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PAULA OF BETHLEHEM: BLENDING THE ASCETIC AND ARISTOCRAT WORLDS

Abstract: In late antique Rome, a unique lady formed a hybrid of the virtues expected for aristocrats and ascetics. Paula, a “daughter of Cornelia” was a Christian who joined two paths in a life that spanned the splendor of imperial Rome and Christian reforms of the fourth century ascetic movement. Spiritual and moral disparities divided the values of church and society, yet singular virtues overlapped in the two ways of life. Paula faced a rupture in her life and overcame harsh conundrums. This elite lady was a student, patron and friend, to Jerome of Stridon for she blended the values of aristocrat and ascetic, causing two worlds to unite in her.

Keywords: *Patristics, Ascetics, Monasticism, Holy Lands, Early Christianity, Late Antiquity*

Words of God on Her Lips

As Paula of Rome, a daughter of Cornelia,¹ lay dying in Bethlehem in 404 BC, the final words she whispered were out of the Psalms of David, quoted in Hebrew.² Yet Paula (347-404) is not well known. Few articles, chapters or books describe her; she has not won great renown. Who was this lady, with an identity that was both aristocrat and ascetic?

Ambivalence to Women

Features of Paula fit both worlds easily, for example, she was well educated and exhibited a desire to learn, was hospitable, and Paula wrote, although her writing was not well circulated for letters by women were kept

¹ McNamara. J. *Cornelia's Daughters: Paula and Eustochium*. A 1984 article in *Woman's Studies*; 11:9-27.

² *Letters of Jerome*, Trans. By W.H.Freemantle, Balliol, Oxford. Aeterna 2016, 108.29.353.

private in early Christian history.³ Many church fathers had deep affection for their lady-patrons and protected and kept their correspondence out of circulation but men also felt ambivalence for women.⁴ A negative view was expressed, a perennial insistence, that women fomented heresy.⁵ Women might be more virtuous than men but were dangerous.⁶ The way to recover a woman's tale often came by men's words, not by the lady herself.⁷

Although we are told of her letters, we read only Jerome's responses. Fortunately, men admired her greatly, in particular, Jerome of Stridon (c347-420), and Palladius of Helenopolis (c363-c430).⁸ Through what they wrote, a glimpse of Paula's accomplishments are seen, a crumb of the life of this aristocrat turned ascetic.

A Dazzling Ascetic

If simplicity and holiness could dazzle, in her they did. Letter 108 exclaimed, "If all the members of my body were to be converted into tongues," it would not be adequate to declare the quality of holiness of the venerable Paula. Great praise from Jerome was incomplete to all that Paula was.

Even considering the tendency Jerome had to exaggerate, Paula was unique. In 386, the young widow began the tangible work she achieved to fulfill a dream of her friend and client, Jerome: a monastic dwelling after she and her daughter left Rome to moved to Bethlehem. They built a guest house, a monastery "left to men" to manage, and nunneries, "full of virgins and widows from many provinces, of the noble, middle, and lower classes."⁹ As a wealthy widow, she supervised the construction of the women's houses built on the very site where Christ was said to have been born.

³ Ruether, Rosemary and Eleanor McLaughlin. *Women of Spirit. Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*. Wolf and Stock, OR.1998,16.

⁴ Clark, E.A. *Women in the Early Church*. Liturgical Press.Collegville MN. 1983,15.

⁵ Denzey, Nicola, *The Bone Gatherers.The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*. Beacon Press, Boston, 2007, 184.

⁶ Cooper, Kate. *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women*. Overlook Press NY 2013, 35

⁷ Adkins, Emma. *Male Authors, Female Lives*. BA Diss't. www. academia.edu. Male_Authors_Female_Lives. 4-6.

⁸ Palladius, *Lausiaca History*,36.6.126. Trans. W.K.Loiwther Clark, SPCK, MacMillan NY London 1898.

⁹ Letter 108.20.345. Aeterna. See also Schaff; *Nicean and Ante Nicean Fathers*, vol. 3.127.

