Christian Women in the Patristic World

Their Influence, Authority, and Legacy in the Second through Fifth Centuries

Lynn H. Cohick
and Amy Brown Hughes

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Cohick, Lynn H., author. | Hughes, Amy Brown, author.
Title: Christian women in the patristic world : their influence, authority, and legacy in the second through fifth centuries / Lynn H. Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes.
Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Academic, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017018733 | ISBN 9780801039553 (pbk. : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Women in Christianity—History—Early church, ca. 30–600.
Classification: LCC BR195.W6 C625 2017 | DDC 270.1082—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017018733

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.

green press INITIATIVE

To Scott and Sally Harrison,
parents of Lynn H. Cohick

To Yvonne Brown,
grandmother of Amy Brown Hughes,
memory eternal!

Contents

List of Illustrations ix
Acknowledgments xi
Abbreviations xiii
Introduction xix

1. Thecla: Christian Female Protomartyr and Virgin of the Church 1
2. Perpetua and Felicitas: Mothers and Martyrs 27
3. Christian Women in Catacomb Art 65
4. From Pagan to Christian, Martyr to Ascetic 89
5. Helena Augusta, "Mother of the Empire" 109
6. Egeria's *Itinerary* and Christian Pilgrimage 127
7. Macrina the Ascetic Entrepreneur and the "Unlearned" Wisdom of Monica 157
8. Paula, Marcella, and the Melanias: Ascetics, Scholars, and Compatriots in Controversy 189
9. Aelia Pulcheria, "Protectress of the Empire," and Empress Eudocia, a Theological Poet 219

Conclusion: Responsibly Remembering 253
Bibliography 261
Index of Ancient Sources 279
Index of Subjects 285

Illustrations

Time Line of Major Persons and Events xvii
1.1 St. Thecla listening to Paul 4
1.2 Thecla stands triumphant next to lions 6
1.3 Thecla's initial encounter with Paul 17
1.4 St. Thecla monastery 21
2.1 Death of Perpetua, Felicitas, and other martyrs 37
2.2 Mosaic of Perpetua 43
2.3 Mosaic of Felicitas 56
3.1 *Fractio Panis* 66
3.2 Catacomb of Callixtus 72
3.3 Woman in *orans* pose 76
3.4 Banquet in the Catacomb of Marcellinus and Peter 83
3.5 St. Agnes in the *orans* pose 87
5.1 Coin depicting Helena Augusta 115
5.2 Helena Augusta's discovery of the True Cross 119
5.3 The True Cross raises a man from the dead 122
6.1 Map: The Roman Empire at the time of Constantine 129
6.2 Map: The Eastern dioceses 136
6.3 Mosaic of Jerusalem 144
6.4 Monastery of St. Catherine 154
7.1 The *Penitent Magdalene* by Donatello 159
7.2 St. Macrina the Younger 167

7.3 The *Saint Augustine Taken to School by Saint Monica* by di Pietro 185
7.4 Augustine and Monica 186
7.5 Monica's tomb 187
8.1 St. Jerome with St. Paula and St. Eustochium 192
8.2 St. Paula and her nuns 202
8.3 Melania the Younger 216
9.1 Coin depicting Aelia Pulcheria 227
9.2 Reliquary procession 232
9.3 Coin depicting Aelia Eudocia 241
9.4 "Hagia Eudokia" (Holy Eudocia) 246
Sculpture of Marie Wilkinson 258

Acknowledgments

A casual conversation, sharing a similar vision about research into early Christian women, grew over three years into this book. We are indebted to family, friends, and colleagues who encouraged and supported our efforts over the last few years as the dream became a reality. We are grateful to James Ernest, then executive editor at Baker Academic, who supported and guided this project through its initial stages. His encouragement and wise counsel helped shape its content and scope. James handed over the reins of the project to the capable hands of Bryan Dyer, acquisitions editor at Baker Academic. We deeply appreciate the energy and sound advice he provided in bringing this book to completion.

To the Wheaton College PhD students Jeremy Otten and Caleb Friedeman, many thanks for your painstaking editing and double-checking footnotes and bibliography. We express gratitude to Emrie Smith, a Christian Ministries major at Gordon College, for her careful help indexing our volume.

Thanks also to the editors, Carrie Schroeder and Catherine Chin, and the other contributors to *Melania: Early Christianity through the Life of One Family* for granting us access to your marvelous book ahead of its release date (University of California Press, 2016).

I (Lynn) am thankful for Wheaton College providing me a yearlong sabbatical to get to know the characters that animate these ancient stories and explore the lives of these ancient women. And I am grateful to the women in my family who shaped me: my mother, Sally, my sister, Ann Louise, and my grandmother, Elise Louise Garden Duncan Harrison, whose stories of life in the early 1900s fascinated me and planted the love of history deep within me.

I (Amy) am thankful for Gordon College granting me some space in my first-year teaching schedule to bring this book to fruition and for my husband, Benjie, who listened to all my stories about Thecla and Macrina and empresses. I am also grateful to George Kalantzis, my *Doktorvater* and friend who helped me to learn how not to hedge or hesitate and to speak boldly and take risks. Many women have shepherded, mentored, and taught me over the years. I am grateful for my mom and my sister, my dear friends and colleagues from my graduate work at Wheaton, and those who have pastored me from their kitchen tables and from the pulpit.

Abbreviations

General

AM	*anno mundi* (in the year of the world)
b.	born
BCE	before the Common Era
ca.	*circa*, approximately
CE	Common Era
cf.	*confer*, compare
chap(s).	chapter(s)
d.	died
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition
esp.	especially
ET	English translation
et al.	*et alii*, and others
i.e.	*id est*, that is
NASB	New American Standard Version
repr.	reprint(ed)
rev.	revised (by)
sing.	singular
trans.	translator(s), translated by

Ancient Sources

Aen.	Virgil, *Aeneid*
An.	Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrectione cum sorore sua Macrina dialogus* (*Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection with His Sister Macrina*)
An.	Tertullian, *De anima* (*On the Soul*)
Ann.	Tacitus, *Annales* (*Annals*)
APTh	Acts of Paul and Thecla
Barn.	Epistle of Barnabas
Beat.	Augustine, *De vita beata* (*On the Happy Life*)
Cels.	Origen, *Contra Celsum* (*Against Celsus*)
Chron.	John Malalas, *Chronicon* (*Chronicle*)
Chron. Pasch.	[anonymous], Chronicon Paschale (Paschal Chronicle)
Conf.	Augustine, *Confessiones* (*Confessions*)
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians

Dial.	Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* (*Dialogue with Trypho*)
Did.	Didache (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles)
Ep.	[various authors], *Epistulae* (*Epistles/Letters*)
Eph.	Ephesians
Exod.	Exodus
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Gal.	Galatians
Gen.	Genesis
Haer.	Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* (*Refutation of All Heresies*)
Haer.	Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* (*Against Heresies*)
Heb.	Hebrews
Hist.	Livy, *Ab urbe condita libri* (*Books from the Foundation of the City = History of Rome [and the Roman People]*)
Hist.	Rufinus, *Eusebii Historia ecclesiastica a Rufino translata et continuata* (*Eusebius's "Ecclesiastical History" Translated and Continued by Rufinus*)
Hist. eccl.	Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Ecclesiastical History*)
Hist. eccl.	Evagrius Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Ecclesiastical History*)
Hist. eccl.	Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Ecclesiastical History*)
Hist. eccl.	Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Ecclesiastical History*)
Hist. eccl.	Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Ecclesiastical History*)
Hist. Laus.	Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* (*Lausiac History*)
Ign. *Smyrn.*	Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans*
It. Eg.	Egeria, *Itinerarium Egeriae* (*Itinerary of Egeria*)
1–2 Macc.	1–2 Maccabees
Matt.	Matthew
Mor.	Plutarch, *Moralia* (*Morals = Customs and Mores*)
Num.	Numbers
Ob. Theo.	Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii* (*On the Obituary of Theodosius*)
Or.	Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* (*Oration*)
Ord.	Augustine, *De ordine* (*On Order*)
Paed.	Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* (*Christ the Educator*)
Pan.	Epiphanius, *Panarion (Adversus haereses)* (*Refutation of All Heresies*)
Pass.	Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas
Phil.	Philippians
Pol. *Phil.*	Polycarp, *To the Philippians*
Ps(s).	Psalm(s)
Pud.	Tertullian, *De pudicitia* (*On Modesty*)
Rev.	Revelation
Rom.	Romans
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
Serm.	Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones* (*Sermons*)
Song	Song of Songs
Stat.	John Chrysostom, *Ad populum Antiochenum de statuis* (*To the People of Antioch, about the Statues*)
Symp.	Methodius of Olympus, *Symposium sive Convivium decem virginum* (*Symposium, or Banquet of the Ten Virgins*)
2 Tim.	2 Timothy

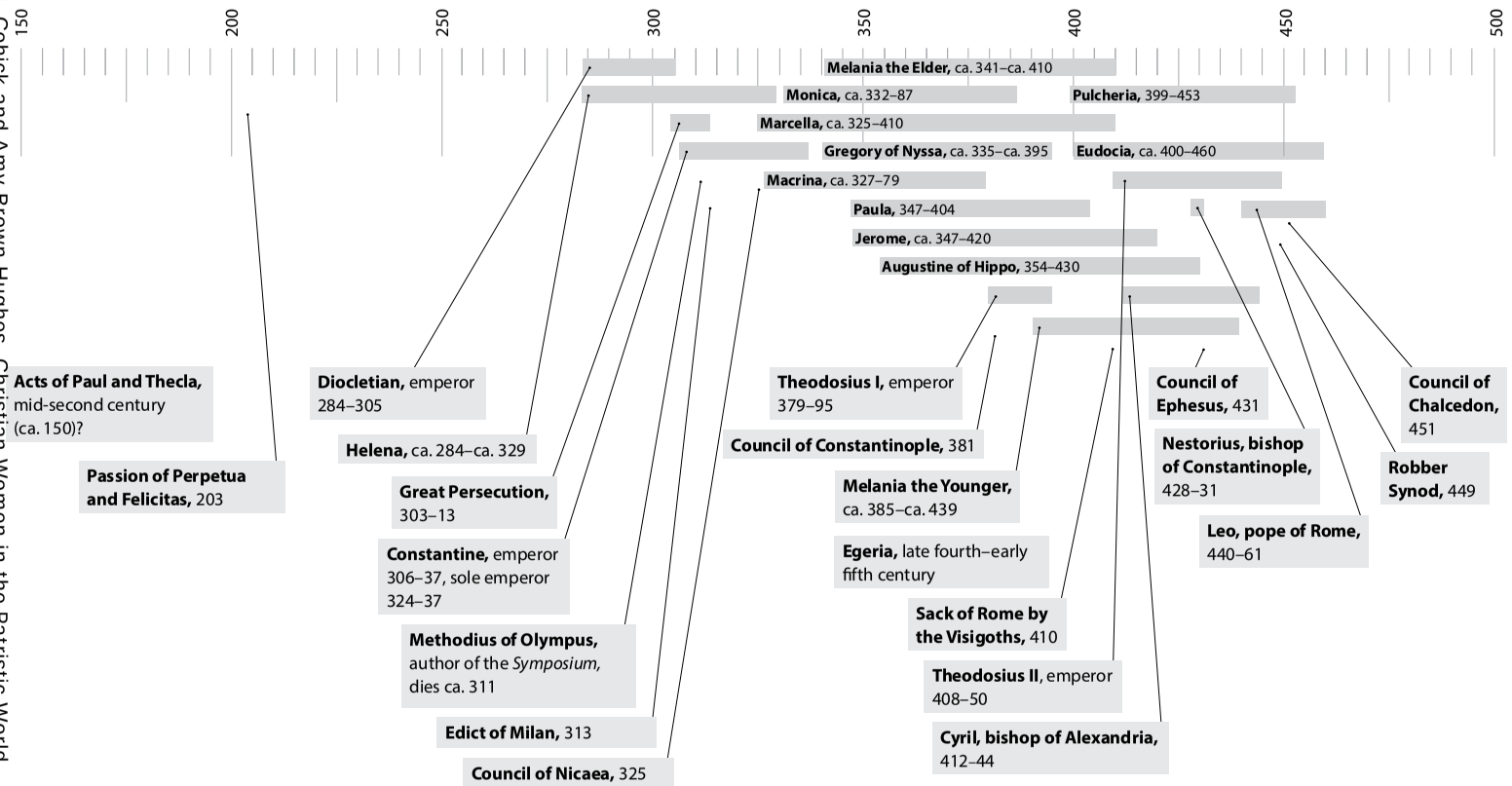
Vit. Const.	Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* (*Life of Constantine*)
Vit. Macr.	Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita s. Macrinae* (*Life of St. Macrina*)
Vit. Mel.	Gerontius, *Vita Sanctae Melaniae Iunioris* (*Life of the Holy Melania the Younger*)

Journals, Series, and Collections

AARTTS	American Academy of Religion Texts and Translations Series
ACO	*Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*. Edited by Eduard Schwartz et al. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1914–84.
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AThR	*Anglican Theological Review*
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BRev	*Bible Review*
CAGN	Reardon, Bryan P. *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. New ed., 2008.
CCEL	Christian Classics Ethereal Library. https://www.ccel.org/.
CCR	Columbia Classics in Religion
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–.
CH	*Church History*
CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Berlin, 1862–.
ClQ	*Classical Quarterly*
CSHJ	Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism
ECF	Early Church Fathers
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
FC	Fathers of the Church
FCNTECW	Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte
GNO	Gregorii Nyssenni Opera
GTR	Gender, Theory, and Religion
Historia	*Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* (University of Erfurt)
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
Hug	*Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
JLA	*Journal of Late Antiquity*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
MAMA	*Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua*. Manchester and London, 1928–93.
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NPNF[1]	*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1. Edited by P. Schaff. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.

