


Fall 2015

Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the 'Acts of Peter'

Meghan Henning

University of Dayton, mhenning2@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Other Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Henning, Meghan, "Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the 'Acts of Peter'" (2015). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 97.

https://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub/97

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact fricel@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Paralysis and Sexuality in Medical Literature and the *Acts of Peter*

This paper focuses on the story of Peter's daughter that is found in the Berlin Coptic papyrus BG 8502.4, and is associated with the apocryphal Acts of Peter. Research on the story of Peter's daughter has primarily focused on its interpretation of the theme of chastity, or whether the story was originally included in the Acts of Peter. In the course of these investigations, scholars have taken for granted the curious assumption of the text that paralysis renders Peter's daughter unfit for marriage, and thus safe from Ptolemy's unwanted advances. This paper explores the underlying understandings of paralysis and sexuality that would have enabled ancient Christian audiences to make this leap from paralysis to sexual inviolability. Using data from ancient medical texts, this work demonstrates that both paralysis and infertility were understood as symptoms of excessive cooling and insufficient blood flow. Thus, for the ancient audience a paralyzed female body was incapable of bearing children, and an undesirable candidate for marriage. When read in light of these findings, Peter's daughter is not only a model of early Christian chastity, but of early Christian story telling—using common cultural assumptions about disability to redefine normativity.

Modern editions of the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* open with one of Christianity's most befuddling miracle stories¹: once the wonder-working apostle Peter heals the sick and impaired members of the crowd, one of the bystanders asks

I would like to thank the editors of this issue, the anonymous reviewers, Matthew C. Baldwin, and Christine Luckritz Marquis, for their suggestions, all of which have greatly improved this project. I am grateful to my graduate assistant Shelby Mongan, who cheerfully assisted with a research trip to the University of Cincinnati Classics library. Thanks also go to Joel Baden, Candida R. Moss, and Anna Rebecca Solevåg, who generously shared their work with me prior to publication. Above all, I owe a debt of gratitude to Candida R. Moss—without her thoughtful questions, profound insights, and enduring support I would have long ago stopped puzzling over Petronilla.

¹ The episode of the healing of Peter's daughter is found in the Berlin Coptic papyrus BG 8502.4, available in Brashler and Parott 1979, 473–93. The *editio princeps* for the Latin *Acts of Peter* (*Actus Vercellenses*) remains Tischendorf, Bonnet, and Lipsius 1959. For English translations see Elliott 1993, 397–427; Schneemelcher 1991, 285–317. Translations here are modified from Schneemelcher.

why it is that Peter dedicates so much time to curing the sick when he has not helped his own daughter. It is at this moment that the audience's attention shifts to Peter's "virgin daughter, who has grown up beautiful and believed in the name of God" and yet "is quite paralyzed on one side, and lies there stretched out in the corner helpless" (ΕΙΣ ΖΗΗΤΕ ΓΑΡ ΠΕΣΟΥΔΟΑ ΟΗΘ ΤΗΡΩ ΔΥΩ ΟΗΗΧ ΜΠΙΟΑ ΝΥΚΛΧΕ).² Peter's response is threefold. Initially he appeals to the mysterious knowledge of God—he alone knows why she is unwell—but then to prove that God is capable of healing her should he so choose, Peter tells his daughter to arise and walk around. To the amazement of those gathered there, Peter then commands her to "return to [her] infirmity," explaining that "this is expedient for you and for me" (ΠΑΙ ΓΑΡ ΠΕ ΤΡ̄ ΝΟΩΡΕ ΝΕ ΝΗΜΔΕΙ).³

After using his daughter as a prop to demonstrate God's power, Peter relates the history of the girl's condition. When his daughter was born, Peter explains to the crowd, he received a vision in which he was informed that she would be a great trial for him and that—if her body was healthy—she would "harm many souls."⁴ The manuscript here is fragmented but when the narrative recommences Peter is in the middle of narrating a story about the girl's youth. When she was ten years old, a man called Ptolemy saw her bathing and resolved to marry her. His servants abducted the girl and brought her to his house, placing her in his doorway. When Peter and his wife realize that their daughter was missing they rushed to Ptolemy's house only to find that she was paralyzed on one side and untouched by Ptolemy. And from that point onward the girl had been unable to move. As for Ptolemy, he was temporarily struck blind before receiving a vision, dedicating himself to God, and bequeathing a large sum of money to Peter's daughter in his will.⁵ Placed in the context of the *Acts of Peter's* interest in asceticism,⁶ celibacy and sexual

² BG 8502.4, 128–29.

³ BG 8502.4, 131.

⁴ BG 8502.4, 131.

⁵ BG 8502.4, 135–39.

⁶ The relationship between the Coptic papyrus BG 8502.4, Pseudo-Titus, and the longer Latin text of the *Acts of Peter* in the *Actus Vercellenses* has been contested, with some scholars arguing that all three texts are a cohesive unit (Schmidt 1903). Others have called into question the thematic similarities between the three texts (Molinari 1999). More recently, Thomas 2003, 17–20, has argued that the Coptic fragment is part of the lost portion of a single unified Greek text that now exists in fragments, whereas Baldwin 2005, 60–66, contends that the *Actus Vercellenses* is best studied as a work "in its own right," implying that BG 8502.4 and Pseudo-Titus should be treated as separate texts. For the purposes of this analysis we will first treat the Coptic fragment separately, while keeping in mind that it later became associated with other *Acts of Peter* by some late ancient audiences (as in Augustine *Adim.* 17.5). See Henning forthcoming for my argument that the Coptic fragment is a *chreia* that was attributed to Peter and "elaborated by a second century author according to a shared set of traditions about Peter as the apostle of Power."

continence, scholars take the message of this story to be that disability is preferable to sexual corruption, even in the context of marriage.⁷

Scholarly treatments of the story also presume, as the narrative itself does, that paralysis renders a woman ineligible for marriage. These treatments appear to accept that her paralysis has either made her sexually undesirable⁸ or, for some other reason, an inappropriate choice for a wife.⁹ Scholars thereby work from the presumption that her unsuitability for marriage resolves all tension in the text.¹⁰ This reading, however, is not held up by the story. Peter's daughter is not in fact exempt from sexual attention: The bystander who initially enquires of Peter as to why he has not healed his daughter takes special note of her beauty. Moreover, there are clues in the text indicating that her condition makes her more vulnerable to sexual attack.¹¹ The author describes her as "helpless" and lying "in a corner." Given that she is in a seemingly more precarious position when she becomes paralyzed, we must wonder why

⁷ See Brock 1999; Molanari 2000; Thomas 2003, and Klauck 2008.

