

The Celibate Christ:  
A Suggestive Reading of John 20:17  
*μή μου ἄπτου οὕτω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα*  
(“Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended”)

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theology, the University of Auckland, 2019.



## **Abstract**

Jesus' words in John 20:17, μή μου ἄπτου, οὐπώ γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα ("Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended"), have been read in a variety of ways in their reception history. In this thesis I offer a new reading using a social-rhetorical method, examining both the language of the text and its social environment. I argue that the text is best understood as a reference to sexual abstinence. My hypothesis is that "Do not touch me" is a sexual euphemism that John uses in the narrative to refer obliquely to the celibate state of Jesus. "For I have not yet ascended" refers to the entry of Jesus into the anticipated angelic life where physical desire will no longer exist. John's purpose in including this episode illustrates his emphasis on the continued human embodiment of Jesus between his resurrection and ascension.

Chapter One introduces the structure and themes of the thesis, and gives a justification for the pursual of my argument and grounds for my approach. The description of my method in this chapter shows the complexity of interpreting a verse which is intended to be a euphemism, by nature indirect and obtuse, so a language inquiry alone is insufficient. Instead, several clues external to the workings of the verse must be drawn in to shed light on its ambiguity. Chapter Two offers an illustrative survey of other suggested explanations of the verse. Chapter Three starts to lay the groundwork for my own reading of this verse by uncovering the preference given to voluntary celibacy over marriage in the ideology of the New Testament (NT). In this respect, I argue that the distance Jesus places between himself and his foremost female companion in John 20:17 is consonant with this theme in the NT canon. The chapter further uncovers the common NT understanding that the resurrected state was celibate, just as Jesus was in John 20:17. It seems from additional NT texts that celibacy could be undertaken as a form of anticipation of resurrection, in the belief that immortal life began proleptically at baptism.

The subsequent chapters validate my hypothesis in a variety of ways. Chapter Four shows that ἄπτομαι is used as a sexual euphemism in other texts, as I am arguing is the

case in John 20:17. In certain non-biblical texts, the relationship of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is consistently portrayed as ascetic, a vestige of the story of 20:17. I argue from two of these texts, which reflect belief in an immediate, disembodied ascension at death, that 20:17 offers a contradiction in its focus on Jesus' body, and its emphasis on his physicality, until after his ascension. Chapter Five locates John's narrative in Judaea, the home of Essenism, and suggests that both groups shared an espousal of eschatological celibacy. In Chapter Six, a comparison of 20:17 with Jesus' subsequent invitation to Thomas to touch him (20:27), shows a common Johannine theme of revealing Jesus as resurrected and embodied.

The thesis offers a fresh – albeit a suggestive – reading of “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended.” I argue that John intends not to confound his readers – despite the experience of many a reader – but to communicate subtly that Jesus remained celibate and embodied at his resurrection. “Do not touch me” indicates he is both touchable and therefore embodied as a man, but as a celibate he is refusing touch from Mary. His anticipated leaving at ascension, however, will release him from embodiment. Despite the refusal to touch and impending departure, Mary is not left bereft, but the reader is left with the sense that somehow the relationship will continue beyond such an ascension.

For friends and colleagues of Laidlaw College  
(formerly Bible College of New Zealand)

*Ἄγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου . . .*

*έξ ὅλης τῆς διανοίας σου . . .*

*καὶ ἔξ ὅλης τῆς συνέσεως*

Mark 12:30-33



## **Acknowledgements**

My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisor at the University of Auckland, Dr Caroline Blyth, for her consistent support over the last three years. I appreciated her questions which unfailingly delved beneath the surface of my words, and her persistent demand for clarity. Caroline has facilitated not only the writing of this thesis but also the development of my own capacity for learning. Thank you, Caroline. I am also grateful to Dr Nicolas Thompson, my second supervisor, for comments and conversation on underlying historical and cultural issues as they related to my thesis. It has been a pleasure to write under such guidance.



## **Whakapapa**

Generations from Nga Puhi ancestor Rahiri:

Rahiri  
Kaharau  
Taurapoho  
Tupoto  
Miruiti  
Tuatahi  
Te Wehi  
Te Kopa  
Takitaki  
Te Karupe  
Moengaherehere  
Arihia Moengaherehere – William Pickering  
Mary Elizabeth (Raiha) Pickering – Alfred Turner  
William Turner – Catherine Filmer  
Barbara Turner – Ernest Timmins  
Raymond Timmins – Dale Robson  
Anne Timmins – Peter Aalbers  
Rebecca, David, Mary and Jonathan Aalbers.

This whakapapa uses the Ngata model of tararere from the original Nga Puhi ancestor through the generations to Moengaherehere; that is, a single line of descent without showing marriages or other kin on the line. Marriage connections are shown from Moengaherehere onwards.



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## Abbreviations

1QS	The Qumran Community Rule
AD	<i>Anno Domini</i>
<i>Adv. Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus Haereses</i>
<i>A.J.</i>	<i>Antiquitates Judaicae</i>
<i>ANF</i>	<i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325.</i> Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1867–1885
BC	Before Christ
BDAG	Bauer, Walter, Frederick W. Danker, William Arndt, and Wilbur F. Gingrich. <i>A Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.</i> 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000
<i>B.J.</i>	<i>Bellum Judaicum</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Reception</i>
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina.</i> 221– vols. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1953–
CD	Cairo Damascus Document
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
<i>DSSSE</i>	<i>The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition.</i> Edited by Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–1998
ECNT	Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>Ep. Rheg.</i>	<i>Epistle to Reginos</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>ET</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>Gos. Mary</i>	<i>Gospel of Mary</i>
<i>Gos. Thom.</i>	<i>Gospel of Thomas</i>
<i>Hist. Eccl.</i>	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JB	Jerusalem Bible
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LXX	Septuagint
NA <sup>27</sup>	Nestle-Aland, <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 27th ed.
NA <sup>28</sup>	Nestle-Aland, <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 28th ed.

<i>NHL</i>	<i>Nag Hammadi Library in English.</i> Edited by James M. Robinson. 3 <sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988
<i>NICNT</i>	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NIV</i>	New International Version
<i>NPNF<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.</i> Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 Vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1886–1889
<i>NPNF<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.</i> Series 2. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 14 Vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1886–1890
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NT</i>	New Testament
<i>NTApoc</i>	<i>The New Testament Apocrypha.</i> Edited by W. Schnuemelcher and R. McL. Wilson. 2 vols. Rev. ed. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1990–1992
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>OT</i>	Old Testament
<i>OTP</i>	<i>The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.</i> Edited by James H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. Repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2011
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>RSPT</i>	<i>Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologique</i>
<i>RSV</i>	Revised Standard Version
<i>SBL</i>	Society of Biblical Literature
<i>SBLSP</i>	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
<i>SNTS</i>	Society for NT Studies
<i>SNTSMS</i>	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
<i>SupNT</i>	Supplements to <i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>UBS</i>	<i>United Bible Societies</i>
<i>WUNT</i>	<i>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</i>
<i>ZDPV</i>	<i>Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins (German Society for the Exploration of Palestine)</i>

# Chapter One: Preliminary Matters

## The Text in Context: John 20:11-18

<sup>11</sup>But Mary stayed standing outside, next to the tomb, weeping. As she wept, she bent down into the tomb, <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet of where the body of Jesus had been. <sup>13</sup>They said to her, “Woman why are you weeping?” She said to them “They have taken away my lord, and I do not know where they have put him.” <sup>14</sup>Having said these things, she turned behind her and saw Jesus but she did not know it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Mary.” Turning, she said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni,” which means, “Teacher.” <sup>17</sup>Jesus said to her, “Do not touch me ( $\mu\acute{\eta}$   $\mu\acute{o}\nu$   $\alpha\pi\tau\acute{o}u$ ), for I have not yet ascended ( $\mathcal{O}\mathcal{U}\pi\omega$   $\gamma\grave{a}\rho$   $\alpha\nu\alpha\beta\acute{e}\beta\eta\kappa\alpha$ ) to the Father; but go to my brothers and tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went away telling the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and that he said these things to her.<sup>1</sup>

## The Problem: Love in the Garden

Many interpreters have offered possible explanations for the enigmatic command of John 20:17,<sup>2</sup> in which Jesus prohibits Mary Magdalene from touching him, and the equally enigmatic reason he gives, “for I have not yet ascended.” The variety of readings offered over the last two millennia is evidence in itself that John 20:17 “belongs to a handful of the most difficult passages in the New Testament.”<sup>3</sup> Some interpreters, discussed in the next chapter, suggest that  $\mu\acute{\eta}$   $\mu\acute{o}\nu$   $\alpha\pi\tau\acute{o}u$  (“Do not touch me”) is a sexual reference which may indicate a sexual relationship, but the majority read the verse as an interchange between disciple and teacher. In my proposed reading, the verse represents an

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical references in this thesis are my translations of NA<sup>27</sup>, NA<sup>28</sup>, the *UBS* Greek NT (4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed.) and Rahlf's LXX (1979). As is common practice, the historic present tense is usually translated as a simple English past.

<sup>2</sup> Rather than dissect the verse into separate components, the term “John 20:17” is used in this thesis as an abbreviated form of the more lengthy referent, “Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended to the Father,” or part thereof.

<sup>3</sup> Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 641.

understanding of a relationship which sits somewhere on the middle of that spectrum, a relationship I term “celibate love.”<sup>4</sup> It seems natural to infer in a naïve reading of John 20:11–18 – naïve in the sense of coming to the text without presuppositions – that the gender of the two participants in the encounter is paramount in the dynamic of the narrative. My thesis proposes that it is. I suggest the scene is a gendered one and begs attention to its subtleties.

It is an unfathomable question to ask whether Jesus ever actually spoke the words, μή μου ἄπτου, or at what point the words might have entered the Jesus tradition.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the case may be, the question this thesis addresses is: What does the author of John’s Gospel want us, the reader, to understand from the verse in the context of its narrative? Here is a man and a woman; she is grieved at his absence, weeping inconsolably we are told (20:13,15); this man and woman are alone in a garden (20:10–11); there is talk of touch and of the prohibition of touch (20:17); there is the tender calling of a name, Μαριάμ (20:16) and nothing more is needed to stop her crying; there is joy at the end of the search for her beloved (20:18). The story of the encounter in the garden is told in a way that all but the most hard-hearted of us must admit: John intends us to grasp that a personal love existed between Mary and Jesus.

John’s text portrays Mary’s passionate desire to be close to the body of Jesus, the lifelessness of that body notwithstanding since it is all now that is left to her. “There seems to be an undeniable physical attraction that Magdalene has for Jesus,” states James

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<sup>4</sup> I use the terms “celibacy” and “celibate” (*caelebs* and *caelebatus* respectively) in an extension of the original sense of “unmarried” to refer to abstinence in sexual matters for spiritual, ideological or religious reasons. See Patricia Wittberg in *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (NY: SUNY, 1994). Contemporary celibacy often entails a vow to abstain from all sexual relations. Carl Olson, ed., *Celibacy and Religious Traditions* (NY: Oxford University, 2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Recent research by sociolinguist Allan Bell on bilingualism and its probability amongst the NT writers and Jesus himself raises possibilities. The ability of a bilingualist for “code-switching” and mixing languages during communication, without the need for conscious translation, may have been part of the process of the earliest oral transmission of stories about Jesus and the NT writing. Bell suggests that Jesus and the Evangelists were probably equally fluent in both Aramaic and Greek. Allan Bell, “The Early Greek-Language Tradition behind the Gospels,” in *Holding Forth the Word of Life: Essays in Honor of Tim Meadowcroft*, ed. John de Jong and Csilla Saysell (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 229–42.

Charlesworth, “she even wants his dead body.”<sup>6</sup> The other women, Peter and the disciple with him accept that the tomb is empty and go away (20:10). Mary, however, remains to search for his body and is distraught at the loss of her loved one. Celsus (c. 25 BC – c. AD 50),<sup>7</sup> in an effort to discredit the early believers, described Mary, the first witness of the empty tomb, as a frantic or hysterical woman ( $\gamma\upsilon\nu\eta\ \pi\alpha\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omega\varsigma$ ).<sup>8</sup> Her grief is relentless.<sup>9</sup> Of Jesus’ role in the emotion-laden interaction, we are only told he speaks her name, Μαριάμ, and this is enough for immediate recognition (20:16). She responds to him with the title Παβλούντι, a tender form of Παβλῖ (teacher).<sup>10</sup>

At this point in the narrative, the author of John bestows on the reader a literary disappointment. The climax of the story is suddenly diffused into a separation. The reader was expecting a joyful reunion, at a minimum an embrace, or perhaps even more than that, in the fashion of a Greek romance novel, an erotic reunion between a man returned from the afterworld and a woman from this world. Rather, this man, so loved by Mary, arrests her desire to be close to him and commands her, “Do not touch me.” Jean-Luc Nancy calls this abrupt disconnection a “theological *hapax*” or an “oxymoron,” because “nothing and no one is untouchable in Christianity.”<sup>11</sup> Nancy is right: “Do not touch” confounds John’s central premise that “the Word became flesh” (1:14), and this contradiction in the text of Christianity<sup>12</sup> needs to be addressed. “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended” presents a theological, exegetical and literary conundrum.

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<sup>6</sup> James Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John: The Genius in the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 493.

<sup>7</sup> I have chosen in this thesis to retain use of the BC/AD nomenclature over the more recent option of BCE/CE, following the argument of Wei-Hsien Wan, “Whose Time? Which Rationality? Reflections on Empire, 1 Peter, and the ‘Common Era’,” *Postscripts* 7.3 (2011): 279–94. Doi: 10.1558/post.v7.3.28300. Wan argues that Western imperialism is sanitised by removing the historical specificity of BC/AD and treating it as “common.” BCE/CE language, “obfuscates the relations of power that [is] at work in it . . . despite its apparent religious and cultural inclusivity.” *Ibid*, 281.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, 2.55 (ANF 4:453 and note).

<sup>9</sup> Her weeping is mentioned four times at John 20:11a, 11b, 13 and 15.

<sup>10</sup> The term is an unusual one of endearment and means “beloved Rabbi.” Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, 497.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, ed. John D. Caputo, trans. Sarah Clift *et al.*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 14.

<sup>12</sup> This is Nancy’s term, but how early the terms “Christian” and “Christianity” were in use is a matter of debate. Judith Lieu sums up the dilemma as “an early first century in which we find Judaism and, within it,

Several scholars whose work is discussed in the next chapter suggest that John is conveying a sexual subtlety which indicates that Jesus and Mary were married and the prohibition to touch represents an end to their physical relationship. In this thesis, however, while I discuss the sexual connotations of John's language, I argue that it is more likely that, while Jesus and Mary loved each other, they were neither lovers nor married. The view they had a physical relationship gives insufficient consideration to other factors which I raise in this thesis. The *pericope*, therefore, cannot be read viably from one such single view: I thus engage with other dimensions of the text. In the next section I outline my method to show that other weightier contextual factors make Jesus' celibacy post-resurrection a more plausible reading of the verse than his marriage.

Other scholars, also discussed in Chapter Two, find themselves at the other end of the spectrum and fail to give full credit to Mary's seeming desire for the physical closeness to Jesus which John's verse clearly communicates. There may be concern that any suggestion of such desire could compromise Christian traditions about the celibacy of Jesus<sup>13</sup> and the repentant, reformed celibacy of Mary. As Kwok Pui-Lan says, "The

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a charismatic preacher with a band of followers, and a later period . . . in which Judaism and Christianity are recognizable as two separate and independent systems: a historical datum." Judith Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, Cornerstones, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 38. Late first- and early-second-century texts state that Χριστιανός ("Christian"), belonging to Χριστός, was in use at the time of the apostle Paul (Acts 11:25–26; 26:28; 1 Pe 4:15–16). Donald Hagner argues that Christians were becoming a distinct group even within the era of the writing of the NT (Acts 11:26; 12:3; 24:5; 24:14), evidenced by the exemption for Christians from the Jewish temple tax imposed by Rome. Donald Hagner, "Another Look at 'The Parting of the ways,'" in *Earliest Christian History: History, Literature, and Theology*, ed. Michael Bird and Jason Maston, WUNT 320 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 406 fn. 89. Where John is concerned, Daniel Boyarin is aware of "nascent Christian kerygma" in John's Gospel and speaks of ways in which "the earliest Christian groups (including, or even especially the Johannine one) distinguished themselves from non-Christian Jews." Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 105. Adele Reinhartz prefers the image of a multi-lane highway, of cars travelling in parallel lanes but also crossing into shared lanes at intervals, to describe the process of the "parting of the ways" in the several decades after the first Jewish Revolt. Although the final "fork in the road" may not have been evident until the time of Constantine, she detects divisions, especially in the fourth Gospel, between "Jews who do not believe Jesus to be the Messiah" and 'everybody who does.' Adele Reinhartz, "A Fork in the Road or a Multi-Lane Highway?" in *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and other Graeco-Roman Religions in Antiquity*, ed. Ian Henderson *et al.* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 280–95.

<sup>13</sup> For some arguments for and against the celibacy of Jesus, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 1 (Anchor Bible; NY: Doubleday, 1991), 332–345. Dale Martin, for one, is quite convinced: "All our evidence pointing to the historical Jesus, therefore, indicates that he not only avoided marriage and family himself but also taught people to forsake those institutions and enter into an

sexuality of Jesus is a highly tabooed subject in the Christian church and in the academy,”<sup>14</sup> with the result that the emotional potential portrayed within this *pericope* has often been avoided or reinterpreted. Yet, the NT does not make any explicit claims about Jesus being “asexual” in the sense of “without sexual feeling” and, moreover, “asexuality” and “celibacy” are not synonymous terms. In contemporary understandings of celibacy, the celibate remains a sexual person since sexuality is integral to personality, while foregoing sexual relationships or sexual behaviours.<sup>15</sup> In other words, desire and celibacy should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Admittedly, it is impossible to know the exact emotional relationship of Mary and Jesus: their love may have been mutual, or one-sided, or platonic. I am arguing that John’s Jesus (with his embodied sexuality) recognized that Mary’s touch, the touch of a woman who loved him/whom he loved, could potentially threaten his celibate status.

William Phipps, one of the voices discussed in the next chapter who argues that Jesus was a married man, accepts this distinction, observing that Jesus’ marital status is “incidental . . . [a]s long as it is recognized that Jesus was a sexual being and had a warm appreciation of marriage and children.”<sup>16</sup> It is through this lens of a physically warm but celibate Christ that I propose a fresh reading of John 20:17. John’s Gospel is at pains to tell us Jesus felt hunger and thirst, and sorrow and joy: he experienced manhood, both physically and emotionally. John is also claiming that this very human Jesus was later crucified and rose from the dead, and this resurrected Jesus was still somehow human: continuing to be “the Word made flesh” (1:14). He can still share breakfast on the beach

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alternative eschatological society. . . For the historical Jesus, the rejection of marriage and the family was as necessary as the proclamation of the resurrection and the eternal kingdom of God.” Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 106.

<sup>14</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, “Touching the Taboo: On the Sexuality of Jesus,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, 2nd ed. (Westminster: John Knox, 2010), 119.

<sup>15</sup> For distinctions between “affective/diffused sexuality” and “focused/genital sexuality” see Donald Goergen, *The Sexual Celibate* (London: SPCK, 1976) and Jim Cotter, *Pleasure, Pain and Passion* (Sheffield: Cairns, 1993). Janie Gustafson distinguishes libido from *eros* for the same reason, in “Celibate Passion,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 279.

<sup>16</sup> William Phipps, *The Sexuality of Jesus* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1996), 197.

with his friends (21:12); Thomas can still feel the marks of wounds, if he were so inclined (20:27). I am proposing that the prohibition, “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended,” functions the same way in the overall narrative of John. In an implicit and oblique way, John’s words reveal the sexual status of the risen Christ: he is celibate.

The thesis I present in the pages that follow allows for both the love between Mary and Jesus and yet their sexual restraint: John invites us into an emotional encounter between the two in 20:11–18 and at the same time presents us with an abrupt disconnection or, as Nancy so aptly calls it, a “theological *hapax*.” I show throughout the thesis that, while John 20:17 presents a conundrum to the modern reader, it was nevertheless clear in its original context and to its primary audience. The conundrum is all but dissipated when we read the verse as John’s subtle reference to the celibacy of Jesus.

## Methodology

The goal of this thesis is to offer a plausible alternative reading of μή μου ἅπτου, οὐπώ γὰρ ἀναβεβηκα in light of the current lack of academic consensus. I am proposing that at the heart of this prohibition is both the pull of some form of love between Mary and Jesus and the imposition by Jesus of a distance between them because of his celibacy. My method shows the complexity of interpreting a verse which is a negative sexual innuendo using language which is intended to be loaded but obtuse. Hence a solely exegetical approach, focusing only on the narrow confines of the text, is insufficient. Instead, several clues external to the workings of the verse must be drawn in to shed light on its ambiguity.

Vernon Robbins advises especially in the case of an ancient text that, “No complete interpretation of a text is humanly possible, and this state of things should be admitted as one begins the exciting task of interpretation.”<sup>17</sup> Given the impossibility of any watertight solution to the enigma this verse presents, my intention might be more aptly regarded as an attempt to bring together phenomena which appear in different contexts

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<sup>17</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*, repr. (NY: Bloomsbury, 2012), 2.

and show how these seemingly disparate realities may have a bearing on interpretation. If one image for John 20:17 might be that of jigsaw puzzle, then I offer in this thesis several pieces of that jigsaw which I propose fit with each other and give a clearer glimpse of the whole.

Not all solutions to puzzles can be reached by methods of linear argumentation, particularly when the evidence available is predominantly circumstantial. In these cases, abductive reasoning can offer an alternative means of inquiry, given that it is specifically intended to be “a reasoning process invoked to explain a puzzling observation.”<sup>18</sup> Much like a diagnosis of a medical condition, which takes observable symptoms of sickness as indicators of an identifiable disease, or like a detective’s use of clues,<sup>19</sup> abductive inference involves following our inquiry from the circumstantial evidence or “clues” we have to hand towards a plausible explanation that is in our minds, “beyond a reasonable doubt.”<sup>20</sup> In the case of this research, John’s story of a rejection of touch by Jesus is puzzling; but, as a hypothesis, if John as an author were eager to communicate the celibacy of Jesus, then such a story is not so perplexing, but in fact such a prohibition would make sense, or even be expected.

To use a mixed metaphor, I offer in this thesis the “observable symptoms” which may each be treated as a “piece in the puzzle.” My hypothesis that John is referring to celibacy by the ambiguous wording of the prohibition unifies several observable phenomena. To name but a few of those that I present in this thesis: the practice of celibacy was given a high value in the NT and commonly linked to the resurrected state, overlapping with the life of angels; tensions in the NT over asceticism<sup>21</sup> are evident; later traditions in the

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<sup>18</sup> Atocha Aliseda, *Abductive Reasoning: Logical Investigations into Discovery and Explanation* (London: Springer, 2006), 28.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Shank, “The Extraordinary Ordinary Powers of Abductive Reasoning,” *Theory and Psychology*, 8(1998): 841–60.

<sup>20</sup> Aliseda, *Abductive Reasoning*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Joseph offers a useful definition of asceticism within his argument that Jesus was an ascetic: “Jesus and his followers are described as renouncing their attachments to worldly possessions, security, home and family. Such behaviour, and such extreme self-denial of common comforts, should probably be called ascetic.” Simon Joseph, “The Ascetic Jesus,” *JSHJ* 8 (2010): 180. “Asceticism” differs from “celibacy” in that the former includes deprivation in other areas of physical and material existence, not just sexuality. The two terms occasionally overlap, since, as Carl Olson observes, celibacy is “part of a pattern of actions

second and third centuries remember Jesus and Mary as ascetics; the verb John uses for “do not touch” in this instance was also used for sexual prohibition in other instances in the LXX and NT; beliefs over spiritual or physical resurrection were controversial both before and after the first century, a controversy that John’s text does not evade with its emphasis on physical incarnation; there are signals from ancient historians that celibate communities were known in Judaea at the time of Jesus. By abductive inference, we are led from a puzzling observation (the prohibition of touch in John 20:17) to a plausible explanation, given the variety of clues that point towards sexual abstinence. In other words, all these pieces of evidence, when in some way related to the biblical or extra-biblical traditions of Mary and Jesus, could mean that John 20:17 can be read as a reference to celibacy, beyond a reasonable doubt. In the thesis that follows, the prohibition in the garden scene becomes no longer a surprise but is fully consonant with the general phenomenon of celibacy.

For this reason, I have chosen to explore John 20:17 using a form of socio-rhetorical criticism designed by Vernon Robbins, which allows me to explore the “multiple textures” and layers in the text and thus approach it from a variety of angles.<sup>22</sup> The value of this method is that it avoids the problematic tendency in interpretation to read wearing only one lens, whether that be linguistic, exegetical, theological, social or anthropological. Socio-rhetorical criticism allows – or even demands – the use of a number of methodological approaches, such as historical-critical criticism, textual criticism, reception history, literary criticism, narrative criticism and so on. Throughout the thesis, I draw on a number of these approaches which allow me to see the text as “a thickly textured tapestry . . . an intricately woven tapestry”<sup>23</sup> that is complex and complicated, and therefore defies any one single approach. Using categories that Robbins suggests, I explore the ideological, intertextual, socio-cultural and inner textures of John

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undertaken to control the body,” in *Celibacy*, 5. In later Christian centuries, this included excessive fasting and severe physical deprivation. See Elizabeth Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), 14–17.

<sup>22</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 2.

20:17, looking for specific links with celibate practice. Each of these categories is a layer of the text that forms a piece in the puzzle, or a clue to the detective. Each layer warrants its own chapter, as I elaborate below.

Before discussion of the four layers of the text in the thesis, the following chapter will review significant literature on the interpretation of John 20:17. This will lay down foundational arguments that have elucidated the verse – or clouded it, as the case may be! – and cover ground that I need not repeat. Many of those reviewed acknowledge the sexual connotations of the verse, but sometimes seem at a loss to know where to place the implications of this innuendo: hence the need for the multi-layered approach which I adopt in this thesis. I am therefore indebted to those interpretations that have preceded my own as I seek to bring other contextual factors to bear on a resolution. Past discussions have enabled me to integrate insights which have already been made and ultimately to offer a further alternative.

One of the volumes that I have appreciated in this research and which features significantly in my following chapter is the publication of essays in 2013 of the interdisciplinary volume, *To Touch or Not to Touch?*<sup>24</sup> The volume includes chapters on exegetical, theological and philosophical inquiry, art history and the history of the reception of the text. Admittedly, it does not claim to be exhaustive, but my intention is that my thesis, based on Robbins' method of examining the text's many layers and differing textures, will add new angles of approach to the text. Being persuaded of the need to look beyond the usual horizons for an adequate reading of this text, I add a consideration of male-female relationships in other NT texts (Chapter Three), later memories or traditions of Mary and Jesus as ascetics (Chapter Four), a consideration of the Judaean narrative setting of the fourth Gospel (Chapter Five) and the use of rhetoric by the author of John in his intended comparison of 20:11-18 and 20:24-29 (Chapter Six).

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<sup>24</sup> Reimund Bieringer, Karlijn Demasure, and Barbara Baert (eds.), *To Touch or Not to Touch? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the “Noli Me Tangere,”* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

Chapter Three, based on Robbins' suggested layer of the “Ideological Texture” of the text, places the first “puzzle piece” in the picture of “celibacy” in John 20:17. Here I examine the ideology of the NT with specific reference to celibacy. The chapter focuses on beliefs about sexual abstinence and shows that such abstinence was not only a common feature of the NT, but in some instances was considered a spiritual undertaking and an elevated state. Some texts show that celibacy had an eschatological function, and there are signs of the development of asceticism within groups of followers of the resurrected Christ, which promoted sexual denial and connected asceticism to life in the eschaton. In John 20:17, a scene in which Jesus is resurrected as a divine and human being, it makes sense that John, taking his valid place in NT ideology, would portray Jesus as celibate.

This study of the sexual ideologies of the NT texts in Chapter Three paves the way for me to place John thematically in the canon of the NT. Since it is possible to identify tensions over sexual asceticism in NT texts discussed, then it is plausible that these same themes are also common to John’s text. Therefore, a necessary precursor to Chapter Three is the section below titled, “The Provenience and Dating of the Johannine Corpus.” This shows that the setting of the writing of John holds common ground with other NT texts. Thus, the themes of eschatological celibacy and tensions over celibacy and marriage, as well as varying apocalyptic<sup>25</sup> expectations, show that my reading of “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended” as an expression of celibacy may have likewise been the reading adopted by its first audiences.

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<sup>25</sup> An apocalypse may be defined as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 14, ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/auckland/detail.action?docID=4859099>. More recently, however, scholars have noted that the genre in many cases lacks a coherent uniformity and the term might therefore be more appropriately applied to a text of “a religious bearing that is preoccupied by the approach of the end of all normal time and history.” James Charlesworth, “Introduction,” *OTP* 1:4. My use of the terms “apocalyptic/apocalypse” in this thesis is broad and inclusive. The genre is most commonly associated with a group of Jewish writings of the Second-Temple Period, many of which were held in the Qumran library, including Daniel, parts of Ezekiel and Isaiah, 1 and 2 Enoch, Baruch and others. Later texts include the NT Book of Revelation, as well as some of the non-canonical texts of earliest Christianity.

In Chapter Four, another puzzle piece, the layer of “Intertexture,” contributes to the overall picture in which celibacy is a likely explanation for the enigmatic John 20:17. The topic shifts from the tensions surrounding sexual practice in the NT, discussed in the previous chapter, to ambivalences found in a variety of other texts, but ambivalences which reflect the same themes as those in my proposed reading of John’s verse. Socio-rhetorical criticism allows for “a complex correlation between a text and the contexts in which a text has been read and reread, including various dynamic interrelations between creator and contemplators, *past and present*.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the texts in the previous chapter which shared an approximate first-century date, these intertextual resonances come from a variety of dates and traditions but nonetheless contain language and concepts which act as a mirror to John 20:17 and, I propose, reflect a common image of the celibate Christ.

This chapter has three sections in which I explore three aspects of the verse and how each might interact with other texts. The three aspects of the verse which I find have resonances in other texts are: 1) the verb ἀπτομαι (“touch”); 2) the relationship of Jesus and Mary; and 3) resurrection and ascension. Because the texts also deal with celibacy, I suggest they elucidate those same aspects of John 20:17. In Section One of this chapter, I examine the use of the verb ἀπτομαι in John 20:17 with its parallel use in other texts to show that in many contexts, in a similar negation, it can signify a demand for sexual restraint. I believe John deliberately uses this word rather than one of the several others that carry a more generic meaning of “touch.” The use of this negative command in several other texts where it refers to sexual restraint validates my suggestion that this may also be its meaning in the conversation between Mary and Jesus.

In Section Two, I examine evidence of a textual reception history of the relationship of Jesus and Mary Magdalene as a type of “intertext.” It is worth noting that in later texts which survive from the first few centuries of Christianity, the depictions of the relationship of Jesus and Mary resonate with my suggested reading of John 20:17. Mary is a leading woman ascetic and she is portrayed as spiritually intimate with Jesus in

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<sup>26</sup> David Gowler, “Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation: Textures of a Text and its Reception,” *JSNT* 33 2 (2010): 191. Italics added.

traditions that deny the value of sexuality. This echo of Mary and Jesus in later texts is too loud and clear to be ignored and it provides another “clue” or “puzzle piece” to support my reading of John 20:17. The tradition of a bond between Mary and Jesus, of which I suggest John 20:17 is the earliest textual indication, has its own reception history in the texts that I discuss in this section.

In the third section of Chapter Four, I use two further texts, this time as examples of the reception history of the twin concepts of resurrection and ascension. As in the above case of the texts which exemplify the relationship of Mary and Jesus, the use of reception history here forms a valid part of socio-rhetorical criticism, and I approach these later texts to explore how they reflect ideologies and theologies that are potentially evident in the earlier text. I use the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Epistle to Rheginos* to illustrate the tenets of a “body debate,” a controversy which aired both before and after the claimed resurrection of Jesus and which was concerned with the nature of the resurrected body. This theme is, in fact, a thread that runs through all four textures and chapters of the thesis: it appears that a relationship existed between asceticism and resurrection.

Hovering in the background, from the angelic ascetic of the Pauline churches in Chapter Three to the eschatological warrior at Qumran in Chapter Five, lies the general premise that physical freedom from sexuality in the celibate state was lived in anticipation of the absence of sexuality in “heaven” or in the resurrected state.

The two texts I use in this section I have named “anti-intertexts,” since they reflect belief in an immediate ascension after death, or a spiritual resurrection, rather than the physical resurrection that John promotes, a concept that will be enlarged in Chapter Six. The sharp contrast of the texts with the emphasis in 20:17 suggests an oppositional theology. “Do not touch me” highlights that Jesus could be touched as a palpable, embodied man, and “for I have not yet ascended” refers to this interim embodiment before his final going away. I suggest that John writes to his environment in this case, emphasising Jesus’ risen humanity.

I am conscious in this chapter, especially in the section which discusses Mary Magdalene as an ascetic, that over the centuries, the body and sexuality of Mary have already been given their share of unwelcome attention. I have no wish to add to this, but I have necessarily engaged with ascetic texts. In terms of the gender dynamics evoked in the texts I am looking at, I admit at the outset that all the texts I refer to, both biblical texts and those outside the canon, are the product of a patriarchal understanding which pre-dated these texts. They are mostly written by men and for men, but even where they are not, they expose the patriarchal belief that women – especially in their capacity as sexual beings and, by extension, as mothers – were culturally considered inferior. Although this ancient view certainly invites critique, a focused feminist reading of these patriarchal texts is beyond the remit of this thesis. In discussions of celibacy and virginity, it is impossible to know how much the choices of the women represented in the texts were determined by the men around them – anymore than it is possible to know how much the men themselves were controlled by the machinations of social constructions and hierarchical power structures. As far as possible, I let the women and men in the texts speak for themselves, without knowing the degree of individual agency that any of the participants had in those roles.

Chapter Five seeks to place another piece of the puzzle in the picture of John 20:17 by moving to the “Social and Cultural Texture” of the text. I move from the largely extra-biblical texts of the previous chapter, and the NT texts of Chapter Three, to the narrative setting of the Gospel of John itself: the story of Jesus from the perspective of John. In this chapter, I present celibacy as an integral part of mid-first-century Judaean life, the milieu in which Jesus, in John, spends much of his time. As a precursor to this, I address below, in “Reading John from a Judaean Perspective,” a recognition that the author of John places the ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem and Judaea rather than the impression given by the Synoptics that the ministry of Jesus focused on Galilee until his final week in Jerusalem. Chapter Five, then, discusses the narrative of the fourth Gospel set in the society and culture of Jerusalem and Judaea. I suggest that this location was especially

familiar with celibate practice, given that signs of “virtuoso religion”<sup>27</sup> are detectible in John’s Gospel, as argued by Timothy Ling.<sup>28</sup> The fourth Gospel’s location of the Jesus story in Judaea thus allows for a plausible reading of John 20:17 as a reference to celibacy.

It is especially in this chapter, however, that I note my own departure, not from Robbins’ overall method, but from certain underlying assumptions. Robbins draws on the work of Bruce Malina for his understanding of rhetoric and social structure in the ancient Mediterranean, and it is this framework that Robbins brings to his interpretation of the NT text.<sup>29</sup> But Timothy Ling is critical of Malina and other social anthropologists who “adhere to a vision of the social world that ignores its religious dimension.”<sup>30</sup> While the economic and social dimension has its place in analysis, it is “an error to overwrite its religious dimension.”<sup>31</sup> Thus Robbins’ control assumptions (such as the agonist nature of agrarian societies; limited good within their economic systems; honour and shame as motivators) become inadequate as a framework for NT criticism. Ling shows that religious motivation operates beyond these boundaries and, in certain cases, falsifies them. Ben Witherington has also expressed a similar criticism of Robbins, and the “new rhetoric” school with which he is associated. The method, Witherington argues, “involves an implicit denial of the theory or theology of revelation that the NT writers assumed and on the basis of which they operated.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, though they were certainly informal rhetoricians, immersed in their social context, the NT writers were not bound by these environmental tools. Similarly, the religious actor – such as Jesus as

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<sup>27</sup> In the sense of modern, institutionalised religion, “the jury is still out on the existence or non-existence of religion in antiquity,” according to Adele Reinhartz, “The Vanishing Jews of Antiquity,” *Marginalia*, 24 June, 2014, <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/vanishing-Jews-Antiquity-Adele-Reinhartz/>. I use the terms “religion” and “religious” in this thesis, however, in reference to that which is spiritual or theological, so having to do with beliefs concerning deities, worship, afterlife and expressions of faith in the unseen. I follow Daniel Boyarin’s use of the term: “When the Temple was extant, most Jews organized their religious lives around its festivals and rites, its priests and practices.” *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (The New Press, 2012), 4. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/auckland/detail.action?docID=900500>.

<sup>28</sup> See Timothy Ling in Bibliography.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 30–31.

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Ling, *The Judaean Poor and the Fourth Gospel*, SNTSMS 136 (NY: Cambridge, 2006), 110.

<sup>31</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 110.

<sup>32</sup> Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2009), 242.

portrayed by John in Judaea, and indeed the Essenes or any religious virtuoso group – may have been guided or motivated by a spiritual belief system that operated in a counter-cultural fashion to the culture and society that was typical in its wider context.

One further note of departure from Robbins is his adoption of the model of supposed Mediterranean social structure as if it were equally useful for all NT texts: a generalisation that does not do justice to the complexity of the NT, least of all the Gospel of John. Ling has shown that the area of Judaea, as the religious and political capital of Judaism<sup>33</sup> (albeit a puppet to Rome), was economically, socially and culturally distinct not only from the Mediterranean but also from other areas of Israel.<sup>34</sup> The Johannine version of the story of Jesus allocates a much greater amount of time and attention to Jesus in Judaea, and to his interactions with the Jews in that area.<sup>35</sup> Since John locates the story of Jesus in Judaea, my reading of John 20:17 approaches celibacy in the social and cultural setting of that geographical area in the mid-first century. Thus, while I work with an understanding in Chapter Five of a Judaean narrative setting for John which departs from Robbins' broad

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<sup>33</sup> Boyarin states in *Jewish Gospels*, 21: “the term ‘Judaism’ will be used as a convenience to refer to that part of Jewish life that was concerned with obedience to God, worship and belief, though I recognize that the term is an anachronism.” I follow Boyarin’s use of the term, although it is an anachronism if understood in the sense of an organised, unified or institutionalised modern religion, but it does appear in the second-temple period to describe the revolt led by Judas Maccabeus of those who remained loyal ἐν τῷ Ιουδαϊσμῷ, translated as “loyal to Judaism” by JB (LXX 2 Macc 8:1).

<sup>34</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> John uses a generic term of Ιουδαῖοι (“the Jews”) for those who oppose Jesus and are ultimately responsible for his death, but he also states this caused division (σχίσμα) and that some Jews believed in Jesus (10:19–21). Two issues derive from this for readers of the fourth Gospel. The first is a literary problem: who were οἱ Ιουδαῖοι? The second is an ethical one: how should οἱ Ιουδαῖοι be translated today to avoid further anti-Jewish sentiment and the unconscionable defence of anti-Semitism? On the problems and some suggested solutions for the translation of οἱ Ιουδαῖοι, see Ruth Sheridan, “Issues in the Translation of οἱ Ιουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* 132 3 (2013): 671–95. In this thesis, I retain the use of “the Jews” for οἱ Ιουδαῖοι in accordance with the arguments of Adele Reinhartz who fears that “the vital connection — the persistence of identity — between ancient and modern Jews” is ruptured by the loss of the use of the term. She also observes that “just as anti-Semitism is not created by the mere usage of Jew in a particular text, so can it not be eradicated simply by replacing Jew with some other term.” In Reinhartz, “Vanishing Jews.” Nonetheless, because John himself seems to mean different things at different times, I occasionally understand οἱ Ιουδαῖοι as “the Judaeans” where the context seems to suggest Jews from Judaea in contrast to Jews from elsewhere, such as οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι, the Galileans (4:43–45). John’s first use of οἱ Ιουδαῖοι is couched as those from Jerusalem (ἐξ Ἱεροσολύμων) who send their representative priests and Levites (1:19) and Pharisees (1:24). It may have been John’s Ιουδαῖοι as representatives of Jewish leadership who came from Jerusalem to Galilee to dispute with Jesus when he was there (Matt 15:1; Mark 3:22), and were later held responsible for his death (Matt 16:21).

Mediterranean interpretive model, nevertheless I appreciate the elucidation of text of John 20:17 that can be achieved by an overall study of its multi-layered texture.

Throughout the thesis, but especially in Chapter Five, I use the distinct but connected terms, Qumran, the DSS and the Essenes, so an explanation is warranted here. Qumran refers to the site of a Jewish sectarian community which seems to have been originally established in the middle of the second century BC and lasted over two hundred years, until the defeat of the Jews by the Romans in AD 68-70.<sup>36</sup> It was inhabited, at some estimates, by about three hundred or so members.<sup>37</sup> The DSS were discovered near the site mid-last century. Although the handwriting on some of the Scrolls resembles that found on inscriptions in the ruins,<sup>38</sup> many do not pertain specifically to the Qumran community.<sup>39</sup> Many are common to Judaism, such as biblical texts,<sup>40</sup> and many were composed elsewhere and in use by other groups at the time.<sup>41</sup> The Essenes, it seems, belonged to “the ‘monastic’ brotherhood of Qumran.”<sup>42</sup> Pliny the Elder places the Essenes on the western shores of the Dead Sea in his records, thus the overlap seems likely.<sup>43</sup> As I discuss in Chapter Five, the overall Essene movement by the early first century AD was larger and more influential than the Qumran settlement alone.<sup>44</sup> Qumran, then, could be

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<sup>36</sup> Geza Vermes and Martin Goodman, eds., *The Essenes according to the Classical Sources* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 14.

<sup>37</sup> James VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 99.

<sup>38</sup> Timothy Lim, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 64.

<sup>39</sup> Albert Hogeterp, “Belief in Resurrection and Its Religious Settings in Qumran and the New Testament,” in *Echoes from the Caves: Qumran and the New Testament*, ed. Florentino García Martínez, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 85 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 300.

<sup>40</sup> Florentino García Martínez, “Qumran between the Old and the New Testament,” in Martínez, *Echoes from the Caves*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> William Loader, *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Sectarian and Related Literature at Qumran* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Vermes and Goodman, *Essenes*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 5.15 (LCL 352:277).

<sup>44</sup> VanderKam, *Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 71-79; Brian Capper, “John, Qumran, and Virtuoso Religion,” in *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate*, ed. Mary Coloe and Tom Thatcher, Early Judaism and its Literature 32 (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 100-103; James Charlesworth, “The Fourth Evangelist and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Assessing Trends over Nearly Sixty Years,” in Coloe and Thatcher, *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 161-82.

seen as a type of “headquarters” for the Essenes, or the home of a particularly devoted group.<sup>45</sup>

Chapter Six places one more piece of the puzzle onto the picture of celibacy in John 20:17: my reading is consonant with John’s internal thematic coherence of purpose and style as an author. I argue that emphasising the *celibacy* of Jesus is a vehicle for John to emphasise the *humanity* of Jesus and ultimately his incarnation. Here, I treat John as a rhetorical text and the Johannine author as one of considerable rhetorical skill, as I explore the category that is termed by Robbins as the “Inner Texture” of the text.

In this chapter, I suggest that by deliberately placing two narratives which both resonate and contrast with each other, John brings the characters’ gender to the fore, thus furthering his emphases on the incarnation and physical resurrection of Jesus. I suggest the juxtaposition of the two stories attempts to show the physical humanity of the resurrected Jesus, which supports my reading of John 20:17 as a statement of Jesus’ divine celibacy. To facilitate discussion, I use a tenth-century artistic representation titled “*Noli me tangere* and the Incredulity of Thomas,” in which the scene of Mary and Jesus in John 20:17 is effectively juxtaposed with the scene of Thomas and Jesus in John 20:27. I explore the stories in both their artistic and textual representations. Using the image as a visual exegesis of the two Johannine traditions of Mary and Thomas, I argue that the artist shows an accurate instinct for what John himself was intending to say, and for the reader of his Gospel text to understand: it was because Mary was a woman – and only for that reason – that the command to refrain from touch makes sense. My reading that the prohibition refers to celibacy is thus warranted.

The use of socio-rhetorical criticism allows, as the name suggests, both a social and a rhetorical approach to reading John 20:17. This is especially evident in Chapters Five and Six in which I discuss the social/cultural context of the setting of the narrative of John and the rhetorical/literary structure of John 20:11–29, respectively. Thus, I read John as not completely ahistorical (Chapter Five) nor devoid of rhetoric (Chapter Six) – or

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<sup>45</sup> Charlesworth, “Fourth Evangelist,” 162.

rather, as both a historical *and* a rhetorical text. It is historical in the sense that, like its predecessors Matthew, Mark and Luke, John's text forms part of the evidence we have of the existence of a historical character known as Jesus, called Christ by his followers, who lived in Palestine under Roman rule some two millennia ago. It is rhetorical in the sense that, again in common with the other three Gospels, the author has his own motivations for writing which govern his emphases, omissions and ultimately his version of the story, a motivation expressed openly in John's case: "These things have been written that, believing, you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Rhetoric and history in all four Gospels are intertwined – to an ultimately unknowable degree – but nonetheless they give a prisms *bios* (life)<sup>46</sup> of Jesus, threading together snippets of his story as the writers understood it.<sup>47</sup>

My task in this thesis is not to unwind history from rhetoric. I am loath at any point to cast doubt on the integrity of the writer of John's Gospel or to accuse him of excessive "rhetorical flair or wilful deception."<sup>48</sup> The Gospel has a simplicity and an honesty that draws the reader into the conversations and experiences of the characters in the present, and invites trust. My task in this thesis is to listen to the voice of another in antiquity who specifically asks to be heard as authentic.<sup>49</sup> Because the Johannine writer has failed to be clear to us, so distant in time, I suggest afresh – whether he writes historically or rhetorically or both – what he may have meant, and what may have been subtle but not unclear to his intended audiences. Each chapter of the thesis demonstrates ways in which

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*

<sup>47</sup> As Social Memory theorist Rafael Rodriguez says, "the Evangelists' interpretive activities – in other words their theological interests – function as *the vehicles conveying the historical Jesus to new situations and audiences* rather than obstacles to and obfuscations of the historical Jesus." Rafael Rodriguez, "What is History? Reading John 1 as Historical Representation," *JSHJ* 16 (2018): 31–51. As he observes further, "Without the interpretive activities of Jesus' followers, we wouldn't even know there *was* a historical Jesus." *Ibid.* 45. Italics in both cases are Rodriguez'.

<sup>48</sup> Ling, *Judean Poor*, 167. Rodriguez describes as "commemorative images" the memories of Jesus committed to writing after his death, including those recorded by John: "Commemorative images invest history with cultural, social, psychological, and especially *moral*/significance. As historians, we can hardly claim to have come into more authentic connection with the past by means of stripping it of that significance." Rodriguez, "What is History?" 39.

<sup>49</sup> "The one who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true, and he knows he speaks the truth" (19:35); "He is the disciple bearing witness to these things and having written these things down, and we know that his witness is true" (21:24).

I suggest my reading of John 20:17 is consonant with the way the writer of John 20:17 seems to have intended it to be understood. Chapters Three to Six of the thesis are designed to show that the ideological context in which the Gospel was written, other intertextual resonances and dissonances with “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended,” the Judaean setting of the narrative and the juxtaposition of the stories of Mary and Thomas all support my reading. Each chapter shows the likelihood that a desire to convey the celibacy of Jesus is the motivation behind John’s telling of the prohibition.

## The Manuscript

The text under scrutiny in this thesis is the portion of the verse John 20:17 which reads μή μου ἅπτου οὐπώ γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα (“Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended”). Given its history of hermeneutical controversy, it has a surprising lack of complications listed in the critical apparatus of NA<sup>27</sup> and NA<sup>28</sup>. In fact, the second clause, οὐπώ γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα (“for I have not yet ascended”) has no variants at all. Neither is there any manuscript evidence of an omission of the command by Jesus in its transmission history.

Even the initial clause, μή μου ἅπτου (“Do not touch me”) – the prohibition around which the storm whirls – has no serious textual issues. The only real textual variant in the manuscript evidence is that of the word order, which, though it may affect the emphasis, does not have a significant impact on the meaning of the text or change the translation. The word order adopted by Nestle–Aland, μή μου ἅπτου, is supported by the majority of manuscripts, while Vaticanus (B) reads μὴ ἅπτου μου.<sup>50</sup> Vaticanus as the sole variant witness is slightly problematic, because it is considered “by far the most significant of the uncials,”<sup>51</sup> and so holds a disproportionate weight in the textual tradition.

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<sup>50</sup> The unusual order is retained as a marginal gloss at John 20:17 by Westcott and Hort in their *New Testament in the Original Greek* (1881).

<sup>51</sup> Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 107.

This does raise the question of whether or not the best-attested word order ( $\mu\bar{n}\mu\bar{o}v$   $\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v$ ), in terms of the number of witnesses, is actually the correct one, given the general reliability of B ( $\mu\bar{n}\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v\mu\bar{o}v$ ). But, *vice versa*, and more likely, is that the majority of witnesses supporting the accepted version are correct but for some reason the normally reliable scribal hand of B has erred. As a speculation, perhaps a moment's inattention by the scribe of B produced what is the more natural, mechanical Greek word order of verb-subject-object, that is, "not-touch-me." Thus, B is perhaps the error of a copyist who has failed to retain the unusual word order of "not-me-touch."

Interestingly, the only other use of  $\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{m}\bar{a}i$  in the Johannine literature, 1 John 5:18, uses this word order in a similar lexical structure:  $o\bar{u}\chi\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{e}ta\bar{i}\alpha\bar{u}t\bar{o}\bar{u}$  ("it does not touch him"). This is the normal Greek word order of verb-subject-object, parallel to the usage by B for John 20:17. The NA<sup>28</sup> lists no variants for 1 John 5:18, so it would seem normal and correct. In other words, the word order found in 1 John 5:18 of negative particle- $\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{m}\bar{a}i$ -pronoun is the same word order which B alone repeats in John 20:17. It would seem that the vast majority of other ancient witnesses have retained an authentic emphasis/highlight with a deliberate negative particle-pronoun- $\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{m}\bar{a}i$  structure. *Noli me tangere* scholar Reimund Bieringer also notes that B is the only serious variant, and although B is normally a reliable hand, he agrees that, as a singular reading in this instance, "it does not carry much weight."<sup>52</sup>

Sandra Schneiders believes that the placing of the  $\mu\bar{o}v$  in the middle of  $\mu\bar{n}\mu\bar{o}v\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v$ , found in the majority of witnesses, is deliberate. In her view, this creates an emphasis on the word immediately following the negative, so this word order creates a negation of the object of touch, Jesus himself. The wording, in this case, is more accurately

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<sup>52</sup> Reimund Bieringer, "Touching Jesus? The Meaning of  $\mu\bar{n}\mu\bar{o}v\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v$  in Its Johannine Context," in *To Touch or Not to Touch?* 69. For some reason Bieringer discusses this as  $\mu\bar{o}v\mu\bar{n}\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v$ . I have no wish to be a pedant, but Vaticanus reads ΜΗΑΠΤΟΥΜΟΥ ( $\mu\bar{n}\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v\mu\bar{o}v$ ), not  $\mu\bar{o}v\mu\bar{n}\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v$  as Bieringer writes. Both NA<sup>27</sup> and NA<sup>28</sup> say that the accepted text word order of  $\mu\bar{n}\mu\bar{o}v\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v$  reads as 1 3 2 in the variant B ( $\mu\bar{n}\breve{\alpha}\pi\tau\tau\bar{o}v\mu\bar{o}v$ ), so are in agreement, contrary to the word order Bieringer has stated. But his point remains the same.

attempting to convey “do not touch *me*” rather than the usual “do not *touch me*.<sup>53</sup> By contrast, the emphasis in B lies in the negation of the act of touching. This lends support to the view that B may have erroneously strayed to a more normal pattern, overlooking the intended emphasis on “me” of μή μου ἄπτου in the original. This variation in meaning is one of several different aspects of the verse that will be addressed in the next chapter.

One of the earliest evidences of a difficulty with the logic of “Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended” is a scribal addition at 20:16. Just before the enigmatic 20:17, some manuscripts<sup>54</sup> add καὶ προσεδραμεν ἀψασθαι αὐτου (“she ran forward to touch him”). Bieringer observes:

The earliest example of this addition was by the first corrector of the Codex Sinaiticus (§<sup>1</sup>), dated between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Textual criticism demonstrates that it is unlikely that [the addition] was originally part of 20:16. [Rather] even at a very early stage, it was felt that a step in the story was missing between 20:16 and 20:17.<sup>55</sup>

This addition is known as the Caesarean recension, as its corrector is thought to have worked on Sinaiticus from Caesarea, but its presence in other manuscripts suggests “the addition was once present in Egyptian manuscripts.”<sup>56</sup> It is also present in varying forms in the western Diatessaron tradition.<sup>57</sup> Tjitze Baarda suggests the interpolation in the Greek text was as early as the second or early third century in Alexandria.<sup>58</sup> Whether, then, it was based on an authentic early tradition or not is an option that cannot be retrieved from history, but its absence from the earliest manuscripts suggests it was not.

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<sup>53</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (NY: Crossroad, 2003), 219.

<sup>54</sup> NA<sup>27</sup> lists the first corrector of Sinaiticus, §<sup>1</sup>; NA<sup>28</sup> lists the second §<sup>2a</sup>; both list the lesser manuscripts Θ, ψ, vg<sup>mss</sup> f<sup>13</sup> and sy<sup>(s).h.</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Reimund Bieringer, “*Noli Me Tangere* and the New Testament,” in “*Noli Me Tangere:” Mary Magdalene; One Person, Many Images*, ed. Barbara Baert *et al.* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 14.

<sup>56</sup> Tjitze Baarda, “Jesus and Mary (John 20:16f) in the Second Epistle on Virginity Ascribed to Clement,” in *Essays on the Diatessaron* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 102.

<sup>57</sup> Baarda, “Jesus and Mary,” 108.

<sup>58</sup> Baarda, “Jesus and Mary,” 109.

In a paradoxical fashion, the interpolation serves the purpose of my thesis. It suggests that a prohibition that did not need explanation at the time of the writing of the Gospels – and especially in the case of John, interspersed with editorial help throughout – was already becoming a puzzle by the second and third centuries. The enigma that the verse posed to the later scribe seems to have prompted him to offer an explanation. Hence, he inserts “she ran forward to touch him” as a bridge between Mary’s surprised address, ῥαββουνί, and Jesus’ response, μή μου ἄπτου. On the other hand, the retention of the enigma in the earliest manuscripts without explanation itself suggests the subtlety of a loaded exchange in which the first readers of a celibate community – as will be developed throughout the thesis – knew instinctively what was meant.

Of some tangential interest, it is noteworthy that the insertion in 20:16 uses the aorist infinitive, ἀψασθαι for “to touch,” rather than the present infinitive. Much of the debate around the prohibition has centred on the use of the present imperative of ἄπτομαι (ἄπτου in 20:17), as if the present tense of the verb – its continuous aspect rather than punctiliar – were not just a contributing factor to interpretation, but the determinant. This has been one of the contributing issues in which the argument to replace the traditional “touch” in biblical translations with “hold onto” has been at least temporarily won, since “hold onto” conveys a more continuous action than “touch.” The scribal insertion challenges the significance given by some scholars to the continuous aspect of ἄπτου. Although there is one slight manuscript variation in the form of the aorist used in the insertion (*F*<sup>13</sup> has αψεσθαι), it is significant that the aorist form is used, rather than a corresponding present tense. In the next chapter, I will refer to Reimund Bieringer’s contention that the use of the present or aorist tense is often a purely stylistic choice and that the present tense used in μή μου ἄπτου is not of ultimate significance and, in his view, does not justify the translation “hold onto” rather than the subtle expression “touch.” This scribal insertion at 20:16, using the aorist to support a present-tense text, would support Bieringer’s contention and would seem to signify that, early on in the history of the text, the two tenses could be used interchangeably.

With all this difficulty, it is not surprising that someone might hope to simplify matters by suggesting the text is corrupt and therefore the negative should be removed altogether. NA<sup>27</sup> notes in its critical apparatus a conjecture by the sixteenth-century philologist Justus Lipsius that the negative particle should be eliminated and treated as an addition to the original, and the text be read as ἄπτου μου (“Touch me”). This would certainly make much more sense. “Touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father,” is quite logical. The proposition, however, lacks sufficient supporting evidence, and for this reason is omitted from NA<sup>28</sup>.<sup>59</sup>

As well as the suggested reading of ἄπτου μου (“touch me”) by Lipsius, Bieringer notes other attempted conjectures in the text history of μή μου ἄπτου such as μὴ οὐ ἄπτου (“do not touch at all”), μήν μου ἄπτου (“indeed touch me”), σύ μου ἄπτου (“you touch me”), μοῦ ἄπτου (“touch me”).<sup>60</sup> Such conjectures indirectly convey a desperation to make rationally comprehensible a text that is not so, at least not on its surface. Bieringer is arguing for a simple meaning of “do not touch me” in spite of its difficulties:

After these experiments with conjectures and hypotheses about erroneous translations which could never command more than a short-lived success in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century exegetes returned to the firmly attested Greek text μή μου ἄπτου. But even then scholars found another way of overcoming the understanding of μή μου ἄπτου as a prohibition of touch.<sup>61</sup>

In summary, the textual tradition of μή μου ἄπτου is unusually certain in view of the vagaries of manuscript transmission. Indeed, accusations of corruption, directed at a perfectly innocent text, highlight its intrigue. Failing to find any real problems with the text itself in its transmission history, further inquiry is necessary.

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<sup>59</sup> NA<sup>27</sup> lists the conjecture of Lipsius alone, and the editors of NA<sup>28</sup> made the decision not to list conjectures at all. Generally, NA<sup>28</sup> omits conjectures in the critical apparatus, along with other conjectures found in NA<sup>27</sup>. The editors regret this because “[conjectures] often indicate passages of particular text-critical and exegetical interest. However . . . an index of all conjectures . . . at the VU University Amsterdam will be of assistance.” NA<sup>28</sup> p.49\*.

<sup>60</sup> Bieringer lists Vogel, Kessler, Schultheß and Gersdorf, respectively, “Touching Jesus?” 70.

<sup>61</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 71. (The lack of a comma is Bieringer’s.)

## The Authorship of John's Gospel

In this thesis, I use the term “John” to refer to both the work of the Gospel as well as the author/s, while acknowledging that the identity of John, the author to whom the work is credited, is ambiguous, and his exact role in the writing of the Gospel is unknown.

Included in my discussion below, and of interest to my reading of John 20:17, the “John” associated with the writing of the Gospel is remembered in later textual traditions as a virgin. If the writer of the Gospel belonged to an ascetic tradition, then his motivation to include the prohibition of 20:17 in his text as a reminder of the celibacy of Jesus is logical.

According to the Gospel itself, a character known simply as the disciple whom Jesus loved (οὐκ ἡγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς), who sat next to Jesus at his last meal, was its author (21:21-24). However, the writer of the Gospel presents the reader with an immediate paradox: the writer implies that he knew the beloved disciple, rather than that he *was* the beloved disciple. Throughout the Gospel, this disciple appears in the third person, not the first. In describing the disciple whom Jesus loved, the writer says, “This is the disciple bearing witness (ὁ μαρτυρῶν) to these things and who wrote (ὁ γράψας) these things, and we know that his witness is true” (21:24). On the one hand, the writer is claiming to be this loved disciple since he is doing the writing, but, on the other hand, the writer’s self-identification with the “we” in the sentence implies he is a third party in the authorship process. Of course, one may write about oneself in the third person, which may be the case in the witness to Jesus’ death: “the one who has seen it has given witness, and his witness is true and he knows he speaks the truth.” (19:35).

That the beloved disciple was the one “who wrote these things” is best explained by three other examples from the Gospel which similarly express a broad sense of agency, all in the case of Pilate’s authority. After Jesus’ trial, according to the text, “Pilate took Jesus and beat him” (ἔμαστίγωσεν), using an active verb. If this were to be read literally, the reader would infer that Pilate himself had done the beating, but the natural translation is to say, “Pilate had Jesus beaten,” as a passive verb. Similarly, there are two examples later in the

narrative, relevant because they concern what Pilate “wrote.” John’s text says, in the active voice, that “Pilate wrote a sign and placed it on the cross” (19:19), and later when the Jews (*οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι*) who were there wanted the wording changed, Pilate says, “what I have written (*ὅ γέγραφα*), I have written” (19:22). One might safely assume that Pilate did not personally write the signs, but rather that it was by his authority that they were written. The same could therefore be said of the authorship of the fourth Gospel: the disciple “who wrote these things” was probably the disciple who exercised the authority to have them written.

According to John, this anonymous beloved disciple was at Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, sitting next to Jesus himself (13:23–25; 21:20). There have been many suggestions who this unnamed disciple might have been. At this point, says Ruth Edwards, “conjectures become rife:” John Mark, Matthias, Paul, Apollos, Philip, the rich young man of Luke’s Gospel, Lazarus, Thomas, Judas (not Iscariot), John the son of Zebedee and John the Elder.<sup>62</sup> Others have suggested Mary Magdalene, a suggestion I raise in Chapter Four. Of those named in John’s text, such as Thomas, Lazarus and Mary Magdalene, given the effort of the author to retain the character’s anonymity, I am of the view it is unlikely to be any named disciple in the narrative. On the one hand, the Gospel could be a communal effort, a result of the collaboration of members of a school or a foundation,<sup>63</sup> or the result of several editions; but on the other hand, from a literary perspective, a narrative unity can be detected,<sup>64</sup> or at least a consistency of style, which may suggest a sole author, or an author and an editor in the Johannine tradition. Still others hold that the beloved disciple was a fictional character, an idealised disciple, but Brown maintains that “the thesis that he is purely fictional or only an ideal figure is quite implausible,” as the deception involved would override the point of the Gospel.<sup>65</sup> Such a

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<sup>62</sup> Ruth Edwards, *Discovering John* (London: SPCK, 2003), 20.

<sup>63</sup> John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 194–95; Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 214–15,222.

<sup>64</sup> See Alan Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

<sup>65</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (NY: Paulist Press, 1979), 31.

phantom would permeate the fabric of the text and militate against the claims to truth throughout.

From the earliest times, a “John” has been associated with this Gospel: the Muratorian Canon (ca. AD 170) identifies a John “who confesses himself not merely an eye and ear witness, but also a writer.”<sup>66</sup> Equally from early tradition, the identity of the beloved disciple has been equated with “John.” Tertullian (ca. AD 150–225) names *Iohannem* as the disciple Jesus loved, *dilectissimum Domino*, who leaned against Jesus’ breast (13:23) and to whom Jesus gave the care of his mother (19:26).<sup>67</sup> B. F. Westcott<sup>68</sup> and John A. T. Robinson<sup>69</sup> have argued, with the traditional majority position, that the beloved disciple was John the apostle, the son of Zebedee and one of the twelve. This has some historical attestation,<sup>70</sup> and would account for the Synoptics’ naming of John as a significant disciple, one of Jesus’ inner circle of three with Peter and James. It would also account for his anonymity in the fourth Gospel – one so well-known would not need to be named, in the same way the mother of Jesus is not named in this Gospel. The disciple that Jesus loved is among those who went fishing with Peter in the closing chapter of John (21:7), consistent with the identity of the sons of Zebedee as fishermen (Matt 4:21). Another NT detail in its favour is the appearance in Acts of this John with Peter before the temple council, defending “the things we saw and heard” (ἃ εἶδαμεν καὶ ἤκουσαμεν), a phrase reminiscent of the Johannine phrase (1 John 1:3), “what we have seen and have heard” (ἃ ἐωράκαμεν καὶ ἀκηκόαμεν).

More recently, Martin Hengel and others have restated an earlier minority position that the fourth Gospel, with its focus of detail in Jerusalem and its more contemplative style, is not the work of a Galilean fisherman, or a “son of thunder” as the apostle was known (Mark 3:17), but a Jerusalem disciple, not one of the twelve, but John the Elder, named as

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<sup>66</sup> *Canon Muratori* 26–34 (*NTApoc* 1:34–35).

<sup>67</sup> Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 22.5 (*CCSL* 1:203).

<sup>68</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John: The Authorised Version, with Introduction and Notes* (London: James Clarke, 1958), v–xxxii.

<sup>69</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, ed. J. F. Coakley (London: SCM, 1985) 105–22.

<sup>70</sup> Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 445.

the author of the Johannine Epistles (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1).<sup>71</sup> Hengel's theory that John the Elder should be identified as both the beloved disciple and the author of the Gospel and Letters, has been followed and expanded by Richard Bauckham. Bauckham argues that the Gospel itself does not claim authorship by the apostle but that this was a later attribution; he also notes that John the Elder, known as a great teacher in the early church,<sup>72</sup> otherwise fades inexplicably from historical significance.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, a reference from Polycrates, that the beloved disciple had priestly connections (John 18:15), is recorded by Eusebius:

The date of the death of John has also been already mentioned, and the place of his body is shown by a letter of Polycrates (he was bishop of the diocese of Ephesus) which he wrote to Victor, bishop of Rome. . . . “And there is also John, who leaned on the Lord’s breast (ο ἐπὶ τὸ στῆθος τοῦ κυρίου ἀναπεσών), who was a priest wearing the mitre (ἱερεὺς τὸ πέταλον πεφορεκώς), and martyr and teacher, and he sleeps at Ephesus.”<sup>74</sup>

This witness of Polycrates suggests an earlier knowledge of a John who wore priestly attire, also here identified with the beloved disciple who leaned on the Lord's breast at his last meal (John 13:23). For this reason, Bauckham argues that the beloved disciple was not the fisherman, John the son of Zebedee, but a Jerusalem leader, John the Elder.<sup>75</sup> Anderson acknowledges the likelihood that the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, played a role in the formation of the fourth Gospel, but “this is not to say that he was its final editor or even its primary narrator.”<sup>76</sup> The mystery is only compounded by the incidental

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<sup>71</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1989), 124.

<sup>72</sup> I use the word “church” throughout this thesis as a translation of ἐκκλησία, since its context throughout the NT is a specific one: it does not refer to assembly for political or racial reasons (as ἐκκλησία in the first century might indicate) but to local gatherings of Jewish and non-Jewish followers of the post-resurrection Christ. Lieu points out that using terms such as “the Jesus movement” to replace the language of “church” is a “superficially less tendentious label but in fact equally value-laden,” Lieu, *Neither Jew Nor Greek?* 206. She also claims that “it remains broadly true that even from the New Testament period there is a consciousness of being a single body, the church,” *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 34–37.

