



LOVE,
MARRIAGE,
AND
FAMILY

Learning from the
Early Christians

ERKKI KOSKENNIEMI

PRAISE FOR LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND FAMILY

It is tempting to think that our present struggles on the subjects of sexuality, marriage, children, divorce, and other such related issues are charting new territory for Christians in society. Erkki Koskenniemi provides us with substantial evidence that the early church, following their Jewish heritage, confronted similar challenges. What they confronted and how they dealt with it, as spelled out in this book, provide much needed help as we stand, and live, in the confession of God's Word.

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CONTENTS

Foreword	v
Preface	ix
Introduction	1
1 A Child Is Born. What Next?	7
2 Family Feasts and Social Life	17
3 When Children Grow Up.	25
4 Men and Men, Women and Women	39
5 Family People in Corinth or Galilean Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom: Marriage or Single Life?	51
6 What Is Marriage? How Was It Made?	65
7 Only to Have Children? Sex Within Jewish and Christian Marriage ...	87
8 Adultery: About Morals and Lack of Morals ...	97
9 Wrecked! Ending Marriage	105
10 A New Love?	115
11 We and the World: Sexual Morality in Our Context	123
Translations Used	133

FOREWORD



Like most pastors, I have always found conversations with couples preparing for marriage to be difficult as well as joyous. More often than not, I have had to ask whether they are already living together and engaging in sexual relations without God’s blessing. The goal is not to shame or condemn them but to seek the best possible foundation for their marriage. And that sometimes involves repentance, forgiveness, and the commitment to a fresh start. The next nervous conversation is usually about the marriage ceremony itself—a struggle to keep it focused on Christ and worshipful in character without importing shallow secular music or the latest Hollywood fads. And then, of course, there is the inevitable discomfort over the traditional wedding vows, whether the bride will be willing to say “obey.”

These premarital discussions involve a clash of cultures, but not in the way many couples perceive it. Is the church simply clinging to old-fashioned notions of marriage, women, and sexuality? The truth is rather the opposite. As this deceptively simple book details the ways in which love, marriage, and family operated in the ancient Greco-Roman world, it quickly becomes apparent that the world around us is, in many ways, more “traditional” than the Christian Church. As Christian influence on Western culture wanes, our culture is not so much pursuing a sexual revolution as it is simply returning to the ways of the ancient world.

Thus the reader should not be surprised to find in the following pages that the beliefs and practices of people in the ancient world are strikingly modern, including the widespread use of

contraception, abortion, and exposure of infants so that men could engage in sexual exploits without taking responsibility for their actions; cultural expectation that boys should become sexually active as soon as they were physically capable but not commit to marriage until many years later; sex as entertainment; children as a burden; and the cultural normalization of homosexual activity, exploitation of young boys and vulnerable women, frivolous divorce, and multiple remarriages.

Erkki Koskenniemi, a sparkling classicist and philologist who is also widely known in Finland for teaching the faith to generations of young Lutherans in confirmation camp, is eminently qualified to be our guide to this ancient world. He is one of the few people I know whose name appears in the footnotes of the standard Greek lexicon of the New Testament (Bauer, Danker, Amdt, Gingrich, editors)—together with the name of his more famous father, Heikki. His doctoral dissertation on Apollonius of Tyana debunked the mighty Rudolf Bultmann by exposing the mythological character of his own scholarship. (That's an inside joke for New Testament specialists, by the way.)

Dr. Koskenniemi shows us that the clash of cultures was never simply between old-fashioned notions and progressive ideologies but has always been between God's Word and the way of the sinful world. He unpacks the teachings of the Old Testament, which gave God's people a holy and righteous way to live, love, marry, and bear children. And he demonstrates how the apostolic writers of the New Testament strengthened Christian people to live out their holy lives in the midst of a rebellious culture. By the strength of God's Word, we can do the same today.