⁸ Perkins 1995 describes the daughter's paralysis as salvation from sexual desire, both for her and for Ptolemy. She summarizes: "the girl's paralysis has saved her from a life of lust." And again, she says "Ptolemy saved from his lust by the fortuitous paralysis of Peter's daughter, leaves her a bequest." Although her use of the term "lust" implies that she interprets paralysis to be antithetical to sexual desire, both of these descriptions are part of a larger argument, which is not specifically focused on how or why paralysis "saves" in the story. See also, Horn 2006, 130–37, who asserts that Peter's un-healing of his daughter reduces virginity to "a necessity for salvation," but she does not clarify how paralysis leads to virginity.

⁹ Most readings of the text simply summarize the events surrounding the lacuna in the text, reporting that she is paralyzed, and thus is saved from rape and/or cannot marry. For examples see Brock 1999; Molanari 2000; Thomas 2003, 17–20, 68; and Klauck 2008, 106. Although Molinari 2000, 140 states that becoming paralyzed is "killing" her womb, he does not mean this literally. Instead he means that her womb is effectively "killed" because she will not marry, in order to demonstrate that this story is parallel to the legend of Verginia (who was stabbed with a knife), explaining "in either case there will be no descendants for either father." Klauck 2008, 106, simply states, "she became paralyzed, and thus could no longer marry."

¹⁰ Bremmer 1998, Baden and Moss forthcoming, and Solevåg forthcoming are the exceptions to this trend in the secondary literature. Bremmer 1998 enables readers to see beyond the internal logic of the story by trying to understand the historical verisimilitude of the story of Peter's daughter. Bremmer suggests that the reference to Peter's daughter bathing with her mother is intended to stress the evil intent of the man's desire (baths in Asia Minor were haunted by voyeurs looking to pick up boys and girls, and later Christians objected to the baths [see Petronius 92.7–8; Martial 1.23, 11.63]). Bremmer also clarifies that ten years old was quite young, since Greek girls' menarche started later than this and most did not marry before fifteen. Similarly, Solevåg asks why Peter's daughter is "less of a risk to herself and the men" if she is still beautiful. She explains the situation through Constantine's "marriage by abduction" laws, arguing that under these conditions a virgin is "best protected by staying in her father's house." Although this explanation fits with the logic of the passage, the story of Peter's daughter likely predates Constantine (see Henning forthcoming).

¹¹ Though we must keep in mind also that, once paralyzed, she would be more likely to be confined within her household and thus protected by her father. As Solevåg forthcoming has argued, becoming paralyzed does not exclude rape, and "it seems more likely that paralysis would make the daughter more vulnerable to sexual assault."

it is that the story depicts her as becoming *invulnerable* to Ptolemy's sexual advances once she is paralyzed.¹² When read carefully, the story's perspective on paralysis is confounding in that it gives no explanation as to why or how paralysis is both repulsive and "expedient."¹³

This attitude toward paralysis, namely that it is somehow expedient, is unusual in the ancient world. When paralysis is mentioned in a healing context it is usually understood as an ailment that is in need of a cure; it is not in any way "expedient" or "profitable." For instance, epigraphic evidence from the Asclepieion at Epidaurus¹⁴ demonstrates that lameness or loss of limb function was a common problem that was remedied at these healing shrines.¹⁵ In general, the attitude toward paralysis, lameness, or loss of limb function that we find in the inscriptions indicates that these conditions were all in need of "cure," and they are cast in opposition to "health." Thus, the logic underwriting the story of Peter's daughter is either anomalous, or it reflects a more complex understanding of paralysis as it relates to wellness (ὕγιη).

This paper takes a wide view of ancient medical perspectives on paralysis in order to identify an interpretive lens that makes sense of the strange equation of paralysis and sexual inviolability in the Coptic fragment. The following investigation of medical sources will reveal an intricate set of causal relationships between excessive cooling, insufficient blood flow, paralysis, and infertility. I argue that this complex of medical ideas reflects a cultural understanding of the body that enables Peter to pronounce that his daughter's paralysis was "expedient." Specifically, I suggest that the daughter's paralysis is invoked in the Coptic fragment as a marker of infertility, thus rendering her unsuitable for marriage, in turn serving the ascetic ideals of the text.

¹² As Baden and Moss forthcoming, 195–96 point out, the language that is used to describe Peter's daughter's beauty and Ptolemaeus' desire should press readers to inquire more deeply about how paralysis is functioning in this story. They demonstrate that the rhetoric in this passage is dependent upon Peter's reversal of the ancient "economy of the body," in which "physical infertility and undesirability are prized more highly than youth, beauty, and fertility."

¹³ Although Solevåg's investigation (forthcoming) goes a long way toward explaining some of these logical inconsistencies, I hope to augment her explanation that "a disability of this kind would clearly render a virgin unmarriageable," by explaining why ancient readers might have equated paralysis with unmarriageability.

