PART I

Introduction

The purpose of this anthology is to introduce the reader to the wide range of texts that reflect early Christian thought and practice on the subject of marriage. Documents from the second to the sixth century are presented in chronological order to provide a sense of the dynamic development that has characterized Christianity in this area, as in so many others. Various genres are represented: the sermon, letter, theological treatise, legal document, novel, liturgical blessing, and marriage poem. This diversity of form reveals something of the diversity of outlook among the various texts.

Early Christian thought on marriage and sexuality has had an enormous influence on the development of Christian ethics and, indeed, on the marital ethos of the Western world more generally. But these ancient traditions were themselves shaped by a variety of historical factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic to Christianity itself. The issues confronting Christians varied considerably between the first and sixth centuries. Changing circumstances required new responses in every aspect of Christian life, and marriage was no exception.

This introduction discusses some of the more important factors that shaped the early Christian documents presented

in this anthology, beginning with the New Testament. The modern reader is invited into a world of discourse that is sometimes quite familiar and at other times quite alien to contemporary sensibilities. The voices of the early Christian writers will speak directly to some Christians today; others will be repulsed by the anti-sexual or anti-female bias in some of the texts. Both reactions are legitimate, for the early Christians bequeathed to posterity a legacy that is profoundly ambiguous. These traditions, for better or for worse, have shaped the identity of the church itself and, therefore, the attitudes of many Christians today.

1.

The New Testament Evidence

1.1 JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

The world into which Christianity first emerged was profoundly ambivalent on the question of marriage. While the earliest Christians inherited from Judaism a rich tradition of reflection on marriage, other currents of thought, such as apocalyptic, tended to run counter to that tradition. Jesus himself, almost certainly, was unmarried. His proclamation of the imminent coming of God's kingdom seemed to require a degree of commitment so radical as to eclipse all other, "worldly" loyalties: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."[1] Sharing the apocalyptic perspective of many Jews of his day, Jesus, as recorded in the Synoptic tradition, regarded the life of the resurrection as an angelic life, "where they neither marry nor are given in marriage."[2]

Among the Synoptic stories, however, one passage sheds a somewhat different light on Jesus's teaching, one that would

1. Luke 14:26; cf. Matt 10:37; Mark 10:29.
2. Mark 12:25; cf. Matt 22:30; Luke 20:35.

have considerable impact on the development of early Christian thought. All three Synoptic Gospels report a discussion with Pharisees regarding the permissibility of divorce. In Mark's version, Jesus responds to the statement that the Mosaic law allowed a man to divorce his wife: "Because of your hardness of heart [Moses] wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, *God made them male and female*.[3] *For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*.[4] So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."[5]

Jesus's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage seems to have been closely linked to his eschatological preaching. Those entering the kingdom of God were expected to manifest the holiness and perfection that was characteristic of God's original creation, and this included monogamous unions. Like the Jewish sectarians at Qumran, who took a similar position on the question of divorce, Jesus also may have wished his followers to imitate the holiness of the temple priests, who were forbidden to marry divorced women.[6]

An important departure from the version of Mark is found in the Gospel of Matthew. After citing the saying of Jesus in almost the same words as Mark and Luke 16:18, Matthew placed this significant exception on the lips of Jesus: "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality [*porneia*], and marries another commits adultery."[7] This important qualification, "except for sexual immorality," may have been added by the evangelist to make Jesus's teaching conform more closely to that of the Mosaic law. Because

3. Gen 1:27.

4. Gen 2:24.

5. Mark 10:5–9.

6. Cf. Lev 21:7. On the apocalyptic character of Jesus's message about marriage and its parallels in Judaism, see E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 230, 257–59.

7. Matt 19:9; cf. 5:32. The precise semantic range of the Greek word *porneia* is disputed. For a recent discussion, see Jennifer Glancy, "The Sexual Use of Slaves: A Response to Kyle Harper on Jewish and Christian *porneia*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134 (2015): 215–29.

of this exception in Matthew's Gospel, some early Christians allowed not only divorce but also remarriage if one of the spouses committed adultery.[8] The basic bias against divorce, however, remained even in Matthew's version, along with the citation of the Genesis creation narratives.

Early Christians, from the apostle Paul onward, looked back on these traditions about Jesus whenever they needed guidance on questions of marital morality. They found two primary lessons in these traditions. On the one hand, the texts affirmed that the normal state of marriage is indissoluble: except in the case of adultery, remarriage after divorce is forbidden. On the other hand, the passage shows Jesus citing the original intention of God the Creator to "make them male and female" and to unite man and woman "in one flesh." The first lesson—on indissolubility—became a teaching that helped to define Christian identity in a world where marital stability was not always cherished. The second lesson—on the original place of marriage in God's creative plan—became a valuable resource for Christians confronted with a denial of the goodness of marriage.

