

Resurrection and the Future of Marriage: Interpreting Luke 20:34–36 in its Hebraic Context (Part 2)

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Abstract

When the Sadducees challenged Jesus with their marriage riddle, he replied 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). The church has long viewed this as evidence that resurrection marks the start of an eternally celibate existence.

Yet many vital questions surrounding this interpretation have remained largely unexplored. How did the early church fathers view the passage, and what interpretive lens shaped their conclusions? Does the rest of the biblical data say anything about resurrected celibates? Is the concept of *eternal celibacy* an accurate reading of Jesus’ words in their original Hebraic context?

This two-part series will examine the historical record and the Hebrew Scriptures for answers to those questions. It will argue that Jesus’ remarks regarding “marrying and giving in marriage” in fact fell prey to misinterpretation by the Hellenized church fathers, which in turn obscured the biblical portrait of the future of marriage.

In part 1, we will first trace the interpretive history of the passage and identify potential influences behind the popular reading. We will then examine three indications that Jesus actually had a very different meaning in mind. In part 2, we will present an alternative reading that proposes a specific Old Testament text as the background for his famous reply.

Our previous article examined historical and exegetical evidence that calls into question the traditional *eternal celibacy* reading of Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees’ marriage riddle. In this article, we will offer an alternative reading of the scene that better fits the evidence discussed. Before embarking on this journey, however,

it is worth noting that other interpreters have likewise challenged the traditional view with a diverse range of alternative conclusions.

Outi Lehtipuu, for example, argues that Luke 20:34–36 is actually a call to celibacy in the *present* age (though it presumably continues into the future age).¹ By contrast, Ben Witherington theorizes that since the text refers to the act of marrying but says nothing about existing marriages, Jesus was merely saying no *new* marriages would be formed in the future age (i.e., eternal celibacy only for the unmarried).² Dru Johnson finds no celibacy at all in the passage, suggesting that “marrying and giving in marriage” is emblematic of life as usual and is therefore simply a metaphor for spiritual sluggishness in the face of coming judgment.³

These disparate readings have in common the assumption that Jesus was referring to marriage in a general sense. However, our previous article demonstrated that he most likely had forbidden marriages in view, and that his answer was most likely rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. Our approach will therefore differ from most other readings in that we will evaluate the context of the scene for indications of an OT background involving the prohibition of illicit marriage.

In particular, our goal will be to show that Luke’s account expands upon the shorter versions of the conflict with the Sadducees in order to follow more closely a specific section of the book of Malachi that stands in the background. We will accomplish this task by considering two underappreciated elements of the scene—the marital sins of Jesus’ antagonists and the series of temple confrontations leading up to his reply.

Considering the Audience: The Marital Sins of the Sadducees

The Sadducees’ levirate marriage scenario is inhabited 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.⁴

It may be, then, that the Sadducees were casting *themselves* in the role of these seven righteous brothers who faithfully obey God’s marital laws. But would such

1 Outi Lehtipuu, “No Sex in Heaven—Nor on Earth? Luke 20:27–38 as a Proof-Text in Early Christian Discourses on Resurrection and Asceticism,” in *Bodies, Borders, Believers: Ancient Texts and Present Conversations Essays in honor of Turid Karlsen Seim on her 70th Birthday* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015), 22–39. See also Crispin Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts: Angels, Christology and Soteriology* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 82–86.

2 Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 34.

3 Dru Johnson, “Q&A Series: Is There Marriage in Heaven?,” July 22, 2022 in *The Biblical Mind Podcast*, podcast, MP3 audio, 28:11, <https://hebraicthought.org/podcast/is-there-marriage-in-heaven-dru-johnson/>.

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

a self-characterization be in keeping with their actual marital practices? Let us consider the evidence.

