Women Leaders in Early Christianity

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Introduction: A Tale of Two Women

A young girl sits by her window in a Mediterranean town watching a steady stream of women go eagerly into the house opposite. Someone is teaching. The girl can't see who it is, but she can hear his voice across the narrow street and she is transfixed. Despite the best efforts of her mother and her fiancé to distract her, she remains frozen to her seat – like a spider clinging to the window, as her mother puts it. And what teaching has kept her rapt attention? It's a call to a new way of life: to follow Jesus Christ, to put aside the things of this world and—most importantly for this young girl—to reject marriage.

This man was Saint Paul. The young girl was Thecla. She did eventually leave her window, we are told – and her mother and her fiancé. She followed Paul and, after a few adventures, pursued her own career as a Christian preacher and teacher.

About three hundred years later, another young girl of the same age was also due to be married. Her fiancé was making a name for himself in a good profession as a rhetorician. Alas, he died before their wedding day. Other suitors came to seek her hand for she was very beautiful and of a wealthy family. But she was also a young girl with a strong mind. She firmly declared that a promise of marriage was in fact a real marriage, that her fiancé was not utterly dead but a soul awaiting the resurrection and that therefore she could not marry another. She was determined to 'spend the rest of her life by herself'.[1] By this she meant staying in her family home, regulating her life with a routine of prayer, the singing of psalms, and manual labour (probably wool work, baking bread and the other tasks of running a house). Within a few years this young woman had turned her whole household, including her mother, their female servants and slaves, into a Christian ascetic community. A men's community joined them, based in a further corner of the family's country estate. By the end of her life she was the leader of a monastery of both women and men.

This woman was Macrina. Her biographer tells us that her remarkable life was set in train by the secret name she was given by her mother at birth: that name was Thecla.

Women Leaders in Early Christianity: Who, When, Where?

What can this pair of vivid stories about remarkable women tell us about early Christian women leaders? The first story comes from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, an anonymous text which was probably composed in the second century CE, although it clearly mimics the earlier Acts of the Apostles. The second story is taken from the biography, or rather hagiography of Macrina, written by her brother Gregory of Nyssa. Macrina is also mentioned in a couple of epigrams by a family friend and she plays the central role in Gregory's Christian dialogue, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.

We will return to each of these texts in due course. But as for the question of what they can tell us about early Christian women leaders, scholars have been quick to point out that there are many problems with treating them as straightforward historical sources. For a start, there are grave doubts as to whether Thecla even existed, despite the fact that she was 'perhaps the most celebrated female saint… in late antiquity', whose cult rivalled that of the Virgin Mary.[2] And while few doubt Macrina's existence, we can tell little about

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[1] *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 166. The idea that she chose to be 'on her own' or 'by herself' refers not to complete isolation (she is not a hermit), but to her rejection of a marital alliance.

[2] Thecla fictional: e.g. Ross Shepard Kraemer, 'Thecla of Iconium, Reconsidered', in *Unreliable Witnesses: Religion,*

her own sense of vocation or motivations, for our only evidence comes from texts written by men, albeit men who knew her very well.

In the second half of the twentieth century a first stream of enthusiastic feminist historians eagerly tried to recover the lives of early Christian women – women who were hiding in plain sight in early Christian texts like these, but who were woefully understudied. Later historians, however, have been more cautious. For example, in her famous study 'The Lady Vanishes', Elizabeth Clark warned against seeking to recover women 'pure and simple from texts'. She writes,

> *we cannot with certainty claim to hear the voices of "real" women in early Christian texts, so appropriated have they been by male authors.*[3]

But does the lady vanish completely? We must indeed treat these texts with caution, especially when they describe the virtues and vices of women through a distinctly male gaze. But, even so, we know that, to put it bluntly, many Christians were women. Furthermore, some of these were deemed important enough to feature in men's writing and we need to ask why. Women feature conspicuously in the letters of Paul, who describes them as his co-workers. Over the next few centuries, they appear in the lives of saints and martyrs and in the texts describing the origins of monasticism. Great fathers of the church such as Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine, wrote to women – women who were clearly influential in their Christian communities.[4] Over the past decade or so scholars have drawn together a substantial and exciting body of evidence, pieced carefully together from literary texts, inscriptions and other sources, that shows that women did indeed exercise leadership roles in the church. There were almost certainly women priests. There may have been some women bishops. There were undoubtedly many women deacons who assisted in liturgy, prepared women for baptism and played an important role in the baptismal rite itself. Several early church theologians complain about women doing too much in the way of baptising and teaching. The tendency of earlier generations of church historians was to assume that these women, almost by definition, must have been associated with marginal movements within Christianity. But there simply is not enough evidence to support the view that <u>all</u> those women were heretics.[5]

