



Was Jesus a Manly Man? On Reading Masculinity in the New Testament

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When I was growing up, the image of the Marlboro Man was plastered everywhere—magazine pages, billboards, television commercials. Everyone knew who the Marlboro man was. And even if very few men actually roped cattle for a living, this was an image that was projected across the country as the ideal of masculinity. The idea was that if you smoked Marlboros, you could exude the same sort of masculinity as this rugged cowboy who wrangled cattle. More recently, cowboy imagery is not front and center as a model of ideal masculinity, but there is no shortage of images that project a particular view of masculinity to be emulated by the broader culture. Consider, for example, a cologne advertisement featuring a photo of soccer star David Beckham looking very polished in pin-striped suit and slicked-back hair. The advertisement advises the viewer to “redefine your classics.”

I begin with these more or less contemporary cultural projections of masculinity to remind us that in the ancient world, too, the idea of “how to be a man” was always culturally determined. At the time when Jesus lived, images of the Roman emperor were plastered everywhere—on coins, statues, and monumental reliefs. Accompanying these visual reminders were many more inscriptions and edicts de-

The idea of “how to be a man” has always been culturally determined, in the world of Jesus just as it is now. Understanding how the ancient world construed masculinity can help us see how the New Testament portrayal of Jesus both reflects and undermines this worldview.

signed to project and underscore the masculine power of the emperor. And this imperial propaganda was not the only way that a dominant version of masculinity was elevated in the first century. Cultural views of manliness had long been reflected and produced by the epics, poetry, drama, and philosophical treatises of Greek and Latin writers. By the first century C.E., there was wide agreement among these writers on what constituted ideal masculinity. In this article, I first give a brief description of what this ancient manliness “looked” like. I then turn to problems inherent in the story of Jesus’ crucifixion vis-à-vis this culturally dominant view of masculinity. Finally, I point to some different ways the New Testament authors addressed these problems in order to show how Jesus measured up to the standards of masculinity, in spite of the central fact of his crucifixion.

MASCULINITY IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

Examples abound in Greco-Roman literature of how these ancient elites thought about manliness.¹ But one surprising aspect is how masculinity was understood not only to be the superior sex, but in a way, the *only* one. In a highly influential work, Thomas Laqueur suggests that ancient writers like Aristotle and the second-century C.E. physician Galen conceived of a sex/gender system in which one sex, the ideal male, was positioned at the top of a gender hierarchy, with other less-than-male figures populating the areas below.² In this “one-sex” model, women were incomplete versions of the ideal male, while slaves were, in a sense, “unmen,” compared to the free male citizen. One of the implications of this hierarchical view of masculinity was that it was something that had to be constantly achieved, and was always a status that could be lost.

Manliness was gained and maintained through proper comportment, especially a clear display of self-control. This meant a show of restraint and moderation in terms of luxuries, diet, sexual relations, and display of passionate emotions. Another major indicator of masculinity was a show of active agency rather than passive submission to others. This was true in terms of sexual conduct, but also with respect to the body in general. As Jonathan Walters argues, for free Roman men the idea of impenetrability, or the inviolability of the body, was crucial to the construction of manliness.³ Protecting one’s body from violation was closely related to the

¹For detailed work on Roman masculinity, see Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Jonathan Walters, “Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). See also Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). According to Laqueur, more contemporary notions of two “opposite” sexes, male and female, did not develop until the eighteenth century.

³Walters, “Invading the Roman Body.” For an extended discussion of the violated body in relation to Paul’s masculinity, see Jennifer A. Glancy, “Boasting of Beatings (2 Corinthians 11:23–25),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123/1 (Spring 2004) 99–135.

idea of self-control. Allowing oneself to be beaten or sexually penetrated amounted to the same thing—a body that was under the control of another dominant force.

Philo argues, “So earnestly and carefully does the law desire to train and exercise the soul to manly courage...that it strictly forbids a man to assume a woman’s garb, in order that no trace, no mere shadow of the female, should attach to him to spoil his masculinity.”

Significantly, worries about masculinity were not restricted to Greek or Roman writers. Writing from a Hellenistic Jewish perspective, Philo swims in the same waters, and interprets the Bible with an eye toward masculine deportment. He worries about men being afflicted with the “female disease” from passive sexual intercourse, which would move one down the gender gradient. Similarly, wearing women’s clothing could be catastrophic to one’s manly deportment. As Philo argues, “So earnestly and carefully does the law desire to train and exercise the soul to manly courage...that it strictly forbids a man to assume a woman’s garb, in order that no trace, no mere shadow of the female, should attach to him to spoil his masculinity.”⁴ Philo also relates this pursuit of masculinity to progress in piety for the soul. For him, this progress involves “giving up of the female genus by changing into the male, since the female gender is maternal, passive, corporeal and sense-perceptive while the male is action, rational, incorporeal and more akin to mind and thought.”⁵ Note that for Philo masculinity is not, in the end, a physical attribute, but a spiritual, incorporeal status to be achieved. Far from inconsequential, the categories of masculinity and femininity called for careful examination and explanation. For example, Philo even feels the need to explain why linguistically the term *Sophia* (referring to God’s Wisdom) is feminine rather than masculine.

