

THE CASE FOR A MARRIED JESUS

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Appreciation is overdue for a Mormon who had the insight and courage to revive a Hebraic viewpoint toward Jesus' relationships with women. Orson Hyde, the President of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, in a sermon delivered at Salt Lake City in 1857, maintained that Jesus was married. He argued: "If he was never married, his intimacy with Mary, Martha, and the other Mary also, who Jesus loved, must have been highly unbecoming and improper, to say the best of it." In that same sermon President Hyde even suggested that the story in John 2 of a wedding at Cana is a record of Jesus' marriage to a Galilean woman.¹ In support of this speculation, another Mormon writer, Ogden Kraut, has recently noted that Jesus' mother would hardly have been anxious over the supply of wine becoming exhausted had the wedding not been of someone from her family.²

Hyde's striking belief in Jesus' marriage gained wide acceptance in the pioneer Mormon community. *The Journal of the Discourses of Brigham Young* discloses that others shared his conviction that Jesus, like other holy men, participated in the institution of matrimony.

Recognizing that the Bible provides no explicit information on Jesus' marital status, what could have stimulated Hyde to assert what no Christian had claimed for many centuries? Joseph Fielding Smith may provide a clue when he points out that Hyde was sent to Palestine to do missionary work among Jews because he was "of the house of Judah."³ That cultural association doubtless made him more aware than most Christians that marriage in traditional Judaism — either single or plural — was prerequisite to righteous manhood. Since Jesus was addressed as "Rabbi" and was a devout Jew, he would in all probability have married.

This essay will explore in some detail the way in which Hyde's position on Jesus' marital status was in accord with the Hebraic outlook. It will also show why this significant matter pertaining to the historical Jesus was long lost. Even the discussion of Jesus' marital status became taboo and remains so to the present time for most Christians.

I

From the opening pages of Hebrew Scripture onward, the sanctity of marriage as a part of the divine creation is a prominent theme. Sexual relations between those "joined by God" was considered a necessary good, not a neces-

sary evil. The writer of the Garden of Eden story believed that the unmarried state was "not good," and that every man (*adham*) should utilize the sexual impulse and other gifts of nature for human fulfillment. The solitary state is the first thing the Lord pronounced undesirable. Genesis 2 tells of man's ecstasy when his loneliness is relieved by female companionship and when his "rib" is returned to form a "one flesh" wholeness. Masculine and feminine interdependence and complementariness are exquisitely expressed in that ancient story. There is no indication that its writer or any other biblical writers believed that sexual desire was contaminated because of the sin of the first human parents. Marriage was expressly required for the Levitical priests, for they transmitted their office by family inheritance. The burning love of a couple which "many waters cannot quench" was admired by the prophets and poets of Israel.

Jesus gave the Old Testament conception of marriage emphatic approval in Matthew 19. When asked for his outlook on divorce, he quoted from the Garden of Eden story and reiterated that man and woman were made for permanent marital companionship. The apostle Paul also admired that creation account which focuses on the integrative and mutual commitment role of marriage. In Ephesians 5:32 Paul asserted that profound theology is revealed in the Genesis "one flesh" view of matrimony.

Sociological practice in biblical culture with respect to marriage was in accord with theological doctrine. Marriage was considered a sacred obligation in Judaism and was fulfilled at an early age. In the many centuries of biblical history there is no instance of lifelong celibacy. However, two persons, Jeremiah and Paul, abstained from marriage for part of their lives because they considered themselves to be in special crisis situations. Jeremiah temporarily refrained from marital life to dramatize the senseless deprivation which would result from fighting against the Babylonians. Paul indicated that he had once been married but was either a widower or separated from his wife when he wrote to the Corinthians. The apostle was convinced at that period of his Christian career that the finale of history was near. That predicament reconciled him to his own unattached state and caused him to recommend it for others with a similar disposition.

Since marriage was expected of every Jewish adult, individual marital status was often not considered noteworthy in the Bible even for major personalities, and we know of the marriage of many only incidentally. The documentary silence on the marital status of various persons in the Old and New Testaments should be interpreted to mean that they were in all probability married. The burden of the proof rests upon those who maintain that such persons deviated from the sanctioned pattern of behavior.

In my study, *Was Jesus Married?* (Harper and Row, 1970), the alleged New Testament evidence for Jesus' celibacy was weighed and found wanting. Paul, who provides the earliest record of Jesus and who personally thought at one period of his life that the single were not obligated to marry, did not point to Jesus as a model for the unmarried. In 1 Corinthians 7, where appeal is made to the teaching of Jesus on marriage, the apostle explicitly admitted that he knew nothing of Jesus' position on celibacy. Since the voluntary "eunuch" was unheard of in Judaism and hence would have attracted much attention if someone professed such a status, it is inconceivable that Paul

would not have been aware of Jesus' condition had he and some of his followers vowed to renounce marriage for life.

