

# ***Diakonos and prostatis: Women's patronage in Early Christianity***

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## **Abstract**

*In spite of numerous studies on the patronage system in Mediterranean antiquity, little attention has been paid to either how the patronage of women was part of the system or how it differed. In fact, there is substantial evidence for women's exercise of both public and private patronage to women and men in the Greco-Roman world, by both elites and sub-elites. This information must then be applied to early Christian texts to infer how women's patronage functioned in early house churches and Christian life.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The name of Phoebe and the allusion to Romans 16:1 these days evokes interest, controversy, and extensive bibliography. I do not intend here to exegete this passage, but to use it as a springboard to examine a significant part of the social life of early Christianity that has received little attention: the role of women patrons in the life of the church. To do that, we must back up and look first of all at the wider phenomenon of patronage in the ancient Greco-Roman world and how it functioned with regard to women.

The phenomenon of patronage in ancient Roman society has been well studied. There are major cross-cultural studies of the social construction of patronage (Gellner & Waterbury 1977; Eisenstadt & Roniger 1984; Elliott 1996) and of its specific exercise in ancient Rome (Saller 1982; Wallace-Hadrill 1989; Krause 1987). Patronage in early Christianity is now beginning to

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occupy the attention of biblical scholars and historians, beginning already with Fred Danker's influential *Benefactor* 1982 (later, Chow 1992; Joubert 2001) and of course, the ever-insightful E A Judge already in 1960. In all of the above cases, however, the androcentric norm prevails, and women are hardly mentioned, in spite of the fact that they participated heavily in the patronage system on both sides, as patrons and clients.

Thus, this article has four parts: first, a quick survey of patronage and how it functioned; second, women's exercise of patronage in the Roman world; third, the role of patronage in early Christian life; and finally, the role of Christian women in this social system.

## **2. PATRONAGE IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN AT THE TIME OF THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE**

In their cross-cultural study of patronage, Eisenstadt & Roniger (1984:48-49) list nine characteristics of patron-client relations. They are usually "particularistic and diffuse." They are characterized by simultaneous exchange of different kinds of resources, economic and political on one side and "promises of reciprocity, solidarity, and loyalty on the other." The exchange of resources usually comes as some kind of "package-deal" in which none can be exchanged separately, but only in full combination. They contain an ideal of "unconditionality and of long-range credit." They bring with them a strong sense of interpersonal obligation that is intricately connected with concepts of honor and shame. Patron-client relationships are not fully legal but rather more informal, and at times, go directly against or furnish a means to circumvent laws. These relationships are entered into and can be abandoned more or less voluntarily, though social constraints can certainly set up a situation in which a client has little choice. They are formed in vertical personal relationships and tend to undermine any sense of horizontal solidarity. Finally, they are "based on a very strong element of inequality and of differences of power between patrons and clients."

John Elliott (1996:148) notes that patronage "involves issues of unequal power relations, pyramids of power, power brokers, protection, privilege, prestige, payoffs and tradeoffs, influence, 'juice,' 'clout,' 'connections,' *Beziehungen*, *raccomendazioni*, 'networks,' reciprocal grants and obligations, values associated with friendship, loyalty, and generosity, and the various strands that link this institution to the social system at large."

Richard Saller (1982:1), in his study of Roman personal patronage, synthesizes it all into three pivotal characteristics: there is reciprocal exchange of goods and services, the relationship is personal and of some duration, and finally, the relationship is asymmetrical. A fourth characteristic is often added

in the consensus: that is it voluntary and not legally enforceable (Wallace-Hadrill 1989:3).

One of the contributions of the patronage system to the social order is to give the weak a means of influencing the powerful (Saller 1982:191-92). The client could expect to receive economic and political benefits, for example, gifts of food, invitations to dinner (for the importance of this dinner invitation as symbol of patronage, see Juvenal, *Sat* 5.12-15), gifts of land, house, or sometimes cash, low or no interest loans, lodging in the town house or villa of the patron, favorable recommendations and appointments, help with matchmaking, and bequests and inheritance (White 1978:90-92). The patron in return could expect loyalty, public support, economic assistance if needed and possible, votes, and most important, public praise and presence, especially at significant times for the political advancement of the patron. Clients found themselves in a double bind: it was expected that they would publicize the generosity of their patron's *beneficia*, but the admission of having received them marked one's own lower social status (Saller 1982:127-28). A client who did not give proper praise was considered *ingratus* and unworthy of more benefaction.

It is recognized by ancient social historians that patronage systems definitely existed to some extent in the cities of classical Greece even though there seems to have been no terminology to refer to it exactly (Millett 1989). For example, the word *prostatēs*, so important to us for understanding Romans 16:1, was in classical Athens the term for the required citizen patron of a *metoikos*, so no citizen would acknowledge having one. Yet in the Roman period, Plutarch understands *prostatēs* as the equivalent of *patronus* (*Romulus* 13) (Millett 1989:33-34). However, the institution of patronage never developed in earlier Greece in the extensive way that it did in Roman society. Moreover, the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire signaled a new resurgence in patronal relationships, as the old structures of government and power gave way to the uncertainty of newly developing ways of exercising power. The new figure of the *imperator* took advantage of the vacuum of power to seize control of major power networks, governing by an intricate balance of relationships with the elite families. Augustus was able to consolidate power and set up a system in which "the inaccessibility of the center except through personal links" deepened and nourished the patronal structure of society, and to cast himself as *pater patriae*, chief benevolent father figure of the entire Mediterranean world (Saller 1982:2-3; Wallace-Hadrill 1989:74, 79-81; Johnson and Dandeker 1989:237-38).

