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Transgender Metaphoric in the New Testament and After-biblical Christianity¹

Joachim Kügler

Abstract

The article contributes some remarks on variations of God's masculinity that appear quite queer from a modern perspective. These variations partly can be found in sources belonging to the New Testament canon, while the majority of the sources are post-biblical writings belonging to Early Christian literature of the 2nd to 4th century CE. In both cases, the sources show a transfer of characteristics read as typically feminine to God respectively his Christ. Thus, these texts create a transgender concept of masculinity that might be of interest for modern discussions on gender and the transformation of gender roles. Yet, one must acknowledge that these imaginations of God are framed by a culture of Masculine Domination (Bourdieu 2001). Older examples from the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East show, that the maternal characteristics attributed to masculine deities are not meant to feminize the respective deity but to make their power complete. Thus, these transgender imaginations of breastfeeding God/gods will only develop a liberating impact if they are de-framed and read beyond patriarchal patterns.

Keywords: New Testament, Church Fathers, trans, masculinity, breastfeeding, Gender Studies, Queer Theology, history of religions, Hebrew Bible, Ancient Near East, Greek-Roman antiquity.

¹ This chapter is an extended English version of my Farewell Lecture at the University of Bamberg, 19th July 2024. As Ezra could not attend, I thought it a nice compensation to dedicate this text to him.

Introduction

1. How can God be *trans*?

While my colleague and friend Ezra Chitando is an expert in analyzing African concepts of masculinity, I am not. Yet, I dare to contribute to his Festschrift some short remarks on variations of divine masculinity that appear – from a modern perspective – surprisingly queer. These variations partly can be found in sources belonging to the New Testament, while the majority of the sources are post-biblical writings belonging to Early Christian literature of the second to fourth century CE. In both cases, the sources show a transfer of characteristics read as typically feminine to God respectively his Christ. Thus, these texts create a transgender concept of masculinity that might be of interest for modern discussions on gender and the transformation of gender roles.

In mainstream Christian religion and theology, the adjective ‘trans’ is rather unusual in relation to God. For many Christians a trans person is not a person they would see positively, accept or at least tolerate. Some may even think that being trans is something evil, ‘unnatural,’ breaking the norms of the divine order of creation. Although I know about such attitudes, I nevertheless must insist that it is kind of ‘natural’ that God is trans! The theological reason is quite simple. God *transcends* all human categories – including categories of sex and gender. Already the Hebrew Bible clearly states that God is “god and not a human/man²” (Hos 11:9) and the later teaching of the Church puts that on a very general level, saying that the difference between God as creator and the creatures always is greater than any similarities between them.³ Therefore, one can conclude that even a correct statement about God is more inappropriate than appropriate. This divine quality of being beyond human categories, being ‘*totaliter aliter*’ (completely different) is perfectly expressed by the word ‘trans,’ even if some would regard that as a blasphemy. However, those who do so should ask themselves what they love more, the Biblical and

² The Hebrew „ish“ and the Greek “anthropos” (LXX) both can stand for “man” as well as for “human being” because the man patriarchally is seen as the full human person.

³ The crucial definition is given by the Lateran Council IV (1215 CE) teaching that “between creator and creature no similarity so great can be noted that not a greater difference is to be noted”. [My verbal English translation of: “inter creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda,” (DH 806)].

Christian tradition of God's otherness or their own religious and cultural prejudices about God's 'straightness.'

2. Why is mother milk so important?

In pre-industrial times, breastfeeding is essential for the survival of the new-born – as it is with all mammals. It is dangerous for the baby if the mother is not able to give milk. Substitutes like animal milk or milk from a wet nurse are possible but they are neither without risk nor are they always available. With reference to Greek-Roman antiquity, Claude-Emmanuelle Centlivres Challet concludes:

If a Roman mother could not or would not breastfeed her child, the choice of the alternative(s) must have depended on the socio-cultural background of the family, on its medical beliefs and its cultural practices. While elite families might choose or decide to resort to a wet nurse, most non-elite families did not have that possibility. From a modern nutritional and medical point of view, if maternal milk was not available, the enrolment of a relative, a friend, or a wet nurse was the healthiest, safest option; but, in the last case at least, cross-contamination and neglect were potential threats, even if they proved less likely in the case of in-house wet nurses whose behaviour could be more closely monitored. Animal milk, either given via a baby bottle or suckled at the udder, was another, endangering, option, with damaging or even lethal consequences: the potential lack of hygiene of the handlers, bacterial contamination through the non-sterile containers and contents, and the specific chemical components of animal milk caused this practice to be an unhealthy alternative for feeding nurslings. (Centlivres Challet 2017: 902-903)

Additionally, most patriarchal societies see the semen of the father as the central part of begetting a child, while the mother is seen more as a 'container' sheltering, warming, and nourishing the offspring. Often, the specific cultural concepts compare the role of the mother to that of the soil, while the father is seen as the farmer sowing his seed.⁴ Consequently, these cultural systems have problems of understanding the physical relationship between mother and child. Therefore, many patrilinear societies see this relationship as being constituted by breastfeeding. The motherly milk-relationship may not be as important as the fatherly semen-relationship, but still, it is essential, not only for the survival of the baby but also

⁴ The recent publication of Clarissa Breu (2024) adds texts from Plato and Hellenistic Judaism to the well-known sources – esp. Aristotle's *De Generatione Animalium* (Lesky 1950) – for this concept.

for their status in society. The breastfeeding mother gives a product of her own body – so to say something of herself – to the suckling. Therefore, being breastfed by a wet nurse (in antiquity, often a slave having a child on her own) was a bit suspicious as she might have transferred her slave-character to the baby. The upper-class tried to minimize the risk by a bulge of physical and mental criteria that made a woman eligible for this important task.