1.2 THE APOSTLE PAUL

The apostle Paul's extensive discussion of marriage in chapter 7 of his First Letter to the Corinthians exercised an equal influence on early Christian views of marriage. Writing in response to questions sent to him from this predominantly gentile Christian community, Paul faced a group of ascetics who seemed to take pride in their spiritual gifts (*charismata*) and spiritual knowledge (*gnōsis*). Christians at Corinth were questioning the value, and even the permissibility, of marriage. Their slogan was: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman."[9] Paul carefully distanced himself from the views of such ascetics. He insisted that sexual relations between

8. See, e.g., the selection from Ambrosiaster translated in part 2, chapter 8.
9. 1 Cor 7:1.

spouses were allowed;[10] furthermore, husband and wife were bound by a reciprocal duty to render to each other their due: "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does."[11] Abstention from sex should occur only by mutual consent for the sake of prayer, and only for a limited time.[12]

Paul proceeded to argue, citing the teaching of Jesus, that Christian spouses ought not to divorce or remarry: "To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife."[13] Even a marriage with a non-Christian spouse was to be preserved, for the non-Christian is made holy in the Christian spouse.[14] Paul's general rule was that Christians should remain in the state in which God first called them.[15] He taught that the unmarried and widows would do better to remain unmarried, although they were free to marry if they wished, "for it is better to marry than to be on fire."[16]

Toward the end of chapter 7 Paul revealed the reason for his ambivalent view of Christian marriage: "I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none. . . . For the present form of this world is passing away."[17] Like Jesus, Paul viewed the lives and duties of married Christians through the lens of the expectation of the imminent end of

10. 1 Cor 7:2–3.
11. 1 Cor 7:4.
12. Cf. 1 Cor 7:5.
13. Cf. 1 Cor 7:10–11. It is noteworthy that Paul did not explicitly forbid remarriage by the man, as he did in the case of the woman. This omission led some early Christians to allow remarriage in the case of a man who divorced his wife because of her adultery. This view, which may have been the dominant tradition prior to the late fourth century, was eventually challenged by Augustine, who argued for absolute indissolubility for both spouses, even in the case of adultery.
14. Cf. 1 Cor 7:14.
15. Cf. 1 Cor 7:17–28.
16. 1 Cor 7:9; cf. 7:28.
17. 1 Cor 7:29–31.

time. Although he strongly resisted the attempts of the ascetic Christians at Corinth to impose a requirement of celibacy on the community, he maintained that, because of the imminent end of this age, the burdens and distractions of the married life were best foregone.[18]

Like the accounts of Jesus's teachings in the gospels, the writings of Paul were eventually adopted into the developing canon of scripture. But when subsequent generations of Christians read the teachings of Jesus or Paul, they generally did so in a context no longer troubled by the impending end of time. Shorn of their apocalyptic significance, Paul's views took on a rather different significance: many of the earliest Christians came to regard marriage itself as inferior to celibacy and saw Paul's recommendation of celibacy as advice for all times, not merely for the interim before the "end times." But, again like that of Jesus, Paul's clear acceptance of marriage, at least as an alternative to fornication, provided early Christians with a powerful rejoinder to those who would forbid marriage altogether.

1.3 LATER NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

Most of the later New Testament writings continued Paul's resistance to the demands of ascetic Christians for sexual renunciation. They also developed further his desire to preserve the established structures of society, marriage among them. Written in an age less anxious about the end of time and more concerned to present a good appearance to non-Christian society, documents from the later years of the first century tended to construct a bridge between the teachings of Jesus and Paul, on the one side, and the structures and values of Greco-Roman society, on the other. The household codes found in several New Testament writings provide a good example of the early Christian adaptation to a changed environment: the traditional roles and structures of the

18. 1 Cor 7:28, 31, 38, 40.

Roman household were now regarded as normative for the church.[19]

Among these codes is a passage in the Letter to the Ephesians, in which the author (probably not the apostle Paul) treated the union of husband and wife by analogy with the union of Christ and the church.[20] Not only did human marriage provide the author with an image for the marriage of Christ and the church, but the reverse was also the case: the union of Christ and the church became a paradigm for the mutual love and respect that should subsist between husband and wife. Quoting the same Genesis text cited by Jesus, "A man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh,"[21] the author of the Letter to the Ephesians took the passage to refer both to the union of Christ and the church and to human marriage.

With very few exceptions, most of the later documents of the New Testament followed the same basic trajectory of thought. Marriage was regarded as the work of a good Creator, and any attempt to forbid marriage was repudiated.[22] The Pastoral Epistles went so far as to make marriage, along with the successful management of a household, a prerequisite for appointment to the position of overseer or bishop (*episkopos*) in the Christian community.[23] This close identification of church leadership with the households of married Christians is significant. Both structures were considered useful in combating alternative varieties of Christianity that were emerging at the time. Threatened by the radical ascetic tendencies of some Christian groups in the second century, the author of the Pastoral Epistles insisted on the close association between the order of the church and the order of the Greco-Roman household.

19. For example, Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Pet 2:17–3:9; 1 Tim 2:8–15; 6:1–10; and Titus 2:1–10.

20. Cf. Eph 5:21–33.

21. Gen 2:24.

22. Cf. 1 Tim 4:1–5.

23. Cf. 1 Tim 3:1–5; Titus 1:6.