

The Reception of the Acts of Thecla in Syriac Christianity: Translation, Collection,
and Reception

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Abstract
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This dissertation examines the reception of an early Christian text – the Acts of Thecla – in sixth-century Syriac Christianity by offering an analysis of the sixth-century Syriac manuscript BL Add. 14,652 as a series of roughly sequential textual acts. These textual acts include composition, translation, and collection, and each of them reflected the interests and assumptions of the Syriac Christians involved. Neither the textual acts nor the resulting texts were initially related, but the fact that they were codicological companions by the sixth century indicates that by that time, the texts or the themes in them were explicitly or implicitly associated in the minds of some Syriac Christians. Through the consideration of the relationship of the Syriac translation of the Acts of Thecla to the Greek original, of the various uses of the Acts of Thecla by Syriac Christians, of the selection and sequence of texts chosen for the component titled collection of the Book of Women, and of the ideas and emphases of the texts that follow the Book of Women in the manuscript, arguments are offered for how such an association of texts occurred and what ideas that association of texts preserved or promoted. While neither the Acts of Thecla, the Book of Women, or the other texts in the manuscript indicate a focus on or even a clear interest in monastic women, the cumulative result of the series of textual undertakings witnessed in the manuscript indicates an eventual association of Thecla with monastic women, an association that authorized and encouraged the female monastic life.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This project began innocently enough, with the simple question, “What is Thecla doing *there*?” Why, that is, is Thecla, virginal admirer and disciple of the apostle Paul, in a sixth-century manuscript in something called the Book of Women, with Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith? All of what follows grew out of my pursuit of an answer to that question, so we begin with the context in which the question arose: the Syriac manuscript BL Add. 14,652, acquired and catalogued for the British Museum in the 19th century.¹

This sixth-century codex is essentially intact, is written in one sixth-century hand throughout² and begins with a collection titled ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܡ, the Book of Women, consisting of the stories of four notable women of Jewish Scripture—Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith—and the story of Thecla, and then moves on to a Life,

¹ W. Wright, Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum, acquired since the year 1838, part 2 (London, 1871), 651-2 (no. 731). The British Museum manuscripts are now in the collection of the British Library. The Peshitta Institute has accepted Wright’s paleographic dating of the manuscript, assigning it the siglum 6f1. The left number of the siglum indicates the century, the letter the category of manuscript, and the right number differentiates manuscripts within the category. The folios are numbered in Coptic, and the surviving quires are marked with letters, numbers, and Arabic words. The manuscript has suffered considerable damage; it is stained and torn, and several leaves are missing. As a result, there are gaps in four of the five texts included. The first text, Ruth, lacks verses 4.2b to the end. The second text, Esther, is lacking until the middle of 1:12. Susanna appears next; it is complete. Judith currently lacks 15:8 to 16:2. The History of Thecla, disciple of Paul ends the collection; much of the latter portion of the story is lost with several missing leaves, as is any original colophon that might have appeared at the end of the Book of Women.

² Barring page numbers, occasional vocalization, and an additional title and note, both discussed below, in chapter seven.

instructions, and sermon of Rabbula, a fifth-century bishop of Edessa. The unity of the manuscript is apparent not only in the hand, but also in the format of the component texts. The first text begins on 1v, with the titles, *Book*of Women*Ruth* - the asterisks here represent the lozenges of four dots used to separate the three evenly spaced words of the two titles – followed by the text of Ruth. The titles are in the same hand as the body of the text, and are placed on the page where the first line of text appears on the next folio, followed by a space, then 22 lines of text to the next folio's 24, indicating beyond any doubt that these titles were included in this manuscript by its compiler or scribe. The title *Book*of Ruth* first appears on 3v, and is set above the level of the text on the page, as compared to the following folio.

This title placement continues throughout the various texts in the manuscript, always beginning on the verso of a given folio and occurring every four or five folios throughout the manuscript, with the exception of 137v, the damaged penultimate surviving folio; it is unclear whether there was once a title here. Leaves are wanting in the manuscript after folio 7, and the text resumes at Esther 1:12. The title *Book of Esther* appears on 11v, and continues as expected; the text ends on 24v with the note, *[here]ends* [the] Book * of Esther*. This, too, sets the pattern throughout the manuscript for the end of each component text, when the end is not lost. Susanna, Judith, and Thecla follow in the established format, with Thecla's titles and some of Susanna's spaced across the top of two folios.

Thecla ends at 83r with the usual note and dividing line, followed by the title, Heroic Deeds of Mar Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa, the Blessed City. This text ends on 125r in the middle of a line, at the end of the narrative component of the vita, but,

notably, before the sermon mentioned in the vita as being appended. Seven lines are completely lost, then the word 'first' appears at the end of an otherwise lost line, beginning the Rules and Admonitions for Priests and Bnay Qyama. Because of the now-illegible lines, this title first appears at the end of the text in the usual ending statement, on 131r. The next title, Admonitions for Monks, by Mar Rabbula Bishop of Edessa, is abbreviated to Admonitions for Monks at the end of the text. The title Heroic Deeds of Mar Rabbula Bishop continues after the end of the Life, through both sets of instructions. The Admonitions for Monks end on 133v with the usual note and dividing line, followed by the title Sermon of Mar Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa, Delivered in Constantinople to the Whole People. The sermon continues until the end of the manuscript, at folio 138, after which the rest of the leaves are wanting.

This manuscript is a unified whole in its hand and format; more importantly, I will argue, it is a material residue of the early reception-history of Thecla in Syriac Christianity. First, it preserves the Syriac text of Thecla, translated from the original Greek as the first act in that reception-history. That translation is, in the codex, in the Book of Women, a later collection of texts which is the second act in this particular strand of the reception-history, valorizing Thecla, offering her life as the best life for Christian women. The Book of Women was then placed into a manuscript, followed in that codicological context by a hagiographic life of Rabbula, which details Rabbula's conversion and activities, repeatedly emphasizing the ascetic rigors he undertook and his affinity for the monastic life. It also, notably, mentions his interest in the public behavior of Christian women and the welfare of

women. The rules of Rabbula for, first, the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, and then for the monks have been inserted into the Life between the narrative and the sermon that the Life's author indicated would end the Life. The last folios are missing, so any colophon is lost. The manuscript itself is the last step in one strand of the reception-history of Thecla in Syriac Christianity, preserving a textual scheme that in its selection and arrangement of component texts demonstrates interests and ideas not precisely the same as those of the translator of Syriac Thecla or the creator of the Book of Women.

I have already made several claims about the Book of Women and the sixth-century manuscript containing it, asserting meaning where no one else has seen it. These claims will be supported by recourse to a variety of methods and data: textual criticism (or at least, translation criticism); literary analysis of the Book of Women collection as a metanarrative or "text" in itself; the cultural context of early Syriac Christianity; the manuscript history of Syriac Thecla, and; the Syriac citations of Thecla and her story.

This approach was devised as a consequence of three facts. The first is that Thecla is in a collection with Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith; as mentioned above, I wanted to consider what this grouping might be able to tell us about Thecla in Syriac Christianity. Since I was in search of a plausible "meaning" for the collection, but had no external textual or visual references to this combination of women, I turned to literary analysis, considering the collection as a "text." The second is simply that there is an unpublished, relatively recently discovered, sixth-

century Syriac manuscript,³ whose text of the Acts is closely congruent with the long-available sixth-century Syriac Acts, and has therefore not attracted any real interest from scholars of the Apocryphal Acts in the fifty-plus years since it was recorded and publicly noted. The question of how these two manuscript frames for Thecla's story came to be so different, yet preserved very, very closely similar texts of that story brought textual criticism into play. Finally, neither of these manuscripts has attracted any real attention, despite the fact that the Book of Women manuscript has been a matter of public knowledge, for anyone who cared to look, since the 19th century, and the other was noted, filmed, and added to the various lists of surviving Syriac manuscripts in the 1960's. The "new" manuscript, pairing the Acts of Thecla with the book of Daniel,⁴ and the Book of Women manuscript⁵ have both have been mined,

³ Ms. Deir al-Surian 28b; this ms. is paleographically dated to the sixth century, and was later combined with a manuscript of the Book of Job whose colophon dates it to 598. Described in Murad Kamil's unpublished "Catalogue of the Syrian Manuscripts Newly Found in the Monastery of St. Mary Deipara in the Nitrian Desert," an undated (ca.1960) English translation an earlier Arabic inventory, and in Catherine Burris and Lucas Van Rompay, "Thecla in Syriac Christianity: Preliminary Observations," in the online journal Hugoye (<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye>), July 2002. The numbering used is from Kamil's catalog, and will change when the new catalog of manuscripts at Deir al-Surian, currently under preparation, is published. Leaves are wanting after 69v and 74v, and two folios are missing from the film but probably present in the manuscript after 71r; my thanks to Professor Van Rompay for his unpublished description of the manuscript.

⁴ This text of Daniel was used in the Leiden edition of Daniel in Syriac; Th. Sprey et al, in A. Gelston, The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version. Part III, Fascicle 4: Dodekapropheton (Leiden: Brill, 1980).

⁵ This is an important manuscript in the study of Syriac literature, providing the earliest surviving texts of Ruth, Esther, and Judith, and one of the earliest texts of Susanna. See the Peshitta Institute's List of Old Testament Peshitta Manuscripts (Preliminary Issue) (Leiden, 1961), Index 2, under each book, and the Institute's seven updates to the list, published in Vetus Testamentum. Susanna also occurs in one other sixth-century manuscript, BL Add. 14,445. It is dated 532, and contains only Daniel, with all of the apocryphal additions. As for Thecla, while there are Coptic papyrus fragments of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, including one large group from a sixth-century manuscript, this collection provides the earliest nearly complete text of the Acts of Thecla in any language, and the earliest occurrence of any sort in Syriac. For references, see Wilhelm Schneemelcher, "The Acts of Paul," in Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds., New Testament Apocrypha, vol. 2, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia, 1965), 326. The earliest Greek manuscript of her story is from the tenth century. Even including much later manuscripts, there are only eleven surviving Syriac texts of the Acts of Thecla, and three of them occur in Books of Women. The manuscript under discussion was used by

their component texts used, but neither has been considered as a manuscript, as things in themselves. This third fact, the evident disinterest in the contemporary but strikingly different codicological contexts for Thecla in Syriac, baffled me. We have two sixth-century Syriac manuscripts containing the Acts of Thecla, but their other contents are entirely dissimilar: might not this difference be informative, indicative of something about the way Thecla's story was understood and used? This led me, via the question of how a Syriac reader would have likely encountered texts, to consider the sociology of texts and reading. Each of these approaches had to be used, so far as possible, to argue for specifically Syriac receptions of Thecla, which meant that the other, more usual sorts of reception, such as homiletic and hagiographic references, had to be brought into the project, as did what we know of the cultural context of early Syriac Christianity.

In the end, I hope to demonstrate that combining the analysis of the manuscript contexts in which texts occur with the analysis of the texts themselves and of textual references to them is productive, and in fact offers the possibility of glimpsing some portion of the ideas and textual activities of the silent majority, the non-elite and/or less-educated persons who so vastly outnumbered the famous, sometimes notorious, authors of the foundational or controversial texts of late-ancient Christianity. Translators, collectors, and even hagiographic writers engaged in textual activities as complex and revelatory as those of theologians, preachers, and commentators. Sometimes, these writers were, in fact, the same people writing in different modes, but this does not appear to be the case in most of the surviving

William Wright as the basis for his edition and translation of the Acts. For further details on Syriac Thecla manuscripts, see Burriss and Van Rompay, "Thecla in Syriac Christianity."

written receptions of Thecla's story in Syriac Christianity. Establishing that we do, in fact, have both non-elite and elite receptions of Thecla, and that the non-elite receptions are, on analysis, both legible and distinct from the elite receptions will occupy most of the following chapters.

Chapter two sets the scene for the reception of the Acts of Thecla in Syriac Christianity, mapping out the relevant cultural context – 'relevant,' recognizing that the idea of cultural context is impossibly, or at least unworkably, broad, and must be more closely defined. I have chosen gender as the category of analysis for this work, not because of the various essays and monographs dissecting the Acts of Thecla with particular attention to matters of gender,⁶ but because six of the seven surviving Syriac texts of and substantive references to Thecla's story through the sixth century have an explicit interest in/pertinence to women/gender. The Syriac translation emphasizes the gender-transformative possibilities already apparent in the Greek; references by Severus of Antioch depict her as other than simply female; the rhetorical targets of one of his sermons apparently invoked Thecla to license certain religious activities by women; the Life of Febronia makes her a model for its martyred female protagonist; the Book of Women is about, obviously, women; and, the codex preserving the Book of Women is for/about a female religious community. Only a reference to Thecla in the Life of John of Tella is *not* concerned with women/gender. Gender therefore seems a reasonable choice for the aspect of cultural context considered.

The chapter begins with Aphrahat and Ephrem, the two fourth-century Syriac writers who give us the most, and are almost universally cited, on the question of the

⁶ Discussed below, in chapter five.

status of women in Syriac Christianity. It ends with an analysis of women in the early Syriac hagiographic accounts, including the Syriac version of the Greek account of the finding of the true cross by Helena Augusta, a story quite distinct from the original, changing time, characters, and other details.

Chapter three moves to the first step in the reception-history of Thecla's story in Syriac, the translation from the Greek. In contrast to the story of the finding of the true cross, the translation is similar enough to the Greek original that it can, on first reading, pass for simply a not-terribly literal translation. Closer inspection, however, reveals a whole series of differences, differences which fall into three categories. Some are easily explicable by the interests and ideas of Syriac Christians. The others are not so easily explained, but when the manuscript contexts of Syriac Thecla are considered, it becomes apparent that the translation is intertextual, preserving a pattern of changes that serve to align Thecla's story more closely with that of Daniel. That textual affiliation implies that the remaining changes, emphasizing the gender-transformative potential of Thecla's story, are meaningful rather than stylistic, and part of the apparent tendency of Syriac writers to understand Thecla's story as relevant to issues of gender. Gender alone does not, however, account for the differing ways her story is used in Syriac Christianity; nor can the Book of Women codex.

The other receptions of her story, not obviously associated with the Book of Women include sermons of, and hymns associated with, Severus of Antioch, the Life of John of Tella, and the Life of Febronia. In chapter four, through the analysis of these materials, I will argue that two different approaches to Thecla's story are

apparent, and status-specific, not only in Severus' sermon and targeted group, but also in the saint's lives. Paralleling what we see in the sermon, one life, about the highly educated, respected, and powerful John of Tella, refers to Thecla in a way clearly based on an analytic approach to texts, while the other, about a nun who had authority outside the convent only after her death, uses Thecla's story more literally, reflecting what, for lack of a better term, I am labeling 'exemplary reading,' an essentially hagiographic approach to or relationship with narrative texts.

This exemplary relationship with texts, I will argue in chapter five, is apparent in the Book of Women. It is as much a composition as any traditional commentary, selecting episodes and offering interpretation, here through the construction of a metanarrative. The identification of Daniel as Thecla's first Syriac companion means that her placement in the Book of Women was a deliberate, and gendered, choice. The discussion of some of the implications of this choice opens the chapter, and is followed by a consideration of the probable readings of the Book of Women, based largely on reader-response theory.

Chapter six will first consider whether the sixth-century manuscript in which the Book of Women is preserved ought to be understood as a metanarrative of the same sort as the Book of Women, or indeed at all. The fragmentary colophon suggests that the manuscript was made for a female monastic community, but can we say anything beyond that about why these texts would have been interesting to such a community, and whether their relationship is anything more than a coincidence of copying? A rationale for this specific set of texts, in this order, will be proposed, based on the contents – the Book of Women collection, the Life of

Rabbula, and both sets of Rules – and the context of sixth-century Syriac Christianity, with some recourse to the questions of authority and legitimacy associated with texts and reading(s).

CHAPTER TWO

Situating Women in Syriac Christianity

Since six of the seven substantive references to Thecla in Syriac Christian literature in the period of and before the sixth-century Book of Women manuscript are in texts which are in some sense “about” women, any analysis of those references must involve an examination of the ideas concerning women in Syriac Christianity. The evidence is entirely literary, and in it, we see women taking up ascetic callings in a manner parallel to men, and being given literary and actual voices in religious discourses.⁷ Their religious lives are, however, controlled, bounded, because of their gender even as they are urged to pursue lives of ascetic celibacy, and celebrated for doing so. This is apparent throughout those few Syriac sources which either explicitly address or importantly feature women; for the early period, prior to the sixth century, we have only the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem, both of whom wrote in the fourth century, a small number of hagiographic accounts of holy women, and the rules contained in the Book of Women manuscript, discussed below, in chapter seven.

⁷ Women’s roles in the Syriac church have most fully been explored by Susan Harvey. See, inter alia, “Women in the Syriac Tradition,” in Prasanna Vazheparampil, ed., Woman in Prism and Focus: Her Profile in Major World Religions and in Christian Traditions (CMC; Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1996) 69-80; “Women’s Service in Ancient Syriac Christianity,” Kanon 16(2001):226-41; “Women in Syriac Christian Tradition,” Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies 3(2003):44-58; “Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant: Women’s Choirs and Sacred Song in Ancient Syriac Christianity,” Hugoye 8/2(2005). [<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol8No2/HV8N2Harvey.html>] See also Sebastian Brock, “Deaconesses in the Syriac Tradition,” in Vazheparampil, Woman in Prism and Focus, 205-218.

These sources all witness a tradition closely focused on celibacy and asceticism, and clarify the extent to which women who chose this path were understood to escape the limitations of their gender, but the two types of material, the explicitly paraenetic discourses and poems versus the edifying narratives, provide two distinct lenses for understanding likely readings of Thecla's story, the Book of Women, and the manuscript in which the latter is contained in its Syriac context.

The writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem are earlier than the hagiographic accounts, and illuminate the general historical background of women in Syriac Christianity, situating and highlighting the themes apparent in the various textual and manuscript engagements with Thecla's story. The hagiographic material brings us closer in time to the Book of Women manuscript, and offers a glimpse of the constructions of women current at the time of the collection, permitting a closer analysis of how the included texts would likely have been understood to work together in sixth-century Syriac Christianity.

Women in Aphrahat's Demonstrations

The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the 'Persian Sage,' were written between 336 and 345 CE,⁸ and we have three manuscripts of his work – containing only his work, so not simply copied as a result of traveling with some other text – from the fifth and sixth centuries, bringing knowledge of the Demonstrations up to our period

⁸ For a fuller discussion of Aphrahat, including the acceptance of the tenth-century identification of the 'Persian Sage' as Aphrahat, see Marie-Joseph Pierre, *Aphraate Le Sage Persan: Les Exposés*, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988), pp. 33-41.

of interest.⁹ There is also a discussion of the identity of the author of the Demonstrations in the early eighth-century (Syriac) letters of George, bishop of the Arabs,¹⁰ witnessing some level of continued interest in them.

The lengthiest and most specific discussions of women come in Demonstration 6, concerning perhaps the most distinctive and widely known group in Syriac Christianity – the ‘Daughters/Sons of the Covenant,’ the *بنات / بنو صهيون*.¹¹ This attention is largely negative, but does indicate that women as well as men were ‘Children of the Covenant,’ living a life of religious celibacy, that they were consecrated virgins.

Aphrahat directly addresses these religious women in this Demonstration, saying:

O virgins, who have espoused yourselves to Christ, if one of the [Sons of the Covenant] should say to one of you, “May I live with you, and you serve me.” You say to him, “I am betrothed to a man, the King, and him I serve. If I leave his service and come to serve you, my betrothed will be angry at me and he will write me a letter of divorce and he will dismiss me from his house. If

⁹ BM Add. 14,169, sixth century; BM Add. 17,182, ff.1-99, dated 474 CE; BM Add. 17,182, ff.100-175, dated 512 CE. See Wright, *Catalogue*, vol. II, pp.401-405.

¹⁰ See Lucas Van Rompay, “Past and Present Perceptions of Syriac Literary Tradition,” *Hugoye* 3/1(2000), section 23. Available online at: <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol3No1/HV3N1VanRompay.html>.

¹¹ The foundational article on the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant is George Nedungatt, “The Covenanters in the Early Syriac-Speaking Church,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39(1973):191-215, 419-444. More recently, see Sidney H. Griffith, “‘Singles’ and the ‘Sons of the Covenant’: Reflections on Syriac Ascetic Terminology,” in E. Carr et al, eds., *Eulogêma: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft, S.J.* (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1993) and idem, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York: OUP, 1995), pp. 220-245.

you want to be held in honor by me, and if I am to be held in honor by you...you stay honorably alone, and I will be honorably alone...And I shall get oil ready for myself to enter with the wise ones, and not be left outside with the foolish virgins.”¹²

This continues his theme of forbidding male and female religious to live together so that they might not risk giving in to lust, addressed to both men and women earlier in the same Demonstration:

Any man, a [Son of the Covenant], or a consecrated holy one who loves [Singleness], but wants a woman, a [Daughter of the Covenant] like himself, to live with him, it were better for him to take a woman openly and not be captivated in lust. And a woman, too, it is also fitting for her, if she cannot separate from the man, the [Single One], to belong to the man openly.¹³

Women, however, act as the occasions of desire, and are more to blame for the problem of desire than men. Aphrahat describes the way that Eve, Potiphar’s wife, Delilah, Leah, Miriam, Zipporah, Tamar, Solomon’s pagan wife, Jezebel, Job’s wife, and other women tempted and destroyed men.¹⁴ He shares the common late-ancient tendency to blame women for not just sexual activity, but also the fallen nature of the world, saying “we know and have seen that from the beginning women

¹² Sidney Griffith’s translation, somewhat abbreviated; “Asceticism in the Church of Syria,” p. 236. This, and all citations from Aphrahat, rely on the edition of I. Parisot, Aphraatis Sapientis Persae Demonstrationes (Patrologia Syriaca; Paris, 1884).

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Translation of this section – 6.3 in Parisot’s edition – in Adam Lehto, “Women in Aphrahat: Some Observations” Hugoye 4/2(2001). [<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol4No2/HV4N2Lehto.html>]

have been a way for the Adversary to gain access to men...Because of them the earth was cursed, so that it would bring forth thorns and thistles.”¹⁵

Despite this, women are able to choose a life of consecrated celibacy, and can expect a heavenly reward for that choice. This is apparent in the words he puts in the mouth of the faithful virgin, “I am betrothed to a man, the King, and him I serve...And I shall get oil ready for myself to enter with the wise ones, and not be left outside with the foolish virgins,”¹⁶ and in a later portion of the same section that lists women who have served the adversary, where he says,

But now, by the coming of the child of the blessed Mary...paradise is promised to the blessed and the virgins and the holy ones...All those who are betrothed to Christ are far removed from the curses of the Law, and are saved from the penalty imposed on the daughters of Eve, for they do not unite with men...They do not consider death, since they do not hand children over to it, and place of a mortal husband they are betrothed to Christ...¹⁷

These are women who choose celibacy, and are being urged to refuse to live with men; not only, as we have seen, men who would be sexual partners, but also celibate men who wish to be served by these celibate women. They therefore are being told to live outside the traditional social structures, free of not merely the

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Cited above at n.41.

¹⁷ Still in the sixth Demonstration; translation from Lehto, “Women,” sections 8 and 9.

obligations of husband and children, but even of serving men in non-familial situations.

So, Aphrahat's references and exhortations to these women witness ideas about the value of virginity and the necessity of foregoing traditional social expectations and situations. That said, Aphrahat's ideal Daughter of the Covenant clearly still faces pressure from religious men to live with them, to serve them, to act in socially normal fashion, only refraining from sexual congress. In fact, some religious women may have not merely assented to these situations, but sought them out; there is no reason to assume that only men were reluctant to let go of traditional social models. Aphrahat, although operating under a traditional view of the nature of and dangers presented by women, allows those social models no place in the life of the Daughters of the Covenant, insisting that their obedience and service to Christ precludes obedience and service to a husband.

Women in Ephrem's Hymns

The relationship between female holiness and rejection/acceptance of traditional social models is somewhat the same in the Hymns of Ephrem (d.373). Ephrem's writings were still hugely important¹⁸ in Syriac Christianity by the sixth century. We have at least ten manuscripts from the fifth and sixth centuries, and we also have use and discussion of him and his work by three separate writers in those centuries. Philoxenus of Mabbug, writing in the 480's, and again in 521, cites

¹⁸ In general, see Sebastian Brock, "The Transmission of Ephrem's *madrashe* in the Syriac liturgical tradition," in E. A. Livingstone, ed., *Studia Patristica* 33(1997): 490-505.

Ephrem's work;¹⁹ Jacob of Serugh (d.521) wrote a memra, a metrical homily, on Ephrem;²⁰ and, the anonymous Syriac Life of Ephrem is probably a sixth-century composition.²¹

In his Hymns, Ephrem, like Aphrahat, valorizes virginity and witnesses a distinctly gendered set of social expectations; he, however, does not distance himself or the women he addresses from those social expectations, but embraces and even promotes them. He does promote a model of female religious life based on virginity and renunciation. That life is not, however, necessarily superior to one embodied by more traditional Christian women (mothers in particular): both constructions of religious women are apparent in the Hymns.

Ephrem saw Scripture, and indeed the world, as a great complex of symbols:

In his book Moses
described the creation of the natural world,
so that both Nature and Scripture
might bear witness to the Creator:
Nature, through man's use of it,

¹⁹ Discussed at length in Lucas Van Rompay, "*Mallpânâ dilan Suryâyâ*. Ephrem in the Works of Philoxenus of Mabbog: Respect and Distance," *Hugoye* 7/1(2004), available online at: <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol7No1/HV7N1VanRompay.html#S3>.

²⁰ Edited and translated, Joseph P. Amar, *A Metrical Homily on Holy Mar Ephrem by Mar Jacob of Serugh*, *Patrologia Orientalis* 47/1(1995).

²¹ Discussed most cogently in Sidney Griffith, "Images of Ephrem: the Syrian Holy Man and his Church," *Traditio* 45(1989/90):7-33 and Joseph Amar, "Byzantine ascetic monachism and Greek bias in the Vita tradition of Ephrem the Syrian," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 58(1992):123-56. See also Sebastian Brock, "St. Ephrem in the Eyes of Later Syriac Liturgical Tradition," *Hugoye* 2/1(1999), available online at: <http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol2No1/HV2N1Brock.html#S0300>.

Scripture, through his reading of it.

These are the witnesses

which reach everywhere.

they are to be found at all times,

present at every hour,

confuting the unbeliever

who defames the Creator.²²

Even as symbols, though, the men and women of Scripture are read differently. Ephrem's is a very gendered symbolism, and the range of meaning for female symbolic figures is importantly smaller than for male symbolic figures.

This may seem an odd claim, given just how wide the scope of what they do represent is. Asenath, for example, is read as "a symbol of the church of the Gentiles. She loved Joseph, and Joseph's son in truth the holy church loved."²³ The Samaritan woman of John 4 represents an even larger whole: "she is a type of our humanity that He leads step by step."²⁴

These identifications, however, are much less frequent than readings of Scriptural women as types of Mary and of the Samaritan woman.

Rachel cried out to her husband; she said,

'Give me sons!' Blessed is Mary

for, without her asking, You dwelt in her womb

²² Hymns on Paradise V.1; translated in Sebastian Brock, St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), p.102.

²³ Hymns on Virginitly [hereafter, HVirg], 21.9. This and all subsequent citations from Ephrem's Hymns are from Kathleen McVey, transl., Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

²⁴ HVirg 22.21.

chastely,...
Anna with bitter sobs
asked for a child; Sarah and Rebekah
with vows and words, and even Elizabeth...
Blessed is Mary, who without vows
and without prayer, in her virginity
conceived and brought forth the Lord of all...²⁵

Here, prominent Scriptural mothers serve as antitypes, highlighting the blessedness and uniqueness of Mary. Notice that although she is, in Ephrem's view, infinitely superior to the other women, she is, like them, a woman blessed by the birth of a child. Ephrem also has Mary take Tamar as a type for herself, saying to Christ, "I who am slandered have conceived and given birth to the True Judge Who will vindicate me. For if Tamar was acquitted by Judah, how much more will I be acquitted by You!"²⁶ Again, while Mary is far superior to Tamar, she is, like Tamar, a vulnerable woman criticized by others who is saved by the public vindication of a powerful male relative.

