

Where Do We Put Saint Thecla? An Examination of Saint Thecla's Place in Time, Theology, and Femininity

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Abstract

Saint Thecla is a prominent early Christian martyr. Drawing from *Acts of Thecla*, a second-century text, and the *Life of Thecla*, a fifth-century account, this paper examines the evolution of Thecla's narrative. The earlier Acts of Thecla leads contemporaries to portray her as a radical and autonomous figure who baptizes herself without the permission of the Apostle Paul, challenging early Christian patriarchal norms. The *Life of Thecla*, on the other hand, frames her more conservatively, aligning her actions with male authority while maintaining her status as a revered virgin and martyr. There are, of course, scholarly and religious debates surrounding Thecla's apostolic status, her representation of female piety, and her role in Christian tradition. This paper highlights how her story resonated with female audiences over the centuries since her death, especially in the context of her shrine and cult in Seleucia where Thecla was revered. This paper argues that Thecla's complex narrative reveals her to be an ultimately autonomous character whose existence reflects broader tensions in early Christian society regarding gender, religious authority, and feminine autonomy.



Acts of Thecla, from *The Apocryphal Acts of The Apostles*, is a text about the life and martyrdom of Thecla, an early Christian figure and the first female martyr (second only to Stephen). The author, an anonymous presbyter from Asia Minor, wrote this text in the apostolic style in the second century alongside *Acts of Paul*. The two texts were often grouped together as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, though Thecla's section was much more popular, while *Acts of Paul* gradually disappeared in Late Antiquity.

Around the same period, a second text, a collection of twenty-eight chapters on Thecla's life, appeared in Seleucia, the home of Thecla's shrine, cult, and adulthood. Known as the *Life of Thecla* and written somewhere between 444 and 448 AD, the fifth-century text is much longer and based directly on the *Acts*. While initially attributed to Archbishop Basil of Seleucia, this assumption has been debunked due to internal textual evidence¹. Both the *Acts* and the *Life* portray Thecla as a devout virgin who, inspired by the teachings of the Apostle Paul, embarks on a faith-filled journey. Along the way, she defends her chastity, survives near-executions, and famously performs an act of self-baptism. Although these texts share thematic elements, these texts differ significantly in cultural perspective, religious ideology, and dramatic flair. They both (but more significantly *Acts*) are the subject of fierce debate between scholars of female piety and apostolic texts, usually over the origin of the narrative and the radical nature of Thecla. Thecla was certainly radical and feminine, and she faced her share of male pious critics over the ages. However, we cannot assign to her story a total rebellion of patriarchal piety, as her texts survived (in some respect or another) every era of masculine hierarchy. A comparison of the two texts, *Acts* and *Life*, allows for further insight into this thin line that Thecla tows into late antique society.

Acts of Thecla (translated by J. K. Elliot²) closely mirrors the scriptural style of the New Testament, a point that has generated significant controversy. The scriptural composition style garnered the negative attention of the theologian Tertullian (160-240 AD), as Thecla's feminine ability to baptize is given (in his opinion, unfounded) validity by her apostolic portrayal. More modern scholars further argue that the historical and theological accuracy of the text is not consistent with apostolic and first-century Christianity, contrasting the writing style. Naturally, these theologians resent the implication that Thecla originated at the time of the Apostles (1st Century). The fifth-century text, *Life of Thecla*, however, does classify

¹Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008), 40.

²J.K. Elliot, trans., "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," in *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*

Thecla as an Apostle (as well as a martyr³). This argument over the possibility of a female Apostle no doubt holds serious weight for feminist scholars and theologians, as well as for the Catholic church that canonized Thecla.

Life of Thecla is certainly not in the scriptural style. It uniquely embellishes lofty and dramatic speeches and monologues of the characters, both pious and pagan, and is the first half of a broader text by the same author, *Life and Miracles of Thecla*. *Miracles* portrays Thecla's miracles (mostly in life and surrounding healing, some posthumous) in Seleucia, where her cult and shrine were located in the 5th Century, but is not fully explored in this analysis. This particular English translation by Andrew S. Jacobs is based upon the French translation from Greek by Gilbert Dagron and covers only *Life*. The differences between the two original texts, *Acts* (from the 2nd Century), and *Life* (from the 5th Century), can be largely accounted for by the difference in cultural and generational perspective, especially considering the large cult already amassed by Saint Thecla in the town where the authorship of *Life* took place.

