

PAULA THE ELDER:  
A GLIMPSE INTO THE LIFE OF A WOMAN EDUCATOR AND SCHOLAR IN ORDER TO  
RESCUE HISTORY FROM FEMINIST REVISIONISM

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Cicero, the famous Roman politician, said, “History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life and brings us tidings of antiquity.”<sup>1</sup> In the study of Christian history, those tidings of antiquity often come in the form of testimonies of men and women who have “fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.”<sup>2</sup> These testimonies prove valuable to believers and non-believers alike to illuminate, challenge, teach and exhort, and sometimes even to mystify.

A tragic phenomenon has occurred within the last thirty to forty years in relation to the study of women in church history. The influence of feminist theologians has seeped into historical venues. These theologians feel that by developing a “feminist” hermeneutic or a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” which takes women’s experiences as normative and places the Bible under the judgment of those experiences, the Bible could be salvaged from what they deem the evil intentions of patriarchal society. Pamela Young states the result of this type of hermeneutic, “What counts as the Word of God, then, is only that which liberates women, and so not all of Scripture is the Word of God.”<sup>3</sup>

In a similar fashion, feminist historians have adopted this “hermeneutic of suspicion” in relationship to the testimonies of women entered into history by the Church Fathers, and as a consequence, these scholars have stolen the legacies of women from the church. They consider themselves the arbiters of truth; only they can divest history of its patriarchal corruption to hear the true voices of women. However, instead of enabling people to hear the voices of women more clearly, they have muddied the waters and muffled the women they call the “Church Mothers.” They have done exactly what they accuse others of doing—they have placed their own grid over history. In their minds, they must salvage the testimonies of women. However, maybe in truth these women in history need saving from feminist revisionists. The following study will examine the approach of feminists to patristic historiography, discuss the implications of their approach on the ascetic women of the fourth century, and then investigate the life of one of these women—Paula the Elder—as a test case in order to see if Paula was a feminist pioneer, as she is categorized by feminist historians.

### **Feminist Approaches to History**

Anne Hickey notes, “The feminist movement of the early 1970s has channeled more women into academe and sparked their interest in women’s experiences in the past which might have points of contiguity with contemporary social and religious struggle.”<sup>4</sup> These women desire to rescue women’s studies from what they call the “academic ghetto”<sup>5</sup> and women’s history from the fringes of its discipline. Jane Simpson in her article, “Women and Asceticism in the Fourth Century: A Question of Interpretation,” states, “Just as feminism involves a way of looking at and thinking of life for all women, feminist revisionist church historians have

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<sup>1</sup> From *Pro Publio Sestio*, 2.36.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 4:7.

<sup>3</sup> Pamela Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of a Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Ewing Hickey, *Women of the Roman Aristocracy as Christian Monastics* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History,” *Church History* 70, no. 3 (September 2001), 395-396.

introduced new ways of looking at the past.”<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Castelli has voiced the frustration of many of her contemporaries in saying, “To ask questions about women’s history in any period is to embark on a treacherous and often disappointing search for buried treasure.”<sup>7</sup> The worry of these scholars is that “... women’s side of the story is never preserved.”<sup>8</sup>

Feminist revisionist historians, most notably Elizabeth Clark and Rosemary Radford Ruether, the forerunners in feminist revisionist scholarship,<sup>9</sup> see their job as one of reconstructionism. They feel that “are forced to reconstruct [women’s] lives and personalities through the uncertain mirror of their male admirers (or detractors).”<sup>10</sup> Andrew Jacobs asks the question, “With a dearth of women’s own voice, can historians be expected to reconstruct women’s lives? ... Scholars are much less confident today in our ability to peel back layers of rhetoric and find the ‘real’ woman concealed underneath.”<sup>11</sup>

The language of this discussion is flooded with images of women as “victims of patriarchy,”<sup>12</sup> and historians as symbolic white knights circumventing “the confines of patriarchy.”<sup>13</sup> Make no doubt, many feminists see this as a battle; and, as Elizabeth Clark states, “the battle has yet been won for *women’s* history.”<sup>14</sup> Ruether has even gone as far as to suggest that the church destroyed the letters of women in order to silence them.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately as these historians do battle to, as they say, “recover” women’s voices, few conservative scholars even step onto the battlefield to contradict and challenge their outrageous conclusions.

