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From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License from Apostolic Practice in the *Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla*

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When Paul wrote of the folly of the cross (1 Cor. 1:23–25), he expressed an apostle’s awareness that perfect virtue rarely achieves visible success or social approval. In a similar way, other first-century writings such as the canonical gospels, Luke’s Acts, and the epistles of undisputed Pauline authorship emphasize that love is revealed by perseverance, not by cheering crowds or tongues of angels.

It has long been considered a mark of sainthood to respond to this apostolic vision by abandoning oneself to the anonymity of missionary work, the radical commitment of celibacy, or the humiliation of martyrdom.¹

¹ In this essay, the word “apostolic” is used in two ways: to refer to a particular historic era and to designate certain Christian writings that originated in that era. The period of history herein designated as “apostolic” is the latter two-thirds of the first century C.E. Although several scholars have divided this seventy-year period into an apostolic and a postapostolic or subapostolic era, I have chosen to simplify usage by applying the word “apostolic” to the entire era from the proclamation at Pentecost to the mid-nineties. The decade of the nineties seems a reasonable cutoff date for an apostolic era for three reasons. First, the years 95–97 C.E. mark the first major persecution since Nero; second, they are the dates most scholars assign to the letter of Clement, which is the earliest ecclesiastical letter issued without a claim to authorship by Paul, a member of the Twelve, or a relative of Jesus; third, they end the era in which any members of the Twelve could conceivably be alive and are the usual dates assigned to John’s Gospel. The documents that originated in this era and that I have termed apostolic writings are those that present Jesus in the context of Law, Prophets, and Temple, and, therefore, can plausibly be traced to the thought and expression of those who were “with Jesus from the beginning” or to those who traveled or interacted with this first generation of Christian witnesses. This distinction between an apostolic age and apostolic practice was made as early as the second century by the Christian apologist Irenaeus (*Adversus haereses* 1,27,2; 3, 2, 2). Jean Daniélou points out that Irenaeus distinguished between ideas and practices established by the apostles (*ab apostolis*)—and therefore a source of norms for church practice—and ideas from the era in which the apostles lived (*apostolorum*)—and therefore of no normative value for the church; see “Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture,” trans. and ed. John A. Baker, in his *A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1973), 2:144–47.

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Yet as inspiring as this self-sacrificing virtue may be for some, others doubt the value of such heroic commitment unless it is endorsed by signs of divine approval or earthly success. Thus by the end of the second century, hagiographical narratives glorifying the attainments of devout men and women became an important source of popular piety and ethics.²

By adding scenes of crowd-dazzling miracles to lives known only for monotonous self-denial or for having ended in martyrdom, hagiography encouraged admiration and imitation of heroic virtue. In most cases, fantasizing about a saint's use of supernatural power or success in public confrontations did not distort the life of humility at the heart of the narrative. Nevertheless, hagiography could undermine Christian virtue when an author substituted an intended audience's secular values or pagan concepts of divinity for the stark, God-centered motives of the historical saint. Such is the problem encountered in the *Acts of Paul*, a late second-century work that purports to record the life and death of the Apostle to the Gentiles and, in one intriguing episode, to describe the accomplishments of his convert Thecla.

Interest in the *Acts of Paul*, and particularly its Thecla episode, has been raised by several modern scholars who propose that parts of the narrative are as much a record of apostolic practice as the canonical Scriptures. It is the contention of this essay, however, that the stories of Paul and Thecla display a second-century cultural perspective, inconsistencies with first-century thought and expression, and neglect of issues relevant to diaspora-based ecclesial communities. All of these features eliminate the possibility that any part of the *Acts of Paul* or its so-called *Acts of Thecla* supplements the canonical New Testament with historically accurate sources of information about the apostolic age. References to historical figures of the first century and to events and controversies of the apostolic age indicate that the author of the *Acts of Paul*, though acquainted with some of the information and wording contained in the texts that would be assembled into the New Testament, had little understanding of the historical or intellectual context experienced by first-century Christians. Thus the parts of the *Acts of Paul*/*Acts of Thecla* that describe events not found in canonical texts do not transmit oral or written sources from the apostolic age that supplement and redefine the canon. Instead, such narrative details constitute a hagiographer's attempt to make the obscure debates and austere saints of the first century relevant to second-century audiences. Consequently, the popularity of the Thecla episode in the second through fifth centuries did not indicate its de facto acceptance as a

² For a discussion of early Christian hagiography and classification of the *Acts of Paul* as hagiography, see Willy Rordorf, *Liturgie, foi, et vie de premiers Chrétiens* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1986), p. 435. See also Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

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revealed scripture but instead reflected the story's appeal among uninstructed Christians who had difficulty understanding the ideas and values of apostolic writings.

Even casual reading of the Thecla episode reveals that its author knew little of the theological controversies and religious terminology of the apostolic age. For example, the narrative quotes Paul as preaching that those who fear God "shall become angels of God"—a confusion of natures that would be absurd for Paul or for anyone else grounded in the Jewish intellectual context of first-generation Christianity.³ Moreover, the author of the *Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla*, though apparently aware of the existence of documents such as Luke's Acts and certain Pauline epistles, seemed to know only isolated passages from these writings.⁴

As a result, the *Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla* shows no awareness that Paul's apostolate was encumbered with tedious administrative concerns or that his sermons involved complex, labored exegesis of Law and Prophets. In contrast to the often-disappointed Paul of the canonical Acts and the Captivity Epistles, the Paul described in the *Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla* undercuts adversaries with apt phrases, receives favorable answers to prayers, and preaches a simple message that wins immediate, emotional conversions.

No less successful than Paul is the Iconian maiden Thecla. The single episode that deals with Thecla reports that she vowed virginity after being mesmerized by a sermon in which Paul promised salvation to the celibate. Although Thecla's fiancé and other spurned suitors arranged to have her burned at the stake and subjected to contests involving bulls, lions, and a

³ *Acts of Paul* (hereafter *API*), 3.5, in Edgar Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* (hereafter *NTA*), ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 2:354. On the concept of angels in Hebrew scriptures and early Christian thought, see Peter Schaefer, *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975). A second-century work that reflects the biblical distinction between human and angelic spirits is *Shepherd of Hermas*, which declares "you . . . must remain steadfast . . . that your passing may be with (meta) the holy angels" (Vision 2.2.7) and "apostles and teachers who preached to all . . . the passing of such is with (meta) the angels" (Similitudes 9.25.2). But the *Martyrdom of Polycarp's* assertion that those who suffered martyrdom "were no longer men but already angels" (chap. 2, verse 3) reflects the emergence by the end of the second century among less-instructed Christians of a hellenized understanding of spirits. Both the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* are in *Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, 2 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1924) 2:21, 281, 315.

⁴ Schneemelcher notes that the *API* affects the style of first-century epistles, gospels, and acts and shows some knowledge of the content of these works (*NTA* 2:348). But misapplication of terminology, inability to make references to the Jewish scriptures, and ignorance of the context in which first-century narratives and letters present events, indicate that the author of the *API* had no regular access to first century texts. Contrast this with the hagiographer who composed the *Nativity of Mary* (ca. 140) and who not only cites Isaiah but declares that he is "omitting those things which have been more fully written in the gospel" to deal with events in saints' lives that are "less worthy of being narrated." *Nativity of Mary* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter *ANF*), vol. 8, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1886), pp. 384–87.

