

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MAY 24, 2006

Could Jesus have had a wife?



In the wake of the DaVinci Code release, I thought it would make for a nice thought experiment to ask whether Jesus could have had a wife. Does it matter? What's at stake in the question? What significance does Jesus' marital status have for his identity as Lord and Savior of the world?

Note that I am not asking the very different question "did Jesus have a wife?" Such a question is rightly

established by historical inquiry.

For instance, I find the specific suggestion that Jesus hooked up with Mary Magdalene highly dubious, as there are no trustworthy documents that make such a claim. Even those that hint at it do so in a mythological way that has little to do with history and are embedded in a gnostic philosophical schema that identifies their relationship as a sort of mind-meld, and therefore the furthest thing from fleshy relations. In light of the historical record, a cover-up surrounding a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene is pure fantasy .

The broader historical question of whether Jesus had a wife (other than Mary Magdalene) is best left open. Most of the documentation makes no mention of Jesus' marital status. To say conclusively that Jesus was single is an argument from silence. We hear about his father, mother and brothers, and therefore could say that if he had a wife she would have been at least mentioned as they are. It is thus *probable* that Jesus was single. But probability is not conclusive certainty. What we can say with certainty is that if Jesus had married, we know nothing of it nor was it particularly relevant information to those who preserved his memory.

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The stark silence on the matter from the Gospels and other records makes possible the pure speculative (i.e., not historical) thought experiment I want to explore: *Could* Jesus have had a wife? Is there some reason why Jesus must be single to be who he is and do what he does?

Some would be inclined to say that Jesus' singleness is connected to his sinlessness. Jesus was sinless and so therefore does not engage in the "necessary evil" of sexual intercourse. Needless to say, I think such a connection is an incredibly bad idea. I do not believe that sex is inherently sinful. Therefore, there is no logical necessity requiring Jesus to abstain from sex in order to be a sinless sacrifice.

More to the point, some might say that Jesus' divinity is at stake in this matter of his singleness. If Jesus had a wife, then he could not be divine. This seems to be the assumption of *The DaVinci Code*, which incorrectly and unimaginatively represents the problem of Christology as a choice *between* the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Orthodoxy Christianity has from early times affirmed *both* the divinity *and* the humanity of Jesus. It is not a coincidence that *The DaVinci Code* focuses exclusively on Nicaea 325, which affirmed the full deity of Christ, but makes no mention of Chalcedon 451, which affirmed the full humanity of Christ. Christians need not feel threatened by the suggestion that Jesus led a fully human life, which in principle could have included marital relations. Of course, I am not saying that he *did* have a wife. I am just saying that Christians can handle the thought that he *could* have had a wife.

Of course, this is just a thought experiment. We ought not to speculate about such things for too long. Precisely *because* the Gospels do not speak about the matter, we should be careful not to focus too much on these distracting lines of inquiry. We are called to attend to Scripture in what it *does* say, not what it could have said.

Nevertheless, this thought experiment hopefully shows what is at stake in the ideas and objections that are floating around today: namely, not that much. The drama of *The DaVinci Code* might make it seem like a big deal, but Christians have dealt with greater challenges than this before. In the face of such "heresy lite," we can calmly but confidently respond to the objection by pointing back to the truth of Jesus Christ.

Any thoughts?

Have I misrepresented the historical record concerning Jesus' marital status?

Is there some good theological reason for denying even the possibility that Jesus was married?

Does the sheer vehemence of Christian reaction to *The DaVinci Code*

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reveal something about our own forgetfulness of the full humanity of Christ?

How do we best respond to such tantalizing alternatives?

Labels: [Christology](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 2:40 PM

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24 Comments:

At [3:42 PM, May 24, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I guess my theory has always been that it would have been socially irresponsible for a man who knew for a fact that he would die young to get married. On the other hand if you tried hard enough you could argue that Jesus must have been married in order to be tempted to cheat on his wife in order for it to be true that he was "tempted in all ways like we are". I don't see any serious theological issue with a married Jesus. However if he had kids that's a whole different story. Which leads us back to my first point. To leave a young widow without kids to take care of her would be pretty low. To leave little (potentially) divine ankle biters around is also problematic. So if not "doing unto others..." and not showing love and compassion are sin then I guess you could argue that Jesus could not have been the sinless Lamb if he chose to marry. Ok I'll shut up now.

At [4:01 PM, May 24, 2006](#), [Eric](#) said...

Great thoughts as always. Many Christians have argued that we can simply dismiss the book as fiction, that it has no spiritual value for faithful followers of Christ. While I don't think the book in any way provides us a new vision into who Christ is, I do think it provides a poignant moment for reflection along the lines of your post. Why is our knee-jerk reaction to reject that Jesus could have been married? Certainly, the historical improbability of it in light of the textual evidence is partly behind the response, but I wonder if there is something more. Have we so calcified our vision of the "historical Jesus" that when jarring counter-visions come into view, we simply reject them? Is such a strict demarcation of who Jesus can be healthy to our faith? Are we closing ourselves to new possibilities?