In my premarital instruction, I have always tried to confront and deconstruct the false and dangerous notions of our

contemporary culture by walking through the three great texts in our marriage rite: God's institution of marriage at the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1-2, our Lord's reaffirmation of the goodness of marriage in Matthew 19, and Paul's Christological exposition of marriage in Ephesians 5. While these texts and the Christian way of life they describe can bestow the blessing of a healthy, long-lived marriage in accord with God's will, Ephesians 5 crowns this Christian catechesis with a great Gospel blessing. For Paul teaches us that a great mystery is hidden in this seemingly mundane institution: "I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (v. 32). Yes, it's about the Gospel! The ordered relationship of man and wife certainly isn't about power and self-gratification, nor even just about domestic harmony and mutual care. Rather, there is an opportunity in a Christian marriage for a husband to proclaim Christ to his bride through his self-sacrificial love, as "Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior" (v. 23). And a wife can grow in faith and model it to her husband as she willingly subordinates herself to him "as the church submits to Christ" (v. 24).

This is the glory of marriage when illuminated by the light of God's Word. This is what the Christian Church can offer to men and women seeking to deepen and bless their union and the children God may give them. It has always been a countercultural message because it comes from God's wisdom, not man's. I hope and pray that this little book will guide the church in exploring this sacred mystery and strengthen her confession before a world that needs God's blessing as much as ever.

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PREFACE



As a pastor and Bible teacher for decades, my favorite part of my work has been working with young Christians. Over the years, they have faced many challenges growing up in the modern Western world. Many of them have gotten married and raised children. I have enjoyed knowing their families and sharing their journey. When I see the mess in which especially younger people must live in our world, my heart praises God, who still guides us with His Word in this world.

Before studying theology, I spent years studying Greek and Latin texts. As a biblical scholar, I often return to these works. I learned to love tragedians like Sophocles and Euripides, poets like Virgil and Horace, and many other writers. While I admired their insight into the human mind and their strong morals, I did not agree with all of their views. Greek and Roman morals often clashed with Jewish and Christian ethics regarding sex, family, and marriage.

Today I encounter people who hold stunningly similar ideas in a post-Christian world. The views of reasoning Gentiles on subjects like abortion, premarital sexual activity, homosexuality, marriage, affairs, and divorce were not all that different from the views of today's reasoning Westerners. My favorite poets weren't hopelessly evil, nor are the people I encounter today; they, like the ancients, simply lack biblical guidance, and that makes them think and do what society commonly considers reasonable. You may wonder what ancient Greece and Rome can teach us about the world we live in. In the Old and New Testaments, we meet God's people, who struggled to follow God's standard despite the world's ungodly standards. Today

I also meet Christians who, though decreasing in number, still strive to follow biblical standards.

This book explores traditional family morals among Greeks and Romans. It also shows how Jews and, subsequently, early Christians lived as minorities. We have much to learn by studying the world in which they lived. It is time to study our roots, present our treasures, and call everyone to hear the loving voice of the Creator. He once gave, and still gives, forgiveness and a home for people who had earlier lived a completely different life. This is a book about our loving God, who has given us love, marriage, and family—the best gifts we can have in this world—and who also tells us how to use those gifts.

At the time I was finalizing this book, I celebrated the forty-fifth anniversary of my marriage with Marja. God has given us five sons, lovely daughters-in-law, and—at this point—twelve lively grandchildren. After these decades, I indeed recognize that this is the best that sinful people like us can have in this world. I thankfully dedicate this book to Marja, knowing that nothing is better than to love and be loved until death separates us and makes us wait for the voice of our merciful God, who will reunite us with all the saints in His glory.

INTRODUCTION

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Our first Christian sisters and brothers lived as a minority in the cities and among the people of the Roman Empire. In many ways, the lives they lived are of interest to contemporary Christians. What kind of difficulties, for instance, did a young Christian mother in Corinth face when explaining her family choices to her neighbors? What were the differences a Christian pupil at school had to repeatedly explain to his friends, who still did not quite understand him? What was life like for a Christian slave girl, a stranger in her own city? Observing religious feasts in Gentile temples was an essential part of social life, a kind of national pastime, and whoever refused to join the crowd was easily suspected, if not hated. However, for Christians, participation was at odds with their faith. But perhaps the single biggest difference between Christians and their neighbors was sexual morality. It was also a very important factor in drawing theological lines that continue to shape our thinking. This booklet illuminates early Christian sexual morality in its historical context and asks what we can learn from the choices of early Christians.

So, what was the sexual morality of Gentile Corinth? How similar was it to the practice of the rest of the Greek and Roman world? We have some of those answers, but not all of them. The period we know as classical antiquity lasted more than a thousand years. Not surprisingly, ethics, morals, and practices varied over that time, and there was no common ancient sexual morality. Furthermore, the Mediterranean world was a sea of different people, and we know next to nothing about many of them, and even less about their sexual morality.

