Chapter I

A Cainite Invocation of Thecla?
The Reception of the Acts of Paul in North Africa as Exemplified in Tertullian’s de Baptismo

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Introduction and Apologia

Sometime between 196 and 206, Tertullian (b. c. 155), a Christian living and writing in Carthage, North Africa, wrote a homily entitled de Baptismo.¹ This work is probably best known for a reference to the acrostic ΙΧΘΥΣ (i.e., Ιησου Χριστος Θεου [or Θεος] Υιος Σωτηρ, “Jesus Christ God Son Savior”) that is translated as “fish” and was popularly used as an early Christian symbol. However, the primary thrust of the homily seems to be Tertullian’s defense of baptism directed against a woman, whom he calls a female viper from a Cainite sect,² who is preaching, teaching, and denying the practice. My interest in de Baptismo is connected to a minor argument of Tertullian where he denounces the Acts of Paul (Lat., Acta Pauli) as part of his denunciation of the female adversary. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to critically examine the reception of Thecla as a female described within a known literary work, Acta Pauli, within Tertullian’s de Baptismo.

Before conducting this examination, a brief discussion of several broad concerns might be helpful. I realize the scope of the entire volume is to examine the literary reception of Thecla within late antique and early medieval hagiography. The italicized words, of course, point to the specific areas that I wish to reflect upon briefly as they pertain to my topic. First, after a cursory reading of de Baptismo, one will quickly note that an explicit

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“literary” reference to the *Acts of Paul* can hardly be found. Tertullian does not make a citation from any part of what we know of as the *Acts of Paul* nor specifically to the section within it that is known as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Nevertheless, we may be able to justify our inquiry if we content ourselves by looking for “allusions” and “echoes” in the text.³ Tertullian is seemingly aware (at most) of a text, or, at least, he has heard rumors of the story as told within a text. However, to say that he is appreciative of its literary, martyrrological, or hagiographical value might be an overstatement.

This leads to my second point: one would be hard-pressed to argue that Tertullian is living within the late antique (to say nothing of “early medieval”) period. As best can be determined, while Tertullian is alive throughout most of the first half of the second century, this writing still precedes the reign of Diocletian (r. 284–305) by nearly three quarters of a century.⁴ We are dealing with a mention of a literary work that could be thought to be too early for the scope of this volume.

Third, I would be remiss if I failed to mention that hagiography is often thought of as a “later” phenomenon that may be observed within the late antique, byzantine, and early medieval period (and beyond).⁵ Nevertheless, this is where a loophole may be exploited in order to consider Tertullian’s opinions on Thecla within the context of this volume. Granted that we are essentially one century removed from Eusebius of Caesarea’s (d. 339) lost work, *An Assembly of Ancient Martyrs*, and two centuries earlier than the *vita* written by Athanasius (d. 373) to honor Antony, my approach is similar to that argued by Ghazzal Dabiri, in the Introduction to this volume, that we address hagiographies in the broader sense.⁶ This is where we might gain traction.

The place of this essay could be described as a terminus a quo for investigations of hagiographical references pertaining to Thecla. In other words, this would be the historical “origins” for thinking about the literary reception of *Thecla* that grows and flourishes within late antiquity and the early medieval period. Thus, from a certain point of view, this is the beginning of a phenomenon of thinking of Thecla within the framework of hagiography.

⁴ Diocletian’s reign can represent the “beginning” of late antiquity. See Eder, “Late Antiquity,” 2005.
If, then, we are to examine the reception of the Acts of Paul as a form of hagiography within the churches of North Africa (as will be done shortly), this leads to acknowledging several factors. The honoring of “saint” Thecla in this region should be thought of as an already important part of church life as Tertullian inadvertently proves. Tertullian appears to be aware of the Thecla, as noted above, and associates her with an Acta – possibly the Acts of Paul – which deals with her teaching and baptizing. In his denunciation of (1) the writer of the Acts, for claiming that Thecla teaches, and (2) a Cainite female teaching, he is obviously threatened by communities who appeal to Thecla. This detail is highlighted here again due to the fact that Tertullian’s reference to Thecla has become standard in discussions of the dating and reception of the Acts of Paul, however, scholars are not questioning his knowledge of Thecla of Iconium.

I am aware that the textual evidence, relatively speaking, is considered “strong” for this time period, but I am trying to indicate that no manuscripts of the Acts of Paul exist near to the time of its composition. In regard to the evidence that remains of the Acts of Paul, there is a Greek, third-century manuscript containing 3 Corinthians (i.e., Bodmer Papyrus X), three Greek papyri fragments from the third to fifth centuries, and the Coptic “Heidelberg” papyrus from the fifth–sixth century. Thus, the evidence that does remain clearly fits within a time period where the veneration of saints and the production of hagiography have significantly increased, and Thecla, more than many saints, has reached the peak of her popularity. To go along with these thoughts, we also know that the Acts of Paul and Thecla does seem to represent a prototype and exemplar martyrion similar to the martyrion of Perpetua and Felicitas. This appears to represent a sort of “origins” for hagiography. As an example, many of the descriptive elements that loosely fit within hagiography (i.e., passiones, vitae, miracle stories, emphasis upon asceticism and virginity, the praise of missionary efforts, and so forth) are clearly present

7 MacMullen, The Second Church, 2009.
here; and again, as indicated by Tertullian, this is a source of inspiration and veneration by the early Christians within North Africa. 

