

RBL 05/2009

Elisabeth Esch-Wermeling

Thekla –
Paulusschülerin wider Willen?

Strategien der Leserlenkung in den Theklaakten

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Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 53

Münster: Aschendorff, 2008. Pp. 376. Hardcover.
€56.00. ISBN 3402114364.



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Note: The most complete text of the Acts of Paul is to be found in Willy Rordorf et al., “Actes de Paul,” in *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens* 1 (ed. F. Bovon and P. Geoltrain; Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 1115–77, supplemented by Rodolphe Kasser and Philippe Luisier, “Le Papyrus Bodmer XLI en Édition Princeps l’Épisode d’Éphèse des *Acta Pauli* en Copte et en Traduction,” *Le Muséon* 117 (2004): 281–384. This translation is a preview of Rordorf’s forthcoming edition. The material about (Paul and) Thekla, comprehended as chapter 3 in earlier versions, is now divided into chapters 3 and 4, the former located in Iconium, the latter in Antioch, in accordance with the geographical plan followed by most editors. This review retains the traditional, continuous section markings.

The title “Acts of Paul and Thekla” is inappropriate to the Acts of Paul in their entirety. It belongs to one of the forty-eight independent manuscripts of chapters 3–4. More common is “The Passion of the Holy Protomartyr Thekla.” These titles, which are secondary, indicate that this material was detached from the Acts of Paul for hagiographical purposes. Elisabeth Esch-Wermeling provides a commentary upon both of these secondary titles.

The premise of this vigorous and informative monograph (a lightly revised 2008 Münster dissertation supervised by Martin Ebner) is that the two chapters of the Acts of Paul

featuring Thecla (or Thekla) were once independent. Esch-Wermeling did not discover this distinction, but she has done much to support it. Her purpose is to show how the earlier (Antioch, ch. 4) material was integrated into a new picture portraying Thecla as a celibate pupil of Paul and how the narrative guides readers into accepting this composite picture.

A survey seeking major distinctive themes and issues in Acts of Paul would undoubtedly find the following atop the list: conflict with the Pastoral Epistles; celibacy, with Thecla as its exhibit number one; some interaction with Greek romantic novels; and a female missionary. All but the last of these items are based upon a single chapter: 3 (Iconium). As Esch-Wermeling demonstrates, chapters 3 and 4 have different theological, ethical, and ecclesiological orientations. They rely upon different literary models. With the brief and partial exception of Paul, they share one major character. That character, Thecla, is, to a large degree, two different persons who happen to share the same name.

This summary is less exaggerated than one might think. Like a good old-fashioned redaction critic—which she is not—Esch-Wermeling looks to the problems of the narrative—gaps, holes, inconsistencies, and contradictions—as clues to its literary history. When dealing with popular narrative, the danger of an incompetent author is a constant possibility, but the quantity and quality of narrative glitches stand in Esch-Wermeling’s favor, as does the facility with which she handles the various topics. This essentially literary study does not overlook philology, history of religions backgrounds, and early Christian theology.

Of the two patent strategies for reading this material—either as a detached piece of hagiography about Thecla or as a segment of the Acts of Paul—Esch-Wermeling strongly emphasizes the former. This is legitimate because she makes a convincing case that chapter 4 (Antioch) is primary. Although this question lies outside of the author’s current scope, it seems probable that the overall author of the Acts of Paul should be assigned the responsibility for composing chapter 3 in its present form and thus of incorporating the story of Thecla into that of Paul, a box from which it soon escaped to serve as hagiography for Thecla.

The Iconium chapter is a complex and skilled composition, with many characters, plots, and subtypes. Although Paul receives a full and famous description (3.3), Thecla did not “fall in love at first sight” but at first hearing (just as well, some who read the description of the apostle might unkindly say). What she heard were the initial macarisms of a “Sermon in the House” that strongly emphasized abstinence from sexual activity. This Thecla, as Esch-Wermeling shows, is in some ways the ideal of 1 Timothy: a silent woman who does not speak a word to another person—and that a child—until the chapter

approaches its close. Those few words underline her pursuit of Paul (3.23). Words are important at Iconium, for persuasion comes through proclamation. The message embraces a robustly future eschatology. If ecclesiology were the basis for dating Acts of Paul, they would be considered earlier than the canonical Acts, for church officers do not exist. The local house church appears to be an independent entity. One of its functions is to serve as a base for itinerant missionaries, including Titus, Paul, and, to at least a degree, Thecla.

By contrasting the organizations of different communities, Esch-Wermeling prompts reflection upon the relation between itinerant missionary and household church. Onesiphorus, Paul's household host in Iconium, and his family abandoned the world to follow Paul. One result is that no one has anything to eat and a tomb must serve as shelter. Paul generates food by selling his cloak, but that is a short-range solution (3.23). In the end, Paul sends them back to Iconium and "the world" (3.26; 4.42). The implicit message is that, although all should, in theory, become itinerants, survival of the movement requires that some must stay home to provide wanderers with a base and support. No text provides a better illustration of this reality than does Acts of Paul 3, raising the question of its possible basis in early tradition.

Paul was not present at Thecla's first ordeal, but understandably so, for he had been thrown out of Iconium. That excuse will not work for Antioch. The complex of 3.24–4.26 begins with Thecla's offer to cut her hair (= obliterate her femininity) and follow Paul. This is evidently declined, but Paul does take her to Antioch, only to abandon her in the face of a sexual assault by a highly placed oaf. The apostle's response to this fellow Alexander's offer to purchase Thecla resembles nothing so much as Peter's denial of Jesus (e.g., Mark 14:71). He thereupon vanishes, not to be seen until Thecla discovers him in Myra (4.40). Various explanations for his apparently craven betrayal can be advanced, but Esch-Wermeling focuses upon literary history: the incident has been expanded to include Paul and provide a link in the story (see 143). With that recognition—which does not obviate the need for appreciation and interpretation of the final text—chapter 4 features a Thecla who is not equal to or even superior to Paul but without him.

Antioch, probably the Syrian capital in the earlier tradition, comes equipped with a Syriarch, the aforementioned Alexander. His duties authorize or mandate a habit that includes an image of the emperor. By damaging these goods, Thecla has committed sacrilege. Clothing symbolism is important in this chapter. Without male helpers, Thecla must face the beasts. She does, however, have female support, including a lioness and the local women, one of whom was Queen Tryphaena. Power, it transpires, resides in weakness. Whereas Iconium featured a Christian household, Antioch sets one Christian against the polytheist world. Eschatology is oriented to the present. Conversion comes

through miracle rather than proclamation. Thecla effectively replaces Cybele and the numerous mistresses of the beasts venerated for millennia. She also establishes a community composed of women (4.39). Then she begins to long for Paul (4.40). The wild bulls could not capture Thecla, but the editor can.

Focus upon the distinctive character of chapter 4 is Esch-Wermeling's major but not sole achievement. One of the most notable passages in the Acts of Paul is Thecla's alleged self-baptism (4.34). Esch-Wermeling provides a full discussion of the issue (84–89). She points out what should have been perfectly obvious: §34 states twice that Thecla "threw herself" (ἔβαλεν ἑαυτήν) into the water; she did not make two dives. The first, in which she says "I am baptized in the name of Jesus Christ on/for the last day," is an interpolation. The earlier text evidently viewed martyrdom as baptism, in accordance with long-standing Christian tradition.

Many other detailed investigations could be reported. These examples should motivate the interested to read the book and receive a rich reward. The category of "interested" includes, but is not limited to, students of the Pauline legacy, Christian Apocrypha, early church history, women's studies, and literary analysis of popular texts.