

Resurrection and the Future of Marriage:

Interpreting Luke 20:34-36

in its Hebraic Context

By Sarah Giles

Introduction

No biblical prophecy has captivated Christendom quite like the resurrection of the dead. Believers throughout the history of the church have longed for the day when Christ will descend from heaven with a shout to raise his people from the grave. But there is one apparent result of the resurrection that creates more anxiety than anticipation – according to traditional Christian teaching, it marks the start of an eternally celibate existence.

The primary basis for this doctrine is the scene in which Jesus told the Sadducees that *"the sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage"* (Luke 20:34-35).¹

The church has long viewed these words as proof that human marriage is temporary. Yet, remarkably, a number of vital questions surrounding this interpretation have remained largely unexplored. How did the early church fathers interact with the passage, and what interpretive lens shaped their conclusions? Does the rest of the Biblical data have anything to say about resurrected celibates? Is the concept of eternal celibacy an accurate reading of Jesus' words in their original Hebraic context?

This paper will examine both ancient history and the Hebrew Scriptures for answers to those questions. It will seek to demonstrate that the words of Jesus regarding "marrying and giving in marriage" in fact fell prey to misinterpretation by the Hellenized church fathers in the post-apostolic era, which in turn obscured the Biblical portrait of resurrected humanity with respect to the institution of marriage.

Part one will briefly trace the interpretive history of the passage in question and identify potential influences behind the popular reading. Part two will examine three exegetical indications that Jesus actually had a very different meaning in mind. And finally, part three will present a robustly supported alternative reading that proposes a specific Old Testament background for Jesus' reply in this famous confrontation.

¹ All scripture quotations are taken from the ESV translation unless otherwise specified.

The Question

On the final day of his public ministry, Jesus is accosted by a group of Sadducean priests with a challenge rooted in the Mosaic Law. It involves the Levirate marriage statute that was designed to keep the family's inheritance within the family line:

Deuteronomy 25:5-6 – If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

These instructions in the Torah form the linchpin of their carefully crafted scenario:

Luke 20:28-33 – ...Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.

The Sadducees presume that the resurrection would cause the woman to be married to all seven brothers at once. This, of course, would violate the Lev. 20:21 law against a man being married to his brother's wife while the brother is still alive. The goal of their absurdly exaggerated scenario is transparent: they are trying to prove the resurrection impossible on the grounds that it would violate the Torah.

Part I: The Traditional Interpretation

Jesus' response has historically been considered a declaration about the fate of human marriage. The traditional view interprets it something like this: "Ignorant Sadducees, marriage is for this age, not the age to come!" But if such is the case, it is the first and only time in his entire ministry that Jesus has mentioned the idea of eternal celibacy for the resurrected. What then does the rest of the New Testament have to say about his announcement?

In considering this question, we are quickly confronted with a striking fact: apart from the traditional interpretation of the scene with the Sadducees, the New Testament never once states that the resurrected will not marry. Not one of its authors offers so much as a brief comment attesting to the future cessation of this fundamental institution.

Indeed, while celibacy in the *present* age is permitted in certain situations such as an urgent spiritual mission (Matt. 19:12) or impending tribulation (1 Cor. 7:29), these prove to be exceptions within a worldview that highly esteems the marriage relationship and denounces the elevation of celibacy above marriage as nothing short of demonic.²

To be sure, a small handful of passages are often thought to hint at the idea of celibacy in the future age. These include the corporate marriage of Christ and the church in Eph. 5 (thought to replace individual human marriages) and the “spiritual” resurrected body in 1 Cor. 15 (thought to be an asexual body). But even in such places, the idea of eternal celibacy is neither explicitly stated nor even clearly implied.³ Thus, the remainder of the NT offers no definitive support for this interpretation of Jesus’ remarks to the Sadducees.

The most significant witness to the teachings of Jesus outside of the NT are the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (ca. 70 CE – 150 CE).⁴ As one might expect, their commentary reflects the same pattern established in the scriptures. Celibacy in the *present* age is permitted in

² E.g. Eph. 5:28, Col. 3:19, Heb. 13:4, 1 Pe. 3:7, 1 Ti. 4:1-3.

³ Peter O’Brien notes that Eph. 5 likely draws in part upon Ezekiel 16:10-14, which describes Israel’s spiritual marriage with Yahweh. (Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letters to the Ephesians*. (The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 367). This marriage to Yahweh resulted in Israel receiving his covenant blessings, which expressly included the multiplication of her numbers via marriage and childbearing (Eze. 16:6, cp. Ex. 1:20-21). Just as Israel’s Old Covenant marriage with Yahweh never precluded individual marriages, so also the church’s New Covenant marriage with Yahweh through Christ is never said to replace individual marriages. To the contrary, Paul points to Christ’s covenantal sacrifice as the very model for love between husbands and wives that will cause their marriages to *flourish*, with no termination point in view.

The resurrected “spiritual” (*pneumatikos* in Greek) body described in 1 Cor. 15:42-49 is often assumed to suggest an asexual body. Yet as N.T. Wright explains, this word “is not about the substance of which the body is composed, but about the driving force that animates it.” Wright notes that Paul normally uses the word *pneumatikos* in reference to being animated by the Holy Spirit. In 1 Cor. 2:14 Paul identifies one who has received the Holy Spirit as a “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*) person. (N. T. Wright, “Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body: All for One and One for All Reflections on Paul’s Anthropology in his Complex Contexts,” *NT Wright Page*, [ntwrightpage.com /2016/07/12/mind-spirit-soul-and-body](http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/mind-spirit-soul-and-body)). Thus there is no hint of an asexual existence in 1 Cor. 15:42-49; if anything, a resurrected body animated and fully indwelt by the Holy Spirit implies the sexually *moral* existence God originally intended for mankind, in contrast to the sexually *immoral* existence of a life lived according to the fallen flesh.

⁴ This technical term refers to the earliest known Christian writings outside of the New Testament. The Apostolic Fathers are generally thought to have had some point of contact with the apostles themselves.

specific qualified cases⁵ that are exceptions to the prevailing high regard for marriage.⁶ By contrast, the idea of *future* eternal celibacy for the resurrected is simply never mentioned by any Apostolic Father.

It turns out that the popular view of Jesus' reply does not arrive on the scene until around the mid-second century CE. By this time, Christianity had spread into a Greco-Roman culture saturated in the teachings of the pagan philosopher Plato. Numerous influential church fathers of the second century and beyond were trained in Platonic philosophy prior to converting to Christianity, and most retained a great admiration for it after their conversion.

The Platonist version of the afterlife had no room for bodily resurrection. Instead, the soul was thought to shed the body like a husk and ascend to the heavens to dwell in eternal celibacy among the gods. The mortal body, according to Plato, was little more than a prison that hindered one from seeking spiritual truth. He therefore urged his followers to "avoid, so far as possible, intercourse and communion with the body, except what is absolutely necessary."⁷

This paradigm naturally engendered disdain for all aspects of human physicality. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains that "the true philosopher despises bodily pleasures such as food, drink, and sex, so he more than anyone else wants to free himself from his body....philosophy itself is, in fact, a kind of 'training for dying,' a purification of the philosopher's soul from its bodily attachment."⁸

Many early church fathers both practiced and advocated ascetic celibacy. Joseph Lynch comments that "the ordinary believers and even clergy who did not adopt an ascetic way of life were increasingly regarded as real but second-class Christians. The ascetics gradually became the Christian elite, who did what Jesus had recommended to those who wanted to be 'perfect.'"⁹

⁵ Ignatius, *Polycarp* 5.2; Shepherd of Hermas, *Commandment* 4.4-11 (Michal W. Holmes, ed. *The Apostolic Fathers in English*. Translated by Michael W. Holmes. 3d ed.: Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

⁶ See e.g. *1 Clement* 1.3, 6.3; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 4.2; Ignatius, *Polycarp* 5.1 (Holmes).

⁷ Plato, *Phaedo*, 67a. (vol. 1 of *Plato in Twelve Volumes*. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

⁸ Tim Connolly, "Plato: Phaedo," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/phaedo.

⁹ Joseph H. Lynch. *Early Christianity: A Brief History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 195.

This worldview left an indelible mark upon the theology of the Hellenized church fathers in the second century and beyond. In particular, many of their works reveal a striking connection between their prevailing low view of marriage and the emergence of an “eternal celibacy” interpretation of Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees. A representative sampling from the first four centuries of the church offers some interesting insights in this regard.

We begin with *On the Resurrection* (ca. 150-180 CE), a work traditionally attributed to Justin Martyr.¹⁰ Our author holds to a literal resurrection of the flesh and debates an opponent who rejects such a resurrection largely because it would be pointless to resurrect one’s sexual organs if the resurrected are celibate (as both men presume Jesus taught).

Justin answers his opponent by pointing to voluntary celibates in the present age, most notably Christ. He asserts that Christ was born of a virgin “for no other reason than that he might destroy the begetting [of children] by lawless desire.”¹¹ Here Justin refers to children conceived *within* the bond of marriage. In line with the ascetic paradigm, he considers all sexual desire as inherently sinful.

The very institution of marriage, he claims, was “made lawless through lust”¹² – that is to say, through sexual desire shared between spouses. He views Christ’s single life as a condemnation of the institution itself and is therefore quite comfortable interpreting Jesus to mean that “in the future world, sexual intercourse should be done away with.”¹³

Influential church father Clement of Alexandria (182 CE) went a step further by rejecting a literal resurrection and arguing instead that the New Testament supported the Platonic idea of eternal disembodiment in the heavens.¹⁴ He was a moderate ascetic who supported marriage but discouraged the enjoyment of conjugal relations. Husbands were instructed to suppress any physical desire they might feel for their wives because “the human ideal of

¹⁰ While the authorship of this document is dubious, its antiquity is not (ca. 150-180 CE), and thus still provides us a window into early church views. We refer to the author as Justin purely for the sake of convenience. The one authentic text by Justin that mentions Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees (*Dialogue with Trypho* 1.81), quotes Jesus without interpretive comment and so is not examined in this paper; nevertheless, Justin’s inclination to extol lifelong celibacy is evident in places such as *First Apology* 1.15.

¹¹ Justin, *On the Resurrection* 1.3 (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–1887. 10 vols. Repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 295.

¹² *On the Resurrection* 1.3 (ANF 1:295).

¹³ *On the Resurrection* 1.3 (ANF 1:295).

