

The ascetic choices of Rome's aristocratic women and ecclesiastical authority in late fourth-century Rome

A proposed background for Codex Bezae's so-called "anti-feminist" readings in Acts

The so-called "Western" text of Acts has long been cited for a pattern of readings that seem to diminish the visibility of women in its narrative. Back in 1883, W. M. Ramsay attributed the variants in Acts 17 to "dislike to the prominence assigned to women in the accepted text."¹ E. Schüssler-Fiorenza addresses these readings more recently in her reconstruction of early Christianity, noting that "[w]hereas Luke plays down the ecclesial leadership activity of women but underlines the support of prominent women for the Christian mission, Codex D eliminates them totally."² Calling Schüssler-Fiorenza's reconstruction a "clearly focussed case," D. C. Parker remarks that:

"Here we have clear instances of the way in which ... changes have a theological significance. We can also see how the text has been modified as a consequence of an issue within the early church."³

While noting the limitations of detecting such patterns, Michael Holmes nevertheless acknowledges that *if* we consider "the cumulative impact of the 'maximalist' group of eight readings, one apparent effect is some loss of emphasis on women of leadership or prominence in Acts."⁴ Indeed, similar abbreviations of these readings have been corroborated by scholars such as J. H. Ropes, P. H. Menoud, Eldon Jay Epp, Ben Witherington, and Ann Graham Brock.⁵ We would not want to suggest, of course, that the essential raw material is not already found in the

¹ W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170* (1883) 161.

² Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Memory*, 50.

³ D. C. Parker, *Codex Bezae: An early Christian manuscript and its text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 191–192, citing E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 52. The references cited are Acts 1:14; 17:4, 12, 34; 18:28.

⁴ Michael W. Holmes, "Women and the 'Western' Text of Acts" in *The Book of Acts as Church History: Text, Textual Traditions and Ancient Interpretations* (ed. Tobias Nicklas and Michael Tilly; BZNW 120; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003) 183–203 at 203.

⁵ James Hardy Ropes. *The Text of Acts* in part 1 of *The Beginnings of Christianity: The Acts of the Apostles* (ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake; London: Macmillan, 1926) ccxxxiv; Philippe Henri Menoud, "The Western Text and the Theology of Acts" (Cambridge: Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, 1951) 19–32 at 30; Eldon Jay Epp, *The Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis in Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 75n3, 167n7; Ben Witherington, "The Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the 'Western' Text in Acts." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984) 82–84; A. G. Brock, "Appeasement, Authority, and the Role of Women in the D-Text of Acts," in Niklas and Tilly, *Acts*, 205-224.

initial text. In fact, these patterns work by reader reaction to the initial text. But Bezae is clearly selective in its points of emphasis and accentuation of theological details.⁶ As Brock observes, Bezae “does not exaggerate arbitrarily [T]here is more at stake when certain elements are accentuated than the mere addition of ‘vivid detail.’”⁷ We have a sense then that — with appropriate cautions and limitations — this pattern is a real feature of Bezae’s text and, in disregarding it, we overlook potentially relevant contextual evidence.

TOWARDS A FOURTH-CENTURY CONTEXT FOR BEZAE’S TENDENCIES

Now it is often taken for granted that these variants must stem from the earliest period of Christianity, generally, no later than the second century. This is evident in titles, such as Schüssler-Fiorenza’s “Reconstruction of *Christian Origins*,” Ropes’s “*The Beginnings of Christianity*,” or Ramsay’s “*Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 170*.” Menoud writes that “the anti-feminist tendency of the writer of D seems to be more or less general in the last decades of the first century.”⁸ Similarly Witherington notes that “it appears ... there was a concerted effort by some part of the Church, perhaps as early as the late first century or beginning of the second, to tone down texts in Luke’s second volume that indicated that women played an important and prominent part in the early days of the Christian community.”⁹ So it is typical to contextualize this pattern in the mid-second century or even earlier.

But as Holmes remarks, a high proportion of these “anti-feminist” readings — including all three cases I will examine below — are at the moment attested only by Codex Bezae.¹⁰ As apparently singular readings, we would normally assign them to a time frame close to the manuscript’s production, perhaps even to the so-called “scribe.”¹¹ So far from being ancient, these readings more likely belong to the time of Bezae’s production in c. 400, as Holmes explains:

⁶ Cite C. K. Barrett and D. C. Parker.

⁷ Brock, “Appeasement,” 208.

⁸ Menoud, “Western Text,” 30–31.

⁹ Witherington, “Anti-Feminist Tendencies,” 83.

¹⁰ Using collation tools at the INTF’s Virtual Manuscript Reading Room, I verified that these readings are still singular in the Greek tradition. Nor are they attested in the versions.

