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The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis[1]

Elizabeth A. Clark

"Let us kiss him whose embrace is chastity. Let us have intercourse (*copulemur*) with him with whom marriage is virginity"[2]: thus Paulinus of Nola, a late-ancient aristocratic bishop and ascetic practitioner, exhorts his friend Severus to share in a sexless, but nonetheless sexually construed, marriage with Jesus.[3]

Paulinus's exhortation should not be summarily dismissed as an egregious example of metaphor run riot, for paradox and reversal were staples of early Christian rhetoric; metaphor in particular, as Averil Cameron claims, stood "at the heart of Christian language."[4] Yet metaphor is not merely an intratextual linguistic form: the metaphor of the "celibate Bridegroom," I shall argue, performed useful service in the everyday world of early Christians. Depicting Jesus as "Bridegroom/Husband" might suggest softer, warmer associations of divinity than images of Jesus as King in relation to his subjects or Master in relation to his servants. Despite its epistemological incoherence, the metaphor of "celibate Bridegroom" enabled Christians simultaneously to valorize the institution of marriage while lauding (in a titillating manner) sexual continence.[5] Moreover, and equally important, by

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[2]Paulinus of Nola, *ep*. 23.42.

[3]For a detailed study of Paulinus, see Dennis E. Trout, *Paulinus of Nola: Life, Letters, and Poems*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 27 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[4]Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Sather Classical Lectures 55 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 58, cf. 155–156, 179, 181. Paradoxes and reversals: the divine becomes human, the weak become strong. Also see Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982 [1981]), 54–55.

[5]The "erotics" of ancient Christian ascetic piety is well-explored by Virginia Burrus in *The Sex Lives of the Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Elizabeth A. Clark is the John Carlisle Kilgo Professor of religion at Duke University.

styling a commitment to virginity or to celibacy as "marriage," it reinserted Christian ascetics within a familiar domestic economy. Although a young virgin's rejection of earthly nuptials might shock the aristocratic society of the late Roman Empire, she could nonetheless be imagined as *someone's* wife.[6]

Despite its utility, the metaphor nonetheless raised perplexing problems in its intersection with other exegetical, theological, and pastoral discussions of the era. Was Jesus to be represented as the sensual lover of the Song of Songs,[7] or as the ascetic prophet who proclaims "no marrying or giving in marriage in Heaven" (Matt. 22:30; Luke 20:35)—or both? What might be implied about resurrected bodies—including that of Jesus—if Christians were to be "married" to him in the hereafter? Should bishops and spiritual advisers, consoling bereaved widows, encourage them to hope for a reunion in the afterlife with their deceased husbands if they were, or were to be, "married to Jesus"—bigamy presumably being no more sanctioned in heaven than on earth? Such theological and pastoral problems, however, did not hinder the metaphor's popularity, as its long life in later Christian discourse suggests. The "work" performed by this marital metaphor provides a revealing glimpse into the precariousness of early Christian meaning production and its relation to forms of everyday life. First, however, some reflection on how metaphors function.

I. Metaphor Theory

To "bear across," "to transfer"—*metaphorein* in Greek, *translatio* in Latin—suggests the root meaning of the word "metaphor." Yet mere etymology does not explain how a transfer of meaning is accomplished. Ancient and modern theories of metaphor lend varying degrees of assistance.

Ancient theories of metaphor as elaborated by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian only partially illumine the problem this essay addresses, since they assume that metaphor betokens a "likeness" or "resemblance" that clarifies or enhances meaning, lending a "brilliant patina." Metaphors, on this reading, should not sound too "foreign" or "far-fetched."[8] If they do not

[6]For some reflections on this theme, see Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2:1 (Spring 1986): esp. 86–88; and David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), chap. 1, esp. 52–54. The formal ceremony in which virgins were veiled/dedicated could itself be compared to ceremonies of betrothal or marriage. Examples of young women's resistance to marriage abound in the ascetic and hagiographical literature of the period, of which the *Life of Melania the Younger* may stand as one example.

[7]For a recent discussion of the nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs, see J. Christopher King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), chap. 2.

[8]Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.2.8–9 (1405a); 3.2.12 (1405a); 3.10.4 (1410b); Aristotle, *Poetics* 22.17 (1459a); Cicero, *De oratore* 3.38.155–156–39.157.

clarify or ornament, they seem "out of place" (*improprium*),[9] appear "ridiculous" (*geloios*),[10] and perhaps even descend into "jibberish" (*barbarismos*).[11]

Metaphor, Cicero posits, stems from the poverty (*inopia*) of language, from an attempt to name that which has no name—but with time, the metaphor born of impoverishment becomes popular in that speakers find it agreeable and entertaining.[12] Metaphors, he counsels, should not appear to have forced their way into discourse "without permission."[13] Since metaphors simultaneously substitute and displace—a word has been put into a position that does not truly belong to it—users should be on guard lest the metaphor seem a usurper.[14] Elaborating Cicero's theory, Patricia Parker describes metaphor as a "*Gastarbeiter*" who "must be as civil as possible, an outsider on his best behaviour."[15] Her image is apt: if metaphors do not perform their work, they will be deemed unwelcome, intruding "guests."

The patristic metaphor of the "celibate Bridegroom" might by these standards seem a failure, an unhelpful *Gastarbeiter* who should be denied entry: aside from its ornamental function, it appears on the surface to obscure rather than to clarify.[16] The pagan commentators mentioned above, I suspect, would likely have considered this metaphor among the far-fetched, inappropriate, and ridiculous, against which they warn. Yet, as Cicero wrote, metaphors are born to fill a need, to supply a lack—and from *this* perspective, "celibate Bridegroom" does its work. The metaphor's

[9]Quintilian, *Instituto oratoria* 8.6.4–6. Speakers and writers should, in any event, take care not to overdo metaphoric speech and writing (8.6.14). Quintilian also popularized the view that metaphor is a shorter form of simile (8.6.8), a view that is now questioned.

[10]Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 3.4 (1406b).

[11]Aristotle, *Poetics* 22.4 (1458a).

[12]Cicero, *De oratore* 3.38.155–156; cf. Cicero, *Orator* 62.211. Cicero compares the use of metaphor to clothes, which were invented from necessity, as a protection for humans, but which became a form of adornment (*De oratore* 3.38.155). Metaphor originally sprang from "lack," but once imported to fill a need, was kept on for entertainment (*delectatio*). Noting that metaphor is the most common figure in the speech of both country folk and sophisticated urbanites, Cicero implies that it is an easily understood trope (*Orator* 24.81–82).

[13]Cicero, *De oratore* 3.41.163, 3.41.165; where there is no real resemblance, metaphor should be avoided (3.40.162).

[14]Cicero, *De oratore* 3.39.157: "*in alieno loco tanquam in suo positum*."

[15]Patricia A. Parker, "The Metaphorical Plot," in *Metaphor: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. David S. Miall (Brighton, U.K.: Harvester, 1982), 134.

[16]Aristotle considers antithesis (seemingly pertinent to the metaphor of the "celibate Bridegroom") a "smart" (*asteios*) form of metaphor, whose conciseness and pungency convey "rapid knowledge" (*Rhetoric* 3.11.9–10 [1412b]; cf. Cicero, *De oratore* 3.38.156). Our metaphor appears to be an oxymoron: "a closely tightened syntactic linking of contradictory terms into a unity which, as a result, acquires a strong contradictive tension" (Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, ed. David E. Orton and R. Dean Anderson, trans. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen, and David E. Orton [Leiden: Brill, 1998; trans. from 2nd German ed., 1973], 385).

conceptual murkiness seems the very means of its utility,[17] rendering helpful assistance in early Christian theological and ecclesiastical life.

To be sure, an incoherence attends all "literal" approaches to metaphor, since the reader or hearer must know how to make the correct association, excluding those that are inappropriate or even absurd. John Searle offers an amusing illustration of the problem: when Romeo says of Juliet, "Juliet is the sun," hearers and readers must rule out that he means "Juliet is for the most part gaseous" or "Juliet is 90 million miles from earth."[18] How "correctly" to restrict the meaning of the comparison, to understand what has been "withdrawn" and what added, is here the issue: "uptake" is important.[19]

Modern commentators on metaphor sharply debate how metaphor functions. Some theorists eschew consideration of context and speaker's intention,[20] while others underscore its necessity.[21] Some accord metaphor an epistemological status as a "cognitive instrument" capable of creativity,[22] of contributing new information,[23] while others claim that metaphor functions only on an emotive level, performing its work by the feelings it induces.[24]

[17]Thus Janet Martin Soskice argues that the very vagueness of metaphor can be useful in apprehending states and relations we partially understand (*Metaphor and Religious Language* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985], 133–134).

[18]John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 95. Note Aristotle's and Cicero's worry (as detailed above) that metaphor can become "laughable" if pressed inappropriately.

