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CHAPTER 2

*Early Christian Contempt for the Flesh and the Woman
Who Loved Too Much in the Gospel of Luke*

Mark I. Wallace

AT ITS ORIGINS, Christianity was deeply troubled about the role of the body and sexual expression in spiritual life ("It is well for a man not to touch a woman," 1 Cor. 7:1). Today, however, many Christians are moving into a joyous space where sexual pleasure and intimacy are valued as a primary site of God's presence in human community.¹ This emergence into what I would call carnal spirituality is nourished by the endearing scriptural narratives of sexual and nonsexual touching that challenge the soul-deadening disregard for bodily pleasure in some of the central teachings of ancient Christianity. The biblical celebration of erotic pleasure reaches a crescendo in the Song of Solomon ("Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine . . . and your kisses like the best wine," 7:8-9 RSV) and continues with canonical stories about Jesus' scandalously fleshly, transgressive acts of sexually nuanced touching and being touched. The exegesis of one of these ancient stories in

the New Testament around the theme of erotic hospitality is the focal point of this essay.

After a brief introduction to early Christian attitudes toward bodily desire, my focus falls on the "sinful woman"—or better, the "woman who loved too much"—in Luke 7:36-50 who lovingly massages, wets, and kisses Jesus' feet, perhaps preparing them for his burial. This unnamed woman wets Jesus' feet with her tears, rubs them with her hair, kisses them with her mouth, and anoints them with a sweet-smelling lotion. Noting the importance of this story for biblical erotics, I focus on how Jesus embraces the scandal this robustly sensual encounter generates ("from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet," 7:45) in order to articulate his message of welcoming the body as central to his mission. Next, I compare this Lukan story of deep touching with the healing intimacies between Ruth and Boaz, a widowed Gentile and her Hebrew kinsman in the book of Ruth, and Sethe and Paul D, two former slaves in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The ancient practice of arranged marriage, along with the modern slave trade, generally trafficked in flesh as a market commodity; nevertheless, against the greatest of odds, Ruth and Boaz, on the one hand, and Sethe and Paul D, on the other, develop their own rituals of erotic play and healing. The enfleshed sensuality of biblical and Morrisonian touching celebrates, welcomes, and heals flesh as sacred gift. Through the Lukan woman's and Jesus' passion for intimacy, and echoing the book of Ruth and *Beloved*, I conclude with the outlines of a biblically inflected "haptology" (Gk., *haptos*)—a theology of touching—with the potential to heal our culture of its abuse of one another's flesh and to teach us to love our own and others' innermost desires for pleasure, intimacy, friendship, and love.

WAR AGAINST THE FLESH

Much of early Christianity is a sustained polemic against bodily instincts, sexual desire, and even the institution of marriage itself. The three loci for these arguments are (1) Jesus' valorization of voluntary, self-imposed celibacy in Matthew 19:12 ("For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can"); (2) Jesus' proposal in Matthew 22:30 that married couples, postmortem, will be angel-like, single people again ("For in the resurrection [spouses] neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven"); and (3) Paul's ascetic ideal in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 that marriage, while not a model state for Christians, is sometimes

necessary as a prophylactic to fend off uncontrollable lust ("To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion").

Privileging celibacy allowed early Christians to position themselves as religiously superior to their "fleshly" cousins in the Jewish world of the first and second centuries C.E. As a celibate who put under control his sexual desires, Paul distinguished between the Gentile Christian "children of the promise," who are the true heirs of God's covenant with Israel, and the Jewish "children of the flesh," whose covenant with God, while not abrogated, is now expanded to include Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus (Rom. 9:1-13). Paul and his patristic successors became masters of allegorical biblical hermeneutics in which the "living spirit" of the Christian gospel supersedes the "dead letter" of Jewish law. Sexual renunciation and spiritual circumcision became tangible signs of this new figurative reading of Torah. In the writings of Paul and other early church leaders, the old observance of the law relied on outward, physical signs of obedience to Torah (especially having children and being circumcised), whereas the new fidelity to Christ takes leave of the body in favor of the inner faith of the believer. Procreation and circumcision were basic to Jewish observance based on the Genesis commands to "be fruitful and multiply" (1:22) and "Every male among you shall be circumcised" (17:10). These corporeal covenants are spiritualized and set aside by Paul in favor of his proposal that "he who marries his fiancée does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do better" (1 Cor. 7:38) and his notion that "true circumcision" is not "external and physical" but "a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal" (Rom. 3:28-29). True covenantal life with God is a spiritual exercise of the heart, not a product or a mark of the flesh. Inward fidelity to Jesus and the gospel now supplants outward duty to Torah.

