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The *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus and the Critique of Fatalism

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Abstract

This study examines a specific section of the *Symposium* by Methodius of Olympus, a Church Father of the late 3rd and early 4th centuries, focusing on the critique of astrological fatalism. In Methodius's *Symposium*, the virgin Thecla offers a series of rational arguments against the notion of an inescapable fate governing human events, emphasizing the primacy of human free will and responsibility. Notably, Thecla's refutation of fatalism relies almost entirely on classical philosophical reasoning—citing Homer and echoing Platonic thought—rather than on Scripture, thereby engaging pagan cultural ideas on common ground. The paper highlights how Thecla's excursus on fate, unique within the dialogue, underscores the centrality of human freedom in Methodius's theology. Furthermore, a comparison with Methodius's dialogue *On Free Will* suggests that the *Symposium*'s anti-fatalistic arguments are consistent with his broader defence of free will as God's greatest gift to humanity, which requires the synergistic participation of human freedom alongside divine grace.

Keywords: Methodius of Olympus; *Symposium*; virginity; Techla; fatalism; astrology; freedom; free will

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1. Introduction

The present study focuses on a rather limited section of the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus, a Church Father who lived at the turn of the third and fourth centuries. Little information has come down to us about Methodius. The main source, which in any case is not without contradictions and problematic aspects, is Jerome[1]. Which information can we consider reliable about the life of the author this article deals with? Most scholars agree that Methodius was a writer and bishop from Olympus in Lycia, Asia Minor, who lived in the second half of the 3rd century and the first decade of the 4th. He probably died a martyr's death in the persecution of 311–312, which took place under Maximinus Daza.

Of his works, only the *Symposium* has come down to us in its entirety in its original language, Greek. With respect to the subject of the present study, I believe it is worth mentioning at least two other Methodian writings, the dialogues *On Free Will* and *On the Resurrection*, which have been preserved only in part in the original language and in full in an early Slavonic translation[2]. The first is a dialogue in which two proponents of dualistic theories on God and matter clash with a spokesman of Christian doctrine. The theme on which the three characters confront each other is that of evil, matter and human freedom. As will be seen later, there are passages within this writing that are quite close in theme to

the section of the *Symposium* that is the subject of the present study. *On the Resurrection*, on the other hand, is a dialogue in which Aglaophon and Proclus speak from the heterodox perspective, while Methodius–Eubulius and Memianus represent the orthodox position. The former radically reject the resurrection of the flesh, whereas the latter defend this dogma—understood as the reconstitution of the same body, both in its material substance and external form—using arguments of various kinds.

Scholars seem to agree in considering *On the Resurrection* one of the Methodian works belonging to the writer's last phase, a phase in which he comes to a direct and explicit confrontation with Origen. The *Symposium*, on the other hand, would belong to an earlier phase, in which the author still tends to conceive of himself as a disciple of the great Alexandrian[3], although the evolution of the Methodian attitude cannot be traced too clearly[4]. The *Symposium* could, therefore, have been composed between 260 and 280. I will not deal with the problem of the location of *On Free Will* in relation to the *Symposium* at this point, as I will have to return to this later.

With the *Symposium*, the Methodian work on which this article focuses, the author from the very title places himself in dialogue with Plato's work of the same name. If, however, the narrative frame of Plato's dialogue is constituted by a banquet in Agathon's house, at which the diners—including Socrates himself—decide to sing the praises of *eros* in turn, in the Methodian work, the narrative frame is represented by the meeting of ten virgins who gather at the garden of Virtue, the daughter of Philosophy: each of the ten virgins—the reference to the Gospel parable is evident—is invited by the hostess to present a speech in praise of chastity[5].

As is evident from this brief presentation of the work, Methodius constructs his dialogue according to a structure similar to that of Plato's writing: a double prologue (the first in which one person questions another about an event, the second in which the event in question is evoked), a central part with the speeches concerning a single theme and, finally, an epilogue. The bishop of Olympus also scatters the prologue and, in general, the entire work with numerous allusions to the *Symposium* and other writings of the philosopher of Athens[6].

The ten Methodian virgins, in describing the value of the Christian ἁγνεία, almost always take their cue from the exegesis of Scripture. Such is also the case with the virgin Thecla[7], the eighth virgin to take the floor, the one who proposes the critique of fatalism with which this article is concerned. It is a common theme within early Christian literature. It is with the Stoic Chrysippus (c. 280–206 BC) that a first systematization of certain fatalistic conceptions is achieved, a systematization that represents the first polemical objective of a series of writings defending free will from Academic, Peripatetic, Epicurean, Skeptical, Neoplatonic, and Christian perspectives. To the objective represented by the Stoic current is added astrological fatalism of Chaldean origin. As will be seen in the course of the study, the anti-astrological polemic of Christian authors is expressed through a series of τόποι, some of which date back to Carneades (c. 219–129 BC), scholarch of an Academy dominated by skeptical tendencies[8].

The virgin Thecla begins her speech by stating that virginity makes one like God. The soul of those who practice it flies up to the meadows of immortality, where it can contemplate the selfsame realities of righteousness, continence, truth, etc. A long exegesis of *Apoc* 12:1–6 is thus proposed, an exegesis that constitutes the central and most extensive part of Thecla's discourse. The woman in childbirth is the Church, which gives birth to the baptized; the dragon is the devil, who lays snares for those who have been born in Christ; the desert in which the woman takes refuge is the land of virtue. The virgins are called to defeat the Beast, whose heads represent the various vices. The explanation of the New Testament passage aims to present the Christian virgins with the example of the Mother,

the Church, who was able to resist the devil's threats. That of the virgins is a struggle that requires a proper use of freedom. Linking the theme of freedom, indispensable in the fight against evil, with that of criticism of the fatalist view, Thecla states:

> Now it is possible for us to determine beforehand and to prefer what is better instead of what is earthly, since we have received minds that are independent of all compulsion (αὐτοκράτορα καὶ αὐτεξούσιον τὸν λογισμὸν εἰληφότας καὶ πάσης ἀνάγκης ἐκτὸς) in the choice of whatever we, as our own masters (αὐτοδεσπότως), think best: we are not slaves to Fate or to the whims of Fortune (οὐ δουλεύοντας εἱμαρμένῃ καὶ τύχαις). *** So that each one of us might not be merely human, but might become good and blessed by following the human examen of Christ and by modelling oneself on Him and living in imitation of Him. (Methodius, *symp*. VIII,13,30–36)[9]

The virgin, in fact, considers that the greatest evil is to refer the causes of sins to the movements of the stars (τὸ τὰς αἰτίας τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων εἰς τὰς τῶν ἀστέρων κινήσεις ἀναφέρειν, ibid. VIII,13,37–39)[10] and to say that our life is governed by the necessity of fate (τὸν βίον ἡμῶν οἰακίζεσθαι τῆς εἱμαρμένης ταῖς ἀνάγκαις, ibid. VIII,13,39–40)[11]. This is the position of one who relied more on conjecture than on reasoning (Ὑπονοίᾳ γὰρ μᾶλλον ἢ τῷ φρονεῖν, ibid. VIII,13,41)[12]. Thecla therefore asks Virtue, the hostess, for permission to extraordinarily prolong the discourse with an additional part in which she claims to refute fatalism and, specifically, that view that binds the fate of men to the movement of the stars. As is evident from the words above, with the section in question, the virgin seeks to convey the idea that there is nothing external that can influence the free and voluntary choice to live a chaste life and, more generally, to choose what is best, disowning what does not live up to it[13].