<sup>74</sup> Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 3.31.3; (LCL 153:270–71).

<sup>75</sup> Bauckham, *Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 49.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 99.

appearance of one or two anonymous Johns in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 13:5; 13:13).

To add to the intrigue, Papias of Ephesus (AD 60–130), a companion of Polycarp (69–155) who was said to have heard “John” for himself,<sup>77</sup> distinguishes between two Johns. Papias refers to the conversations with elders that he had concerning what Andrew, Philip, Thomas, James, John and Matthew had said, and to conversations concerning “the things which Ariston and John the elder say.”<sup>78</sup> Papias also indicates there were two monuments to Christian leaders buried in Ephesus who were both called John:<sup>79</sup> the one who was titled the presbyter or elder (ὁ πρεσβύτερος Ἰωάννης);<sup>80</sup> the other identified by Irenaeus of Lyons simply as “John the disciple of the Lord” (Ιωάννης ὁ τοῦ κυρίου μαθητὴς),<sup>81</sup> probably an abbreviation of “the disciple whom Jesus loved,”<sup>82</sup> since he is identified with the apostle and son of Zebedee at times.<sup>83</sup> An interesting tradition, extant in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, states that in Ephesus, Timothy was ordained as bishop by Paul, and then after him, “John” was ordained by the apostle John.<sup>84</sup> The Muratorian Canon names the John who wrote the Gospel as “one of the disciples,” which seems to separate him from those such as Andrew who was “one of the apostles.”<sup>85</sup> In this thesis, then, when I refer to “John,” I acknowledge the limitations of such an ambiguous identity.

### John the Virgin

In spite of the ambiguities, and of greater interest for the purposes of my proposed reading of John 20:17, there are certain textual references in antiquity to “John the Virgin,” referring to the author of the Gospel. There are no other names of apostolic

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<sup>77</sup> *Fragments of Papias and Quadratus: Papias Fragments* 1.4 (LCL 25:94–95).

<sup>78</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3 (LCL 153:293).

<sup>79</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.25.16 (LCL 265:202).

<sup>80</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.4–7 (LCL 153:292).

<sup>81</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.14.6 (LCL 153:336).

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, *Riddles*, 99,154.

<sup>83</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.23.3 (LCL 153:242).

<sup>84</sup> *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 7.46 (ANF7:478).

<sup>85</sup> *Canon Muratori* 9–14 (NTApoc 1:34).

characters to whom this appellation is attached, and no other leaders whose sexual status is publicly attached to an identity in this way. Such references to him are not as early as the Gospel itself, but that does not in itself render them insignificant. If these are authentic traditions, it would seem logical that an author, himself known widely as a virgin, would have had a vested interest in preserving the tradition of the celibacy of his main character, Jesus. It would also make sense that a community for whom the practice was valued would preserve the story of John 20:17, which the synoptic traditions omit. It is not possible to show this definitively, but such a motivation on the part of the author would account for the inclusion of the enigmatic “Do not touch me” conversation between Mary and Jesus.

Tertullian refers to John as a eunuch of Christ: *Ioannes aliqui Christi spado*.<sup>86</sup> The hagiographical *Historia Iohannis* makes a reference to him as well: “And it happened that when this holy virgin, namely John, the son of Zebedee, went forth, the grace (of God) accompanied him, through the Spirit of holiness, that it might lead him to the country of the Ephesians.”<sup>87</sup> In the fourth-century gnostic<sup>88</sup> *Psalms of Herakleides*, “John the Virgin” is included in its list of apostles, identifying him as the brother of James, and including him after Peter and Andrew. Along with “Peter, the foundation of his Church” and “James, the spring of the new wisdom,” he is identified as “John, the flower of

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<sup>86</sup> Tertullian, *De Monogamia* 17.1 (CCSL 2:1252).

<sup>87</sup> “The History of John,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, ed. W. Wright, vol. 2 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1871), 5, [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/apocryphal\\_acts\\_02\\_john\\_history.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/apocryphal_acts_02_john_history.htm).

<sup>88</sup> I use the terms “gnostic” and “gnosticism” as a broad category for those who claimed “knowledge” ( $\gamma\gamma\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ) of spiritual matters by special revelation, a generic term describing a “religious worldview” rather than a specific religion, as explained by Roelf van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12. Van den Broek describes some similarities, though: “Almost all gnostic writings start from a mythical view of reality characterized by a sharp distinction between the invisible divine world and the earthly conditions in which we live.” *Ibid*, 26. Charles Hill defines “gnosticism” as “a belief in a Supreme Being (or beings) above the Creator, an inherently flawed creation, a docetic Christology, and a salvation limited to the non-material.” Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 10. In terms of this thesis, anti-material attitudes to the body and sexuality associated with gnosticism are of most relevance. Jonathan Cahana notes that the gnostic texts display “a recurrent motif . . . [that] the original perfect human, or *anthropos*, is neither gendered nor sexed, and gender is the creation of an evil, inferior, and overly masculine god.” Jonathan Cahana, “Gnostically Queer: Gender Trouble in Gnosticism,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41 1 (2011): 24–35. Gnostic texts are variously referred to as heterodox, apocryphal, non-canonical or extra-canonical and these are discussed further in Chapter Four in relation to the received traditions around Mary and Jesus.

virginity.”<sup>89</sup> This is not simply a case of gnostic bias, since the thoroughly orthodox<sup>90</sup> Jerome (AD 347–420), although a persuaded ascetic himself, holds a similar tradition. In his address to the monks under his care, he exhorted them: “Realize your nobility, monks! John is the first one of our calling. He is a monk.”<sup>91</sup> Gnostic bias, however, may well be present in the *Acts of John* (dated in the second half of the second century or the first half of the third<sup>92</sup>) with passages that clearly denigrate marriage and sexuality. Thus, John gives thanks to God for saving him from marriage and preserving his virginity at his death:

Thou who hast kept me also till this present hour pure for thyself and untouched by union with a woman; who when I wished to marry in my youth didst appear to me and say: “John, I need thee”; who when I was about to marry . . . didst prevent me, and . . . didst say to me upon the sea, “John if thou wert not mine, I should have allowed thee to marry”; who when I regained my sight didst disclose to me the repugnance even of looking closely at a woman; . . . who hast made my love for thee unsullied; . . . Lord Jesus, count me worthy of thy rest and grant me my end in thee.<sup>93</sup>

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) continued the tradition of *Iohanne qui nullas expertus est nuptias*, conceding that:

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<sup>89</sup> *The Psalms of Herakleides* 192.7; 194.7–10. All quotations of Manichaean psalms in this thesis are taken from C. R. C. Allberry, *A Manichaean Psalm-Book, Part II*, Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection, 2 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938).

<sup>90</sup> According to Daniel Boyarin, “The idea of orthodoxy comes into the world some time in the second century with a group of Christian writers . . . and their counterparts, the Rabbis . . . through discourses of orthodoxy/heresy.” The naming of difference became necessary at that time in order to “make sense of the fact that there were different groups of *Christanoi* and *Ioudaioi* at various places, surely by the middle of the second century and almost certainly before that.” Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 2,90.

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/166>. In this thesis, my interest lies not in Christian/Jewish orthodoxy but in the contrast within Christianity between “heretical” trends which rejected materiality (and the sexual activity which propagated it) and those “orthodox” trends which tolerated sexual activity (and by contrast came to practise rituals based around the material world), sanctioning biological life in marriage, in funerals and in the baptism of infants. See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (NY: Vintage, 1979), 147.

<sup>91</sup> Jerome, *Homilies*, 87 in *The Homilies of Saint Jerome: vol. 2 60–96* (trans. Marie Liguori Ewald; Fathers of the Church 57; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 1966), 213.

<sup>92</sup> *New Testament Apocrypha II: Writings Relating to the Apostles, Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, ed. Edgar Hennecke, Wilhelm Schneemelcher, R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed. (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 1992), 166–67.

<sup>93</sup> *Acts of John*, 113 (*NTApoc II*, 203).

the merit of continence in John who had no experience of marriage and that of Abraham who fathered offspring was much the same; for the celibacy of the one and the marriage of the other both campaigned for Christ according to the allocation of the times. But whereas John demonstrated his continence in action as well, Abraham maintained his solely in his disposition.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, although Abraham was *conubium* and John *celibatus*, the former maintained continence in his disposition, making his spiritual status equal to that of John the Virgin. Augustine also used the tradition associated with John in Revelation 14:1–5 as an encouragement to virgins to persevere: “[John] saw you, twelve times twelve thousand blessed harpists, your virginity of body undefiled, your truth of heart inviolate, and he wrote these words about you because you follow the lamb wherever he goes.”<sup>95</sup>

It is also worth noting the close association given to this John and the mother of Jesus, herself later revered as a virgin. In the Gospel she is given into the care of the beloved disciple (John 19:26) and after Jesus’ death she and John are named as present in the community of disciples in Jerusalem (Acts 1:13–14). In the same way that John came to be titled as a virgin, so she evolved into the Virgin Mary. Several letters claiming to be from Ignatius of Antioch (AD 50–108), although not attested before the sixth century,<sup>96</sup> make a continued close association between Mary and John, which may indicate both the popularity of such ascetical practice, and the influence their practice had on the burgeoning ascetical movement. An Epistle addressed to St John says, “[Mary] is full of all graces and all virtues after the manner of a virgin, fruitful in virtue and grace . . . She is the lady of our new religion and repentance.”<sup>97</sup> A second Epistle to St John acclaims John’s privilege in knowing her closely: “For who would not rejoice to behold and address her who bore the true God from her own womb?”<sup>98</sup> The Virgin Mary and John

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<sup>94</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Conjugali*, 21.26 in *Augustine: De Bono Coniugali; De Sancta Virginitate*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh, Oxford Early Christian Classics (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 49.

<sup>95</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 27 (Walsh, 101).

<sup>96</sup> I refer to this Ignatius as Pseudo-Ignatius although the debate continues over their authenticity. See the Introduction to the *Spurious Letters of Ignatius* in *ANF* 1:105.

<sup>97</sup> Pseudo-Ignatius, “Epistle of Ignatius to St John” (*ANF* 1:124).

<sup>98</sup> Pseudo-Ignatius, “Second Epistle of Ignatius to St John” (*ANF* 1:125).

the Virgin were therefore closely associated with each other in the early centuries, a tradition beginning at the foot of Jesus' cross (19:26–27).

Thus, the textual tradition of John with virginity, and then John's association with the writing of the Gospel, explains to some degree the inclusion of the detail of 20:17 as a prohibition between two celibates. I suggest the work of John was shaped by an author of the same persuasion and edited in the same tradition.

### Provenience and Dating of the Johannine Corpus

It may be clear from the discussion above that the city of Ephesus plays a curiously important role in the search for authorial origins. By the time of Irenaeus, "the church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the Apostles."<sup>99</sup> Ancient tradition locates Ephesus as the place of composition for John's Gospel.<sup>100</sup> It seems that a certain John connected with the production of the Gospel was also known as John of Ephesus in accordance with the earliest Asian tradition that the Johannine literature originated in Ephesus.<sup>101</sup> The Gospel of John then, shared a geographical history with the other churches of Asia Minor: some of these are the churches addressed by Paul in his letters dealing with the practice of celibacy as well as an asceticism he refutes; these are also the churches addressed in Revelation. Sexual beliefs and practices in these churches will be discussed in Chapter Three: they form a backdrop to the sexual ideology in the Gospel which forms a necessary background to my reading of John 20:17.

In this thesis, I locate the writing of the fourth Gospel at the end of the first century. According to Eusebius of Caesarea (AD 263–339), Clement of Alexandria left a report that John had read the other three Gospels and wrote to supplement them from the

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<sup>99</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.3.4 in *The Writings of Irenaeus*, trans. Alexander Roberts and W. H. Rambaut, 2 vols., Ante-Nicene Christian Library, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868), 1:264.

<sup>100</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.8.4 (LCL 153:454).

<sup>101</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, ciii; Bauckham, *Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 37; Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 472–73.

tradition he knew, which at least dates John after the Synoptics.<sup>102</sup> Clement's report may explain some of the Johannine material not found in the Synoptics, as I discuss below, but furthermore, if John wrote after reading the other three, then the dating for the fourth Gospel lies at least after the completion and availability of the others, so the last decade of the first century.

Stanley Porter offers a range of views on dating John between AD 70 and 170, but his own conclusion is that John has enough in common to share a first-century date with the other three Gospels, and “there is no need to pull John’s Gospel away from Synoptics” into the second century.<sup>103</sup> The Gospel’s acceptance in such early orthodox witnesses as Polycarp, Ignatius, Aristides and others suggests this was the case.<sup>104</sup> By the first decade of the second century, Ignatius reflects literary knowledge of John and there are traces of the Gospel in a letter from Polycarp in Smyrna to the Philippian church.<sup>105</sup> In the textual world, the recent discovery in Egypt of a fragment of John’s Gospel – the earliest known fragment of the NT – would seem to confirm a first-century date for the Gospel. The fragment, now held at the Rylands Museum and known as P<sup>52</sup> or Rylands 457, has been dated by some as early as the first half of the second century.<sup>106</sup> If this is the case, working backwards with an estimation of the time allowed from its copying and circulation in Egypt to the setting of its original writing and circulation in ancient Asia Minor, a late first-century date for the final written version of John is feasible.<sup>107</sup>

Another reason to locate John’s Gospel in the first century is the critical role it played in the Quartodeciman controversy of the second century. According to Eusebius, Victor of Rome sought to excommunicate the Asian churches – including Ephesus – for their rigid

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<sup>102</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.7 (LCL 265:48).

<sup>103</sup> Stanley Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015), 15–17, 35.

<sup>104</sup> Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 465.

<sup>105</sup> Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 444.

<sup>106</sup> Christopher Tuckett, “P<sup>52</sup> and *Nomina Sacra*,” *NTS* 47 (2001): 544–548. According to Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, 248, “Though some scholars argue that P52 dates to the end of the second century CE, other expert palaeographers date P52 no later than 125 CE and perhaps as early as 100 CE.”

<sup>107</sup> Stanley Porter, “The Date of John’s Gospel and Its Origins,” in *The Origins of John’s Gospel*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Hughson T. Ong, *Johannine Studies 2*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 17.

adherence to a calculation of Easter based on the fourteenth of Nisan as the day on which Jesus died, a date which differed from the rest of the catholic church and depended on John's chronology. The fourth Gospel and the Synoptics are difficult to harmonise on this point, and Ephesus clung to John's version. The synoptic tradition assumes that the Passover meal was eaten the night before Jesus died; the disciples had prepared for the Passover (Matt 26:19), and at that meal, Jesus says, "I have strongly wanted to eat this Passover (*τοῦτο τὸ πάσχα*) with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). John, on the other hand, locates Jesus' death on the day of preparation for the evening meal of the Passover, the fourteenth of Nisan, the day the sacrificial lambs for the meal were to be slaughtered (Ex 12:6). In John's chronology, the meal that Jesus shared with the disciples before he was arrested was not the feast of the Passover (13:1), but was before it (*πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα*). On the day after Jesus' arrest, during his trial, the Jews did not wish to enter the Roman Praetorium for fear they would become ceremoniously defiled and thus be unable to eat the Passover meal that evening (18:28). According to John, Jesus was tried and crucified while the Jews were preparing the Passover meal (19:14,31).

The correspondence Eusebius records is from Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, at the close of the second century. Polycrates insisted, against the dictates of Rome, that Easter should be celebrated on fourteenth Nisan, in accordance with current practice in Ephesus. Polycrates laid claim to ancient Johannine tradition. He named a line of bishops and martyrs of Asia, such as Melito, Papirius, Sagaris, Thraseas, Polycarp, right down to Philip and his four daughters and finally the beloved disciple (13:23), identified as John who lay against the Lord's breast (*Ιωάννης ὁ ἐπὶ τὸ στῆθος τοῦ κυρίου ἀναπεσών*) and was buried in Ephesus: "All these kept the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the gospel (*κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον*), never swerving, but following according to the rule of the faith." Polycrates adds in his letter that he is eighth in line in a family of seven other bishops, who also accepted this chronology.<sup>108</sup> A final version of John extant in the first century is easily imaginable in such a claimed historical construction.

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<sup>108</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.24.1-7 (LCL 153:504-507).

By contrast, second-century dates for John are difficult to defend: for one reason, the Gospel was well in use by both orthodox and heterodox groups by that stage. It was already listed as part of the accepted books of the Christian canon in the Muratorian Canon (ca. AD 170),<sup>109</sup> and the earliest known commentary on John is that of the gnostic Heracleon (AD 160–180). As Hill argues, the Gospel was easily available by the second century and “had thus become fair game for any rival Christian factions to use as they saw fit.”<sup>110</sup> I therefore adopt in this thesis a late first-century date for the final version of John.

I adopt the view in this thesis that the rest of the Johannine corpus – the Letters and Revelation – was also extant at the turn of the first century and also located at Ephesus. Similarities between the Gospel and Johannine Letters seem to connect their authorship easily with each other. They share an emphasis on love, themes of the physical appearance of the Christ in the flesh, as well as giving direction on community living. The claimed authorship by the Elder of at least two of the letters (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1), suggest the authorship of John the Elder, referred to by Papias, above. Brown’s assessment is to place the earliest written version of the Gospel at AD 75–90, and then, slightly later, the three Johannine Letters to correct misunderstanding of the Gospel, or to reemphasise central teaching (ca. 100).<sup>111</sup> This is plausible since the Letters show signs of internal division in the community (1 John 2:19), which could have resulted in the author’s intention to repeat certain emphases, such as the need for love between community members and stressing what may have been a divisive tenet of faith: the belief in the physical appearance of the Christ in the flesh.

The Book of Revelation, however, seems distinct from the Gospel and Epistles. On this, Eusebius offers his opinion: “the Apocalypse is utterly different from, and foreign to, these writings; it has no connexion, no affinity, in any way with them; it scarcely, so to

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<sup>109</sup> *Canon Muratori* 26–34 (*NTApoc* 1:34–35).

<sup>110</sup> Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 467.

<sup>111</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, ed. Francis J. Moloney, Anchor Bible (NY: Doubleday, 2003), 215.

speak, has even a syllable in common with them,”<sup>112</sup> but admits that “the writer of these words, therefore, was John, one must believe, since he says it. But what John, is not clear.”<sup>113</sup> In Chapter Three I will argue for separate authorship, highlighting the opposing attitudes towards love and sexuality. The ideology of Revelation appears incompatible with the Gospel that ostensibly goes by the name of the same author, although it also seems to date from the end of the first century.

### Reading John from a Judaean Perspective

In Chapter Two which follows, I give an illustrative selection of the diverse ways in which John 20:17 has been expounded over time. It will become clear that many of the earlier scholars I have included tended to read the verse through a “synoptic” lens, that is, by giving priority to the traditions of Jesus – and what could be assumed about the historical Jesus – as narrated by Matthew, Mark and Luke.<sup>114</sup> Given John’s difference from the synoptic Gospels, one solution has been to read the fourth Gospel as a non-historical, redactional form of the Synoptics and dependent on them for their knowledge of Jesus.<sup>115</sup> However, in line with the current scholarship to which I refer throughout the chapters of this thesis, I adopt the view that John, although aware of the Synoptics, also had access to other early sources for his Gospel, and gives a Judaean perspective on Jesus: the story of Jesus is located primarily in Judaea throughout his life, ministry and death.<sup>116</sup> While the initial chapters of the thesis acknowledge the canonical setting of John and its

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<sup>112</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.25.22 (LCL 265:207).

<sup>113</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.25.12 (LCL 265:201).

<sup>114</sup> The problematic statistic is that while 93% of Mark is found in Matthew and Luke, only 8% of John has parallels in the Synoptics. Andreas Kostenberger, “John’s Transpositional Theology: Retelling the Story of Jesus in a Different Key,” in *Earliest Christian History*, 193.

<sup>115</sup> The result of this, according to Paul Anderson, has been the “dehistoricization of John and the de-Johannification of Jesus,” in Paul N. Anderson, “Why This Study Is Needed, and Why It Is Needed Now,” in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, S.J., and Tom Thatcher; SBL Symposium 44; SBL, 2007), 13–70.

<sup>116</sup> Rodriguez states, “When historians of Jesus dismiss the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal(s) of Jesus, they do not move closer to the historical figure who was active in the 20s of the first century. Instead, they jettison the late-first-century Johannine reception of the Jesus tradition in favor of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment receptions of the Synoptic Gospels.” Rodriguez, “What is History?” 47. John thus needs to be heard in his own right.

place of writing in Ephesus, my proposal for a fresh reading of the verse, from a Judaean perspective and in its narrative context, is further elucidated in Chapter Five.

Two comments from the discussion above on the authorship and dating of John's Gospel are pertinent to my discussion of this Judaean perspective. First, I referred to a report left by Clement, according to Eusebius, that John's was the fourth of the Gospels to be written down, hence the later date. The Gospel does seem to be aware of other known stories of Jesus not included in this book (20:30) and of the potential for many other books to be written outside its own coverage (21:25).<sup>117</sup> But of greater interest is Clement's assertion that John intends to fill in the story where the synoptic Gospels have fallen short:

The three gospels which had been written down before were distributed to all including himself; it is said that he welcomed them and testified to their truth but said that there was only lacking to the narrative the account of what was done by Christ at first and at the beginning of the preaching. . . They say accordingly that for this reason the apostle John was asked to relate in his own gospel the period passed over in silence by the former evangelists.<sup>118</sup>

One of the "silences" in the Synoptics seems to concern the period before the start of the Galilee ministry (John 1:19–4:43). In John, Jesus initially meets some of his core disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter and an anonymous disciple (whom the reader is possibly intended to read as the unnamed beloved disciple) at his baptism by John the Baptist "beyond the Jordan" (1:37–42) in the south.<sup>119</sup> It was after this, according to John, that Jesus wanted to leave for Galilee (ἐξελθεῖν εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν) in the north (1:43). There he meets Philip and Nathaniel, and he and his disciples accompany his mother to a wedding in Galilee, but they stay there "not many days" (οὐ πολλὰς ἡμέρας) before they return to Judaea

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<sup>117</sup> Kostenberger, "John's Transpositional Theology," 219, suggests that John used both eyewitness sources and access to the Synoptics for his Gospel. He observes that passages such as John 1:40, 3:24, 6:67 and 11:2 suggest that readers of John had access to prior information and prerequisite knowledge of the details. *Ibid*, 200.

<sup>118</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.24.7–11 (LCL 153:249–51).

<sup>119</sup> I discuss John's location of Jesus' baptism further in Chapter Five, but its usual identification is in Jordan at the southern end of the Jordan River, about 10k north of the Dead Sea, in a World Heritage site known as Al-Maghtas (Arabic for "baptism"). The site is on the east bank of the Jordan River at the mouth of the tributary Wadi al-Kharrar.

(2:12). From there he “stayed” ( $\delta\acute{\iota}\epsilon\tau\rho\beta\epsilon\nu$ ) in the land of Judaea with his disciples (3:22). All this occurs in John’s narrative at a time when “John [the Baptist] had not yet been put in prison” (3:24), whereas the synoptic tradition begins the story later in the life of Jesus: “Having heard that John had been arrested, he departed for Galilee” (Matt 4:12). It is only after this event in the Synoptics that the reader is introduced to the characters and narrative of John, James, Peter and Andrew (4:18–22).<sup>120</sup>

As Fredriksen points out, in John’s Gospel, Jesus “entered into his sense of his own mission through John, by the Jordan in the south.”<sup>121</sup> This makes a more coherent story than Mark’s Jesus calling from the shore to the yet-unknown Galileans, “Come follow me,” at which the fishermen, abruptly and inexplicably, “leaving their nets, they followed him” (Mark 1:18). John gives to the reader the interlude before Jesus’ public appearance as an itinerant preacher in the north, which begins only after his rejection in Judaea – well into John’s chapter 4.<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, the other three Gospels do not contradict John’s emphasis, even though they do not share it. Mark hints at Jesus’ presence in Judaea too, although he seems unaware of any detail: Jesus taught the crowds “as was his custom” in the region of Judaea, across the Jordan (Mark 10:1). Luke also comments that early in his ministry, Jesus “was preaching in the synagogues of Judaea” (Luke 4:44). According to Matthew, “Great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judaea and across the Jordan” (Matt 4:25). A Judaean perspective in John recognises that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea, began his ministry there and died there. It also recognises that during his lifetime he spent time there.

The Synoptics are relatively silent about any activities of Jesus in Jerusalem during his lifetime. John compensates for this and Jesus attends at least five feasts at the Temple.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> See Andrew Lincoln for discussions around the period in which the fourth Gospel portrays an overlap between the ministry of John the Baptist and the early ministry of Jesus, in “We Know That His Testimony is True?: Johannine Truth Claims and Historicity,” in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1*, 187–91.

<sup>121</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “The Historical Jesus, the Scene in the Temple, and the Gospel of John,” in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul Anderson, Felix Just and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 274.

<sup>122</sup> John 4:43–45; 7:1; 11:7–8,54.

<sup>123</sup> John 2:13; 5:1; 7:2,10; 10:22–23; 12:1.

Without this perspective, Mark's Gospel leaves the reader with an impression of a condensed public ministry with one single trip to Jerusalem at the end of it, in which Jesus cleared the Temple and then was arrested and killed. This final week in Jerusalem occupies a third of Mark's content (chapters 11–16), but the Johannine narrative which spans three Passovers in Jerusalem<sup>124</sup> gives a more comprehensive picture of time. In the Judaean perspective offered by John, Jesus' ministry lasted three years, spent not only in Galilee but also in Jerusalem and other parts of Judaea, and Samaria in between. Jesus spends time in the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem and in the wilderness location of Bethany beyond the Jordan where he was baptised.<sup>125</sup>

A second point I noted in my earlier discussion of John's authorship and dating was in reference to Hengel's argument regarding the Judaean setting of John's Gospel:

This special and deliberate stress on the southern province and the capital is one of the reasons which make it extremely improbable that the Gospel was written or even prompted by a Galilean disciple. The balance of activity is shifted completely to Jerusalem, in contrast to the synoptic tradition. In its topographical (and historical) information about Jerusalem and Judaea the Gospel is far superior to the Synoptics.<sup>126</sup>

This "special and deliberate stress" on Judaea and Jerusalem, as Hengel notes, is underscored by an accurate knowledge of the area in which John sets his narrative of the life of Jesus. As well as the time that John allocates to Jesus' activities and conversations in Jerusalem and its environs, he is meticulous in the detail he offers. At Jesus' trial, only John mentions the stone pavement leading to Pilate's judgment seat, *Gabbatha* in Hebrew (John 19:13), a detail since verified by the discovery of huge stone slabs that existed pre-AD 70 in the place where Pilate's palace had been. Two mineral pools, the

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<sup>124</sup> John 2:13; 12:1 and possibly 5:1.

<sup>125</sup> I note here the distinction between Bethany where Jesus was baptised by John, and Bethany, the home where Jesus sometimes stayed, since I refer to both in this thesis. The former is referred to as "Bethany beyond the Jordan" in John's text (1:28), which (see fn. 112 above), is widely recognised as the archaeological site east of the southern end of the Jordan River, not far north of the Dead Sea, and the latter Bethany as a residence only fifteen stadia from Jerusalem (11:18), where Mary, Martha and Lazarus live (12:1–3). At one point in John's narrative, Jesus makes the journey from Bethany beyond the Jordan (10:40) to Bethany near Jerusalem (11:17–18). John locates both Bethany sites in Judaea, a location that is discussed further in Chapter Five.

<sup>126</sup> Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, 124.

sites of two miraculous healings in John but destroyed by Roman armies, have now been uncovered and verified: the Pool of Bethzatha (5:2) “does have five porticoes and the columns can be seen today lying on the ground.”<sup>127</sup> Likewise, the Pool of Siloam to which John makes reference (9:7) is not just as a metaphor for spiritual healing but recent archaeological excavations reveal the pool did actually exist, with a staircase leading up to the temple gates. Charlesworth is also convinced by the knowledge in this tradition of pre-70 Jewish customs, such as the significance of the six stone jars in Cana of Galilee (2:6): excavations have since shown that these vessels were used for purification.<sup>128</sup> He claims, “Archaeological discoveries prove that sometimes the Fourth Evangelist knew more about Jewish customs and debates than the authors of the Synoptics and more about the architectural landscape of Jerusalem than the authors of the Qumran Scrolls or Josephus.”<sup>129</sup>

Near the end of the last century, “a series of unexpected archaeological, documentary, and textual discoveries” began to redeem John’s Gospel from its perceived inferiority to the Synoptics and to allow scholars “to recognise how fragile was the base which supported the highly skeptical analysis of John.”<sup>130</sup> One of the most significant of these discoveries was in 1946/47–1956 when several caves storing jars containing ancient manuscripts were found in the area of the Dead Sea and the ruins of a site now known as Qumran. According to Charlesworth:

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some influential scholars judged the Fourth Gospel to be a mid- to late second century composition inspired by Greek

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<sup>127</sup> James Charlesworth “The Historical Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: A Paradigm Shift?” *JSHJ* 8 (2010): 3–46.

<sup>128</sup> Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, x. John 4:1–42 also shows an accurate awareness of Jewish/Samaritan relations including the location of Jacob’s Well, the former temple on Mt Gerizim and the Samaritan expectation of a messiah. Reinhard Pummer, “Samaritans, Galileans, and Judeans in Josephus and the Gospel of John,” *JSHJ* 18 (2020): 77–99.

<sup>129</sup> Charlesworth, “Historical Jesus,” 3. Flavius Josephus (AD 38–100) is used as a source throughout this thesis, but he “should not only be understood as a mere historian, but also as an interpreter of history. Additionally, we should be aware that, concerning the Hellenistic–Roman period, we are mainly dependent on his works.” Gerbern S. Oegema, *The Anointed and his People: Messianic Expectations from the Maccabees to Bar Kochba*, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 27 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 134.

<sup>130</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John 1–12*, Anchor Bible, vol. 1 (NY: Doubleday, 1966), xxii.

philosophy. Today, almost fifty years later, a growing scholarly consensus finds John to be a first century composition. More surprising still, scholars now concur that it is fundamentally Jewish. Elements that were once thought to be reflections of Greek philosophy appear in the Dead Sea Scrolls, revealing unknown concepts among Jews in Palestine and contemporaneous with the origins of John and its traditions. The Dead Sea Scrolls have been a, if not the, major force in this *paradigmatic shift in the winds of Johannine scholarship*.<sup>131</sup>

In summary, it would seem we have been left with two perspectives on the story of Jesus: the Johannine view in which Jesus begins his ministry in Judaea and spends time at the Temple throughout three years, and the synoptic view in which his ministry is condensed into his time in and around Galilee, save his final sojourn into Jerusalem for his last Passover feast. The four Gospels then, as Paul Anderson points out, give us a “bi-optic” perspective on Jesus,<sup>132</sup> bi-optic because, as Fredriksen has perceptively observed, given the commonly accepted premise that Matthew and Luke relied on Mark, “what we have is not a three-one split but an even choice: Mark’s or John’s.”<sup>133</sup> In other words, what we have is evidence of the evolution of two separate traditions in the stories of Jesus.

Further, to make use of biological evolution as an analogy, there are signs of common genetic material that the two evolved species (Johannine and synoptic) might have shared, signs of a stage before they began to take on their own distinct form. Paul Anderson has noticed some overlap in the language of the written texts (e.g. Matt 11:27; John 1:18) which he believes are signs of written and oral<sup>134</sup> “interfluence” of John and

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<sup>131</sup> Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, 247. Italics Charlesworth’s. Martin Hengel also notes the new connections, following the discovery of the DSS, that could be made between Christianity and Essenism: “[B]oth are an expression of the very creative religious plurality of Palestinian Judaism before AD 70, which had been underestimated by scholars for a long time and which led to great effects that in turn exerted a global influence on the history of religion.” Martin Hengel “Qumran and Early Christianity,” in *Earliest Christian History*, 531. Paul Anderson asserts that since the Qumran discoveries, the Johannine writings can be “interpreted authentically as Jewish writings,” in “John and Qumran: Discovery and Interpretation over Sixty Years,” in Coloe and Thatcher, *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 50.

<sup>132</sup> Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 173.

<sup>133</sup> Fredriksen, “Historical Jesus,” 251.

<sup>134</sup> In this thesis, when I refer to oral tradition before the written sources of the NT, I am concerned with the stories that circulated informally and orally in the *kerygma* of the disciples immediately after the death of Jesus, in the different geographical areas of his influence and the influence of his movement. I refer to

early synoptic tradition.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, Brown claims that, in the stories and sayings of both traditions, the pre-Johannine tradition shows comparable signs of antiquity to the pre-Synoptic tradition. He therefore assigns a date between AD 40 and 60 to the formation of two distinct traditions, Johannine and Synoptic.<sup>136</sup> Charlesworth has suggested a first edition of the Gospel written from Jerusalem, given John's intricate knowledge of Jerusalem and its terrain, before its destruction by the Romans in AD 70, some twenty years before the final edition.<sup>137</sup>

One factor in favour of the Johannine tradition is that, as Fredriksen has observed, "John's Jerusalem-centred mission, often disregarded, has the undeniable virtue of conforming to what else we know about the postresurrection Christian movement, which was also Jerusalem-centred. . . For the movement's first generation, Jerusalem remained the hub."<sup>138</sup> This certainly raises questions on the link between John and the historical Jesus, but this thesis is not intended as a contribution to such a quest.<sup>139</sup> Rather, it presents an argument that the language of the Gospel and its settings indicate the way in which 20:17 was intended to be read: as an oblique reference to celibacy. The Gospel's setting at the time of writing, a setting which reflected the tensions over asceticism evident in the NT canon (Chapter Three), and the narrative setting in Judaea where the author focuses the activities of Jesus (Chapter Five) both support my reading. I read John 20:17 from a Judaean perspective because that is the lens which John himself seems to have offered to the reader. I suggest further in Chapter Five that the time and place of the

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oral tradition as that which was handed on by word of mouth both before and during the earliest compositions of the written epistles, narratives and didactic sayings of Jesus (such as the early Pauline letters and, debatably, Q and *Thomas*). The apostle Paul refers in 1 Cor 15:3 to passing on to others that which he had received: a story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Presumably, this was in oral, not written, form.

<sup>135</sup> Anderson, *Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus*, 125.

<sup>136</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, lxxxiii–iv.

<sup>137</sup> Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, 53. Mark Allan Powell, holds that the fourth Gospel was the last to be completed but shows content from a period earlier than the Synoptics in "The De-Johannification of Jesus: The Twentieth Century and Beyond," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1*, 121–22.

<sup>138</sup> Fredriksen, "Historical Jesus," 273.

<sup>139</sup> Nonetheless, according to Bruce Chilton, one of the chief failures of the "Jesus Seminar" in its search for the historical Jesus was its failure to locate Jesus within Judaism, assuming that all Judaism in the first century was Hellenistic. Bruce Chilton, "Implications and Prospects of Jewish Jesus Research," *JSHJ* 16 (2018): 62–79, doi 10.1163/17455197-01601001. The discovery of the Scrolls refutes that assumption.

setting of the story of Jesus as told by John – a cultural context in Judaea during the mid-first century – is one that creates a “perfect storm” so that the first audience of John 20:17 would have understood an implicit reference to celibacy.

## **Chapter One Conclusion**

At this point, the preliminary matters have been dealt with: I have outlined my justification to explore, at least, the possibility of celibate love in the enigmatic verse of John 20:17, “Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended.” There are sufficient clues, as I will bring to light, to give plausibility to my reading of this verse. As outlined in the Methodology section above, I use a multi-layered approach, dedicating one chapter to each layer from Chapter Three through to Chapter Six. However, before engaging with the enigma itself, I outline in the next chapter a selection of works by those who have already attempted to do so, with an appreciation for the ancient and ever-growing body of interpreters of John 20:17.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Literature on the interpretation of μή μου ἄπτου οὐπώ γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα (John 20:17) is overwhelming, both in quantity and in its uncanny ability to be resurrected, time and again, to face another critique. It is because of this lack of consensus amongst scholars that the unfashionable quest for original meaning, which I am pursuing, is justified.

Jostling for pride of place amongst modern exegetes, this verse is considered “one of the most difficult and certainly among the most disputed in the New Testament.”<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity of the verse invites discussion and my purpose in this chapter is to introduce scholars who have sought a satisfactory interpretation, which is a pursuit I share. Of the solutions offered, it seems that, in the end, literature which successfully answers one concern does not do so convincingly for another area, hence the lack of consensus continues. A reading of the text is needed which integrates all perspectives and makes a coherent picture of a fragmented story. It is my hope that interpreting 20:17 as a reference to celibacy offers such an integration.

Because of the multitude of scholars who have either inquired into John 20:17 or found it necessary to make an incidental comment for another purpose, the task in this chapter is an illustrative rather than an exhaustive one. The literature I have chosen to review is representative of themes that have been pursued to date. Given my own concern with the original context of this verse, I have focused on scholars who share this approach in their interpretation of this verse.<sup>2</sup> Certain themes that become part of my own argument are indicated throughout the review. However, unlike the interpretations which follow, I will thereafter use a multi-layered approach to the verse in order to show that each level of the text – whether it be echoes in other NT texts or later texts, or whether it be in the

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<sup>1</sup> Reimund Bieringer, “I Am Ascending to My Father and Your Father, to My God and Your God’ (John 20:17a): Resurrection and Ascension in the Gospel of John,” in *Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, ed. Craig R. Koester and Reimund Bieringer (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 233.

<sup>2</sup> I have omitted, for instance, the philosophical approach of Jean-Luc Nancy, “*Noli me tangere:*” *Essai sur la Levée du Corps* (Bayard: Paris, 2003). I have also omitted approaches to the text which focus on its relevance in more contemporary contexts, such as Deirdre Good, “Mary and Jesus in the Garden: Ban and Blessing,” *BR* 2 (2013): 134–149.

language or structure John uses, or whether it be in the Judaean setting in which his Gospel is set – supports in some way my reading of John 20:17.

I will delve more deeply into how the question of the celibate love of Jesus and Mary might affect the interpretation of John 20:17. I am persuaded that John’s first-century readers knew exactly what this verse meant, even in the event that the author himself was “sidestepping” the matter to avoid being explicit. It may well be that the very ambiguity that motivates this discussion is deliberate, and a pointer to the author’s intention of alerting his reader to a sexual subtlety. After illustrating in this chapter the various interpretations to date, I offer in the subsequent chapters an alternative – and hopefully more satisfying – reading of John 20:17.

### The Shoulders on Which We Stand . . .

Many current themes in the interpretation John 20:17 have ancient echoes, and were familiar to the church fathers. Tertullian, for instance, recognised one of the outstanding anomalies of what seems to be a blatant contradiction in John 20:27, where the disciple Thomas is invited to touch – or more than touch – to *probe* Jesus’ wounds. Tertullian calls Mary “so faithful a woman,” who wanted to touch Jesus “out of love, not from curiosity, nor with Thomas’ incredulity.”<sup>3</sup> It is rather because of the ascension, and pending separation, that Mary may not touch, in Tertullian’s view. I suggest in Chapter Six that the encounter with Thomas deliberately draws attention to Jesus’ humanity in a parallel manner to the encounter with Mary Magdalene.

Allegorical and intertextual interpretations have long influenced interpretations of John 20:17, many of them with a subtlety that foreshadows my suggestion of celibate sexuality between Mary and Jesus. Although an erotic relationship between Mary and Jesus was probably far from *his* mind, Hippolytus of Rome (AD 170–235) stretches *our* minds: such is the power of allegory. By using the Song of Songs 3:3–4 as an intertext for interpretation – a lead which many others have since followed – he immediately calls to

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<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 25.2 (ANF3:621).

mind for the reader the narrative backdrop of an erotic relationship between the Lover and the Shulamite. In Hippolytus' exposition of the verse, Mary's love for Jesus is palpable:

For at that moment she clings to him, embracing his feet. And he calls to her: 'Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended to the Father.' She continued to cling to him and said: 'I will not let you go until I have brought you in and have let you into my heart.' 'I will not let you go until I have brought you into my mother's house and into the chamber where she became pregnant with me.' Because love of Christ had gathered in her belly she did not want to go away. Therefore she cries: 'I have found him and will not let him go.' O blessed woman who continued to cling to his feet, so that she could fly up with him in the air!<sup>4</sup>

Hippolytus is not shy of passion, though it is spiritual and not the physical passion of the Shulamite and her lover. Hippolytus overlays the sexual love celebrated in the Song of Songs with the celibate love of Mary and Jesus which he detects in John 20:17.

Another interesting early text on John 20:17 explicitly refers to Jesus' relationship with Mary as an example of chastity. In an *Epistle concerning Virginity*, pseudo-Clement does not see the rejection of touch as a rejection of Mary, but associates the meaning of the text with the behaviour of celibate monks. This would be even more significant if it could be shown to be the work of Clement of Rome, after whom it is named.

Unfortunately, the commentary which appears to be the earliest on John 20:17 at the turn of the first century is probably the work of an imposter in the third or fourth century.<sup>5</sup> The focus is on the behaviour of monks cohabitating with women at the time:

He sent them out two and two together, men with men; but women were not sent with them, and neither in the highway nor in the house did they associate with women or with maidens: and thus they pleased God in everything. . . but also when our Lord was risen from the place of the dead, and Mary came to the place of the sepulchre, she ran and fell at the feet of our Lord and worshipped Him and would have taken hold of Him. But He said to her: "Touch Me not; for I am not yet

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<sup>4</sup> Hippolytus, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 25.2 [trans. Esther de Boer in *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up: The Sources behind the Myth*, trans. John Bowden (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 100].

<sup>5</sup> I refer to this Clement as pseudo-Clement although the debate continues over their authenticity, usually along the Catholic/Protestant divide. See the Introduction to Clement's *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity* in *ANF* 8:54.

ascended to My Father.” Is it not, then, matter for astonishment, that, while our Lord did not allow Mary, the blessed woman, to touch his feet, yet thou livest with them, and art waited on by women and maidens . . . To Jesus Christ our Lord women ministered of their substance; but they did not live with him; but chastely, and holily, and unblameably they behaved before the Lord, and finished their course, and received the crown in our Lord God Almighty.<sup>6</sup>

According to Elizabeth Clark, pseudo-Clement is referring to the practice of virginal “subintroductae” living with celibate monks as “Platonic lovers,” as John Chrysostom would describe such couples.<sup>7</sup> This practice (known as *synesisaktism*) was a type of “spiritual marriage,” in which it seems that those thus cohabitating “had prematurely assumed that they had shed their bodily desires,” and, as we see in the discussion of some relevant texts in the next chapter, “monks and virgins . . . perhaps thought that God had already given them the impassibility of angels.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, there is an immediate anomaly in pseudo-Clement’s argument above, since Jesus did in fact allow the touch of women, including an anointing by Mary of Bethany (John 12:3). Nonetheless, if Jesus had a unique relationship with Mary above other women – which I argue in Chapter Four – then the tradition that pseudo-Clement draws on in his interpretation coheres with my reading of the verse. Pseudo-Clement’s interpretation of John 20:17 as a warning to monks who practise celibacy offers a resonance with my reading of Jesus’ distancing of Mary Magdalene.

There is an ancient and persistent tradition of interpretation that sought to explain the prohibition of John 20:17 as a rebuke to Mary, and to do so, highlighted a failure or shortcoming in her. Ambrose of Milan (AD 337–397), for example, considered that Mary had not made sufficient spiritual progress to be considered equal to the disciples to whom

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<sup>6</sup> Pseudo-Clement, *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity* 2.15 (ANF 8:65).

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Clark, “John Chrysostom and the ‘Subintroductae’,” *Church History* 46 2 (1977): 171–85. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3165004>. Also see Elizabeth Clark, “The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis.” *Church History* 77 1 (2008): 1–25.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, “Chrysostom and the ‘Subintroductae’,” 185.

she was sent. Indeed, in Ambrose's view, "do not touch me" was metaphorical language for "do not preach or teach in public."

So what does this mean: 'Do not touch me'? Do not put your hand on what is too great for you, but go to my brothers, that is, to the more perfect persons – whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother – for the resurrection cannot come easily into one's reach, but only of those who have made further progress. The privilege of this belief is reserved for those who have firmer ground under them. However, 'I do not allow women to teach in the gathering.' 'Let them question their man at home.' So Mary was sent to her household and accepted the commandments prescribed.<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult to interact with this interpretation, as Ambrose is not playing by modern hermeneutical rules. He introduces two Pauline texts (1 Cor 14:35; 1 Tim 2:12) into his argument and then proceeds to use these as controlling texts, in spite of the fact that both express concepts that are foreign to John's thought. In my view, this destroys the natural reading of the Johannine narrative and derails its author's motivation. In Chapters Four and Five I will argue that the Johannine and apocryphal traditions highlight Mary as significant and prominent in the early Christian tradition, yet for Ambrose her womanhood renders her, and other women, inadequate for full discipleship. Ambrose undervalues Mary's role in John's narrative, but he is correct on one point at least: it is Mary's womanhood that is the basis of Jesus' caution in 20:17.

John Calvin, the sixteenth century reformer, was in no doubt: the women at the tomb were quite blameworthy. By using Matthew's story of the resurrection (28:8-10) as the historical version (hence the "women" rather than Mary alone), Calvin greatly influenced subsequent readings of the verse. He was one of the earliest critical interpreters to consciously justify the sense of "do not hold on to me" in John 20:17.<sup>10</sup> In his view, Mary was out of control and hysterical, as women tended to be, according to popular thought

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<sup>9</sup> Ambrose, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* 10.165 (trans. de Boer, *Cover-Up*, 103).

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Dale Brunner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 1156.

at the time: “What kept them at the grave was mere superstition, together with the feelings of the flesh.”<sup>11</sup> For Calvin, there was no enigma:

The answer is easy. . . The truth is that Jesus did not forbid them to touch him until he saw their stupid and excited desire to keep him here on earth. . . By these words, he commanded the women to control themselves until he was received into heavenly glory.<sup>12</sup>

In Chapter Six, I will suggest that Mary was no more culpable than Thomas, nor any of the other disciples for that matter, so this offers no insight into the prohibition to touch. On the contrary, in that chapter I suggest that the juxtaposition of the Thomas and Mary stories is a rhetorical placement reflecting John’s emphasis on the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus – an incarnation that includes the subtleties of touch.

Calvin, though, broke into new ground. By fusing the two resurrection narratives in John and Matthew he was the first to take the present tense imperative ἄπτου in John 20:17 as durative (continuous) in its aspect. The traditional English translation “touch” assumed the aspect of ἄπτου was conative (to prohibit an attempted action) or iterative (to prevent a repeated or continual action). Ingeniously, Calvin used the obvious exegetical advantage if the aspect of the verb should be deemed durative, thus representing a continued action such as grasping, holding or clinging. In this way, he was able to import Matt 28:9 “they grasped his feet” (ἐκράτησαν αὐτοῦ τοὺς πόδας), into John’s meaning. The meaning of the present tense of ἄπτου continues to be analysed in academic debate. This and some of the other semantic complexities of John 20:17 deserve closer attention and are addressed in the next section.

## Exegetical and Theological Considerations

Early in the twentieth century, J. H. Bernard considered that “do not touch me” was a textual corruption of “do not fear.” Bernard argued that the original of John 20:17 read μὴ πττόου; from thence a short step of redactional emendation to μὴ ἄπτου. Thus,

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries* 3.3 (LCC 23:168).

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries* 3.3 (LCC 23:169–70).

according to Bernard, “If the text were originally μὴ πτόου an easy corruption would be μὴ ἄπτου, and then the μου would naturally be added either before or after ἄπτου to make the sense clear.”<sup>13</sup> W. E. P. Cotter called this proposal “ingenious” and “tempting” as it would make the verse much more logical, but sadly admits it is conjecture, given all manuscripts give μὴ ἄπτου not μὴ πτόου.<sup>14</sup> He asks, “why should a simple and easy reading be changed into one that is difficult?”<sup>15</sup>

Rather, Cotter retained the meaning “hold onto” introduced by Calvin, combined with the sense of “Do not fear” from the account in Matt 28:9–10. Matthew records that the women touched – actually, they grasped (ἐκράτησαν) Jesus – and his response was that they should not fear (μή φοβεῖσθε). From this, Cotter deduced that Jesus’ motive in the prohibitive response was to remove Mary’s fear that he was about to leave her again, as she wanted to keep him there with her. In other words: “Do not keep holding me, there is no need to do so, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Cotter explains the anomaly that results by Jesus’ sending of Mary to tell the others “I am ascending,” by adding “but my stay here is short.”<sup>16</sup> However, the text does not fully fit the meaning Cotter wishes it to convey. If based on Mary’s fear, then surely “do hold onto me for I have not yet ascended to the Father” would make more sense? There is something of an internal contradiction to say the equivalent of, “Don’t panic, I have not yet ascended, but tell the others I am ascending.”

C. H. Dodd, in his interpretation of 20:17, claimed that while the aorist of ἄπτομαι means “touch,” the present tense means “hold,” a claim which has been accepted by many contemporary translations. According to Dodd:

The sense of μή μου ἄπτου (xx.17) is not entirely unambiguous. . . But the present ἄπτεσθαι differs from the aorist ἄψασθαι in more than mere *Aksionsart*. ἄψασθαι

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<sup>13</sup> J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, ed. A. H. McNeile (Edinburgh: Clark, 1928), 670–71.

<sup>14</sup> W. E. P. Cotter, “Touch me not; for I have not yet ascended to the Father,” *ET* 43 (1931–1932): 45–46.

<sup>15</sup> Cotter, “Touch me not,” 46.

<sup>16</sup> Cotter, “Touch me not,” 46.

means ‘touch’ (so invariably in Matthew and Mark), ἀπτεοθαι means ‘hold,’ ‘grasp,’ even ‘cling.’<sup>17</sup>

He was in good company – or, at least, company that was acceptable: Rudolf Bultmann assumed, “There is no essential difference between ἀπτεοθαι [“to touch”] of v.17 and κρατειν [“to grasp”] of Mt 28.9.”<sup>18</sup>

Raymond Brown, in his famed commentary on John, admits that μή μου ἄπτου “can mean that she is trying to touch him and he is telling her she should not.”<sup>19</sup> This is a highly significant admission, given the discussion around the tenses of ἄπτομαι, but, unfortunately, he opts for “cling,” because he considers Matt 28:9 “a parallel scene.”<sup>20</sup> He is, in fact, critical of those who would translate the verb as “touch.” Brown notes Cotter’s solution above, incorporating the parallel reference to fear in Matt 28:10,<sup>21</sup> but neither he nor Cotter would go so far as to agree with the theory of Bernard, above. As Brown summarises: a “frequent approach is to emend the text or to translate the Greek in an unusual way, thus avoiding the difficulty.”<sup>22</sup>

Brown is dismissive of K. Kastner’s theory that because Jesus was naked following his resurrection, it would only be after ascension that sexual temptation would be removed.<sup>23</sup> Whether this is my tendency to side with the underdog, or a propensity for Freudian interpretations, I think the theory deserves respectful acknowledgment, as the graveclothes were, after all, left in the tomb (20:6). Such a naturist reading does, however, create problems for the other recorded appearances of Jesus! But more than that, Brown here minimises Kastner’s point. In Chapters Four and Six especially, I argue that John does, in fact, intend the reader to understand that physical desire would be

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<sup>17</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1953; repr. 1970), 443, fn. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 687, fn. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John 13-21* Anchor Bible, vol. 2 (NY: Doubleday, 1970), 992.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 992.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 993.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 993.

<sup>23</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 993, citing K. Kastner, “Noli me Tangere,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 13 (1915): 344-53.

removed after ascension, hence the negative command to Mary, “for I have not yet ascended.” In the next chapter, I illustrate the common belief in, and anticipation of, an eschatological existence like that of the angels, without sexual intercourse and beyond sexual desire.

The line between exegesis and theology is a blurred one, since the former can lead to the latter, but the latter can also shape the former. E. Hoskyns understood the Gospel of John as largely metaphorical and 20:17 as symbolic of the Eucharist:

[A]fter the Ascension, both she and the disciples will be concretely united with Him in a manner which can actually be described as ‘touching’ and of this the eating of the Lord’s Body and the drinking of His Blood (vi.51–8) is the most poignant illustration.<sup>24</sup>

Alan Shaw was also in favour of a Eucharistic reading of the 20:17 encounter, and the meal of 21:13,<sup>25</sup> reading a late ecclesial understanding into John’s text.

Somewhere in the aftermath of the change from “touch” to “cling” in popular Bible translations, there was a resistance movement, of which David Fowler was one spokesperson.<sup>26</sup> His main critique is against Brown, in spite of judging Brown’s theory “an impressive resolution of the problem,”<sup>27</sup> with the claim that, “linguistic analysis cannot be decisive.”<sup>28</sup> Fowler’s comparatively emotive inquiry stands in contrast to the pages of the commentary, but he does succeed in showing that the language of John 20:17 lends itself to ambiguities in interpretation, subtleties that cannot be tied down in the telling. In his discussion on the translation of μή μου ἅπτου as “hold” or “touch,” Fowler argues that because of the “psychological subtlety” of the Magdalene episode . . . the traditional translation ‘touch me not’ is to be preferred and should be restored.”<sup>29</sup> There is certainly a subtlety here that reminds the exegete that we are not just dealing

<sup>24</sup> Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. Francis Noel Davey; London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 543.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Shaw, “The Breakfast by the Shore and the Mary Magdalene Encounter as Eucharistic Narratives,” *JTS* 25 (1974): 12–26.

<sup>26</sup> David Fowler, “The Meaning of ‘Touch Me Not’ in John 20:17,” *EQ* 47 (1975): 16–25.

<sup>27</sup> Fowler, “Meaning of ‘Touch Me Not,’” 19.

<sup>28</sup> Fowler, “Meaning of ‘Touch Me Not,’” 17.

<sup>29</sup> Fowler, “Meaning of ‘Touch Me Not,’” 25.

with grammar and syntax in this verse; we are not even just dealing with a story, but an unusual one, which few readers find unmoving. C. H. Dodd describes it as, “a reflective, subtle, most delicate approach to the depths of human experience. This story never came out of any common stock of tradition; it has an arresting individuality.”<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, some of this is the craft of the story-teller, as Dodd suggests, but the “psychological subtlety” of the encounter strikes me as the “dance of the sexes.” The Aramaic name calling Μαριάμ and Παβλούν as Mary and Jesus face each other (20:16), and a wistful enforcement of boundaries, bespeaks this dance of man and woman. This also strikes me as a sure indicator of the earthly humanity of Jesus, resurrected and yet restricted.

Like Brown and against Fowler, Frans Neirynck claimed that the meaning of ἄπτομαι should be “cling” or “hold onto,” and that John’s Gospel was dependent on the synoptic record as its source, specifically in this instance, on Matt 28:9–10.<sup>31</sup>

Μή μου ἄπτου is part of the saying of Jesus and should be read in parallel with Mt. 28.10, and not directly in parallel with v.9. Jesus’ instruction to the women, ‘go and tell my brothers . . .’, seems to imply that the prostration should come to an end. And this is the basic pattern of Jesus saying in Jn. 20.17: μή μου ἄπτου, πορεύου δὲ . . .<sup>32</sup>

In that sense, there is nothing astounding or new in Neirynck’s interpretation, and he may well have suffered the same fate of exclusion from this literature review as other incidental interpretations were it not for the relevance of his surrounding discussion. The reverberations of his work are still felt in Johannine scholarship, especially in the interpretation of 20:17. As Reimund Bieringer notes:

Jn 20,1–18 is one of the keystones in the so-called ‘Louvain Hypothesis’ which defends the direct literary dependence of the fourth gospel on the synoptics. The publications by Frans Neirynck on this topic and their impact on research in this area illustrate this impressively.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> C. H. Dodd, “The Appearances of the Risen Christ: An Essay in Form-Criticism of the Gospels,” in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 19.

<sup>31</sup> Frans Neirynck, “John and the Synoptics: The Empty Tomb Stories,” *NTS* 30 2 (1984): 161–87.

<sup>32</sup> Neirynck, “John and the Synoptics,” 169.

<sup>33</sup> Reimund Bieringer, “‘They Have Taken Away My Lord’: Text-Immanent Repetitions and Variations in John 20:1–18,” in *Repetitions and Variations in the Fourth Gospel* (Walpole, Mass: Peeters, 2009), 609.

In this way, Neirynck's discussion of John 20:17 gave new impetus to the theory of John's unreliability, according to the scholarly trend in that direction at the time, as I discussed in Chapter One. By claiming John's heavy redaction of Matthew as a source, Neirynck reinforced the belief that the Synoptics were the real source of the Jesus tradition and John merely modified the facts for his own purposes.

Neirynck claimed a parallel between John 20:17 and Matt 28:10; between  $\mu\nu\mu\alpha\pi\tau\tau\mu\alpha$  (“do not hold onto me”) and  $\mu\nu\mu\phi\beta\varepsilon\iota\sigma\theta\varepsilon$  (“do not fear”).<sup>34</sup> He also claimed a correspondence between John 20:17 and Matt 28:9. In this latter verse, the women's response to Jesus is that  $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau\eta\sigma\alpha\acute{v}$   $\alpha\acute{v}\tau\omega\acute{v}$   $\tau\omega\acute{v}\acute{\epsilon}\rho\acute{d}\alpha\acute{v}$  (“they grasped his feet”), the supposed equivalent of Mary's attempt to grasp the risen Jesus, thereby eliciting Jesus' response  $\mu\nu\mu\alpha\pi\tau\tau\mu\alpha$ . “The verbs  $\alpha\pi\tau\mu\alpha$  and  $\kappa\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega$  are interchangeable,” claimed Neirynck.<sup>35</sup> As a classic defence of the above claim, he used two versions of the story of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law, found in Matt 8:15 (which uses  $\alpha\pi\tau\mu\alpha$ ) and Mark 1:31 (which uses  $\kappa\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega$ ). From Neirynck's source-critical perspective, the two may well represent, historically, the same story told differently, but he avoids the obvious possibility that, from the perspective of the authors of Matthew and Mark, the difference between the texts is deliberate. In the Matthean story, where  $\alpha\pi\tau\mu\alpha$  is used, Jesus “touched ( $\eta\psi\alpha\tau\omega$ ) her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up,” whereas in the Markan picture, Jesus “raised her up, holding ( $\kappa\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau\eta\sigma\alpha\acute{v}$ ) [her] by the hand.” All that can be said with surety is that the two texts reveal slightly different traditions in Matthew and Mark. Thus, the verbs  $\alpha\pi\tau\mu\alpha$  and  $\kappa\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega$  need *not* be interchangeable. Furthermore, John uses  $\alpha\pi\tau\mu\alpha$  nowhere else in his Gospel, so its use in 20:17 is unique, and he uses  $\kappa\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega$  only once too, with the distinct meaning of “hold onto” (20:23). The sole use of  $\alpha\pi\tau\mu\alpha$  in 20:17 – in a gospel marked otherwise by repetitive vocabulary – suggests John is giving the verb a very specific meaning. I will explore further the significance of this in Chapter Four. Be that as it may, the interpretation of John 20:17 by Neirynck and

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<sup>34</sup> Neirynck, “John and the Synoptics,” 169.

<sup>35</sup> Neirynck, “John and the Synoptics,” 168.

others, on the basis of Matthew’s Gospel, creates a meaning for the text of John that I suggest the text itself does not invite, nor even offer permission.

Neirynck concluded that “the so-called protophany of Mary Magdalene has no traditional basis.”<sup>36</sup> But this is a circular argument. With new challenges that have appeared in more recent years (such as evidence for an independent Johannine tradition or that ἀπτομαι does not mean the same as κρατεω), the “traditional basis” for the story of 20:17 has changed. In the end, there is little evidence that μή μου ἀπτου οὐπω γὰρ ἀναβεβηκα means that Mary’s prostration should end, as Matthew records of the women. One needs to look elsewhere for further insight.

The disputed reliability of John’s Gospel reached new heights with Gregory Riley at the end of last century, but for a different reason. Rather than the dilemma of John versus the synoptic Gospels, Riley’s disquiet was based around the recent interest in the *Gospel of Thomas*. According to Riley, John produced his Gospel with little more than his own imaginative creativity, as the protagonist against *Thomas* in “a heated and purposely offensive argument over physical resurrection, a controversy which began early in the first Christian century, and lasted for more than four hundred years.”<sup>37</sup> The main cause of dissension was that the Thomasine Christians held to the common ancient belief that, “the soul beyond the grave could not be handled. . . [Post-mortem souls] could do all things as we, and more, but were reputed to be impalpable.”<sup>38</sup> In Chapter Four I will illustrate further this docetic view of Christ and, by contrast, in Chapter Six I will illustrate the view of the Johannine believers that Jesus was still physical and able to be touched after resurrection.<sup>39</sup> The acceptance of Jesus’ embodiment in the fourth Gospel – before and after resurrection – includes the command to refrain from touch in 20:17.

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<sup>36</sup> Neirynck, “John and the Synoptics,” 172.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 116.

<sup>38</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 68.

<sup>39</sup> I use the terms “docetism” and “docetists,” from δοκέω “seem,” to refer to those who held that Jesus was a spiritual being and merely appeared or seemed to be human and physical.

Riley's explanation for 20:17 is to translate the verb as "stop clinging to me," with a footnoted comment that, "The author of John, one must remember, *wants* Jesus to be tangible."<sup>40</sup> The sense of the prohibition is the command, "Let go of me now, for I need to go to my Father, and you need to go to the other disciples." Riley seems to understand the expression of 20:17 as John's devious intent to show tangibility, but surely this could have just as easily been expressed by, "Come, give me a hug before we part" – it still does not explain the distancing of Mary by an explicit prohibition. Riley's overall thesis contains a greater anomaly: his accusation that, in the battle over resurrection, John was without a concern for truth, implicitly charges him with gross and deliberate deception. This is a serious charge in view of the Gospel's claims to eyewitness truth (19:35; 21:24). Riley portrays the *Gospel of Thomas* as a more authentic form of the early Jesus tradition than the Johannine Gospel, without acknowledging its limitations as a "sayings" source rather than a narrative source.

Tom Wright agrees with Riley that, in pre-NT texts, the shedding of the physical and mortal body was an essential component of immortal existence.<sup>41</sup> But where Riley argued that John either "manipulated" the inherited NT tradition or fabricated a "creation" to debunk these beliefs,<sup>42</sup> Wright argues the opposite. Instead, according to Wright, the resurrection (ἀνάστασις) preached by the first believers in Christ was a new concept in which, unlike the vision of the afterlife imagined by the ancients, resurrection was "death's reversal."<sup>43</sup> Wright argues that, in its first-century context, "A great many things supposedly happened to the dead, but resurrection did not."<sup>44</sup> I discuss various understandings of resurrection in second-temple Jewish thought in Chapter Four, but Wright appears to be referring to the embodied resurrection of Jesus as described in the NT, in line with John's emphasis on incarnation and resurrection.<sup>45</sup> Wright's term

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<sup>40</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 98, fn. 86.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 83.

<sup>43</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 83.

<sup>45</sup> James Charlesworth identifies a variety of divergent understandings of resurrection in second-temple literature, including both physical and spiritual raising of an individual or nation. Charlesworth, "Prolegomenous Reflections towards a Taxonomy of Resurrection Texts (1QH<sup>a</sup>, 1En, 4Q521, Paul, Luke,

“transphysical” describes what he believes the early Christians were referring to as “a new mode of embodiment,” beyond normal physical boundaries.<sup>46</sup> Wright thus objects to Riley’s interpretation:

John may be saying both that Jesus was indeed, so to speak, graspable, and that Mary was to go and get on with her new task. . . It is illegitimate to appeal to John as a witness to a view of Jesus and the resurrection in which Easter stories are simply a dramatic, coded way of saying that his death was somehow victorious, that he was now alive in heaven, and that his followers now experience a new life through him. If that really was what John was trying to say, he went about it in as misleading a fashion as he could.<sup>47</sup>

Neither Wright nor Riley, however, disagrees that John’s intent was to communicate the embodied, rather than purely spiritual, nature of Jesus’ body after resurrection. They may differ on whether John achieved that by a manipulation of earlier sources or by an honest account of the author’s belief, but they both recognise the fourth Gospel’s intended emphasis on incarnation and resurrection. In Chapter Six I focus on this emphasis and suggest that the invitation to touch extended to Thomas and the prohibition of touch given to Mary are intended as twin illustrations of the embodied resurrection of Jesus.

While discussion over the independence of John’s Gospel continued at the turn of this century, so also did the grammatical debate around 20:17. Michael McGhee continued the search by re-examining the grammar of the verse, a valid exercise given that the earliest text does not display any punctuation. He suggested that, “given the tremendous disparity in the commentaries from Tertullian to Bultmann, it is possible that one reason the text may not be clear theologically is that the traditional rendering does not make sense grammatically.”<sup>48</sup> McGhee suggests the culprit is the postpositive γάρ (“for”) in οὐπίω γὰρ ἀναβεβηκα (“for I have not yet ascended”), which he argues functions not in the usual, causal way of “for,” but is what he calls an “anticipatory *gar*,” and should be

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the Fourth Gospel, and Psalm 30),” in *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity and Other Graeco-Roman Religions in Antiquity*, ed. Ian H. Henderson *et al.* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 237–64.

<sup>46</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 477.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 666.

<sup>48</sup> Michael McGhee, “A Less Theological Reading of John 20:17,” *JBL* 105 (1986): 299–302.

translated “since.” Thus, a simplified, more logical reasoning results: “Do not cling to me. Since I have not yet ascended to the Father, go to my brothers and tell them.” Although McGehee adopts Brown’s translation “cling to,” he also critiques Brown for having “wandered too far from the text” and “into the theological quagmire that results from taking *gar* as the causal conjunction ‘for.’”<sup>49</sup>

McGehee admits, however, that most examples of γάρ as anticipatory are from classical Greek, and although he cites three examples from John maintaining the translation cannot be “for,”<sup>50</sup> these do not hold up to close scrutiny.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the concept of an anticipatory γάρ has not received general scholarly support.<sup>52</sup> If the more likely translation of “touch” is accepted, as some propose and I support in Chapter Four, then the verse becomes, “Do not touch me. Because I have not yet ascended, go . . .” Causal or anticipatory clause notwithstanding, it still does not make logical sense of the rejection of touch. McGehee would simply be transferring the causal nature of γάρ onto the third clause, with the sense of, “Go, for I have not yet ascended . . .” without indicating why touch is not allowed, so the overall interpretive problem remains.

Regardless of this, McGehee’s general indignation at the complexities that have arisen in scholarly discussion around John 20:17 and his search for a meaning that is not theologically “cryptic” is commendable.<sup>53</sup> As he implies, there is something we are not seeing, and there is a need to think beyond familiar parameters. Since the solution does not lie in simplifying the punctuation of the text, I suggest an acknowledgement of the likelihood of gendered language, which is both obtuse and simple at the same time, could help. Ambiguity and euphemism, leaving the obvious unsaid, may result in a verse that seems “cryptic,” especially many centuries later.