[19]A similar problem besets the frequently cited example in philosophers' analyses of metaphor: "Man is a wolf." In common parlance, "wolf" is supposed to convey the image of a dangerous, rapacious animal. But what if wolves turn out to be uncommonly sociable and often kindly to their own (as some students of animal behavior suggest)? Does the metaphor then lose its utility?

[20]For example, Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), critiqued in Soskice, *Metaphor*, 32–38.

[21]So Soskice, *Metaphor*, 22, 36, 44, 136, 149, 151; likewise, Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 77, 80. Elsewhere, Searle states a common way to detect metaphor: "Where the utterance is defective if taken literally, look for an utterance meaning that differs from the sentence meaning." He adds that this approach is very common to "the interpretation of poetry. If I hear a figure on a Grecian urn being addressed as a 'still unravish'd bride of quietness,' I know I had better look for alternative meanings" (John Searle, "Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979], 114). Here, the active "uptake" by the reader/hearer is often stressed as a necessary ingredient in discerning the metaphor's meaning; see Max Black, "More About Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Ortony, 29, 34–35 (This essay originally appeared in *Dialectica* 31:3–4 [December 1977]: 431–457).

[22]Black, "More About Metaphor," 23, 39.

[23]Walker Percy, "Metaphor as Mistake," in Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975), 64–82 (stressing the "discovery" function of metaphor); Max Black, "Metaphor," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s. 55 (1955): 273–294 (stressing the "interaction" [vs. "substitution"] theory of metaphor). For a critique of Black's assumption that each metaphor has two distinct subjects, see Soskice, *Metaphor*, 41–43.

[24]Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), esp. 31, 43–35; W. V. Quine, "A Postscript on Metaphor," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sacks, 160.

Still others, adopting a phenomenological approach, emphasize the "new reality," the "redescription" that metaphor opens up.[25]

One important theory of metaphor, "interanimation," first posited by I. A. Richards and now developed by Janet Martin Soskice,[26] holds (in Soskice's version) that metaphor is "cognitively unique" (that is, that it offers a concept that cannot be expressed in another way), gives "two ideas for one," and takes into account intention, context, and reception.[27] Soskice argues that metaphor draws upon two sets of *associations*, without positing two distinct subjects. "Lively" metaphors enable us to keep on expanding the "associative networks," suggesting "new categories of interpretation," "new entities, states of affairs, and causal relations."[28] Theologian David Hart adds that theological metaphors fuse "distinct aspects of the tradition in one particular locution," gathering "more and more elements of the tradition around it, and sustain[ing] them in a kind of dynamic and changing unity."[29] Our metaphor, I shall suggest, does just that—although by gathering new

[25]Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977; French original, 1975], Study 1, 6–7, 22; sharp critiques of Ricoeur's notion of metaphor can be found in Dominick LaCapra, "Who Rules Metaphor? Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Discourse," in LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 118–144 (this essay originally appeared in *Diacritics* 10:40 [Winter 1980] 15–28); and in Jacques Derrida, "The *Retrait* of Metaphor," *Enclitic* 2:2 (1978): 5–33. For another approach stressing the "new reality" that metaphor opens, see David Tracy, "Metaphor and Religion: The Test Case of Christian Texts," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sacks, esp. 98–99, 104. Tracy goes so far as to claim that the language of parable is "normative" for all later Christianity and should stand at the center of theological studies (104). On metaphor's ability to create new understandings and thus also new realities, also see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 156, 235. The phenomenological explanation is sometimes favored by New Testament scholars in their analyses of Jesus' parables that announce a reversal of existing conditions and human judgments. For discussion of the parables from this perspective, see, for example, Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke (Rev. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963; trans. from 6th German edition of 1962), esp. 142, 147–148; Norman Perrin, *The New Testament, An Introduction: Proclamation and Parenesis, Myth and History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), esp. 293–295.

[26]I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936); Soskice, *Metaphor*, 43–53.

[27]Soskice, *Metaphor*, 44. Metaphor as providing "two ideas for one" is attributed to Samuel Johnson by metaphor theorists. Peter S. Hawkins wittily comments, "The rate of exchange is actually a great deal more generous than that, but the definition nonetheless alerts us to one of the primary qualities of metaphoric speech: one lie yields a multiplicity of truths" ("The Truth of Metaphor: The Fine Art of Lying," *Massachusetts Studies in English* 8 [1982]: 1).

[28]Soskice, *Metaphor*, 50–53, 62. Soskice argues that Max Black and others who subscribe to the notion that every metaphor has two subjects (for example, "Man is a wolf") have no way to explain metaphors in which there is only one "subject," for example, "tattered scruples," "writhing scripts" (43, 50).

[29]David Hart, private communication, 20 April 2001.

realms of theological discourse to itself, it sometimes provoked new conceptual problems.

Jacques Derrida's discussion of metaphor in his essays "White Mythology"[30] and "The *Retrait* of Metaphor"[31] add further points for consideration. After rehearsing his familiar themes that *all* language, including philosophical language, is metaphorical,[32] and that a quest for origins, for "the virginity of a history of beginnings," is futile,[33] Derrida makes two points that are especially suggestive for our case. Metaphor, he posits, produces "surplus-value":[34] something more results from metaphor's "work" than the minimum required to keep ordinary expression going. Such surplus value resonates with the notion of supplementarity (signifying both substitution and accretion) that Derrida developed in *Of Grammatology*:[35] the metaphor "overflows," adds a "supplementary trait"—but also takes away something.[36] Thus metaphor contains an "internal multiplicity" in its double movement of supplementing and withdrawing.[37]

In passing, Derrida encourages scholars to study *how* significations become metaphorical by "being transported out of their own habitat" or disciplinary homes (for example, biology or economics), both spatially and temporally conceived: words have "pasts" that leave their traces on subsequent meaning.[38] Derrida here cites Georges Canguilhem's exploration of the use

[30]Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 209–271. Derrida so describes "white mythology": "metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest" (213; cf. 215).

[31]Derrida, "*Retrait*," 5–33; see n. 25 above for bibliographical information.

[32]Philosophers of various stripes often wish to bracket off their field's discourse from any taint of "metaphor," imagining that by doing so they arrive at "truth" (Derrida, "*Retrait*," 16). One purpose of *White Mythology*, he claims, was to question philosophers' interpretation of metaphor as "a transfer from the sensible to the intelligible" realm (13).

[33]Derrida, "White Mythology," 229. Derrida familiarly concludes that metaphor is itself a metaphorization, a "bottomless overdeterminability" (243). Metaphor is both inescapable and always "carries its death within itself" (271). For a somewhat more accessible deconstructive analysis of metaphor (with special attention to Locke and Kant), see Paul de Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sacks, 11–28.

[34]Derrida, "*Retrait*," 13.

[35]Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976 [1967]), 200, and part 2, chaps. 2, 3.2, and 4, passim.

[36]Derrida, "*Retrait*," 8. Lakoff and Johnson also sound this theme, referring to metaphor as both "highlighting" and "hiding" (*Metaphors*, 10, 139).

[37]Derrida, "*Retrait*," 22. Gayatri Spivak in the "Translator's Preface" to *Of Grammatology* (lxxv) explains what the dismantling process of deconstruction would mean for metaphor: "If a metaphor seems to suppress its implications, we shall catch at that metaphor. We shall follow its adventures through the text and see the text coming undone as a structure of concealment, revealing its self-transgression, its undecidability."

[38]Derrida, "White Mythology," 220. These "habitats" or places of origin he labels "lending" discourses, while the "recipient" realms are categorized as "borrowing"—though Derrida

of metaphor in the life sciences[39]—and his elaboration is suggestive for our endeavor.

The particular example of metaphor that Canguilhem explores is cellular theory. From what arena does the "cell" in "cellular" derive? Not from the "cell" of the monk or that of the prisoner, Canguilhem argues, but from that of the bee making its honeycomb. When the metaphor of a cell in *this* sense is appropriated by scientific theory, an almost unconscious "notion of the cooperative work of which the honeycomb is the product" is assimilated along with the image; "over" the biological theory there "hovers" an unspoken approbation of the mode of bees' activity, the "affective and social values of cooperation and association."[40] Canguilhem's "hovering" associations resonate both with Derrida's "traces" that produce surplus value, and with Soskice's "associative networks": these are the mechanisms that lend metaphoric statements their power.

