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How Temporality Shapes Social Structure in the *Acts of Thomas*

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to discuss the image of women in the *Acts of Thomas* against the wider theoretical background of temporality as it was perceived and construed through the text. More specifically, I will focus on how notions of time that emerged in the early centuries of the Christian era proved to be a key factor in shaping women's agency as this is reflected in the apocryphal Acts. The nexus between time and the construction of the feminine in the *Acts of Thomas* emerges as being particularly interesting because it sheds light on many relevant questions in early Christianity, such as chastity, asceticism, reconfiguration of family ties, social norms, and roles.

Keywords

apocrypha – gender – temporality – eschatology

1 Introduction

The present article attempts to discuss the image of women in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* against the wider theoretical background of temporality.¹

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- 1 On temporality see S. Kattan Gribetz – L. Kaye, “The Temporal Turn in Ancient Judaism and Jewish Studies,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 17/3 (2019) 332–395. Kattan Gribetz and Kaye underlines that there is a subtle distinction between ‘temporality’ and ‘time’: the former denotes concepts, perspectives, orientations related to time; on the contrary, time describes a more circumscribed idea, especially with reference to the measured sequence of events. For a broader historical survey and analysis of the notion of temporality against the background of a psychological and philosophical approach see *Subjective Time: The Philosophy*,

A focus on temporality appears as highly relevant here due to a plot construction entirely built upon a temporal contrast between earthly life and life after death. More specifically, the emphasis in the narrative on the afterlife – with consequent allusions to the otherworldly realms – refers to the widespread eschatological temporality perceived by Christians in second and third century Christianity.² In addition, Thomas's intense teaching on the imminence of the 'time of the end' constantly influences the ordinary course of earthly life as it is described in the narrative, thus urging men and women to subvert a traditional social order.³

Within the general framework of an eschatologically oriented social subversion, I will focus more precisely on how the abovementioned temporal contrast affected mainly women's agency, thus bringing about a negation of women's functions within the patriarchal structures of ancient society. Given the devaluation of worldly life preached by the apostle Thomas, a traditional social structure gradually lost importance. On the other hand, the relevance of chastity as a means of bodily purification to gain salvation entailed a reconfiguration of family ties and corresponding social roles. The subversion of a well-established normative structure affected mainly women since their agency was traditionally limited to domestic and restricted spaces and almost exclusively

Psychology, and Neuroscience of Temporality, edited by V. Arstila – D. Lloyd (Cambridge, MA – London, 2014).

- 2 Given the restricted focus of the analysis, I refer here to the description of eschatology in early Christian apocrypha. For a definition and discussion of eschatology within the context of early Christian apocrypha see O. Lehtipuu, "Eschatology and the Fate of the Dead in Early Christian Apocrypha," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*, edited by A. Gregory – C. Tuckett (Oxford, 2015) 343–360. More specifically, Lehtipuu states that in this set of sources eschatology alludes to "the 'last day' and implies a time when a profound, cosmic change will take place, the present order will end, and an entirely new one will begin" (Lehtipuu, "Eschatology and the Fate," cit. 343). For a wider contextualization of eschatological temporality, especially in reference to Judeo-Christian eschatology, see C. Gauthier, "Temps et eschatologie," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 162/2 (2013) 123–141.
- 3 In this sense, it is useful to address the general distinction outlined by Giorgio Agamben. He stresses the necessity to distinguish between the eschaton (the end of time) and the messianic time (the time of the end). Therefore, the messianic time "is not the last day, it is not the instant in which time ends, but the time that contracts itself and begins to end (and here the allusion can be to the *ho kairos symestalmenos estin* in 1 Cor. 7:29), or if you prefer, the time that remains between time and its end" (G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by P. Dailey [Stanford, 2005] 62). On this, see also E. Cuvillier, "Le « temps messianique »: réflexions sur la temporalité chez Paul," in *Paul, une théologie en construction*, edited by A. Dettwiler – J.-D. Kaestli – D. Marguerat (Genève, 2004) 215–224.

to their role of wives and mothers.⁴ As Kraemer argues, “the Christianity of the apocryphal Acts demands of its adherents both chastity and severance from family. This had substantial implications, especially for women. Ascetic Christianity, in fact, offered women a new measure of worth which involved a rejection of their traditional sociosexual roles.”⁵

In addition, since female bodies are strictly regulated by physiological cycles,⁶ women’s time has been traditionally conceived and theorized as a cyclical time contrasted with a linear time of history, as clearly stated by Julia Kristeva in a well-known essay.⁷ Along the same lines, Simone de Beauvoir stressed that women were inevitably intended to live in an eternal present with a cyclical repetition of everyday acts performed within the limited boundaries of a domestic space. On the contrary, men were involved in a working and social activity intended to enable both progress and a construction of the future.⁸ In this sense, ‘waiting’ appears as a typical female attitude and gendered temporality.⁹ Against this wider theoretical background, the interruption of the traditional temporal flow inevitably subverts women’s cyclical time and the social roles associated with it. In this sense, the eschatological

4 See in this regard E.H. Karaman, *Ephesian Women in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Perspective* (Tübingen, 2018). Although the focus of the monograph is on Ephesus, Karaman extends the analysis to the wider Greco-Roman context and the early Christian tradition. Karaman states that marriage and childbearing were the backbone of ancient Mediterranean society. Consequently, women were essentially relegated to a domestic role of wives and mothers. This is evident – she states – also in the case of widows, who were urged to remarry to give birth to other children, thus assuring reproduction and preservation of society. In this regard, see also P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988) 8–12, where a relationship between eschatology and continence is discussed. More specifically, Brown stresses the different impact that a temporally oriented deprivation had on men and women against the wider context of ancient Mediterranean society.

5 R.S. Kraemer, “The Conversion of Women to Ascetic Forms of Christianity,” *Signs* 6/2 (1980) 298–307, 306–307.

6 See in this regard S. Kattan Gribetz, “Women’s Bodies as Metaphors for Time in Biblical, Second Temple, and Rabbinic Literature,” in *The Construction of Time in Antiquity: Ritual, Art and Identity*, edited by J. Ben-Dov – L. Doering (New York, 2017) 173–204.

7 J. Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” translated by A. Jardine – H. Blake, *Signs* 7/1 (1981) 13–35, 16–17.

8 See S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley (London, 1953), 415–466.

9 On this, see S. Pickard, “Waiting like a girl? The temporal constitution of femininity as a factor in gender inequality,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 71 (2020) 314–327. Pickard highlights that ‘waiting’ is a typically female temporal embodiment. More specifically, it is described as a disposition which does not allow women to look to the future. This shows how temporality and women’s body/agency are strictly related.

expectations shaping early Christianity imposed a radical subversion of women's 'waiting': a perception of the impending end times activated women's reaction, thus urging them to break a passive disposition towards the flow of events.¹⁰

The *Acts of Thomas* represent a significant case in this regard. The relevance of chastity alongside the rejection of marriage, the consequent rupture of family ties, the exhortation not to have children to avoid the anxieties of this world are the major traits that permeate the plot and contribute to creating a rigorously ascetic framework. Furthermore, the narrative is characterized by a series of temporal determinations that constantly create a contrast between a temporary and the eternal dimension. Most importantly, a temporary dimension is associated with earthly life, while eternity refers to a 'true' life. In this sense, a contrast between present and future time, with a consequent devaluation of earthly life, is a key factor in shaping the narrative. This overarching temporal pattern redefines women's agency against the wider background of the normative structure of ancient society.