Therefore, if no early manuscripts exist and if the Acts of Paul and Thecla is a text within a tradition of hagiographical production, then one cannot help but wonder if and to what extent the text might have been altered. While serious Formgeschichte Untersuchungen have been conducted on the Acts of Paul and Thecla, I am not quite sure we can reduce the text down to any earlier forms without offering an uncomfortable degree of speculation. In the same way that Hippolyte Delehaye was able to present a reduced version of Procopius from his surrounding legends, a similar reduction cannot be accomplished in this case. In other words, as best as can be determined by the manuscript history, the text of the Acts of Paul and Thecla that we have today should be considered stable and, thus, represents a hagiography at a very early date. Therefore, for the purposes of this volume, I offer this brief discussion for the inclusion of a piece focused upon Tertullian’s interest in Thecla and suggest that this early hagiography might suit the context of this volume well as a beginning point for inquiring into her literary reception in later hagiographies.

Having made these comments above, I now backtrack to an important question; namely, what is Tertullian reading and what does he know about Thecla and the text that “speaks” of her, the Acts of Paul? To answer this question, another component will be added into the mix. In addition to his opposition to Thecla and the Acts of Paul, Tertullian seems to be aware of another group he opposes that he identifies as “Cainites” while also possibly alluding to a second group, known as “Ophites.” Both groups may have been two branches of early Christian Gnosticism whose locations and origins are not known with certainty. At a minimum, he


Delehaye, Les Légendes grecques, 1909; and Delehaye, Cinq leçons, 1934. See also the comment of Conybeare, Myth, Magic, 1910: 348: “In his scholarly work, Les Légendes Hagiographiques, Father Hippolyte Delehaye, S.J. (Brussels, 1905), has a chapter entitled ‘The Dossier of a Saint,’ in which he shows how the brief and true account given by Eusebius of a martyr named Procopius, who suffered under Diocletian, was added to and recast by the professional compilers of Acts of Saints until it was no longer recognizable. All the stages by which the acts of this saint were exaggerated and falsified lie before us in the different manuscripts; and, if we had not got Eusebius’ succinct and sober narrative of his trial and execution, we could hardly venture to affirm that Procopius was a historical personage at all, and not rather a creation of the mythoplastic imagination of hagiographers.”


For descriptions of Cainites and Ophites, see Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses 1.30–31 (henceforth Haer.); Clement, Stromata 7.17; Pseudo-Tertullian, Adversus omnes haereses 2; Pseudo-Hippolytus, Refutatio omnium haeresium 2.5 and 8.13; Origen, Contra Celsum 3.13; Epiphanius, Panarion
is familiar with a particular concept as something worthy of his opposition, namely, a Cainite female teaching and denying baptism. In fact, a “literary analysis” could be made on how Tertullian weaves his understanding of the “Ophites” [Gk., ὄφις, “snake”] as a group into his theology by making a play on words as he compares the group to asps, vipers, basilisks, and even the serpent in Genesis 3, all of which may have been important Ophite symbols that he connects to the Cainite female. At any rate, the reason for adding Tertullian’s mention of Cainites and the possible allusion to Ophites has to do with the fact that Tertullian is clearly opposing the “Cainite viper” while also opposing Thecla’s example. In other words, we could equally ask: Is Tertullian reading Cainite/Ophite texts and the Acts of Paul (and Thecla) or does he mention them only as a rhetorical invention drawn from contemporary situations in North Africa?

If a conservative assessment is made of de Baptismo, as will be done later within this chapter, it is not immediately apparent that Tertullian is reading either the Acts of Paul (and Thecla) or texts from Cainites or Ophites. Thus, while it would be presumptuous to make the conclusions before the evidence has been examined, I do offer this information to suggest that the aforementioned points may be the two opposite poles between which a conclusion will likely fall. Stated differently, on one end of the spectrum, Tertullian is reading “Cainite” texts such as the Gospel of Judas, or – more cautiously – on the other end of the spectrum, he is not reading them but is aware of North African churches who are reading and/or using concepts from these texts. Of course, in mentioning “Cainite” texts, I refer here to the only text that has been identified directly with the Cainites: namely, the Gospel of Judas. Having been brought to light as

recently as 2006, the mid-second century Gnostic text called the *Gospel of Judas* is a text sharing an affinity for Seth with other similar Gnostic texts, such as the *Apocryphon of John, Apocalypse of Adam, Gospel of the Egyptians* (i.e., *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*), or Zostrianos, but has prompted the most controversy by generating new discussions of the role of Judas in the betrayal of Jesus.¹⁷

At any rate, my point is that the beginning of a discussion of the literary reception of Thecla in hagiography, while early on the timetable, could (and possibly should) begin here and might be corroborated indirectly by an assessment of Tertullian’s utilization of other figures (and texts) that he opposes. With such thoughts in mind, a deeper investigation into Tertullian’s *de Baptismo* could prove stimulating, especially if we critique it with a view to (1) see how well his insights on Thecla match up with the *Acts of Paul* and (2) consider how his allusions to Ophites and mention of Cainites match up with a possible Cainite text, the newly discovered *Gospel of Judas*.

Putting Together Tertullian’s *de Baptismo*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Gospel of Judas*

Tertullian states in *Bapt.* 1.2–3:

> a certain female viper from the Cainite sect, who recently spent some time here, carried off a good number with her exceptionally pestilential doctrine, making a particular point of demolishing baptism. Evidently in this according to nature: for vipers and asps as a rule, and even basilisks, frequent dry and waterless places. But we, being little fishes, as Jesus Christ is our great Fish, begin our life in the water, and only while we abide in the water are we safe and sound. Thus it was that that portent of a woman, who had no right to teach even correctly, knew very well how to kill the little fishes by taking them out of the water.¹⁸

¹⁷ For further discussion on Sethianism within the *Gospel of Judas*, see first Schröter, “‘The Figure of Seth,’” 2017; and also Turner, “The Place of the *Gospel of Judas,*” 2008. In general, Sethianism is known as a “mainstream” or “classical” version of Gnosticism that emphasizes the role of Seth as providing the incorruptible “seed” to humanity from Barbelo (i.e., the ultimate divine being) and is best attested in six of the (thirteen) Nag Hammadi codices that contain texts such as the *Apocryphon of John, the Trimorphic Protennoia,* or the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*. However, in recent scholarship, the designation “Sethian Gnosticism” is being brought into question as a misnomer that has been advanced and propagated in the last half century, largely due to Hans-Martin Schenke. (See Schenke, “Das sethianische System,” 1974).