The Sadducees set the stage for their riddle by pointing out that a man must “raise up seed” 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.⁵ The irony in alluding to this scene is that Judah sired Onan through a *forbidden* marriage with a Canaanite woman (cf. Gen 24:2–4). So began a pattern that would plague Israel throughout her history, despite God’s stern warning in the law:

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. (Deut 7:1, 3–4a)

The prophets would rebuke Israel time and again for participating in such forbidden marriages. It reached 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 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.”⁶ 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.**⁷

Illegitimate marriages among Israel’s leaders continued unabated into the time of Christ, when Herod the Great—an Edomite who professed Judaism—married

5 Scholars widely recognize this allusion. See, e.g., I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 739; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 719.

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

7 Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*, 21.

no less than ten wives.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 king¹⁰ who had illegitimately separated from his first wife and executed his second.¹¹

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 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*.

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.¹²

8 Josephus, *A.J.* 17.1.3.

9 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.

10 Marriage to an Edomite was forbidden (1 Kgs 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.

11 Josephus, *A.J.* 15.9.3.

12 In addition, early Jewish tradition suggests that the family line of Sadducean high priest Joseph Caiaphas was involved in questionable levirate marriage practices. The Tosefta (ca. 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, as attested in t. Yev. 1:10: "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." Brackets mine. See also Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 93–94, 218.

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.¹³ 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 (Luke 20:1) and ends with Luke's observation that they no longer dared to ask Jesus any question (Luke 20:40).¹⁴

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 and scribes" (Luke 9:22, cf. 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 (Luke 19:45–46).

Jesus' opening move brings John the Baptist into a discussion that initially has nothing to do with the Baptizer (Luke 20:2), revealing much about the direction he will take in these controversies. We are reminded of his earlier rebuke of Israel's religious leaders for rejecting both himself *and* John (Luke 7:31–35), whose ministries were closely related. But our attention is also drawn to the primary background that accompanies the figure of John the Baptist—the book of Malachi.

Luke's gospel frequently makes connections between John the Baptist and the prophecies of Malachi.¹⁵ And yet, little attention has been paid to this 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 (Luke 20:1–8)

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 response 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.

Jesus' counter-question effectively highlighted their rejection of John in his

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

14 Robert Stein notes a similar construct in Mark 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*, 710–11.

15 E.g., Luke 1:17, cf. Mal 4:5–6; Luke 3:17, cf. Mal 3:19; Luke 7:27, cf. Mal 3:1a.

role as the Mal 3:1 forerunner of the Messiah.¹⁶ By reminding them of John's ministry, he 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).¹⁷ At that moment, Jesus was quite literally standing in the temple precincts face to face with the corrupt "sons of Levi."

Dispute #2: They Ask if Paying Taxes to Caesar Violates Mosaic Law (Luke 20:21–22)

The spies of the chief priests next presented Jesus with a financial question designed to trap him no matter how he replied.¹⁸ If he said that paying the tribute tax 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 asked them to identify the image and inscription found on a denarius. When they replied that it was Caesar's, he instructed them to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:25).¹⁹

In considering his reply, it should be kept in mind that the challenge regarded a financial aspect of Mosaic Law and was issued by a group of hypocritical priests whom Jesus had come to Jerusalem to indict. These things signal that his answer will be designed to expose their mistreatment of God's financial laws as outlined in the Torah.²⁰

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

17 Many scholars consider Jesus' cleansing of the temple an evocation of Mal 3:1. See, 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 first dispute about Jesus' authority. We suggest the temple cleansing and the subsequent three temple controversies are all of a piece and so jointly evoke Mal 3:1.

18 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 (cf. 11:27).

19 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.

20 Interpreters often 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 a benign reply in this final showdown with his enemies is highly implausible. A more specific answer targeting his immediate audience seems the better option. The inscription on the denarius called Tiberius Caesar "son of divine Augustus" and identified him as "high priest" (Bock, *Gospel of Luke*, 1612); similarly, the Levitical priests were considered sons of God who reflected his image in a unique way and so were held to a very high standard (cf. Mal 1:6). Jesus' answer is therefore likely addressing their priestly duties in particular, which prominently included administering the tithes and offerings.

