

A Fresh Reading of John 20:17:

“Do Not Touch Me”

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the language of John 20:17 and its possible interpretations. The narrative context of the verse is an encounter and ensuing conversation between Mary Magdalene and Jesus following his resurrection. Once Mary recognises Jesus, he says to her, “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.”¹ As well as exploring a selection of the verse’s various readings over the last two millennia, I examine the language used by the writer of John’s gospel, whom I refer to throughout as “John,”² and conclude by suggesting my own reading of the verse that I believe best captures its intended meaning: that Jesus’ command to Mary in John 20:17 can be read as a sexual euphemism, which implicitly attests to the celibacy of the resurrected Jesus.

Key Words: John 20:17; celibacy; *haptomai*; Mary Magdalene; Jesus

Introduction

Not too many decades ago, in some English Bible versions, a reader could expect to see John 20:17 translated as, “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” More recently, one is likely to see the words, “Do not hold onto me” or “Do not cling to me” instead of “Do not touch me.” Yet the verb John uses in this verse (*haptomai* in its lexical form) continues to be routinely translated as “touch” in other parts of the New Testament (NT).³ There are many reasons that have been used to justify this change in translation. For instance, there has been debate over the significance of *haptou*, the present imperative of *haptomai* which John uses: does the present tense signify “touch” or “hold”? Also significant is the convention to read John 20:17 as dependent upon Matt 28:9, where several women (including Mary Magdalene) cling to the feet of the risen Jesus: could “touch” and “cling” therefore be regarded as the same action? There has been disquiet over the seemingly negative command of John 20:17, and Jesus’ possibly rebuffing tone, directed

¹ Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations in this article are my translations of the Greek texts: *Nestle-Aland Greek NT*, 27th ed. (hereafter NA²⁷), 28th ed. (hereafter NA²⁸), *United Bible Societies Greek NT* (hereafter *UBS*) and the Septuagint (hereafter *LXX*).

² The author of the fourth Gospel remains anonymous throughout that work. The “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 19:26; 21:20-24) is given ultimate authority for the content, but the final signature at 21:24 (“we know that his witness is true”) suggests a communal effort or at least an editor. Early textual tradition associates “John” with the authorship of the Gospel, such as the Muratorian Canon (ca. CE 170), *Canon Muratori* 26-34 (*NT Apocrypha* 1:34-35). Tertullian (ca. CE 150-225) identifies *Iohannem* as the disciple Jesus loved in *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 22.5.

³ Of the 35 instances of *haptomai* in the NT, only John 20:17 and Col 2:21 (which I discuss later) are not routinely translated as “touch.”

toward a woman: do translators seek to soften this by changing “touch” to “hold” or “cling”? I discuss the different translations of *mē mou haptou* (“Do not touch me”) in the second half of this article, but for now let me suggest another reason for their occurrence. The English word “touch” is ambiguous in the same way that *haptomai* is—“touch” can be used in contexts that allow room for sexual meaning. As I demonstrate, *haptomai* also allows for sexual innuendo but does not demand it, and so I maintain that “touch” best conveys the subtle thought of John 20:17. I wonder if the change from “touch” to “hold” in recent translations is partly motivated by the notion that readers might be uncomfortable with this innuendo where Mary and Jesus are concerned. The story of the garden encounter, as told in John 20:1-18, is an intensely emotional scene between this man and woman, which culminates in the ambiguities of desired—yet prohibited—touch. Perhaps the discomfort wrought by readers’ religious or cultural sensibilities are ameliorated by the replacement of “touch” with the cold logic of a command that suggests Mary is clinging and must let Jesus go.

In this article, I therefore suggest that the words from Jesus to Mary, *mē mou haptou*, are a deliberately obtuse “loaded” prohibition that carries sexual meaning. Readers’ discomfort notwithstanding, Jesus is, after all, human, and sexuality is part of being human. In my previous research (Aalbers 2021), I have proposed that Jesus’s command to Mary in John 20:17 can be read as a sexual euphemism. At first glance, this may imply that Jesus and Mary had been lovers or married and the “Do not touch me” admonition was bringing an end to their relationship.⁴ This is possible, but other contextual considerations, covered in my previous research, make it more likely that the sexual euphemism is alluding to the celibacy of Jesus, rather than any past sexual relationship with Mary.⁵ I argue that John uses this negative linguistic tool to convey that Jesus is celibate at least at his resurrection—and possibly beforehand—and the touch of Mary is a threat in some way to that status. John’s resurrection stories (20:1–21:25) portray Jesus to the reader as a man who is still physical and embodied in resurrection, able to eat with his disciples (21:12), able to be touched by a doubting Thomas (20:27), and, I propose, who is still vulnerable to the love of Mary. John’s emphasis in the prologue to his Gospel on the incarnation of the divine Christ as human (1:1-18) climaxes in the resurrection of the divine human man—a humanity which includes sexuality. Therefore, I focus here on the semantic possibilities of the language of Jesus’s prohibition to show its sexual potential. I maintain that Mary’s action of approaching Jesus is not synonymous with her platonic clinging in Matt 28:9; rather, the encounter between Mary and Jesus in John 20:17 is imbued with a “psychological subtlety,”⁶ culminating in the tender ambiguity of *mē mou haptou* as a signal to sexual restraint.

⁴ See the following section for examples of theologians and scholars who have interpreted the verse in this light.

⁵ For example, celibacy in the NT was highly valued (Luke 2:36-37; 1 Cor 7:6-7) and it was considered an ideal “angelic” state to be anticipated in the future resurrection (Mark 12:25). The Dead Sea Scrolls, before the writing of the NT, also show a high regard for celibacy in certain Judaic contexts. Post-NT texts, such as those from Nag Hammadi, dated between the second and fourth centuries CE, consistently portray Mary Magdalene and Jesus in an ascetic although spiritually intimate relationship.