Tamar also serves to foreshadow the Samaritan woman, to whom Ephrem devotes two hymns. The Samaritan woman is, however, read in a somewhat startling way: not only has she been unjustly reviled – "Blessed are you, who are

²⁵ Hymns on the Nativity [hereafter, HNat], 8.14-16.

²⁶ HNat 15.8.

slandered...called a harlot, but if you were, your bad reputation would have wafted to Him"²⁷ – but she is, in fact, in a sham marriage undertaken for appearances' sake:

Rightly she said and our Lord confirmed
concerning that man, that he was not her husband...
Therefore she to whom he said, "He exists," witnesses
that he was either old or indigent and sat in her protection
as she in his shelter.
It is written, "Seven women will take
a single man" out of their shame,
but they seek nothing more than his name..."²⁸

In like manner,

Tamar deceived and made her reproach pass away,
and the Samaritan woman concealed her reproach.
Tamar's deceit was revealed for our benefit, and hers for our
advantage...
Tamar trusted that from Judah
would arise the king whose symbol she stole.
This woman, too, among the Samaritans expected
that perhaps the Messiah would arise from her..."²⁹

Sarah and Rahab are also types for the Samaritan woman, as read by
Ephrem.

²⁷ HVirg 22.5.

²⁸ HVirg 22.13-14.

²⁹ HVirg 22.19-20.

Although she had a husband, Sarah denied [it]
but she made a husband for herself as a pretext...
God revealed that Sarah was the wife of a husband,
so also the Son of the Most High
revealed that this woman was without husband...
the house of Abimelech believed because of her [Sarah],
so the Samaritans believed because of her..³⁰

Rahab, like Tamar and Sarah, foreshadows the Samaritan woman, who is, in Ephrem's presentation, the savior of others. Joshua "saved Rahab the harlot who had been the maelstrom of many men. Jesus the Most High freed your daughter who had belonged to many men. Rahab saved only the household of her fathers, but your daughter [saved] many."³¹

It is Ephrem's reading of the Samaritan woman as chaste that makes her worthy, in his understanding, of speaking with Jesus, and of serving as, effectively, an apostle. Jesus' willingness to engage in conversation with her, to teach her, "shows that [her] heart was not contemptible...it was not necessary for her to petition about her sins."³² She then goes on to spread the word of the messiah's arrival to the people of Shechem:

Your voice, O woman, first brought forth fruit,
before even the apostles, with the kerygma.

The apostles were forbidden to announce Him

³⁰ HNat 22.17-18.

³¹ HNat 18.7.

³² HNat 22.5-6.

among pagans and Samaritans.

Blessed is your mouth that He opened and confirmed...³³

She, like Mary, has great importance and high status for Ephrem; that the (other) women of Scripture serve as symbols for them is no small thing. Ephrem, however, seems unable or unwilling to jump the gender divide and allow female figures to serve as types for Christ.

The problem is not that no human can, even symbolically, represent Christ's attributes and activities: an assortment of the men of Scripture do just that. As a child of a virgin mother, Christ is "a type of splendid Adam, [taken] from the virgin earth that had not been worked until he was formed."³⁴ Christ is likewise visible in the Nazirite Samson, who "tore the lion apart, the likeness of death. You ripped [death] asunder and made the sweet life emerge from its bitterness for human beings,"³⁵ and in Samuel, "for Your justice was hidden in him who tore Hagag apart as [You did] the Evil One. He wept over Saul, for your Goodness was also portrayed in him."³⁶ And, of course,

Your type looks out from the youth
of the fair Isaac. At You looked
Sarah who saw that Your mysteries dwelt
upon his childishness: "O son of my vows

³³ HNat 23.7.

³⁴ HNat 2.12.

³⁵ HNat 13.4.

³⁶ HNat 13.5.

in whom is hidden the Lord of my vows!"³⁷

As the intended victim of a paternal sacrifice, Isaac is an obvious, and popular, type for Christ. What is striking is that even though Ephrem uses the story of Jephthah's daughter, who actually was sacrificed by her father, he does not make her a type for Christ. Rather, she serves as part of an exhortation to Christian chastity:

Jephthah's daughter bowed her neck to the sword;

her pearl, delivered from all dangers, remained with her and consoled her...

Jephthah's daughter willed to die to fulfill her father's vow.

Do not annul by your eyes the vows of virginity your mouth has vowed.

Jephthah poured out his daughter's blood,

but your Bridegroom shed His blood for love of you.³⁸

Jephthah's vow and action are presented as parallel to the Christian woman's vow of virginity and to Christ's self-sacrifice. It is Jephthah, rather than his daughter, who is the actor of the piece: he pours out her blood as Christ pours out His own blood.³⁹ Ephrem's refusal to see the daughter's obedient death as a type of Christ's

³⁷ HNat 13.3.

³⁸ HVirg 2.10-11.

³⁹ Here I respectfully, and in a very limited sense, disagree with Susan Harvey, "Bride of Blood, Bride of Light: Biblical Women as Images of Church in Jacob of Serug," in George Kiraz, ed., Malphono w-Rabo d-Malphone: Festschrift for Sebastian P. Brock (Gorgias Press, 2008), 189-218. As she details on pp.184-185, Aphrahat and Ephrem both present *Jephthah* as a type of Christ; it is when she later asserts that "commentators from Aphrahat and Ephrem through Dionysius bar Salibi," including Jacob of Serug, "present Jephthah's Daughter as a type of Christ" (186) that we disagree. I would slightly modify her claim to say that Aphrahat and Ephrem witness a chain of commentary presenting the episode of Jephthah and his daughter as a type of Christ's willing self-sacrifice, but that it is not until Jacob of Serug that we see the daughter herself presented as a type of Christ.

obedient death seems odd, until we accept the extent to which his interpretation of Scriptural symbols is controlled by gender bias.

That bias is most concisely illustrated in his hymn on Mary and the beloved disciple.

Blessed are you, O woman, whose Lord and son
entrusted you to one fashioned in his image...
He [Christ] drank from your breast visible milk,
but he [the beloved disciple] drank from His bosom hidden mysteries...
The youth who loved our Lord very much,
who portrayed [and] put Him on and resembled Him...
It is amazing how much the clay is able to be imprinted
with the beauty of its sculptor.⁴⁰

That imprint, though, is only visible in the (male) beloved disciple. Although Ephrem says that “Your mother saw You in Your disciple; and he saw You in Your mother,”⁴¹ what the beloved disciple sees is “how much that Exalted One was lowered, how He entered...a weak womb...and was suckled with weak milk.”⁴² He honors Mary, but as “the Temple in which you dwelt, to teach us that today the King’s Son dwells in holy virgins.”⁴³ Mary looks at the beloved disciple and sees the image of Christ; he looks at her and sees a weak, fleshly vessel.

⁴⁰ HVirg 25.2-4.

⁴¹ HVirg 25.9.

⁴² HVirg 25.8.

⁴³ HVirg 25.10.

Women do not represent Christ for Ephrem; this lack is demonstrably not due to any perceived necessity for some physical resemblance of symbol to object, as even animals may represent Christ. In his commentary on Genesis, he says, “The mountain spit out the tree and the tree the ram, so that in the ram that hung on the tree and had become a sacrifice in the place of Abraham’s son, there might be depicted the day of Him who was to hang upon the wood like a ram...”⁴⁴ And when discussing Passover, he says, “The lamb is a type of our Lord, who entered the womb on the tenth of Nisan...And so, on the tenth [of Nisan] when the lamb was confined, our Lord was conceived. And on the fourteenth, when [the lamb] was slaughtered, its type was crucified...”⁴⁵ Men can be types of Christ. Animals can. Women cannot.

This assent to gender-specific limitations on Scriptural interpretation is more overt than Aphrahat’s assent to traditional ideas about women and the dangers they represent, but the fact that Ephrem also does not wholly reject traditional social expectations for women seems to stand in opposition to Aphrahat’s promotion of a more radically renunciate life for the Daughters of the Covenant. This contrast, however, does not hold. Ephrem either insists upon and rhapsodizes about the chastity of his female symbols, or valorizes the later, virginal version which the earlier, traditional and sexual version only imperfectly foreshadowed. Both, in the end, present virginity as the ideal state for Christian women; the difference is simply that Ephrem is a more active interpreter of Scripture, finding meanings and ‘truth’ not

⁴⁴ Commentary on Genesis, XX.3; translation from Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, translators, and Kathleen McVey, ed., *St. Ephrem the Syrian. Selected Prose Works* (The Fathers of the Church, vol. 91; Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 1994), p.169.

⁴⁵ Commentary on Exodus, XII.2-3; also from Mathews and Amar, pp. 246-7.

apparent to the uninstructed eye in the stories, while Aphrahat uses Scriptural stories and their female characters in a manner unsurprising to anyone familiar with the stories. (These differing approaches to Scripture and narrative more generally will be explored at length in chapter four.)

Although Aphrahat and Ephrem are frequently – almost universally – cited in studies of early Syriac Christianity in general and women in particular, when we consider the reception-history of Thecla's story we can and must look past them to other sources in order to support or contradict any thesis about what is being done with her story in the various Syriac references to it. After Aphrahat and Ephrem, Syriac hagiography provides the richest, indeed the only substantive, source of original Syriac texts about women up through the sixth century.

Women in Early Syriac Hagiography

In this period, we have original Syriac compositions about women by five different authors, and one contemporary Syriac revision of a Greek text likewise about a woman.⁴⁶ While these texts cannot, of course, be used naively to reconstruct the lived reality of female religious life in the period, they do bear witness to the perceived norms and limits of female religious life. Through them, we see a

⁴⁶ The Life of Febronia will be considered in chapter four, as it references Thecla. I focus here on hagiographic texts primarily about women, and so am not considering the interesting, but minor, maternal and other female characters in various lives of holy men [an idea first considered in Andrew Palmer, "Sisters, Fiancées, Wives and Mothers of Syrian Holy Men," in René Lavenant, ed., *V Symposium Syriacum 1988* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 236; Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990), 207-214.], or the various early references to the mother of the Maccabean martyrs [Witold Witakowski, "Mart(y) Shmuni, The Mother of The Maccabean Martyrs, In Syriac Tradition," in René Lavenant, ed., *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 247; Rome, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1994), 153-168.]

range of possibilities for female religious life, and a distinct set of expectations regarding the women who live those lives.⁴⁷

The story of Euphemia and the Goth, composed in the fifth century,⁴⁸ presents women who pursue holiness in a familial but celibate context, a young woman who is assertive only in extremis, and whose faith is credited to a parental figure. None of the female characters in the story can be said to be authoritative or positively assertive.

The narrative may be summarized as follows.⁴⁹ In 396 CE, some Roman soldiers live in Edessa while they defend the region against the Huns. A Goth serving in the army is billeted with the pious widow Sophia and her virgin daughter Euphemia. Sophia hides Euphemia from the Goth, but he sees Euphemia for an instant and is inflamed with desire. He carefully and deceitfully campaigns to get the mother's permission to marry her daughter; Sophia is suspicious and afraid, but eventually is overcome and agrees, after he agrees not to take Euphemia away from Edessa. Soon, he does, and cruelly reveals to the pregnant Euphemia that she is his mistress, as he already has a wife. She laments, speaking for the first time in the story, and prays for help from the Edessene saints and God. The Goth's wife is suspicious, and treats Euphemia cruelly, and kills Euphemia's infant son. Euphemia

⁴⁷ This approach is similar to the one taken by Susan Harvey in "Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in early Syriac Hagiography," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4/1(1996):27-56, although here I attempt to correlate the representations in these texts to ideas in Aphrahat, Ephrem, and the Syriac translation of the Acts of Thecla rather than to any historical data.

⁴⁸ Dated between ca. 430 and the beginning of the sixth century by F.C. Burkitt, accepted by Susan Harvey, the only recent scholar to address the text. See F.C. Burkitt, *Euphemia and the Goth, with the Acts of Martyrdom of the Confessors of Edessa* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), pp. 48-61, and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Sacred Bonding," 35 and n.34.

⁴⁹ Syriac text in Burkitt, *Euphemia*; translation, pp. 129-153.

kills the wife by the surreptitious administration of the remnants of the poison used on her son, and when her crime is suspected, she is shut in the tomb with the body of the dead wife. She again prays for help from the Edessene saints and God, and she is miraculously transported to Edessa and the shrine of the local saints, where she praises the saints for their miraculous assistance, and then does not speak again in the story. The custodian fetches her mother Sophia, who does not recognize Euphemia at first because she is “clothed with garments of humiliation.” The women thenceforth live a life of prayer and modesty. The Goth eventually returns to Edessa, pretending that Euphemia is alive and well as his wife; he is dramatically and publicly accused by Sophia and confronted with the living, and silent Euphemia, his ‘bride.’ He is convicted and executed, although more mercifully than he deserves.

The action of the story is evenly divided between Sophia and Euphemia: maternal angst, oration, and anger dominate in 18 of 46 folios, and the daughter’s prayers, revenge, and lamentation dominate in 17 of 46 folios. The remainder are descriptive, featuring other characters. Sophia, a widow, is vocal from the beginning and makes choices for herself and her daughter, although those choices are made under duress. Euphemia speaks only after she has been shamed by the revelation of her true status as mistress rather than wife, and only chooses in extremis, acting to avenge her son’s murder. She is unable to act against her false ‘husband,’ to protect her child, or to act openly against, or even accuse, her son’s murderer. She is also silent in the story after her miraculous return to Edessa and the recounting of

that miracle; once she and her mother have begun their life of prayer, her mother's voice once again dominates.

So, a markedly familial context for a religious life neither institutional nor regulated, a young woman whose faith is implicitly attributed to her parent, and who speaks only in extremis and only until her miraculous salvation. The women of the story are more often than not powerless, and the daughter is sexually vulnerable. Each of these themes recurs, in some form, in the remaining three original Syriac compositions.

In fact, all of these themes are made even more explicit in the late fifth-century story of Mary, the niece of Abraham of Qidun.⁵⁰ The story is simply summarized. Mary, the niece of the recluse Abraham, is taken by her relatives to live with him after she is orphaned. He instructs her in the Psalms and Scriptures, prays on her behalf, and gives her inheritance to the poor. She willingly assumes a life of penitence and humility. Later, a bad man seduces her. She volubly laments her sin, runs away from her uncle in shame, and becomes a serving wench and prostitute in a tavern. He notices her absence after two days, and finds her after two years; when he goes to bring her home, she recognizes him and does more vocal lamenting. (Notably, even here she speaks much less than her uncle does.) They return to his home, and she lives a life of weeping and penitence until she dies

⁵⁰ Dated by Sebastian Brock and Susan Harvey in Holy Women of the Syrian Orient (updated paperback edition; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998; orig.pub. 1987), p.27, with reference to the probability that the Life of Abraham draws on Theodoret, Palladius, and the Life of Antony. Only the portion of the story concerning Mary is of interest here; that portion is translated in Brock and Harvey, op.cit., pp. 29-36, from the text of a fifth- or sixth-century manuscript, BL Add. 14,644. Virginia Burrus offers an interesting reading of Mary's story in The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography (Divinations: Rereading Ancient Religion, no series #; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp.132-7.

fifteen years later; although she is said to pray, we do not hear her speak again in the narrative after Abraham saves her.

Like Euphemia, Mary's religious life is lived in a familial context. Not only does she live with her uncle, she was placed there by her relatives without her consent, and her uncle gives away her inheritance likewise without her prior consent. Their life, while clearly disciplined, is not regulated in any sense; where Euphemia and her mother spend the days of their life of prayer in church or in the shrine to the saints who saved her, and have some interaction with the 'brethren of the shrine of the martyrs,'⁵¹ no religious institution, or anyone affiliated with one, plays a part in Mary's story. A monk does appear, but he is the villain who seduces Mary; this hardly speaks to a positive interest in regulated religious life. Further, while Mary is depicted as eagerly accepting her uncle Abraham's instruction, it is his faith and instruction that move her to a proper religious life – "she trained herself in all the excellent ways of her blessed uncle"⁵² – and his actions, described at length, that save her from her life as serving wench and prostitute. Finally, she is heard to say one very brief prayer before her seduction, flight, and ignominy, but her only real speeches come during those times of crisis; after Abraham removes her from the tavern, which she refers to as coming "after me in order to raise me up from this foul abyss of mine," she does not speak again in the story. Just as Euphemia does not speak again after being saved by the Edessene martyrs, Mary does not speak after being saved by Abraham.

⁵¹ Euphemia, p. 145, section 34.

⁵² Brock and Harvey, Holy Women, p. 29, section 17.

The other Syriac texts about women are somewhat different, as they are martyrological; here and in the other Syriac martyrdoms of women, the women speak with authority, asserting their faith in some detail, but this is a predictable feature of any martyrdom, no matter who the subject.⁵³ The martyrdoms do appear to presume the themes already apparent in the hagiographic accounts.

Tarbo, one of the Christians martyred in Persia in the fourth century, was known at least by name to Syriac Christians by 411/412 when the names of the Persian martyrs were included in a martyrology.⁵⁴ A fully narrativized account of her story is preserved in a fifth-/sixth-century manuscript, where it is included with other martyrdoms.⁵⁵ In this account, she is specifically identified as a ܕܘܝܬܪܒܘܢܐ, Daughter of the Covenant, is arrested with her married-but-continent sister and her sister's female servant, whom Tarbo had instructed in the faith. Although she has been charged with witchcraft, the three officials in charge of the trial each offer, individually, to spare her life if she will marry them. Shaken – a unique instance in the early Syriac martyrdoms of the martyr's loss of composure – and indignant, she refuses each man, and they conspire to convict her and her companions of the false

⁵³ On martyrs' speech, particularly female martyrs, see Gail P.C. Streete, Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 25-47, esp. 30-37. On martyrs' speech as a "ritualized and performative speech act associated with a statement of pure essence," and a component of late-ancient martyrdoms, see Daniel Boyarin, Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 95.

⁵⁴ BL Add. 12,150, the earliest surviving dated Syriac manuscript.

⁵⁵ BL Add. 14,654. The other narrativized accounts of female Persian martyrs – Candida, Martha, Thekla, and Anahid – do not appear in this collection, and only Candida, discussed below, has manuscript remains prior to the tenth century. Translations of the martyrdoms of Tarbo, Martha, Thekla, and Anahid appear in Brock and Harvey, Holy Women, pp. 63-99.

charge of witchcraft. When all three women refuse their last chance for pardon – sun worship – they are executed.

This account shares with the properly hagiographical texts a familial, non-institutional setting for religious practice, and a sexually vulnerable virgin of marriageable age. Tarbo appears to have been living with her sister and sister's servant, and dies with them; and, although Tarbo and the servant are Daughters of the Covenant, this can hardly be understood as an institutional or regulated setting. She is also specifically represented as sexually vulnerable, subjected to the advances of all three officials, while there is no mention of her married sister facing similar advances. Finally, although it is unclear whether Tarbo was instructed in the faith by her older brother, the bishop Simeon, she does say that she is following his example in embracing death for her faith.

In contrast, the fifth-century martyrdom of Candida, a wife of the Persian king Vahran II,⁵⁶ does explicitly indicate that the female protagonist owes her faith to her parents.⁵⁷ The logic of the narrative – she is one of the captives taken from Roman territory by the Persians, and is taken as a wife by the king because of her beauty – does not permit further familial context. Notably, her breasts are cut off, and she is forced to carry them through the city, a highly sexualized torture. Equally notably, the narrator explains that Candida “preserved her modesty and her faith intact.”⁵⁸

The word “modesty,” *ܡܕܝܥܘܬܐ*, also has connotations of chastity and continence.

⁵⁶ Dated, with an edition and translation of the sixth-century manuscript in which it appears, by Sebastian Brock, in “A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 96(1978):167-181; reprinted in idem, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum, 1984), #9.

⁵⁷ Brock, “Candida,” 174.3-4(Syriac) and 178.

⁵⁸ Brock, “Candida,” 174.4-5(Syriac) and 178.

Since Candida says as she is dying, “I am going to my wedding feast...[The text is mutilated here]” she is, arguably, represented as a virgin in the text, against all logic, and is therefore sexually vulnerable, as in the other Syriac texts we have seen.

The last of the relevant Syriac texts are in the sixth-century account of the martyrs of Najran.⁵⁹ These texts, six relatively brief accounts, do not offer, unlike Tarbo, Euphemia, Mary and Candida, clear indications of female sexual vulnerability, although this may reflect a choice of protagonists rather than a different view: individual women, when discussed, are specifically indicated as wives, grandmothers, ‘forty-seven years old,’ ‘nine years old,’ or as having willingly exposed her naked body to men and women “many times of my own will,”⁶⁰ each of which effectively removes the woman in question from the category of marriageable virgins. Like Tarbo, they offer at best the odd implication that these women derive their faith from some male or older relative. What they do offer is a clear tendency to deny marriageable virgins speech or agency, and, in common with both Tarbo and the hagiographic accounts, a repeated emphasis on a familial context for female religious practice.

Tahna⁶¹ seeks, and finds, martyrdom with her daughter, a Daughter of the Covenant who lives in her house, and her maidservant; Tahna, the matron, is the one who asserts herself and takes the others with her. A group of maidservants

⁵⁹ See Irfan Shahid, The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents (Subsidia Hagiographica, 49; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1971). Syriac text, pp.I-XXXII, translation pp.43-64. Excerpted and discussed in Brock and Harvey, pp. 105-121.

⁶⁰ In the stories of, respectively, the freeborn women, Ruhm, Elizabeth, Ruhm again (her granddaughter), and Mahya. References for each account in next paragraph.

⁶¹ Shahid, Martyrs, p.49.

insists on martyrdom, to follow their “masters, mistresses, and ...relatives.”⁶²

Another maidservant, Mahya, presents herself for martyrdom after her “owners and her family and companions had been put to death.”⁶³ She is not, apparently, a virgin, as she is represented, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, as having willingly exposed her naked body to men and women “many times of my own will.”⁶⁴

The widow Ruhm dies with her three virgin daughters; she is the one who takes the initiative to present herself and her daughters for martyrdom, and the one ‘daughter’ who does speak is immediately thereafter revealed to actually be her nine-year old granddaughter. Her marriageable virgin daughters do not speak.⁶⁵ The forty-seven year old deaconess Elizabeth, who was hidden away after her brother’s execution and then escaped in order to die for her faith, says “I shall go to Christ with you, my brother...” and tells her killers that she wants to be burned in the church, along with her brother’s bones. Then, we see “three young men from family of the blessed one” searching for, and properly burying, her body.⁶⁶ The preference for religious practice in a familial context is most pronounced in the account of the unnamed freeborn widows who, after their husbands’ martyrdoms, assert their right to die first,

⁶² Shahid, Martyrs, pp.54-5. The maidservants speak as a group; no individual woman is named or credited with speech. Interestingly, although the king reminds the handmaids that their “masters, mistresses and relatives” have already died for their stubborn Christianity, the handmaids reply that they wish to die with their “masters and companions,” apparently subsuming their mistresses and relatives to the supercessory category of (religious) companions. Syriac text, pp.XVIII-XIX. This difference in description between the king and the handmaids is preserved in the translation of Brock and Harvey (Holy Women, p. 109), but is lost in Shahid’s translation.

⁶³ Brock and Harvey, Holy Women, p. 109-111. As in the account of the handmaids, Shahid’s translation renders ‘companions’ as ‘relatives.’ Shahid, Martyrs, pp.55-7.

⁶⁴ Shahid, Martyrs, p.56.

⁶⁵ Shahid, Martyrs, pp.57-60.

⁶⁶ Shahid, Martyrs, pp.47-8.

trumping the efforts of the Daughters of the Covenant and nuns. These newly-minted widows, set up in opposition to the other, apparently isolated women (since the Daughters of the Covenant are grouped here with nuns, and the text does not mention any relatives, I take the whole group to represent a non-familial form or forms of religious life) not only win the right to die first, but also are the only ones who make an explicit declaration of faith in the text. Familial contexts are generally presumed in these texts, and in the one instance where another form of religious life is mentioned, its practitioners are trumped by women whose faith was lived in a familial context; even among those women pursuing a religious life in a familial context, virgins of marriageable age tend to be silent and without agency.

These themes are apparent not only in original Syriac compositions of the fifth and sixth centuries, but even in the surviving contemporary Syriac redaction of a Greek text. This text, the story of Protonike's discovery of the True Cross in the first century, is not, like the other narratives discussed here, a *de novo* Syriac composition, but rather an early fifth-century Syriac translation and redaction of the late fourth-century Greek narrative of Helena Augusta's discovery of the cross during the reign of her son Constantine.

Unlike the majority of women in the original Syriac compositions, neither the empress Protonike nor her female daughter are presented as anything resembling a Daughter of the Covenant; it would be surprising if they were, since no surviving Syriac text imagines that the institution of the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant exists outside Syriac-speaking communities. Still, the Syriac redactor changed the story of Helena Augusta and the discovery of the True Cross to reflect the

expectations of a Syriac audience, as we see them in the contemporary Syriac stories about women. There is a clear and repeated preference for a familial context, and a tendency to deny female characters activity/authority in the narrative.

It is possible to track those changes even though we cannot be certain which version of the Helena Augusta story the Syriac redactor knew. The earliest known versions of the story are those in Ambrose of Milan's 395 CE *De Obitu Theodosii* and the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Gelasius of Caesarea, written soon after 387 CE.⁶⁷ The Syriac Protonike text cannot be dependent on Ambrose's Latin version, because that account does not include the identification of the cross by its miraculous powers,⁶⁸ which the Protonike text and Gelasius' Greek version both include. Gelasius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* is, of course, lost, but we have both a fragmentary reconstruction and four surviving dependent accounts, those of Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret.⁶⁹ These accounts are in substantial agreement as to the chronology and content of the story, and whichever of them provided the base text for the Protonike redaction, that base text will have included:

1. Helena, the pious mother of Constantine, is prompted by visions or dreams to go to Jerusalem to search for the True Cross.

⁶⁷ Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, vol. 27; Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 95-97.

⁶⁸ Ambrose's version is conveniently summarized, and discussed in some detail in Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, pp. 109-113.

⁶⁹ Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, pp. 96-108, including summaries of each of the four accounts.

2. After searching for Golgotha, she finds it and orders the statue of [or temple to] Venus destroyed, and finds the tomb and three crosses; it is unclear which one is Christ's cross.
3. Through the intervention, prayers, and actions of Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, a dying noblewoman is healed by the True Cross and it is thus identified.
4. Part of the Cross remains in Jerusalem in a silver casket, and part goes to the imperial house; the nails used in the crucifixion become a part of Constantine's helmet and bridle.
5. She builds a great church at Golgotha.
6. Helena invites the holy virgins of Jerusalem to a banquet, and acts as their servant at said banquet.⁷⁰

Some of the changes in the Syriac redaction appear to arise from the change of narrative context from the fourth to the first century, but others are reflective of fifth-century Syriac expectations. The Protonike redaction retains the basic structure of the Helena story, but changes the female characters at almost every turn.

1. Protonike, wife of Claudius, is moved by pious desire to go to Jerusalem with her children after being converted by Simon Peter; she meets James, the leader of the Jerusalem church.

⁷⁰ In contrast to Drijvers, Stephan Borgehammar offers a well-documented and argued 'paraphrase' of Gelasius' version; this summary is based on that account and the two surviving versions which clearly predate the Protonike story – Rufinus, ca. 402, and Socrates, from 338-443. (Dates from Drijvers, *Helena*, pp. 100, 102.) See Stephan Borgehammar, "How the Holy Cross was Found" (*Bibliotheca Theologiae Practicae, Kyrkovetenskapliga studier* 47; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991), pp. 31-55.

2. She goes to the tomb [no signs or excavations are necessary] and finds three crosses.
3. Her 'virgin daughter' dies at that very instant, and Protonike prays for forgiveness; her son suggests that she touch his sister with the crosses, thus resurrecting her and identifying the True Cross.
4. She gives the Cross to James, to be kept in 'great honor.'
5. She builds a great church at Golgotha.
6. She displays her unveiled, resurrected daughter so that 'all the people might see her and glorify God.'⁷¹

Notice those changes not necessitated by the shift from the fourth to the first century: Protonike, unlike Helena, travels with family members; she does not need either to search at length or to order the destruction of pagan structures in order to find the Cross; her daughter, rather than a noblewoman, is resurrected rather than being merely healed; as a part of this episode, Protonike prays for forgiveness because she in the past "worshipped creatures instead of you," and her suffering and lamenting are emphasized; also, it is her son rather than the bishop of Jerusalem who suggests that the crosses be touched to his dead sister; and, the entire 'holy virgins' episode is missing.

