Women Martyrs in the Early Church:
Hearing Another Side to the Story

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Introduction

It is no secret that the vast majority of the voices that speak to us from the days of the early church are male. Early church history is filled with stories of famous martyr-bishops such as Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. A.D. 107–8), Polycarp of Smyrna (d. ca. A.D. 156), and Cyprian of Carthage (d. A.D. 238). In addition to these unforgettable personages, there is also no lack of male evangelists, apologists, and theologians whose views are readily available for anyone who has the time and desire to read them. As an early church historian, I would hardly dissuade anyone from taking up such a task. However, it saddens me that the stories of women, who surely must have made up at least fifty percent of the early church population, go largely untold.

Happily, much progress has been made toward righting this injustice over the last several decades. This is evidenced by a number of popular works that collect traditions related to early Christian women, making them readily accessible to contemporary Christians. In addition, many scholarly pieces have been published that range from more general introductions to the subject to specific studies of individual early Christian women. However, one of the persistent problems faced by any scholar who attempts to paint an accurate portrait of women in early Christianity is the paucity of historical sources. The historian is forced to learn how to read between the lines, piecing together a plausible back story around the almost footnote-like references to various Christian women and their activities. In this short article, it is my hope to demonstrate briefly just how such ancient detective work is accomplished and how this work can bear good fruit in terms of fleshing out a more accurate picture of the roles women played in the early church. To this end, I intend to consider two of the earliest instances of women suffering martyrdom for their faith, namely the tradition involving Peter’s wife and the two women “deaconesses” mentioned by Pliny the Younger in his famous letter to the Emperor Trajan.

Peter’s wife

We don’t know the name of Peter’s wife. Sadly, like so many of her sisters in the early church, her name and much of who she was has been lost to us. In fact, as far as the gospel tradition is concerned, we only learn of her existence through the process of deduction. Mark’s gospel, widely held by modern scholars to have been the first canonical gospel, tells us in 1:29–31 of a particular occasion in which Jesus visited the home of Simon Peter and Andrew, accompanied by these disciples along with James and John. Upon arrival, Jesus is informed that Simon’s mother-in-law is bedridden with a serious fever. Without delay, Jesus goes to the sick woman’s bedside, takes her by the hand, and raises her up. The fever leaves “immediately” (a favorite word of Mark), and she ministers to her visitors. Thus, we learn, almost incidentally, that Peter is a married man.

While the oblique way in which we learn about Peter’s marital status is intriguing, for our purposes the key tradition that involves Peter’s wife is found in the writings of Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 150–215), who, at least according to the great church historian Eusebius, was the head of the Alexandrian catechetical school in the late second century and in the first few years of the third century. In Stromateis 7.11, Clement relates the tradition of the martyrdom of Peter’s wife:

They say, accordingly, that the blessed Peter, on seeing his wife led to death, rejoiced on account of her call and conveyance home, and called very encouragingly and comfortingly, addressing her by name, “Remember thou the Lord.” Such was the marriage of the blessed, and their perfect disposition toward those dearest to them.

This story is poignant and powerful and practically begs for greater elaboration. As it stands, it is impossible to know whether this story existed only in oral form or whether it had a literary life that would have predated Clement’s recitation (book 7 was probably written after 202). In whatever state it found itself before our encounter with it in Stromateis, I find it hard to imagine that such a tragic and heroic story, involving the wife of arguably the most universally beloved apostle, would not have been told in greater detail. This is especially the case when one considers that, during this period, both Greek romances and apocryphal acts of the apostles were in vogue.

Regardless of how the story circulated, its content must give us pause. Certainly a question that springs to mind is: Did this really happen? The short answer is that there is simply no way to verify such a story, especially since there is no other independent witness to this alleged event. Thus, the question morphs into another: Is this story plausible? To this second question we can say that the idea of a Christian woman being persecuted for her faith is hardly exceptional. As early as the canonical Acts of the Apostles (written during the last decade or so of the first century A.D.), notation is made that both “men and women” (te andras kai gunaiakas) are included as sufferers in the early persecutions.

These accounts describe believers of both genders being "handed over to imprisonment" (paredidou eis phuakên; 8:3; cf. also 9:2) and stress the hostility of Paul toward his male and female victims, i.e., "breathing threats and murder" (emphnēon apeilēs kai phonon).