Who Paula Was

Paula was many things; a host to ecclesiastical visitors, a bible student and linguist, a mother, a widow, an ascetic who chose a life of prayer and chastity, and an aristocrat who gave prodigiously. After Marcella, she became Jerome's patron. As a mentee of the eminent ascetic, Marcella of Rome, Paula came to asceticism after widowhood, just as her aristocratic relative had done. For Paula was high born, of a noble family and married at a young age, perhaps twelve. From a rich, senatorial clan, they claimed descent from Agamemnon, and Paula had four girls and one boy but after her husband, Toxotius Senior, died, she turned to the ascetic path of Christianity.¹⁰

Intermarriage was common among upper classes of the empire, so Paula and Marcella were related. Years later, Pammachius, cousin of Marcella, married Paula's second daughter, Paulina and even later another cousin became wife to Toxotius Junior. An older nun, Marcella's life was likely known and observed by Paula while she was a maid, young wife and mother. Jointly they rejected traditions of Rome, including familial wealth, adornment and lavish luxury not suited to Christ-followers but portions of the path of high society which did fit were kept. Visible in this was sincere care for travelers; it was highly valued by both aristocrats and ascetics in the ancient world, even care for strangers.

The Way of Hospitality: Place

Paula's custom led her to hospitality. A major contribution she had was domesticity for guests, caring for the well-being of strangers and for Jerome, as she set up a place for him to work on his translation. Was her primary achievement domestic, limited to an external achievement, or was there more?

Even a superficial glance at noble women who supported churchmen in the fourth century leads to recognition of an obvious contribution of elite women – 'place.' Financial gifts of money and the prestige that an aristocratic woman bestowed on a low-to-medium class client provided a place of prestige and funds for safe productivity. Marcella (c325-410) in-

¹⁰ Cohick, Lynn, Amy Hughes. *Christian Women in the Patristic World. Their Influence Authority and Legacy.* Baker Academic, 2017, 198-200.

vited Jerome to her palace to lecture and offer bible exposition.¹¹ Juliana the Virgin gave Origen (c185-c253) a place to live in tumultuous times, a place to hide.¹² Olympias of Constantinople (368-408) aided the patriarch Chrysostom.¹³ Melania the Elder (350-410) offered both Rufinus of Aquilae and Evagrius of Pontus a residence from which to pray, study and write.¹⁴ Macrina of Anissi (c327-379) created a domestic monastery for ascetics to gather, pray, fast and study the bible.¹⁵ Benefice from an aristocrat- ascetic carried a domestic element, elemental and necessary.

Church men like Jerome, Origen, Rufinus, Evagrius and Chrysostom belong to this hegemony of “partners in ministry,” fathers of the church who received from female’s money, legal help and protection. It led to friendships so that women like Paula also provided advice, contributed linguist biblical expertise, and was a sounding board for theological developments. As Elizabeth Clark said, “Women were good to think with.”¹⁶ Benefaction profited men in Christian endeavors, bringing monks like Jerome the basic provision of ‘place,’ and women like Paula a wider, expansive role of an aristocratic - ascetic partner.

Private and Public Hospitality

Paula’s private and public assistance was costly and noble. Hospitality was characteristic to aristocrats and it was women who ruled the private palaces and family residences. A married woman’s place was at her home, and it was private which protected her modesty yet also fulfilled a significant community need. Travelers needed housing. Women were in charge of the residences.

Therefore, this quality of Paula’s was not unique but habitual to aristocrats, as in 381, she was host to guests of Pope Damasus.¹⁷ Caring for visitors such as Bishop Epiphanius, Paulinus of Antioch and Jerome of Stridon,

¹¹ NANE. *Letters of Jerome*, vol. 3.127. Aeterna, *ibid*.

¹² Palladius, *LH*. LXIV.171. Juliana was a student of the bible translator, Symmachius of that century.

¹³ *ibid*. LVI,160.

¹⁴ Palladius. *Ibid*. XXXVIII. 132-7. Evagrius’ wrote many letters to Melania the Elder.

¹⁵ Silva, Anna. *Macrina the Younger. Philosopher of God*. Brepols, Belgium, 2008, 77.

¹⁶ Clark, Elizabeth. *Ibid*.

¹⁷ Marcella’s mother Albina was a noteworthy hostess, welcoming papal visitors. *Letter* 127.5.431.

their translator, enlivened her life with the novelty of traveling bishops and pious ascetic monks. This was the meeting point and initial contact with Jerome yet over time, the tie of friendship deepened. Good deeds of Paula to the pope in Rome, therefore, rebounded to her personal benefit. Hospitality brought rewards.

Another contribution from women like Paula came in the building of monasteries across the empire.¹⁸ The Elder Melania built a double monastery in Jerusalem. Macrina created a domestic nunnery in Assisi. In Bethlehem after 386, funds from this valued *prostat*, Paula, of her family's wealth, built a convent, hospice and monastery over three years, fulfilling Jerome's dream. Monks might be secluded but the hospice was open, so Palladius' reports, and ecclesiastical pilgrims came. Palladius himself was in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, but was not led to admire Jerome. Rather he exalted Paula whose patience with the irritable monk from Dalmatia was prodigious.¹⁹ Competent and capable, Paula supervised houses, dispersed wealth, building a religious estate.

