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A WOMAN'S UNBOUND HAIR IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE STORY OF THE “SINFUL WOMAN” IN LUKE 7:36–50

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In Luke 7:36–50 an unnamed woman described as “a sinner in the city” weeps on Jesus’ feet, wipes them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with oil from an alabaster flask. My purpose here is to clarify the social meaning of the woman’s gestures with her hair in this story.¹

A first step is to set forth the stated and implied elements of the woman’s actions. She enters Simon’s house, carrying an alabaster flask of ointment, and walks over to where Jesus is reclining at table. She positions herself behind him near his feet. In view of what she does next, she must have either bent over or knelt to reach his feet. She begins to weep profusely onto his feet and to dry them with her hair. Her hair must be loose at this point to serve as a makeshift towel. For the time being, we will leave open the question of when she unbinds her hair. Kissing his feet, she anoints them with ointment.

How would Luke and his readers have interpreted this scene of a woman crouched or kneeling at Jesus’ feet, *with her hair undone*, weeping, kissing his feet, and pouring ointment over them?

¹ A complex traditio-historical nexus links Luke 7:36–50, John 12:1–8, and Mark 14:3–9. The story in John 12 also includes a statement about a woman (Mary, sister of Lazarus) anointing Jesus’ feet and wiping them with her hair. It is not my purpose here to sort out the traditio-historical relations between these stories or to comment on the narratives in Mark and John. Nevertheless, my study of the meaning of the woman’s gesture with her hair in Luke 7 should prove helpful for efforts to interpret the similar gesture in John 12. Helpful discussions of the relationship between the Lukan and Johannine stories can be found in the standard commentaries. For good summaries of the issues and scholarly debate, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i–xii): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 449–52; John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20* (WBC 35A; Dallas: Word, 1989), 351–53.

I. Modern Interpretation of the Woman's Gesture with Her Hair in Luke 7

Many commentators hold that the woman is a prostitute, and a common interpretation of the woman's gesture with her hair is that it shows her to be a sexually promiscuous person.² But some who are confident that she is a prostitute do not connect her loose hair with her sexual behavior. For example, Walter Radl holds that the woman is a prostitute but sees her undoing of her hair as a spontaneous action in the moment, the purpose of which is simply to dry Jesus' feet.³ Still other interpreters are cautious or doubtful about whether the woman is a prostitute but nonetheless assume that loose hair on a woman is invariably a sign of immodesty or immorality in antiquity. These interpreters tend to see her intentions as good (she aims to express love, pious grief, gratitude, etc.), even if her actions are socially immodest. Joachim Jeremias, for example, raises doubts about whether we should assume the woman is a prostitute but envisions the scene as involving a disgraceful unbinding of the hair. He chalks this up to the woman's absorption in the moment: "she was so shocked at having bedewed Jesus with her tears, that she entirely forgot her surroundings."⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer cautions that the identification of the woman as a prostitute is at best only a plausible inference from the narrative (and not the only possibility). He understands the woman's actions (tears, kisses, the anointing and wiping with her hair) as "signs of love and gratitude" for forgiveness and observes that the unbinding of her hair "does not confirm her sinfulness" but "merely gives rise to an interpretation of her" (by Simon).⁵ Darrel Bock sees the unbinding of the hair as an act that "some might think immodest" (in her social context) but it is part of her gestures as a whole, which express humility, devotion, reverence.⁶ According to Frederick Danker, the woman's loose hair is

² See, e.g., Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke* (4th ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1910), 210–11; R. K. Orchard, "On the Composition of Luke 7, 36–50," *JTS* 38 (1937): 243–45; Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (SNTSMS 51; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 54–55.

³ Walter Radl, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas: Kommentar, Erster Teil, 1.1–9.50* (Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 495 with n. 242 and 496 with n. 251. Josef Schmid identifies the woman as a prostitute but makes no mention of her loose hair (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [4th ed.; RNT 3; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1960], 147).

⁴ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (rev. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 126.

⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I–IX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 28; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 689, 687, 689.

⁶ Darrel L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 1, 1:1–9:50 (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT 3; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 696–97.

grounds for questioning her character but her actions are "a monument of sacred affection."⁷

Other commentators give the traditional interpretation of the woman's unbound hair as immodest a more intense coloring. They see the unbound hair as part of a cluster of sexually provocative gestures by the woman. Joel Green describes her behavior as "erotic" and therefore "outrageous." Letting down her hair "would have been on a par with appearing topless in public." Likewise, her touching of Jesus' feet is like the fondling that slave girls performed on guests at dinner parties as a prelude to sexual favors.⁸ The same or similar points are made also by Kathleen Corley (to whom Green refers), François Bovon, and others.⁹ These interpreters are not saying that the woman's gestures are meant *by her* to be erotic, only that they would have been construed that way (e.g., by a character like Simon) and that the public connotations of her actions heighten the drama and underscore the Lukan theme that Jesus accepts the disreputables.

A very different take on the story of the sinful woman is found in a retelling of the story by fourth-century church father Asterius of Amasea, who presumably had some sense of the propriety of women's gestures with their hair in ancient Mediterranean culture:

Showing her unworthiness and utmost timidity through her manner and assuming a place to the rear, she did not simply stand but took a position behind his feet, loosed her hair, and made her grieving soul a matter of public business by her actions. Shedding tears on the feet of Jesus with great feeling she begged for mercy. And she poured forth such tears that she wet his

⁷ Frederick W. Danker, *Commentary on Luke: Jesus and the New Age* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 169–70. Other interpreters who see the woman's action with her hair as immodest but who are cautious about identifying her as a prostitute include Frederic Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke* (trans. E. W. Shalders and M. D. Cusin; New York: I. K. Funk, 1881), 228 (he refers to his more detailed treatment of the quasi-parallel story in John 12; see Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* [trans. and ed. Timothy Dwight; New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1886], 207); and Fernando Méndez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion in Luke* (JSNTSup 252; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 106–9.