The investigation of the abovementioned aspects will be strengthened by recurring to the analysis of specific episodes in the *Acts of Thomas* related to visions and otherworldly journeys. While describing such religious experiences,¹¹ the author seems to take advantage of the narrative rhythm to convey a precise religious message: shifts, delays, dilations, and extensions modulate the development of the narrative while emphasizing the religious notion of a contracted eschatological temporality.¹² In this sense, a reciprocal influence between two different but strictly related temporal levels is underlined also in terms of the construction of the narrative.

10 On this, see M. Dell'Isola, "Waiting for the end. Two case studies on the relationship between time and gender in early Christianity," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 26/3 (2022) forthcoming, where the examples of Thecla, Perpetua and Felicitas are investigated. By referring to the same theoretical background outlined in the abovementioned article, I will analyse here a different case study where the notion of gendered temporality seems to be highly relevant.

11 On religious experience see A. Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, 2009). On the otherworldly journeys see M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia, 1983). On dreams and visions in early Christianity, see G.G. Stroumsa, "Dreams and Visions in Early Christian Discourse," in *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*, edited by D. Shulman – G.G. Stroumsa (Oxford, 1997) 189–212.

12 On this see, for example, L.M. Ciolfi, "Changing the rhythm to change the society: narrative time in the Life of John Vatatzes (BHG 933)," in *Storytelling in Byzantium: Narratological approaches to Byzantine texts and images*, edited by C. Messis – M. Mullett – I. Nilsson (Uppsala, 2018) 159–176.

The apocryphal acts of the apostles have been widely investigated under different perspectives,¹³ also in terms of gender.¹⁴ However, the focus on the relevance of temporality against the wider context of women's agency remains unexplored. In recent times, the significance of both temporality and gender as theoretical issues at the core of a socio-historical investigation of early Christianity has received much attention. This is attested by a very recent contribution by Moss Bahr on temporality in *New Testament Studies*,¹⁵ and by a collection of essays on gendered temporality in antiquity edited by Eidinow and Maurizio.¹⁶ Both published in 2020, these two works highlight a strong contemporary relevance of both temporality and, consequently, gendered temporality for the scholarly study of antiquity. Therefore, in line with this very recent tendency, the present article attempts to investigate the *Acts of Thomas* as a representative case study of the eschatological impact on women's social roles and norms in early Christian society.¹⁷

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- 13 See for example the recently published *The Oxford Handbook*, cit. See also the series of collected essays edited by Jan Bremmer: *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, edited by J.N. Bremmer (Kampen, 1995); *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, edited by J.N. Bremmer (Kampen, 1996); *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter. Magic, Miracles and Gnosticism*, edited by J.N. Bremmer (Leuven, 1998); *The Apocryphal Acts of Andrew*, edited by J.N. Bremmer (Leuven, 2000); *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, edited by J.N. Bremmer (Leuven, 2001).
- 14 See in this regard V. Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston–Queenston, 1987). See also *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, edited by A.-J. Levine – M. Mayo Robbins (London–New York, 2006).
- 15 L. Moss Bahr, "The 'Temporal Turn' in New Testament Studies," *Currents in Biblical Research* 18/3 (2020) 268–279. See also her monograph: L. Moss Bahr, *"The Time Is Fulfilled": Jesus's Apocalypticism in the Context of Continental Philosophy* (London, 2019). For recent and more general contributions on time and temporality in antiquity see *The Construction of Time in Antiquity*, cit. Note that in this collection there is only one article on the relationship between time and gender: Kattan Gribetz, "Women's Bodies," cit. See also D.F. Kennedy, *Antiquity and the Meanings of Time: A Philosophy of Ancient and Modern Literature* (London–New York, 2013), and *Time and Temporality in the Ancient World*, edited by R.M. Rosen (Philadelphia, 2004).
- 16 *Narratives of Time and Gender in Antiquity*, edited by E. Eidinow – L. Maurizio (London–New York, 2020). Two essays of this collection explore the nexus between time and gender in the context of Christian practices and literature (E.A. Castelli, "Telling time with Epiphanius: Periodization and metaphors of genealogy and gender in the Panarion," in *Narratives of Time*, cit. 150–165; N. Denzey Lewis, "(En)Gendering Christian time: Female saints and Roman martyrological calendars," in *Narratives of Time*, cit. 166–180).
- 17 For a recent collection of essays on this aspect, see *Women and Knowledge in Early Christianity*, edited by U. Tervahauta – I. Miroshnikov – O. Lehtipuu – I. Dunderberg (Leiden–Boston, 2017).

2 The time of the end. Social subversion in the *Acts of Thomas*

The *Acts of Thomas* are a third century work, composed in Syriac or Greek.¹⁸ The contents entirely revolve around the story of Thomas's preaching in India, where the apostle arrives after having been sold to an Indian merchant. The long and richly detailed narrative is structured in a series of juxtaposed episodes where Thomas intervenes with preaching, prophetic activity or performed miracles.¹⁹ However, the common thread is "the struggle against corruption".²⁰

The narrative is built upon a constantly emphasized contrast between sin and salvation, corruption and purity/purification. Moreover, this opposition mainly extends to the corporeal dimension of human existence. This means that salvation can be reached only through a purification of the body, thus by

18 There is not a definite consensus on the language of composition. For a recent and complete overview of the scholarly debate in this regard see J.E. Spittler, "The Anthropology of the *Acts of Thomas*," in *Christian Body, Christian Self: Concepts of Early Christian Personhood*, edited by C.K. Rothschild – T.W. Thompson (Tübingen, 2011) 203–216, 203–204. Spittler concludes that there seems to be a current consensus on the hypothesis suggested in A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas. Introduction, Text and Commentary* (Leiden-Boston, 2003) 3, where the author asserts that the *Acts of Thomas* were written simultaneously in both languages, Syriac and Greek, due to the bilingual background of the place of composition. However, the English translation by Klijn is based upon the Syriac edition by W. Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Amsterdam, 1968). Given the lack of consensus on the original language of composition – and due to the extremely complicated history of the text and its transmission revealed by the comparison of both versions (see in this regard H.J.W. Drijvers, "The *Acts of Thomas*," in *New Testament Apocrypha, II: Writings Related to the Apostles, Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, edited by W. Schneemelcher, English translation by R. McL. Wilson [Louisville, Kentucky, 2003] 323) – I will refer to the Greek text edited by Bonnet (R.A. Lipsius – M. Bonnet, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* II [Darmstadt, 1959]). For the English translation of the Greek text, I will refer to J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford, 1993), based on the Greek edition by Lipsius and Bonnet, with some adjustments. For a recent attempt to demonstrate that the *Acts of Thomas* were originally composed in Greek see L.R. Lanzillotta, "A Syriac Original for the *Acts of Thomas*? The Hypothesis of Syriac Priority Revisited," in *Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: The Role of Religion in Shaping Narrative Forms*, edited by I. Ramelli – J. Perkins (Tübingen, 2015) 105–133. For a detailed analysis of issues related to author, date and place of composition see J. Bremmer, "The Acts of Thomas: Place, Date and Women," in *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, cit. 74–78.

