

Holy Family Values

The world into which Jesus was born and raised has shaped morals for two millennia. How Jewish mores became Christianity's customs.

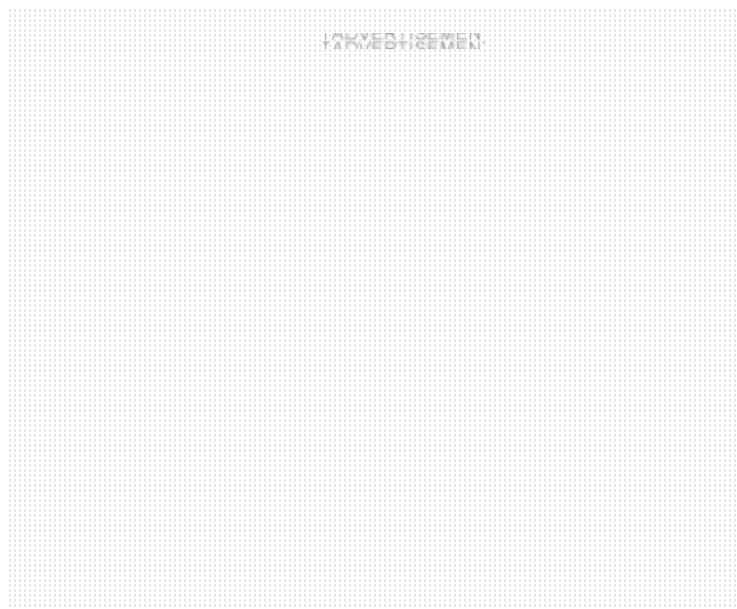
By [Lisa Miller](#) | NEWSWEEK

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Sometime around the beginning of the Common Era, a nice Jewish girl comes to her fiancé with a problem. She is pregnant; he is not the father. The groom-to-be is understandably enraged. In his world, almost nothing brings more shame on a man and his family than a broken promise of virginity. Her explanation, that the baby was conceived by God, must have sounded implausible, desperate, even insane. On reflection, though, the man, who is profoundly decent--"righteous," as the story goes--decides that he cannot bear to inflict upon the girl the rare (but wholly legal) punishment for such crimes, which is stoning. And so he resolves to handle the matter in his own way. He will "divorce her quietly."

If the story ended there, it would be an ordinary drama about a family in crisis, one familiar in many times and many places. But this story was only beginning. The righteous man, Joseph, goes to sleep and receives a visit from an angel. "Joseph, son of David," the angel says, "do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins." Like all good Jews who had received visits from God or angels before him--Abraham, Moses--Joseph does as he is told. The baby is born in Bethlehem; his human parents name him Jesus.

As the world's 2 billion Christians prepare to commemorate the birth of the figure they believe to be the Son of God, it is important to note that Christianity's origins lie more in the image of the empty tomb on the Sunday after the crucifixion than they do at the crèche. It was their fervent belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth that convinced his followers he was, as Peter put it, "the Christ, the son of the living God" who had told them of a new way of salvation: that he would die and rise again, thus effecting the forgiveness of sins and offering a portal



to eternal life.

But whatever one's personal beliefs, no student of religion or culture should overlook the significance of the world of the Nativity, for the milieu into which Jesus was born--and in which he was raised--has fundamentally shaped the manners and morals of the ensuing two millennia. The Jewish family values that were prevalent in first-century Judea--the values of Mary and Joseph and of the young Jesus--became the values of Christianity, and of the regions of the world in which Christianity has long been a critical force.

It all began with the habits and culture of Judaism. The emphasis on family, on sexual morality, on caring for one's kith and kin--all were (and are) sacred Jewish traditions, and the transmission of those mores from a relative backwater of the Roman Empire in the first years of the Common Era to our own time is the unlikely result of Mary and Joseph's parenting, the disciples' failed apocalyptic hopes and, ultimately, the early Christians' search for a way to survive once they realized the Second Coming was not as imminent as they first believed.