In earlier years, when she and Jerome met in Rome, he came to be advisor-linguist for facilitate solicitation of primates from the east.²⁰ By then Paula's Roman estate, like Marcella's, had been converted to a monastic retreat or domestic nunnery. She thus hosted the eastern dignitaries and cared for delegates to the pope. Ehipanius of Salamis was one of these, a man Brown calls the "Grand Old Man of Palestinian monasticism," and bishop of Cyprus in 367.²¹ He spoke Hebrew, Syriac, Egyptian and Greek but sought a translator fluent in Latin. Jerome was the man chosen. The young widow Paula was the hostess.

Hospitality had a critical function in the church, to fulfil needs of both it and society, for under *pax romana* many citizens traveled. Soon, in Palestine when the guest house was completed, pilgrims to the Holy Land did not hear, "no room" in Bethlehem, but instead found spiritual refresh-

¹⁸ Brown, Peter. *Body and Society*. P A G Eon buildings by women/ see also WESTERN Civilization

¹⁹ LH. He considered Jerome lower spiritually than Paula, less able in languages, blocking her talent.

²⁰ Rebenich, Stefan. *Jerome*, Routledge, London, 2002, 31-33. Paulinus ordained Jerome a priest but lost the see in Antioch to Melitius. Paulinus hoped to make his objections to Pope Damasus, to win support.

²¹ Brown, Peter. *Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Columbia University Press. 1998, 381.

ment and a welcome which made strangers into guests. Charity work also poured forth from the pilgrim hostelry run by Paula and Jerome, soon called, "Mary's Inn."²²

In Bethlehem, Paula earned a high profile as a hostess and in gifts distributed to the poor. Philanthropy and hospitality fit both the Christian and Roman ways of life. An aristocrat, she was also and also a devout Bible student.

Benefactor as Student

Women could be students as well as benefactors. Patrons selected clients and Paula paid for Jerome's scribes, treatises and books, building religious residences where men and women lived, mimicking the Elder Melania. If an elite widow was patron to a monk, no matter how brilliant he was, the social inferior gained prestige from the relationship.²³ Prestige and productivity were brought and thus his productivity relied on her, and the entirety of his *corpus*, the letters, treatises and Bible, the whole of what Jerome achieved in Bethlehem, rose of steady support from his *prostatas*.²⁴ He was tied to Paula, for as with many church fathers, their thought processes were the product of "an environment maintained and filled with pious females."²⁵ His tenacity in work came out of the finances of his benefactor's gifts, and these were fruitful.²⁶

Relationship of benefaction were reciprocal. Paula and her daughter gained because they were avid scripture students, in offer many questions and receiving aid from the teacher, Jerome, both in Rome and in Bethlehem.²⁷ She was a loyal student in 382, after Marcella invited him to tutor widows and virgins, and was his scripture student in Bethlehem after 386.

Paula's father was Greek and with women in Marcella's salon she stud-

²² Letter 55.14 and 108.14.

²³ Williams, Megan Hale. *The Monk and the Book. Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship*. University of Chicago Press, 2006, 52-55.

²⁴ Graves, Michael. *The Bible Scholarship of a Fourth Century Woman: Marcella of Rome*. Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses, 87/4, 2011.

²⁵ Cloke, Gillian. "This Female Man of God." *Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age*. Routledge, 1995. 4.

²⁶ Cain, Andrew. *Letters of Jerome. Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2009. 200.

²⁷ Letter 108.27. A threnody of Jerome to Eustochium on Paula's death. Aeterna, 351-2.

ied Origen in the original languages, learning Hebrew as Marcella had done.²⁸ Jerome sent letters to Paula as well as letters to Marcella, from which her interests and the depth of her questions as a student are seen.²⁹ Jerome wrote to Paula about the so-called “alphabet Psalms,” for example and described his (early) opinion of Origen.

When Paula’s entourage first arrived in Palestine after 386, Paula and Jerome visited the Mount of Olives. They saw how Melania the Elder and Rufinus of Aquileia led the double monastery where both men and women pursued a holy, disciplined life. This model suited the wishes of Paula and Jerome.³⁰

After visiting monks in Nitria, Paula and Jerome settled in Bethlehem. For three years, Paula and her daughter inhabited a hospice while active with additional construction. Out of her family’s vast properties, she financed the building of new religious houses as well as offering continuous, substantial relief to the local poor. Her charity was profligate, so much so that by 404, no wealth remained. As complex as it was to liquidate property, as cumbersome as family possessions were, she managed to spend all she owned on the church, the monasteries and the poor. This wealthy aristocrat died a penniless ascetic.