Virtue grants her this and even states that the speech can only be considered perfect with this further addition. This is the only instance in the entire work in which one of the speakers makes such a request, which, moreover, is followed by Virtue's concession[14]. This section (ibid. VIII,14–17), which is added to the eulogy of chastity and which thematically retains a certain independence from it, makes Thecla's speech by far the most extensive[15]. I wonder whether this *excursus* might constitute one of the elements that could explain Thecla's victory in the oratorical competition, given its exceptional nature. As will become clear throughout this article, this exceptionality lies not so much in the content of her arguments as in the way they are integrated into the *Symposium*, a Christian dialogue on virginity.

In presenting the theme she wishes to explore, that of human freedom and the falsity of the fatalist position that limits its value, Thecla quotes Homer, *Od.* I,34: "By their own wickedness they suffer misery beyond what is fated" (σφῇσιν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ὑπέρμορον ἄλγε᾽ ἔχουσιν, in Methodius, *symp*. VIII,13,49)[16], a passage quoted by Thecla also in ibid. VIII,16,63. In the *incipit* of the Homeric poem, Zeus, when speaking in the council of gods, alludes to the human habit of attributing to a god every misfortune whose cause is not obvious. I believe that this quotation from Thecla already offers the horizon within which the virgin wishes to place her reflection on fatalism: Thecla wishes to place the question on common ground with pagan culture and for this she will resort above all to rational arguments that can be accepted by believers and non-believers alike. It is striking, in this sense, the almost total absence of references to the Holy Scriptures throughout the *excursus* in question, which is quite exceptional in a writing like the *Symposium*, always interwoven with references to the Bible[17].

I believe that this feature of Thecla's arguments in this part of her discourse is not necessarily in contradiction with what some scholars have observed, according to which the primary audience of the anti-astrological section would be the followers of Christ.

Indeed, the *Symposium*, due to the characteristics it presents, can only have as its addressees Christians, who, very often, do not hesitate to reconcile their faith in Christ with practices proper to astral fatalism[18]. And yet, while addressing Christians *first* and *foremost*, Thecla decides to employ arguments proper to a polemic that, as we have said, did not originate in the Christian sphere and that, on the contrary, by the time Christianity began to spread, had already developed over several centuries. The virgin therefore gives priority to those arguments that do not derive their value from Revelation, but from their intrinsic logical coherence.

It is now time to analyze, at least in its main arguments, the section of Thecla's speech against fatalism.

2. The Virgin Thecla and Her Argument Against Fatalism

It seems to me that the argument developed by Thecla against fatalism is organized around five groups of arguments, followed by a conclusion. All the arguments are punctuated by a refrain that is repeated throughout the section: "Therefore destiny does not exist" (Οὐκ ἄρα γένεσις/Οὐκ ἄρα εἱμαρμένη)[19].

1. (§§ 210–217) The nature of the signs of the zodiac, the constituent elements of astrology, is based on myths and legends with no rational foundation. The cosmological model that those who practice astrology defend is presented. Furthermore, if the signs of the zodiac are only present in the sky from a certain point in time, did our ancestors live without a destiny?
2. (§§ 218–219) If the stars are endowed with a divine nature, how can they determine the most negative actions of human beings? If they are alien to passions and pain, how can they determine in human life that to which they themselves are alien?
3. (§§ 220–224) If man is governed by the movement of the heavenly bodies, which, in turn, is caused by God, the latter is the cause of evil. However, if justice is distinct from injustice, God cannot be the cause of injustice. The same is said with respect to temperance and intemperance and, more generally, with respect to good and evil. In conclusion, God cannot be the cause of evil, because He is good.
4. (§§ 224–227) Laws and fatalism cannot be reconciled: if a violent act is determined by the necessity of fate, laws seek to prevent what has been determined by fate. They, therefore, eliminate fatalism, as they show that virtue, being directed towards the freedom of the human being, can be taught.
5. (§§ 227–229) If the wicked are wicked because of the necessity of fate and the good are good for the same reason, then the former are not deserving of punishment and the latter are not deserving of praise. However, wickedness is blameworthy, while virtue is pleasing to God.

In the conclusion of her *excursus* (§§ 229–231), Thecla states that, ultimately, virtue and vice depend on two tendencies that have their origin *within* the human being and not *outside*, as those who advocate astrology and fatalism believe. The end of Thecla's speech is followed by a brief exchange between Eubulion and Gregorion (§§ 231–232), the two women who converse in the play's prologue and epilogue. Both emphasize Thecla's great oratorical ability, an ability, moreover, accompanied by great candour and an irrepressible love for Christ[20].

As will be seen below, the arguments developed by Thecla are quite common in antifatalist and anti-astrological polemics in pagan and Christian circles. According to Macías and González (2005, pp. 322–27), an exception is Thecla's attack on the cosmic model defended by those who practice astrology, an attack that is found at the beginning of the section (§§ 210–217) and which, in the opinion of the two scholars, is surprising for its originality. The model the virgin mocks is the traditional one in classical times, based on

a spherical world with the earth at its centre. The Church Fathers are faced with two basic cosmic models: the traditional Greek model and the biblically derived Jewish model, with a flat earth, a heavenly vault resting on the earth, and a firmament located below the sky. The defence of the biblical model over the traditional Greek one arose within Syriac Christianity in the mid-4th century. Thus, although Methodius does not make an explicit statement in favour of the biblical cosmological model, by ridiculing the traditional Greek model, he is anticipating a polemic that would later erupt in the second half of the 4th century[21].

On this point, having carefully read Thecla's reasoning, I find no significant evidence to sufficiently justify Macías and González's interpretation. In my opinion, what Thecla is primarily criticizing is the existence of the zodiacal constellations and their purported influence on human affairs. I find no critique of the Greek model itself, which is based on a spherical world with the Earth at its centre. Even less so do I find any indication of a defence of the biblical model, as the two mentioned scholars claim. Consequently, I believe the assessment of the argument's novelty—according to the scholars, a precursor to a controversy that would arise about a century later—should also be reconsidered. Overall, I find it rather speculative to draw all these elements from the text.

Not new, however, is the argument employed by Thecla that there can be no destiny if the constellations that determine it were born at a specific time, leaving the previous period somewhat 'uncovered' (cf. *symp.* VIII,14,59–15,25). What about those who were born before the zodiacal signs were placed among the stars? In fact, they survived perfectly well, even though they were not influenced by zodiacal constellations, which did not yet exist. A similar argument is found, for example, in Tatian, *orat*. 9[22].

