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Martyrs and Matriarchs: Women in Early Christian Apocrypha

By Robert Wilf

Abstract:

Today, organized religions seem split on whether or not to allow the Ordination of Women, with dissenters typically arguing along the lines of tradition. What these dissenters do not realize is that there is a strong history of Woman leadership in early Christianity. These piece researches three Apocryphal texts about woman leadership in the early church that were considered by some to be canon. The Gospel of Mary, The Acts of Saint Paul and Saint Thecla, and The Passion of Saint Perpetua, Saint Felicitas, and their companions. The latter two stories were widespread throughout the early Christian world, but were hampered by early bishops and Theologians heavily edited or trying to censor women's voices until neither are well known today. By bringing these texts back into the narrative we can get a better understanding at women's role in shaping Christianity then what forms it can take moving forward.

Introduction:

Modern Christianity tends to conform to the “Master Story” which claims there is one correct way of looking at Christianity passed down through the apostles, fighting off discord sown by the devil to create Orthodox Christianity. However, this view ignores the larger theological debates ongoing at the time, especially in scripture written by or about women. These apocryphal texts can be useful not just to reassess our modern notions of what it means to be Christian, but open more path ways for women in it as set by too often ignored saints and martyrs in the early days. In this paper I will examine three different texts, each about a different extraordinary woman from the first, second, and third centuries and examine the gender issues brought up in them that challenge the typical patriarchal view of the church.

The Bible and Nicene Creed have historically been the guidelines on how to be Christian. But let’s think back to before the Nicene Creed, before the battle of the battle of the Milvian Bridge, and before the New Testament was codified. Throughout the Mediterranean world, Christianity had spread through travelling preachers, many of which were women. There was much debate over the actual meaning of the gospels and which should be included or not, but also on how the early church should function. Thanks to the influence of Apostles such as Peter, a loose hierarchy of bishops leading priests in certain cities had already formed by the end of the first century.¹ However, during the first several centuries, especially when Christianity was still a counter-cultural movement, it was often women who flocked to the church far more than men. One early church found in Jerusalem has a Greek transcription that suggests the church itself was

¹ Kevin, Knight “St. Peter, Prince of the Apostles.” New Advent, 2017

run by a woman.² This is supported by references in the Letters of St. Paul as well as the records we have concerning early Christian martyrs shows that four women died for confessing their belief in Christ for every one man. Despite this, women were barred from most formal places and positions of power, such as the office of bishop, and by the end of the 1st millennium women only made up one in six of the recognized saints.³ This tells us that many stories of women martyrs and early woman leaders were forgotten, downplayed, or ignored by the formation of the church.

Out of all these women I will only touch upon three in this paper but there are many more. I will be focusing on writing by or about Mary Magdalene, Saint Thecla, and Saint Perpetua. Mary Magdalene is the only one that requires no introduction but the gospel attributed to her known as, “The Gospel of Mary” likely does. The fragment of text we have dates to the third century CE but the original was likely produced within a century after Christ’s crucifixion.⁴ The narrative surrounds a risen Christ appearing to his Apostles before ascending, followed by Mary revealing further teachings only to have her authority challenged by Peter. A similar challenge by a then contemporary author came not long later when the theologian Tertullian rejected the far more widespread Acts of St. Paul and St. Thecla. This text written around 170CE tells of a woman in Asia Minor who was converted by Paul, abandoned by him twice, and survived to two subsequent execution attempts before baptizing herself in front of a crowd of cheering women.⁵ While Thecla’s account may be fictitious or at least exaggerated, she provided an ideal for later women martyrs in the coming centuries such as Perpetua, a real woman whom

² Freeman, Morgan “story of god” S3E2 gods among Us

³ B. Shaw (1993). *The Passion of Perpetua. Past & Present*, (139) 13

⁴ Karen, King “Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle” 2003 3

⁵ Edgar Johnson, Goodspeed. (1901). “The Acts of Paul and Thecla.” *The Biblical World*, 17(3), 186

was martyred in 203 AD and left behind her prison diary. This matter of fact account by a woman in this era is a rare find and all three of these texts together form a basis for the power of women and women leadership in the first three centuries of Christianity. And yet these stories are almost never told in Modern Christianity. The most popular figure in these texts, Mary, had hers lost for over a thousand years until only fragments were rediscovered. But before we can understand their contributions, we must understand the world they lived in.

