

12 Marriage, Reproduction, and the Incarnation

What Could Jesus Do?

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Introduction

It has been customary among Christians to hold that Jesus Christ did not take a spouse, did not have children, and did not engage in sexual activity.¹ The canonical Gospels certainly report no such things. But some recent historians and archeologists have challenged this view. For instance, in 2012 Harvard historian Karen King brought to public attention a fragment from a fourth-century Coptic gospel that included the inscription, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife,’” which led some to believe that Jesus had been married. Another example comes from Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson’s (2015) book *The Lost Gospel*, which purports to expose evidence that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had children. These ideas also appear in popular culture, such as Dan Brown’s book (and the resulting film) *The Da Vinci Code*. However, most historical scholars have impugned the authenticity of these findings.² Even King has recently concluded that the discovered fragment is likely a forgery.

We will not be addressing this historical debate but will assume the standard view regarding Jesus’s marital and parental status. We are, however, aware of some Christians who find the idea of Jesus engaging in sexual activity, being married, or having children as impious or somehow demeaning of Christ’s divinity, and we want to take this concern seriously. There are two related questions that should be distinguished:

1. Would it have been *morally impermissible* for an incarnate God to take a spouse, to engage in sexual relations, or to biologically reproduce?³
2. Would it have been (*overall*) *unfitting*⁴ for an incarnate God to do so?

In this paper, we’ll attempt to answer both of these questions. Regarding (1), we consider some possible reasons for answering that question in the affirmative, but we conclude that these reasons are weak. However, this issue does raise the question of why we should think that such activities are morally permissible for an incarnate God, and, as we will argue,



how one answers that question depends on which theory one holds with respect to God's ethical standards.

But even if it is morally permissible for an incarnate God to engage in sexual relations or have a wife and children, one may still wonder about (2). After a brief discussion on the notion of fittingness, we'll look into considerations for why it may seem fitting for an incarnate God to engage in such activities. In the end, however, we argue that it would not have been *overall* fitting for Jesus to do so, especially given the actual circumstances of the time and the location of the incarnation and its subsequent effects. Given that it is overall unfitting, we should expect not to find an incarnate God who did engage in such activities, which accords with the dominant view of historical scholarship on Jesus's marital and parental status.

The Question of Moral Permissibility

As far as we know, no academic scholar has offered an argument for the moral impermissibility of Christ engaging in sexual activity or having a wife or children. Nevertheless, we have noticed an almost knee-jerk reaction against the very idea of it. When King's fragment and Jacobovici and Barrie's book came out, there was a storm of popular-level responses on blogs and social media seeking to refute the alleged claims. On some occasions, there seemed to be an implicit assumption or concern that it is somehow unbecoming or unacceptable for Jesus to have engaged in such things.

One motivation for this popular reaction may be due to a quasi-Gnostic impulse by some Christians, where the body or bodily desires are regarded as inherently bad whereas the spiritual or spiritual desires are regarded as inherently good. This may yield tendencies towards Docetism in Christology, where Jesus was truly divine but only appeared to be human. Additionally, some Christians also understand St. Paul's use of '*sarx*' or 'flesh' to mean sin-nature (which is evident in some of the earlier NIV translations of the Bible), which is often associated with the physical body and its desires—and this is so even though most biblical scholars do not interpret '*sarx*' in this way (Russell 1993). This negative attitude towards the body or the physical should not hold much weight, however, since traditional Christianity maintains that God created a good world, and that human beings are created in the image of God (which we take to include both mental and physical aspects). Moreover, Jesus is clearly depicted in the Gospels as eating and drinking, even to the point where some of his contemporaries worried that he was a drunkard (or at least associated too closely with those who were). So the quasi-Gnostic impulse should be rejected by Christians.⁵

Another reason for the negative reaction to Jesus having a wife or engaging in sexual activity may come from strictly Roman Catholic





quarters, in particular in the defense of celibate priests. Catholic theologian Max Thurian (1993) claims that since Christ never married, “His life is valid justification for the vocation to celibacy.” The mandate of priestly celibacy is no doubt controversial, but the claim is that holding to a celibate Christ appears to provide some support for priestly celibacy given that Christ serves as an example or model for priests. This will of course be unpersuasive for those who reject the requirement of celibacy for clergy. Moreover, there may be other reasons for endorsing priestly celibacy (which Thurian and other Catholic theologians have offered) which does not rely upon Christ’s celibacy.

Lastly, we have heard of reactions to the claim that Christ engaged in sexual activity as somehow treating the incarnate God’s behavior in a way similar to the ancient Greco-Roman gods, who are recorded as having performed sexual activities and sired demi-god children through the usual biological means (as well as having divine children through non-biological means—such as Athena springing forth from Zeus’s head). Clearly much of the sexual activities of Zeus and the other gods were morally unacceptable, so perhaps it would also be unacceptable for Christ. But the problematic elements between the relations of the Greek gods and humans need not have been present had Christ engaged in such activities. The morally reprehensible aspects include sexual assault and violation of human dignity against the human victims of the gods. But it does not follow that loving sexual activity is thereby precluded.