Stavroula Constantinou and Aspasia Skouroumouni-Stavrinou sum up their research, saying:

According to our sources, the wet nurse, who mothers the elite infant, should be *sōphrōn*, so that her charge grows up according to the moral principles of its social class. At the same time, the wet nurse's low standing allows the matrona to assert power over her and to strengthen her own position as the infant's mother. Seen as a threat for the elite nursling, the wet nurse has to be placed from the outset under the control of her employers, even before her employment has begun. Soranos' chapter and those of other medical authors on the selection of the wet nurse, as well as "Myia's" Letter, illustrate in the most graphic way how Greco-Roman and early Byzantine elite families could excuse their total indifference to the wet nurse's situation and difficulties in order to satisfy both their children's and their own interests, needs, and aspirations. To rephrase Simone de Beauvoir's famous and much-quoted dictum, "one is not born, but rather becomes" a nursing woman, a statement that could be employed as a one-sentence summary of the wet nurse's socio-ideological position in Greco-Roman antiquity and early Byzantium as expressed in the examined sources. Our analysis has shown that the wet nurse was an essential category of the ancient and Byzantine institution of motherhood, in the framework of which she was treated as the elite mother's inferior Other and the nursling's most devoted servant. Despite the fact that in the examined period, there were also biological mothers who undertook to breastfeed and raise their own children, the socio-ideological treatment of wet nurses was quite distinctive, thus validating the separate examination of them that has been attempted here. (Constantinou & Skouroumouni-Stavrinou 2024: 86)

While ordinary mothers breastfeeding her child are almost invisible in Greek-roman art, the suckling scene is a predominant topic in the context of royal and imperial ideology. In this intersectional area of politics and religion, it was important to legitimate the autocratic power of the ruler by using – explicitly or not – the traditional category of the god-king. In displaying himself as a representative and agent of the divine power a common topic was the idea of the ruler as a "son of (a) god", who has been

begotten by a masculine deity (like Amun-Ra in old Egypt, Ammon in Alexander's time, and Jupiter or Apollo in Augustus' Rome). As this concept related the autocrat only with the masculine half of the divine world, it was of interest to claim the feminine half as his mothers. Therefore, the autocrats also displayed themselves as having been suckled by goddesses (like Hathor or Isis in old Egypt, the Hellenistic world and even the Roman Empire). Pictures and texts on monuments praise the ruler as having received divine breastmilk. Thus, he could be seen as a full member of the divine family. By the act of breastfeeding the ruler, the motherly goddesses gave their divine quality and power to him as their son. At the end of the day, the ruler was then not only filled with the power of (a) divine father(s) but also with the power of (a) divine mother(s). Out of the vast number of examples for the divine breastfeeding of the ruler that can be found in Ancient Egypt, Greek mythology and even Roman Imperial ideology (Kügler 2014: 110-114), I render here only three samples. One stands for the mainstream tradition, and the other two are selected as they are exceptional. The first source shows a topic that can be found from the first documents of Egyptian royal ideology up to Roman times: a motherly goddess breastfeeding the king (in this case King Sahure, ca. 2500 BCE).



⁵ King Sahure (5th dynasty) being suckled by a goddess, detail of a relief at Sahure's pyramid. Graphic JK, based on the edition of Borchardt 1910.1913.

The second source is about one thousand years younger than the first one and can be found in the tomb of King Thutmose III, the nephew and successor of Hatshepsut (both 18th dynasty). The painting shows a tree breastfeeding the King. This picture attests that Egyptian religious imagination is not bound to natural analogies. Although trees do not have breasts (or arms), the tree-goddess is no less a mother to the king than other goddesses are. As a mother of the king, she nurses him and shares her divine essence with him. Therefore, she must be depicted with a breast to suckle her son and bestow him with divine-royal power.