### Attraction of Women to Asceticism

In the fourth century, the rise of women attracted to the ascetic life and the numerous discourses on this manner of life by such notable figures as Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine, have drawn the attention of feminist revisionists. These scholars can be divided into two camps:

- Those who see asceticism as what Ruether calls “virginal feminism,”<sup>16</sup> or

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Simpson, “Women and Asceticism in the Fourth Century: A Question of Interpretation,” *The Journal of Religious History* 15, no. 1 (June 1988), 57.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Castelli, “Virginity and its Meaning or Women’s Sexuality in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 61.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> Simpson, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 76.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Jacobs, “Writing Demetrias: Ascetic Logic in Ancient Christianity,” *Church History* 69 (December 2000), 720.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, “Women, Gender, and the Study of Christian History,” 402.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

<sup>15</sup> Ruether, *Women of Spirit*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church,” in *Women in Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 262-295.

- Those who view ascetic women as victims of powerful male teachers.<sup>17</sup>

Those in the first camp, see asceticism as a form of liberation for women, and the women who participated in this lifestyle as early feminists. Consider what several scholars have said:

Asceticism may be seen as the path to women's liberation in the early church.<sup>18</sup>

What individuals find 'liberating' is relative, but perhaps the most important common denominator of the liberating choice is the sense of taking charge of one's own life; of rejecting a state of being governed and defined by others. One experiences the sense of moving from being an object to becoming a subject. I would argue that asceticism could and was experienced as that kind of liberating choice for women in the fourth century, for not only did it allow women to throw off the traditional female roles, but it offered female-directed communities where they could pursue the highest self-development as autonomous persons. It also offered security, for wealthy women endowed these communities for themselves and others. As a result, throngs of women were attracted to asceticism at this time, especially as the old Roman way of life was disintegrating.<sup>19</sup>

Several feminist scholars have attempted to explain the attraction of the ascetic life for early Christian women by demonstrating that renunciation of world paradoxically offered women the possibility of moving outside the constraints of socially and sexually conventional roles, of exercising power, and of experiencing a sense of worth which was often unavailable to them within the traditional setting of marriage ... asceticism provided the aristocratic women of the fourth century with otherwise unavailable opportunities to pursue study and to act as administrators and spiritual leaders of their communities.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that these women lived in a fashion similar to that of male monastics gave them freedom to pursue activities that would not have been considered entirely proper for Christian matrons in the world, activities sanctioned by churchmen. Take the issue of traveling: proper Christian wives did not wander about the world unaccompanied by husbands or fathers, yet such wandering was acceptable for these ascetics when it was blessed with the name of pilgrimage or when undertaken as religious duty ... a second indication that they enjoyed greater freedom than their married Christian sisters lies in the praise their instructional and intellectual efforts were awarded.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hickey, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Everett Ferguson, "Women in the Post-Apostolic Church," in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity, Vol. 1*, ed. by Carroll D. Osburn (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 1993), 501.

<sup>19</sup> Ruether, *Women of Spirit*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Castelli, 61, 84-85.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Queenstown: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 186-187.

