**Gender**

*After Jesus Before Christianity*

Excerpts and comments by Robert Traer

Gender is a social concept, that differs in varied historical and cultural contexts. How was gender understood in early communities of the Anointed? AJBC proposes that considering the Gospel of Mary as well as 1 Timothy will provide insights. “First Timothy, included in what would become the New Testament, has been a major influence on historical constructions of Christian gender relations.” The gospel attributed to Mary Magdalene, which AJBC refers to simply as “Gospel of Mary,” has only recently affected our understanding of gender in the first two centuries.

“Gospel of Mary, a fragmentary text dating to the late first or early second century, has not had the same voice [as 1 Timothy] throughout history; lost for centuries and then found at the end of the nineteenth century, be became a focus of scholarly discussion only in the late 1990s. These two texts present very different, and equally important, depictions of women’s leadership in the early movements of the Anointed.”

“The beginning of this gospel is lost; as it now exists, it starts in the middle of a teaching about the nature of sin. The Savior, as the Anointed One is called in this gospel, concludes his teaching, and then departs, leaving his followers pained and weeping, despairing of their next move. ‘How shall we go to the nations and proclaim the good news of the Child of Humanity? If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?’ the Savior’s followers worry (Gos. Mary 5:1-3).

“Mary stands in the midst of this group of the Savior. She comforts and encourages them, exhorting them not to doubt, for the Savior’s ‘grace will be with you and shelter you.’ She then ‘turned their heart to the Good,’ and calming down, they began to discuss the Savior’s teachings (5:4-10).

“Peter asks Mary to teach them, saying, ‘Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of the women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember, which you know and we do not, nor have we heard them’ (6:1-2). Mary obliges and begins to tell the followers about a vision she had of the Savior, and the Savior’s response to that vision.

After “Mary concludes her instruction, Andrew responds with disbelief. ‘Certainly, these teachings are strange ideas,’ he states (10:2). Peter, though he had asked Mary to teach them, then turns on her, sneering, ‘Did the Savior really speak with a woman without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and all listen to her? Did he choose her over us?’ (10:3-4) Mary weeps. ‘My brother, Peter, what are you thinking?’ she cries. ‘Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am telling lies about the Savior?’ (10:5-6)

Levi stands to support Mary, arguing: ‘Peter, you have always been an angry person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you, then, to reject her? Surely the Savior’s knowledge of her is trustworthy. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather, let us be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and proclaim the good news, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said. (10:7-13) Levi has the last word; after he speaks, the members of this group of the Savior go out to teach, and the gospel ends.

“Mary is presented very simply in this gospel: she is Mary, a woman. There are no other descriptors. No mention is made of which Mary she is; no mention of whether she is a virgin, a mother, a sex worker, a wife—nothing. Mary is known by her activities: she is obviously a leader. She is a teacher, revealing and relaying words of the Savior unheard by the other followers. She is a seer, describing a vision of the Lord. She is an authority, exhorting the followers of the Savior to action when they would fear and despair, giving focus and stability to the group.”

“According to Gospel of Mary, women were held up as authorities in groups of the Savior; in the words of the Savior, they were teachers and leaders. Prohibiting women’s leadership was actually a characteristic of ‘the adversaries.’” AJBC asserts, “This equal right derives from a shared focus beyond gender: a focus on the attainment of true, perfect human status.” (AJBC, 101-105)

First Timothy is attributed to Paul, but scholars agree that it was written in the second century and thus too late to have been written by Paul. It clearly limits the role of women in a Jesus group.

“I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Tim. 2:8-15)

This text attributed to Paul expresses a view that is contradicted by “the Paul of other letters. First Corinthians assumes that women are visible and active within Chloe’s people in Corinth, leading prayers and prophecy. Chapter 16 of Paul’s Letter to the Romans lists a significant number of female leaders and officials of Jesus associations there, eight by name. In Philippians Paul speaks to Euodia and Syntyche, two women who ‘worked with me in the good news,’ ‘co-workers’ he calls them (Phil. 4:2-3).

Galatians 3:28, one of Paul’s most famous sayings, speaks directly to the significance—or rather, the insignificance—of gender in his Jesus communities in the context of belonging: ‘You are no longer Judean or Greek, no longer enslaved or freeborn, no longer *male and female*. Instead, you all have the same status in the service of God’s Anointed, Jesus.’ Paul is reimagining creation here, playing with the wording of Genesis 1:27: ‘So God created humanity in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’ A new creation, with a new view of gender: Paul’s position in Galatians is radical.”

