

The Paradox of Women in the Early Church: 1 Timothy and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*

1 Timothy and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* have frequently been portrayed as opposite responses to women's roles and authority within the church. *Thecla* presents a woman who travels to teach and preach the gospel, roles that depart from culturally accepted norms for women. By contrast, 1 Timothy advocates women returning to socially acceptable, passive roles.¹ To take one example from a popular textbook, Bart Ehrman writes the following about attitudes toward women in the early church: "The Pastoral epistles present a stark contrast to the views set forth in *The Acts of Paul and*

¹ In the 1980's, MacDonald argued that 1 Timothy represents a community's rejection of the active leadership of women found in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983). See also the works in this period by Virginia Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987); Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).

More recently, scholars tend to see *Thecla* and 1 Timothy as independent literary works, but affirm that they take opposite stances regarding the roles of women and the emerging church structure. E.g., James W. Aageson, *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 206. Richard Bauckham reverses the influence and argues that *Thecla*'s author used 2 Timothy as a source.

Richard Bauckham, "The *Acts of Paul* as a Sequel to Acts," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* (ed. Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 122-23.

Thecla.”² From this perspective, the portrayal of Thecla’s bold action comes from a Christian community that accepted and encouraged women’s leadership, while 1 Timothy represents the backlash against such radical social innovation.

This common assessment represents a series of decisions about these early Christian texts in light of the complex evidence for women’s participation in the Greco-Roman world. Scholars in biblical studies and classics have long recognized the diverse and contradictory evidence for women’s activities in this period. On the one hand, the basic cultural assumption was that women were inferior to men and should obey their husbands or fathers. Philosophical and legal writings provide ample evidence of such views.³ On the other hand, the glimpses of women’s lives that the scattered evidence allow us show women engaged in commerce, heading households, and influencing politics, both with and without their husband’s participation. Scholars who read these texts as products of their culture make interpretive decisions about how to understand this contradictory picture, and how to situate the texts within it.

An early approach to the evidence was to marginalize the evidence for women’s participation by suggesting it was not “real” participation. Women may have appeared to hold religious and public offices, yet these were either merely honorary, or represented domestic (and thus unimportant) functions.⁴ In this approach, the philosophical norms of women’s inferiority limit the meaning of all other evidence regarding women’s roles.

² Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (4th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 409-410.

³ As examples, see Josephus, *Ag. Ap.*, 2.201; Plutarch, *Conj. Praec.* 6, 11, 33.

⁴ See the discussion by Riet van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation: Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Amsterdam: J. C.

A more recent approach understands some ancient women as inhabiting true leadership roles. Glimpses of women's leadership are understood as exceptions to an otherwise repressive rule.⁵ Individual women, or perhaps women within a geographic region, gained a level of autonomy that was rare for women in general. The evidence diverges because it applies to distinct groups or individuals: the majority of women were still viewed by the culture as inferior and incapable, but a select few stepped outside of these constraints.

In this article I advocate a different view of the position of women in Greco-Roman society. Instead of reading the conflicting reports as evidence of distinct groups of women, I interpret them as evidence of a tension that pervades the culture. The position of women in Greco-Roman culture is paradoxical: at the same time that women are ideally described as modest and confined to the home, some virtues required women to exercise leadership and to pursue the broad interests of their households and cities. The pattern of evidence suggests that, instead of defining the boundaries between communities, this tension exists within various subgroups in the Greco-Roman world.

Gieben, 1996), 3-4. Cf. Tom Hillard, "On the Stage, Behind the Curtain: Images of Politically Active Women in the Late Roman Republic," in *Stereotypes of Women in Power: Historical Perspectives and Revisionist Views* (ed. Barbara Garlick, Suzanne Dixon, and Pauline Allen; New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 40; Ramsay MacMullen, "Woman in Public in the Roman Empire," *Historia* 29, no. 2 (1980): 215.

⁵ E.g., Judith P. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 6, 29; MacMullen, "Woman in Public," 218. The argument is usually that only elite women were able to step outside of the constraints placed on women.

Drawing on this understanding, I advocate a different relationship between 1 Timothy and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Both texts reaffirm virtues of modesty and domestic fidelity that were widespread in the ancient world. Both are not only aware of but also sanction public leadership by such virtuous women. Viewed in this light, both *Thecla* and 1 Timothy display the same tensions and ambiguities regarding women's roles that are found in the culture at large.

Women in the Greco-Roman World

In the Greco-Roman world the ideal woman was modest, industrious, and loyal to her family. Funerary monuments provide some of the clearest expressions of the standards, because they praise the deceased for having fulfilled the ideal: e.g., “Here lies Amymome, wife of Marcus, best and most beautiful, worker in wool, pious, chaste, thrifty, faithful, a stayer-at-home.”⁶ The use of these qualities again and again in inscriptions and literary sources suggests a consistent set of standards for women's behavior.

Sometimes the ideals of modesty, industry, and loyalty coincide very smoothly. For example, the cultural expectation that women should be virgins when married combines the ideal of modesty with that of loyalty to her family—both to her father's

⁶ ILS 8402 in Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* (2nd ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 17. For other similar summaries of the ideals, see Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 67-71; Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 243-49.

household as well as to that of her future husband. Likewise, the Roman ideal of the *univira*, a woman married only once, suggests both modesty and loyalty to family—in this case, the loyalty involves sexual fidelity to the husband as well as pursuit of the interests of the husband’s children, for remarriage had the potential to divide a woman’s loyalty. These are powerful social norms that often suggest a cohesive worldview that confined women to a restricted set of roles.

