

Series: The King is Born

Title: What the Christmas Story Teaches Us

Text: Matthew 1:18-21

Date: December 19, 2021

Verse 18

Matthew transitioned from his genealogy (1:1-17) to share details concerning the actual birth of Jesus. His account can be compared and contrasted to the one Luke provided in Luke 1:26-38 and 2:1-7. He said, "The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18). In the original language of the text, the name of Jesus was at the forefront of verse 18. It literally read, "Of Jesus Christ, the birth." Matthew's intent was to emphasize the person of Jesus.¹

In the Greek, the apostle did not use the normal word for a "birth." Instead he used the word for a "genesis." In fact, he used the same word in the opening of his gospel back in Matthew 1:1. In doing so, he reiterated his emphasis on the "genesis of Jesus."² Once again, the apostle aimed to depict the way in which Jesus came to give a new genesis, or a new birth, to repentant sinners.

Notice that "Mary had been engaged to Joseph." The young woman would have been a mere teenager at this point. Joseph would have most likely been a good bit older.³ The word rendered "engaged" meant "to be betrothed."⁴ It referred to a first-century arrangement for couples who intended to marry. The arrangement was a lot different than our modern pre-marital engagements. Once one was betrothed to another, it was as if he or she was married to his or her spouse, except the two did not live together.⁵

The time period was normally one year.⁶ A legal, pre-nuptial contract was ratified before public witnesses. The contract made an eventual marriage binding. It is for this reason that Matthew referred to Joseph as Mary's "husband" in verse 19.⁷ Death was seen as the only escape clause that did not require legal action.⁸ A betrothal could only be broken by a legal process that could be likened to a modern divorce.⁹

¹ Robertson, 5.

² Glasscock, 41.

³ Blomberg, 57.

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 1.

⁵ Glasscock, 41.

⁶ France, 82.

⁷ Blomberg, 57.

⁸ France, 82.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 1.

During a betrothal period, the bride still lived with her father's household while the groom made necessary financial and domestic preparations for the couple's homestead. As they awaited their wedding day, they abstained from physical intimacy of any sort. During the betrothal period, flirtation or fornication with another individual would have been regarded as tantamount to adultery. Perhaps, something akin to the practice of betrothal can be seen in the Bible's account of Jacob's agreement with Laban for his marriage to the man's daughters (Genesis 29:13-35).¹⁰

Notice from our current text Matthew's emphasis on the fact that Joseph and Mary had not yet been fully united in marriage. Such is revealed through his words "before they came together." The language referred to the act of sexual intercourse.¹¹ His intent was to say that Mary and Joseph had not yet had intimate relations. They were not living with one another. By clarifying this matter, the gospel writer accomplished two purposes. First, he underscored the reality of the Virgin Birth. Second, he defended charges of immorality that might have been placed at the feet of Mary. Even in Jesus' day, Jews insinuated that our Lord was a product of an illegitimate birth (Mark 6:3). The Talmud formally made such a charge.¹²

The reason for her pregnancy was not adultery or immorality of any sort. Matthew explained that "she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit." The original language was strong. It literally meant "pregnant *out of* the Holy Spirit."¹³ Matthew intended to emphasize the fact that the Third Person of the Trinity was the source of Mary's pregnancy. Luke's gospel accentuated the same reality. In that account, the angel told Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

In reading about the Holy Spirit in verse 18, many of Matthew's Jewish readers would have had a hard time not thinking about Scripture's account of creation.¹⁴ In Genesis 1:2, Moses said, "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters." Twice in his two opening sections, Matthew seemed to make a strong reference to the Bible's account of creation. It seems he intended to emphasize the way in which the coming of Jesus led to a sort of re-creation for humanity.

For many ancient readers, the thought of a god impregnating a woman was not all too uncommon. A great number of pagan religions contained reports of gods descending from heavenly realms to procreate with mere mortals. Perhaps such folklore found its origin in localized reports of the Nephilim incident of Genesis 6:1-4. Maybe Satan instigated that demonic incident in an attempt to undo God's gospel announcement in

¹⁰ Robertson, 6.

¹¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 1.

¹² Robertson, 9.

¹³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 1.

¹⁴ Glasscock, 42.

Genesis 3:15. Whatever the case, it is important to clarify that the Virgin Birth did not imply any sort of intercourse between the Holy Spirit and Mary.¹⁵ Jesus is superior to the false gods of the Greek pantheon.

