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The First Apocalypse of James

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Martyrdom and Sexual Difference

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For Beth and Bob
Preface

This book began as a dissertation at Harvard University, under the supervision of Karen King. I remember when the Tchacos Codex was first published and my colleague Taylor Petrey asked Professor King if there was anything in the codex’s new copy of the *First Apocalypse of James* that might be useful for his project on the resurrection. “No,” she said, “I think this is a text for Mikael Haxby.” She was, of course, correct. This newly-discovered copy of an ancient text filled in a number of missing pages from the version that had been found among the Nag Hammadi documents and published in the 1960s. With these previously lost pages now recovered, it turned out that the *First Apocalypse of James* included discussions of a set of issues in early Christian history that fascinated me, regarding martyrdom and state violence, ideas and practices of sexual difference, scriptural interpretation, and ethical development. I am thankful for the opportunity to devote years of my life to studying these problems, and for the support I received at school in that project.

Professor King was my mentor through the writing process as well as a constantly engaging and challenging dialogue partner. Professors Amy Hollywood and Laura Nasrallah were both generous with their support and feedback as members of my committee. I count myself fortunate to have been helped through the dissertation process by three such fabulous teachers, and I hope that their excellent work is reflected in this book. My colleagues in the graduate program Taylor Petrey and Katherine Shaner were invaluable readers and I cherish our long discussions of matters academic and not so academic. The members of the Columbia New Testament Seminar and the Nordic Nag Hammadi and Gnosticism Network read and commented on work that, in particular, turned into major new sections of this book not present in the initial dissertation.

It took several years for me to return to this project after leaving academia in 2016. Once again, it was Professor King’s recommendation that I seek out the *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* second series from Mohr Siebeck. I thank Professor Jörg Frey for accepting the manuscript for the series and Professor Tobias Nicklas for his help with the second round of research and pointing me toward crucial recent scholarship. I am grateful for the help I received from Elena Müller and Markus Kirchner in updating this manuscript for publication. The revisions ended up being more extensive
than I had planned. The simple act of publishing a dissertation turned into an opportunity for me to revisit materials and questions that continue to fascinate me. In particular I was able to expand on two major sections. First, this book offers a more intentional intervention into debates about martyrdom, heresy, and docetism, arguing that the category of “docetism” serves to obscure certain deeper tensions within Christian theology. Second, I was able to revise the concluding section on sexual difference, which had always felt unfinished. I bring forward the importance of feminine divine figures and the “undefiled Sophia” to argue that this text represents a peculiar and different approach to questions of sexual difference that must be added to the panoply of ancient Christian engagements with these issues. A “Sophia-Christ dilemma” stands behind the articulation of sexual difference in the First Apocalypse of James, which must be understood on its own terms. In both cases, I believe that these interventions show how the close reading of a single, obscure text can make contributions to larger conversations in the history of ancient Christianity and the study of religion. The very category of “docetism” smuggles into academic analysis not only normative theological concepts but I hypothesize a certain anxiety within much Christian theology about the question of what seems and what is. The centrality of Sophia to the theology of this and many other early Christian texts points to the continued importance of divine female figures in Christian thought and the way that ongoing discussions about theology and politics in a Christian context remain shaped by the echoes of feminine divinities. I hope that these revisions offer a clearer and sharper intervention into several academic discussions I always found compelling and valuable.
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Introduction

On the First Apocalypse of James

“Since you asked about femaleness, listen.” These are among the first words spoken by Jesus to his brother James in the First Apocalypse of James (ἐπειδή ἀκοῦσες εἰτε τὴν τεκμηρίαν γενήτευς; 10.19–20). This text, which continues in dialogue form with James requesting revelation and Jesus providing it, begins with an answer to a question that was not asked. It offers a puzzle – what was this question? – that highlights the importance of the concept or character of “femaleness.” In this book, I will seek to address the unraised question about femaleness from the first page of the text. As 1ApocJas moves forward, Jesus explains the nature of femaleness through theological revelation and discussions of female disciples and martyrs. These martyrs along with “femaleness” provide the keys to understanding 1ApocJas.