Though both follow a certain glorifying and romantic pattern of adventure (which some scholars argue is Hellenistic and unchristian due to the abundance of earthly rewards), *Life* is lengthy enough to include the drama of interpersonal relationships. The text is littered with personal laments about Thecla's aesthetics and her decision to remain chaste, such as characters exclaiming over her beauty or giving dramatic and self-important speeches. Thecla's mother began a public speech with the words, "Hear of this calamity from someone who doesn't want to speak of it!"⁴ with all the narrative drama of a layman's work of fiction. These speeches often give (arguably too much) characterization and reason to the opposers of Thecla and Christianity that were not there in the 2nd Century text. Perhaps the author uses these arguments to highlight and comment on the debates more relevant to fifth-century Seleucia. A particularly compelling case for resurrection through marriage rather than chastity is expressed by a town leader in *Life*, as he states, "the true and accurate 'resurrection' is preserved and accomplished every day in human nature itself: for the succession of children born from us is what exists and is desired, with the image of those sowing and reproducing being renewed again in their children, and so in this way 'resurrecting,' such that we seem to see those who long ago passed away in the living people who are once more with us".⁵ This is uniquely eloquent, especially for a character branded as an enemy of Christianity in a religious text. This is not an isolated

example in 5th Century *Life*, but there are no examples of such developed debates in the 2nd Century *Acts*.

Acts does, however, afford Thecla a more clear and autonomous Baptism, which is the heart of much of the scholarly debate and radical sentiment surrounding *Acts*. *Acts*'s Thecla states clearly, after surviving multiple beasts, harnessing a Lioness, and before jumping into a pit of "savage seals"⁶, "In the name of Christ I baptize myself on my last day."⁷ This baptism is not preceded by the permission of the Apostle Paul; she baptizes with full autonomy from all but Christ. The 5th Century text *Life*⁸, however, does require such permission, which leads many to believe that Thecla had more religious autonomy in the original *Acts*. The baptism in *Life* is still somewhat autonomous and transpired under similar circumstances, with Thecla stating, "resolve this fear for me through baptism of death."⁹ This version gives less power to the secular, antemortem self, and has more suicidal undertones. This certainly aligns with the antiquitous and medieval move into a pious rejection of the body out of ultimate respect for the spirit.

Whether or not this scene grants Thecla the power to baptize others after surviving this attempt is another matter of debate surrounding both texts, and usually comes down to differences in translation from ancient Greek. In any case, these differences illuminate the stark and aggressive controversies in a few scholarly questions. When and how did the story of Thecla originate? Was Thecla an Apostle? Was she an example of the possibility of radical femininity in Christian piety, or just a submissive follower of a masculine religion with exemplary chastity?

The first question, of when and how the story of Thecla came to be, is not nearly as straightforward as one might hope. Of course, *Acts* came first, and its writer was deposited in the latter second century. But some scholars, such as Stephen Davis, argue that the text was a written account of an earlier oral history, passed down by women.¹⁰ Evidence for this, beyond the story's female protagonist and working knowledge of female struggle (marriage, sexual assault, travel), lies a particular chastisement in the Old Testament that some believe is a direct attack on Thecla (which would imply her existence in the original world of Christianity and apostles). The tendencies of patriarchal New Testament texts to chastise gossip and "old wife's tales"¹¹ had, according to J.K. Elliot, substantial evidence implying a reference to the Thecla specifically. Several recent scholars, such as Lynne C. Broughton and Esther Yue Lo Ng, deny this claim of oral sources and pre-2nd Century origin (and many other popular claims about *Acts*) with fervor. Broughton goes so far as to claim that most of Thecla's

³ Andrew S. Jacobs, "Life of Thecla (Ps.-Basil of Seleucia)," accessed December 2023, <https://andrewjacobs.org/translations/thecla.html>. Chapter 9.

