

THE RELIGIOUS LIVES OF WOMEN IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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INTRODUCTION

When discussing the religious lives of women in the early church it is important to begin with two important clarifications. First, our terminology is misleading. In order to be clear about the gradual birth of Christianity and distinction from Judaism, some scholars are hesitant to use the term "early Christians" at all for the first few centuries—preferring such language as the "Jesus movement" or "Christ-followers." Even "early church" has seemed to some to conjure images of ecclesiastical structures that are foreign to the early period—despite the fact that "church" is the English translation of *ekklēsia*, a term that the earliest believers used to describe themselves and that, in simplest terms, means "assembly." Similarly, the use of the term "Jew" for the worshipers of the God of Israel of this era has come under increasing scrutiny because of the potentially misleading associations with later traditions and because it fails to capture connotations of ethnicity (some now prefer "Judean" for the period before the second century CE). For the sake of clarity and simplicity, however, I will continue to use the terms "early Christian"/"early church member," "Jew," and "pagan" (for the majority inhabitants of the Roman world who were not members of early Christian or Jewish groups). But we must remember the existence of overlapping traditions and identities.

Secondly, it is crucial to understand the distinction between the modern understanding of religion and the ancient perspective: Ancient people did not distinguish between religious activities and other aspects of their existence in the same way that modern people in a secular

society do. In particular, there was significant overlap between what we view as religion, politics, economics, and family life. For example, when the first-century-CE author Josephus sought to defend the civility and respectability of the Jewish population in the Roman Empire, he linked the wider political sphere with Jewish worship of God and family life. He identified marriage between Jews under the law as central to Jewish identity bound up with concepts of God and the temple (*Against Apion* 2.190–203). For Josephus, the behavior of women and other members of the household could serve as a major indicator of *eusebeia*, a Greek term that is often translated simply as "piety," but actually refers to the broad range of interrelated religious, familial, and political duties that were viewed as civic obligations (*Against Apion* 2.181). It was a term that was employed by pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Roman world to communicate community expectations and ideals.

This ancient perspective will help us to understand what was at stake for women who offered their allegiance to emerging early church groups without the support of their husbands or male guardians. Loyalty to the gods, the state, and the heads of households was firmly connected. Thus, the second-century-CE author Plutarch stressed that fidelity to one's husband meant fidelity to his gods, and a wife was to shut the door tight on strange rituals and superstitions (Plutarch, *Moralia*, Advice to the Bride and Groom, 140 D). Plutarch's discourse calls to mind Pliny the Younger's reference to the early Christians at the beginning of the second century as an illicit

new movement (*superstitio*; Pliny, *Letters* 10.96). From an ancient (elite male) perspective, a wife who displayed disloyalty of this kind placed the entire household at risk, including its economic welfare. In legal terms, the authority of the male head of the household (*paterfamilias*) was conceived of largely in terms of property ownership; his wife, children, and slaves were grouped together with goods as things under his legal control (*patria potestas*).

An appreciation of the interrelationship between what we would understand as religious activities and other aspects of existence can also help us to appreciate the depth of women's contributions to early church groups. For example, although it has been widely recognized only within the past few decades, Phoebe's leadership (Rom. 16:1–2) includes a clear economic component. She is called *prostatis*, sometimes simply translated as "helper," but more accurately translated as "benefactor" (NRSV) or "patron." Paul's description of Phoebe reveals the influence of a fundamental pattern of interaction in the Roman world: social structures guide the dealings of superior (patron) and subordinate (client), and loyalty to one's uppers is rewarded by social and material benefits of various kinds. Women of means acted as patrons throughout the Roman world for associations of various kinds (see below).

Women's Allegiance to House Churches

The New Testament explicitly names women as leaders of house churches. The most explicit reference to a woman's independent leadership of a house church is to Nympha, who hosts an *ekklēsia* in her house (Col. 4:15). Later copyists were so uncomfortable about a woman head of a house church that they sometimes "masculinized" the text through a simple scribal alteration to read Nymphas (a man). Acts also suggests that the house of Mary (Acts 12:12–17) and the house of Lydia (Acts 16:14–15, 40) served as bases for the movement. At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch sent greetings to the house of Tavia in Smyrna (Ign. *Smyrn.* 13.2). In the second-century apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Tryphaena is presented as a household head offering assistance to Thecla. The independent service of a woman of means is also implied by the presentation of Grapte in the Shepherd of Hermas (Herm. Vis. 2.4.3); she appears to be

responsible for a center (a house church?) of instruction for widows and orphans. Probably the most widely attested influential woman in Paul's letters, Prisca (her ministry is lauded not only by Paul, but also in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles), leads a house church along with her husband. Paul's letters indicate that Prisca and Aquila were hosts to house churches in Ephesus and Rome (1 Cor. 16:19 and Rom. 16:3–5), and evidence from Acts (Acts 18:2–3; 18:18–9:1; she is called Priscilla) indicates that this was the case also in Corinth.

