Thinking through Gender  
_in the Second Century Jesus Movements_  

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The Christianity Seminar continues to explore the way the early Jesus movements proliferated in a multiplicity of forms and iterations. In this paper I take up the question of gender, asking: What are the places people occupied in the early Jesus movement on the basis of gender? What spaces did gender carve out? Given the scope of the subject, this paper is meant to be more suggestive than exhaustive, but it attempts highlight some contours and possibilities, particularly during the 2nd century CE.

To explore the topic of gender, I take a look at four 2nd century CE texts where gender plays an important role: 1 Timothy, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the Gospel of Mary, and On the Origin of the World. In each, women play a prominent role, however, the position of females within these texts often situates them in stark contrast to their male “counter parts,” highlighting a array of gendered dynamics. These texts also address a wide range of issues from sexuality to celibacy, marital status to violence, suggesting a wide variety of investments and concerns within the proliferation of Jesus groups during this time period. In conclusion, I will compare points of connection and disjunction between the four texts and also, raise questions around distinctions between rhetoric and real people.

_1 Timothy: On Silence, Prescription, and Policing_  

1 Timothy is probably most famous—or at least infamous—for verses 2:8-15, in which the author says:¹

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves in modest clothes with respect and discretion—not with plaited hair and gold or pearls, or costly clothes, but, as fitting for women who are God-fearing, with good works. Let a woman learn in silence in full subordination. I command no woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived

¹ As with the majority of scholars, I assume that 1 Timothy was not a letter written by Paul and most likely dates to the first half of the second century CE.
and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, if they stand fast in faith and love and holiness with discretion.  

These words are both prescriptive and prohibitive: women are told what to wear—“dress in modest clothes with respect and discretion”—as well as what not to wear—“plaited hair,” “gold,” “pearls,” or “costly clothes,” (1 Tim. 2:9). Women are allowed to “learn in silence in full submission,” but are not allowed “to teach or have authority over a man,” (1 Tim. 2:11-12a). Then, as if once were not enough, the text re-emphasizes the command for women to be silent (1 Tim. 2:12b).

To justify these positions, the author of 1 Timothy predicates his argument on the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis 2:4-3:24. He justifies the subordination of woman to man because, in the order of creation, “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (Gen. 2:7 plassō; 2:20-22), and “Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived (Gen. 3:13 apataō) and became a transgressor,” (1 Tim. 2:13-14). However, despite their position as the “second sex,” women may be saved through childbearing (Gen. 3:16), but if, and only if, they hold fast in faith, love, and holiness with the discretion and modesty previously prescribed (1 Tim. 2:15). These prescriptions, particularly in regard to childbearing, generally relegate women to the domain of the home—and possibly the assembly as long as they are seen in dress that does not bring shame (as defined by the author of 1 Timothy) and not heard.

In addition to these general prescriptions for women, the letter has further instructions for women who are widows. 1 Timothy begins by making a distinction between what it considers real widows—older women, who, left to their own devices, hopes and abides in God—and false widows, who live “in excess” and are “dead,” (1 Tim. 5:5-6). “Real” widows, who have children or grandchildren should “learn piety in their own household,” repaying what has been given to them (5:4). “Real” widows must also be over sixty, married only once, known for good works, child rearing, hospitality, washing the feet of the holy ones, and helping the distressed (5:9-10). “False” widows, are known for wantonness, a desire to remarry, laziness, gossiping and meddling (5:11-13). Because of these things, even though it “annuls their first promise,” (5:12), these young widows should remarry and “bear children and manage their households” lest they “follow Satan” (5:14-15).

Though women—both married and widowed—are instructed to manage their homes well, 1 Timothy is clear that they are subordinate in this, too. In prescribing and prohibiting attributes of would-be bishops, the text states men must be, “irreproachable,  

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
3 Cf. 1 Tim. 5:4, 14 regarding widows and the household.
married only once, sober, reasonable, modest, hospitable, a good teacher, not a drunk, not violent but kindly, uncombative, not money-loving,” (3:2-3). But the pinnacle of this list comes when the letter states that the prospective bishop “must head his own household well, keeping his children submiss and respectfully in every way—for if one does not know how to head his own household, how can he manage God’s assembly?” (3:4-5). In addition, future bishops must not be new to the faith or delusionally arrogant, lest they fall into the hands of the devil (3:6).

