Beyond his* own historical embodiment and the memories of those who knew him*, Jesus/Christ³ has led an extraordinarily robust afterlife as a paradigmatic figure whose diverse representations have affected the social, psychological, intimate, and institutional lives of millions of people across two millennia. Much of that legacy continues to impact the gravest social policies, deeply entrenched theological controversies, and the nebulous intricacies of human relations and feelings. Urgent, even life and death issues continue to be at stake.

Contemporary scholarship on the gender and sexuality of Jesus/Christ belongs to this afterlife. Many approaches to this expansive topic are possible. The goal here is not to recover “the real Jesus.” Little can be said specifically about the material body of Jesus except that he* was cut in circumcision and pierced in crucifixion. The most historically reliable evidence is silent about whether or not he* married or engaged in any sort of sexual relations. What the evidence of early Christian literature from the first two to three centuries shows instead are a variety of paradigmatic representations of Jesus/Christ, sometimes conflicting or controversial, that served particular theological, moral-spiritual, and social projects and polemics. All these representations are in some way gendered. For the purposes of this brief essay, I have tried to bring out representations of Jesus/Christ that have had, or may yet have, significant impact, although any selection will necessarily be partial and others would no doubt have made other choices.

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¹ In memory of Tommy J.: “to right a great wrong.”
² The essay uses he*/him*/she*/her* to acknowledge the multiplicity and instability of sex/gender representations of Jesus/Christ and other figures that appear in early Christian literature. The ancient texts use masculine pronouns (Greek, Latin, Coptic).
³ In early Christian literature, Jesus is referred to with a wide variety of nomenclature (Christ, Savior, Lamb, Son of Man, et al.); I use Jesus/Christ as a way to signal this diversity.
Following a brief introduction to select ancient gender protocols, I have organized these representations into four groups: Jesus/Christ as elite male, unman; as divine Wisdom, mother; as husband, virgin, eunuch; and as circumcised Jew. Each section attempts to highlight the rhetorical aims and potential effects of the work that these representations are doing in their ancient literary-historical contexts, while acknowledging that the interests and assumptions of contemporary interpreters, including my own, are always operating. A final set of reflections summarizes the results and briefly discusses contemporary issues.

Ancient Gender Protocols

Any representation of the gender and sexuality of Jesus/Christ in early Christian literature participates in ancient sex-gender constructions, discourses, and dynamics. To understand how, scholars have been turning to studies of the discourses or codes of masculinity in the Greek and Roman world to which Christians fully belonged. Speech, actions, roles, and bodily markings were all gender-coded, even in the absence of direct reference to sexuality or gender. Craig Williams offers a helpfully compact characterization of the Roman code of masculinity:

According to the conceptualizations of masculinity prevalent in the Roman textual tradition, a real man is in control of his own desires, fears, and passions, and he exercises dominion over others and their bodies. An effeminate man ceded control and is dominated, whether by his own desires and fears or by others’ bodies—and those bodies may be male or female. (2010: 170)

Several crucial points are apparent here. First, masculinity is tied to control. That control was exercised through positions of domination over others, including roles as rulers, generals, fathers, husbands, and slave masters, and performed through a variety of behaviors, including bold speech and positions of penetration in sexual relations (see Williams 2010; Gleason 1995, 1999). Practices of self-control were also marked as masculine, especially overcoming passions such as sexual desire and fear, and demonstrating endurance, courage, moderation, and willing assent (Nussbaum 1987).

Second, discourses and protocols of masculinity were conceived and enacted in relation to those of femininity, and cannot be analyzed in isolation. Only a very few elite men would have been able to embody a high degree of hegemonic masculinity, while the vast majority of
people were placed along a scale toward unmen, including political subjects, subordinates, women, slaves, and children (see Walters 1997; Moore 2001: 135-46). Such unmen could, however, display masculinity through certain behaviors, such as endurance of suffering, pain, injustice, or adversity (Shaw 1996; Moore and Anderson 1998). Since control of one’s sexual desires, as well as fear and other passions (Nussbaum 1987), was also marked as masculine, slaves, women, and even crucified criminals or martyrs could achieve masculinity of a sort. Possession of male genitals was therefore no guarantee of masculinity, nor was their absence an impossible barrier. Accordingly we should not consider masculinity to be a single, fixed thing, but rather an unstable condition that was made or lost in the eyes of others who judged where a person stood on a scale tipping toward masculine or feminine. An individual’s gender status was always at risk and required continuous surveillance and labor to maintain (Williams 2010: 18, 151-156).

Third, protocols of masculinity also intersected with economic and social status, ethnicity, age, culture, and geographical location. It is useful, then, to think not of a single masculinity, but of multiple, often interacting masculinities that can be operating and interacting simultaneously in a given context. Moreover, while a supra-regional, hegemonic masculinity can have a considerable impact locally, it can also come into conflict with regional, ethnic, or class-based masculinities. Such fraught situations provide the space and complexity in which manifold strategies can operate, whether to support, appropriate, resist, negotiate, or even change hegemonic protocols (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Moore 2001: 7-18, 135-146; Dunning 2011: 13-19; Burrus 2007). The notion of multiple masculinities in play also suggests we should assume that non-elite groups, even slaves, had their own operative gender protocols, and that our ignorance of them is a problem. With regard to the early Christian literature, Gleason suggests that attention should be given “to the gender norms ... of each text’s probable audience,” whether in Aramaic-speaking Palestine, among non-elite urban dwellers, or for the next generations of readers (2003: 327). Questions about local masculinities and changing geographical, ethnic-linguistic, and social status contexts need to be part of the analysis. A good example can be seen with respect to the topic of circumcision. Within a Jewish context, it marked Jesus as a full, male member of the covenant people. From the perspective of Greeks and Romans, however, this “barbaric” act marked him as ethnically inferior and even feminized him. Below we will discuss how Christian authors negotiated this dynamic.
Finally, it should be emphasized that control and domination, so highly valorized in Roman protocols of masculinity, are not the only ways to understand gender and sexuality. As Martha Nussbaum reminds us: “Sexuality was not simply a domain of power relations but also an arena in which people attempted to cultivate themselves as restrained, decent, just, moderate, and courageous people” (2010: xiii). For Christians, representations of Jesus/Christ’s sexuality and gender provided paradigmatic models to pursue holiness, purity, and goodness that shaped not only individual lives but also institutions such as marriage and monasticism.

