

Tertullian's Views of Gender, Baptism, and Martyrdom

Through the Examples of Thecla and Perpetua

by

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### **Abstract**

Using mainly textual analysis, this thesis examines Tertullian's views of gender, martyrdom, and baptism by studying his differing reactions to the martyrs Thecla and Perpetua. Tertullian was the first writer to make reference to both of these women. Considering Tertullian was the only church father to disparage Thecla, discovering the reasons behind his rejection will allow for a greater understanding of the issues that he sees as most important in his church. It will be made clear that the events in the Thecla narrative are in opposition to Tertullian's central beliefs about how he expects Christian women to behave, whereas Perpetua's actions confirm Tertullian's ideals.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Introduction .....	5
Chapter 1	
Tertullian's Identifications of the Species of Women .....	24
Chapter 2	
Thecla and Perpetua as Representations of Their Species .....	56
Chapter 3	
Tertullian and Baptism .....	87
Chapter 4	
Baptism in the Thecla and Perpetua Narratives .....	107
Chapter 5	
Tertullian's Advice <i>To the Martyrs</i> .....	127
Chapter 6	
The Martyrdoms of Thecla and Perpetua .....	147
Conclusion .....	187

## Introduction

Readers are often struck by the hostile language Tertullian uses to describe women and his apparent desire to limit women's authority and participation within the church. These hostilities are especially evident in the treatises *On the Apparel of Women*, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, and *On Baptism*. However, other treatises such as *To His Wife* and *To the Martyrs* reveal a glorification of wives and female martyrs consistent with the views of the narrator of *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. How can this view be reconciled with his otherwise apparently virulent opposition to women in any position of authority? The content of the works of Tertullian cannot be divided into misogynist ideas and feminist ideas, not the least because both categories are anachronistic.<sup>1</sup> Rather, his writings must be approached with a set of questions that are sensitive to his historical circumstances (both particular and general) and larger debates within his contemporary church.

This thesis will therefore examine the ways that Tertullian represents women and gender differences by focusing on his drastically different opinions of two women who initially appear to be very similar. Both Thecla and Perpetua were Christian women who were condemned to die in the arena. The narrative texts detailing the lives of both women quickly became popular reading among men and women and both women were looked to as examples for how Christians ought to live, die, and profess their faith. Despite these similarities, Tertullian explicitly rejects the Thecla narrative as a forgery<sup>2</sup> while Tertullian himself may have edited the Perpetua narrative. Even if he did not have

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<sup>1</sup> Earl Lavender, "Tertullian - Against Women?" in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity: Volume 2*. Ed. Carol D. Osburn. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1995), 334.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 17. Latin version edited by J.W.Ph. Borleffs in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* I (1954). English translation of *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1964).

a hand in creating the text, it certainly contains many similarities to imagery found in Tertullian's other treatises, and he praises Perpetua fully in his treatise *On the Soul*.<sup>3</sup> This disparate reaction to two superficially similar women can be used to demonstrate the issues that Tertullian views as the most important as well as the role that gender plays in making his determinations. The issues of the different identities of women (Thecla is a virgin, while Perpetua is a wife and mother), baptism, and martyrdom are particularly important both to Tertullian and to the Thecla and Perpetua narratives and will therefore be closely examined. This will provide a way to understand what constitutes a normative interpretation of culturally available symbols that Tertullian uses to understand gender and the way that these symbols are either upheld or challenged in the Thecla and Perpetua narratives.

Terms such as sex and gender are socially constructed, and Tertullian demonstrates this through his construction of subcategories of women, which he identifies as virgins, wives, and widows. In attempting to explore these issues, Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" will provide a foundation. In this article, Scott argues that gender should be understood as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes."<sup>4</sup> Scott further identifies that "normative concepts" of gender are "expressed in religious, educational, scientific, legal, and political doctrines and typically take the form of a fixed binary opposition, categorically and unequivocally asserting the meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine."<sup>5</sup> It is with this understanding that I will be exploring Tertullian's

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<sup>3</sup> Tert., *De Anima* 55. Latin version edited by J.H. Waszink in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* II (1954). English translation of *On the Soul* trans. by Peter Holmes in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870).

<sup>4</sup> Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1067.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

attempts to recreate a normative interpretation of the role of women within his church that is in direct contrast to male authority. This thesis will also show that there are competing constructions of these categories within the church of Tertullian's time. Some, like the ones Tertullian is opposing in his rejection of the Thecla narrative, represent radical departures from the normative interpretations of the Roman patriarchal familial structure that Tertullian attempts to re-assert.

### **Tertullian**

Before engaging in a close reading of Tertullian's treatises, his identity and cultural context must be examined. While Tertullian's dates of birth and death, many details of his life, and the precise chronology of his writings cannot be known with certainty, it is generally accepted that Tertullian was born at Carthage around 160.<sup>6</sup> That he spent his literary career in Carthage and writing about issues in the Carthaginian church can be seen through several mentions to the city in his writings.<sup>7</sup> The most detailed reference to Tertullian and his importance comes from Jerome's *On Illustrious Men*, written at the end of the fourth century.<sup>8</sup> In this text, Jerome identifies Tertullian as being "from the province of Africa, from the city of Carthage . . . A man of impetuous temperament, he was in his prime in the reign of the emperor Severus and Antoninus Caracalla."<sup>9</sup> While Jerome lived long after the death of Tertullian, and therefore did not know him personally, it is not difficult to imagine how Tertullian may have gained a reputation of impetuosity, as his writings display "a passionate commitment to Christ

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<sup>6</sup> Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 4. These include addressing *De Pallio* to the men of Carthage, his reference to the Carthaginian martyr Perpetua, and the fact that *Ad Scapulam* was written to the proconsul of the Roman province of Africa. For further examples, see Dunn, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 53.1-2. Jerome, *On Illustrious Men*, trans. Thomas P. Halton (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999).

and . . . a violent polemic [against] those persecuting the church.”<sup>10</sup> However, Jerome does provide details of Tertullian that are likely more based on tradition than truth, including that his father was a “proconsular centurion”<sup>11</sup> and that Tertullian was “a presbyter of the church until his middle years.”<sup>12</sup> That Tertullian was not a presbyter “may be inferred from some of the comments that he made in which he contrasted himself and lay Christians with clerics on the topic of second marriage and found no contrast at all (*On Monogamy* 12.2; *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7.3).”<sup>13</sup> Significantly, Tertullian also never identifies himself as a priest, nor does he refer to his official position in the church in order to strengthen an argument;<sup>14</sup> a rhetor as skilled as Tertullian would certainly not have ignored an opportunity to enhance an argument with such an assertion of authority.

As with his status as a layperson, some details of Tertullian’s life can be found through a close reading of his treatises. For example, Tertullian’s introduction to *On Repentance*<sup>15</sup> demonstrates that he converted to Christianity in response to a specific event, which led him to reject his past life.<sup>16</sup> His treatise *To His Wife* reveals that he was married, and his identification of her as “my best beloved fellow-servant in the Lord”<sup>17</sup> suggests that she was also a Christian. Whether she converted like he did or was born into a Christian family is not known. The fact that Tertullian could read and write alone

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<sup>10</sup> Decret, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Jer., *De vir. ill.*, 53.1. This term “proconsular centurion” seems not to have existed in Carthaginian military; for further discussion of Tertullian’s father, see Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 11-21.

<sup>12</sup> Jer., *De vir. ill.*, 53.4.

<sup>13</sup> Dunn, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Barnes, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Tert., *De paenitentia* 1.1. Latin version edited by J.W.Ph. Borleffs in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* II (1954). English translation of *On Repentance*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>16</sup> Dunn, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Tert., *Ad uxorem*, 1.1.1. Latin version edited by A. Kroymann in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* I (1954). English translation of *To His Wife*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

demonstrates that he belonged to an elite class, since he had received the necessary education.<sup>18</sup> Tertullian likely received a higher education than most, as he “displays a disdain for the ‘rude’ and simple.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Tertullian’s writing style, references to a wide variety of Christian and classical sources, and the fact that he wrote in both Latin and Greek demonstrate that he must have progressed in his education to learn rhetoric at a tertiary level.<sup>20</sup> An example of his skilled use of classical sources can be seen in *Apology*, where he references over thirty literary authorities; the obscurity of some of these sources is perhaps due to the fact that “a man who wished to regard himself as genuinely erudite would not be satisfied with the standard texts, especially if he were intent on impressing others.”<sup>21</sup> Regardless of Tertullian’s intentions, the fact that he was able to reference such a large number and variety of sources confirms that his family belonged to an upper class, since only someone from a wealthy family could afford to be granted such an education.<sup>22</sup>

Tertullian put this rhetorical education to good use during his extensive writing career. There are 31 extant treatises of Tertullian, all in Latin,<sup>23</sup> but countless others have been lost. Dating the treatises in chronological order has proven difficult, as many treatises provide no indication or evidence of when they were written.<sup>24</sup> The criteria normally used to determine the order of his treatises include “doctrinal development, stylistic variation, disciplinary rigour, attitudes towards the Catholic church and the New

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<sup>18</sup> Dunn, 5.

<sup>19</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>20</sup> Dunn, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Barnes, 196. For further discussion of Tertullian’s knowledge of classic literature as being superior his that of his contemporaries, see Barnes 196-206.

<sup>22</sup> Dunn, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Prophecy movement, historical allusions and references to other writings.”<sup>25</sup> Some of these criteria obviously rely greatly on individual interpretation,<sup>26</sup> and as such no universal agreement on the chronology of treatises has been reached.<sup>27</sup> While questions remain as to the order of the treatises, Tertullian’s active period is agreed to be between about 196 to 212,<sup>28</sup> with some estimations extending to 222.<sup>29</sup> Nothing is known about the time or details of Tertullian’s death, although Jerome relates, “He is said to have lived to a very old age.”<sup>30</sup> Given a probable date of birth of 160-170 (estimated from the dating of his early works and the level and type of education necessary), Tertullian would have been around forty or fifty years old at the composition of his final treatise. Barnes suggests, “he can surely not have survived for very many more years,”<sup>31</sup> but the exact year and circumstance of his death remain unknown.

The treatises studied closely within this thesis cover the span of Tertullian’s writing career and were chosen because they contain a discussion of the issues found in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. The treatises will be studied closely for clues to Tertullian’s views of women, baptism, and martyrdom while being mindful of the fact that they were written up to a decade apart and that he wrote his treatises not as an exercise in spiritual exegesis but because there was a

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<sup>25</sup> Rankin, xiv.

<sup>26</sup> The question of Tertullian’s involvement in the New Prophecy (or Montanist) movement is beyond the scope of this thesis. The criteria for what constitutes New Prophecy is not agreed upon, and therefore using it as a determining factor for dating is difficult and problematic. For further exploration of this issue and evidence of Montanism in his treatises, see Barnes, 130-142; Dunn 9-10; and Decret 37-41.

<sup>27</sup> An in-depth discussion of the chronology issue is not necessary for this thesis. For Barnes’ dating, see Barnes 30-56. An alternative chronology is offered in Jean-Claude Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris: Institut des Etudes Augustiniennes. Collection des Etudes Augustiniennes Serie Antiquite 47, 1972). For a comparison between Barnes and Fredouille, see Rankin, xiv-xvii and Dunn, 7-10.

<sup>28</sup> Barnes, 55.

<sup>29</sup> Decret, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Jer., *De vir. ill.*, 53.5.

<sup>31</sup> Barnes, 59.

specific point in dispute, an argument to be made, or some error to be corrected.<sup>32</sup> As such, where there are some discrepancies in his viewpoints over time, it is not a question of him changing his mind but of writing with particular audiences in mind.<sup>33</sup> This thesis will take into consideration the audiences of each treatise and the potential rhetorical purpose Tertullian had for making his arguments. Therefore, the statements that seem like discrepancies can actually be found to be the result of a broader methodological and rhetorical structure within Tertullian's works, which helps to explain his contradictory views on the issues within the narratives of Thecla and Perpetua.

### **Thecla**

The character of Thecla first appears in the late-second century text the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.<sup>34</sup> This text was likely originally published as part of a work known as the *Acts of Paul*, and Tertullian probably knew of the text as part of this larger framework,<sup>35</sup> since he refers to Thecla in the context of "certain Acts of Paul, which are falsely so named, [that] claim the example of Thecla."<sup>36</sup> Briefly, Paul is depicted as preaching a message of chastity in Iconium, which causes Thecla to become enamored with his words and to abandon her responsibilities to her mother and her fiancé in order to follow Paul. She overcomes two persecutions by miraculous means, eventually baptizing herself in a pool of ravenous seals that are miraculously killed by a lightning bolt before they can harm her. After this, she is released and dresses as a man to embark on a journey to find Paul. When she finds him, he gives her his blessing to go out and teach, and she is depicted as doing so until her death many years later.

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<sup>32</sup> Dunn, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>35</sup> Gail P.C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 79.

<sup>36</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17

A brief discussion of the genre and audience of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is also necessary. The Thecla narrative “echoes the genre of the ancient romantic novel, though explicitly in the service of a religiously infused ethical project.”<sup>37</sup> Like its predecessor the Greek romance, this work is a written narrative, “yet many scholars . . . do not presuppose an original written form but, as in the case of the romantic novels, an oral prehistory.”<sup>38</sup> Tertullian’s assertion that an Asian presbyter “compiled (*contruere*)”<sup>39</sup> the *Acts of Paul*<sup>40</sup> adds further credence to the argument of an oral history, suggesting that, while a presbyter in Asia Minor edited the text, his work may have been the result of oral traditions transmitted by earlier communities of women.<sup>41</sup> There are many references in antiquity to women’s storytelling, suggesting that this practice would have been an important means by which their social traditions were preserved and transmitted.<sup>42</sup> The written version of the Thecla narrative takes the traditional formula of the ancient novel and adjusts it to fit within the Christian framework of personal piety. This standard formula “involves the meeting of the paired lovers; their subsequent separation by circumstance, whether hardship or adventure; and their eventual restoration to each other by the end of the story, a restoration often symbolized by marriage and generally predicated upon mutual fidelity and trust in the divine.”<sup>43</sup> A similar framework can be seen in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, but with an emphasis on “the ascetic imperative that they affirm resides at the heart of Christian commitment.

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<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 140.

<sup>38</sup> Streete, 80.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 140.

The desire of the lover for the beloved transforms itself in the Apocryphal Acts into the desire of the Christian for unity with God.”<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the Greek novel, the Thecla narrative echoes the oral Hellenistic chastity stories as well as “parallels to the tale types in which the heroine is abandoned by the hero and ends up pursuing him in male clothing in order to reunite with him.”<sup>45</sup> This is clearly demonstrated in the text as Paul abandons Thecla on more than one occasion and she states that she seeks only to be reunited with him. Understanding the narrative as an extension of the Greek literary tradition is important because it demonstrates that Thecla’s actions would not have seemed extreme or out of the ordinary within this genre. That is, where Tertullian expresses his dissatisfaction with Thecla’s adoption of the male activities of teaching and baptizing, this kind of blurring of the gender lines would have been expected (or at least accepted) for a female character within the genre of the romantic novel. At the same time, however, “to view the characterization of Thecla merely as a stereotype of ancient romance is to neglect several aspects of her story that at least potentially suggest verisimilitude with the social concerns of ancient Christian women - especially the concerns of women’s asceticism and travel, and the relation of charismatic wandering women to the settled, local communities.”<sup>46</sup> As such, a kind of balance must be struck between understanding Thecla as part of a broader literary tradition as well as a very real and potentially influential representation of a Christian woman in the second century. Tertullian’s view of Thecla as a very real threat to male authority might ignore the potential literary reasons for Thecla’s actions, but others in the Christian community did not share these fears. Since many of Tertullian’s contemporaries and subsequent generations of writers

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>45</sup> Davis, 14-15.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 19.

considered Thecla as the ideal representation of a virgin martyr,<sup>47</sup> it is possible that these men understood her role as a fictional representation of the ideals of chastity and asceticism. Therefore, both the literary function and the potential real-life implications of Thecla's actions must be considered in order to understand Tertullian's views and why he is apparently alone in his opposition.

The intended audience of such Christian novels is the subject of much scholarly debate. Building off of the strength and positive portrayal of the female characters, some scholars such as Davies, MacDonald, and Burrus all assume that communities of celibate women were responsible for creating such Christian "anti-romance" tales.<sup>48</sup> However, "by the fourth century Thecla had become an exemplar of virginity for those church fathers who were anxious to promote asceticism,"<sup>49</sup> suggesting that Thecla's example was used by the church as a kind of ideal virgin-martyr and not to promote female autonomy or authority.<sup>50</sup> The genre of the ancient novel was at one point believed to be composed exclusively for a female audience, but most scholars no longer accept this<sup>51</sup> and suggest that the intended audience must be understood to be a mixture of both men and women. The lack of consensus of the audience of the text also demonstrates that early Christians (both men and women) understood the literary experiences of women in different ways, and as representing different models of authority.<sup>52</sup> That is, there was no single audience who was reading the text and each audience would have interpreted it in different ways to fit within their communities' specific ideals. However, Tertullian's rejection of the narrative does provide a glimpse

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<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1986): 76.

<sup>48</sup> Streete, 80.

<sup>49</sup> Leonie Hayne, "Thecla and the Church Fathers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 210.

<sup>50</sup> Streete, 80.

<sup>51</sup> Davis, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Streete, 80.

into one type of people who were reading and being influenced by the text, as his anger against those who were using Thecla's example to teach and baptize "confirms Thecla's early association with the social and religious empowerment of women."<sup>53</sup>

### **Perpetua**

In contrast to the ancient romantic novel formula of the Thecla narrative, Perpetua's text has a foundation in real events and is composed of a prison diary and a framing narrative. The content of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* describes the imprisonment and martyrdom of a group of catechumens in Carthage in 203 and is situated by scholars "historically and juridicially in the religiopolitical circumstances of early third-century North Africa."<sup>54</sup> In a diary allegedly written by Perpetua herself and framed by a narrative written by an anonymous editor, the catechumens' final days are explored from their arrest to their deaths in the arena. Perpetua records both the events that she experiences as well as a series of visions and her interpretation of these dreams. Perpetua speaks of the pain that she experiences as she must reject her familial obligations (to her father and her infant son) in order to retain her status as a Christian. Once in the arena, a narrator tells of the final actions and deaths of the martyrs.

While the author of the diary cannot be proven to have been Perpetua herself, most modern scholars accept the narrator's assertion that the text is made up of the diaries "as she left it described by her own hand and with her own mind."<sup>55</sup> This makes

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<sup>53</sup> Davis, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 85

<sup>55</sup> *Passio Perpetuae*, 1.1. Latin version edited by Herbert Anthony Musurillo in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). English translation by R.E. Wallis in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885). All chapter citations are Wallis'. For a brief summary of the arguments of scholars who accept that Perpetua is the author, see L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 95.

the text important for study simply for the fact that it is possibly the earliest Christian text written by a woman.<sup>56</sup> As evidence of female authorship, Shaw asserts that Perpetua's writing "flows directly out of a world of oral communication to which we otherwise have little, or no, access."<sup>57</sup> Therefore, while the story itself does not have a basis in previous oral tales, the way that Perpetua tells her story may have been influenced by narratives that do, such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Given the unique nature of the text, it is difficult to assign it to a specific genre. Indeed, while Perpetua does not engage in writing as an ascetic exercise, "her diary can fruitfully be read as a record of ascetic engagement, where disciplined practice and repetition generate a new identity and inaugurate a new symbolic reality."<sup>58</sup> That is, Perpetua's record of her emotions and actions while imprisoned demonstrates her attempts to redefine her identity. She must transition from being a Roman wife and mother to a Christian martyr. There is very little to which Perpetua's writing can be compared, meaning, "if Perpetua was the first to so write, she was, in many ways, the last. There were to be few repetitions of her singular achievement."<sup>59</sup> While Thecla's actions may be examined in relation to the actions of women in countless novels from antiquity, Perpetua's diary stands very much alone and must be interpreted based upon the contextual information available. Since Perpetua was part of the same Carthaginian community as Tertullian, it is likely that she would have read his treatises and gained much of her understanding of Christianity from his writings.

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<sup>56</sup> Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 86.

<sup>57</sup> Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past & Present* 139 (1993): 20.

<sup>58</sup> Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 86.

<sup>59</sup> Shaw, 20.

While the bulk of the text is composed of the diary accounts, the role of the editor must not be overlooked, since he could choose how he compiled Perpetua's writings.<sup>60</sup> That is, while "There are few signs that the editing was a deliberate attempt to distort . . . the resulting text seems to mirror the way in which he assumed this text ought naturally to be interpreted."<sup>61</sup> Therefore, while perhaps not intending to distract from Perpetua's words, the narrator's insertions do reveal the way another Christian viewed the actions of the martyrs. By adding in his own views about the glory of the martyrs and how they should be regarded, the editor further shapes the audience's response. As such, while a woman may have written the core of the text, the narrative structure and the interpretations of the events within are the work of a male writer. Although the narrator is anonymous, he is often identified as Tertullian.<sup>62</sup> Whether or not Tertullian actually wrote the framework of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* or was present during their suffering in the arena, his dates of activity within Carthage coincide with the events of the text<sup>63</sup> and he was aware of the suffering of these martyrs. He references Perpetua in his treatise on *The Soul*, asking, "How is it that the most heroic martyr Perpetua on the day of her passion saw only her fellow-martyrs there, in the revelation which she received of Paradise, if it were not that the sword which guarded the entrance permitted none to go in, except those who had died in Christ and not in Adam?"<sup>64</sup> The vision that he references here is found in the text of the *Passion*, but it is seen by the catechumen Saturus, not Perpetua.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, this citation<sup>66</sup> shows both that Tertullian is at least familiar with the narrative (even if he is not the author of it), and that he subscribes

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<sup>60</sup> Cobb, 96.

<sup>61</sup> Shaw, 30.

<sup>62</sup> Streete, 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>64</sup> Tert., *An.* 55.

<sup>65</sup> Streete, 50.

<sup>66</sup> Tertullian is the first writer to mention Perpetua. Streete, 52.

to the beliefs and arguments about martyrdom found within it. Tertullian's description of Perpetua as "the most heroic martyr" stands in sharp contrast to his association of Thecla to "some new serpent . . . like that original one."<sup>67</sup> The reasons for these differences will be explored and examined in six chapters.

### Chapter Overview

The first chapter will discuss the labels that Tertullian places on women and how these categories affect his views and expectations of Perpetua and Thecla. Tertullian sees clear distinctions between the broad term "woman" and the specific *kind* of woman an individual is, such as a virgin, wife, or widow. He labels these sub-categories "species," each with their own "proper terms."<sup>68</sup> In addition to *On the Veiling of Virgins* and *On Prayer*, this chapter will focus on Tertullian's *To His Wife* in order to demonstrate the way that Tertullian viewed the species of virgins, wives, and widows as having different behavioural expectations, appropriateness of dress, and inherent biological makeup that causes him to have severe reactions against women who defy these expectations. A woman who does not fit within these categories is seen as a "third generic class, some monstrosity with a head of its own."<sup>69</sup>

Building off the first chapter, the second chapter will engage in a close reading of the Thecla and Perpetua narratives alongside Tertullian's views of their species (virgin and wife/mother, respectively). Tertullian reproduces standard assumptions about

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<sup>67</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

<sup>68</sup> Tert., *De Oratione* 22. Latin version edited by G.F. Diercks in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* I (1954). English translation of *Tertullian's Tract on the Prayer*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1953). "distinguit autem utramque speciem suis uocabulis designans."

<sup>69</sup> Tert., *De Virginibus Velandis* 7. Latin version edited by E. Dekkers in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* II (1954). English translation of *On the Veiling of Virgins*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870).

gender, seeing virgins as “important symbols of the holiness of the church”<sup>70</sup> and wives as upholding the Roman ideals of “marriage, fertility, fidelity, modesty, and beauty.”<sup>71</sup> This chapter will especially focus on the instances in the texts where each woman is identified by her species, as well as when and how she explicitly rejects this identification (at least, the identification as Tertullian sees it). The differences in the way that each woman rejects her species will play an important role in attempting to discern some of the reasons why Tertullian might have reacted the way that he did. It will be argued that, while both Thecla and Perpetua engage in some activities that oppose Tertullian’s views of their species, the way that Thecla rejects her family and seeks to dress as a man is far more egregious than Perpetua’s rejection of her familial role.

Tertullian’s opposition to Thecla appears within his treatise *On Baptism*, indicating that his rejection of the narrative is closely tied to the way that he views this initiation ritual. This third chapter will engage in a close reading of this treatise in order to understand the context in which Tertullian opposed Thecla and the surrounding issues that he sees concerning baptism within his community. Tertullian focuses on certain aspects of initiation, such as the role of water and triple immersion in the ceremony, as well as asserting who has the authority to confer baptism under what circumstances. It is in this context of establishing authority that his opposition to female baptizers (including self-baptizers like Thecla) occurs. He states that only clergy should be allowed to perform baptisms, unless in the case of an emergency where a person is likely to die and there is no bishop nearby who may perform the baptism. In this case, a layperson may confer baptism on the dying, but only because this layperson technically has the capacity to be ordained. Since a woman could never become a priest, she is

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<sup>70</sup> Rankin, 179.

<sup>71</sup> Cobb, 121.

never allowed to confer baptism. The identification of issues such as these will allow for a broader understanding of the way the narratives of both Thecla and Perpetua fit within Tertullian's worldview and his understanding of the Christian initiation rituals and authority structure.

In *On Baptism*, Tertullian states, "if certain Acts of Paul, which are falsely so named, claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptize, let men know that in Asia the presbyter who compiled that document, thinking to add of his own to Paul's reputation, was found out, and though he professed he had done it for love of Paul, was deposed from his position."<sup>72</sup> Drawing on the information from the previous chapter, the fourth chapter will focus on the way that baptismal imagery from Tertullian's treatise corresponds to the way that baptism is portrayed in the Thecla and Perpetua narratives. Both texts contain several references to baptism and baptismal imagery, whether in direct relation to the main female characters or to the surrounding action. Thecla's self-baptizing demonstrates a kind of authority that would have been inappropriate for both a virgin and a layperson, and is therefore one of the main reasons that she is so troubling to Tertullian. However, much of the imagery that Tertullian connects to baptism in his treatise also appears in the Thecla text. In contrast, the circumstances of Perpetua's baptism and the corresponding baptismal imagery throughout the rest of the narrative remain consistent with Tertullian's views on the topic as demonstrated in *On Baptism*. Ultimately, this chapter will suggest that Tertullian's interest in proper baptism (and therefore his rejection of Thecla) is a symptom of the larger issue of the struggle for authority within his church community.

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<sup>72</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

The fifth chapter focuses on Tertullian's treatise *To the Martyrs*, which was composed in order to encourage a specific group of imprisoned martyrs. While some scholars suggest that this group of martyrs was actually Perpetua and her fellow catechumens,<sup>73</sup> this is not accepted universally. Nevertheless, this treatise is important because it provides insight into the way that Tertullian understood the martyr's function within the Christian community. He expects martyrs to act as examples to all Christians and to provide encouragement to those who may have strayed from the church. He further suggests that martyrs may have the ability to forgive sins and impart peace upon others, thereby elevating them to an almost priestly level of authority. It is because martyrs are given access to positions of authority within the church that Tertullian views their actions so critically and insists that they must behave in a certain manner because their behaviour might have a wide impact. Since Tertullian considers Thecla's actions to be subversive, her role as a martyr gives her the power to influence others to act in a similarly inappropriate manner. In this treatise, he encourages the martyrs to act in a specific way in order to avoid similar issues. He encourages them to be united while imprisoned and to endure the pain of torture and imprisonment joyfully since they will be rewarded with a place in heaven. Tertullian compares martyrs to gladiators, athletes, and soldiers who must endure hardships during training so that they may be better able to fight their final battle. This clearly demonstrates Tertullian's belief that all Christians are in a war of faith. Similar imagery occurs in both the Thecla and Perpetua narratives, demonstrating the pervasiveness of these ideals as well as the significance that members of the community might place upon the martyrs. Finally, this treatise shows that Tertullian believed that women as well as men could attain glory in martyrdom,

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<sup>73</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 86-87.

suggesting that martyrdom is the one place within Tertullian's worldview in which women could be equal to men.

The final chapter will explore the way martyrdom is portrayed in the Thecla and Perpetua narratives and will also compare these depictions with Tertullian's view of martyrs as found in *To the Martyrs*. It will be shown that Thecla's martyrdom is problematic because she is arrested not for being a Christian, but as a result of her rejection of gender role and identification. Additionally, Thecla's martyrdom is never completed, as she does not die from her trials in the arena. In contrast, Perpetua's martyrdom occurs as a direct result of her self-identification as a Christian, and her martyrdom is completed appropriately in the arena. The events of Perpetua's imprisonment and death closely mirror the content of *To the Martyrs*, whereas the Thecla narrative again contains many instances of opposing or problematic views. Additionally, Perpetua's visions contain much of the same imagery as Tertullian's treatise, suggesting a common worldview that would have encouraged Tertullian's approval of Perpetua. This chapter will also refer back to Tertullian's gender expectations from the first two chapters as a way of further asserting that Perpetua acts in way befitting her status as a Roman wife turned Christian martyr while Thecla continually challenges her role as a virgin and does not fit within Tertullian's views of the ideal martyr since she does not die.

Ultimately, this thesis attempts to understand the reasons why Tertullian may have held differing views of the female martyrs Thecla and Perpetua. By examining closely the treatises that deal most closely with the issues found in the Thecla and Perpetua narratives, it is possible to gain insight into the way that Tertullian himself may have understood these texts. While Tertullian claims to reject Thecla only based on her actions of teaching and baptizing, it is clear that there are several other objectionable

aspects to her narrative that must also be considered as possible reasons for Tertullian's rejection of the entire text. In comparison, the Perpetua narrative is revealed to be largely in line with Tertullian's views, perhaps because it originated in Carthage during Tertullian's active period. This kind of comparison has never been undertaken by any other scholars and is important because it will yield insights into the kind of issues that faced Tertullian and his church community. Tertullian's theological treatises might use complex language and discuss minute theological issues, but he is always responding to specific events and questions within his community. By juxtaposing several of these treatises with the more readily accessible and popular texts of *The Acts of Thecla* and *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, it will be made clear how Tertullian dealt with these issues and how he attempted to shape the opinions and beliefs of his peers. This is an important approach to take because it shows how Tertullian's views were reinforced or challenged within popular literature of his contemporaries and how Tertullian dealt with these differences. Tertullian was troubled by the plurality within the Christian community of his time and his treatises reveal his attempt to consolidate these beliefs to align with his own.

## Chapter 1 - Tertullian's Identifications of the Species of Women

Tertullian's writings consistently display a deep concern with the behaviour and appearance of women, especially as these issues relate to their roles within the church. Before he can discuss what his expectations for these women are, however, he must define how he views their gender. In the most focused of his treatises on this question, he compares the term "women" and the subcategories of "virgin", "wife", and "widow" to the scientific classifications of genus and species.<sup>74</sup> In both treatises, the original Latin specifically uses the term species. He references Paul, saying "he does make a distinction, designating both species under their proper terms."<sup>75</sup> Further, he explains, "Of the natural word, the general word is woman. Of the general, again, the special is virgin, or wife, or widow, or whatever other names, even of the successive stages of life, are added hereto."<sup>76</sup> Tertullian uses this categorical language in order to enforce the rhetorical distinction he wants to make between virgins, wives, and widows. Tertullian's examination of these issues was a response to the fact that others within his Carthaginian Christian community, and indeed within the broader Christian world, were starting to believe that both virginity and widowhood gave Christian women access to certain positions of authority. Tertullian counters this movement by re-asserting traditional patriarchal Roman family values through creating an understanding of gender that both acknowledges the differences between species of women while simultaneously asserting that these differences ultimately make little difference, since virgins, wives, and widows are still women after all.

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<sup>74</sup> Tertullian, *De Oratione* 22. *Tertullian's Tract on the Prayer*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1953); Tert., *De Virginibus Velandis* 4. Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870).

<sup>75</sup> Tert., *Orat.* 22. ". . . distinguit autem utramque speciem suis uocabulis designans . . ."

<sup>76</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 4.7. "Naturale uocabulum est femina, naturalis uocabuli generale mulier, generalis etiam speciale uirgo uel nupta uel uidua uel quot etiam aetatis nomina accedunt."

This chapter will first study the reasons why Tertullian examines this subject, as well as the rhetorical arguments Tertullian uses to define the terms. Next, the species of virgin, wife, and widow will be examined in order to demonstrate the different expectations placed on each. While some members of the Carthaginian church believed that virginity allowed for women to have special access to positions of authority, Tertullian reinforces the traditional Roman views of the family. Tertullian's concern with identifying the roles of women and the consequences of these identifications impact the way he views the narratives of Thecla and Perpetua, since Thecla is a virgin and Perpetua is a wife and mother. In order to most fully understand why he views these two women the way he does, it is essential to understand how he views the whole gender as well as the subcategories of virgin and wife.

Two of Tertullian's treatises that deal most directly with the issue of the identifications of women are *On the Veiling of Virgins* and *On Prayer*. Timothy Barnes dates *On Prayer* to between 198 and 203, which is early in Tertullian's writing career, and *On the Veiling of Virgins* to 208 to 209.<sup>77</sup> Geoffrey Dunn agrees with this assessment, noting "*On the Veiling of Virgins* is an expanded form of what appeared in the earlier and briefer *On Prayer* . . . [and] seems . . . to have a smooth and flowing tripartite structure, whereas the material in *On Prayer* seems more jumbled and haphazardly arranged."<sup>78</sup> This can be seen in that in the five to ten years between the treatises, Tertullian's attitude towards the veiling of virgins hardened from the somewhat relaxed attitude that no one could be compelled to be veiled to his assertion that all women (regardless of species) must be veiled.<sup>79</sup> It should be noted that, unlike *On*

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<sup>77</sup> Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 55.

<sup>78</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 136.

<sup>79</sup> See Tert., *Orat.* 22; *Virg. Vel.* 3.

*Prayer*, in which veiling formed only a small part of a larger discussion about prayer in general, *On the Veiling of Virgins* was likely written in response to a concrete situation in which some of the virgins who were going nonveiled were trying to convince other women that they, too, should forego the veil. This direct opposition to Tertullian's beliefs might have been what led to the later treatise's stronger language.<sup>80</sup>

More important than the specific issue that compelled Tertullian to write is the language he uses to make his argument about types of women. In attempting to situate his arguments in both treatises, Tertullian strives to identify the meaning behind the term "woman" to see how it is used in the earlier tradition of scripture, from nature, and from ecclesiastical teachings. He argues that the term "woman" should be understood as containing within it different classes of women including, for example, virgins. To prove this, he notes that Genesis 2:23 refers to Eve as a "woman" when she was a virgin, and therefore this term should continue to be used to signify both virgins and non-virgins alike.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Tertullian points out that in Luke 1:42, an angel addresses Mary, saying "Blessed be thou among women," despite the fact that earlier, in Luke 1:26-27, she was clearly identified as a virgin.<sup>82</sup> It is important for Tertullian to establish this precedent because it allows him to defend Paul and argue against those who say that virgins do not have to be veiled because Paul did not explicitly use the term "virgins" in his letter.<sup>83</sup> Having established that "women" encompasses all species of females, Tertullian can more effectively argue that Paul's statement that "every woman praying or

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<sup>80</sup> Dunn, 136.

<sup>81</sup> Tert., *Orat.* 22.

<sup>82</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 6.5.

<sup>83</sup> Importantly, Tertullian refers to Paul's Greek in making the distinction between "women" and "females", saying, "What of the fact that in the Greek speech, in which the apostle wrote his letters, it is usual to say, "women" rather than "females;" that is, γυναῖκας rather than θηλείας? Therefore if that word, γυνή, which by interpretation represents what "female" (*femina*) represents, is frequently used *instead* of the name of the sex, he has named the *sex* in saying γυναῖκα; but in the *sex* even the *virgin* is embraced." Tert., *Orat.* 22.

prophesying with her head unveiled dishonors her head”<sup>84</sup> most definitely includes virgins, who are a specific kind of woman.

Once he has established this definition, Tertullian reports the argument that people who support the nonveiling of virgins within his community are making. According to him, they state that, “no mention is made by the apostle where he is prescribing about the veil, but that ‘women’ only are named; whereas, if he had willed virgins as well to be covered, he would have pronounced concerning ‘virgins’ also together with the ‘women’ named.”<sup>85</sup> This is important because it shows that the separation of a type or status of woman from the all-encompassing term “woman” is of concern to other people within the Christian community, and not just to Tertullian. That is, his argument is not merely a rhetorical device that has no basis in the reality of the situation he faces; rather, Tertullian is forced to discuss the differences between types of women precisely because others within his community are already doing so. He believes that excluding virgins from their understanding of “women” is improper and therefore he must convey what he believes to be the correct interpretation before he can move on to other issues. Tertullian must define how he will be using the terms that relate to gender roles in order to make sure that his audience understands his point and the context of his arguments.

However, Tertullian does not stop at scriptural exegesis, but goes on to suggest that the inclusion of virgins within the broad term “women” does not simply designate a stage or state of womanhood, but is representative of a different kind or species of woman altogether, showing that “‘woman’ is the genus that includes ‘virgin’ as a

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<sup>84</sup> 1 Cor. 11:5.

<sup>85</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 4.1.

species.”<sup>86</sup> To be sure, part of the distinction between the species of women comes from age and the phase of life they are in, but this does not tell the whole story since some women can (and do) choose to remain virgins into old age. He tries to clarify his argument further:

Subject, therefore, the special is to the general (because the general is prior); and the succedent to the antecedent and the partial to the universal: (each) is implied in the word itself to which it is the subject; and is signified in it, because contained in it. Thus neither hand, nor foot, nor any one of the members, requires to be signified when the body is named.<sup>87</sup>

While similar, the comparison of the types of women to body parts is not entirely congruent. A species is part of a genus but can also exist separately, unlike a body part that cannot exist without the whole body. What is most important is the idea that, when one mentions the term “body,” it is understood to contain all aspects of that body. Similarly, when a genus is mentioned, it is implied that all species within that genus are taken into account.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, Tertullian believes that when Paul, or anyone, uses the term “woman,” it should be understood that they are including in that all the parts or species of women. He makes this clear when he states that Paul’s phrase “every woman” must refer to women “of every age, of every rank, of every condition.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Dunn, 137.

<sup>87</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 4.7. “Subiectum est igitur generali speciale, quia generale prius est, ut subcessivum antecessivo et portionale universali: in ipso intelligitur, cui subicitur, et in ipso significatur, quia in ipso continetur. Sic nec manus nec pes nec ullum membrorum desiderat nominari corpore nominato.”

<sup>88</sup> Tertullian’s use of genus and species to refer to types women seems to have been unique within the ancient world. I am not confident that he is using these terms in the biological sense that English suggests, but rather I suspect that he uses these terms in order to emphasize the separation and distinction that he sees between the categories. As will be shown, virgins, wives, and widows cannot cross the barriers between species, nor can they revert back once they have progressed to the subsequent species. Other terms that he could have used (for example, “categories” or “types” of women) leave open the possibility of changing memberships or allegiances; genus and species form more rigid barriers that cannot easily be overcome.

