

Family, Marriage, and Celibacy in the New Testament

Mark D. Ellison

The institution of the family forms an important, complex backdrop to the New Testament and Christian origins. The family (Greek *oikos/oikia*, “house” or household) is both the context for many activities of the early church and the subject of diverse New Testament teachings.¹ After the Resurrection, followers of Jesus met to worship in homes in gatherings called “house churches” that would have included a host family joined by other individuals and families. Christian worship developed within this household setting, and members of the faith community used familial imagery and terminology to describe themselves—believers were “brothers” and “sisters,” and the church, long before it constructed buildings, was the household of God (*oikos theou*), God’s family (1 Timothy 3:15; 5:1–2). The gospel of Christ spread through networks of houses, kinship relations, and other social connections, and sometimes entire households converted together (Acts 16:15, 34). Among Jesus’s teachings and stories that early Christians remembered, retold, and recorded were many that related to the household setting, family relationships, marriage, and wedding feasts. The apostles and others who authored New Testament books wrote counsel applying the gospel to life in the home.

As Latter-day Saint readers encounter these teachings, they may sometimes meet challenges. For one, they may be surprised by the diverse perspectives the New Testament presents on the subjects of family and marriage. Some precepts will be familiar, such as the commandment to honor one’s father and mother, warnings against sexual sin and immorality, or teachings that marriage is ideally permanent, part of the divine plan from the

beginning, a symbol of the relationship of Christ and the church, and a requirement for bishops. Others may seem puzzling when compared to current Latter-day Saint teachings and practices. For example, in contrast to the esteem and importance given to family, marriage, and childbearing among Latter-day Saints, some New Testament passages approach these subjects with ambivalence. Some passages subvert familial roles and loyalties, and some even praise the unmarried state for the opportunity it gave for undivided dedication to God. The presence of such differences should perhaps not be too surprising, given the different culture and circumstances of the first century. It can be easy, however, to overlook or forget how foreign the biblical world was, in certain respects, in comparison to our own. The task of reading ancient scripture requires efforts to step into the ancient world and understand teachings on their own terms, in their own cultural context.²

An important consideration for Latter-day Saint readers to bear in mind is that, according to the Doctrine and Covenants, some of our distinctive doctrines and practices have their origins in modern revelations that were not known in any previous age (see Doctrine and Covenants 121:26–27; 124:41; 128:18).³ While we tend to think of the Restoration as “bringing back that which was lost,” some revelations concern “things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world,” reserved for “this, the dispensation of the fulness of times” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:18).⁴ Therefore, we should not expect to find them in the New Testament, whose authors addressed needs of an earlier age, within the religious and cultural framework of that age.

It is also important to recognize that New Testament teachings on family and marriage come to us in somewhat fragmentary form. None of the books of the New Testament was meant to serve as a treatise on the subject of family, marriage, or celibacy; rather, teachings on these subjects appear incidentally as authors address larger concerns, writing at various times, in diverse locales, facing different situations.

Family and marriage as conceived in the ancient Mediterranean world of the New Testament reflected the circumstances, traditions, and attitudes of that time and place, some of which would be quite uncomfortable or even morally offensive to modern readers. Lack of privacy, physical violence, slavery, male authoritarianism, and misogyny were cultural realities.⁵ Against this backdrop, New Testament authors did share a conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ should have a transforming, refining, ennobling effect on the private lives and personal relationships of all believers. Even so, the very real problems in their cultural environment call for caution and discernment in understanding New Testament teachings and evaluating their application in our own age. For example, readers may detect tension between current Latter-day Saint teachings and ancient attitudes on gender. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints currently emphasizes that marriage is “a partnership of equals, with neither person exercising dominion over the other,”⁶ yet two New Testament passages state “the husband is the head of the wife” (Ephesians 5:23; see 1 Corinthians 11:3), and another describes the wife as “the weaker vessel” (1 Peter 3:7). The voices of women are to be valued and sought in the modern Church,⁷ but two New Testament passages instruct women to remain silent at church (1 Corinthians 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:11–12).⁸

Past Latter-day Saint authorities have attempted to soften such passages by qualifying them somewhat,⁹ but more recently Church leaders have opted not to quote them but rather to cite passages that emphasize equality and partnership over male domination in the home.¹⁰ Some New Testament statements about family and marriage may simply reflect ancient attitudes and do not necessarily represent teachings essential to the gospel. We can be charitable readers and, as we are invited to do with the Book of Mormon, recognize that in the New Testament “if there are faults they are the mistakes of men,” and choose to “condemn not the things of God,” but “give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been” (title page of the Book of Mormon; Mormon 9:31).

Another factor that helps to explain the complexity of New Testament teachings on family, marriage, and celibacy is that they appear in writings of the formative period of the early church. Christ had come, ministered, died, and risen; all the books of the New Testament represent efforts to understand these transformative events and their implications in the lives of Jesus’s followers. They and their world were forever changed—but what did that mean in practice? When it came to being “in the world but not of the world,” some New Testament texts emphasized being “not of the world” and challenged social norms associated with family and marriage, while others (written at other times in different circumstances) emphasized being “in the world” and took more traditional stances toward family and marriage.

This chapter proceeds with the belief that if the multifaceted New Testament teachings on family, marriage, and celibacy are appreciated in their historical context and evaluated in light of the totality of the gospel, they can be of enduring value in our day and may be a resource for strengthening individuals, couples, and families and fostering inclusiveness among all the diverse members of the latter-day “household of God.” Our “household” includes married couples who are trying to build a harmonious home life, and parents—some married, some single—who are working to raise believing children in frequently adverse conditions. What could the Saints of former days teach us about how the gospel of Christ affected their approach to family life in their own, often challenging circumstances? Our “household” also includes single members of whom Church teaching requires chastity, who may feel a deep need for scriptural role models and resources that speak to their life situation. Further, our church family includes childless adults who, with their unmarried brothers and sisters, at times feel grieved or marginalized in a church culture that gives superlative emphasis to childrearing, family, and marriage. What could the richness of New Testament teachings do for these members, and for the whole “body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12–31)? This chapter does not take up these questions directly but poses them for the reader to contemplate. In what follows, this chapter touches occasionally on Latter-day Saint perspectives while it aims primarily to describe how family, marriage, and celibacy were understood in the New Testament world and how New Testament authors taught about these subjects. It does so, mindful that engagement with the past better equips us in the present (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:78–80; 93:53).

Customs and Cultural Background

Ancient Mediterranean households typically consisted of not only parents and children but also extended family such as cousins, elderly relatives, or the parents' adult siblings and their spouses.¹¹ In Galilean villages the picture of family is of this group of relatives who live and work together: a house and fields shared by brothers, sisters, mother, father, and children (Mark 10:29). Wealthy households throughout the Roman world included other dependents such as employees, slaves, freed slaves, and clients who sought the patronage of the head of the household. Individual households belonged to larger families of kinship connections. Family members generally valued group identity over individual identity and worked to advance their collective honor and well-being.

In Roman society, the household's oldest living male was the *pater familias*, the head of the household and its estate, who wielded considerable authority (*patria potestas*, the father's power over his descendants and dependents). Roman law gave fathers "the power of life and death"—in theory the authority to imprison, enslave, beat, or even kill a descendant, but in practice a mostly symbolic principle that generally upheld the father's position yet was curbed by various social and legal restraints.¹² Nevertheless, defying a father's will was a serious matter. In such an authoritarian society, it could be difficult for individuals who heard the gospel message to choose to become a follower of Jesus; early Christian literature contains plentiful references to the potential discord caused when families included both believers and unbelievers.¹³ This condition seems anticipated in Jesus's statement "I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come 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 foes shall be they of his own household" (Matthew 10:34–36).¹⁴ Such circumstances may partially explain why Jesus, Paul, and other early Christians subordinated familial loyalties to the higher duty disciples owed to God and the faith community. Followers of Jesus frequently had to choose between the two.