Certainly, beyond these statements from Acts, there is good reason to believe that the Neronic Persecution, which erupted in the period following the Great Fire of July 19, A.D. 64, claimed Christians of both sexes as its victims. Tacitus, writing his Annales (ca. A.D. 115), claims that Nero decided to blame the Roman Christians for the fire so as to shift suspicion from himself. Tacitus explains that an initial arrest included those who pled guilty to being a Christian and then, on their information, "vast numbers" (multitudo ingens) were convicted and subsequently executed in brutal ways. The Latin in Tacitus' narrative doesn't really reveal the gender of Nero's victims, but important elucidating evidence is provided by 1 Clement, a late first-century Roman document. First Clement 5 explains how in "recent times" (5:1) the apostles Peter and Paul "were persecuted and they struggled in the contest even to death" (5:2). Chapter 6 goes on to note how, in addition to Peter and Paul, a "great multitude" (poly plēthos) suffered "numerous torments and tortures" (6:1). Of particular interest to us is what the author claims next: "Women were persecuted as Danaids and Dirceae and suffered terrifying and profane torments" (6:2). It is highly likely that the author here is referring to what Kathleen M. Coleman has dubbed "fatal charades," which she defines as "the punishment of criminals in a formal public display involving role-play set in a dramatic context; the punishment is usually capital." In these often mythologically themed melodramas, the criminals were forced to play out the parts of various tragic figures, usually to brutal and/or gruesome result. The Greek text in 6.2 is not without its complications, but it is entirely possible that the reference to the Danaids, alluding to how the daughters of Danaüs were given as prizes to the winners of a race, may be an indication of how some Christian women endured public rape before their executions. Likewise, other Christian women were executed as Dirce of Greek myth, tied to the horns of a bull and dragged to death. As horrific as these things are to think about, they are hardly without precedent in this very period. If one takes into account this first-century evidence and considers it in light of the trajectory of violence perpetrated against women Christians as is described in so many of the later martyrdoms, we must conclude that the execution of Peter's wife for her faith is fully within the realm of possibility.

There is another nagging aspect of this story. Why Peter's wife? What was she doing that would cause her to be a viable target for the authorities, Roman or provincial? Consider that Clement of Alexandria's account asks us to imagine the "prince of the apostles" standing by unmolested as his wife is led off to her death! Surely the authorities didn't reason among themselves, "Never mind that troublesome preacher of this new teaching; the one we really need to target is that woman in the back room there doing dishes and baking brownies! We will crush the Christiani by cutting off their supply of after-service desserts!" Sarcasm aside, Peter's wife had to have been doing something comparable to Peter and other male early Christian evangelists in order to provoke such an extreme response!

Insight into this question is provided by an offhanded remark of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:5, which he makes in the context of defending his freedom as an apostle. Paul states, "Do we [i.e., Barnabas and I] not have the right to be accompanied by a wife (gune), as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" Here, in an accidental manner reminiscent of the story from Mark 1, we learn that Peter is accompanied by his wife on his travels. The historicity of this is rock solid as Paul makes this comment in passing, without pausing to argue one way or the other for its propriety. He takes it for granted that his hearers in Corinth know this to be a fact, a particularly interesting point when we consider that there was a faction in Corinth that was dedicated to Peter as their supreme authority (cf. 1 Cor. 1:12). If Peter had visited Corinth on his missionary travels and his wife did accompany him, we can conclude that most, if not all, of the Corinthian Christians would have met Peter's wife!

Perhaps Peter's wife was doing more than merely shopping and sightseeing in Corinth as Peter conducted his work. Again, Paul may provide some insight into their activities by another comment he makes in Romans 16:7, where he greets Andronicus and Junia, a man and woman, likely husband and wife, of whom he notes "they are well known among the apostles" (eisin episēmoi en tois apostoloi). Thus, both man (husband?) and woman (wife?) are counted as apostles by Paul. Here, the emphasis may be less on a canonical office (certainly one meaning of the word) and more on the function performed by these apostles, namely, that of being sent by their respective community for some specific evangelical mission (cf. the “sending out” of Barnabas and Saul by the church of Antioch in Acts 13:1–3). Certainly, we are also well aware of Prisca and Aquila, a married couple, whom Paul calls "my fellow workers in Christ" (tous suнерgous mou en Christo lesoi; Rom. 16:3), who worked side by side with Paul in both Corinth and Ephesus and perhaps also Rome.