While Wisdom’s name is feminine, her nature is masculine. For all the virtues have women’s titles, but powers and activities of perfect men (*andrōn teleiōtatōn*). For that which comes after God, even if it were the chiefest of all other things, occupies a second place, and therefore was termed feminine to express its contrast with the Maker of the Universe, who is masculine, and its affinity to everything else. For the feminine always falls short and is inferior to the masculine, which has priority.⁶

These examples from Philo are not exceptional occurrences in discussions of masculinity in the broader culture. While Philo may offer a unique reading of the Scriptures in light of his Hellenistic philosophical interests, he does not stand out in terms of his views on gender. In short, masculinity was on the minds of these ancient

⁴Philo, *On the Virtues*, 18.

⁵Philo, *QE*, 1.8.

⁶Philo, *On Flight and Findings*, IX, verses 51–52.

authors, and what they wrote reflected a broader cultural preoccupation with ideal manliness. Given this, the story of Jesus' crucifixion, not to mention aligning oneself with a movement that followed a crucified savior, could present complications for one's masculine status.

THE UNMANLY CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS

That Jesus' crucifixion would have been viewed as an utterly shameful death has long been recognized, even if it has not often been discussed in gendered terms. But in the Greco-Roman world, a crucified body—one that had been stripped bare, exposed, and violated—was an emasculated body. It was a body that displayed the ultimate loss of control, coming completely under the submission of others. Thus, the Roman writer Cicero describes crucifixion as “the most disgraceful punishment” and suggests that “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed” from the Roman citizen.⁷

The New Testament writers were well aware of how Jesus' death might be viewed as a source of humiliation for him and for his followers. When Paul famously declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel, he implies that others are (Rom 1:16). The Markan Jesus, in predicting his crucifixion, admonishes those who find him shameful (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26). Neither Paul nor the Gospel writers make explicit what the reason for this shame would be. There was no need. For the first-century audience, it would be obvious that Jesus had suffered a shameful, emasculating death at the hands of the Roman Empire. For this reason, part of the work of the early Christian writers was to defend or restore the manliness of Jesus for his followers.

They did so in different ways. In many cases, the writers found ways to accommodate their presentations of Jesus to the cultural standards of masculinity in the dominant culture. One major way was to write about Jesus' death as a sacrificial death on behalf of others. The idea of a vicarious noble death was an idea already well established in Greco-Roman literature.⁸ It is also reflected in Hellenistic Jewish martyr traditions. Fourth Maccabees, for example, makes heavy use of the idea of a vicarious death, with the seven brothers and their mother all dying “on behalf of virtue” or “of the beautiful and good” and “for the sake of the law.” Notably, 4 Maccabees is also a text heavily infused with the rhetoric of manliness.⁹ Texts such as these support the argument that by the first century C.E., “the notion of ‘dying for’ became an attractive option to be admired, reflected on, and considered for application.”¹⁰

⁷Cicero, *Pro Rabirio Postumo*, 5.16

⁸See Conway, *Behold the Man*, 71–72.

⁹See Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, “Taking It Like a Man: Masculinity in 4 Maccabees,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117/2 (Summer 1998) 249–273.

¹⁰Henk S. Versnel, “Making Sense of Jesus' Death: The Pagan Contribution,” in *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament*, ed. Jørge Frey and Jens Schröter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 283–284.

When Paul makes frequent use of the “dying for” formula in referring to the death of Jesus, he participates in larger cultural conversation. When he speaks of Jesus dying “for” “our sins” (1 Cor 15:3) or “for all” (2 Cor 5:14–15) or dying “instead of” “us” (1 Thess 5:10) or “the ungodly” (Rom 5:6) or the “weak believers” (1 Cor 8:11), he shifts the discourse from one of emasculation to one of honor. While contemporary Christians may now take such language for granted as reflecting the salvific work of Christ, for early believers the adoption of this language with respect to Jesus’ death would have been edifying from a christological perspective, and strategic from a gender-critical one. Interpreting the death of Jesus as a vicarious death for the sake of others reshaped the crucifixion of Jesus from a passive, submissive death to an active, voluntary death, and thereby, a manly one.