Marriages typically were arranged between fathers of the bride and groom. Jews often married within kin groups.¹⁵ People usually married not because they were in love (a modern motive), but because their fathers regarded the match as advantageous to the families and the couple.¹⁶ This did not preclude a husband and wife from developing a genuinely loving, caring relationship; marital affection and harmony were widely valued ideals. The authority



Marble funerary relief with portrait of a family group, 2nd–3rd century AD. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org, Fletcher Fund, 1949.

of fathers was tempered by their knowledge that the marriage's success depended largely on the willingness of both bride and groom and by consent requirements in Roman law.

A first stage in the formation of marriage was the betrothal, which often included negotiation of a dowry (a contribution of money or property from the bride's family to the new household). The betrothal period (which could vary in length) concluded with a formalization of marriage celebrated by wedding ceremonies and festivities. These were private affairs in the sense that they were not conducted under governmental authority (nor church authority, for centuries) but were celebrated by families in their homes and communities, with friends and relatives. Under Roman law, marriages could be formed without a ceremony, but celebrations and some rites were typical, foremost being the *deductio*—the leading of the betrothed woman from her father's house into the house of her husband. A description of this part of a wedding celebration appears in the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees, written in the late second or early first century BC. In "celebrating a great wedding," members of two well-to-do families conducted the bride from her home "with a large escort" in "a tumultuous procession with a great amount of baggage; and the bridegroom came out with his friends and his brothers to meet them with tambourines and musicians" (1 Maccabees 9:37–39 NRSV; compare the parable of the ten virgins, Matthew 25:1–13). The wedding feast would typically take place at the groom's house; the celebrations might include songs, music, love poems, and dancing (Matthew 22:1–14; Luke 14:15–24; John 2:1–11).

Jewish weddings appear to have included prayers or blessings pronounced upon the bride and groom (compare Genesis 24:60).¹⁷ In the apocryphal book Tobit (written in the late third to early second century BC), part of a nuptial prayer refers to Adam and Eve as the archetypal married couple and role models for the newlyweds Tobias and Sarah (Tobit 8:4–8). Jesus also referred to the first parents when teaching about marriage (Matthew 19:3–6; Mark 10:2–9). When Christians in fourth-century Rome developed a practice of having a priest or bishop pronounce a blessing upon a marrying couple (an early stage in the development of Christian marriage rites), the blessing used the words spoken to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful, and multiply" (Genesis 1:28), a practice that early Christians inherited from Jewish custom.¹⁸ The concept of marriage as a covenant is attested in postexilic Judaism: "The Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth; . . . she is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Malachi 2:14 NRSV).¹⁹

For first marriages, Roman women tended to wed after age fifteen, while men usually married after twenty-five; in the eastern Mediterranean both bride and groom were usually in their teens.²⁰ The age disparity in Roman marriage meant that from the outset of marriage, men might be financially established and their authority emphasized. Yet it also meant that husbands often predeceased their wives, leaving many widows. A widow's circumstances and ability to subsist could be precarious (Deuteronomy 27:19; Ruth 1; Mark 12:41–44) but need not be; some widows in the Greco-Roman world were quite wealthy and exercised considerable influence as heads of households. In the New Testament, women like Lydia (Acts 16:14–15), Phoebe (Romans 16:1–2), and Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11) seem

to have been heads of households who used their resources to host Christian congregations and serve important roles in the church.

A life expectancy of less than twenty-five years exerted an inexorable pressure for marriage and reproduction, which took a toll on women—it was not uncommon for women to die when giving birth in their late teens or early twenties.²¹ Child mortality was high—“by the time a child reached the age of ten, half of his or her birth cohort were dead”—but if a child survived its first few years, life expectancy might rise to about forty years.²² Only wealthy families could afford tutors or schoolmasters for their children; literacy hovered around 10–15 percent (but may have been a little higher in Jewish communities).²³ Thus, most people who became familiar with books of the Bible would have done so by hearing them read aloud in community worship, in the synagogue, or in house churches.

In Roman society unwanted infants were sometimes exposed (abandoned outdoors), and either died or were taken in by adults, often as slaves. By contrast, Jesus’s sayings about children (e.g., Matthew 18:3–6; 19:14) “suggested that children were spiritually valuable persons who could even be exemplary.”²⁴ Influenced by these teachings, early Christians strongly opposed infanticide, abortion, and exposure of infants and encouraged the adopting of abandoned children.²⁵

Adoption of adults was also a practice in Roman society, particularly among imperial elites who sought to secure heirs and advance their dynasties; Julius Caesar famously adopted Octavian, who, as Augustus, adopted Tiberius. First-century Christians would have been aware that adopted sons, especially among nobility, were far from second-class members of a family but were full and honored heirs. Paul drew on the imagery of adoption as he wrote to the saints in Rome about the meaning of being a “child of God”: “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:14–17 NRSV). For Paul and many scriptural authors, a “child of God” was what a person *became* by entering the gospel covenant and living “in Christ” (compare John 1:12; Mosiah 5:7), not what a person *is* as a preexistent spirit; the premortal existence of humanity is a doctrine articulated most clearly in latter-day scripture (see Doctrine and Covenants 93:23; Abraham 3:22–23) but not unambiguously taught in the Bible. “In the Roman worldview, sonship did not primarily point *backward* to begetting, but *forward* to inheritance, often through the medium of adoption”;²⁶ for this reason, Paul found the imagery of adoption an apt way of illustrating the idea of *becoming* a “child of God” in Christ.

Many households included slaves. Slaves constituted an estimated 10 percent of the 50–60 million people in the empire, and perhaps 17 percent of the population closer to Rome.²⁷ The Greek word for “slave,” *doulos*, appears over one hundred times in the New Testament, but it is translated “servant” in the King James Version, obscuring the reality of slavery as an institution in the New Testament world.²⁸ Slavery in the Roman Empire was not based on race or nationality; one became a slave as a prisoner of war, as a kidnapping victim, as

punishment for a crime, by being abandoned or sold by one's parents, being born to slave parents, or selling oneself to escape debt or poverty. Slavery was not always lifelong; a slave's freedom could be purchased for a ransom price (compare Mark 10:45), and masters might free their slaves. Slaves were vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, and some served in brutally harsh settings. Others, however, worked in professions, were educated, and filled positions of trust for their masters, exercising authority and enjoying relatively comfortable circumstances. Many freed slaves (*liberti*) became quite wealthy and influential members of society (Acts 6:9).

New Testament writings attest the presence of slaves and masters among the members of the church. Slavery was so enmeshed in ancient society that New Testament authors took it for granted rather than questioning or criticizing it as an institution. However, Paul stands out remarkably in encouraging a unity among the saints that would transcend social divisions: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 NRSV; compare Colossians 3:11). In one case Paul encouraged a Christian householder to receive back his escaped slave "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother" (Philemon 1:16 NRSV).²⁹ The metaphor of slavery figures in many New Testament sayings (e.g., John 8:34; Galatians 4:22–5:1). In his mortal ministry, Christ emptied himself of his divine status and took the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7). Both Jesus and Paul referred to discipleship as being the Lord's "servant" or "slave" (e.g., Matthew 10:24; 24:45–51; Luke 17:7–10; Romans 1:1), but both also taught that the relationship with God is better understood as that of a child to a father rather than that of a slave to a master (Matthew 6:9; John 20:17; Galatians 4:6–7).

