

## *Chapter 1*

# WOMEN AND THE EARLY CHURCHES

## THE CHALLENGE OF EARLY CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Anyone who wishes to study the status of women in the first six centuries of Christian history is faced with a challenging task. During this period, the church spread beyond Judaism and Palestine into the vast expanse of Greco-Roman culture. It was both persecuted and elevated to a position of eminence, all the while struggling to come to terms with the intellectual movements of the ancient world. Beliefs and practices varied greatly from place to place and century to century. There was no clearly defined and universally accepted tradition passed directly from Jesus to a body of faithful leaders. Recent scholarship points instead to a struggle within the church over many issues, including roles for women.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, our sources of information for this period are scarce and often fragmentary and ambiguous. Yet the early years of Christianity are vital to the status of women, for they established attitudes and practices that still continue in the Christian community.

Biblical scholars and theologians make some important suggestions for those who want to explore the history of women in the early church.<sup>2</sup> They remind us that our sources of information have been written and interpreted by men, often with unfortunate results. We have overlooked, for example,

the information in the New Testament on the work of women and instead assumed that the church was a “man’s church.” We have forgotten that most sources tell us only what men thought about women. We have assumed also that the categories such as “apostle” and “prophet” only include men unless women are specifically mentioned. We should instead remember that what we know about the activities of women probably only represents the tip of the iceberg. It is likely that women participated in the early development of the church to a much greater extent than our sources imply.

Learning about the history of women during this period has been aided by several new historical strategies beyond that of simply reading early Christian texts with suspicion. Scholars have been looking increasingly at archaeology, art (specifically mosaics and frescoes), and inscriptions to provide material about women. They are also looking more carefully at the Jewish, Greek, and Roman contexts in which Christian women lived in an attempt to discern where their experiences may have conformed to these cultures and where they deviated.

Both Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures present a far more complex picture of women than was previously assumed by scholars. Greco-Roman culture was dominated by an honor/shame ideology in which men were rewarded for public effort and achievement while women were to guard their “shame” or chastity by remaining obedient and secluded.<sup>3</sup> Yet Roman women appeared freely in a variety of public places as well as managed their households. It was not unusual for wealthy women to be patrons of clubs, and both Greek and Roman women were accepted as priestesses and prophetesses.

In the first century, Judaism—so central to the development of Christianity—also reveals diverse perspectives on women and a wide range of practices. The dominant model of a virtuous woman was one who remained at home and obeyed her husband, a theme reflected in the book of Esther, for example. Women were not required to fulfill most religious obligations apart from dietary and sexual laws and the lighting of Sabbath candles. Although we get only a glimpse of first-century Judaism from later rabbinic literature, strong continuities concerning attitudes toward women are present across the centuries. Many rabbis regarded women as socially and religiously inferior to men, and some even expressed contempt for them. Not only were men cautioned against speaking to women in public, but also women were not permitted to be witnesses in a court of law, nor were they to be counted

in a quorum necessary for the formation of a synagogue congregation. At the temple in Jerusalem, they were to be restricted to an outer court; in the synagogues, they were to be seated separately and were not permitted to read aloud or to assume any public position. Perhaps most significant, they were not permitted to study the scriptures. One rabbi vigorously made this point when he wrote, "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than to be entrusted to a woman."<sup>4</sup>

Yet there was disagreement among the rabbis themselves on some of these points. A minority argued that women should indeed study the Torah and that both women and men be permitted to initiate divorce proceedings. And of course the day-to-day reality of women's lives often challenged official teaching. Women and men were forced, for example, to relate and communicate in public places simply to keep society functioning. Indeed, inscriptions from synagogues in various parts of the Roman Empire give women leadership titles such as "mother" and "elder." Bernadette J. Brooten concludes that these titles were more than honorific; they reveal that women had liturgical, teaching, judicial, and financial responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> Both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, therefore, reinforced the silencing and subordination of women but at the same time made it possible for Christianity to accept active women members and powerful women leaders.<sup>6</sup>

## THE PROMINENCE OF WOMEN IN THE EARLIEST CHURCHES

In light of the Jewish practice that defined a synagogue congregation by the number of circumcised males present, the fact that early Christian communities had inclusive membership was unusual. We have clear evidence, however, that women were included as full members of early Christian communities. For example, Saul (before his conversion) sets out to arrest both men and women who had adopted the new faith of Christianity (Acts 8:3; 9:2). Another passage in Acts (17:11-12) claims that in Berea, a Macedonian city, both men and women "received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." Also, Luke's Gospel, which is a rich source of material on Jesus' teachings about women and his ministry to them, contains evidence that it was shaped by a social context in which

large numbers of women were interested in and responding to the Christian message.<sup>7</sup> Some historians argue that women were in the majority in the early Christian congregations; they use comments made by ancient writers who ridicule Christianity as woman's religion and articles of women's clothing found at early Christian sites as evidence.<sup>8</sup> Historians also suggest that this large female membership resulted from the variety of significant roles offered women, as well as the fact that the early church banned infanticide. While these new roles were shaped by and similar to what women were doing in Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, the Christian community offered them to a broader range of women and in a more radical form, as we shall see.

What can we learn about the lives and ministries of these early Christian women? While direct evidence is limited and women's ministries are not well defined, we do have hints at what was happening from a variety of early Christian documents. Historians generally agree that women had a decisive part in the creation of the church and played a more prominent role in the first generation of Christianity than they did in later centuries.<sup>9</sup> One reason for this was the flexible and informal organization of the church. There appeared to be no division between ministers and lay people; leadership was shared among members. Every member, male and female, was regarded as having certain gifts from the Holy Spirit that could be used in the service of the community. Some of these gifts were given to members who had been appointed in a formal way by the community to do a variety of tasks. Others were given directly and indiscriminately by the Holy Spirit and were simply recognized by the community. But even more important than church organization was the way in which the Gospel tradition and the Gospels themselves, along with the writing of Paul, could be interpreted as moving women beyond silence and subordination.

### *Jesus and the Gospels*

A significant number of female characters appear in the Gospels and a significant amount of text is devoted to their stories. They do, in fact, take on theological significance as they reveal Jesus' identity and mission and model the nature of true discipleship. The Gospel writers also present Jesus as someone who questions all social structures including the honor/shame ideology of the ancient world.

Discipleship in the New Testament breaks down barriers of gender, class, race, and culture; and so women, while rarely called “disciples,” are described as those who follow and serve Jesus. Luke names specific women along with an unidentified group who travel with Jesus, and the latter are also mentioned in Mark and Matthew (Luke 8:1-3). Their “service” may have been domestic, but it is also possible that the Gospel writers may have been using an early Christian term involving proclamation.<sup>10</sup> In all of the Gospels, most women are portrayed as effective disciples. They are models of a spirit-filled life in Luke and they are “good seed” that bear fruit in Mark. The Samaritan woman in John shows more faith than Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), and Mark compares the female disciples favorably to the male followers who abandon Jesus (Mark 14:32-50 and 15:40).

As effective disciples, women in the Gospel tradition fill the role of apostle in some instances because they convey important messages about Jesus to others. The Samaritan woman recognizes Jesus as a prophet who discerns her life situation (perhaps a series of levirate marriages), but she then grasps his messianic identity and obeys the command to tell her neighbors. Mary Magdalene, likewise, assumes an apostolic role not only in conveying the message that Jesus had risen from the dead, but also by verifying her claim in describing Jesus’ appearance to her. Some scholars suggest that Mary’s example may have been the foundation for female power and leadership in the early church. The Christian community, with no basis in Gospel fact, later identified Mary as a penitent whore, possibly to diminish her influence.<sup>11</sup>

In his teachings and his actions, Jesus turns established social structures upside down: the kingdom of God values service, humility, and faith rather than political and religious power. “Family” means those who are loyal to Jesus and includes those on the margins of society. It is within this context that Jesus challenges the gender rules of his culture. A woman is was hemorrhaging appears unaccompanied in a crowd (Matt. 9:18-26; Mark 5:24-34; Luke 8:40-56). She not only touches Jesus, a strange man, but she extends her impurity to him. Yet Jesus both heals and commends her for her faith. In a similar violation of cultural norms, Jesus speaks to the woman at the well and takes a drink from her (John 4:1-42). She is a Samaritan, a group hated by the Jews, and a female, but Jesus still engages her in significant theological conversation. And although scholars disagree on the best interpretation of the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42), Jesus does

seem willing to teach a woman seated at his feet much as male students surrounded a rabbi.

While much in the Gospel tradition could be used to support the full participation of women in the Christian community, there is also some ambivalence in the material. Jesus does not appoint a woman to his group of twelve intimate disciples, and he does not make any statements on male/female equality. His teachings on divorce could be seen as forcing women to stay in abusive marriages or to endure years of isolation with no chance to remarry. Usually unnamed and rarely spoken to, the women of Luke especially are relegated to the passive roles of listening and pondering. Luke has been very influential in the creation of a Christian tradition that does not affirm female leadership but relegates women to the margins of the community.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Writings of the Apostle Paul*

Aside from the creation stories, the writings of the apostle Paul have been cited most frequently in discussions about the status of women in the Christian community. A controversial figure on the question of women, Paul has been condemned as the eternal enemy of women and has been celebrated as the only consistent spokesperson for the liberation of women in the New Testament. The truth may lie somewhere in between.

Paul was probably not the author of certain passages often cited in support of the view that he degraded women. It is likely that these passages (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:21-33; Titus 2:3-5; I Tim. 2:8-15 and 5:3-16) originated at a later time and reflected changes in the environment of the early Christian community as well as its organizational structure. In the eyes of many contemporary interpreters, the material that does come from Paul himself reflects a marked ambivalence toward women. He was a man in conflict. On the one hand, Paul knew the transforming power of the gospel and clearly recognized that relationships in the human community would be altered dramatically as a result. On the other hand, certain features of his Greco-Roman and Jewish backgrounds intruded upon his belief that women and men should be full participants in the churches. Keep in mind, too, that his letters were occasional pieces to specific mission situations and not intended to present a systematic position.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the second century, therefore, such diverse writers as the author of I Timothy (who counseled women to be silent and submissive)

and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (in which Thecla preached, traveled, and made independent decisions) could claim Paul as an authority.

Paul's recognition of the radical difference that life in Christ makes to people is summed up in Galatians 3:28, probably inspired by a statement used in early Christian baptisms. The Jewish male of Paul's day was expected to thank God daily that he was not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. The man of Greek culture used a similar formula to express the same sentiments, and this text may have been an attempt to parallel and contradict these expressions. In the Christian community, these natural and social barriers broke down. The values, roles, and customs of the world were replaced by a new reality. But what did these words really mean in terms of gender relations? They were given diverse interpretations as Christianity developed. Some said they refer to equality in the heavenly kingdom of God. Another interpretation said that male and female differences disappeared for the female ascetics who had given up reproduction and taken on male personality traits.<sup>14</sup> Still others believed it was important to see that this new order of existence applied not only to a person's relationship with God but also to the actual life of the congregation. Paul in fact indicates that conditions expected in the future kingdom are in some ways already realized in the community of believers, and he warmly greets and commends women workers in the churches.