Nevertheless, a pattern does emerge from this evidence. As the Christian church developed, so women's public roles became more circumscribed. For this reason, the stories of women like Thecla and Macrina have sometimes been used to paint a picture of decline: an exciting initial phase of freedom in which women could preach and teach like Thecla, followed by a period of increasing restriction until a point at which the leadership of women like Macrina existed only in certain, specific and semi-private settings.[6]

Most historians have accepted that broad pattern of increasing restriction. The question of assessing the nature of early Christian women's leadership has, however, been complicated by the way in which various members of modern Christian denominations want to use the evidence in relation to the question of women's ministry today. The question can be skewed either way. Some want to read texts about early Christian women as fictions or they minimise the impact of women by portraying them as marginal in one way or another. Many people holding this perspective would deny that there was ever an early period of women's leadership: there simply were no women apostles. Others want to maximalise any small piece of evidence for women's leadership they can. According to this view not only were there women apostles, but women's leadership was more pervasive and lasted longer than most people think.

Most historians, however, settle for a position somewhere in the middle and, as I have just noted, most accept a broad pattern of increasing restriction in women's leadership in Christianity. With regard to my lecture

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Gender, and History in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 121. Influence of her cult: Stephen J Davis, *The Cult of St Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), v, 4.

[3] Elizabeth A. Clark, 'The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the "Linguistic Turn"', *Church History* 67, no. 1 (March 1998): 31.

[4] Unfortunately, we usually have just one side of the correspondence.

[5] For a detailed examination of textual and material evidence see: Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

[6] E.g. Joan Taylor and Ilaria Ramelli argue that certain early Christian texts (including the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*) provide historical evidence for the existence of early Christian missionary pairings of one man and one woman: Joan Taylor, 'Male-Female Missionary Pairings among Jesus' Disciples', in *Patterns of Women's Leadership in Early Christianity*, ed. Joan E. Taylor and Ilaria Ramelli, First edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Ilaria Ramelli, 'Colleagues of Apostles, Presbyters, and Bishops', in *Patterns of Women's Leadership in Early Christianity*, ed. Joan E. Taylor and Ilaria Ramelli, First edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

today, I would like to focus not only on the consequences of changes in women's leadership, but on asking why those changes took place. Certainly, they seem to parallel the growth and the increasingly public nature of the Christian church – especially after the accession of the Emperor Constantine. Even though changes in worship and church organisation had begun to happen before his rule, Christianity certainly gained a more public and confident profile afterwards. But why should public religious ritual rule out women's participation? After all, women in Roman society could offer sacrifices, lead rituals, and hold formal roles as priestesses and the administrators of temple sites.[7] We need therefore to look somewhere else to explain the change in women's roles. Rather than focussing on the question of what women could and could not do – especially with regard to sacramental ministry – I want to focus on another question: what could early Christian women say?

In the ancient world, even more so than today, speech was an expression of power. Effective leadership depended on the kind of public speech that was deemed authoritative, reliable and persuasive. This was the kind of speech that took place in the public assemblies, law-courts, army parades and the imperial court. But, as we shall see, there were cultural expectations around who could speak where. In the Roman world, on the whole, good girls didn't speak in public – or at least they didn't speak in the public contexts I have just mentioned. One very persuasive theory of the decline of women's ministry in the early church has therefore suggested that while churches were small and based on households or local communities, women could easily undertake leadership roles. The leadership of a house-church seen in this light was an extension of the roles many middle to high-status women played in governing the day-to-day running of their households. However, once churches grew and both worship and institutional governance were more public it was less easy to accept women's leadership because it would entail women speaking in ways and in places which were deemed inappropriate.

This theory has been articulated finely in recent scholarship.[8] It might explain why someone like Thecla was able to assume a leadership role, because the text implies that churches were still meeting in domestic settings. This is presumably the context of Paul's preaching in the scene I have just described. It explains why Macrina, however impressive, was very unlikely to have been a priest even though she was an abbess, because by that time churches were public places. But the theory leaves us with two problems. Firstly, as we shall see, the account of Thecla's life does describe her speaking in public. Her teaching ministry is rather definitely not confined to a church meeting in her own household. She spends a lot of time on the road. Secondly, Macrina does speak a surprising amount, and with a surprisingly authoritative voice. Even though she is not preaching in public, her words are persuasive, effective and have a broad impact on quite a wide circle around her. So, does this mean that we should abandon our attempts to use these texts as reliable historical sources? Are these women simply examples of extraordinary and exceptional women, such as one might find in Greek tragedy or Plutarch's parallel lives? Are these ideal rather than real women? Have our ladies vanished after all?

