

The cloud of Thecla and the construction of her character as a virgin (παρθένος), martyr (μάρτυς) and apostle (ἀπόστολος)

[La nube de Tecla y la construcción de su personaje como virgen (παρθένος), mártir (μάρτυς) y apóstol (ἀπόστολος)]

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Abstract: In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (APTh) a cloud appears in the most important scenes of the tale. This motif is used to highlight the protection offered by God on behalf of the young woman and echoes that cloud appearing in *Exodus* guiding and protecting the Israelites. Thanks to these kinds of echoes, the author of the APTh tries to establish a connection between both scenes in his readers' minds and builds, at the same time, the character of Thecla, portrayed as a virgin, a martyr or an apostle in different scenes of the narration.

Keywords: Acts of Paul and Thecla; Thecla; Echoes; Early Christianity.

Abstract: En los *Hechos de Pablo y Tecla* (APTh) aparece una nube en algunas de las escenas más importante de la narración. Este motivo es utilizado para resaltar la protección ofrecida por Dios hacia la joven y evoca el idéntico motivo que aparece en *Éxodo* guiando y protegiendo a los israelitas. Gracias a este tipo de ecos, el autor de APTh intenta establecer la conexión entre ambos textos en la mente de sus lectores y construir, al mismo tiempo, el personaje de Tecla, caracterizada como virgen, mártir o apóstol en diferentes momentos de la narración.

Keywords: Hechos de Pablo y Tecla; Tecla; Ecos; Cristianismo primitivo.



Introduction

The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (APTh) has been examined from many different points of view. It is likely that the presence of a character such as Thecla -considered as the first female martyr of the Christian tradition- is the reason that has led scholars to study and deeply analyze such a text. Even so, in our opinion, little attention has been paid to Thecla's construction as a character and her evolution throughout the text from her childhood home, where she is portrayed as a young virgin at the beginning of the story, to the semi-eremical milieu in which she ends her life in Seleukeia.

In the following lines we will analyze the evolution of Thecla. To this end, it is essential to understand how the author of the text creates the ἥθος of Thecla, not only by narrating her own story, but also by displaying a narrative strategy consisting of echoes or intertextual resonances of different motifs of other Christian tales, which have been well known and popular among the Christian readers of the text.

In this interplay the element of the cloud (νεφέλη) can be served as a prototypical example and deserves a special attention, since it appears in three of the most dramatic moments of the narration of Thecla: 1) her first martyrdom in Iconium; 2) her second martyrdom in Antioch and, finally, 3) her arrival to Seleukeia as depicted in manuscript *Oxon. Barocc. gr. 180* (codex G). In the different commentaries of the text,¹ each of their authors has applied an overall

¹ Jeremy W. Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Tübingen: Möhr Siebeck, 2009); Mario Erbetta, *Gli apocrifi del Nuovo Testamento. Vol. II. Atti e leggende* (Torino: Marietti, 1966); Elisabeth Esch-Wermeling, *Thekla - Paulusschülerin wider willen? Strategien der Leserlenkung in der Theklaakten* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2008); Anne Jensen, *Thekla - die Apostolin. Ein apokrypher Text neu entdeckt* (Freiburg - Basel -

analysis of the three passages appearing the cloud. In our opinion, the influence of the *Old Testament* tradition on these three sections of the text is clear, but it ought to be interpreted as a unique motif developed in three different ways. The cloud of the three passages, not only the one appearing in the latter, as Mangogna pointed out,² must be considered as a divine sign related to the power of God, akin to the one driving and protecting the Israelites in *Exodus*,³ and its presence in the *APTh* must be understood from this point of view.

Even so, as we shall see, the cloud will be just a part of the different motifs used by the author of the text to portray the character of Thecla. The evolution of her figure will follow a path in which, first of all, she will be presented as a young woman (*παρθένος*), then as a martyr (*μάρτυς*) and finally as an apostle (*ἀπόστολος*). We will be able to observe this transformation and how some echoes of different biblical stories, consciously used by the author of the text, play an important role of the characterization of Thecla.

Evoking the biblical tradition

To understand the notion of “echo”, which corresponds to others such as “intertextual resonance” or “linguistic reminiscence”,⁴ we

Wien: Herder, 1995); Viviana Mangogna, *Commentario agli Atti di Paolo e Tecla. Composizione e trasmissione di un modello narrativo nel cristianesimo delle origini* (Ph.D. Dissertation [Supervisor: Prof. Ugo Mario Criscuolo, Università degli studi di Napoli Federico II], Napoli, 2006); Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 2014); Antonio Piñero & Gonzalo Del Cerro, *Hechos Apócrifos de los Apóstoles. Vol. II. Hechos de Pablo y Tomás* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2005); Léon Vouaux, *Les Actes de Paul et ses lettres apocryphes* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1913).

² Mangogna, *Commentario agli Atti di Paolo e Tecla*, pp. 153-154.

³ Jan Christian Gertz, “The Miracle at the Sea: Remarks on the Recent Discussion about Origin and Composition of the Exodus Narrative”, in Thomas B. Dozeman, Craig A. Evans & Joel N. Lohr (eds.), *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception and Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 91-120.

⁴ Koen De Temmerman, “Characterization in the Ancient Novel”, en Edmund Cueva & Shannon Byrne (eds.), *A companion to the ancient novel* (Malden & Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 231-243.

have followed Hollander's statement⁵ and the application of the approach of Hays to the Pauline epistles. The latter points out that "allusive echo functions to suggest to the reader that text B should be understood in light of a broad interplay with text A, encompassing aspects of A beyond those explicitly echoed".⁶

In this case, B would be the *APTh* while A would represent different biblical stories. From this point of view, not only the direct and evident quotations of biblical passages on the text may try to link the *APTh* to biblical tradition, but also the linguistic subtleties may replace a whole passage in a different context establishing a strong relationship between Thecla and the heroes of the scenes evoked. Even if the debate about the readers of the *APTh* seems to postulate that the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* in general and, more specifically, the *APTh*, were addressed to the same audience than the other Greek novels of that time, the debate remains open. As Greene points out, for readers of the Greek novels, some "social themes -we would add- (and motifs) may be foreign, but the arrangement of the events to induce specific emotional responses is familiar".⁷ In addition, they probably would not have been able to understand these intertextual resonances, but in the case of a Christian believer the link could be automatically established.

The methodology of this study is based on a philological approach to the text of the *APTh*. From this point of view, linguistic coincidences or echoes of significant meaning are analyzed in order to propose a potentially broader interpretation relating the *APTh* to biblical tradition. The analysis applied will try to prove whether the tale of Thecla could be interpreted within Christian storytelling tradition and whether her character's construction is made on the

⁵ John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

⁶ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 20.

⁷ Robin Greene, "(Un)Happily Ever After: Literary and Religious Tensions in the Endings of the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*", in Marília P. Futre Pinheiro, Judith Perkins & Richard Pervo (eds.), *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections* (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012), p. 26.

basis of Old and New Testament reminiscences. It distinguishes a narrative strategy that encloses the *APTh* within Christian literature, though generic patterns shared as well by the novels of that time, rather with regards to the structure of the story than the motifs featured, a distinction which must be taken into account.

