

# Introduction to the New Testament History and Literature

## Lecture 20: The "Anti-household" Paul: Thecla Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rfst-152/lecture-20>

### Overview

*The Acts of Paul and Thecla* has a narrative quite similar to those in ancient Greco-Roman novels: Thecla becomes enamored of Paul and they share a number of adventures. However, the Acts redirects eroticism towards a belief in a gospel of purity and asceticism. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* present an ascetic, anti-marriage, anti-family message that would break the cycle of sex, birth, death, and decay that was so obvious in the ancient world. Given that Thecla emerges from the story as the true hero (and not Paul), is it possible to read the story as a feminist one?

### 1. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* in Its Literary Context

[1] *Professor Dale Martin*: This topic today is really fun. I love the Acts of Paul and Thecla. It is such a bizarre document. I hope you read it before class as the syllabus instructed you to. It's not an easy document to get into if it's the first time you've come across this kind of non-canonical early Christian literature. Sometimes we'll call this stuff "apocryphal" which is just the Greek word for "hidden." This is not part of the apocrypha that's published in your Bible, your study Bible if you bought the Bible that I requested which was the Oxford Study Bible with Apocrypha. That apocrypha, as I explained at the beginning of the whole semester is Jewish literature that was written sometime in the Second Temple period and it's not explicitly Christian literature for the most part. When people talk about The Apocrypha that's published in a modern Bible, they're talking about that Jewish literature that survived in Greek mainly. In fact this is why those books were rejected by the reformers Martin Luther and Calvin, and Melancthon. They tended to not use the apocrypha in a Protestant Bible precisely because they wanted to go back to the Hebrew Bible like the rabbis were using, and so The Apocrypha, although it has continued to be part of the Roman Catholic Bible, and as something having a secondary status, has not been part of the Protestant

Bible. That term "apocrypha" refers to that very varying list because what is actually even included in that Jewish apocrypha varies according to which publication you may pick up.

[2] Sometimes people will also use this word "apocrypha" for what they call something like New Testament apocrypha or early Christian apocrypha. That's kind of a misleading term because there's nothing hidden about this literature at all. It's always been there, it's just not part of the Christian canon. Some of it is entirely orthodox, some of it is rather heretical, and some of it is somewhere not completely in tune with later orthodoxy but nevertheless reflecting what was definitely orthodox in its own day. All this literature is written in the second century, our document today, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, was composed in the second century and it was considered quite good literature by many early Christians. It just wasn't part of the New Testament, mainly because people knew it was a bit later of a document, not so much because of concerns for orthodoxy.

[3] One of the purposes of my teaching this course, one of my purposes of teaching all of my courses, is to get students to start thinking completely differently. In other words, you've noticed, perhaps, that one of the things I stress in my lectures is how odd the ancient world is, even how odd early Christianity is from what

most of us tend to come at it. This is because I teach New Testament studies and the history of early Christianity almost like ethnography. I try to get you to imagine yourself coming into a culture that's really different from the culture you grew up in. This is something I think is basic to religious studies as a discipline, and religious studies teaches you to look at some kind of group of people, or an activity, or a belief structure that seems to you initially absolutely bizarre. And you think, how could any rational person do that? How can any rational person believe that? To keep looking at it seriously and to look at it with enough sympathy that you actually can see eventually how it is perfectly rational. This document today is a great place to illustrate that, because whenever I teach this document to people your age, eighteen to twenty-two year old college students, if you read this carefully and you get into this stuff, it should be bizarre to you.

[4] This document depicts young people who are attracted to a version of Christianity that forbids having sex entirely. It's completely ascetic. The Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla says, if you have sex you're probably not going to go to heaven. Basically the gospel mentioned in this document is continence, by which this document means avoiding sex. And that's going to be bizarre enough because people in the modern world kind of have the idea, well why would somebody join any movement that forbade sexual intimacy entirely? What kind of draw did that have for people? Why did that gospel succeed? What may be surprising to you is it did succeed. In the ancient world a lot of people, especially it seems sometimes even young people, were drawn to early Christianity precisely because it was ascetic. It taught this radical asceticism of watching what you eat and especially avoiding sex, or if not avoiding sex entirely, severely limiting sexual intercourse and sexual attraction. \What is it about the ancient culture, what is it about these people that caused them not only to be converted to Christianity but to be converted especially to a form of it that was radically ascetic? In order to see why that kind of Christianity was—because that's the actual kind of Christianity that was successful in the ancient world.