¹⁴ These inscriptions offer one of the few venues in antiquity in which sick persons are given a voice. That said, because the inscriptions follow a general structure, some scholars have classified them as folk-material or even propaganda designed to support the temple infrastructure. See LiDonnici 1995, 70–3; Wells 1998, 21. Whether or not their agency was compromised by the overarching aims of the temple and its priests, these stories still represent a predominant understanding of sickness as it was produced by the numerous Asclepieia throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

¹⁵ For instance, see Aleshire 1989. For examples, see LiDonnici, 1995, 111–13 [B15-B18]. In each of these narratives the lame or paralyzed person comes to the sanctuary, has a dream encounter with the god, and leaves "well" (ὕγιης).

By situating the condition of Peter's daughter in the context of ancient medicine, I do not assume that the author of the Coptic fragment or his audience members had access to the medical literature being surveyed here, though scholars have now reached some consensus that basic medical knowledge would have trickled down to even those without formal training.¹⁶ What is more, the diverging geographical and social origins of this material make it impossible to construct some grand general narrative of paralysis in antiquity. Nevertheless, the sources assembled here are part of a continuing conversation among ancient medical practitioners, reflecting observations on the human body that were not intended to be understood as discrete theories, but as refinements and contributions to the corpus of medical knowledge.¹⁷ Thus, many of the sources are not putting forth new ideas about paralysis or sexuality, but augmenting existing theories, adding to the growing body of ancient medical knowledge.

As we will see below, there are some basic conceptions of women's bodies that are shared between the Greek medical authors and Egyptian medical practitioners.¹⁸ Although Coptic medical references to women's bodies become less frequent than in the older papyri, in late antiquity we find more significant overlaps with the Greek medical literature, specifically with respect to gynecology.¹⁹ While these concepts are found in the context of theoretical discussion, they are reflexive of broader social structures and widely held ideological beliefs about paralysis and women's bodies.²⁰ Through the medical

¹⁶ For discussions regarding the extent to which the broader population would have understood ancient medical concepts see Ferngren 2009, 13–41; Flemming 2000, 50–70; Nutton 2004, 248–91.

¹⁷ As Ferngren 2009, 41 notes, the early Christian appropriation of ancient medical knowledge was “more easily accomplished because medicine enjoyed nearly universal recognition in the classical world as a humane art that transcended local cultures and particular ideologies.” See also the breadth of sources adduced by Nutton 2004, 1–17, esp. 11, who emphasizes that the Egyptian papyri need not be excluded from the evidence, but instead represent both the “range and diversity” of ancient medical practice.

¹⁸ On the shared concept that blood flow was correlated with fertility, see the discussion of older Egyptian gynecological papyrus below.

¹⁹ Compare the few references to ailments of the uterus in *WM* 6 and *CH* 24, *CH* 123–25; see Kolta 1991, 1579–80. For similarities between Coptic and Greek gynecological practices compare the lactagogues in the White Monastery medical codex (recipes to induce lactation; Crislip 2008, 26–68) to Galen's pharmacological prescriptions for generating seed and milk (*Gal. SMT* 6.A.22, 6.E.I.; Kuhn XI 821, 876).

²⁰ Shaw 1998, 64–78, demonstrates the interrelationship between ideology and scientific theory, arguing that the ancient medical text “can and does reflect ideology.” A particularly helpful example of this is her discussion of the “appetite of the womb,” found in both Plato *Tim.* 91c and in Sor. *Gyn.* 1.10, 37. Shaw later compares this concept of the female body to early Christian understandings of the female body with respect to fasting and chastity, demonstrating the ideological overlap between the medical literature and common understandings of the body.

literature we are able to access ancient cultural understandings of disability and gender that are not always articulated with clarity, but are instead implied in texts like the Coptic *Act of Peter*.²¹

Before we can discuss the medical literature, I must say a few words about terminology. The term paralysis (παράλυσις), which was used quite frequently in ancient literature, encompassed a broad category of mobility impairments involving the “disabling of the nerves”; these could range from the temporary effects of intoxication from strong wine to permanent or semi-permanent conditions.²² More particular terms such as ἀποπληξία and λιποθυμία referred to sudden collapse. Ἀποπληξία, for instance, is understood by Celsus as the condition in which either the body or mind are “stunned” or “stupefied,” thought to be related to stroke and treated through blood-letting.²³ Narcosis (*narkē*) and tremor (*tromos*) are both descriptive terms that indicate the symptoms associated with paralysis such as numbness, deadness of the limbs, and trembling. Although these terms vary with respect to the shade of meaning each confers, they are all used to refer to bodily paralysis.

“Cooling” as a Precondition for Paralysis

Although there is not a systematic understanding of the etiology of paralysis in the Hippocratic corpus, we do find a pattern of interpreting paralysis as a kind of degeneration, caused by an underlying problem with the body’s temperature. In this regard the understandings of paralysis are all part of the popular strand of ancient medical thinking that was concerned with balance or moderation of the humours, influenced by Aristotelian efforts to find the “mean” in all spheres of life.²⁴ Disease or disability occurs when the body

²¹ The following discussion will treat both Greek and Egyptian medical texts. Although we cannot be sure of the original context of the story of Peter’s daughter, we put forward the hypothesis that the fragment is composed in a context, like Alexandria for the following reasons: 1) As I argue in Henning forthcoming, the fragment is a χρεία elaboration, and would have been composed by someone with a basic rhetorical education/familiarity with παιδεία; 2) the pericope is preserved in a Coptic fragment but the story may have originated in Greek; and 3) the attitude toward marriage that we find in the fragment is similar to that of Clement of Alexandria (see, for example, Shaw 1998, 46–52, regarding the “convergence of philosophy and medicine” around understandings of the body in Clement of Alexandria and Galen). While none of this offers us conclusive evidence for the fragment’s *Sitz Im Leben*, the following discussion will begin to explore this hypothesis.