The authors of AJBC assert that 1 Timothy “seems to have more in common with the New Testament letters Colossians and Ephesians, letters also attributed to Paul but authored by others, in the judgment of most scholars. Colossians and Ephesians include a household code—a list of ideal relationships within the main family unit, the household. Colossians 3:18-4:1 and Ephesians 5:22-6:9 both begin with a command for wives to be subordinate to their husbands, while husbands are to love their wives. ‘For the husband is head of the wife as also the Anointed is head of the assembly, the Savior of the body,’ declares the writer of Ephesians, continuing, ‘Just as the assembly is made subject to the Anointed, so also are wives, in everything, to their husbands’ (Eph. 5:22-24). (AJBC, 105-108)

“The writings of the early people of the Way, some of which were later included in the New Testament, contain contradictory depictions of women and gender, not just between biblical writings, but within them, individually. Paul’s first letter to Chloe’s people I Corinth presents readers with such tension, a tension both intriguing and challenging. In chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians, Paul offers Chloe’s people some advice about marrying or remaining single: he would prefer it if everyone in the community could remain single, but if singleness is not possible, it is reasonable for community members to marry. When married, husbands and wives should grant one another their ‘conjugal rights.’ Paul then states, ‘the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does’ (v.4) That representation of authority, husband over wife, is not surprising for ancient Greece and Rome, Next, however, Paul affirms, ‘likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.’ The statement that a woman has authority over the body of the husband, the head of the household, is not only much more surprising, but really radical. The male head of the household was the primary authority figure in ancient Rome, wielding power over the other men, women, children, and the enslaved in his house.

“Paul then moves to a discussion of situations in which a man or woman marries someone who does not follow the Anointed. Paul declares, ‘the husband who is not a member is consecrated through his wife and the wife who is not a member is consecrated through her husband . . . After all, wife, what do you really know about whether you will save your husband; or what do you really know, husband, about whether you will save your wife?’ (1 Cor. 7:14, 16). The reciprocity expressed here, the rights for both wives and husbands, is remarkable. (AJBC, 109-111)

“Where Paul previously upsets social convention in 1 Corinthians 7, here in chapter 11 he, or perhaps a later editor of Paul’s letter reinforces it.” AJBC clarifies, in Greece and Rome in the first century, “adult women active in public with uncovered heads were sexually and socially transgressive—they violated expected norms.” Perhaps Paul or an editor of the letter is advising caution to Chloe’s people, to protect them from charges of sexual immorality.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, women are told they should be silent during the meetings and remain subordinate to their husbands. The authors of AJBC note that, “First Corinthians 11:2-11 and 14:33-36 both seem out of place in the argument of the letter and therefore are likely additions to the letter made after Paul’s time. Several translations such as the New Revised Standard Version, place 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 in parentheses to highlight the dubious or perhaps later (post-second century) authorship of these verses.”

These first (and perhaps second century) verses clearly reveal that “the early groups of the Savior were incredibly diverse.” This is a significant fact, which contradicts “the popular notion that ‘Christianity’ was some kind of unified ‘whole’ from the start and that fragmentation or disunity—diversity—came later. There was no such thing as ‘Christianity’ in the first centuries of the Common Era.” (AJBC, 112-114)

The Christianity that later would rework Paul’s writings and include them in the New Testament excluded from the New Testament the “Acts of Paul and Thecla.” There are likely several reasons. First, “Although Paul’s name in first place indicates his priority as a male over a female, Thecla actually dominates the story. She is its true hero.” This would be reason enough, but also Thecla takes Paul’s advice about remaining unmarried and becomes a celibate teacher on behalf of the Anointed One. This is surely the second and perhaps the major reason for her exclusion from the New Testament. “Tertullian is the first author to remark on Thecla’s story only to attack it.” Yet, AJBC tells us, the well-known Christian teacher, Gregory of Nazianzus, “in the fourth century withdrew to her tomb for three years of prayer.” Furthermore, “Thecla remained a popular saint whose tomb in Seleucia was venerated until well into the sixth century.”

Why was Thecla venerated as a saint? Her story begins with Thecla overhearing Paul’s preaching. She is convinced that she should remain celibate, so like Paul she can be a witness to the Anointed One. Thamyris, who is engaged to Thecla, denounces Paul before the proconsul,” accusing Paul of making ‘virgins averse to marriage.’ When questioned by the proconsul, Paul says the living God ‘has sent me that I may rescue them from corruption and uncleanness and all pleasure, and from death, that they may sin no more: (Thecla 17)—all of which calls for self-control.

