Sandra Bland at the cross: A womanist reading of Mark 15:40-47

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Abstract
How do women who lack power and privilege experience the cross? How do women who lack power and privilege view privileged men at the cross? How do such questions probe issues of Jesus’s death in the Markan passion narrative? This article employs a womanist hermeneutic of “gazing” to interpret differently the complexity of women in close proximity to death while interrogating one particular woman’s close proximity to death in contemporary memory: Sandra Bland. Particularly, a womanist hermeneutic of gazing coupled with a womanist hermeneutic of suspicion provides a liberating space for nuanced engagement with the women who gaze upon Jesus’s crucifixion from afar. Recognizing specifically that the Gospel of Mark uses the Greek word βλέπω (blepō) to identify “seeing” as a metaphor for belief, how does a womanist understanding of the Greek term θεωρέω (theōreō, which the gospel writer uses sparingly) crack open the text for contemporary audiences? Engaging issues of power, privilege, and death in relationship to the “gaze” of Mark 15:40-47, this article highlights that the women who attempt to anoint Jesus’s body in the Markan narrative, because of their gender in the highly charged testosterone environment of a militarized imperial execution, have more “skin in the game,” different from the privileged position of men in the text. What happens when women are confronted with men who exhibit high levels of masculine testosterone and masculine identity? Like Sandra Bland, they are closer to death. Accordingly, thinking through the women who go to anoint Jesus with contemporary women today means that women who are often closer to death must continue the analytical work of “gazing”, as found in Mark 15:47 to the point that returning the “gaze” produces change for those closest to death (e.g., black and brown bodies close to militarized imperial violence).

Keywords
#BlackLivesMatter, atonement, Mark, Sandra Bland, womanist

Introduction
Many lay church members would potentially agree that Jesus’s atoning work, understood as the beginning of reconciling humanity to God, began with his death on the cross and culminated when he rose from the state of being dead 3 days later.1 However, I would like to pose different foci

1. In discussions about the NT, “the Atonement” is generally understood to refer to the work of Jesus in putting right the human situation in relation to God. Throughout Christian history this work has been
related to the crucifixion. How do women who lack power and privilege experience the cross? How do women who lack power and privilege view privileged men who have different experiences of Christ’s cross? Has it always been atoning or do we move too quickly to what “atonement” is in the cross of Jesus?

I ask these questions because many Christians glorify the “redemptive suffering” of Jesus but do not bat an eye at the suffering deaths of black lives at the hands of militaristic police nor ponder how humanity can be reconciled to one another through Jesus. For example, Sandra Bland was a 28-year-old Black Lives Matter activist who was stopped by former Texas patrol officer Brian Encinia on July 10, 2015. Encinia apparently stopped Bland for switching lanes without signaling. As has become standard response, Encinia reported that he “feared for his life” during the traffic stop. After her arrest and imprisonment, Bland was found 3 days later, dead in a jail cell. Autopsy reports ruled that she died by suicide. One has to raise a couple of issues immediately: (1) why not let Bland off with a warning, and (2) what constituted Bland’s being arrested and placed in jail for 3 days?

The public re-visits the circumstances surrounding Bland’s arrest and death 4 years later. Sandra Bland speaks from the grave after authorities release her personal cell phone footage. The cell phone footage shows her perspective of the arrest, a perspective that shows the officer lied. For the first time, witnesses can see Bland’s gaze from afar after 4 years of the footage never being presented to the public (or even to Bland’s family!) Since “fearing for life” has been the standard response of men (and woman) who possess police power, especially damning is to know that, in many cases, the officers are simply lying and exerting a privilege that black and brown folk do not possess: being credited with belief even if another witness is dead. Moreover, from Bland’s gaze, we know that the officer was probably more upset that a black woman did not immediately defer to his privileged position in the way that he expected. Furthermore, only after the public is able to see the arrest from Bland’s perspective and gaze did some of these facts come to light.

