

Was Jesus Married? A Religion Scholar Decodes the Clues

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A 4th Century papyrus fragment, now being called *The Gospel of Jesus's Wife*, has reignited the controversy over whether Jesus was or was not married. While many scholars believe the fragment authentic, and [are awaiting](#) further tests, the Vatican [is calling](#) it an “inept forgery,” and FOX newsman Shepard Smith comments that “Christian tradition obviously holds that Jesus never got married. I mean, whoever heard of Mr. and Mrs. Jesus?”

Karen L. King, Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School, presented the fragment at the September 18 meeting of the 10th International Congress of Coptic Studies in Rome. According to King, this fragment is a 4th Century Coptic work which was probably originally written in Greek in the 2nd Century. The text has eight partially legible lines, so that it reads:

1...not [to] me. My mother gave to me li[fe]...2 The disciples said to Jesus, 3...deny. Mary is worthy of it...4...Jesus said to them, “My wife...5...she will be able to be my disciple...6...Let wicked people swell up...7...As for me, I dwell with her in order to...8...an image.

It is interesting to consider this tantalizing fragment in the light of passages in two other 2nd Century Coptic Gnostic Gospels-----*The Gospel of Mary* and *The Gospel of Philip*, both of which refer to an intimate relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. In *The Gospel of Mary*, Mary Magdalene instructs the disciples concerning teachings which Jesus had revealed to her but not to them. Peter and Andrew say that they do not believe that Jesus really taught these things, but Levi says, “Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us.” In *The Gospel of Philip* we find a related text which says, “The companion (*koinônos*) of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalene. [But Christ loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on the [mouth].” (Scholarly reconstructions of the text are bracketed.)

Considering these three texts together, we could conclude that in certain Gnostic circles of 2nd Century Christianity it was believed that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, enjoying a relationship which was both physically and spiritually intimate. But if it really were the case that they were married, wouldn't there be some evidence of this in the earliest Christian writings—those of the New Testament?

Nowhere do any of the New Testament writings say whether Jesus was married or single. At least not explicitly. In fact, they say nothing about Jesus between the ages of twelve and thirty. These eighteen “missing years” would have been the very time of life for a young Jewish man to get married and start obeying God's commandment to “be fruitful and multiply.” In fact, marriage and offspring were expected. But if Jesus were married, what might be the reason for not disclosing it?

Early Christianity, like other spiritual movements in the Greco-Roman world, was a “mystery religion.” The Christian community required its inner circle to keep certain matters concealed and not reveal them to the uninitiated. This concealment begins with Jesus himself, who tells his disciples to keep to themselves what they know about his miracles and about him being the

Messiah, the so-called “messianic secret.” He says to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of heaven, but for those outside everything comes in parables” (Mark 4:11). The fact that Jesus was married, and the identity of his wife as Mary Magdalene, may be secrets of early Christianity. But they may be secrets which biblical and other early Christian texts actually disclose in a variety of parabolic, allegorical, and cryptic ways.

Take the *Gospel of John*. Chapter 2 tells a story about Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in the village of Cana. It is the first miraculous “sign” he performs. Though the text states that Jesus and his mother are guests at the wedding, they instead behave like the bridegroom and the bridegroom’s mother. In a 1st century Jewish wedding the groom’s family would host the wedding festivities. In the story, when the wedding party runs out of wine, the mother of Jesus, as would be her role if this were her son’s wedding, orders the servants to do whatever he tells them to do. He in turn orders them to fill six large jars with water. After tasting some of the water-turned-to-wine the wedding steward remarks that the “bridegroom” has kept the best wine until last.

The *Gospel of John* also provides a clue that the bride at this wedding is Mary Magdalene. This gospel is structured in a chiastic, or palindromic, form – ABCBA. As part of this structure, the text refers just twice to something that happens “on the third day.” One reference is in the first verse of chapter 2, “On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee...” The other reference is the first verse of chapter 20, the next to the last chapter of the gospel. The chapter begins, “Early on the first day of the week...” which would be the third day after Jesus’ crucifixion, when he foretold that he would be resurrected. Then it reports that Mary Magdalene, alone among the followers of Jesus, comes to the tomb. After discovering it to be empty she encounters the resurrected Jesus in the garden. In other words, the wedding at Cana near the beginning of the Gospel is rhythmically paired with Mary’s encounter with Jesus near the end of the Gospel. The author may be cryptically communicating that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, and that it is as his grieving spouse that she comes and weeps at his tomb.

The wedding theme, with its bride and bridegroom, permeates early Christian literature. Jesus tells a number of wedding parables, and in two of them he refers to himself as a “bridegroom.” The *Book of Revelation* tells us about the “marriage supper” of the “Lamb” (who is Christ) and his “Bride.” In its apocalyptic view the celebration of this messianic banquet at the end of the future millennial reign of Christ will take the form of his wedding to the church, imagined as the “New Jerusalem.” And the *Gospel of Philip* tells us that the holiest of all the sacraments instituted by Jesus is the “mystery” of bride and bridegroom in the “bridal chamber.”

The early Christian wedding motif has ancient Near Eastern and East Mediterranean roots — the *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage) ritual, myths of the Sumerian goddess Inanna and her beloved husband Dumuzi, and Greek Dionysian mysteries. The foundational text for this theme in biblical literature is the *Song of Solomon* (also known as the *Song of Songs*) in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The *Song of Solomon* begins with the bride saying, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” The poetry gets steamier after this, with the male lover “thrusting his hand (*yad*, a euphemism in Hebrew) into her opening,” and we are immersed in images of wine and lovemaking in a luscious garden. Although the erotic wedding poetry of this text is

allegorized and spiritualized in Jewish and Christian interpretations, it was originally understood as being beautifully true on the physical, sexual plane as well.

The *Gospel of John*, by having Jesus turn water into wine at his own wedding with Mary Magdalene, and then having their final encounter take place in a garden, is resurrecting ancient imagery from the *Song of Solomon*. Cryptically, as would be required when writing about a top-secret early Christian mystery, the Gospel appears to reveal that Jesus and Mary are lovers. Perhaps, as the *Gospel of Jesus's Wife* might imply, the secret includes the knowledge that they were married.

Here we may be getting at the reason why orthodox and evangelical Christians respond so defensively when novels and films like *The Da Vinci Code* or *The Last Temptation of Christ* depict Jesus as married, or wishing he were. For centuries the church has cultivated the image of a neutered Jesus, with no human father and a virgin mother. Likewise the medieval church, without any biblical basis, cultivated the image of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute. We tend to imagine holy beings as without genitalia or sexual impulses, and sexual beings as libertines or prostitutes. For those who ascribe to the view of St. Paul, marriage is only for those who cannot control their passions, and the church has regarded the only purpose of sex as being procreational. When Westerners encounter erotic images in Hindu temples of the god Siva they often regard them as pornographic.

Thus the wondrous beauty, delight, and spiritual depth of romantic sexual union are denied. As we have lost the sexual dimension of spirituality, we have also lost the spiritual dimension of sexuality. Reading texts that depict Jesus as sexually active and married appeals to our sense of something sacred that has been lost and is being rediscovered and reclaimed.