

The Curious Case of Apphia, our Sister

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Abstract

Far from being formulaic, the Pauline letter opening serves as a dynamic rhetorical strategy that intertwines characters and themes to suit the objectives of each letter. In *Philemon*² the person of Apphia appears in the opening, occupying the unique intersection between identity and rhetoric, where she is inscribed into a social group privileged with proximity to Paul. As the sole female to be included in a Pauline address, questions regarding the inclusion of her name, the seemingly vague appellation of sister (ἀδελφή), and Paul's silence regarding her relationship to the other parties in the greeting, have led to an ongoing debate regarding this mysterious character. This paper traces and critically engages various renderings of Apphia in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of *Philemon*. It explores the potential rhetorical effect of her inclusion in the Pauline corpus and what it means for Bible interpreters engaging her narrative from the Global South. It is, therefore, a central claim of this paper that tracing the many versions of Apphia retrieves history for contemporary audiences to appropriate meaning from Paul's salutation to our sister.

Keywords

Apphia; Philemon; Paul; *Wirkungsgeschichte*, deliberative rhetoric.

1 About the Authors

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² We distinguish the letter to Philemon from the person by italicising the former.

1. Introduction

Mentioned once in a letter about a slave called Onesimus and a *paterfamilias* called Philemon, Apphia remains an enigmatic figure that makes a sudden appearance in *Philemon's* opening, and in the broader New Testament (NT). While her sole reference may appear disconnected from the epistle's rhetorical emphases, the *deliberative* role played by both her presence in a prominent part of the epistle and her gender should not be understated. Contrastingly, the limited description accompanying her textual location among a group of men, who make multiple appearances in the broader Pauline corpus (cf. Phlm 23–24; Col 1:7–8, 4:7–17; 2 Tim 4:10)³ presents to the reader a peculiarity that has not gone unnoticed. It is into this space that this essay voyages as it explores Apphia's inclusion from both historical and rhetorical shores. First, we locate Apphia as a character standing in continuity with other female personalities in the broader Pauline corpus. A brief treatment of her fictive kin, in the non-disputed and so-called 'disputed' letters, is undertaken to elucidate her pride of place in what is essentially Paul's promissory note to Philemon (cf. Phlm 17). Second, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of *Philemon*, vis-à-vis Apphia, is given due attention demonstrating the divergent interpretive preferences and the social forces behind them, where appropriate. Third, a (re)imagination of the various renderings of this figure, for the Global South, converges *Philemon's* opening with a new hermeneutical horizon in which an epistolary salutation serves as a harbinger of universal equity in the new society. Arguably, such a vision underscores Paul's revolutionary egalitarian ethic (cf. Gal 3:28, 1 Cor 12:12–13), moving the conversation to a new norm in which Apphia's social location—as an equal among the brothers—reverberates across a host of interpretive frequencies.

3 In this paper Pauline authorship is ascribed to Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy, part of the so-called 'disputed letters'.

2. Apphia Among the Sisters

2.1. Phoebe, Apphia's sister

Apphia is one of many women mentioned and celebrated in the Pauline corpus. However, unlike her, most of them are named in the closing greetings of Romans 16. In this chapter, Paul greets Phoebe (vv.1–2), a person who probably functioned as the courier of the letter and the first public reader of the epistle. Phoebe is identified as τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν (our sister)⁴ and οὗσαν διάκονον ([one] being a deacon) of the church at Cenchreae, a seaport near Corinth. Paul commended her to the church in Rome, so that (ἵνα) they would welcome her and contribute (lit. 'place besides') to whatever need she may have had. Paul ascribes his commendation of Phoebe to the fact that she

4 Paul's reference to Phoebe as 'our sister' essentially forces the Romans to recognise her as their sister too.

5 Although it is telling that its only use, by Paul, is for a woman.

6 Belleville (2005:38) emphasises that patrons of benefactors did more than provide financial means, but that they 'welcomed clients to their house, rendered assistance as called for, and offered legal aid as needed'.

7 Luke uses the diminutive suffix by referring to her as Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18, 26).

8 ...ἦσαν γὰρ σκηνοποιοὶ τῆ τέχνη (Acts 18:3).

became a patron (προστάτις) to many, including Paul. Phoebe is thus given three identity markers: [our] sister, deacon, and patron. It is worth noting that within the Graeco-Roman milieu, the role of patron was mostly associated with men, although not exclusively (Wajda 2017:47).⁵ Being the feminine of προσάτης, which is rendered 'front rank man', 'leader', 'chief' or 'ruler' (LSJ:1527), προσάτης denotes a female benefactor or 'a woman in a supportive role' (BDAG:885). Therefore, when Paul uses the term, it indicates that Phoebe's support may have been financial, which would mean that she was a woman of means and the owner of the house in which the church gathered.⁶ While patron and benefactor constitute the social descriptions awarded Phoebe by Paul, we cannot extrapolate this to mean that Paul and Phoebe were in a patron-client relationship. This is because '[al]though *prostates* is used by Classical Attic writers in the sense of 'patron'... it is not unlikely that its widespread use in this way in the Roman times took its cue partly from this Macedonian context', (*NewDocs* 4:242). This non-monolithic use of the term negates the uncritical collapsing of its use into the Roman world, where patronage and clientism were pervasive (BDAG:885). Nevertheless, what is uncontested is Phoebe's prominence and the support she awarded Paul and others (Rom 16:2).