Paul's move away from the outward activities of procreative sex and circumcision to the inner life of the Spirit marked a sea change in the evolution of early Christianity from its Jewish origins.² The physical reality of Israel and the sexualized, circumcised Jewish body were now supplanted by the "new Israel" of the church and the holy Christian body, which had taken leave of the flesh (read: sexuality, procreation, and circumcision) in order to realize the ideal of pure, sexless, unmarried life in the Spirit. Virginal purity was now the insignia of genuine Christianity—a cultural oddity in antiquity that opened up an unbridgeable rift between early Christianity and formative Judaism: "in spite of the enormous variations within both Christianities and rabbinic Judaism, the near-universal privileging of virginity, even for

Christian thinkers who valorize marriage, produces an irreducible difference between that [Christian] formation and rabbinic Judaism, for which sexuality and procreation are understood as acts of ultimate religious significance and for which virginity is highly problematic, as Christian writers in antiquity correctly emphasized."³

Over and against formative Judaism, the New Testament's deprecation of the body and sexual desire rendered many subsequent early Christian leaders "athletes of God," in historian of antiquity Peter Brown's phrase, who made war against their flesh in order to cultivate their spiritual natures.⁴ Origen, the third-century Christian allegorical theologian, literally interpreted Jesus' blessing regarding those who "[make] themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:12) and at age twenty castrated himself. As a virgin for Christ no longer dominated by his sexual and physical drives, Origen graphically appropriated Jesus' counsel about celibacy and became a perfect vessel for the display of the Spirit.⁵ Origen's celibate athleticism is further underscored by the extracanonical fifth-century text, Pseudo-Titus, which offers a sustained exhortation to celibacy and monastic rigor as a badge of purity and holiness.⁶ The author calls on young men to be like the mythological phoenix, a paradigm of virginal solitude, and achieve holiness by avoiding female temptation:

Above all the ascetic should avoid women on that account and see to it that he does (worthily) the duty entrusted to him by God. . . . O man, who understands nothing at all of the fruits of righteousness, why has the Lord made the divine phoenix and not given it a little wife, but allowed it to remain in loneliness? Manifestly only on purpose to show the standing of virginity, i.e., that young men, remote from intercourse with women, should remain holy.⁷

In the Christian West, Augustine appears most responsible for early Christian antagonism toward sex and the body. Extending Paul's dictum that "what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh" (Gal. 5:17), Augustine maintains that human beings are ruled by carnal desire (concupiscence) as a result of Adam's fall from grace in the garden of Eden. All people are now "in Adam," as it were, since Adam's sin is transferred to his offspring—the human race—through semen, what Augustine calls the "seminal substance from which we were to be propagated."⁸ As historian of early Christianity Elaine Pagels puts

it, "That semen itself, Augustine argues, already 'shackled by the bond of death,' transmits the damage incurred by sin. Hence, Augustine concludes, every human being ever conceived through semen already is born contaminated with sin."⁹ In their fleshly bodies, seminally generated infants are tainted with "original sin" communicated to them through their biological parents' sexual intercourse. To put this point bluntly, the fetus is damned at the moment of conception—even before birth—because it is contaminated by Adam's primordial transgression through the transmission of semen during the conjugal act. Augustine further asserts that physical weakness, bodily suffering, and sexual desire (*libido*) itself are signs that the corporeal, material world is under God's judgment. "Ever since Eden, however, spontaneous sexual desire is, Augustine contends, the clearest evidence of the effect of original sin."¹⁰ Thus, without the infusion of supernatural grace, all of creation—as depraved and corrupted—is no longer amenable to the influence of God's love and power. Augustine's division between spirit and sex, religion and desire, God and the body is an ugly splitting that survives in our own time—an era, often in the name of religion, marked by deep anxiety about and hostility toward human sexuality, the body, and the natural world in general.