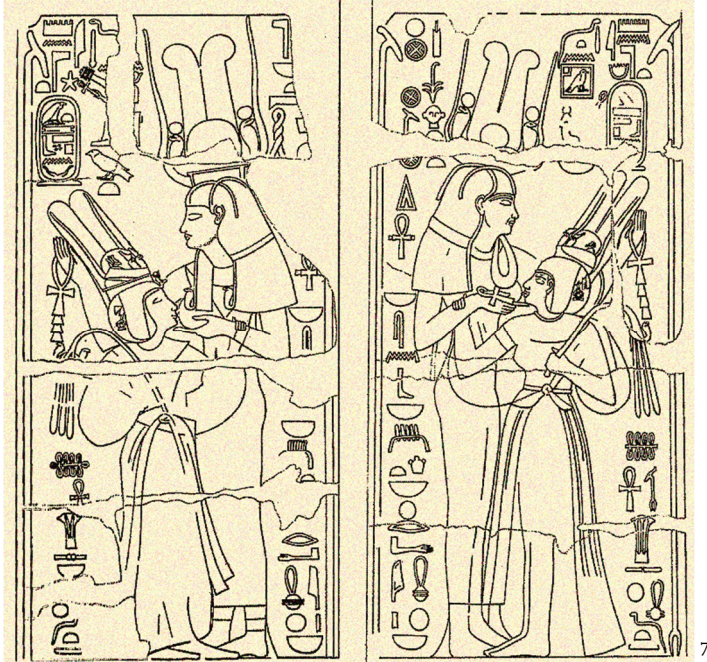


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The third source is exceptional under gender aspects, as it shows a female ruler being suckled by two goddesses. The reliefs stem from the Osiris chapel of God's Wife Shepenupet I (23rd dynasty) at Karnak and surprise with showing a king-like ruler as a feminine figure. The older versions at

⁶ A goddess in tree-shape suckles the King, wall painting from the tomb of Thutmose III. Graphic JK. Another astonishing image with a breastfeeding cobra nourishing the king can be found at: <https://egypt-museum.com/pendant-of-tutankhamun-with-werethekau/> (achieved 14. Nov. 2024)

Deir El-Bahari, created for the female king Hatshepsut ignore the femininity of the ruler and show her in a completely masculine body (Kügler 2017: 111-142).



Instead, Shepenupet's feminine body and attire remain visible while being suckled with divine milk by two goddesses (Hathor and Semat-Weret) transferring her royal-divine power.

3. Why should men be interested in mothering?

If you believe that your God is the one and only, and if you imagine your God as a masculine being, you may get a specific religious problem. The woman is missing, and with her the aspects of femininity that is an important part of human life experience. Even societies structured along the guidelines of Masculine Domination cannot exist without this aspect of

⁷ Shepenupet being suckled by motherly goddesses. Pair of reliefs, Karnak. Computer graphic: JK. The graphic (joining two breastfeeding scenes) relies on Ayad 2009: 125.

human reality – no matter how much they might contempt women/femininity and privilege men/masculinity. The Hebrew Bible – I am referring again to the Book of Hosea – is dealing with that problem. Not only is God not a man, ‘he’ also shows certain characters (culturally defined as) typically feminine like having mercy, sheltering, comforting, and nourishing ‘his’ son Israel (Hos 11:3-4). If one looks closer, the characteristics attributed here to YHWH are not simply feminine ones; especially *motherly* attributes are mentioned. According to my understanding, this is not by incident. In cultural systems, which follow the principles of Masculine Domination, power is gendered as masculine and therefore, women accessing power have to gradually masculinize as the cases of the Egyptian King Hatshepsut, the female Christians in Pauline communities (Kügler 2023: 32-48), Margret Thatcher, and many others are showing. The only exception in such systems is the powerful role of the mother, essential for the existence of the offspring. The ‘idealtypisch’ mother is attributed power in a very limited social area but her power is great⁸ and it is specifically feminine. Therefore, if powerful men want to complete their power, *maternal* power is attractive, while other feminine traits are not; they stand for the minor status of women. Masculine Domination may declare it shameful for a man to adopt roles and qualities defined as feminine (e.g. emotions, sexual desire, weakness, subordination, being made for penetration), but motherly attributes can be an exception – and breastfeeding clearly is such an exception. Giving life by one’s milk, constituting family relationship was seen as such a powerful act that it was highly interesting for men and gods.

Breastfeeding Fathers in the New Testament?

1. An uncertain case: Paul breastfeeding in 1. Cor 3:2?

In 1. Corinthians 3, the Apostle Paul writes:

I gave you **milk** to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly.

⁸ If one needs a historical proof for this general statement, one may look at the important role of the King’s mother in ancient Egypt, Alexander’s mother Olympias in Greece, Augustus’ mother Atia in Rome, and Jesus’ mother Mary in Christian history.

For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?² (1. Cor 3:2-3 ^{NAS}).

