

# Women in the Syrian Tradition

by Susan Ashbrook Harvey



Syriac legend holds that Christianity was brought to India by the apostle Judas Thomas in the middle of the first century A.D. At the beginning of the Acts of Thomas, the form in which this legend survives, two striking encounters with women take place. The first occurs soon after Thomas arrives in India as a slave, bought to serve King Gundaphorus as a carpenter. The only person to recognize that Thomas is not what he seems is a young Hebrew flute girl. The servant girl is portrayed as one whom others consider of no account. Yet it is she who perceives that Thomas is a messenger of holy tidings and a minister of holy works. Declaring that Thomas is either God or an apostle of God; she confesses her faith in Christ, leaves her livelihood, and devotes herself to God.

Shortly thereafter, the king takes Thomas to bless his newlywed daughter in her bridal chamber. Thomas' prayer brings about the appearance of Christ - in Thomas' own likeness - to the bridal couple that night. The vision converts the young couple to Christianity, and specifically to the life of virginity in devotion to Christ. In the morning, the king and queen are scandalized to find their daughter sitting joyfully with her husband, her face unveiled. To the horror of the royal household, both bride and groom declare their freedom from the "shame," obligations, and harshness of earthly marriage; instead, they now live in joyful betrothal to the Lord, awaiting their heavenly bridal chamber. Their decision represents an assault on the social and moral code of the kingdom: bold and unveiled, a woman who turns away from all that society dictates she should do. Soon, more women will follow her example as Thomas preaches his message throughout the land. Fearing the destruction of their social and political order - an order dependent on defined gender roles fulfilled through the patriarchal family and its biological procreation - the horrified husbands finally murder Thomas. Thus his story ends. (1)

The Acts of Thomas is one of our earliest documents for the history of Syrian Christianity. In it, the first person to recognize God's messenger is a woman; the first person to heed the Gospel message and to leave the familiar world of marriage, family, and political loyalties for the sake of the Gospel is a woman. Women are the first to receive and the first to pursue the Gospel. Just as the Virgin Mary was the first to learn of God's salvific plan by her conception of Jesus the Christ; just as Mary Magdalene, a disciple of Jesus who had left her home and family to travel with her Lord on his Ministry, was the first to receive the news of the resurrection and to see the risen Lord; so, too, are the women of the Acts of Thomas the first to hear and to act. Two unnamed women of Syrian legend, a servant flute girl and a royal bride, encapsulate in their brief stories the issues and imagery of women in the Syrian Christian tradition. Let us use

their memory as a guide for exploring what that tradition has held for the women who have been present within it.

**Women's Work**I will use the terms Syrian Christianity and Syriac tradition to refer to that Christianity which since the late first century has used the Syriac language (a dialect of Aramaic) as its primary means of expression and liturgical celebration. In the early Christian era, the Syrian Orient included a large portion of the Middle East (the under Roman domination) as well as Persia, areas now spread over Syria, Lebanon, Israel, eastern Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. Over the course of the first seven Christian centuries, Syrian missions spread beyond these territories to India, Ethiopia, the Arabian peninsula, through Turkestan, Mongolia, and into China, there establishing a thriving and long-lived Christian community. In the eastern Roman territory that will be the focus of this article, some major cities (like Antioch) were primarily Greek-speaking, and were centers of Greco-Roman culture; some writers (like Theodoret of Cyrrhus) wrote in Greek and were deeply versed in Hellenic philosophy and literature. Yet such places and writers still demonstrated an ethos decidedly influenced by Semitic roots, and a distinct and emerging Syrian Christian culture. Syrian Christianity thus developed in an inherently multicultural context. In constant interaction with Greek and Latin Christianity throughout the patristic period, Syrian Christianity yet forged a rich and distinct literary and cultural expression of its own.(2)

The study of women in the Syriac tradition is highly problematic. For the patristic Syriac church, the focus of this article, no known text written by a woman remains to us.(3) There is much general evidence about women in Syrian Christianity, but it is clear that the social agenda of the male Church hierarchy often determined what was actually said about them. One feels a tension between the actions attributed to women and the words used to describe them. Where there were clashes between cultural expectations and women's vocations, the writings often curtail the full impact of women's work or even omit their presence altogether. Nonetheless, women made their mark on Syrian Christianity. Though we may lack their own words, their story remains a profound witness to the power of faith.

The earliest evidence for Syrian Christianity supports the images of women found in the legend of the Apostle Thomas. That legend, as we have noted, mirrors the Gospel model by presenting women as the first to respond to God's call. It also identifies virginity as a central symbol for Christian conversion, and as the element most deeply disturbing to the non-Christian social order. Although in the Acts of Thomas, men also take vows of celibacy, it is women's determination to do so that creates political and social chaos and leads to Thomas's martyrdom.

