The Jesus Woman and the Jesus Women

A well-known passage in Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither male nor female because you all are one in Christ Jesus.” This image of Jesus’s body as neither male nor female, but also, as male and female in one, was a potentially powerful symbol of sexual unification. This idealized image opens the possibility that Paul and other Jesus followers may have believed Jesus’s own body reflected this ideal, as if the last *adam*, like the first, was created in the divine image, male and female, a body which today would be called intersex, but which then was sometimes called androgyne.¹ Another first-century passage, Gospel of Thomas 22, presents Jesus instructing the disciples to make themselves into this ideal, neither male nor female, but one and the same, both male and female:

Jesus said to them: “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, 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].”²

How would one make oneself both male and female? The second-century author of the epistle known as 2 Clement explained what Jesus meant in each phrase in Gospel of Thomas 22:

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For the Lord himself, being asked by a certain person when his kingdom would come, said, *When the two shall be one, and the outside as the inside, and the male with the female, neither male or female. Now the two are one*, when we speak truth among ourselves, and in two bodies there shall be one soul without dissimulation. And by the *outside as the inside* he means this: by the inside he means the soul and by the outside the body. Therefore in like manner as your body appears, so also let your soul be manifest by its good works. And by the *male with the female, neither male nor female*, he means that a brother seeing a sister should have no thought of her as a female, and that a sister seeing a brother should not have any thought of him as a male. If you do these things, he says, the kingdom of my father shall come.

2 Clement, thus, preserves critical early exegesis for understanding the present implications of this male-female ideal, especially in Gal 3:28, which is sometimes interpreted as referring only to the future world in heaven. The ending of the passage in 2 Clement in particular is explicit that *neither male nor female* refers to one’s own behavior in the present, and indeed, that one’s behavior in the present is how one gets into heaven. The explanation here of Jesus’s quote in the final passage of Gospel of Thomas 22 is worth repeating: “And by the *male with the female, neither male nor female*, he means that a brother seeing a sister should have no thought of her as a female, and that a sister seeing a brother should not have any thought of him as a male. If you do these things, he says, the kingdom of my father shall come.” This final passage suggests that Jesus followers should abandon cultural gender roles in this world.

In this essay, I provide literary evidence that the first-century ideal of a male-female Jesus not only encouraged second-century Jesus followers to abandon cultural gender roles, this ideal body also was used as justification for women leaders. I demonstrate that an early tradition of gender parallel leadership was probably dominant because surviving material remains dated third- to fifth-century witness it. Corresponding to a potential link between the intersex body of

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Jesus and this gender parallel leadership, during the same era many artists were portraying Jesus as womanly, without a beard, with long hair, and even with breasts.

**The Second-Century Jesus Woman and the Associated Leadership of Women at the Meal**

Two reports of the practices and beliefs of second-century Jesus communities serve to establish a relationship between the intersex image of Jesus and the leadership of women. The first report is from Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130 – 200), who complained about a popular neighboring Jesus community. According to Irenaeus, a leader in this community named Marcus taught that “The unoriginated, inconceivable Father, who is without material substance, and is *neither male nor female* . . . sent forth the Word similar to Himself.”

Marcus’s description appears to reference the gender theology of both Galatians 3:28 and Genesis 1:27. Judaism itself provides evidence for the origin of the intersex image in Hebrew religion, especially Genesis 1:27, where *elohim* creates the first human in the divine image, male and female. The compound word *elohim* itself suggests that this gender theology may be as old as the Hebrew language, with *eloh*, the feminine singular, combined with the masculine plural *im* ending, literally comprising a divine male and female yoked pair. This yoked pair may have been the reference point for the editors of the Genesis Rabbah, which quotes the second-century sage Jeremiah ben Leazar saying that the first *adam* was “hermaphrodite,” or “androgy nous.” With Galatians 3:28 in view, this rabbinic interpretation of the intersex body of the first *adam* may provide a broader cultural context within Judaism for Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 15:45 that Jesus was the “last” *adam*. Further suggesting Paul’s location within a wider Jewish understanding of

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adam created with a male and female body, the Genesis Rabbah also quotes the third-century sage Simlai specifying that adam was created “in our image, after our likeness; neither man without woman nor woman without man, and neither of them without the Divine Spirit,” a saying Paul appears to have paraphrased in 1 Cor 11:11, when he wrote, “Neither man without woman nor woman without man, in the Lord.”

Of key interest with respect to the importance of this image of Jesus as a justification for women leaders among the Jesus followers, in the chapter immediately preceding Marcus’s description of Jesus, Irenaeus complained that in this community a man and a woman presided together at the consecration the wine. Irenaeus used the transitive verb eucharistein when referring to the woman’s consecration of the wine, and this community’s practice almost certainly was archaic, not innovative. Embedded in his complaints, however slanted, Irenaeus unwittingly left a record of the performance of this ritual during the meal:

Handing mixed cups to the women, he bids them consecrate these in his presence. When this has been done, he himself produces another cup of much larger size than that which the deluded woman has consecrated, and pouring from the smaller one consecrated by the woman into that which has been brought forward by himself.

