

**Male Virgins, Male Martyrs, Male Brides:
A reconsideration of the 144,000
'who have not dirtied themselves with women' (Rev 14.4).**

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Male Virgins

Readers of the Book of Revelation have long been occupied by its inconsistent narrative structure and bizarre imagery. More recently, its moral vision has generated alarm and even revulsion. It is, in the words of novelist, Will Self,

a sick text...Perhaps it's the occlusion of judgemental types, and the congruent occlusion of psyches, but there's something not quite right about Revelation...The text is a guignol of tedium, a portentous horror film.¹

Self is not alone in his negative assessment of Revelation's alleged gratuitous violence. D. H. Lawrence, Harold Bloom, and Carl Jung have all questioned the morality of the Apocalypse, the latter dubbing it an "orgy of hatred, wrath, vindictiveness, and blind destructive fury,"² characteristics which led Walter Wink to declare that it departs from Jesus' essential message of love of enemy.³ Concerns have also been raised about its "misogynistic" representation of women.⁴ This modern reassessment of the morality of Revelation is summed up by Tina Pippin and Michael Clark's entry in *The Queer Bible Commentary*. They conclude that the Apocalypse is "misogynistic, patriarchal, homophobic, violent and, to understate it, a poor vision of future justice"⁵ in which is found "a punishing, authoritarian deity inflicting pain on all and rescue and redemption on *a few really good children*."⁶

1 Will Self, *Revelation* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998), xii–xiii.

2 Carl H. Jung, *Answer to Job* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, 1959), 125. See Mara Kalnins (ed.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of D. H. Lawrence: Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Harold Bloom, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (London: Chelsea House, 1988).

3 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 99–100. Wink does manage to make positive use of Revelation later on in the same book (319–24).

4 See especially, Tina Pippin, "The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 60 (1992), 67–82 (emphasis added).

5 Tina Pippin and J. Michael Clark, 'Revelation/Apocalypse' in *The Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache; London: SCM Press, 2006), 753–68, 754.

6 Pippin and Clark, "Revelation," 760 (emphasis added). Of course, such concern about Revelation is not new; Luther and Zwingli both initially questioned the value of the Apocalypse, and as early as the third century, Dionysius of Alexandria thought its material so questionable as to attribute its authorship to the

One example of Pippin and Clark’s “really good children” is found at Revelation 14.1–5. Immediately following the description of the activities of the Beasts and their followers (ch. 13), John sees a vision of the Lamb standing on Mount Zion,

and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand, who had his name and the name of his Father written upon their foreheads...and they sing a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures and the elders. And no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth (οἱ ἠγορασμένοι ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς). It is these who have not dirtied themselves with women (μετὰ γυναικῶν οὐκ ἐμολύνθησαν), for they are virgins (παρθένοι); it is these who follow (ἀκολουθοῦντες) the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first-fruits (ἠγοράσθησαν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀπαρχή,) for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless (ἄμωμοι). (14.1–5)

The identity of the 144,000 virgins of 14.4, who have not “dirtied themselves with women,” has been the source of much exegetical controversy. Sweet goes so far as to call this verse “the most misunderstood words in the book.”⁷ Taken at face value, the verse implies that the Lamb’s most faithful followers are exclusively male.⁸ Not only is celibacy elevated, physical marriage appears to be denigrated, and women become merely potential polluters of men. Yarbro Collins judges that John’s description of women here betrays a “complex set of emotions, involving perhaps hatred and fear both of women and of one’s own body.”⁹

The unusual use of the word παρθένος for men has led some commentators to insist the term must also include women.¹⁰ However, the fact that the virgins are said not to have “dirtied themselves with women” effectively rules this out. Moreover, John could have employed the language of πορνεία with similar effect had he wanted to keep the gender of the group ambiguous. With women a danger to holy men, together with the presentation of the supreme enemy as a whore, scholars have complained that “John presents Christ and his Christians as icons of masculinity, reserving feminine imagery for the enemy.”¹¹

“heretic” Cerinthus. Today, Revelation is not read in the services of the Eastern Orthodox Church. See Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (BBC; Massachusetts: Blackwells, 2004).

⁷ John Sweet, *The Apocalypse of St John* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 222.

⁸ Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 70.

⁹ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Women’s History and the Book of Revelation,” in K. H. Richards (ed.), *SBL Seminar Papers* (1987), 80–91.

¹⁰ So Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 88.

¹¹ Stephen D. Moore, “Revolting Revelations” in *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Ingrid R. Kitzberger; London: Routledge, 1999), 183–199 (esp. 193). For discussion on sex, gender, and holy space in Revelation, see also Jorunn Økland, “Sex, gender and ancient Greek: a case-study in theoretical misfit,”

Various solutions have been offered in response to the celibacy conundrum. The earliest interpreters of Revelation took 14.4 to mean celibacy was promoted as an ideal state. Origen conceived of the 144,000 celibates as a group more spiritually distinguished from their kinsmen.¹² Similarly, in later Christian texts a celibate state is commended for all, with a warning that sex is defiling. In the *Acts of Paul*, Paul teaches that there can be no resurrection unless followers remain chaste and do not dirty (μολύνητε) the flesh.¹³ Furthermore, there is an unmistakable ascetic strand throughout the teaching of Jesus, such as the command to would-be followers to abandon family ties, including house or wife (Lk 18.29; Q 14.26–27; Mk 10.29). Moreover, a tradition of celibacy may underpin the enigmatic saying about those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven (Mt 19.12).¹⁴ Kiddle does not appear to be far wrong when he states that “in John’s opinion the married Christian is further from the godly ideal than the unmarried.”¹⁵

However, others, such as Swete, have reacted strongly against this view.