However, there are a great many instances in which the ideals of modesty, industry, and loyalty interact in surprising ways. As I discuss below, a woman’s loyalty to her family often required her active involvement in arenas defined as masculine. Likewise, industrious women entered into commerce and politics, pursuing wealth and honor for themselves and their families. In light of sources that confine women’s duties to the home, modern readers often see this behavior as striking. Yet most of the ancient sources give no indication that these actions were unusual or untoward. Quite a few of the sources attribute domestic virtues like modesty to these active women. Thus, modesty does not disappear as a requisite virtue in such situations, yet neither does it circumscribe the boundaries of women’s activities. Instead, “modest” women take on roles and exert authority in ways that may seem surprising to modern readers. These women are not stepping outside of existing social norms, but inhabiting them in a variety of ways.

Here I flesh out the interplay between modesty, industry, and loyalty with respect to women’s wealth and patronage. I hope to show a social pattern in which women who exhibited traditional domestic virtues also played influential roles within their families and communities. I am not arguing that women were free to do whatever they pleased. Instead, I assert that conformity to social norms for womanly virtue left open a range of possibilities for women’s behavior, many of which included active leadership roles within the household, civic groups, and in the city itself.

First, regarding wealth: women of the Imperial period owned a good deal of property and made decisions regarding its use. Richard Saller estimates that women controlled one-fifth to one-third of property in the Roman Empire.⁷ Elite women often owned large country estates and property in the cities as well. For example, Terentia sells property during her husband, Cicero's exile, a fact he laments (*Fam.* 8.5). Both Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* 117) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 12.22) mention the immense wealth of Lollia Paulina. Pliny the Younger writes of the many country estates of his mother-in-law, Pompeia Celerina (*Ep.* 1.4; 3.9; 6.10). His description of Ummidia Quadratilla (*Ep.* 7.24) and inscriptions in her town (CIL 10.5813) attest to her wealth and status. None of these sources try to explain or excuse the wealth of such women. Women controlling property was a part of everyday life in the Roman world.

Non-elite women also controlled property, albeit on a lesser scale. Papyri record women of lesser means establishing wills, and buying, selling, and renting land and livestock.⁸ Women also inherited, bought, sold, and freed slaves.⁹ Women appear less frequently than men in the papyri, but they are engaged in many of the same activities.

⁷ Richard P. Saller, "Household and Gender," in *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (ed. Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris, and Richard Saller; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97. Cf. Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC-AD 800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 80.

⁸ For wills, see e.g.: Jane Rowlandson, ed., *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 196-201, 232-34. For property, see e.g., Bagnall and Cribiore, *Women's Letters*, 70-71; Rowlandson, ed., *Women and Society*, 235-38, 241-43, 251-56.

However, wealth was never simply a personal affair over which women (or men, for that matter) made autonomous decisions. Wealth was a household or familial matter. Not surprisingly, women's actions to preserve and extend their wealth are shaped and framed by expectations of loyalty to family. In the west, funeral inscriptions often praise women for their bequests to family.¹⁰ Women inherited wealth from their husbands with the shared expectation that they steward that wealth and pass it on to his children.¹¹ Certainly there were avenues for men to exercise influence over women's decisions with their property.¹² Yet women also exercised daily influence over their husband's affairs through their oversight of household production.¹³ I do not mean to suggest that control

⁹ E.g., Rowlandson, ed., *Women and Society*, 69, 92-3, 95, 192, 195, 200-201, 207-208, 239, 268.

¹⁰ E.g., Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, 17-18.

¹¹ Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 48-50.

¹² Van Bremen argues that the institution of *tutela* was one factor reinforcing cultural norms that shaped women's decisions about their finances. See van Bremen, *Limits*, 225-36. Most women remained *in tutela*, under a guardian, whose permission was necessary for certain types of transactions: selling slaves, certain types of livestock, and land within Italy (Gaius *Inst.* 2.1.29). The role of the guardian was thus rather limited, and changes over time decreased the likelihood that a guardian could interfere in a freeborn woman's affairs (Gaius *Inst.* 1.190-192).

¹³ This was a job that varied depending on the social status of the family, but in any case involved the woman directly in making decisions about the use of household resources for the good of the household. In the ancient world, the household was the

of property was a two-way street. Men had legal rights that women did not.¹⁴ Yet women had both formal and informal control over property, and used both to marshal resources for the benefit of the household.

Yet even as they assert control over resources, women are portrayed by their families and also portray themselves according to traditional virtues. For example, in a number of funerary monuments in the west, women of average means are depicted as domestic matrons. A world that required these women's active participation in producing wealth for their families nevertheless honored them by depicting them as static, and located within the household.¹⁵ In a couple of the Egyptian papyri, a woman seeking a ruler's authorization or intervention on her behalf argues her point by underscoring her

primary site of production of food and clothing. Although cloth and other food items could be purchased in the cities, women still performed many of the tasks required to make clothing and meals, or supervised the slaves who did so. See Bagnall and Cribiore, *Women's Letters*, 77-81; Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 94-5; Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, 203-4. See also Cicero, *Fam.* 173.

