Article

FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Holy Spirit Mother, the Baptismal Womb, and the Walesby Tank: Excavating Early Christian Women Baptizers

Feminist Theology
2023, Vol. 31(2) 143–164

DOI: 10.1177/09667350221135461
journals.sagepub.com/home/fth
SAGE

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Abstract

Writers starting with Tertullian and the author behind the Didascalia Apostolorum attest to the presence of early Christian women baptizers, as do a variety of later writers. The early Christian tradition of Holy Spirit as female and mother, her womb the font of new birth (Jn 3.3-5), helps illuminate why women may have been seen as the midwives, or ministers, of this birthing ritual. Likewise, the identification of the font as a womb adds to Jocelyn Toynbee's 1964 proposal that a scene on the Walesby Tank, a fourth-century Romano-British baptismal font, portrayed two clothed women assisting a nude female neophyte at her baptism.

Keywords

Baptism, women baptizers, Holy Spirit, Walesby Tank, Nicene Creed

Baptism in Water from Holy Spirit Mother's Womb

According to Jn. 3.3-5, Jesus said that one must receive birth from above in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Nicodemus then asked him, "How can a grown person enter their mother's womb a second time and be born again?" Jesus answered, "Unless one receives birth from water and Spirit, one cannot enter the kingdom." Consistent with this passage, some early Christians appear to have considered baptism as new birth with water flowing down from the womb of their Mother above, the Holy Spirit.

The passage in John about Jesus' baptism is perhaps the very oldest to evince an understanding among some Jesus followers that Holy Spirit was Mother. Another, perhaps equally old, was in the first- or second-century *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, which was composed in Aramaic, a Hebrew dialect spoken from Jerusalem to Antioch. In the early Christian era, this gospel often was attributed to Matthew, writing in his

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native language, Aramaic. Papias of Hierapolis (c. 60–130) said that "Matthew composed his history in the Hebrew dialect."[1] Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202) likewise reported that Matthew "issued a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect."[2] Origen of Caesarea (c. 184–253) twice referenced a saying in this gospel, which he called the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. Origen wrote that after John baptized Jesus, Jesus spoke of "My Mother, the Holy Spirit."[3]

In the early fifth century, Jerome three times argued that the femininity of Holy Spirit in this Hebrew gospel passage was merely a fluke of grammar since "spirit" was feminine gendered in Hebrew, neuter in Greek, and masculine in Latin.[4] However, as we shall see, Jerome's assertion regarding the serendipitous gender of Spirit may have had a polemical purpose, because even in Hebrew the grammatical gender of Spirit—*ruach*—as well as the gender of its associated adjectives and verbs, depended upon context. For example, an analysis of *ruach* in the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrates that, indeed, *ruach* was usually feminine gendered when it referred to the Spirit of God or of the people[5]—but it was often masculine gendered when it referred to a demon such as Belial[6]—and, when it simply meant "breath," it was sometimes masculine gendered and sometimes feminine.[7] Certainly Holy Spirit identified as female and Mother was strong in Ancient Syria where Aramaic was spoken, the geographical area where Christianity originated.[8]

An early version of this paper was presented at the 2020 International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds; I would like to thank Adrian Palladino and other participants for their helpful comments, as well as Mary Ann Beavis, Miriam Jane De Cock, JL Manzo, Deborah Niederer Saxon, and Massimiliano Vitello for their suggestions regarding various aspects.

1. Eusebius recorded what Papias wrote in his *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.16 (trans. CF Cruse, and Eusebius (1998) *Ecclesiastical History*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 106).
2. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1 (Roberts A and Donaldson J (2004) *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1:414). Eusebius also recorded what Irenaeus wrote in *Ecclesiastical History* 5.8.2.
3. Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.87 (Heine RE and Origen (1989) *Commentary on the Gospel According to John Books 1-10*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 116); Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah* 15.4 (Smith JC and Origen (1998) *Homilies on Jeremiah Homily on 1 Kings 28*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 161).
4. Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* 11.24 (Scheck T and Jerome (2015) *Commentary on Isaiah*. Mahwah, NJ: Newman, 539); see also Jerome, *Commentary on Micah 7.6* and *Commentary on Ezekiel* 16.13.
5. Sekki A (1989) *The Meaning of RUAH at Qumran*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 71, 99.
6. Sekki A (1989) *The Meaning of RUAH at Qumran*, 145–149.
7. Sekki A (1989) *The Meaning of RUAH at Qumran*, 179.
8. Murray R (1975) *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 312–320; Harvey SA (1993) Feminine imagery for the divine: the Holy Spirit, the *Odes of Solomon*, and early Syriac tradition. *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37(2–3): 111–139; Brock S (1998) *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*. Pune, India: Anita Printers, 16–36; Kateusz A (2019) *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 142–143; and van Oort J (2016) The Holy Spirit as feminine: early Christian testimonies and their interpretation. *Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(1): 1–6. Available at: https://hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/3225 (accessed 1 April 2022).

Yet, in addition to Aramaic, also known as classical Syriac, literary artifacts describing Holy Spirit as female or Mother have survived around the Mediterranean in Greek, Coptic, and Latin.

The identification of Holy Spirit as Mother appears to have been known as far as India, and the Hebrew gospel itself may have accounted for at least part of the popularity of this concept. In any case, a Christian philosopher named Pantænus (c. 120–c. 190) wrote that the apostle Bartholomew took the gospel of Matthew in Hebrew script to India[9]—and consistent with the Hebrew gospel's first-century arrival in India, the Greek *Acts of Thomas*, which are about the apostle Thomas' mission in India, quote Thomas during two baptismal rituals identifying Holy Spirit as "Mother."[10]

As in Greek, Spirit is neuter gendered in Coptic, yet several of the Nag Hammadi texts also identify Holy Spirit as "Mother." These include the *Gospel of Thomas*,[11] the *Gospel of Philip*,[12] and the *Apocryphon of John*,[13] plus, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* repeatedly identifies a trinity of Father, Mother, and Son.[14] Even in Jerome's Latin, where the word for Spirit—*SPIRITUS*—was generally masculine gendered, Irenaeus reported that disciples of the Christian teacher Valentinus (c. 100—160), who had a school in Rome, called "Holy Spirit" their "Mother."[15] In any case, the femaleness of Holy Spirit apparently was so important to some pre-Constantinian Latin Christians that they used the feminine gendered *SPIRITA SANCTA* on their epigraphs instead of the masculine *SPIRITUS SANCTUS*.[16] See Figure 1 for two of these stone inscriptions, copies in the Vatican Museum collection. Note that the plaque fragment on the right is broken and today its initial "*S*" in *SPIRITA* is missing.