We turn now to select representations of the gender and sexuality of Jesus/Christ.

Elite Male, Unman

Early Christian gospels depict Jesus as a man who came from a humble family of craftspeople from the backwaters of Galilee. He* left his* family and went out to preach about God’s imperial rule, and his* life ended on a Roman cross. Such images of a less than ideally elite male were problematic for promoting Christian teachings as the ultimate, divine truth. One strategy was to represent Jesus/Christ as exemplarily masculine (see Clines 1998), even in those traditions where he* appears most as an unman: crucified, enslaved, uneducated, and homeless (see Glancy 2003: 261-4; Moxnes 2003: 72-90; Conway 2008; Wilson 2015: 190-242). Representations drew especially upon gendered protocols of patriarchal/kyriarchal family, imperial domination, and self-control.

Jesus’s seemingly humble birth status (Mark 6:3; John 1:46; 7:41, 52), for example, is countered by a miraculous birth and divine paternity (Matt 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-20). Prestigious lineages link him either to the patriarchs and kings of Israel (Matt 1:1-17) or to the archetypal human and first child of God, Adam (Luke 3:23-38). The Gospel of John presents Jesus as the pre-existent divine Word and Son of God (John 1:1-18). While his* human paternity appears in question, Jesus/Christ is presented theologically as a dutiful Son who does His divine Father’s will (John 5:19-30). His brutal death as a condemned criminal is figured not as just punishment but as properly pious obedience of a son to his father in line with patriarchal family protocols. In other cases, too, His* humiliating death is not denied but revalorized. Philippians, for example, says that Jesus took “the form of a slave” but it portrays his* obedience to death on the cross as a prelude to divine exultation (Phil 2:6-11). 1 Peter exhorts actual slaves
to obey even unjust and brutal masters, following the example of the righteous Christ who also endured unjust suffering (1 Pet 2:18-21). These passages reinscribe the relations of patriarchal lineage and household, but they also potentially challenge them, by naming the slaves as Christ and insisting on their righteousness against unjust masters and Roman rulers. Finally, Jesus’s masculinity is potentially compromised because he was not a householder and no mention is made of him* having children. Yet Paul and many later Christians understood that attaining salvation by becoming sons and heirs of Abraham is enabled by the faith of/in Christ who was himself son and heir (see Johnson Hodge 2007; Petrey 2014). Such representations of Jesus/Christ as an obedient son and a righteous slave enduring great suffering with masculine self-control countered the many ways in which his* masculinity would be in question.

Taking on these and other issues, individual works offer complex portraits of Jesus/Christ’s gender status (see, e.g., Conway 2008). Two examples will have to suffice here: the Gospel of Mark and Revelation.

In his interpretation of the Gospel of Mark, Tat-siong Benny Liew shows how displays of Jesus’s power through healing and exorcism undergird the Gospel’s claims that Jesus is God’s son and heir, the one who will sit on the throne and mete out eschatological judgment. Although Jesus is uneducated, he* speaks boldly with power. The submission even of demons to his control works to attribute “absolute authority” to Jesus (1999: esp. 13-22, 24-26). In these ways, Liew argues, Mark not only resists empire but he “has indeed internalized the imperialist ideology of his colonizers” (1999: 13; see also Thurman 2007: 228). Liew further elaborates and complexifies this analysis by acknowledging “competing ideologies of masculinity” at work. He notes, on the one hand, Jesus’s masculinized roles as public speaker, fertile sower of grain (God’s word), heir and head of a “fictive” family, and, on the other hand, his portrayal as a defeated and crucified slave whose disciples desert him (2003: 98-107). In Mark’s presentation, however, the latter serves to demonstrate Jesus’s subversive masculinity as “the heroism of discipline, endurance, and self-sacrifice, even the willingness to submit oneself to punishment and death” (2003: 107-111; citation 108). Yet in the end, Jesus upholds patriarchal norms by submitting to the brutal will of his Father. For Liew, this complexity shows how contradictions can fortify “masculinity’s de(con)structive machinery” by “(re)producing the system that engenders and endangers” Jesus (2003: 123-34, 133). As this and other studies emphasize (see Moore 2004; Thurman 2007; Conway 2008: 89-106), these multiple masculinities were being
deployed with the aim of authorizing Mark’s version of Jesus’s teaching about God’s family and His imperial rule and, in context, they were aimed at least in part against Judaean elites and Roman imperial rule.