⁸ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 309, 310. He offers no evidence that party prostitutes fondled the feet of the male guests.

⁹ Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 125; François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (trans. Christine M. Thomas; ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 294–95. Keith F. Nickle imagines Simon interpreting the woman's actions as "hanky-panky" (*Preaching the Gospel of Luke: Proclaiming God's Royal Rule* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000], 78).

feet. And wiping her tears with her hair she again displayed her perfectly circumspect humility. (*Hom.* 13.10.2–3)¹⁰

Asterius makes the woman's act of unbinding her hair an explicit detail of the story and sees it as a gesture of grieving (displaying τὴν πενθοῦσαν ψυχὴν¹¹), not as a sign of her loose morals or even as an awkward but forgivable breach of decorum prompted by the unforeseen necessity of drying Jesus' feet. This is evident not only from his praise of this action but also from the fact that in his retelling the loosing of the hair comes at the moment she places herself at Jesus' feet but *before* she starts weeping. Hence, the gesture has its own independent significance as an expression of pious grief for her sin. This ancient interpretation should give us pause about whether the woman's gesture with her hair (along with her other actions) is sexually provocative or even a lapse in etiquette by ancient Mediterranean standards. To that question we now turn.

II. The Social Symbolism of Women's Hair and Actions Involving Women's Hair in Antiquity

The following examination of references to unbound hair/unbinding the hair covers many centuries and reveals a consistency of basic attitudes. I have not found any evidence to suggest that for first-century Jews a woman's unbound hair carried different meanings from what it had in the wider society. Hence, when it comes to applying the results of the survey to Luke 7:36–50, I assume that general Mediterranean social codes are applicable. I am encouraged in this by two things: (1) the fact that the ancient Jewish evidence we possess jibes with general Greco-Roman conventions regarding hair; (2) the fact that Luke and his audience, representing an urban and predominantly Gentile Christianity, are likely to have understood the story in terms of general Greco-Roman social conventions.

The typical women's style throughout many centuries was to wear their hair long¹² but to bind it in some way so that it did not hang down loosely.¹³ Often this involved plaiting or braiding.¹⁴ Cloth bands, pins, and combs were used to restrain the hair in a chaste and often ornamental way.

¹⁰ My translation. For the Greek text, see C. Datema, ed., *Asterius of Amasea: Homilies I–XIV: Text, Introduction, and Notes* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 191.

¹¹ On the use of πενθέω as sorrow for one's sins, see 1 Cor 5:2 and *T. Reub.* 1:10.

¹² See Paul's observation about this in 1 Cor 11:15. Shorter hairstyles are also in evidence, however, in artistic representations.

¹³ See "Haartracht," *DNP*, 5:40–45.

¹⁴ A woman's plaited hair with a long braid was found among the sad remains at Masada. See Yigael Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealot's Last Stand* (New York: Random House, 1966), 54, 56. See also the reference to braided hair in 1 Tim 2:9.

In antiquity, a woman's unbound hair (and the act of unbinding the hair) often had sexual connotations. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this. In one popular telling of the story of Medusa, Medusa's beautiful hair attracts Poseidon, who rapes her, leaving her to be punished by her rival, Jove's daughter (Athena), who transforms Medusa's hair into snakes (Ovid, *Met.* 4.794–803). The wild, unbound hair of Medusa is beautiful, sexually seductive, and dangerous (above all to her!).¹⁵ In *Shepherd of Hermas* (*Sim.* 9.9.6 and 15.1–3) certain beautiful women dressed in black and wearing loose hair symbolize vices. A certain Phaedra, in a play of Euripides, is torn by adulterous desire. As she begins to speak of her passion, she asks her nurse to unbind her hair (Euripides, *Hipp.* 198–202). Even more famously, Apuleius, through the voice of Lucius, expresses a sexual fetish for women's hair and deliciously describes the pleasure he has in watching a servant girl let down her hair for him as a prelude to their lovemaking (Apuleius, *Met.* 2.17).

There is no need to rehearse here all the ways in which men in antiquity (and in later times) projected their own sexually aggressive urges onto women, casting the female as a threat to male virtue because of her allegedly voracious sexual appetite and weak moral nature. The sexual meaning of women's long, free-flowing hair belongs in part to this ideology.

But there are other meanings of a woman's unbound hair and the act of unbinding the hair. A particularly interesting example is found in the actions of Callirhoe in the temple of Aphrodite in the popular ancient Greek novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe*. The first time Callirhoe visits Aphrodite, she prostrates herself at the feet of the goddess and prays to her (2.2.7). This is consistent with what we know of ancient Greek customs of praying in shrines: men stood and prayed with arms raised; women knelt.¹⁶ The second time, at the very end of the novel, Callirhoe's actions are described in greater detail. Having been reunited with her husband, she now enters the shrine of Aphrodite to express her gratitude. She places her hands and face on the goddess's feet, lets down her hair, and kisses the feet of the goddess (8.8.15).¹⁷ In this setting, the loving attention to the feet and the letting down of the hair are clearly acts of thankful veneration. A similar gesture (although it does not involve hair) appears in the resurrection-appearance story in Matthew 28, where the women

¹⁵ Molly Myerowitz Levine comments: "Transformed from golden to serpentine, Medusa's head, once unmoored, becomes a reincarnated, infinitely more potent version of the pure female threat" ("The Gendered Grammar of Ancient Mediterranean Hair," in *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture* [ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995], 94).