¹⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.5 (ANF 2:416).

continence, I mean that which is set forth by Greek philosophers, teaches that one should fight desire."¹⁵ This worldview provides the backdrop for his interpretation of Jesus' reply to the Sadducees:

*"For in this world," [Jesus] says, "they marry, and are given in marriage," in which alone the female is distinguished from the male; "but in that world it is so no more." There the rewards of this social and holy life, which is based on conjugal union, are laid up, not for male and female, but for man, **the sexual desire which divides humanity being removed.***¹⁶

Irenaeus of Lyons (175 CE) affirmed both a bodily resurrection and a literal Messianic kingdom on earth. Nevertheless, he interpreted Jesus' reply to the Sadducees much like his contemporary Clement, with one notable difference. Irenaeus explained the apparent cessation of marriage in more pragmatic terms:

*...all those who have been enrolled for [eternal] life shall rise again...Those, on the other hand, who are worthy of punishment, shall go away into it...Both classes shall then cease from any longer begetting and being begotten, from marrying and being given in marriage; **so that the number of mankind, corresponding to the foreordination of God, being completed, may fully realize the scheme formed by the Father.***¹⁷

He borrows the idea of a "number of mankind" from the Jewish tradition that a certain number of humans are ordained to be born; to this tradition he adds his own conclusion that when the foreordained number is reached, the resurrected are turned into unmarried celibates to prevent any further multiplying.¹⁸

But Irenaeus is unique among the church fathers in that he also attempts to produce Old Testament support for the "eternal celibacy" interpretation of Jesus' reply. He rests the full weight of his case upon Isaiah 6:11-12 as translated in the Greek Septuagint (LXX):

¹⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.7.57 (ANF 2:391).

¹⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 1.4 (ANF 2:211). See also 2.10 (ANF 2:263).

¹⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.33 (ANF 1:411).

¹⁸ The Jewish work known as 2 Baruch (ca. 90 CE) describes a tradition in which God responds to Adam's sin by determining the number of men who would be born and decreeing that the dead would not live again until that number was complete (2 Baruch 23:4-5).

*"For, behold," says Isaiah, "the day of the Lord cometh past remedy, full of fury and wrath, to lay waste the city of the earth, and to root sinners out of it.".... And when these things are done, he says, "**God will remove [us] men far away, and those that are left shall multiply in the earth.**"....For all these and other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just....**as many believers as God has prepared for this purpose, to multiply those left upon earth, [these will] be under the rule of the saints to minister to this Jerusalem...**"¹⁹*

Irenaeus presents Is. 6:11-12 as proof that the *most* worthy Christians – among whom he includes himself – will be resurrected and “removed” to a heavenly Jerusalem to live as celibates during the millennium. They will rule over the *least* worthy believers who remain on earth at Christ’s return in order to do the marrying and multiplying.²⁰

But this reading comes at the cost of the passage’s historical context. Scholars almost universally recognize it as a prophecy of judgment that describes the people of Judah being “removed” to exile.²¹ The subsequent “multiplying” (mentioned only in the LXX) thus refers to the surviving remnant who fruitfully reproduce (Is. 6:13), ensuring the continuation of the nation. All of this took place long before Christ’s first advent.

In other words, the “removal” in Is. 6:11-12 has nothing to do with the resurrection. This perhaps explains why we do not find later church fathers employing Irenaeus’ interpretation of the passage as a proof text for the eternal celibacy view.

Nevertheless, this view continued its rise to prominence in the following century by way of two notable church fathers. The first of these, Tertullian (220 CE), was a gifted theologian from

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.35 (ANF 1:565). Brackets mine. The insertion of “us” in brackets is based on his earlier citation of the same passage: “God will remove us men far away.” See *Against Heresies* 5.34 (ANF 1:564).

²⁰ This problematic theory fails to align with the OT, where prophecies of marriage and childbearing in the future age are consistently styled as a great reward for God’s people Israel. It also appears to mistakenly attribute the prophesied servitude of Israel’s oppressors (Is. 60:10-12) to her regathered exiles, who are at that time subservient to no one but God and his Messiah (Is. 14:1-2, 49:20-23). The fruitful marriage prophecies of the OT are in fact rooted in the Abrahamic Covenant promise of marital fruitfulness (e.g. Gen. 22:17). Consequently, they are never once portrayed as a consolation prize set in contrast to the superior blessing of eternal celibacy; to the contrary, they and the other Abrahamic Covenant blessings are portrayed as the very *pinnacle* of God’s kingdom rewards, while an allegedly superior celibate class of people is nowhere to be found. Irenaeus’ idiosyncratic scheme is thus foreign to the OT but nevertheless survives in various forms to this day.

²¹ See, e.g., John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39*, (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 7, 189-191. See also Bible translations like the HCSB: “the LORD *drives* the people far away.”

Africa who composed entire treatises extolling asceticism in general and celibacy in particular. In a letter to his wife, he urged her to remain a celibate widow after his death based upon his reading of Jesus' remarks to the Sadducees:

*But to Christians...no restoration of marriage is promised in the day of the resurrection...The question raised by the Sadducees has yielded to the Lord's sentence...**There will at that day be no resumption of voluptuous disgrace between us. No such frivolities, no such impurities, does God promise to His (servants).***²²

Tertullian's characterization of marriage as frivolous, disgraceful, and impure betrays a strong inclination to read the passage through an ascetic lens. His contemporary Origen of Alexandria (184 CE) took a similarly dim view of marriage. Considered one of the most influential theologians of the third century church, Origen was an outspoken Platonist and avowed ascetic who reportedly castrated himself in a zealous commitment to celibacy.²³

The concept of a resurrected physical body clashed sharply with Origen's ascetic paradigm. He thus viewed the resurrection and many other Old Testament eschatological prophecies in a purely figurative sense.²⁴

This interpretive matrix is evident in his polemic against some Christians in his day who evidently believed on the basis of the OT that marriage and childbearing *would* continue for the resurrected.²⁵ Such a belief, in his view, could only be motivated by lustful desire:

Certain persons...adopting a superficial view of the letter of the law, and yielding rather in some measure to the indulgence of their own desires and lusts...are of opinion that the fulfilment of the promises of the future are to be looked for in bodily pleasure and luxury...And consequently they say that after the resurrection there will be marriages, and the begetting of children...²⁶

²² Tertullian, *To His Wife* 1.1 (ANF 4:39).

²³ Eusebius, *The Church History of Eusebius* 6.8 (NPNF 2/1:254).

²⁴ E.g. Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.18-5.19 (ANF 4:550-551). He understood the "spiritual" body described by Paul in 1 Cor. 15 in a dualistic sense, such that the resurrected body would be composed of spirit rather than flesh. On his allegorical approach to interpretation see *De Principiis* 4.1.16 (ANF 4:365).

²⁵ Ironically, Origen admitted that "these views they think to establish on the authority of the prophets by those promises which are written regarding Jerusalem," but dismissed their interpretation as too "Jewish" (*De Principiis* 2.11 (ANF 4:297)).

²⁶ Origen, *De Principiis* 2.11 (ANF 4:297).

This paradigm marched onward into the fourth century through the teaching of prominent ascetic theologians Augustine and Jerome. As an affirmed Platonist,²⁷ Augustine held that “contenance is preferred to wedded life, and pious virginity to marriage.”²⁸ Jerome, meanwhile, admitted that his view of marriage was influenced by Plato’s *Phaedrus*²⁹ and ultimately disavowed the institution as nothing short of a “defilement.”³⁰

It is therefore unsurprising that Augustine took Jesus to mean resurrected females “shall then indeed be superior to carnal intercourse and child-bearing,”³¹ or that Jerome used his reading of Jesus’ reply to promote celibacy in the present age: “...after the resurrection there will be no wedlock. But if death be the end of marriage, why do we not voluntarily embrace the inevitable?”³²

In this brief survey, we have observed a remarkable *absence* of evidence for the “eternal celibacy” interpretation of Jesus’ remarks in the remainder of the NT and in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. Nevertheless, many prominent Christians in later centuries interpreted Jesus in precisely this way. But their predominantly negative view of marriage and corresponding inclination to exalt celibacy reveals an interpretive bias that very likely hindered them from considering the scene in its original Hebraic context.

Part II: Indications of a Different Meaning

The traditional reading of Luke 20:34-36 fails to recognize several key indications that Jesus had something other than eternal celibacy in mind. Below we will examine three of these red flags in more detail.

1. Jesus appealed to the Old Testament scriptures and the scribes affirmed his reply.

According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus began his reply by sternly rebuking the Sadducees for failing to understand the scriptures (Matt. 22:29). If indeed he followed this by saying that the resurrected would be unmarried celibates, it was no minor doctrinal point.

²⁷ See e.g. *Letters* 1.1 (NPNF 1/1:219).

²⁸ Augustine, *Of Holy Virginity* 1.1 (NPNF 1/1:417).

²⁹ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1.49 (NPNF 2/6:386).

³⁰ Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1.26 (NPNF 2/6:366).

³¹ Augustine, *City of God* 22.17 (NPNF 1/2:496).

³² Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* 1.13 (NPNF 2/6:357).

The scriptures he cited know nothing of eternal celibacy but are unabashed in their esteem for both the physical body and the institution of marriage. The human body is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14) and its value is made clear by the fact that it will be resurrected to continue life in a physically perfected state (e.g. Is. 26:19, Dan. 12:2).

In Genesis, we learn that God originally intended for Adam and Eve to reign over the earth together as a sinless husband-and-wife unit, filling the earth with equally sinless unions through their offspring (Gen. 1:26-28).³³ The ensuing failure of mankind to achieve God’s marital ideal is vividly depicted throughout the Old Testament. But the *future* of marriage is also a topic of considerable attention.

As Jonathan Huddleston observes, the book of Genesis alone contains many post-fall promises about the future fruitful marriages of God’s people (e.g. Gen. 17:5-6, 26:4, 28:13-14). This tells us something about God’s ultimate plan for the institution:

For Genesis’ audiences, all of this language of [future] multiplication and fruitfulness evokes...a creation blessing expressing the creator’s will for all life upon the earth...Genesis’ story of loss and of promise does not just describe the origins of the present imperfect world; it also evokes an eschatological hope for future Edenic fruitfulness.³⁴

Huddleston has put his finger on a central theme of Old Testament eschatology: that God’s original Edenic intentions for mankind will finally be realized in the eschaton. Thus marriage and childbearing are not merely esteemed in the present age but are also anticipated as a central blessing in the *future* age.³⁵

Ezekiel 37 is perhaps the quintessential example. Here we find an eschatological blessing of fruitful marriages bestowed upon people expressly said to have been raised from the dead. Composed of two closely related visions known as the Dry Bones (vss. 1-14) and the Two Sticks (vss. 15-28),³⁶ Ezekiel 37 describes the bodily resurrection of “the whole house of Israel” (vs. 11). This group is then placed in the Promised Land and blessed with fruitful marriages:

³³ Presumably, once the earth had been filled childbearing would have ceased naturally.

³⁴ Jonathan Huddleston, *Eschatology in Genesis* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 149.