Actually, as Konstan points out, “the pattern in the Acts inverts the basic paradigm that informs ancient Greek novels”.⁸ Following this statement, the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles could be seen as a sort of “anti-novels”, a reaction from certain communities of that time in order to create a “commercial” Christian literature which will be able to compete with these popular stories. To do so, they displayed similar techniques as in the novel, but its referenced background was not that of Classical literary tradition, but that of the biblical texts. Here they found a larger repertory of motifs, roles, functions and attitudes to construct new characters in comparison with the Greek novel from which they inherited moreover structural patterns or rhetorical strategies such as metaphorical characterization. The sources, however, from which the intertextual relationship was originated, belonged to different literary and idealistic tradition. In addition, most of the motifs shared by both the Greek novel and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles may respond to a common folkloristic theme, later developed and reinterpreted in each literary tradition.⁹

In addition, one must consider that the context of the spread of the first Christian texts is dominated by a situation in which orality and literacy coexisted together and, as Koester suggested,¹⁰ the biblical texts would have circulated in both written and oral traditions. Some

⁸ David Konstan, “Acts of Love: A Narrative Pattern in the Apocryphal Acts”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), p. 15

⁹ The folkloristic background of the Greek novel has been already studied and demonstrated by Ruiz Montero on the basis of Vladimir Propp’s on this topic: Consuelo Ruiz Montero, *La estructura de la novela griega. Análisis funcional* (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1988). Deeper investigation including the *APTh* has revealed a closer dependency of this text from folk-tale tradition: Consuelo Ruiz Montero, “Los apócrifos Hechos de Pablo y Tecla y sus modelos narrativos”, in Israel M. Gallarte & Jesús Peláez (eds.), *In mari vita tua. Philological Studies in Honour of Antonio Piñero* (Córdoba: El Almendro, 2016), pp. 111-129.

¹⁰ Helmut Koester, “Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994), pp. 293-297, espec. 294.

authors, in fact, have underlined the compatibility between both traditions in Early Christianity. The latter would have predominated among the first Christian communities,¹¹ gathering mainly the words attributed to Jesus and memorized by the believers.¹² Thus, through the oral transmission, the biblical texts would not have died at the time they were written, instead they would have also survived in oral milieu.¹³

In this context of coexistence between orality and literacy in which, however the former would predominate, words acquire a great importance. A right choice of words echoing a concrete passage of a biblical story in a precise scene would provoke this connection between both traditions and characters, as we have mentioned above. To do so, the author of the *APTh* made a conscious choice of words, or rather keywords, to construct Thecla's character on the basis of significant linguistic coincidences with scenes from both the Old and the New Testament.

It must be said that, concerning the plot of the *APTh*, as we shall see, the most important difference of Thecla in comparison with Paul –the other main character of the story– is that the first source to know her personality is precisely the *APTh*. Since Paul has already appeared in the canonical Acts and written a large corpus of letters, he was a very well-known character related to the New Testament sphere. A personality was needed to be attributed to Thecla and that is likely the reason of the display of these echoes or intertextual resonances, since the author of the text builds her personality through the simple narration of the events and also through these connections with other popular heroes of the biblical tradition.

¹¹ David Rhoads, "Performance Events in Early Christianity: New Testament in an Oral Context", in Annette Weissenrieder & Robert B. Coote (eds.), *The Interface of Orality and Writing. Speaking, Seeing, Writing in the Shaping of New Genres* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 168-169.

¹² Harm W. Hollander, "The Words of Jesus: From Oral Tradition to Written Record in Paul and Q", *Novum Testamentum* 42 (2000), pp. 340-357, espec. 351-354.

¹³ Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History - History as Story* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 138-144.

Thecla as a virgin (παρθένος)

At the beginning of the *APTh* Thecla is described as a young παρθένος, who were in the middle of the process which would turn her into a woman.¹⁴ Del Cerro, in his study about the women featured in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, defines a similar profile shared by Thecla, Maximila in the *Acts of Andrew*, and Drusiana and Migdonia in the *Acts of Thomas*: 1) They are all noble women, married –betrothed in the case of Thecla– to a mighty man of their own cities. 2) They are beautiful women, desired by men. 3) Each of these women finally converts into Christianity. 4) None of them have children. 5) They are not only chaste, but also pious and discreet. 6) In every situation, they are more solid and purposeful than their husbands or fiancé.¹⁵ In the case of Thecla, the action determining her whole story is her conversion and her renouncing to marry Thamyras. Indeed, this is a common motif of the female characters featured in the Apocryphal Acts which shows the break of the future expectations of a normal woman of this time by the adoption of an ascetical way of life.¹⁶

The conversion of Thecla implies the adoption of a certain ascetic way of life. She renounces marriage, but, at the same time, refuses any food or drink and focuses only on Paul's preaching. Even if the scene described in *APTh* 7-8 could be interpreted as some kind of *signa amoris* experienced by Thecla,¹⁷ her bizarre behavior, defined by her relatives

¹⁴ Cornelia B. Horn, "Suffering Children, Parental Authority and the Quest for Liberation?: A Tale of Three Girls in the *Acts of Paul (and Thecla)*, the *Act(s) of Peter*, the *Acts of Nerseus and Achilleus* and the *Epistle of Pseudo-Titus*", in Amy-Jill Levine & Maria Mayo Robbins (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha* (Cleveland: A&C Black, 2006), p. 123.

¹⁵ Gonzalo Del Cerro, *Las mujeres en los Hechos Apócrifos de los Apóstoles* (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 2003), pp. 23-26.

¹⁶ Ross S. Kraemer, "The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity", *Signs* 6 (1980), pp. 298-307.

¹⁷ An interesting overview on these scenes is made by Eyl, who highlights the absence of the visual component in the first scene in which Thecla gets in touch with Paul in comparison with Greek novels of that time, where its importance is major to the beginning of the love-story: Jennifer Eyl, "Why Thekla Does Not See Paul: Visual Perception and the Displacement of Erōs in the *Acts of Paul and Thekla*", in Marília P. Futre Pinheiro, Judith Perkins & Richard Pervo (eds.), *The*

in terms of madness (*παραπληξία*), perfectly matches with some of the most widespread principles of the ascetic way of life based on a conscious and well-established *imitatio Christi* (abandonment of material world to focus on the spiritual, fasts and oration), which might be indeed misunderstood outside Christian communities of that time. In addition, she stays at home and does not leave her household until the situation reaches a critical point with the imprisonment of the apostle. This will be precisely the attitude expected on the part of a young Christian woman of that time, as it is manifested very often in Early Christian literature, where it is recommended to the young women to devote their lives to the pursuit of holiness by leading an ascetic life confined to home.¹⁸

Thus, this attitude of Thecla before Paul's preaching not only anticipates some of the features of the ideal of ascetic young women from Early Christianity onwards, but also her own way of life by the end of the story of the *APTh*, expanded elsewhere, on the appended endings of the story narrating the end of the life of Thecla in Seleukeia or even on the fifth century *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*. Furthermore, it is very well known that in Early Christianity the adoption of an ascetic way of life prepared people to face persecutions and martyrdom, as it can be observed, among many others, in Origen's *Exhortatio ad martyrium*.¹⁹ From this point of view, these first ascetic attitudes of Thecla will indicate this prototypical link between asceticism and martyrdom, and show her training to face the trials in Iconium and Antioch, where she evolves to the next level and becomes a martyr (*μάρτυς*).

Once presented as a virgin (*παρθένος*) and a passive character, Thecla needs to become active in order to overcome her natural

Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing & Groningen University Library, 2012), pp. 3-19.

¹⁸ David Amand de Mendieta & Matthieu C. Moons, "Une curieuse homélie grecque inédite sur la virginité adressée aux pères de famille", *Revue Bénédictine* 63 (1953), pp. 211-238.

¹⁹ José Antonio Calvo, *El clero y los religiosos en la Edad Media* (Madrid: Síntesis, 2017), pp. 61-63.

weakness (*ἀσθένεια*),²⁰ and shows an unexpected *ἀνδρεία*, such as other charismatic women of Early Christianity as Blandina or Perpetua,²¹ with the goal of astonishing the readers of the text and using these heroines as examples of the ideal Christian woman. This transformation will take place when Thecla runs away from home and visits Paul in prison, a similar scene to that in which Artemilla and Eubula enter the prison to hear the preaching of Paul in the *Acta Pauli* (AP 3). From a narrative point of view, the scene refers to the first meeting between Paul and Thecla.

