



An Outrageous Question,
But So Relevant Today

Was Jesus Sexual?

God Incarnate and ‘The Sex Question’

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(Painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, 1827)

In one of the few books written on Jesus and the question of his sexuality, Andy Angels (*Intimate Jesus: The Sexuality of God Incarnate*, 2017) states in his introduction, “I apologize in advance to any who might find the material offensive” (p. xv). I echo that sentiment here, but with this coda: Jesus would have probably welcomed this question!

I’m asking it in this piece because I *know* the sexuality of Jesus has become fodder for speculation over the last decade and a half, in an age of *DaVinci Codes* and the need to ‘queer’ God for the sake of revisionist doctrines.¹ Even more important is to understand the way Jesus lived, spoke, acted—which defines in fact how followers should live, speak, and act themselves.

Was Jesus sexual? We can’t even begin to imagine a response without framing the question around the incarnation of Christ.

¹ Marcella Althaus-Reed, *The Queer God*. Routledge, 2004; Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

It is John, son of Zebedee and the ‘beloved disciple’, who writes in the prologue to his gospel that “the Word became *flesh*,” (σὰρξ ἐγένετο, ‘sarx egeneto’). The Greek term “flesh” expresses human nature as opposed to the divine, and material nature as opposed to the spiritual. And it is probably for this reason that John uses “flesh” rather than “body,” since the latter could be immediately connected to Jesus being male, and thus a gendered limitation as well as a limitation on human nature.²

John is intending his readers to understand that the incarnation of Jesus embodied the human experience in full, as attested to in the temptations Jesus underwent (Matt 4:1ff), in his display of human behaviors, emotions, physical body, body reactions, and in his death.³ Not to acknowledge that Jesus’ incarnation also and wholly included his sexuality is to deny that Jesus understands *our* sexuality as humanly embodied. Jesus can meet people where they are, unafraid of their humanity, because he experienced it.

God, in a Male Body

In other writings, I’ve discussed probable rationales on why God incarnates as male, so we will leave that discussion for readers of my 2021 book.⁴

Here, I’d like to review what we *never talk about* when we talk about Jesus as a *man*, a son, a carpenter from Jerusalem. Such embody development, physicality, hormone actions, bodily features, and mental development. They also embody gender and male sex role development, internalizations based on notions of such at the time Jesus grew into manhood.

As fully human in appearance, he was “found as a man” (Phil. 2:8). We’ve all seen centuries of artwork that try to capture “Jesus the man” — in sundry forms, looks, and protoypes that vary with the ages and imagination. We see him as a baby, sometimes nude (with male genitals); partially clad in sundry occasions (his baptism, his judgment, his crucifixion); and robed as a common man of his day. We see him muscular and strong, but sometimes thin and weak; sometimes looking more effeminate than masculine, as based on traditional notions of masculinity and femininity when the paintings were created.

² John intends for his audience to hear that God, incarnate as Jesus, experiences the totality of being human. That Jesus remains God is a mystery, but we get a glimpse of the ‘how’ in Philipians 2:6–8: God, becoming “nothing” (the term used is “*ekenosis*,” ἐκένωσεν, ‘to empty one’s self’). I take that to mean God ‘empties’ aspects of Godship when embodying as Christ to put on “humanness.” The God and human union is called *the hypostatic union*, and is a central doctrine in Christendom. (Kevin DeYoung, “Theological Primer: Hypostatic Union.” *The Gospel Coalition*, December 19, 2018.) Such a union cannot be fathomed or appropriately explained by the human mind—we are not God. The term “flesh,” as used, is not only a gender-neutral term for humanity, but has often been a euphemism for the sexual—its erotic dimension and human *sexual* experience. That meaning is hidden here, but not in other passages (Rom 7:5, 14, 18, 25; Eph 5:29). In his book, Angel makes the point that John wants readers to know God incarnate experienced human sexuality in its physical embodiment like any other human male (30). John uses the term “flesh” to have us understand Jesus took on the weakness of human flesh (Angel, 49).

³ Jesus was *born* (Luke 2:7); he grew (Luke 2:40, 52). Jesus tired (John 4:6), got thirsty (19:28) and hungry (Matt 4:2). He experienced weakness (Matt 4:11; Luke 23:26). He got angry (six times recorded, e.g., John 2:13-17, Matthew 21:12-17); and he died (Luke 23:46).