³⁵ E.g. Ps. 69:35-36; Is. 54:3, 59:21, 60:21-22, 61:9, 65:23; Jer. 23:3-4, 30:19-20, 31:27, 33:10-11,22; Zech. 8:3-5.

³⁶ Both visions describe the placement of God’s spirit within his people (Dry Bones: vs. 14, Two Sticks: vs. 23, cp. Eze. 36:25-27) and the placement of his people within their land (Dry Bones: vs. 14, Two Sticks: vs. 21).

Ezekiel 37:13-14, 25-26

13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.

14 And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD....

25 They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever.

26 I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore.

Many modern Biblical scholars regard the Ezekiel 37 resurrection as pure metaphor for the restoration of national Israel. Several potent objections could be lodged against this view,³⁷ but we will focus upon the evidence that many ancient Jews – including the authors of the New Testament – took the passage quite literally.

Dead Sea Scroll scholars Emile Puech and Benjamin Wold observe that the scrolls *On Resurrection* and *Pesudo-Ezekiel* (ca. 150 BCE-70 CE) describe the Ezekiel 37 resurrection event in decidedly literal terms.³⁸ Further evidence appears in a series of paintings on Ezekiel 37 discovered in a 3rd century CE Jewish synagogue in Syria. Known as the “Ezekiel Panel,” it portrays in vivid detail the bodily resurrection of national Israel.³⁹

We also find evidence of this view in the New Testament. Shelly Matthews argues that Jesus’ description of his resurrected body as “flesh and bone” in Lk. 24:39 evokes the resurrected “flesh” and “bone” of Eze. 37:7-8. She writes that “Luke shares with Ezek 37:1-14 the idea that

³⁷ Leading Ezekiel scholar Daniel Block points out that “earlier prophets anticipate Ezekiel’s vision of a national resurrection. The fact that Hosea (6:1-3) and Isaiah (26:19) had already toyed with the idea suggests that in chapter 37 an idea that had germinated at least one and a half centuries earlier has begun to bud.” (Daniel I. Block, *By the River Chebar: Historical, Literary, and Theological Studies in the Book of Ezekiel* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013), 197) Further, Ezekiel’s prophecy is specifically directed to the sixth century BCE exiles (see Eze. 11:14-25). The numerous exiles of his generation who died in captivity - likely including Ezekiel himself - had no hope of participating in the promise of a restored nation permanently settled in their land apart from the bodily resurrection described in the oracle.

³⁸ Benjamin Wold, “Agency and Raising the Dead in 4QPseudo-Ezekiel and 4Q521 2 II,” *Academia.edu*, academia.edu/306575/Agency_and_Raising_the_Dead_in_4QPseudo-Ezekiel_and_4Q521_2_ii. See also Emile Puech, 2006. Resurrection: The Bible and Qumran. Pages 264–71 in *Scripture and the Scrolls*. Edited by James H. Charlesworth. Vol. 1 of *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by James H. Charlesworth. Waco: Baylor University Press.

³⁹ Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein. 1941. The Conception of the Resurrection in the Ezekiel Panel of the Dura Synagogue. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 60, no. 1: 43-55.

resurrection entails the reconstitution of the bodily substances of bones and flesh....it seems likely that he draws the image from knowledge of Ezekiel tradition."⁴⁰

Another likely allusion is seen in Jn. 5:27-29, where Jesus says the "son of man" will command those in the tombs to come out to eternal life or judgment. This recalls both Eze. 37:11-12, where Ezekiel is the "son of man" who raises the dead from their graves with a verbal command, and Dan. 12:2, where some rise to eternal life and others to eternal contempt.

A third allusion occurs in Revelation 11. Following the death of the two witnesses, Rev. 11:11 states that "a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet." This recalls the Ezekiel 37:10 statement that "the breath came into them and they lived and stood on their feet."

A literal view of the Ezekiel 37 resurrection permeated the Judaism of Jesus' day. As James Edwards points out, it is precisely because of this passage that "the rabbis [of Jesus' day] argued for the continuation of earthly circumstances and conditions in the resurrected state, including marriage and sexual intercourse in it."⁴¹

Whatever one makes of Ezekiel 37, this much is certain: the OT describes resurrection *into* the future age and fruitful marriages *during* the future age, without any hint that the former excludes one from the latter. This fact definitively shaped how Jews of the intertestamental period viewed the future age. Based on his exhaustive survey of marriage and sexuality in the Jewish pseudepigraphal literature (ca. 300 BCE to 300 CE), William Loader concludes:

*The most common and widespread Jewish expectation was that the [eschatological] future....will be a time of abundance, including abundant offspring...**the assumption is that life will resemble its current forms, including, therefore, sexual relations and procreation, often in association with [Old Testament] promises that barrenness will cease and progeny be abundant.***⁴²

⁴⁰ Shelly Matthews, "Elijah, Ezekiel, and Romulus: Luke's Flesh and Bones (Luke 24:39) in Light of Ancient Narratives of Ascent, Resurrection, and Apotheosis," www.academia.edu/28728390/Elijah_Ezekiel_and_Romulus_Luke_s_Flesh_and_Bones_Luke_24_39_in_Light_of_Ancient_Narratives_of_Ascent_Resurrection_and_Apotheosis.

⁴¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 368 (fn 42). Brackets mine. One such example in Talmudic tradition is found in b. Sanh. 92b.

⁴² William Loader. 2014. Sexuality and Eschatology: In Search of a Celibate Utopia in Pseudepigraphic Literature. *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 24.1: 45, 53.

The idea of an eternally celibate state was indeed virtually unknown to Jews at the time of Christ.⁴³ This is why the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection, still assumed marriage for the resurrected in their challenge. And while the scribes sought to “catch [Jesus] in what he said” (Lk. 20:19-20), they didn’t question his reply, despite being fully aware of the many OT promises that marriage would persist into the future age.

Moreover, to suppose that Jesus announced eternal celibacy for the resurrected is to say that he first appealed to the OT scriptures, and then proceeded to introduce a new doctrine that was totally foreign (and arguably contradictory) to those scriptures – yet his enemies accepted it without a trace of protest.⁴⁴ Such a scenario defies credibility.

The fact that the scripturally astute scribes were forced to admit Jesus had “spoken well” (Lk. 20:39) reveals that they believed his answer was *supported* by the Old Testament Scriptures. This in turn makes it highly unlikely that Jesus was announcing the cessation of human marriage.

⁴³ Loader finds only two pseudepigraphal texts suggesting an eternally celibate future, the *Sibylline Oracles 1-2* and the *Apocalypse of Moses*. Significantly, he notes that both of these works also espouse negative views of sex within marriage in the present life, which runs counter to Biblical Judaism (Loader, *Sexuality and Eschatology*, 50). Loader thus considers “the belief that eternal life makes procreation and so marriage and sexual relations redundant” to be the *least* likely Jewish background for the scene with the Sadducees (Loader, *Sexuality and Eschatology*, 64).

⁴⁴ Faced with the complete absence of OT support for the eternal celibacy view, commentators often attempt to locate the background for Jesus’ reply in a handful of extra-Biblical Jewish traditions. Three in particular are commonly cited: b. Berakhot 17a, 1 Enoch 15:6-7, and 2 Baruch 51:10. Berakhot 17a, found in the Babylonian Talmud, creatively interprets Exod. 24:11: “In the future world there is no eating nor drinking nor propagation nor business nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the divine presence, as it [Exodus 24:11] says, ‘And they beheld God, and did eat and drink.’” This interpretation of Ex. 24:11 imposes a preconceived view of the future onto a verse that has actually nothing to do with marriage or procreation in the future age. The idea that Jesus was alluding to this obtuse reading of Ex. 24:11 from Jewish tradition is a highly implausible attempt to justify the presumption that he was announcing the future cessation of marriage.

In 1 Enoch 15:6b-7 (ca. 200 BCE -100 CE), Enoch rebukes the angelic Watchers who fell from heaven to beget children: “...But you were formerly spiritual, living the eternal life, and immortal for all generations of the world. And therefore I have not appointed wives for you; for as for the spiritual ones of the heaven, in heaven is their dwelling.” However, this passage is addressing the angels and so says nothing about the key issue, which is the marital status of resurrected humans. Commentators who cite it typically neglect 1 Enoch 10:17, which says that in the future age righteous humans *will* marry: “And then shall all the righteous escape, and shall live till they beget thousands of children, and all the days of their youth and their old age shall they complete in peace.”

2 Baruch 51:10 (ca. 100-200 CE) states: “For in the heights of that world shall they dwell, and they shall be made like unto the angels, and be made equal to the stars, and they shall be changed into every form they desire, from beauty into loveliness, and from light into the splendor of glory.” But like 1 Enoch 15:6-7, the marital status of resurrected humanity is not mentioned here. Any such assumption is simply read into the text. And like 1 Enoch 10:17, 2 Baruch 70:7 explicitly affirms Isaiah’s prophecy of marriage and childbearing in the future age: “And women shall no longer then have pain when they bear, nor shall they suffer torment when they yield the fruit of the womb.”

2. Jesus was contrasting righteous sons and wicked sons living in the present age.

The phrase "the sons of this age" (*hoi huioi tou aionos toutou*) is an unusual expression that appears only twice in the Bible. Significantly, both instances are found in Luke's gospel. The first usage appears in the parable of the shrewd manager (Lk. 16:1-8), where Jesus specifically identifies the manager as "unrighteous" and puts him in the category of "the sons of this age" (16:8).⁴⁵

These sons are connected with a generation previously characterized as "faithless" (9:41) and "evil" (11:29), thereby reinforcing their morally bankrupt character.⁴⁶ Jesus then contrasts them with the righteous "sons of light" who coexist alongside them.⁴⁷ Thus, the first time we encounter the phrase "the sons of this age" in Luke's gospel, it is applied to the wicked in the context of a moral contrast set in the present age.

The distinctly Hebraic nature of this phrase further confirms its negative connotation. As I. Howard Marshall notes, "[using] *hoi huioi* (the sons) with a genitive is a common Semitic phrase to denote people belonging to a particular class."⁴⁸ E. W. Bullinger concurs that "[t]he word 'son,' when qualified by another noun, denotes the *nature* and *character* of the person or persons so named."⁴⁹

Consequently, "the sons of disobedience" in Eph. 2:2 are the wicked, while "the sons of light" in Lk. 16:8 are the righteous. The expression "the sons of this age" similarly implies that these "sons" embody the character of "this age." What then is the character of the present age in Jewish thought?

⁴⁵ There has been much scholarly debate surrounding the fact that the wicked steward is commended for his shrewdness. Some scholars have tried to paint the steward as a good man. Yet the fact remains that Jesus explicitly labeled the steward as morally wicked (*adikias*). The Greek word *adikia* is elsewhere rendered *unrighteousness*, *injustice*, *iniquity*, *evildoers*, and *wickedness* in the NASB. The only other time it appears in Luke we find it on the lips of Jesus: "Depart from me, all you workers of *adikia*!" (Lk. 13:27).

