

Complicating Discrete Proto-Orthodoxy with the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

Tim Olson

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the category of proto-orthodoxy by considering the scholarly debate surrounding the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The lack of consensus as to whether the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* should be considered a proto-orthodox text not only illustrates problems with the category, but it also invites an analysis of the text that shelves questions about its categorical status and prioritizes *how* the text uses the example of Thecla to make Pauline memory meaningful for a new audience. By critiquing the major scholarly attempts to classify the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and proposing an alternative way to analyze the text, this paper argues that the construction of “proto-orthodoxy” as a discrete category inhibits our ability to analyze texts on their own terms and distorts our view of early Christian history.

Introduction

The study of early Christianity has long suffered from a fixation with categories. The temptation is understandable: when faced with such a diverse array of Christian texts—many of which appear to be in stark disagreement with each other—the desire to sort these texts into discrete groups seems natural. The problem with many of these categories, however, is that they have been used inconsistently and have lost their edge. While the limitations of categories like “heresy” and “Gnosticism” have received considerable scholarly attention, “proto-orthodoxy”—a term used to describe the Christian group that eventually won imperial sponsorship in the fourth century—continues to be used more or less as usual.¹ I argue that many of the criticisms that have been rightly leveled at “Gnosticism” and “heresy” should also be applied to proto-orthodoxy. Since proto-orthodoxy is a category constructed by scholars, it seems obvious that it should serve some analytical purpose. The continued use of proto-orthodoxy can only be justified if it does something useful for us. There has been a steady increase in awareness that the categories of Gnosticism and heresy confuse analysis more than they clarify anything, but can the same be said for proto-orthodoxy? By considering the scholarly debate that surrounds the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*ActPlThl*), I argue that analyzing the text with one eye turned to a

¹ The two most prominent attempts to retire “Gnosticism” have been Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996) and Karen L King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2003). Notable works that continue to use “proto-orthodoxy” include Bart D Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005); Benjamin L White, *Remembering Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). The term is also ubiquitous in introductory textbooks to the New Testament and Christian Origins: e.g., Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002); Bart D Ehrman, *The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

stable and discrete “proto-orthodoxy” only impairs our ability to analyze the text on its own terms.

While a full deconstruction of proto-orthodoxy is well beyond the scope of this project, the anxiety that surrounds attempts to classify and contextualize the *ActPlThl* illustrates many of the broader problems with the proto-orthodox category. Most of the attention paid to the *ActPlThl* focuses on the social context behind the production of the Thecla story and its relationship to the canonical Pastoral Epistles (PE). While virtually all scholars confidently locate the PE in the context of proto-orthodoxy or “the Great Church,” the *ActPlThl* does not fit neatly within those boundaries, nor does it align with “heretical” viewpoints found in other second-century texts.² As a result, there have been various attempts to contextualize the *ActPlThl*, especially with respect to its relationship to the PE and, by extension, proto-orthodoxy. Our search to find a comfortable home for the *ActPlThl* reveals that the rigid categories used to imagine pre-Constantinian Christianity inhibit our ability to accommodate the extent and nuance of early Christian textual diversity. Much of the scholarly debate surrounding the *ActPlThl*, especially vis-à-vis the Pastorals, rests on the assumption that there are discrete categories—proto-orthodoxy, heresy, or a women-led egalitarian movement—that the *ActPlThl* can be included in or excluded from.

Rather than trying to directly reconstruct the *Sitz im Leben* behind the Thecla text, I argue that a more productive way to analyze the *ActPlThl* is to consider how the text uses the example of Thecla to demonstrate the transformative potential of Paul’s message of *enkrateia*. This

² The Pastoral Epistles are linked to proto-orthodoxy due to 1) their eventual canonical status, 2) their shared viewpoints with contemporaneous “proto-orthodox” and later “orthodox” writers, and 3) their frequent invocation by the heresiologists, most notably Irenaeus, who leverages the Pastoral image of Paul as heresy fighter against second century “heretics.”

approach takes into consideration the important contributions of gender studies and tradition while consciously avoiding any attempt to force the text into an already-established category of second-century Christianity.

This thesis consists of four parts. The first two sections offer brief introductions to proto-orthodoxy and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Section three sketches the major scholarly attempts to reconstruct the *Sitz im Leben* of the Thecla story. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will focus on three of the most prominent and illustrative examples. Section four outlines one possible method of analyzing the text that prioritizes what the text *does* rather than what it *is*. By incorporating theoretical approaches to tradition and ancient masculinity, I argue that *Acts of Paul and Thecla* uses Thecla's transformation into a manly figure to make Pauline memory meaningful for a new audience: Christians with unmasculine bodies who would otherwise be excluded from positions of leadership.

1. The Emergence of the Proto-Orthodox Category

The emergence of the proto-orthodox category is intimately connected to the various models that have been used to imagine and reconstruct pre-Constantinian Christianity. More precisely, the popularity of “proto-orthodox” as a descriptive term for a contingent of early Christians is a by-product of the shift from the Irenaean model to the now-dominant “varieties of early Christianity” model.

Irenaeus, who aimed to refute the teachings of his “heretical” opponents, portrayed Christian history as a unified, stable orthodoxy under constant assault from various false teachers. While orthodoxy and heresy could both be traced to a single origin—Jesus for the orthodox, Simon Magus for the heretics—orthodoxy was prior and stable, while heresy was derivative and constantly mutating.³ In his attempts to secure the borders of orthodoxy, Irenaeus insisted that all manifestations of the Great Church were unified in belief:

“As I have already observed, the [Great] Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. ... For the churches which have been planted in Germany *do not believe or hand down anything different*, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world.”⁴

The Irenaean model was refined by Eusebius (c.265-340), who further developed and standardized Irenaeus’s model with imperial support. The Irenaean/Eusebian model would represent the dominant mode of imagining second century Christianity until the middle of the

³ David Brakke, *The Gnostics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010), 4.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.10.1. Italics mine. The bracketed inclusion of “Great” is an editorial addition to distinguish Irenaeus’s use of the singular “Church” from the “churches” that are contained within it. This is typically considered the first extant reference to the “Great Church.”

twentieth century, when scholars began to cast doubt on the heresiological portrait of early Christian history. Walter Bauer's landmark *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (1934) marked a major shift in the way scholars understood early Christian development.⁵ Against the Irenaean/Eusebian model, which insisted on the priority and primacy of orthodoxy in all places, Bauer argued that heresy was, in fact, prior to orthodoxy everywhere outside of Rome. A decade later, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices (1945) added to the growing suspicion of the once-dominant Irenaean model. Previously unavailable writings from the exact groups Irenaeus sought to denounce showed that the heresiologist was not always accurate or reliable in his polemical descriptions, which forced scholars to reimagine the Early Christian landscape.

