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**A FAIR QUESTION:  
Does Mormon Apologist Marc A. Schindler Successfully  
Harmonize Celestial Marriage with Matthew 22:23–30?**

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**Synopsis**

Within Mormon theology, celestial marriage is both eternal and essential to achieving godhood. Therefore, Jesus' revelation that "marrying" will cease in the afterlife (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34–36) represents a formidable barrier that must be removed if celestial marriage is to avoid conflict with the Bible. Mormon apologist Marc A. Schindler assumes this very task by attempting to demonstrate that Jesus was not eliminating marriage altogether, but only the contraction of new marriages in heaven. In doing so, he appeals to the precise meanings of the Greek verbs used in these passages.

In response, Christians may argue that Jesus' pronouncement that they "neither marry, nor are given in marriage" has been subjected by Schindler to a literal and fragmented reading, which overlooks the idiomatic value of the statement. Comparisons with the Old Testament and other texts in the Gospels, where the same combination occurs, reveal that "to marry and be given in marriage" is a formula for the entire institution of marriage and the family. The context of the dispute further supports this interpretation, since the abolition of marriage in the afterlife silences the Sadducees and comports with the reaction of the bystanders. Consequently, Schindler's effort to harmonize the Bible with the LDS view of celestial marriage fails.

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Since authoritative revelation on the eternal state is limited, our understanding of conditions in the afterlife is properly restricted to logical inferences and cautious guesswork. One of the few conditions, however, that most scholars believe we can safely assign to the afterlife is celibacy and the extinction of marriage, primarily on the basis of pronouncements in the Gospel tradition: Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25; and Luke

20:34–36. These texts contain Jesus’ response to the Sadducees that in the resurrection men and women “neither marry, nor are given in marriage,” provided here in Luke’s expanded version: “And Jesus answering said unto them, ‘The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage: But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.’”<sup>1</sup> As it turns out, this conventional understanding of the text contradicts the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ (LDS) doctrine of celestial marriage, which is an essential step in a Mormon’s exaltation to godhood. These texts are problematic because in LDS theology, celestial marriages, under the right conditions, will continue in the afterlife and last for eternity. (Marriages for “time,” on the other hand, will be dissolved at death.) Understandably, then, the consensus position on these passages has provoked Mormons to develop a response. This includes FAIR, the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, a prominent, though unofficial, apologetic arm of the LDS church.

In a 2002 article, “Doesn’t Matthew 22:23–30 Contradict the LDS Doctrine of Eternal Marriage?” FAIR apologist Marc A. Schindler attempts to remove this roadblock and bring this indispensable Mormon doctrine into line with Scripture.<sup>2</sup> His argument consists of two major planks.

First, Schindler claims that Jesus sidestepped the doctrinal problem inherent in the Sadducees’ question, rather than directly addressing it. Jesus, instead, chided the Sadducees for their ignorance of the Old Testament. According to Schindler, God will sort out the nettlesome issues raised by the Sadducees in Paradise. His description of the Sadducees’ strategy and the severity of the problem they pose is, nevertheless, insufficient.

Second, he argues from the Greek text (correctly, I might add) that the verbs themselves signify only the initiation of marriage and not the continuing state of marriage. He concludes therefore that all that is discontinued is the performance of *new* marriages in the afterlife, not the extension of previous (celestial) ones—all of which is perfectly compatible with Mormon doctrine.

### **Is the Literal Meaning the Best?**

Schindler is not the first to observe that the Greek verbs *gameo* (“marry”) and *gamizo* (“give [a woman] in marriage”) describe entrance into marriage rather than the state of marriage. Certain New Testament scholars have also pointed out that these verbs, when correctly understood, rule out the possibility of weddings in the resurrection, rather than the possibility of wedlock.<sup>3</sup> This group includes the distinguished evangelical scholar Ben Witherington III, who has argued this point rather persistently.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the initial plausibility of this position, however, it appears that these authors have overlooked the idiomatic value of these terms when used together. That is, *gameo* and *gamizo* when teamed up mean much more than the sum of their individual parts: men marry and women are given in marriage. Rather, they refer to the entire

practice of family building, what we would call today the institution of marriage and the family. This is exactly what the Hebrew counterpart and probable source of these verbs means in the Old Testament,<sup>5</sup> with Jeremiah 29:6 as the best example: “Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished.”