The chief priests certainly rendered unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's. As members of the Sanhedrin, they themselves were responsible for collecting the tribute tax at issue.²¹ And 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 also faithfully "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.²² 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.²³

Furthermore, the family of Annas profited handsomely from the money-changers that Jesus drove out of the temple for making God's house a "den of robbers" (Luke 19:45). It is therefore unsurprising that later Jewish tradition remembered the first century priesthood as those who "robbed the sacrifices of the Lord."²⁴

A similar situation is recorded in Mal 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶

Malachi 3:3–5 expects such financial corruption to continue 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 states that "Jesus in essence charges [his questioners], together with the Sanhedrin, with being

21 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.

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

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

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

25 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.

26 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.

about the business of Rome rather than the business of God.”²⁷ 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 (Luke 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—in reality they *denied* the resurrection and were historically *unfaithful* to God’s marriage laws.

In this regard they mirrored the priests of Malachi’s day, who likewise taught false doctrine (Mal 2:8) and led the nation into forbidden marriages (Mal 2:11, cf. Neh 13:25–29). Significantly, 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
And Jesus said to [the Sadducean priests], “The sons of this age	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)
marry and are given in marriage,	For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. ²⁸ (Mal 2:11)

27 Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 715. Brackets mine.

28 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. See Verhoeff, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, 275. Beth Glazier-McDonald explains why such intermarriages 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.” See 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 the 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 by engaging in syncretistic pagan practices which were very likely precipitated by literal intermarriages with pagan women.

Luke 20:34–36	Malachi 1–3
but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection of the dead	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)
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 [i.e., do not divorce your wives to marry foreign women]. (Mal 2:15b)
for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels	My covenant with Levi 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 [<i>ma'lak</i>, 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 once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. (Mal 3:17–18a)

Malachi identified two groups of sons co-existing in the nation of Judah, one legitimate and the other not. The false sons—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.²⁹

Jesus formulated his reply to the Sadducean priests using precisely this theme. Thus, he constructed his answer in the present tense: the “sons of this age” are those presently contracting marriages that are by implication forbidden. The “sons of God” are those who do not contract such marriages. Only the latter group is considered worthy of the resurrection.

Interpreters often fail to notice that the status of being “equal to angels” is also in the present tense. David Aune confirms that “there is no manuscript or lectionary evidence known to me that replaces the present tense verb found in Luke

²⁹ The day of judgement described in Mal 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 John 6:40; 11:24.

20:36 and its Synoptic parallels . . . ‘they *are* like angels’ with the future verb . . . ‘they *shall be* like angels.’”³⁰

The notion of men being like the angels in the present age was a familiar concept to the priests whom Jesus addressed. In the 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.”³¹

The Dead Sea Scroll *1QSb* 4:24–26 even 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.”³²

Keil and Delitzsch confirm that in Mal 2:7, “the standing epithet for the angels as the heavenly messengers of God is here applied to the priests.”³³ Crispin Fletcher-Lewis similarly emphasizes that in this text the “priest is God’s angel (not merely his ‘messenger’).”³⁴ And Andrew Hill concurs: “Malachi affirms the complementary role of human and angelic agents in the mediation of Yahweh’s word and will.”³⁵

Jesus himself highlighted this priest-angel comparison prior to his

30 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. Several biblical and extra-biblical texts do expect resurrected humans to possess a shining physical appearance like that of the angels (e.g., Dan 12:3; Matt 13:40–43; 4 Macc 17:5–6; Wis 3:7–8; 1 En 104:1–6; 2 Bar 51:1–11), but this glorified state is not said to entail a new asexual ontology. A rare contrast is the Jewish Platonist Philo, who opined that the deceased patriarchs have already become “equal to angels” since in his view they have shed their bodies to become permanently incorporeal and thus also by implication permanently celibate (*Sacr.* 2.5–6).

31 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 YHWH with respect to wisdom and righteousness.

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

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

34 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 (Heb=*ma’lak*, Grk=*angelos*) “messenger” in Mal 2:7, this is purely an editorial choice of the translators that unfortunately obscures the implicit angel-priest comparison.

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

confrontation with the Sadducees. In Luke 7:27, he identified John the Baptist as the “angel” (*angelos*) who “will prepare the way before you.” Scholars widely recognize this verse as a combined allusion to Mal 3:1 and Exod 23:20.³⁶ In the latter verse, God promised to send an angel to “guard you on the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.”