[5] If you were listening to most modern American Christians, modern American people generally, what are the two most

important teachings about Christianity in the minds of most Americans? The family, the importance of the family, and by that they mean the heterosexual nuclear family, but even the liberal churches which are willing to recognize gay relationships, they still construe that as gay marriage or just gay versions of the nuclear family. The family is the most important thing about Christianity in the minds of a lot of Americans. The second thing is nationalism, patriotism. If you took away patriotism and nationalism, and the family out of Christianity, most people in modern America wouldn't recognize it as such. What's odd is that, when you read these ancient documents, that's precisely the two things that Christianity attacks. This form of early Christianity was anti-family, for the most part, and it was anti-patriotic. The people who say, but this is traditional Christianity, those people don't know their history before 1950, because the church, the overall Christian churches were never pro-family for the first 1500 years of its existence. The Roman Catholic Church, up until the Reformation, always had as its official position, not just popular ideas, its official position was celibacy is superior to sexuality. If you have to have sex, if you can't control yourself you're allowed to get married and have sex within the bounds of marriage. But the better thing, the better virtue would be to avoid sex entirely for your entire life. The next best thing is to have sex if you need just to make babies, but then as soon as you have your babies, stop having sex and be ascetic the rest of your life. If your spouse dies, you are permitted to get remarried, most of the time, but the higher virtue would be in remaining unmarried and remaining celibate for the rest of your life. That was considered the doctrine in Christianity, at least up until the Reformation, so the sixteenth century.

[6] When people talk about “traditional family values” being traditionally the Christian way, they're not talking about Christianity as it existed from the time of Jesus all the way up until around 1600, and even then from 1600 until 1950, the ideal form in most Christianity was not the nuclear family but some kind of household. In Puritan New England, people didn't live in little nuclear families—townships, the New Haven Colony, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they were organized into households that were run by the male head of

household, his wife under him, children under that, servants and other free people often living in the household also or connected to the household. If you are, for example, an adult male, twenty-five years old in New England, in Puritan New England, and you weren't married, you weren't really supposed to live alone or with other men. That happens sometimes, but the town fathers—and these colonies were ruled as communities, not individual people—the town fathers would want to put you into somebody else's household, into the household of another man. They certainly wouldn't let women, adult women, live separately. Notice, this is not individualism in the modern sense, and it's not the nuclear family in the modern sense, these are extended family households. That was the New England Protestant way. When did the idea that the best form of the family was the nuclear family come about in popular culture overall? The 1950s. When people talk about that being the Christian thing they're forgetting the vast sweep of Christian history. They're just ignoring it. This document is a good place to see why that made sense for people, especially in the ancient world, and to make it—since for the Middle Ages and all the rest of the time you'll have to take another course.

[7] One of the things I want you to do is enter into this text as if you're an ethnographer, an anthropologist and try to see how does this make sense, how does this gospel that this text proclaimed, how did it make sense to people and why was it so wildly popular, because it was wildly popular. First, you have to know a bit about the Greco-Roman novel. I talked about this early in the semester when we talked about the Acts of the Apostles. Greek novels are very interesting, there are six of them that survive in almost whole, and in fragments of a lot of others, and you can find these in the English translation. Help me out teaching fellows, what's the name of the collection of the Greek novels? It's called something like *Collected Greek Novels*, yes. Reardon is the editor: R-E-A-R-D-O-N. If you want to dip into these just get the collected ancient novels - edited by Reardon and read through some of them. They're very entertaining.

[8] One of the things that the typical plot is, a woman of high elite status, these are—these usually are people—young people of elite

families—they're usually set in classical Greece although they're not written until the first century, second century, third century of our era, but they're often set in a more classical Greek setting. They are upper class people: a young woman who's of an upper class family falls in love with a young man who's also from an upper class family, and in a few of the Greek novels they actually get married and have a little honeymoon, a brief honeymoon period, and then all hell breaks loose and something happens. In some cases they don't even get to consummate their love yet because something intervenes. Usually what happens is a disaster strikes.

