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THE “DOMESTICATION” OF SAINT THECLA

Characterization of Thecla in the *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*

Susan E. Hylen

Scholars argue that the *Acts of Thecla* is a radical ascetic text that contrasts sharply with proto-orthodox Christian views. This hypothesis is complicated by the reception of Thecla’s story. Thecla’s popularity in the fourth and fifth centuries, even among church fathers, is well established. To explain her prominence, scholars argue that the radical Thecla was “domesticated” in later versions. In this paper, Hylen explores the fifth-century *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla* to counter the prevailing view that the later Thecla is watered down. Rather, the Thecla of this work retains and expands her charismatic and leadership roles.

In the standard scholarly narrative about the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*ATH*), Thecla is a radical female leader whose acceptance of Paul’s call to virginity frees her to live an active life of ministry.¹ Scholars often situate this work in contrast to the Pastoral Epistles, which, they argue, represent a tendency of the emerging orthodox church to enforce norms of modesty for women, thereby excluding women from leadership roles.²

¹ The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, also known as the *Acts of Thecla*, is a late second-century text of uncertain origin.

² In the 1980s, Dennis MacDonald argued that 1 Tim represents a community’s rejection of the leadership of women and the legends transmitted in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983). See also Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987); Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980). More recently, scholars have modified this portrait of Thecla. See, for example, Willi Braun, “Physiotherapy of Femininity in the *Acts of Thecla*,” in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honor of Peter Richardson*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson and

If this reading is correct, that is, if *Thecla* is a book embraced by heretical, active women, and if the orthodox church eliminates such leadership by women, it would be reasonable to expect that Thecla's story would quickly die out in the church. We might find modest evidence of Thecla being criticized by later proto-orthodox writers, as she is by Tertullian, who defames her story in response to its use as an argument that women may baptize. We might expect a few such comments followed by a long silence.

Instead, we find quite the opposite. Thecla was enormously popular in the fourth and fifth centuries. Both Egeria (chap. 22–23) and Gregory of Nazianzus (*de vita sua* 545–50) visited her shrine in Seleucia. She is an exemplar of Christian virtues in sermons and treatises, which assume the hearer already knows the story of her life. Material culture suggests devotion to Thecla across the Mediterranean basin, including many churches and shrines dedicated in her name. Thus, instead of seeing Thecla's story diminish or disappear as orthodoxy is established, her popularity increases.³

Michel Desjardins (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000); Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion, Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117–52. However, many still affirm that *Thecla* and 1 Tim take opposite stances regarding the roles of women and the emerging church structure. See, for example, James W. Aageson, *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 206; Outi Lehtipuu, "The Example of Thecla and the Example(s) of Paul: Disputing Women's Role in Early Christianity," in *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kelhoffer, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum neuen Testament* vol. 263 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 357–58.

³ This is a rich topic that lies beyond the scope of this article. Thecla is often mentioned as an example of virtue in letters and sermons: as one who gave away her gold (John Chrysostom, *hom.* 25 on Acts); as one despising death (Ambrose *Ep.* 54); and of virginity (Ambrose *Ep.* 59; *Virg.* 3). See also Augustine, *Virg.* 44; John Chrysostom, *hom. in Ac.* 25; Gregory of Nyssa, *hom. In Cant.* 14; Jerome *ep.* 22.41 to Eustochium; Gregory of Nazianzus *or.* 21.22; and the anonymous *Life of Olympias* 1. Methodius's *Symposium* positions Thecla as first among the other virgins (Logos 9; Epilogue). For a discussion of Athanasius's embrace of Thecla, see Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 86–94. For a discussion of material culture, see *ibid.*, 37–38, 114–20, 126–33, 172–77.

Thecla also appears in Syriac works, including Severus's letter to Solon and homily 97 on Thecla's saint day. See Severus of Antioch, *The Sixth Book of the Select Letters of Severus, Patriarch of Antioch*, trans. E. W. Brooks, vol. 2 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1903), 12; and Severus of Antioch, *Les Homiliae Cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche: Traduction Syriaque de Jacques d'Édesse*, trans. Maurice Brière, *Patrologia Orientalis* 25.1 (Paris: Fermin-Didot, 1935), 121–38. An anonymous hymn to Thecla is also found in a collection of Syriac hymns: James of Edessa, *The Hymns of Severus of Antioch and Others*, trans. E. W. Brooks, *Patrologia Orientalis* 6.1 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1909), 620–21. For discussion, see Catherine Burris, "Imagining Thecla: Rhetorical Strategies in Severus of Antioch's 97th Cathedral Homily," in *Studia Patristica 42: Papers Presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2003*, ed. F. Young, M. Edwards, and P. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 83–87; and Catherine Burris and Lucas van Rompay, "Some Further Notes on Thecla in Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye* 6 (2009): 337–42.

How does one explain such evidence that runs against the grain of our expectations? Scholars have largely argued that the later Thecla is “domesticated,” or watered down, in order to be acceptable to the orthodox church. Gilbert Dagron, who published a critical edition and French translation of the fifth-century Greek text, *The Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla* (LM), argued that in this work the story of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is “washed of its most evident heretical connotations.”⁴ Dagron was not thinking of the leadership of women, but meant instead the possibility of encratism or gnostic thought. However, feminist scholars expanded this idea to include the notion that the story is washed of troubling roles or activities for women.⁵ They argued that the later Thecla is less bold, and she teaches only women. The focus shifts from her traveling and preaching to an emphasis on her virginity. Others view the *Life and Miracles* as having a less radical ascetic viewpoint. For example, Scott Johnson argues that “the author of the LM takes some pains to de-asceticize the *ATH*’s portrait of Thekla—not completely erasing the ascetic but toning it down significantly.”⁶ As a result of this reinterpretation of the earlier text, women in the emerging orthodox church could see Thecla as an example of passive feminine virtue worthy of their emulation and yet not be encouraged to undertake action that might threaten the male church hierarchy.