By comparing John—who was both a prophet and of priestly descent—to an angelic being, Jesus affirmed his function as God’s holy messenger. The Baptizer may not have served at the temple in an official capacity, but he fit the Mal 2:7 priestly mold by faithfully instructing the people in the way of righteousness to prepare them for the coming kingdom.³⁷ This mission would ultimately include speaking out against an illicit marriage at the cost of his own life.

Indeed, 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.³⁸ But like their forebears in Malachi’s day, the Sadducean priests did not adhere to God’s marital laws and so failed to live out their holy calling.

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 throughout the OT in places like 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 example³⁹—are like the angels in that they 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 alone are

36 E.g., Joel Green observes that in this verse Jesus “interweaves” Mal 3:1 and Exod 23:20 (*Gospel of Luke*, 298). See also the discussion in Bock, *Gospel of Luke*, 673–74.

37 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.” See 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.

38 The Dead Sea Scrolls actually connect the presence of angels with fruitful childbearing in the eschatological future. William Loader points out that scroll 4Q285 assumes “marriage, sexual relations, and procreation are a normal part of life in the future as in the present. . . . 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!” See *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Sectarian and Related Literature at Qumran*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 377.

39 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 in Luke 3:2, where he juxtaposed “the high priesthood of Annas” in Luke 3:2 with the introduction of “John the son of Zacharias.” See *The Gospel According to Malachi*, 266.

considered worthy to attain the resurrection of the just. Like their angelic counterparts, they are no longer subject to the dominion of death.⁴⁰

The Book of Malachi as an Interpretive Grid

As we have seen, the book of Malachi provides a clarifying lens through which to view the temple controversies. It allows us to identify Jesus' answers as a series of rebukes in which the scene with the Sadducees finds its purpose: to emphasize the consummate spiritual and moral failure of the first century priesthood, and the resulting need for a fundamental change to that priesthood.

It is appropriate that he would allude to this portion of the Old Testament, since it anticipated the financial and marital sins of his antagonists with striking specificity. Furthermore, by highlighting the priest—angel comparison in Mal 2:7, Jesus exposed as fallacious the Sadducees' denial of the existence of such beings. They could hardly fulfill their charge to function like an angel of God when they did not even acknowledge angels existed. His answer made it clear that the Sadducees were on the wrong side of this doctrinal debate as well (cf. Acts 23:6–10).⁴¹

Moreover, the emphasis on the failures of the priesthood at this critical juncture in the narrative serves to underscore the importance of Jesus' imminent crucifixion, which would inaugurate a superior eternal priesthood. It is thus fitting that the temple controversies are immediately followed by Jesus' citation of Ps 110 (Luke 20:42–43), a passage that depicts the resurrected Messiah enthroned beside YHWH as the eternal High Priest. His death would become the means by which these corrupt sons of Levi could be purified and participate in the far greater "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6) that God had in mind all along.

Whose Wife Would She Be?

One naturally wonders what Jesus might have said about the fate of the unfortunate woman in this scenario if he had chosen to answer his opponents directly. Would

40 We are reminded of the tradition found in 1 En. 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." See R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch or 1 Enoch* (Oxford, 1912) 139. In this text, being "like the angels" did not exclude Adam and Eve from marriage and procreation. Instead, it reflected God's intention that man should possess the same righteous *character* as the angels and so remain deathless as they are.

41 The false doctrine of the Sadducees also included the claim that God did not care about the affairs of man, and here we find another parallel with the priests of Malachi's day. 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." See *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." See Josephus, *B.J.* 2.162–66.

she be free to marry any brother she wishes, since death severs the marriage bond completely (Rom 7:2–3)? Or would she be married to her first husband, since only that union did not involve the law of levirate marriage, which is made obsolete by the resurrection?

Equally difficult questions arise when we look beyond the confines of the Sadducees’ riddle. Imagine a man who is widowed after fifty years of marriage and decides to remarry just a few years before the resurrection occurs. When his first wife arises, will he now have to choose between the two women, so that his current wife suddenly finds herself in competition with the first one? Or will he remain married to his current wife, so that his first wife is suddenly forced to find a new spouse after a lifetime of marriage to him?