The source of the worry, as we diagnose it, appears to be the feeling of unease when it comes to discussing sexuality and divinity. But if sexuality is part of God’s creation, which is good, then such a feeling of unease is not warranted, especially with a lack of a compelling reason. Moreover, one might have to be more nuanced in the claim that Christ engages in sexual activity. For the incarnate God could only do so in his human nature—just as he eats and drinks by way of his human nature and not his divine nature. Now his human nature (understanding ‘nature’ in a concrete way)⁶ has biological reproductive features, and his employment of those features should not be any more problematic than his employment of his cardiovascular or gastrointestinal features.

Perhaps, then, the main response to the popular-level worry is to “get over it”—to get over what we are not accustomed to conjoining in our thoughts. However, there is a more pressing issue, which is understanding exactly why it would be morally permissible for an incarnate God to engage in sexual activity, which we turn to next.

What if God’s Ethical Standards Are the Same as Ours?

In order for us to assess whether it is morally permissible for God to engage in sexual activity, we have to answer what makes any act morally permissible or impermissible for God. That is, we have to ask what the





ethical standards are for God. God's ethical standards are either the same as ours or they are different. Let us take each possibility in turn.

Suppose God's ethical standards are the same as ours, or at least that they overlap considerably with ours. For many Christians, some of the basic moral rules are found in the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus, and it would be morally impermissible to violate any of those moral injunctions. Or one might opt for a particular moral theory—such as divine command theory, Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, virtue exemplarism, etc.—such that moral obligations are grounded in God's commands, or the good will, or more pleasurable or less painful outcomes, or moral exemplars, etc. If God's ethical standards are the same as ours, then God would perform a wrong action provided that he violated the norm that arises from whichever theory is true of our moral obligations.

With the particular case of sexual activity, marriage, and reproduction, whatever the ethical standards are for humans with respect to these activities would then apply to God. In order to assess this, we need to know what is morally permitted with respect to these activities. Some philosophers have argued that sexual activity must only occur among monogamous married partners or that complete satisfaction of sexual fulfillment must be coital.⁷ Under this view, had Christ engaged in sexual activity without being married or reached complete sexual satisfaction outside of coitus, then Christ would have acted wrongly (which would be incompatible with the claim that he was morally perfect). However, other philosophers claim that sexual activity need not only occur between married couples or that complete satisfaction need not occur only through coitus.⁸

The difficulty, then, of knowing what is morally permissible for an incarnate God to perform depends on figuring out what is morally permissible for anyone with regards to some action. Nevertheless, since we are assuming that Christ is God incarnate, whatever the conditions are for some action being morally permissible, we can state that Christ did not do anything that was morally impermissible.⁹

That said, by most ethical standards, engaging in sexual intercourse, getting married, and having children are not intrinsically morally wrong. And they are not intrinsically immoral according to Christian doctrine. Humans can be involved in these activities provided that they abide by the relevant moral requirements (whatever they may be). If so, then Christ could have licitly engaged in sexual intercourse, married, and had children as long as he did not violate any moral obligations or perform a morally prohibited act.

There is a possible objection: does it follow that because it is not morally wrong for a human being to have sexual relations, take a spouse, and have children, then it is not morally wrong for an incarnate God to do so? This is a complex issue, especially since we are dealing with the concept of a morally perfect being. For some have argued that God must always





do what is best or what is in the class of best actions (Rowe 2004). Thus, even if God incarnate violates no binding moral rule in engaging in sexual activity or taking a spouse, it does not follow that this would be one of the morally best things to do.

In response to such a concern, one might argue that a morally perfect being need not always do what is best or that there is neither a best action nor class of best actions (Plantinga 1974). Or one might argue that it is part of the class of best actions for an incarnate God to take a spouse, have sexual relations, or have children (though we have a hard time seeing how the case for this might go). However this is answered, the burden appears to be on the objector who claims that it is not the best for God to marry or have children. After all, what appears to us as the best state of affairs may not in fact be so. For example, we might suppose that the actual world is the best or is among the best worlds, yet it appears to contain horrifying evils, ones that we might not have initially included in our description of the best worlds. Yet if such a world is in the class of best worlds—perhaps because it contains the incarnation and the atonement (Plantinga 2004)—then we should not be troubled by considerations that make it appear as though it is not (at least without further reflection). God may have outweighing reasons for creating a world with horrifying evils, though we may not know what those reasons are.¹⁰ Similarly, God may have outweighing reasons for taking on a spouse that are unknown to us. So this worry seems to us to be misplaced (or at least inadequately developed).

What if God's Ethical Standards Are Different Than Ours?

There is an easier way out of the above worry, which is to claim that the ethical standards for God are not the same as ours—that the set of moral injunctions that apply to God is disjointed from the set of moral commands that apply to human creatures. In that case, what is morally impermissible for us may not be morally impermissible for God.

