Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies, Vol. 24.1, 3-34

ANXIOUS VIGILANCE: HERESY AND RITUAL POLLUTION IN JOHN OF TELLA AND SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH

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ABSTRACT

Anti-Chalcedonian Christians like John of Tella, Severus of Antioch, Philoxenos of Mabbug, and John Rufus were concerned about orthodox Christians mingling with heretics. This essay argues that John of Tella combined narratives of heresy with those of bodily purity and pollution, such as those related to menstruation, to frame heretics as dangerous to orthodox Christians not only in their beliefs that could lure an unsuspecting Christian to accept heretical views, but in their very bodies whose proximity brought the threat of contamination. John integrated expectations of bodily purity and doctrinal orthodoxy in ways that suggested that heresy could physically contaminate, while Severus tried to calm his congregants' fears about the same. The spread of COVID-19 and the global responses to it have heightened our awareness of the dynamics of fear and anxiety that can be produced by threats of physical contamination. The global pandemic in 2020 thus helps to clarify the power that the rhetoric of these sixth-century anti-Chalcedonian texts had to confront the spread of what John of Tella

> *implied was the dangerous physical pollution of Christian heresy.*

The spread of COVID-19 and the global responses to it have heightened our awareness of some of the dynamics of fear and anxiety produced by threats of physical contamination. As we learn new habits of social distancing, and experience the anxiety and vigilance produced by the potentially fatal spread of an unseen contagion, we are better able to imagine some of the social dynamics that early Christian rhetoric around heresy and ritual pollution, such as in relation to menstruating bodies, might have hoped to produce. Sixth-century anti-Chalcedonian leaders claimed that heresy threatened Christians' eternal salvation and warned that it was often difficult for the untrained eye to distinguish a heretic from an orthodox Christian.[1] John of Tella combined this argument with familiar

[1] In this essay I use "anti-Chalcedonian" to refer to what some scholars call Miaphysite (or, earlier, Monophysite) or sometimes non-Chalcedonian Christianity. No terminology is without complications, but this term accurately highlights the individuals' hostile relation to the Council of Chalcedon (451). Volker Menze recommends the term "non-Chalcedonian" in his study of this period, concerned that "anti-Chalcedonian" retains too much emphasis on doctrinal issues for his study, which "deals mainly with historical and not Christological issues," but the focus on doctrinal issues is appropriate in this present essay: Volker Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2. Furthermore, "non-Chalcedonian" could also describe the churches in Persia that became the Church of the East, which are not intended here. Cornelia Horn addresses similar concerns and likewise prefers "anti-Chalcedonian": Cornelia Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 8-9. On the terminology used for one's adversaries more generally, see Muriel Debié "Désigner l'adversaire: La guerre des noms dans les controverses," in *Les controverses religieuses en syriaque*, ed. Flavia Ruani, 307-48 (Paris: Geuthner, 2016). On the terminology for the Christians at the center of this project, see Fergus Millar, "The Evolution of

concepts of purity and pollution in order to suggest that physical proximity to heresy could pose a risk of contamination. In contrast, John's colleague Severus of Antioch downplayed the danger that heresy posed as a form of pollution in an effort to calm the fears of his congregants. As a novel Coronavirus spreads through our world, health officials warn us about this sometimes invisible contagion, and the safety precautions that should be taken at all times because so many people who have the virus are asymptomatic. We are warned to keep our distance from others to protect ourselves and the small communities with whom we interact most closely. The global pandemic in 2020 thus helps to clarify the power that the rhetoric of these sixth-century anti-Chalcedonian texts had to confront the spread of what John of Tella implied was the dangerous physical pollution of Christian heresy.

John of Tella (Yuḥanon bar Qursus) was fundamental to the development of the West Syrian church, but his story is much less well known outside of that tradition.[2] John was born in 482 in Callinicus (Raqqa, Syria) in the Roman province of Osrhoene, and knew both Syriac and Greek.[3] In 507 when he was twenty-five years old, John joined a monastery near his hometown where he stayed until he was ordained as the bishop of Tella (near modern Aleppo) in 519 by the famous seventy-year old

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the Syrian Orthodox Church in the Pre-Islamic Period: From Greek to Syriac?" *JECS* 21.1 (2013): 43-92.

[2] Volker Menze and Kutlu Akalin, *John of Tella's Profession of Faith: The Legacy of a Sixth-Century Syrian Orthodox Bishop* (Gorgias Press, 2009), 1. Joseph Ghanem traced a history of the modern western study of John of Tella through 1970, and offered a historical background for John's life: Joseph R. Ghanem, "The Biography of John of Tella (d. AD 537) by Elias, Translated from the Syriac with a Historical Introduction and Historical and Linguistic Commentaries." PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1970, esp. 1-39.

[3] Ghanem, "The Biography of John of Tella," 13.

scholar and poet Jacob of Serugh (d. 521) and his colleagues.[4] John briefly lived in residence as bishop of Tella from 519-521/2 but then he was sent into exile under the emperor Justin I.[5] It was in exile, though, that John solidified his place in history with the astonishing number of ordinations he performed, bringing countless lay people and monks into the diaconate and the priesthood in an effort to help the anti-Chalcedonian church not only survive but flourish.[6] Volker Menze and Kutlu Akalin outline "John's role in establishing the first independent non-Chalcedonian ecclesiastical hierarchy," a goal for which by all accounts he worked tirelessly.[7] John spent his exile primarily in the Sasanian Empire's western borderland region, including near modern-day Mardin, Turkey. Early in 537, however, Roman leaders arranged for John's capture in the mountains of Persia, and he was brought as a prisoner to Antioch, which was under the control of the staunchly Chalcedonian bishop Ephraim, whom anti-Chalcedonian writers like John of Ephesus describe as a vicious persecutor.[8] John of Tella died in 538 in his mid-fifties while in Ephraim's custody in Antioch. Warning of the danger that physical proximity to heretics or other material objects associated with heresy posed to orthodox Christians helped John in his relentless efforts to expand and preserve the anti-Chalcedonian community during his itinerant exile.

Severus of Antioch, on the other hand, has remained better known. A Greek-speaker born in the mid-460s in Sozopolis in the region of Pisidia, in western modern Turkey, he was

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[4] Regarding his title, see Menze and Akalin, *John of Tella's Profession of* Faith, 7-8. See also Volker Menze, "The *Regula ad Diaconos*: John of Tella, his Eucharistic Ecclesiology and the Establishment of an Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in Exile," *Oriens Christianus* 90 (2006): 46-8.

