Astrological Determinism, Free Will, and Desire According to St. Thecla in the Symposium of Methodius of Olympus

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CHAPTER 10

Astrological Determinism, Free Will, and Desire According to Thecla (St. Methodius, *Symposium* 8.15–16)

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Introduction

The eighth discourse of Methodius of Olympus's *Symposium* is delivered by perhaps the most famous figure we meet in the treatise, Thecla.[1] In a work which is chiefly occupied with the life of chastity and virtuous action, Thecla opts for the big picture, plunging into celestial matters. She begins with an etymology typical of the *Cratylus* and its predecessors (παρθενία = παρθεῖα) (8.1), describes the ascent of the soul (8.2–3), performs allegorical exegesis of Revelation 12 (8.4–12), and finishes with a polemic against astrological determinism (8.13–16). While Thecla is neither the first nor last to speak in the *Symposium*, her speech occupies perhaps the most privileged place in it.[2] Following her discourse, it is Thecla who finally wins the ἄθλον, receives the "thickest" wreath, and is permitted to sing the great hymn to Christ that serves as the climax of the treatise ("chastely I live for thee"—12). It is Thecla who is assigned, in a discourse whose title cannot refer to anything but Plato's most beautiful

1 On Thecla's legend, see Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6–8. For overviews of Methodius's thought, see Lloyd William Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus: Divine Sovereignty, Human Freedom, and Life in Christ* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997); Katharina Bracht, *Volkommenheit und Vollendung: Zur Anthropologie des Methodius von Olympus*, STAC 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999); eadem, "Methodius von Olympus," *RAC* 24:768–784; Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, "Methodius," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherney, VCSup 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 494–496. It is to my regret that several works relevant to the present study had not yet appeared at the time of writing: Katharina Bracht, ed., *Methodius of Olympus: State of the Art and New Perspectives*, TUGAL 178 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), and Ilaria Ramelli, ed., *Bardaisan on Free Will, Fate, and Human Nature: The Book of the Laws of Countries* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

2 Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus*, 95; Davis, *Cult of St. Thecla*, 4–5.

dialogue, the last word on the philosophical questions of agency, desire, and will. Many scholars have touched upon Thecla's polemic, attempting to diagnose its sources and proper contextualization in the history of early Christian ideas about astrology, determinism, and free will, and, as we will see, "gnostic" sources have played a significant role in such attempts.[3] However, thorough doxographical studies of Thecla's attack on astrological determinism are rare.[4] It is thus with great pleasure that I present these brief meditations on Thecla's refutation of astrological determinism to Antti Marjanen, who has contributed so much to our understanding of ancient Christian women, particularly with respect to our extant gnostic sources and the Nag Hammadi Codices.

Thecla's Polemic against Astrological Determinism

Immediately following her exegesis of the Great Red Dragon of Revelation 12, Thecla jumps into her polemic against astrology. She begins:

> For the greatest of all the evils that have been implanted amongst the common people is to attribute of the causes of sin to the movements of the stars (τὰς αἰτίας τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων εἰς τὰς τῶν ἀστέρων κινήσεις), and to say that our lives are controlled by the necessities of Fate, as is taught by the astronomers with great arrogance.[5]
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> *Symp.* 8.13.37–41

3 As far as the present argument is concerned, it does not matter whether "Gnosticism" is a useful historical category or not. Therefore it will be used with "scare quotes," on occasions where other scholars discussing the issues at hand have invoked it.

4 Cristóbal Macías and Marta González, "El Banquete de Metodio de Olimpo y sus argumentos contra la astrología," *Μήνη: Revista Internacional de Investigación sobre Magia y Astrología Antiguas* 5 (2005): 319–341, is largely occupied by introduction and Spanish translation with commentary. Bracht, *Vollkommenheit und Vollendung*, 243–247, observes that here Thecla speaks as one baptized to the baptized, and that the conception of free will that she mentions in 8.17 must be considered in light of Methodius's ideas about virginity and human psychology. While this is so, it tells us nothing about the philosophical valence of the arguments Thecla makes in 8.15–16.

5 For the text of the *Symposium*, I have consulted V.-H. Debidour and Herbert A. Musurillo, eds., *Méthode d'Olympe: Le banquet*, SC 95 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1963). All translations given in this article are my own.