Recently, Mark Murphy (2014, 2017) has offered such a view. When moral goodness is ascribed as a property of God, it is often assumed that such a notion includes an orientation towards the welfare of other sentient beings. From this assumption, some conclude that a morally good being (as far as able) prevents anything that would significantly undermine creaturely well-being unless there were strong reasons for not doing so. However, Murphy has rejected this conception of God, instead arguing that a perfect being is not required to promote creaturely well-being.¹¹ One reason is that given the maximal intrinsic value of a perfect being, every possible world with a perfect being would have no difference in value. So, the promotion of creaturely well-being does not increase the value in a world, and thus a perfect being cannot be required to perform any act that promotes creaturely well-being or prevents any setback to creaturely well-being.





Proof

What follows is that the ethical standards for God are entirely different from ours (which is compatible with the view that God has no moral obligations). The moral obligations that apply to us do not impose the same requirement for God, especially if God need not act in such a way as to promote creaturely well-being. So it would be morally wrong for one human being to steal someone else's car or to command another person to slaughter an innocent bystander, but under Murphy's view, it would not be morally wrong for God to take someone's car or to command bringing about the death of an innocent individual.

One need not adopt Murphy's account to make this claim, for a similar view regarding the non-overlapping ethical standards between God and human beings may also follow from certain forms of divine command theory.¹² In response to the criticism against God's moral goodness which arises from God's command to the Israelites to destroy every living being in the land of Canaan, William Lane Craig attempts to defend God's moral perfection by adopting a view in which the ethical standards for God and for humans do not overlap. According to Craig,

[s]ince God doesn't issue commands to Himself, He has no moral duties to fulfill. He is certainly not subject to the same moral obligations and prohibitions that we are. For example, I have no right to take an innocent life. For me to do so would be murder. But God has no such prohibition. He can give and take life as He chooses.

(Craig 2007)

Not for distribution

Under divine command theory, moral obligations are grounded in God's issuing of commands. Since God commands that we do not steal or murder each other, such actions are morally impermissible for us. However, no such commands are made to God since God is the giver of the moral law and not the recipient, and thereby no action is morally forbidden for God.

Whether one adopts Murphy's approach or Craig's version of divine command theory, the ethical standards for God are unlike ours, and hence what is morally wrong for us may be morally permissible for God. Thus, an incarnate God that has the property of being morally perfect would have no moral prohibition against any action that undermines creaturely well-being since there would be no decrease in the total value of the world, even if he were to engage in actions or permit events that diminish the well-being of human creatures. We therefore cannot assert that any sexual activity is morally impermissible for God, and the same is true for getting married and having children. So, if the ethical standards for God are different, it follows that Christ could have engaged in various activities that are morally wrong for us, such as have multiple spouses or have children out of wedlock (on the assumption that these are morally impermissible for us).

Proof





We should note that we do not endorse these views which maintain that the ethical standards for God are wholly unlike ours. It seems to us that the practice of God making covenants with human beings in effect morally binds God to act in certain ways and not in others. Moreover, the biblical claim that “it is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6:18) seems to us to make little sense unless it is morally wrong for God to lie. However, it is worth making perspicuous that stating what is morally permissible for God depends on what one’s account of morality is for God, and the laxity of Murphy and Craig’s approach allows one to claim (quite easily) that sexual activity, marriage, and having children are morally permissible for incarnate God—though it also implies that many other activities that are illicit for humans may be morally licit for God.

The approaches discussed so far have been taking moral obligations as fundamental, whether these are moral obligations that apply to both humans and God or whether there are different sets of obligations for each. They also begin by stating what such obligations are and then claim that a perfect being is one who does not violate any of them (and for Craig’s view, there need not be any such obligation). However, Linda Zagzebski has proposed another account of God’s relation to morality that reverses the priority. Instead of stating what moral duties there are that God must follow, divine motivation theory begins with an exemplar and the motives or emotions of that exemplar.¹³ What is morally fundamental, then, is a moral agent or exemplar. So an act is morally wrong just in case a moral exemplar would characteristically have an adverse motive or emotion towards that act in relevantly similar circumstances.

God does not act based on what God first regards as a good outcome or right action, but God’s actions are expressive of God’s own nature, in particular God’s motives. Zagzebski thinks this moral framework can help with certain versions of the problem of evil. The problem is often stated in a way that invokes the concept of a morally perfect being, where such a being would not permit setbacks to creaturely well-being without strong reason, and since there doesn’t appear to be any strong reason, the presence of significant setbacks (such as horrifying suffering) makes the existence of a morally perfect (and omnipotent) being less likely. For Murphy, since God need not promote creaturely well-being, God is off the hook. For Zagzebski, the problem lies in the framework which starts with certain moral duties (such as the obligation to promote creaturely well-being) that a morally perfect being must then follow. But divine motivation theory does not start with duties but rather with the emotions of exemplars. What is morally bad or morally wrong is grounded on the emotions of a moral exemplar such as God. Since God does not appear to be wholly averse to the presence of significant setbacks to creaturely well-being (since there is horrifying suffering in our world), there isn’t an obligation for God to prevent such setbacks.