Background

By the time of Christ, The Roman Empire ruled most of the known world including almost all lands touching the Mediterranean. And it was incredibly misogynistic. While treatment of women varied by area, in the Roman ideal, families were headed by the *Pater Familias*, who had power of life and death over their spouses, children, and slaves. Women had no personal names save for a feminine form of their family name and could not vote or hold office. Most notably for our purposes here, women were banned from positions of religious leadership save for specific cults that varied by city. The most notable of these were the Vestal Virgins of Rome. There were several female dominated festivals in specific areas but women leadership was more the exception rather than the rule.⁶ Early Christianity may be one of those exceptions.

As for Judaism, women were excluded from entering the inner court of the second Temple, thus possibly explaining the origin of men and women praying separately. However, because of this, women often led their own services in the outer chambers. Outside the temple, women's participation in other sects of the time varied wildly. Some early rabbinic traditions had

⁶ Mar, Cartwright (2014) "The role of Women in the Roman World"

women serving as presbyters and even as *Mater Synagagos* or “Mother of the Synagogue”. Others held women in a clearly inferior position and even used the Hellenistic influence of the time to make connections between Eve in the garden and Pandora’s box, claiming that women are responsible for the fall of men.⁷ Still certain activities such as the separation of challah and lighting of the candles were reserved for women. The one consistent thread seemed to be the emphasis that women’s responsibility to caring for the home and family outweighed any obligation to preform actively in religious life.⁸ This would set the stage for women’s role in Christianity.

Additionally, at least two of the stories we’re going to be looking at are specifically about Christian persecution in the Roman Empire, though not in Rome or Jerusalem. Aside from Nero’s short lived persecution, the legality of Christianity was buy-in-large a grey area for the first couple centuries. Legally all citizens of the empire were expected to give some sacrifice to the emperor and the approved gods, except for Jews who were largely exempt. So what about this strange new off-shoot which attracted people of non-Jewish heritage in masse? Jewish Christians who kept many of the old practices such as circumcision could usually rely on these old laws. Others often made the sacrifice anyway, or had a servant do it and then went back to observing Christianity. These Christians argued the sacrifice as invalid anyway, if there are no true gods other than the Christian one. It took very specific and devoted people to refuse even this token gesture to paganism, as well as a government looking for a scapegoat to help buckle-

⁷ Tal, Ilan "Post-Biblical and Rabbinic Women." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on June 16, 2019)

⁸ Tracey R, J Rich. “The Role of Women” *Judaism* 101 1995.

down on the state religion. These sporadic and localized persecutions caused Tertullian to remark, “If the Tiber overflows or the Nile doesn’t, the cry goes up, ‘Christians to the lions!’”⁹

Mary

The most comprehensive version of the Gospel of Mary was written in Coptic and rediscovered in 1896. Other fragments have been found in Greek that date back to the third century but none well-kept enough to give us a full picture. What we do have starts in the middle of the story with the risen Jesus giving one last sermon to his assembled apostles before ascending to heaven. The teaching’s emphasis on inner knowledge marks it as part of the gnostic off-shoot which only held sway in many parts of the Jewish-Christian milieu until what would become orthodox Christianity gained and ousted it around the third century. This is likely part of the reason that much of the text has been lost, though interestingly one of the few remaining sections of Jesus’s final sermon contains meta-commentary reinterpretation, saying “Go then, preac[h] the good news about the Realm. [Do] not lay down any rule beyond what I determined for you, nor promulgate like a law-giver, or else you might be dominated by it.” (Mary 4:8-10)¹⁰