¹⁴ E.g., Ulpian, *Dig.* 50.16.195.2, 50.17.2; Gaius, *Inst.* 1.144.

¹⁵ Natalie Boymel Kampen, *Image and Status: Roman Working Women in Ostia* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1981), 130-36. In a similar vein, Matthew Roller shows how women dined reclining, though they were often depicted in the more modest pose, seated with their husband. See Matthew B. Roller, *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

own weakness and vulnerability as a woman.¹⁶ This ability to act and assert one's modesty at the same time is not an odd exception to the rule but appears to be woven into the fabric of Greco-Roman culture.

A similar pattern emerges in relation to patronage. Ownership had political consequences in the Roman social system, although the consequences were different depending on one's social status.¹⁷ Elite women took on leadership roles in their communities. As patrons and donors, they gained honor for their families and provided concrete benefits to their cities.¹⁸ They served in ceremonial capacities that symbolized

¹⁶ E.g., Rowlandson, ed., *Women and Society*, 92-3, 239-40. Cf. pp. 29-30, 354; Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women: Sources, Genres and Real Life* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 84-5.

¹⁷ See the discussion of political influence by elite women of Richard A. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1992); D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, 148-66; Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 307-13.

¹⁸ For a general discussion, see Zeba Crook, "Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited," 128 (2009): 604-609; Suzanne Dixon, "A Family Business: Women's Role in Patronage and Politics at Rome 80-44 B.C.," 34 (1983): 91-121; Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, 158-161; van Bremen, *Limits*.

Certain women's activities as patrons are well known. For the empress Livia, see Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 291-94; Dixon, *Reading Roman Women*, 110-12. For Junia Theodora, see Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 301-3; Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, 160. For Plancia Magna, see Mary Taliaferro Boatwright, "Plancia Magna of Perge: Women's Roles and Status in Roman

the importance of their generosity, and bore many of the same titles men did:

stephanephoros, *demiourgos*, etc.¹⁹ Such benefaction was not limited to elite women, and there is evidence at many levels of society that women gave gifts to communities or local organizations, made bequests, loaned money, owned and freed slaves, and thus acted as patrons in many of the same ways men did.²⁰

Service as a patron was again not simply an individual act but was also a way of extending the family's influence.²¹ Inscriptions praising patrons often attribute honor to

Asia Minor," in *Women's History and Ancient History* (ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 247-72; D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, 21-22; van Bremen, *Limits*, 104-108.

¹⁹ van Bremen, *Limits*, 59-80.

²⁰ On a smaller scale, they donated or renovated buildings in support of professional guilds and religious groups. On the patronage of Eumachia, see Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*, 294-96; Dixon, *Reading Roman Women*, 107; Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, 159. Women made loans and supported individual clients in business and social life. Dixon, *Reading Roman Women*, 100-106. For women making loans and gifts, see e.g., Cicero *Att.* 12.21.5; 12.51.3; *Clu.* 178; Pliny the Younger, Ep. 3.19. Inscriptions dedicated by slaves or freed people to their female owners also show women's participation in the patron-client culture. E.g., Richard Gordon, "The Veil of Power: Emperors, Sacrificers, and Benefactors," in *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. Mary Beard and John North; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 225-26; Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women's Life*, 158.

²¹ van Bremen, *Limits*, ch. 4.

the whole family by situating the gift within a pattern of familial giving.²² Women's civic donations are evidence of active leadership. Yet their decisions were surely shaped by the fact that the social capital accumulated through such gifts accrued, not just to themselves, but also to their families.

As they give such gifts, women are again praised for modesty and domestic virtues. Junia Theodora, commemorated in five inscriptions for her political patronage of the Lycian people, is described as "living modestly" (ζῶσα σωφρόνως).²³ Claudia Metrodora, who twice served as *stephanephoros*, the highest magistracy of her city (Chiot) and who donated a public bath complex, is "virtuous and of noble character" (ἀρετῆς ... καὶ καλοκαγαθίας).²⁴ The attribution of domestic virtues in such cases should not be read as an indication that these women never left their homes. Instead, the inscriptions attribute honor to women patrons by describing them as virtuous.²⁵

²² E.g., *Ibid.*, 71, 102.

²³ R. A. Kearsley, "Women in Public Life in the Roman East: Iunia Theodora, Claudia Metrodora and Phoebe, Benefactress of Paul," *TynBul* 50 (1999): 204-205. Cf. Demetrios I. Pallas, Séraphin Charitonidis, and Jaques Vénencie, "Inscriptions lyciennes trouvées à Solômos près de Corinthe," *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 83 (1959): 498.

²⁴ Kearsley, "Women in Public Life," 208-9. Kearsley argues that the terms are "reminiscent of the domestic sphere rather than the public one." Kearsley, "Women in Public Life," 200.

²⁵ The trend is noted by MacMullen, "Woman in Public," 216; van Bremen, *Limits*, 166, 170. Forbis notes differences for Italian women: Elizabeth P. Forbis, "Women's Public Image in Italian Honorary Inscriptions," *AJP* 111 (1990): 493-512.