In summation, it seems entirely possible that Peter's wife was sharing in his apostolic mission, most likely by sharing her own witness of who Jesus was to her. And what a testimony she must have had!
that the story of the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law derives from Peter’s wife herself.\textsuperscript{15} Who would have had a greater stake in relating the story? Certainly, this would not be the only or even the most important gospel story that is dependent on the testimony of women. Clearly, the story of the empty tomb, in all its variants, must ultimately depend on the testimony of women, much to the chagrin of some males (cf. Luke 24:10–11, 22)!

**The deaconesses in Bithynia**

Our next stop on our journey of investigation into early women martyrs leads us to the Roman province of Bithynia, located on what is now the Black Sea coast of Turkey. Our source is the Roman governor (i.e., legatus) of this province, Gaius Plinius Luci, known to history as Pliny the Younger.\textsuperscript{16} Pliny’s letters, both personal and professional, are an incredible window into the life of a Roman senator and the political machinations of the Roman bureaucracy. Among other things, they contain a first-person account of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius on August 24, A.D. 79 (see Epistles 10.20), which resulted in the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, and the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii.

For our purposes, we turn to Book 10 of Pliny’s collection, which contains his letters to the Emperor Trajan, who ruled from A.D. 98–117. Among these, two in particular are crucial for our study, Epistles 96 and 97. The former is Pliny’s letter to Trajan requesting advice on how to deal with a troublesome religious sect that he has encountered in his province: the Christians. The latter is Trajan’s brief reply, which largely approves of Pliny’s methods, but cautions against seeking the Christians out. Rather, Trajan directs that the Christians are not to be hunted down. If they are brought before Pliny and proved to be Christian, they are to be punished. However, if anyone denies that he is a Christian and offers the requisite sacrifices, he should be pardoned forthwith. This exchange represents the very first extant Roman discussion of the Christian “problem.” The fact that this exchange is between an emperor and one of his governors makes it of inestimable value.\textsuperscript{17}

Pliny’s Epistle 96 is particularly pertinent to our discussion here in that Pliny relates his initial encounter with the Christians and his subsequent attempts to deal with them through normal judicial means. Apparently, the first description he receives of Christian beliefs and practices is acquired from those Christians who apostatized, first confessing, then denying their faith when confronted with the threat of execution (96.6–7). Pliny relates their testimony:

They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternatively among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and assemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind; but they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your instructions, which banned all political societies.

This description sounded so pathetically innocent to Pliny that he was suspicious of it. He states as much when he writes, “Because of this I believed it more necessary [to extract] from two slave women, who were being called deaconesses, what might be true, by means of torture (Quo magis necessarium credidi ex duabus ancillis, quae ministrae dicebantur, quid esset veri, et per tormenta quaerere).\textsuperscript{18} It is hardly a surprise that Pliny resorts to torture. Nor is it peculiar that he targets slaves.\textsuperscript{19} What is interesting here is that he claims that these slaves were recognized by their own community as being in some kind of leadership role.

The exact nature of this role is unclear. Part of the problem is that the Greek word diakonos, meaning servant or minister—the word upon which the Latin ministrae is surely dependent—is vague as to its exact meaning as used in the early Christian communities. The evidence of what male deacons did in the early church reinforces this indeterminacy in the language. Male deacons served as ambassadors for local churches (Ignatius of Antioch, *Philadelphians* 10.1–2) and messengers/mail carriers for bishops (Ephesians 2.1, Smyrneans 12.1, *Philadelphians* 11.1–2), and performed various liturgical functions such as assisting in baptisms (*Apostolic Tradition* 21) and bringing the weekly Eucharist to the homebound (Justin, *1 Apology* 67). They gave assistance to widows and orphans (Acts 6:1–6, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Similitudes* 9.26.2) and ministered to those in prison for their confession of the faith (*Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 3). In general, it may be best to think of the deacons as embodying in a special way the attitude of service articulated by Jesus himself, “the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28 NRSV).\textsuperscript{20}

