

## Sex and Celibacy

### A first century perspective on issues of celibacy, then and now

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Celibacy is a choice which people make. It may seem to be a straightforward choice and a simple notion, as put by the Oxford and Webster dictionaries, which define it as

“Abstaining from marriage and sexual relations, typically for religious reasons.”<sup>2</sup>

“the state of not being married” “abstention from sexual intercourse” and “abstention by vow from marriage *priestly celibacy*”<sup>3</sup>

In reality it is a good deal more complex, already in the first century, the area of my competence, but also in the twenty-first, where I don't claim any expertise but where I shall also make a few observations in conclusion.

In the early second century BCE Jewish writing, *The Book of Jubilees*, preserved in full in Ethiopic, but also found in substantial fragments 1500 years earlier in the caves of the Dead Sea, we have a typical reference to celibacy when it paraphrases and reworks the story of Adam and Eve. The author refashions Genesis' rationale for making woman from the need for the man to have a companion to the fact that Adam saw the animals joining in sexual relations and both he and God saw this as something desirable and good also for himself (3:1-7), so very positive about sexual union. Accordingly, God created Eve and brought Adam to her and they engaged in sexual intercourse. They were then placed in a garden deemed to be a sanctuary, indeed the holiest place on earth (3:12; 4:26; 8:19), an interesting take on the garden of Eden. There they desisted from sexual relations. As in many religions and cultures, so in Israel, sexual relations have no place in holy space. Celibacy rules. This in no way implies a negative attitude towards sexuality. It is a matter of time and place. Only after they leave the garden do they then engage in sexual relations again and this time also to bring forth offspring (4:1), which was not the focus before then.

Holy places required celibacy, a complex notion relating in part to the deeming of bodily fluids as out of place and contaminating, not in a moral but in a ritual, cultic, sense. This is why people needed ritual cleansing before entering the temple and those who served there needed to be celibate when on roster. Similarly among the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls those who entered or stayed in their sacred site needed to be celibate and that requirement ceased when they left or if they lived in the wider community.<sup>4</sup> Some extreme groups extended the holy space from the temple precincts to the whole of Jerusalem,<sup>5</sup> no sex in the city, and also required abstinence from sexual relations on the

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed discussion see William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) and reference there to my five volume work which it summarises.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/celibate> (accessed 290517)

<sup>3</sup> Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/celibacy> (accessed 290517)

<sup>4</sup> Damascus Document 7.4b-9a / 19.1-5a; Community Rule 8.4b-7a; 9.5-6. See also Josephus *Jewish Wars* 2.160; Pliny *sina ulla femina*, “without any women” (*Natural History* 5.17); Philo, though he explains that Essenes preferred not to include women because, he claims, they cause too much dissent and lack self control (*Hypothetica*. 11.14). He writes similarly of the exclusively male Therapeutai and female Therapeutrides groups monastic groups.

<sup>5</sup> So the Temple Scroll 45.6-12; CD 12.1-2.

sabbath, holy time.<sup>6</sup> For the same reason Exodus tells us that the Israelites were instructed to be celibate for three days before they approached Mt Sinai (19:15).<sup>7</sup> The same logic informs Paul's instruction that married couples could abstain from sexual intercourse in order to spend a period of time in prayer (1 Cor 7:5).<sup>8</sup> That tradition lived on with ministers not having sex on Saturday night before preaching, a sacral not a moral issue.

Generally Jewish tradition of those ancient times had a very positive attitude towards sexual relations as part of God's creation and their depictions of future utopia included abundance not only among plants and animals but also among humans: high levels of fertility for all.<sup>9</sup> Some, however, came to see the ideal future as a holy state. Had *Jubilees*, for instance, contained an image of future hope as return to paradise, the garden of Eden, it would have required celibacy.<sup>10</sup> The view of future hope as entering a holy sanctuary became common among the first Christians. Mark reports Jesus as saying: "When they rise from the dead they will neither marry nor be given in marriage, but shall be like the angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25). That wasn't about weddings. It was about celibacy in holy space. The Book of Revelation assumes that the age to come will be a holy state, a temple, to which the 144,000 who have been celibate in this life will enter first, followed by the rest of us (14:4-5; 7:1-8).

Seeing the future as sexless was a logical extension of seeing it in cultic terms as sacred time and place. It also belonged to the notion of resurrected life as not a crude resuscitation of corpses or resurrected flesh and blood, but as becoming embodied in a spiritual body, like the embodied angels and the materializing and dematerializing Jesus of the Easter stories. It did not, in itself, imply anything negative about sexuality, but inevitably this would follow as some thought about it. Paul found that people in Corinth had made the connection and seemed to be requiring that believers abandon their marriages and sexual relations and all become celibate like him. Perhaps the myth of a future where male and female distinctions would disappear and all become like the original Adam played a role. Paul had to fight a rear-guard action in 1 Corinthians 7, insisting that marriage was something positive and that people should engage in sexual relations, that it was not sin, nor was it sin to marry. If they want to spend periods in prayer and for that purpose be celibate, a concession he is prepared to make, that should not do that for too long (7:5). The need to defend marriage against this imposition of celibacy is to be found also in the very differently oriented Gospel according to Matthew, which portrays Jesus as insisting that celibacy is only for those called to it, not for all (19:10-12; similarly Paul in 1 Cor 7:7).