⁴ The title, *A Christian’s Guide through the Gender Revolution: Gender, Cisgender, Transgender, and Intersex*. Cascade Publishers, 2021. The conversation on Jesus’ embodiment as male is covered in Chapter 7.

The Gospels give no account of Jesus as a sexual person, other than his maleness. But we have the certainty of knowing that “as a man,” Jesus must have experienced all the developmental, physical elements of a maturing male sexuality. That would have included:

- Prepubescent and pubescent development, which includes the actions of hormones—principally *testosterone*—acting on his genital development, muscularity; also coding his brain (already bathed in utero with fetal androgens) to be receptive to visual, olfactory, and tactile erotic stimuli common to males.
- Experiencing erections (“*morning wood*” and others; and as pubertal and young adult development ensued, most likely nocturnal emissions of semen (i.e., the “*wet dreams*” young men experience.)
- Having a sexual drive. To say “Jesus must have had a sexual drive” underscores the humanity of his body and brain coding which enable erotics. (It is not the same as saying Jesus *acted* on his sexual drive in “wrong ways,” nor dwelled mentally on the “wrong things.” We discuss this below.)
- Having sexual ‘temptations’. Here, let’s exercise some understanding: We *are* told in the gospels that Jesus was tempted in all manners humanly possible by Satan during the forty days in the desert. We are also told he never gave into temptations. Again in John, we are told that Jesus humbled himself, “having become obedient unto death” (2:8). To be tempted as a human is not the same as to give in to temptation as a human. He never gave in to any temptation (Hebrews 4:15); but I am certain Jesus was tempted sexually. (We know Satan doesn’t miss any opportunity when available.)

So let’s recap here: The Jesus we understand in a male body as fully human must have experienced all the developmental items we’ve listed. And in human embodiment, I’m certain Jesus wrestled with sexual elements as much as he must have wrestled with his human emotions; even with God’s ultimate will (remember the “*If it is possible, let this cup pass from me*” moment [Matt 26:38–39]). Yet we are told—his witnesses testifying—Jesus never sinned.

This is how Jesus is distinguished from us, and from “the first Adam”: He experiences humanness by living in a human body, situated in a broken world; but he doesn’t give into that world, or what that world may request of that body, or what that body may request of that mind. “Righteous in all he does” includes a righteous sexuality.

What does that mean? It means a sexuality and ethic that remains willfully constrained so that it does not interfere with the will of God, which is for Jesus, becoming our sacrificial lamb. Being perfect, Jesus is not doing wrong by or with his sexuality—and I must assume that means in thought or deed.

Does it mean, for instance, Jesus never “played with himself,” even as a pubescent boy?

We can’t know that, but we can assume “probably not.” If Jesus at around 12 years is found debating the Law with elders in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41ff), and is “about his Father’s house,” it

would be doubtful a pubescent Jesus is concerning himself with his budding erotics. This doesn't mean Jesus didn't have budding erotics; it means Jesus, even at that age, understood the priorities of his mission.⁵

We also have no history of Jesus having intercourse of any kind, not taking any of his disciples to bed (male or female), or looking at a woman and mentally undressing her, or fantasizing taking her to bed. If Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, then let's remember that there were significant prohibitions already "on the books" (i.e. in the Torah) regarding semen and hygiene; against fornication, adultery, lusting, homosexuality, etc. Christ himself warns about lust and equates it with sexual behavior (Matt 5:28). Thus, if in Christ the Law is fulfilled (Rom 8:3-4); and if, indeed, Christ is the sacrificial Lamb of God, spotless and without fault (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19), then it stands to reason that Jesus stayed true to his righteousness—his sexuality included.

I address one more physical item before we move on: How can a male Jesus relate to a female if he didn't experience female embodiment? (Isn't this the age-old predicament—men, assuming to know all about women, when they themselves *aren't women*?) Is there any evidence that Jesus understood what a "woman embodied" was like?

There's significant evidence that Jesus "got" women, raised women's statuses, and included them in ways that were not the customs of his day (see below). Jesus understood the plight of women and strove to minister to them as equally as he did men. I also believe this included knowing *their* embodiment.