<sup>89</sup> Tert., *Orat.* 22.

Included in these ranks and conditions of women are virgins, wives, and widows.<sup>90</sup> However, the fact that Tertullian identifies virgins, wives, and widows as different species does not mean that any of these individual species deserve special treatment or recognition. That is, while the members of each species are expected to uphold specific criteria and behave in a certain way, they are all still women first and foremost. There are some criteria that Tertullian believes all women must adhere to, such as his argument that virgins still needed to be veiled within the church because all women must be veiled. There should be no distinguishing feature to separate the species of virgins from any other species of woman. These identifications will be important in the discussion of his reactions to Thecla and Perpetua and in understanding the way each woman fits within her designated species. First, however, the history of these terms within Tertullian's late second-century Carthaginian context and his use of the sub-categories will be explored.

### **Virgins**

As with other species of women, Tertullian understands virgins "not from a strictly theological standpoint, but from the history and present condition of the church."<sup>91</sup> In the classical world, female virgins formed "part of the timeless religious landscape."<sup>92</sup> However, unlike Tertullian's views on virgins and chastity, the virginal state of the priestesses and prophetesses of the classical world was "of crucial importance for the community precisely because it was anomalous."<sup>93</sup> That is, earlier classical religions regarded virgins as forming a separate and distinct part of religious society that was significant because it was unique. More importantly, contrary to how it comes to be

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<sup>90</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 4.

<sup>91</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 178.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 8.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

viewed in the Christian perspective, virginity in the classical world did “not represent the primal state of humankind that could, and should, be recaptured by men quite as much as by women.”<sup>94</sup> That is, while Christians such as Tertullian demonstrate a belief in the virtue of perpetual virginity, this is different from the expected and necessary virginity of the bride, which all classical societies ascribed to. Thus, while the classical world may not have viewed virginity as the ideal for all women to follow, examining the literature of the classical world does show that virginity “symbolizes a virtue that can be distinctly feminine . . . . When it relates to the much-praised ancient virtue of chastity, virginity before and fidelity after marriage, it is characterized, advised, and admired as a virtue of women.”<sup>95</sup> Despite the praiseworthy nature of virgins, and the admiration of virgins who form part of important religious sects, it is rare that women would remain virgins for their entire life. Instead, “women’s sexual restraint was seen as their gender’s form of *sophrosyne*, self control.”<sup>96</sup> However, this sexual restraint need not manifest itself in strict virginity. Instead, a woman was expected to maintain her chastity throughout all stages of her life. This history of finding virtue in sexual restraint provides the foundation for the later Christian views and Tertullian’s exultation of virginity.<sup>97</sup>

Tertullian’s main discussion of virgins comes by way of his argument that virgins must be veiled. It should first be noted that the veiling of women is not a uniquely Christian convention; rather Tertullian is reproducing Roman ideas of gender differences

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Gail P.C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 75.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Virginity and chastity are related terms, but unlike virginity, chastity must continue throughout the life of both women and men. For example, Tertullian emphasizes chastity within marriage, and this is often expressed through modest dress and behaviour than an actual abstinence of sexual intercourse. The idea of sexual restraint can be applied to both virgins and non-virgins, since it is representative of a kind of self-control. Tertullian’s views that outer modest appearance is related to inner virtue and chastity will be explored further throughout this thesis.

and virtues. In antiquity, the sexual nature of women's heads, and therefore the necessity of covering them, was intrinsically linked to "sexual authority, [and] the dominance of the male gaze."<sup>98</sup> The veiling of virgins and wives alike within the Roman cultural context was done in order to preserve herself for the gaze of the husband alone.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Tertullian believes that it is a fact of nature that all women, including virgins, are seductive, and being a baptized Christian cannot change this.<sup>100</sup> Being nonveiled invites the intrusive gaze of men and therefore cannot be reconciled with chastity. The veiling of women is furthermore connected to the virtues of chastity because any woman who does not wear a veil "is guilty of 'provocation,' of 'inviting' the gaze of another."<sup>101</sup> All women should be veiled in order to protect themselves from the gaze of any man who is not their husband. Veiling was also connected to chastity and honour within the Jewish context, as well as being a representation of a woman's self-respect. The veil was a sign of a woman's dignity, and "to remove it is an insult as well as an assault and marks her as a 'common' woman."<sup>102</sup> Clearly, in the foundational Roman and Jewish contexts, the veiling of women was connected to the masculine gaze. Since it was impossible to stop men from looking upon women, it was the responsibility and the duty of the women to restrict what the men may gaze upon. Veiling therefore became a kind of agency by which women could demonstrate their honour and chastity by protecting themselves from men. The tradition of veiling

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<sup>98</sup> Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Veils, Virgins, and the Tongues of Men and Angels: Women's Heads in Early Christianity," in *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 139.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>100</sup> Brown, 81.

<sup>101</sup> D'Angelo, 141.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

therefore had deep roots outside of Christianity and this is what Tertullian is using as the basis for his arguments against the nonveiled virgins.

It is also important to note that veiling in Tertullian's time meant simply covering the head, not the face. For Roman women, the article of clothing used for this purpose was likely the mantle, which was a shawl draped around the body, similar to the male toga, which could be pulled up over the head when necessary.<sup>103</sup> The mantle had likely once been intended as protection against bad weather, but it soon became an essential covering for a modest woman, and no respectable woman would appear in public without her head covered.<sup>104</sup> While it is not clear what adult unmarried women (and therefore virgins) wore in public,<sup>105</sup> it is likely they would have copied the modest attire of the matrons. Additionally, virgins involved in religious ceremonies, such as the vestal virgins, wore specific attire, of which "the most important element [. . .] was the covering for the head."<sup>106</sup> Although contemporary portraits are rare, literary evidence and a few surviving garments<sup>107</sup> show that Jewish women seem to have worn hip-length veils, which were "an important part of the costume, as women by custom (but not by law) had to keep their head covered when outside."<sup>108</sup> Similarly, there is little evidence of pre-Roman North Africa, although there are some reliefs in Carthage that show women with the mantle covering their heads.<sup>109</sup> Once North Africa became Romanized, their women would have followed the Roman traditions of veiling when outside the home. Clearly, while fashions changed over time and across geographical regions, the practice of

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<sup>103</sup> Dunn, 141.

<sup>104</sup> A.T. Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Charleston, SC: Tempus Publishing Inc., 2000), 87.

<sup>105</sup> Dunn, 141.

<sup>106</sup> Croom, 112.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

wearing a head covering of some sort (or at least, the idea that it was proper to do so) was common for women and not a new development within Christianity.

Although he recognizes that virgins represent a different species of women, Tertullian does not believe that they deserve special treatment or recognition within the broader community by being permitted to wear different clothing. They are still women first and foremost and therefore must cover their heads. This treatise, as previously mentioned, addresses the problem of virgins claiming that they have the right to go nonveiled in church. Tertullian disagrees with this for many reasons. The first thing that is immediately clear is that, for Tertullian, the outward appearance of the virgins is directly related to their inner virtue.<sup>110</sup> Tertullian states, “You have denuded a maiden in regard of her head, and forthwith she wholly ceases to be a virgin to herself; she has undergone a change!”<sup>111</sup> By uncovering the head of a virgin, her entire being is somehow transformed. That is, he argues that “for a virgin to be seen or to be distinguished by any sort of honor nullifies her virginity.”<sup>112</sup> Ultimately, it is clear that Tertullian is focused on two main issues if a virgin were to go nonveiled, “the danger of the gaze, and the danger of honor and glory.”<sup>113</sup> Tertullian thinks that true virgins, if they would go without a head covering, would be “blushing at being recognized in public, quaking at being unveiled, as if they had been invited as it were to a rape . . . the very spirit itself is violated in a virgin by the abstraction of her covering, [and] she has learnt to lose what

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<sup>110</sup> He affirms this belief forcefully in other treatises such as *On the Apparel of Women*, where he states “To Christian modesty it is not enough to be so, but to seem so too.” Tert., *De Cultu Feminarum* 2:13. Latin version edited by A. Kroymann in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina I* (1954). English translation of *On the Apparel of Women*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>111</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 3.8.

<sup>112</sup> D’Angelo, 145.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

she used to keep.”<sup>114</sup> The essence of a virgin is manifested in her veil. If the veil is taken away, the central component of virginity is lost and the virgin is transformed into a different, indefinable species. This concept will be explored further in the following chapter, where Thecla engages in public behaviour that would be inappropriate for her species. She endeavors to teach and be seen in public and therefore stand out from the rest of the women. Regardless of her identity as a virgin, Thecla’s behaviour rejects the interpretation of gender that Tertullian attempts to recreate.

Tertullian further enforces the importance of the veil by revealing some of the less-than ideal situations that some virgins are involved in within his community. He references pregnancies among supposed virgins, showing that their sexual vulnerability is manifest in reality. He connects these instances directly to their lack of head covering:<sup>115</sup> “Deservedly, therefore, while they do not cover their head, in order they may be solicited for the sake of glory, they are forced to cover their bellies by the ruin resulting from infirmity.”<sup>116</sup> Again, this demonstrates Tertullian’s belief that outward appearances of modesty and chastity are directly related to the inner virtues. The implication seems to be that, if these women had kept their heads covered, they would not have found themselves in the situation of being pregnant out of wedlock because the veil would have ensured that their chastity was preserved. Tertullian argues that true virginity “betakes itself for refuge to the veil of the head as to a helmet, as to a shield, to protect its glory against the blows of temptations, against the dam of scandals, against suspicions and whispers of emulation; (against) envy also itself.”<sup>117</sup> Later, he addresses the virgins directly and implores them to “Put on the panoply of modesty; surround

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<sup>114</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 3.6.

<sup>115</sup> Dunn, 54.

<sup>116</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 14.2.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.1

yourself with the stockade of bashfulness; rear a rampart for your sex, which must neither allow your own eyes egress nor ingress to other people's."<sup>118</sup> This strong allegory shows the power that Tertullian places upon clothing. The veil is not merely fabric but armour protecting the virgins from the dangers of the gaze of men and the subsequent dishonour that may arise. The virgins therefore are given an agency with which to preserve their chastity. It is within their power to protect themselves by wearing the veil. The Thecla narrative explores the vulnerability of virgins, as Thecla is attacked while traveling alone. Tertullian's arguments that virgins should hide themselves away for their own safety is therefore validated, as Thecla is only endangered when she engages in activities that are inappropriate for her species.

Tertullian also believes that dishonesty would result if virgins are allowed to stop wearing their veils. He again recognizes the shortcomings of the real world as opposed to his idealized views as he writes, "If an uncovered head is a recognized mark of virginity, (then) if any virgin falls from the grace of virginity, she remains permanently with head uncovered for fear of discovery, and walks about in a garb which then indeed is another's."<sup>119</sup> In other words, she is "trapped because she could not suddenly start wearing a veil (to acknowledge that she was no longer physically a virgin) without drawing scandal upon herself."<sup>120</sup> Additionally, since not wearing a veil is seen as a seductive invitation to the male gaze, it is likely Tertullian expected that a virgin who does not wear a veil would end up corrupted sooner rather than later. If the object of the veil is to protect women from the gaze of men, Tertullian's argument that "true virginity

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 16.5.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 14.8.

<sup>120</sup> Dunn, 139.

does nothing to draw attention to itself; rather, it hides itself away”<sup>121</sup> is representative of this viewpoint and is not just misogynistic rhetoric. He states, “true and absolute and pure virginity fears nothing more than itself. Even female eyes it shrinks from encountering.”<sup>122</sup> If virgins are publicly acknowledged, either through being nonveiled or through special recognition within the congregation, “the public celebration they receive is likely to lead them to betray their virginity.”<sup>123</sup> It is therefore in the best interest of the virgins to not give them any public recognition. Being subjected to the gaze of the Christian community causes true virgins to be afraid and feel violated. Further, the more they are subjected to this public exposure, the more likely they are to compromise their chastity and cease to be virgins. The veil offers a measure of protection, but the veiling must be accompanied by a denial of distinguishing them in any way from the rest of the congregation.

Tertullian also utilizes an argument from nature that all women (including virgins) should wear veils in order to demonstrate that there is someone in authority over them,<sup>124</sup> an argument which will have significance in the discussion of the Thecla narrative. He argues this point referencing 1 Cor 11:3, “If ‘the man is head of the woman,’ of course (he is) of the virgin too, from whom comes the woman who has married; unless the virgin is a third generic class, some monstrosity with a head of its own.”<sup>125</sup> This is likely in response to the views of the Carthaginians who permit the virgins to go nonveiled as a way of signifying that “a virgin does indeed have a head of her own . . . [and] that a virgin is not subject to a husband, but only to Christ.”<sup>126</sup> This is

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 15.1.

<sup>123</sup> D’Angelo, 148.

<sup>124</sup> Dunn, 137.

<sup>125</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 7.2.

<sup>126</sup> D’Angelo, 149.

the result of a popular conviction that virginity did, in fact, represent a kind of “transcendence of sex”<sup>127</sup> since she did not belong to a man in earthly marriage but only to Christ in a heavenly bond. While some of the Carthaginian Christians are comfortable with this interpretation, Tertullian is clearly not. The idea of a third sex, neither male nor female but something other, is monstrous to him. A virgin may be a species within the genus woman, but she is a woman above all else and is therefore always under the authority of a man. Thecla rejects the male authority figures in her text, thereby rejecting one of the characteristics of her species and gender.

However, Tertullian does not insist that female-virgins be veiled only in order to subordinate them to men (both virginal and non-virginal). He notes, “it were sufficiently discourteous, that while *females*, subjected as they are throughout to men, bear in their front an honourable mark of their virginity . . . [while] so many men-virgins, so many voluntary eunuchs, should carry their glory in secret, carrying no token to make them, too, illustrious.”<sup>128</sup> Therefore, if “men-virgins” should “carry their glory in secret” (and Tertullian certainly agrees that they should, since it is more difficult for men to maintain sexual self control),<sup>129</sup> then female-virgins should do the same. In effect, male and female virgins should be designated as equals within the Christian community by being equally indistinguishable from the rest of their genders. Of course, to modern sensibilities, his way of showing this still seems to emphasize the inherent inequality between the sexes, for he says sarcastically that if female-virgins are going to be nonveiled, then “let [men-virgins] lurk in the churches with their heads veiled.”<sup>130</sup> This suggestion, which Tertullian clearly expects to be taken as ludicrous by his audience,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 10.1.

<sup>129</sup> Dunn, 139.

<sup>130</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 10.2.

shows that, whether virgins or not, Tertullian expects both women and men to maintain the responsibilities and expectations of their genders. Indeed, for Tertullian, “the Church was a somber assembly. No person in it, and much less a woman, could dare to claim to be exceptional.”<sup>131</sup> Female-virgins must be veiled because *all* women must be veiled. Men-virgins must remain nonveiled (and otherwise unadorned) because all men are nonveiled.

While Tertullian insists that there not be any outward differences between virgins and other women, he maintains that virgins are a specific type of women who have inherently different reactions to events than other types of women would. For example, he asserts, “You put a virgin to the blush more by praising than by blaming her; because the front of sin is more hard, learning shamelessness from and in the sin itself.”<sup>132</sup> This suggests that virgins are naturally more sensitive than other types of women since true virgins, unlike other women, do not respond positively to praise. They remain chaste not as a way to distinguish themselves within their community but for the sole purpose of glorifying God. The idea of virgins having different characters from their non-virginal counterparts occurs in both genders. He notes, “To blush if he sees a virgin is as much a mark of a chaste man, as of a chaste virgin is seen by a man.”<sup>133</sup> Therefore the act of blushing is an instinctual response for a virgin who looks upon others and who is looked upon. Blushing is not an act that can be consciously controlled by the body, and therefore it must be a natural feature of being a virgin. Furthermore, this blushing is closely related to shame of the flesh in that “Shame is an affect closely linked with

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<sup>131</sup> Brown, 81.

<sup>132</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 2.4.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

sensation, and this itself binds it tightly to the flesh.”<sup>134</sup> The blush, therefore, is a physical manifestation of the shame of the flesh through the colouring of the flesh. Shame “seems to come from somewhere deep inside us, [and] it registers most vividly on the exposed surfaces of our flesh. Shame arrives *as a feeling* - the hot spread of a blush.”<sup>135</sup> According to Tertullian, a characteristic that makes the species of virgin unique from other kinds of women is that praise causes the instinctual and involuntary response of blushing, which is a visible representation of shame.

In conclusion, Tertullian views virgins as a distinct species of women who are subject to different expectations than other kinds of women. They are expected to act at all times in a way that demonstrates their chastity. Some of their reactions are uncontrollable such as their tendency to blush under other people’s gazes and praises. Other expectations, including being constantly veiled, are required both to preserve their virginity as well as to remind them (and the rest of the church congregation) that they are still women, first and foremost. The virgins who want to go nonveiled should be understood more like disobedient teenagers who are rebelling against the system,<sup>136</sup> with Tertullian as the authority figure trying to re-assert his understanding of gender. There is no doubt that Tertullian is serious when he states, “nothing in the way of public honour is permitted to a virgin.”<sup>137</sup> Virginity is a quality to be admired, but the best way for virgins to act admirably is to act in a chaste and nondescript manner. Tertullian’s ideal virgin would be submissive and indistinguishable from any other woman. She would conform to all aspects of church society that are required of her. The virgin Thecla is depicted in opposition to nearly all of Tertullian’s ideals, and her subversive

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<sup>134</sup> Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 45.

<sup>135</sup> Burrus, 45.

<sup>136</sup> Dunn, 140.

<sup>137</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 9.6.

behaviour in terms of her species is one of the reasons why Tertullian rejects her entire narrative. This will be studied closely in the following chapter.

### **Wives**

Marriage has its roots long before Christianity's existence and formed a vital part of the fabric of the community and the continuation of traditions and ways of life. Peter Brown asserts, "the inhabitants of an ancient Mediterranean community . . . knew that they had few resources for continuity and cohesion more dependable, and for which they were more directly responsible, than their own bodies. If their little world was not to come to an end for lack of citizens, they must reproduce it, every generation, by marriage, intercourse and the begetting and rearing of children."<sup>138</sup> It was therefore a societal expectation that a woman would be changed from the species of a virgin to the species of a wife in order to become the related species of mother. This recognition of the importance of wives and mothers for creating life and allowing for the continuation of the community was reflected in the societal expectations of the actions and virtues of an ideal Roman woman. These included "marriage, fertility, fidelity, modesty, and beauty."<sup>139</sup> The way that Tertullian viewed marriage and wives is important to study in order to understand the way that Perpetua is held to a different set of criteria than is Thecla. Perpetua fulfills these ideals and shows continued concern for acting in a way befitting the role of a Roman wife and mother.

The ideologies of Roman society stressed the importance of bonds of affection between a husband and wife as part of the nuclear family. The Romans viewed marriage as a free consensus between a man and a woman.<sup>140</sup> The aspiration towards

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<sup>138</sup> Brown, 7.

<sup>139</sup> L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>140</sup> Brown, 16.

contentment within marriage can also be seen in inscriptions commissioned by wives in honour of their deceased husbands. In one such inscription from Carthage, “a wife says she ‘set up this monument to her blessed husband, who was most generous and dutiful; “while I lived with him, he never said a cruel word to me, never gave offense to me.””<sup>141</sup> While it is unlikely that inscriptions such as this represent the literal truth, they are at least a concrete example of the way that wives viewed the ideal husband and marriage.<sup>142</sup> The importance of marriage, and the balance between the husband and wife within it, is also demonstrated by the fact that marriage was seen as “a reassuring microcosm of the social order”<sup>143</sup> of Roman society. Indeed, a happy marriage that produced many children (and future Roman citizens) was represented in the emperor Augustus’ marriage laws, which rewarded fertile parents and pressured the divorced and widowed to remarry.<sup>144</sup> While these laws were modified to suspend their provisions against celibacy shortly after Constantine’s rise to power in the early fourth century,<sup>145</sup> they were still very much in place during Tertullian’s time and formed part of the consciousness of the society. Indeed, Tertullian recognizes the societal need for marriage, noting, “We do not indeed forbid the union of man and woman, blest by God as the seminary of the human race, and devised for the replenishment of the earth.”<sup>146</sup> Men must become husbands and women must become wives.

Once married, the Roman woman became, as Tertullian would put it, a different species. One way that the species of wife is different from other species of women is

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<sup>141</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz, “Wives and Husbands,” *Greece and Rome* 30 (1983): 44.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Brown, 17.

<sup>144</sup> Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 43.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>146</sup> Tert., *Ad uxorem*, 1.2.1. Tertullian, *To His Wife*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

that she is permitted to function in society in ways previously unavailable to her. As one half of a married couple, the wife may now appear in public, and wealthy wives were often expected to perform an important role as benefactresses to the artistic and religious sectors of their communities.<sup>147</sup> Inscriptions attest to the widespread nature of this practice and praise women who maintained temples, sponsored games, processions, and sacrifices as “model citizens of the type ‘married wealthy woman.’”<sup>148</sup> Therefore, a wife could increase the status of herself and her family by using her wealth to enhance the lives of the people of the community through public (and often religious) events. Indeed, it is not overstating the case to say that “sanctioned marriage was functionally the only goal for women, as well as men, who wished to participate in the respected public life of their cities.”<sup>149</sup>

However, it should be noted that the extent to which a wife could participate in society is determined far more by her social class than her gender.<sup>150</sup> Unlike their lower-class counterparts, elite Roman women regularly joined their husbands and male family members in taking part in a wide variety of Roman cultural and social activities.<sup>151</sup> However, upper-class women were far from independent and were still reliant upon their male relatives for things such as serving as their legal guardians, arranging their marriages, and funding their dowries.<sup>152</sup> The behaviour of women was of concern to men because a woman’s behaviour reflected upon her male relatives. Literature of the

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<sup>147</sup> Brown, 15.

<sup>148</sup> Lynn R. LiDonnici, “Women’s Religions and Religious Lives in the Greco-Roman City,” in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 86.

<sup>149</sup> Streete, 76.

<sup>150</sup> Judith P. Hallett, “Women’s lives in the ancient Mediterranean” in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

time demonstrates this, as heroic tales indicate that whenever a woman is discussed, a man's character is being judged in relation to the woman.<sup>153</sup> A woman therefore might go from reflecting positive attributes of her father and male relatives<sup>154</sup> to being understood as half of a social unit whose actions both reflect and are reflected in the qualities of her husband. Furthermore, only once a woman became a wife could she be trusted to participate more fully in public life. Identified as a Roman matron of noble birth, Perpetua would have understood these expectations and is depicted as meeting them before her arrest with the other catechumens. It is clear that marriage, and becoming a wife, was more than a simple societal expectation. It was a social necessity and it was virtually the only option available for the typical Roman woman. She must make the transition from virgin to wife and mother in order to be understood and serve a greater role within her society.<sup>155</sup>

In addition to the ability to play a (carefully-regulated) role within the public sphere, a wife (within both the Roman and Christian contexts) could and should play an important role within her household. Wives of the wealthier classes were expected to maintain the day-to-day activities of their households, including supervising large staffs of slaves.<sup>156</sup> The view that women were to take care of the private sphere should not be understood as an essentially minor role in comparison to their husband's "public" duties. Instead, "the notion of a 'private' sphere divested of 'public' significance would have seemed impossible (and undesirable) to the ancient mind. The *domus*, along with its

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<sup>153</sup> Cooper, 19.

<sup>154</sup> Hallett, 30.

<sup>155</sup> I am referring to women of the upper classes because Tertullian's arguments about marriage relate largely to the wealthier classes, to which he himself likely belongs. Furthermore, I will be applying his identification and understanding of wives to the representation of Perpetua, who is identified as "respectably born, liberally educated, a married matron." *Passio Perpetuae*, 1.1. *The Passion of Perpetua*, trans. R.E. Wallis in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885.)

<sup>156</sup> Hallett, 33.

aspects of family and dynasty, was the primary unit of cultural identity, political significance, and economic production.”<sup>157</sup> Therefore, the managerial duties of the high-ranking Roman woman were of vital importance to the place of the whole family within society. As a result, a properly pious wife “could turn a large Roman household into a holy place.”<sup>158</sup>

The previous descriptions of the roles and expectations of Roman wives demonstrate the context that Tertullian and his audience would have been familiar with. Tertullian discusses marriage most closely in the treatise *To His Wife*. Here, he addresses his wife as “my best beloved fellow-servant in the Lord,”<sup>159</sup> which implies that his she was also a Christian, although whether she was born into a Christian family or converted like Tertullian is not known. That he identifies her as a fellow-servant in his Christian work demonstrates an important difference between the species of virgin and wife. While Tertullian believes that a virgin will blush and feel shame if she is given any sort of public attention, the wife is a partner with her husband in his Christian activities as well as his non-religious ones. However, neither of these women are permitted any kind of official recognition, and the outer distinction between virgin and wife should not be evident. In keeping with the Roman expectations of the role of the wife, Tertullian acknowledges the power that a wife has to influence the religious activities of the rest of the household. However, he rejects the idea that it was the Christian woman’s duty to marry a non-Christian with the view of converting her husband and any other non-Christians in his household, although fact that Tertullian raises this viewpoint and argues

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<sup>157</sup> Cooper, 14.

<sup>158</sup> Brown, 378.

<sup>159</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 1.1.1.

against this practice forcefully and at length demonstrates the frequency with which it was occurring within his Carthaginian community.<sup>160</sup>

Tertullian sees the viewpoint that a Christian woman should marry a non-Christian in order to convert him as arising from a common misinterpretation of Paul's statements that "if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband."<sup>161</sup> Tertullian does not oppose the idea that if a Christian inadvertently marries a non-Christian, it is possible for either a husband or a wife to convert their spouse to the true religion. Rather, he rejects the interpretation that a Christian man or woman should knowingly marry a non-Christian with the view of eventually converting them once they assume their roles within the marriage. Tertullian asserts, "[Paul's letter says if] 'any believer *has* an unbelieving wife;' it does not say, '*takes* an unbelieving wife.' It shows that it is the duty of one who, already living in marriage with an unbelieving woman, has presently been by the grace of God converted, to continue with his wife."<sup>162</sup> This is more of a rejection of divorce than a confirmation of what Paul is saying. Once the marriage contract is entered into, it should not be broken because the shift in species from virgin to wife is already complete. Interestingly, the idea that a wife and husband must have the same spiritual beliefs conforms to the Roman ideal of relative equality and happiness within the ideal marriage.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 113. For further discussion of the high ratio of female Christians to male Christians in the first centuries of Christianity, the frequency of Christian women marrying pagan men, and the impact of this on the spread of the religion, see Stark, Chapter 5 - "The Role of Women" (95-128).

<sup>161</sup> 1 Cor 7:12-14.

<sup>162</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 2.2.2.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Brown, 16.

Aside from this, Tertullian does not appear to be especially interested in the particulars within a Christian marriage.<sup>164</sup> This may partially be attributed to his lack of desire to go against the accepted Roman societal model, or simply because he subscribes to its basic patriarchal structure. He exhorts Christians to chastity and yet “he [does] not allow the practice of continence to weaken in any way the basic structures of the household: even when the master and mistress of the house lived in chastity, in order to receive clear guidance from the spirit, their household would retain its wealth and slaves; women would obey their menfolk, and children their elders.”<sup>165</sup> That is, Tertullian desires Christians to live a modest Christian lifestyle within the already-established parameters of Roman society and he does not see any hypocrisy in having this viewpoint. This is a reflection of the African church of Tertullian’s time, which “perfectly tolerated the Roman Empire and the African society to which it belonged and managed to focus effectively on its interests, which did not include challenging the political order.”<sup>166</sup> Since the relationship between a husband and a wife within a marriage represents a “microcosm of the social order,”<sup>167</sup> it provides a good example of the type of political order that the African church, and Tertullian, is not interested in disturbing.

However, despite his tendency to conform with the Roman societal model whenever possible, Tertullian appears at times to be conflicted on the topic of marriage. As he often does when in doubt, Tertullian appeals to Paul, saying, “we learn from the apostle, who *permits* marrying indeed, but *prefers* abstinence.”<sup>168</sup> Again, Tertullian is

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<sup>164</sup> Dunn, 54.

<sup>165</sup> Brown, 78.

<sup>166</sup> Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 44.

<sup>167</sup> Brown, 17.

<sup>168</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 1.3.2; 1 Cor 7:1-2.

torn between his idealistic beliefs and his recognition of the reality of the world in which he lived. Within the same letter to his wife, he states, “There are some things which are not to be *desired* merely because they are not *forbidden*, albeit they are in a certain sense *forbidden* when other things are preferred to them.”<sup>169</sup> He is, of course, referring to the fact that marriage is not forbidden within Paul’s writings, nor within the scriptures, nor certainly within the Roman society in which Tertullian is immersed, and yet he cannot say that it is good either. He further notes strongly that “what is *permitted* is not *good* . . . a thing is not ‘good’ simply because it is not ‘evil’.”<sup>170</sup> It falls within the gray area between his spiritual ideals and the real necessity of living. The true measure of his inner conflict can be seen by comparing these arguments to the conclusion to the letter in which he glorifies marriage, asking “Whence are we to find (words) enough fully to tell the happiness of that marriage which the Church cements, and the oblation confirms, and the benediction signs and seals; (which) angels carry back the news of (to heaven), (which) the Father holds for ratified?”<sup>171</sup> Perhaps Tertullian is also walking a fine line here in terms of his rhetoric. He is trying simultaneously to both convince unmarried Christians that it is better to follow the example of Paul and remain unmarried and abstinent while also trying to reassure married Christians (like himself) that their marriage is sanctioned by God, that it conforms with societal expectations, and that it allows for the continuation of Christianity by producing Christian children.

Ultimately, it is clear that Tertullian views the role of marriage in society, and the role of women as wives within the marriage, in the traditional Roman way. He acknowledges the continuation of the typical Roman role of the wife within the family’s spiritual upbringing and he also recognizes that the perpetuation of Christianity is reliant

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<sup>169</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 1.3.5.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 2.8.6.

upon women becoming wives and mothers. Just as he does not seek to become involved in other social changes, Tertullian does not attempt to fundamentally change the way that Christian marriage functions within his Roman society. He is torn between exhorting Christians to maintain the chastity of Paul and recognizing the necessity that of marriage, which he himself entered into, within the reality of Roman Carthage. Because of the long history of marriage within society, and the idealization of woman as wives within this social construct, it is clear that Tertullian would have viewed wife- and motherhood as acceptable roles for a woman to play within society. Indeed, next to the often-impractical species of virgin, the species of wife represents the ideal goal for a woman to achieve. If a wife performed her duties with the proper Roman virtues of “fertility, fidelity, modesty, and beauty,”<sup>172</sup> it is possible for her to continue to represent Tertullian’s notions of what virtues are important for a Christian to uphold. These qualities are important to understand since Perpetua represents the ideal of Roman wives and mothers within her martyrdom narrative. The way that she reconciles these expectations with her identity as a Christian will be explored in the next chapter.

### **Widows**

One aspect of marriage where Tertullian differs from commonly held beliefs is his condemnation of remarriage. While the ideal of single marriages has its roots before Christianity,<sup>173</sup> it is a matter that Tertullian feels exceptionally strongly about as a central feature of his brand of Christianity. Once a woman has been transformed from a wife to a widow by the death of her husband, she may not revert back to wife by taking on a new husband. Indeed, he spends much of his letter *To His Wife* asking her not to

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<sup>172</sup> Cobb, 121.

<sup>173</sup> Barnes, 136.

remarry if he happens to die first.<sup>174</sup> Tertullian implores all women to subscribe to the notion that “she whose husband has departed from the world should thenceforward impose rest on her sex by abstinence from marriage.”<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, he argues, “The same who brings us into the world must of necessity take us out of it too. Therefore, when, through the will of God, the husband is deceased, the marriage likewise, by the will of God, deceases. Why should you restore what God has put an end to?”<sup>176</sup>

He repeats this belief forcefully in other treatises. In *On Exhortation to Chastity*, he addresses a widower who wishes to remarry, noting, “Let it now be granted that repetition of marriage is lawful, if everything which is lawful is good.”<sup>177</sup> He reiterates this point in the next chapter, “Be thankful if God has once for all granted you indulgence to marry. Thankful, moreover, you will be if you know not that he has granted you that indulgence a second time.”<sup>178</sup> Whether this view is representative of Tertullian’s own personal definition of chastity that he is trying to impose on the rest of his Christian community, or whether it is a symptom of his larger theological agenda is hard to say. He attempts to explain his reasoning in another treatise, asserting “We admit one marriage, just as we do one God.”<sup>179</sup> He further claims that this policy comes about having “been revealed apart from the Scriptures by the Paraclete,”<sup>180</sup> which, although outside the scope of this thesis, is sometimes used to connect his views against remarriage to his so-called Montanism.

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<sup>174</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 1.4-1.5; 2.1.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.1.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.7.2.

<sup>177</sup> Tert., *De Exhortatione Castitatis* 8.1. Latin version edited by E. Kroymann in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina I* (1954). English translation of *On Exhortation to Chastity*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870).

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.4.

<sup>179</sup> Tert., *De Monogamia* 1.4. Latin version edited by E. Dekkers in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina I* (1954). English translation of *On Monogamy*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870).

<sup>180</sup> Dunn, 55.

Just as becoming a wife allows a woman to become more active within her community, a widow is also able to take a more visible role within the church. Tertullian references an order of widows, a phenomenon that seems to have taken place in many Christian communities across of geographical lines. Peter Brown notes that most of the widows within the order were “helpless creatures, destitute old ladies only too glad to receive food and clothing from the hands of the clergy.”<sup>181</sup> Tertullian references this role for the order when he notes that some women argue that they need to remarry because they are reliant upon a man to survive. He notes, they “plead the necessity of a husband to the female sex, as a source of authority and of comfort, or to render it safe from evil rumours.”<sup>182</sup> Certainly, in mainstream Roman society, a woman would be expected to remarry in order to maintain a certain lifestyle or even to simply survive. In this regard, Tertullian goes against traditional Roman beliefs and emphasizes again his idea that a woman, once changed from a wife to a widow, should not revert back to a wife but remain a widow for the rest of her life. To emphasize this point and encourage other women to follow suit, Tertullian refers his audience to “the examples of sisters of ours whose names are with the Lord, who, when their husbands have preceded them (to glory), give to no opportunity of beauty or of age the precedence of holiness. They prefer to be wedded to God.”<sup>183</sup> Just as virgins are viewed as wives of Christ, widows should only become wives again if they are wedded to God. Since a husband would have been expected to provide the necessities of life, the church, acting as God’s agents, provided these for the widows. However, not all widows are of the lower classes and indeed “women of high status . . . would have experienced the greatest difficulty in finding husbands within the church . . . [and] would have found themselves, on the death

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<sup>181</sup> Brown, 147.

<sup>182</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 1.4.3.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

of their husbands, with the prospect of spending the rest of their lives in the service of the church.”<sup>184</sup> For these wealthier widows, the order would have had to offer them something beyond the provision of the necessities of life, since they would have had the means to do so for themselves. Perhaps these women viewed the order as a way of “opt[ing] out of the domestic sphere and enter[ing] the public world; they could exist apart from their fathers, husbands or children.”<sup>185</sup>

The existence of an order of widows, the activities of this order, and its members all varied from community to community, and details are often unclear. In Carthage, Tertullian takes his cue from 1 Timothy when he discusses the qualities a widow must possess in order to be granted a place in the order of the widows. Referring to the epistle, Tertullian asserts, “he would not grant a widow admittance into the order unless she had been ‘the wife of one man;’ for it behooves God’s altar to be set forth pure.”<sup>186</sup> In *On the Veiling of Virgins*, Tertullian references Timothy’s other specifications, which state, “Let none be enrolled as a widow under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for good works; if she hath brought up children, if she hath used hospitality to strangers, if she hath washed the saints’ feet, if she hath relieved the afflicted, if she hath diligently followed every good work.”<sup>187</sup> Clearly, not every widow may be admitted into the order. Only exceptionally pious women who resist the cultural expectation to remarry and who are of a certain age (over 60) should be permitted to hold the somewhat elevated position within the church. The limiting criteria, which few women would likely have been able to meet (if only because of the advanced age requirement), were perhaps indicative of the discomfort these women likely caused the

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<sup>184</sup> Brown, 148.

<sup>185</sup> Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1996), 146.

<sup>186</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 1.7.4.

<sup>187</sup> Tert. *Virg. Vel.* 9.5; 1 Tim 5:9-10.

high-ranking men of the congregation. Brown asserts that widows would have been seen as “disturbingly amphibious creatures . . . [who were] neither unambiguously disqualified as married, sexually active persons, nor were they fully at home in the ranks of the clergy.”<sup>188</sup> As a result, the strict criteria regarding who could enter the order of the widows was a way of imposing an authoritative structure upon the potentially threatening group of women.

Other scholars understand the order of the widows as a “testimony to the compromise that had to exist between the old and the new. If women were to live the new life, spread the gospel and support the embryonic communities in the public sphere, they still had to observe the restrictions society placed on their freedom. They therefore had to present themselves publicly as non-sexual beings.”<sup>189</sup> Similarly, Peter Brown asserts that Tertullian’s views on widowhood are directly related to his attempt to institute a way to overcome the kind of sexual desires that plague the younger species. According to Tertullian, “Sexuality was to be rigidly controlled among the marriageable and married young. But age would soon cool its heat. It was to be repressed at the end of life, so that the Spirit might flood unimpeded into the hearts of widows and widowers.”<sup>190</sup> The idea of a cooling of heat is not just metaphorical, but is a biological change for Tertullian, again reinforcing the idea that widows are a distinct species and are inherently different from virgins or wives. Furthermore, the differences in species are partially connected to age, as Tertullian expects older women to be able to control their desires, but he also anticipates a cooling that makes these desires no longer present. He notes, “More glorious is the continence which is aware of its own right, which knows what it has seen. The virgin may possibly be held the happier, but the widow is more

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<sup>188</sup> Brown, 148.

<sup>189</sup> Sawyer, 148.

<sup>190</sup> Brown, 79-80.

hardly tasked.”<sup>191</sup> That is, it is more difficult for a widow than a virgin to remain chaste because a widow knows what she is giving up. The widows’ task is therefore more worthy of recognition and respect within an official capacity. Further, Tertullian’s acknowledgement of widows over virgins may be seen as another way of rendering the virgins as essentially passive and unnecessary. If a woman wished to receive recognition within the church, she should only do so once she becomes the species of widow.

Tertullian relates a conflation of the roles of the virgin and the widow in one church that causes him much discomfort. He states, “I know plainly, that in a certain place a virgin of less than twenty years of age has been placed in the order of widows! [. . .] such a miracle, not to say monster, should not be pointed at in the church, a virgin-widow!”<sup>192</sup> The very idea that a virgin and a widow could undertake the same duties in the church causes Tertullian to be repulsed. A twenty-year old virgin and a sixty-year old widow are of dramatically different species and therefore cannot be treated the same way. A conflation of species is monstrous to him, just like a virgin without a veil is a monstrous third sex. Any time when the lines are blurred between species, such as when a virgin is allowed into the order of widows, when a widow remarries and becomes a wife for a second time, or when a virgin dresses in a way distinct from other women, is unacceptable to Tertullian and goes against the way he understands the natural order of things to be.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, Tertullian’s writings about the species of women demonstrate that the differences between species really make little difference at all. He acknowledges that

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<sup>191</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 1.8.2.