NPNF[2]	*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2. Edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace. Repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004.
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts
PG	Patrologia Graeca [= Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca]. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–86.
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SCH	Studies in Church History
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions (supplements to Numen)
SJRS	*Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*
StPatr	Studia Patristica
SWR	Studies in Women and Religion
TJT	*Toronto Journal of Theology*
VC	*Vigiliae Christianae*
VCSup	Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
YCS	Yale Classical Studies
ZAC	*Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum / Journal of Ancient Christianity*

Time Line of Major Persons and Events



Introduction

After sitting for three days listening to his message, she made a fateful decision that would change the course of her life and the lives of countless others for centuries to come. Her choice established a norm for faithful conduct and inspired generations of men and women to forgo their ordinary life for one of celibacy and asceticism. Her life was used as a meme for theological and philosophical reflection and ethical direction. Her name was Thecla, the protomartyr whose story in the Acts of Paul and Thecla reverberated from the mid-second century well into the Middle Ages. A member of a leading family in her city, Thecla was engaged to wed a young man from another wealthy household. Then she heard Paul's gospel message, and she changed the direction of her life.[1] Thecla's story sprouted in the second century, and her influence mushroomed as a myriad of others modeled their life on hers, visited shrines dedicated to her, and bought clay votive lamps with her image and symbols stamped upon them.

This book explores stories of women like Thecla, women who helped construct the growing Christian movement and left their legacy in devotional practices, written texts, and glittering mosaics. We look at Perpetua, an early martyr whose testimony, "I am a Christian," sealed her fate and was memorialized in the yearly liturgical cycle of the church. We examine the visual witness to Christian beliefs preserved in Rome's catacombs in the late second to fourth centuries. Overlapping this underground activity,

1. For an English translation, see Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 2:239–46. See also Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, WUNT 2/270 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, declared her Christian identity by opening the imperial coffers to build imposing basilicas in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Both Helena and Egeria, a wealthy woman from the western edges of the empire, set out on pilgrimages; and we discover that these journeys were much more than personal quests for spiritual renewal. We study another influential mother, Monica, the mother of Augustine, who is remembered by her son for her tireless commitment to prayer for his salvation, her bright mind for philosophical dialogue, and her maturity in faith that drew them both into communion with God. We meet Macrina, who embraced the monastic life and guided her brothers, Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea, in spiritual and philosophical teachings. Melania the Elder and her granddaughter, Melania the Younger, along with Paula and Marcella, give us examples of aristocrats-turned-ascetics who abdicated their wealth and powerful societal positions in order to establish monasteries, promote scholarship, and participate in key doctrinal discussions of their day, such as the protracted controversy over Origen's teachings. We also examine two empresses of the Theodosian court, Pulcheria and Eudocia. Pulcheria was the powerful sister of the Christian emperor Theodosius II and a dedicated virgin who influenced two of the most important councils in church history; Eudocia became Theodosius's wife, as well as a poet and pilgrim who was often at odds with the imperial house.

The perceptive reader will have picked up the recurring themes of virginity and asceticism woven within these women's lives. These were more than lifestyle commitments; they reflect deep theological convictions shared by male theologians of the early church. The women in our book also contributed to the lively contemporary philosophical discussions surrounding human nature, the human body, and the future of humanity. Women like Paula and Melania the Elder participated in these debates and helped shape early Christianity with their intellectual acuity, their desire to live lives marked by devotion to God, and the authority that accompanied a chaste lifestyle.

The early church historian Peter Brown coined the phrase "men use women to think with," drawing on the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.[2] This is certainly true, but perhaps not the whole truth. Our study reveals men and women thinking together about the nature of the Christian church and its teachings. The women considered in our book captured the imagination of average Christian pilgrims, learned male authors, and government officials. Indeed, some of the women we discuss exercised authority in the imperial

2. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, new ed., CCR (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 153.

government, wrote influential prose and poetry, and traveled on pilgrimage and established basilicas and martyr shrines and relics. This book celebrates their legacy.

Why We Wrote This Book

Sometimes it happens in a single moment, a chance comment, a juxtaposition of text and circumstance. You sense you have glimpsed the tip of the iceberg and feel compelled to explore. This book grew out of such experiences. In graduate school in the 1980s, I (Lynn) read Julian of Norwich's *Showings*; I was pregnant with my first child. The juxtaposition is important, for Julian's vision includes a rich reflection on Christ as our Mother. This fourteenth-century anchorite gave me my first glimpse of women's influence and authority in the life of the church. I wanted to investigate more and plunged into the church fathers' work. If reading Julian's *Showings* was like a walk in a gentle summer rain, then Tertullian's hateful comment, "Woman is the devil's gateway,"[3] stung like hail in a thunderstorm. I decided to abandon the exploration for a time, for lack of a suitable guide to help navigate the unfamiliar terrain. Recent scholarship, however, has provided important methodological insights that allow today's readers to navigate the early Christian texts' rhetoric concerning women and the category of female. Greater attention is now paid to the role and influence of women in theological conversations and controversies. It seemed a good time to resume my journey into the world of Christian women in the early church.

I (Amy) am often asked why I became a historical theologian of early Christianity, what it was that gripped my imagination and pricked my desire to contribute to the two-thousand-year-old conversation by Christians speaking about God. For me it was sitting in an undergraduate class and hearing about the controversial second-century prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla. All of a sudden my charismatic tradition, which before had seemed to me to be a novel force for mobilizing the church, had a history beyond the New Testament. Almost fifteen years later and on the cusp of doctoral work, I was approached by Sarah, a twenty-year-old pastor's daughter, after a service at my small urban church in Aurora, Illinois. She asked, "What is my role now in the church as a single, young adult woman? Where do I fit?" I knew Sarah well, and her earnest question confirmed that part of my journey as a theologian was to answer her question. This book gave me the opportunity to tell some stories about women in early Christianity and

3. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women* (*De cultu feminarum*) 1.1.1–3 (CCSL 1.343–44).

how they were instrumental in constructing the church and its teachings in various ways.

How We Wrote This Book

This book emerged as a joint effort to explore Christian women's lives and thought in the early church through the Late Antique period, roughly the second through the fifth centuries. It attempts to fill out the reader's knowledge of the historical periods and provide helpful strategies for interpreting the documents and archaeological evidence in their theological and historical settings. For example, this historical period saw the establishment of creeds and doctrines as church councils, made up of male clerics and scholars, defined Christian doctrine. But this is only part of what happened—and if this half is told as though it is the entire story, a false impression is created that women were ancillary to the development of the church's doctrines and practices. As our study shows, however, women made numerous contributions to theological discussions and religious practices.

Advocating Agency: Negotiating Virtues in the Ancient World

Our approach stands over against both those works of modern scholarship that simply lament and dismiss the church fathers as hopelessly misogynistic, as well as those that take a naive, pious perspective on the evidence, for both approaches fail to deal analytically with the sources. Within these early Christian writings, we find disparaging comments about women or the female sex as well as active engagement and genuine conversation with learned women. We do not read the church fathers' statements about women as direct windows into church doctrine and practice; rather, we nuance these texts by considering the ways women themselves shaped their lives and their social worlds. As Susan Hylen observes with reference to the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the text does "give insight into what the author wanted to persuade the audience of, and what he assumed they would take for granted."[4] She makes the important observation that a society's key values and dispositions are negotiated by the individuals within it; and they decide how to convey civic virtues by choosing among multiple options in expressing those values. For example, she notices that key virtues incumbent upon women included showing loyalty to family; exhibiting modesty in dress, speech, and interaction with men; and working

4. Susan E. Hylen, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

industriously. Showing loyalty to family might necessitate a public statement; however, a public statement might be viewed as immodest. Individuals dealt with these multiple social norms in creative and integrative ways,[5] such that a modest matron might offer a public statement or gesture on behalf of her city—and be considered entirely modest.

Hylen perceptively points out the problems with dividing the ancient social world into two diametrically opposite spheres: the private/female sphere and the public/male sphere. And she rejects the assumption that female agency can be seen only in countercultural resistant postures. This older form of argument often concluded that women primarily chose celibacy to resist patriarchy within marriage. Hylen suggests instead that women chose celibacy as an expression of their society's expectations of modesty. She points to Thecla and states, "Early readers would have likely understood Thecla's modesty and leadership as a coherent part of a single picture."[6] Ancient women could express their agency by conforming to their society's values even as their act of performing these values also shaped these very values. Modern readers might see a contradiction in the text that the ancient reader would accept as appropriate for the given occasion. For example, the second-century reader might have seen as natural "the appearance of women in leadership roles because domestic virtues took on added importance as evidence of civic responsibility."[7]

Nevertheless, women often faced an uphill march in pursuing their goals. We examine the many obstacles (ideological, cultural, theological, and political) that prevented women, in general and within Christianity, from living their lives to the same full extent that was available for men of comparable rank and station. We pay close attention to the rhetorical and historical contexts of these men's reports in order to bring early Christian women into greater focus. Our book seeks to paint a general landscape of possibilities for women based on public records, physical evidence such as inscriptions or catacomb art, and texts. We understand that the visual and textual representation of a woman may be grounded in the events of her life, and also that such representation informed the religious identity of the community that embraced the figure. The evidence shows that these women carried theological influence, as we will see with Gregory of Nyssa's remembrance of his sister Macrina as an authority on christological imitation and on the nature of the resurrection (chap. 7) and with Melania the Elder's involvement with the Origenist

5. Ibid., 17.
6. Ibid., 74.
7. Ibid., 11.

controversy, a wide-ranging debate on the reception of some of the more speculative teachings of Origen, including the nature of the resurrected body and the preexistence of souls (see chap. 8). Our hope is that this book will attract readers who are exploring the patristic period and educate them about the lives of the most important women from this period, so that their influence can be better integrated into the history of the church. To accomplish this, we must explain our approach in greater detail as it relates to the study of women more generally.

Advocating Contextual Reading: Paying Attention to Historical Context

A historical subject is necessarily contextualized, having lived, thought, and acted in a past age. This contextualization is the basis of her authority to speak informatively about her historical period, but she is also very much a part of that age, not living in a historical vacuum. She grew up with a set of values, had specific understandings of how the world works, how things should and should not be. These views, beliefs, and observations are not necessarily reflective of what we might today consider "true." Again, these beliefs were not static but were shaped and reshaped by people of that time as they negotiated their culture's virtues and values. What it means is that historical subjects, such as Christian men and women, are constituted by their experience; however, experience is not the sole property of the subjects: they are in fact formed through experience. Experience is not the base from which "true" history springs; it is "at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation."[8] Experiences as reflected in ancient texts cannot be taken as read without seeing their rhetorical and political nature. Said another way, we reject the idea that historians can simply read and understand a text and then turn around to present their findings to the world, free of any agenda or binding theoretical system. Experience needs explanation. Experience will not grant the historian unmediated access for the reconstitution of women in history.

Advocating "Responsible Remembrance": Feminism and Christian History

Poor Pandora! According to Greek mythology, not only was she created as a punishing "gift" after man had stolen fire from Prometheus, but also she, the first of womankind, opened a jar out of curiosity and released all kinds of

8. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 37.

evil. This story not only denigrates the creation of woman but also blames her for the ills of the world. Pandora introduces difference into a homogeneous world by her very presence, her femininity a dangerous enigma that brings catastrophe.[9] Pandora serves as the archetype for the dangerous female, and women have been trying to shake or reconstruct (or at times embrace) this myth ever since. Broadly speaking, the effort to stamp out Pandora's reputation reflects the aim of feminist interpretation: to shake off the misconceptions of women as dangerous other and to reconstruct history in order to include women's contributions and those of other marginalized groups.

Feminists have shone the spotlight on history and literature, demonstrating how the oppression of women is deeply entrenched, systemically permeating political structures, domestic life, and religious devotion. Of course, Christianity is not immune to the charge of denigrating women and in fact has often been the appropriated force behind the subjugation of women and even the instigator of atrocities against various groups of women. Because of this oppressive norm, feminists read texts with a hermeneutics of suspicion, assuming that the author is reflecting a patriarchal bias. Yet even in the most oppressive of societies and situations, we have examples of women living their lives with creative energy and mobility, taking opportunities as they arise, owning agency and demonstrating religious conviction in ways that surprise modern sensibilities, and contributing to the variegated story of early Christianity.

