

The Acts of Paul and Thecla

Introduction to the Reading

Written before 190 CE, and perhaps in the 100's CE. The Acts of Paul and Thecla tells the story of how a young woman named Thecla experienced a conversion to Christianity after hearing the preaching of the Apostle Paul. The Epistles of Paul contain some passages that have been used to argue for a subordinate position in the Christian church. This narrative about Thecla presents her as a figure who makes decisions for herself, baptizes herself, and decides to travel to preach Christian beliefs.

'The Acts of Paul' The Apocryphal New Testament (Trans. M.R. James, 1924) edited for clarity

Paul is preaching in Iconium (in modern Turkey)

2 And a certain man named Onesiphorus, when he heard that Paul was come to Iconium, went out with his children Simmias and Zeno and his wife Lectra to meet him, that he might receive him into his house: for Titus had told him what manner of man Paul was in appearance; for he had not seen him in the flesh, but only in the spirit.

3 And he went by the king's highway that leads to Lystra and stood expecting him, and looked upon them that came, according to the description of Titus. And he saw Paul coming, a man little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel.

...

5 And when Paul entered into the house of Onesiphorus, there was great joy, and bowing of knees and breaking of bread, and the word of God concerning abstinence (or continence) and the resurrection; for Paul said:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are they that keep the flesh chaste, for they shall become the temple of God.

Blessed are they that abstain (or the continent), for unto them shall God speak.

Blessed are they that have renounced this world, for they shall be well-pleasing unto God.

Blessed are they that possess their wives as though they had them not, for they shall inherit God.

Blessed are they that have the fear of God, for they shall become angels of God.

6 Blessed are they that tremble at the oracles of God, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are they that receive the wisdom of Jesus Christ, for they shall be called sons of the Most High.

Blessed are they that have kept their baptism pure, for they shall rest with the Father and with the Son.

Blessed are they that have compassed the understanding of Jesus Christ, for they shall be in light.

Blessed are they that for love of God have departed from the fashion of this world, for they shall judge angels, and shall be blessed at the right hand of the Father.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy and shall not see the bitter day of judgement. Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well-pleasing unto God and shall not lose the reward of their continence (chastity), for the word of the Father shall be unto them a work of salvation in the day of his Son, and they shall have rest world Without end.

7 And as Paul was saying these things in the midst of the assembly (church) in the house of Onesiphorus, a certain virgin, Thecla, whose mother was Theocleia, who was betrothed to a husband, Thamyris, sat at the window hard by, and listened night and day unto the word concerning chastity which was spoken by Paul: and she stirred not from the window, but was led onward (or pressed onward) by faith, rejoicing exceedingly: and further, when she saw many women and virgins entering in to Paul, she also desired earnestly to be accounted worthy to stand before Paul's face and to hear the word of Christ; for she had not yet seen the appearance of Paul, but only heard his speech.

8 Now as she moved not from the window, her mother sent for Thamyris, and he came with great joy as if he were already to take her to wife. Thamyris therefore said to Theocleia: Where is my Thecla? And Theocleia said: I have a new tale to tell you, Thamyris: for for three days and three nights Thecla arises not from the window, neither to eat nor to drink, but looking earnestly as it were upon a joyful spectacle, she so listens to a stranger who teaches deceitful and various words, that I marvel how the great modesty of the maiden is so hardly beset.

9 O Thamyris, this man [Paul] upsets the whole city of the Iconians, and your Thecla also, for all the women and the young men go in to him and are taught by him. You must, he says, fear one only God and live chastely. And my daughter, too, like a spider at the window, bound by his words, is held by a new desire and a fearful passion: for she hangs upon the things that he speaks, and the maiden is captured. But go thou to her and speak to her; for she is betrothed to you.