This message for unity and unfiltered preaching quickly becomes an issue when the apostles fear for their lives over having to continue Jesus’s work. All save for Mary who reassures them. Perhaps needing more assurance or impressed by her tenacity, Peter asks Mary for further revelation acknowledging the fact that, “the Savior loves you [Mary] more than all other women” (Mary 6:1). And he also asks for more of Jesus’s teaching that she heard which the rest of them hadn’t. Encouraged by this, Mary gives a lengthy treatise on the immortal nature of the soul, much of which remains lost. Peter rebukes her, questioning if Jesus would

⁹ *Acts of Paul and Thecla* . Trans, Jeremiah, Jones. 1724 retrieved from

¹⁰ Karen King 14

reveal secret teachings to a woman that weren't revealed to the other male disciples. This is of course after Peter explicitly asked Mary to do just that.

The simplest explanation for Peter's inconstancy is that he was not expecting Mary's teachings to be of such high importance, or as Andrew calls them, "strange". Peter acknowledges that Jesus favored Mary above all other women, but didn't realize this also meant above most if not all men. Unable to accept this, Peter lashes out in anger, all but accusing Mary of lying and driving her to tears. Levi steps in to defend Mary, calling Peter a hothead and confirms that Jesus loved Mary more than any of the male disciples. He suggests Jesus knew her well enough to pass on these teachings, which Peter was not ready for. He then ends the argument by calling for all of them to go out and preach this new gospel, though the reader is left to wonder just which laws the disciples, and Peter especially, will teach and what they'll insert or leave out to reconcile with their pre-existing worldviews.

The argument in the Gospel of Mary is a stand-in for two larger debates ongoing at the time. One was the more general interpretation of Jesus's divine nature and importance of His teaching versus that of His death which caused the split between different sects of early Christianity. The other is the question of gender that underpins both the debate in and out of gospel. Many of the most vocal and powerful sects were dominated by male hierarchy with the bishop system slowly developing in emulation of Roman patriarchy. However, what often goes under the radar is the vast amount of smaller movements with looser systems of power that were dominated by women. These were especially popular in Egypt and Asia Minor. This disjunction between belief systems and questions of female power can be found in multiple texts throughout the time period. In nearly all they're best represented by the depictions of Mary and Peter. Texts that emphasize Peter tend to deemphasize Mary and vice-versa. Anne Brock noticed that both

Mary and Peter are the only apostles to have received individual resurrection appearances and different sources claim that each were visited first, putting them in competition with each other. Texts that emphasize Peter tend to portray women as submissive or not include them at all. Texts that feature Mary appeal to her as a model for woman leadership and as a source of the true Christianity.¹¹

Women's Right to Preach

In the early Christian milieu, church authority was still taking shape. As said previously less hierarchical churches were often led or dominated by women while the structured authority reserved most spaces for men. We do have accounts of women deacons, including in the Bible. In Romans 16, Paul writes, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me." (Rom 16:1-2). It's also recorded that wealthier women, particularly widows, played a huge role as benefactors of the early church and their respective power is one that male leaders eventually cracked down on. Most notably in the early third century, Hippolytus of Rome wrote a treatise which banned the ordination of widows.¹² Women held power from the start of Christianity, and the active role of influential men to ban them also started early.

One of the best examples of this debate is in the epistles of Paul where he argues against a clearly common practice of female leadership; otherwise he wouldn't need to argue against it. Despite the earlier acknowledgement of Phoebe's hospitality, he argues that women should not preach or even speak in church, calling such actions "shameful" (1 Cor 14:35). Paul instead

¹¹ Ibid 172

¹² "Deacon Chat: A conversation about Women Deacons" *Future church.org*

claims that if women wished to learn and understand more about Christianity, they should consult their husbands as he assumes the man would inherently have a better understanding even if he was not as devoted or knowledgeable as his wife. Unfortunately, his words and interpretation is what became doctrine over the millennia despite being one of many interpretations flying around in the early milieu, and seemingly having no basis in the life or teachings of Jesus. If Gospel of Mary is to be believed, Paul's restrictions actually go against scripture.

