“She Destroyed Multitudes”: Marcellina’s Group in Rome

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In his discussion of the Alexandrian philosopher Carpocrates, Irenaeus briefly mentions a female student of Carpocrates named Marcellina. This intrepid lady left her teacher in Egypt and immigrated to Rome in the mid-second century, where she founded a group dedicated to the Platonist-inspired teachings of her mentor. The circle of devotees she attracted supposedly used images of Jesus, Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle as part of their religious practice, a fact that should earn her a place in the first chapter of any study on Christian iconography.¹ A woman who leaves her home, travels from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, founds her own group in the largest and most intimidating city in the known world, a group that, in the words of Irenaeus, “destroyed multitudes,” will naturally excite both admiration and curiosity. It makes a fitting topic for the present volume, given Antti Marjanen’s attention to the study of women in early Christianity.

Heresiological Accounts of the Carpocratians

After a somewhat lengthy section on Carpocrates, Irenaeus comments as follows,²

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¹ Neither Marcellina nor the Carpocratians are mentioned in Ernst Kitzinger, “The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm,” DOP 8 (1954): 83–150; missing also from Paul Corby Finney, The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). In Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity (Minneapolis: Eerdmans, 2005), 8–9, Robin Jensen mentions the Carpocratians generally, without drawing attention to Marcellina in particular. One of the most sustained treatments of Marcellina is by Madeleine Scopello, Femme, gnose, et manichéisme; de l’espace mythique au territoire du réel (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 218–221.

² Haer. 1.25.6. The translation given here is chiefly that of Dominic Unger, in Irenaeus of Lyons, Against the Heresies, Book 1, ACW 55 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 89–90, with a few minor changes. With regard to “teaching,” Unger discusses why doctrina surely represents
Some of them put a mark on their disciples, branding them behind the lobe of the right ear. Among these [followers of Carpocrates] was Marcellina, who came to Rome under Anicetus and, with this teaching (doc-trina), she destroyed many. They call themselves gnostics. They also possess images, some of which are paintings (imagines), some made of other materials, saying that Christ’s image was copied by Pilate at the time Jesus lived among men. They put garlands on these images and exhibit them along with the images of the philosophers of the world, images of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and the rest. Toward these [images] they practice other rites like those of the nations.\(^3\)

This short notice conceals a puzzle often elided in the brief treatments this passage receives. First, there is some question as to whether the “they” that serves as the subject of vocant in the third sentence and habent in the following sentence, (“they call themselves gnostics,” “they possess images”) refers primarily to Marcellina or to the Carpocratians generally, the main subject of this section. If the latter—if the remarks about the use of images apply principally to Carpocrates and his followers in Alexandria—then the specificity of this remark and whether it should apply to Marcellina in Rome is diminished. Even if she does proceed from the orbit of Carpocrates, there is no guarantee that her group automatically replicates all Carpocratian practices: not all students follow in the exact footsteps of their teachers.

The question becomes more acute on reading Hippolytus’s account of the Carpocratians, as he makes no mention of Marcellina. After recounting Carpocratian teachings on metempsychosis—straightforwardly copying much of

\[\text{διδασκαλεῖον}\] in the Greek original (pp. 242–243), and so he translates, “because she belonged to this school.” But as he notes in his commentary to 11.1 (pp. 194–195), where a similar situation arises, it must mean something more like “system of doctrine,” for which “teaching” seems adequate.