1 Timothy prescribes and prohibits similar qualities for deacons, who must be: “honorable, not insincere, not indulging in too much wine, not greedy,” have faith, a clear conscience, and be blameless (3:8-10). They, of course, too, must “be married only once” and be able to “head their children and their households well,” (3:12).

While often the prescriptions and prohibitions for women are emphasized in 1 Timothy, it is important to note that the letter is prescriptive and prohibitive for men as well—even though, or because, they are the only ones authorized for leadership. Men in this text are positioned to both uphold societal norms in a manner beyond reproach as well as embody the ideals of the ekklesia. While women’s positions and possibilities are severely limited by the letter—particularly in terms of leadership and teaching—men’s positions are proscribed as well. 1 Timothy instructs men in terms of behavior and perception, and urges them to police all those who fall under their purview, thereby proscribing their own positions as they proscribe the positions of their subordinates.

Thecla: On Power, Celibacy, and Safety

The Acts of Paul and Thecla tells the story of a young girl who becomes enamored with the teachings of Paul. Thecla’s mother, Theocleia, describes her daughter as “a spider in the window…bound to his words” (9:2). Indeed, Paul’s word so captivates Thecla that she searches out Paul in prison after his arrest at the urging of Thamyris, thus abandoning her mother, her fiancé, and her entire household to follow Paul’s teachings. Thecla’s refusal to uphold her circumscribed social position as daughter and wife, incites her own mother calls for her death by burning in the theater. This sentence not only serves to punish her lawlessness, but also provides a deterrent for all women who might wish to follow Paul.

Paul is whipped and released for his teachings, but, as her mother demands, Thecla is condemned to burn. In the midst of the theater, as Thecla is stripped naked and placed on the pyre, the fire burns but the flames do not touch her. Through God’s

compassion, the earth resounds, and hail and rain pour from the sky, dousing the flames and freeing Thecla.

Thecla then departs in search of Paul, who rejoices upon learning of her escape. Upon meeting she declares to Paul, “I will cut my hair and follow you wherever you go.” Paul rebuffs her saying, “It is a shameful time and you are fair.” He then hopes, aloud, that she does not encounter any more trials such as this, where “you are unable to stand firm but are cowardly.” Thecla responds that if only Paul will baptize her, her courage will remain intact, but Paul refuses. However, despite this refusal, though Paul and Thecla, travel together to Antioch (23:1-26:1).

Upon entering Antioch, Thecla and Paul are confronted by Alexander, the president of the provincial council. Paul’s words of Thecla’s “fairness” and future trials seem a prophecy as Alexander becomes enamored with her, plying Paul with money and gifts, and presuming that Thecla is his ward. Paul then provokes the very trials he hopes Thecla is spared by denying any knowledge of her and leaves her to fend for herself. As Alexander attempts to embrace her, Thecla screams aloud against his violation, tearing his cloak and taking his crown.

Though he loves her, Alexander is dishonored by the public shame Thecla has brought him through refusing his advances. As a result, he brings her before the governor. Though denied by Paul, Thecla does not deny what she has done in her own defense, and, as punishment, she is sentenced to the wild beasts. At this point, the women of Antioch rally to defend Thecla, crying, “Evil judgment! Unholy judgment!” A rich queen and relative of the emperor, Tryphaena, takes Thecla into her care to guard her purity (27:1-2).

Women and children continue to defend Thecla as she is processed in the street, and bound to a ferocious lioness who, rather than mauling her, sits and licks her feet. Both Tryphaena and Thecla appeal to God as Thecla is lead into the stadium. Stripped, but for a girdle, as lions and bears are thrown into the ring, Thecla is rushed by a lioness who once again lays at her feet. A bear then attacks, but the lioness intercepts, killing it. Finally, a man-eating lion is let loose, but again, the lioness engages it. She kills the lion, but loses her own life in the process.