Under Roman law, fully legal marriage was available only to free persons who were citizens or belonged to another legally recognized category.³⁰ From a legal standpoint, all other marriages between noncitizens or between slaves would have been regarded as a form of concubinage. However, as historian Carolyn Osiek points out, "the unfavorable connotations attached to terms like 'concubinage' today did not apply. Concubinage was simply a marital union not fully recognized under the restrictive marriage legislation of Rome." Some early Christians may have been citizens (such as Paul, Acts 22:25–29), but many would not have been, and their marriages "were recognized by local law and by community custom."³¹

Celibacy—abstinence from marriage and sexual relations—was practiced by various groups throughout the broader Mediterranean and Near East. Though family, marriage, and childbearing were honored in Jewish tradition, Judaism in the first century also included a few groups of people who practiced sexual renunciation, for life or for limited periods, in pursuit of a holy way of life. These included the Qumran community, some Essenes (probably the same group) described by Pliny the Elder and Josephus, and the celibate male and female Therapeutae mentioned by Philo.³² The Old Testament nowhere commands a practice of lifelong celibacy but does mention temporary abstinence for the ritual purity needed to participate in acts of worship (e.g., Exodus 19:10–15; Leviticus 15:18–23). By the first century, this connection between sexual abstinence and religious activity had developed into an opinion among some that a prophetic vocation required lifelong continence.³³

Roman culture also had its own ambiguities regarding family and marriage. On one hand, Roman law and philosophy promoted marriage and family as crucial to the sustaining of society: Augustan legislation penalized adultery and bachelorhood and promoted legitimate childbearing; the first-century-AD Stoic Musonius Rufus taught the necessity of sound households, stating, “Whoever destroys human marriage destroys the home, the city, and the whole human race.”³⁴ Yet divorce was easy to obtain, and marriage bonds among Romans remained weak.³⁵ Roman society also had its own ascetic expressions: sexual renunciation was seen as key to forming religious specialists (such as the Vestal Virgins, priestesses in the Roman state religion), and sexual restraint was regarded as an essential element in the philosophical way of life (some philosophers denied themselves marriage and reproduction, while others taught that sexual intercourse in marriage was proper only for the procreation of children).

Anxieties about the body, ritual purity, and sexuality and the exploration of alternatives to traditional ways of life were to a degree characteristic of late ancient society. In this milieu, the writings of the New Testament are generally typical of the age in preserving both teachings that affirm marital and familial relationships, and others that challenge them in certain ways.

Family, Marriage, and Celibacy in the Gospels

Some passages in the Gospels firmly uphold the institution of the family with its attendant loyalties. In his conversation with the rich young man, Jesus listed “Honor thy father and mother” among the commandments to keep in order to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23). While on the cross, Jesus placed his mother in the care of his disciple John (John 19:25–27), showing concern for her well-being even in his extremity and exemplifying the duty to care for a widowed mother (evidently Joseph had died by this point).³⁶ Curiously, however, Jesus did not commit his mother to the care of his surviving brothers, but to his disciple, leaving the reader to wonder whether this might have been due to the disbelief of Jesus’s brothers (John 7:5) or to the idea that his followers composed a new kind of family.

The majority of Jesus’s sayings on the subject of family tend to subordinate traditional familial roles and loyalties to the role disciples hold in the kingdom, with its priorities. When Jesus’s mother and brothers arrived at Capernaum where he was teaching, he used the opportunity to ask the crowd, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Identifying his listeners as his family, he told them, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:31–35 NRSV; see Matthew 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21).³⁷ On occasions Jesus bluntly told individuals that following him had to take priority over such duties as burying a deceased parent or bidding family members farewell (Luke 9:59–62; Matthew 8:21–22). Whoever left houses, brothers or sisters, father or mother, children, or fields for Christ’s sake would receive a hundredfold reward and inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:29–30; Luke 18:29–30).³⁸ An arresting statement in Luke, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and

mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26 NRSV), is expressed more softly yet perhaps closer to the intended meaning in Matthew: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37 NRSV).³⁹

On the subject of marriage, once again the reader encounters teachings that uphold the institution and others that challenge people’s thinking in certain ways. Jesus’s approval of marriage is clear in his attendance at the Cana wedding feast (John 2:1–12) and particularly in his response to a question about divorce. As related in Matthew, some Pharisees approached Jesus with the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” (Matthew 19:3 NRSV). The phrasing reflects debate between two schools of thought among first-century Pharisees; followers of the Jewish sage Shammai forbade divorce except for adultery, while followers of the sage Hillel permitted divorce for a wide variety of reasons (including if a woman burnt her husband’s dinner!).⁴⁰ In response, Jesus redirected focus from permissible reasons for divorce to the original aim of marriage, referring to the creation story in Genesis as a basis for teaching that since husband and wife are “what God has joined together,” marriage ought to be permanent:

He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female’ [Genesis 1:27], and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’ [Genesis 2:24]? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”⁴¹ (Matthew 19:4–6 NRSV; compare Mark 10:6–9)

In later centuries, this saying, with its affirmation of the original place of marriage and sexuality in God’s creation, proved valuable for Christians seeking to defend the goodness of marriage against extreme ascetics whose teachings demeaned marriage and childbearing.⁴² It also figured in the development of a doctrine of marital indissolubility (permanence)—a teaching that “helped to define Christian identity in a world where marital stability was not always cherished.”⁴³

Mark records that Jesus went on to teach: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11 NRSV). Other New Testament passages indicate that the early church recognized legitimate reasons for divorce and did not view every case of remarriage as adultery (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15),⁴⁴ but what may have struck Mark’s earliest readers as most surprising was Jesus’s statement that the man who divorces his wife commits adultery *against her*. In the ancient world, adultery was viewed as an offense *against a man*—a crime against either the husband of a married woman or against the father of an unmarried woman who “belonged” to her father until she married and thereafter “belonged” to her husband. By teaching that a man’s adultery was an offense *against his wife*, Jesus placed the husband under “the same moral obligation as the wife” and “raised the dignity and status of women.”⁴⁵ A wife did not simply “belong” to her husband like

a possession, but each belonged to the other and had mutual claim on the other's fidelity (1 Corinthians 7:3–4).

In Matthew these teachings on marriage and divorce are immediately followed by an exchange that affirms a single life as a worthy spiritual vocation for some individuals. When the disciples remark that if divorce is so serious, “it is better not to marry,” Jesus states: “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can” (Matthew 19:10–12 NRSV).⁴⁶ The reference to those “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” is best understood not as a literal reference to emasculation, but as a figurative reference to voluntary celibacy that uses the same kind of hyperbole Jesus employed in such sayings as “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out” and “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off” (Matthew 5:29–30 NRSV).⁴⁷ Since the saying is followed by references to Peter and the other disciples having left everything (including family, if only temporarily) in order to follow Jesus, it may figuratively describe the disciples during the time they traveled with Jesus.⁴⁸

The New Testament gives no indication that Jesus himself was married.⁴⁹ Because marriage was so common at the time, it is possible that Jesus was married and that the Gospel writers simply never mentioned it. The marital status of the apostles is not mentioned in the Gospels except in the case of Peter, whose mother-in-law was healed by Jesus (Mark 1:29–31 and parallels; compare 1 Corinthians 9:5). On the other hand, the idea that Jesus might have had a wife, as it has surfaced in popular culture in recent years, is based on texts that are of dubious historical value or are outright fictions.⁵⁰ At times some Latter-day Saints have assumed that Jesus must have been married, but the reasons typically given are quite debatable, and Church spokespersons have stated that it is *not* a Church doctrine that Jesus was married.⁵¹ During his ministry Jesus had no home of his own (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58), and it is not unreasonable to guess that his sacrifice of home and property extended also to marriage so that he might give single-minded devotion to his atoning mission (see Luke 12:50). Certainly in the period following the New Testament, early Christians remembered Jesus as celibate.⁵² Ultimately, Latter-day Saints need not be unsettled to learn either that Jesus was not, or was, married; as some Latter-day Saint scholars have observed, the Gospel authors focused on Christ's redemptive mission, not his marital status.⁵³

