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Was Jesus single, married or widower?

23 Questions & answers about Jesus Christ, prepared by a team of catholic theologians of the University of Navarre. This is question 4: "Was Jesus single, married or widower?"

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● The facts preserved in the Gospels tell us that Jesus carried out his artisan job in Nazareth (Mark 6.3). When He was some thirty years old,

He began his public ministry (Luke 3:23). During this time of ministry, there were some women who followed Him (Luke 8:2-3) and others with whom He was acquainted (Luke 10:38-42). Although at no time are we told that he lived a celibate life or was married or became a widower, the Gospels refer to his family, to his mother, to his brothers and sisters, but never to His “wife”. This silence is eloquent.

► Jesus was known as the “son of Joseph” (Luke 23:4.22, John 2:45; 6.42) and, when the people in Nazareth are surprised by his teaching they exclaim: “Is this not the carpenter Mary’s son, and brother of James and Joseph and of Judas and Simon? And his sisters, do they not live here among us?” (Luke 6.3).

► In no place is reference made to Jesus having or having had a wife. Tradition has never spoken of Jesus’

possible marriage. And it has not done so simply because it considered the reality of marriage insulting for someone like Jesus (who, incidentally, restored marriage to its original dignity, Matt 19:1-12) or because it is incompatible with the faith in Christ's divinity.

► Instead, tradition simply abided by historical reality. If there was a desire to silence aspects that could be compromising for the faith of the Church, why did it transmit the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptist who administered a baptism for the remission of sins? If the primitive Church had wanted to silence Jesus' marriage, why didn't it silence the presence of certain women among the people who were working with Him?

● In spite of all of this, views maintaining that Jesus was married have continued to exist. This has

been so, because of the practice and doctrine common among rabbis of the 1st Century A.D. (See "What was the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalen?" for information about Jesus' supposed marriage to her).

► As Jesus was a rabbi and celibacy was inconceivable among rabbis at the time, it is assumed that He had to be married. (There were exceptions, like Rabbi Simon ben Azzai, who when accused of remaining single, said: "My soul is in love of the Torah. Others can take care of the world", Talmud of Babylon. B Yeb. 63d).

► It is because of this that some affirm that Jesus, like any pious Jew, would have been married when he was twenty and then would have abandoned His wife and children in order to carry out His mission.

● The answer to this objection is twofold:

► 1. There is evidence that among the Jews of the 1st Century celibacy was practised.

– Flavius Josephus, Filon, and Phynius the Old, tell us that there were Essenes who practised celibacy, and we know that some from Qumran were celibate.

– Filon points out that the “therapists”, a group of ascetics from Egypt, led celibate lives.

– Also, in the tradition of Israel, some famous people such as Jeremiah, were celibate. Similarly, Moses, according to the rabbinical tradition, lived sexual abstinence in order to maintain a close relationship with God.

– John the Baptist never married.

– Though celibacy was not very common, it was not something unheard of.

► 2. Even if nobody lived celibacy in Israel, we would not have to assume therefore that Jesus was married.

– The evidence shows that He wanted to remain celibate and there are many reasons that make this option commendable and fitting, precisely because being celibate underlines Jesus' uniqueness in relation to the Judaism of his time.

– Also it is more in accord with his mission. It is obvious that without devaluing marriage, or demanding celibacy from his followers, the cause of the Kingdom of God (Matt 19:12), the love for God that he embodies, are above everything else. Jesus wanted to be celibate in order to convey better that very love.

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