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"The Scandal of Equality in Jesus' Ethical Teaching".

David Instone-Brewer

Summary

Jesus taught on three issues in which he could take a complementarian or an egalitarian stance: monogamy, divorce and singleness. On all three issues Jesus took an egalitarian position which stood against the prevailing viewpoints. This paper explores the reasons for these decisions and find that although Jesus promoted women far more than his contemporaries, he did not follow an egalitarian ideology when deciding ethical issues. Instead, he based it on his understanding of Scripture.

Introduction

A question which people sometimes ask is: 'Was the New Testament egalitarian or complementarian?' This question is as nonsensical and anachronistic as the question 'Was the New Testament Charismatic or Liturgical?'. The battle-lines between these two ideologies had not yet been drawn up and New Testament authors had many more fundamental things to be concerned about.

Jesus certainly encouraged women more than any of his contemporaries.¹ We see this especially in the way that he allowed a woman to join his disciples' teaching session (Lk.10.39) and allowed women to accompany them on their missions (Mk.15.40f // Mt.27.55f // Lk.23.49).

Three ethical issues in the Gospels might be said to relate to complementarian or egalitarian ideologies and they are conveniently grouped together by Matthew in chapter 19. Here Jesus is asked about only one issue (divorce) but he chose to add teaching on two other issues (monogamy and singleness). He disagreed with many Jews on the issue of divorce, and disagreed with most or all Jews on the issues of polygamy and singleness.

Polygamy

The first issue Jesus confronted was polygamy.² This practice was accepted as normal, lawful and useful by most Jews in the first Century, and the rabbis did not officially forbid it till the 11th century, though it fell into disuse long before this. In the first

¹ This has been pointed out by many modern authors though perhaps the most forceful and persuasive account was given several decades ago by J. Jeremias in his appendix to *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1969).

² I have written in detail on this subject in "Jesus' Old Testament Basis for Monogamy", in *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J.L.North* ed. Steve Moyise, JNTS Supp 189 (Sheffield: Sheffield Ac Press, 2000) 75-105

century polygamy would only be allowed in Palestine where Roman law (which enforced monogamy elsewhere) allows local customs some leeway. We do not know how common it was because we have very few family documents which survive from that time, though two pieces of evidence make us think that it was relatively normal in Palestine.

First, the family documents of Babatha have survived from 93-132 CE, preserved in a cave in the Judean desert at Nahal Hever.³ Babatha was widowed when young, and married Judah Khthusion who was already married to Mariamme, so she became his second wife. She owned some fields, so this second marriage helped both of them. Although this is only one family, there is no reason to believe that Babatha was unusual.

The second clue comes from the New Testament where there are a number of passages dealing with a problem which Judaism did not seem to suffer from in the same way: widows. Of course Judaism had widows, and they were looked after by family members and the normal social benefit system called the 'basket',⁴ which is roughly equivalent to the aid given in Act.6. But the New Testament had more problems with widows than Judaism, and had to institute a special support group for them (called 'the Widows) with membership requirements and other rules (Act.9.39-41; 1Tim.5:3-16; 2Tim.3:6)⁵. In Jewish society a widow would be likely to become a second wife to someone but in Christian society this was not possible. Admittedly this is a weak argument, because all the NT passages concerning the group of Widows come from outside Palestine where Jewish widows too were unable to practice polygamy, but it is likely that this organisation started in Jerusalem following to the crisis after Pentecost and developed in the Diaspora, based on the Palestinian model.

Whether or not polygamy was common in first century Palestine, it was considered to be part of the law of Moses by almost all Jews except those at Qumran. The Old Testament clearly implies that polygamy is allowed, not only by the number of important people who had more than one wife (such as Abraham, Jacob, Simeon, Gideon, Saul, David, and Solomon) but also by the laws which regulated this practice (e.g. Exod.21:10, Deut.21:15 and Lv.18:18). At Qumran, however, they argued that this was not the original intention of the Law, and that a man should marry only one wife at a time, though they excused David and others because they were ignorant of this law. As proof, they pointed to the law in Lev.18.18 which says that you may not marry two sisters at the same time because they will be rivals to each other. They reasoned that all Israelite women were sisters, and as you should only marry Israelites, you cannot marry more than one of them at a time.⁶

³ First published in *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba period in the Cave of Letters: Greek papyri*, ed. Naphtali Lewis, Yigael Yadin, and Jonas C. Greenfield (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society; Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Shrine of the Book, 1989).

