

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS: THE COUPLE

(Advent 2021)

Scripture

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." ²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.
(Matthew 1:18-25)

³⁹At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"
(Luke 1:39-45)

⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child... (Luke 2:5)

Message

We have been talking together about the Christmas story from Bethlehem. We've heard this story thousands of times but not always from a purely Biblical perspective. The original story has become tainted with traditions – not only from the Christian community, but often from the secular community.

The last couple of weeks, and for the next couple of weeks, we're trying to separate fact from fiction, truth from tradition, reality from embellishment. We'll continue this series of focusing on the First Christmas this morning and look at two of the main characters: Mary and Joseph.

THE EXAMINATION

As we do that, we're again going to test your Christmas knowledge. We're going to raise the bar (multiple choice and fill in the blank, and twelve questions).

1. The angel Michael appeared and explained the baby's special conception to Mary: "*The Holy Spirit shall come upon you...*" (**True or False?**)
2. Mary went to visit the home of her cousin Elizabeth three months prior to the birth of John the Baptist. (**True or False?**)
3. When Mary arrived at Zachariah's home... (**Circle all the correct answers**)
 - a. Mary simply greeted Elizabeth.
 - b. Mary kissed her cousin.
 - c. Mary received a message from Zechariah.
 - d. Mary felt the baby leap in her womb.
4. Mary was likely about fourteen or fifteen years old when she became engaged. (**True or False?**)
5. Joseph's father's name was _____. (**Fill in the blank**). For extra credit, name Mary's father: _____.
6. How many angelic dreams did Joseph have in connection with the birth and early childhood of Jesus? ____ (**Fill in the blank**)
7. Joseph was a *tekton* - i.e., was he likely a "stone mason." (**True or False?**)
8. Mary and Joseph didn't get *married* until after Jesus was born. (**True or False?**)
9. In Biblical times, marriage was considered a covenant between two families and usually included a dowry. (**True or False?**)
10. Unfaithfulness during betrothal was considered adultery and punishable by death. (**True or False?**)
11. In Jesus' day, to dissolve a legal betrothal required a formal divorce. (**True or False?**)
12. Joseph and Mary originally planned to settle in Bethlehem of Judea. (**True or False?**)

B. Let's examine some of these questions and their answers together...

THE EXPLANATION

Jewish marriage included three basic stages: **arrangement**, **betrothal**, **wedding**.

The process started with the **arrangements**. While young men and women could make their preferences known, marriage was primarily a family affair normally initiated by the family (**father**) of the **Groom**.

Young women were often pledged between thirteen and fifteen years. The young men seeking a bride were often eighteen to twenty-five years of age. Paul Maier, one of the foremost authorities on First Century customs, believes Joseph was toward the top of that range.

Romance and courtship did not play a significant role in these arrangements in Jesus' day. At the same time, while marriages were arranged, couples were seldom just thrown at each other; interest, family connections, and even love were often factors in these alliances.

Joseph likely first asked his parents if he could marry the village girl, Mary, daughter of Heli (cf. **Luke 3:23f**; understood as the genealogy of Mary's family).

Jacob, Joseph's father, and Joseph's mother would have discussed it – appraising Mary's parentage, ancestry, and resources. The last issue would not have been a major issue because everyone in Nazareth was poor. Nor could they fault Mary's background—it was the same as theirs.

When the father of a perspective groom would approach the father of a prospective bride with an invitation to form an engagement, it should not have come as a total shock - Mary would likely have already shared her feelings about Joseph with their parents.

With marriage considered a covenant between the two families - not just the bridal pair - there were many matters to discuss and settle. One would have been the **dowry**, a gift offered by the groom for the **bride**. It would have been small for Mary because her family was poor (some grain, olive oil, etc.), but covenants require a promise, a commitment, a "payment (dowry)." The arrangements would have included other promises and commitments between the two families.

Once the "arrangements" had been worked out, and the dowry paid, Joseph's family would bring him (formally) before Mary and her parents. The groom's father would hand the potential groom (Joseph) a cup of wine; the groom would offer it to his future bride: "*By offering this cup, I vow I am willing to give my life for you.*" (Sound familiar? Cf. **Mark 14:23**).

The bride to be (Mary) would take the cup and by drinking from it, she would indicate her willingness to give her life for her future husband. Then

the groom's (Joseph's) response would've been simple: *"I'm going to go and prepare a place for you; and when I am finished, I'll come back and take you to be my wife."* (Sound familiar? Cf. **John 14:2-3**)

Their parents would then utter a formal benediction over them. (**Genesis 24:60**).

The groom would then return home and build an additional room onto the family home (the *insula*) especially for the new couple. The bride would focus on learning how to grind flour, bake, and cook. She may even learn a skill (e.g., weaving).

The betrothal was considered a legally binding contract. It gave the man legal rights over the woman and could only be broken by a formal process of divorce – designed to protect the future of the woman. So after the engagement was formalized, the terms of "husband" and "wife" were often used to refer to the betrothed partners (**Matthew** does this: **1:16,19,20,24**). If one died during this period, the other was considered a widow or widower.