Let us now turn to Thecla's argument that the stars, being endowed with a divine nature and being strangers to passions and pain, cannot determine the more negative actions of human beings (§§ 218–219). Origen, like Methodius, also believes that the stars are beings that enjoy a more blissful life than humans[23]. The great Alexandrian, in fact, cannot accept the idea widespread in certain Gnostic groups that some celestial bodies are malignant and others benign[24]. Yet Origen considers the stars to be endowed with a soul, rationality and free will and, consequently, believes that they are not exempt from the experience of sin and evil[25]. Thecla, on the other hand, explains that there is no action that does not start from a desire, nor a desire that does not arise from a need. Consequently, divinity, devoid of need, is unable to conceive of anything evil. Similarly, the stars, close to the divine nature and, therefore, devoid of deficiencies, cannot conceive evil (cf. *symp*. VIII,16,1–5). In the opinion of Burns (2017, pp. 215–17), Methodius, opposed to the theory of the sin of the stars, may have considered the Origenian notion of the possibility of sin of celestial bodies as a concession to the supporters of astrology[26].

Something similar can perhaps also be said with respect to another possible source of Methodius, namely the *Liber legum regionum* or *Against Fate* by Bardaisan of Edessa, a Syriac author who lived between the 2nd and 3rd centuries and who, with this dialogue-like writing, claimed to address the issue of human freedom, refuting astral determinism[27]. With regard to the argument of laws instituted by human beings in an anti-fatalist function, an argument used by both Bardaisan and Methodius, this will be discussed later. Here, however, I would like to highlight a point of discontinuity between the dialogue of the Syriac writer and that of the bishop of Olympus. According to Bardaisan, the stars exercise some power over human nature, although they are not entirely responsible for the sin of human beings[28]. Thecla, on the other hand, bluntly rejects the possibility that the stars exert any causal force within human affairs. Burns (2017, pp. 214–15) considers that, in Thecla's eyes, Bardaisan's position, as well as that of Origen, previously mentioned, is an unnecessary surrender in favor of the proponents of astrology.

The Methodian virgin, at this point, develops what we might call a 'theological' argument, closely related to the previous one. Whoever claims that man is governed by the movement of the heavenly bodies is also asserting that God is the cause of evil, since it is He who directs all astral movement. However, God cannot be the cause of evil, because He is good (§§ 220–224). With these words Thecla begins to present the argument in question:

> Those who lay down the definition that man has no free will (μὴ εἶναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον αὐτεξούσιον) but is governed by the ineluctable necessities and the unwritten decrees of Fate, commit impiety against God Himself, since they declare that He is the source and cause of man's sins (τὸν θεὸν παρεκτικὸν τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων αὐτὸν κακῶν καὶ ποιητὴν). For if He harmoniously directs the entire circular motion of the stars with ineffable and inscrutable wisdom, and if, on the other hand, the stars produce the qualities of vice and virtue in life, dragging men to these things by the chains of necessity, then they declare that God is the cause and source of all evil (αἴτιον τῶν κακῶν τὸν θεὸν ἀποφαίνονται καὶ δότην). But God is not the cause of harm to anyone. Hence there are no horoscopes. (Methodius, *symp*. VIII,16,12–23)[29]

Is the 'theological' argument an exception to the purely rational and philosophical style that the virgin is adopting in this section, as noted above? Actually, it is not an exception at all, for it is not difficult to see how, in this part of the anti-astrological section, Thecla echoes Platonic ideas and expressions. For instance, when Thecla, immediately after the passage quoted above, states that "the divine is just, good, wise, true, beneficent, not responsible for evil, free from passion, and so forth" (τὸ θεῖον δίκαιον, ἀγαθόν, σοφόν, ἀληθές, ὠφέλιμον, ἀναίτιον κακῶν, ἀσύμπλοκον πάθους καὶ πᾶν ὅ τι τοιοῦτον, ibid. VIII,16,24–26)[30], she is in all probability taking up the list of divine virtues found in Plato, *Phdr.* 246e[31]. Moreover, when the eighth orator later states that "whichever of these is the cause, God is not responsible" (Ὁπότερον δ᾽ ἂν τούτων ᾖ τὸ αἴτιον, ὁ θεὸς ἀναίτιος, Methodius, *symp*. VIII,16,100–101)[32], seems to paraphrase the famous passage from the myth of Er in which the priest declares that "The blame is his who chooses: God is blameless" (αἰτία ἑλομένου· θεὸς ἀναίτιος, Plato, *R.* X,617e)[33].

The theme Thecla is developing is in fact a central aspect of Platonic thought, an aspect that emerges with great force in the second and tenth books of the *Republic*. It is clear that, in Plato's eyes, Homer is among those who propagated the idea that some evils derive from the gods. Indeed, in the *Iliad*, the idea of a divinity responsible as much for the goods as for the evils that befall man is dominant[34]. For Plato, on the other hand, the god is good, is only the cause of goods and has no responsibility for evils. It will therefore be necessary to look for another cause of evils, other than the godhead. Even in the myth of Er, to which Thecla may be alluding, the irresponsibility of the divine is reconfirmed and, at the same time, the value of the individual's responsibility is emphasized when he assumes a certain pattern of life.

The philosopher of Athens, therefore, seeks to remove all forms of negative causality from the intelligible and divine sphere. On the other hand, he makes the cause of evil coincide with the heart of the phenomenal world, to which man also belongs. It is as if he distinguishes between two forms of evil: a 'passive' evil, which belongs to the sensible sphere as such, and an 'active' evil, which can be traced back to man's behavior[35]. If the Christian Methodius takes up Platonic expressions concerning the goodness of God, his irresponsibility for evil and the responsibility of man, he cannot at all take up—and indeed distances himself from—the idea that the cause of negativity resides, on a cosmic level, in corporeality. Suffice it to recall that a large part of the discourse of Theophila, the second speaker, is dedicated to defending the positivity of matter and, therefore, to affirming man's responsibility in the event of its misuse[36].

In the concluding part of her discourse, Thecla introduces the anti-astrological argument based on laws: if crimes of various kinds are determined by fate, then laws that aim to prevent or punish them are contrary to fate. Consequently, laws and fate are irreconcilable (§§ 224–227). I quote some of the virgin's words: "For the law forbids the things which destiny determines; and destiny compels men to do the things which the law forbids. Thus the law is at war with destiny" (Πολέμιον ἄρα γενέσει νόμος) (Methodius, *symp.* VIII,16,68–70)[37]. And further on: "But the law destroys destiny, teaching that virtue can be learned and is acquired by effort, and that vice is to be avoided and arises from lack of discipline. Hence destiny does not exist" (ibid. VIII,16,90–92)[38].

Here again, we are faced with a reworking of an actual τόπος, already employed by Carneades, a scholarch of the Academy who lived at the turn of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. He, critical towards the arts of divination in general, elaborated a number of arguments based on logic and common sense, which had a certain amount of success. Among the various objections advanced against genethliac astrology, a technique that predicts the entire destiny of men on the basis of the configuration of the sky at the moment of birth, the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά stands out. The life of each people is governed by specific laws, customs and habits. It follows that men are not so much conditioned by the stars as by the institutions they have given themselves[39].