II. Metaphor Theory and the "Celibate Bridegroom"

Religious metaphor—with which we here deal—is especially prone to (alleged) misinterpretation. Soskice notes that if the metaphor of "God the Father" is pushed too far, it runs into absurdity; for example, God's Fatherhood implies that he has a wife.[41] Fourth-century debates over "Fatherhood" and "Sonship" within the Godhead illustrate how metaphor could lead theologians astray if they pressed the human analogy in a theologically "inappropriate" direction.[42]

In the case of "celibate Bridegroom," the adjective "celibate" puts a restrictive brake on the sexual association of "bridegroom": as Derrida suggests, metaphor withdraws as well as supplements. "Like a bridegroom *in certain—but not in all—respects*," the addition warns. Yet even as "celibate"

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concludes that the classification of "borrowing" and "lending" is *itself* governed by metaphor. See Judith H. Anderson's discussion of Derrida and "etymological traces" in her essay, "Translating Investments: The Metaphoricity of Language, 2 *Henry IV*, and *Hamlet*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 40:3 (Fall 1998): esp. 238–239, 243. I thank Professor Anderson for providing me with some helpful references regarding metaphor theory.

[39]Derrida, "White Mythology," 261–262, citing from Canguilhem's *La connaissance de la vie* (2nd ed.; Paris: Vrin, 1969), 48–49. For other interesting comments on the implication of metaphors in the development of science, see Quine, "Postscript," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sacks, 159.

[40]Canguilhem states (*Connaissance*, 48) that here he borrows examples from Marc Klein's *Histoire des origines de la théorie cellulaire* (Paris, 1936).

[41]Soskice, *Metaphor*, 116; also see John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), chap. 10 ("Divine Incarnation as Metaphor").

[42]For an artful exploration of the intersection of theological language and changing notions of masculinity in late antiquity, see Virginia Burrus, "*Begotten, Not Made*": *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

subtracts something expected from the nuptials, the metaphor suggests something richer: a vision of newly intimate relations with the divine, of an eternal life of bliss, of an ecstatic coupling with the Savior. The warm associations of marriage for ancient Romans of a certain status—the potential enhancement of wealth, property, inter-familial alignments, and political influence; the reproduction that ensures the continuation of the family line—contributed a positive "charge" that continues to "hover over" the metaphor.[43]

Yet this attempted extrusion of the sexual by the addition of "celibate" was not complete, nor *could* it be if patristic writers wished to derive surplus value from the metaphor's erotic overtones, to promote celibacy as an object of desire. "Sex," an eroticized originary discourse or habitat, continues to "hover over" the exhortation to sexual renunciation.[44]

Metaphors, like all figurative language, can operate "outside" as well as "inside" the text.[45] Ancient allegory, David Dawson suggests, "actually engaged social and cultural practice in the ancient world." It entered the contest over "social and cultural identity, authority, and power."[46] Allegory, he concludes, could be and was deployed "to endorse, revise, and subvert competing world views and forms of life."[47]

The metaphor of the "celibate Bridegroom" likewise performed "work" in the extra-textual world: it both contributed to and mediated the debate over the relative values of celibacy, marriage, and embodiment, whether here and

[43]Given the rather negative assessment of marriage expressed by some ascetically minded Church Fathers and their constant rehearsals of the "woes of marriage," it is good to remember that they were doubtless in a minority, even among the Christian population. For some accounts of those Christians less than enthusiastic about ascetic propaganda, see Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) and David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For some standard works concerning "pagan" practice and ideology of marriage, see essays in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage:* Iusti Coniuges *From the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991).

[44]On this theme, Richard Rambuss's *Closet Devotions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), faults modern scholars' attempts to circumscribe and "normalize" the erotic in Christian texts. (Rambuss's book studies the metaphysical poets.) For a counter-example pertinent to our theme, Rambuss analyzes Francis Rous's poem "Mysticall Marriage," in which, Rambuss argues, the reader is not just invited to "love Christ"; rather, the poem is "a provocation to concupiscence—a 'spirituall concupiscence,' but concupiscence nonetheless. . . . He invokes a form of sexual appetite—lust—that is no other than a sin, the very transgressivity of this carnal desire serving as the expressive mechanism by which religious affect is to be stimulated and enhanced. Nothing heats the passions, it has been said, like the taboo" (5).

[45]Lakoff and Johnson strongly press this point (*Metaphors*, 3, 153, 156, 235).

[46]David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2.

[47]Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*, 1.

now or in the afterlife. It held together "marriage" and "celibacy" in a creative tension that reflected the Church's need to affirm the worth of each.[48] "Celibate Bridegroom" seems a singularly fitting illustration of Hart's description of metaphor's fecundity, to which I alluded above:

> [Metaphor] succeeds in joining together distinct moments within a tradition of discourse in a way that is pleasing and recognizable, but whose meaning also clearly exceeds the discrete occasion of its utterance; and it thus has the power to gather more and more elements of the tradition around it, and sustain them in a kind of dynamic and changing unity, through an ever greater range of subordinate metaphorical supplements.[49]

Let us now turn to examine the originary habitats of the metaphor's components that contributed *both* to its conceptual incoherence *and* to its service as a truly exemplary *Gastarbeiter* in the service of Christian doctrine and life.

III. Scriptural and Early Christian Habitats

Scriptural verses collided—but created surplus value—in the production of the metaphor "celibate Bridegroom." As I argue in *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity*, ancient interpreters liberated biblical verses from what modern scholars might deem their historical context and textual emplotment, repositioning them to promote the superiority of abstinence.[50] Yet insofar as those contexts continued to "hover over" the new usage, these redeployments engendered further paradoxes. A good case is provided by scriptural references to bridegrooms and lovers.

The representation of Israel as the bride of God in the book of Hosea, in Isaiah 54, and in Jeremiah 3 doubtless encouraged the notion of God as metaphorically "marriageable." More centrally, the images of bridegroom/lover in the Song of Songs and in Psalm 45 (a royal wedding psalm) proved rich sources for later Christian interpreters. Nonetheless—in contrast to Christian appropriation—this bridegroom or lover was neither imagined as

[48]Anthropologist Sherry Ortner's term, "key symbol," also expresses the work that metaphor can do. A "key symbol" (to list Ortner's criteria) is "culturally important," arouses strong positive or negative feelings, emerges in many different contexts, enjoys abundant cultural elaboration, and is surrounded by great "cultural restrictions." A key symbol that "summarizes" (in contrast to those that "elaborate"), she argues, achieves its end by "its focusing power, its drawing-together, intensifying, catalyzing impact" on the observer/listener: these means, I posit, are precisely those evoked by the metaphor of the "celibate Bridegroom." See Sherry B. Ortner, "On Key Symbols," *American Anthropologist* new series 75:5 (October 1973): 1339, 1342.

[49]David Hart, private communication, 20 April 2001.

[50]Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3–4.

the Messiah,[51] nor, in his original habitat of the Hebrew Bible, was he understood metaphorically—although by late antiquity, Jews could interpret the Song of Songs as allegorically expressing the love between God and Israel.[52]

The first biblical depiction of the *Messiah* as Bridegroom is found in Paul's words to the Corinthians: "I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband" (II Cor. 11:2). Next, the image of Bridegroom (understood as Jesus) surfaces in the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins who await the delayed Bridegroom (Matt. 25:1–13), and in the parable of the Wedding Banquet for the king's son (Matt. 22: 1–14)—both of which parables counsel sober readiness for the eschaton, not sexual exuberance. Then in the Gospel of John 3:29–30, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the anticipated Bridegroom and himself as the Bridegroom's friend, who must "decrease" while the Bridegroom "increases." The metaphor is further domesticated and adapted to ancient Roman social structures in Ephesians 5 by its inclusion in a Household Code that demands the ready subjection of wives to husbands and the chastity ("without spot or wrinkle") of the wife, on the model of Christ the Bridegroom's marriage to his bride, the Church.[53] Finally, Revelation 19:6–9 depicts the heavenly wedding feast of the Lamb of God, Christ. These biblical identifications of Jesus as Bridegroom, however, might appear problematic once sexual renunciation was deemed a chief marker of Christian commitment: now, the qualification of "celibate" was needed to blunt the sexual association.

Nowhere, Averil Cameron argues, did the paradoxical, seemingly "irrational" aspects of Christian exhortation emerge more forcefully than in language pertaining to virginity and celibacy.[54] With the rising evaluation of ascetic renunciation, "marriage" might seem a less cogent image with which to depict the Christian's relation to Jesus. Indeed, already in I Corinthians 7 and in Jesus' response to the Sadducees (that there will be "no marrying or giving in marriage in heaven" [Matt. 22:30, Luke 20:35]), the demotion of

[51]Jeremias, *Parables*, 52; 52 n. 13 provides further references for this claim.

[52]For some recent discussions of rabbinic exegesis of the Song of Songs, see Daniel Boyarin, "The Song of Songs: Lock or Key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina M. Schwartz (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 214–230; Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 163–168, 184–186. Of particular interest here is Eilberg-Schwartz's claim that ancient Jewish men learned to read themselves as "women" in relation to the lover of the Song of Songs; cf. the citation from Paulinus of Nola with which the present essay begins.