For me, the most significant evidence of the latter comes by way of the woman with an issue of blood, who Jesus heals.

I can only speculate, but Mark 5:30 tells that "*at once, Jesus was aware of the power that had gone out from him.*" Did God-inside-the-flesh understand well the dimensions of *her* uterine problem? And, that power which had emanated from him—wasn't it directed specifically to the organ bleeding for 12 years? Miracle healings are never explored from the perspective of what God knows and understands about the body, its issues, because "of course," God understands *all* about *all issues!* In this case, however, God is an incarnate *man*. . . God incarnate has no uterus, never had a menses.

And yet. . . *and yet*, Jesus searches for the woman, knowing that the source of her healing from him targeted a specific part of the body, a part that he did not share. The way Mark 5:30 phrases it, the particularity of Jesus looking for the woman, are especially telling: ⁶ I believe Jesus

⁵ Let me be clear here, that this line of thinking regarding Jesus, his body, his organs, his mind, doesn't settle the question of what exploration behaviors—for instance masturbation—may be deemed "not okay" by ethical or moral standards. Or, for that matter, other forms of self-stimulation. For these questions, we need a different essay.

⁶ The Greek reveals an intentionally awkward way of expressing what Jesus is feeling. The literal Greek states, "Jesus, having known in himself the power out of him, power having gone forth, having turned in the crowd, said, 'Who, of me, touched the garments?' The term for power, *dynamis* (δύναμις) is understood as miraculous power, divine strength. But it is Mark's comments about Jesus knowing the specific 'power out of him' that catches the attention; a power that makes Jesus ask *who has touched him*. "*Who touched me?*" A crazy thing to ask given the crowd, surely; but Jesus wants an answer! Is it because he doesn't know who has touched him? Or does he want the woman to know that he knows the nature of the power emanated, and how it is healing *her body*? Of course there's more, Jesus eventually affirms her

understood and could resonate with her physiology, stemming from the very nature of the healing power that emanated from him. At least, I'd like to think that Jesus' experience of humanity also covered *her* humanity.

Jesus and Gender: Masculinity or Androgyny?

There are theological treatises that extoll Jesus' incarnation as a male and his male role, as if his masculinity needed a coda. In doing so, what's admired is not only his male ancestry and lineage, marking him Jewish for the Jews and the greater Roman world to note; but the precedence of his maleness:

He grew to a certain height with specific features that made him identifiable to all who knew him as a man. He became a carpenter. He had a sexual make-up that identified him as male [*meaning without saying it, Jesus had male genitals*] . . . and was most likely bearded, as a Nazir (a pious man) would have been then. What is described for us reveals Jesus fully embodied as a male, with all that goes along to make him a man: a male body with physiology and musculature to daily hunger. From all that is said about him, Jesus acted authoritatively as a man would in such occasions.⁷

Assigning masculinity to Jesus with the attributes perceived to be 'manly', whether in his own culture or our own now, is patently wrong. 'Of course' Jesus was 'masculine', and probably absorbed all necessary masculinities of his time to function in his sociocultural world. But the greater notion is that Jesus did more to break free from any *masculine stereotypes* than any other biblical persona.⁸ He did not need patent masculinity to make him Emmanuel:

Jesus visits Mary and Martha often and has chats with them, something men of the day would never do with single or widowed women. Jesus openly weeps as he comforts Martha and Mary after Lazarus dies (John 11:35). He didn't take a wife, as per male Jewish custom. He traveled with both male and female followers. He is homosocially intimate with his beloved disciple John, who often rests on his chest. He plays with children, and admonishes followers to be like them. He speaks directly to women; he heals women. He addresses women like he would address any man. Ultimately, he is anointed by women, and appears to his women followers first. For a "man of his day," Jesus does more to free male gendered roles than any other prophet, teacher, or rabbi. Add to these androgynous attributes the following qualities which Jesus often exhibited: *perseverance, generosity, compassion, faith, servanthood, being loving, empathic, forgiving, prayerful, committed, patient, and humble* (Gal 5:22).

Godly people ought to aspire and emulate Jesus regardless of their sexual form or gender identity. The family of God has no room for sex-stereotyping Jesus, or anyone else.

action of faith. But there is a specificity to the question Jesus asks that underscores the nature of the power emanated, and the target—her bleeding womb.