The Book of Revelation presents a cosmic Jesus in multiple guises—an angel, a Lamb, one like the Son of Man, and a rider on a white horse. According to Stephen Moore:

In Revelation, Jesus is not so much God become man as God become masculine—although it doesn’t look like that at first. In chapter 1, Jesus is an angel, and in chapters 5 and following he is a lamb, but in chapter 19 he is a superwarrior. As angel he is barely human, as lamb he is barely a man, but as warrior he is hegemonically hypermasculine. In the final analysis, John presents Christ, together with his Christians, as icons of masculinity, reserving feminine imagery for the enemy. (2001: 190, emphasis original)

Christopher Frilingos reads Revelation through “the penetration grid,” which codes penetrators as male, penetrated as female. From this perspective, the figure of the Lamb destabilizes binary categories of masculine and feminine. Insofar as the Lamb has been pierced and is the subject of penetrating gazes in Rev 5, the figure is feminized. But in Revelation 14, this passive figure takes on the active role of penetrator, setting its punishing gaze on enemies and aligning with the warrior on the white horse wielding a (penetrating) sword in Revelation 19 (2004: 64-67, 75-88). Many have noted how this imagery of a penetrated but triumphant Jesus/Christ is used in representing martyrs. Effeminized by their suffering and execution, martyrs are nonetheless shown to be triumphantly masculine through endurance; in the End, it is they who will gaze upon the eternal suffering of their enemies (Stratton 2009).

What are the possible effects of this representational rhetoric? A hypermasculine Jesus/Christ gives a positive valorization to violent hypermasculinity. Frilingos suggests, however, that Revelation’s imagery of virginal male martyrs works as “an apologia for passive resistance as a legitimate masculine stance” (2004: 192). In other literature, the representation of women martyrs as masculine in their courage and endurance can serve to reinforce the masculine as dominant and feminine as dominated, but these performances of gender instability can also crack open the imagination to potential ways of thinking and acting otherwise, as we will see below with the female slave and martyr Blandina-Christ. Or, as Colleen Conway argues, in Mark’s account of Jesus’s “anguished cry from the cross,” it is possible to see “genuine resistance to hegemonic masculinity” if only for a moment and at an unconscious level (2006: 

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Yet, Conway points out, the masculinity of Revelation is violent to the point of being overdone. It can exceed “the civilized masculinity of Roman imperial rhetoric,” not only in the ways that God and the Lamb surpass imperial rule, but in the bloodiness of divine vengeance, so that “the masculine honor of God and Christ is impugned in the process” (Conway 2008: 174). In the end, the Gospel of Mark, Revelation, and other early Christian works do inscribe elite (imperial) masculinity onto Jesus/Christ, but they also imagine alternatives for passive resistance and dignity for unmen, as well as offer opportunities to critique the excessive violence and wrath of imperial God.

In the early literature, Jesus/Christ is presented not only as son and slave (and as we will see below, father and husband), but also as another member of the ancient household: a mother.

Divine Sophia (Wisdom) and Mother

Female characteristics attributed to Jesus/Christ were significant for early Christian soteriology, as were portrayals of divine female figures and women martyrs as Christ. While gender protocols that coded femininity and women as penetrable, inferior, and subordinate were operating in images of Jesus as crucified and enslaved, Jesus was also represented in highly honored female roles as strong, protecting, and nurturing. Images of Jesus as mother, divine Sophia, and female revealer in antiquity appeared in a broad range of literature to convey Jesus’s roles as creator, nurturer, teacher, revealer, and divine savior (see Petersen 2002). Indeed Sophia Christology (see Schüssler Fiorenza 1994: 131-162) is arguably the earliest way of conceiving the person, nature, and roles of Christ (Hengel 1979; Schüssler Fiorenza 1994: 141).

Particularly prominent are feminine images of Jesus/Christ-Sophia as a mother nursing her children, as a descending and ascending teacher and revealer, and as co-creator with God. Portraits of Jesus in Q (see Kloppenborg 1978; Piper 1989), Paul (see Conzelman 1965/66: Sanders 1971), and the Gospels of Matthew (see Suggs 1975; Deutsch 2001), John (see Brown 1966: cxxii-cxxv; Willette 1992), and Thomas (Davies 1983) drew on Jewish wisdom literature to portray Jesus as a prophet of divine Wisdom or as Wisdom herself, especially associated with creation and salvation. Such imagery did not, however, preclude masculinizing images or strategies that minimized women (for example, in the Gospel of John, see Fehribach 2003; Seim 2005, 2010; Myers 2014; Sawyer 1995).
Less well known portraits of Christ as a divine female figure—such as Pronoia and Protennoia (female Sophia figures)—appear in the Apocryphon of John (NHC II/IV) and Trimorphic Protennoia (NHC XIII,1) (Poirier 2006: esp. 91-105). Ap. John presents a post-resurrection vision where the polymorphic Christ is revealed as an elder, a woman, and a slave (see King 2011: 527-8). Moreover, the addition of the so-called Pronoia Hymn to the longer version of Ap. John resulted in the whole work being recast as the salvific triple-descent of male-female Pronoia-Christ into the world (Barc and Painchaud 1999). Trim. Prot. frequently associates the divine Protennoia, also a female Sophia figure, with Christ, and also briefly identifies the salvific work of Jesus’s incarnation, crucifixion, and ascension with the male-female Protennoia-Christ who proclaims: “I, I put on Jesus. I bore him from the cursed wood and set him firmly in the dwelling places of His Father” (Trim. Prot. 50:12-15; Turner 1990: 432-3; Poirier 2006: 365-66).

So, too, men and women martyrs were depicted as “becoming Christs” (see Moss 2010). The case of Blandina in Martyrs of Lyon is particularly notable (Murusillo 1972: xx-xxii, 62-85). As she* is being tortured, she* is portrayed as acting “like a noble mother encouraging her children,” bringing others to salvation through her* steadfast confession (Mart. Lyons 55). More striking, the text claims that she* was seen with physical eyes as Christ (Mart. Lyons 41), for “she had put on Christ, that mighty and invincible athlete” (Mart. Lyons 42). This brutalized slave woman becomes Christ incarnate, even as the incarnate and crucified Jesus is clothed with divine Protennoia-Christ in Trimorphic Protennoia.