In I Corinthians 9:5 Paul asserted in passing that travel with wives was the standard practice of the apostles. It is unlikely that this would have been the case if Jesus had been single and had expected the devout to follow his example. Moreover, in the Pastoral Letters, marriage is laid down as a qualification for those who hold church office. This requirement is unaccountable had not Jesus and his apostles been married.

What can be said regarding Jesus' sexuality as portrayed in the New Testament? He is described as one with human passions like other men. Such qualities as love, joy, serenity, patience, and faithful companionship, which he expressed in a fullsome manner, are also basic ingredients of ideal marriage. In comparison with John the Baptist, Jesus indulged more in satisfying fleshly appetites and some of his contemporaries made this behavior an excuse for slander. Moreover, Jesus had no prejudice against women or marital sexuality that would preclude his becoming married. By asserting that "he was tempted in every respect as we are," Hebrews 4:15 implies that Jesus had sexual temptations.

The Gospel writers refer to Joseph as the father of Jesus. According to ancient Jewish oral tradition, one of the primary obligations that a father had toward his son was "to find a wife for him."⁴ Assuming that Joseph discharged his duty as a righteous father, he must have arranged for Jesus' betrothal. Sometime following Jesus' boyhood experience in the temple, during the decade of his life which is totally unrecorded in history, it is most probable that Jesus married. Also, the probability of his having offspring would be as great as that of any other man in his society.

In 1945 an ancient Christian folio volume, the *Gospel of Philip*, was discovered in Egypt. It explicitly states that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' "consort." If that document preserves an authentic tradition, as it well may, then it affords evidence that Jesus married. Also, the term *gunē*, used in the Greek of the New Testament, may mean either "woman" or "wife." It is therefore possible that Mary was his wife and that she belonged to that group of women-wives who are occasionally mentioned in the Gospels as traveling with Jesus and his male disciples.

It would be contrary to both ancient and modern notions of virtuous behavior if Jesus were closely associated day after day with a group of unattached women. Hyde has perceptively commented:

I will venture to say that if Jesus Christ were now to pass through the most pious countries in Christendom with a train of women, such as used to follow him, fondling about him, combing his hair, anointing him with precious ointment, washing his feet with tears, and wiping them with the hair of their heads . . . he would be mobbed, tarred, and feathered, and rode not on an ass, but on a rail.

There are no known writings by Jesus and no records about him until a generation after his death, so there is little that can be stated that goes beyond the realm of historical probability. In spite of the emotional desire of humans for absolute certainty, there are few indubitable facts regarding Jesus' life. For only a small portion of his life-span do we have any facts at all. Because of the paucity of documentary sources it cannot even be definitely

asserted that Jesus received schooling in his home town. Hence, to say that Jesus *probably* married or that he *probably* received some formal education is as strong a statement as can be made.

II

If Jesus married, why is it that the opposite assumption has been dominant throughout the history of Christianity? The moral dualism of Hellenistic philosophy that infiltrated Gentile Christianity in the post-apostolic era has been mainly responsible for the dogma that Jesus was perpetually virginal. That dualism held that the pure immaterial soul was imprisoned in the defiled flesh during this earthly existence. Consequently, the best way of freeing the spiritual essence even before death was by a practice of rigid abstention — which is now designated as asceticism. Some of his major interpreters in church history have, on the basis of an anti-biblical psychology, assumed that Jesus had no sexual desire or that he could not have expressed it in relations with a woman.

Sexual asceticism was found in early Greek philosophy and it became increasingly prominent in the Hellenistic age. As this side of the Greco-Roman civilization is not admired in modern secular culture, little attention has been given to its influence. From the Renaissance to the present day, the ancient Greeks have been associated with a balanced ethic — “nothing overmuch.” Of course, beginning with Homer that rational moral mean can be traced. But some of the more recent studies show that ascetic movements were also significant. In the Roman era an extreme ethic was popular among eclectic philosophers who drew on the earlier asceticism of Pythagoreanism, Platonism, and Cynic-Stoicism. Philosophers such as Cicero, Philo, Plotinus, and Porphyry — all scathing in their denunciation of physical pleasure — had a powerful impact on what came to be known as the Christian ethic. This ascetic tendency among philosophers, coupled with the popular veneration for virginity in cults of the Mediterranean area, partially eclipsed the biblical belief in the sanctity of the physical.

