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Masculinity

(5,817 words)

In the field of the study of early Christian origins, a similar dynamic can be observed as within religious studies with an interest in the question of gender at large: in research on early Christian anthropologies and the role of men and women in early Christian communities, the understanding and role of women have been studied extensively and fruitfully. However, the study of the construction and role of men and masculinities is only in its infancy, despite the publication of a number of significant studies (see for this and the following: Smit, 2017a; more recently also: Asikainen, 2018; Troost, 2019) and a substantial body of literature on the theory of the construction of masculinity in antiquity, also in relation to early Christian (and Jewish) texts. Studies that explore this field seek to redress a situation in which, on the one hand, masculinity, men, their role, and construction are taken for granted, while, on the other hand, women are treated as “special cases” that need to be approached through the lens of gender studies and gender-sensitive exegesis (a point stressed by Troost, 2019). Many insights for the study of the construction of early Christian masculinities, not in the last place the masculinity of Jesus (Christ, Jesus, 01: Survey) as it is described and constructed through early Christian writings and practice, derive from the broader field of the study of the 1st-century CE Greco-Roman world and later and the study of masculinity that takes place there. In order to outline this, first an overview will be offered of characteristics of (ideal) masculinity in the Greco-Roman world, after which the (representative) aspect of the construction of early Christian masculinities will be presented; the entry ends with considerations about the future of research in this field.

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(Ideal) Masculinities in the Greco-Roman World

Studies of masculinity/-ies in the Greco-Roman world, including early Christianity, often have as their point of departure an outline of “hegemonic” or “ideal-typical” masculinity (see e.g. Mayordomo-Marín, 2006). Even if the exclusive focus on such forms of masculinity might be

somewhat narrow, this nonetheless enables one to get a good grasp of the themes and topics associated with the notion of masculinity at large. Usually, these were organized around the notion of *andreia*, being a virtue and an aspect of gender at the same time, as would also be true of the Latin *virtus*. Such identities could also be embodied by women, even if a misogynistic bias is often detectable in ancient sources, yet it is also criticized, as Plutarch's *De virtutibus mulierum* shows. The common idea that the women of one's own group were more virtuous/masculine than the male heroes of another group is simultaneously emancipatory and discriminatory (see e.g. the biblical book of Judith, or 4 Maccabees). The hierarchically organized Greco-Roman world knew a ditto understanding of masculinity, expressive of the overarching social order (see e.g. Asikainen, 2018, 19–45). In this understanding of masculinity, everyone, including women, had a place. In the Greco-Roman world, a “monosexual” model was current, in which a person can only be more or less masculine and is not man or woman and hence not masculine or feminine in any essential sense. This hierarchy of masculinities can be described as a hierarchy of penetration. This is shorthand for a situation in which one's degree of masculinity is determined by the extent to which one penetrates others and vice versa. Even though much of the background of this image is sexual, it is of importance to note that it could be applied to all aspects of life. In this context, concepts such as autarky and the control over one's own passions became closely associated with the ideal of masculinity. J. Larson describes the state of affairs as follows:

Elite males were highly conscious of the fact that each of these groups [slaves, clients, women] was subject to their sexual demands; their right to sexually penetrate members of these groups was a reflection of their political and social dominance. According to a celebrated saying of the advocate Haterius, “Loss of sexual virtue [*impudicitia*] is a crime in a free man, a necessity for a slave, and a duty [*officium*] for a freed-man.” What was most appalling about free, elite males who played a passive role in intercourse was that they willingly surrendered the masculine prerogative, thus allying themselves with lower-status groups who were expected to conciliate, flatter, and provide pleasure to their superiors. (Larson, 2004, 93; see also the nuance added by M. Perry, 2011)