⁴⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 720. Luke Timothy Johnson notes that "Luke uses [the term 'generation'] increasingly of those opposed to the prophet's message (Luke 9:41; 11:29, 30, 31, 32, 50, 51; 16:8; 17:25; Acts 2:40)." Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Sacra Pagina. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 123.

⁴⁷ Crispin Fletcher-Louis identifies these two groups as "the righteous and unrighteous" who "coexist" in the present age. (Crispin Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts: Angels, Christology and Soteriology* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 82.)

⁴⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 620.

⁴⁹ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1898), 503. Brackets and parentheses mine.

It turns out that Jews living in the Second Temple period widely considered the present age to be an *evil* age.⁵⁰ For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls *Damascus Document* and *War Scroll* both frequently refer to the present “age of wickedness” in which “the sons of darkness” and “the sons of light” coexisted.

This pattern continues into the New Testament, where Jesus identified the “end of the age” as a time when “the sons of the evil one” are judged after “the sons of the kingdom” are delivered (Matt. 13:37-43). The apostle Paul likewise portrayed this period as “the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) to which believers should not be conformed (Rom. 12:2).⁵¹

Paul also associated “the age (*aion*) of this world”⁵² with “the sons of disobedience” in Eph. 2:2, prompting S. M. Baugh to point out that “the ‘age of this world’ clearly has a negative reference, as it is not only a time reference but refers to the fallen world system...the sons of this age (Lk. 16:8; cf. Lk. 20:34)...are accordingly called here the sons of disobedience.”⁵³

The seemingly innocuous term “this age” was in fact loaded with negative connotation in first century Jewish thought. This further indicates that the phrase “the sons of this age” is not neutral but instead denotes the *wicked*. With this in mind, we now turn to Luke’s final use of the phrase in Luke 20:34.

Just as he did in Lk. 16:8, Jesus contrasts “the sons of this age” with a righteous group of sons using the present tense. The “sons of this age” *are marrying* (*gamousin*), while the “sons of God” *are not marrying* (*oute gamousin*). The ones who are not marrying are not said to be living in the future age; they are only considered worthy to *attain* to the future age.

As New Testament scholar Crispin Fletcher-Louis and others have noted, the present tense verbs indicate that both groups of sons are living in the present age, with the sons worthy of resurrection being identified by their marital restraint. Fletcher-Louis sums it up well: “[the

⁵⁰ See Richard Bauckham, “The Delay of the Parousia,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980), 8. The Second Temple period refers to the period spanning from the building of the second Jerusalem temple in 515 BCE to its destruction in 70 CE.

⁵¹ The term “this age” is used in a neutral sense on rare occasion, e.g. Matt. 12:32. But it predominantly carries a negative connotation that is usually explicit and also occasionally implicit (e.g. the foolish “wisdom of ‘this age’” and the doomed “rulers of ‘this age’” in 1 Cor. 2:6).

⁵² Most translations render Eph 2:2 “the *course* of this world.” However, the YLT correctly gives the literal rendering: “the *age* (aionos) of this world.” The NET perhaps best conveys the negative meaning by rendering it “this world’s present path.”

⁵³ Steven M. Baugh, *Ephesians* (Evangelical Exegetical Commentary. Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016), 149.

activities in] the present tense in [Luke] 20:35b-6 should be attributed to the present life.”⁵⁴ But this was no call to a life of celibacy. As we have seen, “the sons of this age” identifies the group of sons who marry as *wicked* sons, signaling that a particular sort of marriage is in view – Jesus was by implication referring to *forbidden* marriages.⁵⁵

3. Jesus later applied the phrase “marrying and giving in marriage” to *illicit* marriages.

The expression “marrying and giving in marriage” (*gamousin kai ekgamiskontai*) is another rare phrase found in only two New Testament scenes. Jesus used it in his reply to the Sadducees, and then again in the Olivet Discourse just a few hours later.⁵⁶ In the latter case, he was describing the marrying and giving in marriage that would occur before his return:

Matthew 24:37-39 – For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were **eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage**, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

This passage is commonly thought to contain a list of morally neutral activities. But Darrell Bock rightly challenges the common view: “[t]he verbs may seem neutral, but anyone familiar with the flood story would know that they connote moral corruption.”⁵⁷ Indeed, upon closer inspection we will find that Jesus is actually warning his disciples not to participate in each pair of activities. We will consider each of these pairs in turn.

⁵⁴ Crispin Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts: Angels, Christology and Soteriology*, 82. See also David Aune, “Luke 20:34-36: A ‘Gnosticised’ Logion of Jesus?” *Geschichte-Tradition-Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. H. Cancik, H. Lichtenberger and P. Schafer. 3 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 121. Such scholars generally take the unconventional view that Luke 20:34-36 is a call to celibacy in the present age. In making this argument, however, they do not take into account the negative connotation of “the sons of this age” or the other indications discussed in this paper that Jesus had illicit marriages in view.

⁵⁵ Jesus had previously denounced forbidden marriages in Luke 16:18: “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who *marries* a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

⁵⁶ Matthew and Mark place it in the Olivet Discourse. In Luke, Jesus uses a similar phrase to describe the same eschatological scenario, but delivers it prior to entering Jerusalem (Lk. 17:27). There is no scholarly consensus on why Luke places this scene prior to the Olivet Discourse in Jerusalem. Bock suggests that Luke had an additional source (besides Mark and Matthew) which had an eschatological discourse occurring outside of Jerusalem. In Bock’s theory, Luke decided to use this source and omit the duplicate material found in the Olivet Discourse. (Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1422-1423.)

⁵⁷ Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1432.

Eating and Drinking

Rarely is it noticed that Jesus explains the nature of this “eating and drinking” later in the Olivet Discourse. He warns the disciples that they must stay awake to be ready for his coming, because the “*wicked servant*” who “eats and drinks *with drunkards*” will be surprised by his return and judged a hypocrite (vss. 48-50). A particular form of eating and drinking is clearly in view. This is shown in the table below:

Olivet Discourse: The Warning	Olivet Discourse: Explanation of the Warning
For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking , marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away , so will be the coming of the Son of Man... Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Matt. 24:38-39, 42)	But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces... (Matt. 24:48-51) But watch yourself lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness....and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap....But stay awake at all times... (Lk. 21:34,36)

The charge to “stay awake” is an eschatological metaphor with both spiritual and physical connotations. The disciples were to be *spiritually* sober, which involved *physically* refraining from the kind of eating and drinking that leads to debauchery and would render them unprepared for his return.

Such “eating and drinking” is strongly condemned in the Old Testament. It included eating and drinking in the context of idolatrous rituals (e.g. Ex. 32:5-6, Hos. 2:11-13) or the overindulgence of food and alcohol (e.g. Deut. 21:20, Ecc. 10:16-17) that is often associated with other sins like violence and the neglect of the poor. One key example of this latter category occurs in Isaiah 5, a passage Jesus alluded to when denouncing the corrupt priests:⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See Lk. 20:9-16.

Isaiah 5:11-12 – Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them! They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or see the work of his hands.

The *Assumption of Moses*, a Jewish work dated by R. H. Charles and others to around the first century CE, reveals the similar expectation of immoral eating and drinking in an eschatological context:

And, in the time of these, destructive and impious men shall rule...[they will be] filled with lawlessness and iniquity from sunrise to sunset: saying: 'We shall have feastings and luxury, eating and drinking, and we shall esteem ourselves as princes.' And there shall come upon them a second visitation and wrath, such as has not befallen them from the beginning until that time...⁵⁹

These texts illustrate the sort of “eating and drinking” Jesus has in view. He identifies it as the behavior of the wicked at the time of the flood and later associates it with drunkenness, confirming it to be immoral in nature. This in turn implies that the next pair of verbs he mentions will also denote immoral behavior.

Marrying and Giving in Marriage

Interpreters often neglect the fact that Jesus sets this “marrying and giving in marriage” in a very specific context: the days of Noah before the flood. It is clearly an allusion to Genesis 6, which mentions the marriages that took place precisely because they were forbidden:

Genesis 6:2-3 Brenton (LXX) – And it came to pass when men began to be numerous upon the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God having seen the daughters of men that they were beautiful, took to themselves wives of all whom they chose. And the Lord God said, “My Spirit shall certainly not remain among these men forever...”

⁵⁹ R. H. Charles, “The Assumption of Moses” (vol. 1 of *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*; Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, 2004), 419-420.

The cause-and-effect connection between illicit marriage and the flood judgment was firmly embedded in Israel's national consciousness. Ellen Robbins observes that sexual immorality as the primary cause of the flood "remains the dominant motif in later [Jewish] interpretation."⁶⁰ One example is the tradition found in the book of *Jubilees* (ca. 150 BCE), where Noah warns his sons to refrain from the sort of marriages that instigated the flood judgment:

Noah....exhorted his sons to....guard their souls from fornication and uncleanness and all iniquity. For owing to these three things came the flood upon the earth, namely, owing to the fornication wherein the Watchers against the law of their ordinances went a whoring after the daughters of men, and took themselves wives of all which they chose: and they made the beginning of uncleanness.⁶¹

Both the Old Testament and most other Second Temple Jewish texts regard illicit marriages as the primary cause of the flood. Jesus' disciples therefore would have instantly recognized his reference to "marrying and giving in marriage" in the days of Noah as a warning against becoming entangled in sexual immorality.

Sinful Behavior at the End of the Age

Luke Timothy Johnson observes that "[f]or ancient moral logic generally, incontinence with respect to food is integrally linked to incontinence with respect to sex."⁶² The linkage between these two negative pairs of activities appears in several NT passages that specifically allude to the Olivet Discourse.

Peter compared his generation with the "days of Noah" (1 Pe. 3:20-21) and cautioned believers to avoid "doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in *sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties* and lawless idolatry" (4:3). And Paul told the Roman church that "the

⁶⁰ Ellen Robbins, "The Pleiades, Flood, and Jewish New Year," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*. Ed. R. Chazan, W. Hallo, and L. Schiffman, (Winona Lake 1999), 341. The question of whether the "sons of God" are human or angelic has long been debated among interpreters. However, the salient point is the universally recognized *immoral* nature of these antediluvian marriages.

⁶¹ R. H. Charles, "The Book of Jubilees," (*The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 24. Other examples include Judith 16:7, Tobit 4:12, 3 Maccabees 2:4, 1 Baruch 3:26, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs 5:5-6, 1 Enoch 6-16, and DSS CD Geniza A Col. 2 lines 14-21.

