

Review of
Anne Jensen. *Thekla die Apostolin. Ein apokrypher Text neu entdeckt*. Frauen - Kultur -
Geschichte 3. Freiburg: Herder, 1995.
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Would the effacement of the first male martyr, Stephen, from his place in the Roman calendar (December 26) be imaginable? Anne Jensen asks this question in the introduction to her new book. This very thing, however, has happened to Thecla, the female whom early Christians honored with the name "First Martyr and Apostel-like", Thecla has disappeared from the Roman Mass-book and *Martyrologium*. When Jensen asked the Church officials why Thecla is no longer there, they eventually gave two responses: (1) Thecla may never have existed, and so celebrating a holiday on her behalf is not adequately justified. (2) The *Acts of Paul and Thecla (Athl)* supports *Syneisaktenpraxis*, a practice rejected early by the Church, in which two unmarried ascetics, a male and a female, live together in a "spiritual marriage" without sexual relations.¹ Since Jensen does not accept this explanation, she will attempt to redeem Thecla from such misunderstandings in this commentary intended for a broad readership.

Jensen promised this commentary on the *Athl* in 1987 at Walberberg (see "Sources cited" below). In the meantime she has successfully completed her *Habilitationsschrift*, published under the title, *Gottes selbstbewusste Töchter. Frauenemanzipation im frühen Christentum* (1992), an exhaustive study of women in the early church from an overtly feminist perspective. Her *Habilitation* prepared her significantly for her study of Thecla, having given her a treasure of external sources which she can bring to bear in her interpretation of the *Athl* (see examples below). This is refreshing in the research of Thecla, since some have recently given feminist readings of Thecla with more superficial results.²

After a brief introduction, Jensen offers a new German translation of the *Athl* with notes. The textual basis of her translation is Lipsius-Bonnet (1881-1903, vol. 1). The notes often offer insights which will be useful not only to the broader, intended readership, but also to the

¹Response of Ambrosius Eszer, OP, *Relator*, letter of 22.3.1986 (Jensen, 1995:8)

²See, my review article (1994); as well Kaestli, 1990.

scholar, whom, however, her occasional lack of documentation will frustrate.³ The notes very often anticipate and point to Part Two, the Commentary, and thus, she makes it possible to know what passages she will later discuss. Part Two, the commentary, is an critical explanation of the *ATHl*, in which she proposes the reason for Thecla's decline in the West:

The connection with Paul, or more precisely, the integration of Thecla's story in the *API*, has damaged her reputation, diminished her fame and finally, lead to her disappearance from the memory of the western Church. [1995:43]

How does she try to demonstrate this thesis? First, she introduces her reader to the genre of the Apostolic Novel (*Apostelroman*), which includes the older Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (AAA). The Thecla story would appear to be only one among a whole row of stories of women in the AAA who convert to ascetic Christianity at the preaching of one of the Apostles. Nevertheless, she insists rightly upon the varied traditional material within the individual AAA themselves, and thus, concludes, that even the stories within the *API* are not necessarily homogenous. Each episode must be studied on its own as to its *Sitz im Leben*. She then proceeds to apply the question to Thecla, whether she is a typical character from the Apostolic Novel and what insight the other women stories in the AAA gives towards understanding the *ATHl*. Her answer is as follows:

1. Thecla is a typical female figure within the Apostolic Novel, for she appears within a chastity story, she is connected with numerous miracles, and her story climaxes with a martyrdom report. 2. On the other hand, Thecla is also atypical within the Apostolic Novel, for unlike the other women who remain under the apostle's shadow, she herself is the protagonist of the drama. She is herself active in an apostolic manner and suffers martyrdom.[1995:69]

Given this deviation from the other stories, Jensen considers it justified to look elsewhere for the proper genre of or pattern for the *ATHl*. She sees two possibilities: 1. Traditions about female martyrs. 2. Traditions about female apostles and prophetesses. She thus attempts to free the Thecla tradition from its novelistic baggage—behind the *ATHl* would appear to be originally a

³For this reason, as well as the selectiveness of her comments, her notes do not fulfill the need for a proper commentary, a task which remains to be done not only for the *ATHl*, but for the entire *API*.

ancient martyrdom report. By comparing the *ATHl* with the martyrdom account of Polycarp, Perpetua and others, she shows that Thecla's story does not step beyond the realm of history. She finds that it necessary to strip certain "romantic" or "novelistic" elements, which include encratism and the Apostle himself. This leads her to suggest that the Iconian episode, in comparison to the Antiochean episode, represents the Presbyter's own innovation.

She shows that even elements in the Antioch story which appear novelistic are true to life. For example, she turns the tide on previous feminist interpreters who have focussed on the solidarity of women in the Antioch episode as an indication of female authorship (Davies, 1980; Carlé, 1980) or story tellers (MacDonald, 1983; Burrus, 1987). No, we are not necessarily dealing with either here. Instead, it is historical. The protest on the part of non-Christians against Roman officials occurs in other depictions of persecution (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44). The *Matyrdom of Pionius*, reports that Greeks, Jews and women gathered at the Forum for the trial of Sabina. Jensen cites two secular texts where women sway the decision of the authorities (Livy 34.1,5). She concludes that the *ATHl* portrays realistic events:

The fact that we find no literary doublettes in the details of Thecla's martyrdom in Antioch, indicates that we are not dealing with a "motif" here, but in all likelihood with a reminiscence of concrete events. The protest as it is portrayed does not exit from the realm of real possibilities which women had to have an influence.[1995:89]

In any case, she argues that the other scholars have exaggerated solidarity of women. The lionness, who takes Thecla's side, for example, must fight off a she-bear (*Bärin*, *ATHl* 33; Greek, ἡ ἄρκος), a fact which does not come out in the English translations.

