



Jesus and Family in the Gospels

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A fundamental tension exists in how family is presented in the Gospels. We encounter both the call of Jesus to uphold one another as mother, sister and brother (Matt. 12:50) and the command of Jesus to ‘hate’ one’s family (Luke 14:26). As numerous scholars have argued, by modern Western standards, Jesus does not uphold ‘traditional family values’.

Families, however, are found across all four gospels. As New Testament scholar Stephen Barton writes, ‘few people in the gospels appear without reference to their families’.¹ The family in the world surrounding Jesus formed the social, economic, and political foundation for much of life. Many of Jesus’ stories and parables are set within a household or family. For some, Jesus’ teachings and actions challenge and even threaten to tear apart families. For others, Jesus’ teachings and actions are models for family life. But all of these judgements depend on an agreed understanding of what we mean by terms like family, household, marriage, and family values – a discussion well beyond the scope of this short reflection.

In the discussion that follows, we’ll examine four aspects of the Jesus and the family in the Gospels, examining how the family presented in the Gospels and then Jesus’ teachings and actions about family as rejection, affirmation, and redefinition. We’ll conclude with a brief overview of other directions that focus on Jesus and family could have taken.

Families in the Gospels

Graeco-Roman households varied significantly and whether they were small or large, included multiple generations or not, or included others such as enslaved persons, depended much on wealth, class, and wider communal needs. As Barton writes, ‘households were flexible, extendable, and always changing.’²

Just as there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ Roman family, so too the families encountered across Gospel parables and stories are complex. Within the Gospels we encounter people who are single with a wide support network (Jesus), small families (Mark 5:40-43: Jairus, his wife, and daughter), households of siblings (Luke 10:40; John 11:1-3: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus), people married multiple times (John 4:16-18: Samaritan woman; Mark: 12-19-23: woman married 7 times), unmarried people co-habiting (John 4:16-18: Samaritan woman), multi-generational households (Mark 1:29-30: Peter, his brother, wife, and mother-in-law), a childless widow (Luke 2:36-7: Anna), a widow with children (Luke 7:12), and households that included enslaved persons and soldiers (Mark 6:17-29: Herod Antipas).

Jesus himself has a complex family situation. His relationship with his mother is, at times, tense (Luke 2:48; John 2:4; Matt 12:48), at times obedient (Luke 2:51), and at times one of compassion and care (John 19:26-7). His father Joseph is not his biological father and

¹ Stephen Barton, ‘Family’ in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 226.

² Barton, ‘Family’, 227.



disappears from the story before he is an adult, leading some scholars to suggest Joseph died in Jesus' youth. And Jesus appears to have a complex relationship with his siblings, accusing them of sinning against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:20-1; see also Mark 3:32-5 and 6:4) and, after rejecting them in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they never appear again even though they are known by others (Matt 13:55-6).³ Even in John's gospel where Jesus' relationship with his mother is the most intimate, he still falls out with his brothers who don't believe in him (John 7:1-9). To be fair, it's difficult to imagine what it would be like to have Jesus as a sibling or child!

We could argue that Jesus has two families in the gospels – one with Joseph, Mary and his siblings and one with his disciples – and that Jesus' most difficult statements about family stems from this tension which seems to spill over into the family dynamics of his disciples.

Jesus and Family: Rejection

Within the Gospels, those called to be disciples also appear to be called to imitate Jesus' own separation from his family. A relationship with Jesus will bring division at the heart of family relationships.

Jesus frequently calls his disciples away from their families to follow him and separation from family is a central aspect of discipleship (Mark 10:21; Matt. 8:22; Luke 9:59-62). They must, Jesus says, love him more than family (Matt. 10:37). When Jesus calls his disciples James and John, they immediately leave their father Zebedee in a boat and their family business to follow Jesus (Mark 1:16-20/Matt. 4:18-22). When a disciple wants to return home to bury his father, Jesus tells him to 'let the dead bury their own dead' (Matt. 8:18-22). When another wants to say farewell to those in their home, Jesus says no (Luke 9:60).

Jesus speaks frequently in Matthew's gospel of the division that following him will entail, where 'brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child' (Matt. 10:21) because he, Jesus, has 'come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law' for 'whoever loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me' (Matt. 10:35-37). When Jesus' family tries to restrain him because they think he has 'lost his mind', he asks the crowd around him: 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' and then suggests that his family is not his blood relations but rather those who hear God's word and do it (Mark 3.31-35/Matt. 12.48-50).