²² See παράλυσις in LSJ 1996. Vitruvius (8.3.4), for instance, classifies this ailment along with sore muscles and other temporary conditions that can be cured through the application of heat.

²³ Cels. *Med.* 3.26. In Greek the phrase ἀποπληξία μέρος is sometimes used synonymously with *paralysis*. See ἀποπληξία in LSJ 1996. For other discussions of apoplexy in Galen see *Symp. Diff.* 7.59; *Loc. Aff.* 8.208, 211; *Caus. Morb.* 7.13–14; *Temp.* 1.660–1; *Hipp. Aph.* 17B.626; *Caus. Symp.* 7.144 (cf. *Ps.-Gal. Int.* 14.737; Caelius Aurelianus, *MA* 3.48–60).

²⁴ As Martin 1995, argues, there were two main theories of the origin of illness in the ancient world, a theory of “invasion” and a theory of “imbalance.” Martin relies upon several anthro-

is too hot, too cold, too wet, or too dry, and the condition is reversed by restoring the body to the appropriate temperature and moisture levels.²⁵ For instance, Hippocrates *Epidemics* 1.12 associates head and neck pain with paralysis in elderly people whose “natural heat is failing.” These elderly persons are compared with women and children who also have head and neck pain, but do not present the same symptoms (paralysis, raving, or blindness) because they do not have the same deficiency of their “natural heat.”²⁶ Numbness, deadness of the limbs, and trembling were associated with being chilled to the point of shivering or freezing.²⁷

Galen corroborates the connection between body temperature and paralysis, and demonstrates that this link is not only known to medical practitioners, but is also an underlying assumption in a popular story about Alexander the Great. In his work *On Antecedent Causes* (*De causis procatartictis*), Galen observes the connection between cold bodies and paralysis, noting that some people who are exposed to extreme cold develop “incapacity (*apoplecticus/ἀπόπληκτος*), or loss of sensation (*torposus/ναρκώδης*), tremors, or convulsions, just as Alexander did after bathing unwisely in the river Cydnus.”²⁸ Galen mentions the story of Alexander the Great as a well-known example of the connection between excessive cooling and paralysis, but he does so in

polological studies of disease most notably Lock 1980. Likewise, Nutton 2004, 77, notes that this concept of imbalance is the general basis for Hippocratic understanding of disease as “the result of something wrong with the body’s system of fluids and conduits.”

²⁵ See, for instance, Gal. *San. Tu.* 1.3 (trans. Green, 1951). While much post-Aristotelian medical literature is focused on this kind of bodily “mean,” the specific type of balance to be achieved is dependent upon the author’s theoretical predilections or the task at hand. In some cases (as in Hp. *Nat. Hom.* 42–43: 6. 38–40) the emphasis is on balancing the four humours themselves (bile, black bile, blood, phlegm), whereas Galen’s depiction of the healthy body (*San. Tu.* 1.3) imagines an overall balance of the four qualities: heat, cold, wet, dry. For succinct discussion of the role of Aristotle on ancient medical thinking see Nutton 2004, 115–27.

²⁶ As we will discuss in more detail below, there is also a whole sphere of medical thinking in which gender is overlaid upon notions of bodily balance, arguing that women are colder than men. See, for instance, Arist. *GA* 727B.18 and 765B.8; and Gal. *UP* 14.6. Within the Hippocratic corpus, however, this is not necessarily the prevailing assumption. In Hp. *Mul.* 1.1, women’s blood is presumed to be hotter than men’s, and in *Mul.* 2.3 we learn that the emphasis on fluxes and hot and cold could be applied unchanged to male bodies.

²⁷ See, for instance, Plato *Tim.* 62b and Hippocrates *VM* 22. Galen links narcosis and tremor to paralysis, involving loss of motor-control (*νάρκη/torposus*): *Caus. Symp.* 7.108–11, 144, 152; *Hipp. Aph.* 17B.660; (*τρόμος/tremulentus*) *Trem. Palp.* 7.618, 638–39; *Loc. Aff.* 8.169; *Hipp. Aph.* 17B.735–36, 785; *Hipp. Prorr.* 16. 651; *Ars Med.* 1.388.

²⁸ Gal. *CP* 8.109–111. See Hankinson 1998. The story about Alexander the Great is recounted in Arr. *Anab.* 2.4 7–11, in which he was cured by Philip the Acarnanian, after other doctors refused to treat him (cf. Plutarch *V. Alex.* 19.2–5, 674E–75B). Galen’s treatise is only extant as a Latin translation from the fourteenth century, but a Greek back-translation was provided by Bardong 1937 in the earliest modern edition of the text. Thus, here I have supplied the Latin terms, followed by their likely Greek antecedents in the original text.

order to argue that conditional inferences like these are faulty. When exposed to cold temperatures, some persons develop a fever, some paralysis, and this Galen argues, “suffices to show that the conditional inference is not sound.”²⁹ Galen appears to be arguing for caution in determining causality precisely because of the difficulty ancient persons had in resisting the urge to posit a causal link that offers a tidy explanation for a particular ailment.³⁰ Yet even as Galen strains to make this point, by upholding the tendency to presume that excessive cooling causes paralysis as his example, he provides further evidence that this was indeed a common understanding of paralysis at this time. The Hippocratic link between paralysis and cooling that we discussed above, as well as an example from Vitruvius provide supporting evidence that the link between excessive cold and paralysis existed prior to Galen’s time. Vitruvius describes the use of the natural hot springs as a means of treatment for paralysis, arguing that they “counteract the chill by the opposite effect of their heat, and thus equably restoring the limbs to their former condition.”³¹

On its own, the assumption that paralysis results from an imbalance in the body’s temperature does not elucidate how Peter’s daughter’s paralysis would have been “expedient” in the face of marriage by abduction. The logic begins to become clear, however, when we investigate the medical literature that connects paralysis, temperature, and infertility. In the ancient imagination excessive cooling is not only linked to paralysis, but is also connected to gender difference, improper blood flow, and reproductive dysfunction. Examples in the section that follows demonstrate that a range of issues related to sexuality derive from cold blood or poor blood flow, and that any number of these issues may have been in the minds of readers who encountered the story of Peter’s daughter.

