

RAW MATERIAL

Studies in Biblical Sexuality

By

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Chapter 15

Beyond Genealogy

New Testament Family Values

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New Testament Family Values

At the height of the Family Values campaign in the 1990s a series of billboards across the United States proclaimed "Jesus on Family Values." The billboards then quoted from Matthew 10:35-38 in the Douay-Rheims version of the Bible.

"For I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's enemies shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not up his cross, and followeth me, is not worthy of me."

Though the Douay citation indicates a Catholic organization behind the billboard campaign, the text and its parallels (Luke 12:51-53; 14:25-27) can be found in any Protestant version of the Bible as well.

Clearly the New Testament had a different attitude about procreation and family than generally found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and neither testament of the Bible carries the Family Values message which has been served to the American public by a largely Evangelical Protestant coalition of religious leaders. New Testament family values begin with its genealogies.

Two Genealogies

Jesus has two detailed genealogies in the New Testament, Matthew 1:1-16 and Luke 3:23-38. Both genealogies, for all their differences, agree on one curious thing. They agree that Jesus was not a blood descendant of the people in the genealogy.

The genealogy in Matthew's Gospel hints at something unusual by listing four women aside from Mary. First there is Tamar, the Canaanite woman who committed incest with her father-in-law to provide Judah with progeny and a tribe. Then there is Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who betrayed her city to the invading Israelites. A Moabite woman named Ruth marries into a Bethlehem family and becomes the ancestor of David — the great king who commits adultery with the wife of Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba, mother of Solomon. To have women in the genealogy is anomalous enough, but each woman mentioned is herself anomalous and questionable in Jewish tradition. The writer assumes that David and Solomon are unassailable, and therefore glories in their questionable lineage.

There is another anomaly coming. The genealogy is about to be perturbed again, and this time it is the ultimate turbulence.

The 16-verse genealogy at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew leads up to "Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus was born who is called Christ." (Ἰακωβ δε εγεννησεν τον Ιωσηφ τον ανδρα Μαριας εξ ης εγεννηθη Ιησους ο λεγομενος Χριστος.) Matthew is coy here, but in the following five verses he is explicit that Joseph is not the father of Jesus. Rather his wife Mary conceived as a virgin. Luke also touches on the point lightly. Like Matthew his genealogy is 16 verses long, and it begins, "Jesus . . . being the son *as it was supposed* of Joseph, son of Eli . . ." (Ἰησους . . . ων υιος *ως ενομιζετο* Ιωσηφ του Ηλι . . .). Again, Luke 1:27 describes Joseph, not Mary, as "of the house of David." In the first chapter of Luke Mary asks the angel how she could possibly become pregnant without having been with a man. According to both gospels Jesus is the son of Mary, but not of Joseph. Yet both gospels expend a significant amount of space establishing the genealogy of Joseph, not Mary.

These genealogies are legal genealogies, and Joseph is the legal father of Jesus. As Joseph is one of the legal heirs of King David he is a "son of David," and so are his legal heirs, including Jesus, son of his wife Mary. Matthew and Luke want it understood that Jesus is legally the Son of David. But they also want it understood that this lineage is independent of biological descent. Though Mary was a virgin when she married Joseph, in this case her virginity was not for the purpose of guarantying that his legal heir would also be the child of his loins.

Remember that (in the New Testament) Jesus never married or had descendants. This is very important for understanding the early Christian view of procreation in the church. It is well to remember that John the Baptist likewise is not assigned a wife or descendants in the New Testament. Luke tells us that John is a relative of Jesus, six months older and the forerunner of Jesus. If we look at Luke's story of John we find another story which adds to the New Testament concept of procreation in the church.

John's parents are Elizabeth and Zachariah, an elderly couple with no children. In this they resemble Abraham and Sarah. Like Abraham and Sarah, Elizabeth and Zachariah are promised a child of their old age. Abraham was promised a son so that his progeny would be like the stars of heaven and like the sand of the sea. In Jewish culture all are encouraged to reproduce and so increase Israel. Priests even more are encouraged to reproduce. For a priest to be childless is a double shame. With their

child of old age Elizabeth and Zechariah have their shame removed. Now they have a descendant — a descendant who can produce even more descendants.