While the Latin language of patronage contained such direct words as *patronatus*, *patronus/a*, *clientela*, and *cliens*, by the time of the early Empire

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this language was generally considered too abrasive to the delicate honor system, and a new set of terms was adapted into the structures of patronage: that of friendship. Thus the semantic field of *amicitia* becomes the preferred language (Saller 1982:11-15; Brunt 1965). Because the patronage relationship was by definition asymmetrical but the language of friendship could also be used in the *topos* of true friendship, one could speak of *amici minores* (Pliny, *Ep* 2.6.2), *amici pauperes* (Pliny, *Ep* 9.30), *amici inferiores* (Seneca, *Ep ad Lucilium* 94.14) or the like, all of which were meant to be less condescending than the bald word *cliens* (Saller 1982:12; White 1978:81). Seneca (*De beneficiis* 6.34.2) credits Gaius Gracchus and Livius Drusus as the first to classify their "friends" into three categories, and suggests that the classification is reasonable and to be continued: *amici primi* who are received in private, *amici secundi* received with others, and *numquam veri* (never trustworthy) to be received all together. Some preferred the term *cultor* for one who was attempting to ingratiate him/herself with a patron, and more commonly, the verb *colere*, which also applied to honor and reverence due to the gods, a meaning that carried over into Christian usage. One of the major ways of exercising patronage was with regard to artists, poets, and writers; here words like *patronus* and *patrocinium* are never used (Joubert 2001:20; White 1978:79; cf Gold 1982).

The range of terms employed for this informal but essential social custom varies greatly: *amare/amor*, *sodalis*, *diligere/dilectus*, *contubernium* (more often used for a non-legal marriage), *caritas/carus*, *familiaritas/familiaris*, even *meus* and *noster* (White 1978:80-81). The exchange of goods and services was connoted by such terms as *meritum* and *gratia*, but primarily under the name of *officium* and *beneficium*, originally a gesture of duty and loyalty from the inferior vs. a gesture of largesse on the part of the superior. Gradually, however, the terms became almost interchangeable, and are thus used even by Cicero in his treatise *De officiis* (Saller 1982:12-22). The language of friendship could be used in an upward as well as a downward direction, that is, toward one's patron as well as toward one's client. The patronal relationship was often between two persons of distinctly different social classes, but it need not be. It could exist between near-equals, for example between a senior and a junior senator. Even senators could be referred to as imperial *clientes*. While one would think that the loyalty inherent in the patron-client relationship should have implied that a client could have only one patron, there is some evidence that it was possible to have more than one patron, perhaps in a way that would make it possible for the client to subtly play them off each other (Saller 1989:53-54). In the fourth century, the famous orator Libanius delivered at Antioch his oration

against patronage (*De patrociniis vicorum*) in the context of social and political upheavals that were driving peasants to align themselves in clientage with powerful military patrons, undermining the authority of aristocratic landowners over their peasants. In this context, he argues strongly that there must be only one patron: the landowner. Here, in the interest of wealthy landowners (Libanius' own class), we see both the ideal and the reality.

Two further aspects of the patronage system deserve further comment. The first is the particular relationship between patron and freed slave. Most of the characteristics of patronage still apply here, the main difference being that the *officia* and loyalty owed to the patron, under the title of *operae* and *obsequium*, was specifically designated, not at all voluntary, and enforceable by law. Here the terminology of patron and *libertus/a* was used, even in funerary inscriptions. The relationship was certainly not voluntary on the part of the freedperson, who often continued doing pretty much what he or she had done as a slave. Jennifer Glancy (2002:124-26) cautions that the patron-client model was not a good one in this more coercive case. Nevertheless, the terminology was used and some of the same mutually advantageous benefits were applied.

The second aspect is the phenomenon of public patronage or euergetism (Harmand 1957; Hands 1965; Joubert 2001)<sup>2</sup> and of an intermediate form that is important for early Christianity, patronage of a private group. While the essence of the patronage system is a relationship between two individual persons who are not social equals, in fact the relationship of one dominant person to groups of social inferiors has always been part of the system as an extension of the personal relationship into one with a collective relationship, whether a professional guild, a club, a group of the poor, the devotees of a private religion, or a city. Building public facilities like fountains or baths, providing free meals to the needy or to children of the city, or holding banquets at civic celebrations are all examples of public patronage. Building meeting houses and temples for groups, providing economic assistance or banquets to devotees are examples of the exercise of private patronage to groups. In return, the patron is named in thankful inscriptions or has a statue erected in his or her honor, is seated in a place of honor at official gatherings of the group, appointed to an official position (which may be honorary), and generally hailed as VIP. Of course, the role of the emperor constitutes the highest form of public patronage. The giving of public banquets by the emperor or by wealthy private citizens on the occasion of a festival or celebration is a familiar form of patronage, and those forms that we would call

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<sup>2</sup> Joubert's (2001) attempt to draw sharp distinctions between Roman patronage and Greek euergetism is not convincing.

charity or social aid were exercised not primarily out of compassion, but for the motive for which all patronage was exercised: honor, *philotimia*, *philodoxia* (Hands 1965:49).

### 3. WOMEN'S PATRONAGE IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Both private and public patronages were activities in which women were deeply involved. Women could attend the morning *salutatio* (Juvenal, *Sat* 1.120-16). There is ample evidence of women's participation in business. Women who had the legal status *sui iuris* could conduct their own transactions, though there were some legal limitations imposed. The earlier institution of *tutela*, male guardianship requiring permission to alienate property, was mostly inactive by the Augustan age, though former owners could still exercise considerable control over the property of a *liberta*. Other legislation was enacted that prevented women from taking on liability for the debts of others. Roman legal scholars think that this restriction was primarily aimed to protect women from unscrupulous husbands. As is often the case with Roman law, what is on the books is not necessarily what is done, and there were many exceptions (Gardner 1991:233-36).

The social and political patronage of elite women can be well documented. First, of course, women often served as patrons for other women. Cratia, the wife of M Cornelius Fronto, tutor of Marcus Aurelius, is called in one of his letters to the emperor a *cliēta* of Domitia Lucilla, the emperor's mother. As such, she visited the imperial family, staying with them in Naples without her husband to celebrate her patron's birthday (Fronto 1.145-51; Champlin 1980:25). An otherwise unknown woman named Valatta on the British frontier writes to Flavius Cerialis, commanding officer of the Vindolanda outpost, about a favor mediated by his wife ("Per Lepidinam"), Sulpicia Lepidina (Bowman & Thomas 1994:230-231).<sup>3</sup> The epitaph of Epiphania, a second or third century benefactor, the well-traveled daughter and wife of ship owners, reports that she was generous with her wealth, motivated by *eusebeia*, especially to abandoned friends *hōs gynē gynēksi*, as a woman to women (Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 2:55-56).