⁶ For a nostalgic journey tracing the loss of the word “touch” from translations, see Fowler (1975).

Sexual Innuendo in John 20:17: Previous Interpretations

The idea that the prohibition of John 20:17 might have a sexual underpinning is not a new thought. Hippolytus of Rome (170-235 CE) saw a type of passionate spiritual love between Mary and Jesus. He read the scene intertextually with Song of Songs 3:3-4, creating an emotive backdrop for Mary and Jesus that mirrored the erotic relationship between the Lover and the Shulamite:

For at that moment she clings to him, embracing his feet. And he calls to her: “Do not touch me, for I am not yet ascended to the Father.” She continued to cling to him and said: “I will not let you go until I have brought you in and have let you into my heart.” “I will not let you go until I have brought you into my mother’s house and into the chamber where she became pregnant with me.” Because love of Christ had gathered in her belly she did not want to go away. Therefore she cries: “I have found him and will not let him go.” O blessed woman who continued to cling to his feet, so that she could fly up with him in the air! (Hippolytus, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 25.2; translation from de Boer 2007)

Another interesting early reading of John 20:17 explicitly refers to Jesus’ relationship with Mary as an example of chastity. In his *Epistle Concerning Virginity*, pseudo-Clement associates the meaning of the text with the behaviour of celibate monks who were in the practice of cohabitating with women at the time:⁷

[Jesus] sent them out two and two together, men with men; but women were not sent with them, and neither in the highway nor in the house did they associate with women or with maidens: and thus they pleased God in everything ... but also when our Lord was risen from the place of the dead, and Mary came to the place of the sepulchre, she ran and fell at the feet of our Lord and worshipped Him and would have taken hold of Him. But He said to her: “Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father.” Is it not, then, matter for astonishment, that, while our Lord did not allow Mary, the blessed woman, to touch his feet, yet thou livest with them, and art waited on by women and maidens ... To Jesus Christ our Lord women ministered of their substance; but they did not live with him; but chastely, and holily, and unblameably they behaved before the Lord, and finished their course, and received the crown in our Lord God Almighty. (Pseudo-Clement, *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity* 2.15)

According to Elizabeth Clark, pseudo-Clement is referring to the practice of virginal “subintroductae” living with celibate monks as “Platonic lovers” (1977; see also Clark 2008). This practice (known as *syneisaktism*) was a type of “spiritual marriage,” in which it seems that those thus cohabitating “had prematurely assumed that they had shed their bodily desires” and that “monks and virgins ... perhaps thought that God had already given them the impassibility of angels” (Clark 1977, 185). Yet,

⁷ I refer to this Clement as pseudo-Clement although the debate continues over their authenticity, usually along the Catholic/Protestant divide. See the Introduction to Clement’s *Two Epistles Concerning Virginity* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8:54.

there is an immediate anomaly in pseudo-Clement's argument, since Jesus did in fact allow the touch of women, including an anointing by Mary of Bethany (John 12:3). Nonetheless, my reading of Jesus's distancing of Mary Magdalene in John 20:17 resonates with pseudo-Clement's early interpretation of the verse as a warning that the touch of women presented a threat to monks who claimed to practise celibacy.

Modern scholarship also entertains the idea that the "Do not touch" prohibition in John 20:17 comments on the love between Mary and Jesus, albeit in different ways. Esther de Boer, for example, understands Mary's love as a case of classroom admiration, stating that the scene is "not of love between lovers. It is about the love between disciple and teacher" (2007, 16). Adele Reinhartz, by contrast, acknowledges the "sexual undertones" of John 20:17 and, echoing Hippolytus, sees a parallel with Song of Songs 3:4 (2001, 108). She also sees a second intertextual echo in the garden of Eden narrative (Gen 2-3) in which Eve and Adam mirror the new couple of redemption, Mary and Jesus. Armed with these two intertexts, Reinhartz believes that John thereby "casts Mary and Jesus in the role of lovers. Mary's search for the body of her beloved is fuelled by love as expressed through her desire to hold him and touch him" (1999, 65). She also draws parallels between the cleaving of Adam to his wife (Gen 2:24) and Mary's unfulfilled desire to hold Jesus, which raises the question of "what might constitute consummation in the Johannine context" (2001, 111). It is "not an embrace but Mary's testimony to the disciples of what she has seen and what she has heard. Although the beloved is not accessible in the flesh, she has his image in her mind's eye, and his words upon her lips" (Reinhartz 1999, 67). Thus, the passions of love are sublimated into the missionary endeavour.

Other scholars take John 20:17 as an indication that Jesus and Mary were married. James Charlesworth, for instance, is taken by John's emphasis on Mary's weeping in her search for the body of Jesus before her encounter with him: John mentions four times that Mary was weeping (John 20:11a, 11b, 13, 15). "There seems to be an undeniable physical attraction that Magdalene has for Jesus," Charlesworth states, "she even wants his dead body" (2019, 493). William Phipps is also of the view that Jesus was married and that his body had changed significantly after resurrection: "No longer could she take hold of him physically, for he was no longer incarnate" (1996, 132). Admittedly, the language of the prohibition—as I discuss below—does allow for such interpretations.

It is perhaps Harold Attridge who comes closest to my own reading of John 20:17. After a consideration of the ascetic portrayal of Mary and Jesus in the Nag Hammadi texts, Attridge sees a resonance there and describes John 20:17 as a parallel "invitation to asceticism" (2003, 162). This is in contrast to de Boer who insists that "*Noli me tangere* does not mean to touch in the context of sexuality and asceticism as one would perhaps expect" (2013, 129). I argue, however, that reading *mē mou haptou* as a call to celibacy is the most satisfactory reading of the verse, not least because it is couched in the language of sexual euphemism, a topic to which I now turn.

