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Was Jesus Married?

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In its purest form, the question about whether or not Jesus ever was married could reflect a high regard for the sanctity of a marriage relationship. However, the question about Jesus and marriage is often construed from a less purely motivated angle. From that angle, the question really is, “Was there some secret marriage between Jesus and one of his female followers, and was that marriage hidden for political purposes?” This kind of question has recently reached a new popular level in a novel by Dan Brown entitled *The Da Vinci Code*.¹ Brown suggests that Jesus was secretly married to Mary Magdalene, and that their offspring formed one of the royal families of the Middle Ages. Since those who suspect Jesus of having been married, or at least of having an intimate relationship with one of His female followers, most often identify Mary Magdalene as Jesus’ partner, it will be necessary to paint a biblical picture of Mary and then consider the evidence regarding Jesus and marriage.

Who Was Mary Magdalene?

Mary Magdalene is mentioned several times in the accounts of Jesus’ life in the Gospels. She is best known for having been delivered from demon possession by Jesus and for being the first to see Jesus after His resurrection (Mark 16:9). She was also present at

Jesus’ crucifixion (Matthew 27:55-56) and His burial (Matthew 27:61).

However, Mary Magdalene may actually be best known in popular thinking as a former prostitute who had been forgiven by Jesus. But this unfortunate identification doesn’t reflect biblical teaching. Jesus did forgive a prostitute who washed and anointed Jesus’ feet in the home of a Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50). The verses that follow this account in Luke’s Gospel refer to Mary Magdalene and other women who followed Jesus during His earthly ministry (Luke 8:1-3). However, there is a clear break between these two pericopes, with not even a hint that the sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50 should be identified with Mary Magdalene or, for that matter, any of the other women listed in Luke 8:1-3.

To further complicate the case, another woman by the name of Mary, a sister to Martha and Lazarus, also washed and anointed Jesus’ feet just prior to His crucifixion (John 12:1-8). This was clearly a separate event and a different woman, but the Mary who anointed Jesus prior to His crucifixion has in some cases become confused with Mary Magdalene and the unnamed sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ feet in the home of a Pharisee. The unwarranted conclusion, therefore, has been that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. These associations, however, are without foundation.

How, then, did the idea that Mary Magdalene was a former prostitute become so commonly accepted? Grant says:

Many Fathers of the Church, however, refused, rightly in the opinion of some modern commentators, to identify Mary Magdalene with the Mary who anointed Jesus’ feet or head. Yet the identification gradually gained ground. It was emphatically supported by Pope Gregory I the Great, more than five hundred years later; and ever since then, western Christians have cherished the cult of St Mary Magdalene, the repentant prostitute who was privileged to see the risen Christ.²

This misidentification was only relatively recently withdrawn. Lutzer states, “At any rate, in 1969 the Vatican rightly corrected centuries of misrepresentation and acknowledged that there was no reason to make Mary a repentant harlot.”³

The New Testament simply describes Mary Magdalene as a woman who had been delivered from demonic control and who gratefully followed Jesus during His earthly ministry. To suggest that Mary was a prostitute or, even worse, to suggest that Mary was intimate with Jesus has no basis in the Gospels.

What Evidence Suggests that Jesus was Married?

Why, then, do some people assert that Jesus must have been married? Some argue that marriage was a common expectation in ancient Palestine, and therefore Jesus would have followed the cultural norm and been married. But in every society there are any number of people who don't follow the pattern of the majority. Even the apostle Paul, a Pharisee by training, endorsed celibacy as a legitimate calling for those who want to devote greater attention to serving God (1 Corinthians 7:7-8). Jesus certainly had a higher calling than to simply follow societal norms.

Some liberal scholars appeal to what are known as the Gnostic Gospels, a collection of ancient writings by a heretical sect dating over two hundred years after the time of Jesus. In one passage in the Gnostic Gospels, the so-called *Gospel of Philip* (62:33-36), Jesus is purported to have favored Mary Magdalene and kissed her often on the face or lips. However, the fragmentary nature of the manuscript that contains the *Gospel of Philip* shows significant gaps in the text, as shown in the following scholarly translation: "And the companion of the [. . .] Mary Magdalene. [. . .] loved her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [. . .]."⁴ These gaps in the text and the uncertainty they imply make it unfeasible to use the *Gospel of Philip* as a foundation for believing that Jesus was married. Did Jesus kiss Mary Magdalene on the face or lips? We cannot be certain because of the gap in the manuscript. As Lutzer says, "So scholars fill in the blank with the word *mouth, face, or forehead*, etc. Actually, for all we know the text might have said 'the hand' or even 'the cheek' since the statement implies that he also kissed his other students—presumably on the cheek as is still done in the Middle East."⁵ Jesus probably never kissed Mary at all.

Apart from unfounded legends and spurious documents like the Gnostic Gospels, there is no evidence that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene or to any other woman.

Could Jesus Be Married without Impugning His Deity?

One motivation for teaching that Jesus was married seems to be the desire to detract from Jesus' deity. If Jesus had been married, and especially if Jesus had had children by that marriage, then Jesus becomes much more "human" in our thinking and much less "divine." While Jesus was both God and man in one person, we must remember that Jesus' deity does make Him unique. There is nothing sinful about marriage. In fact, marriage is sacred in God's sight (Hebrews 13:4). Furthermore, marriage forms a one-flesh relationship between a man and a woman (Matthew 19:4-6). Since Jesus was sinless, and since everyone else has a sinful nature, any marriage Jesus might have entered into would have formed a one-flesh relationship with a sinful soul, something that would be impossible for Jesus to do. As Lutzer states:

Since he was a human being—indeed even a sinless human being—we can assume he could have married. However, because he had both a human nature and a divine nature we must confess it is unthinkable that Jesus, the God-man, could be joined to a sinner in the most intimate physical human bond. If he had married, presumably it would have been to someone as holy as he—which severely limited his options!⁶

In conclusion, there is no reliable historical evidence that Jesus was married. Theologically speaking, it is difficult to see any possibility of Jesus having been married. While Jesus honored marriage by attending the wedding at Cana, and while Jesus upheld the sanctity of marriage, He Himself had a separate and higher calling.

¹ Brown, Dan. *The Da Vinci Code*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

² Grant, Michael. *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, p. 83.

³ Lutzer, Erwin W. *The Da Vinci Deception*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2004, p. 45.

⁴ "The Gospel of Philip." Translated by Wesley W. Isenberg. In *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. Revised Edition. Edited by James M. Robinson. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988, p. 148.

⁵ Lutzer, p. 49.

⁶ Lutzer, p. 56.