19 Please note that in this assumption I follow the organizing principle and the order in which Bonnet has assembled the text in his edition of the *Acts of Thomas*. However, given the manuscript tradition, it is unclear what the extent of the 'original' work actually was. On this, see the very detailed analysis in I. Muñoz Gallarte – Á. Narro, "The Abridged Version(s) of the So-Called Family Γ of the Apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*," in *The Apostles Peter, Paul, John, Thomas and Philip with their Companions in Late Antiquity*, edited by T. Nicklas – J.E. Spittler – J.N. Bremmer (Leuven–Paris–Bristol, 2021) 254–269.

20 Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas*, cit. 10.

rejecting all bodily experiences – like sexual intercourses – which bind men and women to earthly pleasures. On the contrary, a liberation from the relationship to the body is functional to gaining eternal life. Therefore, the perspective of future salvation orients the necessity of bodily purification towards a temporal dichotomy. The present time of earthly life is connected with continence (ἐγκράτεια²¹). In this regard, both abstention from sexual intercourses and more generally a renunciation of the world are earthly conditions to observe in order to gain future salvation. In this sense, it is the eschatological expectation which initiates continence. The exaltation of chastity – which is a common thread in all the apocryphal Acts²² – is constantly framed in a rigorously defined temporal structure. Chastity is the true force behind the narrative, and the eschatological expectation, in turn, is the true force behind the compelling drive to reject earthly pleasures and, by extension, a well-established social structure:²³

That time required its own, and this time requires its own. That time was of the beginning, but this is of the end. That time was of the earthly life, this of the everlasting. That was of a transient pleasure, this of an everlasting. That was of the day and of the night, this of the day without night. You have seen the wedding which passed over and remains here. This wedding remains in eternity. That communion was of destruction, this is of eternal life. Those groomsmen and bridesmaids are temporary men and women; but these now remain to the end. That wedding ... That bride chamber passes away, but this remains forever. That bed was covered with mantles, but this with charity and faith. You are a bridegroom who pass away and are destroyed, but Jesus is the true bridegroom, remaining immortal in eternity. That bridal gift was treasures and garments which grow old; this, however, is living words which never pass away.²⁴

21 On encratism in the *Acts of Thomas* see Y. Tissot, “L’encratisme des Actes de Thomas,” in *ANRW* II 25 (Berlin–New York, 1988) 4415–4430.

22 On this, see Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy*, cit. See also Y. Tissot, “Encratism and the Apocryphal Acts,” in *The Oxford Handbook*, cit. 407–423. Note that Tissot highlights the necessity to avoid the overarching and specific category of Encratism to define the exaltation of asceticism in the apocryphal Acts.

23 On this, see M. Dell’Isola, “Martiri e profetesse: il sovvertimento escatologico della vita terrena nel cristianesimo antico,” in *Tempo di Dio, tempo dell’uomo: XLVI Incontro di Studiosi dell’Antichità Cristiana (Roma, 10–12 maggio 2018)* (Roma–Firenze, 2019) 53–60. See also Kraemer, “The Conversion of Women,” cit. More specifically, on the subversion of the traditional familial structure in antiquity (with a special focus on the apocryphal Acts) see A.S. Jacobs, “‘Her Own Proper Kinship’: Marriage, Class and Women in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” in *A Feminist Companion*, cit. 18–46.

24 *A. Thom.* 124: Ὁ καιρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἀπῆτει τὰ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ οὗτος τὰ ἴδια· ὁ καιρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἀρχῆς ἦν, οὗτος δὲ τέλους· ἐκεῖνος ὁ καιρὸς ἦν προσκαιροῦ ζωῆς, οὗτος δὲ αἰωνίου· ἐκεῖνος παρερχομένης

These are the words uttered by Mygdonia, the wife of Charisius, a kinsman of the king Misdaeus. Charisius had asked his wife to remember the beauty of the day when they first met, in an ultimate attempt to convince her of the importance of their marriage. Such a request from Charisius occurred because Mygdonia, after listening to Thomas's preaching, was so impressed with the ascetic discourse on corruption and salvation that she decided to abstain from sexual intercourses with her husband. By doing this, she devoted herself to a new life dominated by a total rejection of earthly pleasures. Mygdonia's reply is entirely shaped by a recurrent repetition of specific terms referring to the semantic field of time. More specifically, she stresses a twofold time which manifests itself in a traditional contrast between a 'here and now' and the eternity which starts after the end of the present world. The time of the beginning corresponds to the time of transient pleasure. This is the time of the wedding which passes over, and it is characterized by destruction, temporary men and women, things which grow old. On the contrary, the time of the end is the time of the everlasting. Therefore, it is defined by both a wedding which remains in eternity and the eternal life and living words which never pass away. This traditional dichotomy is also stylistically constructed by recurring to a series of parallel oppositions between *ἐκεῖνος* (with *ὁ καιρὸς* as subject) and *οὗτος*: the former refers to earthly life (*ὁ καιρὸς ἦν προσκαίρου ζωῆς*) and transient pleasures (*ἐκεῖνος παρερχομένης ἦν ἡδονῆς*), while the latter defines the 'true' eternal life (*οὗτος δὲ αἰωνίου*) which remains (*οὗτος δὲ διὰ παντὸς παραμόνου*). This is a life where *τέλος* replaces *ἀρχή*. Strikingly relevant here is the contrast between different temporal perceptions: on the one hand, there is movement and progress; on the other, permanence and immobility.