More and more animals enter the arena as Thecla raises her hands in prayer. She then plunges into a pool filled with killer-seals, declaring for herself that which was denied by Paul: “In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself!” With a lightning flash, the seals die, and Thecla is surrounded by “a cloud of fire so that neither the wild animals could touch her, nor could she be seen naked,” (34:36). As the onslaught of animals continue, Thecla is aided by women pacifying the beasts with perfume. In a final effort to see her dead, she is bound to bulls, but her bonds are consumed by flame, and she is set free.
These attempts on Thecla’s life prove too much for the queen Tryphaena. She faints and is thought dead, bringing terror to the people and the governor who think Caesar will seek retribution and destroy the entire city. At this, Thecla is released, and Tryphaena is discovered to be alive. Thecla returns to Tryphaena’s home to rest, teaching the entire household the word of God. But, again, she misses Paul and seeks him.

Binding her breasts and donning a man’s robe, Thecla travels with an entourage of young women and men to find Paul. When she finds him, seeing the crowd with her, Paul is astonished and wonders (or maybe fears) if “another trial is upon her.” But seeing his dis-ease, Thecla simply declares her baptism (40:3-4). Paul takes Thecla to the home in which he is staying and listens to her ordeals. Thecla then decides to return to Iconium, and Paul finally seems to affirm her, saying, “Go and teach the word of God,” (41:3). Upon her return to Iconium, she finds Thamyris dead and reconciles with her mother.

In a final episode, Thecla is healing people, most likely in Seleucia, and doctors send “violent young men to ruin her,” presumably to regain the business and patients she has taken away from them. Thecla escapes these men when, through the foresight of God, “she entered into a rock, alive, and it descended under the earth,” (44:1-2). The text ends as she travels to Rome in search of Paul and learns he has died. Thecla continues her teaching and healing, and lived to the age of ninety.

Though Thecla’s mother claims that she is caught up in a spider’s web spun by Paul’s words, Paul’s teachings place Thecla in wide-ranging webs of relationship that are only possible because she is no longer tied to her fiancé and family. Thecla’s virginity and devotion to God, rather than cutting her off from the world and sequestering her in isolation, embed her in a world of intimacy which extends beyond the human to the animal and elemental—even though her choices constantly cause confrontations with law-and-order.

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6 As many commentators have pointed out, Thecla shuns the conventional societal role of wife and mother, opening other ways of possibility. While some scholars have framed the story of Thecla as a debates between men and their position in Roman society (see, for example, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity, Twentieth-Anniversary Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, (1998, 2008), 153-4; Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996)), Tertullian’s comment that the story was used as a justification for women’s teaching, healing, and baptism points to its influence beyond the rhetorical. See, for example Shelly Matthews, “Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Fall 2001), 39-55 and conclusion below.
In her journey to God, some commentators note that Thecla transforms from a woman to a man during the course of the story, but there are other ways to read this as well. For example, Thecla’s donning of men’s clothes is a way for her to take responsibility for her own safety. Once Thecla leaves the safety of her family and fiancé—i.e. the care of men and the sanctioned social body—the social implication is that she is without protection. Thecla encounters this lack of protection time and time again as Thamyris hands her to the governor and her mother calls for her death—not only as a punishment for her crimes, but as an example to women who try to thwart the system. Thecla encounters a dearth of defense as she is threatened by Alexander and abandoned by Paul. Additionally, Paul distances himself from her on multiple occasions somehow fearing her penchant for trial will infect him. Thecla’s choice to bind her breasts, wear men’s clothes, and an attempt to ensure her safety—an attempt which nevertheless fails to protect her from the threat of rape from the physicians in Seleucia.

As Thecla thwarts convention, abandoning her sense of safety, Paul seems to gird his own. We see this specifically in three locations. The first occurs when Paul refuses to baptize Thecla, fearing she does not have the fortitude necessary to follow Christ nor the courage to persevere through further trials. The second occurs during Thecla’s confrontation with Alexander where Paul denies their relationship outright. The third occurs when Paul is teaching in Myra and becomes anxious seeing her, fearing her trials will adversely affect him.

