

We've been studying circumstances surrounding some very important births and their announcements recently. Zechariah was given the good news about his son by a direct messenger from God. There could be no doubt about who this messenger was, because of where he was. This messenger's word was as good as God's word. Yet, this message that should have required very little faith was still doubted by Zechariah. He struck deaf and dumb for his lack of faith.

Then, Mary was told that she would give birth to the Messiah. She was given a sign, and that sign was fulfilled. She had faith, even though she needed a sign. It still took some faith. I can imagine what was going through her head, and how awed she must have been by the prospect of what was going to happen soon. But, there were certain things that she knew. For one thing, she knew that a virgin would give birth to a Messiah, and she knew that she was a virgin. Joseph didn't even have that certain knowledge. We are going to find out that he had to rely entirely on faith.

Let's look here in verse 18: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise..." In the Greek, "Jesus Christ" comes before "birth"; the Messiah is the focus of the attention, not the birth. The birth, or the genealogy itself, is dealt with back in verse 16.

It is not even certain, whether the word "Jesus" is a part of the text here. It's absent in the old Syriac and even the Old Latin. The Vatican Codex had "Christ Jesus". It's clear that the story is talking about the birth of the Messiah. But, it's the Messiah that's the center of attention here. The story of the coming of the Messiah is to be told briefly, "on this wise", which is the usual Greek Idiom.

Clearly, the addition of the word "Jesus" was intended to clarify exactly whom the passage was referring to, but as with many things that are added, it doesn't really clarify. I think the Scriptures are intending to be drawing emphasis to the Messiah, as savior, and not as man. I think they are saying, "here's the story of the Messiah, now think about this", and then they go on later to clarify that Jesus is the Messiah. I think it's simply someone filling in the blank, where no blank was intended.

The word translated as "birth" is interesting. The oldest manuscripts have the same word in verse 18 that is used in verse 1: "Genesis" or genealogy, not "gennaos" or birth or begotten. Matthew, is about to describe, not the genesis of the heavens and the earth, and not merely physical birth, but the genesis of Him who made the heavens and the earth, and who will one day make a new heavens and a new earth.

"The Messiah was generated like this," would be a good way to start this story of how the Messiah came to be man. Now, Matthew is going to give a very concise telling of this story. Remember, Matthew was writing to the Jews, and that's one of the reasons the story is important that it be from Joseph's viewpoint. This is the legal lineage of the Messiah.

“When as His mother Mary was espoused to Joseph...” Matthew proceeds here to explain his statement in Matthew 1:16, which implied that Joseph, though the legal father of Jesus in the royal line, was not the actual father of Mary’s Son. [Matthew 1:16]

The narrative here in verse 18 implies a distinction between betrothal and marriage. Betrothal to the Jews was a serious matter, not lightly entered into and not lightly broken. The man who betrothed a maiden was legally her husband, according to Genesis 29:21 and Deuteronomy 22:23, and an informal canceling of betrothal was impossible. There was a time when a promise was a promise. Even in recent history, you could file for breach of contract if the marriage was called off. But, in Jewish society, the union could only be dissolved by regular divorce or death.

Not only that, but although they did not live together as husband and wife until the actual marriage ceremony (usually, there was about a year between betrothal and marriage), breach of faithfulness on the part of the betrothed was treated as adultery and punished with stoning. The law was very strict in an ordinary case of this kind, and demanded that the woman be taken to the entrance of her father’s house and the men of her city required to stone her until she died. If this happened, the woman’s property became that of her betrothed, unless he renounced it, but even then he was the legal heir.

So, what does it say here in the end of verse 18? “When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost Spirit.” It was, of course, only the fact that she was pregnant that was discovered. The discovery that Mary was pregnant was inevitable, and it appears from what we’re told in Scripture that she had not told Joseph. She had been visiting with Elizabeth for several months, and she was probably starting to show a little by now. Perhaps, like Elizabeth, Mary decided to “keep herself close”, and let God speak for Himself. The explanation of how this came to be is given here by Matthew to the readers.