This article ponders how women who lack power and privilege watch privileged men navigate systems of political and policing privilege. Specifically, I employ a womanist hermeneutic of “gazing” to interpret differently the complexity of women in close proximity to the cross of Jesus to re-imagine atoning work both in ancient society and contemporary society. Recognizing that the Gospel of Mark uses the Greek word βλέπω (blepō) to identify “seeing” as a metaphor for belief, I ask how a womanist understanding of the Greek term θεωρέω (theōreō, which the gospel writer uses sparingly) cracks open the text for contemporary audiences and their understanding of the women who were gazing upon Jesus’s death from afar. Moreover, in the contemporary context this

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1. See C. M. Tuckett, “Atonement in the NT,” in ABD, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:518.
2. Since the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 at the knee of a Minnesota police officer, an increase in protests and the acknowledgement by many that #BlackLivesMatter is a legitimate protest movement has occurred. Many across the world could not avert their gaze from the cell phone footage of the officer kneeling on Floyd’s neck for nearly nine minutes while onlookers begged him to remove his knee. See Brittany Shammas, Kim Bellware and Brady Dennis, “Murder Charges Filed against all Four Officers in George Floyd’s Death as Protests against Biased Policing Continue,” Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/03/george-floyd-police-officers-charges/. For an excellent exploration of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and its conversation with Black liberation, please see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).
3. See Tim Elfrink, “Open up the Case, period’: Sandra Bland’s Family Demands Answers over New Video of her Arrest,” https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/05/07/open-up-case-period-sandra-blands-family-demands-answers-over-new-video-her-arrest/.
4. CBS This Morning reported on the release of the new cell phone footage from Sandra Bland’s vantage point, see “Newly released video shows Sandra Bland’s arrest from her point of view,” May 8, 2019, video, 2:39, https://youtu.be/iUmhNHURKKX8.
article unapologetically interacts and converses with the #BlackLivesMatter movement as a way to bring the cross of Jesus in conversation with the women and men who suffer consistently from police violence in the United States of America. Engaging the current cultural moment of the #BlackLivesMatter phenomenon, while reading Mark 15:40-47 with Sandra Bland, this article elucidates the above-referenced issues by employing a womanist hermeneutic of “gazing” to ponder the complexity of women in close proximity to power, privilege, and death.

A womanist hermeneutic of gazing onto privilege

I opened this article with questions about how women who lack power and privilege experience the cross of Jesus the Christ. As I move to the particularity of African American women and this conversation, I recognize that as a womanist I already possess certain womanist methodologies in my arsenal. For example, the womanist tenet of radical subjectivity is an essential part of my developing womanist hermeneutic. Radical subjectivity is the epistemological privileging of black women’s identity and selfhood. Radical subjectivity stems from the African folk expression, “You actin’ womanish.” Black mothers would often say this to their black daughters whenever the daughter acted as though she knew too much. For me, as the daughter of a black woman who was born in Alabama and whose own mother worked land during Reconstruction Alabama, I remember my questions of “why?” I think even in my beginning years I was wrestling with my own struggles for wanting to know more than what others thought I should know. In essence, womanists are gazing upon and wrestling for justice in order to assert their own radical subjectivity in the face of white hypocrisy and supremacy and black male misogyny.

5. As a term coined by Alice Walker, “womanism” may be defined as a type of thought pertaining to black women to set aside mainstream white feminists from feminists of color while also resisting anti-blackness within the feminist movement. By focusing specifically on black women, womanism aims for the transformation of society and liberation of all people in the black community. Some seminal texts include Jacquelyn Grant, White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Katie Cannon, Black Womanist Ethics (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Cannon, Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community (New York: Continuum, 1995); Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, Exorcising Evil: Theodicy and African American Spirituals—A Womanist Perspective (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Emilie Maureen Townes, Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993); and Townes, A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

6. For another article on the Gospel of Mark and Sandra Bland, please see Mitzi J. Smith, “Race, Gender, and the Politics of ‘Sass’: Reading Mark 7:24-30 through a Womanist Lens of Intersectionality and Inter(con)textuality,” in Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 95–112. Smith reads the Syro-Phoenician woman’s word in Mark as sass or “talk-back” to Jesus.

7. The other tenets of womanism include the following: (1) Traditional communalism is the recognition of the collective value of the entire black community. If a slave was going to walk to Canada to gain her freedom, she was not going alone; she was taking everyone else with her. (2) Redemptive self-love is love and acceptance of the self regardless what others say or think. When a womanist proposes redemptive self-love, she recognizes that the struggle that occurs within herself and with other people as she seeks and asserts her desire for self-love. (3) A womanist loves the struggle, because that means there is room for growth and she has neither given up on life nor yielded to the struggle. (4) Finally, critical engagement is a deep and sustained analysis of Jacquelyn Grant’s tridimensional intersection of oppression of race, sex, and gender. Critical engagement also includes dialogue with feminism since womanists recognize that “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,” meaning that womanist purple is a deeper shade of feminist lavender. See Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xii.
Foucault’s gaze