¹¹ Parker has shown that Bezae’s upper layer cannot be attributed to the actual scribe: “It is not permissible to regard the text of D as coterminous with the Codex Bezae.” Parker, *Bezae*, 96.

“Codex Bezae ... preserves several ‘layers’ of variant readings. Some ... are the product of the late fourth or early fifth century scribe who copied the manuscript ... Many ... represent the distinctive ... textual tradition to which the label ‘Western’ has been attached, others reflect the textual base upon which the ‘Western’ text was built ...”¹²

Now if these readings are in fact the product of Bezae’s producers, it is obviously futile to look any earlier than the end of the fourth century for potential contexts. But at this time we find a peculiar coincidence between defenders of the so-called “Western” text found in Bezae and anti-ascetic voices, who argued that marriage and child-rearing were to be promoted as equal in merit to “celibacy” and “virginity,” who sought to extend clerical authority over independent female ascetics, and who insisted on male headship as a prerequisite for the realization of the *imago dei* in women, that is, precisely opinions that we might in hindsight regard as “anti-feminist.” Within two decades preceding Bezae’s transcription in c. 400, writers such as Helvidius, Ambrosiaster, and Jovinian all advocated such opinions, while at the same time arguing the priority of so-called “Western” readings over mainstream Greek readings.¹³

BEZAE’S TEXT OF ACTS IN AN ANTI-ASCETIC CONTEXT

In this paper, I will examine three of Bezae’s so-called “anti-feminist” readings in relation to late fourth-century anti-asceticism: first, Bezae’s addition of children to the women in the upper room in Acts 1:14; second, Bezae’s addition of men before the women Luke’s reference to prominent Greek women in Acts 17:12; and, third, Bezae’s removal of Damaris’s name from the list of Paul’s Athenian converts in Acts 17:34.

Acts 1:14

In our first reading, in Acts 1:14, Bezae adds “children” to the “women” in the upper room, asserting that the apostles “devoted themselves to prayer with the women *and children*,” implicitly turning the women into the wives and mothers, respectively, of the apostles and their children. The fact that Bezae is the only known witness suggests that we may tentatively assign this reading to Bezae’s immediate tradition. Now the addition of these two new words could hardly have been accidental or mechanical. At the same time, one searches in vain for biblical parallels to which the Bezan text might be harmonized. So it is clear that *some* in Bezae’s context

¹² Holmes, “Women,” 186–187.

¹³ Jerome, *Helv.* 8, 18; *Jov.* 1.13,26,37. Ambrosiaster, *Com. Rom.* 5:14.

considered it appropriate to mention children with the women, a change that is typically understood to downplay the role of women as participants in Luke's narrative with an appeal to social conventions. As Brock observes, Bezae "depicts women as no longer an independent group but nuances their role ... to being simply the wives of the apostles."¹⁴ While the effect is undeniable, we wonder why it was accomplished by *adding* a reference to children rather than *changing* or *omitting* reference to the women.

But what if the issue was not about the women being wives and mothers, but the apostles being married? In the context of Bezae's production, this reading can be seen as taking aim at radical ascetics like Jerome who insisted that, when they forsook their ships and nets, the married apostles also forsook their wives for a life of celibacy.¹⁵ Jerome argues against Jovinian that "Peter and the other Apostles ... had indeed wives, but those which they had taken before they knew the Gospel. But once they were received into the Apostolate, they forsook the offices of marriage."¹⁶

But to opponents these encratic distinctions between "spiritual" ascetics and "worldly" Christians drew suspicions of Manichaeism and its distinction between "elect" and "auditors." While Jerome argued against the need for procreation that "[t]he world is already full, and the population ... too large for the soil,"¹⁷ Ambrosiaster challenges the ascetics on these very terms, asking "[w]hy, then, do some ... say that what God has blessed is a sordid and contaminated work, unless they themselves ... raise their hands against God? ... Who, when he hears the blessed, thinks it is cursed, unless he be animated by another spirit?"¹⁸ Jovinian gets straight to the point, arguing that "[a]ll this makes it clear that ... [you] are followers of the Manichaeans."¹⁹ To objectors then, this new asceticism impugned the creator and, more importantly, contradicted apostolic precedent. Jovinian, Ambrosiaster, and it seems Bezae all want us to know that marriage and child-rearing had apostolic precedent. After all, the first among the apostles, Peter himself, was married and, according to tradition, had children. While

¹⁴ Brock, "Appeasement," 218.

¹⁵ Jerome, *Ep.* 118.4, "to Julian." "Peter was married too, but when he forsook his ship and his nets he forsook his wife also" (NPNF 2.6, 222).