[9] In one—I think I mentioned this to you, by Chariton, Chaereas and Callirhoe, in one the husband gets jealous thinking that his wife has had an affair he—in a fit of rage—he kicks her, she falls over and everybody thinks she's dead. So he's grieving and grieving because of course he's still madly in love with her. They're both madly in love with each other. But they bury her in the tomb, the big family tomb that's on the shore by the water. Of course like—and Shakespeare stole mercilessly from these kinds of things—she wakes up in the tomb after they've already sealed the tomb and she can't get out, and she says, woe is me, they've buried me, I will never see my loved one. Pirates, who happened to be outside, there were always pirates in these things, lots of pirates. Pirates happened to be outside, they hear her crying, and they break into the tomb. They were just going to do a little tomb robbery, they were just attempting a tomb robbery, but they find this living maiden—not maiden anymore she's had sex now so she's a maid, not a maiden anymore. Anyway a beautiful young woman and they decide, well great this—we can get more for her than from the stuff in here. We'll kidnap her, sell her as into slavery at some other port. And they do. So they take her off, they take her around over to Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. And there they sell her to this wealthy man. He falls in love with her, so he decides to marry her. And then something else happens and they go to the King of Persia, and the King of Persia falls in love with her. So he steals her away from the Greek guy. And then wars break out. And her husband as soon as he finds that she's been stolen away, he starts traveling all around the Mediterranean looking for her. And he'll get

just to Alexandria in Egypt the day after she's been sold off to slavery someplace else. These two traipse around the Mediterranean looking for their—because they're madly in love and they want to consummate their marriage. And of course everybody falls in love with both of them.

[10] No matter where this young woman goes every man around falls in love with her, and that causes problems all over the place. Of course in the ancient world everywhere the young man goes everybody falls in love with him, both women and men, because that was quite common. And so they both have all this eroticism. They're describing their beauty all the time. Usually there's someplace in the novel where they can get naked. Where somehow the plot happens where she's stripped because she's going to be punished, or he's stripped because he's going to be crucified, or something has happened and the story kind of concentrates on how beautiful their bodies are. In other words, the novels are about being faithful to the person you loved in your youth, because they both try not to have sex with anybody else if they can at all do that. Be faithful to your lover from your youth. But the erotic drive is just all the way through the novel. The novels are full of eroticism and the eroticism of the eye.

[11] This Acts of Paul and Thecla is so wonderfully like those things because it also uses eroticism. Did you notice how often Thecla is portrayed as gorgeous and even stripped so you, as the voyeuristic reader, can imagine her naked body before she's thrown into the vat of killer man-eating seals. You remember that scene. The erotic is here in this text, but the erotic is used to the opposite purpose. The erotic is used to actually teach you to avoid sex. To really read this text of the Acts of Paul and Thecla it helps if you know the way these ancient Greek novels often work.

## 2. *The Gospel of Asceticism in the Acts of Paul and Thecla*

[12] Let's look at the text now, and I'll show you some of these things. Look at paragraph 18. I don't know if you have the pages, there are a couple of different editions that I've used in this class. I don't know which I had for downloading with you but I'm going to not talk about page numbers most of the time but

paragraph numbers because the texts are all divided up into paragraph numbers. In paragraph 18, Thecla has gone off to prison. Of course the story goes that she hears Paul preaching in her hometown, and she falls in love with him just from hearing his preaching. Now the text doesn't really say she falls in love with him, right? But it describes her as being enamored of Paul, at least of his gospel, and so she goes to visit him in prison. He's been thrown in prison because wherever Paul goes he gets into trouble with the men of the city. And it's always the men of the city he gets in trouble with, right? It's because he's teaching wives not to have sex with their husbands anymore. Well, this gets the guys upset. He's teaching unmarried women not to get married and young men not to get married. Well, if you don't get married and you don't have sex, you're not going to have children, you're not going to have babies, and the households will all fall apart. So Paul gets in trouble precisely because of his anti-household, anti-sex message because the men of the city know full well that if you don't have sex and you don't have households, you're not going to have a city. Civilization is going to fall apart, in their view. He's arrested, she goes to visit him in prison, and then it says, "To the jailer she gave a silver mirror," a mirror is in the ancient world is a typical sign for femininity in women. On tombstones you'll often see a mirror carved when it's a girl, a young girl who's buried at that tomb. So she gives the jailer her silver mirror.

[13] She went into Paul and sat at his feet and heard him proclaim the mighty acts of God. Paul feared nothing but comported himself with full confidence in God, and her faith was also increased as she kissed his fetters.