The Protonike redaction gives us a woman who always speaks and acts in a familial context, and who is not as authoritative as her textual model. This Syriac

⁷¹ Text available, the Syriac of ms. Leningrad N.S. 4 (sixth century) and a facing English translation, in George Howard, *The Teaching of Addai* (Texts and Translations 16, Early Christian Literature Series 4; Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1981), pp. 21-35. There is also a fragment of a fifth-century ms., BL Add. 14, 654, fol. 33, and another sixth-century ms., BL Add. 14, 644. See Howard, *Teaching*, p. viii.

redaction of the Helena story adds family members and gives them roles in the narrative, notably Protonike's oldest son and her daughter. In fact, while the bishop of Jerusalem was in charge in the cave in the Helena story, here Protonike's son is the one who knows what to do (although Protonike does say the prayers); not only are family members inserted here, at least one of them serves to make Protonike less authoritative than Helena, as she bows to her son's wisdom rather than the bishop's. This loss of authority is supplemented by her self-abasement in the prayers she says in the tomb, not an element present in any of Helena's speeches in the original. Both of these themes recur in the original Syriac compositions.

It is also worth mentioning that while the healed noblewoman of the Greek version is described after her healing as stronger than before and filled with praise for the power of the Cross (although she does not speak),⁷² Protonike's resurrected daughter is shamed by appearing in public unveiled. She does glorify God (also without explicit speech) but there is a distinct difference between Gelasius' once-dying noblewoman – note that she is neither young nor identified as a virgin – running around her house praising God and the Syriac text's once-dead imperial virgin offering thanks and then being paraded through the streets of Jerusalem “without the veil of honor suited for queens.”⁷³

All of these themes are apparent in the indigenous Syriac compositions about women. Protonike's familial context is shared by all but Candida, who is a captive bride of the Persian king, but who still owes her faith to her family. Her comparative lack of authority reflects the situation of the women in the hagiographic accounts.

⁷² See Borgehammar, *Holy Cross*, pp. 54-55.

⁷³ See Borgehammar, *Holy Cross*, pp. 54-55 and Howard, *Teaching*, p. 31.

Her virgin daughter's death and post-resurrection silence is consistent with the tendency in the original Syriac compositions for marriageable virgins to be vulnerable (although her brief death is not sexualized, she is then exposed to public view, a form of violation), to play a lesser and often voiceless role, and with the specific silences of Euphemia and Mary (after their respective salvations) and the virgins in the account of the martyrs of Najran. Given these numerous shared themes, the elimination of the 'holy virgins' of Jerusalem plausibly springs from the same impulse that made the nuns, in their only early Syriac textual appearance, second to widows in the account of the freeborn women martyred at Najran: a preference for household-centered, familial, female religious life.

Much of this stands in contrast to the ideas promoted by Aphrahat and Ephrem, admittedly in large part because they focused on Daughters of the Covenant. Still, the profoundly different ideas about familial religiosity and the preeminence of the virginal Daughters of the Covenant are important and allow us a glimpse of what other ideas about religious women were in circulation in Syriac Christianity in this period. Arguably, since the hagiographic material involves six different sources as opposed to the ideas of just two writers, it may well reflect the expectations, the axiomatic truths, of a larger segment of the Syriac church than the far more prestigious and widely cited materials.

The ideas about women and their religious lives expressed by Aphrahat, Ephrem, and the assorted hagiographic and martyrological writers may help to explain Thecla's apparent popularity in Syriac Christianity. Thecla could easily serve as an exemplar of the religious value of female virginity so consistently valued in the

assorted texts. In addition to the oft-cited admonitions and paeans in praise of virginity in Aphrahat and Ephrem, the hagiographic and martyrological accounts also place a high value on female virginity. Sophia, Euphemia's mother, attempted to preserve her daughter's virginity against the Goth. Mary's loss of her virginity is catastrophic, and she cannot even pray until her uncle Abraham takes her guilt upon himself. Tarbo adamantly and repeatedly refuses to marry to save herself from martyrdom. The martyred queen Candida is presented as a virgin, against all textual logic. Even the accounts of the martyrs of Najran, brief though they are, show indications of a preference for virginity: the handmaids who insist on being executed do so not only to join their "masters and companions," but in also in rejection of the king's offer to free them and marry them off to free-born husbands,⁷⁴ and Ruhm, having rejoiced in her freedom from the woes of marriage, proclaims herself and her three virgin daughters betrothed to Christ. Protonike is certainly not virginal, but the redactor's decision to substitute her virgin daughter's resurrection for the healing of an unspecified noblewoman is notable.

Beyond a shared obsession with virginity, at least three other aspects of Thecla's story would have fit nicely with Syriac expectations as we see them in the paraenetic and hagiographic/martyrological materials. First, the fact that Thecla's trials arose from her rejection of the advances of her fiancé and the nobleman Alexander makes perfect sense to a culture which consistently sees virgins as sexually vulnerable. Remember, it is not merely the virgins' gender which makes them vulnerable, but their innate and nigh-irresistible allure: Euphemia, Mary, Tarbo, and Thecla inflame the desire of men simply because of who they are and how they

⁷⁴ Shahid, Martyrs, p.54.

look. This emphasis on ‘female magnetism’ speaks not only to the constant danger they face, but also to their essentially gendered nature. Second, the repeated representation of virgins as generally lacking in volition, entirely guided by and subject to their relatives, would likely appear to a Syriac reader to be echoed in Thecla’s determined fidelity and obedience to Paul.

Finally, the marked and consistent preference in the narrative accounts for familial settings for religious activity suggests that Thecla’s rejection of home and family would have been a matter of note for a sixth-century Syriac audience. If, that is, they read the story in that way. If we read the Acts of Thecla under the assumption that female religious activity takes place in a familial context, as a Syriac reader would have, things look decidedly different.

Thecla does leave her home and her mother, but she finds a new mother in Tryphaena, who not only “kept her in purity,” as the Syriac emphasizes, but also called Thecla “daughter.” In a Syriac context, Thecla actually serves to demonstrate the importance of family in female religious activity.

This familial emphasis is accomplished by emphasizing Tryphaena’s maternal function, and inserting references to maternal emotions and speech. The Greek twice mentions Tryphaena keeping Thecla “pure;” the Syriac keeps those instances and adds another to Tryphaena keeping Thecla in purity, *ܕܘܟܘܢܐ ܡܝܗܝܘܢܐ*.⁷⁵ The Syriac also adds two references to Tryphaena weeping for Thecla, *ܕܘܟܘܢܐ ܕܘܟܘܢܐ*

⁷⁵ The Greek Acts of Thecla are edited in R.A. Lipsius and M. Bonnet, eds., *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1891), 235-272. The Syriac text is edited in William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, Edited From Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*. Vol. II, *The Syriac Texts* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1871), 128-169. The instances in the Greek are: Lipsius, 255.2, 258.5; Syriac, Wright, *Acts*, 150.12, 155.8, adding 165.13. (Indicating the third line of the page; this convention will be followed in all references to edited texts and to manuscript pages.)

ܚܠܝܢ,⁷⁶ emphasizing her attachment to Thecla and consequent grief, and twice has Tryphaena refer to Thecla as “my daughter,” ܕܝܘܬܝ,⁷⁷ an appellation not present in the Greek original.

These small changes seem unimportant and uninformative until considered in light of Syriac ideas about religious women, and, more importantly, until the translation itself is recognized as a stage in the reception-history of the Acts of Thecla in Syriac Christianity. It is a textual act no less informative than the de novo construction of a sermon or hagiographic narrative, and when considered as such, the Syriac translation emerges as a version, an interpretation, showing not only small changes of the sort described here, but a larger pattern of changes clearly made in aid of specific readings of Thecla’s story. That pattern of changes is the subject of chapter three.

⁷⁶ Wright, Acts, 151.11, 153.12.

⁷⁷ Wright, Acts, 163.16 (both occurrences).

CHAPTER THREE

Translation as Reception: Thecla in Greek and Syriac

The first part of the reception-history of Thecla in Syriac is the translation of her story from the original Greek into Syriac, thus making it available to a Syriac audience. Since the surviving texts of Syriac Thecla ranging from the sixth to the twelfth century are closely congruent,⁷⁸ I suggest that there was only one Syriac translation of Thecla in circulation in this period.

That translation is rather loose, with numerous insertions and shifts in meaning from the Greek original; this suggests an early date. As Sebastian Brock has established, “early Syriac translations from Greek are free to a surprising degree. They are essentially reader-oriented, and can all be classed as either expositional or tendential in character.”⁷⁹ That is, they are loose translations more interested in dynamic equivalence - conveying accurately the meaning behind the Greek - than in the literal translation of the words, and may in fact include the insertion of ideas which appear foreign to the original text.⁸⁰ This textual freedom is

⁷⁸ Wright used four of the six manuscripts in his edition of the Syriac text (Wright, *Apocryphal Acts*, vol.1), and Professor Van Rompay kindly provided me with a film of ms. Deir al-Surian 28b, including both Daniel and the unpublished text of the Acts of Thecla. The 8th century text in ms. Deir al-Surian 27b remains unpublished; while not considered here, it will be included in my forthcoming translation and edition of Syriac Thecla, updating Wright’s edition to take it, and the Daniel-Thecla manuscript discussed below in this chapter, into account.

⁷⁹ Sebastian Brock, “Towards A History of Syriac Translation Technique,” in René Lavenant, ed., *III Symposium Syriacum, 1980* (OCA 221; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1983), 10.

somewhat less apparent in the sixth century, and by the seventh century, is gone, and “mirror” translations are the standard. The translators attempt “to take the reader to the original by offering him a reading which reflects as many details of the Greek source text as possible...he adopts a totally self-effacing attitude toward the authority of the original.”⁸¹ So, the presence of numerous alterations and insertions in the Syriac text of Thecla places it, as a translation, in or even before Brock’s earliest period, the fourth/fifth centuries.

The fact that Thecla is mentioned, briefly, twice in the late fourth to early fifth centuries in Syriac literature also indicates that her story was available in Syriac at an early date. The late fourth-century Syriac *Liber Graduum* names Thecla as an example of humble endurance in the face of familial hostility to one’s faith,⁸² and in fact, certain features of the Syriac translation suggest shared interests with the community of the *Liber Graduum*, although other features make it clear that the translation is not a product of it. Rabbula, the early fifth-century bishop of Edessa whose rules and *Life* are a part of the *Book of Women* manuscript, refers in a letter to the purchase of bread and herbs to feed Paul and the other believers whom Thecla encounters after her first trial, but does not refer to her by name.⁸³ Neither

⁸⁰ Brock, “Toward A History,” 4-5. Three more essays by Brock on Greek-Syriac translations, all from the 1970’s, are in his collection, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (Collected Studies 199; Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1984). Also of interest is Lionel Wickham, “Translation Techniques Greek/Syriac and Syriac/English” in René Lavenant, ed., *V Symposium Syriacum 1988* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 236; Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990), 345-353.

⁸¹ Brock, “Toward A History,” 12-13.

⁸² Robert Kitchen, *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2004), 306. Kitchen provides a brief historical introduction and discussion of the manuscript tradition, xiii-lxxxiii, as well as an English translation. Kyle Smith, in a forthcoming paper, argues that the *Liber Graduum* may in fact be as late as the early fifth century.

reference is accompanied by any recounting of her story, indicating that her story was known to the respective audiences of those texts as well as the writers, meaning that there was a Syriac translation of Thecla's story in circulation by the late fourth century/early fifth century.

The identification of numerous differences between the Greek and the Syriac Acts of Thecla fits with the evidence of an early date for Syriac Thecla already suggested by the Liber Graduum and Rabbula's letter; this, however, is not the most interesting result of the close comparison of the Greek and the Syriac. It is the nature of the changes that make Syriac Thecla a distinct version, not just a translation, of the Acts of Thecla.

An Acculturated Translation

My interest in Syriac Thecla is not in the language, but in the contents. My approach, therefore, was to compare the texts in detail, compiling a roster of changes, and then analyzing those changes or redactions. I looked for substantive changes, by which I mean, lengthy insertions/deletions, repeated shifts/expansions of meaning, or strikingly odd insertions or changes. This yielded a list of changes which, while not exhaustive, does serve to highlight the general characteristics and tendencies of the version.

⁸³ Discussed in Walter Bauer, Der Apostolos der Syrer in der Zeit von der Mitte des vierten Jahrhunderts bis der Spaltung der syrischen Kirche (Giessen, 1903), 19-21. The Syriac letters are available in J. Joseph Overbeck, ed., S. Ephraem Syri, Rabulae Episcopi Edesseni, Balaei, Aliorumque Opera Selecta (Oxford: Clarendon, 1865), 222-238, transcribed from the sixth or seventh century ms. BL Add. 17,202, folios 182-185; the relevant passage is on 237 at lines 10-12. Manuscript described in Wright, Catalogue, III, 1046-1061. Rabbula's knowledge of Thecla will be discussed further in chapter seven.

For instance, the difference between Paul’s going to Iconium “after his flight from Antioch,” in the Greek, and “after his persecution” ܡܫܘܚܘܬܝܗ ܝܬܘܢ in the Syriac,⁸⁴ is not significant because both the city of Antioch and Paul fleeing something occur later in the text, and the word “persecution” does not. In contrast, the fact that the Syriac has Onesimus not only go and look for Paul, as the Greek, but has him go and stand, repeated in the next phrase as “standing and waiting,” is, on further inspection, quite suggestive.

Various forms of the Syriac ܡܫܘܚ, meaning “rise” and “stand,” appear thirty-five times in the text, most of them without any direct parallel action in the Greek. This matters, because ܡܫܘܚ is the root for ܡܫܘܚܝܗ, “covenant,” as in “Daughters of the Covenant,” the Syriac proto-monastic religious order discussed in the previous chapter. No one in the Syriac text is referred to as a Daughter (or a Son) of the Covenant, but a Syriac reader or audience would have seen or heard the association. Whether this is a conscious, deliberate change in order to encourage the association of the Thecla or her story with the Daughters of the Covenant is unclear, but, having observed this verbal predilection in the Syriac, we can say that it allows the audience a specific ideological linkage with a local form of regulated ascetic life and may suggest such a linkage in the mind of the translator. At least one other Syriac tradition of the fourth century, that of the Edessan martyrs Shmona, Guria, and Habib, uses this kind of verbal allusion to link the martyrs to the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Lipsius, 235.1-2; Wright, Acts, 128.1-2.

This implicit linkage to proto-monastic life fits with the second notable tendency of the Syriac text, to negate any potentially “romantic” readings or elements of the story. Thecla and Paul are never alone together in the Syriac – this is done so consistently, and explicitly, as to be a deliberate emphasis. When Thecla goes to visit Paul in prison, the jailer takes her in to Paul, and she listens to his teaching with “everyone who was with him,” while the Greek mentions neither accompaniment or companions,⁸⁶ and has a parallel insertion shortly later, when Thecla’s family finds her “and many people”⁸⁷ in the prison with Paul, none of whom are mentioned in the Greek or seem a logical part of Thecla’s secret nighttime visit to Paul. While one could argue that the Syriac in these instances is simply taking account of the many women in both the Syriac and the Greek who have been going to hear Paul preach, since the same difference is apparent in the two other instances in which the Greek appears to have Paul and Thecla alone, it seems more likely that this is a distinct interest or emphasis in the Syriac. First, when Thecla is reunited with Paul after her miraculous survival in Iconium, he sends Onesiphorus and his family home, and then the two of them go to Antioch. The Syriac has Paul, Thecla, “and those people with him”⁸⁸ go to Antioch. Later, after Thecla has again

⁸⁵ Discussed in Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “The Edessan Martyrs and Ascetic Tradition,” in René Lavenant, ed., V Symposium Syriacum (OCA 236; Roma: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990), 195-206. See esp. 199-200. The martyrs’ stories are preserved as two texts, the Acts of Shmona and Guria and the Acts of Habib. See F.C. Burkitt, The Acts of the Edessan Martyrs Guria and Shmona, and Habib, and the Story of Their Deliverance of Euphemia (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007; facsimile reprint of idem, Euphemia and the Goth {London: Williams and Norgate, 1913}).

⁸⁶ Lipsius, 247.10-11; Wright, Acts, 143.3. As Wright’s edition of the Syriac is based on the text of Thecla in the Book of Women manuscript, I will refer to that edition here.

⁸⁷ Lipsius, 248.5-6; Wright, Acts, 143.16.

⁸⁸ Wright, Acts, 149.1.

miraculously survived, and been reunited with Paul once more, he takes her hand and leads her to the house of Hermias and listens to all things from her; in the Syriac, he takes her and “all the people with her.”⁸⁹

There is also a greater tendency toward dialogue in the Syriac. Even minor characters, such as the slave who informs on the doorkeeper and the unnamed persons who search for Paul after Thecla’s adventures in Antioch, speak in the Syriac. Some of those who do speak in the Greek speak more in the Syriac: the Antiochene governor speaks both earlier and more, Tryphaena speaks at more length, Thecla says a long prayer in the arena and speaks at more length before the governor, to Tryphaena, and to her mother, and the Antiochene women who object to her treatment speak more. These additions are generally either restatements of what has happened earlier in the narrative, or a simple switch from exposition to dialogue,⁹⁰ and are consistent with the tendency in Syriac Christian literature to provide dramatic dialogue, particularly for women.⁹¹

These are not the only insertions in the Syriac text. In at least four places, references to the “commandments of God,” ܠܡܠܟܐ ܕܥܡܪܘܩܐ, have been added to the text; in five more, “word of Christ” or “word of God” has been changed to “commandments of God.”⁹² The changes must be deliberate, rather than a less-

⁸⁹ Wright, *Acts*, 165.3-4.

⁹⁰ There is also apparent recourse to formulaic speech such as “Our Father who art in heaven,” as opposed to “Father of Christ” in the Greek. This is not a doctrinally motivated difference, since only a few lines later Paul does refer to the “father of our Lord Jesus the messiah.” Wright, *Acts*, 147.11-12 and 148.1-2; Lipsius, 252.4.

⁹¹ Discussed in Susan Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence: Biblical Women in Syriac Tradition,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9.1(2001): 105-131.

than-obvious word choice, since the Greek “word” is translated as *ܠܗܘܘܬܐ*, “word,” in several places in the translation, including instances of “word of God,” *ܠܘܓܘܟܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ*, as simply *ܠܘܓܘܟܝܘܬܐ*, “word of God.”⁹³ This, in conjunction with the translator’s closing blessing on “those who keep his commandments in purity,” *ܠܗܘܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ*,⁹⁴ could suggest affinities with the Liber Graduum, the teachings of which concern “...how one can distinguish Perfection from Righteousness, so that one will be Perfect by the great commandments but [merely] Righteous by the small,” *ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ*.⁹⁵

This shared focus on the commandments of God is, however, the extent of the affinity between the texts. In fact, one occurrence of “commandments of God” in the translation of Thecla strongly suggests that the texts cannot have been products of the same community. The translator’s blessing, quoted in the previous paragraph, commends those who keep the commandments “in purity,” *ܠܗܘܘܬܐ*, where we would expect “in perfection,” *ܕܥܠܡܝܘܬܐ* if he were a part of the community of the Liber Graduum. Thecla does, in her final prayer, only a few lines

⁹² Additions in the Syriac, Wright, *Acts*, 143.2, 144.7, 165.10, 167.3. Changes, 134.7, 164.4,13;166.1,9 (twice on each of the latter two pages).

⁹³ Wright, *Acts*,132.9, 168.9; Lipsius,239.3 and 269.6.

⁹⁴ Wright, *Acts*, 169.1-2.

⁹⁵ My translation, using only half of the terminology for the two groups suggested by Kitchen, *Book of Steps*,x-xi. The Syriac is from Lionel Wickham, “The ‘Liber Graduum Revisited,” in René Lavenant, ed., *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992* (OCA 247; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1994),179, from Bibliothèque Nationale Syr. 201, as the edition of Kmosko used by Kitchen for his translation has proven elusive (Michael Kmosko, ed., *Liber Graduum* [Patrologia Syriaca 1/3; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1926]).

before the blessing, mention the ones who keep commandments “in righteousness,” ܠܗܘܪܘܫܝܢܐ, but no form of “Perfect,” ܠܡܫܘܠܡܐ, appears in the text. Even if, perhaps, Thecla was not considered to be “Perfect,” surely Paul would have been? Given this absence of the key appellations in the Liber Graduum, the interest in commandments here may simply be that of the Syriac ascetic tradition, echoing the interest in the regulation of ascetic life already discussed in Aphrahat, and also apparent in the monastic rules in the Book of Women manuscript, which are labeled as “commandments.”⁹⁶

The remaining insertions into the text make the distinction between the translator’s context and assumptions and those of the community behind the Liber Graduum even clearer. When Thecla’s bonds are burned away and she springs up as though she had never been bound to the bulls in the Antioch arena, the Syriac adds, “as if she felt no pain,” ܠܡܫܘܠܡܐ ܕܠܗܘܪܘܫܝܢܐ. ⁹⁷ This singular addition is part of a larger pattern in the Syriac, discussed below, but is relevant here in that it simultaneously speaks to the early date of the translation and moves it away from the teachings of the Liber Graduum. That text calls upon the Perfect to imitate Christ with, among other things, “powerful crying out with many tears, much supplication and with the sweat of afflictions,”⁹⁸ and Syriac martyrologies, as early as

⁹⁶ Adam Lehto has recently considered Aphrahat’s understanding of “commandments” and “the law,” in “Moral, Ascetic, and Ritual Dimensions to Law-Observance in Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*,” Journal of Early Christian Studies 14/2(2006):157-181. Naomi Koltun-Fromm considered Aphrahat’s view of ascetic obligations more broadly in “Yokes of the Holy-Ones: The Embodiment of a Christian Vocation,” Harvard Theological Review 94/2(2001):205-218.

⁹⁷ Wright, Acts, 160.16-17.

⁹⁸ Liber Graduum, 20; Kitchen, 217. See also Robert A. Kitchen, “The Gattung of the Liber Graduum. Implications For A Sociology of Asceticism,” in HJW Drijvers et al, eds., IV Symposium Syriacum

the fifth-century accounts mentioned above, see pain and the endurance of it as having a positive value. This idea becomes even more prevalent in Syriac Christian literature as time goes on.⁹⁹

The insertion of four references to the “strength (or power) God gave to her,” ܠܟܘܢܐ ܕܥܡܘܩܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ,¹⁰⁰ further demonstrates that the real affinity here is to martyrological texts rather than the Liber Graduum, as that text is concerned with discernment and knowledge rather than strength or power. Martyrological texts, however, do remark upon the strength with which the martyrs endure their assorted tortures; that this is what the strength or power in the Syriac is echoing is made clear by the last of the four additions of the idea, into Thecla’s final speech as the climactic phrase – “my God and my Lord helped me and gave me the power to endure all these things,” ܠܟܘܢܐ ܕܥܡܘܩܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ – makes it clear that this martyr’s strength is the strength being attributed to Thecla, and emphasizes that her strength and her status are a result of her afflictions, a common theme in martyrological literature.

Finally, while the translator’s choice to use ܠܟܘܢܐ for “stranger” – a loan-word originally transliterated from the Greek ξένος – rather than the native Syriac ܠܟܘܢܐ might at first appear to strengthen the alignment of interests between Syriac Thecla and the Liber Graduum, given recent discussions linking both Thecla and the

1984: *Literary Genres in Syriac Literature*” (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 229; Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 173-182.

⁹⁹ The endurance of pain is an important theme in martyrological literature in general; for a recent and insightful analysis of this theme, see Brent Shaw, “Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4/3(1996):269-312.

¹⁰⁰ Wright, *Acts*, 152.1-2, 163.2-3, 165.5-6, and 168.5-6.

community of the Liber Graduum to the itinerant Christians called “strangers,” ξενοι or ܩܚܘܒܐ,¹⁰¹ it does not. Apart from the fact that the Liber Graduum does not appear to actually use the term, at least one Syriac text of the period does use ܩܚܘܒܐ in a context that clearly means simply stranger as in foreign or unknown, without any religious connotations. The fifth-century “History of Euphemia,” discussed in the previous chapter, refers to the thoroughly and unrepentantly villainous soldier who tricks Euphemia into a false marriage as ܩܚܘܒܐ.¹⁰² Absent any indication that the term was used or understood in the translation in that way, or that the Syriac shows a greater interest in “strangers,” this is simply a natural use of the closest parallel word by the translator.

The Syriac translation of the Acts of Thecla witnesses three related interests or assumptions. First, a verbal linkage of Thecla to the Daughters of the Covenant – perhaps not demanded by the translation, but at least licensed. Second, a strong interest in the “commandments of God,” which in the context of the story appear to have a renunciatory, ascetic tone, considering Paul’s ascetic reworking of the Beatitudes, and Thecla’s determined defense of her virginity. Third, it grants Thecla a greater voice and explicitly grants her strength in and through her endurance, which reinforces her status as an almost-martyr. The martyrological emphasis may

¹⁰¹ Thecla as ξενη, and discussion of her as an apostolic wanderer, Steven J. Davis, The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women’s Piety in Late Antiquity (Oxford Early Christian Studies; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001),22-26; “strangers”/ܩܚܘܒܐ in the Acts of Thomas and then generalized to cover the Liber Graduum, see Daniel Caner, Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage XXXIII; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002),57-82 and 106-112.

¹⁰² Burkitt, The Acts of Guria and Shmona; Syriac,53. Interestingly, in the fourth century, Aphrahat uses ܩܚܘܒܐ in urging the Sons of the Covenant to be “strangers to the world just as the messiah was not of it [the world].” Demonstration Six, I. Parisot, ed., Aphraatis Demonstrationes I-XXII (Patrologia Syriaca 1/1; Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1894), col.241.

also be apparent in her verbal association with the Daughters of the Covenant. Each of these themes in the translation can be explained by the interests and assumptions apparent in other Syriac texts.

I would characterize the Syriac translation as a close relative of the “ascetic translations” discussed by Elizabeth Clark,¹⁰³ here giving the text a Syriac tenor in the process of translation. Naturally enough, given the nature of early Syriac Christianity, this acculturated translation retains and refines the ascetic tenor of the original, but as it exhibits an absence of explicatory or argumentative material, it is not quite the same sort of activity engaged in by her ascetic translators. They are, as she makes clear, engaging in innovative translation as a part of their larger exegetical project of promoting the ascetic ideal, while the changes and interpolations discussed thus far seem to focus on making the text intelligible to a Syriac audience. To revert to Brock’s terminology, described above, this appears to be an expositional translation, as opposed to the translations produced by Clark’s ascetics, which would fall into his category of tendential translations.

As such, the Syriac translation seems more like the scribal activities discussed by Bart Ehrman in The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture than Clark’s ascetic translators. Ehrman’s scribes, as he establishes by an analysis which sorts out changes by their apparent concern with one of four separate Christological controversies, changed texts in pursuit of more-obviously orthodox texts. His study focuses on deliberately polemical changes, parallel to Clark’s ascetic translators, but emphasizes that “these scribes knew exactly what the text said, or thought they

¹⁰³ Elizabeth Clark, Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 113-118.

knew (which for our purposes comes to the same thing), and that the changes they made functioned to make these certain meanings all the more certain.”¹⁰⁴ I would expand that assertion to include translators, and add that those changes are not always conscious choices, but may be automatic expressions of unexamined assumptions in early Syriac Christianity. Those, I suspect, are the sorts of changes addressed thus far.

I have followed a variant of Ehrman’s approach to scribal changes in scriptural texts: after establishing the original or earlier form of the text, he then evaluated variations from that version in relationship to the christological controversies of the third/fourth centuries.¹⁰⁵ As I am dealing with a translation from a Greek original into Syriac, I have used the available reconstruction of the Greek, and have evaluated the changes in light of Syriac Christian interests and ideas as we see them in the early Syriac literature. This, however, has only accounted for some of the changes in the Syriac version. Like Ehrman’s scribal changes, the changes in the Syriac version arise from more than one concern or idea.

It is not, however, likely that the different sorts of changes indicate the ongoing activity of multiple scribes, working separately, with separate interests, as his changes do. These changes, based on the pattern of their survival, seem to be the result of the original translator’s intervention. In this chapter, seventy-two changes, which include the lengthy, striking, and repeated changes in Syriac Thecla, will be discussed; of those, sixty-nine are present in the sixth-century Book of

¹⁰⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 280.