[53]On Ephesians 5 and other Household Codes' adaptation to current social norms, see Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), esp. chap. 7.

[54]Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 181. Also see Frye, *The Great Code*, 54–55.

"real-life" marriage found assistance.[55] Yet if Jesus the Bridegroom, like his Bride the Church, could be depicted as "without spot or wrinkle" (cf. Eph. 5:27)—which connoted, to the fourth-century ascetic enthusiast Jerome, "without the contamination of sexual intercourse"—the metaphor became not just acceptable, but productive.[56] And if Jesus' nuptials were to be endlessly delayed (a motif promoted by the New Testament teaching of the delay of the Parousia), his unconsummated marriage could remain suggestive yet "unsullied."

Early Christian interpreters of the Song of Songs and of Psalm 45 routinely, and ingeniously, turned the hero of these texts into the Bridegroom, Christ, and represented him as married—quite polygamously—to virgins, to widows, to men, to the Church, and indeed, to all Christian believers. Although the erotic association of "Bridegroom" could not be erased—the original habitat of nuptials "hovered over" the metaphor—skillful interpretation might adjust it to its new home in Christian ascetic culture, betokening (rather tamely) God's steadfast love. Yet the metaphor does not escape its originary habitat: the return of the repressed ensures that the "celibate Bridegroom" still emerges as erotically desirable. Some examples will illustrate the point.

Bishop Alexander of Alexandria in the fourth century (according to Athanasius's report) exhorts the virgins under his care to learn from Scripture that Jesus, both their brother *and* their Bridegroom, is "radiant and ruddy" (Song of Songs 5:10), the one to whom they should cling and "beside whom you sleep."[57] John Chrysostom, a few decades later, argues that since unmarried men and women committed to celibacy were espoused to Christ, their living together, even in a sexless relation, constitutes "adultery" or "fornication."[58] He warns virgins not to settle for any earthly partner, since the Bridegroom Jesus whom they will receive as their Spouse is "hotter" (*sphodroteros*) than any man.[59] The erotic language of the Song of Songs is introduced to display to these women the wonders of their heavenly lover. Doubtless one of the attractions of the "celibate Bridegroom" metaphor was that it enabled the Christian ascetic to luxuriate in the "heat" without suffering the "corruption."

[55]Jesus' response to the Sadducees can itself be read as an injunction to celibacy here and now.

[56]Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.16.

[57]Athanasius reports Alexander's sermon to the virgins in *ep. 1 virg.* 37, 40, 43.

[58]For example, John Chrysostom, *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant* 4 (*Patrologia Graeca* [PG] version: 3); Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 7.26; Cyprian, *ep.* 61(=4).4. For this practice (*syneisaktism*) and its popularity in early Christianity, see Hans Achelis, *Virgines Subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII Kapitel des I. Korintherbriefe* (Leipzig, 1902), and Elizabeth A. Clark, "John Chrysostom and the *Subintroductae*," *Church History* 46:2 (June 1977): 171–185.

[59]John Chrysostom, *Quod regulares* 12 (PG version: 9).

IV. Change of Locale

With the failure of Jesus' speedy return to usher in the Kingdom, the reunion of Jesus with his devotees was thought not to occur in an imminent eschaton on a transformed earth, but in a heavenly afterlife. Accordingly, patristic exegetes from the third century onward transmuted Paul's stated reason for counseling celibacy (the expectation of an imminent eschaton [I Cor. 7:26, 29, 31]) into the hope that celibacy on earth would reap for the renunciant a partnership with Jesus *after death*. That "the time is short" and "the form of this world is passing away" was handily reinterpreted to mean that Christians should prepare for an imminent death,[60] that human lifespans are but seventy years.[61]

Afterlife as an ascetic's marital union with Jesus now merges in patristic imagination with biblical passages pertaining to the Last Judgment. Slight interpretive license could meld the judgment throne (Matt. 25:31–46) with a bridal chamber, a *thalamos*. Will the ascetic woman be worthy of her Bridegroom's call ("Come O blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world")[62]—or will she be ejected from the bridal chamber, to feed the goats on Jesus' left hand (Matt. 25:32–34)?[63] Now, it is *virgins* who, if they fail to prepare for themselves a suitable wedding garment (so an anonymous author of a treatise *On Virginity* threatens) will find themselves "cast into outer darkness" where "men will weep and gnash their teeth" (Matt. 22:11–13).[64] Those destined to be Brides of Christ should ready themselves, through ascetic renunciation, to meet their Groom at death.[65] The merger of Judgment seat and *thalamos* threatens punishment to those who fall from chastity but doubtless enlivens the prospect of the Judgment for the sexually abstinent. The New Testament exhortation to readiness for an immediate eschaton now "hovers over" the encouragement to sexual renunciation.

[60]John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 72, 73.4; *Hom. 43 Gen.* 1.

[61]Anonymous, *De castitate* 10.11.

[62]So Melania the Younger: *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* 64.

[63]Jerome, *ep*. 22.25. That the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins and the depiction of the Last Judgment are found in the same chapter (Matt. 25) doubtless encouraged this elision.

[64]Anonymous ("Pseudo-Basil"), *De virginitate* 9.132–140: the author warns virgins that the penalty is so dire that he cannot bear to repeat the words; nonetheless, they must "put to silence the appetites of the flesh." The melding of the bridal chamber motif in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins in Matt. 25 with the Last Judgment theme of Matt. 22 is also found in Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 6.1.

[65]Aphrahat in *Demonstration* 6.6 expresses this theme when he writes that the marriage cry is at hand; the tombs shall be opened, the dead shall rise, and those still living shall fly away to meet the heavenly King.

V. Jesus' Brides and Life "Outside the Text"

Who might qualify as a Bride of Christ? Ephesians 5 identifies her collectively with the Church, and this association resounds throughout dozens of patristic writings.[66] With the progressive asceticizing of Christianity, however, the Bride of Christ could also easily be identified with *individuals* who had committed themselves to lifelong virginity.[67] Particular virgins (for example, Eustochium, Paula the Younger, Demetrias,[68] and Marcellina[69]) now emerge as Christ's "Bride" with predictable regularity. The theme of those committed to celibacy as betrothed or married to Jesus the Bridegroom is also common in the ascetic literature of the early Syrian Church.[70] Likewise, unnamed consecrated virgins receive exhortation from the bishops who stood guard over them. Thus from John Chrysostom,[71] Augustine,[72] Athanasius,[73] Ambrose,[74] and Basil of Ancyra[75] comes the constant refrain that these virgins are—or are to be—Brides of Christ. The Bride's "spotless and unwrinkled" condition is lifted from its original habitat (Christ's union with

[66]For example, Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 3.6.49 (as an explanation for why Jesus did not marry on earth) and 3.11.74; Origen, *Hom. Cant.* 1.1, 1.5, 1.9; Tertullian, *De corona* 14; Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum* 2.19; Cyprian, *ep.* 75(=69).3; Jerome, *ep*. 123.12; Methodius, *Symposium* 3.8; Ambrose, *Comm. Luc*. 6.38; Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.5.22; Ambrose, *De fide* 3.10.71–72; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 20 Eph*. (on 5:26–27); (Anonymous), *De castitate* 15.2; Augustine, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.10.11, 1.17.19; Augustine, *Ennar. Ps*. 45.3; Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 22.87; Augustine, *De Gen. contra Man*. 2.14.20; 2.24.37; Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 17.16, 17.20, and throughout his anti-Donatist writings. An especially nice example can be found in Origen's *Commentary on I Corinthians* (on I Cor. 7:28b): while (human) marriage begins in the dark on account of sexual intercourse and licentiousness (Rom. 13:13 serves here as an intertext), the marriage of Christ to the Church begins in the light, as with the Wise Virgins who waited with their oil and lamps and were brought into the wedding.

[67]Jerome, *epp*. 22.17, 24, 25; 107.7; 130.7, 8; Pelagius, *Ad Demetriadem* 24.2, 30.3; Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.3.11 and throughout; and citing Bishop Liberius's words at Marcellina's consecration, 3.1.1. For anonymous virgins, see John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 59; Augustine, *De sancta virginitate* 54.54; Athanasius, *ep. 1 virg.* 1, 21, 31, 34; Athanasius, *De virginitate* 1, 17; Ambrose, *Exhortatio virginitatis* 10.62; Ambrose *De virginibus* 1.9.52; Basil of Ancyra, *De virginitate* 26, 27.

[68]Jerome, *epp.* 22.17, 24, 25; 107.7; 130.7, 8; Pelagius, *Ad Demetriadem* 24.2, 30.3.

[69]Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.3.11 and throughout; and citing Pope Liberius's words at Marcellina's consecration, 3.1.1.