I don't think we need be quite so pessimistic. But what we do need to do is to carry out a very careful analysis of where and how Thecla and Macrina speak. Where does their speech lie with regard to the boundary of the public and private realms? But before I do that, I need briefly to discuss Roman assumptions about public and private speech.

Leadership, Voice and Public Space

In the ancient Mediterranean world, space and place were highly significant. Households were on the whole larger than European households today: they included extended family, servants and slaves. But household space was seen as enclosed and indoor space; it was a stationary location; it was associated with that which is natural, female and inferior. Public space, on the other hand – that is the space of the city, of law-making and political negotiations – was seen as open and outdoor space; it was associated with mobility and with

[7] e.g. Amy Richlin, 'Carrying Water in a Sieve: Class and Body in Roman Women's Religion', in *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen L King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 192; Karen Jo Torjesen, 'Social and Historical Setting: Christianity as Culture Critique', in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances M. Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181–99.
[8] On rhetoric as a male space, see especially the work of Amy Richlin, e.g. 'Gender and Rhetoric: Producing Manhood in the Schools', in *Roman Eloquence: Rhetoric in Society and Literature*, ed. William J Dominik (London; New York: Routledge, 1997). Women's speech and early Christianity: Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995); Torjesen, 'Social and Historical Setting', 192.

that which is civilised, male and superior.[9]

The *paterfamilias* or head of the household could mediate between both realms; even though women controlled the day-to-day running of the household, it was usually a male head of household who held ultimate authority over major decisions, such as the marriage of a daughter, and who could connect the household with the city of which it was a part.

The ancient world also worked with another pairing, however – that of philosophy and rhetoric. Rhetoric was public speech. It was clearly associated with the life of the *polis* – its typical locations were law-courts, assembly-rooms, or the theatre. Rhetoric was also clearly associated with those who were male and highly trained in traditional Greco-Roman literary culture. The good orator, for Quintilian, is emphatically a good man who is expert in speaking. Philosophy, on the other hand, had a more ambivalent place. Historically, philosophy was taught in various locations, some of which were in fact public or semi-public. Nevertheless, there was in the ancient world a strong tendency to associate philosophy with more restricted space. It was assumed to involve teaching a few chosen pupils. It came to be associated with private space – the indoor space in which many of Plato's dialogues took place, or the enclosed space of a garden. Rhetoric and philosophy were also associated with particular kinds of speech. Rhetoric was the skill of making formal or semi-formal public speeches to prosecute or defend a case in the law-courts, or to persuade people of what action was good for the city. It reinforced social ties by creating set-piece speeches to mark key events in the life of the city or the household – for example, celebrating a marriage or commemorating those who had died in war. Philosophy, on the other hand, valued a more conversational form of speech, dialectic, which was aimed at the detailed analysis and testing of a problem. These two kinds of speech are not contradictory. But partly because their teachers competed for pupils, there was a vigorous rivalry between practitioners of these two kinds of speech: philosophers characterised rhetoric as merely crowd-pleasing rather than seeking the truth; rhetors said that philosophy was secretive and esoteric.

In fact, of course, many men combined the study of both philosophy and rhetoric, and a few boasted about their ability to bring the two together. One such man was Themistius, the fourth century philosopher and statesman based in Constantinople. He stakes his claim to unite philosophy and rhetoric by deliberately playing on their associations with different kinds of space:

> *'I take philosophy—cooped up in her house, ill-humored, and avoiding gathering places . . . and persuade her to come out into the open and not to deprive the multitude grudgingly of her beauty'.*[10]

Themistius is here drawing on the tradition of the ideal statesman, the one who combines philosophy and rhetoric, the one who has moral integrity and who demonstrates this as he mediates between public and private spheres. It is an idea that goes back at least as far as Plato's *Republic*. Themistius was a follower of traditional Greek religion, making a very successful career for himself in the imperial court. At exactly the same time as this, Christian bishops like Macrina's brothers Basil and her biographer Gregory, were seeking to construct a role for themselves in very similar ways. Many of these bishops had a training in classical rhetoric and philosophy. They too staked a claim to that crucial middle ground by combining their rhetorical skills with their philosophical training and their knowledge of what they saw as the true philosophy, that is, the Christian gospel.