First Corinthians 7:1-40 is a lengthy discussion on the subject of marriage. Clues in the text indicate that women in the congregation had adopted a variety of lifestyles, including celibacy and church membership (both with and without their husbands). There is considerable disagreement over the meaning of this passage for their status, but scholars argue that Paul seems to be on uncomfortable ground here. His comments on the marriage relationship are unusual in light of his own Jewish and Hellenistic background as well as the cultural situation in which he is writing. Marriage, as he describes it, shows a surprising degree of mutuality between husband and wife. There are six passages in I Corinthians 7 (3-4, 10-11, 12-13, 14, 16, 32-33) that suggest reciprocal or equal responsibilities in the relationship. He claims, for example, that "the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." This is a remarkable statement for a man writing in the first century, although Elizabeth Castelli cautions us to ask whether men and women experience this text in the same way. Often physically weaker

than men, women who surrender their bodies are much more vulnerable to abuse.<sup>15</sup>

In this passage, Paul also plants a seed that has the effect of reinforcing a new social alternative for women. He presents celibacy as a way of living because he believes the end of time to be near. Women can choose not to marry and raise children. Later on, the church shaped Paul's ideas on the renunciation of marriage into a lifestyle that was often liberating for women. Women were eventually given a vocational status in which they are not only independent but also accepted as equals by their male coworkers.

The ambivalent attitudes Paul held about women become even more obvious in I Cor. II:2-16. He clearly assumed in verse 5 that women can be vehicles of God's spirit. They, like men, can pray and prophesy in the congregation, and by prophesying, Paul meant intelligible preaching and teaching that built up the faith of the church. The prophets at Corinth seemed to hold rank and power. In this passage, however, Paul also launches into a "bad-tempered tirade" in which traditional honor/shame conventions take over.<sup>16</sup> This passage appears within a long section on the proper way to conduct worship. It seems that Paul was concerned with curbing the abuses and stopping the chaos in the Corinthian church. Antoinette Clark Wire argues that the old established families, which originally made up the Corinthian congregation, were joined by individuals who brought with them an ecstatic and participatory form of worship.<sup>17</sup> People were praying, singing, and prophesying all at once; they were speaking in tongues without interpreters and women were carrying out these activities without head coverings. Paul reacts by insisting that women cover their heads while praying or prophesying in order to maintain decency and order.

In the process of defending his position, Paul explicitly argues for the subordination of women to men. The head covering was necessary because it symbolized the subjection of the female. God was the head of Christ, Christ the head of the male, and the male the head of the female. Paul turns to rabbinic Judaism to defend his position in verses 8 and 9. Woman was made from man and in his image, according to Genesis 2. Also, she was made *for* man, to exist as his helper. It is interesting that he does not use the argument of I Timothy that states that women are subordinate because they are morally inferior to men. He then supplements this theological defense with an appeal in verse 13 to what was proper or customary in his social setting. Paul



suddenly interrupts himself in verses 11 and 12 with a comment that seems to undermine his argument. He is unable to keep himself from making a qualifying remark, showing the deep impact that the transforming power of the gospel had on him. These verses express a degree of mutual support between male and female that is more compatible with Gal. 3:28. The general lines of Paul's argument in I Corinthians 11 follow the presuppositions of his culture; by inserting these two verses, however, he points to a new set of assumptions operating in the body of Christ.

Wire draws our attention to another important passage, I Cor. 14:33b-36. This text commands that women keep silent in the churches. Scholars disagree over whether in fact Paul wrote these verses since they could have been added later to the original letter. Some believe Paul is quoting his enemies in order to refute them, while others argue that Paul is objecting to disruptive speech. Wolfgang Stegemann claims that while women who carried out religious rituals could be accepted in Paul's culture, they could not engage in theological debate, which, he argues, Paul objects to here.<sup>18</sup> It is also possible that Paul is silencing the disorderly female prophets we read about in chapter 11. What is most significant about all these approaches is that the text can be read as not undermining Paul's egalitarianism.

## MINISTRIES OF WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCHES

### *Evangelists and House Church Leaders*

Women were clearly involved in the spread of Christianity and in the establishment of new congregations, which met in private houses. In Romans 16, Paul refers to women who have been his coworkers in the evangelization of the Hellenistic world and commends Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis for having "labored hard" in the Lord. In the same chapter, he pays tribute to the outstanding missionary work, including teaching doctrine to Apollos, of Priscilla (or Prisca) and her husband Aquila. Priscilla's significance may be highlighted by the fact that she is mentioned before her husband in four out of six references, a literary device to suggest importance. Some biblical

scholars believe that Priscilla's role in teaching doctrine is reported without comment because it was not an unusual role for women.<sup>19</sup> In Phil. 4:2, Euodia and Syntyche are described as women who have worked or "struggled" side by side with Paul. To emphasize their importance, Paul mentions them in the body of the letter rather than the salutation. There is no indication in these passages that women were subordinate to or dependent upon Paul.

House churches were crucial to the success of the early mission efforts because they provided support and sustenance to the growing Christian congregations. They were the places in which the Lord's Supper was celebrated and the gospel preached. It is recorded that women provided the facilities for some groups, especially if the women were wealthy and prominent members of the community. Acts 16:14, for example, mentions Lydia, a successful businesswoman who offered her house to the Christian church. She is baptized along with her household, which she appears to have ruled. Although many interpreters of the New Testament in the past have translated the name in Col. 4:14 as the male name "Nymphas," it is generally agreed that the verse correctly reads, "Nympha and the church in her house." The house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, was also used in this way (Acts 12:12).

Households in the ancient world were places in which women taught, disciplined family members and servants, and managed material resources. If wealthy, women also frequently presided over groups of visitors under their patronage. Managing the household required the same qualities as serving the community, including humility, sobriety, and a sense of order. Although we cannot be sure of the role women played in the worship and administration of house churches, leadership roles would not have been surprising.<sup>20</sup> The churches conceived of themselves as households of God. In the New Testament, women are not only described as the patronesses of house churches but also as their leaders. The letter to Philemon greets Apphia "our sister," who, together with Philemon and Archippus, was a leader of the house church at Colossae. Also, in I Thess. 5:12 Paul commands the church to give respect and recognition to the laborers and coworkers who "have charge of you in the Lord." In other places he uses these identical descriptive phrases to refer to his female colleagues. He believed that the authority of Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4), who worked with him at Philippi, was so great that their dissension would do serious damage to the community.

### *Leadership Roles beyond House Churches*

Phoebe appears to have been a prominent woman in the early church. Paul calls her both *diakonos* and a *prostasis* in Romans 16, titles that have been misinterpreted traditionally. *Diakonos*, although grammatically masculine, is usually translated as “deaconess,” implying that Phoebe only did the subservient and female-oriented tasks of the deaconess in later Christian history. Yet when Paul uses this word in other contexts, he is referring to individuals who preach and teach as official congregational leaders. Furthermore, *prostasis* is usually translated as “helper” but in the literature of the first century, the word commonly indicates a leader, president, or superintendent. The word means “to rule or manage” when used as a verb. Biblical scholars, however, have also suggested that *prostasis* may mean “patroness,” a way to indicate that Phoebe, in Roman tradition, offered money and protection to congregations and acquired prestige in return. It is likely that Phoebe not only held great authority in Cenchreae but also was widely respected throughout the Christian community.

Another female leader of the early church is probably revealed in Rom. 16:7. Here, Andronicus and Junia are commended for their outstanding work in spreading the gospel. Again, translators in the past, finding it inconceivable that a woman would be called “apostle,” used the male name “Junias.” Junia, however, was a common female name in the first century, and church leaders as late as the medieval period had no problem accepting the female form. Gospel accounts of the risen Jesus also reveal that women could fulfill the requirements for the role of apostle. In their direct confrontation with the risen Jesus, women receive a commission from him to preach the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

### *Female Prophets*

Some ministries in which women were clearly involved continued long after female teaching and sacramental functions were officially discouraged. Women, for example, filled the role of prophet in the early churches. Prophets were not formally ordained or appointed by the congregations; rather, their authority was based on their reception of immediate revelation and inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Such revelation involved the clarification of texts, instruction in Christian living, and the discernment of God’s will for individuals and communities. In this way, women contributed to

the construction of early Christian teaching. In some instances, it seems that they presided over the life and worship of individual congregations. The *Didache*, a manual of church order from the second century, claims that the traveling prophets filled a role of great importance, some celebrating the Lord's Supper. The four daughters of Philip were prophets (Acts 21:9) who ministered first in Caesarea and then moved to Hierapolis in Asia Minor. The female prophet from Thyatira in Rev. 2:20 is also portrayed as holding great power in the community.

Montanus and two women, Priscilla and Maxima, led a religious movement that developed at the end of the second century. The Montanists, as their followers came to be called, enthusiastically proclaimed the Christian message, believing themselves to be channels for divine truth. They thus continued the tradition that God speaks through believers other than church officials. There is evidence in the Montanist movement that women were given access to leadership positions, although women were bishops and presbyters only in Montanist groups that split from the main movement. Women such as Priscilla, whose oracles were collected and circulated in writing, were held in great honor as "prophetesses."

What lay behind this openness to women at a time when subordination was becoming a Christian norm? The Montanists believed that since Eve was the first to eat of the tree of knowledge, women were more likely than men to be recipients of divine wisdom and revelation. They also did not discriminate on the basis of sex because of Paul's statement that "in Christ, there is neither male nor female." As happened in subsequent centuries, their emphasis on the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit invalidated gender distinctions. But perhaps most important, Montanists believed the end of the world was near, allowing for a radical disruption of the status quo.

### *Sacramental Ministries*

It is not clear whether women functioned as presbyters or priests in the early churches and whether they baptized people and celebrated the Lord's Supper, although there are strong suggestions that they did. There are fragments of information from archaeological discoveries that suggest a wide role for women in these early years; no inscription or painting, however, is unambiguous. Some Greek-language tombstones that refer to women as presbyters have

been located, although it is not certain whether these women were presbyters in Jewish or Christian congregations. Also, one fresco from a Roman catacomb appears to depict a group of women jointly celebrating the Lord's Supper, probably during a catacomb vigil to mark the anniversary of the death of a Christian friend. These figures are all characterized by upswept hair, slender necks, sloping shoulders, and a hint of earrings. The figure actually breaking the bread is clothed in distinctively female dress. Another third-century Roman fresco from the Priscilla catacombs in Rome called "The Veiling" has been interpreted traditionally as a wedding ceremony. A prominent woman holding a scroll, a seated bishop touching her shoulder, and a young man in the background holding a veil in shades not typical of wedding colors suggest, however, that this is the ordination of a presbyter.

Many groups that advocate the ordination of women to the priesthood also point to a mosaic in the Roman church of Santa Praxedis. The mosaic shows Mary and two female saints along with a woman identified as Bishop Theodora. Some scholars indicate that her coif shows she is not married and is, therefore, neither the wife nor the mother of Bishop Theodo. Rather, she is a bishop in her own right.

The vehemence and frequency with which the sacramental functions of women are denounced also suggest that these activities may have been going on in some places. By the end of the second century, the writings of theologians and pastors as well as books of discipline and church order repeatedly condemn such activities. The need for repetition may bear witness to the continuing failure of such commands. Manuals such as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (a book of church order from Syria, written between 200 and 250 C.E.) and *Apostolic Church Order* (a document regulating church practices from Egypt, written around 300 C.E.) prohibit women from baptizing or conducting the Lord's Supper. The general message was that women could not exercise authority over men and could not speak at the church's public gatherings. Although some leaders permitted women to instruct other women in private and their husbands at home, others forbade women even to write about their faith because this was similar to teaching. Similar sentiments are seen, finally, in a letter sent by Pope Gelasius to the bishops of southern Italy and Sicily, an area strongly influenced by Byzantine culture and perhaps Montanism and Gnosticism. In one of the papal decrees in the letter the pope condemns female priests who were officiating at sacred altars.