This consecration presumably was part of a ritual performed during a meal that symbolized what 1 Cor 11:20 called “the Lord’s supper.” The leadership of a woman consecrating wine at this meal comes more closely into view when seen in the context of the female officiants in another second-century Jesus movement today known as Montanism, but which called itself New Prophecy. Both Epiphanius of Salamis and Augustine reported that the

7 Genesis Rabbah 8.9 (Freedman, Midrash Rabbah, 1:61).
9 Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1 13.2 (ANF 1:334).
10 Although various ancient authors referred to New Prophecy by different names—Montanists, Phrygians, Pepuzuans, Pricillianists, Quintillianists, etc.—scholars generally agree all were New Prophecy; Christine Trevett, Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.
second-century New Prophecy prophetesses Priscilla and Quintilla said, “Christ came to me
dressed in a white robe in the form of a woman.” Just as Irenaeus had associated a woman
leader at the consecration of the wine with a description of Jesus as neither male nor female,
Epiphanius and Augustine likewise associated this description of Jesus as a woman with
women’s ritual leadership. Augustine said that this community gives “such great positions of
leadership to women that women even receive the honor of the priesthood among them, for they
say that . . . Christ was revealed to Quintilla and Priscilla in the form of a woman.”
Epiphanius, within just a few sentences of his description of Christ coming to the prophetesses in the form of
a woman, stated, “They ordain women to the episcopate and presbyterate.” He explicitly linked
this female leadership to Galatians 3:28 by stating: “They have women bishops, presbyters and
the rest; they say that none of this makes any difference because ‘In Christ Jesus there is neither
male nor female.’”

Reception of Gender Parallel Leadership

Above we have established the continuing influence in second-century Jesus
communities of first-century sayings about the intersex body of Christ, especially with respect to
the leadership of women. Ireneaus reported that both men and women consecrated the wine in
the community of Jesus followers he knew near Lyon. Epiphanius and Augustine reported there
were women officiants in the widespread, popular Jesus communities of New Prophecy. What
did the meal look like in communities such as these?

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11 Epiphanius of Salamis, Panarion 49.1 (Frank Williams, trans., The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, 2 vols.
13 Epiphanius of Salamis, Panarion 49.2.5 (Williams, Panarion, 2:22).
14 Epiphanius of Salamis, Panarion 49.1.3 (Williams, Panarion, 2:21).
Curiously, liturgical manuscripts from the first seven Christian centuries have disappeared. According to Paul Bradshaw, virtually no liturgical manuscripts have survived from the first seven centuries, neither Christian nor Jewish. In the eighth century, however, large numbers of liturgical manuscripts suddenly fill the void, all looking the same, or, as F. L. Cross says, they have “a specious similarity. They are written in similar scripts and on similar writing materials . . . their intent was not to make an accurate reproduction of an existing model.” Apparently due to censorship, thus, we have no manuscript evidence of the liturgy of the first seven centuries.

Material remains therefore become invaluable for assessing what the leadership model was for the ritual to be performed during the meal. Strikingly, material remains dated from the third to early fifth-century suggest female leadership—which Irenaeus, Epiphanius, and Augustine associated with the female body of Jesus—alongside male leadership at the mensa. In the third-century this gender parallel leadership is suggested by the gendered floor mosaics which flanked the mensa in the army church at Megiddo in Palestine. Also in the third, or perhaps early fourth, the same model is suggested by several frescos of meals around a mensa in the Christian catacombs of Rome. It is further evinced by two early fifth-century carvings, the very oldest surviving artifacts to depict people at the table inside a real church.

The first of these artifacts is floor mosaics that flank what may be the very oldest remains of a Christian mensa. This table was inside a small church building in the Roman military compound of Megiddo in Palestine, dated ca. 230 and abandoned ca. 305. The building was next to the bakery, which Joan E. Taylor suggests may indicate that meals of shared bread were a key

function of the space. The two stones in the floor are all that remain of the mensa, but on one side of the stones a floor mosaic commemorates two men, and on the other side, mosaics commemorate five women, including the woman Acetous, who donated the table. The placement of these gendered mosaics on opposite sides of the mensa may identify where a man and a woman customarily stood during the meal. If so, this placement may identify men and women in a ritual that reflected the ideal of the male and female body of Jesus.