Such division within families, while shocking, is not wholly radical but is also found in Jewish scriptures in relation to God. For example, Abraham leaves his home to follow God's call (Gen. 1:21), the prophet Micah tells us that one's greatest enemies are from one's own household (Micah 7:5-6), in Jubilees 23:16 sons will go after their fathers, and in 1 Enoch 99:5, brothers will kill each other.

³ See Carolyn Osiek, 'The Family in Early Christianity: "Family Values" Revisited' in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58.1 (1996), 1-25, pp2-3.



Family relationships for those who are called to follow God are often strained and even severed. And while distressing for many wanting to uphold ‘family values’, such sayings in the Gospels and across Scripture offer meaning for those in tense and difficult family situations and consolation that they are not alone.

Jesus and Family: Affirmation

For all the anti-family teaching and actions in the Gospels, family is still ever present for Jesus and his disciples. The mother of James and John – the sons of Zebedee – seems to be around and concerned about her sons’ welfare, children are frequently found in the Gospels, and Peter’s home also features (see above). John 2:12 suggests that Jesus spent time with his family (both families!), travelling to Capernaum ‘with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and the remained there for a few days.’ As Osiek argues, ‘Jesus is portrayed as a person who takes an interest in the family life of others, in spite of the way he seems to give up on his own.’⁴

When Jesus is challenged by religious authorities concerning the commandment to honour father and mother, he insists that the commandment cannot be ignored and that honour of parents is an essential duty and the ‘word of God’ (Matt. 15:3-6; Mark 7:10-12). Jesus also upholds the authority of parents over children (Mark 7:9-13), the authority of the patriarch in a Roman household (Matt. 18:23-34), and the significance of descendants through a male line (the genealogies in Matthew and Luke). He understands and addresses sibling rivalry through two parables about two sons (Matt. 21:28-31; Luke 15:11-24) and the ambitions of a parent for their children (Matt. 20:28-31).

Jesus has strong views on divorce and its prohibition except for the reason of unchastity (Matt. 19:9). Though in Luke’s gospel divorce is forbidden except for Jesus’ sake as he says, ‘there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life’ (Luke 18:29-30). Worth noting, as well, is that marriage in the Gospels is not a romantic partnership of equals, but language used is that of inequality, self-control, and commitment to God.⁵

Jesus has strong views about children and their example (see next section), and he has compassion on the parents of sick children. He attends with care to an official with a sick son (John 4:46-53), another with a dying daughter (Matt. 9:18-26), the widow at Nain (Luke 7:11-17), the father of a possessed boy (Mark 9:14-28), and a woman with a sick daughter (Matt. 15:21-28).

⁴ Osiek, ‘The Family’, 5-6.

⁵ Much more could be said on Jesus and his sayings on divorce, adultery, remarriage, and the nuances in each Gospel for which there is not space in this brief piece. See ‘Further Reading’ at the end for some texts which engage such topics in greater depth.



When it comes to the complex relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and between husband and wife, Jesus offers strong counsel, understanding, and compassion and doesn't shy away from difficult topics or devastating situations.

Jesus and Family: Redefinition

Redefinition of family happens in at least two ways within the Gospels: who is family and what is emphasised within family.

For the latter, Jesus' emphasis on children across the Gospels is unexpected in his cultural context. Children in the ancient world were extremely vulnerable, viewed as unfinished persons, subject to abuse and submission, and often forced into labour from a very early age. That Jesus upholds children as models of faith and as examples of what is necessary to enter the kingdom is subversive (Luke 9:48; Mark 9:26-7; Matt. 18:1-5).

Jesus' use of the language of family to describe those beyond its bounds is also subversive, discussing his disciples as 'brothers', his followers as God's 'children', and telling parables about 'bridesmaids' all of which suggest that those who are in these positions will be rewarded with much more than a blood relative could ever offer.