The story of Jesus--and thus the story of Christianity--begins with a common Jewish family. Mary is an innocent; Joseph is generous and protective, even of a child who is not his own. The baby is a baby, miraculous enough; like all happy births, his is cause for gossip, celebration and gift giving. On close inspection, the details of the Nativity don't add up particularly well: the birth narrative appears in just two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke, and they differ a great deal. Matthew starts with a genealogy, Luke with the story of the miraculous pregnancy of Mary's cousin Elizabeth. The Christmas story most people know from church pageants and television specials is a conflation of the two Gospels, putting Matthew's Magi together with the shepherds of Luke.

As the Nativity story makes clear, though, Mary and Joseph's era was one rich in moral standards designed to offer stability in an uncertain world, and they would have transmitted those standards to their son as he grew up. A woman's virginity, for example, was a sacred possession, to be given away or stolen at great cost. According to Deuteronomy, a man who violated a virgin had to pay a fine of 50 silver shekels and marry the woman in question; an unmarried woman who willfully had sex with a man other than her fiancé could be put to death. In ancient Israel, this value was probably a matter of pragmatism more than theology; it assured men who lived in a culture that prized family above all that their children were their own. "Because it was encoded in Biblical texts and the texts became sacred, [virginity] took on a moral dimension," says Carol Meyers, editor of "Women in Scripture" and a professor of religion at Duke. "By the time of Christianity ... any violation was seen as going against God's word."

The values of Jewish families were unique given the circumstances of the time. It is true that Romans of

the first century had some regard for family, too (in his book "Jewish Marriage in Antiquity," Brown University professor Michael Satlow points out that Roman law esteemed married men with children above married men without children and unmarried men as part of the social order).

But Jewish devotion to family predates the Romans by thousands of years--think of all those begats--and by the time of Jesus, Jewish family values were noticeably different from those of their neighbors. A Roman father could, for any or no reason, choose to kill his newborn infant either by cutting the umbilical cord too close or by leaving the baby outside, and the Jewish refusal to do so was seen as peculiar. "The Jews see to it that their numbers increase," wrote the historian Tacitus around A.D. 100. "It is a deadly sin to kill a born or unborn child, and they think that eternal life is granted to those who die in battle or execution--hence their eagerness to have children, and their contempt for death." Herod himself executed two of his own sons, leading Augustus Caesar to remark that "I'd rather be Herod's pigs than Herod's sons."

In a culture so devoted to children, married sex was a blessing. "The harmonious coming together of man and woman and their consummation is figuratively a house. And everything which is without a woman is imperfect and homeless," wrote the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.-A.D. 40). Within this context, whether Joseph and Mary, a married Jewish couple, did or did not eventually procreate on their own is a subject of endless scholarly and theological debate. When, in the Gospel of Matthew, the author says that Joseph had no union with Mary "until she gave birth to a son," he implies that a union did occur afterward--a decent explanation for the appearance in Mark and Matthew of Jesus' brothers James, Joseph, Judas and Simon, as well as unnamed sisters. "Some good historians believe that [these brothers and sisters] were part of Jesus' entourage," says Rodney Stark, of Baylor University.

And so the growing Jesus would have come of age in a world that cherished procreation, family ties and the history and theology of Israel, including immersion in the Scriptures and the ancient stories of God's deliverance of his people. According to Luke, when Jesus was 12, he traveled with his parents to Jerusalem from Galilee to celebrate Passover. The family feasted there and when they were done, Joseph and Mary turned around and headed home. After a day, they noticed that their son was missing from their entourage and rushed back to Jerusalem to find him. There, the story goes, they discovered Jesus in the temple, talking to the priests and astonishing the assembled crowds with his wisdom.

But his parents were parents, and they were worried. "Son, why have you treated us like this?" his mother asks. "Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

"Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying.

It would not, in all likelihood, be the last time. Their son was growing up in a time of great theological and political turbulence in Judea; in the time of Mary and Joseph, some Jews had begun to believe that the end of the world was coming any day. It would be brought about by a warrior king, a messiah from the house of David, who would destroy the wicked and usher in the kingdom of heaven on earth. The Gospels do not say what Joseph and Mary believed about the apocalypse, but John the Baptist believed in one, and when Jesus says, in Luke, "The Kingdom of God is near," an apocalypse is precisely what he means.

