

*Questions*  
**Women Asked**



# Questions Women Asked



Historical Issues, Timeless Answers

Simonetta Carr



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To the women who have shaped my life, especially my mother, Luciana Negrini, who taught me to raise questions; my daughter Renaissance Carr, whose questions always challenge me to grow in wisdom and understanding; and my granddaughters Charlize, Micaela, and Cate Carr, who just gave me a big book of questions to try to answer.





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## Preface

Questions are important. Sometimes they help us understand the person who is posing them. Sometimes they help us understand ourselves and bring to light similar queries that have fluttered in our minds. Quite often, they spark new questions and generate new discussions.

The women included in this book span most of the history of the church. I have chosen thirty-one inquisitive women who have either posed or examined a variety of puzzling questions, striving to find biblical answers. Of course, each woman included in this collection asked more questions than the one featured in her chapter. Readers are encouraged to explore the resources listed at the end of each chapter and to do more independent studies.

Each chapter ends with a section titled “Food for Thought,” which can be used for private reflection or for group studies. Rather than endorsing wholesale every conclusion the women in this book have made, I encourage readers to use the questions in this book as a springboard for a deeper consideration of important issues.

Finally, a note about names: while today’s editorial rules require that both men and women be referred to by their last names, I have chosen to use the first names of these women so that readers can view them as close friends.



## Acknowledgments

I want to thank everyone who has encouraged me to pursue this project, especially my friends and excellent authors Glenda Mathes and Janie Cheaney, who have supported me with prayer and advice; and my friend Kris Moberly, who has read every chapter of this book and brought up new and interesting questions.

I can't even begin to describe the forbearance of the scholars who have patiently replied to my relentless questions. By now, they probably dread receiving an email from me. But this book couldn't have come about without their help.

Following the order of the chapters they edited, I want to thank Philip Cary, scholar-in-residence at Templeton Honors College, Eastern University, and author of several books on Augustine of Hippo and on church history, for reading my chapters on Macrina and Monica; medieval scholar Travis Baker, who has read my chapters on Dhuoda and Christine de Pizan; Michael Haykin, professor of church history and biblical spirituality and director of the Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who has read my chapters on Anne Dutton and Anne Steele; Justin Skirry, professor of philosophy at Nebraska Wesleyan University and author of *Descartes: A Guide for the Perplexed*, who has read my chapter on Elisabeth of the Palatinate; and E. Wyn James, emeritus professor of the School of Welsh at Cardiff University and editor of *Flame in the Mountains: Williams Pantycelyn, Ann Griffiths*

*and the Welsh Hymn*, who has read my chapter on Ann Griffiths and has educated me on the fascinating story of Welsh Methodism.

All these have generously and patiently given their time to correct my misgivings and to provide valuable suggestions. I will be forever grateful.

As always, I am also thankful for the encouragement and support of Dr. Joel Beeke, Jay Collier, Annette Gysen, David Woollin, and all the staff at Reformation Heritage Books, who have welcomed this idea and brought the book to completion.

Last but certainly never least, I thank my husband, Tom, who has patiently listened to my frequent recounting of the discoveries I made in my research and has supported me with his interest and encouragement.

## How Can I Understand Scripture Correctly?

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**MARCELLA OF ROME** (ca. 325–410)

Marcella became a widow after seven months of marriage. As an attractive noblewoman in her midthirties, she had no shortage of suitors. Even a consul, Neratius Cerealis, asked insistently for her hand. He was much older than she and promised her honors and guidance. Marcella's mother, Albina, who was also a widow, saw it as a golden opportunity.

Marcella was not interested. She lived in the days of the great hermits and early monastic communities. The life story of the desert monk Anthony and his struggle with demons, written by the Egyptian bishop Athanasius, was a best seller, especially among young believers who thought Constantine's edict of toleration of Christians had made life too easy and convenient for followers of Christ.

