“A Genius of a Woman”

How an early Christian widow journeyed from Roman mansions to the manger where Christ was born  By Martha Ann Kirk

Without the work of a generous widow, millions of people may have gone without a good translation of the Bible for centuries. This woman had a profound hunger for the word of God, boundless care for the needy, courage to cross cultural boundaries based on gender, ethnicity, and class, and gospel vision to put the values of Christ before the values of empire. This amazing woman was born in Rome in 347 and died in Bethlehem in 404. Her name was Paula.

Paula joins Jerome

Jerome, a man from Dalmatia who had been studying scripture in Bible lands, returned to Rome in 382. Pope Damasus employed Jerome to translate the Bible into Latin. This translation came to be called the Vulgate, from *vulga*, which meant the common language of the people who did not know the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic of the Scriptures. The Vulgate was the most used translation of the Bible until the modern period, and it is still used today.

Marcella invited Jerome to speak on Scripture at her “church of the household.” While there, he also told them about the fervor of monks and nuns in the East. Jerome decided to return to Jerusalem when the pope died in 384 (Jerome was not well-liked in Rome because of his quarrelsome personality). Paula and Eustochium decided to join Jerome and go to the East to learn how to follow Christ more closely.

Needless to say, family and friends in Rome criticized Paula for abandoning the luxurious palace and going to the eastern deserts to learn from the nuns and the monks about following the poor and simple Christ. Paula’s decision echoed Paul’s words “I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as dung that I may win Christ” (Phil. 3:8).

Paula’s pilgrimage East

In 385 Paula, her third daughter Eustochium, and a group of prayerful young women set sail from the mouth of the Tiber River at Ostia. Their first stop was the island of Pontia, where they visited the wife of the Emperor Domitian, who had been banished there for being a
Paula settles in Bethlehem

Paula was deeply moved by Bethlehem and the place where Jesus was born. In her letter to Marcella, Paula described the place as a lesson in gospel values. Her reference to the “miserable toil of doomed wretches” reveals her compassion for slaves who were the foundation of the imperial economy. She contrasted Roman mansions like the one she left behind, which depended on slave labor, with Christ’s humble birthplace:

[Letter 46]et us pass now to the cottage-inn which sheltered Christ and Mary. With what expressions and what language can we set before you the cave of the Saviour? The stall where he cried as a babe can be best honored by silence; for words are inadequate to speak its praise. Where are the spacious porticoes? Where are the gilded ceilings? Where are the mansions furnished by the miserable toil of doomed wretches? Where are the costly halls raised by untitled opulence for man’s vile body to walk in? Where are the roofs that intercept the sky, as if anything could be finer than the expanse of heaven? Behold, in this poor crevice of the earth the Creator of the heavens was born; here He was wrapped in swaddling clothes; here He was seen by the shepherds; here He was pointed out by the star; here He was adored by the wise men. (Letter 46)

Paula decided to settle in Bethlehem and she lived there for twenty years until her death. Her daughter and entourage formed the heart of a religious community. Today we would call them “Sisters.” Paula began to draw women from different classes and provinces to join them. She used her wealth to support monastic communities for women and one for men, which Jerome joined.

Jerome described how Paula and the sisters shared and worked together: “At dawn, at the third, sixth and ninth hours, at evening, and at midnight they recited the Psalter each in turn. No sister was allowed to be ignorant of the psalms, and all had every day to learn a certain portion of the holy scriptures...” (Letter 108). After they returned from Sunday worship in the next door Church of the Nativity, each sister was given tasks for the week, such as helping the poor, cooking, sewing, or cleaning.

While most of us do not have the luxury of joining others at a convent chapel five times a day to pray the psalms, we can learn to let the awareness of God and the praise of God saturate the hours of our days and nights. As the psalms turn to God in hope, desire, fear, joy, confusion, and especially gratitude, we can learn to bring each of our very human emotions to the Holy One.

In her letter urging Marcella to leave “Babylon”—the false idols of Roman wealth and power—and to come to the holy land, Paula described her new home in Palestine as a place of simplicity and prayer:

But, as we have said above, in the cottage of Christ all is simple and rustic: and except for the chanting of psalms there is complete silence. Wherever one turns the laborer at his plough sings alleluia, the toiling mower cheers himself with psalms, and the vine-dresser while he prunes his vine sings one of the lays of David. These are the songs of the country; these, in popular phrase, its love ditties: these the shepherd whistles; these the tiller uses to aid his toil. (Letter 46)

**Paula’s Legacy**

Jerome probably couldn’t have finished the translation of the Bible without Paula’s help. Her wealth subsidized him during years and years of translating, her charming personality covered some of his rudeness, and some scholars say that she contributed to the translating and editing. Jerome never acknowledged this, but in the _Lausiac History_, the historian Palladius wrote of Paula:

A certain Jerome of Dalmatia stood in her way, for she was well able to surpass everyone else, being a genius of a woman. He thwarted her with his jealousy and prevailed upon her to work to his own end and purpose. (Ancient Christian Writers 34, pg. 118)

Most of what we know of Paula comes from Jerome’s Epitaph of Paula, which he wrote for his daughter Eustochium when she died. He commended his benefactor’s many virtues, and though he did not reveal how much she might have helped with the Bible, he praised her knowledge of Hebrew:

While I myself beginning as a young man have with much toil and effort partially acquired the Hebrew tongue and study it now unceasingly lest if I leave it, it also may leave me; Paula, on making up her mind that she too would learn it, succeeded so well that she could chant the psalms in Hebrew and could speak the language without a trace of the pronunciation peculiar to Latin. The same accomplishment can be seen to this day in her daughter Eustochium….7 (Letter 108)

In addition to her mastery of Hebrew, Paula also studied Greek and her father was of Greek background.

Jerome recognized that Paula was just as determined in her kindness and generosity as she was in her study of the Scriptures:

How shall I describe her kindness and attention toward the sick or the wonderful care and devotion with which she nursed them? Yet, although when others were sick she freely gave them every indulgence…, when she fell ill herself, she made no concessions to her own weakness, and seemed unfairly to change in her own case to harshness the kindness which she was always ready to show to others. (Letter 108)

He also praised Paula’s mediating ability: “When the sisters quarreled one with another she reconciled them with soothing words” (Letter 108).

Paula died at age 56 and was buried in a cave beside the Nativity of Christ. Jerome described her funeral as being attended by every monk and virgin in Palestine. The gathering lasted for an entire week:

The bishops lifted up the dead woman with their own hands, placed her upon a bier, and carrying her on their shoulders to the church in the cave of the Saviour, laid her down in the centre of it….As in the case of Dorcas, the widows and the poor showed the garments Paula had given them, while the destitute cried aloud that they had lost in her a mother and a nurse. (Letter 108)

**Conclusion**

In ancient times women rarely had the opportunity to become biblical scholars. Men could “sit at the feet of a rabbi” studying scripture, but women were expected to focus on household tasks. Jesus invited women beyond those gender stereotypes and into scripture study when he invited Martha to sit at his feet, to study scripture like her sister Mary. The “better part” shall not be kept from women (Luke 10). Paula followed this tradition.

Paula had lived at the center of the empire and its values. The Roman empire dominated other lands and peoples to its own advantage. Wealth and comfort were built on the enslavement of others. Today Christians are called to consider how we might be unjustly profiting from others. We have only to start looking at the labels on our clothing. We’re connected by these threads to women around the world. Are they economically enslaved?

What can we learn from Paula about exchanging the values of empire for the values of Christ who cared about the poor and the little ones, who would give his life, but not take the life of another?

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