But John does not reproduce, at least biologically. Instead he preaches in the wilderness and baptizes those who repent of their ways. John tells his listeners not to depend on their genealogy, “for God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” (Luke 3:8) Later, when the mother and brothers of Jesus come to see him Jesus replies that his disciples are his family, for "My mother and brothers are those who hear and do the word of God." (Luke 8:21)

These statements foreshadow Paul’s claim that the seed of Abraham includes both Jew and Greek. "For there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s you are the seed of Abraham, heirs in accordance with the promise." (Gal 3:28-29) Paul is more circumspect in his use of "the seed of Abraham" in Romans 9:6-13 where he limits himself to John the Baptist’s message, that Israelites should not rely on genealogy. Even so, in Galatians Paul lets himself proclaim the message of Luke 8, that Abraham’s true seed does not require genetic descent, but consists of those who hear and heed the word of God. It is not limited to those who can trace their genealogy.

Jesus is also a true son of David because he is by nature a godly king. Jesus is the Son of David not because he is a genetic descendant of David but because God placed him in the legal position of David’s heir. And even though John the Baptist is a priest by genetic lineage, in the New Testament Jesus is a priest by God’s appointment, aside from genealogy (Hebrews 7:12-16). Melchizedek is upheld as the forerunner of Jesus because Melchizedek was a priest without mention of genealogy. The Pastorals warn against interest in genealogies (1 Tim 1:4; Tit 3:9).

A broad and deep current in the New Testament is the idea that election and salvation are aside from procreation. There is a consistent separation between genetic inheritance and God’s blessings. The family of God is not produced or reproduced through sexual intercourse, and procreation is not a goal promoted in the church.

The contrast with the Hebrew Scriptures is profound. In general the Hebrew Scriptures link sexuality and reproduction with an emphasis on genealogy and carrying on the family line. However, there are important exceptions. One exception is the claim that sin and salvation are not heritable, but rather each generation will be lost or saved based on their own behavior, not that of their fathers (Ezk 18; Jer 31:29-30). This is in contrast to some high-profile texts such as the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:5; Deut

5:9) which treat sin and guilt as heritable. The Jeremiah text is immediately followed by the declaration of the new covenant (31:31-34), an important text cited in the epistle to the Hebrews (8:8-12; 10:16-17) and the basis for the two covenant theology which has given the two Testaments their names in the Christian tradition. It may be significant that Jeremiah's two-covenant declaration is linked with a strong theological break in the tradition of family inheritance.

Inheritance traditionally is linked to legitimacy and illegitimacy of offspring, but not in the New Testament. Though Matthew 19 and Mark 10 define remarriage after divorce as adultery, neither text discusses the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the offspring. When Jesus instructs the married to remain married for life, the marriage is not for their children, but rather each other ("one flesh"). In fact, inheritance is treated as an issue of no importance within the church (Luke 12:13-14). In contrast legitimacy is tightly linked to inheritance in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Judges 11:1-2).

It is very important that although Mary was pregnant with a child which was not her husband's child, this was acceptable because she had no sexual relations with another man. Her marriage remained sacred because there was no physical violation of the sexual bond, even though Joseph was not the one whose child was being produced in Mary's womb. This situation clearly shows a disjunction between sexual bonding in marriage and issues of child legitimacy. There is potential ethical material here for modern issues surrounding artificial insemination and surrogate childbearing.

Though there are a few New Testament texts which advise parents on the proper upbringing of their children, the New Testament avoids linking procreation with human sexuality or salvation with genealogy. Genesis 1:26-27 is quoted and referenced several times in the New Testament in texts which mention "male and female" and the "image of God" (Mt 19:4; Mk 10:6; 1 Cor 11:7; 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:4; Gal 3:28; Col 1:15; 3:10; Jas 3:9, etc.), but never Genesis 1:28. The New Testament never tells us to, "be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." The image of God and the monogamy of the first couple are important in the New Testament, but sexual reproduction is not a New Testament family value. Incidentally, this lack of interest in genealogy, legitimacy and reproductive sex is not a newly discovered aspect of New Testament values. From time to time this lack of interest is displayed as one of the shocking and disreputable characteristics of early Christianity (e.g., Holl, pp. 77-96).

Baptism and the New Birth

John the Baptist did not reproduce biologically — at least not within the New Testament texts. But he did baptize, the first baptizer in the Christian tradition. It is important to recognize the role baptism and the new birth play in the early Christian concept of reproduction. When Peter expands the church to include uncircumcised gentiles it is John's baptism which he invokes (Acts 10:37).

