



And Death is Gain...A Reflection on the Christian View of Death

By: Msgr. Charles Pope

*Deus, qui fidelium ment*In the month of November, we remember the souls of the faithful departed and our obligation to pray for them. November and into the early part of Advent is also a part of the Church year during which we begin to ponder the last things: death, judgment, Heaven, and Hell. In the northern hemisphere, the days grow shorter. In regions farther north, the once green trees and fields shed their lively green, and after the brief, golden gown of autumn, a kind of death overtakes the landscape. Life changes; we grow older, and one day we will die.

It is fitting at this time that we ponder the passing glory of things and set our gaze on Heaven, where joys will never end. There is a beautiful prayer in the Roman Missal that captures this disposition:

Dues unius efficit voluntatis, da populis tuis id amare quod praecipis, id desiderare quod promittis, ut, inter mundanas varietates, ibi nostra fixa sint corda, ubi vera sunt gaudia.

O God, who makes the minds of the faithful to be of one accord, grant to your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, among the changes of this world, our hearts may there be fixed where true joys are (21st Sunday of the year).

So here we are, well into November. Summer has passed and winter beckons. Ponder with me the fact that this world is passing. And I have a question to ask you:

How do you see death? Do you long to one day depart this life and go home to God? St. Paul wrote to the Philippians of his longing to leave this world and go to God. He was not suicidal; he just wanted to be with God:

Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me life is Christ, and death is gain. If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. And I do not know which I shall choose. I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better. Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit (Phil 1:20-23).

These days I am struck by the fact that almost no one speaks publicly of their longing to depart this life and be with God. I suspect it is because we live very comfortably, at least in the affluent West. Many of the daily hardships with which even our most recent ancestors struggled have been minimized or even eliminated. I suppose that when the struggles of this life are minimized, fewer people long to leave it and go to Heaven. They set their sights, hopes, and prayers on having things be better HERE. "O God, please give me better health, a better marriage, a financial blessing, a promotion at work, ..." In other words, "Make this world an even better place for me and I'll be content to stay here, rather than longing to go to Heaven."

Longing to be with God was more evident in the older prayers, many of which were written just a few generations ago. Consider, for example, the well known Salve Regina and note (especially in the words I have highlighted in bold) the longing to leave this world and be with God:

Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our Life, our Sweetness, and our Hope. To Thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To Thee do we send up our sighs, mourning, and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious Advocate, Thine Eyes of Mercy towards us, and after this our exile, show us the Blessed Fruit of thy Womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

The prayer acknowledges in a very realistic and sober way that life here can be very difficult. Rather than ask for deliverance from all of it, for this world is an exile after all, the prayer simply expresses a longing to go to Heaven and be worthy to see Jesus. It is this longing that I sense is somewhat absent in our modern world, even among regular Churchgoers.

When was the last time you meditated on Heaven? When was the last time you heard a sermon on Heaven? I understand that we all have a natural fear and aversion to dying. But for a Christian, there should be a deepening thirst for God that begins to erode the fear and aversion to death. St. Francis praised God for Sister bodily death which no one can escape (Canticum Fratris Solis). And why not praise God for it? It is what ultimately brings us home.

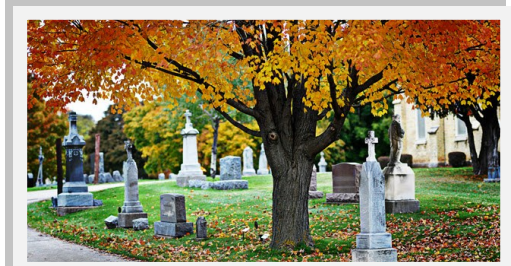
As for me, I will say it: I long to leave this world one day and go home and be with God. I am not suicidal and I love what I do here. But I can't wait to be with God. I don't mind getting older because it means I'm closer to home. Another day's journey and I'm so glad because I'm one day closer to home! In our youth-centered culture, people (especially women) are encouraged to be anxious about getting older. As for me, when I hit forty, I said, "Hallelujah, I'm halfway home (err ... as far as I know)!" Now at 53, I rejoice even more. I'm glad to be getting older. God has made me wiser and He is preparing me to meet Him. I can't wait!