The move to preserve position and power are displayed even more forcefully in the other men encountered in the text. These characteristics are seen in Paul’s traveling companions, Demas and Hermongenes (not recounted above,) who are jealous of Paul and called hypocrites (1:1). They stoke the fires of Thamyris’s rage, helping him build a case against Paul as they try to elevate their own position by attempting to put Thecla in her place. This preservation of power is not only seen in Thamyris actions to force shame upon Thecla’s choices, but also by Alexander who sees death as a just punishment for the shame incurred by Thecla’s self-defense against his violence. Finally, the physicians, too, attempt to preserve their status by sending men to violate and thus shame and undermine Thecla’s own healing prowess. In these examples, while Thecla moves beyond her circumscribed status, the men must work harder and harder not only to try to restore her to her proper place, but also to retain their own social status.
The Gospel of Mary: On Women’s Leadership and Authority

The Gospel of Mary\(^7\) mentions nothing about sexuality. While Mary is defined and named as “woman” throughout her eponymous gospel, nothing in particular is said about her sexuality or marital status: she is neither celibate or wife, mother nor virgin; in this text she is simply teacher, seer, comforter, and exemplary leader. However, due to the fragmentary nature of the text, many characteristics and attributes of Mary may be absent.

The Gospel of Mary begins in the middle, the first six pages of the manuscript missing. It opens with dialogue between Jesus, here referred to as the Savior, and his followers. Peter is the only one named in this section, but the Savior is addressing a plural you. In the next scene, the Savior departs, telling those listening, among other things, to follow the child of humanity (son of man) within, to “proclaim the good news of the empire,” and not to make any laws beyond those that have been given (4:5-10).\(^8\)

Upon the Savior’s departure, his followers are pained and weeping. They are afraid that if they preach the good news to the nations they, like Jesus, will be killed. It is at this point in the extant text that Mary enters. She stands, comforting and encouraging them, telling them not to weep or be pained for the Savior’s grace remains with them. Instead, she says, they should praise him since he has made them real human beings. With this, Mary turns their hearts toward the good (5:1-9).

At this juncture, those gathered begin to talk about the Savior, and Peter asks Mary to share with them a teaching she received in private from the Savior, saying, “we know the Savior loved you more than the rest of the women,” (5:10-6:2). Mary agrees and tells them of a vision she has of the Savior. An additional six pages of this teaching are missing and when the text resumes, Mary is in the middle of relaying a story of the soul’s ascent through the powers of desire, ignorance, and the seven powers of wrath (7:1-9:30).

Upon the conclusion of the teaching, Andrew speaks and says he does not believe Mary was taught these things by the Savior, stating “for certainly these teachings are strange ideas.” Peter, the very one who asks Mary to relay the teaching in the first place then responds, “Did he really speak with a woman without us knowing about it? Are we to turn around and all listen to her? Did he choose her over us?” (10:1-4).

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\(^7\) For a comprehensive overview on the Gospel of Mary see Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2003).

Now, it is Mary’s turn to weep. In the face of Peter’s bait and switch, Mary is beside herself. She asks Peter, “My brother...what are you thinking? Do you think I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am telling lies about the Savior?” Then Levi steps in, saying, “Peter, you have always been a wrathful person. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you, then, to reject her? Surely the Savior’s knowledge of her is trustworthy. That is why he loved her more than us. Rather, let us be ashamed. We should clothe ourselves with the perfect Human, acquire it for ourselves as he commanded us, and proclaim the good news, not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what the Savior said,” (10:1-13).

Throughout the extant portion of this text, Mary exemplifies the stability, clarity, and knowledge of an exemplary leader. In the midst of the Savior’s departure and the fear of similar violence, Mary not only is an example of stability and clarity, but she uses her own skill to steady the group. Additionally, she is singled out for special status with the Savior and the special teachings from him. While Peter qualifies Mary’s special relationship saying that the Savior loved her more than other women, Levi is clear to correct that the Savior loved her more than everyone, his male followers included.