What does this mean for our two “deaconesses”? It means that we simply can’t know the specifics of what their positions entailed. However, we can speculate as to at least some of their duties. If *Apostolic Tradition* 21.3, 11–12 presents an accurate picture of early Christian baptism and catechumens were indeed anointed and baptized *naked*, with a deacon accompanying them down into the pool of water, then it seems entirely reasonable that a woman perform this task in the case of female catechumens. Simple propriety would suggest such a function. The early third-century Syrian church order, the *Didascalia*, reinforces this instinctual assumption, stating:

In many other cases again, the employment of a woman deaconess is necessary. To begin with, when women descend into the water, it is required that those who descend into the water be anointed by the deaconesses with the oil of anointing. Where there is no woman, above all no deaconess, it has to be the minister of baptism who himself carries out the anointing of her who is being baptized. But if there is a woman and above all a deaconess, it is not fit that the woman should be seen by men (16).\textsuperscript{21}

This makes perfect sense if one considers that the anointing would not have involved merely pouring oil over the candidate’s head.
and shoulders, but most likely would have been comparable with the way oil was used in both Greco-Roman bathing and in athletic contests of the period, being rubbed into the person’s skin and over their whole body as a kind of quasi-mystical enhancement of their physical body. Likewise, in the case of female Christians who were sick or otherwise housebound, it would make perfect sense that a woman deliver the Eucharist to them, especially when one considers that such duties would involve visiting the woman in question in her bedchambers.22

As for other duties, we know from 1 Timothy 2:12 that women in the early church did teach. The author’s vehement command that women should not teach is clear proof that they, in fact, did! The ongoing involvement of deaconesses in teaching is also evidenced by the Didascalia, which, while limiting the scope of a woman’s potential listening audience, clearly states that “when the baptized woman comes up out of the water, the deaconess is to receive her and instruct her in purity and holiness, that the seal of baptism is unbreakable” (16).

Certainly, a full discussion of the existence, role, and functions of women deacons is beyond the scope of this study.23 What is important here is that, at the beginning of the second century in the Roman province of Bithynia, two slave women were recognized by their community because they performed certain important functions on behalf of their fellow believers. It would be their position as recognized leaders and therefore “insiders” within the Bithynia church that would expose them to Pliny’s torturers. Apparently, the torture of these two women didn’t produce any new information. Pliny states, “I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths” (Ep. 96.8).

One question remains: What was the ultimate fate of the two women? There are a range of possible answers. If the women maintained their confession of Christ, then we know that they were summarily executed. Pliny himself tells us as much, stating, “For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and a third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution . . . ” (97.2–3). It is also entirely possible that the women may have been broken by their experience of torture and recanted their testimony to Christ. Certainly, Pliny’s letter clearly indicates that a good number of those arrested did just that. Pliny explains:

Others, whose names were given to me by an informer, first admitted the charge and then denied it; they said that they had ceased to be Christians two or more years previously, and some of them even twenty years ago. They all did reverence to your statue and the images of the gods in the same way as the others, and reviled the name of Christ (97.6–7).

Regardless of their ability to remain faithful to the cause of Christ, we can be certain that these women endured great suffering and probably extensive torture. As I noted above, Pliny decided to torture these two deaconesses precisely because he was suspicious of the veracity of the description of Christianity he had received previously. It was simply too innocent to be true. Surely there had to be more. We know from Pliny’s own statement that the interrogation and torture of these two women resulted in no new information. Pliny states, “I found nothing . . . ” (97.8). If we consider this process, it is logical that it unfolded as follows. Pliny’s torturers, known as tortures and carnifices, began their gruesome work, probably using some mixture of the typical methods of their trade, namely scourging, laceration with hooks, and burning. The women had two options. They could either remain silent, enduring progressively more brutal tortures, or they could answer the questions put to them, thus revealing a similar description of Christian worship as was outlined before by those who apostatized from the faith. If they took the second of these two paths—which, based on Pliny’s own account, seems to be the case—it would not have spared them further tortures. The reason is that, in the ancient world, it was assumed that slaves were loyal to their masters and would lie to protect them—at least at first until they could no longer hold out under the intense pain.24 Thus, when the torturers heard the women “confess” to an account of Christianity similar to that already known, they would have reapplied their tools trying to get at the “real” story, continuing to abuse the two women until they were satisfied that they were speaking the truth. Either way, the women were no doubt horribly mangled by their experience.

