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RLST – 345

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FINAL EXAM

1. Explain how negative attitudes toward Judaism are evident in some Christian interpretations of New Testament texts. Use at least one specific passage from the New Testament as an example. [Note: the question asks for focus upon interpretation. You may choose to include commentary on anti-Jewish sentiment in a passage itself, but the essay must distinguish between text/interpretive choices].

- a. Given the complexity of the situation, it is interesting how negative attitudes towards Judaism are present considering that Jesus himself was Jewish. In this period, ethnicity was a large part of one's identity, and thus customarily drawn lines between groups were an evident part of ancient biblical culture. Likewise, Jewish people in the New Testament period lived in a dominant Greco-Roman society, resulting in a heavily influenced Hellenistic identity. The negative attitude towards the Jewish people is complex in that Christians in this period were also Jewish. The hatred derives from competition; the minority of the movement created a split identity between the Jews and Christian (Messianic) Jews. This served to set them apart and create tensions, lasting for the following centuries. The best example in the New Testament that outlines attitudes towards Judaism is the Crucifixion of Christ. As agreed upon by all written authority, Jesus was a Jewish victim of Roman violence. The New Testament recognizes this Roman involvement but makes room for Jewish

collaboration in certain ways. For example, high ranking Jewish authorities are stressed to have conspired with Gentile leaders to have Jesus put to death, and the chaotic crowd of those in Jerusalem called for Jesus to be crucified. Christian tradition puts increased blame on the Jews for the death of Jesus, decreasing the blame on the Romans. In the passages where the crucifixion takes place, it states that, “All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!” Matt 27:25 (NIV), this relating to the Jews answering the Roman governor Pilate who hesitates in the completion of the crucifixion. This line serves to create justification for Christians to place blame on the Jews, as they gladly accept the responsibility. This amplifies the poor relationship at hand, and Christians for centuries have found justification in antisemitism. John’s gospel also serves to portray Jews wanting to kill Jesus throughout his ministry. For example, in the book of John it says, “After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about to Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him.” John 5:18 (NIV). Negative associations towards the Jewish people can be found throughout the New Testament, stirring up the poor relationship held between Christians and Jews – who share the first five books of the bible!

2. Thurston writes, “It seems to me too easy to say, in effect that Paul was pro-woman, but the Deutero-Paulinists were not” (154). Take a stand either agreeing or disagreeing with this assessment of the authentically Pauline and pseudo-Pauline texts, citing specific examples for each textual category.

a. Ultimately, I do not accredit Paul nor the Deutero-Paulinists of being “pro-woman.”

Within the introduction of the third chapter of *Women in the New Testament*, it says,

“Paul has often been viewed by feminists as at best unsympathetic to women, and more probably, actively misogynistic” (Thurston, 30). Given this, followers of Paul would improbably stray from these sexist ideals. Sure, Paul served to rattle typical beliefs with the Jewish church by dismissing the need for circumcision to enter the church. By doing this, he takes away the automatic exclusion for women entering the church - in a sense, serving to help women. He has also lifted the matriarchs Sarah and Hagar, mentioning that the son of God was “Born of a woman” Galatians 4:4 (NIV), demonstrating the superiority of faith over law. Further, he empowered the traditional roles of women by extending the responsibilities to all members of the church (Galatians 5:13). However, there are issues in the books accredited to only Paul (1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Galatians, Romans, and Philemon) where statements about women are met with inconsistencies. Often his pastoral approaches as opposed to historical accounts take effect on the views had toward women. The documentation he takes may be prescriptive (explaining roles he wanted the women to have) as opposed to descriptive reports (what the women actually did) (Thurston, 32). For example, Paul makes the following claims, “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.” 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 (NIV). It's questionable that women followed these commands, considering the role of women in Christian communities who often hosted church in their homes and were likely leaders. In this period however, the role of women to have children was considered loyal citizenry. When women heard of Paul's ideas about the equality found in the oneness found in Christ Jesus, they served

to publicly proclaim freedom in the movement and became women prophets (who preferred celibacy – serving to take away the from the loyalty associated with the community). This served to threaten Paul's authority and the reputation of the community. He may have granted women freedom found in Christ but revealed himself as critical towards the methods women exercised at the expense of the community. The Deutero-Paulinists books (Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, and Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus)) offer little information about the lives of women, yet historically marks a period where the early Christian community had drastically changed. The ethnic composition of the church was more likely to be of Pagan or Greco-Roman heritage than of Jewish descent. Thus, Christian theology was heavily influenced by Hellenism, and Gnosticism (text written after the Gospels, that are not canonical in the Christian realm,) resulting in an increased authority that addresses the place of women. A prominent story in 1 Corinthians is that of Nympha who provided a place for a church in the area to meet. Given her prominent role in the early Pauline church, she is a distinguished woman in the community who had responsibilities in managing economic affairs; large enough to sustain the meeting of the Christian population. What is argued about her character is whether 'Nympha' was a male or female name. The textual problem raises issues in some circles regarding the unique feminine form. Can a woman not be the leader of a house-church? This simple pronoun miscommunication changes the meaning of the text entirely if viewed in a masculine or feminine context, and that is a striking phenomenon. Is there meaning stripped if this story is viewed from a masculine point of view? Are the Deutero-Paulinists raising up a feminine leader or pointing out yet another example of male dominance? All in all, Paul and his pseudonymous writers