However, there is a subtle detail which renders the picture more nuanced than it appears on a first reading. Mygdonia refers to the time of the end and the everlasting as a time which is already here. It is a present time (Mygdonia uses the phrase *ὁ καιρὸς οὗτος*) which is 'here and now'. Due to a time which contracts its length although still effective, it is not possible to reject entirely earthly life. On the contrary, the temporal contraction drives a radical

ἦν ἡδονῆς, οὗτος δὲ διὰ παντὸς παραμόνου· ἐκεῖνος ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός, οὗτος δὲ ἡμέρας χωρὶς νυκτός· εἶδες ἐκεῖνον τὸν παρελθόντα γάμον ὦδε καὶ μόνον, ὁ δὲ γάμος οὗτος εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα μένει· ἡ κοινωνία ἐκεῖνη διαφθορᾶς ἦν, αὕτη δὲ ζωῆς αἰωνίου· οἱ παράνομοι ἐκεῖνοι ἄνδρες εἰσὶν καὶ γυναῖκες πρόσκαιροι, οἱ δὲ νῦν εἰς τέλος παραμένουσιν· ἐκεῖνος ὁ γάμος ἐπὶ γῆς ἴστησιν φιλοanthρωπῆαν δροσίζων· ἐκεῖνος ὁ παστὸς λύεται πάλιν, οὗτος δὲ διὰ παντὸς μένει· ἐκεῖνη ἡ κλίνη πάρεσιν κατέστρωται, αὕτη δὲ στοργῇ τε καὶ πίστει· σὺ νυμφίος εἶ παριῶν καὶ λυόμενος, ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς νυμφίος ἐστὶν ἀληθινός, εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα παραμένων ἀθάνατος· ἐκεῖνο τὸ ἀνακαλυπτήριον χρήματα ἦν καὶ πέπλα παλαιούμενα, τοῦτο δὲ ζῶντες λόγοι μηδέποτε παρερχόμενοι.

transformation of the normative structures which traditionally shaped the configuration of ancient society.

Not coincidentally, in the abovementioned passage there is a great emphasis on marriage. Mygdonia highlights a sharp contrast between a wedding which passes over (εἶδες ἐκείνον τὸν παρελθόντα γάμον) and a wedding which remains in eternity (ὁ δὲ γάμος οὐτός εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα μένει). This contrast is even more sharply defined in terms of temporality when Mygdonia further stresses the difference between an 'old' marriage conceived as corruption and destruction (ἡ κοινωνία ἐκεῖνη διαφθορᾶς ἦν) and the 'new' marriage of the eternal life (αὕτη δὲ ζωῆς αἰωνίου). Marriage and creation of a family always emerge as the backbone of societal organization.²⁵ In this sense, the rejection of marriage undermines the cornerstone of the social structure.²⁶ Mygdonia refuses the traditional social order not by supporting a radical interruption of every relation with the world, but rather through a subversion from within the internal organization of society.²⁷ Mygdonia remains in the world, but she subverts the culturally constructed functioning system of the world itself. More importantly, the subversion is determined by a sharp temporal shift from a lifetime which is perceived as transient and temporary to the everlasting and eternal time of a 'true' life.

The rejection of normative roles had a more significant impact on women because they were more anchored to a traditional society, as the statement by Charisius, Mygdonia's husband, clearly illustrates. Charisius accuses his wife Mygdonia of disobedience before she pronounces her discourse on time. He says: "If you obey me, I shall have no more grief".²⁸ This relationship between husband and wife is stressed also in a previous passage:

25 For a broader contextualization of the nexus between family and society see P. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, translated by R. Johnson (Stanford, 1998) 64–74.

26 On the social impact of Christian continence see P. Brown, "The Notion of Virginité in the Early Church," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, edited by B. McGinn – J. Meyendorff (New York, 1985) 427–443, 435. Here Brown states that "[...] the virgin body was abnormal largely because it was, by normal categories, profoundly asocial – it did not belong to society as naturally defined". More generally on women's virginity and continence in early Christianity see E. Castelli, "Virginité and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2/1 (1986) 61–88.

27 On this, see P. Germond, "A Rhetoric of Gender in Early Christianity: Sex and Salvation in the *Acts of Thomas*," in *Rhetoric, Scripture and Theology: Essays from the 1994 Pretoria Conference*, edited by S.E. Porter – T.H. Olbricht (Sheffield, 1996) 350–368. However, Germond asserts that, despite the overall subversion of traditional society, women in the *Acts of Thomas* still occupy subordinate positions.

28 *A. Thom.* 124: Ἐὰν σὺ μοι πεισθῆς, οὐδεμία μοι λοιπὸν ἔσται λύπη.

My lady Mygdonia, why does this nauseous disease take possession of you? And why have you done this? I am your husband since the time of your virginity, and the gods as well as the laws give me the right to rule over you.²⁹

The emphasis put by Charisius on his role as a husband, together with the appeal to laws and gods giving him the right to rule over his wife, stress the rooted notion of family as a social structure where women must be subject to a husband's authority protected by the law. This scene recalls the episode described in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, where Theocleia, Thecla's mother, reproaches her daughter who decided not to marry her fiancé Thamyris after listening to Paul's preaching on continence and resurrection. Strikingly relevant here – as in the case of Charisius and Mygdonia – is that Theocleia accuses her daughter Thecla of being against the law and custom.³⁰ The strict interaction between law and custom in terms of influence on social roles and norms becomes more evident when Charisius adds the following statement:

I am your husband Charisius, whom all the people honour and fear. What shall I do? I know not how to act.³¹

Furthermore, a few lines later he also states:

And I am a prince, second in authority to the king. All this Mygdonia has taken from me by rejecting me.³²

29 *A. Thom.* 114: Κυρία μου Μυγδονία, τί σε ἡ χυλεπὴ αὕτη κατέχει νόσος; καὶ τίνας ἔνεκα διεπράξω ταῦτα; ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἐκ παρθενίας σου γαμέτης, τῶν τε θεῶν καὶ τῶν νόμων ἄρχειν σοῦ μοι διδόντων.

30 See *A. Paul. et Thecl.* 20 (I refer here to the following critical edition: L. Vouaux, *Les actes de Paul et ses lettres apocryphes* [Paris, 1913]).

31 *A. Thom.* 115: ἐγὼ εἰμι Χαρίσιος ὁ σὸς γαμετός, ὃν ὅλον τὸ ἔθνος τιμᾶ καὶ δέδιεν· τί με δεῖ πράξαι; καὶ οὐκ οἶδα πῶς ἀναστρέψω. The same appeal to dishonor and shame is also present in other Christian works where the female character rejects family ties. See, for example, the appeal to *dedecus* in *Passio Perp.* 5,2–5: here Perpetua's father tries to persuade his daughter that her martyrdom is an affront to family. Therefore, he begs her to renounce to die to avoid scandal and dishonor. For the critical edition I refer to: "Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis," edited by A.A.R. Bastiaensen, in *Atti e Passioni dei martiri*, edited by A.A.R. Bastiaensen – A. Hilhorst – G.A.A. Kortekaas – A.P. Orbán – M.M. Van Assendelft (Milan, 1987) 107–147.

32 *A. Thom.* 115: εἰμι δὲ ἄρχων, δεύτερος τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως ἀρχῆς· ἠθέτησεν δέ με Μυγδονία ταῦτα πάντα ἀφείλατο.

All these passages, with a repeated emphasis on the semantic fields of law, custom, authority, hierarchy, honor, rule, and obedience, highlight that the impact of Christian eschatological temporality on women's life had direct consequences on the entire social structure.