¹⁶ John Stambaugh, "The Function of Roman Temples," in *ANRW* 2.16.1:579.

¹⁷ Chariton, *Le Roman de Chairéas et Callirhoé* (ed. and trans. Georges Moline; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1979), 203.

fleeing the empty tomb meet the risen Jesus and take hold of his feet in an act of worship (Matt 28:9).

A more formal custom of women wearing their hair unbound in acts of religious devotion was part of the Andanian mysteries. According to an inscription dating to 92/91 B.C.E. that gives the rule for the celebration of these rites, female initiates are not to wear "gold, or rouge, or white make-up, or a hair band, or braided hair or shoes made of anything but felt or leather from sacrificial victims."¹⁸ Loose hair goes here with other divestments of culture, implying that the worshipers enter the rites in a pure and natural state. Similarly, the regulations for entering the temple of the goddess Despoina at Lycosura stipulate that women are not to enter with their hair bound (and men are not to cover their heads).¹⁹ In *Satyricon*, Petronius has Ganymede remember the "old days" when people believed in religion and "the mothers in their best robes used to climb the hill with bare feet and loose hair, pure in spirit, and pray Jupiter to send rain" (*Sat.* 45).²⁰ We also have an ancient law attributed to Numa Pompilius (716–673 B.C.E.) that should a concubine touch the altar of Juno, she must offer a ewe lamb to Juno, approaching with her hair unbound.²¹ From what we have seen, it appears that for a woman to unbind her hair before a god was a gesture of humility and reverence.

A famous story is told, which became a subject of artistic representation, that at the festival of Poseidon in Eleusis, "in sight of the whole Greek world" a beautiful and wealthy courtesan named Phryne "removed only her outer garment, loosed her hair, and stepped into the sea" (Athenaeus, *Deip.* 13.590).²² This is clearly an act of symbolic self-offering to the god. Athenaeus stresses the modesty of Phryne, and one of his points here is that she does not completely disrobe. But the gesture of self-offering also seems to have sexual overtones, an impression reinforced for us through an additional comment by Athenaeus about this episode. He reports what was probably a common opinion that the artist Apelles modeled his *Aphrodite Rising from the Sea* on Phryne's act at the festival of Poseidon, an event the artist is said to have witnessed. Whether he

¹⁸ Translation of Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook: Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 53. For the Greek text, see *SIG*, vol. 2, no. 736 (specific language about hair on p. 403).

¹⁹ *Leges Graecorum sacrae e titulis collectae* (ed. Hans Theodor Anton von Prott and Ludwig Ziehen; repr., Chicago: Ares, 1988), no. 63, pp. 197–99.

²⁰ *Petronius*, with a translation by Michael Heseltine, revised by E. H. Warmington (LCL; London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 87.

²¹ *Fontes Iures Romani Antejustiniani*, vol. 1 (2nd ed.; ed. Salvatore Riccobono et al.; 3 vols.; Florence: G. Barbèra, 1940–43), 13 (#13).

²² My translation, following the Greek text in Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, with an English translation by Charles Burtin Gulick, vol. 6 (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1950), 186.

witnessed the event or not, Apelles conceived it in erotic terms, and anyone who thought that Phryne was the model for his *Aphrodite Rising from the Sea* probably associated the eroticism of Apelles' painting with Phryne's famous dip in the sea with unbound hair.

Of special interest for us is the possibility that it was customary for women to unbind their hair and step into the sea at the festival of Poseidon at Eleusis or elsewhere, but I have not found any evidence of this beyond the story about Phryne.²³

The Matronalia festival honored Juno Lucina, goddess of childbirth. Only women were permitted to celebrate this festival, which required that they untie knots in their clothing and wear their hair unbound to ensure safety in childbirth (Ovid, *Fast.* 3.245). An ancient notion of *sympatheia* seems to be involved here, the idea that the untying of knots in clothing and hair will encourage an untying or loosening of the birth canal.

Unmarried Roman and Greek girls wore their hair free (see *Hom. Hym.* 2.176–78) or restrained by a single headband (Ovid, *Met.* 2.413). In Heliodorus's *An Ethiopian Story*, the beautiful young Charicleia, riding from the temple of Artemis in a chariot drawn by white bullocks and clad in a blouse of handmade black and gold snakes, wears her hair long down the back (but the ringlets in the front are controlled and chaste).²⁴ Nymphs have loose hair (see Longus, *Poim.* 1.4; 2.23) as do maidens in idyllic seascapes (away from society).²⁵ In these settings unbound hair is a symbol of freedom, naturalness (and in this sense freedom from the conventions of society), even wildness.²⁶ Aristophanes portrays the free, wild maidens of Sparta, who, in their unmarried state, frolic with unbound hair like the bacchantes (*Lys.* 1308–13). Ovid speaks of Daphne's "lawless locks" (*sine lege capillos*) in *Met.* 1.477. Warrior women are sometimes described as having free-flowing hair,²⁷ which may symbolize their wildness or fierceness, perhaps through association with Spartan male

²³ Such a ritual would be practical only at shrines near the sea and where the geography afforded a beach. The Eleusinian mysteries included bathing in the sea as a ritual of purification. See Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Greco-Roman Religions* (trans. Brian McNeil; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 100.

²⁴ Heliodorus, *Ath.* 3.4. Compare the novelist Xenophon's description of the fourteen-year-old Anthia marching in the local procession at the festival of Artemis: "Her hair was golden—a little of it plaited, but most hanging loose and blowing in the wind" (Xenophon, *Anth.* 1.2; translation by Graham Anderson in B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], 129).