The quite recent analysis of Esther Kobel (2021) sees Paul here not only as the giver of milk to the Christians at Corinth but as the source of the milk he mentions. In her view, we have here a metaphorical trans self-conception of Paul who sees himself in the female role of a mother (or wet nurse) breastfeeding her children. I am, however, rather sceptical about such a reading. The simple reason is the fact that the text never attributes special quality to the milk mentioned, although it is a metaphor of Paul's first teaching at Corinth. I would even admit, that Paul adopts the powerful role of a nourishing mother or wet nurse, but the trans aspect of this metaphoric speech is low. Here, the focus of the milk trope is neither on the milk as something special nor on the nourishing mother/nurse as producing the milk. Instead, the stress is completely on the status of the addressees. By receiving milk they are characterized as babies, not able to eat the food of adults. They are conceived as immature in faith, unable to lead a Christian life by themselves. They still are dependent on the Apostle, they have to be guided and criticized by Paul, whom they should respect and obey to. As in the many other cases in the Hellenistic-Roman literature, the milk-stable-food-opposition is an expression of hierarchy. Those, who are unable to eat solid food are helpless nurslings; in their dependency on parental care they are far away from the status of an self-determining adult. Kobel's argument that "Paul is not presented here as a father who is allowed to give a milk-bottle from time to time, but is actually perceived as a milk donor" (Kobel 2021: 253; English translation: JK), is not very convincing as Paul's characterization is not the intention of the text. Neither does he want to portray himself as mother/nursing nor does he characterize the milk given to the congregation. The intention is to tell the Christ-believers that they are not yet understanding Christian teaching fully as their behaviour still is that of "fleshly" pagans. Her reference to the interpretation of the Church fathers is irrelevant as these authors usually use 1. Peter 3 (see below) to read 1. Cor 3. Thus, one should stay with characterizing Paul's milk-text in 1. Cor 3 as an unclear case, where the powerful role of the mother/nurse is implied but not more. The actual focus of the text is stabilizing the hierarchical relationship between the Apostle – having his wisdom from the Lord himself and being experienced in how to be a follower of Christ – and the freshly converted Christians at Corinth whose behavior shows that they still need apostolic correction and guidance.

2. Another uncertain case: Heb 5:12-13

The anonymous author of the Letter to Hebrews is even more focusing on the addressees, when they reproaches them by writing:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. (Heb 5:12-13 ^{NAS})

Although being already a somewhat older congregation – so to say, in the age of adults – the “Hebrews” fell back to the status of being immature and helpless, and need to be taught the basics of faith again. The “solid food” is identified in V 13 as the “word of righteousness” while the “milk” is identified as the basics of faith. Yet, there is no stress on the divine quality of the milk. The origin of the milk is not mentioned in any way; thus, there is no trans aspect detectable – even less than with Paul in 1. Cor 3.

This use of the milk trope is very similar to the work of Philo, the famous Jewish author from Alexandria, who compares the first steps in philosophical learning with drinking milk as a baby, while the full study of philosophy is then eating solid food. The student of philosophy is characterized as someone progressing from a childish status to that of a mature person (cf. Philo, Agr. 1:9; Congr. 1:19; Prob. 1:160). No trans aspect is implied in using this conventional metaphor. This is true also for the pagan texts using the opposition ‘milk vs. solid food’ (Kobel 2021: 251 incl. footnote 26).

3. A clear case: Christ/his church in 1. Peter 2:2-3

Rather different, however, is the situation in the first Letter of Peter, where the status of a suckling is not seen in a negative way, and special qualities are attributed to the milk. The (fictitious) apostolic author writes:

Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes, long for the logos-related and unchanged milk,⁹ that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. (1.Pet 2:1-3)

Obviously, the milk is seen here as having divine qualities in itself. This milk is unaltered, unspoiled, pure, or original, and related to the divine

⁹ My own translation of τὸ λογικὸν ἄδολον γάλα (1.Pet 2:2).

logos. The attribute *logikos* does not necessarily relate to the *logos* as a person (see John 1:1). It can also refer to the *logos* as the salvific word of the gospel, the (divine) reason, mind, idea, or wisdom. Anyway, this milk is a food with redemptive power as it strengthens and fosters growth towards salvation. Here, redemption is not seen as a specific point in the past of the believers but as a process which needs support by a special nourishment which helps to strengthen the addressees and helps them to overcome all the dangerous sinful things, which V 1 is talking about.

The question is, who is delivering this wonderful food? If one relates *logikon* primarily with the gospel, the church would be a good candidate for the role of the nourishing mother or wet nurse. For most of recent readers this understanding would not imply any transgender topic as today's Christians are used to the metaphorical understanding of the church as a spiritual mother. We should, however, be careful with backdating this idea to the time of the New Testament texts. The metaphorical gender of the church originally could be masculine also. As shows the Pauline idea of the church as 'body of Christ' (cf. Rom 12:5; 1. Cor 10:17; 12:13.27), early Christians could as well use a masculine gender metaphor for their church in understanding it as the masculine body of Jesus Christ. This would imply a transgender metaphoric as the masculine church would be understood as breastfeeding.

Of course, the transgender aspect is even clearer if we understand the milk's attribute *logikon* as referring to Christ, the divine *logos* in person. Admittedly, one might ask, if this transfer of meaning from John 1:1.14 and Revelation 19:13 to 1. Pet 2:2 is justified. Yet, the following verse supports this understanding. It remembers the addressees that they already *tasted* how gracious Lord Christ is. Using ἐγεύσασθε in 2:3 the text remains in the metaphorical field of eating and drinking. Thus, talking about 'tasting before', links the milk with the gracious Lord. By that, it is insinuated that the merciful Lord is the origin of the *logikon* milk. He is the origin of life, grace and redemption. He was that when the addressees initially came to believe in him and received salvation by that (and by baptism). Afterwards, he is also the source of the grace, which supports their growth and completion in faith. Christ's post-baptismal support for the Christians is expressed by the metaphor of maternal milk. Although the believers already may be adults they are supposed to behave *like* (ὡς) sucklings. Obviously there is nothing shameful implied in behaving that way, as the motherly authority is a divine one that stands above all. This inter-

pretation clearly implies a transgender metaphoric. The masculine redeemer acts as a mother breastfeeding his children. And even if we would prefer to see the church as the source of milk, the possibility is given that the milk metaphor implies a transgender aspect.