⁷ Assemblies of God, "Transgenderism, Transsexuality, and Intersexuality: A Position Paper," 2017, 7. Also see, Nate Pyle, *Man Enough: How Jesus Redefines Manhood*. Zondervan, 2015.

⁸ See Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Androgyny of Jesus. Daughters of Sarah*, V2 (March) 1976, 3.

The Offensives: Queering Jesus or Marrying Him

Today, there's no shortage of queer theologians interested in fomenting outrageous claims about Jesus' sexuality, not the least of which makes Jesus bi, or gay, or closeted. These go further than the *DaVinci Code*, it fictionally claiming Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. In trying to find cause for turning orthodox positions on sex and marriage untenable, Jesus becomes the target, and his sexuality becomes the fodder for gayness, for trysts; or to be more 'conforming', for marriage.

Queering Jesus: *Jesus and John*. The particularly close connection of John the disciple with Jesus (John 13:23, 25; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20) isn't just considered brotherhood or male homosociability. It's considered not-so-hidden homosexuality, as ugly as this statement is.

But John in his gospel account isn't alluding to anything between Jesus and John himself; but rather, an underscore and redefinition of male intimacy. He is challenging the status quo of the day, that when men showed interest and affection to another, there were always sexual undertones.⁹

The words for "love" used by John are *agapao* (ἀγαπάω) and *phileo* (φιλέω), words that mean to *love a friend, a brother; as in admiration, esteem; to be kindly disposed to another*. As a matter of course, these are the very terms used to describe the love between God the Father and God the Son, who also enjoys a filial intimacy at the breast of the father (John 1:18). *"By using an image of physical closeness, John intends his audience to hear from the outset that the relationship of John to Jesus is akin to the Father and the Son, and is marked by intimacy."*¹⁰

The idea that God so loved the world that men could share this level of fraternal intimacy with one another, physically without sex, spiritually and emotionally bonding, was worth enough for John to write about. After all, he had been the recipient of this amazing love.

Queering Jesus: *Jesus and Peter*. The other passage made out to be an outrageous flirtation by Jesus situates the occasion on the beach in Galilee, with Simon Peter (John 21). Here, before his ascension, Jesus asks Peter three times, *"Do you love me?"* Contextually, the first ask is in relationship to Peter's relationship with other disciples: *"Do you love me more than these?"* This first ask, in full context, is hardly an insinuation of promiscuity between disciple and master. To the contrary, it begs the question of who Peter is listening to and obeying—recall that by then, Peter had denied Christ three times. And, Christ's response is to request of Peter care of his flock.

In the other two asks, Jesus' response is again decentered, demonstrating that emphasizing Peter's love for the Master is a precursor to service: caring and 'feeding' the Master's flock. This

⁹ Let's recall that in the Roman world of the Gospel's setting, people lived in a culture which celebrated human physicality and sexuality. Roman baths were noted for more than saunas and exercise; they were places people 'scoped' each other, naked wrestling among men offering a precursor for sexual prowess and encounters. It would be natural to assume, then, any demonstration of intimacy or affection between two friends would be more than friendship. This position has been taken by queer theologians to infer that Jesus and John had more than friendship between them—a proposition John the apostle is careful to avoid implying, by connecting the relationship of John and Jesus to Jesus and the Father.

¹⁰ Andy Angel, *Intimate Jesus*, p.15.

is not a conversation highlighting erotic love; to the contrary: it is a conversation underscoring the need for Peter to restore his trust in Christ after having denied him three times:

If he [Peter] had slipped again into the circle of the disciples with no special treatment or reference to his fall, it might have seemed a trivial fault to others, and even to himself. And so, after that strange meal on the beach, we have this exquisitely beautiful and deeply instructive incident of the special treatment needed by the denier before he could be publicly reinstated in his office.¹¹

Marrying Jesus: *Mary Magdalene.* If Jesus isn't gay, but straight, then he must have married—so goes the argument. And, of course, there are no two better candidates than Mary Magdalene or Mary of Bethany.