Combining womanist thought with Michel Foucault’s concept of the “gaze” engages theory as a way to formulate questions of gazing from a womanist perspective. Michel Foucault (1926-1984), prominent French historian and philosopher, had significant influence over the sociological understanding of the examining gaze as both normalizing and normative for discipline and punishment of certain bodies. Though introducing the term the “gaze” in his 1963 book *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault’s work *Discipline and Punish* is particularly helpful for theorizing about women’s (specifically black women’s) subjectivity in the midst of normalizing governmental bodies such as the police or even the military. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows how the Enlightenment period, the Industrial Revolution, and the Church control actual bodies through the gaze, power, and normalization. Foucault contributes to understandings of contemporary society, and Foucault’s concepts of the “gaze” and “biopower” are prime for thinking through the Markan text. Foucault’s theory provides a nuanced understanding of what womanist biblical scholars are attempting to do, that is, returning the “gaze” of hermeneutical assumptions and presuppositions back upon the ways that traditional scholars have understood the biblical texts.

For Foucault, the concepts of the gaze and power are intimately entwined. For society to exercise authoritative discipline, some type of apparatus must exist that makes inducing power upon people possible. That apparatus is what Foucault theorizes as panopticism, occurring as the result of a plague where folks in seventeenth-century villages were often quarantined. How appropriate is such an idea in the age of Covid-19. In a perfect village, patrols exercise all power through the exact observation, using the gaze as the overall functioning of power. A network of gazes supervises one another. The perfect disciplinary apparatus would enable a single gaze to see everything constantly. While Foucault, of course, did not live to witness the ramifications of the modern cell phone, I would argue that the cell phone acts as a way of gaining panoptic vision. They allow a network of gazing that can combat the overall functioning of power and reflect a gaze back to the panoptic center.

A word on privilege

Another theoretical idea that converses well with Foucault’s gaze is the idea of privilege. In the academic field of study, privilege is the theory evidencing how groups benefit from unearned and unacknowledged advantages that increase their power in relationship to that of others. Scholars who have studied privilege in the past few decades recognize that financial, material, and emotional gains occur as a result of privilege. Via these gains, social inequality also results. While privilege is generally an invisible commodity, multiple factors, such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and class, influence a person’s level of privilege. For example, a white man may gain access to certain arenas of society more easily than a black woman with similar skills. In contemporary US society, privilege has many benefits including access to housing, education, and jobs. In addition, as born out through the lived experiences of black women, men, and children in the United States of America, privilege recognizes that, while white-identified people may not expect to be killed by police, black folks do not share the same privilege. In essence, privilege is a sense of self-confidence and comfortableness that one experiences without the need to think about it.

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8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Book, 1977).
9. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 171.
10. See France Winddance Twine, *Geographies of Privilege* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 8–10. See also Peggy McIntosh’s groundbreaking essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*, ed. Scott Plous (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 191–96.
Bringing together womanist thought, the gaze, and privilege, my womanist hermeneutic of gazing upon privilege asks the following questions. First, the hermeneutic has an underlying stance that asks about the radical subjectivity of the women in the text. Specifically, how have traditional and feminist scholars interpreted these women? Second, the hermeneutic asks how historical-critical practices within biblical scholarship will engage the “real-lived” experiences of womanists and their experiences of male privilege, with particular attention to masculine policing privilege. Third, the hermeneutic addresses the question of who is allowed to “gaze,” judge, and normalize experiences, recognizing that these issues stem from conversations in power dynamics in ancient and contemporary society. Fourth, the hermeneutic will turn the “gaze” back upon privileged people who often-times have difficulty recognizing their privilege, specifically men in power both within the ancient and contemporary contexts. In summary, my womanist hermeneutic allows me to construct a strategy that takes into account black women’s lived experiences as both recipient of militaristic power and observers of the abuse of militaristic power on black and brown bodies, as I interrogate the issues of the gazing and privilege within the biblical text.11

Mark 15:40-47 from a womanist perspective

There were also women beholding (θεωροῦσαι) from a distance, one of them was Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Jacob the less and the mother of Josias and Salome,

When in Galilee, these (women) were following him and ministering to him, and many others (women) going up with him to Jerusalem.

And after evening was coming, it was the preparation which is the Sabbath.

After Joseph came, the one from Arimathea, a prominent council member, who also himself was anticipating the kingdom of God, boldly went into Pilate and requested the fallen body of Jesus.

But Pilate marveled if already he had died and called a centurion and asked him if so soon he had died.

And knowing from the centurion, he granted the corpse to Joseph

And after buying a fine linen cloth, taking him down, he wrapped him in the fine linen cloth and placed him in a tomb which was hewn from rock and placed a stone in the door of the tomb.

And Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Josias were beholding (ἐθεωροῦν) where he was placed.