So, despite the rivalry between rhetoric and philosophy, the right kind of man could use a combination of the two to stake a claim to that crucial middle ground of civic life. It had to be a man because you needed rhetoric to inhabit that middle space and rhetoric was firmly associated with men's spheres of activity. There is a sense, I think, that philosophy is a somewhat unstable, even dangerous practice, threatening to burst out of its dining-room or garden into the forum. Philosophers who ostentatiously wandered the streets, like the cynics, were deemed highly improper – and that is exactly the reaction they courted. There was definitely a sense that if philosophy wanted to become public it needed to be tamed – civilised – by rhetoric.

However, the association of philosophy with indoor space and semi-private conversation did open opportunities up: you could be a woman who studied and even taught philosophy without committing social impropriety. It is perhaps significant that Themistius, in the quote we have just heard, describes philosophy

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[9] See e.g., Karen Jo Torjesen and Virginia Burrus, '2. Household Management and Women's Authority', in *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 53–87.

[10] Themistius *Or*. 26, trans. Robert J Penella, *The Private Orations of Themistius* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), 151; see also 155 on the value of public speech.

as a woman ‘cooped up in her house’. In any case, while there were vanishingly few women who practised rhetoric in the ancient Mediterranean world, there were significant women philosophers.[11]

In sum, then, both space and speech in the ancient world were thought of in gendered terms. My suggestion is that if one maps out the speech of women in ancient texts, we should see a pattern emerging which reflects the concept of speech which I have just articulated here. I will begin with Thecla and then move on to examine Macrina.

Thecla

As I mentioned earlier, the story of Thecla has come down to us in an anonymous second century work, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.[12] Its form and its focus on Paul the apostle clearly emulate the biblical Acts of the Apostles, but it also draws heavily on ancient Greek novels, a genre which combined romance and adventure. In our very chaste romance, Thecla meets Paul in Iconium, loses him when he is arrested, and finds him again in prison. They are tried together, on the grounds that their Christian ideology of rejecting marriage will destabilise Iconian society. Paul is exiled and Thecla is sentenced to death by burning, but is miraculously saved by a divine shower of rain. Thecla goes off to find Paul again and Paul reluctantly agrees that she can travel to Antioch together with him.

The narrative of their time in Antioch functions as a kind of second act of the drama which repeats some aspects of the first act in Iconium. In Antioch, as in Iconium, Thecla repels a suitor, is arrested, tried and sentenced to death. In Antioch too she escapes death, although this time God protects her from bulls, lions and carnivorous seals. Other parts of the story are reversed in this second act. Back home in Iconium, Thecla’s rejection of her fiancé provoked her own mother into rejecting her and calling for her death. In Antioch, however, she is adopted by a wealthy woman called Tryphaena, who offers her refuge in the period between her conviction and her execution – the implication is that a beautiful young woman would not be safe in prison. Similarly, after her second miraculous escape, Thecla again goes to find Paul. But this time she has to travel all the way to a neighbouring city to find him and she is accompanied by ‘a band of young men and maidens’. This detail implicitly presents her as an independent teacher with her own disciples.

The way in which the second act echoes but reverses the first is also reflected in the ways in which and the places in which Thecla speaks. In Iconium, she hardly speaks at all. She is silent as she listens to Paul speak. She is silent when she and Paul are tried by the local governor. She is silent as she goes to meet her death, merely making the sign of the cross as she approaches her funeral pyre.[13] When she first speaks, it is to a child whom she meets on her way to find Paul. When she does find Paul, sheltering in makeshift accommodation with a local man and his family, her first words are a prayer of thanksgiving addressed to God. A striking feature of this encounter is that although Thecla and Paul are overjoyed to find each other, their conversation is awkward. Thecla is eager to follow him and to be baptised: ‘I will cut my hair off and follow you wherever you will go!’, she cries impetuously. Paul, however, tries to dampen her enthusiasm: if she travels, he asserts, she will be prone to the temptation of lust; baptism won’t protect her from that, so she should wait to be baptised.