Artists in the catacombs of the city of Rome in the late third century, or perhaps early fourth, painted frescos of meal scenes around a mensa, a table often laden with a fish and loaf of bread. Janet Tulloch identifies two leaders depicted in several of these meal scenes, a man and a woman, with the woman typically depicted as the most active leader, for example, standing and raising the cup. Tulloch says, “Female figures dominate the cup action.” This female leadership is all the more striking because it is the opposite of what artists depicted in funeral scenes in Roman religion, which almost invariably portrayed men lifting the cup. Tulloch assumes that these painters represented funerary meals, but worthy of mention, considering that these frescos were in the catacombs and surrounded by graves, is that the Latin Didascalia apostolorum instructed that the Eucharist be performed in cemeteries. See Figure 1 for one of the frescos that Tulloch described. Its painter depicted a small congregation around a mensa

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20 Tulloch, “Women Leaders in Family Funerary Banquets,” 164–93, esp. 181–85, figs. 8.2–8.5, quote from 182. Note that Tulloch does not mention that in the past these meals sometimes were identified as eucharistic; she proposes that these meals scenes depict a family funerary banquet with a woman offering a toast.
laden with bread and fish. On the right, a woman lifts a cup. On the left, a seated man holds a larger cup.

Fig. 1 Woman (right) raises the cup. Man (left) seated with cup. Pietro and Marcellinus Catacomb, Rome. Third or early fourth century. Image: Josef Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*, 2 vols., (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herdersche, 1903), plate 157.2

The two very oldest surviving artifacts to portray people around the mensa inside an actual church help bring a tradition of gender parallel leadership into clearer focus. Both are carvings, one in ivory and one in stone, and both are usually dated to the decades around the year 430.\(^23\) In both cases the table is in the center of the scene, flanked by curtains, a cross on it, and a

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\(^{23}\) For the ivory, see Davide Longhi, *La capsella eburnea di Samagher: Iconografia e committenza* (Ravenna: Girasole, 2006), 112; and Margherita Guarducci, *La capsella eburnea di Samagher: Un cimelio di arte*
columned canopy, or ciborium, above it. Both scenes depict men and women in parallel flanking the table, with men on the left and women on the right—inside the sanctuaries of Old Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome and the second Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. To my knowledge, no iconographic artifacts of this era have survived that portrayed men, and only men, at a church altar, at least through the end of the fifth century. Both of these artifacts were excavated in the twentieth century, and the fact that no similar artifacts survived aboveground suggests there was widespread censorship not only of liturgical manuscripts, but also of art depicting the early liturgy.

The first carving is on a reliquary box excavated from beneath the altar area of a Roman-era church near Pola, Croatia in 1906. Six spiral columns, which hold up the ciborium over the

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24 In making this claim, I considered two candidates. The first is the lower register of the dome mosaics in the fourth- to sixth-century Rotunda Church of Thessaloniki. These depict only men—labeled as bishops, presbyters, soldiers, musicians—but the key liturgical element, the offering table, is not present. Nor do any of these arm-raised men hold a chalice or paten. The general view is that these are portraits of martyrs in the heavenly realm. For details on the Rotunda church, see Nasrallah, “Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki, 465–509, esp. 488–90; Kleinbauer, “Orantes in the Mosaic Decoration,” 25–45; Bente Kiilerich and Hjalmar Torp, *The Rotunda in Thessaloniki and Its Mosaics* (Athens: Kapon Editions, 2017), 22–45; Charalampos Bakirtzis, Eftychia Kourkoutidou-Nikolaidou, and Chrysanthis Mavropoulou-Tsioumi, *Mosaics of Thessaloniki: 4th–14th century* (Athens: Kapon, 2012). The second candidate is the lost apse mosaic of the fifth-century San Giovanni Evangelista church in Ravenna—but this mosaic has not survived, and we have only second-hand descriptions of it, descriptions which suggest that it included two male and female couples flanking two other people at an altar, perhaps Bishop Peter Chrysologus and an angel, or perhaps, symbolizing the imperial priesthood, Melchizedek and another person—or who knows who, due to the multiplicity of possible interpretations about an artifact after it has been destroyed, and the tendency of some interpreters to imagine only modern constructs, which is why I restrict my analysis to art that has survived. For San Giovanni Evangelista, see Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 68–69, 68 n. 163; and Vincenza Zangara, “Una predicazione alla presenza dei principi: la chiesa di Ravenna nella prima metà del sec. V,” *Antiquité Tardive* 8 (2000): 265–304. 289–92.
table, match the famous six spiral columns that today reside in the galleries of the modern Saint Peter’s, and which according to church tradition originally held up the fourth-century ciborium over the altar in Old Saint Peter’s. In 1940, the Vatican excavated beneath the high altar of Saint Peter’s and directly below discovered a second-century shrine with a mensa—a shrine and table which matched the size and details of the shrine and table beneath the ciborium depicted on the ivory. For this reason Vatican excavators identified the ivory carving as undoubtedly portraying a scene inside Old Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome. As Vatican excavator Englebert Kirschbaum later wrote, the ivory was “so striking even in its details as to confirm conclusively its interpretation as the Constantinian apse in Saint Peter’s.”25 This ivory scene is shown in Figure 2.