[14] Next paragraph down 20: "He commanded Paul to be brought to the judgment seat. But Thecla rolled herself on the place where Paul taught as he sat in prison." She's rolling around in the dust where Paul had sat earlier. Did you ever hear old people talk about how in very strict Roman Catholic schools and stuff, guys were not supposed to sit in the same folding chair that a girl had just sat in because it would be warm, and that was considered a little too erotic? Yep. People were screwed up. "She stood there looking steadily at Paul," and a little further, "Thecla sought for Paul as a

lamb in the wilderness looks about for shepherd.” In paragraph 22:

- [15] The young men and the maidens brought wood and straw that Thecla might be burned, and as she was brought in naked the governor wept and marveled at the power that was in her.
- [16] I'm not too sure about the writing here. Notice how over and over again in this text there's something about kissing or marveling, or looking, and right at the point where you think that the body should be what's being referred to, the author says something like "power" or "message." There's a direction toward the body all the way through this text, and then a diversion of your attention as a reader away from the body to the gospel. But the body is still there just hovering right around the edge of your vision. So the text does that over and over again. Look at paragraph 25—well over and over again—I'm not going to go through anymore examples of that because they're just all the way through the text. Sex is the driving force of this piece of literature even though the piece of literature is going to try to teach you not to have sex, and so there's also desire and passion all the way through.
- [17] But, as I said, the main message of the text is don't have sex. So look at paragraph 5, this is where Paul is giving his own version of the beatitudes that you're familiar with from Matthew and Luke. Paul's version is very different though, right? It says in paragraph 5:
- [18] When Paul was entered into the house of Onesiphorus, there was great joy, bowing of knees, breaking of bread, and the word of God concerning continence and the resurrection.
- [19] Now the word "continence" there is just referring to asceticism, but in this text it doesn't mean just controlling your sex life, it means not having sex entirely. When this author, this translation says "continence," you read that as complete sexual asceticism, so that's the message. Notice how continence is linked to resurrection, so the avoidance of sex is directly linked to the resurrection of the body in this text. These are the beatitudes:
- [20] Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Blessed are they who have kept the flesh pure [and don't be misled in this text that means not having sex] for they shall become a

temple of God. Blessed are the continent for to them God will speak. Blessed are they who have renounced this world for they shall be well pleasing unto God. Blessed are they who have wives as if they had them not for they shall inherit God.

- [21] Now that's actually almost a quotation from Paul's letter. Paul talks about having, as if you did not have, and this sort of thing, living your life "as if." "Blessed are they who have fear of God for they shall become angels of God." Now it might help you to know there that angels in the ancient world are often depicted as androgynous, as not being sexual. Anybody seen the movie "Dogma"? How many have seen the movie "Dogma"? Raise your hand so I can see them. If you haven't seen the movie "Dogma" go rent it. It's a highly important theological movie. It's a very theological movie actually. If you've seen it you remember there's a place where the angel who's appearing to the woman who's going to be the chosen one, the Mary-type figure, he appears in her bedroom in the middle of the night, right? She thinks he's there to rape her so she takes a baseball bat and she's going to try to—and he's trying to not get pummeled with the baseball bat, so he pulls his pants down to show her that he's an angel. Why does that work? Because he doesn't have genitalia, and so that proves to her, or it's supposed to prove to her, she's just confused. She doesn't know her angelology properly. If she knew her angelology, she would know that angels, at least in one dominant form of tradition, are androgynous, so they don't have genitalia or they're either completely male or something like that, so that's why Paul says in this beatitude, "You will be as the angels of God."
- [22] "Blessed are they who have kept their baptism secure." Again one of the teachings of early Christianity like this was, once you're baptized you're not allowed to sin anymore. Baptism, according to some teachings in early Christianity, would cleanse you of all the sins you had committed up until the time you're baptized. What if you sin after your baptism? Well, there might be other ways to get forgiveness for that, but you're in trouble. This is why a lot of emperors would not get baptized until their deathbed, because they wanted to make sure—emperors have to sin, they have to kill people, they have to fight wars, so the idea was you just don't get baptized until right

before you die and then you can go to heaven. That's what this is talking about, keeping your baptism pure.

[23] Below that the last blessed, "Blessed are the bodies of the virgins for they shall be well pleasing to God and shall not lose the reward of their purity." Right below that in paragraph 7:

[24] Thamyris sat at a nearby window and listened night and day to the word of the virgin life, as it was spoken by Paul, moreover she saw many women and virgins going into Paul, she desired to be counted worthy herself to stand in Paul's presence.

[25] Now look right at paragraph 9:

[26] "All the women and young people go into him and are taught by him. You must, he says, fear one single God only and live chastely. And my daughter also, like a spider at the window bound by his words, is dominated by a new desire."

