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## THE ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA.

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THE religious romance known as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* has of late become the object of peculiar interest through the discovery of the long-lost *Acts of Paul*.<sup>1</sup> While the opening sentence of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* has always been felt to be abrupt, few scholars were prepared to find that this abruptness was due to the removal of the romance from a larger work, the *Acts of Paul*, of which the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* originally formed part.<sup>2</sup>

The first of the Fathers to mention the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is Tertullian, who inveighed against it on the ground of its advocacy of the rights of women to preach and to baptize. Tertullian seeks to overthrow the authority of the work by alleging that its author was a presbyter of Asia Minor who confessed to having forged the story from love of Paul, and who had been deposed from office in consequence.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>1</sup>The standard edition of the Greek text of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is in LIPSIUS AND BONNET, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, I, 235-72. The Syriac is accessible in the translation of PROFESSOR WRIGHT, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, II, 116-45; the Armenian in MR. CONYBEARE'S translation, in *The Acts of Apollonius and Other Monuments of Early Christianity*, pp. 49-88. HARNACK'S statement as to date, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur bis Eusebius*, II, pp. 493-505, readily adjusts itself to the new facts disclosed by the recovery of the Coptic *Acts of Paul*. Cf. HARNACK, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur*, neue Folge, IV, 3, "Drei wenig beachtete Cyprianische Schriften und die 'Acta Pauli,'" pp. 1-34; V, 3, pp. 100-106.

<sup>2</sup>The very recent recovery of considerable parts of the *Acts of Paul* in a Coptic form in a Heidelberg papyrus has already been noticed in American journals, and the fact is here recalled only for its important bearing on the origin of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as a constituent part of that larger work.

<sup>3</sup>That the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* had already been separated in common use from the parent body of *Acts of Paul* and was current, when Tertullian wrote, as an independent work, seems, from what that Father says, probable, but not quite certain.

romance was written probably in the latter part of the second century—Harnack would say between 160 and 170 A. D.—and in Asia Minor.<sup>4</sup> Its purpose was clearly threefold: first, to defend the apostle against his Ebionite traducers, with their hints of personal attachment to his women converts; second, to inculcate the practice of virginity and celibacy; and, third, to assert the right of women to preach and to baptize. In length it was a little longer than Second Corinthians.<sup>5</sup>

The scene is laid in Asia Minor. Paul is on one of his evangelizing tours in Lycaonia, and with two companions, Demas and Hermogenes, approaches Iconium. His personal appearance is described with such circumstantial detail as to suggest that possibly it preserves, in part at least, an authentic tradition; certainly the apostle's admirer has not idealized him. "In stature," says the Syriac, "he was a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were projecting, and he had large [the Armenian says "blue"] eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long, and he was full of grace and mercy; at one time he seemed like a man, and at another time he seemed like an angel." An Iconian named Onesiphorus, with his wife and sons, goes forth to meet Paul and recognizes him by this description, which Titus has given him. Onesiphorus takes Paul to his house and entertains him. There, after prayer and the breaking of bread, Paul presents the virginity doctrine in a series of beatitudes.

From the window of an adjoining house Paul's words are overheard by a maiden named Thecla, the betrothed of one Thamyris. She is fascinated by his teaching and cannot be prevailed upon to leave the window from which she hears Paul's

<sup>4</sup> The year 190 A. D., the probable date of the *De Baptismo* in which Tertullian assails this romance, here constitutes the *terminus ad quem*.

<sup>5</sup> Besides the Greek form of the romance, which is probably substantially the original form, there are Syriac, Latin, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopic versions, which sometimes diverge strikingly from the representation of the Greek. Thus much that Professor Ramsay has thought anachronistic in the Greek form disappears in the Armenian, while in the Ethiopic, with the omission of Thecla's admitted claim to preach and to baptize, half the point of the story is lost.

voice. Alarmed at this her mother summons Thamyris, and tells him how for three days Thecla has not eaten nor drunk, but remained at her window. They both labor with her, to no purpose. On leaving the house, Thamyris, now greatly incensed, encounters Paul's companions, Demas and Hermogenes. He offers them money for information against Paul, and entertains them sumptuously. The men explain the virginity teaching and advise Thamyris to have Paul before the prefect on the charge of teaching a new doctrine and being a Christian. Accordingly the next day Paul is seized by Thamyris and his associates and brought before the prefect, by whom he is examined and committed to prison.

In his prison he is visited by Thecla, who escapes by night from her mother's house by bribing the doorkeeper with her bracelets, and gains admission to the prison by giving the jailer her silver mirror. In the prison she listens joyfully to the teachings of Paul, sitting at his feet and kissing his fetters. Meanwhile her family and her betrothed, aroused by her disappearance, are searching the city for her. The confession of the doorkeeper reveals her whereabouts, and her friends surprise her listening in the prison, with many others, to the apostle's preaching. They inform the prefect. He orders Paul and Thecla to be brought before him. Paul is scourged and cast out of the city, but Thecla, at her mother's instance, is condemned to be burned. The pile of fagots is prepared in the theater, and Thecla, encouraged by a vision of the Lord, stretches out her hands in the form of the cross and ascends the pile. But no sooner is the torch applied than a flood of rain extinguishes the fire, and Thecla is delivered.