[5] Menze and Akalin, *John of Tella's Profession of Faith*, 5.

[6] Yonatan Moss, *Incorruptible Bodies: Christology, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 62.

[7] Menze and Akalin, *John of Tella's Profession of Faith*, 7-8.

[8] See, for example, John of Ephesus, *Lives*, PO 17.21; 18.608; 17.293-4; cf., 17.125.

educated at some of the best schools in the Roman Empire, first in Alexandria and then in the famous law school in Berytus (Beirut).[9] According to his hagiographers, Severus was baptized in 488 at the church of St. Leontius in Tripolis (Tripoli, Lebanon) and committed himself to a life of asceticism as Ambrose, Augustine, and many other elite Romans also did. Soon after this, a side-trip to Peter the Iberian's monastery near Gaza during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem changed Severus's plans to practice law, and he spent the next twenty years as an ascetic in southern Palestine where he was also ordained as a priest.[10] In 508, Severus began a new and more public and politically involved phase of his life when he led a large delegation of monks to Constantinople. In 512 the emperor Anastasius deposed Flavian II from the see of Antioch, thanks in large part to the maneuverings of Philoxenos of Mabbug, and appointed Severus as the city's new bishop. Severus was forced into exile in 518 upon Justin I's accession to the throne, and lived most of the rest of his episcopacy in Egypt until he died in 538, within days of John of Tella's death in Severus's episcopal home of

[9] On Severus's life and works, see, for example, Pauline Allen and C.T.R. Hayward, *Severus of Antioch* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3-55; John D'Alton and Youhanna Youssef, eds., *Severus of Antioch: His Life and Times* (Boston: Brill, 2016); Sebastian Brock and Brian Fitzgerald, *Two Early Lives of Severos, Patriarch of Antioch* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 1-29; Moss, *Incorruptible Bodies*; Iaian Torrance, *Christology after Chalcedon: Severus of Antioch and Sergius the Monophysite* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1988), 3-25; Lucas Van Rompay, "Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (512-538), in the Greek, Syriac, and Coptic Traditions," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 8 (2008): 3-22; René Roux, *L'Exégèse Biblique dans les Homélies Cathédrales de Sévère d'Antioche*, Studia Ephemerides Augustinianum 84 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2002), 5-19; and Aryeh Kofsky, "Severus of Antioch and Christological Politics in the Early Sixth Century," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 57 (2007): 43-57.

[10] Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Monastic School of Gaza* (Boston: Brill, 2006), 33.

Antioch.[11] Severus's influence in the controversies over the definition of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy was far-reaching, particularly in the West Syrian tradition of Syrian Orthodoxy. Severus differed from John of Tella, though, in his insistence that anti-Chalcedonian orthodoxy remained a universal church, and as a result Severus was sometimes more flexible and willing to compromise than John.[12] This, along with his context in residence as bishop of Antioch, could explain Severus's efforts to calm rather than stoke his audience's fears about heresy's ability to pollute the liturgy and congregation.

Anti-Chalcedonian leaders like Philoxenos of Mabbug (d. 523), John Rufus (fl. 500-18), Severus, and John of Tella all expressed concern about anti-Chalcedonian Christians mingling with heretics, and as late antique Christians they inherited a variety of ways to think about retaining the spiritual purity and health of their community. New Testament comments attributed to Paul offered one relevant discourse, such as of their community as a body in which the spiritual health of one part affected the whole.[13] Paul asked, "Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?"[14] When Paul taught his audience "not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one,"[15] he established a method of defining and defending community boundaries that prioritized associating only with those who were spiritually healthy, which anti-Chalcedonian leaders insisted did not include Chalcedonian heretics or "Nestorian" Persian Christians. Like

[11] On Severus's exile, see Allen and Hayward, *Severus of Antioch*, 25-30.

[12] On Severus' willingness to compromise in order to preserve his coherence within imperial orthodoxy, see Moss, *Incorruptible* Bodies, 1-6, 44-74.

[13] 1 Cor 5-6. See also 1 Cor 6.15-16. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

[14] 1 Cor 5.6.

[15] 1 Cor 5.11.

Paul, later Christians also inherited scriptural teachings about bodily purity, reinterpretations of which kept them relevant long past the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. John of Tella drew on familiar narratives of bodily purity and pollution, such as those related to menstruation, to frame heretics as dangerous to orthodox Christians not only in their beliefs that could lure an unsuspecting Christian to accept heretical views, but in their very bodies whose proximity brought the threat of contamination. In two letters from his time in residence as Antioch's powerful bishop, Severus, in contrast, wrote to counter the fear that the perception of heresy as a physical pollution had provoked in his own congregants.[16] These texts suggest that the idea that heresy was a contaminating pollution was a particularly powerful tool for besieged leaders like John during his long exile, because it inspired vigilant boundary-maintenance among Christians who faced pressure to abandon anti-Chalcedonian teachings in favor of the imperially sanctioned Chalcedonian church.

PURITY AND POLLUTION: REGULATING MENSTRUATING BODIES

Interpretations of biblical regulations involving the ancient contact-contagion of ritual impurity provide a critical contextual frame for understanding John of Tella's rhetoric about the dangers of proximity posed by heresy, and the related concerns of Severus's congregants. While metaphors of heresy as an illness or disease were familiar in late antiquity,[17] in Greek

[16] That these letters (Severus, *Ep.* 44, 45) date from Severus's time in Antioch is suggested in part by his address of his congregation regarding their concerns over the names read in the liturgical diptychs, which implies that Severus is currently leading the services. E.W. Brooks dates Severus, *Ep.* 44 and 45 to 516-7 in his edition and translation (PO 12.310-15)

[17] Severus, for example, referred to the "disease" of Arius, and referred to Eusebius as "contaminated by the sickness of Arius." Severus, *Hom* 30 (PO

traditions illness was not consistently understood to be contracted through person-to-person contact.[18] Moral impurities, on the other hand, could be described as being transmitted from one person to another along the lines of ritual bodily impurities. As Naomi Koltun-Fromm and Christine Hayes note, the apostle Paul left Christians with the concept that "the individual body can contract 'moral' impurities from others who are 'morally impure'."[19] More consistently than

36.4.610-11). Translations of this text are from the Syriac edition and French translation by M. Brière and F. Graffin in PO 36.4. Jennifer Barry notes, "Heresy, imagined as a disease, was a popular concept that flourished after the second half of the fifth century…. by overlapping the medical with the theological, Christian authors helped their readers to distinguish the guilty from the innocent": Jennifer Barry, "Diagnosing Heresy: Ps.-Martyrius's *Funerary Speech for John Chrysostom*," *JECS* 24.3 (2016): 395-418, at 402.