In the temple, Jesus is as rude as a 12-year-old can be. But he's also the kind of Jewish son a mother would be proud of: he takes the family values of his childhood and, in his later years, makes a revolutionary leap. Family, he comes to preach, is not in the blood ties and biology his parents' generation so reveres. To him, the end of the world is coming and what matters now is the community of believers, the followers of the Messiah--on earth and in heaven. What matters is the family, as he put it, of man. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus makes this point again and again. "Let the dead bury the dead," he says in Luke. There's no need for sweet goodbyes. The only thing a believer must do is "follow me" and proclaim the Kingdom of God.

The meaning of this message was powerful to his followers, who tended to be laborers and not affluent urbanites. (Though his ministry was apparently funded by relatively wealthy single women.) "For Jesus, family values means treating other people in the community as if they were your biological siblings or your mother, and that's extraordinary," says Amy-Jill Levine, author of "The Misunderstood Jew" and a professor at Vanderbilt. That is why, when the Pharisees come to him and ask him how to punish an adulterer, he takes her side. "If any of you is without sin, let you be the first to throw a stone at her," he says.

With the kingdom at hand--really at hand; Jesus says at one point that there are listeners in his hearing "who shall not taste death" before the coming of the Messiah--practical concerns about the care and feeding of kin were less than critical. Jesus de-emphasized not just earthly family, but also sex and marriage--though he preached strongly against divorce. Unmarried himself, his disciples were also either single or solo, presumably leaving behind parents, children and spouses to follow their new family. In Matthew, he speaks with respect of "eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

Jesus was not the first Jew to connect ideas of sexual asceticism with spiritual salvation. Around the time of his birth, another group of apocalypse-minded Jews called the Essenes lived together in ascetic community, and the Jewish historian Josephus found their marital customs odd enough to write down. One sect of Essenes, he wrote, shuns marriage and prefers instead to educate other people's children; another has "no intercourse with [their wives] during pregnancy, thus showing that their motive in marrying is not self-indulgence but the procreation of children." The break Jesus and people such as the

Essenes made with the values of their youths was predicated on the end of the world.

Then came the Passion, but still nothing happened. Jesus had died and risen again--even appeared to his disciples on numerous occasions shortly after the first Easter--yet the world continued just as it had the day before, without trumpets or angels or fiery battles. The first small band of followers must have felt at least some disappointment; instead of going to heaven, they were going back to their farms, to their fishing or, in cases like Peter and James's, to the work of making sense of the theological thunderbolt that had changed them forever. No matter what they were doing, their parents, their children and their earthly responsibilities were waiting.

As the years passed and the early church took shape, the original followers began, naturally, to die off, and the followers of Jesus' message had a choice to make: would they shape the message for the masses or would they opt, like Paul and the Jewish Essenes, for a more ascetic approach? The decision was urgent, for history was unfolding, the pull of the Roman Empire was strong, and without some kind of family and social structure the movement would be doomed.

It was, then, time to return to the values of the world of the Nativity, to ways of preserving families even in times of crisis. In her 1988 book "Adam, Eve and the Serpent," Elaine Pagels of Princeton University argues that Matthew recalibrated some of Jesus' more radical sayings to accommodate the familial concerns of regular people. Matthew, Pagels points out, provides a loophole for divorce: "Let no man put asunder," Jesus says, except in cases where the wife has committed adultery. Also in Matthew, Jesus reasserts the commandment "Honor your mother and father." Near the end of the first century, Pope Clement argues that Jesus' unmarried state was in no way meant to be an example for everyone: "the reason that Jesus didn't marry was that, in the first place, he was already engaged, so to speak, to the church; and, in the second place, he was no ordinary man."

No matter what one thinks of Jesus of Nazareth--that he was the Son of God, an interesting prophetic figure or a religious provocateur with particularly prolific followers--surely we can agree that he was no ordinary man. Yet at the end, in agony on Golgotha, Jesus affirmed the familial order he had spent so much of his public ministry arguing was about to be disrupted. He saw his mother standing nearby, watching her boy die a criminal's death. In a final act of human compassion, he called to his disciple John. "And he said to his mother 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on this disciple took her into his home." At the end of his life, then, Jesus took care of his mother, the penultimate act of a nice Jewish boy--and a blessing of the kinds of values that should endure, as his followers say even now, until his coming again.

With Anne Underwood, Julie Scelfo and Joshua Alston

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