1988

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Recommended Citation

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Two Faces of Paul

by Peggy Fye O'Rourke

The Legend and the Apostle by Dennis Ronald McDonald is about the Apostle Paul and the controversy which surrounds stories of his teachings. Stories about Paul come down to us from the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, and from oral tradition such as those stories written down in The Acts of Paul, which includes the story of Paul and the woman Thecla. MacDonald argues that it is timely to include in our image of Paul not just the Pastoral Epistles but also the stories salvaged from oral tradition. In this essay I will discuss the "truths" of both sources and review the similarities between the two images of Paul.

MacDonald, in common with a majority of biblical scholars, believes that the Pastoral Epistles, herein called Pastorals, were not written down as Paul went through his life of travel and teaching in 50-60 C.E. (97). Biblical scholars do not agree, however, upon who might have authored the Pastorals and why. There are at least nineteen theories regarding the opponents against whom the author of the Pastorals wrote (56). MacDonald's own theory is of particular interest to feminists because he believes that the Pastorals were written around 140 C.E. to counter oral traditions which spoke of Paul as a social extremist who taught against and led a life in opposition to the established norms of the early church (7).

Why must we care about this controversy? We must care about it because it involves the discussion and debate about Paul's teaching in regard to women. Second century custom and rules severely limited the freedom of women, particularly in the church. The Pastorals claim Paul supported these limitations. The Acts of Paul claims he spoke against them. By examining both sources, we can weigh the "truth" and also preserve in our memories the difficult circumstances of our sisters from the past.

Memories are often preserved in the form of a story. The term "story" may be immediately suspect because our modern usage of the word connotes fiction. Using McDonald's arguments, I will try to show that stories in the oral tradition about Paul are not fiction, but traditional narratives which can give us a more accurate understanding of Paul. MacDonald cites a process used over and over by storytellers of the past which shows us that the legends of Paul were not put together haphazardly, but preserved and repeated carefully (26). This process, identified and defined by Alex Olrick, contains eight "laws" or parts which provide a structure with which we can analyze the Pauline legends, thus lending some stability and credibility to the stories. 1
For example, in the Paul and Thecla story, Paul is welcomed in the home of Onesiphorus with hospitality and gladness. Followers of Paul speak against him and his Christian teachings, causing him to be arrested. At about the same time, a woman follower of Paul named Thecla is arrested for refusing to marry. Paul receives a flogging; Theda receives a death sentence. Paul prays for Thecla’s life to be delivered from the flames. God intervenes and saves Thecla from the fire (New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. II, 331). These events fit Olrick’s “law of opening” which says stories move from quiet hospitality to become more violent until God intervenes to save the life of the character in danger. It is important to MacDonald and to us to remember that oral tradition, the passing on of stories, was not just for entertainment, but to preserve history. Few people wrote down historical information. They relied on memory and a structured process to help the memories stay intact. Without oral tradition, most of what we know about the time and circumstances of Paul, the social extremist, would have been lost forever.

MacDonald provides other information which demonstrates the credibility of the oral traditions. History makes many references to the famed ministry and teachings of Thecla. Her deeds were honored over vast areas from the Caspian Sea to the Atlantic shores and were depicted in artwork found from the fifth century and later (94). References to Thecla give the impression that the whole world knew who she was and what she had done. Thecla’s name, an unusual name, was found to be a popular name for virgins and martyrs clear into the fourth century (95). Thecla was also numbered among the early saints and later, in 375 C.E., a monastery in Seleucia, Isauria, was named for and dedicated to her.

These “truths” about the legends lend credence to the legends and cast large doubts on any claim that oral traditions stem from fiction and fictitious characters. Moreover, they show us that the Pastorals, canonized and accepted as “truths” about Paul’s teachings, cannot be wholly accepted as the ultimate authority on the life of Paul. MacDonald questions the authors’ methods of proving that their writings were the authoritative stories of Paul’s life. He points out that authors went so far as to try to convince readers that Paul himself wrote the Pastorals by penning in many places, people and happenings associated with Paul. For instance, the author(s) of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus took great pains to include twenty-seven of Paul’s associates in those very short letters (56). As illogical as it may seem, it appears that “name-dropping” was used to convince the reader that Paul wrote the letters. In the process of “over-doing” it, the authors have called into question the claim that the Pastorals are authentically Paul’s.
The Pastorals contain attacks on rather elusive adversaries of the orthodox church. These attacks in their frequency and ambiguity show us that the Pastorals may well have been written only to respond to opponents of the established church and to uphold the structure of that church, and not as a documentary preservation of history as Paul’s life progressed. Although the attacks are frequent, the target of the attacks is rarely clarified. The author(s) of the Pastorals lists many distinguishing habits of the adversary being addressed, but no single opponent of the orthodox church (Gnostics, Marcionites, Jewish Christians) could lay claim to all those characteristics at once (56).