[18] Vivian Nutton notes that many Greek medical writers were influenced by Aristotelian and Platonic ideas and not the "mechanistic view" of the universe of many Epicureans; as a result they often did not describe diseases passing through human-to-human contact. Nevertheless, Nutton admits that many Greek authors who were not medical experts did believe that proximity to a sick person could pose a risk to one's health. Vivian Nutton, "Did the Greeks Have a Word for It? Contagion and Contagion Theory in Classical Antiquity," in *Contagion: Perspectives from Pre-Modern Societies*, ed. Lawrence Conrad and Dominik Wujastyk, 137-62 (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2000). On the Greek concept of *miasma*, which often stood in place of human contact to explain disease spread, see Jacques Jouanna, "Air, miasma and Contagion in the Time of Hippocrates and the Survival of Miasmas in Post-Hippocratic Medicine," in *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, ed. Philip van der Eijk, trans. Neil Allies, 121-36 (Boston: Brill, 2012).

[19] Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *The Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 88; Koltun-Fromm relies on Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Nutton agrees that in antiquity, "Whether pagan or Christian, heretic or libertine, the views of one's opponents are characterized by the metaphors of disease and contagion, of pollution and contamination," such that

metaphors of sickness, it seems to have been the language of purity and pollution that provoked a heightened sense of Christian vigilance about physical proximity. Mira Balberg has discussed concepts of purity and impurity that lived on in rabbinic traditions after the Temple's destruction, especially "as powerful conceptual and hermeneutic tools through which ideas about self and other can be manifested, through which one's body and environment can be scrutinized and manifested, and through which one constitutes and forms oneself as a subject."[20] Early Christians – despite a frequent rhetorical disdain for a "Jewish" focus on ritual, purity laws, and the body – likewise continued to see religious significance in the perceived state of a person's body, whether it was praising the virginal body, preventing certain types of bodies from ordination, or regulating the participation of bodies with discharges in the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist. Tracking some of the expectations that sixth-century anti-Chalcedonian Christians inherited regarding perceptions of ritual purity and the pollution caused by bodily discharges such as menstruation provides a new lens for understanding their concerns about the risk that bodies contaminated by heresy could pose.

Late antique readers of scripture, of course, like readers in any period, updated the biblical rhetoric around bodily purity for their own context. Balberg notes that the early rabbis inherited a variety of narratives about bodily purity "as one of the pivots of the consistent effort to distinguish 'us' from 'them'," and she demonstrates that "the rabbis posit the engagement with impurity… as a critical component in one's

"physical and moral diseases are almost interchangeable" (Nutton, "Did the Greeks Have a Word for It," 153).

[20] Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 3.

formation as a committed rabbinic Jewish subject."[21] She argues that these post-Temple leaders transformed earlier conversations to be newly focused on the purity of a religious self under the authority of the rabbis.[22] Among these discussions, Balberg notes mishnaic descriptions of Gentiles as those who were "considered to convey the same impurity as persons with abnormal genital discharges, regardless of their physical condition," such that "if a Jew or a Jew's property comes into physical contact with a Gentile, the Jew or her property is immediately rendered impure."[23] Balberg argues, "the rabbis' insistence that Gentiles are categorically impure seems geared to cultivating a particular way of *thinking* about Gentiles."[24] I suggest that John of Tella deployed "heretics" in a way similar to these rabbinic texts' use of Gentiles by suggesting that heresy was a form of pollution that could contaminate orthodox bodies, which would have had the benefits of sharpening a distinction between "us" and "them," thus encouraging Christians to keep their distance from heretics, and giving John the authority to define those boundaries.

Early Christian readers, like the rabbis, interpreted these biblical texts about bodily discharges for their own historical and theological contexts. Some Christians believed that honoring God required approaching the divine with a pure body as well as soul, based on early biblical traditions where, as Naomi Koltun-Fromm says, "It is assumed that human bodily impurities, such as semen, are anathema in some way to God's presence and must be neutralized through purification rites before a divine encounter."[25] Koltun-Fromm argues that in the early biblical priestly tradition "purity functions as a means to

[21] Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self*, 15.
[22] Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self*, 4-5.
[23] Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self*, 16, 124.
[24] Balberg, *Purity, Body, and Self*, 131.
[25] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, 40.

protect the holy," while "nonpriestly biblical narratives in general have a looser notion" in which "purity is something one does in order to handle holy items such as a sacrifice."[26] Eastern Christian responses to menstruating women's bodies in late antiquity provide some relevant interpretive context for thinking of heresy as a physical, polluting contaminant among Severus's congregants and in John of Tella's sixth-century Syriac texts.

The third-century *Didascalia*, for example, offers two ways in which biblical purity laws were interpreted by Christ-followers, one through the voice of the narrator and the other through the arguments attributed to some women in the community. As Charlotte Fonrobert explains, the *Didascalia* argues against women whom the text claims "keep themselves from prayer and from receiving the Eucharist [*eucharistia*], or from reading the Scriptures" during the "seven days of their menstrual period."[27] Fonrobert usefully compares this with a passage from the early rabbinic Tosefta that allows menstruating women to study and read the scripture, noting that here the Tosefta and the *Didascalia* agree with each other against the behavior attributed to the *Didascalia*'s women, although the Tosefta expects women to keep other "biblical regulations concerning menstruation" whereas the *Didascalia* does not.[28] The *Didascalia* argues that unlike earlier ablutions for ritual impurity that were temporary, Christian baptism, with its subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit, protects an upright

[26] Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness*, 37.

[27] Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 173; *Didascalia* 26 (Vööbus, 255-63/238-45, cited by the page of the Syriac/English edition and translation). Translations of this text in this essay are revised from the edition and English translation in Arthur Vööbus, *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac II*, CSCO 407-8 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1979).