“Was found with child”, is the usual Greek idiom, and it plainly shows that it was this discovery that shocked Joseph. He did not as yet know what Matthew plainly tells us: That the Holy Spirit, not Joseph, and most certainly not another man, was responsible for the pregnancy of Mary.

The Virgin birth of the Messiah has been a disturbing fact to many through all the ages, and is disturbing today to the vast majority of humanity. It’s a problem to anyone who doesn’t believe in the pre-existence of Christ, the Son of God, before His incarnation on earth. This is the primary fact that needs to be understood about the birth of Christ. The incarnation of Christ is clearly stated by Paul and by John. If you embrace the actual pre-existence of Christ, and the real, physical incarnation, you have taken the most difficult step in understanding and accepting the supernatural birth of Christ. Anyone who accepts the Bible as true and inerrant should have no trouble accepting this. So, accepting this one fact is both difficult and easy, like so many things of faith.

Matthew tells us that she was found with child **by** the Holy Spirit. Clearly, the fact that the Holy Spirit is a living, conscious being is implied here. In the unity of the God-head,

the Holy Spirit is distinct, both from the Father and from the Son. The Bible is clear that there is a distinctness, but still an equality, between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. [2 Corinthians] Matthew 29:19 says, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy ~~Ghost~~ Spirit”. [2 Corinthians 13:14; emphasis – the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.] They’re distinct.

These things being true, no merely human birth without the supernatural element can possibly explain the facts. Incarnation is more than the indwelling of God by the Holy Spirit in the human heart; all believers have that. To accept both real incarnation and full human birth is difficult in and of itself, yet it’s easy, if you trust in God. It’s not necessarily easy to understand, but it’s easy to accept.

We see here, God sending His Son into the world as a savior. He gave Him a human mother, but not a human father. Jesus the Christ is both Son of God and Son of Man; He’s the God-Man. As we studied a few weeks ago, Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus from the standpoint of Joseph, and Luke gives the standpoint of Mary. As such, they don’t contradict; they harmonize.

God is Spirit. God is Person. God holds the power of all life. He created everything. He breathed the universe into existence. John 3:16 is called the Little Gospel, because it puts briefly the love of God for men in sending His only Son to live and to die for us. Matthew is telling us that this is how the Messiah came to be born into this world.

Joseph didn’t have the luxury of knowing these things beforehand. I’m sure he loved Mary. He had been married before and he had children. He didn’t have to get married to provide heirs. But, he chose to do so. And, he suddenly finds Mary to be with child before they came together.

The Law called for her to be taken to her father’s door and be stoned to death. But, Joseph was a just man. It doesn’t say he was beneficial, or even merciful, but that he was just or righteous. The same word is used to describe Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1:6, and it’s also used to describe Simeon in Luke 2:25. Joseph was an upright man. As a good Jew, he wanted to observe the law, and the law would have been death by stoning.

He could not bring himself to do this, and he couldn’t simply call the marriage off. Although he was upright, and a good Jew, he was not willing to do that. He was just and yet he was not willing to hold her up to public infamy and disgrace. [The difference between the spirit and the letter of the law again.] This word involves open and public shame. Hebrews 6:6 uses a compound form of this same word, where it says, “If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put *him* to an open shame.” [Colossians 2:15] uses the word in a more positive way.

Matthew makes a distinction between willing (thelOn) and wishing (eboulEthE). The distinction between the two is not always made, but it is here. The two words are often used interchangeably, but thelOn is the stronger of the two words. For instance, in

[Matthew 8:3], he would be entirely inappropriate. He doesn't simply wish the leprosy to be cleansed; he wills it. It's a stronger word.

[Matthew 1:19] It was not his purpose to make her a public example. Joseph was an upright man, but he was unwilling to put her to an open shame (he wasn't going to do it), and he was wishing to put her away privately (this is how he wanted to go about it).

