Breu, Clarissa. "Touching the Divine: Intra-action in the Gospel of Luke." *Genealogy+Critique* 11, no. 1 (2025): 1–17. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/gc.18388

Touching the Divine: Intra-action in the Gospel of Luke

Dr. Clarissa Breu, Department of New Testament Studies, University of Vienna, AT, clarissa.breu@univie.ac.at

In this article, two passages in which Jesus encounters women who touch him are juxtaposed with Karen Barad's theory of touch (Luke 7:36–50 and 8:43–49). It is shown that an interpretation in the light of critical posthumanism allows a new perspective on the narrative production of bodies in these texts. In a close reading against the background of other ancient texts, the argument is developed that Jesus and the women in these two passages are intra-acting. They emerge as entangled entities in their encounters. Hierarchies associated with binary oppositions and a tradition of separation between an invisible spiritual and a visible material sphere are thus challenged.

Genealogy+Critique is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

1. Introduction

Biblical texts produce material bodies, because they are enacted in bodily gestures in their aftermath and in trajectories of reception.[1] It can make a difference to "understand the nature of this production."[2] The way in which "religious belief and practice" provides "adherents with tangible, embodied and concrete connections to the world of meaning," or establishes and maintains "relationships with significant others, including supernatural, divine or deceased beings,"[3] is related to constructions of power and hierarchy. These constructions can be influential outside the field of theology. In an article on the gesture of touch, Doris Kolesch, who is a scholar in theatre studies, draws a generalizing conclusion about "Christian culture," based on Jesus' refutation of Mary Magdalene's touch in the famous *Noli me tangere* scene in John 20:17: "The prohibition of touch rejects the materiality of the senses and the world of the senses; Christian culture seeks the authentication of reality in a metaphysics of the Word and Scripture."[4] In this quote, Kolesch points to a Christian tradition of a spiritual sublimation of the physical. The emphasis on the dichotomy between a spiritual, male, heavenly, untouchable teacher and a material, female, earthly, touching disciple entailed the valorization of the former categories and the devaluation of the latter. The way in which embodied relations with the divine Other are conceptualized has implications not only for how we perceive relations between bodies, but also for how we relate body and mind, the material and the spiritual, to each other. In other words: The way we perceive narrative constructions of encounters between bodies affects the way we construct relationships with the Other.

---

[1] Pope Francis, e.g., washed the feet of eleven Muslim asylum seekers in their camp and a woman from the camp organization in the Holy Thursday Mess in 2016, and said: "Today, at this moment, as I perform the same act as Jesus by washing the feet of you twelve, we are all engaged in the act of brotherhood […]"; *Mass of the Lord's Supper: Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis*, accessed February 5, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160324_omelia-coena-domini.html.

[2] Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 808, https://doi.org/10.1086/345321.

[3] Elaine Graham, "Religion," in *Critical Posthumanism*, accessed July 12, 2024, https://criticalposthumanism.net/religion/. Stefan Herbrechter refers to god, among others (cyborgs, monsters, strangers), as the Other; see Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus, "What Is a Postmodernist Reading?" *Angelaki* 13, no. 1 (2008): 97, https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250802156091; see Nina Lykke, "Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations With Science," in *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations With Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, ed. Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti (London: Zed, 1996), 13–29.

[4] Doris Kolesch, "Die Geste der Berührung," in *Gesten: Inszenierung, Aufführung und Praxis*, ed. Christoph Wulf and Erika Fischer-Lichte (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2010), 231; My translation of: "Das Berührungsverbot weist die Materialität der Sinne und der Sinnenwelt zurück, die christliche Kultur sucht die Beglaubigung der Wirklichkeit in einer Metaphysik des Wortes und der Schrift."

In this article, I draw on the recent emphasis on embodiment in New Testament scholarship[5] to show that Jesus' encounters with women who touch him do not necessarily lead to a dichotomy between the material and the spiritual spheres or between male and female bodies. On the contrary, they show in a condensed way that material and spiritual realities cannot be separated from each other and that male and female bodies function as performative units. I analyze Luke 7:36–50, where a woman touches Jesus' feet, and Luke 8:43–49, where a woman hoping to be healed touches Jesus' garment. I focus on the narrative function of the motif of touch and juxtapose it with Karen Barad's "On Touching." Against the background of "critical posthumanism,"[6] which questions humanist dichotomies between man/woman, body/mind and subject/object and envisions the "deconstruction of the integrity of the human and the other,"[7] a possible hierarchy between Jesus and the women he encounters is deconstructed. Touch performatively enacts the interconnectedness between material bodies and the spiritual sphere.

In what follows, I show that the bodies of Jesus and the two women are involved in a mutual process of becoming. As a result, the relationship between the human and the divine is performatively developed as a relationship between bodies in "intra-action." Before examining the Lukan Gospel and especially the two Lukan texts for the motif of touch, I introduce Karen Barad's theory of touch and the notion of intra-action.