10 And Thamyris went to her, alike loving her and fearing because of her disturbance (ecstasy), and said: Thecla, my betrothed, why do you sit this way? and what passion is it that holds thee in amazement; turn to your Thamyris and be ashamed. And her mother also said the same: Thecla, why do you sit this way, looking downward, and answering nothing, but as one stricken? And they wept sorrowfully, Thamyris because he was losing a wife, and Theocleia because she was losing a child, and the female enslaved persons were losing a mistress; there was, therefore, great confusion of mourning in the house. And while all this was so, Thecla did not turn away, but paid listened to the speech of Paul.

11 But Thamyris leapt up and went forth into the street and watched those who went in to Paul and came out. And he saw two men fighting bitterly with one another, and said to them: You men, tell me who you are, and who is he that is within with you, who makes the souls of young men and maidens to err, deceiving them that there may be no marriages but they should live as they are. I promise therefore to give you much money if you will tell me of him: for I am a chief man of the city.

12 And Demas and Hermogenes said unto him: Who this man is, we know not; but he defrauds the young men of wives and the maidens of husbands, saying: You have no resurrection otherwise, unless you continue to be chaste, and defile not the flesh but keep it pure.

13 And Thamyris said to them: Come, you men, into mine house and refresh yourselves with me. And they went to a costly banquet and much wine and great wealth and a brilliant table. And Thamyris made them drink, for he loved Thecla and desired to take her to wife: and at the dinner Thamyris said: Tell me, men, what is his teaching, that I also may know it: for I am not a little afflicted concerning Thecla because she so loves the stranger, and I am defrauded of my marriage.

14 And Demas and Hermogenes said: Bring him before Castelius the governor as one that persuades the multitudes with the new doctrine of the Christians; and so will he destroy him and you shall have thy wife Thecla. And we will teach you about that resurrection which he asserts, that it is already come to pass in the children which we have, and we rise again when we have come to the knowledge of the true God.

15 But when Thamyris heard this of them, he was filled with envy and wrath, and rose up early and went to the house of Onesiphorus with the rulers and officers and a great crowd with staves, saying unto Paul: Thou hast destroyed the city of the Iconians and her that was espoused unto me, so that she will not have me: let us go unto Castelius the governor. And all the multitude said: Away with the wizard, for he hath corrupted all our wives. And the multitude rose up together against him.

16 And Thamyris, standing before the judgement seat, cried aloud and said: O proconsul, this is the man-we do not know where he comes from he is-who does not allow maidens to marry: let him declare before thee why he teaches such things. And Demas and Hermogenes said to Thamyris: Say thou that he is a Christian, and so wilt thou destroy him. But the governor kept his mind steadfast and called Paul, saying unto him: Who art you, and what do you teach? for it is no light accusation that these men bring against you.

17 And Paul lifted up his voice and said: If I am this day examined what I teach, listen, O proconsul. The living God, the God of vengeance, the jealous God, the God that has need of nothing, but desires the salvation of men, has sent me, that I may sever them from corruption and uncleanness and all pleasure and death, that they may sin no more. Wherefore God has sent his own Child, whom I preach and teach that men should have hope in him who alone has had compassion upon the world that was in error; that men may no more be under judgement but have faith and the fear of God and the knowledge of sobriety and the love of truth. If then I teach the things that have been revealed unto me of God, what wrong do I O proconsul? And the governor having heard that, commanded Paul to be bound and taken away to prison until he should have leisure to hear him more carefully.

18 But Thecla at night took off her bracelets and gave them to the doorkeeper, and when the door was opened for her she went into the prison, and gave the jailer a mirror of silver and so went in to Paul and sat by his feet and heard the wonderful works of God. And Paul feared not at all, but walked in the confidence of God: and her faith also was increased as she kissed his chains.

19 Now when Thecla was sought by her own people and by Thamyris, she was looked for through the streets as one lost; and one of the fellow-enslaved persons of the doorkeeper said that she went out by night. And they examined the doorkeeper and he told them that she was gone to the stranger unto the prison; and they went as he told them and found her as it were bound with him, in affection. And they went forth thence and gathered the multitude to them and showed it to the governor.