The realization that there was now a fundamental tension between the world and the new ideals inspired asceticism, behavior signifying a new critical attitude of resistance, a refusal to orient the body, indeed, the self, in the world in traditional or socially acceptable ways...[it was] resistance to different circles of establishment, power, and tradition.<sup>22</sup>

Within the texts of the ancient Christian ascetic movement we can, then, detect signs of women gaining control over their bodies and sexuality. We discern the faint traces of the ongoing history of women struggling to free their flesh from imprisonment in the male word and gaze.<sup>23</sup>

Female asceticism was a rejection of the social oppression of patriarchal marriage.<sup>24</sup>

These scholars view marriage as a form of slavery for fourth-century women, and asceticism as a way to gain power and freedom.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, several other scholars view asceticism as the consequence of male misogyny and the women practitioners as victims.<sup>26</sup> Anne Hickey feels that asceticism was “foisted” upon women by Jerome and that Paula “unwilling succumbed to Jerome’s monastic pressure.”<sup>27</sup> Burrus states that asceticism was Jerome’s attempt to try and control women (although Jerome himself lived the ascetic life).<sup>28</sup> Jeffery Masson has conjectured that all ascetics must have been victims of harsh and unloving parents, although this theory can be easily discarded when considering the close relationship of Paula and her daughter Eustochium as well as Laeta and her daughter, Paula the Younger.<sup>29</sup>

With these two categories in mind—feminist forerunners or victims of male oppression—let’s turn to the life of Paula the Elder to see if, in fact, her life supports either one of these categories.

### **Paula: Feminist Forerunner or Victim of Misogyny?**

Most of what is known about Paula comes from Jerome’s letters to and about her. Although some feminist scholars call into question Jerome’s portrayal of Paula,<sup>30</sup> it is Jerome to

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<sup>22</sup> Vincent Wimbush, “The Ascetic Impulse in Ancient Christianity,” *Theology Today* 50, no. 3 (October 1993), 420-421.

<sup>23</sup> Virginia Burrus, “Word and Flesh: The Bodies and Sexuality of Ascetic Women in Christian Antiquity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 32.

<sup>24</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 220-226.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, *Ascetic Piety and Women’s Faith*, 183.

<sup>26</sup> Simpson, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Hickey, 19, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Burrus, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Jeffery Moussaieff Masson, “The Psychology of the Ascetic,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 35 (1976), 623.

<sup>30</sup> Hickey, 21, 45.

whom we are indebted for the account of this remarkable woman's life. Knowing that some people would not believe the authenticity of his portrayal, at one point Jerome stated,

I am now free to describe at greater length the virtue which was her peculiar charm; and in settling forth this I call God to witness that I am no flatterer. I add nothing. I exaggerate nothing. On the contrary I tone down much that I may not appear to relate incredibilities.<sup>31</sup>

Paula the Elder's life testifies to her unwavering love for God, commitment to education, and dedication to scholarship and service. During her lifetime Athanasius wrote a letter confirming the New Testament canon, Christianity was made the state religion of the Roman Empire, Augustine was converted, John Chrysostom became bishop of Constantinople, Ambrose defied the Emperor, and Jerome neared completion of the Vulgate. The period in which Paula lived her life proved to be an exciting time in the history of Christianity, and she left her own indelible marks on the pages of this period. A careful study of this unique and passionate woman will reveal what God can do through a life yielded to Him, and not, as feminist historians desire to demonstrate, the life of a feminist or victim.

### *A Charmed Life*

In Rome in AD 347, a young girl named Paula was born into a life of luxury and wealth. Her parents, Rogatus and Blesilla, were "high-born" Greeks of status in the family line of such notable figures as King Agamemnon of Troy.<sup>32</sup> Her father was a senator, and Paula grew up around Rome's senatorial class. As Paula grew to be a woman, she moved throughout the city of Rome dressed in fine silks and exquisite ornaments, and her eunuch slaves carried her on a pallet so that her feet literally did not have to touch the ground. Paula embraced this charmed life, and she did not become a believer in Christ until later in her life. Even though her parents were Christians, Paula's friend Marcella played the biggest role in Paula's conversion.<sup>33</sup>

In AD 362 at the age of sixteen or seventeen, Paula married a man named Toxotius from a patrician family whose most famous member was Julius Caesar.<sup>34</sup> Toxotius was not a Christian, but religious toleration was the theme in Rome at that time. For Paula to have had any leanings toward Christianity during her marriage to Toxotius would not have been so abnormal, for mixed marriages were very common at the time.<sup>35</sup> Toxotius and Paula lived in great wealth and luxury, and the homes of people in their class were known for their great opulence. Married women spent hours of leisure at the baths and various social gatherings in what one historian calls the "competitive salon culture."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jerome, *Letters and Select Works* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VI (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 108.15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.3.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. 5; and A. Cabaniss, "Paula," *Who's Who in Christian History*, ed. by J.D. Douglas (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), 545.