Between the 2nd and 3rd centuries of our era, the Christian Bardaisan took up the argument of the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά in the dialogue already mentioned, the *Liber legum regionum* (also known as *Against Fate*)[40]. The version elaborated by Bardaisan became the most widespread, especially in Christian circles. According to some scholars, Thecla also took up this argument in the form taken by authors shortly before or almost contemporary with Methodius, such as Bardaisan rather than in the original version formulated by Carneades[41]. In any case, given the wide circulation of the argument, it is difficult to establish exact intertextual dependency relations between the different testimonies.

We have thus come to the last argument of the anti-astrological section of Thecla's discourse. If the wicked are wicked by necessity of fate, they cannot be blamed; similarly, if the good act well for the same cause, they cannot be praised (§§ 227–229).

This argument is closely related to the previous one and, like the latter, is not distinguished by any originality[42]. Here again, Carneades can be regarded as the father of the moral objection: if human affairs are predetermined by fate, then reward, praise and blame lose their meaning. Denying human freedom amounts to dissolving all forms of moral responsibility, ultimately justifying even the most immoral actions; no social order would be possible[43].

In the opinion of Amand (1973, p. 340), the scholar who most thoroughly analyzed the survival of Carneades' arguments in Greek philosophy and early Christian theology during the first four centuries, a direct use of Carneades' ethical arguments must be excluded. However, it is possible to attribute a neo-academic origin to "ces syllogismes arides, raccourcis et dépourvus de toute forme oratoire". According to the scholar, it cannot be ruled out that Methodius drew them from a scholastic manual, a hypothesis that gains consistency if one considers the diffusion of the ὑπομνήματα in the philosophical teaching of the imperial era.

When the virgin Thecla feels that astrological fatalism has been satisfactorily refuted, she concludes with these words:

> so that even a child could by now see clearly and perceive their error; for good and evil are within our power and are not determined by the stars (ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν ἐστι τὸ διαπράξασθαι τὸ καλὸν ἢ τὸ κακὸν καὶ οὐκ ἐν τοῖς ἀστράσι). For we have two motions within us, the desire of the body and that of the soul (Δύο γὰρ κινήσεε ἐν ἡμῖν ἔστον· ἐπιθυμία πεφυκότε σαρκὸς καὶ ψυχῆς), and they

> are distinct from each other. Hence too they have received two different names, virtue and vice (ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἀρετῆς, ἡ δὲ κακίας). And we of course, should be led on by the most glorious and golden persuasion of virtue, choosing what is best rather than what is base. (Methodius, *symp*. VIII,17,5–11)[44]

The virgin Thecla seems to conclude her discourse by introducing a certain dichotomy between flesh and soul, ἐπιθυμία of the flesh as wickedness and ἐπιθυμία of the soul as virtue. It is hardly surprising that the *Symposium* contains traces of a certain dualism of Platonic and Alexandrian origin, considering the plurality of influences exerted by various authors on the virgins and, in particular, the affinity with Origenian thought, which is especially evident in Methodius' early writings[45]. In any case, I think it is useful to read this passage in the light of other Methodian places in which the author, trying to avoid misunderstandings in the interpretation of certain Pauline passages, specifies that sometimes the term σάρξ indicates not so much the bodily dimension, as a dissolute way of living this dimension[46].

It is time to question the reasons that may have led the virgin Thecla to develop a reflection in an anti-fatalist key. This will lead us to assess the importance of the theme of freedom in the *Symposium* and, more generally, in Methodian work.

3. The Importance of the Theme of Freedom in the *Symposium* and a Comparison with *On Free Will*

The exceptionality of this section has already been mentioned in relation to the overall development of the work: Thecla's request to prolong the discourse with an anti-astrological *excursus* is extraordinary; the length of the virgin's discourse with this 'unexpected' addition is extraordinary; and so too, in a certain sense, is its content, given that in this section Thecla neither directly addresses the theme of chastity nor interprets Scripture, as she did in the first part of her speech and as all her companions do. It seems to me, therefore, appropriate to try to understand the reasons that may have led Thecla and, therefore, Methodius to propose this reflection.

As is evident from the analysis just conducted on the anti-fatalist section, the great theme raised by Thecla is that of the freedom of the human being. In Thecla's eyes and, in all likelihood, in the eyes of any Christian, the greatest danger inherent in astrological fatalism consists in the denial of human freedom and responsibility: to subtract God, the creator of the entire universe, including the celestial bodies, from any responsibility for the existence of evil is to affirm the dizzying value of human freedom.

It seems to me that this theme is central throughout Methodius' dialogue. Consider, for example, the speech of the virgin Theophila, the second speaker. In my doctoral thesis, I asked myself why a virgin, in a dialogue entirely devoted to the theme of chastity, focuses her entire speech on the goodness of the conjugal act and procreation. Evidently, the virgin intends to demonstrate that the proposed chastity cannot be confused with Encratitic continence. Here, in summary, is the significance of Theophila's contribution and its value within the work as a whole: Methodian virgins are free in the face of conjugal union, as they are in the face of all the reality of the world, just as Jesus was. The choice of the virginal state is not an obligatory choice in a context in which other states of life, such as the corporal and sexual element, would be rejected. This very freedom accentuates even more the radicality of a total consecration to God. For this reason, Theophila's contribution should not be understood as a parenthesis on the margins of the subject of virginity. On the contrary, in-depth exploration of the relationship between man and woman allows us to understand the virginal condition from the correct perspective[47].

Moreover, as already mentioned, when the virgin Theophila responds to Marcella's objection regarding the existence of illegitimate children, she is able to insist even more

explicitly on the centrality of the freedom of the human being. After evoking the image of the house and the clay, Theophila defends the goodness of every being who has come into the world, however much the parents may have conceived him through an adulterous act (Methodius, *symp*. II,4–5). There are no realities that are bad in themselves, but there are actions that misuse a reality conceived for a good end[48].

The final dialogue between Eubulion and Gregorion (ibid. epil.) also reproposes the theme of human freedom. At the end of the work, in fact, we return to that external setting in which the two women dialogue that readers had encountered in the prologue. Through a rapid exchange, Eubulion manages to convince the second woman that a soul subject to passions is preferable to one untouched by them, since one who is tested by passions and resists demonstrates a higher moral form than one who remains untroubled.

In this way, Eubulion is presenting the desires, disturbances and trials of life as exercises of freedom, that is, as occasions in which freedom is brought into play in a more substantial way. Just as the sexual act is not bad in itself, but ends up being so when man decides to perform it under certain circumstances, so the trials that life presents are not bad in themselves, but become so when man succumbs to them. The relative positivity of the trials that life holds in store, a stimulus to act with greater commitment and assume greater responsibility, is a theme that runs through all of Method's production[49]. It is not surprising, then, that the *Symposium*, a work entirely dedicated to the virginal state, closes on this question: the human being could not embrace virginity in an authentic and integral manner, were it not through the assent of his own freedom.