In Galilee, sexual relations between betrothed partners were not permitted. In fact, sexual unfaithfulness during this stage was considered adultery; the penalty for adultery was death by stoning (cf. **Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:23-24**)

Usually about a year after the betrothal began, the formal marriage was initiated. When the groom completed the room on his father's insula, the father would say, *"It's time."*

The groom would dress in special wedding garments, then he and his companions would *process* triumphantly to the bride's home. The bride would be prepared for him; her unmarried attendants were ready when she called. The groom would escort the bride back to his home for a wedding supper (cf. **Matt. 22:1-14**).

Following a wedding ceremony, the couple would retreat to a specially prepared nuptial chamber to pray together and consummate the marriage. A blood-stained cloth was even produced to prove the bride's purity (virginity) and to seal the covenant. (**Deut. 22:13-21**). The festivities would continue for up to a week (**Genesis 29:27**). Then couple would establish their home in the family insula (in their father's house). (Don't miss the connections to the covenant Jesus longs to establish with us – the groom to his church).

One day between Mary's betrothal and wedding there was an angelic announcement: Mary would have a baby! It would be scandalous.

The angel Gabriel appeared: *"Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you...You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High...His kingdom will never end."* (**Luke 1:30f**)

Mary's response was quite logical: *"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"* Gabriel answers: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you. The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*

Mary responds with simple and profound trust: *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."*

For Mary, the news that she would bear the Christ, the long-promised Messiah, was both joyful and exciting as well as staggering and frightening. Her life was now in danger.

Mary would express her sense of wonder in a song (Lk. 1:46-55) we call the *Magnificat*: *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,"* but her pregnancy would come as cruel and shocking news to Joseph.

It is doubtful he believed her story about an angelic visit. Would you believe someone who told you the Father if her baby was God? Joseph would assume, as any reasonable person would, that Mary had been unfaithful. **Mary's** pregnancy left **Joseph** in agony. Joseph had three possible options:

First, he could **marry** the girl quickly and hope the tongues of Nazareth would stop wagging over a **"six-month baby."**

Or, secondly, he could publicly **divorce** Mary claiming she was an **adulteress**, in which case she would likely be stoned to death.

Or, he could have the marriage contract quietly **set aside** (voided), while Mary went off to have her baby elsewhere - likely a nearby Roman (pagan) city where such things were far more common.

Being a good and pious man, Joseph could not in good conscience marry an adulteress; there goes option one. He loved Mary too much to wish her public shame or death; there goes option two. So he quickly decided on the third option...and then...

And then an angel interrupted Joseph's day, and his plans, to **explain** to him what God was doing.

"An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you're to give him the name Jesus because he'll save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:20)

As a result, Joseph set aside his suspicions and anxieties and decided to go ahead and marry his beloved.

Then came the decree for a census from Caesar Augustus. Joseph - actually all males - was required to register. The census probably didn't **require** Joseph to go to Bethlehem (he could have registered in Nazareth); certainly,

the census didn't require him to take his betrothed along. But after three months (out of sight) with Elizabeth, God provided an opportunity for Joseph to take Mary to Bethlehem—out of sight of the gossiping mouths of Nazareth—and into the safety of a city far away for a very **plausible** (legitimate) reason: the census.

Augustus' decree settled two formidable problems for the couple. It concealed the source of the pregnancy - no one would have believed this child was conceived by the Holy Spirit (by God himself). And, it would fulfill the prophets' proclamation that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

Notice how Joseph protects Mary and the child; notice how God protects Joseph, Mary, and the child: Elizabeth, Bethlehem and then Egypt. God is in control. He cared for and protected them.

After the birth, after the wedding (we're actually never told when it took place), after Egypt, Mary and Joseph went to settle down. When Mary and Joseph (and the baby) returned from Egypt, they intended to settle near **Bethlehem** - away from the whispers and rumors of Nazareth.

But because Bethlehem was now under the rule of Herod Archelaus, an angel warned Joseph (**Matthew 2:22-23**) to abandon his plans and sent them back to **Nazareth** - another small community of 2-300, i.e., a few extended families—to fulfill more prophecy.

Nazareth, unlike Bethlehem, was not a sheltered retreat. Jesus would see, maybe work on, the construction of the nearby (1-2 miles away) Hellenistic city of Sepphoris (**map**); and the major trade route—the Via Maris—of the ancient world passed very close to Nazareth.

Joseph was a **tekton** in Nazareth and he taught his *son*, Jesus, to be a *tekton* as well (cf. **Mark 6:3**). Jesus never really studied to be a rabbi; instead, he went into the family trade.

The Greek word, "*tekton*," has been translated as "carpenter" in some (European) Bibles, and it makes a wonderful narrative: Jesus went from working with wood and nails and ends it nailed to a wooden cross. The word, *tecton*, literally means "*a craftsman who builds*." Given that almost every building in Israel, not to mention the buildings in the Sepphoris (just a stone throw away) were made of stone and rocks, there were very few wood workers in Israel. And given the lack of wood in Galilee, Joseph is far more likely to have worked as a **stone mason** (a stone worker) than as a wood worker (carpenter), most likely on site with other workers rather than secluded in a carpentry shop (**PICs**). Jesus likely spent hours helping his father shape and cut stones. Peter (**1 Peter 2:5**) reminds us that Jesus is *The Living Stone* who would be rejected by men (cf. **Psalm 118:22; Mark 12:10**).