No condemnation of marriage, no exclusion of the married from the highest blessings of the Christian life, finds a place in the N. T. Our Lord recognizes abstinence as a Christian practice only in cases where men are able to receive it.¹⁶

While it is not obvious the grounds on which such a claim is made, Charles similarly rejects the notion that John could have written a text referring only to men, so he dismisses verse 4 as the work of an interpolator “who sought by his manipulation of the text...to transform them [the 144,000] into a body of monkish celibates.”¹⁷ This is an unsatisfactory and rather arbitrary solution to an interpretative difficulty, and there is no manuscript evidence to support an interpolation theory.

A second view is that while literal celibacy is imagined, it is set in the context of apocalyptic crisis. Since the author conceives the world as coming to an end, there is little point in engaging in marriage.¹⁸ This view finds support from other New Testament sources,

Studia Theologica 57 (2003): 124–42. Økland concludes, “Revelation’s holy places are all-male” (134). However, one may point to chapter 12 as a positive portrayal of a woman.

¹² Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.1–4. See also Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins* 4–5; and Augustine, *Sermon* 304.2.

¹³ *Acts of Paul*, 12.

¹⁴ For the view this saying goes back to Jesus see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew* (Vol. 3; ICC: Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 21–25.

¹⁵ Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St John* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), 268.

¹⁶ Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), 179.

¹⁷ R. H. Charles, *Revelation* (2 vols; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 2.6–9. In his view the extent of the interpolation runs from ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς in v.3 to ἡγοράσθησαν in v.4.

¹⁸ So Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 131.

most notably 1 Cor 7, where Paul urges the unmarried to remain as they are “in view of the present distress” (7.25).¹⁹ However, while possible, the emphatic way in which celibacy is contrasted with sexual activity is problematic for this view.

The third possibility is that celibacy here reflects the purity regulations expected of soldiers engaging in Holy War (Lev 15.16; Deut 23.9–14; 1 Sam 21.5; 2 Sam 11.9–13; 1 QM 7.3–6). In ancient Israel, war took place within the context of religious ceremony (Jer. 6.4; Micah 3.5; Joel 3.9), and soldiers were expected to observe ceremonial purity rules. The roll call of the 144,000 in Rev 7.4–8, where each of the twelve tribes contribute 12,000 persons, resembles a measurement of military capability (cf. Num 1.2–3; 26.1–2; 2 Sam 24.1–9; 1 Chr 27.1–24).²⁰ Revelation 7 and 14 are clearly linked. In both, a crowd of 144,000 are listed, who have all been sealed on their foreheads (cf. 7.3). However, in neither is a military role for the massed company made explicit.²¹

Fourth is the view virginity should be understood metaphorically, representing the purity of Christians who have not polluted themselves through beast worship.²² This view is promising as Paul also employs *μολύνω* in relation to the consciences of the weak being defiled (*μολύνεται*) by eating idolmeat (1 Cor 8.7). Similarly, the verb has the sense of cultic pollution in the Old Testament in relation to priests and prophets (Jer 23.11^{LXX}), vessels (Zech 14.2^{LXX}), and of the Temple (1 Macc 1.37; 2 Macc 6.2).²³ Indeed, in 2 Maccabees, it is used of the high priest, Alcimus, who willingly defiled himself (*μεμολυσμένος*) by engaging in pagan rites (2 Macc 14.3). Indeed, John liberally uses the explicitly sexual *πορνεῖω* group of words when depicting activity with the whore of Babylon. However, while sex with the whore clearly defiles, it is not obvious why sex in general works as a metaphor for all idolatry. Similarly, although pollution and physical sexual intercourse are linked in the *Book of the Watchers* where angels “have lain with women” and “defiled” themselves “with the

¹⁹ For a discussion on marriage in 1 Cor. 7 see James D. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 692–98. I have previously applied this idea to Rev. 14, suggesting that since the author expects Christians to be martyred it is better they remain unmarried, see Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (LNTS 307; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 164 n. 161. Below, I offer an alternative reading.

²⁰ George B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (BNTC; London: Black, 1966) 179–81, and especially Richard Bauckham, “The Book of Revelation as a Christian War Scroll,” *Neot.* 22 (1988): 17–40; Bauckham, “The List of Tribes in Revelation 7 Again,” *JSNT* 42 (1991): 99–115.

²¹ Olsen, “Defiled,” 495; also Aune, *Revelation*, 436.

²² For example, J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (AB 38; New York: Doubleday, 1975), 242–3. Carrington’s interpretation along these lines is slightly more literal in that he imagines the men having refrained from polluting themselves with prostitutes in heathen Temple rites (*The Meaning of Revelation* [London: SPCK, 1931], 337–40).