GREEK AND ROMAN SOURCES

Even when we have good sources, it is unclear what sweeping generalizations we can make. There are numerous texts, for example, from the golden age of Athens, the dialogues of Plato, the tragedies of Euripides, and numerous speeches at courts that richly describe life in the city. All of these texts, however, tend to express the views more of the wealthy elite, poets and philosophers, and less those of ordinary people. And less than two hundred kilometers away in Sparta, people led completely different lives.

Luckily, there are other kinds of sources. The Greeks living in Egypt left behind papyri that allow us glimpses of ordinary life back then. Promissory notes, petitions directed to officials, marriage contracts, and other documents were preserved to us only by chance, and many of them tell us about the lives of ordinary people.

Roman and Latin texts draw a different picture. Many literary texts have been preserved, but we also receive some help from papyri, though little. In addition, as in the Greek-speaking areas, there are thousands of inscriptions or texts carved in stones. Although these are of limited assistance—you may ask how little of our lives will be written in stone—they provide important pieces of the puzzle. There is also graffiti, for example in Pompeii, that we may compare to scribbles and ugly drawings in public bathrooms today.

So Athens, Egypt, Corinth, and Rome tell one set of stories. But who can say anything about the world Paul and Barnabas encountered when they arrived among the Lycaonians, whose language was as unknown to them as to modern scholars? There were numerous people whose language and culture are almost completely unknown to us. Generalization would thus be dangerous.

JEWISH SOURCES

But the first Christians were not the first to stand out from their Gentile neighbors in their manner of life. Jews had lived in Palestine for centuries, but millions of them also lived in Diaspora in various parts of the Mediterranean. Their families, communities, and synagogues made up a distinct way of life. The rich world of early Judaism helps us understand what it meant to live as a minority. This Jewish tradition shaped Christian thinking as well.

Judaism in Jesus' time was by no means a monolithic religion, as we can already see in the differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Gospels. We do not know exactly what the Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes taught. The large collections of Mishna and Tosefta,¹ as well as other rabbinic sources, include traditions that were added much later, and these traditions originate from a variety of sources, time periods, and cultural environments. Moreover, early Jewish texts, written in both Semitic languages, like the so-called Old Testament Apocrypha and the Scrolls from Qumran, and in Greek, like the works by Philo and Josephus, show that early Judaism had room for a plethora of opinions. Recent scholars even claim that Jews lived like the people around them. It would indeed be naïve to claim that every Jew followed the standards of Jewish teachers. Nevertheless, the scarce sources we have tell us that religious teachers tried to teach a special manner of life. The role of the synagogue as the place where ethics were taught should never be overlooked.

Alexandria, which was one of the most important cities in the world and a famous cultural center, had a strong Jewish

1 The Mishna is an early collection of Jewish teachings, redacted at the end of the second Christian century. The Tosefta is a corpus of supplementary materials to the Mishna, redacted between AD 200 and 400.

minority, a number of whom went to the best schools in the city. Usually, many people were allowed to live in a city, but only a tiny minority could become citizens. These people were trained in a gymnasium, which was not merely a school, but rather a military service sorting the future citizens. The life of a Jew in an Alexandrian gymnasium differed from the life of a farmer in a small Palestinian village or a merchant in Philippi, where the few Jews living in the town did not even have a synagogue. Some Jews probably fully adopted the Gentile manner of life, some rejected it, and some adopted parts of it—as people always do. It seems, however, that in general, Jews in the Mediterranean world followed their Jewish way and tried to teach it to their offspring. It is difficult and often impossible to say how much ordinary Jews listened to their teachers. Notwithstanding, it is important to trace the sexual morality these teachers tried to teach to the people who cared to listen.

EARLY CHRISTIAN SOURCES

Jewish heritage greatly influenced the early church, but the sources are very limited when it comes to understanding the lives of the first Christians. Outside of the Bible, there is very little material from the end of the first and the beginning of the second century AD. There are more sources from the second half of the second century, but it does not take very long to read every Christian text written before AD 200. After this time, the number goes up, and it would take a lifetime to read them all. Unfortunately, there are fewer documents shedding light on the lives of ordinary Christian people. For example, only Paul's letters testify of early Christian life in Corinth. Based on them, sparks were flying in the Christian community, which was clearly struggling with the sexual

morality of Corinth. Understanding conventional Greek and Jewish ways of life helps us understand these struggles and the solutions Paul offers. That alone is enough to make our journey worthwhile as Christians struggle with the sexual morality of our own culture.