Consistent with an identification around the Mediterranean of Holy Spirit as female and Mother, both literary and archeological artifacts demonstrate that some Christians identified the baptismal font as a womb.[17] For example, two authors who were contemporaries, but on opposite sides of the Mediterranean, called the font the womb. The poet

9. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.10.3.
10. *Acts of Thomas* 2.27, 5.50 (Schneemelcher W (1992) *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2. Cambridge: James Clark, 2:349–350 and 359–360; for detail on Holy Spirit as Mother in the *Acts of Thomas*, see 333–334).
11. *Gospel of Thomas* 101 (Robinson J (1990) *Nag Hammadi Library*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSan Francisco, 137).
12. *Gospel of Philip* 52.20-24, 55.23-27 (Robinson (1990) *Nag Hammadi Library*, 142, 143).
13. *Apocryphon of John* 9.10-11, 10.16-17 (Robinson (1990) *Nag Hammadi Library*, 109, 110).
14. *Gospel of the Egyptians* III 41.7-9, 42.4; IV 56.24, 58.3-4, 59.13-14; III 55.9-10 (Robinson (1990) *Nag Hammadi Library*, 209, 209, 210, 210–211, 211, 211, 213).
15. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.3 (Roberts A and Donaldson J (2004) *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:323).
16. Snyder G (2018) *Ante Pacem: Archeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 222; and Cabrol F and LeClerq H (1907–1953) *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, 1–15 vols. Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 3.1.1335 and 7.1.1006.
17. Brock S (1998) *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 130–131; Harvey SA (1993) Feminine imagery for the divine, 120; and Jensen R (2012) *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 56–58, 162–165.

Figure 1. Pre-Constantinian plaques originally inscribed with *SPIRITA SANCTA*.
Photo: Marrucci, *Monumenti* (1910), plate 52, nos 32 and 33.

Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373) called the font "womb of water."[18] Zeno of Verona (c. 300–371), writing in Latin about baptismal neophytes, called the baptismal font a mother's womb, *uterus*.[19]

This symbolism of the font as womb appears to have been strong in northern Africa, because some of the most extraordinary womb-shaped baptismal fonts are preserved there. Two of the most striking were in the baptisteries of neighboring churches in ancient Sufetula (modern Sbeïtla) in northern Africa. The small church of Bellator is dated late fourth century, and the much larger adjacent Basilica of Vitalis is dated between the late fifth and early sixth centuries.[20] The womb-shaped font of the church of Bellator appears to have been removed from service, because a column was placed inside it and the font was covered over; the baptistery may have been converted into a saint's shrine.[21] The beautiful mosaic-covered font of the Basilica of Vitalis, however, has survived nearly intact. Robin Jensen says that the undulating shape of these fonts "appear to have been designed to represent a woman's vulva"; she adds, "The round center well with its Christogram may have been intended to symbolize either the womb or the birth canal."[22] For the baptismal font in the baptistery attached to the Basilica of Vitalis, see Figure 2.

Jensen also proposes that round baptismal fonts may have been intended to represent the womb.[23] A round font is preserved in the ruins of the baptistery of the Servus basilica,

18. Ephrem, *Homily on the Crucifixion* 3.7.4 (Brock S (1998) *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 131).
19. Zeno of Verona, *Tractus* I 55 [II 33], *Ad Neophytos* (Löfstedt B (1971) *Zenonis Veronensis Tractatus*. Turnhout: Brepols, 130).
20. Burns JP and Jensen R (2014) *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 147–152.
21. Burns JP and Jensen R (2014) *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 150, plate 66.
22. Jensen R (2012) *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity*, 165, fig. 4.9.
23. Jensen R (2012) *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity*, 163–165.

Figure 2. Vulva-shaped baptismal font in the Basilica of Vitalis baptistery. Inscription of donors: *Vitalis and Cardela have fulfilled their vow.*
Sbeïtla, Tunisia. Photo: Author.

dated mid-to-late-fifth century, and most likely the Donatist Christian basilica of ancient Sufetula.[24] This font has flesh-colored, fleshy-looking layers surrounding the round well at the very bottom of the font where the initiate presumably would have stood. Consistent with Jensen's observation, this design, too, evokes the entrance of the vagina or birth canal (see Figure 3).

A scene of the Baptism of Jesus on an ivory book cover carved in the Latin West and today in the Milan Cathedral Treasury appears to preserve a similar womb motif. The ivory sculptor portrayed John the Baptist as a hairy muscular man, but Jesus as a small naked boy, as if he were being born again. Supporting the motif of being born again, the child is portrayed emerging from what looks like a birth canal made of swirling water, water flowing down from heaven above. A dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit is carved over the child (see Figure 4).

Two fourth-century sculptors of Christian sarcophagi portrayed John the Baptist baptizing child-like Jesus with the baptismal waters flowing down out of a fleshy-looking orifice in the sky. This is not a stream emanating from a pile of rocks, nor does it seem to represent the river Jordan, because in both cases, the baptismal water is falling out of a fleshy-looking object in the sky. One of the sarcophagi was found in a cemetery near Arles in southern France, and today is in the Musée de l'Arles antique (Figure 5). The other was found in the city of Rome and is in the Vatican Museum (Figure 6).[25]

24. Burns JP and Jensen R (2014) *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 152–153, plate 77.
25. Wilpert J (1929) *I Sarcofagi cristiani antichi*, 2 vols. Rome: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia Cristiana, vol. 2, plate 8.4.

Figure 3. Baptismal font as symbolic entrance to the womb Servus Basilica, Sbeïtla, Tunisia.
Photo: Author.

Figure 4. Baptism of Jesus inside a vagina of water. Ivory book cover, Milan Cathedral Treasury.
Photo: Alinari Archives, Florence—Collection: Alinari Archives-Seat Archive.

