



Gender, Body & Sexuality

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For more information:
Journal of Religion and Culture
Department of Religions and Cultures (FA-101)
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve O.,
Montreal, Quebec
H3G 1M8

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What Looking at the Son of Man's Bustline Reveals

Aaron Ricker – Ph.D. Student, Religion at McGill University

ABSTRACT

From the surprising “mastoī” glimpsed in John’s Revelation to the nourishing/erotic bosoms described by mystics medieval and modern, the image of a male Jesus with female breasts is able to raise the spirits of some and the eyebrows of others. The image is just traditional and sensational enough to perhaps someday claim its own 15 minutes of 21st-century fame, too, given the right news cycle, newly found or forged manuscript, edgy artistic exploitation, or viral e-vent. The sexuality of Jesus has perennial potential as a “news” item (as seen in the splashes made by the “gay” and “married” Jesuses periodically conjured up from exotic fragments or findings), and the female-breasted Jesus looks particularly interesting to groups as disparate as feminist/LGBTQ Christian advocates and Muslim pop polemicists, for their own contrasting reasons. What would a momentarily intrigued student, colleague, or interviewer want to know from a Religious Studies scholar about Jesus’ breasts? What should they know? This paper offers a bird’s-eye review of the evolving relationships between this image and ideas of femininity and power, using the work of scholars like Stephen D. Moore, Jesse Rainbow, Caroline Walker Bynum, and Sarah Shier to clarify the implications of theorizing this recurring image in a time when so many of us are struggling to articulate non-binary, non-oppressive approaches to sexual and religious identity/expression. It proposes four simple takeaway points to remember when researching and teaching (and if and when the next wave of interviewers comes knocking).

From the surprising *μαστοί* glimpsed under the Son of Man’s girdle in John’s Revelation to the nourishing/erotic bosoms described by mystics medieval and modern, the image of a male Jesus with female breasts is able to raise the spirits of some and the eyebrows of others. The image is just traditional and just sensational enough to perhaps someday claim its own 15 minutes of 21st-century fame, too, given the right news cycle, newly found or forged manuscript, edgy artistic exploitation, or viral e-vent. What would a momentarily intrigued student, colleague, or interviewer want to know, then, from a Religious Studies scholar about Jesus’ breasts? What should they know? This paper addresses the implications of theorizing this recurring image for (post)moderns struggling to articulate non-bi-

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nary, non-oppressive approaches to sexual and religious expression. **BEEP BEEP**. I propose four simple takeaway points to remember when researching and teaching (and if and when the next wave of interviewers comes knocking). The hurry with which these things come and go is really **BEEP BEEP**. The phone could ring at literally any... **BEEP BEEP**. Excuse me.

Hello! Finally. This isn't a bad time, I hope?

Well, I am in the middle of something.

Good. Do you remember me – I interviewed you last year about the Vatican cover-up of the lost Gospel written by Jesus' Wife?

You mean when I told you that wasn't the story, and you cut me from the piece?

Editing with a deadline is hell, you have no idea. It's like making sausage. Anyway, I need to pick your brain again for a minute here. I'm assuming you've seen the viral mash-up of the blockbuster movie and hit music video that were based on the controversial newly-discovered papyrus where Jesus... has breasts.

No, but I saw part of a clip where somebody had auto-tuned people's reactions as they watched it.

Good, so we're clear on what we're talking about then. Just how important is this rediscovery of the shocking lost tradition that Jesus... had breasts?

Well, I can't comment on the papyrus until they relocate it and make it public, but I can tell you that the Jesus who has breasts is, like the Jesus who has a wife, not a tradition, but rather a series of recurring images (each fully comprehensible only as an expression of its own time and place), and it's not always clear which (if any) are directly related to one another. Remember we talked about this phenomenon with regard to Jesus' wives, in Scorsese's Last Temptation versus The DaVinci Code, etc?

So would you say it's important to "keep abreast" of such controversies?

...

So how old is this tradition?

