

Morgan Yadron

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The inclusion of canonical scripture and exclusion of various books, texts, and gospels within the Bible remains a critical and contested subject of debate, particularly within scholarly circles of Christians and non-Christians alike. Apocryphal texts, such as the Acts of Paul and Thecla, describe a different narrative atypical to that of proto-orthodox Christianity, a movement from the 2nd to 3rd centuries A.D. One may reason that proto-orthodox Christianity, in its purest sense, aimed to sustain, protect, and propagate Christian theology and doctrine they deemed to be true—that is to say, they won the theological battles against various heresies that were deemed contrary to the true nature of Christ. Naturally, this evolved and promulgated to a hierarchical structure, completed and accompanied by apostolic succession, sacraments, and doctrine. In return, this solidified into the ubiquitous Roman Catholic Church that we know today. Indeed, this took an extended amount of time, hundreds of years to be exact, through various revisions, alterations, and modifications to Christian theology—including the books of the Bible. We arrive then at this salient and fascinating question: why was the Acts of Paul and Thecla excluded from biblical canon? How would Christianity as a whole look today if it were not discarded, and furthermore, how should modern scholars approach this issue? Within this essay, I aim to answer these questions within a comprehensive and holistic overview.

Before assessing the implications of the aforementioned apocryphal text, we must understand its contents. Doing so will give a better comprehension on why it was excluded, and how it conflicts with Christian theology. The Acts of Paul and Thecla offers a rather unconventional look into Christian baptism, gender dynamics, female autonomy, and

ecclesiastical authority. The narrative follows a virgin woman, Thecla, and her vehement devotion to Paul and his teachings. Listening from her window for days-on-end, she shows immense fidelity to Paul and his words regarding Christ, chastity, and the resurrection. See here the interesting and noteworthy passage of her behavior. “While Paul was saying these things in the midst of the church in Onesiphorus’s house, there was a certain virgin named Thecla,...who was sitting at the window of the house next door. Day and night Thecla heard what Paul said about chastity, and she did not budge from the window, but was drawn to faith with great joy. Yet when she saw many wives and virgins going in to see Paul, she also wanted to be found worthy to stand in Paul’s presence to hear the word of Christ. For she had not yet seen what Paul looked like, but had only heard his word” (Erhman). Serving as the antecedent for the rest of the story, this passage serves as a gentle reminder to the devotion and fascination Thecla has with Paul and his teachings. Naturally, each sequence of events follow, with each being more bizarre than the previous, such as Thecla breaking into Paul’s prison cell to hear his word and kissing his chains, wild beasts licking Thecla’s feet instead of killing her, and Thecla jumping into a pool of water and baptizing herself (Erhman). What do we make of all of this?

I strongly believe that the proto-orthodox Christian movement removed this from the biblical canon for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it is not erroneous to say that the early Christian movement was concerned with theological consistency. With this apocryphal text being a radical break from traditional gender roles within the early church, it was a symbol of dissension, a text that offered a different perspective on women’s autonomy and their specific role. We see this drastic contrast within Timothy, where the pseudonymous author under the name of Paul reasons, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent” (1 Tim. 2.12, *Revised Standard Version*). Although it is likely this author isn’t Paul outright, it still serves as a

crucial look into the ideology of the early church and proto-Orthodox movement. Timothy offers a male-led hierarchy, with clear gender roles for men and women –while the Acts of Paul and Thecla talks of her baptizing herself and preaching herself, all under apostolic approval.

When we look at the historical context, the role of women within the early church is apparent and present. Bart Erhman and Hugo Mendez reason such, “Women played a prominent role in the earliest Christian churches, including those associated with the apostle Paul. They served as evangelists, pastors, teachers, and prophets” (Erhman and Mendez pg. 465). To an early church with a desire to have a cohesive narrative surrounding the gender roles of men and women, this is particularly dangerous and reason for concern.

Secondly, Timothy is more conservative and traditional, while the Acts of Paul and Thecla tends to be more transcendent and progressive. Thecla, within this apocryphal text, has a great spiritual and transcendent nature to her, where in an act of prowess and power she baptizes herself, as well as choosing virginity not to submit to a man, but to be the perfect archetype of Christ. This is akin to the women mentioned in the letter to the Corinthians, where the women within the spiritual body contain and exercise their spiritual gifts (Erhman and Mendez pg. H140). This entirely contradicts the strict and repressive edges of early proto-orthodox Christianity.

Nevertheless, this diversity of early Christianity raises the question of if scholars should maintain a distinction between canonical and non-canonical texts. While texts such as the Acts of Paul and Thecla illuminate the diverse, heterogenous, and perhaps progressive nature of early Christianity, they should still be evaluated with the same critical approach of other texts. In my opinion, based off the fact that this text has heavy spiritual and transcendental themes, along with

the various peculiar details (such as sentient lions that are reminiscent of ancient miracle literature), it should not be held to the same standard as the canonical texts. Here's why.

Firstly, we must understand that the earlier a text is written, the briefer it is, and the tame-er the claims, the more reliable in a historical and scholarly sense. Take the gospel of Mark for example, thought to be written 30-40 years after Christ's death and resurrection, and is also the shortest gospel. This is as opposed to John –which was written in 100 A.D. and conveniently happened to contain the most illuminating, enlightening, and unique Christological claims of Jesus' divinity and his ontological personhood. This isn't to say that the gospel of John isn't necessarily true, rather today we look at it with more skepticism than Mark. Scholars will place Mark in a more reliable position because of this reason. That being said, the unique and peculiar nature of this apocryphal text should raise concern, and therefore it shouldn't be placed in biblical canon. But different doesn't mean less valuable, and we should still treat this text with the same respect as others.

We should take into consideration, then, that conceivably the various scenes within this text are true. Would it still fit with the overall narrative and message of the other books of the Bible, then? Perhaps not. It could very well be that the proto-orthodox Christian movement left this book out for a reason –not for it being progressive gender-wise– but that its theological concepts did not align with the teachings of Christ and apostolic tradition. That is to say, it could be that particular exclusion reflects theological priorities we should critically examine today rather than simply accept. Nevertheless, if say Timothy and the Acts of Paul and Thecla were to be reversed, the historical and theological implications would be astronomical.

Firstly, women most likely would be held in a higher position within the Catholic church. If we are talking in a strict, apostolic-succession-sense, the proto-orthodox Christian movement

eventually evolved into the Catholic church as we know it today. Of course, this took 2,000 years, yet the concept remains the same. If women held positions of priesthood throughout the Mediterranean and Asia Minor early on, it is likely that through the apostolic succession and tradition they would have held higher positions of power within the church –say bishops and clergy, given enough time.

The question of if “things would be better or worse than they are today” regarding women in hierarchical positions in the church is arduous to answer and probably can’t be answered. Man or woman, the moral weight of our decisions remains the same, so whether it is a man-pope making morally-bad choices or a woman-pope making morally bad choices, the end result is the same. Still, there are various factors to take into consideration –such as looking at women-rule throughout the centuries, their influence, how they were treated, and so forth. Therefore this question isn’t entirely cut and dry. As for individuality, most Christians and Catholics may agree that the current status of women within the church is fair, equal, and upright. Women, like men, are seen as the respective counterpart’s missing piece, with their own gifts to bring and talents. This should be duly noted. Within positions of power in the church, however, I cannot say.

Regardless, this apocryphal text remains as a crucial insight into the diverse landscape of early Christianity, the strictness of the proto-orthodox Christian movement, and the various ideological-theological doctrines that existed during that time. Perhaps with time, we can discover more texts like this one, offering a better glimpse into the historical context behind the important and influential movement of Christianity.