Another challenging passage occurs when a group of Sadducees poses a question to Jesus regarding a woman who had had seven husbands, asking whose wife she would be in the Resurrection (Matthew 22:23–32; Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–38). Jesus answers, “When they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven” (Mark 12:25; compare Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:34–36). Some Christian writers from the second century forward took this to mean that the next life would be a nonconjugal state in which marriage would no longer exist—a view that has prevailed in traditional Christianity to the present day.⁵⁴ However, both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint commentators have drawn attention to the ambiguity in Jesus's

response, with its reference to there being no *creation* of marriages, rather than no *existence* of marriage, in the age to come. For example, non-Latter-day Saint New Testament scholar Ben Witherington observed that Jesus's statement that "no new marriages will be initiated in the eschatological state" is "surely not the same as claiming that all existing marriages will disappear in the eschatological state."⁵⁵ Since the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection (Matthew 22:23), their question was not a serious inquiry, but was meant to ridicule and was unlikely to have elicited much detail from Jesus about conditions in the Resurrection (Matthew 7:6). The people Jesus referred to when he said "*they* neither marry nor are given in marriage" appear to be Sadducees ("there were *with us* seven brethren"; Matthew 22:25; emphasis added), perhaps limiting the scope of Jesus's response, which might be paraphrased (as Gaye Strathearn has proposed): "If, as you believe, there is no resurrection, then obviously the wife will not belong to any of the brothers because *you don't even believe that there will be a resurrection.*"⁵⁶ The Sadducees' question also presupposed a practice of levirate marriage (in which a widow without offspring might marry her late husband's brother, Deuteronomy 25:5–6)—a practice that created a temporal marriage to address needs raised by death but was unneeded in the next world in which death would no longer exist.⁵⁷ Both the practice of levirate marriage and the Sadducees' disbelief in resurrection seem to correspond to the teaching in Doctrine and Covenants 132:15–16 that when a man marries a woman merely for "so long as he is in the world and she with him," it is "not of force when they are dead." But if first-century hearers understood Jesus's saying in this sense, that nuance was lost on later Christian writers.

Intriguingly, literary and archaeological evidence show that early Christians anticipated that spouses would reunite after death. Tertullian (third century AD) wrote that believing spouses would continue to be "bound" to each other in the Resurrection.⁵⁸ An inscription on the tomb of a twenty-two-year-old woman named Bassa (fourth century AD) speaks comfort to her bereaved husband Gaudentius with assurance of their affectionate reunion in heaven: "Sweet husband, most closely bound to me forever, drive off your tears, the noble court of heaven is pleasant. . . . You will be saved, I confess, and will come to the kisses of Bassa."⁵⁹ The sarcophagus of a couple named Catervius and Severina (fourth century AD) portrays the pair receiving a crown of glory from the hand of God (1 Peter 5:4; 2 Timothy 4:8) directly beneath an inscription blessing them to "rise together among the blessed with the help of Christ."⁶⁰ John Chrysostom



Sarcophagus relief with portrait of Flavius Julius Caterius and Septimia Severina, late 4th century, Cathedral of San Catervo, Tolentino. © Mark D. Ellison.

(fourth century AD) assured a young widow whose husband had died after just five years of marriage, “You shall depart one day to join the same company with him, not to dwell with him for five years as you did here, nor for 20, or 100, nor for a thousand or twice that number but for infinite and endless ages.”⁶¹ Early Christians do not seem to have understood these reunions as “eternal marriage” or “eternal family” in the same sense that modern Latter-day Saints do (in the Roman world, the concepts of “marriage” and “family” were tied to many concerns of this world such as the production of legitimate heirs who would inherit possessions). However, the hopes early Christians expressed for heavenly reunions and living together eternally show that they did not believe Jesus’s answer to the Sadducees implied a dissolution of loving marital and familial bonds after death.

Family, Marriage, and Celibacy in the Undisputed Letters of Paul

Paul’s writings also display a complex attitude toward family and marriage.⁶² In some passages Paul sought to reinforce the stability of marriage among church members. First Thessalonians—likely the earliest-written book of the New Testament—includes Paul’s instruction to know how “to control your own body (KJV “possess his vessel”) in holiness and honor,” which might alternatively be understood as to take unto himself a wife in holiness and honor. In this context Paul teaches against fornication (Greek *porneia*, sexual sin) and uncontrolled passion (1 Thessalonians 4:3–5 NRSV; compare 1 Corinthians 6:15–20; 9:25). Yet Paul’s teaching of self-control was balanced by a resistance of ascetic extremism. Responding to church members at Corinth who thought it was “well for a man not to touch a woman,” Paul discouraged sexual abstinence within marriage except perhaps for temporary, mutually agreed-on periods of prayer; otherwise, husband and wife were to show each other consideration and deference in matters of sexual intimacy (1 Corinthians 7:1–5).⁶³ Paul also reiterated Jesus’s teaching against divorce and encouraged believers not to divorce an unbelieving spouse so long as each consented to remain married, promising that believers would have a sanctifying, saving influence on their unbelieving spouse and children (7:10–16). Nevertheless, when people had a choice to marry, Paul’s counsel was to marry “in the Lord”—to wed a fellow Christian (7:39).

On the other hand, Paul expressed the wish that the Corinthians would be as he was, unmarried and sexually continent (1 Corinthians 7:8–9).⁶⁴ Clarifying that he was giving his personal opinion, Paul taught that it would be preferable for the unwed not to marry (unless their passions were strong) and pointed to the free, unencumbered devotion to God possible in the unmarried state (7:6–40). Paul stated that his reason for this counsel was because “the appointed time has grown short” and “the present form of this world is passing away” (7:29, 31 NRSV). The plain sense of his rationale, as written, is that he was anticipating an imminent return of Christ and the apocalyptic end of the current age of the world, with all its attendant tribulations. Given this “impending crisis,” he wanted the saints at Corinth “to be free from anxieties,” able to give undivided attention to “the affairs of the Lord” and pleasing the Lord rather than being anxious about pleasing a

spouse (1 Corinthians 7:26, 32–35 NRSV). Underlying Paul’s thought may have been Jesus’s teachings about the tribulations to come and how those days would be particularly difficult for any who were with child or caring for an infant (Matthew 24:19).

Historian David G. Hunter comments: “It is fair to say that in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul failed to provide a truly positive rationale for Christian marriage. Ultimately he presented marriage as merely a defense against illicit desire. ‘By this essentially negative, even alarmist strategy,’ Peter Brown has observed, ‘Paul left a fatal legacy to future ages.’”⁶⁵ Part of that legacy was the development of a tradition that virginity was of greater religious merit and would earn a greater eternal reward than a life that included marriage and childbearing (compare 1 Corinthians 7:38).