¹⁶ *Jov.* 1.26; NPNF 2.6, 365. Jerome cites Matthew 19:27, "We have left everything to follow you!"

¹⁷ *Helv.* 23; NPNF 2.6, 345.

¹⁸ David G. Hunter, "On the Sin of Adam and Eve: A Little-known Defense of Marriage and Childbearing by Ambrosiaster," *Harvard Theological Review* 82 (1989): 283–99 at 289, citing *Quaest.* 127.7; CSEL 50, 401.

¹⁹ *Jov.* 1.5; NPNF 2.6, 349.

Jovinian was condemned at a 393 synod in Rome, his popularity is cited by contemporaries, such as Siricius, Jerome, and Augustine,²⁰ who informs us that a decade after his condemnation, Jovinian's ideas continued to be propagated secretly.²¹ Perhaps Bezae's readings reflect this dissenting voice.

Acts 17:12

In our second reading, in Acts 17:12, Bezae changes "prominent Greek women and not a few Greek men" to "prominent Greeks, men and also women," usually viewed as reaction to the women eclipsing the men in prominence in Luke's text.²² As Brock observes, "[t]he variant in Acts 17,12 ... looks suspiciously like a patriarchally-motivated alteration on the part of D."²³ While this seems correct, Brock also notices that readings that appear to us motivated by concern for the visibility and roles of women may in fact be driven by ascetic concerns, leaving similar fingerprints on the text, as she observes, "one could argue that it is not Codex D that appears to diminish the role of women by relegating them to the category of being merely 'wives,' but that *perhaps Codex B is more ascetically-oriented* and therefore diminishes the references to 'wives' or 'children.'"²⁴ Of course, conversely, we may view Bezae's readings through an anti-ascetic grid, as reacting to the accolades bestowed on female ascetics from Rome's aristocratic families, exalted by writers such as Ambrose and Jerome, to a spiritual elite among the elite, a more noble nobility. Thus Jerome, calls Eustochium "the first virgin of noble birth in Rome" (22.15), urging her to "[l]earn ... a holy arrogance; know that you are better than them all."²⁵ Similarly, Jerome eulogizes Marcella as,

"the glory of her native Rome. I will not set forth her illustrious family and lofty lineage, nor will I trace her pedigree through a line of consuls and praetorian prefects. I will praise her for nothing but the virtue which is her own and which is the more noble, because forsaking both wealth and rank she has sought the true nobility of poverty and lowliness."²⁶

²⁰ They are Siricius, *Ep.* 2.2.3 (Haller 69-71); Jerome, *Jov.* 2.36 (Haller 40-41); Augustine, *De peccatorum mentis et remissione* 3.13 (Haller 88).

²¹ David G. Hunter, "Resistance to the Virginal Ideal in Late-Fourth-Century Rome: The Case of Jovinian," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987) 45-64 at 48, citing Augustine, *Retract.* 2.22 (48) (Haller 92).

²² Although Bezae is singular in Acts 17:12, where P127 is lacunose, in Acts 17:4, Bezae shares a similar reading with P127, where what we read as "prominent women" becomes "wives of prominent men."

²³ Brock, "Appeasement," 217.

²⁴ Brock, "Appeasement," 217, italics mine.

²⁵ Hunter, "Adam and Eve," 294 citing Jerome, *Ep.* 22.16.1; NPNF 2.6, 27-28.

²⁶ Jerome, *Ep.* 127.1; NPNF 2.6, 253.

Jerome notes how relatives lavished praise on the heiress Demetrias for her choice of virginity: “[they] congratulated each other that now a virgin was to make a noble house more noble still by her virginity.”²⁷ Jerome continues, “[h]ad you become a man’s bride but one province would have known of you; while as a Christian virgin you are known to the whole world.”²⁸

But singling out these ascetics as prominent moral examples for the emulation of the church raised predictable tensions with the male clergy. David Hunter explains that

“in the later years of the fourth century, the increased stature and visibility of ascetic women caused ... acute problems. The ascetic and monastic movements produced many notable female converts among the western aristocracy. ... It was inevitable that the male clergy in the West would attempt to circumscribe the influence of these wealthy and powerful ascetic women.”²⁹

It seems then that a patriarchal element underlies this opposition to the ascetic movement reflecting the insecurities of the male clergy who found their moral influence challenged by the example of female ascetics. Pope Siricius puts the matter baldly:

“For with what shame has a bishop or presbyter dared to preach integrity or continence to a widow or virgin ... whenever he himself has been more involved in the begetting of children for the world than for God?”³⁰

In the late fourth century, we find this patriarchal insecurity institutionalized in practices such as clerical celibacy and the veiling of virgins, both of which offered the clergy a means to extend its moral authority over female ascetics. Now F. C. Burkitt once suggested that Bezae was an ecclesiastically-sponsored text, whose first corrector was none other than the local bishop, a view that Parker calls “thoughtful,” “imaginative,” and “worth repeating.”³¹ But if this is so, we can see why Bezae’s producers might have been hesitant to single out prominent women as moral exemplars.