A further illustration of this state of affairs concerning gender and the construction of masculinity, with women and slaves (typically; Slave/Slavery) at the bottom of the hierarchy, is the high frequency of themes such as the “clever slave” or the “dominant woman” in contemporary comedy, addressing the perpetually vulnerable masculinity of husbands and masters. Even though various overviews of the characteristics of “hegemonic” masculinity are available, the one provided by M. Mayordomo-Marín is particularly helpful (Mayordomo-Marín, 2006; see Asikainen, 2018, 19–45). He mentions the following seven aspects of hegemonic masculinity:

1. The conventional Greco-Roman view of gender, sex, and body was that in reality only a “monosexual” body existed that could manifest itself as (more) masculine or (more) feminine through genitals that had grown either outwardly or inwardly.
2. Masculinity was not necessarily a fact determined by the body with which one was born, but needed to be proven constantly in the public arena, through one’s appearance, behavior, and performance. Everyone, both men and women, could constantly become more or less masculine.
3. Masculinity was very closely bound up with the notions of activity and dominance; as Mayordomo put it: “Being a man in antiquity was very closely linked to the role of being an active agent rather than passive. Be it in politics, in sports, in war, in rhetoric or in the vast field of sexuality, what qualified an individual as a man was his active control of the situation” (Mayordomo-Marín, 2006).
4. Masculinity and being virtuous were closely intertwined, specifically through the cardinal virtue of ἀνδρεία and through the virtues in general (*virtutes*).
5. Self-control, especially with respect to anger and other forms of passions, including those associated with sexuality, was an essential part of the aforementioned dominance: “The most active agent would be a man who controls himself with respect to anger and all other forms of passions, especially those associated with sexuality.” (Mayordomo-Marín, 2006)
6. This state of affairs also meant that, *sensu stricto*, no one was really born as a man, but that even a boy needed to be educated and trained to be a proper man.
7. Finally, masculinity and femininity were both associated with respective social spaces, in other worlds outside and inside, or public and private.

Being masculine in relation to these characteristics was a process of constant negotiation, especially if one occupied a less-than-elite position in society, which applied to many, if not most, early Christian personalities, certainly prior to the “conversion of Constantine” and its aftermath. To be sure, early Christians could also tap into the resources of (popular) philosophical discourses, such as the Stoic and Cynic ones, that were also concerned with the construction of “subhegemonic” forms of masculinity in relation to the “hegemonic” ideal, thus challenging this ideal in the process.

With this background, the question can be asked how early Christian masculinities relate to the ideal-typical view of masculinity as it was just outlined. In order to do so, three key personalities from the early Christian world will be considered. First, Jesus of Nazareth portrayed as he is in the (canonical) Gospels. Second, Paul of Tarsus in the (authentic) Pauline Letters. And third, Thecla of Iconium, in the Acts of (Paul and) Thecla. By analyzing them, the most central characteristics and dynamics of the early Christian discourse on masculinity can be traced – even if it is quite obvious that this discourse went well beyond the 2nd century CE. Several studies in early Christian masculinity show this by researching, for example, Augustine of Hippo (Sawyer, 1995; Deutscher, 2007), the Cappadocian fathers (e.g. Burrus, 2006; 2007),

and others, usually with attention for the performative, rather than essential character of masculinity (or any gender for that matter, see Burrus, 2000; Cobb, 2008; Kuefler, 2001; Dunning, 2011; Aspegren, 1990; Cloke, 1995).

Jesus (in the Gospels)

The field of research into Jesus, the Gospels and masculinity is still in motion (see Smit, 2017a; Klinken & Smit, 2013). Some claim that Jesus represents an alternative masculinity throughout while others make the opposite claim, stating that the depiction of Jesus in the New Testament is already well on the way toward subscribing to Greco-Roman ideals of masculinity (Conway, 2008), with others taking a mediating position (Asikainen, 2018). While it is much too early to attempt to make up the balance, some examples may be given here, as to how Christ, as a man, was and was not represented and constructed by early Christian authors. Three instances of Jesus' depiction will be considered here. First, Jesus' speech; second, an example of a miracle story; and third, aspects of the crucifixion (Cross/Crucifixion) and resurrection (Resurrection of Jesus Christ) are looked at. By considering these, it will become clear how multifaceted the depiction and construction of Jesus as a man are and how precisely they can help to explain, at least partially, the widely varying constructions of "Christian masculinities" in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection.