To summarize: the evidence that women pursued wealth and acted as patrons suggests a more complex picture of the socially acceptable roles played by women. The ideal woman was modest, yet that modesty inhabited a variety of forms. Modest women engaged in business and other public roles, especially when those actions were perceived to benefit their families or cities. In taking on such active roles, women did not transgress social norms, but embodied them in ways deemed acceptable by their culture.

Interpreting Early Christian Writings

Two additional aspects of this social pattern are directly related to the interpretation of Christian texts. First, the tension created by the gendered virtues (modesty, loyalty, and industry) can be found within a single source. Plutarch, for example, lauds the submission of women to men (*Conj. Praec.*). Yet he also recommends his wife's work as an author (*Conj. Praec.* 48), dedicates his own work to a female friend (*Mulier. Virt.* 1; *Is. Os.* 1), and praises examples of women's political leadership (*Mulier. Virt.*).²⁶ Likewise, Philo frequently reproduces common gender stereotypes in his writings (e.g., Philo, *Sacr.* 21, 26; *Spec.* 3.169). Yet he also approves of women living the philosophical life in parallel with men (*Contempl.* 32-33, 69-71, 83-90).²⁷ Such sources

²⁶ For a discussion of Plutarch's views on women, see the essays in Sarah B. Pomeroy, ed., *Plutarch's Advice to the Bride and Groom and A Consolation to His Wife: English Translations, Commentary, Interpretive Essays, and Bibliography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁷ For recent discussions of gender issues in Philo, see Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Gender and Geopolitics in the Word of Philo of Alexandria: Jewish Piety and Imperial Family Values," in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourse* (ed. Todd Penner

reinforce the idea that interpreters may find contradictory approaches to women within individuals or communities.

Second, the pattern includes elements that appear to modern readers as explicit contradictions. For example, the jurists tell us that *potestas*, the control of the *pater familias* over lesser members of the household is, by definition, a male capacity (Ulpian, *Dig.* 50.16.195.2).²⁸ However, other evidence shows women acting as *pater familias*: doing the work of the head of household.²⁹ In another example, Ulpian states that women do not serve as magistrates (*Dig.* 50.17.2).³⁰ Yet as I discussed above, inscriptions assign women the titles of magistrates. This is a regular feature of Roman life: there are explicit

and Caroline Vander Stichele; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 63-88; Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo's "Therapeutae" Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Taylor argues that Philo's portrayal of these women as modest is inherent to his idealization of the Therapeutae. See Joan E. Taylor, "The Women 'Priests' of Philo's *De Vita Contemplativa*: Reconstruction the Therapeutae," in *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds* (ed. Jane Schaeberg, Alice Bach, and Esther Fuchs; New York: Continuum, 2004), 110.

Philo may also have sought the wisdom of a female teacher (*Fug.* 55-58), although scholars debate whether the reference is meant allegorically.

²⁸ For a discussion, see Jane F. Gardner, "Gender-Role Assumptions in Roman Law," *Echos du Monde Classique* 39 (1995): 377.

²⁹ Richard Saller, "Pater Familias, Mater Familias, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household," *Classical Philology* 94, no. 2 (1999): 188-90.

³⁰ Cf. Ulpian, *Dig.* 3.1.1.5; Paulus, *Dig.* 5.1.12.2.

prohibitions of women's participation in certain activities or roles, along with evidence that women not only did these things, but did them with approval.

My intention is not to explain this contradiction, but to note its regular appearance. The pattern suggests a deeper tension within Roman culture. It is not that some women could be civic and familial leaders, but not others, or that women in some places could, but not in others. Instead, Roman women both could and could not be leaders of households and communities. Modesty and the assumed superiority of men demanded that they not do these things. At the same time, the pursuit of other gendered virtues demanded that they do so.

1 Timothy as a reflection of Greco-Roman culture

Against this background, 1 Timothy and *Thecla* look different, both in relation to the cultural context, and to one another. I begin with 1 Timothy, in which we also see evidence of this complex interplay of values. Women are expected to conform to standards of modesty, industry, and loyalty.

Modesty is expressed through dress and behavior. In 1 Timothy 2, modesty is expressed through simple dress (2:9-10) and submission to men (2:11-12). In chapter 5, the instructions for young widows to marry reflect the ideals of modesty and industry (5:11-13). The young, unmarried widow is portrayed as being at risk. The author draws on the common notion that young women were passionate by nature, driven by sensual desires (5:11), and of marriage as a correction for this problem. A second problem to be solved was idleness: "they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say" (5:13). Such women were at risk of becoming the opposite of the modest, industrious wife.

Yet as industrious, loyal wives, women also played leadership roles. Women serve as deacons in this community. Those who do are expected to exhibit certain virtues, as are men: they must be “serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things” (3:11).³¹ The qualification of v. 12, “Let deacons be married once, and let them manage

³¹ The language of v. 11 is best read as a reference to women deacons. This makes sense because of the parallel structure of vv. 8 and 11. The phrase, “deacons, likewise” (v. 8) introduces a new instruction regarding a church office parallel to that of the bishop (3:1-2). Similarly, “Women, likewise” introduces a new instruction regarding women deacons. The absence of the expected possessive to explicitly indicate “their wives” strengthens this reading. The historical likelihood of women deacons is strengthened by Paul’s commendation of Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1). The instructions about women make most sense if one assumes the presence of women deacons in the community and understands 3:11 as an explicit indication of the relevance of these instructions for women as well as men. Scholars who read “women (deacons)” instead of “wives (of deacons)” in 3:11 include Jouette M. Bassler, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (ed. Victor Paul Furnish; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 70; Raymond F. Collins, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 90-1; Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Press, 1988), 88-9; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 228-29; Elsa Tamez, *Struggles for Power in Early Christianity: A Study of the First Letter to Timothy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 2007), 106.