Here a minimalist interpretation is impossible. Jeremiah is clearly speaking of perpetuating the family into future generations, using the same kind of vocabulary that Jesus used, “taking and giving in marriage,” though in a more robust and nuanced way. The rendering in the Gospels simply represents an abbreviated version of the same type of construction, probably shortened for memorability and impact, as was Jesus’ custom. And Jesus’ penchant for using figures of speech and catchy expressions to assist memorization is widely acknowledged.<sup>6</sup>

More importantly, the same expression occurs elsewhere in the Gospels, where it is accompanied by other paired activities, which are clearly idiomatic.<sup>7</sup> “And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded” (Luke 17:26–28; parallel Matt. 24:37–39).

For example, here, “eating” and “drinking” refer not only to the mundane activities of consuming food and beverage for survival, but to the pleasure associated with meals, feasting, and fellowship. It could easily be paraphrased, “they were enjoying good times.” Likewise, “planting” and “building” signify much more than just these tasks: planting includes harvesting and consuming the harvest, and building involves auxiliary activities such as dedicating houses and living in them (Deut. 20:5–6; Isa. 65:21; Jer. 29:5, 28). Therefore, because “marrying and being given in marriage” occurs within the same context as these idioms, it stands to reason that it also possesses an idiomatic and expanded meaning: the institution of marriage and the family. And if the meaning of the pair is idiomatic *here*, it vouches for the same sense in our passages, especially since both situations broadly describe conditions within ages or eras. Therefore, I submit that “marrying and being given in marriage” refers to the entire institution of marriage and the family, which will expire with this age—as most scholars, from a variety of theological backgrounds, have already recognized.

### **DOES JESUS CIRCUMVENT THE ISSUE?**

It will be recalled that Schindler also attempted to make sense of Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees’ question, which reads as follows: “Master, Moses wrote unto us, If any man’s brother die, having a wife, and he die without children, that his brother should take his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother. There were therefore seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and died without children. And the second took her to wife, and he died childless. And the third took her; and in like manner the seven also: and

they left no children, and died. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore in the resurrection whose wife of them is she? for seven had her to wife” (Luke 20:28–33).

Underlying their question is the assumption that the resurrected state must be like the present: marriage continues and marital commitments from this age are carried over into the next. Hence, the concept of a resurrected state is patently absurd, because the remarried widow must be simultaneously married to seven husbands in the resurrection, since all seven had *equal* claim on her. According to the conventional interpretation, Jesus entirely disarms the Sadducees by informing them that marriage is a necessity of this age but will become obsolete in the next. It will do so because, like angels, human beings will never die again (Luke 20:36)—with the implication that procreation is therefore unnecessary.<sup>8</sup> As a result of Jesus’ explanation, the marital complications anticipated in the resurrected state disappear along with the doctrinal ambush of the Sadducees.

By rejecting this reading, however, alternative explanations for Jesus’ answer must be sought. According to Schindler, Jesus’ prohibition against new marriages in heaven underscores the necessity of contracting celestial marriages in this life; this may reinforce Joseph Smith, Jr.’s, unique, Mormon interpretation of this passage (see below), but it does not address the actual problem posed by the Sadducees—nor does it appear that Schindler intended it to.

Therefore, Schindler is left to propose that “Jesus side- steps the doctrinal issue by responding with a reproach of the Sadducees for not understanding the scriptures.” But, if a reproach was the essence of Jesus’ response, it is mystifying why Luke would omit it and take a much more irenic tack, leaving out the critical remarks recorded in Mark 12:24–27:

*And Jesus answering said unto them, “Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God? For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven. And as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’ He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living: ye therefore do greatly err” (Mark 12:24–27).*

Compare with Luke 20:34–36:

*And Jesus answering said unto them, “The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage: But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.”*

Notice how Luke chooses rather to concentrate on Jesus’ argument, which is invested in the distinction between the ages, a distinction that exposes the faulty basis of the Sadducees’ supposedly insuperable challenge.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, if sidestepping was the best that Jesus could do, the Sadducees would surely have walked away with the assurance that they had just stumped the upstart rabbi, since the problem of multiple marriage partners in the resurrection would remain. And if the Sadducees came away victorious from the confrontation, the closing remarks of Luke—also Mark (12:28) and Matthew (20:33–34)—are difficult to comprehend: “Then certain of the scribes answering said, ‘Master, Thou hast well said.’ And after that they durst not ask Him any question at all” (Luke 20:39–40). If we were to adopt Schindler’s reconstruction, the Sadducees would have been even more emboldened to engage Jesus in the future.