The text concludes with James’ martyrdom. The beginning and the end of the narrative thus bring forth the central concerns of 1ApocJas, sexual difference and martyrdom. As James receives revelation, he grows progressively more confident in his knowledge, and his fear of persecution and death subsides. These revelations principally concern the nature of “femaleness” as a figure in the divine realms, and through his discourses on the divine realms Jesus provides James the understanding he needs to endure persecution. Further, James learns of a set of female martyrs, who provide a moral exemplar in his training. The two leading, interrelated concerns of the First Apocalypse of James, then, are martyrdom and sexual difference.

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1 There are two extant versions of the First Apocalypse of James, both written in Coptic, one found in the Tchacos Codex and the other in Nag Hammadi Codex V. I have quoted here from the Tchacos Codex, which is the better preserved of the two. My practice through this book will be to cite primarily from the more complete Tchacos Codex version, except for passages which are better preserved in the Nag Hammadi version. For the lines quoted here, the parallel in Nag Hammadi Codex V is practically identical, lacking only the command to listen. “Since you asked about femaleness” (ἐπειδή ἀκοῦσες Γενήτευς; NHC V 24.26–27). I will discuss the manuscript evidence for 1ApocJas below on pp. 17–22. William R. Schoedel, “The (First) Apocalypse of James,” in Nag Hammadi Codices V,2–5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4, ed. Douglas M. Perrott; NHS XI (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 65–104; Rodolphe Kasser and Gregor Wurst, eds, The Gospel of Judas: Critical Edition (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2007).
A. Ideologies of Power and Sexual Difference in the Arena

This is a common concatenation of themes in early Christian literature. Christians and other persecuted groups developed notions of martyrdom in response to the risk of persecution and execution under Roman law. Such notions of martyrdom were significantly determined by the typical space in which executions took place, the Roman arena. The arena was a key location for the working out of gendered power relations in the ancient Mediterranean world. The logic of the arena pressed upon the persecuted communities a need to embody certain virtues coded as male within ancient understandings of sexual difference. As Erik Gunderson argues, “Nearly every major theme
of the Roman power structure was deployed in the spectacles,” and this included the strict hierarchy maintained by “repression of women and exaltation of bellicose masculinity.” Truly “bellicose” masculinity was unavailable to prisoners about to be killed, but martyrdom texts offer another strategy: emphasizing the masculine self-control and steadfast endurance of martyrs. The texts employ gendered notions of philosophical virtue to establish that those executed in the arena embodied masculine character. As Elizabeth Castelli argues, “The masculine ideal of stoic fortitude dominates the arena, and it is so crucial to Christian claims to virtue that women can provisionally embody it.”

In the Martyrdom of Polycarp, for instance, a voice comes from heaven as Polycarp enters the arena, saying, “Play the man.” Polycarp will demonstrate his self-control and endurance in the arena, quite literally performing gender. In early Christian literature, as Castelli points out, it was not only men who might embody masculinity in the arena. In the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, when Perpetua has a vision of herself engaging in combat in the arena, she imagines, “suddenly I became a man” to fight her opponent. She

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5 Gunderson, “The Ideology of the Arena,” 140.

6 On the valuation of “endurance” as the paradigmatic masculine virtue of the martyr, see Shaw, “Body/Pow/Identity,” 284–291. For a critique of Shaw’s emphasis on the feminine quality of endurance in ancient thought, see Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 134–135.

7 Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory, 121.

says that she interpreted this vision to mean that she must die in the arena.\(^9\) Both male and female martyrs might attain self-mastery and demonstrate their fortitude, but always within a system where the virtuous Christian is the masculine one. As Castelli puts it, “the gender binary need not always be binding though its intrinsic value system (the masculine is always necessarily more positively charged than the feminine) remains relentlessly intact.”\(^10\) This relentless hierarchical model structures early Christian martyrdom literature and enables, in Castelli’s reading, only certain strategies for authorizing martyrs.