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Notably, from the discovery of the ivory box in 1906 until now, there has not been any controversy among art historians that three men are sculpted on the left of the table and three women on the right. For example, in 1908, Anton Gnirs, the first to publish a scholarly article

about the ivory box, described the altar and the ciborium over the altar. He described two men and two women, all with raised arms, flanking opposite sides of the ciborium. Finally, he described the two people under the ciborium who were carved facing each other across the altar—a man and a woman.\footnote{Gnirs, “Basilica,” 34, 36–37, fig. 28.} Gnirs speculated that perhaps the man and woman at the altar were spouses, and the liturgy the sacrament of matrimony. But, he observed, there was no third person, i.e., no priest.\footnote{Gnirs, “Basilica,” 37.}

The box achieved wider attention in 1939 when Henri Leclercq, one of the editors of the popular \textit{Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie}, tentatively identified the presbytery carved on the box as Old Saint Peter’s.\footnote{Leclercq, “Pola,” coll. 1342–1346, esp. col. 1345, fig. 10429.} Leclercq described the spiral columns of the ciborium over the altar, and the man and woman at the altar, who he suggested were the owners or donors of the box. Instead of a wedding liturgy, however, Leclercq assumed the couple was venerating a relic of the True Cross—but, he noted, Old Saint Peter’s was not known to have had a relic of the True Cross. He concluded that the scene at the altar with the man and the woman was \textit{un peu fantaisiste}.\footnote{Leclercq, “Pola,” quotes from col. 1345.} In 1939, word was getting out—a fifth-century ivory sculptor had depicted a woman and a man at the altar in Old Saint Peter’s Basilica.

The very next year, despite the onset of World War II, the Vatican began its excavations beneath the high altar. Perhaps the Vatican excavators had hoped to prove that, despite the six
famous spiral columns, the scene on the ivory box did not depict the altar in Old Saint Peter’s. Yet beneath the high altar they discovered a second-century shrine that was the same size as the marble-encrusted wall sculpted on the ivory, and even the niche holding a cross behind the table on the ivory matched a niche behind the table on the second-century shrine. See Figure 2A.

Fig. 2A Man (left) and woman (right) at the second-century mensa beneath the ciborium

31 For a diagram of the niche over the mensa, see Kirschbaum, Tombs, figs. 13 and 37; for an illustration, see Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins, The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations, (New York: Pantheon, 1957), fig. 17.
Some art historians have pointed out that the woman on the right of the table beneath the columned ciborium was portrayed lifting some kind of container.\textsuperscript{32} The woman lifting a container at this table might comport with the woman lifting the cup in the third-century catacomb meal scenes, as well as in Irenaeus’s second-century report. Notably, the mosaics dated to the 550s which flank the altar inside the holy of holies in San Vitale in Ravenna appear to also witness this tradition, because here, just as on the ivory, the men stand on the left of the altar and women on the right. On the left, Justinian holds the paten for the bread. On the right, Theodora holds the chalice.\textsuperscript{33} The sculptor of the ivory box, thus, likewise may have intended for the woman at the altar in Old Saint Peter’s to be seen lifting the cup.

It is not difficult to imagine the consternation in the Vatican after the excavators proved that the ivory sculptor had sculpted a woman at the altar inside Old Saint Peter’s, the premier basilica of the faith. For more about what happened afterwards, see the forensic analysis in my Spring 2017 article in the \textit{Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion},\textsuperscript{34} and an update with additional details in my 2019 book, \textit{Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership}.\textsuperscript{35}

Nearly a half-century later, in 1988, the second early fifth-century sculpture to depict gender parallelism at the altar in a real church was excavated. This scene is on a large stone sarcophagus front, which was found in a hypogeum adjacent the Theodosian walls in Constantinople. Based on its type of columns, which were known to have been inside the second Hagia Sophia, Early Christian art historian Johannes G. Deckers and the archeologist, Ümit


\textsuperscript{33} For more detail on these mosaics, see Ally Kateusz, “‘She sacrificed herself as the priest’: Early Christian Female and Male Co-Priests.” \textit{Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion} 33, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 45–67, 65-66, figs. 6–8; Ally Kateusz, \textit{Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership}, 172–73, figs. 7.7–7.9.

\textsuperscript{34} Kateusz, “‘She sacrificed herself as the priest,’” 56–63.