<sup>192</sup> Tert. *Virg. Vel.* 9.5.

virgins, wives, and widows have some unique traits, but only insofar as these unique traits do not allow them any special recognition. Indeed, his discussion of these different species re-asserts their positions within the Roman patriarchal family structure at a time when other Christians were challenging these roles. In Tertullian's view, the visible differences between the species should not be celebrated but suppressed. His identification of the distinct features of the species of virgin, including that she should blush at being seen and that her chaste identity is reliant upon being veiled, serves also to counteract the arguments being put forth in his congregation, namely that virgins are worthy of the creation of an order similar to that of the order of widows. Tertullian does not reject the order of widows, but he also does not discuss the order at any length, except to re-affirm the importance of following the criteria set forth in 1 Timothy. Perhaps the low numbers of once-married, 60-year-old women who would qualify for membership proved to be less threatening to Tertullian than the groups of young women who sought recognition in their church by virtue of their virginity.

Tertullian carefully frames his argument in categorical language, emphasizing that the different species of women belong to "successive stages of life."<sup>193</sup> The transformation of species can only occur in one direction. A woman might not become all three species in her lifetime, but she cannot reach the final species of widow unless she has first been a virgin and a wife. Virgins cannot do the same things that wives can do, wives cannot participate in the community the same way widows can, and neither a widow nor a wife can revert back to being a virgin. His arguments against re-marriage reaffirms his opinion that once a woman has transformed from wife to widow, this transformation cannot be undone. Tertullian acknowledges that virginity is to be admired

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 4.7.

while simultaneously pushing the traditional Roman values of marriage and procreation. While others, both within Carthage and outside of it, believed that virginity and widowhood *did* give Christian women access to positions of authority and leadership, Tertullian counters this by turning different types of women into species that are subordinate to their genus and whose differences really make little difference at all.

Regardless of species, Tertullian's treatises all reinforce the importance that a woman conform and live up to the ideal standards that he sets out for them. He bases these standards on examples from nature as well as from scripture. He is also heavily influenced by the cultural world of the Roman Empire and rarely deviates from the traditions unless they directly oppose Christian beliefs. Even his heavy encouragement of continence builds upon the Roman ideals of chastity. As the following chapter will demonstrate, Tertullian's focus on outwardly representing the ideals of a woman's species while remaining firmly within the traditional Roman framework forms an important part of his exhortation of Perpetua and his rejection of Thecla. The traditional Roman matron who converts to Christianity while retaining her Roman virtues, Perpetua exemplifies the species of wife and seems to understand what her role entails. The virgin Thecla, by contrast, rejects the ideals emphasized by Tertullian, most especially because she seeks recognition within her community through her different dress and overt behaviour, thereby differentiating herself from all the other women. These issues and others will be explored through a close reading of the texts alongside the guidelines set out for each species.

## Chapter 2 - Thecla and Perpetua as Representations of Their Species

Tertullian's understanding of gender is informed largely by his identification of the existence of different species of women, including virgins and wives. The different responsibilities that Tertullian places upon each species are informed from Roman tradition, scripture, and nature. As examined in the previous chapter, his treatises clearly identify the differences between the species while simultaneously insisting that there be no way to distinguish one species of woman from the other. Within these identifications, he remains firmly within the traditional Roman framework and shows no desire to upset the mainstream expectations placed upon Roman virgins and wives. This worldview forms an important factor in explaining his exultation of Perpetua and his rejection of Thecla.

The reason that Tertullian gives for his opposition to Thecla and her narrative is because some women "claim Thecla's example as a license for women's teaching."<sup>194</sup> This is problematic because he follows Paul in the belief that a woman should not be permitted "even to learn with over-boldness,"<sup>195</sup> let alone teach others. However, this chapter will demonstrate that there are many other underlying reasons that may have prompted Tertullian to reject the entire Thecla narrative. Tertullian sees virgins as "important symbols of the holiness of the church,"<sup>196</sup> who nevertheless should not be distinguished from any other species of woman. However, there were clearly groups of people who saw virgins such as Thecla as worthy of special attention by virtue of their virginity. Tertullian fully recognizes the potency and radical potential for the images of virginity that Thecla represents to upset the established social order. His attempts to

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<sup>194</sup> Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 17. *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1964).

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 179.

discredit her narrative are therefore related to his efforts to establish that virgins should have no special authority within the church.

In contrast, Tertullian refers to Perpetua as “the most heroic martyr.”<sup>197</sup> This chapter will argue that this approval is partially because the expectations of Perpetua’s species and Perpetua’s actions as a Christian wife living under a Roman model are in sharp contrast to Thecla’s rejection of her identity as a virgin. Perpetua’s identity as a wife, mother, and daughter is secondary to her identity as a Christian. However, while Thecla’s rejection of her identity as a virgin and fiancé is demonstrated by behaviour inappropriate to her species, Perpetua’s rejection of her primary identity as a wife in favour of her Christian identity does not involve explicitly rejecting the expected behaviour of a Roman wife. Furthermore, Perpetua’s self-identification as a Christian above all else is not as dangerous as Thecla’s rejections of her role as a virgin. Where Thecla’s actions threaten the social order, Perpetua’s defiance to her father “may pose a threat to the hierarchy of the pagan government, but she poses none to the ecclesiastical hierarchy in which Tertullian believed so strongly.”<sup>198</sup>

This chapter will be divided into two sections, the first on the virgin Thecla and the second on the wife and mother Perpetua. Both sections will engage in a close reading of the narratives in conjunction with relevant passages from Tertullian’s writings. Particular attention will be paid to the instances where each woman is identified by her species, as well as where and how she explicitly rejects this identification. The differences in the way that each woman rejects her species will play an important role in

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<sup>197</sup> Tert., *De anima* 55. Tertullian, *On the Soul*, trans. Peter Holmes in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870).

<sup>198</sup> Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 21.

attempting to discern some of the reasons why Tertullian might have reacted the way that he did.

### **Thecla**

Despite the fact that Tertullian might have been expected to praise Thecla for her determined chastity, he is instead hostile towards her, focusing on the depiction of her teaching and baptizing and the fact that her example had lead other women to wrongly imagine that they could do the same.<sup>199</sup> Since Thecla is described as a virgin, and Tertullian elsewhere praises chastity, the way that the concepts of chastity and virginity are depicted within the text must be examined in order to understand Tertullian's negative opinion of the text as a whole. The central importance of chastity in the narrative made immediately clear in Paul's<sup>200</sup> proclamations in Onesiphorus's house in Iconium. Initially, this Paul's teachings seem consistent with the epistle-writing Paul's teachings about sexual restraint of 1 Cor 7:29-31, "albeit intensified in the direction of virginity as well as abstinence even in marriage."<sup>201</sup> With Thecla listening from her window, Paul says, "Blessed are those who have kept the flesh chaste, for they will become a temple of God"<sup>202</sup> and "Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for these will be pleasing to God and will not lose the reward for their chastity."<sup>203</sup> Paul's emphasis on virginity as having precedence over even marriage causes problems within the text, "as

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<sup>199</sup> Leonie Hayne, "Thecla and the Church Fathers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 209.

<sup>200</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I will be referring to the character Paul from *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* as simply "Paul" for convenience's sake although this Paul is obviously different from the Paul of the canonical epistles (whom the author of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was likely trying to imitate).

<sup>201</sup> Streete, 81.

<sup>202</sup> *Acti Pauli et Theclae* 5. Greek version edited by R. A. Lipsius in *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1891). English translation of *The Acts of Thecla*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman in *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make it into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Paul's message disrupts the social order, family relationships, and households."<sup>204</sup> Indeed, when Paul says "Blessed are those who have wives as if they did not have them,"<sup>205</sup> this is a direct threat to the purpose of marriage as it was understood within the Roman Mediterranean context.<sup>206</sup> While Tertullian exhorts Christians to chastity, he nevertheless states, "We do not indeed forbid the union of man and woman, blest by God as the seminary of the human race, and devised for the replenishment of the earth."<sup>207</sup> Therefore, Paul's absolute rejection of all sexual activity, even within marriage for the purpose of procreation, would have been troubling to Tertullian's desire to maintain the Roman societal structure and it would have been incongruous to the beliefs of the epistle-writing Paul with whom Tertullian is familiar. Interestingly, when Thecla is introduced, she is described in an expected way, as "a certain virgin named Thecla, daughter of Theocleia and engaged to a man named Thamyris."<sup>208</sup> That is, as an unmarried woman, Thecla would have been expected to be a virgin, and she also would have expected to be preparing to move onto the next stage as a wife. At the beginning of the narrative, then, Paul is the subversive character, not Thecla.

While Paul is preaching these things about chastity, Thecla sits listening unseen in the window of her house. In doing so, Thecla conforms to her identity as a virgin, "remain[ing] modestly within her house yet daringly on the verge of it."<sup>209</sup> Thecla's mother, Theocleia, is concerned by Thecla's singular focus on Paul and calls Thecla's fiancé, Thamyris, in desperation. When asked where Thecla is, Theocleia replies,

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<sup>204</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 141.

<sup>205</sup> *ATH* 5.

<sup>206</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>207</sup> Tert., *Ad uxorem* 1.2.1. Tertullian, *To His Wife*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>208</sup> *ATH* 7.

<sup>209</sup> Streete, 81.

“Thecla has not gotten up from the window for three days and nights . . . but she is gazing out as if watching a festival. For she has grown attached to a foreign man who is teaching various deceitful words, so that I am amazed at how the virgin’s sense of modesty can be so badly disturbed.”<sup>210</sup> Indeed, Tertullian would likely agree with Theocleia’s assessment that Thecla’s sense of modesty is disturbed by her devotion to Paul, since it is causing Thecla to reject her family. The way that Thecla rejects her family and the expectations of her species are also problematic. When Thecla continues to ignore her family’s pleas, she is perceived to be essentially dead and the entire household enters a period of mourning.<sup>211</sup> Clearly, this is not simply a case of a disobedient daughter. Thecla’s unfeeling rejection of the people she formerly loved result in her metaphorical death, complete with mourning, and all the while she “continued gazing toward the words spoken by Paul.”<sup>212</sup>

Thecla’s refusal to acknowledge her family, and her implicit rejection of her duties as a virgin (to transition into the role of a wife by marrying Thamyris), cannot be understood by the characters in the text except by some supernatural means. This kind of behaviour would have been expected from the main female character in the ancient Greek novels. As the Thecla narrative appears to have been based upon this genre, it is likely that the audience would have recognized Thecla’s behaviour as typical signs of lovesickness.<sup>213</sup> Theocleia and Thamyris “[render] this refusal of marriage a symptom of disturbed passion and madness, pointing toward a social death whereby Thecla as daughter, fiancée, and mistress is understood by her mother, her betrothed, and her

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<sup>210</sup> *ATH* 8.

<sup>211</sup> Castelli, 141.

<sup>212</sup> *ATH* 10.

<sup>213</sup> Streete, 82.

slaves to have gone astray.”<sup>214</sup> This viewpoint can find confirmation within the text when Thecla’s mother states, “the virgin has been captured.”<sup>215</sup> Similarly, Thamyris sees Thecla as being overwhelmed by a “mad passion.”<sup>216</sup> This type of language demonstrates the “ancient scenario of supernatural violence exercised through love spells [which] was a device exploited with gusto by all writers in the second century.”<sup>217</sup> Tertullian would have been very familiar with these stylistic devices and might therefore have been more inclined to view Thecla’s actions as sexually charged (or at least sexually inappropriate) than the later interpreters who prized the ascetic qualities of the text above all else.<sup>218</sup> Additionally, where others may have been able to separate the common literary devices used in the novel form from the stated affirmations of Thecla’s virginity, Tertullian appears to not be able to do so.

The characters in the narrative, however, do not blame Thecla for her indiscretion as Tertullian would likely have been apt to do.<sup>219</sup> Instead, they blame Paul and seek to have him expelled from the city. This may be partially related to the idea that Thecla is under some kind of a spell, as she appears “lost through the bewitching erotic spells cast by the apostolic invader of their homes.”<sup>220</sup> Thamyris, described as “the leading citizen of the city,”<sup>221</sup> causes Paul to stand trial before the governor. He and the townspeople condemn Paul saying, “he is depriving young men of their wives and virgins of their

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<sup>214</sup> Castelli, 142.

<sup>215</sup> *ATH* 9.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

<sup>217</sup> Brown, 157.

<sup>218</sup> Hayne, 210.

<sup>219</sup> He blames supposed-virgin’s pregnancies solely on their decision to not wear a veil (Tert., *De Virginibus Velandis* 14. Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870) and suggests that if a virgin exposes her head to others, she is opening herself up to seductions (*Virg. Vel.* 15). It seems it is always the virgin’s responsibility to maintain her virginity and it is solely her fault if her virginity is taken by a man, whether she desires it to be or not. Therefore, Thecla is responsible for disturbing her own “sense of modesty” regardless of how compelling Paul’s words may be.

<sup>220</sup> Streete, 82.

<sup>221</sup> *ATH* 11.

husbands, by saying that ‘You will not be raised from the dead unless you remain chaste, abstain from polluting the flesh, and guard your chastity.’<sup>222</sup> The men of the community further complain that he is “leading astray the youths and deceiving the virgins by telling them not to get married but to remain as they are.”<sup>223</sup> The characters demonstrate Tertullian’s concern that Thecla’s actions are threatening to overturn societal expectations. Despite his commitment to Christianity, he does not wish to disrupt the social order of the Roman world, of which marriage and reproduction is central.<sup>224</sup> Therefore, what is at stake within the narrative is really what it means to be a virgin. For Tertullian, there should be nothing distinguishable about a virgin, either in her appearance or in her behaviour, except for her abstinence. Virgins should wear veils because all women wear veils.<sup>225</sup> Tertullian’s view that “true virginity does nothing to draw attention to itself; rather, it hides itself away”<sup>226</sup> is therefore a way of conserving the social structures as well as opposing the idea that female virginity provides the basis for challenging patriarchal structure and breaking “the ‘sound barrier’ of sexual shame,”<sup>227</sup> as Thecla seems to be doing.

Thecla’s rejection of her expected transition in species from virgin to wife is not an individual or private transgression but is threatening to the community and society as a whole. Thecla is punished more severely than Paul because she “presents an even greater disruption to her family, city, and society than does Paul . . . she has abandoned her maidenly modesty, not for the expected consummation of marriage, but in order to

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>224</sup> Brown, 78.

<sup>225</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 10.

<sup>226</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 139.

<sup>227</sup> Brown, 80.

boldly follow a 'strange' new teaching out of love for a foreigner."<sup>228</sup> Paul may be the one preaching to the community that he is sent "to provide people with salvation by dragging them away from corruption and impurity and every pleasure and death, that they may no longer sin,"<sup>229</sup> but Thecla is the one threatening social order because she is actually following his teachings. Tertullian labels the text as "writings which wrongly go under Paul's name"<sup>230</sup> precisely because he does not interpret the true Paul's teachings to go against social order in such a way as to convince women to reject their homes and roles in the dramatic way Thecla does. By undermining the authority of the text, Tertullian is also recognizing the power that both the text and Paul's name have upon his fellow Christians.

Thecla's actions following Paul's imprisonment would have been a further cause of concern for Tertullian. Thecla leaves the protection of her home so that she is now on display for anyone to see. This action is "not consistent with the public chastity expected in a Greco-Roman city: she leaves her house, the upper-class woman's sphere, at night, alone, in search of Paul, a man to whom she is not related."<sup>231</sup> Thecla's nocturnal journey indicates that she is not a "true" virgin in Tertullian's sense because he believes that true virginity "hides itself away."<sup>232</sup> Thecla removes her bracelets<sup>233</sup> and gives them to the gatekeeper so that she may be let out of her home and then gives her silver mirror

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<sup>228</sup> Streete, 82.

<sup>229</sup> *Ath* 17.

<sup>230</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

<sup>231</sup> Streete, 83.

<sup>232</sup> Dunn, 139.

<sup>233</sup> The very fact that Thecla wears bracelets would have been troublesome to Tertullian, whose treatise *On the Apparel of Women* seeks to convince women that adornments of any kind compromise their chastity and should be avoided. He asserts that wearing jewelry and bright colours are "invariably conjoined with and appropriate to bodily prostitution." Tert., *De Cultu Feminarum* 2.12. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

to the guard at the prison so that she may be allowed to enter and see Paul.<sup>234</sup> This action is highly symbolic and may be interpreted in different ways. One interpretation is that “By giving away her bracelets and her mirror, objects which are strongly identified both with her social class and her gender, Thecla purchases the right to go on listening to Paul’s words.”<sup>235</sup> Given that Tertullian sees dress and outward appearance as an extension of internal virtue,<sup>236</sup> Thecla’s act of bribing men with feminine objects could be seen as giving these men a part of her, or perhaps even giving away her chastity itself. Indeed, finding these objects in the possession of other men would have signaled something alarming. Thecla’s chastity is compromised by undertaking actions that are inappropriate for a virgin. She does not fit within Tertullian’s expectations of her species and is therefore transforming into something monstrous.

Referencing Magda Misset-van de Weg, Gail Streete proposes another interpretation, that Thecla’s removal of her bracelets and the trade of her mirror “symbolize that Thecla severs the ties that bind her to her family and everything that ‘mirrors’ the world (*kosmos*), including marriage,’ which includes jewelry as part of a dowry.”<sup>237</sup> By looking at her actions from this perspective, Thecla’s actions are even more counter-cultural and would have been extremely offensive to Tertullian’s sensibilities. Thecla directly rejects the accepted Roman societal model by symbolically severing ties with marriage and her expected role as wife. Again, she does so silently, without any expression of explanation or remorse. This disruption of the “reassuring microcosm of the social order”<sup>238</sup> that marriage represents is disturbing to the characters

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<sup>234</sup> *Ath* 18.

<sup>235</sup> McNerney, 39.

<sup>236</sup> This can be seen in *On the Apparel of Women*, where he states “To Christian modesty it is not enough to be so, but to seem so too.” Tert., *Cult. Fem.* 2.13.

<sup>237</sup> Streete, 83.

<sup>238</sup> Brown, 17.

within the text for the same reasons Tertullian may have objected. Marriage is not simply a private partnership, but a civic one,<sup>239</sup> and as such the community is involved in ensuring that the marriages continue. As a virgin, Thecla is expected to become a wife and continue on this tradition and when she rejects this expectation in such a dramatic and outrageous manner, it causes her community to retaliate in equally dramatic ways.<sup>240</sup>

Her actions once inside the jail are no less inappropriate than giving away her jewelry. The text states that, inside Paul's cell, "Thecla's faith increased as she was kissing Paul's bonds"<sup>241</sup> and when Thamyris and other members of her household find her in the morning she is found, "in a manner of speaking, bound together with Paul in affection."<sup>242</sup> These "unabashedly sexual scenarios"<sup>243</sup> are taken one step further when, after Paul is taken away to be brought before the judgment seat, Thecla remains behind "Rolling around on the place where Paul had been teaching while sitting in the jail."<sup>244</sup> The Greek term used for "affection" (συνδεδεμένην τῇ στοργῇ) within the text is "sufficiently ambiguous to draw attention to the purportedly disreputable character of Thecla's actions while also emphasizing the overarching innocence of Thecla's emotional attachment to Paul."<sup>245</sup> Interestingly, in the letter *To His Wife*, Tertullian mentions similar actions as being appropriate for a Christian wife to undertake, but ones

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<sup>239</sup> Streete, 83.

<sup>240</sup> When Thecla refuses to answer the question of why she will not marry Thamyris "in accordance with the law of the Iconians," her own mother cries out dramatically, "Burn the lawless one! Burn the one who will not be a bride! . . . Then all the wives who have been taught by this one will fear!" *ATh* 20. Clearly, Thecla's rejection of the social order is extremely serious. Her mother's recommendation of putting her to death represents the idea that individual desires do not come before the needs of the community.

<sup>241</sup> *ATh* 18.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>243</sup> Brown, 157.

<sup>244</sup> *ATh* 20.

<sup>245</sup> Castelli, 142.

that pagan husbands are likely to not understand. Speaking of pagan husbands, he asks “who will willingly bear her being taken from his side by nocturnal convocations, if need so be? [. . .] Who will suffer her to creep into prison to kiss a martyr’s bonds?”<sup>246</sup> He uses these arguments to protest against marriage between Christians and pagans and Thamyris fits exactly within Tertullian’s idea of how a pagan husband might restrict the pious actions of his Christian wife. Therefore, despite the sexual subtext, Thecla’s excursion to Paul’s cell might have been an example of Thecla of which Tertullian might have approved<sup>247</sup> if Thecla had been a Christian wife. However, she is not a wife but a virgin, and while she might have represented a model Christian who visits the cells of the martyrs<sup>248</sup> to some listeners, for Tertullian her nocturnal excursions to meet with a strange man go against his expectations of her species and must therefore be punished.

Thecla is condemned to be burned at the stake, but she escapes through a miracle.<sup>249</sup> Once she escapes the pyre, she seeks Paul to ask him to allow her to come with him as he travels teaching. Paul replies “The time is shameful and you are beautiful; another temptation may overtake you worse than the first, and you may not be able to endure but behave like a cowardly man.”<sup>250</sup> Interestingly, Paul refuses to allow Thecla to follow him, stating that he thinks that she will fall into temptation. The idea that virgins are especially susceptible to being seduced fits within Tertullian’s description of the species. According to Tertullian, “every public exposure of an honourable virgin is (to her) a suffering of rape.”<sup>251</sup> This can be understood both literally and figuratively, since virgins wandering around alone would certainly have been vulnerable to unwanted

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<sup>246</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 2.4.2.

<sup>247</sup> Streete, 83.

<sup>248</sup> Brown, 156.

<sup>249</sup> See chapter 6 for a closer discussion of Thecla’s near-martyrdoms.

<sup>250</sup> *ATH* 25.

<sup>251</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 3.6.

advances from men. Further, Tertullian believes that public acknowledgement of a virgin is likely to cause her to become corrupted and lose her virginity.<sup>252</sup> Thecla responds to Paul, “Only give me the seal in Christ and no temptation will touch me,”<sup>253</sup> revealing her belief that baptism would transform her and protect her both from being tempted and from tempting others.<sup>254</sup> This goes against Tertullian’s belief that “sexual drives were an irremovable and perilous component of the human person. Those who thought that the grace conferred on Christians by the coming of the Holy Spirit might enable them to transcend the dangers associated with sexual attraction were, in his opinion, profoundly mistaken.”<sup>255</sup> Thecla misunderstands this important rite. Women, whether virgin, wife, or widow, are seductive and seducible; baptism cannot change this fact of nature.<sup>256</sup>

The likelihood of encountering dangerous temptations is made immediately clear when Paul agrees to take Thecla to Antioch and she encounters a leader of the city named Alexander who “saw Thecla and was inflamed with passion for her.”<sup>257</sup> Here Paul officially rejects her, for when Alexander offers him money and gifts for Thecla, Paul asserts “I do not know the woman you are speaking of, nor is she mine.”<sup>258</sup> Thecla is left alone and her vulnerability is taken advantage of as Alexander “began embracing her in the street.”<sup>259</sup> Tertullian would likely have believed that Thecla is deserving of this assault since she inappropriately appears in public. When discussing the virgins in Carthage who refuse to wear veils, Tertullian states, “Deservedly, therefore, while they

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<sup>252</sup> Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Veils, Virgins, and the Tongues of Men and Angels: Women’s Heads in Early Christianity,” in *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women’s Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 145.

<sup>253</sup> *ATH* 25.

<sup>254</sup> See chapter 4 for a discussion of Thecla’s baptism.

<sup>255</sup> Brown, 80.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>257</sup> *ATH* 26.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

do not cover their head, in order they may be solicited for the sake of glory.”<sup>260</sup> Thecla is metaphorically unveiled by appearing in public in a strange town with a foreigner and without permission from her family. She therefore is guilty of provoking Alexander and enticing him to embrace her. Tertullian encourages virgins to protect themselves by dressing and behaving in an appropriate manner.<sup>261</sup> By continuing to reject her role as virgin and following Paul into Antioch, she rejects the safety of her home and therefore opens herself up to being attacked and having her chastity threatened. Again, a true virgin would not do such things, and therefore Thecla does not really belong to that species.

Once Thecla overcomes her trials in the arena,<sup>262</sup> she embarks on a journey to find Paul. She prepares for this journey “by sewing her outer garment to make it look like a man’s cloak.”<sup>263</sup> The cross-dressing is an explicit rejection of gender, familial, and social categories. Far from wearing the virgin’s veil as deemed appropriate for her species by Tertullian, Thecla elects to wear the clothing of the opposing gender. Her donning of a man’s cloak may also be interpreted as Thecla adopting the mantle of the philosopher, the *tribon*.<sup>264</sup> However, this is no less problematic, as virgins are not permitted “to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer, nor to claim to herself a lot in any manly function.”<sup>265</sup> Thecla also offers to change her outward appearance in her first attempt to follow Paul, saying, “I will cut off my hair and follow you wherever you go.”<sup>266</sup> The cutting of her hair is representative also of the rejection of wearing a veil. Tertullian bases his argument that virgins should be veiled upon Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church, which

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<sup>260</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 14.2.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>262</sup> See chapter 6.

<sup>263</sup> *ATH* 40.

<sup>264</sup> McInerney, 43.

<sup>265</sup> Tert., *Virg. Vel.* 9.2.

<sup>266</sup> *ATH* 25.

states, “every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered shames her head; for it is one and the same thing with a shaven woman.”<sup>267</sup> Tertullian references this passage directly, noting “if it is shameful for a woman to be shaven, no less so is it for a virgin.”<sup>268</sup> Thecla rejects her species and her gender by wearing male clothing and by cutting her hair short in order to be allowed to travel with Paul. This indicates that, along with being a defiant gesture of rejection against her status as a woman, “Thecla’s change of dress would also have had the very practical function of protection against further assault (sexual or otherwise) during her journeys as a charismatic teacher and missionary.”<sup>269</sup> This interpretation would likely have not comforted Tertullian, considering his view that outward appearance and dress is directly related to inner virtue. By adopting the clothing and hairstyle of another gender, Thecla is rejecting her own identity as a female virgin and attempting to become something unnatural; indeed, Tertullian would call it “monstrous”. The knowledge that some women are seeking to emulate Thecla’s actions and therefore might also be emulating her cross-dressing might provide Tertullian with further reason to condemn the narrative.

The reason that Tertullian gives for his rejection of Thecla and her narrative is because some women “claim Thecla’s example as a license for women’s teaching.”<sup>270</sup> This is demonstrated within the text when Paul tells Thecla, “Go and preach the word of God.”<sup>271</sup> Tertullian argues that the writings “wrongly go under Paul’s name”<sup>272</sup> and that this can be proven, since “how credible would it seem, that he who has not permitted a woman even to learn with over-boldness, should give a female the power of teaching

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<sup>267</sup> 1 Cor. 11:5.

<sup>268</sup> Tert., *Orat.* 22. See also D’Angelo, 144.

<sup>269</sup> Davis, 33.

<sup>270</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

<sup>271</sup> *ATH* 41.

<sup>272</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

and baptizing! ‘Let them be silent,’ he says, ‘and at home consult their own husbands.’<sup>273</sup> Here Tertullian is referencing 1 Corinthians: “women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”<sup>274</sup> Tertullian’s argument then is that, if Paul asserts that women are not allowed to speak in the churches, even if it is just to ask a question, then Paul would never authorize Thecla to go and preach. Therefore, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* cannot have been written by Paul and must “wrongly go under Paul’s name.”<sup>275</sup> Tertullian adds evidence to support his claim, stating that “in Asia, the presbyter who composed that writing, as if he was augmenting Paul’s fame from his own store, after being convicted, and confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office.”<sup>276</sup> Tertullian’s argument is “flawlessly circular”<sup>277</sup> in that the Paul of the epistle of the Corinthians could not have been involved in the Thecla narrative because he would never have allowed her to act so inappropriately. Since Tertullian relies heavily on Paul for support for his own beliefs, it is not surprising that he would react so negatively to a narrative that he sees as corrupting Paul’s teachings.

In conclusion, the Thecla narrative would have been troubling to Tertullian for many reasons related to her rejection of the social order. Her refusal to acknowledge her mother and fiancé is threatening to the expectation that a virgin will become a wife and contribute to the society as a wife and mother. The fact that she does so with no apparent care for the pain she causes her family and community further asserts the

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> 1 Cor 14:34-35.

<sup>275</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> McInerney, 18.

danger she represents to the roles of mainstream society. When Paul is jailed, Thecla again goes against expectations by sneaking out to meet him at night, having no regard for the appearance of chastity, as a good Christian should. By traveling and appearing in public, Thecla continually opens herself up to be violated and have her virginity compromised. Finally, Thecla offers to cut her hair and dons the attire of a man as a way of asserting her authority to teach. All of these factors, along with Paul's final approval of her teaching, would have been abhorrent to Tertullian. Tertullian expects virgins to dress appropriately, act modestly, and eventually become a wife, either to Christ as a perpetual virgin or to a Christian husband. Thecla's uncaring rejection of her family and her community are dangerous in the sense that they might encourage other women to follow her example. Indeed, her actions and dress cause her to be distinguishable from all the other women, leading her to become a monstrous, indefinable creature that Tertullian fears and therefore seeks to discredit.

### **Perpetua**

*The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* also centres around a female martyr.

Since this text contains sections purported to be written by a woman (and a woman who is shown having prophetic visions), it is perhaps surprising that Tertullian would be so supportive of it, particularly considering his harsh condemnation of Thecla's narrative. Unlike Thecla, however, Perpetua is not representing virgins but wives and mothers. The expectations of Perpetua's species and her actions as a Christian wife living under a Roman model are in sharp contrast to Thecla's rejection of her identity as a virgin. The centrality of Perpetua's identity as a Roman wife and mother is immediately apparent in her introduction by the narrator. She is identified as, "Vibia Perpetua, respectably born, liberally educated, a married matron, having a father and a mother and two brothers, one

of whom, like herself, was a catechumen, and a son an infant at the breast. She herself was about twenty-two years of age.<sup>278</sup> While both Thecla and Perpetua belong to a wealthy class, Perpetua completes her expected transition from virgin to wife and mother. It is important to note that Perpetua is not unique in that she is identified as being well-educated, since there is ample evidence to show that “Romans believed educated women would be best able to pass on to their sons the values of Rome.”<sup>279</sup> At twenty-two years old, Perpetua would certainly have been expected to be married, and may even have married a bit later than normal (some translations assert that she is “newly married” at twenty-two).<sup>280</sup> At any rate, the introduction of Perpetua does not reveal anything that should be a surprise to either the contemporary Roman audience or to the modern one. Perpetua is depicted as perfectly aspiring to the Roman ideals of “marriage, fertility, fidelity, modesty, and beauty.”<sup>281</sup> The fact that she has already produced a child, and that her child is a son also contributes to her identity as the ideal Roman wife. Tertullian would have recognized that Perpetua represents the ideal wife, for, despite his high praise for continence, he asserts that God endorses marriage as a means to perpetuate humanity<sup>282</sup> and Perpetua is doing her part by producing an heir.

One aspect of Perpetua’s life that may cause the audience to pause is the absence of mention of her husband. Indeed, the audience is only aware that Perpetua has a husband due to the fact that she is identified as a wife. There are many theories

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<sup>278</sup> *Passio Perpetuae* 1.1. Latin version edited by Herbert Anthony Musurillo in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). English translation by R.E. Wallis in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* ((Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885). All chapter citations are Wallis’.

<sup>279</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>282</sup> Tert., *Ux.* 1.2.1.

as to why her husband is not mentioned either in the narrative or the diary. Perhaps her husband was pagan like the ones who Tertullian spoke of as hindering their Christian wives' behaviour.<sup>283</sup> Perhaps Perpetua's conversion was against her husband's wishes and either she distanced herself from him, or he rejected her. Perhaps Perpetua, facing imprisonment and impending martyrdom, did not think it significant to dwell upon her husband within her diary. Others suggest that Perpetua did write about her husband but this was later edited out of the text to avoid the sexual implications that his presence might invite. Significantly, still others note that he may simply have been out of town and might not have known anything of the fate of his wife until he returned.<sup>284</sup> Ultimately, it is impossible to know anything of the relationship between Perpetua and her husband, nor about what he might have thought about his wife's martyrdom. However, the absence of Perpetua's husband is minimized by the presence of her father who appears at three key points to plead for his daughter's life. This perhaps indicates that Perpetua's marriage was of the *sine manu* type in which a father retained legal control over his daughter even after her marriage.<sup>285</sup> This was a popular form of marriage during Perpetua's time, and the fact that Perpetua's father is the one who came to the trial to plead with her seems to demonstrate that Perpetua's marriage was of this type.<sup>286</sup> Perhaps then, the absence of mention of Perpetua's husband is due to the type of marriage that she was part of, in which her father retains the authority over her and not her husband. Perpetua's identity as an ideal wife is therefore reliant upon her behaviour as an ideal daughter.

Upon her arrest, Perpetua must reject her identity as wife, mother and daughter in order to retain her status as a Christian. While she ultimately undertakes this shift,

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 2.4.

<sup>284</sup> Salisbury, 8.

<sup>285</sup> Cobb, 97.

<sup>286</sup> Salisbury, 8.

she does so with much agony. This is in stark contrast to Thecla's seemingly unfeeling rejection of her mother and fiancé, and of her societal obligations. In other words, while Thecla's actions go against all societal norms, "Perpetua represents herself as a woman resistant to Imperial but not masculine control."<sup>287</sup> She does not go against her father's wishes because she wants to upset the expectations of family life (and therefore the greater social structure that the family represents). Instead, she goes against her father because it is the only way to retain her Christian identity. In the beginning of her diary, she states, "we were still with the persecutors, and my father, for the sake of his affection for me, was persisting in seeking to turn me away, and to cast me down from the faith."<sup>288</sup> Perpetua presents herself as both understanding that her father's actions arise out of love for her, as well as asserting that the only way for her to be a Christian is to disobey her father's wishes, perhaps for the first time. Unlike Thecla's silent withdrawal from her family and her role within it, Perpetua attempts to make her father understand her actions:

"Father," said I, "do you see, let us say, this vessel lying here to be a little pitcher, or something else?"  
 And he said, "I see it to be so."  
 And I replied to him, "Can it be called by any other name than what it is?"  
 And he said, "No."  
 "Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian."<sup>289</sup>

This dialogue clearly demonstrates the importance that Perpetua places upon her identity as a Christian. She sees it "as a state of being"<sup>290</sup> where her identity as a wife, mother, and daughter is secondary to her identity as a Christian. While Thecla's rejection of her identity as a virgin and fiancée is demonstrated by inappropriate

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<sup>287</sup> McInerney, 21.

<sup>288</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.2.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.* "Pater, inquam, vides verbi gratia vas hoc iacens, urceolum sive aliud? Et dixit: video. Et ego dixi ei: Numquid alio nomine vocari potest quam quod est? et ait: Non. Sic et ego aliud me dicere non possum nisi quot sum, Christiana."

<sup>290</sup> Salisbury, 82.

behaviour and adopting male dress and actions, Perpetua's rejection of her primary identity as a wife in favour of her Christian identity does not involve explicitly rejecting the expected behaviour of a Roman wife. Perpetua's father, understanding what consequences her assertions of Christianity will have, reacts violently, and Perpetua recounts, "then my father, provoked at this saying, threw himself upon me as if he would tear my eyes out. But he only distressed me, and went away overcome by the devil's arguments."<sup>291</sup>

That Perpetua identifies her father's reluctance for her to be martyred in the arena as being "overcome by the devil's arguments" is also significant. Perpetua does not see her refusal to follow her father's requests as a kind of disobedience but as a battle against the devil. Just as Tertullian warns against taking a pagan husband because of the problems associated with "having at her side a servant of the devil,"<sup>292</sup> Perpetua's father is trying to reason with her using the arguments of the devil. Her father's reaction to her self-identification as a Christian is also problematic because "his violent actions rob him of his masculinity because they expose his lack of self-control."<sup>293</sup> In contrast, Perpetua's style of resisting her father would have been seen as more masculine than her father's begging,<sup>294</sup> perhaps suggesting that her father is unworthy of obedience, given his pagan allegiances and his weak masculinity. While Tertullian generally cannot support upsetting the expectations of social order, Perpetua's defiance to her father "may pose a threat to the hierarchy of the pagan government, but she poses none to the ecclesiastical hierarchy in which Tertullian believed so strongly."<sup>295</sup> She defies her father as the only means to retain her status as Christian and her father

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<sup>291</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.2.

<sup>292</sup> *Tert., Ux.* 2.4.1.

<sup>293</sup> Cobb, 97.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>295</sup> McNerney, 21.

quickly reveals himself to be a less than ideal representation of masculinity, thereby weakening his authority.

Perpetua retains concern for her father as well as for her infant son. She states, “I was unusually distressed by my anxiety for my infant . . . I suckled my child, which was now enfeebled with hunger. In my anxiety for it, I addressed my mother and comforted my brother, and commended to their care my son.”<sup>296</sup> As a mother, she is concerned for the well being of her son, as a daughter, she remains communicative with her mother, and as a sister, she comforts her brother. She also ensures that her son will be provided for once she cannot by giving her son to them to care for. Where Thecla halts all communication with her mother and fiancé from the moment she is converted by hearing Paul’s words, Perpetua does not sever these ties but continues to care for her family in whatever way she can. Indeed, “Perpetua’s Christianity alters her relationship to her family, but her attitudes toward her father, her son, and her brothers remain consistent with Roman models of filial piety, and she takes great pains to emphasize her concern for her father and son.”<sup>297</sup> When she is permitted to keep her son with her in the dungeon, she states, “I grew strong and was relieved from distress and anxiety about my infant; and the dungeon became to me as it were a palace, so that I preferred being there to being elsewhere.”<sup>298</sup> Clearly, Perpetua finds it difficult to completely separate herself from her identity as a mother. She only finds comfort once she has her son with her, and once she has him, she does not need anything else. However, she understands that ultimately this bond must be severed in order to fully attain martyrdom.<sup>299</sup> Again, unlike Thecla who is not described as agonizing over cutting her

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<sup>296</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.2.

<sup>297</sup> McNerney, 22.

<sup>298</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.2.

<sup>299</sup> Cobb, 103. This point will be examined further in the chapter on martyrdom.

familial ties, Perpetua is unable to do so immediately and suffers a great deal during her attempts.

Perpetua's father again begs her to recant her position and return to her family.