2.2. Prisca, Apphia's sister

Next, Paul greets Prisca and her husband, Aquila (Rom 16:3–4).⁷ This couple is mentioned in Acts 18:1–3, where Paul joins them at Corinth. Both are identified as Jewish believers and tentmakers by trade (not just Aquila).⁸ After they encounter Paul, they accompany him to Ephesus, where they remain. During this phase they expound God's word to Apollos in a more accurate way (18:24–26).⁹ Paul also

9 This is despite the writer's description of Apollos as λόγιος (learned) v. 24b, δυνατός ὢν ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς (competent in the Scriptures) v.24b, ζέων τῷ πνεύματι (fervent in spirit) v.25b, and ἐδίδασκεν ἀκριβῶς τὰ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (taught about Jesus accurately) v. 25b-c. Perhaps Apollos's oratory and rhetorical prowess is suggested by the juxtaposition of his accurate knowledge of the baptism of John and his limited knowledge of the Christ as proclaimed by Paul, Prisca and Aquila. In Acts, the limitations of John's baptism and the agents who proclaimed it are often placed in continuity with the message about Christ, as propagated by his agents. The latter seem to occupy a higher plane of understanding and are often seen serving the former with instruction on how to ascend the ladder to fuller knowledge (see Acts 1:5, 13:23–25, 18:25,19:1–6; cf. Luke 7:29, 20:4). On this, Pervo (2009:459) writes, 'Although it seems to cut the Gordian knot, the best solution is to view "the baptism of John" as a Lucan cipher for inadequate doctrine and rite, not explicitly false teaching, since it is based on ignorance rather than deceit, and the like'. Whether this is a Lukan strategy aimed at harmonising the emphases of different Christian groups in the first century CE, is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, what can be deduced from the text is that Prisca led the charge in transitioning and forming Apollos from the 'baptism of John' to the 'message about the Christ'.

mentions Prisca and Aquila in 1 Corinthians 16:19. On this occasion they, and the church that meets in their home, send greetings to the church at Corinth.¹⁰ In 2 Timothy 4:19, Paul presents the couple as the recipients of greetings, unlike in 1 Corinthians 16:19 where the reverse is true. The depth of relationship inferred from the bi-directional greetings may serve as a pointer to the partnership they shared with Paul. This seems to be supported by Paul's use of 'my fellow workers' (τοὺς συνεργούς μου) in Romans 16:3, where he adds that they 'risked their necks' for his life. Their authenticity and quality, as presented by τοὺς συνεργούς μου, are perhaps underlined by the fact that a group of believers gathered in their home (v.5a). Effectively, these descriptions reveal two things about the couple: firstly, they were prominent leaders in the church and secondly, they were people of some means. Based on Friesen's (2004:341) poverty scale, an economic categorisation for different groups in the first-century CE Mediterranean world, we would place Prisca and Aquila in the PS5-PS6 groups.

2.3. Junia, Apphia's sister

Paul then greets Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7) who lived in Rome when the letter was written. He refers to them as his kin (τοὺς συγγενεῖς μου) and his fellow prisoners (συναιχμαλώτους μου), probably implying that they spent some time in prison for their labour in the Gospel. While there is no consensus on the relationship between Andronicus and Junia, two main interpretations prevail. On one hand, if one takes συγγενής (kin) as referring to blood relations, both Andronicus and Junia are relatives of Paul, which means that they are probably related in a familial way (cf. Lazarus' relationship to Martha and Mary in John 11:5). On the other hand, if it refers to their status as Jewish kin, the coupling of their names probably indicates that they are husband and wife (cf. Prisca and Aquila) (Stenschke 2009:155–156).¹¹ Paul further describes the pair by affirming that they were prominent or 'well known among the apostles' and that they were in Christ before he was.¹²

2.4. Other sisters

Next on the greeting list in Romans 16, is Mary (v.6). The only thing said about her is that she toiled greatly for the church in Rome (ἦτις πολλὰ ἐκοπίασεν εἰς ὑμᾶς).¹³ Finally, Paul greets Tryphena and Tryphosa (v. 12), whom he labels as 'those who are toiling in the Lord' (τὰς κοπιώσας ἐν κυρίῳ) and Persis, the beloved (τὴν ἀγαπητὴν), who is also commended for her hard toil in the Lord. He also greets the mother of Rufus (v.13), whom he commends for being a mother to him also (μητέρα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐμοῦ). Julia, together with the sister of Nereus and Olympas (v.15), are also greeted, although not much context is given regarding their origins and function.

10 ...τῆ κατ' οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησία.