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But redefining the death of Jesus was not the only way that the masculinity of Jesus was restored by early Christian writers. Other ways to assure followers of Jesus’ masculine status focused on his manly deportment during his lifetime. Given the cultural mandate for manly self-control, one might expect to see this behavior exhibited by the canonical Jesus. And so it is, most strikingly so in the Gospel of John.

The Johannine Jesus appears in the Gospel as one who exudes self-mastery. He is presented as completely in control of his life in spite of the fact that he will die eventually at the hands of others.¹¹ No one takes his life; he has the power to lay it down and take it up again (John 10:15, 17–18). At the scene of his arrest, the Johannine Jesus steps forward to identify himself, initially bringing his would-be captors to their knees in awe (John 18:5–6). When he stands before Pilate, he refutes Pilate’s claim of control over him, arguing that his power is only what has been given him by God (19:11). And, true to his word, Jesus knows when his work on earth is finished, and it is he who bows his head and gives up his spirit (19:28–30).

Yet another way that New Testament writers construct a masculine view of Jesus with respect to the first-century world is to speak of him in terms normally reserved for the emperor. The author of Luke-Acts, for instance, opens his Gospels with claims about Jesus that closely correspond to imperial claims of power. When the Gospel writer designates Jesus as savior, for example, he is using an imperial title.¹² Honorary statues of the emperor often described him as the “savior and bene-

¹¹For a more detailed discussion, see Colleen M. Conway, “Behold the Man!’: Masculine Christology and the Fourth Gospel,” in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

¹²See Luke 1:47; 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23. Notably, the Gospel of Luke is the only one of the canonical gospels that uses this title for Jesus, except for one instance in John 4:42.

factor” or “savior of the inhabited world.”¹³ One famous decree from Asia, the Priene Inscription (9 B.C.E.), marks the institution of a new calendar coinciding with the birthday of Caesar Augustus by noting the action of divine Providence “for good luck and salvation.” It notes that “for us and for those after us she bestowed a savior, who brought an end to war and established peace.” Not only is Jesus designated a savior in Luke-Acts, he is the also one who brings peace (Luke 1:79). In this way, the author both defines Jesus in terms of imperial, masculine power, but also subverts that very power by shifting it from the emperor to Jesus. That this is an intentional move is supported later in Acts, where Peter’s bold speech reinforces this power transfer: “There is no other salvation, nor another name under heaven given among people in which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, my translation).

This association between the early Christian movement and high-ranking authority continues in Luke’s second volume. The Lukan Paul’s encounters with various Roman officials confer a high level of prestige on him, which comports with ideal masculinity. The “intelligent” proconsul Sergius Paulus wants to hear Paul and is impressed by Paul’s ability to blind Elymas the magician (Acts 13:7–12). The corrupt governor, Felix, provides a foil against whom Paul appears morally superior and sober-minded (Acts 24:22–27). King Agrippa is depicted in the midst of imperial pomp and circumstance offering an audience for Paul to exhibit his rhetorical prowess (Acts 25:23–26:32). The Spirit endows Paul and other apostles with healing power that results in expressions of honor and acclaim (Acts 14:11–19; 28:5, 10). And the author emphasizes the fact that the gospel message attracts Greeks of high standing (Acts 17:12). For these reasons, I have been convinced that the author wants to present his heroes as “fully capable of holding their own in the upper echelons of the masculine world of the Roman Empire.”¹⁴

ALTERNATIVE MASCULINITIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

Having offered one view of how New Testament authors interact with the gender ideology of their day, I should also point out that there are places where their efforts to have Jesus meet the standards of elite, imperial masculinity falter. Or, as some scholars argue, there may be places where the authors deliberately offer alternative constructions of masculinity by way of the figure of Jesus. For example, Brittany Wilson argues that in Luke-Acts, Jesus, Paul and the minor characters of Zechariah and the Ethiopian Eunuch are all examples of characters who do *not* conform to Greco-Roman standards of masculinity. She contends that these four characters represent a reconfiguration of masculinity, one that lifts up qualities that would be deemed unmanly in the ancient world (for example, powerlessness) in order to emphasize the power of God.¹⁵

¹³See Robert K. Sherk, *Rome and the Greek East to the Death of Augustus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁴Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 127.

¹⁵Brittany Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Reconfigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Disparate readings such as this suggest that understanding the workings of gender, and in this case, of ancient masculinity is not an easy task. They also reinforce the very thing that gender theorists have been arguing for a long time, and what the ancient Greek and Roman writers knew implicitly. Gender, and in this case, masculinity, is not a stable identity marker, nor is it a quality inherent to individuals. The tension between different readings of the masculinity in the New Testament unmasks the constructed quality of masculinity, both in these writings and in lived experience.