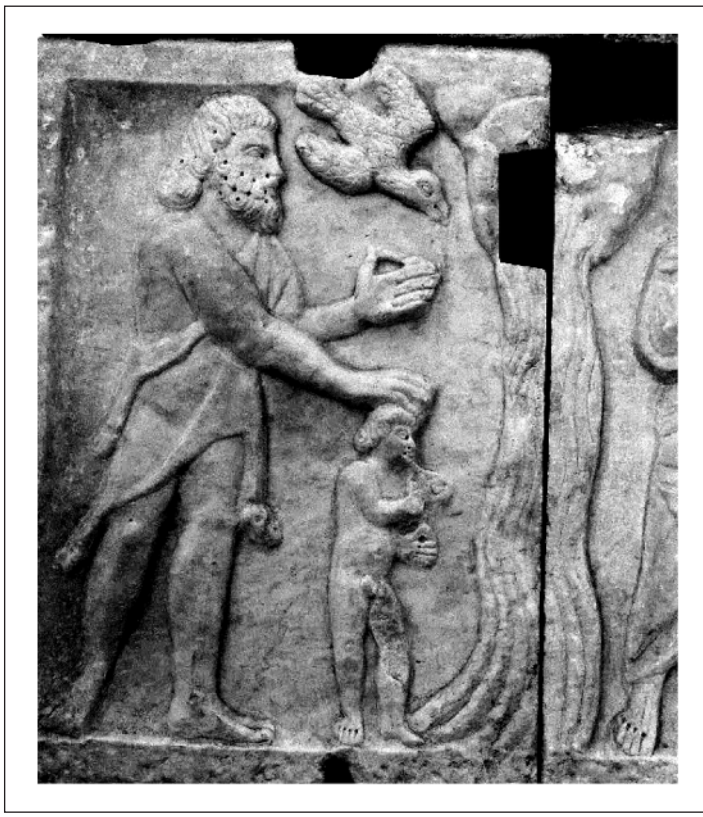

Figure 5. Water flowing from above Musée de l'Arles antique, ca. 380.
Photo: Author

The heavenly object from which the baptismal water flows is in the top right corner of both sarcophagus scenes. It is also prominent in the top *left* corner of the ivory carving in Figure 4. On both the ivory carving and the Arles sarcophagus, a dove is adjacent the object. Did these sculptors perhaps represent the womb of the Mother above, with the water of new birth flowing from her heavenly womb?

Consistent with the idea of baptism with water from the heavenly womb of Holy Spirit Mother, the sculptor of the Arles sarcophagus depicted the naked boy standing on dry land beside this vertical stream, no river in sight, as if he were going to step under the baptismal waterfall. The sculptor of the sarcophagus found in Rome sculpted the stream falling from heaven, and Jesus standing knee deep in its pool, but this sculptor also carved a second, smaller stream pouring down into a bowl held by John the Baptist—as if John were about to baptize the boy by pouring water over his head, a type of baptism called affusion. These scenes do not suggest that Jesus' baptism was effected through dunking in the River Jordan. They suggest that the sacred element necessary for valid baptism was the water of the heavenly womb.

Figure 6. John the Baptist with a bowl Vatican Museum, early fourth century.
Photo: Wilpert, *Sarcophagi*, 2: pl. 8.4.

Women Baptizers

The female sex gave birth and typically it was women who were midwives. Did these two highly gendered roles mean that women could be seen as baptizers, as the midwives of the new birth from the womb of the mother above?

Perhaps the oldest literary witness to women serving as officiants of the baptismal ritual is found in a complaint written in northern Africa by Tertullian (ca. 155–220 AD). He argued that women should not baptize—but in the very same breath complained that some women *were* baptizing. He said that these women baptizers were using the example of a woman evangelist named Thecla as a license to baptize.[26] He

26. Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17 (Roberts A and Donaldson J (2004) *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:677).

also complained that women were baptizing in Valentinian and Marcion Christian communities.[27] As Ferguson notes with respect to such prohibitions, "We may safely assume that what someone forbids, someone else is doing."[28] In other words, Tertullian both forbid women to baptize, and also, by his proscription, affirmed that some women *were*. In contrast to Tertullian's complaints, and affirming Ferguson's observation, some early Christian authors described women baptizing other people without any polemic or hint of controversy, as if women baptizing were the norm in their communities. One provocative example comes from Ephrem, who called the font a womb of water. Jensen says that in a poem about baptism, he "compared the officiating priest to a midwife."[29] Midwives, of course, were women. Below are six texts that preserve passages about women baptizers. The first three describe women baptizing other women. The next three portray women baptizing men and women.

The first text to describe women baptizing other women is the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, for which fragments survive in both Syriac and Latin. It is usually thought to have been compiled in the third century from even older literary elements. Most importantly here, its text pairs male and female deacons, and explains that the woman deacon is devoted to the ministry of women and the male deacon to the ministry of men. And, in particular, a woman deacon is needed during the baptism of women, as well as for women's instruction afterwards.[30] Suggesting the importance of the female Holy Spirit as justification for the liturgical role of women deacons, the text specifies that the male deacon was to stand beside the altar as the type of Jesus Christ, and the female deacon was to stand at the altar as the type of the Holy Spirit. This gender parity at the altar makes sense when Jesus is understood as male and the Holy Spirit as female. Not only were they given an important role at the altar, but the male and female deacons also appear to have had more ecclesial authority than presbyters. Presbyters were called the type of apostles, a lower rank than Jesus and the Holy Spirit.[31]

The second example is found in the *Acts of Philip*, most likely compiled around the fourth century, but also with some older elements. According to the *Acts of Philip*, both Philip and Mariamne were apostles. Most significantly, the text reads, "Philip was baptizing the men and Mariamne the women."[32] This statement has no explanation, as if

27. Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics* 41 (Roberts A and Donaldson J (2004) *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:263).
28. Ferguson E (2009) *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 568.
29. Jensen R (2012) *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity*, 147; see Ephrem, *Hymn on Virginity* 7.7.
30. Syriac *Didascalia apostolorum* 16 (Stewart-Sykes A (2009) *The Didascalia Apostolorum: An English Version with Introduction and Translation*. Turnhout: Brepols, 193–194); Lat. *Apost. did*. 35 (Hauler E (1900) *Didascaliae apostolorum fragmenta Veronensia Latina: accedunt Canonum qui dicuntur Apostolorum et Aegyptiorum reliquiae*. Leipzig: Teubner, 50).
31. Syriac *Didascalia apostolorum* 9.2.5-7 (Stewart-Sykes A (2009) *The Didascalia Apostolorum*, 151); Lat. *Apost. did*. 25 (Hauler E (1900) *Didascaliae apostolorum fragmenta Veronensia Latina*, 37).
32. *Acts of Philip* 14.9 (Bovon F and Matthews C (2012) *The Acts of Philip: A New Translation*. Waco, TX: Baylor, 91).

none were needed in this author's community. Indicating that in this author's community, men and women were paired in liturgical roles like the male and female deacon in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, this author listed gendered pairs of church leaders: "deacons, deaconesses" and "male and female priests."[33] Gendered pairs appear to have been relatively common in church leadership, because Ilaria Ramelli identified dozens of male and female pairs of ecclesial leaders in the literature of the early Christian era.[34]

The third example illustrates how translators, both ancient and modern, sometimes mistranslated female markers of liturgical authority, thereby obscuring them. This third scene is in a Dormition narrative about the death of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and is preserved in the underscript of a fifth-century Old Syriac palimpsest, the very oldest nearly complete Dormition manuscript. The palimpsest was discovered, edited, translated, and published in 1902 by the Syriac scholar Agnes Smith Lewis.[35] This text describes Mary with several markers of liturgical leadership such as raising her arms to lead the prayer, preaching the gospel, exorcizing demons, setting out the censer of incense to God, and sending out women evangelists with books, markers that later scribes often redacted or excised.[36] Most important to the current discussion, however, the fifth-century palimpsest text includes a passage that portrays Mary baptizing two very sick women, one filled with leprosy and the other with a demon constantly strangling her. It says that Mary "took water and sealed them," and "sprinkled" it upon their bodies, and they were healed.[37] One might think perhaps this was not a baptism, but simply a healing with water sprinkled on two sick women, but two factors suggest that indeed the scene represents baptism. First, baptism sometimes was performed in the hopes of healing sick people, and when someone was sick, water could be carried to them and *sprinkled* upon them to baptize them. For example, in his *Epistle 75* 12, Cyprian of Carthage (c. 210–258) defended sprinkling water to baptize the sick, saying that sprinkling was equal to washing. Sealing potentially could signify anointing with oil, or the chrism, which in Ancient Syria was part of the baptismal ritual, but here sealing is used in combination with sprinkling water, which suggests the entire baptismal ritual. Second, sealing was an ancient way to describe baptizing, as Ferguson explains: "'Seal' was the commonest baptismal designation in the second century . . . 'seal' is no separate baptismal rite but an interpretation of the baptismal bath."[38] B. McGowan likewise says, "Baptism is often referred to in ancient texts as a 'seal'".[39] For example, according to the second-century

33. *Acts of Philip* 1.12 (Bovon F and Matthews C (2012) *The Acts of Philip*, 36).
34. Ramelli I (2021) Colleagues of apostles, presbyters, and bishops: women *syzygoi* in ancient Christian communities. In: Taylor J and Ramelli I (eds) *Patterns of Women's Leadership in Early Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 26–58.
35. Lewis AS (1902) Transitus Mariae. In: Lewis AS (ed.) *Apocrypha Syriaca: The Protevangelium Jacobi and Transitus Mariae*. London: C. J. Clay, 12–69.
36. Kateusz A (2013) Collyridian Déjà Vu: the trajectory of redaction of the markers of Mary's liturgical leadership. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29(2): 75–92, esp. 79–84, 92.
37. Lewis AS (1902) Transitus Mariae, 34.
38. Ferguson E (2009) *Baptism in the Early Church*, 8.
39. McGowan A (2014) *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 153–154.

Acts of Paul and Thecla, Thecla asks Paul to give her the "seal in Christ," to which he answers, "Have patience, Thecla, and thou shalt receive the water."[40]

Worthy of mention with respect to this scene of Jesus' mother sprinkling water and "sealing" is that William Wright translated a later, sixth-century, Dormition manuscript as Mary "made the sign of the cross" instead of as Mary "sealed."[41] Apparently relying upon Wright's translation, Stephen Shoemaker recently questioned my conclusion that Mary sealing and sprinkling water "sounds much like a baptismal ritual"[42]—he cited Wright's translation and added, "Note that the verb in question, ܚܬܡ (https://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/1187), can also mean 'to make the sign of the cross,' in which case Mary would simply make the sign of the cross over these women to heal them."[43] Yet was Wright's translation the most faithful? Or was Agnes Smith Lewis'? A review of the major Syriac dictionaries online at sedra.bethmardutho.org demonstrates that in every case the very first definition of ܚܬܡ (https://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/1187) is "to seal."[44] Further militating for Agnes Smith Lewis' translation, the Payne Smith (Mrs Margoliouth's) *Compendius Syriac Dictionary* suggests that the Syriac word for "cross"—ܨܠܝܒ—also must be present in order for the definition of "to make the sign of the cross" to apply. This famous dictionary says: "with ܨܠܝܒ expressed or understood to make the sign of the Cross."[45] A close inspection of Wright's Syriac edition demonstrates that ܨܠܝܒ [cross] is not present in the passage.[46]

Why would Wright translate this passage using an inferior and even incorrect definition for a word instead of its first definition? It seems to me that Tal Ilan's observation regarding the way descriptions of women leaders have been diminished over time may apply:

> Even as the ancient authors (historians or otherwise) recorded these exceptional women, they did not believe their sources of information and sought to transform them. They were followed by a long line of transmitters—redactors, scribes, interpreters, and finally modern scholars, whose constant disbelief and discomfort further and further diminished the stature of these women.[47]

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40. *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 3.25 (Schneemelcher W (1992) *New Testament Apocrypha*, 239–246, 243).
41. Wright W (1865) *The Departure of My Lady Mary from this World* (Edited from two Syriac manuscripts in the British Museum, and translated by William Wright, Reprinted for Private Circulation from *The Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record*, January and April, 1965). London: Mitchell and Hughes, 1–32 (Eng), esp. 13; the Syriac edition with Syriac pagination follows the English translation. Available at: https://menadoc.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/ssg/content/titleinfo/671831
42. Kateusz A (2013) Collyridian Déjà Vu, 83.
43. Shoemaker S (2016) *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 159, 159n75.
44. Available at: https://sedra.bethmardutho.org/lexeme/get/1187 (accessed 19 April 2022).
45. Payne Smith J (Mrs. Margoliouth) (1902) *A Compendius Syriac Dictionary Founded upon the Thesaurus Syriacus of R. Payne Smith*. Oxford: Clarendon, 163.
46. Wright W (1865) *The Departure of My Lady Mary from this World*, ܚܕ (Syr).
47. Ilan T (2006) *Silencing the Queen*. Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 19–20.

