

§7: THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 2:1–7

Joseph's Dilemma

Mt. 1:18–19

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was thus:

When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

19 And Joseph her husband, being righteous and not wanting to make her a public example [of disgrace], decided to divorce her secretly.

An Angel of the Lord Appears to Joseph

Mt. 1:20–21

20 Now when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying:

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife;
for that which has been begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit.

21 And she will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus,
for it is He who will save His people from their sins.

Fulfillment of O.T. Prophecy

Mt. 1:22–23

22 Now all this happened in order that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying:

23 Behold, the virgin will be with child and will bear a son,
and they shall call His name Emmanuel—which is translated: With us is God.

Joseph Takes Mary as Wife

Mt. 1:24–25

24 And Joseph arose from his sleep,
and he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and he took his wife,

25 and he did not know her [sexually] until she bore a son;
and he called His name Jesus.

Census of Augustus

Lk. 2:1–3

1 Now it came about in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus,
that all the inhabited earth be registered [in the tax lists].

2 This took place as a first registration while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

3 And all were proceeding to register, each to his own city.

Joseph and Mary Go to Bethlehem to Register

Lk. 2:4–5

4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth,
to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem,
because he was of the house and family of David,

5 to register with Mary who was betrothed to him and was pregnant.

The Birth of Jesus

Lk. 2:6–7

6 And it came about while they were there, the days were fulfilled for her to give birth.

7 And she bore her first-born son, and she wrapped Him in cloths,
and she laid Him down in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Notes

1. **Betrothed (Mt. 1:18; Lk. 2:5).** See §3, note 2. According to Mt. 1:24–25, Joseph took Mary as wife, which generally means they were “married,” though not every one would celebrate a marriage feast in grand style. However, according to Lk 2:5, Mary is still only “betrothed” to Joseph. The explanation lies in Mt. 1:25. The normal procedure was first to become betrothed, a legally binding matter, then get married, a more or less social matter which involved a great feast of a week or more during which man and wife came together in sexual union for the first time. Even though Joseph has officially “taken” Mary as his wife, i.e. brought her into his home, they in fact are still acting as though they were only betrothed, not having begun the sexual relationship.
2. **By the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:18).** See back on Luke 1:35.
3. Note on Joseph's Dilemma.

[For various laws in the O.T. on marriage, adultery, divorce, see Num. 5:11–31; Deut. 22:13–20; 24:1–4. On the stoning of a betrothed woman involved in sex with another man, note Deut. 24:23–24].

Mary is pregnant. Can Joseph believe it really happened through the Holy Spirit? Nothing like this has ever happened before. He can take one of four possible courses of action:

- 1) Believe Mary. This he does not do.
- 2) Forgive Mary, take her as his wife, learn to live with what hopefully will be the only act of unfaithfulness. This he does not do. Perhaps his reasoning was: If something like this can happen already during the betrothal, what guarantee do I have that it won't happen again? Note also that if indeed Mary spent the first three months visiting Elizabeth before she told Joseph of her pregnancy upon her return to Nazareth, he may have had good reason to suspect misbehavior on Mary's trip.
- 3) Bring Mary to court and file a formal, public charge of fornication. [Note: In N.T. times there would be no death penalty exercised. There would be some kind of punishment that would bring open and public scorn upon her]. This he does not do—because he is righteous! He still maintained an attitude of consideration and compassion for Mary.
- 4) Divorce her “secretly” through a private, though legal, certificate of divorce. This is what he decides to do.

Although the matter would eventually become known, the divorce itself would take place secretly rather than through open court proceedings. Though Joseph showed consideration for Mary, yet his righteousness also made it difficult for him to simply ignore what he suspected had taken place. His decision to divorce Mary came not because he was hard-hearted and unforgiving. The decision not to make Mary an example of public shame came from his righteous attitude; but his decision to divorce Mary secretly came from that same attitude. Thus, Deut. 24:1–4 which Jesus said was written “for the hardness of hearts,” does not apply to Joseph. Even God “divorced” Israel (Jer. 3:8) for spiritual adultery and was not hard-hearted in doing so.

Joseph's decision, however, was by no means an easy one. While he considers (reflects upon, ponders) the various options in his mind, he falls asleep (Mt. 1:20,24) and dreams. An angel of the Lord appears to him and solves his dilemma for him. There is much to learn here about how a righteous man goes about trying to solve a complex personal problem in his life. There is serious contemplation, and there are no “snap” judgments.

4. **Begotten (Mt. 1:20).** The word is used here of a woman in reference to “conception,” although it is generally used in the sense “become the father of” (as often in the genealogy of Matt. 1, for example). The child “conceived” is called the same thing as the child “born”—“begotten.”
5. **Caesar Augustus (Lk. 2:1).** Known also as Octavian, he was emperor in Rome from about 29/27 B.C. until his death in A.D. 14. He was a grandnephew of Julius Caesar.
6. **Decree (Lk. 2:1).** There are some unsolved chronological questions regarding the exact date of the decree mentioned in Luke. Information can be found in Bible encyclopedias, dictionaries and commentaries.

Especially detailed and helpful is: *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, by Jack Finegan (revised edition, 1998, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.) It is interesting to note that our “Christian Era” was introduced in 525 A.D. by Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk at Rome, who considered it inappropriate to continue reckoning time from the reign of the emperor Diocletian who had fiercely persecuted Christians. Dionysius chose the date A.U.C. 753 as the beginning of the Christian era (A.U.C. = *ab urbe condita* = from the founding of the city [Rome]). It is thought by many that Dionysius made an error in his calculations, which has led to modern timelines placing the birth of Jesus at or around 4 B.C.

7. **Bethlehem (Lk. 2:4).** See 1 Sam. 17:58; 20:6.
8. **Inn (Lk. 2:7).** There are several different meanings for the word translated “inn” including “lodging,” “guest room,” even “dining room.” At any rate, it was a place where travelers could normally stay. It may have been that private homes were already filled with relatives, and the inn was perhaps fully occupied by Roman officials and soldiers who had come to supervise the census.