The Irenaean model has been gradually replaced by the “varieties of early Christianity” model, sometimes alternatively represented through the metaphors of warfare or a horse race. In this view, there was never a single Christianity, but multiple discrete Christian groups that battled for dominance. Races and wars, of course, must have their winners and losers. In this model, the form of Christianity that eventually won by earning imperial sponsorship in the fourth century is retroactively referred to as “proto-orthodox” in the pre-Constantinian period.⁶ As the most prominent advocate of this model puts it, “The historical significance of the *victory* of proto-orthodox Christianity can scarcely be overstated. The form of Christianity that emerged from the conflicts of the second and third centuries was destined to become the religion of the

⁵ Walter Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen 1934). Translated into English in 1971 as *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

⁶ Brakke, 7.

Roman Empire.”⁷ Once it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, proto-orthodoxy became orthodoxy, and it was finally able to leverage imperial power to silence its opponents. Many scholars and theologians have considered the eventual victory of proto-orthodoxy as an inevitable compromise between the dual exaggerations of Judaism and Gnosticism—a happy medium—as one textbook definition of the term demonstrates:

The type of Christianity that ultimately became predominant was neither Judaic nor Gnostic. It developed out of Pauline, Johannine, and related forms of Christianity and consisted primarily of Gentiles. Christians of this type regarded their own perspective as orthodoxy (correct belief), while rejecting other perspectives as heresy (false doctrine). They also called their church “catholic,” meaning “universal.” Scholars call this type of early Christianity “Proto-Orthodoxy” or “early Catholicism,” because it was the forerunner of the types of Christianity that developed later, known as Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The Proto-Orthodox considered both Judaic Christianity and Gnostic Christianity as heresy and ultimately prevailed against both.⁸

While the “varieties of early Christianity” model is a significant improvement over the Irenaean model, it is not without limitations. David Brakke, who uses the metaphor of a horse race to describe this model, points out its most problematic feature: “horses are—thank goodness—discrete bounded entities, clearly distinct from one another. Racing horses do not really change throughout their competition with one another.”⁹ Unlike racing horses, religious groups are rarely so discrete, and their boundaries rarely so defined, especially in the early stages of their development. Imagining proto-orthodoxy—or any other early Christian group—as a single horse in a race implies the existence of rigid boundaries that separate these groups. The

⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 247. Italics mine.

⁸ Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 423.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

evidence, as an analysis of the *ActPlThl* reveals, suggests a much higher level of hybridity, interaction, and borrowing between groups.

As we will see, the limitations of the horse-race model become even more clear when we try to apply the model to particular texts. In the case of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, some scholars argue that the text was riding an egalitarian horse, some argue it was riding an Encratite horse, while others suggest that it was clearly riding the proto-orthodox horse. Of course, it could not have been riding all three, so how can we make sense of this disparity? This disagreement cannot simply be solved by selecting one horse and rejecting the others, nor can it be solved by introducing a new horse into the race. The problem is not with the horses, but with the model.

2. *The Acts of Paul (and Thecla)*

To understand how the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* complicates proto-orthodoxy, it is useful to have some background information on the text. The Thecla story seems to have circulated within the *Acts of Paul (APL)*, a second-century collection of texts extant in Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and Latin manuscripts that has been the center of a heated scholarly debate regarding both the production of the text and what it can tell us about the social world of second-century Christianity. The manuscript evidence suggests that the *APL* typically circulated with four component parts: The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the pseudepigraphic *Epistle of the Corinthians to Paul*, the *Third Epistle to the Corinthians*, and an account of Paul's martyrdom at the hands of Nero.¹⁰ While the latter three components of the text have attracted some attention, the vast majority of scholarship on the *APL* has focused on the popular and well attested Thecla episode.

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* follows the journey of a young woman who is engaged to Thamyris, a man of high civil status in the city of Iconium. On the day before her wedding, Thecla is sitting in the window of her house listening to Paul's message on chastity and resurrection (*ActPlThl* 7). Instead of marrying Thamyris, Thecla sits in the window for three days listening to the Apostle, inciting the rage of her fiancé and her mother, Theoclia. After Thamyris fails to convince Thecla to marry him, he and Theoclia conspire to have Paul arrested and Thecla burned at the stake. Thecla is brought into the theater, stripped of her clothes, and tied to the stake, but a hailstorm extinguishes the fire. She then returns to Paul and promises to follow him if he agrees to baptize her. Still unsure of her commitment, Paul tells her to "have patience" to

¹⁰ Richard I Pervo, *The Making of Paul* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2010), 157.

“receive the seal in Christ” (*ActPlThl* 24). Thecla joins Paul on the road to Antioch, but when they enter the city, the magistrate Alexander tries to force himself on Thecla, who responds by tearing his coat and throwing his crown on the ground (*ActPlThl* 26). The disgraced Alexander condemns Thecla to be thrown to the beasts, but she is protected by a lioness long enough to be baptized by throwing herself in a pool of water (*ActPlThl* 28). Thecla once again returns to Paul, who finally commissions her to “Go and teach the word of God” (*ActPlThl* 41).

Dating and authorship are less problematic for the *ActPlThl* than the Pastoral Epistles (PE). Unlike the canonical PE, which claims to be written by the Apostle Paul, the *ActPlThl* makes no explicit claim of apostolic authorship to be accepted or rejected.¹¹ Due to Tertullian’s disapproval of a group of writings that “wrongly go under Paul’s name,” which “claim Thecla’s example as a licence for women’s teaching and baptizing,” we can reasonably conclude that the *ActPlThl* is a product of the second-century (*De Baptismo* 42). Tertullian’s knowledge of the text suggests at the very least that the Thecla story was circulating rather broadly in North Africa by the beginning of the third century.¹² Most scholars agree that the text should be dated to the latter half of the second century—probably between 160 and 190 C.E.—but an important minority suggests that the text relies on an earlier stratum of oral tradition that stretches back to the first

¹¹Ehrman emphasizes the crucial distinction between fabrication and forgery. Tertullian does not accuse the presbyter of forging the text, but of fabricating it. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery*, 1st ed. (US: Oxford University Press, 2012), 379.