2. Karen Barad's Theory of Touch

Touch is at odds with the idea of a clearly delineated subject. In the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, we can relate to Anne Carson's quote about the danger of touch: "As members of human society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another [...]."[8] As touching and touched persons, we experience our dependence on the Other. The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility describes the extent to which touch blurs the boundary between subject and object. Whoever actively touches is at the same time touched. The touching and the touched person are both subjects and objects of touch. The phenomenology of

[5] See, e.g., Brittany E. Wilson, *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Annette Weissenrieder and Katrin Dolle, eds., *Körper und Verkörperung: Biblische Anthropologie im Kontext antiker Medizin und Philosophie: Ein Quellenbuch für die Septuaginta und das Neue Testament* (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2019).

[6] Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 9–30.

[7] Herbrechter and Callus, "Reading," 96.

[8] Anne Carson, "Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin, John J. Winkler, and David M. Halperin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 135.

touch shows that human bodies are always open to other bodies.[9] Recently Karen Barad has taken up Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as part of her posthumanist theory. In her essay "On Touching," the physicist and philosopher describes touch as a material process that undermines clear boundaries. She describes "all material 'entities'" as "entangled relations of becoming. [M]ateriality 'itself' is always already touched by and touching infinite configurations of possible others."[10] Materiality implies the touch of the wholly Other, which dissolves the boundaries of any material form. She writes: "[T]ouching is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response."[11] Touch is not an active expression of a self-identical subject, but a response to the Other. Barad also emphasizes that the boundary between finitude and infinity is blurred in the process of touching, for, "all touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the Other is touching all Others, including the 'self.' [E]very finite being is always already threaded through with an infinite alterity diffracted through being and time."[12] Touch, then, emphasizes a moment of boundlessness that is not only material-spatial but also temporal. Barad understands infinity as infinite otherness in the self. In this respect, a temporal dimension is materially grounded.[13] Even the self becomes the Other in the process of touch. In Barad's thought, it is not two previously established subjects that touch each other and transcend their boundaries in the process of touch, but subjects only exist in touch with the Other. They constitute themselves through a constant transformation that Barad calls "intra-action,"[14] "*the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*."[15] Thus, in contrast to interaction, two previously given separate entities do not interact with each other, but intra-action occurs between two others who are other to themselves and to the Other. Barad's subject is a performatively produced part of the world's becoming.[16]

---

[9] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Das Sichtbare und das Unsichtbare*, trans. Regula Giuliani and Bernhard Waldenfels (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1994), 172–203; Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 24–64.

[10] Karen Barad, "On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am," *differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 214, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892943.

[11] Barad, "On Touching," 214.

[12] Barad, "On Touching," 215.

[13] Lorina Buhr, "Das Subjekt als Werden der Welt: Begriffliche Anmerkungen zur neumaterialistischen Subjektkonzeption von Karen Barad," *Rechtsphilosophie* 5, no. 1 (2019): 86, https://doi.org/10.5771/2364-1355-2019-1-79, describes intra-acting components as spatially and temporally intertwined.

[14] This concept resonates with Barad's agential realism, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 132–85.

[15] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 33; emphasis original.

[16] Buhr, "Subjekt," 86.

This notion of the subject describes a connection and, thus, subverts dichotomies of physical/spiritual, male/female, finite/infinite etc., as Margit Shildrick notes:

> Accordingly, our lived experience with others is the basis of our being (or becoming)-in-the-world at all, and the autonomy and sovereignty of the subject are continually undone, even as they are enacted, by intercorporeal encounters. It is not a question of dependency nor yet of incorporation, neither passivity nor consumption in the face of otherness, but of profound connection that enables the emergence of provisional selves.[17]

Touch enacts an infinite entanglement with the Other. I will show below that in the two encounters with women in Luke 7 and 8, touch epitomizes intra-action in Barad's sense, that is, it transcends bodily boundaries and dichotomies. The touch of the two women shows that the texts envision the power of divine forces as grounded in material processes.

3. Two Encounters with Women in the Context of the Lukan Gospel

The two passages, Luke 7:36–50 and 8:43–49, are part of a Gospel that emphasizes touch:

In Luke 6:19, a brief note on miraculous healings, it says, "And the people all tried to touch him, because power (*dynamis*) was coming from him and healing them all." Jesus' healing power comes from somewhere else. But it emanates from his material existence and is activated by touch. This corresponds to the ancient notion of *dynamis*, which was attributed to both living beings and dead matter.[18] It can be transferred and delegated (see Luke 9:1; 24:49; Acts 6:8).[19] Jesus appears as the materialization of divine power and spirit, but he is not identical with them. He is thus a figure between human and God, materially tangible and at the same time interwoven with infinity.

In Luke 7:36–50 a woman enters a symposion scene as an uninvited guest.[20] She wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them and anoints them

---

[17] Margrit Shildrick, "Re/membering the Body," in *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, ed. Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti (Cham: Springer, 2018), 167.

[18] Susanne Luther, "Dynamis," in *Wibilex*, accessed July 17, 2023, https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/wibilex/das-bibellexikon/lexikon/sachwort/anzeigen/details/dynamis/ch/f1e695b86e6ed489a4ae9da22fbb283c/.