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bear, Thecla is delivered by miraculous occurrences. On two occasions she is rescued by lionesses who pay her homage. Thecla's fortitude in the arena and miraculous escapes from injury win the admiration of crowds of pagan women, especially Tryphaena, a member of the imperial family. In the climax of the episode, Thecla, facing another threat in the arena, immerses herself in water and declares herself baptized. Spared once again, Thecla inspires the conversion of Tryphaena and, making use of an endowment from the noblewoman, dons men's clothing to travel in search of Paul. Informed of her trials and baptism, Paul authorizes Thecla to teach. Consequently the rest of her long life is spent "enlightening many" with the word of God.⁵

The story of Thecla in the *Acts of Paul* is one of at least six different legends that report the persecution of a Thecla or Thecusa. The five other accounts differ from one another and from the *Acts of Paul* concerning when, where, and with whom Thecla suffered persecution. Yet none of the five accounts, not even the two that situate Thecla in the first century, describe her as a convert or companion of Paul.⁶ Thus the episode in the *Acts of Paul* is the least sensitive to historical context since it emphasizes Thecla's association with Paul but attributes her trials to conflicts with local imperial authorities and to methods of persecution that did not develop until long after Paul's execution under Nero.⁷ Moreover, in all Thecla stories other than the *Acts of Paul* and its later derivatives, Thecla's only attainment, like that of her companions in the arena, was martyrdom. Although a tomb of Thecla in Seleucia supports the *Acts of Paul* in its reference to her peaceful death there, a tomb in Rome which, like that of many martyrs, is near that of Paul, attests to a martyred Thecla.⁸

⁵ See *API* 3.28, 32, 33, 35 in *NTA* 2:360–62. A woman named Tryphaena is mentioned in Rom. 16:12. The name also belongs to a second cousin of a Caligula who lived in Asia Minor from 37 C.E. until 50 C.E. But the *API* author's attempt to associate a member of the imperial household with early Christianity is an example of use of first-century names without knowledge of context. Arrest of Christians for vows of chastity did not take place during Paul's lifetime and certainly not during the period when Tryphaena lived in Pontus (not Pisidian Antioch as in the *API*). See Carl Schmidt, *Acta Pauli aus der Heidelberger* (Leipzig, 1904; reprint of 2d ed., Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), pp. 203–4.

⁶ *The Book of Saints*, comp. Benedictine Monks, St. Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate, 5th ed. (New York: Crowell, 1966), pp. 79–80, 249, 562, 670, 676, 690.

⁷ See Jacques Moreau, *Les persecutions du Christianisme dans l'empire romain* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), pp. 34–38; Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 316; and Harold Mattingly, *Christianity in the Roman Empire* (New York: Norton, 1967), pp. 31–57. See also Acts 16:19–40 and 21:21–39.

⁸ See "Thecla of Iconium" in *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, ed. Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater, 4 vols. (New York: Kenedy, 1965), 3:623–25; and also Richard A. Lipsius, *Die Apocryphen Apostelgeschichten und Apostellegenden*, 3 vols. in 4 books (Braunschweig: Schwetschke & Sohn, 1883), 2:424. Willy Rordorf, who believes that the *API* account of Thecla is historical, thinks the tomb venerated at Rome is that of an unknown Roman martyr who, because her bones were found near Paul's, was assumed to be the Thecla of the *API* account. Rordorf also suggests

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But an obscure maiden whose God rewarded devotion with only a martyr's crown would be as incomprehensible to second-century Greco-Roman Christians as would Paul's halachic letters to the first-century churches of Rome and Corinth. Thus the author of the *Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla* focused on the simplicity of Paul's message and on the divine consolation and social approbation that attended Christian virtue. It is in the story of Thecla's triumph over persecution that the connection between uncomplicated faith and spiritual affirmation is most clearly drawn. Since the episodic structure of the *Acts of Paul* allowed its more popular tales to circulate apart from the main work, the Thecla narrative came to be widely distributed as the *Acts of Thecla*.⁹ Whereas independently circulating copies of the *Acts of Thecla* remained accessible into the modern era, texts of the complete *Acts of Paul* gradually disappeared from circulation and were not rediscovered by modern scholars until the twentieth century.

It was the study of an independent *Acts of Thecla* that led W. M. Ramsay to propose in 1893 that the Thecla story, particularly in its focus on Thecla's spiritual leadership, preserved historical information about apostolic practice. From references made by patristic authors, Ramsay knew that the Thecla narrative was part of a larger "Acts." But without a text of the *Acts of Paul*, Ramsay treated an available fourth-century edition of the *Acts of Thecla* as an independent entity. Noting accurate descriptions of some first-century secular customs and ascertaining that the names of several characters belonged to people who lived during apostolic times, Ramsay proposed that a primitive *Acts of Thecla* was composed in the first century. He hypothesized that information about apostolic practices drawn from this primitive text served as the historical foundation for a

as an alternate possibility that Thecla, after her adventures in Seleucia, traveled to Rome where she eventually died (see Rordorf, pp. 441–42). Yet if Thecla, as the *APL* episode recounts, escaped martyrdom and died in Seleucia, why would the bones of a martyr in Rome be considered hers unless the remains were previously associated with another Thecla? Moreover, the idea that Seleucian Thecla eventually traveled to Rome and died there is based on additions made to an independently circulating *Acts of Thecla*. See Bernhard Pick, *Apocryphal Acts of Paul, Peter, John, Andrew and Thomas* (Chicago: Open Court, 1909), pp. 32–34. Endings added to an independent *Acts of Thecla* may be seen in *ANF*, 8:491–92. It is likely that these additions represent an attempt to reconcile the legend of Thecla found in the *APL* with the material evidence that a martyred Thecla died without experiencing any of the adventures in Asia Minor that are described in the *APL*.

⁹ These were the "Acts of Thecla (and Paul)," "Third Letter of Paul to the Corinthians," and "Martyrdom of Paul" (*NTA*, 2:325–28). A case has been made that the "Third Letter" was developed separately from the *APL*. George W. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1987). An English translation from the Syriac version of an independently circulating Acts of Thecla is in William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Amsterdam: Philo, 1968), pp. 116–45.

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lost second-century account mentioned by Tertullian (died 230) and for the surviving fourth-century edition.¹⁰

Ramsay's conclusions were challenged ten years later by Carl Schmidt's discovery of a Coptic edition of an almost complete *Acts of Paul*. Schmidt concluded from his analysis of this text that the Thecla episode displayed a uniformity with the rest of the *Acts of Paul* in style, structure, cosmology, language, and characterization that undermined the possibility that the Thecla story had been based on an earlier document. Schmidt, who published a German translation of the Coptic text in 1904, concluded that none of the episodes in the *Acts of Paul* showed knowledge of first-century roads, customs, or historical figures beyond what was readily available to any second-century author.¹¹

Schmidt's analysis did not eliminate conjectures that the Thecla story conveyed historical information. Adolf Harnack, for example, saw no reason to revise his own theory, based on Ramsay's thesis, that oral traditions transmitted first-century tales that were assembled and updated by a second-century author. Harnack admitted, however, that it was impossible to determine which parts of the *Acts of Paul* and its Thecla episode were based on fact and which were fictitious.¹²

Since the mid-1970s, much research has hypothesized that the factual elements in the Thecla episode can be ascertained. Several scholars, particularly those claiming Roman Catholic affiliation and feminist concerns, have proposed that references in the Thecla story to a woman's self-baptism, missionary activity, and commissioning by Paul not only constitute the historical element in the narrative but also reveal that women in apostolic times shared in the sacerdotal and teaching offices of apostles. Research into this hypothesis has pursued two different but often converging lines of inquiry. One line proposes that popularity and liturgical use in the third through fifth centuries indicate that the *Acts of Thecla* was accepted as a revealed text and, therefore, met the standard by which documents were declared canonical. The other line of inquiry has concentrated on the means by which a model of female leadership could have been transmitted from the apostolic era to the time it was assembled in written form.