First, one of the areas in which masculinity was to be displayed and defended was that of public debate (see for this and the following esp. Conway, 2008 and Asikainen, 2018). As M. Mayordomo-Marín has shown for Paul, the way in which a public speaker acted did much for the attribution of masculinity to him (or her; see Mayordomo-Marín, 2006). Paul is a somewhat conflicted figure in this respect, as his performance as a public speaker seems to have been less than spectacular – unlike his acumen in letter writing. When the depiction of Jesus as a public speaker is surveyed, however, one gets a different impression throughout. While Jesus is never depicted as writing (with the exception of the *pericopa adulterae* in John 7:53–8:11), nor are any writings of him known, he is certainly depicted as speaking. In fact, he is shown to be a superb speaker. He does not only deliver various lengthy discourses (esp. in Matthew and John), but he also teaches effectively, making use of various rhetorical techniques (Rhetoric), such as parables. Furthermore, he is also presented as a superior debater, virtually without fail putting his opponents to shame (he is, in fact, only bested by women, not by other 'hegemonic' men, see e.g. the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7:24–30.) On this basis, one might be seduced into thinking that Jesus is presented as an extraordinarily masculine person in general. However, this would not be entirely to the point.

Second, in miracle stories (Miracles), Jesus also demonstrates an extraordinary amount of authority and power, which is often recognized. At the same time, Jesus is also depicted as being at pains to keep things quiet, which results in a kind of paradoxical "hypermasculine" status: one that is known to the reader, but hidden from public view in the narrative itself. Nonetheless, the issue of Jesus' status and masculinity appears throughout the Gospel narratives, even in miracle stories that, at first glance, might have nothing to do with questions of masculinity, such as the "miraculous feeding" in Mark 6 (and parallels; see Smit, 2017b).

However, when reading this text in its narrative context, recognizing the juxtaposition of two banqueting scenes (i.e. Herod's birthday banquet in 6:21–29, followed by Jesus' meal in the wilderness in 6:30–44), it appears that here two kinds of leaders are presented. One of them cannot control his feelings and descends, with his male guests, into chaos at a dinner party where the only dish mentioned contains the severed head of John the Baptist. The other maintaining perfect control over himself and others in a chaotic situation, resulting in an abundant and well-ordered meal for all. This development also speaks to the masculinity that Jesus and Herod embody and the "honor" they have in the eyes of contemporary society. While this applies to the synoptic tradition, in the Gospel of John (John, Gospel of), Jesus' *semeia* are explicitly related to the notion of glory or honor, in other words *doxa*, and possessing honor (also in the sense of *doxa* as 'a good reputation') was again essential for anyone wishing to be considered truly masculine. However, when considering a text as John 2:1–11, the wedding in Cana, where Jesus acts as the stand-in patron of the wedding by providing a large amount of wine and performing his first *semeion* (see Smit, 2013), there is something distinctly odd about Jesus' display of his power and honor. His *doxa* remains hidden and is not publicly proclaimed as it would have been necessary for the establishment of his masculinity, given that that attribute of a person only existed when it was publicly embodied and acclaimed. A reading of this oddity that is well possible is to relate it to Jesus' remark in John 2:4 that his "hour" had not yet come. When taking this as a reference to his death on the cross, which in the Gospel of John also means Jesus' glorification, then Jesus' embodiment of masculinity must be related to the crucifixion, which is indeed a public embodiment of something, but can it be considered a credible form of masculinity?