Thorny situations like these are plentiful in a world where marriage exists alongside death. However, much as we would like an answer for every possible complication, Jesus was apparently content to leave this line of inquiry unexplored in the interest of making a more pressing point. We might say that he followed the example set by the OT, which affirms marriage in the future age but does not explain how it will play out in light of the resurrection.

The Parallel Passages

The parallel versions of this scene present an obvious challenge. A surface reading of these texts has led many to conclude that marriage will cease for the resurrected. But such a conclusion neglects the considerations discussed in our series that point to a very different meaning. We will therefore take a closer look at these passages, which give comparatively brief versions of Jesus’ reply:

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.

Matthew and Mark lack the explicit moral contrast found in Luke.⁴² But even if the shorter accounts are closer to Jesus' original words, his meaning would have been apparent to an audience familiar with the Hebrew Bible. His replies to the first two challenges already pointed to Malachi's prophecies about the corrupt priesthood. His third reply stands out for its focus on being "like the angels." This likewise would have drawn attention to the book of Malachi (*mal'aki*), whose name means "my angel" and in which we are told that the priest is the "angel of the LORD."

While the phrases "when they rise from the dead" (Mark 12:25) and "in the resurrection" (Matt 22:30) 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; Mark 13:26–27).⁴³

The implication is that Jesus' reply is primarily focused upon the present *spiritual* aspect of the resurrection that must precede the future *physical* aspect. Jesus' reference to "the dead" in Mark 12:25 is not unlike his comment to the church in Sardis that "you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1), or his parable of the prodigal son in which the father says that "your brother was dead and is alive" (Luke 15:32).

The "dead" in these cases were very much alive from a physical standpoint, but considered dead from a spiritual standpoint. In other words, if they continued down their present path, they would ultimately experience the second death described in Rev 21:8. Those in such a state can only "rise from the dead" by first turning away from their sin in submission to the Holy Spirit—a spiritual resurrection in the present that will culminate in a physical resurrection in the future. We can discern both elements of the resurrection 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.**"

42 Matthew does, however, include the theme of two morally contrasting sons (identified as the wicked chief priests versus the repentant tax collectors and prostitutes) in the first of the three temple controversies (Matt 21:28–32). He also 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 YHWH.

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

Stefanos Mihalios explains that “John probably sees both the spiritual and physical aspects of the final resurrection as two sides of the same coin.”⁴⁴ Understood in this light, the phrases “when they rise from the dead” (Mark 12:25) and “in the resurrection” (Matt 22:30) begin a pointed rebuke of the spiritually dead Sadducees. By setting the resurrection in the present tense, Jesus made it clear that he preached a resurrection rooted in repentance, which therefore must begin in the present age before it is completed in the future age by the raising of the body.

Luke’s expansion of the scene inserts the idea of two contrasting groups of sons in the present age, thereby aligning it more closely with the indictment of the priests in Malachi. Interestingly, he also omits the parable of the two sons, which appears in the first temple controversy in Matthew’s account (Matt 21:28–32). That parable describes two morally opposite groups of sons, with the wicked sons identified as the chief priests. Could it be that Luke used this material to expand the shorter version of Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees in the third controversy?

His expansion also may have been influenced by the teaching of Paul, who was his ministry companion. In Pauline thought we find the concept of two morally opposite groups of sons co-existing in the present age (as highlighted in Luke’s account) merged with the idea that the righteous are already raised from the dead in a spiritual sense that anticipates their future bodily resurrection (as emphasized in Matthew and Mark’s accounts):⁴⁵

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**. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for **because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them**; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. **Walk as children of light** . . . for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “**Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead**, and Christ will shine on you.” (Eph 5:5–8, 14)⁴⁶

But regardless of how Luke came to expand on the scene with the Sadducees, the expansion itself is intriguing. Perhaps it reflects a concern that the Gentiles

44 Mihalios, *The Danielic Eschatological Hour in the Johannine Literature*, 113.

45 Scholarship is divided on the authorship of Ephesians. We follow here the traditional view that Paul authored the book. For a defense of this view, see Harold Hoener, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 2–61. 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.

