

## **Response: Manhood and New Testament Studies after September 11**

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It is a good time to be a man—a manly man in America. My son turned seventeen this past summer, and he loves to show me how powerful he is. He says to me, “Come here Dad, I’ve got something to show you in the living room.” And I fall for him every time. He grabs me, tries to trip me, and wrestle me to the floor. As he pins my arms behind my back, I protest and complain that I am much too old for this sort of roughhousing. I’m over fifty. My bones are getting brittle. But that doesn’t seem to dissuade him. He forces me to the floor anyway. He has a need to flex his muscles; to test his strength “mano de mano.”

I should wear a steel cup for all the times he walks past me in the kitchen or dining room and sucker-punches me in the balls. The behavior must be symbolic of something, it happens so regularly. Maybe his actions somehow represent the passing of the male baton to the next generation. I am old and slow. He is young, strong, and agile. He is old enough to drive. I wear bifocals, but still hit curbs occasionally just so I know where I am on the street. It is true that I would die for my son; but he is nearly old enough to die for his country—in Iraq or Afghanistan—or some other place where

American interests seem to need protection. Are US military personnel issued steel cups?  
I hope so.

A year ago, terrorists invaded our sacred American space. They penetrated our most holy and private places; our centers of male power, with sleek, pen-shaped jets. The twin towers, those “legs of alabaster columns set upon bases of gold” (SoS 5:15) exploded in pain and agony and we were powerless to stop the iron rods of Allah’s anger. Not once, but twice, jets hit the towers. Then the Pentagon. And only the spontaneous act of a few good men on United Airlines Flight 93 averted further disaster at the US capitol. So buckle on your steel cups, ye men of valor. Sharpen your pens, ye hooded professors of New Testament. Flex your muscles as my son does; and forge your pens into bayonets. Pass the baton. The New Testament and Semeia have something to say to US about manhood. A year after 9/11.

Jerome Neyrey tells us that in the ancient Mediterranean world, “All challenges, to be effective, must be ‘public,’ . . . every honorable male must not turn the other cheek but deliver a riposte” (20). Likewise, we biblical scholars fight with words on the public battlefields of Semeia and JBL in order to prove our “manhood.” So how, in good agonistic fashion, shall we New Testament critics divide and conquer the textual geography our editors have now set before us? Every good war—paper or otherwise—starts with deployment. Perhaps this paper war should also begin with organizing the troops. Men and women in leadership positions—the managers, supervisors, editors—make sure that everything is properly ordered. So let’s choose the terrain and set out our troops.

Thrust into the forefront of the battle, I have decided to meet the manly crisis with the following strategy: Social scientific/social description essays will be my first line of attack. Since the essays of Jerome Neyrey, David Clines, Jennifer Glancey, and Colleen Conway primarily focus on how masculinity operated in the ancient Mediterranean Basin; what masculinity was like in the eastern Roman Empire during the late Augustan era, their essays function as shock troops. They tell us (again and again) that the contours of masculinity were much different then than in the twenty-first century Western world. Yet, how the General Reader is to apply that newly acquired knowledge (if it can be applied at all) is the general's own problem, and not the primary interest of these authors. It's like firing salvos at a distance. Analyze the evidence embedded in the ancient social map of the Bible and elsewhere, but don't worry about the text as a living canon aimed at US. It is too far away, pointed in the opposite direction, and we are out of range anyway. It won't hurt us.

So Neyrey, Clines, Glancey, and Conway just map the contours of masculinity in the ancient Mediterranean world. And they do it well. For example, Neyrey's statement of purpose works fairly well for all four writers: "This study has two parts, data and interpretation. First we will rehearse the ancient data for the gender stereotype" (1). Since his focus is on Matthew, "with this data we will then interpret the figure of the male Jesus in Matthew. We wish to see how much of this stereotype Matthew knows, how he presents Jesus as an ideal male, and what this means for the interpretation of his gospel" (ibid). This first group of essays push beyond the first skirmishes of "social scientific biblical criticism" in the 1980s and early 1990s, where there was virtually no attempt to

nuance the elite ideal models for more narrowly defined subgroups—especially for those who were outside the culture’s spheres of status and honor.

Neyrey, a point man in the battlefield of applying cultural anthropological models to New Testament studies, has learned to ask a slightly different question than he was asking ten years ago. His current inquiry focuses on the issue “Does the same set of [ancient Mediterranean] gender expectations apply equally to elite and non-elite males and females” (p. 10)? And Neyrey is led to conclude that “Few males . . . had the opportunity to fulfill the ideal stereotype of masculinity” (11). In his analysis, Jesus is at “egregious variance” “from the male stereotype” (26), but while “Jesus may seem not to conform to the gender stereotype when he makes [certain] demand on this followers, . . . [nevertheless] these shameful actions actually become the way to honor in the eyes of God and Jesus” (29). Neyrey’s point is well taken: the author of Matthew does not step unarmed into no man’s land. He still lives in an androcentric, patriarchal honor-shame world, for despite Jesus’ apparent dishonorable death, Jesus ultimately is pronounced honorable in the sight of God, and exalted to a status superior to any human (Mt 21:42; 26:64; 28:17). However, in view of the Jewish revolt of 70 CE, I wonder whether the “honor” of enduring shameful actions (29) may have lost some of its luster for Matthew’s community. In light of the events of 70 CE, is the author of Matthew trying to restore martyrdom to a place of male honor in his community? If Q had no passion narrative, as is often argued (and so must have represented a different construal of Jesus’ masculine honor), does Matthew’s coupling of Q and Mark represent a reconfiguring of that tradition’s masculinity? It would be interesting to see how Neyrey might assess the

historical trajectory of masculinity in Matthew's community in light of Matthew's use of Q traditions.

