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Why Didn't Jesus Get Married?

For thousands of years, Jesus' singleness has been a source of debate over how he expects the leaders of the church to live. Should we assume that singleness is his highest goal for followers who want to be like him? Looking at the lifestyle of rabbinic teachers of his day can shed some light on the issue.

The commandment "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28) has always been strongly emphasized in Judaism, both today and in the first century. It is therefore surprising that Jesus, who in every other way observed the commandments, did not marry – at least the New Testament gives no indication that he had a wife or children.¹

The rabbis taught that one should perpetuate the human race by marrying. It was considered especially significant that the commandment, "be fruitful and multiply," is chronologically the first in the Pentateuch. The school of Hillel ruled that to fulfill this commandment a man must have at least one son and one daughter:

No man may neglect the commandment "Be fruitful and multiply" [Gen 1:28] unless he already has children: according to the school of Shammai, two sons; according to the school of Hillel, a son and a daughter, as it is written, "Male and female created he them." [Gen 1:27]²

Would the members of first-century Jewish society have respected an unmarried 30-year-old teacher? Would his teaching have been given a hearing?

A bachelor rabbi functioning within Jewish society of the first century was not as abnormal as it might first appear. Rabbis often spent many years far from home, first as students and then as itinerant teachers. It was not uncommon for such men to marry in their late thirties or forties. Just as some students today wait to marry until they finish their education, so there were disciples and

even rabbis who postponed marriage until later in life.

One such rabbi was Rabban Gamaliel, the grandson of Rabban Gamaliel the Elder, the apostle Paul's teacher (Acts 22:3; 5:34). As the following story shows, the younger Gamaliel was already a rabbi and already had disciples before he married:

A bridegroom is exempt from reciting the Shema on the first night of his marriage.... When Rabban Gamaliel married he recited the Shema on the first night. His disciples said to him: "Master, didn't you teach us that a bridegroom is exempt from reciting the Shema on the first night?"

"I will not listen to you," he replied, "so as to cast off from myself the Kingdom of Heaven even for a moment."³

Enamored with Torah

Another unmarried rabbi was Shim'on ben Azzai. He lived in the generation immediately after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. It is related of him that in his teaching he so strongly emphasized the importance of the commandment to marry, his colleagues expressed their amazement that he did not do so himself. His answer:

What shall I do? I am enamored with Torah. Others can enable the world to continue to exist.⁴

So we see that it would have been possible for Jesus to have been accepted as a teacher in first-century Jewish society without his being married.

Although Shim'on ben Azzai was not married, he did not endorse the unmarried state. He may have married later in life. Jesus may not have been making a statement about the undesirability of marriage because of his unmarried state either. He was still relatively young when he was crucified, and his death may have come before he would have had a chance to marry.

¹ Michael Hilton and Gordian Marshall point out that the silence of the Gospels might suggest that Jesus was married: "It was so unusual for rabbis not to marry that such a fact [Jesus had not married] would

probably have been mentioned. Thus a Jew reading the Gospels might assume that Jesus was married" (*The Gospels and Rabbinic Judaism: A Study Guide* [Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1988], p. 135).

² M. Yevamot 6:6; cf. b. Yevamot 64a.

³ M. Berachot 2:5. (The Shema was said twice daily by Jews in Jesus' time as a recommitment of one's self to the one true God of Israel. The statement "to cast off the Kingdom of Heaven" means to exempt oneself from God's reign. Even if the rabbi had one moment in all of his life that he was excused from submitting to God as his Lord, he still would not take it.)

⁴ T. Yevamot 8:7.

"Why Didn't Jesus Get Married?" was adapted and abridged from the article, "Jesus, a Jewish Bachelor?" by David Bivin, which is available at www.JerusalemPerspective.com.

For more information or to order the book, *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus: Insights from His Jewish Context*, please visit: <http://www.egrc.net/gdex.html>