

Lecture Fifteen

The Acts of Paul and Thecla

Scope: One of the most popular apocryphal accounts from Christian antiquity involved the conversion and exploits of Thecla, an aristocratic woman of Asia Minor who converted to the Christian faith through the preaching of Paul. The account survives as part of the Acts of Paul, a narrative that was evidently forged by a well-meaning Christian in Asia Minor, who later confessed to the deed. The narrative indicates that Thecla is principally drawn to Paul's proclamation of sexual abstinence. This leads to difficulties, because Thecla's fiancé and mother take offense at her decision not to marry and arrange for her to be executed by the state for her Christian beliefs. Through a series of miraculous interventions, though, Thecla is eventually set free and allowed to follow Paul, then go forth on her own to proclaim the gospel of ascetic living.

Outline

- I. To this point, we have looked at two of our non-canonical Acts, those of John and of Thomas. In this lecture, we exam a third, one that was possibly the most popular in antiquity and is almost certainly the most popular among scholars of antiquity, the Acts of Paul and Thecla.
 - A. This is a legendary narrative about the exploits of one of Paul's early converts to Christianity, the aristocratic young woman Thecla, who abandons her home, her family, and her fiancé to follow Paul's teachings of strict sexual renunciation.
 - B. The account forms a portion of the larger narrative known as the Acts of Paul, a collection of tales already attested to by the late second century.
 1. The proto-orthodox church father Tertullian condemned the account for its lax attitude toward the role of women in the Christian church.
 2. According to Tertullian, the entire account was, in fact, fabricated by a presbyter in Asia Minor, who was caught red-handed in the act and later confessed to making the forgery.
 - C. Why and how did people forge documents?
 1. Sometimes, people forged documents as a way to make money.
 2. People also forged documents as an act of humility.

3. More commonly, documents were forged in the ancient world because, by claiming to be someone famous, the writer could get a hearing for his views. This appears to be the principal reason that Christians forged documents in antiquity, writing their views in the name of an apostle.
 4. Such forgers attempted to inject aspects of verisimilitude into their forgeries, for instance, adding offhand comments presumably made by the author.
 5. Forgeries could be recognized by comparing the writing style, vocabulary, and views to those of the author under whose name the forger was writing.
- D. This account contains numerous earlier traditions about Paul and his converts, none of which is more riveting than the narrative known as the Acts of Paul and Thecla, which may have originally circulated independently of the Acts of Paul.
- II. As with the other Apocryphal Acts, this book can be seen as a kind of Christianized version of the popular literature known as romances or novels.
- A. It shares many of the generic characteristics and concerns of ancient novels. These books are all about love, magic, danger, escape, and restoration.
 - B. But the Christian versions of the novels stand against the pagan versions in central and striking ways.
 1. The pagan romances are all driven by a concern to set forth the sanctity of marriage and marital love in the context of religion and in relation to an overarching concern for the integrity of the social fabric (strong families and marital institutions work to preserve the good of society).
 2. The Apocryphal Acts are concerned to promote strict sexual renunciation and illustrate how the gospel of Christ destroys the social fabric of family and community, all for the sake of the greater truth of heaven and the world above.
 - C. These similarities and differences can be neatly seen in the gripping tale of the Acts of Paul and Thecla.
- III. The narrative can be divided into four scenes of action.
- A. First scene: Thecla's dramatic and socially disruptive conversion to Paul's message of sexual renunciation.

1. **The main characters:** a wealthy aristocratic young woman, Thecla; Thecla's mother, Theoclia; Thecla's fiance, Thamyris; and the apostle Paul.
 2. **The action:** Paul arrives in Thecla's city of Iconium to preach his gospel that eternal life will come to those who abstain from sexual activity, even within marriage. Thecla listens to Paul for three days on end from the window of her home and converts to his message, to the severe consternation of her mother and fiancé.
- B. Second scene: Trial by fire in Iconium.
1. **The main characters:** Thecla, Paul, Thamyris, the governor of Iconium.
 2. **The action:** Thamyris and other men of the city, outraged that Paul's message has taken their wives and fiancées from them, have him arrested. Thecla shows her absolute devotion to Paul by bribing the guards to let her in to see him. Out of frustration, Thamyris and Theoclia hand her over for punishment. The governor condemns her to death by burning. But God miraculously intervenes at the last moment, dousing the fire with a thunderstorm, and Thecla is set free.
- C. Third scene: Thrown to the wild beasts in Antioch.
1. **The main characters:** Paul, Thecla, Alexander (an influential citizen of Antioch), the governor of Antioch, and the Queen Tryphaena.
 2. **The action:** Paul and Thecla travel to Antioch, where she is accosted by Alexander, who desires her. She publicly humiliates him and, in response, he arranges to have her condemned to the wild beasts. Before her execution, the governor hands her over for safekeeping to an aristocratic woman, Tryphaena, relative of the emperor, who befriends her. When taken to the arena, Thecla is again miraculously protected from the wild beasts by God and eventually throws herself into a vat of wild, ravenous seals and baptizes herself there. When no beast will molest her, she is again set free.
- D. Final scene: Resolution and restoration.
1. **The main characters:** Thecla and Paul.
 2. **The action:** Thecla longs for Paul, seeks after him and finds him, and receives his blessing to teach the word of God. She finds her mother, Theoclia, is restored to her, and moves to Seleucia, where

she lives long and happy as a celibate preacher of the gospel.

- IV. Some of the overarching themes of this fascinating account can be taken as representative of all the Apocryphal Acts.
- A. Passion and desire are not eliminated here but redirected; their proper objects are not sexual partners but God, Christ, and their earthly representatives.
 - B. Those who reject this world and its pleasures and trappings are those who have found the truth of the world above and are in a right standing with God, both now and for eternity.
 - C. Those who accept the gospel of Christ and renounce the pleasures of this world, including sexual love, will be socially disruptive and hated by the rest of the world.
 - D. But God will protect them and miraculously vindicate the truthfulness of their message.
 - E. No wonder that, looking at it from the outside, Christianity was seen to be such a dangerous religion by some pagans in the Roman Empire. It struck at the very heart of what most pagans held dear: social structure, family life, marital love, and the enjoyment of the simple pleasures of this life.
 - F. Why were these accounts—and the idea of asceticism—so popular among Christian women?
 - 1. Scholars believe that the social structure in the Roman Empire, where women were forced to be subservient to men, played a role in leading women to this new ideology that denied marriage.
 - 2. Without sex or marriage, women were liberated from a male-dominated society.
 - 3. A cult surrounding Thecla continued into the Middle Ages, and women saw her as a model to be followed in their daily lives.

Essential Reading:

J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, pp. 364-372.

Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, pp. 220-223.

Supplementary Reading:

Jan Bremmer, *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

Stephen Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts*.

Dennis McDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Some scholars have maintained that the Acts of Thecla may well have been authored by a woman. What arguments can you think of both for and against this theory?
2. Explain why the example of Thecla may have seemed "liberating" for Christian women in the patriarchal societies of the ancient world.