[19] See Aristotle, *Cael*. 1.7. See also Weissenrieder and Dolle, *Körper*, 670: stones, amulets and medicinal plants were attributed *dynameis*. The healing power emanating from Jesus' body can thus be compared to those healing powers emanating from material things; see also Weissenrieder and Dolle, 675.

[20] In ancient meals uninvited guests/*akletoi* play a recurring role; see Klaus Berger, "Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, part 2, vol. 25, no. 2, ed. Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984), 1313.

with perfume. Simon, the host, comments on this in an interior monologue, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Jesus responds with a parable, praises the woman's hospitality and promises her forgiveness. Jesus transforms the bodily relation between himself and the woman into a positive encounter, while the host questions Jesus' prophetic qualities. The motif of touch is not made explicit in parallel traditions of the other Gospels (cf. Matt 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–11). There, it is rather the waste of precious perfume that is discussed.

In Luke 8:43–49 the motif of touch is mentioned more than once. A woman from the crowd surrounding Jesus approaches him from behind. She has been suffering from hemorrhage for twelve years and has not been healed. This changes when she touches the hem of Jesus' garment. Jesus responds, asking, "Who touched me?" When no one answers, he repeats "Someone touched me. I know that power (*dynamis*) has gone out from me." The woman now comes forward and admits that she touched Jesus and was healed.[21] The touch of the hemorrhaging woman is similar to the touch of those who want to be healed in Luke 6:19. Again, the healing power emanates from Jesus through touch. The passage also makes clear that Jesus knows about the touch because he feels the power going out from him, not because he feels the touch as such (cf. Luke 8:46).

The two women who touch Jesus are narratively intertwined because both are dismissed with the same words: "(Daugther),[22] your faith has saved/healed you. Go in peace" (7:50; 8:48). The repetition of Jesus' words suggests that there are also other points of comparison between the two women. Both are characterized in ways that can be interpreted as reinforcing binary oppositions. Both women are depicted in a subordinate position. They approach Jesus from behind and they are at his feet. They approach Jesus uninvited and unsolicited. They are associated with materiality in that bodily fluids (tears and blood) and the motif of physical touch play an important role. In other words: both women act bodily. The verbal reactions of the bystanders confirm the emphasis on their physical actions because the women do not speak for themselves (in a direct speech), but others verbally comment on their actions. However, they are not passive physical objects, but they act on their own,[23] in their own interest and actively.

---

[21] Interestingly enough, the garment seems to transport the *dynamis* from Jesus' body.

[22] Annette Weissenrieder states that the designation of the hemorrhaging woman as Jesus' daughter expresses her reintegration into the community of believers. It could be due to the erotic implications of the passage that the woman in Luke 7 is not called a daughter. See Annette Weissenrieder, "Die Plage der Unreinheit? Das antike Krankheitskonstrukt 'Blutfluss' in Lukas 8,43–48," in *Jesus in neuen Kontexten*, ed. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theißen (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 85.

[23] See Weissenrieder, "Die Plage der Unreinheit?," 84.

In Luke 24:39, the risen Lord, who even eats fish with his disciples as a sign of his material presence, explicitly invites them to touch him. The emphasis on touchability distinguishes Jesus' appearance after his death from the epiphany of a ghost.[24]

The Gospel of Luke emphasizes explicit moments of touch. These moments always underline Jesus' openness to divine power and to human touch. Touch stages Jesus' body as the materialization of the divine presence constituted by its relational entanglement with human beings as the Other. The finite materiality of the human body thus becomes the site of the presence of infinity and immaterial powers. They transcend the body and point to the Other. The surpassing of the human is inherent in the human, which becomes particularly clear when the motifs of touch and fluids occur together.

In the following two sections of this article, I analyze the passages in Luke 7 and 8 in more detail to show how the intra-action between a material touch and a spiritual reality helps to deconstruct the binary opposition between the touching women and the touched man. Both passages can be interpreted in terms of Barad's notion of intra-action as representing "entangled relations of becoming."

4. Intra-action in Luke 7:36–50

In the encounter between Jesus and a woman in Luke 7, the women's tears touch Jesus' feet, which she then dries with her hair. Luke emphasizes the tears. They are not mentioned in parallel narratives[25] in the other Gospels.[26] The scene alludes to and alters a typical foot-washing scene. In ancient times, slaves or close female relatives often performed foot washings on guests as a sign of hospitality.[27] Jesus refers to this ritual when he admonishes Simon: "I came to your house. You did not give me any water

[24] A comparison with post-resurrection stories and the motif of touch in the Gospel of John would fill a whole article. The (non-)touch by Mary Magdalene and Thomas in the Gospel of John is of particular interest. When Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus in their encounter after his death, she calls out "Rabbouni!" and Jesus responds with "Me mou haptou," a phrase not easy to translate. Depending on the translation (Do not touch me/Stop touching me/Do not come closer), it is implied that Jesus has already been touched or that Mary is about to touch him. Thomas is exhorted by Jesus to put his finger into his wound. It is, however, not explicitly mentioned that Thomas actually touches Jesus. In any case, both passages seem to express that Jesus is touchable or physically present even after his death, but that the touch takes place on a different level and can be experienced within the believing community.

[25] Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8.

[26] Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 127.