ἡ δὲ Θεκλα νυκτὸς περιελομένη τὰ ψέλια ἔδωκεν τῷ πυλωρῷ καὶ ἀνοιγείσης αὐτῇ τῆς θύρας ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὴν φυλακὴν· καὶ δοῦσα τῷ δεσμοφύλακι κάτοπτρον ἀργυροῦν εἰσῆλθεν πρὸς τὸν Παῦλον, καὶ καθίσασα παρὰ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ἤκουσεν τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ. καὶ οὐδὲν ἐδεδοίκει ὁ Παῦλος, ἀλλὰ τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ παρρησίᾳ ἐνεπολιτεύετο· κακείνης ἠῤῥξανεν ἡ πίστις, καταφιλοῦσης τὰ δεσμὰ αὐτοῦ. (APTh 18)

«But Thecla, at night, having loosened her bracelets, gave them to the gatekeeper, who opened the gate for her, and she entered into the prison. And giving to the jailer a silver mirror, she entered to Paul, and she sat by his feet listening to the great things of God. And Paul feared nothing, but living as a free citizen with the confidence of God. And her faith grew, as she was kissing his bonds».²²

The description of the woman sitting at the apostle's feet stresses the special tie between them, comparable perhaps to that between the lovers of Greek novels. As Holzberg suggests,²³ the whole scene is a popular motif among the novelists of the time. A parallel with the

²⁰ Ugo Mattioli, "La donna nel pensiero patrístico", in Renato Uglione (ed.), *Atti del Convegno nazionale di studi su 'La donna nel mondo antico'*. Torino, 21-22-23 Aprile 1986 (Torino: Associazione italiana di cultura classica, 1987), pp. 228-229.

²¹ Ugo Mattioli, *Ἀσθένεια εἰς Ἀνδρεία. Aspetti della femminilità nella letteratura classica, biblica e cristiana antica* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1983), pp. 145-157.

²² Translation of Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, p. 113.

²³ Niklas Holzberg, *The Ancient Novel: An Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 9-10.

secret meeting between Leucippe and Clitophon in Achilles Tatius (II 23) has been suggested for this scene.

Nevertheless, as we shall see, the echoes of the *Gospels* in this scene are clear and evident. At the same moment in the text, Thecla, by becoming an active figure, displaces Paul as the main character of the narration. This internal movement is favored by the change of space in the scene, from Thecla's house (where women stayed at the time) to the prison in which the apostle has been confined.²⁴ In addition, the young woman bribes the gatekeeper of the prison with some bracelets and the jailer with a mirror of silver in order to enter the prison to meet the apostle; this novelesque topic is repeated in latter apocryphal texts, as seen in the *Acts of Thomas* with Migdonia (*A Thom* 151) and in the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* (*AXP* 13).

Once Thecla and Paul are together, the young woman sits at Paul's feet to hear the word of god, a clear allusion to the scene of the *Gospel of Luke* when Mary of Bethany sits at the feet of Jesus to hear him preaching (*Luke* 10, 39). In our opinion, the author of the *APTh* is trying to link the character of Paul to Jesus, and that of Thecla to Mary of Bethany. Thus, he starts to build the personality of Thecla on the basis of one female character of the New Testament.

He even uses a sentence with a similar syntactic structure, by preserving the same disposition of elements, and making slight modifications to its morpho-syntactic features:

[ἡ] καὶ παρακαθεσθεῖσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας τοῦ κυρίου ἤκουεν τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ (*Luke* 10, 39).

«[who] sat at the Lord's feet listening to his words»

καὶ καθίσασα παρὰ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ἤκουσεν τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ (*APTh* 18).

«and she sat by his feet listening to the great things of God»

The scene continues, and the author describes Thecla kissing the chains which bind the apostle. As Brock suggests,²⁵ this might be an

²⁴ Caroline Vander Stichele & Todd C. Penner, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse. Thinking beyond Thecla* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), pp. 88-89.

²⁵ Anne G. Brock, "Genre of the Acts of Paul. One tradition enhancing another", *Apocrypha* 5 (1994), p. 122.

echo of the passage of *Luke* (7:38), in which a woman kisses Jesus' feet. Even if this echo postulated by Brock is only based on the presence of the verb *καταφιλέω*, we have to consider this passage as a secondary inspiration for the author of the *APT* in this scene, since it features other female character with which Thecla might be identified by a Christian reader. To sum up, this passage and the echoes displayed by the author connecting Thecla with these female followers of Jesus is a midway in the evolution of her character, since she becomes a female *ἀκόλουθος* of Paul and, subsequently, of the Christian doctrine.

Thecla as a martyr (μάρτυς) - First martyrdom and first apparition of the cloud

In Early Christianity, Thecla was very popular for being the first female Christian martyr and, accordingly, she was considered the female *πρωτομάρτυς*, as the counterpart of the first male martyr, Stephen, by some authors of Late Antiquity such as Severianus of Gabala (*Caec.* PG 59, 544), the anonymous hagiographer of the above mentioned *Life and Miracles of Thecla* (*VTh.* 1, 11-18), Theodorus Lector (*HE* 3, 440; 3, 344) or Evagrius Scholasticus (*HE* 107, 31; 108, 3), among many others. This fact was stimulated by its double martyrdom in the *APT*.

Her first trial takes place in Iconium. When Thamyras discovers Thecla at the feet of the apostle in the prison, he casts Paul before the governor. The crowd accuses Paul of being a magician, a widespread motif within the acts of martyrs, the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and later in hagiography.²⁶ After that, the governor asks Thecla why she does not want to marry Thamyras and she keeps silent. The silence is broken by her own mother who asks the governor to burn her daughter in a pyre.

²⁶ Gérard Poupon, "L'accusation de magie dans les Actes apocryphes", in François Bovon; Eric Junod & Jean-Daniel Kaestli (eds.), *Les actes apocryphes des apôtres. Christianisme et monde païen* (Genève: Labor et fides, 1981), pp. 71-85; Gabriele Marasco, "L'accusa di magia e i cristiani nella tarda antichità", *Augustinianum* 51 (2011), pp. 367-422, espec. 406-418.

The whole scene recreates a typical judgment against a Christian believer including the interrogatory, condemnation and execution of the defendant, as seen in many acts of the martyrs. In general terms, in Early Christianity the behavior of the martyr facing its tragic fate is based on the *imitatio Christi*. This commonplace explains the silence of Thecla, imitating Jesus' attitude before both the High Priest (*Mark* 14:66) and Pilate (*Matthew* 27:14; *Mark* 15:4). Then, Paul will be scourged and Thecla condemned to be burnt. Right before the start of her first martyrdom, in *APTh* 21, the young woman is compared with a lamb looking for its shepherd (ἡ δὲ Θέκλα ὡς ἀμνὸς ἐν ἐρήμῳ περισκοπεῖ τὸν ποιμένα, οὕτως ἐκείνη τὸν Παῦλον ἐζήτει), an unequivocal and double allusion to the *Gospel of John*, where the "Lamb of God" appears (*John* 1:29 and 1:36: ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) as well as the pericope of the good shepherd through the term ποιμήν related in this case to Paul (*John* 10:11-16).

