Was Jesus Married? An Ancient Papyrus Raises Questions

(Ed. Note: The above headline, which ran in the The New York Times*, September 20, 2012, inspired the following.)*

Another long day. Dusty and hot. Supposedly he was a carpenter, but in reality he spent most of his time making things like grape trellises, ploughshares, and stone and clay huts. There wasn't a lot of wood around, and whatever there was was always grabbed quickly by the Romans.

As usual, he got to the house around five, dropping his work belt on the floor with a thud and shouting "Hi Mary, I'm home." From the kitchen he heard a tired voice say "Jesus Christ." This was always the problem these days: was she welcoming him home, or just taking his name in vain, as she seemed to do more and more often?

The truth was that the marriage wasn't in great shape. So many little things had been allowed to fester that they'd become big things, too big to talk about, but impossible to ignore. Most evenings, he'd retreat for hours to his small study to practice his miracles, while she stayed in the kitchen, polishing and arranging relics to sell in the giant yard sale that she hoped to hold in a month or so.

And he couldn't deny that the celibacy factor was getting to both of them, a gigantic elephant in the room. Mary was young and had kept her figure. Still a fox, in a way. Plus, given her history, she obviously knew her way around the block. He himself was kind of a looker, flowing chestnut hair, a muscular build which he wasn't shy about flaunting. But rules were rules, and his Father had made crystal clear what was expected. "Nothing with women, nothing with men, nothing with animals. And no interfering with yourself!"

Then there was the extended family problem. He happened to like her family a lot. The Magdalenes were great, and had sort of adopted him as the son they never had. They always seemed charmed, rather than bugged, by his obvious weirdness. The sisters were funny and cute, the mom was sweet and kind, and Mr. M. was a big, loud, fun-loving guy. Ran a donkey cart business. Always clapping him on the back and saying "Jesus, what are you going to do with yourself? The carpentry thing's going nowhere. I tell you, you should go into preaching. You'd be a natural, just because you're so wacky and you tell such great stories. People love wacky."

Jesus could tell he meant it in a good way.

The real problem was on her end. She had what you could only describe as a world-class in-law issue, which of course she refused to discuss, and which he was unwilling to raise because it always went so badly. His earthly father—who was still completely puzzled about where Jesus actually came from—had to be referred to as Uncle Joe. He was pretty insecure, but he was an okay guy.

The fly in the ointment was his belief that his real dad was God, a claim of which his wife was deeply suspicious. She'd never even met the guy. Didn't come to the wedding. Didn't stop by when they bought their house.

She'd say "Who has a father who hasn't ever been seen by anyone? Anyone. He's like just a rumor. Come on, now."

But Jesus kept trying to be a better husband. He was working hard to cut down on his use of parables in normal conversation, which even he knew was an annoying habit. "You are sooo random," she would say. "What are you getting at, what's the point? Just say it."

Coming in the door on this particular day, hot and tired, he'd said "Honey, do you want to have a drink before dinner?" Meaning it as a peace offering.

"Oh fine," she said, coming into the room and placing a water pitcher on the table. "But you make the drinks. Red wine for me." Just once, couldn't she mix the cocktails, instead of insisting that he do his little trick?

After a couple of glasses, he girded his loins for a tough conversation, thinking "God, I hope this goes okay."

"Mare, I've been thinking about a career change. Like your dad always says, I think I'd make a pretty fair preacher. I'd like to see if I can make a go of it. I've been working up some homilies and practicing some miracles, and I've things down pretty good. I really want to give it a shot."

He knew she'd object, probably on the grounds that he was viewed as a raving lunatic in the community—he already knew this—and that no one in their right mind would want to stand on a dusty corner listening to his nutty stories. Or else she'd be worried about finances, and the increasing rates the money changers were charging. But he was surprised by the tack she took.

"What about the bird? What are you going to do with the bird if you're preaching? I hate to break it to you, but it really freaks people that that thing is hovering around you all the time." He'd named the bird Trinity. It was a pretty good pet, though admittedly a bit messy. Also, it sometimes looked at you with these sharp beady eyes that could freak you out, like it knew something you didn't.

She saw a problem in everything. Nothing ever good enough. What could go wrong would go wrong. That was her philosophy. But—though he hated to admit it—she was often partly right. One of the few clear instructions Father had given him was "Always keep the bird with you, and take good care of it. Feed it and whatnot, whatever a bird wants. Just don't let it out of your sight."

This was not a problem if he was out in the desert mending an axle, where the thing could spend hours pecking about for grain. But Mary was right, preaching on a street corner, with the ghostly creature on his shoulder, he'd look like he was a pirate or something, or a homeless guy. He might make a few tips, but certainly not enough to support the family.

Jesus wept. Things really sucked. He felt trapped and hopeless. He knew that for the next two thousand years people would be examining the story of his life, studying every aspect of it, and that a failed marriage would definitely not help his rep.

He needed some kind of miracle. Some astonishingly grandiose exit strategy that would allow him to get out of this lousy marriage, without anyone guessing that that was really what he was doing. A clever gambit that would involve no shame, no blame, no lawyers, no alimony. And he would be free, forever and ever!

As he gazed out the window at the crucifixes on the distant hillside, a wondrous plan took shape in his mind.

J Ritchie