¹⁰⁵ Succinctly stated on p.31 of Orthodox Corruption.

Instances of adding references to others with them when Paul and Thecla would appear, in the Greek, to be alone together.

143.3	115r.11
143.16	115v.12
149.1	119r.16
165.3-4	128v.2-3

Instances of inserted or expanded prayers by Thecla

156.6-11	123r.16-123v.3
166.14 – 167.3	129v.5-9
168.1-6	130r.2-13

Instances of $\epsilon\kappa\tau\epsilon\lambda\lambda\alpha\sigma\sigma\epsilon\iota\varsigma$, $\tau\omicron\upsilon\lambda\alpha\kappa\tau\omicron\upsilon\sigma$, “commandments of God”

134.2	change	110v.8
143.2	addition	115r.10
144.7	addition	116r.7
164.4,13	change	127v.20, 128r.14
165.10	addition	128v.16
166.1,9	change	129r.15,17
167.3	addition	129v.9

References to the $\delta\upsilon\lambda\alpha\mu\iota\alpha$, “power” in/given to Thecla

152.1-2	121r.4
163.2-3	127r.12-13
165.5-6	128v.7-8
168.6	130r.12-13

Changes assimilating Thecla’s story to the book of Daniel

133.13	an upper window	110r.16-17
146.7-8	her hair is not singed	117r.19-20
146.12	onlookers perish	117v.6

148.4-5	“deliver those who praise you”	118v.12-14
150.7,12	“be thrown to the beasts”	120r.8,16
153.2-3	“	121v.10
153.14	“be devoured”	122r.17
155.3	“	122v.12
158.14	“	124v.8
160.4	“	125r.19
161.11	“	126r.13
160.16-17	as if she felt no pain	125v.19-20
162.6	Son of God beside her	126v.11-12

Insertions downplaying Thecla’s femininity

148.11-13	“become mad after men” in Greek, omitted from Syriac	119r.5-7
149.8-9	“if indeed she is a woman” added	119v.7-8
164.9-10	(added to dressing herself like a man)...”and she girded her loins like a man.” Not in Wright’s C, ms. BL Add.12,174 of the 10 th /11 th century	Not in manuscript.

Only two of the changes are omitted from any of the manuscripts, and only one of those is omitted from two manuscripts. There is simply not enough variation in the survival of the changes to argue for more than one source, more than one translator/editor. If multiple people made changes promoting their cultural, homiletic, or other interests, whether they made them in the process of translation or of later copying, we should not see this kind of uniform survival. Its presence suggests, in the strongest terms, a single source for all of these manuscripts. The alternative is that five scribes, over the course of about six centuries, all copied from the same now-lost original, and that that lost original combined the work of at least three

translators and textually-active (inclined to alteration) scribes, whose separate works are also now lost.

Do notice that no one manuscript lacks both changes which were on occasion omitted, no manuscript lacks more than one of the changes, and that the omitted changes are not the only instances of the promotion of that idea. The absence of one of 35 instances of the verb ܩܪܥ in one of the manuscripts is probably indicative of nothing more than a slip of the pen, and the phrase emphasizing Thecla's male appearance, absent from two manuscripts, is far weaker in its effect than the phrase, "if indeed she is a woman," which is present in all five of the manuscripts. Absent any evidence of such an unlikely combination of circumstances, I posit one translator, who adapted the Greek Acts of Thecla to reflect Syriac ideas and interests, perhaps thinking of those changes as in aid of nothing more than easy comprehension by a Syriac audience.

These changes, adapting the Greek ascetically-inclined story to reflect what a Syriac reader would "know" about an ascetically-inclined story, are easily explicable by recourse to the cultural context of the translation. This, however, accounts for only some of the changes in the Syriac version. When we consider the still-unexplained changes not merely in light of textual history, but also of manuscript history, these changes further support, and follow from, the translator's already-apparent martyrological reading of Thecla's story. S/he also promoted a particular understanding of Thecla's story by creating an intertextual translation, and emphasized at least one of the potential consequences of that choice, further refining the kind of 'holy woman' presented to the Syriac audience.

An Intertextual Translation

Most of the remaining changes seem, on first inspection, to be small and, frankly, unimportant. Taken singly, and without consideration of the manuscript tradition of Syriac Thecla, they could be dismissed as clarification and repetition of episodes in the Greek original, with a couple of oddities, not terribly uncommon in ancient texts.¹⁰⁶ Does it matter that in the Syriac, Tryphaena the queen speaks of Thecla going to the beasts to be eaten, rather than to fight them, or that the window where Thecla listens to Paul is “close under the roof” in the Syriac? It does. These, and other changes, indicate that Syriac Thecla is an intertextual translation, deliberately read with, and into, the book of Daniel, and recognizing this helps to explain the last of the changes.

So far as possible, the evidence for this assertion will be presented following the order of the changes in Syriac Thecla. The reader should bear in mind that no single change will be presented as sufficient to prove the case; it is the cumulative effect of the changes that demonstrates the linkage of the text of Syriac Thecla with the text of Syriac Daniel.

There are seven changes reflecting some degree of assimilation of Thecla’s story to the book of Daniel:

¹⁰⁶ Taken singly, they could also be read as anaphoric transformations, “whereby a [target language] element seems to be a rendering of [a source language] element elsewhere or is influenced by a related passage in the same book or from a different text.” This phenomenon is discussed by Theodorus Anthonie Willem van der Louw, in “Transformations in the Septuagint. Towards an Interaction of Septuagint Studies and Translation Studies,” [PhD dissertation, Leiden, 2006; now available as Theo A.W. van der Louw, Transformations in the Septuagint: Towards an Interaction of Septuagint Studies and Translation Studies (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 47; Leuven: Peeters, 2007)]. Since Syriac Thecla presents a pattern of changes relating to one other text, this is something more, a fully intertextual translation.

1. The window from which Thecla listens to Paul, which is merely “close by” in the Greek, is clarified as “near to their roof,” ܕܝܘܡܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ . ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ (Lipsius,240.8-9; Wright, Acts, 133.13)
2. While Thecla is untouched by the fire in both accounts, in the Syriac, that is expanded to include the fact that “not even one part of her hair was singed,” $\text{ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ}$. (Lipsius,250.10; Wright, Acts,146.7-8)
3. Many of the people watching, expecting to see Thecla burn at the stake, are endangered by the miraculous hailstorm in the Greek, but in the Syriac, they “perish,” ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ . (Lipsius,250.12-251.1; Wright, Acts,146.12)
4. When Paul gives thanks at being reunited with Thecla after she has been saved from the fire, the Syriac expands the prayer to include the assertion that for God, “it is an easy thing to deliver from all distress one who praises thy name forever,” $\text{ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ}$. (Lipsius,252.10; Wright, Acts,148.4-5)
5. In the Greek, Thecla is described as engaged in a “fight” θηριομαξέω , with the beasts, θηρία , twice in Antioch. In the Syriac, she also encounters the beasts twice. The governor similarly decrees “that they should throw her to the beasts,” $\text{ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܘܨܝܢܐ}$, and the phrase is repeated once more in reference to Thecla’s first encounter with the beasts, and one final time in Tryphaea’s first comment about her

upcoming second encounter with the beasts. Then, a few lines later, Tryphaena mourns because the beasts are going to devour, ܘܚܝܠܐ, Thecla. This verb is then used four more times to describe her presumptive fate in her second encounter with the beasts, despite the fact that there is not one single reference to Thecla's peril as that of being eaten in the Greek. (Lipsius,255.2, 256.6, 257.5, 258.1; Wright, Acts,150.7, 12;153.2-3; then, referring to second encounter,153.14; 155.3;158.14; 160.4; 161.11)

6. When Thecla is bound between the bulls in Antioch, she is miraculously freed in both accounts, and is as if she had not been bound in both, but the Syriac adds that it was though she had no pain, ܘܠܐ ܚܘܒܐ ܕܠܐ ܚܘܒܐ ܘܦܘܠܐ. (Lipsius,262.5; Wright, Acts,160.16-17)
7. In the Greek, after her final triumph in Antioch the governor asks her “what is there about you” that saved her, ܛܝܘܐ ܛܐ ܦܝܪܝ ܫܝܥ; in the Syriac, he asks her “who was with you,” ܘܚܝܠܐ ܚܘܒܐ ܘܦܘܠܐ. In the Greek, she responds that she believed in the Son of God, and so the beasts did not touch her, and in the Syriac, she responds that “the one beside me was the Son of the living God,” ܘܚܝܠܐ ܚܘܒܐ ܘܦܘܠܐ ܘܚܝܠܐ ܚܘܒܐ. (Lipsius,263.6; Wright, Acts,162.6)

The fact that one of the two sixth-century Syriac Thecla manuscripts pairs her with Daniel¹⁰⁷ means that this codicological pairing or placement is just as likely to have been the original codicological context for Syriac Thecla as the Book of Women; of course, both contexts could reflect later choices. Since, however, the changes listed above echo passages from the book of Daniel with the apocryphal additions,¹⁰⁸ as we have it in the sixth-century manuscript, I will argue that Syriac Thecla first travelled with the book of Daniel. It is, in fact, intertextual with the book of Daniel, and the Greek Acts of Thecla may perhaps have reached Syria in a manuscript that placed the two together. The latter claim is based not on the survival of such a manuscript in Syriac, but on the progression of the changes in the text.

The first four changes listed above seem minor when taken singly. Still, consider the following. Thecla's roof-adjacent window is rather like the Jerusalem-facing windows in Daniel's "upper room," ܠܘܠܐ in the text of Daniel preserved in the sixth-century manuscript.¹⁰⁹ Her unsinged hair is quite like that of the three young men of whom it is observed when they emerge from the furnace, "the hair of their heads was not singed," ܘܝܘܕܝܪ ܕܠܘܟܠܝܢ ܠܝܘܫܐ.¹¹⁰ The death of some of those watching Thecla in the fire sounds quite like the Chaldeans who are near the furnace and die in the apocryphal expansion of the account of the three young men,

¹⁰⁷ Ms. Deir al-Surian 28b, described in the introduction.

¹⁰⁸ Not, however, including Susanna.

¹⁰⁹ Daniel 6:10; folio 82r.6-17 in ms. Deir al-Surian 28b. All manuscript references for Daniel and the apocryphal additions are to this manuscript.

¹¹⁰ Daniel 3:27; folio 74r.15-16.

as do the men who put the young men into the furnace in the canonical text of Daniel.¹¹¹ Finally, Paul thanks God for delivering Thecla from the fire, as He easily delivers those who praise him forever, which seems to echo the ideas in the closing lines of the young men's prayer, "...sing praise to him and highly exalt him forever...from the midst of the fire he has delivered us...sing praise to him and give thanks to him for his mercy endures forever," although the phrasing is not similar, and the passages share only the verb **שׁבַח**.¹¹²

There is nothing startling about any of these changes; none of them, taken singly, strongly suggest a link to the book of Daniel. Each could be simple clarification, and even with four of these small echoes, the relationship between the texts is tenuous at best. We still, however, have three more changes to consider, and these make the linkage clear.

The change from Thecla fighting the beasts to Thecla going to be devoured by the beasts suddenly makes sense when read in conjunction with Daniel, who goes into a lions' den twice. In the first episode, Daniel (and then his accusers) are thrown to the lions,¹¹³ using the verb, **לָקַח**, that is used in Thecla's first encounter with the beasts – and remember, the Greek has "fight" rather than "throw." In the second episode, the lions are deprived of food so that "they will devour Daniel," **אֲכָלוּ אֹתוֹ**, and when Daniel's opponents are thrown into the den, they are

¹¹¹ Numbered as Prayer of Azariah 23 in the NRSV, and Daniel 3:22. Both verses would fall into the missing folios of the Daniel-Thecla ms.

¹¹² Prayer of Azariah 66-68, folio 73r.10 - 73v.7.

¹¹³ Daniel 6:16 and 22: folio 83r.14 and 84r.14.

summarily devoured, again using the same verb, ܬܚܪ, ¹¹⁴ that the translator used in Thecla's story.

So, reference to Daniel explains not only the choice to make the second episode involve the danger of being eaten, but also the change from fighting the beasts to being thrown to them, which did not seem significant until Daniel was brought into the conversation. Since the Greek has Thecla fighting in both episodes, and the Syriac changes that to being thrown to the beasts in the first episode and to being (presumably) eaten by the beasts in the second, involving multiple occurrences of both changed descriptions, this appears to be a deliberate assimilation of Thecla's story to Daniel's.

The next change, adding the idea that Thecla was (or, was as if she were) without pain, is admittedly singular and brief. It is important, though, because it is not merely inexplicable without recourse to the book of Daniel, but is actually contradictory to the emphasis on pain and suffering apparent in Syriac martyrdoms. However, both the canonical portion of Daniel and the apocryphal version of the story of Azariah and his companions fit with this representation of Thecla. In the canonical version, Nebuchadnezzar sees them "unbound and walking in the fire, and they are unharmed," ܘܢܚܘܢܘܢ ܘܡܫܘܟܘܢ ܕܢܘܚܐ ܕܢܘܚܐ ܕܢܘܚܐ ܕܢܘܚܐ, and in the apocryphal addition, they have "no pain or distress."¹¹⁵ So, at the only point in Thecla's story when she is described as unbound, she is, in the Syriac, without pain

¹¹⁴ Draco 32 and 42; folio 106v.3 and 107r.18-20.

¹¹⁵ Daniel 3:25 and Prayer of Azariah 27. The former is at folio 73v.16-18. The latter is in the folios missing from the manuscript.

just as the three young men in the book of Daniel are without pain or any harm when they are described as unbound.¹¹⁶

The final change is the most telling. When, in Antioch, the governor asks her who was with her before the beasts, and she replies that the Son of God was beside her, this would appear to be reflection of the appearance of one with the “form of a son of the gods,” *ܩܘܡܐ ܕܒܢܝ ܕܥܠܡܐ* in the furnace with the three young men.¹¹⁷ Neither Thecla nor the governor understands anyone to have been with her in the arena in the Greek.

This insertion of an appearance of “the Son of God” into the story, echoing the one like “a son of the gods” in the story of the three young men, comes quite late in the Syriac story. It follows, in order, four changes which mostly seem to clarify or amplify existing ideas in the Greek, the deliberate distinction between Thecla’s peril in her two beastly ordeals in Antioch in ways directly parallel to Daniel’s two ordeals in the lions’ den, the expansion of the idea that Thecla was not merely miraculously unbound to include being miraculously unharmed (distinctly atypical in Syriac martyrological texts), just as we have it in the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace.

The changes assimilating Thecla’s story to the book of Daniel seem to build in intensity, not merely because of their cumulative effect, but because they become more clearly intentional. After a few small, unsurprising changes which do not seem

¹¹⁶ Both Aphrahat and Ephrem refer to this episode in Daniel. For discussion, see Craig E. Morrison, “The Reception of the Book of Daniel in Aphrahat’s Fifth Demonstration, ‘On Wars,’” *Hugoye* 7/1(2004) and Phil J. Botha, “The Interpretation of Daniel 3 in the Syriac Commentary Ascribed to Ephrem the Syrian,” *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 16(2005):29-53. The latter compares the interpretation of Daniel 3 in the commentary to the references to the same story in Ephrem’s hymns.

¹¹⁷ Daniel 3:25b; folio 74.1.

to change the events or implications of those events, we then have repeated and consistent use of two distinct verbs to differentiate episodes which are not differentiated in the Greek, an addition that is strikingly inexplicable without recourse to Daniel, and finally an apparition of Christ, visible both to Thecla and to the pagan governor. This building intensity or degree of change may indicate that the translator did not begin the translation as a deliberately intertextual act, only choosing to do so after having already begun the translation, perhaps from a Greek manuscript pairing the book of Daniel and the Acts of Thecla.

This is far from certain, of course, but the series of seven changes, two of them occurring more than once, does indicate an assimilation of Thecla's story to the book of Daniel, and this means that it is now possible to support and strengthen the suggestion "that the Daniel-Thecla pairing witnessed only in [ms. Deir al-Surian 28b] was not unique to the writer of that manuscript."¹¹⁸

That suggestion was based on the existence of three sermons involving both Daniel and Thecla, delivered by Severus of Antioch to Syriac audiences in the early years of the sixth century. In the sermon on Thecla, discussed at some length below in chapter four, he compares her suffering to that of the three young men in the furnace, and that of Daniel in the lions' den. The other two sermons¹¹⁹ are not so explicit in their linkage, merely following references to Daniel's perils with mentions of Thecla. The fact that the sermons and the manuscript all date from the sixth century confused the issue – could Severus have inspired such a manuscript pairing

¹¹⁸ Burris and Van Rompay, "Thecla in Syriac Christianity: Preliminary Observations," section 20.

¹¹⁹ Homilies 71 and 75. M. Brière, Les Homiliae Cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche. Homélie LXX à LXXXVI (Patrologia Orientalis 12/1; Paris, 1915), 69 and 130.

by some scribe? Now, though, with evidence that the original Syriac translation of Thecla from the Greek was made with reference to Daniel, was intertextual with Daniel, and a probable date for that translation in the late fourth century, based on the demonstration of its relative freedom, it is clear that the sixth-century Daniel-Thecla manuscript is part of an established tradition of association between the two stories.

That tradition of association appears to be based upon the identification of Thecla as a martyr. The changes in the Syriac version that echo passages in the book of Daniel are all associated with suffering as a result of faith broadly construed (the refusal to worship other gods or to stop praying to God, the destruction of a pagan object of worship): the translation and its intertext serve to emphasize Thecla as a martyr. Moreover, whether as a part of the reason for the selection of Daniel or as a result of the linkage of these texts – the latter seems more likely – the Syriac version also makes Thecla importantly less female.

A Gendered Translation

The last three substantive changes, not readily explicable by recourse to ideas common in late-ancient Syriac Christianity or to themes/episodes/phrases in the book of Daniel, make Thecla less importantly female. First, an omission appears to make her less sexual than in the Greek, then an addition brings her feminine gender into question, and finally, an expansion emphasizes the male appearance she chooses after her final trial and victory in Antioch.

After Thecla is saved from the fire, rejoins Paul, and offers to cut her hair and follow him, he says that he is afraid, because she is beautiful and another

temptation, worse than the first, may come to her, and she might fail, and “become mad after men,” *δειλανδρησης*, and then she responds that if he will only give her the seal of God, nothing will tempt her,¹²⁰ but the Syriac entirely omits any reference to the nature of the temptation/failure, moving directly from her possible failure to withstand temptation to her statement.¹²¹ This makes her less sexual than in the Greek account, removing the idea that she might be tempted by men.

As soon as Paul and Thecla reach Antioch, Alexander is attracted to her, and tries to convince Paul to give her to him. Paul denies knowing her, and apparently flees, as he is next seen in Myra, after she survives her trials in Antioch and goes to find him. All of this is in both the Greek and the Syriac, but the Syriac adds, between “I do not know the woman of whom you speak” and “nor is she mine,” the phrase “if she is a woman as you say,” *ܕܝܘܡܢܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ*.¹²² This addition does seem to bring Thecla’s identity as female into question.

Finally, when Thecla prepares to go and find Paul once again, after her encounters with the beasts in Antioch, the Greek has her wear a cloak altered to look like a man’s. The Syriac keeps this phrase, and adds that she also “girded her loins like a man,” *ܕܘܟܠܘܨܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ ܡܢ ܗܘܢܐ*,¹²³ amplifying the idea that she chose to travel dressed like a man.

Taken together, these additions could signal an even stronger interest in the possibility of effective gender transformation of religious women, so often considered

¹²⁰ Lipsius, 253.6.

¹²¹ Wright, *Acts*, 148.11-13.

¹²² Wright, *Acts*, 149.8-9.

¹²³ Wright, *Acts*, 164.9-10.

in recent discussions.¹²⁴ There is at least one clear reference to a religious woman attempting (unsuccessfully) to live as a man in early Syriac literature, in the fifth-century “History of the Exploits of Bishop Paul of Qanetos and Priest John of Edessa.”¹²⁵ It is also entirely possible that these additions simply reflect the kind of social/cultural discomfort apparent in the addition of other persons to scenes in which Paul and Thecla appear, in the Greek, to be alone together; women ought not, in Syriac hagiography, act as Thecla does, so it was important to establish that she was not merely female.

In any case, the additions downplaying or denying Thecla’s female identity, combined with the translational assimilation of her story to the book of Daniel, suggests that the placement of Syriac Thecla into the Book of Women, grouping her with Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith rather than with Daniel, is a deliberate choice, a change in the way that her story was presented and preserved. That particular choice was not universal. As mentioned above, Severus of Antioch wrote three sermons involving both Daniel and Thecla; in those sermons, he seems to

¹²⁴ In addition to the work on Thecla discussed below, the following consider transgender/transvestite saints more specifically, with or without the inclusion of Thecla. Kristi Upson-Saia, “Making an Appearance: Sexual Renunciation and Gender Revision in the Attire of Early Christian Female Ascetics,” Duke University dissertation, 2006. Willi Braun, “Physiotherapy of Femininity in the Acts of Thecla,” in Stephen J. Wilson and Michel Desjardins, eds., Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity. Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 9; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2000), 209-230. Gillian Cloke, ‘This Female Man of God.’ Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350=450 (New York: Routledge, 1995), especially ch. 4, “Eunuchs for the Love of Heaven.” Anti Marjanen, “Male Women Martyrs: The Function of Gender-Transformation Language in Early Christian Martyrdom Accounts,” in Turid Karlsen Seim and Jorunn Øklund, eds., Metamorphoses. Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity (Ekstasis 1; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 231-247. Karen Jo Torjeson, “Martyrs, Ascetics, and Gnostics. Gender-Crossing in Early Christianity,” in Sabrina P. Ramet, ed., Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives (New York: Routledge, 1996), 79-91. Patricia Cox Miller, “Is there a Harlot in This Text? Hagiography and the Grotesque,” Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 33/3(2003): 419-435.

¹²⁵ See Kyle Smith, “Dendrites and Other Standers in *History of the Exploits of Bishop Paul of Qanetos and Priest John of Edessa*,” Hugoye 12/1:117-134, especially 124-125.

know, and to assume his audience knows, Thecla as a Christian counterpart of Daniel. Two other early Syriac texts invoke Thecla; one may also be aware of the Daniel-Thecla pairing, while the other shows no indications of such an awareness. These references, entirely separate from the line of reception preserved in the Book of Women collection and manuscript, nonetheless help to illuminate the Book of Women, and are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Composition as Reception: Elite and Non-Elite Use of Thecla

A number of Syriac homiletic and hagiographic texts refer to Thecla, presenting her as an estimable figure, but they do so in a different ways and to different ends. Severus of Antioch, responding to a group of women who took Thecla's story as warrant for non-traditional religious behavior, repeatedly attempts to make Thecla less available as a model for difference or dissent; John of Tella's biographer uses Thecla's story to explain one stage in his subject's religious development; and the Life of Febronia uses Thecla as a model of the appropriate way for a Christian woman to face martyrdom. These deployments of Thecla's story reflect related but distinct ways of engaging with the narrative of her deeds. Each offers Thecla as a model, but how and for whom she is a model varies.

Severus' sermons deploy Thecla in a manner that is both illustrative and typological, thereby downplaying her status and making her less available and less authoritative as a role model for women. The women whom he believes misunderstand Thecla and her import took her story injunctively, as modeling in a direct fashion the best life for Christian women. These three modes of reception – illustrative, typological, and injunctive – are also apparent in the Syriac hagiographic compositions referencing Thecla. Both deploy Thecla to valorize their subject, but while the Life of John of Tella uses her to emphasize John's heroic status in ways similar to Severus' use of the story, the Life of Febronia uses her to present

Febronia and her sister nuns as models for Christian behavior, much as the women targeted in Severus' sermon did.

Thecla in Severus of Antioch

Severus was the Miaphysite patriarch of Antioch from 512 to 518,¹²⁶ and although he taught and wrote in Greek, he is relevant here not precisely because of his lasting importance for Syriac Christianity, but because his various writings were so immediately and persistently important in Syriac Christianity. The manuscript evidence demonstrates that his sermons were translated into Syriac in the sixth century, some of them by 528, and the Syriac translation – only snippets of the Greek survive – circulated widely and was the subject of continued, intense interest for centuries.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Severus' sermons, letters, and hymns are most recently and conveniently discussed in Pauline Allen and C.T.R. Hayward, *Severus of Antioch* (The Early Church Fathers; New York: Routledge, 2004). Some of the foundational analyses of Severus and his thought are: J. Lebon, *Le monophysisme sévérien* (Louvain: J. Van Linthout, 1909); R. C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies. Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabbug and Jacob of Sarug* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement. Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); and idem, "Severus of Antioch and the origins of the monophysite hierarchy," in D. Neiman and M. Graffin, (eds), *The Heritage of the Early Church. Essays in Honor of G.V. Florovsky* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 195; Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1973. For Severus' Christology, see now Iain R. Torrance, *Christology After Chalcedon. Severus of Antioch and Sergius the Monophysite* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1988). Also of interest is F. Graffin, "La vie à Antioche d'après les homélies de Sévère. Invectives contre les courses de chevaux, le théâtre et les jeux olympique," in G. Wiessner, ed., *Erkenntnis und Meinung, vol. 2 (Göttinger Orientforschungen, 1. Reihe: Syriaca, Bd. 17* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978), 115-30. Robin Darling Young's "The Patriarchate of Severus of Antioch" (PhD dissertation, Chicago, 1982) remains unpublished.

¹²⁷ The translation was revised, with notes referring to the earlier translation(s), by Jacob of Edessa (d.708). The edition used for this paper is drawn from that later translation, preserved in ms. Vat. Syr. 141 and published as Brière, *Les Homiliae Cathedralis de Sévère d'Antioche. Homélies LXX à LXXXVI* (Patrologia Orientalis 12/1, Paris 1915) and idem, *Les Homiliae Cathedralis de Sévère d'Antioche. Homélies XCI à XCVIII* (Patrologia Orientalis 25/1; Paris, 1943.) For a summary of the manuscript tradition, including the surviving Greek fragments, see Lucas Van Rompay, "Les versions syriaques," in Françoise Petit, *La Chaîne sur l'Exode. I. Fragments de Sévère d'Antioche. Texte grec établi et traduit* (Traditio Exegetica Graeca series; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 111-131. This essay also includes a discussion of Jacob of Edessa's translation technique, as well as further references on the subject. See also now idem, "Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (512-538), in the Greek, Syriac, and

So his writings were, in the sixth century, a part of Syriac Christianity, even if we were to so narrowly define it as to include only texts demonstrably available in Syriac. Beyond this, at least one of his sermons clearly responds to what he perceived as problematic behavior by women in his Antiochene congregation; others of his writings share some of the same ideas and implications, and may well be less direct responses to the same, or parallel, situations in the sixth-century Syriac church. We have sermons, hymns, and letters written by Severus, and while neither women in general nor Thecla in particular can be said to be a major theme of his work, texts from each category do invoke and discuss both historical and contemporary women.

Severus wrote a series of sermons, three of which reference Daniel and Thecla together. Combined with the existence of the sixth-century manuscript, the existence of not one but three sermons in which Severus explicitly links Daniel and Thecla suggests a tradition with some popularity or currency, at least in late-ancient/early Byzantine Syria. The fact that Severus seems, especially in the first two sermons, those which are focused on other figures, anxious to immediately negate the force of the link by making Thecla one among many Christian figures, suggests that although he was not comfortable with the possible implications of the pairing, his Antiochene congregants were not merely familiar with it, but indeed expected to hear Thecla's name when they heard Daniel's.