## CREATING A PATRIARCHAL CHURCH

As the church grew and became more structured, it gradually underwent a process of “patriarchalization” in which women were excluded from positions of leadership and authority. Historian Virginia Burrus writes that it is difficult to point to one clearly defined moment of downfall.<sup>22</sup> The process, however, had started by the end of the first century and by the fifth century hostility toward prominent women had circumscribed their activities. They were restricted to ascetic communities and the clearly subordinate diaconate. This change was caused by a complex set of factors, and one of the most significant was the emergence of patriarchal texts that were accepted as authoritative by more and more congregations.

A strong protest against the leadership of women in the early churches is registered in several passages of the New Testament (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:21-33; Titus 2:3-5; I Tim. 2:8-15; and 5:3-16). These passages were probably written between 80 and 125 c.e. Although this is a matter of scholarly conjecture, the arguments for a later dating are persuasive.<sup>23</sup> The texts do not describe the status of women in all the churches but instead reflect an unsettled state of affairs and try to impose upon the Christian communities the patriarchal standards of the ancient world. This approach eventually prevailed in the Christian churches but not without difficulty. Throughout the early centuries, church authorities, as we have seen, continued to rule against the leadership of women, an indication that women persisted in assuming authoritative roles in some places.

The passages listed in the paragraph above come from a school or tradition of writers influenced by Paul, although the style and vocabulary are different from what appear to be the genuine works of the apostle. The outlook or perspective of these chapters tends to preserve the more traditional patriarchal dimension of Paul’s writing. The dominant images of women are submissive wife and mother. Women are commanded to be subject to their husbands in Col. 3:18 and Eph. 5:22. Obedience to the husband as God’s chosen authority is a message to be passed on from older women to younger ones in Titus 2:5. The relationship between the head and the body is used as an analogy both for the relationship of Christ to the church and the husband to the wife. This analogy has had lasting implications for women in the Christian tradition. Men were identified with the spirit and mind while women were asso-

ciated with that which is sensual, earthy, and related to physical needs and desires. Men were instructed to love their wives, but, as one biblical scholar puts it, Christians were simply exchanging “pagan patriarchy” for a “love patriarchy.”<sup>24</sup>

These letters also provide a theological rationale for the subordination of female to male that goes beyond what Paul suggests in I Corinthians II. The first and second letters to Timothy attribute this status to the fact that woman was created after man and that she was easily deceived by the devil. Second Timothy 3:6 reflects this by declaring that false beliefs may be spread by weak women throughout the community. First Timothy suggests that women may compensate for this transgression through obedience in marriage and childbearing. The option of celibacy to work for the kingdom of God is not presented.

Appropriate behavior for women in the churches, the “households of God,” is also prescribed. First Timothy 2 prohibits women from speaking or teaching and from exercising any kind of authority in the congregations. Questions on religious matters were to be discussed at home under the guidance of a wise husband. The bishop is defined carefully as “the husband of one wife” and is to be judged by his success in exercising patriarchal authority over his own household. Thus, the leadership of the Christian churches is defined as male. The restrictions placed on women in these sources eventually came to be the normal pattern for the Christian community.

What were the reasons behind the curtailment of female leadership in the latter part of the first century that is reflected in these texts? By the time the letters discussed in this section were composed, the churches had begun to realize that the end of the world was not upon them. Instead, they had to prepare for a long stay in the world, which, for most congregations, also meant coming to terms with the Greco-Roman culture around them. That culture was often hostile to Christianity, charging it with secret cannibalism and disloyalty to the Roman emperor and imposing harsh penalties upon its supporters. The dominant culture was also experiencing turmoil over women’s roles. It was a culture, as we have already observed, dominated by an honor/shame ideology in which virtuous men pursued honor and success in the public sphere while virtuous women protected their “shame” or chastity by being discreet, subordinate, and secluded. In reality, however, Greco-Roman women were doing such things as traveling and controlling their own property. The

early Christians may have wished to draw as little attention to themselves as possible in this hostile and insecure environment. They adopted and even surpassed traditional cultural views on appropriate behavior for women and in so doing began to stifle female leadership in the churches.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the emergence of authoritative patriarchal texts, other factors served to erode female ministry. A less frequently articulated but nevertheless real concern of early churchmen was the fear that menstruating women would somehow pollute the worship services and sacraments of the church. Ancient cultures regarded menstruating women with fear and suspicion. We can only speculate on reasons for this. The monthly cycle may have linked women with cosmic forces because it resembled the cycle of the moon. Blood was almost universally regarded as a mysterious, awe-full life force—yet women bled and did not die. Whatever the reasons, menstruation was seen as giving women power and this power was believed to be evil and destructive ultimately. Among people who believed that the whole cosmos could be upset if nature intruded into human culture, women were viewed as a source of foul contamination. And so menstrual blood was thought to rust iron and sour new wine. It was even feared that sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman would cause castration. Women were often isolated from the community each month and rigid controls were placed on them.

These attitudes passed into Judaism, Greco-Roman culture, and eventually into Christianity, although they did compete with beliefs that only the soul could be unclean and that the secretions of the body were ordained by God. Whether Christian women initially obeyed Jewish purity laws is not clear, but by the third century the church was increasingly turning to the Old Testament for guidance. One early Christian bishop, Dionysius the Great, urged that restrictions be placed on menstruating women. Subsequent church councils repeated his view that “impure persons” should not be allowed near the altar. In some places, this prohibition was extended to say that menstruating women should not even enter a church. During the seventh century, for example, one archbishop of Canterbury proclaimed that “women shall not in the time of impurity enter into a church, or communicate.”<sup>26</sup> Women may not have seen these restrictions as unreasonable because the purity tradition in ancient cultures was such a strong one.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, women were probably eased out of certain ministries as the church underwent organizational changes, particularly as the church found grow-



ing favor with the governing elite of the Roman Empire. In the early decades of church history, the concept of ministry included a variety of tasks and included all the members of the community. The Holy Spirit, who acted through the community but was not bound by it, gave the gifts needed to fulfill these distinctive services. By the fourth century, however, a gradual shift in the church's understanding of ministry and in its organizational structure had started to occur. The church became more hierarchical. A superior ministry, which included teaching and sacramental functions, began to emerge over and above an inferior laity. The church took as its organizational model the civil service of the Roman Empire. More and more power was vested in the offices of bishop and presbyter or priest, and those who filled them were selected by other members in positions of power. Because of its bias against placing women in positions of authority and superiority, it was impossible for the Christian community to select women as bishops and presbyters.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, once the church acquired legal status, it began to build basilicas as places for public worship. The basilica in Roman culture had political meaning as places where public officials presided; they were different architecturally from the pagan temples that the church sought to avoid. Prominent women would have been presiding in public and political space, a violation of Roman gender ideology.<sup>29</sup>

A new look at the documentary and material evidence shows that women had a variety of roles and were surprisingly important in the earliest Christian communities. Their position, however, eroded fairly quickly for many different reasons after this flurry of participation in ministries that were open to both men and women. Women were shunted into the special "orders" of widow, deaconess, and virgin as male leaders struggled to gain the upper hand.<sup>30</sup>

## WIDOWS

One role for women that is dealt with extensively in early Christian literature is that of widow. Originally widows were simply the worthy recipients of charity from churches, provided that they were known for their righteous lives and completely without other resources. They were enrolled or registered throughout the early centuries of church history as eligible for

donations along with orphans, although whether they belonged to a structured organization is not clear.

By the third century, however, widows also began to appear in many places as members of a special “order” to which they were appointed. To qualify for this special appointment, a woman generally had to be over sixty years old (fifty in some places) and married only once. She was obligated to live a life of complete chastity. She was not ordained but simply appointed or “named,” often in a simple public ritual. Her main task was that of prayer for the whole church and for her benefactors. Behind this task was the ancient belief that God heard the prayers of the widowed and oppressed. The widow was thought to be particularly effective in praying for the sick and was sometimes encouraged to lay hands on the sick. Frequent fasting became an additional obligation accompanying prayer in some places. The widow exercised no liturgical ministry, although Tertullian and the *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi* (a Syrian work from the second half of the fifth century) argued that widows were entitled to special seating in the church.

Powerful leaders within the early church were never comfortable with the widows, who were recognized as legally independent and who often had both wealth and life experience. Through church orders appealing to the authority of the apostles, these leaders often tried to place the widows under the control of bishops and bring an end to some of their activities. The “good widows” were meek, silent, and stayed at home—fixed, like the “altar of God”; they taught only very simple things in private and did not baptize. The “bad widows” ignored their duty to guard their sexual reputations by going out, seeking donations, and having the arrogance to teach theology. The example of Jesus—since he was not baptized by his mother and did not commission women to teach—was cited repeatedly. Eventually, the order of widows was absorbed into the much more highly controlled positions of deaconess and virgin.

## FEMALE DEACONS

By the end of the first century, male deacons were a recognized part of church structure. They cared for the needy, prepared new converts for baptism, read the Scriptures in worship, and distributed the Lord’s Supper. As assistants

to the bishop and under his authority, male deacons were set apart to serve (*diakonein*) the community. Evidence for the existence of female deacons in the earliest congregations, however, is ambiguous. First Timothy 3:11 may refer to both men and women when it gives instructions for the appropriate behavior of deacons. Also, a letter written by Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, claims that he tortured two young Christian women who were called *ministrae*, or ministers, in their community. If women were deacons in the earliest years of Christian history, their duties are not clear. They may have been identical to those of the male deacons.

By the end of the third century, however, female deacons, or “deaconesses,” filled a special role in many places in the early Christian world, a role dramatically different from the one they may have occupied earlier. Both manuscript evidence and inscriptions coming from the Eastern churches in places such as Jerusalem, Syria, Greece, and Asia Minor give a clear record of the existence and nature of this ministry. At first women were appointed by the bishop from the entire congregation, although as time passed they were required to be virgins or widows. Their main tasks were aimed at keeping the church from harmful scandal in a hostile culture. The women deacons visited sick women in their homes and anointed women at the time of their baptism. They also received baptized women when they emerged from the water. In all of these situations, the church feared that male deacons might be exposed to nude or semi-clothed females. Some early Christian literature attributed additional duties to the women deacons. They were to distribute charity to poor women, find seats for women in church, and act as intermediaries between women and the male clergy. Sometimes they were even charged with the responsibility of teaching recently baptized women about Christian life.

What happened to this office is a reflection of the church’s general impulse toward segregating men and women, and the rationale for this is evident in the ordination prayer for deaconesses.<sup>31</sup> In many places, between the third and sixth centuries women deacons were regarded as part of the clergy, and they were ordained to their office. The procedure for this ritual in the church orders follows that for the male deacons. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, for example, contains the following prayer for the ordination of a woman to the office of deacon: “O Eternal God, . . . the Creator of man and of woman, who replenished with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna and Huldah . . .

do Thou now also look down upon this Thy servant who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Thy Holy Spirit.”<sup>32</sup> But unlike that for deacons, the prayer for deaconesses also asks that God deliver the woman from filthiness of the flesh and spirit and reminds the congregation that God did not shun being born of a woman.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the fact that these women were ordained to a clerical office, they occupied a subordinate and circumscribed position. They were excluded from some of the tasks the male deacons performed and did not assist, for example, at the Lord’s Supper. In some of the church orders, they were specifically forbidden to carry out activities reserved for the bishops, presbyters, and male deacons. At the baptismal ceremony, they were barred from pronouncing the baptismal formula.