[28] Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 173-4; tBer 2:13.

Christian for the long term and removes the need for further purification, including from menstruating.[29] This relation between bodily and spiritual purity relies on what Jonathan Klawans notes seems to have been an innovation by John the Baptist to advocate for a ritual cleansing that was "more frequently associated in the past with ritual impurity" as newly a one-time means "of achieving moral purity" through baptism.[30]

The *Didascalia* critiques these women "because of the observances that you keep," arguing that "all these observances are foolish and hurtful," and reminds the women of all the other laws they would also have to keep if they followed this one aspect of what the text calls the former legislation.[31] The *Didascalia* asks the women to "flee and avoid such observances.... do not observe these things, nor think them pollution [*ṭamutā*]; and do not refrain yourselves on their account, nor seek after sprinklings, or baptisms, or purifications [*dukaye*] for these things;" but rather "come together even in the cemeteries, and read the holy Scriptures, and without hesitation perform your ministry and your supplication to God; and offer an acceptable Eucharist [*eukarisṭia*]."[32] Thus while these women are said to have kept themselves from the Eucharist, prayer, and reading scripture during menstruation as an extrapolation of biblical observances, the *Didascalia*'s narrator made a strong argument that bodily discharges did not

[29] *Didascalia* 26 (Vööbus, 255/238). Fonrobert also details the arguments in the *Didascalia*, and the ways in which the text's logic is tied to its representation of what it calls the "second legislation," that is, some biblical expectations that the author believes to have been abrogated by the resurrection of the messiah in the person of Jesus (Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 172-85).

[30] Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 160. See also Hayes, *Gentile Impurities*.

[31] *Didascalia* 26 (Vööbus, 258-9/241-2).

[32] *Didascalia* 26 (Vööbus, 261/243).

make a person impure, and therefore should not curtail Christians' behavior, including in taking the Eucharist.

Despite the *Didascalia*'s passionate argument and its repetition in the late fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*, some church leaders did ask menstruating women, among others with bodily discharges, to delay Christian rituals until their bodies were cleansed. As Fonrobert notes, for example, "Whereas the Didascalia tried to convince women in its community to partake in the Eucharist while they are menstruating," a nearly contemporary Greek text by Dionysius of Alexandria (d. 265) "attempts to keep them away from it, as well as from the altar and the church altogether."[33] The text described here is a letter attributed to Dionysius and written to the Bishop Basilides, which comes to be part of later Greek canon law. It responds to a question about whether "women in the time of their separation" can "enter the house of God" by saying, "I do not think that, if they are believing and pious women, they will themselves be rash enough in such a condition either to approach the holy table or to touch the body and blood of the Lord.... For to pray... in whatever condition a person may be" is blameless, but "the individual who is not perfectly pure [*katharas*] both in soul and in body, shall be prohibited from approaching the holy of holies."[34] In this case, bodily purity is expected of Christians approaching the divine.

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[33] Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 196; text from Ross Kraemer, *Maenads, Martyrs, Matrons, Monastics: A Sourcebook on Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 43. This text is attributed to Dionysius in a "larger collection of epistles of the Greek church which served as one of the sources of that church's canon law" (Kraemer, *Maenads*, 397); Kramer found the text in Charles Feltoe, *Dionusiou Leipsana: The Letters and Other Remains of Dionysius of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904); ANF translation 6:94-96.

[34] Kraemer, *Maenads*, 43; Canon II (PG 10, 1272-77).

The West Syrian *Synodicon*, a compilation of earlier sources, reveals that the *Didascalia*'s narrator did not have the final say, such as in letters attributed to the anti-Chalcedonian bishop-saints Timothy II (Aelurus) of Alexandria (d. 477) and Severus of Antioch. The *Synodicon* says that Timothy II answered the question, "If a woman… on the day of baptism is menstruating [*hawā lāh kepsā*], is it lawful for her to be baptized or shall she be postponed?" with the response, "It is lawful that she should be postponed until she becomes purified [*metdakya*]."[35] Similarly, he replied to the question, "If a faithful woman is menstruating [*hawā lāh kepsā*], is it lawful for her to approach in order to approach the holy mysteries [*rāze qadiše*] on the same day or not?" with the answer, "It is unlawful that she approach before she becomes purified."[36] The *Synodicon* attributes similar teachings to Severus in an otherwise unattested letter to Caesaria: "it is not lawful for a woman who has the usual flow of blood [*marditā dadmā*] to participate [*teštawtap*] in the divine communion [*šawtaputa alāhāitā*] until the coming of blood stops."[37] These anti-Chalcedonian texts continue the tradition of separating bodies with discharges from Christian rituals until they were cleansed.

The *Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ* not only contains similar expectations but also explains how they should be understood. As Sebastian Brock has summarized, this text appears to have originated in Greek in the late fourth or late fifth century and was translated into Syriac in 686/7 by a man named Jacob, usually identified as Jacob of Edessa, and it

[35] Timothy Aelurus, *Questions and Answers*, in Arthur Vööbus, *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition*, CSCO 367-8, 375-6 (Leuven: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 197506), I.141/139, cited by volume followed by the pages of Vööbus's Syriac/English edition and translation.

[36] Timothy Aelurus, *Questions and Answers* (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.141/139).

[37] Severus of Antioch, *Letter to Caesaria* (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.144/141).

became part of the *Synodicon*.[38] It teaches about widows, "If she is menstruating [*kepsā*], she shall abide in the temple [*haiklā*], but shall not approach the altar [*madbḥā*]. This is not because she has pollution [*saibutā*], but in order that the altar shall have honor. Afterwards when she fasts and washes herself," she can approach.[39] A section on catechumens teaches that if a woman is menstruating when the time comes for baptism, she should wait an extra day for washing and cleansing.[40] Finally, its canons include a variety of teachings about bodily purity and the Eucharist, teaching that if a priest has a nightly emission, he can neither give nor receive the Eucharist until he has fasted and washed; likewise anyone of the *bnai qyama* in a similar condition cannot approach (the altar) without fasting and washing, and a widow or any woman who is menstruating [*kepsā*] "shall not approach the communion of the mysteries [*šawtaputā d-rāze*] until she is cleansed and washed."[41] As in the section on widows, the text again stresses that these regulations are not because the bodies are polluted [*saibutā*] but for the honor of the altar.[42] Despite their protests, these Christian texts recall biblical injunctions regarding pollution by precluding bodies with discharges from having contact with, or even proximity to, the altar and the Eucharist.