²⁷ Jerome, *Ep.* 130.6; NPNF 2.6, 263.

²⁸ Jerome, *Ep.* 130.6; NPNF 2.6, 263.

²⁹ David G. Hunter, “Clerical Celibacy and the Veiling of Virgins: New Boundaries in Late Ancient Christianity” in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus* (ed. William E. Klingshirm and Mark Vessey; Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999) 139–152 at 142

³⁰ Cited by Hunter, “Celibacy,” 141 from Siricius, *Ep.* 10.2.5; PL 13:1184–1185.

³¹ F. C. Burkitt, “The Date of Codex Bezae,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 3 (1902) 501–513 at 511; Parker, *Codex Bezae*, 129.

Acts 17:34

In our third reading, in Acts 17:34, Bezae omits reference to “a woman named Damaris” from the already short list of Paul’s converts in Athens. That Damaris is qualified as “the woman” Damaris suggests that the omission is related to her gender, a notion that gains ground through Bezae’s substitution of the omitted phrase with the adjective εὐσχήμων used to enhance her male counterpart Dionysius, now the “prominent” Areopagite. Now εὐσχήμων is the very adjective we encountered in Acts 17:12 to describe, in Bezae’s words, “prominent Greeks, men and also women,” suggesting that neither change is accidental and that both are in fact related, that is, to the gender of the participants.³² Once again, the reading’s apparent singularity suggests tentatively that it reflects Bezae’s immediate context, when at the same time we find similar concerns expressed by Jerome’s pseudonymous critic, Ambrosiaster, who as Hunter observes,

“was as ... disturbed by the independence of ascetical widows and virgins as he was devoted to the notion of clerical authority. In a manner virtually unique among patristic writers, Ambrosiaster argued that women were not created in God’s image, because the image of God consists in the male [Adam] ... being the ... source of all other human beings.”³³

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34, Ambrosiaster argues,

“[i]f the man is the image of God, not the woman, and if the woman is subordinate to the man by the law of nature, how much more ought women to be subordinate in the church out of reverence for him ... who is the legate ... of the One who is the head of man.”³⁴

In presenting Damaris’s conversion as an autonomous choice, the mainstream text undercuts these subordinationist notions, seemingly encouraging women to make such ascetic choices that earned respect in the church, while bypassing clerical authority structures. From Bezae’s perspective, perhaps there was no need to advertise a woman converting freely in the public market, unencumbered by the consent of a male head, not only within the family, but also in the church, in *both* locations circumventing paternalistic authority.

³² Brock, “Appeasement,” 217–218.

³³ Hunter, “Celibacy,” 144–145. See also, D. G. Hunter, “The Paradise of Patriarchy: Ambrosiaster on Woman as (Not) God’s Image,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 43 (1992): 447–69. See Genesis 2:21–23.

³⁴ Hunter, “Celibacy,” 146.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that Bezae's so-called "anti-feminist" readings, while no less relevant to questions of gender and patriarchal privilege, are nonetheless consistent with a more specific "anti-ascetic" context in the late fourth century. But how good is our case that these readings actually belong in the late fourth-century? In fact, there are clear pointers to this later period. After all Bezae is a fifth-century artifact, whose apparently singular readings are naturally considered in the context of its production and whose initial correctors exhibit some familiarity and affinity with the underlying text, implying that the community that created the text also corrected the text. If Bezae's singular readings date from the late first century, we have many difficulties explaining how they managed to survive intact for three centuries. The situation is possible, but the simpler hypothesis is that obscure readings flow from nearby sources. It is appropriate then to begin our inquiry from Bezae's immediate context, when all of our sources agree that the ascetic controversy was a pressing matter. With this new asceticism on the rise and objectors, like Jovinian, condemned without a hearing, Bezae's traditionalist producers had every motive to take the discussion underground, as it were, to subvert the text itself. At a time when not even an Origen was safe from posthumous condemnation, orthodoxy was a delicate matter. With beatifications or anathemas resting on the skillful deployment of proof texts, here we find every incentive for textual changes of the kind found in Bezae's text of Acts. What better place was there to appeal to apostolic and catholic orthodoxy than the canonical text of the Acts of the Apostles?