X. Tertullian on the Acts of Paul

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In his treatise *De baptismo*, which was written between 198 and 206, Tertullian pronounces upon the *AP* in a way which is of paramount importance for the dating of that text and of several related writings as well. Nor is that all: he also informs us about the author of the *AP* and his whereabouts, his motives, his readers, and the theological discussions in which his writing played a role. Of course Tertullian's testimony has been known and used by scholars for a long time. Only recently did Willy Rordorf dedicate a most valuable discussion to it. Nevertheless I will return to the passage; its exceptional importance for our knowledge of apocryphal literature seems to justify this. First of all, I shall discuss the establishment and meaning of the text. Next I shall confront it with the interpretation of one of its ancient readers. Finally I shall draw some conclusions regarding the information it offers on the *AP* and their author.

1. Tertullian, *De baptismo* 17.5

The treatise *De baptismo*, which occupies some eighteen pages in the Corpus Christianorum edition, belongs to Tertullian's pre-Mon-

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TANIST period and expounds the doctrine of baptism, its necessity and its effects. In ch. 17 the question is raised of who is entitled to administer baptism. Preferably this should be done by the bishop, otherwise if possible by presbyters or deacons, but if necessary even by lay persons. As Tertullian aptly remarks, 'what is equally received can be equally given'. It is well-known, however, that some persons are more equal than others: baptizing by women is out of the question. In that context, in 17.5, Tertullian brings up the AP, which had been alleged by his opponents to defend the right of women to baptize. As so often, Tertullian's text is inhospitable to the reader. There are problems both of textual criticism and of meaning, and we cannot use the statement as a source unless we have tackled them. Let us start by discussing the text-form.

Up to 1916 for De baptismo we had to rely on the text edited by Mesnartius in 1545, the manuscript he had used being lost. Thus in Oehler's critical edition, published in 1853, 17.5 runs as follows:

Quodsi quae Pauli perperam scripta sunt exemplum Theclae ad licentiam mulierum docendi tinguendique defendunt, sciant in Asia presbyterum qui eam scripturam construxit, quasi titulo Pauli de suo cumulans, convictum atque confessum id se amore Pauli fecisse loco decessisse.

This hardly differs from Mesnartius's text. Oehler reads exemplum instead of scriptum (a variant mentioned in the margin of Mesnartius's edition), but otherwise repeats the text of Mesnartius. For an interpretation we may turn to the translation by S. Thelwall in the 'Ante-Nicene Christian Library':

But if the writings which wrongly go under Paul's name, claim Thecla's example as a licence for women's teaching

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3 Except for Theclae instead of Tecla and tinguendique instead of tinguendi que. As for the latter, as early as 1550 the second editor of Tertullian, Sigismund Gelenius, read tingendique.
and baptizing, let them know that, in Asia, the presbyter
who composed that writing, as if he were augmenting
Paul's fame from his own store, after being convicted, and
confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was re-
moved from his office.4

This seems a fairly accurate rendering, which does not try to iron
out the harshnesses in the text. Harshnesses are there indeed:
(1) 'writings which wrongly go under Paul's name' suggests works
allegedly written by Paul whereas the allusion is to a spurious
work which is written about Paul;
(2) 'writings' are performing the typically human activity of
'claiming', and more important: the AP do not seem to be written
in order to propagate certain rights.
(3) sciant is without an expressly mentioned subject (probably it
has to be supplemented from mulierum).

The textual situation changed in 1916, when the Benedictine
scholar André Wilmart found a twelfth-century manuscript of De
baptismo in the French city of Troyes. This witness, the Troyes
manuscript or codex Trecensis, proved superior by far to the
traditional text.5 In the passage under discussion, it has two extra
words: for Pauli, it reads Acta Pauli quae. So according to this
witness the text reads as follows; I quote from the edition publ-
ished by Ernest Evans in 1964:

quod si quae Acta Pauli, quae perperam scripta sunt, exem-
plum Theclae ad licentiam mulierum docendi tinguendique defendunt, sciant in Asia presbyterum qui eam scripturam construxit, quasi titulo Pauli de suo cumulans, convictum atque confessum id se amore Pauli fecisse loco decessisse.6

The editor takes this to mean the following:

But if certain Acts of Paul, which are falsely so named, claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptize, let men know that in Asia the presbyter who compiled that document, thinking to add of his own to Paul's reputation, was found out, and though he professed he had done it for love of Paul, was deposed from his position.