At [5:44 PM, May 24, 2006](#), [Amanda](#) said...

Hmmm--you've got me thinking (again).

I can't think of any theological reasons why marriage would be a problem; although I would be surprised if that were the case.

It would seem strange for Jesus to tell John to take Mary as his mother while on the cross and not hand over his wife for someone to look after as well.

["The Father is Greater than I" \(Bible Brain Buster...](#)

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Amanda

At [9:15 PM, May 24, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Hear, hear! It cuts both ways, the conservative who gets angry because he or she assumes it is unbiblical to suggest Jesus was married (wrong) and the self-proclaimed "subversive" who thinks it's somehow enlightened to suggest, "You know Jesus might have been married" (boring). Probably not, but no sweat.

At [11:47 PM, May 24, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

If Jesus was married, doesn't that kind of dismiss the whole symbolism and theology of him as the Bridegroom and the Church as his Bride?

Wouldn't that be adultery on his account?

At [1:09 PM, May 25, 2006](#), [ap](#) said...

If the connection between procreation and marriage is as strong as I think it is, then I don't believe Jesus would have married without intending to procreate. And hindsight reminds us that a procreating God raises issues of ontology that can cross one's eyes.

At [1:36 PM, May 25, 2006](#), [Kristopher](#) said...

he wouldn't of had time for a wife.

At [2:28 PM, May 25, 2006](#), [Denise](#) said...

It seems that Mark 10 does need to be taken seriously here:
7 For this cause a man will leave his father and mother, and will join to his wife,
8 and the two will become one flesh, so that they are no longer two, but one flesh.

This seems pretty problematic when considering the coming together of a fully divine/human husband and a strictly human wife. Of course, we do have the virgin birth... but does that work in reverse?

At [9:56 PM, May 25, 2006](#), [Aaron](#) said...

It is of no consequence to my faith ... I think you are right on most if not all accounts. Children don't really bother me either ... I don't think there were any, nor do I think he was married ... but neither would shake my faith.

At [11:21 PM, May 25, 2006](#), [Ben Robinson](#) said...

Mark W. beat me to the point I intended to present. I have read both the book and seen the movie (of the daVinci Code) and after considerable reflection am concerned with whether the marriage of Jesus with an earthly wife would undermine his marriage with the

Church. To me that's the most serious issue that arises with such speculation.

At [8:00 AM, May 26, 2006](#), [Dave & Lynnette Mason](#) said...

This post has been removed by a blog administrator.

At [8:05 AM, May 26, 2006](#), [Dave & Lynnette Mason](#) said...

When Jesus said "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" He shows his lack of need for regular human relationships, replaced with spiritual ones. I think Jesus would have been "married" to the Father and not have the need for a human marriage. Although I guess I agree that it would not have been sin for him to have taken a wife.

Being able to perform miracles probably would have really helped with his "honey-do" lists...later

At [9:05 AM, May 26, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I don't think there is an issue with Jesus being married and his bride being the church. Death releases the bonds of marriage and only after his death did the church as we know it start.

At [9:38 AM, May 26, 2006](#), Ben Davis said...

I see the point that an earthly marriage complicates the "bride of Christ" metaphor. But, it's a metaphor, so it is not ruled out necessarily by the possibility of a wife. The church can be the "body of Christ" even though Jesus had a physical body too.

At [1:27 PM, May 26, 2006](#), [taj](#) said...

I have to say that I really would not have a problem were we to learn that Jesus had a wife. I cannot think of a better husband.

As far as how this might undermine the whole church-as-bride business, I think we're worrying a little too much about the issue. The writers of the Gospels still felt compelled to include this metaphor in their accounts, regardless of Christ's marital status, of which I am sure they were aware. No worries on my end.

At [2:12 PM, May 27, 2006](#), [Ben Robinson](#) said...

I don't think we can so easily dismiss the complication of the Church as Christ's bride by simply appealing to "metaphor." Perhaps we are not taking seriously enough the implications of what it means to speak in such a way.

I would think it of no consequence that Jesus had a wife *if there was no mention of the Church being Christ's bride*. I would not even be that concerned with the ontology of Jesus' progeny. There is nothing about Jesus having a wife that would jeopardize his ontology, nor his work. But I have to refrain from saying there would be no theological

conflict with Christ having a bride and the Church as Christ's bride.

God often related himself in marital language to the nation of Israel. The book of Hosea, for example, presents its message by viewing God as a faithful spouse even unto an unfaithful spouse. The prophets long spoke of God's relationship with Israel in marital terms before the incarnation. If the Church is the new Israel, then God has not severed his marriage relationships with Israel nor has the marriage motif begun solely after Christ's death. The marriage motif is strung out throughout the entire biblical narrative.