¹⁰ W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170* (New York: Putnam, 1933), pp. 375–428. Ramsay's dating for the various editions of the *Acts of Thecla* is discussed on pp. 275–381.

¹¹ Schmidt, *Acta Pauli aus der Heidelberger*, pp. 198–217; also Carl Schmidt, *Acta Pauli* (Gluckstadt: J. J. Augustin, 1936), p. 122. The impact of Schmidt's *Acta Pauli aus der Heidelberger* is discussed in *NTA*, 2:250–51, 325, 348–49. As early as 1883, Lipsius noted inconsistencies in the itinerary and symbolism in the available *Acts of Thecla*, which suggested that the work was a fantasy about historical figures (Lipsius, 2:464–67).

¹² The theory was suggested as early as 1899 by Adolf Harnack, *Drei wenig beachtete cyprianische Schriften und die Acta Pauli* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899). See also *NTA*, 2:332–33.

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A major proponent for the first approach has been Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who maintains that the *Acts of Thecla*, along with several other texts that suggest women's leadership, was "long considered canonical even by the mainstream church."¹³ In line with the thinking of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elaine Pagels, Schüssler Fiorenza sees the church as diverse in theology and practice from its origins through the fourth century. According to all three scholars, episcopal efforts in the fourth century to formalize the canon were the culmination of a slowly emerging but innovative program that excluded all forms of revelation that did not support a patriarchal and hierarchical view of society and the church. From the perspective of this method of canon criticism, the New Testament is not a compilation of works selected on the basis of objective and uniform criteria long applied by those whose education and authority could be traced to apostolic succession. Instead, the Christian canon is regarded as the "record of the historical winners."¹⁴

Although Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza note that the *Acts of Thecla* contains the sentimentality and romanticism characteristic of late second-century authorship,¹⁵ neither mentions that such lateness of composition would make the Thecla episode or any part of the *Acts of Paul* an oddity in a canon in which the narrative books were composed over a century earlier.¹⁶ For Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza, late composition of the *Acts of Thecla* is a less important consideration than the apparent earliness of cer-

¹³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Word, Spirit and Power: Women in the Early Christian Communities," in *Women of Spirit*, ed. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), p. 51.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 55. Both Rosemary Radford Ruether (in Ruether and McLaughlin, eds., pp. 51–57) and Elaine Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels* [New York: Random House, 1979], pp. 61–69) argue that certain writings were denied canonical status on the basis of their inconsistency with fourth-century cultural values, not because they were inconsistent with first-century apostolic documents.

¹⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 51–55; Ruether, "Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age," in Ruether and McLaughlin, eds., pp. 74–75.

¹⁶ Research done since the Qumran discoveries has established that the narrative writings of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, John, Luke—Acts—are first-century works. (See, e.g., studies by John Meier, William Albright, F. F. Bruce, Raymond Brown, etc.) There is some disagreement, however, concerning certain epistolary writings, particularly the pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) and 2 Peter. Scholars such as Norbert Brox, in "Historische und theologische Probleme der Pastoralbriefe der NT" (*Kairos* 11 [1969]: 81–94), argue in the tradition of Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934) that the ideas against which the pastorals and 2 Peter are directed originated in the early second century and therefore the epistles themselves could be as late as 125–50 C.E. Yet other scholars who accept the pseudepigraphical character of these epistles make a reasonable case for dating these letters in the 80s and 90s. See, e.g., Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 70–75; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 136n. Henri-Charles Puech makes the case that the errors criticized in the epistles arose during the lifetime of the apostles and were not second-century developments (*En quête de la Gnose*, 2 vols. [Paris: Gallimard, 1978], 1:147).

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tain ideas and models of behavior in the Thecla story. Although both Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza cite Ramsay, neither refers to Schmidt's research. Nevertheless Schüssler Fiorenza is certain that Thecla reflects "forms of early Christian theology and praxis that acknowledged the leadership claims of women" and that evidence of these apostolic practices was obscured by the "patriarchalization" of the church that led to the fourth-century establishment of a closed canon.¹⁷

The argument that the *Acts of Thecla* was, by usage and content, on a par with works later assembled into the canon depends on finding evidence for Harnack's theory that an oral tradition behind the Thecla story infused it with historical information. But it also requires a task that Harnack thought impossible: the identification of a particular element in the story, in this case the apostolic commissioning of a woman for church leadership, as factual. The attempt to identify this aspect of the story as historical has led to the line of research that seeks a means by which women's roles in the apostolic church could have been reliably transmitted.

According to Stevan L. Davies, the Thecla narrative, like other second-century writings about women exercising a prophetic or authoritative role, has a feminine focus as well as a female protagonist. It is Davies's conclusion that the communities of widows established in the earliest era of apostolic activity may have preserved, in oral and, eventually, written form, stories of particular relevance to themselves as Christian women.¹⁸

Drawing on the work of Davies, Dennis R. MacDonald combines an attempt to distinguish a historical apostolic-age feminism in the *Acts of Thecla* with the assertion that the New Testament canon of Pauline epistles distorted subsequent understanding of Paul's ideas and policies. MacDonald argues that the Epistles to Timothy and Titus were neither Paul's own composition in the 60s nor pseudepigraphical recollections of Paul's words in the 80s. Instead, MacDonald proposes that the pastoral Letters, with their restriction of church administration to male householders, were written in the second century to counteract the acceptance of female leadership in Paul's earlier epistles and in the traditions long preserved and subsequently written "by women."¹⁹ Having rejected the

¹⁷ Quotation from Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 54. Other studies of women's roles in early Christianity have noted that widows exercised no leadership roles and played no role in liturgical service. The communities of widows involved enrollment in a way of life, not ordination to service. Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, trans. Jean Laporte and Mary Louise Hall (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1976), pp. 109–12.

¹⁸ Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), pp. 96, 105–6. See also Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1987), pp. 53–60.