Women's patronage was not limited to women, however. Though women could not vote or hold elective office, elite women were heavily involved in the exertion of political pressure and the informal negotiations that were always included. Indeed, it seems likely that all elite women were involved in politics at some level by reason of their family connections. The influence of powerful women in the palace and the law court through their

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<sup>3</sup> No 257 (inv. 85.117). The tablet is dated to period 3 of the fort, 97-102/3 CE.

exercise of patronage, *amicitiae muliebres*, was ever present (Champlin 1980:109, 171 note 87; Bauman 1992; Dixon 1983:91). Moreover, Valerius Maximus 8.3 cites situations in which women argued their own cases in court. Though he thought this self-defense unusual, he does not at all imply that it was unusual for women to be involved in legal suits, either as defendant or plaintiff (Dixon 1983:100).

Roscius of Ameria, later defended by Cicero in a parricide case that involved political machinations against Sulla, fled for protection in Rome to the aristocrat Caecilia Metella, and not to any of her abundant male relatives or her husband, because of her *amicitia* with his deceased father. Whatever the political intricacies in the story, it was recognized that she was his patron, not one of the male members of her family (Dixon 1983:94, with other examples).

Augustus' wife Livia was exalted in public imagery as the paragon of wifely virtue, *patrona ordinis matronarum*, and upholder, with her husband, of "family values," in spite of their utter failure as parents to instill the advantages of the virtuous life in their daughter, Julia. Livia had her own entourage and client loyalties, even receiving the Senate in her house during her widowhood. Josephus recounts her benefactions to the Herodian family, including marriage advice to Salome (*Ant* 17.10).<sup>4</sup> Upon her death, the grateful Senate voted the erection of an arch in her honor, which had never before been done for a woman, but Tiberius never allowed it to be built. The Senate's gratitude arose because she had saved the lives of some of its members, provided for their orphaned children, and helped many by paying their daughters' dowries. She was so popular that she was called informally, in parallel to Augustus' title, *mater patriae*, a title that was denied to her officially, alas, even after her death (Dio Cassius 58.2.3) (Bauman 1992:124-129).<sup>5</sup>

Nero's aunt Domitia had clients, and the schemer Agrippina, Nero's mother, was known to be a patron for numbers of men eager for political advancement. It was she who succeeded in getting Seneca's exile rescinded (Tacitus, *Ann* 12.8). On the death of her father Germanicus, his *clientela* passed to her as well. At one point, Nero had her residence moved from the palace to the house that had belonged to Antonia in order to prevent the crowds that arrived for the morning *salutatio* to their patron (Tacitus, *Ann* 13.18.5). Her political enemy, Junia Silana, got two of her own male clients to charge Agrippina with inciting revolt from imperial authority in the person of

<sup>4</sup> Other imperial women who were benefactors to the Herodians, according to Josephus, were Antonia and Agrippina the Younger. Poppaea Sabina, wife of Nero, was also said to be mediator for Jewish causes (*Ant* 18.143, 164; 20.135-36; 20.189-96; *Life* 13-16), and Domitia, wife of Domitian, a personal benefactor of Josephus (*Life* 429) (see Matthews 2001:30-36).

<sup>5</sup> Livia's power was derivative of that of Augustus, but, like many queens and empresses, while she had it, she exercised it quite independently.

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Rubellius Plautus (Bauman 1992:146-48). Antonia Caenis, freedwoman of Claudius' mother Antonia, became mistress of Vespasian until her death. Dio Cassius (65.14.1-5) gives a vivid description of her patronal power and wealth: she gave in exchange for money various kinds of public offices and priesthods, and obtained imperial decisions and secured imperial pardons in favor of her clients.

Many more incidents could be mentioned. The names of Poppaea Sabina with Nero, Plotina with Trajan, Marcia with Commodus, and Julia Domna with Caracalla are among them. These stories of political involvement of elite women, or women who gain access to elite status through consorting with an elite male, are well known. Less attention has been paid to lesser women and their exercise of patronage. Cornelius Nepos' comment about the presence on the dining couches of Roman women – as contrasted to Greek – at dinner parties indicates greater social freedom of movement for first-century Roman and romanized women, but it also means greater access to the corridors of informal power and greater ability to influence them (Preface, *Illustrious Lives*). Juvenal complains of women who not only attend mixed dinner parties but also host them, and discourse on politics and literature (*Sat* 6.434-456) (Dixon 2001:101). He also hints (1.39) that the best way to social advancement is through the patronage of some aging wealthy woman.

The exercise of women's patronage was not limited to the elite, however. The evidence from Pompeii reveals women active in a variety of businesses and trades. They rented out and leased buildings and sold various commodities. The 154 wax tablets in the business files of the auctioneer L Caecilius Iucundus, for example, contain references to fourteen women who transacted business with him, including Umbricia Ianuaria who received 11,039 sesterces from the proceeds of a sale he had conducted for her (*CIL* 4.3440) (Ward s a:10-11). Other women lent money and, though they could not vote, supported local candidates for public office on wall graffiti like this one: "Statia and Petronia ask you to vote for Marcus Casellius and Lucius Alfucius for aediles. May our colony always have such citizens!" (*CIL* 4.3678; other examples in Lefkowitz and Fant 1992:152-53). Some women earned income from use of their property,<sup>6</sup> like the enterprising Julia Felix, probably a freedwoman, who owned a vast urban property in the northeast corner of Pompeii that contained a parking lot for horses and carriages, private dining rooms (one with its own fountain), baths, swimming pool, wine shop, and more modest areas for dining – and probably for takeout as well. She had more than what meets the eye today, for her notice on the outside wall advertised for lease "the Venus baths, fitted up for the best people, taverns,

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of women landowners in Hellenistic Egypt, see Pomeroy (1984:148-60, 171-73).



shops and second story rooms.”<sup>7</sup> The property is situated just across the street from the city palestra and amphitheatre. One suspects that this was *the* place to stop off before and after sports activities.