The proponent of divine motivation theory, then, will have an answer similar to Murphy's on the question of whether it is morally permissible for an incarnate God to engage in sexual activity or have a wife or children. If an incarnate God is not characteristically averse to or has no negative emotions towards such activities, then God would not be performing a morally wrong act by undertaking such activities. But unlike Murphy's view, divine motivation theory allows for overlapping ethical standards for God and humans while claiming that certain activities related to sexual activity and reproduction are not morally impermissible for God.

We even have reason for thinking that an incarnate God would have positive attitudes towards these activities. Christ clearly had positive emotions towards children and rebuked those who attempted to keep children away from him. And since marriage, and its consummating act of sexual union, is a covenant that Christians claim has been established by God, then it would be odd to think that an incarnate God would have negative attitudes toward these things.

Answering the question of what is morally permissible for God is a complex issue, leading to questions about whether God has similar ethical standards as we do. From the theories examined so far, we have no reason for believing that it would have been morally impermissible for an incarnate God to have engaged in sexual activity, been married, or had children. Some of these views will maintain that he could have done so (morally speaking) only if he played by the same moral rules that we do. Other views claim that he would have done nothing wrong by doing so, and that he could have even engaged licitly in activities that would have been morally impermissible for us. So even if, contrary to current historical scholarship, Christ engaged in sexual activity, took a spouse, or biologically reproduced, he would have done nothing morally wrong. He could engage in all these acts while still being divine. Hence, the popular-level worries against somehow discovering that an incarnate God had engaged in such activities are misguided. The historical question is interesting, and there is as of yet no reason to doubt the historical consensus regarding Christ's non-marital or non-parental status. But even if new evidence shows up that is contrary to the current historical consensus, there is no worry here—at least with respect to whether an incarnate God has done anything morally wrong.

The Question of Fittingness

We now turn to our second question, whether it would be fitting for an incarnate God to engage in sexual activity, take a spouse, or produce children. There are different notions of fittingness,¹⁴ and we mean by 'fitting' something along the lines of what was meant by medieval philosophers in their use of the term *convenientia*. What is fitting, in the sense





at issue, is what is appropriate or proper given the relevant conditions of some circumstance. But that term also appears to connote various other aspects, such as beauty, harmony, suitability, expectation, probability, etc. A course of action for God is fitting provided that such an action makes the most sense, or is the most harmonious with background knowledge, or is what we would expect given God's nature and the situation at hand, etc. For our purposes, it may be enough to proceed with a rough-and-ready sense of what is appropriate or fitting for God (or any rational agent) to do. However, examining some of the different medieval conceptions might be useful in answering our question regarding what is fitting for an incarnate God to do.

Medieval philosophers, such as Anselm and Aquinas, appealed to considerations pertaining to fittingness to explain why God performed certain actions, such as becoming incarnate or making atonement for human beings. But there is an open question regarding the relation between fittingness and truth. Even Anselm concedes that fittingness does not entail truth. But consider the following passage from Anselm:

Does not this seem to be a sufficiently necessary reason that God ought to have done the things we say: that the human race—such a precious work of God—had utterly perished, and that it was not fitting that God's purpose for human beings should be completely annihilated, and that his purpose could not be brought to fulfillment unless the human race were liberated by its Creator himself?

(Anselm 1997, I.4)

Even if fittingness does not entail truth, the above passage claims that unfittingness entails falsity—that is, an unfitting course of action strictly implies that God would not undertake that course of action (Flint 2009, 99).¹⁵

Anselm's account of (un)fittingness focuses on eliminating possible courses of action for God. He also makes the distinction between what is *fitting* and what is *most fitting* (Flint 2009, 101).¹⁶ Anselm holds that if it is most fitting for God to perform such action, then it follows that God does perform that action. Though even this account appears to have worrisome consequences, such as yielding a problematic modal collapse where every true proposition turns out necessarily true (Flint 2009, 104–107).

There is, however, another way to construe fittingness, which follows closer to Aquinas's approach. Here is one way to interpret Aquinas's account of fittingness:

For Thomas *convenire* refers primarily to the bringing together of various things: *convenire*, to come or bring together. At a key point early in the argument, Thomas makes this understanding explicit:





“A means is the more appropriate [*convenientior*] for an end, as it brings together [*concurrent*] more assets towards the end” (*ST* 3.46.3). A logic based on God’s purposes underlies Christ’s passion, which we may appreciate by understanding how this act is the most fitting way to achieve that end—that is to say, how it brings about the most effects ordered towards that end. This understanding of fittingness is decisive for Thomas: the way in which a particular act is preferable to another by bringing about more effects which themselves contribute towards the goal of that act.

(Johnson 2010, 305)

What is fitting for God to do, then, is a matter of what would bring about the greatest number of desired effects. It is not to say that God is required to bring about the greatest number of desired effects, and so like Anselm, Aquinas maintains that fittingness does not entail truth. But given God’s goals, what is fitting is what would contribute to bringing about more effects related to that goal.