### **MARCELLA'S COMMUNITY OF FAITH**

The extreme life choice to retreat from the world made exasperated parents sigh in frustration. "Incomprehensible!" an upstanding citizen of Antioch said about one of these young, restless people. "How could the son of respectable middle-class parents with a good education and excellent prospects for a steady comfortable life leave his home to go off and join a company of dirty vagrants!"<sup>1</sup>

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1. John Chrysostom, *Against Those Who Oppose the Monastic Life*, as

And yet this was the type of life Marcella wanted for herself. She was still a teenager when she heard Athanasius speak about Egyptian monks like Anthony and Pachomius and the monasteries they established or promoted.<sup>2</sup> She later heard similar stories from Peter, bishop of Alexandria, who stayed in Rome between 373 and 378. She was enticed. In the end, her choice was not as drastic. Instead of traveling to the desert, she lived a simple life of prayer and meditation at home.

Because of this, she refused every suitor, even when Albina insisted on the importance of marrying into financial security. Marrying for money seemed illogical to Marcella. “If I wanted to marry and didn’t wish to devote myself to perpetual chastity,” she told her mother, “I would look for a husband—not an inheritance.”<sup>3</sup>

On the contrary, she readily renounced her fancy clothes, jewelry, and riches in order to donate her money to the poor. Albina could only persuade her to compromise a little. If Marcella had to give her wealth away, she should at least keep it in the family and give it to some cousins who could use it. She complied. Gradually, Albina accepted and even adopted her daughter’s choice.

Soon, other women joined them: first Paola and her daughters Eustochium and Blesilla, and then Sofronia, Asella, Principia, Leah, Feliciana, and Marcellina. Marcella’s large domus on the outskirts of Rome in a quiet country area known as Aventino provided an ideal place for a religious community. Some women lived with her, and others, like Paola, stayed in their homes, but they all met together to pray, sing psalms, read Scripture, and perform charitable work. Managing a community of women who looked to her as a mother in the faith was a large responsibility for Marcella, who faced it by

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quoted in Robert Wilken, *The First Thousand Years* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 108.

2. Marcella probably heard Athanasius speak during his exile in Rome (339–346).

3. As quoted in Jerome to Principia, Letter 127.2, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, part 3, ed. Isidoer Hilberg (Leipzig: G. Freytag, 1918), 146; my translation.



devoting herself to a serious study of Scripture. When in 382 a young Christian presbyter named Jerome (340–420) arrived in Rome from Antioch, she insisted on meeting him.

### MARCELLA AND JEROME

Fiery, skillful, and determined, Jerome attracted both loyal followers and fierce critics. Marcella had heard of him as a famous ascetic and exegete, well versed in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and decided to ask him some questions she had pondered for a while. At first Jerome shunned her. He was a firm believer in chastity as a holier form of life, so he avoided, out of “modesty,” any eye contact with women.<sup>4</sup> But Marcella didn’t give up easily. She kept insisting “in season and out of season,”<sup>5</sup> until she gained his attention. Her overall question was, How can I understand Scripture correctly?

It was imperative that she did. The Christian church was still establishing certain areas of its doctrine, and the formulation of different views demanded that Christians engage in a careful investigation of Scripture. Marcella’s position of influence over the women in her circle made this investigation particularly urgent. Besides, there were several other teachers trying to enlist her support, and she had to weigh their doctrines in order to decide whether they were based on Scripture.

Initially, Jerome’s replies were short and simple. *Not sufficient*, she thought. She persisted in her inquiries, both in person and by letter, not “for argument’s sake but to learn the answers to those objections which might, as she saw, be made.”<sup>6</sup>

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4. Jerome, Letter 127.7, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 6, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature, 1893).

5. 2 Tim. 4:2, quoted in Jerome, Letter 127:7.

6. Jerome, Letter 127:7. An example of Marcella’s questions can be found at “Letters of St. Jerome,” Letter 59, Church Fathers, New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001059.htm>. Other women at that time also asked Jerome questions. See <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/1290.html>.