We are fortunate enough to have accounts of some of these ancient and modern women. Sometimes their presence is redacted or reconstrued by a male writer for various reasons (not all nefarious), and sometimes we have the prospect of entering the world of such a one directly through diaries or other writings. We do not have nearly enough of these accounts, but what we do find is that Christian women often had to navigate the tricky congress between their femaleness and the faith, tradition, and Scriptures that they held so dear.

In this book we will be looking at women of various regions, backgrounds, situations, and temperaments from the earliest centuries of Christianity and remembering the many ways they assumed authority, exercised power, and shaped not only their legacy but also the legacy of Christianity. This remembrance is self-aware. Perhaps controversially, this remembrance is not a neutral reading; rather, this reading is functionally an "admission of advocacy," a speaking for the participation of the other, those who have been relegated

9. Vered Lev Kenaan renders Pandora as introducing "difference" into the world of interpreting classical texts in *Pandora's Senses: The Feminine Character of the Ancient Text*, Wisconsin Studies in Classics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

and silenced.[10] For our sake and for the sake of others, we need to commit to advocacy and practice what Justo González calls "responsible remembrance."[11]

Advocacy is a necessary position when it comes to the activity of remembering the contributions of early Christian women. Because for the most part their personages are recorded only through the pens of male writers, it is not always clear as to where women fit into that new culture of Christianity. Unfortunately, this pattern continues for centuries, leaving women to ask, "Where is my place between Eve and Mary, heroine and servant, saint and whore?"[12] Part of the role for advocates for early Christian women is to bear the responsibility to critique the patriarchal norm and the vitriolic language used by some of the church fathers, such as Tertullian. And the responsibility extends to considering positive views of women found in these texts as well. As Susanne Heine observes, "There is no doubt that a history of Christian hostility to women can be written, but so too can a history of Christian friendliness towards women."[13]

Furthermore, we should not be surprised to find early Christian writers' interpretations of the biblical texts laced with contextual gender ideologies. It is all the more important, then, to read these texts with a keen eye toward the cultural, interpretive, and theological assumptions present at that time. As modern readers we will bring our own assumptions to bear on the biblical text and its interpretation; this is unavoidable. As a result, we might be put off by how these biblical women are portrayed by the church fathers. Our reading should be one of advocacy for a more inclusive gender framework in reading the biblical text; yet our reading of these ancient interpreters should also be marked by charity. We must take into account that a writer cannot excuse himself from his context and the information available at the time. But this charity does not mean we excuse the author's silencing or oppression of women because "that's just how it was back then."

Early Christian Women and Theology

A fundamental presupposition of this project is that women were instrumental in the construction of Christian identity and theology in the

10. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," in *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, ed. Mary Ann Tolbert, Semeia 28 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 118.

11. Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon 1990), 79.

12. Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1987), 26.

13. Ibid., 5.

first five centuries of Christian history. The theology piece is often missing in explorations of women in early Christianity, and for understandable reasons. First, the theology of early Christian women is not immediately accessible since we have so few sources written by women. At several points in this book we address the scarcity of sources and thus how to read texts about women written by men. We rely on the efforts of many fine scholars who have worked through the theoretical and methodological issues that come to the forefront when reading early Christian texts. Second, our exploration of theology in general tends to assume particular conceptions of what constitutes a theological work. In reading early Christian texts, there has been a tendency to expect that theology was primarily done and found in treatises on theological subjects, and therefore to limit exploration of a theological topic to those said treatises and those who wrote them. Fortunately, this approach to early Christian theology has been in the process of reexamination and revision. One example of this shifting and broadening of our understanding of early Christian theology is happening in scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa, whom we will meet in chapter 7. Like most early Christian writers, Gregory did not understand theology in the modern sense as a separate discipline from such things as biblical commentary or exhortations to asceticism.[14] A more synthetic reading of writers such as Gregory takes into account his broader conception of theology and by extension a broader understanding of theology in early Christianity. Freeing early Christian theology from a presumed dogmatism pigeonholed in the form of treatises allows for the rich texture of early Christian theology to emerge in its diverse instantiations.

Fundamental to our approach is the supposition that theology in the early church was a dynamic and organic project that included a myriad of voices and approaches. It is a significant error to limit constructive theological work to councils and specific kinds of texts because, as will become clear especially in regard to the central discussions of the Trinity and Christology in early Christianity, core work on these subjects was happening in imaginative rewritings of Plato, the construction of the Christian historical narrative, letters between friends, dialogues in the middle of the night, the establishing of monastic communities in homes and in the desert, pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the reception of the martyr tradition, and the ascetic negotiation with the body. Construction of early Christian theology is best viewed as through a prism

14. See Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Sarah Coakley, *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

that captures the nuance, the fluctuation between rigidity and flexibility, the creative invention and the emphasis on embodiment.

In this prismatic paradigm for interpreting early Christian theology, women's theologizing is fundamental to the development of Christian thought and should not be relegated to the fringe or regarded as a concession prize at best. Women were key in the central discussions of trinitarian theology and Christology, for example. Teasing out their contributions becomes a more fruitful venture within the framework of theologizing that includes "performing" theologies (embodied participation, such as virginity, in a theological discourse) and performative theological acts, such as building and funding monasteries or other sites of devotion and utilizing network or familial relationships for the purposes of furthering a theological cause.[15]

What Is in This Book

We situate Christian women in their historical context because we are interested in knowing what we can about their lives. Thus we have structured this book as a chronological sweep from the second to the fifth centuries. This enables us to walk with the generations of women who grow up in the community and pass along their faith to the next generation. And it allows us to highlight the tremendous shift that occurs within Christian history when Emperor Constantine establishes Christianity as a protected and even favored religion in the empire. Yet there are potential pitfalls to this chronological approach that we will attempt to avoid.

Most important, the chronological structure does not suggest that the church developed in some preordained fashion. We are not implying that the church moved from primitive to advanced or the reverse, from an early golden age to an age of political corruption. We are not charting progress. Rather, we are highlighting the remarkable changes in the participation of women throughout the development of early Christianity in the context of the volatile and shifting imperial landscape of the Roman Empire. As we move through the second century's age of apologists and missionaries, we find very little concerning women apart from the few prophetesses and teachers. The third century can be characterized by martyrdom and misery for many as sporadic assaults were made on Christian communities. This is also the age

15. See Kate Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. 1–27. On virginity as "performing" Christology, see Amy Brown Hughes, "The Legacy of the Feminine in the Christology of Origen of Alexandria, Methodius of Olympus, and Gregory of Nyssa," *VC* 69 (2015): 1–26.

of the catacombs in Rome, which testify to Roman Christian burial practices in artwork that bedazzles the eye and frustrates the interpreter. The fourth century marks the rise of the Christian emperor, and with him the beginning of public, political Christianity. Women in the imperial family wield great authority, while wealthy women use their patronage to influence and shape theological debates. In the fifth century, the invading Visigoths and Vandals overthrow much of the Roman Empire, and Rome itself falls (twice). The center of Christianity moves to Constantinople (modern Istanbul). Pilgrims and refugees shift from West to East, and the church wrestles with internal conflict. Women patrons build monasteries, support theologians such as Jerome and Rufinus, and write letters and texts engaging in the theological debates that whirled around the Mediterranean.

In the first chapter, we focus on the second-century text the Acts of Paul and Thecla. The story develops from the biblical references of the apostle Paul traveling to Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The leading character in this story is a young, wealthy woman, Thecla, who embraces Paul's message, leaves her fiancé, and pursues an ascetic life. This story remained influential throughout our period, with families in the fourth century naming their daughters "Thecla," and men in the sixth century embracing an ascetic lifestyle based on her example. The place of asceticism continues to grow within the Christian movement and will become a critical part of later theological discussions, as discussed in chapters 7 and 8.

The second chapter focuses on the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, most likely the earliest extant writing by a woman in Latin. The work places front and center the reality of martyrdom and its role in forming Christian identity. Shrines dedicated to male and female martyrs, as well as to their relics (often bones), became part of the pious landscape in the succeeding centuries. Additionally, this account highlights how these Christian women understood themselves as mothers and daughters. And we explore the impact of the Roman social world as female slaves serve as model martyrs.

The third chapter explores the visual world of the early Christians. Here we focus on the Roman catacomb frescoes, especially those depicting meal scenes and the *orans* figure—a human standing with arms outstretched to either side of the body and elbows slightly bent. These images invite reflection on the roles women played in the worship practices within the church and family.

Chapter 4 covers arguably the most dramatic period of social and political change experienced by the church in its history. The fourth century begins with the Great Persecution (303–13),[16] then sees the shift toward Christianity with

16. All dates are CE unless identified as BCE.

the rise of Constantine and the establishment of lasting creedal statements at the Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381), and finishes with the reign of Theodosius I, the father of Pulcheria the empress, whose life we trace in our final chapter. In chapter 4 we look at how martyr stories about women were preserved in the work of the fourth-century church historian Eusebius, from whom we gather so much of our knowledge of the church's first three centuries, and we meet a new version of the famous Thecla in the work of Methodius of Olympus.

In chapter 5, we remain in the early fourth century for a bit longer to focus on Helena, the mother of Constantine. Helena becomes the archetype of piety for the Christian empresses who follow. Legend has it that she is responsible for the recovery of the True Cross (the one on which Jesus was crucified) while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We will piece together what we know about Helena and consider how a legend is made.

In chapter 6, close attention is paid to another female writer, Egeria, and her description of her pilgrimage and year spent in the Jerusalem church. Egeria's *Itinerary* highlights the land and landscape of the Holy Land in the late fourth century or early fifth century and offers the earliest detailed description of Christian liturgical practices. The *Itinerary* allows us to explore questions of Christian worship practices and fits nicely with our exploration of the Roman catacombs in chapter 3.

Another famous mother takes center stage in chapter 7. Monica, mother of Augustine, famously prodded her son and prayed for him. For Augustine, her voice was often indistinguishable from the voice of God. We also explore the life of Macrina, a wealthy woman who founded a monastery on her estate and is remembered by her well-known brother Gregory of Nyssa as a philosopher and ascetic exemplar. Both these women are accessible to modern readers only through writings of their male family members. This chapter addresses the difficult interpretive process created by the lack of written materials from the women themselves; it concludes that the male authors were seemingly motivated by a desire to promote these women as examples for others to emulate—including the male authors themselves! Their writings testify to these women's capabilities and provide them a legacy through which their words and deeds continue to influence generations.

"Who would be able to give a worthy and clear account of the truly masculine acts of this blessed lady?" Chapter 8 pursues this question from the pen of Gerontius, who wrote a biography of Melania the Younger. Like her grandmother, Melania the Elder, she promotes the ascetic life that promises freedom through renunciation of their substantial wealth. The grandmother established a monastery in Jerusalem, supported the theologian Rufinus, and

studied the Scriptures and earlier commentators deeply. Her granddaughter continued in her matriarch's footsteps by training and instructing virgins and engaging in theological conversations. On the other side of the Origenist controversy, we find Paula and Marcella. These aristocrats-turned-ascetics supported Jerome in his theological and monastic endeavors. Marcella remained in Rome, and Paula resided in Bethlehem near Jerome.

The final chapter moves us into the imperial household, but we do not leave the ascetic life behind. Pulcheria, the sister of Theodosius II, chooses the life of a virgin over producing a possible heir to the throne. Her opinions and ideas deeply influence her brother, and she wields a great deal of power. Eudocia, the wife of Theodosius II, did not share her sister-in-law's esteemed birth, and she found herself frequently at odds with Pulcheria. She was highly educated, she gave many speeches, and some of her poetry survives. These two imperial women greatly influence their times, albeit in different ways.

Taken together, these nine chapters highlight how important the female voice was to the early church. It is tempting to relegate a woman's voice to the margins, for she did not speak in the councils, nor do we have her letters debating a doctrine with her male peers. Yet the continuing work of the church in developing its identity and its presence in the community happened outside the channels of ecclesial pronouncements. We recognize these women's contributions to the development of Christianity, its doctrines, and its ethics.

What Is Not in This Book

Gnosticism

The careful reader might assume that we would have included a chapter on women and gnosticism. Such an expectation might be based on evidence of previous scholarship, beginning with Elaine Pagels's groundbreaking book *The Gnostic Gospels*,[17] which was awarded the National Book Award. Pagels introduced to a broad audience the astonishing find of gnostic texts discovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945. The fifty-two works written in Coptic include titles such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel to the Egyptians, and the Apocryphon of John. These primary source texts were probably copied between 350 and 400. They provide an autonomous and insider voice at the historians' table, a table whose seats until that time were occupied only by early church heresiologists who condemned gnostic ideas and activities. Pagels argues that

17. Elaine H. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979).

the Nag Hammadi texts provide a much-needed opportunity to reexamine gnosticism. She contends that the evidence "clearly indicates a correlation between religious theory and social practice. Among such gnostic groups as the Valentinians, women were considered equal to men; some were revered as prophets; others acted as teachers, traveling evangelists, healers, priests, perhaps even bishops."[18] Pagels sees different attitudes toward sexuality and gender within the gnostic and the orthodox groups. "In simplest form, many gnostic Christians correlate their description of God in both masculine and feminine terms with a complementary description of human nature."[19] Pagels asserts that the gnostic communities' social and political frameworks were grounded in their principle of gender equality. She contrasts that with the orthodox texts portraying God in masculine terms, which shape social practices where men have authority over women.