In this paper, I take up this fifth-century interpretation of Thecla, testing its presentation of Thecla against the hypothesis about her reception. *The Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla* was written in 444–448 CE by a priest in or around Seleucia, a major center of devotion to Thecla with a shrine and monastic communities.⁷ Book 1, the *Life*, retells the story of Thecla from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. As in the *ATH*, Thecla’s story centers around two parallel sequences of events. In each, Thecla’s commitment to chastity, learned from Paul, brings the threat of capital punishment, which is averted by divine intervention on her

⁴ Gilbert Dagron, *Vie et Miracles de Sainte Thècle: Texte Grec, Traduction et Commentaire* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), 34. My translation.

⁵ See, for example, Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, ed. Amy Hollywood (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 144; Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 144; Dennis Ronald MacDonald and Andrew D. Scrimgeour, “Pseudo-Chrysostom’s Panegyric to Thecla: The Heroine of the *Acts of Paul* in Homily and Art,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Dennis Ronald MacDonald (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 153; Monika Pesthy, “Thecla among the Fathers of the Church,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 175; Gail Corrington Streeter, “Of Martyrs and Men: Perpetua, Thecla, and the Ambiguity of Female Heroism in Early Christianity,” in *The Subjective Eye: Essays in Culture, Religion, and Gender in Honor of Margaret R. Miles*, ed. Richard Valantasis (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 261, 263.

⁶ Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study* (Cambridge: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2006), 150–51.

⁷ The author is located in or near Seleucia Isauria, also known as Seleucia ad Calycadnum, now the modern site of Silifke, Turkey. On the dating of the text, see Dagron, *Vie*, 17–18; Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 41; and Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, 5–6n18.

behalf. Book 2, the *Miracles*, chronicles many of the recent miracles Thecla performed at her shrine in Seleucia. The author catalogs miracle stories of his own period in which Thecla's power manifests itself to bring benefits to her devotees and to convert others to Christ.

To preview, I argue that Thecla of the *Life and Miracles* is anything but watered down. Thecla certainly remains the preeminent example of the virtues of modesty and self-control. Yet the Thecla that emerges in this work is perhaps more powerful than the Thecla of the *Acts*. Because of this, the *LM* creates an interesting problem for our understanding of women in the early church. After a discussion of the characterization of Thecla, I take up one of the specific arguments for her "domestication": that the work encourages marriage and thereby moves away from the freedom accorded to women by the *Acts of Thecla*. Instead, I argue that the *LM* assumes readers will expect that powerful women patrons served political and ecclesial roles.

Thecla's Character in the *Life and Miracles*

In this section, I explore Thecla's literary character. I analyze the qualities attributed to Thecla by the narrator, her words and actions, and the responses of other characters to her.⁸ Because each of these literary components initially made sense within a fifth-century cultural context, I situate Thecla's attributes or actions within that historical framework.

Other interpreters of the *LM* have already discussed the work's traditional gendered virtues.⁹ Conventions of feminine modesty and male superiority are certainly present in the work. Thecla supports marriage, especially as a protection against sexual impurity. She embodies modesty and deference. For example, her silence during the trial in Iconium is the result of Thecla "judging it worthy of neither feminine decency nor virginal modesty to make public her voice" (1.12.3–4). She appeals to Paul's authority and receives his validation of her ministry (1.25–26). Through these actions, Thecla is characterized according to conventional norms of feminine virtue.

But Thecla's modesty exists alongside other, more active virtues. I highlight these elements of the text in what follows, not to deny the importance of her modesty but rather to show how it exists alongside her power. In the *LM*, Thecla is not only "virgin" but also "martyr" and "apostle." She teaches, baptizes, and heals. She is the supreme patron of her city, a holy and divine being who manifests God's power, both to provide benefits for those devoted to her and

⁸ For methodological discussion, see David B. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend*, ed. Vernon K. Robbins (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 55–75; and Susan E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 12–15.

⁹ See, for example, Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 137–38, 152; and Streete, "Martyrs and Men," 263.

to judge the wicked. From the narrator’s perspective, Thecla’s active character traits do not cancel out her modesty. Instead, she remains the supreme example of feminine virtue even as she acts powerfully on behalf of others.

Thecla’s Titles

The qualities the narrator attributes directly to Thecla indicate her status in his eyes. She is virgin, martyr, and apostle. Thecla remains a girl or virgin (*parthenos*) in the *Life and Miracles*, as she was in the *Acts of Thecla*.¹⁰ Yet by the fifth century, virginity is a social practice with its own rites and norms. Indeed, the virgins who inhabit Thecla’s shrine in the author’s day are also described with the same word, *parthenos* (e.g., 2.32.24; 2.34.25). In the *LM*, Thecla is not simply a virgin but “the virgin” (e.g., 2.1.14; 2.9.80; 2.15.27). She exemplifies the virtues of chastity and self-control and is a role model for those who would take up this way of life.