Rather, she states, human beings are "free of all necessity" and "are not slaves to fate and fortune" (8.13.32–33). The claim that human beings are not subject to the enslavement of malevolent cosmic forces is central to early Christian discourse, but the focus on the proposition that the stars are responsible for sin is somewhat more distinctive.[6] Following an exposition of the basics of astrology (8.14), she offers a series of arguments, which may be broken down by topic into four groups:

The first set of arguments have to do with the order of creation. If it were better for people to be born under horoscopes, Thecla asks, why then were there no horoscopes at the beginning of time? And if there were horoscopes, why then did the system of constellations come into existence later (8.15.1–15)? In fact, the heavens are not "made of" the constellations at all (8.15.16–25). The second set of arguments, meanwhile, is concerned with the character of "the sun and the moon and the other celestial bodies." If they govern the passage of the seasons through their beautiful and regular motion, they are happy indeed; but if they "contrive and effect (τεκταίνεται καὶ ἐνεργεῖ)" human crimes, then they "are even more wretched than human beings (ἄρα ἀθλιώτερα τῶν ἀνθρώπων)," since they are also involved in human evil (8.15.31–38). She continues:

> If no act can occur without desire, and no desire without need, and the divine has no needs, then it (i.e., the divine) is also without conception of wickedness (οὐδὲ μὴν ἐπιθυμία χωρὶς ἐνδείας, ἀνενδεὲς δὲ τὸ θεῖον, ἀνεννόητον ἄρα πονηρίας). Further, if the nature of the stars has been created closer to God and exceeds the virtue of even exceptional human beings, then the stars exist without conception of evil and without needs (ἀνεννόητα κακίας … καὶ ἀνενδεῆ).
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> *Symp*. 8.16.1–5

Indeed, the astral bodies "are not admitting of the experiences of pleasure and pain, for such loathsome appetites do not befit heavenly beings" (8.16.8–10).

Thecla here proceeds to the third set of arguments, regarding the character of virtue. She begins with a short proof that intemperance is bad; therefore, "the divine is insulated from passion; therefore there is no horoscope" (8.16.37–38). Moreover, temperance is identified with manliness, and intemperance with

6 For recent survey of the rhetoric of cosmic enslavement in early Christian discourse, see Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate in Gnosticism and Greco-Roman Antiquity: Under Pitiless Skies*, NHMS 81 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

femininity (8.16.49–55). In any case, God cannot be the cause of wickedness; "rather, if some people are wicked, they are wicked because of the emptiness of their hearts, not because of their horoscope (κατὰ ἔνδειαν φρενῶν … καὶ οὐ κατὰ γένεσιν)" (8.16.61–62).

Thecla turns to three arguments—introducing our fourth set—concerning the relationship between laws, fate, and human nature. The existence of human laws and that of the fate determined by a horoscope are, she claims, mutually exclusive (8.16.64–88). Rather, the law assumes that one can learn to be virtuous (and should be punished if one fails to learn virtue); "therefore, there is no horoscope" (8.16.88–93). In fact, if destiny is responsible for behavior, then why do we have laws at all?—It would have been better for God to simply not create wicked people, rather than to create them and then give them laws, if they were not meant to be capable of wickedness (8.16.93–98).

These three arguments are followed by the statement that "the causes of sinful acts derive from either nurture and custom, or the soul's passions and the body's desires. And whichever of these is at fault, God is not at fault" (8.16.99–101). After asking again why God did not simply create human beings incapable of injustice in the first place, Thecla introduces the factor of human nature: if wicked people are simply living according to their wicked natures—immutably determined "by the decrees of providence, according to the horoscope (κατὰ γένεσιν προνοίας ταγαῖς)"—would they not be *un*deserving of punishment for their acts of wickedness (8.16.106–112)? The deterministic view, then, goes something like this: "someone living in accordance with his own nature (κατὰ τὴν προσοῦσαν αὐτῷ φύσιν) does not sin, for it is not he that has made himself such a person; rather, it is fate (εἱμαρμένη), and he lives according to the motion of that guiding entity, led on by the inexorable workings of necessity." Yet God hates wickedness, and the law exists to punish; "therefore, there is no fate" (οὐκ ἄρα εἱμαρμένη—8.16.116–119).

Methodius on Gnosticism, Bardaisan, or Origen?