When Thecla, “remaining faithful to Paul’s teaching about virginity, refuses to marry Thamyris, the proconsul condemns her to die by fire. Thecla maintains her self-mastery despite her sentence, not requiring the vision sent to her of the Lord as Paul to shore up her resolve: ‘As if I were unable to endure, Paul has come to look after me’ (Thecla 21). When Thecla is brought naked before the proconsul to be burned, the procounsel ‘wept and admired the power that was in her (Thecla 22). She is not defeated; she is not a victim. [She is prepared to die a noble death.] When the fire threatens to consume her, God causes a great thunderstorm to swamp the theater, so that Thecla is saved, and the spectators are threatened with drowning.”

Paul is unsure that Thecla can maintain her purity. “Times are evil and you are beautiful. I am afraid lest another temptation come upon you worse than the first and that you do not withstand it but become mad after men” (Thecla 25). “Right on cue,” AJBC continues, “Alexander, one of the chief men of Antioch, sees Thecla and falls madly in love with her. He forces himself on her, but she strongly resists and makes a laughingstock of him in public. He brings her before yet another Roman official who condemns her to die with the beasts.” Thecla is stripped “and was thrown into the arena. Lions and bears were let loose upon her. A fierce lioness ran up and lay down at her feet.” A bear then came up to attack her, but the lioness tore the bear to pieces. (Thecla 33)

The AJBC account continues, “As the beasts keep coming, Thecla sees a pit of water and says, ‘Now it is time to wash myself.’ So, she throws herself in the water, saying, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself on my last day’ (Thecla 34). This remarkable self-baptism demonstrates how totally in control Thecla is.” [And Thecla baptizing herself is a third reason for excluding her story from the New Testament.]

“The women in the crowd, seeing Thecla enter the pit of water, worry that she is going to drown herself. ‘She then threw herself into the water in the name of Jesus Christ, but the seals, having seen a flash of lightning, floated dead on the surface. And there was round her a cloud of fire so that neither could the beasts touch her nor could she be seen naked’ (Thecla 34).

“The tale of Thecla is a marvelous antidote to the debates raging in the schools of the Anointed and wisdom circles in the second century. Both sides can find something of worth in her story, which probably accounts for its popularity and longevity. Her self-mastery is complete. She is not afraid and speaks boldly. She never appears as a passive victim. She even dresses as a man (Thecla 40). She resists the power of the empire, both in the presence of its officials and in its effort to destroy her in public spectacles of violence. The emphasis on her virginity and refusal to marry wellborn men rejects the empires ‘family values,’ in which marriage and bearing children was a requirement of wellborn women.’ Before her death, she converted her mother ‘and enlightened many by the word of God; then she rested in a glorious sleep’ (Thecla 43). (AJBC, 210-213)

Well-known biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan, writing in a Foreword to *A New New Testament*, tells his readers, “You must know what was rejected to understand what was accepted. And why and when, and where.” He is referring, of course, to the New Testament canon, and then to illustrate his assertion tells us more about Thecla’s significant place in Christian history.

“High on the northern slopes of the Bülbül Daği, off the mid-Aegean coast of Turkey, is a small flat clearing on the hillside with a stone frontal for a small doorway. This opens into a cave carved in antiquity to an eight-by-eight-by-fifty-foot passageway shrine called the Grotto of St Paul by excavators from the Austrian Archeological Institute in the 1990s. Beneath later plaster they found frescoes from around the year 500 CE.

On the wall is a fresco that does not seem to reflect a story from either the Hebrew scriptures or the New Testament. “Of its three figures, the central one is definitely ‘Paulos’—bald-headed, double-goateed, named, but not haloed. He is seated and reading from an open book on his lap. His right hand is raised in the teaching-and-blessing gesture of Byzantine iconography—fingers separated into two and three, for the two natures in Christ and the three persons in the Trinity.

“To viewer right of Paul is a standing woman named ‘Theoklia,’ [the mother of Thecla] coiffed as a matron by the veil around her hair. She is slightly taller than Paul, and her right hand is raised in a gesture identical to his. But her dignity, importance, and teaching authority are all negated by having her eyes blinded and her hand scraped and burned off the wall (not iconoclasm, by the way, as only *her* eyes were obliterated).

“To the viewer left of Paul is a second female figure iconographically designated as a nubile virgin—her hair is unveiled and she listens to Paul’s message, not with others out in the open but from a window in a red-brick house that encases her completely.” Her name, ‘Thekla,’ is still—but barely—discernible beside her head. [Thekla is a variant spelling of Thecla.]

Crossan reminds us that in the Roman empire, Thecla would have been engaged by her parents to be married after her first menses, when she was about 13 years old. Now that you know her story, if you visited this ancient Christian memorial cave you would recognize her and her mother. You also, Crossan says, now know more about Paul. Tecla’s story is available in *A New New Testament*.