On the other hand, the subversion of traditional society is introduced in a very pregnant way in the introductory section of the narrative. Here a highly significant passage describes procreation as an experience to completely avoid. During the wedding of the daughter of the king of Andrapolis – a royal city where Thomas and the merchant Abban arrived after their departing from Jerusalem – Thomas manifested himself as a God's apostle. Therefore, the king went to see Thomas and asked him to pray for his daughter. Thomas prayed for both king's daughter and the groom, and he left. Shortly afterwards, both the bride and the groom had a vision where Jesus appeared in the form of Judas Thomas. And Jesus said:

Remember, my children, what my brother said to you, and to whom he commended you; and know that if you refrain from this filthy intercourse you become temples holy and pure, being released from afflictions and troubles, known and unknown, and you will not be involved in the cares of life and of children, whose end is destruction. But if you get many children, for their sakes you become grasping and avaricious, plundering orphans and deceiving widows, and by doing this you subject yourselves to most grievous punishments. For most children become unprofitable, being possessed by demons, some openly and some secretly. For they become either lunatics or half-withered or crippled or deaf or dumb or paralytics or idiots. And though they be healthy, they will be again good-for-nothing, doing unprofitable and abominable works. For they will be detected either in adultery or in murder or in theft or in unchastity, and by all these you will be afflicted. But if you obey and preserve your souls pure to God, there will be born to you living children, untouched by these hurtful things, and you will be without care, spending an untroubled life, free from grief and care, looking forward to receive that incorruptible and true marriage, and you will enter as groomsmen into that bridal chamber full of immortality and light.³³

33 *A. Thom.* 12: Μνημονεύετε τέκνα μου ὧν ὁ ἀδελφός μου ἐλάλησεν ὑμῖν καὶ τίνι ὑμᾶς παρέθετο καὶ τοῦτο γινώτε, ὅτι ἐάν ἀπαλλαγῆτε τῆς ῥυπαρᾶς κοινωνίας ταύτης, γίνεσθε ναοὶ ἅγιοι, καθαροί, ἀπαλλαγέντες πλήξεων καὶ ὀδυνῶν φανερῶν τε καὶ ἀφανῶν, καὶ φροντίδας οὐ περιθήσεσθε βίου καὶ τέκνων, ὧν τὸ τέλος ἀπώλεια ὑπάρχει. ἐάν δὲ καὶ κτήσησθε παῖδας πολλούς, διὰ τούτους γίνεσθε ἄρπαγες καὶ πλεονέκται, ὀρφανοὺς δέροντες καὶ χήρας πλεονεκτοῦντες, καὶ ταῦτα ποιοῦντες ὑποβάλλετε ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τιμωρίας κακίστας. οἱ γὰρ πολλοὶ παῖδες ἄχρηστοι γίνονται,

Here there is not a rejection of marriage per se, but more specifically a condemnation of procreation conceived as a source of afflictions, troubles, and eventually destruction. The description of the precariousness of human life is characterized by significant terms conveying a well-defined temporal orientation. The existence of children has only one outcome (τὸ τέλος): destruction (ἀπώλεια). At the same time, destruction coincides with a complete disappearance, here conceived as the interruption of a temporal cycle. Therefore, husbands and wives must refrain from what is portrayed as a “filthy intercourse”. They should keep their bodies holy and pure in order to receive “the incorruptible and true marriage” (ἐκείνον τὸν γάμον τὸν ἄφθορον καὶ ἀληθινόν) which is not within the boundaries of earthly life and present time. On the contrary, it provides access to a place of immortality ([...] συνεισερχόμενοι εἰς τὸν νυμφώνα ἐκείνον τὸν τῆς ἀθανασίας). Furthermore, Jesus adds that if men and women will keep their bodies and souls pure, they will have “living children” (παῖδες ζῶντες). The description of these children as ‘living’ is highly significant here. Jesus defines as ‘living’ a category of children who will never live, because they are introduced as the outcome of a chaste marriage without sexual intercourses. In this sense, an ordinary life becomes death. On the contrary, what has not even been generated is defined as ‘living’. This is a radical substitution of the ordinary time defined by the natural cycle of procreation with a time located outside the natural boundaries of earthly life. Procreation traditionally means life: since it allows life to be perpetuated, it conveys a natural time flow. However, here procreation is the equivalent of death: it coincides with the sudden interruption of the natural time flow. On the other hand, natural and traditional social events – like procreation itself and family – will be restored within a realm located outside the boundaries of a limited earthly time.

Therefore, the following day, the bride said to her father the king:

[...] I have been joined in a different marriage. And that I had no conjugal intercourse with a temporary husband, whose end is repentance and bitterness of soul, is because I have been united to the true husband.³⁴

ὑπὸ δαιμονίων ὀχλούμενοι, οἱ μὲν φανερώς, οἱ δὲ καὶ ἀφανῶς· γίνονται γὰρ ἢ σεληνιαζόμενοι ἢ ἡμίξηροι ἢ πηροὶ ἢ κωφοὶ ἢ ἄλαλοι ἢ παραλυτικοὶ ἢ μωροί· ἐὰν δὲ καὶ ὦσιν ὑγιαίνοντες, ἔσονται πάλιν ἀποίητοι, ἄχρηστα καὶ βδελυκτὰ ἔργα διαπραττόμενοι· εὐρίσκονται γὰρ ἢ ἐν μοιχείᾳ ἢ ἐν φόνῳ ἢ ἐν κλοπῇ ἢ ἐν πορνείᾳ, καὶ ἐν τούτοις πᾶσιν ὑμεῖς συντριβήσεσθε. ἐὰν δὲ πεισθῆτε καὶ τηρήσητε τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν ἀγνάς τῷ θεῷ, γενήσονται ὑμῖν παῖδες ζῶντες, ὧν αἱ βλάβαι αὐταὶ οὐ θιγγάνουσιν, καὶ ἔσεσθε ἀμέριμνοι, ἄσκυλτον διάγοντες βίον χωρὶς λύπης καὶ μερίμνης, προσδοκῶντες ἀπολήψεσθαι ἐκείνον τὸν γάμον τὸν ἄφθορον καὶ ἀληθινόν, καὶ ἔσεσθε ἐν αὐτῷ παράνυμφοι συνεισερχόμενοι εἰς τὸν νυμφώνα ἐκείνον τὸν τῆς ἀθανασίας καὶ φωτὸς πλήρης.

34 *A. Thom.* 14: [...] ἐπειδὴ ἐτέρῳ γάμῳ ἡρμόσθην· καὶ ὅτι οὐ συνεμίγην ἀνδρὶ προσκαίρῳ, οὐδὲ τὸ τέλος μετὰ λαγνείας καὶ πικρίας ψυχῆς ὑπάρχει, ἐπειδὴ ἀνδρὶ ἀληθινῷ συνεζεύχθην.