Gender Difference, Body Temperature, and Blood Flow

The female body in general was thought to be cooler than the male body, and to contain more blood. Aristotle describes a hierarchy of natural beings in which this relative coolness of the female body is a deficiency (relative to

²⁹ Gal. *CP* 8.109–11.

³⁰ Later in *CP* 15. 188, Galen argues even more forcefully that causality must be held at bay, no matter the ailment in question. For further discussion of paralysis, phrenitis, and lethargy see *Ps.-Gal. Def. Med.* 19.412–15. As Flemming 2000, 346–49 notes, Galen’s solution to the problem of causality in *Gal. MMG* is to take into account the complexity of each therapeutic situation, ordering treatments in terms of the relative seriousness of the symptoms and considering the associations between different organs.

³¹ Vitruvius 8.3.4: *aluminosi aut, cum dissoluta membra corporum paralysi aut tali qua vi morbi receperunt, fovendo per patentes venas refrigerationem contraria caloris vi reficiunt, et hoc continenter restituunt antiquam membrorum conversationem.*

the heat and the perfection of the male body), and women exist as imperfect or mutilated males.³² According to Aristotle, the temperature differences between the male and female body are necessary for reproduction.³³ The greater heat of the male body is required to decoct sperm, which is essentially cooked down from the nutritive elements in the blood. Women's bodies, by contrast, are only warm enough to cook the nutrients to menstrual blood or milk, and are thus unable to produce any seed or essence by virtue of their relative frigidity. Galen reiterates this logic in his explanation of female anatomy, explaining that female reproductive organs are unable to "peep out" when they are formed because of a "weakness in the heat."³⁴ Within the medical literature this understanding of the female body as cooler than the male body was extended to nearly every diagnosis of and therapy recommended for women.³⁵ Moreover, they were prone to all manner of diseases that were caused by this imbalance of temperature and moisture, such as improper monthly blood flow, excessive cooling, and infertility.³⁶ For Galen, the coolness of the female body is not understood as a simple anatomical fact, but as a root cause of illness.³⁷ Thus, for Galen the expulsion of excess fluid through menses is a kind of preventative health measure that wards off illness by keeping the already cold female body from getting cooler.³⁸

³² See Arist. *GA* 728.A17, 767.B7, 775.A15; Arist. *HA* 588.B4–589.A9; Arist. *Met.* 1058.A29; Arist. *PA* 681.A12–28. As noted above, there is one notable exception to this line of thinking within the Hippocratic corpus in Hp. *Mul.* 1.1, where women's blood is presumed to be hotter than men's.

³³ Arist. *GA* 721.A30–730.B31.

³⁴ Gal. *UP* 14.6–7.

³⁵ For instance, women's thermal deficit was thought to be the reason why they could not concoct and evacuate their nutrients efficiently; instead they accumulated and stored their nutrients as cold and wet menstrual fluid, which had to be expelled once a month. Hp. *Gland.* 16.8.572.13; Hp. *Mul.* 1.1.8.12.6–21. Arist. *GA* 726B.31–727A.19. See Dean-Jones 1994, 55–65.

³⁶ As a result, many of the medical texts that discuss the disease and treatment of the female body focus on menstruation and blood flow. With few exceptions, to the ancient medical practitioner a healthy female body is "well purged" and child bearing. Hanson 1990, 318, argues that this is Hippocrates' "constant refrain": "if she becomes pregnant she is healthy." Galen emphasizes the importance of perfect menstrual purging on several occasions, including *Loc. Aff.* 5.7 and *Ven. Sect. Er.* 5. Flemming 2000, 339 summarizes that for Galen, "the menstrually regular female is in a stronger position in respect to disease than the ordinarily perfect male." Galen's thinking, however, is exceptional in that he also acknowledges the danger that pregnancy can pose to the health of the female body (Hp. *Epid.* 3.3.77). On the centrality of childbearing and the menstrual purge to both Hippocrates and Galen see Dean-Jones 1994, 136–46 and Flemming 2000, 331–43.

³⁷ See, for example, Gal. *Loc. Aff.* 6.5, in which he describes the halt of respiration among widows, nausea, shivering, headaches, and fever, all as symptoms that are directly related to irregular menstruation and excessive cooling.

³⁸ While this positive role of menstruation is emphasized in Galen and the Hippocratic corpus, Aristotle and Soranus acknowledge that for some women menses can be a drain on their strength. See Arist. *GA* 727A.22–5 and Sor. *Gyn.* 1.6.29.

Galen further explains that the female body is not only naturally “cooler” than the male body, but it is also highly dependent upon proper blood flow between the reproductive organs in order to maintain proper reproductive functioning and overall health. In his explanation of the female reproductive system in *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, Galen argues that the breasts are directly connected to the uterus through blood vessels and he emphasizes the importance of easy blood flow for the proper functioning of the female reproductive system:

For the parts [the uteri and breasts] that I mentioned earlier are the only ones needing to be connected by vessels, in order that whenever an embryo is being formed and is growing in the uteri, it alone may be flooded with nutriment from both parts by the common veins, and in order that when a child has been born, all the nutriment may in turn flow to the breasts. This is the reason why the female cannot menstruate properly and give suck at the same time; for one part is always dried up when the blood turns toward the other.³⁹

According to Galen, the female reproductive system is a closed system connected by blood vessels, and any changes or abnormalities can be explained as a kind of plumbing problem within this system. That is, without proper blood flow, the female reproductive system does not work.

