

The Church of the Servant King

Thursday Night Bible Study

The Gospel of Matthew

(Thurs_Matthew_The Birth of Jesus)

THE BIRTH OF JESUS (1:18-25)

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: 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 a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. 20 But 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 the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." 22 Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." 24 And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, 25 but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (Matt 1:18-25)

THE PREGNANCY OF MARY (1:18)

A key to understanding the virgin birth of Jesus is found in the word *betrothed* (Gr. *mnesteuo* – μνηστευω) which could be translated “engaged” and means to “woo and win.”¹ In Hebrew culture, there were several phases of the marriage process.

After the bride had been selected (usually by the young man’s father), the couple entered a *betrothal* period that usually lasted a year. This period was initiated with a formal proceeding which was usually undertaken by a friend or legal representative on the part of the bridegroom and by the parents of the bride on the part of the bride. It was confirmed by oaths and accompanied by presents to the bride, i.e. a dowry. Many times presents would also be given to the relatives of the bride.

Typically, the dowry given was consistent with the status of the bride and this no doubt prevented many poorer men from taking brides from more well-to-do families. The act of *betrothal* was celebrated by a feast.

After the elapse of a period of time (about a year), the bridegroom would adorn himself in festive dress and placing a garland upon his head, he would leave his house with a procession of others to the bride’s father’s house. Usually the procession would consist of his groomsmen, musicians and/or singers, and others with lamps. When he arrived at the bride’s house, the bride and her companions awaited his arrival.

He would then lead the procession with his bride back to his own (or perhaps his father’s house) to enjoy a feast. Along the way, other friends of both parties would join the procession and would include a party of young girls (virgins). The feast would last anywhere from seven to

¹ William Arndt, Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the new Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), electronic edition published by Logos Research Systems, 1996.

fourteen days. The host provided the guests with wedding clothes and the entertainment would consist of riddles and other amusements. The last act of the ceremony would occur when the bridegroom conducted the bride into the bridal chamber.

During the betrothal period, a formal divorce could occur if there were any violations of chastity found in the bride. During this period, the man and woman were called "husband" and "wife" even though they had not yet consummated the marriage and would not do so until the conclusion of the wedding festivities at the end of the *betrothal* period.

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

Obviously, this situation would have been viewed as a scandal – a situation where at least Mary had been unfaithful or in which Mary and Joseph had been together prior to the conclusion of the *betrothal* period. Obviously, at an early point, only Mary really knew the truth.

JOSEPH – A JUST MAN (1:19)

"...being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly."

During the one year *betrothal* period, Mary became pregnant. Apart from divine revelation, Joseph could only conclude that Mary had been unfaithful. Joseph would have been within his rights to make the divorce a public matter and grant her a certificate of divorce as was the custom in ancient Israel (see Deut 24:1 and Jer 3:1, 8).

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house. (Deut 24:1)

1 God says, "If a husband divorces his wife
And she goes from him
And belongs to another man,
Will he still return to her?
Will not that land be completely polluted?
But you are a harlot with many lovers;
Yet you turn to Me," declares the LORD. (Jer 3:1)

8 "And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also. (Jer 3:8)

Under the provisions of the Mosaic Law, Joseph could have created a public ordeal out of this "scandal" by exposing Mary's condition to the judges at the city gate – an act which could have resulted in Mary's stoning (Deut 22:23-24).

23 "If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, 24 then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor's wife. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. (Deut 22:23-24)

One can only imagine the disappointment and soul searching that must have occurred in Joseph's mind. Obviously, some time had elapsed between impregnation and Mary's condition

progressing to the point where her condition was obvious. Joseph had decided to deal with this issue discretely – obviously out of concern for Mary. He did not desire to make her an object of ridicule and scorn and perhaps even death. A lesser man (a man who was more interested in addressing his bruised ego) would not have been concerned about Mary and may have even wanted revenge against her to the point that he would have encouraged her stoning.

Principle: In God's order, acts of self-vindication and exaltation are at odds with Godly character.

JOSEPH - SON OF DAVID (1:20)

"Joseph, son of David..."

As we discussed in our introduction to Matthew's Gospel, Matthew's emphasis is upon Jesus' legal right to the throne of Israel; therefore, Matthew continues the theme he established in the genealogy of verses 1-17. That theme is that Jesus had legal claim to the throne of Israel even though he was not the physical descendant of David through Joseph.²

JESUS' NAME (1:21)

"...you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Jesus is the Greek word Ιεσοους and is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *Yeshua*. It means "the Lord shall save." The name expresses Jesus' work on earth to save (spiritual) and deliver (physical).

"FULFILLMENT" OF PROPHECY (1:22-23)

"Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."