So, in Iconium Thecla is either silent, or talks in private and somewhat awkward situations. In Antioch however Thecla finds her voice, both in the sense that she is much more talkative and in the sense that she finds her confidence in speaking. At her second trial she offers a defence to the governor and she negotiates her safe accommodation before her execution. She prays fervently and in public for her new mother Tryphaena. In Iconium she had begged Paul to baptise her; in Antioch she baptises herself, throwing herself into the pool of seals in the arena turning danger into salvation with the bold declaration: ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself!’.[14] When she escapes and is questioned by the governor of Antioch as to how that was possible, her explanation is eloquent and her theology compares positively with Paul’s similar apologia to the governor of Iconium. While Paul calls on the ‘God of vengeance, the jealous God’ and declares his mission to rescue people ‘from corruption and uncleanness and from all pleasure’, Thecla invokes a merciful Son of God who is ‘a refuge to the storm-tossed, a solace to the afflicted, a shelter to the

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[11] For a discussion of the exceptions, Amy Richlin, ‘Roman Oratory, Pornography and the Silencing of Anita Hill’. *Southern California Law Review* 65, no. 3 (1992): 1321–32; Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-Styles*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008.
[12] e.g., Kraemer, ‘Thecla of Iconium, Reconsidered’, 122.
[13] The words in *Paul and Thecla* paragraph 21 appear to represent an interior monologue.
[14] *Paul and Thecla* paragraph 34.

despairing'.[15] Interestingly, perhaps wisely, Thecla avoids any reference to the philosophy of life-long celibacy which Paul in this text can't help returning to.

Thecla's final conversation with Paul sums up these contrasts perfectly. When she finally finds him after her second escape she approaches him with calm confidence, surrounded by her disciples, announcing: 'I have received baptism, O Paul'. Her words amaze and encourage those who are listening to her. This part of the conversation appears to be in public because the text tells us that Paul then led her to the house of a Christian follower. Finally, the text makes clear that Thecla no longer seeks Paul's permission to go on the road; when she has had enough of conversation she gets up and simply says, 'I am going to Iconium'. When she goes on the road with her disciples, she is vocal, using her voice to witness to God's salvation miraculously evidenced in her own escapes.

So, Thecla is first silent, then vocal; her speech starts with prayers, then becomes sacramental ('I baptize myself'); she preaches both to the governor of Antioch and to Paul's followers at the end of the text. This increasing confidence parallels her movements in physical space. The story first tends to locate her in typically indoor spaces: her maternal home, Paul's prison, Paul's make-shift accommodation with his friend. Even in Antioch she takes up safe quarters in another woman's home. The only point at which she is in a fully public space in Iconium – at her trial – she is silent. When she does speak with someone in public, on the street, it is significantly with a child, a much more appropriate public conversation-partner than a male stranger.

But from the moment she is taken from her safe lodging with Tryphaena in Antioch to be executed, the narrative depicts Thecla in public spaces. The fulcrum of the action is not so much Thecla's move from Iconium to Antioch, but rather the moment she emerges from Tryphaena's house. There is a magnificent parade, in which she is accompanied by the animals who are her anticipated executioners. She is taken to a crowded arena where her public exposure is emphasised by her clothes being stripped off. As many scholars have noted, the narrative heightens these elements to pique its audience's visual imagination. Thecla is made a spectacle. Images of Thecla from the early centuries often focus on those moments in the arena (– like the terracotta pilgrims' flasks in my slide). But my research on voice and space highlights that this is also precisely the point at which Thecla becomes most vocal: she is not just exposed to public gaze, but she becomes eloquent. Indeed, her speech is not just public but effective: it is authoritative, reliable and persuasive. From this moment Thecla performs her role with increasing poise and independence.

I am arguing, then, that the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* narrate a change from Thecla's silent domesticity to her vocal public presence. It would not be right to import modern ideas of character-development on to this text: it is not a nineteenth century novel. Thecla does not so much change but discover who she really is. So perhaps the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is a bit like a road movie, in which Thecla's encounters and journeying enable a process of self-discovery or self-realisation. But however we view it, there has been a change.

Macrina

If we turn to the *Life of Macrina*, however, there seems to be hardly any change with regard to the central character at all. Peter Brown remarks that 'for her brothers, Macrina would always be the still eye of the storm'.[16] The text was written by her younger brother, the bishop and theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, who creates a three act drama out of her story: first, her early choice of asceticism, then her death and finally her funeral. Gregory's careful narrative creates a bold contrast: on the one hand, Macrina's life-long dedication to the stability of ascetic withdrawal in her family home at Annesi; on the other, men's busy involvement with the public life of cities, councils and the imperial court. Indeed, Gregory gives the impression that to be a bishop like himself is to be permanently on the road. At various points in the narrative, he describes himself as travelling: from Antioch to Jerusalem, from Antioch to Annesi and from Annesi to Sebastopolis. The whole text is structured around his journey to see Macrina, his brief stay with her as she died, and then his return home after the funeral. There are a lot of comings and goings in this text, but Macrina hardly moves at all.

