

Jesus's surprising embrace of family

Familialism, family, and discipleship in the Gospels

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Introduction

North American Christians seeking religious revival can find familial language in Scripture a compelling starting point. Shedding an old family and stepping into a new one is a powerful idea for those desiring radical community, and it is an idea Jesus seems to promote at length. It is concerning, however, that encouraging followers to separate from their existing families is also a tactic abusive leaders can use to isolate vulnerable people. Is this what Jesus was doing when he said, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters . . . cannot be my disciple”?¹ On their own, these words can become manipulative, and Jesus’s teachings on family have indeed been weaponized by exploitative cults.² Given the damaging potential of misinterpreting Jesus’s message, clarifying the relationship between Jesus, discipleship, and family is crucial.

In order to understand Jesus’s emphasis on discipleship as a new family, we have to consider the culture of familialism that shaped first-century Judea. Family’s place at the center of socioeconomic life in Jesus’s time and place means family imagery in his context promotes engagement in a new, public form of community, not a retreat into an isolated group. Jesus explicitly endorses connections with existing kin, except when those connections directly interfere with the demands of mission.

Family and Jesus’s context

For many North American readers, passages on family in the Gospels do not stand out as uniquely important relative to Jesus’s other teachings. After all, in much of the West family is but one institution around which life

1 Luke 14:26. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are from the NRSV.

2 See further discussion in Mark L. Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly: The Puzzling Paradoxes of a Man from Galilee* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 109–110.

is patterned, and it is rarely the primary means by which an individual defines themselves. In the world of first-century Judea, however, kinship was an essential framework for understanding reality, from the largest structures of society to the core of one's identity. Members of Jesus's audience

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and the first audiences of the Gospels lived and sometimes died for this all-encompassing familialist orientation.

Kinship systems had a more prominent role as social and economic structures in Jesus's context than they do in present-day North America. Family or household vocabulary in ancient Jewish society expanded beyond the nuclear two-generation model, referring not

only to several generations of family members but also to household slaves and personal property. Strategic marriages bound these mega-households to each other into increasingly higher levels of larger social bodies, and these familial bonds and patterns of inheritance formed the average Jew's main political and economic network. Family was a primary metaphor for understanding all alliances, including ones North Americans would not consider familial.³ Members of a neighbourhood, for example, would often associate with and treat each other as family members, sharing in life events as though one household.⁴ Even relationship with God was expressed through the medium of family, as with the promise of offspring at the centre of the Abrahamic covenant.⁵

Pervasive familialism in Jesus's cultural context puts kinship systems at the heart of both socioeconomic interaction and self-conception. Family represented most forms of interpersonal support, and interpersonal support was in turn interpreted through familial language. Mentions of kinship in the Gospels, then, must be read with the household's extensive sociopolitical significance in mind.

3 For more on the observations in this paragraph, see Bruce Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 50, 53; Lina Toth, "Back to the Roots: From the Old Testament to Jesus," in *Singleness and Marriage after Christendom: Being and Doing Family* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 26–40.

4 Malina, *Social World*, 53.

5 Romans 4:18–20.

Discipleship and the new family

Locating Jesus in a familialist context sheds new light on his teachings about discipleship as life in a new family. Instead of drawing on a private sentimentality suitable to the pop spirituality of today, comparing discipleship to family evokes a transformation of society and self. Likewise, many of Jesus's more explicit teachings about social transformation

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contain culturally relevant references to family structures. This association between discipleship and societal familialism is key for interpreting Jesus's use of family language.

Some images Jesus uses to describe discipleship are conspicuously familial. For instance, throughout the Gospels he refers to God as a Father to him and

his disciples.⁶ While there are undertones of familiarity and closeness in Jesus's use of *Father*, it should not be lost that a first-century Judean father bears socioeconomic responsibilities for his household and connected households. A patriarch and his family cannot simply withdraw from wider society into the private sphere, but they must live as an integrated social body.⁷ Likewise, when Jesus calls his disciples "mother" and "brothers," he is referring to participation in family as a highly visible institution.⁸ The privacy with which present-day Western family life is conducted can lead readers to focus on the nuclear intimacy of these images, but considering a family's political significance for Jesus's audience brings out a vision of a new social order rather than a secluded commune.