⁴ Jacobs, "Life of Thecla." Chapter 3

⁵ Jacobs, "Life of Thecla." Chapter 5

⁶ Most scholars agree that this is a mistranslation, with the original intent being "sharks" rather than "seals"

⁷ "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," Ch. 34, p181

⁸ Jacobs, "Life of Thecla." Chapter 14

⁹ Jacobs, "Life of Thecla." Chapter 20

¹⁰ Davis, The Cult of Saint Thecla, 41

¹¹ "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," 177

scholarly concern is riddled with “Catholic affiliation and feminist concerns,”¹² and states that claims attributing Thecla to early apostolic texts or assigning her religious accolades are full of “self-fulfilling hypotheses and questionable selection of evidence.”¹³ Broughton suggests that specific moral elements of *Acts* (the earlier text) are direct misalignments with the Hebrew teachings that ruled scripture during the time of the apostles¹⁴, and the scriptural composition of the text is “dangerous”¹⁵ for that reason. Lo Ng’s analysis aligns with Broughton’s and adds further evidence to her claims against the apostolic classification of Thecla. She adds locational inaccuracies regarding a “1st Century” character in *Acts*, the Queen Tryphaena.¹⁶ Lo Ng spends most of her analysis on the defensive against scholars like Stephen Davis and D. R. MacDonald. She specifically attacks the latter on their claim that Thecla was “initially accepted as scripture until its pro-woman stance was seen as heretical by a patriarchal church.”¹⁷

D. R. MacDonald’s claim may not have enough evidence to hold such a lofty implication. However, Broughton and Lo Ng’s classification of *Acts* as “anti-scriptural” in content, and Thecla as too uneducated to be an apostle¹⁸, are ignorant of a couple of important points (one of which is illuminated by the 5th Century text, *Life*). The first, which Broughton weakly acknowledges, is the possibility that certain pieces of apostolic evidence were naturally or intentionally stifled by the years of patriarchal clergy and record-keeping. This would not be an implausible or isolated situation if it were the case. The second, which neither analyses confront, is far more relevant. The fifth-century text, *Life*, outright classifies Thecla as an Apostle. In this text, it is said by the (quite revered and influential) apostle Paul, directly to Thecla, “Apostles, among whom also you will be numbered,” in a manner which I am sure is not light-hearted.¹⁹

The extent to which Saint Thecla represents the radically feminine in Christianity goes beyond (though is very much intertwined with) her status as an Apostle. The controversial idea was that her story was not only *about* women but also *by* women through oral tradition. It furthers Thecla’s message of autonomy and creates another example of female authorship in scripture/hagiography. This theory that the tale of Thecla was originally an oral history, *by and for* women, is championed by Dr. Stephen Davis. While the *by* is highly contested, there is reasonable evidence that the story of Thecla was *for* women. *Acts*, the original text, was just a short part of the

much larger text, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. According to Davis, this implies that Thecla was for a specifically female audience.²⁰ The success of *Acts of Thecla* compared to the lengthy irrelevancy and disappearance of *Acts of Paul* suggests that the particular style and thematic content of the author’s texts were better received by women than men. For *Acts of Thecla* in particular, the adventurous and autonomous Thecla represents the literary and scriptural rarity of a charismatic feminine leader. Not only is Thecla feminine, but her story accurately represents a few uniquely female struggles surrounding early Christian faith and late Antique culture.

Thecla (in both *Acts* and *Life*) was subjected to pressure from a legally binding marriage proposal to a Pagan man, as well as social obligations to procreate for her town. Throughout this pressure, Thecla derived her faith from a male Apostle, rebelling against her mother and local government by deciding to keep her virginity, rather than simply save it for her future husband. The complexity of this social and religious pressure would not resonate well with male crowds.