This kind of evidence is important for seeing the wide range of possibilities for women’s personal patronage. All of these non-elite women who had accumulated even a modest amount of wealth and connections could be active in patronage relationships. A freedwoman named Manlia T I Gnome, for example, boasts on her epitaph that she had many clients (*clientes habui multos* – *CIL* 6.21975). Women were also patrons of their own freedmen and freedwomen, with the differences that these legal relationships carried. A *patronissa* whose name has been lost from the inscription is honored on a second or third century Roman Greek epitaph by the freedman Gaius Fulvius Eutyches (Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 2:60-61). The same laws and customs applied to female as to male patrons. They set up their *libertus/a* with loans or gifts of money to start a new business, with a certain amount of legal control and the expectation of generous bequests in their former slaves’ will.<sup>8</sup> Marriages between a *patrona* and her *libertus*, though heavily discouraged and even forbidden by law at some points, are not unknown (e.g., *CIL* 6.14014; 14462; 15106; 15548; 16445; 21657; 23915; 25504; 28815; 35973). Some of these were likely cases in which the *patrona* herself came from originally servile status, but at least one is not: T Claudius Hermes in Rome commemorates his freeborn wife, Claudia, as *patrona optima* and *coniux fidelissima* (no 5106). Alimentary and funerary foundations provided sustenance in life and burials and commemorations at death, whether in the patron’s lifetime or by bequest, for members of the *familia*, that is, predominantly slaves and former slaves (Dixon 2001:106-7).

Women’s patronage of unofficial groups is an activity that bears directly on our understanding of their patronage in early Christianity. Euxenia, priestess of Aphrodite in Megalopolis in the Peloponnese in the second century BCE donated a guesthouse and a wall around the temple (*IG* 5.2.461) (Van Bremen 1993:223). Tation, daughter of Straton son of Empedon, from Kyme either built or remodeled at her own expense the building and the surrounding precinct of a synagogue, for which the Jews honored her with two traditional ways of rewarding a patron: a gold crown and a place of honor (*proedria*). The wording of the inscription (“the Jews honor her”), as well as the family names, suggests that she was not Jewish, but an outside benefactor (*CIJ* 2.738; Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 1:111). Similarly, Julia Severa of Acmonia in Phrygia who held a number of distinguished priesthoods and

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<sup>7</sup> Translation by Ward (s a:9).

<sup>8</sup> This was a bit restricted by the Papian Law of the Augustan period: *patronae* acquired more inheritance rights if they had two or three children (see Treggiari 1991:74-75).

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city offices, of a family sufficiently prominent that her son entered the Senate, donated property to the local synagogue, perhaps because two of its archons were freedmen or clients (*CIJ* 2.766; *MAMA* 6.264; L M White 1992:18-19).

Eumachia a public priestess of Pompeii, patroness of the fullers' guild, in her own name and that of her son, Numistrius Fronto, erected at her own expense a gallery, cryptoporticus, and portico for the fullers' building in a prominent place in the forum, dedicating them herself to *concordia* and *pietas augusti*. In gratitude, the guild erected a dedicatory statue of her with inscription, a copy of which still stands behind its building in Pompeii. She also built a tomb for herself and her *familia* outside one of the city gates (*CIL* 10.810, 811, 813).

Alimentary programs for poor children were popular ways for both men and women to exercise civic patronage. Besides imperial subsidy of these charitable projects, such as those in memory of the two imperial Faustinas, other wealthy women found this a suitable outlet for their money and a suitable way to be immortalized. Crispia Restituta of Beneventum set up one such project on income from her farm in 101 CE (*ILS* 6675). Caelia Macrina set up a fund to distribute a monthly meal to one hundred boys and one hundred girls in Tarracina (*ILS* 6278=*CIL* 10.6328). Fabia Agrippina of Ostia contributed the sizable sum of one million sesterces to such a program for one hundred girls, in memory of her mother (*CIL* 14.4450). Since officially sponsored alimentary programs favored boys, these deliberate acts of attention to the needs of girls may have been a conscious effort on the part of women benefactors to create a balance (Dixon 2001:108). Menodora in first century Sillyon in Pisidia gave wheat and money to her city, including 300,000 denarii for the support of its children. She also erected a statue of her deceased son, all the donations being in his memory (Van Bremen 1993:223).

Other forms of public patronage by women are also common, including in Asia Minor those connected with the holding of public office. The same Menodora held quite a number of public offices, including priestess of Demeter and of the imperial cult, *hierophantis* (a priest involved in initiations), *decaprōtos* (a committee of ten who supervised public revenue and collected taxes), *ktistria* (founder), *dēmiourgis* (magistrate), and *gymnasiarchos* (superintendent and/or supplier of the palestra). She was honored with many statues and inscriptions, as was the early second-century benefactor of Perga, Plankia Magna, who held the titles of *dēmiourgos* and *gymnasiarchos*.<sup>9</sup> Vedia Marcia of late third century Ephesus had held the title of *prytanis*, representative of the official cult of Artemis and also one of the principal

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<sup>9</sup> Other female gymnasiarchs are known (see Casarico 1982:118-22). There is even one in Egypt, and a female tax collector (see Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 8:49).

magistrates of the city (Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 6:26). Tata of second century Aphrodisias bore the title of *stephanephorus* (crownbearer), as did her husband, Attalus. She, however, supplied oil for athletes, was a priestess of the imperial cult, and many times held banquets for the citizens, supplying dining couches and the best entertainment (Kraemer 1992:84; 2004:249).

Junia Theodora of first-century Corinth, originally from Lycia, provided an anchorhold for Lycians passing through this commercially strategic city. In return for her benefactions, the Lycians set up in or near Corinth (the stone was discovered nearby in secondary use) five inscriptions on a single stone dedicated to her honor from the Lycian cities she had served. The combination of Latin and Greek names for Junia Theodora may indicate her Roman citizenship. The monument was set up during her lifetime, for the inscription from the federal assembly of the Lycians says that the assembly sends her a gold crown “for the time when she will come into the presence of the gods.” A second decree of the assembly offers her not only a gold crown but also “a portrait for her deification after her death,” painted on a gilt background. Among the services she performed for traveling Lycians were hospitality in her own house, cultivating the friendship of the Roman authorities in their favor, and designating her heir, Sextus Iulius, who gave every sign of carrying on what she began. Her patronage was not only directly to the Lycians but also on their behalf with the political powers. The decree of the Lycian city of Telmessos speaks of her *prostasia* in the context of hospitality and mediation (Kearsley 1985; Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 6:24-25).