While I shall return to this citation soon, it would befit us now to notice that Tertullian is beginning his defense of the practice of baptism by making it clear that he is refuting a woman who is apparently associated with a Cainite sect (or possibly an Ophite sect) in North Africa and is denying the practice of baptism. Further, the problem is not only her doctrine but the fact that she is “undermining the faith” (Bapt. 2) by “carrying off” the laity.

Moving further along into the homily, near the end, in Bapt. 17, Tertullian refers to another early Christian text, the Acts of Paul. In particular, he seems to have a precise section of the Acts of Paul in mind: the Acts of Paul and Thecla. His reason for mentioning this text is not a commendation to read the text but rather a criticism of it. He seems to find the text offensive as it seems to lend support and legitimacy to his female opponent who is looking to it to justify female authority within churches to preach, teach, or determine the appropriateness of baptism. Tertullian writes:

But the impudence of that woman who assumed the right to teach is evidently not going to arrogate to her the right to baptize as well – unless perhaps some new serpent appears, like that original one, so that as that woman abolished baptism, some other should of her own authority confer it. 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. How could we believe that Paul should give a female power to teach and to baptize, when he did not allow a woman even to learn by her own right? Let them keep silence, he says, and ask their husbands at home.

Is Tertullian reading the Acta Pauli? As he indicates, the Acts of Paul was written by a presbyter living in Asia and had apparently made its way as far as North Africa. From what we know today, the text recounts the many adventures of Paul in his travels throughout Asia, Greece, Macedonia, Turkey, Palestine, Syria, and Italy and, in this regard, is similar to the Acts of the Apostles. In particular, in one section entitled the Acts of Paul and Thecla, Paul travels with a female companion by the name of Thecla. As the story unfolds, Paul refuses to permit her to teach with him, yet God essentially sets her apart; he saves her miraculously from two violent

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19 I shall deal with the textual problems associated with “Cainite” at a later point.

20 Tertullian, de Baptismo 17, ll. 22–29.
martyrdoms and then allows her to baptize herself and further to go out on her own as a missionary preaching and teaching others. Tertullian is annoyed and offended by this bold impertinence. In *Bapt. 1.3*, he seems to be drawing on 1 Tim 2:12 (“I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man”) when he criticizes his female opponent in stating that she has no right to teach at all. Then, here in *Bapt. 17*, he encapsulates his thoughts on Thecla with a reference to the misplaced impudence of the woman in Genesis 3:1 and concludes with a citation from Paul from 1 Cor 14:35, “Let them keep silence ... and ask their husbands at home.”

As we see from these two excerpts in *Bapt. 1 and 17*, Tertullian is a reader of what is now known as “canonical” Scripture (e.g., 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians). Beyond this, it would seem that he and others in his communities are also reading other Christian narratives, in particular the *Acts of Paul*, and possibly even Cainite or Ophite texts. It is the reading of the latter that now focuses my thoughts.

For the better part of the past century, scholars have had sufficient access to most of the *Acts of Paul* and specifically to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Yet, only since 2006 have scholars had the opportunity to read what is thought of as a “Cainite” text (and the only one of its kind of which we are aware). I am referring to the most famous, supposed “Cainite” text: the *Gospel of Judas*. This is important for our discussion since Irenaeus (130–202), bishop of Lyon, helped connect a text entitled the *Gospel of Judas* to a group who identified with Cain.21 Therefore, scholars can now read what heresiologists wrote about Cainites (e.g., Irenaeus in *Against the Heresies* or Tertullian’s *de Baptismo*), then compare it to writings of the Cainites themselves (e.g., *Gospel of Judas*) and, from this comparison, make an evaluation of the various data.

While many of the details of Irenaeus’ life are unclear, especially in regard to his life in Gaul, we do know that he was living in Lyon, France when he wrote the five-volume work *Against the Heresies.*22 In books 1 and 2, he begins by establishing and identifying many of the various groups and tenets of faith within so-called Gnostic factions. Most pertinent to this discussion are his comments in chapter 31 concerning one particular sect. Irenaeus states:

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21 One should note that Irenaeus probably did not mention the name of the group explicitly (e.g., “Cainites”), but the connection of Irenaeus’ words with the group comes two centuries later from Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403), who is reading Irenaeus. See Gathercole, “Das Judasevangelium,” 2018: 28.

Others, again, say that Cain comes from the Supreme Authority on high. They confess that Esau, Core, the Sodomites, and all such persons are their relatives. And so they indeed were attacked by the Maker; but none of them were injured; for Wisdom snatched to herself from them whatever they possessed that was proper to herself. Also Judas, the traitor, they say, had exact knowledge of these things, and since he alone knew the truth better than the other apostles, he accomplished the mystery of betrayal. Through him all things in heaven and on earth were destroyed. This fiction they adduce, and call it the Gospel of Judas.23

In this passage, Irenaeus points to the Gospel of Judas as a primary source for the Cainites’ understanding of God and religious practice.24 Since the discovery, re-discovery, and publication(s) of the Gospel of Judas,25 scholars are now able to test Irenaeus’ claim that the Cainites were using it to support their religious claims.26 The excitement of such an opportunity is difficult to put into words. Therefore, when Tertullian mentions a Cainite woman who is teaching, preaching, and denying baptism, and then suggests that she is drawing on Thecla and the Acta Pauli for authoritative support, now that we have the Gospel of Judas, we can at least test whether or not this scenario is possible.

