



Gender Disrupted: Jesus as a “Man” in the Fourfold Gospel

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“Can a male savior save women?” Christian theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether famously posed this question in her book, *Sexism and God-Talk*, and since its publication in 1983, her query continues to be a point of contention to this day.¹ Does the maleness of Christ privilege men or imply a gender hierarchy? Are women somehow “lesser” or “other” since God came as a man and not a woman? If both male and female are created in the image of God, as Gen 1:26–27 claims, are only men redeemed since God specifically took on male flesh? Ruether notes that while maleness is only one aspect of Jesus’ historical humanity, Jesus’ identity as a man has gained disproportionate theological importance within the history of the church.² The historical Jesus was, among other things, a low-status Jew, but many church leaders have singled out his maleness, arguing that only men can represent Christ in the priesthood or clergy. With such arguments, Jesus’ status and ethnicity fall by the wayside, and his gender takes on paramount importance.

Ruether was by no means the first to raise a question regarding the gendered ramifications of Jesus’ maleness, and many since Ruether have answered this question in myriad ways. Theologian Graham Ward, for instance, contends that Jesus

¹Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1983) 116–138, here 116.

²*Ibid.*, 125–126.

By his very nature, Jesus upsets the polarity of “human” and “divine,” as well as “male” and “female.” Because Jesus is God in human flesh, Jesus disrupts our preconceived categories, including our conception of gender, for Jesus embodies this categorical disruption within his very body.

in fact destabilizes gender.³ Ward belongs to a movement known as “radical orthodoxy”—a fusion of postmodern insights and Karl Barth’s neo-orthodox theology—and he maintains that Jesus’ gendered body eventually “expands to embrace the whole of creation.”⁴ Ward does not deny the historical particularity of Jesus’ body; he makes it clear that God did not become an androgynous, ethnically ambiguous human walking around in a generic body. But Ward does claim that the particularity of Jesus’ body undergoes a series of transformations, or “displacements,” during his lifetime and that this displaced body ultimately transforms into the church, or “the multigendered body of Christ.”⁵ According to Ward, the question “Can a male savior save women?” in fact fails to discern the nature of the body of Christ.⁶

This article follows in the footsteps of Ward and others who emphasize that Jesus ultimately disrupts, or complicates, gender. To explore this disruption of gender, the article focuses on Jesus’ depiction as a “man” in the four canonical Gospel accounts, otherwise known as the fourfold Gospel, and traces the basic narrative arc of Jesus’ life; namely, his incarnation, birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. In doing so, I argue, as I have elsewhere, that Jesus looks unmanly when compared to ancient views of masculinity, or what it meant to “be a man” in the Greco-Roman world.⁷ Elite males living in the Roman Empire were the ones largely responsible for disseminating such views, and Jesus, as a nonelite Jew from Galilee, often falls short of larger cultural expectations concerning manly men.⁸ Furthermore, Jesus, by his very nature as God incarnate, complicates our understanding of his gender. Jesus’ body, though biologically male, is still culturally construed, and it repeatedly crosses boundaries between “male” and “female,” as well as “human” and “divine.” Thus while this article does not presume to answer the question of *why* God came as male flesh, it does problematize how we view Jesus as a “man.”

INCARNATION AND BIRTH

New Testament scholars have long debated how the Gospel authors depict Jesus in relation to the divine.⁹ Regardless, it is clear that Jesus has a unique relation-

³Graham Ward, “Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ,” in *Men and Masculinities in Christianity and Judaism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Björn Krondorfer (London: SCM Press, 2009) 96–112.

⁴*Ibid.*, 109.

⁵*Ibid.*, 98–99.

⁶*Ibid.*, 99, 109.

⁷Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁸*Ibid.*, 39–75, 190–242.

⁹Some scholars, such as Wilhelm Bousset (*Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. J. E. Steely [Nashville: Abingdon, 1970]), argue that devotion to Jesus as divine was a later, secondary development (historically speaking), whereas others, such as Larry W. Hurtado (*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]), argue that Christ devotion was early and central to Christian practice.