Third, Jesus's death and resurrection, arguably the pivot of the early Christian "story," also need to be considered in any evaluation of early Christian construction of Jesus' masculinity. Whether one takes the account of any of the (canonical) Gospels or one of the accounts that Paul gives (e.g. in 1 Cor. 15 or in Phil. 2:5–11), the conflicting associations that the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ evoke when read against the background of Greco-Roman conventions regarding masculinity remain structurally similar. Jesus' death on the cross must be regarded as an utterly shameful death, fit for slaves, exposing, penetrating, and humiliating the body in a way that had absolutely no place in contemporary understandings of masculinity. The resurrection, soon conceptualized as a victory over death, however, must be seen as a glorious event that, for example according to Phil 2:9–11, gave Christ a hypermasculine position and identity. Untying this knot seems to be difficult, especially as, depending on the account one takes, Jesus goes into his death willingly, thus retaining a certain amount of control over the events (a point stressed by Asikainen, 2018). One generally accepted way of conceptualizing all this would be Jesus' identity as a martyr, to whose identity a (potentially shameful) death was inherent, but who, due to his (or her) faithfulness to his (or her) cause, would die an honorable death. Still, the crucifixion does not fit into this line of thought without some difficulties, shameful a death as it remained – and hence a source of some embarrassment for early Christians.

In sum, therefore, the representation of Jesus Christ's masculinity in early Christian writing is a highly instable matter and, while there are some models that may do justice to it to a considerable extent, such as the model of the righteous martyr, some instability remains. This instability is a productive one, when it comes to the reception and interpretation of Jesus traditions in subsequent discourses on human identity, specifically on masculinity.

Paul

One of the key witnesses to early Christians' attempt to come to terms with the paradoxical legacy of Jesus, as far as masculinity is concerned, is Paul of Tarsus (Paul [Apostle]). In his letters, Paul wrestles with the question as to what living "in Christ" means in a variety of settings and vis-à-vis a whole range of challenges. These challenges include both reflection on Paul's experience of marginalization and the integration of the notion of being the follower (even servant) of a crucified Lord, all of which had to have an impact on his view of an appropriate performance and understanding of masculinity. The result is a rather ambiguous stance vis-à-vis generally held ideals of masculinity in the Greco-Roman world. In fact, it has been claimed that it was precisely Paul's instable answer to the question as to what gender differences amounted to (and where they originated from and/or were located) that haunted the early church to such an extent that definitive answers were never given (Dunning, 2011). In particular, M. Mayordomo-Marín has pointed out how Paul renegotiates what hegemonic masculinity amounts to, while retaining some of the 'typical' Greco-Roman ideals associated with it (Mayordomo-Marín, 2006; Smit, 2007; see also Larson 2004). The following three of his conclusions constitute a good starting point for the line of thought followed in this entry:

As a man Paul does not question the active role of the male agent. But he makes, at least, two qualifications: A Christian male belongs as bodily person to Christ and he is morally bound to express his love towards his fellow-believers by renouncing important aspects of his male autonomy. (Mayordomo-Marín, 2006)

As a follower of Christ Paul clings to a system of values (or virtues) which has much in common with the Roman value system, but not all: being humble (*tapeinos*), for instance, is something which runs contrary to hegemonic forms of masculinity. On the other hand we do not find "courage" (*andreia*) as a virtue exposed by Paul. (Mayordomo-Marín, 2006)

As an unmarried Jewish man Paul limits sexuality to marriage. But even marriage is a lesser evil, because sexuality always implies a retraction from the complete rule of Christ. The most excellent form of male control is, thus, self-control. (Mayordomo-Marín, 2006)

Thus, Paul accepts generally held ideals of masculinity, such as the ideal of absolute self-control, but also modifies them, for example by attributing all his strength to a source outside of himself, Christ, who himself embodies very unmanly virtues, such as humility. In this context, one can also argue that the concept of the cross and the self-identification with someone as unmanly as a crucified Messiah, while upholding the significance of true manliness, is part of the background of Paul's need to renegotiate the ideals of masculinity. Something similar can be argued for John as well: the combination of Christ as an ideal male with Christ as the one who reveals his glory at his crucifixion leads to a reinterpretation of what it means to be an ideal man. These examples show how more generally held ideals of masculinity and emerging Christian theologizing could interact. Especially the cross and dependence on an outward source of identity, namely Christ, which enables a person to be in control both of himself and of whatever life and others throw at him, seem to have been important incentives for rethinking ideal masculinity. In particular, this has also been a source of inspiration for early Christian asceticism, as M. Mayordomo-Marín has put it:

Christian masculinity culminates in complete control over one's bodily needs for him. This anthropological choice paves the way for the latter Christian movement of celibate life. From this perspective, early ascetics and monks were not defective males but, quite to the contrary, hyper-masculine figures, able to control even the most forceful passions. (Mayordomo-Marín, 2006)

This topic of asceticism and masculinity leads to a further arena of early Christian wrestling with masculinity "in Christ." This will be considered in relation to those writing after the New Testament, with a focus on the particularly eloquent example of the *Acts of Thecla*.

After the New Testament

When conceptualizing the development of early Christian tradition as a way of interculturally receiving biblical texts and traditions (themselves part of this tradition, to be sure), a wrestling with a number of instabilities that are present in the texts that were to become canonical can also be seen to take place. Dunning has explored this with regard to masculine/feminine difference (Dunning, 2011), but it can also be argued to be the case with regard to masculinity at large. The reason for this is that potentially conflicting and not fully resolved tendencies exist in early Christian blueprints for masculinity, such as the combination of claim that Jesus is Lord and the veneration of Jesus as a crucified Lord. Naturally, early Christianity and its constructions of masculinity are broader than just Jesus and Paul. Still, the figure of Jesus and the insights of Paul are important ingredients for the ongoing process of reflection upon and performance of masculinity in early Christian discourse (and beyond). In particular, their suffering and its conceptualization in the Gospels about Jesus and the Letters of Paul provided (subversive) input for such constructions, especially as it was precisely suffering, marginalization, and lack of status that appeared to give Jesus, Paul, and those following in their (ascetic) footsteps access to divine authority and power. This, in a way, made precisely

these apparently marginalized figures highly masculine, quite against the grain of aspects of their less-than-masculine appearance, such as lack of control over one's own body when suffering, or lack of possessions with which one could be dominant in society.

A particularly eloquent example of this can be found in the *Acts of Thecla* (*Paul and Thecla, Acts of*), a text that is to be dated in the middle or toward the end of the 2nd century CE, which exists now as part of the *Acts of Paul* (*Paul, Acts of*), but which has also existed as a separate document. The *Acts of Thecla* had a broad reception among women and men in antiquity, although as, for example, the voice of Tertullian (*Bapt.* 17.5) indicates, not an uncontroversial one. Its contents consist of an account of the effect of the preaching of Paul on a young woman, Thecla, who, in a radical way, becomes a disciple of Paul and Christ. The narrative uses a variety of motives and strategies from Greco-Roman (romantic) novels and early Christian martyr acts, while these are used in the service of the theological and literary interests of the *Acts of Thecla* (see Smit, 2014).

When having to sketch the development of Thecla in very broad strokes, using a tool from ritual studies might be helpful, given that both the field of ritual studies and the *Acts of Thecla* are very much interested in developing identities, including gendered identities. It seems that many aspects of the *Acts of Thecla* fit the mold of the format “separation – transformation – aggregation,” given that Thecla separates herself from the identity with which she starts out, is molded as an apostle, and finally is accepted as such. Thecla's various trials can be seen to belong to the middle, liminal phase, whereas her emancipation agrees with the first phase, and Thecla's acceptance by Paul in her new role (and possibly also by her mother Theocleia) agrees with the phase of “aggregation.” Thecla's acceptance of Paul's preaching and her yearning to follow him and start a life of asceticism and sexual abstinence, leads to a rupture with her previous life. When the narrative takes Thecla and Paul to Antioch, Thecla, deviant as she is, is accosted again by a man who seeks to bring her under his control, but also this man fails quite spectacularly, being beaten up by Thecla. Thecla also survives her trials in the arena as a female *theriomachos* (θηριομάχος), performs a kind of self-baptism, and is eventually released, only to start a ministry of preaching and teaching. This leads to another encounter with Paul, who now acknowledges her ministry, upon which Thecla returns to Iconium, takes Paul's place there, and preaches the faith. In the course of all of this, Thecla develops the outer characteristics of a man, which is fitting, given her new role in the public, in other words male, arena. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, Thecla stands out as a very masculine person, especially because she started out as a rather unmanly person; her assumed weakness thus acts as a canvas from which her actual performance of ἀνδρεία stands out rather gloriously (as such a trope in early Christian martyrologies, see Cobb, 2008).