In the above translation of Mark 15:40-47, I seek to accomplish two things. First, noting that this pericope is a Markan sandwich, I highlight how the women make up the “bread” of the sandwich with Joseph of Arimathea in the middle. As scholars note, proper Markan “sandwich” interpretations connect the “bread” with the “meat.” Notably, the woman are gazing or watching intently from afar. Second, in my reading and interpretation, I emphasize that the women watch privilege and do not have any expectation to exert privilege. They are in close proximity to power, and often-times close proximity to power for women equals death.

11. For excellent discussion on reader response criticism, please see Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 37, 169, 214. Iser’s theory serves the interests of my work because he stresses the reader’s central role in determining meaning. Iser maintains that, in the interaction between the reader and the text, “the role prescribed by the text will be stronger but the reader’s own disposition will never disappear totally,” 37. The reader’s disposition will instead form the background and serve as a frame of reference for the act of understanding and comprehending the material of the text.
**Powerless women gazing from afar**

Scholars of the Gospel of Mark believe Mark was the first gospel written, probably between 66 and 70 CE during the Jewish War against Rome. The context of war is important for proper interpretation of the Gospel of Mark as scholars know the Jewish nation stopped paying taxes to the Roman Empire as a show of revolt for heavy taxation. Nonetheless, Rome exerted ultimate power by breaching the walls of Jerusalem and destroying a pivotal part of Jewish identity: the Temple. The war against Rome was especially egregious because Jewish writers, such as Josephus, record how women’s proximity to militaristic forces often put women in precarious positions. For example, Josephus relays the horrific story of the Jewish woman who boils her baby to serve rebel troops since all of the food had run out. War is not kind to women, infants, or children.12

This context is interesting as the Gospel of Mark functions in the same mode of a two level drama: talking about Jesus’s crucifixion from years prior while the Jewish War is going on in the gospel writer’s “present.” Moreover, the gospel writer has not mentioned women following Jesus from Galilee until Mark 15:40-47. When I teach the Gospel in my seminary context, I often ask students, “knowing that women were always there, how do we re-read some of Jesus’s conversations with his disciples from Mark 1 to Mark 15?” The sudden emergence of women at the crucifixion of Jesus would definitely jolt the original auditor’s attention since I believe, and a majority of scholars concur, that the gospel was first told in an oral tradition.

Citing Louis Schottroff, Raymond Brown states that while Mark may have thought of these women as disciples of Jesus, the Markan narrative does not think of these women as “proper disciples.”13 While Brown may have a point, because the women seem to be a Markan “afterthought,” I disagree with Brown’s statement as one cannot know the intentionality of the gospel writer. Even if the intent of the gospel writer was not to consider the women “proper disciples,” I contend that the original female auditors of the Markan narrative would have heard the Markan narrative in a different way, perhaps similarly to how women “hear” the crucifixion narrative differently from men. Comparing the women as gazing upon Joseph may help understand the difference.14 Attention to the Greek word θεωρέω (theōreō) becomes important to my argument.

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12. Yes, dear Reader, you should hear WIC in this sentence. WIC is the Special Supplementation Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) that provides federal grants to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk. As a black woman in these United States of America, I know many women (Black, White, Hispanic, etc.) who benefit from WIC and do not want to see such a program depleted because certain groups think of these as entitlements even when big corporations get entitlements from government bailouts. See “Special Supplementation Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC),” USDA Food and Nutrition Service, https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic.
13. See Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1156. Other scholars who discuss these women include Susan Miller, Women in Mark’s Gospel (New York: T & T Clark, 2004); Hisako Kinukawa, Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); and Seong Hee Kim, Mark, Women and Empire: A Korean Postcolonial Perspective (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010).
14. A significant number of feminist Markan scholars have interrogated the appearance of these women at this juncture of the Markan narrative. While noting that the Markan narrative gives Jesus’s women disciples very little visibility and even less voice, Joan L. Mitchell argues that the Markan narratives give readers permission to see women disciples with Jesus throughout his ministry from its beginning in Galilee to its end in Jerusalem at the cross, burial, and empty tomb; Mitchell, Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark (New York: Continuum, 2001), 8–9. Schüssler-Fiorenza acknowledges the women as “true disciples.” See Schüssler-Fiorenza’s In Memory of Her, 320. Following Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (who argues that the male disciples proved fallible) and W. Munro, Susan
The importance of \textit{θεωρέω}

In the Markan sandwich of 15:40-47, the narrative frames the sandwich with the Greek verb \textit{θεωρέω}. The verb \textit{θεωρέω} has several connotations distinct from the verb \textit{βλέπω}, which the gospel writer uses more frequently. The verb \textit{βλέπω} means “I see.” 