One means by which Latter-day Saints have avoided this legacy is the Joseph Smith Translation of 1 Corinthians 7:29, which alters the meaning of the passage by narrowing its audience, “*But I speak unto you who are called unto the ministry*,” and redefining the shortness of time as that remaining until those addressed “*shall be sent forth unto the ministry*.” Thus, the unwed state was preferable for those embarking on full-time missionary journeys but not necessarily for everyone. It is not clear from the JST whether this represents a restoration of original intent (if not original text) or an inspired, prophetic reframing of the ancient text that harmonizes it with Restoration scripture and makes it applicable to the latter-day Church.⁶⁶ In any case, there is no insurmountable theological problem with the plain reading of the received text of 1 Corinthians 7, including Paul’s expectation of an imminent return of Christ. Latter-day Saints believe that apostles may hold personal opinions and that “not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine.”⁶⁷

Often quoted in Latter-day Saint discussions of marriage, 1 Corinthians 11:11 does not deal primarily with marriage in its original context within the epistle. Rather, the statement “neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” occurs in the course of a larger passage (1 Corinthians 11:2–16), notoriously difficult and much debated, regarding women in worship settings. Paul affirms that women pray and prophesy in Christian worship (1 Corinthians 11:5) yet is concerned that they wear proper hair coverings. The discussion is marked by tension between hierarchical and egalitarian views of gender. On one hand, the sequence of creation in Genesis (Genesis 2:7, 21–22) leads Paul to say, “The husband is the head of his wife” (1 Corinthians 11:3 NRSV). On the other hand, Paul turns around and challenges this notion as he states that man also comes through woman (is born of woman) and neither is without the other in the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:11–12).⁶⁸ Though Paul’s overriding intention appears to have been to encourage unity in the church (1 Corinthians 11:18), his statement about the mutual interdependence and reciprocity of woman and man “in the Lord” certainly has application in marriage. Both in marriage and in the Church family, men and women are “intended to learn from, strengthen, bless, and complete each other.”⁶⁹

Family, Marriage, and Celibacy in Later Epistles

Embedded in a number of New Testament books are texts listing instructions to various members of early Christian households—wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. Called “household codes” by scholars, these texts bear similarity to passages in Greek and Hellenistic Jewish literature promoting social stability by extolling ordered, well-managed homes in which family members fill their roles in proper relationship to each other.

The earliest of the New Testament household codes appear in Colossians 3:18–4:1, 1 Peter 2:13–3:12, and Ephesians 5:21–6:9 (which derives from the code in Colossians). The codes in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy 2:8–15; 5:1–22; 6:1–10; Titus 2:1–10) are of a later date, and since they add other members of the congregation such as widows, elders, bishops, and deacons, they might be called “congregational codes” written for the house church setting.⁷⁰ All but the code in 1 Peter are attributed to Paul, but on the basis of key differences between these texts and the undisputed epistles of Paul, most New Testament scholars believe they were written by followers of Paul in his name, potentially after his lifetime.⁷¹ In any case, these codes represent a more traditionalist strand of teaching that upholds existing social structures and hierarchies in the ancient household. They seem to reflect a setting in which expectations of an imminent Second Coming had begun to fade, and the charged apocalypticism underlying the Synoptic Gospels and Pauline Epistles was moderating. Christian communities across the Mediterranean world were coming to terms with the long-term project of building up the church and establishing themselves within society. This required defending against charges of being countercultural or seditious; one can see an anxious desire for peaceful social integration in the counsel to honor the emperor, pray for kings and other authority figures, be subject to rulers, live a quiet, peaceful life, avoid disputes, and be courteous to everyone (1 Peter 2:17; 1 Timothy 2:1–2; Titus 3:1–2). This assimilating expression of New Testament-era Christianity included affirming the norms of traditional households. However, the New Testament household codes made some important modifications to existing norms.

For example, the codes redescribed familial relationships by emphasizing mutual deference to counterparts and reorienting individuals to each other in view of each person’s relationship to Deity: wives were to be subject to their husbands *as unto the Lord* (Ephesians 5:22–24, 33; Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1, 5–6); children were to obey their parents *in the Lord* (Ephesians 6:1–3; Colossians 3:20); slaves were to be subject to their masters *as unto Christ* (Ephesians 6:5–8; Colossians 3:22–25; 1 Peter 2:18–25); husbands were not to treat a wife harshly but to be considerate of her, honor her, and love her *as Christ loved the church* and gave himself for it (Ephesians 5:25–33; Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7); fathers were not to provoke their children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction *of the Lord* (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21); masters were to treat slaves justly and fairly knowing that both they and their slaves had the same *Master in heaven* (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1). Thus, while the household codes reinforced the order and patriarchal authority valued in the broader society, they also urged their readers to rethink their household roles in light of the gospel of Christ. The traditionally subordinate members of each pair—wives, children, and

slaves—are addressed first, “as persons in their own right endowed with dignity,” showing that they “also have a significant role to play.”⁷² The counsel to wives in 1 Peter 3:1–6 runs counter to the ancient custom that a wife should fear her husband and adopt the worship of his gods; rather, the believing woman’s faith might win over her unbelieving husband. The instruction in Ephesians 5:22 for wives to be subject to their husbands appears only after the preliminary statement in Ephesians 5:21 that *all* household members—husbands and wives alike—should “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21 NRSV). In fact, the verb *hypotassō*, “to submit, to subject,” does not appear at all in verse 22 but is “borrowed” from verse 21; the sense of the two verses is “Submit yourselves to each other, wives to your husbands . . .,” and so on through the household, with instructions specifying ways for each member to manifest that mutual submission.⁷³ Though Christian households continued to be quite patriarchal and hierarchical, these modifications urged them toward greater equality and respect for each individual.⁷⁴

The material on marriage in Ephesians 5:22–33 is of special significance; here marriage serves as analogy for the relationship between Christ and the church, and the reverse is also true—Christ and the church serve as a model for the loving relationship that ought to exist between husband and wife.⁷⁵ This is described as “a great mystery” (Greek *mysterion*, Latin *sacramentum*, Ephesians 5:32)—language that influenced the gradual development of marriage as a sacrament in Christian tradition.⁷⁶

In the Pastoral Epistles, one encounters a different set of concerns centered on false teachings and dissidents (1 Timothy 1:3, 19; 4:1, 7; 6:3–5; 2 Timothy 4:3–4).⁷⁷ Certain rebellious teachers were contradicting sound doctrine and upsetting entire households or house churches (Titus 1:9–11). A particular characteristic of some of the false teachings was their asceticism—forbidding to marry, fasting and abstaining from certain foods, and promoting rigorous bodily discipline (1 Timothy 4:3, 8). In response, the Pastorals emphasized the goodness of God’s creation (1 Timothy 4:4–5); required that bishops, deacons, and elders be married, though only once (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:5–6); and urged church leaders to teach sound doctrine (1 Timothy 4:6; Titus 2:1).

Some scholars hold that the Pastorals were written to counter folktales, teachings, and practices of the kind that eventually were recorded in the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla.⁷⁸ This second-century text relates the tale of a young woman named Thecla who, upon hearing the ascetic teaching of Paul, becomes fiercely loyal to the apostle and determines to live her life as a virgin, greatly upsetting her mother, not to mention her fiancé. Tumult ensues, and the tales of Thecla’s deeds and travels portray her as defiant of male Roman authorities yet repeatedly delivered from death by miraculous means. She baptizes herself and ultimately becomes a healer and a revered holy woman. In contrast, the Pastoral Epistles oppose the renunciation of marriage (1 Timothy 4:3–5), express concern about “profane myths and old wives’ tales” (1 Timothy 4:7 NRSV), sound an alarm about women led astray by teachers of falsehoods who infiltrate Christian households (2 Timothy 3:6–8), counsel women to be silent and submit to male authority (1 Timothy 2:11–15),⁷⁹ and urge loyalty to family (1 Timothy 5:8). Together, the Pastoral Epistles and the Acts of Paul and Thecla

provide a glimpse at a period of controversy over how church members were to be different from the world, how the gospel was to affect private life, what roles men and women were to play in the church, and how the legacy of Paul was to be remembered. The Pastorals also give evidence of attempts to prevent interpreting earlier teachings about the value of celibacy for *some* people, in *some* circumstances, as the superior or preferred way of life for *all* people.⁸⁰

Family, Marriage, and Celibacy in Christian and Latter-day Saint Tradition

New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson observed that over the centuries, Christian traditions have responded in different ways to what he calls “the complex witness of the New Testament concerning marriage, family, and sexuality.” Some radical ascetic sects renounced marriage; Roman Catholicism upheld both celibacy and marriage as honorable vocations but regarded virginity as the holier path; Protestantism viewed marriage and family more positively, “in a more direct continuity with the Old Testament and the order of the first creation,” but lost connection with aspects of New Testament teaching.⁸¹

Where do Latter-day Saints stand regarding these New Testament teachings? Certainly Restoration scripture and teachings of Latter-day Saint prophets have dramatically influenced our outlook. We have come to understand marriage and family as divinely ordained, central to the developmental purposes of mortal life, and potentially eternal (Doctrine and Covenants 49:16–17; 131:1–4; 132:19). In these respects, Latter-day Saint theology surpasses what can be found in the New Testament, and for many these teachings and practices are among the most cherished aspects of Latter-day Saint identity and purpose. Yet the question remains what value we might still gain from the complex, perhaps wonderfully nuanced record of our New Testament forebears. If we are to turn our hearts to our fathers and mothers, including our spiritual ancestors of the early church, what might we learn from them? If we without them cannot be complete (see Doctrine and Covenants 128:15), in what ways might the multifaceted witness of the New Testament make us more complete?