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In fact, one way to understand the different interpretations of Jesus’ masculinity in Luke-Acts (manly vs. unmanly) is that one interpretation gives more attention to narrative constructs while the other pays more attention to the places where this construct falters under the weight of historical tradition. In other words, while the author of Luke-Acts may work to depict his leading men as reputable “men,” he also must include what was already well established in the memory of the early followers of Jesus, namely, that Jesus and some of his closest followers were beaten and killed. These are traditions that are inescapably part of the story of Jesus. They are also traditions that attest to the violence done to male bodies in the first century, despite any effort to shift the audience’s gaze to more “manly” constructions.¹⁶ And this leads me to some final reflections.

MASCULINITY STUDIES AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: WHAT’S THE POINT?

David Clines’s closing remarks in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* notes a certain disinterested approach to the study of masculinity in the Bible, commenting that it is strangely lacking in passion. He urges scholars to name and critique “the unlovely aspects of what we teach and research.”¹⁷ He is not the only one to call for a more politically engaged study of masculinities in the Bible. On the New Testament side of things, Robert Myles has noted the largely descriptive enterprise of masculinity studies and argues that it is “ethically necessary” to include a hermeneutics of liberation.¹⁸ Ovidiu Creangă is perhaps the most

¹⁶For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Colleen M. Conway, “Taking the Measure of Masculinity in Acts,” in *Reading Acts in the Discourses of Masculinity and Politics*, forthcoming with T & T Clark.

¹⁷David Clines, “Final Reflections on Biblical Masculinity,” in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010) 238.

¹⁸Robert J. Myles, “Dandy Discipleship: A Queering of Mark’s Male Disciples,” *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 4/2 (2010), available at www.jmmsweb.org.

forthright in claiming that scholars have an obligation “to offer viable models of masculinity that promote well-being, healthy relationship/marriages/unions, good parenting, peaceful conflict-resolution, and responsible living among all people and the creation.”¹⁹

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I certainly agree that we should be willing to critique aspects that align with a dominating masculinity that would define itself via the subordination of others. We might also lift up alternative representations of masculinity that disrupt a culturally normative masculinity that has not felt “normal” to the great majority of men. Part of this work is to recognize ways in which the New Testament writers, wittingly or not, participate and contribute to dominating modes of masculinity. Do we really want to admonish a church member to “Act like a man!” or do we want to acknowledge the pain and anguish that sometimes come from making hard choices in life, including a life of self-sacrifice? In other words, being attuned to the presence of masculine ideologies in the New Testament writers allows us to be more attuned to them in our own lives, especially our own lives in the church. These writers were doing their best to make sense of their powerful encounter with the story of Jesus, and to share that story with future generations. They naturally did so in a way that drew on cultural assumptions about power. One result of reading for masculinity is to see how these writers imitated that rhetoric of masculine power and to consider what it might mean for us to unconsciously continue to imitate that same rhetoric.

Some of the most powerful aspects of the story of Jesus are those places where the presentation of Jesus subverts—or at least reveals the underside of—masculine ideology. One of those places is in the Gospel of Mark. Here there is no courageous show of manly deportment from the cross. Jesus does not calmly take care of household affairs and then hand over his own life. Rather, he cries out in anguish, hanging utterly abandoned on the cross. Our Roman writers would have little positive to say about such an audible display. Cicero has a lengthy discussion about whether a man might acceptably cry out in pain, deciding in the end that “sometimes, though seldom, it is allowable for a man to groan aloud.”²⁰ But groan aloud is exactly what the Markan Jesus does. Although earlier in the Gospel of Mark the author does draw on the noble death tradition, here at the cross such rhetoric is completely absent. Instead, the image is one of Jesus exposed, vulnerable, aban-

¹⁹Ovidiu Creangă, “Introduction,” in *Biblical Masculinities Foregrounded*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă and Peter-Ben Smit (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014) 10.

²⁰Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, XXIII.

done, and crying out in anguish. Perhaps this is one place in the New Testament where, for a brief moment, a genuine resistance to a masculine ideology that would call for a “manly” death is fully exposed for the grueling cultural demand that it can be.²¹ Perhaps it is at the foot of the cross of the Markan Jesus that we might begin a reflection about contemporary views of masculinity in the church and in the broader culture. ⊕

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²¹On this point, Carlin Barton’s work on the expendability of men’s lives in ancient Rome provides a compelling glimpse of the demands of masculinity. See Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).