

# Ten things they never told me about Jesus

... a beginner's guide to a larger Christ

John L. Bell

Sample pages



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## Chapter four

# Christian family values?

Family Values – it's a favourite curtain-raiser and vote-winner for politicians, especially in the USA, and most especially when the adjective 'Christian' prefaces it to attract the interest of those in the faith community.

So, I was keen to investigate what the Bible says about this salient issue and asked people at a conference on Iona to do the research. We split into three groups, each of which had a different remit, one Bible per person, and a list of references to start their project.

Group A was to look at the exemplars of good family values whom Jesus would discover among the patriarchs and heroes of the Jewish faith.

Group B had the responsibility of looking at the kind of relationship Jesus had with people in his own family.

Group C was asked to attend to the specific words Jesus said about family life and deduce what they could from such utterances.

We separated for almost an hour and when we returned, members of all three groups had amusement and consternation on their faces. The reason became clear when we discussed their findings.

### **Ancestral exemplars**

There are few, if any, men in the hierarchy of Old Testament heroes who model a sense of family responsibility which others should be encouraged to emulate.

At the start of the Jewish family tree comes Abraham, who may have shown his trust in God by being prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, but whose fidelity to his wife Sarah has to be questioned in the light of two occasions on which he passed her off as his sister, leading to at least one embarrassing overture (*Genesis 12:10–16; & 20:1–18*). His grandson, Jacob, followed his grandfather's practice. This was after he had persuaded his hapless brother to forgo his birthright, and covered his own smooth arm with a hairy pelt in order to be given his father's blessing (*Genesis 25:29–34; & 27:1–17*).

Isaac, Abraham's son, (like Samson who appears much later) enters into marriage with someone whom his father has sought for him. It is an unusual mating ritual. Whenever the unsuspecting girl Rebecca appears, Isaac immediately takes her into his tent and beds her in consolation for the loss of his mother (*Genesis 24: esp v 67*).

Joseph comes from a large family where it seems that his own precocity and the jealousy of his brothers combine to ensure the disruption of normal family relations and a practised duplicity in the reunification of the family years later (*Genesis 37 & 42*).

Much later in the genealogy there is David who has a collection of spouses, not all of whom are happy, and who commits adultery with the wife of a loyal soldier (*II Samuel 11*). In his years as king, his life is threatened by the murderous intent of his son Absalom (*II Samuel 17 & 18*). Another son,

Solomon, the fruit of his union with Bathsheba, should have known a lot about family values, given that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines (*I Kings 11:3*). But he is curiously seldom quoted as a model for emulation.

Outside the Abrahamic/Davidic lineage there are men like Moses, who had a rather disruptive and disorienting childhood, having been born a Hebrew but raised in an Egyptian palace. Apart from being a murderer and a fugitive, he had a less than fulfilling relationship with his wife, who must be one of the few women in history to have circumcised her own husband (*Exodus 1:2 & 4:25*).

Then there is Jephthah, a soldier and devout believer, who promised God that if he won a victory he would sacrifice the first creature that ran out of his farmyard. Presuming it might be a farm animal or even a favourite dog, he was brought up short when his daughter ran to greet the conquering hero. He subsequently sacrificed her (*Judges 11*).

By-passing Samson, for reasons best discovered by those who want to read his full story (*Judges 14–16*), we might light on Saul, the first anointed king of Israel. Apart from suffering from what could have been a form of schizophrenic illness, he also boiled with irrational jealousy at his son's affectionate relationship with the young David (*I Samuel 16:14–23 & 20:30–34*).

No, there are not many good examples in his ancestry to which Jesus could have pointed in an attempt to illustrate blissful domestic life. Granted, the women come off slightly better than the men, but their virtue only serves to highlight the inadequacy of the marriages into which they entered.

## **Jesus and his own family**

The group looking at this subject found little to go on.