Jesus/Christ appears in a wide variety of other early literature as a (nursing) mother and woman revealer (see 1 Pet 2:2-3; Clement of Alexandria, Paed. 1.6.46.1; III.12.101.3; Irenaeus, Haer. 4.38.1). In Odes of Solomon 8.16, the Redeemer says: “I prepared my own breasts for them that they might drink my holy milk to live by it.” This image of breasts “refers to the ‘holy’ and elemental food, antithetical to everything worldly and profane. In other words, the first person Revealer is not only Redeemer and (co-)creator of ‘his own’ but also the one who nourishes and sustains them as such. And whoever drinks this ‘holy milk’ is enabled to live a ‘holy life’” (Lattke 2009: 122-23). In another account of Jesus/Christ as a woman, Epiphanius (Pan. 49.1.2-3) reports that the prophet Priscilla received a vision in which Christ came and slept beside her “in the form of a woman” and “imbued me with wisdom” (Williams 1994: 21).

What are we to make of such images? Benjamin Dunning in particular has exposed “the
intractable problem ... of assigning a stable and theologically coherent significance to the
sexually differentiated body” (2011: 152). He shows how again and again theological attempts
to make meaning from male-only positions (Father/Son, Adam/Christ) stumble over the
positioning of the female (Mary, Eve). Moreover, this literature demonstrates, as Silke Petersen
(2002: 123) puts it, that an exclusively male Christ is insufficient. Gender coding in antiquity
marked the honored roles of birthing (creation), nurturing (breast feeding), instructing children,
and even giving divine revelation as those of a mother. Applying these images to Jesus/Christ
and his* mission expanded theological possibilities to include these significant roles in Christian
soteriology and to depict a female-inclusive Christology.

Husband, Virgin, Eunuch⁴

References to Jesus’s sexual and marital status appear in early Christian literature within
contexts of apostolic rivalry, apocalyptic dualism, debates over sexual ethics, moral formation,
ritual practice, and ecclesiology. They serve to authorize particular positions in controversies,
provide models for spiritual formation, and articulate theological views.

The first mention of Christ as a husband comes in a polemical context where Paul is
defending his gospel against competing apostles (2 Cor 11:1-5). He represents believers who
follow his gospel as a chaste virgin offered in marriage to one husband, Christ, in contrast to
those who are being seduced into adultery by “super-apostles,” just as Eve was by the serpent
(see 2 En 31). This imagery seems to invoke traditional representations of Israel as properly a
chaste spouse of God (see Isa 54:4 and Hos 2:19-20; 4:12-14) that were used to condemn other
Israelites, said to be idolaters who “whore” after different gods—or, in Paul’s terms, after a
gospel different from his.

Revelation also represents Jesus (the Lamb) as married, now in the polemical context of
apocalyptic dualism. In sharp contrast to Babylon, the whore, drunk on the blood of martyrs
(Rev 17:1-6, 15-17), the bride of the Lamb is described as clothed in linen (the righteous deeds
of the saints; Rev 19:7-8), and she appears as the new Jerusalem descending from heaven (Rev
21:2, 9). As in Paul, the image of the righteous and heavenly bride works to define the moral

⁴ This section contains some material previously published in King 2013.
and sexual purity of believers in contrast to idolaters. The characterization of the 144,000 redeemed as virgins who had not defiled themselves with women (Rev 14:3-4) suggests a preference for male celibacy—and a male audience. In both these texts, the chastity of followers is linked with a married Jesus/Christ.

More frequently, references to Jesus’s marital status appear explicitly in the context of early and heated controversies among Christians over marriage and sexuality (see Brown 1988; Gaca 2007; Hunter 2007: 87-129). Most of these discussions circle around differing interpretations of statements ascribed to Jesus or Paul. Jesus, for example, affirms marriage as God’s purpose in creation (Matt 19:3-9), but also praises those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:10-12), and he* denies marriage a role in the resurrected life (Luke 20:34-36; cf. Mark 12:18-27; Matt 22:23-33; see Petrey 2015). Paul clearly condemns adultery and sexual immorality, but offers more ambivalent advice regarding marriage and divorce (1 Cor 6:9-7:39). These materials from Jesus and Paul were cited by later Christians to develop and support diverse positions on proper sexual-marital ethics and practices.