Jesus is still doing his Father's work – shaping and crafting “*living stones*” (you and I) into a spiritual house.

THE ELUCIDATION

Let's check our answers and see how we did.

1. The angel Michael appeared and explained the baby's special conception to Mary: “*The Holy Spirit shall come upon you...*” (Trick question. It is **False; it was Gabriel**)
2. Mary went to visit the home of her cousin Elizabeth three months prior to the birth of John the Baptist. (**True; Luke 1:36**)
3. When Mary arrived at Zachariah's home... (**a; cf. Luke 1:39**)
 - a. Mary simply greeted Elizabeth.
 - b. Mary kissed her cousin.
 - c. Mary received a message from Zechariah.
 - d. Mary felt the baby leap in her womb.
4. Mary was likely about thirteen to fifteen years old when she became engaged. (**Most likely True**)
5. Joseph's father's name was _____. (**Jacob; cf. Matthew 1:16**); for extra credit, name Mary's father: _____. (**Heli; cf. Luke 3:23f**; understood to be Mary's genealogy).
6. How many angelic dreams did Joseph have in connection with the birth and early childhood of Jesus? (**Four; Matthew 1:20; 2:13; 2:19; 2:22**)
7. Joseph was a *tekton* - i.e., was he likely a “stone mason”? (**True; cf. Matthew 13:55**)
8. Mary and Joseph didn't get *married* until after Jesus was born. (**True; Luke 2:5**)
9. In Biblical times, marriage was considered a covenant between two families and usually included a dowry. (**True**)
10. Unfaithfulness during betrothal was considered adultery and punishable by death. (**T; Leviticus 20:10**)
11. In Jesus' day, to dissolve a legal betrothal required a formal divorce (**T**)
12. Joseph and Mary originally planned to settle in Bethlehem of Judea (**T; Mat. 2:21-23**)

As believers, we understand Jesus was born to die. When Jesus said, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood,*” he was saying to us “*I love you. Will you marry me? Will you be my spiritual bride?*” At that last supper, he offered the drink to his disciples, saying, “*I am **willing to give my life** for you...*”

What an incredible promise, commitment – especially knowing it would be only a matter of hours and was absolutely certain. (Most of us make this promise while hoping and praying we'll never have to follow through – Jesus knew he would be, very soon, making the ultimate payment out of his love.) The bride price (the dowery) now established by the Father and the cup he offers to seal our relationship with Him is the very lifeblood of the groom – Jesus.

In the Jewish marriage ceremony, the bride could choose to take the cup offered by the bridegroom and drink the wine or she could refuse. If she took the cup, she accepted the offer of the life of the groom and she promised: “*I am willing to **give my life** to you!*” After the betrothal ceremony in **John 13** when Jesus offered the cup to his disciples: “*And he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.*” (**Mark 14:23**). At our first communion after publicly professing our faith, he offers it to us—part of his chosen bride—anticipating we'll take it, drink it, and commit our life to him. In calling us calls us to “*do this in remembrance of him,*” every time we commemorate the Lord's Supper we are not only remembering his commitment to us, we are renewing our commitment to him.

After his resurrection and with his ascension, Jesus has now gone home to **prepare a place** for us “[Now] *I am going [to my Father's house] to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*” (**John 14:2**)

So while our Groom (Jesus) is fulfilling his obligations, we, the Church, as His bride, must prepare ourselves to be a bride who faithfully honors her groom. We understand our sinfulness prevents us from being the perfect bride, but our groom offers us forgiveness. And as we prepare, we need to remember our Groom is eagerly preparing for our wedding day as well – the day when he will come back to take us home to be with him.

A Jewish groom didn't know exactly when he would return to claim his bride; only the groom's father knew when all the preparations had been made and the time was right. The bride doesn't know the time when her husband will come; but she's confident he will and lives anticipating the day he will return to take her to be with him.

And when the shofar (trumpet) sounds, the groom will come, and the bride will be ready – the bride must be ready, the marriage will be consummated, and wedding feast (eternity) will begin! (Don't miss this picture Scripture paints for us).

Jesus has already expressed his intention. The bride price has already been paid. The cup of the new covenant has been offered. Have you accepted it yet?

If so, the groom is now preparing a place for us; and we must be preparing so we're ready when he comes.

Soon the Father will say "the time is right", and our wedding day will arrive. The trumpet will sound; we will join his *insula* (family) as His *bride* for eternity. Advent is a reminder of the importance of being faithful today so we will be ready to meet our groom when he returns tomorrow.

John, Jesus' beloved disciple, will write:

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready...Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb! (Revelation 19:7,9a)

When the **Father** says the time is right, our **wedding** day will come. Let's make sure we are **ready** so we can enjoy the wedding supper...

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