In ancient Greek, Herodotus and Xenophon use the word \textit{θεωρέω} to connote the idea of inspecting and reviewing soldiers, which is slightly more nuanced than \textit{βλέπω}. A secondary meaning for \textit{θεωρέω} is to “contemplate, consider or observe.” Stemming from theatrical meanings, \textit{θεωρέω} connotes a viewing public as well. In all of these examples, the meaning seems to insinuate an intense look or speculation to the point of contemplation or even theorizing.

In my view, the Gospel of Mark begs for a hermeneutic that interrogates the idea of “seeing” in its gospel. Foucault’s language of the gaze and the power behind it highlight the fact that, even when a network of gazes exists, part of the power behind the gaze is how the gaze is deployed. A womanist hermeneutic of the gaze will deploy the gaze in this text to focus on the women and allow the women to return their gaze upon Joseph. I argue, therefore, that these women are not simply “looking” at some circumstance, but they are actively gazing upon a situation in order to contemplate their next action.

Returning to the issue of privilege in the Markan sandwich (and since the verb \textit{θεωρέω} appears in both slices of the Markan “bread”), I argue that these women are gazing upon a privileged Joseph requesting the \textit{σῶμα} (sōma, v. 43) of Jesus for burial. When one ponders the fact that these women are intensely contemplating upon what they are gazing, it seems apropos to imagine what emotions may be running through their minds as well. At the end of the gospel (16:8), according to the gospel writer, the women exhibit “fear and awe” (τρόμος καὶ ἐκστασις, \textit{tromos kai ekstasis}) and “they were afraid” (ἐφοβοῦντο, \textit{ephobounto}). I question, however, whether the women experienced these emotions prior to the gospel writer’s characterization of their “fear” in 16:8. \textit{Perhaps a more appropriate question would be, what was the culmination of emotions that may overcome women who have already been placed in a highly charged militaristic event and then witness an angelic conversation thereafter?}

In essence, I argue the plausibility of women experiencing feelings around extreme lack of privilege. The women are not allowed to get close to the scene to handle their deceased loved one and leader. This argument stems from the relationship (or lack thereof) between Joseph of Arimathea and the women who had been following Jesus since Galilee. If the women were in Jesus’s close company and if Joseph was a disciple, as some scholars argue, why did the women and Joseph not converse about burying Jesus? I, therefore, read the women (i.e., the “bread” of the Markan sandwich) with Joseph (i.e., the “meat” of the Markan sandwich), while most scholars tend to read the women separate from Joseph. Moreover, scholars who do read Joseph and the women together

Miller argues that the women act as foils to the twelve male disciples; Miller, \textit{Women in Mark’s Gospel}, 153–73; See Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark,” \textit{Semeia} 28 (1983): 29–48; and Winsome Munro, “Women Disciples in Mark?” \textit{CBQ} 44 (1982): 225–41. Japanese feminist scholar Hisako Kinukawa argues that the women serve as role models of “life-giving” suffering as they are examples of challenge to the male disciples who avoided the struggles of the oppressed. Kinukawa, \textit{Women and Jesus in Mark}, 90–106. Korean feminist postcolonial scholar Seong Hee Kim offers a Salim interpretation of these women wherein they act as members present in an apocalyptic cross of life and wherein they are precursors to Korean women who fulfill a model of discipleship in a situation of suffering; Kim, \textit{Mark, Women and Empire}, 117–32. 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tend to focus negatively on the women while focusing positively on Joseph. As a part of my own particular womanist hermeneutic, I note that the women lack both power and privilege to intervene. Surely, if they knew Joseph and he was, in fact, a disciple, would he not have used his privilege to protect the women for the burial? The women only have enough power to gaze from afar, possessing no privilege to force Joseph (or Pilate) to gaze upon their own male privilege. To bring interpretative force to bear on this gaze is my present task.

### Powerless women gazing upon privilege

The gospel writer states that Joseph “boldly” requests the body (σῶμα, sōma, v 43) of Jesus. As a womanist reader gazing with the women who followed Jesus from Galilee, I ask “what exactly is the ‘bold’ emotion Joseph portrays?” More specifically, I question whether boldness is an actual emotion that gave Joseph courage to ask for the corpse of Jesus, or was the action, as I will argue, that of a privileged man who expects to be accepted or received wherever he goes?