Notably, the causal relationship between desire or passion—coached in the language of privation, of need—and sin is the hinge by which all the arguments beyond the first set move.[7] We should expect no less from a treatise on chastity, and so Musurillo is correct to surmise that the arguments were inserted by

7 Yet Harper restricts his remarks to the first set of the arguments, regarding the priority of the creation of terrestrial to celestial life in Gen 1; Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian*

Methodius into Thecla's speech to express how "in his (Methodius's) view men have the ability, with God's assistance, to transcend the limitations of the flesh."[8] Perhaps due to its obviousness, this point disappears in modern doxography of the speech, which tends to take two perspectives regarding its background and targets.[9]

The first is concerned with "Gnosticism." Musurillo detects here a vaguely "anti-Gnostic" stance in the polemic.[10] Patterson, meanwhile, regards the refutation as a "digest" of arguments that would later see fruition in his *De autexousio*, directed against cosmic dualism and gnostic determinism.[11] Despite the appearance of Valentinus in a brief catalogue of heretics furnished in Thecla's exegesis of the stars swept to earth by the tail of the Great Red Dragon (8.10.22–32, re: Rev 12:4),[12] such allusions to Gnosticism seem misleading, since Thecla's oration does not mention any doctrines distinctively associated with Gnosticism (in any of its various construals).[13] Rather, one senses here the oper-

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Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 129.

8 Methodius, *The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity*, trans. Herbert A. Musurillo, ACW 27 (Westminster: Newman Press, 1958), 231 n. 89.

9 Patterson, meanwhile, states that the polemic is reminiscent of "philosophical rejections of fate (see, e.g., Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De fato*)." Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus*, 62 n. 38; similarly, ibid., 104, adding that the arguments are so compact that one cannot draw any specific parallels.

10 Methodius, *Symposium*, 16.

11 Thus Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus*, 103; further, "it was in the circumstances of the writing of the *Symposium* that Methodius came to associate his opposition to a cosmological dualism, the dominant theme of the *De libero arbitrio*, explicitly with the issue of gnostic teaching as it is assumed to be related to such a dualism in the writings of his predecessors"; ibid., 62.

12 In any case there is, as Musurillo notes, some evidence to suggest that the catalogue is a textual interpolation; Methodius, *Symposium*, 223–224 n. 49.

13 As Patterson himself notes, the distinction given between the psychics and spirituals in *Symp*. 8.6.187 need not necessarily be taken as an allusion to Valentinianism; *Methodius of Olympus*, 98; Musurillo refers rather to 1 Cor 2:14 ff. (Methodius, *Symposium*, 222 n. 33). Patterson also recalls *Symp*. 8.9.1–12, where Thecla takes Matt 3:17 (quoting Ps 2:7; cf. Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22)—God telling Jesus at his baptism, "you are my Son," and not "you have become my Son"—to mean that Christ existed "before the ages" and was at this moment "begotten for the world." Musurillo thinks this passage to have been a later, orthodox interpolation (Methodius, *Symposium*, 223 n. 46), but Patterson believes Methodius to recall Clement of Alexandria, *Paed*. 1.6.25, an invocation of the same passage ostensibly directed against Marcion; thus, according to Patterson, Thecla criticizes "the opponents

ative assumption, widespread in 20th-century scholarship, that "gnostics" were prone to a cosmic pessimism predicated in part upon astral fatalism.[14]

Ilaria Ramelli goes further, focusing on the fourth set of arguments—concerned with the consequences that the existence of human laws holds for astrological determinism—and pointing to Bardaisan and Origen, for good reason. The *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (*Liber legum regionum*), penned by Bardaisan's disciple Philip, is the programmatic early Christian exposition of the so-called νόμιμα βαρβαρικά, the refutation of the efficient power of the stars read in a horoscope by reference to the plurality of human laws and customs discovered by Hellenistic ethnography: "in all countries, every day and every hour, people are born with different horoscopes, yet the laws of human beings are stronger than fate, and they lead their lives according to their own customs."[15] Thus Ramelli states that

> Methodius employs the same arguments as Bardaisan in the *Liber legum regionum*: the laws instituted by human beings contradict Fate; in 8,16, Methodius asks the very same question as Bardaisan is asked in the *Liber*: why God did not make the human being incapable of sinning from the beginning. The answer is the same: because God created it free. It was precisely to defend human free will against Gnostic predestinationism, at the same time safeguarding theodicy, that Origen had constructed his history of salvation from the ἀρχή to the τέλος, the latter characterized as apokatastasis.[16]

Origen also invoked the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά in his Genesis commentary, in passages known from Eusebius and extant portions of the *Philocalia*.[17] It is worth adding that Methodius's thoughts on free will in his *De autexousio* strongly

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whom Clement designates, certainly Marcion but here especially Valentinus" (*Methodius of Olympus*, 102).

14 For survey, see Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 13–28.

15 *Lib. leg. reg*. 52.8–11. Text in H.J.W. Drijvers, ed., *The Book of the Laws of Countries: Dialogue on Fate of Bardaiṣan of Edessa* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1965).