⁴ See notes re m.Pea.8.5-7 in TRENT I – i.e. D. Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*, vol.1 *Prayer and Agriculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004)

⁵ The whole subject of widows in the NT and the early church is covered in superb detail by Gustav Stählin in *Χηρα*, in Kittel, Gerhard., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)* 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1995) IX:440-465

⁶ See CD 4.19-5:5, esp. 4.20. This passage was correctly understood by its very first editor, Louis Ginzberg in *An Unknown Jewish Sect* (New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1978), but it was not explained well. Many subsequent scholars till recent times followed the different

They also argued that this doctrine had been taught from the very beginning in the phrase “male and female”, which occurs both in the creation story of Adam and Eve, and in the story of Noah’s pairs of animals. Because Noah’s story clearly says they were in pairs, then all marriages should be made up of pairs. In rabbinic Judaism this argument is known as *Gezera Shavah* – i.e. using the meaning of a word or phrase in one text to enlighten its meaning in another text. This was one of the most common exegetical techniques in first century Judaism and would have been immediately understood by anyone who attended synagogue regularly. In the Damascus Document, they summarise their arguments like this:

The foundation of creation is “*male and female he created them.*” [Gen.1:27]. (1) And those who entered (Noah’s) ark went in two by two into the ark [Gen.7.9]. (CD 4.20—5.1)

This is almost identical to the first argument which Jesus cites for monogamy:

But **from the beginning of creation**, ‘*He made them male and female.*’ [Gen.1:27] (Mk.10.6)

He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them **from the beginning** made them male and female, [Gen.1:27] (Mt.19.4)

When the Gospel writers record it, Jesus does not cite the second text, so the argument might be said to be defective, but it was probably so well known that there was no need. It is remarkable that the introduction to these proof texts which is found at Qumran (“The foundation of creation is...”) is rendered almost exactly in the Greek of the Gospel versions (esp. Mark’s “from the beginning of creation”). Either Jesus was quoting the Qumran version of this argument or, more likely, this argument was well known and commonly expressed in this way.

The Damascus Document is the only other place where this particular argument is preserved, but there is much wider evidence for the next argument which Jesus used against polygamy:

‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, (8) and the two shall become one flesh.’ [Gen.2:24] So they are no longer two but one flesh. (Mk.10.7-8// Mt.19.5-6)

We are so used to reading this that the startling misquotation of Genesis 2.24 does not stand out, even when Jesus adds a sentence to emphasise it. Genesis 2.24 does not, of course, contain the word “two” in the Hebrew text. Jesus has added this word, and then he has emphasised it by saying: “they are no longer two, but one”. Jesus was not the first to add the word “two” in this text, and everyone listening to him would already be familiar with this addition. If they attended a Greek-speaking synagogue they would have heard it when the Septuagint was read out, and if they attended an Aramaic-speaking synagogue they would hear it when Hebrew was paraphrased as

interpretation by Chaim Rabin in *The Zadokite Documents* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954) that this referred to divorce. For a fuller exposition of Ginzberg’s explanation see Instone-Brewer, “Monogamy”. For a reassessment of the Qumran teaching on polygamy see Adriel Schremer “Qumran Polemic on Marital Law: CD 4:20-5.11 and its social background” in Joseph M. Baumgarten, Esther G. Chason, Avital Pinnick eds, *The Damascus Document, a centennial of discovery: Proceedings of the third international symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature*, 4-8 February, 1998, Studies on the texts of the Desert of Judah, 34 (Leiden, 2000). pp. 147-160.

the Aramaic Targum. This additional word is found in all the ancient translations of the Old Testament,⁷ and yet it is found in none of the Hebrew texts or citations of the Hebrew text.⁸ This suggests that it was not a variant, but a very self-conscious decision to add a word to the text in order to emphasise its meaning.

Presumably the reason for adding the word “two” in this verse was to indicate that God intended a marriage to consist of two people. Jesus shows that he agrees with this interpretation by both citing the verse with this additional word, and then appending an emphasis that indicated he had added it very intentionally.

