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ABSTRACT:
The piece sheds light on the identity of the individual mentioned as Junia in Paul’s writings to the Romans. Numerous sources, spanning from the Patristics to contemporary academia, shed further insight into her life and character. The more significant question for our times becomes why Junia is less well-known and how she exemplifies a change (though slow) in the Roman Catholic Church’s perspective on women.

Junia the Apostle
History and Future of Women in the Church

by Hannah Miers

Junia is among the women mentioned and referenced in Paul’s letters, called out for their unique Christian witness in the early church. However, there seems to be a lack of awareness about Junia and with her obscurity the question is raised as to why such obscurity exists in the first place when compared to more well-known women such as St. Phoebe the deaconess (Romans 16:1-2). In discussing the background of Junia, Pauline churches are brought to light as a reason why there is minimal care for women like Junia. In order to
acknowledge Junia’s authenticity, it is necessary to analyze the complex history of the early church as well as the factors that led to the move from a system of gender equality to one that is more patriarchal.

Junia is located in Paul’s letter to the Christian community in Rome, mentioned within Romans 16:7: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (NRSVCE). However, this is the only thing that has been written about her, and ever since that time, theologians and scholars have been attempting to determine who this woman is and where she stands within the church. As a consequence of evaluating Junia, there is hope within the church that it will change its view of women to a more positive one. As women of the future, we hope for the potential for women to rise to more positions of authority within the church, though this will take time!

To start, in his commentary on Romans, John Chrysostom provides one of the earliest examples of providing some identity on Junia, “Oh, how great is the devotion (φιλοσοφία) of this woman, that she should be even counted worthy of the appellation of apostle!” That in and of itself has been the subject of a great deal of investigation given the implications of viewing Junia as a female leader within the Church in equal standing to the Apostles, in a potential position of authority. It is interesting to note the kinds of investigation and study conducted on Junia as a result, namely if Junia is a woman at all. The Greek word used in Paul’s letter to name Junia, IOYNIAN, was first researched to such a complicated extent that alongside the German translation of Junia by Luther, potentially alluded to Junia being a man instead. The question of whether IOYNIAN is a masculine or feminine term became one of the most contentious debates, an issue that has only in recent years achieved a consensus of the majority. The consensus is that Junia is, in fact, a feminine name and, thus, was a woman, “The linguistic possibility of a masculine name Ιουνία or of a

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2 Hartmann, This quote can be found under 3 IOYNIAN – from Chrysostom to the Reformers.
hypocoristic name ‘Iouvtoc is doubtful in the extreme.” What is done with such information, however, is to present the reality of such contentions, as much as the obstruction of women’s roles in the Church.

The obscurity of Junia’s ministry represents the crucial and wider problems surrounding women’s ministerial relevance. In not seeing women as true leaders, such a view becomes a barrier to understanding what the church can do with what is known about Junia with regard to her status in the community throughout her life. Not much has been done within church leadership, despite some scholars arguing definitively that, “imprisoned together for their devotion to Christ in preaching the gospel. Paul knew Andronicus and Junia well and acknowledged them as exemplary apostles called by God, sent to preach.”

Even though time has passed since these initial debates and the church has recognized Junia as an individual who deserves appropriate recognition, the question still remains as to how her and other early women’s statuses impact the role of women in the church today. Junia represents the real possibility of seeing women differently from a historical perspective, yet the fact she is not seen as a sign of women’s authority in the church means an alternative view persists. This historical background does exist, and in order to properly understand the controversy of the church to not see women’s ministry in the same manner as it sees men’s ministry, it is important to learn it.

Junia, as well as the entire debate that surrounds her, becomes “merely a confirmation of the violent erasure women have received throughout church history, of which the Junia debate is a mere microcosm.”

Appearing to have reached a point where it is no longer possible to solely concentrate on Junia, it is imperative to investigate the manner in which the church shifted toward a more patriarchal standpoint about women to create clarity on why the church maintains its current stances.

The distinction between how such a shift occurred and influenced the discrimination of women is something that needs to be studied and discerned. If these changes did not arise as a result of an origin of divine providence, then they would not have substantial authority.

While the subject of how the church moved itself away from more positive views of women is incredibly complicated and impossible to dissect as a whole. What can be done instead is review small instances of decisions made and how these choices had greater consequences.

The most important aspect to consider before anything else is the time and place the early church found itself in, alongside those early Christians and how they saw the world around them. A combination of social-communal practices in early Christianity, women gradually but intentionally not permitting themselves to go out and undertake ministry, and the very opinions of men over what work women had been doing all affected the church’s stance on women. So to help see where and how these shifts took place, one can look into the ministerial decisions made by Paul/the Pauline letters with respect to women and the reasoning behind them to observe what influenced Christian communities. From these letters, the social contexts of early church communities can be better understood and how they led to inequality, permitting a return to discussing Junia further.