Indeed, the recently discovered Gospel of Judas affords scholars the opportunity to determine if this is the same text that Irenaeus had heard about and, further, whether or not Irenaeus’ descriptions of “Cainites” are accurate. The first examinations have resulted in only modest conclusions.27 Most notably, the high moral standards described in the Gospel of Judas do not meld well with the descriptions of loose morality amongst the Cainites reported by Irenaeus and elaborated upon by Epiphanius and other late-antique heresiographers. At best, Garry Trompf is able to “square” the Gospel of Judas with the comments of Jude and Irenaeus by concluding that this Cainite sect must have used the Gospel of Judas only to champion the primary ideas of their group, but they could never have authored it.28 “The factual discrepancies between Irenaeus’ account of the Gnostics who used the Gospel of Judas and the text of the Gospel of Judas itself are simply too great. Two examples will make this point clear. First, while according to Irenaeus, Cain seems to be the key figure within the

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24 For more on the Cainites, see n. 15 and n. 16. It is doubtful that Irenaeus used the term “Cainites.”
cosmology of this Gnostic sect; nevertheless, he is never mentioned within the Gospel of Judas. Second, Irenaeus seems to think this group to be loose in their social legislation of morality. However, a reading of the Gospel of Judas would imply just the opposite; they are quite rigid in the governance of morality within their group, while their apparent opponents within the Great Church are represented as quite immoral (e.g., Gospel of Judas 38–39). While some are ready to completely dismiss the heresiographers’ categories of Barbeloites, Cainites, and Ophites as “purely a heresiological invention,” I would like to examine this issue a little further. Therefore, in spite of these differences between Irenaeus’ account and the evidence of the Gospel of Judas, if we were to grant some legitimacy to Irenaeus’ claims, then what might be determined when attention is turned to Tertullian and his mention of the Acts of Paul, Thecla, and Cainites? After all, the fact that Tertullian addresses his female adversary in North Africa as part of an existing Cainite sect does give me pause in dismissing this group as merely a rhetorical invention.

Baptism within the Gospel of Judas and the Acts of Paul

To probe this issue further, the discussion may be narrowed down to a specific examination of one particular concern, namely, baptism. By doing so, we may be able to deal with a concrete issue that is addressed in the Gospel of Judas, the Acts of Paul, and also within Tertullian’s homily On Baptism. All three texts seem to affirm the practice of the ritual of baptism. It should be noted here that an outlier in this discussion are the comments of Irenaeus. He does not address directly baptism amongst the Cainites, unless one believes that the statement, “they hold that they cannot be saved except they pass through all things,” (Haer. 1.31.2) might be a reference that would include baptism (cf. Epiphanius,

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29 Unfortunately, the recent translations of the additional fragments of the Gospel of Judas have not added anything to this issue. Again, see Robinson, “An Update,” 2011. Ehrman, The Lost Gospel, 2008: 62–65, thinks it is possible that the text says more about Cain, but too many of the pages have been lost to acknowledge this with certainty.


31 While there is a strong polemic against the “sacrificial theology of the so-called apostolic churches at the turn to the third century,” which includes the rituals of baptism and the eucharist, the text nonetheless appears to be quite in line with Sethian Gnostic practices and with “obvious Sethian features:” Turner, “The Place of the Gospel of Judas,” 2008: 228–229. This would have included ritual baptisms.

32 See brief comment in Unger (trans.), St. Irenaeus of Lyons, 1992: 268 n. 3. This citation most certainly refers to their “immoral” activities to defy the creator god. See Trompf, “The Epistle of Jude,” 2010: 575–581.
Pan. 1.38.1.6) Nevertheless, I tend to agree with Trompf’s conclusion (mentioned above) that Irenaeus indeed may be considered a vaguely reliable source concerning the Gospel of Judas, even if this requires us to understand that the Cainites were “unable or not prepared to see the inconsistency between their own view and the moral tenor of the Judas gospel.”33 In other words, Irenaeus’ silence on the subject is probably not sufficient reason (1) to think that he had no knowledge or opinion on their ritual activities when they gather as a community or (2) to prohibit my advancing of the following comparison of texts.

In examining baptism, one is immediately struck by the apparent incompatibility of the aforementioned three texts. For instance, Tertullian, who is attempting to refute the teaching and practices of a Gnostic, Cainite woman, offers up a condemnation of Thecla and the entire Acts of Paul: a text that is obviously not known to be influenced by Gnostics.34 Would a Cainite woman be using the Acts of Paul? To further aggravate this discrepancy, from what we know of early Gnostic practices, many Gnostics did practice the rite of immersion; especially as demonstrated within those Gnostic texts that have come to be associated with the figure of Seth.35 However, Tertullian suggests that this Cainite woman is opposing baptism. It could be that Tertullian is mixing different concerns from his opponents and making a sort of collage of them and their ideas. Yet, his homily does imply that Thecla is being heralded within certain, and among them Gnostic, communities as a heroine worthy of emulation. This promotion of Thecla seems like a concrete reality for one or more communities with which Tertullian is familiar. Otherwise, there would be no reason for Tertullian to even bring up Thecla as an example to be condemned. One must assume that Thecla’s authority is a reality within his community and the community of his opponents in order for his argument to hold any weight. In other words, it would seem that his statement could be taken as reflecting a historical reality of Christian North Africa. One may even view the cult of Thecla’s immense growth in popularity in this region in later centuries as proof of this reality.36

33 Ibid.: §81. No support for baptism is even alluded to in the Nag Hammadi text, the Coptic Apocalypse of Paul, if one were to (speculatively) equate it with the Ascension of Paul as mentioned by Epiphanius (cf. Pan. 1.38.2.5).
34 I think it is safe to say that the tenets of faith that are described within Marcionism, the Nag Hammadi codices, or other texts of gnosis did not significantly influence the thought world of the author of the Acts of Paul.
36 See Davis, The Cult of St. Thecla, 2001. See also Arietta Papaconstantinou’s contribution in this volume (Chapter 6).
If this is the case, then I am missing something. Tertullian seems to demonstrate a lack of clear information concerning the “female viper.” In other words, why would a Cainite (i.e., a branch of immersion-practicing Gnosticism) withhold the ritual of baptism while using a text about Thecla that affirms baptism? Ernest Evans resolves the difficulty by cautioning the readers that

[it is possible to make too much of this woman’s importance. Christian institutions continually call for explanation or even defense: and a wise preacher conciliates attention by reference to current interests, however temporary and insignificant.]

