

Rebecca Ruth Faber¹

REBUKE BY AND RECIPROCITY OF MARCELLA

Abstract: In the fourth century Eternal City, a bizarre event occurred. A murmur and rumor of innovation came when Jerome, an itinerant scholar, lectured for a patron in an Aventine palace. What was appalling was that the students of 382-385 CE were female. Marcella who led Psalms recitations in Hebrew, to them, morning and evening was active before Jerome arrived. She rose to rebuke his arrogance to Roman clergy. Marcella had a not-tangential role in an ascetic dispute, in 390's Rome over Origen's works. This article sketches the matrix of bible study, education and gender, asking about the fourth century trend.

Keywords: *Fourth Century Theology, Marcella, Jerome, Paula, Early Christian Women, Patristics, Origen, Late Antiquity, Patristics, Patronage.*

What led Marcella (c 335-410) a wealthy, privileged fourth century widow to solicit a scholarly monk, Jerome of Stridon (c347-420), to lecture in her palace home? What prompted this elite to press into biblical linguistics, and expand her exegetical skill to include Hebrew?² A year or so later, she rebuked Jerome, her teacher, for his bile erupted, expressed towards church hegemony.³ As a patron, she was formidable, having had a formative role, and a patron who functioned as a protector. Marcella was a celibate, wealthy elite lady who taught bible women.

¹ The author is a doctoral candidate in Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Theology of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". E-mail: beckyruthfaber@honeycomholdings.com.

² Lossel, Josef. Andrew Cain. *Jerome of Stridon. His Life, Writings and Legacy*. Ashgate, Cardiff, 2009, 48.

³ *Letters of Jerome*, Trans. into English. W.H. Freemantle, Balliol, Oxford. Aeterna Press Christian Literature Publishers, NY, 2016. 127.7, 432. He refers to Marcella's "student" Eustochium (*Ep.* 127,5; cf. *Ep.* 46,1.3). Marcella led Principia into Scripture study (*Ep.* 65,2) and Principia became her successor. Of her influence to younger women, see also C. KRUMMEICH, *Hieronymus und die christlichen feminae clarissimae*, Bonn, Habelt, 1993, p. 76.

Bold, fearless, wearing sackcloth, caring for the sick, copied by many who did as she did, the ascetics renounced marriage, fasted, and held daily bible study. The group she led followed communal prayer several times a day. One of her disciples was Paula, host to papal guests including Epiphanius of Salamis, the bishop after the 350's who visited Rome in 382. Marcella's successor was Principia, in 410. Having a quiet, potent presence in the fourth century church, Marcella ably constructed a philosophical circle. In her day, asceticism was considered degrading by secular society, yet she led a bible salon in an Aventine palace there at the heart of the Roman Empire.

In what way was her role formative? First, to Jerome.⁴ In 382, she sought out Jerome of Stridon (c. 347-420) for his scriptural expertise, to become tutor of widows and virgins on her estate. She became his patron, or *prostatis*, and friend.⁵

The relationship formed by benefaction was an institution with expectations and demands on both sides of the equation.⁶ Although as a woman, society and the church saw her as inferior,⁷ Marcella became Jerome's caretaker, with a rigorous partner role in the Origen disputes of the 390's.⁸ Through her, the emphasis of Jerome's professional identity switched. His work expanded to encompass more than a mere scholar, translator or secretary-adviser to Pope Damasus.⁹ He became a class-room teacher. Jerome styled his pedagogy on the craft of Origen of Caesarea in the ancient theology schools of Palestine. But his students were women. This new behavior caused consternation and a furor among clergy in Rome.

So, if a monk teaching virgins and widow was controversial, why did Marcella invite Jerome? Book knowledge and love of education was deep

⁴ Noll, Mark. *Turning Points*. Baker Academic, 1997, 79. Jerome's work on the Vulgate brought fame.

⁵ Madigan, Kevin, Carolyn Osiek. *Ordained Women in the Early Church. A Documentary History*. John Hopkins Press, 2011, 45. Gender free terms apply to patronage, like deacon, or *diakonos*.

⁶ Cohick, Lynn. *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*. Baker Academic, 2009, 320.

⁷ E.A. Clark, *Devil's Gateway and the Bride of Christ: Women in the Early Christian World, in Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith*, Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen, 1986, 23-60, 42-43.