Building on this scholarship, Stephanie Cobb argues that Christian martyrdom texts make use of a set of feminizing strategies, which contrast to the masculinizing ones. Cobb demonstrates first how martyrdom texts depict female martyrs as masculine, or even as becoming male, in order to show the greatness of the Christians.\(^11\) Yet, Cobb’s readings also highlight how Christian texts used strategies of feminizing women martyrs – emphasizing their beauty, their motherhood, and the physical character of their bodies on display in the arena. In the Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, the depiction of the martyrs’ deaths includes a story of Perpetua and her female slave Felicitas being sent into the arena “stripped naked” to the prurient horror of the crowd.\(^12\) Cobb argues that this inverse strategy of feminizing the martyrs served to blunt the possibly radical nature of these texts’ masculinizing claims.

The texts, therefore, in various ways, attempt to balance appropriate behavior by, on the one hand, illustrating the necessity and possibility of women moving toward the ideals of masculinity, and, on the other hand, ensuring that the female martyr is placed safely back within the confines of proper, domestic femininity.\(^13\)

The reading depends on identifying strategies as either masculinizing or feminizing, with one side empowering Christian women and the other restraining them. Cobb’s critique usefully challenges assumptions in the field that early Christian martyrdom texts simply and straightforwardly masculinize martyrs in order to valorize them. At the same time, Cobb suggests that “masculinization” and “feminization” are complementary strategies. The same hierarchical model of sexual difference is maintained. Masculinizing martyrs serves to authorize the Christian community to outsiders, while feminizing martyrs keeps women in their place inside the community.

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\(^9\) Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas 10.7 (Musurillo).
\(^10\) Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory, 63.
\(^11\) Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 97–107. See also Castelli, Martyrdom and Memory, 62–67 and 121–122.
\(^12\) Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas 20.2 (Musurillo).
\(^13\) Cobb, Dying to Be Men, 122–123.
In a challenge to these descriptions of relentlessly hierarchical gender distinctions, Virginia Burrus suggests that martyrdom texts exhibit a more “complex gendering” than has often been acknowledged. She argues that the process of audience identification with the female martyrs opened up, first, “spaces for the production of novel female subjectivities that may provide sites of ambivalent identification for female readers.” At the same time, “for male authors and readers, they also, I suggest, offer an ambiguously ‘feminized’ male subjectivity.” Burrus suggests that strategies perhaps aimed at maintaining the gendered hierarchy of the arena also produced opportunities for more complex articulations of sexual difference. The female martyr who is unexpectedly masculinized and then hurriedly feminized becomes a site of complex identifications.

I believe the First Apocalypse of James can offer new insights to this debate. First, 1ApocJas features an exhortation to James that he imitate the example of female disciples and martyrs. This process by which a male Christian takes on a female martyr as a moral exemplar seems to embody precisely the “ambiguous” identification that Burrus suggests. Further, the extended discussion of the category of “femaleness” suggests a deeper and more direct engagement with questions of sexual difference than most of the traditional martyrdom texts ever attempt. Within these theological discourses, 1ApocJas develops multiple overlapping methods for authorizing female martyrs. These methods do not simply reduce to masculinizing or feminizing the martyr. Rather, the goal appears to be to identify different articulations of sexual difference, which could authorize a set of female martyrs as moral exemplars. I will ask, by what logic do these articulations of sexual difference work? What resources do they draw upon to articulate these improvisational visions of sexual difference?

Given that 1ApocJas offers a rich discussion of martyrdom and sexual difference, why has it been so little studied within these scholarly discussions? This is partly a function of the manuscript evidence. There are only two extant versions of the text, and one of them, from the Tchacos Codex, was published in 2007. While the other version has been available for decades in a copy found among the Nag Hammadi codices, a number of the most important passages on sexual difference found in the TC version of 1ApocJas are riddled with lacunae in their NHC V parallels. The publication of the

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15 Ibid., 70–71.
17 Compare for example TC 25.17–29.15 and NHC V 39.15–43.19.