In other words, Tertullian’s mention of a Cainite woman opposing baptism might be a rhetorical technique used in the homily and perhaps should not be taken too seriously. If we follow Evans on this point, then we are assuming that Tertullian actually knows very little about his opponents, what they are reading, or even exactly what they are doing. However, this is precisely what I am attempting to do: determine if his knowledge may be taken seriously, especially in regard to baptism.

Despite the problems that emerge, a comparison with other Gnostic texts is not out of line here considering that the Gospel of Judas appears to be a text with cosmological affinities to the Apocryphon of John and other texts that emphasize the roles of Barbelo, Saklas, Seth, etc. Is there anything in Gnostic literature that tells us about baptismal rites? The answer is “yes.” To address what is known of Gnostic baptism, we may turn to Hans-Martin Schenke, who wrote a foundational essay entitled “The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism.” In the section entitled “Cultic Practice in Sethianism,” Schenke illustrates that baptism was one of two major sacraments of these Gnostics.

Indeed, in several Gnostic texts, baptism is referred to as “taking off the body of the flesh,” (Gospel of the Egyptians) alluding to an earlier deutero-Pauline tractate on baptism, entitled Colossians (in particular Col 2:11–15). Other, similar metaphoric expressions, such as “taking off the body of the flesh,” can also be found that deal with ascensions to heaven or

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37 Evans (ed. and trans.), Tertullian’s Homily, 1964: xi.
41 Ibid.: 602–607.
42 Ibid.: 603–605.
moving out of darkness and into the light. Reading the *Gospel of Judas*, one is immediately drawn to Judas’ question on leaves 55–56, “What will those who have been baptized in your name do?” Jesus said, “Truly I say [to you], this baptism [in] my name...” Unfortunately, the manuscript breaks off there. When the text resumes in 56.11, Jesus is speaking of sacrifices being made to Saklas, leading one to assume that the Great Church sacrificial baptisms are being equated with human sacrifice offered to Saklas. As is stated in the text, “Truly [I] say to you, Judas, those who offer sacrifices to Saklas [as if a] god [speaks] in him...” It is unclear from the fragmented text how Jesus intends the readers to think of baptism (ἵππος in Coptic, meaning to wash or baptize). John Turner suggests that these lines should be read with a generally “hostile stance toward the practice of ordinary Christian baptism in Jesus’ name (55.22–56.1).” Yet, while it is inferred that the author detests the ritual, namely, the baptismal practices of “l’Église chrétienne,” it can also be inferred that Sethian Gnostic baptism is subtly supported through a discussion in 42.5–23. Thus, one should note that the hostile response has more to do with baptism in Jesus’ name than to the ritual of baptism itself. The implication from the *Gospel of Judas* is that Jesus is teaching Judas that baptisms in the name of the Christ are misguided and, further, are sacrificial offerings to Saklas and his human, corruptible body. In other words, they are in vain. On the other hand, the implications of the *Gospel of Judas* are that these Gnostics practice a baptismal ritual (e.g., *Gospel of Judas* 42.5–23), and there is no clear reason to think that this text would differ from other similar Gnostic texts that also affirm the practice. Nevertheless, with such practices being “assumed” by the implied author and readers of the text, subsequently, this would make the *Gospel of Judas* what might be thought of as an “insider’s text.” At any rate, to summarize my main points here, the practice of baptism is explicitly addressed in the *Gospel of Judas*. Beyond this, Jesus seems to direct his polemic “against the baptismal practice of the proto-orthodox Christian church,” especially in regard to its (human) sacrificial theology that is supported by the symbolic rituals of the eucharist and baptism. Meanwhile, Gnostic baptismal rituals are implicitly affirmed.

Up to this point, the evidence suggests the Acts of Paul and the Gospel of Judas both affirm baptism. This leaves us to unravel Tertullian’s comments. Are his remarks directed at a Cainite woman historically valid or are they merely rhetoric? As we have ascertained, Tertullian is making a defense of baptism against a Cainite woman who rejects baptism and is apparently addressing the portion of the Acts of Paul that deals with Thecla. Several options exist to deal with this dilemma:

(1) Tertullian is not refuting a Cainite sect at all. In fact, in the quote above by Evans, the Latin word for Cain, caina, is not found in any manuscripts of de Baptismo. Based on two passages in Jerome (Epistle 82 and Adv. Vigilantium), Adolf von Harnack surmised that the words canina or Gaiana as found in the twelfth-century manuscript Codex Trecensis 523 and the fifteenth-century compilation of codices by Martin Mesnart, respectively, must have been misspellings for Caina. Ernest Evans agrees with Harnack that de caina haeresi is the correct reading. However, he acknowledges that the reference may have been toward Cynics living in Carthage at the time, and the word canina (an adjective meaning dog) may have been a play on words in reference to Cynics. In other words, an original reading of canina, rather than caina, could be possible. Indeed, if we consult Apuleius (c. 125–170), Florida ii.14, we learn that, in second-century Carthage, the Cynic philosopher Crates consummated his marriage to his young bride Hipparche in the arena before a crowd to demonstrate a rejection of the social mores and values of their society. In sum, since there is no clear textual evidence in the manuscripts to suggest that Tertullian knows of the Cainite “heresy,” maybe he just called this woman “a dog” to compare her implicitly to Hipparche? If this is the case, then Tertullian is not reading a Cainite text. Therefore, reconciling de Baptismo’s understanding of Cainite doctrine with the Gnostic texts is not necessary since we can just assume that Tertullian did not mention Cainites at all, and he is calling the woman a “dog.” However, to come to this conclusion, one must reject the learned insight of both Evans and Harnack.