Thecla

Paul's attitude towards women in his epistles has often been used as proof for the fictional origins of "The Acts of Paul and Thecla". This title describes only part of a larger work known as "The Acts of Paul." However, as early as the late 2nd century it had already been distributed throughout Asia Minor and Egypt as its own stand-alone work, inciting much comment from the early church. Many female martyrs used it as the basis to inspire their martyrdom, despite the fact that Thecla's martyr status is questionable at best, considering she survives all attempts on her life.¹³ At the same time, Tertullian also condemned it as a work of fiction created by a male presbyter in Antioch who had since lost his position. Tertullian never gives a name to this presbyter or any evidence of it being a work of fiction other than a brief account of his confession and subsequent loss of status. The increasingly miraculous events depicted in the story do lend the claim some credence of it being wholly or partially fiction. Stephen J. Davis in his book proposes that the phrase Tertullian used could describe the presbyter creating the story, or stitching together older stories from an oral tradition. She argues

¹³ Goodspeed 185

that it may come from a woman-dominated oral tradition described in 1 Timothy as idle women babbling about things they should not.¹⁴ But there's simply not enough evidence to know for sure. Nonetheless, the character of Thecla as an ideal and chaste woman martyr became a powerful symbol to Christian woman as persecution increased from both Romans seeking to end this new cult, and Christian men seeking to solidify and reserve their exclusive power over baptism.

The text begins with Paul arriving to preach in Iconium outside the house of an 18-year-old Thecla, and he begins to preach on the merits of abstinence and turning away from other worldly pleasures. She listens to him preach by her window entranced for three days until neither her mother nor fiancé can move her. Distraught, the fiancé rallies up a mob to arrest Paul but Thecla bribes the guards, not to free him, but so that she may receive private lessons from Paul. So moved is she by these teachings that she kisses Paul's chains.

Now despite the emphasis on virginity throughout the story, and a less than flattering but likely accurate portrayal of Paul as a short and balding man at the beginning of this work, there is a clear romantic theme going on. Goodspeed categorized called the work a "religious romance,"¹⁵ and Davis connects similar themes to other Hellenistic romances whom earlier scholars assumed to be geared towards women. While Thecla likely is, modern scholars are now aware the Hellenistic romances might have had broader appeal than Victorian scholars initially assumed.¹⁶ Goodspeed argues these undertones were mostly to increase the work's popularity. Though considering one of the first themes of the work is the merits of virginity, it was likely a

¹⁴ Stephen J, Davis. *The Cut of Saint Thecla* New York. 2001 pg. 16

¹⁵ Goodspeed 185

¹⁶ Cult of Thecla 12

more purposeful example of how one living in God's light can experience love while still abstaining from sex. The love that Thecla experiences for Paul, and through him, for all of Christianity is genuine, it is not always returned as we'll soon see.

Upon finding them the next morning, the judge orders that Paul should be whipped out of the city and Thecla to be burned. The imbalance of punishments is sadly never addressed. Thecla only survives the burning due to a series of miracles including rain to put out the fire and an earthquake to swallow up a few of the people that meant to burn her. After the ordeal, Thecla eventually finds Paul in a cave praying for her safety. He rejoices at her return but refuses to baptize her when she asks. Paul's rationale is that, "... You [Thecla] being handsome, I am afraid that you might meet with greater temptation...and would not withstand it, but be overcome." (Thecla, 6)¹⁷

Paul so far has lived up to the basic expectations of a Christian leader by praying for Thecla but fails to see past the surface when he confuses his own attraction to Thecla for her being prone to temptation. This reaction, whether intended by the author or not, shows Paul lacks what Karen King described as spiritual maturity, leaving Paul like Peter, a figure holding on to patrilineal power alone. Paul even abandons the tropes of romantic drama when he quickly claims to have never met Thecla and abandons her for a second time. The purposeful absence of Paul for the majority of a work titled after him seems inconsistent with his earlier characterization. Goodspeed argues this is because promoting celibacy was not the only goal of the author but also to defend Paul from Ebonite claims of him being overly attached to his female followers.¹⁸ Though if that was truly the case the early romanticism of him in Thecla's