11 Westfall (2016:270) identifies Andronicus and Junia as Hellenistic Jews, part of the dispersion set off by Stephen's stoning in Acts 7.

The phrase εἰσιν ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις ('they are prominent among the apostles') has led to many a controversy in NT scholarship, especially in the conversation around women in ministry. While some have opted to interpret Junia as a male, this interpretation finds no archaeological support as there seems to be no trace of the male name Junias in any Latin or Greek document during the Graeco-Roman period, while the female name Junia is well-attested (Belleville 2005:38). The second controversy relates to the use of the preposition ἐν plus the dative. This phrasing could mean that Junia (and Andronicus) was either simply well-known by the apostles or that she was a well-known member of the apostolic group. While engaging this debate would take this paper beyond its stated scope, it is worthwhile to note that the category of apostle in this context refers to a wider group than the twelve (cf. Paul's inclusion of himself in the apostolic group in 1 Cor 4:9, Gal 1:17 and 1 Thess 2:6, which he omits here) and that the category of apostle as gift to the church (1 Cor 12:28–29; Eph 4:11) is not qualified by any gender qualifications or limits.

13 Westfall (2016:275) observes that Paul only employs κοπιᾶω for women (Mary; Tryphena; Tryphosa) in the letter to the Romans—a term he characteristically uses to refer to his own missionary work (cf. 1 Cor 4:12, 15:10; Gal 4:11; Phil 2:16; Col 1:29; 1 Tim 4:10).

First Corinthians and Philippians are two epistles that contain explicit references to women, although not in similar vogue to Romans 16. Paul's reference to τῶν Χλόης (lit. 'those of Chloe'; 1 Cor 1:11) probably indicates that she had a church meeting in her house. The report from the saints in her household is one of the main occasions for the letter to the church in Corinth. In the letter to the Philippians (4:2), Euodia and Syntyche are greeted. Both are described as those who strived/contended (συνήθλησάν) together with Paul, Clement, and other co-labourers (συνεργόι) in the Gospel. These two women are exhorted by Paul to agree or 'think the same' in the Lord (τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ἐν κυρίῳ), implying that there was probably some form of strife or division between them which had spilled over into the ἐκκλησία and was causing tension among its members. Among the so-called disputed letters, Paul sends regards from a woman named Claudia to Timothy (2 Tim 4:21). However, apart from her probable Roman identity as revealed by her name (Walls 1996:209), nothing else is known about her. In Colossians 4:15, Paul greets a woman named Nympha together with the church meeting in her house (τὴν κατ' οἶκον αὐτῆς ἐκκλησίαν) in the Lycus Valley.

Based on the above, it is evident that Paul's salutations to other women were far from superficial. Women occupied key roles in the new society and steered the substantive matters of the movement drawing from their manifold resources. However, despite Paul's positive portrait of female Christ followers, only Apphia appears in a Pauline letter opening, making her a unique figure in his corpus. What follows is a treatment of Apphia's reception across the ages, and it is shown that this reception is a product of interpretation and socially-motivated happenings in front of the text.

3. Apphia's *identities* Across the Ages

Apphia's name, probably of Phrygian origin, was common in Western Asia Minor (Bieberstein 2012:850). Apart from the epithet, ἡ ἀδελφή (v.2), Paul provides no additional social identity markers to identify her. Important to note, regarding the epistolary greeting, is that it did not simply function as a salutation but was essential in establishing the relationship between sender(s) and receiver(s) (Wall 1993:193). The senders of the letter to Philemon are identified as Paul and Timothy, while the addressees are fourfold: Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church 'in your house' (τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ).¹⁴ The fact that Philemon, Apphia and Archippus are not collapsed into this category of ἐκκλησία is significant, as it indicates that all three function as distinguished members of the community

14 The single genitive of possession (σου) seems to rule out the possibility that the house belonged to more than one of the three addressees. The implications of this singular use for the possible marital status of Apphia and Philemon will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

(Wajda 2017:44). In Apphia's (and Archippus') case, the reason for this distinguished status has, however, plagued interpreters for centuries, because, while Paul clearly wishes to single her out, he (probably due to the high-context nature of the letter) does not specify why he does so.

3.1. Apphia in the middle

Worth noting is that Paul places Apphia's name between that of Philemon and Archippus. While it makes sense to identify Philemon as the primary addressee due to the placement of his name as the first one (Quient 2017:10), the order in which Apphia and Archippus appear is a bit more curious. There are those, like Jerome (c.347–419/420) who held that the placement of Apphia's name in the middle of the two male names (whom Jerome recognised as two apostles) illustrates a sense of protection and support from them (*in Philm.* 1–3, 88.196).¹⁵ Jerome also recognised that her placement before Archippus denotes a sense of merit, meaning that she ranked before him (88.196–7). Theodoret of Cyrus (c.393–457) speculated that the inclusion of Apphia's name served to appease her. Portraying a view of women as jealous (Hill 2001:265), he (insubstantially) argued that, if her name were to be left out of the letter, she would have resisted Paul's commands out of spite (*in Philm.* 1–3, 288.12–13). While Apphia is absent in the writings of the likes of Ambrosiaster (Bray 2009), Luther (1968) and Calvin (2010), others have resorted to ascribing a variety of possible identities to her to solve the mystery. The most popular among these is the theory of Apphia as Philemon's wife.