In two of the sermons, Severus mentions Thecla as one specific example taken from the vast group of equally-admirable Christian martyrs. This illustrative

Coptic Traditions," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 8 (2008), 3-22, of which Professor Van Rompay was kind enough to give me an early version.

use frames her as “an utterly typical instance of a series of similar objects,”¹²⁸ thereby making her less notable, less authoritative as a role model. In another sermon, Severus explains Thecla as a type for the church, thus subordinating Thecla to the authority of the church, since the type is always a pale foreshadowing of what it represents, and then using that subordination to explain that Thecla’s actions, permissible then, are now outlawed by the church. Here, he very neatly assents to Thecla’s high status, by making her a type of the church in the same way that scriptural figures serve as types, and by doing so, at least rhetorically removes the possibility of women taking Thecla’s story as a model for their own lives. The women who concern him took Thecla as model by reading her story injunctively, seeing it as “distinctive, crucially *unlike* other objects, especially in its ethical import...demanding that other objects *should* be like or unlike this one.”¹²⁹

In Sermon 71, on the Ascension, Severus moves from an extended christological discussion to the final admonition that Christians, when they go to watch the beasts tear men like themselves apart, make it clear that they no longer carry within themselves the “icon, the pure image.”¹³⁰ Conformity to this image of the divine is the Christian’s ultimate goal, and is achieved by understanding and imitation of the model of Christ and even of other virtuous people, including figures

¹²⁸ Matthew B. Roller, “Exemplarity in Roman Culture: The Cases of Horatius Cocles and Cloelia,” *Classical Philology* 99(2004), 52. The terms ‘illustrative’ and ‘injunctive’ are used by Roller to clarify the distinction, in Roman exemplary discourse, between the use of heroes’ stories without explanation or recounting, as part of a list, and use of those stories, usually with more detail as to the deeds attributed to the hero, as a model set forth for the reader to follow, discussed in J.D. Chaplin, *Livy’s Exemplary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹²⁹ Roller, “Exemplarity,” 52.

¹³⁰ Brière, hom. 71, 52-69, provides the Syriac and a French translation.

from Hebrew Scripture. In fact, the games themselves recapitulate humanity's sin and call to mind the sovereignty over the beasts, lost with Adam's sin, and reveal

the new honor we have been given, that rather than primacy over the earth, instead, the kingdom of heaven passed over to us. That if we should be worthy, and it was right for us to be given [this honor], we became formidable not only to the wild beasts, but also to the demons. And also, [we became] respected by the angels. And this is affirmed [thus]: Daniel, when he was a prisoner in the pit, the lions stood in awe of him. This is also asserted [thus]: Thecla was tested greatly and endured greatly in her virginity and her faith, and also the innumerable multitude of martyrs who checked the savage frenzy, and were stronger than the many animals, because they were accounted like Christ, the beginning/origin of our race...¹³¹

The "innumerable multitude of martyrs" does not merely outnumber Thecla here; they also seem to be the ones who were "accounted like Christ." No animal is presented as standing in awe of Thecla as of Daniel, or being checked and overpowered by the Christ-image in her as it was in the martyrs. We could, of course, argue that both of these things happen in Thecla's story; the point is that Severus does not. He does the same sort of thing in Homily 75, on the martyr Julian, detailing the suffering and witness of Julian and his mother, then concluding that in times past,

¹³¹ Brière, hom. 71, 69.

the Lord snatched from in the midst of dangers his intimate servants, like Daniel from the lions' pit and the three youths from the fire that was very great and very strong. On the other hand, after his advent in the flesh in the divine rays [of light] that shine on the entire habitable earth, many lived in danger; for example, Thecla was brave in everything, in all the many times that she died and was not separated from the body...

He then goes on to explain that the many other martyrs who ...with great and amazing fortitude towards that dwelling where they were displaced [their bodies] because they were fixed on the resurrection proclaimed [for them], they accepted that they would suffer on account of it.¹³²

Thecla is just one martyr among many, by implication no better than all the other Christian martyrs. In these sermons he has effectively 'diluted' her, making her not a singular or archetypal Christian martyr, whose perfection was foreshadowed in the story of Daniel, but one of many, and not even the foremost among them. By thus lowering her status, he makes her less authoritative as a role model for Christians; in particular, he seems determined to make her less effective as a role model for transgressive women. This becomes apparent when we consider his longest, most developed discussion of Thecla, his 97th cathedral homily.

¹³² Brière, hom. 75.

The homily, delivered on her saint's day, nonetheless is unsuccessful as a panegyric on Thecla.¹³³ Severus seems more interested in attacking the women who take Thecla as a role model than in praising Thecla, and when he does praise her, he does so in a way that effectively removes her from availability as a role model.

Severus begins his homily by speaking of David, explaining that David was speaking prophetically of the church when he said, "The queen stands at your right, clothed in a robe of gold and offering a varied aspect."¹³⁴ This, Severus tells us, immediately brings Thecla to mind, as she gives, by her deeds, a reading of the prophecy. She is like the church, which, taken as a whole, has these same virtues. The assembly of believers forms Christ's body, fashioned by baptism and apostolic edicts into a glorious whole. Paul, speaking of the holy and immaculate church, purified by baptism in order that Christ might present it to himself,¹³⁵ was confirming this prophecy of David's.

David and Paul are speaking, according to Severus, not just of the church but of the swift zeal of the church in matters of faith. The assembly of those who, hearing the word, followed,¹³⁶ stands like a queen, close beside Christ the king¹³⁷

¹³³ I presented this reading of homily 97 at the Fourteenth Oxford Patristic Conference, in August 2003 as "Imagining Thecla: Rhetorical Strategies in Severus of Antioch's 97th Cathedral Homily," and subsequently published it in F. Young, M. Edwards, and P. Parvis, eds., Studia Patristica XLII. Papers presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2003 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 83-88. The Syriac text of the homily is edited, with a French translation, in M. Brière, Les Homiliae Cathedrales de Sévère d'Antioche. Homélie XCI à XCVIII (Patrologia Orientalis 25/1; Paris, 1943), pp.121-138.

¹³⁴ Referring to Psalm 45:9 [44:10]. The identifications of scriptural references in the sermon are Brière's.

¹³⁵ Ephesians 5:23-27.

and enters with him into the bedchamber as a spouse. This is what the Song of Songs¹³⁸ refers to, expanding further on David's prophetic words. The church wears an assemblage of virtues like the robes of a queen¹³⁹ and is beautiful in its perfect agreement. This is what David meant when he spoke of the bride who listens and leaves her father and her home, forgetting her people to go to the king.¹⁴⁰

But, Severus says, someone will ask, "Why are you talking about the church and not Thecla? Have you forgotten why you're here?" But it is only excessive devotion to Thecla that prevents his imagined interlocutor from seeing that Thecla was prefigured in the prophecies that refer to the church.

He explains: when Thecla heard Paul's preaching, she immediately enacted the image of the church as predicted by David; she listened, she forgot her family, and she became dear to the king, standing close, at his right hand, assuming the robes of virtue and showing her changed nature.¹⁴¹

But then his imagined interlocutor poses another question: how is Thecla inferior to the church, which Severus now calls 'the maternal image'? She does, after all, fulfill these prophecies, just as the church does. Again, the prophetic words of David enlighten us: "The virgins will follow the king after her; the maidens will follow you, they will follow in joy and rejoicing, they will go to the temple of the

¹³⁶ Matthew 4:19, 9:9.

¹³⁷ Psalm 45:9 [44:10].

¹³⁸ Song of Solomon 1:3, 5:2.

¹³⁹ Psalm 45:13 [44:10].

¹⁴⁰ Psalm 45:10-11 [44:11].

¹⁴¹ 2 Timothy 2:9; Matthew 16:18.

king.”¹⁴² The words ‘after her’ indicate the subordination of virgins to the queen, of daughters to mothers, of Thecla to the church.

Severus then returns to the narration of Thecla’s deeds. Having endured the flames, she cut her hair in order to damage her beauty, so that her outward appearance agreed with her virile spirit. She became Paul’s disciple, preaching as he did. Yes, Severus says, Paul told us that women should not teach, and another rule of the church says that women should not cut their hair or wear men’s clothing.¹⁴³ Thecla was special in that she had the actual strength before she had the outward appearance. Other women, the ones who prompted the legislation, had the outward appearance of strength but not the reality, and this lent itself to ridicule and shame. And now, after the ban, even those women who attempt to rival Thecla are not permitted to do these things, because it is necessary to submit to custom, as it says in Scripture: “Do not displace the customs which were given to our fathers.”¹⁴⁴

Thecla came to Antioch with the appearance and firm resolve of a man. Even she was unable to hide her nature; she was attacked because of her beauty and her religion. She stood firm, and was sent to the arena to face the beasts. When she was victorious, the Jews pondered how a mere female had not only survived the fire like the three young men who passed through the flames without burning, but had

¹⁴² Psalm 45:14-15 [44:15-16], 63:8 [62:9]; 65:4 [64:5-6].

¹⁴³ 1 Corinthians 14:34.

¹⁴⁴ Deuteronomy 19:14.

also surpassed even Daniel, surviving not just lions, but ‘the whole race of savage beasts.’ Because of this, they believed in Christ.

Thecla emerged from her trials without injury, having fought as a martyr and having received the martyr’s crown,¹⁴⁵ and then she left for Seleucia in Isauria, where her body remains and miracles occur, while her soul made the journey to its heavenly home. And it is from there that she watches and visits on the one hand the city of Seleucia, because of her body, and Antioch, on the other hand, because of her struggles here.

This is why we praise her, Severus says, here in this place dedicated to Saint Stephen and to her. He is the first male martyr, and she is the first female martyr. She fulfilled Paul’s command to ‘Glorify God in your body and in your spirit,’¹⁴⁶ glorifying God by both her virginity and her martyrdom.

So, Severus concludes, virgins have a role model in Thecla, but so do married women. They can live an honest and chaste life, thus glorifying Christ and in return being glorified by him.¹⁴⁷

And there, the homily ends. The question is, what are we to make of it? He has not made a case for his conclusion about Thecla and married women, and in fact the assertion is somewhat jarring after what has preceded it. I suggest that this is because presenting Thecla as a role model for all women is not the point here.

¹⁴⁵ Isaiah 32:9; Matthew 13:46; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Timothy 4:7.

¹⁴⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:20.

¹⁴⁷ 1 Kings 2:30.

Rather, the homily is aimed squarely at a group, whether real or imagined, of insistently, visibly, and vocally devout women in Severus' church.

In his extended discussion of the church at the beginning of the homily, Severus repeatedly refers to the assembled church, to the believers who, together, form the church. He emphasizes the necessary universality of the church, asserting that the church is not, and should not be, composed of only one sort of person – of, for instance, women who attempt to live as Thecla did. Moreover, what makes the church glorious is its harmonious unity; those people in the church who disrupt that unity are wrong to do so.

Those same people are wrong when they refuse, as he says, out of excessive devotion to Thecla, to see that she is an image of the church, admittedly a good image, but only modeled on the perfect original. She is, he feels compelled to assert, not of equal stature with the church itself. This may be in response to some notion that one could, even should, follow the example of Thecla rather than the teaching of the church, in the person of the bishop.

These disruptive and disobedient people are almost certainly women, since he then discusses the women who attempt to imitate Thecla. They also appear to have also been teachers, and to have taken on the appearance of men, perhaps through some form of tonsure and the adoption of male dress. These are the actions Severus details as forbidden despite Thecla's example, teaching, the cutting of (women's) hair, and women dressing like men. Thecla's imitators, Severus says, do not have Thecla's strength, and the custom of the church forbids it. More importantly, a woman acting as a man can only be a pretense, one which cannot

succeed. Even Thecla, with her manly resolve, her inner strength, could not hide her true, feminine, nature. If the blessed martyr has failed in this attempt, how then can any woman succeed?

The failure of Thecla's ruse demonstrates this, and that failure was a good thing: she won the crown of a martyr, and the Jews who witnessed her trial believed. Women ought, in Severus' view, to be seen to be, and to behave as, women. This is their essential identity, and even holy women cannot escape that identity and its consequent limitations. Because they are women, they are weak and sinful. We have already seen the women who try, without Thecla's strength, to take on her appearance and bring shame on themselves. Only two other women are used in Severus' arguments: first, Thecla's mother, not a positive character in any reading of the story, and described by Severus as hysterical over the loss of social and economic status entailed by Thecla's refusal to marry, and, second, the rich women whom Isaiah fruitlessly called to repentance. The latter is an especially interesting choice since the wealthy convert, Queen Tryphaena, is not mentioned in the sermon. These negative female characters are set over and against Thecla and her renunciation of her status and her family, while the male merchant who found a single pearl of great price is, Severus tells us, the model Thecla imitated in this episode of her story.

Thecla is successful only because she is in some sense masculine. Beyond the references to manly resolve and virile strength, we can see this idea at its most explicit in the example offered immediately after the merchant and his pearl: Adam, who was created in the image of God, before he sinned was surrounded, like a king,

by savage beasts, and he gave names to all of them like the owner of a flock. So also Thecla, who had learned from Paul that “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature,” was surrounded by savage beasts, and they were tame for her. The implication is that Thecla has become a new creature, a male creature.

No other, present-day female, can do this. Severus clearly will not countenance any ideas about Christians transcending their gender, about women being able to leave gender-specific limitations behind by or for their faith. His very vehemence suggests that there were those in his see who disagreed, and acted upon such ideas.

He asserts not only that his rhetorical targets have not only damaged the church, overvalued Thecla, and ignored their own natures, but also that they have misunderstood the relative importance of virginity in the grand scheme of salvation. It has, in Severus’ presentation, no priority over other forms of devotion. Severus splits Thecla in two, body and soul. Both are important, but the spirit is clearly more so than the body. Thecla’s body is buried in Seleucia, and acts as a magnet of sorts, drawing her soul back to perform miracles. But, that soul ascended to heaven, is responsible for the miracles at her shrine, and returns to Antioch as a victor.

Most of us will think of ascetic practices, including virginity, when we speak of the preeminence of the spirit over the flesh, but this is not the way that Severus presents it in this sermon. He says that Thecla glorified God in her body by her virginity and in her spirit by her martyrdom. Virginity, as a discipline of the body, is a lesser virtue, and not, as Thecla’s imitators would have it, the best Christian life.

True virtue is the swift and zealous obedience that he attributes to the church, and to which he refers repeatedly throughout the homily.

The homily may end with the assertion that not only virgins, but also married women, can take Thecla as a role model, but this is not the conclusion. It is just one final jab at his opponents, asserting that they are so wrong about their beloved Thecla that the very people who live the lives they have rejected, married women, can imitate Thecla as effectively as any virgin.

Severus' rhetorical opponents are unruly and divisive. They choose to heed the example of Thecla rather than the teachings of the church, valuing virginity over obedience. They are, worse still, women who attempt to act as men, taking on themselves authority which they cannot and should not wield. Whether these women formed, or were part of, any organized group in sixth-century Antioch is not clear, but Severus clearly felt the need to rein in women he perceived as transgressing, or intending to transgress, accepted gender norms. This behavior is, for Severus, entirely unacceptable, and this is apparent in his correspondence as well.

He describes proper behavior for women who have chosen a life of consecrated virginity, emphasizing the restrictions necessary to live successful religious lives, in letters to Valeria and Jannia, both heads of communities of consecrated women. In addition to warnings about lustfulness, the corruption of servile behavior in the freeborn, possessions, humility, idleness, and unseemly laughter, Severus warns against

adornment of the body or of clothes, from which spring fornication and foul and filthy thoughts. For one may wear the lowly and dark tunic itself or cloak in no modest or chaste fashion, but wantonly and immodestly, and walk unbecomingly, and turn one's eyes about in a disorderly way, and use dissolute language, and place one's limbs in a languishing posture, and so satisfy the passion of elegance, and excite the lascivious desires...¹⁴⁸

While the general warnings seem common enough injunctions in any monastic order, male or female, the specific emphasis on adornment and wanton behavior appears specific to women religious. In like manner, Severus' letters to laywomen have some advice common to any Christian, but also specific instructions for women, instructions which emphasize women's innate and necessary subjection to men. When addressing the concerns of the wife of Calliopos the patrician regarding the proper confession of the faith, he first clarifies the Christological problem, and then goes on to add,

...though it is certainly in no way alien to believing women to help one another...The practice of women teaching in public and giving expositions to men the wise Paul disallowed...But that they should correct their sisters in their assemblies and conversations he properly permitted, especially those who are advanced in age...Also the women who were taught at that time

¹⁴⁸ Letter 7.2 in E.W. Brooks, The Sixth Book of the Select Letters of Severus Patriarch of Antioch. The Syriac Version of Athanasius of Nisibis. Vol. II (Translation) Part II (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904).

by the Lord show that instruction in religion is not foreign even to the female sex...Accordingly both to learn and to teach such things, in a proper manner and according to the character of each person, belongs to every sex and is praiseworthy and blessed.¹⁴⁹

Women must not teach men, or in public, but may teach other women in the privacy of their own ‘assemblies and conversations.’ In like manner, he admonishes an unnamed woman and Theodore the tribune and notary¹⁵⁰ in the same terms, warning them that they may not, as married persons, choose a life of consecrated chastity unless their spouse consents, but in another letter goes on to give a more restrictive, and gender-specific, command. In one of his letters to the Caesaria the patrician, he responds to her request pray for her release from the cares of marriage and entry into a life of consecrated virginity by reminding her not to forget

that the apostle Paul in his epistle to Titus lays down a law for women that are yoked in marriage in these terms; “Let the young women be lovers of their husbands, lovers of their children, chaste, pure, good housekeepers, subject to their husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.”...A woman who fears God and obeys Christ’s commands must practise love of her husband as readily as the love of God itself. If the husband is the head of the wife in the same fashion as the Lord

¹⁴⁹ Brooks, Select, letter 7.7.

¹⁵⁰ Brooks, Select, letters 10.2 and 10.3.

is the head of the church, a woman who loves her husband through the medium of her husband loves Christ...If you walk by these laws and know your place, and do not desire other things beyond the measure that is commanded, you will be an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven, and with the wives of those patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all that are such, you will receive the promises of immortal life...¹⁵¹

This is not merely a concern for the spiritual welfare of one's spouse; it is a lengthy injunction to live a specifically female and subordinate life, and the promise of an eternal reward for living within gender norms.

This same insistence upon gender norms is also apparent in his hymns, including one featuring Thecla. The hymns, all brief and sharing the simple structure of biblical quotation, narrative summary, and doxology, are first and most fully preserved in a manuscript which may be an autograph of Jacob of Edessa.¹⁵²

Women appear in a number of the hymns, but often more as objects than actors, in stories such as that of the Canaanite woman, the woman with a flow of blood, and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. The clear emphasis in his use of these stories, as in the parallel stories about the healing of men, is on Jesus' mercy and power, rather than any agency of the afflicted. Even when speaking of actual women, in two preserved funeral hymns for women, the women in question seem remarkably generic; a consecrated, ascetic, virgin, and a widowed mother. The

¹⁵¹ Brooks, Select, letter 10.7.

¹⁵² For details on the hymns and this manuscript, see Van Rompay, "Severus."

virgin is praised for her ascetic life, and the widow for chastity and childrearing. Even in these very bland and nonspecific hymns, Severus treats women who might conceivably be a threat to gender norms differently than those who embody those norms.

“Lord God of my salvation.” By being born of a virgin mother in the flesh, Christ, God, thou didst introduce the purity of virginity into the race of men; and by utterly annihilating and dissolving the power of death by means of the God-befitting Resurrection thou didst arm and strengthen even the weak female of our race for the bodiless war and conflict against the fiends. Accordingly thy bondmaid also in this hope, Lord of all, readily received the pure yoke of virginity, and completed her life in asceticism and gained distinction in it, in that she transfixed and mortified the lusts of her flesh through fear of thee. Her whom thou hast now taken to thyself admit to find pardon of offences and the rich mercy that comes from thee on the day of thy just judgment, as thou art merciful.¹⁵³

Notice that this virgin, although she did succeed as an ascetic, in ‘transfixing and mortifying the lusts of her flesh,’ is marked off as one of the ‘weak females of our race.’ He also asks that she be pardoned, by God’s mercy, for her offences. In contrast, the widow who keeps herself in chastity but does not, apparently, choose a life of consecrated chastity, instead remaining in her household and raising her

¹⁵³ Hymn 348 in E.W. Brooks, James of Edessa. Hymns of Severus of Antioch and Others, vols. I-II (Patrologia Orientalis 6/1 and 7/5; Paris, 1911).

children, receives only praise for her womanly behavior, and Severus prays that she will find mercy and clemency, but does not mention any sin or offense.

“Because of thy grace, O! God.” The widows also to whom witness is borne by good works thou hast promised to justify, merciful one: for thou art the judge of the widows, and the father also of the orphans by reason of thy kindness. Therefore admit thy bondmaid also, who has lived in hope and confidence on thee, and in chastity and purity has brought up children with a praiseworthy upbringing, to find rich mercy and clemency before thee, when she is brought near to stand before the seat of thy grace on the day of the resurrection and of the regeneration, waiting for help in due season.¹⁵⁴

This move to disparage, and to remove as female role models, those figures who could be taken by the women of his church as positive examples of socially transgressive behavior, is even more apparent when Severus discusses female martyrs. It is here that we see him focusing on, and interpreting for his congregants, the actions and status of women. When he invokes the female martyrs, he is constrained by his audience’s existing knowledge of their stories; his chosen emphases and interpretations, then, are all the more interesting, as they reveal his attempts to re-read, to reinterpret, what his audience already knows, turning these stories to his own purposes.

Drosis, the martyred daughter of Trajan, is invoked in two of Severus’ hymns.

¹⁵⁴ Brooks, Hymns, no.349.

“Then shall they say among the nations.” It is not right that we should not in all things and at all hours praise thee, Christ; because by means of thy life-giving Humanization thou didst test our race, which had become spurious and debased from the sin that it had committed, and render it greatly approved. For, if the living blood that welled from thy holy side had not reformed and healed the woman who was formed from the rib of our father Adam, the valiant martyr Drosis would not in the very flower of her youthful age have spurned the glory of the kingdom, and despised and disregarded her body, and been victorious over the torments that were applied to her, while with thy apostle Paul she said and sang, “In all these things we are more conquering and victorious, through thee, Lord, who lovedst us, Jesus Christ, praise to thee.”¹⁵⁵

Here, Drosis is, even while being praised, held up as an example of the daughters of Eve, healed from their inherited gender-specific sin only by Christ’s blood. Severus may start by referring to the entire human race, but he then narrows the discussion to Eve and her sin. Drosis serves as an example, but only of despising her body and enduring torture. In the next hymn, he discusses her in more active terms, granting her more agency.

“Come, hear, and I will tell you.” The equality of honour in the divine calling, in which there is no male nor female (for we are all one in Christ) was clearly shown by the arena of martyrdom

¹⁵⁵ Brooks, Hymns, no.161.

into which the valiant martyr Drosis readily leapt down through the fervour of the Spirit, having spurned and trampled upon her beauty and her youth, preserved by the purity of her virginity, and made the kingdom of heaven a compensation for the temporal kingdom and received it: by whose prayers confirm us also, Lord of all, to the hope of the good things that shall be, as being merciful.¹⁵⁶

Notice that here, where she is very much an actor in her own martyrdom, Severus begins by effectively de-feminizing her, setting her apart from or above questions of gender and sex roles.

The story of Euphemia, martyred under Diocletian, is less problematic, as it already includes a mention of her manly courage.

“Lord, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle?” The triumphant martyr Euphemia after honoring thy birth from the Virgin, Lord, by means of the virginity and purity of her person, and bravely girding herself with the impassible armour of thy life-giving Passion readily went to the contests of martyrdom on thy behalf with courage like a manly maid; having caused the outward comeliness of her flesh to melt and wither through the torments which she endured, but shining in the suprasensual beauty of her soul. Hereupon, having put on a crown of endurance and victory, she passed to the joyful company of angels: by whose

¹⁵⁶ Brooks, Hymns, no.162.

prayers, Christ our Saviour, confirm our hearts also in thy fear,
according to the wealth of thy great mercy.¹⁵⁷

There is no need to remove her from the category of 'female' – this has already been at least suggested in the story itself. Still, she is not, in the end, a model of Christian (much less, female) courage, but of right-minded fear of God. Again, not in any way a role model for female religious activity in public.

Pelagia, who becomes for all intents and purposes a male in the pursuit of holiness, receives no qualification, no limitation on the importance of her actions or the meaning of her story.

“The king’s daughter stood up in glory.” The valiant martyr Pelagia, while she was pre-eminent in birth, and in the possession of goods, and in fair bodily form, strove and was victorious in a double contest; and she kept her purity and her faith: and she yearned to depart from the body and to be with Christ; and accordingly, having willingly raised herself into the air and flown like a light dove, through the suffering of a ready and voluntary death she passed to the eternal mansions: by whose prayers, Lord, admit all of us also to a lot and inheritance with thy saints, according to the abundance of thy great mercy.¹⁵⁸

While Drosis was both classed as an heiress to Eve’s sin and explicitly made a unisex role model, Pelagia, even more so than Euphemia, has already been

¹⁵⁷ Brooks, Hymns, no.163.

¹⁵⁸ Brooks, Hymns, no.164.

removed from the realm of women, and so does not require either implicit denigration or de-feminization. She is already unavailable for use as a role model for women in the public life of the Syriac church; even if they were able to follow her example, and make themselves men, in doing so they would no longer be visible as socially transgressive women, but only as holy men, revealed as women, as was Pelagia, only after death.

Thecla is demonstrably the most socially transgressive of the women martyrs Severus mentions, remaining female but nonetheless acting as an evangelist, like unto the apostles, preaching and proclaiming the gospel as she travelled the land.

“The king shall delight in thy beauty.” Christ who speaks in Paul, who said, “I have come to put fire on the earth,” by inflaming with his love the soul of the holy virgin Thecla burned from her the bonds of fleshly brotherhood, preserved her virginity in purity, supported her in the combat of martyrdom, quenched the fire and placed a muzzle and a bit in the mouth of carnivorous beasts, rendered the idolatrous bondmaid an evangelist and apostolic, while she preached and proclaimed the word of life everywhere amid all dangers: by whose prayers, our Saviour, bestow upon men and women alike thoughts of chastity, and thy great mercy.¹⁵⁹

So, although Severus cannot deny that Thecla acted with public authority, as a teacher, deriving that authority from her endurance and courage in the arena, the

¹⁵⁹ Brooks, *Hymns*, no. 160. Translation by Lucas Van Rompay, based on the translation of Brooks, in Catherine Burris and Lucas Van Rompay, “Some Further Notes on Thecla in Syriac Christianity,” *Hugoye* 6/2(2003).

lesson he offers has nothing to do with any of this. Rather, he offers her as a model of chastity, and, importantly, as a model for both men and women.

She is not to be taken as a role model for women in particular; this would give women the wrong ideas. If she is a role model for men and women, what is notable – what stands out as an unusual behavior – is her heroic defense of her virginity. All of the other things, men are permitted, and often encouraged, to do. If she is a role model specifically for women, then what stands out as unusual behavior is not just her chastity; many, even most, female martyrs share the same behavior on that issue. As a woman, what stands out is the way she defies gender norms – taking upon herself the authority to teach, to teach publicly, and to travel from town to town doing so. This is entirely unacceptable, and so her story cannot be used as a model for Christian women; this rhetorical removal of Thecla as potential warrant for nontraditional female behavior by making her more broadly significant and effectively genderless is directly parallel to the way that Severus' 97th sermon, as discussed above, used her as a type for the church, so making her both universally significant and subordinate to the laws and traditions of the church.

Whether typological or illustrative, Severus' references to Thecla serve his larger goal of reinforcing gender norms in his congregation, while the injunctive or exemplary reading of the women he targeted in his 97th homily apparently served to authorize or legitimate their gender-transgressive activities. The hagiographic lives citing Thecla do not share Severus' goals, but they also do not use Thecla to sanction breaks with church tradition; they use the same modes of reception as Severus and his women for different, if related, purposes.

Thecla in the Life of John of Tella

The extended reference to Thecla in the hagiographic life of John of Tella deploys her story in a combination of the illustrative and typological modes used by Severus. The injunctive mode is, of course, at work here, in that this a saint's life, and hagiography has as one of its primary purposes the inspiration of imitation of the saint. Readers and hearers of hagiographic texts were, and are, explicitly or implicitly enjoined to do as the saint did.¹⁶⁰ This particular saint's life, however, spends more time on the theological controversies of John's day than on describing exemplary deeds suitable for imitation,¹⁶¹ and so the injunctive work being done by the text he creates is minimal, and that only with regard to John himself. The references to Thecla and other figures, episodes, and ideas, the texts he cites in his own text are not injunctive. The author's mode of reception is what I will term "citational,"¹⁶² involving the invocation of numerous isolated episodes without reference to, and sometimes in contradiction to, the original context of the cited episode or phrase.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ This characterization of the saint as exemplar was elegantly formulated in Peter Brown, "The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity," *Representations* 2(1983):1-25, and is a commonplace in the academic literature on hagiographic texts.

¹⁶¹ It is, therefore, more like the biographies of holy men so ably analyzed by Patricia Cox Miller in her *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage 5; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983) than the lower-level saints' lives, those less concerned with theology and politics than with the deeds and charisma of the saint.