Because the Greek word *γυνή* means both “woman” and “wife,” some understand these verses as setting standards for the behavior of male deacons, who are judged in part by the comportment of their wives. A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids:

their children and their households well,” probably applies to both men and women deacons, and is evidence of the virtues of loyalty and industry.

First Timothy may also provide our earliest evidence that some widows served the church in an official capacity.³² The qualifications of the widow attest to the virtue of industry: “she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints’ feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way” (5:10). This list assumes the woman has an active role in the household. She has brought up children, which in the social context would mean overseeing their education. In her help for the afflicted, she has directed resources of the household toward those in need. The resources may have belonged to the woman herself or to her husband. In either case, the language reflects the conventional role of managing household resources.

The exhortation that believing women should assist widows (5:16) likewise assumes that women in the community control their own finances and advocates the industrious and loyal use of such. As I argued above, the use of those resources for the good of the family was a common cultural expectation. That the author does not take time

Eerdmans, 1982), 80-1; J. L. Houlden, *The Pastoral Epistles: I and II Timothy and Titus* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 80.

³² Many scholars argue that the use of the word “enrolled” in 5:9 indicates an order of widows. Collins, *Timothy*, 139; Tamez, *Struggles for Power*, 51. Johnson argues that the language refers to financial care for poor women. Johnson, *1 & 2 Timothy*, 273-75.

to justify this role for women suggests that it falls within the social expectations of his audience.³³

In order to make sense of the varied evidence the letter presents, scholars have most often seen the instructions that describe women's modesty as evidence of actual women's behavior—both inside and outside the author's community. For example, some scholars agree that women in the community serve as deacons and presbyters, but conclude, in light of 1 Tim 2:11–12, that “their teaching is to be restricted to the instruction of other women.”³⁴ Likewise, many argue that the author's instructions regarding women imply criticism of the actions of women among the opponents.³⁵ This

³³ Contra Bruce Winter, who sees the instruction for women's support of widows as a Christian innovation. Bruce W. Winter, "Providentia for the Widows of 1 Timothy 5:3-16," *TynBul* 39 (1988): 94. Cf. Collins, *Timothy*, 142. Although instructions to care for widow are not specifically addressed to women, in a culture in which some women moved into the role of *paterfamilias*, overseeing the welfare of the entire family, the care of widows would certainly be included in their expected duties.

³⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 290. Cf. Bassler, *1 Timothy*, 70, 72.

³⁵ Most interpreters read the language restricting women's activity as evidence of the opponents' behavior. See Bassler, *1 Timothy*, 23; Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 8, 70, 72, 122; Tamez, *Struggles for Power*, 8-9, 17, 54; Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 69, 77-8; Philip H. Towner, *The Goal of Our Instruction: The Structure of Theology and Ethics in the Pastoral Epistles* (JSOTSup 34; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 212, 216; Bruce W. Winter, *Roman*

reading understands the restrictions on women's speech within the community as an indicator that women outside engaged in deviant behavior. In both of these interpretations, the author's exhortations restricting women's speech are taken at face value and used to interpret the language suggesting women's leadership. By asserting that women should act modestly and marry, 1 Timothy enforces cultural norms that sharply curtail women's leadership.

My analysis of the cultural context suggests another possibility. First, the attribution of modesty does not describe the degree to which a woman undertook public action, but instead identifies her as a virtuous woman. First Timothy's instructions about speech repeat conventions for women's modesty. Modesty is a virtue that can be used to praise or blame.³⁶ Women who play active civic roles and give large benefactions are frequently hailed as modest. Women who are criticized are immodest. Because this is conventional, the presence of these instructions may underscore that there is disagreement with the opponents, but cannot be used to describe women's actual behavior.³⁷ Nor should the critic be read to deny public roles to all women, for "modest"

Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), ch. 6, 133.

³⁶ Many scholars recognize other ways that 1 Timothy's language reflects cultural conventions for slander of one's opponents. Bassler, *1 Timothy*, 25, 60; Tamez, *Struggles for Power*, 5-7; Towner, *Timothy*, 71; Towner, *Goal of Our Instruction*, 211.

³⁷ For an excellent discussion of the cultural conventions, see Jennifer Wright Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), ch. 1. Luke Johnson reads the language of 1 Tim 5

women undertook similar kinds of roles with approval. Such prohibitions did not function as absolute restrictions on women's roles, but reinforced cultural norms of modesty.

Secondly, marriage did not confine a woman to a domestic or invisible role.³⁸ All women were constrained to some extent by norms of modesty. Yet married, unmarried, and widowed women undertook a variety of civic roles and exerted political influence. A woman's marital status can be difficult to discern in inscriptions, suggesting that it was not a primary qualification for the actions that are praised. The shared values of industry and loyalty led many women to undertake leadership roles.