Haptomai in Other Contexts

In the NT, there are thirty-nine instances of forms of the verb *haptō* (“light” or “ignite”). Of these, *haptō* occurs thirty-five times in different forms of the middle voice, which, in its lexical form, is *haptomai* (most commonly translated as “touch”).⁸ John 20:17 contains one of these, a negated present-tense imperative, *mē mou haptou*. The majority of instances—thirty of the thirty-five—are found in the synoptic Gospels, where they express touch for healing or blessing, either touch by Jesus or someone touching Jesus. However, five of the 35 NT occurrences do not conform to this pattern and, I believe, help to explain John’s usage to express Jesus’s distancing of Mary.⁹ There are also texts outside the NT containing forms of *haptomai* that appear to have sexual connotations. I discuss a selection of these texts below.¹⁰ They resonate with John 20:17 as a grammatically negative construction where a man and a woman are concerned. Forms of *haptomai* with a negative particle, or in a negative context, are found in other texts as a form of prohibition of sexual contact or potential sexual contact, making plausible my thesis that this could be its implication in John’s Gospel.

The first known appearance of the term *haptomai* as a sexual innuendo comes from Plato, whose use of the term is, according to Gordon Fee, “an obvious euphemism for sexual relations” (2003, 204). Plato writes about the character of Iccus of Tarentum, who “during all the period of his training (as the story goes) he never touched (*hēpsato*) a woman nor yet a boy” (*Leges* 8.840A; *LCL* 192: 162-63). The grammatical context for this usage is familiar: a form of *haptomai* is used in conjunction with *gynē* (“woman”) and it appears with a negative particle to negate sexual contact. These three aspects of usage are also present in John 20:17.

There is one suggestion in Plutarch that *haptomai* might also have been used interchangeably with the colloquial phrase “to know” a woman, and its negation for restraint before marriage. In recounting the life of Alexander the Great, Plutarch says that the emperor “did not know another woman” except for Barsiné and was determined “to attach” (*hapsasthai*) to a woman who was good and well-born (*Lives: Alexander* 21.4-5; *LCL* 99: 284-85). In this context, the aorist infinitive *hapsasthai* is translated as “attach to,” but the parallel functions of *oida* (“know”) and *haptomai* give the verbs an interchangeable meaning and suggests here a sexual implication for both expressions.

In biblical usage, Gen 3:3 is not, per se, an explicit reference to sexual touch, but its symbolism may cover this. Bobbi Katsanis has proposed that John 20:17 is an intertextual echo of the divine command to Adam and Eve to refrain from touching the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, including the use of *haptomai*:

“Do not touch” has a familiar ring ... Not only were the first couple not to eat of the fruit of that tree, they were not even to touch it ... Therefore with Christ as the new Adam and Mary as the new Eve, seeking after knowledge,

⁸ Matt 8:3,15; 9:20,21,29; 14:36a,36b; 17:7; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 3:10; 5:27,28,30,31; 6:56a,56b; 7:33; 8:22; 10:13; Luke 5:13; 6:19; 7:14,39; 8:44,45,46,47; 18:15; 22:51; John 20:17; 1 Cor 7:1; 2 Cor 6:17; Col 2:21; 1 John 5:18.

⁹ John 20:17; 1 Cor 7:1; 2 Cor 6:17; Col 2:21; 1 John 5:18. Luke 7:39 may also fall into this category.

¹⁰ In the LXX, Gen 3:3; 20:6; Ruth 2:9; Prov 6:29. Also: Plato, *Leges* 8.840A; Plutarch: *Lives: Alexander* 21.4-5; Aristotle, *Politica* 7.14.12.

her restraint and obedience to Christ's warning points to a completion of the salvation story. (2007, 414)

I would suggest this "knowledge" and "restraint" are sexual in nature. The verse in the LXX Genesis text has a semantic structure similar to John 20:17, except it uses the subjunctive *mē hapsēsthe autou* ("you may not touch it") rather than the imperative of the latter, but with the same prohibitive force. Genesis 3:3 has a sexual context: in the garden, initially the man and woman were both naked and they were not ashamed (Gen 3:1), but as soon as they "touch" the fruit, "they knew that they were naked" (3:7). In the act of touching, woman will henceforth be denigrated as prone to deceit (3:6; cf. 1 Tim 2:14) and both she and the man, in their shame, must cover themselves (Gen 3:21). The desired fruit in itself represents a desire to know the unknown, conjuring up thoughts of sexual intimacy (3:6). Fruit is a common symbol for sexual experience, such as in Song of Songs (7:7-9), in which case "knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5) may well represent the loss of sexual innocence (Edwards 2012, 30). The resonances of *haptomai* in the Genesis story, therefore, are not explicitly that of a sexual prohibition. Nevertheless, the sexual context allows for a similar interpretation in the Johannine garden, where we encounter the new Adam (Rom 5:15) and the woman that Hippolytus would regard as the new Eve (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* 25.3-4).

In another Genesis narrative, a negation of *haptomai* is used specifically to refer to forbidden sexual intercourse. King Abimelech, unaware that Sarah was already Abraham's wife, intends to add Sarah to his harem which would incur the guilt of adultery (Gen 20:3-7). In the narrative, Abimelech has a dream in which God says, "I did not let you touch (*hapsasthai*) her," recognizing the king's ignorance on the matter. Josephus, in his comments on this passage, clearly also considers that the infinitive *hapsasthai* implies sexual contact: "the king of the Egyptians, not content with the reports of her, was fired with a desire to see her and on the point of laying hands on her. But God thwarted his criminal passion" (*Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.163; *LCL* 242: 80-81). The verb *haptomai* thus has sexual connotations here.