Even a necessary stopover in Purgatory cannot eclipse the joy of the day we die. There will surely be the suffering that precedes our death. But deep in our heart, if we are a believer, must ring forth the word, "Soon!" An old spiritual says, "Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world, going home to live with God."

So I ask you again, do you long for heaven? Do you long to depart this world and be with God? You say, "Yes, but first let me raise my kids!" I know, but do you rejoice as the years tick by and the goal becomes closer? Do you long to be with God?

I close with the words of Psalm 27:

One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD ... My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me.



HAVE THEY DISCOVERED A NEW “LOST GOSPEL” THAT SAYS JESUS WAS MARRIED?

by Jimmy Akin

It's getting near Christmas, and you know what that means. That's right! It's time for another book to be released telling us the sensationalistic “truth” about Christianity. This time we have *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus' Marriage to Mary the Magdalene* by Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson. You may remember Jacobovici from his involvement in previous biblical-archeological shenanigans like the discredited “Jesus family tomb” claims of a few years ago—in which Jacobovici similarly claimed that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.

So what do he and sensationalist co-author Barrie Wilson have in store for us this time?

Zecharias Who? The key text used in their new book is preserved in a set of writings attributed to Zecharias Rhetor (i.e., Zecharias the Rhetorician), also known as Zecharias Scholasticus (i.e., Zecharias the Scholar), also known as Zecharias of Mytilene. He was a native of Gaza who lived in the late A.D. 400s and early 500s and who became the bishop of Mytilene. He wrote a number of works in Greek, including a work on Church history that was later translated into Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic), with various editorial changes. It is this Syriac text, brought to the British Museum in 1847, that Jacobovici and Wilson are using in their new book.

What They're Claiming. Among other things, Jacobovici and Wilson claim that they have discovered a lost gospel that is written in code and, when properly decoded, states that Jesus was married, likely to Mary Magdalene, and that they had two sons.

None of this is true.

Not Lost. First, the text in question is not “lost.” It is not some newly discovered work that scholars were previously unaware of. The particular manuscript that Jacobovici and Wilson rely on was brought to the British Museum for more than a century and a half ago, and the same text has been known through other sources for centuries. The scholarly community has been well aware of it, and translations of it in English and other languages are common. To give you an idea of how not-lost this work is, it's been in print for centuries, I have it in my own library, and here's a version you can read online from a book printed in 1918.

Not a Gospel. The work is also not a Gospel. Although some scholars use the term “Gospel” in surprising and misleading ways, a Gospel (in the literary sense) is a book about the life and/or teachings of Jesus. That is not what this text is. This text is not about Jesus. The story it tells is not even set in the first century, when Jesus lived. It's set more than a thousand years before the time of Christ.

Not a Code About Jesus. The work is also not a coded version of the story of Jesus. Instead, it's a work of historical fiction about two figures we already know from the Old Testament: Joseph and Asenath.

Who were Joseph and Asenath? Joseph was one of the sons of Jacob. He angered his brothers, who sold him into slavery. Eventually, he ended up in Egypt, where he rose to prominence and married an Egyptian woman named Asenath, who was the daughter of an Egyptian priest. She and Joseph later had two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who became the patriarchs of two of the tribes of Israel. You can read the biblical account of Joseph in Genesis 37-50, and we read about his marriage to Asenath in Genesis 41:45, 50, and 46:20.

Why are these two figures discussed in Zecharias's writings? If you go into a Christian bookstore today—be it Protestant or Catholic—you are likely to find novelizations of the lives of various biblical and historical figures. These may be fictionalized lives of Old Testament saints, like Abraham and Moses, New Testament saints, like Peter or Paul, or saints from later Church history, like Augustine or Francis of Assisi. Out of the same impulse, a desire to know and imagine more about what famous religious figures' lives were like, Jews and Christians in the ancient world sometimes wrote fictionalized lives of their forebears, and that's what the ancient work known as Joseph and Asenath is: It's a fictionalized account of the lives of the Old Testament patriarch Joseph and his wife.

What happens in the story? A bunch of things, but basically it falls into two parts. The first part is devoted to Asenath's conversion to the Hebrew faith. As the daughter of an Egyptian priest, she was raised a polytheist and an idolater, and in later ages, Jewish men were forbidden from marrying foreign women because of their idolatry and how they would tempt their husbands to worship other gods.

