I’m in the middle of talking about whether Paul wrote the verses now found in 1 Cor. 14:34-35, or if they were a later interpolation into his letters (that is, an insertion that ended up in every single one of our manuscripts). It’s an important issue. This is the passage where Paul sternly tells women that they are NOT to speak in church. They can’t only not be *leaders*. They can’t *talk*.

Wow. OK, then. Did Paul really write that? I’m going to be arguing he did not, that it’s an interpolation (I’m doing this in part in order to show how one can show that a passage is not “original” even if the manuscripts all agree. It doesn’t happen much. But *sometimes*).

But to make sense of it, I have to talk about the two views about Paul and women that emerged after he was dead, one that portrayed him as very much on the side of women, a kind of early Christian proto-feminist, and the other that saw him as a complete misogynist, one of antiquity’s most outspoken. Both of these portrayals have come down to us in the written record, and have been believed as gospel truth by one set of Christians or another over the centuries. Is either historically accurate? And how does it relate to the harsh words of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35?

Today I talk about the view of Paul as an early Christian fore-runner of women’s liberation. Of course he would not have argued for women’s rights in the way they have been pushed in modern times, in the feminist movements that emerged in the 19th century, erupting big time in the 1960s and 70s (when many of us were coming of age), and becoming far more compelling for far more people in the past few decades. Paul was an ancient Jewish male, for good or ill. He wasn’t a 1970s New York feminist. Still: the portrayal is striking for its day — and can be seen nowhere better than in the one-time very famous legends about his interactions with a follower named Thecla, once a household name in many Christian circles, but now only in circles of scholars and those they teach.

These stories present liberation in a different, and possibly unexpected mode. They come through Paul’s insistence on sexual renunciation. People should have sex. That’s liberating for women? It can be in a society where a woman is throughout her entire life legally, socially, and morally subject to the authority, power, and whims of a male adult (first the father; then the husband). What if one didn’t *have* a husband? That changes the equation.

This, in part, is what the tales of Thecla are about. Here is what I say about her and her significance in my Introduction to the New Testament:

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Some of the most interesting pieces of early Christian literature are narratives composed around the person of Paul and modeled, to a limited extent, on the book of Acts, the only narrative about him to be included in the New Testament. Of the noncanonical accounts, perhaps the best known are those that relate the exploits of Paul and his female disciple, Thecla. In these and similar accounts, Paul is portrayed as a hard-core advocate of sexual renunciation, an apostle who preaches the joys of abstinence to audiences eager to escape the drudgeries of arranged marriages and to evade oppressive social arrangements that appear in the guise of established family.

Not surprisingly, those who take Paul’s words to heart (in these tales) are usually women, destined otherwise to live under the oppressive yokes of their future husbands. Thecla’s story is typical of these narratives. Engaged to a wealthy man of the upper classes, she
hears Paul’s disquisition and breaks her engagement. She leaves home to follow the apostle and enjoy the freedom of one liberated from the concerns of the body and the domination of a husband. Her estranged fiancé, as you might imagine, is not amused.

Thecla’s exploits are recounted in a second-century novelistic work called *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. As the plot develops, her fiancé (in cahoots with her mother, who is set to lose a prosperous retirement from the deal) turns on her and prosecutes her, eventually seeking her execution. She is....

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