



Summer Fellows Research 2017

# WAS JESUS MARRIED?

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Any attempt to separate the historical Jesus of Nazareth from the mythical Jesus Christ is always met with skepticism. There are a fair number of scholars who believe the task to be nearly impossible because almost every written account of Jesus is found in a Gospel.<sup>1</sup> It is generally agreed upon that gospels are “testimonies of faith composed by communities of faith and written many years after the events they describe”.<sup>2</sup> Thus each account cannot be taken as unbiased historical records but pieces of faith based puzzles which attempt to portray Jesus in a particular fashion. However, countless scholars have developed countless methods to separate the somewhat factual from the purely fictional. By standing on the shoulders of these countless scholarly giants, it becomes increasingly feasible to formulate possible logical answers to fundamental questions about the life of Jesus of Nazareth. For example, was he married?

As Christianity has developed, Jesus’s chastity has become increasingly important. The importance of Jesus’s virginal state has become so important that many find any suggestion to the contrary offensive. But without historical accounts definitely written by a contemporary, nothing about Jesus can be stated with certainty. Thus it cannot be unequivocally stated that Jesus was or was not married. The debate over his marital status can only be contrasting possibilities, based upon those accounts which are deemed most accurate and reliable.

Apart from the stories of Jesus’s miraculous conception and birth, most written accounts completely omit any mention of Jesus’s adolescence. Of the relatively small number of accounts which do mention Jesus as an adolescent, the Infancy Gospel of Thomas is the only one which states outright that Jesus had an extraordinary childhood and upbringing. The stories of Jesus as an adolescent in other accounts do not support that Jesus’s childhood was significantly different

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<sup>1</sup> Géza Vermès, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013), XXVI.

than that of any other Jewish peasant living in first century Palestine. For example, in the Gospel of Luke, Mary and Joseph return to Jerusalem to find a twelve-year-old Jesus at the temple “discussing with doctors”.<sup>3</sup> While this account is clearly meant to show Jesus’s wisdom beyond his years, it is not proof that his childhood was out of the ordinary. As was the custom in second temple Judaism, Mary and Joseph brought their twelve-year-old to visit the temple for Passover.

It should be noted that according to the scholars collectively known as The Jesus Seminar, the story of a young Jesus and the doctors in Luke was a fabrication. This particular account was marked in black, meaning “Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a larger or different tradition”.<sup>4</sup> The Seminar made this decision based upon the fact that the account is not found in any other Gospel.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, there are a larger number of accounts which point towards the conclusion that Jesus grew up as an average Jewish Peasant.

Perhaps the best examples can be found in the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel begins when an adult Jesus is first marked as the messiah when John the Baptist baptizes him in the river Jordan.<sup>6</sup> Jesus’s mother Mary—along with his siblings—believe that he is not the messiah, and rather is possessed.<sup>7</sup> When he visits his hometown of Nazareth during his ministry, almost none of the Nazarenes believes that he is the Messiah. Jesus is recorded to have lamented, “No prophet goes without respect, except on his home turf and among his relatives and at home!”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Robert W Funk, Roy W Hoover, and Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus : New Translation and Commentary* (New York; Toronto; New York: Macmillan ; Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993), bk. Luke 2:41-52.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., bk. Mark 1:10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., bk. Mark 3:20-21 and 31-35.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Mark 6:4.

This quote was marked by the Jesus Seminar in pink, meaning “Jesus probably said something like this”.<sup>9</sup> The reasoning behind this rating of probability was because similar quotes can be found in Matthew 13: 57, John 4: 44, Luke 4:24, and Thomas 31:1. It was very nearly marked in red, meaning “Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it” but some fellows in the seminar believed the quote to have a “proverbial ring to it”.<sup>10</sup> If Jesus had been brought up extraordinarily or had proven himself to be special in his adolescence, then it would be doubtful that he would face such overwhelming doubt in Nazareth.

In fact, Jesus’s ill-received homecoming could be understood as proof that he was not the messiah. It would have been more compelling for those who wrote the Gospels to omit the account or replace it with a positive reception in Nazareth. Instead of altering his homecoming, the writers of the Gospels stressed that Jesus was not able to perform miracles there because of the skepticism and distrust of the Nazarenes. It is almost as if the writers are attempting to retroactively punish the Nazarenes for not recognizing Jesus as the messiah.

According to the historian E.P. Sanders, incidents such as this should be interpreted as the most reliable stories in the Gospels. He applies the same reasoning to the issue of John baptizing Jesus, as this could be construed to mean that John was above Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Just as the writers of the Gospels explain away the skepticism of the Nazarenes, so they explain how John baptizing Jesus does not place him above Jesus. Many of the Gospels place a particular emphasis upon John hesitating to baptize Jesus, and Jesus reassuring him that he is allowing John to do

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>11</sup> Hershel Shanks, *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development* (Washington, DC; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Biblical Archaeology Society ; Pearson, 2011), chap. 2, 55.

this.<sup>12</sup> Both Jesus's baptism and negative homecoming were clearly important and well-known enough accounts for the writers Gospel to be forced to include them.

The most logical conclusion seems to be that Jesus was raised as an average male in a Jewish household in first century Palestine. The customs and traditions of such an upbringing meant that Jesus would have been married between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. During this time period marriage was an economic and legal arrangement made by the parents. Traditionally the children were not consulted. It would have been at the detriment to the family for a son not to marry, as the wife would come live with the family and help with housework.<sup>13</sup> Thus it was extremely abnormal for an average Jewish male living in first century Palestine to remain unmarried.

