# Was Jesus Married?

*Christopher James Blythe*

While the belief that Jesus was married during his lifetime has been popular among Church leaders and lay members since the nineteenth century, it has never been an essential of Latter-day Saint theology. Rather, belief in a married Christ prospered in the early decades of the Church with little controversy among members, until leaders in the early twentieth century discouraged its public discussion while never disparaging the concept. A century later, as FAIR, an independent apologetic think tank, states on its website, "Some [Latter-day Saints] believe that He was married; others believe He wasn't. Most members are open to believe either way."[1]

While this essay is confined to the subject as it developed among Latter-day Saints, in recent years, the question of Jesus's marital status has been broached by scholarly and (rarely) theological voices outside of the Latter-day Saint tradition. A series of fictional works and conspiratorial histories have claimed a secret history that Jesus was married and had offspring.[2] Among scholars, two arguments for a married Jesus dominate the literature. First, some have argued that because it was presumed that rabbis in the mainstream Jewish culture of the time would marry, the silence on Jesus's marriage in the Gospels should be taken as

1. "Mormonism and the Question of Whether or Not Jesus Christ Was Married," FAIR, accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Jesus_Christ/Was_Jesus_married.

2. Most well-known of these volumes are Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), and Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Messianic Legacy* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986).

evidence that he likely was married. Second, some turn to enigmatic references about Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Philip and other texts.[3]

## A Married Christ in Nineteenth-Century Latter-day Saint Readings of the Bible

The earliest Latter-day Saint statements in favor of a married Jesus date to the 1840s. Not surprisingly, these statements correspond with the timing of new theological developments surrounding marriage. In fact, the same revelation that introduced eternal marriage and plural marriage also distinguished between angels and gods based on their marital status. In Joseph Smith's teachings, angels, like gods, were once mortals, but only gods had obeyed the commandment—what this revelation termed "the law of [God's] Holy Priesthood"—to be sealed in an eternal marriage.[4] As Orson Hyde would explain, just as Jesus was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness," so too would he follow his "Father's law" to multiply and replenish the earth.[5]

Perhaps the earliest sermon to depict Jesus as married was preached by the Apostle William Smith, younger brother of Joseph Smith, on August 17, 1845. Then at odds with his fellow Apostles, who wished to keep their polygamous relationships secret, Smith openly defended the biblical practice of plural marriage. At the end of his remarks on that day, he declared, "The Savior loved all men, and some women too: I do not suppose he lived upon the earth more than 30 years, and not marry. I don't know but he had as many wives as old Jacob had."[6] While William Smith's comments were an oddity for the time, the context of his remarks—a defense of plural marriage—was representative of public defenses of Jesus as a married man in the early Latter-day Saint tradition. In subsequent years, particularly after the official announcement of

3. Two fascinating takes on this question include Bart D. Ehrman, "Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Marriage," in *Truth and Fiction in the Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 141–62; and James D. Tabor, "There's Something about Mary . . . Magdalene," 4 parts, TaborBlog, January 10, 2016, https://jamestabor.com/theres-something-about-mary-magdalene-part-1/.

4. Doctrine and Covenants 132:28.

5. Orson Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses,* 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 4:260.

6. William Smith, discourse, August 17, 1845, CR 100 317, box 1, folder 3, Historian's Office Reports of Speeches 1845–1885, Church History Library, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as CHL).

the practice of plural marriage in 1852, other Apostles also preached on Jesus's marital relationships.

While the Gospels do not include any references to Jesus having a spouse or children, Latter-day Saints claimed scriptural support for a married Messiah in Jesus's interactions with women, most prominently Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene. Specific attention was given to Mary's anointing of Christ's feet and his appearance to Mary Magdalene after his Resurrection.[7] In 1847, Brigham Young presented the image of Mary Magdalene attempting to cling to Jesus's feet as how "every woman [at the Resurrection] will come right to her husband's feet same as Mary."[8] On October 6, 1854, Apostle Orson Hyde explained that Mary's reference to Jesus as "Rabboni; which is to say, Master[,] . . . manifested the affections of a wife. These words speak the kindred ties and sympathies that are common to that relation of husband and wife."[9]

