



# Gender, Body & Sexuality

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# Bodily “μέριμνας”

## *Instances in Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Literature*

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### ABSTRACT

There are about 180 instances of the Greek cognates “μέριμνα/μεριμνάω” found in Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Literature from 3BCE to 3CE (based on a search in “Thesaurus Linguae Graecae”). Commonly denoting “anxieties, worries” and “care, concern for others”, “μέριμνα/μεριμνάω” regularly points out both the great struggle of mankind with the many concerns of life and that which dominates the heart. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to explore how some of the examples found in these literatures display “μέριμνας” as regularly experienced in the human body; to shed light on the broad and varied contexts in which they appear. This paper will not focus on text critical issues; rather, it aims to present an overview of a range of usage that emerges from bodily “μέριμνας” examples in ancient literature. A survey of these cases, I argue, suggests mainly four groupings in which Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian literature’s usage of bodily “μέριμνας” overlap, namely: (1) worries/anxieties of daily life often contrasted with more noble/spiritual concerns; (2) proper posture when approaching the Lord/cultic activities; (3) marriage/sexuality/love; (4) death/hope/eschatology.

**T**he Greek cognates “μέριμνα/μεριμνάω” usually indicate the “anxieties/worries” or “care/concern for others”, pointing out both the great struggle of mankind with the many concerns of life and that which dominates the heart. There are about 180 instances of the Greek terms “μέριμνα/μεριμνάω” found in Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Literature from the 3rd cent. BCE to the 3rd cent. CE (based on a search in “Thesaurus Linguae Graecae”). The purpose of this paper is twofold: to explore how some of the examples found in these literatures display “μέριμνας” as regularly experienced in the human body; to shed light on the broad and varied contexts in which they appear. This paper will not focus on text

critical issues; rather, it aims to present an overview of a range of usage that emerges from bodily “μέριμνας” examples in ancient literature. A survey of these cases, I argue, suggests mainly four groupings in which Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian literature’s usage of bodily “μέριμνας” overlap, namely: (1) worries/anxieties of daily life often contrasted with more noble/spiritual concerns; (2) proper posture when approaching the Lord/cultic activities; (3) marriage/sexuality/love; (4) death/hope/eschatology.

I should also clarify that my categorization of texts as Greco-Roman, Jewish or Christian can be misleading since Jewish and Christian Literature from the 3rd cent BCE to the 3rd cent. CE also belong to the “Greco-Roman World” and “Greco-Roman Literature” in a broad sense, and much of the New Testament material has Jewish background. Rather, what is meant here is concerning works that are Greco-Roman, Jewish or Christian in nature and that are usually written by authors referred to as Greco-Roman, Jewish or Christian.

In a nutshell, before we overview these texts, it is perhaps interesting to point out that MERIMNAO is found in Greek literature from the time of Hesiod (between 750-650BCE) and in the Sophists (2nd cent. BCE), but it is not present among the Stoics (early 3rd cent. BCE to the 6th cent. CE), where we have PHRONTIS and PHRONTIZO. This would probably explain why we don’t find MERIMNAS in Philo and Josephus for instance. In the Septuagint, MERIMNAO is used to translate various Hebrew roots, but frequently translating the words derived from the Hebrews ‘yehab’ and ‘da’ag’ whose primary meanings are “anxiety” (e.g. Ps 54.23) and “being anxious/worried” (e.g. Ps 37.19). As for the New Testament, MERIMNAO and MERIMNA occur twenty-five times: sixteen in the words of Jesus (in the Synoptics), eight in the letters of the apostle Paul, and only once elsewhere (1 Pet 5.7). We also find it in Christian literature in the first three centuries (e.g. among the Church Fathers).

### ***MATERIAL ANXIETIES OF DAILY LIFE OFTEN CONTRASTED WITH MORE SPIRITUAL CONCERNS***

It is worth pointing out that ancient Greek authors often distinguished between the superior-rational faculties and the inferior-physical senses, reflecting a division of the world into a higher-spiritual realm, and a lower-material one. This can also be seen in Jewish and Christian literature.