Nevertheless, Pagels's arguments did not go unchallenged.[20] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued that, instead of having an egalitarian social structure, the gnostic communities held females to be subordinate and inferior to males.[21] Interestingly, both scholars believed a rather straight line could be drawn from the gnostic texts to the social world of the gnostics themselves. Anne McGuire represents a third option, arguing that the imagery of the texts provides very little material from which to sketch the members of the gnostic communities. She explains, "The relation between the mythic worlds of Sophia, Barbelo, Eve, and Norea and the social worlds of real 'Gnostic' women is not clear, and the task of reconstructing the social roles of women in 'Gnosticism' remains one of the most challenging in the study of ancient Mediterranean religions."[22]

Moreover, we do not have much in the way of specific, nonbiblical women known to us from their texts. Within the heresiologists' writings, we have four historical women mentioned: Helena, Marcellina, Philumena, and Flora. Helena is identified as the companion of Simon Magus, the originator of the

18. Ibid., 60.

19. Ibid., 66.

20. Daniel L. Hoffman, *The Status of Women and Gnosticism in Irenaeus and Tertullian*, SWR 36 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1995), offers an extensive critique of Pagels's arguments and a theological interpretation of Irenaeus's and Tertullian's views on women.

21. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 274–79.

22. Anne McGuire, "Women, Gender, and Gnosis in Gnostic Texts and Traditions," in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross S. Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 257. See also Anne McGuire, "Gnosis and Nag Hammadi," in *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham (New York: Routledge, 2010), 204–26.

gnostic movement, according to Irenaeus. Pulling the bits of information together, McGuire suggests that Helena's relationship to Simon is portrayed as "earthly manifestations of a familiar mythic pattern."[23] Irenaeus describes Marcellina as a Carpocratian who taught in Rome in the mid-second century.[24] Philumena is linked with the follower of Marcion, Apelles, and is identified as a prophetess by Hippolytus.[25] The fourth-century antiheresy work by Epiphanius contains a copy of a letter by Ptolemaeus written to "my dear sister Flora."[26] Ptolemaeus took over from the founder of the Valentinian gnostic school, Valentinus, about 160. His letter to Flora is apparently a response to her questions about the Mosaic law. The letter assumes an erudite reader, but beyond that, we cannot form a picture of Flora.

From the third century, we have a Roman funerary inscription dedicated to Flavia Sophē that reads:

> You, who did yearn for the paternal Light,
> Sister, spouse, my Sophē,
> Anointed in the baths of Christ with everlasting, holy oil,
> Hasten to gaze at the divine features of the aeons,
> the great Angel of the great council (i.e., the Redeemer),
> the true Son;
> You entered the bridal chamber and deathless ascended
> To the bosom of the Father.[27]

McGuire evaluates the inscription, observing that masculine names of God are used and that the rituals of baptism and anointing are commended, as is the expectation of a visionary experience.[28] In an interesting and useful discussion, McGuire traces her own development in analyzing gnostic texts. She remarks that at one point she argued that Norea (the daughter of Eve) was a "powerful female model of redemptive subversion."[29] However, she has shifted her conclusions to argue that Norea "participates in just such a system

23. McGuire, "Women, Gender, and Gnosis," 260. See Justin Martyr, *First Apology* (*Apologia i*) 1.26.1–3; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (*Adversus Haereses*) 1.23.2–24.4; Tertullian, *On the Soul* (*De anima*) 34; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* (*Refutatio omnium haeresium*) 6.19; Epiphanius, *Refutation of All Heresies* (*Panarion* [*Adversus haereses*]) 21–22; Origen claims Celsus talks about this, in *Against Celsus* (*Contra Celsum*) 5.62.

24. See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.25.6; Origen, *Cels.* 5.62; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 27.6.1, 8.

25. Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.38.2 (GCS 26.224).

26. Epiphanius, *Pan.* 33.3.1–33.7.10. For an English translation, see Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 306–15.

27. McGuire, "Women, Gender, and Gnosis," 267.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 272.

of power: an ideological system in which true identity and value reside only in the spiritual."[30] McGuire's scholarship highlights the dynamic situation current in gnostic studies. For our purposes in drawing sketches of historical Christian women in the early centuries, we cannot use the mythic discussions of archetype females and the feminine as indicative of the female gnostics and their social world.

In conclusion, the myths embraced by gnostics are not linked in the texts to specific practices that would help us today flesh out their cultural, communal, and liturgical spaces. Given our goals of describing women's lives within the limitations of historical research, the Nag Hammadi collection offers us little to work with. If this book focused on the nature of "female" and "male" in discussions in the second and third centuries from those who claimed the label "Christian," then gnosticism would factor heavily in the discussion. Or, if this book dealt with the give-and-take of theological development within the early centuries of the church, gnostic texts would play a major role. Instead, our book focuses on the women who participated in the communities holding to the *regula fidei*, the confessions that are claimed by what will be called the orthodox church. Therefore, we have elected to set aside the Nag Hammadi material and the hotly debated questions surrounding the definition of gnosticism.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ

The astute reader might also ask why we do not discuss Mary, Jesus's mother, in this book. The reasons include that she is a biblical character, and we chose to begin our survey with Christian women who lived after the apostolic period. Additionally, the historical development of the cult of Mary requires a separate book of its own.[31] Moreover, this history shows that in

30. Ibid.

31. For more information from historical and various theological positions, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Scot McKnight, *The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2007); Tim S. Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals: Toward an Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); Nicholas Constas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1–5, Texts and Translations*, VCSup 66 (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham, eds., *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011); Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (London: Routledge, 1994); Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*, SHR 59 (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins, eds., *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, FCNTECW 10 (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

the period covered by this book, and especially in the third and fourth centuries, when Christian art and iconography begins to flourish, we find, "in surviving frescoes in the catacombs and on other media such as gold glass in the catacombs, Mary is more noticeable by her absence than her presence."[32] Finally, she will make brief appearances in the later chapters as we discuss important events and church councils. For example, imperial women were deeply involved in the Council of Ephesus (431), a council determining that Mary should be known as Theotokos, "bearer of God."

Olympias, Gorgonia, the Desert Mothers, and Others

This book is certainly not an exhaustive treatment of women in Late Antiquity, and the reader familiar with early Christian women will notice that some important women do not feature prominently (or at all). We have aimed to identify some broad themes of women's contributions to the development of Christianity and have constructed each chapter not only to profile these women but also to identify how they participated in wider developments. For example, martyrdom, linked to christological imitation, transitions to living a life of death in asceticism. Again, pilgrimage revealed exegetical exploration, theology developed through dialogue, and the empresses shaped the pious Christian ideal.

Thus the women we selected have a connection in some way to another woman (or several women) in the rest of the book so as to show the interdependence of piety we find throughout these early centuries. The point of highlighting these connections is not to show direct cause and effect or to identify some line of "orthodox" women that preserved a "pure" Christianity. Instead, we demonstrate how women were right in the thick of everything, how their participation and contributions were vital to the construction and maturation of the early church, and how men and women depended on one another for the sake of their love for Christ.

To this end, we have identified a series of lines of "succession" that are not necessarily as starkly delineated as the episcopal or imperial succession but that nonetheless are threads that draw women (and men) together across the passing centuries. One of those major seams holding together that interdependence is the continuing importance of Thecla for the theological and devotional lives of many Christians, including for Macrina, as well as for Gregory of Nazianzus (a longtime friend of Macrina's brother, Basil of Caesarea), who

32. Eileen Rubery, "From Catacomb to Sanctuary: The Orant Figure and the Cults of the Mother of God and S. Agnes in Early Christian Rome, with Special Reference to Gold Glass," in *Papers Presented at the Conference on Early Christian Iconography, Held in Pècs, Hungary*, ed. Allen Brent and Markus Vinzent, StPatr 73 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 135.

spent considerable time at Thecla's shrine in the fourth century. Another is the carefully treasured narrative of Christic imitation that almost seamlessly shifted from martyr to virgin ascetic. We also see the dramatic sweep that was the interdependence of piety between empress and bishop, empress and the desert fathers, and empress and the Roman aristocrat-turned-ascetic. In order to highlight these connections and draw women into the core of the development of Christianity in the second through fifth centuries, we have spent time on the broader historical and theological context. This means that women like the Constantinopolitan heiress and ally to John Chrysostom, Olympias, the fascinating lives and sayings of the Desert Mothers like Amma Sarah, Amma Theodora, and Amma Syncletica, other important family members, like Gregory of Nazianzus's mother, Nonna, and his sister Gorgonia, the famous hermit Pelagia from Antioch, and so many others are not included.[33] That there are too many women to fit into one book is not a bad problem to have! And yet, as we will see, overall our information about women's lives falls far short of the level of data we have on men at this time.

Tolle Lege: "Take Up and Read"

Most of the historical literary evidence during this period that we have to work with comes from and is about those from the upper class. Of course Late Antiquity boasts some exemplary writers, but widespread literacy is a modern Western phenomenon. Those who wrote and could read were, generally speaking, members of a class who could afford the time and the education. Thus we are working with a comparably small set of potential writers and works that have the possibility of being preserved. Even then, preservation in and of itself is not a given. Centuries before the printing press, bookmaking was time-consuming, laborious, and costly.[34] Yet some substantial advances

33. For texts about Gorgonia, Pelagia, the Desert Mothers, and many others, see Patricia Cox Miller, ed., *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); for translations of a collection of Syriac hagiographies of women, see Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 13 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); for a text of the anonymous fifth-century Life of Olympias, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations*, SWR 2 (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979); for a translation of the *Life of Syncletica*, see Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Pseudo-Athanasius: *The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncletica*," in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 265–311.

34. See Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

mitigated these problems. Christians were fond of the codex, a significant shift in format that allowed for more versatility, portability, and preservation of written texts. In contrast to papyrus scrolls, the codex looks more like a modern book. This advancement brought about new utility in the composition and copying of texts and new accessibility in the engagement with texts. When he overhears a child in a neighboring house chanting, "*Tolle lege* [pick up and read]," Augustine reaches for the accessible, codified Letters of Paul that he had with him. The portability and ease of reference of codices changed how readers and writers engaged with texts.

Still, writing and reading were the provinces of the upper class. Interestingly, although Christianity continued the trend of primarily upper-class writers reflecting on and engaging with primarily upper-class subjects, we also find some of those same upper-class writers pursuing nonconventional subjects and content. As we will deal with in more detail in chapter 9, educated Christians had a complicated relationship with the literary composition of biblical works. This created some difficulty for those Christians who were especially keen to go toe-to-toe with their pagan ideological rivals. It was no small task, though; the Gospel of Mark just could not compete with Homer on any kind of rhetorical or literary level. The power of the narrative of Christ and the early Christian church, however, was understood by Christians to transcend those established literary forms and challenge social structures. Christianity contested and even overturned what were considered fundamental ways of understanding the world. One example of this was the biblical and christological concept of strength in weakness. It was understood by Christians that imitation of Christ was central to the corporate and individual's self-understanding; no one's status or gender or age or physicality or background could negate their modeling Christlike behavior. Thus we have cherished narratives of the slave-girl Blandina, aged Desert Fathers and Mothers, young female virgins, old widows, and many others who are held up as exemplars of the Christic-shaped devotion of confession, suffering, and death.

Our research is limited by our sources, for the vast majority of women's lives in the ancient church are inaccessible simply because no literary record of their lives exists or ever existed. Therefore we must be careful not to imprint the experience of one woman onto the multitude. In this book we are dealing with women of status more often than not; while we can draw some conclusions about their lives and the lives of other women by extension, we must be circumspect about the reach of those observations. One thing that we can do, however, is to be mindful as we work through a text to note when others are involved and to engage our imagination beyond the saint who dominates a text. For example, when we imagine Melania the Elder in her convent, we

should imagine her with a cadre of women around her and draw attention especially to those who are named in the text so as to not allow their presence to pass by unnoticed. When we hear of Augustine's congregation clamoring for Melania the Younger's husband to be ordained, we should imagine this crowd and work to understand their resorting to extreme measures and the array of possible reasons for it. Aristocratic saints wielded great power in early Christianity, but we must not allow them to cast such a shadow as to obscure those who supported, those who learned, and those who served around them.

We hope that readers of this book will develop a fuller understanding of women in the patristic period as they seek to bring this important period of the church's history to bear on the present. We recognize that women have always played important roles in many aspects of church and Christian society, and it is no innovation to suggest that this is how things should be. At the same time, we will show how the women we discuss had to work around various impediments in order to speak their thoughts and act on their convictions. It is worthwhile to think theologically about the causes of gender inequity in the patristic period. We hope that Christians today engage with the many significant ideas raised and discussed in the church fathers, while at the same time not uncritically reproducing those elements that were unhelpful for the lives of Christian women. We trust that, by telling the stories of Christian women in the patristic period—and taking seriously their Christian beliefs (doctrine, worship, Scripture, and community)—our book will help readers today to remember a fuller and richer Christian history and engage in their own communities with a stronger, sharper, and sophisticated appreciation for the Christian women of the second through fifth centuries. Reading texts about and by early Christian women helps us expand our understanding of what the Christian story is. Join us as we follow Augustine's example and *tolle lege*.