[70]For example, Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 6 ("Of Monks"); Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Virginity* 2.11, 3.15, 14.11, 16.2, 33.1, 3. For discussion, see Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), chaps. 4 and 5; Sidney H. Griffith, "Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism," in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 220–245.

[71]John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 59.

[72]Augustine, *De sancta virginitate* 54.54.

[73]Athanasius, *ep. 1 virg.* 1, 21, 31, 34; Athanasius, *De virginitate* 1, 17.

[74]Ambrose, *Exhortatio virginitatis* 10.62; Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.9.52.

[75]Basil of Ancyra, *De virginitate* 26, 27.

the Church [Eph. 5:27]) and reassigned to the individual virgin whom Christ will marry.[76]

Likewise, biblical texts condemning adultery and divorce are cited to warn consecrated virgins of the dire end that awaits them if they stray from fidelity to their Spouse, Jesus.[77] For a consecrated virgin to share a house with a man likewise committed to celibacy is now classified as "adultery" or "fornication."[78] Cyprian of Carthage offers a startling analogy calculated to frighten such couples into submitting to (his) episcopal authority: if a human husband saw his wife reclining next to another man, would he not take his sword in hand? What then will Christ think when he sees his dedicated virgin lying with another? Christ will use the "spiritual sword" of divine punishment against her on the Day of Judgment, Cyprian concludes.[79] John Chrysostom also chastises such virgins: does the woman not know that as the betrothed of Christ she is to be free of all "spot and wrinkle" (Eph. 5:27)?[80] Athanasius likewise cautions that consecrated virgins are a "garden locked" (Song of Songs 4:12), entry to which is granted only to "the gardener," Christ (presumably an allusion to Mary Magdalene's mistaking the risen Jesus for a "gardener" in John 20:15).[81] In these examples, Jesus is cast in the role of the jealous husband or lover, who will wreak vengeance on his "adulterous" fiancée or spouse.

Most striking (and revealing of the "gender trouble" that afflicts our metaphor) is Methodius of Olympus's treatise, the *Symposium*, patterned after Plato's treatise of the same name. Methodius exchanges Plato's male pederasts for Christian female virgins who, like their Platonic exemplars, discourse on love. Among the interesting discursive shifts of Methodius's treatise is that the Brides of Christ are carefully distanced from any association with reproduction, unlike Plato's symposiasts for whom the fecund "reproductivity" of *erôs* stands at the forefront of discussion.[82] Methodius's virgins fail even metaphorically to reproduce: although Methodius represents the Church, Paul, and even God as "mothers,"

[76]For example, Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 20; (Anonymous), *Ad Claudiam = De virginitate* 11.

[77]For example, Basil of Ancyra, *De virginitate* 42.

[78]For example, John Chrysostom, *Quod regulares* 4 (PG version: 3); Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 7.26; Cyprian, *ep.* 61(=4).4.

[79]Cyprian, *ep.* 61(=4).3.

[80]John Chrysostom, *Quod regulares* 9 (PG version: 6). The Latin word for the woman involved in the practice (*subintroducta*) suggests that the woman had been "brought in surreptitiously" to the man's quarters.

[81]Athanasius, *ep. 2 virg.* 30.

[82]See especially the arguments of David M. Halperin, in "Why Is Diotima a Woman?" in Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 113–151, 190–211.

maternity is a state to which the virgins never even figuratively advance.[83] Despite the value of Plato's dialogue to Methodius as a literary model, the theme of love's "reproductivity" is entirely suppressed.

Far from "reproducing," Methodius's virgins do not get so far as "sex." Methodius's virginal symposiasts, Brides of Christ,[84] process toward the divine *thalamos* to receive the "nectar" of Christ the Bridegroom[85] (himself the chief of virgins [*archiparthenos*])[86]—but never get a toe across the threshold. One reason for this hesitation, I posit, may lie in the situation of bishops and virgins "outside the text." Deployment of the theme of Jesus as Bridegroom and the virgins as his Brides is obstructed precisely at the point at which ecclesiastical life called for caution.

Although we know little about Methodius's circumstances and the problems he faced as a bishop, it is not unreasonable to posit that he, like many of his episcopal colleagues about whom we are better informed, worried that consecrated virgins might "fall." Christian virgins might be styled as "temples" and as "sacred vessels"[87]—but temples are peculiarly liable to despoliation.[88] And if these "temples of the Holy Spirit" were despoiled, the Church's reputation both at home and abroad suffered.[89] Patristic texts reflecting this despoliation anxiety are abundant: the slightest suspicion that a virgin might be on the path to deflowerment is enough to sound the alarm.[90] The need to uphold the purity of the Church here called for caution:

[83]Methodius, *Symposium* 8.5–8 (the Church); 3.9 (Paul); 1.1 (God).

[84]For example, Methodius, *Symposium* prologue 6, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5, 10.6 and the repeated refrain of the hymn of Thecla at the narration's end (*Sources Chrétiennes* [SC] 95, 48, 166, 170, 176, 302, 310–320); cf. Discourse 7, which exploits the language of the Song of Songs to describe Christ's coming to gather the "flowers" blooming in the virginal garden.

[85]Methodius, *Symposium*, Thecla's hymn (SC 95, 312, 314). Nonetheless, given the erotic language, we may wonder if the Platonic erotics of desire does not still "hover over" Methodius's treatise.

[86]Methodius, *Symposium* 1.4, 1.5, 10.3, 10.5 (SC 95, 62, 64, 292, 296); see comments of J. Montserrat-Torrents, "Methodius of Olympus, *Symposium* III, 4–8: An Interpretation," *Studia Patristica* 13.2 (=TU 116), ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1975), 242.

[87]For numerous examples, see Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 212–215.

[88]See the discussion of how the hierarchical language that ranks purity above impurity is especially vulnerable to degradation, in Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 56.

[89]For example, Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 7, 5, 10, 24, 27; Basil of Caesarea, *epp.* 46; 199.18; Pseudo-Basil, *Peri Parthenia* 2.29; Basil of Ancyra, *De virginitate* 41–42, 43, 61, 62; John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 26; Pelagius (?), *Ad virginem devotam* 2.4; Pelagius (?), *Ad Claudiam = De virginitate* 12; Jerome, *epp*. 22.6, 14; 117.3.

[90]Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 23; Cyprian, *ep.* 61(=4).2; John Chrysostom, *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines*; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.30 (on accusations against Paul of Samosata). For examples regarding "fallen virgins," see Jerome, *Adversus Helvidium* 23; Jerome, *ep.* 22.13; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 19 I Cor.* 7; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 13 I Tim.* (5:3); Augustine, *ep.3**.3; Council of Elvira, canons 13–14; Council of Ancyra, canon 19; Council of Chalcedon canon 16; Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* 14. Some argued that forcing dedicated virgins to submit to gynecological examinations by midwives in

the metaphor of the celibate Bridegroom embracing his virginal brides needed reining in at this crucial associative moment. Something needed to be "withdrawn" from the metaphor's association.

Here intrudes still another extra-textual consideration that further altered the associations of Christ the Bridegroom: most adult Christians in the early centuries were or had been married. Restricting access to Christ the Bridegroom *solely* to virgins ran up against a more egalitarian stream of Christian theology. Depicting Christ as married to *all* the members of the Church, including the chaste married, challenged ascetic elitism. As Augustine writes, dampening the pride of celibates, we "do not dare to sever the bodies of married Christians from the members of Christ."[91] Likewise for Chrysostom: the entire Church, including sexually experienced widows and the faithful married, could be subsumed in the category of "pure virgin" (II Cor. 11:2)—since, as Augustine adds, it is not the virginity of the *body* that makes a believer "Christ's virgin."[92] For both theological and pastoral reasons, the Church Fathers deemed it wise to represent Jesus as an equal-opportunity Bridegroom.

In addition to the faithful married, widows constitute another category of non-virgins who may aspire to be "Brides of Christ." Although the Fathers strongly advise against widows' earthly remarriage, they depict them as "brides" welcomed to the heavenly nuptial chamber by Jesus: Jesus, they are assured, does not reject those among them who have kept celibate since their bereavements. Tertullian, enjoining his wife not to remarry after his death, urges her (and others) to devote her "youth and beauty" to God; with Jesus, such women will "live," "converse," and "touch" (I John 1:1; Luke 24:39; John 20:17).[93] Jerome styles the widows Furia and Paula as the Queen of Psalm 45 who at death will receive the King as spouse. They too—not only those who early devoted themselves to lifelong virginity—will hear Jesus sing to them verses from the Song of Songs: "You are all fair, my love; There is no flaw in you" (4:7); "Arise, my love, my fair one" (2:10).[94] John Chrysostom, for example, reassures widows that while the passion of earthly suitors may flag when they contemplate the widow's "used goods," Christ

order to prove their "purity" disgraced the church, whether or not the young women were subsequently declared "innocent": see Ambrose, *ep.* 5(=Maur. 4); Cyprian, however, assumes that such examinations are necessary to discover who is guilty and who innocent: *ep.* 61(=4).4.