## WOMEN OUTSIDE THE ORTHODOX MAINSTREAM

### *Gnosticism*

The status of women in groups that deviated from what became mainstream, orthodox Christianity is very important to us because women may have been given some public responsibilities. One of these movements, Gnosticism, has been especially interesting to scholars, although it was not as much a religious movement as a cluster of movements that had certain beliefs in common. Gnosticism drew upon a multitude of religious and philosophical ideas circulating at the end of the first century. The Gnostics generally believed that a supreme God, who could not be known, differed from the spirit that created the material world. Creation was the result of either malice or disobedience toward the supreme God, and the material world that resulted was evil. In the turmoil of creation, however, sparks of divinity from the supreme God were imprisoned in certain human beings. A redeemer had been sent to release these imprisoned sparks by giving people special knowledge (*gnosis*) of the existence of the supreme God and the true origins of the world.

Gnosticism had a profound impact upon the interpretation given to the life and work of Jesus in many places. The gnostic Christians argued that Jesus was the redeemer who had been sent to pass on this special knowledge necessary for salvation to his apostles. They backed up their ideas by appeal-

ing to certain parts of the New Testament as well as to special books that they believed to contain material handed down by the apostles.

The exact role played by women in the gnostic groups is uncertain. There are indications in some texts that women may have been prominent in the communities and regarded in an authoritative light, functioning in some circles as prophets, teachers, priests, and even bishops. Karen King suggests that Gnostic rejection of the body created a community in which leadership was based on spiritual achievement and open to women along with men.<sup>34</sup> In the *Gospel of Mary*, for example, Mary Magdalene is given a special revelation by Jesus and is urged to teach it to the other disciples. In a later gnostic book, *Pistis Sophia*, Mary is also given an important role, as Jesus' words imply: "But Mary Magdalene and John, the maiden, will surpass all my disciples. . . . They will be on my right hand and on my left and I am they and they are I."<sup>35</sup> In both of these gnostic texts, the patriarchal trend of the early church, which would become dominant, is represented in the words of Peter, who rebukes Mary for her brashness and doubts the legitimacy of her message. This practical equality may have been based on gnostic descriptions of God as containing masculine and feminine dimensions, although these references lack clarity and were limited to certain groups within Gnosticism. Some systems, however, reinforced patriarchy by claiming that the female represented decay and mutability.

### *Orthodox Responses*

A strong school of thought in the early church opposed gnostic Christianity. This opposing tradition came to be regarded as the orthodox, or "catholic," tradition while the other groups were denounced as heretical. In the case of Gnosticism, orthodox Christians were certainly offended by the ideas that the created world was evil and that Jesus was not truly human. Yet we must at least consider the possibility that orthodox Christianity, which had already succumbed to its male-dominated cultural environment, excluded and persecuted the Gnostics partly because of the varied roles they gave to women. Scholars suggest that later forms of Montanism were also labeled heretical in part because of female leadership. Church leaders justified this by looking back at the founding mothers of Montanism and describing them as false prophets, being possessed by demons, and as sexually adventurous—typical

consequences when women were not submissive and domestic.<sup>36</sup> The orthodox church used the threat of heresy to curtail female activity even further, making the struggle against deviance another factor in nudging the church toward patriarchy.<sup>37</sup>

## PATRISTIC ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN

Attitudes toward women in the Christian tradition even in the twenty-first century have been shaped in no small way by a number of theological writers who lived in the first six centuries of Christian history. The influence wielded by these men is reflected in their designation as the “fathers of the church.” They had a variety of vocations and lived in many geographic locations throughout the Greco-Roman world. For example, Clement of Alexandria was a teacher, Jerome was a biblical scholar and secretary to Pope Damasus I, and Augustine was bishop of the North African city of Hippo. The church fathers included prominent figures in the church hierarchy as well as in the monastic communities.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was central to their work, but the church fathers had to convey and explain the message of the Gospels in terms that would be compatible with the thought patterns of the Greco-Roman world. There was a strong tendency in this culture to divide reality into two opposing or contradictory spheres, the sphere of mind and spirit and the sphere of the body, or flesh. The mind and spirit were identified with that which was good or virtuous while the flesh was represented as that which had to be overcome or conquered. Sometimes this line of thought condemned the body and the material world as hopelessly evil and corrupt, and it deeply influenced the growth of the ascetic spirit within the churches (see chapter 2).

This dualistic approach to the world, as it was called, had an influence on the way in which women were regarded. Women were identified traditionally with the body while the mind was seen as essentially masculine. The result was an association of the female with the flesh, the material world, and the drive to satisfy physical desires and, therefore, with that which was evil. This association was of course largely due to women’s role in childbirth as well as menstruation.

The church fathers certainly made statements that degraded women and the feminine. Such ideas have been picked up and quoted at length by people in the Christian community who have tried to keep women silent and subordinate. Yet these theologians could not ignore the Christian doctrine of the goodness of creation, the blessing of God on married life, and the equality between male and female that Paul proclaims. The works of the church fathers relevant to women, therefore, are not only numerous but also complex, but we can suggest some of the major ideas that emerge on the nature of women, virginity, and married life.

### *Women Prone to Sin*

One prominent belief of the church fathers is that women are responsible for sin in the world. Many turn to the Genesis story to support this, although some of the writers, such as Tertullian and Ambrose, sometimes describe the first sin as a joint responsibility. The fathers also see women as a continuing source of sin in the world since they seduce men away from the lofty heights of mind and spirit to the base concern for physical satisfaction and pleasure.

As a potential source of sin and danger to the spiritual well-being of the community, women were therefore to be kept subordinate in church and society. While some of these theologians regarded subordination as the penalty for Eve's sin, Augustine taught that woman was created as inferior to man. He argued that woman was created with a mind and spirit that were weak and readily overcome by strong physical passion. Even in the Garden of Eden therefore the male was to rule, govern, and teach.

The church fathers do make it clear that men and women are equally redeemed by baptism in Christ, however. In terms of their souls before God, gender was irrelevant. Even for Christian women, however, spiritual equality could have no counterpart in the concrete life of family, church, and nation. Although Christian women might have interior purity, they were still bound to the flesh, which could seduce and succumb to physical pleasure.

Both men and women are advised to adopt a lifestyle of chastity and modesty in a number of these treatises, but the instructions for women are particularly lengthy and explicit. The behavior of the Christian woman is meant to contrast sharply with the behavior of women in the urban centers of the decaying Roman Empire. The Christian woman is to stop using makeup (the

work of the devil) and avoid wearing jewelry. She is to wear a veil to signify her subjection and not to appear in silk dresses, which would show the shape of her body. She is to seclude herself at home and be careful not to visit the public baths.

### *Marriage and Sexuality*

None of the church fathers condemns married life as evil and against the will of God, although Jerome comes close to doing this in a strong plea for the virgin life. Married life is treated generally with delicacy and sensitivity. Some of the fathers stress that husband and wife should live in a relationship of love and trust. They encourage marriage partners to serve each other and to fulfill their mutual responsibilities. They contrast the Christian marriage to that of the non-Christian marriage, in which passion rules the domineering husband and the lusty wife.

There is a strong tendency in these works, however, to see sexual union as tainted with sin. Some of the fathers claim that God's original creation consisted of a single spiritual being who had no sexual characteristics, while others believe that male and female characteristics were part of the perfect creation but were not to result in sexual union. This union became a reality only after sin entered the world. Augustine argued that sexual union did take place in paradise but without lust and under the complete control of the male will and mind. After the Fall, however, lust took over and not only passed on original sin to the offspring but tarnished the relationship between man and woman as well.

### *The Virgin Life*

Augustine and the earlier writer Clement of Alexandria both approved of sexual intercourse to produce children. The union, however, should be the product of the will and not the passions. More commonly, Christians were urged to avoid marriage and sexual intercourse entirely. The life of virginity was celebrated as infinitely preferable to all other marital states. The virgin was regarded as possessing the most important "charism," or gift from the Holy Spirit. Mothers were urged to dedicate their daughters to the chaste life. Jerome even taught that the only possible justification for sexual union was



the production of more virgins: from coitus came virgins just as from thorns came roses and from shells came pearls.

Some of the church fathers suggest practical reasons for choosing the virgin life. Tertullian claims that it freed men and women to be martyrs. Other writers argue that the monastic life offered women protection in a brutal society. Jerome, in his effort to advocate chastity, gives lurid descriptions of married life to deter young men and women. He asks men why they would want to get involved with the perpetual whining and nagging of a wife, and he describes to women the discomforts of pregnancy and the pain of childbirth.

Aside from these practical reasons, many of the church fathers provided theological support for their celebration of the virgin life. Both men and women who chose this life of physical denial anticipated or had a “head start” on the life that awaited them in the kingdom of God. Christians in the kingdom would be given spiritual bodies like those of the angels, without sexual characteristics. For some of the writers, virgins were also concrete examples of God’s original creation that would be restored in the future kingdom. By erasing their sexuality, male or female, they already participated to some extent in a new order of reality.

In the writings of the church fathers, virginity became the one channel in the Christian community through which women could acquire some measure of practical equality with men and some kind of official standing within the church. The price a woman paid was dear; she was to obliterate her “femaleness” (see chapter 2). She did this by denying her childbearing ability, by fasting to eliminate her menstrual cycle, and by making herself as unattractive as possible. The equality baptism brought to women in the earliest decades of the church’s history was restored in part in the virgin life. The church fathers along with many other men speak highly of the learning and dedication of these women. Jerome, for example, praises the biblical scholarship of a group of virgins from the Roman aristocracy as well as their rigor in denying themselves physical pleasures. Women in this life could be allowed some measure of authority and freedom because they no longer represented the powerful lower nature that could lure men away from the virtuous life of mind and spirit. Yet while they were admired and celebrated, even ascetic women were feared; the solution eventually was to require that they be strictly cloistered behind convent walls.

## WRITERS, POETS, AND PILGRIMS

Although the works of the church fathers dominate the written records of the early church, there are several religious works written by women in the first centuries of Christian history. While later female writers generally came from religious orders or monastic communities, some of these early women were married and all were from the upper classes of Roman society. The content and style of their works varied, but all made some contribution to knowledge of the Christian faith. Examples of this can be seen in Proba's *Cento* and Egeria's manuscript describing her trip to the Holy Land as well as Perpetua's story.<sup>38</sup>

### *Martyrdom and the Witness of Perpetua*

The early Christian communities were subjected to periods of persecution during the first centuries of their existence, and women formed a significant portion of those who were martyred. Were their experiences different from those of men? Conflicts between women and Roman authorities over religion were certainly intensified by their refusal to conform to the expectation that they submit to male rule. Women aroused strong emotions—anger, pity, and sometimes remorse—as they defied men and appeared in public in alien space normally reserved for male combat such as the Roman Colosseum.

One such period of persecution occurred in Carthage from 202 to 203 c.e. Christians who refused to worship the gods of the Roman Empire were singled out for punishment. Saturus, a Christian teacher, and five of his newly baptized pupils were arrested. Among them was Perpetua, the daughter of a wealthy civil servant, and her slave girl, Felicitas. Educationally as well as economically privileged, Perpetua left a remarkable written record of the experience of martyrdom in the early church.<sup>39</sup> Her work was later given an introduction and conclusion by an editor and circulated for many years among congregations. It represents the earliest known piece of Christian literature written by a woman. This work allows us to glimpse not only her understanding of Christianity but also her view of the society in which she lived and her role among the other Christian prisoners.

Perpetua's story is about a woman's spiritual awakening that moved her beyond given social and religious definitions.<sup>40</sup> Freed from the law of the

Romans and the expectations of her culture by God, who was the highest authority for a Christian, she was able to forge a new identity. She transcends her roles as daughter and mother in favor of a new family of confessing Christians; she then moves beyond her status as a new Christian to assume spiritual leadership—and challenges her culture's definition of female character.