Moving now to the book of Ruth, the LXX version of Ruth 2:9 has a similar structure and meaning to John 20:17, though it uses an infinitive form of *haptomai*. Boaz says to Ruth that he will command the young men "not to touch (*hapsasthai*) you," while she is out working in the fields. Boaz's initiative to advise Ruth to stay with his servant girls (2:8) and his promise to forbid the young men to touch her indicates that *haptomai* here is referring to unwelcome touch, confirmed by Naomi's observation that the young men in the field could harm Ruth (2:22). A young woman working in the field alone may be vulnerable to the threat of male sexual advances (Blyth 2010, 190). The Hebrew *nāga'* ("touch") in Ruth 2:9 is the same term used in Gen 20:6, both of which the LXX translates as *haptomai*. In Gen 20:6, as discussed earlier, *haptomai* has a clear sexual implication, which in turn opens the possibility that sexual touching is also in view in Ruth 2:9. If this is the case, then once again *haptomai* makes a reference to sexual touching, although, like its usage in John 20:17, this is an implicit rather than explicit turn of phrase.

Similarly, Prov 6:29, in a warning against adultery, uses *haptomai* for sexual touch. The participial use of the verb describes the adulterer as "the one touching/who touches" (*haptomenos*) a woman who is already "under a man" (*hupandron*). The use of *haptomai* in legislation against adultery is also known from

Aristotle: “As to intercourse with another woman or man, in general it must be dishonourable to be known to take any part in it in any circumstances” (*Politica* 7.14.12; *LCL* 264: 624-25). This is literally “not good touching” (*mē kalon haptomenon*), here referring to sexual relations outside of marriage.

From the New Testament, Luke’s account of the woman from an unnamed city of ill repute who anointed Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:36-50) also supports the potential for *haptomai* to convey a sexual context to the reader. No specific grammatical negative is used, but Luke’s narrative conveys the disapproving reaction of a certain Pharisee towards this woman. Her motives may have been innocent, and while there is no explicit indication of a sexual context, her reputation and the reaction of the Pharisee—and presumably those with him—suggest otherwise. Perhaps they doubted the integrity of her extravagant expression of love in the weeping, the kissing, and the anointing of Jesus’ feet with myrrh. “If this man were a prophet,” muses the internal dialogue of the Pharisee (7:39), “he would know what kind of a woman this is who is touching (*haptetai*) him, that she is a sinner.” Assessing the semantic range in which *haptomai* operates, Bieringer agrees: “It is also possible that in 7:39 [*haptetai*] has sexual overtones” (2008, 227). As Robinson puts it, Jesus having “his feet (or head) kissed, scented and wiped with the hair of a woman” would have been suggestive whether or not the woman was “of doubtful repute” (1973, 98), because her actions were extravagant and obviously intended to be pleasurable (Hornsby 2006). The use of *haptomai*, then, gives the passage an edge of sexual innuendo that more general terms of touching do not convey. I suggest this is also the case for John 20:17.

There is another notable case of a woman who touches the hem of Jesus’ cloak and *haptomai* is used in all three Gospels (Matt 9:20-21; Mark 5:27-31; Luke 8:44-47). The story conveys a sense of the woman’s strong desire to be well and yet her reluctance to approach Jesus—as her internal dialogue indicates (Matt 9:21)—probably because of her embarrassment at her otherwise private condition. She had a “flow of blood for twelve years” (Luke 8:43), which, the reader is left to surmise, must be a relentless menstrual dysfunction. If so, this would have rendered her ritually unclean and probably accounts for some of her fear of exposure (8:47). In this instance, *haptomai* appears to carry with it some weight of the woman’s particularly feminine ailment, but does not seem to be a euphemism for sexual touch. It is in the context of a public event and seems no different in that respect from the other examples of touch by or of a person who desires healing or blessing. According to the Synoptics, many sought to touch (*hapsōntai*) the hem of Jesus’ garment, and many who touched it (*hēpsanto*) were healed (Matt 14:36; Mark 6:56). Ultimately, the woman’s touch is commended by Jesus as a sign of her faith and she is publicly praised (8:48). Thus, the context is positive from the narrator’s perspective, and Jesus does not rebuke her or in any way negate her attempt at achieving her desire. This contrasts sharply with the response of Jesus in John 20:17, where he appears to thwart Mary’s desire for touch.

William Loader’s awareness of the potential for *haptomai* to imply sexual touch brings an interesting comment on Jesus’ act of touching children. Mark 10:13 records that the crowds were bringing to Jesus “children that he might touch (*hapsētai*) them.” But this wording is not retained by either of the other two Synoptics. Matthew avoids the use of *haptomai* at all and just says “that he might lay his hands on them and pray” (19:13), and Luke changes *paidia* (“children” or

“slaves”) to *brephē* (“infants”). The crowds bring infants, not children or slaves that he might touch (*haptētai*) them (18:15). Loader notes this departure from Mark 10:13 and asks whether the reluctance to use *haptomai* in the context of children and young slaves is incidental or deliberate:

Some have wondered if other factors are at play. In a world where some teachers are known to have fondled children sexually, might Luke be seeking to avoid having Jesus appear in that light? ... Were those bringing the children seeking to do what some saw as a sexual favour to the teacher, bringing them children to “enjoy”? The Greek word ἅψηται, translated above as “touch,” which gives expression to the intention of those bringing the children, often has sexual connotations. (2005, 60)

If Loader is right—and, given the exception to the usual verbal similarities of the Synoptics, this is plausible—then Matthew and Luke may have deliberately not used *haptomai* to avoid any suggestion that this was Jesus’ motivation. This may be another case of *haptomai* conveying a sexual innuendo, a role I suggest this verb also plays in John 20:17.

John only uses *haptomai* once in the Gospel and once in the Johannine Letters. This in itself is an alert to the significance of its choice, given the generally repetitive nature of the Johannine vocabulary otherwise. The only other occurrence of *haptomai* in the Johannine corpus is 1 John 5:18, also a negated form. It does not appear initially to be a sexual reference, but given the wide semantic range of *haptomai*, it could well include this. The immediate context of the verb is a discussion of sin (5:16-19), which would, in all likelihood, include sexual sin, given its importance in NT ethics (1 Cor 6:9; Acts 15:20). “We know that everyone born of God does not sin” (1 John 5:18), John assures the believers, but rather “the evil one/evil does not touch (*haptetai*) him.” In that context, sexual sin may be implicit. With minor variations such as tense and the placement of the pronoun, 1 John 5:18 represents the same linguistic pattern as John 20:17. It is possible, then, that John’s choice of *haptomai* in his Letter includes a sexual innuendo as I suggest it does in his Gospel.