<sup>34</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.4; Edith Deen, *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (New York: Christian Herald Books, 1959), 30.

<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Jones, *Women Saints: Lives of Faith and Courage* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 79.

<sup>36</sup> M. K. Hopkins, "Elite Mobility in the Roman Empire," *Past and Present* 32 (1965), 25.

Toxotius and Paula had five children—four daughters and one son—Eustochium, Paulina, Blesilla, Rufina,<sup>37</sup> and Toxotius. Not much is known about Paula’s relationship with her husband, and in AD 378 or 379 Toxotius died leaving Paula a wealthy widow at the age of thirty-one or thirty-two. At this point, Paula joined a growing number of Roman women by dedicating her life to asceticism and good works and consecrating her life to God.<sup>38</sup> At this time the ascetic lifestyle had a certain appeal to the aristocratic Roman women that were described as “idle and wealthy women living in a ghetto peopled by children, servants, and sycophants.”<sup>39</sup> Whether this asceticism is a reaction against the opulent wealth that surrounded the upper class of Rome or simply a desire for some deeper connection to God cannot be determined. However, the evidence will not suggest that Paula turned to this lifestyle to seek liberation, opportunities for travel and study, or because this lifestyle was foisted upon her.

### *The Power of Friendship*

Marcella, a wealthy widow much older than Paula, is noted as being one of the first Roman ladies to consecrate her life to God and forsake the extravagant lifestyle common among the Roman upper class. She was challenged by monks and widows in the Nile Valley and started to follow their examples, despite the wishes of her mother, Albina the Elder, for her to remarry after Marcella’s husband of only seven months passed away.<sup>40</sup> A wealthy man sought Marcella’s affection and promised to leave her a large fortune if she agreed to marry him, but Marcella was resolute in her convictions and never remarried.<sup>41</sup> Instead, she cultivated the ground for asceticism to take root among the women of her social circle. She invited noble Roman ladies to her house for a time of prayer and study, and her palace on the Aventine quickly became a meeting place for the ascetic community.<sup>42</sup>

In AD 382, two years after the death of her husband, Paula met Jerome at a Bible study being held in Marcella’s house. Jerome was the greatest theologian of his time and was more attracted to the ascetic lifestyle than he was to seeking fame for himself. He was summoned to Rome in AD 382 as a possible successor to Pope Damasus; and while there, he met Marcella, and she prevailed upon him to teach a small group of ladies the Scripture.

In an attempt to prove the idea of asceticism as a form of feminism, Hinson writes,

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<sup>37</sup> There is some discrepancy about the name of this daughter of Paula’s. In Anna Yarbrough’s journal article “Christianization in the Fourth Century: The Example of Roman Women,” *Church History* 45, No. 2 (June 1976), 150, the name given is Rogata. However, in Jerome, *Ep.* 108.6, Edith Deen’s *Great Women of the Christian Faith*, Kathleen Jones’ *Women Saints: Lives of Faith and Courage*, 80, and Joan M. Peterson’s *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Christian Centuries* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1996), 123, this daughter is called Rufina. For the purposes of this paper, this daughter will be referred to as Rufina since this name seems to be attested by more sources.

<sup>38</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.5.

<sup>39</sup> Yarbrough, 153.

<sup>40</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1975), 93.

<sup>41</sup> Yarbrough, 154.

<sup>42</sup> Mrs. Rundle Charles, *Martyrs and Saints of the First Twelve Centuries* (New York: E. & J.B. Young & Co., 1898), 307.