[91]Augustine, *De bono viduitatis* 6.8.

[92]John Chrysostom, *Hom. 23 II Cor.* 1; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 28 Hebr.* 16; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 2 In Eutropium* 14; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 24 Rom.*; Augustine, *Tr. Joannem* 13.124; cf. 9.2.2.

[93]Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* 1.4.

[94]Jerome, *epp.* 54.3; 108.29.

stands ready and eager to accept them[95]—indeed, not as sexually experienced matrons, but as "pure virgins."[96] Yet here, unlike on earth, their new "marriage" seems not to count against them as remarriage. Joining themselves with the heavenly Bridegroom carries the further advantage that he, unlike earthly husbands, does not die: since death has no dominion over Christ (Rom. 6:9), the widows will enjoy an eternal union.[97]

Nor does a sexually dissolute past preclude a Christian's virginal espousal to Christ. Thus Origen, commenting on the story of the harlot Rahab who aided the Hebrews in their capture of Jericho, posits that even former prostitutes can be united to Christ as "chaste virgins to a single spouse" (II Cor. 11:2); they can be "washed and sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 6:11).[98] The Church, too, was a harlot, John Chrysostom reminds his audience, but one who can be transformed into a virgin; thus, he reasons, the harlot married to Christ paradoxically acquires virginity by marriage.[99] Bolstering this argument were verses from the Song of Songs implying that the Bride, "dark but comely" (1:5), will be "whitened" by Christ:[100] a proclamation not of (alleged) beautification for the sake of sexual desirability, but of sin's remission.[101]

Most surprising, patristic writers—such as those whose correspondence opened this essay—insist that males as well as females can be "married" to Christ. The Song of Songs again proved central for their exegesis. Thus Jerome, consoling his friend Pammachius on his widowerhood, urges him to "seek him on your bed at night whom your soul loves" (Song of Songs 3:1), to confess, "I sleep, but my heart wakes" (5:2). If the Bridegroom flees, Pammachius should search the streets for him (5:6—contrary to Jerome's advice to female virgins[102]); offer him your breasts, your learned bosom, he exhorts Pammachius.[103] John Chrysostom, pleading with his friend, the "fallen Theodore"—"fallen" because he had become smitten with a

[95]John Chrysostom, *De non iterando coniugio* 5–6.

[96]John Chrysostom, *Hom. 15 I Tim*.

[97]Augustine, *De bono viduitatis* 10.13.

[98]Origen, *Hom. 6 Iesus Nave* 4. The story of Rahab is told in Joshua, chapters 2 and 6.

[99]John Chrysostom, *Hom. 2 In Eutropium* 6; cf. 11: human nature is a "harlot" that God desired, that he might convert "her" into a virgin.

[100]Origen employs the image to characterize the Gentile Church: *Comm. in Cant.* 2.1; 3(4).14.

[101]Origen, *Comm. in Cant.* 2.1: when the "dark" beloved is aligned with the "black" Ethiopian woman whom Moses, a type of Christ, marries, her "soiled," that is, "sinful," quality is underscored. Jerome (*ep*. 22.1) appropriates Origen's exposition of these verses to argue that repentant virgins who have not yet scaled the heights of virtue will nonetheless find that "the King desires their beauty" (Ps. 45:11), despite their residual "darkness" stemming from their "black" parentage at birth.

[102]Appealing to the same verse (Song of Songs 3:2,3) in *ep*. 22.25, Jerome counsels Eustochium *not* to seek her Bridegroom in the streets; rather, she should remember that "strait and narrow is the way which leads to life" (Matt. 7:14).

[103]Jerome, *ep.* 66.10.

woman—argues that because Theodore has attached himself to the Heavenly Bridegroom through his pledge of celibacy, it would now be "adultery" to join himself to an earthly wife.[104] Moreover, in the Acts of Thomas, Judas Thomas represents himself as one of the Wise Virgins with blazing lamp who will receive the Lord.[105] And Gregory of Nyssa, for his part, assures readers that since there is "no male and female in Christ" (Gal. 3:27–28), men as well as women can enjoy a marriage to the Heavenly Bridegroom.[106] Early Christian ascetic discourse, as is here evident, offers provocative riches for "queer theory."[107]

What might these representations of Christ the Heavenly Bridegroom—profligately espousing himself not only to virgins, but also to the widowed, the married, the sinful, the soiled, and males—portend? That the image could be so indiscriminately manipulated suggests that, despite the progressive asceticization of Christianity, patristic authors, even ascetic enthusiasts such as Jerome, did not wish to foreclose marriage to the Heavenly Bridegroom to those who were not women, not perpetual virgins, and not sinless. Here a near-universal message of redemption, construed as "marriage," appears to trump the elitism of ascetic Christianity: the entire church, sinners and saints, can gain entry to the heavenly *thalamos*. The "celibate Bridegroom" who (potentially) joins himself to all and sundry Christians, his virginal Brides, provided a powerful image of salvation for late-ancient Christian writers: it gathered to itself associations of divine forgiveness and redemptive love.

VI. Bodies in the Afterlife

Although Christian commentators insisted that nuptial imagery pertaining to Christ and the believer must be taken in a purely spiritual and bodiless sense, the original habitat of the imagery of the Bridegroom/lover still hovered over their discussions. Here, our metaphor spun into the associative orbit of eschatological speculation.

A particular problem might arise over the question of whether the heavenly state involved the resurrection of the *physical* body. Early Christian literature contained disparate representations of the afterlife and of Jesus' resurrected appearance. Although Paul claims that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50), Christians came to affirm that the very flesh of the Incarnate One was at the right hand of God the Father in

[104]John Chrysostom, *Ad Theodorum lapsum* 13.4.
[105]*Acta Thomae* 146.
[106]Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 20.
[107]See, for example, Stephen D. Moore, "The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality," *Church History* 69:2 (June 2000): 328–349.

Heaven.[108] Jesus was deemed to have had a specifically male body while on earth—the story of his circumcision (Luke 2:21) was here essential[109]—but had chosen to remain a "voluntary celibate";[110] he could have reproduced had he so wished, since he was no eunuch.[111] But did he retain these "male" characteristics in Heaven?

The status of Jesus' body post-death was, to be sure, rendered ambivalent by the conflicting reports contained in the Gospels. Jesus offers "doubting Thomas" the chance to touch his body (John 20:27) and urges his startled disciples to "handle" him to test his "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:36–40). He invites the disciples to join him for breakfast (John 21:12–13), and, in another pericope, eats a piece of broiled fish (Luke 24: 41–43). Post-resurrection, the women who have come to Jesus' tomb are said to grasp his feet (Matt. 28:9). Yet Jesus walks through closed doors (John 20:19), and remains unrecognized by his followers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–16). Such diverse representations left open how Christians should imagine the resurrection body[112]—and gave no clue as to the "maleness" of Jesus' heavenly form. Were humans to be resurrected with sexual organs? Would "woman" even be in heaven?[113] What might these diverse representations imply for marriage to a heavenly Bridegroom? Could Jesus in heaven be "touched"?

The exegetical site that prompted the most commentary on women's ability to "touch" Jesus' resurrected body was John 20:17, Jesus' injunction to Mary Magdalene, "Touch me not." Given the Fathers' wariness of cross-sexual "touching"—here, recall I Corinthians 7:1, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman"[114]—the reason for Jesus' disallowance pointedly intrudes. Was it simply because Mary Magdalene was a woman? Patristic writers largely

[108]Anonymous (Pseudo-Tertullian?), *Adversus omnes haereses* 4, arguing against Valentinians; Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 16. Likewise, the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the *flesh*," encouraged such a view.

[109]Origen, commenting on I Cor. 12:12–26 in *Hom. 9 Lev.* 2; Origen, *Hom. 14 Luc.* 4–5; Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.36.

[110]Tertullian, *De monogamia* 5 (although he was a "monogamist in spirit" through his single marriage to the Church), appropriated by Jerome in *ep*. 48.9.

[111]See Augustine's debate with Julian of Eclanum on this issue in *Opus imperfectum* 4.47–49, 52, 122, 134; 6.33, 35.

[112]Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.10.100: when strong desire is educated through self-control, producing chastity; Augustine, *Serm.* 151.8.8, 128.8.10: a heavenly state without lust.

[113]Augustine answers "yes": *De civitate Dei* 22.17; Augustine, *De sermone Domini in monte* 1.15.41. Cyprian (*Tract*. 2.4) and Anonymous (Sulpicius Severus?) (*De virginitate* 11.2–3) both include women among the 144,000 virgins in heaven (Rev. 14:1–4). John Chrysostom answers "no": *Hom. 6 Col*. (on 2:12), citing Gal. 3:28, "no male and female."