Jesus' elevation of celibacy, Paul's proscriptions against marriage, and Augustine's linkage between original sin and erotic desire continue to cast a long shadow over the church's teachings about sexuality. Many scholars today regard Paul's and Augustine's sexual theologies as bedrock to contemporary Christians' negative attitudes toward sex and the body:

Paul and Augustine are two theologians who stand at the headwaters of the Christian religion. They have bequeathed to Christianity an anti-sexual legacy that lingers to this day. Or to express the matter colloquially, traditional Christianity had deliberately chosen to take a dim view of sex. Take, by way of example, the church's veneration of celibacy (the state of having no sex by having no spouse). With its commitment to the concept of the divided self and with its veneration of Saint Paul, who wished that all people were unmarried like him (1 Cor 7:7), the church over the centuries has applauded celibacy. Prior to Christianity's emergence, perpetual celibacy was practiced in neither the Gentile nor Jewish worlds (an exception was the Essene community at Qumran). To be unmarried and childless was—especially for Jews—a disgrace. But Christianity introduced a new way of viewing perpetual celibacy.¹¹

It is against the backdrop of this sort of sexless spirituality in early Christianity—an ideal that divided Christianity from Judaism in antiquity—that the erotic hospitality of Luke’s Jesus is sketched. Alongside the early church’s “majority report” concerning noncorporeal Christian existence, I analyze Luke’s “minority report” of Jesus’ and the anonymous woman’s transgressive and erotically charged interactions as a counterpoint to the mainstream ideal.

THE UNNAMED WOMAN AND EROTIC CARE OF BODIES

The sexual body is a privileged site of divine encounter in the Lukan story of the unnamed woman who washes Jesus’ feet. At Simon the Pharisee’s dinner party, an anonymous woman enters Simon’s home and lovingly wets Jesus’ feet with her tears and hair. Uninvited, she approaches Jesus from behind, lets down her hair and begins to wash and anoint his feet with a jar of perfume, her hair, and her many tears. Throughout this initial encounter, significantly, Jesus does not speak. Simon wonders to himself how Jesus, claiming to be a prophet, could allow this sort of woman, perhaps a prostitute, to touch him. As if reading Simon’s thoughts, Jesus tells a parable about two debtors and how the one who owes the most, once forgiven his debts, now loves the most. Simon understands the meaning of the parable, and Jesus, in one of his classic man-bites-dog reversals of the social order, publicly rebukes Simon for not fully welcoming him to his home and then praises the kissing woman for her “great love” (7:47). Like many of Jesus’ narratives, the story inverts established expectations. Who is the real sinner, the true lover, the authentic follower of Jesus in this account: Simon, the established religious leader, or the notoriously sinful woman? At the end, Jesus forgives the woman her sins and offers her God’s peace, which provokes much questioning and likely criticism among Simon’s dinner guests.

As with many biblical narratives, the scandal and irony of this story is lost to many of us today. Like other scriptural texts, this story has been domesticated by some commentators’ appeal to the putative religious message of divine forgiveness at the story’s end and a general disregard of the shock and discomfort the story was intended to generate among its hearers and readers.¹² Using a feminist hermeneutic, I argue that the story is an exercise in erotic performance art that intends to liberate readers into a new relationship with Christ that is body- and pleasure-affirming. I examine how Luke 7:36-50 functions as a model of female agency that subversively challenges certain structures of oppression in antiquity. From this perspective, the text can be read as valorizing a particular transgressive

practice (the unnamed woman's sexualized foot washing) in order to realize emancipatory possibilities for identity formation against the social and religious distortions of its time.

To begin to make this case, let me offer here a retelling of the story in contemporary terms in order to imagine how the story might speak afresh to the present-day reader.

A Disturbing Incident at Local Minister's Home

Something astonishing took place last week in the home of the Reverend and Mrs. J. Josiah Alexander IV of First Presbyterian Church of Smithtown. As is their custom, the Alexanders invited this year's theologian-in-residence, the Reverend Ian Cameron, to a formal lunch after the morning worship service. A local unemployed woman, reportedly charged this past summer with solicitation, gained access to the house and approached Rev. Cameron just as the Alexanders and guests were sitting down for supper. Appearing emotionally unstable and crying profusely, the woman (her name was not disclosed) unloosened her long hair and proceeded to take off Rev. Cameron's socks and shoes. She then wet his feet with her tears, rubbed them with her hair, and kissed them incessantly, or so it appeared. The woman was wearing a vial of perfume, or similar substance, around her neck that she also used in her attentions to Rev. Cameron's feet. To everyone's dismay, Rev. Cameron allowed these theatrics to continue for quite a while, and then, shockingly, rebuked Rev. Alexander (and presumably Mrs. Alexander) for not properly welcoming him to their home, and contrasting them unfavorably to this overly wrought woman.