Fully implicated in these debates are the masculine protocols of self-control and the conviction that overcoming sexual desire was a necessary part of moral purification and spiritual perfection. Overcoming desire was fundamentally about the cultivation of a pure, spiritual self. Christians disagreed, however, about how to accomplish this, and especially about whether sexual intercourse in marriage was sinful and polluting (see Rom 6:16-23; Moore 2001: 162-4) or whether Christians, filled with the Spirit, could engage in sex, without desire (see 1 Cor 7:5, 9; 1 Thess 4:3-5; Martin 2006: 65-76). The second-century theologian Clement of Alexandria believed that the latter was possible: “We are children of will, not desire,” he states (Strom. 3,58; see John 1:12-13; King 2011: 519-38). But he knows of other Christians who cited 2 Corinthians 6:16-18 to argue that true believers should forbid marriage and even separate from married people (Strom. 3,74.1; see Merz 2000: 143). Other second- and third-century writings attest to a tradition supporting celibacy that claimed that Jesus came “to destroy the works of woman” and end carnal procreation (see Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 3,9.63; Dial. Sav. 144.15-22; Testim. Truth 30.28-30). Eventually, some Christians argued that the life of celibacy, embodied most pristinely by virgins, was the true and highest path to God and a preview of the future resurrection (Tertullian, Exh. cast. 9.4-5; Acts Paul Thecla 5-6).
Other Christian literature, however, supported marriage. For example, letters pseudonymously ascribed to Paul or Peter “Christianized” marriage by admonishing ecclesial and familial households to retain a patriarchal order based on analogy to the model of divine rule (Eph 5:21-6.9; Col 3:18-4.1; 1 Pet 2:18-3:7), by requiring bishops to be married (1 Tim 3:2), or by arguing that women are saved by bearing children (1 Tim 2:15). The author of 1 Timothy 4:1-5 rebuked those who reject marriage as liars who are possessed by demons. Similarly, Hebrews 13:4 argued vociferously for the honor of the undefiled marriage bed. None of these texts, however, appealed directly to Jesus/Christ as a paradigm for their own sexual-marital practice. The first to do so explicitly is Ephesians. It likens hierarchical, heterosexual marriage to Christ’s relationship to the church, perhaps again drawing upon the corporate image of Israel as God’s wife (Eph 5:22-23; Kostenberger 1991; Gerber 2013: 208-209). While Ephesians does not state that the fleshly Jesus was married to a wife and had intercourse with her, it does invoke the relationship of Christ to the church positively in relation to human heterosexual marriage between Christians. Annette Merz argues that Ephesians’ position is formulated explicitly against other Christians who read Paul as devaluing marriage—if not rejecting it entirely—insofar as they regarded each individual as “a pure virgin betrothed to Christ” (2000: 144, 147).

So far all the materials discussed have referred to Jesus’s marital status metaphorically. The earliest surviving reference to the historical-incarnate Jesus/Christ’s marital state comes only in the late second century. Clement of Alexandria reports that some Christians appealed to an unmarried Jesus/Christ to justify virginal celibacy: They “say outright that marriage is fornication and teach that it was introduced by the devil. They proudly say that they are imitating the Lord who neither married nor had any possession in this world, boasting that they understand the gospel better than anyone else” (Strom. 3.6.49.1; trans. Chadwick 1954: 62-63). Although Clement himself opposes this stark rejection of marriage as heresy (Strom. 3.58; see Gaca 2003: 247-72), he does not directly contradict the claim that Jesus did not marry. By the late third to early fourth century, John Chrysostom argued that while sexual intercourse within marriage was allowed, celibacy was superior—far, far superior; after all, he claims, Jesus did not marry—a statement he offers apparently with no anticipation of being contradicted (Virginit. 11.1; 13.4).

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5 I use “historical-incarnate” here to refer to the fact that the historical was not sharply distinguished from the theological until the rise of modern historicism.
As a high valuation of celibacy and virginity flourished, the position that Jesus/Christ was a virgin who never married was used to commend and authorize the celibate life and, eventually, celibate priests. Notably absent in first and second century literature, however, is any evidence of an argument for an all-male leadership, priesthood, or clergy based on Jesus's maleness (see Vatican 1976, esp. section 5; Raming 1976). Moreover, the metaphor of Christ’s marriage to the Church would come to produce many “brides of Christ,” virgins who pledged themselves in “spiritual marriage” (see Clark 2008). That relationship was sometimes expressed in highly erotic language, for example in allegorical readings of the Song of Songs, suggesting that desire could be esteemed if directed toward appropriately spiritual relationships (see Burrus 2004; King 2005: 77-133). As we saw above, Jesus/Christ was presented in the New Testament gospels as having abandoned his earthly household and family, but it would seem that representing Christ as enabling many to become children of God—and figuring him as the divine husband of the Church with many virginal brides—resolved these seeming deficiencies into excessive celebrations of masculine reproductivity and heteronormative prowess.

In other literature, Jesus was portrayed as both married and unmarried: a husband, virgin, and eunuch. For example, the second- to third-century theologian Tertullian refers to Ephesians 5:31-32 (and perhaps 2 Corinthians 11:2-3) when he suggests that Christ was “a monogamist in spirit” insofar as he has one spouse, the Church. This spiritual monogamy, however, corresponds to a fleshly monogamy that had been prefigured by Adam and Eve (see Mon. 5.7; also Exh. cast. 5). In this same passage, Tertullian also states that Christ was “entirely unmarried” (innuptus in totem; Mon. 5.5; Mattai 1988: 150), and he urges believers to a higher perfection by imitating Christ’s state as spado in carne (“an impotent person” or “eunuch in flesh”; Mon. 5.6; Mattai 1988: 150; see also Mon. 3.3; Kuefler 2001: 265-67). Elsewhere Tertullian emphasizes that Christ’s virginity is not only spiritual but also fleshly since he was born of a virgin (Carn. Chr. 20). In laying out his position, Tertullian makes a clear distinction between Christ’s spiritual marriage to the church and his “totally unmarried” flesh in order to promote a sexual ethic that allowed a first (but not second) marriage within certain social and institutional strictures—including female subservience and obedience to males—but valorized virginal celibacy, including castration, as a higher state of sanctity.

