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Thecla of Iconium

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The story of Thecla of Iconium was recorded in a work known as *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, probably towards the end of the second century C.E.¹ Its late composition, along with a general denouncement of its historical and theological validity, has caused it to be forgotten by most in the centuries of Christian tradition which have led up to the present day. It is no surprise, then, that Thecla is often absent from discussions of women in the early church: after all, our only record of her existence comes from an almost “legendary” source, and one which was written decades after the time in which she is thought to have lived.

Recently, however, scholars such as Stevan L. Davies, Virginia Burrus, and Dennis R. MacDonald have studied Thecla’s story anew, and have given us reason to look to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as a unique and vital source of information concerning the experience of women in the very earliest days of the Christian movement. These scholars have found evidence that strongly suggests that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was a written version of a very old story, an oral tradition that had been passed down, told and retold, through a community of Christian women, from very early in the history of the Christian movement. If this is indeed how the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* came to be, then this text contains one of the most direct and extensive witnesses that we have to the experience of women at this time.² In the following essay, I will give a brief summary of the Thecla story, present some of the key evidence that has been offered for the above interpretation of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and discuss what this might tell us about the women who told Thecla’s story. Finally, I will

suggest what the new interpretation of the story could mean for modern Christians.

The Story

The story begins with Paul arriving in Iconium with two companions. Paul is met by Onesiphorous and taken into his home. Paul preaches to them largely on the blessings of purity and the "virgin life". Thecla, a young virgin woman of Iconium, watches from a nearby window and is captivated by his words. Her betrothed, Thamyris, arrives looking for her, and her mother relates how Thecla has been caught up in Paul's shameful teaching for three days and nights. Thamyris angrily stirs up a crowd to take Paul before the governor, who imprisons Paul. Thecla secretly visits Paul in prison after bribing the guards. The two are discovered, and the governor orders Paul to be driven from the city, and Thecla to be burned. Thecla is saved, as God sends rain to extinguish her pyre.

She sets out after Paul, whom she finds praying for her deliverance. She asks to be baptized, but Paul refuses out of a lack of confidence in Thecla's capacity to resist temptation. The two travel together into Antioch where Alexander, an influential Antiochene, falls in love with Thecla, and tries to bribe Paul for her possession. Paul denies any claim over or connection with Thecla, and Alexander subsequently attacks her in the open street. She knocks him down and escapes, but is soon brought before the governor and condemned under the charge of sacrilege, despite the protests of the court women. Tryphaena, a rich woman, houses and protects Thecla until the time of her execution. On that day, she is taken to the stadium and beasts are set upon her. A lioness protects her for a while, but is soon killed. At this time, Thecla leaps into a pool of vicious seals, and baptizes herself. Lightning strikes and as the other beasts approach, the women in the audience throw perfumes at them and the beasts fall asleep. Finally, Thecla is tied between two angry bulls, but her fiery aura burns through the ropes. Meanwhile, Tryphaena faints at the circus gates and the governor, thinking her dead, releases Thecla, fearing the wrath of Caesar who was related to Tryphaena. The women rejoice, and Thecla returns to Tryphaena's house and preaches to the women there. Soon, Thecla goes off, dressed as a man,

in search of Paul. She declares her intentions to preach the Gospel and Paul finally commissions her to teach. She returns to Iconium to try and convert her mother. Eventually, she travels to Seleucia and teaches for many years until her death.

The Origin of Thecla's Story

Most commentaries up until the 1980s have largely followed Tertullian's lead in depicting the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as a romance or imaginative novel created by an Asian presbyter. Tertullian wrote concerning the work in his own *De Baptismo*:

But if they claim writings which are wrongly inscribed with Paul's name—I mean the example of Thecla—in support of women's freedom to teach and baptize, let them know that a presbyter in Asia, who put together that book, heaping up a narrative as it were from his own materials under Paul's name, when after conviction he confessed that he had done it from love of Paul, resigned his position.³

Modern commentaries characterize the work similarly:

Thecla was one of the most revered heroines of the earlier ages of the Church, but it is doubtful if she ever existed, for the widespread account of her depends entirely on a second-century romance called the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, an extremely extravagant composition, which, moreover, smacks in parts of heresy (from Attwater's *A Dictionary of Saints*, 1958).