### QUIETING JEROME'S SPIRITS

Jerome had a fiery personality and didn't take criticism well. He was particularly furious with those who criticized his translation of the Gospels as inconsistent with the original Greek. Where could he vent his resentment? In a letter to Marcella, of course—even though he stopped midway to explain he could easily imagine her reaction.

“I know that as you read these words you will knit your brows,” he wrote, “and fear that my freedom of speech is sowing the seeds of fresh quarrels; and that, if you could, you would gladly put your finger on my mouth to prevent me from even speaking of things which others do not blush to do.”<sup>a</sup>

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a. Jerome, Letter 27.2.

Many of her questions regarded the interpretation of Hebrew words, particularly the names of God and words related to worship, such as *ephod*, *therabim*, *selah*, and *hallelujah*. Eventually, she realized she had to learn the language and applied herself to it until she was able not only to interpret it but to sing the Hebrew psalter without a trace of a foreign accent. This is notable in more ways than one because the study of Hebrew was a rare discipline in those days, let alone for a woman.

Jerome's interaction with Marcella—and subsequently her friends—didn't escape the disapproval of those who thought he was wasting his time with insignificant women. Some people even found his friendship with them scandalous. He retorted by pointing to the women who assisted Jesus and had the privilege of seeing His resurrected body sooner than the male disciples. Also, he recognized Marcella's high level of education, so much that in a letter to her he apologized that his Latin was not up to her standards.

Jerome remained in Rome until 385 at the service of Pope Damasus I. For a while, there were great expectations that Jerome would become his successor, but when Damasus died, the choice fell on the deacon Siricius. One substantial reason for this change of plans was

Jerome's encouragement of extreme forms of asceticism. He was particularly accused of having exercised undue influence on the young Blesilla, who died from excessive fasting. He ended up returning to Antioch. From there, he traveled throughout the Holy Land and parts of Egypt.

## **COMMITMENT TO ROME**

By the time Jerome left, Marcella had acquired such a wealth of biblical knowledge that both men and women in Rome sought her advice. She gave it freely but made sure to give credit for the answers to Jerome. She did so partially out of social correctness, partially out of respect for 1 Timothy 2:12, and partially (according to Jerome) to avoid embarrassing the men who had not solved those issues on their own.

Jerome continued to encourage Marcella to join him across the Mediterranean as her disciples Paola and Eustochium had done. The two women wrote Marcella a long letter trying to make her feel guilty for letting them go by themselves: "You were the first to set our tinder alight; the first, by precept and example, to urge us to adopt our present life. As a hen gathers her chickens, so did you take us under your wing. And will you now let us fly about at random with no mother near us? Will you leave us to dread the swoop of the hawk and the shadow of each passing bird of prey?"<sup>7</sup>

Their words suggest that Marcella had reacted with harshness, perhaps showing some irritation at their insistence: "Separated from you, we do what we can: we utter our mournful plaint, and more by sobs than by tears we adjure you to give back to us the Marcella whom we love. She is mild, she is suave, she is sweeter than the sweetest honey. She must not, therefore, be stern and morose to us, whom her

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7. Jerome, Letter 46.1., vol. 6, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1893), Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206/npnf206.i.html>.

winning ways have roused to adopt a life like her own.”<sup>8</sup> The women quoted a long list of Scripture passages, from Genesis to Revelation, as evidence of the special spiritual benefits attached to the Holy Land—especially to Jerusalem.

Paola and Eustochium’s anticipation and list of Marcella’s rebuttals suggest that they had probably discussed these things before. Marcella didn’t share their views on these “holy” places, looking to the Jerusalem to come rather than the earthly one. She had her own independent views and didn’t follow Jerome as closely as others did.