In general, it seems to me that Methodius does not want to give up two poles, both coessential. On the one hand, virginity is a μάθημα revealed by God, a gift bestowed by God on man by his free initiative. It is a gift of the Spirit that *happens* in the course of salvation history. This implies that, at the time of the prophets, it was not yet possible to live in chastity. On the other hand, God's initiative 'needs' the free participation of the human being[50]. As an author that Methodius most likely knows states, "God wants to save us by counting on our own participation" (ἡμᾶς δὲ ἐξ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν βούλεται σῴζεσθαι, Clement of Alexandria, *str.* VI,12,96)[51]. Without one of these two poles, man is not offered a true Christian experience, nor is a genuinely lived virginity realized. If one forgets God's initiative, one ends up thinking that virginity is the product of human decision, whereas it does not exist without a proposal that comes from God. At the same time, without the free adhesion of the human being, every proposal would be useless, since it is imposed from the outside and not accepted inwardly. Here, in short, are the two poles highlighted by Methodius: the freedom of God and the freedom of man.

It is precisely the latter, an exclusive gift that God wished to reserve for human beings, that constitutes the central theme of a dialogue of Methodius that, moreover, we have already mentioned several times in this article: *On Free Will.* At the end of this section, I intend to briefly consider a passage from this dialogue, which bears remarkable similarities to some passages in Thecla's anti-astrological section. After demonstrating that by nature nothing is evil, the orthodox character answers the question of one of the two interlocutors, who asked him where the impulse to evil comes from in man. The Orthodox states that the first man was created master of himself, i.e., free (αὐτεξούσιον [...], τουτέστιν ἐλεύθερον, Methodius, *arbitr*. 16,2)[52]. This is the greatest gift received from God, because all other beings, including the heavens, the sun and the earth, are subject necessarily to the divine order (ἀνάγκῃ δουλεύει τῷ θείῳ προστάγματι, ibid. 16,3)[53]. None of them can do anything other than that for which he was created. Man, on the other hand, having been created free, has the faculty to do what he wants (τὴν ἐξουσίαν [...] τοῦ δύνασθαι ποιεῖν ἃ βούλεται, ibid. 16,7)[54] and thus finds himself choosing between two possibilities: to obey what God has ordered, deserving a reward, or to disobey, deserving on the contrary a punishment.

The argument of the orthodox character is not entirely alien to us. If man's life were determined by fate and the movements of heavenly bodies, he could neither be rewarded nor punished, since he would not be responsible for his own actions. This is, in fact, the properly moral argument that the virgin Thecla develops at the end of the anti-astrological section of her discourse.

Patterson (1997, pp. 103–4) is convinced that Thecla's *excursus* is a compendium rather than an anticipation of the argument of *On Free Will*. In his view, it is difficult to believe that the concise statement on free will in the concluding section of Thecla's discourse is anything other than a compendium of what had been previously written. The most convincing hypothesis, however, seems to me—for several reasons—to be that of those who argue the anteriority of the *Symposium* to *On Free Will*[55].

Firstly, I believe that *On Free Will*, as an attack on certain forms of dualism not distant from the Origenian position, is better explained as a composition following a rupture that had not yet fully taken place at the time of the *Symposium*. Secondly, the great formal distance between the *Symposium* and two works such as *On Free Will* and *On the Resurrection* is striking. The first one, in fact, is a dialogue that—as has been said—gives voice to figures whose personalities, from a human and theological point of view, do not coincide and, indeed, sometimes convey viewpoints that do not fully converge, although none of the virgins are presented as heterodox; the other two dialogues, on the other hand, although of the same literary genre as the *Symposium*, make a very clear distinction between heterodox and orthodox interlocutors, who, therefore, represent Methodius' point of view in a coherent and unified manner.

As for the specific case of the similarity between Thecla's *excursus* and the orthodox discourse *On Free Will*, and differing from Patterson's claims, I do not consider that an analysis of the two texts should necessarily lead to the conclusion that Thecla's version is a summary of the discourse of *On Free Will*. Is it not possible that Thecla's anti-astrological polemic, aimed at stimulating a sense of responsibility in virgins and Christians in general, was followed by the writing *On Free Will*, which makes the question of freedom and theodicy the pivot around which the entire work revolves? In my opinion, in this specific case, Patterson's judgement is not sufficiently justified and, in general, it seems more natural to consider *On Free Will* as being posterior to the *Symposium*.

4. Conclusions

It is now time to look back at the path we have travelled and draw some brief conclusions on the anti-fatalist section of the speech of Thecla, the eighth speaker to take the floor in the *Symposium* of Methodius of Olympus. This is a particular section within the text, whose content manifests a certain independence from the general structure of the work: the theme of chastity, already developed by the virgin in the first part of her speech, is not directly addressed. In fact, the 'improvised' addition makes Thecla's speech far more extended.

Precisely because of this characteristic, we wondered how the virgin comes to perceive this *excursus* as indispensable. Immediately before asking permission to add a reflection against fatalism, Thecla evokes the struggle of virgins against evil. That of the virgins is a real battle, which requires a righteous exercise of freedom. In this fight, there is nothing external that can influence the free and voluntary choice to lead a chaste life.

This is how his argument begins. In a work dense with references to Holy Scripture, the almost total absence of biblical references throughout the *excursus* in question is surprising. On the contrary, she twice quotes a passage from the *Odyssey* and supports her reflection with Platonic echoes. To combat fatalism and astrology, Thecla moves on a terrain that is not exclusively that of dogma and Revelation, but coincides with the space shared by pagan

culture. The arguments she employs, in fact, are rational in nature and can be accepted by believers and non-believers alike. I wondered about the possible reasons behind this choice. It is certainly worth considering that the anti-fatalist controversy already had a history of its own in philosophy, well before the advent of the *nova religio*. There may also be a pedagogical motive: Thecla accuses those who believe in astrology of having clouded reasoning and of hiding the truth "in myth and fiction rather than treating it in a systematic way" (μύθοις μᾶλλον καὶ πλάσμασιν ἢ τέχνῃ τῶν λόγων, Methodius, *symp*. VIII,14,22–23)[56]. Thus, Thecla's choice is precisely to challenge astrology through the τέχνη τῶν λόγων, a method that might prove effective with pagans, Christians, and those whose faith had taken on a syncretistic form not devoid of astrological elements.

We have identified five groups of arguments, followed by a conclusion. None of them is surprising in its originality. Even where some scholars have gone as far as to emphasize the originality of the virgin's alleged criticism of the Greek cosmological model and her defence of the biblical one—elements that would seem to anticipate a controversy that would actually erupt about a century later—I have taken the liberty of expressing my doubts. It is not obvious to me that Thecla is criticizing the Greek model as such, and even less so does she present any explicit defence of the biblical one.

As for the rest, they are, to a large extent, arguments common to anti-fatalist and anti-astrological polemics in both pagan and Christian circles. Possible sources include Carneades, a representative of the skeptical academy, who, in the midst of the Hellenistic era, developed a series of anti-fatalist arguments that were destined to enjoy wide acclaim. Probably some of his arguments reached Methodius through the mediation of authors chronologically closer to him, such as the Christian Bardaisan of Edessa.