ship with God in the Gospel accounts; indeed, all four evangelists depict Jesus as a man unlike other men. The clearest sense of the incarnation—or the belief that God came in human form—appears at the outset of John’s Gospel with the language of “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14).¹⁰ Yet intimations of Jesus’ divinity appear in all the Gospels. The evangelists, for example, never describe Jesus’ physical appearance, even though their contemporaries often detail the “bodily excellences” of their male heroes.¹¹ Such reserve may simply be indicative of the evangelists’ writing style, but it may also stem from a Jewish concern to avoid depictions of the divine and thus avoid idolatry. The evangelists also hint at Jesus’ divinity through his various titles. The masculine title “Lord” (*kyrios*), for instance, links Jesus to the God of Israel, since this term is used to translate the tetragrammaton—or unspeakable name of God—in the Greek versions of Israel’s Scriptures, known as the Septuagint.¹²

In addition to masculine titles, feminine images in the Gospels also point to Jesus’ divinity. Matthew and Luke both identify Jesus as a “mother hen” (Matt 23:37–39; Luke 13:34), evoking avian imagery from Jewish scriptural texts that depict God as a bird or one who offers protection under wings.¹³ Matthew and Luke also associate Jesus with Sophia, or “Woman Wisdom” (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:35), a female personification of God’s attributes, who appears especially in Jewish sapiential literature.¹⁴ Matthew even identifies Jesus *as* Wisdom, paralleling “the deeds [*ergōn*] of Sophia” with “the deeds [*erga*] of the Messiah” (Matt 11:2, 19; cf. 11:20–21).¹⁵ (Although notice that Luke may parallel Sophia’s “children [*teknōn*]” with Jesus’ own “children [*tekna*]” later in his Gospel [Luke 7:35; 13:34].) In short, the evangelists apply both masculine and feminine language to suggest Jesus’ identity as the God of Israel, a divine being who also cannot be confined by singular gender demarcations.

To be clear, Jesus’ body is explicitly a male body. Luke stipulates that Jesus is circumcised (Luke 2:21), and both Luke and John call Jesus a “man,” using the gender specific term *anēr* (“man”) on several occasions (Luke 24:19; John 1:30; Acts 2:22; 17:31; cf. Eph 4:13). Yet while Jesus has the biological markers of man-

¹⁰All biblical translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹See Chad Hartsock, *Sight and Blindness in Luke-Acts: The Use of Physical Features in Characterization* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 7–51.

¹²See, e.g., C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).

¹³See Exod 19:4; Deut 32:11; Ruth 2:12; Pss 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4; Isa 31:5; 2 Bar 41.4; Mary Ann Beavis, “I Like the Bird’: Luke 13:34, Avian Metaphors, and Feminist Theology,” *Folia Theologica* 12 (2003) 119–128.

¹⁴See, e.g., Prov 1:20–9:6; Wis 7:22–11:14; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1989) 163–212, here 168–176. On John’s identification of Jesus as the Word, or Logos, and the Word’s relationship to Wisdom, see Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 213–250.

¹⁵Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 197–198. On the role of Wisdom throughout Matthew more broadly, see Celia Deutsch, “Wisdom in Matthew: Transformation of a Symbol,” *Novum Testamentum* 32 (1990) 13–47; Diane Jacobson, “Jesus as Wisdom in the New Testament,” in *The Quest for Jesus and the Christian Faith*, ed. Frederick J. Gaiser (Saint Paul: Word & World, 1997) 72–93.

hood, these markers do not necessarily evince Jesus’ manliness. In fact, many non-Jewish males considered circumcision a step away from castration and indicative of Jewish inferiority.¹⁶ Moreover, Luke and John’s incorporation of the term *anēr* may simply reflect their reliance on the syntax of the Septuagint.¹⁷ In his second volume, Luke even calls an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch a “man” (*anēr*, Acts 8:27), suggesting that this term does not always connote virile masculinity given that eunuchs were considered the ultimate “non-men” in the Greco-Roman world.¹⁸ Indeed, as the third-century C.E. Greek biographer Diogenes Laertius memorably quips, “men can become eunuchs, but eunuchs never become men.”¹⁹ Thus while Jesus is biologically male, representations of—and responses to—his maleness remain contextually dependent.