These countermoves by both Paul and Jesus are interesting because they both chose celibacy and no wonder others thought that they should, too. With both Jesus and Paul, and probably also John the

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<sup>6</sup> *Jub.* 50:8; see also CD 11.5; 4QD<sup>f</sup>/4Q271 5 i.1-2; CD 12.4; 4QD<sup>o</sup>/4Q270 2 i.18-19; 4QHalakhah A/4Q251.

<sup>7</sup> Similarly 1 Sam 21:5-6; 2 Sam 11:11-13; and the *Rule of the Congregation*, which applies the same to the holy assembly of the people, requiring abstention in advance (1QS 2:3-11; 1QSa/1Q28a 2.4-9; CD 15.15-16; and similarly 4QD<sup>a</sup>/4Q266 8 i.6-9).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly *Testament of Naphtali* 8:2-3

<sup>9</sup> E.g. 1QS/1S28 4.6b-8; CD 2.11b-12a; 4QInstr<sup>g</sup>/4Q423 3 1-5 / 1QInstr/1Q26 2 2-4; 11QT<sup>a</sup>/11Q19 59.12; Philo *Praem.* 98-105.

<sup>10</sup> *Jub.* 23:28; *The Book of Jewish Antiquities (LAB)* 19:12-13; 26:13; 33:5. Cf. also "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15).

Baptist, we are dealing with people who opted out of the standard pattern for men. The standard pattern was that they build up sufficient resources to be able to marry at around age 30, a pattern common to Jewish, Greek and Roman society. It is not by chance that it was at this age that Jesus made a different choice. It was unusual, but by no means odd, for some people, usually men, to feel a call from God to embark on a non family lifestyle in order to be active as a prophet or join a religious group.<sup>11</sup> Possibly Jesus was responding to criticism when he spoke about three kinds of eunuchs: those impotent from birth; those rendered impotent by castration; and those who chose celibacy for the kingdom of God – like himself (Matt 19:12). There was probably a mix of influences at work: holy work meant frequently entering God’s holy presence and so keeping oneself ritually pure, as did Moses according to Philo;<sup>12</sup> the prophetic challenge meant separation from social norms; and perhaps the more modern notion that being unencumbered might mean having more energy to do God’s work.

To opt out of what were society’s norms was confronting. Households were the key to the economy and survival. Secure marriages were in the interests of all household members, both for the present and for the future when offspring would continue the household’s agriculture or crafts and would care for surviving elderly members. Households were networked into a system of wealthy patrons on whom they depended, who were in turn beholden to large landholders and ultimately to Rome’s puppet governors. Jesus’ itinerant band dislocated some of its followers from the system and declared an alternative empire/kingdom to Rome’s (Mark 1:15-20). This challenged family values. New priorities were to inform the lives of both itinerants, some of whom remained married, and those who stayed at home.

The new movement did not however challenge marriage itself. In Jewish, Greek and Roman law adultery was forbidden and mandated divorce. Marriages were arranged, the young controlled (no dating), and virginity mandated to avert the shame of unwanted pregnancies and damaged reputation which would make it harder for fathers to marry off their daughters. Unlike among Jews, for Greeks and Romans, males had more room for sexual experimentation, a double standard, but the ideal, for very obvious reasons in a precontraceptive age was celibacy in singleness. So in the romantic tale, *Joseph and Aseneth*, Joseph insists they not sleep together before the wedding night (21:1). And to widowers and widows who find celibacy hard, Paul commends their getting married, and assures them that to do so is not a sin (1 Cor 7:8-9). Thus Paul was aware of the dangers of celibacy, whether among the unmarried or married. In 1 Corinthians 7 he is worried about the latter abstaining, even for the pious reason of periods of prayer, because, he opines, the men are likely to seek prostitutes, something he warned against in the preceding chapter (7:5).

Paul, however, also shows some shaping from popular Greco-Roman philosophies of his day, though avoids their extremes. One extreme position, promoted by the neo-Pythagoreans was that sexual relations are best avoided, or if necessary for propagation, to be engaged in mechanically, not for pleasure, a view espoused also by Plato (*Laws* 838E-839A). This was all part of a tendency among philosophers to alert people to the dangers of passions, not just sexual passions, but also others like anger, sadness, joy, appetite. The mature man – and it was largely a male discussion – does not get

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. Jer 16:1-4; Luke 12:36; Acts 21:9; 2 *Enoch* 71:1-20.