When it comes to the exact way in which the Virgin Birth was accomplished, Christians should remember that the Lord's miracles are accomplished within the realms of His natural laws. He works supernaturally, but He does not work magically. He accomplishes what appears to be miraculous to the human mind – raising the dead, restoring health, parting waters, and creating worlds – within the confines of the natural laws of His created order. In regard to the Virgin Birth, one has said, "it should not be so strange to think of God's placing in Mary's uterus the biological elements for producing the body of the Lord."¹⁶ The Virgin Birth was not a magic trick. Despite this reality, the happening transcends human understanding.¹⁷ Mere humanity can never fully comprehend the ways of the Lord (Deuteronomy 29:29, Isaiah 55:8-9).

Verse 19

Mary's pregnancy called for a response from Joseph. Our next verse described the way he responded – "So her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly" (Matthew 1:19). While Luke's nativity centered on Mary (Luke 1:26-38), Matthew's account was intentional to focus on Joseph's part in Jesus' birth. The reason for this was simple. Matthew had an interest in presenting Jesus as the Son of David (1:1, 6, 17), so he emphasized Jesus' earthly Davidic ancestor – Joseph.

It seems Joseph made some sort of private arrangement wherein he had a bill of divorce drafted.¹⁸ Though he was undoubtedly hurt by the supposed immorality of his young fiancée, he desired to separate amicably. He loved her too much to expose her to public shame, so he tried to handle the matter secretly.

Joseph could have taken severe legal action against his bride. The Old Testament actually prescribed a death penalty for adultery. Stipulations for such a punishment were outlined in Deuteronomy 22:13-30. In first-century Israel, however, most followed the less-harsh approach. Deuteronomy 24:1-5 was often the guide for divorce. Marriages were usually dissolved through a public legal process.¹⁹

Joseph knew that such a public hearing would have brought great public shame to the woman he loved. There were first-century methods for securing a private divorce in the audience of a small group of witnesses. The Mishnah provided a framework for such

¹⁵ Glasscock, 42.

¹⁶ Glasscock, 42.

¹⁷ Glasscock, 42.

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 1.

¹⁹ France, 82.

a separation in Sota 1:1 and 5.²⁰ It seems Joseph planned to follow the Mishnah's guidelines.

Matthew explained Joseph's approach by pointing out the fact that he was a "righteous man." The word "righteous" referred to one who was "devoted to God and God's standard of truth."²¹ It depicted a law-abiding, upright person.²² Interestingly, Luke used the same adjective in his account of Jesus' birth when talking about Zacharias, Elizabeth, and Simeon (Luke 1:6, 2:25).²³ We know the language did not refer to some sort of sinless perfectionism, since the Bible says, "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). Though Matthew's gospel account was primarily about Jesus, Joseph provides us with a lesson on the importance of Christian character. The man lived faithfully for the Lord. He had an earnest concern for the good of others and the glory of God. The Great Commandment teaches us to live similarly (Matthew 22:37-40). His conduct stood in stark contrast to the self-righteousness of the first-century religious leaders (Matthew 5:20, 9:13, 23:28-29).

Verse 20

Matthew continued his narrative by saying, "But after he had considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit'" (Matthew 1:20). The word rendered "angel" was a Greek one that simply meant "messenger." In Hebrew thought, angels were often means of divine instruction. Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures were replete with instances of angelic visitations. Such phenomenon were almost always the means of some sort of special revelation. Consider the example of Abraham in Genesis 18:1-33 and Daniel in Daniel 10:10-21.

When we read Luke's gospel account, we discover that an angel had previously appeared to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). In fact, an angel told Mary she would conceive a son by the Holy Spirit prior to conception (Luke 1:31, 35). Apparently, the young woman kept the angel's message secret for many days. Joseph was unaware of the Lord's plans until he himself received an angelic visitation as well. Mary must have been relieved when she discovered that her husband had received the same message she had received earlier.

Joseph's experience occurred in a "dream." Hebrew thought also regarded dreams as a means of divine revelation. The Old Testament also contained numerous instances of people receiving special instructions from the Lord in dreams. Both Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel had dreams that foretold of the coming Christ (Daniel 2:1-49, 7:1-28). Since Matthew was so strong in speaking of the exile in the opening verses of his gospel (Matthew 1:11-12 and 17), maybe he had the important dreams of the exile in mind as he wrote.

²⁰ Bloomberg, 58.

²¹ Glasscock, 42.

²² Blomberg, 58.

²³ Robertson, 8.

In addressing Joseph, the angel strategically called the man “son of David.” Matthew recorded this tidbit in his gospel account strategically. As it appeared in verse 20, the title tied the current narrative to the genealogy that preceded it. In addition, the title upheld the theme of Matthew’s gospel. It promoted Jesus as the King of the Jews, the fulfillment of all of the Lord’s promises to the throne of David (2 Samuel 7:8-17). We saw Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus’ Davidic lineage in Matthew 1:1, 6, and 17. We will see it many more times throughout his gospel.