Elsewhere, Hyde taught that Jesus's marriage was documented in Jesus's enigmatic involvement at the wedding at Cana.[10] In his address on October 6, 1854, Hyde read from the second chapter of John, pointing out that after Jesus had miraculously provided wine to the feast's servants at Mary's request, "the governor of the feast called the bridegroom" and praised him for saving the best wine till the end of the celebration. Hyde believed the text hinted that Jesus was the bridegroom. It was "as plain as the translators, or different councils over this Scripture, dare allow it to go to the world, but the thing is there; it is told; Jesus was the bridegroom at the marriage of Cana of Galilee, and he told them what to do."[11]

In 1853, Apostle Orson Pratt expounded on "intimations in scripture concerning the wives of Jesus."[12] Pratt added to the accumulating proof texts Psalm 45, which, based on its use in the New Testament, he understood as a prophecy about Jesus. The relevant passage reads, "Kings' daughters were among thy honourable women: upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir" (Ps. 45:9). Pratt reasoned that these

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7. See John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard, 2016), 226–28.

8. Richard S. Van Wagoner, ed., *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young,* 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009), 1:271 (December 27, 1847).

9. Orson Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses,* 2:81 (October 6, 1854).

10. "Br. Holly and the Sentinel," *Frontier Guardian,* December 26, 1851, 2.

11. Orson Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses,* 2:82. This reading of John 2 was also shared by Joseph F. Smith (Wilford Woodruff, Journal, July 22, 1883, CHL).

12. Orson Pratt, "Celestial Marriage," *The Seer* 1, no. 10 (October 1853): 159.

women were the daughters of righteous men—the "kings and priests" of Revelation 1:6—and one among them would "be chosen to stand at his right hand: perhaps she may have merited that high station by her righteous acts, or by the position she had previously occupied."[13]

Pratt believed that the Gospel writers carefully hinted at these truths in their original manuscripts so as to not expose the secret of Christ's children, and that later King James translators obscured even these references for nefarious ends. He also presented what most Christians would read as symbolic marital language in the New Testament as literal references to Jesus and his wives. Thus, he reviewed the parables in which Christ was characterized as the bridegroom, including the parable of the Ten Virgins and the parable of the marriage of the king's son (see Matt. 22; 25). He pointed to the millennial wedding feast between Christ and his bride. But while at least one other Latter-day Saint theologian, Orson Spencer, also applied a literal rendering to Christ's matrimony with the Church, the traditional reading of these passages as symbolic remained dominant.[14]

Latter-day Saint commentators were also interested in the identity of Christ's descendants. Orson Hyde believed that a passage in Isaiah—"When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed" (Isa. 53:10)—referred to a specific and otherwise unknown event in Jesus's life. He envisioned a scene when, "before the Savior died, he looked upon his own natural children, as we look upon ours; he saw his seed, and immediately afterwards he was cut off from the earth." The ancient Church ensured that knowledge of Christ's children "passed into the shades of obscurity" to protect them from "the hand of the assassin, as the sons of many kings have done who were heirs apparent to the thrones of their fathers." Yet Hyde believed "that seed has had its influence upon the chosen of God in the last days."[15]

Latter-day Saints have always had an interest in identifying sacred lineages. Since 1834, patriarchs had ceremonially revealed individuals' ancestry through the twelve tribes of Israel.[16] Accounts from the late nineteenth century told of Joseph Smith or another prophetic figure

13. Orson Pratt, "Celestial Marriage," *The Seer* 1, no. 11 (November 1853): 169–70.

14. See Orson Spencer, *Patriarchal Order, or Plurality of Wives!* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 14.