It says here, that Joseph "was minded to put her away privily". According to the Law, he could give her a bill of divorcement as laid down in the Mishna (a collection of Jewish traditions and explanations of Scripture), without a public trial. He had to give her the bill and pay the fine, according to Deuteronomy 24:1, which says that if a man finds any uncleanness in her, he can write her a bill of divorcement and send her out of his house.

I said a few moments ago that Joseph obviously loved Mary. He has found out that she has apparently been unfaithful, and yet he is proposing in his own mind to divorce her in secret, so as not to bring shame upon her, and he will pay a fine in order to do so. He's trying to avoid all the scandal that he possibly can. I have to sympathize with this man and his motives because of his love. I can imagine how appalled he would be to find that this woman he loved had been untrue to him, yet he still loved her so much!

Many, including the Talmud have tried to say that the narrative of Matthew has tried to cover up the illegitimate birth of a baby by creating this "legend". It's becoming more and more popular to teach that, especially in these new-age religions that are popping up everywhere. The Talmud openly charges this. Yet, no matter what motive you apply, it is a beautiful story about the short but tragic struggle between Joseph's desire to be a good Jew, and his love for his bride. Joseph was a just man, he loved his wife, and he wanted to do the right thing.

Verse 20: "As he was thinking on these things," it was a long process, not merely something that you ponder for a moment and make a decision; "An angel of the Lord (not Gabriel, who had gone to Zechariah and Mary, and not the angel of the Lord, which in the OT is an expression that is sometimes used to represent the manifestation of the Lord himself) appeared unto him in a dream." If anyone ever needed an angel of the Lord to appear to him, Joseph was that person. Since this baby was God's Son, Joseph had the right to know, so that he could be just and righteous to both Mary and the baby.

The angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, but the message was clear. It says, "Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of (by) the Holy Ghost (Spirit)." Joseph is called, "son of David", as we saw in Matthew 1:16. Mary is called his "wife". Joseph is told, "not to become afraid", to "take to his side" her whom he had planned to send away with a bill of divorce.

Joseph had pondered and planned the best he knew how, as men often do. But, as with so many things that man does, God has different plans. God had told him not to be afraid to carry out his original plans; the plans of marrying Mary. He had to decide if he were willing to shelter Mary by marrying her and taking upon himself any stigma that might be

attached to her. In that society, there would be much finger-pointing going on surrounding this situation. The angel told Joseph that the child was begotten of the Holy Spirit, and thus Mary was innocent of any sin. But, who would believe it if he told them? Mary knew the truth and had not told Joseph, because she could not expect him to believe it. Joseph loved Mary, and he wanted to do what was right, so he had a decision to make.

I find it interesting that Zechariah was given a message that could not be mistaken. He was told that he would become a father in his old age and his son would be the forerunner of the Messiah. He was given this message in the Holy of Holies, so there could be little doubt that the angel was legitimate. Mary had been told that she would bear the Messiah. She was given a sign, by an angel in person, but that sign was not as unmistakable as the one given Zechariah. Joseph was given a message, but it was merely in a dream. I think it's comparable to the different ways that man has been treated in different dispensations. At one time, man was given many direct signs from God, such as pillars of fire by night, and the plagues cast upon Egypt, and the parting of the Red Sea and the destruction of Israel's enemies by the closing of the Red Sea. Yet, people still doubted. In the time that Jesus was upon the earth and for a little while thereafter, Israel had been given signs. These were strong signs, such as healings and speaking in tongues, and casting out demons, but there was room for doubt, and many people doubted. After His death and ascension into the heavens, the things of the Kingdom were opened up to all, but it was a day in which people were to live by faith and not by sight; no more signs. I think that these are types of little faith required, more faith required, and complete faith required.

Joseph had complete faith, with little to go on other than a deep and abiding faith in God and a sense of righteousness.