The significance of the use of *haptomai* is highlighted by John’s use, in a different context, of another term for “touch.” The opening testimony of 1 John claims the witness of Jesus’s disciples to “that which we have seen and our hands touched” (*epsēlaphēsan*), a different term for touch that does not imply sexual touch (1:1). The verb *psēlaphaō* used here is a more generic form of touching, used, for instance, by the writer of Hebrews for the “touching” of the holy mountain (Heb 12:18). It is also used by Luke following Jesus’ resurrection: “See my hands and my feet, that it is me; touch (*psēlaphēsate*) me and look, since a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see me having” (Luke 24:39). It may have the meaning of “to grope” as it is used in Acts of those who are searching for God (Acts 17:27). And there are still further alternative general words for touch: *thigganō* can also mean “touch” or “handle” (Col 2:21; Heb 11:28), including a context of ritual observance or holiness (Heb. 12:20); and *prospasauō* can likewise mean “touch” (Luke 11:46). All these terms are used in contexts where a general sense of touch is required, but none of these alternate words are used in the New Testament to mean *sexual* touch.

The author of John, then, has chosen a word for “touch” which includes in its semantic range the possibility of a sexual inference.

If the author of John’s Gospel had wanted to make clear that the narrative of 20:17 was not to be clouded by any gendered reading, let alone a sexual inference, he had available, in his typically simple Greek vocabulary, many other verbs from which to choose. Yet I suggest that none of these other verbs expresses accurately his intention in 20:17; rather, the choice of *haptomai* is likely to be deliberate. By the choice of a verb which includes sexual inference in its semantic range, the author is thereby relieved of the need to be explicit. The topic is one on which he may prefer to be obtuse and vague: an appropriate innuendo to *his* contemporaries but a persistent conundrum to our own.

Translating Paul

Further to the above examples, there are two uses of *haptomai* in the Pauline corpus¹¹ that I believe have special relevance to understanding John 20:17 and therefore deserve mention: 1 Cor 7:1 and Col 2:21. They are significant for two reasons: first, it appears that they are also examples of sexual euphemism like John 20:17; second, they offer insight into different translation options and whether the choice of “touch” or “hold” better reflects the intention of John 20:17.

In the first instance of the Pauline use of *haptomai*, the Corinthian church had written to Paul asking him for some explanations, and one of the topics they were querying related to marriage and virginity. He replied to them: “Concerning the things you wrote:¹² it is better for a man not to touch (*haptesthai*) a woman” (1 Cor 7:1).¹³ Paul does not go on to directly contradict the assertion, perhaps tacitly implying that it *is* better for a man not to touch a woman. But his impartial advice to the contrary gives caution to the absolutist nature of the assertion: “Because of so much sexual immorality, let each man have his own woman and let each woman have her own man” (7:2). “It is better for a man not to touch a woman” may be a reference to something he has taught earlier about his preference for celibacy (7:7), but the congregation is repeating it askew. Alternatively, the phrase may have originated with local ascetics, either factions within the Corinthian church or outside of it, who are trying to make celibacy mandatory for all Christians. Whatever the occasion, the Corinthians seem to have been rejecting normal sexual relations, a rejection that Paul is not endorsing (Loader 2005, 199). The quip, though, follows the pattern of the use of the verb *haptomai* in a negative context where a woman is concerned, as I have discussed in examples earlier. That it is better for a man “not to touch” (*mē haptesthai*) a woman in 1 Cor 7:1 forms a semantic parallel to the function of “do not touch” (*mē ... haptou*) in John 20:17, where Jesus forbids Mary to touch him. It would seem that, in both cases, not touching a woman may convey sexual connotations.

¹¹ I use the term “Pauline corpus” to refer to the NT epistles traditionally attributed to Paul, while recognizing that the authorship of a number of these epistles remains disputed in NT studies.

¹² NA²⁸ notes that some lesser manuscripts add *moi*, reading “the things you wrote to me about,” which suggests that the church has asked for his ruling on the matter.

¹³ I wonder if this was originally posed by Paul as a question but this has been lost in the later punctuation of the text: “Concerning the things you wrote to me about, Is it better for a man not to touch a woman?”

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), I think rightly, translates 1 Cor 7:1 as “it is better for a man not to touch a woman.” Here, “touch” reflects the ambiguity conveyed by both the word and the context. The *UBS* Greek NT, Reader’s Edition, offers the meaning of *haptomai* here as “have sex (with).” The New International Version (NIV) considers it a colloquialism and uses “marry,” with a footnote, “have sexual relations with.” Fee (2003), however, objects to equating “marriage” with “sexual relations,” since he is convinced that the verse is referring to the ascetic practice of married men abstaining from sex with their wives, a practice Paul is discouraging. In his view, Paul makes use of the normal terms for “marry” (*gameō/gamizō*) where that is what he means, and the English translation “marry” thus negates the force of using a euphemism at all. Fee’s argument—that this is more likely to be a problematic asceticism that is driving men to avoid relations with their wives—is supported in the text by Paul’s immediate insistence that married couples generally continue to have sexual intercourse without “defrauding” each other (7:2-6). The obvious sexual meaning of *haptomai* in this instance—and its negation—surely illustrates its potential to prohibit a range of sexual expression, as it does, I would argue, in John 20:17. It is also evident in this example that the English word “touch” conveys the subtlety of a euphemism better than more explicit options.