Typically, I think, it has been assumed that Jerome directed the affairs. When he said, ‘Rabbit!’ the women jumped. That picture, however, does not take into account much of the evidence. A more accurate portrayal would show Jerome anxious to do the bidding of women who had minds of their own and knew what they needed to do quite apart from any man’s counsel ... It is probably going too far in adjusting the picture to call Jerome the ‘hired hand’ of the Aventine Circle, but he definitely put himself at their service, though reluctantly at first.<sup>43</sup>

Hinson goes on to argue that when Jerome says, “There was not another matron in Rome who was able to sway me except Paula,”<sup>44</sup> Jerome “was surely doing more than lip service; he was at Paula’s beck and call.”<sup>45</sup> However, the evidence does not seem to support this assertion of Hinson.

An event that occurred in AD 384 forged a friendship between Jerome and Paula and her daughter Eustochium that has been likened to the friendship that Jesus had with Mary and Martha rather than some type of power struggle as Hinson portrays. Blesilla, another daughter of Paula, lost her husband after only a few months of marriage. In her grief she turned to the ascetic life and dedicated herself to strict guidelines. Three months later, Blesilla herself died, and her death was attributed to the ascetic life she had undertaken. In fact, it is possible that she died during a fast. Paula took this event very hard, and in seeking to comfort her, Jerome actually reprimanded her for her “excessive grief.”<sup>46</sup> He applauded Blesilla’s dedication even unto death and questioned the source of Paula’s grief, implying that Paula grieved more the loss of the possibility of having grandchildren than she did for her daughter.<sup>47</sup>

Soon after Blesilla’s death, Jerome was forced to leave Rome. His opponents might have actually used the death of Blesilla and the death of Pope Damascus, Jerome’s close friend, as an opportunity to attack him. Jerome was not well liked by the religious powers of that time, and the death of one of his followers and the death of his protector was the excuse they needed to send him away and squelch his growing popularity.

### *Journey to the Holy Land*

Jerome left Rome to settle in Bethlehem, and in AD 385 Paula and her daughter Eustochium followed Jerome to the Holy Land. Paula “left her palace glittering with gold to dwell in a mud cabin.”<sup>48</sup> Paula followed the example of Melania the Elder, who left her remaining child in the hands of a guardian and set for the Holy Land in AD 372.<sup>49</sup> Jerome wrote,

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<sup>43</sup> E. Glenn Hinson, “When the World Collapsed: The Spirituality of Women During the Barbarian Invasion of Rome,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 121.

<sup>44</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 45.3.

<sup>45</sup> Hinson, 145.

<sup>46</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 39.5.

<sup>47</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 39.2.

<sup>48</sup> Petersen, 126.

<sup>49</sup> Jerome, *Epp.* 39.4, 45.4.

No other women in Rome caused scandal except Paula and Melania, who by despising their wealth and deserting their children, uplifted the cross of the Lord as a standard of religion. Had they frequented the baths, chosen to use perfumes, or taken advantage of their wealth and position as widows to have fun and do what they wanted, they would have been saluted as women of high rank and saintliness.<sup>50</sup>

Paula's decision to leave her children was extremely difficult because she knew that she might never see them again (and she never did). Her daughter Paulina was betrothed to a senator named Pammachius. Blesilla had already died at this time, but Rufina was not yet married when Paula took Eustochium to sail for the Holy Land. In a gripping scene, Paulina, Rufina and Toxotius, Paula's young son, stood on the shore as their mother's ship set sail, and they could not hold back their tears. Paulina begged her mother to stay until her marriage to Pammachius was settled, and Toxotius wept and tried to persuade his mother not to go.<sup>51</sup> Paula could not look at her children on the shore because her grief at leaving them was so great. Rufina died a year later in AD 386, Paulina died giving birth to her first child around AD 395, and Toxotius married a woman named Laeta who was a Christian and led him to Christ.<sup>52</sup> They had a daughter named Paula (the Younger) whom they sent to live in the Holy Land with Eustochium. This Paula remained a faithful companion to her aunt and Jerome and was with Jerome at his death in AD 420.