¹⁶² Not in the sense used by Derrida, pertaining to iteration, but evoking the scholarly practice of citation, of adducing diverse texts in support of one's argument. [Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in idem, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 302-330.]

¹⁶³ This mode is described in Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 134-136, with reference to ascetic interpretations of scripture. Her label "Changing the Context" is perfectly correct, but difficult to render adjectivally. The author of the Life also appears to be doing something slightly different than her ascetic writers.

The Life of John of Tella was written by Elias, who describes himself as a companion of John, sometime shortly after John's death in 538 CE, and is framed as a letter to Elias' anti-Chalcedonian brothers. Raised by a widowed Christian mother, John refused the course of government service chosen by her and sought a Christian life, inspired by the recluses in his area. After an unsuccessful attempt to join them, he undertook a life of religious devotion in his home, and then left for a life of monasticism in various forms. Later ordained as bishop, he engaged in a campaign of anti-Chalcedonian teaching and ordination, even under the persecution of Chalcedonian sympathizers. The bulk of the life is about his exploits and teachings as bishop; the classically hagiographic narrative of his innate holiness and conversion serves as prelude.¹⁶⁴

Elias echoes or refers to figures and passages from scripture at least ninety times in the course of his account of John of Tella, drawing from twenty-seven different books of Jewish and Christian scripture.¹⁶⁵ These references are interwoven with his text, adduced in aid of demonstrating John's virtue and orthodoxy by citation rather than by explanation or exemplary modeling. No single text, figure, or idea serves as sufficient, or even necessary, evidence of John's virtue and orthodoxy, and by their sheer volume, each citation becomes less notable, less authoritative, illustrative in the way that Severus' relegation of Thecla to one among many martyrs was. What they illustrate is that John's actions echo scriptural

¹⁶⁴ See Joseph Renee Ghanem, "The Biography of John of Tella (d. A.D. 537) by Elias. Translated from the Syriac with a Historical Introduction and Historical and Linguistic Commentaries" (PhD thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1970). John of Edessa also includes a briefer summary of John of Tella's career; this will be discussed in chapter five.

¹⁶⁵ Based on the scriptural identifications made in Ghanem.

episodes and teachings, citing the scriptural 'originals' of which he is a copy; this is an inverted reflection of typological readings, which offer (generally Jewish) scriptural episodes as preliminary versions of which the Christian (generally scriptural) figure or episode is the complete version. Both elements of this 'citational' mode are apparent in the reference to Thecla:

And one day he [John of Tella] took the book of the history of the blessed Thecla ...who became the disciple of the blessed Apostle, and he was reading in it. ...the love of Christ settled with fervor in his soul. And he immediately took (the book of) the blessed Apostle and he was reading in it diligently. And as soon as in truth he had become a disciple of the blessed Apostle, like the blessed Thecla, he built in his apartment a small upper room [ܩܘܢܝܬܐ, as in Daniel, a term not in Syriac Thecla] and spent there all his time.¹⁶⁶ He and his tutor alone made a pact between themselves that his mother would not know his thought or the deed he was doing. He refrained from eating flesh and from drinking wine, and his meals the tutor would eat. From eventide to late in the evening he would eat only dry bread, and later he would take a taste of something once every two days.

¹⁶⁶ Life of John of Tella, translation to this point by Lucas Van Rompay in Catherine Burris and Lucas Van Rompay, "Some Further Notes on Thecla in Syriac Christianity," *Hugoye* 6/2, (<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye>), July 2003; translation from this point to the end of the excerpt by Adam Becker, in *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisbis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 36. For the Syriac text, see E.W. Brooks, *Vita Iohannis Episcopi Tellae*, in idem, *Vitae virorum apud Monophysitas Celeberrimorum* (CSCO ser. III, tomus 25; Paris: E Typographeo Reipublicae, 1907), 29-95.

...the blessed one would stand and bend as doubled up like a hook with his hands bound behind him and the hair of his head would rest upon the ground. He would wait thus until deep in the evening. Then he would cast himself upon the ground and lie down for a little bit. He also learned the psalms in Syriac...

The episode is framed by scriptural references before and after; none of the three is essential to understanding what John did, and why/how it was a religious good. Just before (in narrative terms) John read Thecla's story, he had a conversation with his mother constructed around his citation of Jesus' injunction to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God the things that are God's," to explain his claim that he cannot "please God and yet be entangled with the world's affairs."¹⁶⁷ Then, having shown, with scriptural support, that he cannot remain in the world, the reference to Thecla explains his withdrawal from it, and midway through the account of his withdrawal there is an apparent reference to Daniel's upper room, and to his vegetarian diet in the palace of King Nebuchadnezzar, thus giving (further) scriptural warrant to John's withdrawal from the world.

This multiplicity of citation, this illustrative deployment of episodes and figures, not only serves to make any one reference inessential, but also to allow for narrowly episodic claims of similarity, a citational modeling amounting to an inverted form of typological interpretation. Thecla's story is used as precedent, even authority, for withdrawal to an upper room; John's withdrawal is presented as an image or copy of this actual component of Thecla's story. This, however, is not the entirety of becoming "a disciple of the blessed Apostle, like the blessed Thecla."

¹⁶⁷ Brooks, *Vita*, 42, following Ghanem's translation; Ghanem, "Biography," 52.

The next element is giving up flesh and wine for vegetables and water, not mentioned in Thecla's story, but definitely a part of the book of Daniel, which has already been brought into the background of the account by having John pray in a 'little upper room,' echoing Daniel's upper room. The reference supporting one small aspect of John's praxis leads to the next, which supports another aspect of that practice, in a chain of references to episodes and details within them rather than to entire narratives. This mode of reception, of textual deployment, also allows Elias to introduce ideas not apparent in the cited original texts.

Notice that it is once John has *ἔπειτα ἔβη ἐκ τοῦ ὀπίσθου ἑστῆσθαι ἐν ἑνὶ ὀπίσθου ἑστῆσθαι*, "become a disciple of the blessed apostle in truth, like the blessed Thecla,"¹⁶⁸ using the same verb as above, when Thecla became a disciple of Paul, that he confines himself to his small upper room and undertakes the rest of his ascetic practices. While Thecla does remain in her room, listening raptly to Paul when he first comes to Iconium, she leaves that room to meet and then follow him; John, Elias tells us, fled his secular life to seek the company of a local hermit in his "monastery," but was forced to return, and then read Thecla's story, became a "disciple of Paul," and confined himself. Her initial reaction to Paul is withdrawal from her family and society, but her discipleship comes to fruition in her travels with him; John's initial impulse to a better Christian life is to find and follow a holy teacher, but his discipleship comes to fruition in his isolation, his chosen confinement. It is Elias' introduction of elements from Daniel's story into Thecla's, linking an upper room with prayer and then moving on to dietary restrictions, that

¹⁶⁸ Brooks, *Vita*, 42.

allows him to use Thecla and her 'window near the roof' to legitimate John's withdrawal and ascetic behavior.¹⁶⁹

Elias uses Thecla citationally, as one authority among many adduced in support of his claims about John of Tella. Her story is, in his text, not presented as either uniquely authoritative or suitable for use as an exemplar, a blueprint to be followed by Christians. This is not to say that he, like Severus, deliberately downplays Thecla's status and the injunctive force of her story; he does not. None of the figures cited are given notably high status, none of their stories are granted injunctive force. He constructs a new narrative, one in which Thecla and his scriptural figures serve as elaboration, even ornamentation, of his main themes. In contrast, the roughly contemporary Life of Febronia uses Thecla in a different way altogether.

Thecla in the Life of Febronia

The reference to Thecla in the Life of Febronia is quite short and, at first reading, utterly straightforward. The Life itself, probably from the sixth or seventh century (a manuscript containing the Life is dated 688 CE), probably written in the late sixth or early seventh century, perhaps by a woman,¹⁷⁰ tells the story of

¹⁶⁹ None of the literature on this life considers how this reading/use of Thecla is possible, or, apparently, notices that Elias' reading is innovative. Granted, the literature is not vast, and the recent work has other foci. See, in addition to Becker, Andrew Palmer, "Saints' Lives with a Difference: Elijah on John of Tella (d.538) and Joseph on Theodotos of Amida (d.698)," IV Symposium Syriacum 1984: Literary Genres in Syriac Literature (OCA 229; Roma: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1987), 203-216; Volker Menze, "Priests, Laity, and the Sacrament of the Eucharist in Sixth-Century Syria," Hugoye 7/2, (<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye>), July 2004; Nathanael J. Andrade, "The Syriac Life of John of Tella and the Frontier Politeia," Hugoye 12/2, (<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye>), July 2009.

¹⁷⁰ Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Holy Women of the Syrian Orient (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 150. Susan Harvey explored the maternal aspect of Bryene's relationship with Febronia in "Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography" Journal of Early Christian Studies 4/1(1996):27-56, and also used this Life in "Women in Early

Febronia's martyrdom, of course, but also deals extensively with the relationships between the female characters in the story. Febronia, orphaned at a young age, is a nun in the monastery of the abbess Bryene, her aunt and surrogate mother. Bryene, moved by the pleas of the pagan widow Hieria, allows Hieria to enter the monastery to see and listen to Febronia read the Scriptures. Hieria is greatly moved, returns home and shares what she has heard. Meanwhile, the Romans move on the monastery, and most of the nuns flee in fear. Febronia, Bryene, and Thomais (the nun who stands second in authority to Bryene in the convent, and by whom the text purports to be written) stay, and Febronia is arrested, questioned, and put through a series of horrific, and sexualized, tortures. After her eventual death, her body is returned to the convent, and when church officials try to remove it to a shrine built to honor her, a great clap of thunder and an earthquake prevent them from doing so. Bryene is able to remove one tooth from the coffin, and the bishops take away this miraculous remnant, leaving Febronia in her chosen place, with Bryene and her sister nuns.

As Febronia is being led away to her gory, glorious martyrdom, the abbess cries out to God: "Bryene then stretched out her hands toward heaven and said in a loud voice, 'Lord Jesus Christ, who appeared to your servant Thekla in the guise of Paul, turn toward this poor girl at the time of her contest.'¹⁷¹ Given the activities of the women who so troubled Severus, and the additional weight given the gender-

Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story," in L. Coon, K. Haldane, and E. Sommer, eds., That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women and Christianity (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990) 36-59, and in "Revisiting the Daughters of the Covenant" and "Spoken Words," both referenced above. David Frankfurter also used Febronia in "Martyrdom and the Prurient Gaze," Journal of Early Christian Studies 17/2(2009): 215-245.

¹⁷¹ Brock and Harvey, Holy Women, 163.

transgressing element in the Syriac version, we might reasonably also include Febronia's statement, a few lines earlier, "In a woman's body [ܘܢܦܫܐ ܢܝܫܐ] I will manifest a man's valiant conviction [ܘܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ]"¹⁷² as also referring, if obliquely, to Thecla's story. Thecla's name does not appear again, and the details of Febronia's life do not resemble Thecla's beyond references to both being beautiful. Febronia has neither hostile pagan mother nor fiancé, does not travel, and is emphatically not saved from her trials or from pain.

Read in isolation, this gives us almost nothing; read in conjunction with Severus' sermons and the Life of John of Tella, some interesting points emerge. First, there are no obvious scriptural citations in the Life of Febronia, only citations of the Acts of Thecla and two other martyrdoms.¹⁷³ She cannot be considered to have scriptural status here; her story nonetheless has greater weight, higher value in these accounts than it does in either Severus' sermons or the Life of John of Tella.

Severus' use of Thecla's story in his sermons is illustrative, placing her as just one martyr among a numberless horde, and effectively dis-injunctive, seeking to bar women from following her example. In the Life of John of Tella, the reference to Thecla is likewise illustrative, and does not consider Thecla as a uniquely important model for the saint. The latter also uses an episode from her story out of context, in a reading far enough from the original narrative as to require the intervention of another text to make the connection. Both of these encounters with the text are in

¹⁷² Quote from Brock and Harvey, 163; Syriac from Paul Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum* (Paris and Leipzig, 1890-97) vol. 5:591.9.

¹⁷³ Those of Lewbe and Leonidas/Lybe and Leonis and Eutropia. Edited in F. Halkin, "La passion grecque des saintes Libye, Eutropie et Léonis," *Analecta Bollandiana* 76(1958):293-315. Identification from Brock and Harvey, 160.

some sense analytical or synthetic, breaking apart narratives, combining the resulting pieces with pieces from other narratives, and constructing new meaning in the process.

In the Life of Febronia, Thecla is one of the select few martyrs who serve as models for Febronia's courage and Bryene's hopes for Febronia in the arena. Neither part of the reference reads in any meaning not apparent in the narrative, and no other texts or explanations are required in order to guide the audience's understanding. She is an exemplar, a high-status model to be followed, as the women targeted in Severus' 97th cathedral homily appear to have done in a different way. Both the author of this text and those women took existing episodes in Syriac Thecla as templates for proper religious behavior, engaging in what I would term "exemplary reading." Severus' women focused on Thecla's living actions – baptism, teaching, traveling – and the author of the Life of Febronia focused on Thecla's attitude toward her (presumed) imminent death, but both used her as an exemplar, understanding her story as injunctive and authoritative for the actions/ideas they sought to promote or legitimate.

These same strategies, I will argue in chapter five, are used in the Book of Women. There, they are used to highlight the aspects of Thecla's story that are to be emulated, and to emphasize the authority of her story as an exemplar.

CHAPTER FIVE

Thecla in the Book of Women

The Book of Women, comprised of the stories of Ruth, Esther, Susanna, Judith, and Thecla, is another example of a Syriac reception of the Acts of Thecla. Unlike Severus' homily, it does not make her an image of some larger, grander, and individually inaccessible idea; neither its title nor the included texts offer any indication of some entity for which she might be a type, so it is not that sort of typological, disjunctive reading. As a collection of separate narratives, it could well be an illustrative presentation, offering her as one example in the midst of others, not marked as superior to those others; not a disjunctive reception, but also not strongly injunctive. On the other hand, it could also be an exemplary reading of Thecla's story, offering the behavior of biblical¹⁷⁴ women as authorization for her behavior, demonstrating her virtue and status in the same way that the Life of Febronia deploys Thecla herself as an exemplar. This reading would also suggest which elements of Thecla's story matter by the selection and ordering of those other stories. Both readings are entirely possible based on the contents and title of the collection, and both will be considered before an argument as to which is the more likely reading is offered.

¹⁷⁴ The status of all but Ruth is, of course, variable and debatable in late ancient and early Byzantine Christianity. However, Ephrem knows not only Ruth but also Susanna, and uses both as examples from Scripture in his Hymns. More pertinently, the seventh- and eighth-century (or perhaps earlier) Syriac Bibles discussed below both include all four books, which at least suggests that all four had scriptural status in the sixth century, too.

Neither reading depends upon authorial intention; whether the placement of the translated Acts of Thecla into the Book of Women was an unexamined choice based upon existing understandings of the Acts of Thecla, or reflects a conscious effort to encourage certain understandings of that story is unclear. In either case, however, the collection is itself a text, and must be considered as such. Not only has this not been done, but the Book of Women has, in fact, barely been acknowledged as a collection.¹⁷⁵

The Book of Women as Christian

The Book of Women as a thing in itself has been largely ignored. While the catalogue of Old Testament Peshitta manuscripts does give the Book of Women a siglum,¹⁷⁶ none of its three occurrences¹⁷⁷ has been the subject of even the most cursory analysis.

This collection is a codicological vehicle reflecting the interpretive interests and assumptions of its creator, it is more than the sum of its parts, doing considerably more than merely preserving early instances of certain texts. As a deliberately created, titled collection, it serves to guide the ways in which the component texts are understood, and to promote a larger message, one only apparent when the collection is understood as itself a textual object.

¹⁷⁵ A shorter, preliminary version of this discussion, with somewhat different conclusions, was published as Catherine Burris, "The Syriac Book of Women: Text and Meta-Text," in William Klingshirn and Linda Safran, eds., *The Early Christian Book* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp.86-98.

¹⁷⁶ See Peshitta Institute, *List*, vii and 76, and *idem*, "Peshitta Institute Communications VII," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968): 128-43.

¹⁷⁷ Discussed below.

The Book of Women presents its audience with five women, each modelling a different life of religious virtue. The collection, and its implied audience, are Christian, despite the Jewish origins of four of the five included texts. More specifically, the collection reflects the traditions of early Byzantine Syriac Christianity, promoting a life of dedicated virginity over the other, lesser, options available to Christian women.

The collection as we have it in the sixth-century manuscript is undeniably Christian; the inclusion of a text about “Thecla, disciple of Paul” signals as much. The question, then, is whether the author simply could have appropriated an existing Jewish Book of Women, in which the texts of Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith already traveled together, and added Thecla to that Jewish collection. If this were the case, then the precise contents and sequence of the appropriated, Jewish, Book of Women would arguably be of less significance than the tradition or traditions of interpretation associated with that Jewish collection. There is, however, no evidence for the existence of such a preexisting collection.

To date, there are no indications of such a collection in Jewish commentaries. Moreover, there is great variation in Syriac tradition regarding the codicological context of these texts. After the first extant version of the Book of Women, in the sixth-century manuscript under discussion, there are two other, later versions from eighth- and tenth-century manuscripts. The second version includes Esther, Judith, Thecla, and Tobit; the beginning of the manuscript is lost, so it is unclear whether the title Book of Women was actually applied to this group, and we cannot be sure of what was included on the early folios. It does, however, seem to evidence an

alternative ordering and expanded roster for the Book of Women, at least to Syriac readers. Another manuscript fragment of the eighth century containing Ruth and Susanna was combined with the eighth-century manuscript fragment containing Esther, Judith, Thecla, and Tobit in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, inserting the ten verses of Esther missing from the latter manuscript onto the last folio of the former¹⁷⁸ to make a five-part Book of Women.¹⁷⁹ The third version is in an intact manuscript of 32 quires, whose entire contents are a titled Book of Women (ܟܬܒܬܐ ܕܡܢܝܢܐ.) It omits Ruth, and includes but reorders Susanna, Esther, Judith, and Thecla, and comes from the same monastery where the sixth-century manuscript was acquired for the British Museum.¹⁸⁰ We do not see the consistency in presence, place, and order that we would expect if the Christian Book of Women involved adding Thecla to an existing collection.

Syriac biblical manuscripts also fail to support the idea of a preexisting, Jewish, Book of Women. While the occurrence of both the Book of Illustrious Women (ܟܬܒܬܐ ܕܗܘܠܐ ܕܡܢܝܢܐ), consisting of Ruth and Susanna, and the Book on Holy Women (ܟܬܒܬܐ ܕܗܘܠܐ ܕܡܢܝܢܐ), consisting of Esther and Judith, in a complete

¹⁷⁸ Peshitta list siglum 8g1 = Deir al-Surian 27. See Peshitta Institute Communications VII, Vetus Testamentum 18 (1968): 135.

¹⁷⁹ Ms. Deir al-Surian 27b (Peshitta list siglum 8f1.) The manuscript is mentioned in Peshitta Institute Communication VII, Vetus Testamentum 18 (1968): 135, in the introduction to the book of Tobit in the Leiden Peshitta edition, and in the unpublished catalog of Murad Kamil, "Catalogue of the Syrian Manuscripts Newly Found in the Monastery of St. Mary Deipara in the Nitrian Desert," which is an unpublished English translation ca. 1960 of an earlier Arabic catalog. The Peshitta list supplement does not mention the presence of the Thecla text, simply inserting an ellipsis in the description of the manuscript between Judith and Tobit.

¹⁸⁰ British Library [hereafter, BL] Add. 14,447. Wright, Catalogue 1:98 (CLVI). Peshitta list siglum 10f1. A note on the first folio states that this manuscript belonged to the convent of St. Mary Deipara (Deir al-Surian); the manuscripts were purchased as a lot from Deir al-Surian in 1843 by the Rev. H. Tattam for the British Museum. The purchase is described in volume 3, xii-xiii.

Syriac Old Testament at first seems suggestive, it must be noted that it is a seventeenth-century manuscript.¹⁸¹ Instances of the four books grouped together without a title offer little more. All four occur together in five relatively early Syriac biblical manuscripts, one from the seventh century and the rest from the eleventh and twelfth centuries.¹⁸² The seventh-century manuscript—a complete Syriac Bible—does group them together, but this alone is insufficient to posit a traditional collection of, or connection between, Ruth, Esther, Susanna and Judith that predates the sixth-century Christian example under discussion, especially given that another, eighth-century, Syriac biblical manuscript includes all four books, but does not group them together.¹⁸³ Four more premodern Syriac manuscripts group Ruth, Esther, and Judith together, and include Susanna with the canonical Daniel and Bel and the Dragon; they are from the tenth and eleventh centuries,¹⁸⁴ and as such do not suggest a Jewish Book of Women that predates the sixth-century Christian example.

As there is no evidence for a preexisting Jewish Book of Women, I take this to be a creation of Syriac Christianity, formed by and in response to its interests, and assert that Thecla was always a component text in it. It is not possible to date the collection beyond noting that it must postdate the translation of Thecla into Syriac,

¹⁸¹ BL Egerton 704, #12 and #18. Wright, *Catalogue* 1:1-3 (I).

¹⁸² Peshitta list sigla: 7a1, 11m1, 11m5, 12a1, 12m2. The first two are complete Bibles; the 11th-12th c. manuscripts are so-called masoretic manuscripts [thus the “m” in the sigla], containing vocalized extracts from each book.

¹⁸³ Peshitta list siglum 8a1 = Paris, N.L., Syr. 341. Some scholars argue for a seventh- or even sixth-century dating.

¹⁸⁴ Peshitta list sigla: 10m3, 11m2, 11m4, and 11m6. These are also so-called masoretic manuscripts.

and probably predates the sixth century manuscript under discussion.¹⁸⁵ Wherever the collection falls in that time frame, the contents of this collection of texts, and the names used for the collection and its component parts provide evidence for how the included texts may have been understood in late ancient and early Byzantine Syriac Christianity.

In grouping Thecla's story with the stories of Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith, the editor of the collection appropriated the Jewish stories for Christian use in a manner parallel to, but importantly different from, the textual activity discussed by Elizabeth Clark in Reading Renunciation. Her work deals with the ways that early Christian writers interpreted and appropriated for their own use

. . . an apparently 'underasceticized' Hebrew (and earlier Christian) past. How could Israel of the flesh, with its concern for abundant reproduction, inspire those who yearned for 'Jerusalem above,' where marriage and family were counted as naught? If 'sacred literature' could not be rejected, only interpreted, hermeneutical strategies had to be devised . . .¹⁸⁶

Clark emphasizes the creation of new texts from old via the medium of commentaries, seeing a process of "decontextualization and relocation"; the Book of Women has a function analogous to the commentaries she examines. Just as a

¹⁸⁵ If this was, in fact, the exemplar for the several later Syriac Books of Women, it does seem odd that the accompanying hagiographic life of Rabbula does not survive in any other manuscript, and that there appear to be no references to this Life during the centuries when those Books of Women were being produced.

¹⁸⁶ Clark, Reading Renunciation, p.177.

commentary on a scriptural text became itself a new, Christian, text, at least didactic and often revered as holy in itself, this collection is a thing in itself, a Christian book that appropriates Jewish figures for Christian use. While the commentators used overt exegetical manipulation to bring Hebrew Scripture into their discourses, the Book of Women witnesses a more subtle manipulation of scriptural texts, constructing an implicit rather than explicit commentary on its component texts.

The Book of Women as Commentary

Beyond the simple presence of the Thecla text in the collection, its placement at the end suggests that Thecla is the successor of Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith, perhaps even the fulfillment or the climax of the story. There is at least an implied evolutionary progression here, and the way in which this collection was probably read (or heard)¹⁸⁷ would have encouraged that sense of moving from good to better, and the appropriation of earlier, Jewish figures into later, Christian tradition. This collection would have been used by Christians, who were most likely familiar with all of the stories included in it. This would have enabled what Matei Calinescu has termed a “double reading,” consisting,

naturally, of the sequential temporal movement of the reader’s mind (attention, memory, hypothetical anticipation, curiosity, involvement) along the horizontal or syntagmatic axis of the work; but it also consists of the reader’s attempt to ‘construct’ (note the building, spatial

¹⁸⁷ For the purposes of this argument, it makes little difference whether the textual object was read or heard; what matters is the experience of the sequence of narratives. I shall, for the sake of convenience, refer to “readers.”

metaphor) the text under perusal, or to perceive it as a 'construction' with certain clearly distinguishable structural properties.¹⁸⁸

The second, "constructive," element of Calinescu's double reading comes into play when the reader has special knowledge of the object being read, a "deeper engagement" with the text, such as we would expect late antique Christians to have with Hebrew Scripture (and probably with Thecla).¹⁸⁹ They would have engaged in both a linear reading that sees a beginning and an end, or climax, and an actively interpretive reading that seeks a schema for the entire textual object. This combination would favor the perception of a teleological structure to the collection, emphasizing Thecla as the climactic figure of the larger story that the component texts come together to form.

Subsequent experiences of the text would have further encouraged the discovery of a comprehensive theme and message in the collection, and enabled a different sort of reading, drawing Thecla into a textual conversation with her companions, one in which they, too, have something to say about her status and identity. This process could only have been encouraged by the titles used in the collection, which would have tended to encourage the perception of Thecla's story as somehow equivalent to those of Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith, granting her almost scriptural status. First, the title Book of Women elides the differences

¹⁸⁸ Matei Calinescu, Rereading (New Haven, 1993), 18-19.

¹⁸⁹ Based on the sheer number of her appearances in sixth century Syriac texts and manuscripts, as described in the introduction.

between its component figures, implying that their essential femininity is their defining feature; the “Jewishness” of the first four stories is essentially lost as the reader moves through the collection, and her or his “expectations are constantly modified in light of what he or she has just read,” in a continuing process of the retrospective assignment of meaning.¹⁹⁰ The titles used for the component texts of the collection do differentiate Thecla from her Jewish fellow-travelers and even as the collection assimilates her to them. Her story is called “the history of Thecla, disciple of Paul the apostle”—*ἱστορία τῆς μαθήτρου τοῦ ἀποστόλου Παύλου*—while each of the other women has a “book” (*βιβλίον*, *ἱστορία*, and so on). Hers is also the only text whose title mentions another, legitimating name. This distinction is not consistent throughout the tradition of the Book of Women; its presence here may well reflect the promotion of the latter sort of reading described here, one in which the stories of Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith act as controls or filters for the audience’s reception of the story of Thecla.¹⁹¹ As discussed later in this chapter, that sort of reading would appear to ‘domesticate’ Thecla, deemphasizing those aspects of her story which were sometimes read as licensing female religious authority and independence.

Both readings of the Book of Women – progressive, valorizing Thecla, and a more recursive or cumulative reading, understanding Thecla in light of Ruth, Esther,

¹⁹⁰ Calinescu, *Rereading*, 45. The alternative is that Thecla is implicitly made Jewish. If so, why retain her link to Paul? What would prompt such a reading?

¹⁹¹ By the time of the eighth-century version, she travels with Esther, Judith, and Tobit, and all four have “books.” (Kamil, “Catalogue,” XXVII.) The tenth-century occurrence uses one title for Susanna, another for Esther, and yet another —“history”—for Judith and Thecla. No one gets a “book” here; only the collection itself is so named. (Wright, *Catalogue*, 1:98.)

Susanna, and Judith – arise from and depend upon the use of the collection as a codicological vehicle for the included texts. Wolfgang Iser has discussed reading as the interaction between the structure of a text and the reader, focusing on the “blanks” in the text, the perceptual places where “the different segments and patterns of the text are to be connected even though the text itself does not say so.”¹⁹² As the reader moves through the text, these blanks produce tension between “heterogenous perspective segments,” and that tension is resolved by a shifting perception of the themes of the text. Perceived themes exercise influence on, and are retroactively influenced by, the themes that succeed them,

for as each theme recedes into the background of its successor, the vacancy shifts, allowing for a reciprocal transformation to take place . . . The shifting blank is responsible for a sequence of colliding images, which condition each other in the time flow of reading. The discarded image imprints itself on its successor, even though the latter is meant to resolve the deficiencies of the former. In this respect the images hang together in a sequence, and it is by this sequence that the meaning of the text comes alive in the reader’s imagination.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Wolfgang Iser, “Interaction Between Text and Reader,” in The Reader in the Text. Essays on Audience and Interpretation, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, 1980), 106-119. The quote is on p. 112, where he is speaking specifically of fiction.