In this view our difficulty (1) disappears: AP evokes Paul as a character, not as an author; it confirms the opinion which had established itself long before on the basis of less smooth wording. Other scholars, however, solve (2) and (3) as well simply by reading the first quae not as a neuter plural adjectival pronoun (quaes Acta 'certain Acts') but as a feminine plural substantival one (quaes = aliquae feminae, 'certain women'). This confers the task of claiming to human beings and at the same time provides a subject for sciant: those who are urged to realize that in Asia etc. are the same women that are claiming. Unfortunately, this creates new problems. Not only does the substantival use of the indefinite pronoun seem to be rather uncommon in the plural, but Acta Pauli, now acting as an object to defendunt, turns out to be a competitor to exemplum Theclae. If the former of these is surmountable, the latter asks for a solution by taking exemplum Theclae either as a parenthesis or a gloss. Neither of these expedients are really satisfactory. The parenthesis makes for stammering Latin,

6 E. Evans, Q. Septimii Florentis Tertulliani de baptism0 liber. Tertullian's Homily on Baptism. The Text edited with an Introduction, Translation and commentary (London, 1964), 36. Actually the Trecensis text differs from it also in some other details which need not detain us here; for them see Borleffs (n. 5), 197.
and the gloss solution is an admission of weakness, since it interferes in the transmitted text. All in all, Evans’s view seems to be the lesser evil.

Perhaps, however, there is a better possibility. In the edition published by Sigismund Gelenius in Basle in 1550, five years after Mesnartius’s editio princeps of De baptismo, our passage reads as follows (I have spelled out the abbreviations):

Quod si quae Pauli perperam scripta legunt, exemplum Teclae ad licentiam mulierum docendi tingendique defendunt, sciant in Asia presbyterum qui eam scripturam construxit quasi titulo Pauli de suo cumulans, convictum atque confessum id se amore Pauli fecisse, loco decessisse.

In this version quae (there is only one quae, as in the Mesnartius text) is a relative feminine plural, and denotes the subject of all of the predicates: legunt, defendunt, and sciant. In it, all of the difficulties inherent in the editions discussed earlier disappear, apart from Pauli perperam scripta as a designation for writings on Paul. This, however, is a harshness, not an absurdity. Our spontaneous inclination is to think of writings by Paul, but Tertullian may well have been so involved in his subject — 'the Paul writings' — that he did not pause to ask if his expression might cause a misunderstanding. Indeed, the genitive basically only denotes a belonging, and in the present case what special relationship there is between Paul and the writings — is Paul the author, the subject-matter or the owner of the writings? — depends on the context. This reveals itself only gradually. First there is Exemplum Teclae,

7 I readily acknowledge that it was W. Rordorf who put the idea into my head, since I heard indirectly of his suspicion that Gelenius’s edition might contain an interesting way out of the problem.
8 Borleffs (n. 5), 189-90 offers other examples of careless composition in De baptismo.
9 2 Tim. 3.11, διὰ τὴν Ὑστηρίαν ἐπισκόπους, is no more than 'a not very intelligent gloss', as B. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (Stuttgart, 1975) 648 puts it.
but this is only telling for those who know that Thecla occurs in stories about Paul, not in works attributed to him. The second half of the sentence, however, makes it perfectly clear that Tertullian is talking about a composition regarding Paul: *Pauli scripta* means 'the writings on Paul' just as in *Adversus Marcionem* 4.42.2 *omne scriptum passionis suae* means 'all that was written on his passion'. Of course we could consider reading, with the *codex Trecensis, Acta Pauli*, but that is perhaps no more than a *lectio facilitor*, the more so since in the early centuries πράξεις as a designation for the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles was translated into Latin by *actus*, not *acta*. For the same reason, we refrain from adopting Ursinus’s emendation *adscripta* or Reifferscheid’s *inseripta* for *scripta*."

To be fair, we should mention that the reading *legunt* cannot be regarded as based on a manuscript. Gelenius did have access to a manuscript unknown to Mesnartius. It is the famous *codex Masburensis*, but that codex almost certainly did not contain the treatise *De baptismo*. So *legunt* is just a conjecture, but it meets the conditions posed to a conjecture: it fits the context better than the alternative reading *sunt*, and it explains that reading. Indeed an absent-minded scribe would rather write *scripta sunt* for *scripta legunt* than the other way round; in the Vulgate there are more than two hundred occurrences of the participle *scriptus* combined with *esse* but none with *legere*. For *legere* with the connotation of

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10 *Pace* Rordorf (n. 2), 155/479, cf. A. Hilhorst, 'The Apocryphal Acts as martyrdom texts: the case of the Acts of Andrew', in *Bremmer, AAJ* 1-14, esp. 2. Thus, in Origen, *Commentary on John 20.12* (342.5 GCS), we read ἐν ταῖς Παύλου Πράξειν, but in *De principiis* 1.2.3, which has come down to us only in Latin, in *Actibus Pauli*. Apart from *De baptismo* 17.5, neither *actus* nor *acta* occurs in Tertullian’s works as a reference to apocryphal Acts of Apostles; the canonical Acts he designates by *Acta* (Apostolorum).