For the former, thinking about who is family, Jesus is clear that his mother, brothers and sisters are not his family but rather those who hear God's word and do it are (Mark 3:31-5). John's gospel goes so far as to suggest that kinship is defined not by family lines but by connection to God. So we find in John 1:12-13 that 'all who receive him...become children of God, who were born, not from blood nor from the will of the flesh nor from the will of man, but from God'. Here God is the one who grants membership in a family, not genes or lineage or marriage.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus spends almost all of his time with this new family: he eats with them, travels with them, stays with them, and teaches them. The disciples are Jesus' family (Matt. 12:49-50; Luke 8:21). Across the Gospels, Jesus seems to be able to form close relationships with ease and relies on a strong support network as family. One might suggest that Jesus would have understood the UK concept of Covid 'support bubbles' as he returns time and again to the home of Mary and Martha to spend time and gain strength from their family and companionship.

But this isn't just Jesus' family, the disciples are also given a new family when they leave everything to follow Jesus' call. They are called to love and forgive one another, imitating God their Father (Matt. 7:1-5; 18:15-22). They are members of Jesus' household (Matt. 10:24-5) and they will betray one another when persecuted (Matt. 24:10-12). And as Jesus dies on the cross in John's gospel, he creates a new family as he says to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son' and to the beloved disciple: 'Here is your mother.' Being a member of this new family is messy, challenging, and intimate.



Other aspects of Jesus and Family

Religion and Ethnicity

It's worth mentioning that the definition of family in the Gospels makes assumptions about religion and ethnicity. The language of 'brothers' used to describe those who are fellow Jews is not an accident. Those who are bound together by religion and ethnic backgrounds are also bound together in language of family, though it is not the only marker of 'family' in the Gospels. Such language continues to have an impact today in the fostering and adoption system in the UK where family-finding for children defines family especially (and for some social workers, predominantly) in terms of ethnicity and nationality (e.g. Polish or Roma).

Jesus, marriage, and sex

The evangelists are fairly consistent in what Jesus thought about marriage: self-control is essential, marriage is a distraction, and yet divorce is prohibited. Such views also presume male dominance, whether in marriage or in who has the right to make decisions about marriage and sex.

One of the most striking and, for many, confusing sayings that Jesus offers about sex in the Gospels is found in a discussion about eunuchs in Matthew's gospel where Jesus commends to his followers not just eunuchs, but 'eunuchs who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 19:12). This commendation follows Jesus' discussion of married sex ('a man shall...be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' (19:5), a second prohibition of divorce (19:9), and a recommendation of celibacy ('it is better not to marry', 19:10). The commendation of eunuchs appears to suggest that self-castration and avoiding marriage is the best choice for his disciples. If one becomes a eunuch, all that precedes concerning marriage is impossible.

Some scholars also argue that the introduction of the eunuch – a symbol of sexual transgression – into a discussion of marriage and sex rejects the binary male/female paradigm for understanding sex and sexed identity in the kingdom. Even as a figure who represents celibacy, this figure stands outside male/female dualism. Moreover, this one is given as an example to follow ('Let anyone accept this who can', 19:12), not one who needs to be corrected, restored, or healed. As such, the Gospels complicate family relationships in terms of marriage, sex, and assumed identity, and introduce figures who challenge the male female model as the only example for family.

A Brief Conclusion

Within the Gospels, the understanding of family is complex and varied. The so-called 'traditional' or 'nuclear' family is not the norm, families struggle and are variously composed, and, as Osiek concludes, family is 'more flexible in early Christianity than in its contemporary idealized version'.⁶ This flexibility and complexity around family in the Gospels tells us at least two things. First, that family is a strong social entity found across the Gospels. Jesus interacts constantly with families in his actions and his teaching. He tells us about adulterous people and

⁶ Osiek, 'The Family,' 24.



quarrelling brothers, he has complex relationships with his mother and his brothers, and he has compassion on parents, children, and many of those most vulnerable in a family system. Second, the flexibility and complexity around family also tells us a lot about Jesus and his two families: his blood relatives and his disciples. The tensions that arise from these two families not only spills over into the lives of his disciples, but is something still ever present in our world today.



Suggestions for Further Reading

Stephen Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Stephen Barton, 'Family' in Joel Green and Scot McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove, Ill, InterVarsity Press, 1992: 226-229.

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Carolyn Osiek, 'The Family in Early Christianity: "Family Values" Revisited', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58.1 (1996): 1-25.