Breastfeeding Fathers in post-Biblical Literature

1. *Deus lactans* in the Odes of Solomon

The Christian collection of hymns called the **Odes of Solomon** (2nd to 3rd century CE), most explicitly uses the trope of a breastfeeding God (*Deus lactans*) several times. For example one reads in the eighth ode a speech of the creator:

And before they yet were,
I perceived (= designed) them.
And on their faces I set a seal.
I fashioned their members,
and my own **breasts** I prepared for them,
that they might drink **my holy milk** to live by it.
I was well pleased in them and I am not ashamed of them.
For they are my work and the power of my thoughts.
Who then will stand against my work,
or who is he who does not obey them?
I willed and formed mind and heart.
and they are mine. (Ode 8,15-20; cf. Lattke 2009:111)

Here, the feminine character of the metaphor seems clear. The creator-god is perceived as a mother, who, among other favors, gives her breasts to the creatures. By that she is nourishing them and transmits her own divine character to them: the milk is holy and gives life to the children. They are not only her creatures but also the output of her powerful ideas (8,18). That means, they are a power-medium of the creator's ideas and plans; they are her proxy. Like rulers the creatures can expect obedience from everybody, and nobody can withstand them. Thus, the sucklings truly are children of the creator, who insists on their dignity by saying: "they are mine" (8,20).

Yet, this reading is wrong in one specific way as it completely ignores the transgender aspect. While translations have no chance to identify the gender of the speaking "I", the original Syrian text indicates that the speaker is masculine (Lattke 2009: 112-113). Thus, we have here the imagination

of a *masculine* creator-god who has breasts filled with holy milk and is giving life to his creatures by breastfeeding like a mother. Some commentators found such a transgender figuration of God as highly inappropriate or even disgusting. However, Lattke (2009:122-123) rightly insists, that the ode simply uses the transgender tradition of the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Judaism (Kobel 2021: 244, footnote 2). The metaphor of milk as life-giving food vividly expresses that the 'I' is not only creator and redeemer but also a graceful nourisher and loving sustainer. The receiver of this milk are not only creatures. They are children of their motherly father and share in his divine power. Therefore, the believer can praise his heavenly father for his motherly sweetness and kindness:

¹ As the eyes of a son upon his father,
So my eyes, Lord, are always toward thee.

² Because with thee are **my sources of milk** and my delight.

(14,1-2; cf. Lattke 2009: 197)

Of course, the Odes of Solomon radicalize the biblical transgender imaginary by explicitly mentioning specific female attributes in a very bodily language. This is in contrast to the biblical texts which never speak about the milk-giving breasts of God. This body language is typical for the use of the breastfeeding trope in the Odes of Solomon. A quite impressive example can be found in Ode 19.

¹ A **cup of milk** was offered to me,
and I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord's kindness.

² The Son is the cup,
and he who was **milked**, the Father,
and [the one] who **milked** him, the Spirit of holiness.

³ Because his **breasts** were full
and it was not desirable that his **milk** should be poured out uselessly,

⁴ the Spirit of holiness opened his [= the Father's] **bosom**
and mixed the **milk** of the two **breasts** of the Father.

(Odes of Solomon 19:1-4; cf. Lattke 2009: 268)

The speaker of this ode is most probably a believer referring in V.1 to his coming to redemptive faith. Lattke (2009: 270) rules out any relation to a special ritual or sacramental tradition like e.g. celebrating Eucharist with milk. And indeed, linking the text with a too specific "Sitz im Leben" would be highly speculative, as we cannot figure out anymore if and how V.1 is alluding to any actual occurrence. From the text itself it is clear that getting a "cup of milk" is a metaphorical expression for finding salvation/being redeemed. We can conclude from the broader context that the

way to redemption is faith. And most probably we are right to say that coming to redemptive faith was manifested in the ritual of baptism. But how can we know if V.1 is alluding to a kind of baptismal ritual which was linked with getting a cup of milk? It seems much better to restrict the interpretation to what is clear from the text itself.

‘Drinking the milk’ is clearly a way to redemption as the cup means the Son. It is common to identify the container with its content. Thus one can conclude that the Son is the Father’s milk (and not only the container). This means that the believer, by drinking the cup of milk, is receiving the Son. As the Son is an emanation of the Father (coming out of the Father’s breast by activity of the Holy Spirit) the believer, by hosting the Son is hosting the Father also. Similar concepts can be found already in the Gospel of John (e.g. 17:23). While the Fourth Gospel, however, indicates the unity of Father and Son by the concept of begetting, this Ode 19:1-4 prefers an androgynous concept of the Father-Son-relation. The message, however, is more or less the same. The Son is not a creation of the Father – if so he would be part of the world – but is an emanation of God, flowing out from inside the Father. As the common concept of milk as transporting the essence of someone can be supposed as cultural background for the Odes of Solomon also, the believer by “drinking” the Son participates in the divine essence of the Father. The unity between Father, Son and believer is the most appropriate ‘use’ of the Father’s milk. If the Son is hosted by the believer, the milk of the Father is not “poured out uselessly” (V.3), but has found his true purpose.