Another important civic patron from the time of Nero is Claudia Metrodora of Chios, again probably a Greek woman with Roman citizenship besides that of her native Chios. She was an illegitimate daughter of Claudius Calobrotus, adopted by another man named Skytheinos, a rare instance of the adoption of a girl to supply an heir in a wealthy family. Like other civic patrons, she held some of the highest offices, gymnasiarch four times, *agonothete*, and *stephanephoros*, likely in exchange for public benefactions. Among them was an entire public bath complex. She also held the office of lifetime priestess of empress Livia under the title Aphrodite Livia. She was elected “queen” of the federation of thirteen Ionian cities, a title that is probably completely honorary whenever it or “king” occurs in this context. At some point she married a man whose name is not preserved and lived in Ephesus, where together they carried on their civic benefactions by erecting a portico (Kearsley 1985:128-30, 135-36).

Sergia Paullina hosted a burial society in her house in Rome (*CIL* 6.9148) and Pompeia Agrippinilla, wife of a consul, was patron of a second-century Dionysiac association near Rome that boasted more than three

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hundred members, who gratefully erected a statue to its patron and priestess (AE 1933.4; Chow 1992:68 note 2). The unflappable Ummidia Quadratilla, grandmother of a friend of Pliny the Younger, caused mayhem during her life by indulging her taste for gambling and pantomime entertainment, both carried on in her own home, to the dismay of many of her friends. Visitors had to accommodate. Pliny breathed a sigh of relief when she turned over her grandson to him to train: no longer would he be subject to this negative influence. However, her hometown of Casinum remembered the old lady differently when she died at the age of seventy-nine. There she was commemorated for her benefactions of amphitheatre, temple, and theatre, a glory of the city and not an embarrassment (Pliny, *Ep* 7.24.5; *CIL* 10.5813=*ILS* 5628; AE 1946.174; Dixon 2001:109, 188 note109).

Other specific women were hailed as patrons of their cities. In North Africa, Aradia Roscia Calpurnia Purgilla was acclaimed in the third century as patron of Bulla Regia (*CIL* 8. 14470) and Caecilia Sexti f. Petroniana Aemiliana patron of Thuburbo Minus (AE 1931.42). Egnatia Certiana was hailed as a patron of Beneventum in the second or third century (*CIL* 9.1578) and Publilia Caeciliana and Publilia Numisiana at Verecunda in the third century. Laberia Hostilia Crispina is proclaimed patron of the women of Trebulae, though it is not clear why (AE 1964.106; Harmand 1957:282, 301, 241; Dixon 2001:109).

In Herculaneum, where the hardened mud that covered the city made immediate retrieval of precious items much more difficult than at Pompeii, more statuary was thus preserved than at Pompeii. At Herculaneum, forty percent of the dedicatory statues are of women, mostly large and in bronze and metal. They were set up alongside those of men in the theatre and the forum area, without any perceptible pattern (Irelli 1979; Dexter 23 note 18).

This selection of evidence makes clear that both personal and public patronage were widely practiced by women in much the same way that it was practiced by men. The older interpretation that public offices and titles when held by men were actual, but when held by women were honorary, is no longer tenable. The burden of proof is on those who would so contend. Indeed, many of these titles and offices in cities, temples, and synagogues, were in fact honorary, but equally so for both men and women (Rajak & Noy 1993).

The major difference for women was that they were excluded from voting and elected office, though at least in Asia women did hold some of the highest public municipal appointments. The prohibition of women from the elective process, however, by no means kept them out of politics or the patronage system. We are accustomed to thinking systemically about women

in this society in terms of gender dichotomies in a gender-based hierarchical structure. But in face of the evidence, we can only conclude that women of *sufficient social status* in the Roman world exercised a great deal of freedom and power with regard to business and social activities. What made this possible? Riet van Bremen in his perceptive essay, “Women and Wealth,” notes that traditional ideas and laws about the subjection and confinement of women seem to have changed little. What did change is the concentration of wealth in the hands of some women and the lessening of the social controls over them through weakening of the distinction between the public and private dimensions of social life (see above). Another factor, however, is that in the Roman social system, as distinct from the older Greek ways, status took precedence over gender as a marker of prestige and power. A person of higher social status and access to power could function as mediator and dispenser of favor regardless of sex, with the same expectations of reciprocity in terms of honor, praise, and loyalty on the part of clients.

### **3. CHRISTIANS AND THE WORLD OF PATRONAGE**

Scholars now see that the model of social networks based on informal and asymmetrical relationships for the exchange of goods and resources is the social reality underlying the relationships that created the early Christian communities. They are “a series of overlapping but not systematically related circles,” in the words of E A Judge (1960a:iii). Patronage underlies exchanges of hospitality, the hosting of Christian gatherings, and most relationships of persons to other persons and to groups. Let us recall the kinds of things clients could expect of patrons, realizing that the same relationships were present in Christian communities: material and cash gifts, food and dinner invitations, lodging, favorable recommendations and appointments, help in matchmaking, and bequests and inheritances.

Civic benefaction by Christians would not be open to them for several centuries. However, there must be some surviving burials of Christians from before the late third century, though they did not leave any signs that mark them as Christian burials. It follows that there may be civic benefactions done by Christians with no sign of their Christian identity. But in this case, as with burials, there is no way to know. The areas of private and group benefaction were the areas in which their patronage primarily functioned, as far as we know.

Roman historians tend to assume that the social patterns documented among the elite were replicated insofar as was possible by the rest of society, a sort of “trickle-down” effect. It is regrettable that there is so little non-Christian or non-Jewish evidence preserved for the social exchanges of non-

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elites in the same period. Some funerary commemorations provide a few glimpses. Even there, however, those who could not afford inscriptions are excluded. In one sense, early Christian literature is one of the best bodies of evidence for the life of non-elites in the first centuries of the Empire. But there are, of course, key differences.