1

Thecla: Christian Female Protomartyr and Virgin of the Church

A young woman smitten by a man's presence—this is the stuff of romance. A woman striving to chart her own path, undaunted by obstacles—this is inspiring. A woman rejecting a life of respectable stability and marital love and choosing an existence of want and possible danger—this is puzzling. A story that combines all this and more is bound to captivate, and indeed the story of Thecla has challenged and inspired Christians, especially in the second through fifth centuries. Yet Thecla is a shadowy figure, which may explain the resilience of her memory and influence, for subsequent generations viewed her as an exemplar for their own times, whether for martyrdom, asceticism, or virginity. Her story is told on the pages of the Acts of Paul and Thecla (APTh), or simply Acts of Thecla, although her narrative probably circulated separately in some cases.[1] It seems likely that some form of this text was written in the mid-second century (if not earlier) and was incorporated into the Acts of Paul as various traditions of Paul were collected. We set the stage for her story below in a brief overview of the church in the second century.

1. For an English translation, see Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:239–46. See also Barrier, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*; Barrier's numbering system will be used in what follows.

Introduction to Christian Women in the Second Century

Christian women in the second century traveled with their male counterparts in uncharted waters as the fledging church of the New Testament stretched beyond its Jewish boundaries and reached into the gentile pagan world. This century sees the separation, by and large, of Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus, as well as the rise of rabbinic Judaism. Second-century Christians were also testing the waters on orthodoxy, or right belief, asking questions about the nature of Jesus Christ and of God the Father. But much of the second century is taken up with questions of practice—when and how to baptize, take communion, and fast. As gentiles turned from paganism to Christianity, questions arose on proper "Christian" behavior over against pagan lifestyles. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the area of sexual ethics. Second-century Christians debated the role of sex in marriage and the worthiness of a continent life. Celibacy and virginity were promoted, as well as marriage to a fellow believer, while second marriages—that is, remarrying after one's spouse died—were criticized. In line with the wider philosophical teachings of the day, Christians valued self-control and self-restraint, but in ways that expressed their Christian beliefs. Asceticism, which included extensive fasting and refraining from sex within marriage, or from marriage entirely, will frame conversations about proper Christian lifestyle for centuries to come.

Alongside conversations about asceticism, we find a growing interest in institutional issues and leadership as a developing "orthodox," or mainstream, Christianity began to take shape. Churches discussed issues at the boundaries, such as prophecy, visions, and who speaks as a genuine prophet. And the churches focused on organization at the center, promoting offices such as deacon, presbyter, and bishop. Questions surrounding the proper expression of Christian faith in daily life and in liturgy animated the second century. And all this happened on the world stage, where the wider culture was hostile toward and suspicious of the emerging Christian groups. Moreover, plagues and earthquakes unnerved the population of the Roman Empire, and political unrest, including civil war, disquieted the city and countryside. These were unsettling times, and the portrait of Christian women highlights the uneasy, apprehensive mood. After a brief sketch of her story, we will discuss how best to interpret Thecla's narrative.

Introduction to Thecla

"Written by the hand of Thecla." So penned the patriarch of Constantinople, Cyril Lucaris, in his note to Charles I, king of England, when in 1627, the

patriarch handed the king the ancient biblical manuscript known as Alexandrinus. Cyril's note explains that Thecla, an honorable Egyptian woman who lived about the time of the Council of Nicaea (325), wrote this copy of the Bible. She was a daughter of the founder of a monastery in Egypt, was persecuted for her faith, and died just after the Council of Nicaea. Originally, her name was attached to the end of the manuscript, but the document was later damaged. About one thousand years later, an Arabic hand noted in the margin of the manuscript's second page, "They say that this book was written by the hand of Thecla, the martyr."[2] It is historically unlikely that this manuscript was penned by the Thecla of APTh, because she lived at least a century before it was copied. Nevertheless, it is appropriate that her name be immortalized in this way, and it echoes down through the centuries, as witnessed by its presence for over thirteen hundred years in the Alexandrinus manuscript's history.

Thecla's story reflects the topic of Christian asceticism and highlights the links between that and women's writing, reading, and teaching. The ancient world connected the disciplines of study—writing and reading—with eating and drinking. Thus the one might be seen as a substitute for the other in the ascetic lifestyle. In Thecla's story, she neither eats nor drinks for three days and three nights but only listens to Paul's words.[3] Thecla, the learned ascetic, inspired countless Christians, and her story influenced generations.

Who Is Thecla?

The narrative begins not with Thecla but with the apostle Paul. Indeed, one of the complicating factors in interpreting Thecla's story is that it stands within the wider Acts of Paul literature, and this collection of stories has its own convoluted textual history. Paul arrives in Thecla's hometown of Iconium (modern Konya, Turkey) and begins to preach his gospel from a neighbor's house. Thecla is mesmerized by his teachings, and embraces them with great fervor. She remains at her window, listening for three days, and determines to follow Paul's ascetic message. This creates a family crisis that propels the rest of Thecla's life, for she refuses to marry her fiancé. Her mother, Theocleia, is furious, and her fiancé, Thamyrus, is devastated. Thecla is undeterred.

2. Kim Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest: Women, Writing, and Representation in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

3. Such connection continued through the centuries, as in the case of Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa's sister, whose secret family name was Thecla. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* (*Vita s. Macrinae*) 3, in *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God*, trans. Anna M. Silvas, Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts 22 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 112. Macrina is discussed in chap. 7.

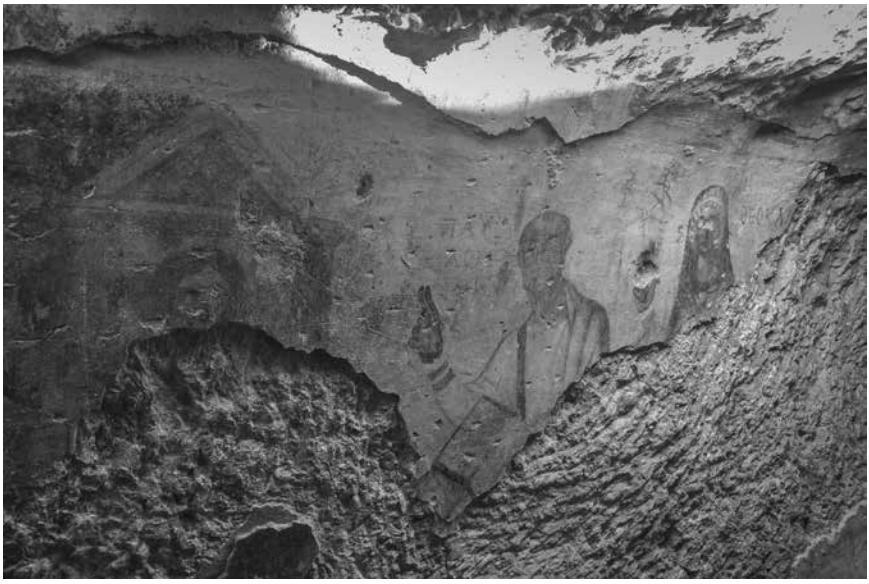


Figure 1.1. A cave outside Ephesus with a fifth- or sixth-century fresco depicting St. Thecla sitting at her window listening to Paul's gospel.

Due to the treachery of Paul's two companions, Demas and Hermogenes, who conspire with Thamyrus, Paul is arrested. The crowd shouts that he is a magician, for he turns wives against their husbands. The governor asks Paul to speak to these charges, and Paul gives a brief account, after which the governor has him committed to prison until a later time when he can talk with Paul more directly. Thecla leaves her house at night to visit Paul in his prison cell and reaffirms her commitment to follow Paul and his teaching. She sits at his feet and kisses his chains. When Paul is taken back to see the governor, she remains in the cell, rolling about in the spot where he sat.

Shortly thereafter, Thecla is called to stand before the governor, which she does with much joy. However, when he asks her why she has refused to marry her fiancé, she remains silent but gazes at Paul. Her obstinacy enrages her mother, who calls for her death. In the first of two appearances in the arena, Thecla faces being burned alive, while Paul is beaten and driven out of the city. As she enters the theater, she looks about for Paul, and sees "the Lord sitting as Paul," who then disappears into the heavens (APTh 3.21). She walks naked to the pyre, and the governor is amazed at her "power." The fire burns, but Thecla is preserved by a violent storm with hail that kills others in the theater.

Then the narrative jumps to Paul, who with his host family has fled the city and is staying in a nearby cave. They are praying and fasting, and then one of

the children goes to the market to buy some bread. There he meets Thecla, who has been searching for Paul. They are reunited, and she begs to go with Paul as he continues his ministry, stating that she will cut her hair to follow him. He refuses, saying that she is young and beautiful and thus might yet succumb to temptations. Even so, she asks to be baptized, and he indicates that it is not yet time for that, but if she is patient, she will receive the water.

In the very next scene, the host family returns to Iconium, and she and Paul arrive in Antioch, where her beauty arouses the desire of Alexander, a leading figure in the city. When Alexander tries to embrace her, Thecla tears his cloak and knocks his crown from his head. At such provocation, he has her taken to the governor, who condemns her to the wild beasts. As she waits her fate, she is given to the care of a leading woman of the city, Tryphaena. This wealthy mother has a vision of her deceased daughter, who declares that Thecla will take her place, and that she, the daughter, will be moved to a righteous place because of Thecla's prayers.

Before the spectacle, Alexander goes to Tryphaena's house and asks for Thecla. The woman adamantly refuses, even though she knows that such a refusal means that Thecla will face a horrific death in the arena. Tryphaena understands Thecla to be a divine mediator whose prayers can save her daughter. As Thecla enters the arena, some in the crowd are appalled at what they see as a miscarriage of justice, but their voice does not carry the day. The beasts attack, but a lioness protects her from a charging bear, and then dies while killing a lion. More beasts are sent into the arena. Thecla raises her hands in prayer, and then she plunges into a pool populated by ferocious seals, thereby experiencing baptism. A lightning strike kills all the seals, and Thecla emerges whole, with a cloud of fire covering her nakedness. Even more beasts are set out, but many women in the crowd have had enough. They throw herbs and spices into the arena to calm the animals. Next bulls are brought in and Thecla is to be drawn and quartered, but her ropes burn and she is freed from the raging beasts.

This proves to be too much for Tryphaena, who faints away as though dead. The city magistrate and Alexander grow terrified because Tryphaena is related to the emperor, and her death at their sponsored spectacle could land them afoul of the ruler. The governor stops everything and asks Thecla who she is that such miracles have happened. Unlike earlier in the story where she remained silent, now she speaks: "I am a slave of the living God" (APTh 4.12). She is released, to the great joy of the women in the crowd. Thecla is restored to Tryphaena, who recovers and confesses her own belief in the resurrection and in her daughter's resurrected life. Tryphaena welcomes Thecla into her home and gives all her wealth to Thecla, who remains eight days while teaching Tryphaena and her

Public domain /Wikimedia Commons

Figure 1.2. In a fifth-century relief, Thecla stands triumphant with lions at her side.

household. Then, seeking Paul, Thecla travels to Myra. For the journey, she dresses as a man and is joined by a group of young men and women. Upon greeting Paul, she tells him of her baptism. He receives the news with joy and blesses her with the words "Go and teach the word of God" (4.16). After this, Thecla returns to her home city of Iconium. She goes to the house of Onesiphorus, the family who hosted Paul at the beginning of our story.[4] There she falls on the very spot where Paul has taught, and she too then begins to teach the word. Her former fiancé having died, she visits her mother, who seems unconvinced by her daughter's testimony. Yet others are persuaded as Thecla teaches. Next she travels to nearby Seleucia, and then dies a peaceful death.

Several additional endings of our story exist in the manuscripts. They add to her experiences in Seleucia, reporting that she lived outside the town and on a mountain, where she endured the devil's temptations. Women travel to her to be taught, and some stay with her to live a monastic life. Those overcome with illness are healed, and unclean spirits are cast out by God's power in her. Yet the physicians of Seleucia are jealous and decide to destroy her power. They determine that she has such power because she is a virgin, falsely concluding that she is a priestess for the goddess Diana, and so they send some local riffraff to rape her. This gang of young men are identified as lions in the text, likely a reference back to the beasts she faced in the arena in Antioch. When they arrive at her door, she reasons with them about the power of God to save her yet again, and then miraculously the side of her cave opens and she walks through, whereupon it closes upon her. The young

4. A believer named Onesiphorus is mentioned in 2 Tim. 1:16; 4:19.

ruffians are left holding only a bit of her veil. The narrator reports that this is how the first female martyr and apostle of God, the virgin Thecla, died.

How Should We Interpret the Material?