[27] This is her mother talking because her mother is very upset that Thecla has done this because Thecla broke off her great engagement to the richest guy in town in order to follow Paul. So the mother doesn't like this. "... dominated by a new desire and a fearful passion." So notice desire and passion again are still part of the narrative, but now they're redirected to a desire and a passion precisely for celibacy.

[28] Also, the bad guys in this are anti-ascetic. Look at paragraph 13. Paul and the good guys are all ascetic. In paragraph 13, in fact, right above that this is Demos and Hermogenes—now a bunch of the names in this document actually come from Pauline literature from the New Testament. So this writer probably knows the Pastoral Epistles and some of the other writings that make up the New Testament because the writer is taking details out of Paul's life, as you would see it in the New Testament, like these names for example. Demos is mentioned in the Pastoral Epistles as someone who forsook Paul, "being in love with the present world," is what it says, so this writer is talking—using the same name. Demos is a bad guy here who had been a follower of Paul but he's now betraying Paul.

[29] They say, "Who this man is we do not know. But he deprives young men of wives, maidens of husbands, saying otherwise there is no resurrection for you except you remain chaste and do not defile the flesh but keep it pure."

[30] They know what Paul's teaching, this radical asceticism, and Paul links this to the resurrection. If you're not chaste and pure, you won't experience the resurrection.

[31] Thamyris said to them, "Come into my house you men and rest with me." And they went off to a sumptuous banquet with much wine, great wealth, and a splendid table.

[32] Notice, these guys who betray Paul are not only teaching that people should get married and have sex, but they're also having great wine, they're having a lot of food, they're doing all the anti-ascetic stuff. They're anti-ascetic. The enemies of Paul, and the gospel here, are the anti-ascetics, and of course that makes you think, who does this look like that we've been reading lately who says, "Drink a little wine for your stomach's sake"? It's the writer of the Pastoral Epistles. Remember we saw that? The writer of I Timothy admonishes Timothy to drink wine, not to be an ascetic and avoid wine. The writer of the Pastoral Epistles teaches that it's the enemies of Paul who forbid marriage. So the Pastoral Epistles, if this author knows the Pastoral Epistles, he's writing against it. And if the Pastoral Epistles knows the Acts of Paul and Thecla, they're written against this. We don't know that they knew each other exactly, although it's entirely possible that this author knew Paul's writings.

### 3. *The Cultural Phenomenon of Sexual Hierarchy*

[33] So, basically, what is the problem of life according to this author? Sex and family. What's the answer to life? Avoiding sex and family, and then you experience the resurrection. What is the deeper problem then that this is addressing? Here the problem you can see it in paragraph 17. This is Paul talking to the proconsul:

[34] "The living God, the God of vengeance, the jealous God, the God who has need of nothing, has sent me since he desires the salvation of men that I may draw them away from corruption and impurity, all pleasure and death, that they may sin no more."

