

Was Jesus a “rabbi”? Was Jesus married?

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The Wedding at Cana, illumination from the *Grandes heures de Jean de Berry* (1409)

Preamble

First, let us specify that there is no ancient (authentic)¹ document, whether of Jewish, Christian, Gnostic² or pagan origin, which attributes a sexual companion to Jesus. This desire to see Jesus lead a “traditional” married life is a very modern preoccupation. The idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had children did not emerge until the second half of the 20th century³. It has taken a phenomenal turn since the release of *The Da Vinci Code* in 2003, so much so that we can no longer count the number of people who claim to be their descendants...

Argument:

JESUS WAS MARRIED

Many people, including in the scientific community, today claim that Jesus was married. Their main argument can be stated as follows:

“Jesus was certainly married because Jesus was a rabbi and, at the time, every rabbi had to be married and have children.”

Counter argument:

In reality – as we will see – these two statements are false:

1. On the one hand, Jesus was not a rabbi.
2. On the other hand, in Jesus’ day, a rabbi did not have to be married and have children.

¹ It has since been shown that the so-called credit card-sized piece of papyrus wrongly dubbed “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” by Karen L. King (2012) was actually a recent forgery. Only the support is old (7th-8th century). The text was written in the early eighties. See here my article online on Academia.edu: “Le prétendu *Évangile de la femme de Jésus* : un faux manifeste” : [https://www.academia.edu/37273974/The so called Gospel of Jesus s Wife Le pr%C3%A9tendu %C3%89vangile de la femme de J%C3%A9sus un faux manifeste](https://www.academia.edu/37273974/The_so_called_Gospel_of_Jesus_s_Wife_Le_pr%C3%A9tendu_%C3%89vangile_de_la_femme_de_J%C3%A9sus_un_faux_manifeste)

² In the *Gospel according to Philip*, an apocryphal writing classified among the Gnostic texts, the Magdalene is called “the companion” of Jesus. On this question, see my article online on Academia.edu: “Mary Magdalene and the *Gospel according to Philip*”: [https://www.academia.edu/45133579/Mary Magdalene and the Gospel according to Philip Murcia 2021](https://www.academia.edu/45133579/Mary_Magdalene_and_the_Gospel_according_to_Philip_Murcia_2021)

³ With the novel by Níkos Kazantzákis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, published in 1955 and brought to the screen by Martin Scorsese in 1988.

Jesus was not a rabbi

Rabbis are, for the most part, the spiritual heirs of the Pharisees. The term “rabbi” to refer specifically to the rabbis is subsequent to the destruction of the Temple in 70. Prior to that date – although some Pharisees were sometimes retroactively honored with the title of “rabbi” in later rabbinical literature – there was no properly “rabbis”⁴ because rabbinism had not yet been instituted. We can only speak of Pharisees⁵ and scribes. If Jesus could not therefore be a rabbi, in the sense in which we understand it, he was neither a Pharisee nor a Sadducee. He sometimes criticizes them sharply⁶ and does not respect their prescriptions⁷ and, unlike them, he frequents tax collectors and sinners and takes his meals with them⁸. Many of the Pharisees seek to discredit and / or trap him⁹ and they clearly criticize him for not being one of them¹⁰.

The fact that in the Gospels Jesus is sometimes called “rabbi” by his disciples¹¹ does not make him “a rabbi”. The proof is that John the Baptist is also called “rabbi” by his disciples (John 3:26) and that he was certainly not neither a rabbi nor a Pharisee. “Rabbi” simply means “my master”, in Hebrew, and corresponds to the Greek *didaskalos*, “master, teacher”, as John himself takes the trouble to point out to his reader when this term is first mentioned in his gospel:

Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them: “what seek ye?” They said unto him: “Rabbi – which is to say, being interpreted, Master – where dwellest thou?” (John 1:38)

⁴ Rabbi Yehoshuah ben Peraḥiah, for example (early 1st century BC), whose late rabbinical satirical account makes Jesus’ own teacher. See Thierry Murcia, *Jésus dans le Talmud et la littérature rabbinique ancienne*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2014, p. 377-422.

⁵ Gamaliel is a Pharisee: Acts 5:34; 22:3.

⁶ Matthew 3:7; 5:20; 12:34, 38-39; 15:12-14; 16:6, 11, 12; 23:13-39; Mark 8:15; Luke 7:30; 11:39-52; 12:1; 16:14-15; 18:10-14; John 9:40-41.

⁷ Non-observance of fasting days (Matthew 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33), ears crushed on a Sabbath day before being eaten (Matthew 12: 1-8; Mark 2: 23-28; Luke 6: 1-5), omission to wash hands before eating (Matthew 15: 1-2; Mark 7: 1-5; Luke 11:38). On the care lavished on the sick by Jesus on the Sabbath (a day when all work is prohibited), see more specifically Thierry Murcia, *Jésus, les miracles élucidés par la médecine*, Paris, Carnot, 2003.

⁸ Matthew 9:11; Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30; 15:2.