Meantime Paul, whose exile is shared by Onesiphorus and his family, has taken refuge in a wayside tomb near the city.<sup>6</sup> As they have been long fasting, and have nothing to buy food with, Paul strips off his tunic, and sends it by a lad to the city,

<sup>6</sup> The Greek says "on the road by which they go from Iconium to Daphne," which the critics interpret as due to a confusion of the Pisidian Antioch with the Syrian Antioch; the latter, it is well known, had a Daphne in its vicinity. Daphne is not mentioned in the Syriac, Armenian, or Ethiopic.

to exchange for bread. This lad meets Thecla coming out of the city, and conducts her to Paul's hiding-place. She finds Paul praying for her deliverance from the flames, and dramatically responds with a prayer of thanksgiving for her preservation, to which Paul rejoins with a prayer of praise. After they have eaten, Thecla proposes to cut off her hair and follow Paul as his attendant, and asks the seal of baptism. Paul bids her be patient. Onesiphorus and his family now return to Iconium, and Paul and Thecla set off for Antioch.

In Antioch a certain Alexander, one of the chief men of the city, was giving public spectacles. Alexander sees Thecla with Paul, and, being enamored of her, tries to buy her from Paul. Paul protests that she is not his, and Alexander thereupon embraces her in the public street. She indignantly resists, tearing his festal garments and dashing from his head his crown of gold leaves with the image of the emperor. Alexander denounces her to the prefect, who examines her and, upon her confession of what she has done, condemns her to be thrown to the beasts. The ground for this seems to have been the insult to the divinity of the emperor, implied in dashing Alexander's wreath from his head.<sup>7</sup> Upon Thecla's petition that she be kept in purity until her execution, she is placed in the keeping of Queen Tryphæna, a cousin of the emperor Claudius. The queen, who has lately lost a daughter, finds consolation in the society of Thecla and conceives a great affection for her.

The time appointed for Thecla's execution having arrived, she is brought into the theater and bound to a huge lioness. But the beast, instead of rending her, licks her feet. Queen Tryphæna, moved by a vision of her daughter, takes Thecla again to her house until the morrow, when she is exposed a second time to the beasts. Again they are powerless against her. A savage lioness takes up its position at her feet and defends her, killing a lion and a bear that are set upon her. While fresh beasts are being brought in, Thecla baptizes herself in the seal tank in the theater. The women among the spectators, filled with sympathy for Thecla, fling perfumes upon her. The

<sup>7</sup> Thus the charge against Thecla in the Greek is sacrilege : she is *ιερόσυλος*.

fresh beasts, instead of attacking Thecla, fall asleep about her. As a last resort she is bound to two savage bulls, and fiery spits are applied to them to infuriate them. But the fiery spits burn off the cords that bind Thecla, and she thus escapes the bulls. At this point Queen Tryphæna, who has been a horrified observer of these ordeals, faints away. A report that she is dead is started by her slaves, and soon reaches the governor. The games are stopped, and at Alexander's express entreaty Thecla is released. She publicly ascribes her preservation to God, declaring herself his handmaiden, and the women of the city greet her release with acclamations and shouts of praise to him. Queen Tryphæna hails her as her daughter and takes her to her house, where Thecla's preaching leads the queen and many of her maidens to believe.

Released from her difficulties Thecla resumes her search for Paul. Learning that he is in Myra, she disguises herself as a man, and with an escort from Queen Tryphæna's household goes thither in search of him. She finds him and narrates to him all her experiences, beginning with her baptism of herself in the theater. All join in thanksgiving over her repeated deliverances. She declares to Paul her intention to return to Iconium, and he replies with the words which give these *Acts* their chief significance: "Go and teach there the commandments of God." With this commission Thecla returns to Iconium. She learns that Thamyris is dead, but meets Onesiphorus and her mother, before whom she bears eloquent testimony to her new faith. Then, departing from Iconium, she takes up her abode in Seleucia, where, after a life devoted to the religious enlightenment of the people, she falls asleep.

The obviously fictitious character of such a work hardly needs to be pointed out. Yet amid its extravagances are reflections of historical conditions which reveal the times in which it was written. The condemnation of anyone merely on the charge of being a Christian is more natural in the days of Antoninus or Marcus Aurelius than earlier, and the entire absence of Jews from the list of the persecutors of Paul and Thecla betrays a late stage in the life of the early church. In Demas and

Hermogenes we have perhaps the slightly veiled impersonations of Gnostic error, which again, though of course nowhere explicitly mentioned, is combated in Paul's preaching in these *Acts*. While the most critical scholarship has favored a date in the latter half of the second century, and the recent discovery of these *Acts* in the *Acts of Paul* has greatly strengthened this position, one must not lose sight of the fact that there are some evidences of exact topographical and historical information as to Lycaonia in the time of Paul which argue for some elements of tradition in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* an origin in the first century. These have been skilfully detected by Professor Ramsay.<sup>8</sup>

The popularity of this singular romance is well attested and easily understood. Its early separation from the parent *Acts of Paul*, the selection of it by Tertullian as an object of attack, and its translation, as a separate work, into many languages, illustrate its popularity; and in times when the celibate life was growing in popular favor, when marvelous martyrdoms were increasingly in demand, and when old men and maidens were the favorite figures among Christian confessors, popularity for a work like the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was natural and inevitable.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. RAMSAY, *The Church in the Roman Empire*, pp. 375-428; and CONYBEARE, *The Acts of Apollonius*, etc., pp. 49 ff.