²⁵ Achilles Tatius, *Leuk.* 1.1.7 (describing girls in a seascape painting).

²⁶ Seneca regarded men's long hair as natural, belonging to a time before culture when men lived lives nearer to animals. Men shaking out their streaming hair reminded him of noble animals shaking out their manes. See *Quaest. Nat.* 1.17.7.

²⁷ See Heliodorus, *Ath.* 1.2, describing the heroine, Charicleia, in her first appearance in a warrior-like pose.

warriors who have free-flowing hair. Apollo, in his pursuit of Daphne, dreams of her wild hair being “arranged” (*comantur*; Ovid, *Met.* 1.498), which probably refers not only to his desire to see her made up beautifully but also to the symbolism of hair so arranged, namely, as a sign of marriage (to him).²⁸

Marriage required a change of hairstyle for women (not for men). Married women did up their hair with headbands,²⁹ symbolizing the sexual unavailability of the matron to any man but her husband. Accordingly, it was shameful for a married woman to appear in public with her hair unbound, except under certain circumstances to be described more fully below.

Before turning to these exceptions, it is important to mention the ritual prescribed in Num 5:18–31 to test whether a woman suspected of adultery has been unfaithful. The accused woman is brought before the priest, who dishevels her hair, places in her hands a grain offering of remembrance, requires an oath from her, and makes her drink a preparation called “the water of bitterness.” The undoing of the woman’s hair looks like an act of shaming designed to mortify her and bring forth a confession. It is to be noted that although the ritual, as a quasi-legal proceeding, does not technically presume the woman’s guilt, it is cast in language strongly biased against her. We find a later version of this ritual in *Sotah* 1.5. The element of shaming is even stronger in this text, which involves not only disheveling the accused woman’s hair but ripping open her clothing to expose her breasts.³⁰

In some social situations, however, a woman whose age or marital status required that she bind her hair and cover her head could expose her head and let down her hair in public without risking censure. Callirhoe in the temple of Aphrodite offers one example (see above). Grieving rituals offer another, as we have noted in Charicleia’s acts of mourning. Plutarch asks, “Why do sons cover their heads when they escort their parents to the grave, while daughters go uncovered and with hair unbound?”³¹ He finds most plausible the explana-

²⁸ *Metamorphoses* 1.498 as translated by A. D. Melville in *Ovid: Metamorphoses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 16. See further Myerowitz Levine, “Gendered Grammar of Ancient Mediterranean Hair,” 82–85.

²⁹ Varro, *Ling.* 7.44 (speaking of the practice of married women to wear their hair on top of their heads fixed by a woollen band). I wish to thank Jennifer Eyl for this reference, found in her paper “Sweeping Sacred Floors with Her Hair: Polybius IX.6 and the Republican Women’s Passus” (paper read at the Bryn Mawr Symposium, October 11, 2003).

³⁰ Numbers 5:11–31 is a complicated passage reflecting a no doubt complicated tradition history. On the passage as a whole, see the contributions by various scholars in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. Alice Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999), 460–522. These commentators say little about the disheveling of the woman’s hair.

³¹ *Moralia* 267 (The Roman Questions No. 14) in *Plutarch’s Moralia*, with an English translation by Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1962), 25.

tion that in mourning men and women do the opposite of what is usual for them.³²

In Xenophon's *An Ephesian Tale*, Anthia dishevels her hair in grief over her separation from her husband and his sufferings (*Ath.* 3.5). Vergil's *Aeneid* speaks of women mourning the dead with hair unbound (*Aen.* 3.65). In *Passion of Perpetua* 20, Perpetua fixes her loosened hair after being knocked down by a bull in the arena; she does so because she regards it as unfitting that a martyr "should seem to grieve in her glory."³³ She also hastily covers her exposed thigh, a gesture of modesty. The author of this drama does not associate the rebinding of the hair with modesty, which shows how strongly unbound hair calls grief to mind. That is, Perpetua does not need to worry that people will interpret her loose hair in a sexual way because she knows they are more likely to associate her loose hair with grieving. Funerary reliefs showing families in mourning depict women with loose, disheveled hair.³⁴ Ovid describes Aurora (Eos) going with disheveled hair to the shrine of Jove (Zeus) after leaving the funeral pyre of her son, Memnon. With streaming hair (*crine soluto*), she falls at the god's feet to beg for Memnon's safe passage to the next world and for some consolation in her grief (*Met.* 583–99). Eumolpus in Petronius's *Satyricon* tells the story of a virtuous woman from Ephesus who in great grief mourns her husband by loosing her hair and beating her naked breast in the funeral procession. Unsatisfied with these customary expressions of grief (*non contenta vulgari more*), she takes up residence in her husband's underground tomb and sets to weeping day and night (subsequently falling in love with a soldier who visits the tomb, and so forth) (*Sat.* 111).³⁵ The tale is fanciful, but it reveals that for a woman to let down her hair and bare her breasts in public³⁶ was considered fitting as an expression of grief. Here these behaviors, as her own actions in a grieving ritual, carry a very different meaning from the same actions performed on her in a violent ordeal of shaming (disheveling of an accused woman's hair and ripping open her clothing to expose her breasts in *Soṭah* 1.5; see above).

Expression of grief through disheveled hair may also explain in part the practice of women to unbind their hair in times of great danger. From Polybius and Livy we have stories about extreme national crises in Rome, when the

³² Ibid., 27.

³³ W. H. Shewing's rendering of *in sua gloria plangere videretur*. See *The Passion of S.S. Perpetua and Felicity M.M., Together with the Sermons of Augustine upon These Saints* (trans. W. H. Shewing; London: Sheed & Ward, 1931), 40 (Latin on p. 19).