Jensen points out that Tryphaena, whom Gutschmid verified as an historic person (see Rordorf, 1986:46-49), also appears in the Antioch episode. The self-baptism of Thecla could also present a problem of historicity, but for Jensen only means that the story was written before the church had a fixed form for baptism, or simply that the Presbyter himself is responsible for this element in the story.

In contrast to the Antiochean episode, Jensen finds the Iconian story improbable!

If if we apply this method of comparison with authentic martyrdom reports to the events in Iconium, the results appear completely different: This narrative proves itself with closer examination to be a conglomeration of improbabilities.[1995:77]

Jensen concedes only the burning of Thecla has a ring of authenticity to it. She offers the Blandina, who placed on stake with her arms stretched out, resembles the form of a cross in the eyes of others. Jensen interprets Thecla making the sign of the cross as "she spreads out her arms in the form of cross" [1995:30, n. 45]. Thecla survives because the flames would not touch her and God sent a shower to extinguish it. Likewise, Polycarp is bound naked to the pyre but the flames would not touch him. When the men stabbed him, blood spurted out extinguishing the fire. The depiction of Thecla's martyrdom in Iconium, thus, corresponds to the typical embellishments which intrude in martyrdom reports of unquestionable historicity.

Other elements in the Iconian episode correspond not to real martyrdom accounts but to the apostolic novel, bent towards asceticism. Thecla's desire to remain pure in Antioch at the house of Tryphaena, on the other hand, stems not from encratism, but from her desire to protect her dignity. Alexander corresponds to a realistic persecutor of women. Thamyris, the jealous fiancé, and Thecla's wrathful mother, however, are "clichées" belonging "to the arsenal of moralizing and romanticizing trivial fiction"[1995:101].

The romantic elements in the Iconium account, lead Jensen to question the historicity of the relationship between Paul and Thecla. Paul's role in the Antioch episode is very slight, whereas at Iconium, he is only absent during Thecla's martyrdom. This leads her to ask,

A question no one has ever previously discussed⁴ needs to be clearly asked: Was Thecla even Paul's disciple? Since the historicity of the data in this short writing are brought into doubt, can this detail be left out? Of course there is hardly any possibility either to verify or disprove this opinion about the female Apostle. Whether or not she came

⁴This is not quite true, since L. C. Boughton (1991:381) suggests that the Thecla presented in Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine* 3 and 6, might be the basis for the *ATHl*. She suggests, "The historical details and methods of persecution suggest an event that took place not in the fourth century but during Trajan's reign (98-117)." Thus, she redates this Thecla before the *ATHl* and thus the possible inspiration for the Presbyter's account: "It is possible that this early second-century execution was the historical event, or legend, from which the author of the *Acts of Paul* selected the name of Thecla, ... and worked the story into an account of the life of Paul." However, Boughton is quite wrong--Eusebius calls her "our Thecla" and the events take place in Caesarea during his own lifetime. He thus offers an eye-witness account of a martyrdom of a woman whom he knew personally!

to Christianity from Paul or from other men or women missionaries can no longer be discerned, ... One should not simply exclude the possibility that Thecla had already become a Christian before Paul.[1995:105]

She concedes, however, that some relationship probably existed between them, otherwise it would be difficult to see why the Presbyter combines their traditions.

The Presbyter's eroticizing and encratizing of the Thecla tradition results in the metamorphosis of the heroine. According to Jensen, the historical Thecla was perhaps not a virgin ascetic, but an apostle and martyr. She would have had the right to an apostolic preaching ministry because of her survival from martyrdom, not because of her decision to remain a virgin. The Presbyter has so influenced her tradition that she has become something she never was, the model of virginity, whose place the Virgin Mary would supplant within a few centuries.

Though Jensen's thesis does not convince me, I still find it a very important to alternative to other theories. She bases her opinion on comparisons with other martyrdom accounts. For example, MacDonald (1983) and Burrus (1986,87) use modern techniques, that of Olrik and Propp respectively, which lead to highly subjective and questionable results. Jensen's attempt to separate *ATHl* from the older tradition is at least plausible. Likewise, she refrains from drawing conclusions about the hypothetical community behind her document. She searches only the "historical Thecla", leading her to strip the romantic, the erotic, and the encratic elements, so that we are left only with a martyrdom account much like others from that time period. Her attempt to blame the Presbyter, the male who wrote the *API*, for the disappearance of Thecla in the West, reveals a feminist bias, but no one is completely objective.

Notwithstanding, we await confirmation of her thesis, perhaps the discovery of a tradition which is older than the *ATHl*. Until such confirmation is found, her thesis will remain only a speculation. Indeed, the Presbyter did the opposite in my view. He immortalized Thecla, by giving her literary embodiment which was the power to live on and be cherished. No earlier accounts survive, possibly because they were so vastly inferior to the *ATHl* that no one could be bothered to preserve them. We only know the effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the Thecla story after the *ATHl*—for which many embellishments and retellings exist; but all the reliable traditions

clearly have the Presbyter's version as their basis.⁵ Thus, rather than being the cause of her demise, the Presbyter's literary activity would seem to have enhanced and assured Thecla's place in history.

⁵One could make the exception of the late Enconium of Ps.-Chrysostom.

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