Marriage was the only life available for women in the ancient world. In advocating the celibate life of service to God (particularly in 1 Corinthians 7), the Apostle Paul may well have been motivated by pragmatism. But early Christians heeded his words together with the model of Christ's own celibacy: single-hearted devotion to God required service unimpeded by any other demands. Furthermore, the marriage parables of the Heavenly Kingdom gave rise to the image of Christ as the Heavenly Bridegroom and each believer as His betrothed. From this perspective, virginity was a redirection of sexuality: sexual faithfulness to one's true spouse.

For women, virginity had profound practical implications. (4) Mortality rates in childbirth and in early childhood were high in the ancient world, and family duties were heavy for wives and mothers. Freed from those dangers and responsibilities, women who chose to serve the Church through a life of virginity also found themselves free to explore entirely new areas of activity - a freedom made possible when the individual was valued apart from her or his sexual identity. Celibacy made possible a life of active service and works: the life to which Syrian women understood themselves to be called as Christians.

The privileged position of celibacy was arguably the single most significant factor affecting women's place in early Syrian Christianity. Into the third century, and perhaps longer, celibacy was a vow both men and women often took, either at baptism or later after having one or two children. Two categories of celibacy were recognized: the *btule*, "virgins," and the *qaddishe*, "holy ones," the married who practiced continence. The way of the *qaddishe* was often called "spiritual marriage," and was commonly followed as a means of combining the social functions of marriage with the life of faith. When the mainstream Church attempted to curtail the practice of spiritual marriage in Christian communities throughout Roman territory around the turn of the fourth century, the Syrian Orient proved the most difficult area to change in this respect.

A rich understanding of basic asceticism as a mode of life characterized Syrian Christianity from its inception. For Syrian Christians, single-handed devotion to God was demonstrated through service to the Church community, enacted in village or city. Lifelong virginity (*btuluta*) or chastity in marriage (*qaddishuta*); simplicity in food, clothing, and possessions; a life of prayer that included both study of Scripture and care for the poor, sick, and suffering - these were the active traits of early Syrian Christian devotion for both women and men. The most basic concept of Syrian monasticism, *ihidayuta*, "singleness" and by extension "single-handedness," was applied to a much larger scale of Christian activity than that of the strictly contemplative life.(5) Accordingly, it was not celibacy per se that determined sanctity in the Syrian tradition. Ephrem the Syrian wrote of consecrated virgins who would be shut out of Paradise because their virginity had not been adorned with good works among the poor and suffering, while married women who instead proved to be the exemplars of the holy life would be let in because their work among the needy expressed their perfect devotion to Christ.(6)

In Syrian Christianity, as in the rest of the Church, there developed a variety of well-defined positions for women: first widows, deaconesses, and virgins, and later consecrated laywomen and nuns. Sometimes these ministries were specifically by women and for women. The fifth-century story of St. Pelagia, the redeemed courtesan of Antioch, describes such a role for the woman deacon Romana. Romana's duties involved spiritual instruction as well as liturgical function, for she assisted in Pelagia's baptism - a role necessary during an era of adult baptism by immersion - and also seems to have served as her sponsor. (7)

However, sometimes women's religious offices involved broader roles. By the third century Syrian Christianity had developed the lay order of the "Sons and Daughters of the Covenant" (*Bnay and Bnat Qyama*), which lasted well into medieval times. Its members took vows of poverty and celibacy, lived in separate households within the Christian community, and worked in the service of the parish priest or bishop. It may be that for the women of this order, vows

were the main aspect of their office. The mid-fourth century Persian martyr Tarbo was a Daughter of the Covenant, as was her (unnamed) servant, who no doubt could have assisted Tarbo in works of service for the Church, but whose own status as a servant would have prohibited her from undertaking any other duties.(8) However, particular ministries could be assigned to the Daughters of the Covenant, notably the chanting of Psalms and madrashe (sacred hymns of the Church); indeed, in the Syrian Orient women's choirs may have been a form of consecrated ministry. The Daughters of the Covenant also worked in the women's hospital run by the Church in the city of Edessa. They assisted the clergy in both villages and cities.(9)

In the fifth century, a canon attributed to Bishop Rabbula of Edessa dictated that the Daughters of the Covenant must not be "compelled by force to weave garments for the clergy."(10) Clearly there was a need to safeguard the religious nature of women's ministry, which at times could be reduced to little more than housekeeping. Nonetheless, even non-Christians recognized the Daughters of the Covenant to hold sacred office. During the fourth-century persecutions of Christians in Roman territory prior to the Edict of Toleration in 313, and later in Persia, Daughters of the Covenant seem to have been specifically targeted along with other clergy for martyrdom.(11)

The emphasis on asceticism as a life of service within the Church community, and on the importance of the lay order of the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, led to a situation in which women's religious vocations were often realized from within households rather than in convents, and were often done in the public domain. Widowed mothers and virgin daughters, and widowed or virgin sisters, aunts, and nieces, whether consecrated as Daughters of the Covenant or not, are often described as living together in their own independent households, pursuing their vocations of prayer and service within the urban community. While women's religious communities developed as part of the monastic movement over the course of the fourth century, there was already a long-standing tradition of women's vocations pursued within the civic context, and this continued unabated.