20 And the governor commanded Paul to be brought to the judgement seat; but Thecla rolled herself upon the place where Paul taught when he sat in the prison. And the governor commanded her also to be brought to the judgement seat, and she went exulting with joy. And when Paul was brought the second time the people cried out more vehemently: He is a sorcerer, away with him! But the governor heard Paul gladly concerning the holy works of Christ: and he took counsel, and called Thecla and said: Why will you not marry Thamyris, according to the law of the Iconians? but she stood looking earnestly upon Paul, and when she did not answer, her mother Theocleia cried out, saying: Burn the lawless one [= Thecla], burn her who is no bride in the middle of the theatre, that all the women which have been taught by this man may be frightened.

21 And the governor was greatly moved: and he had Paul whipped and sent him out of the city, but Thecla he condemned to be burned. And straightway the governor arose and went to the theatre: and all the multitude went forth unto the dreadful spectacle. But Thecla, as the lamb in the wilderness looks about for the shepherd, so she looked for Paul: and she looked upon the multitude and had a vision of the Lord sitting, looking like Paul, and said: As if I were not able to endure, Paul is come to look upon me. And she earnestly paid heed to him: but he departed into the heavens.

22 Now the boys and the maidens brought wood and hay to burn Thecla: and when she was brought in naked, the governor wept and marvelled at the power that was in her. And they laid the wood, and the executioner bade her mount upon the pyre: and she, making the sign of the cross, went up upon the wood. And they lighted it, and though a great fire blazed forth, the fire took no hold on her; for God had compassion on her, and caused a sound under the earth, and a cloud overshadowed her above, full of rain and hail, and all the vessel of it was poured out so that many were in peril of death, and the fire was quenched, and Thecla was preserved.

23 Now Paul was fasting with Onesiphorus and his wife and their children in an open sepulchre on the way whereby they go from Iconium to Daphne. And when many days were past, as they fasted, the boys said unto Paul: We are hungry. And they did not have anything to buy bread, for Onesiphorus had left the goods of this world, and followed Paul with all his house. But Paul took off his upper garment and said: Go, child, buy several loaves and bring them. And as the boy was buying, he saw his neighbour Thecla, and was astonished, and said: Thecla, where are you going? And she said: I seek Paul, for I was preserved from the fire. And the boy said: Come, I will bring you to him, for he mourns for you and prays and has been fasting for the past six days.

24 And when she came to the sepulchre to Paul, who had bowed his knees and was praying and saying: O Father of Christ, let not the fire take hold on Thecla, but spare her, for she is thine: she

standing behind him cried out: O Father that made heaven and earth, the Father of thy beloved child Jesus Christ, I bless you for because you have preserved me from the fire, so that I might see Paul. And Paul arose and saw her and said: O God the knower of hearts, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I bless you who has speedily accomplished that which I asked of you, and has obeyed me.

25 And there was much love within the sepulchre, for Paul rejoiced, and Onesiphorus, and all of them. And they had five loaves, and herbs, and water (and salt), and they rejoiced for the holy works of Christ. And Thecla said unto Paul: I will cut my hair round about and follow thee wherever you go. But Paul said: The time is ill-favoured and thou art beautiful: beware lest another temptation take you, worse than the first, and you do not withstand it but play the coward [= and renounce being Christian]. And Thecla said: Only give me the seal in Christ [=baptism], and temptation shall not touch me. And Paul said: Have patience, Thecla, and you shall receive the water.

26 And Paul sent away Onesiphorus with all his household to Iconium, and so took Thecla and entered into Antioch: and as they entered in, a certain Syriarch, Alexander by name, saw Thecla and was enamoured of her, and would have bribed (flattered) Paul with money and gifts. But Paul said: I do not know the woman of whom you, nor does she belong to me. But as Alexander was of great power, he himself embraced her in the highway; and she endured it not, but sought after Paul and cried out bitterly, saying: Force not the stranger, force not the handmaid of God. I am of the first of the Iconians, and because I would not marry Thamyris, I am cast out of the city. And she caught at Alexander and rent his cloak and took the wreath from his head and made him a mocking-stock.

