

CHAPTER ONE

WAS JESUS MARRIED?

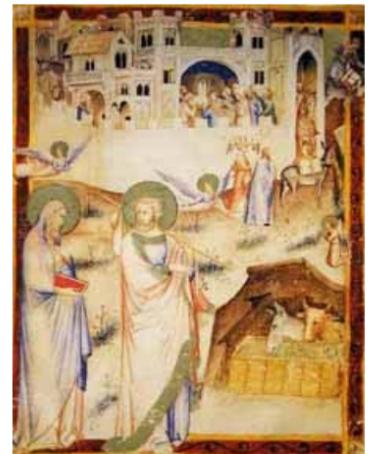
Is There a Historical Record?

Dan Brown's character Sir Leigh Teabing says that the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is a matter of historical record and that Jesus could not possibly have been celibate given the Jewish customs of the day. This has provoked Christian writers to claim that most reputable scholars agree Jesus was not married.¹ Are any of these assertions true?

The reality is that there is no definitive evidence on the marital status of Jesus. We cannot prove he was married, and we cannot prove he was not. Both options are possible, and both plausible.

Though most of the information we have about Jesus is found in the New Testament, and many commentators on this topic seem to treat the New Testament as a historical account, it is not always historically accurate. The gospels were meant to convey the "good news" of the Christian message. They were written for the purpose of teaching new Christians, not as historical records. The four New Testament gospels have many contradictions and inconsistencies among them and compared with other historical records. For example, though the Gospel of Luke tells the story of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem because of a census (Luke 2:1–7), the historical information we have tells us the census was taken when Jesus was ten years old and applied to Judea, not to Galilee, which was under a different government. According to Luke's genealogy for Jesus (Luke 3:21–38), the family connection to Bethlehem was in the distant past, several generations before. There is no conceivable reason why Joseph would have been ordered to go there to register for a census. A census of Joseph and his family would have been taken in Nazareth.²

The Gospel of Matthew tells a completely different story. In that version Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt because Herod is killing Jewish firstborn sons (Matt. 2:13–15). We have records of numerous atrocities committed by Herod, but



ABOVE Miniature from *The Book of Hours* by the Master of James IV of Scotland. Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem for a census, according to the story from the Gospel of Luke, but there is no record of a census taken at that time.

OPPOSITE PAGE *Noli me Tangere* by Frederico Barocci (1535–1612).



Flight to Egypt from *John of Berry's Petites Heures* (14th century). In the Gospel of Matthew, Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt after they have been warned by an angel that Herod will try to kill Jesus.



Massacre of the Innocents by Fra Angelico (ca. 1400–1455). Herod's soldiers are shown killing male children, illustrating the story that appears only in the Gospel of Matthew. There is no historical record that such a massacre actually took place.

there is no record that he killed firstborn sons. This story is most likely based on the story in Exodus 1:15–18.³

The stories of the journeys to Bethlehem and Egypt were probably used to show that Jesus had fulfilled prophecies that the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem and Egypt (Matt. 2:5–6, 15), rather than to record historical events.⁴ Because a primary purpose of the New Testament gospels was to establish doctrine by attempting to prove Jesus was the Messiah or was divine, we must use them with caution as a source of historical information.

The New Testament tells us nothing directly about the marital status of Jesus or of any of the male disciples. It was the general custom of the time to refer to women in terms of their relationships to men, such as Mary, the wife of Clopas, or Mary, the mother of James. If a woman was described as a wife or mother, we can surmise that she was married. No such information is given about the men.

We know that Peter was married, because Jesus healed his mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14–15; Mark 1:29–31; Luke 4:38–39), but we hear nothing about his wife. Since we hear nothing of other wives either, we might conclude that most of the male disciples of Jesus were not married and that Peter was probably a widower. Paul, however, tells us that this was not the case. In a letter to the community at Corinth, he says, “Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas [Peter]?” (1 Cor. 9:5) In other words, by the time of Paul, probably from the late forties to the sixties of the first century, many male disciples, including Peter, were traveling around with their wives.

It is possible, of course, that the apostles Paul talks about all married or remarried after the crucifixion, but that would certainly argue against any theory that Jesus advocated celibacy. Some commentators have even claimed that the “wives” Paul talks about were not really wives but preaching partners who traveled with the male apostles. That seems to be a case of shaving a square peg to fit it in a round hole. Paul’s statement is straightforward—the men were traveling with their wives—and he most likely meant what he said. We can conclude that many of the male disciples of Jesus were probably married at the time they were with Jesus, but their marital status was not mentioned in the New Testament.



ABOVE *Saint Peter Preaching* by Fra Angelico (ca. 1400–1455). In European art, Peter is shown traveling and preaching alone, though the letters of Paul tell us he had a wife who traveled with him.

The gospels of the New Testament were written from 40 to 110 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. It is unlikely that any of the gospels were written by people who were present at the events described. We have no reliable information about the identity of the writers or where the gospels were written. The figures of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were attached to the gospels through later legend.

Stories about Jesus were passed on through oral transmission during the first century after his death, and the written text contains only a very small portion of the information that was once available in the oral tradition. The events recorded in the gospels were the ones considered important by the writers or redactors.

The four gospels of the New Testament are inconsistent on many points, including what Jesus said in certain situations like his trial, what others said to him, and what events took place. This inconsistency may be partly due to variation in the oral tradition. (See Chapter Four.)



Were There Celibate First-Century Jews?

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law. Mosaic from Chora Church, Istanbul (14th century). This story is the only indication we have that Peter was married.

There are three main possibilities regarding both the marital status of Jesus and his teachings about marriage. The first is that Jesus was unmarried and celibate, and taught that celibacy was superior to marriage. This was the view of the early Church, and though most Protestant churches have rejected the Catholic Church's teaching on asceticism and a celibate clergy, there seems to be a strong emotional reaction among many Christians to the possibility that Jesus was sexually active.



The popular writers that Dan Brown relies on reject this first possibility. Brown has Langdon say that it was not possible for Jesus to be celibate because celibacy was condemned in the Judaism of his time. In this the author is incorrect.

According to Flavius Josephus and the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (left), there were at least two Jewish groups of the time that practiced celibacy: the Essenes and the Therapeutae. A younger contemporary of Jesus, the Roman Pliny the Elder, wrote that a community of Essenes was located around Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.⁵ Pliny, however, claimed that the community was all male and completely celibate. Archaeological evidence of female burials at Qumran shows that either this is not the same community Pliny was referring to or he got some of his facts wrong. The second is the more likely, and it raises questions about the accuracy of the other accounts as well.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and Josephus indicate that a few male members of the community remained celibate in the same way men were bound to abstinence during a holy war.⁶ The majority of Essenes were married and engaged in sexual intercourse for purposes of procreation, though not for pleasure.⁷ The Essenes, therefore, were sometimes celibate, but they did not challenge the Jewish tradition of marriage or the necessity of procreation.

The Therapeutae, who lived outside of Palestine, had both men and elderly women as members and seemed to choose celibacy as a way of life. They lived in isolation in separate communities and did not include women of childbearing age, so they did not interfere with or reject procreation.⁸

It was clearly possible for a Jewish man of the time of Jesus to choose celibacy without being considered an outcast. But the possibility does not prove that Jesus actually did so or even make it probable. We know that the Essenes and the Therapeutae were celibate because Josephus, Philo, and Pliny all found the groups' sexual practices worth mentioning. Celibacy was not unknown at the time, but it was unusual enough to be remarked upon.

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