¹²James W. Aageson, *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2008), 194. It is worth noting that some scholars debate whether the text Tertullian is concerned with is the same text as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, since there is some ambiguity whether or not Thecla baptizes anyone in the *ActPlThl*.

century.¹³ On the question of authorship, our only external evidence comes from Tertullian, who claims that the text was composed by a presbyter in Asia who resigned in disgrace after confessing to have written the text.¹⁴ Though many accept Tertullian's attribution—either blindly or cautiously—it is difficult to escape the suspicion that Tertullian would have ample reason to fabricate this detail; a presbyter who was disgracefully removed from office far away from North Africa would serve Tertullian's polemical agenda and be difficult for his readers to confirm.¹⁵

¹³ See Stevan L Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1980) and Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983). Both Davies and MacDonald affirm a second century date for the *API*, but both ascribe a first century origin to a hypothetical oral layer behind the Thecla story, and Davies suggests that the text was authored by women. For dating the *API*, see Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 156-157.

¹⁴ Hilhorst clarifies that the text suggests that the presbyter resigned in disgrace and under pressure, but not that he was removed from office as is commonly supposed. Anthony Hilhorst, "Tertullian on the Acts of Paul," In *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. Jan Bremmer (Kampen: Pharos, 1996), 150-163.

¹⁵ Ross S. Kraemer, "Thecla," ed. Benjamin H. Dunning, *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 487.

3. Attempts to Classify the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

3.1: The Pauline Captivity Narrative

The last four decades of scholarship on the *ActPlThl* have been dominated by attempts to reconstruct the community and context behind the Thecla story. To make sense of the important recent work on the *ActPlThl*, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of a broader shift in Pauline studies that preceded that work: the transition from Pauline Captivity to Pauline Fragmentation.¹⁶

The long persistence of the Pauline Captivity narrative can be traced back to Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860). Though many of his major contributions to the field have been discredited, Baur's major project—excavating a “real Paul” from encrusted layers of tradition—has not been abandoned. Through his dialectical reading of Paul's letters, Baur sorted early Christians into two opposing groups: the Jewish faction under Peter and James and the Gentile faction under Paul. With this division in mind, he assessed the authenticity of Paul's letters by considering which of the letters were primarily concerned with the distinction between Jews and Gentiles. His *Hauptbriefe* of 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans became the Archimedean point from which he launched his historical inquiry. Unsurprisingly, the Paul he uncovered looked—like Baur—remarkably Lutheran and Hegelian. Through his dialectical lens, Baur found a Paul whose chief concern was the opposition between “Judaism and Christianity,”

¹⁶ The fullest discussion of this transition is found in Benjamin L. White's *Remembering Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 20-69.

which were “related to each other as the old and the new *diatheke* [covenant]; the old one is antiquated and extinct, but the new one is bright and luminous.”¹⁷

Among Baur’s many contributions to Pauline studies was his understanding of Pauline reception in the second century. By establishing his *Hauptbriefe*, other “Pauls” could be measured against Baur’s “real” Paul; if it did not match, it was clearly a second-class “Paul of tradition.”¹⁸ This framework paved the way for Baur’s Captivity Narrative, which would form the backdrop for almost 150 years of scholarship on Paul in the second century. Based on a limited reading of second century sources, Baur concluded that “heretical” Christians—most notably Gnostics and Marcionites—latched onto Paul as *their* Apostle, while “orthodox” Christian groups were forced to develop in directions that were “either anti-Pauline or had at least corrupted Paul’s theology.”¹⁹ In Baur’s view, it was not until the end of the second century—with the pseudonymous production of the Pastoral Epistles and the wide circulation of Acts—that Irenaeus could reclaim Paul as firmly in-line with the “orthodox” position.²⁰

More than a century later, Hans Von Campenhausen upheld a more refined version of Baur’s Captivity Narrative: “The Pauline Epistles could not be abandoned—but if they were to be preserved they had to be balanced with needs and ideas of a wholly different kind. It is, in my view, indisputable that it was at this time and with this intention that the Pastoral Epistles must

¹⁷ Ferdinand Christian Baur, “Hebraists, Hellenists, and Catholics,” in *The Writings of St. Paul*, edited by Wayne A. Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2007).

¹⁸ White, 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁰ Baur considered the PE to be products of the mid-second century whose primary concerns were the refutation of gnostic and Marcionite viewpoints.

have been composed.”²¹ The dominance of the Captivity Narrative was based almost exclusively on Pauline “silence” in Justin Martyr, Papias and Hegesippus—three prominent “proto-orthodox” writers in the early and mid-second century.²² Despite the lack of positive evidence for a proto-orthodox rejection of Paul, the long standing Captivity Narrative was not meaningfully challenged until 1979 when, in a three-year span, four book-length publications—two in English, two in German—attempted to topple it.²³ David K. Rensberger’s 1981 dissertation, *As the Apostle Teaches: The Development of the Use of Paul’s Letters in Second Century Christianity* refuted many of the foundational assumptions of the Captivity Narrative. Rensberger emphasized two points, the first and most obvious being the lack of real evidence to suggest any kind of antipathy towards Paul in “proto-orthodox” circles: “there is nothing positive to suggest hostility to Paul.... No positive evidence exists that gnostic and Marcionite use of Paul provoked a widespread reaction to him.”²⁴ These “proto-orthodox” writers certainly opposed the *teachings* of the gnostics and Marcionites, but not the *authorities* they invoked. As Rensberger puts it, “Any response to gnostic or Marcionite exegesis of the epistles is made in the form of counterexegesis, never of repudiation.”²⁵ Donald Penny’s 1979

²¹ Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 181.

²² White, 29.

²³ While the German publications will not be discussed here, it is worth acknowledging the immense importance of Andreas Lindemann, who was the first to challenge the Pauline Captivity narrative by showing how Paul continued to be revered by certain “proto-orthodox” groups in the second century and was rejected or ignored by some “gnostic” groups. Andreas Lindemann, *Paulus im ältesten Christentum: Das Bild des Apostels und die Rezeption der paulinischen Theologie in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Marcion*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 58. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1979. See also Ernst Dassmann, *Der Stachel im Fleisch: Paulus in der frühchristlichen Literatur vis Irenäus*. (Münster: Aschendorff, 1979). For a discussion of Lindemann and Dassmann’s contributions to the disruption of the Captivity Narrative, see White, 44.