[27] See, e.g., Aristophanes, *Vesp*. 605–11; Petronius, *Sat*. 28. For a collection of relevant texts on foot-washing, see Anni Hentschel, *Die Fußwaschungserzählung im Johannesevangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 161–66; see also Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 48; Andrew McGowan, "A Missing Sacrament? Foot-washing, Gender, and Space in Early Christianity," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 18, no. 19 (2017): 108, https://doi.org/10.1515/arege-2016-0007.

for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears" (Luke 7:44). The woman's tears thus metaphorically replace the cleansing water. The material cleansing is mirrored by the spiritual purification that Jesus expresses when he says that the woman is forgiven. It is not clear whether she has been forgiven prior to the scene and is expressing her gratitude or whether she is seeking forgiveness through her gesture.[28] However, if we read her gesture not as the expression of an inner status, but as a performative enactment of intra-action, the reality of forgiveness is staged in the moment of touch. She becomes a woman who is forgiven in her encounter with Jesus. Jesus' body intra-acts with hers in that the cleansing of his feet mirrors the woman's inner cleansing, which is why his body mirrors her inner process, which is then no longer "just" an inner process. Thus, the clear distinction between bodily action and inner process is blurred, and the inner process becomes visible in the bodily relation. The boundary between the touched man and the touching woman is dissolved into a performative unit that enacts a bodily and inner process of purification.

A closer look at the motifs of hair, feet and perfume supports the idea that two bodies are intra-acting here: In the foot-washing scene, not only the woman's tears and Jesus' feet touch each other, but also the woman's "hair of the head," as Luke emphasizes, and Jesus' feet. The hair substitutes for a cloth in a traditional foot-washing scene (cf. John 13:5), just as the tears substitute for water. It is therefore worth asking whether there are parallel texts that shed light on this unusual role of the hair in Luke 7.[29] Livy's *Ab Urbe condita* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* are particularly interesting in this regard, since both passages narrate an encounter between the human and the divine and contain the motifs of unbound hair and the gesture of sweeping. In the *Metamorphoses*, Psyche, a mortal woman, is expecting a child from Amor, the son of the goddess Venus.[30] The goddess, however, will not accept a mortal as the mother of her grandchild. She directs her anger against Psyche, who desperately turns to the goddess Ceres for help: "Then Psyche threw herself to her feet, wetting the goddess' feet with abundant weeping and wiping the floor with her hair she asked for grace under manifold prayers" (Apuleius, *Metam.* 6.2). Ceres decides not to help, preferring to side with her relative Venus. In Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, hair is also used in a *supplicatio*, a plea to the gods:

---

[28] Charles H. Cosgrove, "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, With Special Reference to the Story of the 'Sinful Woman' in Luke 7:36–50," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 4 (2005): 692, https://doi.org/10.2307/30041064.

[29] Cosgrove offers an extensive overview of the motif of unbound hair in antiquity.

[30] For an analysis of the motif of touch in this novel, see Giulia Sissa, "In Touch, in Love: Apuleius on the Aesthetic Impasse of a Platonic Psyche," in *Touch and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Alex Purves (London: Routledge, 2018).

> [T]he wailings of women were heard not only from private houses, but from every direction matrons pouring into the streets ran about among the shrines of the gods, sweeping the altars with their disheveled hair, kneeling, holding up their palms to heaven and the gods, and praying them to rescue the city of Rome from the hands of the enemy and to keep Roman mothers and little children unharmed (Livy, *Hist.* 26.8.7; see also Ovid, *Fast.* 3.213–232).

Against the background of these comparable gestures, the action of the woman in Luke 7 appears as a supplication to a god. Psyche and the woman in Luke 7 weep at the feet of Ceres and Jesus. Psyche then wipes the floor with her hair. The Roman matrons wipe altars with their hair (or the floor in *Hist.* 3.7.7).[31] Wiping feet with hair remains unusual even in the context of these parallels. It shows that Jesus' body substitutes for the place that conveys divine presence in the other texts. Jesus' feet are touched like a Roman altar by a woman called a sinner (Luke 7:37.39). In the Roman religious conception of the sacred, this carries the risk of defiling the sacred, for "[a]nything classified as sacred in Roman religion could potentially be required to be kept separate from daily life and protected."[32] In the Lukan scene, however, the woman becomes a supplicant and Jesus' body becomes an altar of divine presence and agency. The woman's touch and Jesus' response show that he does not propagate a clear boundary between the sacred and the profane.

The contact of hair and feet, however, carries even more connotations: In Jesus' speech to the host Simon, the role of the feet is particularly emphasized, for Simon could have been expected to kiss Jesus and anoint his *head* with oil ("you did not put oil on my head"; Luke 9:45), but the woman anoints Jesus' *feet* with perfume. The emphasized touch between the "hair of the head" and the feet indicates the intra-action of two bodies merging into one, according to the well-known Homeric phrase "from head to foot" (Homer, *Il.* 16.640; 18.353; 26.169), which describes the whole body. The woman's touch initiates the process of becoming a whole body consisting of two persons. This idea is further supported by the intimate-sexual connotations[33] that resonate in the emphasis on the feet. In the Hebrew Bible the dual form of the word "foot" is a metaphor for the penis (cf. Exod 4:25; Isa 7:20)—an equation that was also common in ancient Greece.