The beginning of this answer may stem from the biblical text’s identification of Joseph. Was Joseph a disciple of Jesus? Generally, scholars have three responses, which I briefly discuss further below. First, Joseph is a righteous member of the Sanhedrin who seeks to bury Jesus to keep Palestine “pure.” Second, Joseph has become a disciple of Jesus and seeks to bury him in the tomb. Third, the text is ambiguous, and one cannot ascertain Joseph’s status in relationship to Jesus.

Raymond Brown argues that Joseph was a righteous member of the Sanhedrin. Brown emphasizes that Joseph was a respected member of the council and presumes that the gospel writer intends to describe Joseph as such. Curiously, however, the gospel writer uses συνεδριακός (Sanhedrin) twice in the passion narrative (14:55; 15:1) while using a different word to describe Joseph in 15:43. Since the gospel writer has twice written of “the whole Sanhedrin” as deciding that Jesus should die, Brown wonders why the Markan narrative would seem disposed to make the original auditors think of Sanhedrist Joseph as a follower of Jesus. The gospel writer, in fact, uses

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17. Scholars who read the women with Joseph of Arimathea include Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 392–97. Myers actually reads the centurion, Joseph, and the women as “Aftermath: Responses to Jesus’s Death.” With a forward by Ched Myers, Laurel K. Cobb also reads the women with Joseph of Arimathea; Cobb, *Mark & Empire: Feminist Reflections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 165–66.

18. Greek lexicons denote ἐπιστάμενος (euscheimōn, only here in Mark) as “prominent, honorable or outstanding.” In Acts 13:50 Jews incite prominent citizens against Paul and Barnabas; in Acts 17:12 prominent Greek women as well as men become believers in Jesus. Some scholars have even attempted to connect the description of Joseph as ἐπιστάμενος with the rich people who put large sums in the treasury (Mark 12:41-44) though there is probably no connection grammatically. Further, in Mark the tomb is not identified as Joseph’s. Matthew (27:57, 60) makes Joseph the rich owner of the tomb. See Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. with revised supplement (Oxford: Clarenden Press, 1996), 734; see also Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 414.

19. In the other synoptic gospels, both Matthew and Luke explicitly change the impression of Joseph. For example, Matt 27:57 omits the information that Joseph was a Sanhedrist or a member of any council. Luke, on the other hand, specifies that Joseph had not consented to the purpose and deeds of his fellow Sanhedrists (23:51). The tradition wrestles with the idea of Joseph’s being a disciple of Jesus.
the term βουλευτής (bouleutēs), which may mean something other than a Sanhedrist. However, the gospel writer may still be highlighting some level of privilege that Joseph expected to receive. While not necessarily analyzing that privilege, by the end of his study, Brown believes that Joseph was merely seeking to do what was best for the land of Palestine.

Contra Brown, Robert Gundry argues that Joseph became a disciple of Jesus. Gundry notes that the story of the burial starts with the request for Jesus’s body by Joseph (vv. 42–43), continues with Pilate’s granting the request (vv. 44–45), and reaches its climax in the entombment of the body (v. 46). A notation that two women observe where the entombment takes place closes the story (v. 47). Gundry further notes that Joseph has both political prominence and is a devout religious person.20 Referencing that the purpose of the Greek periphrastic construction is to show more forceful emphasis, Gundry highlights the periphrastic phrase ἴν προσδέχόμενος (v. 43) as one accentuating religious devotion.21 Gundry believes that Joseph’s political prominence, religious devotion, and personal bravery are all the more exceptional in comparison with the rest of the Sanhedrin and hence all the more complimentary of Jesus as he is in the throes of crucifixion.22

The third scholarly response is an argument for ambiguity. In Binding the Strong Man, Ched Myers qualifies the story of Joseph as “ambiguous”; he asserts that the Joseph storyline serves a different purpose. Because the gospel writer states that Joseph “requested” the body of Jesus from Pilate, Joseph was not necessarily on the same power playing field as Pilate, but he nonetheless provides the “oppressor’s response” to the death of Jesus as an oppressive masculine figure of Judaism.23 The problem with Myers’s argument, however, is that he does not nuance the idea of intra-Jewish hatred with such a statement. Nonetheless, I do agree with Myers that scholars tend to misunderstand the passage primarily due to the ambiguity.