What would leadership/hosting of a "house church" actually mean? There are many unanswered questions. Before the end of the second century CE, when houses began to be remodelled into buildings specifically for worship, living space was combined with church meeting space, but we do not know what kind of housing was used. There are hints in the sources, however, of various arrangements. Acts sometimes refers to upper rooms, which probably indicates communities meeting in rooms above shops—very simple apartment-type accommodation comprised of one or more rooms (Acts 9:37; cf. Acts 1:13; 20:7–12). First Corinthians 1:11 speaks of a report of divisions in the Corinth made by "Chloe's people." Rather than describing the church meeting in the house of Chloe, as in the case of Nympha (Col. 4:15), the reference is to the members of Chloe's household, perhaps indicating that Chloe's people gather in simple and fairly cramped accommodation.

Some first Christians in all likelihood met in apartment houses (*insulae*) as well as in independent house structures of various proportions. Others probably met in a larger peristyled *domus* (a house building featuring a colonnade). Spacious housing was not reserved for elite members of society, for archaeological evidence from Pompeii has uncovered the spacious houses of people of modest social status, even former slaves, who nevertheless had accumulated significant wealth. The mother of John Mark has a house large enough to host a good number of the believing community (Acts 12:12; cf. Acts 14:16). While the housing available to Prisca (and Aquila) as house-church hosts remains uncertain, the transient nature of their leadership associated with the life of migrant craftspeople is unmistakable. Although it is not generally recognized, one of Prisca's main ministerial talents may have been in moving and setting up house and in making

the necessary contacts in advance to allow new communities to grow and thrive.

The association of house-church leadership and trade can also be seen in the description of Lydia from Thyatira, the God-fearer (a Gentile worshiper of the God of Israel), who deals in (probably dyes and sells) purple cloth (Acts 16:11–15, 40). Commentators debate many things about Lydia, ranging from her social status to her very existence (see below). But it seems clear that Luke presents her house as near a river because of the source of water required for her work and perhaps because such a "smelly" trade is best located on the outskirts of the city. With respect to the religious lives of women, the representation of Lydia is intriguing because of the merging of various spaces and overlapping aspects of identity associated with Gentiles, Jews, and early church allegiance. Her house is clearly a place of commerce and becomes a place of church meeting.

But her initial encounter with Paul is at another sacred space, a gathering of women near the riverside outside of Philippi, which Luke describes as occurring at a "place of prayer" (the term *proseuchē* sometimes means synagogue, but because Luke usually employs *synagōgē* for synagogue, "place of prayer" is often preferred [NRSV]). Some have seen a parallel here between Luke's description and Euripides' *Bacchae*, a well-known play that told the tale of the worship of Dionysos by old and young women known as "maenads" traveling into the wilderness to participate in ecstatic rites and sacrifices. Ancient literature displays various opinions of the maenads, but Luke may be hoping to dispel any suspicion about early Christian behavior by casting Lydia as a respectable figure.

In a world fearful of the conversion of women to new movements, it is debatable whether Lydia truly represents a model respectable matron. Yet the presentation of Lydia as the owner of a house with an extended household, probably composed of slaves, that is, converted along with her, does fit with broader evidence. Women were property owners in the Roman world, and in legal documents such women could even bear the title of *paterfamilias*, the term usually reserved for male household heads. Elite widows, in particular, often wielded considerable power. But wives also had significant responsibilities in household management, including supervising household staff,

managing the storerooms, caring for guests, overseeing the education of children, and exerting much informal influence, including in the selection of matches for children.

As Plutarch's letter to his wife upon the death of their two-year-old daughter illustrates, such responsibilities only increased when husbands were away; Plutarch expresses his confidence that his wife can manage the funerary and household affairs in his absence (Plutarch, *A Consolation to his Wife* 2). Such evidence should make us cautious about drawing conclusions concerning the unique leadership opportunities offered to women leaders of house churches. At the same time, cultural patterns suggest that the merging of household space with *ekklēsia* space meant that household leadership included leadership in religious activities such as teaching and rituals. In the Roman world, it was normal procedure for the person in whose house a group met to preside, select the meal, and organize the entertainment to follow, which could include a visiting philosopher or wisdom figure. It is reasonable to conclude that women such as Lydia in Philippi and Phoebe in Cenchreae were presiding in their homes as they entertained Paul and his fellow workers.