²⁴ David K. Rensberger, “The Use of Paul’s Letters in Second Century Christianity.” In Meeks *The Writings of St. Paul* 343-344.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 344.

dissertation, “The Pseudo-Pauline letters of the First Two Centuries” provided the language to accompany a turning point in Pauline studies: since the evidence could no longer support the dominant Captivity Narrative, Penny proposed a counternarrative of “Pauline Fragmentation” whereby Paul’s legacy developed along various trajectories from the outset. Though there was tension between these trajectories, none “held greater claim to preserving the ‘genuine Paul’ than the others.”²⁶

3.2: Divergent Pauline Trajectories

With the help of Lindemann, Dassmann, Rensberger, and Penny, crucial space was opened for projects that could explore divergent Pauline legacies throughout the second century without the narrow constraints imposed by the Captivity Narrative. When paired with the emerging “horse-race” model of early Christian development, scholars began to consider how rival Christian groups developed images of Paul that seemed sharply at odds with one another. One of the most complex and intriguing extensions of the Pauline legacy is the popular Thecla story, which describes Paul as a charismatic, itinerant preacher who seems to promote many of the practices that the Paul of the Pastoral Epistles explicitly rejects.

In *The Revolt of the Widows*, Stevan Davies made the first major attempt to reconstruct the context behind the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, arguing that the Apocryphal Acts—a category of early Christian literature detailing the missionizing activities of the surviving eleven disciples and Paul—originated within a community “made up in great part of continent Christian women”

²⁶ White, 48.

and that many of the Apocryphal Acts were, in fact, written by women.²⁷ While Davies's argument for female authorship was met with considerable criticism, his basic context of a second-century women's liberation movement was taken up by Dennis R. MacDonald in his seminal 1983 book, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*. Working from the recently established framework of Pauline Fragmentation, MacDonald considered two competing strands of the second century Pauline legacy: the Pastoral Epistles and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

As a starting point, MacDonald acknowledged the obvious existence of some literary relationship between the Pastorals and the *ActPIThl*, due to the "large number of parallels" that "cannot be explained as independent testimonies to historical events."²⁸ Prior to MacDonald, the dominant understanding of the relationship was that the author of the *ActPIThl* was familiar with and objected to the image of Paul put forth by the Pastoral Epistles, which were already in wide circulation by the time the *ActPIThl* was written. Against this dominant view, MacDonald argued that even though the Thecla text was later than the Pastorals, the *story*—kept alive by oral transmission—was earlier.²⁹ The oral traditions behind the *ActPIThl*, MacDonald claimed, were

²⁷ Davies, 95. The five surviving Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles are attributed to John, Paul, Peter, Andrew, and Thomas, and they are typically dated to the late second or early third centuries.

²⁸ Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 62.

²⁹ Ibid. One of MacDonald's problems with the dominant view—that the *ActPIThl* relied on the PE—was that this model could not explain why the parallels are not exact. Though the PE and the *ActPIThl* list many of the same individuals and geographical locations, the details are jumbled. If the Presbyter had a copy of the Pastorals, MacDonald argued, the parallels should be exact. Instead of attributing these differences to the imprecise use of the Pastorals by the Presbyter, MacDonald suggested that they were due simply to the "vagaries of the storytelling process" whereby names and locations could be altered without fundamentally altering the story's "texture or meaning." MacDonald's creative solution has not stood well to criticism. As Bart Ehrman notes, MacDonald's argument exhibits "too narrow an understanding of how literary dependence can work and overlooks an entire range of secondary orality.... [The Presbyter] may just as well—especially in an ancient context—have heard the earlier text read aloud, possibly multiple times, and decided then to respond to its themes." To put it differently, it is not necessary to suppose that the author of the *ActPIThl* had a physical copy of the PE to maintain the conventional literary relationship between the two. The author of the *ActPIThl* might have recalled some of the names and places,

evidence of a second-century community of continent Christian women who promoted female leadership within the church. For MacDonald, the most logical solution was that the Pastoral Epistles were aware of this female liberation movement and were written to discredit “old wives tales,” such as the Thecla story (1 Tim 4:7 NRSV). Though MacDonald’s inversion of the traditional literary dependency model has been largely discredited, his conflict model remains the dominant mode of interpreting the relationship between the PE and the *ActPIThl*.³⁰

The fundamental conclusion of MacDonald’s argument is that the images of Paul in the PE and the *ActPIThl* are not just divergent, but intentionally antithetical. In the *ActPIThl*, Paul is an itinerant preacher who promotes asceticism, discourages marriage, and supports female leadership. In the PE, Paul emphasizes the need for Church order and stability, warns against asceticism, and insists that women—who are only saved through childbearing—must be silent.

While MacDonald’s conflict model has been generally well-received, there have been prominent outliers who argue that there is no significant conflict between the *ActPIThl* and the PE. Peter Dunn’s “The *Acts of Paul* and the Pauline Legacy in the Second Century” represents the strongest opposition to MacDonald’s conflict model. Against the dominant view that the *ActPIThl* was an anti-orthodox portrait of Paul, Dunn argues that the Thecla story is better understood as a proto-orthodox narrative *expansion* that “never crosses the boundary between heresy and the Great Church.”³¹ Dunn objects to MacDonald’s central thesis, arguing that “the

while the specific relationships between individuals and the movements from place to place would have been more difficult to recall. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery*, 383.

³⁰ For a refutation of MacDonald’s model of literary/oral dependence, see Peter Wallace Dunn, *The Acts of Paul and the Pauline Legacy in the Second Century* (Cambridge, 1996). See also Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery* 382-383.

³¹ Dunn, 68.

Sitz im Leben of a feminist liberation movement in the second century falls dismally short of demonstration.”³² Dunn sees the points of difference between the texts as only “superficial” conflicts that crumble under close analysis.³³ He emphasizes that the *ActPlThl* “never explicitly says that Thecla teaches men nor that she baptizes herself or anyone else” and reminds us that Thecla was received by later orthodox leaders with “not indignation but admiration.”³⁴ In the only surviving mention of the Presbyter who apparently authored the *Acts of Paul*, Tertullian does not rebuke the Presbyter with the language of heresy. Instead, the errant Presbyter is described as a misguided, overly ambitious biographer whose primary motivation for writing the text was “love of Paul.”³⁵ In Dunn’s analysis, Tertullian’s chief target in this notorious passage is not the author, nor the text itself, but the people who “use example of Thecla” to allow women to “teach and baptize.”³⁶

Kate Cooper’s *The Virgin and the Bride*, published the same year as Dunn’s dissertation, found a major flaw with all previous scholarship on the *ActPlThl*. For Cooper, the Thecla story was fundamentally not about women. While Thecla features prominently in the story, and though it is tempting to assume that she is the focus of the narrative, Cooper argues that the plot is

³² Ibid., 59.

³³ Ibid., 68; 89-100. Dunn isolates six attitudes shared by the *APL* and the PE, which he considers to be much more significant than the points of difference that MacDonald focuses on. In his own words, “The PE legislate policies by which Christians must live. The *ActPl* gives these policies narrative embodiment, by providing living examples of proper Christian behavior on the one hand, and improper heterodox behavior on the other” Ibid., 100.