Yet in the *Life and Miracles*, an even more common epithet for Thecla is “the martyr.” Although the idea of Thecla’s martyrdom is familiar from the story of the *Acts of Thecla*, the word “martyr” never appears in the earlier tale.¹¹ By the time of the *LM*, Thecla is seen in light of the church’s long tradition of martyrs. She carries the same holiness and gravity as those figures. Indeed, Thecla is not simply one of many martyrs of the church but preeminent among them as the first female martyr: “At this time, Thecla arose, not after many male or female martyrs, but second, immediately after the apostles and Stephen the martyr, who first knew the word of truth. She was first of all the women, just as Stephen leads the men who struggled for Christ and because of Christ, having contended for the prize in the same way” (1.1.11–18).¹² The author pairs Thecla with Stephen, and the two lead the way for later martyrs of the church. Elsewhere, the author calls Thecla “the holy and great martyr” (2.4.52). Thus, while the title “martyr” places Thecla in a long line of Christians who suffered for the proclamation of their faith, the author also insists on her priority of place even among these.

Similarly, Thecla’s status as “apostle” is not found in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Although the author of the *LM* uses the word *apostle* (*apostolos*) less frequently than *martyr* (*martus*) or *virgin* (*parthenos*), it conveys an important aspect of Thecla’s identity.¹³ Paul is also named as an apostle (1.1.22; 1.5.7; 1.8.6;

¹⁰ Thecla is described as a virgin in the *Life* (e.g. 1.7.2; 1.8.9; 1.9.7) as are other girls who listen to Paul’s teaching (1.7.7; 1.11.5; 1.12.2; 1.16.3).

¹¹ The word *martyr* is found in one of the later additions to the *Acts of Thecla*, Appendix G. See Ricardus Adelbertus Lipsius, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, vol. 1 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1959), 271–72.

¹² All quotations from the *Life and Miracles* are my translation. The Greek text is available through the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, <http://www.tlg.uci.edu>.

¹³ See 1.*prol.*2, 26, 36; 1.9.79; 1.28.36; 2.4.11; 2.15.32; 2.*epi.*35. The author usually pairs the masculine word with a feminine article in reference to Thecla.

1.20.34), and Thecla is described as sitting at his feet (1.10.34). But this same Paul prophesies Thecla's eventual status as an apostle: "Go and teach the word, and complete the evangelical course, and share with me the zeal for Christ. For this reason Christ has chosen you through me, so that he may draw you to the apostolic office (*eis apostolēn*) and entrust to you some of the still uninstructed cities" (1.26.62–66; cf. 1.9.79). While recognizing Paul's authority and prominence, the author presents Thecla as one who shares his authority and function. He describes a friendly rivalry between the cities of Tarsus and Seleucia and their respective apostles (2.4.10–11). And while the author cedes pride of place to Tarsus, it is clear that Thecla's home city yields only slightly to the city of the great Paul (1.27.40–48). The author claims the title of apostle for Thecla without apology and characterizes Paul as affirming and even predicting this office.

Thecla Teaches and Baptizes Many

Thecla's actions uphold the status the author has attributed to her through these titles. Her speeches establish her credibility as a teacher. Just before Paul commissions her to go and teach the gospel (1.26.62–63), there is a long section in which Thecla enumerates the teachings she has learned through Paul.

For God, the king of all, and his only-begotten Son who reigns with the Father and created all things, and the Holy Spirit who reigns with the Father and the Son and who sanctifies and perfects all: the Trinity of the same substance, equal in honor and weight, I learned through you. The divine nature of the Trinity, equal in weight and glory, exactly similar, I learned through you. The inexpressible, inaccessible, immutable, incomprehensible power of the Trinity I learned through you. (1.26.2–10; cf. 1.13.26–40)

Thecla's words show deference to her teacher, Paul, but they also position her as a teacher of Nicene orthodoxy. Thus her speech establishes Thecla's authenticity and authority as a teacher of the gospel.

Thecla's function as a teacher is somewhat expanded in the *Life and Miracles*. She teaches all of Tryphaena's household following her release in Antioch (1.24.27–28). Upon arrival in Seleucia, she instructs many people, both male and female (1.28.1–2). Thecla's teaching is also seen occasionally in the miracles, although the form the teaching takes is miraculous rather than didactic. In *Mir.* 14, Thecla instructs Hypistios, an unbelieving male suffering from an illness, to embrace the orthodox faith so that he may become well. In *Mir.* 10 she intervenes miraculously to convince an Arian bishop to accept a Trinitarian confession. The author thus positions Thecla as a teacher of Nicene orthodoxy.¹⁴

Thecla's role in baptism is also expanded in this work. In the *Life*, Thecla

¹⁴ Orthodoxy was highly contested in the years 444–448, when the bulk of the *LM* was composed. The author of the *LM* never discloses his understanding of the union of divine and human

baptizes herself in the arena, as she does in the *ATH* (*LM* 1.20.30–34; *ATH* 34). But she goes on to baptize many others as well, both men and women. Thecla baptizes Tryphaena along with many of her male and female servants (1.24.27–31). The author summarizes her work in Seleucia as “proclaiming the saving word, instructing, baptizing, and enlisting many soldiers for Christ, doing even more miracles . . . and through the miracles leading many to faith” (1.28.1–6). In this quotation, the direct object of Thecla’s instructing, baptizing, and enlisting is masculine plural (“many,” *pollous*), suggesting a mixed-gender audience. No apology or rationale is given for Thecla’s actions. It is simply reported that she baptizes many.

Thecla as an Ever-Present Charismatic Force

As the above quotation insists, Thecla not only taught and baptized many but also led them to Christ through her miracles. These activities continue after Thecla departs from this life, for she does not die, but enters living into the earth (1.28.1–10). In this way, Thecla retains and expands her power: “For it is not the case that when she was in the body and with people she granted healings and then rested when she departed. But mingling with the angels, she is not cut off from us now but from a better sphere she cares for and attends to us with greater help” (2.*prol.*101–5). The author collects from local memory Thecla’s recent acts as a healer. Eighteen of forty-six miracles involve healing. She heals broken legs (2.8, 17, 18), skin disease (2.11, 12), and blindness (2.23–25). Sometimes, the manner of the healing is not disclosed, and the martyr simply lifts up one with a broken leg (2.18.1–13) or appears in a dream to one who then finds his disease cured (2.12.1–40). Other times, she appears in a waking vision or a dream and prescribes a specific remedy (e.g., 2.7, 11, 18.22–51). She assists men (2.7, 8, 12, 14, 17, 23, 37–41), women (2.18, 19, 42), children (2.11, 24), and animals (2.36).