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<sup>49</sup> McGehee, “Less Theological Reading,” 301.

<sup>50</sup> McGehee, “Less Theological Reading,” 300.

<sup>51</sup> John 4:44; 9:30; 19:6.

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Porter is one of the few who are in general agreement with McGehee’s proposal, in *The Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament: with Reference to Tense and Mood* (NY: Peter Lang, 1993), 356. Donald Carson maintains to the contrary that γάρ has no genuine anticipatory function in the NT, in *Gospel according to John*, 642.

<sup>53</sup> McGehee, “Less Theological Reading,” 302.

Like McGehee, Sandra Schneiders has searched amongst grammatical possibilities for insight into the prohibition. In her view, “for I have not yet ascended to my Father” should be punctuated as a question, “for, have I not yet ascended to the Father?”<sup>54</sup> with an implied affirmative answer (as indicated by the use of οὐπιω rather than μήπιω), that yes, Jesus has ascended. Jesus is directing her to transfer now the physical or earthly encounter with her Lord to that in the community of the church. According to Schneiders, this is a rhetorical question, the effect of which may be grasped by reference to John’s use of double-meaning questions: “Jesus *appears* to be not yet ascended because he is interacting with Mary, but what she (and the reader) must realize is that *in reality* he is now in a very different state, that is, glorified.”<sup>55</sup> In Chapters Four and Six I interpret John’s intended meaning in “for I have not yet ascended” as a signal that Jesus is still embodied and celibate; but his imminent ascension will usher in the angelic state devoid of sexuality, a state discussed in Chapter Three.

Schneiders believes that the movable μου of μή μου ἄπτου offers some insight into the prohibition. As stated in Chapter One, the textual variation in one of the significant and normally reliable uncials, Vaticanus (B), shows a different positioning of the μου, where the text reads μὴ ἄπτου μου rather than the otherwise unanimous witness of μή μου ἄπτου. B shows the more normal, default Greek rendering, which one might expect perhaps from a moment of scribal inattention. This anomaly suggests that, in its original form, the μου was deliberately placed directly after the negative particle to bring it into emphasis and to distance the negative particle from the word “touch.” In Schneiders’ view, the underlying focus is therefore not a negation of *touch* – as 20:24–29 shows – but a negation of Jesus’ own responses to himself as the object of Mary’s touch: μή μου (“not me”). According to Schneiders, the command not to touch is because Mary’s priority must be to go to the disciples first, and it is there in the future she will encounter the risen Lord.<sup>56</sup> So, it is not touch itself that is being discouraged but the focus is on the physical and earthly body of Jesus – the “me” of the touch. Schneiders does not entertain

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<sup>54</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 220.

<sup>55</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 220, fn. 18.

<sup>56</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 220.

any sexual implication for the prohibition, but her observation of emphasis in the text by the deliberate placing of the μου makes sense of the textual evidence. Furthermore, her suggestion that this prohibition is not a sweeping command against all touch concurs with my theory that it applies uniquely to Mary Magdalene because of the high position she held next to Jesus, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

Bieringer's is possibly the most extensive coverage of the grammar and syntax of the verse,<sup>57</sup> which, by his own understatement, “leaves a lot of room for different interpretations.”<sup>58</sup> He is especially critical of those who seek the meaning of μή μου ἄπτου without due consideration of the reason given in the text, οὐπω γὰρ ἀναβεβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα. Therefore McGehee, who wanted to put a full stop between the two clauses, suffers the most criticism but is certainly not the sole target:

οὐπω γὰρ ἀναβεβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα (John 20:17c) was subjected to the complete arsenal of grammatical and style-critical techniques, which are all designed to undo or transform its connection with the preceding prohibition μή μου ἄπτου.. . However, none of these attempts to come up with a smoother text are convincing.<sup>59</sup>

Bieringer points out that “it would be surprising if the prohibition were not motivated at all in the text,” and that it is something of a tautology to say, “Since I have not yet ascended . . . tell them I am ascending.”<sup>60</sup> He is also critical of Schneiders who, he says, “makes 20:17c [for I have not yet ascended] say the opposite of what it otherwise says [Have I not yet ascended?].”<sup>61</sup> I suggest that John’s reference here to ascension could allude to the commonly held belief in the freedom from sexuality in the afterlife, a belief I discuss in the next chapter and further in the following chapters of the thesis.

<sup>57</sup> Bieringer’s work includes his involvement with the two published works already noted, *One Person, Many Images* in 2006 and *To Touch or Not to Touch?* in 2013. It appears that a conference in 2008 in Rome titled *Noli me tangere: Word – Image – Context* resulted in an inter-disciplinary research project, “Mary Magdalene and the Touching of Jesus: An Intra- and Interdisciplinary Investigation of the Interpretation of John 20:17,” followed by a conference initiated from the Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven in 2009. See <https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/nolimetangere/>.

<sup>58</sup> Bieringer, *Noli Me Tangere and the New Testament*, in Baert *et al.*, *One Person Many Images*, 13.

<sup>59</sup> Bieringer, “I Am Ascending,” 217.

<sup>60</sup> Bieringer, “I Am Ascending,” 213.

<sup>61</sup> Bieringer, “I Am Ascending,” 217.

One of Bieringer's most significant critiques of earlier scholars is the assumption that the present imperative ἄπτου is of a durative aspect, which, if so, would yield a sense of the continuous "hold/ hold onto," "grasp" or even "cling."<sup>62</sup> As discussed above, many scholars based their work on a comparison of John 20:17 and Matt 28:9–10. In Bieringer's earlier work, he had agreed to "work with the hypothesis of John's direct dependence on the Synoptics," but there was a sense of reluctance, since "the only part that is literally the same is 'my brothers,' but even this differs."<sup>63</sup> By the time of his later work, his reluctance has grown, so that, "we are not convinced that it is legitimate to read John 20:17 in the light of Mt 28:9."<sup>64</sup>

Bieringer argues instead for a conative aspect of the present tense: rather than being told to stop holding Jesus, Mary is being told literally not to touch.<sup>65</sup> He observes that John would have used μηκέτι ("no longer") rather than simply μή if the intention were to say "stop touching me," an option open to him, and one of which John avails himself in parallel imperative constructions at 5:14 and 8:11. Moreover, the differences between the aorist and the present cannot be that clearly defined. By an extensive study of negatives and imperatives, Bieringer notes a "strong imbalance" and concludes that the author's choice of the present tense of the verb when expressing a command is more likely related to its negative particle than to a distinct verbal aspect.<sup>66</sup> Overall in the NT, there are roughly 700 each of aorist and of present imperatives in the affirmative. But, where negative imperatives are used to create a prohibition, there are only eight in the aorist, and 154 in the present. Even more pertinent, while John uses 16 instances of present tense negative imperatives, there are no examples of negative imperatives making use of the aorist tense. With these statistics, the prohibitive intent of μή μου ἄπτου would be surprising in anything other than a present tense, and need not mean anything more complicated than "do not touch." As further evidence and "a warning not to draw a clear

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<sup>62</sup> Bieringer, "Touching Jesus?" 63.

<sup>63</sup> Bieringer, "I Am Ascending," 222.

<sup>64</sup> Bieringer, "Touching Jesus?" 74.

<sup>65</sup> Bieringer, "Touching Jesus?" 77.

<sup>66</sup> Bieringer, "Touching Jesus?" 76.

dividing line between the present and the aorist,” Bieringer cites 1 Chron 16:22 ( $\mu\bar{n}\acute{\alpha}\psi\eta\sigma\theta\epsilon$ ) and Ps 104:15 ( $\mu\bar{n}\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\epsilon\sigma\theta\epsilon$ ) where two virtually identical sentences use the aorist and present, respectively, interchangeably.<sup>67</sup> These arguments support Bieringer’s view that ultimately “this prohibition expresses a straightforward prohibition to touch Jesus.”<sup>68</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, the use of an aorist in a scribal insertion at verse 16 also suggests this interchangeability and supports Bieringer’s argument.

Bieringer is also critical of the tendency to draw semantic conclusions from supposed parallels between  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$  and  $\kappa\rho\alpha\tau\epsilon\omega$ , as used in Matt 28:9 ( $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\rho\alpha\tau\eta\sigma\alpha v$ , “they grasped” his feet) and the Song 3:4 ( $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\rho\alpha\tau\eta\sigma\alpha$ , “she clung to” him).<sup>69</sup> In both these instances there is a decidedly valid sense of “clinging” or “grasping,” but whether the jump to John 20:17 is warranted is another question. Bieringer is critical of Neirynck who tried to justify a move away from the simple meaning of “Do not touch” by claiming an interchangeability between  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$  and  $\kappa\rho\alpha\tau\epsilon\omega$  in the parallel usages in the narratives of Mark 1:31 and Matt 8:15.<sup>70</sup> Further, as noted above, John is aware of  $\kappa\rho\alpha\tau\epsilon\omega$ , as it is used once in his vocabulary at 20:23. Here, in Jesus’ command regarding the releasing of sin ( $\acute{\alpha}\phi\in\eta\mu\beta i$ ) or of retaining it ( $\kappa\rho\alpha\tau\epsilon\omega$ ), the meaning is specifically “hold onto.” It is therefore highly significant that there is a deliberate choice of  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$  at 20:17, a significance I discuss in Chapter Four.

Bieringer’s conclusion is that “hold” or “cling,” as a translation of  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$ , “does not stand to critical reasoning.”<sup>71</sup> His extensive studies of the use of  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$  in the LXX especially, but also in the NT, leads him to conclude that, “We did not find any instances where  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$  is used to refer to a hug or an embrace. Parallels for a person clinging to or holding on to another have not been identified either.”<sup>72</sup> Rather, with a negative,  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$  is often linked to a divine command to refrain from approaching or drawing near to what is holy. This creation of distance, by a spatial meaning of  $\acute{\alpha}\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$  as “to

<sup>67</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 77.

<sup>68</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 80.

<sup>69</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 63.

<sup>70</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 74.

<sup>71</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 73.

<sup>72</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 72.

come near” or “to approach,” is significant for Bieringer: “More than clinging or cleaving, John 20:17 seems to prohibit touching or even approaching Jesus.”<sup>73</sup> His own solution to the problem of this *crux interpretum* lies in the notable contrast between this relational distance and the narrative context of 20:1–18, since the fourth Gospel “attaches a great deal of importance to companionship and closeness.”<sup>74</sup> The closeness Mary sought at the tomb has not eventuated. Instead, a distance must ensue, as Jesus must ascend and Mary must go to the other disciples.<sup>75</sup> The prohibition is not meant to paralyze Mary in her search for closeness, but “sets her in motion to join the community of disciples.”<sup>76</sup>

Bieringer suggests that Mary has in mind the closeness promised by Jesus earlier: “you will weep and mourn . . . but your grief will turn into joy” (16:20); “A little while you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me” (16:16); and “if I go to prepare a place for you, I am coming again and I will take you to myself” (14:3).<sup>77</sup> She misunderstands since the closeness she desires will only be achieved after ascension,<sup>78</sup> an “obstinate misunderstanding” that is resolved only when Jesus addresses her by her name, Μαριάμ (20:16).<sup>79</sup> Mary’s reply is also significant: παββούνι is given in Hebrew and reinforced as “teacher” in Greek (20:16). According to Bieringer, “The reason why the narrative zooms in on the teacher-disciple relationship at this moment of encounter and recognition is important for the interpretation of the entire story,”<sup>80</sup> since it is a closeness that Mary longs for. But, rather unsatisfyingly in my view, the drama ends as something of a tragedy:

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<sup>73</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 76.

<sup>74</sup> Bieringer, “*Noli me tangere* and the New Testament,” 23.

<sup>75</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 81.

<sup>76</sup> Bieringer, “*Noli me tangere* and the New Testament,” 26.

<sup>77</sup> Colleen Conway also suggests that the weeping of Mary which turns to joy is a reference to Jesus’ words in 16:20–22; likewise the calling of her name alludes to 10:3. Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization*, SBL Dissertation Series 167 (Atlanta: SBL, 1999), 195.

<sup>78</sup> Bieringer, “*Noli me tangere* and the New Testament,” 25.

<sup>79</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 79.

<sup>80</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 79.

[H]er desire of closeness remains unfulfilled – to express this is the function of μή μου ἄπτον – since Jesus needs to ascend to the Father. . . In the meantime Mary only has the consolation of the closeness of the brothers of Jesus to whom she is sent.<sup>81</sup>

In the first section of Chapter Four, I will discuss the verb ἄπτομαι and justify my reading of 20:17 as a sexual euphemism. Bieringer admits to the closeness of Mary and Jesus expressed in the verse and its surrounding context, and the distance effected by the prohibition. I am indebted to Professor Bieringer’s research and grateful for these “shoulders on which I stand:” he has established that there is a subtlety in the prohibition that reflects the close relationship of Mary and Jesus yet demands the restraint of distance. But foremost, Bieringer has laid to rest – at least in my mind – the debate over the need to translate 20:17 as a scene of clinging or even holding, as the simple word “touch” reflects its intention.

## Holiness and Touch

Allied to the exegetical work of Bieringer, certain interpreters have discerned that the prohibition to touch in John 20:17 is an expression of holiness, symbolic of the distance created between humanity and that which is holy. Some sixty years before Bieringer’s conclusions, Dominican professor C. Spicq O.P., reading the book of Hebrews alongside John 20:17, argued that the distance between the carnal and the spiritual is the main issue in the interpretation of John 20:17.<sup>82</sup> Whereas, in his lifetime, Jesus mingled freely with sinners, the resurrection and pending ascension, according to Spicq, elevated him as a spiritual priest: *C'est au Ciel que le Sauveur exerce son ministère sacerdotal où il représente l'humanité en la sainte présence de Dieu.*<sup>83</sup> Jesus’ death and resurrection has placed a new gulf between himself and sinners. In this, Spicq makes much of the priest who is holy compared to sinners: ἄκακος ἀμιαντος, κεχωρισμένος (“separated/distanced”) ἀπὸ τῶν ἀμαρτωλῶν (Heb 7:26).

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<sup>81</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 81.

<sup>82</sup> Ceslas Spicq, “*Noli Me Tangere*,” in *RSPT* 32 (1948): 226-227.

<sup>83</sup> Spicq, “*Noli Me Tangere*,” 226, “It is in Heaven that the Saviour exercises his priestly ministry, where he represents humanity in the holy presence of God.”

*En d'autres termes, si le Christ refuse à Marie-Madeleine toute démonstration sensible d'affection, c'est parce que son ascension va l'élever au-dessus des cieux, du séjour des anges, dans la proximité même de Dieu, et qu'il va exercer . . . son office de médiation sacerdotale. Touchant Dieu, si l'on peut dire, il ne peut plus toucher les hommes ou en être touché, sinon spirituellement. La perfection de son sacerdoce implique le refus de tout contact matériel.<sup>84</sup>*

In view of the invitation given to Thomas to touch Jesus, this argument does not suffice: surely such touching would still sully, unless the implication is that only touch by a *woman* would sully. Spicq makes an incidental comment of interest that the term ἀμιαντος (“undefiled”), employed in Heb 7:26, is often the language of prohibition against profaning the Temple, but is also used in commands concerning *la chasteté*.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps issues of chastity have more bearing here than Jesus’ priestly purity.

Similarly, Mary Rose D’Angelo argues that ritual uncleanness and bodily taboos are related to death in Jewish thinking and this could well be John’s meaning.<sup>86</sup> D’Angelo draws on the similarities between the Johannine incident and what she considers a parallel first-century text, the *Apocalypse of Moses*, in which there is a conversation between a man and a woman, in a garden, in a liminal space where death has occurred and touch is not allowed:

Then Adam said to Eve, “But when I die, leave me alone and let no one touch me until the angel of the LORD shall say something about me. . . But rather rise to pray to God until I shall give back my spirit into the hands of the one who has given it.”<sup>87</sup>

Although her central argument is that Jesus’ body occupies an intermediary space, and cannot be touched, she does also observe that, “It cannot be excluded that the danger of a

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<sup>84</sup> Spicq, “*Noli Me Tangere*,” 227. “In other words, if Christ refuses Mary Magdalene any sensory demonstration of affection, it is because his ascension is going to raise him above the heavens, the place of the angels, into the very proximity of God, and that he is going to exercise . . . his office of priestly mediation. By touching God, if one can say that, he is no longer able to touch men, or to be touched by them, except spiritually. The perfection of his priesthood implies the refusal of all physical contact.”

<sup>85</sup> Spicq, “*Noli Me Tangere*,” 227.

<sup>86</sup> Mary Rose D’Angelo, “A Critical Note: John 20:17 and Apocalypse of Moses 31,” *JTS* 41 (1990): 529–36.

<sup>87</sup> *Life of Adam and Eve* 31.1–4 (*OTP* 2:287). D’Angelo names the *Life of Adam and Eve* by the alternative *Apocalypse of Moses*.

touch between Mary and Jesus involves a sexual meaning of the word.”<sup>88</sup> I assert that such is the case and the danger of touch between Mary and Jesus does involve a sexual meaning.

There is a correspondence in that both texts use the verb ἄπτομαι in the prohibition, but D’Angelo’s use of this intertext may add fuel to the fire, instead of quelling any arguments. The verb forms in the two texts are different: the biblical text uses a second person present imperative, μή μου ἄπτου, compared to a third person aorist subjunctive, μηδείς μου ἄψηται (“let no one touch me”) in the *Life of Adam and Eve*. As discussed above, for scholars such as Neirynck and Dodd, the tense might be considered significant enough to cancel any correspondence: they would argue that the aorist normally signifies “touch” but it is only the present – implying a continuous action – that might mean “hold” or “cling.” If D’Angelo is correct, however, and there is a literary correspondence, the use of the aorist for “touch” in the *Life of Adam and Eve* could act as further evidence for Bieringer’s view that the difference between the present and aorist is often stylistic, and in this case would be incidental.

But other scholars see a lack of resonance for other reasons. In an interaction with D’Angelo’s suggestion, Adele Reinhartz raises the question of how close the parallel between the two texts is, given that Mary’s touch “is not rejected but only postponed until after she has delivered his message as the Lord’s messenger.”<sup>89</sup> Turid Karlsen Seim, also in a critique of D’Angelo, considers that there is no correspondence, even in the use of ἄπτομαι in both texts, and in spite of the broader Adam and Eve symbolism.<sup>90</sup> The impurity of prohibited touch only applies to the corpse, and this is “such a striking difference . . . that it undermines the analogy.”<sup>91</sup> She does agree, though, that μή μου ἄπτου means that “Jesus is in a liminal transition from his corporeal presence among his

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<sup>88</sup> D’Angelo, “A Critical Note,” 536.

<sup>89</sup> Adele Reinhartz, “To Love the Lord: An Intertextual Reading of John 20,” in *Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Fiona Black, Roland Boer and Erin Runions (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 65.

<sup>90</sup> Turid Karlsen Seim, “In Transit from Tangibility to Text: Negotiations of Liminality in John 20,” in Bieringer, Demasure and Baert, *To Touch or Not to Touch?* 39–60.

<sup>91</sup> Seim, “In Transit,” 48.

disciples to an absence being replaced by the Spirit and by the written word,” and, “his disciples are in a corresponding liminal transition” which takes a certain amount of “negotiation” on the disciples’ part.<sup>92</sup> Both Mary and Thomas must cope with the new Jesus, and to both it is said, “Blessed are those who have not touched or not seen and yet have come to believe.”<sup>93</sup> In Chapter Six I suggest that both the encounters of Jesus with Mary and Thomas display his risen humanity rather than his liminality.

Nicholas Lunn finds the answer to John 20:17 in the OT holiness codes.<sup>94</sup> As well as finding allusions in John to the Torah passages on the Tabernacle and the Ark within it, he believes that “John consciously followed . . . the Day of Atonement ritual.”<sup>95</sup> One direct parallel he claims is Num 4:15, “the sons of Kohath . . . will not touch (*οὐχ ἄψωνται*) the holy things, so that they might not die,” reminiscent of John 20:17.<sup>96</sup> John thereby attributes “theophanic significance” to Jesus’ encounter with Mary: “He is the one who reveals the glory of the Father (1:14,18). To see Jesus is to see the Father (14:9).”<sup>97</sup>

This seems plausible, but Lunn’s further connections are complicated and overdrawn. There is an echo, he claims, of the reception of the Israelite burnt offering sacrifice on high, in the Johannine reference to ascension. Lunn had almost successfully argued for a ritual holiness as a motive for the prohibition, but he goes on to muddy the waters with a less credible parallel: that Mary may not touch because Jesus’ act of “self-presentation” to the Father meant his sacrifice had not yet been completed.<sup>98</sup> Some of Lunn’s intertextual links, he openly admits, “are of a more tenuous nature,”<sup>99</sup> and where association is made between ascension and burnt offerings, I agree this is the case.

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<sup>92</sup> Seim, “In Transit,” 57–58.

<sup>93</sup> Seim, “In Transit,” 60.

<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Lunn, “Jesus, the Ark, and the Day of Atonement: Intertextual Echoes in John 19:38–20:18,” *JETS* 52 (2009): 731–745.

<sup>95</sup> Lunn, “Day of Atonement,” 744.

<sup>96</sup> Lunn, “Day of Atonement,” 734.

<sup>97</sup> Lunn, “Day of Atonement,” 737.

<sup>98</sup> Lunn, “Day of Atonement,” 745.

<sup>99</sup> Lunn, “Day of Atonement,” 741.

In this thesis, I do not directly tie the celibacy that I believe underlies John 20:17 to Jewish purity laws. Nonetheless, in Chapters Three and Five I show a connection between celibacy and the holiness of the afterlife, which connects the “Do not touch” admonition with the resurrected Jesus. In Chapter Three it becomes evident that those who are “worthy” of resurrection are “angel-like” (*ἰσάγγελοι*) and unable to die (Luke 20:35–36); they are “in heaven” (*ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ*) and do not marry (Matt 22:30). In Chapter Five I show that the DSS also reflect the idea of eschatological celibacy associated with holiness and lived in the presence of angels.

## A Gendered Interpretation

As can be seen from the sections above, several of the church fathers considered the womanhood of Mary to be integral to a valid reading of John 20:17. I also discussed several exegetical, theological and intertextual interpretations which admit to, or assume, the presence of subtle gender-touch issues in the language of the prohibition. In Chapter Four, I argue further that the prohibition is a sexual euphemism and I cite other textual examples, but the implications of a sexual component can be seen already even at a diffused or affective level, such as the “psychological subtlety” argued above by Fowler. At this point I turn to discuss some other scholars, such as Augustine, who thought that Jesus’ command to Mary to refrain from touch had nothing to do with gender, while others move to the other end of the spectrum and see a more explicit sexual reference in the verse.

Although by today’s standards Augustine is often considered sexist, he held to the potential *spiritual* equality of women and men.<sup>100</sup> He adopted the cultural understanding of his time that the female physical body remained inferior to the male, but his spiritual assessment of the male and female components of the soul allowed him to recognise the spiritual equality of women with men. Thus, he did not think that Mary’s gender was relevant to the prohibition of John 20:17:

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<sup>100</sup> I have argued this view of Augustine’s in my unpublished paper, “Augustine of Hippo: The Interface of Sexuality and Spirituality in His View of Women” (Unpublished MTh paper, Laidlaw College, 2003).

And who could be so absurd as to affirm that He was willing indeed to be touched by the disciples before He ascended to the Father, but refused it in the case of women till after his ascension? But no one, even had any the will, was to be allowed to run into such folly.<sup>101</sup>

Augustine raises two issues here. In my Chapters Four through to Six I discuss Mary's relative equality as a disciple, which makes it unlikely that John intends us to read that her inferiority accounts for the prohibition. Mary's womanhood, however, in the context of Jesus' celibate, resurrected manhood, is pivotal to meaning.

At the other end of the spectrum, William Phipps gives unmitigated support for the obvious sexual implications of the verse, advocating that Jesus was most likely a married man, and Mary Magdalene among the most likely to have been his wife. According to Phipps, Jesus' body had changed significantly after resurrection and therefore John 20:17 means that, "No longer could she take hold of him physically, for he was no longer incarnate."<sup>102</sup> Certainly, most Jewish men were married, as Phipps argues, but he derives too many other arguments from the silence of the NT. He explains the Gospels' failure to identify Jesus' wife by suggesting that – unless it was Mary Magdalene – she remained at home while he was itinerant and thus she does not get due mention.<sup>103</sup> He also gives a disproportionate amount of weight in his theory of Jesus' marriage to the later *Gospel of Philip*, in which Jesus is recorded as kissing Mary Magdalene.<sup>104</sup> In Chapters Three and Five, I discuss the favoured status of celibacy in the NT canonical texts and the Essene texts, so we cannot assume Jesus was married just because he was Jewish. In Chapter Four, I show the ambiguous nature of spiritual-sexual language, such as kissing in the *Gospel of Philip*, and suggest that a "spiritual kiss" is more likely a reflection of asceticism.

Harold Attridge, although his tone seems to admit to a certain tenderness between Mary and Jesus, has a more realistic view of the *Apocrypha* than Phipps and recognises the

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<sup>101</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 121.3 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 7:437).

<sup>102</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 132.

<sup>103</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 174.

<sup>104</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 173–74.

ascetic underlay of the later texts about Mary Magdalene. During his discussion on the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, in which a conflict is played out between Mary's authority and that of Peter, Attridge observes that while Jesus affirms Mary, he does so with the language of making her "a man." This language "may refer to her participation in an ascetical lifestyle in which gender differentiation had been overcome."<sup>105</sup> *Logion 114* of the *Gospel of Thomas*, to which Attridge refers, will be used alongside other such texts elsewhere in the thesis, so its translation here in full is useful:

Simon Peter said to them, 'Let Mary leave us for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>106</sup>

Attridge's interpretation of John 20:17, then, reflects this tradition between Mary and Jesus found in the apocryphal texts:

Jesus' command to Mary not to be touching him could be an invitation to asceticism, the equivalent of the notion in the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary* that Jesus made Mary the equal of the ascetical male disciples.<sup>107</sup>

Attridge's reading of 20:17 parallels my own. Like Attridge, I hold that the received history of the relationship of Mary and Jesus, as reflected in the apocryphal texts, is relevant to our reading of Jesus and Mary's relationship in John 20:17, and this is further explored in Chapter Four, Section Two. Attridge's interpretation differs from mine in that he advocates another motivation for the prohibition: it honours Mary's presence "at the most delicate of moments . . . [after] his victory over death but before he had taken his exalted place in the bosom of the Father."<sup>108</sup> In my reading, the motivation for the

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<sup>105</sup> Harold Attridge, "Don't Be Touching Me": Recent Feminist Scholarship on Mary Magdalene," in *A Feminist Companion to John: Volume 2*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (London: Sheffield, 2003), 161.

<sup>106</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 114 (NHL, 138.)* Quotations from apocryphal texts in this thesis are taken as indicated from the *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988) and from the *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher and R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1990-1992). Square brackets in the quotation indicate corrupt text.

<sup>107</sup> Attridge, "Don't Be Touching Me," 162.

<sup>108</sup> Attridge, "Don't Be Touching Me," 165.

prohibition lies in the Johannine emphasis on incarnation, a topic I turn to in Chapter Six. But the suggestion Attridge offers of 20:17 as an “invitation to asceticism” is, in my view, precisely the impression John gives in the text. At least, it is an allusion to celibacy following resurrection.

Others consider Jesus could not have married or been in a sexual relationship. Loader, for instance, considers it “highly unlikely” that Jesus is saying “do not have sexual relations with me” in John 20:17.<sup>109</sup> In response to Phipps, Loader points out that the silence of the NT on Jesus’ wife and children is inexplicable if he were married, in view of the inclusion of his mother, brothers and sisters.<sup>110</sup> I think that Loader’s premise that Jesus was most likely unmarried is correct: my Chapters Three and Five will give evidence that celibacy was common amongst ancient spiritual enthusiasts. Loader suggests that Jesus chose this lifestyle to challenge the norms of the society of the day and the power of family structures, and there is ample documentation that celibacy and prophetic task often went together.<sup>111</sup> But beyond that, in his interpretation of John 20:17, Loader criticises those who do interpret it sexually:

Conjuring up sexual scenes by reading Jesus’ instruction to Mary Magdalene in John 20:17, not to touch or hold onto him, as to stop having sex with him is as fanciful as interpreting foot as a euphemism for penis in the episode of the woman’s anointing his feet.<sup>112</sup>

Loader, however, does admit elsewhere that ἀπτομαι can carry sexual connotations,<sup>113</sup> which implies that this is at least possible for John 20:17. I agree that there is more evidence for Jesus’ celibacy than for his marriage, but, paradoxically, there are undeniable sexual inferences in the prohibition.

Akin to Hippolytus, Adele Reinhartz is one among many who see a parallel in “Do not touch me” between Mary’s love for Jesus and that of the beloved in the Song of Songs

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<sup>109</sup> William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans, 2005), 147.

<sup>110</sup> William Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* (London: SPCK, 2010), 116.

<sup>111</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the NT*, 117–18.

<sup>112</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the NT*, 117.

<sup>113</sup> Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 60.

(3:4), acknowledging the “sexual undertones” of John 20:17.<sup>114</sup> This is expanded further by Reinhartz through a second intertextual echo: the garden parallel of Eden (Gen 2-3) in which Eve and Adam mirror the new couple of redemption; Mary and Jesus. Armed with these two texts, Reinhartz believes that John thereby “casts Mary and Jesus in the role of lovers. Mary’s search for the body of her beloved is fuelled by love as expressed through her desire to hold him and touch him.”<sup>115</sup> She notes the reversal here too of Adam “cleaving” to his wife and Mary’s unfulfilled desire to hold Jesus. The “consummation” of their love is now expressed “not through touch but through speech and vision.”<sup>116</sup> Mary has seen her beloved and now must go joyfully to tell the disciples. Reinhartz explores “what might constitute consummation in the Johannine context.”<sup>117</sup> For her it is “not an embrace but Mary’s testimony to the disciples of what she has seen and what she has heard. Although the beloved is not accessible in the flesh, she has his image in her mind’s eye, and his words upon her lips.”<sup>118</sup> Thus the passions of love are sublimated into the missionary endeavour, as Mary is refused the comfort of touch and commanded instead to go to the other disciples to tell them of her experience (20:18). In the next chapter I suggest that such behaviour – the sublimation of sexual desire to mission for the kingdom of God – is also behaviour characteristic of the celibate. In that sense, the unfulfilled cleaving of the new Adam and Eve, as Reinhartz suggests, or the absence of a physical consummation of their relationship, coheres with the theme of celibacy.

Bobbi Katsanis, in an examination of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century artistic renderings of the *Noli me tangere* tradition, is likewise convinced that the garden setting of John 20:17 allows for an intertextual resonance with the Garden of Eden.<sup>119</sup> The intertextual

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<sup>114</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John* (NY: Continuum, 2001), 108.

<sup>115</sup> Reinhartz, “To Love the Lord,” 65.

<sup>116</sup> Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, 111.

<sup>117</sup> Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple*, 111.

<sup>118</sup> Reinhartz, “To Love the Lord,” 67.

<sup>119</sup> Bobbi Dykema Katsanis, “Meeting in the Garden: Intertextuality with the Song of Songs in Holbein’s Noli Me Tangere,” *Interpretation* 61 4 (2007): 402-416, 358. Cited 25 February 2015. Online: <http://search.proquest.com/socialsciences/docview/202732095>.

resonances of Adam and Eve reflect the intimacy of a marriage relationship. Eve's report that she has been instructed by God not to eat from the tree (Gen 3:3) – though she also understands this as a prohibition to “touch” – creates a sexual allusion to the touch of Mary and Jesus. Genesis 3:3 uses ἄπτομαι in Eve's retelling to the serpent of the command ἀψησθε (“you may not touch”) given to Adam. Katsanis attaches spiritual significance to the prohibition: Christ is asking Mary not to touch him “because he wishes her to understand their intimacy in a non-physical way.”<sup>120</sup> In Chapter Four I will discuss further intertextual resonances in John's use of the verb ἄπτομαι. The use of echoes of the Genesis creation story are also revisited throughout the thesis.

Mary Ann Beavis also interprets John 20:17 in relation to the Song, noting the “impressive” parallels between the narratives: the desperate passion to find the lost lover early in the morning, with allusions to spices in a garden; conversations of his whereabouts and joy in the finding; the clinging of the Shulamite and Mary being told not to cling.<sup>121</sup> But perhaps of greater interest is Beavis' survey of the belief embedded in popular feminist theology (“thealogy”) of the god/goddess relationship between Mary and Jesus, even though, in Beavis' view, such “methods, arguments and conclusions do not always stand up to scholarly scrutiny.”<sup>122</sup> In one such claim, an erotic relationship between Mary and Jesus is based on the extraction of a parallel from ANE ritual in which royal lovers encounter each other after the resurrection of the king.<sup>123</sup> This goes hand in hand with a second scholarly *faux pas* in which the character of Mary of Bethany is conflated with that of Mary Magdalene; and from that point follows the (potentially) sexually-charged anointing of Jesus' feet by the former (John 12:1-3) and the correspondingly sexually-charged encounter at the empty tomb. Beavis herself does not believe Jesus and Mary were literally married or lovers, but she agrees that “nuptial imagery . . . does figure in the ‘bridegroom-messiah’ christology of John.”<sup>124</sup> This textual

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<sup>120</sup> Katsanis, “Meeting,” p.8 of 14.

<sup>121</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, “The Deification of Mary Magdalene,” *Feminist Theology* 21 (2012): 145–54.

<sup>122</sup> Beavis, “Deification,” 147.

<sup>123</sup> Beavis, “Deification,” 147.

<sup>124</sup> Beavis, “Deification,” 150.

allusion – as with the Song of Songs and Genesis 2-3 – presents itself to the reader of John 20:17 as it speaks of a passionate love. But the point remains of the hiatus created in the typical flow of an erotic narrative: the prohibition to touch in John 20:17 aborts the expected plot. In the chapters that follow, I present my case that John intends the reader to feel the impact of the pairing of Jesus and Mary like the first lovers in Eden, yet with the jarring abruptness of the prohibition at 20:17, John reminds his audience that this latter pair were celibate.

Esther De Boer acknowledges love between Jesus and Mary, yet denies any sexual component. De Boer agrees with Bieringer that it is, “not of love between lovers. It is about the love between disciple and teacher.”<sup>125</sup> Indeed, it need not be the story of consummate lovers, but neither need it be relegated to a classroom admiration. De Boer is complicit in the interpretation that, “*Noli me tangere* does not mean to touch in the context of sexuality and asceticism as one would perhaps expect.”<sup>126</sup> She does not give the grounds on which one might “perhaps expect” a sexual or ascetic interpretation of touch: this expectation in itself is evidence of the most natural reading of John 20:17. Nor does she justify the disappointment of one’s valid expectation. Throughout this thesis, I provide evidence for understanding the *Noli me tangere* motif as touch in the context of sexuality and, if not asceticism, at least celibacy, in fulfilment of the reader’s valid expectations.

In De Boer’s interpretation of 20:17, Mary is seeking to be close to Jesus physically, but instead, “From now on his followers and he have to go their separate ways.”<sup>127</sup> Mary’s role is a significant one of leadership as she is sent out to the brothers as a witness: “Mary Magdalene went, announcing to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’ and that he said these things to her” (20:18). Though in 20:17 Jesus arrests Mary’s movements, she is commissioned as an apostle: “verse 18 also gives her the role as the one who alone and

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<sup>125</sup> De Boer, *Cover-Up*, 16.

<sup>126</sup> Esther A. de Boer, “The Interpretation of John 20:17 in Early Christian Writings: Why is *Noli me tangere* Absent in ‘Apocryphal’ Literature?” in Bieringer *et al.*, *To Touch or Not to Touch?* 129.

<sup>127</sup> De Boer, “Interpretation,” 103.

independently interprets his words.”<sup>128</sup> None of this is minimised by the admission that Mary and Jesus interact as celibates in John 20:17.

De Boer draws on the apocryphal writings as her main source, defending the role of Mary Magdalene as a spokesperson and leader, at times over and above Peter, the historical figure of leadership. But De Boer does not address the negative treatment of female sexuality in these texts in which there is a distinct belittling of Mary’s womanhood as if her sexuality were not integral to her person. There is something familiar about De Boer’s dismissing the wood for the trees by overlooking Mary’s role in the ascetic tradition and its potential as an echo of 20:17. Especially in Chapter Four, I show that both Mary’s leadership role, close to Jesus, and her abstinence from sex – both of which are represented in the gnostic texts – are also indicative of John’s intention in 20:17.

Like De Boer, Erika Mohri uses texts from the *Apocrypha* as a lens through which to view the Johannine verse, describing John 20:17 as the “rejection of Mary Magdalene.”<sup>129</sup> Mohri claims – too simplistically I think – that in the *Apocrypha*, “The master’s relationship with Marihamme [Mary] is a loving one,”<sup>130</sup> as if this were not the case in John 20:17. In John, according to Mohri, Mary is rejected and then fades from the narrative.<sup>131</sup> Agreed, in the *Apocrypha*, Mary does enjoy a role of disciple, teacher and reliable witness, but in Chapter Five I suggest that the women of the Johannine text also enjoy prominence. Furthermore, in Chapter Four I expand on the negative assessment of Mary’s sexuality in her portrayal in non-canonical texts.

Mohri surmises that the gospels of *Thomas*, *Mary* and *Philip*, the *Pistis Sophia* and the Manichaean psalms have no room for a rejection of Mary by Jesus but that the *Noli me tangere* does.<sup>132</sup> However, there is an anomaly in Mohri’s argument. Like Attridge earlier

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<sup>128</sup> De Boer, “Interpretation,” 106–107.

<sup>129</sup> Erika Mohri, “‘Noli Me Tangere’ and the Apocrypha,” in Bieringer *et al.*, *To Touch or Not to Touch?* 83–84.

<sup>130</sup> Mohri, “‘Noli Me Tangere’ and the Apocrypha,” 88.

<sup>131</sup> Mohri, “‘Noli Me Tangere’ and the Apocrypha,” 93–95.

<sup>132</sup> Mohri, “‘Noli Me Tangere’ and the Apocrypha,” 91.

in this section, she acknowledges that these texts speak of Mary “becoming male” as a metaphor for the call directed at women to give up their female sexuality as a symbol of the superiority of maleness and the superiority of sexual asceticism over marriage. But Mohri overlooks the price at which Mary attains her high status in the non-canonical literature: she must become asexual. It is only on condition of an abandonment of sexual activity – and by implication motherhood – that women avoid rejection in these texts.

*Logion 114* in the *Gospel of Thomas* warrants repeating here:

Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary leave us for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’<sup>133</sup>

Mohri’s comment is that Jesus “draws her to him and thus she becomes manly, living spirit. In real life this means sexual asceticism. Asceticism dissolves the connection of women with matter.”<sup>134</sup> Dissolving the connection of women and matter disconnects any woman from her womanhood and the sensuality that goes with menstrual cycles, sexual desire and childbirth. To dissolve the connection between women and matter, to all intents and purposes, *is* a rejection of Mary Magdalene. Thus, Mary’s high status in the *Apocrypha* is dependent on her becoming “male,” or ascetic. I suggest in Chapter Five that Mary Magdalene and other women are given a status, as women, equal to the male disciples in John’s Gospel. John 20:17 is not a rejection of Mary Magdalene at all. Nonetheless, in Chapter Four I show that both the Johannine and apocryphal texts equally portray Mary Magdalene as both close to Jesus, and yet not in a sexual relationship with him.

Very few scholars, and even fewer general readers of John 20:17, would deny there is a broadly-defined “love” at play in the text. Yet, the wide range of scholarly opinion on the sexuality of Mary and Jesus portrayed in John 20:17, discussed above, exemplifies the verse’s troubled history. Some scholars interpret the language of the verse as evidence of a

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<sup>133</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 114 (NHL, 138).*

<sup>134</sup> Mohri, “‘Noli Me Tangere’ and the Apocrypha,” 89.

physical relationship between Mary and Jesus. Many deny the obvious implications of the narrative in an unspoken effort to retain the tradition of a non-sexual relationship between the two. My thesis maintains that it is valid to do both: I suggest the brief exchange in John 20:17 is a sexual innuendo, and that this should be connected to the practice of celibacy. Given the theological impetus of the fourth Gospel to establish the full humanity of Jesus, and indeed that of the broader concerns of the NT that, as mediator for humanity (Heb 4:15), Jesus was like humanity in every way (*κατὰ πάντα καθ' ὁμοιότητα*), it is consonant that John should attempt to convey such information in 20:17.

## Chapter Two Conclusion

As this chapter has indicated, there are many different approaches to searching for an understanding of the enigmatic prohibition, *μή μου ἅπτου οὔπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα*. Reaching a consensus on the intent of the author of John 20:17 would require a reading that satisfies the variety of anomalies that have been raised in this review of literature on the topic. The questions that have been raised and addressed by various scholars are now familiar ones: the relationship of the impending ascension to the prohibition; the role of Mary Magdalene in Jesus' life; the apparent favouritism towards Thomas who is encouraged to approach Jesus; the grammar of the verb *ἅπτομαι* in the present imperative; the implicit sexual innuendo in the emotional encounter; the relationship of 20:17 to the overall purpose of the fourth Gospel, and others. I suggest that the practice of celibacy behind the text provides answers to all these puzzling aspects. Satisfactory solutions surface throughout the remaining chapters of the thesis.

For this reason, as explained in the previous chapter, I have chosen to use Vernon Robbins' structured form of social-rhetorical criticism. This approach to the verse takes into account not just its language, nor solely the impact of John's story on the reader – although both of these are important too – but uses a more comprehensive, layered approach. My proposal that celibacy might provide a key to unlocking the mystery behind the prohibition demands an inquiry into the social, cultural and ideological

settings of the text. I do this in the following chapters, paying particular attention to the integral role that celibacy played in those settings, and any influences these may have had on the author. This provides a multi-faceted approach that, I submit, points to the celibacy of Jesus at resurrection as the most plausible explanation of the verse.

## Chapter Three: Ideological Texture

According to Robbins, an ideological analysis examines “the location and perspective of writers and readers,”<sup>1</sup> thus engaging with the views of the people reading and writing the text. The location of writing and the perspective of the Johannine text is a complex one. Richard Burridge states that the fourth Gospel was “influenced by both Jewish and Hellenistic philosophical and religious ideas – everything from Platonic thought and proto-Gnosticism to Rabbinic or ‘non-conformist’ Judaism – without needing actually to belong to any of these groups.”<sup>2</sup> This web of influences underlies the rest of the thesis, Chapters Three to Six ahead, but with an underlying assumption of the need to locate Jesus within Judaism.<sup>3</sup> I begin in this chapter with the first of my “clues,” to use the detective metaphor again: a NT perspective which placed a high value on the practice of celibacy as a spiritual discipline. I use several NT texts to show that John’s ideological context reflects this perspective, especially where it pertains to the celibate status of the resurrected. I also note evidence of ideological disagreements in these NT texts fuelled by conflicting beliefs. As discussed in Chapter Two, few scholars have considered the high status given to celibacy as an integral part of the interpretation of “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended.” But the discussion below signals that such a prevalent perspective, by readers and writers of the ancient text, should not be omitted from the list of viable solutions to this puzzling verse.

### The Sexual Ideologies of the Gospel Context

According to Michael Satlow, members of society in Palestine at the time of the NT shared an “*oikos* ideology” (*οἶκος* or *οἰκία*; “home” or “household”), an ideology which “reinforced the self-conception of the resident Judaean household as a family business . . . tightly bound to and dependent on the land.”<sup>4</sup> But it seems that this land-and-family-

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<sup>1</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 95.

<sup>2</sup> Burridge, *What are the Gospels?* 214.

<sup>3</sup> See Chilton, “Implications and Prospects of Jewish Jesus Research,” 62–79; Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 20.

based value system was not shared unequivocally by all. First-century historians and texts provide information on religious groups who equally show signs of ideological discord with accepted practices and who avoided marriage and practised celibacy.<sup>5</sup>

According to the general tenor of the Hebrew Bible, permanent celibacy or lifelong virginity did not hold a place of honour: the creation mandate was to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) and sexual love is celebrated in the Song of Songs.<sup>6</sup> Sexual activity in the Levitical code was considered a source of ritual impurity, in need of re-purification, but not sinful in itself.<sup>7</sup> Temporary abstinences from sexual intercourse are known in these ancient Jewish texts, but these are attached to a limited purpose, such as in the case of prophets (Jer 16:2) or for occasions of holy war (1 Sam 21:5; 2 Sam 11:11). There were also sacred places (such as the Garden of Eden and the Temple) and sacred times (such as the Sabbath) in which sexual activity was deemed inappropriate.<sup>8</sup> In traditional Jewish practice, abstinence was determined by the circumstances: “Thus just as mourning consists of fasting, rending the garments, putting dust on the head, and sexual continence, so the experience of joy included eating and drinking, putting on festal attire, anointing oneself with oil and bathing, and sexual union.”<sup>9</sup> The undertaking of celibacy in the Hebrew texts was thus the exception, not the rule.

But there were some exceptions evident during the second-temple period. Simon Joseph, for instance, argues for Jesus being an ascetic in line with Nazirite practice which may have included celibacy, either temporary or life-long, according to the practices of the *Hasidim*.<sup>10</sup> I will discuss in Chapter Five a community of Essenes who inhabited Qumran sometime from the second century BC, some of whom seem to have been celibates, and

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<sup>5</sup> Carl Olson, in *Celibacy*, 5, states that because sexual drive is natural to humanity, celibacy is the “exception” within different cultural traditions.

<sup>6</sup> Eliezer Diamond agrees that Judaism reflects a general rejection of celibacy but exceptions are found in the Therapeuta, the Essenes and at Qumran. Eliezer Diamond, “And Jacob Remained Alone’: The Jewish Struggle with Celibacy,” in Carl Olson, ed., *Celibacy*, 41–45.

<sup>7</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?” *Bible Review* 11 3 (1995): 18–25, 42–47.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Anderson, “Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden? Reflections on Early Jewish-Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden,” *HTR* 82 (1989): 121–48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509640>.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Anderson, “Celibacy or Consummation?” 133.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph, “Ascetic Jesus,” 154–60.

the wider movement of communities of Essenes who were known in Judaea at the time of Jesus, and who also practised celibacy. Another group, the Therapeutae, who lived in the first-century in Egypt, also receive further comment in Chapter Five. From the records we have, this monastic community consisted of both male and female celibates.

In the wider context, William Phipps contends that the Hellenization of the Mediterranean created an opposing ideology to marriage and sexuality, with a prevalent Greek philosophy in which there was wisdom to be gained from abstinence, so that virginity and celibacy were honoured and sexual intercourse was considered defiling, sapping a man of his strength and reason.<sup>11</sup> In the Graeco-Roman social setting, the extreme views of Cicero, Philo and Plotinus, and the teachings of the Pythagoreans, Platonists and Stoics were “all scathing in their denunciation of physical pleasure.”<sup>12</sup> This rather sinister motivation – a common misogyny – is not an attitude expressed explicitly in the NT, although perhaps the apocalyptic Rev 14:4, discussed below, reflects such thought.

Satlow believes that the motivation for celibacy in the NT was that the early Christian community was anti-marriage.<sup>13</sup> This paints a more antagonistic picture than is realistically reflective of NT attitudes to marriage and ignores explicit teaching in favour of marriage. Certainly, there is a decided bias toward celibacy in certain passages such as Paul’s preference for his own gifted lifestyle (1 Cor 7:7) as discussed below, but this is not a rejection *per se*. Jesus taught the permanence and honour due to marriage (Matt 19:3-9) and he more than once used the joy of a marriage celebration as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God (Matt 22:2). The NT texts, which as far as we know continued the *kerygma* of the early believers, are consistent in their insistence that celibacy should be voluntary (1 Cor 7:2-6). Nonetheless, there is no denying an ambivalence between an earthened sexuality and religious ideology. The prevalent Jewish *oikos* ideology did not always prevail when it came into contact with more radical forms of Judaism, or Greek

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<sup>11</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 144-45.

<sup>12</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 24.

asceticism, or later Christianity. In fact, according to church historian Peter Brown, it was this very issue of marriage and celibacy that became the source of an “irreparable parting of the ways” between Judaism and Christianity by the middle of the second century.<sup>14</sup> It seems clear that the fledgling movement of believers in Christ was ambivalent towards marriage and family, an ambivalence that I am suggesting paves the way for a fresh reading of John 20:17 in light of the practice of celibacy.

### Celibacy “for the Kingdom”

Apart from John 20:17 – at least, such is my contention – there are no other discernible references to the state of celibacy in the Johannine Gospel or Letters. But other texts of the NT do contain such references. Some of these, like John’s “Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended,” are implicit, but others are explicit, referring to the state of being unmarried (*άγαμος*) or a virgin (*παρθένος*). Luke records, with high esteem attached, the story of the prophetess Anna who lived with her husband for seven years “from her virginity,” and then as a widow who did not leave the Temple, fasting and praying, day and night, until she was eighty-four (2:36–38). Similar high regard is given to Philip’s four daughters who were virgins and prophetesses (Acts 21:9). Although Mary the mother of Jesus generally plays no more than a supporting role in the Gospel narratives, she is nonetheless seen as the fulfilment of OT prophecy (Matt 1:23) of “the young maiden” who will bear a child (Isa 7:14), translated as *παρθένος* (“virgin”) in the LXX. Her status as virgin at the time of her child’s conception – to be later developed as “ever-virgin” in her cult – is both an indication of the esteem given to virginity in NT ideology, as well as an impetus for its growth. I have chosen in this thesis not to expand on the textual references to this Mary as a virgin mother, nor the later tradition of her perpetual virginity, as the topic would be a thesis of its own. Suffice it to say that in combination with the religious traditions of Paul as a celibate, the probable celibacy of Christ himself and later traditions of John the virgin, Mary held as a virgin is both a textual confirmation and a reinforcement in later developing ascetic traditions in

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 61.

Christian thought of the superior status accorded to those who lived without sexual intercourse.

### Matthew 19:12

An initial text in the discussion on celibacy is found in Matthew 19:12, which uses the metaphor of “eunuch” (εὐνοχός) for the celibate male, a unique occurrence amongst the relevant texts. The verse is the conclusion of a discussion on marriage (19:3–12), in which Jesus’ prohibition of divorce prompts the disciples to ask whether there is anything to be gained (συμφέρει) from getting married (19:10). Jesus twice in the *pericope* expresses a concession to his teaching (19:11–12). His equating divorce and remarriage with adultery (19:9) is one of his more contentious sayings, but one which, he concedes, is not for everyone: it is only for those “to whom it has been given” (οἵς δέδοται) or who “have room for” (χωροῦσιν) such teaching (19:11).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, his teaching on “eunuchs” carries the proviso that only a person who is able may accept it (19:12). In both cases, Jesus recognises that compromise is inevitable: the first refers to the permanence of marriage and the second to celibacy.<sup>16</sup> Jesus describes three types of eunuchs:

είσιν γὰρ εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς ἐγεννήθησαν οὔτως, καὶ είσιν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνουχίσθησαν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ είσιν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. ὁ δυνάμενος χωρεῖν χωρείτω. (Matt 19:12)

For there are eunuchs who were born thus from [their] mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven. The one able to accept [this], let him accept [it].

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<sup>15</sup> I think Bruner translates perfectly here that not everyone “can handle” this teaching. Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2; The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28*. rev. ed. (Grand Rapids., Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 272.

<sup>16</sup> Bruner and others believe that the repeated concession in verses 11 and 12 both refer to celibacy: “It makes more sense of the context . . . to consider . . . that *celibacy* requires a gift – as Jesus’ primary meaning.” Bruner, *Matthew*, 272. I admit the text is somewhat ambiguous as to which aspect exactly Jesus is referring to as difficult to accept, but the first – lifelong monogamous marriage – also requires a gift. The reiterated use of χωρέω in verses 11 and 12 suggests the two different teachings are hard to accept, the permanence of marriage *and* celibacy.

It would seem that the first type of eunuch, “born thus from a mother’s womb,” refers to hermaphrodites or those with some kind of congenital defect that does not allow for normal sexual intercourse; second, those “made into eunuchs by men,” to the castration of male slaves or those who cared for the harem of a ruler (Acts 8:27); and third to those who “made themselves eunuchs,” whether literally or metaphorically, “because of the kingdom of heaven.”

At face value, it could seem, as a literal interpretation, that Jesus is commanding ascetics who literally castrated themselves. Origen (AD 182–254) did read the verse in this “too literal and extreme a sense,” and had himself castrated.<sup>17</sup> But most scholars, ancient and contemporary, understand that “eunuchs” is a metaphor for celibates in the third instance in the verse, although the first two can be taken literally without becoming nonsensical. According to one such commentary:

These men are not impotent. They could marry and fulfil of their responsibilities in that state, if they so desired. Their abstinence from marriage is of a purely voluntary nature. They are eunuchs or celibates ‘in the interest of the kingdom of heaven.’<sup>18</sup>

It seems that the verse was difficult even in its own day. Repetition stresses that the requirement for celibacy was not absolute: only the one who can “make room” ( $\chi\omega\rho\epsilon\tilde{\nu}$ ) for such teaching, should “make room” ( $\chi\omega\rho\epsilon\tilde{\tau}\omega$ ) for it. The verse is independent of Mark and Luke, and, given its unusual teaching, “one might argue, by the criteria of embarrassment and discontinuity, that this offensively graphic metaphor for celibacy goes back to the unconventional and shocking Jesus.”<sup>19</sup>

Loader suggests that this is an indication of two options for Christian life – marriage and celibacy – but agrees that the emphasis is on the voluntary nature of the latter undertaking.<sup>20</sup> In theory this is certainly the case, and Paul is also insistent that everyone has their own gift; for some it is celibacy, for others it is something else (1 Cor 7:7).

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<sup>17</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.8 (LCL 265:29).

<sup>18</sup> William Hendriksen, *Gospel of Matthew*, New Testament Commentary (Edinburgh: Hendriksen, 1973), 718.

<sup>19</sup> Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 344.

<sup>20</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the NT*, 106.

Celibacy, however, was elevated in some circles and in others it was disregarded. In its initial Christian social context, “mainstream Jewish society regarded marriage and childbearing as solemn responsibilities.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus’ words may have recalled that the eunuch was banned from the assembly in Israel (Deut 23:1); he was mocked as impotent and powerless (Sir. 20:4; 30:20). There is a hint that because of the “effeminacy of their soul,” those who had self-castrated were even viewed as morally depraved.<sup>22</sup>

Because marriage was normative in the Jewish context, Phipps’ central argument is that Jesus was probably married and in this Matthean passage he is teaching its permanence (Matt 19:6). He holds that the eunuch metaphor is not a self-description of Jesus, as some claim, because it associates celibacy “with a shattering disability, not with a heroic ideal state.”<sup>23</sup> The eunuchry of the Kingdom, in Phipps’ view, is the renunciation of remarriage, not marriage, that a man might remain unmarried after divorce in the hope of later reconciliation with his wife. It is this state that is to be pitied.<sup>24</sup> In its literary context, this could well be one of the implications of the verse. But Phipps’ interpretation is not totally convincing, since it is men who are asking the question and presumably men who are divorcing their wives (19:3), so remaining unmarried to be reunited with the wife they have just divorced seems counterproductive. There is no evidence that eunuch terminology is a self-description of Jesus’ own celibacy, as 19:12 is grammatically a third- not a first-person assertion.<sup>25</sup> But neither are the negative associations of eunuchry in this text evidence that this is not a self-description. Tertullian retains the label of “eunuch” for Jesus, in his explanation of Paul’s preference for continence, just as Jesus himself was also a eunuch, *ut et ipso spadone*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 472.

<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *A.J.* 4.40 (LCL 490:141-43).

<sup>23</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Phipps gives a survey of arguments around Jesus’ self-designation as a “eunuch” in *Sexuality of Jesus*, 44-53.

<sup>26</sup> Tertullian, *De Monogamia* 3.1 (CCSL 2:1230-31).

This saying of Jesus, condoning celibacy for the sake of the expansion of the Kingdom of God, shows how integral celibacy was to Jesus' teaching and its association with the sacrifice and dedication of not only Jesus himself but of those dedicated to following him: "A metaphor of such shame and sacrifice testifies to the value of the kingdom of God for which anyone would pay such a price."<sup>27</sup> But although Matthew presents celibacy as a hard option, it is a valid one for those who can accept it, and possibly was seen as a fulfilment of the prophet Isaiah's promise of a future time in which obedient eunuchs would not be considered deformed and separated, but would be given a permanent place in the people of God, better than if they had sons and daughters (56:3–5). Thus, in spite of its counter-cultural implications, the early Christian church appears to have been a movement that valued celibacy, based on the teachings of Jesus.

### Luke 18:28-29

A second text that echoes the ideological priority of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God is found in Luke 18:28–29, which differs slightly from the other two Synoptic Gospels. In its context, Peter is asking Jesus what will become of "we, who have left our own ( $\tauὰ \; ἴδια$ ), and follow you" (18:28). In the parallel passages of Matt 19:29 and Mark 10:29, the description of their households ( $οἴκια$ ) that have been abandoned includes fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, children and fields. At least in Peter's case, "our own" must have included a family as Peter had a mother-in-law (Mark 1:30), and this was also the case with some of the other disciples (1 Cor 9:5). Luke alone, however, includes "whoever leaves household or *wife* . . . for the sake of the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:29). Jesus' answer is a promise that those who leave their home and family – including wife – for his sake, and that of the gospel, will be rewarded, not only with a replaced household but also with eternal life (18:30).

This raises the question of Jesus', and broader NT, attitudes to the family unit, considering that this was the locus of sexual relationships. Jesus' words are harsh: the man who "does not hate" ( $μισεῖ$ ) his family –  $καὶ \; τὴν \; γυναικά$  ("and his wife") – cannot be his

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<sup>27</sup> Keener, *Gospel of Matthew*, 472.

disciple (Luke 14:26). Matthew softens this to read that the one “who loves” ( $\phi\imath\lambda\omega\nu$ ) family “more than me” ( $\dot{\upsilon}\pi\grave{\epsilon}\rho\ \dot{\epsilon}\mu\acute{\epsilon}$ ) is not worthy, and in his list of family members, wife is not included (Matt 10:37). Jesus’ teaching on those who drowned in Noah’s flood is directed at those who failed to be watchful due to their “marrying and giving in marriage” (Matt 24:36–38), with the implication that his disciples should refrain from such worldly distractions. Jesus is also portrayed as not giving priority to his physical family in his ministry (Mark 3:32–35), nor is the reciprocal ambivalence of his brothers who do not believe in him hidden (John 7:5–7). The general tenor of the Gospels towards marriage and family, then, is not unmitigated support, despite – or possibly because of – views on the indissolubility of the sexual union (Matt 19:6). Loader is no doubt correct that this low view of marriage “would inevitably affect attitudes towards sexuality.”<sup>28</sup> Whether it warrants Satlow’s accusation that “Jesus himself, it appears, rejected the value of family and *oikos*”<sup>29</sup> is another question.<sup>30</sup> This accusation ignores the ambivalences of the texts overall on the topic of sexuality. I return to the topic of fictive kinship in Chapter Five.

It is not surprising that in the writings of Paul it is easy to detect this same ambivalence. Perhaps because of his former Jewish purism (Phil 3:5–6) or his respect for the order of the household as a citizen of Rome (Eph 5:21–6:9), the ideals of the family or household as a unit are preached and maintained within the Pauline tradition (1 Tim 6:1).<sup>31</sup> Yet at the same time we find a paradoxical, if not inconsistent, idealising of the freedom of the believer (Gal 3:28) and of the advantages of not marrying (1 Cor 7:27–28).

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<sup>28</sup> William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 142.

<sup>29</sup> Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Glenn Holland states that celibacy in the Jesus movement is not easily distinguishable from the desire to be unencumbered by the responsibilities of a household. Celibacy was necessary for Jesus’ peripatetic ministry and his role as a prophet. Glenn Holland, “Celibacy in the Early Christian Church,” in Carl Olson, ed., *Celibacy*, 66.

<sup>31</sup> I refer again to the later dating of some of Paul’s Epistles below in this chapter, but here note that while Romans, 1 Thessalonians, 1 &2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians and Philemon are accepted by the majority of NT scholars as authentic, the direct authorship by Paul of the remainder is disputed. Nonetheless, because of their acceptance into the NT canon at the time of writing as a claim to their stand within Pauline tradition, I refer in this thesis to all of these epistles as “Pauline.”

Perhaps the text of John 20:17 also reflects this thought of celibacy “for the sake of the Kingdom,” as Mary is sent to the brothers in her role as the *apostola apostolorum* (“apostle of the apostles”).<sup>32</sup> John 20:17–18 shows that the prohibition is immediately followed by her embarking on her mission: “Mary Magdalene went announcing to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord,’ and that he had said these things to her” (20:18). It is possible, as some have done, to interpret the prohibition of 20:17 as Jesus’ response to her delaying his mission, but perhaps it is more likely that John is here giving priority to the celibate as the one who is commissioned and sent, in the same way that the Synoptic Gospels commend celibacy, “for the sake of the Kingdom of God/Heaven” (Matt 19:12). As discussed above, celibacy for the sake of mission is also a focus that the apostle Paul encourages by personal recommendation. In the case of Luke’s Gospel, celibacy might be practised for the sake of the kingdom of God, even to the point that a man might leave a wife for the sake of the Kingdom (18:29). Mary is not portrayed as Jesus’ wife, but her desire to touch is sublimated into her apostolate: her desire for physical contact is harnessed for the work ahead. In her missionary excursion to the other disciples, she leaves the one she loves for the sake of the Kingdom of God. I suggest this is consistent with the role of the celibate in other NT texts.

### 1 Corinthians 6:12–7:40

First Corinthians contains the most extensive discussion in the NT expressing attitudes to celibacy: Paul the apostle makes a case for the advantages he sees, without making his own preference mandatory for others. This defence of the practice of celibacy is written from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) around AD 53–55,<sup>33</sup> before the writing of the Gospels, at a time when this apostle to the Gentiles was taking the faith movement initiated by Jesus beyond its original Jewish borders. The letter is quite structured as Paul works through

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<sup>32</sup> *Apostolae apostolorum* (“apostles of the apostles”) was first used by Hippolytus of Rome in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 25.6 to describe all the women who went from the tomb to announce the resurrection (Matt 28:8–10). In later tradition, the title *apostola apostolorum* (“apostle of the apostles”) came to be used for Mary Magdalene alone.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 15; David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker ECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 20.

one issue after the next, using a common rhetorical device of quoting his opponents first,<sup>34</sup> then addressing each issue in relation to the church at Corinth: food offered to idols, behaviour during worship, advice about marriage and celibacy, and more. The discussion around virginity, celibacy and temporary sexual abstinence became critical for future attitudes in the church, so much so that it is “impossible to analyse all the nuances of Paul’s address, since every word and every image was destined to influence later tradition,” whether used by encratites on one hand, or those in favour of marriage on the other.<sup>35</sup> Such complexities need not eliminate the value of Paul’s contribution, but rather they act as a window into the context of early beliefs about celibacy.

The Corinthian church had written to Paul asking him for an explanation, in this instance on the topic of marriage and virginity. He replied to them: “Concerning the things you wrote about,<sup>36</sup> it is better for a man not to touch ( $\alpha\pi\tau\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha i$ ) a woman” (7:1). Paul does not directly contradict the assertion, perhaps tacitly implying that perhaps it *is* better for a man not to touch a woman, but his impartial advice to the contrary gives caution to the absolutist nature of the assertion: “Because of so much sexual immorality, let each man have his own woman and let each woman have her own man” (7:2). “Better not to touch a woman” may be a reference to something he has taught earlier but the congregation is repeating it askew; or it may have originated with local ascetics, either factions within the Corinthian church or outside of it who are trying to make celibacy mandatory for all Christians. This use of the verb  $\alpha\pi\tau\omega\mu\alpha i$  in a negative context where a woman is concerned will be discussed in Chapter Four, but it should be noted at this point that this prohibition for a man not to touch ( $\alpha\pi\tau\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha i$ ) a woman forms a semantic parallel to the function of  $\mu\nu\mu\alpha i$  in John 20:17, where Jesus forbids Mary to touch. I argue that not touching a woman in both cases has a sexual connotation.

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<sup>34</sup> Margaret MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, Sacra Pagina 17, ed. Daniel Harrington S.J., (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000), 116.

<sup>35</sup> Giulia Gasparro, “Asceticism and Anthropology: *Enkratēia* and ‘Double Creation’ in Early Christianity,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 132.

<sup>36</sup> NA<sup>28</sup> notes that some lesser manuscripts add  $\mu\alpha i$ , reading “the things you wrote to me about,” which suggests that the church has asked for his ruling on the matter.

Will Deming has argued that the assertion, “it is better for a man not to touch a woman,” is a topic of debate between the Stoics and the Cynics and this debate has entered the Corinthian church.<sup>37</sup> Whatever its nature, Paul is clear in his response that his own preference is for celibacy: he wishes all could be celibate as he is himself, although he is equally clear that celibacy is not for everyone, as each person has a different gift (7:7), echoing Jesus’ teaching (Matt 19:11). One of the purposes of marriage is to contain sexual drive in a way that avoids immorality (1 Cor 7:2) since it is better to marry than to burn with passion (7:9).<sup>38</sup> Dale Martin suggests that it is this control of desire – often known as “burning” in Graeco-Roman culture – that is at the heart of Paul’s concern.<sup>39</sup> Many of Paul’s reasons for sexual abstinence focus on the freedom to seek God’s Kingdom instead: a married person is concerned about his or her spouse; an unmarried person by contrast is concerned about the things of the Lord (7:32-33).<sup>40</sup> Even married couples, who are not to deprive each other sexually, may undertake periods of abstinence to devote themselves to prayer, although only in limited periods to minimise the temptation to sexual immorality (7:5). Marriage is considered by Paul as an unnecessary distraction “in these present times of stress” (7:26, JB) and because the time is short (7:29). As Van der Horst puts it: “One simply does not beget children when the last judgment is about to take place.”<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, in Paul’s writing there is an undeniable, underlying dichotomy posed to the early Christians: the choice between what is good and what is best. Van der Horst suggests that, given the influence of the ideological mixture of a Jewish mandate to fill the earth (Gen 1:28) and the Greek philosophical search for wisdom associated with celibacy, Paul himself may have been aware of the paradoxical or even conflictual nature

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<sup>37</sup> Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7*, SNTMS 83 (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 212.

<sup>38</sup> In its ancient socio-religious context, sexual intercourse within marriage was ideally for the purpose of procreation [Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 20-21], although its use as a means of containing sexual impulse morally was also known [Pieter W. van der Horst, “Celibacy in Early Judaism,” *RB* 109 (2002): 390-402].