By the New Testament era, married women seemed to have dined together with men (the separation of women seems to have continued in some Eastern regions). Although the evidence is not always conclusive and uncertainties remain about whether the first believers sat or reclined during meals (including the Lord's Supper), some Roman women were reclining on couches next to their husbands by this time; the presence of women leaders of house churches suggests that they would have adopted the same positions as men. But the dining practices of women were bound to attract scrutiny, as it continued to be an area of potential controversy if suspicions arose. Artistic depictions intent on communicating women's virtue and sexual propriety have them seated next to reclining men as opposed to reclining next to them.

Much also remains unknown about how a Jewish or pagan woman would have interpreted a call for exclusive commitment to Christ. Household rites and observances related to family life are especially interesting to consider. For example, the New Testament is silent on the matter of whether Jewish women continued to follow menstrual purity regulations (see Lev.

15:19–24) in church groups, which is striking, given the explicit interest in other purity issues related to food laws and the association with Gentiles. Church members were to shun the worship of idols, but the homes of Roman Gentiles contained small shrines known as *larariums*, where offerings were made to the *Lares* (household deities), to Vesta (goddess of the hearth), and to the *genius* (the ancestor/guardian spirit of the head of the family). We do not have much information, but the matron apparently had special responsibilities of oversight for the hearth and to prepare it for festivals; her responsibilities over the storerooms meant that she honored the *Panates*, the deities who watched over it (Ovid, *Fasti* 2.645–54). Family life incorporated various aspects of domestic cult. On the eve of her wedding a young woman (typically girls married between twelve and eighteen) sacrificed her dolls and toys to the household gods or to Venus. It is impossible to know whether such practices came to an end in house churches or what might have replaced them.

Church Space as Family Space

Family life in the early Christian era extended far beyond relations of kinship (i.e., relations of marriage, parenting, and siblingship). The inclusion of slaves in household life, and ongoing association of former slaves, clients, and dependent workers means that we must think in much broader terms than the modern nuclear family based largely on kinship relations. We can sense this broader understanding when we read the household codes found in the New Testament and some early church documents (e.g., Col. 3:18–4:1; Eph. 5:21–6:9) that address not only the marital and parental relationships, but also the slave-master relationship. These codes are widely recognized by scholars as reflecting many conventional features of ancient discussions of household management going back to the time of Aristotle (see *Politics* 1.1253b–1260b26) that often discuss the same three pairs of relationships. Like these ancient discussions, the early church household codes reinforce the patriarchal authority of the male head of the household.

But with respect to the religious lives of women, the codes present mixed and challenging evidence. First, they remind us that early church members were sometimes addressed during assembly gatherings (epistles were

read aloud; Col. 4:16) directly as wives, children, and slaves (i.e., the texts depart from the usual practice of addressing male heads who are subsequently to guide their subordinates). Secondly, they inform us that although marriage was rejected by some adherents to early Christianity (see further below), married couples are clearly given an important place in the community, and in Ephesians marriage is given some type of spiritual significance in communicating faithfulness and commitment. Thirdly, the reference to wives who have joined the group without their husbands in the household code material of 1 Peter (1 Pet. 3:1–2; cf. 1 Pet. 2:18–3:7) is enormously significant, for it offers an indirect indication that some women made independent choices to join the group; they are enjoined to obey their nonbelieving husbands in the hope of winning them over by their model behavior, even though the decision to join the group without their husbands was insubordinate in its own right.

This evidence from 1 Peter offers an example of how early church groups challenged traditional family structures to some degree. Moreover, the use of sibling terminology (e.g., brothers and sisters "in Christ") and various proclamations of unity (e.g., Gal. 3:28) point to the joining of people together despite barriers of gender and social status. At the same time, patriarchal and oppressive institutions are not eradicated in the New Testament. Moreover, women like Lydia and Phoebe almost certainly owned slaves. In addition, the few slave women we hear about appear to be marginalized in various ways.