Perpetua describes her father as "worn out with anxiety" as he pleads:

Have pity my daughter, on my grey hairs. Have pity on your father, if I am worthy to be called a father by you. If with these hands I have brought you up to this flower of your age, if I have preferred you to all your brothers, do not deliver me up to the scorn of men. Have regard to your brothers, have regard to your mother and your aunt, have regard to your son, who will not be able to live after you. Lay aside your courage and do not bring us all to destruction; for none of us will speak in freedom if you should suffer anything.<sup>300</sup>

Perpetua's father obviously tries to appeal to her emotions, reminding her of his old age and of the loving and preferential treatment she received from him growing up. He further alludes to the fact that her actions will reflect back upon him, as father and supposed authority over her. If she continues with her path towards martyrdom, she will be delivering him "up to the scorn of men" because his inability to control his daughter for whom he is legally responsible, "is a powerful illustration of his diminished masculinity."<sup>301</sup> Despite his pleadings and the impact that Perpetua must have realized that her martyrdom would have on her family, she remains steadfast. Perpetua's father's attempts "to draw Perpetua back again into the family that formed the core of Roman society"<sup>302</sup> by reminding her of her relatives and her position in society is mentioned by Tertullian as a common way for family members to try to distract the martyrs from their purpose. In his letter *To the Martyrs*, Tertullian speaks of "other things, hindrances

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<sup>300</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.1. "Miserere, filia, canis meis; Miserere patri, si dignus sum a te pater vocari; si his te minibus ad huc florem aetatis provexi, sit e praeposui omnibus fratribus tuis: ne me dederis in dedecus hominum. Aspice fratres tuos, aspice matrem tuam et materteram, aspice filium tuum qui post te vivere non poterit. Depone animos; ne universos nos extermines. Nemo enim nostrum libere loquetur, sit u aliquid fueris passa."

<sup>301</sup> Cobb, 98.

<sup>302</sup> Salisbury, 89.

equally of the soul, may have accompanied you as far as the prison gate, which also your relatives may have attended you.”<sup>303</sup> All earthly ties, including emotions of affection and care towards family members, must be severed in order to achieve martyrdom. By reminding Perpetua of the importance that she holds within the lives of her relatives, her father is attempting to make these bonds more difficult to sever.

The growing distance between father and daughter is made clear as Perpetua describes, “with tears he called me not Daughter but Lady.”<sup>304</sup> This change of identification from daughter to lady is significant. First, it demonstrates that “the power dynamics between father and daughter have shifted”<sup>305</sup> so that her father no longer has a role of authority over her. He again does not demand obedience, as would have been his paternal right, but instead “relinquishes his paternal claim altogether”<sup>306</sup> by using the term Lady. Perpetua is no longer a wife, mother, or daughter, but only a Christian. A woman’s species is contingent on her relationship with men and Perpetua cannot complete her transformation to a Christian martyr while retaining the earthly ties to the men in her family. Perpetua must reject everything that defines her in earthly terms, including her connections to her husband, son, or father. By severing ties with them, Perpetua is a woman that cannot be identified by one of Tertullian’s species. She is certainly not a virgin, but she is also not a mother because she gives up her son; she is not a daughter because she rejects her father’s pleas; and she is not a wife because she does not even mention her husband. However, she does not endeavor to be associated with a different species (or a different gender like Thecla) and therefore is not perceived

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<sup>303</sup> Tert., *Ad Martyras* 2. Latin version edited by E. Dekkers in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* I (1954). English translation of *To the Martyrs*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>304</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.1. “. . . lacrimans me iam non filiam nominabat sed dominam.”

<sup>305</sup> Castelli, 89.

<sup>306</sup> Cobb, 98.

as monstrous in the way that Thecla is. She remains a woman who cannot be described by the special, but only by the general. Her father calls her “Lady” because her gender is the only aspect of herself from which she cannot escape. However, this rejection of her earthly identification as a daughter can also be seen as being replaced with a different representation of her daughter within her visions.<sup>307</sup> The audience, including Tertullian, might have recognized this shift as a way of making her rejection of her role as daughter as less threatening to the overall society. Perpetua might try to sever the ties between herself and her father, but she is unable to completely do so as representations of him still appear in her dreams.

Perpetua’s father makes a third and final attempt to save her by again appealing to her identity as a mother. Perpetua and the other catechumens are taken to the town hall to be interrogated, and she relates that her father “immediately appeared with my boy, and withdrew me from the step, and said in a supplicating tone, ‘Have pity on your babe.’”<sup>308</sup> Once more, Perpetua does not relent and refuses the procurator’s order to offer sacrifice for the emperor in order to “‘Spare the grey hairs of your father [and] spare the infancy of your boy.’”<sup>309</sup> Perpetua refuses this final opportunity to return to her family and renounce her Christianity, answering the governor Hilarianus’ question “Are you a Christian?” with the unequivocal “I am a Christian.”<sup>310</sup> This self-identification is significant, since by renaming herself as a Christian in place of her name or position as a daughter and mother, Perpetua takes on a new identity.<sup>311</sup> She is no longer daughter, wife, mother, or even Lady, but only Christian.

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<sup>307</sup> The content and meaning of Perpetua’s visions will be examined further in chapter 6.

<sup>308</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.2.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.* “Christiana sum.”

<sup>311</sup> Salisbury, 91.

Perpetua's father's worry comes to fruition and he is "ordered by Hilarianus to be thrown down, and was beaten with rods."<sup>312</sup> Perpetua observes this all without comment. However, despite her seemingly complete rejection of her familial ties, she is still unable to completely cut off her emotions towards them. She says, "my father's misfortune grieved me as if I myself had been beaten."<sup>313</sup> However she might feel internally, Perpetua does not succumb to these emotions, and "the governor's display of strength . . . does not have its desired effect: she is not persuaded to live by the womanly emotion that would lead her to recant her declaration of faith even if it would save her father."<sup>314</sup> In this way, Perpetua goes against what is typically expected of a woman of any species and instead reacts with a masculine display of reason and firmness of conviction.<sup>315</sup>

When she is returned to the prison with her fellow martyrs-to-be, she reverts back to her earthly desires and sends for her infant, but unsurprisingly, her father will not give him to her. This again is sure to cause her pain, but miraculously, "even as God willed it, the child no long desired the breast, nor did my breast cause me uneasiness, lest I should be tormented by care for my babe and by the pain of my breasts at once."<sup>316</sup> This is significant because "the physical and psychological bonds between mother and infant are divinely severed, and Perpetua's renunciation of the world is complete."<sup>317</sup> She no longer has to worry about her son's comfort or well-being and is therefore able to focus on her impending martyrdom.

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<sup>312</sup> *Pass. Perp. 2.2.*

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>314</sup> Cobb, 101.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *Pass. Perp. 2.2.*

<sup>317</sup> Castelli, 89.

The remainder of the text is focused largely on Perpetua's visions and her experiences in the prison with her fellow martyrs Saturus and Felicitas. While some of the visions may recall a re-interpretation of the earthly familial roles, Perpetua represents herself as focused exclusively upon her role as a martyr-designate. However, the editor of the text makes a final attempt to situate Perpetua back within the expected societal role of a daughter becoming a wife as he describes the martyrs entering the arena: "Perpetua followed with a placid look, and with step and gait as a matron of Christ, beloved of God."<sup>318</sup> By identifying Perpetua in this way perhaps the editor sees her situation "as parallel to that of a young woman who leaves her father for a husband . . . Her entrance into martyrdom is thus figured according to a normative paradigm of gendered behavior, the transmission of a young woman from father to bridegroom."<sup>319</sup> The action of identifying her as a wife of Christ also emphasizes Perpetua's inherent femininity as well as underscores marriage as the fundamental goal for women.<sup>320</sup> With her martyrdom only moments away, Perpetua is linked with the chaste actions of the virgins who are also described by Tertullian as wives of Christ. He addresses virgins, saying, "For wedded you are to Christ: to him you have surrendered your flesh."<sup>321</sup> The same could be said of the martyrs, who voluntarily surrender their flesh to Christ in their willingness to die for him. By situating Perpetua along these lines, the editor reinforces both her chastity (although she is a wife and mother), as well as situates her within a readily understood social order. Her rejection of family should not be understood as a threat to the social order, but simply a rearranging of her allegiances. She is still a wife, but now her husband is divine.

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<sup>318</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.1.

<sup>319</sup> McNerney, 24.

<sup>320</sup> Cobb, 109.

<sup>321</sup> *Tert., Virg. Vel.* 16.6.

One aspect of Perpetua's martyrdom<sup>322</sup> speaks especially to her role as the ideal Roman matron. The editor focuses on Perpetua's appearance as she faces the beasts in the arena:

She was tossed, and fell on her loins; and when she saw her tunic torn from her side, she drew it over her as a veil for her middle, rather mindful of her modesty than her suffering. Then she was called for again, and bound up her disheveled hair; for it was not becoming for a martyr to suffer with disheveled hair, lest she should appear to be mourning in her glory.<sup>323</sup>

Perpetua is described as "enacting the feminine virtue of modesty"<sup>324</sup> that is so important for Tertullian. She demonstrates this virtue through her clothing, again demonstrating that the only way to represent a virtue is by outwardly demonstrating it. Very different from the disobedient virgins in Carthage, Perpetua seeks to cover herself from the gaze of the audience even during the intense fear and pain that the reader would probably impute her to be feeling. Also in contrast to Thecla's desire to cut her hair, Perpetua seeks to maintain a proper hairstyle of a matron even as she is being attacked. Her actions demonstrate "conformity with societal expectations and even with standards of beauty"<sup>325</sup> as well as a way of "preserving her dignity, the dignity of a triumphant Christian. It is also, of course, the dignity of a Roman *matrona*."<sup>326</sup> However, it is important to remember that this section is exclusively the work of the editor. As such, "The careful details and the eyewitness's interpretation of them probably reveal more about the narrator's mind than about Perpetua's."<sup>327</sup> The editor is clearly concerned with

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<sup>322</sup> This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

<sup>323</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.3. ". . . concidit in lumbos et ubi sedit, tunicam a latere discissam ad velamentum femoris reduxit pudoris potius memor quam doloris. Dehinc acu requista et disporsos capillos infibulavit; non enim decebat martyram sparsis capillis pati, ne in sua Gloria plangere videretur."

<sup>324</sup> Cobb, 111.

<sup>325</sup> McNerney, 27.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>327</sup> Salisbury, 143.

Perpetua's identity as simultaneously an ideal Roman matron and an ideal Christian martyr. The perspective is certainly consistent with Tertullian's views on the topic.

"A *matrona* to the last,"<sup>328</sup> Perpetua retains control of her own modesty and the way that she will be viewed by the audience. She protects herself from their intrusive gaze both by the strength of her own gaze (she is described as "casting down the luster of her eyes from the gaze of all,"<sup>329</sup> as well as by shielding her body from their gaze with her tunic.) The action of "staring down those who look at her with her own powerful gaze"<sup>330</sup> is significant because it demonstrates once again the difference between Tertullian's opinion of what is appropriate for a virgin as opposed to what is appropriate for a wife. Tertullian insists on veiling partially as a way to protect the virgins from the harmful gaze of men, as well as a way of stopping them from gazing outward,<sup>331</sup> like Thecla does. Clearly, Perpetua is not afraid of the audience's gaze, but rather uses her own strength to repel the curious and objectifying looks from the spectators. This is acceptable, and even admirable, because she is not a fragile virgin but a strong wife of Christ and a soon-to-be martyr. Her gaze is more powerful than the audience's collective gaze because her faith is stronger than theirs.

Ultimately, everything is related to Perpetua's identity as a member of the typical Roman family. She is described first in relation to her earthly relatives (as a wife, daughter, sister, and mother), she undergoes a series of interactions with her earthly father where she must reject all her roles except for the one of Christian. Finally, she is identified in the arena as a wife of Christ, re-enforcing that her earthly role is not totally rejected, but simply transformed. Through her stated rejections of her roles, Perpetua

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<sup>328</sup> Brown, 75.

<sup>329</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.1.

<sup>330</sup> Castelli, 123.

<sup>331</sup> *Tert., Virg. Vel.* 15.

remains faithful to the expectations of her species. While she does disobey her father's wishes, she agonizes over the pain that she causes him and the rest of her family, and it takes her several attempts before she can truly sever ties with them. The conversations between Perpetua and her father are in sharp contrast to the steadfast silence that Thecla displays when questioned by her mother and fiancé. She does not seek to wear male clothing or cut her hair like Thecla does but instead attempts to maintain an appropriately modest form of dress and hairstyle even when she is facing the beasts in the arena. Thecla actively seeks out the gaze of Paul and later of the wider community generally speaking, while Perpetua only uses her gaze to repel the eyes of the audience. Finally, Thecla consistently attempts to go against what is acceptable for her species by speaking and teaching in public, whereas Perpetua only seeks to be permitted to die for her faith.

### **Conclusions**

Tertullian's identification of virgins and wives as different species of women, each with different expectations that should not be challenged, is a central reason for his rejection of Thecla and his praise of Perpetua. While both narratives demonstrate instances where the women go against the expectations of their species, Thecla does so in a way that threatens social order, whereas Perpetua only severs her familial roles and ties as a way of attaining her ultimate glory in martyrdom. Everything subversive that Thecla does is a result of her deciding to defy the social order by refusing to proceed to the next species by getting married and by distinguishing herself from the rest of the women. By deciding to remain a virgin, she is asserting her independence not only from her family, but from the church and from the rest of society. Thecla removes herself from being under anyone's authority, even Paul's. She continues to seek for Paul even

after he has rejected her, and he only sanctions her teaching at the end of the text when it is clear she will do what she likes anyway. This independence is extremely dangerous to Tertullian's worldview, not only because it was taken as a fact of nature that women were weaker and should be under the authority of men. Thecla's actions are potentially damaging to the still-new religion of Christianity. Tertullian spends much of his treatises discussing ways that Christians should dress and behave in order to present the appearance of modesty to the outside world, since "To Christian modesty it is not enough to be so, but to seem so too."<sup>332</sup> A disrespectful and subversive woman like Thecla, who abandons her family and travels alone while wearing men's clothing, would provide non-Christians with further proof to persecute and marginalize other Christians who would be associated with her. Furthermore, Thecla asserts herself into the role of teacher and baptizer before receiving Paul's blessing (however flawed this blessing might be). This is a disruption of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that Tertullian strives to uphold, and no one, man or woman, should ever insert themselves within the authoritative structure of the church without official sanction.

Perpetua also rejects her role as a wife and mother, but unlike Thecla, this is not a personal decision, but one that is thrust upon her. Perpetua must choose between living with her family in the Roman world or dying with her fellow Christians in the arena. Her decision to give up her familial and social obligations to follow her faith causes her much pain and distress, in contrast to Thecla, who shows no remorse in abandoning her mother and fiancé. Perpetua speaks frequently of being anguished at seeing the pain she causes her father and her son, and yet she does not allow these earthly ties to cause her to waver from her belief. As much as Tertullian seeks to situate Christianity

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<sup>332</sup> Tert., *Cult. Fem.* 2.13.

suitably within the Roman world, the reality is that Christians can and were being persecuted simply for identifying themselves as such. Therefore, in a case such as Perpetua's, where she has already been arrested and is facing having to either renounce her family or her faith, Tertullian would have chosen the same way as Perpetua. Furthermore, at the time of her martyrdom, Perpetua had already fulfilled her expected social roles in the transition from virgin to wife and mother before she submits herself to die for her faith. In this way, Perpetua fulfills both her duties as a Roman and as a Christian, while Thecla completely rejects both in favour of creating a new role with her own set of rules.

Ultimately, it is clear that Tertullian's identification of different expectations for species of women forms a large part of the reason why he rejects Thecla but embraces Perpetua. However, Tertullian's stated reason for his opposition to Thecla must also be taken into consideration. He objects to the narrative because it shows Thecla teaching and baptizing, activities in which a woman should not partake. As a result, Tertullian's understanding of baptism and the rules he associates with it must be examined. The following chapter will therefore focus on his treatise, *On Baptism*.

### Chapter 3 - Tertullian and Baptism

Tertullian's opposition to Thecla appears within his treatise *On Baptism*. His rejection of the Thecla narrative is therefore closely tied to the way that Tertullian views the ritual of baptism. The treatise is written in response to the recent presence in Carthage of a teacher who disputes the importance and necessity of water baptism for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>333</sup> As a result, Tertullian is less concerned with describing his overall understanding of the sacrament than arguing his point about water and asserting that only certain people have the authority to confer baptism. The treatise is "not written as a proposal as to how baptism might be carried out in Carthage. Rather, the originality of the text is that it furnishes us with liturgical details of how the Carthaginian church actually celebrated initiation."<sup>334</sup> As such, this chapter will discuss Tertullian's "slight treatment of this subject,"<sup>335</sup> along with the liturgical aspects of baptism that Tertullian focuses on and deems most important. This will be followed by a longer discussion of some of the symbolic issues that Tertullian raises, such as the role of water and triple immersion. Finally, this chapter will focus on Tertullian's views on who has the authority to confer baptism (with specific focus on his reference to Thecla in opposition of female baptizers), as well as the responsibilities of the baptized. The identification of the issues that Tertullian relates to baptism will allow for an understanding of the way the narratives of both Thecla and Perpetua fit within Tertullian's worldview. As his identification of the species of women contributes to his opposing views of Thecla and Perpetua, his

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<sup>333</sup> Anne Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 100.

<sup>334</sup> Killian McDonnell and George T. Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 114.

<sup>335</sup> Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 17. *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1964).

discussion regarding baptism is also a contributing factor in his rejection of Thecla and his approval of Perpetua.

Timothy Barnes dates *On Baptism* between 198 and 203,<sup>336</sup> putting it at roughly the midpoint in Tertullian's writing career. It is of importance in a broader Christian context because it is the first extant treatise on the initiation ritual.<sup>337</sup> He of course references baptism in other treatises, but this is his only work that is focused specifically upon the rite, and it seems to be written in response to specific issues that have arisen within his community. Tertullian asserts that the object of the treatise is to provide "equipment for those who are at present under instruction, as well as those others who, content to have believed in simplicity, have not examined the reasons for what has been conferred upon them, and because of inexperience are burdened with a faith which is open to temptation."<sup>338</sup> Therefore, he is addressing both the unbaptized (catechumens) as well as those who have been baptized without having a proper understanding of what this means. Additionally, the language of this opening address, along with the relative brevity of the treatise, suggests that it may have been originally intended for oral instruction.<sup>339</sup>

Immediately after designating the audience of his treatise, Tertullian discloses his impetus for writing with an attack against "a female viper of the Cainite sect" who apparently was able to convince some members of the church with her "particular point of demolishing baptism."<sup>340</sup> As with his arguments on the veiling of virgins, Tertullian appeals to nature to make his point. He states that the opposition of this woman to

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<sup>336</sup> Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 55.

<sup>337</sup> McDonnell and Montague, 120.

<sup>338</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 1.

<sup>339</sup> Mark S. LeTourneau, "General and Special Topics in the 'De Baptismo' of Tertullian," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 5 (1987): 89.

<sup>340</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 1.

water-baptism is “according to nature: for vipers and asps as a rule, and even basilisks, frequent dry and waterless places. But we, being little fishes, as Jesus Christ is our great Fish, begin our life in the water, and only while we abide in the water are we safe and sound.”<sup>341</sup> Tertullian’s designation of the woman teaching against a water-baptism as a viper has obvious connections to the serpent that gave the knowledge to Adam and Eve.<sup>342</sup> Tertullian consistently displays the association of women with the story of Adam and Eve (specifically, the idea of original sin) throughout his treatises, most notably when he calls all women Eve, since all women “are the devil’s gateway.”<sup>343</sup> Since any woman is potentially an Eve, it is unsurprising that a female teacher, particularly one who subverts Tertullian’s understandings of the important rite of baptism, should be compared to the serpent. Tertullian further undermines her teachings by referencing 1 Tim 2:12, when he says that this woman has “no right to even teach correctly.”<sup>344</sup> This same argument will be repeated later in the treatise in his argument against Thecla. Tertullian’s comparison of Christians to fish also reveals the importance he places upon water within the ritual, and this will form a central aspect of his treatise.

The rite of baptism as Tertullian understood it “was a serious and highly visible ceremony in which the catechumen finally and fully renounced his or her old life in favor of a new one.”<sup>345</sup> The ceremony itself “consisted of a water-bath, anointing, laying on of hands, and the celebration of the eucharist.”<sup>346</sup> He describes the overall ritual as follows: “with such complete simplicity, without display, without any unusual equipment, and (not

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<sup>341</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 1.

<sup>342</sup> LeTourneau, 89.

<sup>343</sup> Tert., *De Cultu Feminarum* 1.1. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870).

<sup>344</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 1.

<sup>345</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 76.

<sup>346</sup> McDonnell and Montague, 97.

least) without anything to pay, a man is sent down into the water, is washed to the accompaniment of very few words, and comes up little or no cleaner than he was, [because of this] his attainment to eternity is regarded as beyond belief.”<sup>347</sup> From this, the most important factors of the baptismal ritual can be seen. No special clothing or equipment are required; indeed it seems that all is needed is the person to be baptized, the baptizer, and water. Tertullian does not even relate the words that the baptizer is expected to recite, except to say that they are very few. This might be because he believes that the audience would have already known what is said during the ritual, but also perhaps alludes to the fact that there was no universal baptismal liturgy. This statement also demonstrates a common argument against the efficacy of baptism to which Tertullian must answer. Indeed, the simplicity of the ritual would have stood out in sharp contrast to many non-Christian rituals which used “every possible embroidery of ritual and every additional expense”<sup>348</sup> in order to emphasize the sacredness of the ceremony. In reality, the ritual was quite complex if the years-long preparation of the catechumens is taken into consideration, but Tertullian’s emphasis on its simplicity demonstrates the paradoxical power of God. He states, “There is indeed nothing which so hardens men’s minds as the simplicity of God’s works as they are observed in action, compared with the magnificence promised in their effects.”<sup>349</sup> Tertullian is essentially stating that long periods of training are necessary in order to understand how the simple actions of a ritual can yield extraordinary results. The Christians are separated from the non-Christians through this understanding of simplicity, since “For the unbeliever, there is nothing in such plain acts as baptism and the pretended effects are impossible . . .

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<sup>347</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 2.

<sup>348</sup> Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>349</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 2.

[this] illustrates how God uses foolish things to confound worldly wisdom and does easily what men find most difficult.”<sup>350</sup> The importance of the simplicity of the ritual can be seen in the Perpetua narrative, and the lack of simplicity in Thecla’s baptism also contributes to Tertullian’s opposition of her text. Both aspects will be examined in the following chapter.

Apart from the overall simplicity of the ritual, the most important element of baptism for Tertullian is the water. This can be seen in that he professes to oppose the Cainite woman’s teachings not only because she is a woman, but because she is a woman who is teaching an understanding of baptism that is contrary to his own. It should further be noted that it cannot be known exactly what the Cainite woman’s ideas were, since the only evidence of her that remains is Tertullian’s polemic against her. Since Tertullian later uses the example of the Cainite woman to introduce his rejection of Thecla, it is possible that he sees both women as equally threatening to his views of baptism, regardless of the different ways this is done. Apart from the fact that as a woman, she should not be teaching at all, Tertullian states that his main objection to the member of the Cainite sect is her assertion that water baptism is not necessary. Instead, it appears that the type of baptism that she advocated was spiritual, as opposed to the mainstream church’s understanding that was focused on the external rite, including the importance of being cleansed in water.<sup>351</sup>

Tertullian spends the first part of the treatise interpreting and explaining his reasons why it is perfectly reasonable to assert that washing a person with water can have the supernatural effects that the Christians claim, including “remission of sins, deliverance from enslavement to Satan and from death, regeneration, and reception of

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<sup>350</sup> Osborn, 3.

<sup>351</sup> Jensen, 193.

the Holy Spirit.<sup>352</sup> Tertullian accomplishes this using a variety of classical rhetorical devices, as well as evidence from scripture and nature.<sup>353</sup> One of the main arguments that Tertullian utilizes is the argument of antiquity, whereby he situates aspects of baptism (such as the importance of water) in ancient tradition, since “Water was prominent in the ceremonial cleansings of the Old Testament and in the purification ceremonies of pagan antiquity.”<sup>354</sup> He demonstrates his intent to appeal to antiquity in the introduction, when he notes that he will be demonstrating his points on “the grounds of the traditions.”<sup>355</sup> However, the fact that Tertullian believes it to be necessary to compose a treatise on the subject reveals that there were “vigorous discussions in Carthage about the practice of baptism.”<sup>356</sup> Therefore, while Tertullian displays no doubt about the power of water in baptism, clearly many of his fellow Carthaginian Christians did not feel the same way and needed to be convinced through his arguments. This further alludes to the variety of beliefs that comprised Christianity, as well as the desire for Tertullian to bring a measure of unity to the Carthaginian church at least. His opposition to the Cainite woman, and the scriptural basis he gives for this opposition, may therefore be understood in a similar way to his rejection of Thecla. Both Thecla and the Cainite woman offer a different interpretation of the ritual than Tertullian does, and he sees both as being threatening to the authority structure of his church. The fact that the Cainite woman appears to have been actually teaching in his city, whereas Thecla’s

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<sup>352</sup> LeTourneau, 91.

<sup>353</sup> For a closer discussion of Tertullian’s methods and arguments in this regard, see LeTourneau, 89-95.

<sup>354</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 1. “rationibus traditionum.” Everett Ferguson, “Baptismal Motifs in the Ancient Church,” in *Studies in Early Christianity Volume XI: Conversion, Catechumenate, and Baptism in the Early Church*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 356.

<sup>355</sup> McDonnell and Montague, 114.

<sup>356</sup> Jensen, 194.

teachings occur only in text, does not seem to have a bearing on the level of danger that Tertullian perceives these different views to have.

The immersion in water, and the presence of the Trinity in this immersion, is central to Tertullian's understanding of baptism and he uses the texts that come to comprise the New Testament to support this foundation. The gospels, acts, and epistles of Paul reveal essential elements of the rite of baptism and "always included water-baptism in the name of Jesus (or the later trinitarian formula) and the gift of the Holy Spirit."<sup>357</sup> While it does not appear specifically in *On Baptism*, Tertullian references triple immersion in other treatises. In *Against Praxeas*, he states, "baptize unto the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, not unto one only: for not once, but thrice, are we baptized, unto each several Person at each several names."<sup>358</sup> In *The Chaplet*, Tertullian also discusses the process of baptism, saying "we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel."<sup>359</sup> In *On Baptism*, Tertullian asserts that the trinity is an important aspect of the baptism ritual without making specific reference to triple immersion. He states, "because it is under the charge of three that profession of faith and promise of salvation are in pledge, there is a necessary addition, the mention of the Church: because where there are the three, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, there is the Church, which is a body of three."<sup>360</sup> This shows that it is very important to Tertullian that a person be baptized only within the authority structure

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<sup>357</sup> McDonnell and Montague, 76.

<sup>358</sup> Tert., *Adversus Praxean* 26. Latin version edited by E. Dekkers and E. Evans in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* II (1954). English translation of *Against Praxeas*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1964).

<sup>359</sup> Tert., *De Corona Militis* 3. Latin version edited by E. Kroymann in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* II (1954). English translation of *The Chaplet*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869). Ferguson questions whether Tertullian means the triple immersion of Matt 28:19 or the triple confession of Matt 10:32 as being fuller than the gospel desires. Ferguson, 356.

<sup>360</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 6.

of the church. It is important to note, however, that it might be “an overstatement to suggest seriously an absolute identification by Tertullian of the church with either the Spirit or the triune Godhead [ . . . ] Rather, [ . . . ] Tertullian seems to suggest that the authentic church is ultimately constituted by the presence within its life of that Spirit in whom is present the Trinity.”<sup>361</sup>

Tertullian’s understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit during the immersion phase is important to note as the Holy Spirit plays a role in the baptisms of both Thecla and Perpetua within their respective narratives. Tertullian states, “Not that the Holy Spirit is given to us in the water, but that in the water we are made clean by the action of the angel, and made ready for the Holy Spirit.”<sup>362</sup> Thus, part of the function of the immersion in the water is a process of cleansing and preparation. After immersion, Tertullian speaks of “the imposition of the hand in benediction, inviting and welcoming the Holy Spirit.”<sup>363</sup> Therefore, once a catechumen is immersed into the cleansing water, a person in authority places hands upon him or her as a way of welcoming the Holy Spirit. Perhaps in response to further questions of validity by others in the community, Tertullian continues, “Human ingenuity has been permitted to summon spirit to combine with water, and by application of a man’s hands over the result of their union to animate it with another spirit of excellent clarity: and shall not God be permitted, in an organ of his own, by the use of holy hands to play a tune of spiritual sublimity?”<sup>364</sup> Tertullian asserts that God works through the hands of man during baptism, and he finds examples of such work in the Old Testament, such as Jacob placing his hands upon his grandsons.<sup>365</sup>

Tertullian states that, at the point where hands are laid upon the baptized, “that most

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<sup>361</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 75.

<sup>362</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 6.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>365</sup> Gen 48:14.

holy Spirit willingly comes down from the Father upon bodies cleansed and blessed, and comes to rest upon the waters of baptism as though revisiting his primal dwelling-place.<sup>366</sup> This obviously recalls Tertullian's opening comparison of Christians to little fishes, who cannot live outside of the baptismal waters.<sup>367</sup> The water is not merely water, but is infused with the Holy Spirit, meaning that the Christian fishes likewise cannot live without the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the cleansing that occurs in the water with the Holy Spirit is internal and external, as Tertullian notes, "the flesh is washed that the soul may be made spotless."<sup>368</sup> Ultimately, "the cleansing, purifying effect of baptism is attributed, not to the water, but to the Holy Spirit"<sup>369</sup> working through the authority of the church which comes from God. This physical and spiritual cleansing also plays a significant role in the way that baptism is portrayed in the Thecla and Perpetua narratives, with both texts revealing an adherence to the belief that the Holy Spirit resides in the water and has the power to cleanse initiates.

Tertullian also speaks of the practice of being anointed after baptism, which also appears in the imagery in both of the female martyrs' narratives. He sees it as a central feature of the ritual, saying "After that we come up from the washing and are anointed with the blessed unction, following that ancient practice by which, ever since Aaron was anointed by Moses, there was a custom of anointing them for priesthood with oil out of a horn."<sup>370</sup> Tertullian then explains that Jesus is called "Christ" from the Greek word for anointing, and notes, "So also in our case, the unction flows upon the flesh, but turns to

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<sup>366</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 8.

<sup>367</sup> Osborn, 3.

<sup>368</sup> Tert., *De Resurrectione carnis* 8. Latin version edited by J.W.Ph. Borleffs in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* II (1954). English translation of *On the Resurrection of the Body*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1960); Ferguson, 357.

<sup>369</sup> Ferguson, 357.

<sup>370</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 7.

spiritual profit, just as in the baptism itself there is an act that touches the flesh, that we are immersed in water, but a spiritual effect, that we are set free from sins.”<sup>371</sup> In this way, Tertullian again speaks to the supernatural elements of baptism, despite its external simplicity. The commonplace act of anointing, coupled with immersion in water, when done properly, leads to the anointed being freed from sins.

In discussing who may be permitted to perform the rituals of immersion and anointing, Tertullian makes it clear that any authority must first come from the church. When he affirms that there is only one true baptism, “he means one kind, namely, true baptism as administered by the orthodox church.”<sup>372</sup> Since there is only one baptism, the baptism performed outside the authority structure of the church (including the woman from the Cainite sect and Thecla’s self-baptism) is not baptism at all because it is not done with the approval of the church. Tertullian states that those who assume the right to baptize outside of the church:

have not the same God as we have, nor have they the one, that is the same, Christ: consequently they have not the one, because they have not the same, baptism. As they have it not in proper form, there is no doubt that they have it not at all, and there is no possibility of enumerating a thing which is not in any one’s possession. Also they cannot have it given them, since they have it not to give.<sup>373</sup>

That is, Tertullian believes that any baptism performed outside of the authority structure of the church is not truly baptism, since those conferring baptism have not been given that ability by the only true institution, the church. In other words, “since there is but one type of baptism, rather than species of true and false contained in the genus of baptism,

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<sup>371</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 7.

<sup>372</sup> LeTourneau, 99.

<sup>373</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 15. “. . . quia non idem datus est nobis et illis, nec unus Christus, id est idem: ergo nec baptismus unus, quia non idem. Quem cum rite non habeant sine dubio non habent, nec capit numerare quod non habetur: ita nec possunt accipere, quia non habent.”

the argument is properly designated as definition rather than species to genus.<sup>374</sup> Thus, unlike the genus of women that contains many species, including virgins and wives, the genus of baptism contains no species variants within it. There is only one true baptism, and that is baptism within the church, conferred by a person with the proper authority, and given to a person who has the correct understanding of the ritual and its consequences.

Tertullian believes that the only people who should have the authority to confer baptism are the clergy. This view is consistent with his views across many other of his treatises, and “both his terminology and his general tone suggest that Tertullian . . . regarded the clergy as occupying a position of dignity and authority vastly superior to that of the laity.”<sup>375</sup> To put it simply, Tertullian believes that “the church is necessary in the work of salvation.”<sup>376</sup> Tertullian bases this belief in scripture, first relating an argument that people were making questioning the importance of baptism, “‘But look,’ they say, ‘our Lord did come, and did not baptize: for we see it written, how Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples.’”<sup>377</sup> Tertullian answers this by comparing John saying that Jesus would baptize is the same as saying that an emperor would post an edict. No one expects the emperor to physically post the edict, just as Jesus does not need to be the one who actually baptizes, but rather John meant “through him or unto him you will be baptized.”<sup>378</sup> Ultimately, Tertullian argues that Jesus gave his disciples the task of baptizing.<sup>379</sup> Therefore, the authority to baptize comes directly from Jesus and cannot be discarded lightly. These same people who argue that baptism is an

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<sup>374</sup> LeTourneau, 100.

<sup>375</sup> Rankin, 133.

<sup>376</sup> McDonnell and Montague, 113.

<sup>377</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 11.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> LeTourneau, 98.

unimportant ritual also assert that Paul's claim "For Christ sent me not to baptize"<sup>380</sup> is an "argument for abolishing baptism."<sup>381</sup> Tertullian refutes this assertion, noting first that Paul did in fact baptize some people,<sup>382</sup> and then that "even if Christ had in his case given no commission for baptizing, he had for all that instructed the other apostles to baptize."<sup>383</sup> Thus, just as Jesus gave the right to baptize to the apostles, the authority to baptize in Tertullian's time must be conferred by a person of authority. Tertullian states, "The supreme right of giving it belongs to the high priest, which is the bishop: after him, to the presbyters and deacons, yet not without commission from the bishop, on account of the Church's dignity."<sup>384</sup> Just as the disciples could not baptize until Jesus gave them the power, the presbyters and deacons must be given the authority to baptize by the bishop.

Tertullian speaks of exceptional situations where baptism must be conferred when no one of the proper authority is available. In this case, a layperson might perform a baptism, and therefore utilize the function of a bishop "in emergencies, if ever conditions of place or time or person demand it."<sup>385</sup> He further describes the circumstances that he qualifies as "emergencies", stating "the boldness of a rescuer is acceptable when he is constrained to it by the necessities of the man in peril, since he will be guilty of a man's destruction if he forbears to give the help he is free and able to give."<sup>386</sup> It is important to note that this directive is "determined as much by commonsense as [it is] by the strict demands of theological correctness."<sup>387</sup> That is,

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<sup>380</sup> 1 Cor 1:17.

<sup>381</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 14.

<sup>382</sup> 1 Cor 1:14, 16.

<sup>383</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 14.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>387</sup> Rankin, 131.

while Tertullian would never say that a layperson holds the same ability as the clergy to baptize, he recognizes real world instances where this might be preferable to no baptism at all. Furthermore, “his thought here is not ecclesiologically, or liturgically, or sacramentally driven, but always by concern for proper discipline; what is good (or bad) for the priest must also hold for the lay person.”<sup>388</sup> In this way, a layperson who is allowed to baptize in an emergency should be held to the same standards as the priest who would have otherwise performed the ritual. It follows, therefore, that these standards include gender, thereby precluding women from conferring emergency baptism since they can never become priests. Thecla’s act of self-baptism shows her adopting the position of both clergy-member and initiate, thereby challenging Tertullian’s understandings of authority.

Indeed, it is directly after the assertions about who properly has authority to baptize that Tertullian references and rejects Thecla. Tertullian does so by linking Thecla to the “female viper of the Cainite sect” from his introduction:

But the impudence of that woman who assumed the right to teach is evidently not going to arrogate to her the right to baptize as well - unless perhaps some new serpent appears, like the original one, so that as that woman abolished baptism, some other should of her own authority confer it. But if certain Acts of Paul, which are falsely so named, claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptize, let men know that in Asia the presbyter who compiled that document, thinking to add of his own to Paul’s reputation, was found out, and though he professed he had done it for love of Paul, was deposed from his position. How could we believe that Paul should give a female power to teach and to baptize, when he did not allow a woman even to learn by her own right?<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

<sup>389</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17. “Petulantia autem mulieris quae usurpavit docere utique non etiam tinguendi ius sibi rapiet, nisi si quae nova bestia venerit similes pristinae, ut quemadmodum illa baptismum auferebat ita aliqua per se [eum] conferat. Quod si quae Acta Pauli, quae perperam scripta sunt, exemplum Theclae ad licentiam mulierum docendi tinguendique defendant, sciant in Asia presbyterum qui eam scripturam construxit, quasi titulo Pauli de suo cumulans, convictum atque confessum id se amore Pauli fecisse loco decessisse. Quam enim fidei proximum videtur ut is

In this argument, it is obvious that Tertullian sees Thecla as being equally dangerous to the heretical woman of the Cainite sect. This is why it was so important for Tertullian to emphasize that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was a forgery, and that the priest who composed the text was dismissed for his spurious creation.<sup>390</sup> Just as a baptism that occurs outside the authority of the orthodox church is not a baptism at all, Tertullian refutes the validity of the example of Thecla as conferring to women the authority to baptize based on the fact that the narrative falsely goes under Paul's name. Anyone who baptizes using the text of the example of Thecla as evidence of their authority does not baptize at all, according to Tertullian's definition. That is, "Tertullian moves from one extreme of feminine deceit to another; the serpent-like Cainite woman taught by preaching that baptism was invalid, whereas the hypothetical 'new beast' [sometimes translated as new serpent] might teach that woman could baptize, by appealing to Thecla. As far as Tertullian is concerned, the two are equal in monstrosity, since invalid baptism is as bad as no baptism at all."<sup>391</sup>

Tertullian also makes assertions about what kind of Christian may appropriately be baptized. While he is aware of the practice of infant baptism, he asks, "Why should innocent infancy come with haste to the remission of sins?"<sup>392</sup> Instead, Tertullian commands, "let them come, when they are growing up, when they are learning, when they are being taught what they are coming to: let them be made Christians when they

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docendi et tinguendi daret feminae potestatem qui ne discere quidem constanter mulieri permitit?"

<sup>390</sup> Leonie Hayne, "Thecla and the Church Fathers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 48 (1994): 209.

<sup>391</sup> Maud Burnett McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 20.

