

Jesus Was Single Too

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For many different reasons, many of our contemporaries are single. “Single,” though, is not a popular word in many societies. “Bachelor” is usually perceived as meaning someone “not yet married,” as if marriage was the norm and celibacy only a transitional state through which one passes before “getting his/her life in order.”

Many people think the only valid answer to this “problem” of singleness is to marry off singles! However, as Christy R. Robinson says, “Singleness is not a problem or disease for which marriage is a cure. Singleness is a fact of life.”¹

A Lesser Known Aspect of Jesus’ Life

Jesus was single too. Have you thought about that? How did He react to the reality of His singleness? His choice to remain single had to have been a challenge to a very strong social taboo, for in the society of which He was a part when He lived on earth, to remain single was a very rare exception. By not taking a wife, Jesus transgressed the social practices of Judaism. Let’s explore this lesser known aspect of His life.

More than once Jesus surprised His contemporaries by His unusual teaching, His acts, and the way He interacted with His disciples and all kinds of people.² He was not reluctant to break new ground. His determination to bring about true freedom overcame all the resistance that He found. If there is an aspect of Jesus’ life, however, which stood the greatest likelihood of being embarrassing for Him in front of His contemporaries, it would have to be His celibacy. All that is recorded about Jesus’ life makes it evident that He had a single status in His society. By choosing not to be married, Jesus departed radically from the customs of the Jewish society of His time.

Based on what we know of Judaism in the time of Christ, celibacy as a religious vocation apparently did not exist, except among some Essenes, a strict Jewish sect living at the edge of society.³ Before the Middle Ages, in fact, there is no record of any rabbi remaining single, except for Jesus, perhaps John the Baptist, the apostle Paul and a certain rabbi called Simeon ben Azzai.⁴ Rabbi Ben Azzai explained his choice this way: “My soul is married to the Torah.”⁵

The Old Testament taught that priests had to be married. According to the oldest traditions, it seems that it was necessary for the high priest to be married in order to be eligible to proceed to the annual rites of the Feast of expiations, when he was required to offer a sacrifice on behalf of “his house,” that is to say, for his wife and his children.⁶ Even the nazirs, men and women who consecrated themselves to God’s service for a period of time, were not required to be celibate.⁷

*I dedicate this article to all readers who are single, and especially to a personal and very precious list of single people for whom I pray every day.

“Be Fruitful and Multiply”

Marriage was generally considered as the first of the commandments given by God to Adam and Eve, just after their creation, when He commanded them: “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and master it” (Gen. 1:28). A late tradition comments on this order: “Every man is obliged to get married to accomplish the duty of procreation; whoever does not apply himself to perpetuate the human race is like a murderer because he does not allow the image of God to be perpetuated, and puts away from Israel the divine presence.”⁸ Certainly the conviction that procreation was a divine exigency (and not just a privilege) made even more painful the experience of the biblical couples who could not have children.⁹

In order to insure that this procreation commandment was duly observed at the earliest possible opportunity, the Israelites used to arrange for their children to be married while they were very young, the girls even at twelve or thirteen years of age. The preeminent medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides proposed that boys be forced to marriage if they were still single at the age of twenty-five.¹⁰ It seems, however, that force was seldom necessary.

One exception was tolerated: The man who consecrated his life to the study of the Torah could remain single for the duration of his formation, under the condition that he kept control of his sexual appetite.¹¹

The Single Jesus

We can see that Jesus’ choice to remain single was tantamount to transgression in the eyes of the religionists of His day; He did not submit Himself to the first divine commandment—regarding procreation—as it was traditionally understood. According to the mentality of the time, an unmarried man was just half a human being, unable to reach by himself full self-realization. The Babylonian Talmud contended: “He, who remains without a wife, has no joy, no blessing, no happiness, no learning, no protection, no peace: He is not truly a man.”¹² Even worse, without a wife after the age of thirty, Jesus ran the risk of being suspected either of impotence, which was perceived as a curse, or of homosexuality—an abomination in the eyes of the pious Jews (see Rom. 1:26, 27).