¹⁹ Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), pp. 14, 81. MacDonald's position on the pastorals has been criti-

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first-century origins of the letters to Timothy and Titus, MacDonald concludes that the apparent leadership role of Thecla was consistent with Paul's early letters that praised women for their assistance to the church. MacDonald also maintains that the Pauline corpus established by those who assembled the canon at fourth-century councils reflects the ideas of "males of a particular social position" who suppressed the more radical branch of the Pauline legacy in order "to serve the needs of a church increasingly eager to gain social acceptability."²⁰

Those authors who claim historicity for the Thecla legend or who argue that the *Acts of Thecla* was unfairly excluded from the New Testament have raised intriguing issues. Nevertheless, the conclusions that these authors derive concerning the implications of key events in the Thecla narrative and the process of canon formation are grounded in self-fulfilling hypotheses and questionable selection of evidence. By using ecclesiastical terminology such as "church" or "canon" in a manner different from the way those terms were used during the first three Christian centuries, by describing fourth-century conciliar decisions on the canon without discussion of the standards of text evaluation that had developed as early as the second century, and by focusing on the details of Thecla's apparent leadership role without considering the cosmological, moral, and theological context in which it is placed in the narrative, many studies of the *Acts of Thecla* have drawn conclusions from too narrow and, therefore, too arbitrary a range of evidence.

The way in which imprecise use of terminology can distort the selection and evaluation of evidence is most apparent in the work of MacDonald and Schüssler Fiorenza. MacDonald, in offering an example of leadership roles adopted by "women in the early church," draws his evidence from the practices of Montanist communities. Yet Montanism was regarded, explicitly by bishops of Rome Soter (died 175) and Eleutherius (died 189), as being outside the church.²¹

MacDonald asserts that the *Acts of Thecla* was included in biblical manuscripts. But as evidence he refers to the Syriac "Book of Women" and the Codex Claromontanus. The problem with the former is that it is merely a collection of stories about virtuous women and thus hardly biblical in scope. MacDonald is also misleading in suggesting that the *Acts of Thecla* is

cized by Brevard S. Childs in *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 388–91. See n. 16 above.

²⁰ MacDonald, p. 89.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35. The condemnation of Montanism by bishops of Rome is noted in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Montanism." Montanists were regarded by contemporaries such as Didymus of Alexandria as believing in prophetic identity with God that was inconsistent with the Gospels (Laurent Volken, *Visions, Revelations, and the Church*, trans. Edward Gallagher [New York: Kenedy, 1963], pp. 53–54).

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contained “in” the Codex Claromontanus. Yet the Thecla story is not in the text of the codex. What MacDonald refers to is merely a list of titles inserted into the codex. Moreover, even this list does not mention a separate *Acts of Thecla*; only the *Acts of Paul* is listed. Although the titles of most of the books included in the New Testament are on the inserted list, the listing is inappropriate as an example of church usage since there is no indication of the origin or purpose of the list, and the compilation seems to have been done carelessly (listing, e.g., two epistles to Peter and omitting Thessalonians and Philippians). Despite the apparent informality of the list, someone had indicated by use of horizontal lines that the last three titles on the list—Shepherd of Hermas, Acts of Paul, and Apocalypse of Peter—and a previously listed Epistle of Barnabas were regarded differently from the other titles.²²

Schüssler Fiorenza is similarly misleading when she states that “in many regions the book [of Thecla] was regarded as canonical in the first three centuries.”²³ First of all, to refer to a “book” of Thecla implies an independent status and canonical dignity that have not been proven. Second, there is no evidence that a Thecla document had been written until the first century and most of the second century had passed. And, finally, there are no documents from “the mainstream church” that proclaim the *Acts of Thecla* to be a source of information about apostolic teaching. According to the terminology used by Ignatius of Antioch at the end of the first century, only communities that accepted the authority of the bishops were part of “the catholic church.”²⁴ But no community that fit that definition listed the *Acts of Thecla* or even the complete *Acts of Paul* as an undisputed, normative text of scripture.

Unlike another part of the *Acts of Paul*, the “Third Letter of Paul to the Corinthians” which, detached from the main work, appeared in the Armenian Bible and Ephraem’s commentary, neither the *Acts of Paul* nor an independent *Acts of Thecla* was informally “canonized” by local church communities seeking to compile collections of works that could be read regularly in the liturgical assembly. Only Manichaeans, who viewed themselves as adherents of a religion distinct from Christianity, and Montanists, who, along with their Priscillianist subset, viewed written texts as merely a context for the revelations of charismatic prophets, included the Thecla episode—as part of the *Acts of Paul*—in collections of

²² Ibid., p. 90. For a translation of the list found in the Codex Claromontanus, see Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), pp. 310–11, app. 4, no. 4.

²³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (n. 14 above), p. 173. Hans von Campenhausen cautions that use of a document does not constitute canonization; see *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), p. 103.

²⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8.1–2, and *Letter to the Trallians* 3.1, in Lake, trans. (n. 3 above), 1:266–67 and 1:214–15.

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sacred texts and continued to do so after the mainstream church had closed the canon.²⁵

Some might argue that since pre-fourth-century lists of sacred writings are rare, one should seek legitimacy of a text as a Christian scripture by observing its popularity among Christians prior to the closing of the canon. But although the *Acts of Paul* and the separate *Acts of Thecla* were circulated and known by orthodox and heterodox Christians, this in itself did not mean that educated people regarded either work as anything other than hagiography. Although Origen (died 254) and Hippolytus (died 235) knew the Thecla narrative as part of the *Acts of Paul*, their neutral citations of it did not indicate that either believed any part of the text to be revelation. Origen even consigned the *Acts of Paul* to the rejected, not merely disputed, writings. Moreover, when either Origen or Hippolytus cited saints' lives, secular histories, or pagan legends, it was not because they regarded such texts as equivalent to Mark's Gospel or the Letter to the Galatians but because the texts supported the plausibility of the moral demands and supernatural events found in the Septuagint and in Christian writings of undisputed authorship.²⁶

The central issue raised by those who doubt the objectivity of fourth-century decisions on the canon is whether the councils applied standards of text evaluation consistent with those used by earlier generations of Christian scholars. Evidence from first-century Christian writings indicates that those who viewed themselves as church leaders used the texts of the Septuagint as the standard for judging ideas and practices. Epistles as diverse as Romans and 1 Peter indicate that leaders in the apostolic era defined church communities by their faith that Christ's identity and teaching fulfilled the accepted scriptures of the Jewish people. Similarly, Clement of Rome, in a letter composed before 97, defended the emerging hierarchy by noting its consistency with leadership structures described in the writings of Isaiah. In Clement's work one also finds the idea that certain Christian writings have the same normative character as texts from the Septuagint. Clement's copious references to the Letter to the Hebrews suggest that he had access to a copy of the work, and that the consistency of Hebrews with the expectations of the "old covenant" made

²⁵ See *NTA* (n. 3 above), 2:325–27. For information on women's roles in Montanism and Manichaeism see Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (n. 7 above), pp. 282, 373.

²⁶ Origen admitted to having been influenced by Gnostic exegesis. See Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (n. 1 above), pp. 257, 273. Even with this background, Origen rejected the *API* (William Farmer and Denis Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon* (New York: Paulist, 1983), p. 18. Clement of Alexandria (died 215) referred to parts of the *API*, though not to the Thecla episode. Yet it is not clear that he regarded the *API* as revelation. Moreover, Clement was a private teacher and did not represent even the heterodox church at Alexandria. See R. M. Grant, "The New Testament Canon" in the *Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3 vols. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1:302.