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[38] Sebastian Brock, "Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ," in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, edited by Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz and Lucas Van Rompay, https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Testament-of-our-Lord-Jesus-Christ.

[39] *Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.24/45). It is worth noting that this text is unusual in signaling the pollution with the term *saibutā* rather than *ṭamutā*, the former of which appears in Marcus Jastrow's dictionary of early rabbinic Hebrew, but is not in Brown, Driver, Briggs's dictionary of Biblical Hebrew.

[40] *Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.32/52); cf., Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome 20.6.

[41] *Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.40/57).

[42] *Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.40/57).

Like the letter attributed to Severus, John of Tella also kept menstruating women from his liturgical rituals. While John normally allowed deaconesses to give the *qurbānā* to children under five years old,[43] he taught that for a deaconess, "It is not permissible when she is menstruating to enter (the sanctuary) or draw near to the *qudšā*," which he equates in a nearby passage with the *qurbānā*.[44] This highlights John's concern for the physical purity of those approaching the divine. He is asked with respect to the laity, "Is it permitted for a laywoman who is menstruating [*hai d-neše*] to enter the temple of God in order to pray?"[45] John replies, "When she is menstruating it is permitted for her to enter the temple of God to pray, but the canons order her not to participate [*teštautap*] in the holy mysteries."[46] In this case, John provides an explanation that echoes the reason given in the *Testament of our Lord*, explaining

[43] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #32 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.218/202); note that this is #33 in Nau, *Canons*, 16, who depended on the Syriac edition in Thomas Lamy, *Dissertatio de Syrorum Fide et Disciplina in Re Eucharistica* (Louvain: Vanlinthout, 1859), 61-97.

[44] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #36 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.218/203); Nau, *Canons*, 16; note is Question 37 in Nau. Note that the two Syriac editions allude to menstruation through versions of a scriptural phrase: Lamy's text retains "the way of women" [*urḥā d-neše*] (cf., Gen 18.11, 31.35 *derek našim*), and Vööbus's "that of women" [*hai d-neše*]. The text conflates *qudšā* with *qurbānā* in John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #33 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.218/203).

[45] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #31 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.218/202); Nau, *Canons*, 16; note that it is Question 32 in Nau. I have replaced Nau's and Vööbus's translation of "young woman" or "girl" with "laywoman" because the Syriac in both Lamy and Vööbus is *ʿālmāyātā* not *ʿalimtā*. Lamy's Syriac edition with Latin translation commented on this word and suggested the spelling *ʿālmāyātā* in the manuscript should be emended for ease of translation (Lamy, 86), and Nau thus translated it as "young girl"; Vööbus retains the Syriac *ʿālmāyātā* without emendation but translates it as "girl" without further comment.

[46] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #31 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.218/202); Nau, *Canons*, 16; note that it is Question 32 in Nau.

that the delay is "not because of her pollution [*ṭamutā*], but out of honor for the divine mysteries,"[47] a tradition that continued according to the *Synodicon* in the seventh-century teachings of Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), who translated the *Testament of our Lord*.[48] Thus while these anti-Chalcedonian traditions explicitly claimed that bodily impurity was not the reason for the separation, the end result is that these same bodies were kept from participating in the central ritual that defined membership in the orthodox community until they were cleansed.[49] John's and Severus's writings suggest that these traditions that originated with ritual pollution came to inform representations of heresy in some of the same ways that rabbis used them to regulate interactions with Gentiles.

MIND THE GAP: REGULATING ORTHODOXY AND HERESY

The conflicts over the legitimacy of the Council of Chalcedon (451) were complex and long-lived, and leaders from all sides wrote vigorously through the late fifth and sixth centuries to

[47] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #31 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.218/202); Nau, *Canons*, 16; note that it is Question 32 in Nau. Note that the women criticized in the *Didascalia* explicitly purport to consider themselves impure: "according to your opinion you are unclean [*ṭamutā*]" and "do not observe these things, nor think that it is uncleanness" (*Didascalia* 26 [Vööbus, 259/242, 261/243]).

[48] Jacob taught regarding the *qurbānā*, "She who has the way of women shall not participate until the flow of blood stops – if there is no emergency – and until she has washed, not because of uncleanness but out of honor for the *qudshe*": Jacob of Edessa, *Questions* #24 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.262/239). Such concerns are also visible in the Greek Chalcedonian late seventh-century *Questiones et responsiones* of Anastasius of Sinai.

[49] As Derek Krueger has shown, "sixth-century liturgists associated liturgical participation with the shaping of affect and identity": Derek Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 106.

argue for their own legitimacy and against the heretical views of their opponents. The plethora of references in the writings of Philoxenos, John Rufus, John of Tella, and Severus to concerns about the unacceptable social and ritual mixing of people with different doctrinal commitments suggests that these authors hoped to inspire greater vigilance, separation, and distinction among some who currently socialized together. Anti-Chalcedonian writings discouraged not only ritual submission to, but often any social contact whatsoever with anyone outside of anti-Chalcedonian orthodoxy. While all of these writers called for greater separation between their anti-Chalcedonian listeners and their opponents, and reminded them of the eternal reward or punishment they would earn through their zeal (or lack thereof), they did not all describe the danger that heresy posed in the same terms. Most often their writings reflect a concern that anti-Chalcedonian Christians might be persuaded to abandon their doctrine and join the Chalcedonian communion. John of Tella is unusual in encouraging the perception of heresy as a physical contamination. Severus's letters offer a glimpse of the anxiety that such a notion could inspire. Under Justin I, anti-Chalcedonian Christians faced a variety of pressures to join the Chalcedonian church, from ridicule and peer pressure, to financial and material incentives (or disincentives), to arrest and physical violence. Contrasting these authors' different representations of Christian heresy suggests that the notion of heresy as pollution could have been particularly useful in encouraging anti-Chalcedonian zeal among John of Tella's followers, scattered as doctrinal and ritual minorities in the borderlands of the Roman and Sasanian empires, during the years of his exile.

Philoxenos, John Rufus, and Severus, for example, all warned their audience about the dangers of mingling with their doctrinal opponents, but primarily because they might be persuaded to abandon their anti-Chalcedonian commitment.