In the next chapter, *APTh* 22, the martyrdom starts and here one can find the first scene in which the cloud is featured:

οἱ δὲ παῖδες καὶ αἱ παρθένοι ἤνεγκαν ξύλα καὶ χόρτον ἵνα Θέκλα κατακῆ. ὡς δὲ εἰσῆχθη γυμνή, ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ ἡγεμὼν καὶ ἐθαύμασεν τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ δύναμιν. ἔστρωσαν δὲ τὰ ξύλα καὶ ἐκέλευσαν αὐτὴν οἱ δῆμιοι ἐπιβῆναι τῇ πυρᾷ· ἡ δὲ τὸν τύπον τοῦ σταυροῦ ποιησαμένη ἐπέβη τῶν ξύλων· οἱ δὲ ὑψήψαν. καὶ μεγάλου πυρὸς λάμψαντος οὐχ ἤψατο αὐτῆς τὸ πῦρ· ὁ γὰρ θεὸς σπλαγχμισθεὶς ἤχον ὑπόγειον ἐποίησεν, καὶ **νεφέλη** ἄνωθεν ἐπεσκίασεν ὕδατος πλήρης καὶ χαλάζης, καὶ ἐξεχύθη πᾶν τὸ κύτος, ὡς πολλοὺς κινδυνεῦσαι καὶ ἀποθανεῖν, καὶ τὸ πῦρ σβεσθῆναι τὴν δὲ Θέκλαν σωθῆναι. (*APTh* 22)

«And the young ones and virgins brought wood and hay, in order that Thecla might be burned. But as she was brought in, naked, the Governor wept and marveled at the power in her. But the executioners spread the wood and commanded her to go up upon the pyre, But Thecla, making the sign of a cross, went upon the wood. But they set it on fire from underneath. Even though a great fire was shining, it did not touch her. For God who has compassion caused an underground roaring, and a cloud from above full of water and hail,

and all of the contents were poured out, so that many were at risk and died, and the fire was extinguished and Thecla was saved».²⁷

In this first trial, it is clear that the cloud appears as a divine symbol and represents the power of god and his assistance to his new believer and martyr. This cloud is full of rain and hail (ὕδατος πλήρης καὶ χαλάζης) and does not only extinguish the pyre prepared to burn the young woman, but also attacks the population of the city that dares to kill Thecla. This protection offered by God would be a gift for her in return for her renunciation to marriage and conversion. The author tries to connect the motif of the cloud and the protection offered by God, akin to the one driving and protecting the Israelites in *Exodus*.²⁸ This time, the author of the *APTh* would follow the Old Testament imagery, by indicating the relationship between the cloud and the divine power, but the passage, reinterpreted, as suggested by Barrier, under the light of *Matthew 17:5*,²⁹ contains other interesting motifs related to the book of *Revelation*. Thus, there are some apocalyptic elements controlled by God, who uses them to save Thecla at the end of the chapter, such as the presence of an underground roaring (ὑπόγειον ἐποίησεν) and hailstorm (χάλαζα).

Both elements appear in *Rev 11:19*, which indicates the intention of the author of the *APTh* to relate the scene with the apocalyptic universe. The presence of hail (χάλαζα) is a motif echoing the Old Testament tradition. In *Exod 9:19-29*, hail is controlled by Moses thanks to the intervention of God to punish the Egyptians and free the people of Israel. Then, in the book of *Revelation*, it is interpreted as an apocalyptic element to punish impious people.

This intention agrees with the hailstorm appearing in *APTh* and with that of the martyrdom of Paul in Ephesus in the *Acts of Paul* (*AP P.5*), where those supporting the condemnation of Paul, as the people of Iconium defending the martyrdom of Thecla, are severely punished and many of them finally perish. Even so, in the scene of the martyrdom of Paul, the previous cloud does not appear and the

²⁷ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, p. 124.

²⁸ Gertz, "The Miracle at the Sea", pp. 91-120.

²⁹ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, pp. 125-126.

author even highlights that the sky was completely clear before the storm (*αἰθρίου ὄντος τοῦ ἀέρος*).

Moreover, in a previous work, we have already showed the thematic resemblances of this chapter, especially concerning the presence of the pyre, with other similar scenes in both Hellenistic (King Cresus in Herodotus, Chariclea in Heliodorus) and Jewish tradition (The Three Young Men in the book of *Daniel*), but the presence of the cloud in the *APTh* is much more significant due to its new apparitions in other capital scenes of the story. In any case, the connection of *APTh* 22 with the texts of Hellenistic and Jewish tradition is due to the display of folkloristic motifs developed in different ways in each one of these scenes.³⁰

In Herodotus' *Histories* one can find a similar scene in which it is featured a fire and some clouds extinguish it thanks to a divine intervention. King Cresus is condemned to be burned by Cyrus, king of Persia, but, as Cresus had previously invoked the god Apollo, some clouds (*νέφεα*) appear and the pouring rain extinguishes the fire (*Hdt.* I 86-87).

In Heliodorus' novel, as in the book of *Daniel*, the motif shared with *APTh* 22 is not the presence of the cloud, but the fact that the flames can't touch Chariclea's body. In this case, the female character, Chariclea, implores the help of the Sun, the Earth and other divinities, and the fire encircles the woman but is not able to touch and hurt her (*Hel.* VIII 9, 12-13). Even if Mangogna in her commentary precisely indicates the influence of the erotic Greek novel on this passage,³¹ it is impossible to consider Heliodorus' novel as the source of this scene in the *APTh*, since the former must be dated between the 3rd and 4th century.³²

On the other hand, in the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the book of *Daniel* is also featured the same motif. The connection of *APTh* 22 with this scene is absolutely clear from both

³⁰ Ángel Narro, "Apoc. 11, 19 y su influencia en las escenas martiriales de los Hechos de Pablo", in Jordi Redondo & Ramon Torné (eds.), *Apocalipsi, mil·lenarisme i viatges a l'inframón: d'Odiseu a Bernat Metge* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 2014), pp. 81-95.

³¹ Mangogna, *Commentario agli Atti di Paolo e Tecla*, p. 123.

³² Emilio Crespo, *Las Etiópicas o Teágenes y Cariclea* (Madrid: Gredos, 1979), pp. 12-21.

literary and linguistic perspectives. The motif of the flames unable to touch the body of the condemned man or woman is repeated, and the author of the *APT* even reproduces the same words as used in the *Septuaginta* with slight variations:

οὐχ ἤψατο αὐτῆς τὸ πῦρ (*APT* 22)
 «the fire did not touch her»
 καὶ οὐχ ἤψατο αὐτῶν καθόλου τὸ πῦρ (*Dan* 3:50)
 «and the fire did not touch them at all»

This latter passage is, in our opinion, the real inspiration of our author, who consciously echoes it to establish the link between Thecla and the Three Young Men. On the other hand, the rest of thematic resemblances are related to a display of a very widespread folkloristic motif in the Hellenistic literary tradition rather than a direct intertextual relationship, namely the case of the scene of Chariclea's ordeal because of the date of composition of this work.

The evidence of the effects provoked in the Christian readers of the text by the inclusion of such an echo, i.e. the identification of the referent, clearly appears from the very beginning of the diffusion of the *APT*. In fact, the miracle on behalf of Thecla is compared to that of the Three Young Men by at least two authors of early Christian times: Macarius of Egypt (4th century) and the anonymous hagiographer composing the *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla* (5th century). The former exhorts his audience to stand firm against the threats of the enemies, by remembering how the three young men and Thecla resist the flames of the pyre with faith and love until their definitive salvation thanks to the divine intervention (*Serm.* 4, 6, 4). The latter compares both miracles and stresses the importance of the divine intervention on behalf of Thecla (*VTh.* 13, 64-76).

Finally, Barrier underlines the similarities of Thecla in this first trial scene with other virgins in the ancient novel because of the common theme that divine interventions bring about the salvation of pure maidens, and relates the presence of the cloud (νεφέλη) to *Matt* 17:5 (ἔτι αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος ἰδοὺ νεφέλη φωτεινὴ ἐπεσκίασεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἰδοὺ

φωνή ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης λέγουσα), where one can also find the aorist of the verb ἐπισκιάζω (ἐπεσκίασεν).³³ This verb, meaning «throw a shade upon, overshadow» (s.v. ἐπισκιάζω Liddell-Scott), is related in the Old (Ps 90,4) and New Testaments (Luke 1:35; Acts 5:15), as in the case of this scene, to the protection provided by God.

In our opinion, the reuse of the motif of the cloud is clearly inherited from the *Exodus*' story. However, the whole scene is created with the help of other Old Testament motifs such as the hail (χάλαζα), reinterpreted again in the light of the book of *Revelation*, as a punishing element against the enemies of God, and the fire unable to touch the body of the young woman, as in the scene of the book of *Daniel*.³⁴

After suffering her first trial, therefore, Thecla will be no longer a simple παρθένος, but also a μάρτυς, and her evolutionary process will keep going to become an ἀπόστολος at the end of the text, even if already in *APTh* 24 Thecla pronounces a prayer to thank God for the reunion with Paul, very similar to that of the apostles while celebrating their liberation by the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:24). Thus, both prayers are featured in a very similar context after an episode of prison.