Admittedly, in almost every Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth is portrayed as an adult man without a wife. This is traditionally interpreted to mean that Jesus was never married. It is equally as possible that Jesus had been married in his adolescence, but had been separated from his wife. Most likely this separation from his wife was due to his affiliation with the Essenes. The Essenes were a prevalent sect of second temple Judaism, and therefore they had established multiple tight-knit yet isolated communities throughout first century Palestine.<sup>14</sup> The sect's communities were constituted only of men who were committed to living an ascetic, communal, chaste, and extremely disciplined life. Jesus's ties to the Essenes are apparent when the laws and codes he preaches against are compared to those of the Essenes outlined in *The Wars of the Jews* by Josephus Flavius.

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<sup>12</sup> Funk, Hoover, and Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*, bk. Matthew 11:3.

<sup>13</sup> William E Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?: The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

<sup>14</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Israel & The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Wakefield, R.I: Moyer Bell and its subsidiaries, 2000), 140.

Josephus claims to have gone through all three prevalent sects of Judaism—the Sadducees, Pharisees, and the Essenes—before deciding for the Pharisees. His account of the Essenes and their laws is very reliable, especially considering how similar his explanations are to those found in the Manual of Discipline. The Manual of Discipline or The Rule of the Community was one of the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Qumran in 1947. The scroll contains in depth explanations of the Essene’s religious ideals, description of important ceremonies, organizational and disciplinary statutes, as well as a discourse on the sect’s mystical doctrine.<sup>15</sup>

There are a large number of similarities between Essene beliefs and practices and those of early Christians. Both groups adopt the concept of human brotherhood and the existence of an immortal soul within a corruptible body. Most notably the two most important rituals in early Christianity—ritual washing and communion—were also derived from the Essenes.

It was imperative to the Essenes to be clean. Members of the community would go to great lengths for cleanliness, including keeping their skin extremely dry rather than rubbing oil on themselves. This would have been particularly painful in the desert sun. It could be argued that when Jesus preaches that the cleanliness of the inside of the body is far more important than the outside, he is preaching against the particularly harsh purity rules of the Essenes in addition to the general over-emphasis upon Kashrut. Jesus taught against outer cleanliness because he believed the attention people paid to it was at the expense of their souls. The constant ritual washing in an Essene community did take up a large part of the strictly regimented day.

According to Josephus and the Manual of Discipline, baptism was the first major stage of initiation into the community. Anyone, no matter gender, class or marital status could be

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 144–47.

baptized.<sup>16</sup> The Essene understanding of baptism is almost exactly that of early Christians. Both groups believed that to be baptized meant that the body and the soul were cleansed.<sup>17</sup> The Essenes believed that the baptized were closer to the Spirit of Light, just as the Christians believed that the baptized were closer to God. However, only those who were able bodied, unmarried, and male could become full members of the Essene community by drinking wine referred to as “the Drink of the Community.” Unlike the Essenes, Jesus allowed anyone to drink the wine of the community. The scholar Barbara Thiering utilizes the Peshet technique to argue that the story of Jesus turning water into wine was a metaphor for this shift.<sup>18</sup> The Peshet hypothesis asserts that the Gospels were written on two levels. The first level is the surface meaning and the second is the metaphorical meaning of each story. Thiering argues that Jesus is allowing for everyone to become members of his community rather than literally turning the water at the wedding into wine.

It is unclear if Jesus became aware of Essene law as a member of an Essene community or through his close relationship with John the Baptist. Either way, his wife would not have been able to live with him during this period. To become a full-fledged Essene, Jesus would have had to leave his wife.<sup>19</sup> According to Josephus, it was not uncommon for men to separate from their wives to join the Essenes.

If Jesus had learned of Essene law by following—or at least living with—John the Baptist, his wife would not have been able to accompany him. It is generally accepted that John the Baptist was himself an Essene for some length of time before leaving and creating his

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<sup>16</sup> Barbara Thiering, *Jesus & the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His Life Story*, 1st HarperCollins ed edition (San Francisco, Calif.: Harpercollins, 1992), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, *Israel & The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 151.

<sup>18</sup> Thiering, *Jesus & the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson, *Israel & The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 139.

ministry. He lived a very ascetic life, famously nourishing himself with honey and bugs, and wearing only a loincloth. His preaching was very similar to the principals held close by the Essenes, if even more apocalyptic.

It is believed that John was an Essene since childhood. He would not have been entirely inducted into the community until he was an adult, as there were very rigid rules and procedures to be followed before someone was a fully-fledged member. However, Josephus recorded that the Essenes would "...adopt other men's children, while yet accepting them as their kin and molding them in accordance with their own principles".<sup>20</sup> This is what most likely happened to John, and thus he would be well-versed in the Essene way of living. Growing up as an Essene would also mean that John never married and could explain why it is generally accepted that John lived and died a virgin. There are no records which document female followers of John, who at a point had a larger following than Jesus and many believed him to be the Messiah.<sup>21</sup> When Jesus had been living with John, there would have been no place for his wife.

It is only logical that Jesus's wife would not have been present for his baptism by John. However, her absence does not mean that she did not exist. With little to no substantial evidence to the contrary, the most logical conclusion is that Jesus had a normal childhood and adolescence. If this was the case, he was almost definitely married. It would have been extraordinarily odd and rare for a Jewish peasant at the time to remain unmarried. The fact that Jesus does not appear on the scene with a wife does not automatically mean that he was not married.

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<sup>20</sup> Flavius Josephus, Martin Hammond, and Martin Goodman, *The Jewish war*, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Flavius Josephus et al., *Jewish antiquities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930).



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