

A novel about a woman disciple of Paul

The Acts of Thecla

Brendan McConvery C.S.S.R.

The *Acts of Thecla* is the title given to a lengthy section of the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*. The work exists in several ancient versions including Greek, Latin, Coptic, Ethiopic, Syriac, and Armenian. It is not possible to date the *Acts of Paul* with any certainty. The earliest reference to it may be in Tertullian's second-century treatise on baptism. Third- and fourth-century theologians such as Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome knew of it, but they classified it among the apocryphal writings—among those books that circulated within certain circles or localities of the early Church but were not part of sacred Scripture.

The Story

The *Acts of Thecla* recount the adventures of a young woman of marriageable age whom Paul converted shortly after his arrival at Iconium in Asia Minor. Thecla, the daughter of Theoclia and betrothed to Thamyris, listens to Paul's preaching from the window of her house and is so fascinated by the message that she cannot tear herself away. Her mother warns Thamyris of the change that has come over her daughter. Thecla ignores the appeals of both and goes on listening to Paul. With the help of information gleaned from Demas and Hermogenes, two men who accompanied Paul on his travels to Iconium, Thamyris denounces Paul to the governor. The apostle is arrested and put in prison on a charge of making virgins averse to marriage. Thecla visits him by night in his prison, but her family and Thamyris follow her. Paul is eventually expelled while Thecla is condemned to be burned. She scans the crowd looking for Paul, but instead Christ himself briefly appears to comfort her in the form of Paul. She prepares to meet her fate on the pyre, but a great rain storm extinguishes the flames.

Paul, who has taken refuge with Onesiphorus and his family in a tomb, prays for Thecla. She manages to find them, but Paul refuses her request for immediate baptism, agreeing only to take her with them on his jour-

ney to Antioch. There she receives yet another proposal for marriage from an influential citizen named Alexander. He first addresses his request to Paul, who disclaims any responsibility for her. As she passes along the street one day, Alexander attempts to embrace her. Thecla defends herself, knocking off his crown and exposes him to the ridicule of the crowd. For this, he reports her to the governor, and she is again condemned to death. This time she is to be savaged by wild animals in the amphitheatre.

Queen Tryphene, who has lost her only daughter, is won over by Thecla, and her dead daughter appears to the queen in a dream advising her to adopt the girl. Thecla is eventually thrown into the arena, but a lioness defends her. When the lioness is killed, Thecla, fearing that she might die without baptism, throws herself into the seal pond with the words, "In the name of Jesus, I baptize myself on my last day." A flash of lightning kills the seals, and the women in the audience now come in on Thecla's side, hypnotizing the animals with heady perfumes, which they throw to her in the arena.

The governor spares Thecla's life, and she promptly begins her career as a missionary by instructing Queen Tryphene and the women of her household. She resumes her quest for Paul, finding him at Myra. He authorizes her to return to Iconium and to teach the Word of God. Thamyris is dead by now, but Thecla preaches the Gospel to her mother. Thecla's adventures bring her at length to Seleucia where "she enlightened many by the Word of God" before her death.

The Literary Form

There has been something of a resurgence of interest in the apocrypha. Once considered suspect and on the margin of early Christian literature, they were the preserve of specialists in ancient texts and languages. There is a growing awareness today that these texts may be less further from the center than was originally believed. That is not to say that one can regard the *Acts of Thecla* as containing historically reliable information about the life and ministry of Paul. It is too much of an imaginative creation for that.

The apocryphal writings are so distinct in style from the theological writings of the early Christian writers that they must be regarded as a form of popular literature. It is their popular nature that makes them invaluable as a witness to the form and texture of the popular religion of the period. Quite apart from how we judge their stylistic and literary qualities, their widespread diffusion attests to their popularity in their own day. Popular writings express, in a very direct way, some principal values that animated early Christian communities.

A useful starting point in a study of the *Acts of Thecla* might be a rapid survey of some of its merits as entertaining literature. We might call it

the early Christian equivalent of the soap opera. It is a story in which a young woman is the heroine. Like much literature involving young women, it plays on the motif of finding a suitable husband or rejecting one in opposition to family or friends who deem the prospective suitor to be highly eligible. Thecla's story also plays on the theme of exposure to danger and rescue, with suspense generated between the two. Twice Thecla's life is imperiled by fire and wild animals, one more gripping than the other.

*Popular writings express,
in a very direct way,
some principal values
that animated early Christian communities.*

The Characters

Characterization in popular literature is seldom subtle: it depends on more or less instantly recognizable stock types. This is the case here. The heroes are Thecla and the better known Paul, who is merely a foil for Thecla. Her attractiveness naturally marks her out. The cast of characters includes such stock figures as the jealous suitor (Thamyris), the mother whose thwarted ambition turns to destructive hatred (Theoclia), the treacherous friends (Demas and Hermogenes), the strict but in the end, just ruler, the kindly rich protectress (Queen Tryphene), and for good measure, the noble animal (the lioness).

