

Jesus as Monk: Notes on his Practice of Semi-Monasticism

Semi-monasticism shall here be defined as a lifestyle of partial withdrawal from society, complete renunciation of wealth and property, and celibacy, but is practiced in communities of disciples and there is moderate interaction with society for the sake of human welfare and evangelization.

Jewish monasticism was thriving during the time of Jesus.

There are two forms of Jewish monasticism that are known to history:

1. Essenes in Palestine (consisting of interdependent celibate and familial communities)
2. Therapeutae in Egypt, and also apparently throughout the Greek and non-Greek world (consisting of communities that separated men and woman, and were most likely celibate)

Therefore semi-monastic ideals of apostolic Christianity should not be discredited as far-fetched.

In fact John the Baptist was a full-fledge monk.

Jesus was celibate, was a wanderer (Matt. 8:20), and was a renunciate (Luke 12:33; Matt. 6:19; Luke 6:20; Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30). Jesus practiced full-fledge monasticism for a period of time in the wilderness. After he began his ministry he continued to spend significant time every day in solitude, according to the Gospels. He was always going “by himself” to a “solitary place” (Matt. 14:13; Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35; Mark 6:32 Mark 6:46; Luke 4:42, Luke 5:16).

Therefore Jesus himself was a semi-monk.

But he was not always a full-fledge monk (i.e. complete withdrawal from society) because he went to banquets and he and his disciples were “eating and drinking” in contrast to John’s disciples.

There is definite undeniable influence of Essenism on apostolic Christianity: voluntary poverty, economic communalism, recommendation for celibacy, the cult-like community of holy ones (saints) that far excels the norms of mainstream Judaism, identical meal of the covenant consisting of bread and wine, necessity of baptism for entry into the eschatological community, the catechumenate, procedures for re-admittance into the community, role of church officers, etc.

The recommendation for celibacy (this recommendation would have definitely not been accepted in mainstream Judaism) is enough to prove definite influence from Jewish monasticism.

Essene-influenced elements in the early Christian community were paradigmatic for later Christian monasticism: voluntary poverty (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30), the renunciation of private property for communalism (Acts 2 and 4), the counsel of celibacy (Matt. 19:11-12; 1 Cor 7), and obedience to the community officers in regards to temporal matters (Acts 5). For over one thousand years Christianity believed that these passages teach monasticism.

That apostolic Christianity upheld celibacy as the ideal form of life is evident from these verses:

Matt. 19:11-12 But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and **there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.**”

Rev. 14: “**These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.** These were redeemed from among mankind...”

1 Cor 7:7-9 “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

1 Cor. 7:26-40 “... Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ... Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. .. I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. ... So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and **he who refrains from marriage will do even better.** A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

In 1 Cor. 7:6 marriage is regarded as a “concession” to human weakness.

In fact celibacy would be the full-following of Jesus who was himself a celibate.

But celibacy was only the recommended ideal and was never a commandment or an expected norm. Marriage was also hallowed. The disciples could have wives, as did some apostles. These apostles, however, were most likely married before Jesus called them, and divorce was forbidden.

The parallel with Jewish monasticism will help put some passages of the NT into perspective...

Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE -20 CE), himself a Jew, relates this regarding the Therapeutae:

“So when they have given up possession of their property, with nothing further to entice them, they flee without turning to look back, abandoning brothers, children, wives, parents, numerous kin, dear companions, the fatherlands in which they were born and reared...” (The Contemplative Life 18)

This sounds exactly like the words of Jesus (Luke 18:22-30; cf. Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31):

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. **Sell everything you have** and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” Peter said to him, “**We have left all we had to follow you!**” **“Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”**

Why would they need to sell everything and leave their home and family in order to follow Jesus?

The answer to this can be found in the Book of Acts:

Acts 2:44-45 “All the believers were together and **held everything in common. They sold property and possessions** to give to anyone who had need.”

Acts 4:32-5:10 “All the believers were one in heart and mind. **No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.** With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. **For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.** Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet. Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What

made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.” When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.” At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.”

This episode only makes sense if communalism was essential aspect of the kingdom of God.

It is clear from the Gospels and the Book of Acts that the mission of Jesus was to establish the literal kingdom of God on earth. The Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek words for kingdom denote a real physical society. The community of saints, the “church,” is the emerging kingdom of God. An entire thesis paper can be written on this fact. (There is nothing about “the kingdom is within you.” That makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. The actual translation of that verse, which appears in many translations of the Bible, is: “the kingdom is among you” or “in your midst.”) This explains the need to relocate and leave family in order to follow Jesus, i.e. to live separately with his community. In fact the followers of Jesus lived together during his lifetime. This is also the only way that someone could sell everything and still survive, i.e. through communalism. But of course this ideal model of the kingdom did not last and its precepts became the lot of the devout few.

What is the post-apostolic evidence for this? The name of the ancient Jewish-Christian sect, the Ebionites, means “poor” because they practiced voluntary poverty. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries there is mention of Christian ascetics who lived outside of towns and practiced voluntary poverty and celibacy. Some of them reportedly wore distinctive religious robes. At this time in Syria there was an order called the “sons and daughters of the covenant” who took lifelong vows of celibacy.

For more on celibacy in the ante-Nicene church see *Celibacy in the Early Church* by Stefan Heid.

Traditional Christianity –Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Non-Chalcedonian Orthodoxy – teaches that Jesus did in fact promote monasticism and that it is partly based on his own example. In the Catholic Church, the concept of the friar “monk” (ex., Franciscan, Dominican, and Carmelite orders, which are engaged with society) is regarded as the exact model of Jesus’ life. This seems to be quite accurate. The friar can be described as a semi-monk. It is not at all a stretch to describe Jesus as a semi-monk who preached semi-monasticism as the ideal for the kingdom of God.