27 But Alexander alike loving her and being ashamed of what had befallen him, brought her before the governor; and when she confessed that she had done this, he condemned her to the beasts; But the women were greatly amazed, and cried out at the judgement seat: An evil judgement, an impious judgement! And Thecla asked of the governor that she might remain a virgin until she should fight the beasts; and a certain rich queen, Tryphaena by name, whose daughter had died, took her into her keeping, and had her for a consolation.

28 Now when the beasts were led in procession, they bound her to a fierce lioness, and the queen Tryphaena followed after her: but the lioness, when Thecla was set upon her, licked her feet, and all the people marvelled. Now the writing (title) of her accusation was: Guilty of sacrilege. And the women with their children cried out from above: O God, an impious judgement comes to pass in this city. And after the procession Tryphaena took her again. For her daughter Falconilla, which was dead, had said to her in a dream: Mother, you shalt take in my stead Thecla the stranger that is desolate, that she may pray for me and I be translated into the place of the righteous.

29 When therefore Tryphaena received her after the procession, she alike bewailed her because she was to fight the beasts on the morrow, and also, loving her closely as her own daughter Falconilla; and said: Thecla, my second child, come, pray thou for my child that she may live for ever; for this have I seen in a dream. And she without delay lifted up her voice and said: O my God, Son of the Most High that art in heaven, grant unto her according to her desire, that her

daughter Faleonilla may live for ever. And after she had said this, Tryphaena bewailed her, considering that so great beauty was to be cast unto the beasts.

30 And when it was dawn, Alexander came to take her-for it was he that was giving the games-saying: The governor is set and the people trouble us: give me her that is to fight the beasts, that I may take her away. But Tryphaena cried aloud so that he fled away, saying: A second mourning for my Falconilla cometh about in mine house, and there is none to help, neither child, for she is dead, nor kinsman, for I am a widow. O God of Thecla my child, help you, Thecla.

31 And the governor sent soldiers to fetch Thecla: and Tryphaena did not leave her, but herself took her hand and led her up, saying: I did bring my daughter Falconilla unto the sepulchre; but thee, Thecla, do I bring to fight the beasts. And Thecla wept bitterly and groaned to the Lord, saying: Lord God in whom I believe, with whom I have taken refuge, that saved me from the fire, reward Tryphaena who has had pity on your handmaid, and has kept me pure.

32 There was therefore a tumult, and a voice of the beasts, and shouting of the people, and of the women which sat together, some saying: Bring in the sacrilegious one! and the women saying: Away with the city for this unlawful deed! away with all us, thou proconsul! it is a bitter sight, an evil judgement!

38 But Thecla, being taken out of the hand of Tryphaena, was stripped and a girdle put upon her, and was cast into the arena: and lions and bears were set against her. And a fierce lioness running to her lay down at her feet, and the press of women cried aloud. And a bear ran upon her; but the lioness ran and met him, and tore the bear in sunder. And again a lion, trained against men, which was Alexander's, ran upon her, and the lioness wrestled with him and was slain along with him. And the women bewailed yet more, seeing that the lioness also that succoured her was dead.

34 Then did they put in many beasts, while she stood and stretched out her hands and prayed. And when she had ended her prayer, she turned and saw a great tank full of water, and said: Now is it time that I should wash myself. And she cast herself in, saying: In the name of Jesus Christ do I baptize myself on the last day. And all the women seeing it and all the people wept, saying: Don't throw yourself into the water: so that even the governor wept that so great beauty should be devoured by seals. So, then, she cast herself into the water in the name of Jesus Christ; and the seals, seeing the light of a flash of fire, floated dead on the top of the water. And there was about her a cloud of fire, so that neither did the beasts touch her, nor was she seen to be naked.