Choosing a Life of Celibacy

Aristocracy in late antique Rome was mired in decadence so the simplicity of ascetics was extraordinary and, to them, abnormal. Paula was born to nobility and raised in elegance, accustomed to fine food, lavish jewelry, exquisite hairstyles, sumptuous exotic fabrics for beautiful gowns, and surrounded by luxuries as the daily normative of Roman elites.³¹ When she lost her husband in 381, she abandoned this norm for the life of a celibate, which seemed like the act of a madwoman to family and others of the nobility. Her decision met resistance. Paula’s immediate family was senatorial and unsympathetic to ascetic interests, upset by her close association with Jerome, and may even have aided in his untimely expulsion

²⁸ Eustochium also learned Hebrew. *Ibid*, Jerome’s letter 108.27.351-2.

²⁹ Williams.*ibid*. In Letter 33,57. Jerome describes to Paula his view of Origen which changed later.

³⁰ Ruether, *ibid.*, 80-81.

³¹ Compton, M. Sophia, *Sisters in Wisdom. Twelve Women Disciples from East to West*. Published by the Order of St Julian of Norwich. Waukesha, WI. 2013, 46-66.

from Rome.³² Poverty was foolishness to the nobility, if comfort and riches were possible, but Christian ascetics welcomed poverty.

At that time, aristocrats rejected the Christian call to a celibate life, with its upside down values of submission and poverty's rigor. It was a bewildering way to live and censure was abundant because Paula's path was controversial. Human families were demoted but ascetic church members were put first. Monastic fervor inverted society's rules and summoned a conundrum for mothers of Rome. If they set aside an illustrious Roman family, the choice warred against traditional values. Ascetic principles of rigorous poverty and self denial fought with noble ways that preferred a life of ease.

Not only did Paula and the Aventine ladies like Marcella renounce the gratification of an aristocratic life, abjuring the status, comforts and luxuries of the elites, but society derided Paula and criticized Melania the Elder of the Mount of Olive community because they left children behind when they went to serve God.³³ Sons were put in the hands of carefully selected guardians. They relinquished duties and what was expected, set aside what was necessary for a visible, earthly home to focus on service for Christ and an eternal home.³⁴

A controversial decision and one fraught with difficulty, this turn was mandated by their new loyalties. As mothers who loved children and widows who esteemed their kin, they did not cease caring but "look(ed) for their care by deserting one's family (*for*) to impoverish them (now) was to guard their heavenly wellbeing." Provision to a new, ascetic family seemed to require the sacrifice of an old, aristocratic one, but it was believed to enrich the old family's eternal good.

This is what Paula did. Leaving Rome and her son Toxotius, Paula saw him lift his arms and heard him howl in grief as she said farewell, sailing with one daughter to be guests of Epiphanius of Salamis and then to the Holy Land. In that poignant moment, the monastic virtue of equanim-

³² Cain, Andrew. *Letters of Jerome. Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2009, 10.

³³ Denzey, Nikola. *The Bone Gatherers: Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2007,187. See also Ross Kramer, Shepherd, Ed., *Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics. Women Religious in the Graeco-Roman World*. Fortress Press, 1988.50-52. There is a new Publication of old text: *Women's Religions in the Graeco Roman World*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

³⁴ *Ep.* 108.6.331. *Op. cit.* See Gillian Cloke also, *ibid*,53.

ity or “*apatheia*” was absent. Paula was devastated. In events of her life, nobility and her aristocratic character often dominated, but at times the Christian widow and human Paula were seen. Bidding her son farewell, emotions overflowed and she wept.

Prostatis yet Emotional

A hybrid of the rational, cool headed aristocratic she was the humble ascetic, walking paths of divergent *telos*. Yet at times a similar outlook could be shared. Dignity and composure mattered, for example, and stoicism was primary.

Inconsistency was rife, of course, in any attempt to summarize such a weighty topic as Late Roman culture, an impossible task, yet necessary. Christians and the aristocrats of Rome both valued piety and a search for a philosophical life. A wise person was refined by reflection on mortality, set on a path to find virtue and sought an increasing ability to control emotions and be rational.³⁵ For ascetics, *apathei* was a virtue to strive for. Equanimity had merit – monks yearned for a state of equilibrium, and nuns wished to display faith and trust in God, not feelings or human fear. Self control, equanimity and undisturbed passions were virtues highly regarded by both aristocrat and ascetic.