Jesus was standing against official Jewish teaching on polygamy, but it is clear that many people in Israel agreed with his interpretation, and the way that Jesus expressed his arguments reminded his listeners of other sermons they had heard on this subject. He cited the proof text from Gen.1.27 in exactly the form preserved at Qumran, even with the same introductory phrase, and he quoted the other proof text from Gen.2.24 in exactly the way found in all the ancient translations of the Old Testament.

Why did Jesus take this stand against polygamy? Was it because only men could have more than one wife and he was taking an egalitarian position? I will leave this interesting question till we have looked at the two other issues, of divorce and singleness.

Divorce

A question on divorce was what led Jesus into a digression about monogamy, and he came back to the original question after saying that a man and wife became one, when he added: “And those whom God has joined, let no-one separate”. We should note here that Jesus is using the imperative “let no-one separate” which emphasises the life-long nature of marriage by telling people they *should not* separate. We should not read the imperative as though Jesus said, “no man *can* separate”, because an imperative does not mean this. It can be translated as “please do not separate”, or “you must not separate”, or “you should not separate”, but it cannot mean “it is impossible for you to separate”.

As I have shown at length elsewhere,⁹ Jesus was asked here about a relatively new form of divorce called the ‘Any Cause’ divorce, which the Hillelite Pharisees invented at the beginning of the century, and which had almost replaced all the divorces based on biblical grounds. This was a no-fault type of divorce, because any ground at all could be cited, even if it was as trivial as ‘she is not as pretty as the day we got married’. In the Old Testament divorce was allowed by Moses, but for very specific grounds, the most famous of which is adultery, based on Dt.24.1, but also for neglect of food, clothing or love, based on Ex.21.10f.

⁷ Septuagint, Syriac Peshitta, Samaritan Pentateuch, Vulgate, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Targum Neofiti. It is missing from Targum Onqelos (which is often corrected back to the Masoretic text). It occurs in this form also in 1Cor.6:16.

⁸ The text is not found at Qumran, so we only have the witnesses of rabbinic literature, much of which is late, though is cited by Aqiba (bSanh.58a - early second century) and Hananiah (GenR.18:5 - mid second century).

⁹ D. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: the social and literary context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002)

No-fault divorce was already used by Jews in the 5th C BCE, as seen in the papyri from Elephantine, a Jewish military outpost in Egypt where the dry desert sand preserved a remarkable set of documents. We find divorce certificates in which it is recorded that the person stood up (presumably in a public place such as a synagogue) and said: “I hate you”, which was the correct legal ancient Near Eastern terminology meaning “I divorce you”. No grounds were cited in these divorces and both men and women were able to initiate this type of divorce in Elephantine.

The innovation of the Hillelites was to find a scriptural proof text for no-fault divorces, so that they could be used by pious Torah-obedient Jews. They found their proof in the same text on which they established divorce on the ground of adultery, in Deut.24.1, where a man divorced a woman “for a cause of indecency”. They concluded, like everyone else, that ‘indecency’ (literally ‘nakedness’) meant ‘adultery’ but, they said, that this did not explain why the word ‘cause’ was present. God would not include a superfluous word in his perfect Law, so why did he say ‘a cause of indecency’? They concluded that ‘cause’ was another ground for divorce – i.e. ‘Any Cause’.

Although the Hillelite no-fault ‘Any Cause’ divorce was very similar to that found at Elephantine, there was one very big difference – it now only applied to men. This was because the context of the proof text concerned a man who divorced his wife, so in order to base it in Scripture they had to restrict it to men.

Other Jews disagreed with this interpretation and their rivals the Shammaites replied with the slogan that the phrase “a cause of indecency” means ‘nothing but indecency’. This debate was still raging in the time of Jesus, though most of the population had already voted with their feet and got their divorces from Hillelite rabbis because this avoided the embarrassment of public trials where they had to bring evidence of their grounds for divorce. The Pharisees were interested to know where Jesus stood on this, and asked: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for ‘Any Cause’?”