Reading Thecla: The Historical Figure

As we engage Thecla's story in the twenty-first century, we are perhaps first of all aware of a profound distance between our frames of reference and Thecla's world. The intense physical violence of the arena, the strong asceticism, and the fantastical miracles—these are disorienting to modern readers. Yet the ancient Roman arena was a reality, where criminals were tossed to the beasts, made to fight to the death, or burned alive. As we will see in the next chapter, Christian martyrs faced a similar fate. We might have a sneaking admiration for Thecla's gumption in following her own path, however torturous it might be, but the ancient Roman traditionalist would be shocked at Thecla's rejection of wealth and social stability. And while we might puzzle over all the miracles mentioned, the pagan, Jew, and Christian of the second century lived in a world filled with the supernatural; indeed, the sharp divisions between natural and supernatural that we take for granted in a post-Enlightenment world did not exist. Their question was not "Can miracles happen?" but rather "By what power did such an event occur?"

This cultural and intellectual distance, however, can work in our favor because it allows us to experience and engage the *text* from a variety of perspectives, even if the *world* that produced the text varies profoundly from our own. We might ask whether only the uneducated lower classes relished such stories. Were these stories the fantasies of the downtrodden, fairy tales created by those who had no hope? And what were the author's intentions in writing this story? We can ask how and why Thecla's story excited the imagination of Christians for several hundred years. Throughout this book we will explore several key topics and themes sown in this story, motifs that germinate in the third century and blossom in the fourth and fifth centuries.

We get to know Thecla and her story through the narrative. We know that later Christians spoke of her as a model to imitate. But that raises the question: Is she a historical figure? Does her narrative draw on a historical figure? There are several ways to address this question. If one means, is there a first-century Thecla who worked alongside the apostle Paul in Asia Minor?, then we must recognize that we have no other first-century evidence of such a person. Is it possible for there to be a woman named Thecla who, like Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2), Lydia (Acts 16:14), Priscilla

(Acts 18:2; Rom. 16:3), and Junia (Rom. 16:7), served as Paul's coworker? Moreover, the text gives several historical details that tantalize. These include the historical person of Thecla's patron Tryphaena, who lived in the middle of the first century and was a queen of Pontus and a relative of Emperor Claudius.[5] Her kingdom was on the border between the Roman and Persian Empires, and for that reason Rome courted her favor, at least until Nero's reign. We know of her dynasty only through coins and inscriptions, which suggests to some that the person who wrote APTh lived in a period of close proximity to this kingdom's existence, for memory of the queen quickly faded. Such historical details lead some to suggest that behind the current APTh is a first-century work "by some person not far removed from the events, able to compose a history, or at least a poetical idealisation of history."[6] However, the historical Queen Tryphaena was a priestess of Livia who lived in Cyzicus and not Syrian or Pisidian Antioch.[7] The geographical details about Iconium and the royal road system within the story are accurate for the time, as are the basic descriptions of the legal procedures and treatment of criminals.

Ultimately, these historical details do not add up to the conclusion that the text reveals solid historical events about a real figure, Thecla, the faithful disciple of Paul and of Christ. If she existed as a historical figure, the account of her life has been enhanced, changed, and remixed such that only the barest outline of historicity can be discerned. More plausible is the theory that Thecla's narrative builds on a charismatic late first-century or early second-century female disciple whose persona invited reflection. Like a grain of sand captured by an oyster is overlaid with rich layers of protein and crystals to become a pearl, so too it may be that a first-century female teacher caught the attention of a pious writer who sketched her testimony, to which a later witness added layers and interpretations, producing a lasting pearl of remembrance in the current figure of St. Thecla.

If the historical details of a historical Thecla are lost in the mists of the past, would we do better to describe her as a myth? Not necessarily, since "myth" carries the sense of ancient past and cosmic forces, as in the story of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and delivered it to humanity. Others suggest the term "legend," which has the value of suggesting at least a figure rooted in history; however, in ancient Greece a legend was told in verse, not

5. William M. Ramsey, *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1892), 385–87.

6. Ibid., 388.

7. Esther Yue L. Ng, "*Acts of Paul and Thecla*: Women's Stories and Precedent?," *JTS* 55 (2004): 19.

prose.[8] Thecla is first and foremost a literary character. We access her from a narrative, not from a personal diary (as we have from the martyr Perpetua), a court transcript, or a historian's notes (as for Helena, mother of Constantine, described by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*), but that does not make her story a fairy tale. Gillian Clark helpfully sorts out aspects of truth in her comment concerning the martyr-acts: "They are presented as an expression of truth, even if that truth is (in Aristotle's terms) poetic rather than historical, an account of what could happen rather than what did happen."[9]

Reading Thecla: Methodological Considerations

Our reasonable cautiousness concerning the figure of Thecla should not blind us to the historical information embedded in the narrative's assumptions about second-century life among Christians. As Susan Hylen observes, the text does "give insight into what the author wanted to persuade the audience of, and what he assumed they would take for granted."[10] Readers must be alert to the difference between descriptive and prescriptive, and to the rhetoric that encourages a way of life rather than disinterestedly describes a lifestyle. We can discover something about how early Christians understood themselves and their world by focusing on decisions women made. Kate Wilkinson notes that women's agency is itself a means to access real women's lives, for although men have appropriated women's voices, nevertheless women's own agency was at work in the social construction of gender in the society.[11]

Ancient Greco-Roman culture is the broad canvas on which Christian women painted their world. Hylen suggests that we analyze how ancient women creatively expressed the cultural virtues of self-control, modesty, and civic engagement. She challenges previous scholars' arguments that emphasized an internal consistency to culture and promoted a dichotomy between private and public spaces, relegating women to private areas and men to public settings. This sort of analysis leads to the conclusion that women public leaders were an anomaly. Hylen rightly contends, and we agree: "The demands for traditional feminine behavior did not cancel out women's active roles."[12] Her conclusion is based on reconsideration of the way cultural

8. Bryan P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* [*CAGN*] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 2008), 1.

9. Gillian Clark, "Bodies and Blood: Late Antique Debate on Martyrdom, Virginity and Resurrection," in *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity*, ed. Dominic Montserrat (London: Routledge, 1998), 103.

10. Hylen, *Modest Apostle*, 7.

11. Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty*, 13.

12. Hylen, *Modest Apostle*, 4.

values are expressed, for at any given time, two cultural virtues might seem to be at odds (modesty and civic engagement), but the ancient woman would negotiate her expression of these values. Hylen continues, "The dispositions of culture shape human action, but they allow for multiple expressions of the same values, and even, to some extent, choice between the values expressed."[13] In the story of Thecla, and in other ancient stories, we should not be surprised to find seemingly competing values. Instead, we should recognize the complicated cultural context that encouraged women (and men) to act according to their culture's values in ways that also reflected their own understanding and commitment to those values.

This means that women, including Christian women, might choose conservative expressions of modesty as they demonstrate their agency. Kate Wilkinson argues that modesty is "an opportunity for active self-formation and self-representation in a community."[14] As such, modesty is not a private matter, for it is performed among others. Nor is modesty an outcome of self-restraint but is itself a process pursuing self-control. Wilkinson continues, "As a performance, however, modesty belongs to the subject of the action; she is accountable for its content and efficacy."[15] This interpretation of women's agency is an important corrective to earlier scholarship's thesis that agency is synonymous with autonomy and can only be seen in countercultural moves and poses of resistance. Its importance lies in part in revealing the honor culture of the ancient world, which stressed community over against individuality. And in part, this interpretation calls into question the equation of authenticity with resistance to the status quo, for it undermines the notion that culture is static and imposed as a set of rules onto the individual. Instead, individuals are constantly deciding how to manage and express competing and even at times contradictory cultural values.

Reading Thecla: The Plot Thickens

If decisions reveal agency, then within Thecla's narrative we should attend to her choices, and those made by other women. Thecla's rejection of the status quo demonstrated by her refusal to marry is not her only expression of agency. Her insistence on public modesty, so important to the Roman world, also reveals her agency and self-expression. The story's plot is one window through which to view women's agency in the narrative, for it highlights the essential pieces of the narrative and thus the key themes that drive the

13. Ibid., 10.
14. Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty*, 17.
15. Ibid., 24.

narrative. A serendipitous meeting launches the narrative: Thecla hears Paul preach and embraces his message. This new relationship drives the action as these two meet, separate, rejoin, separate again, reunite, and then have a final separation. Their relationship has been interpreted in various ways, usually in conjunction with a decision on the story's genre. We will look at genre options below; at this point we return to the plot and notice that during these times of separation Thecla is severely tested. These tests warrant a closer look. What exactly is being tested? Thecla's resolve to remain a virgin is challenged by her family and by a leading man in Antioch, Alexander. Thus we might say that the plot reveals the supreme importance of virginity. However, a minor character, Onesiphorus, is married and models faithful ascetic living with his family. He is not asked to leave his wife and children; rather, they extend hospitality to itinerant preachers such as Paul and worthy celibates such as Thecla. Again, one might argue that marriage is rejected, but the same caveat concerning Onesiphorus would apply. Thus the plot turns on the issues of marriage and virginity. Supporting both claims is the foundational assertion that the ascetic life, governed by self-control and denial, is essential, for only those made pure by such means will inherit the resurrection.

A second fundamental part of the plot is Thecla's baptism.[16] In her second encounter with Paul, after he is driven from Iconium and she is miraculously saved from the pyre, she asks that he baptize her. He refuses, saying that she might yet fall into temptation. When they meet again, it is after she declares herself to have been baptized (she plunged into a pool filled with killer seals during her ordeal in the arena in Antioch). Paul accepts this baptism and blesses her to continue her teaching. He sees the baptism as evidence of Thecla's faithfulness in the face of martyrdom, a fate brought about not particularly because she confesses to being a Christian, but because she rejects a leading suitor (Thamyris, then Alexander) and humiliates him by her rebuff.

A third force behind the narrative is the figure and support of Tryphaena, whose own daughter's death and uncertain afterlife provides the opportunity for Thecla to demonstrate her powers of prayer and intercession. The deep bond between Thecla and Tryphaena will be explored below. Here we stress that Tryphaena's protection ensures that Thecla retains her virginity before her ordeal in the arena. She also supports Thecla financially so that the latter may travel back to Iconium and then on to Seleucia, living a life of relative solitude. Tryphaena serves as the model pupil of Thecla and sees the truth of the resurrection that Thecla teaches. In some longer endings

16. Ng, "*Acts of Paul and Thecla*," 11.

of the story, Thecla's powers continue during her long life as she teaches the word of God and heals many from her abode outside of Seleucia. It is her healing powers, seen in connection with her virginity, that ultimately bring about her end as she is swallowed by the cave wall before the eyes of her would-be rapists.

Why should questions of marriage and virginity drive the plot? The answer to these questions points back to the beginning of the story, to a description of what Thecla heard that day from her window. In his beatitudes, Paul preached about continence, about undefiled flesh, and about virgins. Those who keep to these practices will have their reward in their salvation; they will be the temple of God and angels of God. Thecla clings to her virginity because of the promised heavenly reward: resurrection from the dead.[17] Death as experienced by Tryphaena's daughter, Falconilla, is seemingly unpleasant, although no details are given; thus, Thecla's message of resurrection to a life of rest and peace was compelling. Virginity was not only related to the afterlife, but it also spoke volumes in the current age. Peter Brown describes the virgin body as "intact" and thus possibly representing "a condensed image of the individual, always threatened with annihilation, poised from birth above the menacing pressures of the world."[18] Additionally, virginity exemplified the self-restraint and self-control that the story as a whole encourages. Thecla's concern to remain chaste before being thrown to the beasts in Antioch would have resonated with her Roman audience, whose own founding myth celebrated a modest matron who valued her chastity over her very life.

This well-known myth, recounted by the ancient historian Livy, emphasizes the importance of female chastity in Roman society. Lucretia, the industrious and virtuous wife of a fifth-century BCE Roman, was raped by Sextus Tarquinius, prince of the Etruscan tyrant ruling Rome. Her virtue was never doubted by her husband and father, yet she drove a dagger through her heart so that no woman after her might ever doubt her commitment to her chaste devotion to marriage.[19] For the married and unmarried woman, her chaste life was of paramount importance for the public good. Lucretia's example of chaste virtue stands with Thecla's determination to remain a virgin. And the virtue of self-restraint demonstrated was equally valued by men who likewise (but perhaps in different ways) expressed self-control. In this way, Thecla served as a role model for both Christian men and women. In other

17. Ibid., 10.
18. Brown, *Body and Society*, 159.
19. Livy, *Hist*. 1.57–58.

words, the Acts of Paul and Thecla is not simply or primarily a story about a pious early Christian; it is a rhetorical masterpiece that draws readers in, compels them to view the world through the eyes of Thecla, and urges them to live in light of that new vision.