⁶² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews*, (The New Testament Library. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 325. Peter O'Brien similarly observes that in Paul's works, "drunkenness is depicted...as epitomizing the ways of darkness (1 Thess. 5:6-8; Rom. 13:12, 13). It leads to dissipation, that is, to sexual excess and debauchery, for those who are drunk give way to dissolute and reckless deeds." (O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 339-40.)

hour has come for you to wake from sleep" (Rom. 13:11), meaning that they should "walk properly as in the daytime, not in *orgies and drunkenness*, not in *sexual immorality and sensuality*" (13:12-13).

Moreover, the activities Jesus mentioned in the Olivet Discourse are a list of sinful behaviors that would be prevalent right before his return. This means that just a few short hours after he first used the phrase "marrying and giving in marriage" in his confrontation with the Sadducees, Jesus used the same phrase a second and final time to describe the *sexual immorality* that would occur at the end of the age.⁶³

Part III: The Proposed Interpretation

Now that we have examined several reasons to reconsider the meaning of Jesus' reply to the Sadducees, we will propose an alternative reading that is firmly rooted in the Hebrew scriptures to which he appealed. The versions of this scene recorded in Matthew and Mark are quite similar in detail and wording. Luke's account, however, is significantly different and includes information not found in the other two.

We will focus our attention primarily upon Luke's version in order to determine the meaning of this additional information. Our goal will be to show that he presents a fuller explanation of Jesus' reply, and in so doing, follows more closely a particular Old Testament text standing in the background. To accomplish this task, we must consider two underappreciated elements of the scene: the marital sins of Jesus' audience and the broader Biblical context of his reply.

⁶³ No less immoral is the list of activities in Lk. 17:28-29, where the people of Sodom were "eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building" just before the city's demise. Contextually this passage focuses upon the judgment of Jerusalem (cp. Matt. 24:15-21), whose sins are often compared to those of Sodom in the OT (e.g. Is. 1:9-10,3:9; Jer. 23:14; Lam. 4:6; Eze. 16:48-49). Bock cites Isaiah 1:10 as its background, where the prophet calls Israel's nobility "you rulers of Sodom" (Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, p. 1433). These wicked leaders "proclaim their sin like Sodom" (Is. 3:9) by openly committing a series of transgressions with their unjustly gained wealth: they greedily purchased numerous fields, planted vineyards, acquired large houses, and participated in drunken feasting (Is. 5:8-12). In other words, they were "eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building." Thus, the activities in Lk. 17:26-37 correspond to the Sodom-like sins of Jerusalem's leadership as outlined by Isaiah. This background strongly supports the conclusion of scholars like Bock, who recognizes that the verbs in Lk. 17:26-27 are being used in the *negative* sense, implicitly referring to the *excess and abuse* of the activities listed (Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, p. 1433).

Considering the Audience: The Marital Sins of the Sadducees

The Sadducees' levirate marriage scenario is populated by seven righteous brothers "among us" (Matt. 22:25). While this scenario may simply refer to the general Israelite populace, levirate marriage was rare in first century Judaism and found primarily among the aristocracy, which largely consisted of the wealthy Sadducean priests.⁶⁴

It may be, then, that the Sadducees were casting *themselves* in the role of these seven righteous brothers. But would their self-characterization of faithful obedience to God's marital laws be in keeping with their actual marital practices? Let us consider the evidence.

They set the stage for their riddle by pointing out that a man must "raise up seed" (YLT) for his deceased brother by taking his brother's wife. This phrase specifically alludes to the levirate marriage mentioned in Gen. 38:8, where Judah instructs his son Onan to "raise up seed" for Onan's deceased brother.⁶⁵

The irony in alluding to this scene is that Judah sired Onan through a *forbidden* marriage with a Canaanite woman (cp. Gen. 24:2-4). So began a pattern that would plague Israel throughout her history, despite God's stern warning in the law:

Deut. 7:1,3-4a – *When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you....**You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons,** for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods...*

The prophets rebuked Israel time and again for participating in such forbidden marriages. It reaches a climax in the book of Malachi, which concludes the Old Testament with an echo of Judah's forbidden marriage to a pagan Canaanite, but this time it is Judah the *nation*, and specifically the *priests*, who contract forbidden marriages with pagan women (Mal. 2:11).

The intertestamental period leading up to the time of Christ was no different. Martha Himmelfarb writes that "priestly families made up a large part of the Jerusalem aristocracy...and

⁶⁴ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus. An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 93.

⁶⁵ Scholars widely recognize this allusion. See e.g. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 739; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 719.

thus they were more likely than common people to intermarry as a means of cementing cordial relations with neighbors who were political allies or trading partners.”⁶⁶ She continues:

Charges of fornication and improper marriages continue to figure prominently in condemnations of the people in the later Second Temple period as in the Damascus Covenant (col. 4, lines 12-19) and the Psalms of Solomon (2:11-13[13-15];8:9-13[9-14]). Such charges are also directed specifically against the priests.⁶⁷

Illegitimate marriages among Israel’s leaders continued unabated into the time of Christ, when Herod the Great – an Edomite who professed Judaism – married no less than ten wives.⁶⁸ Two of these wives are woven into the genealogical history of the Sadducean priests.

At the beginning of his reign, Herod banished his first wife Doris from Jerusalem in order to wed the descendant of a long line of Sadducean priest-kings named Mariamne.⁶⁹ He later executed Mariamne for suspected treason and eventually sought to renew his alliance with the Jews through yet another marriage.

The Sadducean priest Simon Boethus was more than willing to oblige. In exchange for an appointment as High Priest, Boethus gave his daughter Mariamne II in marriage to the Edomite king⁷⁰ who had illegitimately separated from his first wife and executed his second.⁷¹

Following Herod’s line into the next generation, we encounter the most prominent forbidden marriage among Israel’s leaders at the time of Christ – that of Herod Antipas and Herodias. Herodias was the granddaughter of Mariamne I and thus also a descendant of multiple Sadducean priest-kings.

She was originally married to Herod Philip, but when Philip’s half-brother Herod Antipas fell in love with her, she and Antipas deserted their spouses to marry each other. John the Baptist

⁶⁶ Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish & Christian Apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21.

⁶⁷ Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 21.

⁶⁸ Josephus, *A.J.* 17.1.3.

⁶⁹ Mariamne descended from the Hasmonean high priest John Hyrcanus, whom Josephus identified as a Sadducee (*A.J.* 10.6). Many subsequent priest-kings from the Hasmonean Dynasty were also Sadducees. For a full genealogy of Mariamne’s descent, see Josephus, *B.J.* 1.

⁷⁰ Marriage to an Edomite was forbidden (1 Ki. 11:1-2). While Herod claimed to be a Jewish convert, the authenticity of his claim is debatable given his flouting of the Torah’s marriage laws and his accommodation of pagan culture.

⁷¹ Josephus, *A.J.* 15.9.3.

therefore rebuked Antipas for violating the Mosaic Law that forbade a man from marrying his brother's wife (Lev. 18:16, 20:21). It was the real-life antithesis of the Sadducees' levirate marriage scenario, for it involved a man marrying his brother's wife *illicitly*.⁷²

This historical background gives us a better picture of what is taking place when the Sadducees challenge Jesus: they are seeking to trap him with a question about lawful marriage, when they themselves have a long history of *unlawful* marriages.

Considering the Context: The Three Temple Disputations

The Sadducees' levirate marriage scenario is the last in a series of three hostile questions put to Jesus by his adversaries shortly before his crucifixion.⁷³ These debates – which all occur within the temple courts on the same day – are presented as a single unit that begins with the initial approach of the chief priests and scribes (Lk. 20:1) and ends with Luke's observation that they no longer dared to ask Jesus any question (Lk. 20:40).⁷⁴

The obvious goal of each confrontation is to publicly discredit Jesus or trick him into saying something that can be used against him. But Jesus has his own goal to accomplish in the temple: to be "rejected by the elders and chief priests" (Lk. 9:22, 17:25). This suggests that his replies will be calibrated to confront Jerusalem's leadership, in keeping with his scathing criticism of the temple operations the day before (Lk. 19:45-46).

Jesus' opening move reveals much about the direction he will take in these controversies. He brings John the Baptist (Lk. 20:2) into the discussion, underscoring the close connection between their respective ministries. We are reminded of Lk. 7:31-35, where Jesus rebuked his

⁷² Early Jewish tradition indicates that the family line of Sadducean high priest Joseph Caiaphas was involved in questionable levirate marriage practices. The Tosefta (~200 CE) describes a situation in which a man takes two wives, the second of whom is related to his brother (e.g. his brother's daughter), and later dies without children. At issue is whether or not the surviving brother was then allowed to marry the "co-wife" (the second of the two wives, e.g., his own daughter) via the levirate marriage law. Evidently Shammai permitted such a marriage among priestly families, while Hillel did not. It seems this sort of marriage happened in the line of Caiaphas: *"...I testify concerning the family of the house of Alubai from Bet Tzevaim and concerning the family of the house of Qayaphai [i.e. Caiaphas] from Bet Meqodech, that they are the sons of co-wives, yet among them were high priests who used to present offerings on the altar."* (t. Yev. 1:10) See Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 93-94, 218.

⁷³ A fourth question is mentioned in Mark and Matthew, but is clearly distinct from the previous three in that it is a sincere inquiry by a sympathetic scribe who observed Jesus' wise replies to his antagonists (Mk. 12:28-34). See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 370.

⁷⁴ Robert Stein notes a similar construct in Mk. 11:28-33. Robert L. Stein, *Mark* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 523. See also Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 710-711.

generation for rejecting both himself *and* John. But our attention is also drawn to the primary OT background that accompanies the figure of John the Baptist – the book of Malachi.

Luke draws numerous connections between John the Baptist and the prophecies of Malachi throughout his gospel.⁷⁵ And yet, little attention has been paid to this OT background in terms of the role it might play in the temple disputes. But when we consider each of the three related confrontations in more detail, we will find that the book of Malachi plays a significant role indeed.

Dispute #1: They Question the Source of His Authority

The chief priests were no doubt surprised when Jesus did not defend his own heavenly commissioning but instead asked what they thought of John the Baptist. This pressed them into a tight spot: if they denied John's divine appointment, they risked angering the masses who considered John a genuine prophet; if they affirmed it, they risked being rebuked for failing to believe John.

His brilliant counter-question highlighted their rejection of John in his role as the Mal. 3:1 forerunner of the Messiah.⁷⁶ In reminding them of John's ministry while standing in the temple, Jesus also evoked the Mal. 3:1 warning that "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" to "purify the sons of Levi" (i.e. the priesthood).⁷⁷ At that moment, Jesus quite literally stood face to face with the corrupt "sons of Levi."

Dispute #2: They Ask if Paying Taxes to Caesar Would Violate Mosaic Law (Lk. 20:21-22)

In their second attempt to ensnare Jesus, the spies of the chief priests presented a financial scenario designed to trap Jesus however he replied.⁷⁸ If he said that paying the tribute tax

⁷⁵ E.g. Lk. 1:17, cp. Mal. 4:5-6; Lk. 3:17, cp. Mal. 3:19; Lk. 7:27, cp. Mal. 3:1a.