Matthew uses the word "fulfillment" in relation to Old Testament passages in his gospel narrative on twelve occasions (i.e. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; and 27:9). Matthew 1:22-23 contains a quotation from Isaiah 7:14 – a passage which represents a case of *multiple or dual fulfillment*.

14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isa 7:14)

In Isaiah 7:14, Israel and Judah were in the midst of a complex international set of power struggle dynamics. In the West, Assyria had been expanding its borders and wealth under Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 B.C.) by making vassal states out of conquered nations.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been paying tribute to Assyria until Pekah (ruler of the Northern Kingdom) aligned himself to Rezin, Syrian king of Damascus about 734 B.C. in

² As we discussed in our study of Matthew's genealogy, this is a point that has great relevancy to understanding how God's curse upon Coniah was fulfilled. Due to his evil character like his father, Jeremiah pronounces a curse from the Lord upon Coniah in Jeremiah 22:30 that this man should be considered as if childless. The legal right to the throne did pass through his sons. Jesus obtained the **legal** right to the throne through Coniah's son, Shealtiel. Luke's Gospel makes it clear that Jesus was a **physical** descendant of David through another son of David (Nathan – Lu 3:31) while Jesus' human father was a descendant through a lineage that traced back to David and included Coniah – a necessity for Jesus' **legal** right to the throne. Had Jesus been a **physical** descendant of Coniah, He could not have a claim to the throne.

order to revolt against Assyria. However, Ahaz, king of Judah, refused to join this alliance. Pekah attempted to depose Ahaz and install a puppet king.

Ahaz did not have the faith in Yahweh that Isaiah had and he sought to preserve his throne by submitting himself as a vassal to the Assyrian in exchange for the Assyrian's help against this alliance between Israel and Syria. So, Isaiah prophesied that a sign would be provided.

God sent a sign to Ahaz in the form of a child. So, the historical fulfillment of this prophecy occurred in the eighth century B.C. The child symbolized judgment upon Israel and Syria.

- The Hebrew word translated *virgin* in this passage can mean a *young woman of marriageable age* or it can mean a *true virgin*.
- Isaiah's wife is most likely the "prophetess" in Isaiah 8:3-4 who bears a son to whom the Lord commands Isaiah to give the name *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*.
- Before the child would be able to speak, Assyria would plunder Israel.

1 Then the LORD said to me, "Take for yourself a large tablet and write on it in ordinary letters: Swift is the booty, speedy is the prey. 2 "And I will take to Myself faithful witnesses for testimony, Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah." 3 So I approached the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. Then the LORD said to me, "Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz; 4 for before the boy knows how to cry out 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away before the king of Assyria." (Isa 8:1-4)

- *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz* means "*speed the spoil, hasten the booty*" or "*swift is the booty; speedy is the prey.*"
- In Isaiah 7:15, the child of *the virgin* who was to be named *Immanuel* is prophesied to eat curds and honey (verses bread and wine from cultivated lands). This represented the simple diet of Judah after the Assyrian invasion. There was no cultivated land and the diet was associated with hard times.

15 He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. (Isa 7:15)

- Immanuel represents God's salvation (deliverance) and *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz* represents God's judgment. God would judge Israel in 722 B.C., but He would also deliver Judah.
- Some believe that the *virgin* in Isaiah 7:14 was the wife of Ahaz. Therefore, the *virgin* in 7:14 and the prophetess (Isaiah's wife) would be different.
- If the *virgin* in 7:14 was Ahaz's wife, the child would have been Hezekiah, Ahaz's successor. Hezekiah would be a sign to Ahaz that God was in control: the Lord was with Ahaz; He would save Judah from the enemies that surrounded Ahaz, enabling his son to inherit the throne.

Therefore, the immediate fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 was historical. The son of Isaiah would be a sign to Ahaz, King of Judah, of God's judgment upon Israel (and Syria). He would also be a sign of God's mercy and salvation.

The more distant fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 would occur as recorded in Matthew 1:22-23. Jesus was born of a virgin and will ultimately deliver Judah (as well as all Israel) from all enemies and establish His reign of peace – at His Second Advent of course.

JOSEPH DID NOT KNOW HER (1:25)

“And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, 25 but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

On two prior occasions, Matthew affirms the virgin birth (see verses 18 and 20). Verse 25 is also an affirmation. Joseph is said to not have known Mary until she gave birth to Jesus. Matthew uses the imperfect tense of the Greek word *eginosken* which could be literally translated *was not knowing*. Joseph violated all custom by taking Mary into his home before the one year betrothal period had elapsed. No doubt Joseph endured the insinuations that he was the father of a child conceived out of wedlock. In addition, he abstained from any sexual intercourse with Mary until Jesus had been born.