<sup>39</sup> Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 212.

<sup>40</sup> This thought was also known in Judaism, of the Rabbi who might be so devoted to the study of Torah that he did not marry (Van der Horst, “Celibacy in Early Judaism,” 392; De Boer, *Cover-Up*, 16).

<sup>41</sup> Van der Horst, “Celibacy in Early Judaism,” 398.

of this “ascetic tension.”<sup>42</sup> It is of note that Paul did not use the example of the celibacy of Christ as his main argument: I suggest his genuine acceptance of the gifted nature of celibacy probably prevented him from using this as a persuasion for all at Corinth, and even less so for all believers in all churches.<sup>43</sup> But just as genuine was his belief that marriage and therefore an active sexuality demanded divided loyalties. The married man “is divided” and the unmarried woman and the virgin are more able to be “holy in body and in spirit” (7:34), even if, as Deming has argued, this division was a matter of praxis, an expectation of the last days, based on “the expediency of the times.”<sup>44</sup>

The sexual dichotomy is more fully explicated in Paul’s discussion on prostitution, where he lays out an argued rebuttal which reflects his understanding of sexual union.

<sup>16</sup>οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ὁ κολλώμενος τῇ πόρνῃ ἐν σῶμά ἔστιν; ἔσονται γάρ, φησιν, οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν. <sup>17</sup>ὁ δὲ κολλώμενος τῷ κυρίῳ ἐν πνεῦμα ἔστιν.

Do you not know that the one who joins himself with a prostitute is one body? For, it says, *the two will be in one flesh*. But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit. (1 Cor 6:16-17)

Paul is alluding here to Gen 2:24, a foundational text for sexual matters in the NT: “a man will leave his father and his mother and will be joined (*κολληθήσεται*) to his wife and the two will become one flesh” (Matt 19:5). In the LXX, the language used is that the man *προσκολληθήσεται* (“will be joined”) to his wife (Gen 2:24). Paul mirrors this usage of *κολλάω* twice in 1 Cor 6:16-17:<sup>45</sup> he sets up a contrast between “the man who is joined” (*ὁ κολλώμενος*) to the prostitute and “the man who is joined” (*ὁ κολλώμενος*) to the Lord. Although the context here is prostitution and so Paul is arguing against an unholy union, the implications go beyond that. He expresses here his understanding that sexual intercourse enacts a “joining” with another human in a comparable and analogous

<sup>42</sup> Van der Horst, “Celibacy in Early Judaism,” 399–400.

<sup>43</sup> Paul’s silence on Jesus’ marital status could have meant Jesus was married, according to Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 66. But the voluntary nature of celibacy offers sufficient reason: such arguments are only necessary when persuasion either way is intended.

<sup>44</sup> Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*, 219.

<sup>45</sup> The compound form *προσκολλάω* is more often used intransitively and means to “adhere to closely” (BDAG, 881). Paul uses *κολλάω*, a simple form of the compound, with a semantic overlap meaning to “unite/ bind together” (BDAG, 555).

fashion to the spiritual “joining” of the believer with God. Furthermore, where prostitution is concerned, the union is clearly unacceptable on moral grounds, but Paul does not seem clear on the implications for the similar “joining” that also happens in a legitimate marriage. This therefore begs the question of whether or not the exclusive nature of the joining of husband and wife with each other must also be interpreted to mean that even licit sexual union is in conflict with union with the Lord.

The thought is further complicated by the verse following, that every other sin is committed outside the body, but the man involved in sexual immorality sins “in his own body” (*εἰς τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα*, 6:18). Here the joining of two into one (Gen 2:24) is taken a step further to imply that the woman’s body is a part of the man through intercourse. This concept is also found in another Pauline text, which advocates the oneness of the sexual union of marriage (Eph 5:28). In this Ephesian text, Paul says that men should love their own wives as they do their own bodies (*ὡς τὰ ἐαυτῶν σώματα*), since the man who loves his wife loves himself. The context differs but the principle is the same: the “joining” of husband and wife seems to imply a change in identity through sexual intercourse. Reduction to male ownership of the other does not seem to be in view, as the command to love suggests. Perhaps it is, rather, a NT example of Loader’s insightful interpretation of Genesis 2:21: the separation of a part of the man’s own body, in order to fashion a woman, naturally leads to the subsequent reunion of those two parts through sexual intercourse in order to become one again.<sup>46</sup> Be that as it may, Paul seems to understand the oneness of physical union as a parallel – or possibly as a threat – to union with God.

Paul’s objection to the divided loyalty of the man who “is joined to a prostitute,” compared to the man who is “joined to the Lord” is clear and understandable, but whether he believes that a divided loyalty occurs in the case of a mutual spouse is more problematic. Daniel Boyarin overstates, but makes a point: “Paul does not so much

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<sup>46</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the NT*, 84. The thought is also Platonic: love has transformative properties, and the lover might change in becoming one with the beloved. See Robert O’Connell, S.J., “Sexuality and St Augustine,” *Augustine Today*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 80.

oppose sex with prostitutes to legitimate sexual intercourse, but rather physical union between men and women to spiritual union between people and Christ.”<sup>47</sup> Paul no doubt saw the married couple as a joined unit, and they in turn as joined to the Lord spiritually together. But, in the context of his discussion on marriage and celibacy, the good he might attach to the unity of marriage does little to mitigate the superior status he gives to his own choice to join only to the Lord in celibacy.

Overall, one is left with the uneasy feeling that the implicit message of 1 Cor 6:12–7:40 is that the nature of sexual union makes union with the Lord more compatible for the unmarried than the married. Loader agrees: “The assumption in Paul’s argument is that sexual intercourse . . . sets up a rival sphere of influence to that created by our having been joined to Christ.”<sup>48</sup> Paul may not have intended this, in fact the mutuality he accords both parties as he addresses them in the passage suggests otherwise (7:2–4, 13–16).<sup>49</sup> But Boyarin is less ambivalent, labelling Paul a “proto-Encratite” and ascribing to him a responsibility for later Christian asceticism: “Paul is truly showing his hand here. For him, sexuality *per se* is tainted with immorality.”<sup>50</sup> But asceticism was alive and well long before the celibacy of Paul. It is a sad irony, as will be seen below, that Paul’s intention was more likely to counter asceticism.

Realistically, Paul’s exegesis of Genesis in 1 Corinthians 7 was “sufficiently elastic” to allow for variations in interpretation.<sup>51</sup> His words were later interpreted as “giving divine sanction, for some people, to a way of life at variance with the old prescriptions of Genesis. From that time forward, they fell upon fertile soil.”<sup>52</sup> By the time of the church

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<sup>47</sup> Daniel Boyarin, “Body Politic among the Brides of Christ: Paul and the Origins of Christian Sexual Renunciation,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 469.

<sup>48</sup> Loader *Sexuality in the NT*, 73.

<sup>49</sup> Sara Parks notes the gender balance of 1 Corinthians 7 by, “the inclusion of both men and women as recipients of the letter and, further, the ability of both believing men and women to ‘make holy’ an unbelieving spouse. . . . Both genders are exhorted to adhere to the same guidelines.” Sara Parks, *Gender and the Rhetoric of Jesus: Women in Q* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress, 2019), 132–33.

<sup>50</sup> Boyarin, “Body Politic,” 472.

<sup>51</sup> Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 259.

<sup>52</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* (NY: Harrington, 1985), 39.

fathers, “the focus has shifted to a dualistic understanding of the world, cleaving the individual into body and soul, and demanding a choice between sexuality and spirituality.”<sup>53</sup> With superficial Pauline permission, the church harboured an anti-sexual ideology: “The erotic life of Christians is ideally entirely devoted to the new bridegroom, Christ, and the joining with this bridegroom results not in fruit for death but in spiritual fruit for God.”<sup>54</sup> Kim Power makes a similar conclusion in her observations on the evolution of celibate practice in St Augustine some three hundred years after Paul:

[I]n the Christian domain God, too, is the object of desire. The Christian discourse of desire sets up a choice between woman and God, wherein the sexually desirable woman is represented as being in direct conflict with God for the hearts of men.<sup>55</sup>

Given this early church ideology, and evidence in both Paul and other NT writers on the spiritual value of celibacy, it would seem conspicuous if John failed to address the topic. I suggest he does exactly that in 20:17. Within the prohibition to touch, there is human desire for closeness between a man and a woman, in conflict with the demands of celibacy.

But Paul – and, as I will argue later, John – was dealing with an extreme. As I will discuss in the next section, Paul was addressing some very specific problems around sexuality, not just in Corinth but in other churches too. The charge levelled by Boyarin in the discussion above, that Paul was against sexual relations at all,<sup>56</sup> is therefore too harsh, given the controversy in the Corinthian church that he was attempting to address. It is true that Paul gives the higher honour to celibacy throughout the letter, but it is also true that he opposes mandatory sexual asceticism. Giulia Gasparro is of the view that Paul is “showing his considerable flexibility . . . capable of balancing” his own preference for celibacy with the practicalities of normal life.<sup>57</sup> He demonstrates a balance by discouraging married couples from depriving each other of sexual relations, except

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<sup>53</sup> Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*, 224.

<sup>54</sup> Boyarin, “Body Politic,” 472.

<sup>55</sup> Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women* (NY: Continuum, 1996), 3.

<sup>56</sup> Boyarin, “Body Politic,” 469.

<sup>57</sup> Gasparro, “Asceticism,” 132.

temporarily for the sake of prayer (1 Cor 7:5). Paul's own preference for celibacy, then, is not rigorous nor unbalanced.

Nonetheless, some of the problem that Paul is dealing with may have stemmed from his own preference for celibacy and from his own hand: the Corinthians may have been misinterpreting Paul's words expressed earlier in Galatians 3:28.<sup>58</sup> Karin Neutel has pointed out that in the formula that Paul uses in his description of the ideal world, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female (οὐκ ἐνὶ ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ),” the final pair is a reference to celibacy. She argues that the phrase Paul uses, ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ (“male and female”) is a deliberate echo of Genesis 1:27 (LXX) and was used in antiquity to refer not just to the genders but to marriage.<sup>59</sup> “No male and female” in this context, is “a declaration about the ultimate eschatological absence of marriage.”<sup>60</sup> This would support Loader's observation that in the correspondence addressing the Corinthian problems, Paul seems to deliberately omit this “no male and female” division of the Galatian formula either to counter any misunderstanding or to avoid giving further ground to extreme ascetics.<sup>61</sup> If so, it offers insight to both the letters to the Corinthians and the Colossians, where the problem of asceticism has surfaced, as Paul writes simply of the unity of Jew and Greek, circumcised and uncircumcised, slave and free (1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11), but omits male and female. Loader suggests that the Corinthians seem to have been rejecting normal sexual relations. Gordon Fee agrees and suggests that “it is better for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor 7:1) may refer to the ascetic practice of married men abstaining from sex with their wives, a practice Paul is discouraging.<sup>62</sup> Linda Belleville suggests the Corinthians suffered from some kind of “sexual identity confusion,” and they mistakenly thought that being one in Christ as “no

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<sup>58</sup> It seems that Martin reads Galatians 3:28 in the same way the Corinthians did: “no male and female’ promises the abolition of dimorphic sexuality.” Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 87.

<sup>59</sup> Karin Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal: Paul's Declaration 'Neither Jew Nor Greek, Neither Slave Nor Free, Nor Male and Female' in the Context of First-Century Thought*, Library of NT Studies (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 185–86.

<sup>60</sup> Neutel, *Cosmopolitan Ideal*, 206.

<sup>61</sup> Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 199.

<sup>62</sup> Gordon Fee, “First Corinthians 7:1–7 Revisited,” in *Paul and the Corinthians: Studies on a Community in Conflict*, Essays in honour of Margaret Thrall, ed. Trevor Burke and J. Keith Elliot, SupNT 109 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 197–213.

male and female” (Gal 3:28) meant “that they should seek to do away with gender distinctions” hence the women were abandoning their head coverings (1 Cor 11:10).<sup>63</sup>

As we shall see in Chapter Four and elsewhere, doing away with gender distinctions was often a signal for sexual asceticism in the ancient world. Thus, Paul encourages Corinthian church members to marry where appropriate, so that sexual activity was contained within certain social regulations. He is unashamed of his own preference for celibacy, but he opposes extreme forms of abstinence practised by sexual ascetics within and outside the Corinthian church. Therefore, Paul’s response to the Corinthian quip, “it is better for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor 7:1), is but a glimpse into a much broader controversy, to which we now turn.

## Ideological Conflict in the NT Churches

Near the end of the first century, Pauline thought and Johannine thought shared the same ideological minefields, I suggest, evidenced by John 20:17 and the letters to Timothy and the Colossians. While the dating of the previously discussed passage (1 Cor 6:12–7:40) to the 50s is not disputed, it is likely that the letters to Timothy and the Colossians were written slightly later, by someone within the Pauline tradition but not necessarily by Paul himself.<sup>64</sup> A suitable dating of 1 Timothy may be at AD 100<sup>65</sup> and all the Pastoral Letters between AD 80–100.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the Johannine literature and some of the Pauline tradition share a late-first century date. Furthermore, Ephesus, the city that claimed – virtually undisputed – authorship of the Johannine literature, also had connections with the two Pauline texts. First Timothy was addressed to Timothy in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3) and Colossae is in the Lycus Valley, a hundred miles east of Ephesus. Paul Trebilco is convinced that the readers of the Pauline correspondence in Ephesus and

<sup>63</sup> Linda Belleville, “ΚΕΦΑΛΗ and the Thorny Issue of Head Covering in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16,” in Burke and Elliot, *Paul and the Corinthians*, 230.

<sup>64</sup> De Boer dates Colossians and Ephesians as AD 70–100, and 1 Timothy as 100–125, well after the authentically Pauline corpus. De Boer, *Cover-Up*, 135.

<sup>65</sup> Esther de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*, trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity, 1997), 78.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, repr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 235.

the community surrounding the Johannine correspondence, also in Ephesus, would have been aware of each other.<sup>67</sup>

The text of 1 Timothy indicates there is a problem in the church in Ephesus: the communal practice of celibacy seems to have caused factions either from within the church or outside. There were certain leaders teaching against the Pauline position of the voluntary nature of the practice of abstinence with renewed vigour (4:1–5). The opponents held to “the teaching of demons (*δαιμονίων*) . . . forbidding marriage (*κωλυόντων γαμεῖν*), to abstain from food, which God created for receiving with thanksgiving” (4:3). This likely represents an ascetic movement, which elevated abstinence from physical goods such as food and sexual activity. The warning at the end of the letter that Timothy should stay away from the contradictions “of what is falsely called knowledge” (*τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως*, 6:20) could indicate this is a proto-gnostic group, identified for its reliance on revealed knowledge, *gnosis*.<sup>68</sup> For this reason, the letter advises the younger women to marry and raise children (5:14). It is also perhaps the reason for the very unusual pronouncement that womankind “will be saved through child-bearing” (2:15a): if the ascetics were teaching against marriage and progeny, the author of 1 Timothy is restating that motherhood is not to be distained “if they [women] remain in faith and love and holiness with modesty” (2:15b).

There may be additional evidence in 1 Tim 5:11–12 of a related movement towards a more formal undertaking of celibacy by the taking of religious vows. Timothy is not to list younger widows as those to receive aid from the church because: “when they become headstrong against Christ (*καταστρηνάσωσιν τοῦ Χριστοῦ*), they want to marry, being condemned because they have broken the first pledge (*τὴν πρώτην πίστιν*).” How to interpret this “first pledge” is unclear. It is possible that this refers to the widows’ initial marriage vows, and the verse represents a movement to prohibit remarriage for widows.

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<sup>67</sup> Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 626.

<sup>68</sup> Robert M. Price, “Mary Magdalene: Gnostic Apostle?” *Grail* 6, 2 (1990): 54–76. Van den Broek notes some continuity between this early form of gnosticism found in 1 Tim 6:20, defined as “spiritual knowledge,” and later gnosticism of the fourth century. Van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion*, 1. Gnostic religion will be discussed in Chapter Four in relation to the received traditions about Mary and Jesus.

If so, it shows an evolution in Pauline tradition, since it would contradict Paul's clear statement that, although he recommends celibacy for widows, he was of the opinion that a woman was bound to her husband only as long as he lived, and the widow was free to remarry (1 Cor 7:39–40).

A more probable interpretation of the broken vow (1 Tim 5:12) is that widows were making a pledge to remain celibate, but for the younger ones this was too difficult a promise to adhere to. Loader suggests that this was perhaps a more formal “order of celibate widows, the probable context of the young widows’ vows,” which the opponents were promoting.<sup>69</sup> It is interesting that the practice itself does not meet with the Pauline author’s disapproval, just the inability to keep those vows. The degree to which celibacy had become compulsory for some groups from its voluntary beginnings is hard to decipher, but this development was predictable, given the high spiritual value attached to celibacy compared with marriage, and the ambivalence that must have created for the religious adherent.

Like the church in Ephesus, the church in Colossae was also undergoing discord. As in the address to Timothy, Colossians 2:8–23 reflects the Pauline opposition to a rigorous asceticism. It is difficult to name definitively the specific aspects of what has been termed the “Colossian heresy,” but rules against physical pleasure is one characteristic. Judgments around choices concerning food and drinking (2:16) and certain practices of self-abasement (2:18,23) are at stake, as well as severe discipline of the body ( $\alpha\phi\epsilon\iota\delta\iota\alpha$  σώματος, 2:23). In 2:21, Paul uses the same rhetorical device that he does in 1 Corinthians (above), quoting his opponents first in order to debate the issue. In this case, the teaching of the opponents is “μὴ ἄψῃ μηδὲ γεύσῃ μηδὲ θίγῃς” (“Do not touch, do not taste, do not touch,” 2:21), a quip that mimics the local ascetics and their restrictive rules. I suggest that the initial prohibition of the three (μὴ ἄψῃ) is best translated as a prohibition of sexual contact, with “woman” as the implied object grammatically. In the

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<sup>69</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the NT*, 41.

next chapter, I examine the verb ἄπτομαι more closely, including the similarities between μὴ ἄψῃ here and μή μου ἄπτου in John 20:17.

This interpretation of μὴ ἄψῃ (“do not touch”) in Colossians 2:21 as a reference to sexual asceticism is consistent with the practice, mentioned earlier, of those who were forbidding marriage in the church in Ephesus, opposing the Pauline stance. Robert Leaney proposes that this is the same set of opponents as those who forbid marriage and abstain from food (1 Tim 4:1-3), believing the compiler “may well have had in mind this passage – or the same heresy which it condemns.”<sup>70</sup> Margaret MacDonald is in agreement that an extreme stance on celibacy and denial generally was at the root of this:

The reference to severe treatment of the body [2:23] calls to mind a variety of forms of physical renunciation. These verses might also contain evidence of sexual asceticism. . . [T]here is no explicit and indisputable evidence in Colossians that the avoidance of sex was part of the false teaching, and therefore the idea has not won the wide support of scholars. However, it is important to note that in early church literature and in the ancient world generally fasting and sexual asceticism often went together.<sup>71</sup>

Paul is discouraging ascetic practices. In spite of being unmarried himself, it seems asceticism in this location had taken a new turn in its severity, and the voluntary nature of the choice was being undermined. As has been discussed in both Pauline tradition and the Gospel passages above, there is a general recognition that while some believers will not marry, some will, and that this is a simple matter that one person has one gift and one another, at least theoretically. Harsh treatment of the body and denial of creation’s goodness is not in view. Paul is thus at pains to disassociate himself with those groups influencing the church to the contrary.

### A Context of Conflict for John 20:17

In the next chapter, I discuss the parallel usage of ἄπτομαι (“touch”) in John 20:17, in the same way that it is used in the Pauline texts discussed above. Both 1 Cor 7:1 and Col 2:21

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<sup>70</sup> Robert Leaney, “Colossians ii. 21-23. (The use of πρός),” *ET* 64 (1952/53): 92.

<sup>71</sup> MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 121.

are written in the context of a controversy over celibacy in the Pauline churches, as local non-believers and teachers respectively discourage marriage and adopt asceticism. The local quip in Corinth which Paul is refuting, “It is good for a man not to touch (*ἀπτεσθαι*) a woman” (1 Cor 7:1), and the rules causing problems in Colossae, “Do not have sexual contact (*ἀψη*), do not taste, do not touch” (Col 2:21), both use the same verb *ἀπτομαι*, shared with John’s prohibition, “Do not touch (*ἀπτου*) me.” In both the above instances, Paul is trying to play a moderating role, to defend voluntary celibacy but defeat a compulsory and stringent asceticism. The use of *ἀπτομαι* in these contexts supports my decision to give the verb a sexual meaning in its Johannine use.

As I have noted above, the literary setting of John in Ephesus means it probably shared in, or was at least aware of, the conflict around sexuality that was evident in that area of ancient Asia. If John 20:17 does represent a sexual innuendo, as I am proposing, then it is not a surprise that other texts from the same area suggest conflict over sexual beliefs, as we have seen to be the case. John’s narrative is set in Jerusalem, locating Jesus in his home country of Judaea (4:44), and aware of the geography of the area pre-AD 70,<sup>72</sup> a perspective I discuss further in Chapter Five. But the final authorship of the Johannine literature in Ephesus suggests contact with the asceticism that became a familiar topic in the Pauline literature. It was here, when the church was under the leadership of Timothy in that city (1 Tim 1:3), that the Pauline author is critical of those who were promoting a strand of teaching which forbade marriage and enjoying food (4:3). It was also to the church in Colossae, in the same area of ancient Asia, that the Pauline author refutes the ascetic rules, “Do not have sexual contact, do not taste, do not touch” (Col 2:21).

Thus, from the discussion above, it appears that, within the fledgling Christian movement, celibacy was the preferred state for the believer, while there is at the same time an affirmation of marriage as holy, and a repudiation of anti-marriage and anti-sex asceticism. But as will be seen below, celibacy was not simply about sexual practice in this life, nor was the celibate simply an unmarried individual: this state was an

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<sup>72</sup> Charlesworth, “Historical Jesus,” 40–43.

eschatological reality; a future existence of which the celibate was the forerunner. And, after all, John 20:17 is set at the dawn of the eschaton.

## Eschatology and Celibacy

If the text of John 20:17 is a tapestry of different textures in Robbins' schema, then perhaps the theme of the relationship between eschatology and celibacy could be considered to be a thread which runs through each layer, common to each texture. It is a theme that has its place in this chapter and in each of the chapters which follow. While attention to some practical advantages of freedom from sexual attachment is not absent, many of the texts I discuss present the celibate or virginal state as integrally connected to the eschaton: the believer is living in the present as if the future had come. As part of the scene describing the resurrection of Jesus, the "Do not touch me" event occurs in this context.

The synoptic Gospels reflect a belief that the state of the resurrected righteous was celibate, a belief I suggest also permeates John's view of resurrection, and underlies the prohibition to touch. In the context of an argument with the Sadducees, who did not believe in a future resurrection from the dead, Jesus makes an explicit connection between the afterlife and the celibacy of angels and all three Synoptics state that after the resurrection there will be no marriage and the resurrected will be "like angels."

According to Matthew 22:30, in the resurrection, those who are raised neither marry nor are given in marriage, "but they are as angels in heaven" (*ἀλλ’ εἰσιν ως ἄγγελοι ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ*). Almost identically in Mark 12:25, when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, "but they are as angels in the heavens" (*ἀλλ’ εἰσιν ως ἄγγελοι ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς*).

At face value, the verses are saying that the resurrected who are like the angels do not marry, without specifying how angelic they might be in other respects. Wright believes that in the verses above, and in their context, the strong contrasting "but" (*ἀλλά*) suggests that it is only the inability, or lack of need, to marry that is the point of similarity, and the question of likeness in other respects is not in focus, so the verse

cannot be taken to say that the resurrected become “like” angels in all respects.<sup>73</sup> Yet, as I discuss below, the degree to which the resurrected were like angels was to become a point of contention. Luke 20:35–36 has a slightly different focus:

οἱ δὲ καταξιωθέντες τοῦ αἰῶνος ἐκείνου τυχεῖν καὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τῆς ἐκ νεκρῶν οὔτε γαμοῦσιν οὔτε γαμιζονται· οὐδὲ γάρ ἀποθανεῖν ἔτι δύνανται, ἵσταγγελοι γάρ εἰσιν καὶ νίοι εἰσιν θεοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως νίοι ὄντες.

Those counted worthy to experience that age and the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage; for they are no longer able to die, for they are like angels and they are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.

Luke emphasises “the profound difference (if not outright conflict) between the children of this eon and those who are worthy of *anastasis* (resurrection) . . . and *isangelia* (angelhood).”<sup>74</sup> The language of being “counted worthy” (καταξιωθέντες) to attain the next life betrays a bias towards celibacy as a higher state, because it is the state of the resurrected. At the same time, Luke elaborates that these are no longer able to die, perhaps thereby giving one of the reasons the worthy do not need to marry: without death, they do not need to reproduce any longer, nor to continue a family line. In other words, because they are immortal, they are celibate. Loader also suggests that angels and those who are resurrected occupy a sacred space, and in Jewish tradition this indicated that sexual intercourse was inappropriate.<sup>75</sup> The eschaton was seen as an eternal Sabbath, a sacred time of no sexual intercourse.<sup>76</sup> All in all, these texts, “reflect a value system which sees no place for sexuality in the resurrected life.”<sup>77</sup> The afterlife was deemed to be celibate.

Inauguration into an angelic state at resurrection is echoed in other biblical literature. Before the martyrdom of Stephen, for instance, those who looked on saw “his face as the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). Likewise, when Peter was assumed dead but reappears, those who saw him could only surmise, “it is his angel” (Acts 12:15). Such connections

<sup>73</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 421–23.

<sup>74</sup> Gasparro, “Asceticism,” 135.

<sup>75</sup> Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 126.

<sup>76</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the NT*, 104.

<sup>77</sup> Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 126.

also pre-dated Christianity: Second Baruch declares that the resurrected righteous will be changed, “into the splendour of angels.”<sup>78</sup> Those who are worthy will be transformed:

Also, as for the glory of those who proved to be righteous on account of my law, those who possessed intelligence in their life, and those who planted the root of wisdom in their heart – their splendour will then be glorified by transformations, and the shape of their face will be changed into the light of their beauty so that they may acquire and receive the undying world which is promised to them.<sup>79</sup>

This belief is what Charlesworth terms the “concept of angelic transmogrification,”<sup>80</sup> a concept that was accepted in the Gospel culture without any specific discussion or apologetic. Attridge argues that beliefs about asceticism began to mingle with beliefs about the transformation of humans into an angelic state long before the Christian era. “Such traditions,” he claims, “probably developed in Palestinian Jewish circles in the second temple period,” and are evidenced in such early Jewish texts as *3 Enoch*.<sup>81</sup> Some Jewish apocalyptic writings identified angels as virgins and continent men.<sup>82</sup> A connection existed then, at least in some strands of Judaism, with links into the first-century, between the renouncing of sexual relations in this life and the life of angels in the next.

If such beliefs pre-dated Christianity, a treatise by Tertullian shows that angels were still a current topic of debate in his time. In one of his treatises against heresy, he writes to his fellow Christians, that, if they so merit it, *nos angelorum . . . candidati* (“we are candidates of angels”).<sup>83</sup> But, in another work, he clarifies the distinction between the bodily existence of resurrected Christian saints from the spiritual existence of angels, drawing on the synoptic Gospel verses, discussed previously, in which Jesus says the

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<sup>78</sup> 2 Bar 51:5 (*OTP* 1:638).

<sup>79</sup> 2 Bar 51:3 (*OTP* 1:638).

<sup>80</sup> James Charlesworth, “The Portrayal of the Righteous as an Angel,” in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism: Profiles and Paradigms*, ed. John Collins and George Nickelsburg (Atlanta: Scholars, 1980), 136.

<sup>81</sup> Harold W. Attridge, “On Becoming an Angel: Rival Baptismal Theologies at Colossae,” in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament*, ed. Lukas Bormann *et al.* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 497.

<sup>82</sup> Gasparro, “Asceticism,” 135.

<sup>83</sup> Tertullian, *De Oratione* 3.3 (*CCSL* 1:259).

resurrected will not marry.<sup>84</sup> Here Tertullian emphasises Jesus' words concerning the resurrected: Jesus did not say, “they will *be* angels,” but that they will be “*like* angels.”<sup>85</sup> Tertullian points out that Jesus’ words do not deny humanity but conserve it: disembodiment after resurrection is not one of the ways in which people are destined to become like angels. Tertullian’s emphasis, and the need to address the issue of bodily resurrection, is indicative of not only a conflict in his time but, as we will see in the following chapters, a long line of opponents who were arguing to the contrary.

## Angels in Church

The discussion above on 1 Corinthians focused on problems over the practice of celibacy, but it seems this went hand in hand with beliefs about the eschaton. “Why are some among you saying,” chides Paul, “that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor 15:12). Whether this means they were denying the possibility of resurrection at all, or whether they were adopting belief in a resurrection as angels is unclear. The following hypothetical question, however, suggests that the nature of the resurrected body was the issue at stake: “In what kind of body do they [the dead] come?” (15:35). So, it was not just a nascent asceticism in the Corinthian church that Paul was addressing in his letter but how the Corinthians viewed the body, and specifically the resurrected body. It appears, at least in Corinth, that the prospect of spending the eschaton as an angel may have fuelled asceticism. Loader suggests that one possible explanation for the quip discussed earlier, “It is better for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1), is to understand it in the context of “charismatic enthusiasm,” in which the community members were living in fellowship with the angels, as if the age of the eschaton had already come, and so they were not engaging in sex.<sup>86</sup> Paul seems to have accepted the spiritual influence of angels in the church,<sup>87</sup> judging by his reference to those speaking “with the languages of

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<sup>84</sup> Matt 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35–36.

<sup>85</sup> *Denique non dixit ‘Erunt angeli’ ne homines negaret, sed ‘tamquam angeli’ ut homines conseruaret.* Tertullian, *De Resurrectione Mortuorum* 62.4 (CCSL 2:1011).

<sup>86</sup> Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 187.

<sup>87</sup> The writer of Revelation associates a specific angel with each of the seven churches in the Asian area (1:20; 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14), whether or not this was a common understanding which Paul also held.

humans and of angels” (13:1). In his instructions to women, he also seems to be conscious of the presence of angels in church meetings, since during worship, “a woman ought to have authority on her head,” normally thought to mean, in its context, a head covering, “because of the angels” (11:10). It might also be a part of Paul’s attempt to moderate asceticism that he instructs women to wear their head covering in the presence of angels, in order to preserve gender distinction.

As discussed earlier, the catch-cry of the so-called Colossian Heresy, “Do not touch [a woman], do not taste, do not touch” (Col 2:21), indicated some kind of ascetic teaching familiar in the church at Colossae. The proscribed behaviour for this ascetic group demanded abstinence from material pleasures such as food, drink and sexual intercourse, and demanded severe bodily discipline (2:8–23). There is, however, a further clue to identifying the source of the controversy since adherents participated in “the worship of angels” ( $\Thetaρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων$ , 2:18), and angels were commonly understood to be celibate beings. Paul writes to put an end to such ascetical practices. Living the celibate life in the church context of Colossae seems to have taken a turn for the worse in its severe treatment of the body. Paul Trebilco identifies the “over-realised eschatology of the opponents” as the source of the controversy.<sup>88</sup> If so, perhaps they shared similar beliefs with the faction who, “declaring the resurrection to have already come, they also bring to ruin the faith of some” (2 Tim 2:18). It is possible that, if the Pauline opponents believed that the resurrection had already come, they also believed they had already been resurrected and were already *de facto* angels. In this case, the celibate state was normative for all believers: if church members were already angels, that would mean that they should never engage in sex.

Attridge has suggested that the controversy was not only about resurrection and celibacy, but also about baptism, the symbolic initiation into the resurrected state. In this way, beliefs about celibacy in the afterlife, as the mode of angelic existence, began to be pegged to a concrete event in the Christian’s life: baptism. Baptismal piety “offered the

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<sup>88</sup> Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 514.

alternative of ‘living like the angels’ in the present life.<sup>89</sup> This ascetic ideology merged with Christian faith in a proleptic adoption of the resurrected life following baptism. This is possibly what the *Gospel of Philip* refers to in its identification of baptism with resurrection: “Baptism includes the resurrection [and the] redemption.”<sup>90</sup> Therein lay the initiation into the Christian ascetic life.

In the fourth Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus’ resurrection, the presence of angels serves to indicate the heavenly realm and the co-requisite celibate resurrection. Chapter 20 is structured in such a way that Jesus is distinguished from the angels. The angels are dressed in white (20:12) whereas Jesus may easily be a gardener in appearance (20:15). John uses an unusually repetitive literary device prior to 20:17: an angelophany ushers in Mary’s encounter with the risen Jesus, and then the angels fade from the narrative as insignificant. The conversation is then repeated with new effect. The first encounter consists of a question from two angels, “Woman, why are you weeping?” and an answer from Mary, “They have taken away my Lord (κύριος), and I do not know where they have put him” (20:12–13). Mary then encounters Jesus, who echoes the angels: “Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?” Her response is similar: “Sir (κύριος), if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” The repetitive nature of this encounter has led earlier scholars to suggest the angelophany is an interpolation,<sup>91</sup> or represents an earlier form of the gospel story.<sup>92</sup> I suggest, rather, John has retained this tradition as integral to his narrative. First, the angels signify the celibate world of the resurrected. Then, Mary’s two encounters – the first, an unsatisfactory one with the angels, then an emotionally climactic one with Jesus – reinforce the view that Jesus, in his resurrected state, was distinct from the angels, and moreover superseded them.

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<sup>89</sup> Attridge, “On Becoming an Angel,” 498.

<sup>90</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 69.25–26 (*NHL*, 151).

<sup>91</sup> Neirynck, “John and the Synoptics,” 171–72.

<sup>92</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 999.

## Virgins of the Apocalypse

One final NT text in this chapter, from the Revelation to John, claims to open a curtain on the eschaton, the final story beyond the persecution of its time (1:9–11). Revelation 14:4–5 gives a perspective on the life of the resurrected and sexually-abstinent righteous, in the company of angels. The genre is apocalyptic,<sup>93</sup> prophetic and symbolic, and sexual imagery plays an effective role in this. “Babylon” is portrayed as a prostitute, riding a beast (17:3). This great harlot (*τῆς πόρνης τῆς μεγάλης*) is guilty of the unclean things of sexual immorality (*τὰ ἀκάθαρτα τῆς πορνίας*). Another woman is pregnant; she gives birth to a male child (12:5) and is pursued by the dragon (12:7), who made war against “the rest of her offspring – those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (12:17). Another woman “has prepared herself, and she has been given bright, clean, fine linen,” symbolic of the persecuted church in final victory: “for the marriage of the Lamb has come” (19:7–8). Sexual imagery is used to portray the enmity between the spiritually adulterous and the spiritually faithful (2:14,20–22).

There is, however, a further identification of an elite spiritual group, those who are virgins (*παρθένοι*), for whom the intended symbolism, if any, is difficult to interpret (14:4). Here, the earlier description of the redeemed as the “great crowd which no one was able to count, from every nation, even tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9), is superseded in status by a restricted group, a “first fruits” (*ἀπαρχή*) of 144,000 male virgins:

These are they who were not defiled by women (*οἵ μετὰ γυναικῶν οὐκ ἐμολύνθησαν*), for they are virgins (*παρθένοι*), those who follow the lamb wherever he might go. These have been bought from out of humanity, a first-fruit for God and for the lamb. (Rev 14:4)

The verse is a difficult one, inconsistent with the general tenor of the NT on women’s sexuality (1 Pe 3:7): there is no other instance in which sex is defined as “defiling.”

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<sup>93</sup> The first word of the Book of Revelation is ἀποκάλυψις, from which the term “apocalypse” derives. The book begins, “A revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must happen soon” (Rev 1:1).

According to R. Charles, it is the work of a “monkish interpolator, convinced that the highest type of the Christian life was the celibate,” since it “carried with it the degradation of marriage – an idea inadmissible in the NT.”<sup>94</sup> But his solution of excising the verse is equally inadequate. One alternative is to read it in consistency with its apocalyptic genre. It could be seen as “a fitting metaphor for picturing Christians who are innocent of worship at the pagan altars of Rome (‘Babylon’).”<sup>95</sup> Or it could be interpreted as “a symbolic-poetic work” and “a work of visionary rhetoric,” in which the expression “virgins” points to cultic purity, as well as an image of the new Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb (21:9–11).<sup>96</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza also does not read the verse literally, and denies that the male virgins were a historical “class of exclusively male ascetics.”<sup>97</sup> Yet, others do read it literally, which I expand below.

But either way, the text remains problematic since the male virgins are portrayed as superior, and women as defiling. Loader attempts to soften the immediate negative implications of this with a reminder that the 144,000 virgins are only the “first fruits” (14:4) of the larger body of redeemed. Loader tries to reassure the reader, “what appears to be a distinction in the mind of the author between two kinds of believers – those who are celibate . . . and those who marry,” is communicated in the text, “not in a way that disparages either.”<sup>98</sup> I agree that neither the large crowd (7:9) nor the virgins (14:4) are disparaged; but women *are* portrayed as a source of defilement, the opposite image to the purity and innocence of those who follow the Lamb.

Augustine thought Revelation 14:4 should be read as a promise of the superior reward awaiting those who followed in the footsteps of the virginal Christ as virgins. As to the attainment of the “joys peculiar to Christ’s virgins,” he encouraged, “Advance towards

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<sup>94</sup> R. H. Charles *A Critical and exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920, repr. 1950), 9.

<sup>95</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 97.

<sup>96</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 187–89.

<sup>97</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Book of Revelation*, 190.

<sup>98</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament*, 105–106.

them, follow the Lamb, for the Lamb in the flesh is assuredly virginal as well.”<sup>99</sup> As well as endorsing the view of Augustine, a view of virginity typical of the Church Fathers, Pius XII also drew on Revelation 14:1–4 to justify the compulsory requirement of celibacy for the Catholic priesthood.<sup>100</sup>

I find the interpretation by Adela Yarbro Collins, who posits a connection between *1 Enoch* and Revelation 14:4, the most convincing. Collins notes the unusual specificity in the text that these were males who had not defiled themselves with women, a detail which suggests it is more than a purely metaphorical expression.<sup>101</sup> The text presents “the defiling potential of sexual relations with women” and an “androcentric way” in which purity might be pursued.<sup>102</sup> In her interpretation:

Sexual intercourse with women is a narrative emblem for earthly existence. The exchange by the angels of a spiritual existence for an earthly one is symbolized by their having sexual relations with women. Although it is not explicit in the narrative, the corollary is that a man’s exchange of an earthly existence for a spiritual, heavenly one may be symbolized by abstaining from sexual relations with women.<sup>103</sup>

Therefore, Collins argues that the use of the term “virgins” was not just spiritual symbolism in the text, but referred to a historical practice. She contends that the congregations to which John was writing believed that heavenly existence may be anticipated by abstaining from sexual relations with women.<sup>104</sup> On this premise, the verse represents a tradition of celibate males for whom sexual intercourse was not just a declined option, but it was considered defiling, believing that the heavenly realm could be anticipated by avoidance.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 27 (Walsh, 101).

<sup>100</sup> *Sacra Virginitate: Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on Consecrated Virginity* 4,19 (1954), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_25031954\\_sacra-virginitas.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25031954_sacra-virginitas.html).

<sup>101</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, “Women’s History and the Book of Revelation,” in *SBLSP*, ed. Kent Richards (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 80–91.

<sup>102</sup> Collins, “Women’s History,” 87.

<sup>103</sup> Collins, “Women’s History,” 89.

<sup>104</sup> Collins, “Women’s History,” 89.

<sup>105</sup> Collins, “Women’s History,” 89.

If this is the case, the “virgins” are representative of those who, in this earthly life, were celibates. According to the grammar, these were men identified by three characteristics: they were not defiled by women, they remain virgins and they are also “those who are following” (*οὗτοι οἱ ἀκολουθοῦντες*) the lamb. I suggest the best reading for this is to understand these men were itinerant celibates. They followed Christ both in imitation of the tradition of his own virginity, as well as in his itinerant lifestyle. Augustine understood this following of the lamb exactly in this way, a way which was superior to the life of the married:

So the rest of the faithful, who have lost their virginity, must follow the Lamb not wherever he goes, but so far as they themselves can go. They can in fact follow everywhere except where he has advanced into the glory of virginity... But what is beyond doubt is that married people too can walk in his footsteps. Though they do not plant their feet perfectly in the same traces, they none the less tread the same paths.<sup>106</sup>

Collins’ view is therefore plausible: the text is honouring those who have chosen the celibate state in their former, earthly life, by elevating them in this apocalyptic unveiling of the eternal life of the resurrected. There is a likelihood that the reverse was also true: the high status afforded the virgins in the text suggests that the celibate male believers in first-century churches held an eschatological function as an elite representation of the redeemed, prefiguring the virginal state of resurrection.<sup>107</sup>

In response to Collins’ insight into a connection between Revelation and *1 Enoch*, Daniel C. Olson agrees that a metaphorical reading of “virgins” does not adequately explain the detail in the text that *male* virgins are specified, with the elaboration that they have not defiled themselves by sleeping with women.<sup>108</sup> He offers the explanation that here is a “conscious literary allusion” with the Book of Watchers, specifically *1 Enoch*

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<sup>106</sup> Augustine, *De Sancta Virginitate* 28 (Walsh, 103).

<sup>107</sup> If this is the case, the contemporary ideology of Roman Catholic mandated celibacy would seem to resonate with the ideology represented in Revelation, as evidenced in the documents of the Second Vatican Council: “they [the celibate] bear witness to a resurrection in a future life” (*Vatican II*, Decree on the Training of Priests, *Optatam Totius* 54.4.10).

<sup>108</sup> Daniel Olson, “Those Who Have Not Defiled Themselves with Women”: Revelation 14:4 and the Book of Enoch.” *CBQ* 59 (1997): 492-510.

15:2-7,<sup>109</sup> and indeed this text, well-known at Qumran and elsewhere, may well have informed first-century literature, including Revelation. In the text of *Enoch*, as is also evident in Gen 6:1-3, the fallen angels are spirit beings who are condemned for sleeping with human women, with the implication that angels are correctly virgins. Olson's argument relies on a comparison between the language of the passages in Revelation and *Enoch*. He admits the latter does not contain the actual word παρθένοι ("virgins") used in Revelation, but "the term would be a perfectly natural one for the angelic state described in *1 Enoch*," and that "the redeemed 144,000 stand in radical opposition to the fallen angels" of the Book of Watchers.<sup>110</sup> Further, Olson argues that "the redeemed 144,000 actually take the vacated offices of the fallen angels . . . since the idea was 'in the air' in his [Enoch's] day."<sup>111</sup> The belief that the righteous would replace the evil spirits is also preserved in the Jewish tradition around Adam, who would eventually take the place of Satan:

[The LORD] handed [Adam] over to Michael, saying, "Let him be in your custody until the day of dispensing punishment at the last years, when I will turn his sorrow into joy. Then he shall sit on the throne of him who overthrew him."<sup>112</sup>

Augustine also shows the perseverance of this idea until his own day:

Mankind . . . should be in part restored, and should fill up the gap which the rebellion and fall of the devils had left in the company of the angels. For this is the promise to the saints, that at the resurrection they shall be equal to the angels of God.<sup>113</sup>

Olson's conclusion is that Rev 14:4 demonstrates "the angelic status of the Christian."<sup>114</sup> His argument, however, does not ameliorate the exclusive nature of this elite group. It seems unlikely that the virgins represent the angelic status of the generic Christian, simply because, according to the text, these virgins are a minority portion of the

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<sup>109</sup> Olson, "Revelation 4:14," 507.

<sup>110</sup> Olson, "Revelation 4:14," 500.

<sup>111</sup> Olson, "Revelation 4:14," 507.

<sup>112</sup> *Life of Adam and Eve* 47.2-3 (*OTP* 2:290)

<sup>113</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion* 29, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm>.

<sup>114</sup> Olson, "Revelation 4:14," 493.

redeemed. There may well be a parallel with the victorious Watchers in *Enoch*, as Collins herself suggests, but the author of Revelation, by using this specific text as a literary allusion, surely evokes a correspondence not just of the victory won, but also of those who retained their angelic status by not sleeping with women.

The temptation to draw a parallel between Revelation 14:4 and John 20:17 is a strong one: both texts represent, at a superficial level, the rejection of womanhood, or at least the distancing of woman by a man. In a further parallel, the rejection of women in Revelation is by male virgins, who, in accordance with the discussion above, I suggest are not simply a metaphorical category but had a historical referent; and the Johannine Christ who rejects Mary Magdalene is held by Christian tradition as a male virgin.

Traditionally, the two verses shared the same author: many scholars keep the Johannine corpus together because there is some evidence that it was a unity in the early centuries.<sup>115</sup> There are certainly similarities in writing style between the Gospel and Revelation, with signs of apocalyptic or possibly prophetic language shared in both texts.<sup>116</sup> Ian Boxall notes that the sayings of Jesus, probably the earliest form of the Jesus tradition as a whole, are found to be similar whether in the mouth of the Jesus of the Gospel or spoken by either the son of man figure in Revelation or “the one who sits on the throne;” he also notes the Johannine “I am” sayings in both (John 6:48; Rev 1:8) and the unusual construction of τηρεῖν with ἐκ (“to be kept from” something) (John 17:15; Rev 3:10).<sup>117</sup>

Others, such as Raymond Brown, consider that the two works are just too different: “although there are parallels between the two works, they are not close enough” to have had the same author.<sup>118</sup> Anderson agrees that establishing literary relations between Revelation and the other Johannine writings “is speculative at best.”<sup>119</sup> One obvious

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<sup>115</sup> Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 461.

<sup>116</sup> See essays in *John’s Gospel and Intimations of Apocalyptic*, ed. Catrin H. Williams and Christopher Rowland (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>117</sup> Ian Boxall, “From the Apocalypse of John to the Johannine ‘Apocalypse in Reverse’: Intimations of Apocalyptic and the Quest for a Relationship,” in *John’s Gospel and Intimations of Apocalyptic*, 69.

<sup>118</sup> Brown, *Introduction to John*, 205.

<sup>119</sup> Anderson, *Riddles*, 77.

difference is that in Revelation there is no mention of the mysterious beloved disciple, the claimed author of the Gospel (21:20,24), but by contrast the opening stanza identifies the author as John (Rev 1:1). Further, the identity of this John is not clear: “For he did not say that he was, as is frequently said in the Gospel, the disciple loved by the Lord, nor he which leaned back on His breast, nor the brother of James, nor the eye-witness.”<sup>120</sup>

The emphasis on love gives the Gospel much in common with the three Johannine letters as grounds for shared authorship,<sup>121</sup> but Revelation seems to represent an opposing ideology.

The two works are polarised in what I would term their narrative tenor: the deeply pacifist Jesus of the Gospel becomes the source of violence in this record of his afterlife, to the point of contradiction. It is difficult to marry the Jesus who threatens, “I will throw her [“Jezebel”] and her adulterers with her, into her bed, into a great suffering” (Rev 2:20-22) with the response of the Jesus in John’s Gospel to a woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you” (John 8:11). Neither the love expressed between Jesus and Mary in the Gospel,<sup>122</sup> nor the strong respected voices that the Gospel gives to women,<sup>123</sup> are evident in Revelation. In its place, the sexualised symbolism discussed earlier objectifies the female characters. At a deeper level than narrative, then, the texts are opposed: a generous motivation, psychological engagement and tenderness in the Gospel author’s work are absent in Revelation. In fact, the derogatory negative tone towards sexual intercourse with women in Rev 14:4 is more in accord with the Pauline opponents who practised asceticism, as discussed in the texts above, than it is with John 20:17.<sup>124</sup>

There are grounds, therefore, to speculate that Revelation came not just from a different hand from the Gospel, but an antagonistic one. Irenaeus records that John and Cerinthus

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<sup>120</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.25.12 (LCL 265:201).

<sup>121</sup> John 3:16; 13:1,34; 15:13; 1 John 4:7-21.

<sup>122</sup> Such expressions of love include Mary’s weeping in grief (20:11); and recognition in the calling of a name (20:16).

<sup>123</sup> John 2:5; 4:29; 11:27.

<sup>124</sup> 1 Cor 7:1; 1 Tim 4:1-5; Col 2:16-23.

were enemies,<sup>125</sup> so it might be a surprise that a number of the followers of Cerinthus seem to have attributed Revelation to this first-century arch-enemy of John:

For they say that it is not John's, no, nor yet an apocalypse (unveiling), since it is veiled by its heavy, thick curtain of un-intelligibility; and that the author of this book was not only not one of the apostles, nor even one of the saints or those belonging to the Church, but Cerinthus, the same who created the sect called "Cerinthusian" after him, since he desired to affix to his own forgery a name worthy of credit.<sup>126</sup>

But even if this is not the case, as Hill has argued,<sup>127</sup> the fact that an enemy of John could be held by some as the author of Revelation suggests its early ideological disconnection from the Gospel. There is, then, valid room to suggest that two texts which both promote celibacy, may still, in fact, have little in common: one denigrates women while the other accords a high status to women.

We have seen above that adopting the status of "angels" was, for some, a motivation for sexual asceticism. It may or may not be relevant, but while the John of the Gospel is careful to distinguish Jesus from the angels at the tomb, the language of Revelation seems to assume an interchangeability between men and angels in the afterlife (21:17): the measurement of the wall is μέτρον ἀνθρώπου, ὃ ἐστιν ἀγγέλου ("the measure of a man, that is of an angel"). Perhaps Revelation represents an ideological conflict *within* the Johannine community itself. There is some evidence that some members had left, with the charge that they had never really belonged (1 John 2:19). Thus, Revelation 14:4 may have been an indication of the conflict over the ideologies that determined sexual practice, this time not at an inter-church level, as Paul had countered, but within the Johannine community and ensuing tradition.

For the John associated with the Gospel, love was paramount (13:34–35) and rooted in the flesh-and-blood humanity of Christ. This is the Jesus the reader must know as the Word become flesh (1:14); who suffered tiredness (4:6) and thirst (19:28); who even after resurrection was concerned about breakfast (21:13). At the same time, it seems that John's

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<sup>125</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.14.6 (LCL 153:337).

<sup>126</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.25.2 (LCL 265:197).

<sup>127</sup> Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 461.

community and perhaps his opponents too needed reminding that “those who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in flesh, this person is the deceiver and the antichrist” (2 John 7). What better narrative corollary, what better case in point, to teach that Christ had come in the flesh, than the story that John 20:17 enshrines? John has a tradition, available to him in his reservoir of stories of Jesus, of the closeness and love between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, yet also of the distance they kept. Thus, this story found its place of central importance in John’s resurrection text.

## Chapter Three Conclusion

Several tentative conclusions can be drawn at the close of this chapter. The first of these is the least tentative, and that is to emphasise the fact that the perspective of writers in the gospel culture concerning the practice of celibacy must be given fair weight in hermeneutical discussions around John 20:17. My discussion in Chapter Two showed that human sexuality, this ever-present facet of human life, is underplayed by many biblical scholars in interpretation. This occurs despite an acknowledgment by the majority of scholars of the emotional dynamic in the *pericope* or the potential of ἄπτομαι to indicate sexual touch. This chapter has demonstrated that the first century did not perceive celibacy, or even extreme asceticism, as the oddity we might see it as today in a western secular society. An exploration of sexual ideologies has therefore shown that sexual renunciation and abstinence, and the undertaking of celibacy, was a known phenomenon. The practice was prevalent, ideal in some circles if not approved in others, but it undergirded the understanding of readers and writers. Hence it should no longer be eliminated in the search for a satisfactory and lasting interpretation of John 20:17.

Second, there is a clear relationship between celibacy and resurrection in the biblical texts surveyed. We must concede, therefore, that there is a high probability that John’s Gospel would be consistent with this common understanding. My suggestion, that John 20:17 be interpreted in this light, is therefore supported: it is set in a resurrection scene and involves a prohibition of touch between a man and a woman. Certainly, John does not

say explicitly that he is referring to the celibacy of Jesus or Mary, but this picture does paint a thousand words.

The third conclusion is that, clearly, variations in the practice of celibate sexuality created controversy, and beliefs around resurrection and the fate of the body at death was also a controversial topic. In the chapters that follow, these controversies become more apparent and leave us with the conviction that John writes with an awareness in his Gospel of the disputed ideologies of the time. Especially in our interpretation of 20:17, the fourth Gospel takes its place at the forefront of the debate over the resurrection of Jesus and the practice of religious celibacy: Jesus is raised as a male and is still a celibate. As a final observation on John's literary skill in such a debate, we should perhaps not be surprised that agreement on an interpretation of John 20:17 is so elusive: this surely must be John's final irony; his last laugh. Even two thousand years later, few can agree on what is probably the clear intent of a text in which celibacy and resurrection are central.

## Chapter Four: Intertexture

In Chapter Two I reviewed several allusions offered by scholars as insights from other texts into an interpretation of “Do not touch me.” These include similarities with the lovers of Song of Songs: the beloved who sought, and found, and will not let go of the one whom she loved (3:4), and the original man and woman in the Garden of Eden, forbidden by God from touching certain fruit (Gen 3:3). The clinging of Ruth to her mother-in-law is also one among other possibilities (Ruth 2:9), as is the forbidden touch of Adam to Eve in *Life of Adam and Eve* (31.1–4). The original author and audience of John 20:17 may well have had any, or all, of these in mind, yet a consensus in interpretation remains elusive.

In this chapter, I will continue the exploration of textual resonances, examining the intertextual interaction of different aspects of John 20:17 with other texts. In the inquiry into “Intertexture,” Robbins suggests that “thematic elaboration,” may be explored.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I have chosen texts in which certain aspects of “the Johannine account [are] expanded and embellished,”<sup>2</sup> or even, in the final section below, John is contradicted. In the first section I show that the verb ἔπιτομαι, which appears in the prohibition of 20:17, is used in a variety of texts to demonstrate the restraint of sexual activity. John 20:17 can therefore be viewed as a parallel text, demonstrating the restraint of sexual activity between Mary and Jesus as celibates. In the second section I consider intertextual references to Mary and Jesus in other texts. In these texts, Mary Magdalene is a leading ascetic, yet at the same time she is portrayed as the most intimate and prominent among Jesus’ disciples. I therefore argue that Jesus’ encounter with Mary in 20:17 viably represents a parallel. In section three, I use the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Epistle to Reginos* to illustrate two views on resurrection and ascension which are contrary to those expressed in John 20:17. A contrary resonance serves the purpose of identifying

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<sup>1</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> Antti Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 23.

points of contact in the two texts, but instead of showing similarity, these points of contact reveal controversy. Hence, I will use two texts that illustrate disagreement with John and therefore give insight to John's agenda in his writing.

## Section One: The Use of ἄπτομαι in Other Texts

In Chapter Two I discussed the exegetical difficulties of the prohibition μή μου ἄπτου and some of the debates that have arisen in the wake of that, and, in many cases, the inconclusive nature of those debates. I have also, in the previous two chapters, referred to ἄπτομαι (of which ἄπτου is the present imperative) as it is used in ascetic contexts. In this section, I again discuss the use of ἄπτομαι in other texts and I note its appearance in contexts of sexual prohibition which resonates with my reading of John 20:17. This supplies one more strand of support for my reading that μή μου ἄπτου is motivated by John's concern for the celibacy of Jesus.

In the NT, there are thirty-nine instances of forms of the verb ἄπτω ("light" or "ignite").<sup>3</sup> Of these, ἄπτω occurs thirty-five times in the middle voice as ἄπτομαι (most commonly translated as "touch").<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming majority of these – in fact thirty of the thirty-five – are found in the synoptic Gospels where each occurrence expresses touch for healing or blessing, either touch by Jesus or someone touching Jesus. One unusual instance which may have a sexual edge to it is the story of a woman who, in something of a role reversal, blesses Jesus by anointing him and in return receives the reassurance of her forgiveness (Luke 7:36–50). I discuss this example below. I also discuss below the story of another woman who was healed by touching the hem of Jesus cloak.<sup>5</sup> Regardless, it is notable that in all instances in the Synoptics, touch is positive in the assessment of Jesus and the narrator, and there are no instances of rejection of touch by Jesus. In the cases of these two women, their touch is commended in public by Jesus. If

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Logos Bible Software for enabling me to navigate these texts with greater ease.

<sup>4</sup> Matt 8:3,15; 9:20,21,29; 14:36a,36b; 17:7; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 3:10; 5:27,28,30,31; 6:56a,56b; 7:33; 8:22; 10:13; Luke 5:13; 6:19; 7:14,39; 8:44,45,46,47; 18:15; 22:51; John 20:17; 1 Cor 7:1; 2 Cor 6:17; Col 2:21; 1 John 5:18.

<sup>5</sup> Matt 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48.

Mary, in John's Gospel, were reaching out for blessing or healing, Jesus' apparently cold reaction is inexplicable. This is the only example in the NT of Jesus refusing touch; a "theological *hapax*," in Nancy's words.

However, there are other texts containing forms of ἀπτομαι which help explain John's usage to express Jesus' distancing of Mary. These form the basis of the discussion below and are drawn from other NT texts as well as pre-NT texts. Bieringer's survey of the 132 uses of the verb in the LXX shows that ἀπτομαι covers a wide semantic range referring to contact between people, and between people and things: harmful contact, moving someone emotionally, touching a dead body and, of most relevance to this thesis, sexual contact and sexual intercourse.<sup>6</sup> There are also other NT references to ἀπτομαι, outside the Synoptics, expressing sexual contact. While the thirty instances of ἀπτομαι in the Synoptics are positive expressions of healing or blessing, as I noted above, the five uses of the verb outside the Synoptics do not appear to follow suit but instead have sexual connotations (John 20:17; 1 Cor 7:1; 2 Cor 6:17; Col 2:21; 1 John 5:18). The texts I discuss below resonate with John 20:17 in a grammatically negative construction where a man and a woman are concerned. If the verb ἀπτομαι were only used in contexts which implied a generic meaning of touch without the possibility of sexual innuendo, then my thesis would involve the discussion of a lone exception. As it stands, however, ἀπτομαι with a negative particle, or in a negative context, is found in other texts as a form of prohibition of sexual contact or potential sexual contact, making plausible my thesis that this is its natural implication in John's Gospel.

### The negation of ἀπτομαι in a sexual context

The first known appearance of the term ἀπτομαι with a sexual innuendo comes from Plato, where "the phrase is an obvious euphemism for sexual relations."<sup>7</sup> Plato writes of the character of Iccus of Tarentum who "during all the period of his training (as the story goes) he never touched a woman (οὐτε πώποτε . . . γυναικὸς ἤψατο) nor yet a boy."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bieringer, "Touching Jesus?" 71.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, "First Corinthians," 204.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Leges* 8.840A (LCL 192:162–63).

The grammatical context for this usage is familiar: ἄπτομαι is used in conjunction with γυνή (“woman”) and it is used with a negative particle to negate sexual contact. These three aspects of usage are also present in John 20:17.

There is one suggestion in Plutarch that ἄπτομαι might also have been used interchangeably with the colloquial phrase “to know” a woman, and its negation for restraint before marriage. In his telling of the life of Alexander, Plutarch says that Alexander “did not know another woman” (οὐτε ἄλλην ἔγνω γυναῖκα), except for Barsiné, and was determined “to attach” to a woman (ἄψασθαι γυναικός) who was good and well-born.<sup>9</sup> In this context, ἄψασθαι is translated as “attach to,” but the parallel functions of οἶδα (“know”) and ἄπτομαι give the verbs an interchangeable meaning and suggests here a sexual implication for both expressions.

In biblical usage, Genesis 3:3 is not, *per se*, an explicit reference to sexual touch, but its symbolism may cover this. As noted in Chapter Two, Katsanis has proposed that John 20:17 is an intertextual echo of the divine command to Adam and Eve to refrain from touching the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, including the use of ἄπτομαι:

“Do not touch” has a familiar ring. . . Not only were the first couple not to eat of the fruit of that tree, they were not even to touch it . . . Therefore with Christ as the new Adam and Mary as the new Eve, seeking after knowledge, her restraint and obedience to Christ’s warning points to a completion of the salvation story.<sup>10</sup>

I would suggest this “knowledge” and “restraint” are sexual in nature. The verse in Genesis has a semantic structure similar to John 20:17, except it uses the subjunctive μὴ ἄψησθε αὐτοῦ (“you may not touch it”) rather than the imperative of the latter, but with the same prohibitive force. Genesis 3:3 has a sexual context: in the garden, initially the man and woman were both naked and they were not ashamed (Gen 3:1), but immediately that they “touch” the fruit, “they knew that they were naked” (3:7). In the act of touching, woman will henceforth be denigrated as prone to deceit (3:6; 1 Tim 2:14) and both, in their shame, must cover up (Gen 3:21). The desired fruit in itself

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<sup>9</sup> Plutarch: *Lives: Alexander* 21.4–5 (LCL 99:284–85).

<sup>10</sup> Katsanis, “Meeting,” p.8 of 14.

represents a desire to know the unknown, conjuring up thoughts of sexual intimacy (3:6). Fruit is a common symbol for sexual experience, such as in the Song of Songs (7:7-9), in which case “knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5) may well represent the loss of sexual innocence.<sup>11</sup> The resonances of ἀπτομαι in the Genesis story, therefore, are not explicitly that of a sexual prohibition, but the sexual context allows for a similar interpretation in the Johannine garden between the new Adam (Rom 5:15) and the woman Hippolytus would regard as the new Eve.<sup>12</sup>

In another Genesis narrative, a negation of ἀπτομαι is used specifically to refer to forbidden sexual intercourse. King Abimelech, in ignorance that Sarah was already Abraham’s wife, intended to add Sarah to his harem which would incur the guilt of adultery (Gen 20:3-7). In the narrative, Abimelech has a dream in which God says, “I did not let you touch her” (οὐκ ἀφῆκά σε ἄψασθαι αὐτῆς), given the king’s ignorance on the matter. Josephus, in his comments on this passage, clearly also considers ἄψασθαι τῆς Σάρρας (“to touch Sarah”) implies sexual contact: “the king of the Egyptians, not content with the reports of her, was fired with a desire to see her and on the point of laying hands on her. But God thwarted his criminal passion.”<sup>13</sup> The verb ἀπτομαι here clearly has sexual connotations.

Ruth 2:9 has a similar structure and meaning to John 20:17, though it uses an infinitive. Boaz says to Ruth that he will command the young men “not to touch you” (μὴ ἄψασθαι σου), while she is out working in the fields. The initiative taken by Boaz to advise Ruth to stay with his servant girls (2:8) and his promise to forbid the young men to touch her indicates that ἀπτομαι here is referring to unwelcome touch, confirmed by Naomi’s observation that the young men in the field could harm Ruth (2:22). A young woman working in the field alone may be vulnerable to the threat of male sexual advances.<sup>14</sup> The Hebrew *nāga‘* (“touch”) in Ruth 2:9 is the same term used in Genesis

<sup>11</sup> Katie Edwards, *Admen and Eve: The Bible in Contemporary Advertising* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Hippolytus, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 25.3-4 (trans. De Boer, *Cover-Up*, 101).

<sup>13</sup> Josephus, *A.J.* 1.163 (LCL 242: 80-81).

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Blyth, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah’s Silence* (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 190.

20:6, both of which the LXX translates as ἄπτομαι. In Genesis 20:6, as discussed above, ἄπτομαι has a clear sexual implication, which in turn opens the possibility that sexual touching is in view in Ruth 2:9. If this is the case, then once again ἄπτομαι makes a reference to sexual touching, although, like its usage in John 20:17, this is an implicit rather than explicit turn of phrase.

Similarly, Proverbs 6:29, in a warning against adultery, uses ἄπτομαι for sexual touch. The participial use of the verb describes the adulterer as ὁ ἀπτόμενος αὐτῆς (“the one touching/who touches her”). Such a man, who goes to a woman who is already ὑπανδρον (“under a man”), will not be held guiltless. The use of ἄπτομαι in legislation against adultery is also known from Aristotle: “As to intercourse with another woman or man, in general it must be dishonourable to be known to take any part in it in any circumstances.”<sup>15</sup> This is literally μὴ καλὸν ἀπτόμενον (“not good touching”) but referring to sexual relations outside marriage.

From the NT, Luke’s account of the woman of ill repute from an unnamed city who anointed Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:36–50) is not grammatically negative but supports the potential for ἄπτομαι to convey a sexual context to the reader. No specific grammatical negative is used, but Luke’s narrative conveys the negative reaction of a certain Pharisee towards this woman, which achieves a negative context. Her motives may have been innocent, and while there is no explicit indication of a sexual context, her reputation and the reaction of the Pharisee – and presumably those with him – suggest otherwise. Perhaps they doubted the integrity of her extravagant expression of love in the weeping, the kissing and the anointing of Jesus’ feet with myrrh. “If this man were a prophet,” muses the internal dialogue of the Pharisee (7:39), “he would know what kind of a woman this is who is touching him (ἄπτεται αὐτοῦ), that she is a sinner” (ὅτι ἀμαρτωλός ἐστιν). In Bieringer’s assessment of the semantic range in which ἄπτομαι operates, he agrees: “It is also possible that in 7:39 it [ἄπτεται] has sexual overtones.”<sup>16</sup> As Robinson puts it, that Jesus had “his feet (or head) kissed, scented and wiped with the hair

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Politica* 7.14.12 (LCL 264:624–25).

<sup>16</sup> Bieringer, “I Am Ascending,” 227.

of a woman” would have been suggestive “whether or not of doubtful repute.”<sup>17</sup> It was extravagant and obviously intended to be pleasurable.<sup>18</sup> The use of ἀπτομαι, then, gives the passage an edge of sexual innuendo that more general terms of touching do not convey. I suggest this is also the case for John 20:17.

There is another notable case of a woman touching Jesus: the woman who touches the hem of Jesus’ cloak and ἀπτομαι is used in all three Gospels to communicate this touch.<sup>19</sup> The story conveys a sense of the woman’s strong desire to be well and yet her reluctance to approach Jesus – as her internal dialogue indicates (Matt 9:21) – probably because of her embarrassment at her otherwise private condition. She had a “flow of blood for twelve years” (Luke 8:43), which, the reader is left to surmise, must be a relentless menstrual dysfunction. If so, this would have rendered her ritually unclean (Lev 15:25–27) and probably accounts for some of her fear of exposure (Luke 8:47). ἀπτομαι in this instance seems to carry with it some weight of the woman’s particularly feminine ailment, but does not seem to be a euphemism for sexual touch. It is in the context of a public event and seems no different in that respect from the other examples of touch by or of a person who desires healing or blessing of some sort. According to the Synoptics, many sought to touch (ἀψωνται) the hem of Jesus’ garment, and as many who touched it (ἵψαντο) were healed.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the touch is commended by Jesus as a sign of the woman’s faith and she is publicly praised (8:48). Thus, the context is positive from the narrator’s perspective, and Jesus does not rebuke her or in any way negate her attempt at achieving her desire, as he appears to thwart Mary in John 20:17.