Read in this way, the language of 1 Timothy reflects the paradox of the larger culture. Women are understood to be inferior to men, yet are also expected to take on roles in which they exercise considerable authority. Women can be criticized by stereotyping them: they stray from the ideals of modesty and loyalty to the household. Men are ideally in control of their household, and the good behavior of everyone is a reflection of their leadership. At the same time, the assumption is that women manage households, assist those in need, and serve in official capacities as deacons and widows.

Put another way, leadership of women is not any more a problem in 1 Timothy's community than in the culture at large. Women who are wealthy and independent are

rhetorically as an attempt to sexualize and discredit women's behavior. Johnson, *1 & 2 Timothy*, 205.

³⁸ A number of scholars argue that virginity or widowhood set women free from the restrictions of marriage. See Bassler, *1 Timothy*, 94; Tamez, *Struggles for Power*, 65. However, see also the argument of Cooper: Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 14.

expected to use their wealth to benefit their family and community. Those who disagree with such women are likely to criticize them by accusing them of stepping outside the boundaries of modesty and virtue. But this criticism, including the outright prohibitions of behavior unbecoming to women, exists alongside evidence that women not only pursued such roles, but did so with official sanction.

Thecla as a reflection of Greco-Roman culture

Turning now to *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, scholars largely agree that this work represents the transformation of Thecla from home-bound fiancée to active, autonomous woman.³⁹ The story begins with the virgin Thecla inside her family's house, glued to the window to hear Paul's message of self-control. Her blossoming faith leads her to reject her betrothed, leave the house in pursuit of Paul, and eventually to travel and proclaim

³⁹ Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, 89-90; Virginia Burrus, "Chastity As Autonomy: Women in the Stories of the Apocryphal Acts," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Apostles* (ed. Dennis Ronald MacDonald; Semeia 38; Decatur, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1986), 102, 111; Carolyn L. Connor, *Women of Byzantium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 1-12; Sheila E. McGinn, "The Acts of Thecla," in *Searching the Scriptures* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; 2; New York: Crossroad, 1994), 811, 813; Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age," in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (ed. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 74-5; Johannes N. Vorster, "Construction of Culture through the Construction of Person: The Construction of Thecla in the *Acts of Thecla*," in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 110-11.

the word of God herself. Thecla's story is interpreted as a rejection of social norms constricting women's action and an embrace of women's leadership and authority.

There are problems with the way each side of this polarity is constructed. First, Thecla's confinement to the home is not simply a starting point from which Thecla escapes. Her location makes a positive contribution to the development of her character as a woman of virtue. She does not go out to hear Paul preach, but "sat at a near-by window and listened night and day" (7).⁴⁰ Thecla's cloistered position underscores the metaphorical nature of her devotion: her desire is "to be worthy herself to stand in Paul's presence and hear the word of Christ" (7). It also characterizes Thecla with traditional feminine virtues. At this point of the story, Thecla may be "bewitched" by Paul.⁴¹ Yet her status as a "virgin" (7) is unquestioned. She has never even seen Paul. Thus, the author employs conventional associations of women and the home to introduce Thecla in a way that asserts her virtue.

⁴⁰ Translations of Thecla are by Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make it Into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). For the Greek text, see Ricardus Adelbertus Lipsius, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1959), 1:235-272.

⁴¹ Theocleia says to Thamyris, "I am amazed at how the virgin's sense of modesty can be so badly disturbed" (8). Thecla's devotion to Paul suggests immodesty to her accusers. Yet from the view of the omniscient narrator, Thecla's "passion" for Paul is chaste.

Second, Thecla's transformation is not a straightforward rejection of cultural norms.⁴² Many scholars tie Thecla's rejection of marriage to her autonomous movement and action. This conclusion is problematic. The work as a whole does not reject marriage altogether, but advocates self-control. Thecla's rejection of her fiancé, Thamyris, initiates the plot of the work, and her resulting punishment by the local authorities suggests that renunciation of marriage is central to the message of the book. Paul's teaching is heard by Thecla as the "word of the virgin life" (7) and is summarized by Demas and Hermogenes in this way: "Otherwise there is no resurrection for you, unless you remain chaste and do not defile the flesh, but keep it pure" (11). These aspects of the work contribute to a view of *Thecla* as denouncing marriage.

Yet many elements of the work leave open the possibility of marriage. Paul's words include teachings that apply to marriage. Only the final beatitude, "Blessed are the bodies of virgins..." (6) is exclusive to unmarried people. Marriage is explicitly indicated in the fifth saying, "Blessed are those who have wives as if they did not have them, for they will be the heirs of God" (5). Likewise, the third saying, "Blessed are those who are self-controlled, for God will speak to them," could indicate continence regardless of one's marital state. The language of the beatitudes represents ideal Christian virtues to which Paul exhorts his hearer. In the same way that the canonical Paul states a clear preference for virginity while making room for sex within marriage (1 Cor 7:8–9), readers of the beatitudes may also have encountered this language as idealizing the

⁴² Cf. Peter W. Dunn, "Women's Liberation, *The Acts of Paul*, and Other Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," 4 (1993): 251.

virginal state but not excluding other options from within the realm of what is acceptably Christian.⁴³

Paul's message is thus more open than the summary given by Demas and Hermogenes, quoted above. Demas and Hermogenes are introduced as suspicious characters, and the context in which they restate Paul's teaching confirms this. Thamyris first promises them a reward (11) for informing them about Paul. He later provides them a "lavish dinner with ample wine, a great abundance, and a splendid spread" (13). Against the background in which self-control is the preeminent virtue, Demas and Hermogenes cannot be expected to present Paul's message accurately. If they have understood it, they are motivated by other forces to present Paul's words in a negative light. Even Theocleia has a clearer understanding of Paul's words. She paraphrases: "Fear one single God only, and live chastely" (9).