³⁴ See J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 44–47, with notes; plates 9, 10, and 11.

³⁵ See *Petronius*, p. 268.

³⁶ It is not clear whether the grieving woman in Eumolpus's story exposes her breasts completely or only partially. Likewise the shaming ritual in *Soṭah* 1.5 might involve full or only partial exposure of the breasts.

women of the city of Rome would go from temple to temple sweeping the temple pavements and altars with their unbound hair, supplicating the gods to save the city from invasion (Polybius 9.6.3–5; Livy 26.9.7–8).³⁷ This may suggest a kind of proleptic and supplicatory grief (see below). Or it could be a ritual cleansing of the temples to win the gods' favor. The latter possibility has a remote parallel in an Egyptian song in which two priestesses symbolizing Isis and Nephthys invite the god Amen-Ra to wipe upon their hair the impurities of his bones when he (daily) reassembles his body.³⁸ Of course, a ritual like that of the women sweeping the pavements and altars with their hair can have more than one meaning and, in many minds, it was no doubt simply "what we do" to avert disaster in a particular situation.³⁹

Livy and Ovid tell us that the Sabine women of ancient Italy endeavored to stop their men from fighting by venturing into the battlefield, where they knelt with disheveled hair and begged for peace (Livy 1.13.1; Ovid, *Fast.* 213–22). Livy tells a similar story about the mother of Coriolanus, hair torn and disheveled, leading a parade of women to persuade her son from going to war against Rome (7.40.12 referring back to 2.40.5ff.). And Dionysius of Halicarnassus describes Roman women with loose hair beseeching the gods in an effort to ward off an attack against the city (8.22.2). Unbound hair in these passages may be understood as an exhibition of what might be called proleptic grief expressed in advance as a supplication to male warriors and/or the gods to avert war or other disaster. This impression is strengthened by the "Hymn of Demeter," in which Demeter, upon learning that her daughter Persephone (Kore) has been abducted, unbinds her hair and goes in search of her. Similarly, in *Civil War (De Bello Civili)*, Lucan describes a "grief of foreboding" among the people of Rome (B.C. 7.185–91) and then goes on to depict the married women of Rome, with hair disheveled, looking down from Rome's high walls on the eve of the invasion, urging on their men (B.C. 7.369–70). We might understand these women as displaying anticipatory grief, which is also an act of supplication to the gods.

Unbound hair was also associated with conjury. In the *Aeneid* a priestess with her hair disheveled summons subterranean powers (4.509–10). Lucan

³⁷ Jennifer Eyl ("Sweeping Sacred Floors with Her Hair") drew my attention to these passages and those mentioned below describing the Sabine women.

³⁸ See E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1959), 107. I have this reference from Loretta Dornisch, *A Woman Reads the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 83. Unlike her, I don't see here a parallel to what the woman does with her hair in Luke 7.

³⁹ Eyl ("Sweeping Sacred Floors with Her Hair") suggests that women's unbound hair in these stories expresses a liminal state or situation. In the ancient world a woman's unbound hair (and her act of unbinding the hair) could symbolize a crossing of the limen between culture and nature, order and chaos.

portrays the witch Erictho living in deserted tombs, haggard, hair unkempt (B.C. 6.607–18). The sorceress Proselenos appears in Petronius's *Satyricon* with unbound hair (*Sat.* 133). Ecstatic states were associated with loose hair. In both literary and visual depictions (e.g., on vases), Dionysius is typically accompanied by women (maenads) dancing in a frenzied state, their hair flying freely (Euripides, *Bacch.* 695, 864–65, 927–31). The church father Basil of Caesarea complains about women who celebrate the Easter vigil at the martyrs' tombs by uncovering their heads and dancing wildly with disheveled hair.⁴⁰

In the *Apostolic Tradition*, the instructions laid down for women about to be baptized include that they remove their jewelry and loose their hair (21.5). The Sahidic, Arabic, and Ethiopic versions all explain that the reason for the removal of jewelry is that nothing (or “nothing foreign” as one version has it) should go into the water with the baptizand (who is naked). One interpretation of this is that in the ancient world it was thought that demons took up residence in jewelry. Since bound hair is typically fixed in place with bands, pins, or combs, unbinding the hair would entail the removal of these objects, releasing the demons or at least preventing them from going into the water with the baptizand.⁴¹ This fits the parallel instruction in the *Canons of Hippolytus*, which gives as the reason for women to loose their hair as “for fear that something of the alien spirits should go down with them into the water.”⁴² A different interpretation is offered by Willem van Unnik, who sees this baptismal instruction as a Christian version of the rabbinic requirement that proselytes undergo baptismal rites in which, in the case of women, unbound hair symbolizes impurity, to be ritually cleansed.⁴³ As he understands it, the church adopted the rabbinic idea of women's unbound hair as impure and worked it into the meaning of baptism as cleansing from sin. Zwi Werblowsky proposes that the reasoning behind the instruction in the *Apostolic Tradition* is that bound hair might not receive the full effects of the baptism, parts within knotted hair perhaps remaining dry, which is a rabbinic worry mentioned in the Talmud in connection with women's monthly postmenstrual washings.⁴⁴ The regulations for the

⁴⁰ *Hom. 14 in hebraeosus*, PG 31:445; see also Basil, *Sermones de moribus a Symeone Metaphrasta collecti*, PG 32:1349.

⁴¹ See F. J. Dölger, *Der Exorzismus im altchristlichen Taufritual* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1909), 112–14. Dölger draws attention to the claim in *Excerpts of Theodotus* that in some few cases there is a danger that demons might accompany the baptizand into the water (*Ex. Theod.* 83), an idea that he combines with a comment in *1 Enoch* that demons are the inventors of jewelry (in *1 En.* 8 the invention of ornaments is attributed to the fallen angel Azaz'el).