"I entered your home," he said, "and you did not shake my hand or offer me a hug or kiss, whereas this woman placed my tired feet in her own hands and has not ceased to kiss me since I sat down. You did not take my coat, buy she took my socks and shoes and thoughtfully put them aside for me. You did not offer me a drink, but she continues to massage my feet, refreshing my body and spirit and welcoming me to your home in the way you should have done. See this woman? She loves me, but what about you?"

Understandably, the Alexanders and guests were stunned into silence by Rev. Cameron's reprimand, not expecting a respected member of the clergy to sanction the behavior of this uninvited intruder. Equally shocking, Rev. Cameron concluded the woman's visit by telling her that God had forgiven her sins—a rather remarkable claim for a woman who has a reputation as a person of ill repute. The event has generated considerable controversy in Smithtown, where members of the Mayflower-descended and Princeton-educated Alexander family have been respected pillars of the community for generations. Younger residents are referring to the scene at the Alexander home as a "happening," while Rev. Alexander and elders at First Presbyterian are considering initiating a formal ecclesiastical review of Rev. Cameron's behavior during the incident.

With this contemporary retelling as a backdrop, I read the Lukan story as a countertestimony to mainstream Christian anxiety about the body and sexuality. In this vein, I see two crucial issues: the question of the woman's identity as an urban sinner, and the quality of her amorous encounter with Jesus as the basis of God's forgiveness and peace in her life.

Who is the anonymous woman? Much has been written about the phrase in verse 37 that the unnamed woman was "of the city, a sinner," when she learned about Jesus' presence in Simon the Pharisee's house and came to minister to him. It is possible, but by no means certain, that the woman was a prostitute. Feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes that the appellation "sinner" was reserved in antiquity for criminals or those persons who worked in disreputable jobs such as tax collectors, servants, domestics, swineherds, tanners, prostitutes, and so on. Many of these professions were not available to women (though certain service jobs and prostitution were options for women). As well, female prostitutes, as has been the case historically, lived in brothels in urban areas in the first century. Circumstantially, it is possible that this "woman of the city, a sinner" was a prostitute, but to make this claim with any certitude is a mistake.¹³

While this woman in Luke may or may not have been a prostitute, it is also a mistake to identify her with Mary Magdalene who, erroneously, was often read as a prostitute herself in the exegetical history of this narrative. The story of how Mary Magdalene—a steadfast follower of Jesus who bankrolled his early preaching tours (Luke 8:1-3) and was the first eyewitness to the resurrection (John 20:11-18)—became a prostitute has been carefully analyzed by exegetes.¹⁴ In part, the conflation of the anonymous woman in Luke and Mary of Magdala—the "harlot-saint" of early Christian mythology—likely stems from the confusing number of Marys within the New Testament (e.g., Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Bethany, to name just three of the most prominent) that led to a composite "Marian" picture.¹⁵

Confusion about the woman's identity in the Lukan story is further overdetermined by another layer of misunderstanding in the reception history of this text—namely, the harmonizing of this account with the similar story of the woman who anoints Jesus' head at Bethany in the other Gospels. At first glance, Luke 7:36-50 bears a number of formal similarities with Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, and John 12:1-8. Some commentators think a "single gospel memory" animates each account, but it is especially clear in Luke's narrative that a different message is being advanced.¹⁶ On the one hand, in all four accounts, a woman appears with Jesus in a home environment and

uses a costly jar of ointment on his body, perhaps in gesture of anointment. In each case, this act provokes a negative reaction by onlookers that is complemented by Jesus' defense of the woman. In many regards, however, the differences between the four narratives are more striking than the similarities. Matthew and Mark locate the woman in the house of Simon the leper, and John locates her in the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Luke puts the woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee. In the non-Lukan accounts, the disciples complain that the ointment should not have been used on Jesus but sold with the proceeds given to the poor. As well, the Matthean and Markan accounts place the anointing on Jesus' head, not his feet, explicitly associating the anointing with preparing Jesus' body for burial (as does John). On the other hand, however, all three of these versions make no mention of what is central to the story's scandal in Luke's version: the woman's excessive love of Jesus symbolized by her tears and kissing of his feet, and Jesus' forgiveness of the woman's sins.