\textsuperscript{35} Kateusz, \textit{Mary and Early Christian Women}, 160–70.
Serdaroğlu, identified it as a liturgical scene inside the second Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.\textsuperscript{36} This sculptor also carved an arms-raised man on the left of the altar, and an arms-raised woman on the right. This carving is seen in Figure 3.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{sarcophagus_front.png}
\caption{Sarcophagus front depicting liturgical scene in the second Hagia Sophia. Constantinople, ca. 430s. Photo Ally Kateusz}
\end{figure}

The tradition of gender parallel ritual at the symbolic meal, as seen in the fifth century in the basilicas of Rome and Constantinople, may have originated in Judaism. Bernadette Brooten’s study of stone epigraphs that memorialized Jewish women with gender parallel synagogue titles such as “Head of the Synagogue,” “Mother of the Synagogue,” “Elder,” and “Priestess,” suggest that a similar gender parallel leadership may have been present in some synagogues in the

\textsuperscript{36} Johannes G. Deckers and Ümit Serdaroğlu, “Das Hypogäum beim Silivri-Kapi in Istanbul,” \textit{Jahrbuck für Antike und Christentum} 36 (1993): 140–63, esp. 147–52, and for the identification as the second Hagia Sophia, see page 161.
Mediterranean diaspora. Earlier evidence of gender parallelism during a ritual in Second Temple Judaism in Palestine is suggested by what Eileen M. Schuller calls “liturgical-style texts” from Qumran. In 4Q502, for example, male and female pairs are frequently mentioned, as well as in 4Q270, which parallels “Fathers” and “Mothers,” not as biological mothers and fathers, but as “a special group within the congregation.” According to Philo, the ritual performed during the meal of the Therapeutae in first-century Palestine had male and female choirs, as well as a male leader and a female leader. This performance signified the Temple, with bread as holy food, a time of libation, an altar table, and priests. Joan E. Taylor says, “Ultimately, both men and women saw themselves not only as attendants or suppliants but as priests in this Temple.”

Two key pieces of evidence suggest that the liturgy depicted in Old Saint Peter’s Basilica may have originated in the meal traditions of the Therapeutae in first-century Palestine. The first piece of evidence is the way that the ivory sculptor portrayed the arms-raised men and women with their mouths open, as if singing. The closest parallel to these two gender-divided choirs is the Therapeutae’s divided choirs of men and women. Philo said that during their sacred all-night festival these two choirs sang like the Israelites, with “Moses the prophet leading the men, and Miriam the prophetess leading the women”; they sang all night, and “when they saw the sun

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41 Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 343. Note that Ross Shepard Kraemer concludes this highly idealized account was probably fictional, but Hal Taussig finds it unlikely that Philo, who otherwise exhibits patriarchal concerns, would invent women in such roles, and Joan E. Taylor argues that it most likely was an actual Judean meal; see Kraemer, *Unreliable Witnesses*, 57–116; Taussig, "Pivotal Place of the Therapeutae"; and Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 311–43.
42 For a photo with detail of this part of the ivory, see Kateusz, “‘She sacrificed herself as the priest,’” 58, fig. 3; and Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 166, fig. 7.4.
rising, *they raised their hands to heaven.*" The ivory sculptor likewise portrayed men and women singing with their arms raised, and a male and a female leader at the altar. The ivory scene itself may have depicted a famous all-night liturgy, the all-night mass to the memory of Peter, which took place annually in Old Saint Peter’s. See Figure 2B.

![Fig. 2B Arms-raised women singing in Old Saint Peter’s Basilica](image)

The second piece of evidence that the gender parallel liturgy performed in Old Saint Peter’s may have mirrored the gender parallel ritual performed during the meal of the Therapeutae comes from Eusebius of Caesarea. In the early fourth century, Eusebius wrote about the Therapeutae, and said that their practices were still present in churches at that time, including the division between men and women, and the rituals performed by them. Regarding the

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Therapeutae, he said: “Their meetings, the separate abodes of the men and the women in these meetings, and the exercises performed by them . . . are still in vogue among us at present.”

With this report from Eusebius, we have all the more reason to assert that the early fifth-century gender parallel liturgy seen in these two churches quite likely preserves first-century Jewish meal traditions. The parting of the ways, at least with respect to gender parallel leadership during meal, appears to have been later.

**Reception of the Womanly Jesus in Art**

Joan E. Taylor recently pointed out that the canonical gospels preserve no memory of a physical description of Jesus, a phenomenon all the more surprising when contextualized with other histories from that era, in which the hero’s physical description was important and served to illustrate character. Almost without exception, no Christian art has survived from the first two centuries, and third century art is exceedingly rare, with scenes of Jesus even rarer, perhaps due to the prominence in this art of the Good Shepherd and scenes from Jewish scripture. What are most likely the two oldest portraits of Jesus are on the baptistery walls at Dura-Europos, which the Romans enlarged after they captured it in 165, but which was abandoned in 257. The baptistery has two wall paintings portraying Jesus—one healing the paralyzed man and the other walking on water. Although the two paintings themselves have since deteriorated, drawings made of them in situ shortly after discovered show that in both scenes the artist portrayed Jesus with a bouffant of curly hair, and, most remarkable for a rabbi, beardless. This lack of a beard

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46 See Michael Peppard, *The World’s Oldest Church: Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), figs. 3.1 and 3.2 (tracings), and plates 4 and 5 (photos).
is preserved most clearly in the scene of Jesus healing the paralyzed man, but as one can easily
detect by perusing any book on early Christian art, such as Robin Jensen’s *Understanding Early
Christian Art*, prior to the last two decades of the fourth century artists almost never portrayed
Jesus with a beard.