Onesiphorus and his unnamed wife are examples of the married faithful. Onesiphorus, who is married with children (2, 23), is portrayed as perceptive and virtuous when he immediately recognizes Demas and Hermogenes as suspect characters (4). When Paul leaves Iconium, Onesiphorus and his wife and children go, too, fasting along with Paul: "Onesiphorus had left the things of the world and followed Paul with all his house" (23). Clearly, marriage does not preclude Onesiphorus from following Paul. Paul later sends Onesiphorus and his family home (6), but there is nothing to suggest that this

⁴³ The early reception of *Thecla* bears this out. Devotion to Thecla was widespread among ancient Christians, whether married or not. See Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 61-2, 192.

re-domestication of the family renders them less serious in their devotion. In fact, Thecla also returns to his house at the close of the narrative (42).

The inferiority of women and the expectation of women's loyalty to their families also remain intact in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. As many scholars have noted, Thecla is never free from male authority or influence.⁴⁴ In addition, her adoption of male dress enacts the philosophical convention in which becoming virtuous means becoming manly.⁴⁵ Less noticed, Thecla also retains elements of devotion to her mother. Although

⁴⁴ She abandons her initial agreement to marry Thamyris, yet is unswerving in her devotion to her metaphorical husband, Paul. When brought to the judgment seat and asked why she will not marry Thamyris, she simply stands gazing at Paul (20). As preparations are made to burn her at the stake, her main concern is to catch a glimpse of Paul in the theatre (21). She pursues him relentlessly upon her release (23–24, 40). See also Ross S. Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity," *Signs* 6 (1980): 304.

⁴⁵ Following her first trial and deliverance, Thecla declares to Paul, "I will cut my hair short and follow you wherever you go" (25). Yet Paul puts her off, asserting that she may yet change her mind about the virgin life. Following the second contest, Thecla ascertains Paul's whereabouts in Myra. "So she took young men and maidservants and girded herself, and sewed her mantle into a cloak after the fashion of men, and went off to Myra" (40). Thecla's transformation thus assumes the priority of masculinity. See Willi Braun, "Physiotherapy of Femininity in the *Acts of Thecla*," in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honor of Peter Richardson* (ed. Stephen G. Wilson and Michel Desjardins; Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 213–222; Vorster, "Construction of Culture," 111.

the intervening pages take Thecla far from the traditional role of a daughter, at the end of the story there is a brief but important scene in which Thecla returns to her mother. She offers her filial piety as a sign of the faithfulness of God. “And she found Thamyris dead, but her mother still alive; and calling her mother to her she said to her: ‘Theocleia my mother, can you believe that the Lord lives in heaven? For whether you desire money, the Lord will give it to you through me; or your child, see, I stand before you’” (43). Thecla offers her mother money⁴⁶ and the return of the child whose loss Theocleia had grieved (10). The daughter’s return indicates that she has not simply broken from her family, and characterizes her as loyal to her mother. Thecla’s autonomy is somewhat tempered by these details.

Moreover, if Thecla’s conviction and authority were culturally subversive, we would not expect to find other, domesticated women, acting in similar ways. Yet Theocleia and Tryphaena also exert authority publicly. First, Thecla’s mother, Theocleia, is the head of her household. We hear of no husband, and given the representation of Thecla as a pious child, we would expect to hear of her devotion to her father, were he living. Her fiancé, Thamyris calls himself the “leading man of the city” [πρῶτος τῆς πόλεως] (11), and Thecla also identifies herself as the “leading woman of the Iconians” [Ἰκονιέων εἰμὶ πρώτη] (26). Both of these statements are a reflection of Theocleia’s position as well. She is a person of status, able to engage her daughter to the leading man

⁴⁶ Probably that which she has received from Tryphaena (41). The money may represent an offer to restore some of the financial loss inherent in Thecla’s rejection of Thamyris, a “leading citizen of the city” (11).

of the city.⁴⁷ Her response to Thecla's decision not to marry shows the responsibility she undertakes for maintaining the honor of the family. She demands her daughter's death, a harsh punishment indeed, but clearly preferable to the dishonor Theocleia and her household would experience otherwise.⁴⁸

Theocleia's actions also display her civic influence. She alters the course of events by demanding a negative verdict against her daughter: "Burn the lawless one!" (20). The governor complies with her wishes: "The governor was in great agony over the case. He had Paul flogged and cast out of the city; but he ordered Thecla to be burned at the stake" (21). The governor is not incidental to the story, but it is Theocleia who announces the verdict. Theocleia speaks publicly in the courtroom and alters the course of events.

