

**Susan E. Hylen, *A Modest Apostle:
Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.**

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Like most good scholarship, research on the *Acts of Thecla* (*ATH*) builds on, and is in conversation with, previous scholarship on the topic. Susan Hylen's monograph, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church*, is no different. In it, Hylen enters into a discourse that is about so much more than ancient narratives like the *ATH* or even discourses about the lives of early Christian women. *A Modest Apostle*, like the scholarship on Thecla that precedes it, enters into discourses on feminist historiography. In other words, this important contribution not only furthers knowledge about the *ATH*, but it furthers the conversations about how historians can and should reconstruct women's and gender history. For that alone, Hylen has created a significant and important contribution to several distinct and simultaneously imbricated fields.

It is common knowledge amongst scholars of late antiquity, that the works of Virginia Burrus (1987), Stevan Davies (1980), Dennis MacDonald (1983) (and I would also add to this list Shelly Matthews' (2001) excellent essay), have significantly shaped the way scholars read the *ATH* and its implications about the lives of ancient women. Turning away from that important scholarship, Hylen does not attempt to reconstruct the lives of *real* historical women, nor does she attempt to characterize the Christian communities that wrote, copied, and circulated the *ATH*. Instead, Hylen reads the *ATH* alongside one of the pastoral epistles, 1 Timothy. The juxtaposition of these two texts has been used to describe Christian communities polarized on issues related to women's leadership. 1 Timothy famously warns women to remain silent among other prohibitions and restrictions on women's autonomy (2:8-15). The *ATH*'s heroine, Thecla, is anything but silent. However, rather than interpret these texts as descriptive of early Christian communities at odds with one another over the role of women in their respective communities, Hylen argues that these texts have much more in common than is often perceived at first glance.

In order to shift our focus away from seeing these texts as representative of opposing views coming from particular Christian communities, Hylen suggests alternate reading strategies. She states that she approaches texts "as a complex reflection of the social norms and practices of the time" (7). Using the theoretical insights of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Kathryn Tanner, and Saba Mahmood (to name only a few), Hylen argues that what can be gleaned from both the *ATH* and 1 Timothy are sets of shared cultural norms, such as the prescription that women be modest *and* be active civic participants. Rather than reading these concepts—i.e. modesty and civic participation—as undermining one another and therefore only perceivable as the singular component of either the *ATH* or 1 Timothy, Hylen sees

modesty and civic participation as a thread of cultural norms that runs through each text rendering them far more similar than previous scholarship has demonstrated.

The book is organized with an introduction in which Hylen introduces her argument that the two texts reflect similar social norms in their attitudes towards women. In the following chapters Hylen: discusses ideals and expectations of Greco-Roman women through the institution of marriage (chapter two); offers a robust and close reading of 1 Timothy in order to demonstrate alternative options to its traditional interpretation as a text that “counters heretical groups of celibate women” (70) (chapter three); argues that women operate within “similarly complex gender roles and values” (89) in the *ATh* as in 1 Timothy (chapter four); demonstrates through an analysis of the reception history of the *ATh*, how malleable the figure of Thecla was to her interpreters and how she grew more popular with time even as women’s freedom and leadership within the church was declining (chapter five); and finally, Hylen concludes by returning to a discussion about modesty, cultural norms, and women’s authority and leadership. Throughout, her argument is consistent: the *ATh* and 1 Timothy reveal a set of shared cultural norms that value women’s participation as they simultaneously prescribe that women be modest.

A Modest Apostle, is a refreshing and interesting book with an innovative approach not only to reading the *ATh* and 1 Timothy, but arguably to reading all ancient texts. Rather than continuing to operate with discrete categories of identification for ancient Christian communities, Hylen depicts a far more complex relationship between texts and calls into question what, if anything, they are representative of. Hylen has demonstrated how when one approaches texts with different kinds of questions, entirely new worlds of possibilities emerge. And, for this reader, this is what is most fruitful from this work—that is, a new and exciting methodological approach that looks for similarities where only difference could be previously found and therefore shifts the historiography related to a particular topic, or text, or reception history. Hylen reminds readers that “all history is a history of the present. Although historians aim for objective assessment of the available evidence, the questions posed to that evidence and the decisions made interpreting it are invariably a reflection of the historian’s own time” (121). Hylen notes, describes, and appreciates the waves of feminist scholarship that have diligently excavated the past in order to explain something of the present. *A Modest Apostle* sits within this tradition of feminist historiography offering a new way to view the ancient world. Hylen has written an informative and accessible book that would work well in the graduate or undergraduate classroom alike.

Bibliography

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