²³ *Μολύνω* is used of ‘moral’ staining in *Sirach* 21.28 and 22.13, whilst it carries the idea of soiling the soul in *Testament of Abraham* 4.4.

daughters of men” (*1 Enoch* 15.3),²⁴ the cause of defilement here appears to be specific instances of inter-species intercourse rather than sexual activity *per se*.²⁵

None of these interpretations is, therefore, unproblematic, and no single one offers a totally satisfactory solution. However, if we take them together, we find that the cluster of themes—apocalyptic distress, soldier and Holy War imagery, cultic purity—contribute to the imagery associated with another important trope in the Apocalypse; martyrdom. In Christian reflection, martyrs are often described as soldiers or combatants engaged in eschatological battle, which demanded ultimate and single minded devotion to God.²⁶ In this essay, I argue the apparent complete ban on sexual activity rather than only *πορνεία* is best explained by the narrative world John creates, in which faithfulness to God requires radical separation from the activities of the world, which will in turn, necessarily result in martyrdom. Furthermore, the martyred Christians represent the Bride of the Lamb (Rev 19), and in order to remain eligible for marriage to him, sexual purity is a necessary pre-condition. As the maleness of the virgins may present an obstacle to this view, I first argue martyrdom is indeed central to the Apocalypse’s narrative scheme. I then examine marital imagery in two early Christian martyr acts in which gender ambiguity is particularly noteworthy, before turning back to Revelation 14, concluding that the 144,000 male virgins are also martyrs and brides.

Male Martyrs

While a generation of scholars assumed Revelation was written during an intense period of imperial persecution under either Nero or Domitian,²⁷ more recently a consensus has emerged that where Christians faced persecution, it tended to be localised rather than empire-wide, and

²⁴ Daniel C. Olson, “‘Those who have not defiled themselves with women’: Revelation 14:4 and the Book of Enoch,” *CBQ* 59 (1997): 492–510. See also 7.1; 9.8, 10.11; 12.4

²⁵ This theme appears several times in 1 Cor. 5–6. See Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), especially 174–9.

²⁶ See, for example, Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 4.4. Paul also employed metaphors from the games to sum up the Christian struggle (Phil 2.16; 3.12–14; Col 1.29; 1 Tim 6.12).

²⁷ For an extensive discussion on the dating of the Apocalypse, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (WBC 52; Waco: Word, 1997), lvi–lxx.

sporadic rather than sustained.²⁸ Nonetheless, the themes of persecution, suffering and martyrdom overshadow many early Christian texts, including the Apocalypse.²⁹

There are many reasons to read the 144,000 virgins as Christian martyrs, especially when read in the light of the previous chapter.³⁰ Those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes are contrasted with those who go after the Beast (13.3). Beast worshippers are marked on the right hand or the forehead (13.16), while the faithful bear the name of God on their foreheads (14.1; cf. 7.3–4). *All* who dwell *on* the earth (οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) will worship the Beast (13.8), while the 144,000 have been redeemed *from* the earth (οἱ ἠγορασμένοι ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς; 14.3). The 144,000 sing a new song before the Lamb, while Beast worshippers are tormented in his presence (14.10). A call for the endurance of the saints is then issued, suggesting that to “die in the Lord” is the only way to avoid the torment in store for followers of the Beast.³¹ Importantly, only those whose names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life will not worship the Beast (13.8), and all those who refuse to worship the Beast will be slain (13.15). Therefore, it follows that John imagines a narrative world in which everyone who is in the Lamb’s book of life will not worship the Beast, and, consequently, will be martyred. This is confirmed later in the narrative; those who had not worshipped the Beast or received its mark are precisely “those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God” (20.4). In order to make clear to John’s

²⁸ See the classic treatments: Timothy D. Barnes, “Legislation against the Christians,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 58 (1968), 32–50; Geoffrey E. M. de Ste Croix, “Why were the early Christians Persecuted?” *Past and Present* 26 (1963), 5–23; and most recently Candida R. Moss, *The Myth of Christian Persecution: How Early Christians Invented the Story of Martyrdom* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013).

²⁹ On the development of the word μάρτυς from its original meaning of witness to its technical usage for a martyr, see the studies by Norbert Brox, *Zeuge und Märtyrer: Untersuchungen zur frühchristlichen Zeugnis-Terminologie* (Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 5; Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1961) and Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (SNTSMS 31; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). There is some dispute whether or not John has a full blown theology of martyrdom or if μάρτυς is deployed as a *terminus technicus* in Revelation. See Jan Willem van Henten, “The Concept of Martyrdom in Revelation,” in *Die Johannesapokalypse: Kontexte – Konzepte – Rezeption* (ed. Jörg. Frey, James A. Kelhoffer, and Franz Tóth; WUNT: Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 587–618 for a negative assessment, but for the opposite view, Paul Middleton, “What is Martyrdom?” *Mortality* 19 (2014), 117–33, especially 120–21; *Radical Martyrdom*, 158–70. Other significant treatments of martyrdom in the Apocalypse include Stephen Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis* (SNTSMS 128; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 68–116; Michelle V. Lee, “A Call to Martyrdom: Function as Method and Message in Revelation” *NovT* 40 (1998), 164–94; Mitchell G. Reddish, “Martyr Christology in the Apocalypse” *JSNT* 33 (1998), 85–95; André Feuillet, “Les martyrs de l’humanité et l’Agneau égorgé: une interprétation nouvelle de la prière des égorvés en Ap 6,9–11,” *NRT* 99 (1977), 189–207.

