Matthew 1:18-25

The Angel's Message to Joseph

Matthew 1:18 - "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost."

The next event in Jesus' story is recorded by Matthew. This must have happened some time after Mary's meeting with Gabriel.

There is reason to believe that the usual age of the young man at the time of his betrothal was between eighteen and twenty years (m. 'Abot 5:21) although Joseph could have been as old as his early thirties. The age of the young woman was usually about twelve and a half to thirteen or fourteen (m. Ned. 10:5; Gen. Rab. 95).

It was usual for every man to be married. Jesus was unmarried, but so were many Jewish men at the age of 33. For instance, the first child of the historian Josephus was born when he was around 35 years old.

Betrothal—in Hebrew - *qiddushin*, or *erusin* — was the act by which a husband created a legal prohibition for the woman to marry anyone but her intended. The betrothal consisted of the groom giving his betrothed a small sum of money or gift declaring in some fashion, "Be thou betrothed to me by virtue of this money," and she agreed to be consecrated to him (m. Qidd. 1.1).

Yichud is a term that describes the period when a newly wed couple would consummate the marriage directly after the chuppah canopy ceremony by going into a private room. It comes from the Hebrew root *yachad*, which means "join together."

Look at verse 18 again:

Matthew 1:18 - "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost."

So before they "came together" (*synerchomai* = "together," but it can also mean conjugal cohabitation) i.e. "before they had sex."

Paul uses the word in the same context:

- 1 Corinthians 7:5 - "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together (*synerchomai)* again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency."

The phrase "come together" is probably referring to this *yichud* - the point of consummation. This means that Mary was a virgin in Matthew's view.

But being "found with child" before their wedding was a disaster.

During the period in which the woman was betrothed, as well while she was fully married, adultery was a reason for which a man could and should divorce his wife (m. Ketub. 7:6).

T. Soṭah 5:9 sets out the rules in detail:

- • If he saw his wife going out and her hair uncovered and dressed immod-
- • estly and in company of slaves and maidservants, or she wove in public
- • and bathed and sported with any man — one fulfills a commandment by
- • divorcing her, as scripture states: "When a man marries a woman, hav-
- • ing relations with her, then it shall be if she does not find favor in his
- • eyes because he finds in her lewd conduct then he shall write her a docu-
- • ment of divorce and give it into her hand and send her from his house"
- • (**Deuteronomy 24:1**).

If proof were strong that the woman had been unfaithful during the betrothal period, the penalty, under a number of conditions, could have been death (**Deuteronomy 22:24**; b. Ketub. 51b).

In Mary's case, it would not be a "suspicion" of adultery - she was pregnant. -“found to be with child.”

As a "righteous man" who knew he was not the father of the child, Joseph would have had no choice but to divorce her (**Deuteronomy 22:23–27**; m. Soṭah 5:1).

Matthew 1:19 - "Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily."

"Privately" here means "in a secret way," that is, Joseph would hide the reason for the divorce. Perhaps we should understand that this Gospel account is based on a likely scenario: since people in Joseph's community would know that he was righteous and that if he was getting divorced it was likely on account of adultery, he had to divorce her without fanfare.

Instead of bringing Mary before a tribunal to discuss settlements or seek judicial sanctions, he would arrange a brief ceremony before several witnesses, and hand her a written bill of divorce stating that she was now free to marry someone else (m. Git. 9:3).

The same word for "privately" occurs in connection with Herod's meeting with the Magi, where secrecy was necessary.

In rabbinic sources, the term "just" or "righteous" is applied to people who refuse to shame others. Their example is Tamar in another story of suspected adultery, who was willing to die to protect Judah's honor, leading him to exclaim, "She is more righteous than I." (**Genesis 38:25-26**).

Judah and Tamar's son Perez (**Matthew 1:3**) is considered to be the ancestor of the messianic genealogical line: "When Adam sinned [creation's] fullness became defective and will not be completely restored until the Son of Perez comes" [see Gen. Rab. 12:6] meaning the Messiah.

An Angel Appear in a Dream

Matthew 1:20 - "But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost."

Apparently this was not Gabriel but "the Angel of the Lord" who appeared as God's messenger many times in the Old Testament. Also, instead of appearing in person, the angel appears to Joseph in a dream while he sleeps.

By calling Joseph "thou son of David" the angel points out a crucial element. If they marry, then Mary becomes joined to Joseph's household, which descends from King David. This phrase also emphasizes Jesus' Messianic status.

Matthew 1:21 - "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins."

According to Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer, chap. 31, which dates from around the eighth century but which preserves much earlier traditions, the following were named before their births: Isaac, Yishmael, Moses, Solomon, Josiah and the Messiah.

"he shall save his people from their sins" - quotes this Psalm:

- Psalm 130:7-8 - "Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. He will redeem Israel from all his sins."

Matthew 1:22-23 - "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

The quote from isaiah's prophecy (**Isaiah 7:14**) points out the this conception by a virgin is a unique sign that places the birth of Jesus as the crowning fulfillment of Old Testament history.

Matthew 1:24-25 - "Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS."

Apparently the command to abstain from sexual relations was part of the instructions from the angel, although that is not stated. The validity of Jesus miraculous conception had to be protected.

The Risk of Faith

Both Mary and Joseph were faced with the possibility of ruined reputations, and even death, if they accepted God's plan for the coming of Messiah. At best there would always be a lingering suspicion from neighbors in their small town.

Living by faith always requires us to take risks. That's the meaning of faith. Abraham left Ur, "going without knowing" where God would direct him.

- Matthew 10:22 - “And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

Jesus said there would be opposition and division, even within families.

- John 15:20 - "The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

To quote a song - “If there’s a thorny crown for the Master, the servant’s gonna feel the brier. One way or another, we’re goin’ though the fire.”

Resource:

"The Gospel of Matthew and Judaic Traditions," Authors: Herbert Basser and Marsha B. Cohen