⁹ Matthew 9:34; 12:14, 24, 38; 16:1; 19:3; 21:45-46; 22:15; Mark 3:6; 8:11; 10:2; 12:13; Luke 6:7; 11:53-54; John 7:32; 8:3-6; 11:57; 12:42; 18:3.

¹⁰ “By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?” (Matthew 21:23; Mark 11:28; Luke 20:2).

¹¹ Matthew 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; 11:21; 14:45; John 1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8.

What about rabbinical prescriptions?

It is generally taken for granted that celibacy was condemned by the rabbis and that the absence of descent, if it was voluntary, was regarded as a fault. According to the Talmud, a man should marry between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, and preferably between the ages of eighteen and twenty. By virtue of these prescriptions, any pious Jew would therefore have had the obligation to take a wife and have children.

The reality is not that simple. Rabbinical sources, first of all, are not unequivocal. Talmudic literature presents itself rather as “an ocean” in which we find both texts which condemn celibacy and others which praise the merits of the celibate and chaste rabbi, which proves that there were some. The Talmud has preserved the names of three of them¹² who were in this case¹³ – in addition to Shimon Ben Azzai (2nd century), the best known because frequently cited¹⁴. These rules were therefore far from being respected by all, including by the rabbis themselves.

But most importantly, these rules were not enacted until well after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE¹⁵. Not only were they not yet in effect in Jesus’ day, but these same rabbinical sources testify that even in Judaism after 70 CE, celibacy was still widely practiced. In fact, rabbinic thought, which is heir to Pharisaism, evolved considerably between the 1st century and the beginning of the Middle Ages. And it is especially the rabbis of Babylon (who made up their Talmudic corpus between the 6th century and the end of the 8th century) who discredit celibacy.

Trying to transpose matrimonial rules to Jesus that had not yet been established is therefore to commit an anachronism.

¹² A rabbinical tradition even wants a specific place in Paradise to have been reserved for this category of “Righteous”.

¹³ All references to the unbiblical sources mentioned in this article can be found in *Marie appelée la Magdaléenne : Entre traditions et histoire (I^{er}-VIII^e siècle)*, Presses Universitaires de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 2017, p. 159-167 (Chapter XI entitled “Jésus était-il marié ?”).

¹⁴ Ben Azzai is one of the four rabbis who, according to the Talmud, had the privilege of entering Paradise alive.

¹⁵ According to traditional data and commonly accepted chronology, the Mishnah – the oldest part of the Talmud – was completed around 200-220 by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi.

THE REALITY OF THE PRACTICE OF CELIBACY IN JEWISH SOCIETY IN JESUS' TIME

The situation in the 1st century

First of all, it should be observed that while the “Judaism” we know today amounts to more or less “rabbinism”, things were very different in the first century AD. In fact, properly rabbinical Judaism – essentially Pharisee in essence – did not emerge until after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. In the time of Jesus, Judaism was eminently plural and divided into several “sects”: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Baptists, Therapeutae ... to speak only of the best known. Not only did none of these sects exercise a form of “monopoly”, but most Jews probably did not identify with any of them.

What do contemporary sources say?

All contemporary authors – both Jewish and pagan – Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC - c. 45 AD), Flavius Josephus (37/38 - c. 100 AD), Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD), attest that celibacy was then commonly practiced in the Jewish society of their time and that it was even the norm in certain circles. No document of the time condemns or discredits celibacy. On the contrary, in all the sources of this time which deal with the subject, celibacy is honored. The Jew Philo praises its merits and the Jewish movement of Therapeutae, who practice it, is presented as a model of holiness by the same philosopher. The Essenes – who, Josephus tells us, were the second largest Jewish group in membership after the Pharisees – lived for the most part in the strictest celibacy and are described with admiration by contemporary writers, whether they are Jews (Philo, Josephus) or non-Jews (Pliny the Elder, Dio Chrysostom).

What about the Pharisees?

It is possible that the Pharisees promoted marriage and childbearing, but we are not sure. Paul was of Pharisee obedience (Acts 23, 6; 26, 4-5; Philippians 3, 5) and he had no wife (1 Corinthians 7, 7-8). Some have suggested he was a widower. Either way, he too clearly advocates celibacy (1 Corinthians 7, 1-9). In doing so, Paul does not introduce any novelty. He is only the heir of a certain philosophy of life. For his part, the author of the Book of Revelation, who clearly has no connection with the Apostle Paul, also clearly advocates male virginity:

These (the 144,000) are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, [being] the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb. (Revelation 14:4)

Here is also what Jesus himself said, according to Matthew:

There are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 19:12)

Such remarks clearly sound like an apology for chastity and therefore celibacy. They were not born from nothing but are in tune with the times. We read in *The Wisdom of Solomon* (4:1), a book written just a few decades before the birth of Christianity: “Better it is to have no children, and to have virtue.”