⁷⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, (Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 29-30.

⁷⁷ Many scholars consider Jesus' cleansing of the temple an evocation of Mal. 3:1 (e.g. Craig Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: Cleansing or Portent of Destruction?" *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* vol. 51 no. 2 (1989): 252. See also Evans' list of scholars who concur in note 53). The temple cleansing is also thought by many to be the impetus for this dispute about authority. We suggest that the temple cleansing and subsequent temple controversies together evoke Mal. 3:1.

⁷⁸ Luke makes it clear that the chief priests and scribes were ultimately behind this challenge (20:19-20). Mark likewise emphasizes this in 12:13 (cp. 11:27).

would violate Mosaic law, he would be committing sedition against Rome; if he said that it was compatible with Mosaic law, he would anger the Jews who resented Rome's tyranny.

The answer Jesus gave is both surprising and ingenious. Proclaiming them hypocrites, he bade them to identify the image and inscription found on a denarius. They replied that it was Caesar's, and he instructed them to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Lk. 20:25).⁷⁹

In considering his reply, we must account for the fact that the challenge 1) regards Mosaic Law, and 2) was issued by a group of hypocritical priests whom Jesus had come to Jerusalem to indict. These things indicate that Jesus' answer was designed to expose their mistreatment of God's financial laws as outlined in the Torah.⁸⁰

The chief priests certainly rendered unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's. As members of the Sanhedrin, they were responsible for collecting the very tribute tax at issue.⁸¹ They administered this task faithfully, for they knew it was only at Rome's good pleasure that they maintained power over the people.

But did they "render unto God the things that are God's"? According to Jewish historian Josephus, the ruling first century priests instead took by force the portion of the tithes designated by law for the lower-tier priests and Levites.⁸² Rabbinic tradition (70-200 CE) also reports that the Sadducean high priestly family of Annas refused to tithe their produce as obligated by Jewish law.⁸³

⁷⁹ Green notes that the verb *apodote*, translated *render*, is "better understood as 'to give back,' to 'return,' or even 'to pay what one owes.'" See *The Gospel of Luke*, 716. He cites these usages of the verb elsewhere in Luke: 4:20, 7:42, 10:35.

⁸⁰ Many commentators suggest Jesus was drawing a parallel that revolves around the image on the coin: just as a coin bearing Caesar's image should be rendered to Caesar, so also man, who bears God's image (Gen. 1:27), should dedicate his whole self to God. However, the idea that Jesus offered such a benign and generalized reply in this final showdown with his enemies is highly implausible. A more specific parallel directed at his audience seems the better option: as members of Israel and God's holy representatives, the priests were considered "sons" of God (cp. Mal. 1:6) who therefore reflected his image in a unique way. Given that he is seeking to indict the temple leadership on this day, it seems clear that his reply is aimed specifically at his opponents and is therefore related to their priestly duties. Further, Jesus' use of the coin strongly suggests that the reply is financial in nature.

⁸¹ E. P. Sanders writes that "the Roman prefect or procurator had to maintain domestic tranquility and collect tribute. Both tasks he turned over to Jewish aristocrats, especially the priestly aristocrats, headed by the high priest." (E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 268. See also Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 712.

⁸² Josephus, *A.J.* 20.8.8. On this requirement in the law, see e.g., Num. 18:30, 2 Chr. 31:4.

⁸³ Craig Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple and Evidence of Corruption," *Academia.edu*, academia.edu /11940525/Jesus_Action_in_the_Temple_and_Evidence_of_Corruption_English_, 327, 332. On this requirement in the law, see e.g. Deut. 14:22-23, 18:4.

Furthermore, the family of Annas profited handsomely from the moneychangers that Jesus drove out of the temple for making God's house a "den of robbers" (Lk. 19:45). It is therefore unsurprising that later Jewish tradition remembered the first century priesthood as those who "robbed the sacrifices of the Lord."⁸⁴

A similar situation is recorded in Malachi 3:8. Here the prophet charges the entire nation of Judah – and particularly the ruling priests – with "robbing God" of his "tithes and contributions" required by law to support the lower-tier priests and Levites.⁸⁵ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown comment on the striking parallel between the actions of the ruling priests in these two eras:

The priests [of Malachi's day]...appropriated all the tithes, robbing the Levites of their due nine-tenths; as [the first century priests] did also, according to Josephus, before the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. [They were]...robbing God of the services of the Levites, who were driven away by destitution...⁸⁶

Malachi 3:3-5 prophesied that a corrupt priesthood, with sins that specifically included financial abuse, would continue to be a problem until the arrival of the Messiah. It is in this context that Jesus instructed his hypocritical antagonists to "render unto God the things that are God's."

Joel Green aptly notes that "Jesus in essence charges [his questioners], together with the Sanhedrin, with being about the business of Rome rather than the business of God."⁸⁷ Moreover, Jesus turned this would-be trap into an opportunity to rebuke the priests for robbing God of the tithes and offerings, just as their forebears had done in Malachi's day.

Dispute #3: They Imply that the Resurrection Would Violate Mosaic Law (Lk. 20:27-33)

As in the previous challenge, the Sadducees' levirate marriage scenario is ostensibly motivated by concern for Mosaic Law. But the question is disingenuous on two counts: they *denied* the resurrection and were historically *unfaithful* to God's marriage laws.

⁸⁴ Evans, "Jesus' Action in the Temple and Evidence of Corruption," 327.

⁸⁵ Peter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 305. See also the parallel account in Neh. 13:10-13.

⁸⁶ A.R. Fausset, David Brown, and Robert Jamieson, *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), under Malachi 3:8. See also Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 304.

⁸⁷ *The Gospel of Luke*, 715.

In this regard they mirrored the priests of Malachi's day, who also taught false doctrine (Mal. 2:8) and led the nation into forbidden marriages (Mal. 2:11, cp. Neh. 13:25-29). This is significant because Malachi 3 anticipates such sexual immorality among the priests at the time of the Messiah. The close parallel between Jesus' reply and the situation described in Malachi 1-3 is shown in the table below:

Luke 20:34-36	Malachi 1-3
<p>And Jesus said to [the Sadducean priests], "The sons of this age</p>	<p>A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name... (Mal. 1:6)</p>
<p>marry and are given in marriage,</p>	<p>For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god.⁸⁸ (Mal. 2:11)</p>
<p>but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection of the dead</p>	<p>The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. (Mal. 3:16)</p>

⁸⁸ Peter Verhoeff and others note that the expression "Judah has married the daughter of a foreign god" refers to the intermarriages with pagan women that took place among the priests and the people. (Verhoeff, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 275) Beth Glazier-McDonald explains why this would have prompted Malachi's diatribe against divorce (brackets mine): "Desirous of upgrading their economic and social status, many [Jewish] men chose to marry women from wealthy foreign families. However, the relatives of these woman demanded, as a condition of the proposed marriage, that the men first divorce their Jewish wives so that the new spouse would not be neglected." (Beth Glazier-McDonald. 1987. Intermarriage, Divorce, and the Bat-'el Nekar: Insights into Mal 2:10-16. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106, no. 4: 605.) Some scholars argue that this unusual expression is purely figurative marital imagery describing Judah's violation of her covenant with God and therefore says nothing about illicit marriages. But Glazier-McDonald notes that that attestation of intermarriage in Nehemiah and Ezra makes it unrealistic to suppose this problem did not exist in Malachi's time. She further points out that "any Israelite who intermarried violated the covenant obligations and severed his ties not only with his God but with his fellows as well" (p. 607). She therefore rightly discerns both a figurative and literal element to this expression. The nation had figuratively married a foreign god – i.e. she had violated her marriage covenant with Yahweh - by engaging in syncretistic pagan practices likely precipitated by intermarriages with pagan women.

Neither marry nor are given in marriage

...guard yourselves in your spirit, and **let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth [by divorcing your wives to marry foreign women]**. (Mal. 2:15b)

for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels

My covenant with Levi [i.e. the priesthood] was one of life and peace...the lips of **a priest** should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he **is the messenger (Heb=malak, lit. "angel") of the LORD of hosts**. (Mal. 2:5a,7)

and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection."

They [who fear God] shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts...and **I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him**. Then...you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked... (Mal. 3:17-18)

Malachi identified two groups of sons co-existing in the nation of Judah, one legitimate and the other not. The false sons – specifically identified as the priests – were those engaging in a litany of sins that prominently included forbidden marriages. The true sons were those living holy lives in faithfulness to God. Only the latter group was considered worthy of salvation on the day of judgment.⁸⁹

Jesus wove this theme of two morally contrasting groups of sons into his reply to the priests of his own day. He constructed his answer entirely in the present tense: the "sons of this age" (i.e. the wicked sons) are those participating in marriages that are by implication forbidden. The "sons of God" (i.e. the righteous sons) are those who don't contract such marriages. Only the latter group is considered worthy of the resurrection.

⁸⁹ The day of judgement described in Malachi 3:5, 3:17, and 4:1 – later referred to in the gospel of John as the "last day" – was understood to entail resurrection. See Jn. 6:40, 11:24.

Interpreters often fail to notice that the status of being “equal to angels” is also in the present tense. New Testament scholar David Aune confirms that “there is no manuscript or lectionary evidence known to me that replaces the present tense verb found in Luke 20:36 and its Synoptic parallels...‘they *are* like angels’ with the future verb...‘they *shall be* like angels.’”⁹⁰

The idea of men being like the angels was a familiar concept to the priests whom Jesus addressed. In the Hebrew OT, the phrase “angel of the LORD” (*ma’lak Yehovah*) usually refers to heavenly beings, but in two key instances it refers to God’s divinely appointed *human* agents – the prophet (Hag. 1:14) and the priest (Mal. 2:7).

This title signified that these ordained human agents of God functioned in a manner similar to the holy angels. Crispin Fletcher-Lewis points out that “there are times in the liturgical drama when the priest may be said to be and to act as an angel. For example, when he brings revelation to the people from God.”⁹¹

The Dead Sea Scroll 1QSb 4:24-26 anticipates this duty continuing into the future age. The author of the scroll blesses the High Priest by saying, “May you abide forever as an Angel of the Presence in the holy habitation, to the glory of the God of hosts. May you serve in the temple of the kingdom of God, ordering destiny with the Angels of the Presence.”⁹²

Indeed, Hebrew scholars Keil and Delitzsch confirm that in Malachi 2:7, “the standing epithet for the angels as the heavenly messengers of God is here applied to the priests.”⁹³ The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels similarly emphasizes that the “priest is God’s angel (not

⁹⁰ Aune, *Luke 20:34-36: A “Gnosticized” Logion of Jesus*, 126. Aune notes that later church fathers regularly misquoted Jesus by incorrectly making the verb future tense.

