Who Was Thecla? The early Christian saint, rebel, and protagonist of the Acts of Thecla

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The leading lady of the apocryphal work the Acts of Thecla may not be a well-known figure today, but nearly every early Christian knew her name. She was renowned as a Christian martyr and missionary and later venerated by the Church as a saint.

Alicia D. Myers investigates the figure of Thecla, as well as early Christian perceptions of motherhood, in her column “Motherhood and the Early Christian Community,” published in the September/October 2018 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review. In the early Church, St. Thecla was seen as a heroine and role model, who eschewed the social norms of the Roman Empire and chose to follow the teachings of the Apostle Paul—despite persecution.

So, who was Thecla really, and what did she believe?

Although it is not clear if St. Thecla was a historical person, stories of this figure come to us from the Acts of Thecla—a section of the Acts of Paul—dated to the end of the second century C.E.

According to the Acts of Thecla, Thecla is a first-century noblewoman of Iconium (in modern Turkey). When she hears Paul preach in her hometown, she is so absorbed in his message that she neither eats nor drinks for three days. She promptly becomes a Christian and decides to remain unmarried and celibate, as Paul advised. Unfortunately, this is seen as a subversive act by her fiancé and her family, and Thecla is violently persecuted by being burned in a bonfire. Miraculously, the flames do not touch her, and she is spared.

After this close brush with death, she leaves Iconium and follows the Apostle Paul to Antioch. There, Alexander, one of the city’s leaders, desires Thecla. When she rejects him, Alexander hauls her in front of the governor, who sentences her to be thrown to wild beasts in an arena. Again, she miraculously survives this persecution—and emerges from the arena unharmed.

After her second miraculous deliverance, Thecla is freed, and she goes in search of the Apostle Paul once more. When she encounters him in Myra, he commissions her to spread the Gospel of Christianity, teach the Bible, and even baptize converts. She goes to Seleucia (in modern day Iraq) and teaches there.

Thecla’s commitment to Paul’s teachings, particularly her disavowal of marriage, was seen as a serious threat to the Roman Empire. Alicia D. Myers explains why:

Rejecting the “blessedness” of motherhood for the kingdom come was threatening to an empire that prided itself on establishing peace for the whole world (the Pax Romana). The Romans certainly weren’t looking for another kingdom to replace their own, and, for their empire to survive and thrive, it needed children. …
In the Roman world, good girls became mothers. Of course, to be able to wed and become a “woman” (the Greek word *gyne* means both “woman” and “wife”), one needed to be free and of enough means. Becoming a mother, bearing living children (ideally, sons) for her husband and for the stability of his household was essential to being a good wife. In fact, many ancient philosophers and medical authors believed that motherhood was a woman’s sole purpose in creation.

Thecla’s actions were revolutionary to say the least. Her countercultural stance set her at odds with the Roman Empire. Yet her fierce determination and faithfulness were celebrated by many in the early Church, and eventually this perspective would infiltrate the Roman Empire itself.