³⁴ Ibid., 68. Dunn emphasizes that Tertullian is the single orthodox figure who openly objects to the *ActPlThl*, making him an exception rather than the rule.

³⁵ *De Baptismo Liber* 18.

³⁶ Ibid.

driven by “the rivalry between two men over the allegiance of a woman.”³⁷ According to Cooper, the real conflict in the story is between the apostle and the many men who stand in as symbolic representations of the *polis*. Thecla’s continence, Cooper claims, is nothing more than a “narrative device to propel the conflict” between what the text positions as the right allegiance (the apostle) and the wrong allegiance (the *polis*).³⁸ Though Cooper does not explicitly claim that the text aligns itself with or against proto-orthodoxy, she claims that Paul’s challenge to the household and the *polis* is “not really about women, or even about sexual continence, but about authority and social order.”³⁹ By reducing women to communicative symbols in a conversation between men, Cooper dismisses MacDonald’s context of a women’s liberation movement. Like Dunn, Cooper argues that the role of women in the text is superficial, while the *real* concerns of the text are the same as the Pastoral Epistles: authority and social order.

Virtually every treatment of the *ActPlThl* continues to analyze the text in the light of an emerging orthodoxy. Whether or not the final analysis reveals that the Thecla story is harmonious with the proto-orthodox position, there is an implicit assumption that there *is* something that can be definitively and discretely be identified as proto-orthodoxy. In the scholarship on the Thecla story, proto-orthodoxy has been identified with the PE, which seem to hold as their top priorities the prohibition of female leadership (authority) and the establishment of ecclesial offices (social order). Either the *ActPlThl* are in direct conflict with the PE, and by

³⁷ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1996), 52. While Cooper’s work has been generally well received, many recent scholars have pushed back against her central thesis that the Thecla story is not about women. In particular, Ross S. Kraemer, “Thecla,” ed. Benjamin H. Dunning, *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 485–503. See also Shelley Matthews, “Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (Oct 1, 2001): 39-55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

extension proto-orthodoxy (MacDonald), or there is no significant incompatibility between the two, which relocates the *ActPlThl* to the side of proto-orthodoxy or “The Great Church” (Dunn and Cooper).

There is nothing resembling consensus on the extent to which the *ActPlThl* fits within an emerging orthodoxy. This may seem surprising, but a closer analysis of the prominent themes and concerns of the *ActPlThl* reveals that the Thecla story complicates the discrete boundaries of the proto-orthodox category. The dominant scholarly tactic has been to selectively emphasize the text’s various concerns. MacDonald emphasizes female leadership and background theology to put the text in opposition to proto-orthodoxy. Dunn emphasizes the shared theology between the PE and the *ActPlThl* while minimizing the significance of Thecla’s baptism and teaching to show that it is harmonious with other proto-orthodox writers. Cooper prioritizes authority and social order but claims the text tells us nothing about women, suggesting that the *ActPlThl* is not in tension with proto-orthodoxy, but rather addressing the same concerns as the PE through a different genre and from a different direction. The degree to which the text fits into the proto-orthodox category depends entirely on which threads are accentuated and which are set aside. If *all* of the text’s concerns are taken to be significant, the text cannot be neatly included in nor excluded from the proto-orthodox category. This is not a problem with the text, but with the rigidity of the category.

Unfortunately, more recent approaches to the Thecla story have failed to liberate themselves from the category fixation so prominent in earlier scholarship. Two recent monographs on the Pauline legacy in the second century illustrate the persistence of this temptation. In *The Making of Paul*, Richard Pervo concludes that—despite important differences

between the Paul of the Pastorals and the Paul of the *API* in their attitudes towards women—the *API* is best classified as “relatively orthodox.”⁴⁰ In *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church*, James Aageson claims just the opposite: the PE are exemplars of proto-orthodoxy, but the *API* and PE represent “two significant *polarities*” of the Pauline legacy.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 232.

⁴¹ Aageson, 205. Italics mine.

4. An Alternative Approach to Analyzing the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

In the last two decades of scholarship on the *ActPIThl*, there have been a few attempts to shift the analytical focus away from historical reconstruction and toward representational strategies within the text. If we assess the priorities of the *ActPIThl* without one eye turned to a discrete proto-orthodox category, we will be able to produce a more nuanced and well-rounded analysis of this unique second century text.

While theory on tradition and cultural memory has slowly begun to make its way into some areas of biblical studies, such as historical Jesus scholarship, it remains underutilized in Pauline studies.⁴² Since the *existence* of Pauline traditions in the second century is nothing controversial, it should be surprising that there has been almost no critical evaluation of what it means to say that Paul had become a traditioned figure in the second century.⁴³ Instead, the language of “Pauline tradition” has been used to distance a second-rate image of Paul from a pure, untraditioned “historical Paul.” As Benjamin L. White puts it, “‘tradition’ has been used more often as an ideological weapon than as a carefully deployed concept.”⁴⁴

To reach a fuller understanding of Pauline trajectories in the second century, we should avoid the temptation to evaluate Pauline texts by their distance from the historical Paul. All Pauline traditions emphasize certain characteristics of the historical Paul while diminishing others. While we could keep trying to chip away the non-historical material, a more productive

⁴² E.g. Bart D. Ehrman *Jesus Before the Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

⁴³ Benjamin L. White’s *Remembering Paul* (2014) is the first and only English monograph to apply tradition and memory to the Pauline legacy.

⁴⁴ White, 71.

approach might be to consider *why* and *how* a particular text adjusts its image of Paul (and, in our case, Thecla) to better suit its audience. We should think of tradition as a useful analytical tool rather than a label to be tacked onto certain Pauline texts and images.