Though Levi eclipses in some ways in this exchange, he also provides an alternative position and attitude for men. While Andrew and Peter are defended, particularly at the end of the text when they attempt to police Mary and strip her of her authority, Levi holds that it is legitimate to believe a woman. It is important to remember, though, that Levi’s defense is not only predicated on Mary and her character but also upon the Savior’s teachings themselves. Levi’s words imply that Jesus did not prohibit women’s teaching, visions, etc. Rather laying down new laws against women teaching and their place as leaders within the community is characteristic of the adversaries, not followers of the Savior. All can seek and acquire their true humanity, because, according to the text, it is something that lies within. Therefore, in terms of the Gospel of Mary, distinctions in status (though Peter tries again and again) cannot be made on the basis of gender.

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On the Origin of the World and the Rape of Eve: Violence, Sex, and Power

This section addresses On the Origin of the World and particularly the story of the rulers’ rape of Eve embedded within the text. On the Origin of the World is a mythological elaboration of the creation narrative from Genesis in which the fecundity of creation flows from divine female figures. As Eve enters the narrative, the rulers and authorities of the material world (framed by the text as beastly, blind, ignorant, and arrogant) decide to create a human being because they fear the divine realm will try to ruin their work. The rulers fashion this human in the image of their body and in the likeness of the Adam of light. Their purpose in creating humans is twofold: one, so that humans can serve the rulers; and two, so that the Adam of light might fall in love with their human being. In this way, the rulers hope to make those born from the light their slaves (112.25-113.5).

However, while the rulers think they are in control, they are not. Wisdom/Sophia laughs at their plot, knowing through her foresight that their humans will be used in service of the divine to condemn the rulers (113,6-16). In order to advance her plan, Wisdom creates her own human first—a human who will instruct the rulers’ Adam how to escape their grasp. Wisdom names her creation Eve (113,17-35).

When the rulers finish their creation, Adam, he is lifeless on the ground having no spirit/breath, so they abandon him. Wisdom-Life eventually sends her own breath to Adam, giving him a soul; and with a soul he begins to move on the ground but is still unable to stand. Wisdom then sends her daughter Life, also called Eve, to instruct Adam and cause him to rise. Eve sees “her partner” on the ground and says to him, “Adam, live! Arise from the ground!” Eve’s words are efficacious as Adam stands, the text stating that Eve’s “word became a work,” (OnOrig. 115.3-116.8).

When the authorities hear that Adam is alive and has arisen, they become disturbed. As they see Adam talking with Eve they worry that she is the being who appeared to them in the light. Therefore, to keep her from returning to the light, they decide to rape her. In committing this act, the authorities will not only gain power and

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12 The gender imagery around all of these characters is complex. The rulers are often figured as androgynous, leaning toward the masculine while Eve is also initially figured as androgynous though leaning toward the feminine. This leaning can be seen throughout OnOrig with the use of masculine and feminine pronouns respectively. Also, on Eve’s creation see Benjamin H. Dunning, “What Sort of Thing IS This Luminous Woman? Sexual Dimorphism in On the Origin of the World” in Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 75-94.

13 All translations are my own.
control over Eve, but her subsequent children will become subject to them. Yet, as they
plot and plan, they realize they cannot trust Adam. They put him to sleep and tell him
in his slumber that the woman came from his rib, so he thinks she is subject to him and
thinks he is lord over her (116.8-25).

Eve, being a trickster power like Wisdom, sees through the rulers’ scheming
and laughs at them. Then, leaving her likeness with Adam, Eve enters and becomes the
Tree of Knowledge. The rulers mistake this likeness for the true Eve and “act cruelly,”
raping her. This likeness of Eve then gives birth to a multitude of children through the
rulers’ violence (116.25-117.24). But this, as mentioned earlier, is all part of the divine
plan: to bring human forms into existence to condemn the rulers and authorities.