Yet as a wife and mother, Paula’s emotions ran deep and she was a patron who felt intensely. On first entering Bethlehem, threw herself down at the site of Jesus’ birth to cover it with tears and kisses. She fainted at the funeral of a child of hers in Rome.³⁶ She wept and was pierced by human sorrow when she left her son Toxotius Junior to leave Rome and go to be a pilgrim in 386. It was human – even Jesus shed tears. She was a human overcome by grief, but aristocrats sought to be governed by rational thought. For a Roman woman of status and wealth, wife of a senator, high society anticipated that she would keep her dignity. Socially, Paula’s behavior must remain seemly, stoic and restrained. This seemed to have been expected of the imperial aristocracy, yet Paula did not always comply - perhaps she fell short.

The merit placed on passion-free behavior of women who were Chris-

³⁵ Silva, Anna. *Macrina the Younger. Philosopher of God*. Brepols, Belgium, 2008, 102-105.

³⁶ *Letter* 39.2 and 39.5.80-88 Jerome advised Paula to moderate her grief over the death of Blesilla.

tians was saluted with a new term, like a sobriquet. The highest praise an ascetic earned was to be called “a female man of God.”³⁷ Marcella of Rome, Melania the Elder, and the blessed martyr of Carthage, Perpetua (182-c.203), were Christian stoics given this title. They conquered and “surpassed” their gender and became rational. A philosopher denied emotions and was ruled by the mind, like Macrina of Annisi, whose virtue stepped beyond womanly and (human) emotions.

Palladius of Helenopolis praised men and women who achieved this path of sublimation. He and Paulinus of Nola wrote of heroic women like Asella who was praised by Jerome, for her “recreation was fasting... refreshment was hunger.”³⁸ Another of Marcella’s circle, Lea, wore “harsh sackcloth rather than soft fabric, passed sleepless nights in prayer,” and taught (others) by example more than words.³⁹ Marcella “shunned the houses of great ladies ...gave away her possessions...”⁴⁰ These were female men of God.

It was a gender-bending sobriquet and to be “a female man of God,” was an assignment given with veneration. Perpetua of Carthage was remembered for manly courage.⁴¹ Melania the Elder was elevated by her cousin Paulinus of Nola, for self-restraint and masculine discipline.⁴² Palladius offered the Elder Melania encomiums also for sacrifices she made in the Holy Land. Jerome calls Marcella and Eustochium each a “female man of God.”⁴³ The term elevated masculine above feminine, and was a rhetorical title that Paula, however, did not receive.

³⁷ Cloke, Gillian. “*This Female Man of God.*” *Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age.* Routledge, 1995.1-5. Palladius used the term, *Female Man of God*, in *Lausiac History*, 9.1.

³⁸ *Letter 24.3.69. ibid.* Asella and Lea were leaders in Marcella’s circle whose behavior was replicated.

³⁹ *Letter 23.2.67 ibid.* She led a circle of widows and virgins on her own.

⁴⁰ *Letter 127.4.430. ibid.* Part of Marcella’s eulogy Jerome sent to Principia.

⁴¹ Augustine preached an annual sermon in Carthage on Perpetua’s birthday. *Sermons* 282-305.

⁴² Paulinus wrote to Sulpitius Severus from Nola. Letter 29. Palladius *LH* refers to Melania in ch. 9.1

⁴³ *Letters of Jerome. Trans.* W. H. Freemantle. Aeterna Press. Christian Literature Publishing 1892, 39,80. Death of Blessilla.127.428. Also Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God; Women and Spiritual Power in Patristic Age*, 1995,4.

Roman and Christian Values

Values of Late Antique culture could be at war or could exist at times in harmony with Christian principles. Hospitality to strangers and generosity to the poor were lauded. Other characteristics won praise from society and the church.

Modesty and self-restraint were expected of respectable women. As a gender, women were held up as guardians of modesty, “weaker than men,” the ones who upheld the *status quo*, yet could fall victim to emotions. Late Antique women could be seen as volatile. At the funeral of her daughter, Blesilla, Paula collapsed in grief, and was carried away unconscious.⁴⁴ It was an excessive, human response, perhaps immodest, for she expressed parental sorrow without restraint or Christian dignity. Jerome reproved her.

Was it this or were there other reasons Paula was not awarded the special title “female man of God,” despite her “male” courage? She showed stamina when she renounced what was familiar and known, the comforts and luxury of her former noble life. She bravely disregarded her family’s prohibition and censure, and with sadness left her son. In modesty, her personal beauty was hidden and unadorned as her clothes changed from silk to linen. Ultimately, she became a voluntary exile for Christ, abandoning her family and life in Rome.

