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## Genovefa of Paris

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### Genovefa of Paris

Michael Cameron

Genovefa of Paris (ca. 420–502), a charismatic and saintly noblewoman from Nanterre, catalyzed and later symbolized the rise of Christian Gaul. An anonymous monk composed a hagiographic *Vita* some twenty years after her death as part of a generation of storytellers who used the Bible to portray Christianity's transformation of Roman-Gaulish culture. "Living by the written Word, they also insisted that gospel words were the true heroes of Christianization" (Bitel: 36). Genovefa's hagiographer used those words to imbue her life with biblical meaning and to shape the perception of her wisdom and miraculous deeds that made her the patroness of Paris.

According to the *Vita*, the nine-year old Genovefa impressed the bishop Germanus of Auxerre in ways that recalled the child Samuel (1 Sam 3). When she confessed her longing to take a vow of virginity, he encouraged her with prophetic words from Ps 30:25 (*Vetus Latina*): *Age viriliter!* "Act manfully!" When she later fortified the city of Paris against Attila the Hun, the storyteller equated her spiritual strength to that of the OT heroines Esther and Judith. Genovefa later received a vision revealing the site of the tomb of Saint-Denis. It is said that she urged the people of Paris to build a church there, "for there is no doubt this site is terrible and awesome" (quoted in Bitel: 59). These words recalled Jacob's divine encounter at Bethel. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God" (Gen 28:17). Genovefa thus fit the image of an OT patriarch. The hagiographer also paralleled her visionary gift to that of the martyr Stephen, who saw Christ at God's right hand (Acts 7:56). It confirmed her holiness, the monk wrote, "for the Lord made no idle promise when he said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'" (Matt 5:8). She thus deserved the litany of titles of virtue ascribed to her in the language of *The Shepherd of Hermas*, for without such virtues, he continued, "neither virgin nor penitent could inhabit 'Jerusalem which is built as our city'" (Ps 121:3).

Genovefa's Christianizing and the hagiographer's biblicizing were projects that framed the religious and cultural conversion of the late antique landscape. New churches and Christianized cities thus became stops on "the teleological march to transcendence: from Nature to Paris, Paris to Rome, Rome to Jerusalem, thence to the heavenly city" (Bitel: 69).

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