Thecla’s descent into the ground also imbues the landscape itself with her power. There are no relics at the shrine, but the place itself takes on her power.¹⁵ Some cures involve elements found within her shrine or its vicinity—for example, water from her font (2.25) or spring (2.36, 37) heals those who wash in it. In one miracle, she cures a severe kidney disease with “the oil of the night lamp that always shone upon her place” (2.40.9–11).¹⁶ In another instance, Thecla appears to a sick man in a dream and puts a healing pebble into his hand.

natures in Christ, but sticks to the trinitarian language formulated earlier. There is no way to determine the author’s relationship to the christological controversies of his own day.

¹⁵ Peter Brown discusses the martyr’s shrine as a place (*ho topos*) where heaven and earth met. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 11. In the *LM*, see e.g. 1.28.9, 15; 2.10.39; 2.36.30. cf. 1.15.63–69.

¹⁶ Another example is 2.18.22–50, where Thecla heals a broken leg with the dirt accumulated on the chancel barriers surrounding her innermost chamber.

When he awakes, the pebble is gone, but soon afterward his son visits, having found the same distinctive pebble on the road (2.38). The author interjects that the pebble probably has its power because Thecla touched it. The pebble is an example of the way the martyr's presence—even in a dream—has a tangible, physical power that is transmuted to other objects and people.

Yet Thecla's power also radiates out from Seleucia and her shrine. She "haunts" the entire area.¹⁷ She roams the earth, visiting individual people and watching over all. Indeed, "nothing prevents her grace and power from roaming over all and hearing all: neither mountains, nor fields, nor the sea, nor the stations of a road, however many . . . nor the great ocean itself, which borders the land below us and above us" (2.10.40–45).¹⁸ The *Miracles* characterize Thecla as an all-seeing and ever-present charismatic force.

An Advocate for Self-Control

Thecla's life exemplifies self-control (*sōphrosunē*), an important virtue in this period. Building on Paul's exhortation to purity, she consistently pursues chastity even when threatened with death. Her miracles support those who choose this way of life and punish those who are self-indulgent.

Thecla displays fidelity to Paul's teachings, for he praises virginity but supports marriage as well. He begins by teaching that Jesus came to "rescue his own image and work and set us free from the constant tyranny of demons, and besides all this to teach us reverence and self-control, and to advise us concerning purity and virginity and holy abstinence" (1.7.55–59). However, marriage is also given by God to protect humans from the evils of sexual impurity.

And this marriage is presented by God as a remedy and aid for the common human race, being both an antidote against sexual impurity (*porneia*), and a source and stream and succession of our common race, for which of all things it was contrived by the creator for salvation . . . until the time of completion and resurrection comes, and the form of this world disappears, and the better and more divine portion is restored. (1.7.65–72)

Paul's teaching asserts that marriage is temporary, but nevertheless a good gift of God understood as a part of human salvation.

Thecla's miracles also sanction marriage as a protection against self-indulgence. In *Mir.* 20, she responds to the request of Vitianos's wife, who lamented her husband's sexual relations with other women. Thecla restores Vitianos's desire for his wife, forcing "the soul of the man to hate sexual impurity and to

¹⁷ The words "roam," (*phoitaō*) and "visit, haunt" (*epiphōitaō*) appear throughout the *Miracles* (e.g., 2.7.23; 2.9.4; 2.10.40; 2.11.23; 2.27.32). See Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, 123.

¹⁸ Thecla's miracles are also said to be endless, as numerous as the snowflakes (2.10.28–32) and encompassing the whole earth (2.44.1–19).

honor the beauty and custom of marriage” (2.20.33). Similarly, Thecla’s prescription restores Kallistē’s appearance and her husband’s attraction to her (*Mir.* 42). In repairing the married relationships of these women, Thecla seems to neglect a strict sexual asceticism. However, because the husband’s desire is presented as excessive, these miracles also affirm the teaching of Paul in the *Life*, that marriage is an “antidote against sexual impurity” (1.7.66–77).

Some marriages are even pleasing to Thecla. One recipient of Thecla’s benevolence, Xenarchis, is a married woman who lived with her husband, “but she reached such a height of virtue, and the marriage was so pleasing to the virgin, that such a thing [the miracle] is said to have happened to her” (2.45.3–5). In another miracle, Thecla exposes the theft of a jeweled wedding belt. The theft is described as an “insult to the wedding” (2.21.21). Thecla discloses the thief to the bride’s mother, Paula, thus honoring her “for her faith and agreeable way of life” (2.21.28). The narrator does not indicate precisely what is pleasing to Thecla and wins her approval. Yet the “way of life” most commonly upheld is one characterized by self-control, a virtue that could be pursued by the married and unmarried alike. It seems possible that Thecla is pleased by marriages in which the partners practice self-control.

Thus, marriage has a positive role in Christian life, although virginity is better. In *Mir.* 46, Thecla visits Dionysia, a woman who has just given up her husband and children to follow the ascetic life. Thecla appears in the monastery at her shrine and holds Dionysia throughout the night. The author does not comment on and thus seems to affirm Dionysia’s choice to give up her family to pursue a life of chastity. In this way, the life devoted to continence appears superior to marriage. Indeed, although Dionysia is a virtuous woman, her unmarried daughter who pursues a virgin life has “something even more extraordinary than her mother, pure and undefiled virginity” (2.46.21–22). Thus, the narrator’s perspective validates virginity as the superior option.