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Hebrews itself a standard for evaluating Christian ideas and ritual practices. Clement's commitment to certain normative texts is also evident in his challenge to those who defied church leaders to "Pick up the letter [Philippians] of the blessed apostle Paul."²⁷

Acceptance of certain texts as normative was apparent in the second-century hierarchy's rejection of Marcion, whose dualistic and experiential vision of Christianity excluded Yahweh's revelation to the Jews and defined Christian faith in terms of Paul's earliest epistles and a one-book "gospel." The failure of Marcion's appeal to the elders in Rome and his excommunication in 144 reveal that the episcopacy and presbyterate of Rome, unlike the city's pro-Marcion populace, understood the Pauline letters not as self-defining Christian truth but as comprehensible only in the context of a prior written revelation found in the Septuagint.²⁸

By the end of the second century, Christian apologists used four first-century gospels and a collection of epistles, along with the Septuagint, not only to determine ethical precepts and ecclesiastical polity but to serve as the standard for evaluating other texts. By 180, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, emphasized that consistency with a four-gospel tradition (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) determined whether one's understanding of Christian faith conformed to apostolic norms.²⁹

Some modern scholars may doubt, because the information comes from Eusebius's fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History*, that Serapion, bishop of Antioch in the late second century, rejected the "Gospel of Peter" by comparing the ideas in the text with those in the gospels that were "handed down."³⁰ But Eusebius's description of Origen weighing the non-Pauline style of the Epistle to the Hebrews against the closeness of its ideas to letters more readily attributed to Paul is supported by Origen's own testimony. In a letter, Origen referred to the questions of authorship associated with Hebrews and his own conclusion that the text of Hebrews, though probably transcribed, reflected the thought and expression of Paul.³¹ The contro-

²⁷ I Clement, 42.5, 47.1. in Lake, trans., 1:81 and 1:89. On use of the Septuagint and other versions of the Old Testament as standards of evaluation, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 52–56; Jean Daniélou, "The Theology of Jewish Christianity," trans. and ed. John A. Baker, in *A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicaea* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1964), 1:88–115; and Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), pp. 74–99.

²⁸ von Campenhausen, pp. 103, 148–49. Marcion's gospel may have been an edited version of Luke with some elements from Matthew. See Farmer, in Farmer and Farkasfalvy, p. 59; Denis Farkasfalvy, in *ibid.*, pp. 134–41.

²⁹ Irenaeus (n. 1 above), 3.1.

³⁰ Those who affirm the validity of Eusebius's description of Serapion are Grant, 1:284, 296; and Farmer, p. 30.

³¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.11. That Origen used internal evidence to establish the authorship of Hebrews is in "Letter to Africanus" 9, in *Ante Nicene Christian Library*, trans. Frederick Crombie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 10:377–80. See also Richard N.

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versy over Pauline authorship of Hebrews and the tendency throughout the second and third centuries to exclude this epistle from lists of apostolic letters shows that others came to conclusions different from Origen's. But it also indicates that in the second and third centuries Christian scholars applied objective criteria of evaluation to determine the authenticity of texts purporting to carry apostolic authority.

If one accepts the reasoning of Denis Farkasfalvy and Everett Ferguson that the date traditionally assigned to the Muratorian Fragment (ca. 170–200) is correct,³² one can see objective standards being applied in the second century to distinguish normative texts from other religious writings. The Canon Muratori emphasizes the doctrinal and liturgical importance of the four Gospels, Luke's Acts, thirteen Pauline letters (Hebrews is omitted), the Epistle of Jude, two epistles of John, John's Apocalypse, and another apocalypse attributed to Peter. In providing this list, the author of the Canon Muratori revealed considerable sophistication in noting minor inconsistencies in the four Gospels and in describing how the scope of a narrative or letter provided internal evidence of having been composed at a certain time. In specifically rejecting texts such as the Shepherd of Hermas and letters to Laodocians and Alexandrians, the Canon Muratori mentions the "forged" authorship and Marcionite ideas of the two letters and notes that composition of the Shepherd of Hermas during the time when Pius was bishop of Rome (ca. 140–55) made the narrative ineligible for inclusion in a collection of revealed works.³³

Tertullian's *De Baptismo* (198–200) provides similar insights into the standard of text evaluation applied by the end of the second century. Tertullian noted that the "so-called *Acts of Paul*" described "the example of Thecla to maintain the right of women to teach and to baptize."³⁴ Refuting those who cited the narrative to support such claims, Tertullian

Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 162–63. It is interesting to note that the Council of Hippo (393) which included Hebrews in the New Testament and attributed it to Paul listed it separately from other Pauline epistles. See "Council of Hippo, Canon 36," in *Bible Interpretation*, ed. James Megivern (Wilmington, N.C.: Consortium-McGrath, 1978), p. 48.

³² The traditional date of 170 is rejected by Albert C. Sundberg, Jr. ("Canon Muratori: A Fourth-Century List," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 [1973]: 1–41). Farmer accepts Sundberg's interpretation but Farkasfalvy defends traditional dating. Compare Farmer and Farkasfalvy, pp. 94, n. 83, and p. 161, n. 1. Also critical of Sundberg is Everett Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia Patristica* 18 (1982): 677–83; Childs (n. 19 above), p. 238; and Metzger (n. 22 above), p. 193.

³³ Muratorian Fragment in Megivern, ed., pp. 1–3. See also Kelly, p. 59.

³⁴ Tertullian (*De baptismo* 17) also notes inconsistencies between the practices described in the Thecla story with those of First Corinthians. The Latin text and an English translation may be found in Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1964), pp. 36–37. This essay uses the English wording in *NTA*, 2:323, rather than that of Evans. Davies ("Women, Tertullian and the Acts of Paul," *Semeia* 38 [1986]: 139–43) proposes that Tertullian's opponents were referring not to the *API* but to a lost Pauline letter.

offered a reason why the *Acts of Paul* should not be used to establish church polity: "Let them know that the presbyter in Asia who produced this document, as if he could of himself add anything to the prestige of Paul, was removed from his office after he had been convicted and had confessed that he did it out of love for Paul."³⁵

In other words, events in the *Acts of Paul* were not normative because there was evidence that the work had not been composed in apostolic times. Although some modern interpreters have suggested that Tertullian's story of the contrite presbyter was a fabrication designed to uphold emerging hierarchical structures and male spiritual leadership,³⁶ the possibility of such a fabrication would be highly unlikely. Tertullian, the opponent of war, capital punishment, athletic games, cosmetics, and remarriage after widowhood, tended to be morally scrupulous. Moreover his eventual affiliation with Montanism was grounded in his long-standing objections to the hierarchical priesthood and involved his acceptance of women as prophetic and ritual leaders in Montanist congregations.³⁷

But even if Tertullian were the victim of a hoax, the way in which he described the circumstances affecting the presbyter author offers insight into the way in which Christian scholars of the second century evaluated texts. First of all, in noting that the Thecla story was of recent composition, Tertullian seemed satisfied that such information about a text eliminated it from consideration as a normative work. He assumed that his readers would agree that only documents composed by the Twelve, Paul, or by those who interacted with them could reveal apostolic faith and practice. Second, Tertullian did not vilify the author of the Thecla episode. Such a person would be, in the apologist's opinion, foolish to think that he "could of himself add anything to the prestige of Paul." But this indiscretion was the understandable effect of being motivated by pious "love for Paul."³⁸

In other words, the presbyter's hagiography would have been inoffensive had he not, by writing in the style of apostolic narrative, attempted to

³⁵ Tertullian, *De baptismo* 17.

³⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (n. 14 above), pp. 54–55; and Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, vol. 1 of *The Pelican History of the Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 92.

³⁷ For Tertullian's view of the priesthood of the laity, see "On Exhortation to Chastity" 7 [ANF, n. 4 above], 4:54). He accepts as normative the pronouncements of the prophetess Prisca ("On Exhortation to Chastity" 10 [ANF, 4:56], and "On the Resurrection of the Flesh" 11 [ANF, 3:553]).

³⁸ *De baptismo* 17. Tertullian believed that only the church "handed from the apostles" can interpret scriptures ("On Prescription against Heretics" 36–37 [ANF, 3:260–61]). His attitude toward the *APL* is the same as Eusebius of Caesarea's (died 339) attitude toward the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Eusebius implied that those who accepted the *Shepherd* as authoritative did so because they thought it was composed by Hermas, the contemporary of Paul. Also the *Shepherd* was useful for those who needed "an elementary introduction" to genuine Christian teaching. It is for those reasons that the *Shepherd* had been and still was read publicly in the churches. Eusebius is cited in Volken (n. 21 above), pp. 48–49.

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elevate it to a status to which it was not entitled. Tertullian's attitude in this respect was similar to that of Jerome in the fourth century. Jerome unequivocally rejected claims that any part of the *Acts of Paul* was of apostolic origin. Nevertheless, he cited the Thecla episode in encouraging people to imitate the virtues of "Saint Thecla."³⁹

There is another aspect of Tertullian's account that ought to be considered. This is his reference to people using the Thecla story to claim apostolic authorization for women administering baptism and engaging in formal teaching. Yet careful reading of the Thecla episode indicates that Thecla's involvement in teaching and in baptism was very limited. As Willy Rordorf has observed, the narrative describes Thecla as baptizing no one but herself. Moreover, this baptism took place only because she was in danger of death. Rordorf proposes that those who thought Thecla had baptized others were drawing on a Latin translation of the text in which the word chosen to translate Thecla's activity of "enlightening" many was one often used as a synonym for baptism.⁴⁰

Although among Greek-speaking Christians baptism was also associated with "enlightenment" and as early as the second century a newly baptized person was called "photismos,"⁴¹ such references were not to the baptism itself but to the conversion that led to baptism. This usage would be consistent with apostolic texts such as Heb. 6:4 (photisthentas) and 10:32 (photisthentes) and Eph. 1:18 (pephotismenous) in which the word translated as enlightened/enlightening refers to the act of conversion not the act of baptism. Ephesians 1:18, for example, refers to "enlightening the eyes of your heart" and not to the rebirth or cleansing of baptism. So although some readers of Greek texts of the Thecla story may have concluded that Thecla "baptized" many, the text's reference to enlightening does not indicate anything more than instructing potential converts.

Close reading of the Thecla narrative also reveals that Thecla does not bring about conversions through formal teaching or spiritual direction of the church community. The text merely describes Thecla's work as a missionary catechist and her diligence in instructing women. Neither activity suggests that she functioned as an apostle, episcopos, presbyter, or deacon. Some second- and third-century readers may have thought of the entire *Acts of Paul* as apostolic and referred to the Thecla episode to justify the Montanist practice of having women "prophets" among the leaders of the liturgical assembly. But such usage would have been as much a distor-

³⁹ Pick, *Apocryphal Acts* (n. 8 above), p. 12.

⁴⁰ Rordorf, *Liturgie, foi et vie* (n. 2 above), p. 437.

⁴¹ Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 226. See also B. S. Easton, "Self-Baptism," *American Journal of Theology* 24 (1920): 513–18.

tion of the wording and content of the text as is MacDonald's assertion that Paul "ordains" Thecla to teach.⁴²

In the Thecla narrative, the roles attributed to the heroine are those that church hierarchies have traditionally recognized as appropriate for women. The service of women catechists and missionaries is alluded to in epistles formally accepted into the New Testament canon and has been institutionalized for centuries in the traditional apostolates of Roman Catholic and Anglican communities of celibate religious women. Since nothing done by the Thecla character suggests leadership of the worshipping community or a position in the emerging hierarchy, the story of her adventures can hardly constitute a long-suppressed record of women exercising sacerdotal powers. Even if one were to agree with Davies and MacDonald that the folkloric elements in the *Acts of Thecla* indicate transmission of the story from an earlier, if not apostolic date, there is no evidence that the storytellers were familiar with apostolic practice or were reporting historical events.

This raises the most serious problem in the *Acts of Thecla* and in the rest of the *Acts of Paul*: the ideas and actions of the protagonists reflect a theology and cosmology inconsistent with the Septuagint and with first-century Christian gospels and letters. One major problem in the Thecla story is its inherent contradiction of the concept of personhood expressed in Jewish scriptures and in writings of apostolic era Christianity. In one scene of the Thecla episode, Jesus appears to take "the form of Paul."⁴³ This kind of transformation is appropriate to pantheistic religious systems in which the deities are not eternal in nature or personality and are, therefore, capable of avataristic involvement in human affairs. The idea of transitory personalities would also be acceptable to Montanism. Montanism, which emerged around 170, at about the same time the *Acts of Paul* was composed, emphasized possession and use of human personalities by God and relied on prophets and prophetesses who claimed that Christ appeared in different forms and identities.⁴⁴ The idea of God taking possession of human personalities is not consistent with either the creator and lawgiver of the Torah and Prophets or with the concept in first-century Gospels and Acts of a resurrected Christ who maintains physical and spiritual continuity with the historical person of Jesus.

⁴² MacDonald, *Legend and Apostle* (n. 19 above), p. 19. Margaret Howe ("Interpretations of Paul in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*," in *Pauline Studies*, ed. Donald Hagner and Murray J. Harris [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980], p. 41) argues that the narrative shows Paul to be granting a very limited role to Thecla.

⁴³ *API* 3.21, in *NTA*, 2:358.

⁴⁴ Lipsius (*Apocryphen Apostelgeschichten* [n. 8 above], 1:7–8) notes that transformed images of apostles involve gnostic symbolism. Puech (*En quête de la Gnose* [n. 16 above], 2:221) notes that the *Pistis Sophia* emphasizes Christ's identity of personality with the disciples.

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Further out of line with the worldview expressed in apostolic texts or even in second-century episcopal letters are the motivations displayed in the characterizations of Paul and Thecla. Thecla's conversion is grounded not in a conviction that Jesus fulfills prophetic writings or in an appreciation of the idea of redemption that early Pauline epistles indicate was important to first-generation Christians. Instead, Thecla's religiosity is based on attraction to Paul.⁴⁵ More important, her vow of celibacy is nothing more than a refusal to marry. There is no association of her vow with prayer, the Parousia, poverty, self-denial, or undistracted devotion. Only in a fourth-century addendum to a text of the *Acts of Thecla* is the young woman credited with founding a community of virgins. In the Thecla episode in the *Acts of Paul*, lack of a spouse is not a sign of commitment but a convenience that enhances Thecla's closeness to Paul. Significantly, her rejection of marriage does not involve the modesty one finds recommended to celibates in canonical or Patristic writings. Thecla's physical attraction to Paul is blatant. She visits him in prison "kissing his fetters" and, after a night with him there, Thecla is, in the words of the narrative, "found . . . so to speak, bound with him in affection."⁴⁶

In a similar way Thecla's adoption of men's clothing would be unacceptable to people familiar with the prohibitions of the Mosaic Law or Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11:2–16). Thecla's masculine garb, along with her rejection of marriage, suggests the practices of Marcion's followers. Marcionites claimed to have been freed from the social mores of the "old law" and emphasized the prophetic and ritual leadership of an elite group of charismatic men and women. Women in Marcionite communities sometimes wore men's attire to show transcendence of the earthly concerns of femininity.⁴⁷

Terminology in the Thecla episode, as in the rest of the *Acts of Paul*, mimics the style of Luke's Acts but is grounded in a different theological

⁴⁵ *API* 3.7–10, 24, in *NTA*, 2:355–56, 359.

