

Exegetical Notes - Matthew 1:18-25

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Matthew 1:18-25

Verse 18

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together,

- This is the story of Jesus' birth according to the Gospel of Matthew. While the details of Matthew's telling of the story are not the same as those recorded in the other Gospels, the details from the telling in each Gospel dovetail. The result is that the full story can only be known by reading the story in all the Gospels. Over the centuries, scholars have fitted the timing of the events told in each Gospel into a unified history. However, in Matthew we will only learn those details of the story that interested Matthew.
- Jesus' mother's name was Mary. We know very little about Mary except what is told to us here and in Luke 1:26-38. In Luke's details we learn that Mary was a virgin; that she was highly favored by God and thus chosen for this role; that she was afraid when the angel came to her; that she questions the process by which she would become Jesus' mother, but eventually submitted to her involvement in the plan of God. Scholars say that Mary was just 14 years old when all this happened to her.
- Mary was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. This means that they were betrothed but in the Biblical sense. The betrothal period was much more formal than is our engagement period today. During this time the woman was considered the man's wife. Thus Matthew calls Mary, Joseph's wife and he, her husband. The betrothal could only be broken by a decree of divorce. In fact, in that time, betrothed people were considered married in every way but one, sexual relations were forbidden.

- We know less about Joseph than we do about Mary. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus' official lineage is traced through Joseph. That means that Joseph was considered Jesus' legal father even though he was not Jesus' physical father.

she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

- Matthew does not tell us the details about the angel's visit, etc. (see Luke 1:26-38 for those details). All Matthew says is that during the betrothal period Mary was discovered to be pregnant.
- That the baby was the product of union between Mary and the Holy Spirit is the mystery of Jesus' conception. No theory or explanation can fully explain how this happened. It happened as part of the will and plan of God.
- Though the issue is not raised here, Luke makes it very clear that Mary was a virgin, meaning that she conceived Jesus without having had any sexual experience.

Verse 19

¹⁹ Because 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.

- The period of betrothal could not be ended except by a decree of divorce. When Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, he knew that he was not the father of her baby since they had not had sexual contact. His decision to divorce Mary was based on this fact.
- He did not want to expose her to the public. If he did, Mary would have been stoned to death, as this was the punishment given to a woman who had illicit sexual relationships (see Deuteronomy 22:23-24). Certainly the reason for the divorce would become obvious in time. Joseph's hope was that Mary would marry the baby's father and thus escape the punishment she was due according to the Law of Moses.
- The reason for Joseph's action was that he was "righteous." He was known as a man who followed the Law of Moses and the Tradition of the Elders. If he married Mary, under these circumstances, his reputation would be ruined.

- He was also a merciful man and not one overcome by the pride of his reputation. Though it was important to him to maintain his reputation, he also thought of Mary.

Verse 20

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

- After Joseph had determined that he would divorce Mary, an angel appeared to him. The angel is a messenger from God sent specifically to Joseph with a message for Joseph's ears alone. Therefore, this is Joseph's testimony. No one but Joseph could have known of this event.
- The angel came to Joseph "in a dream." In Greek, as in Hebrew, the word for dream and vision is the same. God can use dreams to impart vision if he chooses. In the dream the angel spoke to Joseph.

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife,

- The angel addresses Joseph as the "Son of David," recognizing Joseph's direct descent from the great king and the promised father of the Messiah.
 1. The angel tells Joseph that he should not be afraid to marry Mary and take her into his house as his wife.

"because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

- Mary may have told Joseph this. It is certain that she knew all this (see Luke 1:26-38). However, it is not likely that Joseph would have believed the story from Mary. However, the angel now confirms what is impossible to explain.

Verse 21

²¹ "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

- The angel confirms the message that Mary received in Luke 1:31 that she will bear a son.
- Joseph is then given detailed instructions about the naming of the baby. Naming the baby was the duty/right of the father. By assuming this function, Joseph accepts responsibility for being Jesus' father.

- Under normal circumstances the baby would be named after his father or given the name of one of his ancestors. However, in this case, Joseph is instructed to give the baby a name that does not come from his family.
- The baby is to be called “Jesus,” the Greek/English form of the Hebrew name Joshua. It means “savior” in Hebrew and thereby establishes the function that this baby will perform when grown. He is to be called “savior” for “he will save his people from their sin.”

Verse 22

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

- The prophet is Isaiah (see Isaiah 7:14).
- The phrase, “this took place to fulfill” is used twelve times in the Gospel of Matthew. Each time it is used, its purpose is to show that some event in the story was foretold by one of Israel’s great prophets. This is to help us understand that these events were of God and not of man.

Verse 23

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.”

- Isaiah says that a young woman will give birth to a son. The Hebrew word that Isaiah uses is the word that means young woman. It is not the word that means virgin. However, the word used in Luke 1:27 and 34 is the Greek word that means virgin. The word used here is also the Greek word that means virgin. Therefore, despite the word which is used in Isaiah, the New Testament clearly and consistently uses the Greek word which establishes the virgin birth of Jesus Christ beyond any doubt. If the virgin birth is not historical fact, than all of the New Testament is founded on a lie. However, that is not so, and the doctrine of the virgin birth is essential to Christian faith.
- What is prophesied according to Matthew is the virgin conception of Jesus Christ and that the child born to the virgin would be male.
- Often we get confused in this passage because we think that the name, Immanuel, was prophesied to be the baby’s name but Joseph was just told to name the baby Jesus. What is prophesied is that the baby born to the virgin **“will be called** Immanuel.” The fact is that

while his given name is Jesus, people do call him Immanuel just as the prophet said.

Verse 24

²⁴ When Joseph woke up,

- This tells us that Joseph's vision came in the form of a dream for he was asleep (see notes on verse 20 above).

he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

- Like Mary in Luke 1, Joseph was immediately obedient to the command of God that came to him in a dream. He did exactly as he was told.

Verse 25

²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

- The fact that Joseph and Mary abstained from sexual relations until after the birth of Jesus is designed to re-establish the importance of Jesus' virgin conception. This doctrine is essential to confirm the truth that Jesus was the Son of God.
- That Joseph named the baby Jesus shows his devotion to doing exactly as he was commanded and highlights the historical function that Jesus played in the plan of God. He is our Savior!

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