Since much of the debate surrounding the *ActPIThl* focuses on what the text can tell us about women in early Christianity, it should be surprising that the application of gender theory to the Thecla text has been surprisingly limited.⁴⁵ While recent scholarship has rightfully problematized “mimetic relationships between text and reality,” we should not resign ourselves to thinking that a text like the *ActPIThl* can tell us nothing about actual Christian women.⁴⁶ By considering how gender is manipulated throughout the Thecla narrative, combined with the well-documented popularity of the text for centuries after its production, we can make reasonable conclusions about how some Christians might have read the Thecla text as an authorization for those with non-masculine bodies to assume positions of leadership within the church.⁴⁷

My own analysis of the *ActPIThl* considers how the text makes Paul’s message meaningful to a new audience—unmasculine Christians who would typically be excluded from positions of authority—by demonstrating the potential of *enkrateia* to transform unmasculine bodies into masculine comportment. Paying attention to how the text manipulates gender throughout the narrative allows us to discern how Thecla’s masculinity increases as she faces and

⁴⁵ Shelly Matthews, “Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (October 1, 2001): 39–55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁷ Against the popular notion that Thecla was only accepted after the story’s “domestication” in orthodox circles, see Susan E. Hylan, “The ‘Domestication’ of Saint Thecla: Characterization of Thecla in the Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (October 1, 2014): 5–21. While the later reception of the Thecla text will not be discussed at length, it is worth mentioning a few pieces of evidence for the text’s popularity: 1.) Its early separation from the larger *Acts of Paul*, 2.) Tertullian’s knowledge of and polemic against the text in North Africa, and 3.) its eventual translation as a separate work into many languages. Edgar Johnson Goodspeed, “The Acts of Paul and Thecla,” *The Biblical World* 17, no. 3 (1901): 185–90.

overcomes trials on her journey from disciple to apostle. This analytical method has the added benefit of bypassing questions about the classification of the text, proto-orthodox or otherwise. The purpose is not to decide what category or context is most appropriate for the text, but rather how the example of Thecla makes Paul relevant.

Despite Cooper's important warning against the straightforward retrieval of a social reality from a text, I disagree with her most notorious claim: the Thecla story is "essentially a conflict *between men*," that is "not really about women, or even about sexual continence, but about authority and social order."⁴⁸ I see no reason why the text must only be about one of those things at the expense of the others. As Ross Kraemer points out, "for a text that is 'really' about men, women are everywhere."⁴⁹ Thecla is effectively adopted by Queen Tryphaena, saved by women in the arena, and even protected by a female lion (*ActPlThl* 27, 35, 38). Sexual continence also performs a crucial role in the text: it is the core of Paul's sermon and the central point of conflict between Paul and the various men that represent the *polis*. If the text is really about the conflict between the apostle and other men, why does Paul disappear for almost a third of the narrative? Only by doing considerable violence to the evidence could we say that the text is not *really* about women or sexual continence.

As a starting point to analyze the Thecla story, we should consider the content of Paul's sermon at the beginning of the text. His sermon consists of thirteen beatitudes, which are prefaced as "God's word concerning continence and resurrection [λόγος θεοῦ περὶ ἐγκρατείας

⁴⁸ Cooper, 55.

⁴⁹ Kraemer, 490.

καὶ ἀναστάσεως]” (*ActPIThl* 5).⁵⁰ Though only three of these beatitudes are directly concerned with chastity, it is clear that Thecla’s attraction to Paul’s message is mostly related to this element of his message: “[Thecla] hearkened night and day unto the word concerning chastity [ἀγνείας] which was spoken by Paul.” (*ActPIThl* 6).⁵¹

In its construction of Paul’s message, the text is in most direct conversation with 1 Corinthians and the Pastoral Epistles, especially 1 and 2 Timothy. Paul’s teaching in the *ActPIThl* restates and extends Paul’s message in 1 Cor 7, in which he instructs “those who have wives [to] be as though they had none” (1 Cor 7:29 NRSV). The Paul of the *ActPIThl* reframes the same instruction to fit the beatitude shape: “Blessed are they that possess their wives as though they had them not, for they shall inherit God” (*ActPIThl* 5). Unlike the insistence of the Pastoral Epistles that women will be “saved through childbearing,” the *ActPIThl* suggests that chastity and continence are the ideals that women should strive for (1 Tim 2:15).

Thecla’s attraction to Paul’s message of *enkrateia* and chastity signals the first stage of her transformation. At the outset, the text’s depiction of Thecla is quite limited: she is described as “a certain virgin” who is “betrothed to a husband” (*ActPIThl* 7). Her initial identity is marked only by her virginal status and impending marital attachment to Thamyris, but Paul’s message of *enkrateia* disrupts that identity. By rejecting her obligation to marry Thamyris, Thecla separates from her socially prescribed identity, but she must face numerous trials in order to transform herself into a disciple and ultimately ascend to the role of apostle.

⁵⁰ Richard Adelbert Lipsius, Konstantin von Tischendorf, and Alfred Max Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, 1st ed. (Leipzig: Mendelsohn, 1891), 235–71.

⁵¹ An alternative translation would be “purity.” The use of ἀγνείας may be another point of connection with the PE. Cf. 1 Tim 4:12 and 1 Tim 5:2.

To appreciate Thecla's ascension to disciple—and ultimately to apostle—it is easier to approach her transformation indirectly by considering how the text shapes masculinity. At issue is not only Thecla's *ascending* masculinity throughout the narrative, but also the *descending* masculinities of various other characters who act as foils to the virtuous Thecla. As Colleen Conway points out in her landmark study of Greco-Roman masculinity, *Behold the Man*, masculinity was not biologically assured in the ancient world.⁵² While being born male was a good start on the path toward becoming a man (*vir*), “the body was ultimately not of primary importance in the achievement of ideal masculinity.”⁵³ Ancient masculinity was primarily a factor of one's conduct rather than one's body.⁵⁴ By behaving in a masculine way, one could—regardless of where they started biologically—become more or less manly.⁵⁵ Of the many actions that could make a person less masculine, the most common in an ancient context was the lack of self-restraint. Self-restraint was seen as a virtue (masculine), while being subject to the passions was considered a vice (feminine). By succumbing to the passions—as many characters in the *ActPlThl* do—a person risked “sliding down the scale from man to unman,” while chastity, moderation, and frugality had the potential to elevate an individual along that same scale.⁵⁶

In the *ActPlThl*, Thecla's ascending masculinity is repeatedly juxtaposed with her unmasculine foils: Thamyris, Theoclia, Alexander, and, ultimately, Paul himself. As L.

⁵² Conway's focus is the construction of masculinity in Greco-Roman biographies, especially the Gospels.

⁵³ Colleen Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁵ L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2008), 24-32.

⁵⁶ Conway, 24..