The rulers and authorities continue to worry that Adam and Eve will conquer
them somehow, so they fearfully approach the humans and tell them that they may eat
of any tree in the garden except the Tree of Knowledge—if they eat from this tree they
will die. Then the “wisest of creatures,” a creature from the divine realm, the serpent,
comes and says to Eve, “What did God say to you all? Was it, ‘Do not eat from the Tree
of Knowledge?’” And Eve replies, “He not only said, ‘Do not eat from it,’ but ‘Do not
touch it, or you will die.’” The serpent then tells Eve, “Do not be afraid. In death you
all will not die. For he knows that when you eat from it, your minds will become sober
and you will become like gods, knowing the difference that exists between evil humans
and good. He said this to you in jealousy so that you would not eat from it.” (118.6-
119.6)

OnOrig. says that “Eve had confidence in the words of the instructor,” this
creature sent from the female figures of the divine realm. Eve looks at the tree—this tree
the spiritual Eve became—and sees its beauty and grandeur, and she loves it. She then
takes its fruit and eats, thus taking in the divine piece of her that was split off before the
rulers’ violation. Eve then gives fruit to Adam who eats as well. As they ingest the fruit
their minds open, they become enlightened, and they love one another. Through this
eating they also see the rulers for what they are, beasts, and the two humans “loathe
them” thus enacting the plan of the divine realm to save humanity from the rulers.
(119.6-18)

In OnOrig., there is no man or male savior on top, but rather a constellation of
female figures, imbued with divine power and efficacious in their own right. These
female figures portray a sharp contrast to the rulers: while the female figures of the
divine realm display care and life-giving power, the rulers of the world in their
arrogance and ignorance wield power to violate and subjugate. OnOrig presents the
rulers as representing the dominant social structures which do everything in their power
to keep people in their place: male rulers create and police the reigning order, ensuring
that women (in this case Eve) birth the necessary progeny to guarantee the continuation of their ordered society.

But OnOrig exposes this state of affairs as a construct; it is a text that analyzes the structures of the world and imagines a possibility beyond them. However, it does not see everyday life moving beyond these strictures. In other words, the text sees through the ideological naturalization of patriarchal hierarchy and the gendered violence used to stabilize and undergird it. While it imagines life for both men and women beyond these strictures, that imagined life is mostly one that is relegated to the divine realm. Woman is not derivative or secondary to man, but is figured as efficacious, divine, trickster and also violated and split. Although, with this violation and splitting, as in Thecla’s story, there exist webs of connection created between the divine, animal, elemental, and human.

Additionally, while the rulers defend a paradigm of male dominance, Adam shows the possibility of a maleness which is not afraid of the feminine. The rulers uphold a position of domination and penetration; in contrast, Adam is able to take in and metabolize. Adam holds a space where the feminine does not need to be rejected, controlled, or kept under wraps; a space where men and women can exist in partnership.

OnOrig is an interesting text as it is not one predicated on asceticism, nor is it a text that confines sex to the strictures of conventional norms. Here, Eve occupies a very different location than any of the previous texts we’ve seen: she is divine and human, whole and fractured, violated and healed. Through the wisdom of trickstery, divine females, Eve possesses the resources necessary to protect herself as well as direct her own healing. She is not shamed or blamed for the violence perpetrated against her, but through this violence the brutal structures of the world are unmasked.

Conclusion

In each of the above texts women occupy different spaces or possibilities. In 1 Timothy, women’s roles are circumscribed on the basis of their gender. While the author of 1 Timothy justifies the limitation of women’s roles in the Adam and Eve story, the position of women for which he advocates generally follows the cultural milieu of the era: women are to be subordinate to men and their primary role is that of mother. Particularly, 1 Timothy forbids women to teach or take leadership roles within the hierarchy of the Christ assembly—roles which are relegated to men who exhibit the proper leadership over their own households.

In the Gospel of Mary, Mary holds the very role forbidden to women in 1 Timothy, that of leader and teacher. Not only is Mary a leader and teacher in this

14 Note both Brown and Clark here.
gospel, but she is the *preeminent* leader. Mary is the one who shows stability in the face of the violent loss of the group’s leader; she is the one who is unwavering in the midst of her fellow followers’ uncertainty; she is the one who is able to help her comrades hold fast; and she is the one marked out by the Savior for special teachings.