With an interpenetration of values, aristocratic Rome could at times find itself in harmony with Christian ascetics who praised quiet, calm restraint and demoted human feelings. However, there were moral and spiritual divides, such as the attitude of elites towards possessions and the reverence they gave to earthly social standing. These separated the two ways. Aristocrats treasured wealth, comforts and possessions endowed by status and in fact traditionally they considered it their duty to increase and secure the wealth of family holdings through marriage. In contrast, ascetics denied themselves the physical comforts which material wealth brought and laid aside an emphasis on appearance and rank. A monastic cherished an eschatological sense of destiny, a quiet certainty of eternal outcomes, for their security was no longer placed on residences nor did they rely upon wealth or family status but on divine providence.

All would be revealed in the *parousia*, monks and nuns believed. Chris-

⁴⁴ Salisbury, J.E.; Lefkowitz, M.R. (2001). “Blaesilla”. *Encyclopedia of Women in the Ancient World*. ABC-CLIO E-Books. ABC-CLIO, 32-33.

tians awaited God's kingdom, when all would be well. In the interplay of society and church, did an aristocrat conform to senatorial demands or remain a Christian? At times, principles of the two paths merged but at other times they were widely disparate.

The journey of an ascetic introduced them to new values and to a new family. Some Romans claimed their kindred were frail, women like children who never really grew up.⁴⁵ In this case, a widow like Paula walked free of a husband's dominance, but other male relatives she had, uncles or brothers, might curb her agency, for she had internal as well as external turmoil. Even while she wept at farewell, she clung to the ascetic call that brought loss of her family.⁴⁶ One daughter joined her, for Eustochium,, also renounced the "old" world of structures and decided to be a virgin for Christ. With Paula, she offered up property, children and husband to God to be inducted as 'mother, father, sister, brother' in the "new" ascetic world, as Clarke reminds us.⁴⁷ Celibacy offered a widow such as Paula spiritual, eternal kindred.⁴⁸

So hospitality, modesty, and restraint of emotions were Christian virtues that overlapped with Roman culture. Yet how culture and the church viewed emotions could vary. In some ways, Paula's tender heart matched how imperial Rome saw "weak" women but of lower status, and not in accord with how highly ascetic Christians placed passivity, self-restraint and control.⁴⁹ Writers like Evagrius of Ponticus, for example, did not rank *apatheia* in the highest place, but saw it as a virtue that brought great freedom from sin and fleshly desires, and reduced a propensity to promiscuity or pornographic demonic images. Conflicting views existed on emotions, but restraint was ideal. Impassibility which a nun or monk aspired to revealed

⁴⁵ Vevey, Paul. Ed. Arthur Goldhammer Trans. *A History of Private Lives: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*. Belnap, Harvard University 1987, 9-41 especially 37-9 on marriage in Graeco-Roman culture.

⁴⁶ White, Carolinne. *Lives of Christian Roman Women. Life of Paula*. Penguin, 2010, 98. White excerpted first person sources such as Jerome's letters and Palladius *Lausiatic History*..

⁴⁷ Jerome, *Chrysostom and Friends*. Edwin Mellon, 1979, p. 235.

⁴⁸ Silva, Anna. *Macrina the Younger. Philosopher of God*. Brepols, Belgium, 2008. According to Gregory of Nyssa, his elder sister Macrina was Father, teacher, Pedagogue, mother counselor at Annesi. 12.13-14.

⁴⁹ A gendered expectation, for men were to be rational, calm; women need not be. Vevey *ibid*.

apatheia and a peaceful calm bestowed by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ Christians governed their feelings, reduced the rule of emotions and sublimated passion which might or might not stand in contrast to the pagan or imperial acceptance of these.⁵¹ There were ideal standards expected.

Paula's life showed the disparity between Rome and ascetic fourth century Christianity but also the agreement of principles, such as modesty and hospitality. She experienced warring values and conundrums. Significantly, she excelled in a value that was universally correct, that is, to provide a welcome to travelers, considered a duty for all. But what made travelers sacrosanct?

The Divine Right of Guests

Hospitality expressed by Paula fit the custom of ascetics and that of aristocrats for it dovetailed on a divine right assigned by both. The cultures agreed on how essential it was to care for travelers as times were tumultuous..