<sup>392</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 18. In this, Tertullian might well have been in the minority, as evidence shows that the baptism of children is standard practice in North Africa only two generations after Tertullian's work. McDonnell and Montegue, 98.

have become competent to know Christ.”<sup>393</sup> Thus, there is no one age or stage of life that is appropriate for everyone to be baptized. Each person must be evaluated on an individual basis to determine if he or she is ready to undertake the responsibilities of baptism. Catechumens likely would have undertaken “a multiyear instruction in Christian teaching and conduct”<sup>394</sup> before the baptism rites may be conferred. Tertullian notes, “deferment of baptism is more profitable, in accordance with each person’s character and attitude, and even age: and especially so as regards to children. For what need is there . . . for even their sponsors to be brought into peril, seeing they may possibly themselves fail of their promises by death, or be deceived by the subsequent development of an evil disposition.”<sup>395</sup> The danger of baptism is acknowledged in the Perpetua narrative, as their baptism appears to speed up their martyrdom process. The catechumens are arrested but initially only placed under house arrest. Once baptized, they are moved to the prison and their death becomes certain.

Clearly, for Tertullian, baptism does not constitute an immediate and permanent change of character. If a person is baptized before they are truly ready and before they understand the implications of baptism, there is still the danger of them falling away from the tenets of Christianity and also bringing harm to the ones who sponsored them for baptism in the first place. This viewpoint can be supported by again looking at his insistence on the veiling of all women, whether they are baptized or not. Veiling is essential to Tertullian because it is “based on unalterable facts of nature: women were seductive, and Christian baptism did nothing to change this fact . . . The veiling of women addressed a shared human nature which no drastic baptismal rite could claim to

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<sup>393</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 18.

<sup>394</sup> Jensen, 100.

<sup>395</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 18.

slough off.”<sup>396</sup> In other words, while it might cleanse the soul, “the simplicity of baptism did not produce transformed lives.”<sup>397</sup> In order to be baptized, a person must first undergo intensive training in what it means to be a Christian, but baptism does not act as a method of transforming people or ensuring that they will always behave in a Christian manner. The inherent traits of nature will always be present, and a baptized Christian must always struggle to act in an appropriate manner. Thus, in contrast to what Paul seems to have expected, for Tertullian baptism does not transform the inherent qualities of the baptized.

Since baptism does not create a change in the person, and since the responsibilities of the baptized may be difficult to uphold, a Christian should undergo a period of teaching and training before he or she is baptized. In Rome, these teachings usually culminated in “a time of fasting and prayer, [and] a time of especially intense struggle with the forces of evil, which takes the form of repeated exorcisms.”<sup>398</sup> Tertullian refers to a similar process, stating “Those who are at the point of entering upon baptism ought to pray, with frequent prayers, fastings, bendings of the knee, and all night vigils, along with confession of their former sins.”<sup>399</sup> This would obviously have been a deeply involving and difficult period, and only those who truly believed in the Christian teachings would have been likely to continue. In the Roman context, this period is described as climaxing “in symbolic death in the waters of baptism, in which the baptismal candidate dies with Christ and like Christ, in order to be resurrected in a new life. This new life is expressed symbolically in the climb out of the water, in the anointment as a sign of the reception of the Holy Spirit, [and] in acceptance into the new

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<sup>396</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 82.

<sup>397</sup> Osborn, 225.

<sup>398</sup> Jensen, 100.

<sup>399</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 18.

fellowship through the bishop's laying on of hands."<sup>400</sup> Tertullian echoes a similar ideology in Carthage, stating, "the gentiles are set free from this present world by means of water, and leaving behind, drowned in the water, their ancient tyrant the devil."<sup>401</sup> Clearly, the process of baptism was to be taken very seriously, and the period of study leading up to it would have been intense. Indeed, Tertullian states, "all who understand what a burden baptism is will have more fear of obtaining it than of its postponement. Faith unimpaired has no doubt of its salvation."<sup>402</sup> Therefore, if a person truly understands the requirements of baptism, they will desire to postpone it as long as possible. Baptism is only rushed into by those who are unprepared and unknowledgeable and who therefore will be unlikely to uphold everything that is required of them. Baptism involved a very real struggle with the forces of evil, and this struggle would continue even after the baptized emerged cleansed from the water. This fight between good and evil can be seen in both the Thecla and Perpetua narratives, both in their baptismal imagery and in the references to their martyrdoms.

Tertullian also connects baptism to martyrdom in his discussions about baptism. First, he reveals that there is a close relationship between confession (a key component of martyrdom) and baptism. The origins for this can be seen in the New Testament sources, particularly the epistles of Paul, including Galatians 3:26, Colossians 2:12, Hebrews 10:19-22, and Romans 10:9.<sup>403</sup> Tertullian notes the important connection between confession and baptism in another treatise when he argues, "When entering the water, we make profession of the Christian faith in the words of its rule; we bear public

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<sup>400</sup> Jensen, 100.

<sup>401</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 9.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>403</sup> Ferguson, 352.

testimony that we have renounced the devil, his pomp, and his angels.”<sup>404</sup> Baptism is therefore a public event, like martyrdom in the arena, and it confirms to anyone who may be observing it that the person being baptized is a Christian and has agreed to follow the rules of the Christian faith. Tertullian also more explicitly compares martyrdom to baptism, stating, “we have indeed a second washing . . . that of blood.”<sup>405</sup> Tertullian connects this to the story of Jesus’ crucifixion, “so as to give us our vocation by water and our election by blood, he sent forth these two baptisms from out of the wound of his pierced side, because those who had faith in his blood were to be washed in water and those who had washed in water would need also to be washed in blood.”<sup>406</sup> Baptism in water and baptism in blood are inextricably linked. Tertullian believes that “In the font, as initiates are washed in the saving blood of Jesus, they incur a debt of blood that can only be repaid through lifelong asceticism or martyrdom.”<sup>407</sup> Therefore, in texts such as the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, “martyrdom appears as the fulfillment of baptism, and at the same time baptism is the interpretation of martyrdom.”<sup>408</sup> For Tertullian, this is indeed an important point, since he places an extremely high value upon martyrdom<sup>409</sup> as a goal to which all Christians should aspire. Furthermore, martyrdom is also perhaps one of the burdens of baptism to which Tertullian refers. One should not be baptized until he or she is ready to become a martyr for his or her faith.

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<sup>404</sup> Tert., *De spectaculis* 4. Latin version edited by E. Dekkers in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* I (1954). English translation of *On the Games*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>405</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 16.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Blake Leyerle, “Blood is Seed,” *The Journal of Religion* 81 (2001): 37.

<sup>408</sup> Jensen, 101.

<sup>409</sup> This will be discussed further in a later chapter on martyrdom.

## Conclusions

Tertullian's *On Baptism* reveals both some of the liturgy about baptism in Tertullian's Carthage as well as some of the issues raised by his fellow Carthaginian Christians. Ultimately, Tertullian makes his arguments on "the grounds of the traditions,"<sup>410</sup> demonstrating the importance he places on upholding the practices of his predecessors and scripture. Tertullian argues for the importance of water in baptism because of the abundant evidence he finds in the texts of the New Testament. His understanding of the Holy Spirit as being infused in the water is a central point of this argument. Additionally, Tertullian is focused on retaining the hierarchy found within the New Testament, asserting that only those who have been conferred by a bishop should be allowed to baptize, just as Jesus originally gave the power to baptize to his disciples. The Cainite woman's teachings threatened both the value of water and the authority structure of baptism and compelled Tertullian to respond in such a way as to both affirm the traditional beliefs and discredit her teachings simply on the grounds that she was a woman. As Tertullian believes only clergy members specifically given the authority to baptize by a bishop may confer this sacrament to other Christians, the idea of laypeople (and worse, laywomen) daring to baptize others is threatening to his understanding of the sacredness of the ritual. Furthermore, since baptism is the ritual that officially initiates Christians, anyone who has been baptized by these women is therefore not a true Christian because they have not been given the true baptism.

Tertullian refers to Thecla not because she is directly associated with the "Cainite sect", nor because there is anything within her narrative that disputes water baptism. Instead, Thecla threatens the apostolic authority structure by baptizing herself and

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<sup>410</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 1.

others. Despite the fact that much of the baptismal imagery found in her narrative can also be found in Tertullian's treatise, this challenge of authority causes Tertullian great anxiety. In contrast, while Tertullian does not specifically refer to Perpetua in the treatise, he does reference baptism and martyrdom together in a way that is very similar to the way it appears in *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Furthermore, since *On Baptism* was written shortly before Perpetua's martyrdom, it is likely she would have been familiar with the imagery Tertullian discusses in it, as it would certainly have been circulated within the community.<sup>411</sup> Consequently, the topic of baptism provides another way to compare Tertullian's reactions Thecla and Perpetua. The following chapter will discuss the references to baptism within each text, as well as the circumstances that surrounded each woman's baptism, alongside Tertullian's views of the most important parts of the ritual as demonstrated in *On Baptism*.

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<sup>411</sup> Salisbury, 77.

#### Chapter 4 - Baptism in the Thecla and Perpetua Narratives

Tertullian's rejection of the Thecla narrative occurs in his treatise *On Baptism* and centres around its depiction of Thecla as teaching and baptizing, thereby inspiring other women to do the same. As a result of the audience's interpretation of the narrative, Tertullian attempts to discredit it entirely. As such, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* will be examined closely as a way of determining how baptism is portrayed (apart from and including Thecla's involvement in the ritual) and how this compares to Tertullian's views as outlined in his treatises. Thecla first asks Paul to baptize her, and when he refuses, she baptizes herself in the arena. After this, she informs Paul of her baptism and he gives her the authority to teach others. Thus, while Thecla first seems to follow the guidelines that Tertullian would have deemed to be appropriate, when she is refused baptism, she takes matters into her own hands and assumes an authority far outside of Tertullian's realm of acceptability.

In contrast to the explicit mention of Thecla, Tertullian does not refer to Perpetua's narrative in *On Baptism*. However, it is likely that Perpetua would have known its contents, as it was written shortly before her martyrdom and would certainly have been circulated in the Carthaginian Christian community.<sup>412</sup> Furthermore, there are many aspects of baptism that Tertullian references that appear within the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* and demonstrate that, as a catechumen, Perpetua likely knew what rituals to expect,<sup>413</sup> even if she had not read *On Baptism* itself. For example, unlike Thecla's self-baptism, a person of authority baptizes Perpetua and her fellow catechumen at a designated time. Perpetua further completes the appropriate nature of her baptism through the imagery in her visions. Her dream where a shepherd provides

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<sup>412</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 77.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

her with sweet food recalls the celebratory baptismal meal, and the dream where her deceased brother Dinocrates is refreshed by water speaks to the saving powers of water baptism. Furthermore, the narrator of the text refers to martyrdom as representing a “second baptism” of blood, an idea that is discussed in *On Baptism*. These instances will be examined in more detail to show how they are congruent with Tertullian’s views on baptism, as demonstrated in his treatises. In this way, Tertullian’s exultation of Perpetua and his condemnation of Thecla will be further explained. The fact that they identified with different species of women forms only part of the reason for his differing opinions, and the baptismal imagery found throughout provides additional information for this argument.

### **Thecla**

Baptism is a recurring topic in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and is first referred to briefly as part of Paul’s teachings. He states, “Blessed are those who have kept their baptism, for they will find their rest in the Father and the Son.”<sup>414</sup> Paul does not give an explanation about what keeping their baptism entails, but as the statement comes in the middle of his proclamations about self-control and chastity, it is fair to assume that maintaining chastity would have been a central part of this. The assertion of Paul that those who have kept their baptism are blessed also alludes to the fact that there are some people who are baptized who do not keep their baptismal promise. The idea that the responsibilities of the baptized can be difficult to uphold also occurs in Tertullian’s *On Baptism*, when he warns, “all who understand what a burden baptism is will have more fear of obtaining it than of its postponement.”<sup>415</sup> Indeed, both Tertullian and the Paul of

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<sup>414</sup> *Acti Pauli et Theclae* 6. *The Acts of Thecla*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman in *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make it into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>415</sup> Tertullian, *De Baptismo* 19. *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1964).

the Thecla narrative apparently believed that “baptism did not produce transformed lives,”<sup>416</sup> but instead signaled a new phase of the life of a Christian that was filled with more responsibilities. This viewpoint is in contrast with the view of the New Testament Paul and some of Tertullian’s contemporaries. Additionally, the requirements of upholding chastity are seen by Tertullian as especially difficult for women, and this is “in his opinion, based on unalterable facts of nature: women were seductive, and Christian baptism did nothing to change this fact.”<sup>417</sup>

The next reference to baptism occurs after Thecla escapes from her first near martyrdom. She finds Paul and asks to follow him while he travels around teaching. Paul refuses, citing her inherently fragile nature as a virgin. He replies, “the time is shameful and you are beautiful; another temptation may overtake you worse than the first, and you may not be able to endure but behave like a cowardly man.”<sup>418</sup> Thecla replies that she will be able to withstand whatever dangers may befall her if Paul will baptize her. She implores him, “only give me the seal in Christ, and no temptation will touch me!”<sup>419</sup> This understanding of baptism is clearly at odds with Tertullian’s opinion that women are inherently both seductive and seducible, “which no drastic baptismal rite could claim to slough off.”<sup>420</sup> Furthermore, Tertullian might interpret Paul’s objection to her baptism as being due to the fact that there was only a short period of time between when Thecla converted to Christianity and her asking to be baptized. While baptismal practices could vary from century to century and place to place, Roman evidence shows baptism should only occur after “a multiyear instruction in Christian teaching and

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<sup>416</sup> Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 225.

<sup>417</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 81.

<sup>418</sup> *ATH* 25.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>420</sup> Brown, 82.

conduct.”<sup>421</sup> Tertullian’s writings confirm that “catechetical instruction given candidates for baptism was an essential part of the preparation for the rite.”<sup>422</sup> As such, Thecla’s lack of completion of this instruction means that she is simply not ready to receive baptism. The fact that Thecla should wait longer before it is appropriate for her to be baptized is reinforced within the text when Paul replies, “Thecla, be patient and you will receive the water.”<sup>423</sup> He does not give a timeframe for when this will occur, but it seems sufficient for him to stipulate that her baptism be deferred until he deems her ready. Indeed, Thecla’s hasty desire to be baptized goes against what Tertullian says on the subject, since “deferment of baptism is more profitable.”<sup>424</sup>

Thecla’s baptism does not occur after years of study, but in the arena, “believing herself to be about to die.”<sup>425</sup> In Antioch, she is condemned to death by Alexander for rejecting his advances and embarrassing him.<sup>426</sup> She is matched against female beasts including, remarkably, a large vat of water filled with ravenous seals,<sup>427</sup> providing the water Thecla needs to baptize herself. The text reads, “When she finished her prayer she turned and saw a large vat filled with water, and said, “Now is the time for me to be cleaned!” She throws herself in, saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ, on this final day, I am baptized!”<sup>428</sup> The members of the crowd are horrified at Thecla’s actions, crying, “Do not throw yourself into the water!’ Even the governor began to weep, because seals

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<sup>421</sup> Anne Jensen, *God’s Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women*, translated by O.C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 100.

<sup>422</sup> Everett Ferguson, “Baptismal Motifs in the Ancient Church,” in *Studies in Early Christianity Volume XI: Conversion, Catechumenate, and Baptism in the Early Church*, ed. Everett Ferguson. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 352.

<sup>423</sup> *Ath* 25.

<sup>424</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 18.

<sup>425</sup> Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 36.

<sup>426</sup> This will be discussed further in a later chapter on martyrdom.

<sup>427</sup> The Greek reads Φῶχα. Ehrman translates this as seals, but interestingly Brown reads it as sharks in *The Body and Society* 158. Seals seems to be the more widely accepted translation.

<sup>428</sup> *Ath* 34.

were about to devour such beauty.”<sup>429</sup> This central plot point of the Thecla narrative requires a close examination, especially since Thecla’s self-baptism “is probably the *exemplum Theclae* in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* to which Tertullian so strenuously objected.”<sup>430</sup>

While her self-baptism may have gone against Tertullian’s idea of a proper baptism, Thecla does assert the common baptismal theme of cleansing, as she looks at the vat and exclaims, “Now is the time for me to be cleaned!”<sup>431</sup> Tertullian sees the water as the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit, stating that, “Not that the Holy Spirit is given to us in the water, but that in the water we are made clean by the action of the angel, and made ready for the Holy Spirit.”<sup>432</sup> It would seem that Thecla, in contrast to the Cainite woman to whom Tertullian compares her, believes that water must be present for baptism. She only thinks of the idea of baptizing herself upon seeing the vat of water, which she might be immersed in order to receive the Holy Spirit. Clearly, for Thecla, as well as for Tertullian, washing with water could have supernatural effects of cleansing, including “remission of sins, deliverance from enslavement to Satan and from death, regeneration, and reception of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>433</sup> Thecla’s reference to cleansing fits within Tertullian’s view that baptismal cleansing is not internal but external, since “the flesh is washed that the soul may be made spotless.”<sup>434</sup> Therefore, Thecla’s desire to be

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<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Gail P.C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 88.

<sup>431</sup> *ATH* 34.

<sup>432</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 6.

<sup>433</sup> Mark S. LeTourneau, “General and Special Topics in the ‘De Baptismo’ of Tertullian,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 5 (1987): 91.

<sup>434</sup> Tert., *De Resurrectione carnis* 8. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Body*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1960). Ferguson, 356-357.

cleaned is truly a desire to have her soul purified by the Holy Spirit in preparation for her impending death.

However, once again Thecla miraculously avoids death, as “she threw herself into the water in the name of Jesus Christ; and the seals saw a lightning bolt and floated on the water, dead.”<sup>435</sup> Interestingly, this bears a striking parallel to Tertullian’s view of baptism as being the instance when “the gentiles are set free from this present world by means of water, and leaving behind, drowned in the water, their ancient tyrant the devil.”<sup>436</sup> The seals, the cause and representation of Thecla’s imminent demise, are destroyed as she simultaneously baptizes herself amongst them. Furthermore, Thecla’s escape from these dangerous waters is representative of the liturgy of baptism in that “the baptismal candidate dies with Christ and like Christ, in order to be resurrected in a new life. This new life is expressed symbolically in the climb out of the water.”<sup>437</sup> Thecla emerges from the water being given quite literally a new chance at life.

When she makes the decision to throw herself into the water, however, Thecla does not know that she will be saved again. Indeed, she acknowledges that she believes herself to be about to die in the arena, saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ, on this final day I am baptized!”<sup>438</sup> On the surface, it may seem that Thecla, being in clear immediate danger of death, qualifies for the emergency baptism, which Tertullian states that a layperson may perform if there is no one of authority available to do it.<sup>439</sup> Thecla, surrounded by wild beasts in the middle of the arena, is clearly in a place and time that demanded an emergency baptism. However, nowhere does Tertullian state that a person may baptize themselves if they are in mortal peril and are completely alone. It

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<sup>435</sup> *ATH* 34.

<sup>436</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 9.

<sup>437</sup> Jensen, 100.

<sup>438</sup> *ATH* 34.

<sup>439</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

seems that, in these cases, the person would simply have been consigned to die unbaptized. Furthermore, even though Tertullian allows for a layperson to take the place of a bishop in extreme circumstances, his writings make it clear that when he speaks of the laity, he is only speaking of the laity who have the theoretical ability to become a bishop.<sup>440</sup>

Martyrs provide a potential exception to this rule, as, during the second and third centuries, they are allowed to undertake some priestly duties. For example, “martyrs who awaited death in prison after having publicly confessed their faith . . . were often thought to have earned the power to forgive sins . . . by virtue of their willingness to endure suffering and death in the name of Christ.”<sup>441</sup> While certainly female martyrs would have been granted this ability along with their male counterparts, it is unclear whether the assumption of priestly power would have extended to such ritual functions as baptisms. Certainly where Tertullian recognizes the power of martyrs to impart the peace of the Church upon other Christians,<sup>442</sup> nowhere does he mention that the martyrs have the ability to baptize themselves or others. As Tertullian is driven “always by a concern for proper discipline,”<sup>443</sup> it seems unlikely that he would have been willing to disregard both his reverence for the hierarchical authority structure of the church as well as his views of the roles of women in this regard. It is one thing to grant that female martyrs may provide comfort to others while they are imprisoned and about to die; it is quite another to grant them the ability to initiate new members into the church. Furthermore, within the text, it appears that Thecla’s self-baptism takes the place of her

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<sup>440</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 131.

<sup>441</sup> Davis, 27.

<sup>442</sup> Tert., *Ad Martyras* 1. Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>443</sup> Rankin, 131.

physical martyrdom, giving her the authority to teach.<sup>444</sup> For Tertullian, this is precisely the problem. Thecla does not die as a martyr should but instead abuses her martyr status in order to gain power that she ought not to have. This confirmation of her power is dangerous because it begins to be used by women to “claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptize.”<sup>445</sup> It is clear then, that a woman’s status as a martyr does not supersede her inability to teach or baptize. She may forgive sins, act as a comfort for others, and perhaps even prophesize, but assuming the right to teach and baptize is unacceptable for Tertullian.

After Thecla’s baptism, she is set free by the governor and goes once again to find Paul. She tells him of her baptism again referring to the cleansing motif, saying, “I have received my cleansing, Paul; for the one who has worked with you for the spread of the gospel has worked with me for my own cleansing.”<sup>446</sup> It is interesting to note here that she does not reveal to Paul that she baptized herself. She refers to the Holy Spirit as the one who works with Paul to spread the gospel as being the same one who has helped her with her baptism. It is possible that the characters in the text, and indeed the greater audience, are supposed to understand Thecla’s right to self-baptize as being the result of her confessor status. That is, “Thecla’s self-baptism functions as a seal of her confession (in the place of her physical martyrdom), and as the confirmation of her authority to travel and teach as a surviving confessor.”<sup>447</sup> Perhaps this is how Paul understands it, as he finally gives her the authority that she has long desired, saying, “Go and teach the word of God.”<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Davis, 29.

<sup>445</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 17.

<sup>446</sup> *ATH* 40.

<sup>447</sup> Davis, 29. Thecla’s status as a confessor and the special authority given to these martyrs will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>448</sup> *ATH* 41.

In conclusion, the concept of baptism is first introduced in the Thecla narrative by Paul, who confirms Tertullian's ideas that baptism may be difficult to keep and does not permit Thecla to be baptized when she asks for it, but insists that she wait. Thecla follows his advice and waits until she finds herself in the arena and believes herself to be about to die. Tertullian has provided an exception to his rule that baptism must be conferred by a bishop in the case where a person is about to die and there is no bishop around to provide the baptism. This is certainly the case for Thecla, and she chooses to baptize herself in a vat of water filled with ravenous seals. However, despite the fact that she believed she was near death, as a woman and a virgin, Thecla can never have the authority to baptize, let alone baptize herself. Indeed, it is in reference to this action that Tertullian condemns the text as a whole, demonstrating the significance that it held for him. Furthermore, Tertullian mentions that some women were using Thecla's example as the authority to teach and baptize, meaning that that particular aspect of this] narrative was also dangerous to his overall views of the authority structure of the church. Interestingly, despite the inappropriateness of her self-baptism, Thecla does conform to the expected cleansing imagery of baptism, and attempts to follow the expected rubrics for the ritual. Ultimately, Thecla tells Paul that she has been baptized and it is only then that he gives her permission to teach, demonstrating the importance that baptism holds as a ritual of initiation into Christianity.

### **Perpetua**

In contrast to Thecla's inappropriate baptism, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* shows Perpetua and the other catechumens being properly baptized. Additionally, the Perpetua narrative confirms many of the aspects of baptism mentioned by Tertullian as being important within the Carthaginian church. In her introduction, the

narrator describes Perpetua as a catechumen arrested along with several others. As such, she is not baptized before she is arrested, but only undergoes this ritual after a few days of imprisonment.<sup>449</sup> Perpetua describes her baptism simply, stating, “in that same interval of a few days we were baptized, and to me the Spirit prescribed that in the water of baptism nothing else was to be sought for bodily endurance.”<sup>450</sup> While both occur in the period of time preceding martyrdom, Perpetua’s baptism is in sharp contrast to Thecla’s self-baptism and seems to have been done in a way that Tertullian would have approved. It is impossible to know “whether Perpetua was baptized with the full ritual of anointing and triple immersion that she could have looked forward to in the regular course of her conversion.”<sup>451</sup> Whether the ritual was full or abridged, their baptism represents an official entry into the Christian community. This is confirmed by the fact that the catechumens are only moved from house arrest to prison after their baptism had taken place and they had therefore fully become Christians.<sup>452</sup> Perpetua describes this transition, saying “After a few days we were taken into the dungeon, and I was very much afraid, because I had never felt such darkness.”<sup>453</sup> Indeed, Perpetua’s narrative “records the emotional and physical suffering that is the cost of her commitments”<sup>454</sup> to the faith that she officially entered into through baptism. This suffering is perhaps what Tertullian refers to when he states, “all who understand what a burden baptism is will have more fear of obtaining it than of its postponement.”<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 87.

<sup>450</sup> *Passio Perpetuae* 2.1. *The Passion of Perpetua* trans. R. E. Wallis in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885).

<sup>451</sup> Salisbury, 83.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

<sup>453</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.2.

<sup>454</sup> Castelli, 87.

<sup>455</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 19.

After Perpetua and her fellow catechumens are moved into the prison, “full baptismal images appear in her dreams,”<sup>456</sup> thus compensating for the somewhat incomplete description of her baptism. Perpetua’s first vision consists of salvation imagery,<sup>457</sup> and shows Perpetua climbing a ladder filled with potential dangers. These dangers include a dragon that attempts to prevent Perpetua’s forward movement and that symbolically “echoes the devil and all his pomp, renounced thrice in the baptismal rite.”<sup>458</sup> She reaches the top of the ladder and meets a shepherd who is milking sheep. Perpetua describes their encounter:

And he raised his head and looked upon me, and said to me, “Thou art welcome, daughter.” And he called me, and from the cheese as he was milking he gave me as it were a little cake, and I received it with folded hands; and I ate it, and all who stood around said Amen. And at the sound of their voices I was awakened, still tasting a sweetness which I cannot describe.<sup>459</sup>

This part of the vision is significant for two reasons. First, the shepherd calls Perpetua “daughter” at a point in the narrative right after Perpetua has rejected her father and her familial ties for the first time. This demonstrates that “while she may not be the same daughter to the same father, Perpetua remains a daughter, under the authority of masculine figures such as the white-haired shepherd of her first dream.”<sup>460</sup> Second, Perpetua’s description of the food that the shepherd gives her is consistent with the type of meal traditionally enjoyed after baptism, as “milk is the food of the newly born, so it may symbolize the reborn state of the baptized.”<sup>461</sup> Additionally, “the milk and honey

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<sup>456</sup> Salisbury, 83.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, 100. Perpetua’s visions will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter on martyrdom.

<sup>458</sup> Alwyn Pettersen, “Perpetua: Prisoner of Conscience,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987): 147.

<sup>459</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.3. “et levavit caput et aspexit me et dixit mihi: Bene venisti, teknon. Et clamavit me et de caseo quod mulgebat dedit mihi quasi buccellam; et ego accepi iunctis minibus et manducavi; et universi circumstantes dixerunt Amen. Et ad sonum vocis experrecta sum, conmanducans adhuc dulce nescio quid.”

<sup>460</sup> McNerney, 24.

<sup>461</sup> Salisbury, 77.

also remind one of entering the land of promise (Barnabas 6:13), and that may be the idea behind this liturgical practice.”<sup>462</sup> This liturgical practice is echoed in Tertullian’s treatise *The Chaplet*, where he states that after baptism, “when we are taken up (as new-born children), we taste first of all a mixture of milk and honey.”<sup>463</sup> Therefore, while Perpetua does not describe her baptism as containing all of these elements, it is clear that she is aware of them since they appear in her visions. This demonstrates a closeness between Perpetua and Tertullian’s understandings of these rituals. Furthermore, the fact that she could still taste the sweetness of the food upon awakening from her vision is “a proof of the reality of the vision”<sup>464</sup> and the confirmation that all the appropriate aspects of baptism - including the consumption of post-baptismal food - were completed before she entered the arena.

Perpetua also has two visions about her deceased brother Dinocrates that contain baptismal imagery and coincide with Tertullian’s views of baptism. The first of these visions show Dinocrates, who died at age seven of cancer, “parched and very thirsty, with a filthy countenance and pallid colour” standing in front of a pool of water but unable to drink “on account of the height to its brink.”<sup>465</sup> Perpetua prays for an end to her brother’s suffering, and her prayers are answered with another vision.<sup>466</sup> Perpetua states, “I saw that that place which I had formerly observed to be in gloom was now bright; and Dinocrates, with a clean body well clad, was finding refreshment. And where there had been a wound, I saw a scar; and that pool which I had before seen, I saw now with its margin lowered even to the boy’s navel. And one drew water from the pool

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<sup>462</sup> Ferguson, 362.

<sup>463</sup> Tert., *De Corona Militis* 3. Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>464</sup> Castelli, 88.

<sup>465</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.3.

<sup>466</sup> The power that martyrs have in praying for the deceased and those in need of help will be examined in chapters 5 and 6.

incessantly . . . and when he was satisfied, he went away from the water to play joyously after the manner of children.”<sup>467</sup> The emphasis on Dinocrates’ childlike playing in the water might symbolize the baptized being reborn as children of Christ.<sup>468</sup> Elsewhere the transformation is clear; where Dinocrates was previously suffering from thirst “with a filthy countenance,” in her next vision, he is “with a clean body and well clad.”<sup>469</sup> This can be compared to the purifying and cleansing powers of baptism wherein “the flesh is washed that the soul may be made spotless.”<sup>470</sup> Tertullian further speaks of the baptized emerging from the water “little or no cleaner than he was, [but] his attainment to eternity is regarded as beyond belief.”<sup>471</sup> Dinocrates has transitioned from a place of filth and suffering to a clean paradise through Perpetua’s prayers. Since “the cleansing, purifying effect of baptism is attributed, not to the water, but to the Holy Spirit,”<sup>472</sup> in this case the Holy Spirit may be said to be working through Perpetua, whose prayers apparently served to impart a kind of postmortem baptism upon her brother. Tertullian does not address whether he believes baptism is even possible after death, but what is most important is that the imagery in Perpetua’s vision conforms with his ideas of the ritual. Additionally, he likely would say that no one but a martyr would have the ability to pray for and receive such a vision, meaning that the probability of there being an influx of people claiming that they do not need to be baptized in life because they can receive it in death at the request of a martyr is unlikely. Further, while her prayers appear to be the catalyst for Dinocrates’ baptism, nowhere in the narrative does she take responsibility for

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<sup>467</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.4.

<sup>468</sup> Jensen, 101.

<sup>469</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.4.

<sup>470</sup> Tert., *De R. Carn.* 8.

<sup>471</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 2.

<sup>472</sup> Ferguson, 357.

it. Unlike Thecla, therefore, she does not claim the authority to baptize, but simply prays and waits for the Holy Spirit to take action.

A minor reference to baptism occurs in the time between Perpetua's visions of her brother and her entrance into the arena. In Perpetua's famous vision where she fights an Egyptian in the arena, she depicts herself as being stripped of her clothing and "then my helpers began to rub me down with oil."<sup>473</sup> Obviously this is first referring to the practice of rubbing the athlete with oil before a contest. However, "there may also be reference to the practice of anointing of the newly baptized in preparation for the . . . Christian life."<sup>474</sup> Tertullian speaks of anointing as a central feature of baptism, saying, "After that we come up from the washing and are anointed with the blessed unction."<sup>475</sup> As such, it is likely that he would have understood the double meaning of this part of Perpetua's vision.

The final references to baptism in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* occur in the association of baptism with martyrdom. That is, within the text "martyrdom appears as the fulfillment of baptism, and at the same time baptism is the interpretation of martyrdom."<sup>476</sup> It is important to note that these comparisons are made by the editor/narrator of the text, and not by Perpetua herself. In this way, they provide clues to the way that the martyrdom may have been understood within the Carthaginian community who make up the audience of both the text and Perpetua's martyrdom in the arena. The initiation ritual of baptism is closely connected with blood, as "Not only does [Tertullian] name martyrdom a 'second baptism in blood,' but even the efficacy of water

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<sup>473</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 3.2.

<sup>474</sup> Pettersen, 148.

<sup>475</sup> *Tert., Bapt.* 7.

<sup>476</sup> Jensen, 101.

baptism depends on blood.”<sup>477</sup> Tertullian traces the idea of being baptized first in water and secondly in blood to Jesus’ crucifixion:

We have indeed a second washing . . . that of blood . . . For he had come by water and blood, as John has written, so as to be baptized with water and glorified with blood. Likewise, so as to give us our vocation by water and our election by blood, he sent forth these two baptisms from out of the wound of his pierced side, because those who had faith in his blood were to be washed in water, and those who had washed in water would need also to be washed in blood.<sup>478</sup>

Clearly, a true Christian should first be baptized in water into the “vocation” of Christianity, and then “elected” into heaven by being baptized in the blood of Jesus through death in the arena. In this way, baptism in water and in blood are inextricably linked. Tertullian believes that “In the font, as initiates are washed in the saving blood of Jesus, they incur a debt of blood that can only be repaid through lifelong asceticism or martyrdom.”<sup>479</sup> As such, he is serious when he identifies baptism as a burden that ought to be postponed,<sup>480</sup> since the burden of baptism is ultimately suffering and death.

“The identification of water baptism performed in ritual with blood baptism suffered in reality”<sup>481</sup> can first found in the description of Felicitas being brought into the arena. Felicitas was pregnant when she was arrested with the others, and gives birth in prison three days before she was due to be martyred in the arena.<sup>482</sup> Had she not given birth, she would not have been permitted to join the others in martyrdom “because

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<sup>477</sup> Blake Leyerle, “Blood is Seed,” *The Journal of Religion* 81 (2001): 47.

<sup>478</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 16. “Est quidem nobis etiam secundum lavacrum . . . sanguinis scilicet . . . Venerat enim per aquam et sanguinem, sicut loannes scripsit, ut aqua tingeretur sanguine glorificaretur. Proinde nos facere aqua vocatos sanguine electos hos duos baptismos de vulnere percussi lateris emisit, quia qui in sanguinem eius crederent aqua lavarentur, qui aqua lavissent et sanguine porterent.”

<sup>479</sup> Leyerle, 47.

<sup>480</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 19.

<sup>481</sup> Jensen, 101.

<sup>482</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 5.2.

pregnant women are not allowed to be publicly punished;”<sup>483</sup> the possibility that she might be separated from the others had caused Felicitas and the others much concern.<sup>484</sup> For this reason, the narrator describes her as “rejoicing that she had safely brought forth, so that she might fight with the wild beasts; from the blood and from the midwife to the gladiator, to wash after childbirth with a second baptism.”<sup>485</sup> In this way, Felicitas’ baptism in blood is linked with the idea of a rebirth.<sup>486</sup> Interestingly, while the blood of childbirth is different from that of martyrdom since martyrs deliberately choose to go to their deaths,<sup>487</sup> Felicitas prays that she will give birth in time to shed her blood in the arena with the others. Therefore, while she may not be able to choose the time that she would give birth, she still demonstrates the desire to meet death voluntarily, thereby showing her willingness to shed her blood and have a martyr’s death. This issue of choice begins with baptism. The catechumens such as Felicitas and Perpetua made the decision to become baptized, knowing that it would lead to their imprisonment and death. In this way also, they understood that their baptism of water would inevitably result in a baptism of blood.

Perpetua’s fellow catechumen Saturus is also described undergoing a second baptism of blood in the arena. The narrator describes the scene, “And immediately at the conclusion of the exhibition he was thrown to the leopard; and with one bite of his he was bathed with such a quantity of blood, that the people shouted out to him as he was returning the testimony of his second baptism, “Saved and washed, saved and washed.”<sup>488</sup> The crowd’s rhythmic chanting of the Latin *salvum lotum* (alternatively

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

<sup>484</sup> The union and companionship between martyrs will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>485</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.1.

<sup>486</sup> Jensen, 101.

<sup>487</sup> Leyerle, 37.

<sup>488</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.4.

translated as “had a great bath”<sup>489</sup> or simply “good bath”<sup>490</sup>) is a “mocking parody of the signs that typically adorned bathing establishments wishing patrons a pleasant bathe.”<sup>491</sup> The narrator comments on the “sadistic irony”<sup>492</sup> of the bath wish, saying “Especially well-bathed was he who had washed in this manner.”<sup>493</sup> In this way, the crowd’s chanting “is quickly brought under ideological control by the editor who ascribes the cry to a baptismal reference.”<sup>494</sup> Clearly, the idea of cleansing is central to the baptismal imagery of the Perpetua narrative just as it is within Tertullian’s treatise.

In conclusion, the baptisms that occur in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* all clearly conform to Tertullian’s ideas of what must constitute an appropriate baptism. Perpetua and those arrested with her are catechumens, and therefore have been undergoing the proper instruction required for baptism. Furthermore, they choose to undergo the ritual despite the fact that they know that it will lead to their imprisonment and death, proving that they understand and are willing to accept the burden of baptism of which Tertullian speaks. Perpetua’s visions demonstrate her understanding of the rituals of baptism and her desire to satisfy all aspects of the sacrament, despite her restrictions of imprisonment. Additionally, Perpetua’s visions contain imagery that reinforces her continued connections to her family and therefore her identity as a proper Roman wife, mother, and daughter. Finally, the Perpetua narrative contains references to the idea of a second baptism of blood that must occur as the fulfillment of water baptism. The martyrdoms of both Felicitas and Saturus are described using the language of washing in blood, thus fulfilling Tertullian’s idea that water and blood

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<sup>489</sup> Brent D. Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” *Past & Present* 139 (1993): 9.

<sup>490</sup> Leyerle, 37.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Jensen, 101.

<sup>493</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.4. Translation from Leyerle, 37.

<sup>494</sup> Leyerle, 37.

baptism may not be separated, as both flowed from the side of Jesus upon his crucifixion.<sup>495</sup> Thus, every aspect of baptism as shown in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is consistent with Tertullian's views on the topic.

### Conclusion

While certain common themes can be discerned, there was no universal or orthodox baptism ritual in the late second and early third centuries. Therefore, Tertullian's *On Baptism* cannot be taken to contain the details of an orthodox baptism (because no such thing existed), but it should be understood as containing "liturgical details of how the Carthaginian church actually celebrated initiation."<sup>496</sup> In this way, Tertullian's text serves to rhetorically produce a sense of universality that was not present in Christianity at the time. However diverse the practices might have been, it is clear that Tertullian believed that his interpretations and observations of the ritual were the correct views. Created and taking place in Carthage, the Perpetua narrative presents the image of baptism that Tertullian subscribes to and promotes, with no divergence from Tertullian's ideals. The Thecla narrative, which emerges from Asia Minor, contains several points of agreement with Tertullian's imagery while also demonstrating some significant points of divergence. Since Tertullian appears to have been one of the only church leaders to object to the Thecla narrative, it is clear that the issues that he had with the way baptism was represented in the text did not concern others in the same way. Possibly this is because there was no consistent ritual, and therefore Thecla's divergence from Tertullian's views did not seem so extreme when compared to the multitude of viewpoints on all topics during this period of Christianity.