Many scholars claim that Christianity brought little or nothing new to Mediterranean ethics. This might be true, but it only concerns the wider range of ethics, not the narrow range of sexual morals. Most moral teachers tell you to do good deeds and avoid bad ones, and this was certainly common to both Christian and Gentile teachers. A closer look, of course, reveals the differences. Hardly anywhere did the Jewish and Christian morals differ as much from conventional Greek and Roman thought than in the field of family and sexual morals.

Exploring the New Testament gives new perspectives to all Christians who are seeking God's will in their own life. It might be an exaggeration to say there is nothing new under the sun, but for the most part, our difficulties are not unique to our time. The world was not an easy place for the first Christians to live. What can we learn from the challenges they faced?

Reflection Questions

- What expectations do you have for your study group or self-study?

- How well do you think you know the family ethics within early Christian families?

- How well do you know the world of the Old Testament, early Judaism, and the Greek and Roman worlds?

A CHILD IS BORN. WHAT NEXT?

.....

A typical family in ancient Rome was strikingly similar to a typical family in our time. Families often didn't have more than three children. A whole family would have fit nicely in a modern car. In this chapter, we will take a look at how family planning was done in ancient times. Contraception will be addressed in chapter 7.

In ancient Greece and Rome, family planning was simple. An unwelcomed child was either killed or exposed. This was apparently a well-known practice for everyone in ancient days, and it appears in mythology (Oedipus, Romulus and Remus) and historical sources.

In general, the life of a person living in the ancient world was divided into two areas. Some things were ruled by the government, and some things were ruled by the individual. The birth of children and the size of the family belonged to the area ruled by the individual. The laws rarely, if ever, limited the exposure of children. Governments often hoped for bigger families, but it was the challenges of everyday life that led people to make their own family decisions. The typical family was quite small because few parents made room for

more than two sons and one daughter. Other children born to them outside of marriage were not allowed to join the family. Since child mortality was very high (perhaps about 30 percent or more), we do not know how many children were exposed. Some abandoned children survived, but regrettably, there aren't any statistics on their number.

CHILD EXPOSURE

The reasons children were exposed were pretty similar in Greece and Rome. If a child was born under bad omens, from the wrong father, was of the wrong sex, or suffered a disability, he or she was often abandoned. Poor people did not have enough money to feed all of their babies, and wealthy families did not want to divide their property between too many children. When a child was born after the planned number of babies had been born, or when a child was simply not needed, that baby was not welcome, and it was either killed or exposed. The fate of exposed children varied from sunlight to dark shadows: Often, cold, hunger, or beasts ended the tender life during the child's first days. If the mother knew of a wealthy, childless couple who desperately needed a family member, she might leave her newborn by their door so that they would raise the child as their own. Some exposed babies were brought to brothels to be raised as sex slaves. But most of the children who survived being exposed were probably raised to serve as slaves in neighboring villages.

Exposing children sounds really cruel. But it should be noted that parents didn't rejoice in exposing or killing their children. It was considered a sad necessity. Greeks and Romans whispered about distant people who never abandoned their children. They greatly honored those people. Some of those

people were far enough away to serve as moral examples, and good storytellers added impressive tales about their manners.

JEWISH VIEWS ON INFANTICIDE

But Greeks and Romans also knew of a group of people living in their midst who did not abandon their children. For Jews, abandoning children was strictly forbidden. They viewed it as one of the sins they were never allowed to commit. Exposing babies is not explicitly addressed or unequivocally banned in the Mosaic Law, but early Jewish teachers clearly forbade it. The ban was included in several summaries of the Mosaic Law in the first century AD, especially by Philo, Josephus, and Pseudo-Phocylides.

Of course, banning something doesn't always prevent people from doing it. Sometimes, a newborn child was found abandoned in a Jewish town. That always raised the question, Is this child a Jew or not? Teachers might say that she or he was, provided that the majority of inhabitants in that town were Jews. However, Rabbi Judah, an influential teacher from the second century AD, said that the child belonged to the majority of those who abandoned babies. In other words, the child was a Gentile because Jewish parents did not abandon their children (Mishna, *Makhshirin* 2:7).