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Furthermore, Jesus’ body, though male, is also somehow divine and thus not fixedly male. The evangelists highlight this instability of Jesus’ body in various ways. Luke, for instance, intimates the malleability of Jesus’ body with the twice-repeated detail that Jesus was swaddled (Luke 2:7, 12), an ancient practice designed to shape an infant’s body according to its “natural” form.²⁰ Corporeal ideals, as well as gender ideals, were not inherently bestowed in the ancient world, but had to be cultivated and—in the case of swaddling—manually manipulated. Mark and Luke also depict Jesus’ body as porous, or “leaky” to use Candida Moss’s term, when he inadvertently heals a woman who had a twelve-year flow of blood (Mark 5:24b–34; Luke 8:42b–48; cf. Matt 9:20–22).²¹ Here a woman’s touch initiates a flow of power that seeps out of Jesus and heals her, revealing the permeability of Jesus’ bodily boundaries. Jesus’ power is not always under his control, Moss explains, and his corporeal porosity corresponds more closely to ancient depictions of the “leaky” female body.

Other places in the Gospels also indicate that Jesus’ body is permeable or inherently unstable.²² During the transfiguration, Jesus literally “was metamor-

¹⁶Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 93–105.

¹⁷E.g., Mary Rose D’Angelo, “The ANHP Question in Luke-Acts: Imperial Masculinity and the Deployment of Women in the Early Second Century,” in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. A-J Levine with M. Blickenstaff (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 44–69, here 48–50.

¹⁸Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 113–149.

¹⁹Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 4.43.

²⁰E.g., Soranus, *Gynecology* 2.16.32–34; Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 25–29.

²¹Candida R. Moss, “The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25–34,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (Fall 2010) 507–519.

²²See Ward, “Bodies,” 96–112.

phosed” (*metemorphōthē*) before his disciples’ eyes (Matt 17:2; Mark 9:2), and according to Matthew and Luke, his face changes and shines with a supernatural light that recalls Moses’ shining face on Mount Sinai (Matt 17:2; Luke 9:29; cf. Exod 34:29). During the Last Supper, Jesus equates his body with the bread that he breaks and gives to his disciples, expanding their understanding of his body to include the bread they are ingesting (Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19). Finally, Jesus’ resurrected body, though “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39), is at the same time a transformed body. This resurrected body is initially unrecognizable to those who knew Jesus best (Luke 24:15–16; John 20:14–15; 21:4) and it has the ability to suddenly appear and disappear, since Jesus vanishes from his disciples’ sight (Luke 24:31; cf. 4:30) and materializes in their midst despite shut doors (John 20:19, 26). Jesus’ breath is the Holy Spirit in his resurrected state (John 20:22), and finally, his resurrected body is taken up into heaven during the ascension (Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:6–11), after which, according to Luke, Jesus only intervenes in the earthly realm as a voice or blinding light and not as a flesh and bone body (Acts 9:3–7; 22:6–11, 17–21; 26:13–19). Jesus’ gendered body, therefore, is unlike other bodies because Jesus crosses the boundaries between the human and divine, a transgression that inevitably crosses gender boundaries as well.

Jesus’ conception is unconventional, but his birth is also unconventional in that he is born into a household that lacks a powerful father figure

Jesus differs from other men in that he is God in human form. But Matthew and Luke also specify that Jesus differs from other men in that he enters the world without a male progenitor. Both Matthew and Luke emphasize that Mary’s betrothed, Joseph, plays no part in Jesus’ conception, but that Mary conceives from the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35).²³ In the ancient world, a key part of being a “real man” revolved around a man’s active role in the sexual act, for men were supposed to actively penetrate others.²⁴ Jesus, however, is conceived without male penetrative power. Luke in particular emphasizes that Mary has “not known a man” (Luke 1:34) and explains that Mary will conceive when the Holy Spirit “overshadows” her womb (Luke 1:35), echoing instances from Israel’s Scriptures when the divine presence overshadows mortals in a cloud without harm (e.g., Exod 16:10; 24:15–18; 40:34–35; cf. Luke 9:34). Luke correlates God’s presence with “the Spirit” (*to pneuma*)—a neuter noun in Greek—and this Spirit generates Jesus’ conception without penetrative sex.

Jesus’ conception is unconventional, but his birth is also unconventional in that he is born into a household that lacks a powerful father figure. Joseph is not

²³See Ward, “Bodies,” 100.

²⁴Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 59–60; Holt N. Parker, “The Teratogenic Grid,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 47–65.

only absent from the procreative process, but he is largely absent from Jesus’ life. Luke’s birth narrative especially highlights this theme since Joseph is an ancillary character who never speaks. Luke only mentions Joseph a total of three times, in comparison to Mary’s twelve appearances, and he appears in tandem with Mary as a secondary character of lesser importance (cf. Matt 1:18–2:23).²⁵ Luke also takes pains to demonstrate that Joseph is not Jesus’ actual father, insisting instead that God is Jesus’ father (e.g., Luke 2:41–51; 3:23). Luke is not alone with this insistence, for all the evangelists redefine Jesus’ paternity in this manner (e.g., Matt 3:17; 12:50; 17:5; Mark 14:36; John 5:19–30; 14:1–31).²⁶ For Jesus and those who follow in his footsteps, God alone is the true parental figure.