It is thus fair to conclude that Agnes Smith Lewis' choice of "to seal" was the most faithful translation of this passage. Just as the authors of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Acts of Philip* described a woman baptizing other women, so also the author of the very oldest nearly complete Dormition narrative described Jesus' mother baptizing two sick women.

How common were women baptizers? The next three narratives, which describe a woman baptizer baptizing *both* men and women, with the narrators providing no explanation nor even a hint of controversy around a woman baptizing, suggest that in some Christian communities, women baptizing was commonplace. In each case, the author also called the woman an "apostle."

The first text is about a historical woman named Nino, widely credited with converting all the tribes of Iberia, the area of modern Georgia. According to its narrator, Nino was "the Apostle and joy of the Son of God."[48] She "baptized the Erco-T'ianet'ians," she "entered Kxoet'i, stayed in Kacaret'i and baptized the Kxoet'ians and the Soji with all their people," and "she fetched the princes of Kaxet'i and baptized them."[49]

The second text is about Irene, considered a martyred evangelist saint in the East. The narrative about Irene says the people considered her "one of the Apostles of Jesus."[50] She "instructed many and baptized them."[51] She "taught many and baptized them."[52] "She cured many in the name of Jesus . . . she cleansed the lepers; and she healed all who were in pain; and she baptized many."[53] It also says she "sealed" a dying woman and a sick boy.[54]

The third is the *Life of Thecla*. What is most curious about the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is that it describes Thecla baptizing only herself—but Tertullian complained that women were using Thecla's example as a license to teach and baptize others, to which Stevan L. Davies points out, "The Acts lack the very point about which Tertullian and his opponents argue."[55] Yet the *Life of Thecla*, just as one would expect given Tertullian's complaints, says Thecla "catechized, baptized, and enlisted many people into Christ's army."[56] It also describes Thecla teaching both girls and men in Tryphaena's house, and says that "*by the seal* she enrolled them for Christ."[57] And, unlike the *Acts*, which never call Thecla an apostle, the *Life* five times calls her an apostle.[58]

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48. *Conversion of K'art'li* I.2 (Lerner C (2004) *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography: The Early Medieval Historical Chronicle: The Conversion of K'art'li and The Life of Nino*. London: Bennett and Bloom, 190).
49. *Conversion of K'art'li* I.2 (Lerner C (2004) *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography*, 145).
50. Lewis AS (1900) Irene. In: Lewis AS (ed.) *Select Narratives of Holy Women*. London: Clay, 94–148, 145.
51. Lewis AS (1900) Irene, 113.
52. Lewis AS (1900) Irene, 126.
53. Lewis AS (1900) Irene, 139.
54. Lewis AS (1900) Irene, 119, 126–128.
55. Davies S (1986) Women, Tertullian and the Acts of Paul. *Semeia* 38: 139–143, 141.
56. *Life of Thecla* 28.1-3 (Dagron G (1978) *Vie et miracles de Sainte Thècle: Texte grec, traduction et commentaire*. Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 279–281).
57. *Life of Thecla* 24.27-31 (Dagron G (1978) *Vie et miracles de Sainte Thècle*, 265–267).
58. *Life of Thecla* 1.2, 9.79-80, 13.55, 26.60-65, 28.36. For more on this interesting text, see Kateusz A (2019) *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 58–63.

These examples of women baptizing are largely preserved in manuscripts that contain the very longest surviving text about the woman. For example, the *Life of Thecla* is four times longer than the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The very oldest nearly complete Dormition narrative about Mary in the fifth-century palimpsest that Agnes Smith Lewis published is the very longest surviving Dormition narrative, and the narratives about Irene and Nino are also very long. For centuries, however, longer narratives, such as these about women, were assumed to be later fictions, even when they were in older manuscripts.[59] This was due primarily to a centuries-old, but recently discredited, maxim of New Testament textual criticism, *lectio brevior potior*—that is, *prefer the shorter reading*. In other words, until very recently, the shortest text was [incorrectly] believed to be the oldest text. Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman succinctly summarize the sea change currently taking place in New Testament textual criticism given the advent of research demonstrating that the suppositions behind this old maxim were false:

> Recent studies of the most ancient copies of the New Testament books have uncovered a striking fact: scribes omitted portions of the texts they were copying more often than they added to them. This finding is especially startling given the by now centuries-old text-critical criterion *lectio brevior potior* (prefer the shorter reading).[60]

One reason that centuries of male scholars may have defended *lectio brevior potior* is that the three very longest variants in the New Testament are about women: The longer ending of Mark (in which Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene and the women), Romans 16 (where Paul lists many women leaders, including Junia the apostle), and the *pericope adulterae* (which Augustine said scribes excised because they did not want their own wives excused for similar sin[61]). Another quote from Tal Ilan helps explain why these scholars preferred the shorter editions of texts:

> When I first set out on this expedition into gender country I thought that this elimination phenomenon, which I designated "censorship," was marginal and amusing, evident occasionally in texts, and deserving a footnote here and there, or a short publication at most. Today I have become convinced that, in studying women and ancient texts, this is the most dominant and decisive feature, which scholars should seek out relentlessly.[62]

It is the centuries of censorship with respect to the leadership of women that makes the historical value of iconographic artifacts dug up in the last century priceless. Among these is the Walesby Tank.