What is more, the exchange of blood and nutriment through these vessels is critical, not only for the health of the child, but for the health of the child-bearing woman as well. Elsewhere, Galen explains that this closed system of blood flow within the female body can be precarious and bring harm to the woman if the blood does not flow through the system properly.⁴⁰ During pregnancy the “embryo attracts the most useful blood to itself, as nourishment,” and the “poorer remainder” is “itself an excess” but can also produce evil humours), which unless purged can do great harm to the woman. Thus, in Galen’s estimation the cold female body is in a dangerous position: although it is naturally predisposed to possess cold blood and a slow pulse, it requires the flow of blood to function properly to ensure proper nutrition to the fetus and to avoid disease and even death.⁴¹

While Galen provides a detailed description of the mechanics of the female circulatory system, the general connection between blood flow and reproductive capacity appears in much older texts. For example, in an Egyptian gynecological papyrus (from around 1800 B.C.E.) we find references to practitioners looking for

³⁹ Gal. *UP* 14.8 (trans. May 1968).

⁴⁰ Gal. *Hipp. Epid.* 3.3.77.

⁴¹ Galen argues that female lassitude and innate lack of heat are to blame for a pulsative faculty that is half the strength of a man’s *Caus. Puls.* 3.2; 9.

dilated veins on women's breasts as sign of fertility or early pregnancy: "You rise early in the morning to examine her. [If] you find her blood vessels (*metu*) fresh and good, none being collapsed (lit. sunken), bearing children will be happy (or satisfactory, *hetep*)."⁴² Hippocrates describes a similar examination of the breasts and notes that regression or laxity is a precursor to miscarriage.⁴³ Thus, even in these much earlier sources we find a widespread understanding in both Greek and Egyptian literature that dilated veins are not only indicative of increased blood flow to the breasts, but also the capability to bear a child successfully, suggesting that by the time of the composition of the Coptic fragment there was likely a widely accepted link between temperature, blood flow, and fertility.

Blood Flow, Sexual Dysfunction, and Paralysis

Proper blood flow is not only a sign of reproductive fitness, but is essential for optimal functioning of the sexual organs. Galen (interpreting Hippocrates) believed that the sexual organs on the right side of the body were stronger and thus functioned better (producing male children) because they are "nourished differently" as a result of their privileged place in line with the liver, receiving blood that is both warmer and purer.⁴⁴ The strength of the reproductive organs is not only dependent upon blood flow, but upon blood that is warm and pure. On the contrary, lack of proper blood flow, or cold blood that is "full of residues" leads to sexual dysfunction, infertility, and miscarriage. Galen continues, stating that since the organs on the right side of the body utilize the purer and hotter blood, the "right uterus" produces male fetuses and the "left uterus," females. According to Galen's understanding cold and impure blood will in the best-case scenario lead to a female child and in the worst cases, sexual dysfunction or infertility.⁴⁵ Outside of the medical corpus we find a similar connection between paralysis and unsuitability for sexual contact and reproduction. In *Satyricon* 129, Petronius describes how his protagonist loses strength and firmness in a romantic entanglement with Circe, and Circe warns Encolpius in a letter that he should beware of paralysis.⁴⁶ The

⁴² *Kabun* 26 in Nunn 1996, 192. "Happy/Satisfactory" here is likely a way of saying that the woman will easily become pregnant.

⁴³ Hp. *Aph.* 5.37, 5.53. As Nunn 1996, 192 notes, this is one of the few overlaps between Greek and Egyptian medicine.

⁴⁴ Gal. *UP* 14.7. The precise location of this idea in the Hippocratic corpus is difficult to find. May 1968, 636 suggests that the idea that parts which are in line with one another benefit from one another is approximated in *De victus ratione* 1.6–7.

⁴⁵ Gal. *UP* 14.7.

⁴⁶ This example suggests that paralysis was understood to accompany sexual dysfunction in male bodies as well as female ones. I am grateful to Candida R. Moss for drawing my attention to this reference, and its significance for this project.

same excessive cooling that could lead to paralysis could also restrict the flow of blood, in turn compromising the woman's reproductive capacity. Cooling is thus a common source of both paralysis and reproductive dysfunction.

In his treatise *Venesection against Erasistratus*, Galen makes this apparent connection between paralysis and infertility more explicit. Here Galen correlates perfect menstruation with immunity to serious illnesses, including ἀποπληξία.⁴⁷ According to Galen the coolness of the female body makes it susceptible to the accumulation of blood and the sudden loss of limb function that is caused by this excess blood. He explains earlier in this text that menstruation is the natural means of purging the surfeit of blood that is generated in female bodies, both that which is caused by their natural coldness, and that which is generated because they stay out of the sun and do not work very hard.⁴⁸ In the context of this conception of the female body, he offers his assertion that sudden loss of limb function is a result of improper menstruation or improper blood flow, explaining that paralysis occurs in cold female bodies that are bearing the burden of accumulated blood.⁴⁹ Ostensibly, the woman who is not “well-purged” is not only susceptible to the diseases in Galen's list, but also to reproductive difficulties. By the same token, paralysis was a visible symptom of a set of internal problems with the female reproductive system.⁵⁰ In short, the naturally cold female body was always at risk of becoming colder, and accumulating blood, which could lead to both paralysis and womb dysfunction.

Paralysis in the Story of Peter's Daughter

Within the ancient imagination there were grounds for connecting paralysis to any of a number of other bodily conditions: excessive cooling, improper blood flow, reproductive dysfunction, less than optimal reproductive function, and sexual dysfunction. The above survey has depicted a world in which both paralysis and reproductive dysfunction were the result of cold bodies

⁴⁷ Gal. *Ven. Sect. Er.* 5 (11.165–6 in Kühn 1821–3). Galen also lists ποδάγρα, ἄρθριτις, πλευρίτις, περιπνεθμονία, ἐπιληψία, ἄπνοια, φρένιτις, λήθαργος, σπασμός, τρόμος, τετανός, μανία, and κεφαλαία.