πάτερ, ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν (*ATh* 24, 3-4)
 «Father, the one who made the heavens and the earth»³⁵
 δέσποτα, σὺ ὁ ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν (*Acts* 4:24)
 «Lord, you who made the heavens and the earth»

Once Thecla is portrayed as a martyr, the first part of the story ends. However, the turning point takes place in *APTh* 26, when she will start to become more prominent and Paul will disappear until the end of the story. They go together to the Syrian Antioch but the attempts of Alexander to embrace Thecla provoke a new martyrdom for Thecla.

³³ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, pp. 125-126.

³⁴ Scenes of this sort will be very common in Hagiographical late-antique and byzantine texts: Juan José Pomer Monferrer, “Focs que no cremen en l'hagiografia tardoantiga i bizantina”, *Studia Philologica Valentina* 20 (2018), pp. 141-174.

³⁵ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, p. 130.

Paul and Thecla arrive together at Antioch, and when Alexander tries to embrace Thecla, Paul remains unexplainably passive. This is maybe one of the most significant passages of the text and probably the most discussed, since the behavior of Paul before the aggressiveness of Alexander is not one that the reader might expect.

It is very interesting to realize that in this scene occurs a significant change of roles between Thecla and Paul. If in the scene analyzed above (*APTh* 18) Paul could be identified with Jesus and Thecla with Mary of Bethany through this conscious echo introduced by the author of the *APTh*, in this scene, in which another important echo is displayed, Thecla will be related to Jesus, while Paul assumes the role of his own fellow Peter.

The key to understanding the whole process is the moment when Alexander asks Paul about Thecla. Paul's answer astonishes the reader (*APTh* 26: οὐκ οἶδα τὴν γυναῖκα ἣν λέγεις, οὐδὲ ἔστιν ἐμή) and his attitude recalls Peter's denials (*Matt* 26:69-75; *Mark* 14:66-71; *Luke* 22:56-62; *John* 18:15; 18:25-27). In the *Gospel*, Jesus announces to Peter that he would deny and disown him three times (*Matt* 26:31-35; *Mark* 14:27-31; *John* 13:36-38). In *APTh*, the previous prophecy does not appear, but a similarity between Thecla and Jesus through the linguistic parallels with passages in *Matthew* and *Mark* can be observed. The former, reflecting the second denial of the apostle, is perhaps the most similar to that of the *APTh*.

καὶ πάλιν ἠρνήσατο μετὰ ὄρκου ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον (*Matt* 26:72).

«He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man"»

τότε ἤρξατο καταθεματίζειν καὶ ὀμνύειν ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον (*Matt* 26:74).

«Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man"»

ὁ δὲ ἤρξατο ἀναθεματίζειν καὶ ὀμνύειν ὅτι οὐκ οἶδα τὸν ἄνθρωπον τοῦτον ὃν λέγετε (*Mark* 14:71).

«He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about."»

After Paul's denial, the scene continues, as Alexander attempts to embrace Thecla. The level of drama in the scene increases, when

Thecla looks at the apostle searching for help but the apostle doesn't do anything. In this precise moment, we attend to the definitive creation of the heroine. Thecla already has a main role in the narration and from this moment onwards she even replaces Paul as the main and almost unique main character of the story. By introducing other echo recalling the New Testament, in this case pointing directly to the figure of Jesus, Thecla becomes the main character of the story, her life clearly imitates that of Jesus (*imitatio Christi*) and acquires even a kind of divine status for the readers of the text.

Thecla as a martyr (μάρτυς) – Second martyrdom and second apparition of the cloud

Thecla cries out and tears Alexander's cloak. This man brings her before the governor, who condemns her to the beasts. The decision of the governor provokes the disagreement of the crowd of women supporting Thecla during all her trials in Antioch. They protest against the condemnation by shouting *κακή κρίσις, ἀνοσία κρίσις*, similar words to the ones we find in the *Martyrdom of Carpus, Pappylas and Agathonice* (45: *δεινή κρίσις καὶ ἄδικα προστάγματα*).³⁶ In addition, in this scene appears for the very first time the noblewoman Tryphaena, whose name is mentioned in *Rom 16:12*, with a certain Tryphosa. This woman will host and protect Thecla until her martyrdom. A special bond is born between them. This relationship has been traditionally analyzed from a social point of view in terms of patronage,³⁷ a kind of *do ut des* in which Tryphaena offers Thecla her protection and receives from her some spiritual goods, such as the entrance of her daughter

³⁶ James Keith Elliot, "Imitations in Literature and life: Apocryphal and martyrdom", en Jeffrey Bingham (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 90.

³⁷ Magda Misset-Van de Weg, "A wealthy woman named Tryphaena: patroness of Thecla of Iconium", in Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Kampen: Pharos, 1996), pp. 27-35.

Falconilla in the kingdom of God,³⁸ which has been a special demand of the deceased in a dream vision.³⁹

Thus, Thecla, little by little, becomes more prominent and her character attains an extraordinary divine power. This supernatural feature of Thecla is shown in the first part of her second martyrdom, in which one can observe in outline the normal protocol for those who have been condemned to the beasts, who were dragged naked to the arena while their charges were read in public.⁴⁰ In the case of Thecla, the miracle takes place when the she-lion, who should have killed her, licks her feet and sits next to her.

The author of the *APTh* chooses an animal representing fierceness and virility.⁴¹ Even so, the same motif appears in the Old Testament book of *Daniel*, with whom coincides the iconographic representation of Thecla in Early Christianity,⁴² and in the *Acts of Paul* in the famous scene of the baptized lion (*Pap. Bodmer 6*).⁴³ In our opinion, it would be a folkloristic motif, very popular among the Christian apocryphal writings,⁴⁴ used in this case to establish a link between Thecla and Daniel, and the protection offered by God in both scenes.

On the other hand, if in *APTh* 18 Thecla sat at the feet of Paul as Mary of Bethany in *Luke* 10:39, in *APTh* 31, immediately before the second part of her second martyrdom, she declares to be a *δούλη θεοῦ*,

³⁸ Magda Misset-Van de Weg, "Answers to the plights of an ascetic woman named Thecla", in Amy-Jill Levine & Maria Mayo Robbins (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha* (Cleveland: A&C Black, 2006), pp. 157-161.

³⁹ Concerning the dreams in Antiquity and Early Christian times: J. S. Hanson, "Dreams and visions in the Graeco-Roman World and Early Christianity", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 23 (1980), pp. 1395-1427.

⁴⁰ Donald G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Malden: Wiley, 2007), pp. 327-328.

⁴¹ Tamas Adamik, "The baptized lion in the Acts of Paul", in Jan N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla* (Kampen: Pharos, 1996), pp. 60-74.

⁴² Waldemar Deonna, "Daniel, le 'Maître des Fauves': À propos d'une lampe chrétienne du Musée de Genève", *Artibus Asiae* 12 (1949), pp. 132-134.

⁴³ Rodolphe Kasser, "Acta Pauli 1959", *Revue d'Histoire et Philosophie Religieuses* 40 (1960), pp. 45-57; Israel Muñoz Gallarte, "Fantasía y simbología en los Hechos Apócrifos de los Apóstoles: El relato del león bautizado en Acta Pauli", *Studia Philologica Valentina* 20 (2018), pp. 89-110.