A statement in the gospels seems to unveil the suffering Jesus endured at His choice of celibacy: “But he said unto them, all men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother’s womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.” (Matt. 19:11, 12)¹³.

Towards the Choice of a Single Life

These verses from the lips of Jesus contain an important teaching regarding the choice to remain single. For our Lord, celibacy is no longer related to a congenital sexual defect or to forced sexual mutilation (the first meaning of the word “eunuch”). For Jesus, celibacy may be the result of a deliberate choice, a personal vocation—“for the kingdom of heaven.” Celibacy may simply be an important stage in life.

Jesus, who knew the risks related to His earthly life and the demands required by His ministry, avoided marrying a wife who would have soon been a widow. While most of the disciples supposedly married (cf. Matt. 8:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:5), Paul remained single, integrating into his personal mission the new freedom proposed by Jesus. Paul discerned in the attitude of Christ toward marriage that it no longer was an obligation, nor did it convey a superior status upon men and women. Marriage is “honourable” (Heb. 13:5), an option for adults equally acceptable before God when it responds to a true vocation.

“The apostle Paul, the most visible of biblical singles, notes in 1 Corinthians 7 that single people may be able to devote more resources to God and to their spiritual mission.”¹⁴ He advocates that to be single may be not only a choice but a good one, honourable and self-fulfilling, free of any suspicion of social marginalization: “Now concerning the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. . . . I would like that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God, one has this gift, another has that. I say therefore to the unmarried and the widows, It is good for them to stay unmarried as I am” (1 Cor. 7:1, 7, 8). The point that the apostle wants to make clear here is that single people, on a temporary as well as a permanent basis, may consecrate themselves to God and to their mission or vocation as well and perhaps even better than if they were married.

Christy Robinson rightly observes, “Some people *need* to be single for a time during their lives, to give themselves time to grow and mature into all that God has planned for them to be. Even if singleness is a temporary state, the time can be used wisely.”

Marriage and celibacy are both gifts of God. Jesus has opened the way of a new spiritual life in His Kingdom family where each member may freely choose to get married or to remain single. With either of these two beautiful options believers should feel free from social pressure to live in perfect freedom before God.

¹ Christy K. Robinson, “Creating a Single’s Ministry in a Couples’ Church,” *AR* 21/11/96, p. 17.

² See John 6:66; Luke 19:7, Mark 2:23, 24; 7:1-5; Luke 7:39.

³ Flavius Josephus, *Bell* 2:120, 121.

⁴ See “Celibacy,” *Jewish Encyclopaedia*, p. 191 (French edition).

⁵ See Talmud, *Yevamoth* 63b.

⁶ See Leviticus 21:7, 13-15; 16:6, 11, 17, and Talmud, *Yoma* 1:1.

⁷ See Numbers 6:1-21.

⁸ *Schulchan Aroukh*, EH, 1:1.

⁹ See the cases of Sarah requesting the services of a surrogate mother (Gen. 16:1, 2), of Rachel and Leah trying to obtain children from Jacob (Gen. 30:1-3), and of Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:7, 8).

¹⁰ *Schulchan Aroukh*, EH, 1:3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:4.

¹² Talmud, *Yevamoth* 62b, commentary on Gen. 5:2.

¹³ A definition of “*eunuch*” here may include unfitness for marriage together with mere celibacy. “Physical inability by nature or castration is intended in the first two cases mentioned but this is improbable in the third It could be that Jesus is here reacting against a slander spoken against him and his disciples. Because he was unmarried he was perhaps accused of being a eunuch (cf. the change in Matt. 11:19, “a glutton and a drunkard”). Jesus answers by referring to the kingdom of God. One’s joy in it can be so great that one is prepared for the sake of the kingdom to renounce everything else, under some circumstances even marriage.” H.

Baltensweiler, "Eunuch," in *The NIV Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979, vol. 1, pp. 560-561.

¹⁴ Christy K. Robinson, *op. cit.* p. 17.