A second example occurs in Col 2:21, again in the context of the practices of an ascetic group within or outside the Colossian church. It is difficult to name definitively the specific aspects of what has been termed the “Colossian heresy,” but rules against physical pleasure is one characteristic, so that Col 2:8-23 reflects the Pauline opposition to a rigorous asceticism. Judgments around choices concerning food and drinking (2:16) and certain practices of self-abasement (2:18, 23) are at stake, as well as severe discipline of the body (2:23). In 2:21, the Pauline author uses the same rhetorical device that Paul does in 1 Corinthians (above), quoting the ascetic opponents by mimicking their restrictive rules first in order to debate the issue. In this case, the teaching of the ascetics is a threefold prohibition: “You may not touch (*mē hapsēi*), and you may not taste (*mēde geusēi*), and you may not handle (*mēde thigēis*).”¹⁴ The first of these three commands merits further discussion, as the use of *haptomai* once again suggests a sexual prohibition, although this is not conveyed in English translations.

There appears to be a connection between the passage in Colossians here and a text describing a similar set of ascetics who are addressed in 1 Tim 4:1-5. First Timothy outlines some of the characteristics of a group who “forbid people to marry” and tell people “to abstain from food, which God created for receiving with thanksgiving” (1 Tim 4:3). Robert Leaney proposes that the compiler of 1 Timothy “may well have had in mind this passage [Col 2:21]—or the same heresy which it condemns” (1952/53, 92), as they both seem to represent an ascetic movement which idealised abstinence from physical goods such as food and also sexual activity. The warning at the end of the letter, that Timothy should stay away from the contradictions “of what is falsely called knowledge (*gnōsis*)” (6:20), could indicate the group was proto-gnostic in its ideology, holding to a dualistic rejection of materiality and reliant on revealed knowledge, or *gnosis* (Price 1990; Van den Broek 2013, 1). For this reason, the letter advises the younger women to marry and

¹⁴ Most translations render all three verbs as imperatives (“Do not”) although they are actually all subjunctive (“You should not/may not”), but the point remains the same.

raise children (5:14). It is also perhaps the reason for the unusual pronouncement that womankind “will be saved through child-bearing” (2:15a): if the ascetics were teaching against sexual intercourse and progeny, the author of 1 Timothy is restating that motherhood is not to be distained, “if [women] remain in faith and love and holiness with modesty” (2:15b).

Margaret MacDonald is in agreement that sexual asceticism was at the root of the triple prohibition in Col 2:21 (*mē hapsēi*, *mēde geusēi*, *mēde thigēis*):

The reference to severe treatment of the body [2:23] calls to mind a variety of forms of physical renunciation. These verses might also contain evidence of sexual asceticism ... [T]here is no explicit and indisputable evidence in Colossians that the avoidance of sex was part of the false teaching, and therefore the idea has not won the wide support of scholars. However, it is important to note that in early church literature and in the ancient world generally fasting and sexual asceticism often went together. (2000, 121)

Loader (2005, 199) is also in agreement that the prohibitions of Col 2:21 could have included the body and sexual behaviour, which were touted as destined for destruction (2:22), and an anti-sexual stance could have been part of severe discipline of the body (2:23). It seems likely, then, that the ascetic context of Col 2:21 could have included sexual asceticism. Leaney’s suggestion that the first of the three prohibitions (*mē hapsēi*) should be understood as a reference to sexual prohibition therefore makes sense (1952/53, 92). As in the textual examples above, Col 2:21 may offer one further example of *haptomai* as a sexual euphemism, or at least “touch” in an ambiguous sense which includes sexuality. Thus, *mē hapsēi* could be seen as another semantic parallel to John 20:17, *mē ... haptou*.

Of the thirty-five instances of *haptomai* in the New Testament, there are only two instances in which the verb is not routinely translated as “touch”: the NRSV, NIV, and the Good News Translation (GNT), for example, translate *mē ... haptou* (John 20:17) as “do not hold onto,” while the New Living Translation (NLT), English Standard Version (ESV), and New King James Version (NKJV), among others, use “do not cling to.” With regard to Col 2:21, the NRSV, NIV, ESV, GNT, NLT, and many more versions translate *mē hapsēi* as “Do not handle.” It appears that, in these two instances in which *haptomai* is used as a euphemism for sexual contact, the translators have avoided the word “touch.” I discuss below some of the reasons this may be the case, but I also suspect the English word “touch” likewise carries some sexual ambiguity (as it does in 1 Cor 7:1 above). Perhaps the translators are judging that there is no sexual subtlety intended in the texts of John 20:17 and Col 2:21, or, if there is, seek to avoid it.

In the case of Col 2:21, where both *haptomai* and *thigganō* are used in close proximity, it is admittedly true that both can mean “touch,” so there is a translation dilemma in the three-fold command: to use “touch” for both verbs would yield the redundant-sounding English translation, “Do not touch, do not taste, do not touch.” To solve this, most translators ignore the sexual implications of *haptomai* in spite of its use in other texts, and similarly ignore the likelihood of sexual asceticism in the Pauline social context. This allows them to translate *mē hapsēi* as “do not handle,” so that *mēde thigēis* can be translated “do not touch” without sounding redundant. The innocuous translation results: “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.”

This translation, however, may be missing the point of the verse, given the common usage of *haptomai* in sexual contexts. In my view, *mē hapsēi* is not just as a generic prohibition to touch, since *haptomai* readily carries sexual implications and *mēde thigēs* already offers a generic prohibition to touch or “handle.” In this case, a reversal of current translations might produce a better reading: “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.” Or, if the meaning of *thigganō* must be retained as “touch” then some alternative readings might be, “Do not have sexual relations/marry/touch a woman, do not taste, do not touch anything/generally.” This would at least be consistent with the meaning of *haptomai* in 1 Cor 7:1, mentioned earlier, where it is clearly referring to sexual relations. It is also consistent with the meaning of *haptomai* that I am proposing for John 20:17, with a parallel function in a similar negative context.