Verse 21: "And she shall bring forth a son..." Note that it distinctly does not say that "she shall bear thee a son", as was said to Zechariah in Luke 1:13. "And thou shalt call..." This is committing Joseph to the office of father of the baby. The rabbis named six whose names were given before birth: "Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Solomon, Josiah, and the name of the Messiah, whom may the Holy One, blessed be His name, bring in our day." They knew that He would be named before birth, but they didn't know what that name was. The angel puts it up to Joseph as the accepted father to name the child. We know what that name was, don't we?

"And thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." "Jesus" is the same as "Joshua"; they're both contractions of the name "Jehoshuah", which in Hebrew means "Help of Jehovah". "Jesus" is the Greek form of "Joshua". He is another Joshua to lead the true people of God into the Promised Land; into the Kingdom. "Jehovah is Savior" is seen in Joshua for the Hebrews and in Jesus for all believers. The meaning of the name can simply find expression in the title "Savior".

It says here in verse 21 that "he will save his people from their sins", and thereby he will be their Savior. He will be prophet, priest, and king, but "Savior" sums it up in one word. The explanation is in the phrase, "for He is the one who will save (a play on the name Jesus) his people from their sins". Paul will explain later that this applies to all the

children of promise who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. This wonderful word is the very heart of the mission and the message of the Messiah. Jesus himself will show that the Kingdom of the Heavens includes all those (but only those) who have the reign of Jesus in their hearts and lives.

He will be saving his people from their sins. The verb translated as “sins”, is not the same as lawlessness or anything else. It’s from a word that means missing the mark, as with an arrow. Even the best of people, everyone, falls short and miss the mark and fail to score. Jesus will save us from our sins (as well as out of our sins); they will be completely blotted out and He will clean us completely, if only we take advantage of the glorious, cleansing blood. What does 1 John 1:9 say? “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Verse 22: “Now all this was done...” This stands on record as historical fact. Remember, prophecy is nothing but unfulfilled history and history is nothing but fulfilled prophecy. “Now all this was done, [in order] that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying...” Actually, it says through the prophet. When quoting from the OT, the writers habitually use the preposition *dia* (through) to denote the instrument through which God works or speaks, while they use *upo* (by) to express the direct work of God himself. [If an angel is an official representative of God, then it’s the same as the words being spoken **by** God, not through the angel.] So, here the prophecy that was spoken by the Lord was communicated to men **through** the prophet.

[Verse 23: **the** virgin, not just a virgin] There is no indication that the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 7:14 saw anything more than a woman (then a virgin) would give birth to a son. The word he used was only “virgin” in the extreme sense of the word, but it generally meant a young woman. But God, for proper fulfillment of the prophecy as in everything else, made this occur to a virgin in every sense of the word. This is confirmed in the Greek in this passage. God doesn’t mess around with obeying only the spirit of the law. Jesus, when he was here on the earth obeyed the spirit of the law and the letter of the law, of both God and man. He only held his disciples to the standard of obeying the spirit of the law. Here in Matthew 1:23, it would have been easy to fulfill prophecy without resorting to such obvious and extreme supernatural events, but God is perfect! And, we find out in [verse 25] that in this complete and total perfection, she was still a virgin when Jesus was born! Jesus was born to a virgin in every sense that it can be meant!

[Verse 24] The angel had told Joseph not to be afraid to “take to his side” Mary his wife. So, when he awoke from his sleep, he promptly obeyed the angel (the Lord) and took his wife home. Some think that Mary must have felt relieve and joy when Joseph nobly took on his responsibility to her. I think that she had enough faith in God that she knew she would be taken care of. Either way, Joseph did the just thing and the righteous thing and obeyed God. Now, that’s what I call faith! He didn’t need any signs. So many people today are seeking after signs, when we live in a day in which we are to live by faith and not by sight! I pray that God will give me faith such as this, and I pray that He will give you faith such as this that we may each walk worthy and bring glory and honor to His name in everything we do, so that one day, we will hear, “Well done”.