Perpetua rejects the domestic norms to which she is expected to conform in two important ways. She disregards the pleas of her aged father, who constantly visits her in prison and urges her to compromise her beliefs. She also gives up her newborn son, whom she has been nursing in prison, to her father, thus relinquishing her responsibilities as a mother rather than give in to the Roman authorities. In both of these instances, her family ties are not broken lightly but with great sadness and suffering. She describes her appearance before the governor, Hilarion, in the following words: "Hilarion . . . said, 'Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son; offer sacrifice for the emperors' welfare.' But I answered, 'I will not.' Hilarion asked, 'Are you a Christian?' And I answered, 'I am a Christian.' And when my father persisted in his attempts to dissuade me, Hilarion ordered him thrown out and he was beaten with a rod. My father's injury hurt me as much as if I myself had been beaten."<sup>41</sup>

Martyrdom also disrupted the church's steady march toward the subordination of women, creating a set of circumstances in which the egalitarian conditions of the early church reasserted themselves.<sup>42</sup> Certainly the community around Perpetua in prison reflects some of the egalitarianism connected with the earliest Christians. Perpetua emerges as a figure of authority who has been claimed by the Holy Spirit. She takes on a prophetic role, for example, in communicating God's will to her companions. "My brother said to me, 'Dear sister, you already have such a great reputation in that you could ask for a vision indicating whether you will be condemned or freed.' Since I knew that I could speak with the Lord, whose great favors I had already experienced, I confidently promised to do so."<sup>43</sup> She experiences a series of prophetic visions, which assure her friends that a new and far better life awaited them after death and that they would be victorious over their fears and their persecutors. In her visions as well as in that of Saturus, Perpetua is also raised to a position of spiritual authority even over the male clergy, who were emerging as a powerful force in the church, by settling a dispute among them. And it is her prayer of intercession that wins a place in paradise for her deceased brother.

During her days in prison, Perpetua also transcends her identity as a woman by assuming both masculine and feminine characteristics. She is called the “true spouse of Christ” and the “darling of God” on the day of her martyrdom. She is described as sister, mother, and daughter, and she acts with gentleness, tenderness, and maternal compassion. But she is also a leader and intercessor who is strong and courageous, all traits that her culture associated with men. She chides the jailers for their inhumanity, slyly arguing that it would reflect well on them if the martyrs stayed in good physical condition since they would appear in the arena on Caesar’s birthday. She shows herself clearly in charge when she guides the hand and sword of her executioner. In one of her visions of her coming battle with the forces of evil, she sees herself as a man who is stripped of his clothing and rubbed with oil for combat. This image of the “manly woman,” common in the ancient world, would be used by Christians for centuries to speak of women who had overcome their weak female bodies and characters by spiritual development. Yet in this same vision she sees herself as the peaceful daughter who is given the branch of victory, representing the Christian who is freed from society’s expectations of women and men.

Although Perpetua’s story may have been preserved and edited by Montanists to illustrate the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, it was soon used more widely for purposes of instruction and inspiration. Excerpts from her story were read as part of the official liturgy in many places. The anniversary of her death became the occasion for special celebrations; a basilica was dedicated to her in Carthage; and Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, preached several sermons in her honor. Gradually, however, the memory of Perpetua faded in the Christian tradition. This was partly due to the prominence of earlier martyrs who were leading bishops, but it may also have been caused by the growing power of the male clergy who considered the writings of a woman inadequate and improper for official church use. Martyrdom represented an extraordinary opportunity to challenge the status quo and deviate from prescribed roles; when circumstances were less chaotic, women found few chances for authority outside the ascetic community.

### *Proba’s Cento*

Proba was a matron of the prominent and wealthy Anicii family. She probably became a convert to Christianity sometime in her adult life. Like other

women of the Roman privileged classes, she had a great deal of leisure time and she used some of it for the study of classical culture and for writing. Her *Cento* was probably written sometime around 351 C.E.

*Cento* was a popular form of poetry in the Greco-Roman world. The author of a *cento* borrowed lines and half-lines from the works of a master poet such as Virgil or Homer and arranged them to suit his or her own purposes. Although this appears like plagiarism to us, it was considered to be a high form of praise for the master poet. Proba rearranged parts of Virgil's works on secular subjects in order to tell biblical stories. The first part describes the history of Israel up to the giving of the Law. Then Proba jumps to the life of Jesus, using the verse of Virgil to describe events such as the slaughter of the firstborn in Egypt, the storm on the lake, and the Last Supper.

Although her *Cento* does remain faithful to orthodox views on Jesus, Proba omits large portions of the gospel story in her effort to patch Virgil together and ends up with an adaptation that many scholars see as absurd and forced. Her work, which required a prodigious memory and literary skill, was not given a favorable reception by church authorities in Rome; however, it continued to be used as a textbook for centuries. Education in the classics continued to be a requirement for professional and social success, and the *Cento* provided what was needed: Christianized access to Virgil.

Proba's *Cento* is also significant because it represents a challenge to the exclusion of women from the creation of a Christian theological tradition. In her own way, Proba was attempting to do what the church fathers were doing: interpret Jesus for the Greco-Roman world in familiar thought patterns. Many Roman citizens found the language of the Bible clumsy and were often suspicious and hostile toward Christianity. Proba's *Cento* sought to bridge this gap.

### *Egeria's Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*

A literary work of an entirely different kind from the pen of a woman was discovered at the end of the nineteenth century in the library of an Italian monastery. The manuscript describes a pilgrimage made to the Holy Land, probably in the early fifth century. Scholars believe that the account was written by Egeria.

The only information we have about Egeria must be inferred from her manuscript itself. In it there is evidence that she was a wealthy woman: she was on the pilgrimage for several years, she traveled with an extensive entourage, and she was given preferential treatment in many places by those in authority. The Bishop of Edessa greets her as one who has come from the remote end of the earth, possibly a reference to her home in Gaul or Spain. While she is not as learned in the classics and Latin as aristocratic women, she reveals herself to be well read in the Scriptures. She frequently discussed the Bible with her hosts and often tried to interpret her travels in light of biblical stories. She bombards the Bishop of Carrae, who was “very learned in Scripture,” with a whole series of questions about the geographic movements of Abraham’s family including “where the well was from which Saint Jacob gave water to the sheep which were herded by Rachel the daughter of Laban the Syrian.”<sup>44</sup> It is probable that Egeria belonged to a group of virgin women who were bound together by strong ties of affection, who studied the Bible together, and who had some liturgical responsibilities. She frequently refers to her readers as “ladies,” “my venerable sisters,” and “my light.” They were not members of a religious or monastic order, and there is no hint in Egeria’s account that she lived a life of poverty.

The account itself is really a travel diary describing a pilgrimage that lasted a long period of time. The first half of the manuscript relates her stay in Jerusalem, tours to Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula, and Transjordan, and her homebound journey to Constantinople. The second part gives a detailed account of the forms of worship used in the foremost Jerusalem church. Egeria’s work is not simply a catalogue of places but provides insights into local practices, people, and traditions, which are often missing in most travel diaries. Her work is of great value because of the information it provides on early Christian worship and architecture in the age of Constantinian church building, as well as the condition of the biblical sites in the fifth century. But her diaries had theological significance as well. Believing that she was called by God to her travels, Egeria enlivens and confirms the truth of the Bible for herself and her community.

During her pilgrimage, Egeria stops at the shrine of Saint Thecla near Selucium. Thecla was celebrated in the early church as a missionary who had been converted by Paul and commissioned by him to teach. In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (in circulation by the end of the second century), she breaks off her

engagement and, in the face of violent family opposition, adopts the virgin life. She is presented as a woman of enormous power and zeal, as is clear by her victory over attempted rape and execution by fire and beast. Although commissioned by Paul, her direct relationship with God is symbolized by her self-baptism. While Thecla herself may be legendary, scholars now suggest that the story reflects the teaching and sacramental ministries of some early Christian women. It may have even been created and preserved by them.<sup>45</sup> Yet the later church celebrated her for her willingness to die rather than compromise her virginity. As female leadership was curtailed in the early churches and the roles of widow and deaconess disappeared, the virgin life became an important source of female power and male approval. In medieval Christianity, the “good woman” was a virgin while all other women were associated by nature with the powers of darkness.

## Readings for Chapter 1



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### 1.1 CHRISTIAN WIDOWS

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*This selection comes from a collection of church laws, the Apostolic Constitutions, compiled in Syria around 380 C.E. In addition to incorporating the Didascalia Apostolorum, the legislation covers matters such as liturgical procedures, fasts and feasts, schism, heresy, and Christian burial. It also describes the duties of members of the Christian community. Women, when widowed, were entitled to the support of the church if they were sober, chaste, pious, and the wives of only one husband. They were not to discuss doctrine lest they misconstrue it. The church, in fact, was not to allow any woman to teach. Such teaching, the document argues, would be contrary to the example set by Jesus and the biblical injunction that women be subject to men. Widows, furthermore, were to remain within the confines of their homes to pray for the church.*

**Source:** "Concerning Christian Widows." In *The Work Claiming to Be the Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, including the Canons*, translated by Irah Chase, 81–83. New York: D. Appleton, 1848.

*That the widows are to be very careful of their deportment.*

Let every widow be meek, quiet, gentle, sincere, free from anger; not talkative, not clamorous, not hasty of speech, not given to evil-speaking, not captious, not double-tongued, not a busy-body. If she see or hear any thing that is not right, let her be as one that

doth not see, and as one that doth not hear; and let the widow mind nothing but to pray for those that give, and for the whole church; and when she is asked any thing by any one, let her not easily answer, except questions concerning faith, and righteousness, and hope in God; remitting to the rulers those that desire to be instructed in the doctrines of godliness. Let her answer only so as may tend to subvert the error of polytheism, and demonstrate the doctrine concerning the monarchy of God. But of the remaining doctrines, let her not answer any thing rashly, lest, by saying any thing unlearnedly, she should cause the Word to be blasphemed. For the Lord hath taught us, that the Word is like a grain of mustard seed, which is of a fiery nature; and, if any one useth it unskilfully, he will find it bitter. For in the mystical points we ought not to be rash, but cautious. For the Lord exhorteth us, saying, *Cast not your pearls before swine, lest they trample them with their feet, and turn again and rend you.* For unbelievers, when they hear the doctrine concerning Christ not explained as it ought to be, but defectively, and especially that concerning his incarnation or his passion, will rather reject it with scorn, and laugh at it as false, than praise God for it. And so the aged women will be guilty of rashness, and of causing blasphemy,



and will inherit a woe. For, saith he, *Woe to him by whom my name is blasphemed among the Gentiles.*

*That women ought not to teach, because it is unseemly; and what women followed our Lord.*

We do not permit our *women to teach in the church*, but only to pray, and to hear those that teach. For our Master and Lord, Jesus Christ himself, when he sent us, the twelve, to make disciples of the people and of the nations, did nowhere send out women to preach, although he did not want such; for there were with us the mother of our Lord, and his sisters; also Mary Magdalen; and Mary, the mother of James; and Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus; Salome, and certain others. For, had it been necessary for women to teach, he himself would have first commanded these also to instruct the people with us. For if *the head of the wife be the man*, it is not reasonable that the rest of the body should govern the head.