¹⁷ Acts of Paul and Thecla

¹⁸ Goodspeed 186

eyes makes even less sense and would lead to more accusations. Rather, I think Paul's depiction is twofold, both to tell the story of a woman who fell in love with Christianity as a concept before being exposed to the problem of sexism within its young hierarchy, as well as to introduce Goodspeed's third goal of the piece; Paul as a mentor figure needs to be removed from the narrative so that it may properly portray a women's ability to preach and baptize.

Regardless as to why, Paul leaves denying even knowing Thecla when a Syrian Magistrate attempts to bribe him for her hand in marriage. This leads to the magistrate assaulting her in the street. Thecla stops him by ripping his coat and tearing the crown off his head to publicly humiliate him. For this she is sentenced to the beasts.

Thecla goes along with the proceedings but petitions the governor to ensure that her chastity is not attacked, likely fearing that the magistrate would use his power and her imprisonment to try again. Hearing this, a rich widow named Trifina volunteered to house Thecla. Trifina's status as a widow is reminiscent of the rich widows that helped sponsor and house early Christian preachers and were instrumental in the earliest days of the movement as recorded in the Book of Acts and Timothy. Phoebe from Paul's epistle was also likely one. Widows had the wealth, and time to provide for the church as well increased incentive to remarry to both retain property and fulfill the vows of chastity this text emphasizes. This association was especially prominent in 2nd century Asia Minor.¹⁹

We also see a fair bit of resurrection imagery continuing through Trifina. Not only does Thecla take the place of Trifina's deceased daughter, but Thecla then prays for said daughter. Thus Trifina's daughter is reborn in both heaven thanks to Thecla's prayers, but also on earth

¹⁹ Cult of Thecla 17-18

through her. Trifina even dies of shock during Thecla's execution, which saves Thecla as Trifina is related to the emperor, and upon her death the governor fears continuing in case he invokes any more wrath. Trifina quickly resuscitates not long later after Thecla's baptism, and the narrative reads as if she had only fainted but it said she was fully dead. This makes Trifina a Jesus figure in the story with her death and resurrection being crucial to Thecla's safety. But she was not alone. During the trial all women in the city seemed to be on Thecla's side, including the animals.

When Thecla is thrown to the beasts, one lioness refuses to attack her. Instead it cuts down a female bear and a male lion owned by the magistrate that assaulted her before the lion itself died. This could symbolize Christian women being able to overcome paganism of other people but that it's ultimately doomed unless both Christian men and women work together. The message of women helping women becomes increasingly obvious as the women in the crowd continue to cheer Thecla on and even throw spikes and perfume to confuse what animals are left. In the confusion caused by both this and Trifina's death, Thecla is able to escape into a pit of man-eating sea-cows in order to at least baptize herself before her death. While the women in the audience fear for her safety in a pool of such dangerous aquatic herbivores, a divine flash of lightning and fire kills them all allowing Thecla to complete her baptism.

Thecla survives her ordeal and even preaches to the crowd thusly gathered, professing her belief in the power of Christ. But unlike Paul's earlier proselytizing, which focused strictly on what people need to do in order to reach salvation, Thecla's speech focuses on belief itself and God's willingness to take in everyone. She says, "He is a refuge to those who are in distress, a

support to the afflicted, a hope and defense to those who are hopeless.” (Thecla 9)²⁰ This causes the women to all cheer and even the governor recognizes Thecla as servant of God, before allowing her to go home with Trifina.