³⁰ The crowds of 144,000 of both chapters 14 and 7, and the great multitude in 7.9–17 raises a number of issues. There is much discussion over their identity, whether Jews, Gentiles, Jewish Christians, or inclusive groups, as well as whether or not the groups are distinct from each other. For discussion, see Aune, *Revelation*, 440–48.

³¹ “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth” (14.13).

readers the necessity of this choice, he issues a call “for the endurance and faith of the saints” (13.10). In Revelation one is either a worshipper of the Beast or a martyr of Jesus.

Follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14.4)	Follow the Beast (13.3)
Sealed on their foreheads (14.1; cf. 7.3–4)	Sealed on their foreheads or right hand (13.16)
Bear name of God	Bear the mark of the beast
Redeemed from the earth (14.3)	Dwell on the earth (13.8)
Sing before the Lamb	Tortured before the Lamb (14.10)
Names written in Lamb’s Book of Life (13.8)	Not written in Lamb’s Book of Life (13.8)
Refuse to worship the Beast (13.15)	Worship the beast (13.8)
Will be slain (13.15; 20.4)	Beast worshippers not slain (13.15)

The 144,000 of 14.1–5 are not the only martyrs in Revelation. The 144,000 of chapter seven have been similarly sealed (7.4), and will inevitably meet the same fate for non-participation in Beast worship. This tableau is followed by a vision of a multitude which has come out of the great tribulation (οἱ ἐρχόμενοι ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης); those who have suffered have washed their robes and made them white (ἔπλυναν τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐλεύκαναν αὐτάς) in the blood of the Lamb (7.14). While this metaphor has been read as signifying a theology of cultic atonement,³² it also incorporates the martyrdom of believers.³³ In Revelation’s other occurrence of τὸ αἷμα τοῦ ἀρνίου both ideas are present: “And they conquered (ἐνίκησαν) him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς μαρτυρίας), for they loved not their lives even unto death” (12.11). Washing one’s robes in the blood of the Lamb, therefore, signifies not only the death of Jesus, the first martyr, but all other martyrs who follow his example.

Similarly, white robes (στολή λευκή,) have martyrological import (6.11), and are given to those who conquer (ὁ νικῶν) as the martyrs do (3.5). Moreover, there are other similarities between the great crowd and martyrs: they serve God in the Temple (7.15), just as the martyrs do (20.6); and have the Lamb as their shepherd (7.17), just as the 144,000 “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14.4). Even the phrase “following the Lamb” may itself have martyrological significance, as it does in the *Martyrs of Lyons*:

[Vettius Epagathus], called the Christians’ advocate, he possessed the Advocate within him...which he demonstrated by the fullness of his love, consenting as he

³² See Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 165. This idea is certainly present in Rev 1.5 and 5.9.

³³ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 76–77.

did to lay down his life in defence of his fellow Christians. He was and is a true disciple of Christ, following the Lamb wherever he goes.³⁴

In Revelation, even though victorious, the slain-ness of the Lamb is emphasised (5.6, 9, 12; 13.8).³⁵ Furthermore, Jesus is described as the faithful martyr (ὁ μάρτυς, ὁ πιστός), the firstborn of the dead (ὁ πρωτότοκος τῶν νεκρῶν), and ruler of kings on earth (1.5). This pattern of witness and death, resurrection, and glorification to rule is precisely the model Christians undergo in the Apocalypse: Antipas is ὁ μάρτυς ... ὁ πιστός (2.13); the souls under the altar, and the beheaded martyrs were slain διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν (6.9; 20.4). Secondly, as Jesus is the first born of the dead, the martyrs are redeemed from the earth (14.3), and are the first fruits (ἀπαρχή,) for God and the Lamb (14.4). Paul also uses ἀπαρχή to speak of Jesus' resurrection: "Christ is raised from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep" (Νυνὶ δὲ Χριστὸς ἐγήγερται ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀπαρχὴ τῶν κεκοιμημένων).³⁶ Thirdly, as the martyrs follow Jesus' pattern of death and resurrected, they also reign:

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father. (2.26–27)

Similarly, martyrs also share Christ's judgement seat (3.21; 20.4, 6).

<i>Figure 2: Jesus and the martyr</i>	
Jesus is ὁ μάρτυς, ὁ πιστός (1.5)	Antipas is ὁ μάρτυς... ὁ πιστός (2.13)
	Martyrs are slain διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν (6.0; 20.4)
Jesus is firstborn from the dead (1.5)	Martyrs are redeemed from the earth (14.4)
	Martyrs are first fruits for God and the Lamb (14.4)
Jesus reigns over kings of the earth (1.5)	Martyrs rule with an iron rod (2.23–24)
	Martyrs reign with Christ (20.4–6)

However, before martyrs can claim their rewards, they must first follow the Lamb to death.