Perhaps in the New Testament we hear the testimony of different voices, much as we do in modern Latter-day Saint testimony meetings, each with its own truth to tell. Some voices seem to tell us of a time when family structures were so rigid that they needed to be challenged. Some voices tell us of the ways Christ transformed and elevated their understanding of all their family relationships. Some invite us to expand our concept of family. And some testimonies remind us that even apart from family relationships, the individual follower of Christ holds a role of dignity and honor as God’s child and an heir in the eternal household of God.



Mark D. Ellison is an associate professor in the Department of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.

Further Reading

- Campbell, Ken M., ed. *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003. Essays on marriage and family in the ancient Near East, ancient Israel, the Greco-Roman world, Second Temple Judaism, and the New Testament. The collection is of uneven quality—the chapter on the Roman world distills excellent historical scholarship, while the chapter on New Testament views has some valuable material but is less historical and descriptive than confessional and prescriptive as it defends a conservative evangelical position.
- Holzapfel, Richard N., Eric D. Huntsman, and Thomas A. Wayment. *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006. A plentifully illustrated guide to cultural, historical, and textual insights on the New Testament by three Latter-day Saint scholars. Households and marriage are discussed on pages 161, 205, 210–211, 243, 248, 307.
- Hunter, David G. *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018. This is an updated version of *Marriage in the Early Church* (1992), containing selected early Christian texts on the subject of marriage, from the New Testament to the eighth century, translated into English, with introductory essays.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. “The Complex Witness of the New Testament Concerning Marriage, Family, and Sexuality.” In *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays*, 659–78. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013. A concise but substantive scholarly survey of the complexity of New Testament teachings on marriage, family, and sexuality.
- Maier, Harry O. “The Household and its Members.” In *New Testament Christianity in the Roman World*, by Harry O. Maier, 134–73. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. A discussion of the characteristics of households and household members in the Greco-Roman world that are “foreign” to us, and how understanding these differences illuminates key New Testament texts. Skillfully draws insights from archaeology and ancient literary sources.
- Moxnes, Halvor, ed. *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*. London: Routledge, 1997. A multiauthored volume examining the social institution of the family in the New Testament world and the ways familial metaphors expressed the early church’s self-understanding.
- Osiek, Carolyn, and David L. Balch. *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997. A landmark study that examines households, marriage, celibacy, gender roles, and family life in the New Testament with insights from the fields of archaeology, cultural anthropology, and social history.

Notes

1. In the Greek of the New Testament, several terms denote various aspects of “family.” The term *patria* refers to lineage (Luke 2:4; Acts 3:25; Ephesians 3:15), as can *genos* (Acts 4:6), which also refers more broadly to nationality or race (Mark 7:26; Acts 4:36; 7:13, 19; 13:26; 17:28–29; Philemon 3:5; 1 Peter 2:9). The most frequently used term is *oikos* or *oikia*, “house,” meaning not just the physical structure of a dwelling place but also its inhabitants—the household or (extended) family. The Latin terms *domus* and *familia* correspond roughly to the Greek *oikos* and *oikia*, denoting “household,” its members, and its property; for a discussion, see Harry O. Maier, *New Testament Christianity in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 146–48.
2. Biblical scholar Susan Calef observes that throughout the history of reading and interpreting the Bible, there has been a tendency for interpreters to project “their own understanding of family onto New Testament teachings about the subject”: Susan A. Calef, review of Halvor Moxnes, ed., “Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor,” *Journal of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2000): 122.
3. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 94. Latter-day Saint scholar Stephen Robinson observes,

“The LDS need to do a better job of identifying correctly which of their beliefs originate in the Bible and which originate from modern revelation.”

4. For further discussion of a broader view of “Restoration,” see Philip L. Barlow, “To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith’s Project,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 28–50.
5. For a discussion of this topic, see Carolyn Osiek, “Family Matters,” in *Christian Origins: A People’s History of Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 201–20.
6. lds.org/topics/marriage.
7. M. Russell Ballard, “Strength in Counsel,” *Ensign*, November 1993; and Russell M. Nelson, “A Plea to My Sisters,” *Ensign*, November 2015.
8. Instead of “it is not permitted unto them [women] to speak,” JST 1 Corinthians 14:34 changes the wording to “it is not permitted unto them to *rule*.” No such JST change is made to 1 Timothy 2:11–12.
9. For example, Spencer W. Kimball, “Home: The Place to Save Society,” *Ensign*, January 1975, 2–10.
10. Compare the lack of references to the above passages in recent general conference talks to the many recent references to 1 Corinthians 11:11; see scriptures.byu.edu.
11. Greek and Latin had no term for “family” as commonly understood today—i.e., the coresident, nuclear family of husband, wife, and children; see Halvor Moxnes, “What Is Family? Problems in Constructing Early Christian Families,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 20–21.
12. See Bruce W. Frier and Thomas A. J. McGinn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 191–92.
13. For example, Matthew 10:34–37; 1 Corinthians 7:12–17; Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 1–2; Acts of Paul and Thecla 8–16; The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity 1.1–2; 2.1–2.
14. As Bruce W. Young observes, it is doubtful that Jesus rejoiced in the conflicts he knew would come; see his “Following Christ in Times of War: Latter-day Saints as Peacemakers,” in *Common Ground, Different Opinions: Latter-day Saints and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Justin F. White and James E. Faulconer (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 201.
15. See Tobit 4:12–13.
16. For a study of the transition from ancient models of marriage to marriage based primarily on “love,” see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).
17. Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 13.
18. See Ambrosiaster, *Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti* 127.2–3, CSEL 50, 399–400; *Comm. in 1 Cor 7:40*, CSEL 81/2, 90; *Comm. in 1 Tim 3:12*, CSEL 81/3, 268; Innocent I, *Epistula* 4.6.9; David G. Hunter, “On the Sin of Adam and Eve: A Little-Known Defense of Marriage and Childbearing by Ambrosiaster,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 3 (1989): 287–88; and David G. Hunter, “Sexuality, Marriage, and the Family,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 2, *Constantine to c. 600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 591–92. It is not known whether Jewish marriage customs described in the Talmud represent first-century practices; see Mark Searle and Kenneth W. Stevenson, *Documents of the Marriage Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 3.
19. Jewish tradition held “the view of marriage as a covenant between husband and wife which is entered into and lived out within the larger covenantal relationship of God and Israel. The couple in some sense embody that larger relationship.” Searle and Stevenson, *Documents of the Marriage Liturgy*, 25.
20. Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 400.
21. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 6, 24–25; compare Leonard V. Rutgers, “Cata-