Despite Mary’s place of leadership, resonances with the position of 1 Timothy resound. Peter emphasizes her womanhood throughout the text, incredulous by the end that Mary would be singled out for special status. This is ironic since it was Peter himself who requested that she teach. However, Levi’s intervention need not be seen as undermining Mary’s authority. Rather, Levi’s actions can be read as an equal (or even subordinate) member of the community upholding both Mary’s position as well as the instructions of the Savior not to lay down laws beyond what was given. In this case, we can imagine that relegating Mary to childbirth rather than allowing her to teach or requiring her to be the male head of a household before holding leadership positions are not rules given by the Savior, and are thus illegitimate. In any case, Mary’s role within the community is not based on either her marital status, sexual status or gender (at least not in the extant portion of the text). Rather, Mary’s role is based upon her stability, insight, maturity, and authorization by the Savior.

The place and space that Thecla occupies, while containing some overlapping features with 1 Timothy and the Gospel of Mary, is distinctive in many ways. At the beginning of Thecla’s story she appears to typically connected to the customs of her community, ensconced in her family home and betrothed to be married. Upon hearing the words of Paul, she abandons this position, compelled both to follow Paul’s teachings and preserve her purity/virginity. She is confronted by the reigning powers again and again for frustrating the status quo and pursuing her faith and freedom.

Divine, human, animal, and elemental forces intervene again and again on behalf of this neophyte to the faith, while men in positions of power (and her mother) consistently try to put her in her place and punish her when their efforts fail. Though faced with severe consequences, including death by fire, abandonment and suspicion by Paul, violation and assault by men, and mauling by wild beasts Thecla remains faithful and unwavering. Despite severing socially-sanctioned ties, her faith and stability weave other webs of connection and community in the midst of her continence, eventually even leading to reconciliation with her mother.

Thecla, far from being saved by childbirth, is saved through her steadfast faith and commitment to her path. Even Paul in the end cannot deny her power as upon their

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15 May just want to note the article that talks about this.
16 In this way Theocleia acts on behalf of the status quo which is particularly understandable if we notice that no mention is made of her husband or any other family members, i.e. Thecla’s marriage to Thamyris also ensures her safety and protection.
final meeting he authorizes her to “Go and teach the word of God,” (41:3). Thecla’s status as a woman does not negate her role as a teacher and healer. Rather, her gender, chastity, and position outside of the traditional household almost seem to authorize her leadership abilities.

Eve in On the Origin of the World inhabits the most complicated position within the texts presented. This narrative frames Eve as a figure of the heavens, though she will occupy both the spiritual and material, the divine and human realms within the text. Here, Eve is the ultimate instructor, sent specifically to bring life and to teach humans of the material realm. In a move diverging from the biblical story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, OnOrig’s Eve is created by Wisdom/Sophia. The story that conveys she was created from and therefore subordinate to Adam was just that, a story—but one used to subjugate human beings to the rulers, and women to men.

Additionally, Eve’s story deals with sex in a very different manner from the other three texts. 1 Timothy relegates sex to the confines of marriage, while the Gospel of Mary does not mention it at all. The Acts of Paul and Thecla addresses celibacy, but also addresses sexual violence, as men try to exert power over Thecla through assault. She escapes violation through self-defense, release to Tryphaena’s care, and entering rock and earth at the prompting of God’s foresight. While the spiritual Eve becomes the Tree of Knowledge, her material counterpart is not saved but suffers sexual violation at the hand of the rulers. However, this violation does not relegate her to a position of shame or celibacy, but instead leads her to a place of insight and partnership with Adam—one, through trusting the divine instructor, they have both taken in the fruit. In OnOrig, Eve is life-giver, instructor, trickster, healer, and savior rather than homemaker, child-bearer, or celibate.

Whereas the female actors in these texts occupy a myriad of positions, in many ways the positions of men seem to be more limited. While they hold the majority of the power and leadership positions in all four texts, their major role is to ensure that all people—both men and women—stay in their proper, circumscribed place. Particularly, in the three narrative texts, the positions of men are defended. In the Acts of Paul and Thecla, Thamyris is “filled with jealousy and wrath” (15:1) as Thecla chooses Paul over him; Alexander must call for Thecla’s death as she has “caused him public shame” (26:7); the physicians of Seleucia send men to violate her to protect their business; and even Paul abandons her, worrying that her weakness will bring him trials. In the Gospel of Mary, male defensiveness is seen particularly in the character of Peter: Peter constantly qualifies Mary as a women (“the Savior loved you more than the rest of the women” 6:1); baits her to give a secret teaching only to discredit her later; and is incredulous that the Savior gave her special teachings over the men and that, because of this, they might be required to follow her. In OnOrig, these qualities of jealousy and
incredulity are exhibited by the rulers. Constantly fearful of the figures of the divine realm, they incessantly look for ways to entrap them and make them subordinate, thereby continuously creating more complex and violent plots in their attempts to retain their power over others. While not as overt, the entire letter of 1 Timothy betrays this position as well for the letter establishes rules and regulations for anyone who might find themselves a part of a Christ assembly—men, women, children, slaves, leaders, and subordinates.