Even if we follow Latke in excluding a direct connection between receiving a cup of milk and eucharist, we have to take in account that the text is imbedded in a context, where Christians celebrated the eucharist after baptism with milk. Two important texts should be mentioned, although they do not seem to imply any transgender aspect.

A text, called *Traditio apostolica* (around 200 CE, often attributed to Hippolyte of Rome) shows that clearly. It tells about the spending of baptism:

[After receiving the offerings from the deacons the bishop]
shall say thanks:
over the bread as the image of Christ’s body;
over the cup with mixed wine as the image of the blood
that was shed for all, who believe in him;
over the **mixture of milk and honey** to indicate
that the promise given to the Fathers,

which says about the land where milk and honey are flowing, is now fulfilled.

[...] If the presbyters are not enough to spend, the deacons also shall hold the cups. They should stand in proper order: first the one with the water; then, as second, the one with the **milk**; then the third with the wine.

[...] Everyone shall taste of each cup, one after the other.¹⁰

Around the same time, end of the second century CE, the North African theologian *Tertullian of Carthage* in one of his numerous works also mentions drinking milk after leaving the bath of baptism: “Having stepped out, we enjoy a mixture of **milk** and honey” (*Inde suscepti, lactis et mellis concordiam praegustamus*) (De Corona Militis 3,3).¹¹

2. Christ as the milk of the Father (Clement of Alexandria)

Clement, a Christian author writing in the 2nd and 3rd century CE develops a highly complicated milk theology full of metaphoric diversity. Especially in his work *The Instructor* (Pædagogus) he uses the milk metaphor abundantly and in many variations. It is never easy to follow the logic of Clement’s metaphorical language. However, it is not the purpose of this article to explain his theology systematically. Instead, we only ask for the transgender aspect of his figurative language. In this respect, the most interesting concept is his interpretation of Christ as the divine milk of the Father. Like the Odes of Solomon he does not hesitate to speak of the Father’s breasts and the Christians suckling on these breast. Here are some examples:

Just as the fulfillment of His Father’s will was food for Christ, so, for us little ones who draw **milk** from the **breast**, that is, the Word of Heaven, it is Christ Himself who is our food. Again, the Greek word for ‘seeking’ also means ‘craving,’ implying that to little ones who seek the Word the craved-for **milk** is given from the Father’s **breasts of love** for man. (Paed 1.46.1)

This is our nourishment, the **milk** flowing from the Father by which alone we little ones are fed. I mean the He, the ‘well-beloved,’ the Word, our provider, has saved mankind by shedding His blood for us. Therefore, we fly trustfully to the ‘care-banishing breast’ of God the Father; the breast that is the Word, who is the only one who can truly bestow on us the **milk of love**. (Paed 1.43)¹²

¹⁰ My translation of Geerlings 1991: 267.269.271.

¹¹ Source of the Latin text: https://www.tertullian.org/latin/de_corona.htm.

¹² Source of the English translation: Wood 1954.

Both texts show that Clement is not talking about any physical breasts. Although expressed in a very bodily language, the breastfeeding of the Father only is a metaphoric expression of certain aspects of God's character. These aspects of nourishing and caring culminate in the expression 'love'. It may be a bit confusing – and if one reads more of Clement's milk texts the confusion may even rise – that Christ is sometimes the milk of the father and sometimes the breasts of the father. However, if we remember of the rule that the container stands for its content, it is clearer what is the status of Christ: Like breastmilk he is coming out of the most inner of the Father, and gives something of the Father to humanity. As the divine essence of God is love (1. John 4:8.16), the milk transmits exactly this, love. This love is not just an idea but realizes itself in the son's giving himself. Clement's milk metaphoric is analogy to the Johannine love-theology. 1: John 4 says that God "sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. (4:10^{NAS}) and the Fourth Gospel says almost the same: „For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16^{NAS}). The Son's mission to bring the divine love is completed by giving his life (John 15:13). In rewriting this connection of love, death and salvation, Clement understands the flowing of divine love-milk, which is the son, as Christ's shedding the blood for salvation. As to the transgender aspect, one should say, that the transfer of motherly attributes like breasts and giving milk to God Father, is a way to stress that God's essence is perfect love and care. Remarkably, the unity and essential equality between Father and Son is not expressed by the manly metaphor of sperm/begetting but by the feminine metaphor of milk/breastfeeding.