Matthew's Gospel indicates that Joseph is a direct descendant of Abraham. That may buttress his value as the caretaker or step-father of Jesus, but it says little about his character. What we learn in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel is that Joseph is so principled that he is keen to break off his engagement to Mary when he discovers that she is pregnant (*Mt 1:19*). But Joseph is also a man who, despite his high principles and moral standing, is open to illogical suggestions offered through the medium of dreams. In the first of these (*Mt 1:20–22*) he is persuaded not to do the decent thing, but to do the exceptional thing and become the surrogate father to Mary's child.

Perhaps the decision was not totally based on supernatural persuasion. For if Joseph was aware of his ancestral lineage, he would have known that several of his named forebears were invited by God to do that which took them outside their comfort zone.

As regards Mary, we know virtually nothing of her pedigree. Though it is usually through the maternal lineage that a child is considered a true Jew, we do not know anything about Mary's parentage. The names traditionally given to her own mother and father are the stuff of legend rather than biblical witness, as are the presumptions that she was in her mid-teens when she became pregnant and always wore blue.

The more disconcerting thing for our purposes is that Jesus' life began in an awkward relationship with an unwed girl becoming pregnant and her fiancé, on discovering the news,

being reluctant to go ahead with the marriage (*Mt 1:18–20*). If the impoverished circumstances around his birth are not exceptional, his refugee status is something which not many people have shared (*Mt 2:13–15*).

But we do know that Jesus' relationship with his mother was far from that of doting parent and equally doting child. His absconding from the caravan of pilgrims returning home after the Passover shows Mary as someone beside herself with worry. When they find the twelve-year-old in the temple engaged in dialogue with people many times his age, it is Mary who articulates the upset felt by both parents: 'Why have you treated us like this?' (*Lk 2:48*)

When he and his disciples are present at the wedding feast at Cana, where Mary seems to take precedence in the guest list (*Jn 2:1*), there is a slight altercation behind Jesus' first demonstration of supernatural powers.

The precise moment is when Mary says, 'There's no wine left,' and Jesus replies, 'That's no concern of mine. My hour has not yet come' (*Jn 2:3*). Recently some scholars of John's Gospel have suggested that Jesus' rather severe retort to his mother could well be an expression of exasperation.

We see a further challenge to the sentimental notion of Jesus' relationship with Mary when news is brought to him that his family is outside the house in which he is speaking and would like to hear him. 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?' he asks, before – as on other occasions – indicating that those who best assume that title are those who do God's will (*Mt 12:46–48*). Interestingly, he also indicates that it is not just in his own town that a prophet lacks honour, but also in his own family (*Mt 13:57*).



In a less immediate domestic setting, he is greeted by an admirer who shouts, 'Happy is the womb that carried you and the breasts that suckled you!' To which Jesus more or less says, 'My mother has nothing to do with it' (*Lk 11:27*).

On two other occasions, it seems that his near family do not fully attest to his worth. In Galilee his 'brothers' (a term which might refer to extended family) seem to doubt his judgement in keeping to the periphery when they encourage him to go public: 'No one can hope for recognition if he works in obscurity ... Show yourself to the world.' The immediate comment of the Gospel writer is rather telling: 'Even his brothers had no faith in him' (*Jn 7:3-5*).

The other instance is when, in equally direct terms, his family suggest that he is out of his mind (*Mk 3:21*).

Now, granted, we are dealing with limited evidence. The Gospels are not a biography with insights into the intimate relationship between mother and son or among siblings. But what we have does not warrant the belief that Jesus modelled in himself ideal family life.

### **Sayings regarding family life**

Surely there must be something in Jesus' teachings which sanctifies the family? That is what our third group of researchers had hoped. But again there were sparse pickings to fulfil their expectations. A few selected statements might suffice to undermine any notion that Jesus was a supporter of family values at all costs:

Brother will hand over brother to death, and a father his child; children will turn against their parents and send

them to their death. Everyone will hate you for your allegiance to me. (*Mt 10:21–22*)

I have come not to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man will find enemies under his own roof. (*Mt 10:34–36*)

No one is worthy who cares more for father or mother than for me; no one is worthy of me who cares more for son or daughter. (*Mt 19:37*)

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother, father or children, or land for my sake and for the gospel, who will not in this age receive a hundred times as much ... and persecutions besides and in the age to come eternal life. (*Mk 10:29–30*)

Similar words appear in Luke's gospel (*see Lk 9:59; 11:52; 14:26; & 21:16*).