11 *Scripta* can have the sense of *inscripta* with Tertullian, cf. Borleffs (n. 5), 196 n. 47.

'accept as a canonical text' we may compare the contemporaneous Fragmentum Muratorianum, lines 73 and 77. In conclusion, we feel justified in regarding the text of Gelenius as the one closest to the original."

Our next task is to investigate the purport of this statement. Several aspects ask for comment. First of all, Tertullian has to do with female opponents. In the codex Trecensis version this remained ambiguous, although even there it is unclear why Evans should translate sciant by 'let men know'. Here, however, no shade of doubt remains, and the question is rather which women are meant. Tertullian does not enlarge on that. All he hints at is that some unspecified woman 'who assumed the right to teach' threatens 'to arrogate to her the right to teach' as well (17.4). Evidently this is occurring in the circle of Tertullian's readers.

The presbyter is found guilty, but of what? Writing AP is no mistake in itself, nor is trying to promote Paul. The real offence is implied in the fact that the AP do not deserve that name: Pauli perperam scripta, although what is incompatible with Paul is revealed only in the next sentence. There it is argued that Paul could not have allowed women to teach and baptize, since he did not even permit them to ask questions to the teacher; consequently, a document relating teaching and baptizing by a woman cannot be authentic.

The presbyter's motive is doubly expressed. First it is commented upon from the perspective of Tertullian: quasi titulo Pauli de suo cumulans, 'thinking to add of his own to Paul's reputation'. Next it is described in the presbyter's own words: confessum id se amore Pauli fecisse, 'though he professed he had

13 For more references of legere with the connotation of 'accept as a canonical text' see Thesaurus Linguae Latinae VII.2 (Leipzig, 1956-79) 1131, lines 30-47.

14 In quasi titulo Pauli de suo cumulans the word titulo may be dative as well as ablative, and suo may be substantival as well as adjectival. Yet Evans's rendering, which takes titulo as a dative and suo as substantival seems to do justice to the text: the presbyter thought to add of his own, by himself, to Paul's reputation. Cf. also F. Oehler ad loc.
done it for love of Paul'. These clauses almost seem to adduce attenuating circumstances. As a debater, however, Tertullian's interest can only have been to make the presbyter appear in a bad light. This he achieves by adding quasi, which makes the presbyter's aspiration into a ridiculous arrogance and consequently deprives the presbyter's own words from all lustre as well.

A word should be devoted to loco decessisse. Willy Rordorf has pointed out that all translators incorrectly render 'was deposed from his position' or words of similar import, as if a passive form was used. Nevertheless, this is not too wide off the mark. The presbyter resigned, but under protest, while professing he had done it for love of Paul. Indeed, as Evans has stressed, confessum does not mean 'confessed', as if it were a crime, but 'professed' or 'claimed'. So he saw certainly no reason to retreat voluntarily and took the honourable way out because otherwise he would have been deposed by others.

Finally we should discuss what we have taken for granted so far: is it really to the AP that Tertullian is alluding? This presupposition is not quite without its problems. Several objections have been raised against it, especially by S. L. Davies. Rordorf has refuted most of them, but some more may be said on the absence of baptizing by Thecla in the AP. It is true that there is a self-baptizing, but nowhere does Thecla baptize other persons. Tentatively, two remarks may be made in response. First, teaching may imply baptizing. At the end of the Acts of Paul and Thecla, Thecla is reported to go and teach many people independently of Paul (43). What use is it to be won for the faith if one cannot be baptized? Secondly, the Acts of Paul and Thecla end most abruptly. Thecla meets her mother and tries to make her believe that the Lord lives in heaven. No reaction of the mother is mentioned; instead, only one sentence follows, running thus: 'After

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15 Rordorf (n. 2), 1531477 n. 8.
16 Evans (n. 6), 100.
18 Rordorf (n. 2), 155-9/479-83.
having thus testified, she went to Seleucia and enlightened many by the word of God; then she rested in a glorious sleep.' This has every appearance of a summary. In a more harmonious original version, Thecla might have been pictured as a baptizer.\textsuperscript{19}