- [35] Notice corruption, impurity, pleasure, death, those are all linked together. And here's the clue that helps you see what's going on with the allure of asceticism for these ancient Christians. In the ancient world... This is something that's also changed radically since the 1970s. The 1970s changed dramatically with regard to family, sexuality. It's the time of the sexual revolution. The time of the people's attitudes changing completely. We went back on that in the 1980s with the AIDS scare, and then the way right wingers used AIDS to try to make sex fearful to everybody. But that was sort of reactionary. The 1980s and a lot of the 1990s was reactionary to the sexual revolution. What happened in the 1970s that changed the way people thought about these sorts of things? Two things that were big pushes toward changing people's attitudes about sexuality and the family. The women's movement, which basically was springing off the civil rights movement and saying that women and men are equal, the radical notion that women are people is what feminism is, so women and men are equal.
- [36] Now why was that so important for issues like sex? Because the way sexuality had always been construed up to that point was that the sex act itself, the heterosexual sex act—and homosexual sex acts were always interpreted in the frame of heterosexual sex—the heterosexual sex act embodies in its very practices the hierarchy of man over woman. The idea is, man is superior. He's supposed to be on top. So the preferred position is the missionary position. And in fact, in ancient Judaism and Christianity it was considered abominable—it was considered sex “against nature”—to have the woman penetrate the man in any way. Why? Because they considered it only natural that the man is the superior one and he penetrates the woman. It's male to penetrate; it's feminine to be penetrated. And they believed that whether it was penis/vagina sex, or whether it was oral sex, or whether it was anything. Any kind of sexual intercourse in the ancient world, and this continued pretty much all the way until the modern world, the man is superior, masculinity is superior, and femininity is inferior. And that's embodied in the sex act itself: the superiority of the penetrator and the inferiority of the penetrated. That's why the word “fucked,” is a bad thing, although actually most of think actually doing
- it is not such a bad thing. Why is that in our—in slang and curse words we still use words like “that sucks”? A lot of people don't even know that it refers to sex, but yeah of course it refers to sex. Something that “sucks” is considered bad, it's not considered [bad] to be sucked. Something that fucks is not bad, it's considered bad to be fucked. Why is that? Because our entire history has penetration is superior; it's inferior to be penetrated. It's embodied in our culture.
- [37] That started to be challenged—now see you may find this kind of weird that I'm insisting so literally on the interpretation of these words because that may not be the way you use them or hear them. What I'm saying is that if it's not the way you use them or hear them is because society has changed radically in the last thirty or forty years. No longer is it automatically considered that women are inferior to men, and therefore the sex act is not considered to be one that necessarily has to be hierarchal. The reason that people in the ancient world, if they opposed homosexual sex, the reason they opposed it is they assumed that one man would have to be penetrated by another man, and that was horrible because it disrupted the hierarchy. Or a woman would have to penetrate another woman, and that also disrupted the hierarchy. It has to be man/woman because the hierarchy is man/woman, and every sex act was supposed to imitate that hierarchy. That changed radically beginning in the 1970s.
- [38] The other big thing that changed was the Pill. Now of course there had been contraception for years and years before that, for time immemorial. Human beings have always known how to avoid getting pregnant to some extent. But with the 1970s and the wide availability of contraceptive medicines, drugs, it was much easier to have heterosexual sex and not be worried about whether you were going to get pregnant. Before that, and this is also something that people your age just have trouble getting through your heads, before that every time a woman had heterosexual sex of any kind of penetrated way—the normal way people were having sex she was—she had to at least be partly worried that she was going to get pregnant. Every time a man and a woman had sex, pregnancy, the danger of pregnancy, was always there hanging over their heads. They could accept it and they could want it, but

if they didn't want it, it was still hanging over their heads. That's not true for us today. We have enough reliable means of contraception that we can pretty much decide that we want to have sex just for fun without worrying about pregnancy.

#### 4. *The Early Christian Answer to the Cycle of Birth and Death: Asceticism*

[39] These two things, the women's movement, which challenged the basic hierarchy of the sex act, and the availability of contraception, radically changed notions of sex. Before that, and here's what goes back to the ancient world, I've mentioned this before and we've been talking about other texts already but just to review: for the ancient mind, sex was simply one cog in a wheel. Why did you have sex? In order to make babies. Why did you need to make babies? Because so many of them were dying all the time. I think I've told you the statistic that in the ancient world, for the population of the Roman Empire just to remain stable—not for it to grow, just for it to remain stable—every woman who lived to childbearing age, which was considered about fourteen in the ancient world, had to have an average of five childbirths for the population to remain stable. Think of these girls, every one of you would have to have at least five childbirths on average just to maintain the population. That just shows how many people died in childbirth, how many women died in childbirth, how many infants died. So in people's minds, every birth was automatically linked in their mind to death. Because it was a dangerous thing, people died often in childbirth, women died giving birth, and so many children died. They also knew that they had to keep having babies or the population would shrink, and populations in the ancient world did often shrink, and that was dangerous because whole cities could disappear. Whole populations could disappear if the birthrate didn't remain high. Every birth was considered—because you had to have babies; why do you need babies? Because people were always dying. The idea was you have sex, birth, death, decay. Sex, birth, death, decay, sex, birth, death, decay, that's all what life is. Life is a big circle of sex, birth, death and decay.

[40] Now comes Christianity which says, we're going to teach you to break that cycle. How do

you break the cycle? Well, it may not be intuitive to you, but this seemed to be intuitive to a lot of ancient people who incorporated this into their teachings about Christianity. The Christians said, stop it at sex. Break the cycle at sex. And that's why in these text—it's not intuitive to us, but it's intuitive to them—that if you want to stop that cycle of sex, birth, death, and decay the easiest place for human beings to stop it is at sex. Just break the cycle. Don't have sex, don't have childbirth, don't have death. And of course they believed they had an answer for the death part because they believed, with Christianity, with Jesus Christ, you would have resurrection, the body would be raised, so you don't need childbirth anymore. If you're a faithful Christian you'll live forever anyway, so you don't need to replenish the population by having more babies. All the people who are Christians, who come into Christ, will be resurrected and will live forever, so there's no need for more and more population.