MacDonald calls into question the truths of both the Pastorals and the oral legends by pointing out the existence of two particularly extreme contradictions between the two sources. The first contradiction deals with the practice of chastity, and denying the pleasures of food and drink. According to the oral legends, Paul claimed celibacy was necessary to enter heaven. Paul also allowed himself little more than bread and water (58). The Pastorals object to such austerities by saying in First Timothy 4 that people who practice such things are liars who calm their consciences with asceticisms (57). The second contradiction which stands out is between the claim in the Pastorals that women must keep quiet (I Timothy 2: 11-15) and the legends’ teachings which say Paul ordained women, among them Thecla, to teach the word of God (59). Such contradictory claims have caused scholars and amateurs alike to question the “truths” of the Pastorals and the legends. This questioning helps us move toward a better understanding of Paul.

Similarities, however, do exist between the Pastorals and the oral tradition. Only two places in history mention the name of Onesiphorus. Those two places are in renditions of Paul’s life in the Pastorals and the written legends of The Acts of Paul. Only two places in history mark Alexander’s opposition to Paul. Those two places are in the Pastorals (2 Timothy 4: 14-15) and The Acts of Paul (60). More similarities appear in the story of Paul and the lions. Both the Pastorals (2 Timothy 4: 16-19) and the legends include the stories of Priscilla and Aquila, Paul addressing the Gentiles, and Paul being saved from death by a miracle (61). MacDonald sees no way that these similarities could have occurred by chance.

Scholars have examined the similarities and have developed three theories to explain their existence. The first is that the person who wrote down the spoken legends into what we know as The Acts of Paul may have used the Pastorals to aid his or her writing (62). The second theory claims the legend of Thecla may have been put in written form earlier. This earlier
text may have been known to the authors of the Pastorals and used by him or her (64). The third theory is that both the author of The Acts of Paul and the authors of the Pastorals knew and used the oral traditions (65). No matter which theory holds the most truth, the fact remains that similarities do exist and can help draw both sides closer to a "middle" image of the life of Paul. We could find ourselves with a new image of the Christian community that uses the writings and teachings of Paul as an authority. Views within the church about women and their roles would also require a "second look" using the oral traditions as well as the Paul of the Pastorals.

The Pastorals contain the "core" of second century Christians' appreciation of Paul's teachings. They say that Christians practice by accepting persecution (2 Timothy 3: 12) and the possibility of death which comes with being a Christian (2 Timothy 2: 11-12a). To Paul, suffering as Jesus did is the essence of Christianity (99). The Pastorals also contain teachings attributed to Paul about offending those outside the church. According to the Pastorals, Paul was sensitive to the impressions Christians gave to those outside Christianity. He taught that Christians must live quietly, work hard, and try to get along with everyone (100). The Pastorals also reiterate Paul's belief that all things made by God are good (1 Timothy 4: 3b-4). According to the image of Paul created by the authors of the Pastorals, Paul believed nothing was unclean if it was accepted by believers who gave thanks for it (100). These points show us the importance of reading and hearing the lessons of the Pastorals.

The Acts of Paul, which contains stories of the oral tradition, are of equal importance. For those of us who oppose sexism, slavery, and other atrocities, the oral tradition gives us support and hope from a teacher inspired by God. Thecla's Paul, the Paul of compassion, the Paul of equality for all, the Paul who prayed for her life, is the Paul of the oral tradition. The stand Paul took on issues of the day, in opposition to established norms, takes on special significance for women and others who are oppressed by those norms. The very act of Paul when he ordained Thecla to go out into the world and teach the word of God could have reversed much of that oppression, had it been allowed in the canon of the New Testament as were the Pastoral Epistles. The Acts of Paul show us that conforming to the rest of the world is not necessary for Christianity to survive (102).

The stories of oral tradition have not lost the battle for Paul's spirit. They remain. They are available to us today to help Christians shape their own Christianity. Christians need both resources to support their fight against inhumanities which exist in our modern world. The problems and
those fighting the problems existed in Paul’s day and he addressed them. Christians need his words to help them many centuries later. The basis for Christian faith for many Christians today—values of equality and social justice—were the same basis Christians built upon in Paul’s day and in the second century. Christians need these teachings from those oral traditions. They are an important addition to the writings in the Pastorals. The Pastorals have been and will continue to be important for Christians who struggle to find a place for themselves in the world and to define themselves in relation to the wider culture in which God must also be at work. The issue of women and their roles within the church and outside the church is complex, frustrating, and energy-consuming, but the Pastorals’ Paul of loving guidance and Thecla’s Paul of equality can, together, guide Christian women and men to a satisfactory end to sexism.

Notes


2 The word “virgin” in the early church did not have the connotation we bring to the word today. It was a term that identified women who chose as their vocation service to Christ rather than the more traditional role of women: marriage and motherhood. Thecla, a minister in Asia Minor, is one such “virgin.”

Works Cited