Thecla’s Political and Ecclesial Power

Thecla’s miracles are manifestations of her power and strength, and healing is only one form of this power. Some of her miracles show political and military power. In the first four miracles, she clears away the local gods and goddesses—Sarpedon, Athena, Aphrodite, Zeus—and establishes the region as her “place.” Later, she saves cities from attack (Seleucia, Delisondros, and Selinus, 2.5, 26, 27). She allows the plunder of her own temple and then defeats the enemy in a “war game” (2.28). She protects a bishop’s inheritance from the evil scheme of an imperial eunuch (2.9). Each of these miracles establishes Thecla’s political control over the region and her power to protect her own.

Thecla’s ecclesial powers are no less striking. In one miracle, the bishop at the time, an Arian named Symposios, commanded that a mosaic with a trinitarian formula be removed from Thecla’s shrine. The worker who was assigned

the task chiseled away at the mosaic for many days, but was unable to cut into it because Thecla protected it (2.10.11–15). Finally, he fell from the ladder and broke his leg, at which point Symposios “immediately changed his evil way of thinking. . . . He proclaimed publicly and visibly that he taught the inscription he previously opposed, the Trinity of one substance (*hē Trias homoousias*)” (2.10.21–25). Thecla’s intervention asserts her authority even over bishops and establishes her as an advocate for homooousian orthodoxy.

Another of Thecla’s primary activities in the *Miracles* is judgment. She exposes thieves (2.21, 22) and judges those who lust after women at her shrine (2.33, 34). Introducing the series of miracles involving Thecla’s punishment of the wicked, the author writes, “For the martyr, knowing to reward those who accomplished something good during their lives, also knows to punish the impious and those who undertake unholy acts, in this imitating Christ the king, I think, from whom many acts of kindness and manifestations of wrath against people occurred in the past, and now are found happening still” (2.28.56–61). Thecla is a righteous judge whose actions are described as an extension of Christ’s. Some of the miracles involve Thecla’s rebuke in a vision of someone she judges good at heart (2.30–32). Those who are opposed to her meet a harsher fate. One bishop tries to prevent people from traveling to Thecla’s festival (2.29). Another man plots to steal the inheritance of his late business partner’s children (2.35). Both men are dead shortly thereafter. In these instances, Thecla is characterized as a judge who defends the orphan and corrects the impious.

Thecla as a Powerful Patron

Thecla’s story portrays her as an extraordinary patron. In describing the friendly rivalry between Paul’s city and Thecla’s, the author identifies the two as patrons of both cities. Thecla is also a patron (*proxenos*) of Tarsus, as Paul is a patron of Seleucia (2.4.8). More often, however, it is Thecla’s actions that point to her patronage: to those who are loyal to her, she extends mercy, healing, and protection. In a number of cases, Thecla’s protection encompasses her shrine, city, and the people devoted to her. She saves her city (2.5.25) and shrine (2.28) from disease and attack, performs miracles for her attendants (2.7.5) and suppliants (e.g., 2.13, 16, 18, 20), and honors those faithful to her with visions (2.21.27–28; 2.22.8). Thecla’s power extends out from her own region, as noted above, and thus she provides benefits even for those who are far away (e.g., 2.26, 27) and even to those who do not believe (2.39, 40). Yet the unfaithful and intemperate suffer her judgment (2.33–35).

The author narrates five stories about himself as recipient of Thecla’s benefits (2.12, 31, 41). In one, the author was excommunicated after resisting the appointment of the local bishop, Basil (who was, in the author’s view, neither pure nor holy nor just, 2.12.50). After Thecla appeared to the author and indicated that he would be restored, Basil removed the order of excommunication.

From the author’s perspective, this is an example of Thecla’s influence within the church. She rightly intervenes to maintain justice and orthodoxy.

In addition to the baptisms of the *Life*, the miracle involving the author’s excommunication is another time we see Thecla acting in an ordained capacity. The author recounts how Thecla appeared to him, took his right hand, “and put in it that which Basil wrongly removed. ‘Take, and be encouraged, child,’ she said.” After she departs he says, “I found my hand filled with some remarkable sweet fragrance” (2.12.98–104). Thecla serves communion to the author, signaling his coming reinstatement. Although a modern reader might object that this is “only a dream,” on the one hand, and not a real life liturgical scene, Thecla’s appearances often blur the line between dream and reality, and the author insists on the reality of the visions.¹⁹ As is the case with the baptisms, it is noteworthy that the author makes no excuse or explanation for Thecla’s priestly function. Thecla’s actions are consistent with the pattern the author has established in which her authority extends even over ecclesial matters.

Thecla’s Similarity to Biblical and Homeric Heroes

Allusions to the Bible portray Thecla in parallel to heroes of the Old and New Testaments. In the *Life*, Thecla’s trials in the arena are compared to those of the three youths in the fiery furnace (1.12.62–65; Dan 3). Similarly, the same power of God that saved Daniel from the lions saves Thecla from the beasts (1.19.43–47; Dan 6.18–23).²⁰ The author attributes Thecla’s victory in the arena to her prayer and compares it to the accomplishments of Elijah (1 Kgs 17.1–2), Moses (Exod 17.11–13), Peter (Acts 9.36–43; 5.17–21), and Paul (Acts 16.26; 20.7–12; 13.8–11; see *LM* 1.22.31–55). Thus the story of Thecla’s life manifests the same power of God as found in biblical miracles, and Thecla’s own piety puts her in league with the great biblical leaders of both testaments.