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<sup>495</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 16.

<sup>496</sup> Killian McDonnell and George T. Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 114.

Thecla does not reject the seemingly consistent features of baptism, but instead tries to conform to them despite exceptional and difficult circumstances. While she does not undertake the proper catechetical instruction that appears to have been common in Carthage and Rome, she repeats the cleansing imagery that is so important to Tertullian, and baptizes herself in water only once she believes herself to be about to die. In light of these extraordinary (and unlikely to be repeated) circumstances, other church leaders may have been able to overlook the fact that, as a woman, Thecla should not have been allowed to baptize herself. Tertullian, however, is strict in his insistence on the authority of Scripture and of following the instructions found within. Therefore, if the epistles of Paul state that a woman may not teach or baptize, then a woman may not teach or baptize, regardless of whether or not Tertullian agreed with what else this woman's narrative might show. While baptism is the stated reason for rejecting Thecla, Tertullian's opposition to the narrative and her character goes far beyond this. He rejects the idea that Thecla baptized herself, and that this was implicitly endorsed by Paul in his subsequent conferring of the authority to teach, not because she baptizes herself incorrectly under improper circumstances, but because she does not conform to his ideas of how a virgin should act. These views of the role of virgins, in conjunction with his rejection of the idea that anyone (not just women) could baptize themselves contributes to his rejection of the entire narrative. While subsequent church fathers, and many lay contemporaries, embrace Thecla's narrative as the ideal ascetic female pseudo-martyr, for Tertullian, Thecla's baptism is exemplary of the larger problem of female authority that pervades the text.

In contrast, the baptism of Perpetua and her fellow catechumens do not go against any of the rules that Tertullian espoused. They do not baptize themselves when

they are about to die, but instead choose to be baptized knowing that it would lead to their death. While both Thecla and Perpetua utilize cleansing imagery, Perpetua's use of these symbols can be seen as a way to confirm her proper baptism, while Thecla's can be seen as a way of trying to enforce authority where there should be none.

Ultimately, however, the most significant difference in the narrative is that Perpetua and Felicitas complete their water baptism with a second baptism of blood, while Thecla does not. Indeed, Thecla's death is described in entirely peaceful and decidedly bloodless terms as she is said to "lay down to her glorious rest"<sup>497</sup> years after her baptism. She does not fulfill her burden of water baptism through a baptism of blood, but instead escapes her martyrdom to undertake (as Tertullian would see it) an inappropriate mission of teaching. Perpetua, Felicitas, Saturus, and the others understand that by being baptized in water they are agreeing to find a baptism in blood in the arena, and they make no attempts to escape their fate nor reject that this is what is expected of them as a Christian. Perpetua's death results in her achieving a complete baptism, while Thecla's remains forever incomplete. Since the idea of baptism in blood is so important to Tertullian, and to these narratives, it is important to next examine more closely the issue of martyrdom and the ways that Thecla and Perpetua conformed to Tertullian's ideas of what an ideal martyr should be.

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<sup>497</sup> *ATH* 43.

## Chapter 5 - Tertullian's Advice *To the Martyrs*

Martyrdom is an important concept in the works of Tertullian and is also a central feature of the narratives of Thecla and Perpetua. While Tertullian refers to martyrdom in several of his treatises, the work that most closely addresses the issue is a short address aimed directly at a group of martyrs-designate. In *To the Martyrs*, Tertullian discusses some of the issues that Christian martyrs would have had to deal with, including the pain of imprisonment and the temptation to recant in order to end their suffering. He encourages them to endure the temporary bodily pain since their reward will be a place in heaven. In describing the way that martyrs should behave, Tertullian compares them to soldiers and athletes, who must endure difficult periods of training before they can compete for victory. Furthermore, the treatise is important to study because it discusses the role that Tertullian expected martyrs to fill within the Carthaginian Christian community, namely as that of an example and as an intermediary for those Christians who may have strayed from the mainstream church. This viewpoint means that martyrs held a great deal of power and influence over the most vulnerable members of the church, and therefore it was vital for Tertullian to ensure that the martyrs acted in an appropriate manner. As such, this chapter's discussion of martyrs will provide the information needed to demonstrate the ways in which Thecla opposed Tertullian's perception of the ideal martyrdom while Perpetua's martyrdom fits precisely within these ideals.

First, this chapter will examine the history of martyrdom in North Africa in order to understand the way that the tradition of self-sacrifice may have influenced the way that martyrdom was understood within Carthaginian Christianity. Once the foundation of martyrdom in the region is understood, this chapter will engage in a close reading of

Tertullian's treatise *To the Martyrs* in order to gain a greater understanding of the way that Tertullian viewed martyrdom as well as to gain insight into the position of martyrs within the community. As it is likely that this treatise would have been known by Perpetua and her fellow martyrs, especially close attention will be paid to the passages that directly relate to issues and imagery found in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. Ultimately, the imagery and metaphors that Tertullian uses to describe martyrs as athletes and soldiers indicates Tertullian's belief that all Christians are in a war of faith, and that these martyrs must act as an example to all Christians to demonstrate the proper way to endure suffering in order to ensure eternal happiness.

### **Martyrdom in Carthage**

The first historical record of Christianity in North Africa occurs in reference to a martyrdom.<sup>498</sup> On July 17, 180, twelve martyrs from the region of Scilli were sentenced to death by a Roman proconsul. Their torture and death are recorded in the *Acts of the Scillitans*, which has survived in several Latin as well as one Greek manuscript. While Christianity was obviously known within North Africa before these martyrs were killed in the arena, it is significant that "the opening pages of North African Christianity seem to have no connection to the apostolic period . . . Rather, this history opens through the testimonies of blood."<sup>499</sup> The names of the Christians martyred in Scilli, and the fact that the events occurred in a rural area, are also significant, because they suggest that the first African Christians were indigenous members of the rural population instead of Greek speaking immigrants from urban areas (as can be seen in other places like Gaul).<sup>500</sup> Therefore, if North African Christianity was comprised largely of indigenous North

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<sup>498</sup> Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 10.

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>500</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 11.

Africans and not Greek immigrants, it is likely that North African traditions and beliefs would have been incorporated heavily into the Christian framework.

However, despite the unique aspects of North African Christianity, it is important to note that Christianity, whether in North Africa or elsewhere in the Roman Empire, was not subject to widespread organized persecutions until after Tertullian's period. Indeed, it is generally accepted that, prior to the mid-third century, violence against Christians was "sporadic, decentralized, and the product primarily of local conditions and hostilities."<sup>501</sup> Furthermore, these sporadic persecutions tended to only target the most prominent members of the church, in particular the clergy, meaning that most members of the Christian community did not need to live in fear of their imminent demise.

Evidence of this unofficial and disorganized form of persecution in North Africa can be seen in both the *Acts of the Scillitans* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, which both lack any precision or consistency concerning the reasons for the arrest and prosecution of Christians.<sup>502</sup> Indeed, in the case of Perpetua, her brother is identified within the text as a catechumen, but he is not arrested with the others. Therefore, it seems that they were not sought out as part of an organized campaign against all Christians, but were arrested as part of the sporadic and localized persecutions specific to a particular time and region.<sup>503</sup> However, both texts demonstrate a common reason given for the persecution of Christians, namely that "the persecutors press the Christians to engage in religious activity in accordance with traditional Roman piety and observance; in both cases, the Christians are condemned for their refusal to do so."<sup>504</sup>

This refusal to partake in the religious activity was more than just symbolic; it was

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<sup>501</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>503</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 17.

<sup>504</sup> Castelli, 47.

believed to have very real consequences for the rest of society. Thus, the sporadic persecutions often occurred in response to a natural disaster. Tertullian writes, “If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is a famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is ‘Away with the Christians to the lion!’”<sup>505</sup> Given these circumstances, it is easy to understand how a governor would easily bend to the passionate cries of the people to arrest the groups they deemed to be responsible for these crises.<sup>506</sup> Christians were convenient scapegoats for both the crowds and the governors.

Just as the persecutions were not specific or unique to North African Christianity, the desire to die rather than face dishonour also can be found across the Mediterranean throughout antiquity. However, Salisbury argues that the notion of sacrificial suicide may have held particular appeal in Carthage. She traces this tendency back to Virgil’s telling of the suicide of Queen Dido, whom Tertullian references in *To the Martyrs*, saying, “Dido [threw herself on the pyre], lest, after the death of a husband very dear to her, she should be compelled to marry again.”<sup>507</sup> Salisbury argues that the story of Dido’s self-sacrifice “formed the starting point for the history of Carthage . . . [and] was also a model of the supreme sacrifice that an individual could offer.”<sup>508</sup> Many other examples of the tradition of suicide over facing shame or undesirable circumstances can be seen

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<sup>505</sup> Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 40. Latin version edited by H. Hoppe in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* LXIX (1939). English translation of *Apology*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>506</sup> Decret, 20.

<sup>507</sup> Tert., *Ad Martyras* 4. Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>508</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 53.

throughout Carthage's history.<sup>509</sup> It should not be surprising, therefore, that martyrs such as Perpetua chose death over rejecting their beliefs or their chastity. Indeed, the narratives of the Scillitan martyrs and Perpetua demonstrate this characteristic, in that "They were eager for martyrdom. Even though they were obedient to civil authority, it was divine authority that mattered to them."<sup>510</sup> Indeed, both Perpetua and Tertullian would have grown up hearing these stories, and the writings attributed to both of them demonstrate that "for a Carthaginian, the opportunity to die for a cause was a deeply ingrained value."<sup>511</sup> Tertullian's treatise *To the Martyrs* is a good example of the purpose Tertullian thought that martyrs had within the Christian community. A close examination of the text will make it clear that, for Tertullian as well as other Carthaginians, "Martyrs were the role model."<sup>512</sup>

### **Tertullian's *To the Martyrs***

Tertullian's treatise that focuses most closely on the issue of martyrdom is written as an address to potential martyrs and is known simply as *To the Martyrs*. Timothy Barnes asserts that this work can be dated more precisely than some of Tertullian's other treatises because he references the outcome of the civil wars that led to Septimius Severus becoming emperor in the spring of 197.<sup>513</sup> This fact, combined with the mention of *To the Martyrs* in a later treatise, leads to the conclusion that it was written in either the summer or autumn of 197.<sup>514</sup> In contrast, some scholars speculate that this treatise was written in 203 directly to Perpetua's group of catechumens. These scholars point to evidence within the text such as the fact that Tertullian refers specifically to female

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<sup>509</sup> For more examples, see Salisbury, 54-56.

<sup>510</sup> Dunn, 15.

<sup>511</sup> Salisbury, 56.

<sup>512</sup> Dunn, 16.

<sup>513</sup> Timothy David Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 32-33.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

martyrs in one section. Further, since there are close similarities between his descriptions and the imagery found in Perpetua's visions, it is suggested that his words may have been fresh in her mind while in prison.<sup>515</sup> However, the treatise need not have been written directly for Perpetua for her to have been aware of its contents. Regardless of whether Tertullian composed this work in 197 for an anonymous group of martyrs (or simply a general audience), or in 203 for Perpetua and her companions, it is likely that it, along with Tertullian's other treatises, would have been circulated among the Christian community, and this may account for the inclusion of similar imagery within her diary. It is true that Perpetua "seems to have taken his words to heart,"<sup>516</sup> but this does not necessarily mean that these words come from a new treatise. Ultimately, the issue of dating will never be conclusively solved, other than the fact that the treatise was certainly written before the martyrdom in 203 and therefore provides a basis of knowledge for the way that martyrdom would have been understood in Carthage around the turn of the third century.

The opening chapter of *To the Martyrs* demonstrates that Tertullian is writing to a group of imprisoned martyrs "both to encourage them and to lift their spirits."<sup>517</sup> The introductory sentence both provides Tertullian's reasons for writing as well as reveals a real issue that any imprisoned martyr might face. He states, "Along with the provision which our lady mother the Church from her bountiful breasts, and each brother out of his private means, makes for your bodily wants in prison, accept also from me some contribution to your spiritual sustenance; for it is not good that the flesh be feasted but the spirit starve."<sup>518</sup> The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* makes reference to this

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<sup>515</sup> Salisbury, 86-87.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid., 87. This will be examined further in Chapter 6.

<sup>517</sup> Rankin, 182.

<sup>518</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

practice, as Perpetua and her fellow catechumens are shown as receiving food and comfort from deacons in the church,<sup>519</sup> demonstrating that the practice of feeding prisoners was not uncommon, especially in Carthage. In his introduction, Tertullian references three kinds of help provided to the imprisoned martyrs. First, there is institutional help, where “resources of the church . . . were given to ease the prisoners’ condition.”<sup>520</sup> Next is the “generosity of individual Christians who contributed from their private resources.”<sup>521</sup> It is significant that he does not reference the martyrs’ biological families as playing a role in providing them with food and comfort. This may be the case because “The ties that might otherwise have provided material support for Christian prisoners may often have been jeopardized, less by imprisonment itself than by conversion . . . it is thus not surprising to find the martyrs actually being fed by other members of the church.”<sup>522</sup> Finally, Tertullian offers a kind of spiritual feeding to go along with their bodily sustenance. As such, *To the Martyrs* seems to have been “written as a sort of discursive dietary supplement, a literary version of the food parcels being brought into the prison, occasioned by his perception that the generous material rations furnished to the imprisoned were not matched by forms of spiritual sustenance.”<sup>523</sup>

While imparting spiritual advice and encouragement, Tertullian recognizes that some might question his authority to provide such advice to martyrs, having never been imprisoned himself. In response to this, he states, “Not that I am specially entitled to exhort you; yet not only the trainers and overseers, but even the unskilled [. . .] are wont to animate from afar by their cries the most accomplished gladiators, and from the mere

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<sup>519</sup> *Passio Perpetuae* 1.2. *The Passion of Perpetua* trans. R. E. Wallis in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885).

<sup>520</sup> Salisbury, 86.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>522</sup> Andrew McGowan, “Discipline and Diet: Feeding the Martyrs in Roman Carthage,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 96 (2003): 459.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.

throng of onlookers useful suggestions sometimes come.”<sup>524</sup> This represents only the beginning of Tertullian’s tendency to compare martyrs to athletes, who must train for their competitions. Tertullian further extends the gladiator metaphor in this chapter, while also demonstrating some of the difficulties the martyrs might face while imprisoned. He calls the prison “the devil’s house” where the martyrs have come “for the very purpose of trampling the wicked one under foot in his chosen abode. You have already in pitched battle outside utterly overcome him; let him have no reason, then to say to himself, ‘They are now in my domain; with vile hatreds I shall tempt them, with defections or dissensions among themselves.’”<sup>525</sup> Therefore, it is imperative for martyrs to remain devoted to each other and not let the stresses of being imprisoned create dissensions between them, or, even worse, for them to renounce their Christianity in order to be released from prison. This passage reveals a further reason for composing this treatise, namely out of “fear that those in prison would backslide.”<sup>526</sup> The importance of a group of martyrs remaining united with each other can be seen in the Perpetua narrative as the martyrs find comfort in one another and in the knowledge that they will be departing to heaven together. Furthermore, Tertullian sees imprisonment as another step in a Christian’s constant battle with the devil. The language of a battle with the devil also echoes Tertullian’s baptismal imagery, where the process of baptism ends with “leaving behind, drowned in the water, their ancient tyrant the devil.”<sup>527</sup> Indeed, the idea of catechumens and Christians facing a constant struggle can be seen in the time leading up to initiation into Christianity, which is described as “a time of especially

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<sup>524</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> Dunn, 43.

<sup>527</sup> Tert., *De Baptismo* 9. *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1964).

intense struggle with the forces of evil, which takes the form of repeated exorcisms.”<sup>528</sup>

Tertullian exhorts the martyrs to stand strong and united against the devil, saying, “Give him not the success in his own kingdom of setting you at variance with each other, but let him find you armed and fortified with concord; for peace among you is battle with him.”<sup>529</sup>

After describing the type of difficulties that martyrs could face in prison, Tertullian speaks to the role that these imprisoned martyrs could play within the rest of the community. He asserts, “Some, not able to find this peace in the Church, have been used to seek it from the imprisoned martyrs. And so you ought to have it dwelling with you and to cherish it, and to guard it, that you may be able perhaps to bestow it upon others.”<sup>530</sup> This shows that “The paradox is that in defeat lies victory [. . .] that peace can only be found in prison among the martyrs.”<sup>531</sup> This is a significant passage as “it is possible that the ‘peace’ of which he speaks is the forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation to the church of those who had lapsed.”<sup>532</sup> If this is the case, this provides evidence of the practice “whereby lapsed Christians, unable to effect forgiveness through traditional church channels, seek it instead at the hands of the confessors [who], by virtue of their willingness to undergo martyrdom, are endowed with an extraordinary authority to absolve sin.”<sup>533</sup> Indeed this is even more significant considering Tertullian’s usually strict stance that “the church is necessary in the work of salvation”<sup>534</sup> and

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<sup>528</sup> Anne Jensen, *God’s Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 100.

<sup>529</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>531</sup> G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 63.

<sup>532</sup> Rankin, 182.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-3.

<sup>534</sup> Killian McDonnell and George T. Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit: Evidence from the First Eight Centuries* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 113.

therefore one must hold an official office in order to confer official church absolution of sins. Martyrs here appear to be the exception for Tertullian, thereby adding to their importance within the church despite the lack of an official designation. He urges them to find peace and reject the devil not just for their own salvation, but so that they can be an example to others and even help fellow Christians to return to the church and find forgiveness for their sins. It is for this reason that Tertullian sees someone like Thecla as being so potentially dangerous and someone such as Perpetua as being so vital to the overall well-being of the Christian community. As martyrs, both Thecla and Perpetua theoretically would have had the power to impart forgiveness upon other Christians and both are depicted as doing so within their respective texts. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Tertullian's rejection of the Thecla narrative must therefore be seen as a rejection of her identity as a martyr and of her ability and authority to bestow peace upon others.

In the second chapter of the treatise, Tertullian addresses some of the difficulties that martyrs face, both inside and outside of prison, ultimately "Depicting prison life in a most positive light as an experience for which they should actually be appreciative!"<sup>535</sup> The reason for this appreciation is because it gives them the opportunity to die for God and be glorified by other Christians who will use their suffering and death as examples of how to become a better Christian. First, Tertullian discusses the fact that martyrs must sever ties with their families. He states, "Other things, hindrances equally of the soul, may have accompanied you as far as the prison gate, to which also your relatives may have attended you. There and thenceforth you were severed from the world."<sup>536</sup> Tertullian demonstrates that the family of martyrs might accompany them to the prison

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<sup>535</sup> Rankin, 182.

<sup>536</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 2.

out of love, but once the martyrs pass through the prison gates, they must sever ties with their families and continue alone. As such, Perpetua's eventual rejection of her familial ties should not be seen as counter-cultural but rather as an essential step in her path towards martyrdom. Furthermore, this separation from familiar things should not be a cause of concern or distress for the martyrs, but of joy, since "if we reflect that the world is more really the prison, we shall see that you have gone out of a prison rather than into one."<sup>537</sup> Indeed, Tertullian believes that martyrs should be excited and grateful to be imprisoned, since "the goal of Christian martyrdom was to follow the example of Christ and not let considerations of family, society, or cultural continuity get in the way."<sup>538</sup> He reminds the martyrs of this fact, saying, "The Christian outside the prison has renounced the world, but in the prison he has renounced a prison too. It is of no consequence where you are in the world - you who are not of it."<sup>539</sup> In other words, Christians are not supposed to care for worldly things, so it should not make a difference if a Christian is in a prison or in his home.

Indeed, being in prison allows for the Christian to truly renounce the world because it removes all temptations. Tertullian relates this idea while providing a fascinating glimpse into the daily life in cosmopolitan Carthage. He states that prison is preferable because:

You have no occasion to look on strange gods, you do not run against their images; you have no part in heathen holidays, even by mere bodily mingling in them; you are not annoyed by the foul fumes of idolatrous solemnities; you are not pained by the noise of public shows, nor by the atrocity or madness or immodesty of their celebrants; your eyes do not fall on stews and brothels; you are free from causes of offense, from temptations, from unholy reminiscences.<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid.

<sup>538</sup> Salisbury, 88.

<sup>539</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 2.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid. "non vides alienos deos, non imaginibus eorum incurris, non sollemnes nationum dies ipsa commixtione participas, non nidoribus, spurcis verberaris, non clamoribus spectaculorum,

Tertullian clearly conveys the idea that martyrs should be grateful for being arrested and imprisoned, since they no longer need to avoid any of the temptations of living in a city among non-Christians. That is, Tertullian believes that the outside world is a worse place than the jail, since it contains more criminals who are all sinners.<sup>541</sup> It is clear that, not only should martyrs sever ties with their families and material belongings, but they should find it a blessing to enter the prison and be able to focus solely on God.

Tertullian further compares the martyrs' prison to Jesus' desert, stating, "The prison does the same service for the Christian which the desert did for the prophet. Our Lord Himself spent much of His time in seclusion, that He might have greater liberty to pray, that He might be quit of the world."<sup>542</sup> He further idealizes the martyrs' situation, suggesting, "Let us drop the name of prison; let us call it a place of retirement."<sup>543</sup> Perpetua seems to echo this mindset, writing, "the dungeon became to me as it were a palace, so that I preferred being there to being elsewhere."<sup>544</sup> In this way, Tertullian argues that "those in prison were in fact free because the world was a far larger prison, containing a far larger number of prisoners awaiting a far more imposing judge."<sup>545</sup> As such, imprisonment might restrict the body, but it frees the soul.<sup>546</sup> Tertullian further reassures the martyrs "that their imprisonment would not separate them from the experiences they knew in the services,"<sup>547</sup> since "Though the body is shut in, though the flesh is confined, all things are

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atrocitate vel furore vel impudicitia celebrantium caederis; non in loca libidinum publicarum oculi tui impingunt: vacas a scandalis, a temptationibus, a recordationibus malis, iam et a persecutione."

<sup>541</sup> Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 232-3.

<sup>542</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 2.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

<sup>544</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.2.

<sup>545</sup> Dunn, 43.

<sup>546</sup> Osborn, 214.

<sup>547</sup> Salisbury, 99.

open to the spirit. In spirit, then, roam abroad [. . .] the way which leads to God. As often as in spirit you are in footsteps are there, so often you will not be in bonds.”<sup>548</sup> It is also important to note that, in this, Tertullian might be referring to the martyrs’ visionary dreams, since “in the ancient world, people believed dreams sometimes came because the spirit wandered free during sleep.”<sup>549</sup> As such, Tertullian may be encouraging martyrs to pay close attention to their dreams, should the visions reveal important religious images. Perpetua’s vivid descriptions of her dreams and her subsequent interpretations demonstrate the way in which such visions may have helped to comfort and encourage martyrs during their imprisonment.

In the third chapter, Tertullian again attempts to explain the role of martyrs by comparing them both to soldiers and athletes, in the sense that “As soldiers of Christ they endure hardships, as athletes they train for a contest where the prize is life eternal.”<sup>550</sup> He states, “no soldier comes out to the campaign laden with luxuries, nor does he go to action from his comfortable chamber, but from the light and narrow tent, where every kind of hardness, roughness, and unpleasantness must be put up with.”<sup>551</sup> Similarly, “the athletes, too, are set apart to a more stringent discipline, that they may have their physical powers built up. They are kept from luxury, from daintier meats, from more pleasant drinks; they are pressed, racked, worn out; the harder their labours in the preparatory training, the stronger is the hope of victory.”<sup>552</sup> Ultimately, just as soldiers and athletes go through these difficult training periods in order to make them stronger when their trials come, Tertullian encourages the prospective martyrs “to consider their

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<sup>548</sup> Tert. *Mart.* 2.

<sup>549</sup> Salisbury, 99.

<sup>550</sup> Osborn, 233.

<sup>551</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 3.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

imprisonment as training and strengthening, [. . .] in order that they might obtain an everlasting crown.”<sup>553</sup>

Tertullian furthers this metaphor, demonstrating how the three parts of the trinity participate in the martyrs’ prison experience:

In like manner, O blessed ones, count whatever is hard in this lot of yours as a discipline of your powers of mind and body. You are about to pass through a noble struggle, in which the living God acts the part of superintendent, in which the Holy Ghost is your trainer, in which the prize is an eternal crown of angelic essence, citizenship in the heavens, glory everlasting. Therefore your Master, Jesus Christ, who has anointed you with His Spirit, and led you forth to the arena, has seen it good, before the day of conflict, to take you from a condition more pleasant in itself, and has imposed on you a harder treatment, that your strength might be greater.<sup>554</sup>

Clearly, Tertullian sees a close correlation between the endurance of the body and the status of the mind and soul. The martyrs’ bodily suffering should be seen as a positive experience because it causes them to find greater strength of mind. Indeed, “The athletic imagery conveys the ideal behaviour of one who disciplines the body’s physical needs, desires, and appetites, allowing the body to be taken over by the controlling spirit.”<sup>555</sup> Furthermore, while the martyrs’ experiences in prison are extreme, in his other treatises, Tertullian exhorts all Christians to live a life of strict continence and austerity in order to better connect with the spirit God. That is, “his insistence on the control of the body was so rigorous precisely because he believed that it was directly through the body and its sensations that the soul was tuned to the high pitch required for it to vibrate to the

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<sup>553</sup> Dunn, 43.

<sup>554</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 3. “Proinde vos, benedicti, quodcumque hoc durum est, ad exercitationem virtutum animi et corporis deputate. Bonum agonem subituri estis in quo agonothes Deus vivus est, xystarches Spiritus Sanctus, corona aeternitatis, brabium angelicae substantiae, politia in caelis Gloria in saecula saeculorum. Itaque epistates vester Christus Iesus, qui vos Spiritu unxit, et ad hoc scamma produxit, voluit vos ante diem agonis ad duriolem tractionem a liberiore condicione seponere, ut vires corroborarentur in vobis.”

<sup>555</sup> Gail P.C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 22.

Spirit of God.”<sup>556</sup> Therefore, the martyrs’ control of their bodies even under torture allows them to achieve a closer relationship with God.

Tertullian begins the next chapter further expounding on the topic of torture and suffering. He reminds the martyrs of people who died bravely before them, “although the strong tradition of Carthaginian sacrifice probably meant that they hardly needed to be reminded.”<sup>557</sup> He states, “the flesh might yield obedience to the spirit - the weaker to the stronger; the former thus from the latter getting strength.”<sup>558</sup> Tertullian elaborates on the type of pain that the flesh might experience, perhaps to the chagrin of the martyrs to whom he’s writing, “The flesh, perhaps, will dread the merciless sword, and the lofty cross, and the rage of the wild beasts, and that punishment of the flames, of all most terrible, and all the skill of the executioner in torture.”<sup>559</sup> From here, Tertullian lists a number of non-Christians who had either killed themselves or been killed for refusing to compromise their chastity or beliefs. Significantly, included in this list are a number of women, as Tertullian seeks to demonstrate “how these things, though exceeding painful, have yet been calmly endured by many [. . .] and this is not only in the case of men but of women too, that you, O holy women, may be worthy of your sex.”<sup>560</sup> It is clear therefore that Tertullian “fully expects women to be capable of such effort,”<sup>561</sup> revealing that both Thecla and Perpetua were as eligible to attain glory in martyrdom as were their male counterparts. It is the actions of Thecla that lead Tertullian to eventually reject her, not the sole fact that she is a woman.

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<sup>556</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, & Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 77.

<sup>557</sup> Salisbury, 135.

<sup>558</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>561</sup> Streete, 53.

It can be argued that Tertullian's use of examples are representative of the fact that "Intellectuals schooled in the Latin classics would naturally have adopted a view of martyrdom that presupposed the admiration of noble suicides."<sup>562</sup> One significant example of a female martyr is that of Lucretia who, "in the presence of her kinsfolk, plunged the knife into herself, that she might have glory for her chastity."<sup>563</sup> As previously discussed, Tertullian also includes the story of Dido, who he believes "killed herself honorably to avoid a second marriage,"<sup>564</sup> which fits perfectly within his views against remarriage. Tertullian also (perhaps strangely) includes Cleopatra in his list of noble non-Christian women, stating, "Woman has voluntarily sought the wild beasts, and even asps, those serpents worse than bear or bull, which Cleopatra applied to herself, that she might not fall into the hands of her enemy."<sup>565</sup> Also somewhat surprisingly, Tertullian includes an example of "the Athenian courtesan" as "one of feared neither death nor torture,"<sup>566</sup> as "when, subjected to torture by the tyrant for having taken part in a conspiracy, still making no betrayal of her confederates, she at last bit off her tongue and spat it in the tyrant's face, that he might be convinced of the uselessness of his torments."<sup>567</sup> Regardless of some of the more curious examples, Tertullian's intentions are clear. He argues, "Are we not called on, then, most joyfully to lay out as much for the true as others do for the false?"<sup>568</sup> In other words, "if all these pagans showed so little fear of death, why should Christians flinch from it?"<sup>569</sup> Furthermore, the examples

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<sup>562</sup> Bowersock, 64.

<sup>563</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4. It is interesting to note that "Augustine also uses Lucretia's suicide as an example, but to show what Christian women, even when raped, should *not* do, because it is taking a life; cf. *City of God* 1.19." Streete, 54.

<sup>564</sup> Streete, 53.

<sup>565</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4.

<sup>566</sup> Streete, 53.

<sup>567</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>569</sup> Salisbury, 135.

that Tertullian chooses to use demonstrate his conviction that “peace comes in struggling and in dying for a better cause than the pagans had.”<sup>570</sup> While it may seem obvious, it is important to note that the final act of a martyr is to die. Significantly, although Thecla comes to be revered as a martyr, she does not die in the arena like Perpetua does. The following chapter will explore the danger this unfulfilled martyrdom might have held for Tertullian.

The treatise ends somewhat abruptly with references to current events in Carthage that seem to have affected Tertullian but are not directly related to Christianity. He states, “let the present time bear testimony, when so many persons of rank have met with death in a mere human being’s cause, and that though from their birth and dignities and bodily condition and age such a fate seemed most unlikely; either suffering at his hands if they have taken part against him, or from his enemies if they have been his partisans.”<sup>571</sup> This refers to the fact “that many of noble birth have been put to death recently for their loyalty for the contenders for the imperial crown or for their disloyalty to the victor”<sup>572</sup> and is the passage that is used to help date the treatise.<sup>573</sup> However, its bearing on the martyrs is not immediately clear. Dunn suggests, “the inference was that the Christian, who followed the cause not of an emperor but of God, ought to be all the more prepared to endure persecution willingly.”<sup>574</sup> Therefore, although it initially seems incongruous, Tertullian’s final words of the treatise actually tie in perfectly with his overall message. Christian martyrs should face the suffering of torture and death willingly and joyfully, since many non-Christians have done so with far less of an incentive. Christian

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<sup>570</sup> Bowersock, 63.

<sup>571</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 6.

<sup>572</sup> Dunn, 43.

<sup>573</sup> Cf. Barnes, 32-33.

<sup>574</sup> Dunn, 43.

martyrs are guaranteed “citizenship in the heavens,”<sup>575</sup> which should allow for their bodily pains to be endured for the salvation of their souls. Furthermore, although Tertullian uses many non-Christian martyrs as examples, it is the responsibility of the martyrs to act as examples of encouragement to all Christians and indeed to provide peace to Christians who may have strayed from the church.

### **Conclusions**

Martyrdom was clearly an important aspect of the Christian life for Tertullian and for members of the Carthaginian church in general. Carthage’s close relationship to the idea of martyrdom and self-sacrifice dates back to the legendary account of its founder, Queen Dido, who threw herself on a pyre in order to avoid being married against her will. From this point of violence and sacrifice, Carthaginian stories and myths demonstrate a continued fascination with the concept of martyrdom, which Christians then adopted into their understanding of their own religions. It is important to note that the first record of Christianity in North Africa comes in a martyrdom account and the names of the martyrs are all African, indicating that they would have been immersed in the traditions of martyrdom and would have had a different understanding of the meaning of their deaths than a non-North African would have. Tertullian’s *To the Martyrs* also demonstrates the importance of martyrdom in Carthage when he lists of a group of mostly women who have sacrificed themselves instead of compromising their chastity or beliefs. He is addressing a specific group of martyrs in his treatise (whether this is Perpetua’s group or another is not known), and he uses these examples as a way of encouraging the Christians to stay strong, for, if non-Christians could face death so bravely, surely Christians should be able to do so also. Furthermore, Tertullian reminds these martyrs

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<sup>575</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 3.

that they are like soldiers and athletes preparing for battle or competition. They are in prison and are tortured as a way of training and preparation. Their physical pain acts to make their souls stronger and more ready to connect with God. Their separation from the world should be rejoiced, since they are no longer subjected to having to view the sinful world of daily life in Carthage. Once imprisoned, the martyrs also have the responsibility to act as examples for the rest of the Christian community. Not only should their behaviour be worthy of being emulated, but the martyrs have the ability to grant peace to those Christians who have sinned or strayed from the church. Therefore, while not ordained into the clergy, imprisoned martyrs have the power to impart forgiveness upon Christians and to encourage them to re-join their Christian community. Since martyrs perform such a vital role within the church, it is easy to see why Tertullian holds such strong opinions about the necessity of the martyr to demonstrate appropriately pious behaviour. *To the Martyrs* provides insights into the ways that Tertullian expected martyrs to act, the difficulties that they must endure, and the ways that their community would have interacted with them. Much of the imagery found within this treatise is echoed in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* and opposed in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. As such, the concept of martyrdom provides a further way of demonstrating the issues that ultimately caused Tertullian to exult Perpetua and reject Thecla.

Martyrs like Perpetua and Thecla had the ability to influence Christians, simply by virtue of being condemned to death as Christians. Should a martyr not conform to Tertullian's views of what is appropriate, it is likely that he would have viewed them as extremely dangerous, for not only might they influence Christians to act in an inappropriate manner, but they might actually condemn Christians who were most in need of help and guidance. The following chapter will examine the concept of

martyrdom within the Thecla and Perpetua narratives in relation with Tertullian's *To the Martyrs* as a way of providing further insight into Tertullian's differing opinions of the martyrs.

## Chapter 6 - The Martyrdoms of Thecla and Perpetua

The narratives of Thecla and Perpetua are most often understood as martyrologies, despite the fact that their respective martyrdoms are very different. Thecla's martyrdom is actually never completed, as she does not die from her persecutions. Instead, her narrative deals with martyrdom "through asceticism described in the language of martyrdom"<sup>576</sup> and it is worth noting that, despite the way the text comes to be interpreted, the term "martyr" does not appear within the text.<sup>577</sup> Furthermore, a close reading of the texts will demonstrate that Thecla's potential martyrdoms do not occur as a result of her claims of Christianity, but because she rejects the societal expectations of her gender. Indeed, "there is virtually nothing in the story about her belief in Christ, her rejection of pagan gods, or even her rejection of emperor worship."<sup>578</sup> Ultimately, however, Tertullian's objection to the Thecla narrative is really an objection to the way that some women used to the text to justify their teaching and baptism. As such, this chapter will focus on the details of Thecla's martyrdom that would have been attractive to these women but potentially dangerous to Tertullian.

In sharp contrast, Perpetua's martyrdom comes about directly as a result of her straightforward assertion of her identity of a Christian and her subsequent refusal to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor. Furthermore, unlike Thecla's text that shows only peripheral similarities to the details of martyrdom that Tertullian writes about, the events of Perpetua's imprisonment and death closely mirror the content of Tertullian's treatise *To the Martyrs*. Perpetua's visions especially display an affinity with the imagery

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<sup>576</sup> Gail P.C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>577</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 140.

<sup>578</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 87.

found in Tertullian's treatise and as such contribute to Tertullian's positive depiction of her within his other writings. Furthermore, since Perpetua's actions coincide with Tertullian's theories, there is no danger of the audience using Perpetua's example to go against Tertullian's beliefs. The audience cannot use Perpetua's example to teach and baptize since Perpetua is not shown as doing either of these dangerous things. She is instead shown as conforming to Tertullian's views of how female martyrs should behave. As with Thecla and Perpetua's differences in terms of their species of women and their approaches to baptism, the different ways each text approaches martyrdom will allow for deeper understanding of the reasons why Tertullian might have had such drastically different opinions of the two. Since both women come to prominence through their martyrologies, and since both are revered as female martyrs (however correctly or incorrectly this label may be applied to Thecla), it is vital to examine their texts in relation to Tertullian's views on martyrs. Additionally, since the depictions of their martyrdoms encompass the issues surrounding their gender and their baptisms, this chapter will serve to reinforce the previous chapters' observations and conclusions.

### **Thecla**

Thecla's first attempted martyrdom occurs as a result of her obsession with Paul's teachings and her subsequent refusal to honour her betrothal and marry Thamyris. This devotion to the stranger Paul is consistent with the genre of the ancient Greek novel, with which the Thecla narrative has often been associated. Indeed, Thecla's refusal to marry her betrothed is immediately understood as dangerous by those in the text, since it is clear that she is in love with someone else. The fact that the focus of Thecla's lovesickness is an apostle who is preaching about chastity above all else does not diminish the danger that this poses to Thecla's expected role.

Furthermore, this demonstrates how the expected characteristics of the Greek novel are adapted to fit a Christian context. While the details may be new, the text follows the typical romantic formula; Thecla meets Paul, listens to him through her window, falls in love with him, and subsequently is separated from him and is forced to overcome a series of obstacles before they can be reunited.<sup>579</sup> In this Christianized take on the genre, the first obstacle that Thecla must overcome is an attempt to make her a martyr. When Thecla refuses to acknowledge her mother and marry Thamryis, Theocleia reacts violently, demanding that Thecla be burned in the midst of the theatre.<sup>580</sup> This reaction demonstrates that “according to the logic of the world, which sees marriage as a fulfillment of law and legacy, remaining unmarried cannot help but be associated with criminality and lawlessness.”<sup>581</sup> Therefore, Thecla must be burned because she does not conform to expectations and also as a deterrent to any other women who might consider following her example. Despite the fact that he is the impetus for Thecla’s rejection, Paul is punished less severely by being flogged and exiled from the city.<sup>582</sup> This demonstrates that “Thecla’s crime is that she presents an even greater disruption to her family, city, and society than does Paul [ . . . ] She abandoned her maidenly modesty, not for the expected consummation of marriage, but in order to boldly follow a ‘strange’ new teaching out of love for a foreigner.”<sup>583</sup> Clearly, Thecla’s first punishment has nothing to do with her sudden conversion to Christianity. Instead, she is sentenced to be burned at the stake because she rejects the accepted and expected role of wife, and therefore poses a dangerous threat to the stability of the social structure.

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<sup>579</sup> Castelli, 140.

<sup>580</sup> *Acta Pauli et Theclae* 20. *The Acts of Thecla*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman in *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make it into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>581</sup> Castelli, 142.

<sup>582</sup> *ATH* 21.

<sup>583</sup> Streete, 82.