Even when the virgin expounds what I have called the theological argument, the reference is not biblical. In order to affirm that God is good and not responsible for evils, Thecla takes up Platonic ideas and expressions. However, she cannot accept from the philosopher of Athens the notion of corporeality as the cause of negativity. In fact, part of Theophila's discourse is explicitly aimed at refuting such Platonic dualism.

We then questioned the value of the theme of freedom throughout the *Symposium*. Adherence to virginity cannot be imposed from outside, but can only arise from the leading role of personal freedom. God's initiative cannot force the human being's yes. The comparison with a passage from the Methodian dialogue *On Free Will*, finally, confirms how central this theme—freedom, the greatest gift that God has granted to mankind—is in the theological reflection of the bishop of Olympus.

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Notes

[1] See Jerome, *vir. ill.* 83. Jerome attributes to Methodius the episcopal see of Olympus of Lycia and that of Tyre. In fact, the reference to Phoenicia appears only in Jerome's testimony and is not found in later sources, which, in any case, take what Stridonense says about Methodius as source material. The date of his martyrdom is also certainly problematic. In fact, Jerome himself proposes two possible circumstances that would have caused this event, namely "the last persecution" ("Ad extremum novissimae persecutionis", see the edition by Ceresa-Gastaldo 1988, p. 190) or that of Decius and Valerian. The former would most probably be that of Diocletian, which took place under Maximinus Daza. The latter, in turn, would refer to two separate persecutions, that of Decius in 249–250 and that of Valerian in 258–259. However, Jerome, among the various works of Methodius,

also mentions the writing *Against Porphyry*: if Porphyry composed his *Against the Christians* around 270, the author of *Against Porphyry* cannot have been martyred under either Decius or Valerian. Evidently, the most plausible hypothesis is that Methodius was sentenced to death under Maximinus Daza between 311 and 312. For a concise presentation of the issues surrounding Methodius' life, see Franchi (2015, pp. 25–42), and Mejzner and Zorzi (2010, pp. 5–33). Further bibliographic indications can be found in the introductory parts of the two cited volumes.

2 In the 10th century, a translation into Old Slavonic was made in Bulgaria of the following writings of Methodius: *On Free Will*, *On the Resurrection*, *On Leprosy*, *On the Food, On the Leech* and *On Life*. Of the latter three, there are no fragments left in Greek, nor were we aware of their existence from ancient testimonies. Questions have been raised about the reasons that might explain the making of this translation. I endorse Bracht's thesis (Bracht 1999, p. 12), which, in turn, reconsiders the thesis formulated by Dujčev (1977): the themes addressed in the dialogue *On Free Will* would have served to counter some doctrinal errors committed by the Bogomils, proponents of a cosmological dualism in tenth-century Bulgaria.

3 Vaillant (1930, pp. 649–53), in introducing the critical edition of *On Free Will*, states that Methodius, a disciple of Origen, turns against him in the name of orthodoxy. According to the scholar, the *Symposium* seems to belong to the first phase in which Methodius sympathises with Origen's thought; *On Free Will* heralds the break with Origenism; in *The Resurrection*, he attacks it violently and explicitly. Patterson (1997, pp. 26–34), who devoted his doctoral thesis to the reconstruction of the chronology of the works, takes up and develops the argument of the evolution of the Methodian attitude towards the Origenian heritage. Contrary to Vaillant, Patterson believes that the *Symposium*, a work in which Methodius is said to be nothing more than a follower of Origen as far as the interpretation of Scripture is concerned, is later than *On Free Will*, from which the writer is said to have taken up themes and summarized them in writing the dialogue on chastity. According to Patterson (1997, pp. 31–33), when Methodius wrote *On Free Will*, he was not yet aware that the Alexandrian had made his own those positions that he was criticizing in his writing. It is only during the writing of *On the Resurrection* that he would become aware of it and, in fact, only in the last part of the work is Origen explicitly named as the polemical target of the writing.

4 Prinzivalli (1985, pp. 10–11, n. 6), in fact, blurs the terms of the question, affirming that it is not correct to consider *On the Resurrection* as a fierce attack against Origen, devoid of admiration for the Alexandrian, just as it is not correct to make the *Symposium* a writing completely in line with Origenian thought. Indeed, in all of Method's writings, it is possible to notice a never disavowed Origenian *forma mentis*, at least from an exegetical point of view (see Prinzivalli 1985, p. 13). As Prinzivalli (1985, p. 127) notes in conclusion, the expertise of the bishop of Olympus in the exegetical sphere depends to a great extent on the acquisition of the hermeneutical advances made by Origen. His doubts about the Alexandrian are exclusively on the level of certain doctrinal contents. This judgement is valid for all the works written by Methodius during his lifetime.

5 It is good to specify that with ἁγνvεία, a term that appears in the original title of the dialogue (ΣΥΜΠΟΣΙΟΝ Η ΠΕΡΙ ΑΓΝΕΙΑΣ), Methodius is pointing to a broader reality than παρθενία: it is not just abstention from sexual relations, but an ideal that embraces all the virtues of the Christian spiritual life, a total consecration in body and spirit to the Lord. On the main terms of the *Symposium*, see Zorzi (2009).

6 With regard to the relationship between the Methodian *Symposium* and Plato's dialogues, see Tomaselli (2020), an article in which I attempted to highlight some points of contact between the image of the house and the clay in Methodius' second discourse of the *Symposium* and some passages from Plato's *Republic*, including the famous myth of the cave. From the article, it is possible to derive further bibliographical indications regarding the relationship between Methodius' *Symposium* and Plato's writings.

7 It seems that the virgin must indeed be identified with the saint instructed by Paul according to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. This writing originated as a simple section of the *Acts of Paul*; however, it soon began to circulate as an independent work and in this version it achieved great success among many Church Fathers and communities of believers. That the Methodian Thecla is precisely the character from the *Acts of Paul*, i.e., the woman from Iconium (Asia Minor) who, on hearing Paul's preaching, converted to Christianity and decided to remain a virgin, is shown by the fact that in the *Symposium* Virtue, in giving the word to the virgin, alludes to the training she received from Paul (see Methodius, *symp*. VIII, intro., 8–10), not to mention the allusions to the Saint's martyrdom (see ibid. VIII,2,14–19; VIII,17,30–34; himn 4–5). Thecla is the only one of the ten Methodian virgins that, with the knowledge we have, we can associate with a real personage. The figure of Thecla in the *Symposium*, moreover, is one of the clues in Methodius' writings that demonstrate the author's belonging to a micro-Asiatic context, where in fact, the cult and traditions relating to Thecla were of great importance and experienced great development. On the cult of St Thecla, see Davis (2001).

8 Regarding the debate on fate in early Christian literature, see: Bandini (2003, pp. 15–28); Motta (2008, pp. 13–29); Ramelli (2009, pp. 61–75, 104–6); Franchi (2015, pp. 367–71).