The Return to Touch?

In my introduction, I suggested some reasons which have been offered in the past as grounds for the current translation of *haptomai* as “hold” or “cling” in John 20:17, although the verb is translated as “touch” elsewhere in the New Testament. None of these arguments really justifies the change, and I turn to these now. Admittedly, it appears at first that there is something inherently sexist in Jesus’s rejection of Mary, especially as he invites the touch of Thomas just a few verses later (John 20:27). Replacing “do not touch” with “do not hold on” or “do not cling” seems to ameliorate the force of the rejection since there is more logic to it: Jesus would appear to be saying “let me go.” In the narrative, however, Jesus has allowed the touch of another woman a few days earlier (12:3), so an authorial sexism is unlikely to underlie the prohibition. Yet modern interpretations may endorse such a sexist reading: William H. Willimon, for example, suggests that, “When [Mary] hugged Jesus he said, ‘Don’t hold onto me, I’m ascending to my Father, and your Father, to my God and your God.’ ... ‘Don’t try to pin me down’ ... ‘Don’t hold onto me! I’m on the move’” (2010, 10). As Mary Rose D’Angelo notes, “But the reading ‘Do not cling’ by no means avoids problematic cultural constructions of femininity; rather it appeals to and reinforces another societal definition of women: women’s love is dependent and holds men back from their true call” (1990, 531). The translations “hold on” or “cling” do not therefore solve the difficulty completely.

The issue of Mary “clinging to” or “holding onto” Jesus also appears in Matt. 28:9. Here, when Mary and another woman (also called Mary) encountered the risen Jesus, they worshipped him and “held onto” or “clung to” (*krateō*) his feet. Previous scholarship has tended to read this text alongside John 20:17, importing the latter scene into the former. Frans Neiryck (1984), for example, equates Matthew’s use of *krateō* (“cling” or “grasp”) for the women who met the risen Jesus (Matt 28:9) with John’s use of *haptomai* for Mary Magdalene (John 20:17). To justify this, Neiryck uses two versions of the story of Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law, found in Matt 8:15 (which uses *haptomai*) and Mark 1:31 (which uses *krateō*). He therefore concludes: “The verbs ἅπτομαι [*haptomai*] and κρατέω [*krateō*] are interchangeable” (Neiryck 1984, 168).¹⁵ From his source-critical perspective, the two may well represent, historically, the same story told differently, but Neiryck

¹⁵ Also, Rudolf Bultmann (1971, 687 n.1) held that there was no essential difference between *krateō* and *haptomai*.

neglects to observe that, from the perspective of the authors of Matthew and Mark, the verb expresses a different action within each narrative. In the Matthean story, where *haptomai* is used, Jesus “touched [*hēpsato*] her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up,” whereas in the Markan picture, Jesus “raised her up, holding [*kratēsas*] her hand.” All that can be said with surety is that the two texts reveal slightly different traditions in Matthew and Mark. Thus, the verbs *haptomai* and *krateō* need *not* be interchangeable. Furthermore, John uses *haptomai* nowhere else in his Gospel, so its inclusion in 20:17 is unique, and he uses *krateō* only once too, with the distinct meaning of “hold onto” (20:23).

Reimund Bieringer has conducted extensive studies on the biblical uses of *haptomai*. He concludes that, “in the LXX there is no evidence that ἅπτομαι [*haptomai*] means to seize or to cling. The prevalent meaning is to touch (both positive and negative). But there is also a significant number of instances where ἅπτομαι [*haptomai*] means to draw near, to reach” (Bieringer 2008, 229). The most likely meaning of *mē mou haptou*, then, is a simple prohibition to touch, but since *haptomai* may also cover an implied meaning of “come near” or “approach,” the sense of *mē mou haptou* may also be, “Do not approach me” or “Do not come near to me.” It seems valid that the word “touch” remains Bieringer’s preferred translation to cover both these senses. In this case, Jesus is asking Mary to keep her distance and not to make contact; this is not a request for her to let go.

Finally, the argument that the present tense *haptou* must express a continuous “holding” (or “clinging”) action, rather than an undefined “touching” action that an aorist would have expressed, may also be challenged. C. H. Dodd is one proponent of this position, claiming that the aorist of *haptomai* means “touch” but the present tense means “hold,” “grasp,” or “cling” (1970, 443 n.2). But even while the translation of *haptou* as “cling” was in vogue last century, Raymond Brown, while adopting it himself, also conceded in his commentary that *mē mou haptou* “can mean that she is trying to touch him and he is telling her she should not” (1970, 992). The argument that the present tense should be understood as a continuous action in this instance is not sustainable. Bieringer’s study of Johannine verbal forms concludes that the use of the present tense *haptou* rather than the aorist is more likely to be merely stylistic, and, above all, to be related to the use of the negative particle (2013). While John uses sixteen instances of present tense negative imperatives, there are no examples of negative imperatives making use of the aorist. With these statistics, the prohibitive intent of *mē mou haptou* would be surprising in anything other than a present tense, and need not mean anything more complicated than “do not touch.” As further evidence, and “a warning not to draw a clear dividing line between the present and the aorist,” Bieringer cites an aorist, *mē hapsēsthe* in 1 Chron 16:22, and a present, *mē haptēsthe* in Pss104:15, where two virtually identical sentences use the aorist and present interchangeably (2013, 77). These arguments support Bieringer’s view that, ultimately, “this prohibition expresses a straightforward prohibition to touch Jesus” (2013, 80). He also observes that John would have used *mēketi* (“no longer”) if the intention were to convey a holding or clinging action with the sense of “stop holding onto me,” an imperative construction he uses in a parallel fashion elsewhere in his Gospel (John 5:14; 8:11) (Bieringer 2013, 77).