A number of questions must be asked about the function of patronage in the early church, especially with regard to hierarchy and authority. First, the Roman world loved honor, prestige, status symbols and signs of precedence. It is now generally understood that any exchange between two males outside the familiar setting was an implicit contest for honor. In the literature of the period, the love of honor and praise (*philotimia*) is the primary motive for benefactions. Would the portrait of the humble, crucified Jesus and Paul's proclamation of the cross and strength in weakness have any effect on the instinctive scramble for honor? Paul puts a great deal of effort into changing the mindset in his language of the cross in 1 Corinthians 1 and Galatians. The schismatic tendencies in the Corinthian community suggest that the lesson was not well learned in Paul's day, and the behavior of many bishops in the better-preserved Christian records of the fourth and fifth centuries suggest that it never was. In other words, we are talking here not about ideals but about realities. It is important to remember that the other side of the proclamation of the cross was that Christ was raised in power and subjected his enemies under his feet, a triumph in which the Christian believer was promised an eventual share (1 Cor 15:24-25; Ps 110:1).

Second, patronage nearly always presupposes an unequal relationship, because the whole point of it is access to power that the client would not otherwise have. Where do figures like Jesus and Paul fit here? Does their charismatic authority take precedence over the usually established criteria of status? And does not Paul have some relationships in which he is alternately patron and client? Third, network theory tells us that it is not ideas but personal contacts that create the environment for joining, for continued allegiance, and therefore for conversions. How did those social networks operate among the non-elites of the Roman cities who were brought into contact with Christian evangelizers? (Chow 1992; L M White 1992)

This is not the place to examine the traditions about Jesus in depth, but it is worth looking briefly at the figure of Jesus as it functions in patronal and brokerage roles. The proclamation of the Reign of God is the announcement of efficient patronage: all who approach it will receive what they ask (Mt 7:7; cf Heb 4:16). The relationship is certainly asymmetrical, and it is reciprocal: loyalty and praise are expected of clients in return for favors granted. Jesus is God's authorized agent on earth, dispensing such favors as healing,

exorcising, and above all, forgiveness of sin, the release of debt. The disciples are empowered at various levels to carry on the same work of dispensing God's patronage. In view of the emperor's claim to be chief father figure and Pontifex Maximus, that is, major mediator between gods and inhabitants of the Empire, these were dangerous ideas.

Through Paul's letters, we know more about him than about any other apostolic figure. There is a remarkable paucity in his letters of the terminology of friendship (only the closing greeting in 1 Cor 16:22, which may be a quoted formula), despite efforts to portray his relationship to the communities as one along the traditional lines of the literary topos of friendship (Fitzgerald 1996). There is, however, an abundance of talk about *charis*, understood theologically as grace, but in the world in which Paul developed this new meaning, the semantic field of *charis* is that of favor, graciousness, benefaction, and therefore of the asymmetrical relationship of patronage. It is God's *charis* that Paul emphasizes, and in doing that, Paul is indeed, as many have claimed, creating a new dimension to the patronage pattern that will be followed by Luke and others: to God be the glory, praise, and honor, and therefore the patronage.<sup>10</sup>

Paul's skittishness about dependence on the Corinthians, when he gratefully received gifts from other churches, has always been an interpretive problem. While we do not have enough information about how this patronage was organized in other communities, it does seem that, for example, at Philippi a communal collection was delivered to Paul rather than gifts from individuals (Phlp 4:16-19; God will reciprocate). J Murphy-O'Connor suggests this as the reason for Paul's resistance at Corinth. There, it was to be personal patronage, into whose entangling alliances Paul did not wish to venture (Murphy O'Connor 1996:305-307).

He seems not to have been able to avoid completely such entanglements at Corinth, however. Why did he baptize Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas if he did not see baptizing as part of his mission (1 Cor 1:14-17)? The best answer is that these were the ones Paul perceived as most prominent, those who would sponsor his gospel to their dependents, and under whose patronage he could carry out his mission and the church could thrive (Chow 1992:88-90). Paul has set up his own patronage system, in which their gratitude to him will cultivate loyalty. Stephanas particularly can be singled out for his social prominence, for he hosts Paul and the whole church, the members of which are expected, as good clients, to be submissive to him (1 Cor 16:15-16). He has also taken part in the Corinthian delegation to Paul

<sup>10</sup> A good exposition of *charis* as language of patronage is De Silva (2000:95-156). Elliott (1996:152) lists seventeen New Testament terms associated with patronage.

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at Ephesus, all of which leads Murphy-O'Connor (1996:367) to remark that his role "implies a degree of leisure difficult to associate with those who had to sweat for every morsel of food." At a later time, Gaius hosts the whole Corinthian church (Rm 16:23).

From the submission language about Stephanas and the language of respect and esteem for those who "labor among you, who preside over you and admonish you" in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, it would seem that the expected way to deal with leadership figures very early was with respect and submission. That should not be surprising. In return, loyal church members could expect to receive the benefits of clientage. What *is* surprising to note is that, apart from one passage in 1 *Clement* (1.3) and in the long recension of Ignatius *Philadelphians* 4, the language of submission (*hypotassein*) that we so closely associate with marriage relationships and slavery in the household codes of the New Testament, even though it occurs in many other contexts there including civic authority (Rm 13:1), is no longer used in the marital or slavery context in early Christian literature, but rather in the context of the deference owed to church leaders (also in 1 *Clem* 1.3). The language of submission migrates from household to patronally organized church.

The policies of church leadership toward personal patronage of individuals and especially of groups within the church fluctuated in the following centuries. Diotrephes, the burr under the saddle of the Elder in 3 John 9, is characterized as *philoproteuōn*, which means more than liking to put himself first, as the NRSV renders it: he is overbearing about his patronal claims and does not wish to acknowledge those of the Elder. Hermas criticizes the wealthy for shirking patronal duties: they get so tied up in their business interests that they avoid lesser persons because they do not wish to be asked for favors (*Sim* 9.20.2-4). This would have been considered not only bad but stupid behavior for the wealthy anywhere. Such people would incur the disdain not only of Hermas but of the Christian poor as well. Their repentance will consist in "doing some good," namely, generosity with their riches and the establishment of patronage relationships. The traditional titular churches and catacombs of Rome witness to the benefactions of early patrons by the use of their properties for communal gatherings and burials. In nearly every instance, there is a tradition of original private ownership by a wealthy benefactor who allows communal use of the property.