16 Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of "Apokatastasis": A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, VCSup 120 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 273.

17 Ibid., 272 re: Origen, *Comm. Gen. apud* Eusebius, *Praep. ev*. 6.11.69–70 = Origen, *Philoc*. 23.16. Origen acknowledges elsewhere that people are born into diverse circumstances, but deigns to blame astrological forces for the situation: *Cels*. 5.27 and *Princ*. 2.9.4, per Alan Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 136.

resemble those of Origen.[18] The argument that assigning responsibility for action to fate robs humans of responsibility is also extant in Origen.[19]

A closer look at Thecla's arguments with respect to the thought of Bardaisan and Origen show that the relationship is close indeed, but more fraught than a simple matter of influence. David Amand noted long ago that the initial three arguments that Thecla levies regarding human law likely go back to Carneades, but it is very unlikely that Methodius here relies directly on the New Academy.[20] Rather, he must have known the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά via contemporaries, in turn likely reliant on Bardaisan, as were near-contemporaries such as Eusebius of Caeserea or the author of the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*.[21] Yet while Methodius appears to agree with Bardaisan and Origen in broadly rejecting astral determinism, the nuances of his argument and vocabulary show that he

18 Amply discussed by Patterson, *Methodius of Olympus*, 61; Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, Sather Classical Lectures 68 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 106; Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 129; *pace* André Vaillant, "Le De Autexousio de Méthode d'Olympe, version slave et texte grec édités et traduits en français," *Patrologia Orientalis* 22 (1930): 649–652. On Methodius's philosophical valence in this treatise, see Jean Pépin, "Platonisme et Stoicisme chez Méthode d'Olympe," in *Forma futuri: Studi in onore del Cardinale Michele Pellegrino* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmo, 1975), 126–144.

19 *Philoc*. 23.1–2; Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 145.

20 Dom David Amand, *Fatalisme et liberté dans l'Antiquité grecque: Recherches sur la survivance de l'argumentation morale antifataliste de Carnéade chez les philosophes grecs et les théologiens chrétiens des quatre premiers siècles*, Recueil de Travaux d'Histoire et de Philologie 3.19 (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1945), 338–340, followed by Musurillo in Methodius, *Symposium*, 230; cf. Macías and González. "El Banquete," 328–329. For Carneades's arguments and their reception in Hellenistic and early Imperial philosophy, see Cicero, *Div*. 2.96–97, and the discussion of Heinrich Boll, *Studien über Ptolemäus: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie und Astrologie* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1894), 181–188, followed by Amand, *Fatalisme et liberté*, 55–60; H.J.W. Drijvers, *Bardaiṣan of Edessa* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966), 76; Tim Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, Patristic Studies 6 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 94; Nicole Kelley, *Knowledge and Religious Authority in the Pseudo-Clementines*, WUNT 213 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 116; eadem, "Astrology in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*," *JEH* 59 (2008): 607–629 n. 34, 619.

21 See, e.g., Eusebius, *Praep. Ev*. 6.10.48; Pseudo-Clement, *Rec*. 9.19–29. For discussion, see Kelley, *Knowledge and Religious Authority*, 114–130; eadem, "Astrology in the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*," 612–613; H.J.W. Drijvers, "Bardaisan's Doctrine of Free Will, the Pseudo-Clementines, and Marcionism in Syria," in *Liberté chrétienne et libre arbitre*, ed. G. Bedouelle (Freibourg: O. Fatio, 1994), 25–26; Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, 94.

also takes pains to reject deeply characteristic aspects of their views, likely in the interest of correcting what he envisioned as unnecessary concessions to the "astrologers."

The *Liber legum regionum* and the Sinful Stars in the Third Century CE

Ramelli notes that, like Thecla, Bardaisan poses the question of why God did not create human beings as incapable of sin.[22] The context of the question in the *Liber* pertains to the problem of monotheism vs. dualism—beginning with the protasis, "if God is one …?"—and serves to introduce the issue of free will to a greater anti-Marcionite polemic.[23] Ramelli is correct to see in Methodius a similar logical procession from the problem of cosmic dualism to soteriological determinism. Nonetheless, we also have other reasons to suppose that Methodius knew Bardaisan's thought and had him in mind when composing Thecla's speech.