The story of Lydia's conversion in Acts is followed immediately by Paul's encounter with a slave girl who has a spirit of divination and, consequently, is a source of revenue for her owners. Paul expels the spirit from the girl, who seems to annoy him (while possessed, she announces over and over that Paul and his entourage are slaves of the Most High), which renders her useless in the eyes of her owners. She is not explicitly welcomed by Paul, and we do not know what Luke intends us to think about her fate (Acts 16:16–19). Similarly, the slave doorkeeper Rhoda at the house of the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12–16) is annoyingly insistent in announcing the miraculous appearance of Peter (the first reaction is that she is out of her mind). In Acts the presentation of female slaves seems to be in keeping

with ancient stereotypes and social structures, but at the same time perhaps Luke—with some ambivalence—is revealing that such women were members of church groups and some were even prophets and bearers of important news (cf. Pliny's reference to women slaves discussed below).

It is not easy to determine whether the house-church base of earliest Christianity enhanced opportunities for women's involvement or, alternatively, contained women's behavior in various ways. Probably both phenomena were occurring at the same time. Readers are often struck by the apparent contradiction between Paul's recognition of women prophets in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 and his attempt to exert control over their ritual roles. This may well have been related to the merging of family space with the ritual space of the gathering of the *ekklesia*. Despite the familial atmosphere of the house church, in a few places Paul seems to distinguish between the space of assembly and the space of the household (e.g., the space where women can ask their husbands questions [1 Cor. 14:32–34; cf. 1 Cor. 11:22]). In his response to women's removing their head coverings during worship and prophecy (1 Cor. 11:12–16), Paul establishes a hierarchy: God, Christ, Corinthian men, women; order in the assembly is to reflect a cosmic order rooted in Genesis (see Økland; cf. 1 Tim. 2:8–15). As has been frequently pointed out, however, Paul's views may well be at odds with aspirations and faith commitments of the women themselves.

When we recall the influence of particular women in early Christian circles, we are reminded that the relationship between the prescriptive instructions of male authors and the religious lives of the women was not straightforward. We might consider, for example, the public proclamation of Paul's letter in Nympha's house (Col. 4:16). We need to imagine the diverse membership of ancient households being greeted by Nympha, probably a widow and property owner well known in the neighborhood. Believing husbands and wives accompanied by their children and slaves who cared for all the children of the household would come to assembly, but also wives, children, and slaves who were part of a household ruled by a pagan man. Sometimes slave families would arrive with their tenuous futures ahead of them, for neither their "marriages" nor progeny were recognized or protected by law. Perhaps

an adolescent girl would make her preference known to remain unmarried, finding encouragement and support from Nympha herself or other widows.

The complexities of family life inevitably permeated the house-church atmosphere. We are almost certainly on the right track in imagining a bustling atmosphere of church meeting that included infants and toddlers, youths, as well as adults, slave and free. Yet all subordinate members of households would be instructed to submit to the *paterfamilias* "in the Lord" (Col. 3:18–4:1), while being hosted by an influential woman. We do not know whether Nympha would think that the call for wives to be subject to their husbands would have any bearing on her circumstances at all, and we might imagine that all women had heard this type of traditional teaching before, and it potentially had little immediate effect on their lives. But proclaimed aloud in the space of church meeting, this type of discourse did imbue hierarchical household order with divine sanction. The community is the faithful bride who must obey her heavenly groom, to adopt the perspective of Ephesians (Eph. 5:22–33).

Choice, Conversion, and Risk

In the past twenty years, scholars have become increasingly cautious about drawing conclusions about the real lives of women based upon the textual representations of women in early Christian literature. This is especially the case when male authors engage in detailed description of women's behavior, often with a broader agenda in mind, such as the need to engage in apology (e.g., Justin's description in his *Second Apology* of the Roman matron who divorces her immoral pagan husband) or in novelistic accounts such as the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*. Because Luke displays an interest in the conversion of the heads of households, followed by the remainder of the household (e.g., Acts 10:1–11:18), and in winning the allegiance of leading women (Acts 17:1–34), the figure of Lydia has been carefully examined, with some scholars viewing her as a construct intended to buttress the reputation of emerging Christianity rather than a real historical woman (yet, as noted above, there are many aspects of the presentation of Lydia that are in keeping with what is known about women as property owners and traders). Perhaps no texts have been subject to

more careful scrutiny than those dealing with the conversion of women.