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59. Kateusz A (2019) *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 20–33, 49–65.
60. Knust J and Wasserman T (2018) *To Cast the First Stone: The Transmission of a Gospel Story*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 115–116.
61. Augustine, *Adulterous wives* 2.7.6 (Wilcox C (1955) *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*. Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 107).
62. Ilan T (2006) *Silencing the Queen*, 19–20.

Women Baptizers Portrayed on the Walesby Tank

Ancient Christian rituals are notoriously difficult to reconstruct. In part this is because an estimated 85% of first- and second-century Christian writings have been lost, which we know because these works were mentioned by writers whose own works were preserved.[63] There also is a huge gap in liturgical manuscripts, with almost none surviving from the first seven centuries, neither Christian nor Jewish.[64] Given these astonishing lacunae in the written record, recently discovered material remains take on great weight when reconstructing a Christian gender history that does not simply mirror our own false modern imagination of the past, an imagination carefully cultivated by centuries of male ecclesial authorities and scribes.[65]

Early Christian iconographic artifacts excavated in the twentieth century are giving rise to a better understanding of the breadth of the leadership roles that some women had in early Christianity and into Late Antiquity. For example, three artifacts dug up in the twentieth century portray women at altar tables.[66] The Walesby Tank was also excavated in the twentieth century. It may preserve a scene of women baptizers. In addition, it may itself be a symbol of the Holy Spirit's womb. Some background, however, is needed before making these claims.

The gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism are so ambiguous that today various churches still interpret them differently, with some preferring immersion while others prefer affusion (pouring water over the head). In addition, different geographical areas might account for a preference for one baptism over another; for example, immersion baptisms in British rivers at Easter might be dangerous due to freezing weather or flooding, and in dry areas immersion baptism might be considered an ungodly waste of water.

Perhaps for these reasons, affusion appears to have been common around the Mediterranean because an accounting of many surviving baptismal fonts demonstrates that they were too small or too shallow to permit immersion.[67] Even the very oldest

63. Markschies C (2002) Lehrer, Schuler, Schule: Zur Bedeutung einer Institution fur das antike Christentum. In: Egelhaaf-Gaiser U and Schafer A (eds) *Religiose Vereine in der romischen Antike. Untersuchungen zu Organisation, Ritual und Raumordnung*. Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 97–120, 98.
64. Bradshaw P (2002) *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3.
65. For more on the selectivity by which women leaders have been remembered, see Kateusz A (2019) *Mary and Early Christian Women*; Ilan T (2006) *Silencing the Queen*; DeConick A (2011) *Holy Misogyny: Why Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*. New York: Continuum; Macy G (2008) *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Torjesen K (1995) *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
66. Kateusz A and Confalonieri L (2021) Women Church leaders in and around fifth-century Rome. In: Taylor J and Ramelli I (eds) *Patterns of Women's Leadership in Early Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 228–260, figs. 12.4, 12.7, 12.10-14.
67. Gordon Davies J (1962) *The Architectural Setting of Baptism*. London: Barrie and Rockliff, 23–26.

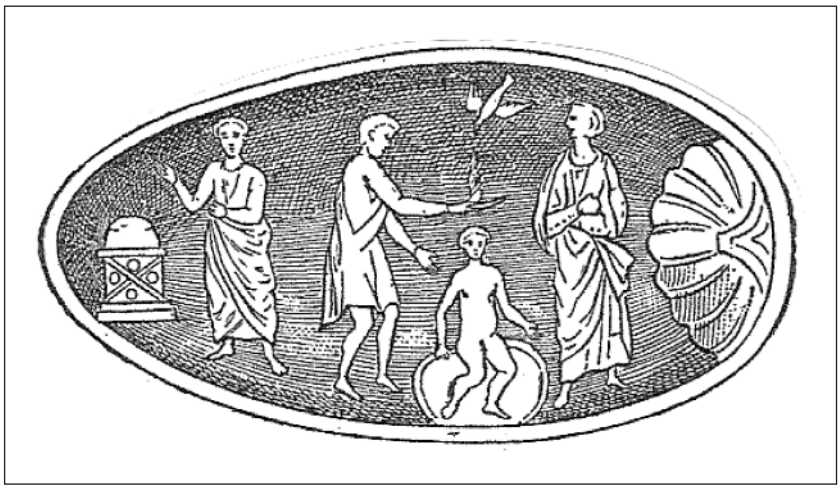

Figure 7. Liturgical spoon: Affusion baptism with initiate in a basin.
Image: Cabrol, 1907, vol. 1.2 fig 877.2.

surviving baptismal font, in the early third-century Dura-Europos Baptistery, was, according to its archeologists, insufficiently deep to permit immersion.[68]

Affusion baptism, not immersion, is also seen on fourth-century art. Figure 5 above portrays Jesus standing on dry land adjacent a vertical stream of water. Figure 6 portrays John holding a bowl above Jesus' head, as if about to pour the water as in affusion baptism. In addition, some portable fourth-century lead basins, or "tanks," found in eastern Roman Britain may have been used as baptismal fonts for affusion baptism, because in shape and size they are similar to fonts used for the neophyte to stand in for an affusion baptism. Similar shallow basins are depicted on a fourth-century liturgical spoon and a stone plaque, both from Aquileia in Italy. Each portrays two people flanking a naked child, who stands in the basin, baptismal water emanating from above.[69] For the spoon, which depicts the left-hand person catching the heavenly water in a shallow bowl, see Figure 7. For the stone plaque, see Figure 8.

A significant number of the Romano-Britain tanks were decorated with symbols usually associated with fourth-century Christianity in Britain, symbols exemplified in the

68. Bauer PVC (1934) The painting in the Christian Chapel. In: Rostovtzeff M (ed.) *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Preliminary Report of the Fifth Season of Work October 1931-March 1932*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 254–288, 255; and Kraeling C and Bradford Welles C (1967) *The Christian Building*. New Haven, CT: Dura Europos Publications, 195, and on p. 26 Kraeling gives the dimensions: approximately 3 ft 3 in deep and wide, and 5 ft 4 in long; I would argue that a person could lay down in the font to immerse, although the water would have to be shallower than the depth in order not to overflow.
69. Toynbee JMC (1964) *Art in Britain under the Romans*. Oxford: Clarendon, 353–354, 353n6; Cabrol F and LeClerq H (1907–1953) *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, vol. 1.2: col 2672, fig 871 (plaque), and col 2681, fig 877.2 (spoon).