Philoxenos wrote, "Do not associate [*ḥulṭānā*] with any of the heretics of the Persians, by communion [*šawtāputā*], or by being eager to ask after their welfare, or by gifts."[50] As Philoxenos wrote with hope at the end of his *Letter to Abu Ya'fur*, "My Lord God will deliver us just as all the children of the holy church, from association [*ḥulṭānā*] and communion [*šawtāputā*] with" the heretics.[51] In other cases Philoxenos criticized those who had relaxed their zeal on account of temporal presents,[52] and praised others who had resisted the impulse to do the same.[53] These examples imply that the danger of interacting was that the Christian might cease to be zealous in defending anti-Chalcedonian doctrine and might acquiesce, perhaps on account of pressure or bribes, to Chalcedonian teachings and rituals. The danger, then, was not so much the physical body of the heretic that threatened to pollute the orthodox body, but the potential of the heretic to persuade the orthodox to abandon Philoxenos's teachings and Eucharist community.

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[50] Philoxenos, *Particular Chapters* [*that We Should Anathematize Each One Who is Nestorian*] in British Library, MS Add. 14529, ff. 66v-68r, ed., and with a partial English transl. E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Discourses of Philoxenos, Bishop of Mabbôgh, A.D. 485-519*, vol. 2 (London, 1894), Syriac cxx-cxxiii, English xxxvii-xxxix, at xxxix, cxxii.

[51] Philoxenos, *Letter to Abu Ya'fur*, published as "Lettre de Philoxène de Mabbûg au phylarque Abū Ya'fūr de Hīrtā de Bētna'mān (selon le manuscrit no 115 du fond patriarcat de Šarfet)," ed. and French transl. Paul Harb, *Melto* 3.1-2 (1967): 183-222, at 221.

[52] Philoxenos, *Letter concerning Zeal*, in A. Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1960), 51-54, at 53.

[53] Philoxenos, *First Letter to the Monks of Beth Gaugal*, in Arthur Vaschalde, ed. and trans. *Three Letters of Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbogh (485-519): Being the Letter to the Monks, the First Letter to the Monks of Beth-Gaugal, and the Letter to Emperor Zeno* (Rome: Tipografia della R. Accademia dei Lincei, 1902), 105-18, 146-62, at 106.

Severus and John Rufus likewise often focused on the danger of social interactions for the person's doctrinal commitment more than their bodily purity. Severus addressed the noblewoman Caesaria by writing, "you ask whether some of the orthodox are doing well in not communicating [*meštawtpein*] with heretics but listening to the reading of the holy Gospel or even staying during the time of the mysterious prayers but not communicating in the rites that are being performed."[54] Echoing Paul's concerns in 1 Corinthians 5, Severus cited 2 John 10-11, and concluded, "If then it is not right to offer even a bare greeting to those who bring another teaching and do not teach the orthodox faith, how can one communicate in prayers and in lessons or in any other such things with such as these?"[55] Severus relied on Titus 3.10, which he believed was written by the apostle Paul, to argue, "Paul the wise commands us to turn away even the very face from those who are in servitude to heresy," leading Severus to conclude, "One therefore who comes together [*metkanaš*] with the guilty renders themself subject to the same judgment."[56] John Rufus presented a similar story that he attributed to the famous ascetic Peter the Iberian who had a vision that he was condemned after he unthinkingly returned a greeting in a tight alleyway where he could not escape the notice of a former friend who had since joined the "heretical" Chalcedonian community.[57] These authors worked

[54] Severus, *Ep.* 6.4.10, 306/272, in Ernest Brooks, ed. and trans., *The Sixth Book of the Select Letters of Severus of Antioch*, vol. 2.1-2 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904). This citation represents Book 6, section 4, letter 10, followed by the pages in Brooks's Syriac/English edition and translation.

[55] Severus, *Ep.* 6.4.10, 306-7/272-3.

[56] Severus, *Ep.* 6.4.10, 307/273.

[57] John Rufus, *Plerophoriae* 76 (PO 8.130-132). Although he does not engage with ancient medical perceptions of illness and contagion and conflates them with pollution, Jan-Eric Steppa has written about the rhetoric of John Rufus's striking "notion of heresy as a contagious disease that could affect even the most holy and orthodox of God's servants – a dangerous kind of

to keep their congregants from joining Chalcedonian services and from associating with heretical Christians more generally, but in order that they would not be persuaded to join the Chalcedonian church or even so they would not be thought to have joined the competing communion. For these leaders, proximity to heretics was dangerous because a person might be persuaded to abandon their zeal and become (or appear to become) associated with the communion of the heretics.

John of Tella, on the other hand, encouraged Christians to keep their distance from heretics and objects that had been used in heretics' rituals in ways that echo his teachings about keeping menstruating bodies from the orthodox altar, suggesting a different kind of contamination. Some of John of Tella's writings, on the one hand, demonstrate that he considered the material objects of heretics' rituals, like Christian altars and the Eucharist itself, to be contaminated and thus inappropriate for orthodox rituals. John's *Questions and Answers*, for example, have a series of questions about what a priest should do if anything related to an altar or the Eucharist should arrive in a community from outside. If its heretical past is certain, then John's answer is clear: "It is not allowed to put an altar [*madbḥa*] of the heretics of Persia in the sanctuary [*beit qudšā*]," although he does allow it to be placed elsewhere for common or ordinary service [*ḥšaḥtā šḥimtā*].[58] The same text

pollution that spread into the society of the orthodox through even the slightest contact." See Jan-Eric Steppa, "Heresy and Orthodoxy: The Anti-Chalcedonian Hagiography of John Rufus," in *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity*, ed. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky, 89-106 (Boston: Brill, 2004), 103.