What is refreshingly distinctive about Luke's story is how its sexually nuanced details foreground the loved and nurtured body as central to Jesus' message of healing and forgiveness. Jesus and the woman engage one another's flesh in tenderness and affection. It is precisely because they perform this, as it were, erotic theatre of the senses that God's power is realized—namely, the woman's sins are forgiven. Note that the relationship between the woman and Jesus is one of mutuality and reciprocity. She approaches him and reaches for his feet, and he welcomes her touch, her tears, her kisses. The "Son of God" enjoys being fondled by this woman and, in turn, he offers her God's forgiveness and peace. God's hospitality is actualized by the woman's deep welcoming of Jesus' needy body: "the *mutual* exchange of hospitality between Jesus and the woman is characteristic of the divine visitation."¹⁷

The power of God's love made manifest in this excessive display of affection is made clear in Simon's initial dismay with Jesus' enjoyment of the woman's stroking of his body. "If this man were a prophet," he says to himself, "he would know what sort of woman is touching him." The buried assumption in Simon's logic is that a true prophet would not allow such a boundary transgression by a woman of such bad reputation. Luke provocatively reverses Simon's logic, a point no reader could miss: it is precisely because this woman is engaging in publicly forbidden behavior and Jesus knows exactly who she is that his identity as a prophet is confirmed. Jesus' divine prophethood is established on the basis of what society regards as sexually polluting behavior, which Jesus now shows to be a privileged site of divine presence and power. At a meal with a Pharisee, where women were likely

not welcomed, and in a first-century culture where women were viewed as property or worse, the woman shreds the social order with her bold physicality. As François Bovon notes, "The woman comes into the midst of a dinner reserved for men, carries a bottle of perfume, unlooses her hair (a particularly erotic action for Jewish perceptions), repeatedly kisses Jesus' feet, and finally in the presence of all the guests does something that belongs in the realm of intimate behavior or even of perverse practices: she anoints his feet."¹⁸ The woman enters a male space with brio and courage, presumably unfastens and lets down her hair, which is long enough to be used as a makeshift towel, and commences a prolonged wiping, kissing, and anointing of Jesus' feet.

Consider the parallelism between her actions in verse 38 and Jesus' endorsement of the same in verses 44-46. Luke writes that the woman wet Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with perfume (7:38). Jesus then replies to Simon that she has wet his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them (continually, he adds), and anointed his feet with perfume (7:44-46). The four verbs employed to describe these actions (*brecho*, Gk., to wet; *ekmasso*, to wipe; *kataphileo*, to kiss; *aleipho*, to anoint) and the actions themselves as recounted by Jesus are the same. The parallelism drives home the text's central theme: Jesus' and the woman's amorous performance art signals that excessive desire for the well-being of another's flesh is the grounds for salvation and forgiveness in God's new order of being. "The kingdom of God is among you," says Jesus in Luke 17:21. God's new order is not "out there" waiting to arrive; it is "here and now" as modeled in this parable of erotic intimacy.

Commentators on Luke are often uncomfortable with the unabashed sensuality in the passage. Far from the text being an exercise in biblical *ars erotica*, traditional readers hyped the "sinful" adjective for the woman, assumed she was a prostitute, interpreted her weeping as repentance, and basically saw her as immodest and shameful. As feminist exegete Teresa Hornsby writes, the woman in Luke 7 was not read as a strong, independent agent of her own spiritual and carnal desires for Jesus but as a sexually suspect, immoral penitent whom Jesus deigns to forgive.

The image of a woman being so lavishly physical with no apparent fear of reprisal and without any shame associated with her act made me glad . . . because I could finally identify with a character in the biblical text, a character who in my initial reading acts independently in blending together the movements of her body with an expression for raw emotion. . . . But when I looked at the interpretation of Luke's passage, I could not find

the woman I had read. I was disappointed to discover that this figure has been used since the earliest interpretations as a symbol of every woman's lewdness, as a symbol of a woman's physicality that stands over and against what is "good" and "proper." With very few exceptions, especially in any work prior to the mid-1980s, scholars either call her a prostitute or they claim that the label the narrator gives her of "sinner" (*hamartolos*) surely indicates that the anointing woman is a carnal transgressor; her effusive weeping, they write, must be indicative of sexual, shame-inspired remorse and repentance; her ointment must have come from her prostitute's tool-box; and the fact that she is kissing a strange man can only mean that she is sexually immoral.¹⁹