MINISTRY

Jesus’ disruption of gender boundaries continues during his ministry. As Luke relates, Jesus begins his ministry at the age of thirty (Luke 3:23), a time when most men were expected to marry and start a household of their own. Yet Jesus does not marry, establish his own household, or accumulate wealth. Instead, he frequently critiques marriage and wealth during his ministry (especially in Luke!), and he becomes itinerant, relying on the hospitality of others during his travels.²⁷ Jesus also expects his disciples to live this life of itinerancy. They are to follow him—someone who has “nowhere to lay his head” (Matt 8:20; Luke 9:58)—and to leave behind their spouses, mothers, fathers, and children (Matt 19:29; Mark 10:29–30; Luke 18:29–30). New Testament scholar Halvor Moxnes notes that when Jesus and his male followers leave the traditional space of the patriarchal household, they give up their identity as sons or fathers in favor of a new identity as children of God.²⁸ Followers join Jesus in what is known as the fictive family of God, a family based on faith, not kinship ties; and loyalty to this family takes precedence over loyalty to biological kin.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus’ propagation of these unconventional family values is a consistent theme. When a potential disciple asks to bury his father before becoming a follower, Jesus responds by saying: “Leave the dead to bury their own dead” (Matt 8:22; Luke 9:59). Discipleship is costly, Jesus teaches, and those who love father, mother, son, or daughter more than Jesus are not worthy of him (Matt 10:37). Luke’s version of this saying is even harsher. Here Jesus claims that anyone who does not “hate [*misei*]” father, mother, wife, children, and siblings

²⁵Joseph is mentioned by name in Luke 1:27; 2:4, 16, and Mary is mentioned by name in 1:27, 30, 34, 39, 41, 46, 56; 2:5, 16, 19, 34. The only time that Joseph acts somewhat independently of Mary is in 2:4–5, yet even here, Mary is mentioned in v. 5 and Joseph is abruptly left behind in vv. 6–7.

²⁶See Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

²⁷See Greg Carey, *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009) 55–71; Dale B. Martin, “Familiar Idolatry and the Christian Case against Marriage,” in *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 103–124, here 106–109.

²⁸See Halvor Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place: A Radical Vision of Household and Kingdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 46–71.

(both brothers and sisters) cannot be his disciple (Luke 14:26). Of course, Jesus also condemns those who avoid obligations to their parents (Matt 15:4–8; Mark 7:9–13) and denounces adultery and divorce (Matt 5:27–32; 15:19; 19:1–9; Mark 7:22; 10:2–12; Luke 16:18). Such instructions, however, in part protect the vulnerable, such as aging parents, women, and children, in order to prevent their exploitation and neglect.²⁹ Ultimately, Jesus insists that following him may in fact bring division to families: father against son, mother against daughter, and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law (Matt 10:34–36; Luke 12:51–53). Indeed, Jesus redefines his own family as those who hear and do God’s word; his brothers and sisters are first and foremost faithful disciples (Matt 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21).

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Jesus indicates that this unconventional ministry impinges on a man’s masculinity when he makes his notoriously difficult comment about eunuchs in Matt 19:12. Here Jesus responds to his disciples’ comment that “it is better [for a man] not to marry” with the following: “there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” Here Jesus identifies three types of eunuchs: congenital eunuchs, men who have been castrated (the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8:26–40 falls into this category), and men who have castrated themselves for the kingdom of heaven. Although most commentators agree that this latter comment metaphorically references celibacy in its Matthean context, some Christians did take Jesus literally and perform voluntary castration.³⁰ More to the point, as New Testament scholar Greg Carey recognizes, Jesus indicates that his lifestyle of itinerant celibacy has gendered consequences.³¹ In the ancient world, eunuchs were ridiculed and considered the ultimate “non-men,” yet Jesus identifies followers with these despised non-men. According to Jesus, to abandon marriage, procreation, and the household was for a man to compromise his masculinity.