For this chapter, we will adopt Aquinas’s approach to fittingness. So, when we ask whether it is fitting for God to engage in sexual relations, marry, or have children, we are asking whether doing so would bring about a greater number of desired effects. If it would, then that is overall fitting for God to do; and if it does not, then that is overall unfitting for God to do.¹⁷ As we’ll argue, there are considerations of fittingness that favor God’s engaging in these activities. However, we conclude that there are more desired effects in God not engaging in these activities, and hence it is overall unfitting for God to have undertaken such activities. If fittingness is connected with expectation or probability, then the overall unfittingness of Christ engaging in sexual activity or getting married gives us reason to expect that Christ would not have done so—just as the current evidence suggests.

Reasons Favoring Fittingness

What are some desired effects that favor an incarnate God to engage in sexual activity and procreation? Let us assume a classical conception of God. From this conception, a preincarnate God arguably does not know what it is like to be limited in space, to have only finite knowledge, or to be tempted by worldly goods. However, by becoming incarnate, God acquires first-person knowledge of what it is like to be contained in a certain region, not to know everything (and to grow in wisdom), and to be tempted by food and comfort given a lengthy period of hunger and physical discomfort.¹⁸ Prior to the incarnation, God had only third-person knowledge of these experiences, but there is great value in God acquiring first-person knowledge of these experiences. Thus, it would also be valuable for God to know what it is like to experience marital





and parental activities and the associated human goods involved. There is great value in knowing what it is like to fall in love with another, make vows of commitment, consummate that union through sexual intimacy, and share with one's partner the joint activity of loving one's progeny. So, acquiring first-person knowledge of these valuable experiences provides some reason for God to engage in these activities.

However, some may claim that God need not actually engage in these activities to have first-person knowledge of them. For God may have the property of omnisubjectivity, which is "the property of consciously grasping with perfect accuracy and completeness the first-person perspective of every conscious being" (Zagzebski 2008, 232). It is often assumed that God does not know what it is like to be me. However, even humans are able to somewhat understand the perspective of another via empathy, such that one experiences the emotion of another person. That is, if one empathizes with a person's grief over the loss of a loved one, then the empathizer experiences that emotion (or one very similar to it). One *totally* empathizes with another if she is in a "state of representing all of another person's conscious states including their beliefs, sensations, moods, desires, and choices, as well as their emotions," and *perfect total* empathy "includes a complete and accurate representation of all of another person's conscious states" (ibid., 241). If God has perfect total empathy for every conscious being, then God has omnisubjectivity. An omnisubjective being would not have to engage in sexual, marital, or reproductive activity in order to know what it is like to experience these activities, especially if such a being perfectly and accurately represents those experiences for herself. Therefore, the above reason for the fittingness of an incarnate God to engage in sexual activity wouldn't apply to God if God has omnisubjectivity.

But even if God already knows what these experiences are like, there is great value in God sharing the full human experience, including mundane marital and parental activities that are part of our daily joys and struggles. Even in human relationships, there is value in participating in an activity that one is familiar with but with different companions. One might already know what camping is like with one friend, but there is great value in sharing that experience with another friend. By possessing omnisubjectivity, God therefore already knows what it is like to be sexually intimate with someone or to be a parent, but sharing in that experience with us by actually engaging in them can yield a deeper sense of fellowship and mutual understanding.¹⁹

Consider the following biblical passage: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). If God has the property of omnisubjectivity, then he empathizes with us maximally, and so is consciously aware of our weaknesses. The passage also states that Christ has been tempted as we have been, and





there are unique temptations with respect to sexual relations, marriage, and parenthood. By being involved in a romantic relationship, Christ could have been tempted by bouts of jealousy. By being a parent, Christ could have been tempted to neglect his children when there were competing goods, such as working as a carpenter or teaching his disciples. Similar temptations are ones that those of us involved sexually with others or who have children deal with on a regular basis. Experiencing these temptations not only would have allowed an incarnate God to share in the full range of human experiences, but it also would have provided for us an exemplar who demonstrated through his own life how we are to manage through these temptations.

Reasons Favoring Unfittingness

It is clear that there are some considerations that make it fitting for an incarnate God to engage in sexual activity, marry, or have children, for it is a desirable effect for God to know what it is like to undergo these experiences or for God to share in a wider range of human experiences that do not involve sin. Nevertheless, we will argue that there are outweighing considerations that favor the unfittingness for an incarnate God to engage in these activities, especially in the actual circumstances in which God decided to become incarnate. Therefore, we conclude that it would be overall unfitting for God to be sexually intimate with another partner, take a spouse, or reproduce.

