

## Gooder's 'Phoebe' and Witherington's 'Priscilla': a comparative review

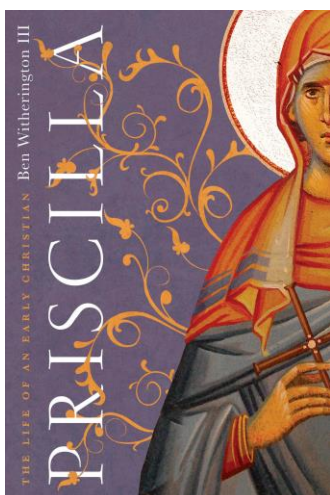
### A Review of:

**Ben Witherington III, Priscilla: the life of an early Christian (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019) ISBN 0830852484, Paperback 208 pages.**

**Paula Gooder, Phoebe: a story (Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2018) ISBN 083085245X, Paperback 316 pages.**

### Reviewed Tamie Davis

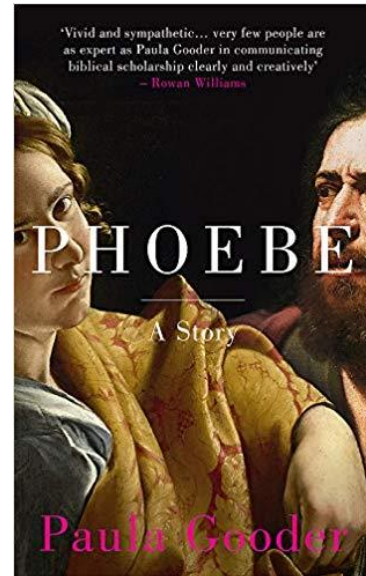
In the last year or two, two biblical scholars have each released a fictionalised account of a woman in the early church. Paula Gooder wrote Phoebe and Ben Witherington III is the author of Priscilla.



Priscilla is the life story of the first half of the famous 'Priscilla and Aquila' team, as told to their adopted daughter Julia. Each chapter begins with a quote from a contemporary source, setting the scene and often giving an account of how others perceived Christians at the time. Most of it is then Priscilla's recounting, taking us through her earliest encounter with Christians in the synagogue and at Pentecost through to their banishment from Rome, time in Corinth and Ephesus. She tells of interactions with various New Testament figures like Paul, Apollos and Junia, and how the different nature of each Roman emperor affected the fate of Christians within the Empire.

Priscilla's story is broken with questions and clarifications from Julia and breaks for food, rest, etc. At times this becomes a little monotonous. You start to sense where the story will be broken up by a paragraph or two of the characters saying they're hungry or tired or emotionally spent, but then the story resumes without it being immediately clear why we had to have those details, apart from an attempt to highlight the physical needs of the characters. Witherington's encyclopedic knowledge of the Roman Empire and the early church is clearly on display, from the details about what people ate and drank and wore, to the vivid description of how the burning of Rome under Nero shaped Peter's letters. However, to me this read more like creative non-fiction than a novel, with Julia's questioning of her mother acting as something of a foil for insertion of historical detail or asking of theological questions that today's readers have of the Bible.

In *Phoebe*, the title character comes to Rome as an outsider, having lived there some years ago and bearing some kind of burden or secret. She is delivering Paul's letter to the Roman church and quickly has to adjust to the cultural differences there from her home in Corinth. She has to get her head around the church politicking, even as she tries to work out her place in it, and what kind of place she desires. Gooder deftly portrays how theology is influenced by our backgrounds through the bluster of Herodion, a Jewish believer who has lost everything and now must rebuild for himself an identity and a family based on the community of Jesus, and how insulting and difficult that is for him even as he is embraced by them.



Gooder's characters brim with personality and life. *Phoebe* doesn't only have a backstory and a task; she is enveloped into a community of people of temperaments and personal histories. For example, Junia and Andronicus are married, but their dynamic is very different to Priscilla and Aquila, as is their ministry, and there is a small orphan boy, Felix, whose desire to make himself helpful to others is not altogether healthy. Everyone in this book is so human and three-dimensional - including the apostle Paul, who never appears himself but is spoken about. This is no hagiography, as the characters talk about Paul's failings, missteps, and unnecessary giving of offence. I loved how they could simultaneously feel hurt or intimidated or confused by Paul and nevertheless recognise his authority, and how this did not feel artificial.

I felt like *Phoebe* grew my appreciation for the humanness of the Bible, which in turn both increased my awe of its God-giveness, and encouraged me about the tumult of today's Christian churches. There are parts where the dialogue doesn't feel entirely natural, for example, where conversation lapses into speech making but I nevertheless found *Phoebe* tremendously entertaining. I liked how Gooder showed me the world of the early church rather than merely telling me about it, and I was intrigued by *Phoebe* and identified with how she grows over the course of the novel. I was disappointed to get to the end of it. I wanted to hear more of *Phoebe's* story!

Witherington's *Priscilla* is more comprehensive in terms of historical and biblical scope than Gooder's *Phoebe*. However, in *Phoebe* I felt like I was right there. I didn't just learn from reading Gooder's characters: I came to love them and identify with them. They came alive to

me and the New Testament seemed more real. As with any historical fiction, Gooder's portrayal of the personalities of characters is just that - a portrayal. It is not authoritative. However, the vibrant and integrated nature of Phoebe meant I retained more of the historical material too, and it enhanced my reading of the Bible.

#### **About the Reviewer**

Tamie Davis is a CMS Australia missionary in Tanzania.