2. Jerome, \textit{De uiris illustribus} 7

The passage in \textit{Tertullian} we are dealing with did not escape the attention of Jerome. In the seventh chapter of his \textit{De uiris illustribus}, where St Luke is under discussion, after mentioning Luke's gospel and the canonical Acts, Jerome raises the question as to whether Luke could have written the \textit{Acts of Paul and Thecla}. On that he has the following to remark:'\textsuperscript{22}'

\textit{Igitur Pauli et Theclae et totam baptizati leonis fabulam inter scripturas apocryphas computemus. Quale enim est ut indiuiduus comes apostoli inter ceteras eius res hoc solum ignorauerit? Sed et Tertullianus, uicinus illorum temporum, referit presbyterum quendam in Asia, \textit{σπουδαστῆν} apostoli Pauli, convictum apud Ioannem quod auctor esset libri et confessum se hoc Pauli amore fecisse, loco excidisse.}

That is, in E.C. Richardson's English translation:'\textsuperscript{22}'

\textit{Therefore the \textit{Acts of Paul and Thecla} and all the fable about the lion baptized by him we reckon among the apocryphal writings, for how is it possible that the inseparable companion of the apostle in his other affairs, alone should have been ignorant}

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. also \textit{Rordorf} (n. 2), 156-7/480-1.
\textsuperscript{21} In P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds), \textit{A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church}, 113 (New York, 1892) 363. Richardson was Ceresa-Gastaldo's (n. 20) predecessor as an editor of Jerome's \textit{De uiris illustribus}. For 'confessed' I would prefer 'professed' or 'claimed', cf. \textit{supra} n. 16.
of this thing. Moreover Tertullian who lived near those times, mentions a certain presbyter in Asia, an adherent of the apostle Paul, who was convicted by John of having been the author of the book, and who, confessing that he did this for love of Paul, resigned his office of presbyter.

So he begins by denying Luke's authorship for the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* on account of the silence he observes on the curious events attributed to Paul in that apocryphal work. If they had really occurred, he implies, Luke would have recorded them in the canonical Acts. He continues by appealing to the authority of Tertullian and offers a paraphrase of the second half of Tertullian's statement, thus enabling us to discover how he interpreted it. We may make the following observations:

1. The logic of the statement has been improved. With Jerome, we immediately understand why writing the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is an offence, because he has already explained that it contained events which could not claim to be historical; otherwise Luke would have recorded them.

2. The choice between a retreat and a deposition is confirmed to be immaterial. Although Jerome no more uses a passive form than Tertullian did, *loco excidisse* makes it clear that the presbyter hardly had a choice to make.

3. The most interesting feature, however, is the addition *apud Iohannem* to *convictum*. John must be the apostle and evangelist of that name. St John the Baptist of course had died long before, so cannot be considered. Apart from him there is only the apostle who can be mentioned without personal details. This is important for the chronology. According to Jerome, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* were written during the lifetime of the apostle John, and probably after Paul's death, because if Paul had lived to see the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* in existence, he would have been the logical one to expose its lies. What ideas did Jerome have about the time in which Paul and John respectively died? He expresses his opinion about that in *De uiris illustribus*. As he declares in ch.

22 For the baptized lion see Adamik, this volume, Ch. 4.
5. Paul died in the fourteenth year of Nero, which means A.D. 68. John on the other hand, he declares in ch. 9, died in the sixty-eighth year after the Lord’s passion, which is in the year A.D. 98, because, as appears from ch. 5, Nero’s second year, which is A.D. 55, is the twenty-fifth after the Lord’s passion. So according to Jerome the Acts of Paul and Thecla were written between A.D. 68 and A.D. 98.

The question may arise whether Jerome meant Tertullian to be a contemporary of the presbyter who composed the Acts of Paul and Thecla, for he describes him as uicinus illorum temporum. This, however, cannot be his opinion, since Jerome knew perfectly well that Tertullian lived and worked under the Emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla, as he states in ch. 53 of his De uiris illustribus, i.e., between A.D. 193 and A.D. 217. Therefore we are bound to interpret uicinus illorum temporum in a relative way: much nearer to those times than Jerome himself was.