The elements of suspense and rescue come from the supernatural interventions in the form of a sudden rain storm to extinguish the fire, the fierce lioness miraculously turned into a protector, and the overcoming of the beasts by the scent of the women's perfume.

The Social Function

Ancient fiction was conscious of its didactic or moral purpose. Its twin goals were "to instruct and to delight." Popular fiction, including the television soap, is sometimes even more conscious of its moral purpose than "high art" since its popularity depends on reinforcing the familiar moral world of its readers, even if only through the simple device of rewarding goodness and punishing wrong. When popular fiction is pressed into the service of religion, it champions the values of the religious world it mirrors still more vigorously. It is not difficult to see a range of edifying intentions in the *Acts of Thecla*.

There is a strongly ascetic tinge to the moral message of the apocrypha. The dominant motif in this story is the rescue from death of the innocent protagonist by divine intervention. This is a common theme in Jewish and early Christian literature. The divine rescues emphasize the extraordinary: they take place just in time, and through miraculous interventions of divine power. The *Acts of Thecla* vindicate the God of the Christians.

Thecla's virginity is the second major theme. Virginity endangered is a common theme in the acts of the martyrs. Here it is the Christian ideal of virginity propounded by Paul that rivets Thecla's attention to his preaching. Paul's sermon is essentially praise of the Christian moral or ascetical life presented in a series of thirteen beatitudes. While several other virtues are singled out for praise, it is the motif of virginity that predominates: "Blessed are those who have kept the flesh chaste . . . the continent . . . blessed are the bodies of virgins for they shall be well pleasing to God and shall not lose the reward of their chastity." Thecla's rejection of two suitors and their jealous desire for vindication are common themes in literature of this nature, as her request that she might remain pure until it was time for her to be brought to the wild beasts.

The third major theme shows Thecla as a disciple of Paul and an early Christian missionary. She first seeks out Paul when he is in prison and bribes the guard to allow her to visit him, where her family and suitor find her "chained to him by affection." On catching up with Paul after her first escape, Thecla offers to cut off her hair as a sign of consecration and to follow him wherever he goes. After her second brush with death, she seeks out Paul again, disguising herself as a man. Paul finally commissions her as a missionary. Among her first converts are Queen Tryphene and her mother. The theme of Thecla as missionary was softened by the later additions that transformed her into a model ascetic. This probably suggests an important shift in how the early Church construed the role of women.

Thecla from a Woman's Perspective

One of the earliest clues we have to the possibility that Thecla was read and used by certain circles within the Church as a defense of women's claim to the right to exercise ministry is to be found in Tertullian's treatise on baptism. In answer to the challenge that women performed baptisms and that their justification for doing so was the example of Thecla, he replied:

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

of love for Paul, he resigned. For how credible will it seem that Paul gave a woman the power of teaching and baptizing when he prohibited a woman from learning? He said, "Let them ask their husbands at home."

(*De Baptismo* 1:17)

If the spurious writing to which Tertullian refers here is the *Acts of Thecla*, then we have some very precious information in this paragraph. First, it helps date Thecla. It must have been written in Asia during the second century and by someone known who acknowledged authorship, possibly the compiler of the *Acts of Paul*. Second, it points to the fact that the example of Thecla was being invoked in some circles that wished to see the baptismal and preaching ministry of women acknowledged.

The desire to combat a more liberal view of Paul implicit in Thecla may have prompted the composition of the pastoral letters with their advice to "have nothing to do with godless and silly myths. Train yourself in godliness" (1 Tim 4:7). The reference is so vague, however, that it is impossible to argue conclusively either way, but it opens up the interesting suggestion that alongside the impulse in the pastoral letters to render the Pauline tradition respectable and to reassert patriarchal values regarding the place of women, there was another trend that kept alive stories of women whom Paul authorized to minister as independent missionaries.

Thecla Today

Adolf von Harnack has compared the modern historian's research on the early Church to someone looking down a dark well and finding his or her own face reflected there. It is possible that much of our engagement with the apocrypha will reflect the issues that moved the Church at the end of the twentieth century more accurately than it will reveal those by which believers lived in the second or third. This may caution some who attempt to interpret the *Acts of Thecla* as a support for women's ministerial role in the early Church. Christianity in the first three centuries is still largely an unknown territory, and New Testament study needs to explore more fully the kind of community and society in which its writings were assembled and transmitted as canon. If the newly awakened interest in the apocrypha goes even some distance toward encouraging us to probe more deeply into the hidden vitality of popular Christianity, it has much to teach us.

Brendan McConvery C.S.S.R. is a native of Belfast and a member of the Irish Province of the Redemptorists. He studied at the Pontifical Biblical Institute and the École Biblique. He teaches at both the Holy Ghost Missionary College (Dublin) and Saint Patrick's College (Maynooth).