In the original language of the text, a word sometimes rendered “behold” appeared before the phrase “what has been conceived in her.” It was one of Matthew’s favorite terms in his gospel. He used it sixty-two times.²⁴ It was a powerful word that was used to draw attention to a person, place, or thing. It was a figure of speech intended to emphasize a surprising or unexpected reality.²⁵ The intention of the small Greek word in our current passage was to draw emphatic attention to the miraculous nature of the conception of the child within Mary’s womb. Believers should marvel at the mysterious and miraculous way Jesus was conceived.

The article rendered “what has” in verse 20 is strangely of the neuter gender in the original language. Why? If the article was meant to refer to Jesus, shouldn’t it have been masculine. It seems the angel meant to refer to Jesus’ body, not to Jesus’ himself.²⁶ Even in Jesus’ birth announcement, Joseph heard the gospel message – Jesus would offer His own body to pay for humanity’s sin debt. This was the message of Hebrews 10:5 – “Therefore, as he was coming into the world, he said: You did not desire sacrifice and offering, but you prepared a body for me.”

Verse 21

The angel continued his birth announcement by saying, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The statement “you are to name him” had the force of a command in the original language of the text.²⁷ The name “Jesus” was a common one in first-century Israel. It was the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Joshua.”²⁸ It meant “Yahweh is Salvation.”²⁹ When one sounded out the name, he or she literally said, “he will save.”³⁰

Jesus’ name revealed that He was the long-awaited Deliverer. He was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies concerning redemption. He was the one of whom Isaiah

²⁴ Ross, 11.

²⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 2.

²⁶ Glasscock, 44.

²⁷ Glasscock, 44.

²⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 2.

²⁹ Ross, 12.

³⁰ France, 83.

said, “We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the Lord has punished him for the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus was the fulfillment of the Psalmist’s song: “He will redeem Israel from all its iniquities” (Psalm 130:8).

The Greek word rendered “save” in verse 21 is one that meant “to rescue” or “to deliver.”³¹ The salvation in view involved a rescue from sin and its accompanying consequences. Jesus’ life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension made deliverance from sin, death, and alienation from God possible. Our Lord Himself indicated that this was precisely His mission in coming to Earth. In John’s gospel, He said, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). Speaking of Jesus’ role as Savior, J.C. Ryle has said:

This is his special office. He saves them from the guilt of sin, by washing them in His own atoning blood. He saves them from the dominion of sin, by putting in their hearts the sanctifying Spirit. He saves them from the presence of sin, when he takes them out of this world to rest with him. He will save them from all the consequences of sin, when he shall give them a glorious body at the last day. Blessed and holy are Christ’s people!³²

Notice that the angel specifically said Jesus would “save *his* people.” Who were the people in view? For many of Matthew’s readers, thoughts would have immediately run to the nation of Israel. Most would have thought of a political emancipation from the Romans.

The angel made it clear that Jesus would provide a spiritual saving through His incarnation. This was made known through the statement that people would be saved from “their sins.” Matthew’s readers needed to know that Jesus would accomplish a spiritual salvation, not a political one. Unfortunately, even our Lord’s disciples were slow to perceive this reality. Remember how Peter was so ready to fight wage a political war at our Lord’s arrest (Mark 14:47).

Jews also needed to know that such salvation would extend far beyond the ethnic lines of Abraham’s offspring. Many held to a theology that centered on salvation from sin, but their perspective was skewed. They mistakingly believed the Messiah’s salvation would simply eradicate sinners (i.e. Gentiles) from the Earth and usher in a golden era of Messianic reign.³³

The angel’s announcement revealed that Christ’s salvation would have a different intent. Such was revealed to be true through the mention of Jesus saving people “from their sins.” The Greek word rendered “sins” is one that was used of one missing an intended target with an arrow.³⁴ The term provided a fitting depiction of sin, since all of

³¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 2.

³² Ryle, 5.

³³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 2.

³⁴ Robertson, 11.

humanity has fallen short of God's standard (Romans 3:23) and stumbled in many ways (James 3:2).

The phrase "his people" in Matthew 1:21 undoubtedly included people outside the boundaries of Israel. Charles Spurgeon was right in saying "his people" included all who would believe in Jesus.³⁵ None should limit the availability of the atonement by reading in between the lines of the announcement the angel made. Jesus Himself said, "Everyone the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:38).

The angel's announcement revealed that the salvation Jesus would provide would extend beyond the boundaries of Jewish ethnic lines. Indeed, Matthew's gospel would end with a call for Jesus' disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Paul would later proclaim this aspect of Jesus' salvation, aiming at both Jews and Gentiles in his gospel preaching. He would say, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel,, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

³⁵ Spurgeon, 6.