The process of Thecla's first potential martyrdom reveals some indication that religion does play a role, but a close examination of this passage reveals that the references to Christianity are more representative of a narrative decision than indicative of the way that the characters view these events. Indeed, the beginning of the description of her impending martyrdom emphasizes once more Thecla's rebellion against societal and family expectations<sup>584</sup> since it is children and virgins who actually bring the wood to the pyre. In other words, the ones who conform to their expected roles are causing the death of the one who dares to step outside of her role:

The children and virgins brought wood and hay for Thecla's burning. When she was brought into the arena naked, the governor wept, marveling at the power he saw in her. They spread out the wood, and the leaders of the people ordered her to mount the pyre. Making the shape of the cross she went up onto the wood. And they lit it. But when it roared into a great fire, the flames did not touch her. For God out of his compassion caused a great roar underground, and overhead a cloud full of water and hailstones overshadowed the place; and there was an immense cloud-burst so that many people were in danger of dying. The fire was extinguished and Thecla was saved.<sup>585</sup>

At first glance, it would appear that Thecla attempts to bring her Christianity into the equation by imitating Jesus in making the shape of the cross. However, some scholars assert that Thecla is not aligning herself with Jesus but instead is portraying herself as a conqueror whose "exposed, vulnerable female naked body has conquered the timidity of the flesh."<sup>586</sup> While nudity would not have been uncommon in the Roman context, this interpretation can be confirmed in that "Thecla does not betray a moment of weakness;

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<sup>584</sup> Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 21.

<sup>585</sup> *ATH 22*. Οἱ δὲ παῖδες καὶ αἱ παρθένοι ἤνεγχαν ξύλα καὶ χόρτον ἵνα Θέκλα χαταχαῖ. ὡς δὲ εἰσῆχθη γυμνή, ἐδάχπυσεν ὁ ἡγεμῶν καὶ ἐθαύμασεν τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ δύναμιν. ἔστρωσαν δὲ τὰ ζύλα καὶ ἐκέλευσαν αὐτὴν οἱ δῆμιοι ἐπιβῆναι τῇ πυρᾷ. ἡ δὲ τὸν τύπον τοῦ σταυροῦ ποιησαμένη ἐπέβη τῶν ξύλων. οἱ δὲ ὑψῆσαν. καὶ μεγάλου πυρὸς λάμπαντος οὐχ ἦψατο αὐτῆς τὸ πῦρ. ὁ γὰρ θεὸς σπλαγχνισθεὶς ἤχον ὑπόγειον ἐποίησεν, καὶ νεφέλη ἄνωθεν ἐπεσχίασεν ὕδατος πλήπης καὶ χαλάζης, καὶ ἐξεχυθη πᾶν τὸ κύτος, ὡς πολλοὺς κινδυνεῦσαι καὶ ἀποθανεῖν, καὶ τὸ πῦρ σβεσθῆναι τὴν δὲ Θέκλαν σωθῆναι.

<sup>586</sup> Streete, 84.

rather it is the governor who weeps, moved not by her pathos but because he ‘marveled at the power that was in her.’<sup>587</sup> This contemporary difference of interpretation reflects the fact that the texts could also have been understood in different ways depending on the audience in Tertullian’s time. Despite the lack of Christianity within the imagery of her first near-martyrdom, Thecla’s unflinching reaction to the prospect of being burned alive fits within Tertullian’s assertion that, while the flesh may fear the physical pain of the fire, “the flesh might yield obedience to the spirit - the weaker to the stronger; the former thus from the latter getting strength.”<sup>588</sup> However, Thecla’s power is not attributed to being given from God; instead, it appears that God himself is impressed enough by her bravery that he sends a natural disaster as a kind of compassionate reward. It is also important to note that despite the assertion that God is the cause of the earthquake and storm that puts out the fire and saves Thecla, there is no indication within that any of the characters in the text reach this conclusion. There is no sudden realization of the power of God from Thecla or anyone the crowd, as might be expected when witnessing such a miracle.

Furthermore, at no point during her martyrdom or her supernatural rescue from the pyre does Thecla proclaim herself to be a Christian (if indeed she even identifies herself as such). However, it should be noted that, if a Christian at all, Thecla would be categorized as “an encratite Christian, at any rate the kind of Christian woman of whom the author of 1 Timothy would strongly have disapproved, one who ‘forbids marriage’ (1 Tim. 4:3).”<sup>589</sup> Since Tertullian relies heavily upon Pauline epistles like 1 Timothy<sup>590</sup> in his

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<sup>587</sup> Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 40.

<sup>588</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Martyras* 4. Tertullian, *To the Martyrs*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>589</sup> Streete, 84.

theology, it is likely that he would have both recognized that Thecla's actions go against these teachings, and agreed that she was the type of woman who was potentially dangerous and should not be accepted into mainstream Christianity. Additionally, the very fact that Thecla escapes this martyrdom (miraculously or not), this would have gone against Tertullian's Carthaginian background, which emphasized an eagerness for martyrdom.<sup>591</sup> For Tertullian, then, Thecla's non-martyrdom therefore is a complete failure; she is not condemned to the pyre because she is a Christian, she does not declare herself to be a Christian, and she does not die (and is thus unable to act as a catalyst for anyone else's conversion). However, it should be noted that, as a Christianized version of a Greek novel, Thecla's text primarily would have served a role of entertainment<sup>592</sup> and so might not have been taken as seriously by everyone else as it seems to have been for Tertullian. While there is no consensus on who the intended audience was, the generally positive way women are portrayed and the negative way men are portrayed suggests that it would have been particularly appealing to women. As such, where Tertullian saw a failed martyrdom, other members of the audience may have seen simply a plot device to prolong the plight of the characters and keep her separated from Paul, her beloved.

Thecla's second unfulfilled martyrdom occurs again due to her rejection of her gender role and has little or nothing to do with her Christianity. After escaping the pyre and finding Paul, she travels with him to Antioch where she encounters a man named Alexander who begins embracing her in the street. Thecla cries out, "Do not force

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<sup>590</sup> Tert., *Ad Uxorem* 1.7. Tertullian, *To His Wife*, trans S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

<sup>591</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 15.

<sup>592</sup> Davis, 12.

yourself on a stranger, do not force yourself on a slave of God.”<sup>593</sup> Just as Thecla’s nocturnal visit to Paul’s jail cell can be interpreted in a sexualized way inappropriate of a virgin, the act of traveling essentially alone (since Paul abandons her almost immediately) opens Thecla up to interpretations of immorality. In this way, “suspicious religious activities outside the house might be cast as sexual immorality [and] Alexander’s public embrace of Thecla probably reflects this aspect of public opinion.”<sup>594</sup> This is a crucial moment in the narrative because it “crystallizes the threat to the social order that Thecla embodies, but it also emphasizes her verbal autonomy. She claims an identity for herself, stranger and handmaid of God . . . she asserts her power to choose her own destiny . . . and she draws from this assertion the power to physically assault Alexander.”<sup>595</sup> However, while she does here assert that she is a slave of God, this is not her emphasized feature, but merely one title that she gives herself in order to try and dispel Alexander’s advances. She emphasizes her foreignness as she tells where she came from, “I am a leading citizen of the Iconians, and since I did not wish to marry Thamyris, I have been exiled from my city.”<sup>596</sup> Her self-identification as a stranger and a slave are significant because both are “quintessential outsiders to civic identity, having no claim to the legal status accorded citizens and free persons . . . physically and socially perennially out of place.”<sup>597</sup> Perhaps this was the emphasis that the author intended, as “Her protest places her identity as ‘stranger’ and as ‘handmaid of God’ in syntactic parallel, suggesting a connection between her itinerant status as a follower of

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<sup>593</sup> *ATH* 26.

<sup>594</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian women and pagan opinion: The power of the hysterical woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 175.

<sup>595</sup> McInerney, 41.

<sup>596</sup> *ATH* 26.

<sup>597</sup> Castelli, 142.

Paul and her vocation as a virgin.”<sup>598</sup> Thecla’s self-identification as a stranger and a slave indicates the ascetic nature of the text as a whole, and suggests that it would have appealed to other Christians who valued the same characteristics of asceticism such as itinerancy and chastity. That the audience of the text used Thecla’s example to authorize their ascetic practices can clearly be seen in Tertullian’s stated rejection of the text since he speaks of women invoking Thecla’s example as the basis for their teaching.

Thecla ultimately rejects Alexander in a violent action, as “She grabbed hold of Alexander, ripped his mantle, and pulled the crown from his head, making him an object of derision.”<sup>599</sup> Thecla’s actions of ripping Alexander’s mantle and pulling the crown from his head are not those of a fragile and vulnerable virgin, but instead represent Thecla’s newfound ability to “act for herself as she speaks for herself, claiming her own new ‘male’ identity.”<sup>600</sup> Thecla’s triumph over Alexander’s male authority, and the subsequent danger this poses to society, must be punished. Thecla is again condemned to die not because of her status as a “slave of God,” but because her actions are drastically in opposition to the acceptable behaviour of a virgin. This is made clear within the narrative of the text, as Alexander “was ashamed of what had happened to him; and so he led her to the governor. When she admitted she had done these things, he condemned her to the wild beasts.”<sup>601</sup> This reaction may seem extreme, but is consistent with Mediterranean culture that places a high emphasis on public perception. That is, “In the challenge-riposte dynamics of interaction in Mediterranean society, Alexander feels bound to answer [Thecla’s] challenge in an equal or more forceful

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<sup>598</sup> Davis, 25.

<sup>599</sup> *Ath* 26.

<sup>600</sup> Streete, 86.

<sup>601</sup> *Ath* 27.

way.”<sup>602</sup> Despite the difference in the details of her condemnation, just as in Iconium, Thecla’s crime is related to her refusal to follow the societal expectations of marriage.<sup>603</sup> She is not sent to the arena because she declares herself to be a slave of God, but because she is a threat to Alexander’s masculine authority. Undoubtedly Tertullian would have seen Thecla’s actions as troubling, particularly for a virgin. In addition, since Thecla’s condemnation martyrdom does not come about due to her faith but instead as a result of her immodesty, he likely would not have been inclined to see it as a martyrdom at all. In contrast, however, for the ascetically-minded audience for whom the text may have been the most popular, Thecla’s Christianity may have been what allowed her to reject her typical social role. Indeed, her commitment to chastity in the face of many obstacles seems to be the cause of her charismatic power.<sup>604</sup> As such, perhaps some of Tertullian’s opposition to the entire narrative can be blamed on the fact that he is not in the intended audience. While Tertullian acknowledges the importance of chastity and living an austere life, he does not wholeheartedly endorse the kind of ascetic lifestyle that the Thecla text seems to be emphasizing. Tertullian does not wish to upset the social structures already in place, but instead advocates for a kind of Christianity that fits within the already-established Roman model. While later thinkers view Thecla as the ideal model for the ascetic virgin, Tertullian is more concerned with what kinds of social repercussions might occur if women like Thecla are given permission to travel and teach.

While Thecla’s condemnation does not come about as a result of her identifying herself as a Christian, later, “the charge against her was inscribed: ‘Sacriligious.’”<sup>605</sup> This charge is a decision “equating the decision for virginity with an affront to the social

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<sup>602</sup> MacDonald, 176.

<sup>603</sup> Streete, 87.

<sup>604</sup> Davis, 26.

<sup>605</sup> *ATH* 28.

order,<sup>606</sup> and does not indicate a crime against Roman religion. While in Iconium, the entire town seemed to support her punishment, in Antioch there are women who support Thecla at her sentencing. Instead of cries to burn her, “the women [in Antioch] were astonished and cried out before the judgment seat, ‘A wicked judgment! An unholy judgment!’”<sup>607</sup> This anonymous group of women and their cries of the unjust nature of Thecla’s condemnation form a consistent motif throughout the rest of the work, functioning “almost like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, appearing and voicing their commentary of support or lamentation over the heroine’s predicament.”<sup>608</sup> Again, aspects of Greek literature that would have been familiar to the Christian audience serve to reinforce Christian ideas while still providing entertainment in an accessible manner. As with other aspects of the text, Tertullian would have likely disagreed with the chorus’ assessment of the situation. As a virgin traveling alone, he would likely have argued that Thecla was inviting just the kind of attention that she received from Alexander. This indeed would have probably been one of the issues he saw with allowing women to travel alone.

Unlike in Iconium, where her sentence was carried out immediately, in Antioch, Thecla is placed under house arrest for some days before she is sent to the arena. This fits within Tertullian’s idea that imprisonment is beneficial to martyrs because “The Christian outside the prison has renounced the world, but in the prison he has renounced a prison too. It is of no consequence where you are in the world - you who are not of it.”<sup>609</sup> Furthermore, spending time apart from general society provides the potential

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<sup>606</sup> Streete, 87.

<sup>607</sup> *ATH* 27.

<sup>608</sup> Davis, 9.

<sup>609</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 2.

martyrs with a chance to focus all of their attention on God.<sup>610</sup> After the judgment is passed down, “Thecla asked the governor to be allowed to remain chaste until she had to fight the wild beasts. A certain wealthy queen named Tryphaena, whose daughter had died, took her into her care and was comforted by her.”<sup>611</sup> As a supportive mother figure in sharp contrast to the actions of Thecla’s real mother, Tryphaena can be seen “perhaps in the way that the Good Shepherd seen in Perpetua’s first vision is a substitute for her earthly father.”<sup>612</sup> This can be seen further in that, “With her mother, fiancé, and even Paul virtually absent from the second half of the narrative, Thecla enters into a new familial relationship with a community of women organized in the context of a household.”<sup>613</sup> Therefore, while Thecla harshly severs ties with her biological family, she is only too happy to be accepted into this new household that is not made up of blood relatives, but of fellow Christians.<sup>614</sup> The idea that Thecla now belongs to a new family can be seen clearly when Tryphaena’s dead daughter, Falconilla, appears to her in a vision, saying “Mother, you should take this desolate stranger, Thecla, in my place, that she may pray for me and I be moved to the place of the righteous.”<sup>615</sup> The comfort that Thecla finds within Tryphaena’s household is similar to the affection that Tertullian expects martyrs to have between one another in the prisons. Tertullian tells the martyrs to find strength in one another to be united against the devil,<sup>616</sup> and Thecla perhaps prepares for her future trials through forming new bonds between the women of Tryphaena’s household who will continue to support her as she enters the arena.

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<sup>610</sup> Ibid.

<sup>611</sup> *ATH* 27.

<sup>612</sup> Streete, 87.

<sup>613</sup> Davis, 17.

<sup>614</sup> MacDonald, 177.

<sup>615</sup> *ATH* 28.

<sup>616</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

Falconilla's request in the vision is also significant because emphasizes Thecla's charisma as a martyr and her subsequent ability to forgive sins. Tryphaena asks Thecla to "come, pray for my child, that she may live forever."<sup>617</sup> Clearly, "Tryphaena's petition reflects the belief that Thecla, as an expectant martyr like Perpetua, had been granted the power to forgive sins during her imprisonment and martyr trials."<sup>618</sup> Thecla immediately grant's Tryphaena's request, as the text relates, "Without a moment's delay, Thecla raised her voice and said, 'O my God, Son of the Highest, you who are in heaven: Give her what she desires, that her daughter Falconilla may live forever.'"<sup>619</sup> Despite his likely disapproval of Thecla's relationship with Tryphaena, Tertullian does speak of the power of forgiveness as being an important feature of imprisoned martyrs. He identifies the role that martyrs should play, stating, "Some, not able to find this peace in the Church, have been used . . . seek it from the imprisoned martyrs . . . that you may be able perhaps to bestow it upon others."<sup>620</sup> Therefore, Thecla, under house arrest, should be able to confer the same kind of peace that Perpetua does while in prison. Whether or not her martyrdoms are ultimately successful, Thecla consistently displays a bravery and willingness to endure pain, and it is because of this willingness that martyrs are endowed with the ability to forgive sins.<sup>621</sup> In this instance, therefore, Tertullian would not be able to argue that Thecla acts like an ideal martyr. She attempts to bring peace to others through her close relationship to God.

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<sup>617</sup> *ATH* 29.

<sup>618</sup> Davis, 29.

<sup>619</sup> *ATH* 29.

<sup>620</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

<sup>621</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 182-3.

When the time comes for Thecla to fight the beasts in the arena, it “is set up a veritable battle between the sexes,”<sup>622</sup> with Thecla attacked by male animals and protected by female animals. This protection begins before she enters the arena, during the procession of the wild beasts, when “they bound Thecla to a fierce lioness . . . but while Thecla was sitting on the lioness, it began licking her feet.”<sup>623</sup> This lioness will prove to be most beneficial to Thecla in the arena. The beginning of her battle in the arena is described as follows:

Thecla was then taken from the hand of Tryphaena and stripped, given an undergarment to wear, and cast into the stadium. Lions and bears were cast in to attack her. And a fierce lioness ran up and lay down at her feet. The crowd of women uttered a great cry. A bear ran up to attack her; but the lioness ran up, met the bear, and ripped him apart. Then a lion owned by Alexander and trained to fight humans ran up to attack her; the lioness tangled with the lion and was destroyed along with it. The women were even more grief stricken, since the lioness that had been protecting her died.<sup>624</sup>

It is interesting that Thecla’s actions or emotions are not described during this period.

Perhaps the audience was supposed to understand that Thecla would have demonstrated the same kind of calm endurance as she did when faced with the pyre. Tertullian refers to the tortures that the martyrs will face, as well as the way that they should deal with these difficulties when he writes, “The flesh, perhaps, will dread the merciless sword, and the lofty cross, and the rage of the wild beasts, and that punishment of the flames . . . But . . . let the spirit set clearly before both itself and the

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<sup>622</sup> McInerney, 41.

<sup>623</sup> *ATH* 28.

<sup>624</sup> *ATH* 33. Ἡ δὲ Θέκλα ἐκ χειρὸς Τρυφαίνης ληφθεῖσα ἐξεδύθη καὶ ἔλαβεν διαζώστραν καὶ ἐβλήθη εἰς τὸ στάδιον. καὶ λέοντες καὶ ἄρκοι ἐβλήθησαν ἐπ’ αὐτήν. καὶ πικρὰ λέαινα προσδραμοῦσα εἰς τοὺς πόδας αὐτῆς ἀνεκλίθη. ὁ δὲ ὄχλος τῶν γυναικῶν ἐβόησεν μέγα. καὶ ἔδραμεν ἐπ’ αὐτήν ἄρκος. ἡ δὲ λέαινα δραμοῦσα ὑπήντησεν καὶ διέρρηξεν τὴν ἄρκον. καὶ πάλιν λέων δεδιδαγμένος ἐπ’ ἀνθρώπους ὃς ἦν Ἀλεζάνδρου ἔδραμεν ἐπ’ αὐτήν. καὶ ἡ λέαινα συμπλέξασα τῷ λέοντι συνανηρέθη. μειζόνως δὲ ἐπένησαν αἱ γυναῖκες, ἐπειδὴ καὶ ἡ βοήθῃς αὐτῆς λέαινα ἀπέθανεν.

flesh, how these things, though exceedingly painful, have been calmly endured by many . . . and this is not only in the case of men but of women too, that you, O holy women, may be worthy of your sex.”<sup>625</sup> While Thecla may be silent, the reactions of the other females in this passage (the lioness and the nameless women in the crowd) are sufficient evidence of Thecla’s worthiness in terms of the example she sets for other Christians. The lioness fights to defend Thecla from the male animals, thus serving as a metaphor for Thecla’s struggles against the narrative’s antagonistic male characters.<sup>626</sup> Furthermore, the lioness’ death and the grief-stricken reaction of the women in the crowd suggests that the animal herself is a martyr for Thecla.<sup>627</sup>

However, the martyr death of Thecla’s lioness protector is only the beginning of her trials in the arena. After the lioness dies, “Then they cast in a large number of wild beasts, while she stood, reaching out her hands and praying.”<sup>628</sup> This first description of Thecla’s actions within the arena is followed immediately by her self-baptism in the vat of rabid seals.<sup>629</sup> One interesting feature of this event is again the focus on retaining Thecla’s chastity (or at least her chaste appearance), as after the lightning hits the water and kills the seal, “a cloud of fire surrounded her, so that the beasts could not attack her and no one could see her naked.”<sup>630</sup> This demonstrates that, after her baptism “even the probing eyes of the spectators are considered potential threats to her physical purity . . . Thecla’s purity of body is once again preserved and highlighted in a demonstration of miraculous power.”<sup>631</sup> After Thecla’s self-baptism and miraculous rescue, more beasts are sent to fight her. Here, the women in the crowd take a more active role in their

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<sup>625</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4.

<sup>626</sup> Davis, 10.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid.

<sup>628</sup> *Ath* 34.

<sup>629</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more detailed examination of this incident.

<sup>630</sup> *Ath* 34.

<sup>631</sup> Davis, 27.

defense of Thecla, crying aloud and “some tossed leaves into the arena, others threw in nard, others cassia, and others cardamon, so that the whole place was filled with the sweet smell of perfume. All the beasts that had been cast in appeared to be overcome with sleep and did not touch her.”<sup>632</sup> Again, women are portrayed as more powerful than men; human women even have the power to defeat male animals with distinct symbols of their femininity. Indeed, throughout the narrative, “the only reliable protection Thecla receives is from women.”<sup>633</sup> The depiction of these female characters further serves to suggest a possible female influence in the creation of the text, and perhaps a largely female audience.

Thecla must face yet another round of beasts before her time in the arena is done. Alexander tells the governor:

“I have some truly fearful bulls; let us bind her to them.” The governor sullenly gave his consent, saying, “Do what you want.” They bound her between the bulls by her feet and put her between the bulls by her feet and put red-hot irons under their genitals so that they would tear about and kill her. And they did begin to leap about, but the flame rose up around them and burned the wooden buildings, so that she was no longer bound.<sup>634</sup>

To be sure, “the symbolism of the beasts (and their owner) with their red-hot genitals is not difficult to read”<sup>635</sup> and Thecla’s subsequent defeat of the beasts through (another) miraculous fire leaves her at last free of any and all bonds. While not done in the usual order or with the proper attitude, this fits within Tertullian’s idea that a martyr needs to be

<sup>632</sup> *ATh* 35.

<sup>633</sup> MacDonald, 176.

<sup>634</sup> *ATh* 35. ὡς τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον εἶπεῖν τῷ ἡγεμόνι Ταύρους ἔχω λίαν φοβερούς, ἐξεῖνοις προσδήσωμεν τὴν θηριομάχον. καὶ στυγνάσας ἐπέτρεψεν ὁ ἡγεμὼν λέγων Ποίει ὃ θέλεις. Καὶ ἔδεσαν αὐτὴν ἐκ τῶν ποδῶν μέσον τῶν ταύρων, καὶ ὑπὸ τὰ ἀναγκαῖα αὐτῶν πεπυρωμένα σίδηρα ὑπέθηκαν, ἵνα πλείονα ταραχθέντες ἀποκτείνωσιν αὐτήν. οἱ μὲν οὖν ἤλλοντο. ἡ δὲ πρεικαιομένη φλόξ διέκαυσεν τοὺς κάλους, καὶ ἦν ὡς οὐ δεδεμένη.

<sup>635</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 88.

“severed from the world”<sup>636</sup> and all things in it. It appears that this final blow to the masculinity of Alexander and the governor finally asks Thecla to declare her identity and explain how she has been able to avoid death. Her reply is the type of martyr confession that would normally have been given by the martyrs during their sentencing and condemnation. Thecla replies:

“I am a slave of the living God. As to what there is about me: I have believed in God’s Son, in whom he is well pleased. That is why none of the beasts has touched me. For this one alone is a boundary marker of God’s salvation and a foundation of life immortal. For he is a refuge to those caught in the storm, a rest for those who are afflicted, a shelter for those who have despaired, and to put it most simply: whoever does not believe in him will not live but will die forever.”<sup>637</sup>

Her words are simultaneously a confession, a prayer, and a sermon. She is “beginning to preach, beginning to use language designed to move and affect her hearers, using metaphor to make her point.”<sup>638</sup> Unlike in Iconium, when Thecla did not speak out explain her miraculous survival and identify herself as a Christian, in Antioch Thecla confesses that “it is Christ that has saved her, as he will save all who believe in him.”<sup>639</sup>

Here, Thecla’s confession is enough to convert the audience, including the Roman governor:

When the governor heard those things he ordered her clothes brought, and he said, “Put on your clothes.” But she replied, “The one who clothed me when I was naked among the wild beasts will clothe me with salvation on the day of judgment.” Then she took her clothes and put them on. The governor immediately sent forth an edict, saying, “I release to you Thecla, the pious slave of God.”<sup>640</sup>

<sup>636</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 2.

<sup>637</sup> *ATh* 37. Ἐγὼ μὲν εἰμι θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος δούλη. τὰ δὲ περὶ ἐμέ, εἰς ὃν εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐπίστευσα. δι’ ὃν οὐδὲ ἐν τῶν θηρίων ἤψατο μου. οὗτος γὰρ μόνος σωτηρίας ὄρος καὶ ζωῆς ἀθανάτου ὑποστασίς ἐστιν. χειμαζομένοις γὰρ γίνεται καταφυγή, φλιβομένοις ἄνεσις, ἀπηλπισμένοις σκέπη, καὶ ἀπαξαιπλῶς ὅς ἐάν μὴ πιστεύσῃ αὐτόν, οὐ ζήσεται ἀλλὰ ἀποθανεῖται εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας.

<sup>638</sup> McInerney, 43.

<sup>639</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion* 89.

<sup>640</sup> *ATh* 38. Καὶ ταῦτα ἀξούτσας ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἐκέλευσεν ἐνέχθηναι ἱμάτια καὶ εἶπεν Ἔνδυσαι τὰ ἱμάτια. Ἡ δὲ εἶπεν Ὁ ἐνδύσας με γυμνὴν ἐν τοῖς θηρίοις, οὗτος ἐν ἡμέρα κρὶ ἐνδύσει με

This recognition is important because it demonstrates that Thecla has completed the task of a martyr, even if her actual martyrdom remains unfulfilled since she does not die. Indeed, “it is essential here to note that not only does Thecla convert the audience (this will become standard in later virgin martyr tales) and the procurator, who recognizes her status as a ‘handmaid of God’ . . . but that the acclamatory formula carries with it a public recognition.”<sup>641</sup> Therefore, Thecla’s final proclamation in the arena serves the function of converting some to Christianity and providing peace to those who are already Christians. The action of being re-clothed symbolizes the end of the threats to her life and her chastity. However, the fact that Thecla is ultimately released from the arena and from prison is a problem in itself, as the question of the status of confessors who were released before being martyred was the cause of numerous conflicts in the early church.<sup>642</sup> This is due to the fact that imprisoned martyrs were endowed with a special ability to forgive sins precisely due to the fact that they are imprisoned and willingly facing death.<sup>643</sup> Normally, of course, the confessors’ temporary priestly function would culminate with their death.<sup>644</sup> Since Thecla does not die, she does not fit within the standard or ideal of Christian martyrs and her actions after her release do not fit within any established parameters. Tertullian famously states, “the blood of martyrs is seed,”<sup>645</sup> but Thecla does not shed any blood. Therefore, she has no place within the growth and spread of the church. Indeed, perhaps Tertullian’s willingness to bestow special

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σωτηρίαν. Καὶ λαβοῦσα τὰ ἱμάτια ἐνεδύσατο. καὶ ἐξέπεμψεν εὐθεως ὁ ἡγεμῶν ἄκτον λέγων  
Θέκλαν τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δούλην τὴν θεοσεβῆ ἀπολύω ὑμῖν.

<sup>641</sup> McInerney, 43.

<sup>642</sup> Davis, 29.

<sup>643</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

<sup>644</sup> Davis, 30.

<sup>645</sup> Tert., *Apolegeticum* 50. Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. S. Thelwall in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869).

authority upon imprisoned martyrs is precisely because he knows that this authority will have a definite and almost immediate end. In this way, Thecla abuses this special consideration by escaping martyrdom and not dying at her appropriate time. Instead of giving up her authority when she is no longer under threat of death, Thecla continues to use it and inspires others to do so at the same time.

Ultimately, Tertullian's objection to the Thecla narrative is an objection to the way that some female members of the audience are using the text to justify their actions of teaching and baptizing. That is, the text is only worthy of mention for him because of what others do with the story. It is therefore important to examine the text in close detail in order to understand the aspects that would have appealed to the group of women to whom Tertullian subsequently objects. Additionally, a close reading of the text reveals some key points that Tertullian would likely have objected to if he had a copy of the text before him and was inclined to refute it point by point. Most importantly, neither of Thecla's attempted martyrdoms come about as a result of her identity as a Christian. In Iconium, Thecla is sentenced to be burned at the stake because she refuses to follow the expectations of society to transition from virgin to wife. Even when she is miraculously saved from death in this instance, she does not praise God, and none of the spectators recognize God's intervention in her rescue. Her second attempted martyrdom in Antioch again comes about because she goes against her expected role as a woman by defending herself against Alexander's advances and attacking him publicly. However, despite the problems that Tertullian would have had with these details, both of these near-martyrdoms emphasize Thecla's commitment to chastity, a quality that later church fathers emphasize and which likely appealed to the groups of

women who first begin to use Thecla's example.<sup>646</sup> As such, these issues appear to be not universally problematic, but only troublesome to Tertullian and his beliefs and the specific rhetorical goals of his treatise. Furthermore, Thecla does align with Tertullian's ideas of what a martyr should do when she finally publicly declares her Christianity and manages to convert many in the crowd, including apparently the procurator.

Additionally, Thecla plays the expected role of a martyr by intervening in the afterlife of Tryphaena's daughter and offering to bring peace to the household. Ultimately, however, Thecla does not fulfill the one constant characteristic of the martyr in that she does not die from her persecutions but instead is depicted as continuing to live and teach. This detail both allows for women to use her example to authorize their own teaching and creates the dangerous precedent that Tertullian must reject in order to confirm his views that are based in the Pauline epistles, particularly 1 Timothy,<sup>647</sup> that assert that women may not teach.

### **Perpetua**

In contrast to Thecla's delay in acknowledging and asserting her Christianity, Perpetua states unequivocally that she identifies herself as a Christian almost immediately within her narrative. Her father comes to Perpetua to ask her to recant so that she may avoid being sentenced to death. Perpetua's reply confirms her Christian identity, "Do you see, let us say, this vessel lying here to be a little pitcher, or something else?' And he said, 'I see it to be so.' And I replied to him, 'Can it be called by any other name than what it is?' And he said, 'No.' 'Neither can I call myself anything else than what I am, a Christian."<sup>648</sup> Not only does this demonstrate that Perpetua is steadfast in

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<sup>646</sup> See Davis, 21-22.

<sup>647</sup> Cf. 1 Tim 2:12.

<sup>648</sup> *Passio Perpetuae* 1.2. *The Passion of Perpetua* trans. R. E. Wallis in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885).

her Christianity, but the fact that Perpetua's father thinks that if she recants she will be released shows that this is the specific charge that she has been arrested for. Indeed, her father's reaction shows the seriousness of the situation, as Perpetua reports, "Then my father, provoked at this saying, threw himself upon me, as if he would tear my eyes out."<sup>649</sup> Clearly, Perpetua's father knew that her self-identification as a Christian would lead to her death.<sup>650</sup> Unlike Thecla, who does not confidently state her Christianity until she has been miraculously saved from death twice, Perpetua "possesses a striking clarity about her identification as a Christian."<sup>651</sup> This clarity requires her to sever ties with her father, a fact that Tertullian sees as simply part of the martyrdom process. He states that worldly relationships must be severed when the martyrs enter prison, noting "Other things, hindrances equally of the soul, may have accompanied you as far as the prison gate, to which also your relatives may have attended you. There and thenceforth you were severed from the world."<sup>652</sup> Perpetua is not willing to recant her Christian identity in order to appease her father; the only other option therefore is for the ties between father and daughter to be broken. While this is technically a disruption of the social order, the reason that Perpetua abandons her role as a wife, mother, and daughter is in order to fulfill a new role as a martyr.

The most significant way that Perpetua fulfills her role as a martyr is through her visions. Perpetua's dreams fit within her new status as a martyr, since "for the martyrs, dreams were one of the surest signs of God's grace, and believers trusted that the dreams had meaning for them as well."<sup>653</sup> That is, Christians look to the dreams and

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<sup>649</sup> Ibid.

<sup>650</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion* 82.

<sup>651</sup> Castelli, 87.

<sup>652</sup> Tert., *Mart. 2*.

<sup>653</sup> Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 84.

visions of martyrs to provide them with insights into their religion, and martyrs are often depicted “as brokers of spiritual power.”<sup>654</sup> It is probable that part of this peace that Tertullian desires the martyrs to impart<sup>655</sup> would have come through the martyrs’ telling of their visions. Perpetua’s apparent recording of her own dreams and her subsequent interpretations of these visions is therefore highly important in understanding this aspect of martyrdom. Furthermore, since much of the imagery in the dreams coincides with the imagery Tertullian puts forth in *To the Martyrs*, the visions demonstrate a consistency of viewpoints in the Carthaginian Christian community, at least in this aspect of martyrdom. The agreement between the Perpetua narrative and Tertullian’s treatise in this significant issue indicates how Tertullian’s writings may have impacted the views of Carthaginian Christians like Perpetua, which in turn led to his approval of Perpetua herself.

Perpetua’s first vision comes at the suggestion of her brother, who says, “My dear sister, you are already in a position of great dignity, and are such that you might ask for a vision, and that it may be made known to you whether this is to result in a passion or an escape.”<sup>656</sup> Perpetua has only just been imprisoned, but already her brother believes that she has been endowed with the special abilities of a martyr. Perpetua, too, demonstrates an extreme confidence in her abilities stating, “And I, who knew that I was privileged to converse with the Lord, whose kindnesses I had found to be so great, boldly promised him, and said, ‘Tomorrow I will tell you.’”<sup>657</sup> Indeed, the Latin verb she uses, *postulo*, “tends not to be used to signify a request that is made obsequiously or submissively. Rather, it implies a demand or a request for something to which someone

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<sup>654</sup> McGowan, 466.

<sup>655</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

<sup>656</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.3.

<sup>657</sup> *Ibid.*

is entitled.”<sup>658</sup> Her confidence is evidently warranted, as she immediately receives her first vision.

As previously discussed, this vision contains much baptismal imagery,<sup>659</sup> but it bears discussing again with a specific instead focus on its martyrdom imagery. Importantly, Perpetua shows no trepidation in approaching the ladder despite the fact that it is covered with “swords, lances, hooks, daggers,”<sup>660</sup> contradicting Tertullian’s repeated warnings that the frail flesh might fall in the face of such certain pain.<sup>661</sup> As Perpetua nears the dragon, “from under the ladder itself, as if in fear of me, he slowly lifted up his head; and as I trod upon the first step, I trod upon his head.”<sup>662</sup> This imagery is significant as it echoes closely Tertullian’s language when he calls prison “the devil’s house” where the martyrs have come “for the very purpose of trampling the wicked one under foot in his chosen abode.”<sup>663</sup> Just like Tertullian, Perpetua obviously understands martyrs to be in a battle with the devil, and her vision allows her to act this out in a more concrete sense. Once she reaches the top of the ladder, Perpetua sees the shepherd who says, “Thou art welcome, daughter.”<sup>664</sup> Clearly, while Perpetua must sever ties with her earthly father in order to become a martyr, there is another father waiting for her in heaven. That is, “while she may not be the same daughter to the same father, Perpetua remains a daughter under the authority of masculine figures”<sup>665</sup> within her visions. It is important to note also that this new father supported her choice in a

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<sup>658</sup> Castelli, 88.

<sup>659</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>660</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.3.

<sup>661</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion* 101.

<sup>662</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.3.

<sup>663</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

<sup>664</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.3.

<sup>665</sup> McInerney, 24.

way that her earthly father could not be.<sup>666</sup> This vision therefore lessens the inappropriateness of Perpetua's necessary rejection of her earthly father, since she is depicted as gaining approval from a more heavenly father. Thecla receives no such indication of familial approval anywhere in her text. When Perpetua awakes from this vision, she immediately interprets her vision saying, "we understood that it was to be a passion, and we ceased henceforth to have any hope in this world."<sup>667</sup> Perpetua's interpretation of the prophetic nature of this dream "resolved her hopes for the future and her relationship with her father, and it confirmed the new community to which she belonged."<sup>668</sup> Additionally, Perpetua's understanding that her destiny is to be martyred in the arena demonstrates an acceptance of this fact. She does not pray to God to deliver her from the pain and suffering that she will endure like Thecla does and therefore more completely accepts her role as a martyr. Tertullian's desire for martyrs to face death with a joyful spirit would have begun with the martyrs first giving up the idea that they may somehow be rescued from such a fate.

Perpetua is not entirely removed from her earthly father, however, as he visits her twice more to attempt to get her to change her mind about her martyrdom. He first begs her to reconsider her decision by appealing to her love for her family, but Perpetua does not waver. She is compassionate towards her father while remaining firm in her decision, as she relates, "I grieved over the grey hairs of my father, that he alone of all my family would not rejoice over my passion. And I comforted him, saying, 'On that scaffold whatever God wills shall happen. For know that we are not placed in our own power but in that of God.'"<sup>669</sup> Once again Perpetua displays great bravery,

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<sup>666</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion* 103.

<sup>667</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 1.3.

<sup>668</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion* 104.

<sup>669</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.1.

demonstrating that her spirit is willing and displaying no weakness of flesh,<sup>670</sup> but rather something approaching eagerness. Her father comes again to Perpetua's public trial. She and her fellow martyrs-designate are brought from the prison to the town hall, where a large crowd of townspeople waits to observe the martyrs' condemnation. Perpetua describes the events:

We mount the platform. The rest were interrogated, and confessed. Then they came to me, and my father immediately appeared with my boy, and withdrew me from the step, and said in a supplicating tone, 'Have pity on your babe.' And Hilarianus the procurator [. . .] said 'Spare the grey hairs of your father, spare the infancy of your boy, offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperors.' And I replied, 'I will not do so.'<sup>671</sup>

Perpetua's father appeals to her identity as a mother, but Perpetua will not be persuaded and rejects the commands of both her father and Hilarianus to sacrifice and recant.

While her father and Hilarianus represent two men who ought to have authority over Perpetua (either familial or political),<sup>672</sup> both are unable to convince Perpetua to waver from her position. This demonstrates Perpetua's identity as "a woman who resists both political and patriarchal power, choosing to go to her death rather than obey the Roman governor or her father."<sup>673</sup> However, she does not disobey these authorities out of a desire to upset the patriarchal society in which she lives. Instead, she does so because it is the only way for her to retain her self-definition as a Christian. That is, "she may pose a threat to the hierarchy of the pagan government, but she poses none to the ecclesiastical hierarchy in which Tertullian believed so strongly."<sup>674</sup> By echoing the

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<sup>670</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4.

<sup>671</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.2. "Ascendimus in catastam. Interrogati ceteri confessi sunt. Ventum est et ad me. Et apparuit pater ilico cum filio meo et extraxit me de gradu dicens: Supplica. miserere infanti. Et Hilarianus procurator [. . .] Parce, inquit, canis patris tui, parce infantiae pueri. Fac cacrum pro salute imperatorum. Et ego respondi: Non facio."