Unlike The Gospel of Mary, “The Acts of Saint Paul and Saint Thecla” were generally well received and even popular for her time. She had a large temple dedicated to her in Seleucia the ruins of which can be studied to this day. She’s mentioned as a patron saint in several other shrines despite having no bodily relics (if the text is to be believed she sank into a passage way in stone upon old age, leaving only a veil behind.) Her text was transcribed and known in Asia Minor, Italy, Gaul, Germania, North Africa, Armenia, and Palestine. Thecla even appears as a relatively popular name in 5th and 6th century Egypt during the height of her celebrity.²¹ However Thecla was not without her controversy. Tertullian’s objection to the piece’s legitimacy struck hard and was clearly directed its attack on the women’s right to preach and baptize. Some Coptic versions of the text even exclude these aspects entirely.

Celibacy and Purity

Even adopters of the Thecla’s teaching tend to put less emphasis on her right to baptize herself, the living, and the dead. Instead most of the adherents focus on the emphasis on celibacy consistent throughout the text, though the exact rules are rather obtuse. Celibacy among practitioners was increasingly common. In fact, one pseudo-Athanasian canon even states that each household should have one virgin as her presence will ensure protection for the family living there, and that in place of a daughter a female servant could be made to fill this role instead. By this time in Egypt the act of celibacy went from a counter-cultural show of faith and

²⁰Acts of Paul and Thecla

²¹ Cult of Saint Thecla 202

breaking from the distraction of society, to one of those obligations largely meant to control women. Anathanasius himself discouraged women from leaving the home so they wouldn't be tempted, further isolating these virgins. Most tellingly is the double standard found within the Acts of Paul and Thecla itself. In this text's version of Paul's first sermon he gives blessings to different followers that keep pure including, "Blessed are they who had wives, as though they had them not, for they shall be made angels of God." (Thecla 2). In the context of a larger blessing for those who kept their bodies pure, this line suggests that married men may get a free pass and re considered pure regardless of their practice. No such acceptance are made for married women, and Thecla's subsequent rejection of her fiancé upon hearing this sermon indicates none would have been made. That said, Thecla's cult in Seleucia had places for both male and female clergy to live and men are described as receiving miracles from her, so Thecla's wide appeal surpasses just those the women she was originally meant to be a model for.²²

The reason for this intense focus on virginity and sexual purity is stated by multiple sources to be a way of divorcing oneself from both the urges of the flesh and the social obligation that came with it, so they can better focus on God. However, as seen in the practice of household virgins in mid-1st millennium Egypt, virginity quickly became a way to maintain social obligations.²³ And the concerns over the magistrate's attempted rape and the possibility of the crowd seeing her nakedness during the trial suggest that it was not the actual practice of abstaining from sex that concerned ascetics. Rather these practices were primarily motivated by fear of anything to do with female sex tainting women's purity, whether if these acts were sought after or forced on them was irrelevant. By contrast, such taint was not carried by men and this

²² Cult of Saint Thecla 54

²³ Ibid 88

double-standard and fear of women's genitalia still underpins modern notions of virginity and purity found in both religious and secular culture today.

Perpetua

Unlike Thecla whose origins seem to be primarily or wholly literary invention, *The Passion of Saint Perpetua and Felicitas* is a firsthand account of the writer's experience in a Carthagian prison awaiting execution for her Christian beliefs. This makes it unusual as a surviving piece of text written by a woman in the first three centuries CE. It is a diary of twenty-two-year-old Vibia Perpetua who was executed on March 7th, 203 CE in Carthage for being a Christian. Unlike Thecla, Perpetua did not fit the model of either a matronly widow or chaste virgin, as she has an infant child who stays with her in prison for most of it. This is presumably her first child which would not be unusual for the time and her age.²⁴ A letter editor tells us she was nobly married but Perpetua herself makes no mention of a husband, and one never appears in the story.