EXAMPLES TAKEN FROM GRECO-ROMAN LITERATURE

i) Theocritus, Idylls 21.3 (III BCE)

“Poverty alone, Diophantus, promotes skilled work: she is toil’s tutor, because care and anxiety make it impossible for laboring men to sleep; and if one of them does nod off for a while, pressing worries suddenly disturb his rest.”<sup>1</sup> (Trans. by Hopkinson, 283)

This citation appears in an introduction to a dialogue about hard work where worries seem to have a negative impact on the body as it disrupts rest and perhaps even sleep.

ii) Claudius Ptolemy, Tetrabiblos 4.10.10 (II CE)

“After the sun, Mars, fifth in order, assumes command of manhood for the space of fifteen years, equal to his own period. He introduces severity and misery into life, and implants cares and troubles in the soul and in the body, giving it, as it were, some sense and notion of passing its prime and urging it, before it approaches its end, by labour to accomplish something among its undertakings that is worthy of note.”<sup>2</sup> (Trans. by Robbins, 445, 447)

This passage is discussing about the division of times, where for likeness and comparison, the age-divisions of mankind depend upon the order of the seven planets. Here, we find an explicit reference to cares and troubles as experienced in the body, which also gives the idea that somehow it leads into something noble in the end.

iii) Diodorus of Sicily, Library of History 2.21.2 (I BCE)

“For in the first place, he spent all his time in the palace, seen by no one but his concubines and the eunuchs who attended him, and devoted his life to luxury and idleness and the consistent avoidance of any suffering or anxiety, holding the end and aim of a happy reign to be the enjoyment of every kind of pleasure without restraint.”<sup>3</sup> (Trans. by Oldfather, 419)

We read in this text on how, unlike his mother Semiramis, her son, Ninyas, the new king of Asia, enjoyed a peaceful reign without war. It seems safe to highlight that the references to concubines, luxury, idleness and avoidance of any suffering or anxiety could all be experienced in the body.

*EXAMPLE TAKEN FROM JEWISH LITERATURE*

i) Unknown author, Sibylline Oracles 3.234-236 (II BCE)

“But they care for righteousness and virtue and not love of money, which begets innumerable evils for mortal men, war, and limitless famine.”<sup>4</sup> (Trans. by Collins, 367)

This oracle is discussing praise of the Jews. We find a contrast between noble concerns and material ones, with only the former being worthy of admiration.

*EXAMPLES TAKEN FROM CHRISTIAN LITERATURE*

i) Matthew, Gospel of Matthew 6.25 (I CE)

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”<sup>5</sup> (NRSV)

Citing the words of Jesus, this biblical verse is found in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount where we have explicit references to earthly/material/bodily concerns. Anxieties over food, body and clothing are presented in contrast with more noble/spiritual ones: seeking first the kingdom of God, for then all these things will be given as well (Matt 6.33, Luke 12.31). These warnings do not encourage insouciance and irresponsibility, rather they point out freedom from worry as being made possible by striving instead and foremost after God’s kingdom.

ii) Luke, Gospel of Luke 10.41-42 (I CE)

“But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”<sup>6</sup> (NRSV)

According to Luke, the worries/busyness of Martha obstructs with the good part, which is here associated to hearing the teachings of Jesus. It is therefore necessary to choose wisely between them.



iii) Basil of Caesarea, Letters 2.15 (IV CE)

“For when the mind is not dissipated upon extraneous things, nor diffused over the world about us through the senses, it withdraws within itself, and of its own accord ascends to the contemplation of God. Then when it is illuminated without and within by that glory, it becomes forgetful even of its own nature; no longer able to drag the soul down to thought of sustenance or to concern for the body’s covering, but enjoying leisure from earthly cares, it transfers all its interest to the acquisition of the eternal goods—”<sup>7</sup> (Trans. by Deferrari, 13, 15)

Discussing on how the first step to purifying the soul is isolation and tranquility, this passage seems to reflect some of the Greek division of the world: the world is experienced through the senses; contemplation and ascension associated to the divinity. Again, we have here a contrast made between body’s covering concerns and earthly cares, and between acquisition of eternal goods and leisure from earthly cares.