In my estimation, the essays of David Clines, Jennifer Glancey, and Colleen Conway do not stray far from Neyrey as point man. Like his essay, these also center largely on the collection of male stereotyped data. One finds only minor forays into such issues as how their interpretations might relate to contemporary communities of faith who read these texts as part of a religious canon.

David Clines' essay on Paul emphasizes Paul as a "pretty normal" male (10). But perhaps because Clines eschews the sort of taxonomies which Neyrey is so fond of, he can go on to say "Paul is not particularly culturally conditioned" (10). Surely Neyrey would find Clines' last statement problematical—while solidly affirming the former. But I would want to push the question further, to: Is there a hermeneutical strategy that one can develop from this "pretty normal but not particularly culturally conditioned" Paul? One that can address or challenge US manhood after 9/11?

Jennifer Glancy's essay on masculinity in the Pastorals suggests that New Testament constructions of the ideal male may not be quite the impregnable fortress that Neyrey presumes. Like Neyrey, she sets out a wealth of extra-biblical material to prove that the "pastor's" construction of masculinity in the Pastoral epistles is no different from what one finds in other first century Mediterranean texts. But where she differs from Neyrey and Clines is in her qualification that other characters in early Christian texts (Paul, Jesus, John the Baptist) reflect "alternative masculinities" (20) which the "pastor" seeks to "overwrite" (ibid). For her, the pastor's "silence on the crucifixion" makes it possible for him to "separate himself from the unmanly image of the crucified Christ"

(38). This observation, usually stated only in the context of the Pastoral epistles' non-Pauline Christology, becomes a significant masculinist insight in her analysis. To put her observation in the context of Matthew and Q: If Q existed as a gospel without a passion narrative, it would seem to fit the Pastor's masculine sensibilities quite well.

Furthermore, Matthew's decision to combine Q with Mark could, perhaps, be seen a Glancian challenge to Neyrey's argument that when all is said and done, Matthew still "fits" the model of the ideal ancient Mediterranean male. To stir up a hornets' nest: Q and the "pastor" represent the ideal ancient Mediterranean masculinity. Matthew is a challenge to it.

These first three essays share a common approach to the ancient biblical text. None of them spend any time theorizing or excavating sources behind the gospels or epistles in an attempt to delineate a trajectory of "masculinity" in the early church the way Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza did so masterfully for feminist biblical studies twenty years ago. But Colleen Conway's essay is a bit different from the first three. In her exploration of masculine Christology in John she does address the roots of the book's supposed feminized wisdom theology and Christology. However, she problematizes the wisdom language in such a way that Jesus is both "an exemplar of masculinity" in relation to the people in the story (25), and a feminized character in his relationship to God. Thus her reading of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel reveals a person who is more fluid (like water?); one who sometimes has masculine characteristics, and sometimes has feminine attributes. Conway's essay ends on a note that is more pointedly hermeneutical and moves in the direction of the final three essays under consideration. Her conclusion speaks of those communities that "have always found ways to read against the text in

their reflections of Christ, or to read in ways that highlight the ultimate instability of the text” (27). For me, this is the point at which we move into a no man’s land that can be life giving; where the canon as weapon turns in upon itself and becomes a fecund opening to a world of restructured masculinities.

In company with the first four scholars, Thurman, Frilingos, and Anderson and Moore also mine ancient Mediterranean texts (e.g. Philo, Greco-Roman erotic novels, patristic theologians) for constructions of masculinity. Here again we are on a familiar battleground (the gospel of Mark, the book of Revelation, and Matthew), and we half expect to find ourselves making body counts and checking dog tags rather than engaging in live action. But surprise! Thurman uses postcolonial discourses to challenge and complicate the ideal of Mediterranean masculinity; Frilingos explores the images of penetration in Revelation, showing how those are linked to “genderbending” (30) and domination through the metaphor of the slain lamb which the reader “watches” (31). And Anderson and Moore hear contrapuntal voices in Matthew that challenge its stereotyped Mediterranean male values. These essays thus share a slightly different orientation; one that I find more constructive when considering the ongoing ethical dimensions of the Christian canon. To my way of thinking, these latter authors all seem to be consciously looking for an intratextual and intertextual hermeneutic for biblical texts that can challenge the dominant, hegemonic, binary framework of ancient Mediterranean masculinity. Thinking about rhetorical constructions of US masculinity after 9/11, I believe these scholars’ probings offer a more fruitful ethical orientation for contemporary communities of faith. Their intertextual tapestries highlight the blurred borders and edges of male identity rather than its bright center. For example, Thurman

takes the reader on a provocative analysis of the term “lestes” in Greco-Roman novels, and with Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial concept of mimicry, leads the reader into the gladiatorial arena to reveal a Jesus who “emerges as a ‘mimic man’ and an “imperial pretender” (19). For Thurman, this means “Mark fails to question male privilege at a fundamental level” (37). But rather than end on this dispirited note, Thurman adds, “Feminist and postcolonial critique . . . disrupts . . . masculinity’s ‘manifest destiny’” (38).