In the *Miracles*, there are still biblical allusions, but the comparisons to Homer’s *Iliad* are prominent. The *Iliad* is a story of a human war, but one in which the gods play a central role, protecting their favorite humans and intervening to tip the scales on their behalf. Allusions to Homer portray Thecla as just such a divine being. In *Mir.* 3, for example, Thecla expels Aphrodite from Seleucia, “equipping Dexianos, her Diomedes” (2.3.3–4). Diomedes is a character of the *Iliad* who is fortified by Athena and emerges as one of the story’s powerful warriors. Athena instructs him not to fight against any immortal except Aphrodite, and when Aphrodite appears to protect her son, he wounds her hand (*Il.* 5).

¹⁹ See 2.9.54; 2.14.32; 2.18.19, 20; 2.32.25. Compare with the discussion above of the potency of Thecla’s touch in a dream in *Mir.* 38.

²⁰ Though Thecla’s miracle is said to surpass the former because the beasts make war on each other (1.19.47–51). Burris and van Rompay note the combination of Thecla and Daniel texts in Syriac Christianity. See Catherine Burris and Lucas van Rompay, “Thecla in Syriac Christianity: Preliminary Observations,” *Hugoye* 5 (2002): 231–32.

Thus, in the portrayal of the *Miracles*, Thecla is Athena, and her bishop is the human warrior she equips for battle.

Although Thecla appears again later as Athena,²¹ she is characterized in comparison to other divine figures of the *Iliad* as well. In *Mir.* 27 she appears as Hera, harnessing her horses (1.26.33–34; *Il.* 5.720; 8.382) to travel across the sky. Although the vocabulary is different—Hera drives a flaming car (*Il.* 8.389) and Thecla a fiery carriage (2.26.12)—the image is much the same. In another case, Thecla is Thetis. In *Mir.* 38, she appears to a teacher who is very sick. “She asked him what he suffered and what he wanted. He replied, ‘You know. Why should I tell it to one who knows all?’” (2.38.15). This is a line from the *Iliad*, spoken by Achilles to his mother, the divine Thetis (*Il.* 1.364–65). Like Hera, Thecla can travel where she wishes quickly and with a show of power; like Thetis and other deities, she has no need for humans to keep her informed.

The author does not see Thecla as a god or goddess in rivalry with his Trinitarian faith. Indeed, he does not see the Greek gods as the equals of Christ, describing their contemporary manifestations in local cults as “demons” (e.g., 2.*prol.* 22, 110; 2.2.4–5). Nevertheless, the literature of Homer has cultural importance to him, and he draws on Homer’s rich portraits of the gods to portray Thecla with similar power and authority. In the healing miracle cited above in which the sick man quotes Homer to Thecla, the virgin recognizes and is pleased by the allusion and what it implies about her.²² Thecla appropriates the form and habits of those ancient protectors of humans while outstripping them all as one sent from God.

To summarize: Thecla espouses orthodox theology and affirms marriage. However, her actions and power do not match the argument that the orthodox church required Thecla’s story to be watered down. In this version of her story, she baptizes men and women, intervenes in church politics, and acts as a powerful patron of those devoted to her.

Reassessing the Domestication of Saint Thecla

Where did we get the idea that Thecla of the *Life and Miracles* was domesticated? One important piece of the argument for Thecla’s later “domestication” has been that Paul’s advocacy of marriage in his speeches in the *Life* reinforces the domestic subordination of women. If women are encouraged to marry, they

²¹ In 2.27.42–48, Thecla’s power is said to be so strong that instead of the tasseled aegis of Athena (for example, *Il.* 2.447; 5.733, 738), she needs only a modest sanctuary to scare away the enemy.

²² Dagron notes the implication that Thecla knows Homer by heart just as the teacher does. Dagron, *Vie*, 157. On the ubiquity of pagan education, even among Christians, see, for example, Michael Roberts, *Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1985), 62–63.

will achieve less freedom than those women who pursued the lifestyle of Thecla in the *Acts of Thecla*. There are two related components to this argument, and each is equally important. First, the *LM* is interpreted as a writing that encourages marriage. Second, it is read in contrast to the *ATH*, which is interpreted as strongly antimarriage. Instead, I argue that the *LM* prefers celibacy to marriage and should not be read in contrast with *ATH* but as one possible way of interpreting it.

The *Life and Miracles* certainly makes room for marriage as a part of Christian life, yet marriage is consistently viewed as an inferior choice to celibacy. Paul's beatitudes seem to contrast marriage (1.2.17–21) with the virgin life: “But I consider even more blessed those who have kept safe and intact the grace [received] in baptism and who have not defiled the garment of Christ through shameful works and words, but such as they received it at first, so they have kept it until the end” (1.2.27–32). The virgin life is preferred, as preserving the baptismal state of purity. Similarly, in the miracles, the virgin daughter of Dionysia has “something even more extraordinary than her mother, pure and undefiled virginity” (2.46.22). The elder Dionysia is a married woman who chooses to embrace virginity. She is described as “beginning to give up husband and children and home and all things” (2.46.1–2). In other Christian literature of the period we have examples of wealthy widows who left behind children to pursue the virgin life.²³ Less frequently, there is evidence that married people also committed themselves to asceticism.²⁴ Dionysia gives up both husband and children, and the narrative implicitly affirms this choice through Thecla's support of Dionysia. This suggests a preference for virginity that might take precedence over existing marital commitments.