This raised a question: How could the patriarch Joseph have married a foreign woman—an Egyptian, even! The first part of the novel answers this by proposing that Asenath repented of her idolatry and embraced the worship of the true God, making her a fitting bride for Joseph. The second part of the novel deals with an adventure in which the son of Pharaoh tries to get Asenath for himself, but Asenath prays to God, who intervenes to save the situation. Pharaoh and his wicked son die, and Joseph becomes the regent of Egypt until a different son of Pharaoh is old enough to reign.

So this isn't a coded story about Jesus? No. It's a straightforward historical novel about two familiar Old Testament figures. It addresses questions that an ancient Jewish audience

Advent Wreath

A Family Activity

You will need a Bible and four candles to celebrate this blessing.

Before your family has gathered for the blessing, select one of the following Scripture passages to be read during the blessing: Isaiah 11:1-4, 61:1-2; Mark 1:1-8; James 5:7-10; or Philippians 4:4-7. Have someone volunteer to read the passage.

Place the Advent wreath on a table and have your family gather around it. Lower the light level in the room to create an appropriate atmosphere for the blessing. Place the four candles (symbolizing the four weeks of Advent) on the table and light a single candle for the first week of Advent. Have someone lead your family in the following prayer.

Leader: This week we begin the season of Advent, when the days grow short and darkness closes in. We are preparing to celebrate at Christmas the birth of Jesus, who is the light of the world. Let's spend some quiet time being aware of the darkness and longing for the light.

(Pause a few moments and then pray the Sign of the Cross.)

Leader: Lord God, bless this wreath and bless us as well. May this wreath remind us of the hope and joy that Jesus brings into the world. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Leader: Advent means “arrival.” In the season of Advent, the church prepares to celebrate the coming of Jesus. We recall the past, celebrate the present, and look to the future with hope. We prepare to celebrate not only the birth of Jesus but also his presence in our family. We wait for the return of the Lord at the end of time when all hopes will be fulfilled. We await the coming of the light that will shine in the darkness, shining light on our path to peace.

Reader: A reading from [name of book in Bible]. (Reader reads selected passage.)

Leader: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

All: Amen.

All: Pray the Lord's Prayer.



would have, like how a pagan priest's daughter could marry a biblical patriarch. Its mention of Joseph's and Asenath's two sons—Ephraim and Manasseh—is not to tell us about sons of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. They are mentioned because they were the patriarchs of two of the later tribes (or “half-tribes”) that everyone in ancient Israel knew about. And it contains a thrilling tale of how God answers prayer and will protect those who turn to him from the machinations of others—just like multiple accounts in the Old Testament.

Are there unanswered questions about the work? Sure. Like a lot of ancient literature, we aren't sure who wrote it or when. There is even debate about whether Joseph and Asenath was a Jewish or a Christian work, or possibly a Jewish work with Christian edits. There are also some strange things in it—like material involving bees and a honeycomb—that some have suggested is meant to teach some kind of spiritual lesson, though it is hard to figure out. *However, the idea that Joseph and Asenath is a coded life story of Jesus is without foundation.*

Are there particular reasons to think that Jesus was not married? Yes. Among other things that could be said, Jesus points to celibacy as a spiritual ideal, saying that this gift is not given to everyone but should be accepted by those to whom it is given (Matt. 19:11-12). Since Jesus was considered himself the paragon of spirituality for Christians, it would be strange for him to propose this spiritual ideal if he himself did not meet it. Further, Jesus depicts himself as a bridegroom (Matt. 9:15, 25:1-10, cf. John 3:27-30), but the marriage he has is a mystical one, not a literal one, for the New Testament portrays the bride of Christ as his Church, not as an individual woman (2 Cor. 11:2, Eph. 5:22-33, Rev. 19:7, 21:2, 9). It is difficult to see how this understanding of the Church as the bride of Christ could have arisen if there were a literal “Mrs. Jesus.” By virtue of her marriage to Jesus, she would have instantly become a prominent figure in early Christianity, and her status as the literal bride of Christ would have prevented the understanding of the Church as the mystical bride of Christ from developing.