3. *Christus lactans* at Ephraim the Syrian

The Syrian Church father **Ephraim** (306-373 CE) is a very good example for the use of the breastfeeding trope under the influence of the Nicene Creed (325 CE) and its stressing the double nature of Christ as true god and true human. Following this Christological teaching, Ephraim uses the milk metaphor in a double way (human milk vs divine milk) and knows to combine the two aspects in one and the same text. In his fourth *Hymn on the birth of Christ* he writes:

[Christ] „was the Highest and he drank Mary's milk,
 while all creatures were drinking from his richness.
 He is the living breast giving breath of life.
 Out of his life the dead did drink and were revived.
 /.../

While then he was drinking Mary's milk,
 he himself was breastfeeding the universe with life.
 /.../
 Out of the great treasure of all creation,
 Mary gave him all she gave him.
 She gave him milk out of what he created,
 She gave him food out of what he called into existence.
 He gave milk to Mary on behalf of his divine nature.
 He sucked it from her on behalf of his human nature.

(Ephraim, Nat. 4, 149-150.153.183-185)¹³

The link between Mary's milk and the human nature of Christ and that between Christ's milk and his divine nature becomes very clear if we put the specific expressions in a table:

Human	Divine
drank Mary's milk	was the Highest
	all creatures drinking from his richness
	living breast giving breath of life
	the dead did drink and were revived
drinking Mary's milk	breastfeeding the universe with life
Mary gave him	great treasure of all creation
She gave him milk	out of what he created
She gave him food	out of what he called into existence
He sucked it from her on behalf of his human nature	He gave milk to Mary on behalf of his divine nature

I think the human-divine opposition is more than obvious in this text. As Mary is no goddess but a human being, she is giving *human* milk to her baby as it does every average woman at that time. And by doing so, she gives proof to the human nature of her son. Christ is drinking the milk of his human mother and by being weak and helpless like a baby he proves his truly human nature. On the other side he also is of divine nature and as incarnated God, he is the one who gives to his mother all she can give him. On the divine level Mary cannot be the giving one. Just in the contrary, the divine Logos (= word, plan, concept, logic) functions as the motherly source of all life! He is God Son, mediator of creation (cf. John

¹³ My English translation is based on the German text of Beck 1959.

1:3-4), sustainer and spender of all natural goods. Ephraim therefore stresses that every human gift that Mary could give to her son derived from the divine creation power. In one single text the author uses two different aspects of the milk. In relation to Mary, he stresses the human nature of mother, milk and baby. But due to the double nature of Christ he can at the same time use the metaphor stressing the supreme divine quality of the milk which the son gives.

Under the aspect of gender, we can see here how the breastfeeding trope is used in twofold way. In relation to Mary breastfeeding her child constitutes the usual hierarchical relationship between powerful spender (mother) and helpless receiver (baby). In this case the suckling role of Jesus belongs to the self-humiliation of incarnation. In this context the breastmilk has no special quality. It is just the common food for a child. On the other side, the divine breastmilk of the eternal Son is by far more important than that of any human mother. It is the divine power of creation, sustaining the universe and redeeming humans – including reviving the dead. Ephraim, uses the divine breastfeeding as an expression of honor and power. In my view, his main interest is not to effeminate Christ. Instead, the function of characterizing the eternal God Son, a masculine divine person, as giving milk is to highlight his powerful status. In this text the status is even the highest possible as the milk of the divine Son is giving life to the whole creation and even can revive the dead. Mary's ability to breastfeed her son is completely dependent on his divine milk for all creatures. By that the powerful motherly status of Mary is deconstructed. She appears as a human tool of the divine creator in the great drama of redemption.

The Function of the Transgender Use of the Breastfeeding Trope

Finally, we have to ask, what was the function of all this metaphoric transgender speaking in the past and what could be its function today.

As for the past, older interpretations simply saw a longing for joining masculinity and femininity on the level of the divine. That may be correct in a way, but it definitely is not enough as one must not ignore that the ancient

sources usually do not join complete masculinity with complete femininity. Instead, they transfer specific aspects of femininity to persons¹⁴/deities that are read as masculine. The result is not really a fusion of two sexes/genders into one new reality. It is more an adoption of selected feminine characters by masculine persons. The adopted traits are limited to those aspects of the feminine gender that are associated with power. The trans aspects attributed to God and his Christ in Early Christian texts are deriving from motherhood, i.e. from the only powerful gender role attributed to women in cultural systems following the rules of Masculine Domination – at least the only one that did not result from women's masculinization. That is not only true for the Christian religion. It applies also to the mainstream ancient religions. As power is the nature of gods, we will not find the transfer of non-power feminine characters to masculine gods.¹⁵ If for example Zeus adopts a feminine aspect like giving birth (to Athena and Dionysus), he benefits from this transgender quality as it allows him to act for his children without being dependent on the motherly power of his jealous wife Hera.



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¹⁴ For the use of the breastfeeding topic in relation to powerful men cf. Kobel 2021: 244, footnote 2.

¹⁵ In this point, there is a difference between Christianity and other religions as there are some aspects of feminizing God and his Christ in the New Testament (and later Christendom). Not only powerful-motherly aspects are transferred to God and Christ but also other elements of feminine stereotypes like weakness and being helpless (Kügler 2023: 91-100).

¹⁶ Hera suckling Heracles. Etruscan bronze mirror (detail), 4th century BCE. Graphic JK based on Pirenne-Delforge, Pironti, Geuss 2022: 260, fig. 3.2.