There are many New Testament texts on baptism, and on new birth, and on becoming a part of God's family. However, nowhere are they tightly linked. These images tend to be used separately. There is a strong theme in the gospel of Luke which bases itself on John the Baptist, the late-born heir who does not himself produce legal or biological heirs. John produces disciples through evangelism, a method carried on by Jesus and his disciples — and by Paul. And these disciples are the true brothers and sisters of Jesus, the new family of the church.

If we return to the gospels we find several passages which set aside biological reproduction as a Christian goal. Instead, Jesus repeatedly focuses on the individual's relationship with God. In Mark 3:31-35 (Mt 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21) the family of Jesus has come for him, but cannot get in to see him because of the crowd. Finally the message gets through the crowd that the family of Jesus is outside seeking him. Jesus replies that his true mother and siblings are those who hear and do God's word. In Luke 11:27-28 someone calls out a blessing on the womb that bore Jesus and the breasts which suckled him, but Jesus demurs, placing the blessing on those who hear and do the will of God. Along with the quote at the beginning of this chapter, we see a strong tradition in the synoptic gospels opposed to family ties, at least those family ties which interfere with being disciples (Mt 10:34-38; Lk 12:51-53; 14:26).

With time these themes develop into a strong unified concept of the church as a true family for the convert, a replacement family for those who suffer persecution in their original family for their faith (Mat 19:29; Mk 10:29-30), and a spiritual family which transcends the bounds even of those families within the church (Hellerman). The New Testament moves God's people beyond the constraints of genealogy and sets aside the value associated with biological reproduction. A different kind of birth and a different kind of family are given value.

Faint Praise

There is one New Testament text which promotes sexual reproduction in marriage. The rare and exceptional nature of this text is illustrated by its importance in Evangelical discussions about Biblical sexual ethics (e.g. Davis 72; Biebel 80). What is this singular New Testament text which promotes sexual reproduction?

1 Timothy 5:14 counsels church leaders to encourage young widows to remarry and bear children. However, the reason for this advice seems to have no connection with continuing the line of the man the widow marries. He is not mentioned. Nor is the command to Adam and Noah, "be fruitful and multiply," mentioned. Rather the reason for this advice is found in the previous verse. Young widows are troublemakers and busybodies. The sole purpose of this one New Testament text promoting procreation is to keep a certain element in the church occupied. And this advice does have some resonance in our hedonistic society -- for people of both genders. Busybodies are produced more by idleness than gender or marital status. But, Biblically speaking, keeping a woman busy with children is a novel approach to procreation. This kind of advice would not be found anywhere in the Old Testament. And the importance of this text in Evangelical studies on reproductive ethics illustrates the lack of appropriate New Testament texts which link human sexuality and procreation.

For some reason Evangelicals neglect an earlier verse in this epistle. 1 Timothy 2:15 speaks of how women are saved through "the childbirth" (της τεκνογονιας). Some commentators understand this as a reference to the birth of the Savior, Jesus, and some even argue that women and their childbearing role were redeemed through the exceptional (and virginal) childbearing of Mary. But there are severe theological problems with this interpretation, and it seems somewhat disjointed from the preceding verses. Others understand this as stating that women may be saved through childbearing, also theologically problematic but a reading which fits the context. Marriage seems assumed here, sexuality is not mentioned, and the text has a legalistic feel which may keep Evangelicals away from this verse. Catholics may also find this verse problematic because historically they have promoted the virginal and non-reproductive religious life of nuns, who therefore cannot be saved through childbirth. It is no wonder that a reading which specifies the birth of Jesus is often favored — a reading which also does not promote sexual reproduction.

A middle road to this verse understands the salvation of women through their reproductive potential, whether or not that potential is ever realized. Because women

have a life-giving function in the natural order, their gender has redeeming qualities in spite of Eve's sin. But this epistle fails to detail any redeeming qualities for the male gender, and Adam sinned without being deceived, openly and high-handedly. The problems with this text are many and difficult to solve. Studies on gender and sexuality tend to steer clear of this verse.

For the record, there is one New Testament text which promotes sexual reproduction, and possibly a second. But this is faint praise at best. The New Testament is interested in other matters. The New Testament is interested in reproduction through evangelism. Reproduction through sexual activity is not part of New Testament sexual values.