## ***PROPER POSTURE WHEN APPROACHING THE CULTIC ACTIVITIES***

### *EXAMPLE TAKEN FROM GRECO-ROMAN LITERATURE*

i) Plutarch, *Moralia* 477d-e (I-II CE)

“It should be full of tranquillity and joy, and not in the manner of the vulgar, who waits for the festivals of Cronus and of Zeus and the Panathenaea and other days of the kind, at which to enjoy and refresh themselves, paying the wages of hired laughter to mimes and dancers. It is true that we sit there on those occasions decorously in reverent silence, for no one wails while he is being initiated or laments as he watches the Pythian games or as he drinks at the festival of Cronus; but by spending the greater part of life in lamentation and heaviness of heart and carking cares men shame the festivals with which the god supplies us and in which he initiates us.”<sup>8</sup> (Trans. by Helmbold, 239, 241)

This text highlights on how one should not wait for festival days to relax and be happy in life. Moreover, it implies that although most people spend most of their lives in lament, the festivals supplied by the gods should be approached properly by those who are celebrating them.

*EXAMPLES TAKEN FROM JEWISH LITERATURE*

- i) Unknown author/translator, Psalm 37.19 LXX [38.19 MT] (III BCE)  
“because my lawlessness I will report, and I will show anxiety  
over my sin.”<sup>9</sup> (NETS)

A Psalm attributed to David, who is overwhelmed by sickness and sin. According to this passage, the right approach towards Yahweh/the Kurios involves confession and real concern/guilt.

- ii) Unknown author/translator, Psalm 54.23 LXX [55.23 MT] (III BCE)  
“Cast your care on the Lord, and he himself will nurture you; he  
will never give shaking to him who is righteous.”<sup>10</sup> (NETS)

This Psalm shows a person (David) that is betrayed and calls upon Yahweh/the Kurios to deliver him. Here, a proper attitude to God involves trust in his care and his vindication over enemies.

Examples taken from Christian Literature

- i) Paul, Philippians 4.6 (I CE)  
“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer  
and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made  
known to God.”<sup>11</sup> (NRSV)

From prison, Paul writes a letter to the Philippians, thanking them for their gift (Epaphroditus) who has become seriously ill during his visit. According to the apostle, it is through prayer to God that one is to defeat worry, and right standing before the Lord requires letting go of worries.

- ii) Peter, 1 Peter 5.7 (I CE)  
“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”<sup>12</sup>  
(NRSV)

In what appears to be a letter of encouragement dealing with suffering intended for Christians living in a pagan environment, the author seems to echo Ps 54.23, although with a new element: those who put their faith in Jesus-Christ. Likewise, this verse points out that an appropriate relationship to God demands trust in him and his cares.

- iii) Hermas, Shepherd of Hermas 19.3 (II CE)  
“For just as elderly people who have no hope of being rejuvenated look forward to nothing but their sleep [Or: death],

so also you, grown feeble because of your worldly affairs, have handed yourselves over to apathy, and you do not cast your anxieties upon the Lord. Your mind has been wounded and you have grown old in your sorrows.”<sup>13</sup> (Trans. by Ehrman, 223)

In this passage, we find a description of the Lord’s reply and explanation of the first vision about the elderly woman seated on a chair. We read that God wishes that his people cast their anxieties upon him; an attitude towards the divinity that appears to be rather mandatory than optional.

iv) Julian, Letters 397d (IV CE)

“For it is natural that men who are distracted by any anxiety should be hampered in spirit, and should not have so much confidence in raising their hands to pray; but that those who are in all respects free from care should rejoice with their whole hearts and offer their suppliant prayers on behalf of my imperial office to Mighty God.”<sup>14</sup> (Trans. by Wright, 179, 181)

From Antioch, in 362 CE, Julian, the Roman emperor, writes a letter to a community of Jews. In this letter we read that anxiety affects worship negatively, and being free from care facilitates proper prayer to God.