Anderson and Moore likewise challenge a Neyreyan reading of Matthew by reading on the edges of its masculine discourses. Especially helpful are the ways in which they show how the Mediterranean language of kinship is rescripted by Jesus in such a way that the image of the ideal male is disrupted (30). This disruption is seen most clearly in their discussion of eunuchs (30-35), who are boundry-blurring people of “‘unman’ status” (35). Finally, Chris Frilingos’s observation that “Penetration, for Romans, equals domination: in such a system, sexuality and gender remain expression of mastery” (11) eerily evokes the rhetoric of our post 9/11 world. I must confess that I read Chris’s essay first, before any of the others, because I was also working on an essay on the book of Revelation. Because of her essay, **[IS CHRIS A SHE??? IF NOT PLEASE CHANGE]** the politics of penetration is still with me. I wonder how much of Frilingos’ choice of metaphor was influenced by the events of 9/11.

Penetration and power; shame and honor. The phallus twins of New York turned inside out; vaginal. Ground Zero. The great hole of Babylon. Some go to gape—and others come, but avert their eyes. Is it the Apocalypse? A postcolonial Mark of devastating mimicry? Matthew rescripted? A Pall hovering, invisible still? We cannot

afford simply to discuss New Testament masculinities as though they have no connection to contemporary Christian communities or US global policies. Ethically responsible biblical interpretation—whether it is historical-critical, literary, social-scientific, postcolonial, or postmodern—must find ways to translate its New Testament visions (versions) of manhood into socially responsible critiques and action. Whether that means finding new ways of reading ancient texts as in the case of Thurman, Frilingos, and Anderson and Moore, or whether it means rejecting these texts outright, as the first set of essays might seem to imply, we ignore them at our own peril. All too quickly the gamesmanship of challenge and riposte gets transformed into “martyrdom,” violence, and annihilation. These texts as canon should mean more to us than that. Somehow the canon must be redirected, retrained, reconfigured.

It seems to me that what is largely lacking in this series of essays on New Testament masculinities is a sense of what is at stake for living, present-day communities of men and women who claim these texts as authoritative; who claim that these texts, in some way, hold sway over their lives; who claim these texts as “canon.” To say that Matthew’s gospel reflects ancient Mediterranean constructions of masculinity is not surprising; to argue that Paul fits within first century social-world constructions of the male is barely interesting. We, as biblical interpreters and scholars, need to be thinking hermeneutically, asking whether there is a hermeneutical framework or interpretive angle to these canonical texts that can lead to fresh visions of manhood.

Analyses of New Testament masculinity must somehow address the question: “What effect does ‘canon’ have upon our strategies of reading masculinity in New Testament texts?” Surely there is value, post 9/11, in recognizing that challenges and

ripostes continue today in international politics; that saving face is of deadly importance. But are there ways to restructure rhetorical situations (canonical or otherwise) so that challenge and riposte are seen for the tropes they are and not as incendiary preludes to violence?

Finally, how might issues of postcolonialism—especially as a strategic exercise in broadening our intertextual repertoire—relate to reading masculinity in the New Testament? For example, how might reading New Testament masculinities with matriarchal or matrilinear honor/shame texts and cultures affect those constructions of masculinity? I'm thinking here particularly of the Bible's reception in different Native American tribal cultures. But African American texts might come into play here as well.

So what do I tell my son at seventeen; strong, virile, flexing his muscles. The one who wrestles me to the floor to prove his manhood (and I let him); the one who is ready to graduate from high school and take on the world? So much a man he is, but with a nation lurking in the shadows, hungry to pounce on him and devour his body as a brave witness, a martyr for . . . for what new snake oil? I want to say to that bush burning (and still not consumed); the Bush fiery with an unquenchable, fierce anger directed at Saddam's sandcastles in the desert, "You can't have my son; this dusky-shaped jewel of masculinity"—so much of him is his own, so much of him is mine—and this homoousios that is us seems only vaguely formed and molded by the canon. But still I want to speak back to the bush burning. I want to say we will not fold under the warped rhetoric of your evangelistic, apocalyptic, shot-through-the-whole-with-hyped-up-male-dominated, language. And I am hoping that some of US New Testament scholars will have the balls

to use our canon in such a way that it turns inside out, quenches those flame-fed masculinities, and gives birth to a new generation of word-wrestling readers.