Unlike Thecla who accepted and forgave her clearly evil mother whom led the charge to burn her, Perpetua actually talks back to her father. She wrote that he vexed her by trying to dissuade her conversion and she gave thanks for his absence. Even so, he is not portrayed simply as an evil pagan but an actual caring person who begged Perpetua not to convert for her own safety. He is said to be the only relation who suffered no joy from her imprisonment, which once again calls into question where the presumptive husband remains in all this. Augustine, later removed some of these comments so that Perpetua never disrespects her father.²⁵

²⁴ B. Shaw 12

²⁵ Ibid 40

In fact, when the church power started coming into its own in the mid-fourth century, an unknown editor decided to condense of Perpetua's Passion into a liturgical *Acta*. By this time many parishioners were already considering Perpetua's account as canonical scripture.²⁶ In order to properly control it the Bishops made the abbreviated *Acta* which simplified moral dilemmas such as the fight with the father and continuously questioned Perpetua's unconventional femininity, even adding a scene where the prisoners are called and questioned again by the proconsul. To the men he asks questions about their faith, making them seem like heroes for defending Christianity. But to the women he asks only about their families, a clear attempt on the editor's part to reduce Perpetua's and Felicia's influence by taking the focus off their faith and on to how they're betraying their families including Perpetua's infant son and Felicitas's unborn child.²⁷

Perpetua asked whoever found her diary to write the account of her death, but they did a bit more than that. The editor adds accounts of other prisoners, including a the hereto unmentioned Felicitas, a slave that was pregnant when captured and gave birth in prison. Why Perpetua didn't mention such a dramatic event could range anywhere from classism, to a fear of writing other's lives for them. Either way is now intrinsically tied to Perpetua's name and they share a feast day together. One other martyr mentioned on that day is Saturus who didn't achieve nearly the same level of renown despite the editor's best efforts. The new script immediately opens with this male martyr having his own dream vision in a much more classic fashion with the martyrs meeting angels. This is often thought to be the editor's invention as it's unlikely he was able to actually hear this account after the fact, and may have been meant to raise another

²⁶ Ibid 35

²⁷ ibid 34

male martyr to Perpetua's status. Either way the editor respects Perpetua's determination and strength in the face of death, recording her piercing gaze that caused guards to look away. Eventually after surviving all the ordeals, Perpetua is set to be executed by a novice gladiator who missed her neck on the first stroke. Badly injured, Perpetua guides the sword, and the editor marvels that perhaps she could not have died if she did not will it.

For the most part, Perpetua's account is a matter-of-fact telling of the events with no dramatic phrasing popular for the time, the main exception being her dreams. Two of them involve praying for her brother who died before he could be baptized. But the third dream has led to far more debate. Two nights before she was set to be executed, Perpetua dreamed that she entered gladiatorial combat with against "a certain ill-favoured Egyptian" she interprets to be the devil. Perpetua is then transformed into a man and defeats him in combat before receiving a branch from a gigantic master of gladiators. Much ink has been shed over the meaning of her gender transformation in the dream. On one hand it may have been no more of a practical transformation than anything else. Only men were allowed in gladiatorial combat so Perpetua became a man to have her fight. On the other, Shaw argues that a Freudian take on the dream meant that Perpetua's transformation into a man releases her and gives her the ability to take down her opponent.²⁸ However, this really leads us back to the original proposition that Perpetua's transformation was just a mental trick to follow the society's gender expectations even in her dreams, and that in her head her gender was ultimately irrelevant to her victory. Indeed even after the transformation the God-Like master of Gladiator refers to her as "daughter".²⁹ Suggesting the transformation was more cosmetic than anything else.