Such is true for Thecla’s trials in Antioch, as she is faced with an attempted rape by a socially powerful man and leans on the support of a female community to retain her chastity. An older woman and a gossiping female chorus support Thecla, while Paul simply flees the situation.²¹ There is evidence that the author of *Life* is aware of the success of this story amongst women, as this latter text (which was authored by a theologian who would have been well aware of Thecla’s female cult) depicts a more intense description of the sexual assault. The earlier text, *Acts*, simply states that the man “embraced her in the street,”²² while *Life* describes the man “entwining himself with her and feverishly pushing against her.”²³ In the latter text, Thecla responds with a defiant and courageous speech and physically humiliates the man, and the survival of her subsequent execution by beasts leads the women of the town to follow Thecla socially and in her faith in God. This happens (albeit less dramatically) in the earlier text as well, omitting the speech. In the words of Stephen Davis, “such charismatic figures do not typically subsist on their own...they tend to exist in symbiosis with settled communities that offer subsistence and material support.”²⁴ Among the women in support of Thecla is Tryphaena, a queen who recently lost her daughter, and took immediate responsibility for the young Thecla because of it. This is yet another example of the uniquely feminine thematic elements in the story of Thecla.

¹² Lynne C. Broughton, “From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy: Distinguishing Hagiographical License from Apostolic Practice in the ‘Acts of Paul/Acts of Thecla,’” *The Journal of Religion* 71, no. 3 (1991): 376.

¹³ “From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy,” 370.

¹⁴ “From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy,” 372.

¹⁵ “From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy,” 383.

¹⁶ Esther Yue L. Ng, “‘ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA’: WOMEN’S STORIES AND PRECEDENT?” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 55, no. 1 (2004): 19.

¹⁷ Ng, “‘ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA,’” 26.

¹⁸ “From Pious Legend to Feminist Fantasy,” 380.

¹⁹ Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 9.

²⁰ Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 39.

²¹ Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 15.

²² “The Acts of Paul and Thecla,” Ch. 26, p180.

²³ Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 15.

²⁴ Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 34.

Conversely, Lo Ng claims that the story of Thecla is not explicitly empowered by gender and is instead meant to “demonstrate the power of God to the helpless.”²⁵ This “helplessness” could be based upon Thecla’s subjection to execution (multiple times), and the unlikely resilience of the young virgin. However, if this were the intention, Thecla would be a flawed example of the helpless. Her wealth and ability to travel safely (although she did have to dress like a man for protection) would hinder this theme, as would her reliance on other women, as well as God, for mercy. Another issue with this claim that Thecla’s helplessness was more central than her femininity is the success of her cult, which was dominated by monastic women at her shrine, *Hagia Thecla*.²⁶ There were many pilgrimages to this shrine, most notably by the female pilgrim Elgeria in the 4th Century. There is certainly a gendered element to Thecla’s appeal beyond “helplessness”.

Life, the fifth-century text, was authored in the same town as *Hagia Thecla*, and the author most likely used their insight to shape and alter the story of Thecla from the original Acts. This shrine was located in Seleucia (in modern-day Turkey), and centralized the cave where the text claimed that “still living, she [Thecla] sank and entered secretly into the earth.”²⁷ This strange fate for the mortal Thecla (being absorbed by rock) is unprecedented but may have had a motive. With intimate knowledge of *Hagia Thecla* and the culture surrounding it, the author of *Life* explains the lack of relics or bones in the cave.²⁸ Another, slightly humorous, display of the author’s social locality to *Hagia Thecla* is his snarky remark about who Thecla belongs to. The author states that Thecla traveled in *Syrian* Antioch, and *not* Pisidian Antioch, “even if the Pisidians should wish it!”²⁹ It seems that the author’s insight into the area and cult in Seleucia also modifies key details in his depiction of Thecla. These modifications create yet another scholarly debate: the fifth-century author’s alleged “domestication” of Saint Thecla.³⁰ It is believed that the latter text tones down Thecla’s original power and subversion, especially because of the differences in the baptism scene.