⁴⁸ Gal. *Ven. Sect. Er.* 5 (11.164–65 in Kühn 1821–3). In the cases of women who are not “well-purged” he recommends phlebotomy.

⁴⁹ In Galen's discussion of the usefulness of the legs he observes that this is why cold-blooded animals are sluggish, namely because they do not have sufficient blood flow to make limbs work. Gal. *UP* 3.1.

⁵⁰ See Gal. *MMG* I.15 (11.47–50 in Kühn 1821–23), in which Galen describes the loss of limb control and womb dysfunction as interrelated symptoms of an underlying problem. In this example, sudden collapse is understood to be the presenting symptom of any of a number of other problems within the female reproductive system.

and their concomitant poor blood flow. In particular, the female body was particularly vulnerable to both of these conditions by virtue of its naturally cooler condition, and the dependence of the female reproductive system upon blood flow. Whether or not the author (or audience) of the Coptic fragment had these views on paralysis in mind, the medical discussions assembled here offer a plausible background that makes sense out of Peter's seemingly illogical claims that his daughter's paralysis was "expedient" for her, himself, and "many other souls." As in other ancient narratives of paralysis, the Coptic fragment reflects the basic ideologies about the body that are theorized in the medical literature in a more sophisticated way.⁵¹

In the story of Peter's daughter we are told that her unwanted suitor, Ptolemy, wishes to marry her, and that when she is paralyzed his servants carry her away and leave her outside his doorstep. For the audience of our text, paralysis seems to communicate something that it does not today, leading readers to interpret the paralyzed body of Peter's daughter as excessively cold, and consequently having poor circulation. In this reading of the story, Ptolemy would have understood her paralysis as a sign of her detrimentally cold body and its reproductive capacity: might she be infertile? Or have difficulty nursing? Or die immediately after childbirth from an inability to purge bad blood? Any of these problems would have made Peter's daughter an undesirable wife. We must also recall that Peter's daughter was reported to have been paralyzed on "one side," which also could have had implications with respect to her procreative capabilities.⁵² To be paralyzed on the right side, for example, would mean that she could only produce female children. Still more, Peter's daughter's paralysis (presumably related to improper blood flow) could have signaled that her sexual function would have been compromised. Thus, if the medical literature reflects a broader ancient cultural understanding of paralyzed female bodies as dysfunctional, then the author of the Coptic fragment could expect his readers to infer that Peter's daughter's paralysis was evidence of any number of problems, from preventing reproduction to precluding sexual activity altogether.

Therefore, when we read the Coptic fragment in light of the medical literature a new interpretive possibility emerges for the story of Peter's daughter.

⁵¹ For examples of other narratives that reflect this basic knowledge about blood flow, paralysis, and sexuality, see the stories of Alexander the Great, and Encolpius and Circe in n. 25 and n. 40 above.

⁵² Molanari 2000, 31–34, notes that "one-sided" paralysis was not such a striking thing (Molanari is countering those who would use this to connect the fragment with the *Actus Vercellenses* story of Rufina), see Gal. *Loc. Aff.* 3.14. Again, Molanari's focus on the literary relationship between the texts precludes an examination of the texts as sources for ancient Christian attitudes toward disability and sexuality. Even if one-sided paralysis is common place it still signals distinct ideas about the body.

In this reading of the text Ptolemy does not primarily reject Peter's daughter because she is paralyzed, but because of the secondary effects of her paralysis, which render her unable to produce male children or any children at all. Further, in this interpretation, the text does not equate paralysis and sexual inviolability, but instead uses paralysis as a means of evading the social institution of marriage, which takes as its chief end reproduction. Since the Ptolemy story is offered by Peter as a way of explaining why her paralysis persists, we could interpret his daughter's paralysis and subsequent infertility as a protection against unwanted marriages. Peter's daughter's paralysis not only allows her to eschew marriage to Ptolemy, but also protects her from doing "harm to many souls," presumably other suitors.⁵³

This reading of the Coptic fragment seems to be at home with the ascetic thought of early Christians, and uses common medical understandings of the body to justify opposition to marriage, child bearing, and child rearing.⁵⁴ In this regard, the story of Peter's daughter leverages prevalent medical theory against its intention to help diagnose reproductive and sexual dysfunction so that people could bear children. In his own similar views on marriage, Clement of Alexandria also utilizes medicalized understandings of the body for counter-cultural ends. Although he does not reject marriage entirely, Clement does think that marriage is only to be valued in specific contexts, namely for the procreation of children.⁵⁵ In this discussion, Clement describes women as constant targets of the male gaze, suggesting that even married women should avoid leaving the house.⁵⁶ The Coptic fragment seems to fit well within this view of the beautiful woman's precarious situation, in which even marriage cannot protect her from potential harm, and only physical avoidance of the male gaze and prayer can act as protection.⁵⁷ Within this thought world the Coptic fragment demonstrates Peter's power and wisdom, "profitably" removing his

⁵³ BG 8502.4, 131.

⁵⁴ As Thomas 2003, 20, notes, Schmidt 1903 and Brashler and Parrott 1979, suggested that the sexual ethics of the Coptic fragment cohere with the "enkratite ideals of fourth-century Gnostic literature" (based largely upon the fact that it was found in a Coptic codex with texts from Nag Hammadi). There are well noted historical problems with associating the enkratite ideal specifically with Gnosticism (Brakke 1995, 19), and with presenting Gnostic literature as a homogenous corpus affiliated with a single group (Brakke 2010.) Since Peter is clearly married in this text, the point does not seem to be a total renunciation of marriage.