Scholars who read the *LM* as deasceticized may recognize the work's preference for virginity but see any accommodation of marriage as a sharp departure from the views of the *ATH*. For example, Elizabeth Castelli argues that “the *Life* blunts the ascetic drive that pulses so sharply through the earlier narrative, reframing the promotion of celibacy in terms that do not condemn marriage altogether.”²⁵ Thus, the portrayal of the *LM* as deasceticized relies on a reading of the *ATH* as radically antimarriage. Readers who see the *ATH* as antimarriage often focus on the action of its central character. Thecla's rejection of her fiancé is an essential element of the plot. She sets an example for those who would faithfully

²³ For example, see the *Life of Melania the Elder* in Palladius, *h. Laus*. 46; and Paula in Jerome *Ep.* 108.6.

²⁴ Melania the Younger is an example of a married woman who takes up the virgin life alongside her husband, Pinianus. See Palladius, *h. Laus*. 61; and Gerontius, *Life of Melania the Younger*.

The letters of Augustine to Ecdica and Pseudo-Pelagius to Celanthia are examples of wealthy women who sought to pursue a life of celibacy while married. See Augustine, *ep.* 262; Pelagius *Celanth.* 28–30.

²⁵ Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 151.

follow Christ according to Paul's teachings: "Blessed are the bodies of virgins, for they will be pleasing to God and will not lose the reward for their chastity" (6).

Yet many early Christian readers saw Thecla's story as an affirmation of the virtues of purity and self-control, not as a rejection of marriage. Although it is clear that ascetic groups valued Thecla, there is no explicit evidence that early Christians read the text as excluding any possibility of marriage. They read Thecla as an example of virtues that were pursued by married and unmarried Christians. These readers probably understood Paul's teaching to include the possibility of marriage. Only two of the beatitudes of *ATH* 5–6 make reference to one's marital state. One declares blessed the bodies of virgins, and the other "those who have wives as if they did not have them" (5). This beatitude clarifies the inclusion of married believers. In addition, those who are pure in heart, chaste, self-controlled, and merciful are also called "blessed," whatever their marital status. The virtues of self-control and purity are central to Paul's teaching, but the practice of these virtues is not restricted to the unmarried.

Other elements of the story make room for early readers to interpret this text in ways that include married believers. Paul's companions, Demas and Hermogenes, summarize Paul's teaching as a rejection of marriage: "You will not be raised from the dead unless you remain chaste, abstain from polluting the flesh, and guard your chastity" (*ATH* 12). Yet these are untrustworthy characters who represent Paul in a negative light. Early readers could easily discount the harsh view of these characters. Even Thecla's mother, Theocleia, has a more open view of Paul's message. She summarizes: "You must fear the one and only God and live a chaste life" (*ATH* 9). Many Christians sought to pursue such chastity (or purity, *hagnos*) within marriage, and would not necessarily have perceived themselves as excluded from the teachings of the *Acts of Thecla*.

Such readers may also have seen the possibility of a virtuous married person in the character of Onesiphorus. Onesiphorus is Paul's virtuous (and married) host. He recognizes the treachery of Demas and Hermogenes early on (*ATH* 4), and provides a location for Paul's teaching. When Paul is sent away, Onesiphorus, his wife Lectra, and their children Simmias and Zenon, go with Paul and fast with him (2, 23). Thecla returns to their house at the end of the story (42). Readers who assumed marriage was an option for Christians may well have seen these characters as a validation of their views about marriage.

For most second-century Christians, as for Romans in general, marriage was an ordinary part of religious life. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul discusses a range of issues related to marriage and virginity. Like the *ATH*, there were and are many ways to interpret 1 Corinthians 7. However, there is evidence that some early Christians understood Paul to declare virginity preferable to marriage, but to affirm marriage as an important way of controlling desire.²⁶ Second-cen-

²⁶ For example, Tertullian uses 1 Cor 7 to argue that marriage is good but abstinence is preferred (*Ux.* 1.3). Clement of Alexandria affirms both marriage and virginity. His discussion of 1 Cor 7

tury Christians who came to the *ATH* with this passage already in mind could easily have seen it affirmed in the later text as well. This is not to say that the *ATH* could not be read in other ways. But in a social world in which marriage was overwhelmingly the norm and in which Christianity was only beginning to develop forms and practices of virginity, it is reasonable to think that many Christians would have encountered Thecla as a text promoting continence, not as one forbidding marriage. Evidence that male and female readers, married and unmarried, saw Thecla as an exemplar supports this conclusion.²⁷

Three centuries later, then, when the author of the *Life and Miracles* makes such an argument, it may not indicate the rejection of an established and radical Thecla, but may instead be an outgrowth of a history of the church's embrace of her. The author acknowledges the *Acts* as the source of the story of Thecla's life, and understands himself as faithfully adhering to the earlier work (1.prol.1–22). As Scott Johnson has argued, the genre of the *Life* is that of rewritten Bible.²⁸ The author adheres to and validates the *Acts of Thecla* while articulating it in language that made sense in his own day. Although his interpretation differs from that of modern readers of the story, the author may have had good reason to understand himself as expressing rather than altering the meaning of the *ATH*.

The *Life and Miracles* is better read as a response to questions about marriage raised in its own day than as a rejection of an earlier reading of the *Acts of Thecla*. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians debated the relative value of marriage in Christian life. Some Christians argued that marriage was to be avoided altogether.²⁹ Other leaders mounted a defense of marriage. Notably, Jovinian argued that virginity was not more meritorious than marriage. Both Jerome (*Iou.*) and Augustine (*Bon. coniug.*) responded to Jovinian upholding the higher status of the virgin life. Augustine also insisted on the good of marriage. Closer to the provenance of the *LM*, John Chrysostom wrote of marriage as a gift given “so that we might live together in self-control” (*Laud. Max.* PG 51.232.51). Elsewhere, he spoke against those who reject marriage and in favor of marriage in which both parties cultivate reverence for God. The one who marries in this way “will not be inferior by much to the monks, nor the married inferior to the unmarried” (*Hom. in Eph.* 20, PG 62.146.46–48). Clearly, Chris-

in *Strom.* 3.12.79–80 shows his interpretation of the passage but also gives voice to some of the opposing views.