[58] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #43 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.220/204). An earlier French translation is also in François Nau, *Canons et les Résolutions Canoniques de Rabboula, Jean de Tella, Cyriaque d'Amid, Jacques d'Edesse, Georges des Arabes, Cyriaque d'Antioche, Jean III, Théodose d'Antioche, et des Perses* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1906), 18. John here seems most concerned about Persian Christians whom we might associate

also includes the question, "If one finds a portable altar [*ṭablitā*] and some people say they heard from others that it was consecrated by the orthodox, what should one do with it? Should one believe those who heard that it belonged to the orthodox when they are trustworthy people, or rather leave it and not serve with it, as if it came from the heretics?" to which John of Tella gives the answer, "As I said above for the altars [*madbḥe*] that come from the Persians, the same one (Mar Abas) ordered certainly not to celebrate [the Eucharist] on them. If, however, there are trustworthy people who say they heard from others that a portable altar [*ṭablitā*] was consecrated by the orthodox, one can use it for the sanctuary without however celebrating on it."[59] Regarding the ritual components of heretics' liturgy, John also teaches, "One must flee their Eucharist [*qurbānā*] as a deadly drug,"[60] and if they should somehow acquire a heretic's Eucharist, "The *qurbānā* that is found on [the altars (*madbḥe*)] will be placed in an honorable spot or hidden in the ground or in the wall, lest the orthodox approach it."[61] These material objects are in John's view compromised by their association with heresy and must be separated from orthodox bodies and rituals.

On the other hand, John of Tella also had a strong sense of the importance of physical separation between people he considered to be heretics and those he considered orthodox. In

with the Church of the East, though he also was in exile because of his rejection of Chalcedonian Christianity; anti-Chalcedonian leaders like John conflated both groups as heretics who inappropriately followed the teachings of Nestorius.

[59] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #47 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.220-1/205); Nau, *Canons*, 19.

[60] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #44 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.220/205); Nau, *Canons*, 18. On the language of the deadly drug, see Ephrem, *Azym.* 19; Ignatius, *Letter to the Trallians* 6.

[61] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #46 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.220/205); Nau, *Canons*, 18-9.

his *Canons*, John of Tella wrote, "Promise … to anathematize all heresies," and he instructed his audience not to "associate with their adherents."[62] John's *Questions and Answers* say, "The canon does not allow eating with heretics, whether the person makes the sign of the cross or not, and even if it would be out of the necessity of a journey;"[63] and he further stated, "If it is not necessary for lack of tombs for the faithful, it is not permitted to inter a faithful in the tombs of the heretics."[64] John did make an exception that he seemed to feel was unavoidable to allow greetings between heretics and orthodox, "provided," he said, "that we don't give them a kiss on the mouth."[65] In his *Canons to Priests*, John again instructed, "do not eat with the heretics," and this time he added, "and do not receive any blessing [or gift], because their hand is the hand of the lawless one"; nor should the orthodox give any blessing/gift to a heretic.[66] John thus sent a clear message that his audience should avoid heretics as much as possible, in addition to the material objects of their rituals.

While John thus encouraged orthodox bodies to distance themselves from heretics just as an orthodox altar was kept from contact with menstruating bodies, it is through Severus's letters explicitly about heresy as pollution that the fear and anxiety that such rhetoric could produce becomes clear. The

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[62] John of Tella, *Canons* #1 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.147/143, 147/143-4); Nau, *Canons*, 21.

[63] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #23 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.215/201); Nau, *Canons*, 14; this is Question 24 in Nau.

[64] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #27 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.215/201); Nau, *Canons*, 14-5; this is Question 28 in Nau. The question that follows is also about burials.

[65] John of Tella, *Questions and Answers* #25 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.216/201); Nau, *Canons*, 14; this is Question 26 in Nau. On drawing community boundaries through kissing, see Michael Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

[66] John of Tella, *Canons* #2 (Vööbus, *Synodicon* I.147/144); Nau, *Canons*, 21.

experience of the global pandemic of 2020, and the anxiety that accompanies our efforts to practice social distancing in order to avoid contracting the potentially fatal virus, suggests that John's rhetoric could likewise have caused anxiety as his audience tried to avoid contamination, especially in a context where notoriously unstable definitions of "orthodoxy" and "heresy" made it difficult to be certain who posed a risk.[67] Severus's *Epistles* 44 and 45 confirm that anti-Chalcedonian Christians in the early sixth century were indeed anxious that they might unwillingly and unwittingly contract heresy in the manner of a bodily pollution. Unlike John, however, Severus addressed these concerns in 516-7 as a bishop in residence under the sympathetic emperor Anastasius. In this context, Severus tried to calm his congregants' worries rather than stoking their fears. Severus's discussion of the pollution associated with heresy highlights the effects that John's language could have had on his community.

Two letters from Severus, written in Greek but preserved in Syriac, provide evidence that at least some of his congregants understood heresy to be a dangerous form of pollution. In *Epistle* 45, Severus addressed congregants' concern that Christians might find themselves polluted by heresy despite their vigilance, a fear that suggests that such rhetoric could be a powerful motivator for creating and maintaining clear boundaries between competing doctrinal communities. Severus tried to assuage their concern by explaining that despite their fears, the orthodox Eucharist would not be polluted if the name of an earlier church leader whom Severus considered a heretic was included in the liturgical diptychs that

[67] Barry notes that church leaders often used this challenge in order to argue for their own role as specialists in "diagnosing" heresy (Barry, "Diagnosing Heresy").

were read during the service.[68] Severus supported this opinion by means of Cyril of Alexandria's defense of keeping Theodore of Mopsuestia's name in the liturgical diptychs despite the fact that, in Severus's words, Theodore "was the putrid sources of the hateful and putrid tenets of Nestorius."[69] Cyril allowed Theodore's name, Severus argued, "in order not to give an opportunity to those who wished to disturb the church," and even though the name was read, Christians did not believe "that thereby some pollution [*ṭamutā*] and stain [*mumā*] of heresy was inflicted on the *qurbānā* of the orthodox," nor did such names "cause any injury to the whole fullness of the body of Christ."[70] Severus insisted, "They are not acting rightly who think that our *qurbānā* is not pure on account of the names of those who have already died and who have fallen into heretical tenets and have not been removed from the sacred tablets."[71] Contrary to what his audience seemed to believe, Severus denied that the name of a heretic would contaminate his orthodox Eucharist and thereby threaten the orthodoxy of his congregants.

Severus addressed the same concern in *Epistle* 44, in this case acknowledging that if orthodox Christians ever found themselves utterly surrounded by those who were "sick [*krihā*] with heresy," then they should indeed avoid that "dead body" that could "pollute" the purity of their communion [*šawtaputā*], using forms of *ṭamutā* throughout to refer to polluting.[72] But as

[68] On Severus's liturgy, see: G.C. Cuming, "The Liturgy of Antioch in the Time of Severus (513-518)," in *Time and Community: In Honor of Thomas Julian Talley*, ed. J.N. Alexander, 83-103 (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1980).