Following what he calls a “Nicodemus motif,” Myers observes that most commentators have praised Joseph’s act as a merciful one on the part of a Jewish leader. Myers contends that the gospel writer’s use of εὐσχήμων (euschēmōn, v. 43) to describe Joseph makes clear that Joseph is a wealthy landowner. Furthermore, as Brown, Myers argues that Joseph is also a member of the Sanhedrin (15:43). In other words, Joseph, like the centurion, is deeply complicit in the process by which the Roman Empire executes Jesus. Because the gospel writer distinguishes Joseph by stating that he was awaiting (ἵν προσδέχόμενος) the Empire of God, Myers argues that the characterization of Joseph is slightly ambiguous because Joseph, like other Sanhedrin members, engages and works with the Roman Empire while awaiting the true Empire of God. Thus, Joseph seeks to bury the fallen body of Jesus in haste so the Jewish leadership can begin disposal of the whole matter and keep awaiting the true Empire of God. Myer’s insight is interesting as it brings two issues forward. First, people of privilege may not necessarily have “skin in the game” the same way others do (such as the disciples of Jesus). Second, sometimes people simply want things to “return to normal.”24

In essence, Joseph is most likely a wealthy, land-owning male in the Roman imperial age who experiences privilege and believes he will be accepted wherever he goes even if he is not in direct

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20. Gundry, Mark, 980.
21. See Stanley Porter, Verbal Aspects in the Greek of the NT, with Reference to Tense and Mood (New York: Peter Lang, 1989); See also Porter, Idioms of the Greek New Testament, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2005), 45–9.
22. Gundry, Mark, 981.
23. See Myers, Binding the Strong Man, 394.
24. I have alluded to protests staged by various activist groups after the murder of Michael Brown by a Ferguson, Missouri police officer. In recent television and newspaper reports, many residents of Ferguson speak about the desire for things to “return to normal” so life can go on. Do the privileged have a deeper desire for things to return to normal when oftentimes the oppressed cannot imagine what normal is anymore?
alliance with Pilate. Because Joseph was not one who followed Jesus as the women followed him from Galilee, I contend that he was not a disciple but a person who possessed privilege as an elite male in the land of Palestine and that he did not want anything undue falling upon the land where he lived. In possession of privilege, Joseph is a kindred spirit of Josephus, the Jewish historian, who seeks to keep the nation of Israel “whole” while still engaging Roman colonialism in a way that does not hurt the inhabitants of Israel. Accordingly, Joseph has every right and benefit to appear before Pilate, not as a disciple of Jesus, but as a wealthy man who seeks to keep Israel “pure” by not allowing a Jewish body to stay on the cross over the Sabbath period.

Pondering the male elite aspect of Joseph’s privilege, I subsequently must ask if the gospel writer’s characterization of his “boldness” is accurate. I would argue that attention to Joseph’s privilege and standing lessens his show of “boldness.” When original female auditors first heard Mark’s gospel, I can imagine they immediately understood that the narrative actually depicts a person who expects to have his requests acknowledged and granted. Joseph’s privilege is what the women were gazing upon as they witnessed Joseph burying Jesus in a tomb.

**Women with “skin in the game” watching male privilege**

Some people attribute the phrase “skin in the game” to Warren Buffet and his use of the phrase in business, finance, gambling, and politics. To have “skin in the game” is to incur a risk by being involved in achieving a goal. In this article, I use the phrase “skin in the game” for two purposes. First, I analyze the women and Joseph in their ancient context to determine who has more “skin in the game” in the Jesus movement. Second, I analyze how my particular womanist reading of Mark 15:40-47 in today’s contemporary context provides a nuanced understanding of “skin in the game” regarding bodies falling via militaristic and police violence.

Because traditional scholarship has tended to focus on interpreting the male disciples of Jesus, the history of interpretation has neglected the female disciples. Perhaps even the attention in scholarship is one way the participants in the gospel narrative exhibit “more” or “less” skin in the game.

Above, I argue that Joseph is most likely a wealthy, land owning male in the Roman imperial age who experiences privilege and thus has less “skin in the game” regarding Jesus. The women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, on the other hand, because of their gender in the highly charged testosterone environment of a militarized imperial execution, have more “skin in the game” as disciples of Jesus. To think through the intricacies of what the women had to lose, one should consider what women experienced when in the presence of militaristic men.

My consideration of women having more “skin in the game,” or more to risk, as a result of being in close proximity to a crucifixion comes from my “reading” of Roman imperial imagery, which provides mini-commentaries about the Roman imperial age. The *Gemma Augustea* cameo is especially helpful for thinking about women with less privilege who risk more “skin in the game.” Specifically, what happens when women are confronted with men who exhibit increased levels of hyper masculinity in militaristic situations?

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25. The Jewish historian Josephus first fought against the Roman Empire in the Jewish War against Rome. However, when he realized that Rome was likely to annihilate Judea, he became a “puppet” historian for the Roman Empire. Accordingly, Josephus’ history is often associated with the idea of being traitorous to Jewish identity.