To be clear, Jesus performs deeds and words that demonstrate his authority and power throughout his ministry. When Jesus calms a storm on the sea of Galilee, for example, we learn that even the wind and sea obey him (Matt 8:27; Mark 4:41; Luke 8:25), and when Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount, we learn that “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority [*exousian*], and not as their scribes” (Matt 7:28–29).³² Moreover, Jesus

²⁹Carey, *Sinners*, 65.

³⁰Moxnes, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 72–90.

³¹Carey, *Sinners*, 69.

³²*Ibid.*, 62.

engages in frequent verbal repartee with his opponents: exchanges in which Jesus typically comes out on top.³³ Jesus amazes the crowds and silences his opponents, and his popularity with the Jewish people is what leads many of his opponents to conspire to kill him. Overall, Jesus is clearly a powerful public speaker and miracle worker; he is a “man, a prophet powerful in deed and word” (Luke 24:19).

At the same time, however, Jesus’ public speaking ability and miraculous feats do not signify his assured status as a manly man. Jesus could certainly command the attention of large crowds, but these crowds mainly comprised low-status Jews. As classicist Maud Gleason explains, “educated elites who excelled in *paideia* were actually suspicious of speakers who were excessively popular with audiences of low degree, stigmatizing them as illegitimate players at the game of words.”³⁴ Elites would have likewise been suspicious of Jesus’ miraculous deeds, for miracle workers were often identified as disreputable charlatans.³⁵ To an elite, Jesus’ many miracles would have sounded very much like magic or “superstition.” Thus while Jesus’ deeds and words establish his authority, they would not have established his manliness according to elite estimations of what “makes a man.”

CRUCIFIXION

The crucifixion is crucial to the evangelists’ portrayal of Jesus, for the Gospel accounts, as Martin Kähler famously observed, are passion narratives with extended introductions.³⁶ The crucifixion is also crucial in depicting Jesus’ disruption of gender, for crucifixion was a means of public execution that particularly “unmanned” its victims through a series of bodily invasions.³⁷ The evangelists capture these bodily invasions, as well as the shame of crucifixion more broadly conceived, in their accounts of Jesus’ death. During Jesus’ trials, Jesus is flogged (Matt 27:26; Mark 15:20; John 19:1), stripped (Matt 27:28, 31; Mark 15:20), blindfolded (Mark 14:65; Luke 22:64–65), spat upon (Matt 26:67; 27:30; Mark 14:65; 15:19), beaten (Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63), and struck on the head and face (Matt 26:67–68; 27:30; Mark 14:65; 15:19; Luke 22:64; John 18:22; 19:3). Jesus is also shamed and mocked by the religious and political leaders, and even his own disciples deny him and abandon him.³⁸ Finally, Jesus’ body is hung high on a cross for all to see as a mark

³³Ibid., 63–64; David J. A. Clines, “*Ecce Vir*, or, Gendering the Son of Man,” in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. C. Exum and S. D. Moore (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 352–375, here 358–362.

³⁴Maud W. Gleason, “By Whose Gender Standards (If Anybody’s) Was Jesus a Real Man?” in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. S. D. Moore and J. Capel Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 325–327, here 325.

³⁵E.g., Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*; Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³⁶Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, ed. and trans. C. E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 80n11.

³⁷Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 201–205.

³⁸See esp. Matt 26:56, 69–75; 27:27–31, 39–44; Mark 14:50, 66–72; 15:16–20, 29–32; Luke 22:54–65; 23:11, 35–36, 39; John 18:15–18, 25–27; 19:2–3.

of public shame. Those crucifying Jesus subject him to the voyeuristic gaze and deride him as an impotent king, pressing a crown of thorns upon his head (Matt 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2, 5) and nailing a sign above him that says: “the King of the Jews—this one!” (Luke 23:38; cf. Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; John 19:19).³⁹ Crucifixion was one of the most shameful ways that a man could be killed in the ancient world, and we see Jesus bearing this shame throughout the Passion Narratives.

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Although Jesus’ death is shameful, the evangelists depict Jesus exercising various degrees of self-control during his passion. In the ancient world, self-control was a prime marker of manliness, and Jesus displays such self-control as he proceeds to his death, especially in the Gospel of John.⁴⁰ During his arrest and passion, for instance, Jesus foresees his fate (for example, Matt 26:45–46, 50; Mark 14:41–42; John 18:4, 11; 19:28, 30), and during his trials, he remains silent before his accusers or provides ambiguous answers to their questions (Matt 26:63; 27:11–14; Mark 14:61; 15:2, 5; Luke 22:67, 70; 23:3, 9; John 18:34, 36–37; 19:9–10). In some ways, Jesus’ passion overlaps with what is known as the noble death tradition: a theme in ancient texts that depicts men “manfully” facing their death with equanimity.⁴¹ The Passion Narratives also differ from the noble death tradition in significant ways, but they still show that Jesus allows himself to be handed over and crucified in accordance with God’s will.