The degree of mobility such a situation allowed was considerable, as was the independence of action women demonstrated, made possible by the profound moral authority accorded the celibate religious woman. In the sixth century, the widow Euphemia and her daughter Maria pursued a shared life of rigorous prayer practice, combined with active social service in the city of Amida (today's Diyarbekr in eastern Turkey). Maria wove yarn which they sold to finance Euphemia's ministry to Amida's sick and destitute and to strangers. Eventually their work became so extensive that the city's nobility contributed to support their efforts. When persecutions broke out against the dissenters from the Council of Chalcedon (soon to become the Syrian Orthodox), the two women provided shelter, supplies, and religious facilities for refugee clergy and monks. In the context of the religious conflict, authorities feared the work of Euphemia and Maria, saying, "These women are upsetting this city - why, the citizens revere and honor them more than the bishops!" Finding themselves exiled as a result, Euphemia and Maria continued their vocation of prayer by joining Euphemia's sister, also named Maria, who had been a wandering holy woman for most of her life.(12)



Another example would be the seventh-century holy woman Shirin, who lived in the village where the monastic writer Martyrios (Sahdona) grew up, in what is now north Iraq. Living alone and not identified as a Daughter of the Covenant, Shirin devoted herself to a severely ascetic life of prayer routine focused on recitation of the monastic office and the reading of Scripture, saints' lives, monastic treatises, and spiritual works. She lived to be quite old - Martyrios remembers her in her eighties - and for many years served as spiritual director for the whole village. Monks and abbots from the area sought her counsel and her prayers; pilgrims came from throughout the region for her teachings. Above all, the village women came, including Martyrios' mother on frequent occasions, to see her example no less than to

hear her words. (13)

Despite the widespread activities of women in the Christian communities of the Syrian Orient, there is much evidence, as is suggested in the Acts of Thomas, that women's service created tremendous ecclesiastical and sometimes social tension. Social stereotypes continued to bear upon the image of women presented in Christian teaching: in sermons, treatises, and even in the lives of saints, women were often presented as weak of will and intellect, sexually promiscuous, greedy, and less able to fulfill the task of devotion than men. Even texts lauding the work of holy women could do so with evident ambivalence. In the mid-fifth century, for example, the bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus wrote his History of the Monks of Syria. (14) In his chapters on holy men and on the establishment of monasteries, Theodoret praises the men's very public and prophetic ministry - a ministry embodied most famously in his portrait of St. Simeon the Stylite (26). Only the final two chapters of the work describe the lives of holy women (29 and 30). In them, Theodoret exhorts women religious to remain enclosed, silent, and passively contemplative. The irony is that the lay populace, even as Theodoret describes them, did not view holy women as having such an introverted role to play, but rather flocked to them for advice, counsel, comfort, and healing.

Patristic sources for the Syrian Orient stress repeatedly that education was an important, perhaps even necessary, part of women's religious training. Education for women in the secular sphere tended to be available only to the wealthy until modern times. The teaching ministry of women's religious offices, and the emphasis on the study of theology and the lives of the saints among women's religious communities, made learning available to women across social and economic classes in the early Church. The legend of the Nisibene martyr Febronia, probably written in the sixth century, treats at length the place of teaching, study, and theological conversation among the women of Febronia's convent and among the laywomen of the city. (15) An understanding of the value of women's intellectual roles within the Church was a prominent feature of the early and patristic periods, and seriously diminished later. The

Daughters of the Covenant may have survived until the tenth century; the orders of widows and deaconesses had disappeared well before that. All three had been ministries that involved teaching. Under Islamic domination in the Middle East, convents virtually vanished, and with them went the living example of communities such as the one described in Febronia's story.

One further point about women's work in the Syrian tradition needs to be made. In the Roman Empire, Christianity was not legalized as a religion until Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313. Prior to that time, Christian belief was considered a crime of treason, punishable by aggravated death. While outright persecutions happened only sporadically, martyrdom was a constant threat for every Christian. This situation, like the valuing of celibacy, held enormous implications for women. Situations of persecution and martyrdom allowed women a dramatically public role in the propagation of the faith. Necessity required leadership from all who could offer it. Moreover, the Church glorified those who died, women and men alike, without distinction, as true saints. Persecution ironically provided women prominent roles of authority and deep veneration by the faithful. Legalization in Greek and Latin territories led to a return to familiar social roles, standardization of Church structure, and increasingly restricted roles for women's ministry in the Church.