Reading Thecla: The Upside-Down Story

One particular rhetorical device deserves special mention: Thecla's story turns upside down some common Roman virtues and values by redefining what is honorable and what is shameful. Since honor and shame were coded to gender, that means that our story uses typical feminine virtues such as silence and passivity and presents them as of the highest honor, superior to the masculine traits of dominance and physical power: "Constructing themselves as female, seemingly powerless to stop their suffering at the hands of Roman male authorities, Christians in fact challenged and defied Roman claims to power."[20]

Within the story itself, we find the rhetorical strategy that Ross Kraemer calls "gender inversion"—that is, the promotion of typically feminine virtues as higher and better than masculine virtues, and the presentation of females as exemplifying masculine traits of self-control or courage better than the males in the story. The story elevates typical feminine qualities to be normative for all and challenges typical masculine virtues such as courage to include submission to force or power, as Thecla does in the arena. Kraemer writes, "The fundamental associations of femininity with weakness, powerlessness, passivity, limited intellect, and numerous other deficiencies were effectively exploited to demonstrate the ultimate power of the Christian God."[21]

The gender-inversion theory invites reflection on the vivid images of Thecla's body, naked in the narrative and to the reader's imagination, and subjected to horrific tortures. Scholars are divided on how to understand the remarks concerning Thecla's nakedness. Is this a voyeuristic look at a young beautiful female? Or is the nakedness symbolic of her purity? Or perhaps this picture simply reflects the reality of any person, male or female, in the arena? While the symbolism of nakedness must be considered, we should not forget, assuming this text was written in the second century, that it accurately reflects the torture that criminals and slaves underwent in the arena. A story of a martyr involves violence, including humiliation through nakedness that accompanies

20. Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 135.

21. Ibid.

such punishment. Thecla's response to the governor, that God has clothed her with salvation, might provide the key to interpreting her nakedness. She appears naked to the audience, but she believes herself to be clothed, perhaps implying that the audience is naked. She writes her own reality; she reconfigures what is shame and who has power. She endures all they can think to do to her body and emerges victorious—a victory fully realized in the resurrection. Brown states, "To the Christian reader, Thecla at her most exposed was the privileged vehicle of the indestructible power of Christ."[22]

While Roman virtues might be resisted or redefined, they can also be embraced by women, who enact them with their own agency. Kate Wilkinson argues that "ancient women had intentions, desires, hopes, and thoughts that they enacted on their own behalf."[23] Decisions that support the status quo, such as modest silence for women, are seen as a demonstration of the woman's agency. Alongside inverting or resisting a social norm or cultural virtue, a woman's conforming actions are owned by her. Whether she resists cultural norms or pursues conservative values such as modesty, the woman is a true subject who chooses actions that reflect her thoughts.

In our story, we find both gender inversion and conformity to existing norms woven in the narrative's fabric. Recall that Thecla is silent for much of the introduction; this may be a signal that Thecla is a highborn woman who is a protected virgin and not a sexually available slave. Later, once her modesty is established, she speaks privately to Paul, and then publicly in the arena to the governor of Antioch. Additional examples of women's voices breaking the silence occur in Antioch, pushing against the feminine virtues of silence and passivity. For example, just before Tryphaena is introduced, a chorus of women speaks out against Antioch's governor and his condemnation of Thecla. Again, these women cry out against the judgment while they and their children watch in horror as Thecla is paraded through the city on the day before her ordeal. A third time, the women shout as Thecla enters the arena to face the beasts, declaring a miscarriage of justice. During the spectacle, women mourn when the lioness that protected Thecla dies, they cry out when Thecla is about to dive into the pool of killer seals, and they toss perfume, spices, and flowers onto the arena floor to dull the beasts. Finally, when Thecla is exonerated and released, the women thank God and cry out, "One is God [or: there is one God] who has saved Thecla" (APTh 4.13). The women's public, truth-speaking voices enact the civic virtue of demanding

22. Brown, *Body and Society*, 157. See also Helen Rhee, *Early Christian Literature: Christ and Culture in the Second and Third Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 137.

23. Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty*, 21.

justice and reinforce the value of modesty in seeking to protect a wellborn virgin and defend the honor of a leading lady of the city.

Reading Thecla: Alongside Other Women in the Story

Strong bonds between women, especially between mother or surrogate mother and daughter, take center stage in Thecla's story and serve to promote the Christian remapping of family that minimized natal relationships and elevated believers as "brothers and sisters" in the Lord.[24] The emphasis on women's relationships is quite pronounced in Thecla and Tryphaena's bonding. Tryphaena does more than simply keep Thecla secure until her appearance in the arena. The bereaved mother finds consolation in her relationship with Thecla, who becomes her "child." Even more, Thecla is drawn into Tryphaena and Falconilla's relationship, which continues although the daughter has died. Falconilla visits her mother in a dream, announcing that Thecla can take the daughter's place with her mother. Thecla prays for Falconilla (now in some way her "sister"), who finds rest and eternal life. Tryphaena accepts Thecla's calling and ascetic desire, at great cost to herself. When Alexander comes to her home asking one last time to make Thecla his wife, Tryphaena drives him away, even while she knows that such action will send Thecla to the beasts, and she will once again be mourning a daughter. Indeed, her grief overwhelms her, and she faints after seeing Thecla tied to bulls. This is not seen as evidence of female weakness, but rather the governor and Alexander both stop the spectacle immediately and release Thecla back to Tryphaena. Thecla's survival is seen as a return from the dead, as confirmation that the dead are raised. Tryphaena exclaims that now she knows that "my child" lives; the reference is most immediately to Thecla, but perhaps it also implies her confidence that Falconilla is indeed now in a place of rest and peace. Tryphaena is mother to Thecla in that she transfers her property to Thecla, and she is patron to her by welcoming her to her home and learning the word of God from Thecla. In the blending of the two roles, we see here a developing picture of the church's understanding of family as fictive kinships that allow strangers to become mother and daughter, as well as pupil and teacher.

This reading of Thecla's story reveals historical data in its narrative and also creates a literary world with upside-down values and a thick plot. Weaving these threads together requires a closer look at the possible genre of the Acts of Paul and Thecla and the likely expectations an ancient reader would bring to such a text.

24. Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (New York: Overlook, 2013), 77–91, offers an accessible discussion of Thecla and her mother, Theocleia.

The Genre of the Acts of Paul and Thecla

We meet Thecla in a narrative, and thus we must explore how the ancient world understood narratives. The Acts of Paul and Thecla incorporates similarities with ancient romance novels and with developing Christian hagiography. As with so many things, where we start will largely determine where we end up. If we start with the notion that the Acts of Paul and Thecla is best read as a type of romance novel, with traits similar to contemporary Greco-Roman romance novels, then we tend to focus on the political dynamics of the story, the exchanges between traditional family structures (marriage, honoring parents), and ascetic Christian goals that reshape the kinship structures to privilege other believers over one's biological family. If we begin with the assessment that the Acts of Paul and Thecla is hagiographic, then the accounts of miracles and the miraculous take center stage as the saint is developed for the church's encouragement. If we lead with the gendered expectations and reversals of the story, we pay close attention to rhetoric in the characters' development and interactions, and perhaps we draw conclusions about social conventions. If we begin with the expectation that this work influenced the piety of Christians for several centuries, our ear becomes attuned to the theological nuances present in the story. A narrative as rich and influential as the Acts of Paul and Thecla deserves a close reading from a cultural, theological, and literary perspective.

What follows is a summary of the ways in which the Acts of Paul and Thecla's composition is understood—that is, what might be its genre. The task of establishing genre is not an idle exercise, because genre gives the reader a clue as to how the text should be read. If someone begins a tale with "Once upon a time," you might settle into your chair in delighted anticipation of an exciting story that will end happily ever after. Not all genres are as fixed as our fairy tale, and certainly in the ancient world, we should not imagine an ideal, abstract "Romance Novel Template" or "Hagiography Model" from which all authors drew. Yet we should expect clues within the text, like our "once upon a time," that guide readers' expectations as to the nature of the material.[25]

The Acts of Paul and Thecla and the Ancient Romance Novel

We might think that the romance novel was a Victorian invention, but the first few centuries of the Roman Empire produced several such tales. These works "are narrative fiction in prose—imaginative, creative literature" that was

25. Edith M. Humphrey, *Joseph and Aseneth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 38–40.

British Museum

Figure 1.3. Thecla's initial encounter with the apostle Paul is depicted on this ivory panel of a fifth-century chest.

most popular in the second century.[26] It is not clear how this genre started, but its impulse seems to stem from the romantic poetry developed toward the end of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire. This was combined with the existing genre of historiography and with the rising interest in the relationship between marriage and the city or wider social and cultural environment. Yet it should not be forgotten that this genre was about entertainment.

Five romances form the core of the evidence, but about twenty texts have been identified in fragments or as references. About fifty to one hundred pages in length in their English translations, they generally follow a typical plotline wherein a young, handsome, and wealthy couple fall deeply in love, then find themselves separated. Enduring terrible misfortunes and trials as well as experiencing exciting adventures, they are at last reunited, and they marry and, we might say, live happily ever after. The young couple remains steadfastly devoted during their time of separation. Ancient novels share an interest in travel and include erotic details and miraculous deeds. The story reaffirms the wider social goals of social stability through promoting elite marriages. Interestingly, the romance novel fades from view with the chaos brought about by the invasions of Rome. Ancient Roman literary historians speak very little, and then not positively, about this genre.

Scholars have noticed the similarities to the romance genre in Thecla's plot, which includes meeting Paul, then being separated from him and enduring horrible tribulations, only to be reunited at the end. Beyond this structural similarity, however, can we find deeper connections that help us understand the message of Thecla's story?

26. *CAGN*, 1.

One broad theory suggests that the Acts of Paul and Thecla seeks to overturn the prevailing cultural norms espoused in the romance novels. In this theory, the plotline of both the romance novel and the Acts of Paul and Thecla is not so much about romance as it is about civic life and politics. While the romance novels end with marriage and reinforce the elite Roman social codes for social and civic life, Thecla's story begins with eschewing her own betrothed and ends with her firm commitment to remain a virgin, thus challenging the prevailing norms that center civic life in the elite family. For example, Kate Cooper suggests that the romance novel carries a second plotline wherein two rival male political forces vie for supremacy.[27] The Acts of Paul and Thecla is read as the words of the emerging Christian male leaders, who seek to usurp the traditional control of the city from the wealthy elite. Thecla becomes a vehicle to establish a new order based on a Christian vision of society, but this vision also retains the old order's insistence on male elite dominance. Cooper's view is provocative but ultimately inadequate to explain the early church's understandings.[28]

A second position builds on the idea of comparing the Acts of Paul and Thecla to a romance novel but suggests that the Thecla story does more than replace one pagan male rival with a Christian interlocutor seeking a similar sort of civic power. Instead, this second view suggests that the Acts of Paul and Thecla calls into question the very nature of Roman marriage as representative of proper civic life.[29] That is, the Acts of Paul and Thecla seeks to overthrow the elites' vision of marriage that had developed during the Roman Empire. In Augustus's time, the understanding of marriage as a private affair between elite Roman citizens was reshaped into a public institution legislated by the state. This meant, first, that marriage was a source of honor for men, because the public realm bestowed (or rescinded) honor. Second, there grew a belief that a happy marriage was one filled with harmony, or *concordia*, between husband and wife. Such harmony was viewed as symbolic of the elite families' relationship with their city, as its cultural and political leaders: "In the second century the married couple was employed as the image for the type of devotion and harmony holding between all members of a society."[30] Third, the

27. Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 51–56.

28. Shelly Matthews, "Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography," *JFSR* 17 (2001): 47–50.

29. Andrew S. Jacobs, "'Her Own Proper Kinship': Marriage, Class and Women in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins, FCNTECW 11 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 19.

30. Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 48.

continence promised between the novel's lovers included both the woman *and the man*. The romance novels allow for a few sexual encounters by the male, but these are carefully coded to reinforce the overarching concern of fidelity to the marriage and thus the city.[31] The elite marriage was public, representing civic loyalty, and the public virtue of *concordia* was internalized within the marriage relationship.

If the romance novel pulls a bit at the hem of this story line from time to time by referencing lower-class experiences of love alongside the elite couple's story, the Acts of Paul and Thecla yanks on the thread, unraveling the whole by challenging the elite's vision of the goals of life. In the Thecla story, the notion of marriage as civic duty and moral responsibility of the elite is upheld by her mother but critiqued by Paul's gospel. Thecla embraces the Christian model of kinship, which devalues familial ties and loyalty to clan. Thus the call of continence for Thecla comes not as a call to reject sex, or even embodiment; it comes as a call to reject her social class. The insight here is that marriage represented different things to the various social classes. For the elite Thecla, her renunciation of the marriage package includes rejecting the moral and civic underpinnings that gave meaning to the conjugal union.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla and Ancient Hagiography

The romance novel genre as backdrop for understanding the Acts of Paul and Thecla has garnered wide support among scholars. Yet some point to hagiography as a helpful lens through which to read Thecla's story. Hagiography is a biography of a saint or holy person. The term can be defined as "ideologically directed biography."[32] Hagiography has also been placed alongside fictional history, which contains embroidered events, and the line between hagiography and fiction is not always clear. Even more, hagiography is well described not so much as a genre, but as "*a manner of narration*."[33] That is, the hagiographer is interested in venerating the saint's life for the edification of the reader.