The most impactful and studied Pauline verses concerning women all refer to or discuss Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSVCE). Specifically, what is being looked at is less on these exact words of Galatians and instead how Paul’s letters adapted early baptismal declarations to be better understood due to societal standards. Given that Pauline communities were Gentiles who on average, would be more likely to resist dramatic social changes, especially when discussing universal freedom, there had to be a way to

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properly teach and minister to these people. While Paul asserts equality because of Christ for women, there remained some limitations in order to remove suspicions that the church is not a sex cult. However as time went on and new generations began to look back on these various traditions, regardless of whether or not they were set up by Paul, “The post-Pauline and pseudo-Pauline tradition will draw out these restrictions in order to change the equality in Christ between women and men…into a relationship of subordination…” So, while Paul may be criticized or applauded for the ministerial decisions he makes here, this is not the real issue; rather, it was how the later communities and traditions interpreted Paul towards an oppressive degree of misogyny.

With the backbone of later interpretations of Paul coming from a ministerial decision on limiting women, the very reason such a choice was made comes from the political context of the Gentiles. Roman social standards, which were themselves impacted by Hellenization, argued to understand the world as a set of who has authority to be in charge. The letter to the Colossian community for example reinterpreted the passage of Galatians 3:28 based on political systems to emphasize how the father was the head of the household similar to how, “[man] exercises republican government over the wife.” To put it in another way, the influence of Greco-Roman political systems can be traced back to philosophers who advocated for and insisted on the dominance and/or subordination of the ego (self) over other people. As a result, recognizing the fact that power is essential for both control and survival, consideration was given to the question of how individuals can exercise power most effectively. The scope of using power not only influenced opinions on government, but it also affected every facet of social life, with the primary emphasis being placed upon families. The perception that women did not possess the same level of authority or power over nature as men did arose from these assertions. By proclaiming that not adhering to these ethical standards

8 Florenza, 624.
9 Florenza, 627.
10 Florenza, 627-629.
is contrary to the teachings of Jesus’s nature, and Paul’s theology, the later interpretations of Paul regarding women gain a foothold. Focusing on the standards that have been socially maintained and giving them theological significance through the metaphor of the relationship with Christ allows misogyny to remain within Christian communities.

Another example showcasing this phenomenon is the Letter to the Ephesians. Rather than arguing that men are superior to women, the letter focuses on the subordination of women and the treatment between all people in different positions of power. Although the letter does contain some themes that pertain to the subjection of wives, the primary focus of the letter is on the connection between husbands and wives, masters and slaves, and those who are dominant and those who are obedient. Reaffirming what was said in Galatians 3:28 as a call to equality between all Christians but at the same time keeping social and cultural differences in order to reduce conflicts between Jews or Gentiles.\textsuperscript{11} This is done for the sake of maintaining harmony inside the Christian household, made available through Christ, to show Christians in dominating or subordinate positions how to treat one another.\textsuperscript{12}

If we compare Ephesians to Colossians, we find that Ephesians uses a metaphor of relationships that is very similar to the one used in Colossians. This metaphor is used to illustrate how wives or slaves are required to view themselves by comparing themselves to the relationship that the church has with Jesus. If the Church is married to Christ, but also finds equality with Christ while following what he says, then all Christians should treat one another similarly despite their social differences. This does include how husbands and wives may see each other, stressing the love between Christ and the church. But putting more effort and writing on how culturally different Christians should treat one another, “transformed the relationship of Gentiles and Jews, but not the social roles of wives and slaves within the household of God.”\textsuperscript{13} The fact that the letters primarily write about the relationship of Christ with the church, establishing a theology on how to see others while maintaining

\textsuperscript{11} Florenza, 631.  
\textsuperscript{12} Florenza, 632.  
\textsuperscript{13} Florenza, 634.
the current societal norms of suppression, allowed for everyone to follow Jesus but keep their inequalities.

Even though this is brief, what is highlighted is a growing pattern in Pauline communities integrating theology into their unchanging social standards. In stark contrast to the liberating ideas between the sexes prevailing in the past where, “from the beginning women were attracted to the new movement in large numbers,” Ephesians highlights the point that greater freedom is associated with Christ, meant for both the eschatological future and in the current moment.

