

“Touch Me Not”

by Danny Brown

“Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.” (John 20:17 KJV)

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There is much confusion and many conjectures and theories about the phrase, “touch me not.” The question is, did Jesus forbid Mary from touching His resurrected body or is He telling her to stop clinging to Him.

“Do Not Touch Me”

There are a great number who hold the view that when Jesus said, “Touch me not,” He was saying “Do not touch me.” He was telling Mary that she was not to lay her hands upon His risen body.

“Christ, who is risen, is not to be sought in this world according to the flesh, but in heaven by faith where he has gone before us.” (Geneva Bible Notes)

“Touch me not, &c. This passage has given rise to a variety of interpretations. Jesus required Thomas to touch him (Joh 20:27), and it has been difficult to ascertain why he forbade this now to Mary. The reason why he directed Thomas to do this was, that he doubted whether he had been restored to life. Mary did not doubt that. The reason why he forbade her to touch him now is to be sought in the circumstances of the case. Mary, filled with joy and gratitude, was about to prostrate herself at his feet, disposed to remain with him, and offer him there her homage as her risen Lord. This is probably included in the word touch in this place; and the language of Jesus may mean this: “Do not approach me now for this purpose. Do not delay here. Other opportunities will yet be afforded to see me. I have not yet ascended-- that is, I am not about to ascend immediately, but shall remain yet on earth to afford opportunity to my disciples to enjoy my presence.” (Albert Barnes)

“Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended

to my Father--Old familiarities must now give place to new and more awful yet sweeter approaches; but for these the time has not come yet. This seems the spirit, at least, of these mysterious words, on which much difference of opinion has obtained, and not much that is satisfactory said." (Jamison, Fawset & Brown)

"Touch me not. She was probably about to clasp his feet. She is told to discharge a higher duty: to go to the brethren with the glad story." (Peoples New Testament)

"We would explain it by the following paraphrase: "Do not lay hold on me and detain yourself and me; I have not yet ascended; this is no brief, passing vision; I am yet in the world, and will be for some time, and there will be other opportunities to see me;" (Fourfold Gospel)

"Stay not to touch me, but haste to my disciples and say" (Bengel)

"The Lord's spiritual body was so tended that he could not bear a vigorous grasp or physical touch." (Olshausen)

"Mary wondered whether he had only a glorified spirit without bodily form, and she wished to verify the latter by handling his person." (Meyer)

"I am unwilling that you should approach me by any mere physical touch, that you should recognize me by the physical senses. I am drawing you to sublimer things." (Leo the Great)

"The meaning appears to be somewhat this: "You are now convinced that I am indeed the risen Lord. But, you cannot decide whether I am really here or if I am simply and only an apparition and you wish therefore to determine, by your physical sense of touch, whether you actually see me or only my ghost. This is not necessary; I am really here; I have not yet ascended to my Father." (Guy N. Woods)

All of the above have said or implied that Jesus forbade Mary to touch Him. However eight days later He asked Thomas to put his finger in the nail prints in His hand and to thrust his hand in His side (John 20:27). Some have suggested that something happened to the resurrected body of Jesus between the time He forbade Mary from touching Him and His asking Thomas to touch His body. With

Mary He was untouchable; with Thomas He was touchable. However there is no statement or even intimation of such a change in Scripture.

The parallel passage to John 20:17 reveals that some disciples of the Lord took hold of His feet and worshipped Him the same day that He arose from the dead. An angel told Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, on the morning of Jesus resurrection, "Go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you. And they departed quickly from the sepulcher with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word. And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said unto them, Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me." (Matt 28:7-9). The question arises, why would Jesus forbid Mary to touch Him in John 20 and permit her ("they") to touch Him in Matthew 28. Keep in mind that these two incidents happened on the same day with but little time between them.

Another View

Some have another understanding of the words of Jesus, "Touch me not." The word haptou translated "touch" in the KJV and the ASV has a number of different meanings. W. E. Vine in his **Dictionary of New Testament Words** lists six definitions for the word. Among his definitions is: "b. to cling to, lay hold of, John 20:17." Arndt and Gingrich defines it: "2. mid. Touch, take hold of" and under this heading in section "a" he says of the phrase, ma mou haptou, "stop clinging to me!" (this is the exact phrase used in John 20:17).

