

**ENGAGE**

- We are beginning a four week series for the month of December on the Advent of Emmanuel.
  - Pastor

**EXAMINE****The Virgin Birth**

An important exegetical perspective that needs to be kept in mind is the Matthean text tells the story more from the angle of Joseph's perspective, while the Lukan birth narrative tells the tale from the perspective of how things affected and were seen by Mary. What the two narratives have in common is interesting:

1) a birth in Bethlehem, even though the family is from Nazareth and Jesus would be called Jesus of Nazareth;

2) a virginal conception;

3) a pregnancy during the engagement period caused through the agency of the Holy Spirit; and

4) Joseph resolves to accept Jesus into his life and family, as is shown by subsequent events.

Though it has become fashionable in some scholarly circles to suggest the story of the miraculous conception of Jesus has analogies with the stories about the births of Emperors or Kings, in fact this is not really accurate. A story about a god coming down and raping a human woman is of a very different ilk than the story of a miraculous virginal conception through the power of the Holy Spirit, not through any sort of intercourse.

Furthermore, the story in Isaiah 7 about a virgin conceiving, while compatible with our story in Matthew 1, does not in fact specify a virginal conception. It simply says a nubile woman of marriageable age, who was indeed a virgin, would conceive and give birth to a child. Unlike Matthew 1, that text does not specify the *means* by which the virgin is impregnated, and all indications are that early Jewish were not looking for, nor did they think, Isaiah 6 predicted a miraculous conception.

This explains the shocked reaction of both Joseph in Matthew 1 and Mary in the Lukan account. The assumption a Torah-true Jew like Joseph must have made is Mary got pregnant in the usual manner, hence his decision to divorce her quietly. It took further divine intervention in the form of a dream to head off that disaster, and the disgracing and shaming (not to mention the potential stoning) of Mary. In short, the potential scandal in this story, and the lack of a clear prediction of a virginal conception in Isaiah 6 or parallel in other birth narratives, means this story arose from an historical incident in the life of Mary and Joseph, and then was explained with the aide of the text of Isaiah 6. The First Evangelist uses Isaiah to

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provide proof that this surprising and unprecedented event was, in fact, a fulfillment of Scripture and all along a part of God's plan for human redemption.

Some background information about early Jewish marriages helps the exposition of this text. In the first place, engagement in this culture was a formal contractual matter, usually decided on by the two fathers in question (i.e. it was an arranged marriage), and was, in fact, the first stage of the marriage itself, to be complete some months hence by the formal wedding ceremony. The reason Matthew says that Joseph had resolved to "divorce" a woman he was only engaged to, is because engagement then was a legally binding contract, unlike engagement in the West today.

Mary is said to be "engaged to Joseph" (1:18, NRSV), but the English word "engaged" hardly captures the meaning of the Greek word that it represents (*mnesteuo*). The variety of translations in some of the most widely known English versions shows how translators have struggled to render the word appropriately. The RSV says that Mary "had been betrothed to Joseph." The KJV says that she "was espoused to Joseph," and the NIV says that she "was pledged to be married to Joseph."

The problem with the word "engaged" (NRSV) is that an engagement can be broken off informally; there is no need for a legal action. But the situation of Mary and Joseph was more complicated than that. According to the custom of the day, there were two stages for a couple to go through in what can be called a marital process.

First came the betrothal (Hebrew *kiddushin*), a marriage contract, typically arranged by the parents, that could be broken only by divorce (cf. 1: 19, where *apoluo* is used, rendered as "divorce" in the RSV and NIV; the NRSV has "dismiss").

That was followed by a second step (Hebrew *nissu'in*) considerably later (sometimes a year later), often including a marriage feast, after which the groom took his wife to his home. The verb *paralambano* ("to take") in 1:20 and 1:24 can actually mean "to take home" one's wife, thus referring to what happened after the second step. The drama of our text, however, takes place between the two events in the lives of this young couple. The first step had taken place; the second is in jeopardy.

Joseph's reaction, when he hears that Mary is pregnant, is to suspect her of adultery, one of the grounds for divorce in Jewish law.<sup>1</sup> In light of that, Joseph "planned to dismiss [RSV: "divorce"] her quietly" (NRSV). It may seem surprising to many in our day that Joseph is called "righteous" as he contemplates divorcing Mary in her time of need (1:19), but the accent must surely be upon the clause saying that he was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace," wanting to keep the whole matter quiet. Moreover, law and the culture of the day would virtually say that Joseph had no alternative but to divorce Mary.

That might not satisfy some hearers of this text today, but at least it softens the seemingly harsh treatment of Mary by the man who is said to be "righteous." Fortunately, Mary knows nothing about his

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deliberations. In any case, it all becomes a moot point when an angel intervenes, telling Joseph in a dream not to refrain from going through with the second step of the marriage custom.

The angel also tells him how it is that Mary is pregnant and announces Jesus' forthcoming birth.