When Christian art blossomed during Constantine’s reign in the early fourth century,
gospel scenes became popular, and in these Jesus was still portrayed beardless. Yet with the
proliferation of art, and especially on the highly detailed marble sarcophagi, we find many
portraits where artists represented Jesus’s body as sexually ambiguous. For example, Robin
Jensen says artists portrayed Jesus “with feminine physical characteristics, including small
protruding breasts, sloping shoulders, wide hips, and long curling hair.” Art historian Thomas
F. Matthews adds, “Not content with hinting at a feminine side of Christ in his face and hair,
Early Christian artists have expressly given him breasts.” These images fundamentally align
with the second-century descriptions of Jesus in the shape of a woman—an image associated in
the second-century with women’s leadership.

One might argue that the image of Jesus as female was taken from the art of some Roman
or Greek gods, such as Dionysus or Hermes, and perhaps it was. Many Mediterranean male gods,
however, were imaged as powerful, manly, bearded gods. If the intent was to portray Jesus as
divine, as has sometimes been proposed, there were many manly gods to choose from. Around
the year 400, the hyper-masculine divine image of Jesus made a prominent appearance in the
apse mosaics of St. Pudenziana in the city of Rome. Here Jesus was portrayed large, muscular,

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University Press, 1993), 128.
49 Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 95–96, Fig. 71.
bearded—hyper-manly—except for his long womanly hair. The motif of long hair on Jesus, first seen in older catacomb art, has persisted through the centuries until today. See Figure 4.

Fig. 4 Manly Jesus. Apse mosaic, St. Pudenziana, Rome, c. 400. Image: Josef Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert*, 4 vols. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1916), plates 42-44.

I have provided below some fourth-century examples of this art, because today Jesus in the form of a woman is a concept difficult to imagine unless one sees it with one’s own eyes. Figure 5 is a womanly statue dated between 250 and 350, which initially was identified as a seated poetess, but was subsequently re-identified as Jesus because many other sculptors had depicted Jesus the same way. For example, Figure 6A shows a womanly Jesus seated in the

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center of a sarcophagus from the catacombs of Rome dated 350 to 375, which is seen in Figure 6. Affirming that this feminine person was Jesus, Figure 6B shows the sarcophagus’s far right scene, which depicts same long-haired person in the gospel scene of Jesus before Pontius Pilate.

Fig. 5 Seated “poetess”
Vatican Museum, 250-350

Fig. 6A Jesus flanked by Paul (left) and Peter (right)
Center of sarcophagus, Rome, dated 350-375

Note: All photos by David Edward Kateusz unless otherwise specified

Fig. 6 Seated Jesus (center). Jesus before Pontius Pilate (far right).
Sarcophagus, Rome, dated 350-375
Most art in the East has been destroyed in repetitive iconoclasms, but images of the womanly Jesus are preserved on sarcophagi and other art in Rome, Ravenna, and Gaul. In some cases, as in Figure 7, Jesus’s breasts are explicit. Often the femininity of Jesus is accentuated by the shorter hair and/or beards of adjacent men, as seen in Figures 8 and 9. The most famous intersex Jesus is in the dome mosaic of the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, where the feminine figure with a penis contrasts with the manly hairiness of John the Baptist. See Figure 10.
Fig. 7  Left
Jesus with breasts in center of a sarcophagus in San Francisco Church, Ravenna, 350-400

Fig. 8  Bottom Left
Jesus (left) with Mary of Bethany Sarcophagus of “Two Brothers,” Rome, 325-350

Fig. 9  Bottom Right
Jesus with Peter and the rooster Sarcophagus today in the crypt of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine Basilica in Saint-Maximin La-Sainte-Baume in Provence, France, 350-375
Implications for 1 Cor 11:3-16 When Jesus Was Intersex

Why was any physical description of Jesus omitted in the gospels? Is it possible that the Jesus followers believed Jesus was intersex? That is, that the child Jesus was born with both male and female genitals? According to current estimates, as many as one child in fifty is born
this way.\textsuperscript{51} If Jesus were intersex, this might explain the omission of any physical description in the gospels—perhaps the writers were concerned that an intersexual messiah would be less auspicious in Roman culture than in Jewish culture, where Genesis 1:27 could suggest that the child was born in the divine image, male and female.

The image of Jesus as intersex provides an additional layer of understanding to Paul’s description of Jesus in Gal 3:28, “There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” as well as in 1 Cor 11:11, “Neither man without woman, nor woman without man, in the Lord.” Most importantly for understanding Paul’s perspective on women leaders, Jesus’s womanly body may untangle what has been called the most contradictory passage in the New Testament—1 Corinthians 11:3-16.