If we look a little more closely, we can see the way in which this pattern plays out in each of the three acts of the Macrina-drama. In the first, Basil returns from university 'puffed up' with his success at learning and although he stays under Macrina's wing for a while he soon flies away to found his own monasteries.[17]

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[15] *Paul and Thecla* paragraphs 17 and 37.
[16] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 178.
[17] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 167.

Macrina's sisters were sent away to be married. Even the brothers, Naucratios and Peter, who stayed longer on the family estate to practice the monastic life, retreated to its further reaches. In the meantime, Macrina remained in enclosed space at home, Gregory vividly remarking that it was as if she were still in her mother's womb.[18]

The other acts build on this by showing that it is Macrina who stays still while people come to her.[19] Gregory conveys the stories of women like Vetiana and Lampadion who came to join her ascetic community, or a soldier who travelled with his wife and small child to experience the place for himself because it had become so renowned.[20] Consequently, rather than being the 'still eye of the storm' Macrina is perhaps better seen as a magnetic force drawing people to her. Indeed, it is not too far-fetched to say that she has become a site of pilgrimage even before her death. The soldier's child was healed of an eye infection, just as might happen at a holy shrine. Men and women come from the whole area to join in the rituals of her funeral, as if it were a feast of local martyrs.[21] As Gregory travelled to meet his sister he dreamt that he was holding in his hands a body glowing with holy light – a sight which he later interprets as a portent of Macrina's own holiness and imminent death. Even her own brother approaches Macrina as a pilgrim. She is not a passive object on display, but an active force drawing people in.

There are only two times we hear of Macrina leaving the monastery. The first is in a time of famine when she went out on to the local roads to rescue children who had been abandoned by the wayside by families who could not afford to feed them. The second is her funeral cortège. Apart from that, Macrina is portrayed as being still and stationary in a space which is clearly domestic and female.

Having sketched out where the various people in the text are located, we should next ask: how does this map on to how they speak? It is notable that Macrina's menfolk are not just rushing about, they are also described as being practitioners of public speech. Macrina's father was a teacher of rhetoric; her brother Basil came home 'puffed up' specifically by his 'rhetorical abilities'; even her fiancé is introduced as a 'young man [showing] great promise' with a 'reputation as an orator, displaying his rhetorical skills in lawsuits in defence of the wronged'.[22] Gregory's mention of the church business which causes him to travel, implies that he is using his rhetorical skills on behalf of the church. Men's speech in this text, then, is figured as outdoors, mobile, and highly trained.

By contrast, women in the *Life of Macrina* speak indoors. There is in this text no movement from silence to speech, or from private to public speech. That is not to say, however, that women's speech is ineffective. We can see the powerful effect of Macrina's speech in at least three ways. First, her speech is persuasive. Her conversations with her parents about her marriage are not reported directly in Gregory's account, but we are left with no doubt that she argued successfully that she should remain unmarried. No less persuasive were her successive calls to her mother and her brothers to join her ascetic project. A final kind of persuasion comes in the form of the consolation she offered her mother on the death of her son Naucratios in a sudden accident.[23] Gregory leads his readers to understand that Macrina's effective and holy persuasion is grounded on her education which focused on reading Scripture and singing the psalms. This is a life which was neither wordless nor especially silent.

Secondly, the effectiveness of Macrina's speech is demonstrated in the way she faces death and, indeed, uses as an opportunity to teach Gregory. Her words are the verbal proof of her education to holiness. Macrina first speaks to console Gregory, who is weeping under the double blow of his brother's death and his sister's grave illness. We are told that she next persuades Gregory into conversation by asking him questions.[24] She then turns to a more substantial mode of argument, teaching Gregory about human nature and human destiny. Her physical weakness means that she can hardly raise herself up on her elbow; yet, Gregory writes, 'her speech flowed with complete ease, just as a stream of water goes down a hill without obstruction'.[25] She

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[18] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 166.
[19] People leave Macrina by dying; she says her dead fiancé is 'abroad' (Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 166). She then becomes a Christian Penelope beset by suitors (Georgia Frank, 'Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's "Life of Macrina"', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8, no. 4 (2000): 511–30.
[20] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 188-9.
[21] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 186-7.
[22] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 166.
[23] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 170.
[24] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 175.
[25] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 175-6.