Loader’s awareness of the potential for ἀπτομαι to imply sexual touch brings an interesting comment on Jesus’ touch of children. Mark 10:13 records that the crowds were bringing to Jesus “children that he might touch them” (παιδία ἵνα αὐτῶν ἀψηται). But this wording is not retained by either of the other two Synoptics. Matthew avoids

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<sup>17</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM, 1973), 98.

<sup>18</sup> Teresa J. Hornsby, “Anointing Traditions,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and John Dominic Crossan, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 339–342.

<sup>19</sup> Matt 9:20–21; Mark 5:27–31; Luke 8:44–47.

<sup>20</sup> Matt 14:36; Mark 6:56.

the use of ἄπτομαι at all and just says “that he might lay his hands on them and pray” (19:13), and Luke changes παιδία (“children” or “slaves”) to βρέφη (“infants”). The crowds bring infants, not children or slaves, that he might touch (ἄπτηται) them (18:15). Loader notes this departure from Mark 10:13 and asks whether the reluctance to use ἄπτομαι in the context of children and young slaves is incidental or deliberate:

Some have wondered if other factors are at play. In a world where some teachers are known to have fondled children sexually, might Luke be seeking to avoid having Jesus appear in that light? . . . Were those bringing the children seeking to do what some saw as a sexual favour to the teacher, bringing them children to “enjoy”? The Greek word ἄψηται, translated above as “touch,” which gives expression to the intention of those bringing the children, often has sexual connotations.<sup>21</sup>

If Loader is right – and, given the exception to the usual verbal similarities of the Synoptics, this is plausible – then Matthew and Luke may have deliberately not used ἄπτομαι to avoid any suggestion that this was Jesus’ motivation. This may be another case of ἄπτομαι conveying a sexual innuendo, a role I suggest this verb also plays in John 20:17. In the next section I discuss further uses of ἄπτομαι.

### Ἄπτομαι in the Johannine Corpus

In Chapter Three I posited the thought that, within the Johannine corpus, a different authorship is likely for Revelation, in spite of the book’s association with John. Its style, vocabulary and purpose are dissimilar, and its message is, in places, antithetical. The verb “touch” that John uses in his Gospel does not occur in Revelation, so I have omitted this text from the discussion below. By contrast, many similarities in tone can be detected between the Johannine Gospel and Letters, in both language and theological emphases, especially the perennial obligation to love one another and to have faith in Jesus. John 16:8–11 shows a similar type of repetitive pattern of argumentation as 1 John 2:12–14. The First Letter shares not only “a significant vocabulary and style” with John’s Gospel but the claim to eyewitness testimony is restated in 1 John 1:1–3.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 60.

<sup>22</sup> John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Sacra Pagina 18 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002), 44.

John only uses ἀπτομαι once in the Gospel and once in the Letters. This in itself is an alert to the significance of its choice, given the generally repetitive nature of the Johannine vocabulary otherwise. The only other occurrence of ἀπτομαι apart from 20:17 in the Johannine corpus is 1 John 5:18, also a negated form. It is not specifically a sexual reference, but given the wide semantic range of ἀπτομαι, it could well include this. The immediate context of the verb is a discussion of sin (5:16–19), which would, in all likelihood, include sexual sin, given its importance in NT ethics (1 Cor 6:9; Acts 15:20). “We know that everyone born of God does not sin” (1 John 5:18), John assures the believers, but rather ὁ πονηρὸς οὐχ ἀπτεται αὐτοῦ (“evil/the evil one does not touch him”). In that context, sexual sin may be implicit. With minor variations such as tense and the placement of the pronoun (a reminder of the deliberate emphasis on μου in 20:17), 1 John 5:18 represents the same linguistic pattern as John 20:17. It is possible, then, that John’s choice of ἀπτομαι in his Letter includes a sexual innuendo as it does in his Gospel.

The significance of the use of ἀπτομαι is highlighted by John’s use, in a different context, of another term for “touch.” The opening testimony of 1 John to the witness of what the disciples saw and heard, and that which “our hands have touched” (ἐψηλάφησαν), show John’s usage of a different term for touch that does not imply sexual touch (1:1). The verb ψηλαφάω used here is a more generic form of touching, used for instance by the writer of Hebrews for the “touching” of the holy mountain (12:18). It is also used by Luke following Jesus’ resurrection: “See my hands and my feet, that it is me; touch me (ψηλαφήσατέ με) and look, since a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see me having” (24:39). It may have the meaning of “grop” as it is used in Acts of those who are searching for God (17:27). And there are still further alternative general words for touch: θιγγάνω can also mean “touch” or “handle” (Col 2:21; Heb 11:28), including a context of ritual observance or holiness (Heb 12:20); and προσψαύω can likewise mean “touch” (Luke 11:46). All these terms are used in contexts where a general sense of touch is required, but none of these alternate words is used in the NT to mean sexual touch.

The author of John, then, has chosen a word for “touch” which presents to his readers the possibility of a sexual inference.

If the author of John’s Gospel had wanted to make clear that the narrative of 20:17 was not to be clouded by any gendered reading, let alone a sexual inference, he had available, in his typically simple Greek vocabulary, many other verbs from which to choose, as discussed above. Yet, none of these other verbs expresses accurately his intention: none of them was known as a sexual euphemism. In the reverse, ἄπτομαι alone includes sexual inference in its semantic range. The choice of this verb in John 20:17 is likely to be deliberate: the author is thereby relieved of the need to be explicit. The topic is one on which he may prefer to be obtuse and vague: an appropriate innuendo to *his* contemporaries but a persistent conundrum to our own.

### Translation and Meaning

The inconclusive debate on the meaning of the present tense imperative ἄπτου, which I outlined in Chapter Two, seems to have done little more than confuse contemporary translators. Following the academic lead, common Scripture versions<sup>23</sup> give an exaggerated weight to the significance of a continuous verbal aspect and translate John 20:17 as, “Do not hold onto me,” or, “Do not cling,” rather than the traditional, “Do not touch.” Strangely, other present tense forms of ἄπτομαι have not suffered the same fate. Of the thirty-five occurrences of the verb ἄπτομαι in the NT, twenty-eight are aorist<sup>24</sup> and seven are present tense,<sup>25</sup> and yet, of these, only two – one aorist and one present tense – have been selected for an alternative translation. The other thirty-three of thirty-five are routinely translated “touch.” The two exceptions are Colossians 2:21 (mentioned in the previous chapter) and John 20:17. They do not have their verbal tense in common but, notably, both are contenders for the category of sexual euphemism. Yet, in both instances, translators have avoided the translation “touch.” Ironically, because the English

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<sup>23</sup> NIV, NRSV, ESV, JB.

<sup>24</sup> Matt 8:3,15; 9:20,21,29; 14:36a,36b; 17:7; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 3:10; 5:27,28,30,31; 6:56a,56b; 7:33; 8:22; 10:13; Luke 5:13; 7:14; 8:44,45,46,47; 22:51; Col 2:21.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 6:19; 7:39; 18:15; John 20:17; 1 Cor 7:1; 2 Cor 6:17; 1 John 5:18.

word “touch” is ambiguous in the same way as ἄπτομαι is (allowing for a sexual meaning, but not demanding it), it would best convey the subtle thought of the verse.

Even if it could be shown conclusively – which it cannot – that ἄπτομαι in the present is best translated as “hold” and in the aorist as “touch,” contemporary translations are inconsistent. For example, of the seven instances of the present tense use of ἄπτομαι in the NT, all are translated as “touch” in the NRSV except for John 20:17. Two of these occur in the Johannine corpus and both are negated; one is the imperative under discussion (John 20:17) and the other an indicative mentioned above, οὐχ ἄπτεται (“it does not touch”), in 1 John 5:18. Of these seven examples, μή μου ἄπτου is the sole instance in which “hold onto” is favoured. Second Corinthians 6:17 is also a negated present imperative of ἄπτομαι, and differs from John 20:17 only in that it is plural, yet μὴ ἄπτεσθε is regularly translated as “Do not touch.”<sup>26</sup>

There is an avoidance, then, of the English word “touch” being used in translations of John 20:17. Yet, Bieringer’s extensive studies have shown that “in the LXX there is no evidence that ἄπτομαι means to seize or to cling. The prevalent meaning is to touch (both positive and negative). But there is also a significant number of instances where ἄπτομαι means to draw near, to reach.”<sup>27</sup> While “touch” remains Bieringer’s preferred translation for ἄπτομαι, it is with the implied meaning of “come near” or “approach,” which renders the sense of μή μου ἄπτου as “Do not approach me” or “Do not come near to me.” Thus, given the added sexual connotations of μή μου ἄπτου, I suggest the word “touch” is both the best functional equivalent of the verb, and the most appropriate formal equivalent.

In Chapter Three I broached the topic of Jesus’ marital status, a topic on which the NT is silent. So, despite the potential sexual innuendo of John 20:17, I do not suggest that μή μου ἄπτου is referring to sexual intercourse. Yet while it might not be a blatant “do not approach me for sex,” surely the meaning need not exclude “do not approach, or touch,

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<sup>26</sup> NRSV, NIV, JB.

<sup>27</sup> Bieringer, “I Am Ascending,” 229.

for sexual reasons.” Consideration must be given to John’s choice of ἄπτομαι: it has range of meanings that are not unambiguous, including having sexual intercourse, but I suggest it may also cover the range not only of sexual touching but also of sexual emotion.

De Boer has suggested that her translation, “stop touching me” might also include a psychological interpretation, assuming that Jesus was moved by Mary’s forlornness and weeping.<sup>28</sup> It could, of course, also mean the reverse: Mary was moved by the sight of Jesus and it is her emotion that Jesus seeks to quell. De Boer’s suggestion is preferable, as such an interpretation puts the ownership of the prohibition onto Jesus as the speaker, implying “do not move me emotionally,” rather than locating the responsibility for the prohibition in Mary herself. This is certainly an emotional situation, and could well include a type of emotional “touching,” but it could also be sexual in nature. I suggest here, then, that ἄπτομαι might best be understood to carry the meaning of “touch with an effect.”

In the active voice, ἄπτω commonly means to “light a fire,” to “ignite,” or “to cause burning to occur.”<sup>29</sup> “Burning with passion” (*πυρόω*) was a common term for sexual desire in Graeco-Roman culture, as Paul uses it in 1 Cor 7:9.<sup>30</sup> If the active voice (*ἄπτω*) with a direct object means lighting a fire and causing something to burn, it would seem a small but logical step that, in the middle voice (*ἄπτομαι*), it comes to mean an internal lighting or burning when it is used of sexual desire. As has already been discussed above, ἄπτομαι conveys emotional or spiritual “lighting;” the middle voice is used to express touch for the purpose of blessing or healing, or to harm, as well as connection for sexual intercourse. I suggest from this that ἄπτομαι is best defined as expressing touch as a form of contact which triggers a result. In this instance, John is conveying the potential for sexual emotion and the necessity for restraint contained in the prohibition μή μου ἄπτου.

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<sup>28</sup> De Boer, “Interpretation,” 103.

<sup>29</sup> BDAG, 126; Luke 8:16; 11:33; 15:8; Acts 28:2.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 212.

In his examination of the uses of ἄπτομαι, Fee demonstrates that the verb often does refer to sexual relations and that it is clearly an idiom or a euphemism.<sup>31</sup> Of note, Fee does not include John 20:17 in his discussion, which I find conspicuous by its absence. The omission of μή μου ἄπτου suggests he does not consider ἄπτομαι a euphemism in this instance, but rather a generic form of “touch.” I have no hesitation in labelling John 20:17 a euphemism, but the difficult task remains: how does one translate a euphemism, when its purpose is to conceal the direct meaning, and communicate in an indirect way? Since the function of a euphemism is to avoid what is explicitly culturally inappropriate, the only solution is to use another euphemism in translation. Perhaps in this case, the best substitute would be, “Do not turn me on!” in the sense of touch that could potentially stir sexual emotions and compromise Jesus’ celibate status. That would certainly fit with the general function of the verb ἄπτομαι. It would also fit with John’s intent to show the continued transphysical existence of Jesus as a normal functioning male. Jesus’ sexuality must surely be included as part of his humanity. However, given the anticipated reluctance of any Scripture translator to modify 20:17 to “Do not turn me on,” the subtlety of the English word “touch” seems an excellent alternative.

At this point, it is pertinent to visit two Pauline uses of ἄπτομαι which were raised in Chapter Three. I discussed the use of this verb in 1 Cor 7:1 in the context of an ascetic movement that discouraged sexual contact. Paul is responding to topics the church has written to him about, in this instance the question of whether, “it is better for a man not to touch (μὴ ἄπτεσθαι) a woman” (NRSV). The word “touch” here well reflects the sense of ἄπτομαι that Bieringer claims is a common one, of “approach or go near,”<sup>32</sup> with obvious sexual implications. The *UBS Greek NT, Reader’s Edition*, offers the meaning of ἄπτομαι here as “have sex (with).” The NIV considers it is a colloquialism and says, “marry,” with a footnote, “have sexual relations with.” Fee, however, objects to equating “marriage” with “sexual relations,” since the problem seems to have been the ascetic denial of sexual relations in marriage.<sup>33</sup> In his view, Paul makes use of the normal

<sup>31</sup> Fee, “First Corinthians,” 204–206.

<sup>32</sup> Bieringer, “I Am Ascending,” 229.

<sup>33</sup> Fee, “First Corinthians,” 206,211.

terms for marriage (*γαμέω*, *γαμίζω*) where that is what he means, and the translation thus negates the force of using a euphemism at all. Rather, these are more likely to be men who are already married but a problematic sexual asceticism is driving them to avoid sexual relations with the wives they have, in which case, “it is better for a man not to touch a woman” carries the context more accurately than, “it is better for a man not to marry a woman.” This is supported in the text by Paul’s immediate insistence that married couples generally continue to have sexual intercourse without “defrauding” each other (7:2-6). Either way, for the purposes of my argument, the obvious sexual meaning of *ἄπτομαι* in this instance – and its negation – surely illustrates its potential to prohibit a range of sexual expression, as it does, I would argue, in John 20:17.

The second Pauline usage of *ἄπτομαι* that is worth noting was discussed in my previous chapter, but deserves mention again. Colossians 2:21 occurs in the context of the Pauline writer’s refutation of the practices of a certain ascetic group, within or outside the Colossian church. As stated above, of the thirty-five instances of *ἄπτομαι* in the NT, there are only two instances which the NRSV does not translate as “touch;” it translates *ἄπτου* as “hold onto” (John 20:17) and *μὴ ἄψῃ* as “Do not handle” (Col 2:21). It appears that, in these two instances in which *ἄπτομαι* is used as a euphemism for sexual contact, the translators have avoided the word “touch,” presumably judging there is no sexual subtlety intended in the text, or avoiding it if there is. Colossians 2:21 occurs in the context of a prohibition which seems to form a type of formulaic motto for the Pauline opponents: “*μὴ ἄψῃ μηδὲ γεύσῃ μηδὲ θίγῃς*.” Because both *ἄπτομαι* and *θιγγάνω* can mean “touch,” this would literally yield the redundant-sounding English translation, “Do not touch, do not taste, do not touch.” To solve this, most translators ignore the sexual implications of *ἄπτομαι*, in spite of its obvious use in other such contexts (Gen 20:6; 1 Cor 7:1) where it means “to have sexual relations with,” and they translate *μὴ ἄψῃ* as “Do not handle,” so that *μηδὲ θίγῃς* can be translated “Do not touch,” without sounding

redundant. Admittedly a more readable translation results: “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (NRSV, NIV).<sup>34</sup>

This translation, however, may be missing the point of the verse, given the common usage of ἄπτομαι in sexual contexts. In my view, μὴ ἄψῃ is not just as a generic prohibition to touch, since ἄπτομαι readily carries sexual implications, and the third instance, which uses θιγγάνω (μηδὲ θίγῃς) is more likely to be a generic prohibition of touch. As discussed in the previous chapter, this verse occurs in the context of conflict in the Colossian church over ascetic and proto-gnostic belief. Leaney has also argued that the meaning of ἄψῃ concerns sexual connection in this instance.<sup>35</sup> Loader agrees that touching here could include the body and sexual behaviour which are destined for destruction (2:22) and an anti-sexual stance could be part of severe discipline of the body (2:23).<sup>36</sup> It is completely possible that an ascetic movement would also mandate sexual abstinence. Thus, a better reading might be, “Do not touch (a woman), do not taste, do not touch,” or, “Do not have sexual relations, do not taste, do not touch,” or possibly, “Do not marry, do not taste, do not touch.” This is consistent with the meaning of ἄπτομαι in 1 Cor 7:1, mentioned above, where it is clearly referring to conjugal relations. It is also consistent with the meaning of ἄπτομαι that I am proposing for John 20:17, with a parallel function in a similar negative context.

### Section One Conclusion

From this survey of texts in which ἄπτομαι occurs, then, it becomes likely that the audiences of John’s story of Jesus’ encounter with Mary Magdalene would have understood a sexual element to μή μου ἄπτου. Fee says quite clearly of the verb ἄπτομαι: “Thus we may conclude that this idiom, occurring as it does over a span of at least seven centuries and in many parts of the empire, is a common euphemism for sexual relations.”<sup>37</sup> Although Fee does not include the encounter of Mary and Jesus in John

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<sup>34</sup> In fact, this is not strictly a prohibition at all, as all three verbs are subjunctive not imperative. A better rendering might be, “you should not,” or “you may not,” but the point remains the same.

<sup>35</sup> Leaney, “Colossians ii. 21-23,” 92.

<sup>36</sup> Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 199.

<sup>37</sup> Fee, “First Corinthians,” 206.

20:17 in his examples, my thesis suggests that this verse did have sexual connotations. The prohibition gains its best interpretation as both an acknowledgment of love between them, and also an acknowledgement of necessary restraint in light of their celibate status. In the next section, I discuss the relationship of Jesus and Mary in other texts, where this love is also present along with its denial of physical expression.

## Section Two: Jesus and Mary in Other Texts

As discussed in the section above, occurrences of ἄπτομαι in other texts carry a similar meaning that resonates with its use in my proposed reading of John 20:17. So too in this section, I locate intertextual references to the relationship of Mary and Jesus which also resonate with my reading. Texts which see Mary and Jesus in a mutually significant relationship, reflecting a love for each other, yet beyond the parameters of a sexual relationship, open the way for a reading of John 20:17 that might reflect these same traditions concerning Mary and Jesus. I will first visit the NT, but the dearth of information on Mary there – apart from John’s account – requires that any further stories of Mary and Jesus come from later – until recently, lost – traditions. The context in which Mary and Jesus relate, in later remembered traditions, is an ascetic one.

As I suggested in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the socio-rhetorical use of intertextuality recognises “a complex correlation between a text and the contexts in which a text has been read and reread.”<sup>38</sup> I suggest further, at this point, that a certain amount of intertextual resonance exists between the NT texts and the Nag Hammadi library and other apocryphal texts.<sup>39</sup> Although two or three centuries may separate the two, echoes of certain beliefs, theologies and understandings expressed in the former are detectable in the latter. Such echoes provide valuable insights into the reception of early Christian and NT traditions (including written texts, beliefs, stories, institutions, conventions, and practices) by different communities, allowing us to discern how its

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<sup>38</sup> Gowler, “Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation,” 191.

<sup>39</sup> The library at Nag Hammadi in Egypt was discovered in 1945 and its texts, referred to variously as gnostic, apocryphal, non-canonical or extra-canonical, are our main source of the Mary Magdalene and Jesus traditions. Van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion*, 1.

members interpreted and found meaning in these traditions.<sup>40</sup> A tradition – such as the relationship between Jesus and Mary – thus develops its own reception history, as it is woven into other texts to create new remembrances that reflect back on earlier texts and shine a light on the tradition’s interpretive journey. For this reason, the apocryphal texts can offer insight into how the tradition of the relationship between Mary and Jesus that I suggest is evoked in John 20:17 might also be known by later communities and reflected and retold in their own texts. Their writers present Mary Magdalene in a way that is commensurate with her significant NT role as witness to Jesus’ death and resurrection, but they also “recontextualise” Mary and Jesus within an ascetic context. Additionally, in view of the NT’s relative silence about other aspects of Mary’s relationship with Jesus (which I discuss directly below), these later texts create a “narrative amplification” of the Mary and Jesus tradition, enriching the NT narratives with new insights and interpretations that were of particular relevance to the communities who created these apocryphal texts. These processes of “recontextualising” and “narrative amplification” are forms of intertextual interaction, which reveal an ongoing dialogue between texts and traditions across space and time.<sup>41</sup>

Mary Magdalene is indeed the subject of a mysterious portrayal in the NT: she is barely there in the life and teachings of Jesus before his death, with no mention in any of the Letters, but when she does appear in the four Gospels, she is a critical witness to its central message. Her silence in the background of the story of Jesus is overturned at the end by her unbidden presence at the most significant moments of Jesus’ life. The reader becomes aware that she is the one who follows Jesus the most closely throughout his death and resurrection. Luke is the only Gospel that introduces her in advance of Jesus’ passion and death, as Μαρία ἡ καλουμένη Μαγδαληνή (“Mary, the one called Magdalene”), and names her as among those who viewed the empty tomb. She is also

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<sup>40</sup> Gowler, “Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation,” 195, identifies the reconfiguration of “objects, institutions and other extra-textual contexts with which the texts interact” as “Intertexture.” Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1989), 159, likewise defines intertextuality as an activity that surpasses the sharing of written texts, where words, ideas, echoes and cultural memories are kit together to form a “woven fabric.”

<sup>41</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 48, 51.

named amongst the group of women who travelled with the group of disciples and helped them out of their own resources (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3). In the other three Gospels, Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνὴ (“Mary the Magdalene”) is named as present at the crucifixion, and then is either the first, or among the first, to find the empty tomb, to see the risen Christ and tell this to the other disciples. In any list of the female disciples, she is usually listed first. It is from this tantalizing wealth – and paradoxical paucity – of information about her that her earliest identity must be gleaned.

The naming of the Magdalene is significant in itself, given the overall task of detecting the practice of celibacy in John 20:17: her identification suggests her independence from a male relative. The normal means of identifying a female in such societies was by naming the males – father, son or brothers – to whom the woman was related. So, for instance, other NT women include: “the Mary of Clopas” (Μαρία ἡ τοῦ Κλωπᾶ), Joanna wife of Chouza (Ἰωάννα γυνὴ Χουζᾶ), Mary of Joses (Μαρία ἡ Ἰωσῆτος) and the Mary of Jacob (Μαρία ἡ τοῦ Ἰακώβου).<sup>42</sup> Of course given the popularity of the name Mary, identification becomes even more critical in the Magdalene’s case. But her naming by her town of origin in Magdala suggests her independence – perhaps she was divorced, widowed or had never married.<sup>43</sup> This independence from a husband or other male would have made her more available as a close disciple of Jesus, a role she plays as a witness to the resurrection in the NT, and the first witness to the resurrection in John. She is also remembered as a significant disciple in later tradition, playing the role of teacher and leader in the apocryphal texts, as I discuss below.

The lack of detail in the NT about this mysterious woman has led to confusion over her identity. There are three accounts of a woman who anointed Jesus. All three have at some stage of history been identified as Mary, though none of them was called the Magdalene in the NT texts. One of them was called Mary, the sister of Martha (John 12:3; Luke 10:38–39), another was known in her town as a woman of ill-repute (Luke

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<sup>42</sup> John 19:25; Luke 8:3; Mark 15:47; 16:1.

<sup>43</sup> Marinella Perroni and Cristina Simonelli, *Mary of Magdala: Revisiting the Sources*, trans. Demetrio S. Yocom (NY: Paulist, 2019), 27–28.

7:37–38) and a third is unidentified (Mark 14:3; Matt 26:7). Mary Magdalene, whose role in the NT is simply that of a disciple (John 20:2), may or may not have been one or all of these, but no NT text states that Mary Magdalene anointed Jesus. On the contrary, since she is identified by the town of Magdala in Galilee and travelled in that area with Jesus' group (Luke 8:1–3), she is unlikely to be the same Mary identified as the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who all came from the village of Bethany (John 11:1–2). If she was not the same character as Mary of Bethany, then there is nothing to say she ever anointed Jesus, nor, therefore, that she was the same character as the anonymous sinful woman who did anoint Jesus (Luke 7:37–38). The NT claim that Jesus cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9) uses language that would normally suggest she was healed of a sickness, not that she was the sinner or prostitute (*ἀμαρτωλός*) of Luke's narrative.

The confusion over Mary Magdalene's identity is an early one, which gives caution to an overly harsh criticism of the conflation. One of the fourth-century *Psalms of Herakleides* merges at least two of the Marys. It refers to Mary Magdalene and claims, “A joyous servant is Martha her sister also.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than an indication of consanguinity, it probably “derives from the period when at least the figures of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany begin to be fused together.”<sup>45</sup> In the sixth century, Pope Gregory gave official sanction to the conflation of the three characters:

This woman, whom Luke calls a sinner, John names Mary. I believe that she is the same Mary of whom Mark says that seven demons had been cast out. How should we interpret the seven demons except as the totality of the vices? . . . It is evident, my friends, that a woman who had earlier been eager for actions which are not allowed had used the ointment as a scent for her own body.<sup>46</sup>

From then, burgeoning into the popular religious cult of Mary Magdalene in the Middle Ages, until the untangling of her identity in the last century under the microscope of

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<sup>44</sup> *Herakleides* 192.23 (Allberry).

<sup>45</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 208.

<sup>46</sup> *Homily 33* in *Forty Gospel Homilies: Gregory the Great*, trans. Dom David Hurst, Cistercian Studies 123 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1990), 269.

modern biblical criticism, Mary has been a repentant prostitute, the model reformed sinner. The use of one Gospel text to fill in details of another and create a new identity, however, might rightly be called “illegitimate,”<sup>47</sup> given the vagueness of the Gospels themselves on the identities of these women.

### Nag Hammadi and Apocryphal Texts

There is, unfortunately, a gap in time between Mary Magdalene in the NT and her strong appearance in texts of the Nag Hammadi library and other apocryphal works, which range from the second to fourth centuries. In this section, I will use Mary’s presence in these texts to examine the later traditions that portray her in her relationship to Jesus. While the NT tells us little about Mary herself, let alone her sexuality, these later texts create a colourful character. They may not offer – or claim – historical accuracy, but they reverberate with the influence and prominence of this mysterious companion of Jesus throughout her reception history.

Cynthia Bourgeault reads the non-canonical texts as an indication that “early Christianity was a riot of pluralism.”<sup>48</sup> McNamara views them as didactic fiction, but also as “legitimate and valuable documents for the study of the obscure religious life of the second-century Christian communities.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps they fit the modern genre of “historical novel:” fiction based on aspects of history. They were written after the first-century Gospels, but I suggest below that these texts communicate a consistent tradition where Mary plays a spiritually intimate role next to Jesus yet she is a sexual ascetic. Marjanen states:

[Such texts] reflect a knowledge of the historical role Mary Magdalene had in the early Christian movement which goes beyond what the New Testament traditions tell about her as the obvious leader of Jesus’ female followers and as the receiver of the Risen Jesus’ appearance.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> De Boer, *Beyond the Myth*, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault. *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), 35.

<sup>49</sup> McNamara, *New Song*, 78.

<sup>50</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 117.

Robert Price agrees on the importance of the heterodox texts and adds that they are consistent with the story of Mary in John 20:11–18, in which “we have discovered one version of the original claim that Mary received unique revelations from the risen Christ.”<sup>51</sup> Given the criterion that to have seen the risen Lord was the mark of the apostle (1 Cor 9:1), Price believes that Mary was an apostle and accepted as such in many circles. Further, he argues that Mary’s activity as a founding apostle of Christianity was ignored by later church structures, thus accounting for her greater prominence outside the church and the NT, apart from her central role in John’s Gospel. I suggest it is just as likely that the side-lining of Mary was as much because of her association with a growing ascetic movement, since ascetic groups discouraged women from becoming mothers, a pattern that was already beginning to show itself in the late-first century NT pastoral texts. Price offers a plausible conclusion: “Mary Magdalene did receive visionary revelations and became the apostle of an egalitarian, celibate Christianity which preached spiritual marriage with Christ.”<sup>52</sup> At the very least, I would argue that the celibacy of Jesus and his relationship to Mary, which I suggest is exemplified in John 20:17, and is also evident in the texts discussed below.

### *The Gospel of Mary*

The *Gospel of Mary*, found in Egypt although not Nag Hammadi, may be dated sometime within the second half of the second century, after the canonical Gospels were disseminated but, judging by the Coptic version and earlier Greek fragments, before AD 200.<sup>53</sup> The setting includes an appearance of the resurrected Jesus and Mary’s memories of a conversation in a vision with the resurrected Jesus.<sup>54</sup> It parallels the encounter in John

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<sup>51</sup> Price, “Gnostic Apostle?” 67.

<sup>52</sup> Price, “Gnostic Apostle?” 57. For evidence of a very early understanding of spiritual marriage with Christ, see the *Odes of Solomon* 42.8–9 (*OTP* 2:771), and Charlesworth’s notes *OTP* 2:725–28. Ashton observes similarities between the *Odes* and John: the symbolic use of opposites such as light and darkness, life and death, and the “sense of persecution” found in both, in *Understanding*, 550.

<sup>53</sup> Perroni and Simonelli, *Mary of Magdala*, 113; Marjanen locates several allusions to the content of the canonical Gospels in the *Gospel of Mary* (*The Woman Jesus Loved*, 98); Hans-Martin Schenke, a translator of *Philip*, states that the general rule for Coptic versions of the *Apocrypha* is that they represent a translation of the Greek (*NTApoc* 1:182).

<sup>54</sup> *Gos. Mary* 9.5; 10.10 (*NHL*, 525).

20, because it recounts a personal conversation between Jesus and Mary of which none of the other disciples have any knowledge. Marjanen notes, “the basic setting of the *Gospel of Mary* presupposes a special encounter between Mary and the risen Jesus analogous to that of John 20:14–18 or Mark 16:9–11.”<sup>55</sup>

Peter addresses Mary:

‘Sister we know that the Savior loved you more than the rest of women. Tell us the words of the Savior which you remember – which you know (but) we do not, nor have we heard them.’ Mary answered and said, ‘What is hidden from you I will proclaim to you.’<sup>56</sup>

Peter acknowledges that Mary is loved more than the other women. De Boer reads between the lines and hazards a guess that “Peter cannot explain the Saviour’s preference for Mary. He tries to accept this as a fact while suggesting female attraction as a cause.”<sup>57</sup> Andrew, meanwhile, challenges Mary’s status to the other disciples: “Say what you wish to say about what she has said. I at least do not believe that the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas.”<sup>58</sup> Peter, who seems to have been happy to accept that Mary is loved more than the other *women*, now joins Andrew in feeling threatened:

‘Did He really speak with a woman without our knowledge (and) not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did He prefer her to us?’ Then Mary wept and said to Peter, ‘My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?’ Levi answered and said to Peter, ‘Peter you have always been hot tempered. Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversaries. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you indeed to reject her? Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why He loved her more than us.’<sup>59</sup>

It seems Mary is loved more than all the disciples, not just the women. Marjanen argues that because Jesus’ “love” for Mary is compared to his love for all the other disciples this is

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<sup>55</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 117.

<sup>56</sup> *Gos. Mary* 10.1–8 (*NHL*, 525).

<sup>57</sup> De Boer, *Beyond the Myth*, 103.

<sup>58</sup> *Gos. Mary* 17.11–15 (*NHL*, 526).

<sup>59</sup> *Gos. Mary* 17.18–18.15 (*NHL*, 526–27).

not erotic love.<sup>60</sup> Agreed, there is a way in which the language of being “known” and “loved” may be an indication of the simple love of discipleship (John 15:15; 1 John 4:8). Nonetheless, being loved and known above all others by the Saviour leaves Mary in a unique position. The Johannine tradition thus holds in common with the *Gospel of Mary* that Mary Magdalene was the first amongst Jesus’ women disciples (John 20:1), who loved him (20:11) and was known and loved by him (20:16), and was a leader and a bearer of Jesus’ words to others (20:18). The *Gospel of Mary* thus echoes and possibly amplifies the tradition evoked in John’s Gospel of Mary as Jesus’ most-loved disciple.

This position has given rise, in contemporary scholarship, to an inconclusive debate concerning Mary as the mysterious “disciple whom Jesus loved” of John’s Gospel (13:23; 19:26). Sandra Schneiders, for example, notes in John’s Gospel, “the complete and successful obscuring of the Beloved Disciple . . . making it impossible to identify the figure conclusively with any particular individual in the Johannine community.”<sup>61</sup> She suggests that this was because the tradition arose from the witness of women, among whom Mary Magdalene was “the foundational apostolic witness of the community.”<sup>62</sup> Part of Schneiders’ argument is the extraordinary portrayal of women in John, both in quality and quantity.<sup>63</sup> I suggest in Chapter Five that the relative significance given to women in John is the product, not of a feminine beloved disciple, but of an author familiar with relatively prominent women and a community in which gender roles and status could be blurred because of the implications of an ideology of celibacy.

John, though, portrays the beloved disciple as male. He does not use, for instance, the feminine form of “disciple” ( $\mu\alpha\theta\acute{\imath}\tau\pi\alpha$ ) at all, nor  $\wp v$ , the feminine pronoun in “the one whom ( $\wp v$ ) Jesus loved.”<sup>64</sup> De Boer, however, argues that the male identity of the anonymous character was simply a ploy, a “double strategy,” because the testimony of women was not trusted at the time.<sup>65</sup> De Boer adds that, at his death, Jesus does not give

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<sup>60</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 116.

<sup>61</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 236.

<sup>62</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 254.

<sup>63</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 93, 238.

<sup>64</sup> John 19:26; 20:2; 21:7.

<sup>65</sup> De Boer, *Cover-Up*, 60–61; *Beyond the Myth*, 53.

his mother into the care of John – the traditional identification of the beloved disciple – but gives her to the women who are gathered there, among them Mary Magdalene: the “first fragile bonding of two women there under the cross.”<sup>66</sup> This is possible since the synoptic Gospels name only women at the cross<sup>67</sup> and John does the same but includes the presence of the beloved disciple (19:25). Schneiders considers that, in Jesus’ address from the cross to his mother – “Woman, behold your son” (19:26) – the word “son” need not be taken literally.<sup>68</sup> Charlesworth, on the other hand, is of the view that it is “inconceivable” that the beloved disciple is a woman, based on the use of that same word “son” (ὁ γιός).<sup>69</sup> Given that Mary Magdalene is addressed by Jesus as “woman” (γυναι) later (20:15) in the same way Jesus had earlier addressed his mother (2:4; 19:26), it seems unlikely he would refer to Mary Magdalene as “son.”

Marjanen claims that, although Mary Magdalene’s position in the *Gospel of Mary* runs parallel to that of the beloved disciple in the Gospel of John, there are parallels in other texts that give priority to similar important characters. For instance, Thomas plays a leadership role in the *Gospel of Thomas* and, similarly, James in the *Apocalypse of James*.<sup>70</sup> She need not be the beloved disciple, but added to her prominent role in the NT as the first to encounter the risen Jesus, Mary appears in textual tradition as Jesus’ most important – or perhaps most loved – female companion. In the *Gospel of Mary*, at least, she stands unrivalled as the woman whom Jesus loved.

### *The Gospel of Philip*

The *Gospel of Philip* continues the tradition of Mary’s prominence, but it also features sexual language in its reference to Jesus and Mary. The gospel is a Valentinian text that can be dated at the end of the second<sup>71</sup> or the third century.<sup>72</sup> An initial impression from

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<sup>66</sup> De Boer, *Cover-Up*, 61.

<sup>67</sup> Matt 27:55; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55.

<sup>68</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 241.

<sup>69</sup> James Charlesworth, *The Beloved Disciple: Whose Witness Validates the Gospel of John?* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1995), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 116.

<sup>71</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 147

<sup>72</sup> NHL, 141.

a cursory reading of the text suggests a physical and romantic relationship between Jesus and Mary:

And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [... loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [...]. The rest of [the disciples ...]. They said to him, ‘Why do you love her more than all of us?’ The savior answered and said to them, ‘Why do I not love you like her?’<sup>73</sup>

The answer Jesus gives for such favouritism is Mary’s supreme knowledge, her *gnosis*.<sup>74</sup> At face value, the language is sexual, but whether it is referring to a physical relationship or not is unclear. “Kissing” may be a euphemism for sexual intercourse, but such intercourse itself may be meant metaphorically, as a spiritual union.<sup>75</sup> In gnostic thought, kissing and sexual language can reflect spiritual union and the passing on of spiritual knowledge; in the *Apocalypse of James*, James is also “kissed” by Jesus in a similar fashion.<sup>76</sup> Further in *Philip*, images of sexual reproduction are used to represent the passing on of spiritual *gnosis*: “For it is by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. For this reason, we also kiss one another. We receive conception by the grace which is in one another.”<sup>77</sup>

The frequent call to the sacrament of the “bridal chamber”<sup>78</sup> in *Philip* adds to the sexual imagery. Irenaeus’ report is that, “Some of them construct a bride-chamber, and celebrate a mystery with certain invocations on their initiate, and say that what they do is a spiritual marriage, according to the likeness of the unions above.”<sup>79</sup> It is from this sacrament of “the mirrored bridal chamber” that one receives “a male power or a female power, the bridegroom and the bride;”<sup>80</sup> it is where “the image and the angel are

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<sup>73</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 63.32–64.5 (*NHL*, 148).

<sup>74</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 64.5–9 (*NHL*, 148).

<sup>75</sup> Price, “Gnostic Apostle?” 59; Perroni and Simonelli, *Mary of Magdala*, 129.

<sup>76</sup> *2 Apoc. Jas.* 56.14–20 (*NHL*, 274): “And he kissed my mouth. He took hold of me, saying, ‘My beloved! Behold I shall reveal to you those (things) that (neither) [the] heavens nor their archons have known.’”

<sup>77</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 59.2–6 (*NHL*, 145).

<sup>78</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 67.5 (*NHL*, 150); 69.1; 69.25–37; 70.9 (*NHL*, 151); 70.33 (*NHL*, 152); 72.20; 74.22 (*NHL*, 153).

<sup>79</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.11.4–5 (LCL 153:329).

<sup>80</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 65.9–12 (*NHL* 149).

united.”<sup>81</sup> It would seem that this imagery functioned to initiate the believer into the celibate life of the angelic resurrected believer: “Baptism includes the resurrection [and the] redemption; the redemption in the bridal chamber.”<sup>82</sup>

References to the sacrament of the bridal chamber could reflect physical marriage between the Valentinians, or even a type of free-love arrangement.<sup>83</sup> According to Pagels, the *Gospel of Philip* seems distinct from other second century Gnostics with less concern over ascetic practices and more with overriding values of truth, *gnosis* and love.<sup>84</sup> It seems more likely, though, and consistent with other gnostic thought, that *Philip* is encratic in outlook, in which case the language of marriage is spiritual and symbolic. The same sacrament, practised by the Thomasine Christians, was a spiritual event: in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus says, “There are many standing at the door, but it is the solitary who will enter the bridal chamber.”<sup>85</sup> In Meyer’s interpretation of this, “the pure asexual wedding chamber seems operative . . . by the linking of the terms *monachos* and ‘wedding chamber’.”<sup>86</sup> It would seem by this that the sacrament was understood as a spiritual union, not a physical one.

According to *Philip*, Mary was known as Jesus’ “companion:” “There were three who always walked with the lord: Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion.”<sup>87</sup> The Coptic word for “companion” and its Greek equivalent, κοινωνός, can mean “marriage partner” (Mal 2:14), though it can also mean other types of partnership or fellowship (2 Cor 6:14).<sup>88</sup> It carries a sense of equal status. It may simply be that Mary is an “equal partner in the teaching and transmission.”<sup>89</sup> But

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<sup>81</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 65.24 (*NHL* 149).

<sup>82</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 69.25-27 (*NHL*, 151).

<sup>83</sup> Van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion*, 147.

<sup>84</sup> Elaine Pagels, “The ‘Mystery of Marriage’ in the *Gospel of Philip* Revisited,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. B. A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 452-54.

<sup>85</sup> *Gos. Thom. log.* 75 (*NTApoc* 1:127).

<sup>86</sup> Marvin Meyer, “Making Mary Male: The Categories ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in the Gospel of Thomas,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 554-70.

<sup>87</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 59.8-9 (*NHL*, 145).

<sup>88</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 151.

<sup>89</sup> Bourgeault, *Meaning of Mary*, 42.

given the tenor of the rest of *Philip*, the most likely interpretation of Mary's role as κοινωνός is as Jesus' "spiritual consort" and partner in the sacrament of the bridal chamber.<sup>90</sup>

*Philip* describes Mary as "the Wisdom who is called 'the barren,' she is the mother [of the] angels. And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...] loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [...]."<sup>91</sup> Here, in the context of her being Jesus' favourite, she is also called Wisdom, an allusion to *Sophia*, the feminine divine counterpart in both Jewish and gnostic tradition. "Barren" suggests she has never had children but coupled with the phrase "mother of the angels," spiritual motherhood is implied. Mary is a leading figure as the companion of Jesus and her relationship to him is a spiritual one: a "spiritual consort" as Marjanen suggests. In *Philip*, then, we might glean intertextual echoes of a tradition regarding the special relationship between Mary and Jesus that is alluded to in John's Gospel but contextualised in *Philip* to reflect the community's gnostic understandings of spiritual love and union.

### *The Psalms of Herakleides*

Mary Magdalene is given a high accord in the liturgical texts of the fourth-century Manichaeans. The Manichaean psalms were probably composed between the end of the third century and the middle of the fourth, with extant versions from the fourth century in Coptic.<sup>92</sup> Of these, the *Psalms of Herakleides* particularly deserves mention as the only ancient known use of John 20:17 as a direct source.<sup>93</sup> The influence of John 20:11–18 on psalm 187 is so striking in its detail that it obviates the need of the author to identify which Mary he/she is referring to, and the "Magdalene" moniker is omitted.<sup>94</sup> It thus represents both the continued textual tradition of the character of Mary, and also of John 20:17 itself.

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<sup>90</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 154.

<sup>91</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 63.30–36 (*NHL* 148).

<sup>92</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 203–204.

<sup>93</sup> De Boer, "Interpretation," 131.

<sup>94</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 208.

As a dualistic religion, Manichaeism denigrated reproduction.<sup>95</sup> Separating the evil of the material world from the perceived superiority of spiritual existence, it could be identified as “Gnosticism’s spiritual heir.”<sup>96</sup> Psalm 187 reframes John’s “Do not touch me,” as “Know me: do not touch me.” Here, revelatory *gnosis* is directly and positively contrasted to the inferior sense of touch:

‘Mariam, Mariam, know me: do not touch me. [Stem] the tears of thy eyes and know me that I am thy master. Only touch me not, for I have not yet seen the face of my Father. Thy God was not stolen away, according to the thoughts of thy littleness: thy God did not die, rather he mastered death.’<sup>97</sup>

It is noteworthy that Mary Magdalene is unashamedly owned by ascetic spirituality, and it is also noteworthy that the prohibition to touch is included in the psalm as worthy of an extended interpretation. At least from the fourth century, then, “Do not touch me” in John 20:17 was associated with the ascetic tradition.

In psalm 194 of *Herakleides*, Mary is also identified with the female figure of Wisdom: “He chose Mariam, the spirit of wisdom,”<sup>98</sup> an identity also ascribed to her in the *Gospel of Philip*, as discussed above. This may simply be naming her gift of wisdom in line with her role as teacher of the others. But the structure of the sentence suggests the pattern of a noun in apposition, which identifies Mary herself as the spirit of wisdom. In this respect, Coyle suggests:

[T]hese writings go further than do Gnostic ones when they *identify* [Mary] with the Spirit of Wisdom. . . The Magdalene, then, would serve Manichaean christology/soteriology in a dual capacity: first as personifying Sophia and, secondly, as an essential complement to the Christ-Saviour figure.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 183,270.

<sup>96</sup> J. Kevin Coyle, “Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?” *Muséon: Revue d’Études Orientales* 104 (1991): 39-55.

<sup>97</sup> *Herakleides* 187.2-8 (Allberry).

<sup>98</sup> *Herakleides* 194.19 (Allberry).

<sup>99</sup> Coyle, “Manichaeism?” 49, 55. Italics original.

Here in the *Psalms of Herakleides*, then, Mary Magdalene would seem to be Jesus' complement, his companion (κοινωνός) and missionary, in the same way she is in the *Gospel of Philip* and, as I suggest, in John 20:17.

As discussed earlier, in a modern context, this sense of Mary's significance to Jesus suggests to some scholars that Mary Magdalene and Jesus, in history, were lovers or married. De Boer gives her answer to this: "The other question which keeps occupying people down through the centuries is whether Mary Magdalene felt attracted as a woman to Jesus. We have not come across any texts which indicate this. The texts show she was impressed by Jesus' teaching."<sup>100</sup> This is true, but it is equally true that there are no texts that indicate that she was *not* attracted to Jesus, nor he to her, nor that discipleship and attraction are mutually exclusive categories. The absence of texts suggesting they were sexual partners is not indicative of an absence of sexual attraction: we simply do not know. John's portrayal of Mary and Jesus in the resurrection garden and the language he uses, as discussed in Section One of this chapter, combined with the remembered tradition of Mary as Jesus' closest spiritual companion, as discussed here, suggests their relationship had at least the potential for attraction to one another.

### Mary Magdalene as "Male"

It is not breaking news that, in the Graeco-Roman worldview in which Christian tradition developed, it was generally accepted as fact that women by nature were inferior to men. Philo of Alexandria, for example, considered the male to be "wise, sound, just, prudent, pious, filled with freedom and boldness, and kin to wisdom," whereas the female, "irrational and akin to bestial passions, fear, sorrow, pleasure and desire, from which ensue incurable weaknesses and indescribable diseases."<sup>101</sup> In popular thought, "femininity was seen as a highly risky, if not inherently negative, condition."<sup>102</sup> In view of high child and maternal mortality rates, negative attitudes to reproduction found their place. Any disdain for the material world was applied, by extension, to women as agents

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<sup>100</sup> De Boer, *Beyond the Myth*, 122.

<sup>101</sup> Philo, *Questions on Genesis* 4.15 (LCL 380:288).

<sup>102</sup> Gasparro, "Asceticism," 140.

of sexual intercourse and childbearing. The texts below show Mary Magdalene as a participant in this thought world, which fostered sexual asceticism and denied the female aspect of humanity. Again, the NT narratives of Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus are amplified and recontextualised within the gnostic worldview.

### *The Gospel of Philip*

The *Gospel of Philip* explained – at least for the Valentinians – the cause of human suffering: the problem lay in the original creation of woman. The solution therefore lay in undoing that creation. According to Valentinian thought, the differentiation of male and female created disunity, brought about by Eve's extraction from Adam's body (Gen 2:22), the solution to which was reunification. When Adam was alone, before the creation of Eve, there was no death: "When Eve was still in Adam, death did not exist. When she was separated from him, death came into being. If he enters again and attains his former self, death will be no more."<sup>103</sup> The return to the sole, adamic state – best understood as the gnostic doctrine of the "primal Anthropos"<sup>104</sup> – meant the elimination of womanhood. In this schema, the reason Christ came to earth and the purpose of his work was to undo the differentiation between male and female, and return human beings to one state:

Because of this, Christ came to repair the separation which was from the beginning and again unite the two, and to give life to those who died as a result of the separation and unite them... Indeed those who have united in the bridal chamber will no longer be separated.<sup>105</sup>

Marjanen suggests that, through the sacrament referred to as the mystery of the bridal chamber, a male and a female were united back into one single Adam, though the text is not clear whether this was a literal sexual union "with another Gnostic of the opposite

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<sup>103</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 68.22–26 (*NHL*, 150).

<sup>104</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John*, SBL Monograph Series 17 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), 15.

<sup>105</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 70.12–21 (*NHL*, 151).

sex” or as a spiritual union “with an angelic counterpart.”<sup>106</sup> Given the overall purpose of the sacrament, the latter seems more likely.

In Chapter Six I will return to the fourth Gospel’s focus on Genesis, a focus that is in many ways irreconcilable with those expressed above in *Philip*. One clear difference exists in the attitude to physical creation, which includes the creation of man and woman. The prologue to the Gospel (1:1) echoes the opening phrase of the Genesis narrative with ἐν ἀρχῇ (Gen 1:1) in which physical creation takes centre stage; Christ as Word is “next to God” ( $\pi\tau\circ\varsigma\ \tau\circ\varsigma\ \theta\epsilon\circ\varsigma$ ) intimately involved in the creation of the world (John 1:1–3), in which this Word ultimately became flesh (1:14). There is no hint of a need to abolish the creation of male and female (Gen 1:27; 2:24); *all* who received him became children of God (John 1:12). It is in the encounter of the male Jesus and the female Mary Magdalene that redemption is sealed on Easter morning: the inclusion of two genders, not a denial of gender.

In the previous chapter, it was evident that the ascetic looked ahead to the angelic state, devoid of sexuality: salvation lay in living a resurrected life in the present, adopting in advance the sexless existence of the future. According to the *Gospel of Philip*, salvation equally lay in looking back to Eden, a return from sexual differentiation back into an androgynous Adam, since it was at the creation of Eve that death and suffering began. Thus, both the anticipation of eschatological angelhood and the return to Adam’s pure state motivated sexual asceticism. As Gasparro notes, “The fusion of *archē* (beginning) and *telos* (end) in the name of angelic similarity was . . . perceived as the absence of sexual activity.”<sup>107</sup> For women especially, “lack of sexual differentiation . . . was both a condition and an effect of eschatological salvation.”<sup>108</sup> For this reason, in the texts below, the ideal woman refrains from sexual intercourse and subsequent pregnancy, and becomes “male” or manly. In these texts, Mary Magdalene participates in the remedy for humankind: her sexual nature is denied. It was the language of masculinity that conveyed

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<sup>106</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 153.

<sup>107</sup> Gasparro, “Asceticism,” 138.

<sup>108</sup> Gasparro, “Asceticism,” 136.

the concept of a female who was spiritual and untied to her sexual nature: she was honoured, who travelled the path of celibacy or a more rigid asceticism.

### *The Gospel of Mary*

The *Gospel of Mary* refers to manhood as ideal for both men and women.

Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brethren, ‘Do not weep and do not grieve nor be irresolute, for his grace will be entirely with you and will protect you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us into men.’ When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good.<sup>109</sup>

In this text, once Levi has defended Mary against Peter, he encourages the disciples to go out and preach: “Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect man, and acquire him for ourselves as He commanded us, and preach the gospel.”<sup>110</sup> The ideal state is to become “men” or “to put on the perfect man.”<sup>111</sup> In both these cases, the Coptic reflects the Greek ἄνθρωπος so could be translated “human beings” and “perfect humanity” respectively.<sup>112</sup> De Boer translates, “true Human Being” instead of “men,”<sup>113</sup> claiming that “Mary here specifically uses the generic term for ‘Man’ and not the term denoting the male. . . Being Human then consists in the indwelling of the Human One.”<sup>114</sup> This may be true, but the common NT usage of ἄνθρωπος as a generic term for “human” carries a masculine bias and is often used for men as representative of humanity (Matt 4:4; Mark 8:24), or men on their own (Matt 12:13; Luke 5:20), but not women.

It is also possible there is an allusion here to the scriptural injunction for believers to reach the knowledge of the son of God, the fullness of Christ, to attain the “perfect man” (ἄνδρα τέλειον, Eph 4:13).<sup>115</sup> If so, the term refers to maleness (ἄνδρα) perfected in Christ, not a generic term for humanity. This is consonant with the encouragement to

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<sup>109</sup> *Gos. Mary* 9.12-22 (*NHL*, 525).

<sup>110</sup> *Gos. Mary* 18.15-19 (*NHL*, 527).

<sup>111</sup> *Gos. Mary* 9.20; 18.16 (*NHL*, 525, 527).

<sup>112</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 105,113,221.

<sup>113</sup> De Boer, *Cover-Up*, 74.

<sup>114</sup> De Boer, *Beyond the Myth*, 106-107.

<sup>115</sup> Perroni and Simonelli, *Mary of Magdala*, 116.

the believer to “put on,” literally “wear” (*ἐνδύω*), Christ, ignoring the desires of the flesh (Rom 13:14). This idea subsumes the feminine into the perfection of the male Christ.

### *Dialogue of the Saviour*

The *Dialogue of the Saviour* was probably not written before the second century,<sup>116</sup> and shows again the association of Mary with a developed asceticism. In this interchange, Jesus rejects “the works of womanhood,” but Mary’s response is ambiguous.

Judas said . . . ‘When we pray, how should we pray?’ The Lord said, ‘Pray in the place where there is no woman.’ Matthew said, “Pray in the place where there is [no woman],” he tells us, meaning, Destroy the works of womanhood, not because there is any other [manner of birth], but because they will cease [giving birth].’ Mary said, ‘They will never be obliterated.’<sup>117</sup>

According to Attridge, “the destruction of or escape from ‘the works of femininity’ frequently meant sexual asceticism . . . and the achievement of ‘masculinity’ could be understood as the return to the primordial state of the androgynous protoplast.”<sup>118</sup> The “works of womanhood” appear to refer to sexual intercourse, conception and giving birth, which were, in gnostic thought, the process of entrapment in a material body facilitated by the female gender.

In a strange irony, Mary is not only a prominent speaker in the *Dialogue* (one of three disciples) but is also highly esteemed as “a woman who understood completely;” or, as Pagels translates, “a woman who knew the All.”<sup>119</sup> Yet all the while, a conversation continues around her, and including her, in which the “works of women” are denigrated. Her womanhood is treated with disdain, but separately from her person, as if her gender and sexuality are not part of the person who is praised. It is possible, too, that the praise accorded to Mary is only permissible because she is one who denies her gender and sexuality. Mary’s role as a leading woman in the circle of Jesus’ followers, which we see

<sup>116</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 77; *NHL*, 244; *NTApoc* 1:303.

<sup>117</sup> *Dial. Sav.* 144.14–22 (*NHL*, 254). From this point the text is so corrupt as to be incoherent.

<sup>118</sup> Harold Attridge, “‘Masculine Fellowship’ in the *Acts of Thomas*,” in *The Future of Early Christianity*, Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 410.

<sup>119</sup> *Dial. Sav.* 139.12–13 (*NHL*, 252); Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 64.

echoed from the NT traditions, especially John, is recontextualised in the *Dialogue* so that it is realised at the cost of her womanhood.

### *Gospel of Thomas*

The *Gospel of Thomas* offers further strands of the tradition that associated Mary Magdalene with the practice of sexual denial and elucidates the meaning of “maleness” in ascetic texts. The text deserves further comment, as it is a type of intertext with John’s Gospel in its own right, so I will return to it, in its own full section below. It is also of particular interest in this thesis because the character of the apostle Thomas – from whom the *Gospel* and the later *Acts of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas the Contender* all derive – shares with Mary a significant role in John’s resurrection account. In John, Thomas also has an encounter with the risen Christ, just a handful of verses after Mary. Thus, the *Gospel of Thomas* is one point of intersection for the traditions of the doubting apostle who was invited to touch (John 20:27) and the Magdalene who was prohibited (20:17). I return to the parallel nature of the encounters in the final chapter of the thesis.

Mary Magdalene appears in two *logia* in the *Gospel of Thomas*. In the first instance, in 21–22, she asks a question on discipleship as a spokeswoman for the disciples, a question which implies a certain sexlessness as the route to the kingdom, indicating asceticism: “Jesus said to them, ‘When you make the two one, . . . and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male be not male nor the female female; . . . then will you enter [the kingdom].’”<sup>120</sup> To meld the male and female is reminiscent of the perfect human being, before Eve was formed from Adam’s body: a return to the “pristine state of the androgynous prelapsarian man,” before the advent of sexual intercourse on earth.<sup>121</sup> Marvin Meyer sees echoes here of Philo’s high accord given to asexuality – the disappearance of male and female characteristics, or a possible allusion to the transformation associated with the baptismal formula in Paul, “there is no male and

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<sup>120</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 22 (NHL, 129).*

<sup>121</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 49–50.

female” (Gal 3:28).<sup>122</sup> The seed thought is that those worthy of the kingdom of God are androgynous.

Similarities and differences between *Thomas* and the Gospel of John will be discussed further below in this chapter as well as in Chapter Six. *Logion* 114 warrants repeating here as it forms a direct contrast with John 20:17 in which Mary may retain her female gender while remaining a key disciple and missionary of Jesus.

Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary leave us for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.’<sup>123</sup>

This introduces a slightly different perspective from *logion* 22 above, in which ideal oneness is achieved by eliminating sexual differentiation, whereas here in 114 the solution is for the female to become male. Marjanen suggests that because of this, and because the Coptic has an exclusive sense of “male” rather than the generic “human being,” it is probably a late-second century addition to the rest of *Thomas*, which would locate it in a more developed gnostic setting.<sup>124</sup> Even if this is the case, it is in accord with the Thomasine tradition, hence its place in the text, and it specified Mary’s womanhood as a basis for rejection.

Along with other scholars, Mohri recognises that texts which speak of Mary “becoming male” are speaking of asceticism.<sup>125</sup> Price suggests that the transformation from female to male, “eliminated gender-based subordination by transcending sexuality altogether,”<sup>126</sup> failing to notice that this is at the expense of female identity. Bourgeault suffers from the same dualism: Mary’s womanhood is only her “outer form” and is dispensable.<sup>127</sup> De Boer suggests it could refer to a move from a woman’s (supposed) natural, earthly and sensory perception, to a spiritual perception and enlightenment; that is, Mary’s move from

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<sup>122</sup> Meyer, “Making Mary Male,” 560.

<sup>123</sup> *Gos. Thom. log.* 114 (*NHL*, 138).

<sup>124</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 51–52.

<sup>125</sup> Mohri, “*Noli Me Tangere*’ and the Apocrypha,” 89.

<sup>126</sup> Price, “Gnostic Apostle?” 60.

<sup>127</sup> Bourgeault, *Meaning of Mary*, 36,78.

misunderstanding to understanding.<sup>128</sup> Pagels suggests *logion* 114 “may be taken symbolically: what is merely human (therefore *female*) must be transformed into what is divine (the ‘living spirit’ the *male*). . . [W]omen] become Jesus’ disciples when they transcend their human nature, and so ‘become male.’”<sup>129</sup> It reflects the generally accepted tenet that “the mind and the link with the divine, is male.”<sup>130</sup> Alternatively, the *logion* is deliberately portraying Peter as a misogynist as an indirect criticism of the institutional church represented by Peter.<sup>131</sup>

There are those who would interpret 114 in more practical terms. The saying could have referred to the known practice of ascetic women disguising themselves in the clothing and external behaviour of men. Thecla, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, says to Paul, for instance, “I will cut my hair and follow you wherever you should go.”<sup>132</sup> Stephen Patterson argues that such strategies would have been a likely disguise as protection on the roads for female disciples travelling with the early Christian itinerant groups.<sup>133</sup> Marilyn Dunn has observed:

The belief that women could become ‘male’ or that gender was temporary meant in practice that in some ascetic groups and sects men and women mixed freely, convinced that the temptations of the flesh were either irrelevant or could be overcome by spiritual achievement.<sup>134</sup>

In this context, Patterson interprets “Blessed is the womb which has not conceived, and the breasts which have not given suck”<sup>135</sup> in tandem with practices of “cropping the hair close, accepting male dress, and in extreme cases, physical emaciation to the extent that

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<sup>128</sup> De Boer, “Interpretation,” 109.

<sup>129</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 67.

<sup>130</sup> Meyer, “Making Mary Male,” 566.

<sup>131</sup> Meyer, “Making Mary Male,” 562.

<sup>132</sup> *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 3.25 in *The Acts of Paul and Thecla: A Critical Introduction and Commentary*, by Jeremy Barrier, WUNT2 270 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 132.

<sup>133</sup> Stephen Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1993), 155.

<sup>134</sup> Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 45.

<sup>135</sup> *Gos. Thom. log.* 79 (*NTApoc* 1:127).

female bodily function and characteristics all but disappear.”<sup>136</sup> This scenario is plausible. There is a tradition found in a fourth century text, the *Acts of Philip*, that Mary Magdalene, as part of the apostolic group, does just that. Jesus speaks to her, in sending her out on a missionary journey with Bartholomew and Philip:

‘But as for you, Mariamne, change your dress and outward appearance, and put off completely your feminine form and the summer garment with which you have clothed yourself. Do not allow the hem of your garment to drag on the ground, neither tie it up, but trim it with scissors and walk together with your brother Philip.’<sup>137</sup>

In a similar vein, the *Gospel of Thomas* makes it clear that Mary must leave behind her own female nature as part of her relationship with Jesus.

## Section Two Conclusion

Our knowledge from first-century texts of the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus is sparse, yet sufficient to ascertain that Mary was greatly significant to Jesus, present and first in his death and resurrection narratives of the NT. She was also unattached to a male and named after her town, which implies she was alone and celibate. Another possible first-century text discussed above, the encratic *Gospel of Thomas*, paints Mary as an ascetic in *logion* 114. My discussion above of the non-canonical gospel tradition shows evidence that Mary Magdalene was seen in the developing centuries of early Christianity as an ascetic woman. In the Egyptian texts of the second to fourth century she was believed to have played a significant role as Jesus’ companion and counterpart who denied her sexuality for the sake of her role as a leader among the disciples. I suggest that this image of the couple could be an intertextual echo, an amplification and recontextualisation of the image that John so clearly imprints upon his reader in his first-century text: an encounter in which they may not embrace, nor

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<sup>136</sup> Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas*, 154. See also Teresa Shaw for evidence that fasting made women physically more like men, in *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 220–253.

<sup>137</sup> The *Acts of Philip* 8.4 in The *Acts of Philip: A New Translation*, ed. Francois Bovon and Christopher R. Matthews (Waco, Baylor UP, 2012), 75. Online at <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/18827>.

touch, nor possibly even come near. Here too – as her later echoes will resound – Mary is a leader amongst the disciples, entrusted with news of the resurrection, even as she is also the recipient of an otherwise puzzling prohibition extended to her by Jesus, a prohibition which nonetheless she understands implicitly.

### Section Three: “Anti-Intertexture”

In this section, I will discuss excerpts from the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Epistle to Rhiginos*, and show the marked divergence between these texts and the Gospel of John on the topics of resurrection and ascension. Intertextual resonances, in this case, become intertextual dissonances. I refer to this as “anti-intertext:” in its world of interaction with other texts, the fourth Gospel makes a point to the contrary. John does hold some common ground with later gnostic, docetic or ascetic texts, but there are also aspects where the Gospel expresses an opposite viewpoint. Because John straddles the two worlds of the spiritual and the physical, with a twin emphasis on both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus, the Gospel reflects “dialectical thinking,” according to Anderson: “regarding the human and divine presentations of Jesus, the Evangelist seeks to hold these polarities in tension.”<sup>138</sup> Thus, the divine, spiritual and revelatory strand threaded throughout the Gospel offered an eclectic appeal to gnostic, docetic and ascetic groups who might overlook John’s equal but opposite focus on physical incarnation.

John’s Gospel appealed to the gnostic Valentinus: the earliest extant commentary on the fourth Gospel is a work of one such second-century theologian, Heracleon. According to Paula Fredriksen, John became “the Gospel of choice for Valentinian Christians.”<sup>139</sup> Irenaeus confirms that they made “copious use of that according to John.”<sup>140</sup> Possibly even before Heracleon’s commentary, the gnostic groups, the Naassenes and Peratae, were also already favouring the fourth Gospel over the Synoptics.<sup>141</sup> The ascetic Montanists were enamoured of John’s Gospel for its focus on the Paraclete, so much so

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<sup>138</sup> Anderson, *Riddles*, 129.

<sup>139</sup> Fredriksen, “Historical Jesus,” 249.

<sup>140</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.11.7 (Roberts and Rambaut, 1:292–93).

<sup>141</sup> Pagels, *Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*, 16.

that the conservative Roman Gaius mistrusted this Gospel because it was used widely by the group.<sup>142</sup> As we saw earlier, one of the Manichaean fourth-century liturgical texts retains the only other known instance of John 20:17, where it was interpreted as an invitation to a gnostic “knowing” beyond touch: Jesus says, “Miriam, *know* me, do not touch me.”<sup>143</sup> Such an uptake by these groups created what Hill has dubbed “Johannophobia:” the modern fear of John’s Gospel as a sectarian text, in spite of its equal acceptance in early church circles.<sup>144</sup>

Nevertheless, the appeal that John held for those groups which valued the spiritual and undermined the physical is understandable. The longest teaching passage in John, chapters 13–17, portrays Jesus in his final hours. This last discourse lends itself to a focus on the Holy Spirit and the importance of revelation and knowledge, topics dear to gnosticism. In the opening prologue of the Gospel, the abstract concept of the *logos* and its play on dark and light (1:1–5) might also appeal to an anti-material theology. Thus, Bultmann came to believe that the fourth Gospel itself has gnostic tendencies, or even origins.<sup>145</sup> Wayne Meeks read John’s ascending and descending messiah as evidence of a gnostic sect.<sup>146</sup> Perhaps John 20:17 itself retained the popularity it did – preserved in the Manichaean psalms until the fourth century – because of its link to the practice of sexual abstinence. But this is a partial reading of John: the Gospel has a parallel focus of equal import. The text – bolstered, I argue, by 20:17 – makes a statement on incarnation and on embodiment.

## The Body Debate

In the next two chapters of the thesis – as has also been the case in this and the previous chapter – implicit and explicit connections can be seen between apocalyptic thought and

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<sup>142</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.16.22 (LCL 153:482–83); D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 7.

<sup>143</sup> *Herakleides* 187.2–3 (Allberry), italics mine.

<sup>144</sup> Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 11.

<sup>145</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, vol. 2 (London: SCM, 1955), 20–21.

<sup>146</sup> Wayne Meeks. “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism.” *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72.

celibacy in the texts discussed. Further, there lies a web of ideas and beliefs beneath the controversies we have seen in the NT texts over ascetic practices amongst believers. This web includes a variety of ideas on resurrection and beliefs about the afterlife and the fate of the body after death. I suggest that John’s Gospel – and hence my reading of 20:17 – comes down on the side of an embodied resurrection. This tendency in John suggests the integral part his Gospel played as reactive literary response from a community of believers in the bodily-risen Christ, and/or as an original source of controversy for later groups.