- combs and Health in Christian Rome,” in *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death, and Interaction*, ed. Christian Laes, Katariina Mustakallio, and Ville Vuolanto (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2015), 35–52.
22. Osiek, “Family Matters,” 205; of course, some individuals lived much longer than the average life expectancy; Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, was eighty-six when he was martyred in the mid-second century: The Martyrdom of Polycarp 9.3. Compare Maier, *New Testament Christianity*, 156: “Half of all children died before the age of two [and] parents needed to conceive five to seven children to assure surviving heirs and material support in their old age. However, in poor families, three children at most could be supported.”
 23. William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Jewish communities in the first century AD may have had higher than average literacy rates, at least in the ability to read (if not write); see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 7; Maier, *New Testament Christianity*, 160–61; and Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.204.
 24. David G. Hunter, “Children,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1998), 236.
 25. Didache 2.2; Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 29; *Letter to Diognetus* 5.6; Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 35.6; Apostolic Constitutions 4.1.1–2.
 26. Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4. Peppard discusses adoption in the Roman world and adoption imagery in the New Testament.
 27. Frier and McGinn, *Roman Family Law*, 14; and Maier, *New Testament Christianity*, 161.
 28. The KJV also uses the word *servant* to translate the Greek word *diákonos*, which connotes one who serves food, waits upon, attends to, or ministers to another, and is the source of the word *deacon*. The one time the English word *slave* appears in the KJV (Revelation 18:13), it translates the Greek *sōma*, literally “body,” reflecting how a slave was a commodity—a body to be owned, worked, and exploited.
 29. See 1 Corinthians 7:21–24; Galatians 3:28; Philemon; Ephesians 6:5–9; Colossians 3:22–4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1–2; 1 Peter 2:18–25; see the discussion in Maier, *New Testament Christianity*, 161–68.
 30. Such as Junian Latins or peregrines (foreigners who were permanent residents); see Frier and McGinn, *Roman Family Law*, 31–33. In AD 212 Emperor Caracalla granted Roman citizenship to practically all free persons.
 31. Osiek, “Family Matters,” 211; compare Maier, *New Testament Christianity*, 146. Epitaphs commemorate the length of *contubernium* marriages to the day, implying that such relationships were at least sometimes formed on a specific date and probably with some form of ceremony; see Karen K. Hersch, *The Roman Wedding: Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 33n70, citing K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 49n12.
 32. Pliny, *Natural History* 5.17.73; Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.1.1, 6; *Jewish War* 2.8.2; Philo, *De vita contemplativa* 3.33; 8.68.
 33. John the Baptist, for example, seems to have been unmarried. For a discussion of this subject and its relevance to Christianity, see Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 99–102.
 34. Musonius Rufus, frag. 14, trans. Cora E. Lutz, “Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates,” *Yale Classical Studies* 10 (1947): 93.
 35. See Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Cooper notes that the transformation of marriage among Christians eventually resulted in an “increased hold of the marriage bond,” xi.
 36. See Tobit 4:3. Jesus showed similar compassion in restoring to life the only son of a widow at Nain (Luke 7:11–17).

37. The use of familial terminology to refer to the relationships between nonrelated members of a group is called “fictive kinship” in the field of anthropology; early Christians are a classic example of fictive kinship. For a discussion, see Maier, *New Testament Christianity*, 171–73.
38. The King James Version adds “or wife” after “father or mother” in Matthew 19:29 and Mark 10:29. Some early manuscripts don’t have “or wife” in Matthew 19:29, though some do, including Codex Sinaiticus; no early manuscripts have “or wife” in Mark 10:29.
39. Luke 11:27–28, too, may be read as a prioritization of discipleship over familial roles. See Warren Carter and Amy-Jill Levine, *The New Testament: Methods and Meanings* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 69; and Julie M. Smith, *Search, Ponder, and Pray: A Guide to the Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2014), 88–89.
40. *Talmud Bavli* (Babylonian Talmud) Gittin 90a.
41. The earliest versions of Jesus’s teaching on divorce appear to prohibit it unconditionally (Mark 10:11–12; 1 Corinthians 7:10–11; compare Luke 16:18); later versions in Matthew give an exception for sexual immorality (*porneia*; Matthew 5:31–32; 19:9). This exception may have been assumed by Jesus and his first hearers and added later for clarification; see Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 16–18. For current Latter-day Saint application of this teaching, see Dallin H. Oaks, “Divorce,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 71.
42. For example, Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.28.1; and Methodius, *Symposion e peri hagneias* 2.1; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.10.
43. David G. Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 3.
44. Compare Dallin H. Oaks, “Divorce,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 70–73.
45. Walter W. Wessel, “Mark” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency, 1984), 8:712; see also Julie M. Smith, *The Gospel according to Mark: A New Rendition*, BYU New Testament Commentary series (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2019).
46. Though most New Testament scholars understand “this teaching” (Matthew 19:11) to refer to celibacy (i.e., not marrying, as stated in Matthew 19:10), some argue that it may refer to remaining unmarried after divorce (implied in Matthew 19:9); see Quentin Quesnell, “Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 19, 12)” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1968): 335–58.
47. Bruce R. McConkie proposed that the eunuchs Jesus mentioned were apparently “men who in false pagan worship had deliberately mutilated themselves in the apostate notion that such would further their salvation.” *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (1965–73), 1:549. Jesus, however, referred not to pagan practices but to those whose celibacy was “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake”; he never used the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” with reference to pagan notions of afterlife. Regarding Jesus’s use of figurative language, the Gospels take a dim view of Jesus’s hearers who understand his words too literally and fail to grasp their higher, symbolic import (see, e.g., Mark 8:14–21; John 3:1–12; 4:5–14; 6:22–66).
48. See Matthew 19:27–30; Mark 10:28–30. The disciples apparently had not abandoned their families permanently but were away from them as they traveled with Jesus; according to 1 Corinthians 9:5, in later years some disciples traveled with their spouses. It is also possible that Jesus meant the statement as a self-reference—that, for the special purposes of his mission, he himself had forgone marriage and was living a celibate life “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”; see Josef Blinzler, “Eisin eunouchoi,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche* 48 (1957): 254–70.
49. New Testament texts mention Jesus’s mother, father, brothers, and sisters, but the only “wife” or “bride” of Christ is metaphorical—the church (Ephesians 5:31–32; 2 Corinthians 11:2–4; Revelation 21:2, 9–10; 22:17).
50. Recent popular speculation that Jesus was married has been fueled by Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* and by the papyrus fragment called “The Gospel of Jesus’s Wife,” which has been shown to be a modern forgery. See Karen L. King, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife . . .’: A New Coptic Papyrus Fragment,” *Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 2 (2014): 131–59; Ariel Sabar, “The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’s Wife,” *Atlantic*, July–August 2016; and Ariel Sabar, “Karen King Responds to ‘The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus’s Wife’”