15. Orson Hyde, in *Journal of Discourses,* 2:82–83.

16. Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, *Binding Earth and Heaven: Patriarchal Blessings in the Prophetic Development of Early Mormonism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 52.

identifying individuals as descendants of Jesus Christ. In 1888, Lorenzo Snow told Orson F. Whitney about "the lineage of my grandparents [Newel] K. Whitney and wife and [Heber] C. Kimball, who he said, the Prophet Joseph told his sister Eliza, were descendants of the Savior."[17] A wife of Joseph Smith's confidant James Adams recalled that the Prophet had told her husband that Adams too was one of Jesus's posterity.[18] In 1894, George Q. Cannon told his son that Heber C. Kimball had "once told him he was a direct descendant of the Savior of the world."[19] Five years before that, in a meeting in the Salt Lake Temple, Cannon declared, "There are men in this congregation who are descendants of the ancient Twelve Apostles, and I shall say it, of the Son of God Himself, for he had seed, and in time they shall be known."[20]

These statements delving into Christ's posterity were confined to private settings. In fact, after the 1850s, references to a married Jesus were almost entirely absent from Church publications and public discourses.[21] This may have been spurred by the negative reaction to the teaching. Shortly after Hyde first suggested that Christ was the groom at the wedding at Cana, the *Savannah Sentinel* condemned his "construction" of John 2 as a "wicked perversion."[22] In 1862, an editorial in a Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints newspaper referred to the idea that Jesus was wed to Mary and Martha as "so absurd" that only "one adulterously insane" would teach it.[23] In 1870, J. H. Beadle characterized the Saints' doctrines on Christ, including that "he had five wives while upon earth," as "most strange and blasphemous."[24]

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17. Orson F. Whitney, journal, November 26, 1888, Special Collections, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

18. Oliver Boardman Huntington, *History of the Life of Oliver B. Huntington* (n.p., 1878–1900), 27.

19. *An Apostle's Record: The Journals of Abraham H. Cannon,* ed. Dennis B. Horne (Clearfield, Utah: Gnolaum Books, 2004), 314.

20. Elizabeth Oberdick Anderson, ed., *Cowboy Apostle: The Diaries of Anthony W. Ivins, 1875–1932* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 211.

21. Lay members occasionally referenced Jesus's wives in publications. See, for example, "Problems," *Ogden Herald,* November 23, 1885; and Angus MacDonald, *Prophetic Numbers or the Rise, Progress and Future Destiny of the "Mormons"* (repr. ed., Salt Lake City: Utah Kraut's Pioneer Press, 1885), 59–63, 75–76.

22. "Br. Hyde and the Guardian," originally published in the *Savannah Sentinel,* republished in *Frontier Guardian,* January 23, 1852.

23. Josiah Ells, "For the Herald: Polygamy," *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 2, no. 8 (February 1862): 178.

24. J. H. Beadle, *Life in Utah; or, the Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1870), 328.

Anti–Latter-day Saint writers did more to promote knowledge of arguments in favor of a married Christ than Latter-day Saint proponents themselves did.

## A Married Jesus in the Twentieth Century

As time passed, Church leaders would eventually proclaim that there was no official position on the topic. In 1912, President Charles W. Penrose of the First Presidency answered the question "Do you believe that Jesus was married?" by pleading the Saints' collective ignorance on the subject: "We do not know anything about Jesus Christ being married. The Church has no authoritative declaration on the subject."[25] In a departure from early exegesis that assumed scripture had been manipulated and distorted through translators and scribes, Penrose reasoned that if there was no overt discussion of Jesus's marriage in scripture, then there was no way to know anything on the subject.

This did not mean that Church leaders had disavowed their personal beliefs on Jesus's marital status. While Penrose implied Latter-day Saints should not publicly speculate on things not taught in the scriptures, a later Church leader's reasons for discouraging discussion had more to do with his reverence for the theological position. In 1963, Joseph Fielding Smith responded to a believer who asked a similar question, "Christ came here to set us the example and, therefore, we believe that he must have been married. Are we right?" Smith responded in a terse note, "Yes! But do not preach it! The Lord advised us not to cast pearls before swine!"[26]

As public conversation on a married Jesus was becoming increasingly rare among orthodox Latter-day Saints, the idea became an essential doctrine for those at odds with the Church's issuing of the Manifesto that ended plural marriage. It was the introduction of plural marriage that seems to have led to the initial sermons on a married Jesus, so it is not surprising that the concept would survive most clearly among those who continued to defend polygamy. One of the principal founders of Mormon Fundamentalism, Lorin C. Woolley, taught several new details about Jesus's marriages, including the names of eight of his wives: Martha, Mary, Phoebe, Sarah, Rebecca, Josephene, Mary

25. Charles W. Penrose, "Peculiar Questions Briefly Answered," *Improvement Era* 15, no. 11 (September 1912): 1043.

26. Joseph Fielding Smith, handwritten note on a letter, J. Ricks Smith to Joseph Fielding Smith, March 17, 1963, copy in possession of the author.