All of this has consequences for Thecla's “masculinity.” In fact, this presentation of Thecla and her development from a “weak” woman to a “strong” manly person – with the appropriate physical (strength, speech) characteristics and outward appearance (hair, clothing) – may serve as a narrative argument indicating that also those with supposedly weak bodies (women, slaves etc.) could rise to a position of authority and leadership “in Christ.” Conversely, given that “gender was understood to have far-reaching moral and spiritual implications,” (Stefaniw, 2010,

354) the *Acts of Thecla* can also be seen to indicate that “even male persons could need to be ‘made men’ in order to be really spiritual.” (Stefaniw, 2010, 354) Men in the *Acts of Thecla* may well be found to be lacking in this respect. While the *Acts of Thecla* use the criterion of masculinity on the one hand to indicate who is and who is not a figure of authority, they also show how an(y) unmasculine person can attain masculinity – and hence authority – through ἐγκράτεια. The body does not determine one’s gender. Paul, as becomes clear at the end of the story, agrees with this way of thinking, which is supported by Christ himself. This can be seen as a further development of the memory of Paul, analogous to that of the Pastoral Epistles, but with a different emphasis, in other words less on the structures of the *oikos* and more on the emancipation of socially prescribed roles.

Relevance and Outlook

From the above, it may be clear that the question of masculinity is something that concerns virtually every aspect of early Christians’ performance of “being in Christ,” given that questions of self-control, power, vulnerability, and so on were part and parcel of just about every situation in life. This is implied in the description of ideals associated with such masculinity as outlined above. This makes the study of masculinity highly relevant for one’s understanding of early Christian texts. Early Christian masculinity as such stands out because it struggles to come to terms with both ideals concerning hegemonic masculinity and aspects of its tradition, such as Jesus’ crucifixion, an ethics of submission, and so on, and of its everyday experience, such as social marginalization. The instability inherent in all of this is a productive one when it comes to the reconceptualization of ideal-typical human/masculine identity, such as in ascetic and martyrological discourses as the one to which the *Acts of Thecla* belong. In later eras of early Christianity, the tension between subscription to “patriarchal” and “hegemonic” understandings of gender and gender roles in general and masculinity and the role of males in particular will continue to characterize the Christian discourse on these topics and performance of gender roles and masculinities. This is just as apparent in early Christian martyrological accounts – a title such as L.S. Cobb’s *Dying to be Men* (2008) is quite illustrative – and asceticism, in particular in relation to the increased social standing of Christian dignitaries, in particular following the “conversion of Constantine” (312 CE). In order to understand and access the pertinent discourses, the key tensions that have been outlined above need to be taken into account.

At the same time, precisely in this interrelationship between “hegemonic ideals” and early Christian creativity lies one of the major methodological challenges for the future study of early Christian masculinities. This concerns the more detailed consideration of the interrelationship and (dis)similarity of early Christian takes on masculinity to forms of masculinity associated with other, also subhegemonic, groups. Such groups would include various kinds of politicians (e.g. the “emasculated” senatorial class during the imperial rule), but also soldiers and athletes (including gladiators), for whom suffering and pain were an integral part of their identity, and furthermore of course slaves, male or female, who did not

have control over their own body, and members of subdued peoples. Comparing and contrasting the kinds of masculinities developed among these groups with those of early Christian groups might provide further insight into the latter.

Peter-Ben Smit

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