Few of us would be prepared to date the Acts of Paul and Thecla as early as Jerome did. But we may ask ourselves whether he found the detail of John exposing the presbyter in his Tertullian text. We would not be the first to think so. Francis Junius was so impressed by it that he adopted the reading in his Tertullian edition of 1597. His example has not been followed, but I am not sure he was foolish to do so. At least we could discuss the arguments. First of all, the textual transmission of the De baptismo is so poor that we cannot make much of it. Secondly, Jerome presents his statement as a paraphrase of Tertullian’s words; only if assuming a falsity on Jerome’s side can we deny that he read it

24 S. Reinach, Cultes, mythes et religions IV (Paris, 1912) 229-51 (‘Thékla’), esp. 242, considers it most probable that Jerome found the mention in Tertullian. This enables him to date the original Thecla history to A.D. 60-90, when, according to the tradition, John lived in Ephesus!
with Tertullian. Ernest Evans thinks it to be 'meaningless and unnecessary' to suppose that Tertullian had conuictum apud Iohannem on account of the fact that 'John the Apostle is far too early, since the work in question was composed well within the second century', but the question is not when the AP were actually composed but when Tertullian thought they were. So I cannot but leave the possibility open that Tertullian wrote conuictum apud Iohannem.

4. Finally, the title Jerome uses for the Acts of Paul and Thecla, namely Περί Πολίων et Theclae, offers a support for our distrust of the codex Trecensis reading Acta Pauli quae over against Mesnartius's and Gelenius's Pauli. The least we can say is that in the early fifth century the title Acta Pauli had not yet established itself.

3. Conclusions

If our interpretation of De baptismo 17.5 is acceptable, there are a number of consequences for the AP, some in conformity with earlier opinions, some contrary to them.

Usually, the AP are dated, on the basis of Tertullian's testimony, at the end of the second century. Indeed we found that Tertullian, writing c. 200, alludes to it. Therefore it cannot be later than the end of the second century. But it is much harder to know if it was written shortly before Tertullian. Apparently most scholars take it for granted that Tertullian would not have been able to come with his disclosure about the author of the AP if they had already been known for a long time. But that is far from demonstrable, and a serious scholar like Jerome, whose 'care for the chronology is constant and fundamental', as A. Ceresa-Gas-taldo remarks on account of his De uiris illustribus and his Chron-

25 Evans (n. 6), 100.
...was able to date the book between 68 and 98 A.D. Therefore, as long as no new clues turn up, it seems to be wise to allow a much larger period of time within which it can be dated than is customarily done. This in turn affects the dating of the other apocryphal Acts, in so far as they are considered to be, directly or indirectly, dependent on the AP.

We cannot be sure which name Tertullian used for the AP. There are good reasons to doubt that is was Acta Pauli, the name we read in the codex Trecensis. Pauli scripta, the reading of the text in Mesnartius and Gelenius, does not look like a title. Candidates for a title — but we do not know if he used any — may have been Jerome's Περιόδοι Pauli et Theclae; the name in the Latin version of Origen, Actus Pauli; or even liber qui appellatur Theclae et Pauli, found in some witnesses to Decretum Gelasianum 5.4.9 (52.289 Dobschütz) as a variant to Actus Theclae et Pauli.

The Acts of Paul and Thecla have not reached us undamaged, for if it is admitted that it was to them that Tertullian alludes, they must have contained unambiguous descriptions of baptizing by Thecla, which are lacking in our present text. Thecla's self-baptizing in ch. 34 (and cf. ch. 40) does not suffice, for if this was all she had done, Tertullian would have pointed to that. At least the final part of the Acts of Paul and Thecla may well have undergone an abridgement. There originally Thecla's baptizing activities may have been narrated; conceivably they have been eliminated to pre-

vent their being used as an argument for baptizing by women.

An interesting aspect of Tertullian's statement is the light it throws on the author. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only case in which we have any information on an author of apocryphal writings; the old tradition which has it that the five early apocryphal Acts were all written by Leucius, the companion of John the Apostle, has long since been rejected. Our author was a presbyter in Asia, i. e. probably the Western part of Asia Minor, and an admirer of Paul, i. e. probably the Paul of the Acts of the Apostles, since his hero is a travelling preacher and, as Tertullian reminds us, the Acts of Paul show no trace of the distinctive range of thought occurring in Paul's Letters. The presbyter's idea to compose a romanticized narrative of Paul's preaching activities was naïve and was not appreciated by more critical members of his community, who forced him to resign. Always supposing Tertullian gives an accurate picture this is an indication that the AP were 'apocryphal' from the very beginning and never had any official status in the milieu in which they were written.

On the other hand, the AP survived the degradation of their author and were read even in the West, more specifically Tertullian's Carthage. There they were used in a debate in which Christian women claimed their right to administer baptism. This is a new chapter in their Nachleben and I cannot agree with J.K. Elliott's opinion that this goal was already in the presbyter's mind.”

30 For the place of composition see also Bremner, this volume, 56-7.
31 Elliott (n. 26), 350.