Who were travelers and pilgrims, hosted in Bethlehem? At its inception, the first monks and nuns of the establishments were family servants and slaves from Rome who accompanied Eustochium and Paula.⁵² A decision to settle at the birthplace of Christ, as Rebenich writes, adjacent to the Church of the Nativity, promised "a lively exchange with wealthy western visitors from the east and west."⁵³ The distinctive site, therefore, inspired pilgrims but their numbers detracted from a quiet study space conducive to Jerome's writing.⁵⁴

Pilgrims flocked to the holy places also where saints who loved Christ had lived, such as the cells of Flavia Domitilla visited by Paula after she left Rome.⁵⁵ Pilgrims also sought holy sites to pray, or wandered with family

⁵⁰ Clarke, *The Origenist Controversy*, 82-3, also Evagrius Ponticus, *Kephalaia gnostica*, V,64 (PO 29, 203).

⁵¹ Palladius *LH* was told by Arsisius of extraordinary "angelic life" of Amoun of Nitria, living in one house but with his wife had two beds. Both "attained impassivity," so after 18 years they moved to separate houses. p. 60. See Chapter 8, p. 59. The "Angelic Life" was thought to restore man's return to Eden.

⁵² *Ep.* 108.14.

⁵³ Rebenich. *Jerome*. Routledge, 2002, 41.

⁵⁴ NNF *Ep.* 66.6.2.

⁵⁵ Burton, Philip. *Sulpicius Severus' Life of Martin*. Oxford University Press 2017. A Christian matron who was imprisoned in the first century on a mediterranean island, 182.

members or in groups of clergy and with trusted monks on roads fraught with danger.⁵⁶ Paula's care to pilgrims and travelers fit the monastic stress on hospitality but her work at Bethlehem did not increase her Roman family's repute or lay greater fame on a husband nor "build up patrilineal powers." Generosity to travelers was a trait of aristocrats; care for their safe-keeping matched the nuns' wish for good deeds.⁵⁷

With hospitality, thus, Paula kept the pattern set by other great Roman ladies, and also joined the pious, female "renouncers" who set aside the traditional life of marriage, money and family, seen in the exemplar Marcella and the Elder Melania in financial outlay to men, as a foundress of religious houses.⁵⁸

Despite all this, somehow Paula failed to rise to the stunning level of a "female man of God." Like Macrina of Annisi, she managed and served the houses and achieved a form of seclusion, withdrawn from society, especially departing from what was expected for the elite, the luxurious wealth of her patriarchy or demands of glamor kept by aristocratic women.

In prayer and study of scripture, she was nourished and protected by an "unmediated contact with the invisible." Paula fed the poor, and distributed her wealth, not under the dictates of a male guardian, a father or husband. Jerome did not completely approve of her generosity, but saw it as a kind of profligacy to the poor.⁵⁹ Munificence was expected, but she gave alms to the unnamed poor. Promising herself to Christ, freedom came to Paula, and a holy loyalty to a heavenly Bridegroom, for like Eustochium, she lived dedicated to continence. Yet her history and life did not seem to rise high enough for her word in letters to be recorded.

Paula achieved status by birth but acquired the love and respect of Christians for her goodness to strangers, care for foreign guests and remarkable stamina maintaining Jerome's houses while he translated the Vulgate, a tome which arguably changed the world, all from little Bethlehem.

In 2020 Brakke wrote of Palestine's international pilgrims,⁶⁰ desert monasticism in Palestine was a cosmopolitan affair from the start. Ascetically

⁵⁶ Elm, Susanna. *Virgins of God*. Clarendon, Oxford, 1994, 274.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 121. Good deeds were feeding the poor, touching bodies of the dead and hospitality.

⁵⁸ Brown, Peter, *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia, 1988, 2008, 272 on female ascetics, 367.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 127 Jerome complained about how often and freely Paula distributed funds to the poor.

⁶⁰ He noted the variety of styles of monastic groups found in Syria, Egypt and the Holy Lands.

inclined aristocrats from the West such as Jerome and Paula played important roles in the establishment of communities close to the holy places near Jerusalem, and others from outside the Holy Land moved there to take up the monastic life. ‘Foreigners’, then, may have made up the majority of Palestinian desert monks in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁶¹

Paula’s Theology

Little is said about Paula’s theology albeit Jerome insisted that her orthodoxy was firm.⁶² Jerome’s eulogiums to Origen in the first part of his life and as he taught at Marcella’s spiritual salon was followed by denials at the end.⁶³ He agreed with Epiphanius of Salamis who ran an anti-Origen campaign and was frustrated that John of Jerusalem would not join them. The Origenist controversy divided Palestine’s Christians for the bishop of Jerusalem was connected to Melania the Elder and Rufinus, the Jerusalem translator of Origen’s works.