³⁴ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.10. All translations of martyr acts are taken from Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

³⁵ Chris Frilingos suggests the image of the slain lamb is feminising, since he has been subject to penetration. "Sexing the Lamb," in *New Testament Masculinities*. (eds Stephen D. Moore and Janice C. Anderson; Semeia Studies; Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 297–317. However, by Rev 5, the narrative already assumes the one who died has been raised and reigns (e.g. Rev 1.5, 18). Therefore, the slain Lamb is not simply an image of Christ's death, but presupposes his resurrection and glorification, making him worthy to open the scroll.

³⁶ 1 Cor 15.20. In 15.23, Paul explicitly states that Christ is the first fruits from the dead and will be followed by believers.

A similar idea is found elsewhere in the New Testament. In Mark 8.34–38, true discipleship implies death.³⁷ Just as Jesus called disciples to take up the cross and follow him (ἀκολουθεῖτω), the martyrs follow (ἀκολουθοῦντες) the Lamb wherever he goes. As Jesus urged these followers to lose their lives (ἀπολέσει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ/) in order to save them (Mark 8.35), true disciples in the Apocalypse loved not their lives (οὐκ ἠγάπησαν τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτῶν) even to death (Rev 12.11). Finally, as Jesus will deny those who deny him before the Father and the angels (Mark 8.38), the Jesus of the Apocalypse will confess the names of those who conquer before his Father and angels (Rev 3.5). This suggests that the call to conquer in Revelation is a call to martyrdom,³⁸ and that a martyrological impulse in early Christianity is established even within Jesus tradition.

If the call to conquer is a call to martyrdom, then this is a call issued to all intended readers of his Apocalypse. At the end of each of the seven letters to the churches is a call to conquer (2.7, 11, 17, 26; 3.5, 12, 21). The rewards listed for those who conquer are precisely those that will be granted to the martyrs, often exclusively so. Those who conquer have the right to eat of the tree of life (2.7), as will those who wash their robes (22.14). Conquerors will not be hurt by the second death (2.11), which is the exclusive reward of the martyrs, whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life (20.14). Those who conquer will be given power over the nations (2.26); they will also be clad in white (cf. 6.11; 7.9, 13–14), and their names found in the book of life (3.5 cf. 13.8, 15); they will be pillars in the temple (3.12); Christ’s name will be written on them (3.12 cf. 7.3; 14.1), and they will sit on Christ’s throne (3.22, cf. 20.4, 6). Therefore, the rewards for conquerors mirror the rewards reserved for martyrs, suggesting conquerors and martyrs are the same group.

<i>Figure 3: Rewards for Conquerors and Martyrs</i>		
Eat of the tree of life	2.7	22.14
Not hurt by second death	2.11	20.14
Given secret knowledge	2.17	14.3
Reign over the nations	2.26	20.6
Given white clothes	3.5	6.10; 7.14
Name in the Lamb’s Book of Life	3.5	13.8
Pillars in the Temple	3.12	20.6
Have Christ’s name written on them	3.12	7.3; 14.1
Sit on Christ’s throne	3.21	20.4

³⁷ Paul Middleton, “Suffering and the Creation of Christian Identity in the Gospel of Mark,” in *The T & T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (eds Brian Tucker and Coleman Baker; London: T & T Clark, 2014), 173–89. I am not suggesting John is dependent on Mark, but that the idea is widespread within early Christianity.

³⁸ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 158–70.

The call to conquer is issued to all Christians, and it is inconceivable that John imagines any faithful Christian engaging in Beast worship to escape death. Therefore, the book of Revelation divides the world into Beast worshippers and martyrs. Martyrs, both male and female, are presented in different ways: a crowd of soldiers assembled for a Holy War (7.4–8), a multitude no-one can count (7.9–17), souls under the altar anxious for justice (6.9–11), those beheaded who reign with Christ (20.4–6), conquerors (*passim*), and, of course, as 144,000 male virgin warriors (14.1–5). It is my contention that the martyrs are also presented as the Bride of the Lamb, so we now turn to marital imagery in early Christian martyr acts.

Male Brides

The themes of virginity, marriage, and martyrdom are often related in early Christian martyr texts, most commonly of female virgin martyrs who are often portrayed as being married to Christ.³⁹ However, in two important early Christian texts—*The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* and *The Passion of Sergius and Bacchus*—the martyrs do not fit this model of virginity, yet divine marital imagery is still found. In these martyr texts there is some fluidity in gender identity, so it may be instructive to read the male virgin martyrs of Revelation 14 in light of these two martyr acts.

The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, written in the early years of the third century, concerns a group of catechumens who were arrested, imprisoned, and executed. The central section of the *Passion* claims to come from Perpetua’s own prison diary. Notably, the text stresses that the two central heroines are not virgins. Perpetua is still nursing an infant child in prison, while Felicitas is pregnant. While the narrator notes that Perpetua is married, her husband never appears in the narrative. Indeed, a striking feature of the *Passion* is Perpetua’s rejection of all earthly identity markers—wife, daughter, mother—in favour of her confession, *Christiana sum*.⁴⁰ Her identity as a Christian, which finds its culmination in martyrdom, obliterates all other identity categories. Even her gender identity is threatened in one of her four prison visions, in which she finds herself in the arena pitted against an

³⁹ For an excellent discussion of virginity and martyrdom, see Maud, B. McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins: From Thecla to Joan of Arc* (The New Middle Ages; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15–83. See also the classic study: Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

⁴⁰ *Passion of Perpetua* 6.4. See Judith M. Lieu, “‘I am a Christian’: Martyrdom and the Beginning of Christian Identity,” in Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek: Constructing Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 211–31.