[114]Commented on by, for example, Tertullian, *De monogamia* 3; Jerome, *ep*. 48.14; Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.7. As Jerome puts it in *Adversus Iovinianum* 2.8, the sense of touch pictures to itself past pleasures and "forces the soul to participate in them and in a way to practice what it does not actually commit."

rejected this solution:[115] numerous episodes in the Gospels suggested that women *had* "touched" Jesus.[116] The Fathers usually explained Jesus' disallowance of Mary's "touch" by her (alleged) lack of faith, her doubt in his resurrection.[117] Nonetheless, their appeal to John 20:17 to warn celibates "not to touch"[118] suggests that sexual implications lingered beneath (or, in Canguilhem's phrase, "hovered over") the official exegesis. Interpretations of this passage leave open the question of whether Jesus can *now* be "touched" by women in heaven—a theme of obvious relevance to the construal of Jesus as a Bridegroom. Paul's comment in I Corinthians 6:17, "he who is united to the Lord becomes one *spirit* with him," here proved readily exploitable by patristic authors. "Becoming one in spirit" suggested a discourse about union with Jesus that avoided the implications of bodily contact.

Here, patristic authors frequently resorted to the teaching ascribed to Jesus, that there would be "no marrying and giving in marriage in heaven"; the resurrected would be "like the angels" (Matt. 22:30; Luke 20:35–36). That virgins here and now might be assimilated to this angelic state was, predictably, a favorite motif of ascetic enthusiasts.[119] Indeed, John Chrysostom stresses that virgins might even rate higher than the angels, since the latter purportedly do not have flesh, blood, and passions against which they must war.[120] This Gospel verse could also be deployed to

[115]An exception: Augustine in *Serm.* 244–246 baldly states that it was because she was a woman, although he rejects this interpretation in *Tract. Ioan.* 121.3 and *Hom. I Ioan.* 32.

[116]For example, presumably the women around Jesus who minister to him (Luke 8: 1–3), a story used by an anonymous patristic author to convince a widow that she will "touch" Jesus (*De vidua servanda* 5); Mary anoints Jesus and wipes his feet with her hair (John 11:2; 12:3); cf. the anonymous woman of Mark 14:3–9/Matt. 26:6–13 who anoints Jesus; in Luke 7:36–39, she is transformed into "a sinner." Jerome, *ep.* 38.2, imagines his ascetic women friends even now clasping the feet of Jesus in heaven. Jerome pictures Jesus calling forth the ascetic (now widowed) Blesilla from the "tomb" of her sickness in the words he addresses to Lazarus in John 11:43; Blesilla "rises" and eats with the Lord (cf. John 12:2); she now, according to Jerome, can clasp the feet of the Savior whom she formerly feared as Judge (cf. Luke 7:38).

[117]For example, Augustine, *Tract. Ioan.* 121.3; Augustine, *Hom. I Ioan.* 32; Ambrose, *Comm. Luc.* 10.161–166; Jerome, *ep*. 39.5. Thus Ambrose (perhaps borrowing from Origen) claims that Jesus addresses Mary Magdalene as "woman" precisely because she does not yet believe that the fullness of divinity resides in Christ's body (*Comm. Luc.* 10. 161, 163. Elsewhere (*De virginitate* 14–16), Ambrose notes that Mary's doubt left her weeping outside the tomb, citing John 19:41 and Matt. 27:60 for his claim. In Origen's allegorical exegesis, "female" customarily stands for "the flesh" as opposed to (male) "reason," as sloth or moral weakness: see, for example, Origen, *Hom. 4 Gen.* 4, *Hom. 11 Num.* 7, *Hom. 1 Num.* 1.

[118]Ps.-Clement, *De virginitate* 2.15; Ps.-Titus *Ep.*: here, of the *subintroductae* and their companions.

[119]For example, Cyprian, *De habitu virginis* 22; Ambrose, *Exhortatio virginitatis* 4.19; Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.3.11; Ambrose, *De virginitate* 27; Jerome, *Comm. Zach.* 1.3.6f.; Basil of Ancyra, *De virginitate* 51; Athanasius, *De virginitate* 16; Eusebius of Emesa, *Hom.* 6.3; 7.5; John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 10.3; Ps.-Titus *Ep*.

[120]John Chrysostom, *De virginitate* 11.1–2.

discourage the remarriage of widows, who likewise are exhorted to imitate the celibate angels in heaven.[121]

But *were* angels bodiless and hence incapable of sexual activity? The ominous narrative in Genesis 6:1–2 of the "angels" who, lusting after the daughters of men, descended from heaven to mate with them countered the assumption that these heavenly beings lacked bodies. Tertullian cites Genesis 6 to warn virgins to cover their heads: "a perilous face casts stumbling blocks even so far as heaven," he intones.[122] The (Pelagian?) treatise *On Chastity* argues that angels are not exempt from marriage merely *because* they are spiritual substances: the angels of Genesis 6 stand as a case in point.[123]

The debate over the nature of the resurrection body, including its sexual status, was fanned to white-hot intensity during the Origenist controversy at the end of the fourth century.[124] Earlier in his career, Jerome, presumably following an Origenist exegesis of Ephesians 5, had claimed that wives (coded as "bodies") will in the afterlife be transformed into men (coded as "souls"). Diversity of sex will cease, there will be "no male and female" (Gal. 3:28), and we will be "like the angels" (Matt. 22:30; Luke 20:35–36).[125] Paul's claim that "corruption cannot inherit incorruption" (I Cor. 15:50) here implies for Jerome that sexual intercourse ("corruption") is excluded from the heavenly afterlife; the best rewards will be assigned to the "incorrupt" Christians who have remained free from the "stain" of sexual activity.[126] On the basis of Jerome's exposition, his erstwhile friend (but now enemy) Rufinus charged that women were asking if their "poor, weak bodies are to rise"—or will they rather receive the "nature of the angels"?[127]

Indeed, under attack, Jerome cannot retreat fast enough from his earlier view of the transformability of bodies and their effective dissolution in the

[121]Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* 1.1, cf. 1.4. The rationale for "no marriage in heaven" usually rested, *tout court*, on an appeal to the innate superiority of virginity. There are, however, significant exceptions. Tertullian, for example, argues (*De resurrectione carnis* 36) that no marriage is needed in heaven because there will be no death that requires "replacements." For Gregory of Nyssa (*De opificio hominis* 17.2), the "end state" of angelic life in heaven is "celibate" because it replicates the original state of creation in which there was no marriage. More frequently, however, the unmarried condition is simply deemed superior to that of marriage, with strong hints of marital "uncleanness" haunting the writings of ascetic enthusiasts such as Jerome (*Adversus Iovinianum* 1.7).

[122]Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* 7. For a variety of views, see (Anonymous), *De castitate* 3.3; Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 15.22; John Cassian, *Conlationes* 8.21.

[123](Anonymous), *De castitate* 3.3.

[124]For a helpful exposition of Origen's view of the resurrection body, see Henri Crouzel, "La Doctrine origénienne du corps ressuscité," *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 81:3–4 (1980): 175–200, 241–266.

[125]Jerome, *Comm. Eph.* 3 (on Eph. 5:25–29).

[126]Jerome, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.37.

[127]Rufinus, *Apologia contra Hieronymum* 1.7, citing Jerome's mockery of these women in his *ep*. 84.6.

afterlife.[128] Now, Jerome repeatedly proclaims that real flesh and blood, not some amorphous "spiritual body," will be raised. We will be equipped, he avers, not just with our blood, veins, bones, and sinews, but also with our sexual organs: "John will be John, Mary will be Mary" is his constant refrain.[129] But, Jerome continues, we will not *use* our sexual organs, even though we will possess them.[130] Resurrected bodies will feel no lust for sexual relation, thus fulfilling the prediction that there will be "no marriage in heaven":[131] rather, all the inhabitants of heaven will make the *choice* of celibacy.[132] Reflecting on the celibate angels, Jerome now argues that Jesus' words do *not* mean that the denizens of heaven are *incapable* of marriage, as are stones and trees; it is from loftier motives that they renounce the option.[133] Controversies over the resurrection body thus intertwined with ascetic aspirations in the interpretation of the angelic status. If angels in heaven did not marry, how much less could the heavenly Jesus be conceived of as "married"?

In ways such as these, conflicting biblical passages pertaining to the nature of the resurrection, especially the resurrected body of Jesus and its "touchability," complicated the metaphor of Jesus as Bridegroom. Affirming that the afterlife would be peopled with male and female bodies strongly supported the Christian belief that God in creating flesh-and-blood human had pronounced them "good," but nonetheless suggested something more graphically physical about marriage in heaven than ascetic commentators might wish. Yet the "supplement" added by the imagination of a heavenly marriage to Jesus lent a charge to eschatological speculation.