⁴⁴ Ángel Narro, "Ecos de la πότνια y el δεσπότης θηρῶν en los cinco principales Hechos apócrifos de los apóstoles", *Minerva* 28 (2015), pp. 185-220.

a formula repeated later in *APTh* 37 and, as Mangogna points out,⁴⁵ echoing the words of Mary in *Luke* 1:38, when she admits to be a δούλη κυρίου. Indeed, in *1 Pet* (2:16) he proclaims the freedom of the Christians, even if he encourages them to behave as “slaves of God” (ὡς ἐλεύθεροι, καὶ μὴ ὡς ἐπικάλυμμα ἔχοντες τῆς κακίας τὴν ἐλευθερίαν, ἀλλ’ ὡς θεοῦ δοῦλοι). However, this concept of the “slave of God” may be also related to the Pauline universe. Actually, in the *Epistle to Titus* (1:1) the apostle introduces himself as such a slave: Παῦλος δοῦλος θεοῦ, ἀπόστολος δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

Indeed, in the two following chapters (*APTh* 32-33) the author refers to the last part of the martyrdom of Thecla using several elements also present in the martyrdom of Paul in Ephesus (*Par. Hamb.* 4-5). Like the she-lion, here a lion runs to the apostle (ἦλθε δρομαίως) and sits (ἀνεκλίθη) at his legs (παρὰ τὰ σκέλη) in this case, a little variation of the passage of *APTh* 33: καὶ πικρὰ λέαινα προσδραμοῦσα εἰς τοὺς πόδας αὐτῆς ἀνεκλίθη. After the arrival of the lion Paul is accused of being a magician and the lion that he had baptized in Jericho is recognized.

Nevertheless, with regards to the *APTh*, the supernatural elements do not stop here. Actually, in *APTh* 34 takes place the most known scene of the text: the self-baptism of Thecla in a pool full of marine beasts.⁴⁶

τότε εἰσβάλλουσιν πολλὰ θηρία, ἐστώσης αὐτῆς καὶ ἐκτετακυίας τὰς χεῖρας καὶ προσευχομένης. ὡς δὲ ἐτέλεσεν τὴν προσευχὴν, ἐστράφη καὶ εἶδεν ὄρυγμα μέγα πλήρες ὕδατος, καὶ εἶπεν νῦν καιρὸς λούσασθαι με. καὶ ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν λέγουσα· ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὑστέρᾳ ἡμέρᾳ βαπτίζομαι. καὶ ἰδοῦσαι αἱ γυναῖκες καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὄχλος ἔκλαυσαν λέγοντες· μὴ βάλῃς ἑαυτὴν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ· ὥστε καὶ τὸν ἡγεμόνα δακρῦσαι, ὅτι τοιοῦτον ἀάλλος φῶκαι ἔμελλον ἐσθίειν. ἢ μὲν οὖν ἔβαλεν ἑαυτὴν εἰς τὸ ὕδωρ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ· αἱ δὲ φῶκαι πυρὸς ἀστραπῆς φέγγος

⁴⁵ Mangogna, *Commentario agli Atti di Paolo e Tecla*, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Bruno Lavagnini, “S. Tecla nella vasca delle foche e gli spettacoli in acqua”, *Byzantion* 33 (1963), pp. 185-190; David Lincicum, “Thecla’s auto-immersion (*APTh* 4.2-14 [3.27-39]): a baptism for dead?”, *Apocrypha* 21 (2010), pp. 203-213.

ἰδοῦσαι νεκραὶ ἐπέπλευσαν. καὶ ἦν περὶ αὐτὴν νεφέλη πυρός, ὥστε μήτε τὰ θηρία ἀπτεσθαι αὐτῆς, μήτε θεωρεῖσθαι αὐτὴν γυμνήν. (APTh 34)
 «Then they sent many wild beasts, while she stood and extended her hands and was praying. But as she was completing the prayer, she turned and saw a great ditch full of water, and said: “Now is time for me to wash myself.” And she cast herself into the water, saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself for the last day.” And looking on, the women and all the crowd cried out saying “Do not cast yourself into the water,” so that even the governor was weeping, because seals were about to eat her. But the seals looking upon a light of fiery lighting floated up as corpses. And there was a cloud of fire around her, so that neither the beasts could touch her, nor could they see her naked.»⁴⁷

This is the climax of the story –or actually the second climax of the story if we accept the division of the text in two main blocks⁴⁸ and the cloud protects again Thecla from death. Anyway, in this case the cloud is even more powerful and saves the young woman not only from the marine beasts of the pool, but also from the immoderate sights of the spectators in the arena. As Pervo points out it is a “clear sign of divine aid”.⁴⁹

Vouaux precises the relationship between this cloud and the one accompanying the Israelite people in the desert,⁵⁰ even if he proposes again the inspiration in *Matt 17:5*. In this case, the cloud is different since it is a cloud of fire (νεφέλη πυρός), suggesting protection as it appears in *Ps (105)*.⁵¹ As the rest of the scholars who have dealt with this text, we have to stress again the influence of the Old Testament imagery and also underline the repetition of the motif in the second climatic moment of the story of Thecla. As we have pointed out a few lines above, Thecla, who was naked during this trial, is protected by

⁴⁷ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, pp. 160-161.

⁴⁸ Margaret P. Aymer, “Hailstorms and Fireballs: Redaction, World Creation, and Resistance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*”, *Semeia* 79 (1997), pp. 45-61.

⁴⁹ Pervo, *The Acts of Paul*, p. 165.

⁵⁰ Vouaux, *Les Actes de Paul et ses lettres apocryphes*, pp. 212-213.

⁵¹ Adele Berlin, “Interpreting Torah Traditions in Psalms”, in Natalie B. Dohrmann & David H. Stern (eds.), *Interpretation and Cultural Exchange. Comparative Exegesis in Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 34-35.

the cloud from the beasts and from the immoderate sights of the spectators,⁵² which corroborates her condition of *παρθένος*. The cloud, indeed, would develop a double function: protecting her body from the beasts, which even feels the supernatural power of the cloud, during her self-baptism,⁵³ and also hiding her naked body in this public setting.⁵⁴

The passage clearly expresses the goal of the cloud with the final consecutive sentence introduced by *ὥστε*. Barrier, with whom we agree concerning this statement, points out the use of the *Old Testament* imagery in this passage in which the cloud echoes other texts such as *Exodus* (13:21) and *Ezekiel* (1:4). In addition, he distinguishes the *νεφέλη* appearing in this section of the *APTh* from the text of *Exodus*, in which the cloud has major significance. In *Exodus*, instead of a cloud of fire (*νεφέλη πυρός*), it is a pillar / column of cloud at daylight and pillar of fire at night (13:22: *στῦλος τῆς νεφέλης ἡμέρας καὶ ὁ στῦλος τοῦ πυρός νυκτός*).⁵⁵ Following Groß⁵⁶ this motif can be considered as an *Old Testament's* echo, then developed in a different manner in the *APTh* and expressed in terms of “cloud” (*νεφέλη*) and not of “pillar” (*στῦλος*), even if it was the same igneous phenomenon in Régerart's opinion.⁵⁷ Actually, the cloud in our text cannot be associated with the tent of meeting in the Hebrew Bible, a sanctuary

⁵² Virginia Burrus, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity”, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10 (1994), p. 29.

⁵³ Willy Rordorf, “Quelques jalons pour une interprétation symbolique des *Actes de Paul*”, in David H. Warren, Anne Graham Brock & David W. Pao *Early Christian Voices in Texts, Traditions and Symbols. Essays in Honor of François Bovon* (Boston & Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 253-254.

⁵⁴ Gail Corrington Streete, *Redeemed Bodies. Women Martyrs in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 45.

⁵⁵ Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, pp. 160-163.

⁵⁶ Walter Groß, “Die Wolkensäule und die Feuersäule in Ex. 13-14: Literarkritische, redaktionsgeschichtliche und quellenkritische Erwägungen”, en Georg Braulik; Walter Groß & Sean E. McEvenue (eds.), *Biblische Theologie und gesellschaftlicher Wandel: Festschrift Norbert Lohfink* (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), pp. 142-165.