[69] Severus, *Ep.* 45 (PO 12.314). Translations of this text in this essay are revised from the Syriac edition and English translation by E.W. Brooks in PO 12.

[70] Severus, *Ep.* 45 (PO 12.314).

[71] Severus, *Ep.* 45 (PO 12.313); cf. *Ep.* 44 (PO 12.310-12).

[72] Severus, *Ep.* 44 (PO 12.310-11). Translations of this text in this essay are revised from the Syriac edition and English translation by E.W. Brooks in PO 12.

with pollution in water, the larger the body of clean water, the less harm a small pollutant could do, so that "if the holding of the orthodox faith and an anathema of every heresy reigns in the churches, and whole regions and provinces, and populous churches confess one uncorrupted confession, then names that are thought to pollute are inundated by the multitude of streams" and thus are safely diluted; while ideally, Severus agreed, "no particle of a dead body" (that is, people infected with heresy) "should be introduced even into a large quantity of water, if perchance it in fact happens to be introduced, it is overpowered by the quantity of streams and swamped by the quantity of cleansing."[73] This echoes language in *Epistle* 45 where Severus argued, "when churches of many provinces and of dioceses are held in one bond of faith, and resemble fair fountains and pools and cisterns of water, the dead thing which has the property of polluting if it fall cannot injure, for it is swamped by the flow, and by the abundance of many streams."[74] In these letters, Severus explicitly described those "infected with heresy" as the equivalent of a "dead body" that early biblical traditions taught could pollute the purity of those who came into contact with it. Writing from the comfort of his episcopal see, Severus argued that the orthodox majority could accommodate and tolerate small amounts of the pollution of heresy without harm.

Despite Severus's pastoral efforts to calm congregants' fears, though, he nevertheless does in both of these letters equate heresy with a form of ritual impurity, in this case from contact with a corpse rather than from menstruation or the like. While Severus is willing to negotiate the degree of the threat that heresy posed in a sea of orthodoxy, in *Epistle* 45 he nevertheless maintains that it poses a significant risk when the proportions are reversed. Severus wrote, "when certain people who are by

[73] Severus, *Ep.* 44 (PO 12.311).
[74] Severus, *Ep.* 45 (PO 12.315).

themselves, in a church for instance, or in one city or in monasteries perhaps make mention of the names of those who are under suspicion and of dead men, like the similarly small amount of water contained in a vessel they are polluted by the mention, as if something dead had fallen in."[75] While the contamination that Severus describes happens aurally through hearing a heretic's name as part of the liturgy, the fact that he compares it to the ritual pollution of corpse impurity suggests both that it could cause a person to be separated from the orthodox altar and that its effects were independent of the hearer's consent. Both factors would have raised the stakes for orthodox Christians to take responsibility for keeping themselves far from any manifestation of heresy on account of the risks it could pose.

John of Tella's implied comparison of menstruating bodies and heretics is made explicit in Severus's letters and his congregants' expectation that heresy could contaminate the liturgy and its participants. John's fervent interest in increasing anti-Chalcedonian Christians' vigilance in performing a sharp distinction and separation between the bodies, rituals, and other material manifestations of orthodoxy and heresy would have been magnified during his exile during the hostile reign of Justin I. Unlike John of Tella, Severus addressed the relation of heresy and pollution from his powerful see of Antioch where the reign of Anastasius buoyed his belief that anti-Chalcedonian Christianity represented the one universal church. In this more favorable context, Severus took pains to reassure his nervous audience that any pollution that might come through hearing a heretic's name in the liturgy would be diluted to safe levels by the flood of orthodoxy represented in his church, even if they should still remain vigilant in less favorable circumstances. Severus's writings thus concurrently

[75] Severus, *Ep.* 45 (PO 12.314-5).

suggest the anxiety that associating heresy with the contact-contagion of ritual pollution could inspire as well as his pastoral decision to try to alleviate rather than foster his congregants' fear.

CONCLUSION

John of Tella is interesting not only for his sixth-century teachings about menstruating bodies and other bodily discharges, but especially for how those ideas interact with his understanding of the dangers of Christian heresy. Rhetoric about ritual pollution and concerns about contamination were familiar to these late antique Christians, particularly through the continuing conversations about bodily purity and the Eucharist. John of Tella instructed that orthodox Christians must not use the contaminated altars or oblations of the heretics in their own rituals, that menstruating bodies should be separated from the divine until they had been cleansed, and that orthodox bodies should avoid heretics at meals, greetings, or burials, all of which his audience might well have heard with concerns of pollution in mind. John's teachings about heretics parallel rabbinic teachings that hoped to preserve community identity by equating Gentile bodies with those with abnormal genital discharges. Although Severus did not want his congregants to worry about his own church services, he and his audience both associated heresy with bodily pollution and his letters reveal that this correlation caused such anxiety that Severus addressed the issue twice in an effort to allay his congregants' fears.

The global pandemic of 2020 provides a unique opportunity to grapple with the effects of sixth-century anti-Chalcedonian warnings that heresy had the potential to convey pollution to orthodox bodies – the anxiety that such a risk could produce, and the behavioral responses that it could lead to if Christians made an effort to avoid contamination. John asked his audience

to put physical distance between orthodox Christians and heretical objects and people. Since the pollution of heresy shared with COVID-19 the possibility that those who carried it might sometimes be indistinguishable to the layperson from those who did not, John urged rigorous zeal in the face of imperial opposition. His rhetoric encouraged anyone who wanted to be assured of their eternal salvation to separate themselves physically from Chalcedonian and Church of the East altars and neighbors. In a context where people of various doctrinal and ritual commitments intermingled on a regular basis,[76] John of Tella strove to preserve anti-Chalcedonian Christianity in challenging circumstances from his nearly twenty years in exile. John seems to have hoped that rhetoric about heresy that echoed concerns about bodily pollution could increase the perceived risks and potential consequences of socializing with heretics, thereby increasing his followers' devoted vigilance to maintaining anti-Chalcedonian orthodoxy in his absence.

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[76] See, for example, Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), e.g., 65-7, 105.

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