Joseph is to name the child "Jesus" (*Iesous* in Greek). The Greek name is derived from the Hebrew Yehoshuah (Joshua in English), which means "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh saves."

The child born to Mary is to be given that name as a designation of his function, which is to save his people from their sins (1:21). The way that is envisioned by Matthew is that Jesus not only grants forgiveness of sins in his earthly ministry (9:2) but does so also in his post-resurrection reign where he has all authority (28:18), and from where he exercises that authority through the ministry of the forgiveness of sins by his disciples in the church (16:19; 18:18; 26:28; cf. 9:8).

The first of Matthew's "formula quotations" is expressed in 1:22-23. In those formulations the evangelist declares that an event has taken place to fulfill what a prophet has spoken, followed by a quotation from the Old Testament (others are at 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 27:9).

The quotation of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23 is based on a Greek version of the Old Testament, in which the term *parthenos* ("virgin" in English) is used. The wording is exactly like that of the Septuagint, except that in 1:23 Matthew has "they shall call," while the Septuagint has "you shall call."

The Hebrew word here (*'almah*) means simply a "young woman" of marriageable age.

The context of Isaiah 7:14 is an encounter between the prophet Isaiah and King Ahaz of Judah during the Syro-Ephraimite war (735-732 B.C.) when Syria and Israel attacked Judah. Jerusalem and the royal family are under siege. But Isaiah expresses hope with a promise. He declares that the Lord will give Ahaz a sign: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." Before that child reaches the age of discernment, the threat to Jerusalem will be over.

The evangelist Matthew sees the coming of God's Son into the world as the fulfillment of the promise given through Isaiah. What Isaiah promised in the eighth century B.C., expecting it to be fulfilled in his time, Matthew saw as having its ultimate fulfillment in his day. Or to put it another way, what Isaiah foresaw as a new era to come, Matthew saw as present. The birth of Jesus is the sign of God's presence, "God with us."

Incidentally, the spelling Immanuel is the customary way to transliterate the Hebrew word in the Old Testament; the spelling Emmanuel (sometimes spelled Emanuel) is the customary way to transliterate the word from Greek in the New. The difference can be seen in the NRSV at Isaiah 7:14 (Immanuel) and at Matthew 1:23 (Emmanuel).

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The reading closes with attention on Joseph (1:24-25). He takes Mary into his home as his wife, and then, after the child is born, he names the child "Jesus" in obedience to the command. Verse 1:25a functions to emphasize the virginal conception by the Spirit.

### First Born

Secondly, we need to understand in that patriarchal culture, the birth of the first born son was all important and crucial to the family line and property transfer. The fact Joseph is prepared to give up the right to sire his own first born son and accept and even name Jesus (Yeshua/Joshua means "Yahweh saves") says a lot about the character of Joseph. It leads to the oddest genealogy ever in Matthew 1:1-17 in which Jesus is shoehorned into Joseph's genealogy by putting Mary into that genealogy despite the fact that it is a patrilineal genealogy (x begat y...).

This is a narrative of surprising and unexpected events and suggests a God of unexpected actions. Finally, Matthew 1:25 is a crucial conclusion to our passage and suggests Mary and Joseph did not have marital relations until after the birth and naming of Jesus. The stories thereafter (see e.g. Mark 3:21-35 and Mark 6 and the parallels in Matthew) suggest Mary and Joseph, being good early Jews, went on to have numerous children, both boys and girls the natural way who are rightly called Jesus' brothers and sisters. In short, Matthew's Gospel affirms the virginal conception of Mary, but not her perpetual virginity, or for that matter her own immaculate conception by her mother. Those ideas are found only in much later Catholic traditions.

### QUESTIONS

"Jesus, Immanuel-God with us"

Matthew 1:18-25 Key Verse: 23

#### Part I: A Jesus-centered house church (18-21; 24-25)

1. How did Matthew tell us about the human situation of Joseph and Mary? (18) What did 'Mary was found to be with child' suggest about her? (18c)
2. How did Joseph respond and what does this show about him? (19) How can we make a godly decision in a crisis like Joseph?
3. How did God intervene between Joseph and Mary? (20) Why did the angel call him "Joseph son of David"? (20) What mission did God give Joseph? (21)
4. What did Joseph do? (24-25) What important role did he play in God's redemptive history?

#### Part II: Jesus saves his people from their sins (21)

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5. What can we learn about the identity and mission of Mary's son? (21) How does Jesus save us from our sins? (Lk 23:34a)
6. Why was Jesus pierced and crushed on the cross? (Isa 53:4-5)? How did Zachariah prophesy about the purpose of Jesus' coming into the world? (LK 1:74-75)

**Part III: Jesus is Immanuel-God with us (22-23)**

7. How is Jesus Immanuel-God with us? (22-23, Jn 1:1-3) How is Jesus with us through the Holy Spirit? (Jn 14:15-16)
8. Why is "the Birth of Jesus" the best news to you at this Christmas season? (23, Mt 28:20b, Phi 1:6)

**Sources**

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