But if the representations of the conversion of women are read in relation to more indirect evidence, we may find ourselves closer to the real experience of women. Particularly telling is the persistent thread of evidence suggesting that wives (and slaves) joined the community without (and presumably often without the permission of) the male head of the household (1 Cor. 7:12–16; 1 Pet. 3:1; 1 Tim. 6:1–2). These New Testament texts hint at the tension and complication that is explored in graphic and violent detail by the authors of the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*. In fact, contrary to what one might expect, outside of Acts the reference to whole families offering their allegiance to early church groups is rare (cf. 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15), suggesting more individualized conversions often took place. By the time Tertullian composed his treatise between 200 and 206 CE, the difficulties associated with mixed marriage were well known. Seeking to capture the pagan husband's perspective, he also provides rare insights into the duties of a Christian wife, which include visiting imprisoned martyrs and various acts of service such as extending hospitality to traveling Christians—all of which become next to impossible if her husband is a non-Christian. According to Tertullian, one should understand a pagan's husband's reluctance to allow his wife to attend the Lord's Supper when it has such a bad reputation (Tertullian, *To His Wife* 2.4)!

The conversion of independent women presented both advantages and problems to early Christian groups. Publicly visible women could act as patrons and could enhance the reputation of the group, but the conversion of wives to new religious groups also increased the suspicion surrounding the group. Jewish evidence from this era can help us understand both the complex reaction to women and the initiative of the women themselves. While it is highly stylized and subject to doubt with respect to historical reliability, Philo's description of the Therapeutrides, the female members of the sect outside of Alexandria known as the Therapeutics, is clearly written in a manner to bolster the group's identity with a presentation of celibate, intellectual women; he is extremely careful to highlight their purity and virtue (*On the Contemplative Life*).

In addition, recent research on the Dead Sea Scrolls challenges the assumption that the

Essenes were predominantly celibate men; the possibility of women joining the group independently—not primarily as a result of familial or spousal intervention—cannot be ruled out. The women followers of Jesus also offer evidence of women making independent choices, some perhaps with the blessing of husbands or other male relatives such as in the case of Joanna, wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and others as single women (widowed, divorced, or unmarried) such as Mary Magdalene or Susanna, the other women singled out by Luke (8:1–3) as accompanying Jesus.

Offices, Leadership, and Ministerial Activities

The issue of choice and risk is closely linked to women's participation in ministerial activities and leadership roles. Two areas of general scholarly consensus have emerged in the last few decades. First, research has demonstrated that as in the case of the woman leader of a synagogue (*archisynagogissa*) or women priestesses or officeholders in pagan practices, we cannot assume that women who are given leadership titles, such as "apostle" (*apostolos*, Junia, Rom. 16:7) or "deacon" (*diakonos*, Phoebe, Rom. 16:1), are simply being given honorific titles with no true leadership responsibilities. Nor can we assume that they bore these titles only because they are married to male leaders. Without evidence to the contrary, we need to assume that their roles were comparable to male counterparts.

Secondly, perhaps more than any other topic, research in this area calls us to situate the women of the early church within the broader framework of the Roman world. Certain texts, especially from the early period, indicate that women in early Christianity had a good measure of social freedom, but this phenomenon reflects the greater social freedom and public visibility that was happening already in several places in the empire in the first century CE. In many respects, early church women were continuing in the roles they had as pagan and Jewish women before they entered believing communities, and we must guard against anachronistic arguments about their acquiring a greater degree of "liberation" than was found in other groups.

Ministerial activities are often related to life choices (albeit the extent to which women had

control over their own lives depended greatly upon their personal circumstances). Most obviously from the very earliest era it is clear that some women were remaining unmarried. Paul speaks of the "virgins" in 1 Corinthians 7 in a manner that suggests that they are consecrated women, holy in body and spirit (1 Cor. 7:34). At various junctures in this text, Paul seeks to regulate their behavior; their lives are a potent sign of the kingdom, but the dangers of immorality mean that their relationships with male members of the community must be guarded carefully (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:36–37; some English translations adopt the term "fiancée" rather than the more literal rendering of the Greek text here, "virgin" [*parthenos*]). Such concern for purity and its relation to worship and religious practice was not invented by the early Christians. The vestal virgins of Rome and Philo's Therapeutrides (see above) are examples from the Roman world. More broadly, an interest in preserving the virginity of women is related to the traditional function of virgins and faithful brides to represent the shame (concern for reputation) of the house or community (see Eph. 5:25–27).