Contrasting popular culture, there is no insinuation in John's or any gospel that Jesus had any relationship of a sexual or erotic nature with Mary Magdalene. To the contrary, John presents Mary as one of Jesus' 'disciples,' who is devoted to the Master (she is with Jesus' mother at the cross; later, on the way to the tomb to anoint the body). Mary is rewarded for that devotion by being the first to see Jesus resurrected. Mary herself addresses Jesus as 'teacher' (John 20:16), and as 'lord' (John 13:13). At the tomb, Jesus addresses Mary with expectant caution: "*Don't touch me*" / "*Don't cling to me*" (John 20:17, KJV and NIV),¹² stated in the Greek with the negative adverb, "*not yet*" (οὐπο', οὐπω), a cautious hesitation since Jesus had not yet ascended to the Father. There is nothing in these passages to suggest anything sexual about the relationship, or the moment at the tomb.

Marrying Jesus: *Mary of Bethany.* What about Mary of Bethany, whose home with Martha and Lazarus Jesus visited often? John's declaration is that Jesus loves them (11:5). When Mary cries over the death of Lazarus, it moves Jesus to tears (11:35), and he is deeply troubled. All good, but what about this Mary always sitting at the Master's feet, listening. . . anointing Jesus' feet with expensive nard; and all that hair-wiping (11:2)? Andy Angel suggests in his book that Mary of Bethany may have well been attracted to Jesus (136). Did Jesus have a 'yen' for Mary?

There is no commentary in the Lazarus story to suggest Jesus had anything but special regard for Mary, probably the younger sister; certainly the most vocal when it came to her disappointment at Jesus not showing up with sufficient time to heal her dying brother. It is clear in Jesus' weeping *after* Mary weeps (v. 35) there is an attendant emotional connection between Jesus and Mary. . . But this is not the same as a romantic infatuation, *even if* Jesus understood she had a crush on him, and he may well have liked her very much as a young woman. Humanly, Jesus may have been flattered. Physically, Jesus may have even felt attraction—it would be humanly natural. John, however, makes no commentary that would suggest there was any romance between them. What can be deduced is that Jesus deeply cared for and understood Mary of Bethany.

¹¹ McClaren's Exposition, "Lovest Thou Me?" John 21:15. <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/john/21-15.htm>.

¹² The verb "touch," (ἅπτου) in its transliteration, 'haptomai', implies to modify, to change, by touching—a touching that 'influences' something; touching that may alter something. When the Greek meaning of the term John uses is taken into consideration, it frames well Jesus' hesitation to be hugged, touched, examined, shortly after his resurrection. This is a moment of triumph not yet to be examined and tested as a resurrected body, as Jesus does later on with Thomas.

No-one can claim as truths things we are never told. There are, however, things we are told about Jesus that allow us, in context and by exploring the Greek terms used, etc., to extrapolate more specific meanings. Queer theologians make much ado about the sexuality of Jesus, but scriptures seem to imply the opposite: Jesus is intimate, close, personal, befriends men and women, but at no point is there any indication, stated or implied, even from the earliest translations, that Jesus had a sexual relationship with any of these.

Fully Human, All the Way Down Fully God, All the Way Up

At another level, the kind of theology we often do hear, which warps Jesus' sexuality by either not addressing it or speaking *only* of its righteousness, denies him that portion of humanity he experienced, which is also *our humanity*. Jesus enters into our complex and confusing sexuality with a focus on exalting it, not fulfilling it. By engaging it with divine love for the other more than for self, Jesus calls us to holiness of life and of love:

God experienced his human sexuality in love. This love meets people where they are and respects all, even those who have lost both self-respect and others' respect on account of their personal history. In his approach to holiness, Jesus walks with his disciples. . .he puts aside his own human sexual needs and desires in order to meet the needs of others.¹³

In John's gospel, Jesus is often surprisingly human, sometimes shocking his disciples, bending gender assumptions, crossing rigid male-female boundaries as well as male-male boundaries in communications and physical closeness. In all these, as well as in the knowledges inhered in understanding a human body, its growth, development, hormones, erotics, we experience the uncomfortable challenges of the incarnation—what it means that our Lord was fully human.

“That God has taken on frail flesh and lived in holiness and love. . .” (Angel, 152) can only enrich our spiritual and relational lives. Such an understanding is assuredly one of the biggest consolations: He knows first-hand, and he cares.

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¹³ Angel, 151.