1 Corinthians 11:3-16 has pivotal importance for understanding Paul’s perspective on women in church leadership. This is because when we strip away the dectero-Paulines—which I call the \textit{faux-Pauls}—and also strip away 1 Cor 14:34-36—which strong evidence suggests is an interpolation\textsuperscript{52}—1 Corinthians 11:3-16 remains the sole passage in Paul’s genuine writings upon which rests his patriarchal reputation as a man who opposed women in church leadership. This passage, so little understood, is frequently used to justify the conclusion that women could not have been leaders. Yet strong evidence demonstrates that women \textit{were}.

Primarily due to the \textit{faux-Pauls}, in which some later writers paired instructions for slaves to obey their masters with instructions for women to obey men—Eph 5:22 and 6:5, Col 3:18 and 3:22, and Titus 2:4-5 and 2:9-10—we sometimes read backwards and assume that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} https://www.intersexequality.com/how-common-is-intersex-in-humans/
\item \textsuperscript{52} For an excellent recap, see Gordon D. Fee, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, rev. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 780-81.
\item \textsuperscript{53} For more reports of gender parallel leadership, see Kateusz, \textit{Mary and Early Christian Women}, 151–54; and Kateusz, “She sacrificed herself as the priest,” 52–56. For more on women officeholders, see Ute E. Eisen, \textit{Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies}, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).
\end{itemize}
the real Paul was patriarchal like these later writers. I argue we then misread 1 Cor 11:3-16, which is the sole indisputably genuine passage with such language in Paul’s genuine letters. We read this passage assuming that Paul believed women should not be in leadership—I cannot tell you how many times I have read that Paul’s teachings are why women could not be in church leadership. Yet we have seen women with men in the oldest surviving material remains of mensas. Is it possible that Paul actually advocated women in leadership? At a minimum, the way Paul describes women leaders in Romans 16 indicates that he did.

In my view, our misunderstanding of Paul as patriarchal in this passage entirely turns on the fact that we have apparently, up until now, been unable to truly imagine how Jesus followers imagined an intersex Jesus. For example, we assume Paul was asking a patriarchal question at 1 Cor 11:14 when he wrote: “Doesn’t nature teach you that long hair on a man is degrading?” Yet if Jesus followers believed Jesus was intersex—which Paul suggested at 1 Cor 11:11 when he wrote, “Neither man without woman nor woman without man, in the Lord”—then what did Corinthians think Jesus looked like? In Corinth, the comparable image of an intersex child was Hermaphroditus, child of the patron goddess of Corinth, Aphrodite, who was typically sculpted with long hair and budding breasts, as well as a penis.

What if Paul and the Corinthians believed Jesus himself had long hair? What if Paul were asking a rhetorical question at 1 Cor 11:14 instead of a patriarchal question? Demonstrating that even in the later fourth century some Christians believed Paul was asking a rhetorical question, Epiphanius said that Christ had long hair, and that Paul was making a “joke” when he asked, “Doesn’t nature teach you that long hair on a man is degrading?”54 I use a fourth-century gold glass plate from the catacombs, which depicts Jesus between Peter

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54 Epiphanius, Panarian 80.7.2–3.
and Paul, to make a cartoon of Paul asking that question, and show the absurd humor in it when Jesus himself has long hair. See Figure 11.

Fig. 11  Long-haired Jesus between Peter and Paul. Fourth-century gold glass, catacombs of Rome. Source: Louis Perret, *Catacombes de Rome*, vol. 4 (Ouvrage publié par ordre du gouvernement, Paris, 1852), fig. 4:115

Doesn’t nature teach you that long hair on a man is degrading?
When Paul is making a joke at 1 Cor 11:14, then 1 Cor 11:3-16 neatly splits into two opposing arguments—a patriarchal argument in 3-10 and an egalitarian rebuttal of it in 11-16. Elsewhere in his genuine letters Paul used the rhetorical device of setting up a straw man, presenting a fictitious bigot’s argument, then rebutting it. This type of prosopopoeia, indirect so as to mute its effect on the friends admonished, is a rhetorical device that the Corinthians, as well as other Greek speakers recognized, especially when used by a teacher.\(^{55}\) Thus, in 1 Cor 11:3-10, I argue that Paul was simply presenting his fictitious opponent’s patriarchal argument first, setting it up for rebuttal. He then rebutted it in 11:11-16. Modern exegetes cannot see these two competing arguments because they assume that Paul was being patriarchal about long hair in 1 Cor 11:14—which makes the passage an incomprehensible mess, with Paul first patriarchal, then egalitarian, then seemingly patriarchal again at 11:14. When Paul and Corinthians believed that Jesus had long hair, and Paul was asking a rhetorical question at 11:14, the two competing arguments come clearly into view.