Stephanie Cobb notes, it is not unusual in early Christian texts—especially martyr accounts—for “anatomically sexed females to be portrayed as masculine (i.e. embodying culturally assigned attributes of men) or for anatomically sexed males to be portrayed as feminine (i.e. embodying the attributes of women.”⁵⁷ The first encounter between Thecla and a feminized male foil occurs before she has met any significant adversity. While her connection to her initial identity has been disrupted, she must still prove herself worthy to be transformed. After Thamyris learns from Demas and Hermogenes that Paul is to blame for Thecla’s new commitment to chastity, he is “filled with envy and wrath,” showing a stereotypically feminine lack of self control, and brings Paul to the governor to be arrested (*ActPlThl* 16-17). While Paul is in prison, Thecla bribes the guards with bracelets and a silver mirror. By rejecting these symbols of opulence and vanity—unmanly characteristics in the ancient world—Thecla emphasizes her separation from her previous identity, ascending masculinity, and readiness to become Paul’s disciple.⁵⁸ She enters the prison and commits herself to stay with Paul and share his fate. At this point in the narrative, Paul remains the paragon of masculinity whom Thecla seeks to imitate. He is firm in speech and calm in the face of danger: “Paul feared not at all, but walked in the confidence of God. [Thecla’s] faith also was increased as she kissed his chains.” (*ActPlThl* 18). Ultimately, the consequence of Thamyris’s unmanly action is Thecla’s elevated courage.

When Thamyris finds Thecla with Paul, he insists that both of them must be punished. Paul is “scourged and sent from the city,” but when Thecla steadfastly refuses to marry Thamyris, her own mother cries out, “Burn the lawless one, burn her that is no bride in the midst of the theatre, that all the women which have been taught by this man may be affrighted”

⁵⁷ Cobb, 29.

⁵⁸ Conway, 29.

(*ActPlThl* 20). Theoclia's outburst functions as the second foil against which Thecla's masculinity is measured. With Paul expelled from the city, Thecla can no longer rely on his strength; she must face this trial alone. As she is brought to the theater, Thecla sees a vision of Christ in the likeness of Paul, strengthening her resolve. The image recedes into the heavens, and Thecla is once again left to prove herself in the face of danger. After making a sign of the cross, Thecla calmly goes up onto the wood and prepares herself to be burned alive, but a storm extinguishes the fire and spares her.

Thecla returns to Paul, still committed to becoming his disciple, and promises to cut her hair short—transforming her outer appearance to match her ascending internal masculinity.⁵⁹ Still unconvinced, Paul expresses his concern that Thecla might be met with a second temptation greater than the first and “play the coward” (*ActPlThl* 25). Thecla responds that if Paul gives her the seal of baptism, she will be able to resist temptation, but he refuses and insists that she must be patient.

Paul and Thecla travel to Antioch, where they are met by Alexander, a Syrian magistrate who immediately falls in love with Thecla. In this scene, there are two examples of unmanly behavior against which Thecla's virtue shines: Alexander and Paul. Alexander, overcome with passion for Thecla, tries to bribe Paul with “money and gifts” (*ActPlThl* 26). Rather than protecting Thecla, Paul responds, “I know not of the woman of whom you speak,” and he disappears from the narrative for a long time (*ActPlThl* 26). With Paul out of the way, Alexander, who is described as a man “of great power,” tries to force himself on Thecla in the

⁵⁹ Kraemer suggests that Thecla cutting off her hair (whether or not Thecla *actually* cuts off her hair is somewhat ambiguous) could be read as a repudiation of Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 11:6 that a woman who does not cover her head might as well cut off her hair, or it could be read as excluding Thecla, a virgin who has refused marriage, from the category of woman. Kraemer, 493.

street, but she resists, tearing his cloak and knocking his crown to the ground, demonstrating greater physical strength than the powerful Alexander (*ActPlThl* 26). The publicly humiliated Alexander brings Thecla to the governor, who condemns her to be thrown to the beasts. Thecla's punishment is met with indignation by the women of the city, who cry out, "An evil judgement, an impious judgement!" (*ActPlThl* 27). Thecla does not object to the punishment, but only requests that her chastity be preserved until her death. Her wish is granted, and she is taken into the home of a rich queen, Tryphaena, who protects her until her day in the arena.

Paul's hesitation to baptise Thecla marks a shift in the narrative that is emphasized by his cowardly deference towards Alexander and sealed by his disappearance from the narrative. Thecla is not destined to remain Paul's disciple, but to become an apostle in her own right. From this point on, Thecla does not behave like a disciple, but as Paul's equal, mirroring Paul's own relationship to God.⁶⁰

Upon entering the arena, Thecla is protected by a lioness, who kills a bear and ultimately dies to save Thecla from a male lion. As more animals are put in the arena, Thecla stretches out her hands and prays. When she ends the prayer, she sees a large tank of water and says, "Now it is time that I should wash myself" (*ActPlThl* 34). She throws herself into the water herself and says, "In the name of Jesus Christ do I baptize myself [*βαπτίζομαι*] on the last day" (*ActPlThl* 34).⁶¹ After her baptism, the women throw flowers and perfumes into the arena, whose odors put

⁶⁰ Smit, 559-560.

⁶¹ Whether or not Thecla actually baptizes herself is somewhat ambiguous. While this passage is typically translated to suggest that Thecla baptizes herself, Dunn suggests that it would be more natural to read *βαπτίζομαι* as a passive than as a middle reflexive. Thus his translation would read something like, "In the name of Jesus Christ am I baptized on the last day," suggesting that Thecla is baptized by God rather than by herself. Despite the strength of Dunn's argument, it complicates Tertullian's rejection of the Thecla story on the basis of women using the example of Thecla to baptize. If the text does not suggest that Thecla baptizes anyone (including herself), it is difficult to imagine why anyone would have used Thecla as an example to authorize female baptism. One possible solution

the animals to sleep. Thecla is tied to a bull, and Alexander orders the bull to be poked with hot irons, but the irons burn Thecla's ropes and set her free. The governor calls off the games, and Thecla once again escapes unharmed.

Now that Thecla has been separated from her initial role and transformed—first into a disciple, then into an apostle equal to (or, perhaps, above) Paul—the only thing that remains to complete her journey is a reconciliation with the apostle to receive his official approval. Before reuniting with Paul, Thecla “[sews] her mantle into a cloak after the fashion of a man” (*ActPlThl* 40), once again signaling an outward physiognomy commensurate with her now-perfected masculinity.⁶² Paul and Thecla reunite for a short time, and Paul tells her to “Go and teach the word of God [δίδασκει τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ]” (*ActPlThl* 41). Thecla returns to Iconium, attempts to convert her mother, and then departs to Seleucia. The narrative concludes by adding that Thecla “had enlightened [πολλοὺς] many with the word of God” before her death.⁶³

While reconstructing the community behind the production of the *ActPlThl* is almost certainly beyond our reach, a more productive approach would be to consider how the text reconfigures the memory of Paul through the example of Thecla. Thecla's ascending masculinity directly coincides with her transformation from weak person to model disciple, and ultimately to

would be that Tertullian was familiar with an earlier recension of the text in which Thecla's self-baptism was less ambiguous. Dunn, 66.

