (at Catholic News Agency), see <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/250445/polish-catholic-bishops-leader-expresses-fraternal-concern-over-german-synodal-way> (accessed on 17 March 2023).
- 5 Their open letter can be found here (accessed on 17 March 2023): <http://www.katolsk.no/nyheter/2022/03/open-letter-to-the-president-of-the-german-bishops-conference>.
- 6 As for the former argument, it is very difficult to see how an argument of this sort can carry any real weight, for it inevitably calls for several follow-up questions that expose its weakness and absurdity, to be frank. For instance, if Jesus had in fact been a woman, does that mean that all priests today would and should be female? If not, why? Moreover, exactly how far should we push this question? Should we involve questions of Jesus' skin color or ethnicity? The present article, however, focuses on the latter, biblical argument.
- 7 The catechism is available online, no. 1577 found here: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P4X.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4X.HTM) (accessed on 17 March 2023). The statement issued by John Paul II, referred to here as *MD* (*Mulieris dignitatem*), is available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html) (accessed on 17 March 2023). The declaration *Inter insigniores* is available here: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19761015\\_inter-insigniores\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html) (accessed on 17 March 2023).
- 8 This is common knowledge in New Testament scholarship. For recent discussion, see, e.g., Porter and Dyer (2016).
- 9 This, too, is common knowledge in New Testament scholarship. For recent discussion, see, e.g., Keener (2019).
- 10 We do not know the real name of the author, but early tradition ascribes the text to a certain "Mark", a common name in antiquity.
- 11 The number symbolizes the twelve tribes of Israel, the re-establishment of which was one of the chief hopes in Judaism in the first century BCE and CE (see further Sanders 1992, pp. 289–91).
- 12 The seven undisputed letters of Paul include (in the traditional order) Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians is disputed (especially Ephesians), whereas most scholars consider the so-called Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy, Titus) to be pseudonymous. For discussion, see most recent introductory works on Paul, e.g., Taylor (2012).
- 13 Comparing Luke's account in Acts, Fitzmyer notes: "Although Luke restricted the meaning of *apostoloi* to the Twelve . . . , there is no evidence that Paul shared that view" (Fitzmyer 2008, p. 358).
- 14 In 1 Cor 12:28 Paul speaks in general terms of God appointing *apostoloi* (also prophets, teachers, and others).
- 15 Apparently, some ancient scribes (D\* F G latt sy<sup>hmg</sup>) found this curious, for they changed "twelve" (δωδεκα) into "eleven" (ένδεκα), possibly under the influence of Matt 28:16.
- 16 Cf. Fitzmyer (2008, p. 551).
- 17 Richard Bauckham has conjectured that Junia is the same person as Joanna, mentioned by Luke in 8:3 and 24:10 (Bauckham 2002, pp. 165–86; cf. also Cohick 2009, pp. 314–16; Clark 2018).
- 18 Some ancient manuscripts read Ιουλιαν (Ioulian, i.e., "Julia"), probably influenced by the mention of Julia in v. 15.
- 19 The 1927 (13th) Nestle-edition was edited by Erwin Nestle who at that point had taken over from his father, Eberhard Nestle. The latter's first edition of the text was published in 1898.
- 20 Lietzmann, for instance, simply asserts that Paul must be greeting a man because of what follows in the text: "Ιουνιαν muß wegen der folgenden Aussagen einen Mann bezeichnen, also Ιουνιᾶς" (Lietzmann [1906] 1971, p. 125). But as Thorley rightly remarks, "surely none of the statements in Rom. 16:7 (or later) require that Ιουνιαν must be a man—unless one assumes that all apostles must be men!" (Thorley 1996, p. 28; italics original).
- 21 Similarly, the argument that Iounian is a Greek version of a Hebrew name, יְהוּנָנִי, pronounced as yēhunnī (Wolters 2008) is both weak and unnecessary (cf. Cohick 2009, p. 215; Lin 2020, p. 194; Hartmann 2020, p. 656 n. 132). Note, however, that Wolters does not exclude the possibility that יְהוּנָנִי / yēhunnī was a feminine name (p. 408).
- 22 The suggestion makes little sense, for Latin nicknames were typically lengthened rather than shortened (Belleville 2005, p. 239), cf., e.g., Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18, 26) for Prisca (Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19).
- 23 On Jacques LeFèvre's (Jacobus Faber Stapulensis') identification in 1512 of Iuniam as a male, see Epp (2005, pp. 35–36). LeFèvre identified Julia in Rom 16:15, too, as a male ("Julias"), which is unique.
- 24 On Luther's view of women, see Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks (2003).
- 25 Gottskálksson did not read Greek, basing his translation on the Vulgate and partly on a Latin translation by Erasmus, but it is clear that he was heavily influenced by Luther's translation (Kvaran et al. 1988, pp. xxii–xxiv).
- 26 For discussion of the variant readings in the Vulgate, see Belleville (2005, p. 238).



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