As noted above, immediately following her brief reference to the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά, Thecla states that "the causes of sinful acts derive from either nurture and custom, or the soul's passions and the body's desires. And whichever of these is at fault, God is not at fault" (8.16.99–101). Musurillo takes the argument to mean that "whether sin is due to education and habit (as the present adversaries hold) or to man's passions (governed by his free will, as Methodius holds), in either case God is not to blame. On any interpretation, the logic is very confused."[24] On the contrary, the sense is lent by the following passages, which introduces the factor of human nature (φύσις) as the source of human passion and desire. According to Thecla, either human culture (a product of human free will) or natural constitution is to blame for sinful behavior, but neither of these can be laid at the feet of destiny, unlike those who think that "someone living in accordance with his own nature (κατὰ τὴν προσοῦσαν αὐτῷ φύσιν) does not sin, for it is not he that has made himself such a person; rather, it is fate (εἱμαρμένη)."

Methodius here likely recalls Bardaisan's description in the *Liber legum regionum* of the three cosmic forces at work in human destiny: nature, fate, and

22 *Lib. leg. reg*. 4.9–13.

23 Drijvers, "Bardaisan's Doctrine," 16; Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, *Bardaisan of Edessa: A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009), 62.

24 Methodius, *Symposium*, 231.

will:[25] "as for us, we are led, equally but distinctly, by nature, by fate, and by our free will, each according to their wont."[26] Fate is conceived of in astral terms:

> That principle which is called fate is that order of the course of stars which has been granted by God to the rulers and the elements. According to this course and order do intellects undergo change while entering the soul, and do souls undergo change while descending to bodies. And that agent of change is called "fate" and "natal horoscope," belonging to that grouping (of qualities) which was mixed and is being purified for the benefit of what, by the grace and goodness of God, was and will be cared for until the consummation of the universe.[27]

Fate is also powerful, its dominion extending to all external circumstances of both life and death, without necessarily overwhelming the human capacity for choice.[28] Similarly, while some aspects of human nature are immutable and thus not subject to astral rule, others are:

> But when the periods and kinds of nature's influence are complete, then does fate manifest in such matters, and work various sorts of effects. Sometimes, it helps and strengthens the natural constitution, and sometimes it harms and mars it. Growing up and reaching physical maturity comes from nature, but, nature set aside, illnesses and deformities result from fate. From nature comes the union of men and women, and the satisfaction of both parties, but from fate come strife and the dissolution of marriage, and all defilement and licentiousness that people commit out of desire under the pretext of marital union.[29]

According to the *Liber legum regionum*, the stars do exercise some (albeit incomplete) power over human nature, although they are not, in Bardaisan's estimation, entirely responsible for sin either.[30]

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25 On this distinctive tripartition, see Drijvers, *Bardaiṣan*, 71, 85–89; Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, 261–263; Ramelli, *Bardaiṣan*, 79; Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 127.

26 *Lib. leg. reg*. 32.8–10.

27 *Lib. leg. reg*. 32.11–19. See also Drijvers, "Bardaisan's Doctrine," 20.

28 Drijvers, "Bardaisan's Doctrine," 20–21; Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, 264; Ute Possekel, "Bardaisan and Origen on Fate and the Power of Stars," *JECS* 20 (2012): 530; Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 128.

29 *Lib. leg. reg*. 34.10–19.

30 *Lib. leg. reg*., 38.16–22; see also Drijvers, "Bardaisan's Doctrine," 21–22.

Given that third and fourth-century Christian sources invoking the in arguments about free will likely did so with reference to Bardaisan, we can suppose that Methodius would have been familiar with not only the ethnographic portions of the *Liber legum regionum*, but also the cosmological schema in which Bardaisan frames them. Thecla's rejection of the notion that astral destiny, as divined in a horoscope, exerts power over a human being's natural constitution ought to be read, in this context, as a rejection of Bardaisan's formulation of just this notion in the *Liber legum regionum*. In fact, Thecla rejects the possibility that the stars exert any causal force within human affairs at all. Bardaisan, meanwhile, concedes significant causal power to "Fate"—much more than Origen—or, we now may say, Methodius—would readily grant.[31]

While Thecla appears to be in full agreement with Origen regarding the (absence of a) relationship between human law and nature and astral destiny, her description of the character of celestial bodies—as given in the second set of arguments in her refutation—deviates in significant ways from Origen's ideas about heavenly bodies. To be sure, both Origen and Methodius stand in a long line of thinkers who consider the stars to be sentient beings who enjoy a more blessed life than humans.[32] Thecla's insistence that the stars are not involved in human misdemeanor and therefore bear no responsibility for worldly evil seems, on first sight, very much in line with Origen's description of the basic goodness of the stars,[33] and his vehement rejection of the idea (which he assigns to Basilideans and Valentinians) that some celestial bodies are malign, others benign.[34]

Yet Origen also regarded the stars as—by virtue of their possession of sentience and free will—having *some* experience of sin and evil. They have fallen away from God, albeit less than have human beings.[35] We learn as much from Job 25:5, he says: "For Job appears to disclose that the stars are not only capable of subjection to sin, but even that they are not free from the contagion of it. For so is it written: 'The stars are not clean in Your sight.' "[36] Thecla, meanwhile,

31 On the difference between Bardaisan's and Origen's conceptions of the reach of the stars' power, see Possekel, "Bardaisan and Origen," 540.