Hornsby is correct. In the history of mainstream biblical theology, the woman is not a model of bold love but an object lesson of immorality. Earlier English translations of the Bible use various deprecating subtitles in order to define the text in this way: The New American Bible titles Luke 7:36-50 "The Pardon of a Sinful Woman," while the Revised Standard Version calls it "The Woman Who Was a Sinner."²⁰ These editorial subtitles miss the point of the pericope. The story is not about the woman's sinfulness but about her great love for Jesus; it is not about how bad she was, or how promiscuous she now supposedly is, but about how her lavish care of Jesus' flesh overflows "proper" boundaries and realizes God's love; it is not about shameful sexual transgression but about Jesus' and the woman's shameless license to pleasure and heal the body. The passage, then, would be better subtitled as "The Woman Who Loved Too Much," "The Woman Who Could Not Stop Kissing the Lord," or "The Woman Who Loved Jesus with Complete Abandon." In her lavishly erotic relationship with Jesus, the unnamed woman pushes the boundaries of social convention by massaging Jesus' feet with her hair and bodily fluids, leading to her forgiveness and opening to readers then and today new possibilities for sexually charged spiritual and bodily relations.

JESUS' AND BOAZ'S FEET

A cursory reading of the Lukan focus on Jesus' feet reminds readers today, as it has throughout Christian history, of the story of Ruth and Boaz. The book of Ruth is a postexilic Hebrew love story that celebrates the inclusion of outsiders within the changing demography of Israel in the third or fourth century B.C.E. Ruth, a Moabite, lives with her mother-in-law, Naomi, outside of Israel when both Ruth's husband and Naomi's husband die. In mourning, Ruth and Naomi decide to relocate to Bethlehem, Naomi's family

home, where Ruth meets a member of her extended family, an older man named Boaz. Naomi tells Ruth to wash and perfume herself and after Boaz has had a meal to go and lie down, unannounced, in Boaz's bed, at his feet, "So [Ruth] went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down" (Ruth 3:6-7). Ruth climbs into bed with Boaz, uncovers his "feet" (i.e., his genitals) and when he awakens at midnight, she asks him to "spread your cloak over your servant [i.e., have sexual relations], for you are next-of-kin" (Ruth 3:9). Boaz agrees and says he will marry her. To avoid embarrassment, Ruth leaves his bed early the next morning before anyone learns of their encounter the night before. Boaz soon thereafter marries Ruth, and they subsequently have a son named Obed.

Traditional commentaries regard the message of the story to be that Ruth, a non-Jewish foreigner, preserved the family line through which King David emerged by marrying a Hebrew man, Boaz: "The women of the neighborhood gave him [Ruth's son] a name . . . Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David" (Ruth 4:17).²¹ On this telling, the importance of Ruth is essentially patriarchal and political: she is a placeholder in the Davidic line that preserves the traditional monarchy. In this vein, she is the legal property of whoever becomes her husband, as Boaz makes clear to Ruth's nearest kinsman regarding the twin purchase of a field owned by Naomi and the person of Ruth: "The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite" (Ruth 4:5). While the bare facts of this reading are accurate, it misses another line of emphasis in the story—namely, that Ruth, like the Lukan woman, is a highly capable and bold agent of her own desires who courageously transgresses social boundaries in order to welcome the body of her lover. She does not define herself as a passive object to be bought and sold; rather, she is an active agent of her desires and hopes.²²

Consider one example that illustrates the agency and resourcefulness of both women. While the anonymous woman uses what she has at hand—her hair—to care for Jesus' body, so also does Ruth rely on her own assets—in this case, her rhetorical skills—to claim Boaz as her kinsman, even though she had a nearer kinsman (unnamed in the story) who should have been her more likely partner. Like the Lukan woman who follows through on her desires for Jesus, Ruth prefers Boaz and goes after him, not her closer cousin. In both cases, eros's arrow follows its own logic.