Figure 8. Stone plaque: Affusion baptism with initiate in a basin.
Image: Cabrol, 1907, vol 1.2 fig 871.

mid-fourth-century Lullingstone villa church, with its Chi-Rho, alpha-omega, and six *orantes*[70]—arms-raised figures, typically feminine, common in the pre-Constantinian Christian catacombs of Rome.[71] Ten of the tanks are decorated with a Chi-Rho monogram; others have an iota-chi, an alpha-omega, *orantes*, or some combination.[72] For example, the East Stoke and Flawborough tank fragments portray *orantes* flanking an inscription with a Chi-Rho in a circle above.[73] See the East Stoke fragment in Figure 9.

This inscription, usually transliterated as *UTERE FELIX*, is one of the most common found on Roman objects such as jewelry and liturgical spoons. It is translated loosely as, "Good luck to the user,"[74] or, as on a gold bracelet in the British Museum inscribed

70. Painter KS (1971) Villas and Christianity in Roman Britain. *British Museum Quarterly* 35: 156–175, figs. 68, 69(a)–(b).
71. Snyder G (2018) *Ante Pacem*, 35–38.
72. Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks: a study in design, destruction and deposition. *Brittania* 43: 135–166, 139–142 and Table 1.
73. For the East Stoke tank, see Collingwood R and Wright R (1991) *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, vol. II. Stroud: Alan Sutton, 68, fig. 2416.8; and for the Flawborough tank, see Malone SJ (2010) *Rumours of Roman Finds: Recent Work on Roman Lincolnshire*. Heckington: Heritage Trust of Lincolnshire, 138, pl. 1.
74. Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks, 142.

Figure 9. Fourth-century lead tank fragment with two *orantes* and a Chi-Rho. East Stoke, Nottinghamshire. Image: Newark Museum.

UTERE FELIX DOMINA IULIANE, as, "Use (this) happily, lady Juliana."[75] While the inscription on the two tanks might mean the same thing, worthy of consideration given that they were fonts used in affusion baptism and that sometimes the font was called the womb—or *uterus* in the Old Latin of Jn 3.4 and Zeno of Verona[76]—then a grammatical translation of *UTERE FELIX* on a baptismal font might be the vocative: "O happy uterus," or, given the first dictionary definitions of *felix*: "O fruitful uterus" or "O productive uterus."[77]

This background brings us to the lead basin known as the Walesby Tank, which was found in Lincolnshire. Cut up and buried in the fourth century, and then plowed up in the middle of the twentieth, only two pieces of it survived. It is most notable for its decoration: a Chi-Rho type monogram and a frieze-like sequence portraying three women and three men. Columns frame the two groups of people, evoking the columns around the atriums of Roman homes, as well as around some baptismal fonts, as seen by the column bases around the fonts in Figures 1 and 2. On the left, three women stand between two columns. Two are fully dressed, but the third is naked, a long mantle almost falling off her shoulders, as if she were disrobing. On the right, three men dressed in tunics stand between two columns. Nearly seventy years ago, Jocelyn Toynbee proposed that the

75. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1946-0702-2 (accessed 20 May 2022).
76. Gasquet A (1914) *Codex Vercellensis*. Rome: Fridericus Pustet, 145; the fourth-century Codex Vercellenis is the very oldest Old Latin gospel manuscript (*OL a*). Zeno of Verona, *Tractus* I 55 (II 33), *Ad Neophytos* (Löfstedt B (1971) *Zenonis Veronensis Tractatus*, 130).
77. Glare PGW (1982) *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon, 684. During an era when fertility was both feared and also, deeply desired and admired, this alternative translation on some women's items, such as a bracelet, might represent a related acclamation or apotropaic.

Figure 10. Detail of the frieze on the Walesby Tank. Left: Three women, the middle one naked. Right: Three clothed men.

frieze portrayed two stages of an early Christian baptismal ritual, a proposal that gained wide acceptance.[78] Toynbee suggested that the two women flanking the nude women could be seen as the sponsors of a female neophyte, who herself was seen disrobing, about to step into the baptismal waters. Of the three dressed men, Toynbee asked, "Could the central one be a male neophyte with his sponsors, waiting his turn to enter the disrobing chamber"?[79] See Figure 10.

In 2012, Belinda Crerar gave a balanced critique of Toynbee's hypothesis. She argued that writers often described baptism by immersion as preferable to that by affusion, but also noted that early Christian art depicted baptism by affusion.[80] She argued that the Chi-Rho was not necessarily always liturgical in nature, yet noted several cases when the Chi-Rho was carefully cut out from a tank and saved, as if it had sacral value.[81] She suggested that the frieze could depict the *Deae Matres*, Venus, or Celtic figures, yet admits there is no clear iconographic analogue for the three women and three men, nor even three women with two clothed and one naked, all facing forward, not to mention, both groups in the vicinity of what is usually identified as a Christian symbol.[82]

78. Toynbee JMC (1964) *Art in Britain under the Romans*, 353–354; Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks, 146.
79. Toynbee JMC (1964) *Art in Britain under the Romans*, 354.
80. Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks, 138, 143–150, figs. 3 and 4.2.
81. Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks, 137–142, 150.
82. Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks, 146–150, esp. 149.