Paul signaled the beginning of his rebuttal at 11:11, by invoking the intersex Jesus, “Neither man without woman, nor woman without man, in the Lord.” Next, at 11:12, Paul gave a stunning short and sweet rebuttal to his patriarchal opponent’s argument that woman came out of man, and therefore women are subordinate to men and must cover their hair—Paul answered: “Even if woman came out of man, every man has come out of a woman, and all things come from God.” Then at 11:13-14, he rhetorically asks: “Judge among yourselves: Is it fitting for a woman to pray uncovered? Doesn’t nature teach you that long hair on a man

is degrading?” At 11:15-16, he finishes, stating, “If a woman has long hair it is her glory, because hair has been given her instead of a covering. If anyone wants to argue about it, we do not recognize any other practice, nor do the churches of God.”

Worthy of mention at this point is that, much as this interpretation of Paul’s letter suggests, wearing a head covering appears to have been optional for Christian women before the fourth century. Only in the fourth century, after the advent of Constantine, were they almost uniformly depicted with head coverings in art. In third-century art, some Christian women around the Mediterranean were depicted without a head covering. For example, in the Dura-Europos baptistery wall paintings, the woman seen at a well does not have a head covering, although the women processing towards the white building do.\(^{56}\) A third-century fresco of Epiphany in the Catacomb of Marcellinus and Pietro in Rome portrays Mary herself, holding her infant, bare-headed.\(^{57}\) In the late third-century Cubiculum of the Velata in the Priscilla Catacomb in Rome, two scenes featuring young bare-headed women flank the portrait of an arms-raised woman known as the velata because of her long head covering, as seen in Figure 12.\(^{58}\) The arms-raised pose was commonly used for the many female figures portrayed in early catacomb art, but this pose did not necessarily mean that the woman would be seen with a head covering. For example, an arms-raised woman flanked by sheep on a third-century Christian sarcophagus from Gaul was portrayed bare headed, as seen in Figure 13.\(^{59}\)

\(^{56}\) Peppard, *World’s Oldest Church*, plates 1, 7, and 9.


Fig. 12 Two scenes featuring a woman without a head covering flank the veiled woman. Cubiculum of the Velata, Priscilla Catacomb, Rome. Late 3rd c. Source: Joseph Wilpert, *Die Katakombengemälde und ihre alten Copien* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1891), plate 9.

Fig. 13 Arms-raised woman without a head covering. Flanked by sheep, a dove, and an anchor, all Christian symbols. A shepherd is also on this sarcophagus. Third-century Gayolle sarcophagus in the Civic Museum of Brignolles, France.
The context of 1 Cor 11:3-16 further suggests that Paul intended the passage to support the leadership of women at the meal. First, in 1:11, Paul specified that people in Chloe’s *ecclesia* had told him there were quarrels among the recipients of the letter, which suggests that the quarrels may have been related to women’s leadership. Second, especially in chapter 7, Paul provided numerous gender parallel instructions for the behavior of men and women. This exceedingly unusual gender parallelism, found nowhere else in the canon, militates for the conclusion that Paul would have employed the same gender theology in 11:3-16. Third, Paul bookended 11:3-16 with detailed discussions of the performance of the “Lord’s supper”—and in this, he repeatedly invoked the *body* of Christ, for example:

- Is not the bread which we break a partaking of the *body of Christ*? Because there is one bread, we the many are *one body*. (10:16-17)

- The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread, and giving thanks, broke it, and said, “This is *my body*, which is for you.” (11:23-24)

- Anyone who eats and drinks *without recognizing the body of the Lord* eats and drinks judgment on himself. (11:29)

Paul’s rebuttal of the patriarchal straw man began at 11:11 where he invoked the male-female body of Jesus with, “No man without woman and no woman without man, *in the Lord*.” In 12:12-13 he then completed the baptismal formula of Gal 3:28 by adding the male-female body of Christ: “We all were baptized into *one body*, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free.”

This reading of Paul as a first-century rabbi affirming women leaders in the meal is consistent with the most complete surviving account of a first-century Jewish meal, that provided by Philo regarding the Therapeutae. The early fifth-century portrayal of men and women flanking the altar in two of the most important orthodox basilicas in the
Mediterranean strongly suggests that still at that time the *faux-Pauls*, and the practice of reading the genuine Pauline epistles through them, had not yet achieved wide acceptance. The wider legitimization of the *faux-Pauls* probably began in the fourth century when they were made part of what eventually became called the canon. In the first through fifth centuries, however, the image of the intersex Jesus was still widespread, as were women leaders at the meal. Almost certainly both had their origins in the traditions of Judea and Israel.

In short, the second-century intersex Jesus was much like the first-century Jesus—and much like the Jesus of the third through fifth centuries, at least in many communities. Our failure to recognize this womanly Jesus is perhaps due more than anything to ancient censorship and the way we privilege texts that have survived. Christoph Markschies estimates that 85% of the early Christian texts *that we know about* from the first two centuries did not survive.\(^60\) Quite likely the ancient patterns that I have illuminated in this essay were far clearer, say, in the books of the New Prophecy prophetesses.

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