Personally, my suspicion is that the women were either killed for their confession or died as a result of the torture they endured. I admit readily that I have little upon which to base this conclusion. My only clue is the declaration Pliny makes immediately following his statement that he tortured the two women. He says, “I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths” (97.8). The key aspect here is the rather negative tone he uses to describe both the Christian worship (‘degenerate’; pravem) and the Christians themselves (“extravagant”; immodicum). This negative tone appears previously in his letter when he describes those Christians who, despite being offered three chances to deny their faith, persisted in their confession of the Name. One can almost hear Pliny’s teeth grind in frustration as he writes, “If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness (pertinaciam) and unshakable obstinacy (inflexibilem obstinationem) should not go unpunished” (97.3). As Pliny clearly states, these people were executed. Thus, it does not seem unreasonable to interpret the harsh words Pliny uses immediately following his description of the torture he inflicted on the two women as reflecting the distasteful and, no
doubt, bloody resolution of his encounter with the deaconesses. As admitted before, this is highly speculative but certainly not outside the realm of the possible.

Recapturing women's names and stories

There is much more that could be written on the topic of women martyrs and their roles within the early Christian communities. However, for now, we must content ourselves with making the effort to pull back the veil just a bit more, revealing ever further the truth of women's contributions to the development and growth of the early Christian movement. In this study, we have sifted through the scattered historical evidence, like archeologists attempting to piece together the shattered remains of an earthenware jar. We have brushed aside the dust of centuries of neglect to reveal a portion of the face of Peter's wife, who, it turns out, was hardly a bystander to her husband's ministry. Rather, the evidence suggests that she was a bona fide threat to the Roman order in her own right. Her faithfulness to Jesus and his church cost her everything, yet the church only remembers her obliquely. In a way, she is not unlike the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with oil in Mark 14:3–9. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the world, "what she has done will be told in memory of her." Like this woman, Peter's wife is part of the gospel, yet remains nameless.

The two Bithynian deaconesses are in much the same situation. I believe that the scholarly investigations of my colleagues, many of whom are mentioned in my endnotes, and, in a small way, this article are an attempt to recapture their names. Since we cannot know the name of Peter's wife, we may refer to her as "Faithful to the end." Likewise, the deaconesses can be known as "Selfless in her giving" and "Witness, faithful and true." Perhaps, in the final analysis, these names will suffice.

Notes


2. This would include studies such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York, N.Y.: Crossroad, 1983); Margaret Y. MacDonald, Early Christian Women and Pagan Opinion: The Power of the Hysterical Woman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Barbara MacHaffie, Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2006).


4. Historia Ecclesiastica 6.6. It should be noted here that there is no evidence beyond that provided by Eusebius that a catechetical school existed in Alexandria before Origen. A good and recent discussion of the issues involved can be found in Eric Osborn, Clement of Alexandria (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 19–24.


7. Tacitus states, "And deision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night."

8. The text is traditionally ascribed to Clement, the bishop of Rome (ca. A.D. 88–97). However, there are conflicting traditions concerning Clement. Tertullian states that Peter himself commissioned Clement (De praescriptione haereticorum 32). On the other hand, Irenaeus (Adversus haereses 3.3.1) and Eusebius (Historia Ecclesiastica 3.15.34) assert that Clement followed Linus and Anacletus. It should be noted here that nowhere in the text does the letter claim to be written by Clement or even mention Clement. See the discussion in Bart D. Ehrman, ed., The Apostolic Fathers (2 vols.; LCL; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.21–23. For comparative purposes, see the discussion by Clayton N. Jefford, The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 15–19.