32 For catalogue, see Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 132.

33 See, e.g., Origen, *Princ*. 1.7, discussed in Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 130–131, and *Cels*. 5.10, discussed in Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, 329.

34 *Comm. Matt*. 13.6, per Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 143–144.

35 On the free will of the stars, see *Or*. 4 and 7; *Cels*. 8.67; Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 131.

36 *Princ*. 1.7.2. Text in Henri Crouzel and Manlio Simonetti, eds., *Origène: Traité des principes, Tome I* (*Livres I et II*), SC 252 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1978). Origen says much the same,

firmly states that "no act can occur without desire, and no desire without need, and what is divine has no needs, so it is without conception of wickedness. Further, if the nature of the stars has been created closer to God and exceeds the virtue of even exceptional human beings, then the stars exist without conception of evil and without needs (ἀνεννόητα κακίας … καὶ ἀνενδεῆ)" (8.16.1–5). Thecla here excludes even the the possibility of sinful action amongst the stars.

Yet her language, which anchors sinful acts first to desire (ἐπιθυμία) and then to "need" or "emptiness" (ἐνδεία), does not reflect that used by Origen for celestial beings. To be sure, a variety of ancient magical, astrological, and philosophical sources did ascribe human desires—and so human vices—to astral, demonic influences.[37] Christian sources did not always disagree. Athenagoras believed that the watchers who fell from heaven and became evil spirits (Gen 6:1–4), together with the demonic souls of the Nephilim, govern an inferior, lower πρόνοια, by which they produce "the irrational and uncanny movements of the soul around opinions" (αἱ τῆς ψυχῆς ἄλογοι καὶ ἰνδαλματώδεις περὶ τὰς δόξας κινήσεις)—faulty sense-perceptions that lead humans to idolatry and thence to sin.[38] One comes across this view now and again at Nag Hammadi. Perhaps most famously, the long recension of the Apocryphon of John features a Book of Zoroaster, giving the names of the various demons who exert their influence over the "psychic" parts corresponding to our material body parts.[39] A fragmentary homily deeply and aggressively implicated in the Alexandrine theology of Origen's day, the Testimony of Truth, even states that stars, together with angels and demons, possess desire:

> For many have sought the truth, and they were unable to find it, because [the] old leaven of the Pharisees and the Scribes of the Law has held them back. But the leaven [is the] desire for error, belonging to the angels [and] the demons and the stars (ⲡⲑⲁⲃ ⲇⲉ ⲡ[ⲉ ⲧⲉ]ⲡⲓⲑⲩⲙⲓⲁ ⲛ̄ⲧⲛ̣ⲁⲛⲏ ⲛ̄ⲧ[ⲉ]

albeit with hesitation, at *Comm. Jo.* 1.35.257. On these passages, see Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 137–138; Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology*, 334 n. 4.

37 See, e.g., Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 113–117, 158, 167, focusing on patristic and Hermetic sources; for the theme in the Pseudo-Clementines, see Kelley, *Knowledge and Religious Authority*, 109–114.

38 *Leg.* 24–27; see Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 35, and esp. Dragoş-Andrei Giulea, "The Watchers' Whispers: Athenagoras's *Legatio* 25,1–3 and the *Book of the Watchers*," *VC* 61 (2007): 266–273.

39 Ap. John NHC II 15.13–19.12. On the Book of Zoroaster, see, e.g., Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 114–119; Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 107–108, 128.