- Atlantic*, June 16, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/06/karen-king-responds-to-the-unbelievable-tale-of-jesus-wife/487484/>. For a discussion of this subject by three Latter-day Saint scholars, see 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), especially 37–50.
51. Examples of Latter-day Saint arguments that Jesus was married include the following: (a) Orson Hyde, who speculated that Jesus was married on the evidence of the wedding of Cana (John 2:1–11) and the reference in Isaiah 53:10 to the Servant's "seed" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:82). However, Jesus attended the wedding as a guest, not a groom (John 2:2), and the Book of Mormon interprets Christ's "seed" as prophets who have taught of Christ and those who have believed them (Mosiah 15:11–15). See fairmormon.org/answers/Jesus_Christ/Was_Jesus_married. (b) The claim that since Judaism held marriage and childbearing in high regard and rabbis were usually married, it would have been scandalous for Jesus not to have been married. For an example of this argument, see D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verses by Verse: The Four Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 108–9. This argument, however, oversimplifies the Judaism of the first century, which included groups of people who practiced sexual renunciation in pursuit of a holy way of life (as discussed above). John the Baptist may have been unmarried. (c) The claim that since Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–4 teaches that marriage is required for the highest degree of heavenly reward, Christ must have been married; see a variation of this in Ogden and Skinner, *Verses by Verse*, 108–9. Though theoretically possible, this reasoning fails to consider the utterly unique character of Christ's mortal mission and the possibility that it might have required a single-minded devotion including a celibate life (see Matthew 19:12; Luke 12:50). Examples of Church spokespersons who have clarified that it is *not* a Church doctrine that Jesus was married include Charles W. Penrose, "Peculiar Questions Briefly Answered," *Improvement Era*, September 1912, 1042, "We do not know anything about Jesus Christ being married. The Church has no authoritative declaration on the subject"; Dale Bills, quoted in "LDS do not endorse claims in 'Da Vinci,'" *Deseret News*, May 17, 2006, "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."
 52. For example, Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 160–215), who wrote quite positively about marriage and family life, mentions ascetic sects who justified their renunciation of marriage on the grounds that they were "imitating the Lord who neither married nor had any possession in this world," an argument that would have gained no traction without widespread memory that Jesus had been single; *Stromata* 3.6.49, *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 2, *Alexandrian Christianity*, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 62–63; Tertullian, *Monogamy* 5 (written c. AD 217), stated that Christ "was entirely unwedded"; trans. S. Thelwall, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 62; Methodius (d. about AD 311), *Symposion e peri hagneias* 1.4–5, referred to Christ as "first and chief of virgins" who "preserved the flesh which He had taken upon Him incorrupt in virginity"; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, trans. William R. Clark, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886), 312–13.
 53. Holzapfel, Skinner, and Wayment, *What Da Vinci Didn't Know*, 37–50.
 54. See, for example, Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator* 1.4.3; Tertullian, *To His Wife* 1.1.4; Jerome, *Epistulae* 75.2; M. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 24–32; Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 39; and Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon, 2007), 58–59.
 55. Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 328; with thanks to Gaye Strathearn, "Teaching the Four Gospels: Five Considerations," *Religious Educator* 13, no. 2 (2012): 106n51. Compare James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 548: "In the resurrection there will be no marrying nor giving in marriage; for all questions of marital status must be settled before that time."

56. Strathearn, "Teaching the Four Gospels," 97, emphasis in the original.
57. Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 328; by the first century, levirate marriage does not seem to have been practiced any longer.
58. Tertullian, *Monogamy* 10.
59. ICUR 5.14076: "Dul[c]is in aeternum mihimet iun[tissi]me coniux, / Ex[c]ute iam lacrimas, placuit bona [r]egia caeli . . . Sospes eris fateor v[. . . . o]scula Bassae"; final line as reconstructed by Antonio Ferrua: "Sospes eris fateor u[enies et ad o]scula Bassae"; trans. Dennis Trout, "Borrowed Verse and Broken Narrative: Agency, Identity, and the (Bethesda) Sarcophagus of Bassa," in *Life, Death, and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, ed. Jaś Elsner and Janet Huskinson (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2010), 341–43; and Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, Giuseppe Bovini, and Hugo Brandenburg, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage, Bd 1 Rom und Ostia* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Franz Steiner, 1967), 229–30, Taf. 85, no. 556.
60. CIL IX 5566 = ILS 1289 = CLE 1560a = ILCV 98b = ICI X 22b, "surgatis pariter cristo praestante beati"; Jutta Dresken-Weiland, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage, zweiter Band: Italien mit einem Nachtrag Rom und Ostia, Dalmatien, Museen der Welt* (Mainz am Rhein, Germany: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1998), 52–53, no. 148; and Aldo Nestori, *Il Mausoleo e il Sarcofago di Flavivs Ivliivs Catervivs a Tolentino* (Citta del Vaticano: Pontificio Instituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1996).
61. John Chrysostom, *To a Young Widow* 3.188–201; *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), trans. W. R. W. Stephens, 9:123. Additional examples in early Christian literature and archaeology discussed in Mark D. Ellison, "Visualizing Christian Marriage in the Roman World" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2017), 193–224.
62. The undisputed letters of Paul are Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon; for a discussion of authorship of the epistles traditionally attributed to Paul, see a modern commentary or study bible, such as the book introductions to each epistle in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, College Edition*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
63. JST 1 Corinthians 7:1–2 clarifies the implicit question and answer in these verses: "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me, *saying*: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, *I say* . . ." JST 1 Corinthians 7:5 changes the KJV "Defraud ye not one the other" to "*Depart ye not one from the other* . . ."
64. In 1 Corinthians 9:5–12, Paul states that he and his missionary companions "have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife," as other apostles, but that they "have not made use of this right." The possibility that he was married but simply not traveling with his wife on his missionary journeys is unlikely given how Paul presents himself as a role model for continent, unmarried believers in 1 Corinthians 7. The implication is that Paul was not married at the time he wrote the epistle. If he had been married previously, he was apparently either widowed or divorced at the time he wrote 1 Corinthians.
65. David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 89; citing Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 55.
66. See Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 8–11, which explains that the JST is not necessarily the restoration of original text, but may represent the restoration of original ideas, clarifications for modern readers, efforts to harmonize text with other scriptural passages or revelations, or inspired teachings that were not written at all by ancient authors.
67. D. Todd Christofferson, "The Doctrine of Christ," *Ensign*, May 2012, 88; and "Approaching Mormon Doctrine," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/approaching-mormon-doctrine>.
68. This paragraph draws in part from Mark D. Ellison, "Adam in the New Testament," bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/adam-in-the-new-testament.aspx.
69. David A. Bednar, "We Believe in Being Chaste," *Ensign*, May 2013, 41–42.

70. David L. Balch, "Household Codes," in David N. Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3.318.
71. But see Lincoln H. Blumell, "Scribes and Ancient Letters: Implications for the Pauline Epistles," in *How the New Testament Came to Be* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 208–26.
72. Osiek, "Family Matters," 216.
73. The New Living Translation gives this sense by rendering the two verses: ". . . submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord."
74. For example, 1 Peter 3:7 illustrates both vestiges of patriarchy and aspects of egalitarianism: the wife is "the weaker vessel," but husband and wife together are "joint-heirs of the grace of life."
75. Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 5; this nuptial metaphor is an extension of that found in many Old Testament passages that describe the Lord's relationship with Israel in terms of marriage, as a covenant; for example, Ezekiel 16:8.
76. See Philip L. Reynolds, *How Marriage Became One of the Sacraments: The Sacramental Theology of Marriage from Its Medieval Origins to the Council of Trent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
77. Some of the teachings of concern, in addition to those discussed, involved early forms of Gnosticism (1 Timothy 6:20, the falsely called knowledge [*gnōsis*]) and Judaism/Judaizing (Titus 1:10, 14).
78. For example, Dennis MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); and Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 8–18.
79. The teaching in 1 Timothy 2:14 that it was Eve, not Adam, who was deceived, stands in contrast to Paul's teaching in Romans 5:12–21 that places blame on Adam for the Fall. Many scholars regard the similar teaching in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36 as a later interpolation since it interrupts the flow of the text, appears elsewhere in some manuscripts, contradicts Paul's approval of women participating in worship in 1 Corinthians 11:5, and seems to be an attempt to insert later views into this earlier letter.
80. For a discussion of how the canonization of the Pastoral Epistles promoted an interpretation of Paul that rejected compulsory celibacy and favored marriage, see Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 92–96. The tensions between marriage and celibacy are seen elsewhere in the New Testament too: marriage is honorable in Hebrews (Hebrews 13:4), while a redeemed multitude in John's Apocalypse are virgins (see Revelation 14:1–4, though this may be symbolic).
81. Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Complex Witness of the New Testament Concerning Marriage, Family, and Sexuality," in *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 659–78.