Magdalene, and Mary, Martha's sister.[27] According to Woolley, after Jesus died, his widows married one of his brothers as was consistent with the biblical practice of leviratic marriage. Their new husband was John the Revelator, who Woolley taught was a son of Mary and Joseph.[28] Among Fundamentalists, Jesus's polygamous status was an essential part of the narrative. Rhea Allred Kunz, a prominent Fundamentalist, would even report a "beautiful vision" in which she saw Jesus minister to his wife Mary Magdalene, who was struggling with jealousies over other women "who had more so-called freedoms than a plural wife, and who, in some instances were free from financial hardships."[29]

The vast majority of Latter-day Saints would be unaware of these developments in Mormon Fundamentalism; however, the movement published tracts and newspapers that perpetuated older Latter-day Saint ideas into the twentieth century. Most importantly, in 1969, Ogden Kraut published his first and most popular title, *Jesus Was Married.*[30] Because Kraut did not advertise his Fundamentalist allegiance, his work was carried in stores that marketed to the LDS consumer. Kraut's widow, Anne Wilde, recalled that a bookstore near Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, had a great deal of success selling the book after the volume was privately recommended by members of the faculty.[31]

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the idea of a married Jesus also appeared in popular scholarship and fiction. In 1970, William E. Phipps, a non–Latter-day Saint scholar, published his popular book *Was Jesus Married?,* which argued that Hebrew culture would have led Jesus to marry.[32] In a departure from the usual silence on beliefs surrounding Jesus's family life, a professor from the Church College of Hawaii responded to Phipps's book in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* declaring that he "has always believed that Jesus was married. . . . Mormons easily

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27. Joseph Musser, "Book of Remembrance," March 29, 1932, 20, typescript in the author's possession. The "Book of Remembrance" is a journal kept by Musser to record the teachings of Lorin Woolley.

28. Musser, "Book of Remembrance," June 12, 1932, 27.

29. Rhea Allred Kunz, *Voices of Women Approbating Celestial or Plural Marriage,* 2 vols. (Draper, Utah: Review and Preview Publishers, 1985), 2:277.

30. Ogden Kraut, *Jesus Was Married* (Genola, Utah: Pioneer Press, 1969).

31. "Anne's Marriage—Was Jesus a Polygamist?" Gospel Tangents, podcast, November 20, 2017, accessed April 23, 2021, https://gospeltangents.com/2017/11/annes-marriage-jesus-polygamist/.

32. William E. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

accept the idea that Jesus was married."[33] In 1972, Phipps wrote an article on reasons to believe in a married Jesus for *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.[34] In 1982, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* inaugurated a new genre of conspiracy-theory/history books claiming to have discovered evidence on the lives of Jesus's posterity after the Crucifixion.[35]

The publication of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* in 2003 and its film adaptation in 2006 again revived among lay Latter-day Saints the question of whether Christ was married. In the novel and film, inspired by *Holy Blood, Holy Grail,* Brown's protagonist stumbles upon a secret society that has preserved the truth that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had children. In the wake of the Crucifixion, a pregnant Mary Magdalene fled to Gaul, where Jesus's descendants would eventually become the Merovingian dynasty of France. Christian leaders wrote and preached against *The Da Vinci Code*'s misrepresentation of the Bible and its human portrayal of Jesus. The Latter-day Saint response to *The Da Vinci Code* was made unusual due to the early advocacy for a married Jesus. LDS leaders and educators faced a barrage of questions about the Church's stance on the issue of a married Jesus. The official response remained neutral. In 2006, Church spokesman Dale Bills stated, "The belief that Christ was married has never been official church doctrine. It is neither sanctioned nor taught by the church. While it is true that a few church leaders in the mid-1800s expressed their opinions on the matter, it was not then, and is not now, church doctrine."[36]