The image of Jesus as a eunuch was apparently raised by Jesus/Christ’s own advocacy of becoming “eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:12). As Mathew Kuefler
demonstrates, “eunuch” is a complex category, encompassing people born without genital organs, castrated as children or adults, or whose genital organs were partially or fully removed. The term was used to characterize persons as females, unmen, or a third sex, usually with accompanying denigrations. All of which, Kuefler suggests, points to a basic unease: “If it were possible to alter one’s sexual identity by means of a surgical maneuver, then the masculine-feminine dichotomy that formed so much of the backbone of Roman culture was tenuous indeed” (2001: 32). Christians offered a variety of opinions, both with respect to the interpretation of Jesus’s praise of eunuchs and the reality of eunuchs in their midst. Some praised eunuchs for giving up the world for the kingdom, while others condemned actual castration in favor of a spiritual castration which could apply to “virgins, continent persons, men or women in sexless marriages, or widows” (2001: 268; see also 244-82). For Tertullian, as we have seen, the literal and spiritual apply simultaneously. Jesus is literally a eunuch and a virgin (a redundancy, since for Tertullian both terms exclude sexual activity), and spiritually pure, modeling a repudiation of worldly things in favor of heavenly reward (Cult. fem. 2.9.33-45).

Christians also represented Jesus/Christ as simultaneously being literally and spiritually married. The Gospel of Philip, a second- to third-century work (Schenke 1997), presents Jesus’s actual virginal birth, incarnation, baptism, and marriage as symbolic paradigms for the mystical union of Christ and the Church, which is effected in the ritual of the bridal chamber. In this ritual, the individual undergoes the usual practices of Christian initiation: baptism, anointing, the exchange of a kiss, and a eucharist meal (see Williams 1986: 205-11; Thomassen 2006: 90-102; King 2013: 571-76). It is called “the bridal chamber” because of the Gospel of Philip’s understanding of the human condition and salvation in sex/gendered terms. For this work, the actual separation of the female Eve from the male Adam is a figure of human separation from God, and the reunion with God is figured in Jesus/Christ’s actual marriage to Mary Magdalene (see King 2013: 576-81). Through the ritual of the bridal chamber, initiates are spiritually united with their divine doubles and they make manifest the pre-existent body of Christ through their incarnate role as members of the Church (King 2013: 584-85).

In my view, the Gospel of Philip’s presentation of Jesus/Christ’s actual marriage as a spiritual paradigm would support a moral-sexual ethics which included proper sexual relations in Christian marriages that are pure because they occur according to a will directed to spiritual matters, including love of the Lord (Gos. Phil. 78.12-25), and that—as with Clement of
Alexandria—are not polluted by improper desire and demonic influence (see King 2013: 581-83; Gaca 2003: 247-72). The Gospel of Philip could also support a positive view of celibacy, but would not consider celibacy to be superior to pure marriage among the initiated, given the paradigm of a married Jesus/Christ.

Circumcised Jew

According to Luke 2:21, Jesus was circumcised as an infant. Within first-century Jewish protocols of ethnic masculinity, this ritual act would have marked him prestigiously as male, a full Israelite, and a participant in the covenant with God. It would have distinguished him especially from women and Gentiles, inscribing categories of sex/gender status and ethnicity onto his material flesh. In the rhetoric of Greek and Roman masculinity, however, circumcision was regarded as a barbaric and effeminating mutilation, a sign of ethnic inferiority (Feldman 1993: 153-58). For Christians who were engaged in marking clear boundaries between themselves and Jews, claiming moral-ethnic superiority to Greeks and Romans, and initiating members into the body of Christ without distinction of ethnicity, gender, and social status, Jesus’s circumcised flesh was problematic (see Cohen 2005: 3-92; Jacobs 2012). They relied on a variety of strategies to resolve the difficulties, notably eschewing actual circumcision, distinguishing sharply between “carnal” and “spiritual” circumcision, and eliding circumcision with the arguably more inclusive ritual of baptism.

Although Paul does not mention Jesus’s circumcision, several themes in his letters were foundational for later Christian writings on the topic (Cohen 2005: 68-73). He draws on a long Biblical tradition (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25-26; 38:33; Ezek 44:7) when he writes that “real circumcision is a matter of the heart; it is spiritual not literal” (Rom 2:25-29; see Stowers 1994:154-58). He stakes out new territory elsewhere, however, by arguing that Abraham proves that “righteousness” does not come from the law but through faith in Jesus Christ by partaking in his* death and resurrection (Phil 3:9-10; Gal. 2:11-3:29). In Philippians, Paul strikes a stronger note when he writes to “all the saints in Jesus Christ,” warning them against those who “mutilate the flesh,” stating that “we are the circumcision,” and admonishing them not not to place their confidence in “the flesh” but to “worship in the Spirit of God” (3:1-3). Later Christians would interpret this distinction between spiritual and fleshly circumcision rhetorically to characterize
Jews as those who are tied to the mutilation of the flesh, carnal desire, and literal interpretation of scripture, while characterizing themselves as those who practice the superior circumcision of heart, embody purity, and understand Scripture in its more profound spiritual sense.

It is, however, the letter to the Colossians, an early epistle pseudonymously ascribed to Paul, that first explicitly discusses the circumcision of Jesus/Christ:

In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him who is the head and ruler of every authority. In him you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ. When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:9-12)

This passage is frequently interpreted as claiming that the new group “in Christ” is formed not by fleshly circumcision, but by the ritual of baptism conceptualized as spiritual circumcision. Yet the passage also insists on the critical importance of Christ’s circumcised body as the site where God dwells fully, and in which Christ was presumably buried and raised from the dead (Ferguson 1988: 490-97). It is “in him” that believers were circumcised and baptized, now conceived as a male ritual for men enacting peoplehood and enabling their transformation into the “new hu/man”: “You have clothed yourselves with the new anthropos, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator, where there is no longer Greek and Jew, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all in all” (Col 3:10-11; see also Gal 3:25-29; Marchal 2010: esp. 171-172). The “all in all” of Christ here is inclusive of ethnicity and social status, but the absence of any explicit mention of women is particularly poignant given that later Christians will come to characterize the exclusion of women from Jewish circumcision as a mark of that tradition’s deficiency in comparison with Christian baptismal inclusion (Justin Martyr, Dial. 23.4-5; Cohen 2005: 93-108).