The role Boaz's feet play in the account further illuminates the narrative artistry at work in the Lukan story. Readers of Ruth have long understood Ruth's action of uncovering Boaz's feet as another way of speaking about sex. With the exception of the Song of Solomon, in general, the Bible does not use explicit language to describe sexual activity or genitalia but relies instead on pointed, conventional euphemisms to communicate these ideas (e.g., "loins" or "feet" for genitalia, "nakedness" or "knowing" for sexual union).²³ In light of these stylistic devices, new vistas of meaning are opened in Luke 7 when this narrative is read against the backdrop of the book of Ruth. As Hornsby writes,

Luke's heightened attention to the feet of Jesus may also suggest to readers various sexual images. That "feet" is a euphemism for male genitals not only in Hebrew texts but also in the Septuagint as well as other Hellenistic and Greco-Roman literature has been convincingly argued. Chapter 3 of the book of Ruth, a plausible intertext to Luke's pericope, offers one of the strongest examples of the euphemism. . . . I am not arguing that Luke presents the anointing woman as attending to Jesus' genitals; I am merely suggesting that to any reader, first century or present day, familiar with the book of Ruth, Luke's attention to a woman at a man's feet sexually nuances a narrative that portrays a woman in an active role.²⁴

Ruth's story and Luke's text can be read as tender portraits of warm-hearted haptology. Beyond the taboos and prohibitions of their respective cultures, both narratives are about hands touching "feet," arousing the appreciation of the men who are the partners in their erotic adventures, and climaxing in enriched experiences of God's presence and power (i.e., the preservation of the Davidic line in Ruth, and the forgiveness of the woman's sins in Luke). Just as Luke's unnamed woman ceaselessly kisses Jesus' feet and makes real possibilities of carnal intimacy that shatters the prohibitions concerning public space and public familiarity in antiquity, so also Ruth may be seen as following her heart's yearnings and actively shaping her relationship with Boaz, shattering postexilic Israel's definition of women as chattel.

TONI MORRISON'S GOSPEL OF FLESH

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, published in 1987, is a gripping fictional retelling of the true story of the infanticide of a little girl by her grief-stricken mother in 1850. Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, is a runaway slave who is almost recaptured, along with her children, at a time when escaped slaves could be

hunted like animals across state lines and taken into custody by their masters or bounty hunters. Sethe kills one of her daughters, the “crawling-already? girl” Beloved—so the title of the novel—in a frantic attempt to prevent her from being returned to slavery by her nemesis, a man referred to as Schoolteacher. In part, the novel is a series of flashbacks to the antebellum and Civil War years in which Sethe, now with her other daughter, Denver, is literally haunted by the unspeakable memories of Beloved’s death and related events at the Sweet Home plantation where she was housed. Sethe’s good friend from the Sweet Home years, Paul D, comes to live with her, Denver, and Beloved, the half-woman, half-child ghost of the infant Sethe had killed earlier. Sethe remembers how Schoolteacher’s plantation boys assaulted her at Sweet Home, stole her breast milk, and cut open her back with beatings. Paul D recalls life on the chain gang and the humiliation of wearing a horse’s bit in his mouth, contorting his face into a painful grimace.

Beloved tells a story of indescribable physical suffering, on the one hand, and of bodies being healed through hair combing, back touching, breast feeding, foot rubbing, and hand holding, on the other. Readers encounter bodies that are broken beyond repair and souls crushed without mercy or remorse. Healing seems impossible, but Morrison uses religion—a certain kind of African-derived, body-loving, nature-based religion—as the medicine the slaves and ex-slaves in the novel use to heal themselves. In particular, she profiles Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law and itinerant evangelist, whose message, “which transforms the Christian message of self-abnegation and deliverance after death, is meant to heal the broken and suffering bodies of those who endured slavery.”²⁵ Nine years after Baby Suggs’s death, Sethe remembers her sermons and dancing in the Clearing, an open space deep in the woods outside Cincinnati where slaves and fugitives would gather to hear Baby Suggs, sitting on a large rock in the trees, preach her new gospel of flesh:

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* . . . This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you.”²⁶

Sethe recalls Baby Suggs's healing services as "fixing ceremonies" that enable her to recover—somewhat—from the physical and psychological wounds suffered under slavery and its aftermath. Sethe's broken recovery sets the stage for readers today to mend from the toxic effects caused by the transatlantic slave system in its time and other systems of oppression in our own time. Baby Suggs's sermons in the Clearing allow present-day readers to regard the whole novel itself as an extended fixing ceremony—"a prayer," as literary critic Barbara Christian writes, "a ritual grounded in active remembering which might result, first of all, in our understanding why it is that so many of us are wounded, fragmented, and in a state of longing. Then, perhaps, we might move beyond that fracturing to those actions that might result in communal healing and in a redesigning of the contemporary world called the 'New World.'"²⁷ This sort of "spiritual" reading of *Beloved*—but spiritual in the sense of world affirming, not world denying—is a counterperformance that staves off the debilitating effects of pathological, anticorporeal religion. In their worst moments, Christianity and its antebellum henchmen despise the flesh, but Baby Suggs teaches us to love our flesh. They tell us to hate our bodies, but she tells us to raise up and kiss our bodies and tenderly touch our bodies and others' bodies as well. Baby Suggs's gospel of flesh is a fixing ceremony that grounds readers' desires to perform rituals of healing and renewal in the face of institutional systems, including the Christian church, that inculcate disgust and derision toward this beautifully enfleshed world, God's gift to all of us and to ourselves.