A good candidate for the oldest appearance of the image is found in Revelation 1:13, but it's not a very clear case, in any sense. Revelation's Greek is famously (even deliberately?) bad (Stevens, 205; Schillebeeckx, 434)), so when it refers to a "golden girdle" covering Jesus's "breasts" – using a word used for female breasts (μαστοί) – it could be written off as a simple mistake. The problem is the fact that, as Sarah Shier has shown, μαστοί is always used to describe female breasts in the New Testament, and when Revelation later refers to the golden girdles on some angels' "breasts" – as in " chests" (Rev 15:6) – it uses the non-gendered word one would expect (Shier, 4-6). Presumably for reasons like these, the King James Bible follows the Bishop's Bible's use of the word "paps," following the Vulgate's use of the Latin mamillas.

Now we're getting somewhere. "Paps," you say.

The resulting image of the Son of Man with female breasts has been dealt with in many ways. It has, to begin with, been erased in various translations (Rainbow, 249; Aune, 94; Massyngberde Ford, 381).

A cover-up! That's good. "Lost in Translation: Troubling Lumps Smoothed Away."

It has also been linked by interpreters to the "lover" of the Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) in the Septuagint, a male with μαστοί – which is, again, very odd (Longman, 90), and not the case anywhere else in Septuagint tradition (Rainbow, 251). If Revelation is referring to this oddity, it may be saying that the Son of Man is the divine Lover imagined in mystical readings of the Song.

Not bad, not bad...

Building on the Solomon connection, Sarah Shier and Jesse Rainbow both mention here the male demon of the Testament of Solomon 9, who seems to have female breasts which he somehow sees through, since he has no head (Shier, 6-7; Rainbow, 251).

Better.

I suppose, then, that giving the Son of Man female breasts could make him seem special and powerful, by making him uncanny and even a bit monstrous – like when we meet him as the Lamb, and he has seven eyes. One last Solomon connection worth mentioning is the "Revealer" figure found in the esoteric/Christian Odes of Solomon (8:16), who (like his divine Fa-

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ther – 19:2-4) is emphatically male but has life-giving, milk-giving breasts (Shier, 6-7). So, as you can see, the picture that emerges here can be vivid, and even lurid, without being at all clear!

It's clear, though, that feminists must love Revelations.

It's far from clear that Revelation is a feminist book. As scholars like Colleen Conway, Stephen D. Moore, Christopher Frilingos, and Tina Pippin have shown, Revelation promotes some of the nastiest ideas of its time about what it means to be “truly masculine” or “feminine” (Conway, 159-174; Moore, *Untold Tales*, 125-154; Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, 70-85; idem, “Sexing the Lamb”; Pippin, 57-86). In fact, a Jesus with female breasts might just be taking what was appealing about popular first-century divine feminine figures (Lady Wisdom, Isis, Artemis, etc.) and arrogating it as part of his hypermasculine power (Moore, *Untold Tales*, 131-133, 150-154; Shier, 8-14). He could, in that case, function like the goddess Roma, whose strange brand of femininity actually ends up promoting the “celebration of a masculinity that constructs itself through the incessant suppression of femininity” (Moore, *Untold Tales*, 154). These contradictions and reversals just go to show how fraught the images preserved in our cultural memories can be.

Did you say cultural mammaries?

No.

We might have to agree to disagree on that.

The next historical examples I can think of are, as I said, not clearly “cultural memories” of this stuff at all. They are medieval images, and show no clear sign of being dependent upon Revelation 1:13. As such, they look more like independent, parallel expressions of imaginative devotion, working along theological lines similar to those just seen in the Odes of Solomon.

Hit me.

Well, they're mostly mystic and/or monastic phenomena. William of St. Thierry (c. 1080 – 1148) interpreted the Song of Solomon by referring to Jesus as the Solomonic Lady Wisdom: “It is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish the holy infancy of your little ones” (*Sur le Cantique*, Chapter

38; Cf. *idem*, *Meditativae Orationes*, Chapter 10). He noted that Christian leaders must also therefore “breastfeed” subordinates (Sur le Cantique, Chapter 52). Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153) had a similar reading: the Church should desire the lovely breasts of Christ her Bridegroom (On the Song of Songs, Sermon 1), Christians need to suck at the breasts of Jesus their mother (Letter 322), and male leaders must feed others with their own spiritual breasts (On the Song of Songs, Sermons 1, 23, and 41). Julian of Norwich (c. 1342 – 1416) compared the spiritual drinking of Christ’s blood from his side to breastfeeding (Revelations of Divine Love, Chapter 60), an association apparently “milked” by numerous medieval mystics and artists (Bynum, 131-133; Bledsoe, 40-44), and the letters of Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380) likewise show an insistent association between the need to drink the blood from Christ’s spear wound and the need to drink the life-giving milk of his breasts (Bynum 134-174, 178).