However, Jesus is by no means a paragon of self-control during his passion, for he does not always control his emotions. Matthew and Mark in particular convey no qualms in depicting an out-of-control Jesus. Prior to his arrest at Gethsemane, Jesus becomes distressed and agitated, saying that he is “deeply grieved even to death” and praying that “the hour” might pass from him and for God to remove “this cup” (Matt 26:37–39, 42, 44; Mark 14:33–36, 39). On the cross, Jesus utters his famous cry of dereliction when he quotes the opening lament of Ps 22:1: “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). In Luke and John, no such cry of despair leaves Jesus’ lips, but even here, he speaks words of petition and lament from the psalms (Luke 23:46 [Ps 31:5]; John 19:28 [Ps 69:21]). In Luke, Jesus also asks God to remove “this cup” (Luke 22:42; cf. John 18:11), and in some witnesses, an angel strengthens Jesus in his state of agony (Luke 22:[43–44]).⁴²

³⁹Translation from Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1995) 2:998.

⁴⁰Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 64–68.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 207–211.

⁴²On this latter point, see *Ibid.*, 216–222.

Jesus is also not an emblem of self-control during his passion because he ultimately fulfills God's plan by allowing his body to be under the control of others. Protecting one's bodily boundaries was a crucial component of Greco-Roman masculinity, and Jesus fails to do this throughout his passion. Jesus' beatings and other bodily violations amount to his emasculation, for as classicist Jonathan Walters argues, sexual penetration and beating were structurally equivalent in Roman terms.⁴³ What is more, both Luke and John emphasize that Jesus' body is specifically pierced. Luke and John relate that Jesus' body is penetrated with nails, revealing this detail during an encounter between Jesus and his disciples in his resurrected state (Luke 24:39–40; John 20:24–27). Jesus' insistence that his disciples look at his hands and feet in Luke may also be an allusion to Ps 21:17 LXX (English 22:17) "My hands and feet are pierced [*ōruxan*]" (Luke 24:39–40). John more pointedly notes that Jesus' side is pierced with a spear while he hangs on the cross (John 19:34), and he concludes Jesus' crucifixion with a citation from Zech 12:10: "they will look on the one whom they have pierced [*exekentēsan*]" (John 19:37). According to Luke and John, phallic-like objects penetrate Jesus' flesh, and this penetration paradoxically fulfills scripture.

RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

Of course, in the Gospels, Jesus is not only shamed on the cross, but also raised from the dead. Jesus' ultimate triumph over death may lead us to assume that Jesus' exaltation—his resurrection and ascension—reverses the unmanliness of Jesus' crucifixion. All the Gospel authors suggest that Jesus' resurrection is tantamount to his glorification or his defeat of death. John in particular depicts the earthly Jesus in light of his glorified state (for example, 1:14; 2:11, 22; 12:16; 20:9), and Luke emphasizes Jesus' resurrection and glory throughout the book of Acts, the companion volume to his Gospel (Acts 1:1–3, 22; 2:24–35; 3:13–26; 4:2, 10, 33; 5:30–31; 10:39–41; 13:27–42; 17:2–3, 18, 31–32; 25:19; 26:22–23). Luke also narrates Jesus' ascension into heaven (Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:6–11) and depicts Jesus at God's right hand (Luke 22:69; Acts 7:55–56), signifying his exaltation and glory.