10. This is claimed by Michael W. Holmes, ed., The Apostolic Fathers, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989), 31, n. 16. Cf. also the sympathetic presentation of this view in James A. Kleist, The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch (ACW 1; New York, N.Y.: Paulist, 1946), 106, n. 32; and Ehrman, The Apostolic Fathers, 44–45, n. 16. As relates to the method of execution in which the women are tied to bulls, Thomas Weidemann includes a photograph of a terracotta figure that depicts a condemned woman who has been tied to a bull and is being attacked by a leopard (Emperors and Gladiators [London: Routledge, 1992], Figure 7).

11. Martial, the Roman epigrammist writing his On the Spectacles in the latter half of the first century A.D., notes that the crowds have actually witnessed a condemned woman, cast as Pasiphaë, sexually violated by a bull (5) as well as many other myths reenacted in the arena. As the story goes, Daedalus built a cow body for her and, in this disguise, she mated with a bull so as to mother the famous Minotaur. Likewise, the late second–early third century Carthaginian theologian Tertullian corroborates Martial's testimony in Apology 15.

12. See, for example, the Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs, which relates the trial of twelve martyrs, five of whom are women (Januaria, Generosa, Donata, Secunda, and Vesta). The twelve Carthaginians were beheaded for their confession on July 17, 180. Consider also the harsh treatment of the young women in the Martyrdom of Saints Agapê, Irenê, and Chionê at Saloniki and the Martyrdom of Crispina which took place in A.D. 304 during the persecution under Diocletian. Of course, Eusebius is a rich source for various accounts describing the heroism displayed by various women martyrs such as Heraïs, the catechumen and pupil of Origen, and the famous Potamiaena and her mother who were executed under Septimius Severus in 203 (Historia Ecclesiastica 6.4–5.4). Cf. also Quinta, another Alexandrian, who was executed during the Decian Persecution (ca. 249–251) (H.E. 6.41.4). Books 8 and 9 of H.E. are replete with examples of the brutality endured by women Christians during the Diocletian persecution.
13. It should be noted that the question of whether or not Peter was ever actually in Corinth is debated. See Terence V. Smith, Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 15; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985), 192, n. 203a and n. 205. For a negative view, see Raymond E. Collins, First Corinthians (Sacra Pagina 7, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1999), 80. However, in my opinion, there is no reason not to think that Peter came to Corinth. Clearly, Christian tradition presents him as a missionary. Despite Peter’s Galilean roots, Paul visited with him in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18) and then later clashed with him in Antioch (Gal. 211). There is no doubt that a variety of sources place Peter in Rome (e.g., 1 Clement 5, the late second-century apocryphal Acts of Peter, and even Tertullian, who offhandedly refers to Peter baptizing in the Tiber in On Baptism 4 [ca. 205]). It is well known that Corinth was on the trade route that passed from Ephesus (and Asia Minor) and other points in the East, through the Corinthian Isthmus, on to Italy and eventually Rome in the West. Simply put, Corinth would have been a logical waypoint on Peter’s journey to Rome.

14. There are complications with the name Junia. Brendan Byrne explains the issues involved succinctly: “Whereas many early interpreters had no difficulty in taking the second of these names (Greek Ioanian) to be that of a woman, later tradition, almost universally, took the Greek word to be the accusative singular of the masculine name ‘Junias.’ Such a name, however, is nowhere attested, whereas the feminine form ‘Junia,’ of which we would have here the accusative singular, is a common Roman name. It is now widely accepted that the second name is that of a woman disciple, probably the spouse of Andronicus” (Romans [Sacra Pagina 6; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996], 453). For a more extensive discussion of the textual issues, see Bernadette Brooten, “‘Junia…Outstanding among the Apostles’ (Romans 16:7),” in Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration (ed. L. Swidler and A. Swidler; New York, N.Y.: Paulist, 1977), 141–44; and Bonnie Thurston, Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary (Companions to the New Testament; New York, N.Y.: Crossroad, 1998), 56–57.