According to the second century novel called the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which abounds in extravagant stories and is not quite orthodox in doctrine, Thecla was... (from *The Book of Saints*, compiled by the Benedictine Monks of St. Augustine's Abbey, 1989).

It was the work of MacDonald that first refuted the idea of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as a novel created from the imagination of a single author, saying that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is a recording of a well-known Christian story with roots extending back to the first century. He shows⁴ how characteristic the narrative style used in the *Acts* is of oral narrative, using a model constructed by folklorist Alex Olrik in his article, "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative". In this article, Olrik identifies certain "laws", which are shown to be common characteristics of oral narrative, and indicate principles of transmission. Olrik says, "While it is impossible to use these laws—or any others—as a fool-proof litmus test for orality, we *can* show that our stories contain characteristics almost always found in oral narratives and often absent in written ones."⁵ MacDonald

shows that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (and other narratives within the *Acts of Paul*) adheres to these principles so well, that not only is there strong evidence that the writing is based on a storytelling tradition, but that “the written text of the stories [appears to be] a veneer laid over narrative structures and techniques taken over from oral tradition”.⁶ Thus, much of the oral form seems to remain intact in the written *Acts* as we have them.⁷

There are several reasons for affirming that both the storytellers and their audiences were primarily women. The predominance of women in the story as protagonists, and of men as antagonists is a strong indicator that women were responsible for transmitting this tradition. There is only one female antagonist in the story (Thecla’s mother, Theocleia) amongst many female protagonists (Thecla, the queen Tryphaena, and many others). Crowds of women, too, speak as one voice in Thecla’s favour. Even animals’ behaviour varies with their gender, as the lioness defends Thecla from the male beasts. Paul and Onesiphorus are the only apparent male protagonists (and even Paul does not support Thecla consistently). Men are characterized, almost without exception, as villains—dangerous, unjust, and controlling. This polarization of the sexes in the female favour makes it extremely unlikely that these were stories told by men.

MacDonald points to Tertullian’s reference to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* being used to justify women’s ministry as further evidence that women transmitted the stories. Tertullian does not explicitly say that women were telling the stories, but other women who were defending their own right to preach (such as Montanist prophetesses Maximilla and Priscilla) certainly did look to “holy women of the past as precedents to justify their ministries”.⁸

Burrus also shows that it is reasonable to assume that the story stayed within a female context. She gives evidence that Hellenistic society strongly separated women’s and men’s cultural spheres between public and private, and that “typically, societies which enforce such separation of spheres produce significant bodies of ‘sex-specific’ folklore”, citing particular examples where this is so in Morocco and the Near East.⁹

The Women Who Shared Thecla's Story

Our attention now turns to the possibility of deducing from the stories a sense of who the women were who told and heard Thecla's story, and why they told the story.

Davies argues that the Thecla story derived "from communities of continent Christian women",¹⁰ reasoning that if one of the purposes of the story is edification, this would be most appropriate for such women. Thecla provides a role model for continent Christian women, remaining perfectly steadfast throughout her struggle with both lustful men who prey upon her (Thamyris, Alexander), and pious men who misunderstand her (Paul).¹¹ She must also deal with parental rejection and betrayal, the threat of persecution, and general social disfavour. Thecla's example may well be useful or inspiring for women who also deal with these difficulties.

Burrus¹² expands Davies' picture of the community which shares Thecla's story, by looking for more reasons why the stories may have been told. She postulates that the story would likely have included a wider range of women than just continent Christian women in community; other women who were sympathetic or supportive of the idea of chastity or desired to live in continence with other women but found it too difficult under their own circumstances would also have been drawn to the story. In doing this, she draws on folklore theory for three functions of the folk tale: "affective", "validation", and "motivation". The "affective" function includes both a potential for "catharsis" by "enabling the expression of repressed emotions"¹³ and "wish fulfillment" in the form of a "pleasurable fantasy which is not being realized in the 'real world' ".¹⁴ The "validation" function can "serve to introduce, explain, and legitimate the practices and structures of a given society [such as living out vows of chastity in community with other women]".¹⁵ "Motivation" is similar to the inspiration mentioned earlier which could be derived from viewing Thecla as a role model. This variety of functions that the story may have fulfilled can help us gain a better picture of who the tellers and audiences were for these stories, and why they participated in the transmission and continuation of the story.