In the latter part of Thecla's story, Queen Tryphaena also exerts public influence.⁴⁹ Unlike Theocleia, the narrative portrays Tryphaena in a positive light. Tryphaena bears the title, *basilissa*, one of many titles found on inscriptions that indicates a role that is at once honorary and civic. Tryphaena does not alter the verdict against Thecla, but she does intervene in important ways. She offers Thecla protection from the

⁴⁷ Contra Vorster, who argues that widows lost their status. Vorster, "Construction of Culture," 108-109. Cf. Magda Misset-van de Weg, "Answers to the Plights of an Ascetic Woman Named Thecla," in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 151.

⁴⁸ A similar reading is given by Misset-van de Weg, "Answers," 150-51.

⁴⁹ Cf. Magda Misset-van de Weg, "A Wealthy Woman Named Tryphaena: Patroness of Thecla of Iconium," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 28-30.

soldiers and from Alexander, both of whom pose a threat to Thecla's virginity (30, 31, 33). And Thecla is ultimately freed when the games are stopped because of Tryphaena's response. When Tryphaena is reported dead, "The governor stopped the festivities and the entire city was terrified" (36). Alexander expresses concern about Caesar's response (36). Tryphaena's social influence stops the proceedings and leads to Thecla's survival and freedom.⁵⁰

Tryphaena and Theocleia fit the picture of Greco-Roman women who acted publicly and wielded considerable authority within their local spheres of influence. Thecla's journey to preach the word of God may represent a different kind of active engagement than that of the other women characters, but there are also many similarities. All three women influence others, including powerful people in their arena. All three bring about certain changes they desire. And all three require the authorization of men to complete these tasks.⁵¹

Read in this way, *Thecla* also reflects the paradox of women in the Roman world. The author draws on conventional virtues of modesty and loyalty to portray Thecla in a favorable light. Her story is meant to be remarkable, but not because she exerts authority in a way that was culturally unknown for women. Like the other women in her story,

⁵⁰ Cf. Misset-van de Weg, "Answers," 160-62.

⁵¹ Theocleia and Tryphaena exert power by influencing male officials. Thecla's pursuit of Paul and his authorization of Thecla's ministry (41) send an important message about her subordination to the apostle. The governor of Antioch ultimately validates Thecla as well. He issues an edict reading, "I release to you Thecla, the pious slave of God" (38). See also Virginia Burrus, "Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity," *JFSR* 10, no. 1 (1994): 47-8.

Thecla plays a public role that lies within the boundaries of acceptable female behavior. She is an example for Christian readers because her public acts stem from her devotion to “the word of God concerning self-control and the resurrection” (5).

Conclusion

In conclusion, part of the reason why *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* and 1 Timothy have appeared to us as opposite perspectives comes from our tendency to imagine ancient culture as a seamless web of expectations for female behavior. The assumption has been that patriarchal ideals form a rigid system that consigns women to domestic anonymity, and women who do not submit represent a rejection of those cultural norms.⁵² However, if the cultural codes were more malleable, as I think they were, both 1 Timothy and

⁵² For such assertions regarding 1 Timothy, see Tamez, *Struggles for Power*, 28. For similar approaches to *Thecla*, see Ann Graham Brock, "Political Authority and Cultural Accommodation: Social Diversity in the *Acts of Paul* and the *Acts of Peter*," in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (ed. François Bovon, Ann Graham Brock, and Christopher R. Matthews; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 145-69; Kraemer, "Conversion," 301-306; Magda Misset-van de Weg, "Magic, Miracle, and Miracle Workers in the *Acts of Thecla*," in *Women and Miracle Stories* (ed. Anne-Marie Korte; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 51; S. Nolan, "Narrative as a Strategic Resource for Resistance: Reading the *Acts of Thecla* for Its Political Purposes," in *Narrativity in Biblical and Related Texts* (ed. G. J. Brooke and J.-D. Kaestli; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 236-37; Gail P. C. Streete, "The 'Divine Woman'? Propaganda and the Power of Celibacy in the New Testament Apocrypha," *ATR* 70 (1988): 209; Vorster, "Construction of Culture," 465.

Thecla may be seen to embrace conventional virtues for women. Both works affirm the importance of modesty and self-control. By definition, a woman who is honorable exhibits these virtues. At the same time, both works are not only aware of public leadership by women, but also explicitly sanction such roles.

My argument about these texts has implications for a number of overlapping conversations within New Testament studies. Some scholars may be interested in how this conversation relates to the dating of 1 Timothy and its relationship to the Pauline epistles, or in the development of the Pauline tradition. Others may be interested in the implications for appropriating the message of 1 Timothy for today, considering the role this text has played in discussions of women's ordination. Still others may see a potential in reading other early Christian texts in light of this understanding of ancient views of women. The understanding of 1 Timothy and *Thecla* as opposite perspectives reflects a larger trend in the way scholars have described the history of women in the early church, and this paper begins to call that history into question. Yet each of these topics lies outside the scope of this argument. The task of the article has been to complicate the picture of ancient women in a way that may help readers to reflect differently on these texts and the questions they raise. I hope that readers may begin to imagine ancient Christians as participants in a complex system of social norms that both limited and assumed women's influence in the public sphere.