Three professors at Brigham Young University—Richard N. Holzapfel, Andrew C. Skinner, and Thomas A. Wayment—also weighed in on the controversy in articles, various presentations, and a full-length book. The professors challenged alternative readings of New Testament scripture that had been used to argue that Jesus was married. Skinner explained, "There is nothing in the canonical New Testament, there is nothing in restoration scripture, there is really even nothing

33. "Book on Marriage of Christ Arouses Much Controversy," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin,* November 14, 1970.

34. William E. Phipps, "The Case for a Married Jesus," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7, no. 4 (1972): 44–49.

35. Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail: The Secret History of Christ; The Shocking Legacy of the Grail* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1982).

36. "LDS Do Not Endorse Claims in 'Da Vinci,'" *Deseret News,* May 17, 2006, https://www.deseret.com/2006/5/17/19953980/lds-do-not-endorse-claims-in-da-vinci.

in non-canonical sources that you can use as evidence that Jesus was married or he wasn't married. The sources are silent on that aspect."[37] Holzapfel, Skinner, and Wayment questioned the popular view that for Christ to provide an example in all things required him to be married, since his special mission differed from others' lives in many ways. While they conceded that Latter-day Saint theology did not oppose the concept of a married Christ, their central message was that the subject was not central to the Church's mission and that individual members should follow the example of Church leaders in refraining from open speculation.[38]

Yet, while these voices discouraged public advocacy for a married Christ, others were inspired to express their beliefs or at least their interest in the possibilities of a married Jesus. Paintings by Latter-day Saint artists James Christensen and Brian Kershisnik portrayed the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus[39] and the later hiding of Christ's children[40] respectively. Both images were featured in Vern Grosvenor Swanson's *Dynasty of the Holy Grail: Mormonism's Sacred Bloodline.* Swanson combined a study of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint statements on Jesus's marital relationships with the claims of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail.* His ultimate thesis was that Joseph Smith was a descendant of Jesus.[41] In late 2017, these ideas were repeated in a documentary called *Hidden Bloodlines: The Grail and the Lost Tribes in the Land of the North.* Feminist theologian Maxine Hanks also wrote a short essay in the wake of *The Da Vinci Code,* arguing that "the idea of a married Jesus is known in Mormonism, as a long-held, sacred, discreet, folk doctrine," but the implications for Jesus's proposed wife, Mary Magdalene, have largely gone "unexplored."[42] She noted, perhaps hopefully, that the Church's belief in continuing revelation allowed for Mary's role to be further fleshed out.

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37. Andrew Skinner, quoted in "LDS Church Issues Statement Regarding 'The Da Vinci Code,'" KSL, May 16, 2006, https://www.ksl.com/article/266159/lds-church-issues-statement-regarding-the-da-vinci-code.

38. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Andrew C. Skinner, and Thomas A. Wayment, *What Da Vinci Didn't Know: An LDS Perspective* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 48–50.

39. Vern Grosvenor Swanson, *Dynasty of the Holy Grail: Mormonism's Sacred Bloodline* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2006), cover and plate 34.

40. Swanson, *Dynasty of the Holy Grail,* plate 20.

41. Swanson, *Dynasty of the Holy Grail.*

42. Maxine Hanks, "Mormonism and Mary Magdalene," in *Secrets of Mary Magdalene: The Untold Story of History's Most Misunderstood Woman* (New York: CDS Books, 2006), 166, 168.

## Conclusion

Current discussions and disagreements concerning Jesus's marital status do not take place in a public forum. Some believe early Church leaders revealed a sacred truth that should only be shared with care. Others believe that the absence of explicit references to Jesus's family suggests that he had either chosen to be single or had yet to marry. Some may be embarrassed by nineteenth-century statements to the contrary. After over a century without a public statement on the subject, Latter-day Saints feel free to accept or reject a married Jesus without departing from an established orthodoxy.

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