Also in this case, there is a subversion of the traditional social order which is accomplished not by escaping from the world – thus, with a radical interruption of every relation with the world itself – but by undermining the internal organization of society. The bride and the groom do not reject entirely the world where they still live, nor they completely deny the institution of marriage, which is – as we have already seen – the normative backbone of society. However, they undermine the foundation of normativity by choosing not to have conjugal intercourse and, more importantly, by deciding not to have children, thus interrupting procreation. Procreation has a strong connotation in terms of temporality because it is the instrument through which earthly life can be preserved and perpetuated. On the contrary, the rejection of procreation imposes a definitive interruption of the progressive linear time normally guaranteed by the cyclical repetition of reproduction. Also in this case, the precariousness of ordinary social structures and norms is stressed by recurring to the usual semantic field of transience: the bride addresses her husband as a “temporary husband” ([...] ἀνδρὶ προσωκαίρῳ) whose outcome (οὗ τὸ τέλος) is lasciviousness and bitterness of soul. Interestingly, here the author uses exactly the same phrase used in *A. Thom.* 12 to address the afflictions caused by the existence of children ([...] τέκνων, ὧν τὸ τέλος ἀπώλεια ὑπάρχει). This semantic overlap attests to the author’s tendency to align marriage and procreation in order to stress that both eventually result in corruption and destruction.

The necessity to interrupt procreation is further stressed also in the case of Mygdonia’s conversion. As already pointed out, Mygdonia listens to Thomas’s preaching and she decides to follow his teaching. One of the key points in Thomas’s discourse is the necessity to avoid the “filthy intercourse”. As a consequence, it is equally important to avoid procreation:

Neither the fame of the authority which surrounds you nor the power of this world nor this filthy intercourse with your husband will be of use to you if you are deprived of the true intercourse. For the exhibition of jewellery is destroyed, and the body ages and changes, and garments wear out, and power and dominion pass away ... And the communion of begetting children also passes away, since it is an object of contempt. Jesus alone remains for ever and they who hope in him.³⁵

35 *A. Thom.* 88: ἀλλ’ οὔτε ἡ φήμη τοῦ περὶ σὲ ἀξιώματος, οὔτε ἡ ἐξουσία τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, οὔτε ἡ κοινωνία ἢ ῥυπαρὰ ἢ πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα σου αὕτη ὀνήσει σε στερηθεῖσαν ἀπὸ τῆς κοινωνίας τῆς ἀληθινῆς· ἡ γὰρ φαντασία τοῦ χαλλωπισμοῦ καταργεῖται, καὶ τὸ σῶμα γηράσκει καὶ ἀλλάσσεται, καὶ τὰ ἐνδύματα παλαιοῦται, καὶ ἡ ἐξουσία καὶ ἡ δεσποτεία παρέρχεται μετ’ αὐτῶν καὶ ὑπόδικον εἶναι, ἐν ᾧ ἤδη πολλοὶ ἐπολιτεύσαντο. παρέρχεται δὲ καὶ ἡ κοινωνία τῆς παιδοποιίας ὡς δὴ χατάρωσις ὄσα. Ἰησοῦς μόνος μένει αἰεὶ καὶ οἱ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐλπίζοντες.

We have here the usual contrast between earthly and heavenly marriage, filthy and true intercourse. They are located in two different places and occur in two different temporal frameworks respectively. The former – together with procreation – is experienced on earth during the entire course of life and, as such, is subject to deterioration and destruction, as the use of a series of verbs denoting the progressive flow of time attests (γηράσκω, ἀλλάσσω, παλαιώω, παρέρχομαι). On the other hand, the existence of Jesus is denoted by temporal stability and immutability, and the faith and hope in him are portrayed as an experience which is not consumed by the inexorable passing of time (Ἰησοῦς μόνος μένει αἰεὶ καὶ οἱ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐλπίζοντες). The necessity to avoid marriage, sexual intercourses and procreation receives further meaning a few passages later by another unequivocal statement uttered once again by Thomas:

Those who serve my king must be holy and pure and free from grief and care for children and unnecessary riches and transitory troubles?³⁶

Being free from children means being free from what causes troubles and keeps mind and body anchored to ordinary life. Strikingly relevant here is the insertion of children within a series of afflictions caused by material things ([...] πλούτου ἀνωφελούς) or more generally by undefined troubles ([...] παραχῆς ματαΐας), as if to prove that procreation has not a privileged status.

Then Thomas goes back to the main general background of his teaching:

This life is given to us as a loan, and this time changes. The life which I teach is imperishable, whereas beauty and conspicuous youth shall be no more after a short time.³⁷

All the key-terms of Thomas' ascetic teaching are reiterated by recurring to very meaningful sentences. Human life is defined as something which is given only for temporary use (κατὰ χρῆσιν δέδοται), being regulated by a time (ὁ καιρὸς οὗτος) which flows and changes (ἀλλάσσεται). This life is characterized by features which will disappear in a short time (μετὰ μικρὸν οὐκ ἔσται). In this regard, it is not coincidence that Thomas mentions beauty and youth, namely the distinguishing factors of the early stages of life. On the contrary, a 'true' life is not defined in terms of temporal flow, because it is a life without end

36 *A. Thom.* 126: Τοὺς τῷ βασιλεῖ μου ὑπηρετοῦντας σεμνοὺς καὶ καθαρούς χρῆ εἶναι καὶ πάσης λύπης καὶ φροντίδος ἀπαλλαγέντας, τέκνων τε καὶ πλούτου ἀνωφελούς καὶ παραχῆς ματαΐας;

37 *A. Thom.* 127: Ἡ ζωὴ αὕτη κατὰ χρῆσιν δέδοται, καὶ ὁ καιρὸς οὗτος ἀλλάσσεται· ἐκείνη δὲ ἡ ζωὴ ἣν ἐγὼ διδάσκω ἀφθαρτὸς ἐστίν. τὸ δὲ κάλλος καὶ ἡ φαινομένη νεότης μετὰ μικρὸν οὐκ ἔσται.

(ἄφθαρτός). This framework receives further emphasis from Mygdonia's reaction to Thomas's statement:

If you could not express the thing by a word, how will you force me to suffer the deed? For I heard you say that this life is only a loan, and that this rest is only temporary and these possessions transient. And again you said that he who renounces this life shall receive the everlasting life, and whoever hates the light of the day and of the night shall see light which is not extinguished, and he who despises these treasures shall find other everlasting treasures.³⁸

The repeatedly stressed contrast between a transient and temporary time and the eternal and everlasting true life after death is not exclusive to the *Acts of Thomas*. This is an overarching tendency which finds its roots in the gospel tradition. However, what is peculiar to this text – and to other Christian apocryphal acts as well³⁹ – is the close connection between the abovementioned time perception and the subsequent reconfiguration of traditional family ties. A traditional family is no longer relevant within a new social structure where time pressure overturns pre-established roles and norms.