⁴⁶ *API* 3.18–19, in *NTA*, 2:358. Carthaginian Bishop Cyprian declared (ca. 249) that clergymen who shared sleeping quarters with virgins, even though no sexual intercourse took place, should be excommunicated immediately. A consecrated virgin who slept with a man but remained a virgin should be excommunicated for a second offense of this nature. See Epistle 61 in *Writings of Cyprian*, vol. 1, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, vol. 8, trans. Robert Wallis (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), 1:204–6.

⁴⁷ Attribution of Marcionism to the late first century and discussion of Marcionite rejection of the value of human nature and denial of Christ's human nature is in R. Joseph Hoffman, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity* 46, AAR Academy Series (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1984), pp. 66–70, 168–71. Despite Marcionite emphasis on the sacramental roles of women deacons, women were prohibited from the Marcionite priesthood (*ibid.*, p. 17). See also E. Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, trans. C. A. L. Jarrot (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), p. 30. Christians in the first through third centuries would also be aware that transvestism was used by pagan contemporaries to convey the idea of assimilation into or intercourse with a deity (see Theodor Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament* [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], pp. 316–18).

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perspective. The account in the Thecla narrative of a sermon by Paul cites him as paraphrasing Jesus' beatitudes. But unlike the synoptic Gospels, which present divine justice as the response to each virtuous quality, the beatitudes in Paul's sermon are rewarded by an undefined "wisdom" that gives "understanding" and will bring those who receive it to "light." Although similar words are found in the Septuagint's wisdom literature, Essene writings, and Johannine texts, in the Thecla narrative they are applied differently. Wisdom is not associated, as it is in John's Gospel and letters, with recognition of God's love or conformity to a body of moral precepts. Nor is light presented as divine activity or a metaphor for divine presence. Instead "wisdom" and "light" are signs that someone has reached spiritual perfection.⁴⁸

The Thecla episode's references to resurrection show an attempt to conform to the ideas of Pauline letters but, at the same time, reveal an incomplete understanding of Paul's concept of the physicality of the general resurrection. The belief of Marcionites and other Gnostic sects that the resurrection is a spiritual transcendence already attained by the elect is rejected in the episode's association of this belief with the villains "Hermogenes and Demas." The use of these names suggests familiarity with the second letter to Timothy but it also shows that the author of the Thecla story has confused "Hymenaeus and Philetus," who are criticized in 2 Tim. 2:16–18 for claiming that some have already been "resurrected," and "Demas," who is mentioned in 2 Tim. 4:9 as having deserted Paul. Despite this attempt to conform to the Pauline concept of resurrection as eschatological, the author of the Acts of Paul, in describing the future resurrection as entirely spiritual, is inconsistent with the emphasis in 1 Cor. 15:35–55 on a general resurrection of physical bodies. As Jean Daniélou has noted, some second-century Gnostics, in attempting to dissociate themselves from Marcion's antinomianism, included vague affirmations of a future resurrection in their writings.⁴⁹ The author of the *Acts of Paul* could be using the same approach.

On the matter of baptism, Thecla acts on the assumption, and Paul confirms, that self-baptism is valid. The baptism itself is presented not as an act of faith or repentance but as the result of a providential occurrence that rewards Thecla's courage and continence with enlightenment. As the narrative reports, "They sent in [to the arena] many beasts, while she

⁴⁸ *API* 3.6 in *NTA*, 2:354. The citation of "beatitudes" by an apostle appears in other apocryphal acts. See François Bovon, "The Synoptic Gospels and the Noncanonical Acts of the Apostles," *Harvard Theological Review* 81 (1988): 31.

⁴⁹ Daniélou, "Gospel Message" (n. 26 above), pp. 221, 224. Compare Schneemelcher who maintains that the *API* is anti-Gnostic (*NTA*, 2:349–50). Theodor Zahn argues that the Thecla episode draws on 2 Timothy in the characterization of Hermogenes and Demas (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 3 vols. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909], 2:21, 129).

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[Thecla] stood and stretched out her hands and prayed. And when she had finished her prayer, she turned and saw a great pit full of water, and said: 'Now is the time for me to wash.' And she threw herself in, saying: 'In the name of Jesus Christ, I baptize myself on the last day.'⁵⁰ After the baptism contributes to another miraculous escape from death, Thecla rejoins Paul and declares, "I have taken the bath, Paul, for he who worked with thee for the Gospel has also worked with me for baptism." Upon hearing Thecla's report of the baptism and the miraculous rescues, Paul tells the still-uninstructed convert, "Go and teach the word of God."⁵¹

Apparently the author of the *Acts of Paul* regarded baptism as a "seal" of perfection and, as two conversations between Paul and Thecla suggest, a guarantee that one could no longer be "tempted."⁵² Paul's initial hesitancy to baptize Thecla and his commissioning of her upon learning that she has "taken the bath" imply a view of baptism as a rite of empowerment granted only to those whose attainments were beyond ordinary levels of faith and virtue. This understanding of baptism conforms to the Marcionite practice of baptizing only people who renounced marriage and gave evidence of a spiritual enlightenment that marked them for prophetic activity.⁵³

Also problematic in the *Acts of Paul* is the presence of miraculous animals. Magical beasts are not found in apostolic era narratives or in diaspora literature. Even the lions that fail to attack in the Book of Daniel do not pay the prophet homage. Yet in one *Acts of Paul* episode a lion responds to Paul and, in the Thecla episode, lionesses rescue the heroine with thematic regularity and willful acts of devotion.⁵⁴ This typology recalls that of the cult of Cybele, a goddess attended by lions, who was honored through castration, other acts of self-mutilation, and a ritual of rebirth involving bull's blood.⁵⁵ Just as the Cybele typology expresses a dualistic cosmology in which spiritual power is manifested by the elimination of natural distinctions between animals and humans, men and women, and one person and another, the descriptions in the stories of Paul and Thecla of animals acting volitionally, of an apostle and a virgin engaging in sexual conduct without concupiscence, and of one person using the form of another indicate a similar belief that natural distinctions are antithetical to divine intentions.

⁵⁰ *API* 3.34, in *NTA*, 2:362.

⁵¹ *API* 3.40–41, in *NTA*, 2:364.

⁵² *API* 3.26, 40, in *NTA*, 2:360, 364.

⁵³ Hoffman, pp. 22–25. See also Arthur Voobus, *History of Asceticism in the Syriac Orient*, 2 vols. (Louvain, 1958).

⁵⁴ *API* 3.28, 33, in *NTA*, 2:360, 362. See also Lipsius (n. 8 above), 1:7–8.