Paula the Elder and Eustochium toured Israel for a year after leaving Rome and then visited Egypt to learn from the desert hermits before settling down in Bethlehem, which would serve as their home for the last twenty years of Paula's life. They visited the Island of Pontia, Metone in Greece, Rhodes, and Lycia before spending ten days in Cyprus visiting Epiphanius, the Bishop of Salamis whom Paula had allowed to stay in her home while he visited Rome. From Cyprus, they turned to Seleucia, Antioch, Gaza, Hebron, Jericho, Bethel, Shiloh, Neapolis, Nazareth, and Capernum, then Socoth, Alexandria and Nitria before returning to Bethlehem.<sup>53</sup> The pilgrimage that Paula and Eustochium made through the land of Jesus was probably the first one of such magnitude made by Christian women.<sup>54</sup> On her tour Paula was deeply moved by the experience of visiting the land of her Lord. In fact, at the tomb, she kissed the stone that had been rolled away from the mouth of the cave and even licked the place where she believed Jesus' body had lain "like one athirst for the river which he had longed for."<sup>55</sup> Not long after, Paula determined to make her home in Bethlehem.

When she arrived in Bethlehem, Paula was struck by the vast difference between this city and her native Rome. In a letter to her friend Marcella she writes,

In the village of Christ...all is rusticity, and except for psalms, silence.  
Whithersoever you turn yourself, the ploughman, holding the plough handle,

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<sup>50</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 45.5.

<sup>51</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.6.

<sup>52</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 107.1.

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of the sites they visited see Jerome, *Ep.* 108. 7; and Anne Hickey, 26-29.

<sup>54</sup> Deen, 28.

<sup>55</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.9.

sings Alleluia; the perspiring reaper diverts himself with psalms, and the vine-dresser sings some of the ballads of this country, these are the love-songs, as they are commonly called, these are whistled by the shepherds, and are the implements of the husbandman. Indeed, we do not think of what we are doing or how we look, but see only that for which we are longing.<sup>56</sup>

Certainly Paula found in the humble little city of Bethlehem what she was seeking. Even though Paula had visited the monasteries of Nitria in Egypt and the most cherished of Christian sites, she found peace and solace in the humble little town of Bethlehem.<sup>57</sup> She spent the rest of her life in Bethlehem, draining her ample wealth for acts of charity.

### *The Ascetic Pioneer and Educator*

The desert asceticists' primary concern was "to preserve a singular attachment to God. In order to achieve this goal they practiced detachment from the world through physical deprivation, poverty of spirit, and a life of virginity or chastity."<sup>58</sup> Paula's life in Bethlehem differed significantly from the life of luxury she experienced in Rome. In a letter to Eustochium after Paula's death, Jerome says

If all the members of my body were converted to tongues, and if each of my limbs were gifted with a human voice, I could still do no justice to the virtues of the holy and venerable Paula. Noble in family, she was nobler still in holiness; rich formerly in this world's goods, she is now more distinguished by the poverty that she has embraced for Christ.<sup>59</sup>

Jerome goes on to describe the quality that chiefly characterized Paula's life

Humility is the first of Christian graces and hers [Paula's] was so pronounced that one who had never seen her, and who on account of her celebrity had desired to see her, would have believed that he saw not her but the lowest of maids. When she was surrounded by companies of virgins, she was always the least remarkable in dress, in speech, in gesture, and in gait.<sup>60</sup>

Jerome recalled that Paula never took a bath unless she was extremely sick, never took oil with her meal unless it was a feast day, and made her bed on the hard ground with only a mat of goat hair as cover.<sup>61</sup> Why did Paula subject herself to such strict and unnecessary discomforts? It appears that guilt controlled her life and that she sought to make penance for her former way of

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<sup>56</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 46.

<sup>57</sup> Jean LaPorte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 88.

<sup>58</sup> Yarbrough, 158.

<sup>59</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.1.