⁴² *Canons of Hippolytus* as quoted in Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 113.

⁴³ W. C. van Unnik, “Les chevaux défaits des femmes baptisées: Un rite de baptême dans l'Ordre Ecclésiastique d'Hippolyte,” *VC* 1 (1947): 77–100, esp. 90–96.

⁴⁴ R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, “On the Baptismal Rite According to St. Hippolytus,” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 2 (ed. Kurt Aland and F. L. Cross; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1955), 99.

Andanian mysteries and those for the temple of Despoina, referred to earlier, may shed light here. At Andania makeup is also forbidden and simplicity of dress required. Simplicity of dress and absence of jewelry are insisted upon for entrance into the temple of Despoina. These rules, along with the regulation that hair be unbound, suggest that the accouterments of culture (and especially of ornament) are not to be carried into the mysteries. The concern is evidently to effect simplicity, lack of ostentation, naturalness. Many ancient Christians may have interpreted the baptismal regulations along the same lines. Moreover, Christians who reflected on these matters likely had varying understandings of the meaning of the rules about attire and hairstyle.

III. Interpreting Luke 7:36–50 in the Light of the Social Symbolism of Gestures with Hair in the Greco-Roman World

My aim in what follows is to delineate reasonable interpretations of the story from an ancient readerly perspective. If the story admits more than one plausible interpretation from an ancient standpoint, then the original meaning of the story is that range of reasonable interpretations that first-century readers could have given.⁴⁵

Luke's story provides two explicit interpretations of the woman's action: Simon the Pharisee's interpretation followed by Jesus' interpretation. Before Simon speaks, readers naturally form their own impressions of the woman's actions. Hence, it may be helpful to analyze the story in terms of three successive judgments about the woman: an initial set of impressions prompted by the description of her in vv. 37–38, Simon's interpretation of the woman's behavior (v. 39), and Jesus' interpretation of both Simon's and the woman's behaviors (vv. 40–50). I do not propose this threefold division as anything more than a heuristic approach to understanding the story. Rereading the story—studying it, preaching it, commenting upon it—naturally breaks up the sequence by bringing these three moments of interpretation into a kind of simultaneous interaction with one another.

⁴⁵ I am not inquiring into Luke's "intent" in a narrow sense. Nevertheless, for those interested in speculating about Luke's intent, I recommend the following dictum attributed by J. Louis Martyn to Walter Bauer: "Before one inquires into the author's intention, one must first ask how the first readers are likely to have understood the text." See J. Louis Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 105–6 n. 169. In my judgment, the closest we can get to Luke's intent is the range of reasonable interpretations that sensitive original readers/auditors gave (or could have given) his story. For those who are interested in a further elaboration of this approach to interpretation, I have treated the matter in greater detail in *Elusive Israel: The Puzzle of Election in Romans* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), xi–xii, 1–25, and 91–96. See also Robert C. Tannehill, "Freedom and Responsibility in Scripture Interpretation, with Application to Luke," in *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts* (ed. Richard P. Thompson and Thomas E. Philips; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 265–78.

First Impressions of the Woman's Entrance and Gesture

In making sense of vv. 37–38, any ancient hearer would have formed a mental picture, just as we do, of the woman wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. Since it is hard to envision her performing this act with her hair up, ancient hearers will have wondered when the woman let down her hair or at least why her hair is hanging loose so she can use it to wipe his feet. Would Luke and his ancient readers have assumed that she entered Simon's house with her head covering off⁴⁶ and her hair unbound? Or would they have imagined her lowering her head covering and loosening her hair at some point during her actions at Jesus' feet, whether at the moment when she decides to dry her tears with her hair or earlier, perhaps even at the time when she first positions herself at his feet?⁴⁷ A first-century hearer could have inferred that she let down her hair as part of her approach to Jesus, or that when she saw that she was getting his feet wet with her tears she let down her hair to wipe them. Either inference is perfectly reasonable.

Would some first-century hearers have imagined that her hair was down because she was a prostitute, the assumption being that prostitutes wore their hair in a provocative, sexually solicitous fashion? Little evidence exists on the subject of how prostitutes wore their hair, and the evidence I have found is mixed. Plautus describes a courtesan who impersonates a married woman by fixing her hair with hairbands (*Mil.* 790–93), but the story of the courtesan Phryne shows that at least some prostitutes wore their hair up and bound when they went about in public. We will see in a moment, when we come to Simon's response, that the story implies that nothing in her appearance marks her as a prostitute or a sexually "loose" woman.

Luke introduces her as "a woman of the city who was a sinner" (7:37). Readers are left to draw their own conclusions about the nature of her sin; prostitution is certainly a possibility (perhaps especially with the mention of the city), but so is adultery or one of the other senses of ἀμαρτωλός as a social status.⁴⁸ In any case, her unbound hair does not reveal the nature of her sin. The narrative leaves the possibilities open.

⁴⁶ Greek and Roman women wore an outer garment with a hood that could be raised or lowered. It covered the head; it was not a veil obscuring the face. Among Jews in the talmudic period both married and unmarried women wore head coverings in public. But there may have been more relaxed attitudes among some Jews and at earlier periods. On the whole matter, see Louis M. Epstein, *Sex Laws and Customs in Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1948), 46–52.

⁴⁷ As we have seen, Asterius took for granted that the woman loosed her hair when she approached Jesus but before she began to weep (*Hom.* 13.10.3.1).