(2) If we agree with Harnack’s and Evans’ reconstruction of the text, Tertullian does call his opponents a Cainite sect, but his assessment is

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49 Evans (ed. and trans.), *Tertullian’s Homily*, 1964: 47.
inaccurate. He is mistaken. They are not truly Cainites. His (1) mention of Cainites, (2) the utilization of a woman attempting to subvert baptism and claim authority, and (3) the condemnation of the *Acts of Paul* along with Thecla are all rhetorical devices to aid his homily. This may be possible, but it still does not deal with the fact that a historical situation must have developed to prompt Tertullian’s tractate. Thus, to dismiss the specific details within the homily would be negligent from a methodological point of view.

(3) Again, if we agree with Harnack’s and Evans’ reconstruction of the text (i.e., Tertullian did mean *caina*, “Cainite” and not *canina*, “dog”), Tertullian does refer to a Cainite sect and he knows what he is talking about. They are a Cainite sect, but the Cainites are more diverse than what we previously knew of them and some of them abolished the physical ritual of baptism. Going back to the textual problem, Evans bases his establishment of the text on the fact that Jerome (d. 420) in *Adv. Vigilantium* also reads this as *caina* (Cainite). In this case, Jerome is probably basing his knowledge on his reading of Tertullian, and we can assume Tertullian did write “Caina.” This is coupled with the calling of the Cainite woman a “serpent,” which, as has been noted already, is probably a reference to the Ophites. The Ophites were a branch of Gnostics, as mentioned by Irenaeus, who used the serpent as a symbol. If this reference is correct, then Evans seems to have understood that the Cainites were a sub-sect of the Ophites and thus takes this as evidence that the text should read *Cainite*. The problem with this interpretation is that it is not at all certain that the Cainites are a subset of the Ophites. Evans seems to be assuming that the paragraph on the “Cainites” in Irenaeus’ *Adversus Haereses* is an extension of the previous chapter on the Ophites and further deduces that the Cainites are a branch of Ophites. If we follow this logic, then Tertullian must have been referring to the Ophites here, and consequently he could have been alluding to the woman as an Ophite and also calling her a Cainite. In spite of the fact that Cainites are not likely to be considered a branch of the Ophites, this reasoning seems fair.

The most likely inference to draw from this is that Tertullian is not certain of the beliefs of his opponents other than that they represent some form of Gnosticism. He does not seem to have a clear understanding of the

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50 Evans (ed. and trans.), *Tertullian’s Homily*, 1964: 47.
difference between an Ophite or a Cainite. Either way, having found the Gospel of Judas helps us realize that the issues of the early Church are more complicated than we knew before discovering such significant primary sources.

In my assessment, I think Tertullian is aware of a group being led by a Cainite woman. Further, his references to her as a serpent in Bapt. 1.2–3 and 17 is an allusion to the Ophites. On the other hand, it seems to me that Tertullian is ill informed about the details of the faith of the Cainites. If this is the case, then why would a Cainite sect be withholding baptism? Especially when the evidence that does remain of so-called Cainite Gnostics (i.e., Gospel of Judas) supports the fact that they performed the ritual of baptism upon their proselytes. Maybe Tertullian is aware that there is some branch of Gnosticism that is preventing people from immersing their followers, possibly a branch of Cainites that do not immerse. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that Tertullian has grouped several sects together and is using this situation as an opportunity to write a treatise on baptism. Further, while he may be aware of their existence, I do not think Tertullian’s homily indicates necessarily that he had read Cainite or Ophite texts prior to the time of this writing.

Tertullian’s Underlying Issue

If Tertullian is not using Cainite or Ophite texts, what might be said of the Acts of Paul? On a first examination, the data seems to indicate that Tertullian is not reading the Acts of Paul either. Tertullian is aware of the Acts of Paul and some of the content regarding Thecla (maybe more), but what he says about it does not closely reflect the actual content of the document. It is true that Tertullian is primarily concerned with refuting the right of a woman to teach and administer baptism. However, the Acts of Paul affirms baptism, and it is not a Gnostic text. Neither does the Acts report that Thecla is administering baptism to anyone. Once again, at this point, it would seem that Tertullian is not reading Gnostic texts or the Acts of Paul. Before making a final conclusion, several other facets need to be considered that might provide evidence to the contrary.

The usual discussion of Tertullian’s comments concerning the Acts of Paul and Thecla tend to center on the accuracy of Tertullian’s assessment that Thecla was giving authorization to baptize (i.e., “claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptize,” Bapt. 17.5). The discussion tends to move from Tertullian’s comments on the Acta Pauli and the mention of Thecla to a search regarding whether or not there is
any evidence of Thecla baptizing or giving authorization to others to baptize within the Acts of Paul and Thecla. Of course, Thecla baptizes no one after her commission from Paul in § 4.16 nor does she commission anyone else. The discussion then moves back to Thecla’s supposed self-baptism and whether or not the Spirit baptized her, God baptized her, or she baptized herself as related in passage 4.9, 15. These results are variously interpreted due primarily to the fact that a “self”-baptism is considered highly unusual. The evidence seems to indicate that Tertullian is not reading the Acts of Paul and Thecla closely or at all.