In any case, she stuck to her decision. Along with any theological convictions, at about sixty years old, she might have been feeling the weight of her years, and there was plenty to do in Rome. Eventually, even Jerome recognized she was needed where she was. After all, it was because of her efforts that he had “the joy of seeing Rome transformed into another Jerusalem.”<sup>9</sup>

## **FIGHT AGAINST HERESY**

Normally, Marcella shunned polemics. At the end of the fourth century, however, when some theological disagreements degenerated into what Jerome called “a tornado of heresy,”<sup>10</sup> she felt compelled to raise her voice.

The catalyst had been a translation by Rufinus of Aquileia (345–411) of two controversial books: one, *On First Principles*, by a theologian named Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184–253); and the other, an *Apology for Origen* by Pamphilus of Caesarea. Today, Origen is often remembered as a key figure in the battle against heretics who denied the inspiration of the Old Testament. Despite his resort to interpreting the Old Testament by allegory, he was important in establishing the literal text of the Bible. He was brilliant in many ways, and sometimes his brilliance led to attempts to explain Christian truths that went beyond what is found in Scripture. Such

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8. Jerome, Letter 46.1.

9. Jerome, Letter 127.8.

10. Jerome, Letter 127.9.

attempts appear to have led him into a belief in a universal salvation and the preexistence of the human soul before the creation of the body. Since at that time writings could easily be misattributed, it's hard to know how many of these ideas were really his and how many were simply accredited to him after his death.

By the time Rufinus published his translations in Rome, the doctrines he included were already viewed with suspicion in large parts of the Western church. Rufinus's claim that the text of *On First Principles* had been modified by heretics and that his version was an attempt to reflect Origen's true thoughts didn't help. In fact, it infuriated Jerome, who thought Rufinus was trying to make Origen's doctrines more acceptable.

Marcella shared these concerns. Together with her cousin Pam-machius, an old friend of Jerome, and other friends, she brought the matter to the bishop of Rome. The details of the controversy are murky, and there was apparently a great deal of misunderstanding between Jerome and Rufinus, who never received Jerome's letter of reconciliation. In any case, Marcella emerges as an important and resilient voice in the defense of orthodoxy.

## **MARCELLA'S DEATH**

Few people could have predicted what happened next. In 408, Alaric, king of the Goths, besieged the "eternal city" of Rome, departing only after receiving large quantities of precious goods. Since Emperor Honorius refused to meet Alaric's conditions, the king attacked the city again in 410, this time thoroughly sacking it and destroying large parts of it. By that time, the Romans had been starved for so long that they could offer little resistance.

The Goths invaded Marcella's property. She was probably in her seventies by this time. According to witnesses' accounts, she didn't show any fear. Refusing to believe that Marcella had chosen a life of poverty, the raiders asked where she had hidden her goods. When they couldn't find them, they beat her brutally. Frustrated by the lack of spoils, they went after Marcella's young disciple Principia, but Marcella defended her with her life. In the end, the Goths relented

and left Marcella's home. She died a few months later, possibly as a result of the attack.

Marcella is remembered as a woman with an insatiable love for God's Word and a desire to interpret it correctly, protecting others from wrong interpretations. At a time when Christian doctrine was still in its formative stage, she found an answer to her quest for proper understanding by studying the original Scriptures and consulting teachers she trusted—always comparing the two and drawing well-informed and careful conclusions.

### **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

- A careful scrutiny of Christian teachings was imperative at a time when doctrines were still being formed. Are things the same or different today? Discuss some differences and similarities.
- Not every Christian can embark on a study of the biblical languages. What can be a valid alternative? Do you think it's important to find a church where the pastor is trained in Hebrew and Greek? Why or why not?
- Marcella had to learn how to properly exegete Scripture because of her responsibilities to other women in her community and because she received many requests from preachers who wanted her support. What are other reasons a woman should embark in a serious study of Scripture? Do you see a difference between men and women in this responsibility? If so, explain the difference.
- How can a Christian learn to properly exegete and apply Scripture?
- Given the historical context, what were some advantages and disadvantages of living a semimonastic life like Marcella's? Why do you think it was particularly attractive to young