⁹¹ Crispin Fletcher-Louis, “On Angels, Men and Priests (Ben Sira, the Qumran Sabbath Songs and the Yom Kippur Avodah)” in *Gottesdienst Und Engel* (Eds. J. Frey & M. Jost; Oxford: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 24. Angel-human parallels are also found in 1 Sam. 29:9, 2 Sam. 14:20, and 2 Sam. 19:27, which compare David to the angel of the Lord with respect to wisdom and righteousness. The first century Jew Philo said that the patriarchs have “become equal to angels” after death by becoming incorporeal (*On the Birth of Abel*, ch. II, sec. 5), but his acceptance of the Platonic view of life after death is well known, and it is thus unsurprising that this comparison between men and angels finds no support in the Hebrew scriptures. His comment is indeed the exception that proves the rule: comparisons between humans and angels in Biblical Judaism were consistently comparisons of spiritual traits such as righteousness and wisdom, and not physical ones such as corporeality.

⁹² Wise, Michael, Martin Abegg Jr., and Edward Cook, eds. *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*. Rev. ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

⁹³ Franz Delitzsch and Carl F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament Vol. 6* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1857). Under Malachi 2:5-7. Brackets mine.

merely his 'messenger').⁹⁴ And The Anchor Bible commentary on Malachi concurs: "Malachi affirms the complementary role of human and angelic agents in the mediation of Yahweh's word and will."⁹⁵

Jesus himself highlighted this priest-angel comparison prior to his confrontation with the Sadducees. In Luke 7:27, he explicitly identified John the Baptist as the "angel" (the Greek word for angel, *angelos*, is used) who "will prepare the way before you." Scholars widely recognize this verse as a combined allusion to Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20.⁹⁶

In Exodus 23:20, God promised to send an angelic being to "guard you on the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared." Thus Jesus compared John the Baptist – who was both a prophet and of priestly descent⁹⁷ – with an angel, in order to convey John's function as God's holy messenger (which entailed speaking out against an illicit marriage at the cost of his life).

As God's angel-like messengers, the priests were to be models of holiness and purity. This required a personal fidelity to God's law, including his statutes regarding the institution of marriage. But like their forebears in Malachi's day, the Sadducean priests did not adhere to God's marital laws and so failed to function like the angels according to their priestly calling.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ C. Fletcher-Louis, "Priests and Priesthood," Page 699 in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Edited by Joel B. Green. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013. Brackets mine. That Malachi 2:7 was understood this way in later Judaism can also be seen in texts such as Jubilees 31:14, which refers to Israel's priests as "angels of the presence." While most Bible translations render the word for angel (*ma'lak* in Hebrew, *aggelos* in Greek) "messenger" in Mal. 2:7, this is simply the editorial choice of the translators and unfortunately obscures the implicit angel-priest comparison.

⁹⁵ Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, (The Anchor Bible, Yale University Press, 1998), 213.

⁹⁶ Joel Green observes that "by interweaving Mal 3:1...and Exod 23:20, [Jesus] clearly embraces the perspective of these divine spokespersons" (Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 298). See also the discussion in Bock, *Gospel of Luke*, 673-674.

⁹⁷ Mark Boda, citing Robert L. Webb, convincingly argues that John's baptism should be understood as "a priestly duty" which "functioned as a protest against perceived abuses by the temple establishment." Mark J. Boda, "The Gospel According to Malachi," in *The Language and Literature of the New Testament* (ed. Lois Fuller Dow, Craig A. Evans, and Andrew W. Pitts; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 367.

⁹⁸ Appendix B of this paper discusses a Jewish rabbinic interpretation of Zechariah 3 dated to the 1st – 2nd century CE, where precisely such a marital failing on the part of the priests was understood to prevent them from continuing their angel-like service in the resurrection. It is also significant that the Dead Sea Scrolls (150 BCE-70 CE) actually connect the presence of angels with fruitful childbearing in the future eschatological life. William Loader notes that scroll 4Q285 assumes "marriage, sexual relations, and procreation are a normal part of life in the future as in the present." He points out that "the rationale for guaranteeing such fruitfulness is, notably, that God and the holy angels will be with them, a reason not for abstinence, but for fertility!" Such texts show that being like the angels and experiencing marital life were perfectly compatible concepts in Jewish thought.

Jesus therefore turned their own hypocritical marriage scenario against them. Using their reference to legitimate marriage as a pivot point, he flipped the riddle on its head by describing the *forbidden* “marrying and giving in marriage” condemned in the OT scriptures (including the Mosaic Law, as in Deut. 7:3: “You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons”).

He reminded them that not all priests are true sons of God. Genuine sons – with John the Baptist implicitly a prime example⁹⁹ – are faithful to God’s statutes and so refrain from (or repent of) the forbidden marriages that had plagued the priesthood for centuries. These sons, like their faithful angelic counterparts, are no longer subject to the dominion of death.¹⁰⁰ They are instead considered worthy to attain the resurrection of the just.

Whose wife Would She Be?

What might Jesus have said about the fate of the woman in this absurdly exaggerated scenario if he had chosen to answer his opponents directly? Such a reply isn’t difficult to envision. Death, by its very nature, severs the marriage bond completely (cp. Rom. 7:2-3); this is the primary reason God instituted the levirate marriage law in the first place. Consequently, when she is resurrected the woman would no longer be bound to any of the seven brothers. At that time she would be free to choose which, if any, brother she wished to marry.

The Malachi Framework as an Interpretive Grid

The book of Malachi provides a clarifying lens through which to view the three temple controversies. It allows us to recognize Jesus’ standoff with the chief priests as a series of indictments in which the scene with the Sadducees finds its purpose: to emphasize the

⁹⁹ Citing Vernon K. Robbins, Mark Boda notes that Luke may have been intentionally contrasting the priesthood of the Sadducee Annas with John’s priestly baptismal ministry as early as Lk. 3:2, where he juxtaposed “the high priesthood of Annas’ in Luke 3:2 with the introduction of “John the son of Zacharias.” (Boda, *The Gospel According to Malachi*, 266)

¹⁰⁰ Luke 20:36 evokes the tradition found in 1 Enoch 69:11 (ca. 200-150 BCE), which interprets Gen. 1:26 as a reference to God and his heavenly court, such that “men were created exactly like the angels, to the intent that they should continue pure and righteous, and death, which destroys everything, could not have taken hold of them.” (R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch or 1 Enoch* (Oxford, 1912) 139). Being “like the angels” did not exclude Adam and Eve from marriage and procreation. Rather, it reflected God’s intention that man should possess the same righteous character as the angels and so remain deathless as they are. This originally intended state of Adam and Eve – which is like the angels yet does not exclude marriage – is what Jesus anticipates for resurrected humans in Luke 20:36.

consummate spiritual and moral failure of the priesthood, and the resulting need for a fundamental change to that priesthood.

This pointed to the imminent sacrificial act of Christ that would usher in the superior eternal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. It is thus fitting that Luke follows these three temple controversies with Jesus' citation of Psalm 110 – the very passage that identifies the Messiah as the Melchizedekian High Priest. Indeed, Jesus' death on the cross would become the means by which the corrupt "sons of Levi" could be purified and participate in the far greater "kingdom of priests" that God had in mind all along.¹⁰¹

The Parallel Passages

The parallel versions of this scene present an obvious challenge. When read apart from the considerations discussed in this paper, they appear to indicate marriage will cease for the resurrected. But several mitigating factors – including Luke's expanded account, the wider context of the temple disputations as a whole, and the likely OT background for those disputes – strongly caution us against jumping to this conclusion. Let us therefore consider Matthew and Mark's highly condensed versions of the reply Jesus gave regarding marriage:

Mark 12:25	Matthew 22:30	Luke 20:34-36
For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.	For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.	The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.

¹⁰¹ The fact that the church is considered a "kingdom of priests" entails that Christians are to avoid intermarriage with non-believers just as Israel's priests were to avoid intermarriage with pagan women. Paul exhorts Christians along these lines in 1 Cor. 6:12-7:40.

Mark and Matthew omit Luke's explicit moral contrast between righteous and wicked sons. But even if these shorter accounts are closer to Jesus' original words, his meaning would have been clear to an audience steeped in the Hebrew scriptures. Contextually, his replies to the previous two challenges already pointed in the direction of Malachi's eschatological prophecies about the corrupt priesthood.¹⁰²

His audience could hardly have missed an allusion to Malachi in this third reply that mentions being "like angels" and is directed at the priests: the very name "Malachi" (*mal'aki*) means "my angel" and Mal. 2:7 describes the priest as the "angel of the LORD." Further, forbidden marriages like those in Malachi were expected to continue to the time of the Messiah (Mal. 3:1-5). With their long history of forbidden marriages, the Sadducees fit the bill to a tee.¹⁰³

While the phrases "in the resurrection" (Matt. 22:30) and "when they rise from the dead" (Mk. 12:25) appear to set his reply in a future context, the careful reader will notice that everything – including the resurrection – is set in the *present tense*. This stands in contrast with the future tense verb used by the Sadducees ("whose wife *will* she be"), and the future tense verbs used by Jesus shortly afterward to describe eschatological events that implicitly include the resurrection (Matt. 24:30-31; Mk. 13:26-27).¹⁰⁴

The implication is that these shortened accounts, like Luke's longer one, are focused upon the present *spiritual* aspect of the resurrection that must precede the future *physical* aspect. Jesus similarly told the church in Sardis that "you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." (Rev. 3:1) and said of the prodigal son that "your brother was dead and is alive" (Lk. 15:32).

¹⁰² Matthew further strengthens the Malachi connection by including the theme of two morally contrasting sons (identified as the rebellious chief priests versus the repentant tax collectors and prostitutes), which he places at the beginning of the three temple controversies (see Matt. 21:28-32). It should also be noted that Matthew includes Jesus' negative use of the expression "marrying and giving in marriage" in Matt. 24:38. Matthew and Mark both include Jesus' Mal. 3:1/Exod. 23:20 comparison between John the Baptist and the angel of Yahweh.

¹⁰³ The parallels between the priests of Malachi's day and the Sadducees extend beyond financial oppression and illicit marriages. Commenting on Malachi 2:17, Andrew Hill writes that the skeptics in Judah, led by the priests, "questioned [God's] concern for and presence in the affairs of community life." (Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, (The Anchor Bible. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 213). Josephus similarly writes of the Sadducees that "[they] suppose that God is not concerned in our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say, that to act what is good, or what is evil, is at men's own choice, and...that they may act as they please." (Josephus, *B.J.* 2.162-166).

¹⁰⁴ The present tense can, of course, be used to describe a future event in Greek. But here the usage stands out, given the future tense verbs used of the *same* event in the surrounding context.