ⲛ̀ⲁⲣ`ⲅⲉⲗⲟⲥ ⲙ̀[ⲛ] ⲛ̀ⲁⲁⲓⲙⲱ[ⲛ] ⲙ̄ⲙⲛ̄ ⲛ̄ⲥⲓⲟⲩ). But, as for the Pharisees and the Scribes, [they] belong to the archons, since they possess authority [over them].[40]

It is against such perspectives that Thecla speaks. Yet Methodius also knew Origen well, particularly on matters related to fate and free will, as we know from his *De autexousio*. Surely he was familiar with Origen's ideas about astrology and the stars—including theory of the sin of the stars. Authors like the homilist of the Testimony of Truth took the character of the stars to be lustful, demonic, and oppressive, something from which to be freed. Methodius, evidently opposed to this view, must have regarded Origen's notion of the sinful character of the stars—like Bardaisan's ideas regarding the potency of fate as regards human nature—as yielding ground to proponents of astrology. Instead, he emphasized that the stars are not sinful, for they exist "without conception of evil and without needs." Meanwhile, Thecla's characterization of the impulse to sin as stemming from a sense of privation—of absence, or emptiness—remains to be explained.

Conclusion: Lack, Desire, and Evil in the *Symposia*

I would suggest that here, Methodius reaches back to Plato's *Symposium* so as to address another controversial aspect of ancient ideas about the stars: the question of their identity with demons. In Plato's dialogue, Socrates interrogates the tragic playwright Agathon following his speech (the fourth speech in praise of Eros). Agathon has insisted on Eros's youth and beauty. Socrates responds by taking the "erotic" element of Eros seriously: if anything is worthy of love, it is noble beauty (i.e., anything κάλος), so Eros must love beauty. This love is a desiring (ἐπιθυμεῖν, or, more directly, ἐρᾶν), and desire must be of something one does not have—hence of something one lacks, or is in need of (ἐνδεῖν). Thus, Socrates asks,

40 Test. Truth NHC IX 29.9–21. Text in Jean-Pierre Mahé, ed., *Le Témoignage Véritable* (*NH IX,3*): *Gnose et Martyre*, BCNHT 23 (Québec: Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1996). On this passage, see Scott, *Origen and the Life of the Stars*, 102; Denzey Lewis, *Cosmology and Fate*, 72–73, 167. These stars deceive the martyrs, amongst others: "But these people are not correct, in the way (that they think): rather, it is by the deceiving stars (that they proceed)" (34.6–10).

> "But tell me this—as regards love of that thing of which there is love, does love desire it or not?"
> "Indeed it does," Agathon replied.
> "And as for that thing that it desires and yearns for—at the moment that it desires and years for it (αὐτὸ οὗ ἐπιθυμεῖ τε καὶ ἐρᾷ, εἶτα ἐπιθυμεῖ τε καὶ ἐρᾷ), does it possess it, or not?"
> "That's not so, it seems likely," he said.
> "Instead of what's likely," said Socrates, "ask yourself whether it be necessary that it be so: whatever desires something, desires that of which it is in need (τὸ ἐπιθυμοῦν ἐπιθυμεῖν οὗ ἐνδεές ἐστιν); it would not desire it, if it were not in need of it."[41]

Socrates continues:

> "And does such a person—and any person, for that matter—desire something which is not at hand and which is not present, and that which one has not, is not, and lacks; and are such objects the objects of desire and love?"
> "Definitely," Agathon said.[42]

Thus, Agathon is horrified to learn, Eros must be ugly, for it could only love beauty if it lacked beauty.[43]

Although Methodius also speaks of desire as privative in his *De resurrectione*,[44] it is worth considering the possibility that he was, in composing his own *Symposium*, inspired by Plato's remarks regarding love and desire as predicated upon absence. Indeed, scholarship has long recognized that Methodius actively engages Plato's conception of terrestrial ἔρος as privative. Bracht, for instance, proposes that the literary artifice of the *Symposium* is meant to evoke the specter of Plato's conceptions of earthly ἔρος, emphasizing their privative nature, so as better to replace them by the principle of virginity (παρθενεία), which connotes desire without privation.[45] Such a thesis assists the greater,

41 Plat. *Symp*. 200a1–b1. For the text, see Kenneth Dover, ed., *Plato: Symposium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

42 Plat. *Symp*. 200e2–6.

43 Plat. *Symp*. 201.

44 *Apud* Epiphanius, *Pan*. 64.55.5–7; Bracht, *Vollkommenheit und Vollendung*, 89–90.

45 Bracht, *Vollkommenheit und Vollendung*, 195–206; cf. Amy Hughes, "'Chastely I Live for Thee': Virginity as Bondage and Freedom in Origen of Alexandria, Methodius of Olympus, and Gregory of Nyssa" (Ph.D. Diss., Wheaton College, 2013), 211–213. For Methodius's

modern-day theological project of reclaiming both *Symposia* as works teaching us that Christian desire need not be predicated upon absence, but presence.[46] As we have observed, Thecla's polemic against astrology regards the privative sense of desire axiomatic and crucial to its conception of sin. Yet given the speech's objective—the demonstration of the logical incoherence of astral determinism—παρθενία does not enter the picture at all.[47] As far as determinism is concerned, privation appears superfluous to Thecla's arguments. Elsewhere, Methodius conceptualizes desire and its relationship with sin in Stoic terms, as resulting from the false poor reactions to sense-perceptions.[48] With ἐπιθυμία so characterized, the validity of Thecla's proofs would remain unchanged. Yet Methodius takes pains here to emphasize precisely such a privative quality.