⁶² Conway, 18-19.

⁶³ Kraemer, 495-496. Like the question of whether or not Thecla baptizes herself, the question of whether or not Thecla “enlightens” men (as opposed to only women) is unclear. As Kraemer notes, “The referent of the accusative object (*pollous*) is grammatically ambiguous. It might designate men alone, although the conversion of Tryphaena and her household mitigates against this. While it *might* designate women and men, it could also be read to convey that Thecla only enlightened other women, a reading that conforms more closely to the Pastoral Epistles' casting of Paul as forbidding women to teach (*didaskein*) or have authority over other men (1 Tim 2:12) but not over other women. Ironically, although Paul commissions Thecla to go forth and teach (also *didaskein*), the extant text of Acts Thecla seems careful to never use this verb for Thecla's actual activity, instead using only verbs of instruction and enlightenment.” Cf. Dunn, 65-68.

a person who is qualified to take over Paul's role as apostle in Iconium.⁶⁴ Thecla's journey in the *ActPlThl* can be read a testament to the power of Paul's teaching on *enkrateia* to transform an unmanly person into someone fully equipped for Christian leadership. In other words, the primary moral of the Thecla story is that an unmanly body is not necessarily an obstacle to Christian authority.

As many scholars have noted, the general portrayal of women in the *ActPlThl* is far more positive than its portrayal of men.⁶⁵ While some have used this as evidence for female authorship of the text or at least a context of female-liberation, it is not the only possible explanation. Ross Kraemer suggests that the *ActPlThl* attempts to demonstrate that Christians are "the true bearers of morality and piety, as demonstrated by their women."⁶⁶ By showing that Christian women are more masculine and virtuous than pagan men, the transformative power of the Christian gospel is put on display. While Kraemer's analysis certainly accounts for a great deal of the gender reversal in the text, it fails to account for Paul's faltering masculinity in his interaction with Alexander and his total disappearance from the most climatic part of the narrative. Thecla is not simply elevated to parity with common Christian men, but she rises at least to the level of Paul and ultimately separates from him to begin her independent ministry in Iconium. In their final encounter, Paul simply acknowledges Thecla's completed transformation. Paul's authorization for Thecla to "go and teach the word of God" does not seem to add anything to Thecla's transformation other than a formal stamp of approval.

⁶⁴ Smit, 560.

⁶⁵ This trend is not universal. Paul and Onesiphorous are portrayed in a generally positive light, and Thecla's mother, Theoclia, is one of the text's primary villains.

⁶⁶ Kraemer, 497.

Conclusion

Thecla's perfected masculinity and ultimate ascension to the role of apostle sheds some light on Tertullian's vehement objection to Christians who "claim Thecla's example as a licence for women's teaching and baptizing."⁶⁷ Some treatments of the *ActPIThl* have downplayed Tertullian's rejection of the Thecla story in order to make the text fit the proto-orthodox category, but in doing so they have obscured the text's earliest historically attested function: authorizing women to teach and baptise.⁶⁸ However, the desire to dismiss Tertullian's remarks is understandable. Considered within the broader history of the text's reception, Tertullian is the only Christian writer who appears to be offended by the Thecla text. Dismissing Tertullian as an exception is not a fair treatment of the evidence, nor can we ignore that most proto-orthodox and eventual orthodox writers received Thecla with admiration rather than indignation.⁶⁹ If all of these writers are "proto-orthodox," why are they in such stark disagreement about the Thecla text? The single beam that supports this apparent contradiction is that all of these writers have been grouped in under the artificial category of proto-orthodoxy. If we disrupt the discrete boundaries of the proto-orthodox category, the contradiction disappears.

My own analysis of the Thecla text has attempted to show that the text could justifiably be read as a testament to the transformative power of Paul's message of *enkrateia* to overcome a

⁶⁷ Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 42.

⁶⁸ Dunn, 68.

⁶⁹ E.g. Macarius Magnes, *Apocriticus* ii.7; Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cantica Canticorum*, Homily 14. Eugenia of Rome, a martyr celebrated in the Catholic church, is said to have taken Thecla as her example. For a fuller discussion of the Thecla's legacy, see Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of St. Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

non-masculine body and become fit for apostolic authority. Whether or not Thecla actually teaches men or baptizes anyone, the text is sufficiently ambiguous to allow that reading. With this in mind, Tertullian's objection to the text and the tension between the *ActPIThl* and the PE is unsurprising. The Thecla story could be read as an authorization of female leadership and baptism—practices directly condemned by both Tertullian and the author of the PE. Besides this significant point of contradiction, however, the text is relatively in line with other “proto-orthodox” viewpoints. Many of the prescriptions for Christian living outlined in the PE are given narrative embodiment in the *ActPIThl*, while the PE's descriptions of heterodox behavior are—with the exception of female leadership—assigned to the villains in the text.⁷⁰ While the depiction of Paul as an itinerant, charismatic teacher is certainly different from the Pastoral image of Paul, no patristic source—including Tertullian—objects to the *ActPIThl*'s image of Paul. Thus we must consider the possibility that there was not a single image of Paul in “proto-orthodox” discourse, but many. While the Pastoral depiction Paul as heresy fighter might have been more polemically useful in some cases, the image of Paul in the *ActPIThl* could have been well suited for other purposes.⁷¹

If both images of Paul seem amenable to different “proto-orthodox” writers, we are left to wonder what a phrase like “the proto-orthodox image of Paul” really means. While abandoning the term altogether might be excessive and would not solve the problem, “proto-orthodox” could be used to refer to patterns of discourse in early Christianity, rather than a discrete group with

⁷⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁷¹ Richard Pervo, who considers the *Acts of Paul* “relatively orthodox,” suggests that the portrait of Paul in the Thecla story could represent an attempt to synthesize the teachings of Jesus (especially those preserved in Q) and the teachings of Paul. Pervo, *The Making of Paul*, 202.

rigid boundaries. This would be similar to another trend in early Christian studies that has abandoned “Gnosticism,” but continues to use “gnostic” with as much precision as possible.⁷²

While the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* functions as a useful case study to reveal the problems of proto-orthodoxy, it is by no means the only text that can serve this purpose. By considering how other second- and third-century Christian texts complicate the discrete boundaries of proto-orthodoxy, our view of early Christian textual diversity will continue to become more clear. We do not need to abandon all categories used to imagine early Christianity, but we should only use them if and when they do something useful.

⁷² Some prominent advocates of this solution are David Brakke, Bentley Layton, and Geoffrey Smith.

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