⁵⁷ Philippe Régerart, “La colonne de feu et sa symbolique dans la littérature chrétienne de l'Antiquité”, in François Vion-Delphin & François Lassus (eds.), *Les hommes et le feu de l'Antiquité du feu mythique et bienfaiteur au feu dévastateur. Actes du colloque de l'Association interuniversitaire de l'Est, Besançon, 26-27 septembre 2003* (Paris: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2007), pp. 44-46.

where God would descend in a cloud to deliver oracles as in *Exodus*,⁵⁸ because here it is rather a sign of the divine protection towards Thecla. In this passage it is important to notice the echo of other biblical passage such as *1 Cor* 10:1-2, where Paul considers the cloud as a sign of God,⁵⁹ remembering how Israelites stayed and were baptized under the cloud. The combination of both elements, namely the apparition of the cloud and the baptism, cannot be casual regarding this chapter. It may indicate that the author of the *APTh* would have constructed this scene evoking this passage of *1 Cor* and all the Old Testament background behind the motif of the cloud.

Thecla as an apostle (ἀπόστολος)

During the second martyrdom of Thecla in Antioch, she is already portrayed somewhat as an apostle. The crowd of women supporting Thecla during her trials and the conversion of Tryphaena, a pagan noblewoman, indicates the beginning of a kind of evangelistic mission started by Thecla. However, this role of Thecla will be clearly expressed after her liberation. Once freed, she starts to preach the Christian doctrine in Tryphaena's house and meets up with Paul in Mira, where the plot of the *Acts of Paul* continues. In this last scene, the character of Thecla will suffer a new evolution: Paul appoints her as an apostle (*APTh* 41: ὑπαγε καὶ δίδασκε τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ), and, by doing so, Thecla completes her route. She has been introduced as a *παρθένος*, but after a certain time she becomes *μάρτυς* and finally reaches the status of *ἀπόστολος*.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 309-310.

⁵⁹ Peter P. Enns, "Exodus/New Exodus", in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids (Mi) & London: Baker Academic & SPCK, 2005), pp. 215-217; Karl Oval Sandnes, "Seal and Baptism in Early Christianity", in David Hellholm; Tor Vegge; Øyvind Nordeval & Christer Hellholm (eds.), *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 1465-1466.

⁶⁰ Susan E. Hulen, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

In addition, by the end of the text the author of the *APTh* seems to stress the evangelistic task of Thecla when he declares that she has enlightened many people (*APTh* 43). Even if her condition of apostle could be further debated, the text of the *APTh* clearly expresses this fact and in the following centuries different authors will consider Thecla in this regard. In the addition of the end of the *APTh* contained in codex *Oxon. Barocc. gr. 180 (G)* (58), she receives this honor, and later she is considered an apostle by the hagiographer of her *Life and Miracles (VTh. prol. 2; prol. 35)*, by Patriarch Nicephorus I (*Refut.* 113, 31) or by the *Synaxarium of Constantinople*.

In these appended endings of the story of Thecla, the cloud appears again, in this case in the first line of the codex G. Anyway, here a significant difference can be observed: the cloud is not protecting Thecla, but guiding her to Seleukeia (καὶ νεφέλη φωτεινὴ ὠδήγει αὐτήν), as we can imagine, to accomplish her evangelistic task in her new role of apostle and holy woman. As in the first martyrdom of Thecla, the mention of the cloud would echoes *Matt 17:5*, where the syntagm νεφέλη φωτεινὴ appeared.

The main idea of the cloud as a divine sign still appears in the last passage featuring this motif, but in this case one can also consider the cloud appearing in *Exod 13:21*, leading Moses and the Israelites in their flight from Egypt.⁶¹

The author of codex G should perfectly know the story of Thecla and interprets the motif of the cloud not only as a divine sign helping the young woman in her trials but rather as a sign of her holiness, a supernatural element accompanying her in every struggle. The author of codex G realizes that the motif of the cloud is repeated in the two most important scenes of the story of Thecla and, for that reason, he uses the same motif to link his own version of the end of the life of Thecla with the primitive text containing her story. Thus, the author of codex G would be using the same narrative strategy as the author of the *APTh*, by echoing the cloud, in this precise context.

In addition, in order to verify the link with the cloud appearing in codex G and the other two clouds of the *APTh*, another one of the

⁶¹ Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla. A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 43.

appended endings of the story edited by Kaestli and Rordorf must be revisited.⁶² Among the many endings of the story of Thecla, appears precisely the codex G (text III for these authors) and also a text borrowed from Symeon Metaphrastes based on the main additions to the life of Thecla rewriting the tale of the physician's plot against the saint and her entering alive into the rock.⁶³ The text indicates how Thecla was arriving at Seleukeia guided by the cloud:

ὁδηγῶ δὲ χρωμένη τῷ φωτὶ ἐκείνης τῆς νεφέλης, ἀνάγεται πρὸς τὸ ὄρος ὃ
 ἐλέγετο Καλαμών εἴπουν Ῥοδίων·
 «And after using the light of that cloud as a guide, she was driven to
 the mountain called Calamon or Rhodeon».

At first sight it may seem a simple indication about the cloud, but the presence of the demonstrative ἐκείνης opens the door to broader interpretation. Why did Symeon Metaphrastes use this demonstrative with the cloud? What did he mean? In our opinion, two possibilities could explain this addition. The first one would be that Symeon Metaphrastes realized that Thecla was guided by a cloud like the Israelite people in *Exodus* and this ἐκείνης would, therefore, indicate that he had previously established this connection between the cloud of Thecla and the Old Testament imagery. The second one would be, instead, that he realized that the cloud had appeared in the two passages of the *APTh* discussed above and this ἐκείνης would recall the other two moments in which the cloud was featured.

Both hypothesis could be valid and ought to be taken into account, even if, in our opinion, the second one would be the most likely. We have to consider that this rewriting of the ending of the life of Thecla was following the text of the *APTh* in manuscripts 4 and 38 in Kaestli and Rordorf's list.⁶⁴ Therefore, it makes much more sense that Symeon Metaphrastes would recall the cloud appearing in the text

⁶² Jean-Daniel Kaestli & Willy Rordorf, "La fin de la vie de Thècle dans les manuscrits des *Actes de Paul et Thècle*. Édition des textes additionnels", *Apocrypha* 25 (2014), pp. 9-101.

⁶³ Kaestli and Rordorf, "La fin de la vie de Thècle", pp. 93-101.

⁶⁴ Kaestli and Rordorf, "La fin de la vie de Thècle", pp. 93-101.

that the manuscripts contain. Thus, Symeon Metaphrastes' version of the end of the life of Thecla may serve as an evidence of the connection of the cloud of Thecla as an element related to her indicating again the protection provided by God.

Thecla in Early Christianity

Nevertheless, towards the end of the story of Thecla and in the continuation of her story in the different appended endings of her life, one can observe an ulterior and important evolution of her personality. Thecla is one of the most representative holy women of the first hagiographic *floruit* in Late Antiquity and among the different texts about her life, one can perfectly track the evolution of her character and her adaptation to new models of holiness. From this point of view, Thecla embodies the evolution from the hagiography focused on martyrs and that describing the ascetic way of life of the first wave of monks and hermits in the deserts. With the end of Christian persecutions, a new model of holy man is postulated on the basis of the practice of ascetism and the physical separation (*ἀναχωρήσις*) from the world in order to live in the deserts (*ἐρημος*), by dedicating the life to pray and acquiring a better connection with God. From these practices, the first monastic communities will be organized and developed.

This way of life was especially followed by men, but also by some women. Many different legends about women disguised as men will appear in Late Antiquity to narrate the stories of these first female nuns. Even if many of them could be very probably fictional creations, it is noticeable to stress that the beginning of this narrative motif in Christian literature about women had its roots in the *APTh*.⁶⁵ In

⁶⁵ For further information about this motif and its literary and historical implications: John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif", *Viator* 5 (1974), pp. 1-32; Evelyne Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance", *Studi Medievali* 17 (1976), pp. 597-623; Sylvia Schein, "The 'Female-Men of God' and 'Men who were women'. Female Saints and Holy Land Pilgrimage during the Byzantine Period", *Hagiographica* 5 (1998), pp. 1-36.

chapter 25 Thecla cuts off her hair to follow Paul in his evangelistic mission in secure and in *APTh* 40 she wears men's clothing to travel as the disguised nuns of Late Antiquity.