3.2. Apphia the *materfamilias*

Seemingly the first to explore the possibility of Apphia as Philemon's wife was the church father John Chrysostom (*hom. in Philm.* 1.2, 6.329.35),¹⁶ writing anywhere between AD 386–404. Chrysostom (1.2, 6.329.35–38) praises Paul for not only consulting the *paterfamilias* of a household, but also his wife and friends, implying that this speaks of Paul's humility. While Chrysostom (1.2, 6.330.6–8) speculated that Archippus could be part of the clergy, this possibility was ruled out for Apphia. Tolmie (2016:290) ventures that this is probably because the office of deacon was only embodied by virgins in Chrysostom's time and since he assumed Apphia to be married, he did not consider the possibility of her holding the office.

Later, Theodore of Mopsuestia also affirmed the hypothesis that Philemon and Apphia were husband and wife. Additionally, he argued that Archippus was Apphia and Philemon's son (*in Philm.* 2, 782.6; 786.25).¹⁷ Theodore did not see Philemon as an apostle,

15 Bucchi's (2003:75–106) critical edition was used here.

16 Field's (1849–1862) text was used here.

17 There is some merit to this point of view as it would be customary to name a husband, then his wife, and then their son (Tolmie, 2016:296). If Apphia was not Philemon's wife, the mention of her name before that of Archippus becomes quite curious to an historically informed audience. This is something that Jerome, who saw Archippus as a bishop, had an immense struggle with.

18 Other than Prisca and Aquila (see Acts 18:2) we have no evidence from this epistle or from other biblical texts to infer that the two were married. Bieberstein (2012:849) emphatically states, 'There is not a single word that relates Apphia to either of the two men. Even the fact that she is named directly after Philemon does not automatically indicate that she is characterized as his wife'. While the designation of Apphia as τῆ ἀδελφῆ could be linked to Paul's reference to a believing wife (ἀδελφὴν γυναῖκα lit, 'sister wife') in 1 Cor 9:5, the accusative ἀδελφὴν, as used in the letter to the Corinthians, does not refer to the spousal status of the woman, but qualifies the spousal status contained in the accusative γυναῖκα. The claim that τῆ ἀδελφῆ alludes to wifely status on Apphia's behalf is thus wanting (Stenschke 2009:168).

19 This is an important observation. The nomenclature of ἀδελφῆ does not necessarily imply leadership or office. However, Apphia's inclusion in the address, which sets her apart from the ἐκκλησία, does seem to imply some special role in the church community.

20 Perhaps the possibility of a marital union between Apphia and Philemon adds further significance to the language used by Paul. Even if Apphia and Philemon were married, Paul does not address Apphia on the basis of her status as spouse (and therefore *materfamilias*), but on the basis of her identity as sister in Christ.

but as a virtuous husband and father, who, together with his wife and son, are addressed in Paul's letter (2, 782.14–17). Theodoret of Cyrus argued along a similar vein, referring to Apphia as τὴν ὁμόζυγα—a yoke bearer, which he interprets both as one sharing the faith and as a wife (*in Philm.* 1–3, 288.9). However, he did not identify Archippus as Apphia and Philemon's son, but as one entrusted with the apostolic teaching based on Colossians 4:17 (288.11–12).

Others like Lightfoot (1975:306), Stuhlmacher (1975:30), Lohse (1988:190), Vincent (2000:176) and Harris (2010:211) have also argued that Apphia was Philemon's wife. Locating the role of wife in the Graeco-Roman context introduces us to the demarcation of public and private space (πόλις and οἶκος). In this context, wives were expected to manage the household, which included exercising authority over household slaves (Westfall 2016:264). If Apphia was Philemon's wife, then her role as *materfamilias* (which was essentially locked up in her relation to the *paterfamilias*) would have given her *potestas* over the slaves in the household. This would have warranted the addition of her name to the greeting (McKnight 2017:58). However, any indication of spousal status on Apphia's part is simply missing from the text.¹⁸ Apphia is not identified as γυνή (wife). Furthermore, Apphia as Philemon's wife was a view that only gained traction five centuries after the letter was composed. Consequently, Tolmie (2016:296) cautions against a simplistic perpetuation as this view was conditioned by a socio-historic climate that placed nuptials in high stead. Perhaps, this is grounded in the echoing of androcentric ways of thought which assume a woman cannot be named on her own terms (Bieberstein 2013:850). Equally, the text does not allow us to make assumptions regarding Apphia's office within the early church. This is because claiming that she was ordained in a specific office would be just as presumptuous as claiming that she was married to one of the two men.¹⁹ However, what the text does reveal is that she was honoured and valued as a contributing member within the household of God. Both Apphia and Archippus are marked by their participation and role in God's kingdom rather than Philemon's household, as demonstrated by the appellations that identify both figures in an ecclesial sense (τῆ ἀδελφῆ for Apphia; τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν for Archippus).²⁰