EARLY CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON INFANTICIDE

Even though a clear ban on exposure is not included in either the Old or New Testament, the early church adopted Jewish customs very quickly. Soon after the New Testament was written, the first Christian works followed, word for word, part of a Jewish moral summary now lost. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, written soon after AD 100, and the *Didache*, written only some decades later, use identical words:

You shall not abort a child nor, again, commit infanticide. (*Epistle of Barnabas* 19:5)²

You shall not abort a child or commit infanticide. (*Didache* 2:2)

The earliest Christian writings make it clear that the Jews had gotten this one right. The first Christians followed the Jewish teachings for centuries, both in the East and in the West. Two of the most influential teachers, Basil the Great in the East (AD 330–379) and Augustine of Hippo in the West (AD 354–430), finally also made it part of Christian doctrine almost unanimously honored to our day. Basil, who defended weak and poor people, was adamant and ruled that parents who had exposed their child had to repent for no less than twenty years before they could be admitted to Holy Communion. Only extreme poverty shifted the guilt to wealthy people. After all, if poor people had to expose their children because they could not feed them, their rich neighbors should have had compassion and helped them (*Epistle of Basil the Great*, 217:56). In the fourth century, Christians were known for saving and raising exposed children.

The first Christians adopted almost all of the arguments from their Jewish predecessors. It was easy to describe the terrible fate of abandoned babies: Hunger and cold killed many, and some were eaten by wild animals who regularly visited the dung heaps where the babies were left. Christian writers helped the parents picture how their abandoned offspring became slaves or were mutilated by their masters so they would get more money when begging on the streets.

2 Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Baker Academic, 2007).

The worst part of their terrible vision included the thought of a father visiting brothels and unknowingly going into his own daughter or son whom he had abandoned as a child. But the most important argument was the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not murder,” which prevented killing newborns. This teaching was conventional among Jews in Jesus’ time. We may call it “a tradition of the elders.” Christians immediately learned to equate exposure of infants with killing. Almighty God has created every human being, and that means that every child has the right to live.

ANCIENT VIEWS ON ABORTION

Ancient sources speak about abortion, but they don’t explain much about how it was performed. It was easiest to do it early and with drugs—if they worked. For a long time, scholars used to laugh at the ancients who thought these drugs could be effective, but not anymore. Modern tests with animals have shown that ancient medicaments very effectively caused abortions, and although they have not been tested on humans, their effect is indisputable (see ch. 7). The famous Hippocratic oath is very critical of abortion, but we aren’t aware of any actual ancient laws that banned it. Since exposure was fully legal, it certainly limited the number of embryotomies (surgical removal of the embryo), which were always dangerous. Nonetheless, both drugs and embryotomy were legal for Greeks and Romans. Sources do not allow us to distinguish abortion by drugs from contraception among Jews and Christians, but embryotomy is sometimes mentioned.

Jewish teachers strictly banned abortion, and this ban was a common part of Jewish ethical handbooks (e.g., Philo, *On the Special Laws*, 3:117–19; Pseudo-Phocylides, 184–85; Josephus, *Apion*, 2.199–203). On ethical handbooks, see

chapter 3. However, if abortion was needed to save the life of the mother, it was allowed.

The woman who is in hard labor—they chop up the child in her womb and they remove it limb by limb, because her life takes precedence over his life. (Mishna, *Ohalot* 7:6)

The Tosefta, collected clearly after the Mishna, repeats the rule and adds that the operation had to be performed even if it was a Sabbath day (Tosefta, *Yebamot* 9:5). That it required the decision of a court shows how seriously the case was taken. Moreover, the right to this emergency abortion ended at a certain moment:

If its greater part has gone forth, they do not touch him, for they do not set aside one life on account of another life. (Mishna, *Ohalot* 7:6)³

Jewish teachers thus allowed abortion to save the life of the mother, but they set clear limits. The life of the child was to be saved, if possible. Man is not free to do with the child whatever he wants, but he is bound by the Law of God.

EARLY CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON ABORTION

The early church closely followed its Jewish heritage. The *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Didache* agree word for word, also here following the lost Jewish ethical handbooks:

3 Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (Yale University Press, 1991).