The rejection of the traditional familial structure proves to be more subversive in the case of women because they suffer mainly of a society which confines them to domestic spaces and roles. This is attested by Tertia, king's wife, when she tries to help Mygdonia by asking her to refrain from her new life purposes:

Mygdonia, most beloved sister and companion, what disease has taken hold of you? Why do you do the deeds of madmen? Know yourself and return to your own ways. Draw near to your numerous family, and save your husband Charisius, and do not do what is alien to your free birth!⁴⁰

38 *A. Thom.* 130: Εἰ σὺ λόγῳ τὸ πρᾶγμα οὐκ ἠδυνήθης, ἐμὲ ὑπομένειν τὸ ἔργον ἀναγκάζεις; ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤκουον παρὰ σοῦ ὅτι ἡ ζωὴ αὐτῆ χρησιμαία οὐκ ἔστιν, καὶ ἡ ἀνεσις αὐτῆ πρόσκαιρος, καὶ ταῦτα τὰ κτήματα ἀπαράμονά ἐστιν. ἔλεγες δὲ πάλιν ὅτι ταύτην ὁ ἀποστρεφόμενος τὴν ζωὴν δέξεται τὴν αἰωνίαν, καὶ ὁ μισῶν τὸ τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς φῶς θεάσεται φῶς τὸ μὴ καταλαμβανόμενον, καὶ ὅτι ὁ ταῦτα παραβλέπων τὰ χρήματα εὐρήσει ἕτερα καὶ αἰδία χρήματα.

39 See for example the list of macarisms in *A. Paul. et Thecl.* 5–6.

40 *A. Thom.* 135: Μυγδονία ἀδελφὴ μου ποθομένη καὶ συνόμιλε, τίς ἐστὶν αὐτῆ ἡ χεὶρ; τίς ἡ νόσος ἢ σὲ καταλαβοῦσα; καὶ τί μεμνηνῶτων ἔργα ποιεῖς; γνοῦσα οὐδ' αὐτὴν ἐπάνελθε εἰς τὴν ἑαυτῆς ἐπάνοδον· πλησίασον τῷ γένει σου τῷ πολλῷ, καὶ φείδου τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ σου ἀνδρὸς Χαρισίου, καὶ μὴ πρᾶττε ὅ ἐστιν τῆς σῆς ἐλευθερίας ἀλλότριον.

Gender boundaries are clearly evident in the exhortation to return to the 'old' role of wife and mother (ἐπάνελθε εἰς τὴν ἑαυτῆς ἐπάνοδον). Strikingly relevant here is also the use of the adjective ἀληθινός in reference to Charisius, Mygdonia's husband. This is an apparent contrast with the description of the heavenly marriage as a 'true' marriage in Thomas's preaching. However, Mygdonia interrupts her traditional gender role in order to create a new reality where the dissolution of temporal boundaries allows the dissolution of gender boundaries accordingly:

Mother, may the remaining days of my life be shortened and all the hours be like one hour, and I could leave this life to depart more quickly and see that beautiful one of whom I heard, that living one who gives life to all who believe in him, where there is neither day and night nor light and darkness, neither good and bad nor poor and rich, male and female, free or bond, no proud one subduing the meek.⁴¹

Once again, it is stressed here that life is not on earth nor does it coincide with the ordinary cycle of a lifetime. On the contrary, life starts after death, and in this 'new' recreated reality Jesus is portrayed as 'living' (τὸν ζῶντα ἐκείνον). Furthermore, the new reality is characterized by the dissolution of the 'old' normative order and its substitution with a complete absence of boundaries and differences, in terms of temporality, social structure and gender roles.

3 The Time of Visions and Otherworldly Journeys

The emphasis on time and temporality in the *Acts of Thomas* is described not only in terms of the contents of the story. As previously outlined, the narrative is generally structured according to a series of juxtaposed episodes strictly related to each other. The story thus develops gradually by following multiple and consecutive interactions between Thomas and all the various characters he encounters. In this sense, the story is narrated in conformity with a chronological order. However, when specific religious experiences occur, the temporal order of the narrative interrupts its gradual progression to give room to

41 *A. Thom.* 129: Συντμηθήϊσαν ἐπ' ἐμοὶ ὧ μῆτηρ αἱ τῆς ζωῆς μου ὑπόλοιποι ἡμέραι, καὶ γένωνται αἱ πάσαι ὥραι ὡς μία ὥρα, καὶ μετασταίην ἐκ τοῦ βίου, ἵνα τάχιον ἀπελθοῦσα ἴδω τὸν ὡραῖον ἐκείνον, οὗ καὶ τῆς φήμης ἤκουσα, τὸν ζῶντα ἐκείνον καὶ ζωῆς δοτήρα τοῖς εἰς αὐτὸν πιστεύουσιν, ὅπου οὔτε ἡμέρα καὶ νύξ ἐστίν, οὔτε φῶς καὶ σκότος, οὔτε ἀγαθὸς καὶ κακός, οὔτε πένης καὶ πλούσιος, ἄρρεν τε καὶ θῆλυ, οὐκ ἐλεύθερος καὶ δοῦλος, οὐχ ὑπερήφανος καὶ τοὺς ταπεινοὺς ὑποτάσσω.

episodes located in another space and in another dilated time. The analysis of the sections containing such religious experiences is highly relevant because it contributes to highlighting the mutual interaction between different temporal levels. By showing that a vision or otherworldly journey has a direct influence on the events taking place on earth, the author strengthens the underlying contention that the present reality is subverted by a pressure exerted from a dilated spatial and temporal experience.

One very significant example of temporal dilation is the episode of the royal palace in heaven in *A. Thom.* 17–24. After meeting Thomas – who had been introduced by merchant Abban as a carpenter – king Gundaphorus asks him to build a palace. Thomas gladly accepts and receives by the king money and the necessities to accomplish the task. However, Thomas takes everything and distributes to the poor. Therefore, when the king asks Thomas to show him the palace he has built, the apostle replies that the palace can be seen only after death, because it has not been built on earth but in heaven. Meanwhile Gad, the king's brother, falls ill and dies. Angels transport his soul up into heaven, where they ask him to choose a place to dwell. Gad then chooses the palace built by Thomas for the king, but the angels reply by saying that he is not allowed to dwell there because that palace has been erected specifically for the king. At that point, Gad asks the angels to allow him to go back to his brother to buy the palace.⁴²

Here there is a first dilation both in space and time. Firstly, the action takes place in the afterlife, therefore a physical location situated within a postponed temporal framework. The afterlife is the future time of the life after death. So Gad, who is already passed away, acts as a soul in the future time which is, at the same time, a living present time for him. However, the two temporal dimensions – life on earth and afterlife – are not constructed as two consecutive sequences, but rather as two juxtaposed narratives mutually influencing each other in the continuous determination of relevant events. The palace showed by the angels directly alludes to the palace which Thomas had to build at the request of the king. This means that the construction of the heavenly palace itself – therefore an action occurring in a space-time other than the earthly one – and the actions carried out by Thomas on earth were simultaneous: while giving to the poor all the money received from the king, Thomas was simultaneously building a palace in heaven. In this sense, the two temporal orders interact and influence each other, thus blurring boundaries between a present time and the afterlife. More importantly, a vision of the heavenly palace – thus an experience occurring within a *post mortem*

42 *A. Thom.* 22.

temporal framework – urges Gad to go back (and down) to earth in order to change future events (i.e. his eternal life). It is evident here that the pressure of a future eschatological time shapes the evolution of events occurring on earth. This mutual influence is even more apparent when the angels allow Gad to go back to life. Consequently, he suddenly awakes from death. Furthermore, the heavenly tour experienced by Gad fills a limited length of time, because Gad awakes at the same time as those standing around are putting on him the burial robe.⁴³ This means that the dilated time of religious experiences like dreams, visions or otherworldly journeys does not coincide with the actual time of real events on earth.