Assuming that Apphia and Philemon were married, simply because her name follows his, is not a compelling argument as her name is one of three (as opposed to one of two; Cotter 1994:351). Moreover, after greeting Philemon, Apphia and Archippus, Paul greets a fourth party: τῆ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησία ('the church in your [singular] house'). When one considers the fact that Paul uses the plural possessive noun

when referring to the church meeting in Prisca and Aquila's house in Romans 16:5 (τὴν κατ' οἶκον αὐτῶν ἐκκλησίαν), the claim that Paul saw Philemon and Apphia (and Archippus) as *familia* does not hold water. One would expect Paul to use the plural possessive pronoun, instead of the singular, if the house belonged to both Philemon and Apphia (Bieberstein 2012:849; Winter 1994:309).²¹ Moreover, Philemon is individually identified as co-worker (the singular dative *συνεργῶ* is used; v.1), while nothing is said of Apphia's participation in this working, not to mention a co-working between the two as yoked believers (cf. Prisca and Aquila being addressed as *τοὺς συνεργούς μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ* in Rom 16:3). Rather, all three addressees receive individual and different appellations (Cotter 1994:351).²²

3.3. Apphia, Philemon's sister

While the theory of Apphia as Philemon's sister is not as common as the one identifying her as his wife, there are some who take Paul's identification of Apphia by the appositional *τῆ ἀδελφῆ* ([to]the sister) in a literal manner.²³ One of the first to explore this possibility is the church father Pelagius (c.360-418), who regarded Apphia as Philemon's biological sister (*in Philm.* 2, 536.10–11). While Pelagius seems to be the first to champion this idea, the absence of a developed defence to accompany his theory may suggest a repetition of an unrecorded existing idea (Tolmie 2016:292). Pelagius also turns to the possibility of Apphia as Philemon's wife but does not endorse this view with the same fervour as he does the former.

Tellingly, Paul uses 'sister' for three women: Apphia (Phlm 2), Phoebe (Rom 16:1), and an unnamed woman identified as the sister of Nereus (Rom 16:15). While the epithet used for Phoebe seems to indicate a more spiritual use of the word,²⁴ and that of Nereus' sister seems more literal,²⁵ Apphia's designation as sister is more ambiguous because of the absence of a possessive noun. Moreover, Paul frequently uses a similar label to refer to churches in other epistles.²⁶ It follows, therefore, that the use of this expression does not necessitate a hereditary kinship but rather 'spiritual relations' (Wajda 2017:44). This means the nomenclature employed in *Philemon* 2 cannot be used to determine Apphia's relationship to any of the men within the epistle. Nevertheless, what can be discerned from *καὶ Ἀπφία τῆ ἀδελφῆ* is that Apphia was recognised by a believing community and, based on her contribution, was regarded as *τῆ ἀδελφῆ*.

²⁶ See Rom 1:13; 7:1, 4; 8:12; 10:1; 11:25; 12:1; 14:10, 13, 15, 21; 15:14, 30; 16:14, 17; 1 Cor 1:10, 11, 26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 5:11; 6:5, 6, 8; 7:12, 15, 24, 29; 1 Cor 8:11–13; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6, 20, 26, 39; 15:1, 6, 31, 50, 58; 16:11, 12, 15, 20; 2 Cor. 1:8; 13:11; Gal 1:11; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18; Phil 1:12; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1, 8; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:4; 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:7; 4:1, 10, 13; 5:1, 4, 12, 14, 25–27; 2 Thess 1:3; 2:1, 13, 15; 3:1, 6, 13; 1 Tim 4:6; 6:2.

²¹ Cf. Col 4:15, where the singular is used to refer to the church meeting in Nympha's house.

²² If one were to identify a potential marriage partner for Apphia based on the appellation of *ἡ ἀδελφή*, the most probable one would be Timothy, who is identified as *ὁ ἀδελφός*, the masculine equivalent of Apphia's title, within the same greeting (Cotter 1994:351).

²³ One of the reasons for this theory being less common is that some manuscripts (mainly Textus Receptus) contain the appellation of 'beloved' where others (codices A, D*, E*, F, G, and κ) use 'sister' for Apphia (Tolmie 2016:293, 5). Translations from the former were used by Chrysostom, Theodore and Theodoret. Apphia's epithet, 'beloved' coincides with the appellation used for Philemon (*τῶ ἀγαπητῶ*), which lends itself to the hypothesis that the two were married. Translations from the latter were used by Pelagius and Jerome, although Jerome favoured the interpretation of Apphia as Philemon's wife.

²⁴ Phoebe is identified as *τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἡμῶν* ('our sister') by Paul. The plural genitive includes others (probably individuals like Timothy, Lucius, Jason, Sosipater, Tertius, Gaius, Erastus and Quartus; Rom 16:21–23), which makes it highly improbable that it refers to blood relations.