Mark, of course, does not include the words “for ‘Any Cause’”, because he was writing earlier when the debate was still raging. He records what was probably the original form of the question: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife”? There was only one type of divorce where there was any question about the legality – the divorce for ‘Any Cause’. The short version of the question in Mark was as unambiguous as, ‘Is it lawful for a 16-year old to drink?’, because only an extreme pedant would bother to ask the full question, ‘Is it lawful for a 16-year old to drink alcoholic beverages?’.

Divorce for ‘Any Cause’ was a controversial issue because so many people had already used this type of divorce. Nevertheless, Jesus was utterly uncompromising in his condemnation of this type of divorce. First he said that it was unscriptural because the interpretation was wrong. He agreed with the Shammaites and others that the phrase “a cause of indecency” means “nothing except indecency (*porneia*)”. He then made it clear that he was not trying to escape any of the hard consequences of his teaching, be informing all those people who had got divorced for ‘Any Cause’ that their divorce was completely invalid — so if they married someone else they would be committing adultery, because they were still married to their former partner.

Why did Jesus take this difficult stand against divorce for ‘Any Cause’? Was it because he this type of divorce was only allowed for men, and not for women, and he wanted to take an egalitarian position? We will examine this question when we have looked at his teaching on singleness.

Before we do that, it is significant to note that Jesus was not being original in either of these teachings. If we assume that the Gospel accounts are an accurate and fair abbreviation of what he said, he appears to deliberately go out of his way to show that his teaching is following others. He quotes the teaching found in the Damascus Document almost verbatim, and the phrase “except for indecency” is a very literal translation of the Shammaite slogan into Greek.¹⁰

These similarities can make a biblical scholar suspicious, because it is possible that the Gospel writers have simply put the teaching of others into the mouth of Jesus. The most sceptical stance is to say that genuine words of Jesus have to pass the test of double dissimilarity — i.e. they have to be dissimilar to anything which the Jews at the time were teaching, and they have to be dissimilar to anything which the early church was trying to promote. Almost nothing can get through this test and the paradox of this principle is that the more we find out about the varieties of early Judaism, the less we know about the teaching of Jesus, because less and less of it can be regarded as unique. Because of this absurdity, many scholars have abandoned the dissimilarity criteria, though it is still a useful guideline for highlighting a special emphasis by Jesus.

The fact that Jesus cited the slogans and proof texts used by others does not mean that this teaching was not his. Just because I use slogans like “the three in one” or proof texts like John 3.16 does not mean that I am insincere or that I am simply copying others – I use them to save myself explaining everything from first principles. The fact that the gospel writers credit Jesus with words used by others is no reason to doubt that he also used them, unless they fail to cohere with the rest of his teaching or unless there are other reasons to believe that the church might have wished that Jesus had said them. On the contrary, the churches probably wished that Jesus had remained silent on these issues, because Jesus was not siding with the majority and he was taking positions which would have very difficult practical consequences. His teaching resulted in the increasing problem of unsupported widows within the early church, and it immediately created a problem about the marital status of those who remarried after an ‘Any Cause’ divorce.

Singleness

The church must also have wished that Jesus had remained silent on the matter of singleness, because this would have been a cause of great scandal, especially in Jewish circles. For both Jews and Roman citizens it was legally compulsory to get married, so this is perhaps the most direct conflict between the teaching of Jesus and civil authority. Augustus established a law which made it compulsory for men to marry in order that they should have legitimate sons who could serve the Empire. Although this law originated just before the turn of the century (in 18 BCE, repeated in 9 CE) it was still valid throughout the first century, and although it was rarely enforced, it was a tool by which a personal enemy could prosecute you in court and claim your goods as his payment.

¹⁰ The Greek connective “*mé epi*” (literally ‘not for’) in Mt.19.9 is difficult to understand till it is compared to the common Hebrew equivalent “*lo ... ala*”, (literally “not ... but”, i.e. ‘except’). The two versions of this phrase, in Mt. 5.32 & 19.9 are exact mirrors of the two versions of the slogan found in rabbinic literature, at Sifré Deut.269; ySot.1.2 [16b] (“except he has found indecency in her”) and mGit.9.10 (“except he has found a matter of indecency in her”).