To take this discussion in a new direction, a closer look at Tertullian’s comments in de Baptismo 13–14 might prove helpful. In chapter 13, Tertullian repudiates his critics by reminding them that there has been imposed a law of baptizing, and its form prescribed: “Go,” he says, “teach the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” When this law was associated with that [well known] pronouncement, “Except a man have been born again of water and the Holy Spirit he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven,” faith was put under obligation to the necessity of baptism.

Tertullian moves from this (1) “great commission” of the Lord to baptize in Matt 28:19–20 and (2) authorization to baptize by the Spirit (John 3:5) to the immediate fulfillment of the command by the apostle Paul who is subsequently baptized (Acts 9:6; 22:10). The implications of Tertullian’s argument are that the pronouncement from Jesus to “go” and baptize (Matt 28:19–20) was the establishment of this ritual practice, even to be obeyed by the likes of apostles, namely, the apostle Paul. Subsequently, the implications are that this process has continued down through the ages and ultimately has come down to North Africa. Therefore, anyone teaching that baptism is not essential is breaking with this tradition that goes back to Jesus.

At this point, Tertullian shifts his argument to discuss Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 1:14–17:

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel.

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After this passage, a detailed analysis ensues in chapter 14 concerning Paul and why he would have said this in Corinth. He begins by saying “[m]oreover they have something to say about the apostle himself,” immediately addressing an attack against Paul. Tertullian’s stream of consciousness runs as follows: God commissioned the apostles to baptize. The Holy Spirit divinely authorized the commission. The ritual practice for believers was initiated. Even the apostle Paul was compelled to obey the command. Then did Paul stop the ritual in Corinth (1:14–17)? At least, Tertullian’s opponents seem to think so. Tertullian’s opponents have deduced from Paul’s comment that the passing on of the ritual of baptism is unnecessary. The implications are that if one is given the commission and authority to teach, then they have the authority to decide if baptism is relevant or not. In other words, accordingly, Paul has taken upon himself the authority to decide when he will and will not baptize anyone.

Tertullian opposes this. Tertullian’s defense centers on Paul’s claim in 1 Cor 1:14–17 that he did not come to Corinth to baptize but to teach and concludes his argument on Paul by stating:

> On this account the apostle, a lover of peace, so as not to seem to claim everything himself, said he was not sent to baptize but to preach. For preaching comes first, baptizing later, when preaching has proceeded. But I suppose one who had permission to preach had also permission to baptize.\(^5\)

Tertullian has just reinforced his arguments for baptism by using a passage from 1 Corinthians, conjured up possibly by a dissenting interlocutor, where Paul states plainly that he did not come to baptize. Tertullian has made the reasonable deduction that if one has the authority to teach, then he or she has the authority to decide if baptism is necessary or not.

Thus, it seems the interest by Tertullian in *de Baptismo* is probably centered upon who baptized Thecla in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* or whether or not she was authorized by others to baptize. The theological matter, according to Tertullian, is composed of interpreting texts such as Matt 28:19–20, 1 Cor 1:14–17, and possibly specific passages within the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. For instance, the last conversation between Paul and Thecla in the *Acts of Paul* (§ 4.16) may have been important for Tertullian. In this passage, immediately after her baptism, Thecla finds Paul and says to him:

> “I have received baptism, O Paul; for he who worked with you for the gospel has worked with me also for baptism.” And Paul, taking her, led her

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\(^5\) Tertullian, *de Baptismo* 14; emphasis added.
to the house of Hermias and heard everything from her ... And Thecla rose up and said to Paul, “I am going to Iconium.” Paul answered, “Go, teach the word of God.”

This passage is significant. At this point, Paul has clearly given a directive with authority to “Go, teach the word of God” reminiscent of the statement made by Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:19 (and quoted by Tertullian in Bapt. 13). Tertullian is certainly playing with both texts. Tertullian has just argued that if one is authorized to teach, then they are authorized to baptize, yet this should not be interpreted to mean that they have the authority to withhold baptism. Apparently, Tertullian’s opponents interpreted 1 Cor. 1:14–17 in this manner.

Why is withholding of baptism a problem for Tertullian? The primary issue at hand is authority. Tertullian might be concerned that the “Asian presbyter,” who authored the Acts of Paul, is drawing from a tradition, whether oral or written, that suggests that Paul has directly supported and empowered a woman to teach, and subsequently this gives her the right to either baptize or not baptize. This version of apostolic tradition, in other words, gives her a sort of apostolic authority. Tertullian’s rhetoric against the presbyter and the Acts of Paul suggests that the presbyter’s writing must have been regarded as an authentic representation of Paul’s activities in Lycaonia by many within the communities of faith in North Africa. In other words, the Acts of Paul was being perceived as authoritative for North African Christian communities. This would make the Acts of Paul, and specifically Thecla, a threat to Tertullian and to the system of authority within the local church there. This turbulent situation is reflected in de Baptismo 17, which might help clarify the issue at hand. He begins the chapter as follows:

To round off our slight treatment of this subject it remains for me to advise you of the rules to be observed in giving and receiving baptism. The supreme right of giving it belongs to the high priest, which is the bishop: after him, to the presbyters and deacons, yet not without commission from the bishop, on account of the Church’s dignity: for when this is safe, peace is safe. Except for that, even laymen have the right.

Tertullian concedes that “even laymen” have the right to administer baptism, knowing that the Lord’s disciples were not bishops, presbyters, or deacons. However, he then highlights the thrust of his argument. He states, “[o]pposition to the episcopate is the mother of schisms.” Indeed,

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breaking outside of the authorized hierarchy for baptizing is not advisable, nor should it be considered standard practice. Tertullian continues by pointing out that it is a problem when women are willing to “arrogate to themselves” the function of a bishop and the right to baptize or not baptize. The issue at stake here is whether or not the Cainite woman has the authority to teach. If so, according to Tertullian’s earlier reasoning, then she has the authority to administer (or not administer) baptism.