VII. Pastoral Concerns: The Consolation of Widows

Next, I turn to a pastoral issue that likewise provoked early Christian reflection on heavenly union with Jesus and the state of the body in the afterlife: the consolation of widows. Bishops and spiritual advisers, attempting to comfort grieving widows, often assured them that they would later join their sentient but "sleeping" husbands in Heaven, thus encouraging them to desist from remarriage.[134] But might not widows'

[128]Jerome, *Apologia contra Rufinum* 1.28–29 contains a lengthy "explanation" of his earlier exegesis of Ephesians 5.

[129]Jerome, *Contra Ioannem Hierosolymitanum* 27, 25, 31, cf. Jerome, *ep*. 75.2; Jerome, *Apologia contra Rufinum* 2.5.

[130]Jerome, *Contra Ioannem* 31, cf. Jerome, *ep.* 108.23.

[131]Jerome, *Apologia contra Rufinum* 1.29; cf. Jerome, *ep.* 75.2.

[132]Jerome, *Contra Ioannem* 31.

[133]Jerome, *Comm. Matt*. 3 (on Matt. 22:30), cf. Jerome, *ep*. 108.23; Jerome, *Contra Ioannem* 31.

[134]Christian teaching that bodies and personality would be preserved in the afterlife doubtless encouraged a different "consolation philosophy" from that present in the classical "pagan" treatises and letters in which bodies find no place. For an overview of "pagan" advice on death

reunion with their husbands in heaven preclude their union with the Heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus? As two important rites of passage, marriage and death are linked. Here again, metaphor and eschatological speculation are drawn into the other's associative network.

Two passages in John Chrysostom's writings prompt reflection. The first, his exposition of I Corinthians 7:39–40 (that widows will be happier if they do not remarry), claims that Paul's very language—the husband "sleeps"—implies that the husband will "wake up" in the resurrection; why, Chrysostom argues, does the widow not await a reunion with him in the afterlife rather than contemplate remarriage?[135] In this case, appealing to the continuing marriage with the dead husband is deployed to forestall a second marriage on earth.

Yet in his letter of consolation *To a Young Widow*, Chrysostom suggests to the grieving widow a different scenario, namely, that God now takes the place of her dead husband. The wording of I Timothy 5:11 (that young widows were "waxing wanton against Christ"), Chrysostom argues, proves that widows have Christ as a spouse.[136] Nonetheless, Chrysostom next, somewhat confusingly, reassures the young widow that she will receive back her husband Therasius, an "emigré" to heaven, not in his former "corporeal beauty" but in "a lustre of another kind."[137] In that eternal life in heaven, she will enjoy "perpetual intercourse" (*sunoikêsai … ton aiôna*) with Therasius, he concludes.[138] What is the reader—and the (probably perplexed) young widow—to understand by this mixed message? Will she be married in heaven *both* to Therasius *and* to Christ? Or will she be married to Christ while she remains on earth, and later, in heaven, to Therasius? Although Chrysostom doubtless aims to dissuade the young widow from remarriage by holding out better options for her in the hereafter, the original habitat of marriage imagery "hovers."

That such motifs of consolation literature are not unique to John Chrysostom or to Greek-speaking Christianity is illustrated by Jerome's letter to a widow, Theodora, on the death of her husband, Lucinius. In an earlier epistle, Jerome praises this wealthy Spanish couple's devotion both to ascetic

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and bereavement, see Robert C. Gregg, *Consolation Philosophy: Greek and Christian Paideia in Basil and the Two Gregories*, Patristic Monograph Series 3 (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975), esp. chap. 1.

[135]John Chrysostom, *Mulier alligata est* 1.

[136]John Chrysostom, *Ad viduam iuniorem* 1–2. The Church Fathers believed that Paul had written the Pastoral Epistles, despite some difficulties occasioned by reconciling these texts with what are now considered Paul's genuine letters.

[137]John Chrysostom, *Ad viduam iuniorem* 3.

[138]John Chrysostom, *Ad viduam iuniorem* 7. In the last sentence of his letter, however, Chrysostom speaks of a union of their two souls.

practice and biblical scholarship; they have chosen to live as partners in the spirit, not in the flesh.[139] Upon Lucinius's death, Jerome writes to console Theodora, encouraging her in her widowhood. She should take comfort in knowing that she will shortly be rejoined with her husband; not dead, but "sleeping," he will be roused (in some indefinite) hereafter. Even now, Lucinius sees her (his "sister," indeed, his "brother" through sexual renunciation) from his heavenly abode, and is preparing a place for her beside him. Yet, Jerome continues, seemingly retracting the implications of his words, in the resurrection there is "no marrying and giving in marriage," and we shall be "like" the angels (Matt. 22:30). Nonetheless, we shall still inhabit human bodies: "Paul will still be Paul, Mary will still be Mary"—and Jerome launches an attack on heretics' dissolution of bodies in the afterlife.[140] Although Tertullian had instructed his wife that in their heavenly reunion there would be no resumption of "voluptuous disgrace between us,"[141] Jerome depicts the sexually abstinent couple in heaven as scarcely "married" at all, despite his attempt to console the bereaved. Thus although the pastoral consolation of grieving widows prompted Christian writers to conjure up a heavenly reunion of married couples as comfort, such "consolation philosophy" might complicate the representation of the widow's marriage to the Bridegroom Jesus. Here, as in the case of the bodily resurrection in the afterlife, our metaphor collided with eschatological speculation in intriguing ways—yet in ways that served helpful pastoral functions in the here and now.

VIII. Conclusion

In the end, one reason the "celibate Bridegroom" image retained its popularity for many centuries lies in its emotional or psychological appeal: those Christian devotees whom the Church Fathers addressed could rest assured that in return for their present restraint, "marriage," with its largely positive network of associations, including a charged erotic relation, awaited them later. While eschatological speculation on the human state post-death appeared to collide with a more "literal" reading of the metaphor of the celibate Bridegroom embracing his virginal brides, the metaphor nonetheless enabled other theological affirmations, as well as rendering pastoral assistance. Pondering how repression feeds on titillation is not an anachronistic note to introduce to this discussion: the Roman audience who read Jerome's *Against Jovinian* and his *Letter* 22 to Eustochium understood well the shockingly sexual

[139]Jerome, *ep.* 71.3.
[140]Jerome, *ep.* 1–2; Lucinius is represented as fighting against Gnosticizing heresy in Spain (3).
[141]Tertullian, *Ad uxorem* 1.1.

import of his interpretation of the Song of Songs.[142] Eroticism and sexual renunciation prove to be close bedfellows in patristic exegesis.[143]

As Patricia Cox Miller argues, explicating Jerome's *Letter* 22 to the adolescent Eustochium that depicts the virgin's ascetic commitment through verses from the Song of Songs, Jerome's attempt to erase the literal body and its sexual passions by "rewriting" it with scriptural tropes was ultimately a failure. Jerome's ascetic theory, she posits, "foundered on an interpretive problematic, namely, his figuration of asceticism in terms of linguistic metaphors of desire."[144] "Curiously," she writes, "as Jerome distances himself from the libidinal contamination of literal female bodies, the 'blaze' of the body burns more brightly in the metaphorical constructions of his text."[145]

I suggest that the Church Fathers' attempts to construct Jesus as "celibate Bridegroom" stumbled on a similar problem, for textual, theological, *and* socio-ecclesiastical reasons—but that the metaphor nonetheless continued to be a hard and indeed appealing "worker" in early Christian theology and practice. The metaphor's "brilliant patina" lent it a supplementary "charge," but it also required careful reining in.

A critic of Origen's extravagant allegories once complained that this author may have been prompted to such literary excess "simply because he will not recognize an ordinary metaphor when he sees one."[146] Perhaps, I submit, the Church Fathers understood metaphor all too well: sexual associations continued to "hover over" the metaphor of the "celibate Bridegroom," keeping sexual renunciation as an object of erotic desire, while prompting patristic writers to keep on theologizing.

[142]See the reaction to Jerome's treatise and letter: Jerome, *ep*. 48(49).2; Rufinus, *Apologia contra Hieronymum* 2.5, 42, 43.

[143]See Rambuss's *Closet Devotions* for some startling examples of the linkage of devotion and eroticism in the metaphysical poets; and Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986; French original, 1957), esp. part I, chap. 11, and part II, chaps. 5 and 6.

[144]Patricia Cox Miller, "The Blazing Body: Ascetic Desire in Jerome's Letter to Eustochium," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1:1 (Spring 1993): 21.

[145]Miller, "Blazing Body," 26.

[146]R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959), 246.