So the 14th century was way more feminist than the first.

Sadly, that’s not the story here either. As Jenny Bledsoe showed in her review of such images, the mystic/monastic trend of seeing Jesus as “feminine” actually “reinforced the subordination of women” (Bledsoe, 57-58). Since they were “built upon systems that perpetuate negative stereotypes of what it means to be feminine” (Bledsoe, 54) – including assumptions that women exist for “mothering, comforting, and nourishing” (Bledsoe, 44) – these images of Jesus didn’t concretely and measurably change the subservient status of actual women for the better at all (Bledsoe, 54-55). I’d second that caveat, and add the post-Judith-Butler kind of footnote that since these images were circulated by men who were trying to articulate the ideal obedient monastic life (Bynum, 45, 48-50), one needs also to remember here the point gestured at by Moore above: defining “the feminine” at all tends to serve the articulation of a “proper order” – one that usually conveniently privileges a simultaneously articulated “proper masculinity” (Butler, 1-6, 25-34).

We should have done this over beers. Academics are such downers when they’re sober.

And of course we struggle with these issues today, in various ways. Mythicist Tom Harpur is interested, for example, in Revelation 1:13 because for him it further associates Jesus with mythical goddesses, and thereby supports his theory that Jesus the human never existed at all (Harpur, 211). Googling “Jesus had breasts” will call up Muslim arguments that Revela-

tion 1:13 “degrades” Jesus, and proves that the New Testament is hopelessly corrupt.¹ You will also find, on the other hand, fringe Christians excited about the image of Jesus with breasts, such as the writer of “The Gender of Jesus,” who hasn’t heard of Revelation 1:13’s *μαστοί*, but who theorizes that Jesus probably should have had breasts if he really was fully human (though he may have bound them to hide them). This postmodern writer draws inspiration from a modern mystic vision of Christ: “His chest was the most masculine one could imagine, yet seemed to envelope me [sic] as though it were a mother’s breast.”² It’s clear from the dichotomies assumed here, and in the other modern examples, that the promise and the problems of this vision and its interpretation are still with us today. Who says a vision of Jesus with breasts is “good” or “bad” somehow? Who says it helps define “femininity,” then or now? The outlines of the bustlines we see direct a careful observer back to the nature and ethics of our ways of seeing.

Gimme some takeaways here. My article is already late.

1. If Jesus being somehow “feminized” is a bad thing for you – a mistake or a sin that needs to be “fixed” – please think again.
2. If you think somebody needs to be “feminine” to serve, support, or nurture, please think again.
3. If you think “being female” equals having breasts, please think again. There are plenty of people out there without swelling breasts (young women, cancer survivors, trans women, etc.) who can claim with good reason to be at least as feminine as any Son of Man.³
4. If the picture of Jesus with breasts is perfectly clear for you, and raises no difficult questions at all, please think again.

So if Jesus had breasts and a wife, what does that mean for gay marriage in the USA?

Thank you for your time and attention.

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ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Abdullah Smith, "Did Jesus Have Female Breasts?" at [answering-christianity.com](http://www.answering-christianity.com). Accessed February 10, 2016. http://www.answering-christianity.com/abdullah_smith/did_jesus_have_female_breasts.htm. See also "The Bible Suggests Jesus Christ is a Hermaphrodite," at discover-the-truth.com. Accessed February 10, 2016. <http://discover-the-truth.com/2013/06/30/bible-dual-nature-of-jesus-christ/>.
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3. See, for example, Lisa R. Rubin and Molly Tanenbaum, "Does That Make Me A Woman? Breast Cancer, Mastectomy, and Breast Reconstruction Decisions Among Sexual minority Women," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35/3 (2011): 410-412; Jacob Hale, "Are Lesbians Women?" in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 291; Eli Clarke, "Body Shame, Body Pride: Lessons from the Disability Rights Movement," in *The Transgender Studies Reader, Vol. 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 263, etc.