Suppose Jesus had taken a spouse and consummated that union. It seems likely that in first-century Palestine that the partner of Christ would have been attributed an elevated status, perhaps regarded on a level much higher than would be merited or appropriate. Although we think multiple incarnations by divine beings are possible,²⁰ we have no reason to believe that Christ's partner would have been a divine person (that is, that such a human nature was assumed by a divine person). Moreover, given that sexual relations are unitive acts in which the persons involved are united biologically, psychologically, spiritually, etc., one might expect a strong temptation on the followers of Christ to worship that partner, thereby increasing the likelihood of idolatry (leading to the violation of the command that one should not worship anyone but God).^{21,22}

For similar reasons, it would be unfitting for Christ to procreate since the incarnate being's progeny would also be subject to the increased likelihood of idolatry or being given an inappropriate elevated status, again on the assumption that the child remained merely human. There already exists in popular imagination conspiracy theories related to the bloodline of Christ. Now imagine that Christ really did have biological successors, none of which were divine. When candidates for a messianic figure were killed off or defeated, followers of that figure often turned to that individual's family member to follow subsequently as the next messianic





candidate. So, if Jesus had a child, we might expect a turn away from Christ at his death and a turn to the child as the next messianic figure, which goes against orthodox Christology that Christ is the anointed one and true king of God's people. Therefore, given how followers of the Messiah might well have acted in that time period, there likely would be undesirable effects had Christ married or had children.²³

Another reason why sexual relations and reproduction would have been unfitting for an incarnate God has to do with the circumstances of the Christian church in the first two centuries. Imitation of Christ was taken extremely seriously, to the point that many early Christians were willing and perhaps even overly zealous to be martyred in order to share in Jesus's self-sacrifice. For example, Ignatius of Antioch appeared quite eager to imitate in Christ's suffering, and this appears to be true also of Polycarp. Hence, we find a theme of *imitatio Christi* running throughout some strands in the early Church approach to Christian living (Moss 2012). If Jesus were married or had children, then there may have been many who might have been tempted to elevate the status of marriage or parenthood, and this could yield the consequence of some denigrating those who are single or without children.²⁴ However, the quality of discipleship is not necessarily related to one's marital or parental status.²⁵

In addition, when considering what activities are fitting for an incarnate God to perform, we must take into account God's purpose for the incarnation, which we take to be primarily soteriological—to accomplish the redemption and reconciliation of human beings to God. So, although there is nothing wrong with getting married, engaging in intercourse, or having children, such activities and their accompanying roles might have detracted Christ from his soteriological mission.²⁶ St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, maintains the moral permissibility of marriage and sexual relations while claiming that it is better to avoid these activities when one is concerned with the work of the Lord. Married individuals and parents have divided interests, while unmarried persons can concentrate much more single-mindedly on the work of the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32–34), and so *a fortiori* does this hold for Christ.

Part of Christ's soteriological mission involved fulfilling Jewish prophecies (when he read from the prophet Isaiah in Luke 4 and declared the fulfillment of the year of the Lord's favor), overturning legal and ceremonial systems that harmed individuals (especially the poor and the oppressed, such as the injunction against divorce which would have likely harmed women in that society since they would have likely become destitute), and ultimately save people through his death and resurrection. It is hard to imagine how one could be a good or exemplary spouse or parent while trying to accomplish these tasks, especially since his interaction with political and religious rulers often put Christ in harm's way (or at least raised the threat of harm). It is even recorded how difficult it was for his mother and his family members to get close to him, and Jesus appears





aloof with respect to them given the need of the people to whom he was ministering (Matthew 12:46–50). Finally, his soteriological task culminated in his death, his resurrection, and to his bodily ascension. Thus, his soteriological mission would have resulted in leaving behind a widow and an orphan had Christ been married and reproduced.²⁷

Had circumstances been different or had God decided to become incarnate in a different place or time, it might have been more fitting for God to have taken a spouse, engaged in sexual activity, or biologically reproduced. If the cultural tendencies were not such that followers of a messianic figure would elevate the status of close family members, then the temptation to elevate the status of Christ's spouse or child might have been removed or kept to a minimum. Or had the situation of the early Church not focused on *imitatio Christi*, perhaps the unwarranted elevation of marriage or parenthood could be avoided. Then under these circumstances, it might have been more fitting for an incarnate God to engage in these activities. So fittingness is somewhat relative; it depends on the local and temporal context.

We have seen, then, that there are considerations of fittingness in favor of an incarnate God engaging in sexual activity, taking a spouse, and reproducing. However, we have also raised considerations for its unfittingness. To be clear, we take overall fittingness to be estimating which action would result in more desired effects, hence the reasons in favor of an overall fitting action need not be so strong as to defeat the reasons against—hence, it is possible for an incarnate God to do something that is not overall fitting, for God may have good reasons for doing so. But in our estimation, there seem to be more desired effects with respect to God's ultimate goal that can be achieved if Christ does not undertake these activities, and hence it is overall fitting for Christ not to do so.