## ***MARRIAGE/SEXUALITY/LOVE***

### *EXAMPLES TAKEN FROM GRECO-ROMAN LITERATURE*

i) Achilles Tatius, The Adventures of Leucippe and Clitophon 1.6.4-5 (II CE)

“All the sensations which were lately at rest are then aroused; mourners feel their grief anew, the anxious their cares, those in danger their fears, and lovers their consuming flame. Hardly about daybreak did sleep of a kind take pity upon me and give me a little respite: but not even then could I banish the maiden from my mind.”<sup>15</sup> (Trans. by Gaselee, 21)

Clitophon, lovesick for Leucippe, describes what will happen if he goes to sleep. Here, MERIMANO is found in a context of the pains of being in love, which are experienced in the body since Clitophon is not able to find respite even in his sleep.

ii) Unknown author, Greek Anthology 5.5 (I CE)

“To faithless Nape Flaccus gave me, a silver lamp, the faithful confidant of the loves of the night. Now I droop by her bedside, looking on the all-suffering shamelessness of the forsworn girl. But you, Flaccus, lie awake, tormented by cruel cares, and both of us are burning far away from each other.”<sup>16</sup> (Trans. by Paton, Vol. I, 203, 205)

This text is a first century erotic epigram on a courtesan. Again, MERIM-NAO is associated with the bodily pains that come with love: an inability to relax/sleep.

iii) Alciphron, Letters 4.8.3 (II-III CE)

“It’s small comfort I get—the consolation withers straight away—from the wreath that, in the course of our wretched squabble at the banquet, you tore from your very hair and flung at me—as though to show that whatever I had sent gave you offence. Well, if this brings you pleasure, pray enjoy my distress; and tell the story, if you choose, to those who are now happier than I but who, once they are in my position, will know sorrow, and that right soon.”<sup>17</sup> (Trans. by Benner and Fobes, 269)

In this text we have a letter from Simalion to Petaê, whom he loves to distraction, expressing his lamentations, love for her, and request that she make her prayer to the goddess Aphroditê that she may never pay her back for her haughtiness. Simalion is lovesick of a woman and this brings him distress; however, it is not clear whether he really hopes that Petaê won’t have to pay back for her indifference and cruelty or if he secretly wants that fate for her.

*EXAMPLE TAKEN FROM JEWISH LITERATURE*

i) Unknown author, Sirach 42.9-10 (II BCE)

“A daughter is a hidden sleeplessness to a father, and anxiety about her takes away sleep— in her youth, lest she become past her prime, and having married, lest she be hated, in virginity, lest she be defiled and she become pregnant in her father’s house, being with a man, lest she transgress, and having married, lest she be barren.”<sup>18</sup> (NETS)

The author of Sirach expresses the anxieties over a daughter that a father experiences in his body: sleepless nights. Interestingly enough, these verses mention marriage, love and sexuality in one same context.

### *EXAMPLE TAKEN FROM CHRISTIAN LITERATURE*

i) Paul, 1 Corinthians 7.32-34 (I CE)

“I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband.”<sup>19</sup> (NRSV)

In what is known to be his first letter to the church of Corinth, the apostle Paul addresses theological, ethical and social tensions within the assembly. In chapter seven, Paul uses MERIMNAO with regard to spouses' concerns/anxieties. Here, he argues that the unmarried is concerned/anxious about the affairs of the Lord, whereas the married with the affairs of the world. It is interesting to point out the apostle's advice for an ascetic lifestyle (1Cor 7:25-26) so that the Corinthians might avoid distress and worries (1Cor 7:28b, 32a with AMERIMNOS); although we find Paul encouraging both marriage/sexuality and celibacy/chastity, with a slight preference for the latter (1Cor 7:38).

### *DEATH/HOPE/ESCHATOLOGY*

#### *EXAMPLE TAKEN FROM GRECO-ROMAN LITERATURE*

i) Unknown author, Greek Anthology 9.148

“Weep for life, Heraclitus, much more than when thou didst live, for life is now more pitiable. Laugh now, Democritus, at life far more than before; the life of all is now more laughable. And I, too, looking at you, am puzzled as to how I am to weep with the one and laugh with the other.”<sup>20</sup> (Trans. by Paton, Vol. III, 77)

This text comes from an anonymous epitaph. The unknown author expresses his/her concern as to how he/she is to deal with beloved ones who  
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have passed. This inscription states the author's belief that there is weeping and laughing in the afterlife.