¹⁹³ Iser, “Interaction,” 118-119.

In this system, the component texts of the Book of Women are the “heterogenous perspective segments.” In the process of moving through the collection, the reader’s understanding of the themes of each text would be influenced by the themes of the other texts. S/he would construct an interpretation of the texts dependent upon the components of the collection as a whole.

By choosing texts about holy (by virtue of their positive representations in Scripture) women, texts that came with a variety of interpretive baggage, the compiler selected the register of interpretation. A register “rearranges the text in such a manner that understanding may emerge,” and provides “a means of access to what is interpreted, but . . . also the framework into which the subject matter is translated.”¹⁹⁴ So, the at least partially determined register of the Book of Women as about holy women, women who are admirable in some as yet to be determined way, is “superimposed on the subject matter, the liminal space is colonized by the concepts brought to bear,”¹⁹⁵ and the reader’s understanding of the texts is thereby guided.

In particular, in an exemplary reading, it would be the reader’s understanding of the Thecla text being guided; the Book of Women would be a re-reading of the Thecla text. Each of the first four texts in the Book of Women serves both as an example of a surpassed Jewish past in contrast to the glory of Thecla’s perfected Christian model, and as a guide for reading Thecla’s story, selecting the important episodes in that story by foreshadowing those episodes in their own stories. Ruth,

¹⁹⁴ Wolfgang Iser, The Range of Interpretation (New York, 2000), 50, 151.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Esther, Susanna, and Judith re-present Thecla, clarifying what matters and what does not in her story. This is a largely progressive reading, emphasizing Thecla as the culmination of a series. Episodes are selected, but as a matter of emphasis, not change, and the reading is strongly injunctive.

The illustrative reading, in contrast, is perhaps better described as cumulative. No one text is the primary focus; the collection is still about holy women, but each component figure has her own particular admirable life and qualities, and the collection serves more as an album of possible models than an argument for a particular model. Taken together, Ruth, Esther, Susanna, Judith, and Thecla witness various sorts of female holiness. It is also quite possibly cumulative with respect to its interpretation of Thecla's story, downplaying many aspects of her story by presenting women who live holy lives in direct contradiction to some of the apparent emphases of the Acts of Thecla. If episodes in Thecla's story are being selected here, it is in order not merely to re-present, but to re-imagine those episodes, to demonstrate the ways in which Thecla fits into existing ideas about female holiness, as opposed to surpassing or fulfilling them. The illustrative reading is vaguely injunctive, offering Thecla as one possible model, but also in an important sense disinjunctive, offering the other included texts to filter out, or at least deemphasize, the more strongly ascetic themes and episodes in her story.

The Book of Women as about Thecla

Both the exemplary and the illustrative readings arise from the narrative contents and sequence of the included texts. The exemplary, strongly progressive, reading in particular depends upon the sequence of stories and reveals a

progression in the Book of Women of the heroines from willingly sexual woman to adamant virgin.

The collection opens with the story of Ruth, a Moabite widow. She is faithful to her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, although she no longer needs to be. After following Naomi to Bethlehem, she seduces and marries Boaz at Naomi's behest. Her son by Boaz becomes, we are told, the grandfather of King David. She is, therefore, an ancestor of Jesus in Christian tradition, and is mentioned in his genealogy in the Gospel of Matthew. We then move to Esther, a Jewish woman who is taken into the harem of King Ahasuerus without her consent, and when he finds her (sexually) pleasing, she becomes his queen. She uses the king's affection for her to save her people from a murderous plot by one of the king's ministers, and then to license their equally murderous revenge on their enemies. The story ends with her establishment of the holiday of Purim to commemorate the event. Next is Susanna, the righteous wife of Joachim, who chooses to face death rather than submit to the lecherous demands of two wicked elders. In answer to her prayer, Daniel steps forward and proves her innocence. Her parents, husband, and relatives praise God "because she was found innocent of a shameful deed." The last Jewish story in the Book of Women is that of Judith, a virtuous and wealthy widow who exhorts the elders of Bethulia to have faith and courage in the face of the Assyrian army laying siege to the town. She then puts off her widow's attire and adorns herself with cosmetics, jewelry, and festive attire and delivers herself to the Assyrian general Holofernes, pretending to betray her people to him and tricking him into an attempt to seduce her. Dazzled by her beauty and the prospect of having

intercourse with her, he becomes drunk, passes out, and she beheads him. She takes his head back to Bethulia, displays it and intimidates the Assyrian army into headlong flight. She is praised by all the people of Israel, leads “all the women of Israel” in a dance, praises God, refuses many offers of marriage, and remains a widow until her death. Finally, we come to Thecla. She is a betrothed virgin, living in her mother’s house, when she hears Paul preach a message of Christian chastity, emphasizing the virtue of virginity. She leaves her mother and fiancé behind to follow Paul, is miraculously saved from death in the arena, suffers an attempted rape, is again miraculously saved from death in the arena, and baptizes herself, which Paul had been reluctant to do. She finds Paul, who had deserted her in her distress, shows herself to him and informs him of her (self-) baptism, and then leaves him to spend the rest of her life preaching and teaching.

So, Ruth both remarries after being widowed, and actively engages in the sexual pursuit of Boaz. Her lasting reward is her status as an ancestor of King David and Jesus. Esther is taken, without her assent, as a concubine and wife; she is able to use the status she achieves by virtue of her sexual activity to save her people. Susanna refuses illicit sexual activity even in the face of death, and is celebrated when her fidelity to her husband is proven. The widowed Judith dextrously avoids sexual activity even while using her beauty to trap and kill Holofernes, and remains unmarried until her death. Thecla flees the prospect of marriage to pursue a life of Christian virginity, avoiding rape along the way.

The collection moves us from a positive valuation of licit sexual activity to a rejection of sexual activity of any sort. First, we have a widow who remarries and

whose sexual activity is condoned and even lauded; this is in contrast to a virgin who is taken against her will but is able to use her sexual activity to benefit her people; and then to another virgin, who marries but is threatened with the specter of illicit sexual activity outside of that marriage. Sex has become not desirable, or even functional, but dangerous. The second widow of the collection refuses all offers of remarriage and avoids sexual activity even while using its appeal to protect her people. This chaste widow is succeeded by an adamant and determined virgin, who preserves her virginity as a religious good. The larger narrative of the collection moves from a positive to a negative valuation of sexual activity, marking the women of the Jewish stories as part of the pre-Christian past, even while demonstrating the movement of the Jewish past toward Christian ideals. Thecla, the only Christian woman in the collection, whose story concludes the Book of Women, is the point of the larger story, the climax to which the metanarrative has built. Her defining characteristic, highlighted by the thematic progression of the collection, is her choice of virginity as a religious lifestyle.

This progressive, exemplary reading stands in many ways in contrast to the tempering of the possibilities of Thecla's story offered by an illustrative reading of the Book of Women. When the stories of the Book of Women are brought into conversation with each other – when they are considered as a normative group, as would tend to happen once the collection became an accepted part of the literature of some group of Syriac Christians – Thecla the defiant virgin who rejects all social norms is reined in by her textual companions.

The book of Ruth emphasizes family, marriage, childbearing and in general the proper functioning of society. Her great virtue is her fidelity to her family in the person of her mother-in-law, resulting in her marriage to a wealthy, generous Israelite, and the eventual birth of a child who is part of the line of David after Boaz carefully legitimates the marriage with the elders of the city and Naomi's next-of-kin. All of this stands in direct opposition to Thecla's rejection of her mother and fiancé, her perpetual virginity, and her repeated clashes with civic authorities. André Lacocque has argued that Ruth's story is a reversal of a typical betrothal narrative, and thus upsets gender norms,¹⁹⁶ but as a foreigner her breaking of social expectations is to be expected, and in the end she fills her expected role admirably, marrying and producing a son to continue her dead husband's line. If Ruth filters Thecla, then the reader would focus on Thecla's fidelity to Paul and Christ in the face of danger, and relegate the ascetic elements of the story and her rejection of social norms to, at least, a less prominent role.

The book of Esther also emphasizes family and the proper functioning of society. Esther maintains a father-daughter relationship with the uncle who raised her, and after her successful intervention to save her people, she remains married to the king, and she and her uncle enjoy great authority in the land. The primary idea here is the salvation of the Jewish people, enacted through the skillful use of political schemes. There is no indication that the foreign king ruling over Israel is bad; he just has bad advisors. While Lacocque argues that Esther is a subversive text,

¹⁹⁶ André Lacocque, The Feminine Unconventional. Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis, 1990), 84-117. His "four subversive figures" are, in order, Susanna, Judith, Esther, and Ruth, but he is apparently unaware of any version of the Book of Women.

framed in opposition to the “Jerusalem establishment,”¹⁹⁷ that opposition is nuanced at best. She does remain a queen, married to Ahasuerus, and her actions save her people, her society. Again, this emphasis on society—Jewish and more general—would act as a filter for Thecla, downplaying the negative role society plays in her story. With this as a filter, the reader might see Queen Tryphaena, who at one point shelters Thecla, and the women who protest Thecla’s apparently imminent death as representatives of the properly functioning social order, rather than as women who step outside of the existing social order.

The emphasis in the story of Susanna is on her chastity and the elders’ villainy. While we would see Susanna’s chastity and Thecla’s virginity as closely linked notions, they are distinct, and the idea that chastity is just as virtuous as virginity would serve to temper the Thecla text’s emphasis on asceticism. The pointed criticism of the elders fits with the presentation of civic officials in Thecla; the important, filtering distinction is that these elders are corrupt, not fulfilling their proper societal function or role. So, the authority figures who cause Thecla problems might be read as aberrant and therefore bad, rather than socially powerful and therefore bad.

Finally, we have Judith, who although widowed, is both wealthy and influential, and remains so even after saving her people, enjoying great honor in the land until and after her death. As in Esther, the important thing is the survival of her people, and she not only operates within society, but at its upper echelons. This would reinforce the filtering of Thecla’s interactions with the existing social order.

¹⁹⁷ Lacocque, 49-83.

Also, while there is a much clearer gender reversal here than in any of the previous three texts—Judith is the action hero of the piece—she acts by emphasizing and utilizing her sexuality, rather than denying it. Being a woman, and specifically a sexually attractive woman, has a positive function here. As in Ruth, and even Esther, this would tend to temper the emphasis on the virtue of Thecla's virginity, and yet again serve to temper any rejection of social norms or criticism of the leaders of any given social unit.

Thus, by the time readers reached Thecla, the last character in the Book of Women, they already would have encountered ideas about virtuous women that were in some ways opposed to those in the Thecla text. These ideas would suggest certain understandings of the story of Thecla, understandings that downplayed or tamed certain potentially troubling aspects of the text.

We know that there were those who did find parts of the story troubling. Most of those are in the Greek and Latin traditions,¹⁹⁸ and there is no evidence that the relevant texts were available to Syriac Christians in this period. In addition to these later Syriac instances of apparent discomfort with certain potential uses of Thecla's story, a number of modern scholars have argued for other late antique receptions or understandings of Thecla's story that would have caused concern to some in the Syrian Orthodox (miaphysite) Church if they in fact perceived those meanings in her story. Dennis MacDonald argued in 1983 that Thecla's story was so strongly against

¹⁹⁸ Lists, details, and discussion in Léonie Hayne, "Thecla and the Church Fathers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 48(1994):209-218 and in Monika Pesthy, "Thecla Among the Fathers of the Church," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer, *Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles 2* (Kampen, 1996), pp.164-178. See also Basil of Seleucia's *Life of Thecla* in Gilbert Dagron, *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle. Texte grec, traduction et commentaire*, SH 62 (Brussels, 1978) and in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla: A Literary Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

the empire, the city, and even the household that the author of the pastoral epistles made a deliberate attempt to counteract its radical rejection of social norms.¹⁹⁹

Soon thereafter, Virginia Burrus made a strong case for understanding the apocryphal acts, including the Acts of Thecla, as championing the creation of “a new community, in which traditional sex roles and authority roles were abolished.”²⁰⁰

Johannes Vorster has argued more specifically that the dominant paradigm of personhood or self in antiquity was andro- and socio-centric, and that the Acts of Thecla undermined those standards, suggesting the possibility of an alternative construction of personhood.²⁰¹ Most recently, Melissa Aubin, expanding on the work of Kate Cooper on the ancient romances, has suggested that the primary function of the Thecla story was to upset accepted gender norms.²⁰² What seems to be an inescapable emphasis on breaking, or at least bending, social and especially gender expectations was apparently increasingly troubling as the Church became ever more closely linked to the Empire and ever more institutional in nature.

The question then, is to what extent this apparent discomfort with the possibilities inherent in Thecla’s story should drive our reading of the Book of

¹⁹⁹ Dennis Ronald MacDonald, The Legend and the Apostle. The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon (Philadelphia, 1983).

²⁰⁰ Virginia Burrus, Chastity as Autonomy. Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts, *Studies in Women and Religion* 23 (Lewiston, ME, 1987); quote from p. 118.

²⁰¹ Johannes N. Vorster, “Construction of Culture through the Construction of Person: The Acts of Thecla as an Example,” in The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 146 (Sheffield, 1997), 445-75.

²⁰² Melissa Aubin, “Reversing Romance? The Acts of Thecla and the Ancient Novel,” in Ronald F. Hock et al., eds., Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative, SBL Symposium Series 6 (Atlanta, 1998), 257-72. She relies on Kate Cooper, The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

Women, whether it makes the illustrative, cumulative reading of the collection more likely than an exemplary, progressive reading in its sixth-century Syriac context. In fact, it does not. First, we have, prior to this collection, only two, passing, references to Thecla in Syriac Christian literature, neither of which is concerned with her gender at all. While at least some Syriac Christians likely shared the concerns of Greek-speaking Christians about Thecla, we should not assume that they did. More to the point, the Syriac versions of the included texts suggest that both readings were not merely possible for a Syriac audience, but in fact likely, and would have, in a Syriac context, worked together.

The Book of Women as Syriac

Syriac hagiographic and paedagogical texts, as discussed in chapter two, valorize virginity and present virgins as sexually vulnerable, obedient, and as leading religious lives in a familial or otherwise sheltered, although not closely organized, situation. An exemplary reading of the Book of Women valorizes Thecla's virginity, and does, in its progression from sexual activity as licit and desirable to illicit and dangerous, fit with an understanding of virgins as sexually vulnerable, but it does not seem to accommodate ideas about obedience and religious practice in a familial or quasi-familial setting. An illustrative, cumulative reading makes virginity less of a focus and retains the possibilities of licit sexual activity, but does foreground and emphasize the ways in which Thecla could be understood to be obedient and even benefiting from quasi-familial protection. Ruth seduced Boaz to further the line of David, in contrast to Thecla's absolute refusal of marriage; God preserved Judith the faithful widow from Holofernes' advances as Thecla the virgin was preserved from

the advances of Thamyris and Alexander; Esther, obeying her uncle, saved her people as Thecla obeyed Paul and “enlightened many people,” ܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܢܐ;²⁰³ Susanna was saved from shame by the intervention of righteous authority from within her community, and her family rejoiced, as Thecla was kept in purity because Tryphaena took her as a surrogate daughter, referring to her as “my daughter.”²⁰⁴

Neither reading seems to fit precisely with what we would expect based upon Syriac ideas about women and their religious lives as discussed above. In order to argue for the most likely reading of the Book of Women as a specifically Syriac creation, we need to examine a narrower context, that of the collection itself, which offers six possible guides for a specifically Syriac reading of the Book of Women.

First, the collection itself: as argued in chapter three, Thecla was translated into Syriac with reference to, and in company with, the biblical book of Daniel. This then means that her placement in the Book of Women was a deliberate choice, moving her from a martyrological context into a context without obvious martyrological emphases, a context that is explicitly gendered in a way her pairing with Daniel was not. The Book of Women is about women, not merely because of its title, but because of its deliberate presentation of Thecla in a new and gendered way. It is not, barring some other indication of martyrological interest, about martyrs.

Each of the component texts also offers the possibility of information regarding specifically Syriac understandings. As the Book of Women under

²⁰³ Wright, *Acts*, 168.9.

²⁰⁴ Wright, *Acts*, 155.8 and 165.13 [Tryphaena keeping Thecla in purity]; 163.16 [specific reference by Tryphaena to Thecla as her daughter].

consideration in ms. BL Add. 14,652 preserves the earliest extant Syriac version of each text,²⁰⁵ it will not be possible to determine whether the texts were altered as a part of their placement in the collection, but it is possible to compare the texts to the ancient Hebrew and Greek versions²⁰⁶ and check for any specifically Syriac understandings of or emphases in the stories witnessed by the translation.

The Syriac text of Ruth preserved in the Book of Women appears to have only one notable divergence from the original Hebrew and the Septuagint version: at 3:7, Ruth falls at Boaz' feet. The Septuagint and the Hebrew have her uncover his feet,²⁰⁷ and then the verse ends, although in 3:4-5 Naomi has instructed her to observe where Boaz sleeps, and then sleep (or lay herself down) at his feet. Ruth receives the same instructions in the Syriac, but in 3:7, she “uncovered the hem of his cloak and fell at his feet,” *ܡܠܟܝ ܝ ܕܗܠ ܕܠܘܐ ܡܦܢܝܝܢܐ ܩܡܝܢ ܕܠܟ*,²⁰⁸ although Naomi's instructions and the description of Boaz' actions consistently use the verb *ܦܘܨܐ*,²⁰⁹ “sleep,” or “lie down,” and also “have intercourse.” This uniquely Syriac insertion echoes the earlier encounter between Ruth and Boaz at 2:10, when she “fell on her face on the ground and bowed to him,” *ܕܝܦܘܨܐ ܕܩܝܡܝܐ ܕܥܡܝܐ ܕܠܗܘܐ*

²⁰⁵ Susanna, as noted above [n.5] is preserved in one other 6th-century Syriac manuscript, there with Daniel and the other apocryphal additions.

²⁰⁶ And, in the case of Ruth and Esther, to check the apparent changes against the Hebrew version.

²⁰⁷ Lacking the ability to read Hebrew, I have used The Jewish Study Bible, edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), which offers the 1999 revised, second edition of the Jewish Publication Society's translation of the Tanakh. For the Septuagint, and for Theodotion's Susanna, I have used the electronic edition prepared by the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Computer Analysis of Texts, via the TITUS website, affiliated with the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, see <http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/indexe.htm>

²⁰⁸ Folio 5v, lines 9-10.

²⁰⁹ Folio 5r, lines 25-27, and folio 5v, line 6.

ܩܠ, ²¹⁰ in response to his surprising generosity to a foreigner, and seems to have more to do with gratitude (or supplication) and humility than with seduction.

Syriac Esther, as preserved in the Book of Women, also appears to have only one notable divergence from the Septuagint and Hebrew versions, at 2:20. The Greek notes, in agreement with the Hebrew, that Esther “obeyed Mordecai just as when she was with him.”²¹¹ The Syriac changes this to have her obey him “as she did with regard to the religion of her people,” *ܡܚܘܒܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ*,²¹² adding a religious emphasis otherwise apparently limited to the inauguration of Purim.

Syriac Susanna has a more extended change from the Greek, greatly expanding the verse, “Susanna groaned and said, I am completely trapped [literally, *στενα μοι παντοθεν*, “all sides are narrow to me”].²¹³ For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord.”²¹⁴ In Syriac, Susanna says quite a bit more:

ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ
ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ
ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ
ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܡܪܕܘܨܐܝܐ

²¹⁰ Folio 4r, lines 9-11.

²¹¹ NRSV translation.

²¹²Folio 11r, lines 20-21.

²¹³ This phrase, not present in Septuagint Susanna but clearly echoed in the Syriac, indicates that the Syriac was translated from Theodotion’s version of the text.

²¹⁴ NRSV translation, Susanna 22-23, from Theodotion’s version.

לְהַרְגֵנִי כִּי אֵין לִי מַלְכוּת לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.
וְאִם אֵין כֵּן אֲבֵלֵנִי וְאֵין לִי חַיִּים לְפָנֶיךָ יְיָ.

And Susanna cried out and said, all my choices are narrow, for if I do this, it is death to me before the Lord because I disgraced the bed of Joachim my husband. And if I do not, I will meet an evil death at their hands, with an evil name that does not fit my chastity. And I will leave disgrace to all my descendants on account of the false witness of unjust choices that will lead to the ruin and the misfortune of Israel because of the reproach of gentile strangers. But it is expedient for me that I should die unjustly at their hands. And I will not sin in the presence of the Lord, He who errs in nothing, because I am a believer in him even if their hands break me.²¹⁵

This expanded outburst from Susanna emphasizes several ideas: God would be displeased by any illicit sexual activity; the disgrace to her husband/marriage vow is what would displease God; that disgrace would not be limited to her family, but

²¹⁵ Folio 26r, line 18 to 26v, line 12.

would in fact rebound upon the entire nation of Israel, exposing it to the ridicule of nonbelievers; and, death is better than sexual sin.²¹⁶

Syriac Judith appears to have only one notable change from the Greek, but it is expanded in such a way as to mark it as deliberate: when Judith enters the tent of Holofernes, she *sits* rather than falling back or lying down. While the shift from “Then Judith came in and lay down”²¹⁷ to “and Judith came in and sat down [ܐܫܝܬܐ]”²¹⁸ might not initially seem significant, or even necessarily deliberate, the preceding verse makes it clear that the change is both. The Greek has, “Her maid went ahead and spread for her on the ground before Holofernes the lambskins she had received from Bagoas for her daily use in reclining.”²¹⁹ The Syriac alters the last phrase and adds a clarification, giving us, “...to sleep on them [the lambskins]. So that she might sit on them to eat,” ܐܫܝܬܐ ܥܠ ܗܘܢܐ ܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܢܐ. ²²⁰ This marks a clear distinction between what Bagoas and Holofernes intended for the lambskins, and the evening, and what Judith intended. This distinction is entirely absent from the Greek.

So, based only on the translations, a few themes emerge. Ruth’s pursuit of Boaz is not sexual, but is about supplication, and perhaps gratitude. Esther’s actions do not reflect simple loyalty to her uncle or people, but are a matter of

²¹⁶ Verse 26, in which the elders first accuse Susanna, is also expanded in the Syriac (no details about the false witness are given in the Greek), but is simply a brief restatement of the full accusation in verses 36-41. Verse 64 is also expanded, with more detail on Daniel’s increasing fame and continued wise and virtuous activities.

²¹⁷ NRSV translation, Judith 12:16.

²¹⁸ Folio 55r, line 14.

²¹⁹ NRSV translation, Judith 12:15b.

²²⁰ Folio 55r, lines 13-14.

religious obedience. Susanna's peril is not merely personal, but also involves possible disgrace to her husband, family, and people, and death is a good and rational alternative to sexual sin. Judith never, ever intended to have sex with Holofernes, and even in the sexually perilous location of his tent, she acts in a way that demonstrates this. Less sex, more religion, sex as perilous in a myriad of ways so intense that death is preferable, and careful preservation of one's virtue; this would appear to support an exemplary reading over an illustrative reading.

That support is not, at first glance, especially strong, and these changes do not, of course, encompass the entirety of the Syriac reception of these texts, or even give an unquestionably secure snapshot of it at the time of the manuscript. The two main problems with redactional analysis are that it cannot determine when the *absence* of change is conscious assent to an idea and when it is simply faithful translation, and it cannot determine when an initial change, later copied, reflects conscious assent to the new idea or reading, and when it is simply faithful copying. Since we do not know precisely when the texts were translated, or even when the Book of Women was compiled, how much the changes mean for the Book of Women would be unclear without further corroboration. That corroboration comes in brief, early references to three of the texts in Syriac literature, and in the arrangement of the texts within the Book of Women.

Although no early Syriac references to Judith have come to light, we do have a very small amount of evidence for early Syriac readings of Ruth, Esther, and Susanna. Ephrem, discussed above in chapter two, briefly mentions Ruth in his hymns: "Ruth lay down with Boaz because she saw hidden in him the medicine of

life; today her vow is fulfilled since from her seed arose the Giver of all life.”²²¹

Aphrahat, also discussed in chapter two, repeatedly refers to Esther’s fasting as an example of virtuous behavior.²²² Ephrem also mentions Susanna his hymns, noting that “a married woman willed to die to put an end to adultery.”²²³ Interestingly, these brief references echo the ideas apparent in the translational changes to the texts. Combining the two sources, we have: Ruth prostrating herself in search of the savior; Esther obeying religious commands; and, Susanna righteously choosing death over illicit sex. Beyond the agreement of the references with the translation, and with themes in Thecla’s story, the very order of the texts further supports the Book of Women an exemplary reading of the Acts of Thecla.

An exemplary reading selects or highlights, and also clarifies, episodes in the target text, the one whose subject is being valorized as following in the footsteps of eminent predecessors and as herself worthy of imitation with regard to those episodes. The Book of Women, when we consider the changes from the source texts made by the Syriac translators as evidence of Syriac understandings of the texts, and then also consider the available explicit evidence of Syriac understandings of the texts, presents the stories of four women who serve to clarify and authorize Thecla’s actions and virtues.

The first story, Ruth’s, emphasizes her pursuit of Boaz as the pursuit of the savior. This selects Thecla’s flight from her home to pursue Paul as important, and

²²¹Kathleen McVey, transl., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (Classics of Western Spirituality series; Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 65.

²²²In his third Demonstration, on fasting. See Ilya Lizorkin, “Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations: A Conversation with the Jews of Mesopotamia*” (PhD dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 2009), pp.209-211, 213, 222.

²²³*Ephrem*, 269.

emphasizes that her desire to see him is about religion. The second story, Esther's, emphasizes that she obeyed Mordecai with regard to religion, following religious commands. This highlights the scene in which Thecla listened to Paul teaching the commandments. The third story, Susanna's, points out that although she will leave her family in disgrace, she must choose death over assent to unwanted, and illicit, sexual advances. So, Thecla's rejection of her arranged marriage to Thamyris, and of her mother's directions, and her willingness to die as a result of her decision, are important, and importantly virtuous. Judith's story has her acting to preserve her chastity, even in the tent of Holofernes, surely the most perilous of situations, which selects Thecla's determination to preserve her purity even while she awaited her ordeals in the Antioch arena as significant and admirable. The stories preceding Thecla's in the Book of Women not only present, and thereby highlight, episodes parallel to those in the Acts of Thecla, but they present them in the order they occur in the narrative, reiterating that narrative and selecting important actions and ideas.

All of this is a form of commentary on the Acts of Thecla, an exemplary reading that at least implicitly urged women to follow her model as framed in the Book of Women. This would seem to involve pursuit of religious instruction; obedience to religious commands, perhaps scriptural, perhaps those of a religious teacher; rejection or at least devaluation of family ties and obligations; willingness to die to remain sexually pure; and the determined protection of that purity in even the most difficult circumstances, avoiding even the appearance of impropriety. This collection, this exemplary and hortative reception, was then placed into a larger

manuscript whole, offering it not merely a context, but further refinement of what Thecla models and warrants for that refinement.

CHAPTER SIX
Thecla in BL Add. 14,652

The Book of Women is immediately followed in the manuscript by the “Triumphs of Mar Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa, the Blessed City,” ^{ܡܝܪܝܢܐ ܕܪܒܘܠܐ ܕܥܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ}, but the Life of Rabbula has not merely been copied from some exemplar. Two sets of rules²²⁴ have been inserted into it: first, the “Commandments and Admonitions for the Clergy and Sons of the Covenant of Mar Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa,”²²⁵ ^{ܕܡܝܪܝܢܐ ܕܪܒܘܠܐ ܕܥܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ}, and then the “Admonitions Concerning Monks By the Same Mar Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa,” ^{ܕܡܝܪܝܢܐ ܕܪܒܘܠܐ ܕܥܕܝܫܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ ܕܥܝܪܐ}. These rules were not a part of the original Life, and thus witness an interest in regulating the lives of sworn religious.

The Rules

These rules, since they are mentioned in the Life, would appear to predate it (they may in fact be what they are labeled as, and date to before Rabbula’s death in 435 or 436) and will be considered first. Then, they will be considered as a part of a

²²⁴ These Rules, together, separately, and in fragments, survive in eight other manuscripts from the seventh through nineteenth centuries. For details, see Arthur Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism (Stockholm: Etse, 1960), pp.26 and 35.