The powerful status of mothering Hera can be clearly seen in the mythical tradition about her divine breastmilk. It is not only powerful enough to create the milky way, but Hera's milk is also necessary for Zeus' extra-marital children to progress from demi-gods to Olympian gods, and become full members of the family of true deities (Pirenne-Delforge, Pironti, Geuss 2022: 257-264; Pedrucci 2018: 343-352).

However, this power of making a god through breastfeeding, is nothing that Zeus ever adopts in Greek mythology. In this point, Greek tradition stays behind Christian imagination. Maybe the impulse of monotheism is crucial here. The lack of a feminine partner on the divine level may lead more directly to the transfer of motherly aspects to the one God.

For the Christian transgender theology it is quite clear, that the function of transferring maternal abilities to a masculine deity is the transfer of power. As far as I understand the sources, the intention is not a feminization of God or Christ. Therefore, characteristics seen as typically feminine like weakness, inability of controlling desires and emotions, helplessness and so on, are not transferred to him. Instead, God is characterized by the power of a mother in addition to that of a father. Therefore, if we talk of an Early Christian trans image of God, the attribute 'trans' signifies that God is seen as a power transcending human power not only by quantity but also by quality. The transgender imagination of a mothering father is making an additional difference between God and humanity. God's power is not bound to the human limitations of sex and gender.

The reconstruction of this historical function is one thing, the more interesting thing may be the function, which such a trans image of God might have today.

My first and very short answer is: This depends on us. Tradition is never binding us simply by itself. We can forget it or use it. And if we decide to use it, we can still decide how. Even the most traditionalist parts of the Church do not believe in the tradition as it was, but in the tradition they reconstruct for their use.¹⁷ Of course, in former times, the transgender tradition was even used to eliminate women from church power, although Christ was venerated as mother of the faithful. The spiritual Mother Christ gives mystical birth to the Church through the side-wound (John 19:34: "one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side") and nourishes children

¹⁷ Consequently the anti-modern Pope Pius IX said: "The tradition am I". <https://www.publik-forum.de/publik-forum-14-2000/la-tradizione-sono-io-die-tradition-bin-ich> (achieved 18.11.2024).

with the own blood. Since ancient times, milk was understood as a variation of blood. Therefore, the church fathers had no problem with interpreting the eucharist as receiving divine milk from Christ. Consequently, medieval theology could associate milk and blood of Christ. Church art even portrayed Jesus in the attitude of the *Madonna lactans*.¹⁸ But such veneration of Jesus as a trans mother did not break up the system of Masculine Domination. It remained the general guideline for practice in church and state. Neither did transgender, or gender-ambiguous persons find much acceptance in Christian society, nor were women admitted to leading roles. Although women were embraced as virgin saints, leaders of monasteries, mystical authors, and more, their exclusion from ordination to the office of deacon, priest and bishop persisted. Instead of ordaining women (or transgender persons) to represent Christ as mother, the leading men in church were invited to develop a spirituality of maternity. Theologians like the crusade-preacher Bernard of Clairvaux tried to integrate the motherly aspects of Christ into masculine church-power (cf. Angenendt 1997: 141-143). Thus, the male church leader should function as father *and* mother on a spiritual *and* pastoral level. Although being only a man on the level of the personal body, the ideal church-leader becomes a complete human person by developing a religious body that unites femininity and masculinity. Therefore, the leading churchman is capable of representing the masculine as well as the feminine aspects of Christ. Consequently, there is no need for women (cf. Kügler 2023: 98). That is Bernard's argument, and in its basic structure it remembers a bit of Joanne K. Rowling and others being afraid that societies' embracing of trans persons might kill feminism – according to the motto: If there are men who also are or represent women you do not need 'real' women ... (<https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/j-k-rowling-writes-about-her-reasons-for-speaking-out-on-sex-and-gender-issues/> [achieved 18.11.2024])

However, it is not necessary to grant such a power to the past with its 'Bernardian' argument for the exclusion of women from power in church and society. Instead, we could try to do new things with old traditions. For

¹⁸ John 19:34 mentions also blood and water coming out from the spear-wound. Middle Ages exegesis understood these elements as referring to the sacraments of the Church (eucharist and baptism) and declared the Church herself to be born out of Jesus's wound as his motherly womb. As Jesus nourishes the faithful with his blood (as Eucharistic wine) the side-wound functioned also as a maternal breast (Bynum 1992: 99-211).

example, we could liberate the New Testament and Early Christian tradition from its patriarchal context. If we would free biblical and post-biblical writings from the framework of Masculine Domination we could see that women (and femininity in general) cannot exclusively be defined by motherhood. Therefore, not only the maternal aspects of femininity are worth being cherished. Instead, the whole range of traits defined as ‘typically feminine’ can be questioned if and how they contribute to a fuller human life for *all* genders. The tradition of divine self-humiliation by incarnation, human weakness, suffering and dying can empower us to play with masculine and feminine stereotypes in a redemptive way. Finally, we even could use the old transgender images of God as an invitation to respect and honor trans people today – definitely not easy for many churches. However, if we believe in the fluid power of the Father’s milk all is possible. Surprising things might happen – Ezra knows that.

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