*EXAMPLES TAKEN FROM JEWISH LITERATURE*

i) Unknown author, Sibylline Oracles 2.325-329 (II-III CE)

“No longer will anyone say at all “night has come” or “tomorrow” or “it happened yesterday,” or worry about many days. No spring, no summer, no winter, no autumn, no marriage, no death, no sales, no purchases, no sunset, no sunrise. For he will make a long day.”<sup>21</sup> (Trans. by Collins, 353)

From vss. 34-347, the second book of the Sibylline Oracles deals with oracles about eschatological disasters and the last judgment. Although it is difficult to assign a good number of these oracles to either a Jewish or a Christian Sibyllist, most scholars attribute 2.325-329 to the Jewish oracle after taking into account most of the content from 2.214 onward. Our passage discusses the eschatological rewards of the righteous, following the description of the physical resurrection of the dead (2.221-226). It has then been suggested that the natural sequel to such a resurrection is a renewal of the earth, instead of a heavenly state. Here, in part, the reward of the righteous will be the freedom from what appears to be the worries that come with time/many days.

ii) Unknown author, Sibylline Oracles 3.88-92 (I BCE)

“There will no longer be twinkling spheres of luminaries, no night, no dawn, no numerous days of care, no spring, no summer, no winter, no autumn. And then indeed the judgment of the great God will come into the midst of the great world, when all these things happen.”<sup>22</sup> (Trans. by Collins, 364)

The content of vss. 75-92, from Book 3, describes the destruction of the reign of Cleopatra in cosmic terms. Yet, this passage also refers to the end-time of the entire universe, describing how God will roll up the heaven as a scroll and orchestrate a raging fire leading to a final cosmic holocaust. With respect to our example, MERIMNA is here associated with judgment: after this final convulsion, there will no longer be numerous days of care.

## EXAMPLES TAKEN FROM CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

## i) Luke, Gospel of Luke 21.34 (I CE)

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly,”<sup>23</sup> (NRSV)

In the New Testament, only Luke employs explicitly MERIMNA in an eschatological passage. In chapter 21, we read the words/prophesies of Jesus on the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, troubles and persecutions, and the coming of the Son of Man. Here, it seems that the worries of this life can prevent people from being ready for the day of judgment.

## ii) Matthew, Gospel of Matthew 6.31, 33 (I CE)

“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’; ‘But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.’<sup>24</sup> (NRSV)

We may also point out what appears to be an implicit eschatological usage of MERIMNAO in the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, the obedience to the instruction to strive first after the kingdom of God (Matt 6.33) frees people already from the overwhelming power of anxiety over their lives and is experienced as a foretaste of the final reward for the righteous of a life without worries (e.g. the beatitudes in Matt 5:3-12).

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have suggested four different contexts in which “μέριμνας/μεριμνάω”, as experienced in the human body, overlap in Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian literature. It goes without saying that there are more usages, a wider range of usage among the 180 or so instances in Greek literature from the 3rd cent BCE to the 3rd cent. CE. For instance, contexts in which “μέριμνας/μεριμνάω” appear in connection with “wisdom and planning ahead”, as we read, among others, in Demonsthenes, Orations 21.192, the Letter of Aristeas 296, and Proverbs 14.23 (LXX). But also, contexts of “humans caring and showing concern for others”, where, for example, the apostle Paul encourages the church of Corinth (1 Cor 12.25) to take the worries/anxieties of others upon oneself; a wish that sounds somewhat shocking since we usually try to get rid of our own worries and avoid carrying someone else’s problems on our shoulders. There are then,

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of course, more “groupings”, but for the purpose of this paper and the topic of this conference I mainly focused on selected examples from different ancient writings where we appear to have corresponding contexts in which “μέριμνας” is displayed as being experienced in the human body.



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## ENDNOTES

1. *Italic added, translating μέριμναι.*
2. *Italic added, translating μερίμνας.*
3. *Italic added, translating μεριμνᾶν.*
4. *Italics added, translating οἱ μεριμνῶσιν.*
5. *Italics added, translating μὴ μεριμνᾶτε.*
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9. *Italics added, translating μεριμνήσω.*
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11. *Italics added, translating μηδὲν μεριμνᾶτε.*
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24. *Italics added, translating μεριμνήσητε.*