

Review of Gail P. C. Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

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Redeemed Bodies makes important contributions to the study of the body and of women in early Christianity. Gail Streete engages these two subjects by focusing on the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* and the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. After situating these texts in their contexts, she considers how the earliest readers of these texts interpreted them and points to the importance of reading them today.

The first chapter is a semi-autobiographical reflection on the study of women martyrs. Streete was once delighted by the empowerment of women glimpsed in early Christian texts. However, she “neglected to notice [the power’s] source and how it was transmitted” (p. 5). For example, women directly work only two miracles in the apocryphal acts, although they are associated with far more miracles worked by male agency. Women in these texts must conform to masculine ideals rather than be honoured for their own gender. One of the key tensions explored in *Redeemed Bodies* emerges from this discussion: Early Christian writers celebrate women as models of masculine virtues but simultaneously oppose ecclesiastical leadership for women. Streete then argues that female anatomy is featured far more in martyrdoms than male. Her central claim about the women martyrs and their bodies is: “Through death by martyrdom and by means of its companion and successor, ascetic restraint, women could not merely deny but also ‘overcome’ the obstacle of femaleness, effectively erasing their bodies and their gender” (p. 23).

The next chapter puts research on the subversive witness of martyrs into conversation with the portrayal of women in martyrdoms. Martyrs often go to trial for calling into question the cultural norms of their time, their deaths becoming lasting witnesses against these norms. Christian males call into question the social and political orders, but women by the very act of appearing in public violate what was considered their proper sphere. Authors of women’s martyrdoms re-emphasize the martyrs’ femininity after temporarily portraying them as models of masculine virtues. Perpetua displays masculine virtues while fighting in the arena, but the continuators of her journal ensure that in her death her femininity takes centre stage. Thecla’s story appears to be a composite of two folktales: one highlights her virilisation, but the other her feminine passivity. This tension suggests that there were disagreements over the roles of women in early Christianity.

The following two chapters look at the early reception history of the stories of these two women. In chapter 3, Streete examines North African responses to the story of Perpetua and Felicitas. Tertullian, in his Montanist stage, thought women capable of achieving martyrdom which “is an expression of true manliness” (p. 54). Perpetua’s role as an exemplar of martyrdom caused consternation for later authors. Cyprian, his biographer Pontius, and Augustine all held negative views of women’s nature, and consequently praise Perpetua as a woman who overcame her feminine attributes, embodying masculine ideals. Streete asks in response: “What better way to incorporate the authority of women martyrs into the service of the male-dominated Catholic church than to praise them as men?” (p. 57). The chapter ends with an exploration of women martyrs’

rejection of their own families as a place where contemporary readers can see social subversion in these texts.

The reception history of Thecla's tale provides an occasion to reflect on female leadership and the portrayal of women's bodies in martyrdoms. Thecla does not attain victory over her female nature through martyrdom, but through chastity. Her subversive power is stronger than those of Perpetua or Felicitas because she stays alive. Paul even gives her the authority to teach and she baptizes herself in a pool of seals. Tertullian and Cyprian respond to women who saw Thecla's actions as an authorization of their own leadership in the church. Egeria's narrative of her visit to Thecla's shrine and the fifth-century *The Life and Miracles of Thecla* carry on the tradition that values Thecla's leadership role. However, "for most of the church fathers from the second to the fifth centuries, Thecla's main function was as a martyr who was willing to defend the virtue they valued – chastity – to the death" (pp. 94–95). The reception history of Thecla represents the conflict between ideals of feminine autonomy and patriarchal constraint on those ideals.

The last chapter of book explores contemporary martyrs and the rhetoric and worldview that support them. The stories of Perpetua and Thecla elicit different responses from students. Few resonate with Perpetua's aspirations to die for her beliefs, while many find Thecla's leadership in a male-dominated society inspiring. To help students understand Perpetua, Streete uses stories of two women shot at Columbine High School. Preachers at the funerals of these women labelled them as martyrs, one equating them with the martyrs of the early church. Just as authors used Perpetua's story to support male domination in the church, so interpreters of these "martyrs" used their deaths to make a claim about the embattled nature of the evangelical church. Streete also uses women suicide attackers to explain Perpetua's martyrdom to students. She suggests that one motive for these martyrdoms is achieving "equality or leadership for women" through their actions (pp. 121). This concluding chapter reinforces Streete's claim that women choose to subvert traditional values through their bodies in acts of martyrdom. The message of these actions, however, is often at the disposal of those who pass their stories on to future generations.

Streete's consideration of the early reception histories of the stories of Perpetua and Thecla will be of particular use to scholars, as she explores versions of these stories often ignored. However, her attempt to use a wide variety of sources and to contextualize the primary texts of interest is not always clear. For example, in the first chapter, the discussion proceeds in reverse chronological order from Eusebius to Plato, then forward from Aristotle to Tertullian, and finally back to the New Testament. Such changes in direction often make it difficult to detect the argument. This is likely to leave at least a few readers disoriented. On the other hand, the chapters on the reception histories and on contemporary martyrdom are clear and will be accessible to students.

Redeemed Bodies fits into the wave of studies on the body that followed the publication of Peter Brown's *Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Both Thecla and Perpetua are featured in that book, but Streete's work is in no way limited by it. Whereas Brown frames Thecla's continence as the model for female holiness (p. 158), Streete reminds us that the legacy of martyrdom, by celibate and non-celibate women alike, lives on today. Streete's study of the reception history of Perpetua and Thecla and her discussion of their relationship to contemporary events will make this volume valuable for scholars interested in the intersection of ancient studies and contemporary debates about the body and equal rights. *Redeemed Bodies* forms a much needed bridge between studies of the body and women that focus on first-century Christianity, and those that focus on the post-Constantinian church. For this it is, and should remain, a valuable analysis of Christianity in its early phases.



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