²⁵ The woman is identified only as *τὴν ἀδελφὴν αὐτοῦ*. If Paul were using the word in a spiritual sense, he would have rather opted for a possessive noun in the first-person plural like the one used for Phoebe (Rom 16:1).

3.4. Apphia the slave

Some, like Barth (1961:228), Bruce (1984:206), Harris (1991:245), Martin (1991:142), Dunn (1996:312), Malina and Pilch (2006:322), Witherington III (2007:54), and Moo (2008:382-383) have suggested an alternative possibility, where Apphia is not related to Philemon or Archippus, but functions as the wife of Onesimus, making her a slave. Slave marriages (*contubernium*), like everything in the household, were under the governance of the *paterfamilias* and were not recognised beyond the confines of the household (Goodman 2012:198; Barth & Blanke 2000:7). Therefore, even if Apphia were a slave in Philemon's household, the mention of her name among the addressees would either be inconsistent with his convention (Quiet 2017:10) or would be a herald to something more revolutionary—which is quite unlikely. Moreover, the problem with treating Onesimus and Apphia as a married couple is effectively an argument from silence, one that remains uncorroborated by the text. For instance, Apphia is mentioned in verse 2 and Onesimus is only brought to the fore in verse 10. Nowhere does Paul draw lines of relationship between them save the ἀδελφή/ἀδελφός designations which he also applies to Philemon (vv.7, 20) and Timothy (v.1). However, if Apphia, were a *vilicus* (a slave in charge of other slaves), then her appearance in the letter opening would imply a rhetorical strategy consistent with the rest of the letter. This, however, would be difficult to establish, since *Philemon* nowhere elaborates on her role in Philemon's οἶκος. Perhaps what is most telling is the fact that nothing is said of Apphia's legal status, a certain way of identification in the first-century CE milieu, rendering this position speculative at best.

When one considers how *contubernium* were used as tools of social control, the speculative nature of this view is further underlined. Commenting on these 'marriages' Cohick (2009:260–261) notes how they were not protected by law and could be dissolved by the *paterfamilias* at a moment's notice. As a slave in such an arrangement, Apphia would have been totally under the *potestas* of the *paterfamilias*, rendering redundant her mention in the letter opening, and by extension doing little to advance Paul's agenda. Thus, if Paul is leveraging influence on Philemon by mentioning a slave in a 'loose marriage,' he weakens his premise and the cogency of his argument from the onset.

3.5. Apphia the witness

Another view championed by the likes of Bieberstein (2012) is that Apphia was a witness. Bieberstein bases this on elements of *deliberative rhetoric* that can be detected in *Philemon* 4–22. According to Aristotle (*Rhet* 1358a36), *deliberative rhetoric* serves

to ‘persuade or dissuade’ a person or persons. Typically, this type of rhetoric has three parts, an *exordium*, a *proof*, and a *peroration*. One may say Paul’s thanksgiving and prayer section (vv.4–7) functions as a form of *exordium* (προίμιον) whose express purpose is to ‘establish the appropriate mood and to secure the goodwill of the hearer, both by praise itself and by linking that praise to the subject in question’ (Church 1978:20). With praise and its linkage to a subject, it is plausible to say that in *Philemon* 4–7 Paul employs elements of *deliberative rhetoric* to set the stage for the request he later makes in the *proof*. According to Ip (2017:58), the *proof* (πίστις) ‘sometimes called the body of the letter, mainly serves the function of advancing the argument’. This stands in contrast to the *exordium* whose purpose is to set the mood between sender and recipient. This it does by establishing ‘two motives for action, honour (*honestas*) and advantage (*utilitas*)’—elements that richly course the flow of the epistle (Church 1978:19). The *peroration* (ἐπίλογος) forms the final phase in *deliberative rhetoric*. It is characterised by four elements which are: ‘restating one’s appeal; securing the hearer’s favour; amplifying one’s argument; and, setting the hearer in an emotional frame of mind’ (Church 1978:20). In *Philemon* this coincides with verses 17–22 whose climax is Paul’s indication of impending release together with expected hospitality at Philemon’s home.

Since Paul’s objective is to persuade Philemon, the first authoritative voice that Paul brings into the conversation is that of Timothy, a well-known brother and leader in the faith. In mentioning Apphia and Archippus, he is adding to his list of (authoritative) witnesses (Bieberstein 2012:848). Either these two had the authority to ensure that Onesimus would be treated appropriately, or they had the authority to influence Philemon and call him to account. Such a perspective takes *Philemon* beyond a conversation between two men but classifies it as an exchange which also submits itself to the watchful eyes of a woman. Bieberstein (2012:850) goes as far as to argue that Paul saw Apphia as someone willing and capable of intervening if Philemon were not to honour Paul’s requests. This indicates that the matter addressed in the letter is more than a personal issue, but essentially concerns a wider group of people. In this vein, McKnight (2017:57) classifies the letter as ‘public-personal’ because Paul includes other addressees.²⁷

27 Moreover, the identification of the church as the fourth recipient and the corresponding use of first-person and second-person plural pronouns in vv. 3 (ἡμῶν; ὑμῖν), 22 (ὑμῶν; ὑμῖν) and 25 (ὑμῶν) indicate that this is not a private letter between one sender and one receiver.