²²⁵ While ^{ܡܝܪܝܢܐ} might be more obviously translated “priests,” the contents of the rules make “clergy” more likely, as will be explained.

deliberately-expanded Life of Rabbula, and then that creation will be considered as a companion to the Book of Women.

The first set of rules, for the clergy and Sons of the Covenant, contains somewhere in the neighborhood of sixty rules. Vööbus²²⁶ breaks the text into fifty-nine rules, but the admittedly inconsistent markings in this manuscript, the earliest witness to the rules, do not always coincide with his divisions, and sometimes are simply unclear. They begin with the first of five separate injunctions concerning heretics and heresy (they are to be avoided),²²⁷ but are mostly concerned with the behavior of religious persons.

The religious persons addressed include the Sons of the Covenant, and the ܩܘܪܒܢܝܢ, periodeutae or traveling priests for villages without clergy, ܩܘܪܒܢܝܢ, priests,²²⁸ and ܩܘܪܒܢܝܢ, deacons. The ܩܘܪܒܢܝܢ, “clergy” of the title appears to be used as a collective term for the priests and deacons, those people who are responsible for the church buildings, are able to offer communion, and must be ordained to their rank.²²⁹ This group is distinctly separate from the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant,²³⁰ and has authority over them, although they are subject to some of the

²²⁶ In *Syriac and Arabic*, pp.36-50. Syriac text and English translation of the sixth-century manuscript under discussion, with varia from the other mss.

²²⁷ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, pp.36 and 48, rules 1, 48, 49, 50, and 51.

²²⁸ This could also mean “presbyters,” or “elders,” but given that the accompanying rules for monks refer to monastic ܩܘܪܒܢܝܢ, “priests” seems more likely here. See Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.31, rules 20 and 21. Vööbus uses “priest” for ܩܘܪܒܢܝܢ as well as for ܩܘܪܒܢܝܢ, which loses the distinction the author chose to make.

²²⁹ Based on occurrences of forms of the word in rules 8, 10, 12, 13, 31, 39, 52 and 58.

²³⁰ Clearest in rule 58, “The benai qeiama shall not ascend to the raised floor of the altar...nor shall the priests eat there...” Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, pp.49-50.

same injunctions, and all of them are separate from the laity. Three of the rules make this quite clear. The priests and deacons are forbidden to force the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant to weave garments,²³¹ to extract or demand funds from the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant or the laity,²³² and the clergy are forbidden to allow the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant to live with laypersons other than relatives.²³³

Male religious of every sort are to be strictly segregated from the Daughters of the Covenant, and indeed from women in general.²³⁴ The priests and deacons and Sons of the Covenant are to live in the church, if possible,²³⁵ and a similarly supervised situation seems to be assumed for the Daughters of the Covenant, who are not to go out alone at night, even to the church, and who are not to go anywhere, in fact, without the deaconesses.²³⁶ These living situations are not envisioned as “monasteries,” ܡܢܐܣܬܝܪܐ, because those are mentioned as a separate place, where sinning Covenanters are to be sent for repentance.²³⁷

Wherever they live, the clergy and Covenanters are enjoined to stay there unless given permission to travel,²³⁸ and to avoid meat and wine, and any wealth

²³¹ Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic, p.37, rule 3.

²³² Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic, p.37; rule 6.

²³³ Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic, p.38; rule 10.

²³⁴ Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic, pp.36-37, rules 2 and 4.

²³⁵ Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic, p.46; rule 42.

²³⁶ Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic, pp.40 and 45, rules 18 and 37.

²³⁷ Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic, p.44, rule 29.

²³⁸ Vööbus, Syriac and Arabic, pp.45-6, rule 38.

beyond their basic needs.²³⁹ Moreover, and more emphatically – in no less than five rules²⁴⁰ - the clergy are enjoined to take care of the poor, whether lay or Covenanters. This concern for the welfare of the poor²⁴¹ and the oppressed, *ܩܘܡܐܢܐ* and *ܩܘܡܐܢܐ*, is explicit in rule 11, and also clear in four more rules forbidding the religious from demanding monies for various purposes from the laity.²⁴²

There is some overlap of interests with the second set of about twenty-six²⁴³ rules, those for the monks, as well as marked differences. Each of the themes described above appears here, as well, but generally with different emphases, and a new theme is introduced.

While the monks are forbidden to have books “outside the doctrine of the church,” *ܩܘܡܐܢܐ ܩܘܡܐܢܐ ܩܘܡܐܢܐ*, this does not occur until rule 10,²⁴⁴ and there is no other direct or indirect mention of heresy. Rather than opening with an injunction regarding heresy, as the first set of rules did, this one opens with a stern warning that women must never set foot in the monasteries, and goes on to say that on those

²³⁹ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.42, rules 23 and 24.

²⁴⁰ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, pp.39-42, rules 11, 12, 16, 19, and 24.

²⁴¹ Although he elsewhere says that *ܩܘܡܐܢܐ* generally means “ascetic,” Vööbus translates it here with the literal meaning, “poor,” and I agree that it clearly means that as used in these rules. While rule 12, “take care of the *ܩܘܡܐܢܐ*...especially those who are the *ܩܘܡܐܢܐ*” could mean “take care of the ascetics, especially...” since rule 11 has just explicitly paired care of the *ܩܘܡܐܢܐ* and demanding “justice for the oppressed,” The term must mean “poor” as used here. See Arthur Vööbus, *Einiges über die karitative Tätigkeit des syrischen Mönchtums: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Liebestätigkeit im Orient* (Contributions of Baltic University, 51; Pinneberg: Baltische Universität, 1947), pp.11-12.

²⁴² Rule 11, Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.39; regarding fees, interest, tributes., pp.37-38, rules 6-9.

²⁴³ As with the first set, the divisions between injunctions are not always clear.

²⁴⁴ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.29.

rare occasions when certain monks may enter the villages, they must observe the “order of chastity,” *ܩܕܝܫܘܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐ*, and that even when giving special blessings, monks may not interact directly with women.²⁴⁵ This more adamant separation of monks from women is accompanied by a more pronounced separation from the community at large and from the monks’ families in particular. In general, monks may not go into the villages, meet with (ܩܘܪܒܐ) their families, and even when burying or remembering their dead, must do so only with other monks.²⁴⁶

This seems not to be only about segregation from the community, but also about stability, as the monks are enjoined to stay in the monastery in all circumstances, and forbidden to allow entrance to any monk who moves from monastery to monastery without his superior’s permission.²⁴⁷ This is a markedly stricter rule than the injunction to the priests, deacons, and Covenanters not to travel without permission.²⁴⁸

Greater strictness is also apparent in the four rules forbidding the accumulation of wealth beyond basic needs,²⁴⁹ but on the issues of diet and care for the poor, these rules are nearly silent. The only parallel, and it is very loose, to the injunction to the priests, deacons, and Covenanters to avoid meat and wine is in rule 4, and forbids drunkenness because of the possibility of accompanying, drunken

²⁴⁵ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, pp.27-28, rules 1, 2, and 7.

²⁴⁶ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, pp.27-28, 30, 32; reules 2, 3, 8, 13, and 24.

²⁴⁷ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, pp. 30, 33; rules 14 and 26.

²⁴⁸ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, pp.45-46, rule 38.

²⁴⁹ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, pp.29, 33; rules 9, 11, 12, 25. Also possibly p.30, rule 15, regarding lawsuits.

blasphemy rather than out of any concern with dietary restraint or restriction.²⁵⁰

echo of the five separate occasions on which the first set of rules enjoins care for the poor at first seems stronger: “They shall receive strangers kindly, and shall not close the door in the face of one of the brothers,”²⁵¹ but the “strangers” here are ܠܘܨܝܢܐ, and as mentioned in chapter three,²⁵² this could mean “wandering religious.” Since the monks are forbidden, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, to receive strange monks if they travel without permission, this cannot mean that they are being forbidden to turn away any monk. Rather, I suspect, they are being enjoined to receive ξενοι, wandering religious, their brother religious, in kindness.²⁵³ Even if this rule does simply refer to people unknown to the monks, it hardly bespeaks an interest in the welfare of the poor, and there is no specific use of the word “poor,” or other rule which might be read to pertain to charitable activities.

Perhaps the monks spent the time that the priests, deacons and Covenanters occupy with charitable activities on other things. They are not to “grow hair, put on iron or hang (it from themselves),” ܠܘܨܝܢܐ ܘܥܘܠܘܢܐ...ܠܘܨܝܢܐ...ܠܘܨܝܢܐ...ܠܘܨܝܢܐ²⁵⁴ unless they isolate themselves in the monastery, which indicates that some monks were

²⁵⁰ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.27.

²⁵¹ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.31, rule 17.

²⁵² See pp. 52-3 above.

²⁵³ Although there is no indication that the Syriac translation of Thecla uses ܠܘܨܝܢܐ in this way, the Life of Rabbula does, as will be discussed below.

²⁵⁴ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.28, rule 5. I have slightly altered Vööbus’ translation to reflect the reading he offers in his *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient. A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East. II, Early Monasticism in Mesopotamia and Syria* (CSCO 197; Louvain, 1960), p.182.

engaging in practices of bodily mortification. Perhaps more than a few did so, since the very next rule forbids those monks who go outside the monastery to wear “garments of hair.”²⁵⁵ Still others wished to live alone, apart, *ܕܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ*, but were not allowed to do so until they had proven themselves worthy.²⁵⁶ None of these ascetic behaviors are considered in the first set of rules; such possibilities appear to be confined to the monastic life.

Many of the themes in both sets of rules are apparent in the fifth-century Life of Rabbula,²⁵⁷ but not all, and some important points in the Life do not appear to be echoed in the rules. More importantly, demonstrate different interests than the Life, use different terms than the Life, and the author of the Life does not say that he will include the rules in the Life.

Several things appear in the rules and not in the Life, but three stand out as important.²⁵⁸ The rules for the clergy and Covenanters repeatedly forbid the extortion of special offerings, fees, and the like from the laity, and yet in the description of the misdeeds Rabbula corrected in his clergy, and in the instructions

²⁵⁵ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.28, rule 6.

²⁵⁶ Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.31, rule 18.

²⁵⁷ The Syriac, from this manuscript, is available in J. Joseph Overbeck, ed., *S. Ephraem Syri, Rabulae Episcopi Edesseni, Balaei, Aliorumque Opera Selecta* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1865), reissued in a facsimile edition by Gorgias Press in 2007; Robert Doran, *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa* (Cistercian Studies Series, no. 288; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006) provides an English translation and introduction, pp. 41-105.

²⁵⁸ While Vööbus translates rule 15 as an injunction to the priests and deacons to “take charge of the monks that are in their territories,” *ܕܘܪܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ ܕܥܘܠܐ*, *Syriac and Arabic*, p.40, and this assumption of authority by priests over monks would seem contrary to the Life, this is more accurately translated, “take the monks that are in their territories as a burden,” since the rule goes on to speak of providing for their needs.

he gave them,²⁵⁹ the Life never mentions this problem, for all that it looms large in the rules. The *periodeutae*, travelling priests, never appear in the Life, despite appearing in the rules, and the rules' concern for stability is not in evidence in the Life;²⁶⁰ although there may not be travelling priests, there is no injunction against travel by priests, monks, or Covenanters in the Life. Finally, the term **ܩܘܪܒܐܢܐ** is never used for priests in the Life – it never occurs in the Life at all, in contrast to its twenty-six uses in the rules – and the deacons, **ܩܘܪܒܐܢܐ**, who are specifically addressed twenty-five times in the rules barely appear in the Life and are never mentioned as regulated.

In addition to these differences, indicating that the rules and the Life are separate texts, the fact that the author of the life says that he will **ܐܘܨܚܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐܢܐ**, “refer to them as needed,”²⁶¹ and in fact does describe them in some detail, indicates that he did not plan to copy them out. Had he so planned, he would have said so, just as he did regarding the sermon of Rabbula, “we will copy [it] out, after we have recounted his history” **ܕܥܘܒܕܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܒܐܢܐ**²⁶² and omitted description of the rules, as he did of the sermon. The rules are therefore an insertion into the Life, and by their insertion, emphasize and expand certain themes in the Life. Because the rules are such a poor match for the Life, it is likely that although the scribe who inserted the rules into the Life labeled and placed them in

²⁵⁹ Overbeck, pp.172-174; Doran, pp.76-78.

²⁶⁰ Discussed further below.

²⁶¹ Overbeck, p.178; Doran, p.81.

²⁶² Overbeck, p.198; my translation differs somewhat from Doran's on p.97.

such a way that they would appear to be a part of it, the rules in the manuscript are not the rules known to the author of the Life. These rules were either preexisting sets of instructions only associated with Rabbula by an editor of the Life, or were in fact written in order to be inserted into the Life.

The Life of Rabbula

The Life has recently been used in the consideration of ecclesiastical power, Syriac use of Greek literary forms, and the care of the poor in Syriac Christianity,²⁶³ but our interest here is in its depiction of Rabbula's religious life and what he prescribed for other religious. So, although the author is very interested in Rabbula's victories over the heretics, we will simply note that he shares that interest with the rules, and goes into much more detail than they do about heresies and the proper response to them, and move on.

The Life shares the rules' assumption of the necessity of male religious living apart from women – when Rabbula takes up the religious life and moves to the monastery (ܩܘܪܝܢܐ) of the blessed Abraham, he sends his wife, mother, and daughters to the monasteries,²⁶⁴ and he enjoins his clergy and the Sons of the Covenant to

²⁶³ In addition to Doran's work cited here, see the following. Han J.W. Drijvers, "The Man of God of Edessa, Bishop Rabbula, and the Urban Poor: Church and Society in the Fifth Century" Journal of Early Christian Studies 4(1996): 235-248; idem, "Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa: Spiritual Authority and Secular Power," in Jan Willem Drijvers and John W. Watt, eds., Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 137; Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp.139-154. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "The Holy and the Poor: Models from Early Syriac Christianity," in Emily Abu Hanawalt and Carter Lindberg, eds., Through the Eye of a Needle. Judeo-Christian Roots of Social Welfare (Kirksville MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1994), pp.43-66. G.W. Bowersock, "The Syriac Life of Rabbula and Syrian Hellenism," in Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau, eds., Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage, xxxi; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp.255-271. Georg Günter Blum, Rabbula von Edessa. Der Christ, der Bischof, der Theologe (CSCO 300; Louvain, 1969) remains the most compendious examination.

²⁶⁴ Overbeck, pp.166-167; Doran, pp.71-72.

“withdraw from the company of women”²⁶⁵ – but it is not a major interest of the work. Nor is stability. No one is enjoined to stay or to avoid travel, and Rabbula himself travels to Jerusalem before entering the monastery, and even after doing so, he continues to travel, not even on the business of the church, but out of desire.²⁶⁶

In contrast, the Life goes far beyond the rules’ injunctions to avoid wealth, and to care for the poor and the oppressed. The wealth of the church, even to the “liturgical vessels of silver and gold” should be given over to the care of the poor,²⁶⁷ the Sons of the Covenant are not to entangle themselves in monetary dealings,²⁶⁸ and priests are not to accept any gifts, fees, or tributes,²⁶⁹ all of which seems much like the rules. However, the author of the Life, after having Rabbula explain that “whatever the Church possesses, she inherits from believing persons for the sustenance of orphans and widows and the needy,” *ܩܕܝܫܬܐ ܕܥܪܡܐ ܕܥܝܪܘܬܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܬܐ ܕܥܪܡܐ ܕܥܝܪܘܬܐ ܕܩܕܝܫܬܐ ܕܥܪܡܐ*,²⁷⁰ then goes on to describe in great detail his care for the (general) poor, *ܩܕܝܫܬܐ*, the *ܩܕܝܫܬܐ ܕܥܪܡܐ*, the “holy poor” of the monasteries, the sick, *ܩܕܝܫܬܐ*, and the “poor lepers,” *ܩܕܝܫܬܐ ܕܥܪܡܐ*.²⁷¹

²⁶⁵ Overbeck, pp.173-174, 176; Doran, pp.77, 79.

²⁶⁶ Granted, his first move is with Abraham’s permission, and by the time he moves to his third monastery he seems to be under his own authority, but there is a marked lack of stability in his religious life, before and after he becomes bishop. Overbeck, 164, 167-170; Doran, pp.69-70, 72-74.

²⁶⁷ Overbeck, pp.172-3, Doran, pp.76-77.

²⁶⁸ Overbeck, p.176; Doran, pp.79-80.

²⁶⁹ Overbeck, p.184; Doran, p.85.

²⁷⁰ Overbeck, p.190; Doran, p.90.

²⁷¹ Overbeck, p.201-203, Doran, pp.99-101. Doran has “poor holy ones,” but I suspect, given the Life’s emphasis on renunciation that the author means something like “holy and necessarily poor”

According to the author, “in all these things...[Rabbula’s] true priesthood...was triumphant,” $\text{ܕܝܗܘܐ ܚܘܒܘܬܗ ܕܡܫܝܚܘܬܗ ܕܡܠܟܘܬܗ ܕܡܘܨܝܚܘܬܗ ܕܡܘܨܝܚܘܬܗ}$, and “the deeds of the Law were embodied in his person.”²⁷²

So, even though this would appear to be a monastic Life – it begins, “My brothers,” ܕܝܗܘܐ ܚܘܒܘܬܗ , and Doran’s translation is filled with references to monks and to Rabbula’s monastic way of life – on the issues of stability and care of the poor, it is markedly different than what we saw in Rabbula’s rules for monks. This seems odd. The explanation for the apparent disjunction between the rules the author knew and credited to Rabbula and what he says about Rabbula lies in a close examination of the words he uses.

The author of the Life uses the obviously translated ܕܝܗܘܐ ܚܘܒܘܬܗ , “monastery/monk” sometimes, but also uses ܕܝܗܘܐ ܚܘܒܘܬܗ , generally translated “way of life,” and ܕܝܗܘܐ ܚܘܒܘܬܗ , also usually translated “way of life,” both with common usages as “monastic way of life.” The latter can sometimes mean “monastery” or “monastic cell,” too. Doran’s translation is perfectly correct, but understandably does not always distinguish between these related terms, or adhere to a strictly consistent translation for them. In order to make the distinctions clear, the better to see what the author was actually saying about monks, monasteries, and the monastic life, in my citations up to this point and in what follows, I have chosen to translate these

rather than “holy and needy.” Rabbula’s care for the sick (he reforms the hospital for men and founds one for women) arises, according to the author, from the fact that “he loved the poor,” ܕܝܗܘܐ ܚܘܒܘܬܗ , reading a bit more literally than Doran.

²⁷² Overbeck, 204-205; my translation differs slightly from Doran’s, on p.102.

terms as follows. Only **ܠܝܘܢܐ** or forms of the same root are translated as monk, monastery, or monastic. Only **ܠܝܘܢܐܘܬܐ** is translated as “way of life,” because all of its occurrences except the two which demand “(monastic) dwelling-place”²⁷³ make perfect sense as referring to a set of customs or expectations. In contrast, **ܠܝܘܢܐ** is translated as “discipline,” because all of the uses allow it, and this is the standard translation of its plural **ܠܝܘܢܐܘܬܐ**.

With these distinctions, a pattern is visible in the Life. Monks and monasteries have a “way of life.” The word **ܠܝܘܢܐܘܬܐ** first appears modified by the adjectival phrase “of the monastery,”²⁷⁴ and is used that way twice more early in the story, describing Rabbula’s entry into a monastery and subsequent founding of his own. That way of life is the same everywhere, involving prayer, liturgy, fasting, and the reading of scripture.²⁷⁵ Later, he “trained the members of his household in the same way...the men who dwelt with him for twenty-four years in his way of life.”²⁷⁶ His household seems to be composed of clerics,²⁷⁷ and is clearly not a monastery: he has to “flee and go far away and perch in his monastery in the desert of Qennishrin”²⁷⁸ for his annual prayer retreat. This makes sense, because Rabbula

²⁷³ Overbeck, pp.167, 201; Doran, pp.72, 99.

²⁷⁴ Overbeck, p.162, Doran, p.68.

²⁷⁵ Overbeck, pp.167-168, Doran, pp.72-73.

²⁷⁶ Overbeck, p.183; Doran, p.84, with my translation of **ܠܝܘܢܐܘܬܐ**.

²⁷⁷ Overbeck, p.184; Doran, p.85. It appears that his “companions in his way of life,” the “men who are with him,” are a subset of “all of his clerics.”

²⁷⁸ Overbeck, p.185; Doran, p.86. He is presumably by this point, worthy of the privilege of solitude; see rule 18 for the monks.

himself is not precisely a monk by this point in the narrative: “Who from the monks may be compared to him? In his mind, he was an ascetic (ܐܘܨܬܝܬܐ, literally ‘mourner.’)”²⁷⁹ This apparent expansion of “way of life” to include non-monastic religious who live like monks is accompanied by a growing emphasis on dietary restriction as the narrative progresses, a practice which is part of his ܐܘܨܬܝܬܐ, “discipline.”

The Life is presented by the author as “an icon of the excellent discipline of Mar Rabbula,” meant to inspire imitation of his “godly discipline.”²⁸⁰ That discipline involves vigils, prayer, and dietary restriction from the beginning, while it is still discussed in the context of his monastic way of life,²⁸¹ but grows more strict and more effective as the narrative and the progression of Rabbula’s life go on. After he becomes a bishop, his discipline included “much fasting. Even his nourishment was like a complete fast...From the day that the name of Christ was invoked over him, nothing could...persuade him to satisfy his hunger.”²⁸² His discipline is heavenly, as is apparent by effectiveness of his prayers for the healing and exorcism of his parishioners.²⁸³ That discipline is not, however, limited to persons of Rabbula’s stature or to monks.

²⁷⁹ Overbeck, p.184; my translation differs substantially from Doran’s on p.85.

²⁸⁰ Overbeck, p.168; Doran, p.65-66 with my translation of ܐܘܨܬܝܬܐ.

²⁸¹ Overbeck, pp.168-169; Doran, pp.73-74. Fasting is mentioned, without any elaboration or emphasis.

²⁸² Overbeck, p.182; Doran, pp.83-84. He is constant in these ܐܘܨܬܝܬܐ, disciplines.

²⁸³ Overbeck, p.186; Doran, p.87.

Anyone who makes a “promise of virginity and holiness,” may, according to the Life, fall away from, and therefore must possess, a discipline. This group is either composed of those who have a *ܩܘܨܬܐ*, “profession” or “Covenant” – as in Sons and Daughters of the Covenant – or at least includes them.²⁸⁴

“Discipline” and “way of life,” both initially associated with a monastic context, are later applied to non-monastic dedicated religious, clergy and Covenanters. This suggests that all of the dedicated religious are, in the eyes of the author of the Life, subject to the same restrictions and capable of the same virtues. The fact that he refers to Rabbula’s “excellent commandments for the priests of the villages and the monasteries and the Covenant,” *ܩܘܨܬܐ ܕܩܘܨܬܐ ܕܩܘܨܬܐ ܕܩܘܨܬܐ ܕܩܘܨܬܐ*,²⁸⁵ grouping these diverse religious groups together, would seem to confirm this. If this is so, then there is no contradiction between the virtuous activities of Rabbula and the rules described by the editor who added them as being by Rabbula, and both of the sets of rules inserted into the Life are, when read with the Life, applicable to all dedicated religious.

This does not mean that the manuscript’s combination of the Book of Women and the expanded Life serves to promote every sort of religious life. In fact, I suggest that it serves to promote one religious life in particular, that of female monasticism.

²⁸⁴ Overbeck, p.180; Doran, p.82.

²⁸⁵ Overbeck, p.178; Doran, p.81, with the literal “commandments” rather than Doran’s “ordinances.”

The Book of Women manuscript, ms. BL Add. 14,652, was owned by, according to the note on the first folio, “the presbyter²⁸⁶ Maryam, head of the monastery” ܡܪܝܡ ܕܥܘܠܡܐ ܕܩܝܝܡܐ. This is hardly surprising, since Thecla is, in this manuscript, a model for female monasticism.

²⁸⁶ It could also be read, “the priestess Maryam,” but this seems extremely unlikely.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

So, we have fifth-century rules whose inclusion by the time of the sixth-century manuscript under discussion clarifies the slightly later Life and the rules themselves. This expanded Life directly follows the probably-fourth-century Syriac translation of Thecla itself having been placed into the Book of Women by the time of the manuscript's creation. This is a series of roughly sequential textual acts – translation, collection, creation of rules, writing of Life, insertion of rules into Life, and juxtaposition of collection and expanded Life – each of which reflects the interests and assumptions of the Syriac Christians involved. Although the rules and Life are unrelated to Thecla or the Book of Women at the time of their creation, the fact that they were, in the sixth century, codicological companions indicates that by that time, the texts or the themes in them were explicitly or implicitly associated in the minds of some Syriac Christians.

John of Tella, or at least the author of his Life, serves as a witness to the association of at least the themes of these texts. Remember, he took Thecla's story as inspiration for seclusion, extreme dietary restriction, bodily mortification, and learning the Psalms, although none of these practices appear in the Acts of Thecla. Such a reading would, however, have apparently had warrant in Syriac Christianity by the sixth century.

The Syriac translation of Thecla allows, and even encourages, her to be read as ܩܘܘܢܝܐ, a Covenanter. The rules indicate that Covenanters should learn the Psalms, and avoid meat and wine. The Life of Rabbula witnesses the assumption that true virtue leads to monasticism or a discipline resembling that of the monastic life, and makes the Covenanters, monks, and all dedicated religious equally virtuous, and subject to the same rules.²⁸⁷

By choosing the expanded Life as the textual counterpoint or successor to the Book of Women, the compiler/editor witnessed (or proposed) a modification of the themes of the Book of Women. Those themes included the valorization of virginity as a religious ideal, specifically sexual danger to women as a common result of their female identity, obedience to religious authority, and the expectation that a virtuous female religious life may involve conflict with or rejection of one's family.

When we bring the expanded Life into the conversation, religiously-desirable but always-imperiled virginity is emphasized by the insistence in the rules and the Life on the necessary and protective segregation of religious women from men. The rules themselves, and the Life's depiction of Rabbula's rule-giving as a part of his virtue, serve to emphasize obedience to authority by female religious. Female religious life in a familial context is still possible: as mentioned above, rule 10 for the clergy and Covenanters allows Daughters of the Covenant to live with laity if they are family. However, the expanded Life, in its generalization of the monastic way of

²⁸⁷ After drafting the material on the Life's interest in opening up the possibilities of perfect religious life to more than just monks, I noticed a reference to the Life as presenting reforms to religious life which "seamlessly joined [all Christians] in one perfect life of devotion," which is an elegant formulation. Quote from Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Sacred Bonding: Mothers and Daughters in Early Syriac Hagiography," *J ECS* 4/1(1996), p. 34, referring to her apparently still-unpublished study, "Bishop Rabbula: Ascetic Tradition and Change in Fifth Century Edessa."

life and discipline to cover the Covenanters, encourages stability. That stability is best exercised in the company of other religious women, because “[t]he unity of the many can be the preserver of them all.”²⁸⁸ This would seem to suggest some sort of religious foundation, perhaps even a female monastic community. And in fact, the manuscript was apparently owned by, according to the note on the first folio, “the holy Maryam, head of the monastery” ܠܩܝܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ ܕܩܝܡܐ. While neither Thecla, the Book of Women, the rules, or the Life contain any indication of monastic women, the cumulative result of this series of textual undertakings witnesses the association of Thecla with monastic women, an association that authorized and encouraged the female monastic life.

The texts themselves and their combination in the manuscript witness ideas current in sixth-century Syriac Christianity. In this manuscript they “mean” differently than they did at the time of their creation, reflecting the interests and assumptions of Syriac Christians at the time of the manuscript’s creation. Those interests and assumptions are not inconsistent with what precedes them in Syriac Christianity, but they are also not identical with those precedents, and they are invisible to us if we limit our analyses to the texts themselves, ignoring the “reception-context” in which they occur. That context includes the relationship of the translated texts to their source texts, the reception history of the text as apparent in surviving references, and the context of culturally-specific ideas on related ideas or categories, such as “women in Syriac Christianity.” These are generally addressed by scholars in the analysis of a text, although translation analysis is too seldom used to identify specific

²⁸⁸ Overbeck, p.177; Doran, p.80.

interests or themes. The “reception-context” also, however, includes something not generally addressed, the manuscript contexts in which texts occur. In failing to consider this aspect of the history of the text, we ignore a potentially valuable source of information on the ways in which texts were understood and deployed.

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