35 Now the women, when other more fearful beasts were put in, shrieked aloud, and some cast leaves, and others nard, others cassia, and some balsam, so that there was a multitude of odours; and all the beasts that were struck thereby were held as it were in sleep and touched her not; so that Alexander said to the governor: I have some bulls exceeding fearful, let us bind the criminal to them. And the governor frowning, allowed it, saying: Do what you want. And they bound her by the feet between the bulls, and put hot irons under their bellies that they might be the more enraged and kill her. They then leaped forward; but the flame that burned about her, burned through the ropes, and she was as one not bound.

36 But Tryphaena, standing by the arena, fainted at the entry, so that her handmaids said: The queen Tryphaena is dead! And the governor stopped the games and all the city was frightened, and Alexander falling at the governor's feet said: Have mercy on me and on the city, and let the condemned go, lest the city perish with her; for if Caesar hear this, perchance he will destroy us and the city, because his kinswoman the queen Tryphaena hath died at the entry.

37 And the governor called Thecla from among the beasts, and said to her: Who are you? and what do you have about yourself that not one of the beasts hath touched you? But she said: I am the handmaid of the living God; and what I have about me-it is that I have believed on that his Son in whom God is well pleased; for whose sake not one of the beasts hath touched me. For he alone is the goal (or way) of salvation and the substance of life immortal; for unto them that are tossed about he is a refuge, unto the oppressed relief, unto the despairing shelter, and in a word, whosoever does not believe in him, shall not live, but die everlastingly.

38 And when the governor heard this, he commanded garments to be brought and said: Put on these garments. And she said: He who clothed me when I was naked among the beasts, the same one on the day of judgement will clothe me with salvation. And she took the garments and put them on. And the governor forthwith issued out an act, saying: I release unto you Thecla the godly, the servant of God. And all the women cried out with a loud voice and as with one mouth gave praise to God, saying: One is the God who hath preserved Thecla: so that with their voice all the city shook.

39 And Tryphaena, when she was told the good tidings, met her with much people and embraced Thecla and said: Now do I believe that the dead are raised up: now do I believe that my child lives: come within, and I will make thee heir of all my substance. Thecla therefore went in with her and rested in her house eight days, teaching her the word of God, so that the more part of the maid-servants also believed, and there was great joy in the house.

40 But Thecla yearned after Paul and sought him, sending about in all places; and it was told her that he was at Myra. And she took young men and maids, and girded herself, and sewed her mantle into a cloak after the fashion of a man, and departed into Myra, and found Paul speaking the word of God, and went to him. But he when he saw her and the people that were with her was amazed, thinking in himself: Hath some other temptation come upon her? But she perceived it, and said to him: I have taken the baptism, O Paul; for he that has worked together with you in the Gospel has worked with me also unto my baptizing.

41 And Paul took her by the hand and brought her into the house of Hermias, and heard all things from her; so that Paul marvelled much, and they that heard were confirmed, and prayed for Tryphaena. And Thecla arose and said to Paul: I go unto Iconium. And Paul said: Go, and teach the word of God. Now Tryphaena had sent her much apparel and gold, so that she left it with Paul for the ministry of the poor.

42 But she herself departed unto Iconium. And she entered into the house of Onesiphorus, and fell down upon the floor where Paul had sat and taught the oracles of God, and wept, saying: O God of me and of this house, where the light shone upon me, Jesus Christ the Son of God, my

helper in prison, my helper before the governors, my helper in the fire, my helper among the beasts, thou art God, and unto thee be the glory for ever. Amen.

43 And she found Thamyris dead, but her mother living. And she saw her mother and said unto her: Theocleia my mother, can you believe that the Lord lives in the heavens? for whether you desire money, the Lord will give it to you through me: or your child, lo, I am here before you. And when she had so testified, she departed unto Seleucia, and after she had enlightened many with the word of God, she slept a good sleep.