The churches were connected. In serving traveling strangers and pilgrims, Paula became a part of the social networks of Palestine which had a tight weave of interdependence. Knitted inside the theologically based concerns of the Origenist controversy at the end of the fourth century and the start of the fifth century were personal alliances and church politics, so it moved beyond a “simple” debate over belief or dogma and became an area of fiery insults. For Jerome, his previous view and didactic certainty about Origen’s superior insights seen for example in a 384 letter to Paula, meant he could be labeled.⁶⁴ Brown suggests Jerome promoted himself as a miniature Origen, when tutoring in 384-6 Marcella’s ascetic circle where Paula belonged, so accusations were ripe.

For Paula or Jerome, to be considered an Origenist now was untenable. Reports began to circulate in the mid-390s that Jerome agreed with the writings of Origen. Vigilantius of Calagurris (near modern Toulouse) was

⁶¹ *Holy Men and Holy Women*, Oxford Dictionary, 2020, 4. Oxford University Press, 2018.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 127.23.348.

⁶³ Freemantle, Oxford translator of Jerome says he “unduly minimized his earlier enthusiasm,” 84.293.

⁶⁴ *Letter*, 33.4.74. To Paula Jerome wrote he considered Origen superior. Contrast this with letter 83 and 84 written to Pammachius asking Jerome to dispel the “perplexity” roiling Rome. 292,293.

a visitor to Bethlehem who reported this in Italy to Paulinus of Nola.⁶⁵ It was also humiliatingly clear that the Gallic church was not united behind Jerome neither in his anti-Origen nor in his pro-ascetic campaign, a blow to his hard-earned work and reputation. By the end of the century, when Jerome distanced himself from his previous enthusiasm, he asked Marcella to convince Christians in Rome that Origen's works were questionable. Polemics over the Latin translation of *First Principles* seemed to arouse more heat than light. In fact, Clark explained as the fifth century began "... churchmen contested each other's orthodoxy and good repute by hurling charges of "Origenism" at their opponents."⁶⁶

Insults, anxiety and the fire of controversy passed but monks were burnt by accusations. Yet Jerome illustrated how women acted in church disputes and the patterns of asceticism that evolved in the places and times where he was.⁶⁷

Paula's Accomplishments

Paula's life and achievements changed the ascetic movement first in Rome then in Palestine for she had a geographic impact. The entire region mourned her death in 404. Because of hospitality, her own life changed as she housed, fed, and cared for Pope Damasus' ecclesiastical guests in her family's palace, the travel companions of Jerome. On the death of Toxotius, she turned ascetic and then later lost another child, Blesilla her daughter while the tutor at Marcella's bible salon, Jerome, was blamed for promoting severe fasting. Paula's distress was great but she remained loyal and when the monk left Rome, so did she. Modest in person, she distributed vast amounts of alms to the poor out of the hospice and monasteries she built and managed in Bethlehem.

"Who could tell the tale of Paula dying with dry eyes?"⁶⁸ Man and beast dissolve to ashes, Jerome wrote. "Our belief in Christ raises us up to heaven

⁶⁵ Hunter, David G. *Vigilantius of Calagariis and Victricius of Roenun: Ascetics, Relics and Clerics*. *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Fall 1999, 7.3. 403-405. *Periodical Articles On Line*. Hunter notes that in 395, Vigilantius was a clerical-courier with letters for delivery, to and from Jerome.

⁶⁶ Clark, El. *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate*, Princeton University Press 1992, 123.

⁶⁷ Rebenich, *ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁸ *Letter*, 108,28.352

and promises eternity to our souls.”⁶⁹

Her death and funeral were a community affair, as the poor and widows wept and showed garments Paula had given them, while bishops came to lament, with monks, nuns and people of the towns.⁷⁰

The ladies of the nunneries recited scripture in Syriac, Greek and Latin. In life, she was constantly quoting scripture, so it is fitting that when Paula of Rome lay dying in Bethlehem in 404 BC, the final words she whispered were Hebrew words taken from the Psalms of David. “THE LORD is my light and my salvation. Whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom then shall I be afraid?”

Paula died as she lived, clinging to the “God of her salvation.” May her name not be forgotten, for she elevated Jesus Christ, and died with his name on her lips. She was an aristocrat who turned to the ascetic life and revealed many of the issues and concerns asceticism in the fourth century faced.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁷⁰ *Letter*, 108.30, 354 Aeterna.