9 In this study I use the translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 120) and the critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 236).

10 Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 236).

11 See the previous note.

12 Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 238).

[13] See Macías and González (2005, p. 319). The study presents the arguments Thecla develops in the section of her discourse against astrology; it also offers a Spanish translation of the passage in question, accompanied by an apparatus of notes. I refer to this article above all for the numerous astrological and astronomical pieces of information it offers, information that allows us to understand the final section of Thecla's discourse even in its most concrete details.

[14] According to Patterson (1997, pp. 102–3) this exchange of lines between Thecla and Virtue may be nothing more than a literary device to break up a very long presentation. However, it could also be a device that, in its exceptionality, seeks to emphasize the theme of the following section.

[15] If we consider the paragraph division of the critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963), we see that Thecla's speech consists of 61 paragraphs (§§ 169–230), while the second longest speech is that of the virgin Thalia, the third speaker, whose speech consists of 40 paragraphs (§§ 51–91).

[16] Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 120) and critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 238).

[17] This is what Bandini (2003, pp. 26–27) says about the writing *Against Fate* by Gregory of Nyssa. The scholar affirms that this perspective is not at all obvious, if one juxtaposes the philosophical framework of the Nissenian's writing with Origen's arguments on the subject of free will, all of which are founded on the exegesis of passages of Holy Scripture. Bandini also quotes Philo of Alexandria, who, at the beginning of his *On Providence* (I,1), stated that his arguments were based on "argumentis a ratione petitis" (edition by Hadas-Lebel 1973, p. 126).

[18] See, in this regard, Macías and González (2005, p. 322).

[19] On the difference between the meaning of γένεσις and that of εἱμαρμένη, see Macías and González (2005, p. 336, n. 73). The interpretation offered in this study of the term γένεσις is the same as that found in Amand (1973, p. 335), who understands γένεσις as "destin de naissance ou fatalité congénitale". Genethliac astronomy is a technique based on the representation of the celestial positions as seen at the time and place of an individual's birth.

[20] Patterson (1997, p. 82) observes that the *Symposium* of Methodius contains two interludes consisting of short exchanges between Eubulion and Gregorion, the first positioned after Thalia's speech and the second after Thecla's speech. In his view, these two interludes indicate two changes in direction within the dialogue.

[21] The study by Macías and González (2005) uses Inglebert's (2001) monograph as a source. However, with respect to the question of the cosmic model advocated by Methodius, the two studies disagree: according to Inglebert (2001, pp. 40, 52) Methodius is a defender of the Greek cosmic model, whereas, according to Macías and González (2005, p. 326), what Thecla does is to summarize and not accept what the defenders of astrology advocated.

[22] In *orat*. 9 Tatian, after mentioning figures from myth transformed into constellations, asks: "then how was it that heaven was in disorder until these bodies were placed in their pre-arranged stations?" (translation by Whittaker 1982, p. 19).

[23] According to Scott (1991, p. 131), "Though believing that the heavenly bodies are spiritually comparable to humanity, Origen never doubts that the stars have a much happier life. Following a long philosophical tradition, Origen thinks that the life of the rational bodies in heaven must be one of great peace and order, in contrast to the troubles which plague the life below".

[24] See Scott (1991, pp. 143–44).

[25] Origen, *princ*. I,7,2: "For Job appears to show that not only may the stars be subject to sins, but even that they are not clean from the contagion of sin. For it is written thus: 'The stars also are not clean in his sight' (*Iob* 25:5)". The translation is by Behr (2017, p. 123). On this passage from Origen, see Scott (1991, pp. 137–38).

[26] The aforementioned article, in its conclusion (Burns 2017, pp. 217–20), establishes a parallelism between the notion of a demon proposed by Plato in the *Symposium* and the presentation of the stars offered by Thecla in Methodius' work of the same name. According to Socrates, in fact, who in turn relates what he learnt from the priestess Diotima of Mantinea, ἔρος is a demon and not a god: his nature is, in fact, marked by lack, from which desire arises, i.e., the impulse to obtain what one does not possess. This conception seems to be alluded to by the eighth Methodian virgin, who derives the impulse to sin from the sense of deprivation, absence and emptiness. Heavenly bodies are incapable of evil, as they know no lack and, consequently, no desire. According to the scholar, the parallelism with Plato's masterpiece is intended to show Methodius' attempt to exempt the stars not only from sin, but also from their identification with demons.

[27] Concerning the *Liber legum regionum* or *Against Fate* of Bardaisan of Edessa, in addition to the edition by Ramelli (2009), which offers an extensive introduction, the original text, a translation into Italian and an extensive set of notes, see also Drijvers (2014, pp. 88–108).

[28] The only fate admitted by Bardaisan is not an autonomous power, but depends entirely on God, as it coincides with God's established order. Fate and the stars from which it derives are subject to God's order, but human free will is not subject to them. One could, therefore, say that fate and the stars influence, but do not constrain. They may condition external events, but they do not morally determine human choices. Indeed, Bardaisan states: "Just as we see that fate annihilates nature, so too we see that man's free will rejects fate and annihilates it: though not entirely, just as fate itself does not reject nature in everything. For it is fitting that these three things, nature and fate and free will, should be held in their existence until the process is complete and the measure and number are completed" (see Ramelli 2009, pp. 171–73).

[29] Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 125) and critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 248).

[30] Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 125) and critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 248). Among the divine characteristics listed, Thecla particularly insists on freedom from the passions (ἀσύμπλοκον πάθους). In fact, immediately afterwards, she presents temperance (σωφροσύνη) as a good, the opposite of which is intemperance (ἀκολασία), which will therefore be an evil (Methodius, *symp.* VIII,16,31–38). It is as if human temperance were a reflection of that characteristic of God which is freedom from the passions: that is why God is pleased with temperance (χαίρει δὲ ὁ θεὸς τῇ σωφροσύνῃ, ibid. VIII,16,40, Musurillo and Debidour 1963, p. 250) which He sees embodied in men. It is hardly surprising that among the various divine characteristics the virgin insists on this one, within a work dedicated to the theme of chastity.

[31] "But the divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and all such qualities" (τὸ δὲ θεῖον καλόν, σοφόν, ἀγαθόν, καὶ πᾶν ὅ τι τοιοῦτον). Translation by Fowler (1982, p. 473). The Greek text I refer to is the one in the same volume.

[32] Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 128) and critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 254).

[33] Translation by Shorey (1980, p. 507). The Greek text I refer to is the one in the same volume. Other possible Platonic echoes in the anti-astrological section are pointed out by Jahn (1865, pp. 59–63).

[34] Perhaps the best known testimony is found in Homer, *Il.* XXIV,525–530, where the two jars are evoked, one full of evils and the other full of goods, from which Zeus extracts now evils, now goods to assign to man. It is important to note that in Homer we also find the first attempt to relieve the deity of responsibility for evil: I refer, of course, to Homer, *Od.* I,34, a verse that Thecla, moreover, quotes twice.