The case of John the Baptist

John the Baptist was the master, or one of Jesus’s spiritual teachers and, at least, his predecessor and Jesus himself presents him as a model. However, John the Baptist himself was certainly not married¹⁶ and yet no one ever tried to find him a wife because this situation never seemed unusual to anyone (what about our famous rabbinical prescriptions which condemn celibacy in his case?). During his lifetime, the Baptist’s opponents seem to have been very much in the minority. In the eyes of most of his contemporaries John was “a just and holy man” (Mark 6:20), believed by many to be a prophet. Jesus even speaks of him as “the greatest among the children of women” (Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28) and presents him as the “new Elijah” (Matthew 11:14; 17:10-13; Mark 9: 11-13; Luke 1:17. See also John 1:21). All this is not trivial because Elijah, precisely – like his disciple Elisha – were known in the ancient Jewish tradition for having remained single (see below). And, while some of his contemporaries wondered if the Baptist would not be the Messiah (Luke 3:15; John 1:20), none, however, thought of reproaching him for his way of life.

Flavius Josephus, for his part, also mentions in his writings a certain hermit named Bannos who was his master for three years and who lived in desert solitudes. It is likewise very unlikely that this other Jewish ascetic, who lived in the 50s AD and who has several points in common with the Baptist, had a wife and children.

Jesus compared only to celibate prophets by his contemporaries

While it seems quite clear that the life that Jesus lives then is not compatible with a married life, there is also a strong indirect internal clue that supports the celibacy thesis. To the well-known question of Jesus to his disciples: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”, They answered him bluntly: “Some [say] John the Baptist¹⁷; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16, 13-14. Cf. Mark 6, 14-16; 8, 27-28; Luke 9:7-9, 19). In another

¹⁶ The oldest Christian documentation also holds that he remained celibate, which, given his way of life, is of course not surprising.

¹⁷ The Baptist has recently died.

place, Jesus himself compares himself to Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:24-27). These few elements, seemingly harmless, are in fact crucial. These four biblical figures, with whom Jesus himself identifies and / or is spontaneously identified by his co-religionists, were not chosen at random. The presence of Jeremiah on this list (Matthew 16:14) immediately catches our attention¹⁸. Indeed, Jeremiah is known to be the only prophet for whom the Bible explicitly tells us he was celibate (not by choice, but following a divine injunction):

Thou shalt not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons or daughters in this place. (Jeremiah 16:2)

As for Elijah and Elisha, an ancient Jewish tradition¹⁹ – attested both by rabbinical and Christian sources – also holds that they remained celibate. In short, Jesus is compared – or he compares himself – only to prophets known to have remained celibate according to the common opinion of the time. It is quite obvious that it is the way of life adopted by Jesus that leads to these comparisons. The opinion of his contemporaries is based only on what they themselves witness. How, moreover, after the death of John, could a man with family responsibilities have been taken for the risen Baptist? Everything suggests that before the destruction of the Temple in 70, the prophetic and messianic atmosphere unquestionably goes hand in hand with celibacy.

SUBSEQUENT TESTIMONIALS CONCERNING THE MARITAL STATUS OF JESUS

What does the oldest tradition say?

The oldest Christian authors (2nd and 3rd centuries) to have explicitly addressed this question (Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Methodius of Olympus) are categorical. According to them, Jesus was celibate. And all of them consider him a model of chastity. A model that the Syrian Tatian (circa 120-180 AD), our oldest witness – sometimes considered one of the fathers of Encratism – would have liked to see extended to all the faithful. Whether their testimony is partisan or not, these are representatives of the oldest tradition.

What do the opponents of Christianity say?

It is noteworthy that no ancient author – including among the fiercest opponents of Christianity (Celsus, Porphyry, Julian the Apostate ...) – has ever reported, or even suggested that Jesus was married and / or had children. The same is true of

¹⁸ The prophet Jeremiah is mentioned only three times in the New Testament, only in Matthew (2:17; 16:14; 27: 9).

¹⁹ Known by scholars of Talmudic literature.

Jewish sources, both rabbinical – supposed to promote marriage – and non-rabbinical. No one among the authors of these various writings – whom one could not accuse of complacency vis-à-vis the person of Jesus – has never thought, nor considered useful, to oppose a denial to the Christian affirmation that Jesus was celibate.

Conclusion

Contrary to what has long been argued – including by many recognized scholars and historians – celibacy was widely practiced in Israel in Jesus' time. Contemporary sources – of all origins – are unanimous. The rabbinical prescriptions aimed at encouraging marriage and procreation were not enacted until later than the time of Jesus and, even within rabbinism, they did not take hold until late. In view of the direct and indirect data we have on the character Jesus and on the historical and socio-cultural background in which he lived, the probability that he was married is in fact very low, in accordance with the oldest tradition.

But one last element must be accounted: you could stay single for a long time before taking a wife. As such, the rabbinic texts that say that a man should marry around the age of twenty are the expression of a desire to establish a norm, rather than a reflection of a lived reality. On the contrary, other Jewish sources indicate that the ideal age for a man to marry was between thirty and forty years. Thus, in another rabbinic writing, it is said:

It is customary for a man to marry at the age of thirty or forty.

Thierry Murcia, PhD, June 2021