The more subtly familial themes in the rebirth imagery of John's Gospel also step into the societal sphere when read within a familialist context. Being born again can be interpreted as an individual, internal transformation, but Jesus also connects this rebirth to the kingdom of God, the new societal order in which God's will is done.⁹ He seems to anticipate the question, *What kind of family will you be born into?* and gives God's Reign and life in the Spirit in response. This is no mere personal

6 Mark 11:25; Matthew 5:44-45; 6:32; 10:20; Luke 2:49; 11:2; 12:32; John 2:16; 5:17; 16:27.

7 See Toth, "Back to the Roots."

8 Mark 3:34-35; Matthew 5:23-24; 12:48-50; Luke 8:21.

9 John 3:3-5.

growth, but it is adoption into a new cosmic household alongside fellow disciples.¹⁰ Like Jesus's use of *Father* and *mother, brothers, and sisters*, the rebirth image is distinctly familial, and when understood through Jesus's experience of the household, it does not evoke anything like a transition into isolation.

Sometimes the societal dimensions of Jesus's behaviour and teachings are evident to present-day readers, but the familial connotations are what is lost. Jesus's conversations with women traverse a cultural gender boundary integral to preserving familial honour via female purity.¹¹ When women like the Syrophenician/Canaanite and the Samaritan at the well question Jesus and Jesus responds, they transgress the cultural value of female submission thought to regulate their mobility and in turn lines of family inheritance.¹² The sexism that

Jesus antagonizes by engaging with and praising women's faith is a generally societal feature, but it is also rooted in concerns for family structures specifically.

In that same vein, many of the meek members of society whose empowerment Jesus proclaims—slaves, eunuchs, and children—are located within the family. Jesus calls disciples to emulate

the lowliest members not just of broader society but of the household specifically, once again speaking to social realities and discipleship in familial terms.¹³

Reading the Gospels with an eye to familialism blows the family images in Jesus's teachings wide open. No longer is family a symbol conveying withdrawal into intimate solitude, but it represents a visible body with tremendous influence on society. It becomes clear that the present-day Western association between family and privacy is what makes Jesus's teachings about new family potential weapons for seducing cult followers into isolation. By discussing discipleship as life in a new family, Jesus pro-

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10 Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 120.

11 Malina, *Social World*, 53–54, 116; Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 218.


12 Malina, *Social World*, 116; Mark 7:24–30; Matthew 15:21–28; John 4:10–12.

13 Osiek and Balch, *Families in the New Testament World*, 135, 188, 218–19.

claims transformation within the context of society, not seclusion from the public eye.

Leaving the family of this world?

The most potentially disturbing of Jesus's teachings on family are his calls to leave family behind: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life

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itself, cannot be my disciple."¹⁴ While Jesus requires followers to relativize their connections to this-world families in commitment to God, rejecting those families outright is not a necessity. Jesus repeatedly demonstrates deep concern for this-world family, and even when he challenges his own family, he does so

due to particular conflicts between his mission and his relatives' expectations, conflicts about which he in turn warns his disciples.

There are several examples of Jesus showing respect for this-world family and calling others to do the same. When Luke describes a young Jesus's disobedience in the temple at Jerusalem, he assures the audience that Jesus obeyed his parents thereafter, tempering himself for their sake.¹⁵ In John, Jesus shows care for his mother's wishes at the Cana wedding. Even at his crucifixion, he ensures she will receive care from the Beloved Disciple, fulfilling his duties as her son and highlighting how his two families can co-exist.¹⁶

Jesus's love of this-world family is reaffirmed in his defences of the Mosaic Law to honour parents.¹⁷ That he invokes this law in critique of the Pharisees' filial neglect suggests that he not only sees faithfulness and family as compatible, but he rebukes those who preach the abandonment of family for religious commitment.¹⁸

The compatibility of this-world family and faithfulness is further displayed through Jesus's disciples. The first four people Jesus calls in Mark

14 Luke 14:26.

15 Luke 2:51; F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do? Gospel Profiles of Jesus' Personal Conduct* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 35; Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 112.

16 Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 39, 42.