As we have seen already in Chapter Three, some groups – both before and after the NT era – foresaw an angelic state after death, while others, such as the Sadducees, denied the possibility of resurrection. It appears that “Jews of the first century seem to have held many different views about death, there was simply no such thing as *the* Jewish view.”<sup>147</sup> Certainly, some OT texts show a resignation to the vague but unhappy world of Sheol,<sup>148</sup> but others speak of future rewards, or an anticipation of metamorphosis into angels and stars.<sup>149</sup> The apocalyptic language of Daniel 12:2-3, for example, expects that the righteous faithful who have suffered will rise up (ἀναστήσονται) from death to eternal life. They will enjoy eternity like the bright lights of heaven (ώς φωστῆρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) and as the stars of heaven (τὰ ἀστρα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ). In other instances, the language of “being raised” could refer to the subject being raised physically to mortal life again, being raised from sickness, shame or disenfranchisement to a place of safety, or resurrection might be understood as a “spiritual rising up.”<sup>150</sup> Eschatological hope also centred around the national restoration of Israel (Acts 1:6).<sup>151</sup>

Among this “pluriform spectrum of resurrection traditions,”<sup>152</sup> there are texts in which a “raising up” conveys the expectation of a bodily resurrection to eternal life for the

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<sup>147</sup> Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 108.

<sup>148</sup> Gen 37:35; Ps 88:3-5; 115:17; Isa 38:18.

<sup>149</sup> Job 38:7; Isa 14:12; Rev 1:20; 9:1-2.

<sup>150</sup> Charlesworth, “Prolegomenous Reflections,” 253.

<sup>151</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 681.

<sup>152</sup> Hogeterp, “Belief in Resurrection,” 319.

righteous believer.<sup>153</sup> Isaiah 26:19 declares that “the dead will rise (ἀναστήσονται), and those in tombs will be raised (ἐγερθήσονται).” A Greek addition to the final words of the book of Job states that it was written of Job that he would “again be raised (πάλιν ἀναστήσεσθαι) with those whom the Lord raises up (ἀνίστησιν)” (LXX Job 42:17a). This belief seems underpinned by a belief that God’s power had no limit, especially on behalf of those who were faithful, and extended even beyond the grave to the raising of the dead.<sup>154</sup>

During the second-temple period, the text of 2 Maccabees is especially informative as it anticipates that the righteous dead will be physically raised. In one story of persecution, a mother of seven sons encourages her children with these words: “I do not know how you appeared in my womb; it was not I who endowed you with breath and life. . . It is the creator of the world . . . who in his mercy will most surely give you back both breath and life” (2 Macc 7:22–23). Her sons reflect a similar belief: “It was heaven that gave me these limbs; for the sake of his laws I distain them; from him I hope to receive them again” (2 Macc 7:11 JB). The persecuted sons trust God’s promise “to be raised up again” (πάλιν ἀναστήσεσθαι) by him; whereas, for their persecutors, “there will be no resurrection (ἀνάστασις) to life” (2 Macc 7:14). C. D. Elledge is of the view that, as well as the Daniel and 2 Maccabees texts above, certain pseudepigraphal texts such as *1 Enoch* reflect resurrection belief, as do the *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521) and *Pseudo-Ezekiel* (4Q385–88, 391) from amongst the DSS,<sup>155</sup> a prospect I discuss in Chapter Five.

Thus, there is evidence of “conflicting tendencies” within the texts of Judaism, so that while some groups entertained “resurrection hope,” others “ignored, opposed, or were generally confused” by it.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless, some texts do give a hope or an expectation that the dead might be raised. None of these texts, however, claim that God had, in fact,

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<sup>153</sup> Also Psalm 16:10; Job 19:25–27.

<sup>154</sup> James L. Crenshaw, “Love is Stronger Than Death: Intimations of Life beyond the Grave,” in James H. Charlesworth *et al.*, *Resurrection: The Origin and Future of a Biblical Doctrine*, Faith and Scholarship Colloquies (NY: T&T Clark, 2006), 56, 71.

<sup>155</sup> C. D. Elledge, “Resurrection of the Dead: Exploring our Earliest Evidence Today,” in *Resurrection: Origin and Future*, 47. The *Messianic Apocalypse* is also known under its previous title, *On Resurrection*.

<sup>156</sup> Elledge, “Resurrection of the Dead,” 41, *cf.* 1 Cor 15:12.

raised an individual to bodily immortality in the way that the texts of the NT claimed about Jesus.<sup>157</sup> But in the context of some of the beliefs evident in the second-temple period, and in the proclamations of the NT, “resurrection was not an unexpected miracle but an expected eschatological event.”<sup>158</sup> This seems to be the same hope that John portrays in Martha’s statement at the event of her brother’s death: “I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day” (John 11:24).

By contrast, Greek philosophy tended to separate the body and soul at death. In his survey of Graeco-Roman beliefs on the afterlife, Riley concluded that, although the post-mortem soul might, in its shadowy existence, appear and have contact with humans, such spirits “were reputed to be impalpable.”<sup>159</sup> The risen body of Jesus as described by the Gospel of John would have been “an impossibility for . . . the Graeco-Roman world.”<sup>160</sup> Rather, a future hope lay in “positing that death is the separation of the soul from the body,”<sup>161</sup> offering release from a body which was the source of suffering and of destructive passions. Human bodies could thus be considered by some to be a holding bay for “souls . . . fettered in the prison of the body.”<sup>162</sup> The body in such a schema could be seen as a “saboteur” throughout life,<sup>163</sup> an enemy to be gladly discarded at death.

Controversy over the nature of Jesus’ body – both before and after its resurrection – occurred against this backdrop. Irenaeus lists the Valentinians, the Nicolaitans, the Marcionites and other Gnostics as incompatible in their teachings with John’s Gospel, on the grounds that, “according to the opinion of no one of the heretics was the Word of God made flesh.”<sup>164</sup> They believed that the Saviour “never became incarnate nor suffered but . . . as soon as He had declared the unknown Father, He did again ascend to the

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<sup>157</sup> James Charlesworth, “Resurrection: The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament,” in *Resurrection: Origin and Future*, 178.

<sup>158</sup> W. Waite Willis Jr., “A Theology of Resurrection: Its Meaning for Jesus, Us, and God,” in *Resurrection: Origin and Future*, 209.

<sup>159</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 68.

<sup>160</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 115.

<sup>161</sup> Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 109.

<sup>162</sup> Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 90.

<sup>163</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 144.

<sup>164</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.11.3 (Roberts and Rambaut, 1:289).

Pleroma.”<sup>165</sup> Irenaeus cites several NT texts<sup>166</sup> to defend his argument that the physical body should be seen as an integral part of humanity, and that at the resurrection, the flesh would rise. The extended argument is presumably directed against those who were arguing it would not.<sup>167</sup>

One sign of the continued debate over the nature of the raised body of Christ has been pointed out by H. B. Swete in the adoption of new language to discuss resurrection in the late first century. The NT is far more likely to make reference to a “resurrection of the dead,” yet a novel and distinctive phrase, the “resurrection of the flesh,” is found in the works Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch, showing that the phrase was in use in Rome by AD 95 or 96, presumably to make the point that Jesus underwent a physical resurrection of the “flesh” not just a resurrection from the dead.<sup>168</sup> Malcolm Peel refers to the topic of the resurrection as the “storm centre of debate,” by the middle of the second century.<sup>169</sup> “It is clear,” Swete adds, “that this repeated insistence on the fact of the Resurrection of the Lord was directed against the Docetic tendency to reduce it to a purely spiritual event.”<sup>170</sup>

By the time of the writing of John, it seems that certain tenets within the beliefs of some anti-material groups diverged from those held by the community represented in John’s Gospel. According to Pagels, points of dissention centred around, first, the definition of Jesus as a human in the ordinary flesh of a man *vis à vis* the divine Christ, and, second, the reliance on the physical, historical events of Jesus’ incarnation, death and resurrection *vis à vis* spiritual symbol, allegory and myth.<sup>171</sup> Integral to this disagreement was

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<sup>165</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.11.3 (Roberts and Rambaut, 1:289).

<sup>166</sup> John 2:19–21; 1 Cor 3:16; 1 Thess 5:23. See also Luke 24:39.

<sup>167</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.6.1–2 (Roberts and Rambaut, 2:67–70).

<sup>168</sup> H. B. Swete, “The Resurrection of the Flesh,” *JTS* 18 70–71 (1917): 135–141, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/10.1093/jts/os-XVIII.70-71.135>.

<sup>169</sup> Malcolm Peel, *The Epistle to Reginos: A Valentinian Letter on the Resurrection*, The New Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 17.

<sup>170</sup> Swete, “Resurrection of the Flesh,” 137.

<sup>171</sup> Pagels, *Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis*, 12.

controversy over the nature of the resurrected body of Jesus – that same body that Mary is forbidden to touch in John 20:17.

## Resurrection and Ascension at the Crossroads

Perhaps those groups of early believers whom John found contrary – or who found John contrary – were as close to home as the proponents of asceticism discussed in the previous chapter, to which 1 Corinthians,<sup>172</sup> 1 Timothy 4 and Colossians 2 allude.

Perhaps this is reflected in 1 John 2:19 as members adopted a divergent view: those who “went out from us but were not from us.” Alternatively, as Irenaeus records, the first-century proto-gnostic Cerinthus may have been the target of the Gospel’s polemic as John attempted to refute the docetic theology and denial of resurrection of the Cerinthians.<sup>173</sup> Irenaeus knows of an early tradition that places Cerinthus as a personal enemy of John:

There are also those who heard from him [Polycrates] that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is within.’<sup>174</sup>

Admittedly, the story may be solely anecdotal, but nonetheless locates proto-gnostic belief as anathema to John, a tradition consistent with the theory that his Gospel was directed against such detractors. Another possibility among many – and I discuss this alternative further below and later in Chapter Six – was a divergent belief among the followers of the apostle Thomas, famous for his initial disbelief in the resurrection (John 20:25). Riley contends that, “There was a Thomas Christianity, much as there was a Pauline or Johannine Christianity, centred in the East in the general geographical area in which the community of John arose . . . these two communities . . . were in debate in the

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<sup>172</sup> Elledge, “Resurrection of the Dead,” 42, calls 1 Corinthians “an eschatological controversy over the resurrection.”

<sup>173</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.11.1 (Roberts and Rambaut, 1:287).

<sup>174</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.3.4 (Roberts and Rambaut, 1:263).

later part of the first century.”<sup>175</sup> At this point I turn to the *Gospel of Thomas* as representative of this group.

### *The Gospel of Thomas*

I suggest that the *Gospel of Thomas* acts as an anti-intertext to the fourth Gospel, as *Thomas* views resurrection as a spiritual event only. According to Riley:

Yet many Christians held for centuries . . . that Jesus had risen alive as a spiritual being, in a spiritual body of light. So they too hoped in the promise of a heavenly afterlife, to be free from the body and its sufferings as spiritual beings, or to be like the angels and themselves to wear the ‘body of his glory.’ So they too doubted the truth of the new proclamation, as had their spiritual predecessor among Jesus’ own disciples, Doubting Thomas.<sup>176</sup>

By contrast, as Riley has stated succinctly, “the affirmation of the physical incarnation and resurrection of Jesus is one of the burdens of this [John’s] Gospel.”<sup>177</sup> John’s intent to communicate the physical incarnation and resurrection is a weight this text carries: a textual “burden” that becomes my focus in Chapter Six. I suggest that John’s burden to communicate both the humanity and divinity of Jesus was birthed by those who did *not* affirm the incarnation or resurrection. The texts that I discuss below illustrate this thought-world that John opposed.

Traditionally, the *Gospel of Thomas* has been categorised along with other second or third century gnostic texts, but recent scholarly interest has challenged this more commonly accepted later date.<sup>178</sup> Many of the 114 *logia* are reflected in – or are a reflection of – the sayings of Jesus recorded in the canonical Gospels, which suggests that “*Thomas* has access to at least some early oral forms of the Jesus tradition.”<sup>179</sup> Stevan Davies, for instance, posits a date of AD 50–70,<sup>180</sup> with a theory that the similarities

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<sup>175</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 80.

<sup>176</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 179.

<sup>177</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 115.

<sup>178</sup> NTApoc 1:113; 2:111; Risto Uro, ed., “*Thomas*” at the Crossroads: Essays on the “*Gospel of Thomas*” (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 1; Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*, 38.

<sup>179</sup> James Dunn, “The Gospel and the Gospels,” *EQ* 85 (2013): 291–308.

<sup>180</sup> Stevan Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (NY: Seabury, 1983), 3.

between *Thomas* and John developed at an early stage of the Johannine community and the Thomasine gospel was based on an early form of Johannine preaching.<sup>181</sup> The brevity of each *logion* could indicate a more primitive version of the sayings, opening the possibility that *Thomas* is, according to Pagels, “as early as, or earlier than, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.”<sup>182</sup> Rather surprising similarities suggest “a common setting in early Christianity from 70CE to the turn of the first century.”<sup>183</sup> If so, this would make at least some of the ideas and traditions contained in *Thomas* contemporaneous with early NT traditions, and earlier than the more developed gnosticism of the later centuries. The jury, however, is still out where dating is concerned.<sup>184</sup>

There are also some shared intertextual themes. Davies thinks that the Gospel of John and the *Gospel of Thomas* are divergent but from common origins. He sees in the Johannine writings, “a developed and transformed version of Thomasine Christianity,” which would account for the light/dark, above/below dichotomies, the echoes of the Wisdom tradition in both, as well as the I-am sayings common to both.<sup>185</sup> Pagels proposes there is a conscious apologetic in John against *Thomas* and that both are using an exegesis of Genesis 1. Where John definitively portrays light coming into the world only once as the *Logos* (John 1:1-3), *Thomas* views the light as always coming into the world.<sup>186</sup> Risto Uro detects three characteristics in the *Gospel of Thomas*, which he judges portray typical first century asceticism: sayings on becoming solitary, anti-familial sayings and sayings on the two becoming one (as the annihilation of gender distinction).<sup>187</sup> If this is the case, I suggest John’s Gospel offers a reversal of these themes: an emphasis on community (13-17); the care of Jesus’ mother (19:27) and her initiation of his first sign

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<sup>181</sup> Davies, *Gospel of Thomas*, 3.

<sup>182</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xvii.

<sup>183</sup> Ismo Dunderberg, “*Thomas*’I-sayings and the Gospel of John,” in Uro, “*Thomas*” at the Crossroads, 64.

<sup>184</sup> One of the indications of dating, which *Thomas* shares with John, is that in both, “the expectation of an imminent end has disappeared, and the Kingdom of God has primarily become an inner matter.” Van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion*, 41.

<sup>185</sup> Davies, *Gospel of Thomas*, 116.

<sup>186</sup> Elaine Pagels, “Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John,” *JBL* 118/3 (1999): 477-496; *logia* 50, 77.

<sup>187</sup> Risto Uro, “Is *Thomas* an Encratite Gospel?” in Uro, “*Thomas*” at the Crossroads, 143.

(2:5); strong female characters and the retention of a distinction between the genders (20:17).

In spite of certain shared themes, *Thomas* operates in an oppositional ideological framework to John: the soteriological emphasis of the two is incompatible. The proto-gnostic gospel begins, “These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke . . . He who shall find the interpretation of these words shall not taste of death.”<sup>188</sup> Thus, *gnosis* was the means of salvation. By contrast, it is not the “secret words” that give life, but John introduces Jesus as himself the one and only Word (1:1). In John, it is not those who are able to interpret the secret revelation, but rather, “Jesus said . . . I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me and dies will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (11:25–26). It is in faith, not in esoteric revelation, that salvation lies in the fourth Gospel.

Attitudes to creation and material existence also differ markedly. Bodily asceticism in relation to Mary Magdalene was discussed above, as found in *logia* 21–22 and 114. In the latter, Jesus defends Mary against Peter and says, “I myself shall lead her,” but her femaleness must be neutralised in the process, and she must become “male.” Jesus continues, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males.” Without this, Mary and other women may not be saved: “For every woman who will make herself male shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.” On the contrary, John retains – and emphasises in 20:17 – gender distinction, which is part of bodily human existence, an emphasis I highlight in Chapter Six. The distance between Jesus and Mary, communicated to the reader through “Do not touch me,” stands in stark contrast to the amalgamation in *logion* 114 of Mary into the male Jesus. *Logia* 21–22 warrant repeating here as an example that the treatment of the body may have been a crux of antagonism between the Johannine and Thomasine communities.

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<sup>188</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 1 (NTApoc 1:117)*.

The disciples said to him, ‘Shall we then, as children, enter the kingdom?’ Jesus said to them, ‘When you make the two one . . . and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female . . . then you will enter [the kingdom].’<sup>189</sup>

The allusion to “children” here probably refers to the loss of innocence and the experience of shame associated with sexuality.<sup>190</sup> The disciples are required to leave behind their material life to obliterate sexual desire, and at least spiritually consider themselves androgynous. Meyer’s synopsis of the teaching of *Thomas* agrees: “*Thomas* announces that the properly spiritual person is one who transcends sexuality and renounces the enslaving life and divisive categories of sexuality, as a part of his or her renunciation of this world of darkness and acceptance of the world of freedom and light.”<sup>191</sup>

But further *logia* suggest that implicit in the ideal relinquishment of sexuality is the eventual loss of the body. Riley expresses this pairing of thought in his comment that *Thomas* contained both “teaching of bodily asceticism in the present and denial of an embodied future.”<sup>192</sup> The language of undressing and nakedness, and the trampling underfoot of the exterior person may be interpreted as a metaphor for the shedding of, and the disposable nature of, the material body.<sup>193</sup>

His disciples said, ‘When will you become revealed to us and when shall we see you?’ Jesus said, ‘When you disrobe without being ashamed and take up your garments and place them under your feet like little children and tread on them, then [you will see] the son of the living one, and you will not be afraid.’<sup>194</sup>

Mary said to Jesus, ‘Whom are your disciples like?’ He said, ‘They are like children who have settled in a field which is not theirs. When the owners of the field come, they will say, “Give us back our field.” They (will) undress in their presence in order to let them have back their field and to give it back to them.’<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 22 (NHL, 129).*

<sup>190</sup> Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 202.

<sup>191</sup> Meyer, “Making Mary Male,” 561.

<sup>192</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 68.

<sup>193</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 11, 21, 37, 51, 71; Wright, Resurrection*, 535.

<sup>194</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 37 (NHL, 130).*

<sup>195</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 21 (NHL, 129).*

True release occurs in the loss of physicality in death, but in the meantime, “the true children of the light are to let go of this world, take off the bodies that are clothing them, and be liberated from mortal existence to immortal life.”<sup>196</sup> It is under this schema of belief that, naturally, the bodily resurrection of Jesus would have no place.

It is probably *logion* 71 that represents the focal point of the antagonistic conversation between the texts of John and *Thomas*.<sup>197</sup> Jesus declares, “I will des[troy this] house, and none shall be able to build it [again].”<sup>198</sup> Wright agrees this could be read as “an explicit denial of bodily resurrection.”<sup>199</sup> It contrasts sharply with John: “Jesus said to them, ‘Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it,’” with the narratorial comment that “he was talking about the temple of his body” (2:19–21). The texts attributed to the Thomas tradition from the later centuries, according to Wright, are consistent with this pattern: in the *Acts of Thomas* 41 and 47, for example, the reader is “back once more in the world of Platonism. Resurrection is not even reinterpreted, but simply rejected.”<sup>200</sup> It seems that the Thomasine Christians did not entertain the concept of bodily resurrection, *contra* the Gospel of John.

I suggest that if those outside John’s community saw the afterlife of the believer as a purely spiritual, ghostly or angelic existence, John’s purpose was to demonstrate otherwise. John’s narrative at 20:17 intentionally displays Jesus’ continued embodiment – and does so powerfully in my view – by Jesus’ refusal to allow touch from his significant female companion. The command to refrain from touch indicates, in the first place, that Jesus’ body *is* touchable. John thereby demonstrates that Jesus has not merely died and entered a new, purely spiritual form of post-mortem existence, but that he has been raised, albeit in a transformed body but nonetheless a body. Second, Jesus’ command to Mary not to touch, in a culture in which unrelated men and women should not normally touch, emphasises John’s point further. The risen Jesus of John 20:17 is palpable, and

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<sup>196</sup> Meyer, “Making Mary Male,” 559.

<sup>197</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 155.

<sup>198</sup> *Gos. Thom. log. 71* (*NTApoc* 1:126; *NHL*, 134).

<sup>199</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 536.

<sup>200</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 533.

responsive to a woman. An integral part of refuting those who denied Jesus' resurrection was to show that he was still a man in the presence of Mary Magdalene.

### *The Epistle to Reginos*

The *Epistle to Reginos* also forms an anti-intertext, in this instance especially to the second part of John 20:17, "for I have not yet ascended." As noted in Chapter Two, one of the perennial problems associated with the verse is the relevance – or lack thereof – of Jesus' ascension to the prohibition of touch. I consider the *Epistle to Reginos* offers an insight. I suggest Jesus' ascension in John 20:17 refers to a departure point at which he will return to where he was before, with the Father (John 6:62), and beyond which the physical implications of life as gendered beings will no longer exist. The *Epistle of Reginos* also carries this definition of ascension, but not its location in time: ascension in *Reginos* occurs simultaneously with death and spiritual resurrection, whereas in John 20:17 it decidedly does not. Wright refers to certain groups who denied resurrection with the doctrine that Jesus simply died and immediately ascended, but that this is untenable in the NT: "One cannot conflate resurrection and ascension."<sup>201</sup> John 20:17 clearly demarcates Jesus' ability to be present to his disciples in an embodied way and distinguishes the impending departure from that state. Of resurrection and ascension, Wright says, "though it is obviously true that John does not want to drive a wedge between the different events, it is equally true that he has not collapsed them into one another."<sup>202</sup> Given this emphasis, I suggest John is countering any suggestion that Jesus has died and ascended immediately to the angelic, sexless state, but has been raised bodily.

Malcolm Peel dates the *Epistle to Reginos* between the second and the fourth century, and notes the suggestion that it could have been penned by Valentinus himself sometime after AD 150.<sup>203</sup> It is also possible that the opponents addressed by Tertullian in his *De*

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<sup>201</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 516.

<sup>202</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 666.

<sup>203</sup> Peel, *Reginos*, 13,17.

*Resurreccione Mortuorum* were the Valentinians represented in this letter.<sup>204</sup> The focus of *Rheginos* is resurrection itself, but it assumes a conflated experience of death, resurrection and ascension of the individual believer at death. This is a sharp contrast with John 20:17.

Wright claims – perhaps too harshly – that the *Epistle to Rheginos* was “mere innovation, not a natural growth or development . . . trying to use current Christian language to describe, and perhaps legitimate, alternative theologies.”<sup>205</sup> In fairness, though, there is enough ambiguity to see some intertextual Pauline and Johannine tradition there too. For example, the claim in *Rheginos* that, “We suffered with him and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him”<sup>206</sup> is not so far from the Pauline claim that God “co-raised and co-seated [us/you] in the heavens with Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6). The writer of the treatise has also retained Paul’s sense that the mortal must put on the immortal (1 Cor 15:53) and the Johannine precept that Christ raised himself (John 2:19): “He transformed [himself] into an imperishable Aeon and raised himself up, having swallowed the visible by the invisible, and gave us the way of our immortality.”<sup>207</sup>

But Peel also notes some distinctions from Pauline and Johannine thought: firstly, there is a severing of Christ’s death and resurrection from the NT writers’ historical grounding in the Jewish story of salvation, consistent with a rejection of the material world. Secondly, the familiar gnostic thought that the created world was a mistake is at odds with both Pauline and Johannine thought. The Valentinian text, the *Gospel of Philip*, states explicitly the belief that “the world came about through a mistake,”<sup>208</sup> meaning the material world has its origin in a lesser being than God. Rather than the physical world which God loves and which awaits renewal (Rom 8:21), Peel notes that the world in *Rheginos* is “not a sphere to be redeemed, but a world from which to escape.”<sup>209</sup> Thus,

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<sup>204</sup> Peel, *Rheginos*, 14.

<sup>205</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 681.

<sup>206</sup> *Ep. Rhei.* 45.25–28 (Peel, 31).

<sup>207</sup> *Ep. Rhei.* 45.17–23 (Peel, 30–31).

<sup>208</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 75.3 (*NHL*, 154).

<sup>209</sup> Peel, *Rheginos*, 146.

the world of physical touch, possible in a transphysical resurrection which John espouses, has no place in the thought-world of the Valentinian.

The *Gospel of Philip* gives voice to another related thought: “If they do not first receive the resurrection while they live, when they die, they will receive nothing.”<sup>210</sup> One tendered option is that *Rheginos* holds similar views to those addressed in 2 Timothy 2:18, who said that such a resurrection had already come. Parts of the text make this possible: “Then what is the resurrection? It is always the disclosure of those who have arisen.”<sup>211</sup> For the recipient/s of *Rheginos*: “Flee from the divisions and the fetters, and already you have the resurrection.”<sup>212</sup> John admittedly allows for an “eternal life” that begins with faith (3:15; 6:47), but resurrection in *Rheginos* is quite distinct from the palpable resurrection appearances of Jesus, especially the appearances to Mary and Thomas, which I discuss in Chapter Six.

Irenaeus gives added insight when he reports on certain gnostic rituals, in which “their inner man may ascend on high in an invisible manner, as if their body were left among created things in this world, while their soul is sent forward to the Demiurge.”<sup>213</sup> This is a conflation of death, resurrection and ascension, which also has a parallel in *Rheginos*: “We are drawn to heaven by him like the beams by the sun, not being restrained by anything. This is the spiritual resurrection.”<sup>214</sup> Peel surmises, then, the significance of death for the Valentinian: “Having gained this freedom, the believer receives via his ascension his former state of pre-existence, an experience paralleling that of the Saviour.”<sup>215</sup> A purely spiritual resurrection and ascension of Jesus reflects an evolution of thought, contrary to John 20:17 which assumes Jesus was touchable after resurrection. In the same vein, John was probably aware of nascent and latent gnostic patterns of thought

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<sup>210</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 73.3-4 (*NHL*, 153).

<sup>211</sup> *Ep. Rhei.* 48.3-6 (Peel, 33).

<sup>212</sup> *Ep. Rhei.* 49.13-16 (Peel, 35).

<sup>213</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.21.5 (Roberts and Rambaut, 1:83).

<sup>214</sup> *Ep. Rhei.* 45.36-40 (Peel, 31).

<sup>215</sup> Peel, *Rheginos*, 145.

in his own time. Without doubt, he writes with emphasis from the story of Jesus that he knows, to illustrate transphysical encounters of the risen Christ.

### Section Three Conclusion

In the world of intertexts, the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Epistle to Reginos* show connections to my reading of John 20:17, in that they speak of resurrection, they make reference in some way to the body after resurrection, and *Reginos* assumes an immediate ascension after death. The texts of *Thomas* and *Reginos* hark back to the discussion above on the “Body Debate” and are examples of debated concepts centring around the anticipated state of the body following death. They also recall my previous chapter in which it became clear that the ideology of the NT held that in heaven, human sexual activity and desire would have dissipated and sexual bodies would change to become like that of the angels. The two texts anticipate further discussion on this topic in Chapter Five as it touches on the DSS.

In spite of approaching the same topic in which John 20:17 is interested, the texts of *Thomas* and *Reginos*, as discussed above, show marked differences from John, and serve to highlight by contrast John’s literary and theological emphases. In Chapter Six, with a closer look at the Gospel overall, I suggest that John 20:17 offers an implied counterclaim to the tenets expressed in both these texts: as an earlier intertext, the verse can be seen to contribute to the theological discussion or controversy that appears to have operated between different groups on the nature of Jesus’ resurrected body and his impending ascension. In John 20:17, Jesus is portrayed as embodied and not yet in the ascended, heavenly state. By refusing the touch of Mary, John’s Jesus highlights the gendered and sexual potential of that touch. Here, the distinction between male and female is the opposite of the solitary or androgynous proto-gnostic ideal. Reading John 20:17 intertextually alongside the later texts of *Thomas* and *Reginos* allows us to discern that the verse could be refuting a solely spiritual or disembodied resurrection and silencing claims of an immediate ascension following death. The emphasis on Jesus’ body

communicates to the reader that the risen Jesus is embodied and not yet ascended to heaven.

## Chapter Four Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored one layer – Intertexture, as Robbins calls it – of the text of John 20:17 by isolating three components in the verse and highlighting the relationship of those components to other intertexts in which they are present. In the first I showed that the vocabulary used in the verse shares similarities of meaning with other texts. The negation of ἀπτομαι, the particular verb used and translated as “touch” in John 20:17, is frequently found in other texts as a prohibition of sexual touch, and is often used of a man refraining from touching a woman, or from a woman’s touch. It is therefore plausible that in John’s Gospel, “Do not touch me” is also determined by the taboo between this man and woman.

Second, I isolated Mary in her relationship to Jesus in other texts, to note any intertextual parallels to the prohibition in John 20:17. I referred to later apocryphal and gnostic texts where she is generally portrayed as a prominent woman among men, and where her role is portrayed as the counterpart of Jesus in a spiritual but anti-physical relationship. Sufficient stories survive beyond the NT era which feature both spiritual intimacy *and* asceticism between Mary and Jesus to suggest this memory may be a valid echo of their celibate encounter as found in my reading of John 20:17.

I located a third aspect of John 20:17 in two texts with adversarial views on resurrection and ascension: the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Epistle to Reginos*. These view ideal discipleship as the denial of the material and the physical, including gender distinction and sexual activity in this life. Death was seen as a release from embodiment and no form of embodiment was anticipated in resurrection. John’s emphasis on incarnation and resurrection makes the fourth Gospel an “anti-intertext;” when read alongside *Thomas* and *Reginos*, we are able to see in John echoes of contradiction against the denial of a bodily resurrection. Where these later texts teach that death results in an immediate

ascension, I suggest John reinforces the opposite as Jesus states explicitly, “for I have not yet ascended” (20:17).

Taken together, these three aspects show the plausibility of my suggestion that “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended” alludes to Jesus’ recognition that Mary’s touch has a sexual significance which could compromise his embodied celibacy. The texts I have discussed in this chapter amplify and recontextualize earlier NT traditions to portray Mary Magdalene as an important ascetic, well-loved by Jesus. The texts of *Thomas* and *Rheginos* illustrate two ancient voices that were hostile towards the physical body and therefore to belief in embodied resurrection. They sharpen our focus on the contrast in John, allowing us to see more clearly that the prohibition of Jesus to Mary at his resurrection distinguishes his embodied state from the angelic state of ascension because it is a gendered encounter. I argue, therefore, that the celibacy of Jesus is at the heart of John’s intended meaning in the prohibition. Through this story of untouchability between resurrection and ascension by a beloved woman – the highlight of 20:17 – John’s Jesus, though resurrected, has not yet reached that ascended state beyond the power of physical touch.

In this section, I have discussed the language and ideas of other texts that I believe have intersected in some way with the textual world of the writing of John (late in the first century). In the next chapter I move to new territory: to the narrative setting in which the author of John locates the story of the life of Jesus (c. AD 30), mainly in Jerusalem and Judaea. I explore the evidence of Jewish groups in that area which practised celibacy and which reflect, in some way, my reading of John 20:17.

## Chapter Five: Social and Cultural Texture

In this chapter, I treat the “social and cultural systems presupposed in the text”<sup>1</sup> as one more piece in the “Do not touch me” puzzle; one more clue to the viability of my reading of this text as an oblique reference to celibate practice. Up to this point, I have discussed traces of celibacy and asceticism in the NT texts and beyond, but I now shift backwards in time to a focus on the original location in which John places his story of the life of Jesus. In John, Jesus spends most of this time in Judaea, a time and location removed from that of the writing of the Johannine literature which I have discussed. Between the one and the other lies the unknown effect on the text of the intervening years between the historical events and its writing: the persecution of Christians from the AD 60s, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, the relocation of the Johannine community<sup>2</sup> to Asia, and the probable internal ideological conflict which ensued, at least according to the Johannine Epistles. Nonetheless, as celibacy featured in the previous chapters, so it does also in this chapter, this time in the setting of John’s narrative, in its Social and Cultural Texture. John’s focus on the life of Jesus in Judaea means John has – either deliberately or accidentally – located Jesus within a context where celibacy would be no stranger, hence supporting the viability of my reading.

In Chapter One, I indicated that I would depart from Robbins’ methodology at this point because his generalised focus on Mediterranean culture fails to highlight the cultural differences applicable to the unique location of John’s Gospel in Judaea and Jerusalem. Robbins’ discussion centres on “the kinds of cultures earliest Christianity nurtured and maintained in the first century Mediterranean world,” failing to show the complexity of variation in those cultures.<sup>3</sup> Ling points out, as indicated below, that, by contrast, the geographical environs in which the Gospel is set was particularly receptive to “virtuoso

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<sup>1</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 71.

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I use the term “Johannine community” in a generic sense, as the community of disciples portrayed in John’s Gospel, not in the specialised sense of a later community as advocated by Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 72.

religion,” as expressed by the Essenes and other pietist movements, incorporating celibacy and care for the poor.<sup>4</sup> The Mediterranean world of the first century was vast and varied, and the culture surrounding the second Jewish Temple was quite distinct. The discoveries of the Qumran Scrolls in the last century have given a new awareness of the different forms of Jewish life at the time of Jesus, some of which accepted celibacy as a valid practice. It is this layer of the social and cultural setting of this Gospel narrative which I examine in this chapter.

## Virtuoso Religion

Early last century, Max Weber introduced the language of “heroic” or ‘virtuoso’ religiosity” as a category of religious practice, found in all world religions, as a popular and informal expression of that religion distinct from “mass religiosity.”<sup>5</sup> He asserted that the institutionalised form of the parent religion “fights principally against all virtuoso-religion and its autonomous development.”<sup>6</sup> The examples of this he cited in Christianity included the early Christian ascetics, the Paulinian and gnostic pneumatic, and monasteries of monks, who all differ from formal church structure in that they “accept only religiously qualified persons in their midst.”<sup>7</sup> They cease to be representative of the general mass of religious observers or to remain embedded in the catholic, or universal, religious body.

Building on the work of Weber and other sociologists, Ling has proposed that John’s Gospel is, in fact, an example of virtuoso religion, reflective of an early community practising such spiritual disciplines as prayer, fasting, almsgiving and celibacy. For example, Jesus prays in a communal setting (17:1-26) rather than withdrawing alone to pray (*cf.* Luke 5:16); he also seems to minimise the importance of eating over spiritual concerns which suggests fasting (4:32-34; 6:27). In this chapter, I am furthering this

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<sup>4</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 62-63.

<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Routledge Sociology Classics (London: Routledge, 1948, 1991), 287.

<sup>6</sup> Weber, *From Max Weber*, 288.

<sup>7</sup> Weber, *From Max Weber*, 287-88.

theory, ultimately suggesting that John 20:17 is indicative of the practice of celibacy, and its narrative of restrained touch can be taken as supporting evidence of the discipline practised by some in the community. Weber proposes that certain characteristics are evident in a virtuoso community, and I suggest that some of these same characteristics are discernible in the fourth Gospel. For example, Weber states that “it is imperative for the virtuoso that he ‘prove’ himself before God, as being called *solely* through the ethical quality of his conduct in this world. This actually means that he ‘prove’ himself to himself as well.”<sup>8</sup> The use of *solely* may be rather too sweeping, but John’s Jesus spends a good amount of his discourse defending himself. “Who from among you convicts me of sin?” he asks his opponents (8:46). Jesus is approved by God and does not need the glory assigned by humans (5:41; 12:43) since he shares the glory of God (11:4). The signs he does (7:31; 10:37–38) and the truth he speaks<sup>9</sup> are also his defence. His conduct in the world shows his connection with the Father which in turn gives him legitimacy (7:18; 17:24). Passages on judgement also underlie God’s approval of Jesus and the impeccability of his conduct,<sup>10</sup> criteria, according to Weber, for functioning as the ideal virtuoso.

Although virtuosity is a characteristic of John’s Gospel, as Ling has argued, he also admits to the difficulty of defining the relationship between the Gospel and virtuosity with greater precision, and leaves a query as the final sentence of his book: “Thus we are left with the tantalising question of the relevance of ‘virtuoso religion’ for the understanding of Jesus himself.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the relationship between the historical Jesus and virtuoso religion can only be a topic of speculation. Were the author/s of John involved in a community which practised such disciplines and was this virtuosity reflected in the writing of the text? This would be consistent with the theory that the text is reflective of the later Johannine community responding to its own context.<sup>12</sup> Or was the claimed

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<sup>8</sup> Weber, *From Max Weber*, 290–91. Weber’s italics.

<sup>9</sup> John 1:17; 8:32; 18:37.

<sup>10</sup> John 3:18–19; 5:22; 12:47–48.

<sup>11</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Martyn, *History and Theology*, 22–23. Martyn read the Gospel of John from the perspective of a community which had been officially ousted from the synagogue following the Council of Jamnia in the

witness to Jesus, the beloved disciple, a character immersed in a Judaean virtuoso community and does his testimony reflect the thoughts, memories and perceptions of the community's interactions with Jesus? Or was the historical Jesus himself a virtuoso community leader when he was in Jerusalem and not on mission as an itinerant in Galilee? Whatever the relationship between virtuoso religion and Jesus himself, I suggest in this chapter that the connections of this Gospel with virtuoso religion in Judaea offer another reason to suggest that John 20:17 may be read as a sexual euphemism in the context of the practice of celibacy.

The Gospel of John also resonates with Weber's definition of the relationship of the virtuoso group to the world: "No matter how much the 'world' as such is religiously devalued and rejected as being creaturely and a vessel of sin, yet psychologically the world is all the more affirmed as the theatre of God-willed activity in one's worldly 'calling'."<sup>13</sup> Such an idea is consistent with the contradictory views of the "world" found in John: the κόσμος is the place of those who do not recognise Jesus (1:10), led by a spiritual ruler who is against him (7:7; 14:30); yet it is also the locus of the love of God, in which Jesus must work out God's will, since he did not come to condemn the world but to save it.<sup>14</sup> This tenor of the fourth Gospel lends itself to the community of the virtuoso.

Modern anthropological theory, however, is not in full agreement with Weber's assumed level of separation between the virtuoso group and society at large. Studies by Ilana Friedrich Silber into medieval monasticism, as a type of virtuosity, highlight "the relation between virtuosi and society that were understated in the Weberian approach."<sup>15</sup> The religious virtuoso, or the virtuoso group, is not withdrawn and disconnected from society, but it plays a critical social role in its "single-minded dedication to other-worldly

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late first century. John uses the unique term ἀποσυνάγωγος (outside the synagogue) at 9:22; 12:42; 16:2. Reinhartz disagrees with the expulsion theory and maintains the parting of the ways was a more gradual process, in "A Fork in the Road or a Multilane Highway?" 290. Rodriguez disagrees with Martyn on the basis that the theory severs Jesus from the past, in "What is History?" 41.

<sup>13</sup> Weber, *From Max Weber*, 291.

<sup>14</sup> John 3:16–17; 6:51; 12:47; 1 John 2:2.

<sup>15</sup> Ilana Friedrich Silber, *Virtuosity, Charisma and Social Order: A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism*, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), 37.

ideals that were of central significance for society at large.”<sup>16</sup> Silber’s case studies demonstrate that religious virtuosity is “not merely the characteristic of a religious minority – but also a cultural variable of far-reaching macrosociological significance.”<sup>17</sup> Patricia Wittberg, in her studies of Roman Catholic Orders, has also noted that religious virtuosi have consistently “served as spiritual advisors to the masses, who make long journeys to seek their counsel.”<sup>18</sup>

Ling prefers to modify Weber’s anthropological theory by foremost highlighting the evidence that in all societies the religious actor may operate *within*, not external to, the fabric of society.

Virtuoso religion is revealed to be distinct from sectarianism by virtue of its ability to function as an alternative community not outside society but within it. Indeed, its capacity to maintain an alternative community within society means that such religious minorities should not be viewed as marginal vis-à-vis their social worlds.<sup>19</sup>

It is from within the majority structure of society, that the religious actor may renounce, on moral grounds, what is accepted as normative cultural behaviour. They may, for instance, forego competition for resources when there is a shortage, or relinquish the demand for honour, or they may creatively avoid systemic oppression.<sup>20</sup> The religious virtuoso operates within the network of normal societal interactions in its counter-cultural activity.

This is not to deny tension as a result of the change that the virtuoso group desires to implement. Wittberg observes that there is, in the virtuoso group, “a consensus about what is wrong with the present situation and what should be done about it, and who should appropriately undertake the task of reform or renewal. . . [T]hey must mutually negotiate and give meaning to a collective identity for themselves.”<sup>21</sup> There were problems faced by the community in the Gospel, as seems to have been the case with

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<sup>16</sup> Silber, *Virtuosity*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Silber, *Virtuosity*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Wittberg, *Rise and Fall*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 60–61.

<sup>21</sup> Wittberg, *Rise and Fall*, 23.

other expressions of Judaism at the time: centuries of foreign domination, and disillusionment at a failed theocracy, paint a picture of religious fragmentation in Judaea, including a corrupt priesthood (John 18:12–14). In the text of John, there are points of conflict between Jesus and οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, the representatives of the parent religion, Judaism. While many Jews accepted Jesus, other incidents suggest a clash of ideology with the established religion (5:9–10). Jews are often portrayed as among Jesus' opponents, and the Gospel foresees the reciprocal status of the Christ-followers as excluded from the synagogue (ἀποσυνάγωγος).<sup>22</sup>

Ling comments on the controversy over who is and who is not considered the descendants of Abraham in John 8:31–59. This is not a case of an “exclusivist retreat,” as one might find in the case of a sect, such as those who stayed at Qumran, but Jesus engages in the public arena, “not as a debate *with* ‘Jews’ but rather *between* ‘Jews’.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus advertises his own faithfulness to the Jewish God (8:28), and claims for himself the witness of Abraham (8:56). He creates division (σχίσμα) between those Jews who believed in him and those who did not.<sup>24</sup> John, in typical virtuoso fashion then, is restating Judaism on different grounds as represented by Jesus (8:42), nullifying not the Jewish descent of those who claim Abrahamic ancestry but the Jewish descent of those who do so in order to reject Jesus as sent by God (8:39).

Michael Hill also modifies Weber to define the religious virtuoso as within, not outside, his or her social context: “The religious virtuoso follows what he takes to be a pure and rigorous interpretation of normative obligations which already exist in a religious tradition.”<sup>25</sup> The virtuoso achieves a “revolution by tradition.”<sup>26</sup> Later religious orders and monastic movements also embraced this type of “revolution,” seeking approval within the structures of the church. On these grounds, Capper’s suggestion, that the community

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<sup>22</sup> John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2.

<sup>23</sup> Ling, *Judean Poor*, 156. For the same reason, Charlesworth observes, “We do not see anti-Judaism; rather we perceive dissensions within Judaism,” in *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> John 8:30–31; 9:16; 10:19–21; 11:45–46.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Hill, *The Religious Order: A Study of Virtuoso Religion and Its Legitimation in the Nineteenth-Century Church of England* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Hill, *Religious Order*, 88.

of John functioned as a “religious order,” might be justified in spite of its anachronism. To be fair, Josephus does describe the Essenes as an “order” (*τάγμα*),<sup>27</sup> so perhaps the term is not so anachronistic. Capper imagines that “Jesus’ disciple group functioned in a similar fashion” to religious orders of contemporary nuns, “who do not even own the clothes they themselves wear . . . a trustworthy channel of material resources from the well-off to those who have too little.”<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, it is from similar economic grounds, and the hidden “poor” in its pages, that Ling comes to identify virtuoso religion in the Gospel of John. It is from John, for instance, that we learn of the communal experience of a shared money bag (*τὸ γλωσσόκομον*) for which Judas was responsible and from which supplies for the last meal together might be bought, and which was also a resource shared with the poor (12:5–6; 13:29). One of the features of virtuoso religious groups, integral to communal living, is the ability of members to share their material resources in common.<sup>29</sup> Ling notes that this observation is omitted by the Synoptics: “only John’s Gospel makes explicit reference to this common purse and . . . only at the locations of Bethany (12:6) and the room of the last supper (13:29)”<sup>30</sup> The nature of the Johannine community, then, lends itself to the category of virtuoso religion. In addition to the theological and economic signals, above, acting as indicators in the text of John, this thesis suggests there is an allusion to celibacy at 20:17 which acts as similar signal to virtuoso practice.

According to Ling, then, a residence in Bethany and the room of the last supper are the only locations that refer to the disciples’ shared financial resources, and both of them are only found in John. Of the former location (John 12:6), Ling highlights:

It is striking that at Bethany two sisters and a brother, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, live together, apparently without spouses. If they are all single, this may indicate the practice of celibacy, an aspect of virtuoso religion.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Josephus, *B.J.* 2.122,143 (LCL 203:368,376).

<sup>28</sup> Capper, “John, Qumran, and Virtuoso Religion,” 114.

<sup>29</sup> Wittberg, *Rise and Fall*, 122–23.

<sup>30</sup> Capper, “John, Qumran, and Virtuoso Religion,” 111.

<sup>31</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 194.

It is also possible that the naming of Martha as “her sister” (11:1) and Lazarus as “my brother” (11:21) indicates fictive kin, rather than biological family. Either way the arrangement is not the usual household structure of a family including spouses and children, and may suggest some form of virtuoso religion.

Of the latter location of a common purse (John 13:29), according to the Synoptics the place is chosen by Jesus ahead of time in Galilee for his last Passover feast with his disciples. Capper offers an intriguing explanation for the identification Jesus gives in the synoptic Gospels to help his disciples find the room in Jerusalem: “a man carrying a water jar” (Mark 14:13).<sup>32</sup> This man, argues Capper, could act as a signal to the ignorant Galilean disciples only because he was an unusual sight in Jerusalem: it is usually women who carry water jars on their heads. Capper suggests the man was probably a member of a celibate religious community, in which the young men did the work usually assigned to women, including carrying water. This recalls Josephus’ observation that the Essenes who were not married, “live by themselves and perform menial tasks for one another.”<sup>33</sup> If Capper is correct, then the narratives of both John and the Synoptics show some coherence and suggest the possibility that the Jesus tradition knew of a male community in Jerusalem. If such virtuoso disciplines were familiar to the Johannine author then it is also possible that John 20:17 might obtusely refer to the practice of celibacy.

## The Cultural Context of John’s Narrative

In this section I discuss the cultural context of the narrative of John’s Gospel and its connections with a contemporaneous community, the Essenes, who are known to have practised celibacy, to some extent, in the same geographical area. The texts of this community, the Dead Sea Scrolls, also made connections between celibacy and apocalypticism, as did the NT texts discussed in Chapter Three. I draw attention in the rest of this chapter to resonances between the Essenes and the Johannine account of the

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<sup>32</sup> Brian Capper, “With the Oldest Monks . . . : Light from Essene History on the Career of the Beloved Disciple?” *JTS* 49 (1998): 1–55.

<sup>33</sup> Josephus, *A.J.* 18.1.5 (LCL 433:19).

life of Jesus and his disciples, and suggest on these grounds the likelihood that this shared social and cultural context may have also indicated a shared practice of celibacy.

## John in Judaea

The location John chooses for his story of Jesus, and the memories of Jesus' life that he chooses to tell, are set for the most part in the geographical area of Judaea.<sup>34</sup> Judaea, "in contrast to other New Testament locations," had several characteristics that were likely to encourage the flourishing of the virtuoso ethos, characteristics absent from ordinary Mediterranean culture.<sup>35</sup> Judaea was a relatively self-contained and isolated terrain, and before the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70, had a distinct religious identity: the Jewish sense of a right of ownership to the land was embedded in its identity as the people of God (Exod 6:8). Before AD 70, when Jerusalem was the only major urban centre in Judaea and also the place of the Temple, the country was "rooted in sacred space."<sup>36</sup> However, the centre of economic and political power in the hands of an unpopular priesthood and ruling elitist families operated at both a civic and religious level.<sup>37</sup> This was especially a local reality for the ordinary Judaeans. Thus, the environs of Judaea and Jerusalem display features "in which virtuoso religion may flourish":<sup>38</sup> counter-cultural social movements, such as virtuoso religion, might rise to deal with social ills and power inequity.

Further to my discussion in Chapter One, John's choice of Judaea as a primary location for the life of Jesus is evident in several ways. I noted there John's knowledge of the area and his emphasis on it. The Gospel suggests that Jesus attended multiple feasts at the

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<sup>34</sup> This is by contrast to Mark's Gospel, for instance, which treats Capernaum in Galilee as the centre of Jesus' activity, a centre which Christopher Zeichmann argues may have been more a redactional emphasis of the Markan evangelist and a likely place of composition for that Gospel. Christopher Zeichmann, "Capernaum: A 'Hub' for the Historical Jesus or the Markan Evangelist?" *JSHJ* 15 (2017): 147-165.

<sup>35</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 84; Also 79-90.

<sup>36</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 84.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Horsley, "Discerning What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Could Not See: Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*," *JSHJ* 17 (2019): 214-39. Horsley notes the "blatant collaboration of the high priests with the Romans" and the "diversity of popular movements of resistance." *Ibid*, 222.

<sup>38</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 90.

Temple,<sup>39</sup> and when he was in Jerusalem he frequented a home in Bethany of Judaea.<sup>40</sup> John also refers to another place in Judaea called Bethany: “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (*Βηθανία πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου*) where Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist (1:28). This becomes, in John’s Gospel, one of Jesus’ favourite haunts. Here, his initial core disciples are introduced to him from among the Baptist’s following (1:37–42). After a brief sojourn to Galilee (2:12), Jesus is once again found here in the land of Judaea, baptising others (3:22). He was no longer with John the Baptist, yet he was again “across the Jordan” (*πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου*), attracting some disciples who would have otherwise followed John (3:26). Later again, following a conflict with his Jewish opponents, Jesus retreated “across the Jordan (*πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου*) to the place where John was first baptising, and he stayed there and many came to him . . . and many believed in him there” (10:40–42).

Some scholars, such as Rainer Riesner, would like to place the baptism of Jesus across the Jordan but in the north. Much of the argument, however, seems to be based on a suggestion by Origen who, unaware of a settlement east of the Jordan in the south, corrected John’s text to “Bethabara,” which Riesner identifies as the area of Batanaea.<sup>41</sup> Most, however, accept the site lies at the southern end of the Jordan River, about 10k north of the Dead Sea, in a World Heritage site known as Al-Maghtas (Arabic for “baptism”). Both Israel on the west bank and Jordan on the east bank lay claim to the authentic site, since although a site has been known on the west bank for some time, recent excavations have unearthed pottery and coins which may date back to the time of John the Baptist.<sup>42</sup> The fourth Gospel’s designation of “beyond the Jordan” does seem to

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<sup>39</sup> John 2:13; 5:1; 7:2,10; 10:22–23; 12:1. John’s portrayal of Jesus as a regular attender of community celebrations, when he was in Galilee and Judaea, is consistent with the broader Jesus tradition: Jesus went with his parents to Jerusalem for Passover, *as was their custom* (Luke 2:41–46); he also, when in Galilee, went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, *as was a custom for him* (4:16).

<sup>40</sup> John 11:1,18; 12:1.

<sup>41</sup> Rainer Riesner, “Bethany beyond the Jordan (John 1:28): Topography, Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987): 29–63.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Sudilovsky, “Site of Jesus’ Baptism Found – Again” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 25 3 (1999): 14–15.

indicate the east bank (1:28), traditionally located at the mouth of the tributary Wadi al-Kharrar. The weight of evidence is at least that the baptism of Jesus occurred in Judaea.

Further, the Synoptics offer no resistance to Jesus' baptism in Judaea. The linguistic term "across the Jordan" is used in places other than John in association with Judaea: τὰ ὅρια τῆς Ἰουδαίας πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου ("the regions of Judaea across the Jordan," Matt 19:1; Mark 10:1). Though the location does not receive the same narrative prominence in the synoptic tradition, it does share the Johannine perspective that John the Baptist began preaching in the desert of Judaea and that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee to be baptised by him in the Jordan (Matt 3:1; Mark 1:9; Luke 3:3).<sup>43</sup>

Whether Jesus was a Galilean or a Judaean depends on one's perspective. Given his attachment to Bethany beyond the Jordan, as noted above, when his first prospective followers ask Jesus, "Where do you live?" (1:38) he takes them to a nearby location to see. Many translators of John, at this point, read, "Where are you staying?" rather than "Where do you live?" which would translate ποῦ μένεις just as well. Admittedly, it is a nuance, and there is nothing in any of the Gospels to suggest Jesus ever settled anywhere. But there is nothing to say that he spent less time in Judaea than in Galilee, nor that his accommodation there was any more transitory. The translation does not represent John's perspective: perhaps it reflects a common phenomenon which may be called "synoptocentrism."

From the beginning of his Gospel, John makes it clear that it was "to his own" (εἰς τὰ ἴδια) that Jesus came, even though some of "his own" (οἱ ἴδιοι) would receive him and some would reject him (1:11–12). John's Gospel calls Judaea Jesus' homeland. In Luke, Galilee is his homeland (ἐν τῇ πατρίδι), the place he has no honour (4:23–24), but in John this homeland (ἐν τῇ ἴδιᾳ πατρίδι) and place of no honour is Judaea, and it is the

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<sup>43</sup> I discuss below the shared spiritual milieu of John's Gospel and the Essenes, but, in advance of that, Peter Flint sees the role of John the Baptist as parallel to the Qumraners who also inhabited the Judaean wilderness to prepare for the Lord's coming. The "voice crying in the wilderness" (Isa 40:3) is also found in 1QS. Peter Flint, "Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and John Dominic Crossan, Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 117.

Galileans who receive him warmly (4:43–45). Again, translators betray a bias. The original text of John quite simply says:

After two days, he [Jesus] went from that place [Jerusalem through Samaria] into Galilee; for Jesus himself bore witness that a prophet has no honour in his own homeland. So, when he came into Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, having seen all the things that he did in Jerusalem during the feast, for they also went to the feast (4:43–45).

But John's text is routinely overridden to give the synoptic narrative precedence. In some cases, this is turned into a complicated parenthetical bracket, a simple aorist ( $\epsilon\mu\alpha\rho\tau\upsilon\rho\eta\sigma\epsilon\nu$ ) is translated as a pluperfect (“had testified”), the “so/then/therefore” ( $\text{ou}\tilde{\nu}$ ) is omitted to remove the sequence from Judaea ( $\epsilon\xi\tilde{\eta}\lambda\theta\epsilon\nu \epsilon\kappa\tilde{\eta}\theta\epsilon\nu$ ) to Galilee, all with the result that John's identification of Jerusalem/Judaea as Jesus' homeland is lost. The otherwise plain Greek is supplanted with:

When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee (for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in his own country). When he came to Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. (NRSV)

Since John wrote to augment the Synoptics,<sup>44</sup> he was probably aware of the northern attempt to own Jesus as a Galilean. A master of subtlety, he undermines the attempted *coup*: “Some were saying, ‘This is the Christ,’ but others were saying, ‘No, for the Christ doesn't come from Galilee, does he? The Scripture says that the Christ comes from the seed of David and the village of Bethlehem’” (7:41–42). Because Jesus was visible in Galilee on his journeys there, many thought he was a Galilean, but the reader-in-the-know is aware that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea, which made him unequivocally Judaeon both by birth and by association. This, in turn, confirms to the reader that Jesus could be the Christ. Again, with brilliant irony, John shows the Pharisees to be ignorant of this: “They [the Pharisees] said to him [Nicodemus], ‘You are not from Galilee too, are you? Search and see that a prophet will not arise from Galilee’” (7:52). The Pharisees know that a prophet will not come from Galilee, they “know” that

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<sup>44</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.24.7–13 (LCL 153:249–51).

Jesus comes from Galilee, therefore they know Jesus cannot be a prophet. The reader, of course, knows more: Jesus does *not* come from Galilee; therefore, he could be a prophet. His home territory is Jerusalem, the location of “my Father’s house” in Judaea (2:16).

## Essenes in Judaea

According to Philo, this same geographical area of Judaea – Παλαιστίνη Συρία (Palestinian Syria) – was home to another type of religious order, the Ἐσσαῖοι (Essenes).<sup>45</sup> The records in the historical sources say they lived in communal houses, they shunned immorality of any kind, they were under obligation to share any individual income, they required a period of initiation from new incumbents, and they ate and dressed frugally.<sup>46</sup> The Essenes are described by Flavius Josephus (AD 37–100) as a school of philosophy known to have practised conscious abstinence from sexual relations.<sup>47</sup> I discuss the Essenes at this point, not to establish any direct influence either way between them and the Johannine community – although there are some scholars who argue so<sup>48</sup> – but to show a shared socio-cultural context between Essenism and John’s story of the life of Jesus. Timothy Lim calls this “a shared sectarian matrix,”<sup>49</sup> and unavoidably draws parallels:

[I]t is undeniable that the all-male community who followed a severe discipline of work and study as depicted in the Rule of the Community shows many traits that are similar to the Christian monastic movement. Asceticism, but to name the most

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<sup>45</sup> Philo, *Every Good Man is Free* 12.75 (LCL 363:53–55).

<sup>46</sup> Lim, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 59; Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 9.13–16 (ANF 5:134).

<sup>47</sup> Josephus, *B.J.* 2.119 (LCL 203:368).

<sup>48</sup> For example, Brian Capper states that “The early Jerusalem community of believers in Jesus drew on the established community forms, social processes and socio-economic expectations which had been developed in the Essene movement over at least the preceding two centuries, becoming culturally embedded in the region.” In Brian Capper, “The Judaean Cultural Context of Community of Goods in the Early Jesus Movement,” *The Qumran Chronicle* 27 1–4 (2019): 53–82. Capper’s conclusions are drawn from the ideological and economic structures found in Essene communities and their parallel structures found in such characteristics as the sharing of possessions in the early Jerusalem community of the NT (Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–37). See Brian Capper, “Essene Community Houses and Jesus’ Early Community,” in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James Charlesworth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 472–502.

<sup>49</sup> Timothy Lim, “Towards a Description of the Sectarian Matrix,” in Martínez, *Echoes from the Caves*, 7–31.

obvious feature, is not a customary practice in Judaism but one that has a long and established tradition in Christianity.<sup>50</sup>

There may be links between Essenism and Christianity, as Lim suggests, and as several scholars I discuss below would concur.<sup>51</sup> But my purpose below is to suggest something more modest: if the Johannine narrative plot is located in the same territory as the Essenes, it is valid to suggest that the communal practice of celibacy, as practised by local adherents to Essenism, may have been an implicit sub-plot in John's *bios* of Jesus, and 20:17 is an allusion to this.

As indicated at the beginning of Chapter Three, Qumran is widely considered to have been a sectarian community of Essenes which was originally established during the Hasmonean rule (167 BC to 37 BC), but other Essenes were also known throughout the Judaean landscape. Philo implies there were numbers of adherents: "They live in many cities of Judaea and in many villages and grouped in great societies of many members."<sup>52</sup> According to Josephus, "The men who practise this way of life number more than four thousand. They neither bring wives into the community nor do they own slaves."<sup>53</sup> That they practised celibacy is evidenced at the Qumran site where the burial arrangements within the compound of a carefully laid, orderly concentration of male skeletons in one section of the cemetery suggests a restricted, male group. There are some female remains, but these are fewer and in a separate part of the cemetery.<sup>54</sup>

The sectarian texts also confirm celibate practice, as the Community Rule (1QS) appears to address only men. While it may be addressed to celibates in general and therefore be inclusive of women celibates,<sup>55</sup> the natural reading adopted by most is that it was directed to a male celibate community. The Cairo Damascus Document (CD) has a prohibition:

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<sup>50</sup> Lim, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 119.

<sup>51</sup> Hengel, for instance, notes the closest NT parallels with Qumran as, "Luke's account about the early church in Jerusalem, Pauline anthropology, and Johannine dualism," in "Qumran and Early Christianity," 529. He suggests that the commonalities "go back to the spiritual world of Jerusalem before AD 70 which was influenced for nearly 200 years by the Essene movement." *Ibid*, 531.

<sup>52</sup> Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.1 (LCL 363:437).

<sup>53</sup> Josephus, *A.J.* 18.1.5 (LCL 433:19).

<sup>54</sup> Vermes and Goodman, *Essenes*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Loader, *Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 376.

“No one should sleep with a woman in the city of the temple, defiling the city of the temple with their impurity.”<sup>56</sup> This restriction has a variety of possible practical implications for sexual behaviour. The “city of the temple” can be read as the Qumran centre itself, in the absence of the Jerusalem Temple, so celibacy was required there. But if the mandate in CD to avoid sexual connection “in the city of the temple” was understood literally, it may indicate that Essenes did not engage in marital relations when in Jerusalem.

Nonetheless, Josephus acknowledges a second order of Essenes who recognised the necessity of marriage, although he gives far less coverage to this group.<sup>57</sup> More recent archaeological discoveries have confirmed that “married Essenes, and not merely the celibate males, were integral to the Qumran community.”<sup>58</sup> As William Loader says, “Many questions remain unanswered, such as whether the celibacy was lifelong or of limited duration . . . only during one’s stay in a special place like Qumran or during set times.”<sup>59</sup> Simon Joseph, too, suggests that the Essenes consisted of celibates who voluntarily undertook abstinence for a period, as well as those of a more permanent nature.<sup>60</sup> While the demands in the *Temple Scroll* for purity suggest that celibacy was routinely required for priests, temporary celibacy may have been required both for permanent residents in the central camp as well as temporary inhabitants there.<sup>61</sup> Loader also suggests it was probably a concern for ritual purity around sexual activity that led to the establishment of camps for the married members outside the main Qumran community area.<sup>62</sup> Riesner proposes that an Essene settlement also existed on the southwestern hill, and may have practised celibacy:

The War Scroll from Qumran . . . seems to presuppose the existence of an Essene community in the Holy City. This document mentioned (1QM 3.11) the “community from Jerusalem” (*h’dh yrwšlym*). Since in the Damascus Document

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<sup>56</sup> CD-A XII, 1-2 (*DSSSE* 1:571).

<sup>57</sup> Josephus, *B.J.* 2.160-61 (LCL 203:384).

<sup>58</sup> Lim, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Loader, *Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 375-76.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph, “Ascetic Jesus,” 158.

<sup>61</sup> Loader, *Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 374.

<sup>62</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the NT*, 102.

sexual intercourse was not permitted in Jerusalem (CD 12.1), the community there may have practiced celibacy. . . [C]orresponding regulations of the Temple Scroll (11QTemple 46.13–51.10) include no prescriptions concerning places of purification for wives within the city walls. . . . [T]here is enough archaeological data, together with literary testimony, to make an Essene quarter on the southwest hill of Jerusalem probable.<sup>63</sup>

It seems likely that the presence of Essenes in Jerusalem coincided with the reign of Herod (37–4 BC) who, Josephus tells us, held the Essenes in higher regard than other Judaic groups.<sup>64</sup> Josephus also mentions the existence of τὴν Ἐστηνῶν πύλην (“the Gate of the Essenes”) on the south western hill of Jerusalem,<sup>65</sup> presumably named because of its frequent use by Essenes to enter and leave the city. The archaeological dating to the Herodian period of the ancient ruins of a gate found at the topographical coordinates given by Josephus, appears to confirm its existence.<sup>66</sup> The gate was “wide enough for only two men to pass; it cannot be a normal gate,”<sup>67</sup> but would allow Essenes to pass in and out at the south-western hill of Jerusalem. In addition, the discovery of ancient remains of a network of ritual baths for purification, as was known at Qumran,<sup>68</sup> suggests that the existence of an Essene quarter in Jerusalem beyond the Essene Gate is feasible.<sup>69</sup> Rainer Riesner is also in favour of the communal use of this gate connected to the Essene Quarter: “According to the reports of Philo (*Every Good Man is Free* 76; *Hypothetica* in Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 8.11.1) and Josephus (*War* 2.24) and to what is presupposed in the Damascus Document (CD 10.21–23; 12.19–23), we have to expect an

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<sup>63</sup> Rainer Riesner, “Jesus, the Primitive Community, and the Essene Quarter of Jerusalem,” in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James Charlesworth (NY: Doubleday, 1992), 215. See also Pixner, “Essene Quarter?” 246, 271, 277; “History of the ‘Essene Gate’,” 98.

<sup>64</sup> Josephus, *A.J.* 15.4 (LCL 489:437).

<sup>65</sup> Josephus, *B.J.* 5.145 (LCL 210:44).

<sup>66</sup> Bargil Pixner, “The History of the ‘Essene Gate’ Area,” *ZDPV* 105 (1989): 96–104. Rainer Riesner supports the identification of the Essene Gate according to the coordinates given by Josephus, as outlined originally by the 19<sup>th</sup> C excavations of F. Bliss and A. Dickie, the later work of Jerusalem-based B. Pixner, and Israeli archaeologists D. Chen and S. Margalit: “In the Second Temple Period there was a gate just where one should expect Flavius’ Josephus’s “Gate of the Essenes,” in Rainer Riesner, “Josephus’ ‘Gate of the Essenes in Modern Discussion,’” *ZDPV* 105 (1989): 105–109.

<sup>67</sup> Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Riesner, “Jesus, the Primitive Community, and the Essene Quarter,” 213.

<sup>69</sup> Bargil Pixner, “An Essene Quarter on Mount Zion?” *Studia Hierosolymitana: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum* 22 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing, 1976), 245–85.

Essene settlement.”<sup>70</sup> At least, given the testimony of Josephus and Philo, above, and archaeological insights, it seems that during the time of Herod until the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the final defeat at Masada, the Essenes were at least familiar in Judaea, overlapping with the period coterminous with the historical Jesus.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, while those at Qumran may have remained sectarian, according to Weber’s categories, Capper claims that, “many Essenes were not sectarians but *virtuosi* gathered in a religious order,” distinct from society but involved enough to exert a positive influence upon it.<sup>72</sup> Ling agrees that they “and the virtuoso religion they embodied were a major cultural phenomenon within first-century Judaea.”<sup>73</sup> Given that the geographical location of the Essenes coincided with John’s narrative location of the life of Jesus, and given the patterns of virtuoso religion in John’s Gospel noted (above and below), surely celibacy would be a practice that interested the author, one of several reasons justifying my suggested reading of 20:17.

## Fictive Kinship

Satlow declares that, “in accord with Josephus’s account that the first group of Essenes created fictive kin,” the community was “more important than one’s biological family.”<sup>74</sup> He claims that those at Qumran did not reject marriage but, rather, they rejected “the idea that the primary function of marriage was the establishment of an *oikos* and social responsibility.”<sup>75</sup> In what seems to be to be an ungrounded accusation, since the phenomena in both the NT and Qumran are open to the same interpretation, he assumes that of the two, only Christianity is anti-family:

The Dead Sea Scrolls never explicitly connect their rejection of the prevalent understanding of marriage and importance of forming an *oikos* to group or ideological goals. The early Christians, on the other hand, do. Although he had little

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<sup>70</sup> Riesner, “Jesus, the Primitive Community, and the Essene Quarter,” 208.