⁸ Graves said what Marcella objected to in Origen's work is unclear. Graves, Michael. "The Biblical Scholarship of a Fourth Century Woman. Marcella of Rome." *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 87/To 4 (2011) 375-391. doi: 10.2143/ETL.87.4.0000000. p. 378.

⁹ Kally, JND. *Jerome. His Life, Writing and Controversies*. Harper and Row, 1975, 93.

in her. A passion for ascetic forms of the Christian faith came naturally.¹⁰ Combining the two was logical. When she was nearly ten, her mother, Albina, housed papal guests, the inestimable Athanasius perhaps in 346, the Nicene hero who died 373. Before him, Albina hosted Peter of Alexandria.¹¹ Asceticism was her choice. Jerome fit this way, as a fan of desert men. He was fiercely devoted, ostensibly, to self-denial and austerity. Ambitious and intellectually curious, Marcella sought eternal verities. She delighted in the bible and relished the tone of Jerome's teaching, his demands for "unrelenting ascetic labor of the mind" as he pressed students towards spiritual enrichment from scripture.¹²

Paula, Marcella's protégé, became Jerome's new patron, but Marcella's formative role extended beyond Jerome and Paula to generations. She was mentor not only to a young sister, Asella, but also won ascetic recruits, like Principia. Friends, ascetic disciples, replicated habits of sexual abstinence, refused meat, denied themselves wine except in times of illness, and avoided public venues or houses of the wealthy.¹³ Glamor and the luxury of lush fabrics was replaced by drab, rough garments. In Rome, by her modest lifestyle, Jerome claimed she had a pioneering impact.¹⁴ Soon her protégé Paula moved to found monastic houses in Bethlehem with Jerome's entourage, continuing Marcella's habits of rigor there. The bible teacher formed Paula's monastic ministry and inspired Jerome's teaching career. Her impact was profound.

In her life, personality and achievements, Marcella also was formidable. She was a powerfully determined aristocrat, blessed status, wealth and holy living, set in pursuit of eternal verities. Her rational, logical style seemed at times male and brought encomiums, with private renown. She was assigned the perplexing cognomen, *female Man of God*, just as was the

¹⁰ Letter 29.1 and 28.1 He said that Marcella was a slave driver asking questions; he wrote many letters to her, numbers 25, 26, 29,34 and 37 are a few. Unfortunately, the letters she wrote to him were not kept or distributed.

¹¹ Brown, Peter. *Body and Society. Men Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. Columbia University Press, 1988, 2008, 369.

¹² *Ibid.*, 369-384.

¹³ 1 Timothy 5.23 is a passage that advises taking a little wine for stomach ailments.

¹⁴ Jerome called her the first female ascetic but Ambrose's older sister, Marcelina, took the veil in 353 in the presence of the pope. Rebenich says the monk sought to legitimize his teaching of women and virgins and for this reason called Marcella a pioneer. (n. 2), p. 163 Rebenich, Stefan. *Hieronymus und sein Kreis*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 1992, 156- 157.

martyr, Perpetua of Carthage 181-203, and Melania the Elder, of Jerusalem 350-410. The description shows the upside-down views and nature of ecclesiastic gender relations, the evolving complexity of the ancient church's view of women.

Jerome considered a female celibate, wedded to asceticism, was one who lost gender, no longer the inferior, lower female but elevated to male.¹⁵ Jerome adored virgins, and celibates "became" virginal. Thus, to be named a "female man of God" was both praise and denigration, a double-edged sword, for it carried implications, claiming male qualities as higher and better than female ones. The title underlined and affirmed the church's ambivalence to females.

Nevertheless, formidable in intellect, persistent in fleeing the world and choosing Christ, Marcella stood tall. In the 390's, she fought for and won rejection of Origen and Origen's work in Rome.¹⁶ This happened in a convoluted way for at that time the church considered teaching - preaching the sole purview of men. Christians in Rome in general did not favor women who teach.

Yet women did teach men, at times. Marcella was called on to play the role of wise counselor. From Bethlehem, Jerome admitted her skill.¹⁷ He said that in Rome Marcella was the foremost exegete, "so wise was she and so well did she understand" scripture. After he left Rome in 385, in the 390s a sudden debate originated in Palestine, rising from work of Jerome's friend, Rufinus of Aquileia.¹⁸ He completed a Latin translation of Origen's *First Principles*, but adjusted Origen's passages to avoid phrases that appeared semi-heretical.