---

[31] "Everywhere were prostrate matrons, sweeping the floors of the temples with their hair, while they besought the angry gods to grant them pardon and end the pestilence."

[32] Jack Lennon, "Contaminating Touch in the Roman World," in *Touch and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Alex Purves (London: Routledge, 2018), 122.

[33] Lorenz Oberlinner, "Begegnungen mit Jesus: Der Pharisäer und die Sünderin nach Lk 7,36–50," in *Liebe, Macht und Religion: Interdisziplinäre Studien zu Grunddimensionen menschlicher Existenz*, ed. Marlis Gielen and Joachim Kügler (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2003), 272.

For example, there was a well-known pun between *pous*/foot and *peos*/penis.[34] The Bomford Cup further substantiates this connection, for this bowl dating from the sixth century BCE stands on a foot in the shape of a penis.[35] If the motif of perfume is included in this reading, the sexual connotation of the woman's act is emphasized even more. It was common for women to anoint their husbands before sex. In Eubulus' play *Carion as Sphinx*, a riddle compares testicles to people who "rub my foot in spicy oils." Feet rubbed with oil or perfume are part of the preparation for sex. In Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* 12.553a–e, the pleasure of men, whose feet are anointed by women with perfumes and unguents, is mentioned.[36] Thus, Eva Keuls can state, "[t]he principal connotation of the alabastron is dutiful conjugal sex."[37] So far, we have seen that the woman's touch enacts an entangled relation of becoming, as two bodies intra-act on multiple levels: (1) the bodily, visible cleansing of Jesus' feet mirrors her inner, invisible cleansing, (2) the wiping of Jesus' body with unbound hair recalls other scenes in ancient literature that suggest that the wiping makes Jesus' body a place of divine presence, (3) the emphasis on the touch between the hair "of the head" and the feet suggests that man and woman become one body in this scene, which also carries a sexual connotation. We will now see that (4) gender attributions and social roles also merge.

The vessel, *alabstron*, the woman is carrying, is associated with women. Men carry oil in *arbylloi*.[38] Not only is the vessel that the woman carries associated with women; the perfume it contains is also connected to femininity. It is described emphatically as *myron*, while in the context of the gestures Simon did not perform, oil is mentioned in terms of *elaion*. Perfume (*myron*) was considered feminine and barbaric in ancient times.[39] Certainly, other uses of the words *myron* and *elaion* exist,[40] but Xenophon's

[34] See Eupirides, *Med.* 679; Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* 3 connects Hephaistos' defective feet with his erotic impairment.

[35] See Daniel B. Levine, "EPATON BAMA ('Her Lovely Footstep'): The Erotics of Feet in Ancient Greece," in *Body Language in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, ed. Douglas Cairns (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2005), 58.

[36] Levine, "EPATON BAMA," 59.

[37] Eva C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 120: "The phallic shape of the alabastron enhances its potential for sexual jokes."

[38] Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus*, 119.

[39] Brooke Holmes, "Marked Bodies: Gender, Race, Class, Age, Disability, and Disease," in *A Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Oxford, New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 175; see Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 13.5.25; 13.1.3; 13.4.20–21; Seneca, *Ep.* 86.12; 108.16; Martial, *Epig.* 6.55; Mireille Lee, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 64: "Given the barbarian connotations of perfumes, it is no surprise that perfumes are most often associated with women, especially in erotic contexts."

[40] Holmes states that the use of perfume was ambivalent in antiquity. The fact that there are many findings of perfume bottles and that literary sources often pejoratively describe the bad smell of the lower classes indicates that a positive view on perfume existed alongside its devaluation. See Holmes, "Marked Bodies," 175; Lee, *Body*, 65: "It seems likely that the use of perfume in itself was not an indicator of gender; rather, the quality of the scent, and its strength, may have been most significant."

Symposion is an important parallel text, since it also features a banquet. In this text, the guests discuss whether or not they should use perfume in the context of their meal: "'Suppose we go further,' said Callias, 'and have someone bring us some perfume, so that we may dine in the midst of pleasant odors, also'" (Xenophon, *Symp.* 2.3). Socrates rejects this idea, because the use of *elaion* is considered masculine, while the use of *myron* associates free men with slaves. After all, anyone could use *myron*, while *elaion* was reserved for free men who trained in the *gymnasioi.*[41] Kathleen Corley argues that, according to the *Symposion*, the use of *myron* undermines binary oppositions: "In Xenophon's Symposium (2.3–4), Socrates denounces the use of perfume by men because it erased the social distinctions between male and female, rich and poor, citizen and slave."[42] Against the background of the *Symposion*, it is also striking that Jesus refers to the woman's intimate physical act as a sign of her *agapē*/love (not *eros*; see Luke 7:47). He places her physical act in the context of love that has no erotic connotations, thus undermining Xenophon's distinction between physical and emotional love. Xenophon compares purely physical love to slavery: "I will now go on to show also that the union is servile when one's regard is for the body rather than when it is for the soul. The man who lusts only after the flesh would with good reason be treated like a mendicant; for he is always dogging the footsteps of this favourite, begging and beseeching the favour of one more kiss or some other caress" (Xenophon, *Symp.* 8.23). The woman takes the position of a slave in a banquet[43] and washes Jesus' feet like a slave.[44] However, the expensive oil speaks against her actually being a slave[45] (or it reinforces the sacrificial character of her gesture). Her actions performatively make her a slave and approximate Jesus, who as a guest was to be served by slaves, to a slave anointed with *myron*. This corresponds to his self-understanding as shown in Luke 22:

---

[41] Aeschines, *Tim.* 1.138: "A slave shall not take exercise or anoint himself in the wrestling-schools."