Egyptian warrior, who is later revealed to represent the devil. As the bout begins, Perpetua is transformed: “My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man (*facta sum masculus*).”⁴¹

We drew close to one another and began to let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet...He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head...⁴²

Then I walked up to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me, ‘Peace be with you, my daughter.’⁴³

Perpetua defeats her opponent by treading on his head, a trope that returns on the day of her martyrdom (18.7). The trainer, who represents God in the vision, calls her “daughter.” While in the narrative she effectively renounced her identity as a daughter by resisting her father’s “devilish” pleas for her to recant and save her life,⁴⁴ this is replaced by a filial relationship with God. Similarly, on the day of her martyrdom, the narrator suggests she is married to Christ.

The day of their victory dawned, and they marched from the prison to the amphitheatre joyfully as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear. Perpetua went along with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ (*matrona Christi*), putting down everyone’s stare by her own intense gaze ... She was already treading on the head of the Egyptian.⁴⁵

Given Perpetua already has a husband, it is striking that she is also said to be the wife of Christ. Some commentators have taken the husband’s narrative absence to be a sign that he is a pagan who has divorced his Christian wife, or that Perpetua has been widowed.⁴⁶ However, while these suggestions are certainly possible, the absence of the husband from the narrative is necessary to clear the way for Perpetua’s marriage to Christ. Furthermore, through the theme of treading on the Egyptian’s head, the narrator links the day of martyrdom to Perpetua’s gender transforming vision, and so in her martyrdom, Perpetua fulfils the roles of warrior martyr and Christ’s Bride in both female and male forms.

⁴¹ *Passion of Perpetua* 10.7.

⁴² Cf. Gen 3.15. In an earlier vision, Perpetua ascends a ladder, which represents martyrdom. To begin the climb she must step on the head of a dragon (4.7). When she finally reaches the arena to be killed, the narrator affirms “she was already treading on the head of the Egyptian” (18.7).

⁴³ *Passion of Perpetua* 10.10–13.

⁴⁴ *Passion of Perpetua* 3.1–3.

⁴⁵ *Passion of Perpetua* 18.2, 7.

⁴⁶ Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 147–8.

In the *Passion of Sergius and Bacchus* both martial and marital imagery are found. However, the imagery is the more extraordinary for the martyrs who are married to Christ are two male soldiers. Sergius and Bacchus⁴⁷ were favoured soldiers under the Emperor Maximian (305–311), who were said to be “one in their love for Christ.” Their Passion tells how the other soldiers become jealous and accuse the pair of being Christians to the emperor. Maximian at first refuses to believe the rumour, but tests them by ordering them to accompany him into the Temple of Zeus to sacrifice, which they refuse to do. Maximian, furious at their disobedience, orders them to be stripped of their military uniforms, dressed in women’s clothing, and paraded through the streets.⁴⁸ Bacchus is flogged to death, and Sergius is forced to run with spikes in his shoes, and is eventually beheaded.

The humiliating punishment of being dressed in women’s clothing, which is not well attested,⁴⁹ is enthusiastically embraced by the narrator. Sergius and Bacchus are transformed into a celebrated Christian drag act; they become brides of Christ:

But when they were led into the middle of the marketplace the saints sang and chanted together...this apostolic saying: “Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and putting off the form of the old man (ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τοῦ παλαιοῦ ἀνθρώπου), naked in faith we rejoice in you, Lord, because you have clothed us with the garment of salvation, and have covered us with the robe of righteousness; as brides (νύμφας) you have decked us with women’s gowns (γυναικείαις στολαῖς) and joined us to you [or: ‘joined us together for you’ (Boswell)] through our confession (ἁρμολογίας).⁵⁰

The women’s robes rather than a humiliation are garments of salvation. In the arena, where male martyrs are passive, scraped, burned, penetrated by spear and other instruments of torture, there is an obvious danger of feminisation.⁵¹ Martyr acts usually

⁴⁷ For a translation of the Passion, see John Boswell, *The Marriage of Likeness: Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 375–90.

⁴⁸ The contrast with Perpetua is irresistible. She removes her clothing and becomes a man; the two male martyrs take on themselves women’s clothing.

⁴⁹ Pace Boswell, *Marriage of Likeness*, 148. Although Boswell states “This was a classic mode of embarrassing males in a society obsessed with warrior masculinity,” there is a scarcity of evidence for this. David Woods, “The Emperor Julian and the Passion of Sergius and Bacchus,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997): 335–367 has located a single example under the emperor Julian as a punishment for desertion (Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 3.3.4–5).