In the novel's chronology, Sethe has another healing encounter with Paul D around the time of Baby Suggs's ministry in the Clearing. She tells Paul D the chilling story of the Sweet Home assault when the plantation boys extracted Sethe's breast milk and then whipped her after she complained to Mrs. Garner, mute and powerless, the proprietress of Sweet Home (so named, horrifically and ironically). She says "Schoolteacher made one [of the boys] open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."²⁸ Sethe says this as she is bending over a hot stove, at which point Paul D reaches

[b]ehind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches. Raising his fingers to the hooks of her dress, he knew without seeing them or hearing any sigh that the tears were coming fast. And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture

her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, "Aw, Lord, girl." And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands.²⁹

Sethe and Paul D's love story is a sensual tale of renewal and pleasure that counterbalances the scenes of unbearable cruelty in the novel. Paul D's hands are an artist's painting a work of beauty over a canvas of flesh crying out for life and deliverance. Sethe's breasts have come home, nestled in the hollows of Paul D's hands, hands that show her that the care of her breasts, at last, are in someone else's hands, and breasts that show him the delight and wonder of intimacy with a woman of fortitude and passion. When Paul D thinks but cannot say, "Aw, Lord, girl," he and Sethe are making a nest for God to inhabit, a beautiful place for the Spirit to indwell, a setting where the Lord—"Aw, Lord, girl"—is present and alive and beating in the rhythm of the two hearts that are now one, the two bodies that are now one flesh. Erotically charged, sexually inflected, this scene, like the scene of Baby Suggs in the Clearing, offers readers a fixing ceremony, a gospel of flesh, which they can enter into for their own restoration and repair.

BIBLICAL HAPTOLOGY FOR OUR TIME

The scandal of Luke's narrative of the woman who loved too much is that a certain type of woman had the temerity to violate sacrosanct boundaries of appropriate public conduct by touching (*haptos*) and kissing (*kataphileo*) Jesus. The thrust of the story is revealed in Simon's comment *sotto voce* that if Jesus were a prophet, he would know what sort of woman this is and, by implication, not allow her to touch him. However, Jesus not only permits the woman's touches and kisses, he relishes in them; indeed, he luxuriates in them to the point of upbraiding and, likely, humiliating Simon and his guests by honoring the woman as a lover—his lover?—a woman who shows to everyone what real hospitality, even affection, is. Quiet at first as she wets and wipes his feet with her tears and hair, Jesus eventually speaks and offers to forgive the woman her sins and offers her God's peace. Wetting, wiping, kissing, anointing, touching—this "sinful" woman from the city, like Ruth and Sethe, has presumably suffered greatly and is now transforming her suffering by seeking carnal joy in her beloved. The Lukan woman, Ruth, and Sethe self-actualize by seeking pleasure and healing in the face of large-scale structures of social and political subjugation. In these transgressive performances

of desire and love, God becomes real and is made present to the actors and their readers alike.

Nietzsche lamented that Christianity's greatest sin is to despise life, drive underground one's innermost drives and passions, and teach contempt for the body.³⁰ But in the cracks and along the margins of Christianity's erstwhile ambivalence and sometimes hostility toward sensual pleasure there emerges many extraordinary celebrations of erotic delight and embodied existence in Scripture and elsewhere. Christianity will always be in travail with itself, but might it be possible one day that the gospel of flesh would trump the Christian ideal of sexual renunciation? Biblical stories and modern fiction alike offer an antidote to so much *contemptus corpus* nonsense in the annals of official Christian teaching. The logic and scandal of Christian faith has always been an exercise in the coincidence of opposites (i.e., divinity and humanity are one). This essay calls Christians to recover this ancient incarnational wisdom and renew the unity of spirit and flesh, the sacred and the body, God and humankind so that physical, erotic, sexual life can become a privileged site of divine power and love once again.

Further Recommended Reading

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