[42] Lee, *Body*, 64.

[43] See Villa under the Farnesina, cubiculum D, right wall, in: Mark Golden and Peter Toohey, eds., *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 226; see also a picture from the Casa di Giuseppe II, Pompeji, in: Matthew Roller, *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 50; see also Petronius, *Sat*. 58.1: Giton stands in a *convivium* at foot of Encolpius' couch (*ad pedes stabat*), masquerading as a slave; Roller, *Dining Posture*, 28; see also Sueton, *Cal.* 26.2; Seneca, *Ben.* 3.27.1.

[44] Kathleen E. Corley, "The Anointing of Jesus in the Synoptic Tradition: An Argument for Authenticity," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 1, no. 1 (2003): 65, https://doi.org/10.1177/147686900300100104.

[45] See Corley, "Anointing," 66. Scholars also discuss if the woman is a prostitute; contra: Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 132; pro: Mark A. Powell, "Table Fellowship," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 927; Luise Schottroff, "Die große Liebende und der Pharisäer Simon (Lukas 7,36–50)," in *Verdrängte Vergangenheit, die uns bedrängt: Feministische Theologie in der Verantwortung für die Geschichte*, ed. Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz (München: Kaiser, 1988), 158.

> 24 A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. 25 Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. 26 But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

The woman places her body in a close relationship with the body of Jesus, occupying the position that he claims for himself, to be the one who serves at the table.[46] At the same time, she feminizes Jesus' body through the use of perfume, which is associated with female gender performance, and approximates it to the body of a slave. In the woman's touch, however, Jesus' body performatively becomes the body that Luke 22:27 says it should be. The woman, acting like a slave, shows in her intra-action with Jesus the ways in which he is a feminized slave. Her physical expression of love undermines the binary opposition between physical and spiritual love. Thus, the gestures of the woman in Luke 7 show that the touching and the touched person merge, undermining a dichotomous characterization.

This passage, then, does not necessarily represent a Christian sublimation of the physical or a dichotomy between a woman who acts physically[47] and men who verbally explain and judge her behavior, but it does show how two bodies intra-act in a process of becoming.

5. Intra-action in Luke 8:43–49

In contrast to the tears of the woman in Luke 7, the menstrual blood of the woman in Luke 8 carries negative connotations. Her touch is often read against the background of impurity in Lev 15, with the implication that she contaminates Jesus.[48] I read the passage, however, in the context of ancient medical texts[49] that conceive of female weak-

[46] Barbara E. Reid, "'Do You See this Woman?' A Liberative Look at Luke 7.36–50 and Strategies for Reading Other Lukan Stories against the Grain," in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (London, New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 117: "The woman in Lk. 7.35–50 exemplifies one who responds properly to Jesus and whose actions mirror his own."

[47] James L. Resseguie, "Automatization and Defamiliarization in Luke 7:36–50," *Journal of Literature & Theology* 5, no. 2 (1991): 142, https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/5.2.137: "Her 'speech' is her actions."

[48] Shaye J. D. Cohen, however, states that also against the backdrop of Lev 15 the woman would not be isolated as an impure person. Menstruating women were only excluded from the inner area of the temple and Josephus, *A.J.* 1.19.10 suggests that menstruating women should not approach sacred objects. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity," in *Women's History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 279.

[49] See Weissenrieder, "Plage," for more information about the ancient notion of blood flow.

ness as resulting from the loss of heat during menstruation.[50] In this view, female weakness is based on the porosity of the female body. In Hippocrates' *Diseases of Women* 1, women are compared to woolen threads that absorb a lot of moisture because they are porous. Menstruation is a reason for this porosity because it opens the bodies of young girls.[51] The porosity of female bodies prevents them from acting according to one of the most important ancient virtues associated with masculinity, self-control (*sophrosyne*).[52] Candida Moss has shown that the touch of the hemorrhaging woman emphasizes Jesus' female porosity. Her porosity is healed because Jesus himself is porous. He feels *dynamis* leaving him. Moss attributes agency to the woman: "It is the woman who is able to pull divine power out of the passive, leaking Jesus."[53] Jesus' *dynamis* is established as divine power and contrasted with the human inability to heal the woman.[54] His divine power is anchored in his body and at the same time distinguished from it.[55] Jesus' identity is marked as fluid at the moment the miracle is performed. His healing power comes at the cost of human vulnerability and feminine porosity. As in Luke 7, Jesus' body intra-acts with the female body that touches him and that he touches. The separation of inner spiritual and outer bodily processes is subverted as the invisible *dynamis* is presented as an embodied experience felt by both Jesus and the woman. It is worth noting that later in the Gospel, Jesus' body is again described as porous because of the blood that flows from it. At the Last Supper, he identifies the cup as "the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20).[56] In his last hours, one verse—a later addition to the text—mentions Jesus' sweat falling to the ground like drops of blood (Luke 22:43). In the book of Acts, the transmission of the Spirit on those who follow Jesus is described as an active outpouring from Jesus, who is seated at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33; cf. Joel 3:1–2).