This is not to say that Jesus discourages family responsibility. He does, after all, ask the rich young man whether he keeps the commandment to honour his parents (*Lk 18:20*). He warns against anything which might abuse children (*Mk 9:42*), and he encourages the settling of inter-family squabbles by honest confrontation and forgiveness when guilt is regretted (*Lk 17:3*).

He also clearly enjoys being in households – among others those of Joanna, Susanna, Lazarus and his sisters, and Peter, though as some women from Lincoln Diocese pointed out to me a few years ago, while Peter's mother-in-law would be grateful to Jesus for healing her, she might want to give him

a piece of her mind for taking the major breadwinner in the household away from his family and domestic responsibilities. Perhaps the father of James and John and the spouse of Matthew (if he was married) might also have had a word to say about the domestic and economic disruption caused by devout discipleship.

But surely there's something yet more positive to be discovered? Does Jesus not make some salient comments about the sanctity of marriage? Doesn't he talk about the differences in the sexes being the reason for man and woman leaving their parents and becoming one flesh? Yes he does. But, curiously, it is not in the context of advice dispensed to the disciples in case they have to lead a marital counselling course. His words on marriage come in the context of a question addressed to him about divorce.

We find evidence of that in Matthew's Gospel (19:3). It is a Pharisee – who may either be looking for greater leniency for divorce, or hoping to identify Jesus as a dangerous liberal – who asks if a man can divorce his wife 'for any cause he pleases'. Jesus here, as elsewhere (*see Lk 16:18*), is quite unbending on divorce. It cannot happen on a male whim, but has to be because of proven adultery.

It is interesting that this is what is called a 'dominical' instruction, a specific word on a moral issue from Jesus. He says nothing about relationships between people of the same sex, male or female. Yet this latter is the issue which vexes churches, while divorce has become a possibility even for Christian couples who don't get on with each other any longer.

Of stories which Jesus tells regarding families, the three principal ones hardly reflect patterns of a kind of domestic bliss to

which people would aspire today. One parable is of a man in bed with his family who finds himself disturbed by a neighbour in the middle of the night (*Lk 11:5–8*). The second has to do with the rather irregular wedding feast for a king's son in which beggars and rough sleepers are invited to the banquet (*Lk 14:12–24*). And the third, the most famous of all, is of a dysfunctional family in which the father seems to exercise a degree of generosity of spirit beyond the tolerance level of most men (*Lk 15:11–24*).

From the findings of all the innocent researchers on Iona, we do not discover substantial material to buttress the claim that Jesus initiated, espoused or encouraged what we now call 'Christian Family Values'. And that, perhaps, is for a reason which sometimes evades us, namely that at the time of Christ families were nothing like the nuclear units we think of now.

### **Family life in first-century Palestine**

In the previous chapter we noted how the majority of people, at the time of Jesus' ministry, were dead by the age of 30. The causes were mainly to do with disease, but the immediate effect was to make mother, father and 2.5 children the exception rather than the rule. It wasn't just older people who were confronted with untimely deaths, as the healings of Jairus's daughter, the widow of Nain's son and the centurion's servant indicate. But the premature death of adults, whether male or female, would inevitably leave a family without a father or a mother. Indeed, perhaps in thinking of the first century, we should see one-parent families as the norm rather than the exception because of the high death rate.

In this situation, the ministry of Jesus was concerned with

initiating a unit of belonging in which, to put it theologically, water is thicker than blood. For Jesus, the pedigree of a person was not the defining issue. Those who were allied to him, as ultimately signified by baptism, entered not just into a personal relationship with their saviour, but into a family relationship with all the others gathered into his church.

Here, in what Malina and Rohrbaugh call the 'fictive kin group', people are intended to find security, belonging and identity which will sustain them should their own biological family die or denounce them.

This is the radical identity which most churches have hardly glimpsed. It is not Jesus spiriting people away from their own homes in the manner of the Moonies or the Children of God. Rather, it is Jesus inviting people into a larger family which is defined by commitment to the Kingdom of God rather than bondage to ancestral tradition.