²⁷ For the use of Thecla by male authors, see note 3, above. Compare with Margaret Aymer, “Hailstorms and Fireballs: Redaction, World Creation, and Resistance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*,” *Semeia* 79 (1997): 48, 59; and Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 192.

²⁸ Johnson, *Life and Miracles*, chap. 2. For a discussion of other poetic works of this type in late antiquity, see Roberts, *Biblical Epic*.

²⁹ For example, Jerome attributes such views to Marcion and Tatian and their followers (*Iou.* 2.16). Augustine derides similar views, probably among the Manichees (*Virginit.* 17). Chrysostom speaks simply of “heretics” who condemn marriage (*Hom. in Eph.* 20).

tians of the fourth and fifth centuries held a variety of views on marriage. The author of the *LM* positions himself within this context using language that resonates with the views of Augustine and John Chrysostom. Marriage is affirmed, but the virgin life is better, and continence should be a goal within marriage as well.³⁰

The portrait of Thecla that emerges from the *Life and Miracles* is not easily described as “domesticated.” She intervenes not only in the household but also in wars, personal disputes, and matters of ecclesial orthodoxy. She affirms the possibility that Christians may marry, while steadfastly representing and supporting the virgin life.

The work is not without gendered stereotypes. Indeed, the author promotes Thecla’s broad-reaching power at the same time he affirms norms of modesty for women. Virgins stay inside the house (1.3.11–12) and remain silent (1.12.1–7). The author understands Thecla as adhering to these norms of modesty: she is offered as the premier example of virtue.

At the same time, the figure of Thecla remains powerful. The author never questions the propriety of a woman performing Thecla’s many tasks. Indeed, the rhetorical function of the text relies upon the assumption that presenting Thecla’s power will be appealing to readers. The author promotes Thecla’s cult through his description of her virtue and power. The pattern that emerges from this study is that the author never apologizes for Thecla’s apparent deviation from gender norms. She baptizes, teaches, roams about, and intervenes politically, all without any apparent need for explanation.

Given the insights of feminist historiographers in recent decades, perhaps this Thecla should not come as such a surprise. When the narrative of Thecla’s radical nature was developed some thirty years ago, scholars fit her into a metanarrative about the history of women in the church that was developing at the time. According to this narrative, women held leadership roles in the early days of the church when charismatic leadership was the norm. But when more formalized structures were put in place, women were necessarily excluded. In recent years, scholars have repeatedly pointed to women both inside and outside the church who had both formalized leadership roles and wide influence. Women were regularly ordained in these centuries to perform roles their communities deemed important.³¹ Women also wielded social and political power as patrons. When patrons made bequests and intervened on behalf of others,

³⁰ See Augustine, *Bon. coniug.* 5–8. John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Eph.* 20; *Hom. in Col.* 12.

³¹ For evidence of women’s ordination, see Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women’s Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

they exerted influence on the world around them and also gained honor.³² The evidence of women’s patronage is not as extensive as that of men. However, the point is not to claim that women and men were equals but that patronage was a source of and path toward public influence available to both women and men.

Women patrons exerted influence in the church as well as in society at large. The literary sources rarely assert women’s authority in a straightforward way, but bear witness to such authority nonetheless. Melania the Elder receives Evagrius’s confession and prays for his release from illness (Palladius, *h. Laus*. 38.8–10). While Palladius does not attribute any clerical title to Melania, he nevertheless can assume that readers understand the authority women like Melania had.³³ Likewise, while Gregory of Nyssa portrays his sister Macrina as a modest virgin who lives with her mother, he also makes it clear that Macrina transformed her household into a monastic community for men and women, and led her brothers Basil, Gregory, and Peter into the ascetic life.³⁴ Similarly, Sozomen portrays Pulcheria as a pious and holy virgin who governs the empire in her brother’s name (*h.e.* 9.1–3).³⁵ These and other examples suggest that it may be time to reassess the narrative of women’s exclusion from the church.

By assuming that Thecla’s roles are natural, the portrait of Thecla in the *Life and Miracles* supports this changing perspective on the roles of women. It expects that readers will not be surprised by a woman undertaking such actions. Thecla’s patronage is connected to her social status in Iconium, but it comes to be founded on the power and honor she achieves through her single-minded pursuit of purity and piety. Thecla’s virtue helps establish her power both in life and in death, power that the author understands as a visceral force in his day. The work does not seek to explain to the reader how such a woman could baptize or exert authority over bishops. It suggests a world in which women influenced the church, not only through the exhibition of humility and modesty but also through the assertion of power.

³² See, for example, Zeba Crook, “Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 591–611; Carolyn L. Connor, *Women of Byzantium* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), chap. 3; and Carolyn Osiek, “The Patronage of Women in Early Christianity,” in *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 173–92.

³³ Another powerful patron of this period is Olympias. Palladius calls her a “confessor,” and elsewhere she is said to be a deacon. Palladius, *h. Laus*. 56; and *Life of Olympias* 6, 16.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *v. Macr.* See the excellent discussion by Susanna Elm, “Virgins of God”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), chap. 4.

³⁵ On the life of Pulcheria, see Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and Vasiliki M. Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (London: Routledge, 1994).



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