17 Mark 7:9-12; Matthew 15:36.

18 See Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 26, for further discussion.

are biological brothers, and their bonds to one another are not dissolved. Moreover, while James and John do walk away from their father, nothing indicates that Simon-Peter and Andrew emotionally part from their households. Mentions of Peter's mother-in-law suggest that he is married, or if he is a widower, he continues looking after his wife's family, even after leaving behind his occupation as a fisherman.¹⁹ These examples point to a Jesus who makes room for disciples to appropriately support their existing families as they follow him.

Despite this family-friendly tendency, when familial priorities interfere with his mission, Jesus and his this-world family do clash. His most explicit familial conflict occurs in Mark 3, when he is accused of madness and his relatives attempt to restrain him.²⁰ Almost immediately after this, while in someone's home Jesus hears his mother and brothers wish to

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see him, but he turns to his followers and calls those who do the will of God his true family.²¹ Jesus's new mention of a "true family" marks a new boundary between him and his biological relatives. He distinguishes his families this way not because his mission is intrinsically anti-this-world family, but because at this point his this-world family has

shown they are more preoccupied with the risk of household shame than Jesus's ministry. The distinction is accentuated by the family's position outside the house. Jesus's true family, the family that embraces him, is the crowd gathered around him.²²

Other instances of Jesus distancing himself from family identity are outcomes of deviating from his place in a familialist society. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is a mutual forsaking between Jesus and his home community, Nazareth—a community that, as has been discussed, would have understood itself in familial terms. When Jesus takes up a ministry whose duties exceed his given place within the household, Jesus's neigh-

19 Stephen Ahearne-Kroll, "Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?" *Family Relations and Family Language in the Gospel of Mark*, *The Journal of Religion* 18, no. 1. (2001): 10; Mark 1:30; Matthew 8:14.

20 Mark 3:20–21.

21 Mark 3:31–35; Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 113.

22 Ahearne-Kroll, "Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?," 14.

bourhood, which is part of the structure he is violating, rejects him.²³ Similarly, in being declared *Son of God* and *King of Israel* in John 1:49, Jesus has his familial title, *Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth*, subdued.²⁴ These conflicts between Jesus and his familial identity exist not because

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Jesus hates his biological family but because he deviates from social structures that happen to be familial in his context.

Likewise, Jesus's commands for disciples to relativize this-world family do not translate into absolute rejection. Hyperbole is a frequent technique in Jesus's teaching, and literalistic readings

of provocative language like "hate" in Luke 14:26 are suspicious.²⁵ One way to contextualize the "hate" hyperbole is by reading it next to Jesus's demands to follow him without burying or saying goodbye to one's relatives.²⁶ Mark Strauss notes that Jesus's comments on family burials and farewells evoke Elisha's drawn-out preparation for discipleship following Elijah's call, interpreting Jesus's phrasing to convey how much more urgent his cause is than Elijah's.²⁷

Another way Jesus talks about relativizing this-world family is in parallel to taking up the cross and giving up one's life.²⁸ To a familialist-oriented reader, the parallel placement of these sacrifices highlights the death-like consequences of leaving one's household for one's social security and sense of self. Importantly, however, like giving up one's life, relinquishing this-world family is not something every disciple will do. As Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll puts it, cutting ties with one's household is "not a prerequisite to, but a possible consequence of, following Jesus."²⁹

When viewed as a whole, Jesus's life and teachings are nowhere near an absolute statement that disciples should leave their households behind. He praises this-world family, and when he distances himself, he

23 Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 37.

24 Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do?*, 38; John 1:45.

25 Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 121.

26 Matthew 8:21–22; Luke 9:59–62.

27 Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly*, 121; 1 Kings 19:19–21.

28 Matthew 10:37–39; Luke 14:26–27.

29 Ahearne-Kroll, "Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?," 18.

does so conditionally. His teachings on leaving family reflect urgency and warn of family division only as a grave contingency.

Conclusion

When the Gospels are read as a whole, they do not depict a Jesus who seeks to separate people from their families. Family was a core organizing principle through which first century Judeans saw the public world, meaning family enjoyed none of the connotations of seclusion that are so advantageous for drawing people away into vulnerable isolation. Moreover, Jesus and his disciples demonstrate allegiances to this-world relatives that, while secondary to doing God's will, are positively appraised at many points. Rather, on the path of discipleship, Jesus makes room for bonds of earthly and spiritual kinship to coexist.

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