In adopting the privative sense of ἔρος from Plato's *Symposium* to characterize states of desire, and in turn emphasizing that astral bodies are incapable of evil—due to their incapability to experience privation ("lack," ἐνδεία) and so desire—Methodius must have intended to exonerate the stars not only from sin, but from their identification with demons. As noted above, many ancient thinkers regarded celestial bodies as demons of some kind, whether benevolent or malevolent. In the Greek philosophical tradition, the notion of δαίμονες as intermediaries between gods and human beings goes back to nowhere other than Plato's *Symposium*, in the discourse of Diotima, immediately following Socrates's interrogation of Agathon:

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appropriation of the literary conceit of the symposion, see esp. Alexander Bril, "Plato and the Sympotic Form in the *Symposium* of St Methodius of Olympus," *ZAC* 9 (2006): 279–302, as well as Macías and González, "El Banquete," 312–313; Bracht, "Methodius von Olympus," col. 771; M. Benedetta Zorzi, "The Use of the Terms ἁγνεία, παρθενία, σωφροσύνη, and ἐγκράτεια in the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus," *VC* 63 (2009): 138–168; Hughes, "'Chastely I Live,'" 64–72.

46 See, e.g., Hughes, "'Chastely I Live,'" 190–193, following Mario Costa, "For the Love of God: The Death of Desire and the Gift of Life," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 38–62. For a theological reading of the language of male orgasm and ecstasy in the *Symposium*, see Ralph Norman, "Methodius and Methodologies: Ways of Reading Third-Century Christian Sexual Symbolism," *Theology & Sexuality* 13 (2006): 79–100.

47 This remains the case despite the fact that Thecla thereafter swings the discussion back to chastity and free will, in 8.17; see above n. 4.

48 Per Bracht, *Vollkommenheit und Vollendung*, 77–94; eadem, "Methodius von Olympus," cols. 777–778.

> "Do you see?" she [Diotima] said, "You think that love is not a god!"
> "Then what," I [Socrates] exclaimed, "would Love be? A mortal?"
> "Certainly not!"
> "But what, then?"
> "Just as was said before," she said, "something between mortal and immortal."
> "What do you mean, Diotima?"
> "A great demon (δαίμων μέγας), dear Socrates. For everything daemonic exists between god and mortal."[49]

In Thecla's refutation of astrology, then, Methodius does not invert Plato's notion of privative ἔρος, but appropriates it. In full agreement that ἔρος ultimately stems from lack—the desire *for* something—Thecla rejects the notion that the stars are ever in a state of need. If the stars were to lack anything, they would be demons—like Diotima's ἔρος himself, insinuated with desire, and thus sin. Meanwhile, the mediating function of the "demon" of love is taken over by the Incarnation, who furnishes a bridge between God and human beings.[50]

Thecla's polemic against astrological determinism is thus not an appendix that may be read independently of the rest of her discourse, or the entire *Symposium*, for that matter. Nor, from a doxographical perspective, should it be regarded as a brisk and compact digest of arguments from *De autexousio*.[51] Rather, Methodius here carefully tweaks common arguments regarding determinism and free will, rendering them in precise terms so as to exclude what he must have regarded as dangerous concessions to the astrologers: Bardaisan's notion that fate does possess causal efficacy in human lives, Origen's view of the stars as capable of sin in a manner comparable with humans, and the widespread identification of certain celestial bodies with demons. On the contrary, says Thecla, fate does not exist, and the stars have no conception of evil or even needs—unlike Eros, the demon of Diotima. Thecla psychologizes desire, the chief cause of sin, in the terms of Plato's privative erotics not only to redeem a notion of desire for chaste Christian women, but to articulate what Methodius believed to be the proper conception of human responsibility in a world where the heavens are inhabited by stars and demons alike.

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49 Plat. *Symp*. 202d7–e1.

50 *Symp*. 1.4, per Bracht, *Vollkommenheit und Vollendung*, 238–240; eadem, "Methodius von Olympus," cols. 779–780.

51 *Pace* Patterson, on both points (see above n. 9 and 11).