²⁸ *ibid* 29

²⁹ Perpetua (203 CE) *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* trans. Shrewring (London 1931) 10

After the editing of *Acta*, Augustine comments at length about Perpetua's non-conforming to gender roles. We know of three treatises by him, each preached on an anniversary of Perpetua's execution. It's likely that Augustine gave one every year for much of his priesthood but the exact number is hard to pin down. Regardless all seemed bent on reinterpreting for the populace the already widely known account, including at one point the direct message "*Nec Scriptura ipsa canonica est*"³⁰ "This is not cannon scripture". Like the editor, Augustine oscillates in between praising the martyrs for their unshakable faith, but also undermining their accomplishments in trying to say that this is not how he thinks women should act. He explains Perpetua's and Felicitas's unshaking conviction as the result of male souls operating in inherently shameful female bodies. To support this Augustine invokes the temptation of Eve as proof of women's curse coupled with Felicitas's labor in prison to further show they were still being punished, before using Perpetua's dream as further evidence that woman must become a man to beat the devil. One would think he'd also connect this dream to the assertion that Perpetua has a masculine soul but on this topic Augustine further splits hairs by questioning whether she even had a male body in the dream as opposed to the male mind taking on one's likeness. All this while bringing up genitalia with the subtlety of a grandfather meeting a trans person for the first time.³¹ Thus Augustine takes the victory of powerful women away from them to preserve his perceptions and adding insult to injury at the same time.

Conclusion

Out of all the stories presented here, Perpetua came closest to being made canon despite having the least connection to the biblical Jesus. She also had no small amount of direct attacks

³⁰ Shaw 37

³¹ Ibid 39-40

on her to further dissuade her influence and inclusion of the gospel, until modern day where many theologians and most laymen have never heard of Perpetua nor Thecla. Mary of Magdala alone has remained a visible figure in modern Christianity, but has been stripped of her role as an apostle, and instead conflated her with a sinful woman mentioned in Luke, 7. This conflation is largely an attack by Pope Gregory I in 591,³² meant to use the already established matrix of virginal purity to dissuade her influence. This conflation remained popular among the theologians until the 16th century and was not officially corrected by the Catholic Church until 1969. But the effects of this character attack still linger in her popular perception. Even as recently as 2016, The catholic church does not recognize her as gospel in her own right but Mary is instead identified as an “apostle of these apostles.”³³

These attacks and reinterpretations are ancient. The women they’re directed to are even more ancient. And yet they still underpin much of our assumptions about gender and church origins in and outside of Christianity. Many forms of Christianity still don’t allow female ordination, including Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Southern Baptists. All this despite these early exemplars of women leadership that were once considered near canonical. With the discovery of gnostic texts including the Nag Hammadi Library in the past hundred years, we learn more and more each day about the chaotic nature of the early church and the powerful role of women in it. This is pushing us to brink of a new reformation, and why shouldn’t it? Protestant groups are yet to truly realize just how judicial the Catholic church was in shaping the standards for the rest of Christianity, to follow. Martin Luther saw what they added but not what they hid. So let’s bring these texts to the forefront to inspire a new generation of women to

³² Lidija, Novakovic “Frequently asked Questions about Mary Magdelene” (Summer 2019 CBE international)

³³ Novakovac Q4

engage with the work and feel like they can make a difference in a world too ready to ignore them. As well as a generation of men or others who can carry Jesus's message of universal love, consistent with the platforms where it's preached. This goals for both inside the church and outside of it.

Two months ago, I had someone online tell that he was Catholic and therefore "believed in order and tradition." This was in reference to Francoist Spain which banned women from most job opportunities, and even the right to testify in court. Belief systems shape the attitudes and treatment of fellow human beings from the personal to the political level. It doesn't matter if the person doesn't follow the leading religion or there is none. It still shapes society on a fundamental level. Therefore religious leaders are in a perfect position to make sure to reshape this society away from hypocritical stances and towards a true ideal. And the only way we can do this is by including everyone. Plato said, "A society that does not educate it's wisdom is like a prize fighter who only trains one arm." Everyone needs to be included in these discussions, and everyone needs to be listening to each other.

But most of all, more than the power of faith, I believe in the power of stories. True stories, with verifiable sources to prove this can happen, like Perpetua and Felicitas. Exaggerated dramatic stories that grasp people's attention and inspire them, like Thecla. And prominent stories that everyone can recognize and attach to even they've been shaped into something else, like Mary. It is through these stories that we see the powerful women not afraid to stand-up to a world against them. We need more leaders like these women.

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