4. Apphia Our Sister

4.1. Apphia and other addressees

Philemon 2a reads, ‘καὶ Ἀφίᾳ τῇ ἀδελφῇ...’ making Apphia the fifth person mentioned in the letter, all within a space of two verses. Arguably, the social designation τῇ ἀδελφῇ (the sister), serves to connect Apphia with Paul, Timothy, Philemon, Archippus, and the ἐκκλησία in the context of Christ’s mission. This concentration of names accompanied with descriptions of close affinity to Paul, sets the foundations for a rhetorical strategy that employs *pathos* in *Philemon’s* deliberative flow. When Apphia is considered against the backdrop of fellow male actors in the letter’s opening and closing, she forms an odd portrait that deviates from the *status quo* in both *Philemon* and the wider Corpus Paulinum. With her name nestled in a group of names with varying levels of ecclesial and social authority, Apphia’s sisterhood does not appear neutral but is employed by Paul to layer his plea with the witness of authoritative figures known to both the apostle and the *paterfamilias*. It follows, therefore, that for Apphia to be inscribed in the opening, among persons with established relational ties to Paul—and who themselves are recognised ministers in the Christian mission—is an indelible testament to her acumen and ecclesial function.

4.2. Ἀδελφοί terminology in *Philemon*

Considering the entire context of *Philemon*, ἀδελφοί terminology (encompassing both ἀδελφός and ἀδελφή) appears five times (vv.1, 2, 7, 16, 20). First, Timothy is introduced as a co-author and brother in *Philemon* 1. On this use of ἀδελφός, Porter (1999:58) notes how it signifies ‘a linguistic move of power on Paul’s part’. This is because the weight of the community of leaders (of which Timothy is prototypical) is brought to bear vis-à-vis Paul’s direct communication with Philemon, with the aim of creating both familial association and sobering seriousness in the *paterfamilias’* disposition. The second use of ἀδελφοί occurs in verse 2 and is directly linked to the mention of Apphia. With the address to Apphia appearing in the dative, speculation about her relationship to Philemon whose social identity is described in *Philemon* 1 and *Philemon* 16. It is here that some have advocated that Apphia was Philemon’s wife or sister, a position difficult to affirm from the text, as was covered earlier.

The remaining uses of ἀδελφοί terminology in *Philemon* occur in verse 7 and verse 20, respectively. Both cases constitute ‘instances of address’. Strikingly, in both instances Philemon is the subject, and he is addressed in the vocative case via the designation ἀδελφέ. Concerning the first ἀδελφέ in *Philemon* 7, this occurs at the end

of the letter's προοίμιον, punctuating the transition to the πίστις in which Paul celebrates Philemon's love evidenced in the refreshment (ἀναπέπαιται) of the saints' σπλάγχνα. Below is a representation of the five uses of ἀδελφός in *Philemon* and the persons they refer to. Included in this representation is the source of this kinship group as supported by *Philemon* 3.

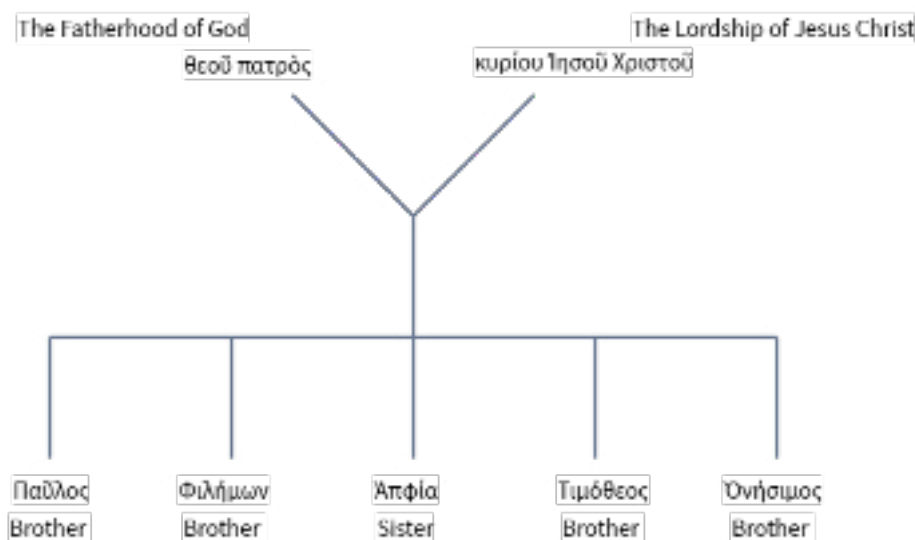


Figure 1. Ἀδελφοί representations in Philemon. Taken from Manyika BI 2019. *Philemon: A Transformation of Social Orders*, (PhD Diss. unpublished). South African Theological Seminary: Johannesburg, p. 252.