Overall Fittingness vs. Most Fittingness

Since fittingness is associated with probability or expectation, we conclude that the overall unfittingness for Christ to engage in sexual relations or have a spouse or child should yield historical evidence that accords with this expectation. And indeed, current historical scholarship favors the standard view that Christ remained celibate. But one may worry about the possibility of the current historical consensus being mistaken. Even if it is, this would not undermine the historicity of the New Testament documents (since they are silent about it), nor would it undermine the divinity of Christ since we have argued that such activities are morally permissible for an incarnate God. But would the overturning of the historical consensus threaten our case that such activities are overall unfitting?

For the Anselmian approach to fittingness, it is not a problem since all these considerations may merely be showing what is fitting for God,





not what is most fitting for God, which would entail truth since God does what is most fitting. But if one is only providing a case for what is fitting, then it is possible to find an outcome contrary to what one expects. However, given the concerns raised against Anselm's approach (in Flint 2009), we opted for a Thomistic account of fittingness.

We take overall fittingness not to be decisive in the sense that it entails that God does what is overall fitting (so we take overall fittingness to be distinct from what is most fitting). It was overall fitting that the atonement was accomplished through the death of Christ on the cross (and his resurrection), but it was not necessary such that the atonement could have been accomplished by other means. But the desirable effects of such an atonement (as enumerated by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* III, Q. 46, a. 3–4) makes it overall fitting. Hence, what is overall fitting is what is more probable. For example, it may be more probable that a loaded die (skewed towards landing on '6') land on '6,' but it may land on another number, and doing so would not imply that the die is not loaded. So, we have argued that there are more desirable effects if Christ does not engage in sexual activity or have a spouse or child, but there are also some desirable effects if Christ does so. Choosing on the basis of producing a desirable effect is not irrational for an agent, and hence Christ would have been rational in choosing to engage in sexual activity. The historical consensus turning out wrong, then, does not threaten our case that it is overall fitting for Christ not to engage in such activities, for what is overall fitting is not what is most fitting.

Conclusion

Our conclusion is that it was morally permissible for an incarnate God to have sexual relations, take a spouse, or biologically reproduce. Historical fascination with overturning current consensus regarding Christ's marital or parental status, then, should not be threatening for traditional Christians who maintain an orthodox Christology. Either Christ engages in such activities but remains within the parameters of our moral laws (on the assumption that the ethical standards for God and humans overlap with respect to sexual activities) or that any of those activities are licit for God since God has different ethical standards. Thus, there need be no knee-jerk reaction to dismantle the case that contradicts the historical consensus of Christ's marital or parental status. We should take each historical evidence on its own and weigh it on its own merits, and not with the impulsive need to overturn it.

We have also concluded that it is overall unfitting for Christ to have engaged in these activities, and thus we expect the evidence to be as it actually is, that Christ was celibate. But since we take what is overall (un)fitting to be probabilistic (unlike the Anselmian notion of what is most





fitting), the overturning of the historical case does not go against our view that it is overall fitting for Christ not to engage in these activities.

Now much of what we have been arguing in this paper has been rather speculative. This is inevitable when investigating counterfactual situations, especially concerning what God would or wouldn't do. We are open to being corrected where we have erred. But in the spirit of this volume, we do not expect to have given the last word on this matter, but we hope that this is only the beginning of a discussion on these matters which have been mostly neglected in the philosophy of religion.

Notes

1. We should note that in this paper, we assume orthodox Christology as defined by the ancient creeds. That is, we hold that Jesus Christ was God incarnate, one person with a human nature and a divine nature.
2. For one example of serious critique, see Richard Bauckham's "Assessing *The Lost Gospel*," which he posted online as a series of refutations of Jacobovici and Wilson's theory. His critique can be found online at: <http://markgoodacre.org/BauckhamLostGospel-full.pdf>
3. In this chapter, we will assume that such activities will in some cases be morally permissible for mere human beings (i.e., non-divine human beings), and so we will assume for the sake of argument the denial of anti-natalism (with regards to the moral permissibility of biological reproduction).
4. We define 'fitting' and 'overall fitting' below.
5. Some of the creeds were formulated to rule out such impulses, thereby giving Christians even more reason to reject this line of reasoning. We thank Kevin Timpe for this point.
6. It is typical to construe Christ's natures as either abstract or concrete. An abstractist approach treats the natures as abstract properties whereas a concretist approach treats the natures as concrete entities, typically a soul-body composite for the human nature of Christ. For more on this distinction, see Plantinga 1999.
7. For those who defend this position, see Pruss 2012 and Lee and George 2014.
8. For a defense of this view, see Corvino 2013. Of course, Corvino rejects the theological assumptions of Christians. But if his arguments are correct and if the ethics of an incarnate God overlaps ours, then the boundaries of what is morally permissible for an incarnate will be drawn differently than the boundaries set by the Catholic philosophers cited in endnote 7.
9. There are some complications. If one had strong antecedent reason to believe that Christ is divine, then if it were discovered that Christ did have sexual activity outside of marriage, then such a fact may serve as a defeater for the claim that such an activity is morally impermissible for anyone. Or one might be strongly convinced that sexual activity outside of a monogamous marriage is morally impermissible, so one may conclude that we will never come across strong reasons or evidence to suppose that Christ did do so. And perhaps it is this conviction that yields the knee-jerk reaction against Christ having engaged in such activities that we discussed in the previous section.
10. One way of taking this approach would be adopting skeptical theism. For more on skeptical theism, see Bergmann 2009 and Dougherty 2014.