Ascetic women found a place very early on in early church communities, and they were not confined to young unmarried daughters, but included widows (at the beginning of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch speaks intriguingly of a seemingly mixed group of women of all ages with the phrase "virgins called widows" [Ign. *Smyrn.* 13.1]). Widows are singled out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:39–40, seem to be organized in groups with special ministerial roles by the period of the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 5:3–16) at the end of the first century CE, and clearly emerge as an office in the church literature of the second century. Much is unknown about their roles, but it seems to have included prayer on behalf of the community (Pol. *Phil.* 4.3: here widows are called God's altar), and they are often praised for their example as role models in domestic service and care for the needy. Scholars have pointed to texts concerning widows as offering evidence of women taking initiative in the choice to remain unmarried, and it is clear from the Pastoral Epistles onward that their influence is sometimes of great concern to male church authorities. Unmarried women are also associated with prophecy in early Christian literature, such as in the case of the unmarried prophesying daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9), the

widow-prophet Anna (Luke 2:36–38), and the two women leaders Priscilla and Maximilla of the New Prophecy (or Montanism), a revivalist movement that originated in the second century.

Ascetic evidence offers only part of the picture, however, for although it is rarely acknowledged, religious leadership was also tied to the role of mother in the early church. Mothers exercised significant informal authority in the Roman world and were praised for their influence in a variety of matters, including education. Ancient literature consistently praises mothers, often widows, for the education of sons, including setting an example in both morals and speech (Plutarch, *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* 1.6–7; Cicero, *Brutus* 211). Second Timothy's reference to Timothy as being formed in the faith by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Tim. 1:5) reflects conventional expectations, but the absence of a reference to male family figures could well also point to the phenomenon of women turning to the Lord without their husbands and serving as evangelists to their children.

Moreover, educational influences are not restricted to the mother-son relationship; in Titus 2:3–5, older women (mothers and grandmothers) are instructed to teach younger women to be good wives, mothers, and household managers, reflecting societal expectations concerning the ongoing education of girls as they made the transition to wife and mother. In the second-century writings of Polycarp, the education/discipline of children in general is presented as the special duty of wives (Pol. *Phil.* 4.2–6.1). Although their legacy is not recorded, we must remember too that slave women were frequently wet nurses and the first teachers of free and slave children alike and may well have been, therefore, evangelists of the very young.

It is clear that both married women and widows acted as patrons to various groups and associations in the Roman world. Junia Theodora of first-century Corinth has often been compared to Phoebe, the female church leader from Cenchreae, the seaport of Corinth (see above); not only is similar patronage terminology used to describe both women, but Junia Theodora is described as offering hospitality to traveling Lycians and facilitating their relationship with Roman authorities in a manner that resembles the endorsement of Phoebe in Romans 16:1–2. Phoebe is also named as a deacon (*diakonos*), a

term that later came to refer to the male office of the diaconate; yet in Paul's first-century context it seems to have carried connotations of mediation, connection, and representation (closely related to Phoebe's role as patron) and is in fact used flexibly by Paul to refer not only to local leaders, but also to his own ministry. Interpreters have usually taken the Roman governor of Bythynia's reference to the *ministrae*, the title given to the Christian slave women whom he had interrogated and tortured, as a reference to women deacons. This breaks down a straightforward correlation between women's leadership in early Christianity and the resources of women of means (Pliny, *Letter* 10.96). It also reminds us that the risks women took to join the group could lead to torture and martyrdom, a fact that was celebrated by various martyrologies such as the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, which recounts the deaths of both a matron and slave, both of whom are depicted as new mothers.

Probably emerging around the beginning of the fourth century, especially strongly in the East and overlapping with the office of widow to a certain degree, the institution of the deaconess (often *diakonissa* is used, but the use of *diakonos* continues) was seemingly restricted to women engaging in ministry among other women (there is no evidence of this in the case of Phoebe); these officeholders were devoted to service to the poor and sick, assisting at the baptisms of women, and the religious instructions of women according to such texts as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. But inscriptional and textual evidence indicates that women's leadership took different shapes in the different places; while women officeholders (e.g., women deacons and women presbyters) may have been absent or a rarity in some regions, in other areas they seem to have been widely accepted. The gnostic

material and apocryphal early Christian literature reveals very little about concrete historical setting because of either highly symbolic language or novelistic style; but the representation of Thecla of Iconium in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and some representations of Mary Magdalene in gnostic texts suggest that roles associated with male church offices, such as teaching, special insight to interpret the words of Jesus, performing baptisms, and itinerant preaching, can be imagined in some circles as taken up by early Christian women. This legacy has survived despite the strong efforts of church authors such as Tertullian, who wrote a response to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, in the hope that these tendencies would be snuffed out (*On Baptism* 17).

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