cannot easily be coined “pro-woman. Paul may have served to take actions that flowered the betterment of women, yet stripped authorities when women got too acclimated with leadership roles. The Deutero-Pauline texts served to emphasize the emerging pattern of domination of minorities (including women) and do not touch on the specificities of women’s stories.

3. How do you understand the story of the Samaritan woman? Explain what you believe to be the key interpretive choices scholars make in reading this story as you support your interpretive choices.

- a. In the Gospel of John, the story of the Samaritan woman takes place in chapter 4 where she functions as an evangelist in traditional scopes. Jesus stops at a well in the middle of the day in Samaria where he encounters a woman. It is assumed she was unwelcomed during the normal hours to draw water (which took place in the morning or evening). Jesus speaks to her, asking for a drink – a startling request given the notion Jewish men were not to speak to women in the public sphere. Samaritans were viewed by the Jews with exorbitant contempt as they associated their women especially with being unclean. Jesus breaks this cultural taboo in speaking to her, but the discussion he sparks serves to be especially conflicting. He riddles her about “living water” and notes that she has had five husbands (John 16-19). In the traditional light, the Samaritan woman is considered unclean, promiscuous, and of questionable morals given this fact, yet if considering the social climate, she may have had five husbands because they died – not because she was sexually sinful. Its' also possible that these ‘five husband’ were symbolic for her idols, and Jesus is questioning where her devotion lies. Regardless, she does not repent for this

statement, nor does she exhibit shame in the notion. Further, she is considered obtuse in her intelligence, being ridiculed in interpretation by not understanding the metaphor Jesus presents about living water. From a completely human standpoint – this would be a challenging idea to grasp for anyone unsuspecting of the interaction! Plus, she probably wasn't expecting to be spoken to by Jesus to begin with; she was caught off guard. Given that she may be considered uneducated, why does the town trust her comprehension when she goes back to evangelize about her interaction with Jesus? Plot holes present themselves in believing she was unintelligent. Who's to say *why* she was at the well during the day too? Perhaps she wasn't hiding anything, especially given that she tells everyone of her interaction immediately following it, taking part in apostolic activity. Her unusual acts (like that of other women in the New Testament,) does not have to align with negative associations.

4. Explain important interpretive choices scholars make about the story of the sisters of Bethany, Mary and Martha as told by Luke. How do you understand this story?

Support your view.

- a. The story of the sisters Mary and Martha is accounted for in Luke, following their trip through Samaria. Jesus arrives at the home of Mary and Martha, as Martha grows distracted by her domestic activities. She hopes that through Jesus' presence he will command Mary to help her. Instead, Jesus affirms Mary's studying of the law, creating a condescending tone towards Martha's notions. The sisters themselves represent two spectrums of theological principles – Martha representing justification by works and Mary justification by faith (Thurston, 108). It makes the reader beg the question, 'are both women devoted to the faith?' and 'are the women pitted against

each other in their methods of praise?’ In this instance, Martha is pitted against the common roles of women in Judaism. However, in contemporary interpretation, we must evaluate what Martha’s work was. In verse 40 it says, “She was distracted by her many tasks.” Is Martha serving as an act of domestic duty or for ministry purposes? Given this, she could have been a leader in the area, and hospitality was a given role. However, Jesus does not seem to criticize Martha’s ministry, rather the anxiety she expresses in the completion of her tasks, suggesting a lack of faith. One could argue this is an act of ableism, associated with similar ideas like blindness and not being able to ‘see the truth.’ In a sense, both Mary and Martha are seen as not pulling their weight in both the faith-filled and tangible works categories. Martha is too distracted by her work to remember her faith, and Mary isn’t doing enough by simply hearing; she must also *do*. Overall, both women were leaders in the early church, especially considering this all takes place in their home – no control relinquished to the ‘man of the house.’ The gospels present many questions regarding the roles of women, and this story muddies the waters on whether women can be active in the church, or if they must remain submissive by the hand of their oppressor.