26. An excellent work on Roman imperial imagery and the age of Augustus is Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988). Zanker argues that art (and architecture) serves as a mirror of Roman society. “Reading” the imagery on Roman imperial art allows interpreters to begin to understand the values of Roman society, especially in the Augustan age. The empire under Augustus Caesar led to the creation of a new system of visual imagery that reflects the consciousness of that “golden age.”
The Gemma Augustea (Latin, “the Gem of Augustus”) is a cameo engraved gem cut from onyx (Figure 1). Scholars date the cutting of the gem to the second or third decade of the first century CE. The gem depicts two scenes. The top depicts the Roman Emperor Augustus being crowned by Jupiter as ruler over the inhabited world (depicted by Gaia, goddess of the earth.) Paul Zanker writes that imagery plays a significant role in imperial praise. Accordingly, the top of the cameo often receives more scholarly attention than the bottom scene. The scene of import here, however, is the lower scene, depicting the erection of a trophy. When the Roman military sensed that victory was at hand, they would erect a cross-like structure and then place upon it the helmet and shield for a fallen soldier as a “trophy” showing they won the battle. My focus is on the woman depicted on the bottom right side of the gem and on asking the question of what happens when women (and men) of an underclass come in direct contact with militaristic forces.

A soldier is seizing the woman by her hair. Important for my “reading” of the woman depicted on the bottom of the gem is the work of David Mattingly, who cogently links the ideas of “sex” and “desire” in the Roman imperial imagery with the inherent “imperialism” and “colonialism” of the ancient context. At the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias are many “conquering” reliefs. As many scholars explain the scenes, the emperors depicted are “forcefully” conquering provinces, which are
depicted in female personifications. For example, in Figure 2, Emperor Claudius subdues Britannia with a knee to her back, pulling her hair, and her breast is exposed.30

The interesting point of both the Gemma Augustea and the relief of Claudius subduing Britannia, as Mattingly points out, is that rape is implicit in them. Where women are depicted as bare-breasted and being seized by their hair, rape is implicit. Notably, the woman at the bottom of the Gemma Augustea seems to be holding up her clothing so as not to expose her breast.

Accordingly, for the women at the cross, getting closer to militaristic activity increases in their consciousness their sensitivity to and understanding of their proximity to violence, more specifically sexualized violence. Therefore, for the women who are gazing upon male privilege from afar, they are watching male privilege while also being aware that, if they get too close, they may suffer sexual violence.

**Concluding thoughts: Contemporary women with “skin in the game”**

Sandra Bland, as I note in the introduction, was a Black Lives Matter activist. She was fighting against the police violence which would eventually cause her own death. Only after seeing Bland’s

30. *Claudius Subdues Britannia*, Relief, Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, Claudius images, copyright Steve Kershaw, licensed under CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0, https://open.conted.ox.ac.uk/resources/images/claudius-images.
cell phone footage was the public able to gaze from her perspective. Bland had “skin in the game.” Daniela Frazier, the 17-year-old girl who filmed the modern day lynching of George Floyd, also has “skin in the game.”31 Black women and girls seemingly possess more “skin in the game” than others. To even document what we gaze upon, we are especially close to violence and death. We have watched our children die during the Middle Passage, during colonial slavery times, during Jim Crow, during the Birmingham bombings, by experiencing lynching in the United States, and gazing upon the deaths of George Floyd and Sandra Bland as a result of police violence.

Hence my focus on Sandra Bland and the recent call in Texas to re-open her death case is a moment in which people can also see that black women have “skin in the game” as we stand vigil over the actual bodies and observe the memory of fallen bodies. We also have “skin in the game” as we identify the systemic decay and immoral actions of political leadership that causes harm to the people under their rule. We see the evidence of political decay as Jesus hung on the cross, a lynched victim, and we see the political decay as the women mourned Jesus from afar.32 In his work, James Cone ponders what is at stake for those who still hope that Jesus’s death on the cross has any atoning value: it is the idea that the Christian gospel “may heal the wounds of racial violence that continue to divide our churches and our society.”33 With that said, how much skin in the game do you have?

Author biography

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31. See Peter Sblendorio “Teen Who Recorded George Floyd Video is Getting Therapy for Trauma,” New York Daily News, June 2, 2020, https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/ny-teen-recorded-george-floyd-therapy-trauma-20200602-xl2jvha7trd2vae6amjquxx4q-story.html.
32. James P. Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012).
33. Cone, Cross and the Lynching Tree, xiii.