[41] The reason that these texts, and this is not the only one, this is just one place where it's very clear, because whenever Paul talks about sex he also talks about death. He talks about corruption and he talks about resurrection. So this text very clearly pulls all of these issues into one another. The basic sensibility of this gospel that we moderns don't have, and you have to imagine yourself back into their world, is the radical availability of death and the linkage of death with sex in ancient minds, and then also the linkage of all these other things with sexuality and death and corruption. Christianity said, stop the cycle at sex and you get rid of death, radical as that may sound to us.

[42] The problem of course is, in this text, the people who find that message very compelling are young women, a lot of wives, although not all of them, and even young men. Also, people who find that message compelling happen to be lionesses. The female animals also like this message, right? Who are the ones who gang up on the bad male animals who are trying to attack Thecla in the arena? The female lion. The text is set up as an opposition. Now notice, I said young men are also included in the good side of this sometimes. What is the opposition to Paul's gospel? It's not men versus women, right? What is the opposition? It's male heads of households against everybody else who

would be members of their household. The people who opposed Paul the most in this text are male heads of households, precisely because they recognize that challenging the centrality of sex and childbirth will in itself challenge their households. In their system, you have to have sex and childbirth in order to maintain the household structure. They're the ones who are against Paul, so Paul appeals mostly to women and young people. I already think—I read part of that in paragraph 7, “The women and the virgins are going to hear him.” In paragraph 9 it talks about women and young people going to him and are talking to him, so that's who it. Then in 12, I read this passage in paragraph 12, “He deprives young men of wives and maidens of husbands,” so he's depriving the men who want to continue the household structure and that's why they're opposed to him.

[43] Notice paragraph 26 and 27: this guy sees Thecla in a different place, Alexander sees Thecla, and he falls in love with her. As is typical in these kinds of texts, there's always a beautiful woman, no man can resist her. He says he wants to marry her:

[44] “I did not wish to marry Thamyras, I've been cast out of the city ... Taking hold of Alexander [so here she takes hold of this Alexander] she ripped his cloak, took off the crown from his head and made him a laughing stock. But he, partly out of love for her and partly in shame at what had befallen him, brought her before the governor. And when she confessed that she had done these things he condemned her to the beasts. But the women were panic stricken and cried out before the judgment seat, “An evil judgment! A godless judgment!” But Thecla asked the governor that she might remain pure until she was to fight with the beast. [In other words she says; just don't make me have sex. I'll be glad to go into the arena and fight with the beast, just don't make me have sex.] A rich woman named Tryphaena, whose wife [correction: husband] had died, took her under her protection and found comfort. When the beasts were led in procession they bound her to a fierce lioness, and the Queen Tryphaena followed her. And as Thecla sat upon her back, the lioness licked her feet, and all the crowd was amazed.”

[45] You have this situation where—what's the problem with Alexander? He's shamed. So in

this honor/shame system of the ancient world, this is also an important point: male heads of household occupy the position of honor. By tearing his clothes, by knocking his crown off, she shames him in public, and this of course totally disrupts this hierarchy of the man over the woman, and that's part of what's going on here. Women who refuse their role as child bearers, as sex objects, shame the men who put them in that role. And so that's what the conflict is about, shaming men and rebelling against the household structure. Then of course there's the solidarity of women with everybody else.

### 5. *Thecla, the Heroine*

[46] Notice in this, Paul himself is rather ambiguously placed. He's a man. What is Paul's role in all of this? I think it's interesting that Paul doesn't come across in this text, at least in my reading, as being a totally positive character. It praises him, of course, and presents him as a man of God. But notice some of the things that Paul does. Paul refuses to baptize her. Remember, she has to baptize herself. This is that wonderful scene where she's being martyred—they're trying to martyr her again, and they strip her naked, and then they have this big vat of killer man-eating seals—yes that's what it says. You probably didn't even know there were man-eating seals, but there were in the ancient Mediterranean world. Instead of waiting to be thrown into the vat of man eating seals, a lightning bolt comes out of the sky, strikes the water, all the man-eating seals die, so God saves her. And then, though, not to let the scene finish she—she's all right, there's water, she's asked Paul to baptize her once and he wouldn't do it, so she throws herself into the water and baptizes herself. This is a woman! You're not supposed to let women go around baptizing themselves! That could just disrupt all kinds of stuff. Paul, at one point, says he doesn't even know her in one place. He refuses to baptize her. And Paul gets in trouble. He runs off and hides in caves and stuff.