⁵⁰ *Passion of Sergius and Bacchus* 7. It is more likely the two are married to Christ rather than to each other (against Boswell’s translation). However, when Bacchus is later killed, Sergius laments, “You have been unyoked (ἀπεζεύχθης) from me and gone up to heaven, leaving me alone on earth, made single (μεμονωμένον), without comfort” (19). Μονόω can be used in the sense of being made a widow, but its semantic range is broader.

⁵¹ This theme is explored by Brent D. Shaw, “Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the martyrs,” *J ECS* 4 (1996): 269–312; Janice C. Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, “Taking it like a man: masculinity in 4 Maccabees,” *JBL* (1998): 249–73 and more recently L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

aggressively stress the martyrs' endurance and fighting qualities. For example, Polycarp is told by a divine voice to be strong and 'act like a man' (ἀνδρίζου).⁵² However, Sergius and Bacchus, embrace both a 'masculine' and 'feminine' identification. As Perpetua's clothes were removed to reveal a masculine body, the former soldiers of the emperor have their clothes removed, and putting off the old man, are dressed in bridal garments. While Perpetua is *matrona Christi*, Sergius and Bacchus similarly are joined in matrimony (ἀρμόζομαι) with Christ. However, while they are no longer in service to the emperor, throughout the text they remain noble soldiers of Christ (οἱ γενναῖοι τοῦ Χριστοῦ στρατιῶται).⁵³ Therefore, Sergius and Bacchus are martyrs, soldiers, and brides.

If two men can be married to Christ, how about 144,000? As Perpetua's husband disappeared from her story, so any spouses of Revelation's martyrs disappear; the continence of the 144,000 παρθένοι is a narrative precondition for a valid marriage between the martyrs and the Lamb. If so, the most problematic aspect of the no longer be so much a comment on the polluting potential of women in general, but specifically the dirtying of the purity of a bride before her/his/their marriage to the Lamb. Similarly, marriage *per se* is not denigrated. However, it would be inappropriate for those betrothed to Christ.

Martyrological themes appear in the marital imagery of the final chapters of Revelation.

The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure (περιβάλλεται βύσσινον λαμπρὸν καθαρὸν) – for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints (τὰ δικαιώματα τῶν ἁγίων; 19.7–8).

Two aspects of the bride's clothing recall imagery associated with martyrdom. First, the bright and pure clothes mirrors the unstained white robes given to the martyrs (2.23–24; 6.10; 7.14). Secondly, the brides linen is the righteous deeds of the saints, which in 14.13 leads to martyrdom. When in chapter 21, the bride is transformed to into the holy city—new Jerusalem (21.2, 9)—further points of connection are made with the martyrs: The city is 144,000 square stadia, and its walls 144 cubits, paralleling the 144,000 virgin martyrs (14.1–

⁵² *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.1.

⁵³ *Passion of Sergius and Bacchus* 2, 6, 9, 12, 13, 19, 28. A further overlap with the Perpetua narrative occurs when the two are visited in prison by an angel, who uses the wrestling motif of Perpetua's prison vision: "Take courage and fight against the devil and his evil spirits as noble soldiers and athletes of Christ, and once you have thrown the enemy and put him under your feet so that when you appear before the King of Glory, we, the host of the army of angels, may come to greet you singing the hymn of victory." (12)

5); the twelve tribes of Israel are mentioned (21.12) as with the 144,000 of chapter 7. Even the use of the term *παρθένοϛ* links the martyrs and the city/bride, since it is traditionally be applied to Zion or the daughter of Zion.⁵⁴

The Bride of the Lamb is contrasted with the great Whore (*τῆϛ πόρνης τῆϛ μεγάλης*) with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication (17.1–2). In his description of the harlot, John again divides the world into Beast worshippers and martyrs. The inhabitants of the earth (*οἱ κατοικοῦντεω τὴν γῆν*), who had all earlier worshipped the Beast (13.8) now become drunk on the cup of the Whore’s abominations (17.2, 4). This cup is found to contain the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus (17.6; cf. 18.24). Once again the choice is clear: one can share in the cup of impurity or become a martyr. The language of sexual and marital infidelity is a common metaphor for spiritual promiscuity in the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁵ Therefore, the purity of the virgins in Revelation 14 represents their monogamous relationship with the Lamb, and their readiness for marriage; they are spotless (*ἄμωμοι*; Rev 14.5).

Men being married to Christ is not a novel concept, and is found elsewhere in the New Testament. In the marriage metaphor utilised for the relationship between Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5, the church—Christ’s Bride—is similarly spotless (*ἄμωμοϛ*; 5.27). The author of Ephesians instructs wives to be subject to their husbands for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church (5.23). Similarly husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the Church (5.25), and giving themselves up for her in order to cleanse and sanctify her (5.26).⁵⁶ The author then makes an extraordinary move. The church becomes Christ’s own body, which he loves as a man loves his own body. However, he then presents the church—his own body—as a spotless bride ready for marriage to himself (5.27). The metaphor is further embodied as the author takes the foundational Genesis marriage text—where through marriage and sexual intercourse man and woman become one flesh (2.24)—and applies it to what he calls “a profound mystery”; the saying refers to Christ and the church (5.32). Christ takes his own body, the church of Christian women and men, and “joins” to it in the most intimate way possible; using the metaphor of sexual intercourse,

⁵⁴ 2 Kings 19.21^{LXX}; 37.22^{LXX}; Lam 2.13^{LXX}.