⁴⁸ Matthew Black suggests that she as a debtor (*An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* [3rd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967], 181–83). Adolf Schlatter argues that she was likely the wife of a man who did not observe the law (*Das Evangelium nach Lukas* [2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1960], 259).

First impressions would also lead first hearers to puzzle about the meaning of the woman's gestures as a whole: the kissing of the feet, the weeping, the use of her hair to wipe Jesus' feet, the anointing with ointment. This sequence of actions is open to at least two interpretations: the woman wants something from Jesus and is seeking his favor, or she has received something from him and is expressing her gratitude.

A woman with unbound hair kissing a man's feet at a dinner party strikes some modern interpreters as a sexually provocative display. But a first-century audience would be unlikely to form this impression of the woman for several reasons. First, the woman has not been supplied by the host. Second, the setting is a Pharisee's dinner party, not a morally lax Greco-Roman banquet. Third, the woman is weeping. In view of the evidence for grieving rituals, expressions of gratitude, and acts of solicitation that we have surveyed, it is difficult for me to imagine the ancient audience reading the woman's actions in a sexual way. They are far more likely to think (and wonder) along the following lines: Why is she grieving and why does she show her grief in this way? Or what kind of act of grateful devotion is this? Or is it a supplication of some kind? The quasi doublet of our story in John 12 has Mary, in her own home (where her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus are hosting Jesus), anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and wiping his feet with her hair. This act is clearly one of devotion, a gesture of loving, self-giving affection. (Jesus interprets Mary's act prophetically as an anointing for his burial.)

Let me put the preceding argument a bit differently. Given the conventional social meanings of the gestures and their appearance in the setting of a Pharisee hosting the holy man Jesus at dinner, first-century Mediterranean hearers would not be any more justified than modern readers are in construing the woman's behavior as sexually provocative or shameful. They *would* be justified in construing her actions as expressions of grief, gratefulness, propitiation, or pleading.

Simon's Reading of the Woman and of Jesus

One test of the preceding is whether it makes sense in the light of Simon's response. After all, Luke must portray Simon as giving a conventional response, what a first-century Mediterranean man who is also a Pharisee might say in this situation. Simon does not comment directly about the woman; he comments about Jesus, thinking to himself, "If this man were a prophet he would have known who and what kind of woman she is, who is touching him, that she is a sinner" (v. 39). The implication is that the woman, *because of who she is* (a sinner), should not be touching Jesus. This tells us a lot about whether the woman's actions are, from a conventional point of view, sexually provocative. Luke's story implies that Simon does not think they are because Simon says, "if

this man were a *prophet*. . . .” In other words, Simon’s view is that although there is nothing in the immediate actions or appearance of the woman to suggest that she is a sinner, a prophet would know her identity by clairvoyance. Assuming that Luke’s portraiture of Simon has verisimilitude (in the eyes of his audience) as a depiction of a strait-laced, morally conservative person, then it is fair to draw the following conclusion. If there is nothing in what the woman does or how she appears to suggest to a *Pharisee* that she is a sinner, then her behavior and appearance must not seem sexually inappropriate by ancient Mediterranean moral codes.⁴⁹ And this conclusion is consistent with the way we have already read her actions in the light of our survey. Unbound hair on a weeping woman is naturally associated with grief, supplication, and gratitude. Moreover, we have seen a case where the fact that a woman’s hair is unbound (in her supplicatory grief) is not even mentioned because it presumably went without saying (in the story of the mother of Coriolanus). We learn of her unbound hair only in a later reference recalling the scene. A first-century audience could construe Luke 7 along similar lines. The reference to the woman’s tears and her use of her hair to wipe Jesus’ feet could easily prompt a retroactive picture of the woman entering the scene in a grief-stricken state with her hair unbound.

Jesus’ Response

The story of the sinful woman has been analyzed form-critically as a pronouncement story (vv. 36–40, 44–47) into which a parable has been inserted (vv. 41–43). Most commentators think that Luke inherited the story in this complex form from the tradition and added a conclusion (vv. 48–50). The effect of this compound is a seeming contradiction between two ways in which Jesus interprets the woman’s actions. The parable suggests that great forgiveness produces great love in the one forgiven. The pronouncement story suggests that great love wins forgiveness. The ending of the narrative asserts a standard gospel refrain, “your faith has saved you,” which restates neither of the preceding two principles, although it does not necessarily contradict either of them.⁵⁰ One way of partially resolving the apparent contradiction is to take the *ὅτι*-clause in v. 47 not in an explanatory sense, as giving the reason why the woman

⁴⁹ It is also worth noting that Simon does not express surprise at the woman’s presence in his house. This may reflect a custom in the ancient Mediterranean world of permitting uninvited persons to attend dinner parties so long as they remained along the walls, not at the table. For evidence in Jewish settings, see Str-B 4:611–39, 615.

⁵⁰ Some interpreters think that “your faith has saved you” is closer to “her sins being many are forgiven because she loved much,” inasmuch as in both the order of reception of God’s grace begins with an act by the woman (love or faith), whereas in the parable the implication is that a divine act of forgiveness produces love on the part of the receiver.

has been forgiven, but in an evidentiary sense, as giving the tokens attesting to a prior forgiveness she had already received. This solution conforms v. 47 to the logic of the parable. It does not, however, reconcile v. 47 to the pronouncement of forgiveness in v. 48.