[47] Who's the big hero of this story? It's not Paul. He's one of the heroes but it's really Thecla. It's this woman who totally refuses to accept her role as a baby factory. And that's what women are in the ancient world, baby factories. She totally refuses to accept that role. She baptizes herself when Paul hesitates

to baptize her. And then of course at the very end of the document, remember how it ends? She goes to Paul and she says she wants to be a follower of his, and he kind of—again he kind of just says, no go leave me alone. Paul is not all that great with her. What does she do? First she inherits a bunch of money; another rich woman left her a ton of money, so she's able to support herself and her mother. I guess she and her mother, by the end of the thing, are now on good terms. I mean if you survive lightning and man-eating seals, and God saves you, maybe your mother will like you better and let you not get married. She supports herself financially through an inheritance that she gets from another woman, and then what does she do? She cuts her hair short, she dresses like a man, she actually becomes an Apostle. She goes off to spread the message of this ascetic, sex avoiding, anti-family, anti-household gospel that she got from Paul. Thecla becomes her own Apostle spreading the message.

[48] Notice what kind of gospel she's going around teaching. This is not pro-family, this is not patriotic, this is not nationalism. This is putting all your eggs in the basket of the kingdom of God. That's the only thing worth living for, is the kingdom of God. How do you get into the kingdom of God? By avoiding sex and avoiding the household, that's how you get in and enjoy—and remain. How do you avoid death? By being resurrected. This message is a very erotic message, in a sense. It's not getting sexual eroticism or sexual desire and throwing it all out the window. It's actually using eroticism and the appeal to beauty, and the appeal of sexual desire, and it's capitalizing on it. The author is trying to get you, as a young person who's afraid about death, to convert to a message of the gospel that will liberate you from the cycle of corruption and death, that you will get into if you agree to go along with sex, birth, death, decay, and that's what you do if you choose the household. It's a radical document.

[49] Now the question is, is this a feminist document? It's a good question. It raises Thecla up even above Paul, and it gives a message of liberation to women, at least from whatever it is that keeps them down at the time, which is the patriarchal household. It gives them a way out of that. This is one of the reasons that there are a lot of women in the

ancient world who became nuns, who wanted to avoid the household, and you had women running away from their husbands all the time. Church leaders talk about it. Why? Because that was—you had to get out of the household if you wanted to have any kind of independence or liberty. If you wanted to have any kind of exercise of power you had to get out of the male dominated household. So Christianity, the whole strain of Christianity appealed to precisely those kinds of people, and the author is trying to get you as a young person to make that choice also. Now the big question is do you think it's feminist? Is this feminism or is there something wrong with thinking about it as feminism? If you're writing a paper this week maybe you can talk about that.

[50] Another big question is, do you think this author is actually attacking the Pastoral Epistles? Are the Pastoral Epistles attacking this author? They are presenting two diametrically opposed versions of Paul. They both claim Paul as their author. They both claim to be representing Paul's gospel, Paul's message. But one of them is very pro-household, and marriage, and sex, and childbirth; and the other is anti-marriage, anti-household, anti-childbirth, and anti-sex. They both claim Paul as the author of their gospel. Do they know each other? That's the interesting historical question. Or is it just by accident that we have these two very radically different appropriations of Paul? All of those questions I hope you'll talk about in your discussion groups later this week, and if you're writing papers, push yourself to answer some big questions in your papers. Any questions? Yes.

[51] *Student:* Is it possible or conceivable that a woman would have written it?

[52] *Professor Dale Martin:* Is it possible or conceivable that a woman would have written it? It's completely possible. We don't know who the author was. Wait, is this the one that—what's the one that Tertullian says up—okay he knew—we actually know that it was written by a priest, right?

[53] *Student:* Yes.

[54] *Professor Dale Martin:* This one wasn't written by a woman, but for some of the text in the ancient world they could be written by—

[55] *Student*: Not everyone believes Tertullian.

[56] *Professor Dale Martin*: What?

[57] *Student*: Not everyone believes Tertullian.

[58] *Professor Dale Martin*: Not everyone believes Tertullian.

[59] *Student*: [Inaudible]

[60] *Professor Dale Martin*: Okay Tertullian—some people say Tertullian was wrong. Tertullian is

a church father who wrote around the year 200 in Latin. He knows the story, and he condemns it partly because he doesn't want Thecla baptizing herself. She's too big for her britches in Tertullian's view. Tertullian says that they know who wrote it and it was a man but the Teaching Fellow says that other people dispute that. Okay, see you next week.

[end of transcript]