The same dynamics occur in the episode of the young man who killed the maiden. After listening to Thomas's preaching on continence, a man tries to persuade the woman he loves to live as a chaste couple. However, she refuses, and so he decides to kill her so that she cannot commit adultery with another man.⁴⁴ But Thomas raises the woman, and after bringing her back to life he asks her to tell where she had been. The woman thus describes her otherworldly journey, a real tour of hell where she had the opportunity to see what happens to the sinners.⁴⁵ Here again – as in the abovementioned case of Gad – the religious experience of the otherworldly journey occurs within the framework of a spatial and temporal dilation. The woman recalls the tour of hell and she describes with great detail the various places where the sinners are punished. However, she does not provide any temporal coordinates. Therefore, the actual length of the journey remains undefined. At the same time, the description of hell is so detailed that the reader has the feeling that the tour lasted for an extended period. Also in this case, the length of the religious experience does not coincide with the actual time which marks the sequence of events on earth. Furthermore, this episode shares the same pattern defining the episode with Gad as the main protagonist. By passing away, the woman departs not only from earth – thus marking a definite change of location – but also from the ordinary time of events on earth. In this way, she can see the punishments inflicted on the souls of men and women already passed away. This is both a prediction of future events after the final judgement, and at the same time a vision of events already occurred or still occurring simultaneously with the course of events in the worldly life.⁴⁶ Ultimately, the awakened woman begs

43 *A. Thom.* 23.

44 *A. Thom.* 51.

45 *A. Thom.* 55–57.

46 On the intersection between different temporal axes within the religious experience of the otherworldly journey see J. Baun, "The Moral Apocalypse in Byzantium," in *Apocalyptic Time*, edited by A.I. Baumgartner (Leiden–Boston–Köln, 2000) 241–267. Although

Thomas not to be brought back to those places of punishment. This means that the eschatological vision exerts pressure on the social conduct. Moreover, this temporal influence is neatly stressed by a narrative which modulates the mutual influence between different temporal levels through a continuous combination of shifts, delays, dilations, and extensions.

4 Conclusions

The already mentioned volume edited by Eidinow and Maurizio⁴⁷ clearly highlights that “[...] although scholarly approaches to time in antiquity are both wide-ranging and detailed in their analysis, they lack any comprehensive consideration of time’s conceptual connection to gender”.⁴⁸ On the contrary, a close examination of ancient Mediterranean literature reveals “[...] the intricate ways in which abstract concepts of time have been gendered and used, and are still used, to shape daily lives, relations and institutions”.⁴⁹ When reading texts like the *Acts of Thomas*, the association between gender and time emerges as an evident pattern of the narrative. This is because in these Acts – as in most of the apocryphal Acts of the apostles – a sharp opposition between two distinct temporalities is depicted. A deeply perceived eschatological tendency is contrasted with the linear time of earthly life which is about to end. Consequently, eternity – here conceived as a time which lies outside the boundaries of human domain – is contrasted with the temporary and precarious lifetime. The course of the latter is directly influenced by the constant pressure of the former which tends to urgently impose its control on human life, thus compelling men and women to subvert a traditional social normativity. Despite the obvious mutual influence between two different temporal

Baun focuses on the *Apocalypse of Anastasia* – a Byzantine apocalyptic text – the temporal pattern that she detects in the narrative shows striking similarities with the description of the tour of hell in the *Acts of Thomas*. For example, Baun stresses that “In ApAnas the time shifts disquietingly between past, present, and future. Some of the sinners whom Anastasia sees seem to have sinned, in the past, and are now burning and will burn forever, as one might expect. Most, however, are described in the present continuous, as people who are in the process of sinning even as Anastasia sees them” (Baun, “The Moral Apocalypse,” cit. 258). She also underlines that “Though Anastasia sees enough to occupy many weeks, within the vision there is no conscious reference to the passage of time or explicit marking of time passed. Anastasia has passed out of earthly time into the eternal present, as experienced in the mind of God” (Baun, “The Moral Apocalypse,” cit. 262).

47 *Narratives of Time and Gender*, cit.

48 *Ibid.* 4.

49 *Ibid.* 9.

perceptions in 2nd and 3rd century Christianity, a specific focus on a gendered eschatological temporality has not received much attention.

This article attempted to shed light on the abovementioned topic. By focusing on the concepts of temporality – here conceived as time in its experiential and phenomenological dimension⁵⁰ – and gender – here intended as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes”⁵¹ – the present contribution described temporality as intertwined with the construction and the experience of social and gendered roles. More specifically, the analysis of a series of relevant passages in the *Acts of Thomas* has attested that the rupture entailed by eschatological time affected women's functions within the patriarchal structures of ancient society. In this sense, women's traditional life-rhythms were replaced by a new subversive trajectory. Women's body has been traditionally linked to cyclical time, as it is biologically defined by menstruation, childbearing, and motherhood. Therefore, the recurring nature of such events has been used to shape the organization of patriarchal societies. However, the eschatological pressure caused “an interruption of usual genre-related expectations”:⁵² the end of time nullified the continuation of society. Therefore, this embodied and experiential time allowed women to reject their traditional role of wives and mothers. In this sense, a cyclical time was interrupted. Consequently, ‘waiting’ as a typically female attitude was suspended or radically subverted.

The contrast between conflicting temporalities is not only described, but also evoked through suspensions and dilations within the general narrative flow. In this sense, the interruption of temporal continuity is also expressed by recurring to the description of visions or otherworldly journeys. The allusion to such religious experiences contributes to emphasize the perception of a linear and continuous temporality which is suddenly overturned by the abrupt occurrence of a non-ordinary time (i.e. the time of non-ordinary states of consciousness⁵³). More importantly, religious experiences taking place in a dilated space and time exert a radical pressure on the events simultaneously occurring on earth. This mutual interaction between two temporal axes strengthens the underlying motif of an eschatologically oriented social subversion. The nexus between eschatological temporality and social structure

50 See C. Schües, “Introduction,” in *Time in Feminist Phenomenology*, edited by C. Schües – D. Olkowski – H. Fielding (Bloomington, 2011) 7.

51 See W.J. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999) 42.

52 *Narratives of Time and Gender*, cit. 6.

53 On the wider category of non-ordinary religious experiences like vision/ecstasy see M. Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford, 2017) 171–173.

attests that religion and society are always coextensive. In this sense, religion has always to be contextualized within the boundaries of social forces and dynamics.

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