Let the widow, therefore, own herself to be the *altar of God*, and let her sit in her house, and not enter into the houses of the faithful, under any pretense, to receive any thing; for the altar of God never runneth about, but is fixed in one place. Let, therefore, the virgin and the widow be such as do not run about, or gad to the houses of those who are alien from the faith. For such as these are gadders and impudent; they do not make their feet to rest in one place, because they are not widows, but purses ready to receive, triflers, evil speakers, counsellors

of strife, without shame, impudent; who, being such, are not worthy of him that called them. For they do not come to the common resting place of the congregation on the Lord's day, as those that are watchful. But they either slumber, or trifle, or allure men, or beg, or ensnare others, bringing them to the evil one; not suffering them to be watchful in the Lord; but taking care that they go out as vain as they came in, because they do not hear the Word of the Lord either taught or read. For of such as these the prophet Isaiah saith, *Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive; for the heart of this people is waxen gross.*

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## 1.2 THE MARTYRDOM OF PERPETUA

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*One of Christianity's oldest and most descriptive accounts of martyrdom is in large part written by a woman. The author, Vibia Perpetua, daughter of a wealthy Carthaginian family, was arrested along with five friends in 202 or 203 C.E. at the direction of Septimus Severus. The account of her imprisonment and visions was supplemented and verified by fellow martyr Saturus and later given an introduction and conclusion. In these sections from Perpetua's story, she makes clear her willingness to defy the norms of family, society, and state although she does so with regret. They also illustrate the androgynous character of the story, presenting Perpetua both as daughter and combatant, nurturer and rebel.*

**Source:** "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas." In *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*,

introduction, texts, and translations by Herbert Musurillo, 109–19. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.

While we were still under arrest (she said) my father out of love for me was trying to persuade me and shake my resolution. “Father,” said I, “do you see this vase here, for example, or waterpot or whatever?”

“Yes, I do,” said he.

And I told him: “Could it be called by any other name than what it is?”

And he said: “No.”

“Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.”

At this my father was so angered by the word “Christian” that he moved towards me as though he would pluck my eyes out. But he left it at that and departed, vanquished along with his diabolical arguments.

For a few days afterwards I gave thanks to the Lord that I was separated from my father, and I was comforted by his absence. During these few days I was baptized, and I was inspired by the Spirit not to ask for any other favor after the water but simply the perseverance of the flesh. A few days later we were lodged in the prison; and I was terrified, as I had never before been in such a dark hole. What a difficult time it was! With the crowd the heat was stifling; then there was the extortion of the soldiers; and to crown all, I was tortured with worry for my baby there.

Then Tertius and Pomponius, those

blessed deacons who tried to take care of us, bribed the soldiers to allow us to go to a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves for a few hours. Everyone then left that dungeon and shifted for himself. I nursed my baby, who was faint from hunger. In my anxiety I spoke to my mother about the child, I tried to comfort my brother, and I gave the child in their charge. I was in pain because I saw them suffering out of pity for me. These were the trials I had to endure for many days. Then I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved as I was of my worry and anxiety over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else. . . .

A few days later there was a rumor that we were going to be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn with worry, and he came to see me with the idea of persuading me.

“Daughter,” he said, “have pity on my grey head—have pity on me your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favored you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you.”

This was the way my father spoke out of love for me, kissing my hands

and throwing himself down before me. With tears in his eyes he no longer addressed me as his daughter but as a woman. I was sorry for my father's sake, because he alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer.

I tried to comfort him saying: "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power."

And he left me in great sorrow.

One day while we were eating breakfast we were suddenly hurried off for a hearing. We arrived at the forum, and straight away the story went about the neighborhood near the forum and a huge crowd gathered. We walked up to the prisoner's dock. All the others when questioned admitted their guilt. Then, when it came my turn, my father appeared with my son, dragged me from the step, and said: "Perform the sacrifice—have pity on your baby!"

Hilarius the governor, who had received his judicial powers as the successor of the late proconsul Minucius Timinianus, said to me: "Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors."

"I will not," I retorted.

"Are you a Christian?" said Hilarius.

And I said: "Yes, I am."

When my father persisted in trying to dissuade me, Hilarius ordered him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. I felt sorry for father, just as

if I myself had been beaten. I felt sorry for his pathetic old age.

Then Hilarius passed sentence on all of us: we were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison in high spirits. But my baby had got used to being nursed at the breast and to staying with me in prison. So I sent the deacon Pomponius straight away to my father to ask for the baby. But father refused to give him over. But as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast, nor did I suffer any inflammation; and so I was relieved of any anxiety for my child and of any discomfort in my breasts. . . .

The day before we were to fight with the beasts I saw the following vision. Pomponius the deacon came to the prison gates and began to knock violently. I went out and opened the gate for him. He was dressed in an unbelted white tunic, wearing elaborate sandals. And he said to me: "Perpetua, come; we are waiting for you."

Then he took my hand and we began to walk through rough and broken country. At last we came to the amphitheater out of breath, and he led me into the center of the arena.

Then he told me: "Do not be afraid. I am here, struggling with you." Then he left.

I looked at the enormous crowd who watched in astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian against me, of vicious

appearance, together with his seconds, to fight with me. There also came up to me some handsome young men to be my seconds and assistants.

My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man. My seconds began to rub me down with oil (as they are wont to do before a contest). Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next there came forth a man of marvellous stature, such that he rose above the top of the amphitheater. He was clad in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes (one on either side) running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were wondrously made of gold and silver, and he carried a wand like an athletic trainer and a green branch on which there were golden apples.

And he asked for silence and said: “If this Egyptian defeats her he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch.” Then he withdrew.

We drew close to one another and began to let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to pummel him without as it were touching the ground. Then when I noticed there was a lull, I put my two hands together linking the fingers of one hand with those of the other and thus I got hold of his head. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head.

The crowd began to shout and my assistants started to sing psalms. Then

I walked up to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me: “Peace be with you, my daughter!” I began to walk in triumph towards the Gate of Life. Then I awoke. I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will.

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### 1.3 ADORNING WOMEN

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*One of the thirty-eight surviving treatises written by Tertullian (c. 160–220), a presbyter in Carthage, deals with appropriate apparel for women. Probably written in 202, the text reflects Tertullian’s hatred of North African, non-Christian culture and his growing interest in the puritanical and uncompromising lifestyle of Montanism. It has been both applauded and denounced as an indictment of women, although the writer does urge modesty on men and never questions women’s equal access to grace. Tertullian’s purpose is to persuade Christian women to abandon elaborate dress, ornaments, and cosmetics. He reasons that the sex that brought sin into the world should wear humble garb and renounce the skills of adornment that were taught by the angels of darkness. He also reminds women that such attire tempts men and betrays impure impulses within their own souls.*

**Source:** Tertullian. “On the Apparel of Women.” Translated by S. Thelwall. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donald-

son. Volume 4:14–15, 18–21, 25. Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885.

If there dwelt upon earth a faith as great as is the reward of faith which is expected in the heavens, no one of you at all, best beloved sisters, from the time that she had first “known the Lord,” and learned (the truth) concerning her own (that is, woman’s) condition, would have desired too gladsome (not to say too ostentatious) a style of dress; so as not rather to go about in humble garb, and rather to affect meanness of appearance, walking about as Eve mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve,—the ignominy, I mean, of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the cause) of human perdition. “In pains and in anxieties dost thou bear (children), woman; and toward thine husband (is) thy inclination, and he lords it over thee.” And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil’s gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: *you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of *your* desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunics of skins? Come, now; if from the beginning of the world the

Milesians sheared sheep, and the Serians spun trees, and the Tyrians dyed, and the Phrygians embroidered with the needle, and the Babylonians with the loom, and pearls gleamed, and onyx-stones flashed; if gold itself also had already issued, with the cupidity (which accompanies it), from the ground; if the mirror, too, already had license to lie so largely, Eve, expelled from paradise, (Eve) already dead, would also have coveted *these* things, I imagine! No more, then, ought she *now* to crave, or be acquainted with (if she desires to live again), what, when she *was* living, she had neither had nor known. Accordingly these things are all the baggage of woman in her condemned and dead state, instituted as if to swell the pomp of her funeral. . . .

For they, withal, who instituted them are assigned, under condemnation, to the penalty of death,—those angels, to wit, who rushed from heaven on the daughters of men; so that this ignominy also attaches to woman. For when to an age much more ignorant (than ours) they had disclosed certain well-concealed material substances, and several not well-revealed scientific arts—if it is true that they had laid bare the operations of metallurgy, and had divulged the natural properties of herbs, and had promulgated the powers of enchantments, and had traced out every curious art, even to the interpretation of the stars—they conferred properly and as it were peculiarly upon women that instrumental mean of womanly ostentation, the radiances of jewels

wherewith necklaces are variegated, and the circlets of gold wherewith the arms are compressed, and the medicaments of orchil with which wools are colored, and that black powder itself wherewith the eyelids and eyelashes are made prominent. What is the quality of these things may be declared meantime, even at this point, from the quality and condition of their teachers: in that sinners could never have either shown or supplied anything conducive to integrity, unlawful lovers anything conducive to chastity, renegade spirits anything conducive to the fear of God. If (these things) are to be called *teachings*, ill masters must of necessity have taught ill; if *as wages of lust*, there is nothing base of which the wages are honorable. But why was it of so much importance to show these things as well as to confer them? Was it that women, without material causes of splendor, and without ingenious contrivances of grace, could not please *men*, who, while still unadorned, and uncouth, and—so to say—crude and rude, had moved (the mind of) *angels*? or was it that the lovers would appear sordid and—through gratuitous use—contumelious, if they had conferred no (compensating) gift on the women who had been enticed into connubial connection with them? But these questions admit of no calculation. Women who possessed angels (as husbands) could desire nothing more; they had, forsooth, made a grand match! Assuredly they who, of course, did sometimes think whence they had fallen, and, after the heated impulses of their lusts,

looked up toward heaven, thus required that very excellence of women, natural beauty, as (having proved) a cause of evil, in order that their good fortune might profit them nothing; but that, being turned from simplicity and sincerity, they, together with (the angels) themselves, might become offensive to God. Sure they were that all ostentation, and ambition, and love of pleasing by carnal means, was *displeasing* to God. And these are the angels whom we are destined to judge: these are the angels whom in baptism we renounce: these, of course, are the reasons why they have deserved to be judged by man. What business, then, have their *things* with their *judges*? What commerce have they who are to condemn with them who are to be condemned? The same, I take it, as Christ has with Belial. With what consistency do we mount that (future) judgment-seat to pronounce sentence against those whose gifts we (now) seek after? For you too, (women as you are,) have the self-same angelic nature promised as your reward, the self-same sex as men: the self-same advancement to the dignity of judging, does (the Lord) promise you. Unless, then, we begin even here to *pre-judge*, by pre-condemning their *things*, which we are hereafter to condemn in *themselves*, *they* will rather judge and condemn *us*. . . .