[35] On Platonic theology in relation to the problem of evil, see Ferrari (1998) and Ferrari (2017).

[36] I refer here to Theophila's response to Marcella's objection, who asks, with a polemical attitude, whether her assertion that no one is born at the margin of God's will also applies to illegitimate children. In order to demonstrate how God works directly for the birth of any human being, the virgin Theophila proposes the image of a house with many entrances, inside which a craftsman moulds all the clay offered to him from outside, even if it is brought in illicitly. Theophila then explains that there are no evil realities in themselves, but that they become so according to the use made of them. The image evoked by Theophila and his explanation can be found in Methodius, *symp.* II,4–5. In Tomaselli (2020), I have highlighted the Platonic influence in Theophila's evocation of the image in question and, at the same time, tried to show how the content of this part of his discourse is in fact far removed from Platonic inspiration.

[37] Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 127) and critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 252).

[38] Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 128).

[39] Concerning the argument of the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά employed by Carneades, see Amand (1973, pp. 55–60).

[40] On the argumentation of the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά in Bardaisan and other Christian authors, see Ramelli (2009, pp. 104–6).

[41] Studies questioning the argumentation of the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά in the discourse of the virgin Thecla and its possible sources include: Amand (1973, pp. 338–40); Ramelli (2013, pp. 272–73); Burns (2017, pp. 211–13). The latter believes that Methodius "must have known the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά via contemporaries, in turn likely reliant on Bardaisan, as were near-contemporaries such as Eusebius of Caeserea or the author of the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*" (Burns 2017, p. 212).

[42] In *2 apol.* 7,6–7 Justin also closely links the argument of the νόμιμα βαρβαρικά, albeit only hinted at, to the properly moral argument: "And this is the nature of all that is made—to be capable of vice and virtue. For neither would any of them be praiseworthy unless there was also power to turn to both. And this also is shown by those people everywhere who have made laws and conducted philosophy according to right reason, by their agreeing to do some things and refrain from others". Translated by Barnard (1997, pp. 78–79). The moral argumentation in an anti-fatalist function also appears in Justin, *2 apol.* 43.

[43] Concerning Carneades' elaboration of the moral argument, see the second and third chapters of Amand's monograph (Amand 1973, pp. 41–68). Other texts—pagan, Jewish or Christian—that present the same or similar arguments are listed by Bandini (2003, p. 21, n. 38).

[44] Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 129) and critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, pp. 256–58).

[45] The expression coined by Prinzivalli (1998, p. 47), according to which Methodius represents "una sorta di ponte culturale", has had some success: on the one hand, he shows himself to be the heir and interpreter of traditions of Asian culture; on the other, he appears to be sensitive to and akin to modern Alexandrian culture. In the specific case of the *Symposium*, one must then consider what I like to call the polyphony of the ten virgins. Methodius did not compose a simple treatise on chastity, but gave voice to ten distinct characters, from whose speeches one cannot derive a systematic and coherent theological thought. None of the ten virgins' speeches represent, taken in isolation, Methodius' viewpoint; on the contrary, they contain elements that can be traced back to different theological traditions, which Methodius considered compatible with his own vision.

[46] See, for example, Methodius, *res.* I,58,5–6 and I,59,1.

[47] With regard to the judgement expressed above, I am indebted to Cantalamessa (1976, pp. 431–32). According to the Capuchin scholar, continence does not need marriage to be repudiated in order to be recognized in its validity. On the contrary, it does not make sense apart from the simultaneous affirmation of marriage. In Jesus, in fact, we observe this freedom in the face of marriage, as in the face of all reality.

[48] This is the general conclusion reached by Theophila: "Now an art always operates on the material submitted to it. And there is nothing that is to be considered evil of itself, but rather becomes such by the act of the men who use it (οὐδὲν γὰρ αὐτό τι καθ᾽ ἑαυτὸ τῶν πραγμάτων ἡγητέον εἶναι κακὸν ἀλλὰ παρὰ τὴν πρᾶξιν τῶν χρωμένων τοιοῦτο γίνεσθαι). For when a thing is dealt with in a good and prudent way, the result is good; and bad when it is treated improperly and disgracefully". Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 54) and critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 80). After proposing a general statement, the virgin presents some examples: iron is not responsible for its use in warfare; metals such as gold, silver and bronze are not to blame if they are used in the creation of statues that foment idolatry; one who works wool merely uses it for the project he has in mind, even if it has been supplied to him by the person who stole it; the same applies to an adulterous relationship, where the responsibility falls solely on the one who commits adultery, not on the fruit of the relationship.

[49] On the fruitfulness of life's trials, see, firstly, Methodius, *De vita* 3, where he is defined as stronger than others who has endured great labours. In *arbitr*. 20,2–8, the orthodox character states that God, although he was able to annihilate the devil, he allowed the devil to exist so that men, who had previously been overcome by him, could overcome him. The world, therefore, is nothing but the gymnasium in which God's disciples wrestle against the Evil One: he who wins against the Enemy is praised by God, while he who does not try hard enough and is knocked down is condemned. This section is characterized by the use of agonistic terminology, probably of Pauline derivation, also used in several passages of the Methodian *Symposium*, including, for example, *symp*. epil. 107–113. The theme of the positivity of the experience of trial in human existence is, moreover, developed in *De cibis* 2–5, where the trials that man is called upon to go through are compared to the fertilizer that makes gardens more beautiful and lush (ibid. 5,4). In *res*. II,5,1–2, on the other hand, we do not go so far as to speak of the positivity of being put to the test, but only of its necessity.

[50] That virginity has been revealed is, for example, the presupposition of the whole description of human progress made by Marcella (cf. Methodius, *symp*. I,2–5). In the first discourse, however, we also find explicit statements on the subject: in ibid. I,1,20–21 virginity is described as a drink that cannot flow from the earth, but only from heaven; in ibid. I,2,1–3 it is described as a plant that was sent from heaven to men at a certain moment in the history of salvation; finally, in ibid. I,4,7–9, Marcella explicitly states that only the Lord could proclaim the μάθημα of virginity, an assertion that is motivated throughout the paragraph. The notion of virginity as a gift from Christ appears several times, until the speech of the last speaker, Domnina, who interprets the fable of Jotham found in *Iud* 9:8–15. With this tale, according to Domnina, the Bible alludes to the different legislations up to Christ. The last commandment directed to man in salvation history is precisely that of virginity, which Christ offers to the apostles (cf. Methodius, *symp*. X,3–4).

[51] The translation is mine, while the critical edition is that of Descortieux (1999, p. 252).

[52] Critical edition by Bonwetsch (1917, p. 186).

[53] See the previous note.

[54] Critical edition by Bonwetsch (1917, p. 188).

[55] Vaillant (1930, pp. 649–53) and Buchheit (1958, p. 172) argue for the anteriority of the *Symposium*; in addition to Patterson, Franchi (2015, pp. 108–10) is of the opposite opinion.

[56] Translation by Musurillo (1958, p. 121) and critical edition by Musurillo and Debidour (1963, p. 240).

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