It is the kind of belonging which I saw in Guguletu, a suburb of Cape Town. There the J.L. Zwane Church takes seriously the reality of a community riddled with HIV. One in four people are positive. There is a wide range of ministries which serve the needs and affirm the potentials of sufferers and carers alike. But there are also some more private forms of caring. When I visited the church in 2005, I was introduced to a woman in her fifties, an unmarried lady who had never had any children. But because so many of the mothering and fathering age group were dying, she decided that, within the body of Christ, she could not absent herself from sharing responsibility for the community, so she took to her home four orphaned boys. Was there ever a better example of the verse that ends Psalm 113:

God makes the woman in a childless house  
A happy mother of children. (*Ps 113:9*)

However, I do not believe that Jesus initiated the Christian community merely to deal with the casualties of a society with a high death rate. I believe there are two deeper reasons for encouraging this trans-biological bonding.

The first is enshrined in a proverb variously attributed to China, Africa and John Wesley, namely that 'it takes a village to rear a child'. No biological family is sufficient. Indeed some biological families may be stifling for the full development of children and parents alike. We are not Russian dolls which fit into each other. We are, in every family, people of different attributes and attitudes. Wives cannot be totally sustained by the companionship of their husbands; they need the company of others. Boys, especially during the rebellious adolescent years, need adults other than their parents to confide in and learn from.

The encouragement which we receive from other people of faith should be a means by which our horizons are extended and the potentials unrecognised by our biological family are identified and affirmed.

I believe also that Jesus saw the church as a surrogate community because neither marriage nor family life can be mandatory for everyone. Jesus himself said that there were some people for whom marriage was not an option (*Mt 19.11*). Does that mean that single people, and widows and orphans, and divorcees should be denied the close companionship of others?

Do children who have been battered by a sadist of a father have no recourse to a better role model which they might

emulate when they become parents themselves? Do the husband and wife who, despite prayer and medical treatment, find themselves unable to conceive have forever to feel outsiders to 'normal' society, particularly where churches use Mothering Sunday as a time to praise fertile women rather than rejoice in the mothering which God and God's church offers to all?

### **Two surrogate family scenarios**

I have a friend in heaven whose name is Gabi de Wil. She spent all of her life in Belgium, and much of it as a member of the parish of the Beguinage in Brussels. Into that church, one Saturday at the time of the afternoon mass, wandered a young man called Jean Claude. No one knew him, but people welcomed him.

He returned week after week, and was evidently glad to be in that community, among whom one of the friends he made was Gabi. In time he revealed to a few people something of his story, namely that he had been thrown out of his home by his parents when he told them he was gay, that he had slept rough in the streets, and that he now lived in a hostel.

In due course, Jean Claude asked if he might be confirmed in the faith, and that happened at the Easter Vigil. Some time later, he confided to Gabi that he had discovered he was HIV positive – at a time when there were no antiretrovirals to combat the disease.

Eventually, when he became very ill, he was admitted to a hospice, to which Gabi would go regularly to visit the boy, sing to him, pray with him and make him laugh with her

outrageous stories. When he died, many of the parish attended his funeral. But as mourners left the graveside, Gabi saw one woman remaining who was not from the church. She approached her and asked if she was, by any chance, Jean Claude's mother. She replied in the affirmative.

'Madame,' said Gabi, 'I want to tell you two things ... that your son died a peaceful death, and that he died as a Christian.'

What or who was it who enabled him to die in this way? Jean Claude was about 21 when he died. Gabi de Wil was almost four times his age. Yet she had been for him a surrogate mother, aunt and girlfriend, representing the family of Jesus in which water is thicker than blood.

The other scenario is much better known. It is, in fact, the moment at which we might recognise how this new unit of belonging was initiated by Jesus. It is at the cross as he, the dying Saviour, looks at those standing around, and turns the attention of the faithful yet grief-stricken Mary to a young man close by, saying, 'Mother, there is your son.' And to the young man, 'Son, there is your mother.' Ever since, those who belong to Jesus have had to see themselves as also belonging to each other.