<sup>60</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.15.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

life in Rome by depriving herself of every comfort. Even Jerome commented one day on her severe way of life, and Paula responded to him by saying:

I must disfigure that face which, contrary to God's commandments, I have painted with rouge, white lead, and antimony. I must mortify that body which has given up to many pleasures. I must make up for my long laughter by constant weeping. I must exchange my soft linen and costly silks for rough goat's hair. I, who have pleased my husband and the world, desire now to please Christ.<sup>62</sup>

Clearly, Paula believed that by denying herself all pleasures and comforts, she could please the Lord.

While in Bethlehem, she used her wealth to build a monastery, over which she turned control to Jerome, who was also a monk. She also established a hospice for travelers because she could not forget that Mary and Joseph had no place to stay when they came to Bethlehem.<sup>63</sup> However, the ministry that took most of her time was financing, establishing, and supervising a convent, which was divided into three cloisters according to the rank of each woman. From virgins of noble birth to the most common woman—all were admitted and expected to follow a disciplined way of life. The women were not allowed to have personal possessions except for their clothing, which was the same, plain outfit for all of the women. Paula cast a discerning eye to all the women in her care; a woman who was too attentive to how she looked was reprimanded because Paula said, "A clean body and clean dress mean an unclean soul."<sup>64</sup>

Paula taught the women in her care that one learned to be poor in spirit by being physically poor. She felt that by separating herself from the world and the cares of the world, a woman could devote all her attention to God. The Rule of Paula's convent was very strict. Women were expected to recite the psalter at six appointed times, and ignorance of the psalms was not tolerated. Paula's own aptitude for scholarly pursuits trickled into the way she educated and trained the women under her own care. As a matter of fact, the practice of hand-copying manuscripts was perfected in Paula's convents.<sup>65</sup>

### *The Dedicated Scholar*

Around thirty-four percent of Jerome's letters were written to women, and of those non-extant letters, clearly many were addressed to Paula. Jerome explained that he did not know how many letters he sent to Paula and Eustochium because he wrote to them daily.<sup>66</sup> He remarked that "our studies made for constant association, which ripened into familiarity, which in turn produced mutual confidence."<sup>67</sup> Jerome admired Paula's insatiable hunger for biblical materials. Jones remarked that "Paula was looking for theological guidance: she asked Jerome about the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Kelly, 129.

<sup>64</sup> Petersen, 148.

<sup>65</sup> Deen 29; Hardesty 19.

<sup>66</sup> Jerome, in *De viris illustribus* 135 (PL 23.759).

<sup>67</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 45.2.

nature of God, the life of Jesus Christ, the operation of the Holy Spirit, the work of the apostles.”<sup>68</sup>

Paula had a quick mind and a passion for the Word of God. In Jerome’s letter to Eustochium after Paula’s death, Jerome quoted verse after verse of Scripture that were never far from Paula’s lips. Paula had such a desire to know more of God’s Holy Word that she pleaded with Jerome to tutor Eustochium and her in the Old and New Testament, and the tutelage she received under Jerome proved invaluable to Jerome later in his life. Jerome recounted how Paula came to learn the Hebrew language,

While I myself, beginning as a young man, have with much toil and effort partially acquired the Hebrew tongue, and study it now unceasingly lest if I leave it, it may also leave me, Paula, making up her mind that she too would learn it, succeeded so well that she could chant the psalms in Hebrew and could speak the language without a trace of the pronunciation peculiar to Latin.<sup>69</sup>

Even Jerome’s opponent Palladius recognized Paula’s intellect and remarked to Jerome about the “the genius of that woman.”<sup>70</sup> Paula aided Jerome in his translation work for many years and purchased expensive books to help him in his work, but she did not see the completion of the Vulgate because Jerome finished it the year after her death. The Vulgate had such an impact on scholarship, that for over a thousand years until the Reformation, biblical scholars worked from the Vulgate instead of the Greek text.<sup>71</sup> Jerome apparently had such genuine respect for Paula and Eustochium and the work they did for him that he considered them to be his spiritual daughters, and he dedicated several of his commentaries and translations of specific books to them.<sup>72</sup> Jerome encouraged their desire for knowledge and wrote to Eustochium, “Read often. Learn as much as you can. Let sleep steal over you, with the book still in your hands; and let the sacred page catch your falling head.”<sup>73</sup>