MacDonald discusses what may be inferred from the stories about the social realities of the women who passed on Thecla's story. He says that "cultural subgroups characteristically

use oral folk narrative to establish the boundaries between the ingroup and outsiders”, and that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* “establishes boundaries between the church, epitomized by the protagonist [Thecla], and the surrounding dominant and hostile society”.¹⁶ He demonstrates that this hostile society specifically encompassed the Roman Empire (represented by the governors and the sacrilege which Thecla was accused of in relation to the imperial cult), Asia Minor society, which seemed particularly opposed to the Christianity suggested by Paul and exhibited by Thecla in the story (represented by the Asians who accused Paul and Thecla and the mobs that laid hold of them), and the institutions of city and household (represented by the charge against Paul of “[destroying] the city of the Iconians” [*AThel* 15])¹⁷, and Thecla’s defiance of her betrothed and unwillingness to enter his household as his wife).

Burrus, too, makes several suggestions as to what the Thecla story can tell us about the social reality of the women involved in its telling.¹⁸ She affirms MacDonald’s identification of the conflicts between the storytellers and the social order (backed by Rome), especially in its imposition of patriarchal marriage and a strict cultural and functional “sphere” for women; restricting their movement, behaviour, and traditional roles. She also says that the story shows that some women did actually defy these restrictions and oppositions, and successfully. She offers for confirmation of this, the witness of Justin Martyr, who in his *Second Apology* describes a situation in which a woman, after an internal struggle, left her intemperate husband who promptly brought her up on charges of being a Christian; she requested of the emperor and received temporary immunity from the charges in order to prepare a legal defense, although it is not told whether she was eventually condemned.¹⁹ Burrus also makes the following observations: although Thecla and several other female protagonists seem to be of the upper classes, the readers are not necessarily so;²⁰ some of the women may have been living in community, either as an order of widows, or an early ascetic community of some kind, and these communities may have been supported by wealthy women from their midst, rather than by the patriarchal church.²¹

Thecla’s story seems to express the conflicts and victories in the lives of the storytellers so that her personality traits,

the roles she takes on, and her living out of chastity become reflective of how the storytellers' reality was or how they would have liked it to be. Thecla embodies an ideal of piety, bravery, endurance, faith, and defiance. She symbolizes the triumph of defying conventions of marriage and household as it is realized in the freedom of self-determination, a freedom which surpasses the shame of being outcast. At a climactic moment, just prior to delivering Alexander his shaming blow, she cries, "Force not the stranger, force not the handmaiden of God! Among the Iconians I am one of the first, and because I did not wish to marry Thamyris I have been cast out of the city" (*ATheI* 26). She says this in triumph, not in despair; she cries it out at the moment of fighting back, showing that she "would not endure it" (*ATheI* 26). She takes on the role of teacher and minister, praying for Tryphaena's daughter's soul (*ATheI* 29), and instructing Tryphaena and all her household in the word of God (*ATheI* 39).

Thecla in the 1990s

How can Christians living in the 1990s be enriched by Thecla's story? What can we do with her story? One of the most important things we can do with her story is *tell it*. The story has remained unknown to most Christians for centuries, and could provide inspiration for the many women today who can relate to her story. Women who desire to preach in Christian churches and find themselves at odds with the established structure can look to Thecla for inspiration, for she was mistrusted by Paul and not given support in her aspiration to teaching; she was misunderstood and told to "have patience" (*ATheI* 25), until she eventually claimed her own right to baptise and teach the Gospel. She is also a role model for women who are frustrated with the strictures of patriarchal society, with men who claim possession of them as Thamyris and Alexander did. Thecla embodies the will to fight back and defend her rights to control her own life, her body, her sexuality. It is clear that the social realities of the Thecla storyteller of the first century bear similarities to those of many modern women, despite the intervening centuries, and for this reason, Thecla's story carries the same appeal.