The distinction between carnal and spiritual circumcision found in these passages reappears in the development of a Christian rhetoric of moral superiority, sexual chastity, and purity in which Jews were slandered as sexually immoral and licentious (Drake 2013: 19-20, 34-45, 78-98; Hunter 2007: 98-101). In his fourth-century Homily on Colossians 6, for example, John Chrysostom interprets Colossians so as to highlight the spiritual redemption of Christians by slandering and condemning Jewish circumcision as sinful, carnal, and sexually corrupt. Tertullian, however, interprets another passage, Phil 3:3 (“we are the circumcision”), to claim
both fleshly and spiritual circumcision for Christians. He argues that Christians are predestined and “trained by God for the purpose of chastising, and, so to say, emasculating the world. We are the circumcision—spiritual and carnal—of all things; for both in the spirit and in the flesh we circumcise worldly principles” (Cult. fem. 2.9.33-45). Although actual circumcision is not necessarily practiced, Tertullian claims Christians engage in other bodily practices, such as temperance in dress, food, and sexual chastity, that he figures as “circumcision of the flesh.”

Of the New Testament gospels, only the Gospel of Luke mentions Jesus/Christ’s circumcision (2:21). It does so to emphasize that everything about Jesus/Christ followed the Law (2:22, 27, 39), the point being to undergird the theological argument of Luke-Acts that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God and that his followers are the true Israel. While the notion of Jesus/Christ as a paradigm would seem to suggest that his followers ought to be circumcised, in practice this was not the case. According to Acts 15:1-21, a council in Jerusalem ruled that it was not necessary for Gentile men to be circumcised (see Bovon 2002: 86, 99; Fitzmyer 1981: 419-21). Later writers explained in various ways why Christian men do not obey the Law and become circumcised. Justin Martyr argued that while Jesus was circumcised to complete God’s plan of redemption, circumcision is not required for salvation, but is useful only to mark off Jews for the suffering they deserve (Dial. 19.2; 67.2-6; Rokéah 2002: 42-60, 81-85; Cohen 2005: 74-76). Origen declared that Christ was circumcised once for all so Christians would not have to be (Hom. Luc. 14.1, 4; Jacobs 2012: 122-25). Lactantius claimed that Jesus was circumcised in order to save the Jews, but baptized in order to save Gentiles (see Ferguson 1988: 489). Circumcision also came to be associated with a literal reading of Scripture, in contrast to the spiritual reading of Christians, notably in the second-century Epistle of Barnabas and by the third-century theologian Origen (see Drake 2013: 41-45). The theological point in all these writings is that followers of Christ are the true Israel, superseding Judaism. The social effect is to demarcate a clear boundary between Jews and Christians by differentiating the bodies of males (circumcised or uncircumcised). Rejecting circumcision also worked to place Christians on the side of hegemonic (Greek and Roman) masculinities that considered the practice to be barbaric.

The Epistle of Barnabas also argues for supersession, but does so through a numerical typology in which Abraham’s circumcision of his household is read as a sign of Jesus/Christ on the cross (Barn. 9.7-8). Here, as Andrew Jacobs writes, Jesus/Christ’s own circumcision is
equated with messianic redemption, with the effect “at once to repudiate Jewish circumcision (as it exists among actual Jews) and reappropriate it as a mark of distinction through (as) Jesus” (2012: 36).

Such caricatures of “carnal Jews” were also used as rhetorical foils in Christian claims to the superiority of their sexual mores and practices (Hunter 2007: 98-101), and they functioned as part of a sexual politics of ethnicity aimed at raising Christians’ status in the eyes of Romans and other elites. By way of this rhetoric, the distinction between “fleshly” or “literal” circumcision (attributed to Jews) and “spiritual” circumcision (attributed to Christians) would eventually harden into a logic of Christian sexual superiority. All these writers point toward the ambiguity many Christians felt toward Jesus/Christ’s circumcised flesh, but it was an ambiguity that could be exploited strategically both to establish ethnic borders between Jews and Christians and to claim Christian moral superiority.

In sum, the circumcision of Jesus/Christ’s penis, seemingly the most unambiguous marker of his maleness, shows itself to be highly problematic for Christian interpretation. Is circumcision a mark of his Jewish identity as a male Israelite? Of his barbarian effeminacy? Of the male gender and ethnic identity of Jesus’s body, the Church? Of God’s work in salvation? Of Christian moral superiority and supersession of Judaism? All these are writ at various times for various ends upon the representations of Jesus/Christ circumcised.

Summary and Reflections

In the end, we have not located the true or real sexuality and gender of Jesus, itself a modern approach to framing the question. What we have discovered instead are the extraordinarily diverse ways in which representations of Jesus/Christ served as paradigmatic figures for authorizing, exemplifying, and promoting early Christian beliefs and practices. Christians variably deployed ancient protocols of masculinity and femininity for a variety of social and rhetorical purposes in diverse contexts with varying (potential) effects. Representations of the gender and sexuality of Jesus/Christ appear in intra-Christian debates, especially regarding sexual ethics; in the promotion of Christian teachings as divinely authoritative; in the polemics of identity formation and boundary setting, especially with regard to Jews; in resistance to violence
and injustice; in the cultivation of moral and spiritual selves; and in theological reflection, especially Christology and ecclesiology.