In the Syrian Orient, however, persecution and martyrdom were not directly a part of Christian experience until the fourth century. (16) Several notable periods of persecutions occurred after that point, in Roman Syrian territory, in Persia, and in the Arabian peninsula.(17) Thus Syrian Christianity did not lack for the glorious witness of martyrdom, but its experience was not as important an influence on Syrian spirituality as it had been on the Latin and Greek traditions. Rather, Syrian Christianity developed a wide range of official and personal ministries for women, with strikingly public dimensions, without the crisis of persecution. In this tradition women's mobility, independence of action, education, and moral and spiritual authority all seem to have derived from the central ideal of *ihidayuta*, single-hearted devotion to God. If we recall the first images of women from the Acts of Thomas, the servant flute girl and the royal bride, we can see the strengths and talents they represent blossoming in the first centuries of Syrian Christianity. Women of all walks of life, of all social circumstances, could and did choose to define themselves solely in relation to their Heavenly Bridegroom and to the service of His Gospel.

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Notes:

1. *The Acts of Thomas* were originally composed in Syrian, but circulated widely in both Syriac and Greek. See "The Acts of Thomas" in Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha, English translation edited by R. McL. Wilson* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), vol. I, pp. 425-531; and *The Acts of Thomas, trans. with commentary by A. F. J. Klijn, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 5* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962).

2. A lively and readable introduction to the emergence of Syriac Christianity is J. B. Segal, *Edessa: the Blessed City* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). For the eastern expansion of Syriac tradition, see now Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992).

3. The sixth century *Life of Febronia* claims to have been written by the nun Thomais. See below, n. 15. The text is a highly literate romance; it is impossible to determine whether it is the product of a real female writer, or whether the claim to female authorship is a literary artifice to enable the author to present a more plausible story. Because this text's presentation of women in general and convent life in particular is so strikingly positive, I have suggested elsewhere that it may in fact have been written by a woman. But male writers could and did sometimes also present such affirmative portrayals of women.

4. Peter Brown, "The Notion of Virginity in the Early Church," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, edited by Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 427-443.

5. See now the masterful study by Sidney H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 220-245.

6. In the "Letter to Publius," sec. 15-16; in *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works*, translated by Edward G. Mathews, Jr. and Joseph P. Amar, edited by Kathleen McVey, *Fathers of the Church 91* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994) 335-355.

7. "Pelagia of Antioch," in *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, by Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987; 2nd ed. 1998) 40-62.  
8. Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*, 73-76.

9. On the Daughters of the Covenant, see G. Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the Early Syriac Speaking Church," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973) 191-215, 419-444. An important set of fifth-century canons is "The Rules of Rabbula for the Clergy and the Qeiama," edited and translated by Arthur Vööbus in *Syriac and Arabic Documents regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism* (Stockholm, 1960) 34-51. On the women's hospital in Edessa, see the *Vita S. Rabbulae*, edited by Paul Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum IV* (Paris/Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1894; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968) 396-450, at p. 444. On St. Ephrem the Syrian and women's choirs, see Kathleen McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York, Paulist Press, 1989) 28.

10. "The Rules of Rabbula for the Clergy and the Qeiama," canon 3; see also canons 4, 9, 10, 11, 19, 28.

11. See the martyrdom of Shmona and Guria, sec. 1, ed. and trans. F. C. Burkitt, *Euphemia and the Goth with the Acts of the Martyrdom of the Confessors of Edessa* (Oxford/London: Williams and Norgate for the Texts and Translation Society, 1913); and the Persian martyr texts translated in Brock and Harvey in *Holy Women*, 63-99.

12. "Mary and Euphemia," translated by Brock and Harvey in *Holy Women*, 124-132.
13. "Shirin," translated by Brock and Harvey in *Holy Women*, 17- 82.
14. *Theodoret of Cyrrhus, A History of the Monks of Syria*, translated by R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1985).
15. "Febronia," translated by Brock and Harvey in *Holy Women*, 150-176.
16. There was one exception in Persia, with a limited persecution in the 270s, from which comes the remarkable account of the woman martyr Candida. See Sebastian P. Brock, "A Martyr at the Sasanid Court under Vahran II: Candida," *Analecta Bollandiana* 96 (1978) 167-181 [= S.P. Brock, *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum, 1984) ch. 9.]
17. Women from all three of these persecutions are included in Brock and Harvey, *Holy Women*.
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