---

[50] Holmes, "Marked Bodies," 163.

[51] Ann Ellis Hanson, "Continuity and Change: Three Case Studies in Hippocratic Gynecological Therapy and Theory," in *Women's History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 85.

[52] Lee, *Body*, 33: "In general, men were considered more rational, whereas women were thought to be prone to hysteria due to the fluctuations of their bodies."

[53] Candida Moss, "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25–34," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 3 (2010): 512, https://doi.org/10.2307/25765949. Teresa Hornsby also describes Jesus' body in Luke 7 as passive; see Teresa Hornsby, "The Annoying Woman: Biblical Scholarship after Judith Butler," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 84. The moment of passivity is also stressed in Appian, *Hist*. 14: "[O]nly mules, having no hands, needed others to rub them."

[54] Weissenrieder, "Plage," 81: "Innerhalb der Kohärenzen der menschlichen Wirklichkeit wird 'Blutfluss' als unheilbarer Krankheitszustand beschrieben, der massive ökonomische Konsequenzen mit sich bringt."

[55] See Plato, *Ion* 534c5–535a1, where the creative power of poets is described as divine *dynamis*, which is not the work of human beings. God himself speaks through the poets who are his servants.

[56] Reid, "A Liberative Look," 117.

In summary, two bodies intra-act not only in Luke 7, but also in Luke 8. By successfully using Jesus' healing power for herself, the active, porous woman performatively stages Jesus' porosity and passivity. The divine power in the human being Jesus thus becomes the reason for his porosity and for the dissolution of his bodily boundaries through human touch. *Dynamis* emanates from him without his intention. It is thus different from him and undermines his male self-control. The woman's touch shows the materialization of divine power in a physical encounter.

6. Conclusions

In the two passages, Luke 7:36–50 and 8:43–49, Jesus' body and the bodies that touch him intra-act, marking the fluidity of seemingly fixed identities. Jesus' divine authority to forgive sins and to heal is tied back to bodily processes. Human bodies thus appear as permeable to this divine reality.

The woman in Luke 7 approaches Jesus as a slave and thereby makes him a slave. She anoints him with *myron*, which is connoted as feminine, barbaric and slavish. She thus corresponds to his self-image, which he metaphorically describes in Luke 22 as serving at a banquet. The woman in Luke 7 approaches Jesus in an intimate way, indicated by the interplay of hair, feet and perfume. The scene suggests preparation for sex. However, Jesus calls these physical actions *agapē*, which brings physical and spiritual love closer together. In this way, the distinction between the divine-male-finite-immaterial and the human-female-finite-material is challenged, as two bodies intra-act with each other through touch. The woman's touch opens Jesus to the Other, it shows that Jesus' body is a place of divine presence, not a heroic body, but the body of a feminized slave. Similarly, the woman's touch in Luke 8 shows that she is porous through her unending menstrual flow. Through her touch, her body intra-acts with Jesus' porous body from which *dynamis* flows out: Thus, what was perceived as a feminine weakness that accompanies porosity also affects Jesus.

A reading of the motif of touch in Luke's Gospel with Barad's theory of touch shows that Jesus' identity is not a preconceived subjectivity but emerges in the intra-action with those who encounter him. It emerges, in the case of the two women in Luke 7 and 8, not through demarcation but through touch. It is embodied, relational and in the process of becoming. This is relevant when faced with a tradition of separation between the sacred and the profane, or the spiritual and the material, because it shows that the hierarchy between bodies that are produced in biblical texts and their interpretations can be deconstructed.

References

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

———."On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am." *differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 206–23. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892943.

———. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/345321.

Berger, Klaus. "Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament." In *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, part 2, vol. 25, no. 2, edited by Wolfgang Haase and Hildegard Temporini, 1032–1432. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984.

Blomberg, Craig L. *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005.

Buhr, Lorina. "Das Subjekt als Werden der Welt: Begriffliche Anmerkungen zur neumaterialistischen Subjektkonzeption von Karen Barad." *Rechtsphilosophie* 5, no. 1 (2019): 79–91. https://doi.org/10.5771/2364-1355-2019-1-79.

Carson, Anne. "Putting Her in Her Place: Women, Dirt, and Desire." In *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, edited by Froma I. Zeitlin, John J. Winkler and David M. Halperin, 135–69. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Cohen, Shaye D. "Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity." In *Women's History and Ancient History*, edited by Sarah B. Pomeroy, 273–99. Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Corley, Kathleen E. "The Anointing of Jesus in the Synoptic Tradition: An Argument for Authenticity." *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 1, no. 1 (2003): 61–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/147686900300100104.