<sup>672</sup> L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 100.

<sup>673</sup> McNerney, 21.

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*

commands of the “pagan” procurator, Perpetua’s father becomes part of the governing body that is condemning her. She does not oppose him as a father, but rather as a symbol of the attempts of the Roman political structure that is trying to force her to reject her Christianity. This passage makes it clear that Perpetua (and the others with her) are arrested and sentenced to the arena for the sole and precise reason that they refused to sacrifice to the emperors.

After Perpetua’s steadfast refusal to sacrifice, Hilarianus asks her directly, “Are you a Christian?” Perpetua replies simply, “I am a Christian,”<sup>675</sup> thereby breaking “the social ties that had defined her as a daughter and mother of Rome.”<sup>676</sup> The simplicity of the Latin phrase, *Christiana sum*, is particularly telling. Perpetua declares in two words what it takes Thecla an entire narrative to admit, and only then in the form of a lengthy sermon-prayer after she has been saved. Perpetua plainly identifies herself as a Christian knowing that this identification will cause her to be tortured and killed. Indeed, “Like martyrs before and after her, by giving up her name and renaming herself as a Christian, Perpetua has taken on a new identity.”<sup>677</sup> However, while Perpetua may still feel compassion and sympathy towards her father, “her confession had separated her from her father once and for all.”<sup>678</sup> The governor’s violence cannot persuade Perpetua to revert back to her identity as a daughter once she has confirmed her sole identity as a Christian. Further, identifying herself as a Christian in this venue means identifying herself as a martyr and accepting death, which she does willingly.

Even though Perpetua continues to show care for her former family (unlike Thecla’s complete and seemingly unfeeling severing of her family ties), she takes on the

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<sup>675</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.2. “Christiana es? Inquit. Et ego respondi: Christiana sum”

<sup>676</sup> Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs* 120.

<sup>677</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 91.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*

joyful countenance of a martyr when she recounts the outcome of the trial. She states, “The procurator then delivered judgment on all of us, and condemned us to the wild beasts, and we went down cheerfully to the dungeon.”<sup>679</sup> Perpetua’s description of the martyrs’ cheerful emotions when they learned of their fate is congruent with Tertullian’s views of how martyrs should act. He provides examples of when “Woman has voluntarily sought the wild beasts,”<sup>680</sup> arguing, “Are we not called on, then, most joyfully to lay out as much for the true as others do for the false?”<sup>681</sup> The fact that Perpetua describes herself and her fellow martyrs as returning “cheerfully” to the dungeon further demonstrates that she subscribes to Tertullian’s arguments within *To the Martyrs*. The peace that they pass on to other Christians can also therefore be said to come from the idea of meeting death happily, since “peace comes in struggling and in dying for a better cause than the pagans had.”<sup>682</sup> Perpetua’s diary confirms and strengthens Tertullian’s arguments by putting his suggestions into practice and demonstrating that it is possible for a martyr to adopt a joyful attitude while facing death. She provides a real-life basis for the ideals that Tertullian espouses.

While Perpetua’s first vision demonstrates her commitment to undergoing martyrdom in a way that is consistent with Tertullian’s beliefs, her second vision reveals her confidence that she has been endowed with the martyr’s powers of helping others through prayer. Once back in prison awaiting the beasts, Perpetua recalls the name of her brother while she and the other martyrs are praying. She then states, “I felt myself immediately to be worthy, and to be called on to ask on his behalf.”<sup>683</sup> Perpetua’s confidence that she was worthy of receiving a vision can be seen in Tertullian’s letter to

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<sup>679</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.2.

<sup>680</sup> *Tert., Mart.* 4.

<sup>681</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>682</sup> G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 63.

<sup>683</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.3.

the martyrs, where he reminds them that they have the ability and the responsibility to use prayer to help their fellow Christians.<sup>684</sup> Perpetua's subsequent vision of Dinocrates shows him filthy and languishing of thirst, his face disfigured by the cancer that killed him,<sup>685</sup> prompting Perpetua to attempt to end his suffering in the afterlife. Perpetua again demonstrates her confidence that performing certain spiritual practices will be able to affect change.<sup>686</sup> She says, "I trusted that my prayer would bring help to his suffering; and I prayed for him every day . . . I made my prayer for my brother day and night, groaning and weeping that he might be granted to me."<sup>687</sup> Perpetua's belief that she can alter her brother's experience in the afterlife is similar to Thecla's prayerful intervention on Falconilla's behalf. While the audience does not see the results of Thecla's prayers, Perpetua is successful, as her next vision reveals that her brother is restored and is no longer suffering. Again, Perpetua is "not only a recipient of visions but also an interpreter of them,"<sup>688</sup> as she states simply, "I understood that he was translated from the place of punishment."<sup>689</sup> This series of visions is especially significant as it shows a completion of her transformation from Roman wife to Christian martyr. That is, "now, not only is she able to conjure visions, but she is able to transform the afterlife experience of her dead brother *and* to conjure a vision that confirms the efficacy of her intervention."<sup>690</sup> Ultimately, Perpetua's visions of Dinocrates are indicative of her further progression towards martyrdom. Indeed, she is only able to attain the results that she does due to the fact that she is imprisoned and awaiting martyrdom. Perpetua's gift of visions and interpretation does not extend to the common Christian, but only to those special few

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<sup>684</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion* 104.

<sup>685</sup> For a more detailed examination of this vision, see Chapter 4.

<sup>686</sup> Castelli, 90.

<sup>687</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.3.

<sup>688</sup> Castelli, 90.

<sup>689</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 2.4.

<sup>690</sup> Castelli, 90.

who were chosen to become martyrs. There is no such limitation shown in the Thecla narrative, as is clearly shown in the fact that some members of the audience began using her example to teach and baptize. If anyone wanted to use Perpetua as an authority to experience visions and interpret them, they would be able to do so only in the context of prison as an imprisoned martyr.

Perpetua's final vision serves to foreshadow Perpetua's real-life experiences in the arena. This vision is particularly important because it contains reference to a great deal of imagery that Tertullian mentions in *To the Martyrs*. Perpetua sees herself being led into the amphitheatre by the deacon Pomponius who tells her, "Do not fear, I am here with you, and I am labouring with you."<sup>691</sup> While Pomponius is not doing physical battle alongside Perpetua, his emotional and spiritual support allows her to remain strong and live up to the ideals of martyrdom. This confirms the importance of the bonds between Perpetua, her fellow martyrs, and the Church (as represented by Pomponius, the deacon). Tertullian reinforces the bonds that martyrs should have with one another in their battle with the devil, stating, "Give him not the success in his own kingdom of setting you at variance with each other, but let him find you armed and fortified with concord; for peace among you is battle with him."<sup>692</sup> The importance of unity between the martyrs can further be seen in the narrative's recount of Felicitas' anxiety that she will not give birth in time to be martyred with the rest of her companions since pregnant women were not permitted to be publicly punished. The text relates, "her fellow-martyrs were painfully saddened lest they should leave so excellent a friend . . . alone in the path of the same hope."<sup>693</sup> They prayed that Felicitas would give birth in time, and their prayers were answered so that she could be martyred with the group, demonstrating that

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<sup>691</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 3.2.

<sup>692</sup> *Tert., Mart.* 1.

<sup>693</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 5.1.

“the message that the Christian community was a new group that brought solidarity was also reaffirmed. The community that had been arrested together could stay together through the final ordeal.”<sup>694</sup> The emphasis on experiencing martyrdom as a group instead of an individual can be seen in Tertullian’s treatise and in the Perpetua narrative, and is in sharp contrast with Thecla’s solitary experiences. Tertullian’s emphasis is always on maintaining the proper sense of community and often this means that individuals should not seek any unique recognition. The group is more powerful than any individual, and at the same time the individuals gain strength from the group. Perpetua is singled out because she happened to leave a diary behind, but her behaviour in life and in her visions consistently emphasizes that she is merely a part of a group of Christian martyrs who desire to die together. In contrast, while Thecla finds a sense of family while under house arrest with Tryphaena, she is alone when in the arena and when she sets out on her teaching mission. When Christians use Thecla’s example to break from their communities and travel and teach, they are also imitating her individuality. Perpetua is certainly depicted as special, but she is a special part of a special whole. She further shows no desire to break from this group, thereby indicating that those who want to emulate her should do so by being an ideal group member.

In one aspect of the vision, however, Perpetua is certainly unique. She relates that, in preparation for her battle, “I was stripped, and became a man.”<sup>695</sup> “The potential for gender malleability and the masculine capacity for athletic victory intersect in this compressed statement,”<sup>696</sup> perhaps alluding to Tertullian’s identification of martyrs of both genders with gladiators and athletes. This can be seen clearly in *To the Martyrs* where he encourages martyrs to think of their imprisonment as a period of training and

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<sup>694</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion* 116.

<sup>695</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 3.2. “Expoliata sum et facta sum masculus”

<sup>696</sup> Castelli, 90.

strengthening so that they might obtain glory in the afterlife.<sup>697</sup> Therefore, not only does Perpetua willingly endure the hardships of prison, but she fulfills her training through a vision in which she is completely transformed into a male athlete. After she becomes a man, she describes, “Then my helpers began to rub me with oil, as is the custom for contest; and I beheld that Egyptian on the other hand rolling in the dust.”<sup>698</sup> This “surprising image” contains “unmistakably sexual overtones” that perhaps also combine the oil of athletic contests with the anointing newly baptized Christians.<sup>699</sup> Tertullian speaks of the martyrs being anointed in the arena, asserting, “your Master, Jesus Christ, [ . . . ] has anointed you with His Spirit, and led you forth to the arena.”<sup>700</sup> In this way, “Perpetua’s anointment with oil by the young men was a blessing by Christ. In her dream, then, the modest Roman matron was transformed completely, anointed and ready to battle in a traditional forum against a new kind of enemy.”<sup>701</sup> Therefore, while Perpetua’s descriptions of becoming a man and being rubbed with oil would at first seem to be as counter-cultural as Thecla’s cross-dressing, this imagery actually serves to reaffirm her status as the ideal martyr. In the real world, she maintains the modesty of a Roman matron, but in her vision, she can be transformed into a male athlete. In this way, she satisfies Tertullian’s difficult ideals; she is paradoxically an ideal woman who can compete with the strength of an athlete or a gladiator.

The athletic imagery is continued in her vision with the presence of an athletic or gladiatorial trainer, which again also appears in Tertullian’s treatise. Perpetua recounts, “a certain man came forth, of wondrous height, so that he even over-topped the top of the amphitheatre; and he wore a loose tunic and a purple robe . . . and he carried a rod

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<sup>697</sup> Dunn, 43.

<sup>698</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 3.2.

<sup>699</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion* 109. See Chapter 4 for a closer discussion of anointing.

<sup>700</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 3.

<sup>701</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 109-10.

as if he were a trainer of gladiators . . . he called for silence, and said, 'This Egyptian, if he should overcome this woman, shall kill her with the sword; and if she shall conquer him, she shall receive this branch.'<sup>702</sup> The presence of this trainer echoes Tertullian's athletic metaphors, as he encourages the martyrs, "You are about to pass through a noble struggle, in which the living God acts the part of superintendent, in which the Holy Ghost is your trainer, in which the prize is an eternal crown of angelic essence, citizenship in the heavens, glory everlasting."<sup>703</sup> Perpetua's description of the purple-robed man who was taller than the amphitheatre certainly recalls Tertullian's idea that the Holy Ghost is the trainer of the martyrs and again indicates the similarity in the imagery between the two works. Whether this is simply a result of the shared experience of being in the Carthaginian Christian community, or whether Perpetua had read *To the Martyrs* and was influenced by the imagery within is unknown. Regardless, the amount of detail that matches between Tertullian's work and Perpetua's diary suggests that Tertullian would have found much to approve of in her story.

Perpetua then describes her battle with the Egyptian<sup>704</sup> in such fluid detail that it "reads like a commentary on a modern wrestling match,"<sup>705</sup> ending with Perpetua's victory. She describes her defeat of the Egyptian with imagery that again echoes Tertullian's treatise, "I took hold upon his head, and he fell on his face, and I trod upon his head."<sup>706</sup> If the Egyptian can be seen as a stand in for the devil - and indeed, it is the devil against whom the martyrs are ultimately fighting - then it is clear that this vision again echoes Tertullian's words as he discusses the martyrs trampling the devil with

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<sup>702</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 3.2.

<sup>703</sup> *Tert., Mart.* 3.

<sup>704</sup> For reasons why an Egyptian may have been chosen to represent the enemy, see Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 110.

<sup>705</sup> Cobb, 106.

<sup>706</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 3.2.

their feet.<sup>707</sup> Perpetua fulfills this objective in her final vision, emphatically crushing the Egyptian's head underfoot after fighting him violently. In this detailed description of her battle, Perpetua identifies herself as "a victorious athlete, a competitor with a competent and agile body, a combatant steeped in courage and raw nerve, the object of unambiguous display and spectacle, a woman who transcends the limits of gender as she abandons the confines of earthly existence."<sup>708</sup> The fact that Perpetua transcends the limits of gender only within her visions is what separates her from Thecla. While Perpetua describes her masculine actions within the visions with great detail, this does not inherently affect her femininity in her daily life. In contrast, Thecla only seeks to adopt masculine clothing and hairstyles as a way of gaining entrance into other areas of masculinity such as teaching and baptizing. Perpetua's masculinization occurs within the safety of her dream visions and therefore again presents no danger to the gender roles within Tertullian's society.

The vision concludes with Perpetua exiting the Sanavivarian gate having defeated all of her enemies. Upon waking from this extraordinarily complicated dream, as she had done with other visions, "Perpetua analyzed its meaning with simple clarity."<sup>709</sup> She states, "[I] perceived that I was not to fight with beasts, but against the devil. Still I knew that the victory was awaiting me."<sup>710</sup> Thus, as "the path toward the arena narrows for Perpetua, [. . .] her spiritual capacities [continue to] develop and expand."<sup>711</sup> She retains her remarkable insight to herself and her fate, and at no point does she waver from her decision. She closes her diary with an invitation for someone

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<sup>707</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

<sup>708</sup> Castelli, 91.

<sup>709</sup> Salisbury, *Blood of Martyrs* 86.

<sup>710</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 3.2.

<sup>711</sup> Castelli, 90.

else to continue writing her story since she no longer can.<sup>712</sup> Clearly, Perpetua hoped that the events of her trials in the arena would be recorded, perhaps for the comfort of future martyrs and for inspiration for other Christians. Again, therefore, Perpetua displays a desire to adhere to Tertullian's views on the role of martyrs to act as an example to others and impart peace to them through their examples.<sup>713</sup> Perpetua perhaps sees her diary as a way of continuing to provide this kind of peace to other Christians even after she is gone.

The editor describes the actions of Perpetua and her companions in a way that conforms with Tertullian's ideas of the way that martyrs should behave in the arena. In this way, the editor's worldview can be considered similar to Perpetua's as both echo Tertullian's martyrdom ideals. He first describes the martyrs' entrance into the arena, "The day of their victory shone forth, and they proceeded from the prison into the amphitheatre, as if to an assembly, joyous and of brilliant countenances; if perchance shrinking, it was with joy, and not with fear."<sup>714</sup> The author is clearly going to great lengths to interpret the behaviour of the martyrs in a way that satisfies the expectations of the ideal martyrs. He preempts an argument that the martyrs were seen as shrinking in fear with the explanation that it was actually with joy, thereby reinforcing Tertullian's idea that martyrs not display any fear in the face of martyrdom.<sup>715</sup> Next, the narrator depicts Perpetua as continuing her role as the ideal Christian martyr when the Romans try to force Perpetua and the other martyrs to wear the clothing of Saturn and Ceres. Perpetua, described as "that noble-minded woman" objects to this, saying, "We have come thus far of our own accord, for this reason, that our liberty might not be restrained.

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<sup>712</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 3.2.

<sup>713</sup> *Tert., Mart.* 1.

<sup>714</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.1.

<sup>715</sup> *Tert., Mart.* 4.

For this reason we have yielded our minds, that we might not do any such thing as this: we have agreed on this with you.”<sup>716</sup> This is significant because it confirms that “The martyrs came to this point of their ‘own free will.’ In this, [the narrator] emphasizes the Carthaginian belief that a sacrifice had to be voluntary to be effective.”<sup>717</sup> Tertullian also speaks to this point, saying “Woman has voluntarily sought the wild beasts,”<sup>718</sup> and his examples show non-Christian women freely choosing death over compromising their beliefs or their chastity. Perpetua’s arguments are successful as the martyrs are allowed to wear their regular clothes, thus “confirm[ing] this procession as sacred to Christianity.”<sup>719</sup> Perpetua reacts joyfully to this concession, singing “psalms, already treading under foot the head of the Egyptian.”<sup>720</sup> The narrator purposefully connects Perpetua’s actions in the arena to her visions, thereby proving her abilities to prophesy and emphasizing her destiny as a martyr.

The description of Perpetua’s confrontation with the wild beasts further emphasizes her ideal nature as both a Christian martyr and a Roman wife and mother. The narrator relates the scene in great detail:

Perpetua is first led in. She was tossed, and fell on her loins; and when she saw her tunic torn from her side, she drew it over her as a veil for her middle, rather mindful of her modesty than her suffering. Then she was called for again, and bound up her disheveled hair; for it was not becoming for a martyr to suffer with disheveled hair, lest she should appear to be mourning in her glory. So she rose up; and when she saw Felicitas crushed, she approached and gave her her hand, and lifted her up. And both of them stood together; and the brutality of the populace being appeased, they were recalled to the Sanavivarian gate.<sup>721</sup>

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<sup>716</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.1.

<sup>717</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion* 139.

<sup>718</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4.

<sup>719</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion* 139.

<sup>720</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.1.

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.3. “Prior Perpetua iactata est et concidit in lumbos et ubi sedit, tunicam a latere discissam ad velamentum femoris reduxit pudoris potius memor quam doloris. Dehinc acu requista et disporsos capillos infibulavit; non enim decebat martyram sparsis capillis pati, ne in sua Gloria plangere videretur. Ita surrexit et elisam Felicitatem cum vidisset, accessit et manum

The central feature of this description is, of course, Perpetua's apparent concern for her modesty above all else. Indeed, her actions provide her with a way of "preserving her dignity, the dignity of a triumphant Christian. It is also, of course, the dignity of a Roman *matrona*."<sup>722</sup> By portraying her as behaving in this way, the author ensures that Perpetua remains "A *matrona* to the last."<sup>723</sup> The question of whether or not these actions actually occurred is secondary to the editor's attempt "to make a point about Perpetua's perfection (in his eyes, modesty marked this) and about the joyful quality of a martyr's death."<sup>724</sup> This narrative interruption is consistent with Tertullian's views on women and martyrs. Whether or not Tertullian was the editor of the Perpetua narrative, Perpetua's actions fit perfectly within his ideologies. It is possible, therefore, that the editor sought to reinforce some of the earlier ideals in his description of her actions in the arena. While it would have been perfectly understandable for Perpetua to have been distracted by the beasts while in the arena in reality, it would not fit within her otherwise ideal depiction. By emphasizing her modesty through correct dress, the narrator emphasizes Perpetua's status as a proper Roman and Christian woman.

Tertullian's belief that martyrs have a special connection to the Holy Spirit is emphasized when the editor relates Perpetua's reaction after her encounter with the cow. The author recounts that "so deeply had she been in the Spirit and in an ecstasy, [she] began to look round her, and to say to the amazement of all, 'I cannot tell when we are to be led out to that cow.'"<sup>725</sup> When she is told that she has already been gored by the cow, she does not believe it "until she had perceived certain signs of injury in her

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ei tradidit et suscitavit illiam. Et ambae pariter steterunt. Et populi duritia devicta, revocatae sunt in portam Sanavivariam."

<sup>722</sup> McNerney, 27.

<sup>723</sup> Brown, 75.

<sup>724</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion* 143.

<sup>725</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.3.

body and her dress.”<sup>726</sup> This fits within Tertullian’s belief that the body and soul could be separated, so that bodily injury and pain should have no impact upon the soul.

Perpetua, having been anointed with the Spirit, has gained the strength to face the beasts without feeling any of the physical suffering. She adopts Tertullian’s ideal behaviour of an athlete,<sup>727</sup> “who disciplines the body’s physical needs, desires, and appetites, allowing the body to be taken over by the controlling spirit.”<sup>728</sup>

Momentarily reunited with her fellow catechumens, Perpetua speaks her last words. She addresses the others, saying “Stand fast in the faith, and love one another, all of you, and be not offended at my sufferings.”<sup>729</sup> Perpetua might as well be speaking to the entire Carthaginian Christian community, encouraging them to continue to use the example of the martyrs to remain committed to the faith. This speech may be compared to Thecla’s confession in the arena, since both constitute a type of prayer or sermon. However, Perpetua’s speech precedes her final sufferings, while Thecla’s speech is merely the first of what appears to have been a long career of teaching. Perpetua’s final words come while she has endured great pain with the help of the Holy Spirit and is in full knowledge that she must face more pain before her death. Unlike Thecla, Perpetua is not shown as having any thoughts of praying to God to escape her fate. Furthermore, after her miraculous escape from the beasts, Perpetua is not pardoned as is Thecla. Instead, she proceeds towards death and accepts it joyfully as Tertullian would have expected and demanded.

Perpetua’s death further conforms to Tertullian’s expectations of a martyr.

Perpetua is the last to die, and the narrator describes her death in detail, “Perpetua, that

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<sup>726</sup> Ibid.

<sup>727</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 3.

<sup>728</sup> Streete, 22.

<sup>729</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.3.

she might taste some pain, being pierced between the ribs, cried out loudly, and she herself placed the wavering right hand of the youthful gladiator to her throat.”<sup>730</sup> The experience of pain is clearly an important part of martyrdom, as Perpetua is shown as not wanting to die without feeling it. Tertullian also reveals a fascination with the pain that martyrs must endure when he says, “the flesh, perhaps, will dread the merciless sword, and the lofty cross, and the rage of the wild beasts, and that punishment of the flames . . . and all the skill of the executioner in torture.”<sup>731</sup> The act of calmly enduring pain is one of the identifying characteristics of a martyr for Tertullian. Furthermore, Perpetua shows an active interest in ensuring that she meets death in the proper manner by actually guiding the gladiator’s sword into her throat. In this, Perpetua follows in the Carthaginian tradition of women from Dido onward who committed suicide for a greater cause.<sup>732</sup> In addition to Dido, Tertullian’s list of non-Christian martyrs also includes Lucretia, who, in parallel with Perpetua, “in the presence of her kinsfolk, plunged the knife into herself, that she might have glory for her chastity.”<sup>733</sup> Perpetua’s decision to plunge the knife into herself therefore has precedent and Perpetua can expect to receive glory for her faith just as Lucretia did for her chastity. Furthermore, just as Thecla’s narrative contains many references to the style of the Greek novel, Perpetua’s death is consistent with women’s deaths in Greek tragedies, wherein “women’s glory - and mastery of themselves - is achieved in violent death.”<sup>734</sup> In this way, Perpetua’s actions would have been readily understood by both the Christians and non-Christians in the audience.

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<sup>730</sup> Ibid., 6.4.

<sup>731</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4.

<sup>732</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion* 147.

<sup>733</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 4.

<sup>734</sup> Streete, 41.

In addition to displaying a commonality with Tertullian's examples of non-Christian female martyrs, Perpetua's final action acts as a completion of the imagery in her visions (and in Tertullian's treatise). Perpetua's participation in her death is "a final act of masculine volition . . . [wherein] the textual transformation of Perpetua the mother, daughter, and woman to . . . gladiator and man is complete."<sup>735</sup> This transformation began with Perpetua's vision where she saw herself transformed into a man, and it ends with her causing her own death in gladiatorial style. Tertullian's encouragement that martyrs should think of themselves as gladiators<sup>736</sup> is clearly influencing the editor, if not Perpetua herself. After describing her actions with gladiator imagery consistent with Tertullian's views, the Carthaginian narrator "praise[s] the act of sacrificial suicide,"<sup>737</sup> saying, "Possibly such a woman could not have been slain unless she herself had willed it, because she was feared by the impure spirit."<sup>738</sup> This is significant because despite Perpetua's seemingly masculine actions throughout the text, in the end the narrator makes sure to identify her as a woman. This final emphasis on Perpetua's physical identity as a woman serves to preempt any threat to the male dominance that might be perceived by the audience. The narrator makes it clear that "although she may converse with the dominant in the dominant's language (masculinity), she dies as a woman. Defiance cannot continue."<sup>739</sup> It is easy to imagine that this view would have echoed Tertullian's. While Perpetua's text is mostly congruent with Tertullian's views, she does display an affinity to masculine actions at several points throughout the text, although none of her behaviour is as egregious as is Thecla's. This behaviour does not cause any trepidation for Tertullian because Perpetua dies, thereby ending any threat to her

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<sup>735</sup> Cobb, 107.

<sup>736</sup> Tert., *Mart.* 1.

<sup>737</sup> Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion* 147.

<sup>738</sup> *Pass. Perp.* 6.4.

<sup>739</sup> Streete, 42.

potentially dangerous behaviour. Where Thecla continues to teach and engage in unacceptable behaviour, Perpetua dies in the arena and the narrator emphatically re-identifies her as a woman first and foremost.

Ultimately, the Perpetua narrative is a balancing act between defiance and submission. Perpetua's defiantly masculine acts (against her father, the procurator, and the various iterations of the devil in her visions) can all be reconciled within Tertullian's viewpoint in that she only engages in these otherwise unacceptable behaviours as a way of confirming her Christian identity and ensuring that she will meet her fate by dying as a martyr. Furthermore, by refusing to submit to the requests of her father and the procurator that she recant her Christianity, Perpetua ensures that she will eventually submit to the gladiator's sword. In the end, it is the gladiator who must submit to Perpetua's hand as she guides the sword into her own throat, but the result is the same. Perpetua's death as a martyr is complete and the record of her experiences and visions in the prison diary ensure that she will continue to serve her duty as a martyr by inspiring other Christians. The narrative consistently displays an agreement with Tertullian's views on martyrdom, echoing his imagery throughout Perpetua's imprisonment, in her visions, and finally in the arena.

### **Conclusions**

It is clear that Perpetua's martyrdom narrative conforms to Tertullian's ideas of how a martyr should behave and the role that martyrs should play within the Christian community. While both Thecla and Perpetua defy masculine authority, Perpetua only does so as a means of asserting her Christian identity. Unlike Thecla who is arrested and condemned expressly because of her rejection of her gender role, Perpetua does not begin to defy her gender role *until* she is arrested for being a Christian. Given

multiple opportunities to recant her Christianity and return to her life as a Roman wife and mother, Perpetua refuses and seems content and eager to uphold her Christian status by dying in the arena. In contrast, Thecla is miraculously saved from death twice and at no point shows eagerness towards death that Tertullian believes a Christian martyr should have. Furthermore, unlike the Thecla narrative, the Perpetua narrative continually demonstrates a close relationship with Tertullian's *To the Martyrs*, particularly in the imagery of her visions. Tertullian urges the martyrs to think of themselves as gladiators and soldiers; it is therefore not surprising that Perpetua views herself that way in her visions. This does not mean that she rejects her gender in the world as Thecla does when she wears men's clothing and offers to cut her hair, actions which Tertullian writes specifically against . Perpetua may demonstrate at times a seemingly dangerous tendency towards masculine behaviour, but these occur either in visions, which are open to a wide range of interpretation, or in the arena where her death quickly eliminates any threat. Indeed, it is arguably the end of their martyrdoms that are the most significant. Perpetua dies of her own hand in an act of self-sacrifice that can serve as a positive example for Carthaginian Christians; Thecla does not die but continues to subvert her gender role and teach for an indeterminate amount of time. Perpetua's martyrdom is proper and complete; Thecla's is not really a martyrdom at all.

## Conclusion

Tertullian's rejection of the Thecla narrative is noteworthy because he seems to have been alone in his opposition. As such, there must have been something within Tertullian's worldview that prevented him from seeing her in the way that many contemporary and subsequent thinkers did. The question that inspired the writing of this thesis was whether it was only the stated reason of Thecla's self-baptizing that Tertullian found objectionable, or whether it was the entire Thecla narrative and the way that some women were using the narrative to promote their own actions of teaching and baptizing. Thecla was a noble virgin who ascribed to the ascetic and celibate lifestyle promoted by Paul. Given the popularity of the text and the otherwise commendable attributes of Thecla, one would think that it would have been easy for Tertullian to reject only the part of the Acts that mention the self-baptizing as, for example, false insertions by a misled scribe. Instead, he thoroughly rejects Thecla in all aspects as the creation of a discredited presbyter indicating that the text and character of Thecla were troubling to Tertullian as a whole.

As a way of answering this question, this thesis focused on another female martyr who initially appears to be very similar to Thecla. Perpetua was also a Christian woman who was condemned to death and whose narrative became popular reading for Christian men and women. However, where he rejected Thecla, Tertullian praised Perpetua. Comparing these two women in conjunction with the issues raised in Tertullian's treatises has provided insight into the deeper reasons why Tertullian might have dismissed the entire Thecla narrative, instead of just his stated objections to the idea of a woman teaching and baptizing. The three main issues that this thesis explored were Tertullian's identification of the species of women, his views on baptism, and his

understanding of martyrdom. The comparison of his treatises with the Thecla and Perpetua narratives has allowed for several conclusions to be drawn.

First, Tertullian's identification of virgins and wives as belonging to different species of the genus woman indicates that there are inherent differences between the two categories. Tertullian's expectations therefore result from this understanding and show that he believes that the appropriate actions for a virgin and a wife are different because they are a different species. Tertullian believes that virgins should react in a distinct way to public exposure by blushing and feeling ashamed when they are praised. The veil is therefore a way of allowing the virgins to hide themselves away, and providing a measure of protection against the dangerous gazes of men. However, while Tertullian recognizes the importance of chastity and the somewhat special status of virgins, he follows the Roman societal model and sees marriage as an important stage of life. Ultimately, Tertullian sees the different species of women as still being women first and foremost. While others within the community believed that virgins had access to certain types of authority by virtue of their virginity, Tertullian argues that their difference makes no difference at all in terms of the way that they can participate in the church. While virgins have some unique characteristics, such as blushing at being looked upon, they must not in any way be distinguished from the other women in the community.

The Thecla narrative reveals several instances where Thecla does not conform to the ideals that Tertullian has set out for her species. She becomes inappropriately enamoured with Paul, leaves her household in the middle of the night, travels alone, seeks to teach and baptize, and eventually forgoes the virgin's veil for male garb. Since Tertullian sees the requirements of a virgin not as arbitrary guidelines but as outer examples of the inner virtues and true identity, Tertullian would necessarily have seen

Thecla's rejection and disobedience of these expectations as monstrous since no true virgin could act this way. Furthermore, Thecla uses her virginity in order to gain for herself the authority to teach and baptize. A text based around the exploits of such a virgin would surely have been unacceptable to him, as he expects virgins to not do anything to draw attention to themselves. Virgins are to remain an indistinguishable part of the genus woman.

In contrast, Perpetua's status as a wife and mother fulfills her obligations within the Roman family structure to which Tertullian strongly adheres. First, Perpetua fulfills the requirements of her role by giving birth to a son. Like Thecla, she rejects her family but only so that she may retain her identity as a Christian. She does not seek to teach or otherwise gain authority in public, but records her experiences and visions in a diary in which she demonstrates the proper measure of grief at being forced to give up her familial ties but notes that she does so in order to become a martyr. Since martyrdom was the ultimate fate for Christians, Tertullian likely would have looked upon this as an appropriate exception to his strict understanding of the distinctions between species. Therefore, the representation of Perpetua as an ideal Roman wife and mother who becomes a Christian martyr is congruent with Tertullian's views of women and with his diminishment of the importance of the virgin within his Christian community.

Another topic that plays an important role in Tertullian's writings as well as in the Thecla and Perpetua narratives is baptism. *On Baptism* reveals that there was no standardized baptism and that outsiders often approached Carthaginian Christians seeking to impose their own ideas. Tertullian seeks to encourage the members of his community to follow his beliefs about the rite of initiation, including that there should be a period of instruction during which catechumens must learn the ramifications of their

baptism, that water was essential for imparting the Holy Spirit upon the Christians, and that baptism should only be imparted by a member of the clergy. Tertullian is compelled to make these arguments in response to a woman who he identifies as belonging to a Cainite sect, who had entered Carthage and convinced some that baptism might be done without water. It is in this context that Tertullian rejects the actions of Thecla, as he asserts that she also has no authority to baptize or to teach others by example the correct way to baptize.

Apart from Thecla's self-baptism, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* reveal several incidents of baptism that coincide with Tertullian's beliefs on the subject. Thecla seeks to be cleansed by the Holy Spirit in water and when she first asks to be baptized, she is encouraged to delay her baptism, echoing Tertullian's instructions that deferment of baptism is more desirable. Since she conforms to Tertullian's views in many important aspects, Thecla's self-baptism must have been considered particularly egregious in order to cause his outright rejection of her entire narrative. Despite the fact that Thecla baptizes herself with appropriate imagery and seemingly appropriate liturgy, the fact that the baptism was done by someone who did not have the proper authority to do so means that the baptism itself is not legitimate. Indeed, since Thecla only seems to deviate from "proper" baptism in this one regard, Tertullian likely viewed this as more dangerous, because some women were being misled into thinking that Thecla's self-baptism was appropriate. The idea of women using the text as an example to teach and to baptize is threatening for Tertullian because it could lead to illegitimate initiations of Christians who would believe that their baptism was proper, thus perpetuating behaviour that went against Tertullian's beliefs about who should make up the true church. Thus,

Tertullian's objections are not only about the text itself but about the way the text is interpreted.

In contrast, Perpetua's narrative displays consistent agreement with Tertullian's treatises, a fact which should not be surprising since she is a member of the Carthaginian church and likely would have been aware of *On Baptism*. Perpetua mentions that she and her fellow catechumens were baptized after they were arrested, and this official initiation into the church leads to the group being transferred into the prison. Once imprisoned, Perpetua experiences several visions that reflect Tertullian's baptismal imagery. Finally, Perpetua and her fellow catechumens experience the burden of baptism to which Tertullian refers when they die in the arena and are baptized in a second baptism of blood. If Tertullian is concerned with the way a text will be interpreted and copied by the audience, there is nothing within the Perpetua narrative that would lead to any dangerous actions.

The final topic that this thesis examined was the topic of martyrdom, which is central to the Thecla and Perpetua narratives and which Tertullian focuses closely on in *To the Martyrs*. In this treatise, Tertullian discusses the pain that the martyrs will have to endure and encourages them to encourage this pain since they will find heavenly rewards. The imagery of gladiators, soldiers, and athletes that Tertullian uses emphasizes the masculine qualities that he expects martyrs to have while he provides examples of non-Christian female martyrs who have proven themselves worthy of admiration by virtue of their bravery in the face of death.

Thecla's text reveals several issues that go against Tertullian's views of the ideal martyr, including the fact that she was never actually sentenced to death because of her professed Christianity. Instead, she is twice condemned because of her rejection of her

gender role. Furthermore, she does not die in the arena but is depicted as living to an old age. Thecla's text may have been written not as a martyrology as it comes to be understood but as a Christianized version of the classical novel, meaning that her character conforms with the traditional expectations of these female characters and not necessarily with how women are expected to act within the Christian community. Since, however, Thecla's narrative apparently inspired some women to use her example to claim the power of teaching and baptizing, Tertullian recognizes that the narrative is not harmless entertainment but is instead a potentially dangerous text. The details that go against his views would have simply added to his conviction that the text must be rejected completely.

In contrast, the Perpetua narrative again coincides directly with the imagery presented in Tertullian's treatises. As with baptism, this is not surprising since Perpetua belonged to the same congregation of Christians as did Tertullian. However, noting the instances of the closest correlation between Perpetua's narrative and Tertullian's treatise is important because it helps to confirm that Tertullian's writings were influential and that his opinions were reflected in the wider community. Perpetua's visions contain gladiatorial imagery, and the narrator relates that she dies with the eagerness and joy that Tertullian insists that martyrs should embody. In her diary, Perpetua writes that she wants her death to be recorded, thereby implying that she wants her story to be available as an example to the rest of the community. Since Tertullian identifies this as one of the functions that a martyr should serve, this is yet another way in which Perpetua agrees with Tertullian's views. Since Tertullian is concerned with the way that martyr texts are interpreted, the simple fact that Perpetua does not deviate from the imagery he presents suggests that hers would have been an example of which he would have approved.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that there are many possible issues that Tertullian would have had with the Thecla text, and comparatively few difficulties that he would have had with the Perpetua narrative. Whether or not Tertullian had the exact version of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* that was explored in this thesis, there were clearly enough problematic details in his copy that resulted in him opting to reject the narrative as a whole. Every aspect of Thecla's narrative, including her consistent rejection of her gender roles, her misunderstanding of the ritual of baptism, and her incomplete martyrdom would have been cause for concern. This thesis has focused upon the details of the work, but even if some of these were slightly different for Tertullian, the overall argument still stands. It was not solely that Thecla baptized herself that caused his objection just as it was not only Thecla's self-baptism that caused women to begin to use her as an example. Tertullian was deeply concerned with establishing and maintaining proper authority, and Thecla is depicted as consistently being outside of the authority structure. She baptizes herself without the authority of the church, but she also rejects her familial and societal obligations. While Tertullian specifically says that women were using Thecla's example to teach and baptize, it is also likely that doing so would have required them to reject their families just as Thecla had. The problem therefore is not simply that Tertullian could not accept the idea of female teachers and baptizers, but that he was worried about the broader implications of these actions. In contrast, Perpetua's status as a martyr places her in a position of great authority, and Tertullian even asserts that female martyrs are equal to male martyrs in terms of their ability to impart peace and forgive sins. This confirms that Tertullian's rejection of the Thecla narrative is not due strictly to her gender and his desire to limit the authority of women. Examining the way that Perpetua's actions differ from Thecla's even as they

are faced with similar circumstances makes it clear that Tertullian's difficulties with the Thecla text were of a far greater scope than the issue of baptism. Perpetua is "the most heroic martyr"<sup>740</sup> who adheres to Tertullian's ideals throughout her trials and dies appropriately in the arena, while Thecla is "some new serpent . . . like that original one"<sup>741</sup> who consistently displays subversive behaviour. The issues of gender roles, baptism, and martyrdom all contribute to Tertullian's rejection of Thecla and his exultation of Perpetua while simultaneously revealing that Tertullian's greatest issue is that of authority. He seeks to enforce who may have authority, what measure of power each person may have (including the limited amount that he grants to women), and the way that this authority may be transferred between Christians. In doing so, he reveals the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the Christian community in Carthage at the turn of the third century.

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<sup>740</sup> Tertullian, *De anima* 55. Tertullian, *On the Soul*, trans. Peter Holmes in *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870).

<sup>741</sup> Tert., *De Baptismo* 17. *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism*, trans. Ernest Evans (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1964).

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