## **A SURVEY OF MORMON SOLUTIONS**

Since Schindler is one of many Mormons to have tackled this issue, a look at some of his predecessors and their explanations promises to enrich the discussion.

### **Joseph Smith**

Joseph Smith himself understood these texts as prohibiting the contraction of celestial marriages in the resurrection for those married merely for “time” on earth; those unfortunate enough to have made this choice would be consigned to mere angelic status, not divine.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, Smith considered the inability to marry in the resurrection a disadvantage to be avoided,<sup>11</sup> whereas Luke attaches nonmarriage in the afterlife to a superior state of being, reserved only for those worthy of the resurrection (20:34–36).

### **Orson Pratt**

Mormon apostle Orson Pratt (1811–1881) managed to untangle the riddle of the Sadducees, but only by proposing a solution that his own church would later annul. Pratt assumed that in such cases only the first marriage was to last for eternity, while the others for “time” alone—thus eliminating potential difficulties in the resurrection.<sup>12</sup> Since, however, this would consign a woman’s subsequent husband(s) to singleness in the afterlife, Pratt paraded the virtues of polygamy as the perfect remedy for the problem; that is, the succeeding husband(s), who were married for “time” to the widow, would then take on additional wives, who were eligible for celestial marriage. In this way they would overcome their handicap. In fact, as far as Pratt was concerned, celestial marriage could not exist independently of plural marriage: “Therefore, if marriage for eternity be a divine institution, as we have abundantly proved it to be, then the plurality of wives is a divine institution also; for the latter necessarily grows out of the circumstances arising in relation to the former.”<sup>13</sup> Apparently Pratt did not anticipate the future manifesto forbidding polygamy (1890), which effectively extinguished his resourceful contribution.

### **James E. Talmage and Spencer W. Kimball**

Another Mormon apostle, James E. Talmage (1862–1933), also claimed that the first husband was married to the woman for eternity, whereas the rest only for “time.”<sup>14</sup>

Spencer W. Kimball, in a presidential message to the church (1974), endorsed Talmage's explanation and added that the other six husbands, by being married to her only for "time," lost their opportunity for eternal happiness with *another* spouse.<sup>15</sup> He went so far as describing the situation of the other six brothers as "sad" and "gloomy."<sup>16</sup> The clear indication from Kimball was that the brothers made the wrong decision. Kimball, however, has neglected the fact that the law of levirate marriage presupposed by the Sadducees is not a disposable human institution but a divine directive (Deut. 25:5–10).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, since God, in this law, commanded marriage for "time," He likewise forced the "sad" and "gloomy" fate of the six brothers, making Kimball's criticism of the six men ultimately a criticism of God!

Moreover, 1 Corinthians 7:39 indicates that Paul's policy was to allow widows to remarry, with the only qualifier being spiritual compatibility: "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord." Although Paul prefers them to choose singleness (1 Cor. 7:40), he foresees no eternal loss in remarriage—for either the widow or her new husband.<sup>18</sup>

The Mormon approach creates another problem as well. What does it say about an exclusive relationship and fidelity within marriage? The first dead husband, married permanently to his wife, will be reunited (sexually) with her in heaven *after* she has married and had intercourse with half-a-dozen other men! Under these conditions, in what sense is the original (eternal) marriage a marriage in the first place? Or why is the woman not considered an adulteress? Perhaps Kimball should have applied the adjectives "sad" and "gloomy" to the situation of the original husband instead.