The Jews in Palestine were probably exempt from this law, but they had a similar and even stricter law. Scripture says “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen.1.28), which is the first of the 613 commandments which Jews found in the Old Testament. In the first century Jews interpreted this as a command to marry and attempt to have children. This was taken with utmost seriousness, even by rabbis who did not really want to marry or, if they were married, did not want to have sexual relations with their wives. One very early rabbinic debate concerned the minimum number of children which fulfilled this command, after which one could be allowed to ignore one’s wife.¹¹ Another early debate was based on the assumption that even slaves had to be able to obey this command.¹² We know of only one rabbi, Ben Azzai, who refused to marry because, he said, he was in love with the Torah and could not help himself. This was regarded as highly reprehensible, and many people called him a hypocrite for acting like this, despite his otherwise worthy reputation as a scholar.¹³

As far as we know, every group within Judaism agreed with this interpretation. There is no hint of any disagreement within Pharisaic Judaism and although we have no evidence that the Sadducees agreed, it is not mentioned as one of the features which distinguished them. It is possible that the minority sect at Qumran believed that marriage was unnecessary, because that community was exclusively male.¹⁴ Isaksson, however, found several clues in their writings to show that they too regarded marriage as compulsory, though they limited it to a period of five years between the age of twenty and twenty-five, leaving enough time to have at least two children. After this, someone who wanted to join the community would divorce his wife.¹⁵ This very severe policy shows how seriously they took the command to have children.

It is therefore somewhat shocking and even scandalous when Jesus told his disciples that marriage was not compulsory:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. (Matt.19.12)

Jesus was referring, no doubt, to the two categories of eunuch which were recognised by rabbinic law. They said that a eunuch could not marry or remain married because the purpose of marriage was to fulfil the command to have children, so either type of

¹¹ Found in m.Yeb.6.6; t.Yeb.8.4.

¹² In t.San.13.3 the Shammaites prove that a slave cannot be half-owned by the fact that this would mean they cannot marry — i.e. it was a fundamental assumption that even a slave must marry, just like any other man.

¹³ R. Eliezer b Hyrcanus, a very conservative teacher just after 70 CE, preached on the common theme that he who refuses to propagate the race is equivalent to a murderer. Simeon Ben Azzai, agreed with this, and they said, ‘Why don’t you practice what you preach?’. He replied that he was in love with the Torah (b.Yeb.63b). This type of tradition occurs in several places, and it is unlikely that someone would have invented such an unflattering story about Ben Azzai who was otherwise highly regarded. To some it seemed impossible that he would disobey this command, and they said that he had been married and divorced, and was merely refusing to get remarried (Sot. 4b).

¹⁴ Some female skeletons have been found there, but they are from a different time period

¹⁵ Abel Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple. A Study with Special Reference to Mt.19.13[sic]-12 and 1.Cor.11.3-16*. Translated by Neil Tomkinson & Jean Gray. Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Unsaliensis. Vol.24. (Lund: Gleerup; Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1965).

'eunuch' was equivalent to someone who was unmarried.¹⁶ Jesus added a third category which the rabbis would have rejected - a voluntary eunuch, i.e. someone who is voluntarily unmarried. He is even audacious enough to say that one can remain unmarried for religious reasons.

The commandment that one had to be fruitful and multiply was applied only to men, so it could be regarded as another example of gender privilege. Jews considered it a privilege to obey the law, and rejoiced when they could fulfil a commandment.¹⁷ Women were not required to fulfil any commandment which was time-limited, such as the Passover, so if they missed the Passover feast they were not expected to celebrate the Second Passover like a man would do if he missed it.¹⁸ For some reason, which is not preserved, women were not expected to fulfil the command to have children. Of course most women married, and therefore shared this responsibility along with men, but if they were not married, they were not required to do anything in order to find a husband and have children.¹⁹ Probably this rule was due more to pragmatism than Scripture, because there was little that a woman could do to engineer a marriage for herself, and most men assumed that a woman would want a husband in any case. However, the gender-specific nature of this ruling must have upset many women..

So, was Jesus' teaching on singleness based on his egalitarian principles? It is time to look at the reasons behind this and the other issues of gender-inequality in the Gospels.

Was Jesus Taking an Egalitarian Stance?

Why did Jesus teach monogamy? The Old Testament appeared to teach two contradictory laws (polygamy and monogamy), so a choice had to be made somehow.