Yet while Jesus' resurrection and ascension mark his victorious defeat of death, none of the evangelists depict the exalted Jesus as a manly victor whose resurrection overcomes the shame of the cross. Mark, for example, highlights the salvific significance of the cross (Mark 10:45), and he concludes his Gospel—not with resurrection appearances—but with the empty tomb (Mark 16:1–8). Later scribes would add resurrection appearances to the end of Mark's Gospel, but Mark himself denies us the comfort of basking in the glory of the resurrection and instead lingers on the crucified Jesus. Of course Matthew, Luke, and John include resurrection appearances in their respective accounts, but they nowhere suggest

⁴³Jonathan Walters, "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 29–43, here 38–39.

that the resurrection negates or “undoes” the crucifixion.⁴⁴ Instead, they present both the crucifixion and resurrection as integral to God’s plan. In Luke, for instance, Jesus connects his passion and exaltation to divine necessity, using the word *dei* (“it is necessary”), when he demands, “Was it not necessary [*dei*] for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26). In sum, the evangelists insist that Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection must be held in tension, for to speak about one without the other is to miss the paradox of the Gospel.

even in his resurrected state, Jesus is still the crucified one, for Jesus remains the one who is permanently pierced

The evangelists Luke and John also suggest that this paradox of crucifixion and resurrection disrupts gender boundaries, for Jesus’ bodily penetration becomes a defining marker that links his crucifixion and his resurrection. Both Luke and John draw attention to the places on Jesus’ body where the nails pierced his skin as a way of demonstrating that Jesus really *is* Jesus, and not simply a ghost (Luke 24:39–40; John 20:24–27). In John, Jesus overcomes the disciple Thomas’s doubt by telling him to see his hands and put his finger into his side so that Thomas may believe (John 20:27). In Luke, Jesus also addresses his disciples’ doubt by proffering his penetrated flesh, and he connects these marks with his identity: “Look at my hands and my feet, [see] that I am myself [*egō eimi autos*]” (Luke 24:39). Even in his resurrected state, Jesus is still the crucified one, for Jesus remains the one who is permanently pierced.

Jesus’ pierced body, however, is not simply experienced by the earliest disciples, for the Gospels indicate that all followers remember Jesus’ crucifixion through the practice of Eucharist. In John, Jesus is the true bread from heaven whose flesh must be consumed and whose blood must be drunk (John 6:22–71). In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus correlates his body with the broken, distributed bread during the Last Supper, saying, “This [*touto*] is my body [*sōma*]” (Matt 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19). Breaking bread, Jesus says, is to be done in remembrance of him, as is the drinking of the cup, or “my blood of the covenant” (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; cf. Luke 22:[20]). Overall, Jesus’ identity as broken bread and consumed wine points to his crucifixion, for while Jesus’ bones are not broken during the crucifixion (John 19:33, 36), his blood is spilt and his body is broken in the sense that it is violated on the cross. Luke even indicates that recognition of the resurrected Jesus occurs in the eucharistic act of breaking bread. On the way to Emmaus, the disciples’ eyes are finally opened when Jesus takes bread and gives it to them (Luke 24:30, 35). Jesus is revealed in this act of bodily breaking; he is

⁴⁴See also Ward, “Bodies,” 105–106.

revealed in an act that Christians themselves performed in remembrance of Jesus’ death on the cross.

When we read about Jesus in the fourfold Gospel, we find that he defies ancient gender categories. The evangelists suggest that Jesus is God in human form and that his body differs from other men’s bodies, including elite representations of male bodies. Many elite males would have considered Jesus’ birth and ministry suspect, and Jesus’ death in particular upsets elite masculine norms. During the crucifixion, Jesus fails to protect his bodily boundaries, one of the cardinal rules of ancient masculinity, and even his resurrection and ascension demand that we keep his unmanly death in view. Christians continue to remember Jesus’ invaded body when they practice Eucharist, and as Graham Ward notes, Jesus’ body—which is ingested by Christians—expands to include the church. Indeed, the Apostle Paul frequently uses the language of “the body of Christ” in his letters (for example, Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:12–31; Gal 3:27–28; cf. Eph 4:25; 5:30), and Luke himself suggests a similar idea in the book of Acts when he indicates that persecuting followers of Jesus is the same as persecuting Jesus himself (Acts 9:1–2, 4–5; 22:4–5, 7–8; 26:9–11, 14–15).

In sum, the question “Can a male savior save women?” operates on the assumption that gender is a fixed polarity. We have seen, however, that biological markers did not determine manhood in the ancient world and that Jesus’ own biological markers were subject to cultural perceptions. Understandings of gender always depend on context, and Jesus did not look manly in his ancient context. Furthermore, Jesus’ body is not static, but porous and constantly in flux. By his very nature, Jesus upsets the polarity of “human” and “divine,” as well as “male” and “female.” Because Jesus is God in human flesh, Jesus disrupts our preconceived categories, including our conception of gender, for Jesus embodies this categorical disruption within his very body. ⊕

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