### SCHINDLER'S HIGH BAR

At the outset of his article, Schindler sets the high bar of noncontradiction. He reminds Mormons that their doctrine of continuing revelation requires only that they demonstrate that the Bible does not oppose Mormon teachings. Schindler is correct in assuming that, as the mind of God, all divine revelation must be consistent with itself. He is mistaken, however, in thinking that his efforts have demonstrated the consistency of celestial marriage with Matthew 22:30, Mark 12:25, and Luke 20:34–36. The conventional understanding of these texts, on the other hand, suffers from none of the difficulties present in the Mormon interpretation, and its only questionable element vanishes when the realistic possibility of idiomatic speech is entertained.

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#### NOTES

- 1 The KJV will be cited throughout this article because of its authoritative status in the LDS church.
- 2 [http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR\\_Brochures/EternalMarriage.pdf](http://www.fairlds.org/FAIR_Brochures/EternalMarriage.pdf).

- 3 E.g., John J. Kilgallen, "The Sadducees and Resurrection from the Dead: Luke 20, 27–40," *Biblica* 67, 4 (1986): 478–95; Bradley R. Trick, "Death, Covenants, and the Proof of Resurrection in Mark 12:18–27," *Novum Testamentum* 49 (2007): 232–56. Schindler also contends that "if Jesus had wanted to deny the existence of eternal marriage, this is the word [*gameo*] that would have been used in chronicling his confrontation with the Sadducees." Nevertheless, he automatically assumes that Jesus would have spoken in Greek. Although Jesus probably knew Greek and used it in certain situations, it is disputable that this was one of them. Schindler is even more presumptuous in asserting that Jesus would have used *gameo*, since there are other ways in Greek to express the state of ongoing marriage, including the one that already occurs in these texts.
- 4 Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 34–35; idem, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 327–30; idem, *Matthew*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2006), 414–16.
- 5 Hebrew *laqah* or *nasa* ("take") and *natan* ("give"): Gen. 34:9, 16, 21; Deut. 7:3; Judg. 3:6; Ezra 9:12; Neh. 10:30; 13:25.
- 6 Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 204; Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 27.
- 7 David R. Catchpole, "The Law and the Prophets in Q," in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of E. Earle Ellis for His 60th Birthday*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 103. An idiomatic sense is also compatible with Moses 8:21 (*Pearl of Great Price*), which appears to annex "eating and drinking" and "marrying and giving in marriage" directly from Matthew 24:38.
- 8 Immortality, in Luke 20:36, is unmistakably linked to the cessation of marriage in 20:35 by the Greek conjunction *gar*, "for." Unfortunately *gar* is not translated in the KJV, even though it appears in all the manuscript traditions, including the *Textus Receptus*.
- 9 Schindler misleads readers by stating that "the wording is almost identical in all three versions." He then cites Matthew, which *does* include a reproach; but as we have just seen, Luke's account differs in key ways from both Matthew and Mark.
- 10 *Doctrine and Covenants* 132:15–20. Smith's language appears rather categorical and that of Orson Pratt, unquestionably so: "Those who have not secured their marriage for eternity in this life, can never have it attended to hereafter." (Orson Pratt, "Celestial Marriage," *The Seer* 1, no. 3 [March 1853]: 43, see also 45, 47.) Both are more restrictive than Bruce R. McConkie, who reasons that Jesus' prohibition against marriage applied only to the Sadducees and other worldly people, but not to those who remained unmarried (on earth) because of circumstances beyond their control. Therefore, "there is no revelation...which says there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage in heaven itself for righteous people." (Bruce R. McConkie, *The Gospels*, vol. 1 of *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965], 607. See also 606.)
- 11 Likewise Pratt, "Celestial Marriage (vol. 1, no. 3)," 43, 47.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 58. Pratt proposes a hypothetical situation similar to the one in the Gospels.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission according to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1977), 547–48. Likewise, Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1971), 280; McConkie, *Gospels*, 608.
- 15 Spencer W. Kimball, "Temples and Eternal Marriage," *Ensign*, August 1974, 4.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Kimball's oversight is all the more remarkable since he acknowledged the role of this law just a few paragraphs earlier: "She in turn married a third brother...all in accordance with the law of Moses." *Ibid.*
- 18 Mormons also invoke Matthew 19:6 as a proof text for the permanence of marriage, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." (McConkie, *Gospels*, 604; Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 280.) Nevertheless, since the topic of this passage is indisputably divorce, application of the phrase "put asunder" should be limited to the practice of divorce.