<sup>71</sup> Martínez, “Qumran,” 4.

<sup>72</sup> Capper, “John, Qumran, and Virtuoso Religion,” 100.

<sup>73</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 96.

<sup>74</sup> Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 23.

<sup>75</sup> Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 24.

to say about marriage, Jesus himself, it appears, rejected the value of family and *oikos*.<sup>76</sup>

However, the NT tradition does not promote a rejection of family any more than the celibates at Qumran did. Celibacy may have been an outcome of Jesus' prophetic role and the practical necessity of his peripatetic ministry.<sup>77</sup> Like Qumran, the NT does not reject the family but promotes the *priority* of fictive kin, and the secondary role of family (Luke 8:21; Matt 19:29). The term ἀδελφός (“brother”) is used both of family and of fellow believers (Mark 6:3 *cf.* Matt 5:22). Jesus extends familial relationships beyond the physical boundaries of his mother and brothers to anyone who does the will of God (Mark 3:31–35). No doubt for the Essenes – as it is with modern communities of celibates – fictive kinship was strengthened by the absence of biological family.

John’s community also manifests the phenomenon of fictive kinship. It demanded higher allegiance between its own members than to a natural family structure, parallel to that of the Essenes. Through a negative comment, Jesus’ physical brothers are placed outside the community as those who “did not believe in him” (7:5). The setting of Jesus’ final meal is with his disciples not his family (13–17). These are disciples who, through extended discourse and the language of knowing and loving, are portrayed as Jesus’ most intimate friends (14:7; 15:15). Filial language is used in the context of the disciples’ spiritual home: Jesus promises on ascension he will prepare a place for them in his Father’s household (*οἰκια*, 14:2–3). Capper makes a similar observation: “Jesus was able from the cross to entrust his mother into the Beloved Disciple’s care (John 19:25–27). The event suggests that a form of ‘fictive kinship’ involving mutual support existed between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple.”<sup>78</sup> After the resurrection, the disciples are termed in the language of fictive kin, as Jesus identifies them as “brothers” and names God as their Father too. “Go to my brothers (ἀδελφούς),” Jesus commands Mary, “and tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father” (20:17). I suggest this language is an indication of fictive kinship

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<sup>76</sup> Satlow, *Jewish Marriage*, 24.

<sup>77</sup> Holland, “Celibacy,” 66.

<sup>78</sup> Capper, “John, Qumran, and Virtuous Religion,” 110.

in the community of John's Gospel, which in turn suggests that the practice of celibacy is embedded within the texture of the fourth Gospel.

## Women in Fictive Kinship

There may also be an indication that John's treatment of his female characters reflects the virtuoso practice of celibacy within the community. Women in John's text are given an equal amount of attention as men in relation to Jesus, and I suggest in this section that this in turn may be an indication of their participation as independent celibates in Johannine tradition. In his anthropological studies, Ling has argued that there are two types of prominent women in texts around the NT era: "the prominence of women in the first-century social world was most closely associated with either the elite or the religious social actor."<sup>79</sup> In other words, the woman who could act outside normal cultural proscriptions either had financial means at her disposal to do so, or, as in the case of the virtuosa, gained visibility and prominence in society by taking on a role in a religious capacity as a spiritual leader. This in turn, he argues, has a bearing on John: the prominence of women in the Gospel may be a sign of virtuoso religion.

It seems that at Qumran, "None of the documents, however, suggests that women were welcome . . . as independent, celibate participants,"<sup>80</sup> and in the married camp, the dominance of the men and the inferiority of the women is stated explicitly in certain texts.<sup>81</sup> However, there was another group, which may have had Essene origins,<sup>82</sup> which did welcome both men and women celibates as participants. This first-century community of Therapeutae in Egypt was a "Jewish monastic movement" in which both genders took the path of abstinence rather than sexual activity.<sup>83</sup> They seem to have accommodated both males and females in a celibate community, to such an extent that

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<sup>79</sup> Ling, *Judean Poor*, 197.

<sup>80</sup> McNamara, *New Song*, 11; See also Vermes and Goodman, *Essenes*, 3; Josephus, *B.J.* 2.119–21 (LCL 203:368).

<sup>81</sup> Loader, *Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 390; CD-A XIII, 16–18 (*DSSSE* 1:573); CD-B XIX, 1–4 (*DSSSE* 1:575).

<sup>82</sup> Vermes and Goodman, *Essenes*, 15–17.

<sup>83</sup> Van der Horst, "Celibacy in Early Judaism," 400.

Philo, the quintessential misogynist,<sup>84</sup> was in awe of the women there.<sup>85</sup> Philo praised the women of the community who practised celibacy, since “they have spurned the pleasures of the body and desire no mortal offspring but those immortal children which only the soul that is dear to God can bring to the birth unaided.”<sup>86</sup> In debatably erotic language, he describes the men and women of the community who worship separately in two opposite choirs, then with ecstatic singing and rhythmic motions, combine to form one ( $\varepsilon\iota\varsigma$ ) chorus.<sup>87</sup> The women seem to have been given a significance that corresponds to that of the men.

Consonant with Ling’s study around the era of the NT, there are signs that celibate women could be placed on a level with men. Historian Peter Brown suggests that there are some historically established patterns which indicate that asceticism often worked in tangent with a raised status for women.<sup>88</sup> The raised status of Mary Magdalene as an ascetic alongside Jesus in the Nag Hammadi and other later texts, as I noted in the previous chapter, exemplifies this in part. In Chapter Three, I drew attention to the conflict caused, with possible roots in Jewish angelology, as celibates saw themselves as spiritually superior to the married and as closest to the angels, a trend which continued into the second century.<sup>89</sup> I also noted in that chapter those Epistles which seemed to be addressing this very issue: women were reminded to submit to husbands, learning from them at home and not permitted themselves to teach anyone (1 Tim 2:11–14). Rather than the roles outside the home that celibate women adopted, the role of these women as child-bearers carried the promise of salvation (2:15). Women who did not comply,

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<sup>84</sup> See Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.14–15 (LCL 363:443).

<sup>85</sup> Philo’s high esteem of these women is out of character for him which some scholars see as evidence of the historicity of his record of the Therapeuta, in Parks, *Gender in the Rhetoric of Jesus*, 139. In Philo’s description, both genders have “parity in terms of their intellectual and spiritual capacity and worth;” are both “active agents in their own quests for piety in service to God;” and are “seekers of wisdom.” *Ibid*, 138. Parks also perceives that the women’s status of equality with the men is contingent on their loss of sexuality and maternity as virgins or celibates. *Ibid*, 139.

<sup>86</sup> Philo, *Contemplative Life* 8.68 (LCL 363:155).

<sup>87</sup> Philo, *Contemplative Life* 11.85 (LCL 363:164).

<sup>88</sup> Peter Brown, *Body and Society*, 144–45; See also Sally Kitch, *Chaste Liberation: Celibacy and Female Cultural Status* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

<sup>89</sup> Wittberg, *Rise and Fall*, 120.

“challenged established ideological and social institutions . . . as a threat to social order and the very fate of humanity.”<sup>90</sup> Celibacy could be said to have threatened patriarchy.<sup>91</sup>

Wittberg has observed in her studies of later virtuoso religious movements that, when defined as the search for sanctity, celibacy acted as the “primary source of the virtuoso’s power.”<sup>92</sup> Exercising a freedom not to marry seems to create a new freedom by releasing women for other roles, giving birth to groups of “autonomous women who lived beyond the roles imposed by gender.”<sup>93</sup> Freedom from the role of wife and mother was, of necessity, linked to freedom from sexual intercourse and childbirth, but by this renunciation, female celibates had the ability to act outside the normal societal expectations of the cultural role as wife and mother.<sup>94</sup>

Gender balance as a feature of John’s Gospel is quite remarkable. John Chrysostom noticed one indication of this as early as the fourth century: while in the synoptic tradition the women watch the crucifixion of Jesus ἀπὸ μακρόθεν (“from afar,” Mark 15:40), in John they stand παρά (“beside”) the cross, the focus of attention (John 19:25–26). According to Chrysostom, “But the women stood by the Cross, and the weaker sex then appeared the manlier; so entirely henceforth were all things transformed.”<sup>95</sup> In contemporary scholarship, John’s portrayal of women both in quality and quantity has led Schneiders to suggest that this Gospel is the product of female authorship, as raised in Chapter Four.<sup>96</sup> Margaret Beirne has argued for a deliberate balance of male and female characters by the literary proximity of “gender pairs,” of which Mary and Thomas are one: “the evangelist demonstrates that the new family of disciples established by the

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<sup>90</sup> Gasparro, “Asceticism,” 141. In other words, the refusal to propagate the human race was seen as subversive by some.

<sup>91</sup> In the same way, Carl Olson, *Celibacy*, 7, observes amongst Hindu ascetics, Buddhist monks and Sufi mystics that, “the person practicing celibacy in some instances becomes an embodiment of power.”

<sup>92</sup> Wittberg, *Rise and Fall*, 120.

<sup>93</sup> McNamara, *New Song*, 77.

<sup>94</sup> Holland, “Celibacy,” 71–72, considers that the characteristics of women celibates include spiritual power, religious purity and independence of decision-making “against the wishes of males.”

<sup>95</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St John* 85.2 (*NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 14:318).

<sup>96</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 93, 238.

Johannine Jesus is decidedly and equally inclusive of women and men.”<sup>97</sup> Marinella Perroni says, “the distance between the Synoptics and John is eloquent,” in reference to their relative portrayal of women, especially given the inclination of the Gospel writers generally to protect the ecclesiastical primacy of Peter.<sup>98</sup>

The characters of all John’s women – the Samaritan woman, Mary of Bethany, the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene – are strong and positive: they are given equal conversation opportunity and approval by the narrator. Jesus’ mother demonstrates a quiet authority which persuades Jesus to perform his first sign (2:3–5); she is also significant as a character close to the beloved disciple (19:26–27). It is not only Nicodemus who engages in significant theological discussion with Jesus (3:2), but also a woman from Samaria, who is then an independent evangelist in her own town (4:28–30). It is during this conversation that the narrator notes the male disciples “were amazed that he was speaking to a woman” (4:27), authenticating the woman’s engagement in conversation. Martha makes a stunning Christological confession in John’s Gospel (11:27) rather than Peter’s less expansive statement (6:69 *cf.* Mark 8:29). She also – in a similar fashion to his mother earlier (2:3) – influences Jesus to perform a sign (11:21–22). Her sister, Mary of Bethany, participates prophetically in Jesus’ mission by anointing him ahead of his burial (12:7). And of course, in John, it is a conversation and encounter with a woman – Mary Magdalene – that defines the future witness of the resurrected Jesus, as she is sent to the brothers.<sup>99</sup> The treatment of women in John, then, suggests the text is the product of a community who accepted a higher level of independence amongst

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<sup>97</sup> Margaret Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals*, JSNTSup 242 (London: Sheffield, 2003), 10, 26. Sara Parks maintains, in *Women in the Rhetoric of Jesus*, 136, that John’s narrative balance shows signs of representing an echo of the earliest texts and that it “does connect disparate early Jesus movements [of the Q and Johannine texts] together by the cord of deliberately gender-balanced language.” By contrast, Matthew and the Luke/Acts tradition felt obliged to modify the gender balance which is found in more authentic form in Mark, John, Q and early Paul. *Ibid.* 54, 136. Parks concludes that the equality reflected in these texts “was a qualified, apocalyptic equality,” which “met with resistance.” *Ibid.* 145. Throughout this thesis, I make a connection between this “apocalyptic equality,” as Parks calls it, and celibacy, concepts which I argue are represented in John 20:17.

<sup>98</sup> Perroni and Simonelli, *Mary of Magdala*, 20.

<sup>99</sup> Notably, in John as in *Gos. Mary* above, Jesus does not first appear to Peter and the other disciples, but Mary is asked to communicate with them on Jesus’ behalf. Conway, *Men and Women*, 198.

women and a more elevated status than seems to have been common.<sup>100</sup> This in turn may be an indication of their role as independent celibate women.

## A Shared Eschatology

In Chapter Four, I discussed the “Body Debate” and noted a variety of attitudes towards the afterlife during the second-temple period. Some scholars have argued, in line with Josephus’ reports of Essene belief, that the Scrolls do not hold evidence that the Essenes expected a bodily post-mortem resurrection.<sup>101</sup> Josephus aligned Essene thought with that of the prevalent Greek view, adding explicitly that they thought like the children of the Greeks (ὅμοδοξοῦντες παισὶν Ἑλλήνων):<sup>102</sup>

For it is a fixed belief of theirs [the Essenes] that the body is corruptible and its constituent matter impermanent, but that the soul is immortal and imperishable. Emanating from the finest ether, these souls become entangled, as it were, in the prison-house of the body, to which they are dragged down by a sort of natural spell; but when once they are released from the bonds of the flesh, then, as though liberated from a long servitude, they rejoice and are borne aloft.<sup>103</sup>

Hippolytus, however, claims an Essene belief in bodily resurrection. He is a sole voice, an isolation which has led many scholars today to believe that his was a “Christianizing” of Josephus.<sup>104</sup> Lim, however, begs to differ, asserting that, although much in Hippolytus is conflated, the passage on the belief of the Essenes on physical resurrection is independent.<sup>105</sup> There is no evidence that the Essenes rejected the concept of resurrection

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<sup>100</sup> Conway states that in John, “women are clearly superior to the men” in the sense of a positive portrayal, in *Men and Women*, 205. Along with the only two positively portrayed men who are both anonymous (the beloved disciple and the man born blind in John 9), the women in the narrative “stand outside the bounds of recognized structures of authority.” *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> John Collins, “The Essenes and the Afterlife,” in *From 4QMMT to Resurrection: mélanges qumraniens en hommage à Emile Puech*, ed. Florentino García Martínez et al., Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 61 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 35–53.

<sup>102</sup> Josephus, *B.J.* 2.155 (LCL 203:382).

<sup>103</sup> Josephus, *B.J.* 2.154–55 (LCL 203:381–83).

<sup>104</sup> Joan Taylor, “The Classical Sources on the Essenes and the Scrolls Communities,” *Oxford Handbooks Online: The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, online publication Jan 2011, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199207237.003.0008, p.14 of 29.

<sup>105</sup> Lim, “Sectarian Matrix,” 29.

as was attributed to the Sadducees.<sup>106</sup> Hippolytus does assert that the Essenes envisaged an eschatological resurrection of the flesh, but that is at a future eschatological resurrection for judgment. He also seems to have seen a similarity between Essene belief and that of the Greeks in that they thought the soul departed from the body, but that the Essenes said the soul rested until the resurrection.<sup>107</sup> It is possible that the report of Hippolytus – that Essene belief included resurrection for future reward and punishment, and vindication of righteous Jews – is more reliable than that of Josephus.

More recent scholarship has suggested that, while they share the array of views on the afterlife common to the second-temple period, the Qumran texts do show some evidence of a hope for resurrection. Elledge points to several Scrolls which suggest that some of the Qumranites, at some stages of the development of the community, held an expectation of resurrection.<sup>108</sup> And of these, at least *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521) and *Pseudo-Ezekiel* (4Q385–88, 391) reflect hope for some form of physical or bodily raising to immortal life.<sup>109</sup>

Peter Flint also highlights the unusual prediction of the raising of the dead in the context of messianic expectations in the *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521). Column 2:1–13 contains the words, “For the heavens and the earth will listen to his Messiah . . . And the Lord will perform glorious things which have not existed, just as he said. For he will heal the wounded (lit. “pierced”), he will make the dead live, he will bring good news to the poor.” According to Flint, because there is no mention of raising the dead as a messianic sign in previous Hebrew Bible prophesies, “4Q521 may be described as a missing link (although not a direct one) between the Hebrew scriptures and the Gospels.”<sup>110</sup> Charlesworth agrees that “this is an obvious reference to the resurrection of the dead,”

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<sup>106</sup> Elledge, “Resurrection of the Dead, 38–40.

<sup>107</sup> Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 9.22 (*ANF* 5:136).

<sup>108</sup> Elledge, “Resurrection of the Dead,” 47, lists: Daniel, 2 Maccabees, *1 Enoch*, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Psalms of Solomon*, *Biblical Antiquities*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, *Pseudo-Phocylides*, *Life of Adam and Eve*, *Lives of the Prophets*.

<sup>109</sup> Elledge, “Resurrection of the Dead,” 36; Charlesworth adds the Scroll *Sapiential Work* (4Q416) to the same category as *Messianic Apocalypse* (4Q521) and *Pseudo-Ezekiel* (4Q385–88, 391) as references to post-mortem resurrection, in Charlesworth, “Resurrection,” 151–153.

<sup>110</sup> Flint, “Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 119.

especially line 12 which he translates, “For he shall heal the slain ones, and bring life to the dead ones.” The text is unclear, however, whether it is the messiah who raises the dead or God who raises the messiah from death: line 1 refers to the messiah, but from line 3 onwards the Lord becomes the subject. Either way, it is God, directly or through the messiah, who raises the dead in this text.<sup>111</sup>

## Realised Eschatology

The Gospel of John belongs to the chain of this indirect “missing link,” as Flint calls it, from the Hebrew Scriptures, through second-temple period thought, found in the *Messianic Apocalypse*, to the NT writers who claimed both that Jesus raised people from death by the power of God (John 11) and was himself raised from the dead by God (John 20). John, however, seems to extend the implications of this power over death that is otherwise found in all four Gospels. In the fourth Gospel, there is a way in which Jesus brings the future eternal life into the present life of the believer (4:10-14); those who believe in Jesus have already passed through judgment into eternal life (5:24). Martha claims faith in an eventual resurrection of her dead brother, Lazarus, at a future time but is told by Jesus, “I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (11:24-26). John thereby brings the impact of the future eschatological resurrection of the dead into the narrative-present life of Jesus, even before Jesus has been raised from death himself. John’s future eschatology is realised in the presence of Jesus.

It seems that John’s Gospel held this tendency towards a realised eschatology in common with the writers of the Qumran texts. One category of resurrection texts during the second-temple period that was “especially evident within the Qumran community and within the Johannine community” was the tendency to “collapse intentionally any distinction between the present age and the future age.”<sup>112</sup> For example, in 1QS, directed to the celibate community, there are references to an eternal life in present terms: “And

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<sup>111</sup> Charlesworth, “Prolegomenous Reflections,” 256.

<sup>112</sup> Charlesworth, “Prolegomenous Reflections,” 251.

the reward of all those who walk in it will be healing, plentiful peace in a long life, fruitful offspring with all everlasting blessings, eternal enjoyment with endless life, and a crown of glory with majestic raiment in eternal light.”<sup>113</sup> The Scrolls envisage a future life in which “there will be no miscarriage.”<sup>114</sup> Loader has argued that this eschatological vision of sexual reproduction in the future suggests that celibacy was not necessarily regarded as the highest ideal at Qumran.<sup>115</sup> This may be the case, but how literally it should be understood as a reference to sexual reproduction is debatable. It has been suggested by Lim that the language of fruitful and everlasting offspring and blessings is figurative, based on the commission of Genesis to be fruitful and multiply.<sup>116</sup> Gary Anderson has also stated, “The Jewish interest in real human marriage in the New Age is consonant with their perspective that the eschaton would entail a return to a real land and a real Temple.”<sup>117</sup> Jewish eschatological hope sought present fulfilment in the Deuteronomic promises of prosperity and the abundance of a promised land.

Of most interest for this thesis, the realised eschatology of Qumran is shown in some texts to meld the heavenly assembly of angels with the community of Qumran in a shared life in the present: “To those whom God has selected he has given them an everlasting possession; and he has given them an inheritance in the lot of the holy ones.

He unites their assembly to the sons of heaven . . . throughout all future ages.”<sup>118</sup>

According to the *War Scroll* (1QM) and other texts, a blissful eschatological existence was envisaged at Qumran for the resurrected who worship in the company of angels in the age to come.<sup>119</sup> Consistent with the NT understanding, angels were seen as existing at the intersection of the present and future and, as we saw in Chapter Three, there was an evident link in apocalyptic thought between angels and asceticism. The supposed celibacy of angels in the future affected sexual practice of adherents in the present, and in

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<sup>113</sup> 1QS IV, 6-8 (*DSSSE* 1:77).

<sup>114</sup> 11Q14 1 II, 11 (*DSSSE* 2:1211); Ex 23:26.

<sup>115</sup> Loader, *Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 377.

<sup>116</sup> Lim, “Sectarian Matrix,” 28.

<sup>117</sup> Gary Anderson, “Celibacy or Consummation?” 136.

<sup>118</sup> 1QS XI, 7-9 (*DSSSE* 1:97).

<sup>119</sup> 1QM VII, 5-6 (*DSSSE* 1:125); 1QS II, 2-3 (*DSSSE* 1:73); 1QS IV, 6-8 (*DSSSE* 1:77); 1QSa II, 3-9 (*DSSSE* 1:103); Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition*, 187.

the reverse, purity regulations in the present made the celibate Essene fit company for angels. In both the DSS and the NT, celibacy was connected to the eschatological age.<sup>120</sup>

The Scrolls also suggest that the presence of the angels in any warfare for the Qumran community meant the members were subject to regulations of ritual purity which in turn required celibacy: “No man, defiled by any of the impurities of a man, shall enter the assembly . . . for the angels of holiness are among their congregation.”<sup>121</sup> Ritual purity was also a prerequisite in the Scrolls for victory in battle, just as it was in the time of the Jewish prophets (1 Sam 21:5; 2 Sam 11:11): “And every man who has not cleansed himself of his ‘spring’ on the day of battle will not go down with them, for the holy angels are together with their armies.”<sup>122</sup> It is unlikely that such talk of angelic armies was referring to physical battle, since Qumran was not a battle site, nor were the Essenes warriors. According to Van der Horst it was probably this “constant state of preparedness for the eschatological war” that led to a permanent undertaking of celibacy of some Qumranites as preparation for battle.<sup>123</sup>

As well as the purity required for war, prohibitions of sexual activity in sacred time and space exist in sectarian Scrolls and Judaic literature generally.<sup>124</sup> For instance, in copies of the book of *Jubilees* – a text which is not sectarian itself but was found amongst those at Qumran – sexual activity on the Sabbath incurred a punishment:

Six days you will work, but the seventh is the sabbath of the LORD your God. You shall not do any work in it, you, or your children . . . And let the man who does anything in it die. Every man who will profane this day, who will lie with his wife . . . let him die.<sup>125</sup>

As well as the Sabbath, certain places came under legislation. As mentioned above, CD prohibits community members from having sexual intercourse in the “city of the

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<sup>120</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Qumran in Perspective*, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1994), 197–98.

<sup>121</sup> 1QSa II, 3–9 (*DSSSE* 1:103).

<sup>122</sup> 1QM VII, 5–6 (*DSSSE* 1:125).

<sup>123</sup> Van der Horst, “Celibacy in Early Judaism,” 396. See 1QM 7.5–6 (*DSSSE* 1:125); 4Q491–496 (*DSSSE* 2:971–91).

<sup>124</sup> Loader, *Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 363–69.

<sup>125</sup> *Jubilees* 50.7–8 (*OTP* 2:142).

temple,” referring either to the literal Holy City or Qumran itself.<sup>126</sup> A similar theme is repeated in *Jubilees* pertaining to the holiness of the Garden of Eden: Adam and Eve do not consummate their marriage in the garden itself.

And he awakened Adam from his sleep, and when he awoke, he stood up on the sixth day. And he brought her to him and he knew her and said to her, “This is now bone of my bone and flesh from my flesh... And after forty days were completed for Adam in the land where he was created, we brought him into the Garden of Eden so that he might work it and guard it. And on the eighth day his wife was also brought in. And after this she entered the Garden of Eden.<sup>127</sup>

According to the account, ritual laws governing purification after childbirth applied in the Garden to protect its holiness.<sup>128</sup> Loader observes, “Adam and Eve engage in sexual intercourse before they enter the garden . . . and after they leave the garden . . . but abstain while in the garden because it is a sanctum.”<sup>129</sup> Gary Anderson believes that for the writer of *Jubilees*, the sexual relations of Adam and Eve occurs outside because “Eden is a prototype of the Temple, a place of quintessential purity.”<sup>130</sup> The Garden of Eden was considered, along with Mount Sinai and Mount Zion as one of the most sacred places on earth, “which will be sanctified in the new creation.”<sup>131</sup> Not only at Qumran, then, but in wider second-temple Judaism, certain sacred times and places demanded celibacy.

It is probable that the future age, the anticipated eschaton, was also seen as one such sanctum which demanded ritual purity and abstinence from sexual intercourse. Loader makes the observation that such restrictions indeed may have been applied to the concept of an eschatological sanctum: “Concern with sacred space and time touches at some points on issues of sexuality . . . which might have had the potential to deny it a place in the future.”<sup>132</sup> In other words, since ritual purity was required in holy places and for

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<sup>126</sup> CD-A XII, 1-2 (*DSSSE* 1:571).

<sup>127</sup> *Jubilees* 3.6-9 (*OTP* 2:59).

<sup>128</sup> *Jubilees* 3.12-13 (*OTP* 2:59).

<sup>129</sup> William Loader, “Eschatology and Sexuality in the So-Called Sectarian Documents from Qumran,” in *Keter Shem Tov: Essays on the Dead Sea Scrolls in Memory of Alan Crown*, ed. Shani Tzoref and Ian Young, Perspectives on Hebrew Scriptures and its Contexts 20 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2013), 307.

<sup>130</sup> Gary Anderson, “Celibacy or Consummation?” 139.

<sup>131</sup> *Jubilees* 4.26 (*OTP* 2:63).

<sup>132</sup> Loader, *Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality*, 388.

sacred times, this may have led to a ban on sexual activity that applied not only to Qumran itself but a ban was also anticipated at the imminent arrival of the eschaton; both places shared by angels. Thus, the heavenly realm may also have been considered a sanctuary, hence sexual intercourse was prohibited in expectation of a sacred future.<sup>133</sup>

While John's realised eschatology does not encompass any explicit evidence of reference to sexual behaviour, the event of Jesus' resurrection in John, accompanied by a conversation with two angels (20:12–13), places the “Do not touch me” admonition on the edge of the eschatological age. Celibacy was demanded in the presence of angels: this is a time and place of holiness, a *sanctum*. The sense of sacredness in the Johannine narrative is augmented by connections with the Garden of Eden. As I elaborate in Chapter Six, the prologue to the Gospel programmes it to mimic Genesis<sup>134</sup> and here the resurrection, set in a garden (19:41), mimics that of Eden. The creation of literary connections sets the stage for allusions to Adam and Eve in the garden encounter.<sup>135</sup> At that moment, Jesus and Mary together inhabit holy space. Jesus' rejection of Mary's touch is consistent with beliefs found in the Qumran scrolls and wider Jewish texts that celibacy in a holy space was mandatory. The garden encounter intersects with the approaching eschatological age and this indeed gives insight to our interpretation of 20:17. It seems plausible, then, that the author's intention was that this prohibition should be read as a euphemism for the sexual restraint of celibacy.

Thus, it is to convey the holiness of the dawning eschaton that John uses the verb ἄπτομαι, best represented by the word “touch,” not “cling.” Bieringer notes the use of two unique words in the language of John in the sentence μή μου ἄπτου οὐπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα that separate it from the synoptic resurrection accounts: ἄπτομαι (“to touch”) and ἀναβαίνω (“ascend/go up”). Bieringer suggests that both of these terms deal with the sacred space of the Temple. Ἀναβαίνω is commonly used in the Gospels in connection with worship, on its own or with εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ (“into/to/in Jerusalem”) or

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<sup>133</sup> Loader, “Eschatology and Sexuality,” 314.

<sup>134</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 667.

<sup>135</sup> Katsanis, “Meeting,” p.8 of 14.

εἰς ἱερόν (“into/to/in the Temple”).<sup>136</sup> Further, in John 3:13; 6:62, ἀναβαίνω is used in relation to the divine sphere, ὁ οὐρανός (“heaven”), and for τὸ πνεῦμα (“spirit”) respectively. John is “theologically transcending the concept of going up [to] the temple/feast into the sense of going up to the Father.”<sup>137</sup> I argue, therefore, that John’s use of ἀπτομαι is, as a sexual euphemism, appropriate to the holiness of the resurrection space and is an allusion to – and preparation of the reader for – Jesus’ ascension to the Father, that space in which, according to all four Gospels, there will be no marriage nor giving in marriage.

## Dualism

As can be seen up to this point in the chapter, many scholars since the discoveries of the DSS have noted themes common to the Scrolls and John’s Gospel.<sup>138</sup> The tendency to dualism in both the Johannine and the Essene texts deserves mention here in discussion of their shared socio-cultural context. This does not necessarily imply literary dependence, since, as Bauckham has pointed out, light and darkness is a common theme in second-temple Judaism, and the imagery is so fundamental to human understanding that it stands as a universal symbol.<sup>139</sup> Nonetheless, it is a shared pattern, “unmistakably rooted in traditional Jewish eschatology,” according to Ashton.<sup>140</sup> Charlesworth has made the claim that, while the dualism in the DSS “casts its light on other compositions” in Jewish, Greek and Latin documents, and while dualism is found frequently in ancient Mediterranean civilizations, a “*dualistic paradigm*,” a mutually exclusive arrangement of

<sup>136</sup> See John 2:13; 5:1; 7:8,9; 7:14; Luke 18:10; 19:28; Mark 10:32,32; Matt 20:17,18.

<sup>137</sup> Bieringer, “I Am Ascending,” 225.

<sup>138</sup> Hannah K. Harrington, for example, has detected similarities between John and Qumran in the use and symbolism of water as an anticipation of the work of the Spirit, in “Purification in the Fourth Gospel in Light of Qumran,” in Coloe and Thatcher, *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 118–19. Nonetheless, John’s “innovation” lay in Jesus’ ability “to fulfil the expectations of purification with water.” *Ibid.* 138. John Ashton in “‘Mystery’ in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Fourth Gospel,” in Coloe and Thatcher, *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 64, notes a parallel emphasis on truth in the community in 1QS 2.24, 4.6, 5.6, 5.10.

<sup>139</sup> Richard Bauckham, “The Qumran Community and the Gospel of John,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after Their Discovery: Proceedings of the Jerusalem Congress, July 20–25, 1997* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society in Cooperation with The Shrine of the Book, Israel Museum, 2000), 105–115.

<sup>140</sup> Ashton, *Understanding*, 223.

opposites, “with *termini technici* eruditely developed is found only in Zurvanism, Qumranism and John.”<sup>141</sup> For example, in 1QS 3.13–4.25 and John 12:35–36, the language of the “Spirit of Truth” and “Holy Spirit” is used as well as a dualistic paradigm comparing those who walk in light and those who walk in darkness.<sup>142</sup> The Scroll 4Q548 1, 9–15<sup>143</sup> offers a promise in which the sons of light who are wise will rejoice but the sons of darkness will be annihilated. This holds some resonances with John’s claim that Jesus was “the light of humanity; and the light appeared in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:4–5). It resonates too with the claim of Jesus himself in John: “I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness” (8:12).<sup>144</sup>

Other dualisms found in John include life and death (11:25), the spatial separation of above and below (3:31; 8:23), a positive sense of the world (3:16) *vis à vis* hatred toward Jesus from the world (15:18). Thus, certain scholars, such as Ashton, have proposed that the Gospel comes to the reader through the lens of an Essene. He is convinced that the inherent way of thinking in the language of John could only be that of a converted Essene: “the evangelist had dualism in his bones,” a dualism that emanates from “his own gut reactions.”<sup>145</sup> Capper is also of the view that the disciple “whom Jesus loved” may well have been an Essene: the Gospel’s emphasis on love (13:31–35) would cohere with Josephus’ description of the Essenes as those who love each other (φιλάλληλοι) more than other groups.<sup>146</sup>

Of note too, is the tendency in John for flesh and spirit to form an irreconcilable pair: “What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the spirit is spirit” (3:6); “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh counts for nothing” (6:63). This includes the sublimation of

<sup>141</sup> Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, 51.

<sup>142</sup> Charlesworth, *Jesus as Mirrored in John*, 51–52.

<sup>143</sup> DSSSE 2:1095.

<sup>144</sup> George Brooke agrees that John is the most like the DSS of the NT texts, although Luke has some similarities too, citing terms such as “sons of light” and “walking in darkness” also found in 1QS 3.19–21. George Brooke, “Luke, John and the DSS,” in Coloe and Thatcher, *John, Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 77–78.

<sup>145</sup> Ashton, *Understanding*, 237.

<sup>146</sup> Capper, “John, Qumran and Virtuous Religion,” 114; Josephus, *B.J.* 2.120 (LCL 203:368).

Jesus' need for physical food to his desire to do God's will (4:32-34) as well as the pattern for his disciples to do the same: "Work not for food which perishes, but food which lasts into eternal life" (6:27). It is surely possible that this flesh-spirit dichotomy is also the language of physical and sexual restraint that we saw in the Pauline texts in Chapter Three where such language referred to sexual practice (1 Cor 6:16-17). It is plausible, therefore, that in a Gospel which is imbued with dualistic language, the description of an eschatological event set by the author in Judaea amongst the Essenes, might euphemistically refer to the common practice of celibacy. That which appears to be a puzzling rejection of a significant woman in the life of Jesus in John 20:17 may in fact not be so, but rather an indication of the celibate ideology held by the author of the Gospel.

## Chapter Five Conclusion

In this chapter, I have connected the practice of celibacy with the Gospel of John's narrative location in Judaea. In order to support my argument that reading John 20:17 through the lens of celibacy is key to understanding the intentions of the author, I have suggested that the influence of the Essenes on the environment of Judaea – as John's setting for the life of Jesus – was not insignificant. I have therefore attempted to show that John's Gospel reflects an expression of virtuoso religion. Further, a virtuoso ethos throughout the pages of the Gospel makes it plausible that John intends us to understand that celibacy was practised by at least some members of the community of Jesus' disciples, at least at some periods, and, therefore, an interpretation of 20:17 as an expression of celibacy is a viable reading. The Essene tradition is probably not a source of direct derivation for Johannine thought, but, unlike the Synoptics, John relies heavily on the Judaean religious landscape as the home of his narrative, so a cultural influence is likely. John knew Judaea, at a minimum, and potentially knew not just its geography but its cultural context and the impact of the Essenes in Jerusalem and Judaea. And while John did not share all the same beliefs or practices of the Essenes (for example, the high status given to women in the Gospel), there are some similarities to be observed. Like the

Essenes, John shows signs of fictive kinship and dualism in his narrative. Of most significance, many of the Qumran texts reflect a belief in celibacy in the presence of the angels, in sacred spaces and as a preparation for eschatological warfare. I suggest that the author of John 20:17 writes to reflect beliefs in an eschaton in which celibacy would be the norm. Thus, the shared geographical locations of Essene habitation and the narrative of John's Gospel, as well as other similarities found in their texts, suggests a shared socio-cultural matrix. Within this, I suggest that the celibacy valued by the Essenes may also have been valued by John, the expression of which is found in 20:17.

I drew attention in this chapter to the fact that, amidst a variety of beliefs on future resurrection within Judaism during the second-temple period, some Essene texts reflect an eschatological hope of a resurrection of the dead, a hope which the NT Gospels and texts announce as having been begun to be fulfilled with the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15:20). In the next chapter, I turn to John's role in the announcement of this resurrection which occupies the final two chapters of his Gospel. I examine more closely John's perspective on the resurrected body of Jesus which, in 20:17, Mary is prohibited to touch.

## Chapter Six: Inner Texture

The past chapters have outlined the strong possibility that “Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended” is a euphemism with sexual overtones and that it should therefore be interpreted in the light of celibacy, which was a culturally acceptable practice at the time of its writing (Chapter Three), and in the setting of its narrative (Chapter Five). In this final chapter, my inquiry comes to light upon the Inner Texture of John’s Gospel itself, as a final “clue” to the reading which I suggest was the most likely to be adopted by the text’s initial audience. The encounter of Mary and Jesus in John 20:11–18 – if not the whole of John – has its strength as literature in what Robbins calls the “sensory-aesthetic texture and pattern” of a text, a strength which lies in “the range of senses the text evokes or embodies.”<sup>1</sup> The language of John 20:11–18 is the language of embodiment: the narrative could be described as sensual. Mary’s body is standing, weeping, bending down (20:11); seeing (20:12); speaking, turning around, seeing again, not recognising (20:14); still weeping, imagining, about to carry (20:15); turning, speaking (20:16); wanting to touch (20:17); going away, announcing (20:18). Language of embodiment is used for Jesus too: body, head, feet (20:12); he is standing (20:14); speaking, a case of mistaken identity (20:15); he names (20:16); he is speaking again, discouraging touch (20:17); sending (20:18). Such language leaves gaps to be filled with the potential “body language” of each character. The story is indeed an aesthetic masterpiece and evocative in the hearing. Dodd has this to say:

Yet I confess that I cannot for long rid myself of the feeling (it can be no more than a feeling) that this *pericopé* has something indefinably first-hand about it. It stands in any case alone. There is nothing quite like it in the Gospels. Is there anything quite like it in all ancient literature?<sup>2</sup>

To find oneself present – as the reader – inside the story, furthers the Gospel’s overall purpose. John creates the experience of physicality within divinity at its core. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 29–30.

<sup>2</sup> Dodd, “Appearances of the Risen Christ,” 20.

prologue to the Gospel, John, the “incarnational theologian,”<sup>3</sup> has already set the scene. The opening verses locate Jesus’ origins in God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (1:1), and then plunge into the mystery of incarnation: “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14). Throughout John’s Gospel these two themes linger: the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus. After the resurrection, the ultimate sign of his divinity, chapters 20 and 21 are devoted to show Jesus as still embodied: he appears to the disciples and shows them his wounds (20:20); he invites Thomas to touch him (20:27); he appears as someone who is “real, palpable, a physical person capable of performing physical acts including cooking breakfast” (21:12).<sup>4</sup> It is fully congruent with this aim that Jesus, in his humanity, is conscious still of his own sexuality and hence he prohibits touch from Mary Magdalene (20:17). Perhaps this is best summed up in the words of the John the Elder: Jesus is “that which was from the beginning, which we saw with our eyes and our hands have touched concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1). In this chapter, I will interpret “Do not touch” in light of this emphasis of John, since the demonstration of Jesus’ sexuality is one aspect of his humanity. John’s emphasis on Jesus’ humanity allows for Jesus’ sexuality to be at the core of the prohibition.

As a window into John’s emphasis on the physical presence of Jesus following his resurrection, this chapter will focus on the arresting of Mary’s attempt to touch in relation to the invitation to Thomas to approach and touch. I suggest that in the former case, an emphasis on physicality means Jesus is still a sexual being, yet this is still within the parameters of one in a celibate state, hence Mary is refused touch. But, for Thomas, the emphasis on Jesus’ physicality is the sight and feel of the wounds displayed on his body, within the divinity of a body not resuscitated, nor angelic or ethereal, but raised from death. Therefore, unlike Mary, Thomas is invited to touch. Both the invitation to touch and the prohibition of touch make the same point: Jesus’ body is transphysical. John uses both Thomas and Mary to further his purpose in showing the full humanity of

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 668.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 668.

Jesus even after resurrection. I offer this as a solution to the enigma of John 20:17: this overriding Johannine purpose makes sense of the invitation to touch given to Thomas, and the prohibition to Mary.

## Mary and Thomas

As noted in Chapter Two, the contrary invitation to Thomas to touch (20:27) presents a conundrum within the literary context of John 20:17: “He then said to Thomas, bring your finger here and see my hands and bring your hand and put it into my side” (*εἰτα λέγει τῷ Θωμᾷ φέρε τὸν δάκτυλόν σου ὅδε καὶ ἴδε τὰς χεῖράς μου καὶ φέρε τὴν χεῖρά σου καὶ βάλε εἰς τὴν πλευράν μου*). Like the encounter with Mary, the Thomas *pericope* is a sensory piece of literature. When Jesus initially appears to the group of disciples, Thomas is absent, “not with them” (20:24) contrasting with Jesus’ physical presence; and, as with Mary, seeing and touching is important (20:25). Jesus’ embodiment is emphasised by Thomas’ adamant request to the other disciples that he wants to see the mark of the nails in Jesus’ hands; to put his finger in that mark; and to put his hand in the wound in his side (20:27). John emphasises the embodiment of Jesus by the imperative verb (*βάλε*) that is used to Thomas in the command to physically touch. *βάλλω* carries the sense of “throw” or “fling,” as well as the usual translation of “put” or “place.”<sup>5</sup> It is used in such contexts as casting nets for fishing (Matt 4:18) or throwing someone into prison (Luke 23:25). While *ἄπτομαι*, used in the prohibition to Mary, has a sense of “do not even approach to touch,”<sup>6</sup> Thomas is invited to physically place his hand into Jesus’ side. The use of *ἄπτομαι* is common in sexual prohibitions, as discussed earlier, but by contrast there are no instances of this being the case for *βάλλω*.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 100, suggests this scene should be read as “homoerotic,” in its contrast to 20:17. This, however, fails to take into account the use of *ἄπτομαι* in other texts as a sexual euphemism, and, by contrast, the absence of the use of *βάλλω* in sexual contexts. Beyond that, the wider ideological, intertextual, socio-cultural and theological investigations, from Chapters Three to Six of my thesis, show that celibacy, in John, the NT, the Hebrew Bible and the extra-biblical texts, takes its place in a heterosexual context.

<sup>6</sup> Bieringer, “I Am Ascending,” 229.

Thus, the two experiences of Mary and Thomas in John's text invite an intentional literary interaction with each other. In their separate encounters with Jesus after his resurrection, the Thomas *pericope* is placed so close to the encounter with Mary that it is hard to judge if it is all apiece. An appearance to the gathered disciples in the upper room by Jesus is all that separates them (20:19–23). I am proposing that this placement invites a comparison, the task of this chapter.

Not all scholars, however, think that such an interpretive comparison is justified. Both Brown and Bieringer consider that the encounters with Mary and Thomas are not related – or at least not intended to be related – by the evangelist, based on linguistic analysis. Of the prohibition to Mary (20:17) and the adjacent invitation to Thomas (20:27), Brown argues, “the two attitudes of Jesus have nothing to do with one other and that the evangelist intended no comparison between them,” mainly because the verb ἄπτομαι is used for Mary, whereas Thomas is invited “to probe his wounds – what is there in common between the two actions?”<sup>7</sup> Bieringer, too, alleges that a direct comparison is “too simplistic,” on the grounds that “touching plays a different role:” in the case of Thomas, “it is an invitation to faith . . . The encounter with Mary Magdalene is not about faith.”<sup>8</sup> This surely destroys the intended unity of the narrative flow, and the immediate, contrasting image it conjures in the reader’s imagination. Certainly, there are differences, but it is this very contrast and dissimilarity that demands comparison, like the drawing together of two magnets. I suggest that each *pericope* represents the polar opposite of a male and female encounter.

Other scholars, such as Margaret Beirne and Dorothy Lee, share my view that there are intended resonances between the two meetings. Beirne demonstrates that John displays a series of six gender pairs throughout his Gospel, of which Mary and Thomas are the final pair.<sup>9</sup> Both Mary and Thomas long to meet the Jesus of their past; both must surpass the sensory experience of physical touch and come to faith; and both experiences contain a

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1011.

<sup>8</sup> Bieringer, “*Noli me tangere* and the New Testament,” 25.

<sup>9</sup> Beirne, *Women and Men*, 26.

message for the faith community: “Their stories hang like parallel panels of the living tableau which is Jn 20.”<sup>10</sup> Lee has similarly argued that both characters in the text show a similar determination to meet the Lord; each receives a revelation and makes a response of faith; each plays a role in the faith of future believers.<sup>11</sup> Certainly the placement of the two *pericopae* seems to be a deliberate part of the narrative structure, and it seems there is a conscious literary juxtaposition intended.

Thus, the paradox needs to be addressed: one scene has a woman at centre-stage, the other a man; one may not touch, the other is invited to place his hand into the scar of a wound. I suggest that John’s point is subtle but succinct: both episodes proclaim Jesus’ physicality, the Word still flesh. The Christ has the same body after resurrection. Not only does he have physical wounds as markers of his suffering, but he is still male. I suggest that the greatest difference between the Mary and Thomas episodes is the gender of the characters. This reinforces the Johannine emphasis on the continued humanity of the resurrected Jesus.

### The *Noli me Tangere* and the Incredulity of Thomas

To facilitate the discussion around “Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended,” I turn at this point to a painted image as a comparative study of John 20:17 and 20:27. The illumination I have chosen acts as a vehicle for my own exploration, as I examine the artist’s interpretation of these two texts. John Harvey has rightly observed, “Visual culture illuminates the text not only as an illustrative adjunct but also as a means of commentary and exegesis every bit as nuanced, problematic and insightful as textual criticism.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the artist’s interpretation of the texts, articulated in visual form, offers insight to my own study, articulated in written form. The painting reflects a tradition of interpretation that recognizes the parallel nature of John 20:17 and 20:27, which I argue

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<sup>10</sup> Beirne, *Women and Men*, 206.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy A. Lee, “Partnership in Easter Faith: The Role of Mary Magdalene and Thomas in John 20,” *JSNT* 58 (1995): 37–49.

<sup>12</sup> John Harvey, *The Bible as Visual Culture: When Text Becomes Image*, The Bible in the Modern World 57 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 200.

in this chapter offers another “clue” to understanding the Johannine prohibition to Mary. Harvey suggests a three-fold process for this, which I will follow: a) to read the visual artefact and biblical text side by side; b) to interrogate the similarities and differences between them; c) to give my own commentary on the text, conscious of my own natural biases in the process.<sup>13</sup> My commentary on John’s text will be shaped by my comparison of the biblical text with the artist’s visual interpretation of that text.

The image I have chosen to perform this visual exegesis is the “*Noli me tangere* and the Incredulity of Thomas,” in which the encounters of Jesus with Mary and Thomas respectively appear deliberately juxtaposed by the artist (Figure 1). The scene was painted for Emperor Otto III of Germany at the end of the tenth century, and it portrays four scenes from the resurrection narrative of John on the same page, folio 251r, of the Gospel Book of Otto III. In this arrangement, the artist’s depiction of the encounter of Mary with Jesus sits on the page directly above, and corresponds in many ways to the parallel encounter of Jesus and Thomas below it. Thus, the invitation to compare these two visual traditions, with their similarities and differences, is unavoidable. Lisa Marie Rafanelli agrees that the image from the Gospel Book of Otto shows that the Thomas and Mary episodes were considered as “pendants,” intended by the artist to be hung together for the purpose of comparison, based on the parallel narratives in the text.<sup>14</sup> This arrangement lends itself to a comparison with the Johannine text.

Although art on the resurrected Christ was abundant before the Middle Ages, it was not until the tenth century that the first of the *Noli me tangere* representations began to appear. Before that time, paintings of the resurrection invariably represented Christ in his encounter with the *myrrhophores* as a group of women together, with Mary as the foremost of the women, but not the encounter with Mary on her own as told by John. Rafanelli suspects the reluctance before the Middle Ages to even paint the scene of Jesus and Mary on their own was “a reluctance to give visual form to the *Noli me tangere*

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<sup>13</sup> Harvey, *Bible as Visual Culture*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Marie Rafanelli, “To Touch or Not to Touch: The *Noli me tangere* and the ‘Incredulity of Thomas’ in Word and Image from Early Christianity to the Ottonian Period,” in Bieringer, Demasure and Baert, *To Touch or Not to Touch?* 139.

with all of its troubling evidence of female empowerment.”<sup>15</sup> During the reign of the previous emperor, Otto II, earlier in the tenth century, the first known paintings of the garden encounter between Mary and Jesus were produced, and of these, the *Noli me tangere* in the Codex Egberti (Figure 2) was placed a mere two pages ahead of a similarly-styled painting of the “Incredulity of Thomas.” The first forms of the *Noli me tangere* tradition in art thus show a pairing with the Thomas episode.

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<sup>15</sup> Rafanelli, “*Noli me tangere* and ‘Incredulity of Thomas,’” 156.

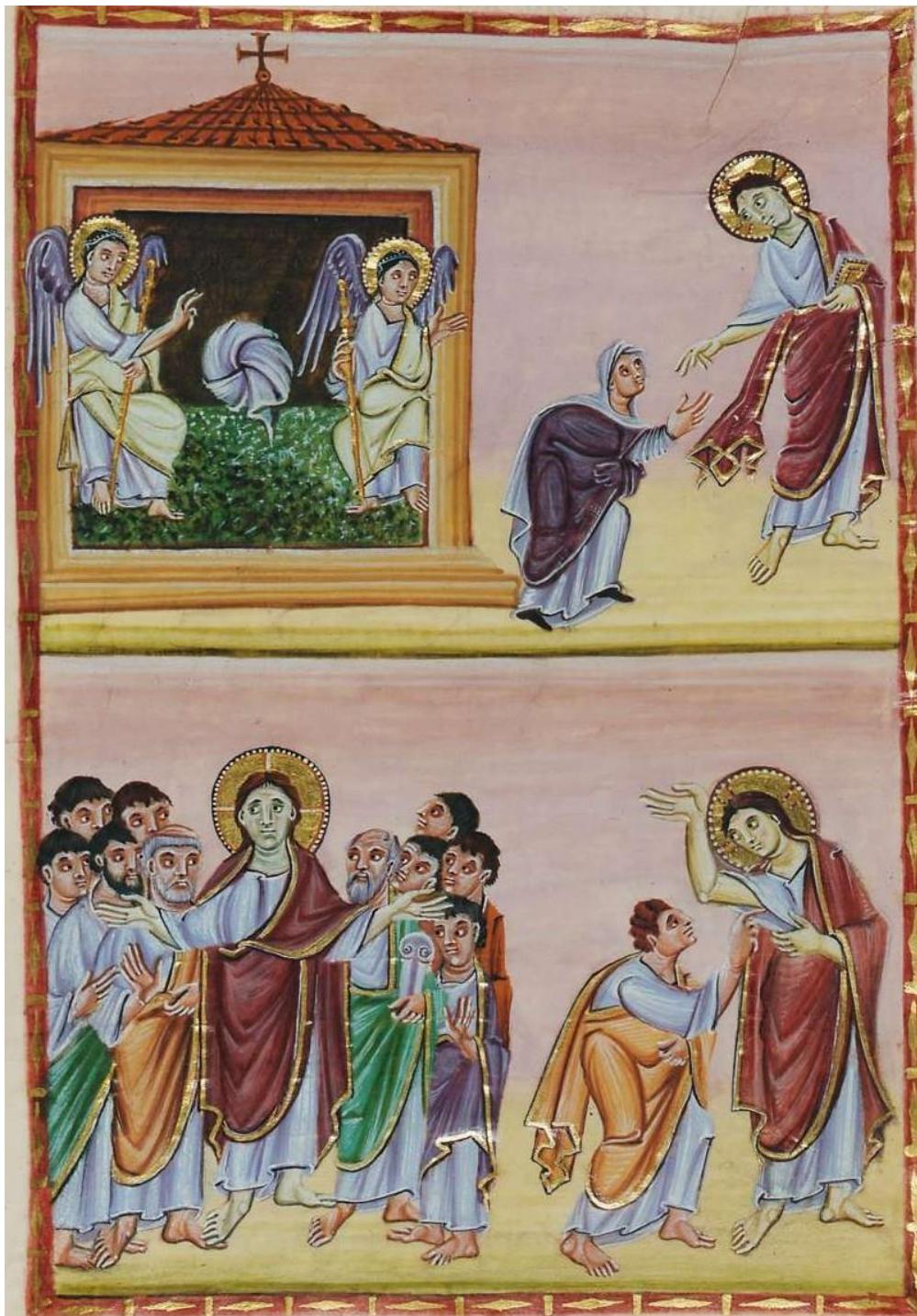


Figure 1: *Noli Me Tangere* and the Incredulity of Thomas, ca. AD 1000.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Folio 251r, from the Gospel Book of Otto III, produced for Emperor Otto III in Reichenau, Germany. Licence CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Clm 4453, urn: nbn: en: bvb: 12-bsb00096593-3, image 104.

Despite the inherent difficulty of capturing a moving narrative onto an image in any two-dimensional, static representation, the folio does remarkably well. It spans John's resurrection story in four quarters from 1) the empty tomb, the grave clothes and Mary's vision of two angels (John 20:1,7,12); through 2) the encounter between Mary and Jesus; to 3) Jesus' appearance to the gathered and fearful disciples (20:19); and lastly 4) the encounter between Jesus and Thomas (20:27). For the sake of my overall interest in 20:17, my focus is weighted in favour of quadrants two and four; this provides insight into how Jesus' encounter with Thomas enlightens the quest for understanding Jesus' encounter with Mary, and his puzzling prohibition to her.

The folio follows the familiar storyline of the text of John 20, balancing a narrative-encounter-narrative-encounter pattern. Quadrants one and three are a necessary part of the narrative, being true to the Gospel text, but the two near-identical encounters on the right are the double climax of the piece. They are given equal space in the image, but this is not obvious in the written text. It would be hard to argue that John does in fact give equal emphasis to the two: he expends far more narrative energy on Mary. Thomas enjoys one paragraph (20:24-29); Mary's presence is felt throughout the discovery of the tomb right until she commissioned (20:1-18). As well as the quantity of verses, the quality of the intimate interchange between Mary and Jesus is arresting.

But the artist of folio 251r has given these two encounters equal importance. Where a text has been modified like this in artistic representations, "adaptations serve as commentaries that explore a text's explicit and implicit meanings."<sup>17</sup> The equalising suggests, in the commissioned painter's mind's eye, an emphasis on the congruence and the likeness between the two episodes. I will discuss below some of these likenesses, and their correspondence with the source text. I also suggest that these likenesses and the visual uniformity they produce serve the purpose of drawing the viewer's attention to the *differences* between the two episodes. The uneventful similarities have the effect of highlighting the features that are not similar and make those features more conspicuous.

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<sup>17</sup> Harvey, *Bible as Visual Culture*, 10.

In other words, the outstanding difference between the two images is simply one of gender: the two encounters are essentially the same, but the character who is female may not approach while the one who is male may come closer.

In my reading of both the text and the painting, John has created what I can best describe as a “metaphor of difference.” Based on the text, the artist’s juxtaposing of the touch and no-touch scenarios achieves the effect of metaphor: in case the reader has missed the sexual euphemism of ἄπτομαι in 20:17, juxtaposition with 20:27 highlights the gendered encounter. As Martin O’Kane explains:

Metaphor, with its capacity to conceal and hide as well as to reveal and disclose, enables the biblical authors to let us ‘see’ what we read, while at the same time shielding important details and characteristics, especially those relating to God, from our gaze, rendering them almost invisible or present to us only in dim and obscure ways.<sup>18</sup>

The juxtaposition of Mary and Thomas, by both the Gospel author and the painter, paradoxically hides and reveals both Jesus’ divinity and his humanity. “Metaphorical statements,” according to Sallie McFague, “always contain the whisper, it is *and it is not*.<sup>19</sup> That which is divine in Jesus is hidden by human wounds that demand to be touched; yet in facing the marks of the human woundedness of Jesus, Thomas says “My Lord and my God” (20:28). Similarly, the refusal to be touched by Mary reveals the human sexuality of Jesus, otherwise hidden in a divine body raised from death. The encounters are the same but different: human gender and human woundedness in the divine come to both Mary and Thomas respectively. The distinction that John makes – and the painter conveys – reveals the embodied nature of the resurrected Christ in two facets: his sexuality where Mary is concerned and his suffering where Thomas is concerned. The single lack of resonance between the two stories – the gendered

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<sup>18</sup> Martin O’Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter*, The Bible in the Modern World 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 13; McFague’s italics.

treatment of touch – supports my thesis that John 20:17 is a prohibition that is best read in its context of celibacy.

### The Posture of Mary and Thomas

In the folio image, Mary and Thomas are both at a similar angle to Jesus and gazing at him with faces upturned; they both have their left leg to the fore and their right leg behind; their left arm is tucked under their chest and their right arm outstretched. Jesus is bent forward, on the same angle towards each, his left arm held to himself, his right arm outstretched, and his right leg is pointed towards Mary and Thomas respectively. His eyes and expression are the same towards both. This sameness seems uneventful in one sense, as it functions to condense and simplify John's narrative of the resurrection encounters of Jesus with two of his disciples. But the immediate impression of likeness between the two episodes is significant. For example, Mary's posture in the earlier Codex Egberti (Figure 2), and in many later images of the *Noli me tangere*, usually conveyed her bowed down in grief and repentance with her eyes lowered.



Figure 2: *Noli me tangere*, AD 977–993.<sup>20</sup>

Mary's bowed posture became conventional in artistic depictions of *Noli me tangere*. During the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great had officially sealed popular speculation and identified Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute (Luke 7:36), an

<sup>20</sup> Folio 91r, from the Codex Egberti, produced during the reign of Otto II. Image by courtesy of Photothèque Gabriel Millet, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Sorbonne, Paris.

identification which naturally contributed to the trend of a bowed Mary. Later European art often portrayed her as a reformed prostitute, alabaster jar in hand, usually on her knees. She often wore garments in deep reds, the colours of whoredom, or was dressed in a way that exposed her body.<sup>21</sup>

Folio 251r in the Gospel Book of Otto (Figure 1) is markedly different from these later works, and it also breaks with an earlier pattern of Mary bowed, found in the Codex Egberti (Figure 2): the Gospel book is the first known portrayal of Mary Magdalene standing upright. If Mary is slightly more bowed than Thomas, it is barely discernible, and is more likely an expression of the commonly-held perception in the tenth century of female inferiority than the abjection of Mary Magdalene *per se*. As Baert notes, “Western artists thus say more in their work about the image of women prevalent in the surrounding culture than about Mary Magdalene in John 20:11–18.”<sup>22</sup> By contrast, in folio 251r Mary is, by and large, in a similar posture to Thomas, not kneeling, and meeting Jesus’ gaze unashamedly. Both she and Thomas are bowed compared to Jesus, indicating their *equal* inferiority to Jesus.

Rafanelli suggests that the presence of powerful women in the Ottonian court, or the fact that Otto III was said to have had a special devotion to Saint Mary Magdalene, may have been an influence on this equalising of Mary and Thomas.<sup>23</sup> It is possible, as an aside, that the artist was a woman herself. This would allow an adequate explanation for the shift in the portrayal of Mary’s position, but it is more likely such a public task would have been assigned to a man. Based on this probability, I refer to the artist as “he” throughout the chapter.

Perhaps the artist has in mind that the unashamed, upright pose of Mary is that of a woman, the beloved, empowered by the love of her lover: a motive that Katsanis suggested in her examination of another later *Noli me tangere* by Hans Holbein the

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the *Noli me tangere* by Martin Schongauer (1480) and by Titian (1514), at <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/northern/schongauer.html> and <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-noli-me-tangere> respectively.

<sup>22</sup> Baert *et al.*, *One Person, Many Images*, viii.

<sup>23</sup> Rafanelli, “*Noli me tangere* and ‘Incredulity of Thomas,’” 177.

Younger. Holbein was one of the first European artists to portray Mary in a standing pose, rather than bowed down. Both Mary and Jesus are dressed in similar dark clothes and although Jesus' hands prohibit her reach, both their left feet inch towards each other.<sup>24</sup>

Yet the forward feet, Christ's with its long toes and Mary's lovely foot in its elegant sandal, are inching toward one another – a subtle gesture that belies the “do not touch me” admonition and speaks of a deeper longing. In this understated way, Holbein inserts into the scene an undercurrent of sexual tension.<sup>25</sup>

Whatever the artist's motivation, the image of an upright Mary is consistent with John's textual tradition. We are told nothing of Thomas' posture in the text, but we are told that Mary, first of all, bent down and looked into the tomb (20:11). After speaking to the angels, she turned behind her (ἐστράφη εἰς τὰ ὄπιστα) and she then sees (θεωρεῖ) Jesus, an action which indicates she is upright (20:14). She has a conversation with the supposed gardener, but when he speaks her name, she changes her posture again, turning (στραφεῖσα) to face him, as she replies ραββουνί (20:16). The text thus allows quite comfortably for a posture of standing from both disciples – Mary as specified and Thomas by an absence of comment.

A love that empowers equality is no doubt present in the garden encounter, but Rafanelli also suggests that, given the low status of women in the tenth century, a higher status is being given to Mary in the folio by representing her in tandem with Thomas, thus raising her status to that of a man.<sup>26</sup> If this is the case, then perhaps the artist has instinctively grasped the Gospel's ethos, and he is returning Mary to her rightful Johannine status. As discussed in the previous chapter, this equalising of the two characters is faithful to the rest of John's Gospel; as Ling notes, “besides Mary, wife of Clopas, all of the Gospel's women are fully rounded characters, each with an individual voice . . . both seen and heard.”<sup>27</sup> Unlike the women disciples in the synoptic version of

<sup>24</sup> See *Noli me tangere* by Hans Holbein (1524) at [http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/h/holbein/hans\\_y/1525/09nolim1.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/h/holbein/hans_y/1525/09nolim1.html).

<sup>25</sup> Katsanis, “Meeting,” p.4 of 14.

<sup>26</sup> Rafanelli, “*Noli me tangere* and ‘Incredulity of Thomas,’” 173.

<sup>27</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 187, 197.

the resurrection (Luke 24:11; Mark 16:8), these Johannine women are fearless and their word is believed (John 2:4–5; 20:2–3). Throughout John’s Gospel, the woman of Samaria, Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha, Jesus’ mother Mary and, of course, Mary Magdalene herself are all very present characters. As discussed previously, Ling believes that the distinctiveness of John’s Gospel and the prominence of its women are related: they are both evidence of the practice of virtuoso religion in the first century social world of Judaea.<sup>28</sup> The practice of celibacy and other disciplines of communal asceticism can have a natural equalising effect on the genders: where resources are sufficient, women are empowered outside a hierachal marriage structure. Mary – ἡ Μαγδαληνή – named after her town, not her husband or father, is one such independent woman. The folio captures this equality well and does justice to the intention of the Gospel’s author.

This overall likeness in posture between Mary and Thomas in their relation to the risen Jesus also gives an immediate impression of unity, of similar events. When one returns to the text this is confirmed: there is a similar encounter with an individual in which Christ is revealed and the prospect of touch is involved. But the overriding difference is that one is rejected and one is accepted; the former is female and the latter is male. The folio 251r image thus helps differentiate the real purpose of the two parallel stories: by drawing attention to the unity of the two encounters through the similar postures of Mary and Thomas, it highlights the only real difference, which is that of gender.

### The Gaze of the Eyes.

“The eyes,” according to anonymous colloquial wisdom, “are the window to the soul.” Eyes can indicate knowing and recognition; or by contrast they can convey misunderstanding. In the case of Mary and Thomas in the Gospel Book of Otto III, there is a positive connection detectable in the eyes of the characters. And there is no distinction given to either disciple: the gaze of Jesus rests equally on Mary and Thomas, and they in turn return the gaze openly. This is indicative of the equality of the two characters, as suggested above, but if the eyes are any indication, perhaps they show that

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<sup>28</sup> Ling, *Judaean Poor*, 182.

both characters equally share the journey of puzzlement and faith, an equality that fails to explain why one might touch and the other may not.

Augustine, however, did not think this was the case. His explanation for Jesus' prohibition to Mary was that "Jesus was giving a lesson in faith to the woman."<sup>29</sup> He argued that Mary failed to see Jesus as the second person of the Trinity, of the same substance as God, and would be permitted to touch only when she believed this: "For I am not yet ascended," He says, "to my Father: there shalt thou touch me, when thou believest me to be God, in no wise unequal with the Father."<sup>30</sup> Her "carnal" reaction, weeping over Jesus "as a man," betrayed her failure to recognise Jesus as equal to the Father. Mary, of course, was oblivious to the concept of a "Trinity," and the fourth century Arian disputes over the formulation of the doctrine on the dual nature of Jesus – his divinity and humanity – were not yet an issue. According to John's text, these were simply eyes that wept over the lost body of her loved one, and tears that were dried when she found him.

Admittedly, John's Gospel was at the forefront of the Arian dispute over the humanity and divinity of Jesus, and was used by both sides, so perhaps Augustine had his own sympathies to defend. John's Gospel was used by the followers of Arius of Alexandria (AD 256–336) to argue that Jesus, the pre-existent *Logos*, was a creature; but the Gospel was equally used by Athanasius of Alexandria (296–373) and the Nicenes to argue that Jesus was not only human but equal with God, eternally begotten and not made.<sup>31</sup> Thus, John's Gospel was instrumental in establishing Jesus, in Christian theology, as God incarnate in human form. It is not possible to know whether or not the artist is also criticising Mary as Augustine had, but in the second quadrant Jesus is carrying a book of the Scriptures under his arm. Perhaps this represents Jesus' need to teach Mary his true identity, as foretold in the ancient Scriptures and later interpreted in the NT.

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<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 121.3 (*NPNF<sup>1</sup>* 7:437).

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 121.3 (*NPNF<sup>1</sup>* 7:438).

<sup>31</sup> Anderson, *Riddles*, 25.

The artist appears to convey the divine and human identity of Jesus. In the first quadrant, one of the angels can be seen holding out his first two fingers in a marked fashion which draws the viewer's attention. Perhaps this is also a note from the artist to the viewer of Jesus' dual nature. The double-fingered symbol may reflect the Johannine emphasis on both the divinity and humanity of Christ. Such a symbolism is not unknown from other ancient works, such as Andrei Rublev's famous fifteenth-century icon of "The Trinity" held in Moscow, where the Christ-figure in the centre of the trinitarian characters similarly displays two fingers.<sup>32</sup> In Rublev's trinitarian depiction of Father, Son and Spirit, the outstretched two fingers of the centre person served as a symbol for the dual human and divine nature of Christ. According to Nikodim Kondakov, "the position of the fingers in blessing" in icons from the eleventh to the eighteenth century was significant. The iconographer "folded down the thumb, fourth and fifth fingers and by extending 'two fingers' (*dvupérstie*), the index and middle finger, symbolized the dual nature of Christ."<sup>33</sup> The artist of folio 251r is perhaps employing the same symbolism in quadrant one to represent from John's text that Jesus was the Word of God in the flesh.

Mary's misunderstanding about some aspect of resurrection is a common thread in both ancient and modern interpretations of 20:17. Fowler, for instance, sees "dramatic progression in the scene from ignorance to knowledge" on Mary's part:<sup>34</sup> this was Jesus' way of saying, as gently as he might, that he must go, and she could not touch, as the contact of the past was about to come to an end. Brown explains that Mary does not have the big picture in mind, but is clinging to Jesus in view of his more recent promises to return to them.<sup>35</sup> She has in her heart the words of Jesus, "I will not leave you orphans, I am coming to you. Yet a little while, and the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, since I live you also will live" (14:18-19). She may recall, "And so now you have sorrow, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, [http://wellsprings.org.uk/rublevs\\_icon/trinity.htm](http://wellsprings.org.uk/rublevs_icon/trinity.htm).