### *Her Legacy*

Paula often told Jerome, “My prayer is that I may die a beggar, not leaving a penny to my daughter and be indebted to strangers for my winding-sheet.”<sup>74</sup> Her prayer was certainly fulfilled because when in AD 404 at the age of 56 she died from an illness brought on by the austerities she practiced, she left her daughter Eustochium with a sinful amount of debts. Her daughter did not appear to harbor any resentment towards her mother, though. Eustochium was

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<sup>68</sup> Jones, 81.

<sup>69</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.27.

<sup>70</sup> McNamara, Jo Ann. “Muffled Voices: The Lives of Consecrated Women in the Fourth Century,” in *Medieval Religious Women*, Vol. 1, ed. by John A Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1984), 26.

<sup>71</sup> Galli, 339.

<sup>72</sup> Deen, 28.

<sup>73</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 22.17.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.15.

Paula's faithful companion who was so bereaved at her death that she wished to be buried with her mother because she could not imagine life without her.

At the end of Paula's life, Jerome said that she was "one who while she lived at Rome was known by no one outside of it, has by hiding herself at Bethlehem become the admiration of all lands roman and barbarian."<sup>75</sup> Jerome was too overcome with Paula's death to even speak at her funeral, but he has secured her place in history through his letters about her.<sup>76</sup> He had inscribed on the front of her tomb in Bethlehem the following words:

Seest thou here hollowed in the rock a grave?  
'Tis Paula's tomb; high heaven has her soul.  
Who Rome and friends, riches and home, forsook,  
Here in this lonely spot to find her rest.  
For here Christ's manager was, and here the kings  
To him, both God and man, their offerings made.<sup>77</sup>

Paula lived for God and devoted herself to Him in incredible ways. Many things may be learned from the careful study of her life, and two important lessons stand out as especially noteworthy. First of all, Paula may be remembered for her passion for God's Word. Paula devoted herself to the study of the Scriptures and especially the study of Hebrew so she could aid Jerome in his translation work. Paula became thoroughly educated in biblical languages and matters of doctrine; however, this did not guarantee that she would not misinterpret God's truth. Knowledge about Scripture does not necessarily mean a person will properly apply Scripture. Nevertheless, Paula's hunger to learn all she could about God's Word and her veracity in exhausting all the possible avenues to obtain knowledge of Scripture is an example for believers today.

Paula's life also testifies to the dangers of "blind spots." This writer is cautious in using such a term, but as incredible as Paula was, she still was not perfect. Paula's devotion to the ascetic lifestyle seems legalistic and works-based at best. Paul warned Timothy against this type of life in 1 Timothy 4:1-4,

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, *men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.* For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude.<sup>78</sup>

The ascetic lifestyle in its severe fasts, self-deprivation, and harsh austerities is not a means to find favor with God. What is certain, though, is that Paula's life was not the testimony of a woman seeking liberation or one who was the victim of a harsh male influence; she adopted the ascetic

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 108.3.

<sup>76</sup> Deen, 33.

<sup>77</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.34.

<sup>78</sup> Emphasis added.

lifestyle to find favor with her Lord. Her choice was not as an early feminist leader but as a sincere follower of Christ.

Paula's zeal for this type of life, while genuine, should not be emulated. This does not mean that Paula's contributions are any less significant; however, a study of history should encourage a person to learn from mistakes and be challenged by triumphs. Paula is certainly a woman whose example can challenge and encourage many women and men today if her voice is not distorted by feminist revisionism. Believers may be *challenged* by Paula's devotion to Scripture while at the same time *encouraged* to examine their own lives for "blind spots."

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