This dispute was complex and layered for issues converged in it. There were personal alliances involved, ecclesiastical politics, and miscommunication, all undergirded by a post Nicene desire for greater definition and church uniformity.

Marcella's role in fighting the "storm" originated at Jerome's request

¹⁵ See also Jerome's elevation of virgins. *Comm. Eph.* 5,28b-29; *Ep.* 75,2; *Ep.* 71,3); and Clark, Gillian, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, 128-130.

¹⁶ Epiphanius of Salamis was an old friend of Jerome who campaigned for years against Origen. See Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2003, 36.

¹⁷ Jerome *Letter* 127.7, Schaff, NAF, *ibid*, 428-30.

¹⁸ *Letter* 127.10. Aeterna, 434.

and was limited to Rome. She rejected the “false” and brought forward orthodox views on the matter. She “it was who originated the condemnation” of the translated work, furnished witnesses to speak against the circulating work. She showed that a large number of Christians were becoming enmeshed in the controversy. Tirelessly, she served the church of Rome who saw that the translated book was passed hand to hand.¹⁹ Prodigiously she wrote letters to refute and to invite teachers to appear and defend themselves.

The result was a resounding victory for Jerome’s anti-Origenists in Rome.²⁰ Marcella, a woman, took to the field of men to conquer “false teaching.” Definitely, she was formidable, guiding students-clients and in the fight for right theology.

Did Marcella have clear objections or disbelief in some of Origen’s claims, about man’s soul and Satan’s possible salvation in God’s *apokatastasis*? Michael Graves point out that this is unknown, without her own writing, letters or words to show.²¹ What did Marcella believe?

It was a time for the church of emphasis on man’s work, specially the ladder of merit, and belief in rising heavenward through one’s actions. Virgins, who had “done the most” were at the top of the ladder. Thus it is likely Marcella had a slanted soteriology, placing action high. Man’s performance was influential in gaining his salvation. God’s work in salvation was partial. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was somewhat incomplete, in this view. The ecclesiastical bent was towards a Christian winning salvation through holy deeds, such as celibacy and asceticism.

Finally, formative in her role as mentor and teacher, formidable in theological battle, she also showed compassionate self-sacrifice. In her capacity as patron, she guarded and watched over the well-being and safety of students or clients’ – the ones under her care. This is seen at the close of her life, with Principia, and illustrated in an incident from Jerome’s and her friendship in 385.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ When Rufinus and Melania the Elder, of the Mount of Olives monasteries, visited Rome in the following decade they faced criticism for continued support of Origen and his works. Rome became anti-Origen. A cousin of Melania, Paulinus of Nola, who became ascetic, settled in 395. His theology also wavered

²¹ Graves said what Marcella objected to in Origen’s work is unclear. Graves, Michael. “The Biblical Scholarship of a Fourth Century Woman. Marcella of Rome.” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 87/To 4 (2011), 375-391. doi: 10.2143/ETL.87.4.0000000. p. 378.

Near the end of her life, in 410, the river Tiber froze allowing barbarian tribes to cross it and descend on Rome. Her behavior at the time of danger illustrated the deep compassion she had. She interposed herself between invading soldiers and her flock. Physically, her body became a wall against the enemy barbarians.

These barbarians, of the tribes of Alaric, pillaged the Eternal City. Some virgins and widows, including Principia, were young, perhaps comely. Marcella hid the women.²² Then as the warriors demanded booty -- or family jewels - she defied them. Marcella insisted her wealth was depleted, stored in "the stomachs of the poor." There were no riches to offer them. Hearing this, the soldiers mishandled and battered Marcella. A few days later she died, escaping to her eternal reward.

At an earlier time, another dramatic instance of protection occurred in the patron - client relationship with Jerome.

The Dalmatian stirred up anger in Rome, because he had an incendiary style with his pen. He depleted the patience of the church hegemony and accumulated the ire of Rome's monks. With insults, he jeered at and belittled many clergy and even maligned the bishop of Milan, Ambrose. While Damasus, the pope, lived, Jerome's security held firm. But in December, 384, the pope died and only Marcella remained in Rome as his patron.²³ A sudden whisper began in 385, raising questions about him and promoting enmity against the monk.