⁵⁵ Clem. Al. *Strom.* 2.23. See Shaw 1998, for a discussion of the overlap between Clement and Galen's understandings of the body, especially with respect to sexuality and ascetic practice.

⁵⁶ Clem. Al. *Strom.* 2.23 Clement says that married women should protect themselves from accusations of adultery (and subsequent divorce) by devoting themselves to prayer, and avoiding excessive adornment, departures from the house, and being seen by men that are not related to them. In Clement's teaching, even in cases where marriage is appropriate, a beautiful wife is at risk of being accused of adultery and being "turned out."

⁵⁷ As BG8502.4 implies, her paralysis has confined her to Peter's home.

beautiful daughter from all potential suitors through a condition that would render her infertile, and thus, for someone like Clement, unmarriageable.⁵⁸

By late antiquity, when the Coptic fragment comes to be associated with the *Acts of Peter*, the theme of lameness as a means of sexual control becomes more explicit.⁵⁹ Not only is Peter able to control his beautiful daughter's sexuality by inflicting her with paralysis, but Paul's apostolic power to "unheal" is also used to control the sexuality of Rufina (*Acts Pet.* 2) and Peter "heroically" mutilates the dancing Ethiopian woman in Marcellus's dream (*Acts of Pet.* 22).⁶⁰ As Solevåg has noted, both of these stories treat disability as a punishment, unlike the story in the Coptic fragment, in which the daughter's paralysis is described as "beneficial."⁶¹ In its late antique context, then, the story of Peter's daughter reflects the tension between sickness as a signifier of divine punishment and the experience of illness as "a mode of asceticism in and of itself."⁶² We find a similar tension at play in the story of the Alexandrian ascetic Syncretica, in which the "decay of her beautiful body," like Peter's daughter's paralysis, is efficacious for others, her wounds curing their souls.⁶³ In contrast to the paralysis that is foisted upon Peter's voiceless daughter, however, the asceticism of Syncretica, or even the chastity stories of the

⁵⁸ Like Clement of Alexandria, the fragment presents marriage as a viable option for some, like Peter, but chastity as the safest course for a beautiful virgin. For discussion of Peter (and others including Paul and Philip) as an apostolic example in defense of marriage see Clem. Al. *Strom.* 3.27. See Brakke 1995, 63, 186, for further discussion regarding the development of ancient Christian attitudes toward sex and marriage in Alexandria. While childrearing (and with it marriage) takes precedence over female chastity for Clement, in Athanasius we find Christian virgins who renounce sex early in life affording them "leisure for literary and philosophical pursuits" (63). This shift may explain the difference between the Coptic fragment's compulsory chastity as "protection" and the agency that is exhibited by the women who choose an ascetic life in *Acts Pet.* 33–41.

⁵⁹ This interpretation of the Coptic fragment also provides further evidence that Egyptians and Greeks shared common medical views of the body, particularly with regard to gynecology.

⁶⁰ In the case of Rufina, who fails to repent for her sin of adultery, paralysis is a punishment for sexual sin. The dancing Ethiopian woman is a demon, who is slain by the apostle as a metaphorical demonstration of the apostle's power over a female demon whose description evokes images of sexual vice. See Solevåg forthcoming, for a discussion of the way that "Ethiopian" was used in the ancient world to connote "sexual vice" and the suggestion that her "dancing" "in rags" may imply a context of slavery and prostitution. See also *Acts Pet.* 32, in which Simon Magus is disabled as a demonstration of apostolic power, not over female sexuality, but over an inferior apostolic opponent.

⁶¹ Although we have tried to make sense out of the logic behind Peter's statement that this is somehow beneficial for his daughter, any "benefit" for her is embedded in ancient assumptions about gender and disability. As I argue in Henning forthcoming, here the clearest benefit is for Peter, in the demonstration of apostolic power and the spiritual edification of others, like Ptolemy.

⁶² See Crislip 2013, 88–96, 168 who argues that Basil the Great depicts the experience of illness as a "mode of asceticism in and of itself, with the potential for self-mastery that surpasses traditional modes of spiritual exercise."

⁶³ *The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncretica* was composed in the Alexandria in the fifth century and falsely attributed to Athanasius (*V. Syn.* 104–13). The text is in *PG* 28:1487–1558, and a translation is available in Castelli 1990. Brakke 2006, 188–93 describes

Acts of Peter, belong to a later conception of chastity that is coupled with autonomy and power.⁶⁴

In the Coptic fragment that is associated with the *Acts of Peter* we find an early Christian concept of marriage that is utterly dependent upon reproductive and sexual capacity. In this story, however, that depiction of marriage seems to be constructed only to be quickly dismissed as Peter celebrates his daughter's paralysis as a means of evasion of an unwanted marriage (as well as the possibility of other marriages). Counter to the cultural cues we have found in the medical literature, which seem poised to uphold the ideal of the body well-suited for conception, in Coptic fragment the paralyzed body is cast as the preferred bodily condition, precisely because of its reproductive inabilities, the very thing the medical authors aimed to mitigate.

University of Dayton
mhenning2@udayton.edu

Synecletica's death as a "spectacle of virtue" as her beautiful body is destroyed by demon-inflicted lung cancer and a throat infection.

⁶⁴ While the Coptic fragment celebrates the intervention of the powerful apostle that saves Peter's daughter, in the *Acts Pet.* 33–41 Agrippa's concubines and Albinus's wife choose chastity "autonomously," creating social space for themselves, but also incurring severe consequences including rape and the death of Peter (See Burrus 1987, 113–18). Crislip 2013, 101 notes that although she has not chosen to be sick, Synecletica does exhibit agency by refusing medical treatment until the end of her life, choosing "a particular way to be ill."