Christians reinscribed the ethos, discourses, and power relations of empire, patriarchal family, slavery, and normative sexualities, but they also challenged and negotiated them, sometimes with innovative potential to think and live differently. Portraits of a hegemonically masculine Jesus/Christ, who defeats demons and human opponents alike, work to support Christian claims about the truth and power of God’s kingdom. The images of an effeminate Jesus, the righteous, crucified, son and slave of God, opened numerous paths to challenging violent domination or supporting the dignity of women and other unmen (slaves, martyrs, and eunuchs) by portraying them as Christs. Images of Jesus as divine Wisdom and mother promoted ways of understanding God that included the honored roles of women as creators, nurturers, and divine teachers. Debates over the place of desire and sex in the Christian life (and afterlife) produced assertions of Jesus/Christ as husband, virgin, and eunuch; all were used explicitly to support or decry the relative merits of (re)marriage and virginal celibacy, even as they exposed the instability of sex/gender binaries. Neither do representations of Jesus as a circumcised Jew mark his masculinity in any uncomplicated way. Rather, such representations demonstrate how the politics of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities are operative in arguments for Christian superiority to Jews. A distinction between spiritual and carnal circumcision is deployed rhetorically to mark the Christian group as spiritual and to slander Jews. Images of marriage and circumcision are used to articulate the meaning of baptismal ritual and what it means for the church to be the gender-inclusive or male body of Christ.

The proliferation of representations of Jesus/Christ did not end in antiquity. Historians, cultural critics, theologians, artists, activists, and others have drawn upon these early representations to continue imagining Jesus’s gender and sexuality in new contexts. They, too, are engaged in a variety of constructive and polemical projects.

Working from the assumptions of modern historicism, historical Jesus researchers have sought to determine whether Jesus was more likely to have been (heteronormatively) married or virginal. Most such investigations have been constrained by assumptions that heterosexuality is natural and normative, excluding possibilities of a homoerotic, eunuch, queer or trans* Jesus. Given that the New Testament is silent on the issue, such research has focused primarily on what would be congruent with Jewish practices of Jesus’s time, and what Jesus’s own teachings on
marriage, sexuality, and divorce might imply about his own practice (see Driver 1965; Blenkinsopp 1969: 81-101; Phipps 1970, 2006; Sapp 1977: 37-56; Meier 1991: 332-45; Kolakowski 1997: 43-45; Allison 1998: 172-210; Roetzel 2000; Loader 2005: 143-8; Strotmann 2015). While a full overview of this literature is beyond the scope of this essay, let me mention a few of the arguments and possibilities: Jesus was a healthy heterosexual male, although we don’t know how he* practiced his* sexuality. As an adult male Jew, marriage would have been an expectation, so Jesus is likely to have married. By the time he* began his* ministry, he* may have been a widower (whose wife died in childbirth). Or he* abandoned his* family for his* ministry (as he* advises followers to do). On the other hand, some Jewish men chose not to marry (e.g., the Therapeutae and Dead Sea community). Like them, his* ascetic life may have been religiously motivated in light of his* eschatological mission and the conviction that there is no marrying in heaven. Or he* may not have married for other reasons. He* may have been a eunuch, too poor to marry, or his* low status may have made him* an unattractive candidate for a son-in-law. Or he* may have been gay or a eunuch. The most general consensus is that the issue cannot be settled definitively, but speculation continues, not least because claims to the truth about Jesus Christ’s sex/gender identity are used to authorize positions in contemporary debates over who can marry whom, who can be ordained, whose desire is pure and righteous and whose is deplorable, as well as many more issues.

Theologians start with other questions. Rosemary Ruether famously asked, “Can a male Savior save women?” (1983: 116-38; 1978: 134-37), while Jacqueline Grant (1989) called attention to the white and racist portrait of “white women’s Christ” and wrote about Jesus out of black women’s experiences and struggles. Graham Ward focuses his investigation on what “the gendered body of that Jewish man, Jesus the Christ” means as “scripture presents it to us and as the Church has reflected upon it.” For him, “Jesus’s body continually refigures a masculine symbolics until the particularities of one sex give way to the particularities of bodies which are male and female” (1999: 163). Mark Jordan starts by asking: “If Jesus’s body was God’s body, how do we begin to tell truths about it?” Through a set of reflections, he comes to advise that “(w)e should learn from the unashamed Jesus that our erotic reactions to him, whether we call him beautiful or ugly, are far from being a cause of shame. They are indispensable in our love of God. ... (T)here is no way into a full language of agape except through the language of eros” (2007: 281, 289). Contemporary representations of Jesus as a female, queer, man-loving,
woman-loving, black, homeless, AIDS-ridden, gender-bending, and gender-inclusive God are enabling new social, theological, and artistic imaginations (Moore 2001: 7-130; Goss 2002; Cherry 2007; Cornwall 2011; R. Williams 2013). Let me suggest that the ancient images of Jesus as a eunuch, a polymorphic Christ, or a tortured, pierced, virtuous wo/man, slave, victor, savior, mother, and Blandina-Chríst also offer particularly rich sites for feminist, womanist, queer, and trans* Christologies and ecclesiology to explore further.

For many people, Jesus/Christ continues to be a paradigmatic figure, foundational to their moral worth and dignity, to the spiritual value of their desires, sexual relations, and identities, to their gendered roles and practices, to their im/possible positions under the law, in public life, or in institutions such as family, church, or military, and indeed to their very safety. The diversity of early Christian representations of Jesus/Christ’s gender and sexuality offer a rich trove with which to think and imagine, careful of the harm that can be done and attentive to the good that might ensue.

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