consoles Gregory's grief, but also rebukes his despondency over the challenges in his life as a bishop.[26] As the time comes for her to die, Macrina offers herself up to God in a long prayer – a chain of biblical quotations – which Gregory reports directly. Her last act is to utter under her breath the words of the traditional evening prayer at the lighting of the lamps.[27]

A third interesting aspect of the influence of Macrina's speech is that she seems to empower other women to speak. After her death, Vetiana and Lampadion talk about her at some length to Gregory. Not only are they revealing things to him about his own sister that he never knew, but their words are powerfully effective witnesses to the life of a saint. Similarly, although the story of the healing of the child is told by the soldier himself, the crucial words testifying to the miracle are given by her mother.[28] In all these cases, Gregory quotes the women's words directly. Of course, we should not take these speeches as a historical record in the modern sense, nevertheless, I think it is significant that in his very carefully crafted account Gregory decides to convey these women's words of witness at length and in direct speech.

Finally, Macrina does not just empower voices, she also sets them in order. Gregory tells us that the ordered life of Macrina's community was punctuated by regular psalm-singing. At several points in his narrative, people's voices become disordered under the weight of uncontrollable grief, but Macrina's influence is credited with ordering them back.[29] Most strikingly, when Macrina dies Gregory reports that the women of Macrina's community began weeping uncontrollably. That grief which had been burning inside them as they watched Macrina's illness progress had been restrained both out of consideration for her condition, but also from fear of her rebuke. Upon her death, their weeping bursts out and is only controlled by Gregory's challenge. But it is clear that he is acting in emulation of his sister: there is a sense in which her effective example of consolation is now working through him as he speaks:

> *Look at her… and be mindful of the instructions she gave you for order and graciousness in everything. Her divine soul sanctioned one moment of tears for us, commanding us to weep at the moment of prayer. This command we can obey by changing the wailing of our lamentation into a united singing of psalms.*[30]

Similarly, when men and women flock to join Macrina's funeral cortège and threaten to disrupt the women's psalm-singing with cries of grief, Gregory divides people into groups ordering their voices so that psalm-singing becomes the dominant mode of expression once again.[31]

In sum, the speech of Macrina and the women associated with her is interior and stationary. It is trained not by the influence of 'outside' education but by the reading of the Bible and the singing of the psalms. Nevertheless, it is portrayed as strong and effective, not least through what we might want to call emotional intelligence – the kind of combination of reason and love which appears in Macrina's words of consolation.

Where Have We Got To? And Why Does It Matter?

So, where have we got to? What do these two texts teach us about early Christian women leaders? And why does it matter?

I think these two texts do show us a development in early Christian attitudes to women's leadership. Although, as I shall suggest in a minute, the picture is a bit messy, in these texts one can trace the restriction of women's leadership roles as the church became a more public institution. Thecla's ministry of preaching and, possibly, baptising resonates with other evidence we have for very early Christian women's ministry. By contrast, the *Life of Macrina* is emphatic that Macrina is not a rhetorician like her brothers, father, and fiancé. Her skills in speech and thus her ministry are restricted to a semi-private and domestic realm.

However, the story is not quite that simple. As I noted earlier, scholars have argued that women's ministry was acceptable as long as women could exercise it in churches which operated in a domestic or quasi-domestic sphere. If this theory applied in a straightforward way, we should expect Thecla to be exercising her ministry in private locations. Some scholars have argued that this is the case in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, but I disagree. As I have shown today, Thecla's speech becomes more confident and more

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[26] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 178-9.
[27] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 181.
[28] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 190.
[29] e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 169-70;
[30] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 183.
[31] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, 186.

authoritative as it becomes more public. Her speech is not only effective, but outdoors and mobile. Now, given that we think Thecla is a fiction, this portrayal of her speech might simply be a fantasy: it might be that Thecla is an idealised woman who is being used to say something about good Christian speaking, rather than good Christian women. But I do wonder whether the plausibility and popularity of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* lay in the fact that it preserved a folk memory of a time when women as well as men took up a ministry as wandering preachers, teaching and baptising as they went.[32]

A second complication is the way in which Macrina is portrayed. Her speech is indeed restricted to the domestic sphere, and we might think she uses her voice in a quasi-maternal way to comfort and heal those around her. But in fact Gregory takes great trouble to portray Macrina's speech as philosophical. Macrina is the one who teaches Gregory about human nature and its destiny (anthropology and eschatology). She encourages him to think about these things by asking him questions (dialectic). She chides Gregory on his failure to count his blessings (ethics). She successfully persuades her brothers to turn away from rhetoric to the kind of philosophical life represented by her community in Annesi (protreptic). All these are recognisable modes of philosophical discourse from the ancient world. Even the consolation of grief was widely held in the ancient world to be a mark of philosophical wisdom. And Macrina excels in all of these, her words running swift and clear as water.[33] So, Macrina is a philosopher who uses words well, and we might want to ask: is this not liberating? Don't we have here a model of a Christian woman stretching the bounds of what was possible in the late fourth century?