By the end of the patristic era Christians generally believed that all the major biblical characters who were not explicitly associated with spouses and/or children were celibates. Elijah among the prophets and John among the apostles were the “virgins” most frequently praised. Others commended as having this supposed *summum bonum* were Miriam, Joshua, Elisha, Jeremiah, and Daniel in the Old Testament. Joseph, John the Baptist, Barnabas, Timothy, Paul, and all the other apostles, except Peter, were held to be celibates. Doubtless each of the other outstanding personalities — such as Peter, the Hebrew patriarchs, Moses, Deborah, Samuel, David, Solomon, Job, Isaiah, and Ezekiel — would also have been deemed virgins if there had not been an incidental remark in Scripture about a spouse or a child who belonged to them.

In orthodoxy, Jesus became the model for virginity among males and Mary among females. By means of a grotesque typology, Bishop Irenaeus presented Jesus and his mother as anti-types of Adam and his wife. According to that influential church father, our first parents lived in an unconsummate marriage until they sinned. Jesus and his mother, unlike Adam and Eve,

never indulged in sex, and thereby they restored corrupt mankind to the good graces of God.⁵ In the third century the earlier tradition held by some Christians that Jesus married was squelched and the speculation by others that Jesus was perpetually virginal coagulated into unquestioned dogma.

In the fourth century some church fathers replaced martyrdom with virginity as the supreme virtue. With the rise of monasticism a rift between secular and sacred vocations emerged, and celibacy gradually became the *sine qua non* of the holier life. The monks assumed that pain was purer than pleasure, so much attention was given to ridding life of all fleshly satisfactions except those absolutely essential for individual survival.

Augustine is most to blame for the sexually ascetic ethic of Latin Christianity. His training in the pagan classics, coupled with a guilt complex resulting from youthful excesses, caused him in later life virtually to identify pleasure with sin. Augustine believed that couples who fall in love also fall in morality. Cupid love effects a lowering of virtue while spiritual love, divorced from sexual intercourse, causes a heightening of virtue. Indulgence of the tender passions was considered incompatible with total consecration.

Augustine denounced Bishop Julian who held that sexual desire was not necessarily defiling and that it was intrinsic to human nature. Julian concluded that Jesus had sexual desire and that Christians who marry are not second class citizens in the kingdom of God. But the Bishop of Hippo argued that it was impossible for Jesus the perfect man to have sexual desire which is tainted with evil. Julian, who was condemned as a heretic, was closer than Augustine to the authentic biblical ethic pertaining to sex and marriage. *A propos* of ironical heresies such as this, David Mace laments:

It is a great pity that the inhibited Christian mind has obscured for us all too often those wholesome features of Old Testament marriage. Some of the statements of the early [Christian] fathers, with their implications concerning the unspiritual and even unwholesome nature of the appointed means of human generation, would have sounded gravely heretical in Hebrew ears.⁶

Jesus, who endorsed the marital standard embodied in the Genesis creation story, would also have rejected Augustine's sexual ethic.

Augustine and Aquinas, the main pillars of medieval orthodoxy, differed little in their sexual asceticism. Both damned marriage with faint praise by making invidious comparisons of its lower good to the higher good of virginity. Both believed that marriage was a concession to human weakness and that the curse of sexual desire had been perpetuated throughout history from the aboriginal disobedient pair.

In modern history all Christian churches have made efforts to de-escalate the medieval anti-sexual crusade and restore an awareness of the sanctity of sexuality. The sin-sex syndrome which came into Christianity from Hellenistic dualism has been the cause of an apostasy that has been most difficult to extricate. Yet it is becoming increasingly apparent to most Christians, as it was to Orson Hyde, that the intimate encounters between husband and wife can enhance the life-style of even the holiest of men. More psychosomatic wholeness would result if there were revived the Hebraic outlook that marital coitus is at least as hallowed as virginal abstinence,

and that a married Savior need not be regarded as less pure than one who was a lifelong celibate.

¹Orson Hyde, *The Journal of Discourses of Brigham Young*, 4 (1857), p. 259.

²Ogden Kraut (author and printer), *Jesus Was Married* (1969), p. 10.

³Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press 1953), p. 313.

⁴*Talmud*, Kiddushin 29a.

⁵Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5,19,1;3,22,4.

⁶David Mace, *Hebrew Marriage: A Sociological Study* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), p. 262.

I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.

— Thomas Jefferson