The reinterpretation of Paul’s words in Galatians 3:28 did establish new traditions of how Christians must see one another while they are in unequal positions of authority and control, but led to more subtle subjection of women. Despite this, there is still adequate historical evidence to prove that influential groups of women within the early church were subjected to targeted misogyny. Prominently, this includes the widows, who are mentioned in many places throughout the New Testament, beginning with the book of Acts (Acts 9, 36-43). As Christianity grew and began to shift toward a more socially accepted and patriarchal perspective, women became dissatisfied with the shortcomings of the church’s promise of liberation. The widows, existing as women who would have had no restrictions on their lives as they served others, saw themselves as being suppressed in a significant way. There was an admonishment in how the widows should act in order to determine who could join, “and reduce the circle of widows to a minimum…grown to an unacceptable size…because of potential and real abuse of the office [of their ministry].” This abuse did include legitimate gnostic heresies, but within these growing groups of widows’ circles included women who sought the freedom to live and serve within the church. As a result, a combination of criticism from wider society and growing heresies influenced the church to decrease the number of members identified as widows. This reflects the church using its hierarchical authority, which,

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15 Bassler, 639.
by consequence, became and was patriarchal.\textsuperscript{16}

However, this would not be the only instance of women being restricted; naturally, such oppression of women would include Junia. If Junia was someone who was so well known by Paul and the community in Rome, but found herself in the social context of Rome, yet remembered throughout the Patristic period, then it is only reasonable that she would be rendered subject to similar repression. In this context, what would be necessary is an evaluation of the degree to which this phenomenon of not portraying women in the positions that they held in the church throughout the course of history has become pervasive. In this particular instance, it is constructive to revisit Junia once more and investigate the possibility of identifying her ministry with an approach that goes beyond the fact that she was a named woman in the early church.

Moving forward toward another popular theory concerning Junia and her identity, it has been argued that, contrary to the widespread perception, Junia is actually someone who is identified in the gospels and Acts of the Apostles. There are two instances in the Gospel of Luke where the hypothetical Junia is referred to by name.\textsuperscript{17} Junia would be Joanna, a married woman who was a member of Herod’s court and one of the many women who traveled with Jesus, as reported in the Gospel of Luke. Joanna is Junia, but she would be using her Latinized identity due to her socio-economic status and education. This hypothesis has been developed for a number of reasons, the most significant of which is that it would provide legitimacy to the reason that Paul denotes Junia as being prominent among the apostles in Romans 16:7. Not just because she is mentioned in the gospels, but also because, curiously enough, “becoming one of the ‘holy women’ who followed Jesus…Aramaic tradition states that Joanna became a traveling missionary to Rome.”\textsuperscript{18} With the

\textsuperscript{16} Bassler, 641-643.
\textsuperscript{18} Clark, 102.
insinuation being Junia was an incredibly significant and prominent leader and witness of Christ’s church with the status of an apostle, more so than Paul who never saw Jesus in the flesh, it makes sense as to why Paul would choose to name her.

Ultimately, the issue for the early church had been that the sudden transformation Christianity brought about in the world as a whole, not just the social order of Greco-Roman society, was so drastically different that it generated resistance even from Christian leaders, minor or major. The tools that would have been necessary for such a significant transition toward at least gender equality, understanding what this world could look like, were not accessible or conceivable. A transformation of this type would have an influence on the perceptions of the political systems already in place. Many would have seen Christianity as ruining the world of family life and government, where domination by power and subordination to it are part of nature. While there was a strong opposition to Christianity, the Church did not fully realize what it could become in light of present eschatological freedom. The expected resistance to the Kingdom of God that Jesus alluded to now additionally came from Christians as well.

Currently, a theology that seeks to reconcile eschatological freedom and socially acceptable subordinate structures remains within exegesis and the wider Christian tradition. Examining Junia was carried out with the intention of recognizing these instances of resisting freedom within tradition in order to make an effort for further appropriate discernment of scripture. However, when it comes to applying anything learned or recognized regarding women in the church, it is met with resistance.

Scholarship only recently changed its perception of Junia no longer being identified as a woman or as an apostle as early as the mid-19th century. The misogyny with which Paul was read and interpreted, in addition to the manner in which he is still currently expressed with regard to women, is evidence of the “reluctance of the church even in modern times to read

19 Eldon J. Epp, “Conclusion: There was an Apostle Junia,” in Junia: The First Woman Apostle (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 79.
Paul afresh.” 20 Paul’s recitation of the promises made in Galatians 3:28, in which the church can now become a present witness to such a reality, reveals the essence of Christian identity and how Paul saw women in light of Christ. This is the revelation that can be found in Galatians. Junia represents women, both in those who have worked in the past and in those who are working now, both known and unknown, to no longer be considered as being “chained to the subordinate roles of the old creation.” 21

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21 Scroggs, 303.
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