Did Jesus base his decision on his belief that men and women were equal in the Law? This was probably the reason why Qumran taught monogamy, because when they accused the Pharisees of practising polygamy and marrying nieces, their argument for against marrying nieces was based on male-female equality in the law. Scripture does not list the niece-uncle relationships as a prohibited marriage, but it does list the nephew-aunt relationship. At Qumran they said "this commandment is written from the point of view of males, but the same applies to women" (CD.5.9f) so if one cannot marry a nephew, one should not marry a niece. It is therefore likely that they based both the rule about nieces and about monogamy on the principle of sexual equality under the law.

¹⁶ In m.Yeb.8:4 Eliezer b. Hyracanus and Aqiba debate about the difference between "eunuchs made by man" and "eunuchs made by nature". Both in this debate which occurred at the end of the first century and in a related debate between the Houses in the first half of the century (m.Nid.5.9) the rabbis assumed that a eunuch could not marry, and if they have married, the marriage is invalid.

¹⁷ See, for example, the parable in t.Pea.3.8 where a man makes a huge Thanksgiving because the Lord helped him to fulfil another commandment

¹⁸ See TRENT I re m.Ber.3.3 and TRENT II re t.Pes.8.10.

¹⁹ When the Houses debated the minimum number of children, they asked how many a 'man' should have, and not how many each of his wives should have (t.Yeb8.4; m.Yeb.6.6).

The Gospel text says nothing about sexual equality, but might give a hint about the reasoning behind Jesus' interpretation when they say that monogamy was present "at the beginning" – which might indicate an argument from priority. This is a popular argument within many churches, who want to base their behaviour on how things were done in the early church, but it is not a straightforward method of interpretation. Just because the early believers sold their possessions to finance a communal lifestyle and met every day for worship (Act.2.44-46), does not mean that all believers, in different circumstances, should necessarily do the same.

Although it is possible that Jesus was arguing from priority, it is also possible that he was arguing from the more general situation, which was unaffected by surrounding cultural influences. The situation in Eden could be said to be exactly what God wanted, and the subsequent laws could be said to be responding to and perhaps even influenced by the polygamous society of the ancient Near East. In this case, Jesus was not simply choosing the law which came first, but he chose morals which were shown to Adam and Eve in Eden, and which were therefore independent of all external considerations.

What was the reason for Jesus' teaching on divorce? Was he against the "Any Cause" divorce because this was only available for men? This is, of course, possible, but it is not the reason which Jesus gives. By citing the slogan of the Shammaites, he implies that he agreed with their criticism of the Hillelites - i.e. he disagreed with the idea of splitting up the phrase "a cause of indecency" in order to extrapolate two grounds for divorce.

A modern reader has similar problems with the Hillelite exegesis. Personally I believe, like the Shammaites, that Scripture was written in normal human language, so that a phrase has to be read in its entirety. The implications of the Gospel account is that Jesus criticised the 'Any Cause' divorce for this same reason,

When we get to the reasons for allowing singleness, an egalitarian motive is also possible because Jesus might be allowing men to remain unmarried to make them equal to women who were allowed to remain single. However, there is another motive for teaching singleness which Jesus' critics might point to - Jesus might have allowed singleness in order to justify the fact that he himself was unmarried.

The Scandal of Jesus' Singleness

It is difficult for us to appreciate how scandalous Jesus' unmarried status was in Jewish society. Those who wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt would assume that he was simply disobeying the first command in Scripture, but those who were not so generously minded would guess at the real reason - that no good Jewish man would let his daughter marry him, because Jesus was a suspected *mamzer*.

A *mamzer* is what we used to call someone of illegitimate birth or, more correctly, a bastard. Although 'bastard' is not an exact translation of '*mamzer*', I will continue to use this term because it helps us to understand some of the stigma which is also carried by the term *mamzer*.

The definition of a bastard was still developing during the first century (m.Yeb.4.13; m.Ket.1.9) but generally it included anyone born from an illegitimate union, and if someone's father was unknown, it was assumed that he was a bastard (m.Ket.1.9),

though some rabbis were willing to believe the word of the mother. Mary was not unmarried when Jesus was born, but anyone who could count knew that she was unmarried when he was conceived. To make things worse, she denied that Joseph was his father. Nazareth was a small town, and Galilee was a closely interconnected group of similar small towns, so this scandal of his birth would follow him where-ever he preached.²⁰

A bastard could only marry another bastard (m.Qid.4.1-2; m.Git.9.2), so if Jesus was officially a bastard, he would be able to marry - in fact he would be expected to do so, in order to fulfil the first commandment. But because he was not officially a bastard, and yet everyone knew that there was something wrong with his birth, no good Jew would allow his daughter to marry him.