11. Murphy's key distinction is between *requiring* reasons and *justifying* reasons (2017, 59), where a justifying reason for S to perform action A makes that action a rational option for S (though S's not performing A would also be rational), whereas a requiring reason for S to do A makes not doing A irrational for S. And Murphy argues that a perfect being would only have justifying reasons for promoting creaturely well-being, not requiring reasons.
12. For one example, inspired by an Ockhamist approach, see Adams 1999.
13. Zagzebski 2004, 309. According to her theory, we can pick out moral exemplars even without knowing the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a moral exemplar (similar to those who claim that we can pick out water without knowing it is made up of H₂O). Zagzebski argues that moral exemplars are picked out by the emotion of admiration (and by reflection). For more on her theory, see Zagzebski 2017.
14. Our meaning of 'fitting' is different than a familiar term used in current ethical/metaethical discussions. For more on the latter concept, see Howard 2018.
15. Flint 2009 also shows that Anselm may have held the stronger principle that unfittingness entails impossibility, which would make fittingness equivalent to possibility, which may not be an adequate conception.
16. The distinction between what is fitting and what is most fitting appears to be similar to Murphy's 2014 distinction between *justifying* reasons and *requiring* reasons, respectively.
17. Kevin Timpe has raised the worry that this account of overall fittingness may collapse into what is most fitting, for if God has more reasons to do x than y, then God will do x. However, we maintain that Aquinas's approach leaves open God doing y. Suppose God has reasons R1 and R2 for doing x but only reason R3 for doing y. So doing x is overall fitting given that it would produce greater number of desired effects (e.g., whatever reason cited in R1 and R2). However, God may still do y, and if God were asked why, God would cite R3. Having a greater number reasons or a greater number of desired effects does not guarantee that that action will be performed.
18. Of course this is not God's main reason for becoming incarnate, though we think it may serve as a valuable good in favor of doing so. Moreover, if one maintains that God is omnirational (in the sense found in Pruss 2013), then God does act partly on this basis.
19. Some may want to claim that God exercises some restraint here. For example, we have heard that Dallas Willard held a view such that although God could know all true propositions, he intentionally withholds knowledge of some things for the good of creatures (or something along these lines). Similarly, God might be able to represent every first-person perspective but may withhold from doing so in some cases.
20. See Pawl 2016 and Aquinas 1947, *Summa Theologiae* III, Q.3, a. 7.
21. Kevin Timpe raises the worry that in the incarnation, there is a union of the divine nature and the human nature, but that we don't worship the human nature. But since that union is greater than the union of marriage, why worry about worshiping Christ's partner? However, this comparison appears inapt, since we would argue that we don't worship natures but rather worship the person Christ, who has both a divine and human nature. Moreover, the idolatrous outcome is only probabilistic—it is not guaranteed or entailed.
22. Blake Hereth raises the concern that our reasoning may count against Jesus picking disciples, especially since there was some temptation to elevate the disciples. Historically, the only disciples elevated were the clear successors or those associated with miraculous deeds. Moreover, we are indeed asserting that given the cultural milieu of first-century Palestine, the probability of



- idolatry occurring appears significantly higher for a divine being taking a spouse than for a divine being taking on students. We are, of course, open to correction here.
23. Additionally, Christ marrying or having children may exhibit a problematic form of favoritism, thereby making such acts unfitting. We thank Blake Hereth for this point.
 24. There exists, even now, in some Protestant circles, a problematic view of those who are in church ministry and who are single or who have no children (despite Paul's claim otherwise in 1 Corinthians 7), and this problem may have been aggravated had Jesus taken on a family.
 25. No doubt that some may argue that Jesus's remaining single and celibate has yielded some problematic effects such as the controversy surrounding priestly celibacy. However, it does not appear that the status of being single as such has been elevated, whereas we think that Christ's being married would have elevated that status as such—especially since getting married would have been something that he had to go out and do, whereas remaining single doesn't require going out and doing something (and it's harder to argue for the case that because Christ didn't do A, then not A-ing is a better thing).
 26. Of course Christ engaged in activities that appear not to have detracted from his soteriological mission, such as eating at feasts and going to weddings. However, we believe there is a big difference between these more mundane activities and the activities of marriage and reproduction since these add the social roles that Christ would have had to play, such as being a husband or father, along with the attending obligations that come with such roles. Whereas eating, drinking, and attending parties do not come with a significant social role with significant obligations.
 27. We think that Christ's death was the overall fitting means of accomplishing atonement. However, some may claim that Christ's death was neither necessary nor overall fitting. If so, then the result of leaving a young widow or an orphan may not be applicable (had Christ lived a typical life and died a natural death). We thank Blake Hereth for raising this point.

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