The “dead” in these cases were alive from a physical standpoint but considered dead from a spiritual standpoint. That is, if they continued down the path they were on, they would ultimately experience the second and permanent death described in Revelation 2:11.

Those in such a state can only “rise from the dead” by first turning from their sin in submission to the Holy Spirit – a spiritual resurrection in the present that will culminate in a physical resurrection unto eternal life in the future. The spiritual rebirth and the physical resurrection are both components of the same event. Thus Jesus can say in John 5:24-25:

*Truly, truly, I say to you, **whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.** “Truly, truly, I say to you, **an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.***

Read in this light, the phrases “in the resurrection” and “when they rise from the dead” begin a pointed rebuke of the spiritually dead Sadducees. By setting the resurrection in the present tense, Jesus effectively dispelled their assumption that he preached a strictly physical resurrection based on lineal descent from Abraham.

Instead, he preached a resurrection rooted in repentance, which therefore must begin in the present age before being completed in the future age by the resurrection of the body. For the corrupt priests, this entailed repenting of the marital sins lurking behind their righteous levirate marriage scenario.

Luke understandably clarifies this point for the gentiles among his audience by structuring the reply in terms of two morally contrasting groups of sons in the present age. This choice may well have its origin in the teaching of the apostle Paul, who was his ministry companion.

Paul merges the concept of two morally opposite groups of sons co-existing in the present age (as found in Luke’s account) with the idea that the righteous are already considered to be raised from the dead in a spiritual sense that anticipates their future bodily resurrection (as emphasized in Matthew and Mark’s accounts):¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ For more on the present age aspect of the resurrection, see also Eph. 2:1-6; Rom. 6:4-11, 7:4-5; Col. 2:13, 3:1-5.

Ephesians 5:5-8,14 ESV

5 For you may be sure of this, that **everyone who is sexually immoral** or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), **has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.**

6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things **the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.**

7 **Therefore do not become partners with them;**

8 for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. **Walk as children of light...**¹⁰⁶

14 for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, **"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,** and Christ will shine on you."

Moreover, both the parallel passages and the remainder of the New Testament support the reading of Luke 20:34-36 presented in this paper. Jesus is not contradicting the OT scriptures by announcing the future cessation of marriage; he is in fact exposing the deplorable state of the priesthood with respect to God's marriage laws, in anticipation of the new high priesthood he is about to inaugurate.

Conclusion

Despite its long-standing dominance, the "eternal celibacy" view of Jesus' reply to the Sadducees appears to be fatally flawed. One is hard-pressed to find so much as a modicum of support within the Old Testament scriptures Jesus cited or the New Testament scriptures that later followed. Indeed, having arisen from the seedbed of Platonic asceticism that infiltrated the second century church, this view makes no attempt to consider Jesus' remarks in their native Hebraic context.

The reading proposed in this paper seeks to remedy these significant shortcomings. It draws upon the background of Jesus' audience and considers the way certain key phrases and concepts are used elsewhere in scripture. It also takes into account both the immediate context of the temple disputations, and the wider context of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah's dealings with the corrupt priesthood.

¹⁰⁶ The "children of light" in Eph. 5:8 are the "sons" referred to in Eph. 1:5. Steven Baugh notes that "the 'children of light' contrasts with the actions of the 'sons of disobedience' and their 'fruitless' works." Baugh, *Ephesians*, 429.

The picture that emerges is one in which Jesus deftly turns the tables on his hypocritical opponents. The corrupt priests seek to disprove the very resurrection Jesus would experience in a few short days, using a marriage scenario that belied their own marital misdeeds. In turn, Jesus alludes to Malachi's indictment of the priests for their forbidden marriages, thereby warning the Sadducees that such marriages would in fact exclude them from the resurrection they so foolishly denied.

Appendix A

The Targum Jonathan on the Prophets (ca. late first century CE)¹⁰⁷ is an interpretive Aramaic paraphrase of the Old Testament prophetic writings. Aramaic was the language of the masses in the first century, and consequently this respected translation was read aloud in the Jewish synagogues alongside the original Hebrew.

Targum Jonathan's rendering of Zechariah 3 holds particular significance for our study. In this scene, the high priest Joshua stands before the angel of the Lord in filthy rags, while Satan accuses him of being unfit to serve in the temple.

This priestly character was understood to be the high priest Joshua ben Jozadak whose sons had married forbidden women shortly after returning from the Babylonian exile (Ezra 10:18).¹⁰⁸ He is instructed to dissolve all the illicit unions, marry a wife fit for priests, and henceforth to walk in righteousness, in order that he may be deemed fit for the resurrection and serve in God's temple among the angels. Targum scholar Marvin A. Sweeney's translation of the Targum on Zechariah 3:1-7 is worth citing in full:

(1) And he showed me Joshua, the High Priest, before the angel of YHWH, and the Sinner was standing by his right hand to accuse him. (2) And YHWH said to the Sinner, "YHWH rebukes you, O Sinner, and YHWH rebukes you, the One who chooses to cause His Shekhinah to dwell in Jerusalem! Is this not a firebrand saved from the fire place? (3) And

¹⁰⁷ See note 10 in Marvin A. Sweeney, "Targum Jonathan's Reading of Zechariah 3; A Gateway For the Palace" in *Tradition in Transition: Haggai and Zechariah 1-8 in the Trajectory of Hebrew Theology*, Eds. Mark J. Boda & Michael H. Floyd; New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 273-274. See also Paul V.M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 221.

¹⁰⁸ This scene would have taken place a few decades prior to Malachi's ministry, and was likely the origin of the pattern of illicit marriages among the second temple priests that Malachi would later condemn.

Joshua had sons who had married to themselves wives who were not fit for the priests, and he was standing before the angel. (4) **And [the angel] answered and said to those who were serving before him, saying, "Speak to him, that he may drive out the wives who are not fit for the priest from his house."** And [the angel] said to him, "Behold! For I have removed from you your sins, and I have dressed you in righteous deeds." (5) And he said, "Place a pure turban upon his head!" And they placed a pure turban upon his head, and **they caused him to marry a wife who was fit for the priests.** And the angel of YHWH was standing by. (6) And the angel of YHWH invested Joshua, saying, (7) **"Thus says YHWH Seba'ot, 'If the paths which are good before me you walk,** and if the charge of My Memra you execute, **then you shall govern those who serve in the house of My Sanctuary,** and you shall oversee my courts, **And at the resurrection of the dead, I will resurrect you, and I will grant to you feet walking between these seraphim.**"¹⁰⁹

This first century interpretive rendering of Zechariah 3 recognizes the gravity of the marital sins of the priests, warning that such marriages would prevent the priests from participating in the resurrection to serve in God's temple among the angels (described in the passage above as seraphim). On the other hand, God-sanctioned marriage is explicitly endorsed and we are given no indication that such marriages will cease at that resurrection.

This Hebraic interpretive lens brings the words of Jesus to the corrupt Sadducean priests into sharp focus. In denouncing the illicit marriages among the priests that rendered them unworthy of the resurrection, Jesus was following a well-established pattern of prophetic rebuke. His specific warning was not new territory, for it was found not only in the pages of Old Testament scripture but also in the Rabbinic Judaism of his own day.

Appendix B

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is a work typically categorized as part of the Jewish pseudepigrapha and is usually dated 200 BCE – 200 CE. This categorization is not without debate; James VanderKam points out that scholars have identified a number of passages within the work that are obviously Christian in nature.¹¹⁰ But given the relatively small number

¹⁰⁹ Sweeney, *Tradition in Transition*, 279.

¹¹⁰ James C. VanderKam, *An Introduction to Early Judaism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 100-101.

of such passages, VanderKam and others conclude it is likely a Jewish work with some Christian additions.

Its relevance to our study is found within the Testament of Levi. In chapters 14-15 of this testament, Jacob's son Levi purportedly gives a prophecy to his own sons about the eschatological fate of the priesthood. He looks ahead to the future destruction of the temple and claims that the priests will bring about this calamity due to a specific set of sins:

14:1 Therefore, my children, I have learnt that **at the end of the ages ye will transgress against the Lord, stretching out hands to wickedness [against Him];** and to all the Gentiles shall ye become a scorn. 2 **For our father Israel is pure from the transgressions of the chief priests [who shall lay their hands upon the Saviour of the world].** 3 For as the heaven is purer in the Lord's sight than the earth, so also be ye, the lights of Israel, (purer) than all the Gentiles. 4 But if ye be darkened through transgressions, what, therefore, will all the Gentiles do living in blindness? Yea, **ye shall bring a curse upon our race, because the light of the law which was given for to lighten every man this ye desire to destroy by teaching commandments contrary to the ordinances of God.** 5 **The offerings of the Lord ye shall rob, and from His portion shall ye steal choice portions,** eating (them) contemptuously with harlots. 6 And out of covetousness ye shall teach the commandments of the Lord, **wedded women shall ye pollute, and the virgins of Jerusalem shall ye defile; and with harlots and adulteresses shall ye be joined, and the daughters of the Gentiles shall ye take to wife, purifying them with an unlawful purification; and your union shall be like unto Sodom and Gomorrah....**15:1 **Therefore the temple, which the Lord shall choose, shall be laid waste through your uncleanness,** and ye shall be captives throughout all nations.

In this translation by R. H. Charles, he places in brackets what he considers to be two obvious Christian interpolations. The remaining text is presumably of older Jewish origin. However,

Marinus DeJonge is less confident about the Jewish origin of T. Levi 14-15, given that it has no detectable parallel in the Dead Sea Scrolls, while other portions of T. Levi do.¹¹¹

But whether we are looking at an older Jewish text that was slightly modified by a second century Christian, or a text that was written entirely by a second century Christian, we have before us an ancient text whose author(s) saw a relationship between the sins of the priesthood and the fall of the temple.

It is unsurprising that the two primary sins mentioned – robbing God of the tithes and contracting illicit marriages – match the sins of the priesthood described by Malachi. Later Jewish pseudepigraphal works such as the Psalms of Solomon (ca. 49-69 CE) picked up on this theme (e.g. Pss. 2:11-15 and 8:11-12), and T. Levi follows in a similar vein by connecting these sins of the priesthood with the destruction of the temple.

These works, written within a few centuries of Christ at most, identify the sins of the priests with striking specificity. Our proposal fits hand in glove with this milieu: the synoptic gospel writers similarly portrayed the series of confrontations between Jesus and the temple leadership as the occasion on which he indicted the priesthood for these very sins, in anticipation of the temple's eventual downfall.

¹¹¹ Marinus de Jonge, "Levi in *Aramaic Levi* and in the *Testament of Levi*," <http://orion.mscc.huji.ac.il/symposiums/2nd/papers/deJonge97.html>.