46 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.” See *Ephesians*, 429.

among his audience—steeped as they were in Greek ideas about a future incorporeal existence—would misunderstand Jesus’ point in the shorter version. Given the interpretation that later arose among Platonically-influenced theologians, such a concern would not have been misplaced.

Conclusion

Despite its long-standing dominance, the eternal celibacy view of Jesus’ reply to the Sadducees appears to be fatally flawed. One struggles to find even a modicum of support for this reading in the Old Testament Scriptures Jesus cited or the New Testament Scriptures that later followed. Moreover, rooted in the Platonic asceticism that permeated the second century church, it ultimately fails to consider Jesus’ remarks in their native Hebraic context.

The reading we have proposed seeks to remedy these significant shortcomings in several ways. First, it identifies how certain key phrases in his reply are used elsewhere in Scripture. Second, it draws upon the background of his antagonists. And finally, it considers both the surrounding context of the temple disputations and the OT expectation that the Messiah will judge an enduringly corrupt priesthood for sins that include illicit marriage.

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

Appendix A: Targum Jonathan

The Targum Jonathan on the Prophets 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 translation was read aloud in the Jewish synagogues alongside the original Hebrew.

Targum Jonathan’s rendering of Zechariah 3, dating from the late first century to the early second century CE,⁴⁷ 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

47 On the dating, 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), 273–74. See also Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 220–21.

Babylonian exile (Ezra 10:18).⁴⁸ He is instructed to dissolve all of these illicit unions, to marry a wife fit for priests, and to henceforth walk in righteousness, that he may be deemed fit for the resurrection which would allow him to serve in God's temple among the angels. Targum scholar Marvin A. Sweeney's translation of the Targum on Zech 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 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."**⁴⁹

Here the targumist emphasizes the gravity of the marital sins of the priests, warning that forbidden marriages would prevent them from participating in the resurrection to serve in God's temple among the angels (described here as seraphim). On the other hand, God-sanctioned marriage is explicitly endorsed and we are given no indication that such marriages will cease at the resurrection.

This Hebraic interpretive lens brings the words of Jesus to the corrupt Sadducean priests into sharp focus. In denouncing the illicit marriages that rendered them unworthy of the resurrection, Jesus was following a well-established pattern

48 This scene would have taken place a few decades before Malachi's ministry, and was likely the origin of the pattern of illicit marriages among the Second Temple priests that Malachi would later condemn.

49 Sweeney, *Tradition in Transition*, 279.

of prophetic rebuke. His specific warning was not new territory, for it was found not only in the pages of the Hebrew Bible but also in the Rabbinic Judaism of his own day.

Appendix B: The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (ca. 200 BCE–200 CE) is a work typically categorized as part of the Jewish pseudepigrapha. 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.⁵⁰ But given the relatively small number 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 work, 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

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

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 and presumes that the remaining text is of older Jewish origin. 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.⁵¹

But whether we are dealing with a Jewish text that was later modified by a second century Christian, or a text that was written entirely by a second century Christian, we have before us an early text whose author(s) saw a relationship between the sins of the first century priests and the fall of the temple.

The specific sins mentioned—robbing God of the tithes, contracting illicit marriages, and teaching false doctrine—clearly match the sins of the priesthood listed in Malachi, which were expected to continue to the time of the Messiah (Mal 3:1–5). Other Jewish pseudepigraphal works such as the Psalms of Solomon (ca. 49–69 CE) also pick up on this theme by highlighting the financial and marital sins of the priests (e.g., Pss 2:11–15; 8:11–12), but T. Levi is explicit in connecting them with the destruction of the Second Temple.

We suggest the synoptic gospel authors similarly portrayed the series of confrontations between Jesus and the temple leadership at the close of his ministry as the occasion on which he indicted the priesthood for the sins listed in Malachi, in anticipation of the temple's eventual downfall.

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