Crerar carefully collated the pottery and coins discovered with each tank, and almost all were clearly fourth century at the latest.[83] The tanks appear to have been removed from service late in the fourth century, often buried or sunk in water, sometimes violently hacked, but in other cases carefully cut to preserve the symbols.[84] Crerar suggested that perhaps pagans or gnostic Christians or Saxons destroyed the tanks of orthodox Christians, but, she notes, historical evidence of this is elusive, especially during the end of the fourth century.[85]

Worthy of consideration, however, is a well-documented political event that took place at the end of the fourth century, a conflict between Christians who followed the Nicene Creed of 324—pro-Nicenes—and the Christians who did not, the anti-Nicenes, today often called "Arians." The Nicene Creed had an innovation that impacted the role of Holy Spirit, because it said that Jesus was *begotten from the Father*, which overturned an earlier baptismal creed recorded by Hippolytus of Rome (170—236), which said Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit,"[86] as well as the nativity accounts in Mt 1.18 and Lk 1.35, which essentially say the same thing. The new Creed, the Nicene Creed, caused a tremendous amount of conflict between Nicene and anti-Nicene Christians, conflict which appears to be captured by a saying in the *Gospel of Philip* 55.24-26, which reads: "Some say Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit. They are in error. They do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever conceive by a woman?"[87]

Roman emperors after Constantine, many of whom themselves were anti-Nicene, stayed out of church politics and quite likely the Council of Constantinople would never have been called, had not the anti-Nicene Goths killed the emperor Valens and destroyed the Roman army at the battle of Adrianople in August of 378. Yet with Valens gone, Theodosius became emperor, and he called the Council of Constantinople, which met in 380. The Nicene Creed of 325 had barely mentioned Holy Spirit—it simply said, "And in the Holy Spirit"[88]—but the Council of Constantinople added that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father."[89] The bishops wrote a cover letter that further defined Holy Spirit as male: "There is one godhead and power and substance of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."[90] The Father and Son, of course, were male, so the substance of the godhead was male, and Holy Spirit was male, too, no longer female nor mother.

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83. Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks, 157–162, Table 1.
84. Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks, 150–153; Guy CJ (1981) Roman circular lead tanks in Britain. *Britannia* 12: 271–276, 275.
85. Crerar B (2012) Contextualizing Romano-British lead tanks, 150–153.
86. This is the so-called Apostles' Creed; Van Voorst R (2001) *Readings in Christianity*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 91.
87. *Gospel of Philip* 53.24 (Robinson (1990) *Nag Hammadi Library*, 143).
88. Kelly JND (1986) *Early Christian Creeds*. New York: Longman's, 216.
89. Kelly JND (1986) *Early Christian Creeds*, 298.
90. Schaff P and Wallace H (2007) *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*. New York: Cosimo, 189.

Theodosius was the first emperor to back a creed with imperial force. He ordered that if any churches did not accept the creed, then "their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches" and must be turned over to bishops who did accept it.[91] His council and his edict appear to have been targeted at the anti-Nicene Goths and their anti-Nicene religious sympathizers.

Yet is it realistic to think that Theodosius' imperial edict had any teeth? Yes, it is. Sebastian Brock says, "It is in fact clear from many different pieces of evidence that towards the end of the fourth century Syriac writers began to become wary about addressing Holy Spirit as mother"; he says these wary scribes not only excised "mother" from their texts, they also grammatically changed the feminine gender of Holy Spirit to masculine.[92] Sometimes they left their newly masculinized noun still paired with its feminine adjective and verb—butchered Syriac grammar that Susan Ashbrook Harvey says "did violence to the fabric of the language."[93] During these same decades after the Council of Constantinople, the influential Nicene theologian Jerome repetitively argued that linguistic serendipity was the reason that the Hebrew gospel quoted Jesus calling Holy Spirit his "Mother." Jerome, notably, was writing in Bethlehem, where Syriac (i.e. Aramaic) was the common language. It seems likely that his argument preserves a whiff of the Nicene polemics around the gender of Holy Spirit during that period.

Romans remained in power in eastern Britain until around 410, and for several years after the Council of Constantinople this area was ruled directly by Emperor Theodosius (389–392, 394–395), who himself had lived in Britain starting in 368, when it was controlled by his father. It seems quite possible, thus, that eastern Britain felt the same fear that scribes felt in the East. In any case, it was during this very time that Christians in eastern Britain, whether Nicene or anti-Nicene, cut up and buried the baptismal fonts that represented the uterus of the Holy Spirit.

But what of the fifth-century womb-shaped fonts in northern Africa built *after* the Council of Constantinople? How do we explain them? It turns out that anti-Nicene Christians built many of them. The Vandals, another largely anti-Nicene, or "Arian," Germanic tribe, controlled northern Africa from 429 until 533. They built the Basilica of Vitalis with its beautiful womb-shaped baptismal font seen in Figure 2; this basilica is thought to have been the "Arian cathedral."[94] Likewise, the fleshy-colored font seen in Figure 3 belonged to the Servus Basilica, usually believed to have been the Donatist Christian church of Sufetula.[95] Donatist Christians, like "Arian" Christians, had well-established conflicts with the Nicenes. In the late fourth century, however, quite possibly prior to the Council of Constantinople, the Nicenes themselves built the Bellator church with its womb-shaped font, a font very similar to that of the later Basilica of Vitalis.

91. Williams S and Friell G (1995) *Theodosius: The Empire at Bay*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 53.
92. Brock S (1998) *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, 19.
93. Harvey (1993) Feminine imagery for the divine, 118.
94. Burns JP and Jensen R (2014) *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 147–152.
95. Burns JP and Jensen R (2014) *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 152–153, plate 77.

Figure 11. Womb-shaped Nicene font taken out of service.
Bellator church, Sbeïtla, Tunisia. Photo: Author.

Sometime after the council, however, just like the British tank-fonts were desecrated and removed from service, the Bellator church's womb-shaped font was desecrated and removed from service. A column was placed inside the font and a floor built over it, the remains of which can be seen in Figure 11.[96]

In conclusion, a careful parsing of early Christian gender theology and the changes that church councils, scribes, and even modern translators have made over time to that theology, helps us identify patterns in the data—patterns with which we can begin to reconstruct the hidden past. In particular, the Nicene bishops at the Council of Constantinople revised the Nicene Creed and essentially made Holy Spirit male, an effort that, with Theodosius' imperial support in Roman territories, appears to have resulted in the destruction of the early Christian tradition of Holy Spirit as Mother. The destruction of evidence included Syriac scribes changing the gender of Holy Spirit to masculine in their manuscripts, as well as Roman Britains taking their uterus-like baptismal fonts out of service. Nonetheless, despite being almost entirely destroyed, some evidence, such as that of the East Stoke and Walesby Tanks, survived. In addition, womb-shaped fonts in northern Africa provide evidence that early traditions persisted in some anti-Nicene Christian communities beyond the reach of Roman and Nicene authorities.

96. Burns JP and Jensen R (2014) *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 150.

It seems probable that the same authorities who opposed the female in the godhead were also responsible for the gradual disappearance of female baptizers.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.