The rumors and scandals about Jerome occurred during a volatile ecclesiastical season in the late Roman empire. It was a time of anxious orthodoxy and political change. Social and ecclesiastical favor might be quickly gained but could also be rapidly lost. A monk's friendship with women was controversial and seemed unwise. But might it even be fatal?

Sadly, it could, as the death of Priscillian of Avila showed.

²² Letters of Jerome. Some taken from NPNE, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, ed. Schaff and Wace, vol. VI (1890-1900) some from *Letters of Jerome*, Aeterna, 2016. More than a third of Jerome's epistles were addressed to women. Notables Ep 23, Asella's death, 66, Ep. 22 to the virgin Eustochium, p.36, Ep.108 on Paula's death, 328, and 127 to Principia on Marcella's death.

²³ Pope Damasus hired Jerome as a translator in Rome, 382-385. Then the pope set him to gather old latin versions of the gospels - New Testament to redact, unite & linguistically polish the scriptures. Clark, Elizabeth. *Women in the Early Church*. Collegville MN, Liturgical Press, 1983.148. See also Cohick, Lynn, and Amy B Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 201.

Over in the west, in Hispania, a priest aroused his congregation and surrounding clergy. Pricillian, c340-385, was the bishop of Avila who formed unconventional relationships, unwise for a prelate. Accused of immoral behavior with women as well as occult practices, he was taken from Spain to face trial and executed as a “heretic” in 385, Trier. Friendship with elite women, especially for monks, might be fatal. He inspired gossip, rumor and, ultimately, death.

There was a campaign of innuendo also in Rome, around the irritable monk of Dalmatia.²⁴ However, Jerome still had one powerful patron whose status covered him, Marcella.

Unlike the bishop from Avila, Jerome did not lose his life.

Back in Rome, in the same year, 385, Marcella rescued him. Scandal and a celibate student, Blesillas’ death near the time of Jerome’s loss of a key patron, the pope, made his situation untenable.²⁵

It was the lowest point of Jerome’s career, yet Marcella quelled the rumors circulating in Rome. These could have led, at the least, to the humiliation of a trial and, at the worst, potentially to death. He was banished and left for Palestine, subdued but alive.

She uncovered the truth to exonerate him. Marcella was a faithful benefactor and loyal *prostatis*. Her rescue of the irritable monk showed the great lengths she would go to protect and guard a client. She was a formative influence and formidable leader, providing astonishing rescue to students and her clients.

Marcella changed Jerome’s life as his patron, even while he changed hers. The impact was felt when Marcella invited and offered Jerome a new identity, as tutor and teacher of widows and virgins. For Marcella, Jerome stretched her talents and fired her intellect, slanted her away from contemporary heresies, and expanded her grasp of scripture. He answered her endless stream of questions comparing Hebrew, Greek and Latin bible verses.²⁶

²⁴ Palladius, *LH*, XXXVI, translated by W. Lowther Clarke, SPCK London, MacMillan, 1918, 126.

²⁵ *Ep.* XLV,1, 2&3. 96-7. Aeterna. Blesilla was a young ascetic widow, daughter of Paula.

²⁶ Letter 127.3. *Letters of Saint Jerome, The Principle Works*. Trans. By W.H. Freeman-tle. Marcella trained virgins and became like a mother to them. Letter 46, p.99, of Paula heightens the teaching skill she had. Aeterna Press, Christian Literature Publishers, NY, 2016, 431.

There was rebuke and reciprocity between the lady and the monk. The meeting of Marcella and Jerome led to a patron-client relationship which evolved to change, enlarge and enrich them both.

Marcella, an elite ascetic, was led as a wealthy, privileged fourth century widow to solicit a scholarly monk to educate her and a philosophical salon of women.²⁷ Jerome of Stridon came to lecture in her palace home and because of this, many lives were changed, including hers.

²⁷ Ruether, R. *Mothers of the Church: Ascetic Women in the Late Patristic Age*, in R. Ruether – E. McLaughlin (eds.), *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, NY, Simon and Schuster, 1979, 71-98, 72-73.