Other later writers under a growing church centralization are not so encouraging. The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus discourages individuals from holding charity meals for the needy without clerical supervision (Bobertz 1993:170-84). Cyprian, probably like most bishops of his time, wanted to consolidate patronal power in his own office by weakening the power of



wealthy members of the church, encouraging centralized charity, and rejecting the charismatic claims of martyrs to forgive sins. The consolidation of charity, already evidenced by Justin and Tertullian, gradually becomes the normal way for Christians to exercise their generosity. By then, the patronage system has been vastly overhauled, and there is only one major patron left: the bishop.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. THE PATRONAGE OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN

Having now described the general functions of patronage and the participation of women in the system, and having taken a brief look at how patronage functioned in early Christianity, we turn at last to Christian women. Both personal and group patronage is evident. Women extend benefaction to individual leaders like Paul and Ignatius, and they open their houses for Christian gatherings. The evidence of women hosting house churches is clearly present in the New Testament: Mary mother of John Mark in Jerusalem (Ac 12:12), Nympha (Col 4:15), Lydia (Ac 16:14-15, 40),<sup>12</sup> and Prisca with Aquila. We cannot here examine how those households and church gatherings were conducted, but the assumption can be made that they were conducted in the same way that any other patronage situation was done, with deference, respect, and submission owed to the patronal figure who expected to be the center of attention and of honor except at those times when founding apostles were present.

Several more general remarks in Acts leave the gaps to be filled in. In Acts 17:4 and 12, Paul's preaching in Thessalonica and Beroea, respectively, results in the conversion of some important men and distinguished women.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the same should be assumed as with Paul's dealings with important people in Corinth: that he welcomed these prominent connections as opportunities to establish patronage networks whereby the less distinguished, especially their dependants, would be favorably impressed and even perhaps pressured toward conversion. The reverse is true at Acts 13:50 in Pisidian Antioch, where the leading Jews incite the leading men and distinguished women against the missionary preachers. Here the power connections are already too well established, and they are not in Paul's favor. Given what we know about women's patronage, we need not assume in any

<sup>11</sup> Daley (1993:529-553) carries the expectations of honor through episcopal relationships among the great centers in the fourth and fifth century, showing that the language of primacy and honor cannot be separated from the expectations of the patronage system.

<sup>12</sup> On the various readings of Lydia's social status, see Matthews (2001:85-89).

<sup>13</sup> On the topos of the rich female convert in many ancient religious traditions, see Matthews (2001:51-71).

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of the above three cases that by the mention of both men and women, married couples are meant.

In Ignatius' letters, there are several more prominent women who must have provided patronage for him, but did not necessarily host a house church: Tavia with her household (*Smyrn* 13.2) and perhaps the highly placed Alkē, "a name that is dear to me," a Jewish woman, whose brother Niketas was later inimical to Polycarp (*Smyrn* 13.2; *Pol* 8.3; *Mart Pol.* 17.2). One suspects a story there of a woman who sacrificed some family ties for her continued support of Ignatius. There is another woman referred to in *Pol* 8.2, an unnamed wife of an unnamed steward (*epitropos*), or of a man called Epitropos, with her whole household and children. This must be the case of a Christian *materfamilias* with an unbelieving husband. We are accustomed to thinking of widows as women in a position to be benefactors of Christian groups, but this passage cautions that married women too might have performed patronage roles to Christian groups independently of their husbands, just as their non-Christian counterparts did to synagogues and temples. The inclusion of the household and children in this case suggests hospitality of some kind, with the husband not objecting. The absence of the woman's name is surprising. It may be a way of protecting her or her husband from public shame by being associated with a convicted criminal – or perhaps Ignatius has just had a "senior moment" and has forgotten her name!

And so we come to the Paul-Phoebe connection. I will not belabor the questions of what a *diakonos* would do in the middle of the first century in Cenchrae, except to agree with those who suggest that the context in Romans 16:1-2 gives the hint that representation of one church to another has something to do with it, since representation or agency is one of the principal connotations of the *diakonia* word group. A parallel may perhaps be found in two passages of Ignatius. In *Phillipians* 10.1 he encourages the church to appoint (*cheirotoneōsai*, the term that will later be the most common for clerical ordination) a *diakonos* as representative (*eis to presbeusai*) to the Syrian church.<sup>14</sup> In *Smyrn* 10.1 two men named Philo and Rheus Agathopous, who accompany Ignatius (*Phil* 11.1) were received by the Smyrnaeans as representatives of God (*hōs diakonous Theou*) when they came to Philadelphia.

The ascription *prostatis* is the one of most concern here. Taking account of everything we have already seen, it becomes clear that the connotations are not so much "presider" as in a liturgical assembly, though

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<sup>14</sup> However, Ignatius also uses the term deacon in a triple-tiered leadership structure, as he does in the next paragraph, saying that other churches have sent on the same mission bishops, presbyters, and deacons (see Schoedel 1985:213-214, 248).

that is not ruled out by reason of the privileged place of the patron in an assembly, but the patronal benefaction and therefore the prestige and authority that come from the position.<sup>15</sup> While it is true that neither the masculine *prostatēs* nor the feminine *prostatīs* necessarily includes hospitality, this role cannot be ruled out either, by reason of the *prostasia* of Junia Theodora, Phoebe's Lycian contemporary in Corinth, whose role description does clearly include hospitality to Lycians passing through Corinth (Zappella 1989:167-171).

Some have suggested specific strategy on Paul's part by entrusting his letter to Phoebe. Robert Jewett sees Phoebe as Paul's front-runner and ace-in-the-hole for his Spanish mission. Since he knows no one there and there is not a sizable Jewish community to which he could attach himself, he relies on the wealthy and influential Phoebe to pave the way in Rome and stimulate there the desire to finance his Spanish mission once he arrives. The greeting list of Romans 16 is then "a roster of potential campaign supporters .... the first stage in the recruitment process" (Jewett 1988:153)

On the other hand, Caroline F Whelan sees Romans 16 as intended for Ephesus, where Paul relies on Phoebe to secure his interests there while he heads west. Paul relies on Phoebe's network of clients and at the same time introduces her to his network as a way to reciprocate her patronage to him. She sees their relationship as "an agreement of 'equals,' albeit with vastly different spheres of interest," this equality on some levels creating a different kind of patron-client relationship, in which there is some kind of mutuality (Whelan 1993:84). This may be so. We saw early on that patronage between two near-equals, for example, senior and junior senator, was possible. But from what we know of relationships in general, seldom was the concept of equality part of the equation, and almost never between men and women until the later days of the Christian ascetics several centuries later. Otherwise, however, in Romans 16:2 we have the odd case of a client, Paul, commending his patron, Phoebe. But this may be justified in the case that the patron is moving into new territory that the client already knows to some extent, as is probably the case here.