⁵⁵ For example: Isa 1.21; Jer 3.20; 13.27; Ezek 16.15–58; 23.1–49; 43.7; Hos 2.2–5; 3.1–5; 9.1.

⁵⁶ Ernest Best worries the image only works because the church has been given feminine gender and wonders whether the metaphor works in a non-patriarchal setting (*Ephesians* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998] 559–61).

Christ and the Church are united as one flesh.⁵⁷ Men as well as women are therefore married and “united” to Christ.

Men are also found among the Brides of Christ when Paul employs marital imagery for the church (2 Cor 11.2). Paul arranges for the betrothal of his church to Christ, and like John, employs the image of the παρθένος. The Corinthian church is a pure virgin (παρθένον ἄγνήν) to be presented to her one husband (2 Cor 11.2). Whether Paul here functions as the marriage broker⁵⁸ or father of the Bride,⁵⁹ it is his responsibility to guarantee the purity of the bride for her husband.⁶⁰ In Ephesians, by contrast, Christ takes responsibility for the purity of the Bride—his own body—that he will join to himself. New Testament authors appear to have little difficulty in conceptualising men in Christian communities as comprising a bride, who are to be married to Christ. The concern Paul has is not the gender of the bride, but the purity of the παρθένος, which he believes to be under external threat. Like Israel, Paul fears that his disciples may wander from their one husband, and be tempted by the preaching of another Jesus or a different spirit (11.4).

A similar concern appears to occupy John. The Apocalypse turns on the potential decision by the Christian to remain faithful to God or fornicate with the Whore. However, for John the danger of pollution is more acute. As the 144,000 avoided *all* sexual contact, not simply πορνεία; John appears to suggest that all contact with Babylon contaminates, and Christians must shun not just *cultic* activity, but *all* activities of the “world”. At the crucial moment of Babylon’s destruction, John issues a clarion call through a voice from heaven: “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues” (18.4). Heavenly figures repeatedly stress that judgement will take place according to one’s deeds (2.23; 18.6; 20.12, 13; 22.12 cf. 2.2; 2.19; 3.1, 8, 15), and that judgement is coming soon (1.3; 2.16; 3.11; 22.6, 7, 12, 20). At critical moments where Christians may be tempted to avoid martyrdom and instead join in Beastly activities, John makes a call for the

⁵⁷ Paul comes very close to this idea in 1 Cor 6.15–20 in his explanation of why a Christian should not have sex with a prostitute. The Christian is joined to Christ and part of his body. Therefore, to unite with a prostitute is to unite the body of Christ to the same. The believer and the prostitute should not become “one flesh” since he is already “one spirit” (ἐν πνεύμα,) with the Lord. In the gospels, Jesus is also portrayed as the Bridegroom (Matt 9.15; Mark 2.19–20; Luke 5.34–35; John 3.29). It is perhaps only in the parable of the foolish virgins where believers are cast in the role of brides (Matt 25.1–10).

⁵⁸ Richard Batey, “Paul’s Bride Image: A Symbol of Realised Eschatology,” *Interpretation* 17 (1963): 176–82.

⁵⁹ This is the majority opinion. See, for example, Margaret E. Thrall, *2 Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 661; and Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 736–7 for discussion.

⁶⁰Harris, *Corinthians*, 735.

“endurance and faith of the saints” (13.10; 14.12). It is better to die than to compromise with Babylon and risk sharing in her fate.

Some of the churches to which John wrote were in danger of such pollution. John tells the church in Sardis that their faith is as good as dead, and if they do not repent, they will face the judgement normally given to Beast worshippers. They have not remained pure, but have dirtied (ἐμόλυναν) their garments (3.4). They are a long way from qualifying for a place among the 144,000 martyrs-brides. However, if they repent and conquer, if they demonstrate single-minded devotion to Christ that results in martyrdom, they will be given white robes, and find themselves back in the Lamb’s book of life. Through martyrdom they will win the garments of both the martyr and the bride; through the blood of the Lamb and the shedding of their own blood, their virgin status will be restored, and they will be able to take their place as members of the pure bride of Christ.

Although Revelation 14.1–5 is, to the modern mind, problematic as a particular picture of the martyrs, it is not the only snapshot of faithful Christians. The book of Revelation calls all faithful Christians to martyrdom in a variety of ways. In Revelation 14, the army of martyrs are contrasted with the kings of the earth and the other inhabitants of the earth who fornicate with the whore. As soldier-brides who could potentially defile themselves with the harlot, masculine imagery is appropriate. However, they do not stand in distinction with the mass of Christians who also receive the call to conquer, refuse to worship the Beast, face martyrdom, and will be resurrected to reign with Christ. There are but two options for all readers of the Apocalypse—male and female alike: they can associate with Babylon and risk fornicating with the whore, dirtying their wedding garments, and excluding them from the marriage supper; or they can remain pure and holy, disassociating with the activities of Babylon. This will result in death, but the faithful will become spotless virgin martyrs transformed into the worthy and spotless bride who will marry the Lamb.

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