All these details about the construction of the character of Thecla do not go unnoticed by the writers expanding her life in the appended endings. Her story ends rudely in *APTh* 43 with her flight to Seleukia and death, but curiosity stimulates the creation of new narrations about her life and death in that city. One of the most significant of these versions is that contained in codex G, in which Thecla will be portrayed as a hermit living in an ascetic way, enlightening many people and performing healing miracles. Here, one can observe an ulterior evolution of the character of Thecla to finally reach the category of saint (*ἁγία*), as seen in her cult in Seleukia in Late Antiquity described in detail in the 5th century *Life and miracles of Saint Thecla*. Even if this final step goes beyond our focus on this study, since it must deserve further debate, it is interesting to highlight the connections between Thecla's portrait in the *APTh* and the extended versions of her life and subsequent texts about her. Such a personality will evolve and adapt to changing times and to new models of holiness, but some features will continue to be present, such as her virginity, her ascetic way of life or the protection provided by God, as can be seen in her disappearance into a rock opened by God to save her from the band of drunken thugs hired by the doctors of Seleukeia to defile Thecla, as they have lost their business because of her healing abilities. This scene has been interpreted as the achievement of her portrait of *μάρτυς*, since she has previously escaped from a premature death in Iconium and Antioch.⁶⁶

Final remarks

As seen above, in the *APTh* several echoes appear which subtly recall stories narrated in both Old and the New Testament books. The author tries to establish a relationship between his text and other popular stories among his Christian readers and builds the character

⁶⁶ Greene, "(Un)Happily Ever After", pp. 29-32.

of Thecla by comparing her implicitly with other characters featured in these tales. This strategy is developed by the author of the *APTh* to easily define the ἥθος of Thecla, and displayed in the most important moments of the narration.

Thecla very likely is a fictional character since she represents a character concentrating most of the main features attributed to Early Christian female saints. The narrative strategy of echoing these scenes displayed by the author of the *APTh* might be used as a reason in support of this thesis. As a literary creation, her portrait has been compared to other feminine prototypical characters of the Greek novels, as Thecla as well “represents roles and functions that imply certain more or less fixed characteristics”.⁶⁷ In this case, her characterization is metaphorical and draws upon intertextual resonances related to biblical tradition. There are no echoes from Classical literature in the text. The author of the *APTh* refers only to the Scriptures and, even in the case of the presence of motifs unknown in Christian literature, these coincidences can be explained by a common folkloristic origin, then developed in both pagan and Christian novels, in two separated traditions with regards to their own cultural background, but interconnected since both display similar literary or generic patterns and structure.

Progressively, the author of the *APTh* relies on these echoes to establish a link between Thecla and other important individual or collective characters from both Old and New Testament literary tradition. In the first part of this study, it has been demonstrated how Thecla starts becoming a simple παρθένος. After her conversion, she keeps showing the main features of a Christian young woman of that time and an ascetical way of life, actually an initial training to her double martyrdom in Iconium and, later, in Antioch. Afterwards, the author tries to establish a clear link between Thecla and Mary of Bethany in the first critical scene of the *APTh*, namely the first meeting of Paul and Thecla. The motif of the woman sitting at the apostle’s feet echoes the scene of Mary of Bethany at the feet of Jesus. A Christian reader of the *APTh* would probably know the story of Mary of Bethany and then would link both narrations and identify Thecla as

⁶⁷ De Temmerman, “Characterization in the Ancient Novel”, p. 237.

a female follower of Jesus or, in this case, of his doctrine represented by Paul.

The presence of the cloud in the text exploits this strategy. In general terms, it can be said that it is a motif related to God, as in the book of *Exodus* or in *Matt 17:5*. In the *APTh* it indicates the protection and guidance provided by God to Thecla in connection and comparison with the one offered to the Israelites in *Exodus*. The first time the cloud appears is the first martyrdom of Thecla (*APTh 22*), another very important scene of this narration, since it implies her evolution towards the category of martyr (μάρτυς). Here, the cloud is a divine sign protecting the young woman and the fact that this cloud was full of rain and hail is very significant, as hail was a natural element controlled by Moses in *Exodus* to punish the Egyptians and free the people of Israel and, furthermore, one of the apocalyptic signs referred in *Revelation*. In this scene, the cloud serves as a sign of the help and the protection provided by God on the behalf of Thecla and show, on the other hand, the fatal consequences against those attacking Christian believers.

The large scene of the second trial of Thecla in Antioch is much more definitive for this analysis not only because of the martyrdom scene and the reappearing of the cloud, but also because of the denial of Paul regarding Thecla when Alexander asks him about the young woman. This very likely echoes the denials of Peter in *Gospel* and the readers of the text would be able to establish a much more significant connection, in this case between Thecla and Jesus. Thus, Thecla starts being a convert, then a female follower of Christian doctrine. In her martyrdom she becomes not only a martyr, but also a woman protected by God, and she acquires as well a major role, by being betrayed by Paul and abandoned to her fate.

This denial should be interpreted as a sign of the extreme *imitatio Christi* with which the author of the *APTh* tries to identify Thecla. Even if the abandonment of Paul has been a much-debated topic among modern scholars, it seems to be minor for the author of the text. In our opinion, his meditated silence concerning this issue is perfectly understandable if this scene is interpreted as a mere strategy displayed to link the characters of Thecla and Jesus and to move the

story forward in narrative terms. The only goal of the narration is to reach the second martyrdom in Antioch, and, from this point of view, the denial of Paul would be a *coup de théâtre*.

In the second part of the trial, the author uses again several echoes with other popular stories among Christian communities, such as Daniel's, to link Thecla with other legendary heroes for those communities. The she-lion licking Thecla's feet shows the submission of the violence and the wildness to the holiness already acquired by Thecla, who was protected by God from her first trial in Iconium onwards. Later, in the second part of her martyrdom the cloud again has its importance. The link with 1 Cor 10:1-2, is, in our opinion, very clear. Thecla, like the Jewish people mentioned by Paul, is self-baptized under the protection of this cloud, so the author of the *APTh* tries to compare Thecla to the Israelite people protected by God in his readers' minds. In addition, under the cloud she will become a Christian believer *stricto sensu*.

Nevertheless, if in *APTh* 22 the cloud had protected the body of Thecla from the eventual physical attacks from the flames, here (*APTh* 34) it repels the attack of the marine beasts, but also hides her naked body from the immoderate sights of the spectators. In this case, the protection is both physical and spiritual, since the body of Thecla is safeguarded and her condition of *παρθένος* protected as well by the sudden apparition of the cloud. The effects of the cloud provoke the commotion of the spectators of the trials and the faint of Tryphaena, which will provoke the release of Thecla.

Once freed, her character will continue its evolution until Thecla is made an apostle (*ἀπόστολος*), as it might be interpreted from Paul's words in *APTh* 41. With this last step, Thecla completes her path *παρθένος – μάρτυς – ἀπόστολος* in her quest of holiness and she will be ready to reach the status of saint (*ἁγία*) in the following centuries. Thus, the author of the *APTh* would have built her portrait on the basis of the echoes of other Christian stories to establish a connection in his readers' minds which could help them to interpret properly the scene and link the heroic attitude or the divine protection of this character with the *ἥθος* of Thecla.

This strategy will be also displayed in the appended endings of the *APTh*, especially in codex G, in which the apparition of the luminous

cloud (νεφέλη φωτεινή) is used by its author to indicate this divine protection and guidance,⁶⁸ enlightening the apostolic way of Thecla. Since the cloud is featured in the most dramatic and important scenes of the narration of Thecla, it would become a symbol of this divine protection and guidance on behalf of the young woman in return for having remained chaste. Thus, the cloud could also become an attribute of Thecla and of her condition of woman protected by God, even if her later iconography preferred the usage of other symbols related to her story such as the lions at her feet, a powerful image showing the divine protection on her behalf and her status of holy woman.

⁶⁸ Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, p. 43.