In response to the idea that the fifth-century text “domesticates” the Thecla of the original text, Susan E. Hylan represents the opposition. In her analysis, the fifth-century text may even radicalize her. Hylan does not believe that Thecla’s self-baptism is toned down, and she asserts that fifth-century *Life* assigns Thecla more modes of power (such as ultimate forgiveness of sin and baptism of others). This would imply that the audience in fifth-century Seleucia would relate to female power, as the text “expects that readers will not be surprised

by a woman undertaking such actions.”³¹ From Thecla’s agency and the author’s classification of Thecla as a martyr and an apostle, the fifth-century Thecla is not “domesticated” or watered down. Unfortunately, the analysis that this insinuates an egalitarian culture or faith does not account for certain crucial factors.

There are over fifteen examples throughout the fifth-century *Life* of the author asserting in great detail the subservient and diminished role of women, either directly or through a character, in words that were *not* present in the original text. Not only this, but he attributes some of Thecla’s power to her adherence to these roles. To account for Thecla’s silence in court (which was attributed to her attraction to Paul in the original text), the author states that there is, to a woman, “nothing so fitting as silence and keeping quiet.”³² These remarks are interspersed with Thecla’s radical and powerful actions, some of which directly attributed her power to Paul, rather than herself, in ways not considered by 2nd Century *Acts*. Paul was, overall, a much stronger character in the fifth-century text, and is given an almost prophetic role, as he warns Thecla of her future trials “through fire and beasts,”³³ long before the events of her martyrdom transpire. Once again, this detail was not present in *Acts*. Davis accounts for this disparity, stating that “the work portrays a cult that is strongly patronized by women, and yet at the same time gripped by elements of patriarchal bias.”³⁴ It is possible, however, that these changes are a little more deliberate than simply products of their time. Perhaps the author meant to channel Thecla’s power for an agenda rather than diminish it.

Life contains more elements of explanation and religious instruction than the scriptural bluntness of the second-century text. Usually through Paul, the author instructs chastity, arguing in favor of marriage (though also of virginity), and often touches on points completely irrelevant to the narrative of Thecla, or the spirit of *Acts*. In a long monologue, Paul speaks on matters such as the “second coming of Christ.”³⁵ It would not be far-fetched to assume that the author wanted this text to instruct Thecla’s unruly cult and other Christian monastics and laymans. This is revealed quite directly in *Life*, as the governor of a town within the narrative exclaims at Thecla’s female popularity; “she taught the women among us not to consider anything more honorable than temperance!”³⁶ In the story, Thecla was a tool for the governor to tame the women of his town. Perhaps the author of *Life* meant to do the same for his retelling of Thecla.

²⁵ Ng, “‘ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA,’” 29.

²⁶ Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 43.

²⁷ Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 28.

²⁸ Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 42.

²⁹ Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 15.

³⁰ “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 (2014): 5–21.

³¹ Hylan, “The ‘Domestication’ of Saint Thecla,” 21.

³² Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 12.

³³ Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 12.

³⁴ Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 48.

³⁵ Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 26.

³⁶ Jacobs, “Life of Thecla,” Chapter 23.



The entire story of Saint Thecla, as portrayed in both *Acts of Thecla* and *Life of Thecla* is a romantic adventure, often criticized for its deviation from the expected monotony and humility of monastic life and scripture. Yet, Thecla remains a woman revered for her chastity and her martyrdom (though she is said to have survived both execution attempts). The total classification of Thecla as a martyr, apostle, Saint, or heretic is a heavy and treacherous scholarly liability. Perhaps this is because of the tendency of the original hagiographers to differ and embellish. A certain fourth-century account of Thecla by Eusebius mentions her so briefly that she only has time to die a martyr's death accompanied by two men, which is a complete deviation from all other accounts. *Acts* portrayed her as an Apostle and *Life* used this status for political and religious messaging. Modern scholars sort through Thecla's texts without agreeing upon their context. Now, the Catholic Church largely ignores this Saint and original Martyr. Perhaps it is so difficult to fit Thecla somewhere simply because she does not fit anywhere, and miraculously existed unto herself in Seleucia into and beyond Late Antiquity. Still, the differences between the origin of the cult, *Acts of Thecla*, and the text influenced by it, *Life of Thecla*, assist the scholar in her burden of classification of the radically autonomous Saint Thecla.

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