The Cainite woman is apparently acting with some form of authority, either ceded to her by a faith community or otherwise. Tertullian writes “but the impudence of that woman who assumed the right to teach is evidently not going to arrogate to her the right to baptize as well” (Bapt. 17.4). If she is acting with a community sanctioned authority, then Tertullian may be aware of his obvious limitations in restricting the ability of this woman to teach. Yet, if he can break the chain of reasoning that suggests that because she can teach, she also has the authority to baptize or not, then the role of baptism can be preserved and protected. The problem with the Acts of Paul is not necessarily that Thecla has baptized herself or not. The problem is rather that Paul has sanctioned her to teach, thus, in effect, she has been authorized to choose to baptize or not baptize. Paul’s own words in 1 Cor 1:14–17 support this interpretation. The startling fact for Tertullian in the quoted passage of the Acts of Paul and Thecla is not merely that “God himself baptizes her,” but rather that the Holy Spirit has sanctioned the rite, and the apostle Paul has commissioned it. In other words, the Acts of Paul and Thecla offers an alternative trajectory that does not necessitate a bishop, presbyter, or deacon for administering baptism. This threatens the chain of authority being passed down as a tradition all the way from Jesus to the current bishops. This is a direct threat to Tertullian, who is resisting a supposed Pauline tradition that supports the teaching and preaching of Thecla and, more importantly, that undermines the hierarchy of the church, the traditions of the church, and the legitimacy of the episcopacy.

Interpreting Bapt. 13–17 in this fashion suggests that Tertullian seems to be quite aware of the content of the Acts of Paul and Thecla and, in particular, of passage 4.16. Tertullian’s citation of Matt 28:19–20 and subsequent argumentation imply that there is a witty “dialogue” of sorts going back and forth on how to interpret these commissioning texts in light of the current situation in the North African context. In conclusion,

if my assessment of *de Baptismo* 17 is correct, then we can assume that Tertullian is indeed reading the *Acts of Paul*.

**Conclusion**

From my investigation of *de Baptismo*, the evidence is not clear whether or not Tertullian is reading Gnostic texts, whether Cainite, Ophite, or otherwise. Unfortunately, the evidence does not seem strong enough to make any conclusions. Looking solely at the example of baptism in the *Gospel of Judas*, as best can be determined, the Gnostics who read these texts practiced immersion. Yet Tertullian opposes a Cainite who seems to be withholding baptism. The reasons for withholding are far from certain when reading Tertullian’s *de Baptismo*. Thus, while questions still seem to linger over the association between *de Baptismo* with either Cainites or specifically the *Gospel of Judas*, we move on to the second concern that does seem to shift the discussion slightly. Is Tertullian reading the *Acts of Paul*? There are no clear citations from the *Acts of Paul* in Tertullian’s *de Baptismo*, at least no citations from the extant version of the *Acts of Paul*. Further, one of the more reliable sections of the *Acts of Paul* is the portion that deals with Thecla, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and this is most certainly not cited by Tertullian. If not a citation, then is there evidence for an allusion or an echo? From reading his remarks about Thecla in *Bapt.* 13–17, I think the evidence is sufficient to suggest Tertullian is dialoguing and engaging with specific content from the *Acts of Paul*. Specifically, there is an allusion to *Acts of Paul* § 4.16 that details Thecla’s baptism. From this evidence, I think it is fair to suggest that Tertullian is reading the *Acts of Paul*. Beyond this, I think it should be considered certain that some communities outside of Tertullian’s community of faith in North Africa at this time are also reading the text. The underlying issue behind Tertullian’s discussion is whether or not one who is commissioned to teach also has the authority to baptize (or the authority to deny baptism). Tertullian supports his rationale by quoting 1 Cor 1:14–17. It is precisely after his discussion of these matters in *Bapt.* 13–14 that Tertullian not only attacks his opponents’ reading of the “great commission” coming from the lips of Paul and is spoken to Thecla in the *Acts of Paul*, “Go, teach the word of God,” but he attacks the entire text, the entire Pauline trajectory exemplified in the *Acts of Paul*, and even its author, the Asian presbyter. The underlying thoughts of this section of *de Baptismo* most certainly assume a knowledge of Thecla and specific events that unfold within the *Acts of Paul*. It possibly even acknowledges that as Matt 28:19–20 was the
great commission for the earliest disciples who were men, this commissioning by God, via Paul in the Acts of Paul, may have been thought by the Cainite woman’s community to be the great commission for the earliest disciples who were women.

Last, but not least, maybe the more significant point that needs to be acknowledged here is that Tertullian provides evidence that Thecla has become a source of inspiration within the churches of North Africa and is directly impacting the ritual practices of the churches. The evidence indicates that the Acts of Paul was being read and was inspiring followers to higher levels of faith and praxis, and, finally, it was leading to a burgeoning of activity especially amongst women in the churches of North Africa. From Tertullian’s de Baptismo, we are able to affirm the reading of the Acts of Paul as an early use of hagiography within the communities of faith. In particular, I think we can feel comfortable in suggesting that Tertullian is reading portions of the Acts of Paul. The ensuing implication is that other churches – especially those that he is critiquing – are reading portions of the story of Thecla that could be categorized as vitae and passiones. Most importantly, this is intriguing for how it is impacting the ritual practices of their communities (i.e., baptismal rituals, or even the commissioning of women, like Thecla, who are praised for “missionary efforts”). Hopefully, this glimpse will provide some insight into a phenomenon that only continued to grow and flourished over the following centuries.

**Bibliography**


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