Interestingly, one of the earliest evidences of a difficulty with “Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended” is a scribal addition at 20:16. Just before the

enigmatic 20:17, some manuscripts¹⁶ add “and she ran forward to touch [*hapsasthai*] him.” The addition is known as the Caesarean recension, as its corrector is thought to have worked on Sinaiticus from Caesarea, but its presence in other manuscripts suggests “the addition was once present in Egyptian manuscripts” (Baarda 1994, 102). Tjitze Baarda argues that the interpolation in the Greek text was as early as the second or early third century in Alexandria (1994, 109). Significantly, the scribal corrector uses the aorist infinitive in the insertion of 20:16 even though it immediately precedes the present tense imperative that John has used at 20:17. The scribe may have had two different actions in mind, but it seems more likely that the action was the same, and the aorist and present were used interchangeably to express this. The insertion is therefore an example, in second- and third-century reception history, of the present tense and the aorist being used to express the same action; this challenges the significance given by some modern scholars to the continuous “holding” aspect of *haptou*.

Beyond these anomalies, as mentioned earlier, the translation of *haptomai* as “hold” or “cling” is notoriously inconsistent in modern versions of the Bible, even where a present tense is concerned. There are seven instances of the present tense use of *haptomai* in the New Testament;¹⁷ all are translated as “touch” in the NRSV except for John 20:17, for which “hold onto” is favoured. Furthermore, 2 Cor 6:17 is a negated present imperative of *haptomai*, and differs from John 20:17 only in that it is plural, yet *mē haptesthe* is regularly translated as “Do not touch” (e.g. NRSV, NIV, Jerusalem Bible). There is an avoidance, then, of the English word “touch” being used in translations of John 20:17. This is perhaps because “touch” is an ambiguous word and can convey sexual innuendo, but I argue that this is even more reason to consider it an appropriate word for translators to use, since *haptomai*, as we have seen, can also be ambiguous and carry sexual connotations. It may be that “touch” is a more accurate reflection of the Gospel author’s intention: it conveys the subtlety of this male-female encounter; it expresses the full humanity of Jesus as a sexual being in the presence of Mary.

De Boer has suggested that her translation, “stop touching me,” might also include a psychological interpretation, assuming that Jesus was moved by Mary’s forlornness and weeping (2013, 103). In this case, the sense would be “do not move me emotionally.” De Boer translates correctly, I think, since the semantic range of the word “touch” allows for a variety of forms of emotional contact. But the problem remains and begs another question: why would Jesus prohibit Mary from moving him emotionally? Invariably in the Gospels, when Jesus is moved with compassion, he does allow the touch of others, and he also touches them. For example, when two blind men call out to Jesus for healing, readers are told that he was “moved with compassion” and “touched their eyes” (Matt 20:34) in order to restore their sight. If Mary’s weeping causes Jesus to feel so moved that he commands her to stay away, as De Boer suggests, then this is a notable contrast to Jesus’ usual way of responding when he feels compassion: normally, he would draw near and touch, even those considered ritually unclean (e.g. Mark 1:41). There are no other examples in the Gospels of Jesus *prohibiting* touch on any grounds: it occurs only once in this abandoned garden of Jesus’ burial, where he finds himself alone with a forlorn and

¹⁶ NA²⁷ lists the first corrector of Sinaiticus, κ^1 ; NA²⁸ lists the second κ^{2a} ; both list the lesser manuscripts θ , ψ , vg^{mss} f^{13} and $sy^{(s),h}$.

¹⁷ Luke 6:19; 7:39; 18:15; John 20:17; 1 Cor 7:1; 2 Cor 6:17; 1 John 5:18.

weeping Mary. The distancing by Jesus could suggest that he experiences an emotional threat, if not a physical one, to his celibate status.

Interestingly, in his examination of the uses of *haptomai*, Fee demonstrates that the verb often does refer to sexual relations and that it is clearly an idiom or a euphemism (2003, 204-6). Of note, however, Fee does not include John 20:17 as an example, which suggests that he does not consider *haptomai* a euphemism in this instance, but rather a generic form of “touch.” On the contrary, I have no hesitation in reading John 20:17 as a euphemism, but the difficult task remains: how does one translate a euphemism into English, when its purpose is to conceal the direct meaning? Since the function of a euphemism is often to avoid what is explicitly culturally inappropriate, the only solution is to use another euphemism in translation. Perhaps “Don’t turn me on!” would be too strong, but it would fit with the general function of the verb *haptomai*, and it would also fit with John’s intent to show the continued embodied existence of the risen Jesus as a normal functioning man. Besides, given the anticipated—and justified—reluctance of any formal versions of Scripture to modify 20:17 to “Don’t turn me on,” the existing subtlety of the English word “touch” seems an excellent alternative.

Conclusion

The command by Jesus to Mary Magdalene that she should not touch him after his resurrection is an enigma that has made John 20:17, according to Bieringer, “one of the most difficult and certainly among the most disputed [verses] in the New Testament” (2008, 233). While many solutions have been offered over the centuries, the verse has an uncanny ability to be resurrected, time and again, to face another investigation, and I have joined that queue. In my previous research (Aalbers 2021), I propose that there are several broader contextual reasons to suggest that the practice of celibacy underpins the prohibition. For example, the New Testament writers seem to have accepted that, in the resurrected state, the human body was celibate (Mark 12:25; Luke 20:36). Furthermore, in contrast to the docetic, purely-spiritual resurrection of Jesus advocated by certain opponents, the Gospel of John highlights the physical incarnation of the divine Jesus (1:1 cf. 1:14). In the same pattern as the prologue to this Gospel, the resurrection stories at its end share the same emphasis on incarnation: Jesus is the resurrected one who experienced not only human woundedness (20:27) but also human sexuality (20:17). I have argued in this article that the language of “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended” allows for the possibility of sexual innuendo. Thus, the distancing of Mary by Jesus can be understood as a necessary command to preserve his celibacy.

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