As a result there are a number who hold the view that Jesus was not telling Mary that she could not touch Him, but telling her to stop clinging to Him and go tell His disciples that He was risen.

Touch me not, me mou haptou, Cling not to me. haptomai has this sense in Job 31:7, where the Septuagint use it for the Hebrew qbd dabak, which signifies to cleave, cling, stick, or be glued to. From Mt 28:9, it appears that some of the women held him by the feet and worshipped him. This probably Mary did; and our Lord seems to have spoken to her to this effect: "Spend no longer time with me now: I am not going immediately to heaven -- you will have several opportunities of seeing me again: but go and tell my disciples, that I am, by and by, to ascend to my Father and God, who is your Father and God also. Therefore, let them take courage." (Adam Clark)

Touch me not - Or rather, Do not cling to me (for she held him by the feet,) Mt 28:9. Detain me not now. You will have other

opportunities of conversing with me. For I am not ascended to my Father -- I have not yet left the world." (John Wesley)

"Mary must have prostrated herself before him and grasped his feet or was in the process of doing so, as the other women did in Matthew's report (28:9). The present imperative with me in the Greek prohibition, 'Hold me not . . .,' in this instance signified the breaking off of an action already in progress. The older rendering, 'Touch me not . . .,' is an inadequate way of translating this line. The Lord is not attempting to prohibit Mary from touching him, for no damage would have been done by her touch, either to him or to her." (Daniel H. King, Sr.)

Technical Description

The phrase "Touch me not" is a prohibition. The Greeks had two ways of expressing prohibitions. If something had not already begun, and was to be prohibited from beginning, *ou* with an aorist subjunctive was used. If something was already in progress and was to be stopped, *me* with the present imperative was used. H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey in their "A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament" on page 301 express it this way:

"The purpose of a prohibition, when expressed by the aorist subjunctive, is to forbid a thing before it has begun; i.e., it commands to never do a thing. But a prohibition in the present imperative means to forbid the continuance of an act; it commands to quit doing a thing. There should be nothing confusing about understanding the force of these negative commands as they occur in these tenses. As we learned in the study of tense, the present tense in any of its moods means linear or durative action, whereas the aorist tense in any of its moods means the converse of linear or durative action, it means punctiliar or summary action.

(1) Thus a prohibition expressed with the present tense demands the cessation of some act that is already in progress.

(2) A prohibition expressed in the aorist tense is a warning or exhortation against doing a thing not yet begun."

The question is, what is the prohibition used in the phrase, "Touch me not." The Greek text (Nestles, Westcott and Hort) is, *me mou haptou*. *Me* is the negative. *Mou* is the pronoun translated "me." *Haptou* is the verb. *Haptou* is second person singular present imperative middle from *haptō*. The verb *haptō* being in the middle voice means to, "fasten one's self to, adhere to, cling to," (Thayer's Lexicon). Since *haptou* is in the present tense, which tense demands or commands the cessation of the action already in progress, our conclusion is

that Jesus told Mary to stop clinging to Him or to quit holding on to Him. Since Jesus used the present tense and not the aorist tense, He did not say do not touch Me, implying that she was about to lay her hands upon His risen body. What He did tell her was for her to stop clinging to Him or holding on to Him.

In confirmation of this analysis and conclusion, Robertson in his "Word Pictures in the New Testament" says, "Touch me not (mê mou haptou). Present middle imperative in prohibition with genitive case, meaning "cease clinging to me" rather than "Do not touch me." Jesus allowed the women to take hold of his feet (ekratêsan) and worship (prosekunêsan) as we read in Mt 28:9.

Also many of the later translations hold this conclusion:

"Jesus said, 'Cease clinging to me, I have not ascended yet to the Father, but go to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my Father and yours. To my God and yours.'" – James Moffatt

"Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" – Revised Standard Version

"Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" -- New International Version

"Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" – New King James Version

"Jesus said to her, 'Stop clinging to Me; for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.' " – New American Standard Version

Conclusion

Any view that holds that there was some impropriety in touching the risen body of Jesus is not founded in Scripture. Thomas was told to place his fingers in the prints on the Lord's hands and to place his hand in His side (John 20:27). The women of Matthew 28:9 "came and held him by the feet and worshipped him." So also we believe that Mary touched Jesus, even to holding on to Him and was told to stop clinging to Him (John 20:17),