Though this role of policing comprises the general trend for males in the texts, there are several exceptions to this, most notably Levi in the Gospel of Mary and Adam in OnOrig. Levi upholds Mary’s power and accepts her authority. Rather than becoming defensive in regard to his position and authority, he comes to Mary’s defense. In OnOrig, Adam holds a similar position to Levi, but expands upon it. Adam is not defended at all, acknowledging the life-giving power Eve has endowed him with. Adam also exhibits trust in Eve as he takes and eats the fruit that she gives him from the Tree of Knowledge. OnOrig posits a world where it might be possible for men and women, male and female to live into their fullness without the need to be regulated or controlled. Through the relationship between Eve, Adam, and the rulers, OnOrig unmasksthe fragility of the dominant masculine position and the work and energy necessary to keep people in their “proper” place. In addition, one could argue that Thecla constitutes an exception to the masculine position of policing as well. Interpreters have noted Thecla’s move from a feminine to masculine position as she asserts more self-determination, contemplates cutting her hair, binds her breasts, dons men’s clothes, teaches, and heals. But if Thecla occupies a male position, it seems far from the reigning paradigms, as she seeks to share her trials and triumphs with Paul, to reconcile with her mother, and to spend her long life healing and helping others. In this way, Thecla demonstrates that women’s roles are flexible enough that they may even occupy the space of males.

It has been suggested that the spaces women occupy in texts such as these, as well as others like them, serve more as rhetorical devices and ideological debates between men rather than reflecting the lives of real women (and men?). But textual evidence supports that these varied roles for women are not simply relegated to the fictional or rhetorical. For example, women are named throughout the letters of Paul as leaders, including Phoebe as a deacon (Rom. 6:1) and Junia as an apostle (Rom. 6:7). Additionally, when the governor Pliny writes to the emperor Trajan for advice on how to deal with those belonging to the Christ association, he mentions two slave women who hold the position of deacon, and whom he tortures for information (10.96.8).

17 For example see Brown, Cooper.
is also evidence from Tertullian’s writings near the turn of the 3rd century that Thecla’s story inspired women to teach and baptize.\(^\text{18}\)

These texts point to the wide-ranging and multiple ways women were figured rhetorically as well as the myriad of possibilities and spaces they could hold—from child-bearer to leader. In the same way that followers of the early Jesus movements used the stories of Jesus’s teachings, life, death, and resurrection creatively in a multitude of configurations, so too, the possibilities for women reflect this multiplicity. Interestingly, these possibilities for the positionality of women are often predicated on the way in which the Jesus story is framed and interpreted.\(^\text{19}\) While men are often seen policing the boundaries of the possible, women seem to hold the potential of occupying multiple spaces.

\(^{18}\) “In fact, concerning the Act of Paul, wrongly attributed to him, they appeal to the example of Thecla as giving women the right to teach and to baptize. Let them know that a priest in Asia constructed this document as if he were heaping up glory for Paul by his own effort; when he was convicted and confessed that he had done it out of love for Paul, he lost his position. For how credible will it seem that Paul gave a woman the power of teaching and baptizing, when he firmly prohibited a woman from learning? He said, Let them be silent and question their husbands at home’ (1 Cor. 14:34-35).” Tertullian, “On Baptism 17” in Women in the Early Church, Elizabeth A. Clark (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 173.

\(^{19}\) For example, in the Gospel of Mary, the Savior does not seem to have laid down laws prohibiting women’s leadership.