Everyone who saw Jesus in his public ministry would be amazed to find that a thirty-year was unmarried, because Jewish males were expected to be married much earlier.²¹ When they asked for the reason they would be told: Haven't you heard? His father is unknown!

Matthew and Luke made sure that they countered this scandal by means of the birth narratives, to explain that Jesus' birth was abnormal but not illegitimate. I do not understand why Mark did nothing to forestall this criticism though perhaps he thought the early reference to "Son of God" (Mk.1.1) was enough of a hint, though he appears to be aware that the crowds know of Jesus' suspicious parenthood because they call him "son of Mary" and not "son of Joseph" (Mk.6.3). Even in John, the least Jewish of the Gospels, you can hear the sarcasm when the crowd asks "And where is your father?... We are not born illegitimately" (Jn.8.19, 41).

For Matthew, who is self-consciously addressing a Jewish readership, this subject is particularly acute. This is probably why, in addition to the birth narratives he adds the teaching about celibacy. Does this mean that this teaching was created by Matthew or his community? Perhaps, but it is unlikely that any Jew would have the courage to invent such a scurrilous doctrine and attribute it to their master. The other Gospels were written for situations where, although they had not totally lost contact with their Jewish roots, they were familiar with Gentile society, which included the option of celibacy for religious motives.

So did Jesus teach against the command to be fruitful simply to disguise the real reason why he was single? Perhaps, though it is unlikely that it would mollify much criticism. It is more likely that Matthew included it to counter the accusation that Jesus, even against his own will, broke a law in Torah. However, it is unlikely that he invented this teaching because the teaching itself would probably be regarded as more scandalous than the inability of Jesus to marry.

It seems more likely that Jesus denied that marriage was compulsory because this is how he understood Scripture. He considered that a command which was given to

²⁰ Chilton thinks that Jesus may have been considered an official *mamzer* in Galilee though not in Judea where the rules were slightly different (m.Ket.1.5). See Bruce Chilton, "Jesus, le mamzer (Mt 1.18)", (*New Testament Studies* 47, 2001, 222-227).

²¹ There is no clear ruling on this in early traditions, but in later rabbinic texts, boys were expected to be married at 12 (Lam.R.1.2; cf. yQid.1.7, 61a), and there is no reason to believe that the situation had changed dramatically since the first century.

Adam and Eve when the world was empty, was not necessarily incumbent on all people at all times.

Therefore, in each case, it seems unlikely that Jesus based his teaching simply on an egalitarian principles. It seems much more likely that Jesus was basing his teaching on what he considered to be the correct interpretation of Scripture, and not on the basis of an ideological stance.

Conclusions

Jesus taught on three issues in which he could take an egalitarian or a complementarian stance – polygamy, no-fault divorce and singleness – and in all three he came to what might be regarded as an egalitarian conclusion. However, the important question is, Why? One might suppose that he was ideologically an egalitarian, though one might also suppose that he taught singleness in order to detract from the apparently scandalous reason why he could not marry.

In each case we have found a good reason for his conclusion in his interpretation of Scripture. He rejected the idea that the allowance of polygamy (which was normal throughout the ancient Near East) should override the principle of monogamy which was established in the beginning of creation. He also rejected the idea that one could take a phrase like “a cause of indecency” and split it into two words, each of which represented a separate ground for divorce, ‘Any Cause’ and ‘Adultery’. He also rejected the idea that the command given to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply”, should be applied to all people in completely different circumstances.

Jesus' interpretation of Scripture resulted in three ethical teachings where he stood against the majority, and he happened to stand on the side of egalitarianism. This concurred with his active encouragement of women, but the text as we have it in the Gospels imply that he based his ethical teaching on Scripture, and not on ideology. However, it is significant that the three conclusions he came to on these ethical issues concurred with his egalitarian practices.