As we have seen, as a woman's symbolic or ritual gesture, unbinding the hair/unbound hair can be part of grieving, including grieving solicitation of help or mercy. It can also be part of expressions of gratitude. Hence, the woman can be seen as seeking Jesus' forgiveness or as expressing her gratitude for a forgiveness she has already received in an assumed but unnarrated part of the story. The story as it now stands in Luke concludes with Jesus pronouncing forgiveness on the woman (vv. 48–50). Looking back on the story from the standpoint of this ending, we are justified in concluding that the woman's actions are pleadings expressing grief for her sin and a desire for mercy. If we assume that the woman knows Jesus' reputation for accepting sinners,⁵¹ then it is also possible to interpret her tears as expressions of pious grief mixed with grateful anticipation of acceptance.⁵²

Jesus also interprets the woman's actions as gestures of hospitality. This is a surprising and ironic way of construing her behavior, designed to draw a contrast between the Pharisee's failure to play the proper host to Jesus and the sinful woman's unwitting fulfillment of Simon's role. If there is any intrinsic connection between Jesus' novel interpretation of her actions and the more conventional meaning those actions might carry, it is found in the association of unbinding the hair/unbound hair and kissing the feet with honorific displays toward a person of high status and with veneration of a deity. To judge from a passage in Petronius, having a guest's feet anointed with ointment (and not merely washed) was a practice of extravagant hospitality.⁵³

Are the woman's actions not also expressions of love and self-offering, not in an erotic sense but as gestures of devotion? This seems plausible and leads some readers to imagine a prior, unnarrated scene in which Jesus shows mercy to the woman, after which she, once she has collected herself or found opportunity, seeks him out to show a gratitude that has already deepened into love. This

⁵¹ Jesus' reputation for befriending sinners is mentioned right before our story (7:34). We can gather from the woman's possession of the alabaster flask and her actions with it that she does not meet Jesus by chance at Simon's house. Moreover, Luke is explicit: she found out (ἐπιγνοῦσα) where he was and went with her flask, and so on (7:37ff.). In these ways, the narrative makes clear that the woman sought out Jesus, the implication being that she did so on the basis of his reputation.

⁵² See Méndez-Moratalla, *Paradigm of Conversion in Luke*, 111.

⁵³ Guests at a wealthy man's extravagant dinner party are surprised when he has their feet anointed with ointment midway through the festivities (*Sat.* 70). This was against convention, the narrator says, presumably meaning that it occurred at an odd time—in the middle of the party and not when the guests first arrived.

interpretation fits nicely with the parable Jesus tells (the one forgiven much loves much in response) but clashes with the ending of the narrative.

Jesus applauds the woman's actions. He interprets her devotion as the kind of care for him a host should have given. She thus becomes an exemplary figure. Moreover, the suggestion that the woman becomes Jesus' host, although it is not meant literally, associates her with the women mentioned in the next narrative. They are his patrons, "providing for him out of their resources" (Luke 8:2–3).⁵⁴ Both the sinful woman and these women take care of him. This construal of the story also fits best with the parable, which implies that the woman's actions are loving expressions of devotion. It does not fit as well with the interpretation encouraged by the end of the pronouncement of forgiveness in v. 48, which leads us to see her actions as moral grief and a plea for mercy.

Both interpretations are reasonable original (ancient) ways to understand Luke 7:36–50, each doing better justice to some aspects of the narrative than to others. The social symbolism of the unbound hair fits either interpretation or any combination of the two.

IV. Conclusion

This study has clarified the meaning of the woman's gesture with her hair in Luke 7:38 by describing the social symbolism of a woman's unbound hair in the ancient Mediterranean world. When a woman wears her hair unbound/unbinds her hair, this can be a sexually suggestive act, an expression of religious devotion, a hairstyle for unmarried girls, a sign of mourning, a symbolic expression of distress or proleptic grief in the face of impending danger (and a way of pleading with or currying the favor of those in power, whether gods or men), a hairstyle associated with conjury, a means of presenting oneself in a natural state in religious initiations, and a precaution against carrying demons or foreign objects into the waters of baptism. As these examples show, in certain social situations it is right for an ancient Mediterranean woman to unbind her hair in public, to do "the opposite" (recall Plutarch) of what is conventionally decorous, often (but not always) to express a state of extremity or liminality.

These results shed light on Luke 7:38. Along with other contextual clues in the passage, they lead us to conclude that the woman's gesture with her hair is not sexually provocative, indecent, or even a breach of etiquette. Some first-century auditors might have imagined that the woman makes her approach (self-presentation) to Jesus with hair undone (entering with hair unbound or

⁵⁴ The manuscript tradition attests both "providing for *him*" and "providing for *them*," that is, for the entourage as a whole.

loosing it when she reaches Jesus' feet) as a gesture expressing grief, gratefulness, or solicitation (or a combination of these). Other auditors might have imagined that she unbinds her hair at the moment she realizes that she has wet Jesus' feet. For these auditors the gesture must have looked like an expedient born of the moment but not as something provocative or indecorous. Even as an unplanned act, it fits the overall deportment of the woman toward Jesus.

The range of social meanings for the woman's gesture with her hair lets us find a congruence between her action and either of two main lines of interpretation of the story: (1) that she has been forgiven antecedent to the narrative and comes to show her gratitude and devotion, or (2) that she comes weighed down by guilt, seeking forgiveness and acceptance, which she receives in the end. Perhaps these two interpretations can be combined by imagining that the woman approaches seeking acceptance from Jesus but also assuming that he will give it, that she belongs to the class of people to whom he has already extended God's forgiveness. In that case, she is grieving, supplicating, and grateful. Whether a comprehensive interpretation of the narrative can accommodate this unifying interpretation or not,⁵⁵ the woman's gesture with her hair can reflect more than one state of mind.

⁵⁵ It has not been my aim to give a comprehensive interpretation of Luke 7:36–50. I have restricted myself to illuminating the gesture of the hair and showing some of its implications for the interpretation of the story.