Why does this category seem appropriate to some scholars? The reasons relate to their dissatisfaction with the explanatory powers of the romance novel lens to answer questions about Thecla's ascetic, devotional choices. For example, the romance novel includes erotic scenes of both heterosexual and homosexual desire. Some see a similar emphasis on erotic desire in Thecla's

31. Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 71.
32. *CAGN*, 3.
33. Glenn E. Snyder, *Acts of Paul: The Formation of a Pauline Corpus*, WUNT 2/352 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 121, emphasis original.

behavior toward Paul. They point to her kissing his chains and rolling on the floor where he has previously sat. They notice her steady gaze toward Paul when she initially hears his message from her window seat, and her fervent glances at the crowd to see Paul when she is first brought into the arena in Iconium. Yet others are not persuaded, suggesting instead that her actions represent the devotion of a disciple to her teacher, and by extension to her God. Thecla represents the model disciple's response to the imprisoned martyr, and her actions bespeak "cultic piety."[34] By this reading, Thecla's kissing his chains or rolling where he sat in prison reflects her conviction that his body is holy. The author hints as much in the opening description of Paul given to Onesiphorus as one who has the face of an angel. Paul later states that those who fear God are blessed, as they shall become angels of God. Thecla is said to "love" Paul (APTh 3.19), but the Greek term used (*storgē*) primarily refers to love between parent and child, or love as an abstraction. Rarely does the term carry sexual connotations.[35] Finally, when she enters the arena and her confidence stumbles, she looks into the crowd and sees "the Lord as Paul"; thus this vision enables her to endure. Glenn Snyder suggests that this episode calls to mind "the cultic practice [of] gazing on an image of the apostle and thus seeing the Lord."[36] Along these same lines, Susan A. Calef suggests that the trials faced by Thecla are best seen in relation to the biblical emphasis on trials producing perseverance, coupled with the romance novel's emphasis on fidelity.[37] Thus the separation of Thecla and Paul serves to test her commitment to the faith and message of the gospel. The tribulations form character and demonstrate steadfast devotion to God.[38]

Answering the genre question is an important piece of the interpretive puzzle, because genre guides the reader in discerning central themes of the work. The Acts of Paul and Thecla draws on the romance novel as a structural framework and also the hagiographical approach to encourage pious behavior in imitation of the saint. The hybrid nature of the narrative's genre

34. Ibid., 125.

35. Ibid., 125n93.

36. Ibid., 129.

37. Susan A. Calef, "Thecla 'Tried and True' and the Inversion of Romance," in Levine and Robbins, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, 180.

38. Snyder, *Acts of Paul*, 129–37, suggests that our narrative might also draw intertextually from the biblical stories of Abraham and Sarah. Snyder draws intriguing parallels, including that Genesis and the APTh tell a story of the woman's capture twice. In both stories (1) foreign males find Sarah/Thecla so beautiful as to be driven to distraction, and (2) familial males deny a relationship with the female, such that (3) the female is taken captive. During the second captivity incident, (4) both Sarah and Thecla's chastity is preserved, and upon release (5) both Abraham/Sarah and Paul/Thecla are given material goods. Isaac and Rebekah used a similar ruse, informing strangers that they are brother and sister (Gen. 26:6–11).

Figure 1.4. Thecla's influence continues today, as witnessed by the St. Thecla monastery near Damascus, Syria.

highlights the complexity of the Acts of Paul and Thecla and perhaps reveals why Thecla's story influenced subsequent centuries of Christian men and women. Its complexity allows flexibility and nimbleness as each generation of readers faced its own challenges. Perhaps Thecla's politically charged resistance to Roman social norms of marriage helped second- and third-century disenfranchised Christian men and women counter their dominant and dominating culture. Here the roles of both Thecla's mother, Theocleia, and the patron/mother figure of Tryphaena come into focus. The former represents the Roman status quo, while the latter serves as Thecla's new mother, her new "kin" who offers protection and financial support. Yet the same action of rejecting marriage could be interpreted by wealthy Christian women in the fourth and fifth centuries as advocating virginity and renunciation of wealth.

Conclusion

In the second and third centuries, Thecla's story was used to think about ascetic lifestyle, the doctrines and practices of baptism and public teaching, and the configuration of kinship or family ties. In the fourth century, her story was shared on her martyr feast day, and pilgrims flocked to her shrines, perhaps for healing, perhaps for a glimpse of divine power. A large church marking her martyr's shrine was built near Seleucia, Asia Minor, her alleged last abode. Current excavations have uncovered three fifth-century churches, including

one measuring eighty meters in length, as well as a large Roman bath and numerous water cisterns.[39] A late fourth- or early fifth-century visitor, Egeria, writes about her journey there; we will meet her in chapter 6.[40] A century later, two women from Syria travel north to Thecla's shrine, forgoing food throughout the journey.[41] Key theologians visited this site; in 374, Gregory of Nazianzus traveled there, in part to escape an unpleasant job post.[42] He included Thecla as the only woman in a list of early apostolic martyrs that included Peter and Paul, James, Stephen, John, Luke, and Andrew.[43]

Thecla's reputation continued to influence Christians. In the fourth century, the bishop of Olympus, Methodius (d. 311/312), presents Thecla as a philosopher and a great teacher of the church. As any good philosopher would do, Thecla models right living. For Methodius, Thecla imitates Christ and thus can serve as a philosopher to the church. She served, as well, as a model for Olympias, a fifth-century deaconess in the cathedral of Constantinople. In the Life of Olympias, the author includes an extensive description of Thecla: "a citizen of heaven, a martyr who conquered in many contests, the holy one among women, who despised wealth, hated the sharp and transitory pleasures of this world, refused a pecunious marriage and confessed that she would present herself a chaste virgin to her true Bridegroom." And the author continues, "Olympias walked in the footsteps of this saint, Thecla, in every virtue of the divinely-inspired way of life."[44] Olympias was a wealthy woman whose first marriage lasted two years; she refused a second marriage even though Emperor Theodosius insisted that she marry one of his kinsmen. She was a close associate of John Chrysostom, who exchanged many letters with her, seventeen of which are extant. Another fourth-century figure, Gregory of Nyssa, reveals that his sister, Macrina, has a secret family name given her by

39. Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6, citing Ernst Herzfeld and Samuel Guyer, *Meriamlik und Korykos: Zwei christliche Ruinenstätten des rauhen Kilikiens*, *MAMA* 2 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1930), 1–89.

40. Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 5; Egeria, *Itinerary of Egeria* (*Itinerarium Egeriae*) 22.2, in *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, trans. George E. Gingras, ACW 38 (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1970), 22–23.

41. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria* 29; English translation in *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 404–5.

42. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Concerning His Own Life* (*De vita sua*) 548–49 (PG 37:1067).

43. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* (*Oration*) 4.69 (*First Invective against Julian the Emperor* [*Contra Julianum*]).

44. Life of Olympias 1.1, in Kraemer, *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, 228. For a full text of the anonymous fifth-century Life of Olympias, see Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, 127–42.

her mother at birth: Thecla.[45] And Jerome promises Eustochium, a young virgin and a daughter of his patron Paula, that Thecla, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Miriam will greet her in heaven.[46] Stephen Davis notes that Thecla was a "female saint whose popularity rivalled that of Mary in the early church."[47]

Her story continued to inspire into the fifth and sixth centuries. One example is the story of Eugenia, the daughter of the Roman eparch Philip in Alexandria, set in the late second century.[48] One day while traveling from the city to a village, she reads the story of Thecla and chooses to follow her example. In *the Life of Eugenia*, the author recounts how Eugenia embraces Thecla's model. She declares herself free from her family by cutting her hair, dressing in men's clothing, and going on pilgrimage. Eventually she resides in a male monastery, concealing her female identity under her short hair and male clothing. Eugenia grows in her piety such that she performs miracles and becomes head abbot. In an ironic twist, a woman healed by Eugenia accuses her of making sexual advances. To prove her innocence and the propriety of her monastery, she reveals that she too is a woman.

Several points should be noticed. First, Thecla's example encourages women to pursue the ascetic life with great determination. Second, women read Thecla's story, which highlights the rising educational level among Christians in the later centuries.[49] Archaeologists have discovered two pocket-sized books of the Acts of Thecla in Egypt, dating from the fourth and fifth centuries.[50] The picture of Eugenia reading Thecla while traveling matches the evidence. Third, in her defense in court against charges of sexual misconduct, Eugenia specifically states she has imitated Thecla, and to show that she is female, she tears her garment to reveal her breasts. Interestingly, her pose presents a picture similar to those stamped on votive clay containers, as Thecla stands naked to the waist.[51]

In Syria, the Syrian Orthodox patriarch in 512–18, Severus of Antioch, writes about the miracles and healings that continue to happen at Thecla's shrine. In his homily given on her feast day (September 24) he makes this clear.[52] Again, in a letter exchanged with Solon, metropolitan bishop of Seleucia, in

45. Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Macr.* 3 (Silvas, *Macrina the Younger*, 112).
46. Jerome, *Epistles* (*Epistulae*) 22.41.
47. Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 4.
48. Ibid., 143–48.
49. John Chrysostom, a fourth-century bishop of Antioch, speaks of wealthy women who wore miniature Gospel books on chains as necklaces; *Homilies on Matthew* (*Homiliae in Matthaeum*) 72 (PG 58:669).
50. For details, see Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 146.
51. Ibid., 147.
52. Severus of Antioch, *Cathedral Homilies* (*Homiliae cathedrales*) 97.

about 511, Severus encourages Solon to be confident in his faith, declaring that "assuredly the honorable in virginity and first of female martyrs, and skilled maker of these things, I mean the holy Thecla, will clothe you in such raiment to do honor to her vote concerning you."[53] The wider context is important: at this time in history, the church has divided between those who adopted the decisions of the council at Chalcedon and those who reject them. These men are part of the non-Chalcedon group. Notice that Thecla is called upon as providing strength in a doctrinal dispute, adding her pious weight to these men's position.

Thecla's story was not only for women; men also were inspired to follow her example. John, bishop of Tella in Syria, was drawn into the ascetic life after reading her book. His biographer describes a well-to-do family and a childhood in which John's father passed away and his mother and a local priest raised him. He was nurtured in the Christian faith. After reading Thecla's story, John withdrew to a small upper room in his home and established himself as an ascetic. Thecla captured the imagination of the poor, the pilgrims, and the bishops. Her story was celebrated on her feast day, and votive lamps were stamped with her seal. This sixth-century anonymous Syrian hymn nicely encapsulates the power Thecla held among the pious followers of Christ during the early centuries of the church.

> "The king shall delight in thy beauty" (Ps. 45:12)
> Christ who speaks in Paul
> —He who said: "I have come to put fire on the earth" [cf. Luke 12:49–53]
> by inflaming with his love the soul of the holy virgin Thecla,
> He burned from her the bonds of fleshly brotherhood,
> He preserved her virginity in purity,
> He supported her in the combat of martyrdom,
> He quenched the fire,
> And placed a muzzle and a bit in the mouth of carnivorous beasts,
> He rendered the idolatrous bondmaid an evangelist and apostolic,
> preaching and proclaiming the word of life everywhere amid all dangers.
> By her prayers bestow, our Savior, upon men and women alike
> Thoughts of chastity and thy great mercy.[54]

53. Catherine Burris and Lucas van Rompay, "Some Further Notes on Thecla in Syriac Christianity," *Hug* 6.2 (2009): 338, citing E. W. Brooks, *The Sixth Book of the Select Letters of Severus Patriarch of Antioch in the Syriac Version of Athanasius of Nisibis*, vol. 1, *Text*, part 1 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1902), 12–13; ET from Brooks, *Sixth Book*, vol. 2, *Translation*, part 1 (1903), 12.

54. Burris and Rompay, "Some Further Notes," 339; ET from E. W. Brooks, *James of Edessa: The Hymns of Severus of Antioch and Others*, PO 6–7 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1911), 2:620–21 (208–9).

In sum, the brilliance of Thecla's story depends not on proving she was in some way a historical figure but on the story's flexibility to meet the new demands of each generation. The blurry historical outline allows her to take new shapes and contours as the church adapts to new circumstances, most notably from being a persecuted minority to providing the religion of the empire. Thecla is a malleable figure that bends to the immediate needs, while still retaining a strong connection to the past. And Thecla is a venerable character, one that is revered by subsequent generations as a figure who inspires, who teaches, who models. Part of the genius of Thecla is that she is a character in a cosmic drama: she is every person or "the church," vulnerable to the terrifying forces of "the world" and yet victorious. Her story tells the church's story and models the church's proper posture toward the world. Thecla becomes what any specific generation of the church needs her to be. In a limited sense, perhaps Thecla is the ancient church's avatar,[55] for she makes a new appearance in successive generations. She presents a "self" to the world that the church upholds and aspires to imitate.

55. There appears to be no easy analogue to Thecla in our own day, but we offer this analogy: Thecla is like a comic book character, who is reappropriated in successive generations. Batman and Superman first fought the Nazis, then the Communists, then perhaps big business. Superheroes are not "real" in a historical sense, but they have their "mild-mannered" side (Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent) that fronts a "normal-guy" facade. Their powers are portrayed as for good, against evil, and stand for American values like freedom and justice and capitalism and rooting for the little guy. In that sense, these heroes inspire each generation, even as in each generation the hero addresses specific cultural values such as the civil rights movement, women's rights, and environmentalism.