———. *Private Women Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993.

Cosgrove, Charles H. "A Woman's Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, With Special Reference to the Story of the 'Sinful Woman' in Luke 7:36–50." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 4 (2005): 675–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/30041064.

Francis, Pope. *Mass of the Lord's Supper: Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis*. Accessed February 5, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160324_omelia-coena-domini.html.

Golden, Mark, and Peter Toohey, eds. *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

Hanson, Ann Ellis. "Continuity and Change: Three Case Studies in Hippocratic Gynecological Therapy and Theory." In *Women's History and Ancient History*, edited by Sarah Pomeroy, 73–110. Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Hentschel, Anni. *Die Fußwaschungserzählung im Johannesevangelium*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022.

Herbrechter, Stefan. *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Herbrechter, Stefan, and Ivan Callus. "What is a Postmodernist Reading?" *Angelaki* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95–111. https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250802156091.

Holmes, Brooke. "Marked Bodies: Gender, Race, Class, Age, Disability, and Disease." In *A Cultural History of the Human Boy in Antiquity*, edited by Daniel H. Garrison, 159–83. Oxford, New York: Bloomsbury, 2010.

Hornsby, Teresa. "The Annoying Woman: Biblical Scholarship after Judith Butler." In *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, edited by Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville, 71–89. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Keuls, Eva. *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Klinghardt, Matthias. *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgemeinschaft: Soziologie und Liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996.

Kolesch, Doris "Die Geste der Berührung." In *Gesten: Inszenierung, Aufführung und Praxis*, edited by Christoph Wulf and Erika Fischer-Lichte, 225–41. München: Wilhelm Fink, 2010.

Lee, Mireille. *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Lennon, Jack. "Contaminating Touch in the Roman World." In *Touch and the Ancient Senses*, edited by Alex Purves, 121–33. London: Routledge, 2018.

Levine, Daniel B. "EPATON BAMA ('Her Lovely Footstep'): The Erotics of Feet in Ancient Greece." In *Body Language in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, edited by Douglas Cairns, 55–72. Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2005.

Luther, Susanne. "Dynamis." In *Wibilex*. Accessed July 17, 2023. https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/wibilex/das-bibellexikon/lexikon/sachwort/anzeigen/details/dynamis/ch/f1e695b86e6ed489a4ae9da22fbb283c/.

Lykke, Nina. "Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science." In *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace*, edited by Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti, 13–29. London: Zed, 1996.

McGowan, Andrew. "A Missing Sacrament? Foot-washing, Gender, and Space in Early Christianity." *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 18, no. 19 (2017): 105–22, https://doi.org/10.1515/arege-2016-0007.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Das Sichtbare und das Unsichtbare*. Translated by Regula Giuliani and Bernhard Waldenfels. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1994.

Moss, Candida. "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25–34." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 3 (2010): 507–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/25765949.

Oberlinner, Lorenz. "Begegnungen mit Jesus: Der Pharisäer und die Sünderin nach Lk 7,36–50." In *Liebe, Macht und Religion: Interdisziplinäre Studien zu Grunddimensionen menschlicher Existenz*, edited by Marlis Gielen and Joachim Kügler, 253–78. Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2003.

Powell, Mark A. "Table Fellowship." In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd ed., edited by Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, 796–800. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013.

Reid, Barbara E. "'Do You See this Woman?' A Liberative Look at Luke 7.36–50 and Strategies for Reading Other Lukan Stories Against the Grain." In *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, 106–20. London, New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.

Resseguie, James L. "Automatization and Defamiliarization in Luke 7:36–50." *Journal of Literature & Theology* 5, no. 2 (1991): 137–50. https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/5.2.137.

Roller, Matthew. *Dining Posture in Ancient Rome: Bodies, Values, and Status*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Schottroff, Luise. "Die große Liebende und der Pharisäer Simon (Luke 7,36–50)." In *Verdrängte Vergangenheit, die uns bedrängt: Feministische Theologie in der Verantwortung für die Geschichte*, edited by Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, 147–62. München: Kaiser, 1988.

Shildrick, Margrit. "Re/membering the Body." In *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*, edited by Cecilia Åsberg, and Rosi Braidotti, 165–74. Cham: Springer, 2018.

Sissa, Giulia. "In Touch, in Love: Apuleius on the Aesthetic Impasse of a Platonic Psyche." In *Touch and the Ancient Senses*, edited by Alex Purves, 150–66. London: Routledge, 2018.

Vasseleu, Cathryn. *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*. London, New York: Routledge, 1998.

Weissenrieder, Annette. "Die Plage der Unreinheit? Das antike Krankheitskonstrukt 'Blutfluss' in Lukas 8,43–48." In *Jesus in neuen Kontexten*, edited by Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theißen, 75–85. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002.

Weissenrieder, Annette, and Katrin Dolle, eds. *Körper und Verkörperung: Biblische Anthropologie im Kontext antiker Medizin und Philosophie: Ein Quellenbuch für die Septuaginta und das Neue Testament*. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2019.

Wilson, Brittany E. *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.