15. It should be noted here that there is some question about the identity of exactly who brings the mother-in-law’s condition to Jesus’ attention. The Greek text in Mark 1:30 is vague, saying only “and immediately they tell him about her” (note the use of the present tense—kai euthus legousin autò peri autès). If the subject is intended here to be Peter and Andrew, it is strange that they are depicted as relating the woman’s condition to Jesus as if it were of little importance, a mere afterthought. The scene would make more sense if, when Jesus arrived at the home, he was met at the door by its occupants (i.e., the women and, perhaps, children) who were intimately aware of the woman’s current situation. Vincent Taylor suggests a similar way of interpreting this passage, proposing that the subject of this phrase be understood as “those of Simon’s [family]” (hòi peri ton Simônà) (The Gospel According to St. Mark [London: MacMillian, 1955], 179). Likewise, more recently, John R. Donahue and Daniel Harrington recognize the disciples and the “they” of verse 30 to be two different groups (The Gospel of Mark [Sacra Pagina 2; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2002], 81).

The Martyrdom of Perpetua is our first knowledge of Christianity in the province of North Africa. A basilica in Carthage was dedicated to Perpetua. Tertullian called her “that bravest martyr of Christ” (On the Soul 55.4). Augustine preached in honor of Perpetua and Felicity on March 7, the anniversary of their deaths, describing them as “two jewels” who have “flashed in the Church today” (Sermon 394.1). He added, “according to the inner self they are found to be neither male nor female” (Sermon 280.1).1 Aída Besançon Spencer

16. The dating of his governorship is uncertain. We know that he arrived in his assigned province in time for Trajan’s birthday celebrations on September 18 in a year which could be 109, 110, or 111. He served a little more than two years and died in office. Thus, the letters we are examining here could date from 109 to 113. See Betty Radice, ed., Pliny Letters, Books I–VII (LCL 55; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), xiv.


18. Whereas the above, more lengthy quotation derives from Radice, Pliny Letters, Books VIII–X Panegyricus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), this admittedly more literal translation is my own.

19. The common character of this practice is expressed by Florence Dupont: “The torturing of slaves to obtain trial evidence against their masters would scandalize modern sensibilities but was a logical consequence of the position of slaves in Roman society. As witnesses to the deeds and actions of citizens, slaves knew everything that went on in Rome, but at the same time were totally dependent on their masters and would only speak at their command. Interrogating slaves about their masters was like asking the masters to incriminate themselves. Torture could free slaves from submission to their masters by enslaving them to their own bodies. They would speak not to obey their master but to obey the dictates of pain. Slaves, as we have seen, had no animus, were devoid of moral autonomy, and if they were no longer guided by their masters’ will then they could be led only by sensuality and natural instincts, impulsus. And as everyone in Rome knew perfectly well, men instinctively sought to escape pain” (Daily Life in Ancient Rome [Oxford: Blackwell, 1992], 61). However, it should be noted that there were plenty of instances in which the tortured slaves did not give testimony (true or false) against their masters, merely to save their own skins (e.g., Valerius Maximus, Works 6.8.1; Cicero, For Cluentius 63, 176). In the end, the Roman courts understood that torture was not always effective as a means of learning the truth of a case: “It is stated in our constitutions that trust should not always be given to torture, but torture should not always be rejected. Torture is a weak and dangerous thing that may fail the truth. Many people have the patience and endurance to be contemptuous of torture. The truth can never be extracted from them. Others have so little patience that they would tell any kind of lie rather than suffer torture” (Justinian, Digest 48.18.1.23).

20. Cf. also Luke 22:27. It may be this concept that is understood by Ignatius of Antioch when he states that “the deacons, who are most dear to me [are] entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ, who was from eternity with the Father and was made manifest at the end of time” (Magnesians 6.1). For more on the varied role of the early deacons, see Testamentum Domini 1.33–34 and Canons of Hippolytus 5. Recent translations of these and other relevant texts can be found in Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2002), 60–66.

21. Here and elsewhere, all quotations from the Didascalia are taken from Lucien Deiss, Early Sources of the Liturgy (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1975).

22. Evidence for deaconesses ministering to sick women is provided in Epiphanius, Adversus haereses 3.2.79.

23. This matter has been debated and argued by many with ranging results. For example, a negative assessment of the evidence is given by Aimé Georges Martimort (Deaconesses: An Historical Study [San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1984]). On the other hand, a more positive view of the evidence is advocated by John Wijngaards (Women Deacons in the Early Church: Historical Texts and Contemporary Debates [New York, N.Y.: Herder & Herder, 2006]).

24. See n. 17.