If we want to understand the Church as Christ's bride *only* metaphorically, fine. But we ought also acknowledge that metaphors are not used flippantly. They express something of great significance. The relationship that Christ has with the Church is of such intimacy that the chosen descriptive is marriage.

It seems it would be irresponsible for God, who has consistently shown himself faithful in the covenant with his people, to enter into another marital covenant with a woman during his earthly ministry.

At [8:35 PM, May 28, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

For all the hype... great director, and a historically good actor to boot... the movie was just terribly done. But anyway, I wonder how the early church would have responded to allegations that Jesus was married. John, help me out here, let me know when the gnostic texts suggesting his close relationships with Mary were discovered, and how the church reacted (other than, "they burned the books.") I wonder if we are responding in a way that the early church would have found nearly blasphemous.

For some reason, I find the argument from silence here much more compelling than I normally do. One would think that Paul would have made a comment about it when telling people 'that it's best to stay single...' That would have really been a good point to say "Sure, Jesus didn't, but that's because..."

At [11:05 PM, May 28, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Sniper,

Isn't your example exactly a place where the silence on the matter proves the opposite? If early Jesus-traditions stated emphatically that Jesus was single, wouldn't Paul be likely to substantiate his preference for singleness on the basis of Jesus' singleness. Yet Paul strikingly makes no such appeal in I Cor 7, suggesting that Jesus' marital status was at minimum irrelevant and possibly even unknown to Paul.

As for the proper response to DaVinci Code and other contemporary heresies, that is the bigger issue at hand that interests me. Generally speaking, in the course of history book burning kicks in after hundreds of years of argument. We should consider pamphleteering and dialoging for a while before we start burning (if ever). I believe one can support a robust account of heresy without burning books.

At [11:18 PM, May 28, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Ben & Ben re: Marital Metaphor

I think you guys have hit on a deep theological issue concerning the marital status of Jesus. I believe it is especially insightful to identify this as the locus of consequence instead of some ontological puzzle surrounding progeny (which betrays Hercules-like misunderstandings of Christology).

Ben Davis is probably right that, logically speaking, there is no inherent necessity requiring Jesus to be single for the bride of Christ metaphor to work.

Ben Robinson is probably right to warn us against using the designation "metaphor" in a minimalistic way and encouraging us to take seriously the theological implications of Biblical imagery.

I think this avenue of discussion raises a question about how much theological claims can guide us in making historical judgments. In other words, what are the limits to such speculations? This post-&-comment string was certainly lively, but was it fruitful? Have we come to know and understand our Lord in a deeper way because of the train of thought instigated by yours truly? I would like to think it has been edifying, at least in as much as it has propelled us to search the Scriptures. What do you think? What is the purpose and/or benefit of a speculative inquiry?

At [10:12 AM, May 29, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

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At [10:34 AM, May 30, 2006](#), [brookssayer](#) said...

From a passage that has traditionally been highlighted as a reference to Christ: Isaiah 53:8 "By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken." (NIV) This "who can speak of his descendants" talk MIGHT be some biblical evidence for Jesus not having any offspring, but is far shy of eliminating marriage as a possibility. (Notice that this verse comes through to the English differently in some other translations)

But of note is the fact that this profile of Jesus foretold in this passage does not lend to me, as a modern day reader, that Jesus was a great piece of "marriage material." But that's just to my 21st Century ears. (no beauty in appearance, despised, rejected by men probably doesn't appear often @ eharmony.com) That's all I have.

At [12:46 PM, May 31, 2006](#), [Thinking in Ohio](#) said...

I simply want to compliment you on this post, John. You've handled a very controversial issue with tact, wisdom and depth! Your point about Chalcedon is especially helpful in any discussion of church tradition and our doctrinal view of Christ's dual nature. Thanks for pointing out the obvious (but missed on my part) lop-sided emphasis on Brown's part.

So just keep thinking and writing so we can learn with you!

At [5:53 PM, June 13, 2006](#), [Siarlys Jenkins](#) said...

You are getting more interesting than Keith Drury! And he's awfully good. I've had this discussion informally with a Coptic friend who abhors the idea that Jesus "defiled himself by having sex." I too don't see it as defiling. He WAS both fully human AND fully divine, according to orthodox doctrine. I don't adhere to whatever those church councils said -- they were human after all. But no, there is no fundamental reason Jesus could not have had a wife. If he did, it

wasn't important enough to mention. Therefore, why should we care?

At [10:14 PM, July 28, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

It seems to me that since God called Israel his wife, albeit unfaithful, and the church is the extension of the faithful saints and is referred to as the bride of Christ and we are at present the body of which He is the head that we need to accept that we are His espoused bride. Those who are tempted to believe Christ was married just don't know the Scriptures and will fall for strong delusions as the Scripture predicts.

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