<sup>12</sup> Philo *Mos.* 2.68-69.

carried away by his passions. And for some that really did mean abstinence. Sexual intercourse should be only for procreation, not fulfilment of desire.<sup>13</sup> Plato fantasizes about an ideal state where marriage has no place and reproduction is managed, a kind of controlled breeding program. Sexual intercourse is acceptable only for propagation of the species, as many argued and is still argued as a main reason for opposing contraception, not to speak of same sex marriage. Accordingly, people worried about the legitimacy of having sex when their wives were menstruating, pregnant, infertile or post-menopausal. Semen might run out and the species not survive, also a reason why they disapproved of masturbation.

Plato,<sup>14</sup> and the first century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, opted for a concession: people past the age could still use sexual intercourse as a way of expressing companionship, as long as it was not flamboyant and excessive (*Spec.* 3.35). But celibacy was hovering everywhere as an ideal. As tombstones still tell us, widows who remained unmarried, called *univerae*, wives of one man, were especially worthy of praise, Anna the prophetess, in Luke's birth narrative a prime example (2:36-37). There were great efforts to depict Jesus' mother Mary as otherwise celibate, despite many counterindications and with no basis in the earliest documents, which assume Jesus had brothers and sisters.

From the second century people on began to misread Jesus' challenge to men about predatory behaviour, looking at someone's else wife in order to have her (Matt 5:28) and his daring imagery of plucking out one's eyes, or cutting off one's hands or feet (5:29). The Greek also allowed a reading which said: any man looking at any woman and having a sexual response to her has committed adultery with her already in his heart (and is to be condemned). Then human sexual response is already a sin. Oh the torment for the men! Some castrated themselves. Oh the danger women posed to them! They must be covered up and controlled. Men should either be safely married or remain celibate. The latter was obviously the more noble way to go and so one could see two levels of discipleship. It took at least another 1000 years before this converted into the requirement that priests be celibate.

People often criticize Paul for an alleged negative attitude towards marriage. He certainly does not see it as a high priority, partly because he expects that history would wrap up in his life time and partly because he believed that marriages would then cease to exist. Like any other Jew, however, he assumes that marriage belongs to the divine order of creation in this world and so is good. He also knows about spouses loving each other and that sexual intercourse belongs in that context (1 Cor 7:3-4. 33-34). Controversially, however, he also depicts marriage as a protective measure against men misbehaving (7:5). He assumes that at least for some men, not giving expression to their sexual desires, is dangerous because sexual desire is so strong; it will want to find a way. Paul's is a wisdom worth heeding wherever people put themselves under pressure to be celibate. He was concerned specifically about prostitution, not an unusual option at the time for men waiting to be 30, but also for married men. He would also have condemned other forms of sexual gratification, not least the pederasty of his time. Of course, like Jews of his time he condemned much more, including

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<sup>13</sup> A common Greco-Roman philosophical view, it is also assumed in *1 Enoch* 15:5-6 and in Luke's rewriting of Mark 12:25 (20:34-36). Philo cannot deny pleasure as part of God's creation and so argues that it increases chances of conception.

<sup>14</sup> (*Leg.* 784E3-785A3, 783E4-7, 784B1-3)

consensual same sex relations among men and women (Rom 1:24-28), and would have also condemned masturbation as self gratification and waste of limited resources.

Idealizing celibacy was in some ways like idealizing the practice of fasting. You don't permanently fast; nor were many practices of celibacy permanent. Rome's Vestal Virgins, for instance, retired after 30 years. Celibacy was for special times and places. It was not Jewish but Greco-Roman influences which advocated a different kind of celibacy which then came to influence the church and was based on negative news about sexual desire.

Is there a link between celibacy and sexual abuse? There is no necessary connection. Most sexual abuse occurs in family contexts and has nothing to do with celibacy. Many who embrace celibacy live healthy and wholesome balanced lives. For others it may well be that embracing celibacy unnaturally suppresses natural urges which then go underground and surface in behaviours which are exploitive and abusive. Requiring of them celibacy is then unhealthy and dangerous. It is all the more so where sexual self pleasuring is removed as an option for release of sexual tension. If predatory behaviour reflects in part an unhealthy response to lack of belonging and affection, then we also need to recognise that the matter can be made worse by responding to predators with hate. Control and rehabilitation need to be the priority.

The discussion of celibacy, such as when conservative believers require it of gay people, exposes how ambiguous the term can be. Is celibacy just not marrying or not having sexual intercourse, as the dictionaries suggest? Then one might imagine a celibate engaging in sexual relations up to the point of penetration or being penetrated. How real is that? Or is orgasm the issue? It would be more consistent to redefine celibacy as committing oneself not to give expression to one's sexual desires. That then becomes problematic, because so much of what we do and say has a sexual component, of which we are sometimes unaware. In my view a healthier approach is to affirm our sexuality and take responsibility for how we express it and never to do so at the expense of others. Celibacy should be a choice and never more than that.