With ἀδελφοί denoting both male and female members of the new society in Christ, Apphia is presented as a member of the community of believers on one hand, and a fully-fledged worker, on par with Timothy and Philemon, on the other. This seems to be supported by the fact that Paul does not refer to other workers, besides those mentioned above, as ἀδελφοί in the context of *Philemon*.

4.3. Apphia on her own terms

While Apphia's relationship to the men in the greeting remains somewhat mysterious, this in no way compromises her contribution to the letter's message. Instead of looking to Philemon or Archippus as Apphia's social agents, we propose that the conversation shift to ask why Apphia *herself* (not Apphia the wife, sister or slave) would be addressed in this letter. An important observation to make is that Paul is not simply identifying her as someone related to a recipient, but bestows upon her the status of a recipient on an equal status with Philemon and Archippus. Furthermore, the absence of subordination and the use of the dative case for all four recipients (Philemon, Apphia, Archippus and the church) connected with the coordinating conjunction καί erases notions of dependence on her part (see Wallace 2000:294).

5. Apphia in the Global South

Sadly, the lack of identity markers and more importantly, official titles (cf. Phoebe, who is identified as *διάκονος* in Rom 16:1 and Junias, who is arguably associated with *οἱ ἀπόστολοι* in Rom 16:7) has led to the general neglect of Apphia in scholarly and ecclesial circles (Quient 2017:10). This muted reality is underscored in the Global South where Apphia's reception history is relegated to the margins consistent with the predominant androcentric leanings facilitated by reformation persuasions following Luther's and Calvin's silent treatment of the character (Luther 1968:1789ff; Calvin 2010:348). The consequence of such strategy may seem innocuous, but when considered in the frame of *Philemon*, the Southern African reality diverges somewhat from the text's injunctions.

Firstly, Apphia, a woman is a fully-fledged member of the *ἐκκλησία* that meets in Philemon's home. She functions as a rhetorical device that serves to curtail deviant behaviour on Philemon's part. In other words, Apphia has authority enough to function as a sentinel of honourable behaviour. She is an independent player in the *public court of reputation* (henceforth PCR) functioning as a watchdog that strengthens Paul's deliberative piece while modelling prototypical kinship behaviour in the new society. Paul raises Apphia to heights of example in the letter opening, warning and modelling for Philemon what is expected of the *paterfamilias* vis-à-vis Onesimus.

When this is translated into the Global South, the naming of a woman in a place of prominence in kinship and literary spaces in the *ἐκκλησία*, provides a model for the church in our context. A woman's gifts and quality of service become the only arbiter of ministerial contribution in the broader *missio Dei*. This challenges notions of nuptial status as the gateway into broader participation in the new society. Like Apphia, the female minister of the Gospel can and should function as a model of Christian ethical behaviour and a warning against deviant behaviour within a broader PCR. Like Philemon, a *paterfamilias*, who is warned and exhorted by a female co-worker, men in the church in the Global South can be encouraged into in-group ethical behaviour through the example of our sisters.

Secondly, to retrieve Apphia from the interpretive margins, however scant the information on Apphia might be, is an example of holding a high view of Scripture. A hermeneutic of trust looks at the text without regressing into predetermined doctrinal superstructures where the creased contours of the text are smoothed out to make the seemingly vague palatable. Apphia refuses to be relegated to the margins. She is prominent in the letter opening for a reason, a reason

consistent with the preservation of Gospel ethic. Thus, when the church in the Global South reads *Philemon*, it becomes imperative to use Apphia as a hermeneutically redemptive counterpoint (Webb 2005:331–349), characterised by amplifying her place in literature and reception history. Arguably, this could be paradigmatic for doing biblical studies and theology from the margins and from the bottom.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we attempted to give a précis of the interpretive factors surrounding the person of Apphia in *Philemon*. In locating Apphia among other sisters mentioned in other Pauline letters, we underlined continuity between female members of the new society. Next, the contours of *Philemon's Wirkungsgeschichte* were treated in the context of the many versions of Apphia that have been advanced to date. The third phase dealt with Apphia in the context of the letter where ἀδελφοί terminology is seen at key junctures in the rhetorical flow of the letter. When framed within this flow, Apphia stands on her own terms. She assumes the role of sentinel within a broader PCR. This strategy was shown to be an instruction to the *paterfamilias* on how to treat the slave Onesimus, also called an ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν. This slave, like Apphia is on equal kinship status as Philemon, Timothy, Paul, and Archippus leading one to conclude that in the new society the voiceless and weak are given voice and identity. We, therefore, propose that liberating Apphia from the imposed categories of wife, mother, sister or slave has far-reaching implications. It not only challenges how we see Apphia, but how we see Paul, who has often been held in contempt because of his so-called misogynistic ways and belittling of the role of women in the early church. For us, Paul's inclusion of Apphia in the letter opening is not a mere literary device, but a cue for the transformation of readers and church communities in the Global South, and indeed the world over.

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