Handmaids of the living God, my fellow-servants and sisters, the right which I enjoy with you—I, the most meanest in that right of fellow-servantship and brotherhood—emboldens me

to address to you a discourse, not, of course, of affection, but paving the way for affection in the cause of your salvation. That salvation—and not (the salvation) of women only, but likewise of men—consists in the exhibition principally of modesty. For since, by the introduction into an appropriation (in) us of the Holy Spirit, we are all “the temple of God.” Modesty is the sacristan and priestess of that temple, who is to suffer nothing unclean or profane to be introduced (into it), for fear that the God who inhabits it should be offended, and quite forsake the polluted abode. But on the present occasion we (are to speak) not about modesty, for the enjoining and exacting of which the divine precepts which press (upon us) on every side are sufficient; but about the matters which pertain to it, that is, the manner in which it behoves you to walk. For most women (which very thing I trust God may permit me, with a view, of course, to my own personal censure, to censure in all), either from simple ignorance or else from dissimulation, have the hardihood so to walk as if modesty consisted only in the (bare) integrity of the flesh, and in turning away from (actual) fornication; and there were no need for anything extrinsic to boot—in the matter (I mean) of the arrangement of dress and ornament, the studied graces of form and brilliance:—wearing in their gait the self-same appearance as the women of the nations, from whom the sense of *true* modesty is absent, because in those who know not God, the Guardian and

Master of truth, there is *nothing* true. For if any modesty can be believed (to exist) in Gentiles, it is plain that it must be imperfect and undisciplined to such a degree that, although it be actively tenacious of itself in the *mind* up to a certain point, it yet allows itself to relax into licentious extravagances of attire; just in accordance with Gentile perversity, in craving after that of which it carefully shuns the effect. How many a one, in short, is there who does not earnestly desire even to look pleasing to strangers? who does not on that very account take care to have herself painted out, and denies that she has (ever) been an object of (carnal) appetite? And yet, granting that even this is a practice familiar to Gentile modesty—(namely,) not actually to *commit* the sin, but still to be *willing* to do so; or even not to be *willing*, yet still not *quite* to refuse—what wonder? For all things which are not God’s are perverse. Let those women therefore look to it, who, by not holding fast the *whole* good, easily mingle with evil even what they do hold fast. Necessary it is that *you* turn aside from them, as in all other things, so also in your gait; since you ought to be “perfect, as (is) your Father who is in the heavens. . . .”

You must know that in the eye of perfect, that is, Christian, modesty, (carnal) desire of one’s self (on the part of others) is not only not to be desired, but even execrated, by you: first, because the study of making personal grace (which we know to be naturally the inviter of lust) a mean of pleasing does not spring

from a sound conscience: why therefore excite toward yourself that evil (passion)? why invite (that) to which you profess yourself a stranger? secondly, because we ought not to open a way to temptations, which, by their instancy, sometimes achieve (a wickedness) which God expels from them who are His; (or,) at all events, put the spirit into a thorough tumult by (presenting) a stumbling-block (to it). We ought indeed to walk so holily, and with so entire substantiality of faith, as to be confident and secure in regard of our own conscience, *desiring* that that (gift) may abide in us to the end, yet not *presuming* (that it will). For he who presumes feels less apprehension; he who feels less apprehension takes less precaution; he who takes less precaution runs more risk. Fear is the foundation of salvation; presumption is an impediment to fear. More useful, then, is it to apprehend that we may possibly fail, than to presume that we cannot; for apprehending will lead us to fear, fearing to caution, and caution to salvation. On the other hand, if we presume, there will be neither fear nor caution to save us. He who acts securely, and not at the same time warily, possesses no safe and firm security; whereas he who is wary will be truly able to be secure. For His own servants, may the Lord by His mercy take care that to *them* it may be lawful even to *presume* on His goodness! But why are we a (source of) danger to our neighbor? why do we import concupiscence into our neighbor? which concupiscence, if God, in “amplifying the law,” do not

dissociate in (the way of) penalty from the actual commission of fornication, I know not whether He allows impunity to him who has been the cause of perdition to some other. For that other, as soon as he has felt concupiscence after your beauty, and has mentally already committed (the deed) which his concupiscence pointed to, perishes; and you have been made the sword which destroys him: so that, albeit you be free from the (actual) crime, you are not free from the odium (attaching to it); as, when a robbery has been committed on some man’s estate, the (actual) crime indeed will not be laid to the owner’s charge, while yet the domain is branded with ignominy, (and) the owner himself aspersed with the infamy. Are we to paint ourselves out that our neighbors may perish? Where, then, is (the command), “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”? “Care not merely about your own (things), but (about your) neighbor’s”? No enunciation of the Holy Spirit ought to be (confined) to the subject immediately in hand merely, and not applied and carried out with a view to *every* occasion to which its application is useful. Since, therefore, both our own interest and that of others is implicated in the studious pursuit of most perilous (outward) comeliness, it is time for you to know that not merely must the pageantry of fictitious and elaborate beauty be rejected by you; but that of even natural grace must be obliterated by concealment and negligence, as equally dangerous to the glances of (the



beholder's) eyes. For, albeit comeliness is not to be *censured*, as being a bodily happiness, as being an additional outlay of the divine plastic art, as being a kind of goodly garment of the soul; yet it is to be *feared*, just on account of the injuriousness and violence of suitors: which (injuriousness and violence) even the father of the faith, Abraham, greatly feared in regard of his own wife's grace; and Isaac, by falsely representing Rebecca as his sister, purchased safety by insult! . . .

These suggestions are not made to you, of course, to be developed into an entire crudity and wildness of appearance; nor are we seeking to persuade you of the good of squalor and slovenliness; but of the limit and norm and just measure of cultivation of the person. There must be no overstepping of that line to which simple and sufficient refinements limit their desires—that line which is pleasing to God. For they who rub their skin with medicaments, stain their cheeks with rouge, make their eyes prominent with antimony, sin against HIM. To them, I suppose, the plastic skill of God is displeasing! In their own persons, I suppose, they convict, they censure, the Artificer of all things! For censure they do when they amend, when they add to, (His work;) taking these their additions, of course, from the adversary artificer. That adversary artificer is the devil. For who would show the way to change the *body*, but he who by wickedness transfigured man's *spirit*? He it is, undoubtedly who adapted ingenious devices of this kind; that in your persons it may be

apparent that you, in a certain sense, do violence to God. Whatever is *born* is the work of God. Whatever, then, is *plastered on* (that), is the devil's work. To superinduce on a divine work Satan's ingenuities, how criminal is it! Our servants borrow nothing from our personal enemies: soldiers eagerly desire nothing from the foes of their own general; for, to demand for (your own) use anything from the adversary of Him in whose hand you are, is a transgression. Shall a Christian be assisted in anything by that evil one? (If he do,) I know not whether this name (of "Christian") will continue (to belong) to him; for he will be *his* in whose lore he eagerly desires to be instructed. But how alien from *your* schoolings and professions are (these things)! How unworthy the Christian name, to wear a fictitious face, (you,) on whom simplicity in every form is enjoined!—to lie in your appearance, (you,) to whom (lying) with the tongue is not lawful!—to seek after what is another's, (you,) to whom is delivered (the precept of) abstinence from what is another's!—to practise adultery in your mien, (you,) who make modesty your study! Think, blessed (sisters), how will you keep God's precepts if you shall not keep in your own persons His lineaments? . . .

Perhaps some (woman) will say: "To me it is not necessary to be approved by men; for I do not require the testimony of men: God is the inspector of the heart." (That) we all know; provided, however, we remember what the same (God) has said through the apostle:

“Let your probity appear before men.” For what purpose, except that malice may have no access at all to you, or that you may be an example and testimony to the evil? Else, what is (that): “Let your works shine”? Why, moreover, does the Lord call us the light of the world; why has He compared us to a city built upon a mountain; if we do not shine in (the midst of) darkness, and stand eminent amid them who are sunk down? If you hide your lamp beneath a bushel, you must necessarily be left quite in darkness, and be run against by many. The things which make us luminaries of the world are these—our good works. What is *good*, moreover, provided it be true and full, loves not darkness: it joys in being seen, and exults over the very pointings which are made at it. To Christian modesty it is not enough to *be* so, but to *seem* so too. For so great ought its plenitude to be, that it may flow out from the mind to the garb, and burst out from the conscience to the outward appearance; so that even from the outside it may gaze, as it were, upon its own furniture,—(a furniture) such as to be suited to retain faith as its inmate perpetually. For such delicacies as tend by their softness and effeminacy to unman the manliness of faith are to be discarded. Otherwise, I know not whether the wrist that has been wont to be surrounded with the palmleaf-like bracelet will endure till it grow into the numb hardness of its own chain. I know not whether the leg that has rejoiced in the anklet will suffer itself to be squeezed into the gyve! I fear

the neck, beset with pearl and emerald nooses, will give no room to the broadsword! Wherefore, blessed (sisters), let us meditate on hardships, and we shall not feel them; let us abandon luxuries, and we shall not regret them. Let us stand ready to endure every violence, having nothing which we may fear to leave behind. It is these things which are the bonds which retard our hope. Let us cast away earthly ornaments if we desire heavenly. Love not gold; in which (one substance) are branded all the sins of the people of Israel. You ought to *bate* what ruined your fathers; what was adored by them who were forsaking God. Even *then* (we find) gold is food for the fire. But Christians always, and now more than ever, pass their times not in gold but in iron: the stoles of martyrdom are (now) preparing: the angels who are to carry us are (now) being awaited! Do you go forth (to meet them) already arrayed in the cosmetics and ornaments of prophets and apostles; drawing your whiteness from simplicity, your ruddy hue from modesty; painting your eyes with bashfulness, and your mouth with silence; implanting in your ears the words of God; fitting on your necks the yoke of Christ. Submit your head to your husbands, and you will be enough adorned. Busy your hands with spinning; keep your feet at home; and you will “please” better than (by arraying yourselves) in gold. Clothe yourselves with the silk of uprightness, the fine linen holiness, the purple of modesty. Thus painted, you will have God as your Lover!

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## 1.4 EGERIA IN THE HOLY LAND

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*This text is part of an account of a pilgrimage to various sacred sites in and around the holy land, to which is added a description of the liturgy used in Jerusalem. It was probably written by Egeria, a wealthy woman of high social status, sometime between 404 and 417 and addressed to a group of learned and devout women serving the church where she lived. She does not simply list the places she visits but enhances her account with details such as the quality of King Agbar's portrait and the customs linked with the feast day of Saint Helpidius. She reveals that she is well read in Scripture and worthy of the hospitality of great bishops and monks.*

**Source:** "The Pilgrimage of Egeria." In *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of the Early Church*, edited by Patricia Wilson-Kastner et al., 102–3, 105–7. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1981.

And so again making my way through several rest-stations, I came to the city whose name we find in Scripture, Bata-nis, which is a city even today. The church, with a holy bishop who is both a monk and confessor, has several martyria. The city contains multitudes of people, for an army with its tribune is based here.

Setting out from there, we arrived in the name of Christ our God at Edessa. When we had arrived there, we immediately went to the church and martyr-ium of Saint Thomas. Thus having prayed according to our custom, and

having done all these things we habitually do in holy places, we also read there some things about Saint Thomas. The church there is large and very beautiful and newly built, and truly worthy to be a house of God. Because there were so many things there which I wanted to see, I had to stay there three days. So I saw many martyria and also holy monks, some living by the martyria and others having their dwellings far from the city in secluded places.

Then the holy bishop of the city, a truly religious monk and confessor, having hospitably received me, told me: "Because I see, daughter, that you have taken such a great work upon yourself, because of your piety coming even from the ends of the earth to these places, we will show you whatever you want, whatever it would please Christians to see." First giving thanks to God, I then asked him to be so kind as to do as he had offered. He first led me to the palace of King Agbar, and showed me there a large portrait of him, quite like him, they say, and as lustrous as if it were made of pearls. Looking at Agbar face to face, he seems to be truly a wise and honorable man. Then the holy bishop said to me: "Here is King Agbar, who before he saw the Lord believed in him as truly the Son of God." Next to that portrait was one also made of marble, said to be his son Magnus, whose countenance was also gracious. . . .