Thecla shows an early Christian example of a woman preaching the Gospel, and her story is part of an alternative

Pauline tradition which was in opposition to the Pauline tradition of the Pastoral Epistles. MacDonald demonstrates the relation between the two traditions, showing that the Epistles were likely written partially to counter the Pauline Christianity that was represented in the Thecla tradition.²² MacDonald says he is convinced that

the Pastoral Epistles have distorted our image of Paul, even for those of us who recognize them as pseudonymous. Scholars still too often assume that the Pastoral Epistles were more or less standard expressions of Paulinism for post-Pauline churches.²³

By viewing the Pastoral tradition as only one version of post-Paulinism among several, we are not restricted to its interpretation of Pauline doctrine, especially to its opposition to women teaching (or even speaking) in the church. This passage of the Pastorals is one of the most frequently quoted biblical sources against women preaching,²⁴ so the questioning of its authority has significant implications for the movement in some Christian churches to remove the barriers which prevent women from preaching.

Finally, Thecla's story provides us with the ability to hear the voices of actual women in the early church in a unique way, through their storytelling. Apart from the other Apocryphal Acts, there seem to be no other early Christian writings that provide us with such a first hand witness to the lives of these women—the Thecla story seems to exist in a form very close to its original as it was told by women of the first and second centuries. It deals directly with social realities that are very specific to the *female* members of the church at this time, and it announces the possibility of victory in opposition to these restricting realities: Thecla defies family traditions, dominating men, condemning judges and mobs, and the limitations of the designated “female” sphere which restricted her from teaching, travelling, and living out a life of chastity.

Notes

¹ See the discussion of Tertullian's witness to it below.

² Bernadette J. Brooten emphasizes the importance of searching for sources that actually derive from women themselves when studying women in the early church: “If one desires to learn about the lives, practices, and beliefs of early Christian women, one should focus primarily on those women... rather [than] on what men thought about

women." Brooten, "Early Christian Women and their Cultural Context: Issues of Method in Historical Reconstruction," in Adela Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

³ Tertullian, *De Baptismo* I, 17, quoted in Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 105–106, note 6.

⁴ MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 17–33.

⁵ Alex Olrik, quoted in MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 27.

⁶ MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 6.

⁷ Virginia Burrus offers further evidence that Thecla's story has remained somewhat unchanged in its form. She compares the structures of the various "chastity stories", with similar themes to Thecla's story, in the other Apocryphal Acts, and finds that they follow strikingly similar patterns. See her analysis in: Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen, 1987).

⁸ MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 35.

⁹ Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 68.

¹⁰ Stevan Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale/Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980) 50.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 60.

¹² Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 82–109.

¹³ *Ibid.* 82.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 83.

¹⁶ MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 40.

¹⁷ All references to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (abbreviated as *AThel*) will be to the translation in Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965).

¹⁸ Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 87–109.

¹⁹ Justin Martyr's *Second Apology* as quoted in Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 97.

²⁰ Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 101–103.

²¹ *Ibid.* 101–103.

²² There are denunciations of women's stories (1 Timothy 4:7–8), and references to weak women being easily influenced (2 Timothy 3:6–7). MacDonald shows that the writers of the Pastorals knew the Thecla tradition and actively worked against its radically ascetic image of Paul, characterizing him as unopposed to Rome or the household. The Pastorals also seem to have tried to work against other aspects of the Pauline tradition contained in Thecla's story, opposing its emphasis on chastity and asceticism (1 Timothy 2:15, 1 Timothy 4:1–5), and Paul's

sanctioning of women's freedom to teach the Gospel (1 Timothy 2:11-15). It also tried to restrict the order of widows (1 Timothy 5:4-16). See MacDonald's discussion in *The Legend and the Apostle*, 54-77.

²³ Ibid. 15.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 is also often used as evidence from the authentic writings of Paul; MacDonald, in *The Legend and the Apostle*, 86-89, suggests that this was an interpolation inserted in order to harmonize this text with the Pastorals.