⁵⁵ On the Cybele cult see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (n. 27 above), pp. 11–12, and Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (n. 7 above), pp. 71–72.

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The reason for mentioning these aspects of the narrative is not to suggest that its author was a follower of Marcion or a devotee of mystery cults. As previously noted, the Thecla episode shows some understanding of Christian orthodoxy and attempts to refute ideas denounced in the pastoral Epistles. But the storyteller had only a partial and perhaps oral acquaintance with ideas affirmed in earlier Christian writings. Hence the Thecla episode places Christian cosmological and ethical concepts (resurrection, baptism, vows of celibacy) in a context different from that of apostolic writings.

If historical elements are present in the Thecla episode beyond the names and paraphrases of first-century documents, they would most likely be found by comparing the episode with other legends and hagiographies involving a person named Thecla. Eusebius, for example, tells the story of a Thecla who he believed was martyred in 304. According to Eusebius's report, three people, Thecla, Timothy, and Agapius, were arrested in a general persecution of Christians. Timothy, a bishop, was burned to death. Thecla was killed by animals. Agapius, though sentenced to death was detained in prison for two years. After completing the prison term, Agapius was offered clemency if he would sacrifice to the gods. He refused and was sent to the arena where he was mauled by a bear. Having survived this torture, Agapius was executed the next day by being drowned in the sea.⁵⁶

The historical details and methods of persecution suggest an event that took place not in the fourth century but during Trajan's reign (98–117).⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in Eusebius's simple account, it is not Thecla but one of her male companions who experiences a stay of execution, survival of a contest with a bear, and a providential "baptism" in which death by immersion assures eternal life. Thecla's glory, like that of the two men with whom she was arrested, lay in martyrdom.

It is possible that this early second-century execution was the historical event, or legend, from which the author of the *Acts of Paul* selected the name of Thecla, attributed to her alone the tribulations of all three martyrs, and worked the story into an account of the life of Paul. This technique of extraction, embellishment, and shifting of time and place was often used in hagiographies.

That the author of the *Acts of Paul* may have applied such techniques in developing the Thecla story is suggested by another *acta* that featured one of the other three martyrs. In the "Acts of Agapitus," a work composed

⁵⁶ Eusebius, "Martyrs of Palestine" 3 and 6, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2d ser., ed. Henry Wace and Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1890), 1:344, 347–348. See also *Butler's Lives*, 3:355.

⁵⁷ Mattingly, *Christianity in the Roman Empire* (n. 7 above), pp. 31–57.

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sometime after the late third century, the martyr Agapius becomes the center of an account that features the names of imperial officials, glorious miracles, and an emphasis on appealing personal qualities of Agapius/Agapitus. Agapitus is described as having been imprisoned during Aurelian's reign (270–76). A local official releases Agapitus from prison and offers him the chance to avoid martyrdom by renouncing Christianity. When Agapitus refuses and is sent to the arena, wild beasts refuse to harm him. His youth and heroism win adulation from the crowd and the miraculous behavior of the animals causes the tribune Anastasus, like Tryphaena in the Thecla story, to be converted.⁵⁸ Compared with the story of the early second-century martyrs Thecla, Timothy, and Agapius, which continued to be transmitted in unembellished form through Eusebius's era, both the "Acts of Agapitus" and the *Acts of Thecla* reveal the willingness of *acta* authors to focus on a central character, to transfer that character to a different time period, to add or remove the names of people with whom the person was originally associated, and to fabricate accomplishments that were more engaging than martyrdom.⁵⁹

Since, as this essay proposes, Thecla's talents in the *Acts of Paul* reflect second-century cultural values rather than transmission of a censored historical tradition, and since there is no evidence that churches committed to episcopal authority and apostolic practice regarded any part of the *Acts of Paul* as revelation, some may question why mainstream churches in the fourth through sixth centuries were warned not to make use of the *Acts of Paul* or the *Acts of Thecla*. In order to understand this situation, one must consider the way in which hagiographical writings were treated by churches that accepted conciliar and hierarchical authority. When the Council of Hippo proclaimed the biblical canon in 393, it declared that only selections from canonical books could be read in the liturgical assembly. On the feast day of a saint, however, an exception could be made. A selection from the appropriate hagiography, specifically the story of a saint's persecution, could be read to the congregation.⁶⁰

Use of the *Acts of Paul* / *Acts of Thecla* in this capacity, however, came to be viewed by some as a danger to orthodoxy. By the fifth century, a work known as *Caena Cypriani* referred to concerns that the *Acts of Paul* was being used in place of Luke's Acts as a source of information about Paul. In the same era, Philastre of Brescia, in his *Diversarum Hereseon* urged that the *Acts of Paul* not be read by all but only by those capable of benefiting

⁵⁸ Compare Agapius and Agapitus in *Butler's Lives* (n. 8 above), 3:355 and 3:345, respectively.

⁵⁹ Another example of the use of cultural embellishments in the telling of a saint's life can be seen in the hagiography of Saint Euphemia. In one legend she is a companion of a Thecla and other women in a first-century martyrdom. But in an "acta," she is killed by a bull while other wild animals fawn at her feet (cf. *Butler's Lives*, 3:567; *Book of Saints* [n. 6 above], p. 249).

⁶⁰ "Council of Hippo, Canon 36," in Megivern, ed. (n. 31 above), p. 48.

from its moral examples.⁶¹ In the sixth century, the so-called Decree of Gelasius reminded Christians that certain listed works, including the “*Acts of Thecla and Paul*,” should be recognized as spurious.⁶²

There were several reasons why the *Acts of Paul*/*Acts of Thecla* caused concern. The most fundamental of these was that the narrative made use of an apostolic setting and style of composition. Congregations could easily be confused concerning the nature of the work and be inclined to turn to it for an understanding of Paul or for apostolic teaching. A reading of the episode detailing Paul’s martyrdom would be more engaging to the uninstructed than the prosaic Lukean accounts of sermons and imprisonments. Another problem related to the first-century style of the *Acts of Paul* was that it gave undue influence to its spiritualized concept of resurrection and its unedifying ideas about the interaction of male and female celibates. On these two issues the Thecla episode was particularly troublesome. Although hagiographies often make theological mistakes, an erroneous concept of the Resurrection embedded in a work that read like Scripture presented serious problems. Moreover although Thecla’s role as catechist did not contradict roles traditionally adopted by celibate women, her behavior, especially the masculine dress and flirtation with Paul, contradicted traditional standards of chastity. Finally, the *Acts of Paul* was used in the fourth through sixth centuries by those who rejected episcopal and conciliar authority. Montanists and Manichaeans found in parts of the work justification for their own leadership structures and cosmic dualism.⁶³

In any case, the problem with the *Acts of Paul*/*Acts of Thecla* as late as the sixth century was the same as that experienced by Tertullian: the archaic style of the work made uninstructed audiences believe that it was more than hagiography. Thus the *Acts of Paul* and its Thecla episode were proscribed not because church authorities wanted to suppress history but because the work pretended to contain a level of historical and doctrinal truth that could never be found in works of its kind.

⁶¹ Rordorf (n. 2 above), pp. 439–41.

⁶² *NTA*, 2:325.

⁶³ *Ibid.*