Having passed three days there, I had to go all the way to Carrae, as they now call it [Charra = Haran]. But in

Scripture it is called Charra where Saint Abraham lived, as it is written in Genesis that the Lord said to Abraham, “Go from your land and from the house of your father and go into Haran,” and so forth [Gen. 12:1]. When I reached there, that is, Charra, I went immediately to the church which is within the city itself. I soon saw the bishop of the place, a truly holy man of God, himself a monk and confessor, who kindly offered to show us all the places we wished. Then he led us immediately to the church outside the city which is on the site where Saint Abraham’s house was, a church made from its stones and on its foundations, as the holy bishop told us. When we had come into that church he prayed and read a passage from the book of Genesis, sang a psalm, and the bishop having said another prayer and blessed us, we went outside. He then kindly agreed to lead us to the well from which Saint Rebecca carried water. The holy bishop told us: “Here is the well from which Saint Rebecca gave water to the camels of the servant of Abraham, Eleazar” [Gen. 24:15-20]. He consented to show us everything.

The church, which, as I said, ladies, venerable sisters, is outside the city, where once was the house of Abraham, now has there a martyrrium to a certain holy monk called Helpidius. It was our good fortune to arrive there the day before the martyr’s day of Saint Helpidius, nine days before the kalends of May [April 23]. On this day from everywhere within the borders of Meso-

potamia all the monks come to Haran, even the great monks who dwell in solitude and are called aescetics, both for that feast which is very highly celebrated here, and for the memory of Saint Abraham, whose house was where the church now is in which is laid the body of the holy martyr. It was more than we had hoped to see these truly holy men of God, the Mesopotamian monks, whose reputation and life are heard of afar. I never thought that I would be able to see them, not because it would be impossible for God to grant this to me, because he has deigned to grant everything, but because I had heard that they did not come down from their dwellings except on the Pasch and on this day, and because these are the sort who do marvelous works. And I did not even know on what day was the martyr’s feast, as I said. Thus, God willing, the day arrived for which I had not dared hope when we had come. We stayed there two days, for the martyr’s feast and for seeing all the holy men who graciously agreed to receive me and speak with me, even though I did not deserve it. Immediately after the martyr’s feast they are not to be seen there, because soon after nightfall they seek the desert and each of them goes to the cell where he lives. In this city, apart from a few clerics and holy monks, I found not a single Christian, for all are pagans. Just as we reverence the place where Saint Abraham first dwelt, honoring his memory, so also the pagans greatly reverence a place about a mile outside the city, where are tombs

of Nahor and Bethuel [Gen. 29:24].

Because the bishop of the city is very learned in Scripture, I asked him, “I beg you, my Lord, tell me something I would like to know about.” He replied, “Ask what you will, daughter, and I will tell you if I know.” “I know through Scripture that Saint Abraham with his father Terah and Sarah his wife and Lot his brother’s son came into this place, but I have not read that either Nahor or Bethuel traveled here [Gen. 11:31]. I know that only the servant of Abraham afterwards came to Charra to seek Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel son of Nahor, for Isaac, the son of his master Abraham.” “Truly, daughter, it is written as you have said in Genesis, that Saint Abraham came here with his family; the Canonical Scriptures do not say at what time Nahor with his family and Bethuel arrived here [Gen. 11:31]. But clearly at sometime afterward they must have come here, for their tombs are about a mile from the city. For Scripture testifies truly that the servant of Saint Abraham came here to receive Saint Rebecca, and again that Saint Jacob came here that he might take the daughters of Laban the Syrian” [Gen. 24:28].

Then I asked him where the well was from which Saint Jacob gave water to the sheep which were herded by Rachel the daughter of Laban the Syrian [Gen. 11:28]. The bishop told me: “Within about six miles of here is a place next to a village which then was the land of Laban the Syrian; when you wish to go there we will go with you and show it

to you, for there are many holy monks and aescetics, as well as a holy church in that place.” I also asked the holy bishop where was the place where first Terah and his family lived among the Chaldeans. Then the holy bishop responded: “The place of which you speak is from here ten days journey into Persia. From here Nisibis is five days, and from there to Ur, the city of the Chaldeans, is five more days. But now there is no access for Romans there, because the Persians hold the whole territory. Particularly this part which is on the Roman borders of Persia and Chaldee is called Syria Orientalis.” He kindly told me many other things, as had also many other holy bishops and monks, always about the Scriptures and the deeds of holy men, of monks, that is; if they were dead, of the marvels they had done, if they are still in the body, of what is done daily by those called aescetics [2 Cor. 12:3]. For I do not wish your affection to think that the monks have any other stories than those of the divine Scriptures and the deeds of the great monks.

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## 1.5 THE ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA

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*This reading comes from the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, written sometime near the end of the second century and set in the towns of southern Asia Minor. In the story, Paul arrives at Iconium and preaches that men and women cannot hope for resurrection from the dead unless*

*they abstain from sexual relations. A wealthy virgin, Thecla, watches from a nearby window and is captivated by Paul's message. She breaks off her engagement to Thamyris and dedicates herself to perpetual virginity. The wrath of both family and local Roman authorities ensue, Paul is driven from the city, and Thecla is condemned to death by burning. A miraculous storm douses the flames, however, and Thecla sets out to find Paul and travel to Antioch with him. Paul welcomes her but refuses to baptize her. The text below takes up the story as Thecla is attacked in the street by the amorous Alexander. She is eventually commissioned to teach and even baptizes herself, but these privileges are linked to the virgin life and "becoming like a man."*

*Source:* "The Acts of Paul and Thecla." In *The Apocryphal New Testament*, translated by Montague Rhodes James, 277–81. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.

<sup>26</sup>And Paul sent away Onesiphorus with all his house unto Iconium, and so took Thecla and entered into Antioch: and as they entered in, a certain Syriarch, Alexander by name, saw Thecla and was enamoured of her, and would have bribed (flattered) Paul with money and gifts. But Paul said: I know not the woman of whom thou speakest, neither is she mine. But as he was of great power, he himself embraced her in the highway; and she endured it not, but sought after Paul and cried out bitterly, saying: Force not the stranger, force not the handmaid of God. I am of the first of the Iconians, and because I would not marry Thamyris, I am cast out of the city. And she caught at Alexander and rent his cloak and took the

wreath from his head and made him a mocking-stock.

<sup>27</sup>But he alike loving her and being ashamed of what had befallen him, brought her before the governor; and when she confessed that she had done this, he condemned her to the beasts. But the women were greatly amazed and cried out at the judgement seat: An evil judgement, an impious judgement! And Thecla asked of the governor that she might remain a virgin until she should fight the beasts; and a certain rich queen, Tryphaena by name, whose daughter had died, took her into her keeping, and had her for a consolation. . . .

<sup>31</sup>And the governor sent soldiers to fetch Thecla: and Tryphaena left her not, but herself took her hand and led her up, saying: I did bring my daughter Falconilla unto the sepulchre; but thee, Thecla, do I bring to fight the beasts. And Thecla wept bitterly and groaned unto the Lord, saying: Lord God in whom I believe, with whom I have taken refuge, that savedst me from the fire, reward thou Tryphaena who hath pity on thy handmaid, and hath kept me pure.

<sup>32</sup>There was therefore a tumult, and a voice of the beasts, and shouting of the people, and of the women which sat together, some saying: Bring in the sacrilegious one! and the women saying: Away with the city for this unlawful deed! away with all us, thou proconsul! it is a bitter sight, an evil judgement!

<sup>33</sup>But Thecla, being taken out of the hand of Tryphaena, was stripped and a girdle put upon her, and was cast into

the stadium: and lions and bears were set against her. And a fierce lioness running to her lay down at her feet, and the press of women cried aloud. And a bear ran upon her; but the lioness ran and met him, and tore the bear in sunder. And again a lion, trained against men, which was Alexander's, ran upon her, and the lioness wrestled with him and was slain along with him. And the women bewailed yet more, seeing that the lioness also that succoured her was dead.

<sup>34</sup>Then did they put in many beasts, while she stood and stretched out her hands and prayed. And when she had ended her prayer, she turned and saw a great tank full of water, and said: Now is it time that I should wash myself. And she cast herself in, saying: In the name of Jesus Christ do I baptize myself on the last day. And all the women seeing it and all the people wept, saying: Cast not thyself into the water: so that even the governor wept that so great beauty should be devoured by seals. So, then, she cast herself into the water in the name of Jesus Christ; and the seals, seeing the light of a flash of fire, floated dead on the top of the water. And there was about her a cloud of fire, so that neither did the beasts touch her, nor was she seen to be naked.

<sup>35</sup>Now the women, when other more fearful beasts were put in, shrieked aloud, and some cast leaves, and other nard, others cassia, and some balsam, so that there was a multitude of odours; and all the beasts that were struck thereby were

held as it were in sleep and touched her not; so that Alexander said to the governor: I have some bulls exceeding fearful, let us bind the criminal to them. And the governor frowning, allowed it, saying: Do that thou wilt. And they bound her by the feet between the bulls, and put hot irons under their bellies that they might be the more enraged and kill her. They then leaped forward; but the flame that burned about her, burned through the ropes, and she was as one not bound.

<sup>36</sup>But Tryphaena, standing by the arena, fainted at the entry, so that her handmaids said: The queen Tryphaena is dead! And the governor stopped the games and all the city was frightened, and Alexander falling at the governor's feet said: Have mercy on me and on the city, and let the condemned go, lest the city perish with her; for if Caesar hear this, perchance he will destroy us and the city, because his kinswoman the queen Tryphaena hath died at the entry.

<sup>37</sup>And the governor called Thecla from among the beasts, and said to her: Who art thou? And what hast thou about thee that not one of the beasts hath touched thee? But she said: I am the handmaid of the living God; and what I have about me—it is that I have believed on that his Son in whom God is well pleased; for whose sake not one of the beasts hath touched me. For he alone is the goal (*or way*) of salvation and the substance of life immortal; for unto them that are tossed about he is a

refuge, unto the oppressed relief, unto the despairing shelter, and in a word, whosoever believeth not on him, shall not live, but die everlastingly.

<sup>38</sup>And when the governor heard this, he commanded garments to be brought and said: Put on these garments. And she said: He that clad me when I was naked among the beasts, the same in the day of judgment will clothe me with salvation. And she took the garments and put them on. And the governor forthwith issued out an act, saying: I release unto you Thecla the godly the servant of God. And all the women cried out with a loud voice and as with one mouth gave praise to God, saying: One is the God who hath preserved Thecla: so that with their voice all the city shook.

<sup>39</sup>And Tryphaena, when she was told the good tidings, met her with much people and embraced Thecla and said: Now do I believe that the dead are raised up: now do I believe that my child liveth: come within, and I will make thee heir of all my substance. Thecla therefore went in with her and rested in her house eight days, teaching her the word of God, so that the more part of the maid-servants also believed, and there was great joy in the house.

<sup>40</sup>But Thecla yearned after Paul and sought him, sending about in all places; and it was told her that he was at Myra. And she took young men and maids, and girded herself, and sewed her mantle into a cloak after the fashion of a man, and departed into Myra, and found Paul speaking the word of God, and went to him. But when he saw her and the people that were with her was amazed, thinking in himself: Hath some other temptation come upon her? But she perceived it, and said to him: I have received the washing, O Paul; for he that hath worked together with thee in the Gospel hath worked with me also unto my baptizing.

<sup>41</sup>And Paul took her by the hand and brought her into the house of Hermias, and heard all things from her; so that Paul marveled much, and they that heard were confirmed, and prayed for Tryphaena. And Thecla arose and said to Paul: I go unto Iconium. And Paul said: Go and teach the word of God. Now Tryphaena *had* sent her much apparel and gold, so that she left *of it* with Paul for the ministry of the poor.