Well, I'm pretty certain Macrina was a remarkable woman. But the way in which she perfectly inhabits the role of Christian philosopher fits precisely with that conception of philosophy which we sketched out earlier: the idea that philosophy functioned in a private or semi-private realm, in contrast to the public realm of rhetoric. While Gregory allows Macrina holiness, wisdom, intelligence and the effective persuasion of those around her, these qualities are never entirely let loose into the public realm. Unlike her brothers she can never be the person who inhabits that ideal space which mediates between public and private life. That was the space which leaders inhabited, and in order to inhabit that space you needed rhetoric. This means that when ancient authors praise women as philosophers, their praise may be entirely sincere, but the location of their speech as domestic encodes an understanding that, precisely as philosophers, their wisdom belonged in a particular place.

Why does this matter? As others have argued, we are still influenced by the ancient world – influenced in ways which include social attitudes about proper and improper speech. But that inheritance has been mixed up with the impact of the Christian church in ways which add considerable complexity to the story, especially with regard to where and how women can speak. There was perhaps a brief period when women like Thecla challenged the dominant Greco-Roman assumptions about the propriety of women's speech, when women could be adventurers setting out on their own road as apostles of Jesus Christ. But all too soon Christianity was won over by the idea that good girls don't talk in public. We need to understand that history.

Some people have stated, either with approval or dismay, that early Christian women were simply silent. However, as I have shown today, whatever one's perspective on the matter, a supposed contrast of male vocality and female silence rather misses the point. The point, as I have argued, is that early Christian women <u>could</u> speak, but only in certain very specific spaces. Their voices were gradually restricted and domesticated, not silenced.

This means that we need to be very careful about the way in which we interpret the texts in which they are shown speaking. The way ancient authors cast women like Macrina as holy philosophers might give us the impression that their speech was unfettered – that these women were exciting exceptions to the rule or that the rules were easy to bend. But in fact the speech of these women <u>conformed</u>: it conformed to the traditional place for philosophy, which was private or semi-private space and it conformed because that was exactly the space where women belonged. That is not to say, of course, that all Christian women attained Macrina's heights of philosophy. But it <u>is</u> to say that Macrina's philosophical speech is exceptional, but not improper. Unlike Thecla, whose speech perhaps recalls the unstable and dangerous philosophy of the wandering cynics, Macrina stayed at home.

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[32] Taylor, 'Male-Female Missionary Pairings among Jesus' Disciples'; Ramelli, 'Colleagues of Apostles, Presbyters, and Bishops'.

[33] Recent scholarship has located the philosophical character of Thecla and Macrina in what they say, with a particular focus on genre: Dawn LaValle Norman, *Early Christian Women*, Elements on Women in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Furthermore, as we have seen, Macrina's education was emphatically not in rhetoric. In her world, philosophy only became a foundation for leadership when it was, as it were, led out of the house by rhetoric. It was the pairing of the two which created the perfect statesman or the perfect bishop. Therefore, the systematic restriction and enclosure of women's speech did not silence women, but it did, for the most part, cut them off from public leadership roles. This restriction has been masked by the way in which holy women have down the centuries been ostentatiously praised for their virtue, their wisdom, their intelligence and indeed their words – they are praised, that is, just as long as they didn't get on the road like Thecla and preach in public. It is not what is said that is the problem, but who speaks in what location.

To conclude: this is why I have argued that it is crucial, when reading texts about early Christian women, to pay attention not just to what they say, but where they are permitted to speak. Only by mapping out their speech in this way can we understand the scope of and the restrictions placed on early Christian women's leadership. But it's not just a question of getting the history right. Mapping out where speech is deemed appropriate still matters, because it exposes ideas about good speech which we have unwittingly inherited from classical antiquity and the early Christian church. There are still many people who are told, 'you speak very well, but you may not speak here'. Like Macrina, their voices are praised, but they are simultaneously pushed aside. And this is not just a problem that affects women: it affects all sorts of individuals whose voices are deemed marginal in one way or another. By mapping out our own assumptions about where it is good for people to speak, we might be in a better position to empower more people to step out of the house and to be, perhaps, a little bit more like Thecla.

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