Whether one considers Romans 16 as addressed to Rome or to Ephesus will necessarily influence one's interpretation of Phoebe's role. But whichever it is, it is likely that Paul is not just commending Phoebe to a new group, but is participating in some greater plan, which may have been initiated not by Paul but by Phoebe.

An unusual Christian inscription from fourth-century Jerusalem commemorates a "slave and bride of Christ" named Sophia, a deacon

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<sup>15</sup> A mother is *prostatīs* for her son in an inscription of 142 BCE (probably a guardian), and another named Zmyrna is *prostatīs* of the god Anoubis (probably a benefactor) (see Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 4:243).

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(*diakonos*), “the second Phoebe” (*hē deuthera Phoibē*). It is doubtful that she is hailed as second Phoebe because she is a deacon, a title held by many Christian women of the period. G H R Horsley proposes several parallels in which men are hailed in inscriptions as “new Homer”, “new Themistocles”, “new Theophanes”, and “new Dionysos”, the last also applied to two emperors, Commodus and Gallienus (Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 4:241). In every case, the person so titled seems to have been a major benefactor of his own or his adoptive city. The title probably began with popular acclamation and stuck to the man's public identity. The same is likely true of Sophia because of her benefactions to the church of Jerusalem.

A few more glimpses of Christian women patrons must be mentioned. Chloe (1 Cor 1:11) I take to be not a Christian, but with a large number of Christians in her *familia*, either functioning independently with regard to religion, or under the patronage of this unbelieving woman, much as a synagogue received the patronage of Tation at Kyme or Julia Severa at Akmonia. Marcia, concubine of Commodus, is known to have interceded in imperial machinery for the release of a group of Christians condemned to the mines in the early third century, among them Callistus, according to his rival Hippolytus. One of the things that Hippolytus found objectionable about Callistus' policies once he became bishop of Rome is that Callistus allowed women of higher status to marry men of lesser status, a practice always frowned upon by society at large. Though not specified further, this is likely to have meant a freeborn woman, an *ingenua*, marrying a freedman, a *libertinus* (Ref 9.12). The old objection about women patrons marrying their own freedmen may have risen once again, this time in Christian context.

The evolution of the office of widow also gives glimpses into what was happening with Christian women patrons. While widows are presented in many texts from 1 Timothy 5 onward as predominantly recipients of charity, the “enrollment” to which they are subject also implies a certain status of honor. In Tertullian's Carthage the order of widows is seated with the clergy to receive petitions for a second marriage and for the ritual prostration of public penitents (*De monog* 11.1; *De pud* 13.7). Beginning in 1 Timothy 5:13, the traditional fear of the power of widows is raised: since they no longer link two families and are no longer under the direct authority of a man, they have too much freedom and their integrity is suspect.

The long recension of Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 4 includes at the end of an extensive discussion of submission relationships an exhortation to widows not to wander about and be lacking in austerity, but to be serious like Judith and Anna. The same motif recurs in the third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* 15 (*Apostolic Constitutions* 3.5-11) (see discussion in Bonnie Bowman Thurston 1989:96-104). Here widows, asked about the faith, must only

respond about the basics, leaving catechesis to the qualified, for if outsiders were to hear about the incarnation and passion of Christ from a woman, their response would be derision. The whole idea of women teaching or baptizing is disapproved of, but the obsession, returned to several times in the text, echoing 1 Timothy 5:13, is with widows moving around from house to house. They may not instruct, visit the sick, or lay hands on anyone without the bishop's permission. From earlier tradition, widows are compared to the altar of God. Just as the altar stays in one place, so should they (Osiek 1983)! Thus there is a deliberate attempt to thwart the mutual aid system that usually functions in women's subgroups, and make the widows entirely dependent on the bishop and his representatives, the deacons. The widows are expressly told that they should not know, and may not reveal if they do know, the identity of their benefactors. The expected desire of clients to be personally connected to their patrons is suppressed in favor of centralized coordination. By this time, we can see a conscious attempt on the part of church authority to control women's patronage as well as men's, and to break the network of personal patronage that had been the backbone of social relationships.

Women did not entirely disappear in this new centralized system. Wealthy women continued to be major donors to the church, and as such to command at least a great deal of respect if not social power. They also participated as deacons throughout the Empire, especially but not exclusively in the East, where the preferred title for such women was *diakonos* rather than *diakonissa* through the sixth century. Male deacons were responsible for carrying out the patronage program of the bishop. It is reasonable to expect that female deacons also participated somehow in that work. Female deacons also contributed to churches and cities and exercised their own charitable works. The deacon/ness Matrona of fourth-century Stobi, for example, paved an exedra in fulfillment of a vow, as did the *diakonos* Agrippiane a mosaic floor in Patrae, while Mary the deacon in sixth-century Archelais, Cappadocia, in keeping with the description in 1 Timothy 5:10, "raised children, exercised hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, and distributed her bread to the needy."<sup>16</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The extent and importance of women's patronage in the Greco-Roman world and especially in early Christianity has been neglected and is still in need of exploration. But to appreciate it, to catch the nuances, we need to be sensitive to the signals, networks, and hierarchical relationships inherent in ancient

<sup>16</sup> Texts and discussion in Eisen (2000:175-76, 164-67). Matrona and Maria also in Llewelyn et al 1981-84, 2:193-95; Agrippiane in Kraemer (2004:259).

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Mediterranean society. Whereas we would think that one who supplies material assistance to another is in a subordinate position, there it was the opposite: the one who received had to acknowledge his or her own subordination. With honor came the expectation of authority. There is no evidence that in ordinary patronage relationships this was any different for women than for men.

While real legal and ideological differences remained, it is doubtful whether in the everyday practice of relationships much difference could have been perceived between the practice of patronage among men and women, except for voting and holding elective office, and even there, other aspects of the political process are very similar. I would suggest that likewise in early Christianity there was little difference between the patronage of men and women, until the patronal power begins to be absorbed into the hands of the bishop. But in that case, both women and non-clerical men find that it is a different world.

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