<sup>33</sup> Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov, *Icons*, Temporis Collection (NY: Parkstone International, 2009), 188, fn. 48, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/auckland/reader.action?docID=915185>.

<sup>34</sup> Fowler, "Meaning of 'Touch Me Not,'" 20.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1012.

joy from you” (16:22). So, according to Brown, Mary misunderstands and clings to Jesus in her joy. As already discussed in Chapter Two, it is a stretch to say that the text actually says, “stop clinging” or “let go of me” which would normally be rendered in an entirely different way.<sup>36</sup> Bieringer agrees with Brown in principle that the prohibition is motivated by Mary’s misunderstanding, although he argues that Mary is merely approaching Jesus to touch, and is not clinging. He suggests she may also have had in mind Jesus’ words, “And if I go, I will also prepare a place for you, I will come and take you to myself, so that where I am, you also might be” (14:3), in which case, “Jesus is telling Mary that he cannot yet take her to himself, because he has not gone away to prepare a place for her.”<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, locating the cause of the prohibition in Mary’s misunderstanding – even if she did misunderstand – still offers no solution in itself to the different treatments of Mary and Thomas. Mary’s misunderstanding, even if it plays a role, is no greater an offence than the explicit and vocal disbelief of Thomas – in text or as depicted in art – so it cannot therefore validly be identified as the source of Jesus’ seeming rejection of Mary in 20:17. In fact, the Gospels generally give voice to the incomprehension of all of Jesus’ followers (Mark 9:32), a further reason that Mary’s misunderstanding cannot be singled out as the reason for the prohibition to touch. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that both Thomas and Mary misunderstand equally. I suggest below that the response of Jesus to them both can shed light on the nature of their misunderstandings: where the invitation to touch is an adequate response to Thomas’ lack of faith and is a display of Jesus’ humanity, likewise the prohibition of touch is equally an adequate and necessary response to Mary, again as an indication of Jesus’ humanity. I suggest below that Jesus’ response to them individually dispels their misunderstanding and allows them to recognise him fully.

In fact, if the proto-gnostic traditions that led to the gnostic gospels of the later centuries are anything to go by, Mary’s reputation in the first centuries was quite the opposite of

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<sup>36</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 77.

<sup>37</sup> Bieringer, “*Noli me tangere* and the New Testament,” 25.

her story in mediaeval times and later. As discussed in Chapter Four, in some of the heterodox texts, Mary was a leader in understanding and wisdom. In the *Gospel of Philip*, when the disciples ask Jesus, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” he does not deny it, but answers, “Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man, and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.”<sup>38</sup> It would seem from this that Mary is one who is enlightened, hence Jesus’ special love for her. The *Gospel of Philip* also describes her as, “the Wisdom who is called ‘the barren,’ she is the mother [of the] angels.”<sup>39</sup> In the *Dialogue of the Saviour*, Mary is “a woman who understood completely,”<sup>40</sup> which could equally be translated as, “a woman who knew the All.”<sup>41</sup> By the time of the fourth century, she is identified by the Manichaeans in the *Psalms of Herakleides* as *Sophia*: “He chose Mariam, the spirit of wisdom.”<sup>42</sup>

Gnostic tradition notwithstanding, the potential for Mary’s misunderstanding to be an underlying factor in the Johannine text must be addressed. Taking John on his own terms, he does consistently use the misunderstanding of his characters as a literary opportunity for Jesus’ teaching. As Alan Culpepper has observed:

One of the distinctive features of the Gospel of John is the frequency with which its secondary characters misunderstand. These misunderstandings may be characterized in general terms by the following elements: (1) Jesus makes a statement which is ambiguous, metaphorical or contains a double-entendre; (2) his dialogue partner responds either in terms of the literal meaning of Jesus’ statement or by a question or protest which shows that he or she has missed the higher meaning of Jesus’ words; in most instances an explanation is then offered by Jesus or (less frequently) the narrator. The misunderstandings, therefore, provide an opportunity to explain the meaning of Jesus’ words and develop significant themes further.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 64.1-9 (*NHL*, 148).

<sup>39</sup> *Gos. Phil.* 63.31-32 (*NHL* 148).

<sup>40</sup> *Dial. Sav.* 139.12-13 (*NHL*, 252).

<sup>41</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> *Herakleides* 194.19 (Allberry).

<sup>43</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 152.

Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman and Martha present opportunities for a didactic expansion of theological themes: spiritual rebirth, faith in a coming messiah and resurrection, respectively.<sup>44</sup> Beirne includes the encounters of Jesus with Mary and Thomas in this category: “That they are both wrong recalls for the reader other examples of Johannine misunderstanding, here as earlier laced with dramatic and theological irony.”<sup>45</sup> Lee also sees this familiar thread of John’s technique in the stories of Mary and Thomas: both “engage in a struggle for understanding and come to Easter faith. The struggle involves a level of misunderstanding which for the narrator is to be read in positive rather than negative terms; as in earlier Johannine narratives, misunderstanding is an authentic marker on the journey of faith.”<sup>46</sup> This is partly true, except that in the case of Mary, we are still debating, some two millennia later, the exact nature of that misunderstanding, whereas in the case of Thomas it is much clearer. Jesus’ appearance to Thomas not only dispels doubt and demonstrates the divinity and humanity of Jesus, but the scene is also of obvious didactic importance: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (20:29). The same cannot be said of the cryptic reason that Mary suddenly moves from misunderstanding to understanding and runs to the brothers with the news (20:18).

Unlike other examples of Johannine misunderstanding, Mary’s encounter notably does not engender any comment of explanation from either Jesus or the narrator. For all its vagueness, the prohibition in 20:17 not only lacks any theological explanation, it offers not even an editorial comment. As discussed in Chapter One, a later scribe had inserted “and she ran forward to touch him” at 20:16 to try and make sense of the nonsensical, but this is not in the earliest manuscripts. This lack of clarity, from an author who is the master of making sure the reader understands, is an alert that this text carries a subtext. At a very basic level throughout his Gospel, John gives the reader all the help she needs, whether a translation of Greek and Aramaic,<sup>47</sup> or the insertion of an editorial or

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<sup>44</sup> John 3:1-21; 4:7-30; 11:17-27.

<sup>45</sup> Beirne, *Women and Men*, 202.

<sup>46</sup> Lee, “Partnership,” 38.

<sup>47</sup> John 19:13,17; 20:16.

narratorial comment to make sure the reader understands.<sup>48</sup> At a deeper level John habitually explains the deeper, spiritual meaning of Jesus' statements. It is significant, therefore, that here in 20:17 the reader is left to guess.

The options for this omission are best explained by the intended subtlety of the turn of phrase, which I suggested in Chapter Four was a euphemism that was commonly understood. The reason that editorial comment is lacking from the enigmatic 20:17, I suggest, is because of its sexual nature. This would not be unusual, as the cultural norms in many societies do not allow for explicit discussion or naming of sexual matters, and more so in ancient cultures. In the scene with Thomas, there is the theological lesson directed at those who have not yet seen; the abrupt command dismissing Mary, however, is of no didactic advantage whatsoever, except to confirm to the first-century reader that in resurrection Jesus is celibate as would be expected. Once again, the touch of Thomas and the distancing of Mary serve the same purpose in John's theological agenda: evidence of the humanity of the divine Jesus.

In spite of this lack of explanation, Mary in the narrative – by contrast with the modern reader – immediately understands the prohibition, like the ancient reader who needed no explanation. For her, it offers a resolution to her search for Jesus. In the same way that Thomas has received reassurance, so she has found what she is looking for – or, rather, for whom she is looking, since it is not a body, but the man she loves.

The open gaze of Mary and Thomas towards Jesus as represented in the Ottonian art also proves insightful on a more imaginative level: it allows room to imagine that both disciples experience a way of knowing – and of being known – or experience a revelation in the encounter. We might see, in the eyes of both characters, a moment of recognition, a point where misunderstanding becomes understanding. As Beirne has observed, both Mary and Thomas believe *without touching*,<sup>49</sup> therefore something else in the encounters allows resolution. I suggest this occurs through the prohibition to

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<sup>48</sup> John 2:21; 4:2,9b; 6:71; 7:39; 8:27; 11:13; 12:6,16; 12:33; 18:40b; 19:38a,39a; 20:9; 21:19; 21:23.

<sup>49</sup> Beirne, *Women and Men*, 203.

touch and through the invitation to touch respectively: it is the prohibition to touch and the invitation to touch that reveals something deeply personal to each character that facilitates their recognition. Jesus “knows” his disciples (1:48; 10:14). Thus, when Jesus knows and addresses the refusal to believe that Thomas had confessed to other disciples (20:25), Thomas immediately recognises him, and knows it is Jesus. Likewise, for Mary, I suggest the prohibition to touch reassures her that this “gardener” really is Jesus, resurrected in all his humanity. They are known to each other in this demonstration of celibacy and confirmed recognition comes through this knowledge. Although she has initially recognised him in the calling of her name, now she knows it is him. In the same way that an invitation to touch has moved Thomas from misunderstanding to the understanding that this is Jesus, so for Mary the prohibition to touch has achieved the same.

### Embodied and Not Yet Ascended.

It may seem superfluous to note that in all four quadrants of folio 251r, the constitution of Jesus’ body remains consistently portrayed, and he is recognisably the same person. Some commentators, however, have suggested that the change in the nature of the person or body of Jesus accounts for the different outcomes in the stories of Mary and Thomas.<sup>50</sup> In this section, I suggest that Jesus is portrayed consistently throughout the resurrection appearances in John’s text and therefore has no bearing on a valid reading of 20:17. As early as Origen, it was rumoured that between the prohibition given to Mary and the invitation to Thomas, the actual nature of Jesus’ body underwent a change, which would account for Jesus’ different reactions to Mary and Thomas. At the crucifixion, so thought Origen, Jesus’ body, soul and spirit were separated, and his spirit was retained with the Father as a “deposit,” which had not yet been received back at the time of the encounter with Mary.<sup>51</sup> Thus she must wait until Jesus was fully constituted again. “Touch me not” meant that “he wished anyone that touched him to touch him in

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<sup>50</sup> Conway, *Men and Women*, 197, proposes that Jesus was in “some sort of liminal state” when he met Mary, as do Seim and D’Angelo referred to in Chapter Two.

<sup>51</sup> Origen, *Dialogue* 138 (LCC 2:442).

his entirety, that having touched him in his entirety he might be benefited in body from his body, in soul from his soul, in spirit from his spirit.”<sup>52</sup> By the fact that Thomas is allowed to touch Jesus, Origen makes the assumption that implicit in the text between the Mary and Thomas incidents (20:19–23), Jesus had ascended and his spirit, which had been deposited with the Father, had been returned to him, which allowed touch: “He ascends to the Father and comes to the disciples.”<sup>53</sup> This theory posits an ascension of Jesus to the Father between the encounters with Mary and Thomas.

The theory has had different versions since the time of Origen. In more recent times, for instance, Molly Haws agrees – though for a different reason – that, “Jesus’ physicality has undergone a change in the interval between his ‘Do not hold onto me’ to Mary and his ‘Put your finger here’ to Thomas.”<sup>54</sup> In a rather novel approach, she suggests:

Jesus was conscious and in his body for at least the final stages of resurrection. The restoration of circulation to tissue that has been deprived of it is accompanied by sensations of pain in that tissue. . . Reanimation of dead tissue, while beyond the scope of current medical science, would have to be an experience more painful than anything most of us are able to comprehend . . . including unhealed wounds.<sup>55</sup>

In Haws’ view, the physical change occurring in Jesus’ body at the time of his meeting with Mary was too painful to allow touch. At the end of the process of his resurrection, and by the time of the meeting with Thomas eight days later, “the ban on touching has been lifted.”<sup>56</sup>

Both these views present difficulties: I suggest the Ottonian painting is more accurate here as a reflection of the Gospel of John, since there is no evidence that Jesus’ constitution underwent any change between his morning appearance to Mary and the appearance that same evening to the disciples, nor between that first day and the eighth when he appeared to Thomas. The narrative of the Gospel as a whole also suggests that,

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<sup>52</sup> Origen, *Dialogue* 140 (LCC 2:443).

<sup>53</sup> Origen, *Dialogue* 140 (LCC 2:443).

<sup>54</sup> Molly Haws, “Put Your Finger Here”: Resurrection and the Construction of the Body,” *Theology and Sexuality* 13 (2007): 181–94.

<sup>55</sup> Haws, “Put Your Finger Here,” 192.

<sup>56</sup> Haws, “Put Your Finger Here,” 191.

with a third display of resurrection physicality on the shores of Galilee (21:13–14) and a further promise of “when I come” in an eschatological sense (21:22), it is the same body of Jesus in all resurrection appearances. The initial non-recognition by both Mary Magdalene (*καὶ οὐκ ἤδει ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστιν*, 20:14) and later by the disciples who had gone fishing (*οὐ μέντοι ἤδεισαν οἱ μαθηταὶ ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστιν*, 21:4) suggests Jesus has not changed between any of the encounters.

Perhaps the artist of folio 251r has imbibed some of Origen’s influence. Between quadrants two and three, which represents the time frame between the meeting with Mary and the evening meeting with the disciples, it appears that the halo above Jesus’ head may have lost some of its brightness. The halo in the second quadrant seems to be more translucent than in quadrants three and four, and as bright as those of the angels in quadrant one. Does the loss of lustre represent the now-touchable Jesus returned to earth after an ascension? It is not possible to know how significant the lustre of a halo might be, but, on the contrary, there are other ways in which the folio artist denies an ascension on that same day – or at least a change in the substance of Jesus’ body. Like the Gospel text, the artist represents the appearance, texture, attire and colour of Jesus’ body consistently throughout all four quadrants, with no evidence of an ascended or changed person. It is rather more likely that the translucent halo in quadrant two is incidental. It is probably a reflection of the morning sunrise, since “early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb” (20:1).

According to Origen and others of the same persuasion, this departure is an ascension and return which marks the distinction between untouchability and touchability. Regardless of its timing, I will return below to the internal contradictions of the assertion of increased touchability following ascension. But for now, Origen does highlight some anomalies that cannot be glossed over lightly: first, John omits to tell the reader exactly when Jesus did ascend. Brown is of the view, given the silence of the literary context on the subject, that “John has no terminus for the earthly appearances of Jesus.”<sup>57</sup> Seim

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<sup>57</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1015.

agrees; Jesus “oscillates from being the one who ascends, descends and re-ascends to guide the believers” throughout the resurrection appearances. Yet, “If there is a process of ascent implied in the narrative, it is not completed until he is no longer seen.”<sup>58</sup> This is also the sense of the final words of Jesus in the Johannine narrative (21:22), which are a reference to a future event, “until I come” (ἕως ἔρχομαι). This suggests that John has in mind a real going away beyond the end of the narrative that will make this second coming possible. But there is no explicit timing of ascension in the text.

Yet John undeniably conveys a *sense* of imminent departure in the text between the Mary and Thomas episodes. Jesus’ statement to Mary is ambiguous: “for I have not yet ascended,” followed immediately by the instruction to tell the disciples, “that I am ascending” (20:17). The latter verb is distinctly present tense (ἀναβαίνω), but whether that implies an ascension that same day or after forty days of resurrected appearances (Acts 1:3) is unclear. A second anomaly is that, between the encounters with Mary and Thomas, Jesus appears to all the disciples and then breathes (ἐνεφύσησεν) in a way that bequeaths to them a holy breath/spirit (πνεῦμα ἄγιον), an act that could represent a “Johannine Pentecost” (John 20:22). Jesus also commissions them, as he might do at an intended departure (20:21), and gives last instructions with regard to forgiving and holding onto sin (John 20:23). Jesus’ promise during his last discourse that he must “go away” (ἀπέλθω) before the giving of the Spirit could imply an ascension: “For if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (16:7). Yet, for all this sense of departure in the text, there is an apparent inconsistency in the fact that Jesus continues to make the same type of appearances, as he had to Mary, to the other disciples such as Thomas (20:25) and those at the lake (21:21:2).

Brown frames the difficulty with a rhetorical question: “Does John mean literally that the appearance to Mary Magdalene took place before the ascension, while the other appearances took place later?”<sup>59</sup> One possible explanation for the puzzling command, “Tell them I am ascending” (20:17), is the Gospel’s *penchant* for an inaugurated

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<sup>58</sup> Seim, “In Transit,” 58–60.

<sup>59</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1014.

eschatology, a characteristic also found in the DSS as discussed in the previous chapter. One form of this in John is the collapsing of the events of Jesus' glorification and exaltation.<sup>60</sup> Schneiders summarises that the “entire mystery of Jesus’ glorification takes place in the Fourth Gospel when he is lifted up on the cross.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, in the same breath that Jesus recognises that “the hour has come for the son of man to be glorified,” he also acknowledges his impending death: “Unless a grain of wheat dies, it remains alone” (12:23–24). The double meaning attached to the verb ὑψόω (“lift up”) is used by John to elicit images of Jesus’ destiny as to be lifted up both on a cross and in victory.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, it is difficult to decipher whether John’s references to the departure of Jesus and his return to the Father are references to Jesus’ death, or his ultimate return to glory, or both.<sup>63</sup> Both suffering and glory are thus fused in a literary time warp, seen from the perspective of the post-resurrection author. It could well be that the ambiguity of an imminent ascension in Jesus’ conversation with Mary (20:17) is one such example.

This ambiguity with ascension occurs elsewhere in John. In a discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus says, “No one has ascended ( $\alpha\omega\beta\epsilon\theta\eta\kappa\nu$ ) to heaven except the one who has come down ( $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\beta\alpha\zeta$ ) from heaven, the son of man” (3:13). Several less important manuscripts add a gloss to the son of man, “who is in heaven,”<sup>64</sup> which illustrates well the overall enigmatic effect of the verse: the Jesus who is speaking seems to say he “has ascended.” In spite of complex discussions on the nature of the Greek Perfect tense,<sup>65</sup> it can generally be accorded a mixture of present state and past action, so Jesus is saying he has ascended and is ascended. Perhaps the best solution is that it is not Jesus speaking, but written from the narrator’s perspective. If so, it would account for the change in verbs just beforehand to the plural, “we speak of what we know . . . and you (plural) do not accept our testimony” (3:11). It is no longer the conversation between

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<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 1013.

<sup>61</sup> Schneiders, *That You May Believe*, 220.

<sup>62</sup> John 3:14–15; 8:28; 12:32–34.

<sup>63</sup> John 16:5, 17, 28.

<sup>64</sup> See NA<sup>28</sup> at John 3:13.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament*; Constantine Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008).

Jesus and Nicodemus but the narrator speaking to the Gospel readers. Thus, the reference to the ascension, seen in hindsight, makes Jesus the one who had come down from heaven and has (at the time the Gospel was written) ascended back to his origins.

Perhaps another possible explanation for the anomaly of the Johannine Pentecost, occurring as it does between Jesus' two appearances on the first day of the week (20:22), lies in John's laying down the foundations of his Gospel in Genesis, as I have suggested earlier and discuss again below. For this reason, Wright is of the opinion, "We should not be surprised when Jesus breathes his own Spirit into them, as YHWH breathed his own Spirit into human nostrils in Genesis 2:7."<sup>66</sup> Edward Klink III also sees a "clear allusion" between John 20:22 and Genesis 2:7: the use of ἐνεφύσησεν ("he breathed") by John is its only use in the NT, and it is the identical verb used in Genesis.<sup>67</sup> God breathed (ἐνεφύσησεν) into the face of the first human, "and the human became a living being" (Gen 2:7). If this allusion to original creation is paramount in the author's mind, then there need not be an implication that the Spirit-giving is a veiled reference to an ascension event between morning and evening. This is not a chronological statement on a covert ascension of Jesus, but a theological assertion of a new creation, modelled on the first creation in Genesis: this is a new beginning for the disciples, the recipients of the Spirit, as Jesus is in the process of going away.

Furthermore, John's own implication is that the role of the Spirit would not be instigated fully until Jesus was absent. The role of the Spirit, once Jesus had gone away, was to comfort the disciples (14:15), to teach them and remind them of what Jesus had said to them (14:26) and to bear witness to Jesus (15:26). Jesus, who claimed to be himself "the way" (ἡ ὁδὸς), promises that, in his absence – presumably after his appearances have come to an end – the Spirit would show the disciples the way ὁδηγήσει (14:6; 16:13). This role would be superfluous during the span of time during which Jesus appeared to his disciples, resurrected, since during that time he was still present to them. Thus, the Johannine Pentecost and its incumbent ascension, which occurred amidst the

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<sup>66</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 667.

<sup>67</sup> Edward Klink III, *John*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 862.

appearances, would seem to have little bearing on a prohibition to touch which applied solely to Mary on that morning.

But I suggest Origen's solution to the enigma of John 20:17, of an ascension immediately after the appearance to Mary and a later physical descent, contains an internal inconsistency. There is a *non sequitur* in his argument that Jesus had ascended between the meetings and had therefore become *more* touchable to Thomas than to Mary: surely Jesus would become *less* touchable after an ascension, when he had gone away to the Father, than before it. By John's own admission, Jesus will eventually return to the Father who sent him and the disciples will no longer see him (7:33; 16:10,28). It is also an integral part of NT tradition: forty days after the risen appearances of Jesus to the disciples, "a cloud took him (*ὑπέλαβεν*) from their sight," and "he was taken up (*ἀνελήμφθη*) into heaven" (Mark 16:19). For the sake of narrative coherence, *either* Jesus ascended immediately after his encounter with Mary, *or* he was more physically available to Thomas than to Mary as John narrates. Both cannot be assumed: Jesus' return to the Father is integral to John's definition of ascension. Given that John does not specify the first option but does indicate the second, we can therefore side with the Ottonian artist and opt for the latter.

Origen notwithstanding, simple logic dictates that an ascended Jesus would be *less* tangible than a solely resurrected one. In general NT tradition, Jesus ascended from the disciples' presence forty days after his resurrection (Acts 1 and 2) and this marked a bodily departure. Thereafter, Jesus was not encountered in a concretely physical or touchable way again. The post-ascension appearances of Jesus, for example, to Paul,<sup>68</sup> Ananias (Acts 9:10) and John the Seer (Rev 1:13) are characterised by oral and, to a lesser degree, visual encounter, but there is no hint of tangibility, in contrast to appearances pre-ascension (Luke 24:28–31; 24:38–43). Jesus, as a resurrected person, is physically and objectively identified as Jesus by the NT writers; Jesus, as an ascended person, is described more by the subjective experience of the recipient of the encounter (Acts 9:4,7; Rev 1:10).

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<sup>68</sup> Acts 9:3–7; 22:6–9; 1 Cor 15:8; Gal 1:15–16.

In fact, in that sense, the post-ascension experiences of Jesus in the NT are more in the same category of revelation as that of gnostic groups whose non-canonical gospels claim direct revelation from, and dialogue with, an appearance of Jesus. One such example, to which I referred in Chapter Four, was the conversation with Jesus that Mary Magdalene recounts to the other disciples in the *Gospel of Mary*. Some groups, as I also discussed in Chapter Four, assumed an immediate ascension of Jesus after death, for example the *Epistle to Rhiginos*, after which Jesus appeared spiritually to the disciples. Others held that his ascension was a part of a spiritual resurrection, which I discuss further below. In spite of differing views on resurrection and ascension, however, I suggest John shared the commonly accepted view that the heavenly – ascended – state anticipated freedom from sexuality, as indicated in 20:17.

In spite of John’s silence – if not his unfathomable intricacies – on the ascension of Jesus, it would seem that the opposite touching experiences of Mary and Thomas are unrelated to the timing of that ascension, at least in as far as it effected any change in Jesus’ body, or any reason to prohibit Mary’s touch. The artist of the Gospel Book of Otto has conveyed well that the body of Jesus is potentially touchable by both Mary and Thomas, but Mary is prohibited from touch. In John 20:17 the concepts of touch and ascension are drawn into an inextricable connection. The body of Jesus before his ascension is tangible, yet a prohibition exists for Mary alone. I suggest that the references, “for I have not yet ascended” and “tell them I am ascending,” are concerned with a focus on the different, ascended state of existence which Jesus would enter, an existence in another world, “like the angels in heaven” (Matt 22:30). The ascension represents a return to the existence Jesus had originally, close to the Father from whom he had come (John 16:5, 17, 28). The repetitive nature of “for I have not yet ascended” and “tell them I am ascending,” is an alert. As suggested earlier in the thesis, in the ancient mind the world of the Father to whom Jesus would ascend, the world beyond John’s narrative, was a world in which gender would hold no sway. In that world, earthly bodies and sexuality would come to an end, but for now, in the narrative, Mary was bound to this world. For the time being, Jesus and Mary inhabited different worlds, although he had promised to one

day take her, and the other disciples, to himself (14:3). Only then would the prohibition be waived; only then would the promise of “not yet” come to pass.

## The Movement Away: A Gendered Difference

Barbara Baert summarises the stunning effect of artistic renderings of the *Noli me tangere* which attempt to “capture that one moment – those three words pregnant with emotion . . . in a snapshot.”<sup>69</sup> The many representations of the scene often convey what Baert calls a “negation, taboo, untouchability.”<sup>70</sup> I have suggested throughout this thesis that this is best understood as sexual taboo. In the art works she studies, Baert pays attention to the feet of Mary and Jesus that “indicate both approach and departure;” they express “yearning and reticence . . . feminine desire and masculine prohibition.”<sup>71</sup> The hands are also significant. Victor Schmidt notes the subtle play of hands in Fra Angelico’s famous fresco, which adorns the wall of a cell in the Dominican convent of San Marco, Florence.<sup>72</sup> It expresses “two opposite actions: He is warding off Mary Magdalene – Touch me not – and at the same time moving away from her – ‘For I have not yet ascended to the Father.’”<sup>73</sup>

In the Gospel Book of Otto, this movement of Jesus away from Mary is expressed by his flowing tunic and a slight bend in his body as he avoids her touch. This is notably distinct from the natural fall of Jesus’ garments in the Thomas frame. The hand movements are also distinct. Jesus raises his arm to allow access to the touch of Thomas. The hands of Jesus and Mary convey a positive regard for each other and they reach out equally toward each other, but it seems as if there is an invisible wall between them, with an impassable space separating their otherwise closely aligned fingers. Their arms are placed in complete parallel, as though they would dovetail perfectly with each other.

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<sup>69</sup> Barbara Baert, “Touching with the Gaze: A Visual Analysis of the *Noli Me Tangere*,” in Baert *et al.*, *One Person, Many Images*, 44. An annotated Catalogue of art works pp. 53-121 follows Baert’s essay.

<sup>70</sup> Baert, “Touching with the Gaze,” 45.

<sup>71</sup> Baert, “Touching with the Gaze,” 44-46.

<sup>72</sup> Victor Schmidt, “Mary Magdalen and the Risen Christ: Changing Perspectives,” in Bieringer *et al.*, *To Touch or Not to Touch?* 207. See, for example, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/fra-angelico/noli-me-tangere-1442>.

<sup>73</sup> Schmidt, “Changing Perspectives,” 209.

There is the sense that both Jesus and Mary would like to touch, and the hands are within reach, but that for some reason – a reason that both reader and viewer here must surmise – touch is prevented.

Thomas' finger is disproportionately long and so close that it is difficult to see its end point. Rafanelli's observes, “the pairing of Thomas's penetration of the wound with the unconsummated touch of the Magdalene lends clarity and concreteness to the difficult concept of Christ's bodily Resurrection.”<sup>74</sup> I agree: the pairing emphasises that Jesus is bodily present. Perhaps Rafanelli's language of “penetration” and “unconsummated touch” conveys something of the sexual undertones that the corresponding male and female encounters bring to mind. But for all that, a close examination of Thomas' hand in the painting reveals that the tip of his finger is visible, so there is no evidence that penetration was in the mind of the artist. The Johannine text does not say whether or not Thomas touched Jesus; the reader may assume so, but in the narrative the invitation is extended and left open. Baert, too, in her analysis, holds that artistic interpretations of the *Noli me tangere* serve to comment on “the mystery of the incarnation.”<sup>75</sup> Paint and canvas put into a visible form that which John describes in text, but which is, otherwise, an unimaginable reality.

As I have described above, the juxtaposition of the Mary and Thomas scenes in the Reichenau work accentuates the similarities of the two scenes as depicted by John. However, the moving away of Jesus from Mary serves to draw attention to the one difference between the two: the gender of the two characters who are the recipients of Jesus' attention. It is my contention that the artist captures accurately John's intention to highlight Jesus' embodiment after resurrection as not only a fully human presence, but a fully male presence. This is achieved, in both text and image, by an encouraged approach in the case of Thomas, and a prevention of approach in the case of Mary.

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<sup>74</sup> Rafanelli, “*Noli me tangere* and ‘Incredulity of Thomas,’” 174.

<sup>75</sup> Baert, “Touching with the Gaze,” 49.

The movement of Jesus away from Mary in folio 251r is well representative of the most likely meaning of the verb ἀπτομαι in 20:17, as I have discussed in previous chapters. There is no clinging or holding onto him by Mary implied in the written text. The Ottonian artist expresses, in his *Noli me tangere*, a prohibition to touch, not a command to let go. As I discussed in Chapter Two, John’s intention in the use of ἀπτομαι, as an imperative in μή μου ἄπτου (20:17), has been defined by Bieringer as conveying the sense of “do not approach me.” This in turn is conveyed in the folio by the movement away from Mary expressed in Jesus’ body. Secondly, I have argued that ἀπτομαι is commonly used as a sexual euphemism, in which case John’s intention is also to express a prohibition of approach. In both instances, the English word “touch” best represents both the artistic and the textual intent, rather than “hold onto” or “cling.”

### Back to the Garden

As a literary work, John’s story of Jesus grounds itself in the creation narrative of Genesis. This is initially clear by the tell-tale introduction to his Gospel that John has taken directly from Genesis 1:1, ἐν ἀρχῇ (“In the beginning”). Boyarin, for instance, is of the opinion that the prologue to the Gospel is based on Genesis 1:1-5 and shows “Judaic patterns of religious thought and midrashic practice.”<sup>76</sup> In his argument against the reading typified by Bultmann of a gnostic/Greek prologue,<sup>77</sup> Boyarin views this introduction to the Gospel as evidence of “Jewish thinking” and of a “Jewish Logos.” In his reading, the *Logos* of God, present at creation, is one and the same *Sophia* of the Wisdom tradition who had already been in the world, but had not been welcomed by God’s own people (John 1:10-11). In response, John claims that the *Logos* became flesh and lived in person amongst humanity (1:14).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 106. Ashton, in “‘Mystery’ and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 62, claims that the *Logos* and the tenor of the prologue resonate with 1QS 11.5-11 and other instances in second-temple Judaism. Paul Anderson also sees, in the cosmology of John’s prologue, similarities to the theme of God’s sovereignty throughout the DSS: “All that exists comes from God’s creative power.” Paul Anderson, “John and Qumran,” 32.

<sup>77</sup> Bultmann’s influential gnostic/Greek reading of the fourth Gospel during the first half of the twentieth century is no longer the predominant view. Rodriguez, “What is History? 41.

<sup>78</sup> Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 93-111.

The Gospel also resonates with Genesis in the creation of humanity. As discussed earlier, God breathed (*ἐνεφύσησεν*) into the amorphous face of humanity to give it life (Gen 2:7), just as Jesus would later breathe (*ἐνεφύσησεν*) a holy spirit into his disciples (John 20:22). Wright has further highlighted a correspondence in structure between the Gospel and the first chapter of Genesis:

John declares from the start, with the obvious allusion to Genesis 1:1, that his book is about the new creation in Jesus. In chapter 20 he makes the same point. . . Easter was ‘the first day of the week’ (20:1,19) . . . On the sixth day of the creation narrative, humankind was created in the divine image; on the sixth day of the last week of Jesus’ life, John has Pilate declare, ‘Behold the man!’ The seventh day is the day of rest for the creator; in John it is the day when Jesus rests in the tomb. Easter is the start of the new creation.<sup>79</sup>

Given John’s intertextuality with Genesis 1, it would be reasonable to find a corresponding echo in John’s Gospel to the Garden of Eden: I suggest the story of Mary and Jesus in John 20:11–18 provides this. It is a sensory – if not a sensual – narrative, on a pristine morning on the first day of the week. In the Gospel, we are also in a garden (Gen 2:8), a place where God might walk as a gardener (Gen 3:8). Mary has found the one she loves – or they have found each other, at last (Gen 2:23). This is paradise. There is talk of touch – or at least of desire to touch – and we remember Adam and Eve (Gen 3:3), or imagine a new Adam and a new Eve. Love is palpable in a name spoken to each other, “Mary” and “Rabbouni.” This is, surely, a mutual naming of the other – in line with the equality given to women in John – which supplants Adam’s sole naming of Eve (Gen 3:20).

In the creation narrative, climactic attention is given to the creation of male and female: “In the image of God he made [humanity], male and female he made them” (Gen 1:27), and in finding an equal partner for the lone human, “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). The highlight given to the union created by sexual intercourse is also significant: “a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his woman, and they will be one flesh. And the two were naked, the man and his woman, and they were

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<sup>79</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 667.

not ashamed” (2:24–25). Each creative work of God is “good” or “beautiful” (1:18), but after the completion of creation, the author comments that the works God saw were “exceedingly good/beautiful” ( $\kappa\alpha\lambda\dot{\alpha} \lambda\acute{\iota}\alpha\mathfrak{v}$ ): this notably includes male and female (1:31). In fact, the only thing in creation that is “not good” ( $\mathfrak{o}\mathfrak{u}\kappa\alpha\lambda\dot{\alpha}\mathfrak{v}$ ) is that the man should be alone (2:18). Given the other echoes of the Genesis creation narrative throughout John, the reader is surely not meant to bypass this reference to human sexuality. One might expect John to embed a shared understanding with Genesis: the creation of both male and female is good.

This grounding of John in Genesis, gives a clue in the task of interpreting 20:17, and warrants the suggestion that John’s apologetic – or at least one of the several points he makes – is that it is not good for the human to be alone, but rather it is good to be male and female (Gen 2:18). Hence, as I asserted in the previous chapter, women are prominent in John. I suggested there that such prominence is historically a known feature of celibate groups generally, but it is also possible that an emphasis on male and female is part of the fourth Gospel’s rhetoric against proto-gnostic groups. Perhaps John’s echoing the Garden of Eden in 20:17 reinstates gender differentiation.

It is perhaps here that the contrast between the encratic *Gospel of Thomas* and John’s Gospel comes to rest on their respective treatments of Mary Magdalene. In both texts, Mary is an intimate companion of Jesus – the “most loved” in some, as discussed in Chapter Four. In both John and *Thomas* she is a leader among women. And in both texts, in spite of this intimacy and her role as a companion to Jesus, Mary is never the wife of Jesus but in all portrayals Jesus is celibate. But there is also a notable difference. In *Thomas*, the absence of sexual recognition takes the form of the abolition of Mary’s gender and her absorption into the male gender of Jesus:

Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary leave us for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a

living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>80</sup>

As discussed, this type of return to the male form may represent an expectation for the perfection of an Eden past, or of an eschatological sexless future, but it is at the cost of womanhood. I suggest John 20:17 creates an antithesis to this: “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” This is antithetical to *Thomas*: not an absorption into maleness, but the gift of space to Mary and her womanhood; not a loss of her identity but a sending out to be her own person.

The encounters with Mary and Thomas achieve this same emphasis on male and female distinction in John. Not just in *Thomas*, but in several encratic texts discussed earlier, sexual asceticism advocated the abolition of distinction between the genders. As I suggested in Chapter Three, proto-gnostic ideology may have been the case in the Corinthian church where women were abandoning traditional female attire (1 Cor 11:10), or might even explain the assertion that woman might be “saved” by childbearing (2 Tim 2:15). On the same trajectory, some later groups sought to amalgamate male and female into one androgynous being.<sup>81</sup> The spiritual ideal was the person who was solitary.<sup>82</sup> Some hoped that the female sex might be obliterated completely.<sup>83</sup> In some texts, Adam alone was sufficient, but the creation of Eve brought suffering.<sup>84</sup> In others, salvation lay in women abandoning their femaleness and becoming male,<sup>85</sup> since the return to the oneness, or the singleness of Adam, was a return to the male form.<sup>86</sup> This anti-creation stance is repudiated by the separate encounters with Mary and Thomas: in the contrasting outcomes of the two stories, it is Mary who is raised above Thomas.

The ending of the fourth Gospel has an intriguing manuscript variant which has kept textual critics and biblical scholars alike engaged in debate. John states the purpose of his

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<sup>80</sup> *Gos. Thom. log.* 114 (*NHL*, 138.)

<sup>81</sup> *Gos. Thom. log.* 22 (*NHL*, 129).

<sup>82</sup> *Gos. Thom. log.* 75 (*NTApoc* 1:127).

<sup>83</sup> *Dial. Sav.* 144.14-22 (*NHL*, 254).

<sup>84</sup> *Gos. Phil* 68.22-26 (*NHL*, 150).

<sup>85</sup> *Gos. Thom. log.* 114 (*NHL*, 138).

<sup>86</sup> Loader, *Sexuality in the NT*, 115.

Gospel (19:35; 20:31) as ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς πιστεύ[σ]ητε (“in order that you also might believe”) and again ἵνα πιστεύ[σ]ητε ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστιν ὁ χριστός (“in order that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ”). In both cases it is unclear whether the aorist subjunctive or present subjunctive (*πιστεύ[σ]ητε*) is the original reading. The aorist, conveying an indefinite aspect, could possibly be addressing new believers, or any who might believe, whereas the present tense is more likely to be directed to those who might continue to believe, so an encouragement for established Christians. NA<sup>28</sup> notes the doubt surrounding the authenticity of the aorist and Brown considers that the attestation for the present is stronger.<sup>87</sup> However, as discussed earlier, the distinction between the present and aorist in John may not necessarily be that clear cut.<sup>88</sup> As Klink observes, it is “difficult to determine the difference in function between the two options,” and therefore the “multiform and complex sense of ‘believe’ in the Gospel must be held in tension.”<sup>89</sup> There is some evidence within the text that it was written with those who were already believers in mind. For example, the lengthy final discourse and prayer of Jesus (13–17) might only be appreciated by those who belonged to the Johannine community. But several groups that may have included “outsiders” may also have been in mind: the Greeks who also sought to be disciples (12:20–21); perhaps Samaritans (4:39–41; 8:48); and of course, Ἰουδαῖοι (Jews or Judaeans), some who believed and some who did not.

Given the beliefs which developed in the churches, as I discussed in Chapter Three, the later development of Christian gnosticism and asceticism in Chapter Four, and the variety of Jewish resurrection beliefs in Chapter Five, I have been suggesting throughout the thesis that John’s community was involved in controversy. Perhaps the fourth Gospel does not pose two such stark alternatives between encouraging those who believe and converting those who do not, but rather a polarisation within the Johannine community to which the Epistles refer. The Elder describes an oppositional group in its ranks: “They went from us, but were not from us; for if they were from us, they would have remained with us” (1 John 2:19). They seem to be those who, broadly, do not “confess Jesus Christ

<sup>87</sup> Brown, *Gospel according to John*, 937, 1056.

<sup>88</sup> Bieringer, “Touching Jesus?” 77.

<sup>89</sup> Klink, *John*, 882–83.

who came in the flesh” (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). Whoever they were, Phipps postulates that, “Those early heretics believed in a divine Jesus but did not accept that he passed through puberty and experienced fleshly desires.”<sup>90</sup> John’s point at 20:17, in my suggested reading, is a reminder to these opponents: Jesus did experience physical desires. John was refuting a form of anti-body and anti-creation androgyny. His persuasion – which pervades his text – is that God intentionally created male and female, a distinction which the Gospel preserves. Within the context of his narrative, John makes a point in juxtaposing the encounter of Jesus and Mary with that of Jesus and Thomas, and I suggest it is a deliberate one. The purpose stated in the Gospel is that the reader might believe that Jesus is the Christ (19:35; 20:31): this is the divine and human Christ of flesh and blood.

### The “Burden” of the Gospel of John

Riley has expressed aptly that, in John, “the affirmation of the physical incarnation and resurrection of Jesus is one of the burdens of this Gospel.”<sup>91</sup> John’s first chapter introduces us to Jesus as the one who “became flesh and lived among us” (1:14) – not just a divine apparition but one who was fully human. John is explicit that Jesus was bound by a normal human body: he felt anger (2:15); he was tired enough to sit down by a well (4:6); his tortured body at death felt thirst (19:28). Moreover, the Gospel is based on the claimed testimony of the disciple who stood beneath the cross: “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear and immediately blood and water flowed out” (19:34–35). Found only in the Gospel of the incarnation, this final wounding of Jesus is omitted by the Synoptics. Throughout Chapters 20 and 21 of the Gospel, John implicitly makes a further claim: that this incarnation of the divine into human flesh continued throughout the resurrection appearances of Jesus. The emphasis on touch – and refrain from touch – and on sight, hearing, speech and different emotions, continues in his embodied state beyond his death. Jesus is, without negating his incarnation – or perhaps because of it – raised to a transphysical body. This emphasis in John is consistent with my argument

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<sup>90</sup> Phipps, *Sexuality of Jesus*, 174.

<sup>91</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 115.

throughout this thesis, that 20:17 is a reference to Jesus' body – in this instance, to his celibate state.

It is no surprising matter, then, that John collected his opponents, or created them. Those whom John intended as the recipients of his critique – or perhaps the recipients of his good news about Jesus – may have been any or all of the groups encountered throughout this thesis. The dissenters John addressed may have been originally associated with the Johannine community, as suggested above. In Chapter Three, I proposed that those who undertook an angelic life of ascetic practice, in advance of a resurrected and angelic future, may have been in mind. In Chapter Four, I discussed post-NT texts in which Mary and Jesus are remembered as intimate companions in an ascetic context in which the physical body was to be dispensed with, especially that of the woman. In these texts, the disciples relate to Jesus as a spiritual being, encountered through internal revelations and visions. Some groups featured a collapsing of the time frame between resurrection and ascension, omitting the physical resurrection appearances of Jesus in favour of direct passing of death to the ascended state. But in the encounter of 20:17, John conveys that Jesus remained a gendered human, after resurrection and before ascension, in the face of those who denied his embodiment. In Chapter Five, the cultural context of John's narrative was shared with other groups who awaited a future resurrection, for which they prepared by the practice of celibacy. This Gospel portrays Jesus as bodily raised from death in 20:17, celibate in the present fulfilment of a future expectation. It seems plausible that the intended recipients of John's emphasis on the bodily resurrection of Jesus included groups which were ideologically aligned to the contrary. John demonstrates that the resurrection of Jesus did not override his humanity; this is a burden of his Gospel. I maintain that, in this task, 20:17 plays a critical role.

### Thomas, Paul and John

As I indicated earlier, the *Gospel of Thomas* exemplifies a proto-gnostic and anti-material ideology which can be read as representing a group which John opposed, or, *vice versa*, who opposed John. I also highlighted above the diametrically opposed

portraits of touch in relation to Mary Magdalene given by John and *Thomas* respectively: in the one Mary is kept distant from Jesus (20:17), in the other she is drawn to him to be made male like him (*Logion* 114). If the two texts were contemporaneous, Riley holds that, “the *Gospel of Thomas* declares that the body will not be raised . . . [and] several aspects of John and *Thomas* may be seen as points in a ‘conversation’ between the two communities.”<sup>92</sup> In his view, the first believers and those of the Thomas community – pre-John’s Gospel – held to an original message of a spiritual resurrection only, more consistent with Graeco-Roman ideas on the afterlife, which John set out to refute. Hill, however, maintaining that John’s Gospel was written first, detects the offence that John caused, which is traceable in the later *Gospel of Thomas*. The “underlying animosity” in *Thomas* towards John centred “first and foremost on its Christology, including its presentation of the full incarnation of the Logos of God, his true human nature and true physical suffering and death on the cross, and his bodily resurrection.”<sup>93</sup> From this perspective of opposing claims and counter-claims, Thomas in John’s resurrection narrative is more than a character in a story: he is a disciple with a following and is thus indirectly representative of a group in opposition to the community of John.

One indicator of this antagonism is Riley’s perception that Thomas is portrayed negatively by John as the “doubter,”<sup>94</sup> and therefore the Thomas *pericope* presents a caricature and a complete fabrication on John’s part.<sup>95</sup> I am not convinced of this caricature, since Thomas utters a highly Christological confession which elevates him in the text: there is no justifiable evidence that the declaration, “my Lord and my God” (20:28) is solely to convert the followers of Thomas to this model. Thomas also takes on the role of the one willing to die with Jesus if necessary (11:16), in the likeness of Jesus himself (15:13). Nor am I convinced this is no more than a fabrication, since Luke, too, conveys the tradition of doubt within the body of disciples on the evening of the

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<sup>92</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 68.

<sup>93</sup> Hill, *Johannine Corpus*, 466.

<sup>94</sup> John 11:16; 14:5; 20:25.

<sup>95</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 83,104.

appearance to the disciples, presumably including Thomas (Luke 24:38–39). A negative portrayal of Thomas in John’s narrative cannot be unequivocally clear, since Charlesworth finds grounds to argue that Thomas was in fact the beloved disciple.<sup>96</sup> While that may or may not be sustainable, there is, at least, little evidence that John is deliberately denigrating Thomas.

A more serious anomaly in Riley’s argument, though, is his defence of Thomasine Christians as being consistent with the Pauline view of resurrection, over and against the Johannine view. As discussed in Chapter Three, Paul was a celibate for whom the lifestyle was voluntary and not classed as necessary for salvation, unlike ascetics, such as the Thomasine Christians, whose beliefs were discussed in Chapter Four. At its basis, I suggest Paul’s theology and *Thomas* are not compatible, whereas Paul and John are. Riley believes, based on his study of Graeco-Roman culture, that the earliest *kerygma* held that Jesus’ risen body was spiritual (1 Cor 15:42–55). He argues that the Thomasine Christians also held this, but the later orthodox church dismissed the concept in favour of a doctrine of physical resurrection, of which John was a defendant.<sup>97</sup> Riley thus drives a wedge between Paul’s writings and John’s Gospel, but I am not convinced that this is justified or that the two are incompatible, a defence I make below. For all Paul’s talk of a spiritual body not a physical one, it is nonetheless an unambiguous *body*. Paul gives no hint of a purely spiritual post-mortem existence for Jesus: Paul’s catch-cry is that “Christ has been raised” (Rom 7:4; 1 Cor 15:13–20).

The painter employed by Emperor Otto III also appears to have made a comment on the resurrection debate. As suggested by Baert and Rafanelli respectively, noted above, incarnation and resurrection are both a “mystery” and a “difficult concept.” The artist of such a scene, then, must attempt to portray Jesus as an incarnated divinity and a resurrected human: no easy task. Although in the Gospel Book of Otto, true to John’s text, the body of Jesus remains the same in all four quadrants, nevertheless, Jesus’ body is not the same as the bodies of the disciples. The body of Jesus after resurrection is different

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<sup>96</sup> Charlesworth, *Whose Witness?* 388.

<sup>97</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 107.

from an ordinary human body before death, both in the text of John's Gospel and illustrated in folio 251r, thus the new form of embodiment is highlighted in the artwork by contrast with the surrounding disciples. The paleness of Jesus' face is visible in comparison to the ruddy, lively, almost warm faces of Mary and Thomas especially. The drawn look on Jesus' face portrays his recent encounter with death, perhaps evoking the *kenosis* he has just undergone. It seems the distinction between Jesus and the disciples indicates both the continuity and discontinuity of Jesus' risen body. The artist thus conveys the ambiguity and subtlety of resurrected existence: Jesus is the same yet different. In all four Gospels, the risen Jesus is recognisably human, yet not immediately recognisable (Luke 24:31). Jesus invites touch because the disciples think he is a spirit (24:37, 39). This and the ability to disappear and reappear at will (24:36) – justifications for the term transphysical – suggest something has changed. For both artist and biblical writer, Jesus was not a spirit after resurrection, nor merely human, but perhaps best described as more-than-human.

The Pauline texts seem to hold a similar view. Paul was not anti-body: the earthly body was to be respected as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:9), and a man should love his own body and that of his wife (Eph 5:28–29). Thus, as Martin points out, Paul could insist on “the future resurrection of the body, thereby denying the lowly status attributed to the body by Graeco-Roman elite culture,” but also admitting it must be “reconstituted so as to be able to rise.”<sup>98</sup> An ethereal form of post-mortem existence is quite different from the Pauline insistence on a new form of body: the physical body (*σῶμα ψυχικόν*) must put on, wear, or be clothed in (*ἐνδύω*) the spiritual body (*σῶμα πνευματικόν*) at resurrection:

What you sow, does not come to life unless it dies; and what you sow, is not the body it will become, but a bare seed, perhaps of grain or something else. . . Thus also is the resurrection of the dead. What is sown as perishable is raised as imperishable; . . . what is sown as a physical body is raised as a spiritual body. . . For it is necessary

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<sup>98</sup> Martin, *Corinthian Body*, 135.

that this perishability wear imperishability, and this mortality wear immortality (1 Cor 15:36–53).

Paul's focus is decidedly on a body. After death, it will be a “spiritual body” – a “paradoxical cleverness” according to Elledge<sup>99</sup> – that will be raised to a new life, but nonetheless still a body. On the one hand, the physical earthly body will be shed, since “flesh and blood are not able to inherit the kingdom of God, neither does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (15:50). But on the other hand, since there are different varieties of “flesh” (15:39–40), there are bodies suited for earth ( $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha\tau\alpha\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\iota}\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\iota\alpha$ ) and bodies suited to heaven ( $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha\tau\alpha\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\acute{\iota}\omega\rho\acute{\alpha}\acute{\nu}\iota\alpha$ ), and of the latter, each has its own “glory” ( $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ ) – including the stars (15:41). The analogy of a seed, which dies in the ground and thereby becomes a new type of body in the plant which sprouts from it, is an apt one (15:37). Paul thus gives voice to the idea of transformation: a body which is identifiable with the one which has died, yet differs to the point of being a new entity. This is exactly the view that I suggest John holds: the final two chapters of his Gospel may be seen as Pauline resurrection theology in narrative form.

Disconcertingly, although Paul's language is clear enough, the concepts seem to have been sufficiently vague to give room in early church debates for both sides to use Pauline resurrection theology to argue for either a purely spiritual future existence or a physical body. Thus, the Nag Hammadi texts, including the *Gospel of Thomas*, assume a spiritual resurrection relying on Paul, while the church fathers such as Tertullian and Justin argue for a bodily resurrection of the flesh, also using Pauline theology. In the former case, Wright opines that “the parallels are strictly superficial,”<sup>100</sup> and, given Paul's language of “putting on” or “being clothed in” ( $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\delta\upsilon\omega$ ) a new body, not just a shedding of the old (15:53–55), I tend to agree. Paul does not envisage a disembodied or purely spiritual resurrection. Neither is he an adequate support for those discussed in Chapter Four, including the *Epistle to Reginos*, who collapse resurrection into ascension, with an immediate departure into the spiritual, heavenly life after death.

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<sup>99</sup> Elledge, “Resurrection of the Dead,” 44.

<sup>100</sup> Wright, *Resurrection*, 541.

Irenaeus certainly sees no hiatus between the Johannine and Pauline concepts. He relies on both John and Paul in his defence of the resurrection of the body: Jesus' body, both before death and after resurrection, is symbolised as "this temple" (John 2:19) and Paul writes to the Corinthians that they are a temple of God and the spirit of God lives in/among them (1 Cor 3:16).<sup>101</sup> Irenaeus makes a pertinent comment on Paul's definition of a spiritual body: those who are termed "spiritual" are called thus, "because they partake of the Spirit, and not because their flesh has been stripped off and taken away."<sup>102</sup> This was surely aimed at those who thought otherwise.

John retains a sense of Paul's ambiguity in his narrative of the new and incorruptible body of Jesus. In his resurrected body, Jesus was physically capable of doing and feeling all the same things he could do previously: he can speak to Mary and her weeping touches him (20:15); he can "stand" (*ἵστημι*) among his disciples (20:19; 21:4) to comfort them and show them his wounds (20:20); he can challenge Thomas (20:27); he can call loudly to fishermen over a lake, build a fire and cook breakfast (21:9); he can stroll along the lakeside after breakfast in conversation (21:20). Yet, there is also a sense of elusiveness about this Jesus: his closest friends do not immediately know who he is (20:14; 21:4); he is capable of being touched but there is no evidence that anyone dares (20:17, 28), nor even dares to ask (21:12); he "appears" (*φανερώω*) mysteriously in different locations (21:1), and can even move through locked doors (20:19,26). This gives the sense of a spiritual, not just a physical, body. Thus, Jesus inhabits physical space, unlike a ghostly, ethereal appearance, but he is not resurrected with the same physical flesh he had previously. According to John, he is a new and transphysical reality.

This thesis has argued that one further physical capacity of which Jesus was capable in his risen body – along with the other signs of his embodiment – was his capacity to be, or remain, the gendered human that he was throughout his life and before his death. I maintain that John 20:17 conveys to the reader that, along with his other physical attributes, Jesus retains his sexuality in his spiritual body. In both incarnation and

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<sup>101</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.6.1 (Roberts and Rambaut, 2:69).

<sup>102</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.6.1 (Roberts and Rambaut, 2:68).

resurrection – the burdens of John’s Gospel – Jesus embodies the imprint of God, who, in the original forming of humanity, “male and female he made them” (Gen 1:27).

## Chapter Six Conclusion

A comparison of Jesus’ resurrection encounters with Mary and Thomas through the medium of an Ottonian work of art, the *“Noli me tangere* and the Incredulity of Thomas,” has helped to highlight that the most – if not the only – significant difference between the two encounters is the gender of the characters. In the artist’s interpretation, Thomas and Mary are equal in their relationship to Jesus and their faith and their comprehension are equivalent. Yet Jesus reacts strongly with a movement towards Thomas and a movement away from Mary. Jesus would seem to be saying, in this case, to Thomas, “Put your hand in my wounds, and see I am still human.” I suggest that to Mary he is saying the same, “Do not touch me, for I am still human. I have not yet ascended.”

The artist sides with John. He paints Jesus with the same hue in each quadrant of the folio, thereby conveying that his risen body remains the same throughout all the resurrection appearances. Consistent with John’s text, there is no immediate ascension bypassing his appearances as a man, nor is there a suggestion that he has ascended and returned between the encounters with Mary and Thomas. At the same time, the artist paints the body of Jesus in a different hue from those of the disciples. Again, this is consistent with the text of John which assumes a distinct new form of embodiment after death: a spiritual body that is tangible at will. In all this, Jesus’ humanity can be positively verified by touch in the case of Thomas. In the case of Mary, his humanity may only be verified through a prohibition of touch.

The burden of John’s Gospel is to demonstrate the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus. In the case of 20:17, “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended” highlights gender and expresses with subtlety the restraint of Jesus and Mary. The implication of John’s narrative is in line with his emphasis on the Genesis creation account, a stark contrast to those ideologies which did not hold to the physical incarnation and resurrection of Jesus.

John's vision of resurrection is consistent with that offered by the Pauline material, against texts that advocated a repudiation of the physical and material world and demanded mandatory abstinence from sexual intercourse for believers. John's Gospel provides an alternative to a solely spiritual resurrection of Jesus. "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended" encapsulates Jesus' maleness as a characteristic of his resurrected body.

## **Thesis Conclusion and Implications**

The hour has come, as John would say, but in this case, it is the hour to draw conclusions on a new reading of John 20:17. My task has been to ascertain the possible meaning of μή μου ἄπτου οὕπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα to its readers, and hearers before them; it is a task I have approached tentatively, given the gulf between the world of the text and my own. Nonetheless, I submit my conclusion that the most plausible ancient reading of the verse was as a reference to Jesus' celibacy. A paraphrase I suggest might be: "Do not touch me; I am not yet in that heavenly, ascended state beyond the power of your touch." No other response would account so naturally for the apparent joy of Mary, and her immediate relinquishment of the desire to touch.

Perhaps this is too simplistic; perhaps it is the easy option of a gendered reading. But the attempts to date by many scholars to avoid such a reading have become unnecessarily complicated. I am willing to admit to simplicity: it is the obvious solution. Admittedly, a gendered reading creates a further complication: repressed love between Jesus and Mary is an uncomfortable conclusion in a modern culture, suspicious of celibacy, but the author of John would have known no such luxury. We would perhaps prefer that either they had been lovers or that Mary had not remained outside the tomb sobbing, but had gone home like the other women (20:2,11). Yet I suggest this middle road. If all the narratives of Mary and Jesus were simply those of a famous teacher and one of many disciples, the mystique attached to Mary Magdalene since that grief-stricken encounter in the garden would have long-since dissipated. But this is not the case. The circumstantial evidence I have presented in this thesis points to exactly that.

Circumstantial evidence, of course, is not as sure as an eyewitness testimony in a trial – though, of course, John's Gospel claims to offer that to the reader too. But where 20:17 is concerned, there is no explicit authorial claim to interpretation one way or the other, so the amassing of circumstantial evidence has been my task: gleanings from canonical and non-canonical texts; anthropological theory such as virtuoso religion; John's unhidden emphases and the ascetical environment in which his Gospel was written; the language

associations of ἄπτομαι, to name but a few. In fact, this need for circumstantial, rather than direct evidence, is a clue to its reception some two thousand years ago: the cloud of mystery surrounding this verse was, in fact, a deliberately placed shroud. The enigma of the verse is the sexual ambiguity which is a necessary subtlety when such delicate matters are included in narrative.

John 20:17, I believe, is rightly interpreted only with respect to the social environment of the time: a culture in Judaea which nourished the idealisms found in virtuoso religion, one aspect of which was the practice of celibacy. Coupled with that is the Johannine emphasis on incarnation which underpins my interpretation of the verse: the thoroughly human but divine word-made-flesh is portrayed as a sexual being, even while celibate. Parallel to the invitation to Thomas to touch, in which the wounds of the post-resurrection Christ reveal him as fully human, the encounter with Mary also reveals Jesus as human – albeit transphysical – in the interim between resurrection and ascension.

Ascension, of course, had added import to the ancient celibate: the earth had its trials and tribulations, but the return to the Father would ultimately be the end of any of the desires of the flesh. In the age to come, as both the canonical and non-canonical texts imply, there would be no need for sexual intercourse, “no marriage nor giving in marriage.” The symbol of the prophetic celibate in this world was, and still is in some strands of Christianity, the norm for the believer in the next. In John 20:17, Mary is not permitted to be in physical contact with Jesus until that time comes: the risen but un-ascended Christ is still a gendered human being under the constraints of celibacy. The task of glorification is not fully completed until Jesus has gone to the Father.

### The Couple Phenomenon

Mary Magdalene – even more than the verse itself – has suffered a history of misunderstanding. Down through time she has spiralled from being the most significant woman in the Gospels, independently named not after her father or her husband or sons, but after the town she came from, to an ascetic companion of Jesus in the early centuries, to a repentant prostitute saint in the Middle Ages. More recently, in popular culture, she

has reached the status of goddess, the divine companion, or, conversely, Jesus' wife and the mother of his children. In short, ambiguity fuels speculation on the relationship between Mary and Jesus. Because of the silence on her in the NT, and yet paradoxically her leadership in the death and resurrection narratives of Jesus' life, popular imagination has filled the gaps. In 1973, the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* portrayed Mary's ambivalent feelings for Jesus in the hit song, "I don't know how to love him." In 2006, the film *The Da Vinci Code*, based on Dan Brown's novel, found an audience amongst those willing to believe that the historical account of the relationship between Mary and Jesus resulted in progeny.<sup>1</sup> According to the film, this was a well-kept secret until modern times.

Part of the problem is that traditional Christianity struggles to raise Mary Magdalene to the height of her true significance. About the time of the release of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Anthony Padovano, a former Catholic priest, was ostracised and rewarded with laicization for his outspoken views, including his suggestion that Mary and Jesus might have been married.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, Karen King from Harvard University revived speculation on Mary's role by publishing a supposedly mid-eighth-century Coptic fragment of a *Gospel of Jesus' Wife*. In the fragment, line four is translated as, "Jesus said to them, 'My wife . . .'" and the previous line is said to contain the name "Mary," amongst other words.<sup>3</sup> This manuscript has suffered more than one accusation of forgery, and is now accepted as one.<sup>4</sup> These examples illustrate the perennial need to pair Mary and Jesus, mostly unsuccessfully, but nonetheless as a couple of some sort.

My thesis offers an answer with a realistic middle ground. A celibate Judaean religious community offers a historical springboard which respects both the love Mary and Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> See the similarly unfounded and speculative account by filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson in *The Lost Gospels: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus' Marriage to Mary the Magdalene* (NY: Pegasus, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony T. Padovano, "Is It Just Possible That Jesus Was Married?" *National Catholic Reporter* (April 12, 1996): 12–15.

<sup>3</sup> Karen L. King, "Jesus Said to Them, 'My Wife . . .': A New Coptic Papyrus Fragment," *HTR* 107 (2014): 131–59.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Christian Askeland, "A Fake Coptic John and Its Implications for the 'Gospel of Jesus's Wife,'" *Tyndale Bulletin* 65 (2014): 1–10.

held for each other and also honours the rigours of the redemptive ideologies operational in virtuoso movements which practised voluntary celibacy.

## The History of Catholic Religious Orders

My inquiry into the historical setting of the verse fills a void which exists between the NT and the evolution of contemporary Christian celibate religious movements. Simon Joseph comments:

Traditionally, most studies of asceticism begin in the late third and fourth centuries during the rise of early eremitic and anchorite Christian monasticism. These studies, while understandably focusing on the most obvious forms of ascetic practice, often neglect the presence of asceticism in earlier centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Most of Johannine study has focused on the unique theology, language and debatable historicity of John's Gospel. The findings of my thesis, however, indicate a quiet link between the virtuoso religious communities of Judaea at the time of Jesus and the rise of Christian monasticism. Like modern religious orders, the fourth Gospel reflects community living and the practice of celibacy. New studies on the texts of the second to fourth centuries found in Egypt show Mary Magdalene as a leader amongst ascetics – before the advent of later institutions and established religious convents for virgins and celibates. Monasticism may have flourished with Anthony the Great of Egypt in the fourth century, under the safety of the Roman empire, followed by the Augustinian rule the following century, and the Benedictines in the sixth. But Christian communal living, including the practice of celibacy, is detectable in the life of Jesus as told in John's Gospel. The synoptic Gospels tell us only of Jesus' itinerant journeys in Galilee; but perhaps the origin of the celibate religious tradition in Christianity belongs in Judaea in the first century.

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph, "The Ascetic Jesus," 152.

## Lost in Translation

Contemporary English versions of the Scriptures appear to have made a unanimous decision that μή μου ἄπτου is no longer best translated, “Do not touch me,” and have replaced it with, “Do not hold onto me” (NRSV; NIV) or “Do not cling to me” (ESV). This is based partly on pedantic grammatical arguments around ἄπτομαι, and partly out of a genuine concern for the negativity in the text towards a woman’s touch, so it is understandable. Where there has been no explanation of the background of celibate practice, nor of John’s purpose in recording the incident, then “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended” simply does not make sense. The change to “Do not hold onto me” at least offers a reasonable explanation: Jesus was simply telling Mary to let him go.

This, however, creates an anomaly. Even if for the sake of consistency alone, contemporary translations here fall short. In the current translations of the NT that the ordinary Christian reader and preacher has in his or her hands, ἄπτομαι is uniformly translated “touch” regardless of the tense or mood of the verb. The only exceptions to this are John 20:17, 1 Corinthians 7:1 and Colossians 2:21, all of which are sexual euphemisms. In the case of John 20:17, the elimination of the word “touch” would appear to be a deliberate attempt to silence the sexual euphemism intended by John.

Hazarding a guess, a sexual subtlety spoken between Mary and Jesus is untenable in the opinion of the translators. In the context of contact with a woman, the English word “touch” is more suggestive than other options. For this reason it is no longer used, but conversely, for this reason it is the closest to what John has in mind, and so should be used.

It would be more honest scholarship, surely, to face the taboos and restrictions that surrounded sexuality and women, and acknowledge – not eliminate – evidence of the historic elevation of the status of the celibate. The touch of a woman would then find its place in the text. Besides, once love is present, the scene of John 20:17 becomes a paradox of the restriction of Mary and yet her honouring. John portrays Jesus after resurrection as still a human being, still a physical male, and still vulnerable to the woman who,

according to the scriptural accounts, held a most significant role in his life by her presence at his death and resurrection. If Christian Bible-reading and teaching could give space to this interpretation, it might find a new understanding of this text.

### God and Man?

Bringing John 20:17 out of the closet has implications for Christian theology. The silence of the NT on the sexuality of Jesus has meant a silence in theology. Yet over the centuries, Church battles have been waged to defend the dual human and divine nature of Jesus Christ; skirmishes have been fought both underground, such as those recently unearthed in Egyptian texts, and at famous public locations such as Nicaea and Chalcedon. Modern theological textbooks often contain John's dialectical references to the humanity and divinity of Jesus: now 20:17 may be added to the list of his human attributes, alongside the invitation for Thomas to touch his wounds.

If Jesus is in some way representative of both God and humanity, as Christians hold, then integrating a sexual interpretation of 20:17 into our understanding of Jesus incorporates his capacity for sexual emotion into the realm of the divine. Biblical theologians might thereby fully endorse the spirit of the Genesis account of the creation of man and woman: gender distinction is integral to the image of God in humanity. Gender was a critical part of Jesus' embodiment. Jesus' incarnation, the Word made flesh, means not only his teaching, his compassion and his suffering, but his sexual vulnerability, made evident in "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended." Could the incarnation of Jesus include sexual desire as a part of the revelation of the divine? As John would say, I suppose the world itself would not have room for the books that could be written.

### A Final Thought

Before the discovery and study of the DSS in the middle of last century, the historical value attributed to John's Gospel had been downgraded to the point at which Riley, for instance, might label it a hoax, arguing it should be read as a fabrication to make a point against those who did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps he is right, as the

story that John includes at 20:11–18 is unknown to the other Gospel writers. To those who have a mind to doubt the explicit claims of the Johannine author, it could be creative fiction – admittedly arresting, engaging and even giving the sense of eye-witness intimacy – but nonetheless fiction. But the journey through this thesis has shown that the puzzling verse of 20:17 – if considered from an ideological perspective, taking note of intertextual resonances, the socio-cultural narrative setting and the internal literary setting – coagulates with the practice of celibacy. A backdrop of celibate practice fits with John’s language, with the ideologically-motivated surroundings of other early Christian thought at the time of writing, with the social and cultural setting of the narrative of the text and with the relationship of Jesus and Mary which may be gleaned from other texts. Interpreting *μή μου ἄπτου οὐπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα* as a prohibition issued by Jesus in light of his celibate status after his resurrection and before his ascension, makes John’s Gospel internally and externally coherent.

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